

The Complete

WORKS

of

Maya

Draco Malfoy, the Amazing Bouncing... Rat?

Chapter One

Coffee and Polyjuice Potion

The worst day of Draco Malfoy's life started, as the majority of days do, by his waking up. A sleeping Crabbe and Goyle were doing their usual vigorous impressions of the Hogwarts express, and Draco woke at six with a vague idea that he had been trapped in a landmine.

Once he got tangled up in his sheets and fell off the bed, he realised this was probably not the case.

He used to wake up like this a lot in first year, he reflected. Lucky he had grown so there wasn't such a long way to fall...

Of course, lucky he had grown in any case, since the love life of a four foot tall sixth year would be a sad, lonely and pretty much one-on-one affair.

Mind you, if he could have been a bit shorter it would have helped with Quidditch. The best Quidditch players were small, it was just like those people who rode horses in the Muggle world... Jackies, or wait, no, wasn't that a president's wife?

Whatever a president was.

Draco reviewed the thoughts he had just had and realised he was in dire need of caffeine. Preferably injected straight into the vein.

I'm a *Malfoy*, he thought. A creature of the *night*. This early in the morning is just not on.

Right, all this calls for is a little bit of will power.

Up!

All right, maybe that was a tad optimistic.

Along, then.

Draco crawled manfully across to where he had dropped his clothes the night before. Once he was dressed in some haphazard fashion, he scrambled to his feet and staggered out of the door.

He felt, and probably looked, a lot like a vampire risen from the grave with a horrible thirst.

Coffee! I must have... coffee!

By the time he got to the Great Hall, he was sure he was cursed with an unholy hunger for all things caffeinated, which would be passed down to all his descendants.

It being a hideous time to be up, the Great Hall was almost empty.

Two Ravenclaws were kissing and studying together - typical Ravenclaw idea of romance - at their table.

"That shouldn't be allowed," Draco mused aloud. "They're going to ruin someone's appetite."

"Like the sight of you has ruined mine, Malfoy?"

Oh, perfect. A member of the Dream Team. How typical of the irony gods, and how typical of Hermione Granger to be up studying at six.

"Granger, all alone with a book? How terribly pathetic - and yet somehow unsurprising."

She shot him an Avada Kedavra look through her dark hair.

"Malfoy, where are Crabbe and Goyle? Doesn't the brain cell you share shut down if you're apart for too long?"

"Where are Potter and Weasley? Indulging in the love that dare not speak its name upstairs?"

She turned a page with unnecessary vehemence.

"Don't tell me *you* can quote Oscar Wilde. He was a Muggle."

"Sure?"

Draco smirked.

Granger sighed, and muttered. "Ferret."

"Mudblood," Draco returned, not to be outdone. But he was letting this idiot girl distract him from his sacred quest.

Coffee...

The Slytherin table was bare. Draco had no idea of how to get coffee. And Draco absolutely, positively had to have coffee.

Granger took a sip from a cup.

Draco only just stopped himself from going completely feral. He took several deep, calming breaths.

I will not torture the information out of her. I will not seize the cup and try to lick the bottom. I will retain some aspect of my dignity.

I want coffee I want coffee I want coffee!

"Oh, Granger?" he drawled in his most unconcerned tones. "How would one go about getting served at this damnable hour?"

Coffee, wailed his utterly spoiled inner child. Right now!

Granger was looking up at him with a slight frown. "In six years, you've never once gotten up early to study? How in the name of God did you get to be a prefect?"

Why are you wasting my time, woman? Give me coffee!

"I study like a normal person," Draco said between gritted teeth. "At *night*."

"Yes, I can see you're not exactly an early bird," she sniffed. "Are you aware that your robes are in a state and you haven't brushed your hair?"

"And yet it still looks better than yours...Look, Granger, I don't have time for this. I just want some coffee! All I want in the world is some coffee! If I had one wish, it would be for coffee!"

That wasn't dignified.

Granger was eyeing him as if he had gone insane. "Just ring the little bell on your table. A house elf will come and serve you. They're not supposed to be seen, but it's so early... Of course, it's appalling that-"

He held up a quelling hand.

"Please, Granger - I'm too tired... I think I might spew myself if I have to listen to you babbling..."

He strode over to the Slytherin table and rang the bell.

"It's not *spew*," Granger rambled on. "It's S.P.E.W... Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare!"

Draco sat down at his table and let his head thump forward onto the wood.

"Aren't you supposed to be the smart one?" he mumbled in understandably muffled tones. "Can't you see that that is a terrible name? What's wrong with H.E.L.P, House Elf Liberation Party, or something?"

Granger seemed startled for some reason, but just at that point Dobby, Draco's old house elf, appeared on the scene.

Draco was so relieved he could have kissed him. If not for the unbelievable gross factor involved, and the fact that Draco didn't really fly that side of the Quidditch pitch, and that lack of caffeine had robbed him of the ability to move.

In all fairness, Dobby looked delighted to see him too.

"Master Malfoy! Dobby is pleased to see you! Dobby has been hoping to see you for months!"

"Yes, well, Draco has been extremely busy," Draco said, not shifting his head from the table. "Draco promises to come and see you more often if Draco could just please, please have some coffee immediately. Draco has far too much blood in his caffeine system."

"Of course, of course..."

Dobby went bustling off. Draco felt a lovely sensation of relief sweep over him.

It was almost immediately dissipated by the eminently annoying voice of the Mudblood.

"How do *you* know Dobby?"

"Hello, he worked in my home for the first twelve years of my life," Draco muttered. "House elves practically bring up highborn wizarding children... not that you'd know that, Mudblood."

"I did actually. I've also read many 'pureblood' genealogies, and for 'highborn' you could just as easily read 'inbred.' Or 'evil ungrateful enslavers of elfkind.'"

"Granger, you can just take whatever book you're reading and-"

"Here's your coffee, Master Malfoy!"

Dobby came trotting in with a tray heaped with breakfast and, filling Draco's eyes like a mirage, a gleaming coffee pot...

He watched greedily as Dobby poured a cup...

"You look like a drug addict, Malfoy."

"And you look like a beaver, Granger."

Draco fell on the cup and drained it. Oh, coffee, my one true love! Coffee and coffee and coffee, sweet sweet coffee!

"Dobby remembered you like it black, sir."

Draco smiled. "Yeah, thanks. It's really good."

"Is Miss Hermione wanting anything more?"

"Just Malfoy's head on a plate, thanks," Granger murmured, not quite low enough.

"If you came here to study, Granger, then study and stop annoying me."

"Oh, you are so one to talk, Malfoy, but I think I'll take your advice. Arithmancy is so much more interesting than you."

Dobby was starting to look upset and bewildered.

"Particularly Summoning Sums," Granger added loftily.

"All right, now I *know* you're mental," Draco said. "Trigomancy is by far the most interesting part of the course."

He began to butter some toast, scowling over at the girl who had beaten him in the Arithmancy exam by five lousy points. To his somewhat overwhelming astonishment, she smiled brilliantly.

Her teeth really had become a whole lot smaller since first year.

"Oh, that's really fun as well!" she agreed enthusiastically. "Tell me, did you prefer using the Theoremagic or did you like the manual spellcasting? It takes longer but I think you get much more of a feel for the subject-"

"Are you mad? The only spell worth considering is the Calculatus spell-"

Draco was really starting to feel much better now he had coffee. And Arithmancy was one of his favourite subjects.

"I never really got that one," Granger confessed, as if she was telling him about her secret life as a Spellstripper.

Well, it wasn't as if this was in *public*...

"You'd have to be completely stupid not to get that one - oh, wait, there's the reason - Look, it's perfectly simple."

Dobby crept off. Draco spent the next hour conducting an across-tables shouting match with Granger about Arithmancy.

Eventually even the absorbed Ravenclaw couple noticed.

"Look," said the boy, "If you two want to talk, can't you just sit together?"

"Go sit on a Blast-Ended Skrewt," Draco suggested sweetly. "Theoremagic is wildly overrated, you bushy-haired imbecile."

They had been Accio!ing each others' napkin diagrams for some time when the door opened again.

"See here, Ferret boy, Pythagoras' Theoremagic Theorem is a classic," Granger was saying heatedly.

"You mean it's old and useless, Mudblood? Quite so."

"Malfoy! *Why* are you bothering Hermione?"

Oh, lovely. If it wasn't the Boy Who Lived To Be Self-Righteous, and his sidekick, Weasley the Freckled Wonder.

Granger looked around and beamed. "Harry, Ron! Nice of you to join us!"

"Us?" echoed the Weasel.

"Granger and the little voices in her head," Draco explained loftily. He finally remembered about his toast, which had gone stone cold. "And I'd be eating, but the sight of you is having such an effect on my upjerk reflex..."

"And the sight of you is having such an effect on my Really Wanting to Pound Your Pasty Face In reflex," growled Weasley.

"One, I wasn't *doing* anything, Weasel boy, and two, I'd like to see you try it, and three, what do you mean by pasty?"

Draco stood up, weighing the odds. He could take Weasley, Wizard Wannabe alone, and with Potter added... Hmm...

"Just leave it, Ron," Hermione said. "You don't need to waste time on narcissistic Slytherins..."

"Huh?"

"What about Malfoy's mother?"

Draco rolled his eyes and left. No wonder, with friends like that, that Granger was occasionally desperate for a bit of intelligent conversation.

He wandered back to the Slytherin rooms, wondering if Crabbe and Goyle would be up to the intellectual challenge of learning to breathe through their noses.

Draco had thought Potions would be relaxing after his somewhat odd breakfast.

Draco should have remembered the law of Murphy, greatest and most depressed Irish wizard of his time. (A teetotal Irishman is a dangerous thing. He may begin to think. Then he may take over the world.)

He was lounging in the back row, wondering what would be the most disgusting thing he could drop down Longbottom's robes and horribly torn between slugs and fresh Boomslang skin, when Snape strode in.

Draco liked Snape. He honestly did. The man was funny, he was a good teacher and he sided with Slytherins against the - oh, rest of the world. As far as Draco was concerned, he had only two faults.

There was the obvious lack of personal hygiene. And there was the apparent PMT.

It was hard to tell behind all the hair, but Draco would have laid a hundred Galleons that the man had a nasty glint in his eye.

He was, quite obviously, ready to kill. He was demented. He was a merciless man on a mission of death.

"I wish to support cooperation and harmony between the houses."

Draco blinked hard. Or not.

"So I've come to the conclusion that each person should work with a partner from the other house on their Polyjuice Potion."

Snape leaned back in his chair and listened to the buzz of shocked protest as if it was Mozart at his best.

Draco, who had remembered about Murphy by now and was employing his favourite world view of persistent pessimism, waited for more.

"Potter and Bulstrode."

Harry Potter looked vaguely panicked and over at Millicent. She licked her thick lips.

He began to look extremely panicked.

Draco couldn't help smiling. Millicent's mad secret crush on Potter had come out in fifth year and in Draco's opinion, it couldn't have happened to a nicer person... This pairing was too, too cruel.

Too, too perfect.

Giggles broke out across the classroom when Millicent fluttered her eyelashes. Potter looked like he wanted to hide.

Even Weasley and Granger were trying not to laugh.

Draco looked over at Granger, who was stuffing her robes in her mouth, and thought - I'll take her. She's the only Gryffindor with any brains, it will really hack her off which will be funny, and - anyway, we weren't quite done talking about Arithmancy...

"Crabbe and Longbottom."

"Sir, are you trying to pair off all the little secret crush cases?" Draco drawled.

Blaise Zabini fell off her seat laughing. Snape's eyes narrowed.

"I must be, Malfoy, because you and Weasley are together."

Ron Weasley went so pale all his freckles seemed to be fluorescently lit. Draco was disgusted, but... well, Weasley's horror was funny, and he supposed he'd asked for it a bit.

Not that he'd ever take this from any teacher but Snape.

"How did you ever guess our naughty little secret?" he inquired as Weasley appeared to suffer a massive coronary. "We thought we were so careful."

"Goyle and Granger."

"Alliteration," Draco said. "Sweet."

He shot Weasley, who was still paralysed with rage, a baleful look.

"I'm not coming to you, lovebunny."

"Just sit there and try not to think disastrous thoughts in the direction of my Potion," Draco ordered in the Malfoy tone which made slaves desperate to obey, enemies desperate to escape and girls... well, just desperate.

It seemed as if it made Weasley desperate to punch him.

"It's our Potion," he snapped.

"It's my perfect grade that takes a dive if you mess up - which seems to be your destiny in this great lottery of life," Draco sneered. "Sit down! If you think you can manage it."

"I will not!"

"The Weasleys, ladies and gentlemen. Fewer brain cells than Galleons - and that's saying something."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I've got something to say to *you*, Malfoy-"

"Ron, shut up!"

"Hey," Draco drawled in Granger's general direction. "That was my line."

She stood in front of them, on her way to fetch some ingredient. Her eyes were snapping.

"He's not worth it," she continued.

"Okay, that wasn't."

She leaned over the desk to touch Weasley's violently coloured hair, looking at him with fierce intentness and - somewhat to Draco's amazement - managing not to vomit.

"He's an utter idiot for treating you - for treating anyone - this way. We just have to assume that this is the way he was taught and he's too stupid or too basically nasty ever to question it. And so he's not worth any of your time or your anger."

"Hey, I'm right here, Mudblood!"

Granger's brown eyes did not even flicker in his direction.

"He's not even worth noticing."

"Pity you didn't work that out a few years ago," Draco called after her retreating back. "It would have saved me a very hard slap across the face."

Granger didn't turn around. Weasley sat back with a smug look on his face.

"Go ahead and mess up the Potion, Malfoy," he said.

"I happen to be good at Potions, Weasel. It's not like you ever made a Potion successfully - let alone this one."

The suddenly smug look on Weasley's face irritated Draco further. It was almost a relief when he started scowling as Draco set up the cauldron.

"Hey, Malfoy, I want to ask you a question."

"That no on the candlelit dinner is final, Weasley."

"I know it's genetically impossible, but could you try to be less of a prat? What the hell were you doing with Hermione this morning?"

"Making mad passionate love across a room. We Malfoys are a talented family."

Weasley's look of speechless fury was a rich reward for the disgusting concept Draco had just presented himself with.

"Talking about school, Wizard Wheezy."

The blank look on Weasley's face was reminiscent of Crabbe and Goyle.

"School?"

"Yes, school. It's this damn great building in which we are all taught, and some of us actually learn, magic? Come to think of it, buggered if we're not there now."

"You were talking to Hermione about school."

"Arithmancy. Remember, that subject you're not intelligent enough to take?"

"Well, you'd just better not do it again."

"What, Arithmancy? Listen, even if I dropped a subject, my grades would still be as far above yours as my family is above yours."

"You leave *Hermione* alone!" Weasley snarled. "Don't start bullying her."

"Awww, does Ronnie have a crush? Awww, isn't that just too precious for words? Say, Weasley, what do you get if you mate a weasel and a beaver?"

Weasley had gone bright red, which was an interesting contrast with his hideous hair. He also looked ready to kill.

"Remember, you each have to drink your partner's Polyjuice Potion at the end of class," Snape said.

Now Weasley looked ready to die of disgust.

"I'd rather kill myself!"

"Take me with you," Draco muttered. "But at least you've stopped blushing like a bashful schoolgirl. Oh no, wait, look - there it is again..."

"Sod *off*, Malfoy!"

Draco and Ron were too busy squabbling to notice anyone else slip by their table.

"Give me a piece of that revolting clown's wig you call hair, Weasley," Draco commanded. "I've already put my hair into your beaker."

"Wait, I've just decided I'd rather fail than become your pasty albino self..."

"Come on Weasley, you know you've always wanted to be rich, handsome and charming... and well, me..."

"You couldn't charm the warts off a skinned toad, Malfoy-"

Draco swung at Ron, and when Ron ducked he pulled out the hairs he wanted.

"Why, you!"

Draco stared at Ron's furious face, wondering whether the Weasley cretin would actually hit him, as he dropped the hairs.

Neither of them noticed that the hairs fell a little way from the beaker.

Neither of them noticed the figure brushing by their table, letting another kind of strand fall into Draco's beaker.

Neither of them noticed anything at all.

"I am extremely disappointed!" Snape shouted. "Although," he said, sneering at Longbottom, "in the cases of some, I am hardly surprised. I handed out clearly Photocharmed instructions on how to make these Potions, and not one of you has been able to manage it! So much for your cleverness, Miss Granger. As for you, Mr Malfoy - I can only suppose Mr Weasley distracted you from your task."

"That's right, sir," Draco agreed placidly. "With his unwanted attentions."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape snapped.

Draco stretched and yawned lazily, feeling that lovely warm glow that comes from being a malicious bastard, and being so *good* at it.

He saw Granger and Weasley both shooting him Avada Kedavra glares, and he winked at them. Weasley looked apoplectic with anger and Granger looked at him with sheer contempt.

Potter still looked far too shaken by his little Brush with Bulstrode to pay any attention to the little cross-class duel going on.

The distinctly scarred-for-life look on Potter's scarred-for-life face distracted Draco from the fact he was feeling quite ill.

I think I'll take a trip to the little wizards' room before Care of Magical Creatures... ugh, being around Gryffindors for two lessons in a row, no wonder I feel queasy.

"You all right?" grunted Crabbe, as Snape told them all they were idiots, failures, squibs, disgraces to their kind and should become Filch's servants but at least should never, never darken the door of his dungeon again (in other words, wrapped up the class pretty much as usual).

Draco grimaced, that savage expression which had started the rumour Malfoys had vampire blood in them.

Which wasn't true.

Probably.

"All the better for you asking stupid questions, Crabbe," he snapped, shaking off his hamlike hand with an imperious air and striding away from him, shoving viciously past the Twee Trio on his way out.

"Dear, dear, is poor little Malfoy sick?" Weasley jeered. "Get Snape to tuck you up in bed."

"I'm not into that kind of thing, Weasley. Unlike you."

Draco stalked off, hearing Granger's voice behind him.

"Harry, what happened? You're looking a bit - fragile-"

Hopefully Millicent had pushed her luck with naughty touches, and Potter would end up gibbering at St Mungo's.

Draco tried not to double up, and dashed into the mens' room as fast as he could.

That *stupid* Weasley, how in God's name had he managed to screw up the Potion? Or could Granger somehow have poisoned his coffee? Oh, treacherously energising beverages!

He fell through the door and onto the floor.

The pain was, quite simply, blinding. It pulsed in silvery cold waves through his stomach, his cheek sticking to the tile with sweat, blood bursting from his lip as he bit it hard and winced, burrowing in on himself, trying to get smaller so he could fold the pain up into a knot and...

He really seemed to be getting smaller...

His clothes felt hot and too heavy, black robes scratching against his skin as he squeaked, his clothes felt...

Too big.

And wait. Squeaked?

Malfoys did not squeak.

Which was when his clothes swallowed him.

A mountain of black robe was swamping him, smothering him, and the itching was getting worse, like...

Like fur growing.

Again.

Draco remembered what having fur was like.

Not another incident like with damn Professor Moody two years ago, please, please no...

"No!" said Draco.

Except all he heard was a squeak.

He shot out from under his robes, desperate to flee, to get away before someone bounced him from floor to ceiling again, vowing revenge on whichever member of the Dream Team had thought this would be funny...

When a pair of feet came hurtling towards him.

You can't outrun a human, Draco. So be sneaky. So be a *Slytherin*.

Draco froze, as if in complete terror. Which was not all that hard an act to put on.

When the hand came down, he bit it so hard the blood spurted.

And then he ran, ran, ran, pausing to be thankful the door was open, scurrying into the suddenly-gigantic corridor, wondering what on earth he was supposed to do now...

When he bumped into another pair of feet, and was seized by another huge hand.

There was something about those feet, he thought. Even at this scale, surely they were oversized...

"Oh, look, guys! What a cute rat!"

Draco's first thought was, a cute *what?*

And his second was - oh no. Not Weasley.

He was a helpless rodent in the hands of the Gryffindors.

Chapter Two

Fluffy the Magic Dra... Er, Rat

'Put me down this instant, Weasley, you utter utter prat,' Draco snapped. 'I am in terrible danger!'

Weasley's oversized and still-ugly face crumpled into an expression that... somehow reminded Draco of that savage Hagrid, the bastard who has misread the dictionary definition of 'set wild beasts upon' for 'teach.'

Oh no, he thought... that was how the madman looked at his precious Blast-Ended Skrewts.

'Isn't it adorable?' Weasley cooed.

'Weasley, let go of me right now, I have no time to deal with your apparent bestiality!'

He waved Draco in the air, making Draco feel distinctly seasick. Granger's curls and Potter's messy black hair wobbled alarmingly into vision.

'Put me down!' Draco howled. 'I don't want to play rat Quidditch. I will visit the dreaded Malfoy vengeance upon you, Weasley! Tremble in your miserable secondhand robes, because you are going doooo - oooh, I'm going to be sick...'

Weasley did not seem deterred by these dire threats.

Potter's tones made Draco feel even more like vomiting.

'It's a - nice rat, yeah, Ron, but I think it wants to get down. It's squirming. It could be wild.'

'It could be diseased,' added Granger.

'Same to you, Granger,' Draco snapped.

'No, it likes me,' Ron said defensively, hugging Draco to his chest. 'It hasn't tried to bite me.'

'You think I want to die of poisoning? Put me down, you delusional psycho!'

The three Gryffindors stood around, looking blissfully unaware of Draco's enraged howls.

'I think you should put it down before we go to Care of Magical Creatures,' Granger advised in her bossy tones.

'Anyway, remember what happened with your last rat,' Potter said in a lower voice.

Ron was still cradling Draco.

'Harry, don't be paranoid. It's just a little rat. It's not even quite full-grown. Did you ever see anything as cute and harmless in your life?'

'I'll get you for that, Weasley!' Draco shouted.

'So... what?' Harry asked. 'You're going to keep it?'

'I'll show it to Crookshanks first,' Ron said defensively.

'Is that your name for your fat mother, Weasley?'

Ron petted Draco, who began to seriously consider the biting option.

Granger was looking anxious.

'We're going to be late... Let's discuss this after class...'

And so Draco found himself tumbling around in that damned Weasley's hands as the Three Musketeers who had plagued his life for six years ran to that insane Hagrid's class.

Where there were mad animals.

Mad, ferocious animals.

Jaws able to crunch up a rat in one bite.

Damn you, Murphy!

*

'I mus' say, it's a fine specimen o'a rat,' Hagrid boomed, holding Draco up to his horrid bushy face.

'I've had just about enough come-ons for today, you filthy half- giant,' sniffed Draco in his most Malfoy manner. 'Unhand me.'

'I'll jus' check if it's a boy 'r a girl,' Hagrid continued.

'Excuse me?! Excuse me, you will not! Oy! No! Stop that! Isn't it clear that I am all man? Hey, hey, those are very special places...'

'A lil boy,' Hagrid announced, handing him back to Weasley.

'What exactly do you mean by little?' Draco demanded, outraged.

'Thanks, Hagrid,' Weasley grinned.

'Thanks?! Oh, yes, insult, sexual abuse-'

'I want to keep him,' Weasley continued.

'Yeah? Yeah, well you and that oaf can keep your desires to yourself!'

'Don' see any problem wi' tha'. Looks quite healthy. An' clean.'

'I bathe a hell of a lot more than either of you!'

Weasley's face was glowing like his hair.

'He does, doesn't he? And I think he likes me. What do you think I should call him?'

'Well... come t'think of it... He does remind me of someone,' said Hagrid. 'Tha' lil face...'

'Draco,' Draco prayed. 'Draco Malfoy! Come on, your most stunning student! He reminds you of Malfoy!'

'Tha' sweet three-headed dog I used to have,' Hagrid concluded.

'YOU IMBECILE!'

'You genius, Hagrid!' Weasley looked at Draco with that unsettlingly boneheaded air again. 'You know, he does look like a Fluffy...'

'FLUFFY?!'

Oh, that just puts the tin lid on everything, that does.

'All ri', class!' Hagrid shouted. 'Now we're goin' to examine those cute Saber-Toothed Butterflies again - you know, the ones tha' grow four feet across...'

To a collective groan, Hagrid turned to Weasley.

'Mebbe ye should take your lil pet outside an' play wi' him. Don' wan' him gettin' eaten.'

'What exactly do you mean by 'play'? ' snapped Draco, who was really getting grouchy, as he was carried off.

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Weasley foiled every one of Draco's cunning plans to escape by the simple expedient of being six foot four with hands which were like walls for a rat.

Then he carried him back to Gryffindor tower. He had a free class and he seemed eager to show off his new pet.

Draco was becoming convinced he had died and gone to hell.

On the other hand, he was sure hell would be filled with more likable people than Gryffindors.

'He's the most adorable rat I've ever seen,' cooed Lavender Brown.

'I'm real sorry your Irish boyfriend doesn't satisfy you, Brown, but get your nasty Gryffindor hands off me this instant.'

'Look at him,' purred Parvati Patil. 'I bet he can understand every word we say, can't you, diddums?'

'The name is Malfoy!'

Weasley's face was bright with pride. He kept grabbing Draco back from the girls to give him an extra pat.

'He has such beautiful fur,' continued Lavender. 'So unusual - it's almost white blond.'

'Remind you of someone's hair?' shouted Draco. 'Idiots! Prats! Damned damned Gryffindors!'

'We've already started to bond,' Ron told them proudly.

'Bond! You kidnapped me!'

'What are you doing?' shrieked Lavender.

For a moment, Draco thought that somebody had heard him at last.

Then he realised that Potter and Granger had come into the room. Granger was carrying a cat.

If Draco's fur had not already been white, it would have become so.

Oh my God, Draco thought. I'm going to die.

But I'm too young and devastatingly attractive to die!

Weasley's grip on him grew tighter.

'Just to make sure, Ron,' said the Boy Who Fed Fellow Students to Felines.

And, with Draco squirming frantically all the time, Weasley held him up to Crookshanks' face.

'I'll kill you, Weasley!' Draco bellowed. 'I'll report you to the MSPCA! I'll tell my father! I'll bite you really, really hard, just you wait and see!'

It wasn't fair. He liked cats. He had even fed this one and patted it a few times. He wouldn't have done that if he'd known it was Granger's.

He wouldn't have done it if he'd known it was going to eat him!

The cat squinted at him.

'Are there no animals who are really animals in this place?' he asked.

Draco gasped. 'You know who I am?'

'Of course. You're that nice boy with the fish heads, Draco Malfoy, the one who annoys my mistress. You're a bit more rat-shaped than usual.'

'Can you help me?'

Oh, that's nice. A true touch of Malfoy dignity, begging household pets for help.

'How can I? I'm a cat. I'll do my best, as I did for Sirius, but if you don't mind - I was in the middle of romancing Mrs Norris. Now there's a foxy kitty-'

Crookshanks leaped out of Granger's arms and trotted away.

Sirius? Draco thought. Sirius Black? The criminal?

Of course! He turned me into a rat, and now he's come to kill Potter!

It's an ill wind...

'You see?' Weasley said triumphantly. 'He's just a sweet, innocent little rat.'

'Oh, please bugger off.'

Granger leaned forward and her hair almost smothered Draco.

'Watch it!'

It smelled quite nice... Shame her shampoo didn't straighten her hair as well.

'You're cutting off my air supply, imbecilic Mudblood.'

She smiled. She didn't have a bad smile.

'He is terribly cute,' she said.

'Oh no, not another one. Are none of you Gryffindors getting any - oh, wait. Stupid question.'

Granger began to stroke him.

'Madam, keep your hands to yourself. I must insist - hey! With the fur, not against it!'

Granger continued to stroke him. At least her hands were gentler than Lavender's.

She came and sat beside Weasley. Potter joined them, sitting on a chair nearby. Draco was extremely thankful that Potter made no attempt to touch him.

'Hey, can I hold Fluffy?' Granger requested.

Weasley beamed with pride. 'I knew you'd take to him. Of course, you take to anything that's cute, Hermione,' he teased.

'For the fifteen millionth time, I do not!' said Granger.

'For the fifteen millionth time,' said Weasley, and coughed out the name 'Lockhart!'

'Oh no, Granger,' said Draco. 'Not old Loveheart. Not you, too. I thought you were supposed to be intelligent!'

'I was twelve!' Granger said indignantly. 'I don't still just go for looks. Otherwise, wouldn't I be camped outside the Slytherin common room with a placard saying 'Draco Malfoy, I luuurve you!''

She laughed casually. Both the Gryffindor boys had frozen in horror.

'What?' chorused Weasley, Potter and Draco in shocked unison.

Of course, nobody heard Draco.

Granger looked mildly amused.

'Oh come on, guys. I don't fancy the ferret, if that's what you're looking Confunded about.'

'Fancy...' Weasley seemed to be rendered speechless by sheer disgust.

'Weasley. It's not that outlandish a concept, and besides you have me on your lap.'

'Hermione, I think that gargling noise Ron is making means that you just indicated Malfoy could be considered in any way attractive.' Potter added hastily, 'I'm sure you didn't mean it.'

'I am in every way attractive!'

'Ron, Harry. His personality is more corrosive than Bubotuber pus. He's a nasty, prejudiced scumbag. I'd like to see him fry. But objectively, you have to admit he's attractive.'

'Damn straight! Oh, and hey about all that other stuff.'

Everyone was still utterly deaf to Draco.

'You can't be serious, Hermione,' Potter was saying weakly.

The gurgling that came from Ron sounded a little like 'foul, rat face.'

'Okay, that's - really pretty accurate,' Draco had to admit.

Granger sighed. 'Parvati! Lavendar!'

The two girls came over from the other side of the common room, and immediately began to

fuss over Draco again.

'Draco Malfoy,' said Granger.

Lavendar pretended to swoon. 'Where?'

'Stop rumpling my ears, Weasley. This is getting interesting.'

'What do you think of him? In a physical sense.'

Lavender and Parvati clearly had not been thinking of any other sense.

'He's gorgeous,' Parvati sighed. 'I mean, ever since fifth year - not that he was bad before then, but once he grew up a little...'

'Got those muscles,' added Lavender. She shot Potter a look that suggested Finnigan had competition. 'All Seekers have that sexy lean-yet- muscled thing going on.'

Potter went red.

'Go back to me,' urged Draco.

Parvati clearly needed no encouragement.

'Those silvery, piercing grey eyes...'

'That preschool-blond hair...' Lavender chimed in.

'Those cheekbones,' said Parvati.

'That face,' added Lavender.

'That body.'

'I heard he had Veela blood in him.'

'I bet he does have Veela blood in him!'

'Careful, now. It's nice to know I have a fan club, but you are drooling an awful lot and I am a very little rat.'

'He got sixty-three singing Valentines last year. I hope he liked mine.'

'I keep watching when Quidditch matches are on,' Parvati grieved, 'but so far he's always been wearing trousers under his robes. So many from the wizarding families don't.'

'Everyone seems to these days,' Lavender said.

Potter went puce.

Draco swore to God that if he ever got out of here, he was giving everyone on his team an extremely urgent warning.

'I saw him without his shirt on once-' Parvati confided girlishly.

'WHAT?' yelped Draco and Weasley together in pain.

Granger looked horrified. 'Thank you, that's quite enough. No need to overshare...'

'But he's an evil Slytherin,' Parvati said hastily. 'Ugh, Slytherins.'

'Eeeew, Slytherins,' Lavender agreed quickly. 'Down with the Slytherins. Uh - on an unrelated topic, Parvati, could I see you over there for a minute?'

Lavender and Parvati sped off, giggling.

'Well, that was... interesting,' said Draco.

'Well, that was... disgusting,' said Potter.

'You see what I mean?' Granger asked. 'Though I wouldn't have put it like that. He's a horrible person, and no girl who respected herself would have anything to do with him. But the fact remains that he's much more handsome than is fair - and he knows it, too.'

'Listen, I have ready access to several mirrors. How could I miss it?'

Draco made a mental note to look into the Gryffindors. He had dated several Ravenclaws, but had kept well away from Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors on general principles. But if the girls were gagging for it...

Then he remembered he was a rat, and his only close personal relationship was likely to be with a cheese rind.

Oh, terrific.

Draco sidled out of Weasley's hands, trying not to attract attention, heading for the inkpot and paper on the little table by their sofa.

Weasley seemed to be in shock and didn't notice.

Draco dipped one paw in the ink and began to write.

I AM

Weasley, not looking, dragged Draco back onto his lap.

'I don't care what you say,' he said. 'Malfoy is vile slime and looks it. Don't you agree, Fluffy, you adorable thing?'

'Go kiss a Flobberworm,' snapped Draco. 'Let go of me! I want to - whoa! What are you

doing, Weasley? No touching of personal places!'

My life is destroyed, Draco thought. I'm a rat, the Gryffindors fancy me, there's no way out of this mess I can see and Ronald Weasley appears to be trying to tickle my stomach.

I have hit rock bottom.

'Professor Flitwick's out,' Weasley told them all. 'I'm going upstairs to change into my pyjamas. I fancy an early night. Come on, Fluffy.'

While you're getting changed?!

Now, Draco thought with deep bitterness, rock bottom has just hit me.

There was absolutely no reason Draco could see for Weasley wanting to take his rat with him to Quidditch practise.

Unless, of course, the sadistic Gryffindor wished to scar him for life.

Draco, as the captain, got his own Slytherin changing room. And his own room. And a certain amount of privacy, and a blissful freedom from nasty, accidental looks at Crabbe and Goyle in their distinctly unwashed glory.

And now...

Gryffindors. Naked Gryffindors.

Not even the female kind.

Not that he would have looked if they were.

Much.

'Oh, honestly, Weasley! Little pink elephants?'

Draco turned around with dignity and then fell off his bench with... less dignity.

'Potter! Oh, good going! Now I'm blind! Blind and traumatised. Not even my father will be able to afford the therapy bills for this!'

Spin around.

Finnegan.

Thomas.

If Longbottom had been on the Quidditch team too, Draco would have committed suicide.

'In the name of God, you Gryffindors! **All** pink elephants?'

*

'Could you take care of Fluffy while I'm practising?' inquired Weasley pitifully of Granger.

Draco was delighted to see Granger looking at the redhead as if he were half-witted.

'I wanted to take him up on the broom,' Weasley pouted, 'but Harry said he might fall off...'

'I'm touched by Potter's concern.'

'But I know he will miss his Daddy, won't you, Fluff?'

'You are losing your mind,' Draco informed him frigidly. 'And you are, most certainly, not my father. He's much wealthi - ugh - oh my god, Weasley, what are you doing?'

Weasley was looking at him in that disgusting besotted way again, and inching Draco up to his face.

'Wait. No. We can work this out some other way. I'll give you any amount of money you want. No. Stop. Help! Sexual abuse! Rape!'

Granger reached up and grabbed Draco.

'Ron, don't even think about giving your rat a goodbye kiss. It probably has fleas.'

'How dare you, you filthy plebeian! I wash every day! I am sparkling clean and kissable.'

Draco reconsidered what he had just said.

'He might give me fleas, though.'

Is this how my life is going to be? he thought. Even shorter than Potter, covered in fur, living in Gryffindor tower and fighting off Weasley's advances?

No, it was too horrible. It couldn't be.

In the grip of desperation, he trotted over to Granger's eternal schoolbag and the ink and parchment that lay beside her.

He tipped over the bottle - no time for neatness, this was life or death! - and dipped his paw into the ensuing flood. He began to write.

I AM D

'Ron!' said Granger. 'Ron, your rat's doing something weird!'

Oh no, here was Weasley back again like a bad penny - which was probably more than his family had in Gringott's.

A flash of diabolical red, and Weasley had Draco in his grip once more.

'Do you know what this means?' bellowed Weasley, in a state of high excitement. 'My rat's...'

'Draco Malfoy!' Draco shouted back. 'Malfoy! Malfoy! Malfoy!'

'*Magic*!' said Ronald, glowing. 'Isn't that cool?'

Draco wriggled away, and began to scribble frantically once more.

YOU REDHAIRED **SOD**, I AM

'Hey, everybody!' crowed Weasley. 'I have a magic rat!'

'There's a switch,' said Potter, who was leaning against Granger's seat looking at Draco with suspicion.

Draco felt comforted by this scrap of normality in a life gone mad.

The world may become flat and the seas may turn to blood, but Potter and I will always hate each other.

'Hey,' he snapped, 'at least **you're** not tiny and pathetic and forced to live in Gryffindor and covered in hair and... oh, wait, hang on...'

At least Draco didn't have a scar.

*

The news got out pretty fast that Ronald Weasley had a magic rat.

That is to say, they told Parvati, and suddenly everyone knew.

And suddenly the corridors was packed with people pushing Harry Potter aside to see Ron Weasley and the Amazing Fluffy.

'Hands off, Hufflepuffs,' Draco snapped. 'No manhandling. You idiot, Weasley, they're going to drop me! I'm telling you, if they get this excited over a rat, their lives must be pathetically empty... wait, we're talking about Hufflepuffs here. Never mind.'

Weasley grinned with moronic pride every time someone asked to hold Draco, and then watched them like a neurotic hawk while they did so. He even managed to stop Longbottom dropping Draco, which led Draco to believe Weasley must be far more magically talented than he had ever given him credit for.

This led to Weasley being shockingly late for class all the time, which was at least good for a laugh.

He was racing towards Herbology when he slammed into a wall.

Wait, no, Draco thought. My mistake.

It was Crabbe and Goyle.

The Slytherins had arrived to show a spot of interest in the magic rat too.

Draco wondered desperately if this interest might be harmless, and then was insulted at the thought that people had been training for years could ever, in any circumstances, be harmless.

'Oh, Weasley,' piped Goyle in a falsetto. 'Can we play with the rat?'

Goyle had twice Crabbe's braincells. Well, two was twice one, after all.

Crabbe merely grunted.

Wonderful, Draco thought. I'm going to be crushed to death by my own minions. Bitter, bitter irony!

'No,' said Weasley.

Was he crazy? All right, he was tall, and not that badly built, but Crabbe and Goyle could have picked him up and tossed him like a salad in a sieve.

They were probably going to, as well.

And me, Draco realised, touched with cold fear.

Which exploded into panic as Crabbe's fist exploded into Weasley's face.

'No!' Draco shouted. 'Beating people up is the sort of thing that gets you caught and then gets you expelled, idiots! Have I taught you nothing! Besides, it's..'

Wrong...

'Me!'

I did not just have that other thought.

Weasley fell down and Draco streaked out from his hands, between Crabbe and Goyle's feet, towards...

Another pair of feet, hiding around the corner.

I know those feet! Those were the feet in the bathroom when I changed!

Which means this is...

Oh God, what am I supposed to do? Headbutt him in the toe? Rat gives himself mild concussion running into enemy's shoe?

Fearsome.

Draco waited until a hand reached out for him, and then he did something he had sworn he would never ever do.

He bit down.

Bleagh, bleagh, tastes of plastic and Muggle artefacts. Oh, for some Magicmouthwash!

Then he ran, ran, ran down the corridors, ran until he felt a hand seize him and lift him up to...

A worried face. A cloud of hair.

'Fluffy?' said Granger.

He could have kissed her.

Except for his current lipless situation.

He opened his mouth to insult her and rail at her about his life, and generally make himself feel better.

'Come and help Ron!'

This extraordinarily selfless speech of Draco's did absolutely no good, of course, because Hermione had no idea what he was saying.

'Where's Ron?' she asked wonderingly. 'Oh, well. Let's go find him.'

She looked as if she was considering putting him down.

She had mentioned Ron as soon as he had...

'Yes, put me down,' Draco said urgently. 'I know where Ron is.'

She put him down! And she ran after him when he ran, although that was possibly out of fear that she was going to lose Ron's precious rat, and so she came upon Ron just as Crabbe and Goyle were kicking him unconscious.

'Stop!' shouted Draco, in the ringing Malfoy tones of command.

Crabbe and Goyle hesitated for just a second, as if they aware of something just on the cusp of hearing.

And Granger shouted, 'Petrificus Totalus!'

Then she dropped to her knees beside Ron.

'Oh, Ron... what... why... Why didn't you use magic on them?'

Ron spoke through battered lips. 'Oh come on, Herm. When guys start a fight with fists, it'd be pretty sissy to whip out a wand...'

'So what?' Draco said irritably. 'He who fights dirty survives, and gets to lie about the battles afterwards.'

It was a Malfoy motto, right after 'Loot, Pillage, Burn!' and 'In the Name of the Dark Lord Insert-Name-Here!'

'You stupid git,' he added.

'I'll get Madame Pomfrey,' Granger told him. 'Oh, they sure took you to the cleaner's...'

'They took him behind the cleaner's and then beat him up with the cleaner's garbage cans,' Draco corrected her.

Which was when Ron, lying bloody on the ground, said,

'Is Fluffy all right?'

Granger sighed in exasperation. 'Yes, Fluffy's all right. Fluffy led me here.'

Ron's face split into a grin.

'Isn't he *cool*?'

*

Granger, who had been petting Draco quite often since his dramatic rescue of Ron, volunteered to take care of him while Ron was in the infirmary, since Madam Pomfrey refused to let him stay there. She said rats were unhygienic, to Ron and Draco's mutual outrage.

'Be careful of him,' Ron said anxiously. 'He likes to be cuddled.'

'No I bloody *don't*, Weasley.'

'He needs affection.'

'You need a girlfriend.'

Granger promised to be careful with him, and carried him up to the Gryffindor girls' room, where - surprise, surprise! - she began to do her homework.

Right after switching on a little machine, which piped at Draco,

'Do you believe in love at first sight?'

'Yes, I was introduced to mirrors at an early age...' Draco returned.

'Yes I'm certain that it happens all the time...'

It was ... music. Some form of Muggle... music.

Except it was different from music, more, sort of...

Fun.

It had a catchy little tune. Draco wished he could dance a bit, since he was quite a good dancer... unlike the Boy Who Had Two Left Feet.

Well, since Granger wasn't looking...

Draco got up onto his two back paws and began to do a little cha-cha that was part keeping his balance, part getting down with his funky rat self.

'Yeah I get by with a little help from my friends,

Oh yeah I get high with a little help from my friends'

He got quite into it.

When he opened his poor unsuspecting rat eyes and found Hermione, Parvati and Lavender all staring at him.

Besottedly.

Oh, bugger.

'Oh, the cutie!' squeaked Lavender. 'Make him do it again!'

'Nobody makes a Malfoy do anything, madam,' Draco informed her coldly.

He had his dignity. He may have just been caught wiggling his little furry behind to the sound of Muggle music, but he still had his dignity...

Right?

'Dance for us, Fluffy,' coaxed Parvati.

His father had said the day would come when girls would beg him. He just hadn't mentioned this whole rat thing.

'I will do no such thing!'

Granger was considering him, a small smile on her face.

'You know,' she said, 'he is terribly precious.'

On the other paw, Draco was nothing if not an exhibitionist. And if girls were clustered around him imploring him to shake his sexy booty, well, it would be something to tell his grandchildren.

He got up on his back paws again.

And as the girls squealed in delight (ha! His father had said he seriously doubted this would happen, and look, it was so easy) Draco considered Ron.

Weasley.

Ron.

He'd been thinking of him as Ron ever since he hit the floor, anyway. It had been a damn fool and just-too-Gryffindor-ish thing to do, getting himself beaten up by Crabbe and Goyle, but it had been...

Nice.

Draco was not a big fan of nice, but then Draco rarely had it directed towards him. It wasn't - entirely a bad feeling.

Besides, he owed the stupid git now. Even if he was poor and had that awful hair and some kind of rodent obsession. He wasn't that bad a guy.

Once Draco got back to his old self, there would be the devil to pay for Crabbe and Goyle.

Worse still, the Malfoy.

Anyway, Draco thought, perking up, I was wasting far too much time torturing Weasley anyway. I should have fixed my concentration on Potter. With my personal, twenty-four hour attention, he should be in St Mungo's before New Year's.

Ahahaha.

You evil genius, Draco, he told himself, and twirled prettily to the sound of 'I Believe in Angels.'

Chapter Three

Teenage Boys Are Animals

Once Hermione - uh, Granger - had him in her care, Draco was faced with an entirely different changing room dilemma.

I won't look, he told himself with dignity. It's beneath me as a Malfoy. We may rape, pillage, loot and burn, but we are not Peeping Toms.

Except for Uncle Ethelfride, but nobody ever talks about him in public.

We especially do not peep at Gryffindors.

Parvati Patil's underclothes narrowly missed hitting his head.

All right, what is this, some kind of strip show? Why am I being tempted beyond the power of rat to resist? Dirty, dirty Gryffindors. It was obscene. They should all be locked up.

Eeeew, it would be bestiality. That's against all laws of god and man!

Well, not Uncle Ethelfride's gods, but again, nobody ever talks about that.

Couldn't they have kept him outside after flying lessons? But no, no, they had to keep precious Fluffy with them...

Damn my irresistible Malfoy charms! If only Grandma hadn't been a Veela...

'Whoops, towel slipped,' Parvati giggled.

I will be strong, Draco chanted to himself. I will be strong.

'Can anyone see my top?' Granger demanded.

Bugger being strong, I'm looking. I'm **so** looking.

Draco turned around and beheld Ron Weasley.

'Gahhhh!'

'AHHHHHHHHH!' screamed a dozen Gryffindor girls.

'Bjargle!' said Ronald Weasley, ladies' man, and turned scarlet. 'I - I'm really sorry, everyone - Hermione - Parvati-'

Hermione was clutching her gym bag to her chest. Parvati had a death grip on her towel.

'I was just let out of the infirmary - I wanted to see Fluffy...'

God damn, Draco thought. He actually seems to be telling the truth.

That's it, he is gay.

'Take him and go!' screeched Parvati.

Ron lumbered over and picked up Draco. Draco was furious that his own personal show had been stopped, but he was also sort of touched that the big stupid lunk was better and had gone looking for him, so he didn't squirm that much.

Hermione's lip was sticking out just a little bit.

'He likes to watch the Weakest Link,' she told Ron. 'But you haven't got a TV...'

Draco had discovered TV just after the radio, and had been entranced.

Oh, blow, he thought. I'm going to miss my soaps.

'JUST GO!' screamed the female Gryffindors, en masse.

Draco couldn't be sure, but he thought as Ron carried him out Granger might have blown him a kiss.

*

'Wasn't that embarrassing?' inquired Ron, who was still pink.

'You big pillock,' Draco snapped. 'That was naked girls. That was fun. Honestly, if you don't stop being so bashful... Let's face it - no looks, no money, and a soul-stirring love life involving one date with Padma Patil, a handful of dates with Granger and looking at that Delacour bint a lot. Nobody's running after you.'

'Ron! Ron, wait!'

'Oooh, I spoke too soon.'

Chasing after Ron Weasley was the siren of the seventh year, the raunch puppet of the Ravenclaws, the don't-we-all-wish-she-was-really-a-head-girl Head Girl, Cho 'The Charmer' Chang.

Draco wasn't that into short girls, but he knew her by reputation and all the sneaked photos in the Slytherin common room. The girl who had that heroic and severely deceased Hufflepuff as a lost love, and Potter following her around like a scarred puppy begging to be put down for three years.

Draco was beginning to doubt his judgment. There must be something to Ron Weasley he'd overlooked.

Ron's ears were re-dyed scarlet with amazing speed.

'I, uh, Cho!'

'Yeah, that's her name. Full marks,' Draco observed.

Cho Chang looked at him with her great big shiny eyes and smiled that bright full-mouthed smile.

Ron was mauve by now.

'I was wondering, could I stroke your-'

'Steady on, girl!' said Draco.

'Rat?' finished Cho.

'Uh - yeah. Yeah, sure,' Ron mumbled. 'Um, his name's Flumpy. Fluffy! Fluffy!'

'Flumpy?' Draco repeated, in dreadful tones.

'I know his name,' Cho said, taking Draco and beginning to pet him. She was a bit reckless about it, if you asked him. Not a girl with a gentle touch. 'Everyone's talking about Ron Weasley and his amazing rat.'

'Rawly? I mean - really?' stuttered Ron.

'You silver-tongued devil,' Draco said, rolling his eyes.

Cho fell into step with Ron.

'So how does it feel, joining the most talked about club?' She sighed. 'Not as pleasant as it seems, is it?'

'I, uh, I think you'd better ask Harry,' Ron muttered.

'Oh, for Heaven's sake, Weasley. If a troop of Veelas in negligees came and bounced on your bed asking if there was anything they could do for you I think you'd say 'no, but why don't you ask Harry'?''

'Modest, modest,' said Cho, not put off. 'No, Harry's always been famous... but suddenly having everyone looking at you... assuming they know you - It's a bit off-putting, isn't it?'

'Well, he's just a rat, I'm not overwhelmingly famous yet,' Ron pointed out, getting out a coherent sentence to the incredulous delight of the audience.

'No...' said Cho. 'I don't know why, I just thought you'd understand... Do you know, I haven't been asked out on a date in two years?'

'Scumrfy?' said Ron, losing all control of his tongue.

'Prat!' howled Draco to the nothingness.

'Either they think I'm destined to be Harry Potter's, or...' Cho looked at her feet. 'I'm just - tired of it. I thought you might understand.'

'Or you thought he might hand out some of that weaselish hot stuff you seem to want.'

'I - I do,' Ron assured her hurriedly.

Cho smiled her dazzling future-Witch-Weekly-model smile. 'I'm so glad we had this talk.'

'He didn't talk that much,' Draco pointed out.

Cho let Draco fall gently into Ron's outstretched hands. They ended up looking deeply into each others' eyes.

'Uh - Weasley, I'm all for you getting some, but I don't want to be crushed in between a passionate clinch... Mind the rat...'

'Ronald Weasley! Cho Chang!'

If it wasn't Professor McI'maVirginandBitter,Okay?

Or McGonagall... whichever...

Cho went bright red and hurried off. Ron looked wretchedly guilty. Professor McSpoilSport looked scandalised.

Draco wondered whether Murphy, that vicious bastard, actually hated **everyone**.

*

The next day Ron was confiding all his troubles to Draco.

'Get a real pet,' Draco advised. 'Get a girlfriend. Get a diary, for God's sake, but stop bothering me!'

'How could I?' Ron wailed, extremely softly. 'I was - well, I wasn't going to do anything, obviously! Harry's my best friend!'

'Get a new best friend,' Draco counselled. 'Cho's a lot better looking than Potter. Plus, this may be your only chance.'

Ron was glancing over at Potter and Hermione, who were happily playing Exploding Snap.

'He's liked her for three years!' he murmured in distraught tones.

'That's his problem. In fact, that's his full-blown stalkerish obsession. Not yours.'

Draco couldn't believe all this Gryffindorish crap. Forget the fact that he was Draco Malfoy, and that except for the fact he had all the letters in his name the word 'moral' had nothing to do with him. He happened to know that Weasley hadn't had a date since the beginning of fifth year, when Weasley and Granger had had their extremely brief liaison.

Not that he'd been paying attention, at all, but it'd been hard to miss when Granger jumped up at breakfast time and yelled that she couldn't go out with Ron because he was jealous and controlling and she couldn't stand fighting any longer.

Draco had a private theory that she hadn't been able to stand looking at that red hair anymore.

Not that he'd cared.

At all.

In any way whatsoever.

'What am I going to do?' Ron demanded.

Parvati Patil ran in. 'Professor McGonagall wants to see all the fifth and sixth years immediately!'

The answer appeared to be: Die of embarrassment.

'Oh no!' Ron agonised. 'Oh my God, what is she going to say?'

*

The answer appeared to be - not much.

Professor McGonagall appeared to be more interested in her shoes than her students.

'I,' she commented. 'That is, very. Come glad that you could. Talk that if you might. Want.'

'What?' whispered Gina Weasley, who was sitting by her brother and ruffling Draco's fur.

At least, he thought it was Gina. Something like that, anyway.

'An incident has made me, er, think,' Professor McGonagall continued.

The same incident made Ronald Weasley squirm.

'So I thought this might be an opportune. I, that is. Professor Snape with me agreed.'

Draco toyed with the idea that she had proposed to Snape and been accepted. Then he thought of the wedding night and felt his mind's eye burn.

'Er. That is - ahem.' Professor McIncoherent coughed. 'Well. Mothers tell stories about storks and Cabbage Patch Charms. But uh, surprisingly...'

Mass mystification among the Gryffindors.

'Not true,' mumbled Professor McBabbling.

'What the hell is she talking about?' Ron whispered to Granger, who shook her head.

The poor, innocent little Gryffindors were completely lost.

Luckily for them, they had Draco Malfoy in their midst. His mind worked a little bit differently.

'Sex!' he shouted.

Which shout must have twigged something in an unconscious, just as his shout had triggered a response in Crabbe and Goyle, because just then someone leaped to their feet.

'Sex!' shouted the Boy Who Looked Like An Idiot in Front of Everyone.

Gina Weasley's mouth dropped open.

Professor McGonagall blushed like a schoolgirl.

'Ah, yes. Mr Potter. That's correct. Uh, if you'd - sit down-'

'Can she honestly think we don't know?' whispered Hermione to a Ron who was convulsed with silent laughter.

'Well, you lot **are** Gryffindors,' Draco observed. 'Anyway, this is all undoubtedly coming as a bit of an eye-opener for Longbottom.'

Hermione put up her hand.

'Professor, should we be taking notes? Is this on a test?'

'I - uh, no...' Professor McHumiliatedtotheDust muttered.

Hermione was in full swing now. 'Is there going to be a practical demonstration?'

Ron choked and fell off his seat.

'I, uh - issue of... Protection,' mumbled Professor McPretendingSheHadn'tHeardThat.

Longbottom's hand shot up.

'Like a Patronus Charm, professor?'

'More like an anti-Paternus Charm,' Draco muttered.

'I - uh, yes, Neville, but uh... in a more accurate way... well, no...' Professor McMumbling went on, interrupted at intervals by questions.

'Did you just say a **condo**?'

'Sorry, I was in the bathroom - a wand, a balloon - is this a party trick?'

'By be prepared, should we lay out ingredients?'

Draco's personal high point of the lecture was when Parvati Patil, who hadn't been paying much attention, asked if that 'mime' was even possible and if McGonagall had ever tried it at home.

Ron was lying on the ground, gasping weakly. Potter was still blushing whenever Gina Weasley glanced over at him.

Hermione was taking notes.

'Hey, hang on a minute...' Draco said. 'Professor Snape has to be doing this, too...'

Ron propped himself up on one elbow.

'Snape,' he muttered. His face split into a disbelieving grin. 'Oy, Harry - **Snape**.'

Potter caught on right away.

'Oh, we couldn't,' he grinned.

'Oh yes you could,' Draco said. 'You must!'

Hermione, Ron and Potter left quite quickly after that.

Of course, Ron took his Fluffy along.

*

'An **invisibility** cloak?' murmured Draco from under it. 'I knew I wasn't seeing floating heads! I **wondered** why you people never got caught. You lucky, jammy Gryffindors, an invisibility cloak...'

Hermione, Ron and Potter were a bit of a tight fit under the cloak. Draco wondered idly if either of the boys had enough Slytherinish spine in them to be taking this opportunity to cop a feel.

He doubted it.

The Gryffindors were stopped short in front of the Slytherin dungeons, pondering in agitated whispers about how they were going to get in without a password.

Typical Gryffindors, never thinking ahead.

'Deadly Nightshade,' conjectured Hermione. 'Hail the Dark Lord. Salazar Slytherin.'

Draco coughed.

'Good guesses all, but actually it's 'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart.' We're going to come up with something suitably sinister soon!' he added hastily.

'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart,' Granger said automatically.

The entrance opened.

'Wow, good **guess**, Hermione,' said Harry Poofter.

Draco was sick of never getting any credit.

They all crept in, unwittingly guided by Draco's directions to the Slytherin assembly room.

Where stood Snape, who was blushing purple beneath his long and unwashed locks.

'I don't **get** it, Professor,' whined Crabbe.

'I don't think you're explaining it right,' Goyle added plaintively.

Potter had to hold Ron up at this point.

'I **know** you're not explaining it right,' murmured Blaise Zabini.

Millicent Bulstrode put her hand up.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Miss Bulstrode?'

'The Gryffindors are learning this too, right?'

'Yes, Miss Bulstrode.' Snape's voice was weary.

'Harry Potter, too?'

'**Yes**, for the seventh time, Miss Bulstrode.'

'Oh.' Millicent's eyes went unfocused with lust. 'Wow.'

Granger had to hold up Potter, who seemed in danger of fainting away in horror.

'Anyway,' Snape said testily, 'if anyone has any questions which do not involve Harry Potter... or Draco Malfoy, that means you, Mr Goyle...'

'Ewwwwwww!'

'**Yes**, Ms. Zabini?'

'Can they involve Harry Potter **and** Draco Malfoy, sir?'

'Ewwwwwww!'

'Certainly not!'

'Let's go,' Draco urged. 'I came here to mock, not to be traumatised...'

'Sir, if you had a toad and...'

'I believe that's illegal, Mr Nott... Yes, even in Sweden! Does nobody in my house have any interest in a healthy relationship?'

'Sir?'

'Yes, Ms. Zabini?'

'What are **you** doing after this lecture?'

Ron made a simmering sound behind his hands. Potter and Granger had to drag him away.

*

The next day, classes were back to normal.

At least, that was the intention...

Professor McGonagall had no sooner walked up to her desk than Draco decided to take evil advantage of his possession of the unconscious plane.

'Ohhhhhhh, McGonagall...' he called.

'Open at page 32,' she said crisply.

'McGonagall, remember what you were talking to these kids about yesterday.'

McGonagall went slightly pink.

'They're remembering it too...'

'Miss Granger, open a window please...'

'They're all thinking about it! They can't stop thinking about it! They're all staring at you!'

'What are you gawping at, Longbottom? Oh - I'm sorry, forgive me...'

'Especially the boys,' Draco continued relentlessly. 'You know boys - simmering, bubbling, unpredictable little things... you lit the fuse and now the sex bomb's about to go off... You can't trust boys. You don't know what teenage boys are thinking. Or rather, you know **exactly** what they're thinking...'

McGonagall darted an outraged look at a frankly bewildered Seamus Finnegan.

'They're evil little sex maniacs!'

'Sex maniacs...' muttered the professor, wiping sweat from her brow.

'Sorry, Professor?' said Ron.

'He heard you...' murmured Draco. 'Ahahaha! They all heard you. Teenage boys are animals!'

Professor McGonagall fled. Everyone had a very nice free class, which was spent mainly in petting the adorable Fluffy.

Draco luxuriated under Granger's caress.

'At least, some of them are,' he smirked.

Chapter Four

The Gryffindor Mascot

It happened at breakfast time, when Ron was trying to slip Draco an espresso without Hermione noticing.

'Oh, Ron!' she sighed. 'You didn't buy that. I'm sure it can't be good for him.'

Draco had, in desperation, raided the dregs of Hermione's coffee cup. Ron had discovered him, and now Hermione's life was a campaign to stop Ron spending his last penny to feed his pet's caffeine obsession.

'Quiet, woman,' ordered Draco, doing his best not to scramble into the cup. 'What do you know about it? I like it. It makes me feel good.'

Mmmm, coffee. Life-giver.

'I want a little milk, too,' he said in imperious tones.

Ron lifted the milk carton and Draco fell into his espresso.

On the carton was... himself. Simply himself.

Tall and white-blond, in a formal picture wearing his black dress-robcs and with his wand dangling casually from his fingers. His head was flung back and he had a disdainful expression on his face that, in Draco's opinion, made him look devastating.

Not that this was anything new.

Ron gazed at the picture with dreamy distraction that Draco understood but was extremely disturbed by.

'Malfoy's still missing,' he said, looking as if he wanted to vomit with glee.

Hermione glanced at the picture. 'I thought he was supposed to be in one of the family's holiday homes?'

'Nah,' Ron waxed expansive in his happiness. 'Dumbledore contacted Malfoy's father, and his dad said he had probably run off to one of their holiday homes. Imagine, he didn't even bother to check! If it hadn't been for Snape going ballistic and running a check - bane of my existence that he is - Malfoy would never have been missed.'

Hermione's nose wrinkled. 'You mean - he's just gone? Really gone? But it's been nearly

three weeks now!'

Ron sighed blissfully. 'Best three weeks of my life.'

'But something terrible could have happened to him.'

'Hermione, don't get my hopes up. The disappointment would crush me.'

Hermione sighed, but to Draco's outrage did not appear unduly concerned by his own possibly tragic fate.

But then, why should she? he thought. When Father...

He's very busy, he reminded himself. He always is. Besides, it's *Muggles* and vermin like Weasleys who get coddled when they're brought up. He gets me presents, doesn't he?

Affection is a poor substitute for material goods. Rule 328 of the Malfoy Code.

And he - spends time with me. Ordering me to join the Voldemort Youth, and all that. Which undoubtedly makes up for the fact that they're both so cold and self-obsessed they wouldn't notice if I dropped dead.

Whoo bloody hoo.

'Awww, Fluffikins,' Ron fussed. 'Your gorgeous fur is all manky with coffee. Come on, we've got to get you a bath.'

Draco snapped out of it.

'You are not bathing me, Ron! No! I mean it! Keep your hands to yourself!'

Hermione ate her egg with callous calm as Ron seized Draco in his merciless grip, and gave him one of his crude and vehement pettings.

Vermin like the Weasleys...

Draco blinked, for some reason.

He was slightly cheered by observing, as Ron carried him off, that Lavender and Parvati had just breakfasted on nutritious cups of milk, bowls of milk and toast made nice and soggy with milk, and were now getting into a bitch fight about who got to have the picture on the empty carton.

He had a suspicion that they were going to paste him inside their lockers.

*

Ron was carrying a damp and disgruntled Draco back in his shirt when he went crashing into Cho Chang.

'Urgklekuh,' said Ron, which had not been how their conversations started when Ron was practising them with Draco reluctantly cast in the part of Cho.

Cho smiled as if this was a masterstroke of wit.

'Ron! Just the boy I wanted to see.'

'No wonder Ravenclaw sucks at Quidditch,' Draco commented to the air. 'Their Seeker needs glasses.'

Ron swept some red hair off his brow, trying desperately to look casual, and poked himself in the eye.

'Arghargh!'

Draco rolled his eyes.

'I... was wondering if you'd like to walk me to class?' Cho inquired delicately, going a little pink.

'Forgotten your way, have you?' Draco asked sweetly. 'And they say Ravenclaws are smart.'

'I, uh. Sure. Where is it?' Ron wanted to know.

'With that smooth talk, you must have to beat them off with a broomstick,' Draco commented.

Cho put her little hand on Ron's large one. Her long black lashes swept her cheek in a way that made Ron swallow and look faint.

'I'll show you,' she said.

'Down, girl,' Draco put in severely. 'The corridor is no place to strip.'

'Uh, I, I... great,' Ron answered. Then the red, excited, embarrassed flush in his cheeks faded. 'I - wait. Harry.'

'That's not her name,' Draco told him.

'Cho - he's my best friend.'

'Apologise for it *later*!' Draco howled. 'No. You're not doing this. I will not let you do this. Do you realise that this could be your only chance ever, and then you could... ugh, get all twisted and bitter, and end up dying with me in a room with a rat as your only friend! And that would be funny, except I would be that rat!'

'I need to-' Ron began, looking miserable but determined.

'Kiss her,' Draco ordered.

Ron stiffened, his ears suddenly flaring scarlet. He stopped talking and stared at Cho.

Draco got enthused.

'Smooch the girl. Give her an amateur tonsillectomy. Land her one. Shower her with affectionate salutations, seize her in your arms, waggle her about and say 'You are my mate, dash it!' Give her a big wet one! ... Huh, innuendo.'

Ron leaned towards Cho, looking as if he was not at all certain this was a good idea, and he expected Cho to shriek and slap him across the face... but looking like he really, really wanted to.

Cho blushed a little and leaned in.

Ron hesitated.

'Oh, just snog the girl already!'

Ron did. There was a small awkward pause, and then Ron's arms went around the small dark girl and gathered her up towards him.

There was a long, involved pause.

'... can't breathe... crushed,' said a small voice nobody heard. '... going to bloody die of oxygen deprivation, Weasley, you selfish bastard...'

Cho's arm slipped around his neck.

'... of course, you might go the same way...' Draco added.

Ron sighed and Cho kissed his jawline.

'Tease,' noted Draco, kiss connoisseur.

Then she moved to his neck.

'Oooh, vixen!'

Which was when another passionate lip-lock ensued.

'... squashed into ratty pulp...' Draco desperately tried to get some air. '... still cute, though... all right, all right, come on now, kids, it's time for class, can't miss it, those fascinating Magical Creatures won't wait around all day. A Blasted Blast-Ended Skrewt may be pining for you.'

Draco began to pray for anything which could break these two up.

O'Toole's law - Murphy was an optimist.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived - Worse Luck! - came around a corner.

'Ron, you're going to be...'

'Damn you, O'Toole!' Draco said violently into the emptiness.

Potter stared. Cho and Ron sprang apart. All of them stood looking at each other.

'Bugger me, this is awkward,' Draco remarked cheerfully in the miserable silence.

'Um, Harry,' Ron began wretchedly. 'I wasn't-'

'Kissing her,' Draco explained ingenuously. 'She just dropped something - uh, in her mouth, and he was helping her look for it.'

Ron paused and frowned as if he was having bizarre thoughts.

'Oh, don't let me interrupt,' Potter said in a strange, tight voice. 'You looked so very busy.'

Then he turned and walked into the Gryffindor entrance, where the Fat Lady had been getting an eyeful.

Ron stared at Cho with a look of horror on his face.

'Oh God, Cho,' he exclaimed. 'I don't know why I did that.'

'Could it be a) raging teen hormones b) you really like her and see her as a special human being or c) a mad rat has you under his evil sway?'

'I guess I just... I really, really like you, but...'

'Wrong answer! You are the Weakest Link! Goodbye!' said Draco, who had been watching too many game shows.

'I - I'm sorry, Ron,' said Cho, turning and fleeing down the corridor.

'Follow the girl, follow the girl,' Draco advised urgently. 'You're not likely to get a snog from Potter... ew, vivid mental picture...'

Ron sighed, squared his shoulders and walked into the Gryffindor room.

O'Toole, you bastard!

With Draco's luck, Ron *would* snog Potter.

*

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lurked, was standing in the Gryffindor common room.

'Clearly waiting for you,' Draco sniffed. 'Wants a scene.'

'Look, Harry...' Ron began. 'I want to apologise - it was an accident-'

'Oh, you tripped and fell on her lips?' Harry inquired coldly. 'Maybe you were put under the Imperius Curse by someone anxious to see young things getting it on? Could this be a dastardly plan of Voldemort's?'

'Could be,' Draco agreed ingenuously. 'Could very well be. Or Cho could have slipped him a Mickey Finn.'

'No,' Ron said miserably. 'No, look... It's this way. I really like Cho-'

'Oh, of course,' Harry snapped. 'Like you really liked Fleur, and Padma Patil, and Lavendar, and Hermione-'

'Don Juan Weasley,' Draco said, and shuddered. 'Never let me think that again.'

'Listen, Harry, just because I haven't been obsessed for three years doesn't mean I can't care about her,' Ron snapped. 'Just because you like her doesn't mean she can never have a relationship.'

'No,' Harry said bitterly. 'But I did think that my best friend would keep away from her - would have some kind of consideration for my feelings. Couldn't you have thought about me?'

'While he was kissing Cho?' Draco inquired. 'Nasty concept.'

'Harry... I never intended to hurt you-'

Potter, the Boy Who Whinged, was not paying attention.

'Ron... you have this great family, you have happiness, you have everything. Couldn't you have left me this one thing?'

'Women aren't things!' said Ron, who had obviously never read Rule 117 of the Malfoy Code.

Harry's lips set into a straight line.

'You know, Ron, when Malfoy told me not to mix with the wrong sort of people - maybe he was being smart.'

'No I wasn't!' Draco yelled. 'I was being an asshole!'

Good Lord, had he really just said that?

'I don't want to speak to you anymore,' Harry continued coldly.

'When will you want to speak to me?' Ron asked.

'Never,' Harry answered.

'Hmmm...' said Draco. 'I don't know, Ron. Is never good for us?'

'Harry, don't be thick... we have that match against Slytherin tomorrow...'

Potter's eyes flashed behind his nerdy little glasses.

'Then I'll speak to you when I absolutely have to... Beater.'

He turned and ran up the stairs.

Ron leaned his head against the wall.

'Well, that went well,' Draco remarked.

*

Next day, Draco was too concerned with his own problems to worry about Ron's.

'Sitting on the Gryffindor side,' he said crossly. 'Watching Malcolm bloody Baddock taking my place as Slytherin Seeker. I might as well be a Gryffindor. Pause, marvel, shudder at the concept.'

Hermione had him in her lap and was sitting between Lavender and Parvati. Lavender and Parvati's touches were frankly becoming a bit intrusive.

'Bubble space, girls,' Draco grumbled. 'We Malfoys are used to fawning women, but moderation in all things.'

'Ooody burble goo,' cooed Lavender. 'You precious, precious thing.'

'I'm really sorry someone hit a Bludger at your head when you were a child,' Draco snapped, squirming away.

However, he could have done with a bit more attention from Hermione. She was looking terribly faraway. She was clearly concerned about Ron and the Boy Who Lived To Make Things Difficult.

'Hey, Herm, is it true about Ron and Ch-' began Parvati, when suddenly a boy came dashing through the stands to Hermione.

He had a camera slung about his neck, and Draco vaguely recognised him. He was a Gryffindor who had recently been made the team photographer. His name was Goblin Greevey, or something.

'Hermione! Hermione!' he shouted. 'I'll take Fluffy. You have to come and do something. It's all my fault. I mentioned Cho Chang, and now Harry and Ron are fighting! And the match is starting!'

The stands were electrified.

'Oh no,' said Hermione. 'Oh no, what shall I do?'

'My Slytherin sneakiness says stall,' Draco suggested. 'Buggered if I know how, though.'

'I've got to stall,' decided Hermione. 'But... I know! Fluffy!'

'What? Me? What?'

Hermione stood up in her seat.

'Accio loudspeaker! Accio radio!'

The items came whizzing towards her, one right out of the hands of a very surprised Millicent Bulstrode, who had taken Lee Jordan's place as commentator - though Jordan had never talked so much about how Potter looked in his Quidditch robes.

Draco considered her an invaluable weapon for the Slytherin side.

'Ladies and gentlemen, and those on the Slytherin side!' Hermione shouted. 'I - uh, before the match, I request you to lend your attention to the performance of - er - the new Gryffindor mascot!'

'You blasted woman!' Draco said with deep conviction.

Now he bloody was on the Gryffindor team.

'He will now dance for us,' declared Hermione.

'Oh, will he? Think again, missy,' Draco told her severely. 'I won't be part of the Gryffindor team, and I certainly won't be the rodent equivalent of a Gryffindor cheerleader!'

Which was when Hermione switched on the radio, and it began to play one of the Insects' (or Beetles) songs.

Draco's very favourites!

'Oh, you fiend of cunning,' Draco grouched.

'Lucy in the sky with diamonds...' carolled the radio.

Well, maybe just a few steps... All right, just a flick of the tail... ooooh, listen to the crowds scream!

'Yes! Yes!' said Draco, after his encore with 'Hey Jude' and having thoroughly gotten down with his funky rat self. 'You love me! You really love me!'

He was vaguely disappointed when the Gryffindor team jogged out at last. Ron, sporting the latest in fashionable cut lips, stopped by the stands to thank Hermione and admire Draco.

'Well, my smart little boy,' he crooned. 'Since you're the Gryffindor mascot now-'

'There's no need to start calling names,' Draco snapped.

'You should fly with us,' Ron continued, scooping Draco up and placing him in his pocket.

'Ron, no!' said Hermione.

'Ron, you imbecile, I will visit the curse of the Malfoys upon you!' shrieked Draco. 'No. You're not to. I insist upon it. Ron, the penalty I will make you pay will be whispered by demons in the darkness, recorded in Books of Pain... you just put me in your pocket, do you know where I can bite you now? Ron, I'm a tiny rat, if I fall I will splatter on the Quidditch pitch...'

Ron launched off into endless space.

Part of the Gryffindors, Draco thought. Unloved by my family. A rat. Quite definitely about to die. What did I ever do to deserve this?

Well, yes, but apart from all that stuff.

*

Panic was fading for Draco now. His feet were cold, and Ron's pocket was decidedly uncomfortable, and the Slytherins were messing up so badly that the score was 20-180 to the Gryffindors, but at least Potter looked miserable and he was getting a black eye.

Mmm, shiny silver lining.

Draco was peeping out his pocket to get another sight of the dejected boy when Ron's broomstick jolted violently and almost tipped him out.

Panic, Draco's familiar friend, came rushing back after its quickie cigarette break.

'Bugger! Watch it!'

Ron's broomstick spun around as Ron's hand went to clutch at his pocket.

'Both hands on the broomstick or we both die!' Draco shouted, the world tipping over. As it turned, he saw Potter's face go ashen, and Hermione and camera-boy staring up at Ron with fixed terror.

The broomstick careened downwards and Ron let go of the pocket, grasping the stick to jerk it upwards.

Which was when Draco fell out.

There was a dazed moment when Draco thought, Whee. I'm flying.

Then he realised he was about to become Draco Malfoy, the amazing splatting rat.

Until Ron shouted incoherently, twisted the broom around and smacked onto the ground.

There was a sickening thump.

Draco landed on him, the redhead effectively breaking his fall.

'Ron!' screamed Potter and Hermione in terrified unison.

And Draco, who had never felt scared for anybody in his life before, stared at his pale still face and gasped,

'Is he dead? Oh God, is he dead?'

Potter landed beside Ron so quickly it was a miracle there wasn't another accident. Draco looked at the boy dazedly and realised Harry was crying.

He wondered in a strange, distracted fashion if he had ever cried for anyone else in his entire life.

'Ron,' sobbed out Potter. 'Oh God, Ron, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please don't be dead, I don't care about Cho, I don't care about anything...'

Ron's eyes opened a slit.

Draco felt swamped by relief.

'Look after Fluffy,' he croaked as Madam Pomfrey's aides came onto the field to pick him up.

'All right, Ron,' said Draco, 'clearly you hit your head a bit too hard...'

'Of course, of course,' Harry answered, seizing Draco in his filthy paws. 'You're going to be just fine, Ron...'

That might well be. But Draco, on top of unwelcome rodentdom, on top of being the damned damned Gryffindor mascot, was now in the power of his arch- nemesis.

Draco was not going to be fine.

And once he got his hands on Murphy and O'Toole, those bastards were dead.

Chapter Five

The Boy Who Wasn't So Bad After All

'Unhand me, Potter,' Draco ordered. 'You utter, utter pratly prat. Release me from your frankly suspicious tight grasp. I wish to go to Hermione. She likes me. She'll let me watch my soaps and listen to my music and she won't poison me.'

Harry Potter, the hero who conquered the Dark Lord and yet who could not obey simple instructions, kept a tight hold on Draco.

'I don't trust you," he whispered. "But I'll do what Ron wants.'

'Potter, your slavery to the Weasley wiles does no credit to your taste. And what's the matter with you, you mad paranoid bastard? You don't *trust* me? I'm an itty, bitty rat. What are the chances that one of Weasley's pets is going to turn evil?'

Just for that, he was peeing in Potter's underwear drawer.

Oh no, he *hadn't* just had that thought. He was going totally rodent. No matter how pathetic Voldemort's plans for vengeance on Harry Potter were, that had never even been on the list. Malfoys had far too much dignity to ever think about using their enemies' chest of drawers as toilets.

Oh, yes, fine, always excepting Uncle Ethelfride.

Draco tried to crush the image of Voldemort perching on Potter's chest of drawers and having a pee into the Boy Who Lived's boxer shorts.

While he was occupied with that, Hermione came flying down from the stands.

'Is he all right?' she demanded.

'Oh, y-' began Harry.

'He looks all right,' Hermione said. 'Oh, diddums, did you get hurt? Speak to your Aunt Hermione. I was so scared when you fell.'

'Are you talking to me, woman?' Draco inquired, scandalised.

'Are you talking to the *rat*, Hermione?' Potter demanded, equally scandalised.

Hermione flushed. 'He's the sweetest thing,' she said defensively.

'I am not,' Draco replied grumpily. 'I just have amazing sexual allure. Or, well, in my current state - animal magnetism.'

'I'll take him,' Hermione proposed. 'Parvati and Lavender adore him anyway. I'd love to have him. He'll like catching up on his soaps.'

'No, no,' Potter the prat said. 'Ron told me to look after him and I will.'

Hermione looked crestfallen. 'But, Harry... I don't think Fluffy likes you.'

'You are a woman of great perception and intelligence,' Draco informed her. 'Your keen wit drives me to frenzied heights of admiration. Now hit this idiot with a Bludger, hide him behind the Hufflepuff stands and make off with me to your tower.'

'Oh for heaven's sake,' Harry exclaimed. 'Has everyone but me gone mad? It's not like this rat is a person!'

With that, he stormed off.

Draco was carried away, protesting violently.

Oh, would the indignities never end?

*

As Potter entered the Gryffindor common room, that Gina Weasley girl lifted her head. Nothing new there, of course, the Weasleys' youngest hope was like a shark. She could detect a trace of Potter at fifty paces.

'Hi Harry!' she said brightly, bobbing up and down in his path.

'Hi Ginny,' responded Potter, with the boyish I'm-such-a-good-guy-join-my- fan-club smile Draco loathed.

Hang on a second, Gina's name was Ginny? Bugger it. Next someone'd be telling him that the Weasley twins weren't called Fred and Greg.

'How's Ron?' she asked in a whisper.

'Oh, like you care,' said Draco. 'You just want to snuggle up and whisper with Potter. And you're not doing it right. You're attractive enough, if the guy's into redheads, but everybody likes a challenge. Talk about Seamus Finnigan.'

Ginny put her head to one side, as if she was considering something.

'Ron will be fine,' said Harry, with his equally detestable I'm-so-decent-are-you-in-distress-damsel? smile.

Ginny Weasley gave him an innocent and charming smile.

'I'm so glad Ron has a friend like you, Harry. You're so... reliable.' The dismissive tone of her voice was clear. 'Say, have you seen Seamus? Now, he played a *great* game. A Chaser's such a *dynamic* thing to be, don't you think?'

She flitted away. Draco looked after her with approval.

Bright girl. Good instincts. Pity they were all so clueless up here in Gryffindor, they had a lot of potential. It had to be the height of the tower, he reflected. High altitude - a high standard of morals.

Morals got in the way of successful sexual expeditions. Still, Draco was amazed that *all* the Gryffindors were this innocent. Blaise Zabini had been cutting a swathe through the school, boys round the clock and girls during that week around full moon.

Potter was gaping after the Ginny girl.

'Don't worry, Potter,' Draco said. 'I think Finnigan's seeing Lavender Brown. And if he's not, whoops, too bad... Heh heh heh.'

Ooooh, this might be fun.

*

'I always knew you'd be insufferably boring,' Draco informed Potter. 'Sitting and brooding beside the window for five whole hours, why, you must be a smash hit at parties. You madly dull bastard.'

Potter was sitting beside the window with a big book in his lap. He had not opened it, he was just staring into the spectacularly uninteresting greyness.

Draco was investigating Potter's stuff.

He had already done a stint hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, running around with it flying behind him, shrieking, 'I am SuperDraco!' He had disarranged Potter's socks and looked at the few pictures on Potter's desk.

'Mother was a redhead, eh? Ginny Weasley's in luck if you have an Oedipus complex,' he had prattled idly to himself. 'That's a nice picture of Hermione. Bloody awful one of Ron, his eyes match his hair. Why on earth do you have a picture of a dog, it looks like a Grim, I'd have nightmares. Not that you probably don't have nightmares anyway, all that frightening stuff happening to you - You Know Who after you, Death Eaters cursing your name, Millicent Bulstrode having the hots for you...'

Now Draco was gingerly investigating under Potter's bed. The boy was a secret slob - wrinkled bits of parchment, screwed-up copies of that most hilariously excellent paper, the Daily Prophet, odd socks and fluff galore lurked there. There was also a picture lying in the fluff, in a cheap frame. Draco wondered if it was a secret love.

He went and took a peek, screamed on a very high note and hit Potter's lap at a run.

'Agh oh my God it's horrible horrible I tell you! Some pink, bloated, dreadful THING, staring at me with awful piggy eyes, yes, it was like a pig in a wig FROM HELL, it wasn't human surely it wasn't human it's too disgusting I feel sick!'

Potter petted him (oh the shame!), seeming slightly amused.

'There there Fluffy. Did the picture of Dudley frighten you?'

'What's a Dudley?' Draco asked suspiciously. 'Potter, that *isn't* a secret lover, is it? Because if it is, and this is the last time I will EVER say this to you, you could do better! *Hagrid* could do better!'

'I bet all of your relatives look handsomer than that,' Harry continued absently.

'That's a relative?' Draco choked. 'Oh, Potter, I'm so magically magnifying that and hanging it over the Gryffindor table.'

Mind you, Potter was right. All of Draco's relatives were a lot handsomer than that. Narcissa Malfoy, of course, as your token trophy wife, was gorgeous and it ran in her family. His father was good-looking in a cold bastard way - and you *knew* it ran in his family.

Even Uncle Ethelfride had been handsome, apart from the manic look in his eyes and aside from the purple clown pants.

'I have better looking relatives, though,' Harry continued, and opened his book.

Inside were more pictures of his dead parents. Blah, blah, blah. Quit brooding about it, Potter, what are you, Mr Billowing Robe o'Pain tm?

Draco, supremely uninterested, was about to scurry off and continue his quest for Potter's secret steroids stash when something wet plopped onto his fur.

Draco stared.

Harry Potter was crying.

Oh, no. Look, whoever was in charge of the world, they were getting it wrong. Harry Potter wasn't supposed to cry, he was supposed to smile that trademark well-flossed and heroic and nauseating smile, or at least frown that I-must-battle-the-forces-of-evil-and-Malfoy-that-means-you frown. He wasn't supposed to actually feel for his parents, he was supposed to secretly glory in his own celebrity and smugly wallow in everyone's adulation. He was supposed to love this.

He was still crying.

And Draco, to his horror, felt some kind of... disgusting... sick-making... *squishy* and distinctly *unnatural* feeling stir inside him.

It was almost as if... oh God no... he felt *sorry* for Potter.

Whoever was in charge of the world, he was clearly taking the day off.

Potter had to stop crying. Then, he'd stop feeling sorry for him, and the world could get back to being less like a bad trip.

'Come on now, it's not that bad,' Draco said briskly. 'Chin up. Buck up. Shut up.'

Potter did not seem noticeably comforted, and Draco, not quite believing he was doing this, rubbed his head against Potter's sleeve.

'Think cheery thoughts,' he offered. 'You're rich and famous. You're a total teachers' pet. Ahhh... A nubile redhead wants to shag you?'

Potter sniffed, and petted Draco.

'Thought that'd do the trick.'

'Oh, hey,' said Harry. 'You're actually kind of nice, aren't you?'

'No! And don't think you're getting around me that way.'

Harry stood up. 'Let's go and get you some coffee.'

Oh damn it, now Potter knew his secret weakness. How was he supposed to resist?

'You sneaky *bastard*!'

God, was he supposed to like Potter now? Feck it, next he was going to be filled with admiring respect for Longbottom.

Still, while the going was caffeinated...

'Triple espresso, please.'

*

Ron got out of the infirmary quite soon this time, and he was delighted to discover Harry's new attitude to his pet.

'I guess he feels bad about Cho,' he whispered to Draco.

'Don't be absurd, Weasley,' Draco said grumpily. 'He simply fell prey to my irresistible charms. It was bound to happen. It had nothing to do with you or your girlfriend.'

Ron and Cho kept eyeing each other from a distance. It was all quite painfully absurd. Draco had gotten quite a bit more action in his time without a quarter of the bother.

But if you were silly enough to go around getting emotionally attached to women, that was the kind of thing you had to put up with. Draco had decided at age three not to get over-fond of anyone, and it had served him well.

Draco's broomstick of thought was blown off the Quidditch course by the sight of Hermione and Harry, racing towards him.

The jolt of pleasure he felt surprised him.

Then Hermione's progress was halted by a small boy barrelling into her and knocking all the breath out of her.

Actually, Draco recognised him. It was Edmund Baddock, wasn't it, Malcolm's little brother.

He was in first year, and he was currently looking mutinous and generally unpleasant as Hermione gasped,

'Do you mind apologising?'

His black eyes narrowed.

'Do you mind watching where you're going - Mudblood?'

Uh-oh, Draco thought. Hermione had once slapped him. Edmund Baddock was small enough for her to kick around like a Muggle ball. She had a wicked temper on her sometimes. Who knew what she was going to do?

She burst into tears.

*

Ron and Harry had taken charge of the situation, seized Hermione's elbows and marched her up to the Gryffindor common room. Then they had sat her down, fetched her hankies and tea, put Draco in her lap and were looking at her appealingly.

'I'll kill him if you like,' Ron offered desperately.

'Someone do something,' Draco urged. 'She's leaking again... and urch, I'm getting all soggy.'

'Why are you even upset?' Harry burst out. 'He's nothing, he doesn't count, he's just a stinking Slytherin...'

Hermione actually sobbed.

'Stop it!' she shouted. 'You can't say that!'

Harry, Ron and Draco sat stunned and silent.

'Oh God,' said Hermione. 'It's just that... It's just that, don't you see, there it is. There's the cycle of hatred. It ends in things like the Ku Klux Klan-'

'The what?' chorused Draco and Ron.

'And Voldemort,' she continued. 'And it starts here, with people like us, in a school. Among contemporaries. Children spout what adults tell them, they say 'Mudblood' or 'stinking Slytherin' and then they hate each other, and then they grow up and *kill* each other, and nobody ever *thinks*!'

Ron waved a hanky, in the same way as a mother might wave a spoon loaded with food in

front of a baby and go, 'Here comes the choo-choo!'

'That kid won't listen to me,' Hermione said. 'And I bet his yearmates hate him, and hit him, and he hates and hits them back, just like we always hated Malfoy and his crowd, just like all Gryffindors do.'

'Steady on now,' Draco protested. 'Half the Gryffindors seem to be lusting after me, remember? I doubt they want me chained up and punished - unless they're more kinky than I ever gave them credit for.'

'But Malfoy's Bubotuber pus,' Ron objected.

'Oh, thank you very much.'

'You see?' said Hermione. 'We all hate each other, and that's where it leads to. You start out with ignorant kids spouting what they've been taught and we never show them they're wrong, and we all hate each other, and it ends in blood. Harry, you told me Hagrid said Slytherins were worse than the other houses, you heard him say that all the Malfoys were rotten.'

'You know, he's been biased since that tiny incident with Uncle Ethelfride and his dog. Oh, and since my father had him thrown in Azkaban.'

Hermione just looked pale and rather sick now.

'We never corrected him, did we? We got angry about other people's prejudices, we never worried about our own, and... we're all almost as bad as each other.'

'We never started with Malfoy the way he started with us!' Harry exclaimed.

'We never stopped either!' Hermione yelled. 'And no, I don't like any of the Slytherins, I think they're ignorant gits, but how are we supposed to let this continue? Isn't there someone, anyone, we could have proved to that... that...'

Her head was in her hands now.

'That I don't believe all of them are supposed to be evil,' she whispered. 'Then maybe there are some of them who would have rethought the belief that Muggleborn are scum. Oh, isn't there some way to challenge all this endless hatred?'

There were so few people who would have cried over this, Draco thought. But Hermione was smart, and Hermione saw things that other people did not and tried to make things right, and... made some very good points.

'We don't even see each other as people anymore,' she said in a low voice. 'Is there a single Slytherin in Hogwarts who would care if they saw me crying?'

'I care,' said Draco.

Oh, bugger me! He was in even more trouble than he had thought.

Chapter Six

Boy Love's First Kiss

Ron had to go back to the infirmary for a check-up, and Harry took Draco to come visit him.

"How are you doing, boy?" Ron asked, tickling him behind the ears.

To think he'd see the day when he wouldn't mind this.

"Oh, you know," Draco said. "This one here needs looking after, he's always breaking his glasses and forgetting to brush his hair, and he hasn't got a TV. On the whole we're doing all right, but it'll be a relief when you get back to look after him."

"I'm taking great care of him," Harry promised.

"If you care, caffeinate," Draco muttered with a certain amount of bitterness.

"And... listen," Harry added awkwardly. "I was thinking... about Cho."

"And I came to the conclusion, who needs her? Let me ravish you on the bed, my gorgeous redhaired raunch puppet."

It was just too much fun to see their little faces when they thought they were actually thinking these things.

Yes, he knew it, he was evil.

"I was mad," Harry confessed. "But Cho isn't required to like me, and I'd like her to be happy. I'd like you to be happy. And when I saw you lying there on the ground, it just... made it all clear. If that's what makes you happy, Ron, then go for it. I - I wouldn't ever want to stand in your way. We're best friends, aren't we? That's not going to change."

"Yeah, yeah, cue the manly, Quidditch-victory-hug of straight guys."

Draco wondered if Gryffindors really had their own evil thoughts, or if this cynical inner Slytherin thing was really freaking them out.

"Harry..." Ron was blushing, apparently because having a discussion about a girl with his best friend of six years was too embarrassing.

From the purity of the Gryffindors, the idiocy of the Hufflepuffs and the general know-it-all attitude of the Ravenclaws, good Lord deliver us.

Famous Slytherin prayer.

"Harry, I'd never want to hurt you..."

Harry touched Ron's shoulder. "I know that, Ron. That's exactly why. That's exactly why."

Cho entered, carrying flowers.

She went red as her poinsettias when she saw Harry. Harry, however, gave her a smile.

Bugger it, Draco thought. The propaganda was true. The bastard really is brave, noble and good. What are the odds?

"We were just done," Harry said gently. "It's nice to see you, Cho... though I'm sure it's even better for Ron."

He managed to almost sound roguish. Cho looked immensely relieved... and a little shy.

Ron looked eager.

"We'll just go..." Harry continued, picking up Draco and backing off.

"Put me down, you twat! You haven't seen him with girls, he needs me!"

Harry had chosen this time to stop listening. Damn Gryffindors.

Draco saw Cho bending over Ron as they went out.

"Oh, never mind. Chang has him right where she wants him - helpless in a bed. It's a good thing you didn't hook up with her, Potter... she seems a demanding creature. Ron'll be fine... big hands, you know..."

Harry shook his head to clear out the disturbing thoughts as he strode down the corridor.

Draco was somewhat touched to see tears welling up in his eyes.

Not to say that if he hadn't been somewhat rodented, Harry would not have received the Mother of All Mockfests.

"No," Draco proceeded smoothly. "What I have in mind for you is something undemanding, you know, something young, adoring and... redheaded."

Honestly, how had the Gryffindors managed their love lives without him?

Oh wait, these were Gryffindors, they didn't have...

And there were Ginny and Hermione now, both looking very pretty if Draco did say it himself. They were giggling together in an innocent way which Draco didn't really see much of down in the dungeons.

It was okay - for a change.

"Hey there, girls," Harry said. "If you're off to visit Ron, give him five minutes."

"Potter, that's insulting!" Draco exclaimed. "Give him at least ten."

"Cho's in there," Harry explained.

Hermione instantly looked concerned. She was too nice for her own good, if you asked Draco.

"Oh, Harry, how are you?"

"Fine, actually. Surprisingly okay. Meaningful look at Ginny."

"Fine, actually. Surprisingly okay," Harry repeated after Draco, giving Ginny a menaningful look.

Then he tried to look at his own mouth in astonishment.

"Oh, I'm good, baby!" Draco said gleefully.

"Oh, I'm..."

Mercifully, Harry stopped himself.

Ginny was looking incredulous and delighted. Hermione looked as if she wondered whether she should sidle away.

Harry unwittingly got a complete revenge when in a flustered attempt to be playful and defuse the situation, he dropped Draco down Hermione's robes.

"AGGH!!!!"

"AGGH!!!! Potter, you bastard, I'm going to kill you!"

Oh, Draco was blind. He couldn't find his way out. Hang on, was this a sleeve... no, it was more like a strap... dammit, what was this slope he had fallen down...? Whoa, whoa, what was this?

Oh.

OH.

"Or maybe I owe you one."

Oh, hang on, no, he was a Malfoy and this kind of cheap copping a feel was...

Yes, very much in character, but...

Hermione had no idea, and taking advantage of unknowing females was...

All right, a very common Slytherin practise, but...

Oh, obviously these bloody Gryffindors were infectious or something.

"Potter? I'm in her left cup. Come get me."

Draco realised the consequences of this when Harry tried to obey, and Hermione gave an outraged shriek.

Draco couldn't help sniggering.

"Harry!" exclaimed Ginny and Hermione in chorus.

"I, ah, uh..."

Draco didn't at all like this idiotic tone in Harry's voice. If he was getting over Cho by turning towards Hermione...

Well, it was just wrong, that was all. He was far too... short for her. It was ridiculous.

Draco didn't make the rules.

"Hands right off, Potter. Weasley, a hand in the war effort here..."

Draco was finally extricated. Hermione and Harry were both scarlet.

"I have to go, uh, fetch a book..." Hermione said hastily, and decamped.

"Should we wait for her?" wondered Harry.

"No, no. She likes books. Can't get enough of them. You'd probably ruin a special moment," Draco told him hastily.

He was getting this Ginny and Harry thing settled.

Draco Malfoy, village matchmaker.

Oh well, you had to do something to while away the weary hours between getting put down girls' tops.

"Now that incident of the Boy Who Had Busy Hands is over," Draco proceeded.

"Now that incident of the Boy Who Had Busy Hands is over," Ginny repeated, and smiled cheekily.

Draco was somewhat surprised.

He was also somewhat impressed. You never knew with redheads, did you.

"I actually have to get a cloak from my room," Ginny finished.

"Oh, I'll walk you," Harry offered instantly.

He hadn't offered to walk Hermione. Veeery iiiinteresting.

Draco's Veela-inherited Barometer o'Sexual Attraction was going off like anything.

And possibly, if left to themselves, Harry and Ginny would have got around to business after several more years of friendship, stammering, a never-spoken-of-afterwards mistletoe event, falling over each others' feet, having an incredibly awkward proposal and the obligatory white wedding.

Draco simply intended to speed things up a bit.

Slytherin style.

*

"So, are you crushed about Cho?"

"Thank you, you scintillatingly outspoken snippet of cuteness," Draco said gratefully.
"You're making my job soooo much easier. One might think you were unGryffindorlike enough to have hormones."

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Everyone Frankly Wondered About, wrinkled his nose in a bashful manner and looked at the ground.

"You know... I meant it when I said I was okay," he said tentatively.

"Oh, that's it?" Draco screeched. "That's all you're giving me to work with? You gutless ra -
weas - bloody forget it!"

Ginny's mind seemed to be working along the same lines from her expression.

Draco thought furiously.

"All right, here's an idea. Maybe it was just an infatuation. Say it! Say it!"

"Maybe..." Harry waited for an excruciating moment.

Oooh, he was so The Boy Who May Actually Have Been Born Asexual.

"Maybe it was just an infatuation," Harry concluded.

Yes! Yes! Harry Potter, you're beautiful!

Heavens, he **had** to get away from these Gryffindors, or he could not be held responsible for any fan clubs he might join.

No. Draco swore that if it ever came down to that, he would take the path of noble suicide.

"Try this," he suggested. "I was looking for love... but I'm starting to think that I was looking in the wrong place."

Draco knew it was unbearably corny, but chicks liked this crap.

Besides, Harry Heroic Potter could hardly bend Ginny backwards in his arms and say through the corner of his mouth, 'What I want I take - on the floor if necessary, you shaggable little piece.'

Draco sniffed. Only he got away with that kind of thing.

"I was looking for love, but I'm starting to think that I was looking in the wrong place."

A dawning light was breaking over Harry's face as he said this, as if he was...

Starting to believe it.

Honestly, there was no call for sincerity! Draco was trying to seduce someone at second hand, there was no need to add further complications!

How like Harry, to begin buying into this.

Ginny looked like she was buying it too. Well, that was a comfort.

"Oh, Harry," she said.

"Yes, Ginny?" said the Boy Who Might Be Straight After All, leaning in.

Oh, thank you, thought Draco. Finally.

"We're at the girls' dormitory," replied Ginny, ducking inside.

Evil, evil redhead!

Draco was most seriously impressed. He was starting to wonder if this girl was too good for Harry.

Of course, the other option was Hermione.

"In there, man!" Draco commanded. "Finish this! Are you a man or a m - okay, we'll stay off the small furry animals subject. Get your arse in there, or may Finnigan get her after all."

Harry looked conflicted. Clearly, barging into the girls' rooms was Not Gryffindor Behaviour.

Draco quite liked the Slytherin girls' dorms. The Ravenclaws weren't bad either.

"She might be taking her clothes off," he suggested.

Harry took two smart steps backwards.

Maybe Draco had been a bit too quick, assuming the boy was into women after all.

Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had been misbegotten enough to put Draco into Gryffindor he

would have screamed and pelted out of the place.

Not scoring for six years... This chivalry had to stop.

There was a crash and a bang from inside.

Thank Salazar, Draco thought fervently as Harry dashed inside.

Ginny Weasley stood, looking somewhat abashed, beside her dresser. Half the contents were on the floor.

Obviously, Ron did not hold a monopoly on the Weasley clumsiness. Falling over tree roots and dumping inoffensive dresser contents everywhere...

No time to muse on the Weasleys' unfortunate genes! Seductionarama!

"I, I thought you might be in trouble," Harry stammered.

Ginny softened visibly. "And you came in to rescue me."

"If you were in any trouble..." Harry said, his voice trailing off into decided weakness as Ginny drew closer... "I'd - I'd come to rescue you..."

"Really?" Ginny whispered.

"Come on," Draco said. "Do I have to wave a flag here? The girl is gagging for it! Kiss her! Give me a K, give me an L..."

Later, Draco always suspected it was Ginny who made the first move.

Not that Harry didn't seem to be enjoying himself.

"Give me a 'now we're getting somewhere!' Good children!" Draco said approvingly. "Excellent. Couldn't have done it - no, I tell a lie, could have done it a whole lot better myself, but the girl seems happy enough."

Harry drew back slightly.

"What I was looking for..." he whispered, "may have been a lot closer than I'd thought..."

I didn't help at all with that particular nauseating sentence, Draco thought. He did it all himself.

He may be a natural.

Thankfully, Ginny shut him up quick.

After a few moments Draco became a little uneasy.

"Well... well, I think that will be splendid for the time being, don't you?"

Neither Harry nor Ginny paid him any attention.

"You have classes you know!" Draco yelled. "Education is vital! Knowledge is power!"

Nobody was moving, and Harry's glasses seemed to be steaming up quick.

"Oh, get a room." Draco quieted. "Hang on, this is her room. Oh, God."

At that precise moment, Hermione burst in.

"Did I hear a - Oh! Ohmigosh! I'm so sorry!"

Draco wondered why on earth anyone had ever made a fuss about her hair. It was great hair! Gorgeous hair! It made her look like a brunette sunburst as she entered a room!

All right, that was probably the hysterical relief talking there.

*

The practically simultaneous hook-up of Ron and Cho Chang, and Harry and Ginny, was the cue for something more alarming and more sickening than Draco had ever dreamed.

The Gryffindors' Pre-Christmas Fest o'Lurve.

Six years of pent-up hormones, smiling shyly at your crush, being decent and bashful, had obviously taken their toll. It was time for an explosion.

But it was a uniquely Gryffindor explosion. Draco could have handled impassioned snogging.

When people held doors open for their crushes, when they began making Christmas cards that put Ginny's Famous Valentine to shame, when Harry with a furious blush presented Ginny with flowers... ugh, it was just too horrible!

Lavender and Seamus came out of the closet and then quickly went back in.

Quite literally.

Disturbing noises followed.

Ron and Cho, Ginny and Harry, held hands and smiled dreamily, as events snowballed around them. Dean Thomas appeared to be dating either or both of the Patil twins, and seemed a bit confused about the whole affair.

There was even a rumour about Colin Creevey and Blaise Zabini, which Draco thought was just sick.

Neville kept looking over at Hermione. This was the dizzy limit.

Draco didn't know if he could take much more.

Thankfully, Hermione did not seem affected by the raging hormonal tide. She looked at people with a faintly amused and contemptuous air, and read quietly in the Gryffindor common room with Draco on her lap, as around her couples giggled and whispered and snogged.

Draco thought this was a very mature attitude.

"So, uh, Hermione," Neville said, "you like the stars, don't you?"

"No she doesn't. Bugger off."

"They're all right," Hermione replied instead. "Why?"

Draco liked his version better.

"I was thinking... we could, uh, maybe go look at them from the Astronomy Tower?"

Across the room, attention was suddenly turned on them.

"The Astronomy Tower!" Draco howled in outrage. "You...! That den of sin, that nest of nookie, that fortress of Blaise Zabini! She is not that kind of girl!"

Hermione smiled.

Far too kindly.

And didn't kick Longbottom.

In Draco's opinion, a wildly ill-judged move.

"I'm kind of tired, Neville," she answered. "I'm going up to bed. Maybe another time."

"Like when hell freezes over, and all the little demonettes go ice-skating hand in hand, twirling little figures of eight in cosmic freaking harmony!"

"May I take Fluffy with me, Ron?" Hermione continued.

Ron looked up from his arduous task of composing another letter to Cho.

"Hm? Oh yes, sure, fine."

"You don't pay me enough attention since that Chang girl came along," Draco told him severely. "If you're not careful, I shall leave you and set up house with Hermione. Then you'll be sorry. And you have Potions homework to complete, you know."

Nevertheless, he was quite happy when Hermione took him upstairs. Hermione had a radio and a TV.

She turned on the radio and climbed into bed, Draco settling on the pillow. Her hair,

whatever else might be said about it, did smell nice, and was extremely soft.

Hermione, who did not seem at all sleepy, began to pet Draco. Her face was pensive.

"It's not that I'm jealous," she said. "I'm happy for them all. I really am."

The radio kept playing.

'I put on my PJs and I hop into bed...'

"I'd just... like to be happy too," Hermione murmured. "I know what they all say. Hermione Granger, more into books than boys."

"Books can be fun too," Draco put in enthusiastically. "There's this certain sections of the Restricted Section, and well... actually I forget. It was a dream. And it wasn't my dream, it was Blaise Zabini's. And let's get off this subject, shall we?"

"And I love books, but - I'm a human being. Viktor was sweet-"

"If you like a man who walks like a DUCK! He was more bird than man."

"But I wasn't all that interested. And Ron, well, I love Ron, I do, but he gets so insecure and he can be so jealous, and he hated it that I still owled Viktor. I couldn't put up with that."

"Nobody could," soothed Draco. "Wait, what? You still owl the duck man? Are you insane, woman?"

'I'm half alive, but I feel mostly dead...'

"And I like Neville, but honestly... I know I'm not pretty, but... Isn't there anyone at all? I'd just like - to have somebody."

'... turn out the light, I shouldn't think any more tonight...'

Draco looked at Hermione as she laid her cheek against the pillow. Saw her sweet, heart-shaped, sad and rather lonely face, the warm light of her closing brown eyes. Even a little miserable, she was a good person and looked it, intelligent, a bit too innocent.

She had argued over Arithmancy, started that house elf society when nobody else cared, narrowed her eyes and actually hit him over some stupid animal, cried because of Edmund bloody Baddock and she had soft hands.

And... there was just something...

Oh, godly God.

'I know you love me, and soon I know you will see...'

"You have me," Draco said in a low voice. "If - if you'd like."

Hermione smiled slightly in the dim light.

"I guess it's just you and me, huh, Fluffy?"

She dozed off, her breathing regular and oh, somehow comforting, in the darkness of this room.

"It certainly seems that way," Draco said at last, in shell-shocked tones, staring emptily into the night.

'You were meant for me, and I was meant for you...'

*

Unluckily, the Gryffindor Gag-Me-With-A-Spoon Snogfest had further-reaching and more terrible consequences than everyone staying over Christmas to be with their honeys and go with them to the Yule Ball, which had been held every year since the Triwizard Tournament because Dumbledore lived to torment his students.

That was Draco's take on the situation, anyway.

Ron started to think that Draco looked lonely. So he fixed him up with Hannah Abbot's rat!

A Hufflepuff rat. Oh, the humanity!

A nasty, brown, common, rodenty rat.

Who badly wanted a piece of Fluffy's action.

Draco could not blame her, but at the same time it was just not on.

Malfoys were fastidious creatures. If the rat wanted one, she was going to have to wait for her Prince Ethelfride.

Yeccccccch.

Draco would not soon forget scooting madly across the floor, the other rat in hot pursuit, screaming "Help me, Weasley, you stupid idiot!" as he tried to leap onto Longbottom's bed in a desperate bid for freedom.

Ron's interference was the only thing that stopped Draco from saying "Goodbye, cruel world!" and throwing himself from the Gryffindor Tower.

One spark of light had come from the whole sorry business, of course. Longbottom had been charmed by Hannah and was even now in the process of writing her a love note.

A Longbottom and a Hufflepuff.

Somebody, please, think of the children!

Draco stretched luxuriantly in Hermione's lap, reflecting that this was not his problem. She was sitting by the fire, a cup of coffee within easy reach which she had surrendered to him. Occasionally Harry reached over and tickled him behind the ears.

Ron sat, buried in his Potions homework, which he was actually getting through rather fast because Draco kept peering over his shoulder and whispering the answers to him.

"I'm getting it! I'm really getting it!" he said jubilantly at intervals.

You had to feel a bit sorry for the boy.

Draco felt more sorry for himself when he discovered he was running low on coffee, but a quick word from him to the extremely suggestible Longbottom fixed that.

"Ahahahaha. You are all my unwitting slaves," he cackled as he sipped from his fresh cup.

Harry smiled slightly, for no reason, as he toasted bread over the fire. Hermione smiled as she read.

It was all so warm, and - and revolting of course, but really so... cosy.

The Slytherin common room wasn't like this.

Draco yawned. Ron jumped up.

"Fluffy's exhausted and so am I. We're off to bed."

"Can't wait to get me alone, Weasley," Draco said grumpily.

"Awww, Ron, I want him," Hermione protested.

"You always have him!" Harry said. "I'm the one who looked after him while Ron was ill. He likes me too you know."

"Come on, three-way bitch fight," Draco urged brightly. "It'll make me feel so special."

"Excuse me? This is my rat," Ron said, and left the room bearing Draco in triumph, to calls of "Sharing is caring!"

Draco yawned again. They weren't... bad kids, any of them.

In fact, he - rather liked them all.

Even this great redhaired lunk, who was cuddling him quite insistently as he tucked him up in bed.

Draco didn't even bother struggling. He was still warm from the fire, and kind of drowsy... it didn't even disturb him when the other boys came in and got into bed.

He felt - peaceful. Peaceful as a child, caressed by a parent.

Not that his parents had been the affectionate type. They weren't touchy- feely. And Draco had never minded, but...

This wasn't... dreadful.

He was almost... happy.

"You know, Fluffy," Ron murmured sleepily, "things have been so wonderful since I found you. It's like - you're lucky. My lucky, magic rat... It's - great."

"You're making me blush," Draco said drily. "Well. Under the fur."

"Night night," Ron whispered, and kissed the top of his head.

Draco was about to remark on how that wasn't hygienic, and Hermione wouldn't approve, and he personally didn't swing that way, but...

Then he felt a sudden, intense pain radiate from the base of his spine to the ends of his fur, tingling madly and horribly as it raced through his body. He doubled up in agony, for just a spasm, a moment, and he clenched his fists and...

Clenched his fists?

Since when did he have...

He saw Ron's eyes gleam with horror in the darkness. They looked an awful lot smaller than they had of late.

Oh, no. Oh, bugger.

At the same time, both boys realised the same terrible truth.

Draco Malfoy was naked in Ron Weasley's bed.

Both boys screamed.

Every light in the dormitory went on.

Chapter Seven

Humiliatus Totalus

For one mad moment, chaos reigned supreme in the Gryffindor dorms.

Shrieks came from all sides.

"It's Malfoy!" wailed Neville Longbottom, diving under the bed.

"Ron, say it isn't so!" Seamus Finnigan exclaimed, his expression indicating imminent hysterics.

"Oh God," Dean Thomas kept repeating fervently. "Oh God... Oh God."

Harry seemed to be transfixed with horror. "Give me your bed sheet!" Draco demanded determinedly. "Right now!"

Ron just sat and stared.

"Fluffy?" he said at last. "*Fluffy?*"

Seamus was shaking by now.

"Please, *please* don't let that be a pet name..."

"Oh God," Dean said with even deeper fervour.

"Keep it up, Thomas, I'm sure he'll pay attention one day." Draco wrenched the bed sheets off Ron's bed, and finally got his shame covered. Not before time, either. These Gryffindors were ones for the unseemly staring.

Made a chap feel quite naked.

"Malfoy?" Harry said at last.

Draco glanced over and saw how pale he was.

"Don't swoon, Potter. I'm not here to ravish you."

"Who are you here to ravish?!" Seamus' voice had become shrill by now.

"Oh God," said Dean.

Everyone was still staring at Draco. He began to tie the sheet around his waist.

Must think. Must plot.

Item One: Human again. That's good. That's definitely good.

Item Two: In Gryffindor tower. Bad, bad, bad. Even worse.

Item Three: Was naked in Weasley's bed. Can wash, and wash, yet will never be clean. Or out of the tabloids.

Item Four: Clothing. Must somehow acquire... clothing.

"What have you done!" roared Ron, catching Draco off guard and around the middle.

Startled, Draco went down with a crash. Ron fell on him and began to swing.

"They're wrestling," Seamus chanted in the tones of one beyond trauma. "They're playing rough little games, they're-"

"Seamus!" Harry snapped. "You're not helping."

Seamus appeared to be beyond hearing as well. "I think he's straddling him."

"Oh God," said Dean, the broken record with the broken mind.

"Get off me!" Draco snarled, more and more aware that this sheet was not secure. "This is all your fault, Weasley. If you hadn't *kissed* me..."

Item Five: Did I just *say* that?

Item Six: I did. To quote Thomas - oh God.

"Oh please," Seamus gasped. "No details. I beg you."

"Seamus!" Ron spluttered. "You can't think I'm - you can't possibly imagine- "

"Now I'm sure there are plenty of innocent explanations for you to be... in bed with a naked Malfoy," Harry said weakly. "I - I, this could be some form of mass hallucination. Or! We could all be on drugs."

"Be on anything you like but me," Draco snapped. "Off!"

The mental picture that ensued apparently made Seamus fall off the bed.

"Plenty of innocent explanations," Harry murmured feebly. "Oh, if only I could think of one..."

Seamus, now on the floor, was rocking back and forth.

"Malfoy's wearing a sheet and Ron won't get off him and Ron's starting to get all sweaty and look crazed with animal lust..."

"Jesus, Finnigan, you need to get out more," Draco said. "And you need to get OFF me, Weasley. Or I'm telling Chang about this."

Ron looked blank.

"How did you know-"

Almost absentmindedly, but to Draco's enormous relief, he scrambled up.

Draco got up, smoothing his sheet and bestowing his traditional Slytherin sneer upon them all. He was aware that the lofty, contemptuous air came off better when he was clothed. It was just one of those things.

"Malfoy!" Harry said, striking the Hero Note of Righteous Indignation at last. "I demand to know what you did to Ron!"

"Don't be graphic," implored Seamus.

"I didn't do *anything* to Ron!" Draco returned sharply.

There was a gurgle of "First names, too," from Seamus.

"Listen, it's all quite simple. We were in bed - no, wait - then there was the kiss - hang on, but that came after the - my clothes were in the bathroom - but that's not important and - I haven't had them on for ages, anyway..."

"Oh God."

"Shut up, Thomas. And then he tackled me to the floor, but hang on... I didn't mean - I've left out the rat part..."

"Animals too! Ron, how could you!" Seamus cried.

"No, no, but *look*, it's all right. It's not like I haven't been in Ron's bed before - I mean, I've been in it for months... when I wasn't in Harry or Hermione's and... sweet Lord, will no-one stop me?"

For the first time in his life, Draco Malfoy found himself entirely tongue- tied.

He looked around at the white, shocked and nauseated faces.

"So," he ended brightly, "I hope that's all cleared up. Now, let us never speak of this again."

"Malfoy, you are a crazed, lying, evil naked person," Harry said with deep conviction.

"I need a shower," Ron exclaimed suddenly.

"*You* need a shower," Draco remarked. "Try being washed by tongue alone for months."

"Oh... eeeerk..."

Seamus' horror had apparently reached the point of no vocalization.

"And what's up with your hair?" inquired Neville, who was under the bed and did not seem up to speed with the entire situation.

Draco became aware of a terrible covered, floppy sensation around his neck.

His hair was unbrushed! Ungelled! Unkempt!

In front of Gryffindors!

He had had enough. Being naked was one thing. Being badly groomed was quite another.

"I am going home," he announced.

"Oh, thank God," said Dean, slightly varying his formula.

"Oh, no you don't," Ron exclaimed.

Seamus gave a moan of terror.

"I mean, look, hang on, you were in my bed!" Ron shouted. "I mean - rat theft! Sexual harassment! Indignity!"

"In your dreams," Draco snapped.

"Malfoy," Harry said firmly, "I think you owe us an explanation."

He stood up. Draco could have told him that looking valiant in small pyjamas was a losing proposition, but in view of his sheet situation decided to keep quiet.

"And I'll give you everything you deserve," he replied smoothly. "Tomorrow."

He shouldn't have done it. But hell, he was a Malfoy, he couldn't help it.

He blamed his ancestors.

He waved coquettishly to Ron.

"Be seeing you, lover."

He cracked a smile as he left the Gryffindor dormitory on the gasp that burst from all throats. The smile carried on as heard Longbottom's apprehensive question, "Is he gone?"

The smile only faded when he realised that he should have begged or stolen some robes.

Oh God, he was wearing a *sheet*.

Oh God, please, please. He *couldn't* bump into anyone.

He must look like such a complete, utter prat.

*

Hermione had picked up the book she'd left in the common room when she looked up at the stairs and saw him.

He looked like a sword of moonlight made human standing on the nighttime steps, hair the impossible colour of childhood innocence grown too long, locks straying at the nape of his neck and cheeks. A soft shock fell into his eyes, which glittered with the dazzling elusiveness of silver light upon water. The moonlight had been crafted by a Renaissance sculptor, each plane of his face severely angled and starkly perfect. His cheekbones and jawline were smooth as the slashes of a knife. His nose, chin, forehead, were shaped by centuries of aristocrats to slope into the same elegant curves as an ornament they commissioned would have been expected to.

His skin was the same colour as marble, which was oddly fitting for the sharply defined lines that made his throat and chest and arms. It was a beauty that seemed designed, like a Greek statue, a celebration of strength in a form that looked fragile as the stem of an expensive wineglass. The crafted hollow at the base of his long throat, the sleek fan of his collarbone and the rounded rise of his shoulders looked far too carefully created to be anything but impossibly delicate.

White material curved from snake-hips. This attire seemed absolutely natural for this frail moment of beauty, quivering pale and lovely as a candle flame.

Then she squinted against the moonlight and assembled the pieces of that face for recognition instead of aesthetic admiration, and realised it was Draco Malfoy.

Bloody hell!

She jumped as if she had been stung.

'Malfoy!'

He stepped forward, carrying off the sheet with the arrogant grace of a young emperor.

Hang on, the sheet?

It looked as if Malfoy was trying to smile in a placating fashion, which looked distinctly odd on him.

'Now, Hermione-'

It took Hermione a few minutes of thought to realise that this was her name and thus quite an appropriate thing to call her, so incongruous did it sound on his lips.

'What are you doing coming down from the... boys' room... wearing... one of the Gryffindor sheets? What did you come up in? No, don't answer that... Malfoy, you've been missing for

over a month!'

Malfoy shrugged somewhat helplessly.

'Uh. Look, there are reasons for-'

'Drugs?' Hermione demanded. 'Dark charms on Harry? Some kind of - liaison - with Neville Longbottom?'

Malfoy almost jumped out of his sheet.

'Ew! Ew, how unbelievably gross! Listen, I could do a lot better than Longbottom.' He looked grouchy. 'I should hope I'd at least rate a Dean Thomas.'

'Was that a confession?!'

'Ewwwww!' Malfoy began deep breathing to calm himself. 'Absolutely not. Honestly, are you secretly reading porn behind a History of Hogwarts? Because for a so-called dedicated student, you have a dirty mind. First fancying Professor Loveheart, now this..'

Hermione put a hand on her hip.

'That is exactly the kind of disgusting thing I would expect to hear from you, Malfoy.'

'Glad I didn't disappoint.'

'But... wait... How did you know I've read a History of Hogwarts?'

Malfoy looked distinctly shifty, which was a familiar look Hermione was rather grateful for.

'Ummm - hasn't everyone?'

'Well, Malfoy, I didn't know you could read.'

'Hey, my grades aren't all about seducing the professors with my celebrated good looks.' He smirked. 'Who has the time? Anyway, consider Professor Flitwick... who has the inclination?'

Hermione had never noticed if Malfoy did well at school or not. Though, given his enthusiasm for Potions and Arithmancy - besides, it wasn't like she cared.

Another thing popped into her mind like a firecracker, which wanted attention.

'And how did you know I fancied Professor Lockhart? Not that I did,' she added quickly. 'And you still haven't explained your disappearance, or the - sheet-'

'Er - ah - who didn't fancy Professor Lockhart?'

'What with that sentence and the fact you just came from the boys' dormitory, I'm starting to wonder about you-'

Hermione was actually starting to feel quite comfortable. Teasing boys was something she did exceptionally well, and Malfoy was starting to look like Ron when he hadn't done his homework.

When Draco Malfoy suddenly remembered that he was, once again, Draco Malfoy.

'I'd love to stand around here chatting all night, Granger,' he drawled. 'But this sheet is wicked draughty, if you get my meaning. Besides, I shudder to think what Professor McProtectorOfMaidenVirtue would imagine if she came upon us in our questionable clothing. What would that do to my reputation?'

Hermione suddenly became acutely conscious that she was wearing a nightshirt, which was absolutely ridiculous considering he was wearing a sheet.

Please, please don't let me be blushing.

She wished desperately for just a shred of Malfoy's incredible poise, quite unmoved by the fact that he was wearing bedclothes. Malfoy had even been able to stand right up and threaten the madman who had turned him into a ferret and bounced him around a room.

At certain times, you had to admire him - the utter jerk.

'Of course,' Malfoy continued, and his voice became winding as a snake's, 'If it is a choice between that rumour and one about Longbottom...'

The pale-haired Slytherin walked slowly towards her. Hermione stared up at the cool gleam of his eyes as his voice curled rich and warm around her, in a sort of frozen disbelief.

In a moment, he was so close she could have reached out and touched his bare chest.

Obviously, she didn't do anything of the kind.

'What are you on, Malfoy?' she hissed.

His smile was pure Malfoy. 'Nothing now. Give me a minute.'

'Ugh - Malfoy, have I mentioned lately that you're revolting?'

'Is that why you're having such problems breathing?'

Bugger.

'Come now, Hermione...' Malfoy's voice was silky. 'Where's that Gryffindor kindness? You wouldn't let that reckless despoiler of purity Longbottom sully my good name?'

He moved in towards her.

Her chest exploded into spangles of panic. She raised a hand and shoved him away, which of course involved touching his bare skin, which was more physical contact than she had ever wanted to have with Malfoy.

It also awakened all kinds of disturbing thoughts about skin taut over muscle, hands sliding and the possible softness of locks that fell into certain eyes, but Hermione put that down to the stress of the moment.

Malfoy lifted his hands in a gesture of innocence, which was not damn well likely.

'Get *out*!' Hermione snapped.

He shrugged, setting off that upsetting interplay of muscle under skin again.

'As you wish.'

He slid out of the common room. A moment after he had gone, Hermione realised he had not given her an answer about any of the important questions she had asked.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

*

Well, that had gone incredibly well, Draco thought to himself. Of all the prats in the world... he had been wearing a damnable sheet when she saw him again.

A sheet!

He still couldn't believe it. He supposed he had to be grateful that she had not gone off shrieking with contemptuous laughter. As for whatever had possessed him to make a move on her, all pure and Gryffindorlike in her girlish nightshirt, something he could not possibly touch...

He had tried to distract her from awkward questions, and got carried away.

Please, Draco thought. I can't take any more embarrassing scenes. Let me just get to my nice cozy bed, and I'll deal with everything in the morning.

'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart,' he whispered, and the door swung open.

Malcolm Baddock let out an ungodly howl.

Draco cursed Murphy, and every Slytherin in Hogwarts, including Professor Snape in fluffy slippers that brightened Draco's day somewhat, showed up at the entrance in double quick time.

And stared. And stared.

Some of the girls were staring in a way that made Draco quite uncomfortable.

Blaise Zabini was eyeing the tie of his sheet in a way that made him feel distinctly panicky.

Pansy Parkinson flung herself at him in a way that made him feel really victimised.

'Oh, Draco!' she cried. 'God, we were all so worried!'

'Er... that's nice... Watch the sheet...'

Everyone obeyed him and watched with interest.

'Where have you been?' demanded Pansy.

'What have you been doing?' asked Goyle.

'What happened to you?' inquired Snape.

'What are you wearing?' Crabbe wanted to know.

'Isn't that a Gryffindor sheet?' Blaise was just a wee bit too observant.

Draco looked around at all the worried, curious, questioning faces hemming him in. He squashed the urge to run.

'I can explain everything,' he promised.

There was an expectant pause.

'In the morning,' he added, and swept off in true Malfoy style, leaving his entire house staring after him.

Chapter Eight

Draco Redux

Dear Father,

Professor Dumbledore has instructed me to write to you and inform you of my safety, as doubtless you have been frantic. I understand that vital matters such as Death Eater meetings and cocktail parties kept you too busy to search for me. As your son and a good Malfoy, I would never question your actions in this or any matter.

I was under a spell, but am now liberated and in hot pursuit of the culprit. Terrible tortures were inflicted upon me, but I bore them like a Malfoy. If you knew exactly what I have done, I feel you would be truly amazed.

Give my regards to the Dark Lord, and also mother.

Your son,

Draco Malfoy.

P.S. Whole school abuzz with the news of my sordid affair with Ron Weasley. Have a nice day.

Draco sat back and admired his letter. He thought it got his message across beautifully.

Of course, there was always a 'Screw you, Dad!' Howler. But Draco felt that lacked subtlety.

Draco felt it made amends for his morning. He had been shaken out of sleep at six and dragged, kicking and screaming and making innumerable muttered comments about sexual deprivation causing moodiness, to Dumbledore's office.

An extremely put out Professor McGonagall had left them alone after that.

Dumbledore had fixed his eyes on Draco, and asked quietly,

'Have you an explanation for your prolonged absence?'

Draco was silent for a few moments, horribly torn between several alternatives. One side of him was clamouring to tell Dumbledore that he had been kidnapped, tied up and forced to be someone's sex slave. Another part brightly suggested that he should claim to have been attending his Death Eater initiation, and receiving a Dark Mark in an unmentionable place.

Quite a bit of him wanted to claim he had been saving the world Harry Potter style because he felt it was his duty to preserve innocents, and see the old man die of heart failure.

Eventually, he did something which would shame the Malfoy name forevermore.

He told the absolute truth.

"I was a rat," he confessed.

The look on Dumbledore's face was something Draco would treasure for some time.

And the Gryffindors thought this man was infallible... even though he had a positive mania for abandoning his students at times of dire peril and bringing the powers of darkness onto the Hogwarts staff...

Draco explained, at length, in detail, and with various illustrative gestures.

No, he had no idea who had done this to him. No, he had no idea how the Polyjuice Potion had been changed in order to have this effect on him. No, he really couldn't explain the dancing.

Yes, he did insist on employing this offensive tone.

Draco had no idea why he was telling the headmaster all these things. He had always disliked the man - and insofar as Dumbledore had noted his existence, he had disliked Draco. But... he had no-one else to tell.

It was some comfort to him that his authentically Malfoy manner kept Dumbledore's eyes narrowed throughout the interview.

At its conclusion, he said, 'I assume, Mr Malfoy, that you blame the Gryffindors? Perhaps Mr Weasley tampered with the Potion?'

Draco's blond head snapped up.

'He bloody well did not!'

'Oh?'

'None of them had *anything* to do with it!'

'Is that so?'

Draco's eyes met Dumbledore's. The old man's eyes were very, very wide and innocent.

Draco had the sudden horrible suspicion that he had been tricked.

He let his lip curl.

'Do you really think Weasley would be intelligent enough to tamper with a potion?' he inquired.

Dumbledore got up and smiled beatifically.

'Mr Malfoy, it has been a pleasure talking to you. If you ever feel like you need to talk to me again, please feel free. Can I say that you remind me of a student I had once?'

'Oh, touching bonding type moment,' Draco drawled. 'Could it possibly *be* the reformed Death Eater Professor Snape? Goodness, what an honour. I see the error of my ways. Will you be my new father figure?'

He paused and scowled.

'And my personal hygiene is impeccable, thanks so much.'

'I was really thinking more of Mr Black,' said Dumbledore.

'Oh... what? I remind you of a mass murderer? You're not supposed to say that to a student! That's not motivational speaking. I see a bright future for you, Mr Malfoy - in Azkaban! This is so typical of you do-gooders. I play dirty at Quidditch and suddenly everyone's screaming 'Cheater, cheater, compulsive Death Eater!' and I'm...'

... standing up, yelling at the headmaster and gesticulating wildly.

Way to get expelled.

"Er... I'm most terribly sorry, sir. This whole rat thing has been... a bit traumatic for me. Let's, ah - just forget it about it, shall we? Ah-'

Draco let go of the front of Dumbledore's robes.

Dumbledore offered him his hand.

'As I said - it's been a pleasure, Mr Malfoy.'

Draco's quick grovel had done nothing for his temper. He stared at the outstretched hand, and folded his arms deliberately across his chest.

He lifted cold grey eyes to Dumbledore's face.

The man was still smiling!

Draco turned around and strode out of the door.

A moment later, the door opened again and a dishevelled blond head reappeared around it.

'And I've seen pictures of Black and his frankly appalling hair,' Draco added. 'You complete bastard!'

When he heard Dumbledore laughed, he slammed the door with all his might.

Draco wished he could slam another door as he gave the letter to his eagle owl, Rover. (He had once heard, and rather fancied, the phrase 'Kill Rover kill!')

Which was when Crabbe and Goyle appeared in the common room.

Draco looked up, his smile brittle and bright as jagged glass.

'Boys,' he said. 'Truly excellent to see you.'

Crabbe and Goyle were thick.

Nobody was quite thick enough to see a Malfoy in the kind of mood where they invented new torture implements without feeling a pressing need to be elsewhere.

Draco stood up, slung his arms around their necks and began pulling them in towards their dormitory.

Squeezing in a friendly, affectionate way which made them go blue and gurgle.

'Let's get together, just us guys, and talk about cruelty to animals,' Draco urged with his sweetest and most charming smile, looking far too much like Satan's choirboy.

He dragged them into the dormitory, and shut the door.

Kill Fluffy kill!

His smile was bright and shiny as a knife.

'Let's *chat*.'

*

'Shhhh, Ron,' Hermione said soothingly. 'I'm sure it was dreadful, but have a nice comforting piece of toast and forget about it. The bad man can't get you now.'

Ron cautiously let his red head lift from his arms.

Draco Malfoy leaned in between Lavender and Parvati to reach the Gryffindor table.

Ron's head slammed back down and connected with the table.

'You lied to me,' he informed Hermione in muffled and reproachful tones.

'Malfoy!' Hermione hissed in outrage. 'Go away!'

He gave her an engaging and angelic smile.

'I'm just picking up my coffee.'

'Your... do you realise that Seamus Finnigan had to be sedated?' Hermione demanded.

Malfoy laughed, a bright carefree laugh which made Lavender and Parvati give a collective sigh.

'No, really?'

Hermione was used to Malfoy's golden-pure looks, and she knew exactly how nasty this pretty boy could be. She simply sneered and looked away.

When Malfoy lifted coffee off the table, Ron launched himself out of his chair and seized him by the robes.

Malfoy stared at him with a mildly astonished and disdainful air.

'Do you mind?'

'Don't you have something to say to me?' Ron snarled.

One pale eyebrow lifted. 'Why, yes. When I told you I would respect you in the morning, I lied.'

Half the Gryffindor table choked.

Hermione grabbed Ron's arm.

'Don't kill him-'

'I'm so touched. I didn't know you cared.'

'You'll get expelled,' Hermione continued stonily.

'I want an *explanation*,' Ron snapped. 'Surely you came over here for something-'

Malfoy shrugged easily out of Ron's grip.

'Just this,' he said, gesturing with the coffee and - oh, purely accidentally - spilling a few strategic and scalding drops. He patted Ron's face with a terribly patronising air. 'And to say good morning, beautiful.'

Hermione hung on to Ron's arm with all her might.

Malfoy turned away still laughing.

Harry and Ginny were coming in the doors of the hall, and they came face to face.

Harry's eyes flashed and he stood firm, the hero determined to combat darkness.

Malfoy's eyes danced with sparkling mischievous light.

'Oh, it's the lovebirds,' he cooed. 'Tell me, Harry, have you started composing Valentines yet? How about 'Her eyes are as brown as a not so fresh pickled toad'?''

Ginny and Harry went a lovely matching shade of scarlet.

Hang on, thought Hermione, since when does Malfoy call Harry by his name?

Malfoy wandered blithely over to his own table, where he was given a hero's welcome.

The prince of Slytherin had returned.

There was just something... bothering Hermione. He was still Malfoy, still an annoying, smart-mouthed brat who swaggered around thinking he owned the world. He was still an irritating bastard with a tongue like a machete.

There was - just something missing.

Like... malice.

Malfoy laughed at something over at his table, and she recognised the simple amusement which had caused his laugh before.

It was almost as if he was playing a game now.

The question was, what kind of game?

A cool grey gaze met hers. Very deliberately, Malfoy winked.

Irritating bastard.

*

Dumbledore stood up at dinner that night and announced what had happened to Draco Malfoy.

'Mr Malfoy,' he said, 'was placed under a spell. It was an outrageous act and an attempt to wipe out an innocent child.'

All eyes turned to the innocent child, who at the present time had an arm around both Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, and who was smiling as if he'd just discovered Original Sin and was having great fun with it.

Hermione felt sure this was intentional.

'It was the unjustifiable act of a Dark Wizard,' Dumbledore continued, 'and it must be paid for. I will not have attacks in my school. I will not bear the absolute violence which threatens the existence of another person. Anyone with information on this subject must come forward, or share guilt for something unforgivable.'

He smiled then, when they were all solemn, and produced a piece of paper from his voluminous robes.

'Mr Malfoy has requested that I read out this - er - statement of his feelings. It is addressed to his attacker, and begins-

"Oh, you are going to be *sorry* you were ever born. I'm going to wrap your intestine around a tree until it snaps like twine. I'm going to remove your manhood and serve it to you roasted with barbecue sauce. I'm going to rip you apart atom by atom and record the sounds of your screams to play to your parents, and finally I am going to get Blaise Zabini to spread dirty rumours about you. I have no mercy, and you will not escape. Soil yourself now and save time. Thanks for listening."

Hermione looked up and saw horror and amusement.

There was a curiously unignorable quality about Draco Malfoy. She should know, Harry had been trying to ignore him for years. He refused to be a background, a bit player.

By now, everyone in Hogwarts knew him, and first year students invariably asked who he was. There was always a reply, and never just a name - whether it was 'That's Draco Malfoy, a complete git' or 'That's Draco Malfoy. Isn't he *gorgeous*?'

In a way, both answers were tributes paid to an unusual character.

Hermione found him unusually annoying, but now she realised that there was nobody indifferent to him in the room, whereas he was indifferent to so many of them.

Of course, she thought, Hitler had also been an arresting and noticeable personality.

It didn't make Malfoy any less black-hearted.

'Mr Malfoy,' added Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling as they always did, as if he knew a secret others didn't, 'also asked me to thank the Gryffindors, who treated him with great kindness while he was among them.'

The Gryffindor table erupted into chaos.

Harry and Ginny were asking each other loudly what the meaning of this could be. Dean was restraining Ron from leaping over to the Slytherin table intent on murder. Lavender and Parvati were giggling helplessly. Neville had dived under the table, apparently convinced this was the harbinger of some fiendish Malfoy plot.

Hermione stood up, silently, among the hysterical people to look over at the Slytherin table.

Everyone there was screaming but Malfoy.

He sat perfectly calm, his head tilted back to face the world and his arms folded across his chest, gazing out at the world with absolute assurance and a faint smirk.

And, very gradually, everybody in the Hall went quiet and stared at him.

Malfoy got up and made a sweeping bow.

His eyes raked over the astounded faces and he looked as if he rather badly wanted to laugh, but instead he simply gave that traditional Malfoy smirk and left.

This was going to take some thinking out.

*

Dumbledore's speech caused such a sensation among the Gryffindors that Hermione was glad when Arithmancy rolled around the next day.

Arithmancy was the only subject she did not share with other Gryffindors, and if she heard one more variation on the theme of 'I-hate-that-sod-Malfoy' she was going to scream.

Of course, Malfoy was in Arithmancy too, but he always took the seat furthest from her and a sea of Ravenclaws separated them, and usually stopped all but the most serious bickering matches.

Hermione was expecting some relief.

She did not expect to go into the room and find Draco Malfoy casually seated at *her* double desk, occupying space she used for *her* notes, bright head bent over an Arithmancy book as if he had every right to be there when everyone knew this was *her* place!

He looked up with a flashing smile as she entered.

'Hi,' he said. 'I thought you could use some company.'

'I'm not stupid, Malfoy,' Hermione said levelly, putting her books down on the desk. 'Tell me what you're really doing here, then get lost.'

Malfoy glanced up at her. His grey eyes were almost exactly like mirrors, opaque and silvery, giving her back simply a lovelier version of herself.

Shards of the Mirror of Erised, if all you cared for was beauty.

'I'm trying to get your attention,' he answered serenely.

Hermione stood and gaped, and then Professor Vector came in and she quickly slipped into her seat.

Only after she had done this did she realise that she was now sitting next to Malfoy.

Bloody, bloody hell.

'You have my attention,' she hissed. 'You always have everyone's attention, don't you? You had my attention when I slapped your face in third year - is that what you want?'

'Heavens, Granger, you kinky thing you,' Malfoy murmured.

Hermione tried not to disrupt the class by having an epileptic fit.

She fought to keep her voice low and level.

'Malfoy. What is it that you want?'

'Oh, you know. A really masculine aftershave. An empire to rule. A harem full of nubile Eastern maidens.' He paused. Smirked. 'Oh, and world peace.'

'Be serious!'

'Ms Granger, be quiet,' Professor Vector said sharply. 'You and Mr Malfoy can have a cosy little talk *after* my lesson.'

Hermione went scarlet. Malfoy opened his book with his most beatific expression.

And that, to Hermione's outrage, was that. Malfoy made no further attempts to annoy her, or talk to her - which of course was the same thing. To all appearances, he was completely absorbed in his Arithmancy.

And he was too shiny.

He distracted you, like something flashing in the landscape. She tried to focus on her Summoning Sums and his too-pale and frankly not all that handsome face would screw up in concentration, and suddenly the sum became gibberish.

The only thing he seemed to notice was the lock of gleaming pale hair which kept falling into his face. He pushed it back every time it did so, a quick motion of ever-increasing irritation.

At the end of the most unproductive Arithmancy lesson ever, he got up and then had to shove back the lock for about the fifteen millionth time.

He rolled his eyes.

'I'm getting this cut. It's quite ridiculous.'

'Oh, and I suppose you're going to start gelling it again? That was ridiculous, if you like,' Hermione snapped. 'It looks much better this way.'

She could have bitten her tongue out.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows.

'I'll keep that in mind, Granger. And I am flattered.'

He smirked, again, and she felt an amazing urge to hit him.

He sauntered off.

She was going to find some Gryffindors, and have a proper conversation with them.

She hated that sod Malfoy.

*

Draco had once heard that in one person was a constant struggle between his Good self and his Evil self.

Draco had considered this proposition at all angles, and had decided it was all a matter of degrees. For instance, Harry Potter's conflicting selves were probably GoodHarry and NaughtyDesiresToOccasionallyTakeCookiesHarry.

Draco had named his EvilDraco and CompleteBastardDraco.

They usually got on fairly well, and ganged up on other people.

They were having a bit of a disagreement now. He supposed it was all that bad Gryffindor influence.

He had *told* EvilDraco not to play with unsuitable children.

He also missed airing his every thought aloud.

'Hello, Draco,' Pansy cooed as he strode through the common room.

'Go away, I find you unattractive.'

All right, all right, so he was hardly bottling it all up. But still.

Draco slammed into his dormitory bathroom and opened his own special cupboard. An avalanche of hair care products almost killed him.

Draco perched on the sink amid the bottles.

EvilDraco said, What kind of person owns more than his body weight in hair care products?

CompleteBastardDraco pointed out that it got results.

Yes, but...

Was it worth all that time? So his hair had a tiny, tiny tendency to wave at the ends. So what? Who really gave a damn?

It looks much better this way...

Draco Malfoy, you unutterable idiot, what in God's name do you think you're doing with that girl?

Draco looked turned and looked at the mirror.

'Hi there, handsome. I missed you,' it said.

Draco was *tired* of all this angst. Well, all this five minutes of angst. Slytherins worked out an evil plot and got on with it.

Mind you, Gryffindors just acted.

Not that that was the way he wanted to behave now, but...

There were certain moments when it might be just a tiny, tiny relief.

Draco weighed a bottle in his hand.

Then he began to throw them.

He hurled bottle after bottle into the courtyard not far below, threw with vicious emphasis and waited to hear the satisfying crack of bottle against stone.

He heard a yowl and Argus Filch's anguished cry.

'Someone just hit my cat!'

Draco hit the floor.

Crabbe came in, and looked understandably confused. Draco gestured to the window.

Crabbe went over and peered out.

'You! It was you!' howled Filch. 'I'm going to kill you!'

Crabbe looked bewildered and terrified.

Draco, chuckling wickedly, exited the bathroom propelled mainly by his elbows.

That inexplicable angsty stuff descended on him again once he was out and on his feet.

He walked into the common room.

Contrary to what the Gryffindors believed, Slytherins did not spend their free time ritually sacrificing small fluffy animals to the Dark Lord. Blaise, Pansy and Goyle were playing cards.

Okay, yes, it was strip poker. Nevertheless.

Slytherins, though Draco flattered himself he was an extra-special exception, were not the heart of pure evil. They were all fiercely loyal to each other. They knew that the other houses were all arrayed against them.

You heard the whispers. Dark Wizards. Better any house than Slytherin. Nasty bunch.

Right, someone created a house to create murderous fiends. The Sorting Hat must have simply forgotten to mention it.

Draco genuinely liked most of his housemates, and he could find a use for the ones he did not like. He had missed them all when he was in Gryffindor tower.

But...

It was damn cold in this dungeon.

The carved chairs were uncomfortable.

Draco stared into the fire.

Oh, well. At least I make a very handsome brooding hero.

*

Hermione looked around at the common room in consternation.

The Gryffindors were - there was no other word for it - *drooping*.

Harry and Ginny seemed to have dug themselves into an awkward conversational rut, and they were tripping over words and blushing. Seamus was still slightly dazed, and rocked back and forth a bit too much for comfort.

Dean Thomas had his guitar out, and was looking over music he had planned to play at Fluffy's next public appearance. He seemed too desolate to play a note.

Parvati and Lavender were trying to console themselves, it appeared, with empty milk cartons.

Neville had made a cup of coffee and was now staring at it in blank confusion because he hated coffee.

It had to be the weather, Hermione thought. It was chill and foggy outside, and that must be dampening everyone's spirits. That must be why the common room seemed so... so flat, and lacking in... sparkle.

Ron had his head in his arms.

'Maybe you should go to bed,' Hermione suggested delicately.

'No!' Ron's face was hunted. 'I'm never going to bed again! The bed is evil, the bed has been defiled, the bed must be burned!'

'Um... okay.'

She rested a tentative hand on Ron's shoulder.

'And I can't *do* this Potions homework!' Ron wailed. 'Why is it suddenly so hard?'

'I can't imagine.'

'And why is everything so boring?' Ron demanded belligerently. 'What's the *matter* with everyone?'

Ron was simply far too transparent. He made you see his feelings, when you could even conceal your own from yourself.

'Ron, nobody knew,' Hermione soothed him. 'It's okay to miss-'

'*Miss* him?' Ron yelled, reacting far more than he would have if he hadn't believed it. 'Miss that evil prat? Miss that, that, snake in rat's clothing? I don't *miss him*, I-'

The silence behind Ron's voice seemed to intensify, to thicken, as if everyone was staring in astonishment at a point behind him and desperate to see what happened next.

This was, in fact, the case.

'You people really should change your password more often,' drawled Draco Malfoy. 'Any evil prat could just walk in.'

Chapter Nine

Pax Draconis

Hermione had always studied carefully. She had studied books, of course, because she had always loved books.

She had only loved two boys enough to study them, but she had Harry and Ron memorised. She had felt fond of a few other people, and had learned the hidden sides to their character with the same care she used to memorise footnotes - Professor Lupin being a case in point.

She had only ever studied one person because she disliked them.

Professor Snape was an unpleasant teacher, but he did not interfere much with her life. Crabbe and Goyle were easy to read as children's books - short words and deeply uninteresting content.

Draco Malfoy was different.

If he was a book, he appeared to be like one of Hagrid's frightening textbooks - impossible to read and quite frequently vicious. Once you'd taken the trouble to wrestle open the book for a glance, there seemed to be a lot of obscenities, written in flaming script and leaving you with the distressing impression that they were in code.

She had kept trying because the bastard kept bothering them, and besides the commonplace observations that he was vain, nasty and far too good-looking for his own good, she had picked up a few things.

The boy was a complete exhibitionist.

It reflected how spoiled he was. He wanted attention so he grabbed at it. Harry got it without trying, and was embarrassed by it. Ron was desperate for it, but had no idea how to get it or what to do with it.

Draco Malfoy arranged matters so everybody looked at him, everybody knew him, and then wore all those stares with the magnificent carelessness of a prince wearing a mantle when he had a dozen like it at home.

Hermione remembered his vigorous impressions of Harry over at the Slytherin table, which some Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs had wandered over to watch. She recalled his loud, head-turning voice hurling insults and reading out Rita Skeeter articles and creating crowds wherever he went. She knew how he could seize attention, absorb all the light in a room, whether it was by pretending he had been savaged by a Hippogriff or mocking a Valentine or just strolling around school in a the-ground-is-so-lucky-I'm-walking-on-it way.

Or by just standing here now, looking at all the stunned Gryffindors with a faintly amused smile on his face.

'Malfoy!' Ron exploded at last. 'What are you doing here?'

He tossed Ron a glance.

'Well, I was hoping to catch Potter in the showers for a cuddle,' he drawled. 'I'm collecting the entire set of Gryffindor boys, don't you know.'

There was a thump from the other end of the room. Very few people looked away from Malfoy.

'Malfoy, how could you!' Hermione cried. 'Seamus is **delicate**!'

'Oh, the Irish can handle anything,' Malfoy said dismissively. 'And they handle it very well, too. I visited last summer.'

'Lavender!' hissed Hermione.

'Oh? Uh,' said Lavender, tearing her eyes off Malfoy and rushing to help her fallen boyfriend.

Seamus made feeble and incoherent gurgling noises.

'So, no chance with Potter then?' Malfoy inquired. 'And here I had my heart set on my very own Gryffindor hot water bottle. I warn you, I shall not sleep. Thank you, Longbottom.'

Thankfully, for the sanity of all concerned, Malfoy had not just expressed gratitude because Neville was going to be his hot water bottle.

Neville looked at his empty hand. His stunned expression was induced either by the fact his coffee had just disappeared, or that Malfoy had actually thanked him.

Draco sipped at the cup and gazed over the rim at the room with innocent silver eyes.

We're all watching him in slack-jawed fascination, Hermione thought with annoyance. As if he's a movie.

The worst thing was that it was all *much* more interesting than moping about a rat.

Malfoy strode over to the fire and stretched out casually in front of it. Hermione was waiting for someone (*cough* Ron *cough*) to lose it and kick (and maybe punch) him out. His absolute barefaced cheek seemed to be holding everyone spellbound.

At this point Hermione's traitorous cat went rushing over to curl on Malfoy's stomach, purring like the Hogwarts Express.

Half the girls in the room looked madly envious.

'Crookshanks!' Hermione exclaimed.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. 'You really have a talent for naming things, don't you, Hermione? Poor kitty. Good kitty. Yes, you are a cute kitty.'

To think that Hermione would see the day when Malfoy would be cuddling her cat.

Although to hear Harry tell it, the Gryffindor boys had seen something a whole lot more traumatic.

'I like cats,' Malfoy proceeded in amiable tones, seeming blissfully unconscious that the entire room was gaping at him. 'Crookshanks and I got acquainted while I was a rat. He has some good stories. Have you heard about his unfortunate misunderstanding concerning Professor McGonagall in feline form?'

To a background of gasps and giggles, Hermione said furiously, 'You're making that up, Malfoy!'

'Would I lie to you, baby?'

Hermione choked on her rage.

'This is just like *'Truly Madly Deeply'*,' Lavender whispered rapturously to Parvati. 'When Lance returned to Priscilla to the shock of all the parish, and then she turned out to be his mother!'

Malfoy grabbed a chair and placed himself in their thrilled midst.

'Lance is Priscilla's mother?' he said. 'But what about the baby?'

'Ah, it's really Greg's baby,' answered Parvati, slightly disconcerted.

'But Greg is Priscilla's son too!'" Malfoy exclaimed in an agitated manner.

'Oh no, you see, Greg and Lance were switched at birth,' Parvati informed him sagely, getting into the spirit of things.

'Wait, isn't Greg married to Frances?'

'Yes, but it turns out Frances is really a man!'

'So that's what the mystery bottle of aftershave meant! I'd been wondering about that for ages.'

When Hermione had begged for a special TV in order to catch the news, she had not expected that her roommates would get addicted to weird and involved Muggle soaps.

She had certainly not expected that Malfoy would do so.

The entire room was watching Malfoy making extravagant gestures and discussing warped incestuous affairs with great animation.

Well, they'd always suspected these were the kind of things Slytherin were into.

Ron made a disgusted noise and got back to staring blankly at his Potions homework.

Malfoy tipped over dangerously in his chair to have a look.

'You have to add Boomslang skin there,' he pointed out in helpful if utterly condescending tones. 'Otherwise you die.'

Ron scowled. 'I don't need your help.'

'No, Weasley, you really do. You bring new meaning to the term 'inept.'"

'And stop bothering me!'

'I'd hate to be a barrier in your glorious progress to academic failure.'

'Why don't you leave Ron alone,' Hermione snapped, to Seamus' hysterical nodding, 'and tell us what you're doing here?'

'Certainly, dear lady,' said Malfoy. 'I'm here for revenge. And all the party favours I can carry.'

The Gryffindors looked blank.

Draco reflected that this was not an uncommon look on them.

'Consider this,' he told them brightly. 'I get turned into a rat. Tra la la. Who should little Draco suspect? After all, I was in a room filled with my minions, love slaves and - oh, yes - deadly enemies. Hm, this is a tricky one.'

'Maybe the Slytherins just felt as if they had to get rid of you,' Hermione suggested. 'I feel such empathy.'

Malfoy pursed that curling mouth, apparently considering this.

'Nah,' he concluded. 'We Slytherins are a sweet and simple folk. Why mess around with Transfiguration when perfectly good homicide is an option?'

Actually, the more he spoke the better homicide sounded to Hermione.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair, stretching luxuriously. Every female in the common room leaned in to get a closer look.

Hermione glanced over at Ginny in shocked reproach. Ginny shrugged.

Honestly, redheads were such vixens.

'So I'm going to be hanging around here for a bit,' Malfoy concluded happily. 'Bringing a little ray of sunlight into your lives. Ornamenting this tasteless common room. And plotting to capture and torture one of your kind.'

Dean Thomas's nervous hand struck an extremely discordant note on his guitar.

Malfoy looked thrilled and launched himself off the chair.

Hermione was disgusted to note that he did this with the graceful poise of one aware that everyone who was anyone precipitated themselves off chairs these days.

'Wow, is that a Muggle instrument? The kind that plays Muggle music? Like the Beatles?' asked Malfoy.

Hermione could *hear* him spelling Beatles wrong.

Dean agreed cautiously that it was.

'Great!' Draco said. 'Teach me how to make noise.'

*

And... that was how it was.

Parvati and Lavender were floating on pink clouds of bliss. Ginny (Vixen!) seemed mildly entertained. Dean actually seemed to be getting friendly with Malfoy. (Never trust a guitar player.) Neville ran errands for him.

Harry was appalled, and Ron kept closing his eyes and wishing it all away. Seamus was having Prozac sent from home.

Hermione was observing.

She observed Malfoy lying in her bedroom amid a pile of giggling girls, watching '*Truly, Madly, Deeply*' with total fascination.

Switching on music as well seemed to give him an attack of joyful schizophrenia.

He cheerfully stole Dean's guitar, and became good at it within the week. Then he utterly refused to give it back.

When shown Dean's football posters, he tortured the figures with pins in an effort to make them squirm.

He played Exploding Snap and cheated blatantly. He did not seem to understand the concept of playing fair, even after numerous explanations.

Then he challenged Ron to a game of wizards' chess, and won. He proceeded to sing his own praises for forty minutes, upon which Ron hit him with the chessboard.

He nicked Harry's copy of 'Quidditch Through the Ages' and read it from cover to cover, then had a shouting match with Harry about the Wronski Feint, which ended up in them hitting each other with their broomsticks.

Which made Seamus dribble about symbolism and run for his Prozac.

The Slytherins were comforted by the fact that their captain was off in the line of duty, driving the Gryffindors out of their little minds.

Hermione thought every aspect of his behaviour was disgraceful, and that he was quite possibly the most irritating person in the world.

She was horrified by the fact she was getting used to him.

*

'Tell me, why are you prancing around in your underwear?'

This most Malfoyesque line was drawled by their only specimen of that accursed breed. He was lying by the fire with Crookshanks on his chest, his usual spot (that they should have a usual spot for Malfoy! The *shame!*)

Dean Thomas looked down at his jeans and then looked mildly surprised.

'Er - have you been at Seamus' Prozac? Because, um, that stuff's not healthy.'

'But it's so fun,' Draco complained. 'Anyway, the selfish Irish bugger won't let me near it. I was just commenting on your state of undress.'

'Undress?'

'If you hope to incite the females into a lustful frenzy, I suggest you invest in a Polyjuice Potion and pay me a scandalous amount for some of my hair.'

'Malfoy, stop your wittering,' said Harry almost tolerantly from a chair.

Did everyone see that? Hermione demanded inside her head. He grows on you! The boy is tall, blond and devastating cancer!

'I don't understand,' Dean said. 'Ah - mother sent me new Levi's for my birthday. I can wear them in the common room.'

Malfoy laughed his charming - hateful! - laugh.

'Right. 'Levi's.' Like that's a word.'

He'd said the same thing about 'morals' yesterday.

It was Hermione who realised what he was on about, and explained. 'They're Muggle clothes. Remember, like people wear at the Quidditch World Cup?'

Clearly, Malfoys didn't bother with this kind of subterfuge. Hermione remembered a wizard running around in a dress at the Quidditch World Cup in fourth year. Highborn wizards were woefully ill-informed about the Muggle world.

'Muggles wear underwear in the street? It must be a scene of depravity and public orgies!'" said Draco. He looked wistful. 'I wish I could go.'

'You've never been to the Muggle world?' Ron asked, giving up the pretence that he wasn't listening.

'Of course I've never been in the Muggle world!' Draco informed him severely. 'The very idea... My parents would be horrified.'

Ron looked almost sympathetic.

'I know, my parents don't even let Percy go into Knockturn Alley yet.'

'Oh, Knockturn Alley? Charming place. Played marbles there as a child.'

'With shrunken heads as befits a Malfoy?' Hermione interjected with maximum sarcasm.

Draco smiled dreamily. 'I love that game.'

'Listen, I am not wearing underwear!' exclaimed Dean. 'Uh. That is to say...'

'It looks just like underwear,' Draco objected.

Harry looked puzzled. 'What kind of underwear are you wearing?'

Seamus, who had just come in, looked around in terror and began to hyperventilate.

'You know... Ordinary underwear,' Draco replied. 'Long johns.'

Ron choked.

Dean shook his head.

'Look, I don't care if you Gryffindors wear scandalous apparel with hippos on them and now these jean-underwear things,' Draco said primly.

'They're not underwear!' Dean snapped. 'Look, this is ridiculous. Come up to my room. Uh - you might have to take off your long johns.'

Draco followed, looking rather intrigued.

Seamus hit the floor in a dead faint as the door shut.

Lavender was propping him up when Draco Malfoy returned, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans.

She dropped him.

'Um... they didn't look like that on Dean,' Parvati murmured.

'Muh,' Lavender moaned faintly.

Ginny had her eyes shut and was mouthing 'I love Harry' to herself desperately.

Turned out there was a world of difference between Dean's thin and somewhat gangly shape, and Draco's slim and leanly muscled version.

Draco looked at himself.

'Bit weird,' he said critically, looking downwards. A swathe of silver-blond fell into his face. 'Somewhat indecent. There's that to be said for it, of course.'

He moved sideways experimentally.

'Ungh,' said Lavender.

'Okay,' Dean said. 'Do you see now they're not underwear? Give them back now.'

Parvati appeared to be promising God that if he did she would be good for the *rest of her life*.

'I think,' Draco replied, surveying the girls' faces, 'I'll keep them on for just a while.'

'Malfoy, take them off!'

Seamus opened his eyes, and then swooned again.

'I'll just keep them on for a tiny moment longer,' Draco promised solemnly.

Dean's trousers had gone the same way as his guitar.

'Hermione?' Harry said in a concerned voice. 'Are you all right? You've gone all red.'

'Fine! Fine! Never better!' Hermione said quickly, hiding her face in a book. 'Absolutely jeans. I mean, great!'

*

Draco's jeans caused a sensation at dinner that night.

Several girls seemed to be composing Valentines (on December the fifteenth!) Pansy Parkinson looked disbelieving that all these ritual baby sacrifices were finally paying off.

There was a slightly less ecstatic reaction from Professor McGonagall.

'Mr. Malfoy! What kind of get-up do you call that?'

Malfoy gazed up at her with limpid silver eyes. 'My uniform,' he said humbly.

'Excuse me?'

'It says in the rules that the uniform can be altered to suit the student's preference,' Draco explained innocently. 'I checked.'

McGonagall looked at the black material of his shirt and trousers.

Draco gave her a winning look.

Professor McSuddenOddResemblanceToSnape stalked off.

'Oh, I *so* put the 'man' in manipulation,' Draco said. 'Longbottom, coffee.'

His cup had been lying by Neville's elbow for some time as Neville watched the showdown. Neville made to get it, and knocked it over.

They all looked at it.

Well, coffee rarely burns through the tablecloth.

'It seems the rogue Gryffindor has finally opted for homicide,' Draco said in the nasty pause. 'Longbottom, different and less fatal coffee.'

'Ah... did you really make those clothes out of your uniform?' asked Neville, trying desperately to start up the conversation.

'Do I look like a house elf to you?'

And Hermione, who had been feeling sick with something like fear, was able to sneer properly at Draco as he sauntered back casually to his own table.

Okay, maybe she ogled too. A tiny bit.

She was only human.

But she didn't care what happened to him. Not at all.

'I wish he'd get struck by lightning,' Ron said.

'Um, yeah,' Hermione agreed. 'Me too.'

*

Draco did not show up at the Gryffindor common room that night.

Five minutes after his usual time, panic reigned.

'He's only a little rat!' Ron was shouting. 'They've done something terrible to him!'

Lavender was sniffing disconsolately into a handkerchief.

'You cannot *trust* those Slytherins,' Harry was saying darkly.

'They are *very bad people*,' Parvati chipped in tearfully.

'Have you all lost your marbles?' Hermione demanded. 'He's Malfoy! A.k.a the star of Slytherin, the perpetrator of terrible deeds, the kind of bad person who eats lesser bad people for breakfast!'

'I remember how he used to dip his ickle paws into coffee,' Ron said, looking on the point of tears.

'And how his little nose used to twitch,' Harry added.

Seamus began to twitch all over.

'He's so cute and helpless,' Lavender mourned.

'Has *everyone* been on Seamus' Prozac?'

Ron gave Hermione a reproachful look.

'Fine then,' he said. 'Harry, *we'll* get your Cloak and wrest poor Fluffy from the grasp of evil!'

'Look, if he's in the grasp of evil he's probably going to be ticked if you interrupt them!'

'Some people just don't *care*,' Ron added, glaring.

In the end, Hermione decided to go with them. Not that she was at all worried. But someone had to keep those boys out of trouble.

*

Draco was drifting peacefully off to sleep.

I'm just a little muffin on a griddle, he thought. Toasty warm and... well, probably not about to be spread with cream and jam, but you can't ask for everything.

Some stuff you have to steal when people aren't looking.

He was just about to fall into sweet slumber when he became aware of odd voices outside his door. They seemed to be trying to be sneaky but failing.

Couldn't be Slytherins. Probably just a dream.

'Where are we going?'

'Well, his bedroom...'

'Oh, I *knew* this was a bad plan...'

'Wstfgl,' said Draco, an expression of haughty irritation which came out a bit muffled. Stupid dream. Why was he having such a stupid dream? Uncle Ethelfride had started off with funny dreams...

Harry, Ron and Hermione burst in the door.

And then he had progressed to full-on hallucinations.

'Oh, hi, Malfoy,' Harry said. 'Um, we were just coming to check if you were alive.'

Hang on, that gormless speech *had* to be genuine Gryffindor.

Draco clutched the bedsheets.

'Hermione!' he said in horror. 'Get out! I'm not decent!'

Harry glanced over.

'You're wearing cuddly pyjamas,' he pointed out.

'That's what I mean!'

Hermione, who had been somewhat distracted by the sight of Draco looking rumpled and adorable - that is, stupid! - in his pyjamas, recollected herself and fixed him with a cold look.

'Where have you been, young man?' she demanded.

'Oh, don't,' Draco begged. 'You sound just like Professor McGruesome. I had a headache, and I went to bed. Possibly the most innocent thing I have ever done. Why are you people here?'

'Er...'

'They were frantic,' Hermione explained coolly.

'Oh, you came too,' Harry mumbled in rebellion.

'You were frantic,' Draco repeated flatly.

'Well, this is a dangerous place,' Harry muttered.

'I'm a dangerous person,' Draco said smugly. 'And I've lived here for almost seven years! You pillock.'

Draco did not believe in beating around the bush.

Just beat the bush. Teach it a lesson.

'Honestly, you people are pathetic,' he continued cheerfully. 'Couldn't you do without me for one night? Why this mad rush to my side?'

Harry, the straightforward one, was looking slightly nauseated as he contemplated the answer.

'I guess... and don't think I'm not reconsidering this in light of your 'You people are pathetic' speech... we might, kind of, sort of, after the rat thing and all, slightly like you,' he concluded.

Draco's silvery eyes widened.

'Oh.'

Hermione took advantage of the rare moment of Draco's silence to try and find a way of truthfully denying this shocking allegation.

She couldn't.

Bugger.

When all else fails, become brisk and capable. This is a weapon of doom.

'Well, *if* we do - you know, that thing,' she said, 'we have a few questions for you.'

Draco looked wary. 'Is this like a test? Do I have to submit some sort of project?'

They all sat on the bed.

'Oh, do make yourselves at home. I'm not trying to get some sleep.'

'It's just to check you're not evil,' Harry reassured him.

Draco gave him an incredulous look. 'What? I *am* evil, Potter. Coo-eee. Where have you *been*?'

'We know that you're a dishonest, amoral prat, Malfoy,' Hermione said.

Draco looked gratified.

'We're just checking for 'pawn of the Dark Lord' status.'

'Malfoys are not the pawns of evil,' Draco muttered. 'Malfoys are the lieutenants of evil.'

'Ahem,' said Hermione. 'If your father instructed you to grovel in the dirt before your master, you would...?'

'In my new clothes? Sod off!'

'If instructed to perform a rite of darkness, you would...?'

'Forget all about it and wander off for a drink. I don't do responsibility.'

'Your approach to the Dark Mark would be...?'

'Oh, so tacky and unappealing. Can't evil be tasteful, I ask you? Not to mention, well, is this person evil? Let's check out the whacking big mark on their arm. Wicked inconspicuous, I don't think. Call themselves Slytherins! Ha!'

'This bit is important,' Harry said urgently. 'If instructed to cut off your hand in Voldemort's dark service...'

'Disfigure myself, Potter? You sick, sick bastard!'

The Gryffindor gaggle stopped and looked at each other.

'Well...' Hermione said. 'Technically, he passed. But it all seems so wrong.'

Draco preened.

Harry put his hand over Draco's.

'I guess you're on the team,' he said with a boyish smile.

'There's no necessity to touch me, Potter,' Draco told him in alarm. 'You know all that was a joke, right? Do you mind getting off my bed now?'

'We mean, you have to be good now,' Ron explained.

'Ha! Good luck!'

'Well, at least marginally less evil,' Hermione conceded.

'Do I get to sleep if I agree?'

'Yes!'

'Is there a salary?'

'No!'

'Oh... fine then.'

'You see, Draco?' Harry said heartily. Draco looked slightly nauseated. 'Isn't this nice? It could have been like this years ago if you hadn't been such a prat on the train!'

'I was *not*!' Draco exclaimed in outrage. 'This red-haired lummock laughed at my name! I had to make him rue the day.'

The Gryffindors just looked at him.

'Well, I'm sensitive about my name,' Draco grumbled. 'It's in the school motto, you know. I was called that and then sent here. Parents can be so cruel. Why didn't they simply call me Neville Longbottom Malfoy and be done with it?'

Ron did not seem to feel Draco's pain, the unsympathetic git.

'So you spent seven years making our lives a misery because you're touchy about your name?' he demanded.

'We Malfoys are a vengeful race,' Draco answered.

'You're sick...' Hermione said, as they left.

The last thing she saw was that disturbingly flattered look on Draco's face.

Only Hermione was under the Cloak as they closed the door. Harry and Ron turned to face the person staring blankly at them in the Slytherin corridor.

'Hi,' said Harry with his innocent grin. 'We were just visiting Draco. I wouldn't go in there though, he's in bed.'

A few minutes later, all the Slytherins had to forcibly prevent Pansy Parkinson from committing suicide.

Then they sent an emergency appeal for some of Seamus' Prozac.

Once outside, Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly startled looks.

'So... we like Malfoy, then?' Ron said in doubtful tones.

'Seems so,' Harry returned.

Pause.

'So,' inquired Ron, 'have the seas turned to blood, and is it a month of blue moons?'

'I'm sure the weather report will inform us,' Hermione said.

*

There was speculation about the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Quidditch match.

People wondered whether Ron Weasley would support his best friend or his best girl, and were entertained to see him flying from end to end of the pitch yelling, 'Go Harry!' 'Go honey!'

People also wondered whether Draco Malfoy would sit in the Slytherin benches or with the Gryffindors he seemed to be spending so much time with.

Another topic of interest was whether Draco would wear his jeans.

He did.

Professor Snape called him a stain upon the Slytherin name. Blaise Zabini called him a sex bunny.

He decided they evened out.

And Hermione was oddly unsurprised to see Draco climbing up the Gryffindor bleachers, waving aloft a huge green and silver flag.

'I claim this seat in the name of Slytherin,' he announced, and sat down beside her. 'Hi, darling.'

'Hello, Malfoy,' Hermione responded. 'I've been researching Polyjuice Potion.'

'Scholarly women are cute,' Draco told her approvingly. 'Could you get a pair of those little gilt glasses?'

Hermione gave him a look. He seemed unabashed.

Of course, people who mooned nunneries probably had more sense of decency than Malfoy.

'It seems that you can use the problems that occur using the Potion to Transfigure yourself into an animal to make the state permanent - or at least until the spell is broken in, ah, the traditional-'

'Yes, yes,' said Draco. 'Please skip ahead.'

'But it would be very complicated,' Hermione told him earnestly. 'I can't see anyone being good enough at Potions to do it - except for you, and me, and Blaise Zabini.'

'Well, it wasn't Blaise,' Draco said instantly. 'She thinks I'm a sex bunny. And you're female, so you probably do too.'

Hermione choked.

'If I could just remember some detail about this person,' Draco mused, absently thumping her on the back.

He thought.

That time he had bitten this person...

They'd *tasted* of something...

Something... He couldn't quite put his finger on it... But he'd recognise it again.

'Stop... hitting... me...' Hermione gasped.

Draco Malfoy stood up, and made an announcement

'I have to lick every Gryffindor in the school!'

There was a thump, much like a certain Chaser falling off his broom.

If this sort of thing continued, Seamus was going to have permanent brain damage.

Chapter Ten

Passion, Perps and Prozac

Hermione seized Draco as Madam Pomfrey ran onto the pitch to assist Seamus.

'Sit down and shut up!'

Draco tilted his head, strands of silver and gold falling into his face, and altered his tone of voice as he noticed Hermione's hand on his.

He turned his fingers deftly, captured hers, and suddenly Hermione was staring in horror at a lazily wicked pair of grey eyes looking at her over her hand.

'Don't worry,' he said in a low purr. 'You're first on my list.'

Hermione reflected that people like Malfoy should be forced to take a test proving they could be trusted out on the streets looking so gorgeous.

She also reflected that in such a test, Malfoy would have failed and then shamelessly tried to seduce the examiner.

While thus distracted, she neglected to yank her hand away.

Bad mistake.

As she became extremely aware when she felt curling lips open on her palm, and something warm trace along her lifeline.

She stared at Draco in shock. Those eyes danced amid the locks of that hair, like dust motes glinting in golden sunlight.

All attention suddenly left the Quidditch pitch.

Draco released her hand a second before Hermione had the chance to snatch it away in outrage.

'No, not you,' he said. 'Oh dear. I feel this is going to be a long day. Who's next? Anyone volunteer?'

Hermione was almost killed in the rush.

*

Harry Potter, The Boy Who Was Just No Fun, had to call half time and convince Draco that this was no way to find the master criminal.

Neither Parvati nor Lavender spoke to him for weeks.

Millicent Bulstrode commented on Harry's masterful manner until Harry borrowed some of Seamus' Prozac.

Then he weaved slightly as he flew for the rest of the match.

Hermione refused to answer Lavender and Parvati's urgent inquiries, and was extremely relieved when Lavender went off to visit Seamus in the infirmary.

'But Hermione,' Parvati wailed, 'if you would just tell me what-'

'No!' said Hermione.

She, Harry, Ron and Ginny were sitting around the table composing a letter to Mrs Weasley, and Hermione tried very hard to project an air of being Really-Far-Too-Busy-To-Talk-About-Malfoy,-Yes-Even-About-How-He-Smells-And-That-Means-You-Parvati.

A hand tapped her on the shoulder.

Hermione snapped. 'All *right*! Fine, he smells like oranges, if you have to know! Oranges and winter nights and-'

'Do go on,' Draco said solicitously. 'I was most interested.'

Hermione went quiet.

'What are you doing, my little Gryffindolts?' Draco inquired amiably, pulling up a chair.

'We all write a letter to my mum together,' Ron answered warily, remembering about fifty thousand insults to his entire family.

Draco's memory seemed rather defective, except on the subject of sweets.

There he was spot on.

'You mean the woman who sent that excellent coffee cake to you last week? That was really good.'

'Well, we wouldn't know, would we?' asked Harry. 'Since you ate it all.'

'You can write something too, if you like,' said Ginny, who seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for Malfoy.

Hermione often wondered why she had surrounded herself with redheads.

Mrs Weasley's letter ended up bemusing and horrifying her slightly.

Dear Mum,

It's Ron and Ginny again! In answer to your question of the past five letters, yes, Ron really does have a girlfriend.

Really. - Ginny.

Ginny and Harry are going out, but neither of them is planning the names of your future grandchildren yet. Sorry. - Ron.

I'm sure we would have liked your cake, but an owl ate it.

The articles in the 'Daily Prophet' about mad orgies in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory were greatly exaggerated. - Ginny.

Total lies! - Ron.

And if they weren't lies, they certainly didn't happen to me. - Ron.

I need another bedsheet. Someone ran off with mine. - Ron.

The story about Gryffindors on drugs has a tiny grain of truth in it, however. We call him Seamus Finnigan. - Ginny.

Er, I can't take Fluffy home from the holidays to show you. He'd need an extra bed, and anyway his father would storm into the house and kill us all. - Ron.

Long story. He's writing a PostScript at the end. - Ginny.

We were sorry to read in your letter that the Gryffindors of sixth year had a worse reputation than the Slytherins. There is an explanation for that. Like we said, he's writing a postscript at the end.

Remember to tell the neighbours that I have a girlfriend! - Ron.

Love, Ginny and Ron.

P.S. - Dear Mrs Weasley, thanks so much for the sweater. Have won my 999th Quidditch match. Have not yet conquered the Dark Lord, but am working on it! My intentions towards your daughter are entirely honourable. I'm sure I would have enjoyed that coffee cake, but - I think someone dropped it. - Harry.

P.P.S - Dear Mrs Weasley, I'm top of the year again. Thank you for asking, I do work hard. I don't really want you to set me up with Percy for the Yule Ball, though. I'd write more, but the forces of evil are jogging my elbow. - Hermione.

P.P.P.S. - Salutations. I am Draco Malfoy. Remember me? I saw you four years ago when your husband was on top of my father. I really liked your coffee cake, and I will return Ron's bedsheet. I am in the process of corrupting the entire tower, including your two youngest spawn.

Sooooo... seven kids, huh? Mr Weasley must be Viking in the sack. - Draco

They enclosed a photograph. When Mrs Weasley saw the disreputable blond in the jeans and the sunglasses leering on the left, she almost fell down.

*

'That's a letter for us from Mrs Weasley,' Harry said, 'and an injunction to stay away from her babies addressed for you.'

'So nice to be appreciated,' murmured Draco. 'Unless I get at least one death threat a day, I feel like I'm not making an impact.'

At this juncture Hermione strode in, and flashed a distraught gaze upon them all.

She saw the boys collected in front of the fire. Harry curled up with 'Quidditch Through the Ages,' Neville busy making coffee, Ron setting up the chessboard with a determined look and Malfoy lounging in a chair with the air of an elegant pale-blond cat, long jeans-clad legs stretched out before him.

She dismissed them all with a perfunctory greeting.

'Pleasure, Harry.'

'A joy, Ron.'

'Enchanted, Neville.'

'Sod off, Malfoy.'

'I like to think we have a special connection,' remarked Draco, stretching gracefully.

Hermione stomped off to the girls' dormitories.

'Don't mind her,' said Harry. 'She always gets like this when she realises that the Christmas holidays will be over soon, and she hasn't started studying for summer.'

'Now, Malfoy,' Ron said grimly, 'let's see who's the Chess Champi-'

The chessboard was knocked off the table by a suddenly alert and panicked blur of blond.

'Oh my God!' he exclaimed. 'She's *right*! What have I been *thinking*? Oh, I bet *everyone* else has started studying by now! Damn those tricky Ravenclaws!'

'Er,' said Neville, blinking.

'There is no *time* for chess, you imbecilic redhead! There is no time to breathe! Oh, oh, death, ruin, academic failure!'

Exit Draco Malfoy, apparently pursued by an invisible bear.

Ron blinked. 'Well, that was... distinctly terrifying.'

*

'Don't you people get it?' Hermione asked somewhat hysterically. 'Colour-coded charts are the only way to revise. Without them, we are doomed!'

'Quiet, Hermione,' Parvati said crossly. 'Gary is just about to have his baby.'

'I don't care!'

The other girls found this tantamount to treason.

Hermione remained indifferent, and began to arrange her revision notes alphabetically. She had to make a chart. She should have made a chart *weeks* ago, there was something terribly the matter with her, rats turning into boys all over the place had distracted her... but the teachers were not going to accept Draco Malfoy as a reason for a grades drop.

Parvati and Lavender had tried last year.

Well, that's it, Hermione promised herself. I'm not going near him again. I won't even look at him in the corridors.

Draco came in.

There was general uproar.

'Malfoy!' Parvati shrieked. 'This is the *girls' dormitory*! We could have been naked!'

Malfoy bit his lip. 'Maybe next time.'

He glanced over at Hermione, who was giving him a cold look over her notes.

'Hi,' he said. 'I was thinking we could study together.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows. 'I don't know what you think you're doing, Malfoy, but I happen to be actually serious-'

'I know, I know,' Draco interrupted, pushing his hair back with a distraught gesture. 'I'm not serious about it. I've been totally neglectful with all this rat stuff. The Ravenclaws probably began to study months ago, but we have to make do with what we have. All I can think of is making more detailed notes on our class notes, possibly with reference to more advanced texts, and of course-'

He turned and dragged something from the threshold.

'A colour-coded chart.'

Hermione gave him a long look.

'All right,' she conceded. 'We could try it.'

'But Gary's having his baby, Draco!' Parvati protested.

Draco dived for Hermione's bed.

Once he had snatched what he wanted, he looked reproachfully at Parvati, two pillows clutched to his ears.

'Tempt me not with your siren song, woman!' He turned back to Hermione. 'So. Let's talk Arithmancy.'

*

'Can you believe that Hagrid hasn't set a written again?'

'I call it an outrage,' Draco said. 'I mean, why did I spend all my time making notes on *'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them'*?

'You just get so discouraged.'

'Yes, *exactly*.'

Hermione had never had this much fun outside the library.

Malfoy was lying on her bed, blond head pillowed on his arm, and doing incredible things to her Arithmancy notes with a highlighter.

Once *'Truly Madly Deeply'* was over the others had cleared out, away from the crazed scholarly folk.

Hermione was just about to bring up the subject of Charms when Malfoy looked over at her again.

'You know,' he said in meditative tones, 'the way your nose wrinkles when you're excited is really extremely fetching.'

This bed is too small!

Hermione valiantly pretended that she had not heard.

'You're blushing,' observed Draco the demon after approximately three seconds.

'I always blush when I study,' Hermione answered stiffly and absurdly. She wished she could get off the bed without seeming self-conscious.

She stopped and recalled that this awful boy had, in fact, shared her bed plenty of times before. In fact, she recalled one night when she had talked to Fluffy about... about her lack of success with *boys*...

Oh, God.

Hermione's face thumped into a pillow.

After a moment, she felt a hand on her hair.

'I mean, I was turned into a rat and infiltrated Gryffindor tower for you,' Draco commented in a neutral tone. 'What else do I have to do?'

'You were turned into a rat by a lunatic against your consent,' Hermione told him in a muffled voice.

'Well, yes. But must you obsess over every detail? What I'm asking you is a question. What else do I have to do?'

Hermione lifted her face and found grey eyes disturbingly close.

'There's nothing you can do,' she snapped. 'The answer is no.'

Malfoy bent forward.

Hermione slapped him.

'I said the answer was no!'

Draco smiled and leaned back.

'Oh, well. At least it's body contact.'

Hermione stared at her hand. She had never been a violent person. She had never touched anyone else in anger before.

Anyone *else*.

I don't like being out of control, Hermione thought.

'Get out.'

'If I go, my chart goes with me.'

Talk about tempting with siren songs.

'Oh...' Hermione sighed angrily. 'All right. But pull up a chair.'

Draco stretched luxuriously.

'Why? I'm very comfortable here.'

Gahhhh...

*

Hermione had always planned on a sensible relationship. She had a methodical mind, and planned her life very much as she planned her study timetable.

Her future was all but colour-coded.

Even the Weasley's' loving home was too full and muddled for her taste, Mr Weasley more eccentric than she would have chosen. Hermione wanted the picture postcard version, a scrubbed white kitchen, a Labrador, white picket fence, two charming toddlers and a loving, dependable partner who understood Muggle and wizard culture.

Ron Weasley had been given the push because he was too intense. Hermione was waiting for perfection.

Her idea of perfection was nothing like Draco Malfoy.

Hermione had had an idea that her ideal would have brown eyes, be kind to animals... be everything, in short, that Draco Malfoy was not.

Draco Malfoy, bigot, narcissist, spawn of Death Eaters. Draco Sorry-I-Was-In-The-Bathroom-When-They-Gave-Out-Morals Malfoy. Too good-looking to be safe, too self-obsessed to be loving, too Malfoy to be dependable.

Draco Malfoy was most emphatically not what Hermione had in mind.

So, she decided to ignore this new idea of his, this insane notion of them together. She hoped that he would get the hint, and she told herself that she was being very mature, and she was quite sure that nothing he could do would change her mind.

Draco Malfoy, on the other hand, did not plan his future.

He was used to getting what he wanted, though. And he was not used to taking no for an answer.

*

Hermione had a very peaceful time of it the next day. There was no Draco insisting on studying with her, forcing her to watch imbecilic programmes or causing a commotion.

He had stopped harassing her. Everything was back to normal.

Which was very nice. And she was not being irritable or distracted at all, Harry Potter, thank you very much!

If that boy made any more such observations, she'd hit him with her fork.

Hermione glanced over to the Slytherin table - just making sure that Malfoy was in his place! Just because...

He wasn't in his place.

Hermione's mind filled with randomised dread just as the lights in the Great Hall went down, and the dread became intense and very specific.

'And now,' Dumbledore said, 'Mr Malfoy has requested the honour of favouring us with a song.'

Draco appeared, walking slowly and holding Dean Thomas' guitar. The dim light reflected off his hair, making it glow like a halo. Beneath that moonbeam shine, his eyes sparkled wickedly.

A hundred breaths caught in a hundred girls' throats.

He leaned forward over the guitar, shadows underlining angular cheekbones and sweeping lashes.

Hermione was furious to find herself mesmerised.

Oh no, oh please don't let him be-

He was coming over, making his way directly to hers. His eyes were blatantly fixed on her and the look in them was distinctly... evil.

He knew she didn't want this! And he knew, damn him, he knew exactly how aware she was of him right now, he knew that she wasn't going to leave!

He began to sing, fingers gliding across the guitar strings, voice lower and huskier than his speaking voice.

Hermione was appalled to find herself shivering.

They all sat there fascinated, watching him, quivering as the strings did under his hand. He was Draco Malfoy, manipulator extraordinaire.

And then a few heads jerked up as they realised what he was singing.

Hermione inhaled a sharp, shocked breath.

Draco kept his eyes on her, and kept singing at her.

'I am everything you want'

Indrawn breaths across the Hall. Hermione almost smiled at his sheer nerve, and recalled him lying on her bed drawling, 'What else do I have to do?'

'I am everything you need'

Draco's mouth on her palm at the Quidditch game.

Draco in Arithmancy saying 'I'm trying to get your attention.'

I am everything inside of you that you wish you could be

I say all the right things'

Draco leaning towards her now, magnificently ignoring the rest of the Hall. Draco Malfoy, exactly what she shouldn't want, vain, untrustworthy, and spoiled to the end - trying to grab what he wanted.

'At exactly the right time

But I mean nothing to you and I don't know why.

Why?'

Hermione looked up into cool grey eyes, and tried to work out... something.

There was a moment of stillness, a moment in which that liquid voice was quiet. Draco simply stood in front of her, silver locks falling into his face, and waited for her to respond.

But Malfoys never waited long.

He blew her a kiss and left the hall, not waiting for the applause.

It rang out around her instead, a cacophony to which she tried to set her thoughts. She gripped the table, still shaken and incredulous. She was coming to understand one thing.

Malfoys did not give up.

*

Draco sat by the fire in front of the Slytherin common rooms, staring into the fire.

This brooding hero thing was, since it was him, very picturesque - but it was getting ridiculous.

Life was generally getting ridiculous.

Friendly with the Gryffindors. Rejected by a woman.

And not just any woman. The woman. The one who mattered.

Actually, there being a woman that mattered was ridiculous too. It was totally against the Malfoy Code.

But... there it was.

Draco was trying not to think too much about it.

He was also trying not to think about how his father would react.

Of course, the 'Daily Prophet' had already interviewed Pansy Parkinson and Seamus Finnigan, and the Harry Potter/Ron Weasley/Draco Malfoy story had broken last week.

His mother had been forced to write to him, as Lucius Malfoy believed he was having a stroke. Draco's portrait had now been hung in the torture chambers beside Uncle Ethelfride's.

There was only so much more his father could do to him.

Draco tried to distract himself by thinking of something more soothing.

Like, who was trying to kill him?

It was a bit unsettling.

If coffee could be poisoned, this person was clearly mad. He must hold nothing sacred.

He was also clearly not a member of the sixth year Gryffindor dormitories, since it would have been easy to get hold of Draco then.

Just as clearly, he had to be a Gryffindor. And he had to be someone who was friendly enough with the sixth years to be sitting close enough to poison Draco's coffee...

But there was nobody in school who had the Potions skill to manipulate the Potion except for Blaise, Hermione and Draco himself.

I've got it, Draco thought. It must have been the Invisible Man. Mwhahaha.

He must have made other attempts to get Draco. Who had been trying to cause distractions around him lately...?

And what the hell had been the taste in Draco's mouth?

Muggle plastic. Who carried pieces of Muggle plastic in their hands?

There was something nudging insistently at the back of Draco's mind. He sat forward in his chair, face intent, the firelight exploding pale orange in his eyes and along his cheekbones.

Across the room, Pansy Parkinson sighed happily and rested her chin on her hands. Getting in some quality gazing time.

Come on, Draco thought. I just need one thing to slot into place, I just need something to...

To...

Click.

Who had charged up the Quidditch bleachers to tell Hermione that Harry and Ron were having a fight, and offered to hold Draco?

Who had been rumoured to be dating Blaise Zabini? Blaise, who was not only extremely talented at Potions but who was in Draco's Potions class?

Who had been near enough to poison the coffee, and who constantly had a plastic Muggle artefact in his nasty hands?

Draco got up, to Pansy's intense disappointment.

'I'll kill him,' he said.

*

Harry and Ron were playing a game of chess when Draco came in, striding toward the dormitories, his eyes cold points of steel.

"Can't talk now. Must destroy."

The chessboard went flying.

Chapter Eleven

Revenge, Romance and Really Traumatic Events

Ron and Harry came to a skidding halt outside the room where Draco had Colin cornered.

"Draco!" Harry panted. "Think. Consider. Pause. Reflect."

Draco thought this was rich, coming from a Gryffindor.

Nevertheless, he took a deep calming breath.

Then four more.

"You're right, Harry," he conceded. "I will."

Harry and Ron breathed sighs of relief.

"*After* I kill him," Draco resumed.

"Nonono! You mustn't!" Ron seized his arm. "What makes you think that Colin did it anyway?"

At this point, Colin Creevey's reedy little voice piped up.

"Because I did!"

Harry blinked. "Oh. Well - that seems conclusive, yeah."

"I am about to conclude his *life*!" Draco shouted. "Push off, Weasley. Go take your morals where they're wanted, I happen to be allergic. Now, where was I? Oh yes - Prepare your last words, Creevey!"

"Eeep!"

Harry seized Draco's other arm.

"Now I'm sure Colin has an explanation," he said soothingly.

"For trying to kill me?!"

"We all have our off days."

"I don't have homicidal lunatic days!" Draco paused to mull this one over. "Or if I do, it's not the point in question."

"I am not a lunatic!"

Creevey claimed this, and yet he kept talking back to an evidently enraged Slytherin.

It just didn't seem convincing.

"I am merely choosing the side of the greatest strength," Colin proceeded. "The Dark side is clearly the most powerful."

"Would that be because he was beaten by a baby, or that children successfully foil him at every turn?" Harry mused. "Wait, sorry. You were saying?"

"All my life I've been fascinated by - power," Colin said. "I worshipped yours for a time, Harry Potter."

Draco rolled his eyes. "We know, your creepy crush was the talk of the school."

"But even Valentines failed to win your attention-"

"That was *you*?" Harry said. "Ew!"

"Can I kill him now?" Draco demanded.

"No!" said Ron.

"Maybe," said Harry.

Colin continued with his rant. Evil people were always just dying to tell people their nefarious plans.

Draco didn't get it. They were never getting a confession out of him unless they brought back the rack.

"So I moved on to bigger game..."

"Please not Dumbledore," Ron breathed. "Don't tell me you sent Valentines to *Dumbledore*!"

"No, the Dark Lord," Colin snapped. "Have you been not paying attention at all? This is my wicked plot here."

"Sorry. Right. It's just the girls are having aerobics right outside that window. There's a lot of lycra and - no. Go on. Really. I'm listening."

"Well, the Dark Lord was pleased to accept my offers of devotion," Colin said.

"And your Valentines?" Draco asked, lifting an eyebrow. "'Roses are red, your eyes are too, Death we eat and-?'"

"Could you people please stop interrupting?" Colin complained. "This is serious, you know!"

"Hm. Oh, yes. I agree with you completely," said Harry, who was looking out the window.

"I wished to gain access to the innermost Circle, and thus to be nearer my Lord. So I decided to barter for favours with the son of one of his most influential Death Eaters."

"Hang on, kidnapping someone's child means you get put into a position of trust and power?" Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. "Pretty standard, really."

"And people wonder why Evil Empires fall..."

"Since the son tends to be a little violent and unstable in his natural form, I decided to transform him into a more natural shape."

"Violent and unstable? Violent and - I'll give you violent and unstable, you little pipsqueak, I'll give you violent and unstable right up the-"

"Come on, Draco," Ron said. "You have to admit he has a point."

Draco subsided. "Well, yes. But I'm still insulted, dammit! I have feelings." He got blank, incredulous stares from all sides. "I could have feelings," he added peevishly. "If I *wanted* to, I could."

"It was difficult," Colin told them all loudly. "I had to use great cunning. I had to seduce Blaise Zabini."

Draco rolled his eyes again. "Boldly going where many men, women and household pets have gone before."

"I had to find out her Potions knowledge, and convince her to slip the Potion into your beaker. Little did she know that I had altered it, so the time limit on it was indefinite. She thought it was a mere joke!"

Colin went off into a peal of wicked, theatrical laughter.

Everyone stood and looked at him until he stopped.

"It was a very cunning plan," he said defensively. "Except then he bit me. And then Ron picked him up, and then all my devilish ploys to get him back, like setting Crabbe and Goyle on Ron and-"

"Maybe you can kill him after all," Ron mused.

"Er, well, they didn't work," Colin finished hastily. "I sneaked into the sixth year dormitory once, but he was sleeping with Hermione that night. So I merely paused to get a few photos of Harry slumbering, and left."

"Oh, this is *nasty*," wailed Harry.

"Why didn't you just go into the girls' dorms and nick me?" Draco inquired.

"Malfoy," Colin said reproachfully. "I realise that I am a minion of darkness, but sneaking into the girls' dorms at night is just plain wrong."

Harry and Ron nodded, looking shocked.

Draco was never going to understand Gryffindors.

"And then Ron performed the reversal of the charm, in the Sleeping Beauty style-"

"Please skip ahead," Ron said.

"Well, I knew I had to dispose of Malfoy before he found out that it was me. I could not risk discovery, so I decided to kill him. But that plot was foiled too."

Harry looked mildly puzzled. "If escaping discovery was so important, why have you just told us everything?"

Colin blinked.

"Oh yeah. Bugger."

"Okay," Draco said briskly. "Now that that's settled, and everyone is convinced of his guilt, I shall just painfully torture Creevey to an agonising death and it's all over, no hard feelings, no harm done."

"No, you can't!" Ron cried. "Harry, back me up here! It would be wrong."

"Yeah... wrong," Harry repeated, looking a bit wistful.

"I happen to know he took photos of you that Millicent Bulstrode bought and keeps in a special collection," Draco tempted him.

"No, no," Harry said, getting a grip on his heroic self. "We have to take him to Dumbledore."

"And he'll what, give him a detention?" Draco yelled. "No! I want to kill him! I want *revenge!* I'm a Malfoy, I want blood! Give me... blood... damn you, Gryffindors... blood... *blood...*"

"Is he always like this?" Colin asked apprehensively.

"Worse in the mornings, when he hasn't had coffee," Harry said. "But don't worry, little evil minion. We won't let him hurt you."

Draco struggled and tried to bite. It was quite an effort to restrain him.

As Seamus trailed home disconsolately from the infirmary, he was presented with the spectacle of a biting sweaty Draco being pinioned by two struggling boys, and Colin Creevey trailing after them like a whipped slave child.

He spent the rest of the day with his head under the blankets.

*

Dumbledore was quite startled when Ron and Harry came barrelling into his office, frogmarching Draco like a prisoner of war between them.

"What has Mr Malfoy done?" he inquired mildly.

"Nothing!" Draco howled in disgust.

Dumbledore looked at Harry inquiringly.

"He's telling the truth, sir," Harry said.

"Really? How... unexpected."

Draco yanked his arms out of the Gryffindor grip.

"It was Colin Creevey!" he declared passionately. "He tried to kill me! He tried to poison my coffee, he put fur on my beautiful beautiful face! I demand that he be expelled, I demand that he be punished, I demand that he be killed until he is sorry!"

Dumbledore put down his quill and looked past the irate blond.

"Where is Mr Creevey?"

Harry and Ron cast a frantic look behind them.

"Er," Harry said. "He was here just a minute ago..."

"To tell you the truth, sir," Ron put in, "we were a bit occupied with Draco..."

"You let him get away?" Draco howled. "You total, utter, complete wankers! You - you *bloody Gryffindors!*"

"Don't listen to him, sir," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, "yeah, he's overwrought..."

"I am not overwrought! I am completely on top of wrought!" Draco snapped. "You two should have been drowned at birth! And you - you - why don't you get the Aurors, there's a murderer on the loose, you senile old... mphmphmph..."

Harry, with great presence of mind, had leaped on Draco's back and clapped a hand over his mouth.

"He's just feeling a bit delicate today," he explained hastily, as Draco foamed at the mouth and tried to strangle him. "When you get to know him, he's really quite - Ron, help me!"

Ron jumped into the fray. The boys wrestled down the viciously struggling Slytherin. Mumbled words about blood were escaping between Harry's fingers and at one point Draco almost heaved himself up and they fell in a jumble of limbs and virulent curses.

Dumbledore quietly cleaned his glasses.

"Draco!" Ron yelled. "Be calm and we can stop Colin escaping!"

Draco wasn't listening. He seemed to be trying to rip Ron's arm off instead.

"Draco!" Harry pleaded. "You're messing up your hair!"

Draco went still.

"...Really?" he asked in a small voice.

"No," Harry said, softening. "I just said it to hurt you."

"...My hair's okay?"

"Er - yeah. Will you be good now?"

"Ha! You wish."

"What Harry meant was, will you try not to rip off our limbs?"

"I can't promise anything..." Draco mumbled mutinously.

"For the next five minutes?"

"Ah - yeah, all right. Get off me, both of you."

Everybody stood up.

Draco crossed his arms and looked distinctly sulky.

"Now begone, incompetent buffoons," he commanded. "You have failed me and I am most seriously displeased."

"Sorry about him, sir," Harry said. "He forgets people aren't house elves."

"Don't talk back!" Draco snapped. "Letting Creevey go, you imbeciles, leave this room at once or it's your ears in the oven door! Go on, I mean it. Out of my sight!"

Dumbledore tactfully motioned them out.

When the door closed, Draco turned his gaze on his headmaster. He narrowed his eyes and pretended that he was a disobedient house elf with an unusual growth of beard.

"It's nice to see that you're getting on well with the Gryffindors," Dumbledore told him amicably.

"Oh yes, let's please talk about my social life rather than pursuing the criminal," Draco said sourly.

"I just like to see that you're making friends," Dumbledore said placidly.

"And probably getting disinherited in the process," Draco added morosely. On balance, he would rather have been tortured a bit. "Why all this concern for me? Trust me, you'd be better off keeping Harry as your golden boy. I'm not even a gold-plated boy."

Dumbledore smiled.

"Well, we're practically family. Or hadn't you heard? My brother Aberforth and your uncle Ethelfride have set up house together. I believe the wedding will be in the summer."

Few things could make Malfoys forget about murderous rage.

This was one of them.

"A-Aberforth Dumbledore?" Draco's voice was low. "The one who was in the papers because of that - *thing* with the goats?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. I hear Ethelfride's bridal gown is quite beautiful."

Draco remained very still for a moment.

Then, in a slow, reproachful voice, he said: "I am going to go now. Try not to inflict any psychological damage on me as I leave."

Harry and Ron were extremely startled to see Draco burst from the headmaster's office screaming.

"What did he say?" Harry asked as the wild shouts echoed in the corridors.

"Er - 'God damn progressive education'?" Ron said doubtfully.

"Huh." Harry blinked. "He worries me sometimes."

"He might end up going the same way as that uncle of his."

"Oh, Ethelfride Malfoy?"

"You know about him?" Ron looked mildly surprised. "You never know about anything."

"*Everyone* knows about Ethelfride."

*

Harry and Ron caught up with Draco, who was still looking white and shaken.

"Let go!" he said. "I wish to be alone, dammit. Or if you won't go away, hand me a mirror, I wish to check my hair."

Harry and Ron seized his elbows.

"Not this again," Draco moaned. "I happen to be a student here, not a criminal."

None of the Malfoys were criminals.

Technically, you weren't a criminal until you were caught.

"No, no, you'll like this," Harry promised. "Look out the window at the lake... see? Colin's making a break for it!"

They all watched the mousy-haired little figure as he seized a boat and began to paddle across the lake.

They all saw the almost lazy swipe of the giant squid towards the boat, and Colin's terrified squeal as he was seized by a tentacle and waggled around.

Then Draco leaned out of the window, stretched delicately and indulged in a mildly evil laugh.

Repent, repent, all ye who mess with the Malfoys, for they are vicious pitiless little bastards.

"I think I'll go take a stroll by the lake," he said innocently. "You know. To enjoy the view."

*

"Please stop chuckling with fiendish glee, Draco."

"I'm sorry, Hermione, do you have a headache?"

"No, I just find it extremely disturbing..."

Draco, curled up by the fire in the Gryffindor common room, was examining photographs taken this afternoon by the lake. He had watched Colin Creevey's desperate swim for the shore quite a few times.

For some reason, he never got tired of it.

But he put them aside to look over as a sweet bedtime visual of fear and terror, and turned to Hermione.

"Tell me about the spell that made it possible for your TV to work," he requested with his most fascinating smile.

Hermione could never resist an appeal for knowledge, and she turned and began to talk quietly. Draco listened carefully.

Ginny, Harry and Dean Thomas exchanged satisfied smiles as her curly head bent over Draco's smooth blond locks, both of them engaged in an utterly incomprehensible conversation.

Awww, said their exchange of glances. Aren't the academic freaks cute?

Ron the Oblivious said loudly, "It's a good thing you rescued Colin's camera, Draco. I want pictures of me and Cho at the Yule Ball."

Ginny stifled a groan behind her hand.

"Hey, Draco," said Ron, "who are you taking to the b - Harry, why are you beating your head against a table?"

"Was I?" Harry asked. "Didn't notice."

Draco gave Ron his Glare o'Death TM (patented to the Malfoy family 1783).

"Oh, I don't know," he said lazily. "Not a Slytherin, that's for sure. They have many sterling qualities, but Pansy Parkinson couldn't take no for an answer back in fourth year. Despite the fact that I was practically dressed as a priest... a fairly drastic procedure for someone who's taken vows of non-poverty and non-chastity."

He cast an elaborately disinterested look around the room.

"Of course, if someone here is in need of an escort I would be delighted - drop dead, Patil, I didn't mean you. And come out from behind the sofa Finnigan, honestly, I have standards."

"I suggest you save yourself and your vows of non-chastity for some Hufflepuff who might appreciate them," Hermione said in a neutral voice

Draco pouted.

Parvati Patil had to go for a nice quiet lie-down.

"Wait, Hermione doesn't have a date either," Ron said brightly. "... Ginny, why are you gnawing your pencil?"

Ginny bit the pencil in half.

"Ah - nervous habit."

"Say, Harry," Ron said in conversational tones. "Could I borrow the Marauder's Map in case - ah, Cho and I want to go someplace private?"

"Of course," Harry said readily. "I won't be using it."

Ginny snatched it back.

"The hell you won't!"

A mumble of "Vixen" came from the direction of Draco Malfoy. Then he glanced over at the Map.

He looked vaguely apprehensive.

"You have a Map which, ah, shows everything going on in the school?"

"Yes, I've had it ever since third year..."

"Oh." Draco blushed very much. "Well. Well, on the, er, few nights you might have seen my dot in the Astronomy Tower with those three girls, I'll have you know it was a perfectly legitimate study group."

"Oh yeah?" Ron said. "What planet were you studying, Ur-"

"Shut up, Weasley!"

*

Harry was looking extremely guilty, Hermione thought. As if he had crept into the girls' dormitory on a mission to seduce the masses, when in actual fact he had been invited in.

He glanced over at Parvati's stocking on the floor as if it was a symbol of flagrant indecency.

"You wanted to talk to me, Harry?" Hermione prompted him.

"We did," Ginny agreed, taking over for Harry since he was busy eyeing the beds apprehensively, as if he suspected that dancing girls were hidden under them.

Harry snapped out of it.

"Draco's a nice guy," he said suddenly and warmly.

"Apart from his regular outbursts of homicidal rage, immoral mentality and the way he spent five and a half years sadistically tormenting us, you mean?"

Harry blinked.

"Well. Yes. There's that."

Ginny coughed. "Overlooking those small issues, Draco has many good points."

Harry nodded. "He's smart."

"He sings well."

"He plays chess well."

"He likes books."

"He's funny."

"He's got those jeans."

"Yeah, he's kind of pretty. Er, so I hear from Parvati."

Hermione stared.

"You people do realise that you're trying to set me up with someone from *Slytherin*. Slytherin, the house that drinks virgin blood."

"Oh, but Draco's different."

"Yes, he is their leader! He probably overdoses on the virgin blood! And if you think he's so great, you take him to the ball."

"I'm taking Harry."

"I'm taking Ginny."

"Harry, I *wasn't* talking to you."

"Oh."

"I don't want to arrive home this summer and tell Mum and Dad that my boyfriend will be along in a second, he's just torturing a helpless puppy he found by the road."

"I'm sure Draco wouldn't hurt a dumb animal," Ginny said at last, after a whispered conference on whether Neville Longbottom counted.

Hermione dropped her book with a thud.

"Have you all gone quite mad? Am I the only person who retains her senses on the subject of Draco 'I Am the Evil One! Bwha!' Malfoy? Just because he thinks he can strut in here with his hair and his jeans and his singing and his jokes and his jeans and - where was I?"

"His jeans," Ginny and Harry chorused.

"I was nowhere of the sort. I mean, I'm perfectly happy being single and untormented. So you people can all trot off to the Yule Ball, and pair off, and I shall be alone and yet fulfilled while you have Harry, and Ron has Cho, and Draco Malfoy has his-"

"Exciting assortment of love slaves?"

The entirely unexpected lazy drawl made a girlish scream echo around the room.

Afterwards, Harry looked quite embarrassed.

Hermione stared at Draco's face framed by her window.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah." Draco smiled winningly. "I've climbed a trellis to your window. It's very romantic and dashing of me, I feel. I'd have asked to climb your hair, but, well, it still has those bushy issues, and there'd be an unpleasant static factor..."

"Draco. I have no trellis."

Draco carefully turned his smile up the few notches from Winning to Irresistibly Adorable.

"You do now."

Hermione ran over to the window.

"You *grew* a *plant*?"

Over her head, Harry and Ginny were giving him a frantic thumbs-up.

"But that must have taken *hours*... you must have missed *classes*..."

"Oh, no," Draco said casually. "I just bullied Neville Longbottom into doing it."

As the window snapped shut on his fingers, he got the uncanny impression that he was still doing something wrong.

*

The next morning at breakfast, Draco gazed morosely into his coffee and mused over his current situation.

Evil had been defeated. Which, surprisingly, was a good thing, because he - for once - hadn't been the evil.

Score. Malfoy - one. Murphy (take that, you bastard!) - zero.

But now...

He was having problems with his *love life*. He was having trouble *getting a girl*.

It just seemed so - wrong.

And the Boy Who Lived But, You Know, Didn't Actually Have Any Sort of Life, was trying to set him up with his friend. Ha! Harry Potter, who wouldn't have known hot action if it had turned up naked in his dorm.

If only he had some sort of clue as to what was going wrong.

He frowned. He was still wealthy, right? Oh yes, he was so wealthy. Mmm-hmm. Just like that, secret Swiss branch of Gringotts account, yes please, enrich me harder.

He was still charming, witty and a sexy bitch. Blaise Zabini and Pansy were composing a poem to that effect further down the Slytherin table.

And he was still gorgeous. Wasn't he? Wasn't he?

Come to think of it, it had been fifteen minutes since he'd checked his hair.

He angled a spoon to his face.

No - still gorgeous. Oh, yes. Could his features *be* more classically defined? Not unless they were described by Homer.

So what could possibly be the problem?

Draco sighed. It was clearly time for drastic measures.

He fixed the Smouldering Gaze on Hermione. He had great hopes for this gaze. He had practised it on Pansy last night and she had screamed faintly, staggered and dived for his clothing.

It had taken several cries of 'Bad touches!' until someone had come to his rescue.

He focused the Smouldering Gaze. Once she looked up, he was planning to give her the I'm So Molestable smirk.

She didn't look up! She just kept reading the paper.

She was a creature of chilled steel.

Draco cuddled his coffee to his chest. Ahh, sweet faithful caffeinated lover. You will never leave me.

When his owl came winging its way over to him, nerves made him spill it on his shirt.

After all, Lucius had written the other day sternly instructing him not to invite Ron Weasley to the ball. He couldn't take much more.

Crabbe picked up the envelope beside Draco's plate.

"What's that?" he rumbled.

"Looks like... a wedding invitation," Goyle said. "Er. Draco. Why are you stabbing yourself with a butter knife?"

"Kill me," Draco said. "It's kinder this way."

Rejected by a woman. About to read the most traumatic document of his young life.

And oh God, Edmund that-rude-little-prat Baddock had just collided with Hermione. Again.

Plus, coffee on his shirt!

"Et tu, Brute!" he murmured wildly.

Draco - one. Murphy - 17, 842.

Draco wondered if he could steal some of Seamus' Prozac.

Chapter Twelve

The Yule Ball

The wedding invitation lay by his plate.

The coffee remained on his shirt.

Alarm bells and manic giggling were going on inside his head.

And Edmund Baddock had just curled his lip and said, "Out of my way, Mudblood."

The only sensible action to take at this time was to slip off his chair and whimper quietly under the table.

Of course, Malfoys Didn't Whimper, but he thought he could get away with a small manly gurgle.

So it remained a total mystery to him why he was suddenly on his feet and pinning Edmund to the nearest wall.

Through a haze of fury, he heard Seamus mutter, "Oh God, paedophilia," and fall off his seat.

"Don't *ever* call her that again."

And he didn't understand, he just didn't understand what this feeling was.

"Don't you dare use it. Because it means that she's less than you are, and all you're doing is repeating Death Eater cant, and you never stop and think!"

And he'd said it himself. Over and over again.

"Don't talk to me about pure blood," he heard himself snarl, gesturing over at Crabbe and Goyle. "Look at them! Just look at them, and then look at her, and just think - think *very carefully* - before you ever say *mudblood* again!"

And then he'd stopped shouting. And the entire Great Hall was staring at him. And he'd just made a speech indicating moral indignation, and there was coffee on his shirt, and he'd clearly made a complete idiot of himself.

What would Hermione think?

Draco began to consider euthanasia as a viable option.

*

"Well, that was fun," Draco said as he and Harry made their way down the corridor. "I can just see the ickle firsties' letters now. 'Dear Mummy, Today at dinner Draco Malfoy gave his weekly performance of a Total Prat Mooning Over A Girl Who Doesn't Like Him.'"

"She does like you," Harry consoled him. "She just doesn't want to go out with you."

"But why doesn't she want to go out with me?" Draco wailed. "I'm gorgeous and charming and practically perfect in every way!"

Harry blinked. "And your modesty astounds us all."

"Well," Draco said in a bashful manner.

"Maybe your chances with Hermione would be better if you didn't flirt with every other female you see," Harry suggested.

Draco looked extremely affronted. "I do no such thing! Why, hello, if it isn't the Attractively Voluptuous Lady."

Harry coughed as the Fat Lady giggled and opened the door for them.

"And, while I'm sure that you're a decent person deep down-"

"Potter!"

"*Really* deep down-"

"Keep trying."

"Fathoms deep."

"Your universal goodwill and faith in the world makes me positively nauseous."

"While I'm sure that you're - not Voldemort in disguise-"

"How do you know?" Draco demanded. "Bwah!"

Harry sighed. "Maybe she won't go out with you because you can't hold a normal conversation."

"I happen to think entirely in one-liners. I can't help it. I was born this way. I think it's a matter of karmic balance."

Harry looked puzzled.

"I'm already stunning and intelligent and charismatic," Draco explained. "Imagine if I was sweet and coherent as well. It'd be utter chaos. I'd be knee-deep in swooning women, I'd never get anything done."

"Remind me again why we're your friends..."

"My birthday's coming up," Draco said. "I figured I could use a few more presents."

Ron looked up as Draco and Harry came into the Gryffindor common room.

"You're going to have to give us some hints," he said. "Remember, for most of the time we've liked you we planned on getting you a little collar for your birthday."

There was a thump from across the room.

"Now you're just tormenting Seamus!" Lavender exclaimed.

*

Upstairs in the girls' dormitory, Hermione had her head in Ginny's lap.

"I never thought... he'd do something like that," she said in a quiet, stunned voice.

"Yeah, it's a shame Colin didn't get a picture of it," Ginny replied. She frowned. "What with him being a minion of evil and stuck in juvie Azkaban."

"Oh God. Oh crap." Hermione put her face in her hands. "What should I do?"

"Well, you could give him a bit of a snog."

"Ginny. What he did was - serious."

"If you're that grateful, you could give him a quick shag."

"Ginny!" Hermione looked scandalised. "Vixen!"

Ginny looked proud.

"Failing that, you could be his date to the Yule Ball."

"I, well... He hasn't asked me."

Ginny sat there and looked down her nose at Hermione.

"He hasn't," Hermione said defensively. "And I, God, it's all so silly, and his father tried to *kill* you-"

Ginny waved a hand. "Stop living in the past."

"And he's amoral and annoying and I don't even like blonds!"

"Nonsense!" Ginny said briskly. "Everybody likes blonds!"

Hermione stared.

"Except for me," Ginny added quickly. "I love Harry."

Hermione sighed and decided to ignore this.

"Look - just because someone's attractive doesn't mean you can have a relationship with them if you're utterly incompatible. He's not an acceptable character - he's not safe. He's hardly even likeable."

Ginny let her hands fall into her lap.

"Tell me one thing, Hermione. Do you even care about him?"

Hermione bit her lip.

"Of course I do!" She turned away. "That's the problem."

*

Hermione suspected dastardly betrayal on Ginny's part.

It was just that - suddenly the whole *world* seemed to know that she would go with Draco Malfoy to the ball if he asked her.

And the whole world was almost convincing her.

Of course, such conviction might be useless.

Hermione gazed fixedly down at her Arithmancy homework.

Draco still hadn't asked her.

Of course, he'd been absorbed in the news of the, er, upcoming wedding in his family.

So had the rest of the Malfoys. The word by owl was that Lucius Malfoy had taken up with the strange Muggle drug Prozac after the news had been broken to him.

Though this hadn't stopped him from sending a Howler to Draco commanding him not to take Ron *or* Harry to the dance.

That day Draco had drunk coffee straight from the pot.

So he was stressed, occupied. He was certainly going to ask her. He was mad about her.

Of course, she had rejected him rather frequently.

And how interesting could a bushy-haired bookworm be, really, to a platinum blond protogod in skin-tight jeans?

Still... he'd turned down all his offers. Surely he was going to...

Hermione turned up her nose.

Not that she cared. She didn't even want to go to the ball. She wanted to use the valuable quiet time studying. She definitely didn't want to go to the ball with Draco Malfoy.

She kept telling herself that. The day before the ball, she told herself that aloud, to the bemusement of everybody around her.

"You?" Seamus said. "Why would Malfoy go to the ball with *you*?"

Hermione gave him a Glare of Death and stormed off.

"After all," Seamus muttered in her wake, "you're a *girl*."

*

The day before the ball, Draco got a package from home.

It contained black velvet robes, and a stern injunction from his father to wear them and instantly cease entertaining this strange Muggle-clothing obsession.

He also ordered him to cease entertaining the Gryffindor boys in his bedroom.

Draco wrinkled his nose at the lurid description in the letter. He had no doubt about where Lucius was getting his information, and he thought that Pansy was letting her imagination run away with her.

This kind of obsession with pretty gay love was frankly unhealthy.

And these robes... Draco looked at them and made a horrible face.

It was just not on. They weren't form-fitting at all. This wasn't any kind of *selfish* reason. Girls throughout Hogwarts were *counting* on him to provide entertainment.

It wouldn't be fair to them.

"Who's the letter for?" asked a sinister hooded figure standing across from him.

Draco looked over disinterestedly.

"Me."

"What, people usually address you as DIM? Well - fair enough."

Draco blushed. "Just because my middle name happens to be Ignatius! - who are you, anyway?"

He asked out of mild curiosity, that was all. Ominous cloaked figures were fairly run-of-the-mill in the Slytherin common room.

One of the reasons he'd pelted away from that figure drinking unicorn blood was that he'd suspected it was Pansy Parkinson.

"Blaise," said the strangely deep voice from under the hood.

"*Blaise?*" Draco squinted. "Oh. Oh, I see. It's full moon again? Bad luck. Have you told whoever's taking you to the ball?"

"I'm taking Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnigan," Blaise answered, pushing back his hood and giving an evil grin. "And, well - she knows. Seems quite happy about the arrangement. And he may be too doped up to notice."

"You might kill him," Draco suggested brightly.

"Wouldn't be the first man I've killed," Blaise smirked.

Or the first woman. Or the first household pet.

For the sake of house togetherness, Draco did not voice this thought.

Blaise sat beside him.

"I've told you how sorry I am about that teensy weensy deal with the Potion, haven't I? You know I would never deliberately do something to hurt you, you gorgeous sex moppet you."

"Er. That's fine. Apology accepted. Could you not sit quite so close to me?"

Blaise sighed. "Colin deceived me. He didn't even seem to mind about the full moon thing. I'm just looking for the right - few people in the world for me." He perked up. "So, about the ball. You can come with us if you'd like."

"That would kill Finnigan," Draco replied absently. "Anyway, I'm going with Hermione Granger."

Blaise pouted and removed his hand from Draco's knee.

"I didn't know that."

"Nor does she."

"You mean you haven't asked her? How do you know she'll go?"

Draco paused. "That's just it. I - don't."

The uncertainty was novel. That was something to be said for it.

Well, if there was a chance he was going dateless, he certainly wasn't going under-dressed.

Draco looked down at the velvet robes, and got a fiendishly brilliant idea.

He called for a house elf.

*

On the night of the Yule Ball, Hermione firmly kissed everyone goodbye. Both couples had offered to let her come with them, but she had refused absolutely.

"Just as well," Ron had admitted, glancing over at Cho. "I think I might be getting lucky tonight."

Harry had looked appalled. "Come with us, Hermione. *We* certainly won't be up to anything depraved."

"That's what he thinks," Ginny had murmured.

She was *such* a vixen.

Hermione had smiled and sent everybody off. Though she had asked someone to take a picture of Seamus' face when he met his dates in the Hall.

She had absolutely no desire to go to this stupid ball.

She was in her nice, comfortable pyjamas and her nice, fluffy slippers and she had a nice steaming cup of coffee. And all she wanted to do was her homework.

And she was utterly indifferent to the fact everyone else was having fun.

And she *certainly* didn't care who Draco Malfoy was taking to the dance. Oh, no. She didn't care what or indeed who he was doing, and she never had, and she would be perfectly happy if only she could never see him again-

And Draco Malfoy was standing in the doorway.

He had turned up his smile all the way to Justifiable Rape and torches gleamed behind him, making his hair shine like an angel's halo and his eyes shine like the downfall of saints.

And he was wearing - what amounted to a black velvet body glove.

Velvet that was poured into the dip of his collarbone, clung all the way down his torso and followed the line of his hips like a fascinated lover. Velvet that made the locks of his hair, brushing against it, glow like white light. Velvet that made him look slim, stunning and sinfully delicious.

He smiled again, this time the slow evil smile of someone who is perfectly aware that those before him are trying not to take unlawful liberties with his person.

"Hello, Hermione."

*

Five minutes ago, outside the common room, Draco Malfoy had been having a most uncharacteristic panic attack.

He had just remembered that the Gryffindor password had been changed to celebrate the ball... and he didn't have the new password.

"Bugger."

Even now, Murphy plagued him!

Here he was, standing here in new clothes, having spent about three hours with his hair, about to actually take an emotional risk. (Against a very specific rule in the Malfoy Code, Number 33: Don't care at all. Really. We mean it.)

And he was distraught, dateless and talking to himself.

"How am I going to get past the Fat Lady - oh, hang on a minute. This is the Fat Lady. Lady. This is a woman. And I am Draco Malfoy! Right then, problem solved."

Of course, talking to yourself sometimes lent clarity to a situation.

If you happened to be dead sexy.

Draco adjusted his already pristine robes, shook back his shining hair and smiled a smile his Veela grandmother had taught him, and which made mirrors fall off walls and offer him sexual favours.

Then he leaned against the wall and fixed the Fat Lady's portrait with a smouldering gaze.

"What's a girl like you doing hanging over an entrance like this?"

*

"D - Draco!"

Of course I stammered, Hermione told herself. I was startled. Anyone would be startled. It would have been the same if Filch had showed up in black velvet.

Draco was extremely upset to see a look of pure revulsion briefly cross Hermione's face.

Then she pulled herself together and banished the disturbing image.

"What are you doing here?"

Draco shook back his hair. "Ah. I was hoping you would do me the honour of accompanying me to the Yule Ball."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "And why are you asking me this late?"

Draco looked mildly panicked. "I - er."

And the fury Hermione had been suppressing for days welled up, looked around and leaped for a jugular.

"Oh, you suddenly realised that you didn't have a date, and you decided to settle. Is that it? Somebody turned you down and you thought it would be a safe option to ask poor dateless Hermione. Well I'm on to you-"

"Excuse me!" Draco shouted her down. "No you're not. You're completely off to me, and you may well be clinically insane! My God, I bloody well sang for you, woman, what will it take for you to believe me, a full-on striptease in the Great Hall?"

The idea had its appeal. But Draco was still raging.

"You turned me down so many times I was bloody dizzy, you idiot Gryffindor, and the reason I came here at this time was because I thought I could persuade you if I came totally dateless and made it clear that the only one I wanted to go with was you, no matter how embarrassing it would be if you rejected me again!"

"...Oh."

"And how dare you insinuate that somebody else turned me down," Draco added huffily. "Me! Don't be absurd."

Hermione forced down a laugh. She was not letting him get around her just because he was funny.

Resorting to humour was very cheap, anyway.

"Why exactly do you want me to go with you, Draco?" she asked primly.

He didn't answer.

She looked at him sharply, and then followed his fascinated gaze down to her cup of coffee.

"Draco!"

He blinked. "Huh? Oh, right. Sorry, what was that?"

"Why. Do. You. Want. Me - oh, for heaven's sake, drink the bloody coffee if you want it that badly."

She had *never* seen anyone move that fast.

Draco might have said 'I love you' but it was muffled under the coffee and Hermione wasn't believing anything an addict said in the throes of addiction.

"I want to go with you because..." Draco paused. "You're cute?"

"Try. Harder."

"I - because - oh, look, *Hermione*! I'm a Malfoy. We don't express any sort of genuine emotion, much less affection, I'm not sure we consider marriages for love legal. Can't we just

- let the fact I'm not saying anything show you that - I'm saying all those things that people say when they're-

"Normal?"

Hermione tipped back her chair and stood up, noticing as she did so that the firelight was glinting off the plastic eyes of her bunny slippers.

"Tell me, Draco. Why should I make exceptions for you just because you're a Malfoy?"

She examined the empty cup on the desk when Draco's face neared hers.

She looked, startled, into his eyes. She stared into her own image, reflected in molten silver. He looked nervous, just a little breathless and damn sexy.

"Well. Malfoys do have certain compensating qualities."

She didn't slap him.

She was *going* to slap him, any minute now, as his mouth touched hers. She was going to hit him so hard he saw stars right after she got her hands untangled from his hair, after she'd pulled away from those warm, searching, *talented* lips, after she had stopped making that embarrassing sound as he pushed her against the table and...

Draco pulled away. Hermione felt aggrieved.

"What do you have to say now?"

"... muh..."

Hermione pulled herself together.

"Try harder," she ordered crisply. "With words, please."

Draco felt extremely put out. After virtuoso Malfoy displays of skill, no maiden for centuries had been able to put together a coherent sentence.

Aside from 'Ravish me now,' that was.

Sometimes he seriously wondered whether he was a disgrace to his name.

"It's just that... you... you're so intelligent, but you've got all those morals, and I don't understand it at all but for some reason I find it bizarrely appealing..."

Hermione softened. "You mean - I make you a better person?"

Draco grimaced. "Sort of. Please don't tell anyone."

Obviously there was a definite limit to the amount of morals any Malfoy could acquire.

"If you say yes," Draco said suddenly, "it will make it all worth it. The rat thing. The name of Malfoy being shamed. My father's impending coronary. Even the - wedding. Everything. This entire adventure will make sense - if only you say yes."

"And if I don't?"

Draco's lip curled. "Then I guess I'll be forced to try and cuddle Potter in the showers after all."

Hermione laughed.

And it would be a stupid and entirely uncharacteristic thing to do. But Draco, standing here looking absolutely beautiful and not entirely sure of himself, was not behaving in classic Slytherin manner either.

It occurred to her for the first time that he couldn't have been planning for this either.

She held out her hand.

"I'll go."

Draco smiled.

"Er. But I have to get changed first."

"Don't do anything on my account," Draco urged. "We can dance the night away with you in your nightclothes, if you like. But if you feel a scanty negligee would be more appropriate for the occasion-"

She smacked him with her textbook.

"Be good. I bet you're a horrible dancer."

"I am a charming dancer," Draco said indignantly.

"In non-rodent form?"

Draco looked very reproachful. Then a thought seemed to strike him.

"Er. Hermione. I think I might go outside the Gryffindor rooms and wait for you. It's just that I had to use a certain amount of persuasion to get in here and... I don't think the Fat Lady will be terribly happy to see me with another woman..."

Hermione was torn between being thunderstruck and being very amused.

"You mean you - *chatted up* a... portrait? How was that even possible? Do portraits have hormones?"

Draco lifted his chin.

"When it comes to the Malfoys, everybody has hormones."

She couldn't help laughing then.

"Draco Malfoy... you rat."

Epilogue

The Wedding of Uncle Ethelfride

Extract from the 'Daily Prophet.'

HOLY MATRIMONY.

Today the noble house of Dumbledore and the notorious house of Malfoy were connected in the most unusual ceremony of our time. In a large gathering of their family and friends, Aberforth Dumbledore and Ethelfride Malfoy were united on this bright and beautiful morning. Not only the circumstances of but the events during the wedding were extremely interesting.

Young Draco Malfoy, the nephew of our bride, the Winner of Witch Weekly's Best Sneer and a boy whose apparently diverse love life is frequently in our pages, had this to say. 'Aren't things bad enough without you pestering me! You people are vultures, vultures I tell you. Feeding on human misery! A pox upon you!'

He was doubtless overwrought after the incidents related overleaf.

A picture of Ethelfride Malfoy-Dumbledore is to be found on page 3, in a stunning sequin and tulle gown.

Several Days Earlier:

"I'm not going," Draco said defiantly. "Nobody can make me go. I can stay here forever if I have to."

"Er, on my bed?" Harry asked. "No you can't."

"Harry, you are not being sympathetic!" Draco wailed. "How would you like to see your uncle put on a wedding dress and marry a man?"

There was a silence. Draco was just about to hit Harry with a pillow when Ron spoke.

"Don't," he said. "This is a special moment for him."

Harry looked on the point of happy tears. "That's the nicest mental picture I ever had."

"Wait until I tell Ginny," Draco remarked. "She'll whip you."

"Do you mind? I don't want to picture my girlfriend with a whip."

"Potter, you are so gay."

There was a thunderous knock on the door.

"Draco!" Hermione yelled. "I know you're in there, you little rodent! Let me in!"

Draco hid his head under a pillow. "You can't come in!" he bellowed. "We're naked!"

There was a pause. "What, all of you?"

"Yes!" Draco howled.

Hermione paused and considered, and decided that there was at least a 65% probability he was lying.

She stormed in. Her boyfriend tried to cover himself with Harry's blanket, which almost toppled him, Harry and Ron onto the ground.

"I just heard a ridiculous rumour that you were planning not to go to your uncle's wedding!"

Draco wondered what on this earth had possessed him to start going out with a girl who could climb to this octave level.

He reminded himself of that great thing she did with her tongue and decided to lift his head and give her the full benefit of the Angelically Appealing Malfoy Gaze.

"Draco," Hermione said in a low, dangerous voice. "Do you know what I will do to you if you perform this selfish and craven act of cowardice?"

Draco shuddered. It was being the child of dentists that did it. She was used to gibbering trauma victims. She was heartless, heartless.

"Hermione, stop!" Harry exclaimed. "You're scaring him."

"Harry Potter, if you take up for him just one more time-"

Harry quailed at this onslaught of rage. "No, Hermione. Sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean it, Hermione."

"Draco. You don't want to make me angry."

"Mmmmf," Draco said, trying to hide his entire body under Harry's pillow. He was going out with the world's only human Howler.

"Don't make me give you another Talk."

"Not a Talk, not a Talk," Ron said fervently. Harry was still gazing at Draco in mute sympathy and distress.

"Are you going to this wedding?"

Draco's rumpled head popped out from under the pillow. He gave her a wide-eyed, beseeching look.

"I will, Hermione," he said in a soft, noble voice. "For your sake I will do this great thing. Because you wish it, I will submit myself to unspeakable torment, I will do all you command since I would rather die than give you pain. Perhaps I will die," he continued, warming to his subject. "But the damned sufferings of hell are all as naught to me-"

"Good," Hermione said sternly, and stalked out.

"Damn," Draco said, sagging. "That's never failed before. Do you think maybe she fancies girls?" He brightened at the thought. "That would be wicked kinky."

"It was a very touching speech, Draco," Harry soothed him. "And we'll all come to the wedding and support you."

"Thank you," Draco said, suddenly looking like a little-boy-lost again. "And, Harry, could I-?"

Harry passed him what he desired. "Yes, Draco. You can borrow my hairbrush."

Ron frowned at the door. "Draco?" he said. "You're a brave man. Does it never scare you to go out with that?"

Draco paused in brushing his hair and looked thoughtful. "Well, yes. But it has its perks." He smiled happily. "I'm not like Potter here. I quite enjoy picturing my girlfriend with a whip."

"Urgh, that's a bit too kinky-"

"Malfoy Code No. 21," Draco said absently. "There's no such thing as too kinky." He paused. "See further numbers for similar rules on being too thin, too rich, too pretty, too wicked or too covered with the blood of your enemies."

"Do you ever wonder whether you might be really, really warped?"

Draco stared blankly. "No. Why do you ask?"

There was another loud knock at the door and Draco howled dramatically at the ceiling.

"Don't come in! I swear, we're all naked this time!"

There was a thump from outside the door. Harry, the conscientious one, got up and went to see what had caused it.

"Er," he said ruefully. "Bad news. I think you killed Seamus."

*

The unlucky Seamus was miraculously revived when Draco, smiling beatifically, offered to give him the Kiss of Life. Then Draco claimed the trauma of Seamus' near-death experience meant that he, Draco, required rest and affection.

Everybody absolutely scorned these claims and therefore it was a mystery to Hermione how she ended up sitting beside the fire with Draco's head in her lap, as Neville fetched coffee and Harry fed him biscuits.

"I told Dumbledore we were all going to the wedding," she informed Draco as she idly stroked his hair.

Draco's contented expression froze.

"Oh did you."

"So you can't wriggle out of it now."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"And you needn't bother making up ridiculous excuses."

"Hermione, your lack of faith wounds me." Draco looked tragic. "It is not my fault that I get violently sick in flying carriages."

"Lucky you'll be taking the train with the rest of us."

"And that a wicked fairy cursed me at my birth never to attend a wedding, lest I be sent to sleep for a hundred years."

"We'll all enjoy the quiet."

"Or lest my hair fall out and leave you with a hideously unattractive boyfriend."

"That's okay," Hermione said placidly. "I'm not shallow."

"But I am!" Draco wailed. "I am deeply deeply shallow!"

"I'll cure you."

Draco gave a martyred sniff and everybody but Hermione looked very sorry for him. Harry fed him another chocolate biscuit.

"You'll all be sorry when I die," Draco muttered rebelliously. "I feel death very near me. I need a cuddle."

Hermione complied.

"I mean a cuddle with more sex than that."

Seamus, who had begun to develop a slightly alarming facial tic, looked around wildly to see who the volunteer would be. Since nobody showed any particular desire to ravish Draco on the hearthrug, he relaxed a fraction.

Draco made a face.

"Don't be sad," Harry said. "Here."

Seamus began to fumble for his Prozac.

Draco opened his eyes very wide. "Can there be icing and chocolate?"

Seamus toppled over. Ron hurried over to him to explain the crucial and often overlooked difference between biscuits and insane passion.

*

"God, you're hot," Draco purred. "I mean, there's no denying that you're just hopelessly, desperately handsome. I'd turn for you. Anyone would turn for you. You gorgeous gorgeous thing."

He heard Hermione's easily recognisable knock on the door, and jumped guiltily.

"Draco! Are you ready to leave yet?"

"I - uh-"

The door opened and Hermione was outlined in the frame, her hands on her hips and her most accusing expression on her face.

"Draco Malfoy, are you talking seductively to the mirror again?"

"Look, I can't help it! I have a problem!"

"Draco," she said, coming up to him and regarding him with the extreme annoyance that Draco thought was her form of affection, "you are a problem. Are you ready?"

"I'm almost ready."

"Okay. What do you have left to pack?"

"Oh, I haven't started packing yet. But my hair is shiny and perfectly groomed."

"Draco," Hermione said in a low, dangerous tone. "This is going to be a very, very busy day. Don't cross me."

"You're right, you're right," Draco said. "Busy, busy, busy. So many things to see and people to do. I'll get the house elves right on the packing."

Hermione looked at him for a long moment. Draco presumed she was gazing fondly upon his countenance.

She smacked him upside the head.

"Go! Pack!"

Then she left. Draco was too caught up in the picture of whips and leather to notice for an instant.

Once he did, he decided that it was clear he'd have to be a virtuous boyfriend. She respected that he needed three hours to get ready when they went out, he should respect her odd little 'respect' and 'fair treatment' thing about house elves.

He'd have to get Longbottom to pack for him. Oh, what he went through for this woman.

The door creaked open, and Draco froze and pasted an expression on his face that he hoped indicated he was innocent of any ideas of forcing Longbottoms into servitude.

"That's a... weird look you have on your face," Blaise Zabini said, coming inside.

Draco lapsed back into his automatic sneer.

Blaise swanned into the room, swinging her hips. Her breasts were always most impressive around this time of the month.

"Your girlfriend coming with you to this wedding?" she asked.

"Oh, they're all coming," Draco answered carelessly.

"You know, Draco, some people are content dating individuals, not whole houses."

"I have special needs," Draco informed Blaise. "Please excuse me. I have people to terrorise and make my abject slaves. It's a lifestyle choice."

*

Draco came into the train compartment by landing heavily on his back.

"How could you, Draco!" Hermione stormed.

"I packed!" Draco protested.

"Neville did all the work!"

"And I supervised," Draco told her severely. "It's a tough job, but someone has to do it. His idea of folding neatly would make you weep."

"Oh, I don't intend to weep," Hermione said, and reached for her wand.

"Hermione, don't hurt him!" Harry exclaimed nobly, and launched himself onto the floor, gathering Draco up in the shelter of one arm.

"Eeep," said Draco in a small voice, peeping out from behind Harry's arm and looking cute and pathetic.

"Don't be cross with him," Ginny cried. "He's so cute and pathetic."

"Cute and pathetic?! I'll give him cute and pathetic right up the-"

"Eeep eeep eep!" Draco said urgently.

"Hermione, maybe you're just a little distraught," Ginny continued soothingly. "Let's go and get him some pumpkin juice. And Harry will tell Draco off."

She guided Hermione patiently to the door, and Hermione only shook her wand fist at Draco once as they left.

"Draco," Harry said, "why do you let yourself down this way?"

"M sorry," Draco answered, giving Harry the old wobbling lip and earnest eyes.

Harry was staring steadfastly out of the window. Damn it, he'd been spending too much time with these Gryffindors, they knew all his best tricks.

"Yes, Draco. But are you sorry for doing something that was wrong or are you sorry that you were caught?"

"M sorry I was caught," Draco mumbled.

Harry was incautious enough to look at Draco, and immediately softened. "Draco, how do you reconcile your conscience to doing these things?"

"Self-awareness and psychological understanding," Draco answered, beaming.

Harry paused. "I'm sorry...?"

"Well, you know how everyone has a conscience," Draco explained ingenuously. "And you know how everyone also has an inner child."

"Okay."

"So what you do is, you imagine a gun and point it at the inner child's head, and then you say to your conscience, 'Shut up, bitch, or the kid gets it!'"

Harry looked very upset. Draco winced, anticipating another round of We Are Saying This Because We Love You, Draco, And You Are Deeply Twisted And In Need of Intensive Therapy.

Luckily, Ginny came in at that point and Draco threw his most beseeching look at her.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "What have you done to him?"

"He meant it for the best," Draco said in a martyred way.

Ginny flung her arms around him and began to give him an anxious cuddle. She also sneaked in a small grope, because she was a vixen.

"Harry, how could you!" she reproached.

Harry looked vexed.

*

Ron and Cho appeared halfway through the train journey.

"We got lost looking for the bathroom," he explained, looking flushed and guilty.

"Oh, I see," said Harry.

"Oh, I bet," said Ginny.

"Do up your shirt properly, Cho," Hermione said helpfully.

"You don't have to," Draco put in, even more helpfully.

He didn't have any actual interest in Cho, but he felt he should uphold Slytherin's reputation for debauchery. No sense in dragging their name out of the mud.

Cho blushed and looked away. Ron looked at Draco as if he was picturing rat poison.

"All right," Hermione said, looking up from her note pad. "Now. I've got this wedding planned out. When Draco's uncle shows you boys his dress, you...?"

"Compliment him on it," Harry and Ron chorused.

"Very good. And when he throws the bouquet, Ginny, you...?"

"Don't bite anyone else to get to it," Ginny answered, looking cross.

"And Draco, all the way through this day, you will...?"

"Not break any laws of public decency, violate any concept you have of morals, treat anyone including a house elf like a house elf, get drunk, take drugs, turn into an animal, turn anyone else into anything, get into the papers again, go anywhere without at least one Gryffindor escort except for the bathroom because we've all heard the rumours, and especially not even think any disturbing and perverse thoughts about cottage cheese."

Draco stopped counting on his fingers and gave Hermione his best winning smile.

"So, in effect, you...?"

"Sit very still in a chair and try not to talk much," Draco said, flouncing while seated.

"Good boy," Ron said absently, patting him on the head.

"Ron," Hermione pointed out in a kind voice. "You're having another 'rat' moment."

Ron snatched his hand back.

"Nobody loves me," Draco said mordantly.

"Don't be silly," Ginny said cheerily. "Everybody loves you. Haven't you read the Daily Prophet? Seamus has to take his Valium before he touches it."

"Don't believe everything you read," Draco replied. "Anyway, I thought it was Prozac."

"He's moved on," Ginny informed him.

"He whimpers at night and dribbles sometimes," Ron mused. "And he's developed that really creepy facial tic."

"Wow," Draco remarked, in a pleased sort of way. "I broke his mind."

"Which is a terrible thing," Hermione pointed out. "And you are evil."

He blew her a kiss.

"If he's evil," said Cho, "doesn't that mean Harry has to kind of, well, destroy him? Being the hero and all."

"Eh," said Harry.

"He's just so darn cute," Ginny explained.

Draco preened.

"Who is it Draco's having an affair with in the Daily Prophet today?" Hermione wondered innocently aloud. "It's Trevor the toad, isn't it?"

Draco slipped down in his seat, relapsing into a pout.

"Nobody loves me," he repeated, in tones of conviction.

*

The train drew into the station, or what had been the station before a media circus had decided to pitch the tents and settle down there forever.

The cries were audible from inside the carriage, and as they drew towards the door it became deafening.

Harry looked shy and apprehensive.

Draco bowed and kissed his hand.

"My adoring public!"

"Draco, they are not your fans," Hermione informed him. "They are seedy gossip mongers out to glean every sordid detail of your supposedly raunchy and perverse sex life."

"Same thing," Draco said dismissively.

"Mr Malfoy! Mr Malfoy, are the rumours about-"

"Mr Malfoy, is the story about the toad-"

"Mr Malfoy, a first-hand account of the incident in the Gryffindor boys!-"

"Oh God," Ron said, paling. "They're not still talking about that, are they?"

Draco scowled. "That's where all this trouble started," he pointed out. "And I'll remind you that it was your fault, Ronald 'Hot Lips' Weasley."

Ron spluttered.

"When Peter Pettigrew was my rat, it caused less trouble than this!"

"Yes," Draco said loudly, "but did you kiss Peter Pettigrew?"

Every reporter's head whipped around to face them. Sudden whispers of 'bestiality' and 'necrophilia' began to buzz around the station. Ron went, very slowly, scarlet.

"Mr Weasley, would you give us an interview?"

"I hate you, Draco Malfoy," Ron said.

"Shut up, Ron," Harry muttered. "At least you didn't get asked to do a joint photo shoot."

"I think you should do that," Ginny put in, with great conviction.

"No!" Harry snapped.

"How much were they offering again?" Draco mused. "I was joking," he said in answer to Harry's scandalised look. "Just joking. And I did offer to make 'Potter's Straight' badges."

"Why do you always go on about badges? Badges are not the solution!"

Draco looked pensive. "I like badges."

"Have you any other suggestions?" Hermione asked, with badly tried patience.

If the boys were cornered about their exploits one more time, she or some other hapless girl was going to be crushed in the crowd. Or beat herself to death with the stack of slanderous papers.

She eyed Draco with distinct disfavour. He smiled at her, his hair blinding in the sunlight.

"To make them believe my reiterated denials, you mean?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "Do you have a plan?"

He smiled again, slow and rich. The thing she hated most about Draco was how he could make her stop hating him for no reason.

He moved towards her, and she was suddenly leaning against the threshold of the train door with his hands on either side of her.

"No absolute plan," he said deliberately, drawing a trail up her neck to her face with one hand and leaning towards her. "But I have a few ideas."

He kissed her then, in the hot sticky train in front of the buzzing crowds, and she shut her eyes. The space behind her eyes was calm and dark while Draco was kissing her, always, and the deep slide of tongue and lip made her shiver as if she were cold or excited, or perhaps both.

He stepped back, and she blinked against the light.

Draco tossed his shining head, hooking one thumb in his jeans and curling one edge of his swollen mouth. He looked debauched.

"When in doubt, smirk," he said, and as he stepped out of the train the crowd parted for him.

Hermione was aware that it was normal, when the bad boy kissed you, to want to slap him around the face.

She hadn't realised that after the happy ending, when you were together, you still felt this urge every time.

Ron made a fumbling move towards Cho, who slapped his hands away.

"Fresh," she said archly.

"I will not put on a show for these vultures," Harry said darkly.

Ginny looked disappointed. Draco looked over his shoulder.

"Believe me, I'm an act you can't follow. Are you people coming or not?"

*

The majestic castle towered over the beautiful green grounds, where even the marquee seemed to grow like a huge striped flower. It was quite possibly the most imposing sight Hermione had ever seen.

"Looks like you could be marrying into money," Ginny said with frank approval as they laid out their sunbeds.

Once they were done, Ginny glanced around for the photographers and then took out a safety pin and let her green robe fall off.

Underneath, she was wearing a white bikini, which was exceedingly skimpy and which earned her a wolf whistle from Draco as she stretched out on the sunbed.

"I'll kill you, Malfoy," Ron said with conviction.

"Ron, don't be absurd," Harry interrupted. "She's my girlfriend. I'll kill him."

"No, I'm going to kill him!"

"Listen, Ron-

Over the shouting, Draco idly examined his fingernails and said to Hermione, "I don't suppose you have any such risque costume under your robes?"

"Oh yes," Hermione snapped. "A full set of leather underwear and chains."

A smile spread across Draco's face. "Cool," he said. "Can I call you my Mistress of Pain?"

"Keep on in that vein for one more second, Draco Malfoy, and you really can."

Draco spun around.

"Boys, boys," he said in a pained voice. "Can't we all just get along? The time has arrived for us to come together in a spirit of love-

"Pick up Seamus, you're doing this on purpose aren't you Draco Malfoy," Hermione said accusingly.

Draco gave her his most angelic smile.

"Who, me? I just want to play ball."

"We should probably loosen his clothes," Blaise Zabini said helpfully. "I'll do that. It's no trouble."

Dean Thomas was always making critical mistakes with Draco. First he'd introduced him to the guitar, then jeans and then the concept of soccer.

A whole new game which he could cheat at outrageously. Hermione knew where that would end.

"You do that, Blaise," Draco told, at present, her. "And get him off the pitch."

"Draco!" Hermione exclaimed. "Lavender, doesn't this bother you?"

"Not so much," said Lavender, who was painting her toenails. "Blaise is a terribly cute guy around the full moon. He and I and Seamus get along very well."

"And what does Seamus think about that?" Hermione demanded.

"Eh." Lavender shrugged. "He's mostly too drugged up to notice."

"My God," Hermione said in disgust. "What started this total moral collapse in the Gryffindors?"

"Well, I don't like to accuse this early in the game," Ginny remarked, "but I'd have to pick you, in the Great Hall, with Draco Malfoy."

"Since dating him appears to have revolutionised our house, why were you suggesting marrying him and sharing all his worldly goods as well? It might destroy society as we know it." Hermione paused. "Plus, I think in his case inbreeding has produced dementia."

Ginny looked over at the game, where Ron had just landed in an ignominious sprawl in the mud and beside whom Draco was doing a victory dance.

"True," she observed critically. "But morals, manners and mental health aside, he sure can shake that booty."

"Vixen," muttered Cho, who was adjusting her sunhat. "Why is Ron's team losing so spectacularly badly?" she continued. "And why in God's name are Harry and Draco on the same side? Doesn't that give their team an unfair advantage?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Cho," she said. "My boyfriend picked the teams. And he is now doing a little victory song and dance. Do you think there is any way he could have stopped himself cheating?"

"Fair point."

On the pitch, Harry was earnestly telling Draco about the rules of the game and the necessity of fair play. Draco was doing little cheerleader kicks in his jeans, which he was too vain to take off even for a soccer game.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "One day I'm going to find a man with moral fibre."

"Nah," Draco said dismissively, coming over and bending towards her. She was only aware of a flash of sweaty blond hair and a football shirt before he had licked once inside her mouth, with care and precision, and then stepped back grinning. "Once you try Slytherin, you never go back."

"Have you wormed your ignominious way to victory enough for one day?" Hermione asked. "Can we go inside now?"

Draco looked over at the immense building that symbolised his ancient heritage and contained his beloved family.

"Can't we live rough for a few days?"

"Draco," Hermione said patiently, "do you want to know what my hair would look like after a few days of living rough?"

He shuddered. "Oh, don't. I might cry."

"Let's go, that's a good boy," Hermione said. "And tell me... I mean, your house is huge. I'd have expected it to be called - Malfoy Mansion, or Malfoy Castle, or-"

Draco looked offended.

"I'll have you know the name Dunroamin has an ancient dignity."

*

They went into Dunroamin, the ancestral home of the Malfoys, once Seamus had been restored to consciousness and detached from Blaise.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy met them in the hall.

Draco was startled to see his father had split ends. He understood that it was sad to see those magnificent Malfoy looks fading, and your only and exceptionally gorgeous son overshadowing you, but there was no reason to let yourself go.

"Hello Father," he said politely.

Lucius twitched. Draco noticed that his eyes were somewhat wide and vacant.

"Draco," he mumbled. "Oh God. My only son."

"Darling, he's here," Narcissa said sharply.

Lucius focused, and twitched more violently. "Are - are there Weasleys with him?" he asked in a low voice. "Or is it another of those dreams?"

Narcissa squinted. "Several of them seem to have rather violently red hair," she admitted.

Draco was really starting to get a bit suspicious now.

His mother was looking like the cat who'd got the cream and the canary, and reinstated the old Egyptian ways of feline worship. She was also wearing a scarlet dress with what Draco would have called cleavage if he'd felt in any way capable of contemplating his mother's breasts.

There were teeth marks on Lucius' cane.

Narcissa leaned forward and gave Draco a quick kiss on the cheek.

"How are you, sweetheart?"

"Oh, fine," Draco said. "Still charming and good-looking. Not a rodent, no thanks to you."

"Are you still sulking about that?"

"I told you in fourth year!" Draco snapped. "I don't want to be turned into a rodent again, I said specifically. Loving parents don't allow their children to grow whiskers."

"Hush, darling. I'll make it up to you."

"Will you take more care of me in future?"

"Well, no," said Narcissa. "But I'll buy you an Invisibility Cloak."

"All right," Draco agreed.

Trust and affection were all very nice, he was sure, but there was just something about disgustingly expensive gifts that appealed to him.

"Now introduce me to your friends," Narcissa invited. "And don't mind your father. He was just so distressed after reading those nasty newspapers. But I think the Muggle drugs are really helping."

Draco eyed his father, intrigued.

"Nice robes, father," he said.

"I can't bear to look upon your face, Draco. Oh, the proud Malfoy name..." Lucius whispered. "Why, why was the curse of my benighted brother visited upon my innocent son? Why did this happen to me? I'm just a murderer of children and a slave to darkness, I'm not a bad man!"

"I think I'm going to use your Gringotts account to pay for a great big party," Draco continued experimentally.

Lucius shuddered. "Do as you want. Leave me to my suffering."

Draco came to a decision. "I'm sorry, mother. You asked who these people were," he said with his most charming smile. "This is my friend Ginny, this is my girlfriend, and these are my bitches."

He looped his arms around Harry and Ron's necks.

"More Prozac," Lucius said urgently. "Quick."

"Charmed," Narcissa smiled. "What's that under your arm, Draco darling?"

"A soccer ball."

Lucius looked like he was about to cry. "And what's that for?" he demanded in fearful tones.

"Use your imagination, Dad." Draco grinned engagingly. "So, what are your plans for the summer?"

Lucius drew himself up. "I plan to serve my master the Dark Lord, lay low the muggleborn and lay waste to the festering pit of muggle lovers who surround us. Dire will be our vengeance, great and unholy the wrath of the Death Eaters-

"No, dear," Narcissa interrupted. "I don't think we'll do that."

"Oh." Lucius looked crestfallen.

Narcissa smiled sweetly and patted his hand.

"Actually, all that Death Eater business always rather bored me," she said. "And I have the key to the medicine cabinet, and the Daily Prophet arrives every morning."

Lucius cowered, searching the ceiling for owls bearing more salacious news of his son.

"I was planning a few select cocktail parties in the summer, and then perhaps a cruise," Narcissa continued complacently. "I think it's time you had a new hobby. Like golf."

"But my Dark Master," Lucius said vaguely.

"Look at it this way," Narcissa said. "It's not like the Dark Lord had good hair."

Lucius might be ready to desert his principles, but he would never desert his hair care products.

"That's true, I suppose," he replied meekly. "Can I have more Prozac now, dear?"

"In a bit," Narcissa answered, smiling and touching Draco's hair. "I want you to know you have my full support in your chosen lifestyle, darling."

"Ah, thanks."

Narcissa beamed on Harry and Ron.

"Such strapping young men," she observed. "Really, there is something enticing about that rough stable boy charm, isn't there? And that scar is just so designer."

"Urk," said Ron, fighting to get away. Draco maintained a death grip.

"Eeep," said Harry, hiding behind Draco as the lesser of two evils.

"Just remember what Mother has always told you," Narcissa said. "Say it for me, darling boy."

"It doesn't matter if you are depraved, as long as you are well dressed," Draco recited dutifully. "Your love will transcend all my life choices, but not bad fashion choices. And above all - you will permit boys, children, demons, goats, garden gnomes, house elves and wardrobes, but never never Hufflepuffs."

Mother and son shared a fastidious little shiver.

"That's my precious boy," Narcissa said. "I think we're all going to be very happy. Come, Lucius!"

She sailed out. Lucius shambled after her.

"I think that went splendidly," Draco announced, looking with satisfaction at the traumatised faces around him.

*

Draco was greatly in favour of trauma. He was also greatly in favour of servants.

He wanted to be traumatised as little as he wanted to perform menial chores like making beds, scrubbing floors or doing his own homework.

He cringed on the sofa.

"I don't want to see it," he said flatly. "I'll go blind. And my heart will break if I can never behold my beautiful face again."

"There, there," Harry said in a voice of no great conviction. "It can't be that bad."

"Yes it can," Ron disagreed. "Lucius and Draco Malfoy are the sane Malfoys, the normal Malfoys. If they are the way they are - imagine what he's going to be like."

Harry and Ron shivered.

Draco had been summoned to his Uncle Ethelfride's apartments to admire his wedding gown. He had clung to Hermione, but Harry 'Sir Lancelot' Potter had flatly refused to let the girls go and behold Draco's uncle, who could be in feminine unmentionables for all they knew.

Draco had flatly refused to go alone.

"I can't believe we came up here," said Ron. "You're such a soft touch, Harry."

Harry looked distressed. "I couldn't say no," he protested. "He just looked so little and helpless."

"He's Draco Malfoy," Ron said. "He's playing you!"

Harry looked even more distressed. "Draco wouldn't do that. We're his friends."

"Well, I might have done it a little bit," Draco said apologetically. "Just a smidgen."

It was just so easy. He only had to give Ron the Cute Rat look, Harry the Helpless Victim look, Ginny the Sexy Bitch look. He couldn't help it if he made such an impression on their feeble minds.

"We've talked about you manipulating us," Harry reproached him.

"I wasn't manipulating you," Draco protested. "I was just using your weaknesses to get you to do exactly what I want."

"You can't keep thinking you're better than us."

"I don't! It's just my intellect is too much for your lowly brains."

Harry still looked upset, for some reason.

"No jury in the world would convict us," Ron suggested with dreamy hopefulness.

Draco gave Harry a wide-eyed and appealing stare.

"Leave him alone, Ron, he means well."

Draco looked like a rather darling little pet.

"Oh, all right," Ron said grudgingly.

Hee hee. Poor fools.

Draco smirked and stretched on the sofa, smugly content.

And then he fell off the sofa, gave a cry of anguish and buried his face in the cushion.

"Oh, for merciful blindness!"

Ron sat down heavily. Harry had apparently put his face in his hands.

Uncle Ethelfride posed in the doorway, a vision in leather, chains and tiny bells.

"Well, boys? What do you think?"

There were no words.

"Think I'm going to be sick," Ron said thickly.

Or maybe there were.

"Er, um, sir," Harry said. "I think you, um, should put your wedding dress on over-"

"This is my wedding dress, cutie pie."

"Harry," Draco said passionately. "You kill evil things, right? I think it's time to perform your sacred duty."

"No!"

"Harry, it would make the world a better place!"

"I don't care, I'm not touching it!"

"Fine, but I'm saying I told you so when it destroys the world."

"Do you not like it?" Ethelfride asked plaintively. "Were the bells too much?"

Draco sneaked another peek, moaned piteously and hid his face again.

"There, there, Draco," said Harry. "I'm sure we can fix it. Or - maybe there'll be an earthquake."

Draco stood up suddenly.

"That's it!"

"No natural disasters, Draco," Ron told him. "Hermione was very firm on that subject."

"We can fix it!" Draco declared. "Fetch the house elves. I need tulle! Can you sew, boys?"

"No," Harry answered, frowning.

"I don't sew," Ron said firmly. "I create sensational marvels of stitching. It's not just embroidery, it's art."

Draco and Harry both stared at him.

"Look, with two girls and seven boys in the house, sewing becomes a very masculine pursuit," Ron said defensively.

"I'm not judging here," Draco told him, almost successfully hiding his smirk.

"I don't put down what you two are into," Ron continued. "I mean, Draco, you come onto your mirror, and Harry, you like whacking big snakes."

"Everybody does it," Ethelfride told Harry soothingly. "It's perfectly normal."

"Mirrors and I have a very special bond," Draco informed them loftily. "None of you could possibly understand. And speaking of mirrors, don't look into them, Uncle Ethelfride. I don't want them cracked, they're antique."

He began to pace the room.

"Now, let me see. The house elves will come soon with the tulle, and you can start helping them with your sensational stitching, Ronald-"

"-look, I just happen to find it therapeutic, is all-"

"Of course you do, of course you do. And Harry, you can be our model."

"The only way tulle is going on me is over my dead body."

"Hush up. Dress, robe, what's the difference?" Draco asked. "Anyway, the house elves won't touch Uncle Ethelfride ever since the incident back in '98 with the trifle and-"

Harry winced.

"If I will, do you promise never to tell me that story?"

"Of course, Harry," Draco soothed him.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ron, who was clearly still smarting over the sewing thing.

Draco beamed. "I'm going to supervise."

*

"I'm going to wake up at night screaming about those bells," Ron said, still pale with horror as they emerged from the room.

Draco's eyebrows rose. "Ron, you are full of surprises today."

"Shut up, Draco. I still swear you took pictures."

"Draco would never do that," Harry said.

"Absolutely not," Draco agreed primly.

He totally had, and he was going to sell them to the highest bidder - either the Daily Prophet or Millicent Bulstrode.

They walked down the corridors, heading downstairs for the marquee, where the party had already started by the sounds of it.

A girl ran up to Draco and flung herself at his feet.

"You sex god!" she wailed.

"Um," said Draco.

"I want to lick your ankles," she continued.

Draco was a little intrigued.

"Is that you, Hannah Abbott?" asked Ron.

"Oh my God, a Hufflepuff," Draco moaned faintly. "Oh my God, it's touching me. Harry, save me."

Harry knelt down.

"I think your, uh, foot touches are making Draco feel uncomfor - mmmffmfffmfff."

The girl had thrown herself at Harry and appeared to be trying to eat his ear.

"Help!" Harry exclaimed.

Draco backed up smartly. "I'd like to, Harry, I really would. But that way lies madness and headlice."

"Cho!" Ron exclaimed, seeing his girlfriend come running up the steps. "Cho, I think Hannah's-"

Cho took two steps towards him and pressed her hands against his chest.

"You magnificently ginger specimen of manhood," she said. "I must have you. Now."

Then she leaped.

"Mrmfmrmmfmrmmf," Ron protested, and then he settled down on the carpet and decided, "Mmm."

Draco was a bit appalled. It was quite an expensive carpet. Still, maybe a session or so with Chang would cure him of all that disturbing sewing business.

Mrs Weasley might even thank him, he decided cheerfully, once she stopped burning him in effigy and sending him all those death threats.

"Draco!" Harry squawked, flapping ineffectually at Hannah. "Help!"

"Just hit her," advised Draco, who had only read the Malfoy Definition of Chivalry - to wit, the way unattractive men acted around women they wanted to sleep with, while said women pined for Malfoys.

"I can't hit a girl! Help!"

Draco threw a vase at her and Hannah toppled to the floor, out cold.

Harry stood up and looked down at her dubiously. "You could've just tried a Body Bind."

Draco shrugged unrepentantly. "I'm a caveman kind of guy." He paused. "I mean that in the forceful and thus sexy sense, rather than in the basic unwashed and lives in a cave way."

Ron and Cho were rolling on the floor making incoherent sounds.

"I'm going downstairs," Draco said with a little shudder.

He had seen enough exposed flesh for one day. Any views of freckles hitherto uncharted by man and the queasiness might overpower him.

They went downstairs. Draco felt his soul being soothed by the enormous marble hall, the cut-glass punch bowl, the general air of people spending obscene amounts on frivolities.

"Muggle children are starving, you know," Harry remarked darkly.

"Really?" asked Draco. "Tell my dad. It might perk him up."

At that point a girl dived towards Draco and tackled him around the knees.

Draco grabbed the balustrade.

"I've always thought your knees were fiendishly attractive," purred Mandy Brocklehurst.

Draco gripped her arms firmly.

"You're the hero, Harry. You deal with it," he said, shoving her at him.

"I deal with dark lords, Draco, not women," Harry said, shoving her back.

"You're reading the wrong kind of fiction." Draco pushed her back again.

"I'm not doing this." He thrust her away.

"Hee," said Draco, who actually quite liked tossing dizzy girls back and forth. He thought it made for solid entertainment. "Hot potato."

"Draco Malfoy, are you crazy?" demanded Draco Malfoy's devoted girlfriend, bearing down upon him. "Isn't it obvious that someone's slipped a Lust Potion into the punch?"

"No," Draco said, staring.

"Didn't it strike you that the girls were behaving oddly?" Hermione raged.

"I don't know that much about girls," Harry said hastily.

"No," Draco answered. "They were just flinging themselves at me in a frenzy of passion. Happens all the time."

"Draco!"

Hermione couldn't be upset about a perfectly commonplace occurrence like girls fancying Draco.

She had to know.

Hating to do it, but having no other option, Draco decided to come clean.

Before he could, Ginny came up and said, "I've got Pansy and Millicent confined in the pantry. Who did this, anyway?"

"Voldemort," Harry offered instantly.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oooh, the Dark Lord decided to make women fancy you? The horror, the horror." He paused. "Actually, it was me."

The look of sheer outrage on Hermione's face told him that she hadn't known after all.

Bugger it.

"Why did you do this?" she asked.

"It's all a big misunderstanding," Draco said. "The house elves mixed things up again. I wanted it put in the punch after dinner, obviously-"

"Oh, you decided to incapacitate half the people here in the house of someone with divided loyalties?" Hermione inquired. "What if Voldemort had shown up?"

"Well, it would have been funny if he'd drunk the punch." Draco offered a smile and looked hastily back down as Hermione glared.

"Did you think it would be funny if I went out of my senses and pawed at you?" she asked icily.

"Might be fun," Draco told her brightly, while Ginny and Harry both waved their hands and mouthed 'no' at him.

"I don't think impairing your girlfriend's judgement so you can get further with her is anything other than despicable, actually."

"Look, Hermione," Draco said, starting to feel panicked, "I didn't want to-"

Hermione's hair looked crackly with rage.

"Oh?" she queried. "You were planning to get off with some other girl?"

"No!" Draco snapped, looking irritated. "What do you think I am, Hermione?"

Hermione had backed up a few steps. She looked at him with clear, furious eyes.

"I think you're a selfish, conceited little brat who does just what he wants without thinking about the consequences, and who doesn't give a damn about anybody else," she said coolly, and stormed off.

"So?" Draco yelled after her. "So what? What's the problem here?"

*

The wedding was held in the Malfoy chapel, a small, peaceful and rather beautiful place that would have been even more perfect if the house elves had remembered to remove the bloodstained altar.

Hermione refused to sit beside Draco. She sat among the girls who had taken the Potion, and who had only been calmed enough for the wedding by Narcissa emptying the contents of her medicine cabinet and giving Prozac to everyone.

Her face was still and stern. Those around her were giggling and dribbling.

Draco sat with Harry and Ginny, looking forlorn and unhappy.

He was appalled to see that this did not seem to be softening Hermione at all.

"Broken up?" he said in a lost voice. "Where did you get 'broken up' from?"

Ginny patted his hand. "Oh, Draco. Has nobody ever broken up with you before?"

Draco looked offended. "Don't ask me ridiculous questions."

Ginny put an arm around his shoulders.

"Poor darling," she said. "Don't worry about it. I don't know how anyone could break up with you."

"I'm in the dark about it too," Draco told her.

"Nice shoulders, by the way," Ginny remarked. "Do you work out?"

Draco preened, but his heart wasn't in it. "Do you think that roses and chocolates will make her happy again?" he inquired.

"No," said the Boy Who Crushed All Hope In His Wake.

"Ah," Draco concluded. "Something more expensive, then?"

"I don't think she wants you to buy her anything," Harry informed him.

"I don't understand," Draco said helplessly. "What else is there?"

"You'll work it out," Ginny assured him comfortably. "I'll talk to her."

Draco cheered up. "Tell her I'll buy her anything," he said anxiously. "Anything at all."

"Ah, I'll see," Ginny said tactfully.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Draco said, remembering his manners. "You two probably want to sit beside each other."

"Nah," said Harry.

"We're fine," Ginny told him, keeping her arm around his shoulders.

"All right," Draco said doubtfully.

"I wonder where Ron and Cho are?" she mused as the music struck up.

Harry and Draco exchanged horrified and guilty looks.

"Um," said Harry.

"I have no idea," Draco lied with great conviction.

Harry looked relieved. And then they all had to be quiet, because Ethelfride Malfoy was sailing up the aisle.

Several members of the audience looked pale and faint. Lucius Malfoy whimpered and began to chew on his cane.

Draco, who knew with absolute certainty that things could have been a whole lot worse, leaned back and felt placidly content that Ethelfride's hair was at least as impeccable as became a Malfoy.

Aberforth Dumbledore, who looked unsettlingly like his brother except for the red vinyl pants he was wearing with his suit jacket, smiled in a besotted manner.

The clergyman began with the time-honoured words of the Malfoy marriage ceremony.

"We are gathered here today to witness the union of two beautiful souls," he intoned, "and two fat bank accounts."

Draco sighed. You could say what you liked, he thought, but old-fashioned romance had its charm.

He glanced over at Hermione, who remained implacable.

She could be so heartless sometimes.

He said as much plaintively to Ginny, as the wedding photographs were being taken on the lawn.

"Don't worry," Ginny said positively. "I can talk her round."

Draco beamed gratefully.

"I'll help," Harry offered.

"This takes a woman's touch," Ginny disagreed. "When all's said and done, Harry - I have the feminine gift of empathy and you - well, you just talk to snakes."

"Don't let anyone tell you it's wrong," said the blushing bride as he swept past. "I named mine."

*

Hermione was lying on her bed.

Except it wasn't her bed. It was a silly ruffled satin affair in a stupidly ostentatious room, in Draco Her Stupid Ex-Boyfriend Malfoy's house with its stupid name.

Ginny Stupid Weasley poked her red stupid head around the stupid door.

Hermione breathed deeply. This was getting out of hand.

She had nothing against the door, after all.

"Can I come in? Thank you," said Ginny, coming in. Malfoy was clearly rubbing off on her.

Things like slime rubbed off so easily.

"I don't want to talk about it," Hermione snapped.

"Oh, okay," Ginny said, sitting on the bed, taking out a nail file and beginning to file her nails.

Hermione sat up.

"He's just so irresponsible," she burst out. "He prances around, and he doesn't seem to care who he hurts, and he makes people forgive him, he makes me forgive him but he's never kind and what's to stop him if he decides to really hurt me?"

"He might stop himself," Ginny suggested.

"Why should he?"

"He might care about you."

Hermione looked up at the stupid crenellated ceiling and the absurd little chandelier. She had found one of her favourite flowers on the pillow and she had asked who had left it there, and the elf had told her that Master Malfoy's instructions on the subject had been most specific.

He'd thought of it. But picking it himself and carrying it to her would never have occurred to him.

"He doesn't think the way I do," she said slowly. "I never feel as if I can trust him."

"He tries," Ginny offered.

"He tries but it doesn't work. I don't even know how his mind works. How - how can I know that he won't change his mind? This little prank of his with the Lust Potion... he's never tried anything, you know. What if he's just - what if he just gets bored?"

"Oh, he might," Ginny said carelessly.

Hermione sat up with a start.

"What?"

"He might do," Ginny nodded placidly. "He likes to fool around. He might go back to changing girls more often than he changes his trousers. And you might decide that it's all getting a bit problematic and go back to your schoolwork, and try to find someone more reliable."

"I wouldn't," protested Hermione. "I just. It was going to be - easy, you understand. I have plans for my life. I had plans for a relationship. It - it works for revision. He never follows the plans."

"You can't trust him," Ginny told her. "Not completely. You can't just trust him. You have to decide if you're going to trust him, and you're not supposed to work it out logically. That's what relationships are, you know. Deciding to trust someone until you really do. And with him, it's hard. So don't do it if it's not worth the effort. Don't do it unless you-"

Hermione had hit the flower with a book, stamped on it and then thrown it in the rubbish bin.

"I do," she whispered. "I think I do." She paused. "It's very annoying. It wasn't in the plan."

"Sod the plan," Ginny told her cheerfully. "And if he hasn't tried anything - well, he's Draco Malfoy. He always tries something. If he isn't - well then, you're different, and so now you know."

Hermione pulled her legs up to her chest, resting her chin on her knees.

"Things are difficult," she said. "These are dark times. There's Voldemort."

"Blah blah blah Evil Overlord cakes. Think of it another way." Ginny flashed her vixen smile. "He's really stupidly attractive."

*

Draco was sitting up on the wall of one of the castle turrets, looking pensive and with his profile shining faintly against the twilight. His skin looked white against the deep velvet of the night, and in his softly tousled hair was the light of netted stars.

He devoutly hoped a photographer would come soon and take his picture. It was cold out here, and he was getting a cramp. There was only so much picturesque brooding one could take.

"Hi there, Draco."

He looked over hopefully, but it was just Harry, glasses and smile crooked to very much the same degree.

"Are you really upset?" asked the Boy Who Loved Coddling Things To An Unhealthy Degree.

"No," Draco said superbly. "I am very happy. I have a cunning plan."

Harry looked doubtful, which was totally outrageous.

"I'm going to have my picture taken," he explained. "I will look charming and wistful and she will see the photograph and her heart will melt, and she will come running to me and shower me with kisses. It is a brilliant and devious scheme."

"Draco, photography is not the answer."

Draco bit his lip. "Do you think perhaps a portrait? If I wore a doublet, and stared nobly off into space?"

"On the whole, I think not," Harry said, choosing his words with care. "Draco. You just have to tell her how you feel."

Honesty in a relationship. The idea made Draco feel on the verge of a panic attack.

"Do you have a back-up plan?"

"Draco, for God's sake," Harry snapped. "I'm a Gryffindor. You're lucky I have one plan."

Draco pouted. "I knew I should have decided to date a different house," he said. "I could have chosen the Hufflepuffs. They would have worshipped me. I would have done no wrong. I would have been the Hufflepuffs' love god."

He pronounced the words 'love god' with extreme severity, and stared down at the member of the other and ungrateful house with reproach.

Harry frowned. "Yeah, Draco, but you would probably have had to touch them."

"That's true." Draco sighed. "And that's an appalling thought. Plus, there's the matter of the colour. The colours are like a bumblebee."

"I like bumblebees," Harry said amiably.

Draco gave him a baleful look. "Bumblebees are not sexy."

"Well spotted," Harry said.

"Don't mock me," Draco said. "Scarlet-clad ingrates, the lot of you. I was seduced into the whole thing with common interests like colour-coded notes."

"The way I heard it, you committed public indecency in the Gryffindor rooms and Hermione had to go out with you to salvage your maiden honour," Harry commented.

Draco tossed his head. "Are you here for some useful purpose, Potter? Because if you're just here to mock my pain, I will throw you into the deepest darkest dungeon of Dunroamin."

"Right."

"I'm not joking," Draco said, and added peevishly, "Fear me."

"I do, Draco, of course I do," Harry soothed him. "Hermione's inside at the party. You need to go in and talk to her. Just be honest."

Draco paused to consider. "Do my jeans look stylish yet remorseful?"

"Er - sure, why not." Harry nodded. "They're your most regretful jeans ever."

*

The rooms of Dunroamin were filled with music and light and dancers. Hermione stood at the edges of the dance floor, smoothing down her hair.

Draco came down the stairs.

He reminded her of the first time she had seen him coming down the stairs from the Gryffindor dormitory, but this time he was outlined in golden lamplight rather than the silver icing of the moon. His hair and eyes had little silver and gold sparks intermingled in them, and he looked cool and ridiculously good to her in his white jeans and shirt.

Always white. If there was someone somewhere playing around with symbolism, they were doing a very simplistic job of it.

He's far too pale, Hermione thought with her last remaining common sense. And his nose is so sharp you could cut things with it. Anaemic little peacock.

He held out his hand to her and she took it, and she felt all those silly little flutters in her stomach and all that trembling delight rising in her throat, because whatever decisions she ever made about him, most of her brain and her entire traitorous body never paid attention to the memos.

He led her out onto the dance floor and he rested his cheek against her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She rubbed her face against his shoulder. He smelled nice, as he always did. She darkly suspected him of ordering exorbitantly priced cologne.

"I over-reacted," she confessed simply.

"I didn't want to take advantage of anyone," Draco continued, sounding faintly sickened at having to say the words. "I was going to tell all of us."

She liked it, that she and her friends were used to Draco. She realised she trusted him more than she'd ever thought she did.

A thousand times more than she'd ever thought she should, but then there was nothing logical about love.

She knew him, though. "All of us?"

"Well. I considered letting Harry have some," Draco said. "I think Ginny deserves that."

"Plus, you could sell the pictures," Hermione pointed out.

Draco's voice was defensive. "That never even occurred to me, Hermione. It shocks me that you could think it."

Her hands were in his hair. He could dance well, she gave him that, even if he was amoral.

"Harry told me he was worried you had pictures of him in tulle, Draco. I won't even ask, but if you consider selling them remember I have pictures of the time we all came in and found you dancing around to We Are The Champions and doing up your trousers."

Draco's voice was awed. "You're Machiavellian," he said. "I like that in a woman."

Hermione laughed softly. She didn't tell him what else Harry had said, which was We all love him, Hermione. Of course, then he'd gone bright red and said, Er. But not like that, and rather spoiled the poignancy of the moment.

Still. She hid her face in his neck. They all loved him, and she was in love with him, and it was that complicated.

"I'll burn them," Draco continued.

"You will not," she said. "You'll sell them to Millicent Bulstrode."

"I'll burn them if you really want me to," Draco said. "Just because every word I say is deceitful doesn't mean that I'm not telling you the truth."

She laughed.

"I'll make it up to you," he said. "I can colour-code the History of Hogwarts if you like."

"You know how to sweet-talk a woman, Draco."

Draco idly smoothed back her hair, doing it better than she could.

"Well, I can't afford to lose my study partner a year before the NEWTS. Do you realise what could happen to my marks? Oooh, I don't even want to think it."

She laughed again, annoyed by how easily he could make her laugh and make her love him. Stupid, arrogant, anaemic prat.

"You don't have to say it," she said. "I understand."

"Ah, I'm working myself up to it," Draco told her cheerfully. "Give me a few years."

"Oh, yes?"

"Oh, yes." Draco paused. "Well. And get me drunk."

*

Ginny and Harry sat side by side, watching the dancers. Ron and Cho came over to them, discreetly adjusting their clothes.

"Lovely party," Ron beamed. "When's the wedding?"

"Already happened," Ginny said absently. "Oh, Cho, did you know Draco put a Lust Potion in your punch?"

Ron went scarlet with fury.

"I'll kill him."

"You won't kill him," Harry said. "If we were going to kill him, we would have done it well before now and saved ourselves a lot of trouble."

Ron breathed deeply in through his nose.

"It's just like having a child," he said. "A horrible, adopted, demonspawn child. Cho - if we, you know, hypothetically, in another universe, get married, promise me we won't have a child like Draco."

"I promise, Ron." Cho took his hand and squeezed it. "Let's face it. I'm Asian and your entire family is redheaded. The chances of having a platinum-blond child are very slim."

She squeezed his hand again, and then looked faintly puzzled.

"Actually," she said, "I didn't have any punch."

Ginny looked impressed. "Vixen," she murmured, just as the guests were all called in to dinner together.

Hermione and Draco came and sat beside the other two couples as everyone gathered at the huge table. After a few minutes, Harry and Draco started trying to show Hermione how a Seeker could defeat another using the Wronski Feint.

The Snitch was a pea.

Lucius Malfoy stared over at his son and his brother with a sort of bleak despair. Occasionally he gnawed on his cane. His wife smiled blandly by his side and passed the chicken.

Suddenly, someone tapped Lucius on the shoulder. He jumped violently. He wasn't medicated enough for any more shocks.

A boy stood behind him, with a twitching left eye and an Irish accent.

"The Prozac isn't working properly for you anymore, is it?" Seamus Finnigan hissed conspiratorially.

Lucius' mouth fell open and he nodded dumbly to this kindred spirit.

Seamus tapped his nose. "Leave it to me," he said. "I can cut you in on some Valium."

Millicent Bulstrode was waking slowly from her stupour, and occasionally she fixed her eyes on Harry and muttered, "Such pretty... nostrils."

Harry had slipped down in his chair in fear.

"You know, I had a letter from Colin Creevey from juvie Azkaban the other day," he said, in an attempt to distract himself. "He seems much better."

"I still can't believe the giant squid didn't eat him," Draco remarked, looking discontent. "What kind of ungodly monster just plays around with a victim for a bit and then hands him over to the authorities? When I inherit the estate - which ought to be sooner rather than later since Father is clearly incapable - I think I'll hire that ENORMOUS SPIDER who lives in the Great Forest to be my guard dog."

"Shut up, Draco," Ron said.

Draco gave him a winning smile and began to eat the food Ron suddenly had no appetite for.

"And now I invite my darling nephew, Draco, who is so clearly following in my footsteps, to make the toast."

Draco looked across at Ethelfride's proud, beglittered and extremely manic face, and promptly choked on Ron's food.

"Whu...?" he gasped.

Hermione thumped him briskly on the back, and she and Harry took his elbows, hoisted him out of his chair and looked up at him expectantly.

Draco realised he had an audience, smiled a smile so charming it was harmful, and lifted his glass.

"A day like this makes us all very grateful for the people who are near and dear to us," he said with perfect sincerity, and adding 'and not clinically insane' only in his mind. "So first of all I'd like to thank the lovely and intelligent Gryffindor who's come into my life, and who-" he changed his smile to roguish and watched Lavender and Parvati sigh. "-who incidentally, gives me the best back-rubs in the school every night-"

"You lying bastard, Malfoy!" Harry yelled. "It was just the one time!"

Draco looked vexed. "I meant, of course, my girlfriend Hermione," he said sharply.

There were a few incredulous murmurs. Draco took careful note of them, and reminded himself to put Incontinence Potion in their dessert.

"Ah," he continued, gathering his wits. "And then it remains my, er, my happy duty to wish the very best to the um, happy couple. I know we all hope that these crazy, crazy, crazy kids can make it work and..."

There was scattered clapping.

He paused and gave it up. Lying, when not for personal profit, was beyond him.

"Oh, for God's sake," he said. "Of course it's not going to work! He'll leave him for a goat in a week! Does everyone but me have maggots in their brains?"

He scowled ferociously at all of them.

"He may be a sexual deviant," Lucius sniffed proudly, "but he's still my little boy."

"You are all insane, and quite possibly perverted. This has been a terrifying day, and I wish never to see red leather again. Damn you all to the uttermost pits of hell."

Draco Malfoy sat down among the Gryffindors, took his girlfriend's hand and scowled at the assembly.

"Well? That's it, I'm done."

Chains

There were dungeons below the Slytherin rooms.

No natural light ever filtered through these bars, no children's feet ever rang out against these flagstones. There was just the stone, and the dark lights of a guttering torch, and the soft cold sounds of chains moving.

And, just now, the querulous sound of Draco Malfoy complaining.

"This is *all your fault*, Potter."

Harry tried to keep his voice even. It came out as a growl. "Go to hell, Malfoy."

Harry called that rich. His fault?

He certainly hadn't asked for this. In fact, he would have given anything for Dumbledore to be at school more often. He would certainly never have supported the decision for Argus Filch to be put in charge of general school discipline in Dumbledore's absence.

"I can't go anywhere," Malfoy said in the sing-song voice which made Harry want to kick him in the teeth. "I'm chained up here, if you hadn't noticed!"

Of course, Harry could not kick him in the teeth. Because he was chained up too.

He tried to block out Malfoy's voice, but he was still seething. He remembered back an hour ago, when the world had still retained some semblance of sanity.

It had been *much* more Malfoy's fault.

*

Harry had just been minding his own business, walking away from the Owlery. He'd only been sending a letter to Sirius. He hadn't been doing anything wrong.

All right, he'd only been communicating with a wanted criminal, but that wasn't the point.

He hadn't done anything to Malfoy. Malfoy had accosted him, smirking and waving the bloody Daily *Prophet* in his face.

"What do you want?" he'd snapped.

"Just trying to help you out," Malfoy had replied innocently. "Thought you might be interested in knowing who you're going out with this week."

"Oh, sod off!"

But Malfoy had unfolded the paper, and was reading aloud in a falsetto voice. “*‘Harry Potter’s closeness to the Weasley family is well known, but recently it has been suggested that he may be drawn even closer into their fold. He is rumoured to be very close to the Weasleys’ only daughter. Winsome and vivacious young Virginia Weasley has said in an exclusive report – ‘I’m not his girlfriend, but – I mean, of course I like him very much, it’s not that I wouldn’t...’ She blushed, her maidenly confusion clearly showing that there was an understanding between the charming girl and her bold dark-haired hero... ’*”

“Shut up, Malfoy!”

Harry felt his ears burn.

“Wait for it, here’s the best part,” said Malfoy, who was obviously enjoying himself hugely. “*‘We understand that the pair are childhood sweethearts. When Virginia was in the thrall of You-Know-Who, Harry went valiantly into the dread Chamber of Secrets in order to rescue his lady love. Swinging his mighty weapon- ’* well, that I don’t believe-”

“Would you quit spouting those lies, Malfoy!”

“Come now, Potter, it’s better than two weeks ago,” Malfoy had drawled. “I recall people suspected you of carrying on an affair with Colin Creevey – tell me, does he really kiss a picture-”

“Would you shut up? I’m trying to repress here!”

“Of course,” Malfoy agreed obligingly. “Where was I...? Oh yes, your – ahem – mighty weapon...”

“Give that here!” He’d shoved Malfoy.

Okay, that had been a mistake. Because Malfoy had almost stumbled, and looked up at him in outrage.

“Fisticuffs now, is it?” he inquired. “Maybe you should marry into the Weasleys. Only they go that low.”

“Shut up about the Weasleys!”

“Make me.”

Harry had punched him in the mouth.

And perhaps that hadn’t been exactly right as well.

Especially since Malfoy had looked at him with a cold light in his eyes, and Harry’d remembered first year. Ron tackling a boy who was taken by surprise and who hadn’t been brought up with five brothers and who had... somehow struggled up from under the larger Ron and given him a heavy nosebleed.

Malfoy'd swung, and connected, and the ringing in Harry's voice had been pain and anger and they'd both just *lunged*...

Harry's blood had been pounding and it had almost felt like he was blacking out every second, he was just so furious and tired of all this and...

He and Malfoy had been rolling on the floor, hitting the stone at every moment they weren't hitting flesh, and Malfoy's harsh breathing had been in his ear when Filch had loomed up behind them.

They had frozen in panic.

"Mr Potter, please get up," Filch had said coldly.

"Okay," Harry had said in muffled and breathless tones. "Get Malfoy off me first."

*

They had been dragged into Filch's office. He had fixed it up a bit since the last time Harry was there. There were no chains, and he had a huge new black chair with spikes on it.

He sat enthroned there, stroking Mrs Norris and generally looking like an evil mastermind.

"Prefects brawling, my sweet... Imagine that. How disgraceful."

"Are you talking to the *cat*, man?" said Malfoy, who had never known when to keep his mouth shut and would never learn, since Harry vowed to kill him.

"Disrespecting the Assistant of the Chief Disciplinarian, too..." Filch noted grimly.

Harry stared at Mrs Norris, and then shared a look of cold fear with Malfoy.

"Do they have any explanation, my pretty?" mused Filch, who was a pioneer in creepiness before unknown to man.

"We were having a fight about Potter's mi-"

"Shut up, Malfoy!" snarled Harry, who was not prepared to see Filch contemplating the mightiness of Harry's weapon.

Ever.

"So they won't talk, my dear. That is suspect," Filch continued, still stroking Mrs Norris. "I think they must be punished most severely."

"Him first," Malfoy and Harry said in unison.

Filch sighed mournfully. "If only Dumbledore had allowed me to re-introduce the rack..."

"Him first," Malfoy and Harry said together again, and exchanged annoyed looks.

“Still, I have a nice alternative...” Filch said. “My days of powerlessness are over. You students have to fear me now!”

Harry and Malfoy had stared at each other, and Harry had seen his own panic reflected in Malfoy’s cold eyes.

The panic had only intensified when Filch went off into a round of manic laughter.

“At last I have the authority to make you squirm now,” Filch gloated, getting up from his chair. “I no longer have to quail in guilt before this portrait!”

He went over to a huge oil painting of a man who looked like a bad-tempered ape caught in an oil slick, and studied it reverently.

“My predecessor,” he murmured in religious tones. “Oh, he could give students scars that would last forever. He was puissant, his name was spoken in low fearful tones throughout the whole school-”

“Did he have a mi-”

Harry’s foot came down quite accidentally and extremely hard on Malfoy’s foot.

“Apollyon Pringle!” Filch breathed, and embraced the picture frame. “I shall not fail your glorious memory!”

First cats and now inanimate objects.

Filch had turned to them, his eyes mad little slits.

“I have prepared a room for this very eventuality,” he murmured. “I moved my – equipment there...”

It was only then that Harry thought to wonder about where the chains were.

And now he was chained up in a dank dungeon with no idea of when they would be freed and with Malfoy of all people... and the stupid prat had the nerve to say it was his fault!

*

“Just – don’t talk to me, Malfoy,” Harry said in stony tones.

Malfoy glared, but said nothing for a few minutes. Then he began to mutter under his breath.

Harry glared over at Malfoy’s bowed head, even paler than usual in the darkness.

“I said, don’t-”

“I’m not talking to you!” Malfoy snapped. “I’m playing with myself!”

There was a long pause.

Then Harry said, very carefully, “Okay, firstly – ew, and secondly – we’re in chains, Malfoy, how the-”

“Good Lord, Potter, drag your feeble little mind out of the gutter before it drowns in filth!” Malfoy turned up his nose. “I was playing a Slytherin game to amuse myself.”

“Oh.”

Harry stared broodingly into the darkness.

After a few minutes, this got very tiring. He wasn’t the hero of a Victorian romance, after all, just a series of modern fantasy volumes.

“So... tell me, what is this game?”

“It’s called Sexual Innuendo Ahoy.”

Harry blinked. “Ex-excuse me?”

“You focus on every aspect of the universe, and try to make it sexual.” Draco Malfoy’s lip curled in satisfaction. “It’s surprisingly easy.”

“Oh, and *I* need to get my mind out of the gutter,” Harry said. “I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me,” Draco said with immense satisfaction. “Take Quidditch, for instance. Oh, it’s too easy. Four different types of ball, not to mention the fact we’re all on-”

“I don’t want to *hear* this!”

“Ever wondered about the amount of leather in the uniforms? Do you know how many professional Quidditch players turn out gay?”

“La la la!”

“Consider the Broomstick Servicing Kit!” Malfoy yelled.

“Oh – shut up, I own one of those!”

“Ah-*ha!*”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Ludo Bagman, for instance,” Malfoy continued relentlessly. “I heard he took quite a fancy to you – huh, how strange, just before he got fired-”

“You’re *sick!*”

Malfoy looked bizarrely complimented.

“And Filch!” he added brightly. “The nights are long and cold and lonely with only a cat and a picture frame for company. Ever think about this little fondness of his for chaining students up – perhaps I should say *fetish* – can’t you just see that horrid little man with a whip and garters?”

Well, now Harry could, and he would in a thousand terrible nightmares from now on.

“Help!” Harry screamed. “I’m chained up in here with a sex maniac!”

“Oh, well done, Potter,” Malfoy sulked. “Now if anyone was coming to rescue us, they’ve just muttered ‘Lucky bastard’ and turned around.”

“Trust me, if they recognised your voice they’re running in horror to my aid.”

“My voice? I wasn’t the one screaming,” Malfoy pointed out. “You scream like a girl, Potter, has Ginny Weasley ever-”

“Shut up about the Weasleys.”

“What are you going to do, Potter? Punch me?”

Malfoy moved so his chains clinked. Harry glanced up at the metal encircling the pale insides of Malfoy’s wrists, and then resumed his stare of loathing.

Malfoy returned it with interest.

“Why don’t you go off somewhere and *rot*,” Harry growled.

Malfoy brought his face close to Harry’s by angling his body against the wall.

“Like a dungeon, Potter?” he suggested softly. “Sit still, stay quiet and rot like a good boy.”

“I always knew *you’d* end up in chains,” Harry countered, glaring back. “You little Death Nibbler.”

“Pardon me?” Malfoy snapped. “Are you suggesting that I am in any way affiliated with the Dark Lord?”

“You hate Muggles!”

“I also hate decaffeinated coffee,” Malfoy informed him. “I don’t plan to kill anyone who drinks it.” He paused. “Unless it is an extreme case, and they eat wholewheat bread too.”

“What about your f-”

“Do you mind, Potter? I have father issues.”

“Oh?” said Harry, grinning a fiendish grin in the darkness. “What are you going to do, Malfoy? Punch me?”

Malfoy was silent for a long, fuming moment.

Then he said, quite calmly, “I’m going to do this,” turned and bit Harry hard in the shoulder.

“OW! Malfoy, you – you *bit* me, you bloody *girl!*”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Uh, I don’t know, *not* bite me?”

“I had to inflict some kind of physical damage, and I’m a little chained up here.”

Malfoy sank back against the wall with a self-satisfied look.

Harry lost it, swung his body around by the chains, and pinned Malfoy further to the wall. The cuffs dug into his wrists, but the stunned look on Malfoy’s face was worth it.

“You don’t bloody well *bite*,” he said furiously, and made a good job of elbowing Draco Malfoy in his thick head.

Malfoy promptly sank his teeth into Harry’s elbow.

“Ow – stop it, you *vicious little-*”

All right, there was nothing for it. Harry’s eyes zeroed in on a rip at the shoulder of Malfoy’s robes. It must have got torn when they were fighting, and now pale skin glimmered through.

Harry bit down on it hard.

Malfoy’s body went taut with pain along Harry’s.

“*Ouch*,” he said, voice muffled against Harry’s skin. “Ouch, that really hurt, you bloody savage-”

He sank his teeth in again and made Harry yelp.

“Why don’t you stop *biting* me like a *girl* -”

This close, it was obvious that Malfoy was still sweaty and breathless from the earlier fight. In fact, his skin tasted like salt.

Harry was pleased to see that he was winning, as Malfoy had to try and bite through several layers.

Malfoy obviously noticed that too, since his eyes narrowed with determination and he went for Harry’s throat.

Quite literally.

Harry groaned in pain and bit down harder on Malfoy's skin to hide it, but Malfoy now had a much larger section of skin than Harry did to work with and his head was buried in Harry's throat and his face was extremely warm and Malfoy's teeth were scraping along his skin and his body was taut with shock and torment and so it was only reasonable to bite *really* hard and try to draw blood and then he had to taste to see if it was blood but no, it was still sweat and God it tasted really good...

Malfoy groaned too, perhaps less in pain, and sucked in a bit more of Harry's throat and it was very, very pleasant and now Harry had the distinct feeling that something was wrong because fighting wasn't actually supposed to be pleasant, now was it?

"Er... Malfoy," he said, and it was weird how polite his words were when his voice was rasping with sudden lust, "This isn't fighting at all, is it?"

He tried not to shiver when Malfoy's voice came out low and pressed against his skin.

"No kidding, Potter."

"Then perhaps we should-" *Stop* was going to be the very next thing Harry said, he swore it was. But just then Malfoy licked a thoughtful trail up Harry's neck, and all ability to process rational thought was lost.

Harry moaned rather embarrassingly, pushed his body further against Malfoy's and when Malfoy pushed back he dipped his head down and dragged his teeth gently along the smooth edge of Malfoy's jaw. He searched, almost blind in the darkness and too close and not willing to move back an inch, open-mouthed along Malfoy's face for his lips and then they were there, and...

His lips were soft but the kiss was hard and desperate and still terribly shocked, tongues and teeth shoving back thought and making Harry moan frantically again. Malfoy licked inside Harry's mouth, which was definitely too erotic to be legal, but Harry tried clumsily to reciprocate and...

There was nothing but arching and kissing and biting and moaning and the sound of chains clinking in the empty darkness. Malfoy ground his body hard as he could against Harry's, and Harry bit down on Malfoy's lip and ground viciously back with the ring of metal in his ears. Malfoy began to rub, slowly, slightly, against him.

"Oh God. Oh *God*."

"I need my hands free," Malfoy gasped. "You need your hands free. Bloody hell..."

"You're doing fine without them," Harry said in a voice of great conviction. He glanced up at Malfoy's chained wrists.

At the lock of one of the cuffs.

"Malfoy."

"Hmmm?" said Malfoy, biting his ear.

Harry fought valiantly against the urge to forget about it. “I – it’s just, the, ah, the, oh – key is in one of your cuffs.”

Malfoy stared. “*What?*”

“I think – I might be able to reach it. If I kind of,” and fine, now it was time for Harry to blush, “er, wriggle up your body just a bit-”

“Be my guest,” Malfoy said in very courteous tones.

Harry tried to do so, as well as trying to tell himself that he wasn’t rubbing up along someone all sweaty and attractive and so he shouldn’t be distracted by that...

“Ah! Malfoy, did you just bite my – er, my-?”

“Nipple. Yes I did. Is that a problem?”

“No! No, in fact – do it again, if you like.”

“You’d probably do better to concentrate.”

“On-? Oh, right! Right. Key, right.”

He inched further up Malfoy’s body and took the key between his teeth.

“Dear me, Potter,” said Malfoy’s amused voice, accompanying a movement that wasn’t doing anything to help the current situation. “I suppose the *Daily Prophet* wasn’t so far wrong after all...”

“Fut up,” Harry requested around the key.

Turn it and you can both get out of here, he told himself, though his lust-soaked brain seemed unimpressed with the idea.

Okay then. Turn it, and he’ll have his hands free.

One of the cuffs snapped open, and Harry sagged back into his chains. Malfoy lifted his free hand, snagged the key and got to work releasing himself.

Practically, it was a smart move. Aesthetically, though, Harry was beginning to have all sorts of disturbing thoughts about how chains rather suited Malfoy.

Malfoy was free in seconds, and then stepped up to Harry and lifted the key to one of his cuffs.

And paused.

“Hang on a second,” he said. “What are we doing here?”

“Well... currently you seem to be busy not freeing me.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Malfoy said. “What are you planning to do afterwards?”

“Er,” said Harry. “I thought, you know, we could – get out, and then have a coffee or something.”

And engage in some hands-on fumbling, but really, Harry felt that was best left implied.

“Have a *coffee*?”

“You said you liked coffee!”

“Potter. Why on earth would you want to have a coffee with me? I mean, yes, I admit it, I’m a very good kisser, but – pay attention, this is a life lesson – that in no way means I’m not a nasty person.”

“I’d noticed,” Harry informed him. “But, well, you said you didn’t support Voldemort, and we said things at the same time, and you made up a sexual innuendo game-”

“How did you know I’d made it up?”

Harry smiled. “It was kind of a hunch.”

Malfoy looked like he might be about to smile back, but then he looked exasperated instead.

“It was a simple arch nemesis teenage boy chains dungeon full of sexual tension experience, Potter,” he said loftily. “There’s no need to confuse the issue with – emotions, and coffee. You are insane, and I am leaving.”

He had actually turned around when Harry spoke.

“Coward,” he said softly.

As he’d expected, Malfoy turned around sharply.

“What was that?”

“You’re running away,” Harry said. “The logical conclusion is that you’re afraid. I’m the one in control here.”

“Oooh, big words from the boy in chains.”

“You’re just turning tail and running. You don’t dare stay here. I’m in control because I’m able to admit that this might mean something. You can’t face that. You can’t even consider the possibility. You-”

Malfoy lunged forward, seized the back of Harry’s head and kissed him.

Harry abruptly lost all interest in his sentence, and the English language in general.

Over-rated, he thought, his mind fragmenting as Malfoy ran his tongue over Harry's. Really, incoherent moaning and pleading got all necessary messages across.

So did body language. Really, it was *so good* Malfoy had his hands free, because now he could use them and it was all extremely... good.

The English language had utterly forsaken him. But Malfoy did have bloody incredible hands.

Harry thought he almost whined when one hand strayed a little adventurously.

"No," Malfoy said in a rich, smooth voice which should be outlawed upon the instant, "I don't think the *Daily Prophet* exaggerated at all..."

"Please..."

Malfoy smiled, though his smile was almost forced and very nearly afraid.

"I'm in control," he said. "And there's one thing I can do."

Harry cleared his throat. "What's that?"

Malfoy turned on his heel and went towards the door. At the threshold, he tossed a glance over his shoulder, the exact same glance he had given Harry just before biting him, and said:

"This."

He left.

Harry sagged, chains giving a forlorn jingle in the darkness, and contemplated the horrific idea of Filch coming to find him in chains and distinctly over-excited.

He might forget he was committed to a cat and a portrait already.

Even that thought did not calm him altogether. Nor did frantic musings on his sexuality, how to get out of this mess and how to get Draco Malfoy on his back and do depraved things to him.

Actually, that last thought pretty much answered the first thought for him. And as for escape...

Harry tried to formulate a plea for release.

He thought 'Help! I'm *not* chained up in here with a sex maniac' might do nicely.

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Chained

Draco Malfoy woke up at the dead of night, securely chained to his bed.

He looked at his feet and hands, securely chained, with mild curiosity, and began to mull over what the reason for this could be.

He had gone to bed right after supper. He hadn't been sleeping well lately, and so after the porridge and pumpkin juice...

Oh. That was probably it. The porridge and juice had probably formed some kind of toxic poisonous substance inside his stomach, inducing weird hallucinatory dreams.

He wondered idly if he could peddle porridge juice to the other Slytherins as the new Drug of Choice. Considering the fact he'd seen Crabbe and Goyle snort sawdust, he was optimistic.

That settled, he didn't think much of this drug-induced hallucinatory dream. He tried to sit up, his chains jangling. He didn't have to stand for this. He'd had bizarre doped-up dreams before, curse Blaise Zabini's funny brownies straight to hell, and he knew his rights.

"Hello?" he said. "Excuse me? Where's the sex?"

There was a funny choking sound.

"Steady on, Malfoy," a voice said, doing a very bad attempt at drawling. "I was just closing the curtains."

Huh. That was new. In one of the dreams there'd been an enthusiastically applauding audience.

"Very modest of you, Bizarre Dream Lover," Draco said.

There was another funny choking sound.

Draco was struck by a sudden dark idea. He had no clue about the potency of porridge juice. *Anyone* could be out there in the blackness. Even Millicent Bulstrode. Even Crabbe. Even Goyle

Even – God forbid! – Crabbe *and* Goyle.

"Could I have some light?" he asked, very cautiously, since he had no wish to inspire dream!Crabbe-and-Goyle to make sudden lustful leaps.

"Anything you want."

There was a whispered "*Lumos*" and then a glowing wand flew through the air and landed neatly in Draco's crystal vase.

“Smooth,” he approved, immeasurably relieved. Even in dreams, Crabbe and Goyle were bound to have the co-ordination of oxen on crack cocaine.

“Thanks,” said Harry Potter, who was lounging against the wall dressed in leather. “I’ve been practising.”

Draco lifted his head to assess the Boy Who Lived critically. His hair wasn’t wet and clinging to his face in a hundred gleaming tendrils like usual. Also, he was still wearing his glasses, and that hardly ever happened.

Unless he was fully naked when the dreams began, of course. Every fantasy has to have a kink.

Still, his Quidditch-muscled body was smooth, honey-pale and mostly revealed by the deep V of the leather shirt, and the clinging material of the leather trousers. He was lounging rather well, and his lower lip was looking full and a bit trembly.

He’d do. Draco wasn’t quibbling.

“Okay,” Draco said. “Sex. Now.”

Harry blinked. “I... um... What?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Oh please. I’m all chained up here. I know exactly how this is supposed to go. You’re going to be all forceful and incredibly hot, and pin me to the bed and have your wicked way with me. Go on. Move.”

Harry blinked again. Draco noticed that his adam’s apple had just bobbed, and there was deep red cresting on his cheeks.

Really, this was a very vivid dream. He had to give porridge juice high marks.

“Malfoy-”

“Draco,” Draco corrected absently.

“Draco.” Harry was doing the blushing thing again. “I have to tell you something.”

Draco was suddenly struck by another horrible idea.

“You’re... not going to suddenly transform into McGonagall and crack a whip at me, are you?” he asked, going a little faint with horror.

“What?”

“I’ve had some very odd dreams,” Draco said, adding hastily, “Nightmares! Nightmares!”

“Draco, you’re not-” Harry paused, then said incredulously, “*McGonagall*? You dreamed about Professor McGonagall?”

“Potter, I have lived my entire adolescence in this school. I’ve had kinky dreams about everyone in the castle.”

“Oh. H-have you?”

“So has real Potter, of course,” Draco added matter-of-factly. “Come on. You’re not telling me you haven’t.”

Harry licked his lips. Oh yes, this was a fetching dream image. “M-maybe I’ve had one or two dreams,” he said, his voice suddenly a few octaves lower. “But certainly not about the whole school!”

“Really?” Draco said conversationally. “I even had one about house elves. Jesus, that was when I was fifteen. I never want to be fifteen again. Once you’re about seventeen, the dreams get much better. We canvassed the Slytherin dormitories and we’re quite sure. It was on my seventeenth birthday that I had the brilliant Blaise, Pansy and Terry Boot dream.”

Funny Choking Sound, #3.

“Terry Boot? I – wouldn’t have thought he was your type.”

“He’s quite dishy if you take off his tie,” Draco assured him. “There was one dream about him and Dumbledore’s desk...”

Harry pouted. Okay, this one didn’t have the immediate sex appeal, but he was beginning to appeal to Draco more and more.

“I just don’t think he’s right for you.”

“Come over here and show me who is,” Draco purred.

Harry blushed again. The flush was spreading down to his collarbone.

“It’s – it’s not that I don’t want to, I just think you should-”

“You’re being terribly bashful,” Draco said critically. “Usually we’re on our way to our second orgasm by now.”

This blushing thing was so cute! He was having porridge juice every night.

“I’m... er...”

“Look,” Draco said sharply, “I will not be having with this kind of nonsense. I don’t care what kind of weird stuff that porridge was. I will only say this once more. Sex, sex, sex!”

“That was three times,” Harry put in helpfully.

Draco directed a ferocious look at him. He quailed.

“Um – okay. Tell me, um, if I do something wrong.” He stopped lounging, and took several steps towards the bed. Good, good, good, nice walk, great trousers...

He was sitting down and had his head in his hands!

Bad dream Harry, bad!

“This isn’t going right at *all*,” he wailed.

Suddenly Draco realised. Of course! It was all so clear!

The drug porridge had mixed up two entirely different dreams! Here Draco was, obviously in the situation of Dark!Exciting!Harry, but there in that Harry’s leather was Blushing!Virgin!Harry, who usually appeared in the corridors.

“Hush, Harry,” Draco said, making his voice low and rich and soothing. “You don’t have to worry. I *understand*. Now come here and sit by me.”

Harry got up and sat beside Draco, rather shyly.

“Look,” he said, “I’m sorry, this was-”

“Just – don’t worry about it, Harry,” Draco said comfortingly. “Come on. We both want this, don’t we? Would you like to kiss me?”

He infused just the right amount of promise into his voice, and saw Harry’s eyes go dark.

“I... Yes,” he answered throatily.

Thank God!

“Then do it.”

Harry won the prize for shortest struggle with his conscience ever, and leaned over. It was a tentative kiss, sucking just a little, open just enough to be hungry, and Draco could at last do *something physical*, so he opened his mouth some more and bit lightly on Harry’s lower lip.

Harry’s soft groan was against Draco’s teeth, which he licked, and then he slid in a sweet weight of leather and skin and heat on top of Draco, licking his tongue and the insides of his mouth, up along the roof and down along the tongue again. Draco shivered helplessly. Harry made another soft sound, and pressed against Draco, squirming and shifting against his body heat, almost burrowing closer, and there was something peculiar about this blind intensity, this particular shy but determined questing and... Draco couldn’t help crying out, just a little bit, arching up to meet Harry oh so slightly, and then he let out a squeak of horror.

This reminded him of that incident in Filch’s dungeon!

Which had been...

“Jesus Christ!” Draco yelled. “You’re real!”

Harry's eyes were still dark with lust, and those wet red lips looked incapable of forming coherent words.

"Hmmm," he said, kissing the side of Draco's mouth.

"Eeek!" Draco argued emphatically. "*No!* Stop it!"

"I..."

Draco bucked upwards at this point, a move which he could only blame on the porridge juice. Harry gave a kind of startled groan, and focused on Draco's mouth with a very alarming obsessive look.

"Help!" Draco shouted. "Murder! Kidnap! Rape!"

Harry levered himself up.

"I've done *none* of those things," he said indignantly.

Draco considered. "Sexual abuse!" he yelled.

"Oh, it so does not count if someone asked for sex beforehand!"

"I did not!"

"Yes you did. Specifically," Harry said conscientiously. "You said 'Sex sex *sex*.' I *heard* you."

"I didn't think you were real! Get off me this instant, anyone could walk in, are you completely crazy!"

"I must be," Harry said grimly.

"I'm not arguing here," Draco returned. "I mean! My God! Turning up in your arch nemesis' bedroom in leather and chaining him up! Have you been at the porridge juice?"

"You're not my arch nemesis," Harry objected. "Voldemort is my arch..."

He paused. Both he and Draco had a nasty simultaneous vision of Harry taking advantage of a Voldemort chained to his bed.

"Urgh," Draco said devoutly. "Your most personable nemesis, then," he corrected. "Someone you hate, is my point. Not to mention the leather! Dear God, how did you manage to negotiate the corridors!"

And not get sexually assaulted. He hadn't said it and so nobody could call him on it. He was innocent, innocent!

"Draco," Harry said softly.

“Malfoy!” Draco shrieked.

“Draco,” Harry persisted, and finally rolled off him. And lay right up against him, one hand in his hair and gazing deeply into his eyes, which was no better! “I don’t hate you.”

“Yes you do, Potter,” Draco asserted earnestly. “You really, really do. You don’t know what you’re doing. It’s the porridge juice talking.”

Harry frowned. “What *are* you wittering about, Draco?”

He was smiling indulgently! He was still gently petting Draco’s hair!

This was wrong, wrong, sick and wrong.

“Draco. Don’t look so panicked.”

Then stop calling me that!

“I only came here to talk to you. I didn’t, um, plan on you still being so autocratic when you were chained up.”

“People do not chain up people for tea and chats, Potter! And anyway – we’ve talked. So get out! Get out this instant! How dare you violate my chambers and while we’re on the subject, my person!”

“Draco-”

“Silence!” Draco snapped, using his House Elf voice. “Leave me this minute, or I’ll have your fingers ironed for this!”

Something inside Potter, very subtly, snapped too.

Harry placed his hands, very firmly, on Draco’s chest, and eased himself over him again. His eyes were still dark and his mouth was still swollen and his expression was set and determined.

Oh, dear. Draco knew that look. It was Dark!Exciting!Harry time.

He’d always thought he was one of the least realistic fantasies, and now here he was in Draco’s bed.

Draco was still outraged, of course. But there was one tiny part of him jumping up and down going, ‘Mmm. Cut me a slice of that and serve with cream.’

“Think this over, Draco,” Harry said, in a low voice. “If I feel like it, I can just leave you chained up in here. In fact, I think it would be poetic justice, don’t you? Do you remember doing the same to me – except in a *dungeon* – not so long ago?”

“Oh yeah,” Draco said, snickering. “But that was different. That was funny. Because it wasn’t me.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re impossible, Draco,” he observed, still in that dark and vaguely disturbing voice. “And this is funny. Want to know why?”

“No,” Draco decided.

Harry’s eyes were really very dark now.

“Because it isn’t me,” he replied, and his mouth descended on Draco’s.

It was warm and urgent and hot and fast, a sloppy kiss that was too direct and brutal to be skilled, and when Draco made a tiny sound Harry moaned again and ground his body down on Draco’s.

Draco’s body spasmed upwards, and the clink of straining chains seemed very far away, seemed not to matter at all, no more than the chill pain of metal biting into his skin. He looked up at Harry, vision dim with lust, saw the sweat gathering, trailing down his throat and into the leather. He angled his head and bit down on Harry’s jaw.

Harry shuddered violently, and then leaned back.

“No... wait,” he said. “I came here because I had something to say.”

All right, this *wasn’t* funny, and Harry Potter was a bastard!

Harry smiled slightly at the outraged expression Draco was doubtless wearing – because he was evil incarnate! – and began to stroke Draco’s hair lightly again.

Draco didn’t want affection! Draco wanted *sex*!

Draco was starting to get a picture of himself as an oversized and exceedingly attractive baby, shaking his rattle against the bars of his cot and crying ‘Waaaah waaaah waaaah sex.’ It was an affront to the Malfoy dignity.

“Well... after the dungeon thing I was really, um-”

“Turned on,” Draco said smugly.

“*Pissed off*,” Harry said sternly.

“Same thing.”

“You’re impossible, do you know that? I was annoyed, but it got me thinking – about you, and I started noticing – um – stuff.”

“Yes yes yes, like the shiny hair and the sparkly eyes and the aristocratic features and how I look in my leather trousers and spider-web shirt.” Draco rolled his eyes. “I get that in my Valentines all the time.”

Really, Draco was insulted. Did Potter imagine that Draco hadn't noticed all the staring in class and the corridors and the library and the Quidditch pitch and Hogsmeade and that embarrassing time in the Prefects' bathroom? Draco had *certainly* noticed.

Not that he'd been looking, you understand.

"No! Well – yes. But that's not all," Harry said. "I noticed that you and I are the only ones who've taken out *Flying Through the Ages* more than fifteen times, and I noticed that you're kind to the little Slytherin kids, and I noticed that you eat weird things together like porridge and pumpkin juice – which isn't good for you, you know."

"Stalking will be on the list of offences with sexual harassment. I hope you realise that. I'm going to sue you, Potter, sue you for every spider in your cupboard."

"Shut up, Draco. And I noticed you looking back-"

"Oh, I did not!"

Damn it, he'd been spotted.

"And I've given it a lot of thought, and I really, really want to go for that cup of coffee. And, um. You kept avoiding talking to me, and I really wanted to talk you into this, so..."

"Let me get this straight," Draco said, speaking carefully. "You crept here in the dead of night, chained me to my bed and vigorously molested me, all in order to blackmail me into *having a cup of coffee with you?*"

"Er... yeah."

"I don't get forcibly ravished?"

"No."

Draco's voice was almost plaintive. "Not even a little bit?"

Harry smiled. It was definitely a Dark!Exciting!Harry smile. "Not unless you agree."

Draco looked at him with dawning admiration. "You're *evil*."

"I thought we should have something else in common."

"Hang on a second here," Draco said. "We're talking about a relationship here, aren't we? How painfully Gryffindor. I utterly refuse. I was not made for that kind of lifestyle, I am a – oooohhhhh."

Harry had just, quite deliberately, draped himself all over Draco.

"Let me," he said in a breathlessly daring sort of voice, "convince you."

Draco was just about to spurn him with extremest scorn, when Harry licked a hot sticky trail up Draco's neck to his ear. His lips lingered there, whispered something Draco didn't catch and wasn't terribly bothered about because Harry's teeth had just lightly scraped his ear and now they were doing it again, slowly, subtly, dragging along the sensitive areas of Draco's skin so he squirmed humiliatingly and made a little noise upsettingly like a kitten's.

He couldn't have cared less. He just wanted *more*, this minute and fiercely, so he pressed his warm open mouth against Harry's exposed throat and Harry made a sound like a scream with his teeth gritted. Then he slid his hand into Draco's pyjama top, and suddenly it was open without all of that pesky button-opening business, and Harry's mouth was moving down Draco's neck, lingering on his collarbone and then moving – oh, yes!

There was a knock on the door.

"Draco, we're coming in!"

Draco almost howled "*Go away! I'm extremely busy shagging Harry Potter!*" before reason mercifully prevailed.

"Er... er... okay, sure, just a minute," he said. Then he hissed, "Quick! Hide! Into the closet!"

"That's a terrible thing to say," Harry said reproachfully. "I'm going through a crisis here."

"Get into the closet this minute!" Draco said in a thin scream. Harry obeyed.

Even as he did so and the door swung open, Draco realised he should have asked Harry to rearrange his pyjamas.

Pansy and Millicent were standing in the doorway in their nightclothes. Draco found it hard to cope with Millicent Bulstrode in a negligee at the best of times.

They were both staring. Millicent appeared to be drooling down her ample front.

"Why, Draco," Pansy said archly, strolling over to the bed. "You seem a little – chained up. What have you been up to?"

"Um," Draco responded, descending to a Potteresque level of communication.

Then, being a Malfoy, he came up with a fiendish and filthy explanation.

"I made the house elves do it," he explained slowly, "because I get off on it."

Well, it was short notice! He thought he was doing remarkably well under the circumstances.

"You *what?!*" said Millicent, her huge jaw dropping.

"Oh yes. It, er, excites me," Draco told her ingenuously. "Being here – all alone, mind you, no partners, none at all, chained up with my clothes all dishevelled... I get the house elves to do that too... It really gets me hot and bothered."

There was Yet Another Funny Choking Sound from the closet.

“Because I’m a dirty, dirty boy!” Draco howled hastily.

Millicent Bulstrode looked like she might faint. Draco hoped she didn’t. It might dent the floor.

Pansy looked like she was going to choke. “That’s – fascinating, Draco. I had no idea.”

“I need to go,” Millicent said, and fled, slamming the door behind her.

Pansy stretched out luxuriously on the bed. “Okay, Harry,” she called out lightly. “You can come out now.”

Bashfully, Harry did so. Draco stared with his mouth open.

“You – you *knew*?”

“Oh, of course,” Pansy nodded. “Who do you think gave Harry the Slytherin password? Who do you think gave Harry the *chains*?”

“I was actually kind of hoping he’d had to seduce them out of Filch.”

Harry gave him a dirty look.

“I noticed Harry staring at you all moony-eyed weeks ago,” Pansy, the Spawn of Evil, continued happily. “I always thought you two would be so cute together. I’m so pleased you finally agree. He’s just what you need, Draco. Plus – it’s really hot.”

Pansy bounced delightedly on the bed.

“So you were trying to make me happy,” Draco said. “You big freak.”

Pansy and Harry both nodded. Bloody, brainless sexual predators that they were.

“And you thought it would be an appropriate and helpful action to engineer me being bound to my bed and sexually assaulted.”

Pansy shrugged unrepentantly. “What can I tell you? I sail the SS Guns and Handcuffs.”

“And I suppose the outfit was Pansy’s idea, too?” Draco asked in a resigned manner.

“Actually, he asked me for clothing advice,” Pansy informed him defensively. She gave Harry a fond smile. “He’s a terribly apt pupil. I think he has such potential for evil, saucy darkness.”

Harry looked disturbed and moved slightly away from her.

“You let him alone,” Draco ordered sternly.

Pansy gave them both a besotted maternal look. “You’re protecting him,” she cooed. “It’s true love.”

“It is not!” Draco snapped.

He was very upset indeed when Potter didn’t immediately contradict her as well.

“Did it never occur to you, Potter,” he asked in his nastiest tone, “that placing your fate in the hands of an unprincipled Slytherin wasn’t something you should have done?”

Potter didn’t even glance at Pansy, but stared at Draco in an intense way that made him feel terribly uncomfortable.

“No,” he replied.

Pansy made some sort of random squeeing sound, but for some reason she seemed terribly far away. There was just Potter’s concentrated gaze, so focused that Draco could taste it, and...

Draco blinked and shook his head violently.

“Someone give me the keys,” he commanded.

“So how was it going?” Pansy inquired anxiously of Harry. “I thought I’d just pop by to see how you were doing.”

“It was going really well,” Harry said earnestly. “Thanks for all your help.”

“No problem. It was worth it all just to see Draco’s horrified face. He’s cute when he’s humiliated to the dust, isn’t he?”

They both gave Draco a glance.

Oh, holy hell.

“And he was co-operating too?” Pansy asked. “Was he moaning?”

Harry blushed.

“I blame it on the porridge juice,” Draco said mordantly.

“Just go out with him, Draco!” Pansy exclaimed. “I know you want to, he knows you want to, everyone knows you want to! Stop being so stubborn and make it with the hot everlasting boy love!”

Harry sighed.

“Don’t bother, Pansy.”

For a second Draco thought Harry was about to leave, and felt an inexplicable bolt of panic.

“I very much doubt that many other people will want to go out with Draco once they hear about the chains and the house elves thing,” Harry said mildly. “Plus, I plan to blackmail him with sexual favours.”

Pansy giggled ecstatically. “Go get him, Harry, you w00bie, you.”

“You what?”

“That one’s been hitting the porridge juice too hard,” Draco muttered darkly.

“You’re both crazy,” Harry commented, and then he walked back over to the bed and laid a hand on Draco’s chest. “Now. Where were we?”

“Ooooh,” Pansy breathed.

Draco glared. “You,” he said. “Out.”

“Oh, come on!” Draco’s glare was implacable. Pansy pouted. “Fine,” she said. “But only because Harry’s a virgin. Anyway,” she mused aloud, “I bet you’ll be much more exhibitionistic once you’ve been together for a while.”

She hummed happily to herself as she went out. Draco caught a snatch that sounded like, *“Rest assured you’re adored...”*

Harry was still blushing at Pansy’s tactful little revelation.

“Oh, don’t go over all shy on me now,” Draco snapped. “I knew, of course.”

“Oh. That’s okay then,” Harry said. “So you understand this is important to me.”

He licked the hollow at Draco’s throat.

“And you’re my boyfriend now.”

“I am not!”

“Okay then,” Harry said. “I suppose I’ll just be going.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Harry’s smile was wicked. “Then I’m getting my way?”

“Oh – have your own way. As long as you have your way with me.”

Harry licked at the hollow again, and moved in a slow warm trail down to one of Draco’s nipples. Just before his mouth touched, he looked up.

His eyes were such a dark green they looked black.

“I really *do* like you, you know,” he said in a scratchy voice the dreams had never quite been able to replicate. “Do you...?”

“I think you’ve got quite enough concessions from me tonight, Potter,” Draco said firmly. “... you can ask me again tomorrow, though.”

He shuddered as Harry’s teeth scraped his skin again. Harry’s mouth formed a wicked smile against Draco’s nipple.

“I might just do that.”

*

Pansy sighed blissfully as the door muffled the bickering voices.

“They’re so *cute!*” she informed the uncaring corridor. “They’re so in *love...*”

Blaise Zabini, clad as usual in skin-tight leather, passed by and stopped to give her an appreciative once-over.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” Blaise said. “Fancy a night of meaningless red-hot sex?”

Pansy tossed her lustrous dark hair behind her shoulder, musing.

“Not just now, Blaise darling,” she decided.

Pansy kept her head tilted towards the closed door, and unobtrusively punched the air when she heard the first moan. She favoured Blaise with her brightest smile.

“I think I’m going to go make some banners.”

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Chapter One: I Want My Life To Make More Sense

This road is crooked, cracked and wrong

They've got the odds stacked nice and high

I don't know how they get along

Me, I just internalise.

Harry thought about himself as he entered the water. Or... perhaps he did not.

He thought about the person he saw reflected in the eyes of others.

Harry Potter.

The Boy Who Lived.

The boy whose miraculous defeat of Voldemort had become so absolutely futile because he had been unable to stop his resurrection. Because he had been a vital part of his rising again, more powerful than ever.

The boy who had been all but worshipped, yet could not even save his schoolmate.

Just another helpless child, but one who was more trouble because Voldemort wanted him dead, and because he had nobody to care for him.

Harry Potter, the boy who failed.

The one they were all so nice to. The one they all pitied.

It was like... being the hero of a story, for four years, and then suddenly being a bit player again. An insignificant annoyance, as the bleak grey war whirled past the windows of Hogwarts.

Everyone had a tired, strained expression on their faces which turned into a false smile as Harry passed. He could hear their thoughts by now - poor injured Harry, we mustn't make Harry feel bad...

As if he was still the child.

It had been that way for three years, and nobody had ever let up an inch in their ceaseless, grinding attempt to Make Harry Feel Better.

Pity is such a remorseless, wrenching thing. Something you offer when you see something weak, and cannot summon up the energy for contempt. Something so far away from love.

The pressure of all those pitying stares drove him into corners, into the back of classrooms, under the covers of his bed.

Anywhere to get away from the Valentines everyone sent, all imitations of Ginny Weasley's second year tribute. From the Quidditch matches where Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs seemed to lose deliberately, so that Harry Potter could be ecstatic about a glorious victory like that of his third year.

Harry had almost grown resigned to it. They wanted to do something for him, why stop them? It was all – inevitable, and entirely useless.

And now had come this.

The final indignity, the final insulting gesture to a pathetic wounded creature.

The next Triwizard Tournament, held three years later.

Let Harry get over it, let Harry win, let him see that nothing bad has happened and then we can all clap and the orphan boy will be happy. Won't that be nice?

He had almost flung it back in their faces, those terrible pitying faces.

But in the end, he complied as he always did.

If that was the price, if they had to convince themselves he could get over Voldemort's resurrection so they could get on with their lives... then so be it.

Harry loved some of them. He wanted them to be content.

So he flew his Firebolt against the dragon. He accepted Parvati Patil's invitation to the ball, and danced with her until she drifted off to her boyfriend, Dean Thomas. (Then he drank some of the water Seamus Finnigan had Transfigured into rum, just enough to make everything mercifully numb but not enough to make anyone worry.)

Harry remembered the ball very clearly, the heat and light of the room overpowering. He had felt dazed and sick after a while, trying to smile at everyone who passed. Receiving the smiles of Hagrid and his wife, and Dumbledore, Hermione and Ron, as if they were unforced.

Eventually everything blurred around him, the dazzling lights mingling with everyone's hair. It seemed as if a light had been turned on a still-wet picture and paint was running, colours blending and changing.

The figures of Hermione and Ron dancing becoming one blurred shape. Dumbledore's blue eyes falling dizzily into the sky-pictured ceiling of the hall. Padma Patil's black hair suddenly streaming out across the room to mingle with the sharp shock of Malfoy's white-blond locks, as he sat at the Slytherin table getting systematically drunk.

It had been a nightmare. Harry had eventually leaned his head in his arms, overwhelmed with slow pressing despair, and pretended he was simply tired.

The second task could be nothing to that.

He had gone to the prefects' bathroom, quite legitimately this time because of course he was a prefect, how could poor dear Harry not be a prefect? He had figured out his clue.

He had found the Gillyweed neatly placed on his pillow by loyal Dobby, still feigning a devotion which must have long faded.

God, he was grateful for the coolness of the water now, the murky green swirling around him, absorbing him and protecting him from stares. He almost wished he could stay down here forever.

What if he did? Harry thought suddenly. He knew that Gillyweed could be dispelled with a wish. He could just tumble down to the bottom and his lungs would burst with the effort to breathe. Then there would be nothing but silence and washing water forever.

But how everyone else would feel... and how right he would have proved them. He would have become that weak child they believed him, unable to bear it.

Harry had never been one to take the easy way out. Even now, he could fight. Even now, he wanted to fight.

So... he would find Ron, then. Find Ron, and wait by all the hostages, and get points and praised for his gallantry.

Find Ron.

Harry swam through the all-enveloping waters, swam listlessly through all the dangers which would not touch him. Swam grateful for the soothing movement of water against his tired body.

Swam until he found the place where the mermen lingered, where the hostages were tied up, and his eyes searched wearily for Ron's bright red hair.

Which was when something reached inside his chest and twisted his heart as if it was a Portkey, turning the centre of his being to transport him to another, much more immediate and terrifying world.

He stared in panic at the empty green of the lake, stared desperately at the strange faces of the hostages. He felt as if the Gillyweed had not worked and he was suddenly drowning, starved of oxygen and with his eyesight failing, refusing to see what was before him.

He couldn't help seeing.

There in the lake, the moody turquoise waters giving a stained-glass cast to his pale face and his tendrils of silver hair drifting in the lazy currents, was Draco Malfoy.

*

Harry utterly forgot about the Gillyweed, and choked on water, flailing, panicked, convinced he was drowning.

He couldn't breathe.

Later, he realised this was shock.

Somewhat helplessly, still gulping, he tumbled in the water in a desperate attempt to put his head between his knees. He'd heard that was good for... for...

Oh, what was happening?

Malfoy refused to go away. He remained on the rock, his hair describing silver scribbles against the green. It was as if the lake had suffered from a hostile Slytherin takeover.

Could this be some kind of *joke*? No, Dumbledore would kill Malfoy if he tried anything like that.

It had to be a mistake, Harry decided. Or maybe there had been some fiendish trick in the riddle, and it had really meant you had to rescue your worst enemy.

God, I have to know!

Harry was aware of the role he was supposed to play. He was supposed to be down here first, and then wait behind for all the hostages. That was what hopelessly heroic Harry did.

And suddenly, he couldn't bear it any more.

I'm so sick of all this crap!

I have to know.

Harry tore at the ropes which bound Malfoy. He was taking his hostage, and then he would find out what the hell was going on!

He wasn't a stupid child any more. And if the hostages really had been about to die, he might have left Malfoy behind him.

It hadn't been so difficult holding onto Ron. Of course, Harry had felt less uncomfortable touching Ron.

He settled with linking an arm around Malfoy's waist, and thanking heaven the boy was slim.

A positive aspect of Malfoy? Alert the Ministry.

Harry set his face, forcing down the panic that wanted to grab people's collars, gibber at them and demand an explanation. He took several deep breaths of water.

Then he surged upwards to the light.

Brightness and clarity lay ahead. Simplicity.

Just then, Harry didn't give a damn what anybody thought. He wanted reasons, and he wanted them now.

He broke the surface of the lake, taking a calming gulp of air.

The sky above him was a beautiful, simple blue, stilling the tumult of Harry's brain. He wished away the Gillyweed and began to swim lightly, easily, towards shore.

Which was when Malfoy opened his eyes and gave a stifled scream. He then made a sterling attempt to strangle Harry.

Harry gave a startled gasp, and had time for nothing more.

They sank, Harry fighting to surface again, limbs twisting and robes billowing in the water. Amidst the green blur and black swathes of material, Harry caught a glimpse of Malfoy's pale angular face, the features drawn taut by fear, the grey eyes wide with horror.

Harry recognised that look from the mirror, washing his face after a nightmare.

He knew how to deal with this.

He grasped Malfoy by the shoulders, and tried to mouth distinctly.

"Stop it, or you drown!"

Malfoy blinked. Underwater and scared out of his mind, he looked younger than he had when he was eleven.

Slowly he nodded, hair flaring about his face in a silver corona.

Harry gripped him harder and tried to help him keep afloat as they surfaced once more.

His whole body was tense with terror.

"Okay, Malfoy, breathe. Hey, it's all right," said Harry Potter, Sucker For People In Distress and completely disgusted with himself for being such a pushover.

"All right?" snapped Malfoy, winner of the Hogwarts' Total Prat Award seventh year running. "I'm soaking wet in a lake, clinging to a complete idiot and trying not to have hysterics. How does that qualify as all right?"

"Shut up and I'll get you out of the lake."

"Why am I in the lake, Potter?" inquired Malfoy in his most supercilious tones.

"I don't know!" Harry cried in exasperation. "I was hoping you could tell me!"

“How am I supposed to know? Dumbledore sent for me, and I came up to his office, and then suddenly I was unconscious!”

“There wasn’t an explanation?”

Malfoy looked shifty, a not uncommon expression on him.

“Well,” he temporised. “There may have been.”

“What?”

“I didn’t hear it, did I,” Malfoy returned sharply. “I was late. Malfoys don’t go scurrying off to the headmaster’s office straight away. Malfoys are fashionably late.”

His haughty voice faltered for a second as he looked down at the lapping water, and Harry softened fractionally. He might be acting obnoxious because he was frightened.

Of course, in that case he must have been in a state of paralysing terror for the entire course of his schooldays.

“I didn’t know you were scared of the water, Malfoy.”

“We hardly do show-and-tell about our feelings, Potter. And everybody has phobias.” Malfoy’s voice turned malicious. “I recall a certain person swooning over Dementors...”

“Shut up right now, Malfoy! I wish I’d left you tied up with the other hostages.”

“Hostages?”

Harry winced and wondered if his ears were bleeding. “Yeah,” he answered cautiously, hoping that it would not provoke another unholy scream.

“What, you mean like – the Triwizard Tournament?”

“No, Malfoy, I mean bandits have kidnapped half the school. Yes, the Tournament!”

“But – bugger it, how...?”

“Clearly,” said Harry, “there has been some horrible mistake.”

“Like your birth?” was Malfoy’s helpful suggestion.

“And once I get to Professor Dumbledore, I’m sure-”

“And here, I believe, comes Hogwarts Champion Harry Potter now!”

Lee Jordan, the twins’ friend and the old Quidditch commentator, had become a surprising success in the Ministry and had taken Bagman’s place as Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Rumour had it Percy Weasley was green with jealousy.

Rumour also had it that he was a bit of a hog when it came to the magic microphone, though he always glanced uneasily over his shoulder whenever Professor McGonagall was around.

Just now, Harry wished Professor McGonagall would cosh him.

“The whole school has been in fevered suspense about the identity of Harry’s hostage, since his best friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley are in the audience. Everyone’s agog to see who the lucky girl is...”

Just then, Malfoy made a noise which suggested asphyxiation.

Harry realised he was splashing up onto the shore with Draco Malfoy, their arms around each other, Malfoy’s head practically on his shoulder, both of them absolutely soaking wet.

In front of the entire school.

“It... it looks like...” Lee’s uncertain voice trailed off with a weak, “Well. Good heavens.”

Hogwarts stared at them for all of five thunderstruck seconds, and then erupted into a frenzy of noise.

“Bugger,” said Harry.

Malfoy paused to deliberate, and then launched into a rather impressive stream of obscenity.

Only Madam Pomfrey did not seem paralysed. She sprang on them as they made their way onto dry land.

“Honestly, this stupid Tournament,” she fussed. “Ducking delicate children into a nasty cold lake...”

“I’m NOT delicate,” said Harry and Malfoy in cross unison.

Harry gave Malfoy a slightly puzzled look.

“Of course you’re not, Draco,” Madam Pomfrey said soothingly. “Look at you,” she continued. “You can’t stand up straight. You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“I would have been, if Potter had worn swimming trunks,” Malfoy murmured, and extricated himself irritably from Harry, standing up straight out of sheer bloody-mindedness.

Harry grabbed him again as he staggered.

Malfoy scowled and Madam Pomfrey seized him, handling him as easily as if he had been Gabrielle Delacour.

“Tch,” she said. “What the headmaster can be thinking of... you’ll be in shock next.”

“I will not,” snapped Malfoy, who still looked far less assured than usual as he struggled with Madam Pomfrey. He seemed ill and his hair was all over his face.

He peered through the plastered blond locks and his eyes widened in horror as Madam Pomfrey announced briskly:

“Have to get you out of these wet clothes immediately,” and pulled his robes over his head.

Nurse undresses student!

Further sensation around the school.

Harry was the first to realise that, in fact, Malfoy was wearing a full set of Muggle clothes underneath his robes.

He thanked God. He had had enough trauma for the day, though he would never have guessed that Malfoy was into the current Muggle clothes fad in Hogwarts.

Of course, he'd definitely never given any thought to what Malfoy wore under his robes.

Madam Pomfrey did not seem to share Harry's relief.

“Ridiculous things you children are wearing,” she commented, and grabbed the edge of Malfoy's sweater.

She had lifted it about an inch, revealing a gleam of white skin, when Malfoy intervened vehemently.

“I will not have pictures taken of me without my shirt on!” he exclaimed. “At least, not without substantial financial remuneration,” he added thoughtfully.

“Pic-” Harry's attention was finally diverted from the spectacle of Malfoy and Madam Pomfrey to the gang of photographers bearing down upon them.

“Oh, God.”

Behind him, he heard Malfoy break into another string of curses, interspersing them with demands for a blanket.

Voices burst in on Harry from all sides.

“Harry, can you tell us-?”

“Harry, how does it feel to be in the lead-?”

“Harry, isn't that Draco Malfoy-?”

“-the son involved in that tragedy-?”

“Here's your blanket, Mr Malfoy, and may I say that I have never heard such language from a student in my life!”

“Fairly shoddy blanket-”

Harry was blinded by the white light of snapping cameras, but he could make a shrewd guess as to which speech was Madame Pomfrey's.

And of course, Malfoy's cool drawl was unmistakable.

Harry blinked into the painful lights, surrounded by the clicking of the cameras all around him as Madam Pomfrey wrapped a blanket tightly around him. He felt the weight of those stares press down upon him again, those wondering, pitying, expectant stares reducing him to that small, dumbfounded child...

"Oh, don't question the poor wounded orphan," sneered Malfoy. "He finds it hard forming coherent sentences on his best days."

Harry straightened up and shot Malfoy a venomous look.

"Harry, can you explain-" said a lone photographer.

Harry focused on her. "No, I can't," he said in a clear strong voice. "It seems there's been some kind of mistake about my hostage. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will have a good explanation, though – and I plan to ask him as soon as possible.."

*

"I can think of no explanation but the obvious one," Dumbledore said calmly.

Harry had considerable affection for his eccentric headmaster. He was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. However, the very respect he felt for him had always, in some measure, kept him on his best behaviour.

Now, however, he was going absolutely berserk.

"What do you mean, you can't...? How are the hostages even *chosen*?" Harry shouted. "Did you do it? How does it work? Who made the mistake?"

Dumbledore, impassive in the face of a raving boy, ate a sherbet lemon.

To Harry's mind, this was heartless levity.

"The Goblet of Fire chooses the hostages, of course," he said patiently. "Really, Harry, do you think we only use an object of such mystical power for selecting champions? The Goblet is a fount of occult knowledge. I do think we can trust it."

"Bollocks!"

Harry had never sworn in front of a teacher before.

"Didn't it select me as a champion because Crouch fiddled with it?" he demanded. "Occult knowledge, I don't think! It'd probably take Voldemort less Dark Magic than

hexing a vegetable!"

“Harry, sit down and at least attempt to calm down.”

Dumbledore paused and looked expectantly up at Harry, like a serene old monarch giving audience to an erring subject.

Harry, who hadn't realised he'd stood up, returned his glance with a distraught but defiant look.

“Naturally since the last—” *time when you ruined everything, got Cedric killed and helped raise the Dark Lord* – “unfortunate incident, we have placed extensive safeguards over the Goblet. I assure you, Harry, it has not been interfered with.”

Harry made a helpless and incoherent protest, but Dumbledore stilled him with a gesture.

“Moreover, Harry, I fail to see why Voldemort would have done such a thing. If the extent of his dark plans is to give Mr. Malfoy a dunking, we might as well all call it a day.”

“But... but why?” Harry stammered.

Dumbledore ate another sweet.

“I really couldn't tell you, Harry. I hardly know Mr. Malfoy, I'm sorry to say. I haven't had time of late to become properly acquainted with all my students. Anyone can see he is an unhappy, hostile young man, but considering the tragedy, who can blame him?”

Dumbledore gave him a piercing look.

“Surely you know him better than that? In light of current evidence.”

“No!” Harry almost screamed. “I *don't* know him, I mean – well, obviously I – I don't know anything *about* him. I mean, I *hate* him, I absolutely loathe him, I think he's-”

“Refrain from thumping my desk, if you would. It seems to me,” Dumbledore observed placidly, “that this loathing is a little excessive. We all have a common enemy, do we not? Mr. Malfoy is on our side.”

Harry's hands clenched into fists.

“In any case, Harry... I have no answers for you.” Dumbledore sighed. “There seem to be fewer and fewer answers these days. I am, however, a little busy. If you would be so good...”

Harry looked at Dumbledore's face, more weary and even more lined than he remembered it, and felt his selfish panic collapse in on itself.

Dumbledore was holding the war-torn wizarding world together. Everybody knew Fudge was an ostrich with his head in the sand, everybody knew about the disappearances, everyone was so scared... Dumbledore was the only thing that stood between wizards and chaos.

And, Harry realised with a slow pain in his chest, Dumbledore was a very old man.

“I’m – sorry, sir.” His voice was a whisper. “If there’s anything I can do-”

“Oh no, Harry. Don’t worry about it.”

That was that. Harry Potter always had to be the protected child. Harry Potter always had to be part of the burden.

Harry’s shoulders sagged.

“All right. Thank you, sir.”

What more could he do or say?

“One more thing, Harry.”

Harry paused on the threshold.

“Remember the exact wording of the clue.”

Ponder this...

The door shut in Harry’s face, leaving him staring at the darkness.

We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss.

He didn’t understand. But he was going to work this out.

Chapter Two

If I Reached Out A Hand

Every time I try the words make little sense

Until you're gone, and everything must change

And so I must resolve to say it

It's just me myself again and I'm just talking to the wall

It's just me myself and I deciding on a plan

Deciding on my plan

And everything must change, change

Inside and out

Harry stumbled into the Gryffindor common room. He blinked, holding up a hand to shield himself from the light and to shield his confused eyes from the others.

A burst of greeting immediately assaulted him.

“Good on you, Harry!” Seamus.

“Poor Harry, imagine saving Malfoy!” Ginny.

“That was brilliant, Harry, but couldn't you have managed to duck him a bit more?” Ron.

“So what did Professor Dumbledore say?” Hermione.

And now Hermione had asked the obvious question, and each of those faces had turned to him, sure that he could explain everything.

Harry felt utterly exhausted.

“He has no idea what happened,” he replied. “Nor do I.”

There was silence, and then a great, hearty burst of conversation.

“Well, whatever it was, you were amazing!” Seamus exclaimed.

“You must have gone into shock when you saw Malfoy there,” commented Hermione.

Malfoy.

God. I have to think about Malfoy.

He had to get away, and then he had to think about Malfoy.

He looked around the room. Neville Longbottom waved a goblet at him, his suit jacket and dungarees somewhat lightening Harry's mood.

Now that the wizarding world was split into two halves, both halves had become extremist. You killed Muggles or you loved them.

Those opposing Voldemort had therefore embraced every Muggle custom they could lay their hands on. Muggle clothes were commonly worn outside the classroom.

People from pureblood wizarding families like Neville were getting things slightly wrong, though. Harry still treasured Colin Creevey's photo of the 'Tutu Incident' in fifth year.

Hermione laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"You look a bit tired, Harry."

He looked up at her with gratitude.

"I am," he said fervently.

"Maybe you should get some rest."

Harry's fingers closed around her hand in mute appreciation. She squeezed back with that terrible sympathy.

Everyone waved to him as he left, and then he was free.

Harry leaned against the door. Now he had to try and understand.

We've taken what you'll sorely miss.

Why Malfoy?

*

He could understand it not being Ron. He loved Ron, he would always love Ron – but a distance had grown between them, a tiny fraction which nevertheless left Harry feeling lonely.

Ron had never been terribly good at empathy. He had not understood, three years ago, that Harry would never have entered the Triwizard Tournament without telling him.

Now Harry was in even graver need of understanding, and Ron could not give it.

It didn't help matters that Ron had been devoting so many hours to being Hermione's besotted boyfriend.

If it had been Hermione... She was the smart one, the one among them all who came closest to understanding.

Or if it had been Sirius. Sirius had been away for Harry's fifth and sixth year, but now he was teaching at school, helping with Lupin's workload. Lupin was trying to deal with Herbology and Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Sirius had been welcomed with that half-desperate warmth shown so often these days.

Harry had hoped they would grow closer, though those golden thirteen-year-old dreams of an adopted father had long faded.

Still, if it had been Hermione, or Sirius...

If it had been anyone but Malfoy!

Harry walked quickly across the room and sat on the windowsill, curling his legs under him, pressing his cheek against the cold glass.

He shut his eyes.

So. Malfoy.

A pale sneering face came instantly into focus against his closed lids.

Harry was vaguely startled by how clear and immediate the image was. He supposed he was familiar enough with Malfoy. The prat had been around for years, after all.

But what was familiarity? Familiarity bred contempt. In the case of Harry's familiarity with Malfoy, it bred contempt like rabbits.

What had changed over the past three years?

Very little.

Malfoy was still the same malicious little git, still the one who got so far under Harry's skin it was amazing he didn't hit bone. Harry still absolutely loathed him.

Except now, apparently, according to some damn goblet and his own traitorous subconscious, he didn't.

How had *Malfoy* changed over the past three years?

Very little.

No... perhaps that wasn't fair.

There had been the – Lucius Malfoy thing. Malfoy's father had been killed early into their fifth year. The rumour that had filtered through the wizarding world was he'd tried a double-cross on Voldemort in an attempt to gain more power, and Voldemort had executed him.

Harry didn't know the details. With the war going on, the families disappearing, fear everywhere... nobody cared enough to investigate.

Harry had even felt a grim satisfaction, remembering how Lucius Malfoy had almost killed Ginny, how he had stood in a circle of Death Eaters and watched a boy of his son's age duel hopelessly with the Dark Lord, and laughed...

In retrospect, that satisfaction seemed almost horrible. Harry had never felt the smallest shred of sympathy for Malfoy. All he had thought was – "Well... that will shut him up".

They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back!

Draco Malfoy had been wrong – his father had been one of the first to go.

And Harry had, almost unconsciously, agreed with Ron's blunt verdict of 'It served him right.'

Malfoy had never seemed particularly grief-stricken. He and his usual gang had turned up to Lupin's Young Order of the Phoenix, to the slight surprise of many, and had immediately become its most disruptive element, to the surprise of nobody at all.

Dumbledore had been right, then. *Mr Malfoy is on our side.*

So Draco Malfoy wasn't a Death Eater.

Wait. Do we have a character insight here?

Surely you know him, Dumbledore had said.

Malfoy had always been extremely annoying, but despite his Death Eater father he had never seemed murderous. He hadn't even retaliated to Hermione's slap in third year. He said disgusting things and played dirtier than a professional mud wrestler, but he wasn't a killer.

Fine. Harry was prepared to concede that he was not the heart of blackest evil.

He didn't see how this led to him being what Harry would miss most in the world. After all, Malfoy was the most irritating person he'd ever known.

Harry pressed his face harder against the window.

It *bothered* Harry that he had not felt the slightest sympathy for Malfoy. Harry liked to think he was a – fairly decent person. He had told Blaise Zabini that he was sorry about his mother, and nobody knew whether Mrs Zabini's disappearance had been death, flight or conversion to the Dark Side.

That was the most irritating thing about Malfoy. He was the only one who could bring Harry down to his own level.

Oh, he could disobey the Dark Lord's order for him to beg under the Imperius Curse... and then he went off and behaved like a prat because of Draco Malfoy.

Mustn't let Malfoy see him sooty and with broken spectacles. Mustn't let Malfoy see him led off to the infirmary because of the Dementors. Must beat Malfoy at Quidditch.

Harry suddenly remembered the start of his sixth year.

He was sixteen, and the growth spurt he had been praying for had finally arrived over the summer. Sadly, still lacking manly muscles, but at least he wasn't ridiculously short any more.

He knew who would be. That was why he had been dashing around the train like a maniac, more animated than he had been for a year and more, desperate to find Malfoy and laugh down at him.

Harry recalled with a peculiar intensity the fierce spurt of anger inside him when he had run into a carriage and met a pair of icy grey eyes exactly on a level with his own.

He had been *furious*. It felt as if Malfoy had grown deliberately to annoy Harry.

Which was absurd.

But he had been furious all the same. Malfoy had that effect on him.

Like in the Young Order meetings when Malfoy would make an off-colour remark about Muggles, and Harry would snap out of a dreary reverie into outrage. Or during those monotonous Quidditch matches when Harry would suddenly be galvanised into action by Malfoy's ever-spiteful face in the crowds. The boy would make a show of himself supporting Hufflepuff as long as it got to Harry.

Not to mention the Slytherin/Gryffindor matches. In the last one Malfoy had, according to rumour, kept a Quidditch rulebook with him and ticked off every rule as he broke them. He cheated furiously and shamelessly, but he most definitely played to win.

He and Malfoy had ended up screaming at each other until Madam Hooch forcibly dragged Harry away. Harry had been alive with seething rage.

Harry had felt... alive.

Harry got up from the window ledge, very carefully.

He walked to his bed and lay down on it, watching the well-known slide of faint moonlight and shadows on the wall opposite him. Light writhed palely against plaster, as if pinned there.

He didn't like Malfoy. He had never liked Malfoy.

We've taken what you'll sorely miss.

But Malfoy had somehow become – important to him. He was the challenge that nobody else dared to be. He made Harry want to get up and strangle him, but at least he made Harry want to get up. He was – providing a motivation for Harry's life.

This was messed up.

And this had been going on for years. Not that Malfoy had even done much. He had simply been himself, a needle under Harry's skin, a constant infuriating pain.

Harry had never even realised – and now that he had, he was appalled.

Life had actually come to a stage when he was clinging to anger to help him live it. When only anger could make the blood pound in his veins, crackle along the very ends of his hair, bring the world into sharp focus and make him react to it.

It was as if he was an adrenaline junkie, and Malfoy was his dealer. And this – this had somehow become more important to him than his friends.

What did it say about him, and his life?

This was an insult to those he loved. And if Malfoy was important to him, at all, in however twisted and terrible a way... it was terrible that Harry hadn't been sorry about his father.

Harry sat up and drew the curtains on his bed.

He was horrified to realise that he was sharply focused on the world now. He was not lost in depression, and his very breath was coming out fast and strong.

He twisted on the bed, as if trying to jack-knife through water away from it all.

This couldn't be true. He wasn't certain – it didn't seem entirely true.

It seemed uncomfortably close to the truth, though.

He had to find out everything about this. If Malfoy was important to him, he could not stay this hostile rival. There had to be a reason why he could affect Harry.

Harry had to find that out too.

He'd gone as far as he could alone. And Dumbledore couldn't help him.

There was no use thinking any longer. But he did think, he kept thinking. He thought as he tossed restlessly on the bed, forgetting to take off his clothes or slide under the covers.

Tomorrow...

Tomorrow he would have to confront Malfoy.

*

“Harry, you seem a bit jumpy.”

Harry jumped.

“I – uh, no. I’m fine,” he said uneasily.

Hermione was looking at him in concern, her piece of toast poised in the air. Harry tried desperately to look as if he hadn’t been up half the night, wasn’t wearing the same clothes as yesterday and really, really wasn’t watching the doors to see when Malfoy would arrive.

Hermione looked at him for another long moment, and then returned to her toast.

I’m just looking at the door, Harry tried to project to the world. The door. Fascinating door. Haven’t appreciated it properly over the past six and a half years, must appreciate it now.

Breakfast wore on, and Malfoy did not arrive.

Oh come on! This was disgraceful. Breakfast was the most important meal of the day. People shouldn’t go around recklessly skipping it.

Even Crabbe and Goyle were there, and Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini, all of his usual crowd. Otherwise known as ‘Malfoy’s court.’

Harry stared across at them until they noticed and gave him nasty looks. He looked away in a hurry.

It’s not my fault. I just want to talk to him. People should eat breakfast.

“Harry, you’re not eating any breakfast,” Hermione said.

Harry, extremely distracted, took some toast and spread it, and took a large bite.

Then he realised that he had just bitten into toast and porridge.

This was ridiculous.

This continued all day.

Seven years, thought Harry. Almost seven years of wishing he would fall into some black hole and the day I’m trying to talk to him he disappears off the face of the earth.

Oh, no. He couldn’t be one of the disappearances, could he? Not now.

Harry was shocked to feel something like fear.

This disturbing emotion was thankfully wiped away when he spied the palest hair in school among a group of Slytherins going to Potions class.

Right!

“Come on,” he said to Ron and Hermione. “Quickly now, to Potions. No lollygagging.”

Lollygagging? He was going mad.

No time to think about that. He would go to Potions, and then Malfoy would push disdainfully past his desk as usual, tossing him a rude comment, and instead of gritting his teeth and resisting the urge to start throwing punches he would...

Um. Well. He hadn't quite worked out that part yet. But say something, definitely.

Words. That was the plan.

The plan was entirely useless.

Malfoy didn't go near Harry's desk. Every other Slytherin went by, though, muttering even more virulent things than usual. They seemed to think the entire affair was a plot to humiliate their chief.

Harry had no idea what Malfoy thought. He sat at the back of the classroom as usual, and was very quiet.

It would have been lovely if Snape had been quiet as well.

“Well, well, well, Mr Potter,” he said, his face looking more disgruntled than ever. “It seems your plan is not only to glorify yourself but to make the Slytherins look bad. Congratulations on a very childish display.”

“But Professor,” Ron said in outrage, “Harry couldn't possibly-”

“It was a mistake,” Hermione chimed in. “Harry didn't-”

Harry turned around in his chair to see if Malfoy agreed with Snape.

Malfoy was staring straight ahead, his face perfectly blank. It was a narrow, ascetic face not made for expression, and Harry had no idea of the thoughts going on behind it.

“Mr Potter,” Snape called out. “Eyes to the front of the classroom, please. Where the lesson is going on? Thank you.”

Harry could feel himself blush. This was all terribly embarrassing.

So he'd talk to Malfoy after the lesson.

He didn't. Malfoy was encircled in a crowd of Slytherins as he walked out. The same went for lunch, and Care of Magical Creatures, and the hallways, and dinner.

They clustered around him like bees around a flower, and Harry found it extraordinarily frustrating.

Why do you all like him so much? He's an annoying git!

Years and years of Malfoy showing up all over the place to laugh at Harry, and now people decided to build a human fortress around him.

And then he was back at the Gryffindor common room after a very, very tiring day in which absolutely nothing had been accomplished. He felt dispirited and frustrated and...

He'd had enough. Harry was tired of hanging around Malfoy waiting for the boy to grant him an audience.

If he wanted to go talk to Malfoy, he was going to go talk to Malfoy.

"I'm off for a walk," he announced to the common room at large, and sprinted away before anyone could offer to accompany him.

*

Halfway to the Slytherin dungeons, Harry changed his mind.

This was ludicrous. He didn't want to talk to Malfoy. He hated the prat. He certainly didn't want to go wandering into the midst of the Slytherins and making a fool of himself in front of Malfoy.

Oh, God. That senseless pang of anxiety again.

Harry remembered hearing Ginny's Valentine in second year, and the clutch of desperation in his chest when he realised Malfoy was going to hear it too. The stupid idiot's opinion mattered to him, for some reason.

He had to find out why.

Harry took a deep breath and hastened through the corridors, concentrating on getting to the Slytherin common room before he could lose his nerve.

Once he had reached it, he hammered on the stretch of bare stone that Harry remembered was the Slytherin entrance. Just like the Slytherins, he reflected, to have an entrance hidden from the other houses. Slytherins were always doing things like that, and appearing in the bottom of lakes where nobody wanted to see them, and then refusing to talk to people all day.

He hit the wall more vehemently.

The wall behind him slid open, and he whirled around and tried to look as if he had been facing that way all along.

"Honestly, Pritchard, have you forgotten the Slytherin password *again*?" said Malcolm Baddock, a small and rather shifty-looking fourth year.

He stopped and stared when he saw Harry Potter, champion of all things Gryffindor, looking rumpled, decidedly nervous and standing on the Slytherin threshold.

“Er,” said Harry, losing control of his tongue at the crucial moment.

Baddock blinked, and looked stunned when Harry was still there.

Harry wished desperately for self-possession. “Er,” he said again, cursing himself. “Er. Um. Could I see Malfoy, please?”

There. Not exactly eloquent, but it certainly got his message across.

Malcolm Baddock stared for just one more moment, and then turned and pelted away with a yell of, “Everybody! Come *quick!*”

In a couple of seconds, Harry found himself faced with a huge crowd of Slytherins, jostling and peering to get a look at this unbelievable sight.

To the fore were Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, wearing identical scowls.

This had been a bad idea.

“What do you want, Potter?” inquired Blaise, his dark face suspicious and distinctly unwelcoming.

Pansy crossed her arms, as if Harry was going to attempt storming the common room.

Harry swallowed. “Could I see Malfoy, please?”

Oh, good. Now he had turned into a parrot, hysterically repeating the same phrase over and over.

“Why?” Pansy demanded stonily. “What else do you plan to do?”

“Nothing! I didn’t do anything!” Harry protested. “I just need to talk to him!”

Blaise and Pansy exchanged hard glances, and seemed to come to a decision.

“Well you can’t,” Pansy informed him curtly, making to close the entrance.

“What the hell is going on here?” demanded an imperious and bad-tempered voice. “Some of us are trying to get some *work* done, you know...”

There was no mistaking that aristocratic tone, nor indeed that white-blond head as Malfoy made his way to the front of the crowd.

Harry simultaneously felt relief, and a flash of the fear he had felt when he thought Malfoy had disappeared.

He realised that he was not only afraid of what might happen to Malfoy, but of what Malfoy might do. If Malfoy was important to him – Malfoy could hurt him. And Malfoy liked to hurt people.

When Malfoy reached the front of the crowd, he stood staring for a moment, grey eyes wide. He seemed as thunderstruck as Malcolm Baddock had been.

“You!” he exclaimed blankly. Then, collecting himself in an instant and rather to Harry’s envy, he asked coldly, “What do *you* want?”

I will remain calm.

“I want to talk to you,” said Harry, and reddened uncontrollably.

Malfoy leaned against the doorframe with careless ease, his arms folded. He watched him with those opaque eyes, reflective, silvery and giving away nothing.

Harry noticed he was wearing a white jumper and jeans. He was one of the very few Slytherins in Muggle clothes.

“Well, here I am,” Malfoy replied. “Talk.”

Harry looked around at the ranks of dangerous-looking Slytherins, arrayed in the mouth of the door like teeth in a shark’s mouth.

“Couldn’t we talk alone?” he asked desperately.

Malfoy looked vaguely startled, but then waved down the outraged buzz behind him.

“I suppose,” he said slowly. He stepped out from the threshold, Harry backing up a few paces as he did so.

The stone wall slid closed, replacing the stunned faces of the Slytherins. Harry was pleased by this improvement.

Then he looked back at Malfoy, who was now leaning casually against the wall, and got back to the business of being nervous.

He was beginning to understand why making a fool of himself in front of Malfoy was so terrible. Malfoy had far too much self-possession for a boy his age, and it seemed to put you at an automatic disadvantage.

“So – er,” said Harry. “Shall we, er, find an empty classroom to talk in, or something?”

He certainly didn’t want to hang around in the corridors where anyone could spot them and spread God-knew-what rumours all over the school.

Malfoy raised a pale eyebrow.

“I spend too much time in classrooms already, thanks. We can go for a walk around the lake.”

“Malfoy, it’s icy out there and neither of us have cloaks!”

“So?” Malfoy inquired. “You said you wanted to talk. I want to walk around the lake. That’s where we can talk – unless, of course, you’ve changed your mind.”

Harry was reminded, at this point, that he still hated Malfoy.

“Fine,” he said, through gritted teeth.

Malfoy smiled one of his faint triumphant smirks. Harry felt his blood come to a simmering boil.

“Splendid,” said Malfoy. “Let’s go.”

*

The wind swept in a ravaging sheet across the grey land and water alike. Everything seemed subdued and flattened by it, until you noticed the tiny rebellious ripples on the lake’s surface. The wind came sharp as a sword from the sky, which was so covered in clouds that only an occasional tinge of steel-grey relieved the vast whiteness.

Harry was freezing, and the wind seemed to have adopted his hair and robes as playthings to buffet around.

Malfoy strolled slightly ahead of him, hands in his pockets, as if out walking on a mild summer’s day. His fair hair was only a little stirred by the wind, lifted and rearranged by invisible fingers, blown back a shade from his brow.

Harry wondered what on earth he was going to say.

This was pretty much as far as his plan had gone, and now he had a supercilious Slytherin on his hands waiting for words he hadn’t actually worked out.

They walked in silence for a while, Malfoy seeming quite comfortable with both the silence and the weather. He had lost all traces of uncertainty he might have shown earlier.

Eventually he turned around. His eyes seemed darker out here, matching the shadowed uneven grey of the lake beyond.

His unhurried drawl was the same as ever.

“Did you simply want to indulge in a bit of taciturn bonding, Potter? Because I have a date with some hot cocoa and a textbook, and frankly this is getting dull.”

“A – a textbook?” Harry stammered. It seemed bizarre that Malfoy might do something as commonplace as study.

“Why, yes, Potter. This is a school, you know. I would have thought even you might have that worked out after all these years. Classes do tend to be involved.”

“Malfoy, shut up,” Harry snapped. “I’m trying to say something here.”

“Say it, then.”

Malfoy stopped and looked at Harry, his air almost amused but his glance a direct challenge.

“Er,” said Harry. “Ah. Um. That is-”

“I take it this isn’t one of your lucid days?”

“Malfoy!” Harry exploded. “Could you just be quiet, and pretend for a second that you’re a halfway decent person? I really do have something to say, and I can’t say anything if you keep interrupting with your nasty comments.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Sure.”

“You’ll be quiet?” said Harry, suspiciously.

“I don’t have all day to listen to your pathetic bleating. I’ll be good,” Malfoy promised. “On my honour as a Slytherin.”

Harry was extremely dubious about the validity of this pledge, but...

“OK then. I, uh, you know yesterday and the lake, um, thing?”

He paused and waited for a response. Malfoy observed him in silence, and it wasn’t until Harry noticed the smirk still playing about his lips that he realised.

“You can speak when I’m asking you a question, for God’s sake!”

“Oh, can I?” Malfoy asked innocently. “So sorry. I didn’t want to interrupt the narrative flow. Of course I remember, you pillock.”

“Er. Didn’t you, kind of, wonder what it was all about?”

“Not really. I put it down to my irresistible sexual appeal and moved on. Life’s too short.”

Harry had conceived of a new plan. Kill Malfoy, hide the body in the lake, and then see if he really missed him all that much.

“Malfoy, stop being stupid,” he exclaimed. “I have been thinking about it.”

“What conclusion have you come to, Wonder Boy? I have no doubt it’s brilliant.”

Malfoy’s eyes said: *Imbecile*.

Harry screwed his eyes up, and stared at the lake. His train of thought was liable to be derailed by impulses to beat Malfoy senseless if he kept looking at him.

“Oh, spit it out, Potter.”

Harry took a deep breath and plunged into an explanation.

“Well... Dumbledore said it wasn't an accident so I had no idea what to think, but I knew I had to figure out by myself so I stayed up all night thinking and I could only come up with one possible reason and this is it. You know how we're sort of rivals?”

“No,” Malfoy responded. Harry turned and squinted at him in disbelief. “We're *enemies*, Potter,” he elaborated condescendingly. “You hate me and I hate you. We'd like to see each other fry. It's not a jolly little competition over Quidditch. This is a virulent loathing we have going on here.”

Oh... Well, this was promising.

Harry was still scrutinising Malfoy. Malfoy had lifted a hand to his hair and caught one flyaway lock absently between his fingers, twisting the fine strand as he waited for Harry to continue. He looked rather thoughtful.

“Whatever,” Harry said hurriedly, rushing on. “It was just – I was thinking about that, and it was the only reason there was. And now I have no idea how to put this, but er, so, I came to the conclusion that your opinion might matter to me somewhat, which obviously was a thick conclusion, but I still can't think of anything else, and so I wanted to see if that was true. And I can't imagine why it should, since basically you seem to be, no offence meant, one of the most horrible people in the world, but if you're not that might explain somewhat and I just wanted to see and to figure out why so um... Er.”

Harry was deeply thankful that he had to stop his gabbling because he was short on breath.

Malfoy tilted his head to one side, seeming caught between diversion and bemusement.

“Potter, you completely incoherent sod, are you trying to be my friend?”

Harry exhaled sharply. “Yes.”

“Oh. Hmm.”

Malfoy was looking meditative again. Harry was unfamiliar with this expression of Malfoy's. It replaced his habitual sneer with an abstracted gaze, and was almost pleasant.

He watched it for a while.

Eventually, Malfoy said: “What's in it for me?”

This blunt and extremely Slytherin question threw Harry.

“Wh – what?”

“Well, if I'm your friend can I have the Gryffindor password so I can sneak up and leave dead animals in Weasley's bed?”

“No!”

“OK, will you tell me all of Weasley and Granger’s dirty little secrets so I can embellish them and then spread them around the school?”

Harry was torn between startled laughter and horror. “No!”

“Can I trick you and turn you over to the Dark Side?”

“N-” Harry stopped, and looked at him in some concern. It was, after all, a fairly serious question. “Would you want to?”

Malfoy pursed his lips, which made his cheekbones appear knife sharp.

“Not particularly. Be quite funny, though.”

Harry shook his head in disbelief.

And yes, fine, in mild entertainment. Nobody could be quite so blatantly nasty as Malfoy, and somehow he was so shameless about it that it almost made you forgive him.

“All right,” Malfoy said at last.

Harry blinked. “You – you’re agreeing?”

“That would be the general meaning of the phrase, yes.”

Harry couldn’t restrain his bewilderment. “Why?”

“Ahhh...” Malfoy tilted his head back, looking at the sky. The line of his throat seemed vulnerable, suddenly. “I’m not sure. Call it morbid curiosity.”

Harry found himself oddly at a loss. He had achieved what he had set his mind on, and now... Exactly what was he supposed to say to Malfoy? Talk to him about how rotten Snape was? Call him Draco? The idea seemed preposterous.

They walked on for a minute, and Harry risked another glance at Malfoy.

He was looking at Harry, and by now he was quite windblown himself. He looked rather lost, staring at him under that silvery fringe.

“What do you do with your friends?” Harry asked him helplessly.

“I tell them what to do, then they go off and leave me in peace.”

“Oh.” The idea didn’t seem that attractive to Harry.

“Will you do what I tell you?” Malfoy asked brightly.

“No!”

“Oh,” said Malfoy, in morose tones. “Well... what do you do with your friends?”

“Er, we talk a lot about how awful you are.”

“You could do that. I’d take it as a compliment.”

Harry was silent. Some part of him was clamouring for him to tell Malfoy it had all been a bad idea, and run off.

The rest of him just didn’t... exactly want to.

Malfoy’s face was slightly screwed up against the wind.

“While we’re having this awkward silence...” he remarked in an unusually small voice, “could we get inside? I’m shockingly cold.”

Harry couldn’t stop himself from laughing again.

“Shut up, Potter.”

“I told you so, Malfoy.”

“And I told you to shut up!”

Malfoy turned and began to walk briskly back, giving up the pretence of a graceful saunter.

“I only wanted to get a look at the bleak landscape for Creative Magic,” he grouched.

“For...?” Harry had a dim memory of a list, and talk of homework in the common rooms. “Oh, the subject. Is it any good?”

Malfoy stopped dead. “Are you joking? It’s the best subject in the world.”

“Oh. I just picked the ones Ron chose,” Harry admitted. “I didn’t really know what they were about.”

“For crying out loud... That’s what they get, throwing people of Muggle birth into magical schools.” Harry was about to make a decided objection to this racist comment, but Malfoy was continuing oblivious, striding into the wind and speaking loudly over his shoulder.

“Creative Magic is like... Well. It’s a transcendence of talent.”

Harry looked blank.

Malfoy sighed impatiently.

“It’s like – there are wizards and witches who can make utterly fantastic books, or plays, or paintings, by being able to transform magic and talent into a single thing so even Muggles are spellbound... So even Muggles say that it’s just like magic.”

Harry had never seen Malfoy get enthusiastic before. He noticed, however, that the extravagant gesturing which Malfoy commonly used in his cruel impressions was oddly

suited to this exuberant description. Malfoy's eyes were shining, and he looked more open than Harry ever remembered seeing him.

Harry bet that the entire Slytherin common room was sick of hearing Malfoy talk about this subject – clearly a favourite.

Still, he had to admit, he was almost charmed. Malfoy was acting like a kid.

Even when they had been younger, Malfoy hadn't acted like a kid.

Unless you counted his all-too-frequent snotty brat moments.

"Muggles wonder where the time has gone after listening to a Magically Created concert or seeing a Magically Created painting. Because the magic does soak up time, it takes them briefly to another dimension, and then they return to their own dimension never knowing what happened but knowing they experienced... something," Malfoy continued eagerly, "and... can we hurry up, Potter? It's getting dark, and I am freezing out here."

"You Slytherins are so fragile," Harry said.

"Oh, shut up. And walk faster. I'm going to die of pneumonia. Can't you walk faster than that? I'm cold, I'm cold, I'm cold!"

Ah. Another snotty brat moment.

Harry sped up. Obviously, Malfoy could not be allowed to act in this dictatorial manner, but... somehow it seemed natural, coming from him.

It was certainly a change from the Gryffindor policy of 'don't breathe too hard on Harry or he'll break'.

Malfoy kept complaining until they were safely inside.

"We're in the warm now," Harry said, laughing. "Quit your whining."

"I wasn't whining, I was about to die of hypothermia," Malfoy grumbled. "I... Hmmm."

Malfoy looked up, and Harry followed his gaze.

Ron and Hermione were coming towards them.

"Harry, we've been looking for you ev-" began Ron, and stopped abruptly.

Malfoy's eyes were luminescent and contemplative in the shadows that hid his face.

"See you tomorrow, then," he murmured. "Same time, same place."

He sloped off, his pale head in the middle distance before Harry had a chance to agree. Harry realised that it had not been a request but a command.

The boy was insufferable. But Harry's traitorous subconscious might have had something there.

Shaking his head, Harry laughed a little ruefully, and stepped forward to meet Ron and Hermione.

"Harry – was that *Malfoy*?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Er," said Harry.

Chapter Three: Down the Pub

So walk with me, talk with me,

Tell me your stories

I'll do my very best to understand you

You're flesh and blood...

Harry told Ron and Hermione that yes, it was Malfoy. He had wanted to talk to him about the lake incident.

He told them nothing else.

He didn't want to lie to them, he wasn't ashamed, but he did feel - as if the whole matter was fragile. It had gone surprisingly well so far, but add Ron, the Reason Redheads Got Their Bad Name, to the mix and Draco Malfoy would be a dot on the horizon. A dot pointing Harry and Ron out and saying, 'They tried to kill me, Professor Snape!'

Harry didn't want that to happen. Harry was surprised at how much he didn't want that to happen.

It wasn't that Malfoy had been pleasant. Of course, a sweet, kind Draco Malfoy might have sent Harry running to Dumbledore gibbering about Polyjuice Potion. Malfoy had been his usual nasty, spoiled brat self, just short of hostile and well into insulting.

All the same... It had gone well.

For some reason, Harry was happy about it.

Harry didn't tell Ron and Hermione about the situation because of one more thing. For the same unintelligible reason, he felt a bit... possessive about the entire business.

It had been a long time since he'd had anything at all private, which the media didn't seize on, which Ron and Hermione didn't know everything about while keeping their own special 'couple' secrets.

He had a feeling they would be distinctly aggrieved when they found out.

He didn't tell them, just the same.

And at breakfast the next day, seeing Malfoy come in and Blaise Zabini put a hand under his elbow, encouraging him into the seat beside him, Harry felt a twinge of that same possessive feeling.

What do you think you're doing, Zabini? There's no need to be grabby.

Harry Potter, the boy who went cuckoo.

"I'm so glad you don't seem depressed lately, Harry," said Hermione.

"Depressed?" Harry replied absently, as Malfoy took the seat by Zabini. "Why would I be depressed?"

Voldemort. The war. Cedric. The shriveling pity surrounding him. The numbing guilt.

Oh... That.

I forgot, Harry thought wonderingly. *I forgot.*

Hermione beamed approbation. "No reason at all. You're quite right, Harry."

I should never forget, Harry thought. But I did... and it felt good.

"C'mon, Defence Against the Dark Arts is first class," Ron said. "I wonder whether Lupin or Sirius will be taking it."

Harry got up, helping Hermione with her stuffed book bag.

Leaving the Hall, he saw Malfoy and Blaise Zabini having an animated discussion. He saw Malfoy's mouth shaping the words 'Creative Magic' and almost smiled, seeing Zabini's well-feigned interest.

Some impulse made him pause for a moment going past the Slytherin table and say:

"Hi, Malfoy."

Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini all shot him *Die Potter Die!* looks.

Malfoy, as placid as if he didn't have bloodthirsty wolves in human form all around him, reached out for a piece of toast and answered, "Good morning, Potter."

Harry felt an obscure sort of triumph about these three words, which reduced the Slytherins and Ron to helpless, choking incredulity.

Of course, after *that* he had to explain more fully, since Ron was on the point of announcing that Voldemort had Polyjuiced himself into Harry and had to be immediately exterminated.

"I just decided to be more friendly," he said as they went to Defence Against the Dark Arts class. "I want to know what was going on about the lake."

"Well, yes, I can understand that," agreed Hermione, compulsive seeker after knowledge. "But really, Harry, Malfoy..."

Ron was almost spitting.

"I can't understand that! It was *clearly* an evil Slytherin plot! You're too trusting, Harry. Those Slytherins aren't like us. They're monsters I tell you, crazed, vicious..."

He paused in his tirade to acknowledge Professor Lupin.

"Hello, Professor. I was wondering whether it would be you or Sirius. Isn't it getting a bit close to..." He mimicked howling at the moon.

"Please take your seats," said Lupin with an indulgent smile.

"Right," Ron resumed. "Where was I?"

"Telling me how Slytherins were crazed, vicious monsters," replied Harry. "But then you got sidetracked by the werewolf."

*

Harry couldn't believe it when he found himself checking his watch.

The minutes were crawling by. And Malfoy didn't appear at lunch.

Skipping meals all the time, Harry thought. *That's how you make yourself sick.*

"What are you fretting about, Harry?"

"I'm not fretting!" Harry exclaimed indignantly. Hermione shrugged and took a bite of her apple.

Maybe Malfoy was sick. He certainly looked pale enough.

Madam Pomfrey should be paying more attention to this. Vitamins should be provided. Those dungeons were probably unhealthy for delicate people.

Harry brooded about this for hours until it came as rather a shock when Malfoy met him at the lake, striding over a hillock about twenty minutes late and looking the picture of health.

"Come on, Potter," he said briefly, turning away and walking back.

Harry ran to catch up, much to his own disgust.

"Hey, Malfoy. You're late. What do you think manners are for?"

Malfoy looked bored. "I think they're for other people. Come *on*."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I'm not catching my death by that lake," Malfoy informed him. "Anyway, I noticed yesterday that you were having problems being coherent. So we're going down to the pub."

"The pub? That's supposed to make me *more* coherent?"

"Oh yes. Alcohol gives you this wonderful sense of false comfort," Malfoy assured him.

"Even though I need some comfort, being around you... Where are you going?"

"Into the school," Malfoy said promptly. "There's a secret passage that leads to Hogsmeade behind the statue..."

"Of the one-eyed witch," Harry finished slowly. "How did you know?"

Malfoy looked smug.

"I worked it out four years ago," he answered. "Weasley wasn't talking to himself on the way into Hogsmeade. He's not subtle, that boy of yours. So you must have taken a short cut through the school in your little Invisibility Cloak - and I found it."

So he does it too, Harry thought. He works to show me up. It matters to him too.

What he said was, "You know about my Cloak?"

Malfoy sneered. "No, Potter. I really thought I was hallucinating. Of course I know, and next time we go to the pub you can take it."

"Next time...? I haven't agreed to go *this* time!"

Harry stormed along in Malfoy's wake, feeling more and more like a dog being taken for a walk. Malfoy didn't reply until they were in the corridor leading to the statue.

Then he glanced over his shoulder, and spoke casually.

"I don't think you've fully absorbed this situation, Potter."

Harry felt a quick thump inside his ribs, as if someone had tapped sharply on his chest.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I haven't taken you on as a lifelong comrade, you know." Malfoy's smile was cold as unexpected snow. "I'm perfectly capable of taking you back to the shop if you don't suit."

Harry felt the beginnings of indignation.

"Do you mean that if I don't go drinking with you-"

Teeth gleamed. "Exactly."

Harry was about to tell Malfoy exactly where he could stuff this so-called friendship, and add a suggestion about following it with his wand and broomstick, when something quite unexpected happened.

Malfoy noticed he was angry, and smiled.

Charm was not something Harry had ever associated with Draco Malfoy. Nevertheless...

Harry felt the urge to blink.

For Malfoy, most acts were calculated. Smiling seemed to be an art.

It was a terribly subtle art. Light crept gradually across that pale and rather cold face, so his eyes glittered like the sun on frost.

He stood there in the empty corridor and he smiled that rich artful smile, until Harry was eventually forced to blink.

Once he opened his eyes, the smile had faded. He felt an obscure pang of disappointment.

"Come on, Potter," Malfoy coaxed. "I postponed Creative Magic homework to have a drink with you."

"Oh, I'm so honoured," Harry said, with a great deal more weakness than sarcasm.

"So you should be."

Malfoy turned and walked on, in the complete - and not ill-founded - conviction that Harry would follow.

"And then you can tell me all of your shocking secrets," he added with satisfaction. He seemed injured by Harry's sceptical look. "What? I'll tell you mine!"

"Yes," Harry said drily, "but Slytherins love to boast about their evil deeds. I'm not sure it's a fair trade."

Malfoy gave him a quick, rather surprised glance, then laughed and shrugged.

The laugh echoed behind them as they slipped in behind the statue.

*

"Malfoy! That's a personal question!"

"That's a 'none,' then, is it?"

"Malfoy, you can be such a bastard."

Harry squinted at the lights in the Three Broomsticks, which were somehow much brighter than they had been when he'd come in.

Hang on, that last word hadn't sounded right...

"You're plastered, Potter." Malfoy sounded amused.

Harry concentrated on Malfoy's face. At first it was merely a golden blur, mixing with the lamp that sparked silver in his hair and eyes, but after a few minutes it resolved into a grin.

"I am not," Harry replied in a dignified manner. He found forming the words a little difficult.

"After three meads, Potter. You lightweight."

Malfoy had had at least five, and he merely seemed more relaxed. These Slytherins needed watching.

"Answer the question, Potter," demanded the imperious brat. "This delay is unmanly."

"Oh - all right... Two."

Malfoy choked on his mead. "Oh, Potter, you Gilderoy Lockhart, you."

"Shut up, Malfoy!"

"Wait, wait. Were these maiden-aunt pecks on the cheek? Was there tongue?"

"Malfoy, you *cannot* ask questions like that... Not with the first one."

Malfoy seemed weak with suppressed laughter. "Who was this poor unfortunate, then?"

"Cho Chang," Harry answered reluctantly. "In fifth year."

He recalled that moment very clearly. Cho Chang had taken him aside, and told him that she couldn't stand the memories - that she was transferring to Beauxbatons for her seventh year. She had added that she did not blame Harry, and as he looked bleakly into her pretty face, she had leaned in and given him a soft kiss on the mouth.

How he had wished for that moment, and then, when it happened...

He had tasted pity on her lips, charity being pressed onto his mouth. Cho Chang's kiss had expressed the same feeling as every touch and word offered to him that year.

She had stepped back, and he had looked into the face he had dreamed of once more, and wished with simple desolation never to see her again.

Draco Malfoy whistled. "Chang? Not bad, Potter... and let me see, the second. Was that rumour about Ginny Weasley true?"

"Yes," Harry answered reluctantly.

Those few awkward kisses with Ginny. He still felt guilty about that, about *using* Ron's little sister as something to stave off the loneliness. He had tried so hard to want her, to want something, back in sixth year...

It hadn't worked. He felt about Ginny almost as if she were his own little sister...

Reminded of the Weasleys and Malfoy's general attitude to them, Harry looked up sharply.

"Are you going to say something about the Weasleys?" he demanded.

Malfoy looked vaguely surprised. "No. I've always had a bit of a weakness for redheads. Your Weasley, of course, being a notable exception."

"Oh?" Harry was intrigued. "So now it's your turn, Malfoy. How many?"

"Er..." Malfoy blinked. "Hang on a minute."

He began to make furious calculations on his napkin.

Well, really. Snape should pay more attention to his students' morals.

"Who was your first, then?"

"Ah." Malfoy signalled for another mead. "Pansy Parkinson, third year. Remember when my young life was almost cut off by that Hippogriff? She came rushing into the infirmary and flung herself on me. I practically went into shock."

"You weren't that shocked," Harry commented, smiling. "You did go with her to the Yule Ball in fourth year."

"Well." Malfoy shrugged. "She asked me."

You couldn't help almost admiring his barefaced cheek.

"What?" Malfoy said, seeing Harry's raised eyebrow. "Malfoys always wait to be asked. Oh, and here's the number."

He handed Harry the napkin.

Good Lord.

"Are there even that many people in the school?"

Malfoy smiled wickedly. "If you count the staff."

"Ew!"

Malfoy burst out laughing at the look on Harry's face. Malfoy seemed to be laughing quite a bit tonight.

Of course, he must be a trifle drunk.

"There is life outside school, Potter," he added once he had calmed down

Madam Rosmerta came up to Malfoy and handed them their drinks with a twinkle in her eye.

"Are you sure you haven't had enough?"

"Rosmerta!" Malfoy looked horrified. "You know me better than that. The night is young and so am I. We're going to get a whole lot drunker before we go home."

Harry was concerned that if he got a whole lot drunker walking might be beyond him.

"You're terrible, Draco Malfoy," she sighed, placing two more glasses on the table. "And you're trying to corrupt poor innocent Harry Potter. You horrify me."

"You love it!" Malfoy called after her. He turned back to Harry and gave him a rather impish grin. "Nice woman. She refused to serve me back in third year and I tried to flirt with her. She says I was the youngest who ever tried that."

"Malfoy, are you sure you're not an alcoholic?"

"I," Malfoy informed him in lofty tones, "am not the underage drinker here. I was eighteen in January."

"You weren't eighteen at the Yule Ball," Harry muttered.

"Nor were you. Anyway, stop talking back to your elders. Hmm - well, I did have another question, but since you've only kissed two people I guess that one is answered as well."

"What...? Oh." To his horror, Harry felt himself blush furiously. "Malfoy!"

Malfoy laughed and leaned back against the wall. "Poor pure little Potter..."

"Shut up! How many countless thousands have you collected, then?"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth lifted. "Countless thousands? Disabuse yourself of the idea that all Slytherins are depraved sinners. It's only... hmm... eighty-nine per cent true."

"How many, Malfoy?" To his surprise, Harry found he was actually curious.

Malfoy mused. "Hand me back that napkin."

Harry laughed, shook his head and had another drink.

Malfoy nodded approvingly.

"I knew you weren't as prudish as all that," he commented. "Honestly, you take the school rules and hit them with a big hammer and everyone acts as if you're an angel."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "And what do you think?"

"I think angels don't get pissed at Yule Balls, that's what I think. I've also seen you having completely unholy thoughts about punching my face in. No - you've got a bit of a nasty bastard streak in you." The calmly analytical expression on Malfoy's face transformed into a smirk. "That's why I decided to give you a chance."

"I'm overwhelmed," Harry said drily.

It was a certainly novel. Nobody had ever expected Harry to behave badly before.

"I'll try to come up with some suitably evil deed."

Malfoy waved this idea away. "Don't be absurd, you're a novice. Be reasonable. Do it my way."

Harry was becoming convinced that Malfoy was, indeed, rather drunk. His eyes were wild and bright, and the pale fringe of his hair was slightly disarrayed.

Harry had only limited control over his motor functions, and was out drinking with a Malfoy whose judgment was impaired.

This was quite interesting.

"I know!" Malfoy announced. "We should sing karaoke."

Harry stared at the delighted face before him.

"You're insane..."

"And it's much more fun," Malfoy assured him. He jumped to his feet with an agile grace that Harry couldn't have copied while sober, and made to drag Harry off his stool.

Which was when Hagrid appeared in the pub, and Malfoy vanished under the table.

Hagrid noticed Harry, staring in a rather bewildered fashion at his own knees, and ambled over.

"Oh no..." said Malfoy, in a tiny voice.

Harry desperately suppressed a laugh.

"Hello there Harry!" Hagrid greeted him with the same uncomfortable heartiness that all the Gryffindors did.

Just now his black eyes were surveying the slightly unsteady Harry and the table with two glasses on it.

"I was just poppin' down fer a drink," he continued. "Olympe doesn' like it much, so I was goin' ter be quick abou' it... Er, Harry..." he lowered his voice in a conspiratorial boom. "Am I interruptin' somethin'?"

Harry stared blankly for a few minutes, until light dawned on him.

A very, very soft obscenity sounded from under the table.

Harry coughed hurriedly.

Unfortunately, Hagrid took this as a sign of embarrassed assent.

"Ah... sorry, Harry... She'll be in the toilet, yeh?"

"Um," said Harry.

Hagrid elbowed him in a friendly teasing manner, which almost caused him to fall over.

"I'm glad ter hear it, Harry. It's abou' time yeh started enjoyin' yerself a bit more."

"Seeing as you have no life," said a quiet voice from the region of Harry's knees.

Harry resisted the urge to either laugh hysterically or kick Malfoy.

"I'll be off, then," Hagrid boomed. "Don' wan' ter embarrass you. I'll jus' have one drink. Jus' tell me one thing, Harry..." he gave him another massive nudge. "Is she pretty?"

"Er," Harry replied.

"*Extremely* pretty," said that bloody voice from under the table.

Hagrid meandered amiably off. As soon as he had his back to them, Malfoy emerged looking dishevelled. He seized Harry and dragged him out of the pub.

The night air came as rather a shocker for Harry, who concentrated on remaining upright.

Malfoy's eyes were still fever bright, but otherwise he looked pale and relieved.

"Escape!"

Harry blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm terrified of him," Malfoy said candidly. "Have been forever. Hurling vicious animals at us and giving us bloodthirsty books. Not to mention the fact that he's appallingly huge."

Harry was stunned. Malfoy, who had always been so icily autocratic around Hagrid, who Harry knew Hagrid was secretly intimidated by.

It left him intrigued. What kind of person reacted to fear like this?

Malfoy blinked, looking thoughtful.

"Oh, dear. I don't think I would ever have admitted something like that sober." He shrugged, a gesture that looked bizarrely fluid to Harry's dim eyesight. "Oh well. I suppose there's always the risk of letting something incriminating slip."

Harry was a bit affronted. "I'm not looking for weak points to attack, Malfoy."

Malfoy tilted his head to one side, a street light making his hair a rival to the half moon. "You do in Quidditch," he observed. "Sign of a good player."

"That's different. Life's not a game."

Malfoy smiled that annoying smile again. "Isn't it?"

At this point, Harry was too busy with the important business of not falling down to answer.

"Careful, Potter. Lying in the gutter should be reserved for real alcoholics. The ones who've earned it."

"Would you help me out if I fell in the gutter?" inquired Harry, who was having distressing doubts about whether he could remain upright.

"What do you take me for! I'd laugh you to scorn."

Oh, excellent.

Faced with this alternative, Harry staggered gamely onwards. He was surprised by the advent of a perfectly companionable silence.

Malfoy, damn him, had been right about the alcohol. Bloody debauched Slytherin.

"So you've taken me drinking," Harry found himself commenting. "What's on the menu tomorrow, a brothel?"

Anyone else would have been horrified by Harry suggesting such a thing.

Malfoy laughed.

"Honestly," he reprimanded Harry. "We have to save something for Thursday."

They made their unsteady way back to school. Harry tried very hard to walk straight. Malfoy swung around several lamp posts.

They parted in the corridor. Harry hesitated, searching for something appropriate to say.

Finally, he settled for: "Same time tomorrow?"

*

The next day Harry woke up with the distinct impression that it had all been a dream.

Out getting smashed with Malfoy? It was too bizarre.

Then he tried to sit up, and a hangover hit him like a Bludger.

Oh. So it was true, then.

Very, very carefully, Harry got up. Then Ron's voice sounded in his ear.

"Harry! Where were you? We were frantic!"

Harry winced. "Could you... possibly not speak so loud?"

"You look like crap," Ron observed with the refreshing honesty that made him known and loved throughout the circles of hell.

"Well, I feel like crap. I'm co-ordinated."

Harry's sarcasm was inspired by bitterness. The buttons of his pyjamas seemed to be glued in the holes.

"Harry, you look like... you look like you were up all night drinking."

"Not all night."

The freckles practically jumped off Ron's face in shock.

"What! Where were you, who were you with... oh no, Harry, tell me it wasn't Malfoy."

"It may have been, sort of, Malfoy," Harry admitted.

Ron breathed hard through his nose. The alarming puce colour of his cheeks clashed violently with his hair.

Then he seized Harry's arm.

"Hang on, I need to get dressed..." Harry protested, struggling into his robes. Ron waited with barely controlled impatience.

"Where are we going?" Harry inquired, trailing in Ron's wake and feeling distinctly fragile.

"To Hermione," Ron said. "She can do the stern maternal speech much better than I can."

"You know, Ron, he's really not all that-"

Ron whirled on him, holding up a finger.

"Not until we find Hermione!"

*

"-can't believe you were so irresponsible, Harry, on a school night! How are you going to pay attention in class? Tell me you at least did your homework, Harry..."

"Who cares about homework!" Ron howled. "What about Malfoy?"

This had been going on for quite some time. At first the Great Hall had been empty, but now quite a few Gryffindors were eavesdropping with varying degrees of subtlety.

Harry had sunk in his seat and was eye-level with his breakfast.

"Oh yes. Malfoy." Hermione looked disapproving. "Did *he* do his homework first?"

Ron made a noise like a kettle about to explode.

Hermione sighed. "And Harry, I know you're curious about this whole Triwizard Tournament affair. But that's no reason to skip your homework to spend time with a nasty little twit like Malfoy. We can always look it up in the library. Still, of course you're a free agent and you can do whatever you want."

Harry and Ron both stared at her incredulously.

"Look on the bright side, Ron," Hermione said pragmatically. "If Harry hangs around that idiot for any amount of time, he'll completely lose his rag and attack him. Then you can collect on your bets."

Harry sat up sharply, ignoring the sick pain it sent through his head.

"Bets? What bets?"

"Well, you remember that last Slytherin/Gryffindor Quidditch match."

Quidditch had not been cancelled this year because of the urgent pleading of all four houses.

"You and Malfoy looked as if you were about to leap on each other," Hermione continued placidly, buttering her toast. "Ron started to lay heavy bets that you would win. Got quite good odds, too, since Malfoy has a reputation for fighting dirty."

Harry was mildly insulted.

"Ron was awfully disappointed," Hermione informed him in serene tones. "But that just goes to show, doesn't it? I mean, you're never violent towards anyone else. You can't stand the boy. You won't be able to put up with him long."

Harry had to admit she might have a point, but nevertheless felt very contrary.

"Nobody could," Hermione assured him, patting his arm. "Malfoy is insufferable, as I keep telling Lavender. He doesn't fool me with those pretty-boy airs."

"Pretty!" Ron spluttered.

Harry remembered Hagrid's unwitting comment and smiled. Ron was apoplectic.

"Come on," said Hermione. "We'd better go to class."

They were going out the door when Malfoy came sauntering in, not a blond hair out of place and looking as if he had slept innocently all night long.

Ron, who was forging ahead, bumped into him.

"Watch it!" snapped Ron, who was in no mood to let Malfoy cheek him by deliberately existing.

"You don't need to hurry quite so desperately, Weasley," Malfoy drawled. "The phrase 'time is money' isn't literal, you know."

"Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed.

Hermione's eyes were narrowed with dislike.

Malfoy swept on regardless.

"I'd reconsider this whole friendship idea of yours, Harry," Ron said with barely controlled wrath. "In fact, I'd reconsider the whole 'murder is wrong' idea in his case."

Harry bit his lip.

He was upset that he was surprised, when he knew precisely what Malfoy was like. Malfoy had just been acting as Malfoy always did... and Harry was upset that he had let himself forget, and almost like the bastard.

*

Harry was exhausted.

He had been defending Malfoy all day to Hermione and Ron, which was problematic since he basically agreed that Malfoy's behaviour was indefensible. He also wanted to have a few severe words with Malfoy on the subject of Ron.

Nevertheless, he had absolutely no intention of giving up on this... strange form of friendship. He was even wondering, with a kind of half-ashamed anticipation, what Malfoy had planned for tonight.

Yesterday had been... interesting.

And there wasn't much that was interesting these days.

Harry scanned the grey landscape for a blond head, that weird anticipation sparking within him.

Malfoy was not in sight.

And, over the next three quarters of an hour, it became very clear that he was not coming.

It was cold by the lake.

Harry's growing anger kept him warm.

By the time he stormed back to the school, it was red hot.

Chapter Four: Find Out Who You Are

You said the air was singing

It's calling you, you don't believe

These things you never see

And never dream

Harry's intention of drawing Malfoy aside and ticking him off properly was foiled by the fact that he was once again surrounded by Slytherins everywhere he went.

He was extraordinarily popular - considering that he was a nasty, inconsiderate little prat who didn't even keep appointments!

Only the prospect of getting a chance to tell him off induced Harry to come to the lake next day.

Being forced into this indignity made him even more annoyed.

What really put the tin lid on it was Malfoy, sitting by the lake and rising to go as he saw Harry.

"What kept you, Potter?" he demanded.

He seemed completely free from guilt.

That did it.

"Where the hell were you last night?"

Malfoy raised one pale eyebrow, seeming mildly surprised at the question.

"I was playing cards in my common room."

"Why?" Harry asked sharply, realising through the anger that he was actually... quite hurt.

Malfoy no longer looked so indifferent.

"Because my housemates asked me, and they're Slytherin."

"So what?"

Harry hurled the question angrily at Malfoy.

Malfoy, who had clearly planned this entire scene, caught it with ease.

"So they always come first," he returned. "You don't understand that, do you? Well - I'm making it clear."

"Making it clear," Harry repeated coldly.

Malfoy began to pace, hands folded behind his back and face impassive.

"Where I stand."

You mean on the edge of a lake with a giant squid in it?

"What are you talking about?" Harry snapped.

"It's a question of loyalty. My loyalty is to Slytherin. Because it has to be.

What does that have to do with keeping appointments?

Harry surprised himself by asking, "Why?" rather than kicking Malfoy into the lake.

Malfoy stopped and turned abruptly towards him. The wind blew back his silver hair and his face seemed less confident without that shining frame.

"Have you never heard something bad said about Slytherin?"

"Heard? I've *said* bad things about Slytherin," Harry told him. "You lot are cheating bastards at Quidditch."

"Oooh, and the Gryffindor displays unexpected evasive talent. You know damn well what I mean - the general opinion that Slytherin house is a Death Eater training camp."

Harry was aware that his face was betraying him, so he didn't respond.

But he did remember: *There wasn't a witch or a wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.*

Malfoy's expression was under much better control. Harry could see no emotion as he observed:

"I see you have. Well, Potter, this is a war, and you know how prejudices explode during war. Every time another person disappears people turn further away from Slytherin. And we don't turn and pander to anyone. We don't play nice with the other children, because playing nice is no fun. We're Slytherins, and that means we're nasty and we're untrustworthy - but not all of us have a burning desire to become minions of the Dark Lord."

"I never said you did," said Harry with an uncomfortable memory of telling a hat: '*Not Slytherin...*'

"Is that so?" Malfoy inquired. "You never said a word? You never even listened to that kind of thing? Thought wouldn't have entered your pure little Gryffindor mind?"

Stinking Slytherin.

Why not just chuck all the Slytherins out?

Harry was quiet.

"Thought so."

This exchange was not going at all how Harry had planned.

"That doesn't mean you can-"

"Let you down?" Malfoy smiled. "It does. I can. I will. I want to. Are you clear now?"

"Crystal. You Slytherins have to stick together, so you'll treat me like crap any time you want."

Harry was hoping for some sort of denial. Instead, Malfoy regarded him with a strange smile, and nodded slowly.

"Well..." Harry said. "I don't think that's a great lookout for me."

"Oh, I don't know," Malfoy answered. "You don't have to be particularly polite to me either. I've never put too high a premium on consideration. Be late, be rude, don't show up at all. I suppose I'm offering you a chance *not* to play nice with the other children, for a change."

He smiled again, somewhat wickedly and more at ease.

"If it doesn't appeal to you, you can sod off. I know I'm not an easy person to l-" He paused, considering. "Be friends with."

Harry thought about it.

He had not... expected the confrontation to go like this. He had anticipated, with a certain amount of foreboding, an angry Gryffindor/nasty Slytherin brat conflict.

Which this had almost been. But... Malfoy had a point.

Harry knew about Slytherins. They went about in gangs. They were fiercely partisan - and that included Snape.

Malfoy was actually - being fair, in a torturous manner. He thought he should give Harry a warning. Malfoy had always been upfront about where he stood.

Harry wasn't sure about this. But he was, after all, a Gryffindor. Gryffindors rushed into things without thinking.

Besides, he was intrigued. If he left now, the curiosity would probably kill him.

He smiled back. "You're an almost impossible person to like, Malfoy. But I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Malfoy looked bored.

"Now you've got that out of your system, get moving."

"Malfoy, I am *not* going to the pub again... I felt rotten all day yesterday."

"Go to the pub again?" Malfoy looked affronted. "What kind of predictable bastard do you think I am?"

Before Harry could answer, he shook his head.

"No, we're going to the Quidditch pitch."

Harry looked around at the gathering dusk. Considered the fact he was still feeling a bit under the weather.

He looked over at Malfoy and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, I suppose if you're not already tired of getting your ass kicked..."

*

"Come on, Potter. Show me what you've got."

Harry stared blankly at Malfoy. Malfoy gazed back with expectant poise, as if he was a society gentleman at a poetry reading, rather than a boy sitting on a Quidditch pitch and making a bizarre demand.

"Sorry?"

Malfoy exhaled. "Yes, you certainly are. Come on, let's see what you can do."

Harry was at a bit of a loss. Malfoy had just cheerfully (and if Harry was any judge, competently) broken into the Quidditch supplies room, taken two brooms, thrown Harry one, flung himself down on the pitch and told him to do...

What, exactly?

Harry tossed down the broom and sat down on the other end of the bench.

"Malfoy, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Flying," Malfoy answered, looking at Harry in a perplexed manner, a tiny frown wrinkling his brow. "You know... playing around with your broom..."

Harry became far too scandalised to care what Malfoy looked like when he was bemused.

"Malfoy, if you're implying...!"

Malfoy's eyebrows hit his hairline.

"Good Lord, Potter, you Gryffindors have fevered imaginations. It must be all that staying in and playing chess that does it to you." He paused, brushing aside a wind-displaced lock of hair with a slight smile. "Chess would drive anyone to naughty thoughts."

"I'm not sure you need to be driven, Malfoy," Harry said warily. "Now can you please tell me what you're talking about?"

Malfoy was too busy snickering at him to do any such thing.

Harry would have thought that friendship involved less wanting to smack Malfoy around.

Once Malfoy had stopped, he still insisted on musing along the same lines.

"I can just see Granger and Weasley whiling away these winter hours. 'Just like that, baby, checkmate me hard!'" Harry's quick, instinctive frown made Malfoy shrug. "You're no fun. Oh come on - surely you flew around a bit when you were a kid?"

"Hardly, Malfoy. Raised in a Muggle home, remember? We use brooms to sweep up dirt."

Malfoy's smile was incredulous.

"Bizarre... though I'd rather sweep a floor than try to fly on some brooms people are using these days." He shrugged again, the dismissive gesture of the spoiled brat Harry knew so well. "Yes, but you must have done some flying there. You knew about Quidditch."

"Er - no, I didn't."

Malfoy faced him now, making a gesture of bemusement.

He noticed once more that Malfoy was a great one for talking with his hands. He acted out what he meant to say as easily and cleverly as he acted out his cruel little imitations.

"But... when we first met in the robes shop, I talked about Quidditch and you said you didn't play. And then in our first flying lesson it clearly wasn't your first time on a broom-"

"Yes, it was," Harry interrupted.

A flicker of emotion passed over Malfoy's face.

"Really? I resented that little presumed lie for years." He paused and mulled over something. "Potter... could any of what I said be taken as a left-handed compliment?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Let's pretend it couldn't. I don't *do* compliments." Malfoy got up, dusting off hands that could not possibly have been dirty. "Now... if you've never done this before, I guess I'm going to have to teach you." He sighed in a martyred fashion. "You are so incredibly tiresome, Potter. All right then - follow my lead, and try not to fall off."

Harry picked up the broom and weighed it in his hand, feeling that familiar rush of confidence.

"Don't worry. I won't. And if you're lucky, I might even try to catch you if you fall."

"Me fall! *I* wasn't raised among the Muggles."

"No, and you weren't the youngest Seeker in a century either."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, as if slightly surprised. What he said, however, was - "You'll see, Potter... this isn't exactly Quidditch."

With that, he grabbed his broom and was off.

Harry had forgotten that Malfoy moved like a snake.

He followed him.

It was a windy day, and Harry had to squint to make him out.

He was going very, very high. You normally didn't go too high in Quidditch - it would be counterproductive, since the Snitch often appeared near the ground and never went too far above the hoops.

Harry became slightly nervous when he realised that he couldn't see that well not only because of his hair, but also because of clouds.

"Malfoy!" he yelled. "We're awfully high!"

"Scared, Potter?" Malfoy yelled back.

"Not likely! But these are school brooms - Fred and George Weasley told me that some school brooms vibrate if they're taken up too high!"

Insofar as Harry could make out Malfoy's expression, it seemed interested.

"Did they happen to mention which ones?"

"*Malfoy!*"

Malfoy shrugged, smiled and turned his broom upside down.

"Malfoy!" Harry made his broom jerk down and met Malfoy's demented and upside down face.

He was laughing.

"Go on, Potter, try it - but hold on tight!"

Harry hesitated. He wasn't crazy enough to try this.

Or perhaps he was.

He did.

The whole world seemed to be below him, extremely far below him, and for a moment Harry experienced intense vertigo. There was only his grip on the broom above to save him, he was too high-

It was very exciting.

Harry remembered that this was a broom. He could do *anything* on a broom.

Malfoy saw he was getting the hang of it and, being the sadistic bastard that he was, switched to something else.

"Not bad, Potter," he said, swerving right side up. "How about this?"

"Malfoy, *stop that!* You're going to fall!"

Malfoy was standing on his broom, a look of intense concentration on his face.

There was no way Harry was trying this. It was all right for Malfoy, he was graceful on the ground. Harry thought of himself more as a Krum type - he was only graceful when *sitting* on a broom.

"Too difficult for you, Potter?"

"Not on your life!"

It was at this point that Harry realised the teachers who constantly talked about how reckless he was had a point.

I don't want to do this, he thought as he clambered onto his knees. The broom lurched alarmingly. *I don't want to do this, I don't-*

He stood up, letting go.

The broom was still sailing forward, and he was just a tremble or a shudder of the stick from free fall. His arms were out for the pathetic amount of balance it would give him, his robes were whipping about him and he was terrified.

"I think I'm going to die!" he yelled.

Malfoy laughed. "Fun?"

"Yeah!"

*

"Oh, my hair," Malfoy said mournfully some time afterwards, once they were back on the ground. "That's the worst thing about flying. My *hair*..."

He was trying unsuccessfully to smooth down the locks of hair that surrounded his face, somewhat like a rumpled halo.

Harry suspected he himself might look a bit like a hedgehog, but he didn't care. He was panting and sweaty, but then of course so was Malfoy. He'd kept up. He thought he'd done pretty well.

So, apparently, did Malfoy. He gave him a rather appraising look.

"That wasn't bad at all, Potter. The first time I tried that trick with the broom I was about two inches off the ground."

Harry gaped. Malfoy continued unremorsefully.

"Well, of course I was. That's bloody dangerous, you know. Do you think I'm some kind of suicidal git?"

"Actually," Harry said in a strangled voice, "yes. I'm two inches from beating you to death with my broomstick."

Malfoy did not seem unduly bothered.

"A bit of practise, Potter, and you'd handle a stick very well."

"And a lot of practise, Malfoy, and you might beat me at Quidditch one day." Harry rolled his eyes. Malfoy looked lofty.

"I really cannot to descend to this kind of childish quibbling with you."

"Since when?"

"Oh, push off, Potter. I'll see you tomorrow." Malfoy looked thoughtful. "I think we'll do something that does not involve damage to the hair."

"Slytherins are so vain," Harry remarked. "And with so little reason for it."

Malfoy scowled. "Go brush your hair, Potter. You look like a hedgehog."

*

The next day, Harry all but had his cloak on when something occurred to him.

I suppose I'm offering you a chance not to play nice with the other children.

It wasn't so much about that. It was - that Harry wasn't going to just *take* Malfoy's behaviour. He never did take any of Malfoy's crap.

He also wanted to see if Malfoy had meant it.

Slowly, Harry replaced the cloak. Then he went into the common room.

"Ron? Up for a game of Exploding Snap?"

Ron agreed with a swift delight that Harry was certain wouldn't have been in place had Harry not lately spent an inordinate amount of time hanging around with Draco Malfoy.

So he stayed in the comfortable warmth of the common room, and the fact that he *could* have been somewhere else with someone else, that he could be absolutely sure they wanted him here... made everything a good deal more pleasant.

Exploding Snap was somewhat impeded by Harry and Ron's enthusiastic discussion of how Ron had finally pulled off the Wronski Feint. He was their most energetic but least technically skilled Chaser.

Hermione, reading her latest book by the fire, rolled her eyes on their third replay.

"Women in the Muggle world complain about homoerotica and male obsession in football," she commented. "They should really try living in a world where the sport of choice has four balls and the players are mounted on flying phallic symbols."

Ron choked.

"Snap," Harry said, taking advantage of this weak moment.

Ron recovered, albeit looking at them both in an aggrieved manner.

"Though even if you are cheating, Harry," he continued, after reproaching them roundly, "it's nice to have you around again."

"Yes, we're both quite fond of you," Hermione said, smiling over her book. "Can't imagine why."

"Don't be thick," Harry replied. "You're my best friends."

"Mind you don't forget it," Hermione admonished. "I still can't believe you're voluntarily spending time with Malfoy. It's sheer masochism."

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said, laying down a card. "He hasn't been so bad."

"I still say it's some kind of trick," Ron said, scowling. "You wouldn't catch him being halfway decent to anyone else."

Harry mulled this one over.

"There's an idea."

"What - what's an idea?" Ron looked vaguely panicked.

"Oh, nothing." Harry laid down another card. "By the way, Snap!"

Once the smoke cleared, he grinned.

"And the game is mine."

*

The next day, Harry walked to the lake determined to wait only five minutes.

To his slight surprise, Malfoy was there first. His long black cloak looked incongruous with jeans and a T-shirt, but since he was Malfoy he carried it off superbly.

"Keep me waiting, would you," he said.

"I'm sorry for not turning up yesterday," Harry told him, suddenly impelled to provoke a reaction. "I had to spend some time with the Gryffindors."

Malfoy looked blank. "Oh, you weren't here? Didn't notice. Come on, Potter-"

"No."

Malfoy raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"We keep doing what you want to do," Harry explained. "I want a turn."

Malfoy looked baleful. "I *like* always doing what I want to do."

"I'd noticed," Harry said dryly. "Come on, Malfoy."

"Where do you want me to go?"

"Well." Harry paused. "It's like this. Ron said you couldn't be halfway decent to anyone-"

"*What?*" Malfoy exploded. "The *cheek* of him!"

Harry nodded sagely. "So I thought we should prove him wrong."

"Bloody right. How dare he, I'm a Malfoy, I was brought up to have impeccable manners..." Malfoy kept muttering along these lines as Harry guided him towards his destination.

Who knew, he thought. It might cure fear on both sides, and it might... you know... go some way towards proving that Malfoy might be a halfway decent person. It might be good for him.

And it had the potential to be extremely amusing.

"I'll show him, the total..." Malfoy looked up, and his eyes widened in alarm. "Potter. What are we doing here?"

"Proving that you can be halfway decent," Harry answered innocently.

"Not here I can't be! No, absolutely not! Let me go this instant!"

Harry seized hold of Malfoy's arm and knocked on Hagrid's door at the same time.

Hagrid opened the door almost at once, and stared at Harry, who was holding on determinedly to a ferociously struggling Malfoy.

"Hi," Harry gasped. "Can I come to tea? I brought a friend."

He shoved Malfoy inside.

*

Malfoy's face was white in the light of Hagrid's hall.

Out of the corner of his mouth, he said: "Potter, you will die for this."

"What is it, Malfoy?" Harry whispered. "Scared?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Oh, *hardly*."

"Then prove it."

Hagrid was still looking at them in an extremely startled manner. Harry saw Malfoy's look up at Hagrid. All the way up.

He also saw the reflexive curl of his lip.

Come on, Malfoy...

Malfoy stopped sneering with a visible effort. "Nice house," he said with only the barest trace of disdain. "Er - relatively speaking. As compared to the hut."

It was rather a nice house, actually. When Beauxbatons had become so depleted it had to be closed, Madame Maxime had insisted on a house.

Harry wondered if this was Malfoy trying to be nice. It didn't seem that different from Malfoy at all other times.

Hagrid shot a look at Harry that said: *What the hell is he doing here?*

Harry tried to appear unconcerned.

Hagrid cleared his throat. "Er - I guess yeh'd better come in, then."

"Thanks," Harry told him quickly, grabbing Malfoy's shirt and propelling him forward.

"Cease manhandling me, Potter," Malfoy hissed. "I said I'd prove Weasley wrong and I will."

He yanked himself free and strode into the sitting room, where Madame Maxime was sitting over the cradle.

Malfoy tossed his hair back and a determined expression crossed his face that Harry knew from Quidditch matches.

Malfoy usually got that look just before a spectacular foul.

He smiled brilliantly, walked over to Madame Maxime and kissed her hand.

Oh my God! What the hell is he playing at?

"So good of you to have me," said Malfoy, gazing deep into her eyes.

Madame Maxime actually blushed. "Charmed."

Harry stared.

"Do you want to see ze baby?" inquired Madame Maxime, still a little flushed.

"I'd be delighted," Malfoy replied smoothly.

This was becoming a love fest.

She actually placed the baby in Malfoy's arms. This was a mark of great favour.

Malfoy almost fell down. He shot Harry a look that said *Help me!* and Harry, repressing a grin, went over to help Malfoy support the baby.

"Guess 'ow old she is," Madame Maxime said, giving the child a fond look.

"Er - four," guessed Malfoy.

"Aren't you clever? She *is* exactly four months."

"*Months?*" Malfoy said, still staggering under the weight. "I mean, ah - I'm a good guesser."

"My leetle girl," cooed Madame Maxime.

"And what a beautiful little girl it is too," Malfoy said winningly.

Hagrid visibly softened. Which meant he was still looking at Malfoy as most people looked at a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but as most people did *before* it stung them.

Hagrid was besotted with his daughter, despite her lack of fangs and surplus heads.

"Sit down, both of you, and 'ave some tea," Madame Maxime invited them graciously.

Malfoy gratefully relinquished the baby. When they took their places around the tea table, Harry caught him surreptitiously trying to massage life back into his arms.

"The rock cakes look really good, Mad - Mrs Hagrid," Harry said.

He really would have to get used to that. They had been married, after all, for a year and a half. It hadn't taken him long to get used to the improved standard of cooking at Hagrid's.

"Do call me Olympe," she urged sweetly. "Both of you."

"What a lovely name," said Malfoy.

I can't take him anywhere.

"Come 'ave some tea, Ruby," Madame Maxime said.

Malfoy tried to hide a smile behind his teacup.

Hagrid went a bit red.

"Ruby loves tea," Madame Maxime proceeded, her voice growing just a touch steely.

"Nevaire drinks anyzing else."

Hagrid began to look gloomy. Malfoy was desperately trying to suppress a snigger with his cup.

"Must be a great comfort to you," he said in a rather choked voice. "Tell me, Olympe, when are you next visiting France?"

"I am not sure," Madame Maxime replied. "It is a great sorrow to me. France is such a beautiful country."

"It is, isn't it?" Malfoy agreed. "I went to Bordeaux last summer with my mother."

Madame Maxime glowed. "You 'ave been to France?"

Malfoy and Madame Maxime began a spirited conversation about France. Harry gave Hagrid a rather helpless smile.

Hagrid brightened as he took this opportunity for a confidential talk.

"Got a letter from Charlie Weasley the other day," he said. "Norbert's the leader o' his herd now. Disembowelled another dragon ter do it," Hagrid added proudly.

"Er - that's great, Hagrid."

Malfoy had tilted his head towards them.

"Was that the dragon you had back in first year?" he inquired in conversational tones. "He was gorgeous."

Harry blinked. "You - you like dragons?"

"Oh, yes. My father taught me all about them. That's why he called me Draco. He loved them too," Malfoy said. "Well, that's why I didn't turn you all in right away. I wanted another look at it. It was a Norwegian Ridgeback, right?"

Hagrid thawed further. "Yeh."

"I think they're my favourites," Malfoy told him.

Harry relaxed. What had he been worrying about? After all, Hagrid liked nasty creatures.

*

"Do come back soon," Madame Maxime said at the doorway, her eyes fixed approvingly on Malfoy.

Hagrid still looked dubious, for which Harry could hardly blame him, but he cleared his throat and conceded,

"I s'pose yeh can, an' all."

As the door closed, they clearly heard Madame Maxime say,

"Such a *nice* boy."

Malfoy gave the door a triumphant look.

"Tell Weasley that," he ordered Harry. "Ha. Ha. I think my manners were perfect."

"What about when Hagrid offered some of his personal cookery and you said: 'Are you trying to kill me, man?'"

"Momentary lapse."

"Ah. I see."

"Not that I am ever forgiving you for doing that to me," Malfoy continued. "For a start, I think holding that child has crippled me. How would you feel if I took you on a social call to visit Professor Snape tomorrow?"

"You won't, will you?" Harry asked in horror.

"Of course not. I like the man. Why should I inflict your company on him?" Malfoy looked thoughtful. "No, I have something else in mind for tomorrow."

"What?" Harry asked apprehensively.

Malfoy smiled beatifically. "You'll see."

*

"The *Forbidden Forest*? You're mental. You're absolutely stark raving mad. I can't believe I'm doing this."

"It's my turn, and I get to choose," Malfoy said obstinately, surveying the forest in a leisurely manner. "And I feel like a nice nature walk."

"Nature walk? Malfoy, do you *remember* the last time we were in the Forest?"

"Well, yes. But I feel the Dark Lord is unlikely to be wandering around the Forest these days. He's a bit busy, if you hadn't noticed."

"There are other dangerous things around here. And as I recall, in a crisis you tend to pelt off screaming like a girl."

"As opposed to being frozen with terror? Yes, that's a *much* more sensible thing to do... I thought you were right behind me, you pillock. And I was not screaming like a girl." Malfoy looked around at the forest in a proprietorial fashion. "It was a - manly yell."

"Right..."

Harry smiled, and followed Malfoy, who was stalking forward. He was beginning to realise that Slytherins had extremely strange ideas about what constituted a good time.

Not that Malfoy had been exactly *wrong* about what constituted a good time.

So far.

"You have to wonder why they put a school right next to a terrifying forest of doom," Malfoy said casually. "I suppose they think a certain amount of blinding fear builds character."

Harry felt that if this was the case, his character should be truly impressive.

Actually, this forest seemed much less blindly terrifying than he remembered it as a child. The fading light made the leaves seem almost transparent, and cast faint green shadows on the pale surface of Malfoy's hair.

Harry relaxed fractionally. "I suppose it's not so bad."

Malfoy looked smug.

"I guess I just have nasty memories of it. Those giant spiders that tried to eat me and Ron..." Harry shuddered.

Malfoy stopped looking smug.

He also stopped walking.

"Giant *what?*"

"Er, spiders."

"You're not serious."

Malfoy's face was always pale. It might have been Harry's imagination that made him think he looked paler just now.

"You are serious," Malfoy said, staring at him. "You maniac! How could you let me come in here?"

"This was your idea-"

"I'm not the one who knew about the bloodthirsty arachnids!"

Malfoy spun around and began to walk back at speed.

Harry was trying not to laugh. "What about fear building character?"

"My character's built enough," Malfoy snapped. "Besides-"

He stopped, listening. Harry heard the rustle of leaves behind him and saw Malfoy's grey eyes widen.

"Get *down!*"

Chapter Five: The Young Order of the Phoenix

'The years of Voldemort's ascension to power were marked with disappearances.'

-Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Things are gonna slide

Slide in all directions

Won't be nothing you can measure anymore

The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold

And it's overturned the order of the soul

And now the wheels of heaven stop

You feel the devil's riding crop

Get ready for the future

It is murder

Hermione was looking for Harry.

She walked through the dark corridor, arms wrapped tightly around herself.

She could keep her thoughts cool and logical despite the hot insistent hammer of panic beating in her chest.

Harry had been seen last with Draco Malfoy, walking down the school steps.

Nobody knew what had happened to them next - that had been five hours ago, and in that time...

Hermione was holding fast to her wand, though she knew that a wand would be useless to her, as it had been to the others. She bit down on her lip and told herself to stop thinking about it.

Ron was looking around the Slytherin dungeons, although Hermione figured the only way the Slytherins would let Harry onto their turf would be in pieces.

She had checked the fourth and was about to check the fifth floor.

Please, please let him be all right. Please, please let him be...

"Malfoy, get *out*!"

...here.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, and ran down the corridor to hug him.

He reciprocated, looking rather startled. He also looked a right mess. His hair was all over the place, his face was streaked with mud, his clothes torn and filled with twigs - and he was smiling a little, looking far more at ease than usual.

It was... strange. Almost disorienting.

"Harry - what happened?"

"Oh - um." Harry blinked. "Nothing much. Malfoy and I went for a walk in the Forbidden Forest-"

"You did *what*? Why? Where did all the, er, mud come from?"

"Well, there was this ditch."

Hermione resisted the urge to tear out her own hair in handfuls.

"Harry. What happened?"

Harry smiled again. "Ah. I happened to mention certain things about giant spiders, and *somebody*," he raised his voice, "lost it when he heard a noise and dragged me into a *ditch*."

A querulous and, Hermione thought, distinctly unpleasant voice answered him. "It could have been something dangerous."

"It was a *deer*, Malfoy," Harry said to the door. "A little, helpless, harmless fawn, to be exact. And I'm covered in mud, and you've been hogging the bathroom for over an hour. So get out."

Hermione was just... too tired for this.

"Harry - why couldn't you have used the Gryffindor bathrooms?" she asked.

"This git said he'd only be a minute!"

"Correction, Potter," came Malfoy's cool voice. "I said I would only take as long as I needed to get my hair right."

"You've been in there an hour! And you've probably used up all the ice-white foam."

"I just happen to like it, all right?"

"Did you know that there's a ghost in school who likes to peep at prefects from out of the taps?"

"*What?*"

There was a hasty splash, as if someone were diving under protective layers of foam.

Hermione was beginning to feel left out of this conversation. She was also horrified at the thought that nudity of a Malfoy nature was happening nearby.

"You seem to know all the school's dirty little secrets, Potter," Malfoy observed in his condescending voice. "It's hardly decent for a Gryffindor

"And how would a Slytherin define decency?"

There was a pause.

"What's Granger want, then?"

And that was when Hermione felt her surface worry and relief fade, leaving only the grim reason she had come looking for Harry.

"Yes, Hermione, what-" Harry saw her face and the small smile left his lips. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Hang on, if it's interesting I want to hear too," Malfoy announced. "I'm getting out - but if any ghosts peep at me there will be very serious consequences."

Hermione was quite ready to tell Harry at once whether the prat liked it or not, but to her amazement Harry held up a hand. She just didn't have the strength to argue now.

In a moment Draco Malfoy appeared in the doorway, a billow of steam preceding him as if to herald the arrival of a demon king in a pantomime.

Rather appropriate, Hermione thought.

The wretched boy's figure became clear after a few moments, vigorously towelling his silvery hair.

"Well, Granger?" he said. "What's going on?"

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest again, to protect herself from Malfoy's uncaring eyes, from Harry's concerned ones... and from her sudden chill.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan have - gone," she said slowly. "Just like the others. They were in the Hufflepuff common room and - then."

There was a heavy silence.

Eventually, Harry said, "They couldn't have... run?"

"Don't be stupid, Potter," Malfoy told him sharply. "They were Hufflepuff's representatives in the Young Council. They were taken, all right."

Hermione pressed her palms flat against her sides, trying to soothe herself, to pretend that it was Ron holding her and she was safe. "Besides, the-" She swallowed. "The Dark Mark was seen again. Over Hogwarts."

There was another silence.

People had been screaming the words until it seemed futile.

How is he doing it?

Nobody ever uttered it.

They were all held still and quiet, linked together by bleakness, and however much Hermione might dislike Malfoy she knew this link must remain. Each of them remained to carry the burden of those who had been taken. Each of them was the next potential victim.

"Oh no," Harry said at last, his tone deadened in the oppressive atmosphere.

"That about sums it up."

Hermione felt as if she was looking in on this scene, an indifferent observer noting the actions of three scared children.

Malfoy was leaning against the doorframe as both Harry and Hermione were leaning against the walls, unwilling to bear their own weight. The gesture was familiar to Hermione as everything about this situation was familiar.

These disappearances were more serious than before. Both the Hufflepuff representatives... a quarter of the Young Council...

We're being targeted.

Hermione resisted the urge to slip down the wall onto the floor, to clasp her arms around her knees and wait for comfort.

Instead she said, in a voice pinched into calmness, "Professor Lupin is holding a meeting of the Young Order tomorrow. The Young Council will probably be asked to stay afterwards."

Harry nodded wearily. It was no more than was expected.

Malfoy gave a sudden shiver. Hermione glanced over at him and noticed that he was still wet. His T-shirt was clinging to his skin, his hair looked like soggy tinsel, and his face gave no hint that the shiver was caused anything other than a chill.

When she looked over at Harry, she his face change from distress to... concern. Bloody hell. Concern for Malfoy? This friendship thing was going a long way too far.

"I'd better get back to my people," Malfoy said, in the muted tones they had all been using. Hermione noticed with a little quiver of distaste the casual, proprietorial way he referred to his housemates. "They'll be worried."

Hermione couldn't see the Slytherins being worried about anything.

"Yeah, of course," Harry replied at once. And now he definitely sounded concerned. "Will you be all right going down there...?"

He seemed to be looking at Malfoy's neck, where another droplet was coursing a path down the pale curve. Hermione had seen this before, of course - in the face of tragedy, you looked everywhere but into people's eyes.

Malfoy's eyebrow quirked.

"If the Dark Lord pounces from behind a corner, I'll give a girlish scream and you can come running to rescue me. Honestly, Potter!"

Harry laughed softly, almost reluctantly, and went with Hermione. She was feeling quite aggrieved.

All that worry because Harry had run off somewhere dangerous with Malfoy, and it wasn't like Malfoy could be trusted in a crisis - it wasn't like Malfoy could be trusted *ever*...

Something could have happened to him, but that was too terrifying even to contemplate. So many people had simply vanished - but not Harry.

Please, let it not happen to Harry.

Ron greeted her with a kiss and Harry with a hug - and he was not usually demonstrative, Hermione reflected.

She held onto him tightly and tried not to think about what had happened or what could happen. She looked over to catch Harry's eye and share more unspoken comfort.

But Harry was looking away, clearly thinking about something else.

*

Ginny Weasley was sitting through the minutes of the last Young Order of the Phoenix meeting and trying not to stare across at Harry.

She spent a great deal of her time in these meetings doing this, lulled into security by the fact that he either hung on Professor Lupin's quiet words or seemed lost in thought.

Of course, she also spent a great deal of time doing this during Quidditch matches, and at meal times, and just passing by in the corridors...

Ginny knew this was ridiculous. Crushes were not supposed to last for seven years.

Crushes were not supposed to last a lifetime, to have been taken in with a four-year-old's bread and milk. What small child could listen to a fairy tale about Prince Charming and not want to fill Cinderella's glass slippers?

What child could hear about a dark-haired hero who had saved the world, and been stranded like the princess in her tower among Muggles, and not want to reach out to him?

Ginny reckoned that every girl of her age had once cherished a secret fantasy about being the Girl Who The Boy Who Lived Loved.

It was just that every girl's brother didn't befriend Harry Potter. Every girl's mother did not practically adopt him.

Every girl was not rescued by Harry Potter when she was a lonely, trembling first year. Every girl did not realise that he was just what the propaganda said - brave, noble and true.

A boy like that only came by once in a lifetime.

Ginny had *tried* to stop embarrassing herself. She had exchanged awkward first kisses with Colin Creevey. She had even briefly dated Dean Thomas, that introspective artistic boy she had *cared* about, really cared, but... it hadn't lasted.

She had come to realise that her crush had been hammered diamond hard by time, and no-one else was ever going to measure up.

After all the hero-worship and the silly Valentines, the persistent yearning remained, and she had decided to just patiently wait it out.

There had to be a chance, just a chance. He had kissed her a couple of times last year, soft experimental kisses which had set her heart hammering with hope. He had not followed up on them - which she understood, of course she did, he had been wounded and unloved throughout his whole life, he couldn't possibly know that she loved him.

There had never been a whisper about him and any other girl, for which Ginny was profoundly grateful. His kiss with Cho Chang had been an unrepeated incident.

One day, Harry might reach out for Ginny again. And if he did, Ginny would be waiting.

Ginny surveyed Harry with shy joy. He was looking better recently, she thought, less unhappy. He was taking more care of his clothes and laughing more often. The Triwizard Tournament was clearly doing him good.

Even this odd little idea of friendship with Malfoy made Ginny smile indulgently. It was so like Harry to try and reclaim people, even hateful Slytherins like Malfoy. If Malfoy could distract Harry, and moreover could take up time that Harry might otherwise spend finding a girl, Ginny was all for it.

Harry would get tired of it soon, in any case.

Perhaps even today. Malfoy was bound to air his disgusting prejudices as usual.

Ginny glared over at Malfoy, whose head was bent over a piece of parchment. The hand that held his costly-looking quill seemed expensive too, all fine bones and pale skin. He was such a cosseted, detestable creature.

Ginny felt that girlish thrill - *Oh, Harry's wonderful!* - when she thought about the last time Malfoy had made a particularly off-colour remark about Mudbloods.

Harry, who had been sitting with that absent miserable look on his face that broke her heart, had looked up and his eyes had burned green fire.

Her fearless hero.

Ginny remembered it vividly.

"Say that again, Malfoy. I dare you," he'd snapped.

Malfoy, in his horrible icy drawl, had said it again.

Harry and Malfoy had stood up and leant across the table, snarling words of hatred at each other, their noses practically touching.

"Go on, Potter," Malfoy had urged him. "What better time to start a fight than in front of an admiring audience of Weasleys?"

He had sneered over at Ginny, who had gone cold.

Harry had grabbed the front of Malfoy's robes, looking about two seconds away from jumping over the table and doing something desperate.

"Leave them out of it!"

Ginny had glowed with adoration.

If Professor Lupin had not quietly broken up the meeting, who knew what could have happened?

Ginny noticed that Harry was watching Malfoy too.

Good. He wouldn't let that Slytherin get away with anything.

*

Harry was wondering if you could be schizophrenic for someone else.

He had the very distinct impression that there were two Malfoys hovering around Hogwarts, when one would be enough for anyone's sanity.

The two Malfoys bore a certain similarity to each other, but only an idiot would be fooled. Both the Malfoys smirked, and tossed around mean comments as if they were going out of fashion. Both the Malfoys had extremely dubious morals.

But one of the Malfoys laughed much more freely, and had ideas that were more about fun than evil. One of the Malfoys, whatever his opinions on Muggles, refrained from using the dreaded 'M' word. The other Malfoy didn't give a damn what he said.

One Malfoy was able to talk without malice. The wind constantly tumbled his hair into silver tangles, giving him a slightly softer look than the other Malfoy.

The second Malfoy was sitting across from Harry now, making some kind of notes on a piece of parchment. His hair was immaculate, the groomed tips of blond silk tucked behind his ears, and he did not look up from his parchment except when Pansy or Blaise spoke to him.

Harry was unobtrusively trying to attract his attention, for no reason he could think of. Perhaps he wanted some kind of reassurance that Malfoy would behave.

He didn't want to get into a fight with him today.

Eventually, he abandoned the indirect path and let out a noise that was half cough and half "Malfoy!"

Malfoy looked up, smiling slightly.

"Potter, you master of subtlety, you."

And in spite of the Slytherin death glares immediately trained on him, Harry felt a little reassured. He would have spoken further, but at that moment Professor Lupin came in.

*

Harry had liked Professor Lupin even back in third year.

He did more than like him now. He revered the man.

At the beginning of fifth year, Hogwarts had been frantic. Over the summer it had become clear to everyone that Voldemort was indeed back. People had begun vanishing.

The whole wizarding world had been suddenly plunged into war.

But children could not fight in a war. All they could do was go to Hogwarts, and wait in fear... for the news of the Mark being seen over their home, for the final horror.

Lupin had taken these terrified children and formed the Young Order of the Phoenix. Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had flocked to the meetings, seizing the chance to discuss things - to feel as if they were contributing something and could learn.

Slytherins had not gone near the meetings.

Until Lucius Malfoy had died - over the Christmas holidays - and Draco Malfoy had turned up at the next meeting with a white set face and his Slytherin friends behind him.

Harry had been beside himself with annoyance at the intrusion. Lupin had accepted them quietly, and coped with the additional numbers by forming the Young Council, with two representatives selected from each House, for emergencies.

Many people hadn't taken the Young Order seriously until the next year, when the graduates from the Young Order used what Lupin had taught them to become formidable soldiers in the war.

Everyone knew now that the Young Order was vital. If you were against Voldemort, if you wanted a chance at survival... You learned the tactics and the reality of war around that table which Lupin headed.

Professor Lupin, always unassuming and yet utterly in charge. More reliable than the impulsive, temperamental Sirius, more available than the overburdened Dumbledore. He had become like a father to those whose parents had been - lost. And his calm presence had a great deal, Harry suspected, to do with so many people remaining at Hogwarts. When even Hogwarts began to suffer disappearances, there was mass panic.

Lupin had stayed calm, had made them feel safe, had *talked* to them.

He had won the love of most of his students, and the respect of even the Slytherins. Harry knew that the seventh years that were leaving Hogwarts would go into this battle with those steadfast grey eyes before them, seeing him as a symbol of hope, relying on what he had taught them.

He had done it all, this greying, shabby teacher who had been an outcast for most of his life.

Harry respected him greatly. Harry could see the adoration in many students' eyes when he called the meeting to order.

And that was why Malfoy's cracks at Young Order meetings had always annoyed Harry so much, and why Harry was dreading another now.

If Malfoy insulted Lupin...

Professor Lupin cleared his throat.

"We all know that - another disappearance has occurred," he said in his understated voice. "It would be pointless to tell you not to be afraid, or distressed. But do not let your fear or grief overwhelm you. Those who are left still have important work to do. Hufflepuff House has my deepest sympathy, and my admiration in that they have already appointed Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones to the Young Council."

Everybody clapped, a murmur of approval rising around the table.

Harry watched Malfoy clap in his decisive manner, much like the applause he gave new Slytherins at the start of every school year.

It struck him as strange that he knew how Malfoy clapped. Stranger that it was their last year, and that he would never notice him clapping for new Slytherins again.

Lupin was still talking.

"-am sure the other Young Councillors will do their utmost to help them. In other news, I'd like to commend Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Boot for their excellent diagram of their plan on last year's storming of the Riddle House. I believe their way would have ensured fewer casualties."

Terry Boot blushed red with pleasure. Malfoy inclined his head, accepting the applause as his due.

Insufferable git, Harry thought with a smile. *So he was working on something with a Ravenclaw. Are they friends?*

He watched Terry's hesitant glance over the table at Malfoy, but was unable to decide whether it was friendly or not. Malfoy was busy making eyes at pretty Susan Bones.

It was commonly known that Malfoy had little time for Hufflepuffs, and he was completely ignoring shy Hannah. But Malfoy always made exceptions for the cute ones.

"We have two motions to put to the vote, one practical and one theoretical."

Harry noticed that Malfoy almost returned Lupin's calm smile.

"Firstly, the question of protection, including drills. As we all know, there has been no year that has not suffered losses. Measures have to be taken to protect students. From now on, according to Miss Granger's excellent plan, teachers will accompany all first and second year students to their classes."

We are too desperately short-staffed to guard the elder classes, as you all know.

That part of Lupin's speech remained unspoken.

"The other students are requested not to go anywhere unaccompanied. Moreover, after the Duelling Club on Fridays we will have drills in case of a full-scale attack on Hogwarts. I want to see how quickly our Young Councillors, with prefects assisting, can bring the all the students down into the Great Hall and then put themselves into defensive positions at the entrances."

There were solemn nods all around. The Order voted unanimously in favour, though Harry noticed the Slytherins glancing at Malfoy before they voted.

"And then there is the theoretical vote."

Gazes were focused on Lupin all around the table. Everyone took theoretical votes seriously these days, since they knew that once they left school these issues would be reality.

"Should we, or should we not, share Mediwizard secrets which could save the lives of Muggles?"

"Absolutely not."

The sharp, cold voice rang around the room.

"I realise *your* viewpoint is different," Hermione said sharply. "You don't care whether Muggles live or die."

"And your viewpoint is different too," Malfoy snapped. "All you care about is your Muggle relatives, Mudblood."

An angry buzz rose around the table.

Malfoy had used that word several times in meetings, but he rarely applied it to another person. Especially not to Hermione Granger, their most respected Councillor.

Ron's face flamed red and Hermione's hand clenched. Lupin's remonstrations were lost amid the rising voices.

Harry felt his chest tighten, outrage and disappointment forming one fierce emotion that burned under his ribs and dimmed his vision.

He saw Malfoy in a haze, his pale face defiant and utterly without regret. His eyes met Harry's coolly, as if they were strangers.

"Malfoy." Harry heard his own voice almost with surprise, slicing sharply through his cloudy emotions. "Outside. Now."

Malfoy's lip curled.

"Why the hell should I go outside, Potter? Are you planning a little brawl out of the teacher's sight?"

"Harry, sit down," he heard Lupin say quietly, but Harry was past caring.

"I'm planning to get you out so everyone doesn't have to suffer from your revolting comments. And I'm planning to have a talk with you about your filthy mouth."

Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. It was only then, when he noticed he was looking at Malfoy from a height, that Harry realised he'd risen to his feet.

"That kind of talk might well get you into a fight," Malfoy informed him with that slow, sneering air of his.

"I don't care," Harry said. "Get out here, and we'll talk. And then, if you like, we can fight."

Malfoy smiled suddenly, that lazy disdainful smile, and rose to look Harry directly in the eye.

"Well, Potter," he drawled, "it's always a good day for you to go down."

Harry strode over to the door, aware that his face was stormy.

"Get out here. And we'll see who goes down."

Ginny Weasley was leaning across the table, her eyes wide. Harry hoped the poor girl wasn't too horrified.

Malfoy had not moved. He seemed rather contemplative.

Harry met those cold eyes again, his gaze a direct challenge.

Malfoy walked out, sweeping past Harry and leaving him to shut the door against the incredulous gazes of the Young Council.

As he did so he heard Hermione say:

"Shouldn't we stop them, Professor?"

"Hermione," said Professor Lupin, "if we allowed our meetings to be broken up every time Harry and Draco Malfoy clash, we would never finish any of them."

Then Harry closed the door, and turned around to face Malfoy.

He was leaning against the wall, head tilted back to give Harry the full benefit of his chill scrutiny.

"Well, Potter? I'm eager to hear what you have to say - the sooner you're done, the sooner I get to give you what you've been asking for for years."

*

"I want to know what the hell you think you were doing in there! Don't you realise what you're making other people think about you? Don't you care what *I* think?"

"When I want your opinion, Potter, I'll give it to you," Malfoy drawled.

Harry slammed Malfoy against the wall.

"Get your hands off me!" Malfoy ordered, his eyes flashing.

"I will not!" Harry said, breathless with anger.

Malfoy lifted his chin, looking every inch the irate aristocrat.

"I can say what I think."

"Yes, but you're smart." Harry hadn't realised he thought that until he'd said it. "You can't possibly believe all that racist crap."

"I certainly don't believe in Lupin's do-gooder little motion."

Malfoy's voice was like ice. His supercilious tones were only making Harry's fury hotter.

Harry was so wrathful he stumbled over the words. "You - you don't think that helping people to survive would be a good thing?"

"I'd rather survive myself. Don't you realise that letting doctors and patients into magical secrets would just be another way to make the Muggle world aware of the magical one? Stop being Lupin's model boy for just a second and think!"

"It's people's lives we're talking about!"

"Yes." Malfoy's voice was flat. "It's us or them. Just like it's always been. You believe all that history they feed us about the Burning Times, Potter? Cutesy little stories about Wendelin the Weird making the flames tickle? You think that's all there is to it? Those were times of fear. Muggles soon learnt that all you have to do is take a wizard's wand. Once they've done that, they can burn you, drown you or break every bone in your body, and thread your limbs through the spokes of a wheel. That's what they did, and that's what they would do now. This is a time of war, it's a time to be more careful, and I don't care if Muggle-lovers are running the show, it's not safe to let our secrets out!"

Malfoy's voice had slowly become more impassioned. His eyes were gleaming now, and he had stepped forward, closer to Harry.

Harry took a step backwards, startled by the force of Malfoy's words.

"You didn't have to use the Mudblood crack," he replied in low tones.

Malfoy leaned back against the wall, his voice chill again.

"I don't trust that kind of people," he returned. "Each one of them gives the Muggles more chance of learning about us and attacking us. Don't you know the kind of resentment a magical person could stir up in a family?"

I was the only one who saw her for what she was - a freak!

Harry crushed down Petunia Dursley's words into the back of his mind.

"Take You-Know-Who," Malfoy said. "His father was a Muggle. My father told me that kind of people are unstable - well, what more proof do you need? Magic makes the Muggles mad. We should keep away from all of them."

"So why don't you refuse to work with Hermione?"

"I'm against You-Know-Who. She's already integrated into the magic world. I'll take allies where I can get them - it doesn't mean I have to like it."

"We're fighting this war against bigotry!"

"I'm not."

"Then... why?"

Malfoy shut his eyes, a move which left Harry staring. He seemed oddly vulnerable.

"I don't like Muggles," he said. "Doesn't mean I want to see them exterminated. But the main reason I'm in this war is - revenge." A small smile ghosted over his lips. "Is that so wrong?"

Harry had not dreamed he would be at a loss for words.

He had expected malice, not the reasoned argument of someone who had thought a lot on this subject. He had certainly not expected an explanation, however small, of Malfoy's motives.

Lupin's suggestion had seemed so reasonable and good. Harry hadn't thought much about the consequences.

But now... He recalled Hagrid's words, back when he was eleven.

We're best left alone.

The picture of wizards' bones being broken... the bitterness behind Malfoy's words and the realisation of the fear behind the hatred those pureblood families felt, with the dark history being passed down the generations.

Harry didn't agree, but he would have found it terribly difficult to argue.

He found himself... respecting Malfoy's point of view, which was perhaps the most unexpected thing of all.

He clung to one certainty.

"She's a good person," he insisted. "You have no right to fling foul insults at her."

"She started it," Malfoy defended himself.

Harry leaned back against the wall beside Malfoy, their shoulders touching. He felt somehow devoid of rancour.

"Don't pretend this is the first time."

"She started it the first time, too," Malfoy said darkly. "Saying I bought my way onto the team."

"Didn't you?" Harry asked, more in a spirit of curiosity than accusation.

"No, I bloody well didn't, Potter! I participated in perfectly normal try-outs after Terence Higgs quit. After I got the position, my father bought the brooms. My father didn't reward people until they showed themselves worthy."

"Look-" Harry decided to leave the question of Lucius Malfoy severely alone. "You know what that word means to everyone in there. It's the way Death Eaters talk, and it's a disgusting word to apply to someone who is honestly decent and kind. There's no reason to use it just to upset her. It's petty, it's childish and it's cruel."

"Cruelty is under-rated, you know."

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, who shrugged and smiled. The fierce surge of rage that had made him slam Malfoy up against a wall and shout had faded.

It was so bizarre, that Malfoy could make him that angry and then somehow be the one who could calm him down this fast.

"Come on, Malfoy."

Malfoy shrugged uncomfortably and looked away.

"Suppose I admitted you have a point. Would you do the same?" he asked at last.

"What do you mean?"

Harry was intrigued. This was becoming a not-uncommon feeling around Malfoy.

"I mean... I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said."

"Just think?"

"Certainly. It's beneath my dignity as a Malfoy to bargain." Malfoy smiled suddenly, that rather impish smirk which was less malicious than usual, and which Harry was getting used to. "Bribery is quite another matter."

Harry considered, and then smiled back.

"All right then. It's a - deal."

As they returned by silent but mutual consent to the meeting room, Harry added:

"You do realise that I will fight you if you call Hermione that again."

Malfoy lifted an eyebrow. "I look forward to taking you down."

The Young Order looked stunned to see Malfoy and Harry returning, both apparently unharmed and in good humour.

Hermione poked Harry suspiciously in the side, apparently checking for internal damage.

Harry was amused to note Pansy Parkinson doing the same across the table.

Malfoy glanced over, and they shared a small rueful smile.

Ginny Weasley glared at Malfoy as if she thought he had performed a quick Imperius.

"Could we have the vote now?" inquired Professor Lupin wryly, choosing to be judiciously blind about the entire affair.

Harry thought about it. Malfoy *had* had a very valid point about this motion...

He voted against it.

Now most of the room looked as if they thought Malfoy had performed a quick Imperius.

"And the motion is lost by one vote," Lupin observed in his neutral tones.

"Hard luck," Malfoy told Hermione in his gloating manner... and the whole room winced apprehensively as he opened his lips to add another word.

What he said, in thoughtful tones, was "Granger."

Now the whole room looked nonplussed. Many people looked intensely relieved when Lupin broke up the meeting, and as the Young Order filed out the gossip was already rising behind the door.

*

The Young Council stayed behind for Lupin's last words.

"Young Councillors," Lupin said, his voice graver now that the last members of the Order had left, "We all know that times are dark. You are in a sense responsible for your fellow students, without being able to protect them completely. Now is not the time for house rivalries or personal dissent. I am putting you all in charge of the practice drills. I want to see all of you working in amicable co-operation."

Harry looked around the table as Lupin spoke.

Hermione's dark intelligent eyes glowed beside him. The round fearful face of Hannah Abbott and Susan's quivering mouth were set in an effort at bravery. Terry Boot and Padma Patil appeared anxious. Blaise Zabini's dark cunning face wore a serious expression for once.

All of them were joined in a sense of grave unity. All of them, in this moment, seemed trustworthy.

Malfoy had tipped back his chair and was smiling a rakish and distinctly unreliable smile. He looked bright and carefree and somewhat evil.

Harry shared that smile, just a little, like a whispered exchange of secrets.

I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said.

Well. Harry was thinking.

"Just try to be friendly," Lupin urged.

"I'll try," said a sudden cheerful voice. Harry was surprised to realise it was his.

Malfoy yawned and stretched. "Oh, why not?" Chapter Five: The Young Order of the Phoenix

'The years of Voldemort's ascension to power were marked with disappearances.'

-Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Things are gonna slide

Slide in all directions

Won't be nothing you can measure anymore

The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold

And it's overturned the order of the soul

And now the wheels of heaven stop

You feel the devil's riding crop

Get ready for the future

It is murder

Hermione was looking for Harry.

She walked through the dark corridor, arms wrapped tightly around herself.

She could keep her thoughts cool and logical despite the hot insistent hammer of panic beating in her chest.

Harry had been seen last with Draco Malfoy, walking down the school steps.

Nobody knew what had happened to them next - that had been five hours ago, and in that time...

Hermione was holding fast to her wand, though she knew that a wand would be useless to her, as it had been to the others. She bit down on her lip and told herself to stop thinking about it.

Ron was looking around the Slytherin dungeons, although Hermione figured the only way the Slytherins would let Harry onto their turf would be in pieces.

She had checked the fourth and was about to check the fifth floor.

Please, please let him be all right. Please, please let him be...

"Malfoy, get *out*!"

...here.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, and ran down the corridor to hug him.

He reciprocated, looking rather startled. He also looked a right mess. His hair was all over the place, his face was streaked with mud, his clothes torn and filled with twigs - and he was smiling a little, looking far more at ease than usual.

It was... strange. Almost disorienting.

"Harry - what happened?"

"Oh - um." Harry blinked. "Nothing much. Malfoy and I went for a walk in the Forbidden Forest-"

"You did *what*? Why? Where did all the, er, mud come from?"

"Well, there was this ditch."

Hermione resisted the urge to tear out her own hair in handfuls.

"Harry. What happened?"

Harry smiled again. "Ah. I happened to mention certain things about giant spiders, and *somebody*," he raised his voice, "lost it when he heard a noise and dragged me into a *ditch*."

A querulous and, Hermione thought, distinctly unpleasant voice answered him. "It could have been something dangerous."

"It was a *deer*, Malfoy," Harry said to the door. "A little, helpless, harmless fawn, to be exact. And I'm covered in mud, and you've been hogging the bathroom for over an hour. So get out."

Hermione was just... too tired for this.

"Harry - why couldn't you have used the Gryffindor bathrooms?" she asked.

"This git said he'd only be a minute!"

"Correction, Potter," came Malfoy's cool voice. "I said I would only take as long as I needed to get my hair right."

"You've been in there an hour! And you've probably used up all the ice-white foam."

"I just happen to like it, all right?"

"Did you know that there's a ghost in school who likes to peep at prefects from out of the taps?"

"*What?*"

There was a hasty splash, as if someone were diving under protective layers of foam.

Hermione was beginning to feel left out of this conversation. She was also horrified at the thought that nudity of a Malfoy nature was happening nearby.

"You seem to know all the school's dirty little secrets, Potter," Malfoy observed in his condescending voice. "It's hardly decent for a Gryffindor

"And how would a Slytherin define decency?"

There was a pause.

"What's Granger want, then?"

And that was when Hermione felt her surface worry and relief fade, leaving only the grim reason she had come looking for Harry.

"Yes, Hermione, what-" Harry saw her face and the small smile left his lips. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Hang on, if it's interesting I want to hear too," Malfoy announced. "I'm getting out - but if any ghosts peep at me there will be very serious consequences."

Hermione was quite ready to tell Harry at once whether the prat liked it or not, but to her amazement Harry held up a hand. She just didn't have the strength to argue now.

In a moment Draco Malfoy appeared in the doorway, a billow of steam preceding him as if to herald the arrival of a demon king in a pantomime.

Rather appropriate, Hermione thought.

The wretched boy's figure became clear after a few moments, vigorously towelling his silvery hair.

"Well, Granger?" he said. "What's going on?"

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest again, to protect herself from Malfoy's uncaring eyes, from Harry's concerned ones... and from her sudden chill.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan have - gone," she said slowly. "Just like the others. They were in the Hufflepuff common room and - then."

There was a heavy silence.

Eventually, Harry said, "They couldn't have... run?"

"Don't be stupid, Potter," Malfoy told him sharply. "They were Hufflepuff's representatives in the Young Council. They were taken, all right."

Hermione pressed her palms flat against her sides, trying to soothe herself, to pretend that it was Ron holding her and she was safe. "Besides, the-" She swallowed. "The Dark Mark was seen again. Over Hogwarts."

There was another silence.

People had been screaming the words until it seemed futile.

How is he doing it?

Nobody ever uttered it.

They were all held still and quiet, linked together by bleakness, and however much Hermione might dislike Malfoy she knew this link must remain. Each of them remained to carry the burden of those who had been taken. Each of them was the next potential victim.

"Oh no," Harry said at last, his tone deadened in the oppressive atmosphere.

"That about sums it up."

Hermione felt as if she was looking in on this scene, an indifferent observer noting the actions of three scared children.

Malfoy was leaning against the doorframe as both Harry and Hermione were leaning against the walls, unwilling to bear their own weight. The gesture was familiar to Hermione as everything about this situation was familiar.

These disappearances were more serious than before. Both the Hufflepuff representatives... a quarter of the Young Council...

We're being targeted.

Hermione resisted the urge to slip down the wall onto the floor, to clasp her arms around her knees and wait for comfort.

Instead she said, in a voice pinched into calmness, "Professor Lupin is holding a meeting of the Young Order tomorrow. The Young Council will probably be asked to stay afterwards."

Harry nodded wearily. It was no more than was expected.

Malfoy gave a sudden shiver. Hermione glanced over at him and noticed that he was still wet. His T-shirt was clinging to his skin, his hair looked like soggy tinsel, and his face gave no hint that the shiver was caused anything other than a chill.

When she looked over at Harry, she his face change from distress to... concern. Bloody hell. Concern for Malfoy? This friendship thing was going a long way too far.

"I'd better get back to my people," Malfoy said, in the muted tones they had all been using. Hermione noticed with a little quiver of distaste the casual, proprietorial way he referred to his housemates. "They'll be worried."

Hermione couldn't see the Slytherins being worried about anything.

"Yeah, of course," Harry replied at once. And now he definitely sounded concerned. "Will you be all right going down there...?"

He seemed to be looking at Malfoy's neck, where another droplet was coursing a path down the pale curve. Hermione had seen this before, of course - in the face of tragedy, you looked everywhere but into people's eyes.

Malfoy's eyebrow quirked.

"If the Dark Lord pounces from behind a corner, I'll give a girlish scream and you can come running to rescue me. Honestly, Potter!"

Harry laughed softly, almost reluctantly, and went with Hermione. She was feeling quite aggrieved.

All that worry because Harry had run off somewhere dangerous with Malfoy, and it wasn't like Malfoy could be trusted in a crisis - it wasn't like Malfoy could be trusted *ever*...

Something could have happened to him, but that was too terrifying even to contemplate. So many people had simply vanished - but not Harry.

Please, let it not happen to Harry.

Ron greeted her with a kiss and Harry with a hug - and he was not usually demonstrative, Hermione reflected.

She held onto him tightly and tried not to think about what had happened or what could happen. She looked over to catch Harry's eye and share more unspoken comfort.

But Harry was looking away, clearly thinking about something else.

*

Ginny Weasley was sitting through the minutes of the last Young Order of the Phoenix meeting and trying not to stare across at Harry.

She spent a great deal of her time in these meetings doing this, lulled into security by the fact that he either hung on Professor Lupin's quiet words or seemed lost in thought.

Of course, she also spent a great deal of time doing this during Quidditch matches, and at meal times, and just passing by in the corridors...

Ginny knew this was ridiculous. Crushes were not supposed to last for seven years.

Crushes were not supposed to last a lifetime, to have been taken in with a four-year-old's bread and milk. What small child could listen to a fairy tale about Prince Charming and not want to fill Cinderella's glass slippers?

What child could hear about a dark-haired hero who had saved the world, and been stranded like the princess in her tower among Muggles, and not want to reach out to him?

Ginny reckoned that every girl of her age had once cherished a secret fantasy about being the Girl Who The Boy Who Lived Loved.

It was just that every girl's brother didn't befriend Harry Potter. Every girl's mother did not practically adopt him.

Every girl was not rescued by Harry Potter when she was a lonely, trembling first year. Every girl did not realise that he was just what the propaganda said - brave, noble and true.

A boy like that only came by once in a lifetime.

Ginny had *tried* to stop embarrassing herself. She had exchanged awkward first kisses with Colin Creevey. She had even briefly dated Dean Thomas, that introspective artistic boy she had *cared* about, really cared, but... it hadn't lasted.

She had come to realise that her crush had been hammered diamond hard by time, and no-one else was ever going to measure up.

After all the hero-worship and the silly Valentines, the persistent yearning remained, and she had decided to just patiently wait it out.

There had to be a chance, just a chance. He had kissed her a couple of times last year, soft experimental kisses which had set her heart hammering with hope. He had not followed up on them - which she understood, of course she did, he had been wounded and unloved throughout his whole life, he couldn't possibly know that she loved him.

There had never been a whisper about him and any other girl, for which Ginny was profoundly grateful. His kiss with Cho Chang had been an unrepeatable incident.

One day, Harry might reach out for Ginny again. And if he did, Ginny would be waiting.

Ginny surveyed Harry with shy joy. He was looking better recently, she thought, less unhappy. He was taking more care of his clothes and laughing more often. The Triwizard Tournament was clearly doing him good.

Even this odd little idea of friendship with Malfoy made Ginny smile indulgently. It was so like Harry to try and reclaim people, even hateful Slytherins like Malfoy. If Malfoy could distract Harry, and moreover could take up time that Harry might otherwise spend finding a girl, Ginny was all for it.

Harry would get tired of it soon, in any case.

Perhaps even today. Malfoy was bound to air his disgusting prejudices as usual.

Ginny glared over at Malfoy, whose head was bent over a piece of parchment. The hand that held his costly-looking quill seemed expensive too, all fine bones and pale skin. He was such a cosseted, detestable creature.

Ginny felt that girlish thrill - *Oh, Harry's wonderful!* - when she thought about the last time Malfoy had made a particularly off-colour remark about Mudbloods.

Harry, who had been sitting with that absent miserable look on his face that broke her heart, had looked up and his eyes had burned green fire.

Her fearless hero.

Ginny remembered it vividly.

"Say that again, Malfoy. I dare you," he'd snapped.

Malfoy, in his horrible icy drawl, had said it again.

Harry and Malfoy had stood up and leant across the table, snarling words of hatred at each other, their noses practically touching.

"Go on, Potter," Malfoy had urged him. "What better time to start a fight than in front of an admiring audience of Weasleys?"

He had sneered over at Ginny, who had gone cold.

Harry had grabbed the front of Malfoy's robes, looking about two seconds away from jumping over the table and doing something desperate.

"Leave them out of it!"

Ginny had glowed with adoration.

If Professor Lupin had not quietly broken up the meeting, who knew what could have happened?

Ginny noticed that Harry was watching Malfoy too.

Good. He wouldn't let that Slytherin get away with anything.

*

Harry was wondering if you could be schizophrenic for someone else.

He had the very distinct impression that there were two Malfoys hovering around Hogwarts, when one would be enough for anyone's sanity.

The two Malfoys bore a certain similarity to each other, but only an idiot would be fooled. Both the Malfoys smirked, and tossed around mean comments as if they were going out of fashion. Both the Malfoys had extremely dubious morals.

But one of the Malfoys laughed much more freely, and had ideas that were more about fun than evil. One of the Malfoys, whatever his opinions on Muggles, refrained from using the dreaded 'M' word. The other Malfoy didn't give a damn what he said.

One Malfoy was able to talk without malice. The wind constantly tumbled his hair into silver tangles, giving him a slightly softer look than the other Malfoy.

The second Malfoy was sitting across from Harry now, making some kind of notes on a piece of parchment. His hair was immaculate, the groomed tips of blond silk tucked behind his ears, and he did not look up from his parchment except when Pansy or Blaise spoke to him.

Harry was unobtrusively trying to attract his attention, for no reason he could think of. Perhaps he wanted some kind of reassurance that Malfoy would behave.

He didn't want to get into a fight with him today.

Eventually, he abandoned the indirect path and let out a noise that was half cough and half "Malfoy!"

Malfoy looked up, smiling slightly.

"Potter, you master of subtlety, you."

And in spite of the Slytherin death glares immediately trained on him, Harry felt a little reassured. He would have spoken further, but at that moment Professor Lupin came in.

*

Harry had liked Professor Lupin even back in third year.

He did more than like him now. He revered the man.

At the beginning of fifth year, Hogwarts had been frantic. Over the summer it had become clear to everyone that Voldemort was indeed back. People had begun vanishing.

The whole wizarding world had been suddenly plunged into war.

But children could not fight in a war. All they could do was go to Hogwarts, and wait in fear... for the news of the Mark being seen over their home, for the final horror.

Lupin had taken these terrified children and formed the Young Order of the Phoenix. Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had flocked to the meetings, seizing the chance to discuss things - to feel as if they were contributing something and could learn.

Slytherins had not gone near the meetings.

Until Lucius Malfoy had died - over the Christmas holidays - and Draco Malfoy had turned up at the next meeting with a white set face and his Slytherin friends behind him.

Harry had been beside himself with annoyance at the intrusion. Lupin had accepted them quietly, and coped with the additional numbers by forming the Young Council, with two representatives selected from each House, for emergencies.

Many people hadn't taken the Young Order seriously until the next year, when the graduates from the Young Order used what Lupin had taught them to become formidable soldiers in the war.

Everyone knew now that the Young Order was vital. If you were against Voldemort, if you wanted a chance at survival... You learned the tactics and the reality of war around that table which Lupin headed.

Professor Lupin, always unassuming and yet utterly in charge. More reliable than the impulsive, temperamental Sirius, more available than the overburdened Dumbledore. He had become like a father to those whose parents had been - lost. And his calm presence had a great deal, Harry suspected, to do with so many people remaining at Hogwarts. When even Hogwarts began to suffer disappearances, there was mass panic.

Lupin had stayed calm, had made them feel safe, had *talked* to them.

He had won the love of most of his students, and the respect of even the Slytherins. Harry knew that the seventh years that were leaving Hogwarts would go into this battle with those steadfast grey eyes before them, seeing him as a symbol of hope, relying on what he had taught them.

He had done it all, this greying, shabby teacher who had been an outcast for most of his life.

Harry respected him greatly. Harry could see the adoration in many students' eyes when he called the meeting to order.

And that was why Malfoy's cracks at Young Order meetings had always annoyed Harry so much, and why Harry was dreading another now.

If Malfoy insulted Lupin...

Professor Lupin cleared his throat.

"We all know that - another disappearance has occurred," he said in his understated voice. "It would be pointless to tell you not to be afraid, or distressed. But do not let your fear or grief overwhelm you. Those who are left still have important work to do. Hufflepuff House has my deepest sympathy, and my admiration in that they have already appointed Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones to the Young Council."

Everybody clapped, a murmur of approval rising around the table.

Harry watched Malfoy clap in his decisive manner, much like the applause he gave new Slytherins at the start of every school year.

It struck him as strange that he knew how Malfoy clapped. Stranger that it was their last year, and that he would never notice him clapping for new Slytherins again.

Lupin was still talking.

"-am sure the other Young Councillors will do their utmost to help them. In other news, I'd like to commend Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Boot for their excellent diagram of their plan on last year's storming of the Riddle House. I believe their way would have ensured fewer casualties."

Terry Boot blushed red with pleasure. Malfoy inclined his head, accepting the applause as his due.

Insufferable git, Harry thought with a smile. *So he was working on something with a Ravenclaw. Are they friends?*

He watched Terry's hesitant glance over the table at Malfoy, but was unable to decide whether it was friendly or not. Malfoy was busy making eyes at pretty Susan Bones.

It was commonly known that Malfoy had little time for Hufflepuffs, and he was completely ignoring shy Hannah. But Malfoy always made exceptions for the cute ones.

"We have two motions to put to the vote, one practical and one theoretical."

Harry noticed that Malfoy almost returned Lupin's calm smile.

"Firstly, the question of protection, including drills. As we all know, there has been no year that has not suffered losses. Measures have to be taken to protect students. From now on, according to Miss Granger's excellent plan, teachers will accompany all first and second year students to their classes."

We are too desperately short-staffed to guard the elder classes, as you all know.

That part of Lupin's speech remained unspoken.

"The other students are requested not to go anywhere unaccompanied. Moreover, after the Duelling Club on Fridays we will have drills in case of a full-scale attack on Hogwarts. I want to see how quickly our Young Councillors, with prefects assisting, can bring the all the students down into the Great Hall and then put themselves into defensive positions at the entrances."

There were solemn nods all around. The Order voted unanimously in favour, though Harry noticed the Slytherins glancing at Malfoy before they voted.

"And then there is the theoretical vote."

Gazes were focused on Lupin all around the table. Everyone took theoretical votes seriously these days, since they knew that once they left school these issues would be reality.

"Should we, or should we not, share Mediwizard secrets which could save the lives of Muggles?"

"Absolutely not."

The sharp, cold voice rang around the room.

"I realise *your* viewpoint is different," Hermione said sharply. "You don't care whether Muggles live or die."

"And your viewpoint is different too," Malfoy snapped. "All you care about is your Muggle relatives, Mudblood."

An angry buzz rose around the table.

Malfoy had used that word several times in meetings, but he rarely applied it to another person. Especially not to Hermione Granger, their most respected Councillor.

Ron's face flamed red and Hermione's hand clenched. Lupin's remonstrations were lost amid the rising voices.

Harry felt his chest tighten, outrage and disappointment forming one fierce emotion that burned under his ribs and dimmed his vision.

He saw Malfoy in a haze, his pale face defiant and utterly without regret. His eyes met Harry's coolly, as if they were strangers.

"Malfoy." Harry heard his own voice almost with surprise, slicing sharply through his cloudy emotions. "Outside. Now."

Malfoy's lip curled.

"Why the hell should I go outside, Potter? Are you planning a little brawl out of the teacher's sight?"

"Harry, sit down," he heard Lupin say quietly, but Harry was past caring.

"I'm planning to get you out so everyone doesn't have to suffer from your revolting comments. And I'm planning to have a talk with you about your filthy mouth."

Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. It was only then, when he noticed he was looking at Malfoy from a height, that Harry realised he'd risen to his feet.

"That kind of talk might well get you into a fight," Malfoy informed him with that slow, sneering air of his.

"I don't care," Harry said. "Get out here, and we'll talk. And then, if you like, we can fight."

Malfoy smiled suddenly, that lazy disdainful smile, and rose to look Harry directly in the eye.

"Well, Potter," he drawled, "it's always a good day for you to go down."

Harry strode over to the door, aware that his face was stormy.

"Get out here. And we'll see who goes down."

Ginny Weasley was leaning across the table, her eyes wide. Harry hoped the poor girl wasn't too horrified.

Malfoy had not moved. He seemed rather contemplative.

Harry met those cold eyes again, his gaze a direct challenge.

Malfoy walked out, sweeping past Harry and leaving him to shut the door against the incredulous gazes of the Young Council.

As he did so he heard Hermione say:

"Shouldn't we stop them, Professor?"

"Hermione," said Professor Lupin, "if we allowed our meetings to be broken up every time Harry and Draco Malfoy clash, we would never finish any of them."

Then Harry closed the door, and turned around to face Malfoy.

He was leaning against the wall, head tilted back to give Harry the full benefit of his chill scrutiny.

"Well, Potter? I'm eager to hear what you have to say - the sooner you're done, the sooner I get to give you what you've been asking for for years."

*

"I want to know what the hell you think you were doing in there! Don't you realise what you're making other people think about you? Don't you care what *I* think?"

"When I want your opinion, Potter, I'll give it to you," Malfoy drawled.

Harry slammed Malfoy against the wall.

"Get your hands off me!" Malfoy ordered, his eyes flashing.

"I will not!" Harry said, breathless with anger.

Malfoy lifted his chin, looking every inch the irate aristocrat.

"I can say what I think."

"Yes, but you're smart." Harry hadn't realised he thought that until he'd said it. "You can't possibly believe all that racist crap."

"I certainly don't believe in Lupin's do-gooder little motion."

Malfoy's voice was like ice. His supercilious tones were only making Harry's fury hotter.

Harry was so wrathful he stumbled over the words. "You - you don't think that helping people to survive would be a good thing?"

"I'd rather survive myself. Don't you realise that letting doctors and patients into magical secrets would just be another way to make the Muggle world aware of the magical one? Stop being Lupin's model boy for just a second and think!"

"It's people's lives we're talking about!"

"Yes." Malfoy's voice was flat. "It's us or them. Just like it's always been. You believe all that history they feed us about the Burning Times, Potter? Cutesy little stories about Wendelin the Weird making the flames tickle? You think that's all there is to it? Those were times of fear. Muggles soon learnt that all you have to do is take a wizard's wand. Once they've done that, they can burn you, drown you or break every bone in your body, and thread your limbs through the spokes of a wheel. That's what they did, and that's what they would do now. This is a time of war, it's a time to be more careful, and I don't care if Muggle-lovers are running the show, it's not safe to let our secrets out!"

Malfoy's voice had slowly become more impassioned. His eyes were gleaming now, and he had stepped forward, closer to Harry.

Harry took a step backwards, startled by the force of Malfoy's words.

"You didn't have to use the Mudblood crack," he replied in low tones.

Malfoy leaned back against the wall, his voice chill again.

"I don't trust that kind of people," he returned. "Each one of them gives the Muggles more chance of learning about us and attacking us. Don't you know the kind of resentment a magical person could stir up in a family?"

I was the only one who saw her for what she was - a freak!

Harry crushed down Petunia Dursley's words into the back of his mind.

"Take You-Know-Who," Malfoy said. "His father was a Muggle. My father told me that kind of people are unstable - well, what more proof do you need? Magic makes the Muggles mad. We should keep away from all of them."

"So why don't you refuse to work with Hermione?"

"I'm against You-Know-Who. She's already integrated into the magic world. I'll take allies where I can get them - it doesn't mean I have to like it."

"We're fighting this war against bigotry!"

"I'm not."

"Then... why?"

Malfoy shut his eyes, a move which left Harry staring. He seemed oddly vulnerable.

"I don't like Muggles," he said. "Doesn't mean I want to see them exterminated. But the main reason I'm in this war is - revenge." A small smile ghosted over his lips. "Is that so wrong?"

Harry had not dreamed he would be at a loss for words.

He had expected malice, not the reasoned argument of someone who had thought a lot on this subject. He had certainly not expected an explanation, however small, of Malfoy's motives.

Lupin's suggestion had seemed so reasonable and good. Harry hadn't thought much about the consequences.

But now... He recalled Hagrid's words, back when he was eleven.

We're best left alone.

The picture of wizards' bones being broken... the bitterness behind Malfoy's words and the realisation of the fear behind the hatred those pureblood families felt, with the dark history being passed down the generations.

Harry didn't agree, but he would have found it terribly difficult to argue.

He found himself... respecting Malfoy's point of view, which was perhaps the most unexpected thing of all.

He clung to one certainty.

"She's a good person," he insisted. "You have no right to fling foul insults at her."

"She started it," Malfoy defended himself.

Harry leaned back against the wall beside Malfoy, their shoulders touching. He felt somehow devoid of rancour.

"Don't pretend this is the first time."

"She started it the first time, too," Malfoy said darkly. "Saying I bought my way onto the team."

"Didn't you?" Harry asked, more in a spirit of curiosity than accusation.

"No, I bloody well didn't, Potter! I participated in perfectly normal try-outs after Terence Higgs quit. After I got the position, my father bought the brooms. My father didn't reward people until they showed themselves worthy."

"Look-" Harry decided to leave the question of Lucius Malfoy severely alone. "You know what that word means to everyone in there. It's the way Death Eaters talk, and it's a disgusting word to apply to someone who is honestly decent and kind. There's no reason to use it just to upset her. It's petty, it's childish and it's cruel."

"Cruelty is under-rated, you know."

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, who shrugged and smiled. The fierce surge of rage that had made him slam Malfoy up against a wall and shout had faded.

It was so bizarre, that Malfoy could make him that angry and then somehow be the one who could calm him down this fast.

"Come on, Malfoy."

Malfoy shrugged uncomfortably and looked away.

"Suppose I admitted you have a point. Would you do the same?" he asked at last.

"What do you mean?"

Harry was intrigued. This was becoming a not-uncommon feeling around Malfoy.

"I mean... I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said."

"Just think?"

"Certainly. It's beneath my dignity as a Malfoy to bargain." Malfoy smiled suddenly, that rather impish smirk which was less malicious than usual, and which Harry was getting used to. "Bribery is quite another matter."

Harry considered, and then smiled back.

"All right then. It's a - deal."

As they returned by silent but mutual consent to the meeting room, Harry added:

"You do realise that I will fight you if you call Hermione that again."

Malfoy lifted an eyebrow. "I look forward to taking you down."

The Young Order looked stunned to see Malfoy and Harry returning, both apparently unharmed and in good humour.

Hermione poked Harry suspiciously in the side, apparently checking for internal damage.

Harry was amused to note Pansy Parkinson doing the same across the table.

Malfoy glanced over, and they shared a small rueful smile.

Ginny Weasley glared at Malfoy as if she thought he had performed a quick Imperius.

"Could we have the vote now?" inquired Professor Lupin wryly, choosing to be judiciously blind about the entire affair.

Harry thought about it. Malfoy *had* had a very valid point about this motion...

He voted against it.

Now most of the room looked as if they thought Malfoy had performed a quick Imperius.

"And the motion is lost by one vote," Lupin observed in his neutral tones.

"Hard luck," Malfoy told Hermione in his gloating manner... and the whole room winced apprehensively as he opened his lips to add another word.

What he said, in thoughtful tones, was "Granger."

Now the whole room looked nonplussed. Many people looked intensely relieved when Lupin broke up the meeting, and as the Young Order filed out the gossip was already rising behind the door.

*

The Young Council stayed behind for Lupin's last words.

"Young Councillors," Lupin said, his voice graver now that the last members of the Order had left, "We all know that times are dark. You are in a sense responsible for your fellow students, without being able to protect them completely. Now is not the time for house rivalries or personal dissent. I am putting you all in charge of the practice drills. I want to see all of you working in amicable co-operation."

Harry looked around the table as Lupin spoke.

Hermione's dark intelligent eyes glowed beside him. The round fearful face of Hannah Abbott and Susan's quivering mouth were set in an effort at bravery. Terry Boot and Padma Patil appeared anxious. Blaise Zabini's dark cunning face wore a serious expression for once.

All of them were joined in a sense of grave unity. All of them, in this moment, seemed trustworthy.

Malfoy had tipped back his chair and was smiling a rakish and distinctly unreliable smile. He looked bright and carefree and somewhat evil.

Harry shared that smile, just a little, like a whispered exchange of secrets.

I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said.

Well. Harry was thinking.

"Just try to be friendly," Lupin urged.

"I'll try," said a sudden cheerful voice. Harry was surprised to realise it was his.

Malfoy yawned and stretched. "Oh, why not?"

Chapter Six: Expeditions

The serious stuff, and the light-hearted

Looking in your eyes and I'm just getting started

Tell me your secrets, all your hopes and wishes too

I want to know everything there is to know about you

Harry Potter had been watching Draco Malfoy for years.

Of course, he hadn't *realised* that until now, but there it was. He remembered searching the Ravenclaw table for Cho's face back in fourth year, but his crush had proved far more ephemeral than his hatred of Malfoy. Harry had never begun a new year without searching among the crowds on the train and at the Slytherin table for Malfoy. He was unable to relax until that familiar loathed blond head was spotted, and he could sit back, enemy located, narrow his eyes and *glare* for a minute.

He hadn't realised that until now. Now that he was trying out this novel concept of friendship he observed how much he already knew about Draco Malfoy's daily life. It was amazing how much more he saw without his eyes narrowed.

The pattern of Malfoy's life seemed to be that there was hardly any pattern. Sometimes he came into breakfast at a respectable time, though he always looked a little severe. Occasionally Pansy and Blaise Zabini would be dragging him in, trying to force-feed him as he grouchy demanded coffee. More often than not, he didn't show up for breakfast at all. He wasn't a morning person, and he missed far too many meals.

But Harry did discern a certain pattern. He formed a pattern himself. Every morning that Malfoy appeared, Harry always walked past the Slytherin table and said good morning. And Malfoy would always respond, though he never seemed to think of volunteering a greeting.

And every Friday, Malfoy arrived a little late to breakfast, but with shining eyes and barely repressed glee, and he talked almost incessantly and ate an obscene amount.

Harry couldn't work that out, until his inquiries of Hermione discovered that Creative Magic was the first class on Friday mornings.

Whenever Malfoy received one of his packages of sweets from home, he had a very definite pattern of behaviour. He opened the exquisitely wrapped parcels carefully, slowly, casting gloating glances at the slaving Crabbe and Goyle. Then, with a flourish, he would tip all the expensive sweets onto his plate.

That done, he would tilt his head back and survey the entire Slytherin table, making sure that he had everybody's attention. He was always the arrogant and capricious prince, bestowing sweets upon those he considered worthy with deliberation and malice.

Whenever he saw that somebody particularly wanted a certain sweet, he would smugly eat it himself. Harry didn't like to watch this display, but he did watch - and it made him smile.

And it unsettled him, slightly, to see the pattern established over these few weeks of friendship broken.

A parcel arrived at a Thursday breakfast. Malfoy's pedigree eagle owl glided toward the Slytherin table with the same lazy grace as its owner, every wingbeat declaring that it was not bred to make clumsy movements, thank you very much.

Harry saw it before Malfoy did, though when it landed Malfoy looked up with no surprise. But when he saw the letter he hesitated.

Harry realised that Malfoy never got letters. There were those regular packages of sweets, even a few tasteful and costly gifts, but... Harry never remembered him getting letters before.

Except now he had a letter, and he was turning it over in his hands, his face carefully blank as if he had not yet figured out the correct emotion to display. He tossed the parcel over into Pansy's lap, indifferent, preoccupied and - yes, this was very uncharacteristic.

Malfoy seemed to have come to a decision. He rose slowly, and now there were emotions passing briefly over his face. There was a certain apprehension and wariness. Harry kept looking at him as Malfoy skirted the tables, making for the exit. He wondered if he should be concerned.

Then Malfoy's eyes lit on Harry. He flashed him a swift bright smile.

"Good morning."

Of course, one thing that this whole Malfoy business should have taught him was that sometimes a break in the pattern was good.

*

In spite of the reassurance of Malfoy's greeting, Harry kept remembering the look of shock on his face, the quick fumble when he took the letter.

So he made his excuses to Hermione and Ron, and followed Malfoy to the Potions classroom. They both had Potions class first on Thursdays.

He found Malfoy in the empty Potions classroom. Malfoy was sitting on one of the desks, back propped against a wall and knees drawn up to his chest. His head was bowed, and he seemed to be deep in thought.

Malfoy looked up when Harry came in, his eyes widening in surprise. Otherwise his face remained unchanged.

"Potter," he said.

"Malfoy," Harry responded. "I - came to see if you were all right?"

"Concerned? Very ministering-Gryffindor of you." There was no resentment in Malfoy's tone, but there didn't seem to be any desire to tell Harry all his woes either.

Harry noticed the letter crumpled up in one hand.

"I hope Professor Snape will be here," Malfoy said suddenly.

Snape wasn't there - a lot. Of course, they all knew what he was doing - *spying* - and every time he went, they all knew there was a chance he might not return.

To think that there would come a day when Lupin would be filling in for Snape in Potions, and Harry would regret it.

"I thought you liked Professor Lupin."

"I don't mind him," Malfoy answered. "But I prefer Professor Snape."

That was true, of course. Malfoy was always slightly more tense while Snape was away. Actively liking Snape - Harry wouldn't have thought it could be done.

For some reason, this short exchange seemed to relax Malfoy a little. He leaned further forward, his chest pressing against his knees, and said abruptly:

"My father was the one who wanted a child."

Harry had absolutely no idea what to say to this.

"Yeah?"

Malfoy glanced down at the creased paper in his hand. The curve of his lower lip made him look like a discontent, ignored child.

"He used to spend time with me. Now he's gone, she feels she has to take an interest."

"What did your mum say in the letter?"

It was odd, somehow, to say 'mum' to Malfoy. Malfoy might well have had a father and mother, but never a mum and dad.

Of course, Harry couldn't exactly picture Lucius Malfoy taking his son out for a ball game. Maybe a shrunken Muggle-head game.

"She wants to see me. She says we'll have a day out in Hogsmeade."

There was no trace of emotion in his voice, but Harry could sense something underneath the unmoved exterior. Harry thought how natural it would be now to cross over to the table

where Malfoy sat, and place a hand on his shoulder or something. But Malfoy was not the kind of person who could be touched casually.

"Of course she wants to see you," Harry said.

"Oh, yes. It's the proper thing for a mother to want. She always does the proper thing."

"I'm, ah - I'm sure she loves you."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and looked at Harry in surprise, and Harry felt as if he had utterly misinterpreted the situation.

"Love," Malfoy repeated, with a soft incredulous chuckle. "You are an infant, aren't you, Potter?"

Harry frowned.

"She might feel a certain affection for me," Malfoy said after a pause. "I just don't know her very well. Whenever she takes me on outings I bring a friend with me so we can all play at being polite, and pretend to know each other."

Harry looked at Malfoy's face, which was calm and shadowed, trying to understand. *Are you unhappy or not?*

The odd thing was that he thought Malfoy was trying to be straightforward.

"I don't blame her for not being interested," Malfoy told him. "And I wouldn't tell this to just anybody, so if you tell Granger or Weasley I'll grind their bones to make your poisoned bread."

"Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed, stung. "I wouldn't tell anyone!"

Malfoy shrugged.

"Well, I didn't think you would." Harry smiled slightly, and Malfoy continued. "After all, you're Harry Potter. Believer in truth and justice, and the very soul of honour."

You're Harry Potter.

Harry stopped smiling.

"I'm sorry if my basic morals offend you, Malfoy."

Malfoy grinned his rather wicked grin.

"Nah, I don't really mind. It's novel." He paused. "Not that it's not a bit *pathetic*, Potter."

"Oh, of course." Harry ducked his head to hide a reciprocal grin. "Hey - um, do you want to be partners? In Potions?"

"Do I want to induce heart failure in my favourite teacher? Be serious, Potter. In any case, Goyle would blow up the dungeon without me." But he was smiling. "If you feel like inducing heart failure in that ex-gamekeeper, we'll see."

Care of Magical Creatures was after break.

Harry gave him another quick smile and a nod of assent as Snape entered the classroom. Snape caught it and looked scandalised, as if Harry had been slipping drugs to his favourite. Harry looked at Malfoy's guarded pleasure at seeing Snape there, and was able to regard even Snape without resentment.

He was Malfoy's partner studying salamanders in Care of Magical Creatures. Of course, the animal turned vicious and Malfoy basely abandoned him, fleeing and locking himself in the hut.

"Typical Slytherin," Harry said, just as he would have said at any time in the past six years.

But he was laughing, and so was Malfoy.

*

"Clothes?" Harry asked blankly.

He and Malfoy were beside the lake, staring out at the wide expanse of water. In spite of Malfoy's often-voiced objections to the cold, they always seemed to meet there.

"Yes, Potter. One uses them for covering in winter, decency in the summer and in your case to commit dire crimes against fashion."

Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Dire's a bit strong..."

Malfoy shook his head vehemently.

"No, it's not strong enough. I mean, your robes are all right, it's fairly hard to go wrong with robes, but the Muggle clothes? I thought you were brought up among that lot."

Harry turned towards the lake, wincing as the wind blew directly in his face. The wince covered his expression as he replied:

"I was. That's the problem."

Malfoy, who was sitting on a rock, stretched out his legs and studied them instead of Harry. This, Harry began to realise, was his form of tact.

"Right, I remember. You were forced into the clothes of your cousin, who has his own orbit of gravity. But you have money, don't you? You've bought a few clothes for yourself?"

"Sure," Harry agreed uneasily.

"Then you're to blame. Let me see, the clothes you actually bought would be the slightly better-fitting but brown and utterly drab things you sport occasionally?"

"Look, I don't know how we got onto the subject of fashion- They're just *sensible*, all right? I mean, clothes aren't that important."

Malfoy's eyebrows shot up into his hair.

"Don't you want to look good?" he inquired, in the scandalised tone of one who will simply not comprehend the situation if the answer is no.

Well, Harry was about to reply, it would be a bit shallow to care about clothes when there's a war going on, wouldn't it? Besides, I'm the Boy Who Lived, I have to fulfill expectations, I can't be sodding well vain, can I...?

Then he remembered that this was Malfoy, and Malfoy might chuck something at him.

He also remembered the acute anxiety he used to feel about Dudley's cast-offs - that bobble jumper! - that dyed-grey uniform he never had to wear - how he used to passionately wish to be like the other children.

"Of course I do," he said slowly. "But... I don't know..."

He looked over at Malfoy, who was wearing a grey T-shirt and jeans with an air usually associated with velvet and lace.

"You... know about Muggle clothes, don't you?" he said.

"Well, I'm certainly not going to wander around looking like you, you monstrous fashion victim."

"Yeah, but... Why do you even wear them?"

Malfoy tilted his head to one side, and paused thoughtfully before he replied.

"It's a - statement. Slytherins don't join the Young Order. Slytherins don't wear Muggle clothes. And I don't do as I'm expected." He narrowed his eyes. "And I certainly don't wear brown corduroy. You make me *ill*, Potter."

"What clothes do you think I should buy?" Harry asked helplessly.

Malfoy turned around and gave him an appraising look.

Harry averted his eyes. Malfoy had a terribly unsettling way of looking at people. He was completely unembarrassed about doing it, and had the attitude of one checking off items on a list.

"Hmm," he said finally, and got up. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"Not to rob a shop, you twit. We're going to clear out your wardrobe first, and then we'll restock it next time we're in Hogsmeade. Some very nice Muggle clothes shops have opened there."

Malfoy turned around and started walking.

Malfoy had a tendency to act on impulse. Harry had thought of mentioning that this was a Gryffindor trait, but he didn't fancy the idea of an all-out fist-fight.

"Wait," Harry called out. "Won't you have to - I mean, to come into the Gryffindor common room... you'll have to hear the password, right?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Um."

There was a pause. Harry looked wretched. Malfoy looked mildly amused.

"You think I'll sneak up and write graffiti on the common room walls?"

"Something like that..." Harry admitted. "Except a bit more evil."

Malfoy shrugged. "Can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind. Let's see." He paused. "The Slytherin password is Vici."

Harry smiled. "Wizard Wheezes."

"So very like the Gryffindors," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "No imagination. Did it occur to you, Potter, that I could quite easily make up a password? Or indeed that I could exchange passwords, commit my evil deeds, and trust to your Gryffindor honour not to retaliate?"

Well, it was occurring to him *now*.

"Er."

"I didn't, as it happens," Malfoy informed him severely. "But I could have. You really shouldn't go around trusting people like me."

"Why, because they might toss out half my clothes?"

"Oh, shut up and get moving."

*

Slytherins were sly. Slytherins were nasty.

Harry knew all that.

What people had forgotten to mention was that Slytherins had a decided talent for histrionics.

Malfoy was making yet another horrible face as he rummaged through Harry's wardrobe. Harry was sitting on his bed, mildly entertained.

"Oh, ugh, Potter, do you take your glasses off when you go shopping? I can't believe I'm *touching* this, this is disgusting!"

Nobody could look quite as fastidious as Malfoy. He picked up the clothes gingerly, as if bad fashion sense might be catching.

"Hmm. This goes in the Just About Bearable Pile, this goes in the Toss Them Out Pile, and this goes in the Burn Them, For I Cannot Live In a World Where They Exist Pile."

Malfoy flung the clothes about in a haphazard manner, but when the third shirt was still in mid-air he turned around and pointed his wand.

"Incendio!"

Ashes floated lazily down to the ground.

"Malfoy! You can't burn my clothes!"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"Watch me."

Harry was watching. Somewhat helplessly. He was also snickering a bit, but he told himself that that was because he'd had the presence of mind to hide his favourite pyjamas.

Malfoy was making some very disturbing snarling noises as he discovered the worst of Dudley's cast-offs.

"Nobody's that huge," he said finally. "You've got to be joking."

"I wish I was."

"I've come to accept that not everyone can have my svelte figure, but this is outrageous. Surely there is some sort of society-"

"To help him diet? There is, but-"

"Well, no." Malfoy frowned at the vast trousers. "I was thinking more in terms of a mercy killing."

"Malfoy!"

"Amazing, the amount of scandalised righteousness you can infuse into one word. Oh. Oh, that's *vile*."

Malfoy had discovered the shameful pile of Dudley's bobble sweaters.

"*Incendio! Incendio! Incendio!*"

"Malfoy, stop burning things!"

Malfoy smiled a placid, angelic smile as the ashes fell all around him. Harry was unable to stop laughing.

Ron Weasley opened the door, gave Malfoy a horrified look and immediately slammed out again.

There was a small pause.

"A shared dormitory always causes these kind of problems," Malfoy remarked. "I mean, how do you people deal with it when you bring home - hang on a second, Gryffindors don't have love lives. Never mind."

"We do have love lives! Ron and Hermione-"

"Potter, stop! That's a very nasty image."

"I'm sure our love lives are more interesting than Crabbe and Goyle's-"

"Potter, that image isn't any better!"

"I - what - *Malfoy!*"

Malfoy abandoned Harry's alarmingly empty closet and sank onto the bed, leaning against the bedstead.

"Again with the scandalised righteousness, Potter," he said lazily. "Hmm. This dealing with the closet of a fashion disaster is tiring work. Maybe I'll go tuck myself up in my nice quiet prefect's bedroom."

He leaned against the bedstead, half-shutting his eyes. His hair looked very pale against the deep red of the hangings.

"Prefects don't get special bedrooms," Harry pointed out.

"Maybe not in *your* house. Ha. Ha."

"Professor McGonagall says that prefects getting special privileges isn't fair."

"Both Professor McGonagall and the concept of *fair* do not count in my house." Malfoy smirked, though the effect was somewhat spoiled because the rest of his face remained relaxed and almost amiable. "Slytherin rules. And when it doesn't, it kills the competitors and usurps the throne. I have a very nice private room, thank you very much. Feel free to drop by and salivate with envy anytime."

Harry got up from the bed and eyed the tiny pile of clothes he was supposed to wear with a certain amount of dismay.

"Malfoy, are there seven items of clothing here?"

Malfoy's eyes opened.

"There are that many? I knew I was being lax!"

*

"It was horrible, Hermione," Ron said darkly.

Hermione was sitting with him by the fire in the common room. He had just dropped on the sofa and buried his face in the cushions. She stretched out, relaxed, happy from hours of quiet reading and ever so slightly mystified.

"What was?" she asked indulgently, stroking his soft red hair.

"Malfoy!" Ron spat the word. "In our dormitory! Doing things to Harry's *clothes*!"

Men Who Love Dragons Too Much fell off Hermione's lap.

"What! What was Harry doing?"

"I don't know," Ron answered in muffled and morose tones. "He was just there on the bed. He seemed quite happy about the whole thing."

"I... oh, Ron!"

"I know. This is all going too far."

"Well, I should just about say so!"

At this juncture, Harry and Malfoy came walking down the stairs. Harry's voice was clear and amused. Malfoy's voice was lower, but then again, those sly Slytherin tones sounded as if he was murmuring lewd things when he was reading out Potions ingredients.

Harry glanced over at Malfoy when he saw them, less a glance of guilt than a glance of concern.

Right, Hermione thought. Harry was afraid that the big bad Gryffindors would bully Malfoy. When Malfoy was apparently ripping clothes off Harry upstairs!

"Hi, guys," he said awkwardly.

"What were you doing with him?" Hermione demanded, too agitated to bother with further preliminaries.

"He was helping me clear out my wardrobe," Harry answered, puzzled.

"Oh."

Oh. Oh, that's what it was. All right, I can breathe now.

Malfoy leaned back against the stone wall and curled his upper lip at them.

Hermione glared daggers back.

Harry looked concerned. "Ron, you almost ready for Quidditch practise?"

Ron sat up, despite the horrible fact that Malfoy was in the process of poisoning Gryffindor air with his presence.

Of course, Hermione reflected, mention of Quidditch practise might bring Ron back from the grave.

Malfoy's cool voice cut through the silence.

"Oh yes," he said thoughtfully. "Quidditch practise. I'm going to be late."

If Ron had been a dog, his hackles would have risen.

"You're not going to be *playing*," he snapped. "We booked the pitch."

Harry, thankfully, gave Malfoy a reproving look.

"Ron's right," he told Malfoy. "Remember. Bookings can't be changed. We settled that last year."

'Settled it' was such an amicable term, Hermione thought. Harry and Malfoy had had to be physically restrained from killing each other when Malfoy rubbed out the Gryffindor booking for the fifth time and Dumbledore was forced to step in.

Looking at Harry and Malfoy standing companionably side by side, she really missed the homicidal days.

"I don't mean practise on the *pitch*," Malfoy said dismissively. "Catch you later, Potter."

He sneered at Hermione and Ron as he strode out.

Harry looked after him, clearly intrigued by Malfoy's last statement. Ron began to rail at Harry before the door had even shut behind him.

Hermione bent down and picked up her book.

*

Harry knew that he had only been given the captainship because he was Harry Potter.

Traditionally it was given to someone of wizarding family, who had been familiar with Quidditch since childhood and could formulate plans based on remembered games and strategies discussed at home. But of course, exceptions were always made for Harry Potter.

Ron could always be trusted for an encyclopaedic knowledge of every game that the Chudley Cannons had ever played, though, and just now he was detailing one of their Keeper's fabled tricks to the attentive new Keeper, Natalie McDonald.

Harry stood at the side, smiling politely as their voices washed over them.

Ron should've been captain.

"I hope Ron's not frightening Natalie," Dean Thomas said behind him.

Harry turned slightly. Dean was smiling at him, the quiet friendly smile Harry and all Dean's roommates were familiar with.

Dean had always been easy to talk to. Harry relaxed a fraction.

"Why should he frighten Natalie?"

"He frightens me," Dean said with a mock shudder. "All that talk of innumerable past matches makes my vision blur. Of course... I've never been terribly into Quidditch."

That was true, of course. Dean had always remained only moderately enthusiastic about Quidditch, though he had great technical ability, and had kept faithful to his soccer and his art.

"Then why'd you join the team?"

Dean looked slightly embarrassed. "Well - I wanted to spend more time with Ginny."

Harry glanced over at Ginny's red hair. She was talking volubly about the Chudley Cannons, her voice loud and cheerful as usual.

Harry had never understood the brief match-up of Ginny and the withdrawn Dean.

"I'm sorry that didn't work out... Bad luck."

Now Dean was with Parvati, of course, so that was all right. He was so nice - Harry hadn't understood why Ginny had broken up with him. Ginny looked around now to find their eyes on her. She blushed.

"Well, things could be worse," Dean said philosophically. "I could be one of the poor fools on the Slytherin team."

Harry shot him a questioning glance.

"Malfoy runs that lot like a manic drill sergeant," Dean explained. "Surely you've noticed."

What Harry noticed was the lack of rancour with which Dean pronounced Malfoy's name.

Dean had always been quiet, but he saw a good deal.

"I haven't got anything against Malfoy," Dean said. "I hardly know him, but he's never bothered me. I hear you two are friends now?"

"Well. Yeah."

"He's an interesting person," Dean remarked with a shrug. "Terrifying, but unique."

"Terri-"

At this moment, Malfoy appeared to prove Dean's point. He was running along the fields surrounding the Quidditch pitch, in hot pursuit of Crabbe and Goyle. His hair was blowing wildly in every direction, his eyes were shining madly and he was carrying a heavy bag. His two Beaters were lumbering as fast as their legs would carry them while he pelted them ferociously with shot-put balls.

"You're never going to get *anywhere* if you're afraid of being hurt by Bludgers! Get back here! Stand and be smacked around like men!"

Neither Crabbe nor Goyle were that stupid. They kept running, howling occasionally as Malfoy got in lucky hits.

"*And power-hungry Slytherin loved those of great ambition*," Dean quoted, but he was grinning. "Malfoy's determined to wipe the pitch with Ravenclaw again. Like I said, terrifying."

Malfoy realised his bag was empty at about the same time he drew level with Harry and Dean. Crabbe and Goyle, not realising, pounded onwards.

"Imbeciles!" Malfoy yelled after them.

He glanced over at Harry and Dean, and nodded perfunctorily. He looked exhausted, wiping sweaty blond locks out of his eyes, but he turned and stalked off with the same energy as ever.

Harry grinned at Dean. "But like you said, unique."

He went over to Ron and Natalie.

"Hey, could we have a little less talking and a bit more Quidditch here? Get up in the air!"

Dean smiled. "Yes, captain."

*

The next Monday at Potions class Harry came early to talk to Malfoy again.

Malfoy had been busy with his fairly spectacular win against Ravenclaw that weekend, and Harry had been spending time with Ron and Hermione. He hadn't seen him alone in a few days, and... he'd been surprised to find that, well, he sort of missed him.

"Congratulations on the win," he said. "I didn't get the chance to wish you luck before the match."

Malfoy lifted his chin. He had shown no sign that he had missed Harry, but he was here early, wasn't he?

Harry was learning to understand Malfoy's ways.

"Slytherins don't need luck," he said. "We have tactics."

"Yeah, and your tactics consist of breaking every rule in the book."

"There are seven hundred ways of committing a foul in Quidditch," Malfoy informed him loftily. "I couldn't be bothered to learn them all."

"You're impossible, Malfoy, has anyone ever told you that?"

Malfoy's face softened slightly. "My father used to tell me that all the time." He paused, then added abruptly: "I can't do anything tonight."

Harry's first emotion was one of gratification. Malfoy had never bothered to tell him something like that before. Showing up usually seemed to be a matter of whim.

He was also, of course, disappointed.

"Oh... Why not?"

"Mad passionate tryst. You know how it is."

Harry's fierce blush had only just started when Malfoy raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Honestly, Potter, you gullible idiot. I'm damn flattered you think I've got the time to be picking up pretty young things. If you hadn't noticed, you've been keeping me busy recently."

Harry felt more relaxed.

"So the famous Malfoy Charm which can pick up girls in the space of two minutes has lost its efficiency?"

"Never doubt the charm, Potter. It's still in operation, but I don't have two minutes to spare from Astronomy homework."

"Well, if you're already going to be at the Astronomy Tower you probably just have to open a cupboard and step into a clinch."

Malfoy waved a quill at him.

"Now you're thinking like a Slytherin. But unfortunately, I'm not going to the Astronomy Tower. I need to be on open stretches of land where I can fill out the wider scope of my project. And unless I want to start rendez-vousing with cows..."

Malfoy shrugged. Harry leaned against his desk thoughtfully.

"Sounds like you're going to have a pretty dull time of it," he commented.

"Yeah, well."

"...I could come with you, if you want?"

Malfoy glanced up, his eyes extremely grey. It was a colour that seemed to give away nothing.

"You don't do Astronomy," he said. "Another sterling example of your stupidity, Potter, because it is a really great class. Don't tell me your life is so pathetic you want to go around lying around in boring fields for the fun of it?"

Harry looked down at the wood grain of the desk.

"Hermione and Ron are having a private get-together. Tonight's shaping up to be so pathetic I might as well. Besides, I thought you could use the company."

He tilted his head back to give Malfoy a lopsided smile.

"Since you're getting rid of me in order to have more time to pick up young things anyway..."

Malfoy's lip quirked. "Did I say that? Oh, fine, you can tag along. Now run away, little Gryffindor, before the angry Potions master bites you."

Harry looked over, noticed that Snape was present and scowling, and fled to his seat.

*

Harry lay on the blanket, feeling strangely calm.

There was something wonderful about the sky - it reminded him of the happiness he felt while playing Quidditch. Even now, when it was black and empty, he looked at it and saw a vast playground. And the field was quiet, and the darkness sheltering, and nobody expected anything of him.

He glanced over at Malfoy, whom he saw in profile against the night, pressing the Omnioculars to his eyes. Occasionally he bent down to his parchment and made some notes with his quill, flicking his hair out of his eyes and giving Harry a casual smile as he did so.

Malfoy certainly didn't give Harry the impression that he expected something from him, not even his company. Malfoy was such a self-contained creature; he'd been able to do without proper friends for years - if you didn't count Crabbe and Goyle. Harry reflected that it probably made very little difference to Malfoy whether he was with him or not. It bothered him slightly.

It was such a novel feeling for him - for Harry Potter - to wish someone were paying him more attention.

Harry smiled again, his head resting on his joined palms as he looked up into the sky.

"What are you smiling about, Potter?" Malfoy asked absently, jotting down another note.

"Oh... nothing. I was just feeling - content."

Content. That was the word.

"In a freezing field in the dead of night? Has anyone ever told you that you have low expectations of life?"

Harry reached over and punched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Ah. I see. Contentment comes from the fact you're able to beat the poor helpless Slytherin around. You know, sadism is not the way to live."

"I thought for Slytherins it was the *only* way to live."

"Ah," said Malfoy, not bothering to deny it. "But you're not a Slytherin."

Harry propped himself up on one elbow.

"I almost was."

Malfoy dropped his Omnioculars.

"*What?*"

Harry felt a small irrational spark of triumph that he had Malfoy's attention now.

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," he admitted, and then quietly, hoping Malfoy would not be offended, "I told it no."

Malfoy didn't even notice his attempt at tact.

"You," he marvelled. "Harry Potter, epitome of all things Gryffindor. Almost thrown in the snake pit." He laughed suddenly, a wickedly appealing laugh. "Now wouldn't *that* have been something!"

Harry leaned back again, the stars glittering in front of his eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "I suppose it would."

"Oh, the multiple ways in which I would have been able to make your life a misery," Malfoy mourned. "We would've been sharing a bedroom for five years. I could have driven you out of your mind."

Harry closed his eyes, the night air playing on his face. The only noise was the familiar sound of Malfoy's voice and the scratching of his quill.

"Hmm. So you don't think we would have become friends sooner?"

"Are we friends now?"

Harry looked up, blinking as if against sudden hurtful light, into Malfoy's face.

Malfoy's gaze was not spiteful but mildly inquiring, and Harry felt a rush of intense relief.

"I know," Malfoy said, his voice as precise and passionless as a piece of his homework, "you asked me to be friends, and I said yes. But are you my friend?"

Harry half sat up, not sure how to phrase it, wanting to say something special.

Finally, all he could think of to say was a forceful: "Yes."

He waited for a response with a certain tenseness.

"Oh. Good," Malfoy replied, tilting his face up to the stars and then finishing his chart with a flourish.

Harry waited, feeling rather strange, for Malfoy to - give him a proper answer, to reciprocate with some words indicating emotion.

This was such an odd friendship, so unlike the comfortable familiar camaraderie with Ron and Hermione, and the undemanding companionship of Seamus and Dean. This was something very new, new enough for tension and uncertainty, and yet it was... intense. It meant more to him than Seamus or Dean, and it - it had the capacity to hurt him without the security that Ron and Hermione offered.

And now he was lying here with his nerves stretched painfully taut, waiting for something that Malfoy seemed to have no intention of offering.

He felt an obscure desire to hit back.

"Of course, then I would never have been friends with Ron and Hermione," he said, using their names with deliberately stressed affection.

"Yes, that would have been a tragedy," Malfoy said.

"I don't know why you hate them so much," Harry said.

Malfoy was putting away his books and didn't look at Harry as he replied, his profile indicating no emotion besides a certain abstractedness,

"I don't hate them. But you know how I feel about - all right, the Muggleborn. And as for that pack of Weasleys..."

His lip curled.

"My father told me all about them."

"The Weasleys are wonderful people," Harry said angrily, sitting up.

Malfoy's face was quite close to his now, as Malfoy knelt by his schoolbag, and there was no reciprocating anger in his eyes. Rather, he looked quite matter-of-fact.

"His father attacked mine in a bookshop. I don't care if they were enemies, there's no excuse for that kind of behaviour. And his children are no different. Those Weasley twins used to hiss at children who'd just been put in Slytherin. People call me prejudiced, but I don't stoop as low as that. And as for your pet Weasley - he's just like his brothers. He doesn't like me because of my family, and I don't like him because of his. That's the way things are - though the Weasleys needn't be such bloody savages about it."

"That's not t-"

I've heard of his family. My dad... says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side.

Harry remembered Ron's slight snigger when he heard this Malfoy boy was called Draco. He'd felt licensed to be unpleasant because of who Malfoy was.

That was one good thing about not having parents. Harry hadn't inherited their grudges or their opinions.

"Ron's a good person," Harry said tiredly, lying back and looking at the stars again. "You shouldn't judge anybody just because of what family they're from."

The whole family's rotten.

"Tell him that," Malfoy sneered.

"I will," Harry answered. "And I'll keep telling you, too."

Malfoy pushed aside his schoolbag and stretched out on the blanket.

"Oh, don't nag me, Potter. Or else I'll set my minions on you."

"Huh." Harry laughed. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Naturally. Harry Potter's not afraid of *anything*," Malfoy said mockingly.

"Shut up!"

"Fearless Potter. You're the only one in the school who doesn't seem to have those moments of blood-freezing terror."

"Why should my blood freeze?"

"The Boy Who Was Totally Oblivious. For a year people disappeared in the outside world, and Hogwarts was safe. And now students are vanishing under Dumbledore's nose, and our

school is no safer than this field, and we all know that someone inside has to be helping him. Are you never scared?"

"I haven't caught you trembling with your head under the bedclothes."

"That's because I have nerves of steel," Malfoy announced grandiosely. "Potter! You bastard, do you have a pillow?"

"I'm using my cloak. See, I wore a cloak. And a jumper. Because it's February, and it's cold, and I'm not an idiot."

"How dare you call me an idiot? You'll be hearing from my lawyers in the morning."

Malfoy villainously tried to steal the folded cloak, but he only succeeded in getting an edge of it.

"Fine," he said with bad grace. "Push over a bit, Potter."

Harry felt a lick of blond hair tickle his ear, and moved to give Malfoy more room. The sky was calm, and Malfoy's breathing was level and reassuring beside him.

"Do you get scared?" Harry asked eventually.

"Hm? Of course I do, Potter, I'm not a bloody valiant Gryffindor. Remember when your stupid Patronus came right at me at that Quidditch match in third year? That was terrifying. It went right for me."

Harry laughed softly.

Right - Malfoy, Goyle and Flint in Dementors' robes.

"I... didn't realise it went straight for you."

"Well, it did."

"In a way it's a left-handed compliment, Malfoy," Harry informed him. "Even in those robes, I recognised you as the adversary."

Malfoy's voice was wry.

"If being charged down by ghost stags means respect, colour me unworthy."

"Oh, don't whine."

Of course, asking Draco not to complain would be a lot like asking the sky to turn yellow, and...

Draco.

Harry realised he'd thought the name quite naturally. A few weeks ago, it would have been - strange. An almost absurd concept. And now, well - his name *was* Draco, wasn't it? It - was what he thought of when he looked at him. It was natural.

Not that Harry was going to call him by it or anything.

"I don't whine!" A small pause. "It's cold," Draco complained. "We should go inside."

"Hmmm." It was peaceful in the field. "In a minute."

*

Harry woke up cold and stiff next morning. He yawned, squinting against the light, turned over and found himself nose to nose with Draco.

He bit his tongue and rolled away hastily, then sat upright. His clothes were soggy with dew.

"Malfoy, wake up! We slept here all night!"

Draco made a small grumbling sound and turned his face into Harry's cloak. He was curled up fast asleep with his hair in his face and his eyes scrunched up. He looked utterly absurd.

"Malfoy!"

Harry seized a shoulder and shook urgently.

"Leave me alone," Draco said in a muffled voice.

"Malfoy, wake *up*!"

Draco opened his eyes a slit. Then they snapped all the way open.

"Potter, what - oh. Oh, no. Oh, tell me I didn't sleep in a field. Oh, how completely *plebeian*."

"Yes, that's what's worrying me," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Whether this will affect my social standing. Everyone will be worried sick."

"Not my housemates," Draco answered promptly. "They'll just assume I was sleeping with somebody. Ugh, my clothes feel horrible - Potter, have I mentioned that I loathe you recently?"

Harry rose and began to brush off his jeans. He offered a hand to help Malfoy up.

Draco, still lying prone, leaned back on his elbows and gave Harry a sour look.

"I *despise* you."

"Of course you do, Malfoy."

Draco took his hand and watched Harry fold up the blanket without offering to help.

"You can carry my bag," he ordered sulkily.

"The hell I will," Harry returned calmly.

Draco picked up his bag. "I hate you. I *abhor* you. I-"

"Detest's a good word," Harry offered.

"Thank you, Potter. I detest you with the fire of a thousand suns."

"Oh, be quiet and come have breakfast."

*

It took a certain amount of persuasion to get Draco to breakfast. He seemed fixed on the idea of getting to a hairbrush and a mirror.

"Don't be vain, Malfoy. You're not skipping. You skip too much as it is."

"You're not my nanny, Potter. I can skip if I like."

"I'll carry your bag."

Pause.

"How far?"

So when Harry went into the Great Hall, he was carrying Draco's bag on top of everything else. Draco abandoned him at the door, flung himself onto a chair at the Slytherin table and stridently demanded coffee.

Just in case anybody wasn't already looking.

Ron and Hermione greeted him with equal parts hysterical relief and reproach. Apparently, Ron had thought he was with a girl. Hermione wouldn't say what she had thought.

Both of them were appalled by the facts.

"In a *field*, Harry, the danger-"

"With *Malfoy*, Harry, ugh-"

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table, where a similar interrogation was going on. Draco seemed to be refusing to answer any questions, and he had his face hidden against Pansy's shoulder. Pansy was looking down at his head with an almost maternal solicitude. Blaise Zabini put his hand on Draco's shoulder.

Hermione reached over and touched Harry's arm. He blinked at her, startled.

"I won't yell at you, Harry - you look cross and exhausted. But you've got to be more careful."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you..." Harry said. "And I'm not cross!"

*

That Friday, Draco didn't appear.

It bothered Harry. Since Monday, Draco had seemed to understand that he should give Harry an excuse if he wasn't coming. It bothered Harry even more that he himself had turned up loyally every day for weeks.

And... being bothered bothered him. Because, damn it, he did want to see Draco, and surely it was all right to admit that.

They were *friends*. He'd said the words, and now he meant them.

And Draco had given him the Slytherin password, and said he could drop by anytime.

Harry was disgusted to find he was actually bargaining with himself for the pleasure of seeing Draco.

I won't use the password, but I can knock and ask if he's there. That wouldn't be an invasion of privacy. And if he's not doing anything important, he'll come out. Maybe he even wants me to come. He likes to test people. He likes to test me.

Yes, he thought he would go to the Slytherin rooms.

Harry glanced around in vague surprise as he realised he was nearly at the Hogwarts entrance already.

*

Harry knew there was something strange happening as soon as the Slytherin door opened. There was an unusual amount of fuss and noise and the girl who opened the door was in low-cut dress robes.

Harry politely averted his eyes from the breasts on display, and asked if he could see Malfoy. It was another indication that something was up when the girl simply blinked and wandered away.

Were her eyes dilated? Somebody should watch these Slytherins.

Was that Blaise Zabini in leather?

This kind of thing was just not on.

Oh, good, there was Draco.

Harry blinked.

Draco propped one wrist against the doorframe, leaning his weight against it and looking at Harry inquiringly.

He was wearing black jeans and a close-fitting shirt the colour of silver. His hair looked soft and bright, as if he'd spent hours on it.

"Um," said Harry. "Hi."

"Hi," said Draco, looking marginally amused. "Just in the neighbourhood, were you? I promise, no ritual sacrifice of virgins is afoot."

"Is there something going on?"

Draco looked a little startled.

"Just the usual outing to the club. You know, beneath the Three Broomsticks. All the older Slytherins go together, every month. I thought you knew."

"No..."

"Oh, well." Draco shrugged. "I'd ask you to join us, but I have horrible memories of your dancing. Besides, they'd eat you alive."

"Oh - sure. Have a good time."

"That's the plan. See you, Potter."

"Er - goodbye."

Harry felt oddly desolate once the door shut in his face.

*

"Oh, right, the Slytherins' little orgies," Hermione said primly. "Using the excuse of solidarity to get drunk and feel each other up."

Apparently everybody knew but Harry.

Typical.

"Well, Harry, don't mope about it," Hermione said. "You can use tonight to get a start on your NEWTs revision."

Ron was sitting at a table, looking hunted, and Hermione was drawing out a colour-coded chart. Ginny was peering over Ron's shoulder with the happy look of someone whose NEWTs were a year and more away.

Ron mouthed 'Run! Save yourself!' when Hermione wasn't looking.

"Thrilling," Harry said morosely, and then sharply, "I'm not *moping*."

Hermione looked as if she would have liked to challenge this claim, but she pursed her lips and maintained a tactful silence.

"It's nice to have you here," said Ginny in muted tones, dropping her pen and going scarlet as she spoke.

"Thanks, Ginny," Harry said, touched. Ginny went scarlet again.

"At least sit away from the fire," Hermione urged. "You've been sitting beside it for hours. You must be roasting."

"We could go out and have a few laps of the Quidditch pitch," Ron suggested hopefully.

"Ron, that Herbology homework is already overdue," Hermione said, fixing him with a menacing eye. "You're doing it if I have to tie you to the chair."

"Very kinky, Granger. Who knew you had hidden depths?"

The easy, drawling voice brought Harry's head up with a jerk.

Draco was leaning against the open Gryffindor entrance. His hair was a little mussed and his face a little flushed, but he was still dressed up and his expression was as cool as ever.

"Malfoy," Harry said, and was startled himself to hear the undisguised pleasure in his tone.

Draco inclined his head. "It was dull at the party," he explained. "I was bored. I came to see if you still wanted to do something."

Harry couldn't help smiling.

"Sure - of course. I'm coming now."

*

Draco flatly refused to go outside in the clothes he was wearing.

"I'd catch a chill," he informed Harry reproachfully. "It's a miracle I didn't die from that little field expedition. I'm fragile, you know."

Harry remembered this so-called fragile boy hurling shot-put balls at people and maintained a tactful silence.

"No," decided. "We can go to my room. There won't be many Slytherins around for hours."

So they did. And Harry was outraged.

"This place is really *nice*! You mean to tell me all Slytherin prefects get these?"

It *was* nice. All decorated in Slytherin green, of course, with a desk, and an actual fireplace, and-

"You have two wardrobes! That's ridiculous!"

Draco scowled. "I *know*. I've told Snape, I can't be expected to live without three, but will he listen? The man has a heart of stone."

Harry threw himself into the soft armchair opposite Draco, and gave him a long incredulous look.

"You don't need three wardrobes. *Nobody* needs three wardrobes."

Draco made a face at him. "Oh, what would you know, you sartorial disaster?"

"I know that thanks to you, I no longer need even one wardrobe."

"Stop harping on that, Potter." Draco stretched. "I said I'd take you to Hogsmeade and tell you what to buy, and I will."

"You're not *telling* me what to buy."

Draco pushed out his lower lip. "Fine."

"But we could go to Hogsmeade tomorrow, if you like." Harry's voice was quite casual.

Draco looked suddenly colder, his features arrested in their gradual relaxation.

"I can't. I'm meeting my mother for our little get-together."

"Oh."

Harry swallowed, trying to fight the urge to ask *Are you all right*, which Draco wouldn't appreciate, and fighting down his own disappointment.

Which was when Draco, as seemed to be his wont, threw off his calculations completely.

"You can come with us, if you like," Draco said casually.

Harry hesitated. He recalled a woman with a rather haughty expression, and the fact that this woman was Lucius Malfoy's widow. He was extremely doubtful about meeting Narcissa Malfoy again.

But on the other hand, he had nothing else to do... and a day without Draco seemed extraordinarily unappealing.

"All right, then," he agreed cautiously.

Draco gave him a brief flashing smile, and then leaned back, the fire playing on his hair, and suggested a card game.

That was how Harry came to be trailing awkwardly in Draco's wake as Draco strode over to meet the woman waiting in Hogsmeade square.

She was smaller than Harry had remembered.

"Hello, mother," Draco said. "This is the friend I said I was bringing."

Narcissa Malfoy looked over at Harry, and blinked.

Then she said blankly, "That's Harry Potter."

"Full marks for observation, mother," Draco observed calmly.

Narcissa smiled and held out her hand to Harry, who took it feeling rather stunned.

"Does that mean I'm not going to receive my next installment of Why I Hate That Sod Potter, Volume IV, Part VII? What a shame. I found it gripping."

Narcissa was not much like her son, who resembled his father so closely. Her hair was golden, several shades darker, and her eyes were a cool blue. Her skin was lightly tanned.

Yet she had a certain refined delicacy about her features that made her look like him when she spoke or moved, and her slow rich smile was very much his.

Harry saw what Draco had meant about his mother. Her eyes were a little chill, and her manner with Draco - gracious but slightly distant - was just the same as her manner with Harry. Still...

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said, wondering if he meant it.

"Pleasure's all mine," Narcissa replied drily. "You seem capable of forming coherent sentences, which is more than I can say for poor little Vincent and Gregory."

"Mother!"

Clearly, this was a favourite topic of Mrs. Malfoy's.

"Draco has sorry taste in friends," she continued. "Present company excepted, of course. That Pansy child always looked at me as if I was the disreputable girlfriend her son had brought home, and I think that Blaise boy was trying to seduce at least one of us."

Harry was coming to realise that Malfoy's flair for shocking conversation was also inherited.

"Well, boys," Narcissa said, "where do you want to go? I am entirely at your disposal."

Draco's eyes narrowed in a calculating manner. Harry took an alarmed step backwards.

"We can't appear in public with him looking like that," Draco announced.

*

Robe Wardrobe had been an extremely exclusive clothing store for years, tailored to meet the needs of every wizard needing a tailor. Nevertheless, Harry noticed that the attendants fluttered around the Malfoys with especial anxiety as they entered the shop. Draco took this with bored indifference, as if it was clearly his due. Narcissa smiled discreetly and sailed onwards.

Harry wished he had his invisibility cloak when Draco dived for the racks of clothing and began to talk in a loud, imperious voice.

"Pretty poor selection, of course. Oh no, that would make you look even *more* hideous. Take that yellow away from me and never let my eyes behold it again."

Narcissa gave Harry that calm, gracious-hostess smile.

"Draco's always been interested in clothes. It rather worried me when he was younger."

Harry tried to exchange pleasantries with her. "And it stopped worrying you when he started pulling girls' pigtails in the school yard?"

Narcissa looked thoughtful.

"I don't recall Draco ever pulling girls' pigtails. He did knock people unconscious with his bucket and spade, though. He was never one to do things by halves."

"I was a charming child," Draco put in. "A delight to meet. So polite. So precocious. And of course, so very pretty." He shoved a pile of clothes at Harry. "Try those on for a start."

"His tutors kept resigning," Narcissa murmured, more in the tones of one speaking about a child she had heard about than one she had given birth to. She indicated the changing cubicles to Harry. "They said he was an overbearing little monster. And he bit, too."

Harry walked hesitatingly into the cubicle. For a start, he wasn't used to getting changed in cubicles. What's more, it was off-putting to have Draco throwing things in constantly.

It was like being caught in a rain of clothes. And the clothes...

"Malfoy, these jeans are *not my size*."

"Of course they are," Draco called back blithely. "It's the ones you're wearing that aren't."

"Malfoy, none of these clothes are my size!"

"Potter, trust me."

"I will not!"

"Potter, don't you want all the girls to fancy you?"

"I - what-" Harry stopped. "Will they?"

"Well, no." Draco's voice was pragmatic. "But we can't Polyjuice you into me for any length of time, so this will have to do."

At length, the rain of clothes and the sounds of Draco carelessly insulting the merchandise and the staff of the shop ceased. Harry was left with the difficulty of getting into the stupid clothes.

"Potter, can't you even dress yourself?" Draco shouted. "Get a move on, or I'm coming in there to help you."

Harry got dressed faster than he would have thought humanly possible. Then he came out, unsure about the entire thing.

"Very nice, Harry," Narcissa complimented him.

Draco drew his brows together.

"Barely adequate, Potter. Next!"

He made Harry try on every item of clothing he'd thrown in. And then, to crown the indignity, he made him buy them all.

*

Narcissa and Harry were walking on the Hogsmeade pier by the lake as the sun set. Harry felt exhausted, laden down by bags... and rather happy. Draco was nowhere in sight.

"I presume this odd camaraderie developed from the incident at the Triwizard Tournament?" inquired Narcissa abruptly.

She had all Draco's tact, as well.

"Er. Yes," Harry answered.

"Mother, don't start interrogating him," Draco drawled, appearing out of nowhere with a blood-flavoured lollipop.

"Where did you get that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Researching."

"Researching what?"

Draco's smile was bright. "The phrase 'easy as taking candy from a baby.'"

"Draco!"

"Malfoy!"

"Calm yourselves," Draco told them dismissively, waving a hand towards the sweets stand at the bottom of the pier. "I said that for dramatic effect. Hey, I have an idea."

"Harry, you seem a sweet, well-spoken boy," Narcissa remarked. "You really shouldn't associate with people like my son."

Draco circled them, still smiling, then leaned back against the pier railing.

"You two could get married," he suggested. "Then you could club together in your efforts at raising me like a decent human being. Come on, Potter, you're a hero and all, you *like* hopeless tasks."

"Not tasks *that* hopeless, I don't."

Narcissa and Draco laughed.

"I think the house elves got most of the brunt of raising you," Narcissa commented lightly.

The smile slipped from Draco's face.

"Yes," he said distantly. "I remember."

He boosted himself up onto the railing, and began to attempt walking down to the bottom.

Narcissa stood looking after her son. For the first time, Harry noticed how cold her blue eyes were.

"I was never a maternal woman," she said. "I could never be very interested in children."

Harry was silent, unsure of what he could offer in return.

"What interest I had, Lucius discouraged. He didn't want his son growing up weak." Narcissa's clear voice was untouched by emotion. "It would have been all right, if Draco had been like either of us. But Draco has always been a little...fierce. He feels too much, and he isn't any good at concealing what he feels."

Harry personally thought that Draco was quite talented at being enigmatic. Still, he recalled Lucius Malfoy's cold voice, the first time he had heard it, advising his son that it was not wise to appear other than fond of Harry Potter. Draco had never paid a blind bit of attention to that.

He recognised too the difference between Narcissa and Draco's smiles. There was a shade of warmth behind Draco's, a passion that this woman did not possess.

Considering his environment, perhaps Draco had grown up rather demonstrative.

"Lucius always tried to repress that," Narcissa mused, "which made him worse, naturally. You'll have noticed that Draco isn't really receptive to moulding."

Harry murmured something more polite than 'That's glaringly obvious.'

"And now - Lucius is dead, and we are both left without him, and Draco thinks that... he, well. He loved him," she concluded. "And I let him love him. It's easier that way."

Harry looked over at Draco.

"He loves you," he said impulsively. "I could tell."

Narcissa's wry expression reminded him forcibly of another face.

"Poor Harry," she said lightly. "Anxious mothers burdening you with their woes. This can hardly be fun for you."

"I don't mind," mumbled Harry.

"It's cold up here on this rail," Draco yelled down at them. "When's dinner?"

He wore that imperious air again, the air Harry had always presumed came from always getting what he wanted. Now he thought that perhaps Draco could only get what he wanted if he acted like he didn't care.

"When would you like it, Draco?" asked his mother.

"Immediately!" Draco paused to consider. "And hot chocolate."

Harry shook his head of doubts, replacing them with that amused incredulity which always followed him when he was with Draco.

Narcissa laid her hand on Harry's arm.

"I'm glad you're Draco's friend," she said. "He wanted it so much."

Harry was looking up at Draco, who was pushing back hair so fine it tangled and untangled itself in the wind. He saw Narcissa Malfoy's delicate build in the slimness of his wrists, and the structure of his face and throat.

He also saw a curiously indomitable look in eyes that refracted to silver light beneath the pale sky.

"Sorry?" Harry asked her, a little distracted. "What was that?"

"Never mind," said Narcissa.

Chapter Seven: Straight Talking

If you want me all you have to do is ask a thousand questions

Could you put a name to someone else's sigh?

Could you put a face to someone else's eyes?

Is it someone that you'd maybe recognise?

But it all fades into morning when you open your eyes.

Draco stalked under the fresh green leaves of the trees around Hagrid's paddocks, looking distinctly put out.

"The end of March," he snarled. "Bringing the beginning of April. Heraldng spring and sunshine, which deliver in their turn sweet summer skies."

He pronounced each 's' as if it had personally affronted him.

Harry suppressed a smile.

"And that bothers you because...?"

"I hate summer," Draco said, narrowing his eyes and enunciating the word as if summer would be in very serious trouble when he got his hands on it.

"All right," Harry answered indulgently, looking up at the pale sunshine and then back at Draco. "Tell me why."

"The sun, of course," Draco replied. "Everybody else with their rotten tans. I find it unacceptable that I can't get one. I've done everything I could think of. I suppose *you* tan?"

Harry blinked as Draco eyed him accusingly. "Well - a bit."

Draco snorted in an aggrieved manner.

"Of course. Fine! I don't care. I'm not bitter," he informed Harry bitterly. "I'm just an off-putting off-white year in, year out. That's great."

The corner of his lip curled and he kicked rather maliciously at the moss.

Harry suppressed another smile. Draco could be such a sulky brat at times and yet, somehow, Harry was coming not only to accept it but find it oddly endearing.

It had never occurred to Harry that Draco's pale skin might bother him. It was - just part of Draco, wasn't it?

Harry glanced over at Draco, whose shirt collar had slipped down a fraction to expose the edge of one collarbone. The colour of his skin made his bones seem sharper, as if they might pierce through the delicate flesh. There was something almost fragile about his skin, something which coupled with his hair might have made him seem childlike if not for the cold, sharp intelligence of his eyes.

Nobody had skin quite like Draco.

"-revolting," he concluded in a disgusted tone.

Harry blinked again. "Oh - look, no. I mean, you're - er - you know, quite good-looking."

He avoided looking at Draco. Draco gave him a scandalised glare.

"You four-eyed git! I'm bloody gorgeous," he said, folding his arms. "Quite good-looking, indeed! I've never been so insulted in my life."

Harry sighed. "Never mind. Perhaps this summer you'll tan - or freckle, or something."

Draco looked even more outraged. "Freckle! That's not funny, Potter."

"Er. Sorry."

"I should say you are," Draco muttered. "Quite good-looking. Freckle. A desecration of my aristocratically fair skin. Some day, Potter, a girl is going to slap you in the face."

"You keep making me all these promises, but you never deliver," Harry said jokingly. "You promised me attention if I bought these stupid clothes, and they've had absolutely no effect."

"Sure. Ginny Weasley just happened to feel like dumping porridge in her lap."

"I... that had nothing to do with me!"

Draco dipped his head and concealed a smirk, which was the closest he could come, Harry thought, to sparing him from mockery.

"Well, Potter. This eventual girl will be getting someone with no fashion sense or tact - but I'm not saying she won't be quite lucky." He tossed his head. "Not as lucky as the person who gets *me*, of course."

"Oh, of course."

Draco bit the side of his lip thoughtfully.

"Actually, I consider that it's an honour too great not to be divided. Perhaps I could be shared among a select group."

Harry couldn't help laughing. It was a nice day, the sun was shining, and in a minute Draco was going to make faces at Hagrid's latest monstrosities. Harry leaned back against the fence, shut his eyes and smiled again.

The scream ripped through the air.

And before his mind registered what he had heard, before his eyes even came open, his instinct made him fast enough to grasp Draco's arm just as Draco set off for the school at a dead run.

*

They burst into the Great Hall and into total uproar.

Harry looked around frantically at the turmoil of panicked faces he did not recognise and tried to make sense of words that were nothing but screams and... It was all just a sea of noise and ugliness and fear, but he still had a grip on Draco's arm.

That felt - safe, like Draco's swift glance back at him as if he too needed reassurance.

He had hardly realised this when Hermione's tear-stained face appeared before him, and he felt terrified concern and a fleeting pang of dismay, because he would have to go to her... and he really did not want to let go.

Hermione leaned in to him as Draco stepped away, and he lost him. He watched Draco's blond head disappear into the crowd of Slytherins even as the Gryffindors surrounded him.

He saw Ron's open scared face, Neville with tears rolling down his cheeks, Ginny's vivid red head pressed briefly against Dean's shoulder, and he *knew*, he knew with cold creeping horror before Hermione spoke.

"There were twelve students taken," she whispered, her voice faltering. "All at once, Harry, people from each house, and... Seamus is gone. He's just - he's-"

She was wringing her hands and crying, Hermione who was always so brave, Hermione who was never helpless. Harry grasped her hand and she clutched back desperately for a second. Then she turned her face into Ron's chest and they were wrapped around each other, his shaking fingers in her hair. She still kept hold of Harry's hand. Harry leaned against them both a little, half closing his eyes, pretending... He didn't know. That they were warm, together and equally all in all to each other, as they were when they were very young and had magical adventures, and nothing could really hurt them.

Seamus. His dorm mate, his friend. Seamus who still kept the shamrock mascots from the Quidditch World Cup and had a secret but often-discussed crush on Padma Patil. *Seamus*.

No, stop thinking about it!

"Wh - who else?"

Ron's face was sick and pale. He couldn't seem to say.

Harry looked towards Dean, who was always calm, but Ginny was still leaning against him and his girlfriend Parvati was looking desolate. He seemed occupied.

Eventually, it was Hermione who spoke once more, her voice ragged and muffled in Ron's robes. Hermione was always brave enough to take charge in a crisis, even if she was trembling and on the point of breaking down.

"I - I don't know. Younger students mostly... Orla Quirke, and B-Blaise Zabini's little brother, and - some first years. I didn't know their names, I-" Her voice became a cry. "I didn't know..."

"Hermione, it's-" Harry began.

Ron, who was never demonstrative, kissed her hair and held her close.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he said, tucking her head under his chin. "It's all right."

Blaise Zabini's little brother... Harry couldn't help looking over at the Slytherins.

Draco was kneeling down, a position Harry had never seen him in before. His face was white and determined, and he was talking to a first year.

Harry watched his mouth shape the words "You are not afraid," an almost brutal order, but Draco seemed so sure, and now the first year looked more sure too.

Harry kept watching, not certain why the sight touched him so.

Then Draco allowed himself to lean closer towards Zabini.

Harry tried to see the expression on Zabini's face, but his head was bowed.

"Oh, Harry," whispered Ginny, "what will we do?"

Harry took her hand and squeezed, and she drew gratefully closer to him. Poor sweet Ginny. He could still be almost a hero for her - or at least a friend.

"I don't know," he said, noticing her wet eyes. "But don't cry, Ginny. Please don't."

She held fast to his side, clinging to his arm.

Harry watched Draco's hair brush Zabini's sleeve.

And then the sounds of distress and despair stilled around them, because Dumbledore had stood up and everyone was staring at him.

Their headmaster was older now and frail, but it was not he himself so much as their *belief* in him that helped.

The only wizard that You-Know-Who ever feared.

Hermione and Ginny were both blinking back their tears.

Professor Dumbledore still had a very powerful kind of magic.

"We are at war," he said simply. "In war horrors are inevitable. My consolation is that I believe you will all suffer courageously. Those who have been taken, I believe we will recover. Those who remain, I know will continue to fight."

There were faces glowing in desperate hope across the room.

"I know that I can count on you all to be brave. Professor Lupin will discuss further precautions at the Young Order meetings, but the most important thing for you all now is simply to face danger, and to keep the conviction that we are fighting for the right reasons and we will not be defeated."

There was an easing of tension around Harry, and a growing conviction in all the faces he looked into.

The Slytherins, Harry noticed, were looking at Dumbledore with respect but without that shining faith. He had never been to them what he was to the rest of the school. Draco was standing up now, resolute and blond and a little like a knight in shining armour, if you didn't look at his eyes. Slytherins were crowding around him. His hand was on Blaise Zabini's arm.

They kept near to him as they moved out of the hall, and Harry thought, *where's Snape? They need somebody - Draco needs somebody...*

He would have liked to speak with him again for a moment, but Draco was with the Slytherins now. He was theirs.

So Harry put on a brave face and put a brotherly arm around Ginny, and went with them all to Gryffindor Tower. They all crowded together in the common room because nobody could face the empty beds and besides, there was safety in numbers.

And Harry told himself that he belonged with them, and it was enough, and he was comforted.

*

Hermione and Ron ended up sleeping curled together on the couch in the common room, holding each other tight against the pain. It was late when Harry climbed the stairs helping up Neville and Dean, weary and scared.

"Good night, Harry," Ginny said as they went.

"Night." He wondered what Draco was doing right now.

The trip to his bed was fast, terribly fast. He tried not to look at Seamus' bed, tried not to see the others avoiding it and pretended every motion they made was not sharp and terrified. Harry tried not to think about being alone, and how people were taken sometimes when they slept. He tried to summon up the sunlight from earlier, and the laughter.

It didn't work. He was twisting among thoughts of who could be taken next, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Dean... and amid the nightmares and the longing he fell asleep and...

He was swimming in the lake at night. He felt peculiarly heavy in the water, as if he might sink at any moment.

That would mean drowning, wouldn't it? He felt strangely at peace with that idea.

Hermione drifted by in one of the boats Hagrid took the first years in, a lantern beside her shining on her book.

He called out to her, and she said, "Harry, I'm very busy. I have to fight a war. Could you please be quiet?"

When the next boat went by, he saw Ron, absorbed in diagrams of Quidditch strategy. He yelled his name, but Ron lifted his head and said,

"I'm sorry, Harry, but after I'm done with these I have to spend a little time with Hermione."

He was getting heavier and heavier.

"Sherbet lemon."

Harry twisted around to see Draco in the water.

"Wh-what did you say?"

Draco laughed, a sound like the light trembling on the lake. He swam backwards, his skin gleaming wet and pale.

"Who do you trust?"

Harry reached out for him then, and woke up.

The night was close around him, and his bed was colder than the lake. Dean and Neville were sleeping, he could hear them, and he needed to be away from the absence of Seamus' faint snores.

He wanted to go talk to Draco, but it was the middle of the night and he had to be asleep; and besides, wandering the corridors at this time... Harry got up and sat by the window, watching the pale dawn as the sun rose.

"Awake, Harry?" Dean asked quietly.

"I... yeah. I had an odd dream."

He could talk to Draco at breakfast.

"What was it about?"

Harry frowned. "I - don't remember."

*

Draco wasn't at breakfast, and they had no classes with the Slytherins that day. At lunch he was surrounded by people; at dinner Harry was occupied with all the Gryffindors discussing Dean and Parvati's split that morning and wondering if it had anything to do with Ginny Weasley, and Draco had booked the Quidditch pitch afterwards.

For some reason, Harry watched the Quidditch practise from the tower window, but he didn't see Draco properly until the meeting of the Young Order.

Draco was leaning back in his chair, his face very pale. There were faint shadows under his eyes, and his hair was ever so slightly out of place. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all.

This is outrageous. Someone should be looking after the Slytherins. He's going to be ill.

Pansy was clinging to one of his hands, which he permitted with a regal air. Blaise Zabini was pressed close to his side. All the Slytherins were clustering about him, closer than ever.

Harry understood why with Lupin's opening words.

"Professor Snape is away, attempting to gather information which will help explain the recent attack. Professor Black and I will be taking his place."

Harry wondered vaguely whether they were desperate enough to let Sirius teach the Slytherins again. That had been forbidden by Dumbledore since the Great Points War of sixth year, when Sirius and Snape had begun a vicious cycle of point removal and Gryffindor and Slytherin had both ended up with negative points. As Harry recalled, there had also been a pile-up outside Dumbledore's office when everybody stopped screaming and finally leaped at each other. Harry remembered trying to crack Draco's head open against the flagstones when Dumbledore came out.

Draco had always liked Snape, and he clearly already knew Snape was gone. A few Slytherin girls looked on the point of tears.

Draco was looking at Lupin, and he seemed calm and absorbed. Harry didn't think he looked too distraught.

"New safety regulations are in place," Lupin continued. "First to third years are absolutely forbidden to leave their common rooms without a teacher. Moreover, a prefect will be on duty at all times to enforce this. Nobody is to leave the school building except as part of a class, and Quidditch practise will be supervised by Madam Hooch. Nobody is to wander alone for any reason whatsoever. This includes the Young Councillors - Harry Potter, I saw you walking the school alone yesterday. Don't let it happen again."

Harry saw the concerned look in Lupin's eyes, and felt wretched for worrying him. *But I was going to meet Draco. If we can't go alone to meet each other, and we can't go outside, when am I ever going to see him?*

"I realise many of you must be in pain," Lupin said softly. "But all of Professor Snape's information so far tells us that the people we have lost are not dead. You-Know-Who has been displaying a great amount of interest in the *Captus* charm."

It was Ginny who shyly raised her hand and asked what that was.

Lupin, who always encouraged discussion, asked if any of the other students felt competent to explain it, and the force of Hermione's hand shooting up almost levitated her out of her chair.

But it was Draco who spoke without being called on, his voice lazy and almost distracted.

"It's a new form of an ancient spell," he elucidated slowly. Harry watched his long, pale fingers play idly with a quill. "Back in the old days, when wizards were more powerful and there were more of us - we could create a whole world, trapped in a tiny sphere, and trap real people inside it. Enter it ourselves and have the world as our realm, and the people as our slaves."

He did not seem at all repelled by the idea. Rather, he looked intrigued and just a little like a drawing of those ancient wizards in Professor Binns' books, with pureblood lines and refined cruelty.

Ron muttered something like, "Typical of *you* to know."

"So does your girlfriend, Weasley," snapped Draco. "The magic to create whole worlds has been lost, but it's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans You-Know-Who can keep in his pocket, that Dementors can patrol and nobody can ever escape from. The advantage to him is that he has a chance to torture our people for information, and to convert them, maybe use the purebloods for arranged breeding later. The advantage to us is that - perhaps we can get them back."

Ron's voice was slightly louder now.

"Odd that you should know so much about Dark Magic, Malfoy."

Draco leaned back in his chair.

"Know your enemy, Weasley."

"Because of course your family has always been so opposed to the Dark Arts," Ron shot back. "Did your Daddy teach you-"

"Ron, don't!" Harry exclaimed.

"*Shut your mouth about my father.*"

The harsh crack of Draco's voice made Pansy reach out to him - he held her off with an imperious gesture. Harry carefully did not meet Ron's shocked gaze.

"I think we can refrain from personal attacks, gentlemen." Lupin's voice was calm, but instantly quelling. "Well explained, Mr. Malfoy, thank you. Does anybody have any questions?"

Blaise Zabini's voice was sharp, almost an accusation.

"It's true that the Dark Lord is being helped by someone inside Hogwarts. Isn't it?"

Draco's been talking to him.

But it made sense, as it had when Draco told Harry. It was something they all knew, though most people didn't speak of it except in half-formed whispers.

Lupin looked back at Zabini, his gaze level. Harry knew that Lupin wouldn't lie to one of his students.

"Yes - I believe it is. We have no idea who it could be, though. I can only urge you all to be discreet and watch for any signs that somebody is communicating with the other side."

All the students watching each other with fear and distrust. That could so easily lead to paranoia. And perhaps that was Voldemort's plan.

Harry was appalled to find himself considering the faces around the table, searching for a flicker of guilt.

"Thank you. All the prefects can escort the others back to their common rooms now. The Young Council needs to discuss further safety measures."

Harry smiled at Ginny as she got up, because she looked so white and scared, as if she really hadn't realised what Lupin said was true. She smiled back, though her smile was shaky.

Harry considered squeezing her hand, but he was distracted by Pansy tentatively pecking Draco on the cheek. Draco let her do it, Pansy's lips grazing against the soft white line of his cheekbone, and Harry thought, *but he doesn't like people to touch him, he doesn't want her to do that...*

Then she swept off, flanked by her Slytherin girls and by Crabbe and Goyle, leaving Blaise and Draco. Harry noticed that Blaise moved his chair closer to Draco's after they had gone.

"All right," Lupin said with quiet intensity, as soon as the door closed on the last non-Council member. "The situation is grave. We all have to act in this emergency, and this is one of the things we must do. Here are maps of Hogwarts, with danger spots which could be escape routes marked, and also enchanted to show the whereabouts of everyone in school."

The wartime version of the Marauder's Map, courtesy of Messrs. Moony and Padfoot.

"The teachers need help guarding these danger spots at night, so with Mr. Boot's help I've made up a schedule for you..."

Lupin was passing out maps and schedules, and Harry took his automatically, reaching for a quill to write his name on the top, and listening to Lupin reading out names.

"And on Tuesday night Padma Patil and Professor Sinistra will guard the statue of the one-eyed witch-"

A list of names, and Harry was reading it and Lupin was reading it out loud and-

"-and Hannah Abbott guarding-"

"Hey!" Harry said. His voice was much too loud, absolutely inappropriate for this time of practical planning and he simply did not care. "What am I doing?"

Lupin's eyes were half-shut as if he was sealing himself off from Harry's pain. Hermione wouldn't meet his eyes. Draco did, but his gaze was utterly noncommittal.

"Why isn't my name on the list?"

"Well. Harry. We all thought it would be wisest to keep you from harm. Nobody doubts that you want to be useful-"

Harry's laugh was jagged, and if it hadn't been for the flicker in Draco's watching eyes Harry would have doubted that it came from him.

"You just don't think that I could be useful. You think you need to protect me."

It was a simple word, *protect*, a word that was meant to be good but was strangling and merciless.

I don't want your pity. I don't want any of this. And I'm not putting up with any more.

"No, Harry, be reasonable-"

"If I can't be like all the other Councillors then why was I put on the stupid Council? We're supposed to help protect the rest of the school, we're not supposed to be helpless and looked after and - *don't touch me*-"

Hermione snatched her hand back as if Harry had bitten it.

"Harry, you have to understand that you are You-Know-Who's target-"

"We're *all* Voldemort's target!" Harry shouted, pronouncing the name viciously. "This is a war! I don't want to be safe while everyone else is in danger, I don't want everybody to feel sorry for me, I don't want to be weak and *maybe I don't want to be Harry Potter*."

And the secret was out, the pretence ruined, everybody was hurt and Harry just no longer gave a damn.

"Harry-"

"Shut up! I'm not a weak little orphan, you don't need to shelter me or to try and make me feel better. I'm a member of the Council, and if I can't be treated like everyone else then - screw the Council. Screw the Triwizard Tournament. And screw you all."

And at last there was a flicker of some feeling in Draco's gaze; it even seemed like he was going to say something, but just then Harry looked away and stormed out of the Council room.

*

Harry leaned his head back against the wall, and told himself that he was not going to cry.

He was still furiously angry, a knot of heat burning in his chest, but the bleakness was beginning to wash over him. He was so tired of all this.

He had blown up a few times before; comparatively minor incidents, but they provided him with a script for this occasion. After waiting a suitable time, Hermione would come looking for him. Then she would lead him back to Gryffindor Tower, where everybody would treat him with that horrible sympathy.

And he'd accept it. He couldn't let them down. He was Harry Potter, poor pitiful victim, brave boy hero.

Harry clenched his teeth until his whole jaw ached.

He could visualise it all now. Hermione's light step down the hall in half an hour, her gentle knock, her tact, not being angry because everyone felt sorry for Harry...

There came a knock that was probably denting the door.

"Potter! Let me in, or I will break down the door and beat your thick head in with the pieces!"

Draco. Nobody else could sound quite so aristocratic and pissed off at the same time.

"What are you doing here?"

"*Alohomora!*" The door went flying open. Draco stood in the doorway, looking around with an unimpressed air. "Flitwick really doesn't secure the Charms classroom properly."

"You could have waited for me to open it," Harry snapped.

"Malfoys are known for their patience." Draco smirked. "That is, people point us out, say we suffer from a severe lack of it and tell stories about my uncle, a waiting room and a bear."

It suddenly dawned on Harry what Draco was doing here.

He was here to offer sympathy. He was Harry's friend, and he'd seen he was upset, and he'd felt sorry for him. And now he was out to comfort him and coax him back.

Oh, Draco. I thought you were different!

"Now," Draco said briskly. "While I'm here, I want to know what the hell that witless little display of self-pity was about."

Harry blinked.

Okay. Still very different.

And kind of insulting.

"I wasn't being-"

Draco tilted his head. "Maybe I don't want to be Harry Potter," he quoted in falsetto tones. "Maybe Neville Longbottom doesn't want to be Neville Longbottom. I'd say the odds are pretty good he doesn't. I'm sure a lot of people are feeling sorry for themselves these days, but one thing they're not doing is disrupting bloody important Council meetings."

Harry's head jerked up. "It wasn't just about the Council meeting!" How dare Draco act as if Harry had been in the wrong? How dare he demand that Harry defend himself?

"Oh, you're right there," sneered Draco. "Half the time you're moping around the place putting everybody off their food. It's bloody ridiculous. I suggest you snap out of it."

Harry leaped up.

"I suggest you don't stick your nose into things you don't understand!"

He realised his fists were clenched. Draco glanced down at Harry's fists, and a corner of his mouth curled.

"Enlighten me." He smirked. "Or hit me, Potter. Whichever you'd prefer. Knowledge is power, and power is fun, but a bit of rough and tumble never goes amiss."

"Oh, shove off and stop being such a bastard!"

He wasn't going to hit him. He wasn't.

"I can prove my legitimacy, Potter. Back twelve generations, if I have to."

Well. Maybe just once.

Harry stepped in close enough so Draco tilted his head back. Harry tried to keep his voice cold and level.

"Stop laughing at me! You don't know what it's like."

"What what's like?"

Draco's voice sounded almost bored, and it was infuriating, and so Harry took a deep breath and told him everything.

"What it's like to have the whole school pitying you! What it's like to have everyone know you failed and someone died! What it's like to be the poor fragile orphan who nobody trusts with anything, who everybody protects, who everybody *coddles*. You've seen it. You know. Everybody knows. The way - I was made Quidditch captain, and Triwizard Tournament champion, and the way everybody always tries to make me *feel better* and yet nobody will let me do anything because they know I'm useless! I hate it - it's unbearable and it's - it's-"

Harry stopped, panting for breath. *I said it*, he thought, dazed. *I said it - and now Draco can see...*

Draco's eyes were wide.

"Crap," he said.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Why are you talking such total crap, Potter?" Draco demanded. "Were you dropped on your head as a child repeatedly?"

"Malfoy, if you're going to make fun of how I feel-"

"Of course I'm going to make fun of how you feel. That's what Malfoys *do*." Draco looked down his nose at Harry. "I'm also going to ask why you decided to spew sentimental idiocy into my ear. Quite frankly, I feel violated. You failed and someone died, in-bloody-deed. So you couldn't stand up to the Dark Lord and a ring of Death Eaters, all by yourself at the age of fourteen. Yes, you certainly let everyone down there. If only Longbottom had been in your place, he would have saved Diggory by heroically soiling himself."

"It's not funny!"

Though it did sound strangely more convincing than *Don't blame yourself, Harry. There was nothing you could have done*.

Draco was raging on.

"Why were you made Quidditch captain, for the love of... You're right, Potter, it could only be sympathy run mad. They really *should* have given the captainship to the whiz kid of the team, the youngest player in a century - oh, hang on just a minute, they did, didn't they! Next minute you'll tell me people are letting you win matches when you've won almost every one you remained conscious for since first year. Do you even listen to yourself when you whine? Get a *grip*!"

Draco looked thoroughly exasperated, and a bit like he would have enjoyed hitting Harry with a chair. Draco could not have been nastier, considering these were someone's honest feelings; he was just being the callous and selfish git Harry had always wanted to pummel into unconsciousness and...

Draco had a *point*. This was *great*.

"Everybody coddles you, indeed. What else can you expect, if you go around pouting about your Great Big Emotional Mess all the time? These are Gryffindors, Potter, the useless do-gooders, if you don't recall. Of course they're going to be nice to you. I doubt their whole lives revolve around protecting and nurturing you, unless you count the smitten Weasley and that creepy Creevey kid. And people say *I'm* vain. I ask you."

Draco exhaled sharply.

"This school is full of people who couldn't give a damn about Harry Potter and his pathetic little crises. Poor fragile orphan. Get over yourself, Potter, students are disappearing all over the place and nobody has time to care about you or your precious par-"

"*Watch it*, Malfoy."

Harry stepped in so furiously close that he almost felt the movement of eyelashes against his face when Draco blinked.

"Get bent, Potter." But he didn't finish his sentence. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. Demolishing your pretty little castle of delusions. They're protecting you because you're so cute and feeble. Am I right?"

Harry certainly wouldn't have phrased it like that, but - "Yeah..."

"Of course. It all makes sense now. They couldn't possibly be afraid for you for a legitimate reason. Since practically everyone in school has foiled the Dark Lord's evil plans for world domination at least once. Lupin can't have thought this one out logically and decided to not to have Harry Potter as a guard and tempt the forces of darkness to swoop in bent on murder."

Harry blinked. He hadn't actually considered it that way.

"Is that what you believe?"

"Actually, no," Draco answered. "You-Know-Who hates you, we all know that, and I think if there was any possibility he could get you, he'd have nabbed you already. I think you're one of the safest people in school. But I can certainly see Lupin's point, and I don't think that anyone believes you need to have your little hand held as you walk through the corridors."

It was at that moment of tremulous relief, with the floating thought that maybe, just maybe, Draco could be right... that Harry realised he was wrong.

"There's the Triwizard Tournament," he said, lifting his chin. "It was made with practically the same tasks, just to make me feel better and get closure. Explain *that*."

Draco stared at him as if in disbelief.

"You are so lucky you weren't put in Slytherin," he informed Harry. "If I'd had to listen to this kind of babble for six years, I'd have hauled off and murdered you with a broomstick."

"Oh, you have a different idea?"

Draco pushed Harry back an inch so he could lean forward.

"Oddly enough, I do. And my idea is much more plausible, which is less odd since yours is the stupidest I ever heard. People do not hold international tournaments to make moody schoolchildren feel better. People hold tournaments to make the entire wizarding *world* feel better. Don't you realise that Beauxbatons has been shut down, and that they had to take their third champion from the last pathetic remains of a wizard school in France? Do you honestly think you're worth all the bother?"

Harry would have answered *no*, but all he seemed able to do was stare at Draco with hope gathering in the pit of his stomach.

"Please, Potter," said Draco in his most disdainful tones. "They arranged this to put a bit of heart into the wizarding world. It was a very simple campaign move so that they'd have something other than disappearances to put in the paper. And sorry, but I don't think they're going to waste their time changing the tasks too much. We're in the middle of a war, and besides - I'm sure everyone would be happy if you won. You are Harry Potter, after all. It would be nice for the papers. But I certainly don't think it was arranged for your benefit."

Draco surveyed him, almost as if he were despairing that anyone could be so stupid. Harry was almost gasping.

Then he slammed Draco up against a wall.

"If you're trying to make me feel better, I'll never forgive you," he swore.

Draco shoved him back.

"I don't try to make people feel better," he replied distantly. "And I don't lie for any purpose other than to serve myself. So why don't you quit it with the amateur dramatics, Potter, and tell me why."

He smoothed down his robes and walked over to Flitwick's low desk, leaning against it with no suggestion that his height in any way discommoded him.

Harry looked after him.

"Why what?" he asked.

Draco smiled, a needle-bright and flashing smile. "If this is what you believed people thought about you for years - if that's what makes you look like a wet week sometimes - then why did you let people think it? You're not the deceitful type. What were you hiding?"

Harry sat down on the floor. Hard.

"Malfoy, don't-"

He drew his knees up, hid his face against them, and maybe he was a child after all, and Draco could be remorseless.

Draco walked over to him, and Harry heard him sit in front of him. Harry looked up and met his intense gaze.

"You can tell *me*," he said.

"I just let them believe what they wanted, all right?" Harry snapped. "There's nothing wrong with that. If they wanted to think I was some kind of martyred innocent, that was better."

"What are you?" Draco threw the words at him, fast and cold and hard.

Emotion bit sharply inside Harry. "I'm - oh, damn it!"

He remembered his hatred of his parents' murderer, and the look on Ron and Hermione's innocent horrified faces.

Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?

The blinding hatred he had felt for Voldemort just hearing about Neville's parents, and then after Cedric... and knowing that nobody else could ever know what the boy hero was thinking, knowing that he wasn't really innocent like them and knowing now - that he had to tell somebody. Draco.

"I hate Voldemort," Harry said thickly, with venom loading his tongue. "I hate him. I loathe him, more than any of the others can imagine, I want to kill him, I'd *love* to kill him... and I'm not supposed to feel like that!"

He was leaning forward, just his knees between himself and Draco, and Draco didn't hesitate for a second.

"I do," he said steadily. "I hate him too. It doesn't mean that you have to hate yourself."

And that cold bleak bitterness ran through Draco's voice, that murderous fury, and Harry thrilled to it and knew it, and there wasn't that automatic recoil he had expected. It was nothing like he expected.

He lowered his head to his knees again, taking a deep helpless breath.

Draco's touch was between his shoulder-blades, brief and light.

"Is that all you've been torturing yourself about?" he demanded. "Just that you want revenge and you don't think the others would understand? It's perfectly natural, it's perfectly normal, and they might understand. Even if they don't, it's all right to be different from them and-" Draco paused. "Potter - are you crying?"

Harry lifted his face indignantly. "No!"

Draco looked distinctly relieved. "Oh. Well. Good. I was about to go running for Granger. Is that it, then?"

He'd hidden it all so well, like a guilty secret, because he wasn't supposed to have that sick anger thrumming through him. Like the secret of being almost sorted into Slytherin, which he'd never told Ron or Hermione. But he'd told Draco, who was Slytherin and who understood pain and hatred and absolutely lethal rage.

He'd told Draco.

"Pretty much," Harry answered. He felt utterly drained.

He could feel Draco leaning forward to peer into his face, feel the weight against Harry's legs, and he felt almost bereft when the weight was removed. Draco seemed satisfied with what he had seen.

"You're a bit of an idiot, Potter," he observed without any real rancour.

Harry leaned back. "Maybe so," he said tiredly. "I can't imagine why you agreed to be my friend."

"Obviously, there's the amusement value," Draco pointed out. He paused, and Harry saw he had that bright vacillating light behind his eyes that meant he was thinking. "And because of - how you feel about You-Know-Who," he said at length, with his eyes focused on Harry. "Because you can do it too."

The ferocity of Draco's gaze answered Harry before he asked his question.

"Do what?"

"Live." Draco threw up his hands. "I mean really live. I don't mean to exist with or without a purpose, I mean to *enjoy* existing. I mean - I don't have to explain it. You know it. What else do you feel when you're flying?"

Harry remembered with a sudden vivid power the feeling the first time he had been on a broom. That utter joy - *this was easy, this was wonderful*.

"Yes, exactly," Draco said, still looking at him fiercely. "That's it. That's the way it can all be. I know that. That's how I live - that's how you can live. And they can't, none of them, not even your oh-so-special friends and that's why they can't be on my level or yours. Because they can't live with the same fury."

Fury. The word seemed oddly appropriate to Harry, simply because anyone else would have found it inappropriate.

He understood. Draco didn't waste moments, Draco threw himself into them. Draco's enmity towards him had been wholehearted because Draco knew no other way to be. Draco was utterly appalling or utterly amusing, but he was utterly something, because there was always passion there.

Passion. It was about passion. And that was why he and Draco, even when they were enemies, had been on the same level.

"They aren't capable of it," Draco continued.

"Don't," said Harry. "I love Ron and Hermione."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Yes, well, that's your problem, isn't it? The fact that you loved them made you feel guilty for years. You put yourself back in the cupboard when you decided to love them."

"No, that's not true," Harry answered. "I see what you mean. I see that's why you can live like you do. But love isn't like that. The possibility of danger makes flying better. I want to love them; it makes my life better. It even made my life better being in that cupboard. Because I absolutely knew afterwards that I never wanted to be trapped again."

"I don't see it," Draco said. "I can live, can't I? And I was never trapped."

Harry thought about Draco over the years, the pure energy of him in everything he did, right or wrong. It was the whole reason Harry had hated him so much; because even though he was only another schoolboy and Harry had faced the powers of darkness, he was able to make himself an enemy who could not be ignored.

And he had done that because Harry *could* hate him so much, could wish with such passion to beat him once and for all.

On the same level, indeed.

"Weren't you?" Harry asked, but he would not bring up the name of Draco's father.

"No," Draco snapped, turning away from Harry in the same decided way he did everything.

"It would be all right to love," Harry told him quietly.

"Who?" Draco demanded.

"Anyone, like I love Ron and Hermione. It isn't the cupboard. It makes everything brighter, it's part of - really living. No man is an island, you know."

"Astute observation. No man is a Quidditch pitch either." The corner of Draco's mouth jerked down. "I don't agree with you."

He smiled suddenly, a smile of such intensity it might have seemed painfully bright to someone other than Harry.

"Anyway. That's why I agreed to all - this." He made an expansive gesture. "All right then. Are we quite done with your emotional breakdown? Sure you aren't thinking about your abusive childhood?"

He got up lightly. Harry looked up.

"Hm?"

Draco laughed. "I asked what you were thinking about."

"Oh. I was thinking about you."

Draco smiled slightly, unreadably, and offered his hand. "In that case, perhaps you can get up the hard floor and we can get back to the meeting. I asked them to wait, I didn't know you'd take such an annoyingly long time."

Harry shook his head in disbelief, but couldn't help laughing. "I like it here. It's not like I'm going to see you again often anyway."

"Oh, really?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "You'll see me tonight. I promise. Now will you get up, you useless prat?"

Harry reached up and took his hand. "Okay."

*

Hermione glared across the table at Blaise Zabini, who narrowed his eyes back at her.

Your little Slytherin leader isn't bringing Harry back. She wanted to say it, wanted to snap it, but Lupin was looking at her and she remained discreetly silent. She knew that bleak look on Harry's face. Harry needed to be left alone after outbursts like this.

Of course, Malfoy hadn't given her time to tell him that. As soon as Harry had fled the room, that interfering Slytherin had knocked back his chair, Malfoy's face a mask that betrayed nothing, and gone after him.

He was no good. Hermione had always known that. And she felt almost satisfied, knowing what Harry's reaction to him was likely to be. Time this bizarre companionship was broken up, anyway. Malfoy was bad for Harry.

Harry. Hermione clenched her fingers around the quill. She hated that miserable look on his face, that shuttered look with the wounded eyes that wanted to be left alone and that made her want to reach out and cry, *I don't care what it is, Harry, you can tell me, you can tell me...*

In a moment she would have to go to him.

In the next moment Malfoy and Harry entered the room. Malfoy held his chin high and surveyed everybody with that magisterial air Hermione found so intensely irritating.

"Did you miss us?" he inquired airily.

Harry flashed an embarrassed smile in Hermione's general direction, and then quietly took his seat.

Hermione was not at all fooled by the shy, unassuming pose which came to Harry as second nature. She looked at the small smile tugging the corner of Harry's mouth and the unusual brightness of his eyes.

She didn't understand anything.

"No brilliant ideas while I was away? Of course not, I was away," Malfoy rambled to himself in his unbearably conceited manner. "Let's discuss the question of security, shall we?"

That brought Hermione's head up with a jerk. She might hate Malfoy, but she was aware that he was an asset to their side. He and Hermione had worked together on a couple of necessary projects, and in between the snide comments and the frequent mirror checks, the boy could plan.

Besides, Harry rarely contributed. Hermione couldn't let the Gryffindor side down.

Malfoy was standing up.

"There's a spy for You-Know-Who in Hogwarts," he said casually. "So, obviously, we have to take precautions. No one person can know everything. We have to assign different areas of investigation and protection to different sections of the Council and the Order."

"I have to be in on both healing and research," Hermione broke in, keeping her tone business-like. "We're almost at a break-through with the preservation of phoenix tears. It could be crucial on a battlefield."

Malfoy gave a small nod. They had long ago established the boundaries of pretended respect.

"How crucial?" Harry asked. "Phoenix tears only affect physical wounds. I remember that. How much would preserved tears help if the Death Eaters relied on spells? They'd only be useful with injuries that happened along the way. Our whole healing department shouldn't be focused on that."

Hermione blinked and wondered if she had wandered into an alternate universe. Of course, Harry knew about phoenix tears from the Chamber in second year, but... it was so unlike him to speak up in a Young Council meeting.

It was so unlike him to look so - aware. Alive.

"Good point, Potter. See about it, Granger," Malfoy said coolly.

Hermione frowned to herself. Obviously, *he* didn't care.

"Now. About the question of how much we should trust Professor Lupin with," Malfoy continued.

Hermione was on her feet. "How dare you! He's the head of the Young Order. He set up this whole thing. How dare you even insinuate that we wouldn't trust him?"

Malfoy arched an eyebrow.

"I'm not. I know you Gryffindors are trusting souls. You can trust him if you like - I'm Slytherin, and we don't trust anybody. And right now, in this situation, we *can't* trust anybody absolutely. So you're damn lucky to have me."

"Professor-!"

"Miss Granger," Lupin said. "I don't want to force anybody's confidence. Mr. Malfoy is doing his best for the school. I'm willing to be equal to everyone else under suspicion - and I think he's right."

"He doesn't suspect you," Harry said, speaking up again.

Malfoy's gaze flickered briefly.

"No," he admitted, more quietly. "I don't. But I could be wrong. It has been known to happen, once or twice. Now, how about having Terry Boot on the research division? Sit *down*, Granger."

Hermione sat down heavily, and looked over for her habitual *those-frustrating-Slytherins* exchange of glances with Harry.

But Harry was looking at Malfoy, glowing with pride.

*

Draco had said he'd see him tonight.

A few hours later, as he was going down the stairs to the common room, Harry doubted this. It wasn't that he didn't *trust* Draco, but it was quite possible that Draco had over-rated his own abilities...

Harry was actually wondering if he could put on the Invisibility Cloak, pretend he was going to the bathroom and sneak down to the dungeons. There was the small matter of Ron and Hermione possibly being sceptical about hours-long stays in the bathroom, and the Slytherins might be a little alarmed by invisible presences opening their door, but...

And then he stopped on the step, because Draco was in their common room. He was leaning against the wall drawling lazily to Parvati Patil, who was looking rather charmed.

Harry supposed that Parvati *was* very pretty.

"Malfoy," Harry said.

Draco turned and smiled. "Potter. Crabbe and Goyle dropped me off here, and I require someone to walk me back. You wouldn't desert an innocent in need, would you?"

Harry grinned. "I'm not sure I'd classify you as an innocent, Malfoy, but I suppose I have to accompany you. You nuisance."

Draco stepped back from Parvati, raising his eyebrows.

"Then I suppose my overdeveloped sense of hospitality will oblige me to entertain you in my room. What a trial. Always a pleasure, Parvati."

Draco favoured her with his most enchanting smile and Parvati smiled back.

Her hair was long and shiny and she was very popular and she had huge dark eyes. She had only just broken up with Dean. It was hardly decent.

Draco was already wandering off towards the door. Parvati stepped up on the step, still smiling and shaking her head.

"That Draco Malfoy," she said in amused undertones. "Shameless."

"Sorry?"

"Potter, get a move on, I don't plan to live here. Some people here are honest and true, and that kind of thing is catching."

Harry rolled his eyes and took his time walking over to where Draco stood with the martyred air of one who has been kept waiting by ill-mannered boors.

This lasted for all of the two seconds it took to leave the Gryffindor rooms, at which point Draco started a conversation with every appearance of complete good humour.

"I'll say this, you Gryffindors do have a very high standard of female beauty," he remarked airily. "Some of the things Hufflepuff churns out are simply tragic. But your girls are almost without exception attractive. There's Parvati, and she's stunning, and your fan Ginny Weasley is rather cute too."

"What about Hermione?" Harry asked accusingly.

Draco laughed.

"Oh, I don't like the girl, but I have to admit she's very attractive."

"Malfoy, you can't say things like that. What about Ron?"

"No, he's not attractive at all."

Draco made a slight face. Harry forbade himself to laugh. After a bit he said casually,

"So, Parvati. Dean split up with her the other day, you know."

He left the sentence hanging. Draco turned to him, one corner of his mouth lifted.

"You think I'm actually interested in the Patil girl? Please. An innocent Gryffindor." He pulled a lock of Harry's hair. "I have *standards*, you know."

Harry couldn't help laughing then.

"My mistake."

"It's always your mistake, Potter. So tell me. Is there any chance you can play poker?"

Harry sighed dramatically. "So that's the way it's going to be. No more adventures, just cards with you in your room. I'll probably be bored to tears."

He doubted that Draco knew how to be boring.

Draco was busy assuming his superior air, which involved him shaking his hair back and regarding the world at large dismissively.

"Don't be absurd, Potter," Draco said. "You have an Invisibility Cloak, don't you? And according to my calculations, you and your companions are completely safe. We can go out tomorrow. Meanwhile, I'll teach you to play poker. A teenage boy unable to gamble illicitly, I call it tragic..."

He broke off.

"Well, what are you laughing at, Potter? And what are you staring at? Don't you know that's rude?"

"It's..." Harry shook his head. It was blithe rulebreaking, illicit plans, and laughing about summer, and this intense and morally questionable force invading his life and feeling *so much better* and - loving it. Loving it.

"It's nothing. Let's go to your room."

Chapter Eight: Calming Storms

If you want my sympathy

Just open your heart to me

And I'll be whatever you ever need

Harry was half asleep under a tree, taking refuge from the blazing sun.

The whole week had been a signal from approaching summer, a heat wave that made everyone remove as many clothes as possible and hide in the shade. One or two classes had been held outside, and Hermione had been coaxing Ron into fetching her cold drinks from the kitchen all week.

It had begun with that evening of cards in Draco's room, and had gone on in that soothing vein all week. The heat had relaxed everyone a little, and Harry just felt... more at ease recently.

He didn't analyse it. He just shut his eyes and basked, and thought about how funny it was to see Draco glaring at everyone's tans as if they had mortally offended him.

Right on cue, Draco hurled himself to the ground beside him.

"Potter," he said. "You lazy sod, have you been lying here all morning?"

"Hmm. More or less," Harry answered. "Ron and Hermione were here a while ago, but they wandered off."

"Snogging behind the broom shed," Draco said promptly. "Believe me, I just came in from Quidditch practice. Oh, my eyes. I was already tired; I did not need to see that."

Harry glanced over at Draco, who was lying on his back with one arm flung over his eyes. He thought it was typical that Draco had thrown himself into a graceful attitude.

"You must be tired," he observed dryly. "Your hair's a mess."

"I hate you, Potter," Draco informed him. "Have I made that clear recently? I just really don't like you at all. You are *so* one to talk. One day I'm going to lose it, seize your head and brush your hair properly."

"Hmm. Looking forward to it."

He glanced over and saw that Draco really was tired. His breathing was slightly accelerated and the collar of his Quidditch robes was open. Even his neck was flushed.

"Quidditch practice tough?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Draco answered innocently. "It was great. We're going to crush you in the final."

The whole school took for granted that the Quidditch final would be between Slytherin and Gryffindor. That was how it usually was, and Gryffindor had won for the last two years. Draco never let this inconvenient detail faze him in the slightest.

It was so like Draco to refuse to acknowledge defeat. The team was composed of his court, and so it was a one-man show. Draco never, Harry reflected, let slip the smallest suggestion that he could not run it all, and run it superbly. Draco's problem was that he couldn't imagine being anything but totally self-sufficient.

"You wish," Harry returned. Draco made a face at him.

The leaves above them cast a shifting pattern of light and shadows on the ground. Harry squinted up at the blurred green and gold. It was such a calm day, there wasn't even a breeze, and he thought he could be quite happy relaxing here with Draco for a few hours.

He hadn't seen Draco last night, as Draco'd been on guard duty. Which was probably another reason he was so tired, not that Draco would ever admit it.

Draco shifted on the ground. "I wish I had a cool drink," he grumbled. "I wish I was at home. We have *proper* house elves there." He propped himself up on an elbow. "I don't suppose you'd consider...?"

That gave Harry an idea.

"Get up," he said.

"Potter!" Draco wailed. "The whole point of you fetching the drink is that I won't have to move. That's the beauty of it."

Harry folded his arms and looked implacable.

"Oh, come on, Potter! I'm on my back. I'm all sweaty. Don't make me beg."

"Don't make me carry you."

Draco gave Harry a slit-eyed and evil glare. He remained prone for a moment, and then sat up grumpily.

"Will there be drinks?"

"I promise."

"Oh, all right."

*

The kitchens made Draco laugh.

"I'm *below stairs*," he said, rather gleefully. "Look, it's an oven. More drinks, slaves."

Hermione would have fainted if she'd heard him ordering the house elves around. Harry himself winced at it. But he noticed that the house elves were giving Draco approving looks as they hurried to do his bidding, as if finally someone who acted *properly* had arrived. Harry hid a smile.

Draco was sitting cross-legged on a table, with several empty glasses and an assortment of strange foodstuffs around him.

Harry leaned against the table.

"I had no idea the blood-flavoured lollipops were just the tip of the iceberg."

"I will not pander to your plebeian expectations," Draco said loftily. "People used to eat stuffed dormice. I think I can eat icing sugar without it causing all this ill-bred commentary."

He ate another spoonful and took another swig of pumpkin juice to prove his point. At some stage Harry was going to mention that the icing sugar had left a light dusting on Draco's sticky mouth.

"So, Potter, feeling stressed?"

"Er, no," Harry said, distracted. "Why?"

Draco waved his spoon. "The third task being moved back to May, of course. It's April now. Pressure getting to you yet? Going to crack, Potter? Going to lose it?"

"Yeah, I'm a nervous wreck. Pass the pumpkin juice."

Draco hugged it protectively to his chest. "There's no need to drown your sorrows, Potter. Drink is never the answer."

It was lucky Draco was so tired. Harry went for the juice and tried to pry it out of his hands, ignoring Draco's small sound of protest and pushing him backwards. It only took a brief struggle, and then Draco was on his back on the table and Harry had the pumpkin juice. Draco blinked up at him reproachfully.

"You great Gryffindor *bully*." He made no effort to sit up, but simply looked up at the lamps, which drizzled soft light onto his eyes and hair. "I hope you get eaten by a monster in the maze."

Harry wondered whether Draco was actually concerned about him. It was hard to tell.

He liked to think so, though, and he tried to be reassuring.

"I'm not too worried."

"Yeah? Got your eyes firmly set on the glory?" Draco finally sat up and pushed Harry back, his eyes gleaming. "I know how much you love having your name in the paper, Potter. Imagine the finish line-"

"There is no finish line-"

"Don't bother me with inconsequential details. The finish line, the cheering crowds, the swooning women." Draco affected a voice alarmingly like Ginny's. "Harry Potter, we luuurve you!"

"Shut up, Malfoy." Harry really wasn't laughing.

Draco clasped his hands to his heart. "But all I want is an autograph, a lock of your hair, to have your love child-"

"Do you know how annoying you are?" Still definitely not laughing.

Draco gave up and leaned back on his elbows, flashing him a smug smile. "You don't think I'm annoying. You think I'm great."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "How do you figure that?"

"The second task, idiot. I was the one who woke up with a mouthful of filthy water and a nice little guarantee of what you thought of me." Draco fished for the marmalade, which Harry really hoped he wasn't planning to eat with icing sugar. There would be even more on his mouth then. "So you claim it's not glory you want. What would you like?"

Harry studied him.

"I'd quite like a guarantee myself," he said.

Draco gave him a startled glance, and in the pause Harry looked at his watch.

"We're going to be late," he added in sudden alarm.

"What for?" Draco asked, distracted.

"The thing in Hogsmeade I wanted us to do. I told you about it yesterday."

"You forgot to mention what precisely it was."

"It doesn't matter. It's fun, I promise. Let's go."

"To Hogsmeade? In my *Quidditch* robes? Looking like *this*?" Draco looked scandalised. "Surely you jest."

"Come on, Malfoy."

Draco raised his eyes to heaven. "Oh, give me twenty minutes." He slid easily off the table and made his way toward the door. "One more thing, Potter. If the Gryffindor idea of fun is cleaning out bed pans in St Mungo's, I'm shutting you up in a cell and going home."

All right, so Harry did laugh then. But by that time Draco was out the door, so it didn't count.

Harry looked helplessly at the utter mess Draco had made of the table.

"Look, can I help-"

"Harry Potter is not to think of doing work for a house elf," Winky said in horror, hurrying forward. She and a team of elves began to clear the table at lightning speed. Harry looked around, thinking vaguely that he could while away the time saying hello to Dobby.

To his surprise Dobby was standing in a corner, and his face remained troubled when Harry greeted him.

"Dobby is thinking that was Master Draco," he stated in noncommittal tones.

Harry had forgotten Dobby must have known Draco.

"Yeah," he said cautiously. "Why didn't you come and say hello?"

Dobby didn't answer him directly. All he said was, "He is looking just like his father."

And suddenly Harry didn't feel like talking to Dobby anymore.

"You're wrong," he informed him coldly. "He's nothing like his father."

Dobby said nothing.

*

Harry ended up waiting for Draco at the bottom of the Hogwarts steps. Draco came sauntering down them after half an hour, wearing his white jumper and giving Harry a disarming smile as he came.

You see, Harry thought to an absent Dobby. He's not like his father. He'd never be like him.

"Let's go," Harry said.

He saw that Draco wasn't the only one who had remembered about the third task being bumped up when a couple of reporters came hurrying up to them as they went into Hogsmeade.

"Harry, would you like to share-"

"Harry, could you tell us-"

"No thank you," Harry said tiredly. "I'm just here for an outing with my friend. Excuse us."

Their eyes lit on Draco, and after a whispered conversation in which Harry distinctly heard the words 'Friend?' and '*Lucius Malfoy's* son?' they turned their assault upon Draco.

"Mr Malfoy! Can you tell us about the second task-"

"We'd be prepared to offer gold-"

Draco tilted his head at Harry, smiling wickedly.

"How much, exactly?" he inquired.

"Malfoy!" Harry said in horror, and dragged him away.

Draco sulked as Harry led him off. "I was planning to make up a very amusing story," he complained. "It would have electrified the wizarding world. How would you have felt about having an illicit affair with a teacher?"

"Malfoy, you are a very bad person," Harry informed him severely.

Draco laughed. "Is there a chance I can have a blood-flavoured lollipop before we do whatever it is you want to do?"

"No," Harry said sternly. "The cruiser will go any minute now."

Draco stopped laughing.

Despite the fact he was squinting against the sun, despite Draco's always fair skin, Harry could see quite clearly that he had gone pale.

"The cruiser?" he repeated.

*

The great lake that stretched to the forest, Hogwarts, and Hogsmeade had only been used for necessary transportation - and of course, the first years' terrifying arrival - for centuries. Until someone had realised that the wizard tourists who flocked to the last non-Muggle settlement in Britain would lap up something like this.

The cruiser, like all magical boats, was powered by a simple spell. It had extra enchantments on it so nobody had to steer and, no matter what the weather, it was always a smooth voyage. Taking a cruise was still a popular tourist activity, and most Hogwarts students had gone at least once.

Harry hadn't been since he'd gone with Ron and Hermione in fifth year. He'd thought it might be nice to go with Draco.

Now the look on Draco's face was fast convincing him otherwise.

"You know, we don't have to go," he said, hurrying after Draco.

Draco was striding towards the dock, his mouth set in a thin painful line.

"I want to go," he answered, his voice hard. "Why wouldn't I want to go? I'm not afraid of a damned boat. Irrational fear is the worst kind, my father used to say. It means you're a stupid coward."

"That's - nice, Malfoy, but-"

"Potter. You wanted to go and we're going, and that's the end of it. And now could you please talk about something else!"

Harry was sure he caught an almost desperate glint in Draco's eyes. He felt wretched.

"I thought it might be fun to go together," he muttered, in apology.

Draco was clearly trying to calm down, though his smile did not come without effort. "We went together once before," he commented.

If finding out with horror that Draco was aboard after the ship had launched counted as going together. Harry recalled standing on the deck trying politely to ignore the passionate fifteen-year-old embraces of Ron and Hermione, who had paired up earlier that very week. He had turned away, trying to look at anything but that, and had seen yet another couple.

Draco Malfoy had disengaged himself slightly from Pansy, who then started work on his neck, and Harry had recognised him at the same time as Draco's eyes lit on him and his upper lip curled slightly in distaste. A couple of minutes later, Draco had strolled by with Pansy clinging to his side and made a loud comment speculating on how Ron could have afforded the fare. Ron hadn't heard. Harry, left out, miserable, and bloody furious, had leaped at him.

The ensuing ferocious tussle on the planks of the deck had only been halted by the furious ferryman threatening to feed them to the giant squid.

Harry smiled. "I'd forgotten."

It was funny how things worked out.

Draco hadn't been bothered by the boat then. He had looked relaxed and happy, actually, in the brief instant before he spotted Harry. Harry supposed he'd been happy to be with Pansy. They had gone out for six months of fifth year, and stayed friends afterwards. Draco had never been with anyone else for half as long.

Harry suppressed a sudden impulse to ask about Pansy. Draco didn't look in the mood to discuss past romances. He was clearly nerving himself to perform some sort of ordeal as Harry got the tickets. Harry wished he'd never suggested this whole stupid thing.

Draco's lips were drained of colour.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course I'm sure," Draco said sharply. "I'm *fine*."

He stormed up the ramp. Harry noticed that he didn't let himself look at the water until he was safely on deck.

Once he did, he gripped the rail so tightly that his knuckles went white.

"Malfoy, are you all right?"

"Yes!" It was almost a shout.

Harry rested his hands against the rail, standing beside Draco and trying to offer some sort of comfort. Little beads of perspiration were standing out on Draco's forehead.

The boat jerked into motion. Draco grabbed Harry's wrist in a death grip.

As the boat moved, Harry's wrist felt like it was going to be broken in a vice. Draco's face was white as bone, and he didn't seem to notice that he was grasping so tight. His whole body shuddered as the boat drifted out onto the lake.

Then the boat rocked, just the tiniest bit, and Draco's nerve broke.

His body convulsed over the rail, and his face was ashen when he looked up.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Draco said between his teeth.

Harry supported him as he made for the bathroom, wincing every time the boat jerked. And he remembered with a painful clarity holding Draco up at the time of the second task, because he was unable to support his own weight.

He should have thought about that. But things had been - different then. He had regarded the whole business of helping Draco Malfoy as an unpleasant necessity.

He hadn't been concerned.

Halfway there, Draco stopped and gripped the rails around the deck again. He swallowed several times and then spoke, his voice strained with the effort to keep it even.

"I don't - I *won't* be sick. Just - get me off the boat, Potter."

"But the boat's-"

"*Please!*"

Harry looked at Draco's face.

"Okay," he said, trying to be gentle. "Fine. Just - hold on a minute there. I promise, I'll take care of it."

Draco managed a nod. Harry whirled on the ferryman.

"Bring us back," he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Look, I can't-" The man stopped. "Hey! You're Harry Potter."

Harry tried to put a lid on that familiar exasperation. He needed to get Draco off this boat, it didn't matter what the hell his name was, it wasn't like it could help...

He paused as an idea struck. Clearly, he'd been spending too much time with Draco.

"Yes, that's right," he said slowly. "I'm Harry Potter. And it's *very urgent* that my friend and I get off this boat."

*

"You did that very well," Draco said in a tired voice. "Maybe you could have made a Slytherin after all."

"Thrill me, why don't you."

Draco only just managed a smile. They were sitting on the porch of one of the little shops around Hogsmeade, which was thankfully closed for lunchtime. Draco was hugging his knees, apparently too sick and miserable to care about appearances.

He must be feeling *really* bad.

"I hate those things," Draco said, vehemently and at last. "I hate the bloody spells. They make the boat move out onto the waters and it's as bad as being *in* the water because anyone can counteract that simple spell, and then you're helpless."

There was a pause. Harry looked over at Draco and tried to come up with something to say.

Draco added darkly, "I can't stand being helpless."

Harry felt the impulse to - oh, reach out and clasp Draco's hand, or something. But Harry was no good at that sort of gesture, and in any case Draco never seemed to welcome them.

"It'll be all right," he said instead. Which was a stupid thing to say.

Draco glanced briefly up at him, a gleam of awareness through his eyelashes, and then his eyes seemed to focus on something else. He seemed suddenly and utterly unaware of Harry.

Oddly, the fact that he spoke to him reinforced this impression.

"My father liked to go out yachting on the lake."

"You have a yacht?"

Even when Draco was in this condition, he could act superior.

"We're Malfoys. We also owned the lake." His gaze was still intent on the middle distance. "He used to take my mother and me out on the lake in the holidays. He'd - go over Quidditch strategies or school marks with me. It was - fun."

It didn't sound like fun to Harry. Still, it wasn't like Draco had been raised lovingly. Perhaps Lucius Malfoy taking an interest in Draco had been the closest thing Draco had experienced to affection.

"It was fifth year - in the Christmas holidays." Draco said it with difficulty. "Mother was sick and she couldn't come. So it was just me and my father. And the - the boat stopped moving."

Draco looked unusually small there on the porch. Without that invincibly self-assured air, he seemed very young.

"And then there was a storm. The sky was black and the water all around us was wild but the boat never moved and... My father told me not to be frightened."

Harry had known Lucius Malfoy well enough to be sure that this had been a command and not reassurance offered from father to son. He could see the magical storm closing around the doomed boat, the sky bruised above them, the younger Draco frantic on the deck, and that cold order ringing out.

The strained edge to Draco's voice made him sound as though he might have liked to cry if he were someone else, in a different world.

"There were words and someone was there and... the boat just broke apart. I was holding onto a plank and screaming but I still heard - I still heard it." He swallowed painfully. "The Killing Curse. I heard it and I saw the light through the storm, and..."

Draco obviously couldn't continue. He just kept his eyes fixed on that private vision, kept his face still as he struggled to maintain Malfoy composure.

And I wasn't even sorry for him, Harry thought. I didn't ask how it happened. I didn't care. And he saw it all, saw a father he loved being murdered and-

He would have done anything, just then, to make it right. He had the sudden fierce impulse to... oh, *grab* Draco, hold onto him as if he could make things okay by holding on tight enough, burrow his head into his shoulder and frame some sort of apology against his neck. But he hadn't the first idea of how to go about doing something like that, and he knew Draco would be appalled anyway.

Instead, he reached out and touched Draco's hair lightly.

Draco didn't pull sharply away as Harry had thought he might. He just sat there, blind to the real world, and kept talking in a relentless rush, as if he had been thinking about this for two years and absolutely had to let it spill out now.

"My father was killed by You-Know-Who. And people say he supported him, and I think he did at first, because he didn't like the Muggleborn, but he must have seen You-Know-Who was mad and going too far. My father always wanted wizards to be respected, but I knew him. He would have drawn the line at massacre, at innocent children getting snatched and families being destroyed. He must have turned against You-Know-Who. I mean, people don't kill their followers. It makes sense."

Normal, sane people don't kill their followers, no, Harry thought. But targeting children, murdering the Muggleborn and planning world domination - why should we expect Voldemort's actions to make sense?

He didn't speak the words aloud. He just brushed Draco's hair gently under his hand, trying to think of what he could say.

Did you know your father, Draco?

Harry had known Lucius Malfoy. The man who would have 'drawn the line at massacre' had given a child a book that was meant to kill dozens of innocent students, and had stood around Harry himself in a circle of Death Eaters and laughed as Harry faced Voldemort.

The first time Harry had heard the Killing Curse uttered against a human being had been in a graveyard where Lucius Malfoy had appeared and offered his loyalty to the one who had spoken it.

But Draco, who could usually see so clearly, obviously couldn't bear to face facts about his father. He couldn't know anything about this.

And Harry couldn't bear to tell him. What if it had been Harry's father who had died, a father who had lived long enough for Harry to love him? Harry would have wanted to believe the best about his father, too.

Besides - Draco had told him all this trusting him.

What could he possibly say?

"Oh, *Draco*..." It was a low cry of pain.

Draco smiled faintly, and Harry realised it was the first time he had ever called him Draco.

There was no displeasure in the smile, so Harry thought he could keep on doing it.

"I'm so sorry," said Harry, which he considered an extremely pathetic thing to say.

Draco had stopped shivering like a wounded animal, though, so Harry realised he must not be doing so badly.

He wouldn't have minded sitting there with Draco for a while more, but he could see the shopkeeper coming down the road to open up and giving the two loiterers a stern glance.

"Should we go back?" Draco asked wearily.

"Actually," Harry said, "I'm quite hungry."

The corner of Draco's mouth lifted. "Bring me near food and I'll kill you."

Harry laughed. "Well, I thought I might buy a sandwich and we could go down to the lake-"

"Are you completely *crazy*, Potter?"

"You could throw stones at the lake and taunt it because it can't get you now."

Draco made a face at him, but seemed to consider it.

"Yes," he decided eventually. "I think I'd like that."

Draco leaned forward on his knees for another moment, as if he was preparing to bear a load.

And Harry only knew that he wanted to carry it for him, and he felt a pang because telling him was the closest Draco would ever come to leaning on him.

Zabini and Pansy Parkinson walked by, and gave Harry and Draco an odd look. Harry realised that he was still stroking Draco's hair

Draco pretended not to notice them. Harry hadn't had his practice with deceit.

"Do they - do they know?"

Draco folded his arms defensively across his chest. "They know my father died. I - no, I haven't told them anything more."

Really, it was wrong to feel pleased about something while Draco was still clearly upset.

"I used to argue with him all the time," Draco said softly. "He was just trying to help me be the best I could be, and I was proud of him, but I resented him and I didn't - I never liked criticism."

Harry remembered again what Lucius Malfoy had actually been like.

Draco wanted to remember it this way. Love always distorted memories of the dead, Harry thought, always prevented any kind of accurate judgment and left you mourning for a fantasy. And those who loved you couldn't take the dream away, and in the end an accurate judgment would be cruelty.

Draco looked so tired and woebegone in that instant that Harry said, suppressing an ignoble feeling of disappointment,

"You're not to do anything tonight. You need to get some sleep. You're going straight to bed when we get home."

Draco sneered, that mock sneer which Harry often took as a smile these days. "Ooh, yes, *Mother*."

"Shut up and come get a sandwich with me, Draco."

He glanced over at Draco to see if it was still all right to call him that. He didn't appear to have noticed.

"Will you tuck me up in bed and tell me a story?" Draco inquired.

Draco was laughing up at Harry by now, and Harry felt both reassured and regretful about the return of that confident mocking look.

He sighed and offered a hand to help Draco up.

*

"Can *Flying with the Cannons* really be that fascinating the thirty-second time, Harry?" Hermione teased.

"Hmm?" Harry looked up. "Well, it's a very good book."

Actually, he had loaned it to Draco last week and that brat had returned it filled with withering scribbles in the margins. Harry had been flicking through them and smiling at his unmitigated nerve.

Not that he'd *lied*. It *was* a very good book.

Hermione smiled at him affectionately, her dark eyes gleaming in the firelight. Her own book was resting open in her lap, and Harry thought Hermione was relaxing, because it wasn't a textbook.

Harry looked around at the common room, feeling affection for them all sweep over him. Things had been slightly better lately. Despite the terrifying situation, everyone was being strong, and just now, they looked happy.

Dean was laughing quietly with Ginny as he amused her by imitating Professor Snape's handwriting in a love letter addressed to Sirius. Ron was drawing a Divination chart that had been due in last week. Lavender and Parvati were making turbans in an ill-fated attempt to look more like Professor Trelawney, and Neville appeared to be trying to mate Trevor and an uninterested lady toad.

Then Ron said, in a voice that tried and failed to be entirely joking, "It's good to have you back here. What with you always running around with bloody Malfoy, I was starting to forget what you look like."

Of course it was no big deal. Harry knew that Ron disliked Draco, and it was fair enough considering Draco despised Ron, and it wasn't something Harry wanted to get into... But Harry suddenly and vividly recalled Draco's distraught face earlier, and felt that same pang of protectiveness.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk like that about Draco," he snapped.

Across the room, Ginny stopped laughing. Hermione glanced up from her book, looking troubled.

Ron's eyebrows drew together.

"*Who?*" he said.

"You know his name," Harry said, making an attempt to soften his voice that was not all that successful.

"Oh, I'm so sorry if I said anything that might offend your new best friend," Ron said, bridling. "Since we all know how polite and gentlemanly *he* is."

"I know he sometimes acts like an idiot," Harry returned, his voice even, "but I still don't want to hear you insult him."

The Ron of a few years ago might have thrown something at Harry's head. This Ron took a few deep breaths, and said something that Harry thought was much worse.

"Look, it worries us, all right? We *care* about you, you stupid git. And I don't want to see you getting too friendly with someone we can't trust."

Of course Harry cared about Ron too, and he was almost softened and he almost replied gently, but there was - that instinct to shield Draco again, and *almost* was not enough to stop him.

"What do you mean, someone we can't trust?"

"What do you think I mean?" Ron spat. "If there's a spy in Hogwarts turning over children to the Dark Lord, who else could it be but Draco Malfoy?"

There was sudden ferment all around them.

Younger Gryffindors began to whisper excitedly. Ginny made a small sound of distress, staring over at Harry's face. Dean and Hermione both said something quiet and sensible and totally disregarded. Parvati stood up and announced loudly that nobody should make that kind of accusation. Neville made a clumsy effort to defuse the situation by wailing something about spoiling the toads' mood.

Harry heard, with an odd distinctness, Lavender leaning over and telling Neville softly, "I think they're both boys. It's not going to work."

Harry also felt, with strange detached fury, all the blood drain out of his face.

His voice was low, but extremely cold.

"How *dare* you."

Ron's face was flushed but resolute. "It's only common sense, Harry," he said angrily. "Think about-"

"I don't want to hear it!" Harry yelled. Silence fell around the common room, and he breathed in and forced his voice down. "You can bloody well take that back."

Ron clearly had no intention of doing so.

"It *has* to be someone in the Council," he argued. "Surely even you must suspect-"

Harry glared at him.

"Apart from Hermione - I'd suspect anyone else in the Council first."

He stepped back, feeling blindly for the door.

"I don't feel like seeing you again tonight," he said, instead of hitting him.

"Where are you going?" Ron demanded furiously.

"Dammit, Ron," he said, turning away. "Where do you *think* I'm going?"

*

Harry stormed out of the Gryffindor rooms without another word. Ron's voice kept ringing in his ears and that protective instinct was screaming inside him and Draco was in bed and he'd have to brave the other Slytherins but he had to, absolutely had to see him right now...

And he walked and he walked and then - he met Draco, emerging from the dungeons.

He just stood there, feeling a wash of unexpected relief, and Draco's eyes opened wide as he saw him. Startled and silvery and making him smile.

"Hi there."

Draco looked as if he was searching for something witty to say, but obviously he had been caught off guard. Finally he rolled his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Hey."

"No socialising with the Slytherins tonight, then?" Harry inquired.

"But of course. Be my guest, run off and seduce Pansy. I fear I can't accompany you, I'm somewhat *persona non grata* down there just now."

Harry opted for staying where he was.

"I, um, had a bit of a fight with Ron," he said. "I don't think any of the Gryffindors want me back there."

"In that case, go and die in a corner somewhere. I'm off to socialise with dear old Weasley and Granger, since I presume I still retain the status of a prince among them."

"The Prince of Darkness, maybe."

Draco grinned. "Royal personage of the year, in my opinion."

Harry began to walk down the steps, and Draco fell into step with him.

"So, do they all hate you now? Going to burn you? Going to force you to join the Hufflepuffs because burning is too merciful an end?"

"Yes, Draco. Yes they are," Harry said. "And then everything will be all right in the morning."

He wasn't repeating any of that madness to Draco. Besides - just now, back with him, it felt like things might be all right in the morning. He could forgive Ron, who didn't know him, couldn't, or he would never have said anything so stupid.

"The morning? If you are under the bizarre delusion, Potter, that I'm wandering draughty corridors with you until morning, you're going to be severely disappointed."

"OK then. How about the Potions classroom?"

Draco just smiled.

"The rumours are all lies," he said.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"All the stories about you, Potter. Poor wee orphan with the fragile humility going on, weeping about how nobody loves him. You expect me to hang about in vile dungeon classrooms for the sake of keeping you company. Do you realise I was raised in the lap of luxury? What an ego."

"Draco. You *live* in the dungeons, you have absolutely no right to talk about anyone else's ego and I'm sure it wouldn't do you any harm to be briefly in the lap of - oh, something other than luxury."

Draco's name still tasted unfamiliar in his mouth.

"I *like* luxury," Draco protested. "Luxury and I are on very close terms."

He followed Harry all the same, and when the door to the classroom defeated Harry Draco leaned down and whispered something to the lock.

"Password," he explained as the door swung open. "Professor Snape gave it to me when I was giving Goyle Potions tutorials."

"So that's how he passed," Harry mused, wandering in. The room seemed much less sinister when a class was not about to happen. "You must be an amazing tutor."

Draco walked in and slid easily onto Snape's desk, pulling up his legs and resting his chin on his knees. Now Harry was never going to be able to see Snape making up a Potion on that desk without visualising a grinning blond boy there instead.

"I have many talents."

"I'm sure you think so." Harry leaned against the wall by the desk, watching as Draco lifted an eyebrow in mock outrage.

"You'd be amazed at all the things I can do." He paused. "Was this fight with Weasley about me?"

Harry paused in turn.

"Maybe," he replied at last. "Why were you wandering around there when I told you to go to bed?"

Draco smiled brightly. "Looking for someone to go to bed with." When Harry just kept looking at him, he sighed and gave in. "I had a fight with Blaise."

Harry gave him a crooked grin, and let himself slide down to sit on the floor.

"Was the fight with Zabini about me?"

Draco sighed again, somewhat more dramatically, and got off Snape's desk to sit beside him, hands clasped around his knees.

"Maybe."

Harry glanced down at Draco's knees, at one of his hands pale and startling against the black material of his jeans.

"Draco-" Even when he was upset and distracted, there was a certain charm in being allowed to say that. He reached over and pulled Draco's hand to him by the wrist.

Draco watched, his face expressionless, and let him do it.

Harry turned over Draco's hand in both of his, examining the knuckles.

"Draco. You hit him?"

There was a slight curl to Draco's mouth, not quite a smile or a sneer. "Yeah. I did."

Harry was faintly appalled.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing that you need to hear," Draco answered, his voice serious for once. "Nothing that was true."

Harry looked thoughtfully at Draco's hand.

"Did he hit you back?"

A small snort. "Not likely."

"That's - good." Draco's hand didn't appear terribly damaged. "I suppose you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Harry could have cared less about any of Blaise Zabini's stupid insults. What mattered - the *only* thing that mattered - about that kind of insult was Draco's reaction to them.

"Potter." Draco's voice was amused. "Am I ever getting my hand back?"

Harry's fingers were darker against Draco's skin. "I don't know." He mused. "I kind of like it."

Draco laughed. "That may be, but I need it for all sorts of things. I think I'm going to insist on having it returned, even if a hook would look dashing."

Harry opened his fingers, and Draco removed his hand.

"I think we can assume that our friends said the same kind of thing about each other," Harry said.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "If so, I am *shocked* at young Weasley."

Harry laughed. "You're such a brat."

"I'm a Slytherin," Draco answered carelessly. "We are brats. We also use language I really wouldn't expect from Weasley."

"He doesn't like you," Harry told him.

Draco looked faintly concerned.

"I'm... really messing things up for you, aren't I, Potter?"

"What do you m-"

"It would be all right to give up on it, you know. Sometimes things are just too much trouble," Draco continued lightly.

"No! I mean - we're friends. I don't care about anything else. I think it's worth it - and you don't cause me any more trouble than I cause you." Harry almost despised himself for betraying wretchedness so unmistakably. "Is - is that it? Do you want to give up?"

Draco looked at him musingly, and Harry thought he was considering it. He tried not to look concerned.

"Nah," Draco said eventually. "I think I'll keep you around."

Harry's smile would not be kept back. Draco returned it, just a little, his smile faint and teasing.

"I wouldn't have given up on it no matter what," Harry told him. "I won't. I - I mean... oh, *you know*, Draco."

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, I know everything. No thanks to you, of course, since you are the most inarticulate person I have ever had the pleasure of meeting." The corner of his mouth lifted. "Well. Now that's settled."

The easing of tension in Draco's body was what made Harry aware it had existed. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes, and Harry wondered for a moment who else was allowed to see Draco Malfoy with his guard down, whether it was to be distraught or relieved or perhaps simply tired. He hoped there wasn't anyone.

"Hey. Potter." Draco nudged him. "What are you thinking about?"

Draco's shoulder was warm and solid against his. It was a comforting touch, reassuring, because this wasn't like the absolute knowledge that Ron would always be there. Most things with Draco were uncertain and different... But he was *here*, wasn't he, and that had to mean something.

He turned towards Draco, whose profile gave away nothing, and gave him a small teasing smile.

"Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

Draco glanced over at him, his face so close Harry could see the small flicker of warmth in his eyes before it became a smile back.

"I've been thinking about your love life."

Harry stared and Draco laughed briefly at his expression.

"Er. What?"

"Well. Ginny Weasley isn't really suitable. I think we can do a little better than a Gryffindor for you. We should find a nice Slytherin girl," Draco suggested brightly.

Harry rolled his eyes pointedly at Draco, who resolutely failed to see this.

"Pansy would be nice, but I'm not sure you like her, and besides - she hates your marrow." He paused, considering. "How about Morag?"

"I don't know her," Harry answered, and *I don't care if I never do* was pretty much implicit.

"You could get to know her. Come on, Potter, what are you going to do with all your Friday nights?"

"I could be with you."

"You're going to have to be really nice to me if you're planning on killing my social life."

Which, Harry noticed, wasn't the same as *no*.

"I think I'll pass up Morag, all the same."

Draco yawned, half-heartedly trying to hide it behind his cupped hand.

"Fine. You don't know what you're missing, though." He looked away from Harry, and yawned again.

Harry blinked.

"You're exhausted."

There were shadows under Draco's eyes and a tiny tug of strain about his mouth. This was ridiculous. He should be in *bed*.

"Just a bit." Draco yawned for the third time and lay on the stones of the dungeon floor, his movements languid, using his elbows to stretch out full length. "Don't let me go to sleep here," he ordered. "No more sleeping places without proper pillows for me. It's uncomfortable, and I don't think I could stand the shame."

Harry stretched out on the stone beside him. "Stop being a prat," he said. "It's not shameful to be tired just like everyone else. And you need to get some rest."

Draco frowned slightly. "Don't *fuss*, Harry," he mumbled sleepily.

Draco's breathing deepened and slowed.

Harry glanced over at him. *He called me Harry*, he thought, a little startled.

And then he smiled.

Chapter Nine: The Onlooker Sees Most of the Game

This is your new thing now

And it makes the whole world spin

It's as least as old as sin

But not quite

This is your new thing now

And now you're turning grinning

But maybe no one's listening

And you might lose it all my darling, yes you might

The creak of the dungeon door opening made Harry wake with a jump, sitting up and automatically moving in front of Draco, and glancing around wildly until he saw Professor Lupin at the door, vaguely startled and with first years behind him.

The jump woke Draco, whose dishevelled head lifted slightly from the floor.

Lupin's eyes widened as they met Draco's over Harry's knee.

"Harry. Draco," he said. "Er - what a surprise."

Draco looked at the first years behind Lupin, who were gazing at them with great interest, and immediately went into a silent laughing fit.

He was *such* a help.

"Um, we were, um, going over our Potions practical, and we fell asleep..."

Well, it didn't count as lying if Lupin clearly didn't believe a word Harry said.

Harry made a vague gesture towards Draco, who had happened to catch Lupin's expression just as Harry made his fumbling explanation, and who was now paralysed with laughter.

"Well, I was escorting the students in here early to get set up," Lupin said, still seeming unsure how to react. "If you hurry, you can get breakfast."

"Aren't points going to be taken off?" one of the first years whispered.

"You don't take points off *Harry Potter*," said a scandalised friend. Harry almost choked.

He looked over at Draco, who was practically crying with mirth.

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said quickly, seizing Draco and pulling him bodily upright.

Harry propelled him out of the door, and Lupin watched them go. Harry couldn't quite read his expression.

A little way down the corridor, Draco had to lean against the wall.

"His *face*!" he exclaimed weakly. "*Your* face... I'm sorry, I need a minute..."

Harry folded his arms and gave him five minutes, giving him a forbearing look.

"Yes, very amusing," he said tolerantly. "Come on. Breakfast."

Draco sobered up instantly. "Not without a hairbrush."

"This hair fixation isn't healthy, Draco. You need to eat more."

"Oh good, so I can be unkempt *and* overweight?" Draco demanded. "You're a sadist, Potter. I require a mirror."

He turned and tried to examine himself in the glass of a door. Harry, just behind him, glanced over Draco's shoulder at Draco's reflection.

The reflection seemed even paler than Draco really was. He looked only half awake, his mouth still soft with sleep and his eyes hooded and hazy.

"Hideous," Draco said, and scowled at it horribly.

"Hm?" Harry blinked. "You're being stupid. Which isn't exactly a rare occurrence, I might add. Come on. I refuse to let you miss breakfast again."

"*Let* me?" Draco echoed, with a voice that would have been baleful if he hadn't yawned as he was speaking. "How do you propose to *stop* me?"

Harry yawned too and rested his forehead against Draco's shoulder. Draco relaxed fractionally and Harry laid his hands flat against Draco's back and shoved him firmly down the corridor.

"Like this, mastermind. Breakfast. Now."

Draco complained half-heartedly all the way there. Harry just kept shoving at strategic intervals.

Where Pansy Parkinson and Ron were standing.

"-any more than you do, Weasley, you red-haired oaf," Pansy was yelling this when she caught sight of Draco and hurled herself at him. "Draco!" She reached up to touch Draco's hair and Draco caught her wrist gently. She gestured instead. "You... It's not brushed."

The accusing look she shot Harry made him think for a wild moment that she was about to demand, *What have you done with my child?*

She began busily dragging him into the Great Hall, asking in a loud voice what he wanted to eat. Harry held on to Draco for an instant. She turned and gave him a venomous glare, and he stared coldly back and let go.

Ron glowered as he came in too.

"I need a cup of coffee," Draco said grouchily. "Get off, Pansy."

He glanced over at the Slytherin table, met Blaise Zabini's narrow-eyed glare and turned very deliberately around to face Harry.

"See you tonight, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sure. Great."

Draco strolled off. Ron's face looked like he had bitten into a lemon.

"Where were you?" he hissed.

"It's none of your business," Harry told him coldly.

Ron breathed out hard through his nose and folded his arms. "Listen, I... Hermione and I had a talk. It was - I shouldn't accuse anybody without proof."

Harry relaxed a little.

"You don't know him, Ron."

And he knew things were okay between them again, even if Ron made a face and muttered, "Do *you*?" as they went to their seats at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione and I had a talk, Ron had said, but Hermione's face gave away nothing as she offered Harry some toast.

He wondered what she thought about all that was going on.

*

Hermione had no idea what to do about this appalling state of affairs.

This was upsetting.

Hermione was used to having ideas, to being reasonable, to understanding. She felt Ron was better equipped for the part of the perplexed one.

But now...

She was curled up on a chair in front of the fire in the Gryffindor classroom as the evening wore into night, thinking about Harry.

She very seldom had to wonder about Harry. A friend could tell whatever they wanted to know from one glance at his face.

Hermione considered Harry's face. It was one of the faces she loved best in the world, a face she had watched so often that she was fondest of its flaws.

In many ways, it was still a child's face. It was thin and pale, the bone structure so delicate it almost seemed triangular. It was such an open face, reflecting everything he thought.

Hermione smiled slightly as she remembered how Harry had acted around Cho Chang back in fourth year, how he had blushed and cast sidelong glances and become utterly tongue-tied around her.

He wasn't anything like Ron, who stared openly or pulled pigtales. Harry was the shy, adoring type.

Hermione's smile faded as she recalled the look Harry had worn most often since fourth year.

Oh, Harry. He thought he hid things so well, when everyone could read the bleak misery on his face. Even though Hermione could see how much he hated all this oppressive sympathy, she could not stop trying to reach out to him, because she couldn't stop feeling desperately anxious about him. Hermione had seen Harry's eyes go flat and cold as the surface of those round glasses he insisted on keeping. Every time she saw that look, her heart broke. She never wanted to see it again.

She had been so pleased he was happy. But now...

Hermione was seeing things she didn't want to see now, too.

She saw the glances between him and Malfoy in the corridors, private and exclusive as a touch. She saw how they seemed to fall instinctively into step. She remembered Harry's crackling black hatred, erupting in fights that sent other students hurtling down the corridors away from them, and she saw where that energy put into that hatred had gone.

She saw little things, like Harry and Malfoy in Care of Magical Creatures sharing one book, the accidental lingering brush of hands, the sitting closer than was necessary. She saw Harry's look at Malfoy when they forgot to stroke the book and it bit Malfoy, and he was making a laughing, histrionic production about it - and she thought, that's not *normal*...

Just then, Harry came in. Hermione cast a glance over at his flushed face and windblown hair. He smiled and dashed up the stairs.

That was one endearing quality of his pale skin - it too showed every emotion. Harry couldn't hide anything from Hermione, even if she was trying her hardest not to see.

She realised, as she gazed into the fire, that she was trying to work out if Harry was attractive or not.

She loved him like a brother, and thus had never given much thought to the matter. But now she had to look up and think of Harry in a different context than she had ever thought of him before. In the light of recent events, she felt she should give the matter some consideration.

Harry walked in again, dressed in his pyjamas, and hopped into the chair beside her.

Hermione decided that he was quite appealing. He looked better than usual in his new clothes and his eyes were flashing with enthusiasm... but no, he wasn't conventionally attractive.

By now they had established a kind of routine.

Harry would come in at some near-unearthly hour and sit beside her, fixing her with that eager gaze. After a while, Hermione would surrender and ask him how his day had been.

It was worth it to see his face glow.

Then he would launch into a thrilled description of whatever amazing adventure he had had that evening, liberally sprinkling the narrative with such staple phrases as 'then Draco said...' His smile throughout the whole story was simple and delighted.

He had been doing this for some time. At first, Hermione had only been relieved that he had cast off that awful depression. Then she had begun to think this friendship was too intense to be healthy. Then...

It was better than the days when Malfoy did not show up. This happened about twice a week, and whatever Hermione's opinion of Malfoy, she absolutely hated to see Harry droop by the fire all evening. All he would do was forlornly reject offers of chess or Exploding Snap.

It was a liability, being that transparent. It made you far too vulnerable.

"So, Harry, what did you do today?" Hermione inquired with a resigned smile.

Harry straightened up in his chair, looking gleeful, and promptly told her.

It was a long, involved tale. It seemed Malfoy had thought it would be extremely funny to try and magic a carpet to fly, and it had ended up dumping them into a tree.

Apparently savage floor-coverings were very much Harry's cup of tea. He seemed to have had a good time.

Hermione noticed that Harry looked small when he was sitting down, and taller than he really was when he was standing up. Oddly enough, his slight build seemed to account for both effects.

It also accounted for his grace, which was of a strange kind. At first sight, he appeared awkward, and then you realised he had the same agility as a fledgling. At first or second sight, you were always touched by the sheer lack of calculation in his every movement.

He was a child in his spontaneity, too.

The only times when he was adult came when he was in the throes of some grave emotion, and then he was wiser and more adult than anyone she knew.

She loved him. She really loved him, serious, reckless, utterly vulnerable Harry, a friend who was closer than a brother.

"That sounds like fun," she said, indulging him.

Harry's face shone. "It was," he agreed. "And then Draco said-"

"Hey Harry, Hermione." Ron was at the foot of the stairs. "It's bedtime."

Harry got up willingly, flashing Hermione that shy I'll-give-you-two-alone-time smile. Harry was never more obvious than when he was trying to be subtle.

Oh, but he didn't have that isolated, desolate look on his face when he left them anymore.

She didn't know. She couldn't decide what would be best.

"You're looking thoughtful, sweetheart."

Hermione looked up at Ron's slightly concerned face. It was a face of broad features and freckles, not very appealing to a casual observer. But somehow, she had come to love it dearly.

For no reason whatsoever, except that she could not help herself.

She got up and slipped her arms around his neck, dismissing worries about Harry from her mind.

Everything was so difficult and so terrifying these days. This was just one more thing to worry about, just one more threat to someone she loved.

Hermione buried her face in Ron's shoulder and tried not to think about anything for a while.

*

The next morning, Hermione's worries had returned.

Sometimes she thought that Ron was right, and she did think too much.

It was one of those dainty grey mornings, like something traced on a teacup. Fragments of cloud lingered on the skyline, which still wore pale echoes of the sunrise. The landscape seemed more subdued than usual.

The morning air had a bite to it as they hurried towards Hagrid's hut for Care of Magical Creatures.

Ron and Hermione were hand in hand, snuggled together for warmth. Hermione offered her other hand to Harry, but just then they saw that the Slytherins were a short way in front of them, bearing down on Hagrid's hut in a body.

Harry smiled that irrepressible youthful smile and waved her hand away.

"Nah," he said.

He didn't even pause before walking onward; he didn't feign a casual approach.

Moving subtly as a snake among his fellow Slytherins, Malfoy fell to the back of his group. That was his only acknowledgement of Harry's existence, until Harry drew near him, when he gave a cool nod.

Harry's grin was wholehearted and artless.

God, but they were different.

Hermione squinted at them, trying her hand at analysis again. This was difficult because she had a Greek chorus in her head that was prone to chanting 'Bastard!' whenever Malfoy was present.

All she could do was look at them together, and think of all the details she had noticed in Harry last night, and then put the two images side by side.

A study in black and white.

Malfoy was pale, of course. In that he was like Harry. But Harry's skin was clear parchment where his emotions could be written plainly.

Emotion could not penetrate Malfoy's skin - assuming he had ever had any emotions, that was. Even intense physical exertion made him pink rather than red.

There was nothing endearing about his poise. It was a chilly thing, that ability to be relaxed and graceful at all times.

Perfection in anyone you dislike is an extremely annoying trait.

He was the antithesis to Harry, whom she loved so dearly and with such protectiveness.

She glared at the blond head turned slightly to Harry's messy dark one. It seemed to be a deliberate contrast with Harry's hair.

Bastard! said her Greek chorus. *Even his hair seems to have a malicious purpose of its own.*

Then Hermione saw his face as he glanced over at Harry, and a new thought occurred to her.

His face, too, was utterly unlike Harry's. It was made for concealment rather than openness, thoughts rather than feelings. It was a narrow face, with ascetic features, a mouth made to curl, a pointed chin and eyes that glittered like frost.

And yes, Hermione had to admit - it was handsome.

But there was something uncalculated about his faint expression of amusement just now... It made her wonder.

Could Malfoy not know?

Obviously, some people didn't know. The Slytherins apparently didn't know, since there had been a lack of bloodthirsty mobs out to get Harry lately. The Gryffindors were clueless for the most part.

Ron didn't know, because he would have gone absolutely insane.

Still - there was a whisper at the Ravenclaw table, and a murmur among the Hufflepuffs, and some raised eyebrows from a couple of the staff. And there was Hermione herself, who had tried and tried to deny it, but who had been forced to accept the glaringly obvious.

Enough people knew so you could say 'Everybody knows...'

Everybody knew that Harry was absolutely dizzy for Draco Malfoy.

Poor innocent Harry, of course, had no idea. Malfoy, however...

Hermione had assumed that he knew all about it - he was the quick type, the little bastard - and he was playing Harry for some fiendish purpose of his own.

Still, that glance - well, it hadn't been friendly, but it hadn't been guarded. Malfoy had looked almost normal, and not like someone who was plotting another person's downfall.

Of course, that could be exactly his intention. *Bastard!*

Either Malfoy was quite aware of the situation, and setting up Harry for a fall, or he was blissfully unconscious of the whole mess.

Either way meant...

"What are you thinking of, Hermione?" Ron asked, sliding his arms around her as they walked together.

She turned her face into his neck for consolation, savouring uncomplicated warmth and closeness. Eventually she answered.

"Trouble," she said darkly.

*

Trouble can be closer than you think.

Hermione realised this on the next day. It was a Saturday, and she began the morning seated opposite to Harry.

His bright Isn't-it-a-beautiful-day-to-be-alive-and-about-to-see-Draco-Malfoy smile put her right off her food.

So did his constant peering over her shoulder to the Slytherin table.

"Today's the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff Quidditch match," he declared at last, putting an egg carefully into his cup.

"I know," Hermione replied. "It's always a nice change to have you in the stands with us."

Except at the last Slytherin-Ravenclaw match, she added silently, when you had your fingers crossed for Slytherin and were so secretly delighted when Malfoy - *bastard!* - caught the Snitch.

Harry went red, the easy childlike colour staining his skin.

"Oh, well... Actually, since it's the only game when we won't be playing, Draco and I were planning to watch it together." He became confidential. "We have a bet on."

Oh, Harry, you adorable idiot, Hermione thought with a sudden aching pang of impatience. *Could you be more smitten?*

Could you be more stupid?

Malfoy entered the Great Hall, wearing those recently acquired weekend Muggle clothes.

Harry knocked his egg out of its cup.

"Sorry," he said to Ron, who was staring at the egg in his cereal. "You know me, I'm always clumsy."

Yes, Hermione thought with heavy sarcasm. *You're our really uncoordinated star Quidditch player. Silly us.*

Harry was still gazing, starry-eyed, across the room.

Hermione didn't really know what he was making such a fuss about. Certainly, Malfoy looked slim in his Muggle jeans, and the open-necked white shirt showed a little more chest than usual, but he was still the king of Bastardshire.

He saw Harry, and he favoured him with another of those cool nods.

Oh, isn't Malfoy emotionally invested, Hermione thought. *Bastard!*

Harry's smile was uncomplicated and delighted.

He doesn't even realise, Hermione reflected as she saw Harry reach out for toast and spread it absently with raspberry jam, just as Malfoy was doing over at the Slytherin table.

Harry seemed too absorbed in watching Malfoy eat to notice what he was eating. Hermione glanced over to see Malfoy smirking and having an animated conversation with Blaise Zabini, waving his toast dramatically in the air. Then she saw the faint reflection of Malfoy's expression on Harry's face, flickering like rays of sunlight over the water. Somehow they seemed pure, filtered through his entirely different features.

God, Harry. Do you have any idea what you're doing? Don't you remember his father was a Death Eater? Lucius Malfoy did not die for our cause. He was punished for double-dealing his precious Dark Lord. He was a cold-blooded murderous Death Eater, one of the worst of his kind. And his son is just like him, only on our side for sweet revenge, and we can't afford to trust someone like that - especially not at a time like this.

And you have to go and fall for the bastard.

*

It was at the Quidditch match when Hermione received the distinctly unwelcome revelation that disaster was hurtling towards them.

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were actually playing a very good game, and the students were all enjoying the uncertainty one got without Harry Potter, who played better than anyone, or Draco Malfoy, who cheated better than anyone.

The day seemed bright and summery, and the game went on in a leisurely fashion for most of the day, until the sun slipped under the horizon and the sky turned violet.

Hermione almost had a good time, leaning against an enthused Ron, watching the game and feeling the sun caress her bare shoulders.

Almost.

If not for the spectacle of the two boys near the Quidditch field.

They weren't in the stands. Ron would not have put up with that, and - Hermione checked the glowering faces of Pansy, Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle - the Slytherins would have torn Harry limb from limb.

Instead, they were just off the pitch, near the benches where the players kept their towels and the substitutes sat. Malfoy was leaning back on his hands, legs stretched out and ankles crossed, his face lifted up to the sky. Harry had his arms locked around his knees and his eyes fixed on the game.

Correction, his eyes *usually* fixed on the game. Hermione noticed that Harry's concentration slipped occasionally.

Such as when Malfoy waved an imaginary flag and drawled, 'Go Ravenclaw.' Or when Malfoy stretched languidly, or shook his head so locks of his hair flashed in the sun.

Harry's eyes slid helplessly away from the game, glanced, and looked away. He didn't even seem aware he was doing it. Hermione was aware, all right. She was also revolted.

She wondered what they were talking about, so she murmured an excuse to Ron and wandered vaguely through the stands to a place where she could spy on them unobtrusively. She knew this was unethical, but... she was desperately worried about Harry! She had to find out what Malfoy was plotting to do with him.

At the exact point when she began eavesdropping, the crowd erupted into a cheer.

Hermione decided this was Life.

Eventually, she made out a certain hateful voice.

"Ravenclaw win! You owe me five blood-flavoured lollipops."

Hermione had a terrible moment where she imagined this was a euphemism.

"Triumph while you can, Draco," said Harry's voice. Hermione burned as she heard his voice, that sweet-tempered voice a shade deeper than one would expect from such a young face, addressing Malfoy as if he were a friend. "I'm going to wipe the pitch with you next week."

"If you do, I shall regard you with the utmost loathing forevermore."

Oh, here we go. Emotional blackmail.

Hermione's fists clenched as she heard the sudden vibration of uncertainty in Harry's tone.

"Really? For-"

"Forevermore," Malfoy supplied. "So you'd better not speak to me for - oh, three days."

Hermione was startled to hear them both laugh, Malfoy's loathsome snicker mingling with Harry's chuckle.

"Anyway," Malfoy continued, "I'm going to win this time. You see, this whole victorious streak of yours has not been, as certain dunderheads in the audience have supposed, an offering of sympathy to your battered heart. It was actually a cunning Slytherin plan to lull you into a false sense of security. Which, being done-"

"Draco, quit your wittering. What's the time?"

The lazy, dismissive affection in Harry's tone made Hermione look over at them in a protective fury. Her eyes narrowed as they rested on Malfoy.

If ever a boy needed another slap in the face...

Then her eyes widened in alarm.

Harry had leaned in casually to get a look at Malfoy's watch, a hand steadying himself on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy had turned and angled himself towards Harry to tell him the time.

Their faces ended up inches apart.

Hermione's heart slammed to a stop with sheer dread.

Their profiles were outlined against the violet sky. She could see the pale light shimmer on Malfoy's smooth hair, could see the gradual unfocusing of Harry's green eyes.

He did not seem to be breathing. His hand was no longer gripping Malfoy's shoulder but placed there lightly, fingers curling around the tendrils of his hair. She could see the trembling of Harry's lips and lashes silhouetted, the faltering soon to be replaced with realisation...

If he moved ever so slightly, he would brush Malfoy's mouth with his own.

Malfoy's profile was aristocratic and unmoved as ever. He turned away, checking his watch again.

"It's a quarter past six."

Harry sank back, the moment of almost-realisation slipping away. His hand lingered an instant too long on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy glanced at it, those fingers just touching his hair, and Hermione prayed for some sign that Malfoy at least knew...

"My hair's getting too long again," he commented airily. "Wretched stuff."

Hermione felt arms slip around her waist, and heroically controlled a startled scream.

"There you are," Ron said behind her. "I've been looking for you." He nuzzled her neck. "So tell me, when's this trouble you were talking about going to happen?"

Hermione leaned back in his arms for security even as her mind ticked over various possibilities.

Harry and Malfoy were getting up. She saw Malfoy glance over at them, his grey eyes coolly distrustful.

Harry, of course, had eyes for no one but Malfoy.

What did that look mean? What was Malfoy going to do? Sooner or later, Harry was going to figure things out, and then...

Hermione remembered Cho Chang. Harry had been so nervous about asking her to the ball, but he had done it. A pretty, popular, older girl - someone most boys wouldn't have dared to try for.

It wasn't that Harry was confident... it was that he couldn't help blindly pursuing what he wanted. That he couldn't help wanting something with his whole heart.

It wasn't a question of what Harry would do. But Malfoy - would he simply break Harry's heart, or could he possibly have a more sinister agenda?

Hermione remembered Lucius Malfoy, and shivered.

"Don't worry about it, Ron."

I can do that for both of us.

*

Hermione knew there would be something different about this meeting of the Duelling Club when they were all asked to show up in casual Muggle clothes.

Her suspicions were confirmed when they came in and the room was full of mats. And when Lupin was joined at the beginning of the class by Sirius, who was usually never allowed within a mile of the Slytherins.

Hermione noticed a certain amount of fluttering among the girls when they saw Sirius. Their newest Professor, now he was getting regular baths and meals, was really quite attractive, and the dark past and the flying motorbike didn't hurt at all.

Hermione thought that this was ridiculous. Sirius Black was almost like a *parent*.

No... that wasn't true, was it? Harry would have been in a much better state if Sirius Black possessed the mindset of a parent.

He loved Harry, Hermione never doubted that. He would have died for him in a second; he was fighting this war with the determination to save Harry at any cost. He was born for dramatic gestures like revenge killings, prison breaks and impulsive adoptions.

But Sirius had not been born for day-to-day life. He didn't know how to take care of a child, how to display the consideration and affection that radiated from the steadier Professor Lupin all the time. He had been born volatile and unreliable, the boy who had nearly killed Snape, and twelve years in Azkaban had only exaggerated those qualities.

He simply wasn't Harry's father. He couldn't help it. And Harry couldn't help hurting because of it.

Hermione saw the smile exchanged between them, and reflected that Sirius had been so busy he couldn't have absorbed this situation between his godson and Draco Malfoy.

Of course, neither had Harry.

But it was only a matter of time.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as Draco Malfoy and the Slytherins arrived in the Duelling Club. So, she was alarmed to notice, did Sirius'.

*

Harry smiled, shook his head and mouthed *You're late* as Draco came into the room.

Draco rolled his eyes at him and carried on arguing with Blaise Zabini, who seemed to think that a shiny stretch top was casual wear.

Of course, fastidious Draco was wearing entirely appropriate clothes: a faded white T-shirt and black combat trousers, which Harry noticed little Natalie MacDonald eyeing.

"You're late, Slytherins," Sirius observed, his eyes black slits.

Harry steeled himself for a gleeful mass removal of points. Draco gave Sirius a cold look.

"We had better get started, then," Lupin interposed gracefully. "Students, Professor Black has kindly agreed to show you some battle arts, in which I confess I have little skill. I believe you know very little of hand-to-hand fighting?"

Ron gave the snort of one with five older brothers, and earned himself a wry smile before Lupin continued.

"I believe it would be a useful skill to learn. It might tip the balance in a duel. Should you and your opponent happen to disarm each other at the same moment, it could be crucial to your survival. I hope you will all pay the closest attention, and try hard when you are asked to duel."

"I learned these skills at school," Sirius chipped in, smiling wickedly at Harry in particular. "You can all do it too."

Most people smiled back at him.

"Marvellous," Draco said, not quite under his breath. "The war against darkness has descended to a bar-room brawl."

Blaise Zabini snickered, Lupin wisely did not hear and Sirius' eyes narrowed again.

"I suppose I should expect that sort of remark - from Lucius Malfoy's son."

Draco lifted his chin and looked annoyingly superior as only he knew how. "That's right."

"Well, I'm sure you have all sorts of dirty tricks up your sleeve for emergencies," Sirius said darkly, "but if you don't mind, I still think there's something I can teach you."

He had turned away, pushing a hand through his black hair with unnecessary force, when the whole room heard Draco whisper not quite low enough:

"I doubt it."

Harry tried to catch Draco's eye, Sirius' eye, *somebody's*, but they were busy glaring at each other.

"Fine," Sirius said tightly. "Since you are such an expert, Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you'll volunteer your services as my assistant?"

Lupin coughed in an urgent sort of manner, and was utterly ignored.

"It would be my pleasure," Draco shot back.

Harry looked at Sirius in alarm. He knew enough not to trust Sirius' temper when Sirius was annoyed - he'd punched Professor Snape last year.

"Sure now?" Sirius asked. "I might mess up your hair."

His eyes flicked with thinly veiled contempt up at Draco's hair. Draco smiled serenely at him.

"Then I might have to kill you."

Sirius' lip curled.

"All right, class," Sirius announced. "Watch carefully, please. I assure you," he added to Pansy, who was clinging to Draco's elbow, "I won't hurt Mr. Malfoy too badly."

"I'm sure you won't," Draco returned, shaking off Pansy and walking purposefully over to the mat where Sirius stood.

Ron was mouthing devout thanks to fate. Harry was resisting the urge to carry Draco off somewhere and not let him go until he'd talked some sense into his thick head.

"You're Snape's little favourite too," Sirius observed, eyeing Draco with increasing dislike. "Everybody watch as I circle young Mr Malfoy..."

"Professor Snape is the best teacher I ever had," Draco responded austere. "He's really an example to his colleagues."

Sirius' teeth came together with a click.

"Please be watchful, Mr Malfoy," he said. "I was in prison for quite a while. You learn a few tricks."

"Yes, I've heard about prison," Draco told him. "I bet you wrestled with young boys there too. Watch where your hands wander."

"Draco," Lupin said sternly, as breaths hissed all around the room.

Everybody knew that Professor Black wasn't exactly a conventional teacher, but this was going altogether too far. Harry clamped down fiercely on that impulse to drag Draco away.

Sirius attacked.

Even furious, Sirius would never have hurt a student. Harry saw him check himself as he lunged, moving to knock Draco's breath out and immobilise him rather than strike. And Sirius was just as quick and deft as Harry had thought.

Harry had not thought about the fact that Draco would have no such qualms, and that he was fast as a snake.

He got in a blow. Sirius staggered back.

The class held their collective breaths.

And, hair tumbling into his furious face, Sirius went for Draco, and he had his arm and Draco was glaring at him defiantly and he might just twist and Harry would have to just stand up and yell...

"Sirius!" It was Professor Lupin's warning voice. "Perhaps it would be best to pair up the students, and instruct them at a remove."

Fury blazed on Sirius' face, but he dropped Draco's arm.

"Fine," he ground out. "Harry - why don't you take him."

"Happy to," Harry answered swiftly. He jumped up and took Draco's arm, pulling him back from Sirius. "You know how incredibly stupid you can be, don't you?" he said into Draco's ear.

Draco looked aggrieved, and Sirius, giving them both an incredulous stare, looked outraged.

Then he stomped off to order the other people into pairs.

"Ron and Hermione, you two together, Neville and - Millicent, why not, Neville, don't whimper... First one to get the other down for a count of five wins."

Draco looked after him, his eyes icy grey slits.

"I loathe that man," he announced loudly.

"Shut up," Harry said. "That's my godfather you're talking about."

He stepped away from Draco and they faced each other on the mat.

Students were paired up across the room. Hermione was laughing as Ron pretended to wrestle with her. Blaise Zabini was yelling at Pansy, who had him in a headlock.

Harry swiped half-heartedly at Draco, and Draco side-stepped without missing a beat.

"Professor Snape told me all about what he did to him," he said, scowling and aiming a blow at Harry it took Seeker swiftness to avoid.

"That was a joke!"

Draco gave him an assessing look. "Some joke," he said finally. "I don't find attempted murder all that amusing. He bloody well knew what would happen if a werewolf got to Professor Snape. And that werewolf was his friend, as well."

Harry paused and Draco almost got him. He had never thought of Sirius' action as a betrayal of Lupin.

"Well..." he said. "He's paid if he ever did anything wrong, hasn't he? Twelve years in Azkaban more than pays for anything, if you ask me."

Draco frowned, but didn't answer. Harry pressed his advantage.

"It's not like Professor Snape hasn't made some serious mistakes in his time. He paid for them, and now it's all right. That's how life works. You do the wrong thing and you make up for it - and then people forgive you."

Draco smiled brilliantly and tried to trip Harry up.

"Yeah? And when did you ever do the wrong thing, Potter?"

"I... made you come to breakfast with messy hair."

"And you can never make up for that. Die, demonspawn, die."

Harry grinned and tried to grab Draco's arm.

"He's my godfather - I love him. Why don't you give him a chance?"

Draco pursed his lips. "I'm not sure if I believe in chances. People seldom give me them."

Harry stopped and looked at him seriously. "I - I would."

"As I recall, you did." Draco gave him a charming smile in exchange for his startled look. "But then, you're absurdly trusting."

Draco lunged at him and tackled him to the floor.

Harry ended up on his back on the mat with Draco on top of him, and Draco must have hit him rather viciously because all the breath had been knocked out of Harry. He breathed hard, dazed, letting the seconds slip by. Draco's hair and breath brushed light on his skin.

Draco's hair was haloed by the light above them. He smiled teasingly into Harry's face, a smile bright and quick as a shiver. Then he propped his elbows on Harry's chest and slid into a different position in order to get off.

"Too easy, Potter."

Chapter Ten: The Last Test

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path and, whether because they were so tall and thick, or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he was underwater again - Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Try to keep it clear

But I'm losing it here

To the twilight

There's a dead end to my left

There's a burning bush to my right

You aren't in sight

You aren't in sight

Harry lay in bed, unable to sleep.

He wished he could blame this restlessness on the weather, or something, but it was a fine April night. That was, of course, the problem.

He wished Draco were here.

He'd thought that it would be all right, the third task. He knew that special precautions were being taken. He knew that Voldemort was not stupid enough to try and do something as predictable as seizing Harry during it. He knew that there was no other Hogwarts champion this year, nobody to... nobody who could...

Kill the spare.

Harry had seen a few dead people since then. Dementors and ogres had tried to storm Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ at the end of fifth year, and a couple of parents had been killed. The students had arrived after the battle, but Harry could still remember those limp forms sprawled on the platform. He could still recall the screams of grief and fear, how Neville Longbottom had been sick, how Ginny couldn't stop shaking. He could still recall how distant those deaths had seemed, how impersonal the next tragedy could be, and the next, and the next...

But Cedric's death had been the first. Death was something that aged you so much more than the adventures other boys boasted about. It was the knowledge of an uncaring universe rather

than someone else's flesh, marking the passage into what might one day be adulthood but which felt more like despair.

Harry still woke up screaming sometimes.

He'd left the curtains of his bed open, and in an attempt to distract himself from Seamus' empty bed opposite, he stared out of the window.

It was just an opening into blackness.

He would have gone to Draco, but Draco was out there in that blackness. This was his day for guarding the gates with Terry Boot. It was the most dangerous post there was, and usually teachers guarded it, but Draco and Terry had volunteered. Harry and Draco had had a shouting match about him taking it, but Draco had been determined.

Harry stopped peering out into the blank night outside the window, looked restlessly around the room and saw Draco slipping in the door.

He sat upright in bed, unable to keep back a smile despite the shock.

"Draco!"

"ush," Draco said sternly, pausing at the threshold. "I'll get into trouble if someone finds me here, you know. Some of us aren't practised at all this creeping about o'nights."

Harry lifted an eyebrow. "You seem to be doing all right. I thought you were out guarding the gates with Terry Boot."

"The esteemed Head Boy and I were relieved of our duties at two," Draco informed him. "I sensed, clearly because I have a psychic gift of awesome proportions, that you were being a silly idiot and were going to stay awake worrying all night. The very idea of this kind of stupidity was irritating me so much I wouldn't have been able to sleep, so I came here to knock you unconscious before I went to bed."

"Oh, I see." Harry stopped his smile from spreading further with no small effort.

Draco's black cloak made his face look white in the moonlight, his hood thrown back to show his pale clean features and his hair, in which raindrops were caught.

"If Weasley wakes up, he's going to murder me," he commented in a casual manner.

"We can go to the common room," Harry decided, throwing off his covers and thanking his stars that he'd chosen not to wear the favourite old pyjamas he had hidden from Draco's campaign of destructiveness. Instead he'd worn the pyjamas Draco had selected on their shopping spree, because - well, they had reminded him of that day, and that had been some little comfort.

Not as good as this.

*

The last embers of the fire were glowing in the common room grate, and the night was a little less intimidating and more comfortable.

Draco gave a small sigh of relief and tumbled onto the largest and most luxurious sofa. In the dim red light, he looked like a tired child.

"Was guarding duty hard?" Harry asked softly, before Draco could talk about anything else. "You know, I could-"

"No," Draco said firmly. "You may not accompany me in your damned Invisibility Cloak."

"You can't tell me what to do!"

Draco smiled faintly. "No, but Professor Lupin can - and I believe he has. There's a reason it's called a position of authority, you know. Besides, it's senseless to exhaust you too and you ought to know it." He looked patronising. "Even though sense has never been your strong point."

Harry leaned over and punched him lightly on the arm.

"Callous creature," Draco reproached him. "And here I've been up half the night serving my cause." He dropped the half-mocking tone. "Get over here, you stupid twit, and tell me all your troubles. I'm not sleeping until you do." He widened his eyes. "And I could get *ill* if I don't sleep."

In one of his more unwise moments last week, Harry had told Draco that he'd get sick if he missed more meals. Draco had been briefly outraged, and now brought up the issue of his fragile health for the purpose of getting his own way at least once an hour.

Harry pretended to scowl and pushed Draco's cloak out of the way as he sat on the sofa Draco had taken over.

"I'm sure your motives are entirely selfish."

"Always," Draco assured him. "Now talk to me, and be quick about it. Don't you know that I'm *fragile*?"

His gaze was wide awake and unwavering. Harry knew Draco; he wasn't going to let this rest.

"I don't know," he said. "I just keep thinking about the last time. About-"

"The Dark Lord?" Draco offered.

"No - Cedric." It still hurt to say his name.

He felt Draco stir against him, a faintly surprised look on his face.

"He's what bothers you most. But I thought you-" He broke off, and smiled with a trace of strain. "How like you, Potter."

"I don't know what you mean."

Draco had his head thrown back, and was studying the ceiling. "Don't you?"

"I'm not some sort of selfless hero," Harry burst out angrily. "I - of course I remember the other stuff. I was a kid, and I was scared to death, and when he performed the Cruciatus curse-"

Draco's eyes snapped back to his face.

"When he *what*?"

Harry fixed his eyes on the embers, and tried to force emotion out of his voice. He didn't want to get out of control - he didn't want to embarrass himself or Draco.

"I still - I still have the scar where Wormtail cut my arm," he said, rolling up his pyjama sleeve. "I didn't want them to remove it. It seemed - all wrong to pretend it was never made."

Draco looked at the mark in silence, eyes shimmering with dim light. He propped himself up on one elbow, reached out and touched it briefly. It was just a flicker of fingers, but it felt like a caress.

Harry turned to look at the dying fire again, and spoke in a low voice about the rising and the duel and his parents, and the final betrayal of Moody.

"Hagrid said that I would be all right," he told him.

Draco's voice was calm and quiet. "And are you?"

"Draco, how should I know? Some days I don't think so." He glanced back at Draco, who was lying back and tugging at his arm, and heard his voice soften involuntarily. "Right now maybe I am."

He sighed with exhaustion and old sorrow and relief, and stretched out beside Draco. Draco was warm and moved to his side to make more room for Harry, yawning somewhere near his ear.

"Thanks," Harry murmured. "For coming. And - well, everything."

"Oh yeah," Draco said dryly. "Everything. I was such a help when all that was actually happening, wasn't I?"

Harry opened his eyes to glance at Draco, his glasses hitting the side of Draco's face. He took them off and Draco was just a blur of sleepy child, and he couldn't see the cool gaze.

He remembered distinctly what Draco had said to him on the Hogwarts Express at the end of fourth year.

"Well, now you've picked the losing side too."

"And you've started choosing your company more carefully," Draco returned, and laughed somewhat bitterly. "I spent ages coming up with exactly the kind of thing I thought might hurt you most. I didn't - I didn't really care about much else, and I didn't know you'd taken so much you'd barely notice a kid yelling at you."

"Oh, I noticed. I always noticed you." Harry paused. "You're - kind of hard to ignore."

"I know," Draco said with a trace of smugness.

"Because you're such an absolutely poisonous brat, of course."

"Of course." Draco's voice was now definitely proud. "I'm a *Slytherin*."

Harry felt the flex of Draco's jaw against his face when Draco grinned.

"Still-" he said. "I meant it. Thank you for coming tonight."

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you, Potter? I simply happened to be bored." Draco touched him then, on his arm, on the exact spot where the scar lay beneath his sleeve. The fact he knew exactly where it was made this second touch feel even more like a caress.

He was so close to Draco he could see him without glasses, his eyes closed, his cheek pillowed against his black hood. He was obscurely delighted when Draco didn't remove his hand.

"Night, Draco."

"Oh, I'm supposed to *sleep* here now?" Draco demanded with well-feigned outrage. "Did you know I'm starting to forget what my bed looks like?"

"Night, Draco," he repeated serenely.

There was a pause. Draco still didn't take away his hand.

"Night, Harry."

*

When Harry woke up, he was alone. He went upstairs and dressed fast, dreading waking anyone. Their obvious worry - about him, about the task - made his intestines form knots of anxiety. He wanted to get to the Hall quickly.

It was only when he was hurrying down the stairs that it occurred to him Draco wouldn't be there. It always took Draco at least three-quarters of an hour to choose his clothes and get his hair right.

Draco was waiting for him at the door of the Great Hall. He clearly hadn't changed - he had brushed his hair, but Draco would have wanted to brush his hair if he was being led out to his own execution.

"You came early." *For me.* Harry smiled.

"For coffee," Draco sniffed. "I didn't sleep at all well."

"Of course."

"You pest."

They walked into the Hall, Harry's relief enormous. If this could be so different from fourth year - perhaps it could all be different.

He was about to suggest that they take toast and go for a walk around the lake, when Draco tugged his arm and led him over to the Slytherin table.

"I'm not sitting here, Draco."

"Did I ask you to?"

Draco methodically piled two plates high and filled two cups with coffee. Then he went to what appeared to be - and in fact was - a blank stone wall at the end of the room. He slid down to the floor and leaned against it.

Draco looked up and Harry could only laugh helplessly.

"You know," he said, sitting down in a more sedate fashion, "I don't like coffee."

Draco gave him a baleful look.

"I know that. Did I ever say the coffee was for *you*?"

"There are two - ah, never mind."

"Good. And I'll have no more insane prattle about caffeine theft from you." Draco pushed the plate towards him. "Eat now. Imagine the headlines if you swooned halfway through the task."

"Oh, you eat," Harry returned. "I'm not the pale, delicate one here."

"Shut up, you horrible little Gryffindor. Now eat, and stop worrying about unimportant things like a tiny Tournament. It can *hardly* be as important as my Creative Magic project."

Draco lifted his chin. Harry smiled behind his hand.

It had been announced that the Creative Magic project would count for half of the Creative Magic N.E.W.T. exam, and Draco had promptly gone insane. One day the floor of his room had been entirely hidden by crumpled-up plans.

"I'm sure that's crucial."

Draco kicked Harry sharply on the ankle. "It *is*. What if I fail the project? Then I'm practically certain to fail the entire subject, and then - death and ruin! My mother will certainly not accept a son who is an abject academic failure. I may be forced to disown myself." He kicked him again. "And you dare to further annoy me. Will you just eat?"

*

Ginny had been working up the nerve to wish Harry good luck all morning.

It could be important. The first time Harry had kissed her last year had been when she congratulated him after a fight.

She had brushed her hair a hundred times this morning, and chosen her nicest robes. She had planned to lean over and take his hand, and talk to him at the breakfast table.

He was shy - but surely that would get the message across.

When Ginny came down, though, Harry was not at the Gryffindor table. He and Draco Malfoy seemed to be sitting on the floor and kicking each other at intervals.

Ginny shook her head with a little smile. It was so *sweet* to see him like this, acting like a child. Harry was usually so serious - not that anyone could blame him, considering all he'd been through.

It did put a bit of a crimp in Ginny's plan, though. She decided to stop him when he went back to the Gryffindor rooms.

She had a small panic when Harry and Malfoy appeared to be heading straight for the Quidditch pitch. Then she realised that if she ran after them, she could guarantee that no Gryffindor - like her incredibly embarrassing brother - would hear her.

So she got up swiftly and hastened after them.

"Harry!" she called after them, panting. "Harry!"

Harry didn't seem to hear her, but Malfoy turned and then Harry did too. Ginny slowed her pace, trying to regain her breath and her composure, and tidy her flying curls.

It gave her time for a brief, delighted glance at Harry.

He was looking so much better these days. *She* had always thought he was handsome, of course, but lately a few other girls had started paying close attention.

He never looked at any of them. He never dreamed they might like him; he was that modest.

He smiled, that bright clear smile of his. He looked so - so *wholesome* to her just then, and so handsome. He was wearing those wonderful new clothes, her very favourite pair of his jeans and a red shirt that clung to him and emphasised his tousled black hair.

His eyes were vivid green, sweet and simple, as he looked at her.

"Ginny."

As always the sound of him saying her name made her heart stutter inside her chest, and filled her with a warm exultant glow.

"Har - Harry. I, um. I wanted to wish you - good luck?"

Harry was looking slightly confused. "Er... thanks."

Ginny consciously registered for the first time that Malfoy was there, standing a little apart and looking more than a little amused.

He was very unlike her Harry, the ideal of what a boy should be. She had never seen him be anything but inclined to be spiteful.

But Harry had chosen him to be his friend, and so it had to be the right choice. People were acting very oddly about that, as if Harry couldn't be trusted to make the right decision.

That probably upset Harry, Ginny reflected, and she turned as sweet a smile as she could on Malfoy. He couldn't be all *that* bad.

"I'm happy you're supporting him," she said.

She was rewarded with Harry's shining affectionate glance. Malfoy just looked even more amused.

"We're all supporting you, Harry," she continued earnestly, encouraged by how pleased he looked.

"And isn't he lucky to have such a lovely and devoted supporter," Malfoy said, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips.

Ginny blushed hotly and noticed Harry's smile snap off.

"We'd better be going. Thanks, Ginny," he said, and he actually hugged her, lifting her bodily away from Malfoy.

Ginny closed her eyes and breathed him in for a moment, the clean smell of soap and the trim feel of a Quidditch player's body.

He let her go too fast.

Then he stepped away, waving awkwardly, and walked off with Malfoy. She saw Malfoy's light head bend towards his black one, and heard the clear sound of Malfoy's laugh. He was obviously teasing Harry about her.

Ginny could have hugged herself. Another boy had kissed her hand - and Harry hadn't liked it.

No, Harry hadn't liked it *at all*.

*

"What did you do that for?"

Harry was aware that Draco was amused and Harry himself was agitated. This situation was rapidly becoming unbearable.

"I thought it would be funny," Draco said lazily. "And oh, it *is*. You're all jumpy and flushed. Decided you fancy the littlest Weasley after all?"

"No!" Harry snapped.

"So there's still a chance for Morag," Draco concluded with satisfaction.

"I still don't know who Morag is!" Harry almost shouted.

"She's been in your Potions classes for almost seven years," Draco observed disapprovingly. "Honestly, what have you been thinking of all this time?"

"I'm sorry, I was absorbed in my all-consuming hatred of you. And Snape," Harry added absently. "Look - Ginny's a nice girl, all right? I don't want her to, you know, get confused by you."

Draco laughed indulgently. "You overestimate my allure, Potter. She wouldn't notice if I began a leisurely striptease."

"*Draco!*" There were younger students filing down to get good seats for the Tournament and hearing him say these shocking things.

Draco looked positively gleeful. "Nobody could ever say that in quite the same scandalised fashion as you. Go on, say it again. I dare you."

"Dr - shut up."

"Of course, O Mighty Boy Who Lived. To hear is to obey. I solemnly swear that the virtue of the entire Weasley clan is safe from me. I offer up this tremendous sacrifice in your hon -
ow."

"You deserved that," Harry informed him severely.

"You *hit* me," Draco said in outrage. "With your *wand*. I'm in an abusive friendship. I don't call randomly attacking people with your wand very heroic. Call that heroic? *I* don't."

Harry stopped listening as the maze came into view.

"I wish they weren't having the Task this early," he blurted. "I know they don't want it to be dark. But I wish I could go somewhere and have a bit of quiet time to think."

He was struggling to overcome the stab of panic that had come from seeing the high hedge around the Quidditch pitch. He wasn't even looking at the shadowy entrance to the maze.

Draco glanced over Harry's shoulder - Harry looked into Draco's eyes and saw Hermione rushing towards them, a tiny figure framed in silver. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "I should go now."

"Don't be stupid," Harry answered. "You know I want you to stay."

Hermione, flanked by other Gryffindors, was bearing down upon them. Draco spoke crossly out of the corner of his mouth.

"I'm *not* stupid."

Hermione and the others reached him, Hermione and Ron pointedly turning their backs on Draco. Harry looked at the worried expressions around him, and then the sulky look on Draco's face. He smiled a little.

"Oh, you kind of are."

"Harry, how are you feeling?" Hermione asked him anxiously.

"I am *not*," Draco insisted in bad-tempered tones.

Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. "Are too."

"Harry!" Hermione's fingers closed so tightly on Harry's arm that he winced.

He tried to look strong and reassure her.

"I'm - all right, Hermione. I just feel a bit... fourteen again."

Pity filled Hermione's eyes. "Oh, Harry-"

"Hermione." He kept his voice quiet. "You don't really have to fuss over me. Why not trust me instead? I can handle this."

Hermione looked startled. "I - I do trust you, Harry."

"I know."

He reached forward and she slipped her arms around his neck. She hung on with the same tenacity she always had, because this was Hermione and she never gave up.

"Steady on there, Harry, getting cuddly with someone else's girlfriend," Ron said, his voice a mock threat. Harry grinned at him over Hermione's shoulder.

"Harry, this is different," Hermione assured him fiercely, combing his hair back with her fingers. "There are all these new precautions, you're safe, and - and everything will be all right."

"Besides," Ron added with a great air of bravado, "Like you said, you can handle yourself. You know a lot more spells now."

Harry cracked a smile. "Still no good at any of them."

Hermione almost strangled Harry with a last squeeze as she pulled away. "Things are different," she repeated, almost as if she was trying to convince herself.

Ron, Neville and Dean all administered slaps on the back with varying degrees of hearty masculinity. Draco lifted his eyebrow at him.

"She's right, you know. Things are different," he commented as the judges and the other contestants bore down upon them.

I know. Last time you were off in a crowd of Slytherins, wearing a Potter Stinks badge. Harry waited for Draco to say something.

Draco smiled wickedly. "You're taller now."

"Oh, sod off and go put on another stupidly insulting badge, why don't you?"

Draco looked outraged. "They were not stupid! I spent hours making those."

"I'd guessed you did it," Harry told him. "You evil ringleader you."

"You wrong me, Potter. I only verbally abuse because I care."

He only had time to laugh incredulously when Lee Jordan took him by the elbow and started leading him off to join the other champions. Harry cast a lingering look over his shoulder as Professor McGonagall began to shoo his friends to the stands.

Draco was standing there among the Gryffindors, probably uncomfortable and openly disdainful. He looked quite definitely out of place. But he was there. Perhaps he'd already said enough.

He caught Harry's gaze and called, "Get a move on, Potter!"

Harry hid another smile as he met the other champions. The French boy was looking decidedly queasy. The Durmstrang girl gave him a shy smile.

"Good friend?" she inquired.

Hiding the smile became distinctly unsuccessful. "Yeah."

Then Harry realised that Lee Jordan was yelling to the crowd.

"-on eighty points, Harry Potter-"

"Tied in first place, on eighty-five points each - Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Harry Potter"

Harry's mouth went dry. Smiling was no longer an issue.

*

He went in first and alone. There was no one sharing the top spot with him this time, nobody to secretly resent and God, feel so guilty about later.

He thought that it would be worse than it was.

That was an immense relief. He thought that it would be fourth year all over again, but instead all he felt was sorry for that unsuspecting boy. He felt very far away from that child, with his head filled with optimistic daydreams about being rescued from the Dursleys.

Well, nobody had ever rescued him from the Dursleys or Voldemort or anything else. He'd had to do that himself.

He'd been able to do it, though.

Harry walked onward, his eyes fixed on the shadowy pathway before him. He'd done it, swung the sword, held the wand, and he planned to do it again, so he could definitely do this.

Harry lifted his head and looked around as he neared a fork in the maze.

And he got the shock of his life.

Naturally since the last unfortunate incident, we have placed extensive safeguards...

There are all these new precautions, you're safe, and - and everything will be all right.

The high hedges on the outside of the maze had begun to blur as if they were water instead of leaves, transparent as wavy glass. Harry could see the people in their crowded stands, and they could see him, even though he couldn't see through the inner hedges of the maze.

Dumbledore really wasn't taking any chances. And now please don't let me look a fool in front of the entire audience; Draco would never let me hear the end of it.

He held his wand flat in the palm of his hand, whispered the spell and followed where it pointed.

There was a little gaggle of the media in the front row, cameras at the ready. How perfect, he didn't think. He'd been told that some younger students had cut out and kept that picture of him and Draco emerging from the lake.

Lee Jordan's whistle told Harry that the other two champions, who were tied, had entered the maze.

A heavy dragging sound made Harry's stomach clench in anticipation, as it told him he was about to meet one of the obstacles. He set his teeth and told himself he could do this.

In the crowd, he saw Hermione and Ron's unmistakable heads, Hermione's bobbing because she was dancing on her tiptoes. Ron was waving one of the *Harry Potter Hogwarts Champion* signs Dean had made.

The creature rounded the corner, and Harry was hard put to it not to retch.

It was a vast Flobberworm, its slimy quivering body filling the passage. Folds of nauseating flesh, the same colour and texture as a worm's, almost hid its tiny black eyes. But unlike every other Flobberworm Harry had ever seen, it had a mouth, a gaping mouth filled with rows of teeth like a shark's, which snapped on mid-air as Harry jumped back.

Its small, menacing head weaved about, as if it was scenting its prey, and it began to move slowly towards Harry, the sound of heavy flesh dragging across the grass accompanied by a small, terrible hissing sound.

Harry seriously wondered if he could concede.

It snapped at him, and he jumped back, its teeth closing an inch from his shirt. Its head reminded Harry of snakes and for a moment he thought he should try to talk to it, but there was no way Dumbledore would have given him that advantage over the other students.

He stepped back, and back, as it moved towards him, unstoppable as a tsunami, until he stepped sideways and his back connected with the hedge.

Then he pointed his wand and shouted "*Impedimenta! Impedimenta!*"

The Flobberworm kept coming, as if its momentum could break any spell. Harry stared up into its tiny blank black eyes. Then suddenly it shuddered, and was still.

All Harry had to do was nerve himself for the disgusting task ahead.

Trying not to touch the thing with his bare skin, Harry began to climb over it. The awful creature squealed and heaved, and Harry fell on his hands and knees. His jeans were covered with viscous ooze.

"Oh - yuck," Harry said, but he couldn't even stop to consider the utter gruesomeness of this experience because the Impediment Jinx wouldn't last forever, and he didn't want to be on top of the Flobberworm when it could move properly.

He went scrambling and slipping down the squishy flesh onto the blessedly dry ground, grimaced and ran as fast as he could away from that object.

Ugh, ugh, ugh, he couldn't believe he had actually touched that sickening, loathsome... *vision of beauty*.

Harry stopped dead. A Veela was undulating on the path in front of him, dancing, and the very grass around her bare feet was curving lovingly in towards her. Harry was not terribly well-versed in the ranks of feminine beauty, let alone demi-sex-goddess beauty, but even he could see that this was an exceptionally lovely specimen.

Her feet were beautiful, tracing patterns in the grass as if she were creating a magical circle around herself, a circle that did not keep people out but invited them in. Harry wanted to do something, to impress her, to perform great deeds for her, but at the same time all he wanted was to move closer and never do anything but watch her dance.

She was seemed bathed in silver light, as if her fluid, hypnotic dance was being spotlighted and... there was something he really had to do, wasn't there, but... it was important that he keep watching, and maybe...

She tossed hair pale as Draco's over her shoulder.

"Stay here and keep me company," she sang out, her voice rich. "Don't think about anything else."

Thought. It was like cold water being thrown on him.

Harry blinked and stepped back. Oh, how *embarrassing*, the whole school was watching as he gaped like an idiot at the Veela.

He shut his eyes and clamped his hands over his ears, and attempted to get his back to the hedge and sidle past. Instead, he was stopped short by the feel of slender hands on his chest.

Harry's eyes snapped open, staring into oceans of deepest blue.

"Excuse me... um, miss," he said, trying not to sound too scandalised. "I'm sure you have a great personality and everything, but I really have to be going."

"I'm so *lonely*," she purred, flowing up against him.

"Erk," Harry replied. "No thank you. It's, um, very kind of you to offer though," he added politely.

He side-stepped away from her, and left her standing there. She stopped dancing and stared after him.

"What are you doing afterwards...?" she called, sounding somewhat forlorn.

Harry sprinted. He hoped like anything that nobody had taken a picture.

The wand pointed him in the right direction for a few blessedly uneventful minutes. Harry almost relaxed as he ran through the maze. Surely nothing could be quite as bad as Slime Monsters and sirens of doom.

The obstacles in the maze this year seemed to be chosen for quality rather than quantity. Harry had a rather peaceful time for a bit, whispering "*Point me*" at intervals, walking onward.

The peace didn't relax him. The quiet seemed ominous, the silence a sign that something cunning was hunting him rather than that he was safe.

Just be wary, he thought to himself. *Just stay alert, remember what you have to do, don't let anything-*

Something hit him and knocked him to the ground, sending his wand flying.

-surprise you.

Harry twisted and turned under the sharp pricking of hooves in his back, trying to fling himself closer to his wand and coming face to face with... a lion. It panted, huge curved fangs close to Harry's face, and a tiny lick of blue flame surrounded one tooth.

Hooves. Lion. Fire.

Harry remembered, with that desperate clarity one gains in these situations, a page from one of Hermione's books.

A lion's head, a serpent's tail, a goat's body.

A chimera.

Harry gasped and reached out with one desperately scrabbling hand. His fingers closed around wood.

A moment later, he realised it was a branch from the translucent hedge. He yanked it off anyway, rolling again to get out from under the chimera and when that didn't work, shoving the stick into its throat and expecting any instant to get a blast of fire in the face.

The monster snarled and snapped at Harry's face instead. One curved tooth scraped along Harry's cheek and he felt the sharp rush of blood. He pushed the stick deep into its throat, shoving it back, praying it wouldn't flame.

I'm fighting an enormous monster with an almost invisible stick, he thought wildly. Call these safety precautions?

The creature snarled and backed off a fraction, and Harry reached up to wipe the blood off his face.

His hand came off clean.

The animal lunged again and Harry rolled in the dirt, stabbed up with the stick, his mind working frantically all the time.

Bizarrely, he heard Uncle Vernon at the breakfast table a couple of years ago in his head, saying that the idea of reduced tax for the handicapped... was a *chimera*.

A fantasy. An illusion.

Harry pressed up into the chimera's throat with his stick, up and up until the monster tumbled backwards and it was in the dirt with Harry leaning over it.

"You can't hurt me," Harry panted. "You're not even real."

He almost fell forward as the creature collapsed in on itself, but he staggered up instead.

Breathing heavily, wiping his forehead against his sleeve, Harry stumbled forward into the next opening.

And it burst into flame.

Harry shouted out with alarm and, by pure chance, stepped forward instead of back.

He stood staring around, waiting for a panicked instant for the pain of burning or the smell of scorching clothes and hair, and then slowly realised that he was perfectly all right. There had been no surge of heat. There had been no real fire at all.

It had been an illusion, just like the chimera.

Harry drew in another deep breath, looked up and saw the Triwizard Cup, gleaming on a plinth not two feet away from him.

He blinked at it in amazement.

Surely it couldn't be over. The dread that had filled him all year over this Tournament, the second Task and all its consequences, the thoughts of Cedric last night and the terrified struggle with the monster just now... How could it be *over*?

Well - it was. There was the Cup, and all he had to do was take it and he would have one less thing to worry about.

He felt almost light with relief as he stretched out his hand to take it. He realised later that he didn't think of Cedric at all as his hand closed on one handle.

In the next second, Cedric's dead face was all he could think about because there came that familiar, sickening pull behind his navel, and the treacherous world was slipping from under his feet and he thought with cold terror, *It's happening again...*

*

He was stronger and not injured this time; he was determined not to tumble to the ground when he landed, and he stayed on his feet despite being rocked by the impact.

He kept hold of the Cup with one hand - *don't put it down, keep it with you, it could bring you back* - and took out his wand.

Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he wasn't in a graveyard after all. He was in his dormitory in Gryffindor tower, it was night time, and all the lights were out.

There was not a sound or a sign of life in the entire room. Every bed was empty.

Just like Seamus.'

Harry looked around wildly, took a step backwards from Ron's deserted bed. The creak of the floor beneath his foot was a hideously alarming noise, as if a sound had not been made in this room for years.

The silence hung heavy and oppressive as the darkness on the room, and Harry couldn't bear to look at those beds any longer.

He turned and ran out of the door, down the steps, into the common room, his heart pounding against his ribs and just praying that someone would be there to help, to *explain*...

It was cold and still in the common room as it had been upstairs.

There were the remnants of an old, old fire in the grate, and on Hermione's favourite chair lay her book, *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. It was opened at the page Harry knew she had been on last night - she was nearly finished, and could hardly be persuaded to put it down.

She had apparently put it down now, though, and when Harry reached out to touch it the page was covered with a thick layer of dust.

He jumped back with a clutch of terror at his throat, as if he had reached out to touch someone's hand and found it cold and dead.

And he went utterly insane.

He did something he had never done before in his life without a thought, racing up the stairs to the girls' dormitory and running inside.

Nothing. Absolute quiet, and dust on a large ornamental butterfly he remembered Parvati had always loved to wear in her hair. The quick horrified breath he let out was the only noise in the world, and then he was running away from this room as well, back down to the common room and over to the Fat Lady's portrait and...

There she was, pink and plump under a layer of dust, as if a picture could die and become a ghost.

"Wh-what happened to everyone?" Harry stammered out, his voice shocking in the hushed room.

"I don't know what you mean," the Fat Lady answered. "Certainly there's a bit less coming and going of late... but..."

She paused, a faint look of distress on her face. The dust on her portrait suggested that she had not swung open for years.

"Never mind that," she said sternly. "The password, if *you* please."

"Um... Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Harry told her.

Let me out of here. His throat was dry with dread.

"Quite right," said the Fat Lady. "Though really, I think it's time you all changed it..."

She swung open, her hinges screaming out loud. The scream echoed hopelessly in the darkened corridor beyond.

Harry ran out into it, hurled himself down the marble stairs and into the Entrance Hall and he was just about to run down to the Slytherin dungeons when another burst of panic exploded in his chest. He backed into a wall, leaning against it and staring up at the ceiling.

His breaths were ragged and desperate in his ears. There were cobwebs on the ceiling, and he really believed that they were all gone, because he was scared of seeing Draco's room empty too.

The horror had come home to him, and his home had been taken away from him.

Even Hogwarts wasn't safe. Even Hogwarts and the people he loved had been destroyed, and he hadn't been able to protect them.

When Harry heard the sound of plate chinking against plate coming from the Great Hall, he almost shouted aloud. And he was fighting down hysterical hope and fear as he pushed open the doors.

The house elves were setting up for dinner, spreading a sumptuous feast before chairs empty and thick with dust. The smell of hot food made Harry want to be violently sick.

An elf looked over at him, and gave a squeak of glee.

"One of the masters is come back!"

Immediately all the elves looked up, and fastened their hands on Harry's clothes, trying to drag him to the Gryffindor table. The feel of their thin, grasping hands through his clothes made him want to vomit more than ever.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Winky stared at him blankly with her huge, rather horrible eyes. "Our last orders was to make dinner, Harry Potter. We has been making dinner for an awfully long time. We is very glad to see you. We hopes you is hungry."

"Let me *go*!"

Harry didn't remember, afterwards, whether he kicked them out of his way. To do something like that - to be someone like that - would remind him too much of Lucius Malfoy, and he never wanted to remember him.

He was desperate to get away, even if it was only to race up the steps again and try to make his way to Dumbledore's office. He was on the second floor before the thought struck him that Dumbledore was just as certainly gone, and he was gazing into the stone gargoyle's eyes and laughing softly, hysterically, as he wondered whether Fawkes was still waiting there for the people to come back. Just like the Fat Lady. Just like the house elves.

He had not spoken a word when the gargoyle sprang aside and the staircase lowered itself down to the ground in a slow, sliding motion.

Harry was past the point of surprise, and enough past fear to only be dimly aware that he was feeling it. So it was only with a distant sort of terror that he saw a huge snake winding down the staircase, with just the same gradual glide of the moving staircase itself. He recognised Nagini at once - he had often seen her in dreams.

It wasn't until he heard the step on the stairs behind the snake that he remembered terror.

He stood waiting, his wand and the Cup still dangling uselessly from his hand. The staircase met the ground.

Voldemort stood high on the stairs, that pale narrow face pitiless as Harry remembered. His red eyes narrowed as they saw Harry, and Harry was alone and all his friends were gone already, and there was nothing left to fight for.

"Now, I think," he said, "You will bow for me without any further persuasion."

Harry stared at him for a long still moment.

"Why should I?" he asked slowly. "You *bastard*."

In that long, calm moment, Harry thought - even Time Turners don't take you into the future. It can't be night time. That dust on everything is impossible.

It's all impossible. It's like the chimera, like the fire, it's...

"You're not even real!"

Voldemort didn't disappear, but began to walk down the stairs.

It's not enough, Harry thought desperately. *I have to do something more, like the stick, like stepping through the flame...*

And it was, quite simply, hopeless. There was nothing he could do against Voldemort.

But he wasn't going to run away.

He stood there, trembling, as Voldemort swept down the remaining steps. He didn't flinch as he looked into that inhuman face and he raised his wand as Voldemort raised his, and Harry thought, quite distinctly, *I've failed everyone*.

Voldemort opened his mouth, and Harry tried to think of a spell to scream. And...

Then he found himself in daylight again, the illusion melting away as if he had never seen it.

The cup in his hand had melted too, and the real Cup stood glimmering on its plinth before him. He reached out... and he was standing outside the maze.

He had won the Triwizard Tournament, and it was all over.

Harry stood in the light, blinking up at Dumbledore, whose face was grave. He didn't have time to ask what he should have done, or how he could have known, or what he felt he should have done - to win something more than the Tournament.

Dumbledore stood aside, and the snapping lights of the cameras and the euphoric rush of his friends towards him obscured everything else.

Ron's hands closed on his shoulders.

"Harry! You just disappeared... We were going mad. Are you all right?"

Harry blinked up at Ron, who was so pale his freckles seemed to be on fire. He remembered, vivid as those freckles, every bed in the dormitory being empty.

"I'm fine," he said slowly.

Sirius and Lupin were having an agitated conversation with Dumbledore. Hermione was trying to push her way through the crowd, her questioning voice too thin to reach Dumbledore's ears.

"Sir! Sir, was... making him disappear *really* necessary...?"

Neville's round face was bright as he looked at Harry over Ron's shoulder. His expression was distressingly reminiscent of Colin Creevey's.

"That was marvellous, Harry," he said in heartfelt tones.

"For Heaven's sake, Longbottom, you're not complimenting him on a sexual exploit."

The vicious drawl made Harry aware that something was wrong even as he turned to look at Draco, his smile fading before it had begun. Like a snake swallowing its own tail. Like a snake.

Draco was standing apart from the immediate crush around Harry, the very way he stood generating space around him. His lip was disdainfully curled and his eyes were cold.

"Congratulations, Potter," he said. "Another stunning display of reckless stupidity. Well *done*."

Then he turned and stalked off.

"What a bastard!" Ron exploded. "Don't listen to him, Harry. He's jealous - he's always been jealous of you."

Ginny's dark eyes were very wide.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry disengaged himself from Ron, staring after Draco. His mind was blank of everything except shock and the pressing need to find out what Draco thought he was doing.

He was still holding the Cup, he realised absently, and pushed it in Ron's direction.

Ron let go of Harry's shoulders to take it.

"Just - hold that for me a minute, would you?" Harry asked, moving past them all.

He'd find Draco and he'd bring him back. It was that simple, and he didn't have attention to spare for the hands trying to detain him as he passed.

He just doggedly went after Draco, who was already away from the Quidditch pitch and accelerating over the slope beyond, out of sight. He seemed to be heading for the Forbidden Forest. He must *really* not want to be followed.

The rain began to fall, tiny near-invisible needle-points, and Harry felt small stabs of annoyance and worry with the cool pelt of rain on his face. What had he done, and why was Draco acting like this, and *damn* it, he was tired and he'd been scared out of his mind, and he'd been looking forward to - to a bit of peace, and maybe for Draco to look pleased or relieved, instead of this!

He focused on that pale head and just ran, because Draco didn't know anyone was following him and he was only stalking onward, and it was the easiest thing in the world to hurl himself forward as they entered the shelter of the trees, and grab Draco's elbow, and yank him around and *yell*.

"What the hell was all that about, Malfoy?"

Draco's face was white and narrow and implacable, and the rain on his face looked like anything but tears.

"I was congratulating you, Potter," Draco answered calmly. "Brilliant exhibition of near-suicidal idiocy. Some of your best work yet, I'd say. Who knows what heights you may achieve? Now that you've received my homage, you'd best get back to the fan club. They're probably pining away without you."

Harry glared at him. Draco stared unforgivingly back.

"Why don't you stop acting like such a prat," Harry suggested, his voice low and heated.

"Why don't you stop *being* such a prat?" Draco demanded in a cool, almost conversational and altogether contemptuous tone.

He tried to pull his sleeve out of Harry's grip, but Harry grabbed his shoulder instead. Harry saw the curl of his mouth and tried to remember what person he hated had just this expression, and then realised it was Malfoy.

The old Malfoy, *just* like him, and Harry felt a bizarre urge to hit him and the only reason he didn't was because why would the old Malfoy have cared if his idiocy had been near-suicidal?

"Why don't you stop insulting me for just one second and *tell me what I did!*" Harry exploded. "I only did what I had to do, I don't understand why you're mad, so why don't you stop all this rubbish and tell me!"

"What you did?" Draco snapped. "You were trying to fight that chimera with a stick!"

"Listen, I had to, there was nothing else and I didn't have time to think-"

"Think?" Draco's voice was thin with outrage. "Do you never think about-"

"I think about you all the time!" Harry shouted.

They stood glaring at each other in the cold glitter of rain, breathing in shallow, furious synchronisation. Draco's shoulder under Harry's hand rose and fell with his chest in sharp, fast breaths.

Draco's mouth was an uncompromising line.

"You're a reckless fool," he said flatly.

"I don't know what-"

"Look, it's got to stop, all right?" Draco snapped. "It's got to stop, all of this running around trying to be the hero and save us all, I can *see* you thinking about it. You can't fight monsters on your own."

"I'm not - I don't - God, Draco, is *that* what you're so worked up about?"

Draco, who seemed to find it so easy to glare, stared at the ground.

"I don't know what-"

Harry felt the sudden calm he had felt entering the maze.

"Draco. Draco, *look* at me." He didn't, and Harry jerked his chin upwards. Instantly Draco was glaring again, eyes wide at the indignity. "It's all right if you were worried about me," Harry said softly.

"What are you going on about, Potter," Draco said in a voice that lacked conviction. Only Harry's hand kept him from turning his face away.

The rain always made Draco's hair a little bit static. Harry didn't mention that it was slightly fluffy, since Draco had enough on his mind.

"It's okay to be worried," he said. "I know you're not used to it."

"Are you delusional, Potter?" Draco demanded. "I'm worried all the time. The whole school is living in terror. My Slytherins aren't safe, I don't know what I'm supposed to do to protect them-"

"And that's your problem!" Harry shouted. "You're used to protecting people by ordering them around and being stronger than everyone else. That's why you're acting like an idiot, because you're not used to seeing someone you care about in danger you can't do anything about!"

"So *what?*" Draco shouted back. "You're just the same! You're worse!"

Harry thought of everyone being gone, of the sharp feeling that he had failed them all.

"I know," he said in a subdued voice. "That's why I understand."

Draco looked up at Harry, of his own accord this time, and bit the side of his lip. Then he took Harry's hand, removing it gently from his face, and let it fall.

"I'm not going to be anything less than you, Draco," Harry said, folding his arms. "You can't order *me* around."

"Well, I'm not going to be anything less than you, Harry," Draco returned sharply. "I don't want to hear any more rubbish about me not signing up for dangerous posts."

"That's not - I was just trying to-" Harry exhaled hard. "All right. I'm sorry."

Draco nodded. "I'm sorry if I was - a bit of a prat back there. Not that you weren't being a suicidal idiot, of course. You should have stayed there nice and cosy with that Veela." He brightened. "Actually, I think she was a bit taken with you. You could-"

Harry couldn't help laughing.

"You're impossible."

Draco smiled brilliantly back, and he lifted his hand to touch Harry's face. Harry felt the cool pressure of wet fingertips drawn along his cheekbone.

He looked at Draco, and thought of the burst of panic in his chest when he couldn't stand even to go and look at his empty room.

Draco drew his hand back, and examined his fingers.

"You're filthy," he remarked. Harry caught his wrist.

"Come back," he said. "I have this whole presentation thing to sort out."

"Oh, my God!" Draco exclaimed, looking appalled. "Of course you do! There's a ceremony! There's *money*. You complete pillock, what do you mean by running all over the place like this?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco didn't even have the decency to look abashed.

"Come back," he repeated, and Draco let Harry pull him back to the Quidditch pitch.

Ginny gave Harry a bright welcoming smile as they returned. Ron gave him a distraught look, barely able to spare a sneer for Draco.

"Harry, *please* take this back," he said, pushing the Cup into Harry's free hand. "The money's supposed to be put in it, and then Fudge is supposed to give you back the Cup in this ceremony. There's a speech and everything. People kept trying to take pictures of it, I was going mental..."

To illustrate Ron's words, an army of photographers were bearing down upon them. Ron backed hastily away towards Hermione. Harry remembered that he was hurt and filthy, and wished Hagrid was nearby to hide behind.

"Oh no," he said quietly.

"They can take pictures of me if they like," Draco announced complacently. "I'm pretty."

Fudge came bustling over them, the self-confidence which had noticeably eroded since the disappearances apparently restored for this special occasion. He had the sack of money in his hands, and he beamed at Harry. Harry studied him with cool distrust. He didn't seem to notice.

"Honestly, Harry, where *did* you get to?" he inquired. "Here, take this and put it in the Cup... You'll say a few words, won't you?" he added, as Harry dropped Draco's wrist to take the money.

"Er," Harry answered, staring. "A speech?"

"I suggest you take that Veela onstage with you, and get her to take off her dress," Draco proposed. "That'll distract everyone nicely. Or you could take off your own shirt. Let's face it, these photographers are clearly desperate for every inch of you."

"Thank you, Draco," Harry said out of the corner of his mouth. "Do you have any suggestions not involving public indecency?"

"Me?" Draco said, scandalised. "Never!"

"You should be on the stage in a few minutes, Harry," Fudge told him. "Just hold onto the Cup for another second - I need to fetch the notes for *my* speech..."

He hurried off. Harry stared after him, looking desperately into the clicking cameras and the golden inside of the Cup. He was already limp with exhaustion and pain.

He glanced over at Draco, made his decision, and smiled.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "Let's go."

"*What?*"

Harry dropped the money and seized Draco's wrist again. Draco looked shocked and reached down to scoop it up.

"Never, ever drop money to grab a person!" he admonished sternly. "You can buy people with money!"

"How about you?" Harry suggested. "Come on. I want to go."

"Certainly not me," Draco said severely. "I rate special. Where precisely do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Anywhere. Not here. With you."

Draco looked almost awed. "You mean it. You *are* crazy."

Harry smiled recklessly. It had all been an illusion, the Tournament was over, and he was damned if he was making a speech. He turned and kept hold of Draco, who laughed and came willingly with him.

"I don't believe you dragged me all the way back there to leave again."

"Oh, but that's different," Harry said confidently, as the gasps began behind them. He began to walk more rapidly up the slope. "By the way, Draco... are you free this Saturday?"

"I expect so," Draco replied cautiously. "Why?"

"I have a present for you," Harry answered, doing his best to sound careless.

Draco looked delighted.

"A present? What for? Why can't I have it now? What is it? Is it shiny?"

Give me a clue."

Harry cast a look over his shoulder. "Draco?"

"Yes?" said Draco, whose mind was clearly occupied by the prospect of a present.

"Run, would you?"

The rain still fell lightly down on them, and laughing for some reason, they raced down the hill with a pack of photographers in hot pursuit.

Chapter Eleven: When It Darkens

I looked into your eyes

They told me plenty I already knew

I never let myself believe that you might stray

And I would stand by you no matter what they say

I thought, I'll be with you until my dying day

It was Friday morning, four days after the end of the Tournament, and Harry had just woken up with his scar burning.

It burned often these days, as Voldemort's power rose. He had learned to accept it.

He hadn't learned not to hate it.

With the worry of the Tournament over, if he looked away from Seamus' bed he could almost pretend Quidditch was all he had to worry about. Why did this pain have to come now?

"Harry."

He turned to the sound of Ron's voice, and felt a sudden, stupid flash of fear, as if Ron would see the scar and think it was the mark of a murderer.

Ron smiled, faintly, in a concerned way. Harry smiled back to show he was all right, and the smile became more genuine when he saw Ron's pyjamas.

Ron was tall enough now to wear the pyjamas Bill had worn at his age, and there was a picture of red, pouting lips on the pocket over his heart Harry always teased him about. And by some Ron law of physics, the pyjama trousers were too short - though Harry was pretty sure he and Bill were the same size.

"You okay?" Ron asked, sitting on the bed.

Harry pulled his legs up to his chest to make room for Ron, glad for the distraction.

"I - yeah. It happens often enough."

And every time makes me think we have to crush him more and more. Makes me more determined to kill the bastard.

"Is it worse, knowing when You-Know-Who's angry?" Ron spoke suddenly, as if he was almost afraid to say it. "I sometimes think it's - not knowing that's the worst thing. I hate mysteries. I hate everything that's-" he made a face. "Creepy."

"I don't know," Harry said wearily. "I've always had this, remember?" He paused. "I expect they're both bad."

"Yeah." Ron hauled himself further up onto the bed, knocking against the bedstead and wincing. "D'you want to know something? It'll sound a bit mental."

Harry nodded.

"You know the awful way Neville snores? Sometimes I listen really hard for it, because it lets me know that someone's still there. Sometimes I can't sleep without it."

They both paused for a minute, and listened to the drone of Neville's snore. It was a dreadful sound, and they exchanged a small grin.

"I don't think it sounds mental," Harry said. "This is all so bad... you take comfort where you can get it."

"Yeah..." Ron squared his jaw. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that. That's why, you know."

"Why what?" Harry asked.

"Why I haven't strangled Malfoy and buried him in a shallow grave to stop you fraternising with the enemy."

"He's not the enemy," Harry said sharply.

"Obviously you don't think so, Harry. But *I* still hate the git. He's always been the enemy-" Ron scowled. "The smarmy, evil-minded little ponce only stops running off at the mouth to fuss over his hair. But - okay, I know for some reason you like him now."

Ron grimaced as he said that, as if he wanted to wash out his mouth.

"He's not like you think," Harry said. "Well. I mean, he does fuss over his hair."

See? Ron's expression said. *Evil.*

"And sometimes he's a bit poncy. And all right, yes, he doesn't know when to stop talking. But..." Harry stopped. "I care about him," he said quietly. "I care about him a lot."

"Um. Yeah, I can see that," Ron said. "I'm not completely thick, you know. I saw you two running like escaped jailbirds from the Tournament." He shook his head. "Honestly, Harry, what did you think you were doing?"

"It almost worked," he protested.

"Harry, they caught you at the foot of the hill, and then that prat tried to tell them you were having an affair with Professor Trelawney."

"It could have worked," Harry said defensively.

"Prat," Ron repeated. "And for the record, I think you'd at least rate Professor Sinistra."

"Ron," Harry said, suppressing a grin. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, well... the point is... things *are* bad, like you said. And we all need things to make it better. If he's helping you - if you trust him - I don't want to take that away from you."

Harry stared at Ron's open face.

Ron scowled. "I still hate it, though. *And* him," he added, just to make things clear. "You might trust him, but I don't think you should. If things were just a little better, I'd scalp him and hang his stupid hair outside the Gryffindor entrance. And if he's not as good a friend as is possible in his slimy Slytherin way, I'll still scalp him."

Harry bit back a smile. "Ron." Ron looked at him. "I... You're my best friend. You know that."

"I should hope so," Ron said. "Otherwise I really would have to kill Malfoy."

"Is this a private slumber party, or can anyone join in?"

Dean's dark eyes were grave and smiling at once, and Harry would never have turned him away. But he would never even have dreamed of it now, when Dean's best friend was not there.

"*Anyone* can't join in," he said. "But you're welcome."

Dean climbed onto the bed, nudging Ron to get more space. "So, what're we talking about?"

"The Tournament," Harry answered.

"Ah." Dean grinned. "That's one thing off your back now, at any rate. Though I must say that when you disappeared it gave us all a scare."

"It wasn't great for me either," Harry replied.

He didn't want to think about it, hadn't wanted to talk about it. The little he had said had made Sirius go white with fury and rush to bite Dumbledore's head off. Dumbledore had said that it was necessary and Harry would understand later.

Harry wished he understood *now*.

"Ginny was in tears," Dean continued softly.

"Hermione was going spare too," added Ron.

"I think everyone was terrified," Dean said. "You know how it is these days. Not even Hogwarts is safe. We've got this spy."

The word, *spy*, pressed the curtains in heavily around them all. Harry couldn't remember anybody ever saying it in the Gryffindor dormitories before. He saw the faces around him grow grim. They huddled in together.

"It'll be all right," Harry told them, because someone had to say it.

"We have to find out who it is," Dean replied quietly. "We have to have at least one place where we can be safe. Then things might start to be all right."

*

It was day now, and lunchtime.

"Come on, Harry."

"Why should I?"

"I *really* want you to."

"Maybe if you beg."

"I'm considering it."

Harry smiled. "On your knees, Malfoy."

Draco tilted his head and gave him a winning smile back. "Does that mean you will?"

"I... have to be looking at a picture of a snake," Harry temporised.

Draco rolled his eyes at him. "Pathetic excuse, Potter. I have a snake on my prefect badge. Look at it, and say something in Parseltongue this minute. I only heard it once, and I want to hear it again!"

"Don't be a brat," Harry said absently. "What would I even say?"

Draco considered. "You could say 'Draco is the supreme ruler of everything, and has perfect cheekbones.'"

Harry focused on the badge pinned to Draco's chest. The snake was just a flat green outline against a silver background, but he could see the flickering forked tongue.

"Draco is a complete idiot some days, and I think he may be in love with his mirror."

The heavy hiss hung on the air.

"Hey!" Draco said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You don't even know what I said."

"No. But I know *you*, twit." Draco indulged himself in a smirk before he continued. "And *that* was great," he told Harry appreciatively. "You should do it more often. I bet Morag would be impressed."

"Draco Malfoy, if you don't shut up about this Morag girl-"

Draco's cool glance swept around the courtyard where they were walking and keeping to the covered walkways because of the chill in the open air.

"Well. If you're not into the Slytherin action, you might like to know that your cutest stalker is still very much in evidence."

Harry looked around and saw a glimpse of bright hair.

"Do you mean Ginny?"

Draco's lip curled. "I certainly didn't mean Creevey, did I? There she is, large as life and twice as infatuated. Lucky you're not the cheating type; six vengeful older brothers would be a worrying prospect. And it's fun to be adored."

"Draco. Do you remember us talking about you not being able to look after me? That includes not being allowed to fix me up."

He was certain Ginny was just out for a walk. Yes, she'd had a bit of a crush on him ever since they were all kids, and the crush had clearly lingered enough for her to have kissed him back that time - and yes, all right, maybe she *would* like to go out with him, but he wasn't interested and she couldn't be that serious.

Draco looked injured.

"I'm just trying to help you on the road to happiness."

"I am happy just now, thanks very much."

"You could be happier," Draco persisted. "There's this tongue thing I taught Morag to do - it's a long story about a nightclub and lemons-"

"Draco!"

Draco's head snapped up. Harry had noticed he could always tell when Harry was serious.

"Just stop it, all right? I don't like to hear about that kind of thing. You're better than that."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"You're idiotic some days, Harry. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But you have to put up with me for the next hour. You promised to leave your damned project alone if I told you the full story about the Chamber of Secrets. You're mine."

Draco smiled. "Far be it from me to go back on a bargain. Though I'm still not sure about this Chamber affair."

Harry nudged him for a brief mock-indignant exchange of glances.

"Would I lie to you?"

"Would I accuse you? It's just the whole pulling a sword from a hat business. You pull *rabbits* from hats."

"I don't think I'd have fancied trying to kill a basilisk with a rabbit."

"Oh, but I would love to see you try it. Imagine it. Imagine the photos." Draco went into a quick but energetic roleplay. "The brave hero brandishes his fluffy and whimpering pet of doom. 'Back, back, foul serpent!' Thwack! Distressed squeak. Th-"

Harry reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back into step with Harry by his sleeve.

"You're *such* a drama queen sometimes, Malfoy."

"How dare you! Nobody understands my artistic temperament."

Harry just shook his head, amused. Draco sulked for a moment, then appeared to cheer up and began to sing under his breath, probably to prove his artistic temperament. Or possibly to annoy Harry.

He was always singing this song. It was an old Weird Sisters One, and Harry recalled that Draco had always seemed fond of it.

The one time in sixth year that his dormitory mates (especially Seamus, but don't think about that) had dragged Harry down to the club in Hogsmeade, Harry had spent the night staring into his Butterbeer as every Weird Sister song played. He had loathed every one of them as he sat there, trying not to watch Ron and Hermione, or Seamus and Lavender who had been together at the time...

And he'd loathed this one most of all, because when it started the Slytherins had all spilled in from the bar in a huge rush of barely covered bodies, and really the Slytherins had never needed their own monthly club night to get drunk and be shocking en masse.

Harry recalled being distinctly taken aback that not only were the girls' robes very low cut, but Zabini and - Malfoy, then - were both wearing too little. Zabini's robes seemed to be made of dragonhide and were slit down his chest, and Malfoy's had no sleeves. Harry'd thought *Typical* and scowled into his Butterbeer as half the Slytherins began enthusiastically shouting the words.

The inside of Malfoy's mouth had been painted black and shocking pink by neon light and shadows.

Harry had thought it was a terrible song.

"Nobody to dance with, Potter? How extremely unsurprising."

He'd recognised the slow, delightedly malicious voice before he looked up. Malfoy, suddenly at his elbow as if placed there by an evil fate.

Clearly drunk and sweaty from the crush, and Harry could smell the sharp mingled scents as Malfoy leaned in to look at Harry's drink and give a yelp of scornful laughter.

"*Butterbeer*? I see we're competing with Longbottom for the coveted title of Most Pathetic Student this year. Go on, Potter, you can do it. I believe in you!"

Harry had shoved him viciously back. "Get away from me, Malfoy."

He'd tried very hard to think of what terrible thing he could have done to be punished for it with Malfoy.

Harry had been saved by Zabini, of all people, walking up behind Malfoy and touching Malfoy's hip for an instant. Even back then, he'd seen that Zabini was unwarrantedly grabby.

"Aren't you dancing, Draco? This is your song."

Malfoy's alcohol-bright eyes had glittered as they left Harry's. "Of course I'm dancing," he'd replied.

Harry had left. He had no desire to be mocked any further, or to see perverted Slytherins writhing all together on the dance floor.

Oh, he'd hated the song then.

He didn't mind it so much now.

He realised he'd been humming along when Draco arched his eyebrow at him.

"You could sing too," Draco proposed.

"No thanks," Harry returned. "I don't sing, any more than I dance."

"Doesn't sing. Doesn't dance. All he can do, ladies and gentlemen, is kill monsters with bunnies."

"I don't-" Harry paused and laughed. "I can do a lot more than that."

"And speak very cool snake language," Draco added. "I'll give you that."

Harry paused and shivered. He could remember Tom Riddle, speaking the same tongue, and the thrill of disgust when Dumbledore told him: *he transferred some of his own powers to you...* He wouldn't have spoken Parseltongue again, if it had been anybody but Draco asking, and if he hadn't felt - guilty.

Because he had lured Draco out of his room under false pretences, of course. He had not told Draco the whole story of the Chamber of Secrets. He had left out the present day villain, the man who had slipped doom to an innocent girl.

He wanted to *protect* Draco, and it didn't matter anymore. So he left Lucius Malfoy's name out, and surely wanting to protect Draco was nothing to feel guilty about.

He still did, though, and he shivered again.

"For God's sake, Harry, you're freezing," Draco remarked. "Why didn't you find some gloves, you great lummo?"

He gave Harry a critical look, and then reached over and knotted Harry's scarf more securely around his neck. And yes, it must be cold, because Draco's breath was oddly warm against Harry's cheek.

"Honestly, the last cold snap of the year," Draco said grouchily. "What kind of sadist organises the last cold snap of the year to happen in *May*?"

"Draco," Harry told him, "I don't think anyone organises these things."

Draco stuck out his lower lip. "It could be retribution for past misdeeds by cruel fate."

"Then you're lucky it's not snowing."

Draco made a hideous face at him, crossing his eyes under the fringe his woollen hat flattened against his forehead.

"At least I am wearing an appropriate hat and gloves," he said in tones of deep satisfaction.

It was so like Draco to have a hat and gloves made to match his Slytherin scarf. It appalled him to see people compromising with any old gloves, and Harry'd noticed he took every opportunity to peacock around in them.

Harry suddenly recalled the last time it had snowed, just before Christmas. He'd been walking around with Ron and Hermione, trying to ignore them teasing each other about mistletoe, and he'd vaguely noticed Malfoy's hat and gloves in a you-vain-bastard way.

At that point Terry Boot had sidled behind Malfoy and wrestled a snowball down his neck. Malfoy had ended up sitting on the snow, looking comically outraged and trying not to laugh. Harry remembered being rather startled at his apparent lack of rancour.

He'd been glaring up at Terry Boot, and there had been snowflakes stuck in his eyelashes.

Then of course he'd leaped up to wreak snowy vengeance, and some Ravenclaws had jumped to their Head Boy's defence, and Harry had led the Gryffindors to supply the difference.

It had ended up being viciously Gryffindor/Slytherin as everything seemed to end up at Hogwarts, with Crabbe and Goyle throwing snow-covered rocks and Pansy using her knee in defence of Malfoy and in a most unladylike fashion, and leaving Ron fallen on the snow.

"Be grateful, Granger," Malfoy had panted. "If it'd been Millicent, you'd be going out with a eunuch about now." He'd smirked. "Which would be terribly amusing-"

Snape and McGonagall had eventually come striding down the snowy hill from the school to deal out detentions and pull the worst offenders apart.

"Potter, get up *this instant!* I am absolutely appalled by your behaviour - have you been *rolling* in the snow? Go upstairs and change immediately."

"Malfoy, when are you going to outgrow this puerile impulse to - what on earth happened to your mouth?"

"Potter tried to force-feed me *ice!*"

"Malfoy *started* the whole thing!" Harry snarled.

Snape prudently placed a restraining hand on Malfoy's shoulder. Malfoy was chastened enough by the presence of his favourite teacher to settle for sneering at Harry behind McGonagall's back.

Harry had glared at Malfoy, whose stupid hat was askew and whose mouth was red, and thought that he was the most hateful person in the entire world.

"Do I have something on my mouth?"

Harry blinked. "No. I was just thinking of Christmastime and, um-"

Draco threw his head back and laughed. "And you trying to stuff ice into my mouth, I remember. You vicious little bugger. I was going through a difficult emotional time around then, you know."

"Yes, well..." He remembered something Draco had said back in the lake. "We hardly did show-and-tell about our feelings, Malfoy."

Draco smiled brightly, and Harry knew he recognised the words.

Parvati and Lavender emerged from a door and, pausing only to exchange a few words with Ginny, waved and began to walk over to them.

Harry fervently wished they would go away. Between classes and homework and Young Order and Council meetings and all the new restrictions, he hardly got to see Draco these days and quite frankly, the intrusion was entirely unwelcome.

"Hi Harry," said Lavender, who was pink from the cold.

"Nice hat, Malfoy," remarked Parvati, putting a hand on her hip and lifting her eyebrow.

She was very poised, and had always been good company, and Harry wanted her to leave this instant.

"I know," Draco replied with great satisfaction. "That's why Ginny Weasley is lurking over there, of course. She is hoping that I will perform a daring striptease, leaving only my hat in place. Born to be porn, that's me."

Parvati and Lavender both laughed.

"So what were you two discussing so intently before we arrived?" Parvati inquired archly.

Draco frowned. "Mainly beating reptiles with small cuddly animals, I believe."

Lavender looked rather alarmed.

Draco smiled charmingly. "And dancing. Harry here can't sing or dance. Isn't it appalling?"

Parvati smiled back. "I do recall having to lead during our first Yule Ball..."

"I was fourteen!" Harry protested.

"Of course you were," Draco said, releasing his hands. "And we cannot all be born with the natural grace of-" he waved vaguely towards Parvati, then changed his mind and pointed to himself. "- yours truly."

"I've seen you out clubbing," Parvati commented. "I know what you think is dancing."

"So you're saying it's not natural grace so much as natural depravity," Harry suggested, automatically dodging before Draco aimed the blow.

"You have no faith in me," Draco observed disapprovingly. "Fine then. I'm picking up your gauntlet."

He pulled his right glove off with his teeth, and then pulled off the left, and tossed them over his shoulder.

"Come on then," he said, tossing his scarf over his shoulder too. "Put your money where your mouth is, Patil."

He seized her hand and pulled her out into the courtyard, ignoring her startled sound as he spun her off the walkway and into his arms. Then he bent her backwards over his arm.

He looked up at Harry and flashed him a smile.

"Who says I can't dance *now*?"

Harry never had time to respond, because Padma Patil came running out of another door and towards them.

Harry remembered for a long time the Patil twins' faces in that moment, those born mirrors reflecting such different things. Parvati was flushed and smiling, innocent and excited, and Padma's face was white and drawn, her eyes huge with horror.

"Everyone come quickly," she said, all the emotion crushed out of her voice. "We need you all in the Young Order room. Now."

*

The Order around the table weren't chatting as they usually did at the beginning of a meeting. They were staring at Lupin in a kind of hushed terror. Neville had gone ashy pale, and Harry tried to send him a reassuring smile. He was already holding one of Hermione's and one of Ginny's hands - Ginny looked as if she was about to cry.

He didn't think the smile was very convincing. Professor Lupin, who had always had a warm glance for them, was looking grave.

Everyone was drawing together around the table, in four tight clusters.

The tightest cluster, and the furthest from the others, were the Slytherins. But it had always been that way.

Harry hadn't always cared that it was that way.

They waited, and finally Lupin spoke. His eyes were on the table, and his voice was low and formal.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Boot were assigned to the research division of our team," he said. "They were looking into the old magic that Professor Dumbledore invoked in several cases to protect places." Lupin's eyes flickered momentarily to Harry. "There was an idea that a secure room could be set up in Hogwarts where students could go at an alarm, and be safe. It was progressing - very satisfactorily. And this morning, it was discovered with all the preliminary wards broken down and the plans stolen."

Lupin lifted his eyes slightly.

Hermione's grip almost broke Harry's hand.

"The spy in Hogwarts has proceeded to outright sabotage. One of our best hopes has been taken from us, and a great deal of work and magic has been wasted. We *have* to find out who knew - and I have to admit I did. Miss Granger, during difficulties with her spellwork, consulted me and I consulted several members of the staff on the matter."

Lupin paused. Harry hated the war most at these moments, when the adults he relied on looked so old and worn.

"I am content to be under suspicion," he said. A murmur of protest rose, and he held up a hand. "But I must insist that Miss Granger and Mr. Boot inform us of any other possible leaks in security. We must have a complete list of suspects."

Harry looked over at Hermione as she spoke, her eyes too large for her suddenly pinched face.

"I told Ron," she said softly. "And I told - I told Ginny. She was scared and I thought I could reassure her."

"Mr. Boot?" asked Lupin, not commenting.

Terry Boot's eyes were hidden by his reading glasses, which might have been why he was wearing them.

"I told Padma and Mandy," he said. "We - worked in a group on all of our projects. We did research on them together."

"Is that everyone?"

Slowly, Hermione and Terry both nodded.

"No," said a cold crisp voice, and every head spun to the centre of the Slytherin cluster. "I knew," Draco continued, his face untouched by emotion. "Boot told me while we were guarding the front gate. I helped him with a tricky part of the spell."

There was just a single moment of stillness. Harry looked at Draco's calm eyes.

Pandemonium broke loose.

People were jumping up, yelling, turning their heads and holding frenzied conversations with their neighbours. And almost imperceptibly, so naturally, backs were turned on the Slytherins.

"I didn't say because I knew people would think it was him," Terry Boot snapped. "And it wasn't."

"I think that's highly unlikely," returned Padma Patil, her gaze cold and fixed on Draco.

"*Unlikely?*" Ron yelled, and he was on his feet. "It was him! You only have to look at him to know it was him! He should be sent to bloody Azkaban this minute!"

Crabbe and Goyle both cracked their knuckles, but it was Pansy Parkinson who tried to dive across the table.

"I'll kill you for that, Weasley!"

"Grab her, Goyle," Draco ordered.

Pansy twisted furiously in Goyle's grip.

"I'll kill you!"

"Obviously his *girlfriend* would say that!"

"Shut your stupid mouth!"

And Hermione let go of Harry's hand and was on her feet. Her eyes were flashing and there were two dark spots of colour on her cheeks.

"Don't you dare talk to Ron that way," she said icily. "How dare Malfoy come creeping in here pretending to be on our side, casting suspicion on people like Professor Lupin. We should never have believed you at all - *any* of you."

"Sit down, Hermione."

Hermione stared at him, and Harry realised through the cold, tightly coiled ball of panic and fury in his chest that he had spoken.

Hardly anybody noticed. People were too busy screaming, demanding, moving slightly to get further away from the Slytherins. Ron and Pansy were shouting obscenities at each other, and Pansy was trying to bite Goyle to get away from him. Blaise Zabini was speaking in chill tones to Padma. Crabbe was staring with heavy menace at some Hufflepuffs, who had gone dead quiet. Almost every Slytherin was vehemently attacking somebody.

But Draco was watching him thoughtfully, and Hermione's shocked eyes were fixed on his face.

"Harry, there can't be a doubt of it any more," she whispered. "Harry, this is *crazy*..."

"He didn't do it," Harry said.

Ginny was trembling violently. He didn't care.

"Silence, please," Lupin said, and Harry looked at him with a sort of desperate hope.

Fix it, tell them, Draco trusts you, tell them that - that...

The voices died reluctantly down.

"Aren't you going to state your innocence, Mr Malfoy?" Lupin asked quietly.

Draco surveyed the Young Order with a twist to his lip that was either bitter or mocking.

"I never waste my breath."

*

"Finders keepers."

Harry almost snarled the password Draco had given him at that blank, staring, infuriating stone wall, and he shoved the stone itself as he went in because it wouldn't open fast enough. The Slytherins in the common room didn't question or even sneer at him as he stormed past.

He banged open the door to Draco's room, and strode inside.

Draco was lying back against the pillows on his bed, studying a book. He laid it down and then looked over at Harry.

"Oh. It's you," he said.

Two sharp steps took him to the side of the bed.

"What did you think you were *doing*?" Harry demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Draco inquired, his cool drawl more maddening than it had ever been.

Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco's robes.

"Hey!" Draco shouted, outraged. "What are-"

"Tell me," Harry said, "what you thought you were doing when you wouldn't bloody well deny it!"

Draco tore himself out of Harry's grasp and off the bed, and stood glaring at him.

"And why do you ask?" he wanted to know.

His voice was still cool, and only the faint colour in his cheeks let Harry know he was angry.

"*What?*" Harry said. Why was Draco asking him *that*? Wasn't it obvious, that he had to protect Draco, even from himself? Wasn't it clear?

Draco stood there looking at him, that faint flush still cresting the tops of his cheekbones, his eyes glittering oddly.

"Do you think I did it?"

For a moment, Harry just stared. Draco looked back, unwavering.

"Well," he said. "Do you?"

"No!" Harry almost shouted. "Of course not!"

Draco smiled unpleasantly. "How sure are you?"

"I'm sure," Harry said, his voice forceful as he could make it. "I'm absolutely sure. I *know* you."

"I could be lying."

"Draco," Harry snapped, "you're not even any good at lying!"

Draco looked insulted. "I am! I-"

"You're *useless* at it," Harry continued relentlessly. "Everybody knows when you're doing it because you have this whole thing of not bothering to deceive the lowly masses, and acting as if you think everything you're doing is brilliant. You could never pretend for one second when you didn't like me, you were even bad at faking a hurt arm. You'd be the worst spy in the history of the world!"

Draco pursed his lips and looked distinctly taken aback. "Well."

Harry allowed himself a small smile at this concession. "You see?" he said, more gently. "I know you."

Draco looked at him again, his eyes intent. "And you don't think I did it."

"I know you didn't do it."

"Absolutely."

"Yes."

"No questions asked."

"Yes."

"Nothing anyone could say would change your mind."

"Yes!" Harry snarled, taking a step towards Draco with no idea clear in his head other than possibly thumping him until he began to make sense.

Draco blinked, took a step backwards and then laughed.

"And how many people do you think have the same faith in me?"

Harry blinked in his turn. "I - I'm sure if you'd denied it, plenty of people would have-"

"Believed a Slytherin's word?" Draco asked. "Believed *my* word? Let me put it this way. Let's say this had happened six months ago. No matter what I said, would you have believed for one second that it wasn't me?"

Harry wanted to say *Yes*, but he remembered thinking this same boy was the Heir of Slytherin, back when they were both twelve.

There was no way he wouldn't have believed it.

"You see," Draco said. "They're going to think it was me. I'd deny it if I thought it would do any good, but it won't. And I'm not going to crawl to a bunch of censorious Ravenclaws and spineless Hufflepuffs for less than nothing."

That was so stupid, but it was so like Draco, and there was a weird kind of logic to it. And Draco mentioning the Ravenclaws...

"Why did Terry Boot have to tell you about it?" Harry mused resentfully. "He ought to have known what people would think if it came out, and you knew. He had no business to do it."

Draco looked vaguely startled. "He didn't mean anything by it," he replied. "He's my friend."

Harry remembered the Order meeting when they had discussed mediwizardry and Muggles, and how at the beginning Terry had looked across at Draco and Harry had wondered if they were friends.

Now that was answered.

"Since when?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Since the start of the year. I was surprised when he was made Head Boy. I always thought it would be you or me. I was *used* to that idea, to victory and making the Gryffindors' lives miserable for a year, or to defeat and being the most mutinous prefect you could possibly imagine."

"You are *such* a twit."

Draco shrugged. "I thought it might be that he was the neutral choice. But I wasn't sure. I was interested, so I decided to get to know him better and manoeuvred him into doing an Astronomy project together."

"You and your cunning Slytherin plans. You couldn't just have talked to him."

Draco lifted his chin. "I like to keep life interesting. And he's interesting. He's clever, and he's observant. You'd like him."

"He doesn't think you did it, either."

"Well, he has his reasons. For one thing, he probably doesn't want to have been the one to have let the secrets out to the spy."

"You're *not* the spy," Harry said. "Don't even say that."

Draco looked at him again with that sharp, intent look, as if Draco was trying to translate a text and wasn't quite sure he understood it.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I mean - are you really sure? I knew you'd say you were, but all your friends are going to think I am, and if you aren't sure you should tell me. I don't want any of your Gryffindor nobility, your sticking by me on principle, I *want to know*."

"Draco, will you stop being stupid!"

Draco wasn't listening. His breathing was fast and the spots of colour on his cheekbones were darkening.

"I'll deny it if you want me to," he told him harshly. "I wouldn't do it for them, but I will. I didn't do it. Do you need to hear that?"

Harry saw Draco's fists were clenched. He grabbed Draco's shoulder.

"No," he said, and realised he was breathing just as fast as Draco. "No, I don't need to hear it."

And quite simply, Draco relaxed, and lapsed back into his easy drawl.

"Well then," he said, and smiled that bright slow smile. "You believe me. The Slytherins believe me. Who else matters?"

The door opened, and Zabini, Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle walked in.

"Oh my God, it's *you*," Zabini said in disgust. "Are you always around here? Do you have no house to go to?"

"We need to talk to Draco," Pansy informed Harry curtly.

"Hello," said Crabbe.

"You don't need to be rude to my guest," Draco said, but without rancour. Harry saw him looking at Pansy, and they could both see that she had been crying.

"I'll go," Harry said, going to the door.

Draco walked over to him, and spoke in a low voice.

"It's a Friday. We could go to Hogsmeade in a bit."

"Yeah?" Harry smiled. "I'd like that."

"I'll see you in two hours," Draco said. He turned to the others and spoke crisply. "Crabbe and Goyle, you go with him. None of us are supposed to be out alone, and Lupin will have seven kinds of fits if the endangered Harry Potter is allowed to stroll back and forth from the Slytherin dungeons."

Crabbe and Goyle moved towards the door without a murmur.

Harry looked back as he went out the door. Pansy was crying with a silent fury, and Draco had just put an arm around her shoulders. Zabini was biting his lips.

Crabbe and Goyle walked him back quietly, neither offering a word. But Harry paused at the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"I know he didn't do it," he said.

There was a pause. Then Crabbe grunted, "'Course he didn't do it."

They left, walking slowly. Harry watched them go.

*

Eventually, though, he had to go inside and face them all.

Hermione looked up as he came in, her eyes flashing and one hand clasped tightly around Ron's. Ron was pale and furious-looking, his freckles like pinpoints against fluorescent light. Parvati was curled up on the chair beside their couch, her face tear-stained, but with no certainty in her eyes to support him. And beside her chair was her sister, that blue Ravenclaw scarf still around her neck, a swathe of cold blue.

Padma Patil faced Harry with eyes that were not hurt, but as coolly devastating as her voice.

"Hermione and I have been having a talk," she told him.

"How nice," Harry said coldly.

"Harry," Ron exclaimed suddenly, involuntarily, on a vibrato of sheer indignation.

"What is it, Ron?" Harry snapped. "What do you have to say? Is it going to be along the lines of not taking away someone I trust?"

"Harry, it's *different* now-" Ron began.

Harry cut him off savagely. "How?"

"It's different because now we have every reason to believe that he's the spy in our midst."

It wasn't an angry voice. Harry hated it because he knew it was a voice that would speak for the whole school, without personal feelings, without passion - but with a remorseless logic that would damn Draco utterly and completely.

It was Padma, of course.

"Why?" Harry asked, his voice tight. "Why should he be under any more suspicion than anyone else who knew?"

"Why-!" For a moment, Ron was speechless with rage, and then Hermione rested her hand on his arm, motioning to Padma to speak.

The girl who was the ideal Ravenclaw who had so naturally become a prefect and a Council member. Who was clever and pretty, and who hadn't bothered to hide the disdain in her eyes when Ron took her to the Ball in frayed dress robes.

Harry had never actually *liked* her.

"It stands to reason, Harry," she said, and oh, Hermione was clever to let Padma talk, because Hermione couldn't have managed this dispassion with him. "He's the only Slytherin who knew, and Slytherins produce the most Dark wizards. He's Lucius Malfoy's son, and he's well known to have anti-Muggle opinions. It was always a mystery why he chose to support our side. If he's a spy, then everything makes sense."

"He *is* the spy," Ron choked out.

"Harry," Hermione said softly, "he has to be."

Harry shut his eyes briefly against the black-red rush of rage, and saw Draco with that flush on his face saying *I didn't do it. Do you need to hear that?*

"No," he snarled, to all of them. "I know him."

"Do you?" Padma inquired. "You've never seemed to have much time for him before this year. Don't you think it's odd that he suddenly decided to be friendly with you - you, Harry Potter - the same year all our secrets start slipping out? He's using you."

Harry could see realisation forming behind Ron's eyes, a black whirl concentrated into a pinpoint of pressure behind his forehead. And the end result - fury.

"I'll kill him," Ron snarled.

And Harry thought, *they're turning everything against him.*

"You won't even think about touching him," he said, his voice frozen. "None of you. I've spent time with him. You haven't. I didn't think much of him before - no. I didn't know how much I thought of him before, but now I do."

"You've *spent time* with him," Padma repeated with chilly emphasis. "So what insight have you to offer? What do you think of him now?"

Harry thought of a faint, old echo of this outrage.

Softly, he said, "I think he's brilliant."

"He's manipulating you," Hermione broke in. "It's not your fault, Harry, I know you're loyal, I know it all, but you have to think - Harry, the last traitor was... He was your dad's friend. You can't afford to trust him this blindly."

Harry realised, to his mild, detached surprise, that he was shaking. They were comparing Draco to that... to that...

"The last traitor," he ground out between his teeth, "was someone everybody trusted."

He glared at Padma Patil, because he couldn't have stood saying that to Hermione or Ron. She looked back at him with the beginnings of personal outrage in her eyes.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed.

"How dare you," Harry returned. "Coming in here - to *my* home - and insulting *my* friend. How would you feel if it was yours? I don't want to hear another word against him."

He didn't care. He wasn't staying in here. He needed to be alone; he needed to think. If someone caught him out wandering the school, he didn't care about that either.

He threw a look back at them, Ron whose face was bright red, Hermione who looked furious and on the point of tears, all of the Gryffindors.

"And that goes for the rest of you, too," he added coldly, and slammed out.

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Ginny was quite pleased with her plan.

Obviously, Harry wasn't going to come back to the Gryffindor rooms for hours. He was furious - and no wonder, with that Padma Patil standing around like she owned the place and accusing him.

He'd saved her from the basilisk. He could be trusted with *anything*. Maybe the spy *was* Malfoy, and Harry had a plan. Maybe he was being loyal to his friend, but he could be trusted to find out the truth. Maybe the spy was someone else, and he already knew and he was working on it.

He was the only one who could save them now. And he was the boy she'd always loved, and he was in pain because nobody believed in him.

Ginny could tell him that she did. He'd be glad to hear that, to know somebody understood him.

Of course, she had no idea where he could be. So she had come up with her plan.

Malfoy was under suspicion, and Harry - loyal Harry - was bound to be hurrying to his side. She just had to find Malfoy, and then she'd find Harry.

She only had to wait for a few minutes before her first objective was achieved. Malfoy and Blaise Zabini erupted from the Slytherin dungeons, obviously in the middle of a heated conversation.

She caught the name, *Harry Potter*, and lost all scruples about listening.

"It wasn't anything like that," Malfoy was saying, and Ginny was quietly terrified by the steel in his voice. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. You don't know much about innocent touches."

"About as much as you do, Draco," Blaise Zabini drawled. He was trying to sound amused, but his irritation was clear.

Ginny had never liked Malfoy, but at least with him you knew where you stood. Everyone knew Zabini was untrustworthy, with his black eyes wells of slippery shadows and his handsome face just a little too cunning to be pleasant.

"Surely I know a little more, simply by default," Malfoy said smoothly. "After all, Blaise, I'd like to think I'm slightly more fastidious than you tend to be. And I've been an extremely good boy lately."

"Yes, you have." Zabini's voice was tight. "Nothing's like it used to be."

Ginny was beginning to feel uneasy about hearing all this. She had thought Malfoy would lead her to Harry almost immediately.

You could have cut ice with Malfoy's voice.

"And what precisely do you mean by that?"

"Look, Malfoy. I'm just - concerned. Especially now." Zabini's tone was suddenly crisp. "All I'm asking is - if you have some sort of plan, if you know what you're doing?"

"Oh don't worry." Malfoy was speaking more softly now, silkily, as if he was suddenly bent on reassuring Zabini, or as if someone else could hear. "I do. Hi, Harry."

Ginny's heart leaped as she saw Harry coming towards them down the corridor, smiling his sweet crooked smile.

It faltered a little when he saw Zabini, and then Malfoy angled himself beside Harry, and his face softened again.

"Blaise was just leaving," Malfoy announced, his voice like syrup, and then that icy gaze was suddenly fixed on Ginny.

She looked back in mute terror, certain that he had known she was there all along.

"Someone has to escort the gorgeous Ginny to her common room, after all." Ginny found the look that accompanied this statement sinister, but Harry laughed. "I'm sure Blaise would be charmed."

Zabini looked sour. Malfoy's smile was bordering on the impish, and Ginny still did not find this in the least amusing.

"No need to bother," a voice said behind them. "I can take Ginny."

Ginny turned in alarm, and then rested gratefully against Dean. He stood there quietly behind her, supporting her, as Malfoy murmured:

"Well, we all know you'd *like* to..."

"Draco!" Harry nudged him reproachfully, and Malfoy subsided.

Zabini's malice, of course, was unchecked. Ginny saw it flashing in his eyes as he gave Dean a long, leisurely look.

"Oh, I don't mind going to the common room with *him*," he informed them all, glancing around with a kind of spiteful glee for the looks of shock on everyone's faces.

Harry was regarding him with dislike and faint bemusement. Malfoy was smiling a small, superior smile.

Dean looked back at Zabini, completely unruffled.

"Naturally you're welcome to come along with me and Ginny if you'd like."

Zabini looked discontent. "Malfoy, you're welcome to the lot of them," he sneered, and stormed off. As he pushed by Ginny and Dean, she heard him mutter, "And I hope you do have a plan."

Ginny didn't look after him as he went, or at Dean. She was too busy staring at Harry, whose brow was adorably furrowed. He reached out and touched Malfoy on the elbow.

"Should you be wandering around with just Zabini?" Harry asked him in a low voice. "I mean, he's-"

Malfoy arched an eyebrow in that particularly annoying way he had.

"I'm perfectly safe. Woe betide any Dark Lord who stole me and Blaise both. He'd be sending us back with a sympathy note within the week."

Harry grinned. "I think we'd only accept one back." He paused. "I suppose Zabini isn't so bad, considering the other choice."

Malfoy shot him a baleful look.

"You two doing okay?" inquired Dean, who had been indulging in some of that tactful deafness Ginny had always deeply appreciated when they were going out and she was chatting to one of her friends.

"I'm fine, Thomas," Malfoy replied, rolling his eyes dramatically. "It's just my idiot Gryffindor here being silly. Again."

"Well, I've got my Creative Magic project to finish," Dean said. "Be seeing you, Malfoy. Harry."

Ginny was startled to see Malfoy actually smile at something Dean had said. His smile made his whole face look brighter and younger.

From the closer attention Harry paid Malfoy then, Ginny could see he was surprised too.

She took Dean's arm, held it in a loose grip and looked yearningly at Harry, hoping that he would ask her to stay. He was still looking at Malfoy when Dean started leading her down the corridor.

"What did Zabini mean?" he asked her in soft, serious tones. "About a plan?"

Ginny thought for a moment. "He was asking Malfoy before - if Malfoy knew what he was doing, if he had a plan. And Malfoy said he did have one."

She glanced up into Dean's face, troubled, and saw worry in his kind brown eyes.

"Do you think we should tell Harry?" she queried anxiously.

"No..." Dean said slowly. "No. He wouldn't believe us."

"Oh, of course. He's so trusting." Ginny leaned against Dean, taking comfort in his simple presence. "But we'll take care of him, won't we?"

Dean tucked her hand more firmly around his arm, his face still very serious for a moment. Then it lightened just a little.

"And I'll take care of you."

*

"Come on," Draco said, once Ginny and Dean had made their much-appreciated departure. "Let's go."

They headed to the corridor with the statue of the one-eyed witch in silence. Harry was searching for a way to put all those distraught and incoherent thoughts he'd had wandering the school alone into words, and he kept being distracted from this task by glancing over at Draco. It was such a relief to have him back, his blond head gleaming pale in the dim light, here where nobody could accuse him or worry him or tell him things that would put him in danger.

"I expect the news will have travelled to Hogsmeade by now," Draco remarked as they went through the tunnel. "Let us all take a moment to curse the grapevine."

"We can go up near the Shrieking Shack," Harry offered. "There won't be anyone there."

Draco gave him a bright look as they emerged into Honeydukes' cellar.

"There could be ghosts," he pointed out. "D'you know, I still can't get Crabbe and Goyle up there?"

"Er," said Harry.

Draco stopped to buy some of his blood-flavoured lollipops, giving the sour-faced shopkeeper his most blithe and charming smile. Then they set off up the hill towards the Shrieking Shack.

Draco was still contemplating past wrongs.

"Attacking someone while in an Invisibility Cloak is not at all a noble thing to do," he mused. "Very sneaky. Very underhanded. Very *Slytherin*, actually, you bastard."

"Draco, you're a Slytherin."

"Exactly! I know what I'm talking about."

Harry couldn't repress a laugh at his sheer nerve.

"Anyway," he said, trying to sound as stern as he could, "you deserved it. You were absolutely rotten about Hagrid."

"I was, wasn't I?" Draco admitted without a shred of remorse. "But that was before I really got to know him."

Harry had been a bit alarmed by the unholy look Draco got in his eyes when he realised at one point over teatime that Hagrid would listen to the students he liked. And that Hagrid was completely insecure about his teaching prowess, and eager for suggestions.

"Before you really got to manipulate him, you mean."

Draco waved a hand dismissively. "Same thing. In any case, I deny your wild and ill-founded allegations. I'm helping. I'm being a teacher's aide."

The lessons had not become noticeably less life-threatening. They did focus on animals that could be put to actual - and usually fiendish - use, though, and Draco seemed to be in a supervisory position an awful lot. He had also developed a tendency to cackle in an unsettling manner during class.

Funny, that.

"You're being a teacher's pet with evil plans to take over the classroom."

"You're... You're trying to distract me from the main point," Draco said darkly. "The main point being the vile attack perpetrated on my person back when I was an innocent child."

"You were a *horrible* child."

"In an innocent way," Draco insisted, stepping with great care along the path to the Shack. It was so like him to even be fussy about getting mud on his boots, Harry thought, and rolled his eyes. "I almost had a heart attack, did you know that? I was a sensitive boy."

"You were a fiend sent directly from hell to torment me."

"Everybody needs a hobby," Draco sniffed. "Not to mention a matter far more important than affairs of the heart - to wit, affairs of the hair. My beautiful, beautiful hair."

"Blond hair makes people look washed out," Harry said casually. "Anyway, it's much too pale to be natural. I bet you dye it."

Draco made a strangled noise of horror. Harry bit his lip on a mad grin.

"Harry," Draco said in a dreadful voice, "that is the worst thing you've ever said to me. That's the worst thing *anyone's* ever said to me."

Draco turned his back on Harry to gesture wildly at the sky, as if to point out to it the wrongs he was suffering. Once he did, Harry bent down.

"He dares to say this to me," Draco raged dramatically at the clouds. "After he ruined my hair. Ruined it! It was encrusted with mud, it was filthy, for a while there it looked *brown*, I had to spend four hours in the shower frantically shampooing it, and he says-"

"Draco," Harry said easily, straightening up and hurling a handful of mud with absolute accuracy, "stop living in the past."

There was a moment of stillness, while the mud seeped through Draco's hair and onto his cloak. Then Draco turned slowly around, vibrating with some suppressed emotion, and fixed Harry with an icy glare.

"Potter," he declared with conviction, "you will die for this."

He bent down and seized a handful of mud as fast as a snake, but Harry had Seeker reflexes too. He dodged, and it only got him on the shoulder, and by then he was crouching on the ground.

Draco turned his face away, and the mud only caught him on the cheek. He rubbed it for a second, looking incredulous, and then side-stepped lightly to avoid another volley. He was still being careful about his boots.

He took a handful of mud and dodged again, this time closer to Harry rather than further from him, and then firmly shoved it down the back of Harry's shirt.

Harry shouted, wriggled away from him and promptly tripped over a rock and landed on his back in the mud.

Draco burst out laughing. Harry reached out, grabbed his ankle and pulled it out from under him.

Draco's yell of outrage was cut off by a combined thump and squelch.

Harry raised his head fractionally to see the fixed, appalled look on Draco's face. His hair was in a pool of mud.

Harry let his own head fall back on the mud and laughed and laughed. He closed his eyes briefly and just thought, *I trust you, no matter what.*

"Doom," Draco intoned in the background. "Anguish. Despair. Oh, my *hair*. I hate you, Harry Potter."

"Yeah yeah," Harry said, flicking some mud at him.

Draco sounded sulky. "I'm in a delicate condition today, you know."

Harry propped himself up on one elbow and stared over at Draco, whose eyes were shut - presumably so he could immerse himself completely in despair. His lashes were faint silvery gleams against his skin.

"Draco," he said softly, "They're saying that you're only my friend to get information out of me."

Draco didn't open his eyes.

"Do you believe them?" he asked evenly.

"No!" How many times did he have to say it? "I just... I meant to say that if it's too difficult for you - if it puts you under more suspicion-"

"Forget it." His eyes did open then, little slices of grey. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

The relief was so great he didn't even try not to smile down at him.

"Aren't I? Damn."

"So close and yet so far," Draco agreed. "I don't plan to lie around here in the mud all night. Help me up."

He stuck out an imperious hand, and then spoiled the effect by waggling it around.

Harry climbed to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, regarding Draco with tolerant amusement until Draco climbed to his feet under his own steam. He gave Harry a reproachful look.

"I'd like to make it clear that I bags the prefects' bathroom," he informed him.

"I don't think so," Harry said blandly. "I believe it belongs to whoever gets there first."

Draco looked at him for a moment, absently scrubbing at the streak of mud on his neck. Then he hurled himself precipitously down the hill.

Harry followed in hot pursuit. They only paused once, to sneak into Honeydukes' cellar and through the trap door.

Then they were back to hurtling through the tunnel, and through the corridors, Draco thumping him judiciously whenever he drew close.

"Get lost, Potter," he panted. "This is *my* bathroom. I require my ice-white foam! I require-"

He stopped in his tracks, mid-thump.

Their friends were standing in the corridor, in the middle of a heated argument.

"We're searching this corridor," Pansy was saying viciously. "Go find your own."

"We were here first," Ron said belligerently.

"Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Sod off, Weasley."

"We are simply concerned-" Hermione began in a thin voice.

Blaise Zabini coughed. "Everyone? Look over there."

Every head spun around to face them. Harry stood there and tried valiantly to project an air of cleanliness.

"Draco!" Pansy said in horrified dismay. "My God, what *happened* to you?" She strode forward, pulling a handkerchief out of her robes and shooting Harry a venomous look. "What did he do?" she demanded, rubbing at Draco's cheek.

"Don't spit in that," Draco instructed her, eyeing the handkerchief with suspicion.

Hermione's voice was tight. "Harry," she said, "*please* come back with us, we were worried-"

Harry met her eyes defiantly.

"There was no need to be worried," he said. "I was with Draco."

"And now you can come back with us," Ron told him with determination.

"And you should go to the prefects' bathroom, Draco," Pansy said, dropping the handkerchief with the air of one who knows when she is defeated.

Draco smirked. "Offering to accompany me, wench?"

"After that," Zabini informed him, "we all have to talk to you."

Draco's mouth went thin. "Fine," he snapped, and leaned in to Harry. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, deliberately pitching his voice low enough to be discreet and clear enough so they could all hear. Then he beamed with a sudden thought. "Which is Saturday."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco had been more or less insufferable all week about this present. He'd become accustomed to hearing 'Harry, what is my present?' instead of the obviously too-common hello.

He looked at Draco standing there, unable to keep one hand from rubbing mud out of his hair, and thought again, *I trust you*.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

Draco smiled. "Looking forward to it."

Chapter Twelve: Look Before You Leap

I've forgiven myself for the mistakes I've made

Now there's just one thing, the only one I want to do

I want to feel the sun shine, shining down on me and you

I don't want to take this life for granted like I used to do

I want to love somebody, love somebody like you.

Harry got up at eight on Saturday to make sure all the preparations were in order, and to collect his hamper from the kitchens. Then he made his way to the Slytherin rooms, murmuring the password and trying not to make any noise until he reached Draco's door.

He knocked, and received absolutely no response from within, so he opened the door and went inside.

He felt a sudden qualm as he crossed the room to the thickly draped bed.

What if Draco... had company?

He wouldn't. He couldn't. He would have told Harry.

With more vigour than strictly necessary, Harry yanked the drapes of the bed apart.

Draco was alone.

Of course.

He was sleeping quietly, cheek pale against the pillow, and he didn't look innocent. Not innocent the way he could look, in that shining calculated way he had when he was awake and it seemed to be to his advantage. He looked faintly troubled, as if sleep was something he had to concentrate on and get right, and he looked - unprotected. His eyelashes were bright and silver and sharp against his skin.

Then his eyes screwed up against the light.

"Harry?" he said without opening his eyes.

Harry started. "How did you know it was me?"

A gleam of grey appeared between his lashes.

"Because I don't know anybody else who is suicidal and stupid enough to wake me at this hour on a Saturday," Draco said in a bad-tempered tone. Then he stretched, lazy as a cat, and his mood seemed to improve with the gesture.

The blanket slipped further down his chest.

"Well, what are you here for?" Draco inquired at last.

Harry shook his head, distracted.

"Come on, get up," he said. "Remember, I have a surprise for you."

Draco propped himself up on one elbow, shaking his head with amused disbelief. "What are you blathering on about, Potter?"

"I said it was a surprise," Harry told him firmly. "Come on, Draco. Move. You can sleep in tomorrow."

He used Draco's name deliberately. For some reason after Draco had called him Potter he felt the urge to prove that he still could.

"I want to sleep in *now*," moaned Draco. "Bring me my surprise after lunch."

"You have to come see the surprise," Harry said, his voice stern. "Right now."

"Oh, we are bossy now we're the Triwizard Tournament champion, aren't we?"

Draco was smiling. It was amazing what one would take from Draco, simply because he was Draco.

"Fine then," he continued, making a lordly dismissive gesture. "Get lost. I'll be out in a minute."

Harry looked dubious.

"Is this an attempt to get me out and go back to sleep?"

It was also amazing how Draco could look down his nose at people while remaining prone.

"No, Harry, you total git," he explained with extreme condescension. "It's because I'm not wearing anything."

Harry felt his face burn. Draco's pale chest looked an awful lot more exposed than it had a minute ago.

"Oh - I - Sorry."

Draco laughed. "It's all right. No need to look all flustered."

I'm not flustered!

All right, he was slightly flustered.

Harry got out of the room quickly, and then told himself he was being stupid. He had seen his Quidditch team-mates and dormitory mates get dressed all the time, for the love of... It was no big deal. He was being a prat.

Draco appeared to think nothing of it when he emerged, rubbing his eyes. Harry was amused to see that his hair was standing up and he was wearing robes over his clothes. He was clearly tired, and Harry, who could get up early with ease, found it bizarrely endearing.

"Oh, this surprise had better be worth it."

"It's past nine, you lazy object."

Draco shuddered. "I *knew* it was some ungodly hour of the morning."

"Come on, you're keeping your surprise waiting."

Draco had not yet expressed a single word of pleasure or gratitude, and did not appear to be about to start now.

"This had better be worth it," he muttered again.

Harry pretended to cuff him. "Brat," he responded, not without affection. "Come on."

*

Draco was still stumbling while they were going down the school steps.

"Why do we have to go to Hogsmeade the long way?" he demanded after a bit, shaking his head and trying to look more alert.

"Because Honeydukes opens at ten on Saturday, and breaking and entering is wrong," Harry explained. "I told you this, Draco."

"Wrong! Define wrong."

"The general definition is 'not right.'"

"That could just as easily mean left. Do we have an objection to doing things that are left?"

"Well, try 'not considerate.' The owners sleep above the shop. We could wake them."

"So what?" Draco asked with spirit. "If I'm awake, everyone should be awake. When I'm not happy, I like to spread it around with a big spoon. Did you never wake up wanting to just *kick* people?"

"Sometimes I have that urge, yeah," Harry said with a sidelong glance.

Draco made a face at him.

"Agh. You suck, Potter."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "'You suck, Potter'? You're off your game, Draco."

"Agh," Draco said, mordantly. "What have you got in the hamper, Harry? Is it part of the present?" He brightened. "Oooh, is it? Can I see? Can I have a tiny peek?"

Harry hit Draco with the hamper.

"It's part of the present, and you can't see it yet."

"That was my *knee*," Draco informed him darkly. "I could *die*."

"How could you die because I hit you in the knee with a hamper? Is this the same special kind of logic that means you're going to die because a Hippogriff cut your arm?"

"I could have died! I could have contracted an infection, you know," Draco said. "It looked very dirty to me. And that hamper could have had a splinter, which would give me blood poisoning, which would lead to my speedy and tragic demise, which would mean thousands of admirers weeping onto the casket containing my beautiful, pallid corpse and then stoning you."

Harry gave Draco a long look. Draco folded his arms and looked defensive.

"It could happen."

"I think I'll risk it," Harry said dryly, and tugged Draco's arm to make him come along.

He was a little too nervous to enjoy anything until he knew what Draco's reaction was going to be. So they walked on in the faint morning mist, which the sun was already beginning to warm and clear away, until they reached the tiny harbour where the ferry usually landed, and Draco saw the present.

He stared in horror and said, "You *have* to be joking."

The small rowboat lay rocking slightly on the lake, ripples marking the placid surface of the water. Harry leaned down and put the hamper into it.

"No," he said. "I'm not joking, Draco."

"I am *not* going to get into that thing."

"What - do you want to be afraid and avoid it forever?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me, yes! I'm not a Gryffindor. Being afraid of things doesn't bother me."

"Doesn't it?" Harry asked.

Draco scowled at him, then looked at the boat again and went pale. Harry saw him swallow.

"Harry," he said quietly. "I *can't*."

"Draco, you don't have to. But it's enchanted so no spell can affect it. It's perfectly safe."

Draco looked at the boat again, and then looked back up at Harry. He swallowed, in a tiny painful motion. "That must have taken ages."

"I asked Hermione to point me to some books that could help." Harry smiled faintly, and was pleased to see Draco smile back. "I didn't tell her what it was for."

"Naturally." Draco glanced back at the boat doubtfully. "No spell at all?"

"I swear. But - you don't have to get in, if you don't want to."

Draco looked at the boat again, and then Harry again. He was chewing his lip a little, but his eyes were wide and clear.

"I know," he replied, and climbed gingerly into the boat.

Harry got in, trying not to rock it. By that time Draco's look had turned suspicious.

"If spells don't affect it," he said, "how precisely are we going to make the boat move?"

"How do you think?" Harry picked up the oars. "The Muggle way, idiot."

Draco looked appalled.

"Manual labour? You're *sick*."

"Take an oar, Draco."

"Me?" Draco said, and looked immediately and carefully blank. "How are you supposed to wave it? What words do you say?"

Harry looked at him in disbelief.

Finally, he said, "You're rowing on the way back," picked up both the oars and began to row steadily away from the edge.

He saw Draco's fingers clench on the sides of the boat, but didn't mention it. Instead, he said, "How's the Creative Magic project going?"

"Dreadful!" Draco answered with prompt despair. "I can't choose. I mean, who could? There's music and art and sculpture and acting and for some reason I really like the idea of poetry."

"I never really thought of you as a poetry person."

"Oh, I'm not. But if I recite one, I get to wear this poet's shirt. I like the sleeves."

"I don't think you should really be considering the sleeves."

Draco shrugged. He had let go of one of the sides, but he still looked up eagerly when Harry reached the centre of the lake.

"Is that it? Can we go back now?"

"No, Draco," Harry said. "We're going to stay here for a while. Past lunchtime - that's why I got the house elves to make the hamper."

Draco looked outraged. "I won't do it and you can't make me!"

Harry smiled at him innocently. "Care to make a small wager on that?" he asked, and dropped the oars over the side.

Draco gave a keening cry of loss.

"I don't believe you *did* that! You said spells don't affect this boat, how are we going to get back? I'm not swimming back," he added flatly. "And I won't let you leave. So we'll *starve*, and you'll die first and I'll have to *eat* you, but that won't save me because, let's face it, your scrawny body wouldn't nourish a chipmunk, and then I will perish all alone."

"Draco. You trust me, right?"

"I suppose," Draco conceded grudgingly.

"We'll get back. Just relax."

Draco looked at the boat, then over at the water, and finally at Harry. He drew in a deep breath.

"All right."

"Good." Harry leaned back in the boat. "And I'm not scrawny," he added with belated indignation.

Draco cautiously began to lean on the other side.

"You are scrawny," he insisted, looking happier. "You have knobby wrists. What you should do is gain a lot of weight, and grow a moustache."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

Draco stretched, managing to look as if he was luxuriously reclining in a small boat which Harry could see he was scared of touching.

"Haven't I told you? It's my cunning plan," he said. "You know how you hate being famous and all that. What you do is, you create an *alter ego*. A normal wizard Joe, if you will. Who would ever suspect that this moustached fatty was the famous Harry Potter? You could wear sweater vests and call yourself Ignatius Trout."

"Ignatius Trout," Harry repeated flatly.

Draco smiled brightly. "I think it suits you. Besides, it's not like Harry Potter is a good name."

"I like my name!"

"Oh, no," Draco said dismissively. "It's a terrible name. Harry, for instance. To harry means to worry or harass, and to potter means to amble about. Think about the message you're sending out to the world! It sounds like you wander around harassing people."

"Well, now I see. Obviously, it should be *your* name."

"You merely speak out of sheer envy of my aristocratic name," Draco observed loftily. "Face it, Potter. Your wrists *are* knobby. And you have a *terrible* name."

The sun was coming out. Draco shrugged out of his robes, absently doing up the buttons on his shirt cuffs. He looked up as he did so, and his smile was small and gleaming.

"But I like you anyway," he added, and leaned back more comfortably.

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Once Draco got to the point where he seemed to be happy and lounging easily, he naturally began complaining.

"Hrrrrrrrrrry."

"Yes, Draco?"

"Hrrrrrrrrrry."

"What is it, Draco?"

Harry had shut his eyes, enjoying the sunshine. When he opened them and looked over at Draco, Draco was peeping over the edge of the boat.

"I think the giant squid is under us," he announced darkly.

"And why does that upset you?" Harry asked indulgently, rolling his eyes and preparing for a scene.

Draco looked scandalised. "It likes to *seize innocents* in its tentacles."

"It saved Dennis Creevey from drowning. It's probably not evil."

"Oh, that's what they want you to think," Draco told them. "I think they were in cahoots. I have my suspicions of those Creeveys. Did you know the oldest one - er, Callum -"

"Colin."

"Whatever. He crept into the Slytherin locker room and took photographs and sold them! Does that sound evil to you or does it not?"

Harry frowned. "Actually, it sounds Slytherin."

"Oh, well. It turned out to be Blaise's idea." Draco flapped a hand. "Nevertheless, I think I've made my point. Evil."

"Sort of stupid, too," Harry mused. "I mean, no offence, but I can't imagine anyone paying much for a picture of Goyle."

"No more than a couple of Knuts, anyway."

Draco maintained a straight face for all of two seconds, and then broke up laughing.

"Draco, that was a *terrible* pun," Harry said, biting the inside of his cheek to stop his own laugh. "You should be ashamed."

"It had to be said," Draco defended himself stoutly. "It's not my fault."

"Oh, well. At least you cleared up the mystery of the pictures of you in a towel that were circulating around Gryffindor Tower last year."

Draco choked on air. Harry smiled innocently.

"You should definitely have been in Slytherin," Draco said with great conviction, and then suddenly looked interested. "Did you, ah, happen to hear what price they fetched?"

"Well, no," Harry said mildly. "I wasn't in the market."

Draco scowled at him. Harry actually recalled several of them had simply ended up on the table in the Gryffindor table until the twins had magically altered the towel to a pink one with hearts on it reading 'Malfoy and McGonagall forever.' He tactfully did not mention this, or the fact that he and Ron had laughed themselves sick.

After all, it would be much funnier if he could locate one of the pictures and then show Draco.

Draco was still scowling and muttering comments about people who thought they were *sooo* amusing when the boat lurched.

"Oh my God," Draco exclaimed, going pale green. "It's the squid. I told you, it's the squid."

"Draco, I promise you it's not evil."

"I don't *care*," Draco wailed. "It touches people with its tentacles." He peered anxiously over the side of the boat again. "I don't want it to touch me," he added wretchedly. "It's all slimy. Hit it with an oar."

"I threw them over the side, remember?"

Draco gave him a baleful look, and then folded his arms over his chest with the martyred air of a man who had resigned himself to a slimy fate.

"Brilliant, Ignatius Trout."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing this time. "You are even more insane in the mornings," he remarked. "And you're a little quirky at the best of times."

"Eat him first," Draco advised the squid loudly. "He's much crunchier."

"No, eat him," Harry counselled. "He's more evil. I hear evil's full of flavour."

"As a matter of fact, I'm very bland," Draco corrected hastily. "I'm evil milk pudding."

"Oh, shut up," Harry said, reaching over the side and splashing some water into Draco's face.

Draco spluttered briefly.

"That had slime in it!" he cried. "That was slimy squid water! You will pay for this, Potter."

Harry's glasses were suddenly liberally sprinkled with water. He saw Draco smirk through the droplets. Harry smiled. Draco's smirk faltered.

"Now we're even," he announced in a suddenly placating voice. "All right, Harry?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Draco nodded, still looking apprehensive. "No, don't even think about it. My hair gets fluffy if it gets wet and is not properly dried."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I see."

"So you're not to splash me."

"If you say so." Harry grinned then, and splashed up a little wave directly onto Draco's head. "Fluffy."

Draco glared at him through a dripping fringe. Then he began to take off his clothes.

"Er?" Harry said interrogatively.

Draco emerged from his robes, water already falling onto the shoulders of his shirt.

"I am preparing to sunbathe," he explained with dignity. "I shall need a pillow in order to elevate my head so it will be properly dried, and also for the secondary purpose of comfort."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco tilted his chin and continued to look appropriately serious.

"Can I share your pillow?"

"Fine," Draco agreed ungraciously. "So long as you understand that my hair is not a laughing matter."

"Oh, I understand," Harry told him, laughing softly as he stretched out along the bottom of the boat.

Draco shaded his eyes with his hand to look up at him.

"That's twice in as many days that you have committed assault upon my hair," he sniffed, and kicked Harry sharply in the ankle. "Infidel."

"Honestly, I've heard of someone's body being their temple, but this is ridiculous," Harry muttered.

Draco sat up abruptly.

"That's it," he declared, and plunged his arm in the water up to the elbow. He removed it and then vigorously ruffled Harry's hair.

Harry put up no resistance, just raised himself up on his elbow and grinned at him, convinced there was very little Draco could do to adversely affect his hair.

Draco wiped his hand fastidiously on his jeans.

"I touched the squid," he informed him cheerfully. "You have slime in your hair. So there, Potter. Now we're even."

"Slime! That's *disgusting*. What are you, four years old?" Harry punched Draco's shoulder as Draco began to lie back down.

Draco looked most affronted, and punched back. "You deserved it," he retorted, pushing his wet hair behind his ear.

Harry pushed him and Draco fell on his back. He squinted up at Harry, eyes almost shut against the sun.

"After all this trouble," Harry mock-reproached him. "Ingrate."

"Never mess with the hair," Draco told him calmly. "And no more rough-housing in the boat; it will tip over and I will scream like a girl and then be forced to drown you to hide my shame."

There was a grain of real fear behind Draco's smile. Harry lay back down.

The sun was shining down and he could have slept, but then Draco jostled his shoulder.

"Harry. Hey, Harry."

"Yeah?"

Draco strained to see the sky. "What do you think that cloud looks like?" he asked, in what seemed to be the spirit of scientific inquiry. "I think it looks like a tortoise in a wig."

*

They lay there for a few hours in the sun, soaking it up and both dozing off at intervals. Every time Draco roused he seemed to have a new question, such as 'If you had to be an inanimate object, which would you be?' and 'Do you think house elves choose mates based on the size of their eyeballs?'

Draco thought they did, and he also decided that Harry should become Ginny Weasley's broomstick, for which Harry was forced to threaten to hit him.

Then Draco said, "And what's your greatest fear?"

Harry lifted his head from his arms, catching the curve of Draco's cheek in the corner of his eye, but most of his mind fixed on a stark and private nightmare.

"Not having the strength to kill Voldemort," he answered quietly.

Draco flinched from the sound of that name, glancing around at the calm water. "I was hoping you were going to say something amusing, like Hannah Abbott in her unmentionables," he complained, trying to keep his voice light.

"Come on, Draco."

Draco sighed and sat up, pulling his legs in against his chest, arms looped around his knees.

"I... fine," he said. "Losing them. Losing the Slytherins. The ones on our side."

Harry levered himself up on his elbows, looking worriedly up into Draco's face.

"Do you mean - them dying, or disappearing?"

"No." Draco bit his lip. "Well, that too. It's that - I'm not saying I made them all join the Young Order, but a lot of us have parents who are - have parents who have expectations of us, or are in places where we're scared, or... It was hard for everyone in Slytherin to make up their minds. And after my father - died, I came back, and I had a - mission, I suppose, and I knew that some of them looked up to me and I took advantage of that and I don't regret it and I *don't give up*. So I got what I wanted, and I usually do, but all I wanted was revenge and I had to take responsibility too. And now... I'm scared for them, and I have to keep them, and..."

Harry looked at Draco, really and utterly serious for once, with his face pale and intent, profile strained against the calm water.

Draco glanced over and then down, took a deep breath, smiled faintly because they understood each other and tried again.

"It's just... it took so much work," he said. "Not that many of us were hopping up and down panting for branded forearms, but there seemed so little choice and there seemed so little to

fight for - we aren't his targets and we don't care much about Muggle-lovers or the Muggleborn. I couldn't count on any blind loyalty to Dumbledore or bright shining ideals. We're not like that." He paused, glanced down at his own hands linked around his knee. "I've worked too hard for them to let them go now."

"Are you saying there's really a chance they could-?"

"I'm saying I don't know!" Draco snapped. "We're not like the rest of you. Some of us are throwing away our families for this. Most of us like Lupin, but it's hard for us to rely on someone who's not our own. I don't like Dumbledore and I won't let him tell me what to do. And now Snape's gone and everyone resents these accusations and it's hard, and I don't know what to do!"

Harry didn't even know what to say. He was sitting there gaping at Draco.

He remembered now, Lupin saying that Professor Snape was away, attempting to gather information that would help explain the recent attack.

Snape had left at the end of March. And this was May. And Harry'd been so used to his absences, so preoccupied with - the Tournament, the war, the worries, Draco - that he *hadn't noticed*.

And he'd wondered why Draco looked tired so often!

He looked over at Draco's bowed head, almost in appeal.

"Draco. You've been trying to carry all this on your own."

Draco didn't look up. "Slytherins don't need any help."

"You stupid *prat*." Harry stopped then, and said, less vehemently: "Are you - are you worried about him?"

Draco did look up then, his eyes wide as if he'd received an unexpected blow. "Yes," he said harshly. "We know exactly the risks he's taking. And he's the only adult here we can trust - and who has any kind of belief in us."

Being Draco, he didn't add, *And I care about him*.

"You can trust Lupin," Harry said. "You can trust Dumbledore."

"Yeah?" Draco snarled. "You want me to ask people who have been brought up to distrust anyone outside of a certain social circle to put their faith in a werewolf? It's hard enough for me to tell myself that. And you want me to trust Dumbledore, who arbitrarily decides to take the House Cup from Slytherin every few years? I don't. He was never my mentor figure. He isn't my leader, and I don't trust him."

"Look, Gryffindor won the House Cup fairly-"

"I'm not accusing you," Draco answered. "I'm telling you how we see it. He never explained anything to us. We don't trust easily, and he never even tried. Do you know what happened when Crouch Transfigured me and then hurled me against stone? Snape told him that if he touched one of his students again, he'd kill him. And Dumbledore hired the maniac. I know which one I trust."

Harry looked at the angry, stubborn look on Draco's face, and thought about the way he told the little story. He recalled a boy in Potions class once telling Snape he was the best teacher in the school.

"Snape will come back," he said softly. Draco looked down at his knees again. "With all this focused loyalty," Harry added carelessly, "maybe you should have been a Hufflepuff."

Draco looked up with his eyes flashing, and a trace of relief behind the flash.

"Take that back, or I brain you with the hamper."

He went rummaging around the bottom of the boat for it, but looked up again when Harry touched his arm.

"You *can* trust them," he said. "Lupin and Dumbledore. Really."

"Why should I believe you, Potter?" Draco inquired disdainfully. "You trust everyone. You even trust *me*. Is there anyone in the school I can have a nice healthy lack of faith in?"

The set of his shoulders was a little too strained, and Harry offered him a reassuring smile.

"Filch," he suggested. "Filch and his really evil cat. You can distrust them all you like."

"I like cats," Draco objected, relaxing. "They're so magnificently selfish. I empathise with cats."

"Nah," Harry said. "I like dogs. I always wanted a puppy, when I was little." He brightened, thinking of something. "And I'm going to get one, when we leave school."

Draco threw his head back and it hit the side of the boat. He didn't seem unduly disturbed by this, just kept his eyes on the sky.

"Oh, yes. Next year," he said. "We've never talked about that, have we? What are you going to do?"

What are you going to do?

He spoke as if Harry's future was going to be utterly unconnected with his, and they never had talked about it before, but what if he, Draco Malfoy, had his all planned out and it just wasn't going to have room?

The sun was out, but Harry felt a little cold. He looked over at Draco and could only see his throat, and he tried to form a casual sentence.

"Am I still going to have you?" he blurted out instead, and he would at that moment have given up all the Quidditch skills if he could have learned to be less disastrously awkward with words. "Um, I mean..."

Draco looked over at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Not as a pet, Potter," he informed him. "I'm going to be staying home. Staying at home with mother does sound like it will cramp my style, but we have thirty bedrooms, so then again possibly not. Besides - some Slytherins are going to need a place to stay. My house will work for that."

His mouth lifted up at the corner.

"You could come stay too," he offered easily. "Now and then. Father had several Quidditch pitches built on the grounds. Are you jealous?"

Harry beamed freely back.

"Yeah, very." He paused. "I'm taking a job with the Aurors," he told him. "I've already bought a flat in a magical part of London."

Remembering that, flat viewing with Sirius last summer, still gave him a jolt of pleasure in his chest. Sirius had offered him a home once, and he had dreamed of nothing but that, a real home and freedom from the Dursleys, but now he was grown up and his earliest childhood dreams had come true. He was able to just buy himself a place and walk out of Privet Drive forever.

A home. Harry had bought it and then asked Sirius to go away for a bit and he had just sat there. No rules, no relatives, permanence and security, a glimpse at some future after this war. He was going to choose furniture and buy a dog, and...

"You should come and stay there sometimes, too," he said.

"Great," Draco said in a pleased tone. "A bachelor pad in town. Fun." He frowned. "Unless Weasley's going to live there too, in which case I shall refuse your kind invitation on the grounds that he would inhospitably smother me in my sleep."

"Ron's staying home," Harry told him. "I think - and don't tell anybody - he wants to save some money and get up the nerve to ask Hermione to live with him in a couple more years."

He was expecting a nasty remark about the golden couple, but he unexpectedly got a golden smile instead.

"Wonderful," Draco said, sunnily. "May I help decorate the spare bedroom?"

"You're going to decorate it in something that will clash with red hair, aren't you?"

"Would I?"

"Ron won't care, you know."

Draco looked vexed.

"You can help me pick out the dog," Harry offered generously.

"I don't want to. I want to help you pick out a cat."

"Draco, if you want a cat you can get one yourself. I'm having a puppy, because I wanted one so badly and the Dursleys always said it'd be-"

"I can't have a cat," Draco sulked. "There's antique furniture in my house. Father always told me a cat would be-"

"Too messy," Harry finished for both of them, and flashed him another smile.

Draco looked thoughtful, curling up at the bottom of the boat like a pensive child. The wind was rising just a little and his hair was lifted slightly off his neck.

"How was it, with the Dursleys?" he asked. "I mean, I've heard the rumours, and I know you never went home for Christmas. But - how bad was it?"

Harry looked at him. Draco looked back, half curiosity, half concern.

God, life was strange. To think that one day he would tell the story of his wretched childhood to Draco Malfoy, of all people.

He took a deep breath, and told him some things. The cupboard. The room with bars on his window and the days with pathetic amounts of food.

When he told Draco that, Draco reached over and took his wrist, fingers pressing painfully against it. He only told him a few things about life with the Dursleys, hesitating as he did so. It was all over now. It didn't matter anymore.

Once he was done, he glanced up at Draco. Draco had that alarmingly determined look he wore before Quidditch games.

"That's nice, Harry," he commented in eerily airy tones. "Now, this is what we are going to do. We're going to leave school with our pretty new licenses and we are going to turn those people into beetles. To give them a new life experience, you see, and then *tragically* we are going to accidentally crush them with a rolling pin, over and over again."

"Draco, I do not want to crush my relatives with a rolling pin." Harry reflected. The idea did have a certain appeal. "Well, anyway, I'm not going to."

Draco's eyes still had that disturbingly fanatical look.

"No jury in the world would convict us," he argued. "You're famous and I'm rich. We're young and reckless. We have to commit crimes and get away with it. It is our public duty."

The idea of Draco even being in the same room as the Dursleys was very odd. They were so dingy and petty, and he would seem so completely out of place in Privet Drive, all fancy cloak and flashing-pale hair and oozing magical aristocracy from every pore.

It was an incongruous image, superimposing Draco onto his old life. He was too animated, too bright for that, and Harry had left all that stifling drabness behind. He had taken everything from his room, and he had known as he had left that he was leaving forever, and so had they, and there had been nothing but relief and that continuous grinding hatred on both sides.

It really did not matter anymore.

Though he would have liked to see Draco's face, just once, if Aunt Petunia ever told him to cook the bacon for Dudley.

He would have wanted to leave before the explosion.

"All right, so you don't want to kill them," Draco said eagerly. "What we do is this. We give them false memories and convince them that they are all go-go dancers-"

"Draco." Harry laughed. "Stop. Really."

Draco did, eyes searching Harry's face again.

"No good can come of go-go dancers," Harry informed him solemnly.

Draco nodded, and dropped Harry's wrist.

"I'm sorry, Harry." He looked up to catch Harry's glance of surprise, and continued. "Your wrists aren't that bad. You don't really have to worry."

"Thank you, Draco. That was tearing me apart."

Draco lifted his chin. "I'm sure it was. Not all of us have the assurance of beautiful bones bred in their blood."

"Sorry," Harry said, "did you say bred in, or inbred? Because I've heard some stories about the old pureblood families-"

"Shut up."

"Were your parents related, Draco?" Harry asked in a hushed voice. "Because you can tell me if they were. It's not your fault - and it would actually explain a lot."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Draco's face was flushed with indignation, the wind from the lake tousling his hair despite all his best efforts to keep it in order, locks whipping around his fingers as he pushed it back. Harry remembered the first time they had walked around the lake, and thought *how different, how strange, and how could I ever have guessed*, and smiled up into his face.

His voice was soft, and solicitous. "Were they cousins, Draco?" he inquired.

Draco smacked his head. "They were linked only by the sacred bond of matrimony, I'll have you know," he said sternly. "And they looked nothing alike, aside from both being blond and devastating. *I don't even look much like my mother.*"

"Aside from being blond and devastating, you mean," put in Harry, who knew this Malfoy.

Draco flashed him a dazzling smile. "But of course." He tossed back his hair superbly, and then looked almost pensive. "People say," he began almost tentatively, which was an odd tone for Draco to use.

"Yes?" asked Harry.

Draco paused for a few moments longer.

"That I look just like my father," he finished abruptly at last, and then looked up and spoke with an eagerness he was clearly trying to hide. "You saw my father, didn't you? Once in a bookstore, and once at the World Cup. Did you - think I looked like him?"

He is looking just like his father.

And the first time Harry had ever seen Lucius Malfoy, he had known he could only be Draco's father.

So like him, the Malfoy eyes and the Malfoy hair and the Malfoy face, the Malfoy heir created in Lucius Malfoy's image and designed to follow Lucius Malfoy's path.

Except that Lucius Malfoy was gone, and the hair and the eyes and the face and the destiny belonged only to Draco, and Harry had never been so vindictively thankful for someone's death.

Harry wanted to say *No*. He wanted to say again, *nothing like him*, and have Draco believe it, and believe that it was good.

But there was that look on Draco's face, that ill-suppressed hunger, that fixed burning need for love you never had and could never have. Harry knew it because he had seen it in the mirror, and though Draco told himself and everybody else lies about being a spoiled child, Harry couldn't fail to notice desperation he knew from the inside out any more than he could believe his own lies about it not mattering now.

He reached out, tilting Draco's chin up. Draco submitted entirely to this, clearly presuming that it was for better examination of his features in order to compare them with paternal ones.

It wasn't about that. It was about...

That hair and those eyes and that face.

"I think you look better," said Harry.

Draco raised an eyebrow and leaned back, leaving Harry's hand hanging in space for an instant. "That would come in useful for the campaign posters, wouldn't it?" he remarked.

"Sorry?"

Draco leaned forward again, elbows on his knees. "My father always wanted me to go into politics," he said, "but I don't know. I'm not sure I'm interested, but then I'm not sure what I am interested in. Maybe something in Creative Magic, or maybe - I've always wondered about the Unspeakables."

"You'll work it out," Harry told him.

"I'll have plenty of time," Draco agreed coolly. "It's not like I can do anything until the war is over. I've got things to do, people to organise, and who knows what could happen."

Meaning that Voldemort could win, or Draco could die, but with Draco being too much of a defiant brat to admit either possibility.

Harry wouldn't allow either of them to happen.

"You'll work it out," he said again, more firmly.

Draco smirked. "Your faith touches me," was all he said. "Maybe I will be a gentleman of leisure, reclining on silk pillows with dozens of dancing girls and chocolates to hand."

"Sounds good to me," Harry answered. "You did say I was invited over. I like white chocolate."

Draco passed a hand over his brow, looking suddenly and very dramatically faint.

"Typical of your heartlessness to harp on about food when I am perishing of malnourishment," he said reproachfully. "Not that I blame you, Harry, for bringing me out here to starve to death. Don't let my early death prey on your mind for a moment, I'd hate to think that my tragic passing upset you."

"It's half past one. I don't think you're going to die just yet."

"Even though you will be directly responsible for my death, don't let the burning guilt consume you. I forgive you, Harry, I really do, in spite of the torturous hunger gnawing at my very vitals."

Draco looked martyred. Harry sighed in resignation.

"You can look in the hamper if you like, Draco."

"Yay," said Draco, seizing it and beginning to rummage through its contents. "Hmm, hmmm, hmm, sandwiches, cheese and ham and you have no imagination, do you, hmm, hmm, hmm, what's in this flask?"

"Pumpkin juice," Harry said.

"And the other one?"

"Well, coffee."

Draco beamed.

"Coffee," he noted with great pleasure. "Oooh, and - weeds. Weeds, Potter. I'm not eating weeds, I don't care how good they are for the complexion."

"It's Gillyweed," Harry explained. "In case the boat tips over."

"In case the boat tips over?" Draco looked scandalised. "How unsafe is this vessel? Why didn't you share your doubts on its seaworthiness earlier? Are we going to spring a leak?"

"Maybe in your brain," Harry theorised, and looked down. "Like I was going to take chances with you. Idiot."

Draco sounded slightly mollified. "Oh."

Then he recommenced rummaging through the hamper.

"Hmm, biscuits, hmm, oh!" He glanced up, startled. "Blood-flavoured lollipops. You remembered."

Harry shrugged and nodded uncomfortably, and then looked back to see if Draco was pleased.

"Assortment of sweets, hmm, hmm, mmm, and a spoon, all right, and - a jar of marmalade, and - a packet of icing sugar." Draco looked up again, letting his hair fly any which way for once, and his glance was almost helpless. "Oh, *Harry*."

"Well, I wanted it to be the weirdest picnic ever," Harry excused himself.

"Best. Day. Ever," Draco said with conviction. "Harry, we have to do one for you next. Maybe I will hire dancing girls. What do you want?"

Harry started taking out the boring things that Draco had ignored, like plates, and laying them out.

"I like being with you," he answered matter-of-factly. "Pour me some pumpkin juice."

"Consider dancing girls," Draco suggested, getting the flask. "I think you'll find the idea preying on your mind. Or at least twisting around a pole in a rather predatory fashion."

"We'll see," Harry agreed placidly.

He looked over at Draco, who was concentrating on Harry's cup, face intent as the boat rocked slightly, bottom lip sucked in just a tiny bit.

"We should order dancing girls when you move into your flat," Draco decided brightly, straightening up. "I've never actually ordered dancing girls before. It would be the best housewarming ever."

Harry winced. "My godfather and Professor Lupin are coming to my housewarming. Don't make me think these things."

"You know, they're really pretty old," Draco remarked. "I'm sure they know about-"

"No, Draco. Don't even suggest it; don't even say the word in connection with my role models. Stop it, how would you like it if I did it?"

"Weeeell, I think I can argue for reasonable doubt with Professor Snape," Draco pointed out, frowning thoughtfully. "I mean, he's so moody, and he has that terrible hair. Then again, he is a Slytherin..."

"What, are - like, flings a Slytherin ritual?"

Draco paused and tilted his head, the sun reflecting off his hair and making him look impossibly innocent.

"Yes, Harry, that's it. It's a ritual. When all Slytherins are twelve, they are forcibly deflowered on an altar stained with the blood of lambs, while dressed in rubber, *by an elderly relative*. Don't say a word. Do I disrespect your house traditions?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Thanks for that image, Draco. I didn't mean it that way."

Draco sniffed. "I'll have you know that we hold purity in great esteem. Not one of us ever says a word to Crabbe on the subject of his personal virtue."

Harry had to look away and have a moment of reflection before that terrible mental image could be assimilated. The lake was darker blue under a slightly darker sky, melding with the hazy dark-greens and greys of the land beyond.

"Are you saying that-" He stopped, and swallowed. "So, like, Goyle has?"

"Oh, yes." Draco nodded calmly. "With Millicent Bulstrode."

"Urgh, stop. Are you *sure*?"

"I'm very sure. He woke me from the sound sleep of the just and mildly intoxicated in order to check on a certain vital spell."

"Oh, ugh, my God. What did you *say*?"

Draco's smile was impish. "As I recall, 'Go get her, tiger.'" He smirked at Harry's look of speechless horror. "I'm a good friend," he defended himself stoutly. "Part of the bargain is to be supportive of your friend's learning experiences."

"Blech," Harry said succinctly. "I never even knew they were seeing each other."

Draco squinted at Harry as if trying to decipher hieroglyphics.

"I don't think they were," he answered slowly. "They were just experimenting. It didn't have much to do with emotions."

"Oh, repulsive," Harry said.

"Thank you very much," Draco returned absently, opening the icing sugar.

"Draco, I didn't mean - You never actually told me how, er, many -"

Draco raised an eyebrow inquiringly. Harry gave up and punched his shoulder.

"Come on."

He relented. "All right, then. Five. Two relationships, two flings and one friend who things happened with a few times."

"Only five?"

Draco looked insulted. "I happen to think that's pretty good for eighteen, Potter," he informed him. "What kind of thing do you people think goes on in the Slytherin dungeons, anyway? There's no whips and leather. In fact, some evenings we do crosswords."

"Right, sorry," Harry said. "Don't look at me. I'm not an expert on this subject."

"Yeah, I know." Draco looked deep in thought. "Harry, would you - would you mind if I-?"

"What?"

"Would it be completely disgusting if I put the icing sugar and marmalade into a sandwich?"

"Yes," Harry said, very definitely. "Yes it would. Don't you dare do it while I'm eating."

"Oh, fine," said Draco sulkily, licking the marmalade off one finger. It was probably the effect of how pale he was that made the inside of his mouth look such a dark red.

Harry realised that Draco had just asked him a question.

"Sorry, what?"

"I guess it upsets you because you're waiting for some great big feeling?"

Harry was uncomfortable enough about this conversation not to want to meet Draco's eyes. He looked at the inseam on Draco's T-shirt instead.

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't really thought about it that much."

That was true. There was always so much else happening, and nothing had been terribly immediate. The issue was a vague promise of comfort and enjoyment in the future, but had always seemed basically disquieting.

"Budge over, I want to stretch out," Draco said imperiously.

Harry obligingly shifted to one side. Draco stood up carefully, still clutching his bag of icing sugar, and stepped over the plates. Then he settled comfortably by Harry's side and continued.

"Bet you are, though," he said. "I know you, with all your ludicrous ideals. You know things aren't black and white, but you want them to be."

"And why is that so ludicrous?" Harry asked, nettled.

Draco leaned back on his elbows.

"Nothing's absolute," he said lazily, stretching out. "It can't be. There's no such thing as absolute beauty or absolute perfection, or absolute feeling. I can't feel absolute faith in someone, and Weasley can't feel absolute affection for Granger, and - my father couldn't feel absolute love for me."

That Draco should gauge the emotions of the world by the experience he had of a cold-blooded murderer.

"You're contradicting yourself," he told him in a soft voice. "You told me once about how you live, remember? About living with fury. If that's how you exist - if you have to live with passion - then what is that but absolute?"

Draco lifted himself up on one hand, hair soft from the breeze still ruffling the lake.

"Murderous paradox, isn't it?" he asked.

He looked almost pleased by it, by inventing an impossible world around himself. Harry didn't see why he should seem so complacent about what seemed like painful uncertainty about everything.

He could have done with, and believed in, a few more promises of absolute. He wanted an answer for everything so much.

He reached out, and touched Draco's shoulder.

"I completely want to be your friend," he said.

Making a promise of absolute himself was the best he could do.

"Now can we please talk about something else?" he asked ruefully. "I could see that wanting-to-set-me-up glint in your eye from a mile off."

"I was just considering the merits of Lavender Brown," Draco said hopefully. "We've been overlooking her, you know. She's a charming girl."

"Draco, I have warned you."

Draco's lip quirked.

"Oooh, Harry, I fear your wrath. Whatever shall become of me?"

Harry hit him over the head with a napkin. "Shut up."

"Don't hurt me," Draco squeaked. "The might of the great and merciless Harry Potter is known to all. I quail before your titanic power. I should fear I was doomed, did I not possess a secret weapon-"

Draco moved in a fraction, and reached out a hand to Harry's face.

His fingers opened, and he tried very hard to force a Nose-Biting Teacup onto Harry's nose. Harry only just caught his wrist in time, and then yelled and pushed him off. Draco landed on his back, the hand with the Teacup in it curled on his chest and a fiendish smile still playing around his lips.

"You carry around tricks in your pockets," Harry said. "You really do behave like a four-year old."

"Nearly got you," Draco said smugly.

"That's not the point."

"A-*ha*! You admit it!"

Harry shook his head and mumbled, "Four," again. A drop of rain fell on his hand and he saw Draco's eyes focus on it in utter dismay.

"Oh no," he declared. "It's going to rain."

Harry shrugged. "So we'll get a little wet."

Draco's face crumpled. "My hair," he said in a small, piteous voice. "It's going to be ruined. Ruined, I tell you!"

Harry looked up at the sky. The clouds did look dark grey, and somewhat ominous. Raindrops were hitting him with ever-increasing regularity.

"We could go back," he offered reluctantly.

Draco dived for something at the other end of the boat. "Nah," he said. "I have a plan. Under the robe!"

At that point, he flung his own discarded robe over his and Harry's head.

"Wonderful plan, Draco," Harry remarked in a muffled voice, trying to move further under the cloak. "I can't see a thing. Oooh, Slytherins are truly cunning folk."

"Quiet, you," commanded Draco, scrambling in order to make sure his hair was covered.

Harry felt Draco's wrist brush his knee.

"Draco."

"Yes?" Draco said in a voice of perfect innocence.

"You're thinking of dropping the Nose-Biting Teacup in my lap. Aren't you."

There was a pause.

"... maybe," Draco admitted, sounding vexed.

Harry laughed and grabbed Draco's wrists. "Stop thinking it."

Clearly the wrath of Harry Potter was upsetting Draco less than the rain. They could both feel it falling thicker onto the cloak.

"Eeep," said Draco, moving in even more, and then laughed. His hair was tickling Harry's ear, and as he spoke Harry could feel the brush of his nose against Harry's cheek and the warmer and slightly different tickle of breath. "It would have been funny," Draco assured him. "It was hilarious when I dropped one into Longbottom's lap. He *screamed*."

It took Harry a moment to process this.

"When you *what*?"

"It was ages ago," Draco said hastily. "And now I come to think of it, it wasn't me. It was Crabbe or Goyle or someone, I probably didn't even give the order, and maybe it wasn't even Longbottom, it could have been anyone, and I might not even have been there, and anyway it was very funny."

Harry blinked in the darkness under the robe, a tiny lock of Draco's hair brushing Harry's neck.

"You're not only four, you're a nasty four-year-old," he said, moving slightly to escape the stray lock.

He felt the warm explosion of breath on his skin when Draco laughed.

"All right, it was last week."

"I'm rolling my eyes at you, Draco. Just so you know. Don't do anything like that again."

"Where did this rain come from?" Draco asked irritably.

"Um, probably the sky. Promise me."

"Fine, I promise never to sic teacups on Longbottom again. You're no fun, Potter."

"You're a vicious little ferret sometimes, *Malfoy*."

Draco squawked, which was a terrible noise when someone's mouth was so close that when he started in outrage, his lips brushed a spot under your ear.

"You said the 'F' word! All my friends have to promise never to say the 'F' word!"

Harry breathed deeply, because it was stifling under that robe, and then whispered, "Ferret ferret ferret," in Draco's ear.

It took him a minute to realise the tiny thrumming sound by his cheek was Draco trying to suppress a laugh.

"I don't need this," Draco informed him dolefully, and managing only to snicker once. "It's pouring, and it's going to last forever, and the rain is already seeping into my hair."

"Well, I'm all right here," Harry said. "Anyway, after the downpour there might be a rainbow."

Draco considered. "Well. Do you have the coffee flask?"

*

There was a faint rainbow, dim as if Dean had painted a picture and now the colours were running and fading into the deep wet blue. The dream-pale colours dissipated in the bright sunlight almost immediately.

Draco and Harry lay on the bottom of the boat, soaking up the last of that sunlight.

"I have never seen anyone eat that much chocolate," Harry remarked lazily, as Draco levered himself up once more for another Chocolate Frog.

Draco turned to face him, looking offended. "I need it for energy," he explained severely.

Harry smiled and shut his eyes. "Sure you do."

"Harry, you may be one of my best friends and all that, but if you insinuate that I am fat I will hit you with the picnic hamper. And there'll be no commentary on the choice of weapon from you, either."

"Who's insinuating anything?" Harry asked lazily, poking Draco in the stomach.

Draco kicked him and squirmed away, raising himself on his elbows in order to glare at Harry and give a speculative look to the Nose-Biting Teacup, which he had balanced precariously, and with a certain admirable amount of nerve, on his belt buckle.

Harry gave the Teacup an apprehensive glance. Then he sat up, reached for the Chocolate Frogs and, snatching it on his way past, flung it into the lake.

"Hey!" Draco sat up fast and glared. "You polluted. I'm telling Professor McGonagall on you."

Harry lay back and shut his eyes. "Okay."

"Oooh, Harry Potter, you're such a rebel." Draco said in a sing-song voice, eerily reminiscent of Colin Creevey. "You're bad to the bone. Luring away innocents from their honest day's work..."

"What exactly were you planning to do?"

Harry opened his eyes to see Draco lift his chin. "I had something very important to do. I was going to get my hair cut."

"I'm so sorry to have ruined your vital plans," Harry said solemnly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I expect so. Because, well, kind of worth it." Draco took another contented bite and beamed, waving the Frog in illustration. "Chocolate," he pointed out.

Harry nodded, feeling drowsy and content. The sun was slightly lower on the horizon, all yellow warmth and so close, and Draco was here on the water and not frightened. Everything was painted in bright simple colours and everything, for a few minutes, could be all right.

Draco looked like he was trying to fall asleep and eat chocolate at the same time, eyes hooded, clothes just slightly out of place so that his T-shirt rose to show a fraction of an inch of skin. He smiled lazily around the chocolate when he caught Harry's eye.

"Kind of worth it," he repeated, and then, "What?"

There was a smudge of chocolate at the edge of Draco's mouth.

"Um, nothing," said Harry, reaching over and brushing it off with the side of his hand. "You just had a little - something-"

"Right, thanks." Draco lay back, looking boneless in his relaxation, one hand curled behind his head. "Hmm. The sun will be going down soon."

"Yeah, we should... get back."

"Hmmm. In a few minutes."

A few more minutes, and in them the sun was growing dimmer, and it was getting just a little colder. Draco's breathing was soft and regular, and when he spoke again his voice was like liquid, happy and completely without strain.

"Harry, how *are* we going to get back without the oars?"

Harry sat up, felt around in the pocket of his jacket and took out his wand.

"*Accio* oars," he said, and grinned as they came flying. "Honestly, Draco. Try to remember you're a wizard."

Draco looked at the wet oars for a speechless moment, and then made a horrible face at Harry. Harry laughed and tossed him one of the oars and Draco concentrated on making an even more horrible face.

"I'm such a *slave*," he muttered in martyred fashion. "I could get *calluses*."

"They're manly," Harry told him, and smiled as Draco made a third horrible and indignant face just before pulling his robe back on.

"I happen to be exceedingly manly already, I'll have you know," he said in muffled tones.

The sound of the oars in the water was slow and steady, Draco glancing over at Harry to see how to do it, their oars falling almost in sync. Harry only felt mild regret once the boat hit the shore, bumping against it slightly, and Draco picked up the hamper and flung it on the shore.

"I think you probably smashed the plates."

"Live dangerously," Draco suggested brightly, standing up and leaping out of the boat.

Which, since Harry had just started to get up, resulted in the boat almost capsizing.

Harry gave him a Look and Draco laughed helplessly, once, and then reached out his hand.

"I'm sorry, come on," he said, and Harry took his hand even though the boat was still shaking and Draco pulled him out too fast, so he gasped and almost stumbled, and Draco laughed again with the breathless glee of this whole day, and dropped Harry's hand while Harry was still unsteady. The light of the sinking sun was gold in his windblown hair and Harry was - was happy, and laughing too, and still caught in that moment where he was about to fall.

He leaned forward and grabbed the front of Draco's robes, almost to keep his balance, and just as they both stopped laughing he kissed him on the mouth.

Harry shut his eyes, the outline of the sun around Draco's hair vivid on the darkness behind his eyelids. There was an instant where his mind was empty of all thought and Draco's lips were so soft.

Then his eyes blinked open, and he started back and looked at Draco.

Draco's face was cold and hard, and the sun was gone.

"So that's what all this was about," he said, his voice absolutely furious, and then he turned and stalked away.

Harry was left standing by the lake, staring after him in horror.

Chapter Thirteen: The Way We Were

Once upon a time

When we were friends

I gave you my heart

The story ends

Harry was lying in bed that night, on the point of sleep.

He could not stop thinking about what had happened. He had not been able to think of anything else for hours, and it could not be any different here in the soporific darkness, Ron's breath slow in the bed next to him, his eyes shut tight as if he could will himself into oblivion.

Why did I do that?

Why had he even wanted to... what had possessed him to... He had no answers for himself.

He was... he liked *girls*. So what the hell had he been playing at? Had he ever even thought about it...?

Thought about what it might have been like today, if Draco's soft mouth had parted under his. If he had been allowed to touch that body, run hands over Draco's chest up to that neck, with Draco's hair so soft between his fingers, and if Draco had touched him too...

Draco's body against his. The taste of him and the thought of those lips pushing back with concentrated ferocity, his head tilted back as Harry kissed him, his skin smooth and sweet under hands and mouth... Draco's voice growing dark and low as it did when his emotions were intense.

"Harry! Harry!"

Harry woke with a gasp and looked up at Ron's concerned face.

"You were making noises," Ron explained. "Was it - a dream about You-Know-Who?"

Harry gulped. "Er, no. It was... It's all right."

Ron nodded sympathetically, and went back to bed.

Harry lay in the darkness, trying to get his breathing back under control.

All sweaty and frantic now. Not good.

So - it was no good trying to think up rational explanations. Hot beads of perspiration were slipping down his face, making his pyjamas stick to his clammy skin. Desperation was making things starkly simple.

I want him.

Wanted him badly. Why hadn't he realised before...? Had he felt...

Harry closed his eyes and tried to shut out thought, but images kept flooding back to him, tiny vivid particles of colour hitting the darkness. His throat was dry.

The feel of Draco on top of him at the Duelling Club. The curl of his mouth when he smiled. The glitter in his grey eyes, as if the sun had just burst out on a storm-tossed sea. The almost malicious and almost childish sound of his laugh. The feathery feel of his hair under Harry's hand.

Harry realised that his teeth were clenched and his body arched in a spasm of longing. He tried belatedly to calm himself.

I am unbelievably stupid.

He should have realised - and he should never have done what he had done.

The memory of Draco's face hit Harry now like a blow to the stomach. That look of suffering turned in on itself, how his mouth went tight and his features all seemed to sharpen with the effort of holding himself in. Harry knew it so well, and he had never meant to... oh, how could he have made Draco look like that?

The bitter twist of his lips, and that last distinct glance of - betrayal.

I never meant to hurt him! Harry thought with a sudden wrench of anguish. I never, ever meant to do that. Not Draco.

He's been hurt enough. I know that. Nobody knows that as well as I do.

And it was with this pain, rather than with the irrepressible happiness earlier or this sudden shock of desire, that Harry understood exactly how much this lonely acerbic creature had come to mean to him.

Draco.

How was he going to make this right? How on earth could he make this up to Draco? How could he even *face* Draco again after that?

He absolutely could not bear the idea of losing Draco. Draco was - he *needed* him!

Harry pressed his face into his pillow.

Things would have been simpler if the Triwizard Tournament hadn't happened. Things used to be clear.

He could not bear it if things went back to the way they had been.

So that's what all this was about, Draco had said. Draco thought the whole friendship was just some kind of hormonal impulse. Draco thought...

Draco was probably disgusted and horrified, and Draco thought...

Draco thought that Harry didn't care about him.

And how was he supposed to explain? He couldn't say that he didn't want Draco, and then Draco would still think...

Harry hardly slept that night.

He said "Draco," under his breath many times, much as he had said "Voldemort" when he was younger. Daring the object of his thoughts to appear, conjured out of the air by his call. He had almost wanted to summon Voldemort then, to try and fight him, to banish fear.

Name the demon and it loses its power.

He wanted to summon Draco - for a thousand things. The desire for revenge was among them, the urge to demand, how could you believe I was using you, how *dare* you make me feel like this and then run away. He also wanted to simply have Draco with him, quiet and comfortable, simply to be able to glance over and receive an occasional smile.

And he wanted to kiss him again.

Harry bit his lip and shut his eyes.

*

He could not respond to Ron the next day. He barely saw Hermione in the common room. It was as if they could not be there, as if he was operating on a different level, was looking up through water to their dimly perceived forms.

Only one thought was impelling him today, this one driving anxiety.

And when he reached the Great Hall, there was only one face that was real, that he could see at all clearly.

Draco was at his level. Draco was all he could see.

He was sitting at the Slytherin table, toying idly with some toast. Harry could only make out the too-sharp curve of a chin, and the licks of blond hair lying against his neck.

It held him, for a moment. He had never realised how true the metaphor of a pinned butterfly could be. He was transfixed by a single point of pain, regret and worry and affection and desire all forming a sharp edge. Confusing and tearing feelings churned inside him and his throat ached as if something was trying to claw its way up.

Once he could move and breathe, Harry acted. He could not help himself.

He went over to the Slytherin table, desperately uncaring about making a scene, and said,

"I need to talk to you."

Draco looked up.

The look shocked Harry backwards. It was a single purposeful blast of vision, like a sword-thrust, and it was entirely lacking in any emotion but anger.

"Then you can go on needing, Potter."

His tone was furiously cold.

"Draco-" Harry said, terrified to hear the depth of passion in his own voice.

Draco's plate and cup went clattering down the table as he shot upright, his face cut clean by venom.

"My name is Malfoy," he hissed.

Harry hated the remorseless lack of warmth in Draco's gaze, and found it utterly impossible to look away.

"Draco," he flung at him, almost in a challenge.

"Shut your mouth."

It was a chilly, typically Malfoy thing to say. And Draco's fists were clenched on the table as if he were aching to kill something.

"Draco, won't you just listen-"

Draco snapped.

He jumped over the table, and seized hold of Harry's robe in order to shove him backwards into a chair.

Harry stumbled at the painful impact, but refused to fall.

Draco's mouth twisted with frustrated spite. He stood there looking white as rage, utterly malevolent and very much as if he wanted to strangle Harry with his bare hands.

Something must have flickered in Harry's eyes, because Draco's became slits of steel.

"No," he said, each word a carefully selected weapon. "I won't listen. I never want to see or speak to you again. This whole farce of friendship is over, Potter, so go crawl back to your loathsome little cronies and leave me the hell alone."

He still had hold of Harry's robes. Harry grabbed his in return.

The flare of outrage in Draco's eyes reminded him too forcibly of yesterday, brought back with terrible clarity the taste of his mouth. Harry forced the memory away with a surge of anger.

"Stop being a stubborn bastard and listen to me!" he shouted.

Draco shoved him, and Harry shoved him back. And then suddenly they were fighting, not hitting each other but locked in straining, shoving, utterly fierce combat.

"Get *away* from me!" Draco snarled, lashing out savagely.

"Bloody well *listen*!" Harry was breathless from the effort of fighting.

Draco's arm hit out, brutally cutting off his air supply.

"I don't want to!" he spat.

Harry flung the arm down.

"I don't give a damn! Because I'm not giving up until you do, I won't go away, I'm not letting you walk off from this! Because you're my *friend*!"

"I'm not your friend," Draco growled. With a sudden rush of strength, he hurled Harry backwards.

Harry grabbed Draco's wrist as he fell, and caught himself. They both saw the other wince at the force of the blow, the sickening twist of the wrist.

Then they were at arm's length, and slowly became aware of their surroundings. All of Hogwarts was staring open-mouthed.

It didn't seem to matter.

Draco's face untwisted gradually, and as he gazed at Harry it seemed still and unforgiving as a frozen landscape.

"I'm not your friend," he explained, "because I hate the very sight of you."

Harry stood stricken.

It had been stupid to place his trust and affection in someone like Draco Malfoy. He realised that now, numbly, even while he knew that the mistake was irrevocable. Draco had a horrible capacity for cruelty.

Now, watching the slow collapse of Harry's face, the corner of Draco's mouth curled in satisfaction.

"Now get lost," he ordered, and turned away.

Harry watched him leave the Great Hall, and then Blaise Zabini's sneering face came into view.

"You heard what he said," Zabini snapped. "Get away from our table, Potter. You're not welcome here."

He stood close to Harry, and lowered his voice.

"You were *never* welcome here. And now he's come to his senses, and if you come anywhere near him again - you're going to regret it."

Zabini stepped back, Crabbe and Goyle flanking him, the promise of menace in their faces.

Harry stared at them dully.

He's come to his senses.

*

Harry ran up the stairs from the Gryffindor common room, ran so fast the world was blurring in front of his eyes. He didn't want to talk to anyone, couldn't explain and couldn't sort out his own feelings and could barely think through the pain-

He hit Ginny Weasley so hard the breath was knocked out of them both.

"Harry!" she said in her soft sympathetic voice. "I just heard about the fight. Are you - okay?"

Harry backed away from her with sudden alarm, trying not to be close to her in the darkness of these stairs, trying not to see her hopeful wide-eyed gaze in the dimness because it was all so like... It was just like...

Back in sixth year, when Snape and Sirius had both tried to remove five hundred points from each other's favoured houses, and all of them had found themselves storming up to Dumbledore's office to complain about each other.

"You know, Snape," Sirius had snapped, "you might be a less utterly obnoxious person if you hadn't been born hideous and unable to get any."

Every Slytherin outside Dumbledore's office had sucked in a hissing breath. The assembled Gryffindors and Slytherins had all glared at each other.

Harry, standing staunchly at Sirius' right, had sent a ferocious look of hatred towards Malfoy, who had his arms crossed and was positioned firmly on Snape's left. Malfoy had curled his upper lip disdainfully.

"I can't think of anything which might make you less obnoxious," Snape had replied. "You were unbearable from the moment we met - you and your precious cronies, the traitor, the werewolf and the utterly hypocritical-"

Sirius had lunged at Snape then, black eyes flashing, and they had fallen in a flurry of robes and fists.

Malfoy had turned, clearly with the intention of lending his favourite teacher a bit of dishonourable help. Harry, stinging from the insult to his father and the outrage from Snape's latest points cut, wasn't having any of that.

He had grabbed Malfoy's arm.

Malfoy'd whipped around, his cold eyes bright with fury, and swung at him.

"Don't you *dare* touch me, Potter," he had ordered, even as his fist connected with Harry's jaw, snapping Harry's head back.

Harry hadn't thought before he had hurled himself at Malfoy and knocked him to the ground. He was barely aware of both houses taking this as a signal for instant war, couldn't hear the roar of erupting mayhem above his pounding blood and the pained gasp of Malfoy's breath.

He had heard Malfoy's icy voice very clearly.

"Of course, you people think that scrapping like mad dogs solves everything. Where does your convict godfather get off, attacking our head of house?"

Then he'd jerked his elbow up to hit beneath Harry's ribs.

Harry had let out a sick startled breath, and Malfoy had taken the opportunity to shove Harry off him and onto the floor.

"Where does Snape get off, insulting my father?" Harry snapped.

Malfoy'd calmly rolled on top of him and given him a bloody nose.

"I didn't hear him insulting anyone," he sneered. "I just heard him telling the truth."

"How would you feel if people talked like that about your family?" Harry demanded. "Oh wait, I forgot, you don't have feelings. About anyone other than yourself, that is."

He'd grabbed Malfoy's robes in a fist, kept him lying on Harry as he punched him in the gut.

"And you don't have a family," Malfoy had said between gritted teeth.

And just - pure *rage* at all Malfoy's crap had levered Harry up off the ground, scrambling almost upright and then falling into the seething mass of bodies on top of Malfoy.

"Another thing I forgot," Harry had snarled, "was that everyone does talk like that about your family."

Malfoy's eyes had narrowed even as he tried to heave Harry off. "You bastard, Potter."

He'd hit Malfoy in the mouth.

"Takes one to know one, Malfoy."

He had seen with fierce satisfaction the blood welling on those curling lips, that arrogant hateful face going flushed with frustration as Malfoy struggled to get Harry off him. He'd exchanged punches and kept him pinned down as he fought and lashed out, twisting as Malfoy shoved up and breathing came ragged and...

Dumbledore had come out of his office and the brawling mass had frozen.

"Students!" he'd bellowed. "What is the meaning of this? Where are the teach-"

His voice had been cut off as Sirius and Snape raised their heads, and two furious pairs of black eyes met his.

Harry had glared down once more at Malfoy, who was breathing and bleeding heavily, but who nevertheless returned the glare with interest. Then he had pushed himself up and off. Malfoy'd risen in one smooth motion, and both of them backed away to their respective sides with their eyes still locked.

Dumbledore had dismissed the students while he dealt with Snape and Sirius, and Harry had made his way up the stairs from the common room, rather urgently wanting a shower.

He must have been distracted or something, because he'd almost knocked down Ginny Weasley. She had smiled at him despite it.

"Harry! I just heard about the fight. Are you - okay?"

Harry had realised he was still breathing hard. He needed a shower now, but she was standing there hopefully and he had to answer her and he had been angry and frustrated and - just itching to do something...

He'd flashed on the memory of Malfoy's hateful pale face beneath him.

I wish I'd got one more good punch in, he had thought.

And he'd said, "I'm just fine," and taken hold of Ginny's hair gently, and kissed her with a sort of straining desperation to be doing something and to feel something...

Her hesitant kiss back hadn't been right and hadn't been enough and he was empty and everything was bleak, like always, and Harry'd drawn back as soon as he could.

He had looked at her with a sort of blind horror, and she'd blushed.

He looked at her now with a different sort of blind horror, but she blushed in just the same way.

"Even then," he whispered. "Oh - shit, even then, oh - I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm - I'm so sorry."

He fled up the stairs, and she stood trembling and delighted in his wake, caressing the memory of unmistakable desire darkening his eyes.

*

Now he was sure, absolutely and hopelessly sure...

It was strange... wanting something again. Harry had almost grown used to the dull ache of not caring very much any more.

And now, suddenly, he wanted something so much.

It was terrible.

It came as a shock every morning. He would wake up tranquil, wondering perhaps what he and Draco would do today, and then something would remind him, and this astonishing new desire would hit him again.

Often, it seemed so bizarre Harry thought he was dreaming. Surely he couldn't - wouldn't he have known before...?

It only took a glimpse of Draco to resolve this doubt.

At other times the feeling would seem purely physical, the distress as well as the lust coiled up in his stomach, too real to be simply emotion.

Every time he tried to tell himself that he couldn't be... that way, something would occur to him, like...

Harry knew Draco Malfoy's mouth better than any other mouth on the planet.

He had spent almost seven years watching it, knew every expression it could form. He had thought about every wicked curl, every smirk, every scowl with varying emotions and equal degrees of intensity.

He had observed it in classrooms and Quidditch, focused on it as if simple furious attention could just force the boy to shut up.

At certain times he had glared in pure hatred at that mouth when it was snarling out something truly appalling, and he had visualised his fist slamming into it.

More recently, he had tried to decipher emotions from that mouth. It went slightly tight when Draco was upset.

He had never dreamed, in all that focusing and hating and analysing, that he would come to obsession.

But perhaps it was inevitable.

Now when he passed him in the corridor, one corner of that mouth curled in involuntary disgust, and it hurt.

And when Harry was sitting in classrooms or walking through the school or staring up at the ceiling of his dormitory on yet another sleepless night...

That mouth was before him again, so flexible, which only expressed the emotions Draco wanted to express. His whole face was trained, including the curve of his mouth.

Harry thought about them, turned over the feel of them in his mind again and again. Dreamed about pressing his thumb down on that lower lip, feeling it give, being *able* to do that. Dreamed about the feel of that mouth, opening in returned kisses.

On the night before the next Young Order of the Phoenix meeting, during which he was planning somehow to talk to Draco, he dreamed.

He dreamed he was sitting by the lake, and the sky was grey and cold but that was all right because he was protected by the translucent walls of the maze.

Draco was walking towards him, sure and silent, wearing a set of Snape's robes. They were a little long and overlarge, the collar slipping down to the left. Harry stared at the soft white skin of exposed collarbone and throat.

"Why are you wearing those clothes?" he asked, since it seemed a little odd.

Draco pushed Harry up against the wall next to the statue, and Harry closed his eyes and turned his face into Draco's hair.

Draco's voice was low and precise in his ear.

"Don't you know?" he said, and Harry just turned his face blindly towards the warmth of Draco's breath.

He blinked and stared at the face of a griffon, then a chimera, then a basilisk.

"Don't you know?" it asked him.

Hermione was kneeling on a sofa, sifting through a pile of books. Harry looked at them in confusion: *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* was among them, but she selected an enormous tome.

"Don't you know?" she inquired, taking off her glasses.

Draco leaned against his chest, and everything was all right, they were in the boat and nothing had ever changed, and Draco was saying, "I like cats," but all Harry could hear was "*Don't you know?*"

Harry woke up gasping.

He knew what he wanted.

*

Hermione thought that the world could be restored to order, now.

Malfoy and Harry had had their huge public fight, and the entire ill-conceived friendship had fallen catastrophically and irrevocably apart. As for Harry's little - thing, well, teenage boys often had odd hormonal impulses, and Harry was too sensible to let it affect him for long.

It broke Hermione's heart to see him unhappy, but she and Ron tried to keep him amused. He smiled when Ron beat him at chess, even.

Everything else was so hard. She told herself *this* was going to be all right.

It was at the first Young Council meeting since the fight that she realised how wrong she was.

There was no scene. There was not even the slightest hint of unpleasantness, not the slightest hint of *anything*, and that, when it came to Draco Malfoy's reactions to Harry Potter, was strange and almost - terrible.

She saw Harry flinch when Malfoy glanced over at him, but Malfoy's gaze was impassive and simply swept the room, checking that everybody was present. And that lack of reaction actually shocked her, felt wrong at bone level.

He was just sitting there idly, twirling his quill in his fingers, and Harry had his eyes fixed on him, and she had never seen anything quite like this before...

Except that she had.

When Draco Malfoy had just joined the Young Order in fifth year, he had behaved in a perfectly civil manner all the way through the first meeting. Ron had announced that it was a Slytherin plot, but Ron also thought that the Slytherins made it rain when the Gryffindor Quidditch team practised.

Harry had vehemently agreed.

When Malfoy started passing him in the hallways and not insulting him, Harry twitched with annoyance.

On the third day Harry got his finger stuck in the gargoyle's mouth above the sink in the Potions classroom. Malfoy bit his lip, clearly dying to fire off several dozen insults and erupt into laughter, and then passed over a towel.

Harry shoved Malfoy against the doorframe when they were leaving class, which was the first time Hermione could remember him touching Malfoy voluntarily.

"What's all this about, Malfoy?" he demanded. "What are you planning?"

"Get off," Malfoy snapped. "Are you having one of your psychotic episodes, Potter? Is your scar going off ag-" He paused, and breathed in. "I mean," he said tightly, "Why are you being so unreasonable? We all have to work together."

"I'll find out, you know," Harry said, and shoved him again.

"You do that," Malfoy told him, pushing him away and walking off.

Harry had stared after him, face intent.

"I'm not letting him get away with this," he said. "Whatever it is, I mean."

Hermione'd thought that he was spending too much time with Ron.

In the next Young Order meeting, Lupin had asked people to shake hands across the table in an effort to quell the hostility towards this Slytherin influx. Malfoy had glared over at Hermione, who he was sitting opposite, and said sharply,

"I don't see why I have to touch a Mud-"

Then he had shut his mouth, to the amazement of all, reached over and abruptly shaken Hermione's hand. He had sat back down quickly and begun writing on the parchment stretched out before him. He looked up several times when people said stupid things and Hermione had seen the palpable yearning to mock clamped down on, and the quill taken up to write ever more vigorously.

Hermione stood up at the end of the meeting and glanced over at the parchment in the moment before he could roll it up.

Over and over again, Draco Malfoy had written '*Get over yourself.*'

Harry, vibrating with anger, had interposed himself between Malfoy and the door.

"Look, what are you trying to do?" he exploded.

Malfoy's fingers had been white against his bag. "I'm trying to get through the door," he told Harry, obviously struggling to keep his voice even. "Do you think you could help me with that?"

"Oh, get over yourself, Malfoy," Harry snapped.

And Malfoy's face had slowly relaxed into its usual malice.

"Now, Potter, why should I do that?" he inquired lazily. "I think I'm *marvellous*."

Harry's face had relaxed into its familiar Malfoy-induced expression of disgust.

"Only you and your girlfriend are deluded enough to believe something like that."

"At least," Malfoy had pointed out in acid tones, "I have a girlfriend."

Pansy Parkinson had appeared, glowering, at his elbow. Hermione had noted with amusement that she was slightly taller than Malfoy. Of course, Hermione was taller than Harry and Malfoy as well.

"Oh, congratulations," Harry snapped.

Malfoy and Harry had been hissing at each other, like two small but ferociously angry cats. Harry grabbed Malfoy's elbow.

"I *knew* you hadn't changed!"

Malfoy'd raised an eyebrow. "Why try to improve on perfection? You're right. I still think exactly the way I always have. I'll never be one of Dumbledore's little lackeys," he said. "So breathe a righteous little sigh of relief and push off, Potter. Go sign some autographs for the swooning little Creeveys, why don't you, and do try not to touch me again. I'm sure your retinue of Weasleys has given you lice."

He had shoved Harry smartly away, and walked off with Pansy behind him.

Parvati had come up behind Harry and Hermione.

"He'd better pray he grows into that strut," she remarked. "Mind you, if he does..."

"Oh, be quiet and stop being ridiculous, Parvati," Harry had snapped, face twisting in revulsion.

After that Malfoy, while making an effort not to seriously disrupt the meetings, had no longer held himself back to the point where it looked as though his head would explode if he didn't taunt somebody.

That had happened, but back then Malfoy had been significantly worse at ignoring people. And then Harry had been bothered, even unduly so, and afterwards had shoved at Malfoy a good deal more... but he hadn't been upset.

And now Malfoy wasn't trying to behave better, but was actually being more unpleasant than he had been for a while. He was only acting as if he hardly noticed *Harry*, and for some reason Hermione found this a great deal more disturbing.

And Harry was now, clearly, in pain.

Hermione looked at him in concern throughout the Young Order meeting.

When Hannah Abbott came in late Malfoy drawled, "Please don't apologise, Abbott. It isn't as if these meetings are about anything important - although of course we all miss your unique contribution of squeaking at the alarming points."

Hermione had only been able to spare one glare for Malfoy in her anxiety. Harry looked as if he had hardly been sleeping. God, what made him think that malicious little idiot was worth all this?

Later Professor Lupin had quietly discussed the details of how much the Ministry had to disclose to Muggle governments, since a link between magic and Muggles had to be maintained.

"A link the Mudbloods keep open," Malfoy muttered.

"Mr Malfoy, that remark is entirely inappropriate," Lupin returned, as everyone in the room looked at Harry.

Harry said, "Draco, *don't*," in a low serious voice.

Malfoy had not looked at Harry, and said, "Malfoy," without a trace of expression or looking at him now.

At the end of the meeting, Harry had got up with a look of determination on his face that filled Hermione with dread and gone over to corner Malfoy before he reached the door.

"Malfoy, can I talk to you?" Terry Boot asked mildly, getting up with much less haste.

Malfoy pushed by Harry as if it was the most natural thing in the world not to bother about him, and answered, "Of course."

"Look," Harry said, "Draco - God, Malfoy if you want-"

"Do you mind, Potter? I'm talking," Malfoy responded calmly.

Hermione put her hand on Harry's arm and tried to draw him towards the door. Every muscle in his arm was taut.

"I hadn't been able to catch you before," Terry said, putting his books in his bag. "I just wanted to apologise-"

"You can talk," Malfoy interrupted with a smile, and reached out to take off Terry's reading glasses, "but you have to remove these. I promise I'm not text."

Terry smiled back. Hermione had always quite liked Terry Boot, and was horrified to see how she had misjudged him. At the very least, she had had too high an opinion of his taste in companionship.

"I have to say I'm sorry about not telling everyone about you at the other meeting," he said. "I panicked. I realise now that I put you in a terrible position. Can you forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive," Malfoy told him easily. "It wasn't some kind of plot to defame me. You only meant to help."

At this point Hermione finally succeeded in pulling Harry out of the door.

"Come on," she said, "Ron's waiting for us in the common room-"

"I - you go ahead," Harry answered, his voice dark with unhappiness. "I just need to - clear my head. I'm going to go out and practise loops. The Cup Final's coming up, after all."

His mouth twisted, and he walked off quickly.

Hermione cradled her books to her chest, and made her way back to the common room. She was thinking about how indescribably strange it was to see Malfoy ignore Harry, and yet he had tried it once before.

She remembered him writing '*Get over yourself*.' The only reason Draco Malfoy, of all people, would have tried to control his own overweeningly arrogant behaviour was if he had a serious objective to attain. If he felt he absolutely had to succeed.

He was an absolutely vile person, and he was hurting Harry now, but as she remembered back then, she could only think of one reason for the effort he had made. If he actually cared about the Young Order and the war, then...

She went into the common room, and took a chair at the table where Ron was sitting.

"Ron," she said slowly, "I'm starting to think Draco Malfoy isn't the spy."

She expected one of their fights, but Ron looked seriously up from his homework.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "The fight with Harry - I mean, I hate him, but if he was really trying to worm something out of Harry why would he fight with him?" He paused, and set his mouth. "It doesn't make any sense. What do you think we should do?"

Hermione leaned in to him, ready to cry with relief. Ron could be so difficult, and over and over again they would be frustrated with each other, but he had never let her down once when she really needed him.

She rested her hand on his shoulder, and almost said, "I love you," but instead said, "We need more parchment."

It was later when Harry returned, looking even more exhausted.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he came in. Ron looked up from the parchment Hermione was writing on.

"We're making a list of possible suspects for the spy," he said.

Harry's face was tight. "I thought you'd made up your mind on that subject."

"We're reconsidering," Hermione explained. "Do you - want to help?"

She hesitated because of the look on Harry's face, but Harry was nothing if not determined.

"Yeah," he said. "Give me that list."

*

When Harry looked back on pain, with the distant feeling one got at the cusp of sleep, events stood out.

Draco's face when he had said 'Mudblood' again in the Young Order of the Phoenix meeting. Everybody had turned to look at Harry... and Harry had been silent, staring at the only countenance not turned to his, feeling a completely inappropriate pang of desire.

He already felt as if he was going mad, and then *this* had to be added to the mix. The Slytherin-Gryffindor match, which would decide the House Cup.

It had been the same in third, fifth and sixth year. Gryffindor and Slytherin, battling for the Cup, locked in first place with the eternally feuding Seekers locked in combat.

It was different this year, for both of them.

Draco seemed even more focused. When they were standing in front of each other at the match, his eyes were narrowed down into nothing but steel and hate.

As Quidditch captains, they had been forced to shake hands.

It was the first skin on skin contact they had had since the... since that day on the lake.

And the cool bite of Draco's unfriendly grip made Harry's head spin out of control.

The furious strength of that grasp made him think of tight crazed clutchings, being alone together, pressed up against the Quidditch bleachers. That other Draco's face was heated and his soft hair was everywhere, even between Harry's lips as he kissed his neck, tasting sweat and skin and...

Draco yanked his hand away from Harry's as fast as possible. Harry was left blinking, staring at this icy cold face with its perfectly arranged hair as if he did not recognise it.

He struggled against insane urges and the bleak bereft feeling he had, and tried to leave emotion behind him as he kicked off. For a moment it felt as if he had succeeded - he was buoyed up in the air, hair and robes whipping in the wind and all he felt was that normal hot rush of exultation.

It would be all right. He had had a crush on Cho Chang and it had never affected him. It was always like the first time he had ever flown...

When Draco had taunted him with Neville's Remembrall, and seeing the shock in Malfoy's eyes had been such satisfaction, and this was *nothing* like Cho Chang because she had never been his enemy and had never been his friend and never been anything real to him, and he had never really cared about her at all.

He needed it to be like it had been before. In either of the before.

Last Quidditch match he had been boiling over with fury, and Malfoy had watched him with narrowed eyes, and at every break to discuss a foul he had gone and checked the rulebook. Harry remembered hating every molecule of Malfoy's body at about the third time Malfoy had chucked down his broomstick and gone striding over to the bleachers. Malfoy had sat down, flipped open the rulebook, glanced venomously over at Harry through his falling hair, deliberately licked the nib of his pencil and crossed out yet another rule.

And Harry's hands had clenched on the broom just as they were clenching now as he realised he knew exactly how Draco flew. It was so calculated, he put so much into getting it exactly right, and it looked smooth as instinct but Harry knew from the pauses before kicking off and after hovering that it wasn't. He had watched for that, to feel the little thrill of triumph.

It wasn't so strange, for him to stare greedily at Draco Malfoy.

Not that he'd ever thought about it before, *of course not*, not when he felt guilty about thinking about that now. It wasn't about that.

It was random that memories were imprinted on his brain, like those long linked fingers or the sweep of a Quidditch robe to show a thigh curved tense over the stick.

A body impacted heavily against Harry's, and shock almost sent him tumbling out of the air. He banked sharply to the left, broomstick cutting into the path of the other player, and of course Harry knew who it was before he glanced over.

Draco was a blur of speed and wind-wild hair for a moment before his stick connected with Harry's and was jarred still. Then his face came into focused, flushed with exertion and strained by concentration and absolutely coldly furious.

He flung his head back and fixed Harry with a chilly glare.

"Don't you dare throw this away, Potter."

It took a moment for Harry to absorb what Draco was saying, because there was a sheen of perspiration on his bare white throat and warm beads of sweat glistened on the skin above his upper lip, rolling down slowly and trembling on the curved line of that mouth.

Then he concentrated on his eyes and felt the beginnings of something like outrage reflected there.

"Throw the *game*?" he snapped. "Have a high opinion of yourself, don't you, Malfoy? I've never thrown a game in my life."

"Good," said Draco. "Keep it that way."

"Oh, go to hell," Harry snarled, banking right and speeding downward. In the corner of his eye he saw Draco's broomstick dip and hurtle to follow Harry.

There was no Snitch in sight. Harry just had the vague idea that he could help some of the players the Slytherins were targeting.

Last match Malfoy had knocked Ginny out of the sky, and Harry had only just been able to catch her. Harry vividly remembered the clutch of her hands around his neck, and the mocking glance Malfoy had tossed him as he argued with Madam Hooch that Gryffindor certainly shouldn't get a penalty shoot when all he'd been doing was fulfilling one of Weasley's little prepubescent fantasies.

This match, though... everything seemed quiet. The Slytherins were ahead on points because they were making little Natalie nervous and tricking Dean with feints, left when they were going right and vice versa, but they weren't actually - they weren't cheating.

They weren't cheating.

The Slytherins *always* cheated in Gryffindor games. Since Draco had taken over in fifth year, they cheated far less with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Just like with his own flying, Draco liked to make it look easy, liked to show off and make sure it was clear that he could win without effort. He cheated when he had to, but it was rare... unless Slytherin were up against Gryffindor, when the cheating was redoubled and savage and drove Harry utterly insane.

Now it was the last Slytherin-Gryffindor match, the last they would ever play against each other, and everything was different and it was even more important. And Draco was too proud and angry to cheat.

For a sinking minute Harry thought about that, the ferocious obnoxious haughtiness of him, and he did feel tempted to throw the game.

But he knew Draco better than Draco thought he did, and he wasn't the kind of person who betrayed others, no matter what Draco thought. And he had never thrown a game in his life.

He did a swooping circle around the pitch, eyes searching and searching, and then he saw a glint of gold, high up in the sky.

Draco was far above him, far closer to it. He kicked the broom straight up, tearing vertically through the air with the wind sucking at his cheeks, and then Draco saw him and he was speeding towards it, *don't look at him don't look at him*, and all Harry could see was the Snitch and the other player was going to reach it first because his broom simply could not rise fast enough. So he stood up on his broom, swaying violently, and heard the scream of the crowd below as he caught the Snitch in his fist.

Draco's broom slammed to a stop beside Harry's, as if he were a bird who had hit a window.

The blank look on his face made Harry realise what a slap in the face it must have been to see Harry win with something Draco had taught him, back when they were friends.

It had just been instinct to win, in whichever way he could. And since he knew how to do it...

Draco's pale eyes were intent and unforgiving.

"At least you didn't toss it," he said.

And they were more alike in the end than anyone could ever have dreamed.

"Look," Harry said in desperation, reaching out with the hand that didn't hold the Snitch, "Please-"

Draco did not even glance over at him, just veered left and down, sharply removing himself from the sky.

Harry swooped down until he reached the ground, slowly touching down into the cheering mass of people and hugging Ron in a leap of exultation that fell too fast, and accepting yet another Cup he no longer wanted.

*

Eventually Harry thought it would probably be safe to go have a shower. Ron had already gone when Hermione wrinkled her nose and refused to hug him.

Harry had already been hugged by Natalie, Ginny, Ron, Dean and - horrifyingly enough - Professor McGonagall. He was all ready for a nice, soothing shower.

"Potter, could I have a word with you?" asked Professor McGonagall.

Typical.

Harry nodded and gently disengaged himself from Ginny, who was talking brightly about his catch.

Professor McGonagall had become slightly ruffled in the melée that had occurred when everyone rushed Harry, and her hat was still askew. Harry's irritation subsided when he saw the streaks of silver in her black hair.

Seven years ago, all of her hair had been black as a crow's. Now the grey had almost consumed it.

She still had a commanding stride, though, and Harry had to lengthen his to keep up. He thought that was impressive for an elderly woman.

They passed the Slytherin stands on their way out of the Quidditch pitch. Draco, Zabini and Pansy were all sitting on Draco's Quidditch robe, spread out on the grass beside the stands. Harry turned his face away from Draco, trying not to stare.

Once they were out of earshot, and walking back up to the school, Professor McGonagall spoke and effectively captured his attention.

"Miss Granger tells me that you have been sleeping badly."

"I..." Harry said, and what he wanted to say was *How* and *why* and *It's none of your business*, but Ron told Hermione everything, Hermione had been giving Professor McGonagall bulletins about other students ever since she became Head Girl and he wasn't stupid enough to say anything like that to Professor McGonagall. Instead he said, lamely, "It's nothing."

"Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a voice sharp with exasperation, then stopped and softened her tone slightly. "You know what Professor Dumbledore told you about your dreams. The nightmares come for the same reason your scar hurts - if You-Know-Who is

close or feeling especially murderous. Your dreams are warnings, and you cannot afford to ignore them."

Harry looked at her and tried desperately to frame 'Actually, my recent dreams are more along the lines of sexual fantasies, and thus do not involve Voldemort' into any sort of sentence he could utter in front of Professor McGonagall.

"I really think-" he began, and stopped himself from adding 'Draco Malfoy taking his clothes off probably isn't in any kind of evil plan.'

He glanced at his broom, and wondered whether he could just beat himself into unconsciousness with it.

"Potter, I know it must be difficult for you to judge what is important," McGonagall told him, not without sympathy. "That's why we had a Somnasieve brought in."

"Um. Professor, what's a Somnasieve?"

They reached the top of the hill, and McGonagall began to climb the steps.

"Come along, Potter," she said briskly. "I'll show you."

*

Professor McGonagall's office had been moved to the dungeons during sixth year. She and Snape had been doing research together Transfiguring suicide potions for soldiers into innocuous-looking badges that would turn back in times of need.

It was yet another stupid unnecessary pang when they passed Snape's empty office, and Harry remembered the desolate look on Draco's face when he said Snape's name.

McGonagall's office was as neat and tidy as Harry remembered from a couple of visits, a large desk with docketed stacks of paper dominating the room. The only personal touch was a small, shabby cat basket in one corner.

It hadn't changed at all except for the shallow stone basin in the centre of the floor, which was inscribed with runes and looked, aside from the absence of any silvery contents, to all appearances exactly like a Pensieve.

"Pensieves and Somnasieves in the wizarding world filter the contents of the human mind, and keep the intended residue," McGonagall said, looking happier now she had a chance to teach. Harry suppressed the urge, which he suspected Hermione would have found irresistible, to go find some parchment and start taking notes. "The Pensieve does this with thoughts. The Somnasieve does it with dreams. What did Professor Dumbledore tell you about Pensieves, exactly?"

Harry tried to remember.

"That it's... easier to spot patterns and links with the excess thoughts put in the Pensieve," he said slowly.

If his dreams being recorded would help with the war, he had to do it.

He wasn't ready to deal with this himself. He didn't know if he was ever going to be ready to let Professor McGonagall deal with it.

That couldn't matter.

"This Somnasieve is specially calibrated to draw out dreams locked in your subconscious, which your conscious mind has forgotten," McGonagall went on precisely. "It is also designed to draw out dreams which come to you from an outside source, rather than the dreams your own mind manufactures."

The relief was so great Harry could only stare.

"What?"

"It's an unusual design," McGonagall continued, and Harry thought he saw now that the runes on this stone basin were different and more complex than those on Dumbledore's Pensieve. "It comes by special order from the Ministry, and with several scrolls' worth of instructions from young Percy Weasley. I think it will siphon off only the dreams sent by You-Know-Who, which will save time and also be significantly less embarrassing for you."

Harry's head jerked up. Professor McGonagall was just ever so slightly pink, but smiling wryly.

"I was young once too, Potter," she informed him severely.

Harry's first impulse was to deny everything and demand whether she thought he had lewd dreams all over the place - which he *didn't* - and then he visualised the words he was about to say, which would include 'Draco Malfoy,' 'fairly recent' and 'physically improbable.'

"Um, I doubt you were a teenage boy, Professor," he said instead, and she smiled just a bit more.

Harry walked forward, touched his forehead with his wand and then poked his wand into the basin.

He had wondered, after seeing Dumbledore do it, how it felt. He had thought he might see thoughts - dreams, now - rewound in his mind and then played again in the Sieve, like a video recorder.

Instead, it was slightly like a wound administered under anaesthesia must be. A slice into himself that was observed rather than felt, and then the flow of... something, a secondary silvery and more elusive kind of blood. He stood there and time seemed to stretch, viscous as the contents pouring into the Sieve.

And then he opened his eyes, which seemed to have fallen shut.

Soft light was rising from the Sieve, a pale shimmer hanging over the silver surface of it. Professor McGonagall was smiling approbation over the shimmer.

"Well then, Potter," she said. "Let's see. If it is working correctly, it should begin with your most recent warning dream."

She lifted her wand and put it into the Somnasieve.

Harry watched and saw the contents of the Somnasieve go transparent. The image of a lake briefly appeared, and then an image of a maze was superimposed on it.

And then there was Draco's pale face, slightly blurred but coming into ever clearer focus until only the ends of his hair still looked liquid, as if he was underwater. He prowled forward, Snape's robes slipping down off one collarbone, and Harry's image in the Somnasieve backed up against the wall.

Harry felt the simultaneous urges to yowl 'But you promised!' to Professor McGonagall, and to hide his face in his hands and proceed to die of embarrassment.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall. "Do you ever get a sense of menace from Draco Malfoy?"

"No-" Harry stopped, and added as forcefully as he could, "Not for years."

McGonagall only nodded, and kept staring into the Somnasieve. He watched her face and saw her expression subtly alter once, but looked back at the images and could not guess what had affected her.

Next was a small shred of violence Harry hadn't even remembered, just a stranger's face and a scream. Harry felt the line of his mouth go grim.

And then - the lake at night. That dream the night after Seamus had disappeared. Harry was swimming, and he saw his bare shoulders and thought edgily, *Was I actually wearing anything?*

Professor McGonagall was one of the last people in the world he wanted to see him naked, next to Moaning Myrtle, and that ship had already sailed.

Boats, and Ron and Hermione and then Draco again but Professor McGonagall couldn't think that meant anything, Hermione was in both dreams too. Draco swimming and *Oh my God, was Draco actually wearing anything?*

"Are you all right, Potter?"

"Fine," Harry said faintly.

He had to start paying more attention to his subconscious.

Looking up after that dream, he saw that Professor McGonagall had definitely gone paler.

"What did you-"

"Hush," McGonagall said sternly, leaning forward.

There was a long stream of violent fragments of dreams, most of which Harry had not even remembered. A few had lingered, had lain by him coldly in his bed at Privet Drive or in the dormitory but always alone, but he had had no idea there had been so many.

He wondered, with a chill, what kind of effect these dark bloody images had on a mind soaked with them.

He didn't know how long he could stand this.

"How far does it go back?" he asked, voice determinedly steady.

"Since you and You-Know-Who's agent, Quirrell, entered the school in your first year," Professor McGonagall returned quietly.

Harry shuddered and kept watching.

There was the one in fourth year, where an owl had carried him to Voldemort's window and Voldemort had cast Cruciatius on Wormtail...

"An eagle owl," Professor McGongall said thoughtfully. "I know we have one in the Owlery. Do you know whose it is?"

"No," Harry lied instantly, and then paused for a frustrated moment. "I mean - Draco Malfoy's, but-"

Professor McGonagall waved him quiet.

It doesn't mean anything, Harry told himself rebelliously. Obviously all these warnings are mixed up with random dream images. I must have noticed Draco's owl at breakfast that day or something.

Since they were back at fourth year, he was vaguely reassured by the fact that lustful thoughts were unlikely to spring forth and appal Professor McGonagall.

He kept doggedly watching, trying to steel himself against the screams. It was odd whenever he himself appeared in the Somnasieve, progressively younger and younger until at last he was a first year with astonishingly knobby knees, fighting with the Sorting Hat.

The turban was in the dream. A warning that had arrived seven years too late.

Harry looked up once that last dream was completed to share a rueful glance with Professor McGonagall, but she was looking even paler and more - scared than she had before.

"Professor, what is it?" he exclaimed.

She seemed to shake herself out of a reverie, her lips tight.

"It's nothing, Potter. I think I might have seen something... I'm not sure. It is no longer your concern."

"It's my mind!" Harry said.

Her voice was strained.

"Yes, and I thank you for your assistance, but you are still a student and I will place no further burden on you!"

Harry looked at her, speechless, but in the next minute McGonagall had composed herself.

"Could you carry a message to Professor Lupin for me?" she inquired. "I wish to see him as soon as possible."

Harry turned and walked quickly towards the door, then stopped at the threshold, struck with a sudden thought.

"Professor - it's already getting dark, and it's a full moon tonight."

He and Sirius had memorised the lunar calendar. And... Dumbledore was at the Ministry and would not be back until late. There was nobody to turn to.

"Should I go fetch Siri - um, Professor Bl-"

"No," Professor McGonagall answered. "No. It can wait until morning. I - thank you, Potter, that will be all."

She was still visibly shaken. While Harry was hesitating in the doorway she walked over to her desk and leaned against it, pushing her hat off. It slid off and crumpled on the desk, and he saw the grey and the pins in her hair.

"When Miss Granger was looking through the books," she murmured, and stopped. She looked up and said sharply, "I said that will be all, Potter."

Harry hesitated another moment, and her face softened.

"If you ever need to talk, Potter," she said, a little stiffly, "I realise your godfather is available - but I am your head of house, after all."

Harry didn't feel as if he could do anything but try to reassure her with a quick, forced smile.

"Yes, Professor," he said, and left.

He walked wearily down the corridor, making for the entrance from the dungeons into the Great Hall. He felt that old ferocious hatred twisting in his stomach, like curling darkness and claws. Voldemort caused all this, caused all that pain and sent it to me...

He looked up, and was standing by the wall leading to the Slytherin rooms. Even his hatred felt tired.

He didn't - he didn't have anything worked out, and he didn't want anything new, he just... He wanted to see Draco, to have that gift of understanding offered in an easy voice and not meant to be comfort. He was so tired, and he was aching for something that felt right.

Harry lifted his hand and pounded on the wall.

He pounded once or twice more, even after it became clear that nobody was going to answer. Then he realised that there were two younger Slytherins standing beside him, and regarding him stonily.

"Well?" he snapped. "Why don't you say the password and get in, then?"

They continued obdurately silent. He let his hand fall.

"Fine," he told them. "But you can tell him I'm coming back."

He stormed off, and there was nothing in the world but that black hatred, and being utterly alone with it.

*

Hermione didn't know exactly what had happened with Malfoy, but she could see what it had done to Harry.

She could see what it had done to Harry, it wasn't *difficult*... the difficult part was knowing what to do. Because she loved him as she had always loved him, but he didn't come to her with his problems any more, and she didn't know how to reach out and reclaim that old trust, let alone help him.

And it was a heartbreaking thing about friendship, that even when she knew she was going to blunder... she didn't know how not to try.

Harry had come back from his talk with Professor McGonagall and refused to talk all evening. He was sitting in front of the fire with his legs stretched out in front of him, head bowed over *Flying with the Cannons*. His attitude towards that book seemed to have become that of an addict to his drug.

She waited until the common room was empty for a time, and then reached out and touched his knee.

"Harry."

He looked up, green eyes shadowed. "What is it you want to say, Hermione?" he asked in a peculiarly neutral tone. "You've been watching me since I came back."

You're hurting, and I'm desperately worried about you, but I can't reach out to you because I don't understand and reaching out will only hurt you more.

She looked down into her lap, and hoped that she had caught him at a time when he was tired enough to be honest with that painful openness which might help him.

"You're not... happy, Harry."

He was quiet for a minute, and then he said, "No."

The admission was enough to break her.

"Harry..." she said, and she was horrified when her voice seemed ragged and on the point of tears. "Can't you just *tell* me, I'll understand, I swear - can't you just tell me what you... I'm asking you not to shut me out. If you'll just tell me - what you want-"

He glanced up at her, affection and pain and distance in his eyes.

Slowly, he said, "I want him back."

"Come on, Harry - just think of all those years when you'd have been glad to be rid of him-"

Her scared, uneasy laugh was cut off by the look in his eyes, a look as if he'd been wounded and the wound was still open and bleeding.

"No," he said. "You don't understand."

She looked speechlessly into his face. *I know I don't*, she thought. *I know, and don't you think that hurts worse than anything, that in these terrifying times I can't even be sure things will be right between us...*

"We weren't friends when I found him at the-" Harry swallowed. "At the bottom of the lake."

"But that was a..." Hermione's voice almost failed her, and she heard the next word pass her lips as if she was afraid of it. "Mistake?"

"No," Harry said again.

She stared at him imploringly, as if she could make him change his mind. He was looking broodingly into the flames.

"I never had anyone before Hogwarts," he told her, and his voice seemed almost still. "And then I came here, and I met you and Ron, and - it was you and me and Ron. Then it was you and Ron so much that there didn't seem to be much of a place for me. But I met him at Hogwarts too, and sometimes when we were fighting - I didn't *realise*, it was just a constant, I didn't think about it but sometimes... it was just me and him."

He clenched his jaw.

Hermione clenched her hands around each other until the bones creaked. She hadn't thought about it, hadn't thought about Harry's life before and how much simple undivided attention could mean to him. How much undivided attention could mean *from* him.

The fire that helped transform house rivalry into a house war in third year, spirals of violent tension centred upon their concentrated hostility. The way Harry, who did *not* gloat, had

pointed out Malfoy's horrified face in first year as if victory over him was what they had to celebrate, was the thing to be savoured.

The way, by fourth year, students ran when they went for their wands, fled down the hall just because of the looks on their faces and Hermione felt that she should have *known*...

"I miss that more than anything," Harry was saying in that belligerent tone boys use, staring in bewildered anger at their own pain. "I want him *back*. Any way at all. I can't stand being - this alone again."

Hermione bit her lips to keep from crying. "You're not alone," she said fiercely.

Harry looked at her again, a brief raw glance. "I didn't mean it like that," he said, but he didn't seem comforted.

Hermione bowed her head so he wouldn't have to see her fight off these shameful tears. She'd been so pleased, felt so utterly *smug*, thought that things could go back to normal now because Malfoy was just his enemy again. But things weren't back to normal, she understood now, Malfoy had never ignored him before, never not sought him out some way before and maybe things had never been normal. Now she understood and worse, now *Harry* understood, and it was tearing him apart.

"Harry, I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I have to go."

She jumped up and ran to the door, her movements oddly clumsy, knocking against the furniture as she went. She didn't even know where she was going until she was out of the Great Hall, hurtling down the steps to the dungeons.

She didn't know what she was going to do until she saw Malfoy himself, strolling down the corridor with his two thugs behind him. Then she - *still* didn't know what to do.

She was much more painfully conscious of it, though.

There he was, hateful as he'd always been, just as she always pictured him. Sneering and cold-eyed with those gorillas at his back, but maybe he wasn't the same, since now there was no venom in his eyes, no recognition of her as a target because she was Harry's friend but a simple impersonal contempt as if she were Neville and - *did that mean something?*

"Granger," he said coldly. "Are you *lost*?"

She hesitated and tried to analyse him. She didn't want to understand him, she wanted to hate him, but she couldn't do that - for Harry's sake.

But could someone who had ruthlessly cut himself from Harry's life care about anything she had to say? If someone was capable of that kind of cold dispassionate fury...

He couldn't care about Harry. She didn't believe it. She would never have hurt someone she cared about like this.

It was useless to try and get anything back for Harry.

"No," she replied, shooting him a single chilly glare. "I was looking for someone who isn't here."

Hermione turned on her heel and walked away, towards the entrance into the Great Hall. She was already up past time, it had been stupid to even come here, she didn't know what she had been thinking, and...

She heard a noise.

It was coming from a dark corridor to her left. It was probably just students messing around in Snape's office, she told herself, and she should go and discipline them, but even as she lifted her wand and said, "*Lumos*," she could hear the tiny quiver in her voice, and the pounding of her heart in her ears.

She should not have come here alone.

The light trembled as her hand did and she got a firmer grip on her wand, wishing with sudden passion for the everyday comfort of normal things and a simple Muggle torch and one of the plaster corridors at home. The light simply showed the narrow stretch of a stone corridor, massive grey blocks with nooks and crannies running along them where the faint light chased and gave up on shadows.

Then the light glimmered on something else, and for a second she had no idea what it was, but her heart was like a frantic creature running already.

It was the shine of light on fur, and she thought, *Just like when the Chamber of Secrets was opened, just like being twelve years old and terrified again.*

The wand went clattering out of her hand onto the floor with a short scream she couldn't believe she had made.

There were running footsteps at once, and she was whirled away from the sight by strong hands on her arms, spinning her around, and her throat hurt and someone was almost supporting her.

Pale eyes serious and intent beneath pale hair. *Malfoy*, she thought, trying to gather her panic-scattered thoughts together.

"Granger," he said, urgently. "Granger! What is it?"

"It's - it's a cat," she forced out, refusing to need support, refusing to crumple up entirely. "It's - Mrs Norris must have been Petrified, it's just like the Chamber of Secrets-"

Stop, she told herself. She would not panic.

One hand still keeping a firm hold on her arm, he lifted his wand and said, "*Lumos*," in a voice that shook slightly just as hers had before she had seen...

Crabbe and Goyle were behind him, both their faces masks of terror. Goyle was looking and his face relaxed just slightly, he moved forward and said,

"She's right. Just Mrs Norris-"

Hermione could not look around or she would - She could already see it all. Malfoy's jaw was tight, and when she held unashamedly onto his arm and he held back his arm was rigid.

He pushed words past the horror, the words she would not even think, as more footsteps came sounding fast and furious behind them.

"It's not Mrs Norris," he said. "And it hasn't been Petrified."

*

Harry never remembered it all clearly afterwards. Just walking, irritated that Ginny had insisted on accompanying him, and then walking faster because Hermione could be anywhere and he didn't want her asking him where he was going, and then hearing something that sounded like a scream and then *running*...

Ginny behind him, footsteps fast and light and faltering, and her first scream coming with the sound of someone falling heavily.

Harry saw it was Goyle, still backing away even though now he was on his hands and knees. And he felt a brief sense of ordinary incredulity when he saw Draco, with one arm almost around Hermione.

It all came in bits and pieces, trickling like the cold dread that went through him.

Crabbe's hand had closed tightly on Draco's shoulder, dwarfing it, and the hand that held Draco's lit wand was resting against Crabbe's in a gesture of protection. His face was white and scared, but he was keeping his voice steady when he said,

"It's not Mrs Norris. And it hasn't been Petrified."

There was a dead cat on the floor.

It might just be the dark and the constant fear and the memory of the Chamber that caused Goyle's whimper and the keening cry that Ginny was making behind him, but he saw Hermione's white face. He saw the still look in Draco's eyes, pretending to have strength to loan the others until he did have it.

They knew.

He felt Ginny's hands try to clutch him back, but he moved forward out of her reach. Draco's light was held steady behind him and he had to go on because nobody else would, and he thought *I can't do this* but he could. He had to.

He thought past the whirling terrors and thought back to a spell taught back a few months since, the words to make the spell Sirius and Lupin had used years ago in the Shrieking Shack easier...

Harry flung the words out in an almost-challenge at last, resounding against the dark close walls.

"In Veterem Revolveris Figuram."

There was a flash of blue-white light.

Professor McGonagall was lying dead on the floor.

Harry would not flinch, but he looked over at the others when Crabbe moaned with an almost desperate relief. Goyle was backing swiftly away.

Neither Draco nor Hermione would make a sound, but she had hidden her face in Draco's shoulder. Draco looked back at Harry, face young and naked in shock but eyes still steady.

Harry was able to look back after a minute. The pins of McGonagall's hair had fallen out and were glittering in the light, which fell directly upon her open eyes.

Ginny's scream was high and pure as fear, and it went on and on until everyone else came, and saw.

Chapter Fourteen: Shadows of Ourselves

People in the dark, they don't know what to do

I had a little lantern, oh but it got blown out too

I'm reaching out my hand. I hope you are too.

I just want to be in the dark with you.

Three days after Professor McGonagall's death, Dumbledore addressed the Young Order.

"There is no doubt left," he said. "There is an enemy in our midst, and he will not stop short of murder."

Everyone was sitting huddled around the table, the Slytherins slightly isolated as usual. Harry looked at all the pale, crumpled faces and felt that familiar rush of rage and desolation.

I can't let this go on. I won't.

"In the words of one of our Aurors-" Dumbledore almost smiled, but the attempt failed.

"Constant vigilance must be exercised. Minerva was loyal, strong and wary, and she was still taken unawares on her way back to the dungeons. We must be even more careful, and even more united to discover this enemy, and cast him out."

Most people were just gratefully soaking up his words. Hermione's face was pinched with desperate attention. Hannah Abbott was crying again, and Padma Patil was staring at Draco with accusation in her eyes.

"We have received a serious blow. I won't conceal that from you," said Dumbledore. "But none of you are to despair. I have every confidence that we can catch this murderer. I have every confidence in you all. I know that none of you will rest in a world where Minerva McGonagall's killer is walking free."

Except for her killer, who is one of us.

The Slytherins looked just as pale and shell-shocked as everyone else, but their faces as they listened to Dumbledore were impassive. Everyone else noticed that, too.

"If any one of you sees or suspects anything at all, my door is always open," Dumbledore continued, and leaned forward. "Anything at all. Rest assured, they will be believed."

He directed a comforting twinkle at Dennis Creevey, who was ashen and who had fainted when he heard about McGonagall. Then he left.

When Dumbledore had gone and it was only the Young Council left, Lupin suggested new safety precautions.

"Mr Malfoy's suggestion of forming into pairs to work on projects was excellent, but has clearly been compromised," he said. "I suggest new pairings, and discretion advanced to the point where nobody outside the pair has any idea of what they are working on. Since people seem to talk inside their houses, I would advise another safety precaution - each pairing should be an interhouse pairing."

"I'll take Granger."

Harry looked at Draco across the table. He had spoken immediately, and in a sharp voice, and he did not look back.

"Miss Granger," Lupin said mildly, "do you have any objection to being paired with Mr Malfoy?"

"No," Hermione answered in a quiet voice. Harry was startled, and Draco looked vaguely surprised at her ready agreement as well. Lupin nodded, as if that was all settled then.

"Any other volunteers?"

"I'll take Terry Boot," Blaise Zabini said, tilting his head back to give Terry an appraising look.

Terry rolled up his parchment. "I'd rather have Harry Potter, actually."

Harry was even more startled. He hardly knew Terry, and what he did know - *obsessed with books, smiles too much at Draco* - he did not particularly like.

Terry gave him a slight smile. "If that's okay, of course."

"Um, all right." He needed someone intelligent. He wanted to make a difference, and if Draco and Hermione were already taken - *oh, damn you, Draco* - Terry Boot would do. He was definitely not going anywhere near Blaise Zabini.

"I'll, er." Susan Bones blushed. "I'll take Blaise Zabini."

Zabini gave her a baleful look. "You wish."

Lupin nodded and paired them together. Hannah looked a little intimidated when paired with Padma, but she was probably cheered by the fact she was not with a Slytherin.

Harry looked around at the table and all the mis-matched pairs. What were any of them going to think of? What could they think of, to make it better?

Professor McGonagall was dead, and Harry did not have the first idea of how to avenge her. Some kind of study group with Terry Boot seemed so inadequate he could have screamed.

Once a lot of people had arrived on the scene that night, and Ron had taken Hermione very firmly from Draco, Harry had approached him. He'd just wanted to exchange a few words, a bit of comfort, something like a reconciliation to hold against all this. Someone to understand the rage that would frighten other people, someone to understand him.

Draco's mouth had tightened and he'd said, "I'm busy, Potter" in a strained voice.

He hadn't been able to talk to him since. They were both busy, talking to other people, comforting people and trying to organise panicked hordes of students. But he was dragging around a sick, heavy load of misery and anger and his Head of House was dead and it was all so unfair and Draco still wouldn't even talk to him. He wanted to take it out on somebody, but that wouldn't be fair either.

Harry took a deep breath, gave Hannah Abbott a small smile of encouragement and felt his heart beat too fast, almost painfully, when he caught Draco looking over at him.

"Want to meet in the library at six, Granger?" he inquired.

Hermione nodded. Harry looked away.

*

Hermione did not like doing things when she had serious doubts about their wisdom. She went into the library uncertain of what she was doing there, and fighting the urge to turn tail and run.

She really resented Malfoy choosing her sanctuary to meet in. She was supposed to be safe in the library! It was her place, always filled with the other serious students who never bothered her, and she came here to rest.

He probably knew that. Bastard!

But she had agreed to take him as her partner. She would have much preferred Padma Patil, who was just as intelligent and much less mean, but he had picked her, and coming from Malfoy that was almost a compliment. And then she had remembered holding onto him in terror, and him holding her. She had never believed Malfoy would do anything like that.

So she had succumbed to sentimentality, and now she was saddled with this blond bastard for the remainder of her last year.

Hermione held her head up high and walked towards the table where Malfoy sat, head bent over some parchment. She noticed he was using an eagle feather quill, which was sheer ostentatious display.

"Ah, Granger," he said with his nasty little smirk. "You took your time."

"I'm busy over in the tower," she replied shortly, and saw his expression change fractionally. She shut her mind away from thoughts of Professor McGonagall, choking off horror and fear, and concentrated on the wood grain of the table in front of her.

"Well, since we have to decide on our project I thought it would be sensible to start by discussing recent events and how to handle them," Draco said.

"All right."

Hermione was surprised and pleased at this methodical approach. She always liked her study partners to be good planners. She almost forgot herself enough to smile at Malfoy.

"I think first of all the Young Council, and possibly the whole Young Order, should view this Somnasieve Potter told the Young Order about, the one McGonagall put Potter's dreams into."

Hermione crushed the flash of pain at the mention of her name, and took a sharp, indignant breath. *Not in front of Malfoy. Don't lose control in front of Malfoy.*

"Certainly not! Those are Harry's private dreams. A whole lot of people have *no right* to see them-

Malfoy's voice was chilly. "Professor McGonagall might have been killed because she knew something. That something could be in those dreams, and so everyone has to see them and give us the best chance we can to find it. We have absolutely no time to consider anyone's personal feelings if we want to win this war."

"What about the fact that people have a right to privacy?" Hermione demanded, trying to keep her outraged voice down and finding it difficult.

"Oh, what about it?" Malfoy sneered. "Didn't Muggles invent peoples' rights? You want me to let someone get away with murder and kidnapping because of your Mudblood scruples?"

Hermione forced down her voice again. "I want you to watch your foul mouth," she told him coldly. "We're supposed to be partners."

Malfoy looked bored. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Granger. Sticks and stones-

"Might break your bones, Malfoy, if you're not careful."

Hermione winced on reflex, and before she could do anything, Malfoy had leaped up at the sound of that loud challenging voice and was staring into Harry's blazing eyes.

What were they both so *angry* about?

"We talked about that, Malfoy," Harry said rapidly, flushing with rage. "I told you it was petty and cruel, and you agreed. Just because we've fallen out doesn't mean that you have a license to stop using your brain - to stop acting like a decent person."

Hermione wanted to hide her face in despair, but kept watching. The lines of both their bodies were taut as bowstrings.

"I have no interest in acting like a decent person, you sanctimonious bastard," snapped Malfoy.

The glitter in Harry's eyes was something like relief.

"That's rubbish! You're just acting like this because you're revolting against everything we talked about, and it's just stupid! You always did cut off your own nose to spite your face, you always behave like a complete little snot-"

"You don't know anything about me!" Malfoy shouted. He calmed down quickly

in the space between two deep furious breaths, chest hitching, and then he spoke more softly. "What about the way you're acting? Didn't you know that these projects are secret? And yet there you were listening - I'd say that's the behaviour of a *spy*, myself-"

Madam Pince was hurrying towards them and already speaking sharply, but both of them were beyond hearing her.

"How dare you!" Harry roared, shoving Draco into a bookcase.

Students all around the library were staring, and Hermione could only bite down on her lip as Harry clenched his fist around Draco's shirt and leaned in, both their shoulders bunched in preparation for violence, hunched towards each other to block out the rest of the world.

"Why the hell did you have to insinuate something like that?" Harry ground out, eyes boring holes in Malfoy's face. "I know you don't believe it, I know that, why do you just have to lash out-"

"What the hell are you doing!"

"I'm only lashing out because you won't listen to me!" Harry snarled, and he kept snarling into Malfoy's face, and Malfoy pushed in further in order to sneer in Harry's face. "Why can't you stop being so awful, and-"

Malfoy reacted suddenly, shoving him viciously away.

"Why can't you leave me alone!" It was almost a scream.

"Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy, twenty points from both your houses!"

The boys finally noticed Madam Pince, but hardly seemed distracted. Harry looked as if he would have quite liked to break Malfoy's bones. Madam Pince actually had to grasp both their elbows in her hands, dragging them out of the library. While they were being swept in her wake, Malfoy's arm connected with Harry's and Malfoy jumped back as if he had been given an electric shock.

Hermione swept her parchment and quills haphazardly into her schoolbag and hurried after them, catching the tail end of Madam Pince's diatribe as she chucked them out of the library.

"Such behaviour! Never in my life-"

They were obviously beyond listening, just glaring at each other with concentrated, distilled fury until the door slammed behind Madam Pince.

Hermione flattened herself against the wall, pretending to be invisible.

"How do you think I feel," Harry said in a low voice, "with you saying those things, with you-"

"Well, how do you think I-" Malfoy stopped yelling. He stood there tensely for a moment, and then his mouth curled maliciously. "Just leave me alone," he said. "That's all I want. Granger and I actually care about doing work for the war."

"You-" Harry's hands curled at his sides. His face was full of sullen misery. "I care."

Malfoy broke away, wheeling around without another word and stalking down the corridor. Hermione glanced desperately at Harry, who was backing off from her with a look of fierce, private unhappiness, and then for reasons entirely unclear to herself ran after Malfoy.

He burst into a classroom and threw a chair at a wall. He stood in the middle of the room, still breathing harshly, and she hesitated in the doorway and wondered if he was unstable. She would definitely get a great deal of satisfaction from Stunning him.

Malfoy looked around at her, not seeming particularly surprised that she had followed him. She noticed his jaw was clenched, his teeth gritted, and she steeled herself for whatever was coming.

He shoved his hands into his pockets with unnecessary force.

"I apologise, Granger," he said through his teeth. "I am aware that I chose you to work with, and it is my responsibility not to let my attitude interfere with what we have to do."

Hermione stared.

"You're going to be polite to me? I don't know, Malfoy. Are you even capable of that?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, and almost grinned at her. It was very bizarre. "I wouldn't go as far as polite," he said. "I was thinking 'not intentionally and overtly offensive.'"

"I repeat, are you even capable of that?"

"I might end up being a very quiet partner."

Hermione realised that Malfoy was trying to convince her that he was in control of himself, which was a little much considering she had just seen him throwing furniture. She also realised that he was being halfway civil, and she hadn't thought of him as a bastard in over five minutes.

Something had to be done.

"Well, I'm glad Harry convinced you."

"Potter had nothing to do with it," Malfoy said curtly. "He can damn well stop bothering me."

Hermione closed her fingers around her wand. "He's bothering you because he wants to get your attention," she informed him. "You should know something about that."

You spoiled, sneering nuisance. Let's not pretend you didn't pester him for six years.

"All I want is to be left alone," Malfoy snapped. "And, don't have a coronary or anything, Granger, but in this particular case you are not in possession of all the facts!"

Hermione took another deep breath. That was true; she did not know exactly how things had happened. Malfoy, utterly unlikely though it seemed, could be entirely innocent. He was not acting like an someone whose cruel little plans had all gone perfectly.

"You're right. It's - none of my business."

Malfoy blinked. "Those aren't words I ever expected to hear from you, Granger."

Hermione chanced a smile. "Well, I never expected to hear 'I apologise' from you, Malfoy."

This was an almost civil conversation. It felt very strange.

"Well. As I said, I have to make it possible for us to work together. I can't be relentlessly nasty." Malfoy looked sulky, as if being condemned to polite behaviour was an enormous burden.

"Be a nice change for you," Hermione said briskly. "This is a truce, then?"

Malfoy looked up at her, eyes wide and startled. "Only until the end of the war. Then I kill you and all of your mixed-blood friends."

Hermione stared. Malfoy grinned.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," he said. "The look on your face is priceless."

"Malfoy! That isn't funny!"

The little twerp clearly cracked himself up. A smile was still playing around his lips when he exited the scene of his desk crime, and he was in a good enough humour to offer to take Hermione's bag as they went down the corridor.

"Thank you, I'm quite able to do it myself," Hermione said dryly.

"You do seem to carry bulging bags as a hobby, but I thought I might as well offer. Always the little gentleman, yours truly."

Hermione snorted. Malfoy looked injured. Natalie McDonald, passing by, gave them a startled look as they went by, and then gave Malfoy an appreciative look. Hermione was going to have to have a talk with that girl.

She thought that Malfoy's jeans attracted attention not because he was, objectively, attractive, but because he wore them as if he were doing something forbidden and daring.

She then realised that she had given actual consideration to the matter of Malfoy's jeans, and felt vaguely dirty.

"Look, Granger." Malfoy hesitated, which was rare enough in itself to make Hermione glance inquiringly up at him. He was frowning slightly, as if in thought. "I was wondering. Would you like to come to my room in a couple of nights? I'm-"

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Hermione asked in horror.

He smiled. All the blood rushed to Hermione's head as she realised that he was serious.

Bastard!

"I cannot believe the *nerve* of you, Malfoy," she snapped, and for the second time in her life she slapped him around the face.

Then she stalked back to Gryffindor Tower.

*

Harry walked around the lake, round and round with the wind lashing his face and misery in a tight knot under his ribs, and a strange feeling of relief easing the raging headache he had had for days. At least he had been able to relax for a while, been able to just let it *out* and not worry, and at least Draco had reacted. He hated it but he had felt alive, and if that was all they could have then he wanted more *now*.

This wasn't healthy.

He didn't want it. He didn't. He wanted things to be right again.

He really did not want to go back to Gryffindor Tower. He felt like he was going to break apart with frustration if he stayed there a moment longer. There was a hush hanging over the whole tower since McGonagall's death, and he kept finding people crying and trying to comfort them, kept seeing people looking to him for answers and reassurance and having none to offer. It made him want to break things. No, it made him want to break *Voldemort*, somehow crush him and make him pay for everything.

He had sat up talking to Neville all night last night. Earlier today in the common room Ginny had hurled herself at him and wept, and he had patted her shoulder, gently and awkwardly as he had spoken to Neville. He was no good at this, all he had ever been good at was facing down something that had to be faced down, he was trapped, he wanted to *act*, and he wanted to scream out his fury to Draco and for Draco to scream back at him that he was an idiot, and then he could finally rest, sit leaning against Draco and talking, and not feeling so responsible.

Harry kicked a rock violently into the lake, and saw the squid stir in protest under the murky surface of the water.

Harry glared at it. "Sod you, too," he muttered, before he realised that he was talking to a squid and might be going irredeemably insane.

He glanced over at the looming lump of stone that was Hogwarts and then at the small light in the window of Hagrid's house. He left the lake and went towards it.

He hadn't been to see Hagrid for ages. He felt his spirits lighten as he approached the door. Hagrid wouldn't expect anything from him, Hagrid had been his first friend in the world-

Hagrid opened the door a chink, looking very embarrassed.

"Ah... hello, Harry," he said in a worried sort of way.

Harry squinted up at him. "Um - hi? Can I come in?"

"Well, o'course," Hagrid replied, opening the door an inch further. "It's just tha' - well, it's a bit of a bad time, don' you know..."

The awful idea that he might have interrupted Hagrid and Madame Maxime flashed on Harry and blinded his mind's eye.

"It's jus' tha' young Malfoy is here," Hagrid finished awkwardly.

"Oh," said Harry.

"An' I know you two have had another fight, so I thought you mightn' wan' ter see him..."

Another fight, because of course all Harry and Draco did was fight, and nobody could have expected a friendship to last, and that was all there was to it. Hagrid's face was still worried and well-meaning, and Harry forced down another wave of desolation.

"No," he said with an effort. "I mean - I do want to see him, it's all right-"

"Ah well," Hagrid beamed. "Tha's good, then, i'n't it?"

He flung the door wide open and Harry followed him into the sitting room, where a fire burned brightly. Madame Maxime was reading a book with fanged horses on the front, the baby was sitting on the hearthrug waving what appeared to be a fanged rattle and the window was wide open, the curtain billowing in the wind.

Draco was gone.

"Oh, it's 'Arry," Madame Maxime said with a faint, uncertain smile. "I vondered vat inspired Draco to 'is - precipitous exit. 'E generally 'as such good manners, for an Eenglish boy."

"He's been comin' here a fair bit," Hagrid told Harry. "He likes playin' with the baby and havin' a bit of a chat wi' Olympe. I think things are gettin' a bit on top of him, ter be honest."

Him and the rest of the world, Harry thought. He found the concern in Hagrid's voice touching and bitterly ironic, and God, Draco was unhappy and he couldn't even talk to him.

"Oh," he said again, helplessly.

Hagrid glanced over at him, beetle-black eyes troubled.

"I've talked to him a bit, since you brought him round a couple o'times. He's a not a bad lad, in his way," he said. "I think we've all been a bit hard on him. This's no time ter be arguin', Harry. Couldn' you make up with him?"

Harry stared at the carpet, and hated every fibre of it. He had been fairly carpet neutral up to this point in time.

"I wish I could," he admitted finally, his voice sullen in his own ears. "He won't talk to me."

*

Ginny hugged her knees, pressing her face against the window. She had watched Harry walking around the lake until darkness fell, but now she could not make out if he was still there. She wondered what he was planning.

She wished he would come back. She thought she would sleep better if he was back in the tower. She kept having nightmares of that night, of darkness and terror and Hermione almost collapsed and even Harry helpless and Professor McGonagall... She kept waking up screaming. It was common enough in the dormitories to wake up screaming these days, so nobody minded much, but Ginny minded. She wanted to be better. She wanted to feel safe.

She had felt safe earlier, when she had broken down and Harry had held her. He wasn't scared like everybody else.

"Ginny, it's pitch black out there. Give it up."

Ginny glanced over at Dean, standing by her window seat with a concerned look on his face. She hugged her knees tighter.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're not going to be able to see Harry," Dean said gently, sitting down beside her.

"I was just-" Ginny stopped, and looked up into Dean's face for some wordless comfort. He had always offered her that before, but he looked distant now, in pain and not reliable at all.

"I know," he told her. "I understand. It's only that - Ginny, I've been trying to understand for months now. I'm getting so tired."

He spoke quietly, in a weary undemanding sort of way, and Ginny did not understand why her throat seized up. She stared at him, and tried to speak past the sudden lump.

"I don't know what you mean."

Her voice sounded cold, and small. She felt cold.

"You were all right before all this started happening. You were - better than all right. You were beautiful, and so alive, and - we were together, and it was right."

Dean stared at the floor when he spoke. Ginny looked up at him, stricken.

"Oh, Dean... but I explained, it's Harry, it has to be Harry..."

"Oh God damn it!" said Dean, so loudly Ginny jumped. "It doesn't have to be Harry! It wasn't Harry before people started being taken from Hogwarts! It was you and me, and I know you're scared and you want to be rescued, but how do you think watching this makes me feel? How do you think I feel without - Ginny, I've been waiting and waiting and I'm scared, too!"

Ginny swallowed. He was scared and Ginny was scared, and she could have taken anything outside and wanted to fight the good fight but this... this slow sapping of their numbers, this constant fear, this violation of their only safe place... She felt as lost and helpless as she had when she was a child whose mind was being invaded. She could not fight something she knew nothing about, but Harry could swoop in and defeat an enemy Ginny had not even been able to recognise. Harry was the hero, Harry was not scared, Harry would save her, and it was Harry she loved.

"I'm sorry," she said in a trembling voice, "but it doesn't change anything."

Professor McGonagall had been *murdered*.

Dean's face made Ginny want to cry. "You were so bright and brave," he said, his voice low and dull. "I always wanted to draw you. You made me laugh and we held each other up-"

"I can't hold anyone else up!" Ginny's voice was almost a scream.

The shadows were closing in around her. Waking in dark corridors with blood on her hands and messages written on the walls, and now another corridor with another cat in it who was...

"I'm sorry," Dean told her, and he regained his usual quiet with an effort. "I didn't mean to - It's just all so-" He stopped. "I love you," he said. "You know that."

He stood up.

"I won't bother you again."

Ginny looked after him as he went with speechless misery. The other people were looking over at her curiously, but most of them were gathered around the fire talking in fearful whispers and did not come over to her. Parvati Patil was walking around the room, looking uncertain about something.

Ginny tried to cry unobtrusively. She felt as if she was drowning, they were all drowning, and she longed more than anything for Harry to come and save everyone.

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Harry did not stay long at Hagrid's. Madame Maxime could not stop tiptoeing around the subject of Professor McGonagall, and the whole visit was a horrible failure.

He still felt wretched and in need of comfort and terrified that he would snap at people if he went back to the tower, though, so he went up to Sirius' rooms. Lupin had patiently explained to both of them that it would be an infraction of teacher and student relations for Harry ever to visit him, and so Sirius had always told Harry to do it discreetly.

They might be less close than Harry had hoped, but he knew he could rely on Sirius.

He looked up when Harry came in, and his mouth moved out of its usual lines of cynical endurance, and into a warm smile.

"Harry," he said. "I was hoping you'd drop by. How are you?"

Harry looked at him for a minute, lost in sick unhappiness, and Sirius got up from his desk at once.

"Stupid question," he said shortly. "Come on, come sit by the fire, I'll make you a cup of tea." He paused. "I could put something stronger in it?"

Harry looked up, startled, from the chair where Sirius had almost forcibly deposited him. Then he grinned faintly. "OK."

"Great," Sirius told him, and grinned his slightly rakish grin back, going for a cupboard standing against the wall. "Don't tell Remus," he added sternly. "He'd have kittens. And then he'd have my head."

"Might be worth it to see a werewolf having kittens," Harry answered. Sirius actually laughed. Harry hadn't heard anyone laugh in days.

He came back with a bottle of Ogden's Firewhiskey, a glass, a cup and a kettle. He put the kettle on the fire. Sirius was still a little awkward with household routine, moving as if doing such normal things was odd, but Harry liked it that he tried. He sat back with a sigh, and then looked at Harry with attentive black eyes.

"I don't know if this will help," he said abruptly, "but Dumbledore just told me that I'm going to be the new Head of Gryffindor."

"You!" Harry blinked. "What about Lupin?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "He turned it down. He was wittering on about how he needed to retain a neutral position for the Young Order. If you ask me, the whole thing is ridiculous. You're almost out of school. You and Ron and Hermione should be allowed to be part of the *real* Order." He made a mock grimace. "Anyway, what's so wrong with me?"

"Nothing," Harry said quickly. "I was just surprised. I - didn't want to think about someone replacing..."

I don't want to say her name. He looked down at the stone floor, and then up again as Sirius reached over and closed his hand around Harry's shoulder. He did it sympathetically, but Harry thought he looked disappointed. He'd wanted Harry to be thrilled it was him.

"Sorry," he told him. "It's great. Really."

Sirius brightened, and for a moment the lines left by Azkaban softened. Sitting in the firelight, Harry could see how Sirius must have looked when he was young and happy, before Voldemort had destroyed all that too.

"At least now there's a silver lining to Snape disappearing," he remarked. "I won't have to discuss house protocol with the slimy git."

The kettle boiled, and Sirius set about making Harry's cup of tea. Harry watched him do it.

"Sirius," he said quietly. "The Slytherins *need* Snape. He has to come back."

Sirius began to pour in the Firewhiskey. "Yes, well, I hope he does. I'm just pointing out the silver lining, like I said. You can't get on with that man."

As Harry recalled, Sirius never made that much of an effort - but it probably wouldn't have mattered if he had. Snape *was* impossible, he reminded himself. Just because Draco...

"You look down in the dumps, Harry," Sirius commented, handing Harry his cup. "I mean - I know that's natural, and there's not much I can do about it. But is there something else wrong I can help you with? Girl trouble?" He gave Harry another hopeful grin. "I can give you a *lot* of advice about that."

"Er, no." Harry took a hasty sip of his tea. It burned as it went down. "Not girl trouble. Definitely not."

Sirius looked disappointed again. "It beats me why the girls aren't swarming over you," he said, in a disastrous attempt to be cheer Harry up. "When James and I were young-" He paused, pouring himself a generous glass of Firewhiskey, and seemed to visualise the wrath of Lupin. "We were quite popular," he concluded circumspectly, and then smiled a brilliant and slightly wicked smile. "And you don't have any competition like me, do you? So shouldn't you be the school heartthrob or something?"

"I'm not the school heartthrob," Harry mumbled, aware that he had gone red. *Please, please, Sirius, stop talking about women.*

Sirius looked offended, as if someone was villainously stealing the title from his godson. "Who d'you think is, then?"

"I don't know..." Harry wished the ground was hungry and could be persuaded to swallow him up. "Draco Malfoy," he muttered. "Um. Maybe."

Sirius choked on his drink.

"*Draco Malfoy?*" he exclaimed, coughing. "That pasty, *pointy* boy? Snape's little disciple?"

Harry took another long drink, and said rebelliously into his tea, "He's not that pointy."

"The anaemic little prat who never stops mouthing off and who spends half his Hogsmeade time at Robe Wardrobe? Is *that* what girls think is attractive?"

You'd have to ask them. But I seem to think so. Harry decided there might be too much alcohol in his tea, and compromised on a "Yeah." After all, girls like Parvati were always hanging around Draco.

"Girls don't like boys who fuss over their hair too much," Sirius told him, still looking appalled. "Your mother told me that herself."

Harry took that sentence and filed it away in his memory. He'd been collecting little bits and pieces of his parents since Sirius and Lupin came in sixth year, even though Lupin confessing that his father had sometimes been cruel had made the depression grow even heavier. If he didn't even have his father to aspire to...

"Hey. Harry," Sirius said, frowning. "You look - upset. Look, I didn't mean-" He stopped. "You've been a little friendly with that Malfoy boy lately, haven't you?"

A little more friendly than he cared for, actually. Harry choked. Too much alcohol in his tea. Too much alcohol.

"We had a fight," he said instead.

"Yes, I know. Well... it's the best thing, Harry," Sirius paused. "I used to know Lucius quite well. I - saw him around at family parties when he got engaged, to tell you the truth. I was fairly young then, of course, and he wasn't much older, but the man was foul." He tipped back his glass with a practised air. "I've never liked people who slither around to the strong looking for power," he growled, and Harry could see that betrayal in his eyes. "I can't stand people like that."

He was remembering Wormtail, and Harry thought, *I let him go when I should have killed him myself.*

He would not make the same mistake twice.

"I know," he replied. "Draco's not like that."

One of Sirius' dark brows flicked upwards. "Oh, no? What exactly was the little Slytherin's reason for being your friend?"

"I don't know. He said it was morbid curiosity." Harry almost smiled at the memory, and saw Sirius' startled look. He hoped that the smile hadn't seemed tender. "Actually, I thought he liked me."

"Bloody Slytherins," Sirius said vehemently. "Being put in Gryffindor saved me, Harry, d'you know that? Otherwise I would have ended up... You don't need a friend like that, Harry. You're better off without him."

Harry focused on some point over Sirius' dark head, trying not to let his face show any expression. *Then how come I miss him so much?*

"Look," Sirius said with one of his abrupt changes of subject, "would you like to be with me and Remus during Minerva's funeral? I have the plans here, I could arrange for you and Ron and-"

The mention of a funeral grated on Harry's ears. He closed his hands around the cup, grateful that it burned him.

He wanted to break the cup. He set it down instead.

"Could we talk about it another time? It's getting late."

Sirius looked confused, and then shook it off and made a furious effort to be gentle. "If you want, Harry. Now I'm your Head of House, we can see more of each other, and if you ever need to talk..."

"Yeah, of course."

Harry had to get out of there. The plans for Professor McGonagall's funeral were on the *desk*, and he wanted to destroy something. He was up out of the chair and going towards the door almost before he realised it.

"Harry, I *mean* it."

The genuine pain in Sirius' voice made Harry look around. His godfather had stood up and was looking at him, struggling to find words to throw over the breach for Harry. Sirius had been so busy, and he really hadn't known what to do with Harry, and Harry had been so angry and miserable and confused, and neither of them had been able to measure up to what they had both wanted.

"I'm a - somewhat rotten and hopeless godfather," Sirius admitted, mouth curling. "But... I do love you. As a matter of fact."

In the end, in spite of disappointments and distance, Sirius would always be there for him. That was why Harry had come here tonight. Besides... that wasn't something Harry had heard often enough to dismiss.

Harry smiled, a bit awkwardly. "Um, I love you too," he said, too fast. "I'll, uh, I'll talk to you later."

Sirius' smile leaped out, that bold flashing smile that made him look young again, and when Harry closed the door, against all the odds, he did feel slightly better after all.

*

"Pass me the coffee," ordered Draco, who was looking pale and frenetic.

Pansy reached over agreeably and poured Draco a cup. Draco grabbed her elbow.

"Yes, toss the starving man a crust, what a good plan," he sneered. "You leave that coffee pot where it is. Just beside me."

"You're such a morning person, Draco." Draco flung his head back in dramatic despair and Pansy relented, patting him on the shoulder with a distinctly over-familiar gesture. "Don't worry about it. You'll be amazing. Or we can fix your marks."

"Don't insult me," Draco snapped, reaching for his coffee. "I can do this, and I can do it right."

He looked determined, and still a little bit too pale.

At that point, what was obviously meant to be a discreet cough but what sounded like quite a small earthquake sounded behind Harry. He jumped guiltily, and turned to look into Goyle's face.

"Move along," Goyle said.

"I was just *standing here*," Harry objected. He was just standing here eavesdropping shamelessly, but however.

Goyle looked obstinate and unmoved. "Move along."

That was when Draco and Pansy looked over, and after a moment Draco looked away again. His eyes appeared almost hooded. He seemed tired.

Harry felt another of those stupid pangs in his chest as he moved over to his own table and sat next to Ron, who was stacking his plate with eggs.

"Is there something going on today?" he asked.

"Don't think so," Ron answered. "Why don't you eat something, Harry? Hermione, you should as well."

Hermione looked tired, and she dropped the piece of toast she had been playing with and dropped her pretence. She just leaned against Ron for a minute, and he put his arm around her.

Harry looked away, and not at the Slytherin table. At the eggs.

"Malfoy's giving his Creative Magic display," Dean said quietly.

Harry's head jerked up. Dean smiled at him from across the table, though his smile was a little strained. He looked tired as well - God, they were all tired and unhappy.

"I did mine last week," Dean continued helpfully. "The practical project's kind of important. It counts for-"

"I know, Draco told me." He didn't think it counted if Draco couldn't even hear him. Anyone could call anyone anything they wanted then.

Draco had talked about the project time and time again, tossing balled-up pieces of paper around his room and occasionally at Harry. Harry had resented it for taking up so much of

Draco's time, but now he could only remember that Draco had talked about it and they had still been talking. Draco had complained about it in the boat before everything went to pieces, and another time Harry had said that he wished he could see it.

Draco had glanced up at him, surprised, and after a moment he had preened. Harry smiled remembering it, and then bit down on the smile.

"I might be persuaded to give you a private show," Draco had said. "If you promise to be very impressed."

"I'm not making any promises," Harry had grinned, and Draco had thrown another balled-up paper at him and ordered him out of his room. Harry hadn't gone.

And now Draco wouldn't speak to him, and his house rooms were blocked to Harry, and Harry was *damned* if he was going to miss the Creative Magic project on top of everything else.

"Dean," he said briskly, "where is Creative Magic taught?"

Dean blinked. "On the second floor," he replied warily. "To the left of the portrait of Lady Violet."

"That's fascinating," Harry told him. "It really is."

He got up and Ron turned in his chair, arm still around Hermione. "What are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm skipping class," Harry informed him. "Tell Professor Trelawney something terrible happened to me, it'll make her day."

"*Harry*," Hermione began in a scandalised voice, but Harry was already leaving the Great Hall.

It felt good to be doing something at last, even something as small as this. He felt energetic and alive again. He took the steps two at a time, and even smiled at the Fat Lady as he told her the password, Chocolate Armadillos - Harry had never been able to manage a whole one, but some of the girls adored them.

He went up to his dormitories and took out his father's Cloak.

It was strange to be invisible in broad daylight. He usually only used it after curfew these days, but it was also slightly thrilling to go down and walk through the milling crowds unseen. Ginny passed him and did not gaze at him. Blaise Zabini walked by and did not offer an obscene gesture.

It felt like freedom, or as close as Harry could get these days.

He passed the portrait of Lady Violet, and got into the classroom before anyone else came in. Then he sat on the window ledge and prepared to be very quiet.

When students started filing in, he was inexpressibly relieved that Dean took the seat by the window. After a while, he noticed that Dean was the only Gryffindor in the room, and there was a short supply of Hufflepuffs as well. Slytherins and Ravenclaws seemed to dominate the scene. No wonder he'd heard so little about Creative Magic before Draco, Harry thought as he watched Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin giggling together over some sort of journal.

When he came in, he didn't look as if he liked it at all. He looked as if he might have quite liked to bolt.

"Mr Malfoy, you may proceed," said the teacher, who Harry was startled to see was Professor Vector. He supposed Hermione *had* said he was in the habit of saying things like 'Mathematics is the music of the universe.'

Draco came and stood at the front of the class. He still looked too pale, and he swallowed nervously. Harry watched the motion of his throat.

Go on, Draco. You'll be great.

It was Draco's innate sense of showmanship that saved him. He glanced around at the attentive faces, and seemed to realise that he had an audience. So he smiled his practised, brilliant smile and made a gesture towards the door.

Crabbe and Goyle came in, pushing what Harry thought for a horrible moment was McGonagall's Somnasieve. Then he realised, because of the different symbols, that it was an ordinary Pensieve.

"Mr Malfoy?"

Draco was, at least outwardly, calm. "We were supposed to display a facet of Creative Magic in our projects," he said. "The only problem was - I couldn't choose. So I distilled my favourite artistic memories, and mingled them together. It took... quite a while."

There was an intrigued murmur around the classroom. Draco, always one to seize the moment to show off, took out his wand with a flourish and dipped it in the stone basin.

The silvery liquid swirled around it, and brighter light began to concentrate inside the Pensieve.

"I'd like everyone to come and touch it," said Draco, who seemed to be enjoying himself by now. He gave Lisa Turpin a dazzling smile. "I want everybody to experience my mind to the full."

Professor Vector only had to nod before everyone was standing up in a mass to go touch the liquid, shimmering thoughts. Dean went last of the students and Harry paused, thought about the wisdom of following, dropped the pretence that he was capable of *not* following and put his hand into the Pensieve.

The whirlpool that sucked him in seemed brighter than Dumbledore's Pensieve had been. He ended up on a bench by Dean, whose perfectly impassive face did not indicate that he was

aware of any invisible people beside him, and then realised that the bench was suspended in mid-air, and the air was...

The air was multi-coloured. The air was alive.

Harry remembered sitting beside Draco as Draco pored over one of his art books, remembered some of the pictures catching his eye. The air was filled with snatches of paintings, mixed streamers of green and cerulean blue and a vivid intense gold. And then Draco, who was standing in front of the class, lifted his wand and murmured some more words, and the air was *moving*.

Melody seemed to come from nowhere, or all directions. Faint songs about love and sorrow, filled with passion, made people look around, and then there were sounds like instruments, music that Harry didn't think existed in the Muggle world and which he suddenly thought of as fairy music. The world around them was twisting in a wave of beauty, and words began to flow in as Draco made another gesture.

"...Fling forth to the sunlight your banner on high, inscribed with the watchword, We conquer or die..."

"... I could not awaken my heart to joy at the same tone, and all I loved, I loved alone..."

"... Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung..."

"... no such song have I heard in the darkness of night before. Where does this tenderness come from?..."

Snatches of everything he had ever read and loved. All those books piled up in his room.

And then, so faint and passing so fast that Harry thought perhaps the others did not see them, but this was *Draco's* mind and he was comfortable here and he could see everything... Images and emotion twisted up in those artistic sights and sounds, all bound up in them.

They were more impressions than images. He thought he saw a woman reaching out with golden hair flying in the strange light, and thought it was Narcissa caught in a rare moment of sweetness. There was a flash of Pansy Parkinson's voice made beautiful by concern and Lucius Malfoy seen from someplace low on the ground, enormous and stern and adored. There was the whistle of wind in Harry's ears like flying, the crash of surf against sand, the sound of a storm somewhere beyond the brightness and the sudden soft lap of water against the ground.

He had a sudden impression of himself, changed as the other images were into something... that shone more than reality, caught in a moment of wordlessness and pushing his hair back. He was very sure that was unintentional.

And there was pain, a whole rush of pain all mixed up in the beautiful things, screams and blind fury and horror and misery all flashing through Harry like lightning and then leaving him with nothing but the idea, vaguely reached for and never quite achieved, that it could all be beautiful.

He stared over at Draco, colour and images wrapped around him as he conducted the whole scene. A streak of sunrise red almost seemed to reflect off the pale line of his jaw, and there was darkness with a few stars in it behind his wild hair. He could *take* all this, take everything and care about it and rage about it and want it all to be beautiful, he could make a play of passion.

Harry realised, in a redundant painful sort of way, that he *really* liked this insane boy.

Draco let his wand fall, breathing hard with his eyes shining.

"And the curtain drops," he said, and gestured again with his wand.

Harry felt himself rising with the others, in a flying mass, and then they were suddenly all back in the classroom. Harry hastily replaced himself on the window ledge.

The bell rang, and Draco, who looked drained, quickly picked up his bag and strode out of the room. Most of the other students seemed to want to stay behind and talk excitedly, but Dean got up immediately and, opening the door very wide, went out. Harry came with him and made a beeline for the nearest bathrooms, stuffing his Cloak into his bag and hurrying to Potions before Draco could get there.

He made it, and listened to Lupin with complete attention. Ron and Hermione crowded around him at lunch and asked where he had gone.

"I wanted to see a Creative Magic class," he answered. Hermione looked sad, but Ron only looked curious.

"What was it like?"

Harry stopped and smiled. "I'll tell you what, Ron," he said. "We should have taken it."

The next class should have been Transfiguration, and they stayed up in the common room and talked about extra wards for the common room. Neville hesitantly volunteered his knowledge of protective herbs.

The last class was Care of Magical Creatures, and Hagrid beamed at them all as he talked about getting them to breed small versions of the Flobberworm Harry had faced during the Third Task. He went into great detail on what they would have to do.

Parvati looked slightly green. "I'll be sick."

"You could help me supervise," Draco offered from across the room, and winked at her.

"You're *supervising*?" Ron demanded. Draco smirked in his direction. "*Git*," Ron said fervently under his breath. "Git, git, *git*."

"Well, yeah." Harry shrugged and Ron gave him a betrayed look.

All they had to do that class was study their books. It wasn't too bad, even though Parvati did keep threatening to be violently ill. Harry went over at the end of class and helped Hagrid put away his alarming diagrams.

He was crouched on the floor tucking away the final papers under Hagrid's desk, when he realised that Draco, Crabbe and Pansy were the last people left in the room.

"How did the display go? We didn't get a word together at lunch. Tell me all about it," said Pansy.

Their footsteps were coming towards the door and the desk, and they were about to see him and shut up. His bag was by his side.

Harry reached over for it, grabbed his Cloak out of it and threw it over himself.

Then he got up cautiously, slipped out of the door at the same time Pansy did, and walked along with them, masking his footsteps by walking in step with Crabbe.

"It went perfectly," Draco said with great satisfaction. "I was scintillatingly, overwhelmingly brilliant." He turned to Crabbe, chewing in his lip. "Wasn't I? Didn't you think?"

"Only saw you for a minute," Crabbe answered.

"But it was a scintillating, overwhelmingly brilliant minute, wasn't it?" Draco looked agitated.

"Sure," Crabbe replied.

Draco's agitation only increased. "Fine, don't lie to me," he said. "I can see what you think. I was too nervous. I overdid it. I made a complete mess of it, I was too theatrical, I'm going to fail the class, oh shame ruin dishonour. Is that what you meant?"

Crabbe frowned. "Whatever you say."

"Oh, what do you know," Draco snapped. "You wouldn't know scintillating brilliance if it shimmied in front of you in Pansy's lingerie."

Crabbe shrugged.

"Less talk about my lingerie, if *you* please," Pansy said dangerously.

Harry could not have agreed more. Draco, Pansy and Crabbe had reached the dungeons now, and were going to the wall that hid their common room. Draco leaned in and whispered something Harry did not catch to the stone.

"How long are we going to have to keep whispering the password?" Pansy asked.

"For as long as we have to," Draco said tersely. "Potter has an Invisibility Cloak. So could anyone else in the school, and there are other ways to go unseen. Do you want to make it easier for this spy to snatch us?"

Harry paused guiltily, especially at the grimace Draco made when he said 'Potter.' But Crabbe was directly behind him, and he was swept into the Slytherin common room with the others. He paused for a second at the closed entrance, wondering if he should wait until he could just slip back outside, and then he rushed into the common room and after Draco, following him as he went through the room and then went into his bedroom.

The door shut behind both of them. Draco paused, and Harry was positive for a terrible second that he could see him.

He breathed again when Draco walked across his floor, kicking off his shoes, and then stopped breathing when Draco undid his robe.

Right. Right. Clothes underneath his robe. I remember. Stop being so pathetic, Harry.

Draco was wearing a thin dark jumper and black jeans. He looked thinner without his robes, and strangely vulnerable. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing Draco in his socks before.

He said, "*Lumos*", and with the flare of light beside his face Harry saw the circles under his eyes. He was obviously exhausted and he had lost too much weight in too few days. Harry could almost see what Sirius had been talking about. His features looked more pointed than ever, and his pallor was underlining his tiredness, and he wasn't exuding conscious charisma in all directions.

He was almost colourless, and unhealthily angular, and Harry wanted to *take care* of him, but he didn't know how to take care of anyone. He just watched Draco prowling around the room, and watched as Draco sighed and sank into the chair at his desk.

Just then, Pansy came in. She was wearing a jumper and jeans as well, her dark hair pulled back and some parchment in her hand.

"Draco," she said in a subdued voice, "here are the papers for Professor McGonagall's funeral. We have to make arrangements for the Slytherins - someone has to supervise us in Snape's place, but obviously nobody will pay attention to any outsider's arrangements..."

Draco looked up, obviously alert and confident. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll handle it. I'll make the arrangements and I'll get Professor Vector to act as a figurehead, and I'll explain it to the others."

Pansy sighed with relief, and walked over to the desk to give him the parchment. He laid it on the desk, and she leaned her arms on the back of his chair and looked down at the top of his head.

He tipped back his head to look at her, and it was intimate and Harry's throat closed up with envy.

"What is it?" Draco asked quietly.

"The first years are having more nightmares," she said. "They don't feel safe any more, not with teachers dying, not since Snape could be..."

She stopped then. Both of them looked anywhere but at each other.

"Can't we sedate them?" Draco suggested brightly.

Pansy laughed. "Madam Pomfrey has all these tiresome rules about her medicine cupboard."

"I still think I could wheedle some sleeping powders out of her. I'll see about it." Draco frowned. "Till then, I think we can terrorise the house elves into serving up a round of hot chocolate after dinner, and then I can terrorise the first years with stories of how annoyed I will be if people don't start getting a full night's sleep."

Tension was almost visibly oozing out of Pansy. She began to sift Draco's hair through the fingers of one hand.

"Speaking of talking," she said reluctantly. "Everyone's so nervous. I'm beginning to hear talk about second thoughts. Maybe we could - maybe it's time to go to Professor Lupin-"

"Nobody would accept that. I'll go around explaining matters to people again." Draco's mouth was the mouth of a spoiled brat who did not intend to take no for an answer. "Everyone's bound to see reason. Or there's always the Imperius."

Pansy's mouth curved. "You're not funny, Draco," she informed him nonetheless. "People are afraid to come home. The summer's coming up-"

"They can all come to my house," Draco interrupted. "I've organised it. They'll be safe there, I'm going to..." He tilted his head up to look at her again. "Oh," he said in a different tone. "Letter from home?"

Pansy nodded, curling her free arm around herself as if she was cold. "Sort of an ultimatum," she said bleakly.

"Oh," said Draco again. "You should have told me right away. What, you expect me to read minds and offer sympathy? You should know I can't do either."

Pansy smiled at Draco's head, and only Harry saw it. "Why, Draco. You always told me you could do anything."

"Well, don't believe everything unprincipled young men tell you," Draco admonished. "That's how nice girls get into trouble."

They both stared at Draco's wardrobe for a minute, the silence stretching out.

"What did the letter say?" Draco asked eventually, and Pansy looked relieved that she didn't have to bring it up again.

"I can quit the Order immediately and come home now, or never come back again."

"And what did you say?"

"I told them they could go to hell. Do you have room for me at your place?"

"You can have the guest room with the ice white foam bath."

Pansy laughed and relaxed as much, Harry suspected, as she could.

"I'll leave you," she said softly. "You have enough to be getting on with. I'll go order the house elves to hit themselves with kettles. We need hot chocolate, and besides it will cheer me up."

She let the hand drop from his hair, and he took it and smiled up at her.

"Hey. Wench." He pressed her fingers. "You're doing all right," he told her loftily. "Keep this up and there could be a place in the Malfoy harem in it for you."

Pansy laughed, and the laugh sounded real this time. She held on for an instant, and then left the room, walking with her head much higher than it had been when she had come in.

Draco sat unmoving in his chair for a moment, the candlelight casting bright points against his hair. Then he slumped forward, back hunched and wretched, and laid his head in his arms.

Sympathy and guilt went through Harry. He wanted to go over to Draco, put his arms around him, work out something awkward to say and try to comfort him. But he couldn't, because Draco wasn't talking to him, because he was not even meant to see this, because Draco would have *hated* that he'd seen him like this.

Proud, private Draco. This was voyeurism, worse than that, because Draco would have wanted anyone to see anything rather than his weakness.

Harry had to get *out* of here.

Pansy had left the door ajar and he went through it, as fast as he could while still being discreet. He got out of the Slytherin rooms, up the stairs, back to the Gryffindor rooms, and threw himself in a chair and tried to fight down loneliness and self-disgust.

"Harry," Neville said tentatively, "could you help me with these Herbology books? The protection plants-"

There was nothing more important than this. He *knew* that.

"Sure," he answered. "Of course."

Neville smiled. "Thanks. Knew I could count on you."

Harry sat down with Neville and opened a book. They found some promising passages and Harry did not notice for quite a while that the common room had emptied.

When he did, he said, "Neville, you'd better hurry if you want to grab some dinner."

Neville blinked. "Oh, yeah... don't you want any, Harry?"

All these emotions twisting in the pit of his stomach seemed to take the place of food nicely.

"Nah, not hungry."

He concentrated ferociously on the books for a while longer and stubbornly would not think about anything else.

Then Ginny came rushing up from the entrance towards Harry, her red hair blown about her face, looking uncertain and a little scandalised.

"There's a *Slytherin* outside demanding to see you," she blurted.

Harry smiled incredulously, unable to help it.

Draco. Who else could it be?

It was a nasty shock when the *Slytherin* outside turned out to be Pansy Parkinson.

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Harry stared at her numbly, and thought that it was strange the kind of people Draco, looking the way he did, surrounded himself with.

Crabbe and Goyle were dark hulking gargoyles, and Blaise Zabini's slightly shifty good looks were similarly dark and sinister. Pansy was tall for a girl, her hard face framed by black, heavy hair that seemed to weigh her down.

Her face looked more forbidding than usual, even though her hair was tied back. Her heavy brows were drawn together and the expression in her brown eyes was distinctly alarming.

"Potter?" she said sharply.

"Um - hello?" ventured Harry, who was a bit at a loss.

Pansy stood with her arms folded, her face set, looking as if Harry should be volunteering something more.

Eventually, Harry was unsettled enough by her accusing glare to offer a feeble, "Can I, er, help you, Pansy?"

Pansy sighed as if astounded that someone as imbecilic as Harry had not been put out of his misery long since.

"Yes, you can," she said crisply. "You can stop making Draco miserable."

Harry stared.

She proceeded to drive her point home, her eyes cold and hard as stone.

"Do you know the amount of crap he had to put up with when he decided to hang around with *you*, Potter? We're *Slytherins*. He certainly didn't just receive lectures about his own good. He

took whatever was thrown at him, though. He had the massively deluded idea that you might be worth knowing. But you seem to have disillusioned him."

"Er," said Harry, who certainly wasn't going to tell her how he'd done it.

"I don't know what you did," Pansy told him, scowling.

Harry was pleased to hear it.

"All I know is that he came storming in one day and trashed his room. We couldn't get a civil answer from him for days. He's still irritable, and whenever he sees *you* in the corridors he freezes up and gives you a death glare. Even Crabbe and Goyle have been able to work out that it's your fault."

Pansy's hands were clenched into fists, but her tone was neutral.

"They wanted to come over here and rough you up a bit. You're lucky I decided you need a woman's touch."

This woman's touch looked like being violent.

Harry would prefer not to be pummelled by Pansy Parkinson, if that was all the same to her. He needed to go and think about what Draco had done - *trashed his room* - and what it could mean.

He had to deal with Pansy first, though. She had, after all, come here simply because...

"You care about him," he observed, almost wonderingly.

He thought of her smile at Draco's head earlier. He had a sudden vivid memory of her when Draco had been hurt in third year, tears pouring down her face.

The same face, older and stronger, grew even more unfriendly.

"You Gryffindors think you have a monopoly on emotions? Of course I care about him. We've been friends since we were children... and yes," she snapped. "Before you say it, I'm mad about him. I have been forever. Everybody knows that."

Harry felt a bizarre kinship with her. He mused on what she would do if he said, 'You and me both.'

He said, "What are you doing here, Pansy?" He tried to say it gently.

Pansy regarded him with extreme disfavour.

"I told you. I want you to stop making him unhappy. If you were just trying to see if Slytherins have feelings, there you have it. We do. We also have great right hooks, as you will see if you don't go and make things right with him. Break off the friendship with a little respect. I don't care if it was all a game to you, you owe him that much."

Harry forgot that he was talking to a girl he didn't know all that well.

"Oh, sod off, Parkinson!"

Pansy looked outraged.

"No, really, go straight to hell," Harry snapped. "A game - what do you think the rest of the houses are, aliens? You think Gryffindors don't have loyalty, you think that we can't really be someone's friend? Stop talking such rubbish."

"I am *not*-"

"You are talking complete rubbish. You think Draco was some sort of inter-house *experiment* to me... You saw me try to talk to him! You saw me do it over and over again! How dare you come over here and lecture me and act like I don't care about him when I *bloody well do*!" Harry stopped yelling and stared belligerently at Pansy. He was breathing hard.

Pansy just looked at him. "You do," she said.

"Yes," Harry answered, his voice under control now and steely. "I do. So you can take your damn lecture and go marching back to your dungeons, you *bitch*, because I *want* to go to him and make things right and *stay* his friend and it kills me that I can't do it!"

Pansy kept standing there, just looking at him with her steadily unfriendly gaze, not going away.

"Potter..." she said at last, and then Harry saw her face soften for a fraction of a second. "He thought you were *something*. We could all see that. He thinks he's so cool, but he's not hard to read. Especially not when you know him."

Harry looked at her in astonishment for a second, and then felt his first really relaxed smile in weeks curve his lips.

"Yeah," he answered quietly. "I... I remember."

Pansy shoved her hands in her pockets. "He thought you were - I don't know. He used to talk about you, you know? When you were the enemies who thought a Potions class without attempted murder with a cauldron was a Potions class wasted... he used to talk about you a lot. He used to *fume*. You know how he can go on."

"I've heard a rant - or twenty," Harry admitted.

She forgot herself enough to smile at him.

"And then he stopped talking about you. We tried to get him to do it - it wasn't *normal* for him not to. We're Slytherins, we like to talk behind people's backs. But he wouldn't do it. He was so casual about it, but he tried to never ever mention your name. Still, sometimes someone else would say it, and he'd - he'd just smile this little smile."

"What are you saying, Pansy?" he asked, speaking quietly so as not to shatter the image.

"I'm saying he acted as if you mattered," Pansy said. "So he cares about you. So..."

She stopped, and made a brief gesture of frustration. She looked as if she wanted to punch the wall.

"I don't *like* you, Potter," she informed him coldly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't like you either. So what?"

"So the Slytherin password is *king cobra*," she snapped. "Wait a few hours. And don't mess things up this time!"

She glared into his stunned face, and then stamped away.

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He went inside. He sat back down to his Herbology books. He studied with determination for two hours.

He went down to the Slytherin rooms. He walked through the stone corridors. He spoke the password. He strode right past the stunned gazes of assorted Slytherins towards his goal, that particular door, steeled for confrontation.

He pushed the door open, and went in.

It was at this moment that his resolve faltered.

Draco and Blaise Zabini were sitting on chairs by the fire, playing cards. The fire had warmed Draco's face slightly and he was laughing.

It was so different from the scene with the lonely figure that he had pictured that he just stood there for a minute with his mouth open. Zabini's face changed from ease to malice with commendable speed.

"I'll get Crabbe and Goyle," he announced, rising from his chair and fixing Harry with a menacing glare.

"No!" Draco snapped, swiftly, and Zabini's face fell and Harry's heart leaped. Then Draco turned to Harry and said in strained tones, "I'd really prefer it if you left, Potter."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't intend to leave, Malfoy. I want to talk to you. In *private*."

"Of all the nerve," Zabini began.

"Shut up," Draco said. "Get out, Potter. I have had a tiring day, I need to unwind, *you* are not welcome and Blaise and I are not finished our game."

Harry walked across the room and took the low seat by the bed.

"That's fine," he said calmly. "I can wait."

Zabini made to rise again.

"Sit down," Draco ordered. "Fine then. Stay, if you like. It makes no difference."

Zabini sat back down with bad grace. "He's *staying*?" he asked, curling his lip in distaste. "Are the stakes changing?"

"No," Draco said, dealing the cards. "He's not important. The stakes remain the same."

Harry did not care what they were talking about. He had won this much ground. He was in this chair, he was *staying* in this chair and eventually he was going to talk to Draco.

Zabini raised his eyebrows, but made no further protest. The fire flared high and warm behind them, and the game continued in silence.

Harry waited. Cards slapped on cards, and there were long thoughtful pauses before they were laid down. The fire was hot and its crackle was almost soothing. The urgency of speaking to Draco was still with Harry, and he was still nervous and edgy about it, but almost against his will he felt his eyelids drift downwards. He was tired, and now he was warm and it was quiet.

Shh, shh, shh, said the fire, and Harry kept watching Draco and Zabini play cards with his eyes half-shut and a very detached interest.

Zabini was looking attentively at Draco, his dark eyes sharp. Draco was leaning back with an elaborate lack of concern.

At long last, they seemed to be reaching a conclusion.

"Care to specify the stakes further?" Zabini inquired, and Harry thought he glanced over at him. Then he smiled his sly smile.

"I like to keep things interesting," Draco answered.

"I only spoke out of concern for you, Draco," Zabini said, laying down his cards one by one.

"I'm touched by your concern, Blaise." Draco threw down his cards. "But it's really not necessary."

Zabini paused, looking down at the cards, and wet his lips rather deliberately. Even his voice was soft and made Harry feel slightly more sleepy.

"Oh, well. I can't say that I'm all that upset," he admitted. "So, Draco... what do you want?"

Draco smiled. "I want you to get out," he answered sweetly. "I need to talk to Potter."

Zabini stared for a minute, made an explosive and unrepeatable sound, got up and stormed out of the room. Harry was shocked fully awake at last when Draco rose from his chair and looked at him.

His gaze dropped almost immediately, and he stood in front of the fire with his hands clasped behind his back, like someone granting an audience.

"I think it's as well that we have a chance to talk," he said in a strange voice. "It's dangerous for members of the Young Council to be feuding in the present situation. We need to be able to get along in a civil manner, and communicate. I realise that I have made this difficult, but I was a little angry. Truthfully, I don't much care for your Gryffindor method of courtship-"

"Draco," Harry interrupted resolutely, "I am so, so sorry. What can I do to make things right?"

Draco glanced up, and blinked. At length he said, "I told you not to call me that." He paused, frowned at the carpet and then continued as if he was cross with himself, "What exactly d'you mean?"

To his absolute horror, Harry found that he had no idea what to say. "I mean... I'm sorry, I'll never do it again, I *promise*," he said, and then realised to his eternal shame that he was going red. "I want to be your friend again," he burst out rebelliously, hating words, hating most things in that instant. "That's all I want, I don't know what you're talking about when you say - say courtship, I didn't mean..."

He looked up. Draco stayed quiet and something under Harry's ribs twisted.

"I just want to be your friend again," he repeated helplessly. "I *miss* you, you stupid prat."

That last bit might not be conciliatory, but he was frustrated and felt ridiculous and why did everything with Draco have to be so difficult?

Draco glanced up, and there was an odd expression on his face. "I thought friends tended to be honest with each other," he said, not sounding entirely calm any more. "I was under the distinct impression that you liked women."

"I do!" Harry exclaimed automatically, and then bit down on his lip hard. "I mean, I don't know, maybe I do. I haven't really thought it through. Things are a bit unclear-"

"You're nearly eighteen, Potter," Draco said, his mouth doing something funny. "What are you, sexually retarded?"

Will you forgive me if I am?

"I've been a bit occupied with other stuff," Harry said reproachfully.

Draco sighed and rumbled his hair, a sure sign of extreme inner turmoil. "So what exactly was it about, then?" he demanded, and there was definitely emotion in his voice now, but he pushed it down and it went steely again. "An experiment?"

"No - of *course* not! What do you think of me?" Harry almost shouted, and then realised he was on a mission of peace. "You're my friend," he added in raw, subdued tones. "I wouldn't do that."

"Well, forgive me, Potter, I'm really unclear on what you would and wouldn't do just now. And there was a rather extended time when you were not particularly keen to be my friend," Draco said sharply. "So what were the little boat trip and the picnic all about, then?"

Harry wondered if Draco had been struck with amnesia.

"Er, you're afraid of water, Draco. I thought that I could help with that. I thought you might *like* the picnic. I did it because I was - wait a second, what did *you* think it was about?"

Draco gave him a look.

"You have a nasty, suspicious mind," Harry said, shaken.

"Having high expectations never seems to work out for me," Draco replied.

"Well, I wouldn't do anything like that," Harry told him angrily. "*Never*. I know I made a mistake and you're furious or disgusted or whatever, but I wouldn't plot something and I promise, I *promise* I won't ever try anything again."

Draco sounded faintly intrigued. "You really didn't know you-"

"No," said Harry crossly. He thought he'd made that clear. "I had no idea."

Draco did something else that looked strange with his mouth, but this time it looked a tiny bit amused. "So, what, are you going through some sort of crisis?"

"Shove off," muttered Harry, and then remembered that he had forced his way into these rooms and demanded the conversation.

"And you really didn't intend-"

This harping on already discussed topics was morbid.

"I said no," said Harry. "That's what I keep saying, and you don't listen. I didn't know and I didn't meant to and I would never do anything to upset you on purpose, and I'm *sorry*, and I just came here to ask you to be friends again, but if you won't-"

"I suppose I will," Draco said slowly.

Harry stopped and stared at him. Draco looked slightly embarrassed.

"Well, I can't stop being your friend if you're going through some sort of crisis," he continued, almost defensively. "That would be *cruel*. You need support. Otherwise," he added in speculative tones, "you might go crazy."

Harry rolled his eyes and made no attempt to control the enormous and ridiculous smile. "I'm not going to go crazy, Draco."

"You might," Draco argued stubbornly. "You're enough of a twit to do anything. Besides..." he paused, as if testing the words. "I suppose you were exposed to almost irresistible temptation."

"Shut up."

"After all," Draco proceeded, looking charmed with the idea of his own charm, "I am gorgeous and marvellous and lovely."

"Shut up." Harry paused, and said awkwardly, "So it's all okay? Friends?"

Draco smiled suddenly and very brightly. "Friends."

Harry went limp with relief at the same time that the clock struck ten.

"Oh, damn it, I'd better go," he said, extremely reluctant. Stupid clocks. Stupid time. Stupid curfew. It was all a very badly thought out arrangement. "Look, can we talk tomorrow? Can we talk at breakfast? I'm-"

"Wait," Draco interrupted, looking thoughtful. "If you like, you can stay."

Chapter Fifteen: Keeping Faith

*We can't play this game any more
But can we still be friends?
Things just can't go on like before
But can we still be friends?*

Harry stared at Draco, his thoughts exploding in panic.

One part of his brain gabbled, it's all right, it's perfectly all right, Draco is just suggesting a sleepover, get your mind out of the gutter, do you want to ruin everything? Another part was screaming in Draco's direction, we just established that I'm *confused* here, what on earth do you think you're suggesting, I don't know if I'm even, *are you*, could you?

Another part was staring at Draco in a stupid, avid way all of a sudden, letting him down by getting all mixed up in the rush of happiness and relief. The curve of Draco's hair against his neck was riveting.

"Er," he said.

Draco laughed. "I'm sorry, that was a very tactless way to put it. Especially since you're in crisis," he added conscientiously. "I mean, I'm having an overnight gathering here to discuss the spy and other events. I'd like you to stay."

"Oh," Harry said. "Oh. Yes, of course."

Draco beamed winningly at him. "Good," he answered.

Harry had *missed* that smile, devious and generally alarming though it was.

"I'm going to speak to you all with a pointer," Draco continued. "It's going to point to things. It endows me with a great air of authority."

He went and sat on his bed, producing the pointer from under his pillow, and beckoning Harry proudly over to see it. He waved it a few times, experimentally.

Harry frowned at the pointer. "Draco. Isn't your wand enough?"

Draco smirked. "Nothing's ever enough, Harry."

"It's too much when it looks like compensation," Harry advised him. Draco hit him with the pointer.

Harry eased himself onto the bed, an enormous sense of relief seeping through him. They were still - right, and he could keep it right.

Draco pulled his legs up and sat in lotus position on the bed, leaning his pointer against his knee.

"We have a while before everybody else gets here," he said. "We should talk about your crisis."

"Um, no, it's all right," Harry told him quickly. "Let's talk about something else. How have you been?"

Draco brightened as something occurred to him. "I displayed my project today," he announced. "I think it might have gone well. You know. Adequately. In a way where perhaps I was brilliant."

Harry looked fixedly at the green coverlet, not looking away from the threads.

"Actually, I saw it." *Please don't be furious.* "It's just - I'd heard you talk about it so often I wanted to see it. So I, um, I used my Invisibility Cloak."

"Really?" Draco laughed, sounding almost startled. "Well... that's kind of voyeuristic. But also flattering, so it's all right. Harry! What did you think?"

He looked eager. Harry smiled at him, relieved again, and tried to form some kind of intelligent sentence about the display.

"It was - different," he said. "I liked it a lot. It was like... concentrated dreams."

Draco glowed. "Well, I am stupendously clever," he admitted shamelessly. "I prattled in Latin from the cradle. Always the little genius, yours truly-"

"Showing off is not clever, Draco."

Draco looked offended. "On the contrary," he said. "If you don't show it off, who's going to know?" He paused. "What were we talking about?"

"You're so clever, you tell me."

Draco tapped Harry on the knee with the pointer. "I know," he said. "Your crisis. All right, don't worry about it. I'm going to help you."

"Er," said Harry. "How?"

Draco bit the side of his lip. "I have to think it over. If only Blaise were willing to help but, well, he hates you, so that's that."

Harry blinked several times after Draco had spoken, and the sentence remained frightening.

"Is Blaise Zabini *gay*?"

Draco blinked at him in turn. "Yes," he said carefully. "And the sky is blue, Harry. The robes we generally wear to school are black. Just in case you hadn't noticed, over the years."

"I don't even like Zabini," Harry said, still shocked. "How could you think-"

Draco sighed, and then looked contrite. "I'm sorry. I forgot about you being sentimental."

"I'm not sentimental!"

The door opened, and Pansy Parkinson came in, dressed in an oversize flannel shirt. Harry only just stopped himself from snapping at her to come back later.

"So the meeting begins," Draco said in an undertone, and reached out and gripped Harry's shoulder, palm flat against his collarbone. "We'll talk later."

Harry smiled at him, unable to help it. "All right."

"Harry Potter," Pansy said archly. "What a surprise this is."

Draco grabbed her lightly as she approached the bed, and shook her by the hips. "We're talking about this later, woman. The conversation may include the words 'unwarranted interference.'"

"It's a house pastime," Pansy said, shrugging. Draco laughed and released her.

"Were we supposed to bring parchment and quills," Blaise Zabini began as he came in the door, and then his face changed when he saw Harry. "What is he still doing here?"

"I invited him," Draco said calmly, hand still against Harry's collarbone.

Zabini stood looking down at Harry with disfavour. "Why? I thought we were all supposed to decide who should be present at the meeting."

Draco moved closer along the bed towards Harry, and quite deliberately slid an arm around his neck and leaned forward.

Harry glanced over at Draco's profile, jaw not two inches from his shoulder, and tried not to catch his breath.

"This is my room," Draco told Zabini softly. "So these are my rules. I'll have anyone I want in my room, and if you don't like it, you can leave."

Harry tore his gaze away from Draco, and glanced over at Zabini. He and Draco were staring at each other, clearly locked in a contest of wills. Zabini never even came close to winning.

He dropped his eyes, and then gave Harry a resentful look.

"Good," Draco said in the very cheerful way he had when he was feeling triumphant and wanted to rub it in. "Besides, I think he'll be useful."

The door opened and Crabbe and Goyle came in. Harry was just a little stunned to see Crabbe had Marvin the Mad Muggle pyjamas. Both of them stopped and looked at Harry, and then looked at Draco with incomprehension.

Zabini flicked up an eyebrow. "Yes, utility is the idea, I'm sure. Because you invited these two here so we'd all get the benefit of their astonishing brain power, I don't think."

Draco stood and went over to Crabbe and Goyle, standing between them and Zabini as if they needed his physical protection.

"I don't think you should talk about them that way," Draco said in a cold voice.

"Oh, please. You talk about them that way. You talk about them that way every hour of every single day."

Zabini rolled his eyes, still scornful. Draco nodded in a 'you've got me there' manner, and then smiled one of those unexpected, irresistible smiles.

"That's different," he said, glancing back at them. "They're my boys."

Crabbe and Goyle stood stolidly behind them. Either because Draco was saying nothing they did not know, or because they really were extraordinarily stupid.

"By the way, you two," Draco added casually, "it was all a misunderstanding. Harry's back. Everything's as it was."

There would be no questions from these two. Goyle nodded.

"Hello, Harry," Crabbe said, as if laboriously coming up with a tactical manoeuvre.

Harry gave him a quick smile. "Hi."

"So that's all settled," Draco remarked. "Isn't harmony a beautiful thing? I have a warm glow. And here are the guests, just in time. Lovely."

Zabini threw himself into the chair he had been occupying earlier, looking as if he had the groundwork for an ulcer. Pansy leaned against the bedpost, and Draco made a welcoming gesture as Parvati Patil opened the door and peeked cautiously around it.

She had her black hair in a long beautiful plait, and Harry saw Draco appreciatively eyeing the picture she made in her rose-coloured pyjamas. Harry had some uncharitable thoughts about the shamelessness of people running around schools in their night clothes and luring Slytherins who were supposed to be sitting next to Harry.

Then she saw Harry and looked thrilled, exclaiming, "Harry, I am *so glad* you're here," and rushing over to sit beside him. Since she had ignored Draco, Harry allowed himself to feel guilty and like the terrible person he undoubtedly was.

She was also taking Draco's place, but he was not petty enough to notice that.

"Parvati, did you actually doubt my word of honour on why I wanted this little rendezvous?" Draco inquired, looking hugely amused.

Parvati blushed. "Well, you said no other Gryffindors would be coming. I wouldn't have if I'd known Harry would be here."

"Well, this is certainly my week to have my motives misinterpreted by virtuous young ladies," Draco said. "I had no idea I had such a terrible reputation. It's very thrilling."

Pansy snorted and Draco made a face at her.

"Draco," Harry said. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Draco exclaimed innocently, and made another welcoming gesture as Terry Boot, Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin came into the room. They were all in their pyjamas and Terry was in the lead, Lisa and Mandy clutching notebooks to their chests. Draco flashed them a smile. "I was explaining to those already assembled that I tried to invite Hermione Granger to our little gathering."

"Well - surely that would be a good idea. She's the brightest student in school," Terry remarked. His dark-grey eyes moved around the room, and clearly took in Harry, but he made no other comment.

Mandy and Lisa both deserted from behind Terry and went to sit on the bed with Harry and Parvati.

Marvellous, Harry thought. *It's after I start being attracted to a boy that girls in their pyjamas decide to swarm me on a bed.*

"Good to see you here, Harry," said Lisa, who he barely knew.

"Er, thanks," he replied.

Meanwhile, Draco was looking a bit sulky. "Granger's not all that brilliant," he grumbled. "And I asked her to come, anyway. It's not my fault that she - ah - misinterpreted my request."

Everyone in the room looked entertained or startled. Harry boggled.

"She what? She never said!"

"She didn't need to apply to her menfolk for protection," Draco said wryly.

Pansy bubbled with laughter. "She hit him," she told everyone gleefully. "Slapped him around the face."

"Oh, not again," Harry exclaimed. Now Pansy and Zabini were looking startled too.

Draco went faintly pink. "I'll have you all know that I was young, and not yet quite so charming."

"Yes," Harry said. "She seems to have been very impressed by your current level of mature charm."

Pansy and Parvati both laughed, and Terry Boot cracked a smile.

"I merely wished to explain why Granger would not be gracing us with her presence."

"Why didn't you explain to *her*?" Terry asked practically.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Somebody thought it was all just too funny, didn't he? Useless creature that he is."

"It is funny," Zabini chimed in. "Imagine *Granger* thinking that Draco was overcome by lust for her."

"I think I could be," Draco said with an introspective look. "I like a girl with spirit."

"That's enough, Draco," Harry said.

Draco glanced at him. Harry looked back. *It's Hermione, so it's not funny, and I'll never in a million years back down like Zabini did.*

Draco did not drop his eyes either. "Or she will never realise our great passion," he said lightly. "Tragic though that would be. Ah, the Hufflepuff contingent has arrived."

Susan Bones slipped inside, drawing a floral dressing gown tightly around herself. She looked around as if she was in the lions' den, and then Draco beamed at her. She smiled back tentatively.

"Where's Smith?" Zabini asked from his armchair.

"He isn't coming," she said, quietly. "I'm sorry. He said he wasn't sure about Malfoy."

She spotted Harry and the other girls, and slipped over to them as fast as she could. Harry Potter, ladies' man, was beginning to feel as if fate was playing a practical joke on him.

"Fine, excellent. We can get started then," Draco said, and flourished his pointer. His lips tightened only fractionally when he added, "I never liked that Smith much anyway."

Blaise and Pansy sighed in very loud unison. "And we all know why, too," Pansy remarked.

Draco looked stubborn. "I don't like blonds."

Pansy looked like a woman who had heard this before, and who was now affectionately exasperated. "Draco, he did not steal the idea from you. You don't have blond copyrighted."

"On the contrary," Draco said. "I'm sure my family must have copyrighted it around 1600. If I could just find the records, that upstart Smith would pay."

Everyone laughed this time. Harry looked around and did not think that Draco had planned to start actual business a moment sooner than this. Everyone looked at their ease, enjoying the others' company.

It was a really impressive performance.

"Let me make a few things clear," Draco continued, on a different note. "I asked all of you here and gave all of you who needed it the Slytherin password, and all I said was that I wanted to discuss current events. All of you must have been quite puzzled - aside from those who thought that I was offering sexual favours, of course."

"You're not?" Pansy asked. "That's it, I'm off."

Draco laughed and pretended to throw her into the chair opposite Zabini. She hooked her legs over an arm.

"The official story is that all you girls are attending a pyjama party of Pansy's in her private room, and all the boys are attending one in mine. Obviously, people will suspect there was a certain amount of mingling, but that will just make us all seem more interesting and we will be the envy of our classmates." Draco flashed an impish smile. "Nobody will ever have to know the dreadful truth that Harry hogged all the girls."

Harry looked around the bed. "Which would you like?" he asked. "I've got a selection."

Parvati giggled and punched him in the arm.

Draco looked soulful. "I have to pick just one? Sharing is caring, Harry. You should keep that in mind. Now, does anyone have a question about the alibis?"

"I do," said Zabini. "Where are *your* pyjamas?"

Naturally Harry had never liked Zabini. He constantly asked people offensive personal questions.

"Excuse me," Draco said in his most aristocratic manner. "I could not possibly get changed before my guests arrived. I had company."

"Never stopped you before," Zabini pointed out.

Draco glanced over at Harry and grinned. "I had special company."

"Enough of this false modesty," Zabini said. "I seriously object to men wearing clothing at night."

Perhaps Draco had had a point, and Harry should really have noticed about Zabini before.

"Take it off!" Pansy put in helpfully.

People were laughing again, very naturally.

"We're here," Draco continued, "because I thought it would be a good idea to have an interhouse group in which we can share secrets and think up plans - not only with less possible interference from the spy, since the spy could be one of us - but without the jurisdiction of the teachers."

"Yeah, Potter," Zabini said slyly. "What we're talking about is breaking the rules. Sure you don't want to scurry off?"

Harry laughed, genuinely startled. "Well, now I'm sure you really don't know anything about me, Zabini."

He saw Susan Bones was looking a little hesitant at this open talk of rule-breaking, though, so he smiled at her reassuringly. She smiled back, looking more confident.

"I'm not just talking about breaking rules," Draco continued. "We can also do morally questionable things that Professor Lupin obviously can't openly countenance. I haven't a moral to my name, and I'm quite prepared to lie, cheat and steal to do any damage to the Dark Lord."

There were nods from the Slytherins around the room, and Terry Boot, but Harry looked around the bed and saw hesitation until he nodded too. Then Parvati and Susan started nodding as well.

"And we can point fingers at who we think is the spy, and investigate them, instead of pursuing this policy of pretending to trust everyone and watching desperately for a random clue. We can point fingers at teachers, even. And of course," Draco concluded grandly, "I have one final argument to sway people into agreeing to these meetings."

He opened his wardrobe. On one door was fixed a calendar-sized notepad, clearly meant to serve as a board. Draco gestured to it with his pointer and a certain amount of pride.

"I think it all looks very official now," he said. "Now, let's have some names. Sorry, Parvati - Padma Patil."

Parvati sat up straight at Harry's side. "I know why you're saying it," she said, "but I know my sister. There's no way. It's not her."

Draco's eyes were cold. "Whoever the spy is," he said softly, "they have people who believe in them. Who trust them implicitly, and who are being betrayed."

"Not Padma," Parvati insisted.

He smiled. "Then let's prove her innocent, shall we, sweetheart?"

He wrote 'Padma Patil' on the notepad. Parvati was still trembling with quiet defiance at Harry's side.

"What about *you*?" she asked. "People suspect you."

Pansy sat up straight. "Look, you little-"

"Sh, Pansy," Draco said sharply. He turned and wrote his own name down. Harry noted with amusement that he did so in much fancier script than he had used for Padma's name, and he added a curl to the 'y' with a flourish.

Apparently being suspected of dark deeds was all right if you could do it with style.

Parvati still looked unsettled, and it was beginning to infect the other girls on the bed. Susan reached over and held onto Harry's elbow: when he glanced at her in bewilderment the look on her face was a cry for reassurance.

He had not looked over at Terry Boot, but it seemed uncertainty was not confined to the bed.

"In the spy hunt, we can't forget the final threat is You-Know-Who."

"I don't," Draco replied shortly.

"Then - how can we use a little group like this to affect *him*?"

"Well, what do you suggest we do?" Pansy demanded, looking like a small, determined dog ready to attack. "Sit around here and get picked off one by one? Brilliant plan."

Draco glanced, quickly, from one to the other. "Ravenclaws are noted for their brilliant plans," he drawled.

Terry blinked at her. "I wasn't attacking-"

Draco needed some help.

"A group can make a difference to Voldemort," Harry said, and silence fell abruptly. Harry saw Blaise Zabini's lip curl at this solemn-hero comment, and decided to stun him silent.

"Though of course, it might be a bit much for Draco's nerves."

Pansy and Zabini both looked suddenly bent on murder.

Draco took Harry's wild throw and ran with it. He looked ridiculously haughty. "If you're referring to that time when I was *eleven* and a little upset by seeing the Dark Lord drinking unicorn blood and thus made a strategic retreat..."

"Strategic retreat in which you ran screaming like a girl," Harry said sweetly. Susan laughed nervously.

"Little-known battle cry of the Malfoys," Draco explained. "Causes untold confusion. Should really be changed."

The Slytherins relaxed. Attack was obviously all right with them, but only as long as they did not feel Draco was threatened. And the others laughed, and stopped looking threatened themselves.

"Oh, I'm *sure*," said Harry.

"Well, *I'm* sure we'd all adore a valiant speech. Everyone's going to get a turn with the notepad and the pointer in the end, anyway," Draco said, neatly letting everyone know there would be no leader. Then he presented the pointer to Harry with a flourish. "Come on then. You up for it?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Why not."

He took the pointer and stood up, fighting the sudden feeling of awkwardness and panic. This was important.

Draco took his place on the bed, and there were representatives from every house all together now.

Draco leered ridiculously around. The girls looked amused and Parvati, fully recovered now, gave him quite a creditable leer back. He slipped an arm loosely around Parvati's shoulders, and Harry crushed down a flicker of - something.

Draco was only teasing. Harry didn't want someone's arm around him as if he were a bloody girl. Harry didn't know what he wanted.

Still.

He pulled himself together. "I got a lot done with two people, when I was much younger than we are now. It's useless to talk about what we haven't got, and what we can't do. We have to pool our resources and achieve what we can."

Susan and Parvati were nodding, looking impressed, and the Ravenclaws were looking thoughtful and almost convinced.

Harry had to trust Draco to deliver the Slytherins.

"It makes sense to work outside the rules sometimes. And it makes sense to work together," Harry said slowly, trying to put into words what he had only just worked out, and not daring to get anything wrong. "The Sorting Hat was always talking about different strengths houses had. We have to combine them, so we can be stronger - so we can be more effective."

"So we can crush them." Blaise Zabini sounded pleased. He and Draco exchanged a swift, fierce look and then Draco looked back at Susan Bones.

"Of course, the strength of the Slytherins is cunning plots. But you'll have already noticed that." He reached over for a pillow, deftly stripped it of its case and pulled the case over his head. Then he wagged his hands. "Whoo," he said, very dry. "I'm a Dementor."

Laughter all around.

"One of Draco's singularly cunning plots," Harry agreed solemnly. "Shame about the utter failure."

Draco pulled off the pillow case, smoothed down his ruffled hair and flashed Harry a smile.

"Ah, but that was because I didn't have all the necessary data," he said. "Which is why we need the Ravenclaws."

Mandy and Lisa looked up from their writing, and both smiled. Then Draco glanced over at Terry Boot, and Harry's eyes followed.

Terry looked interested. "Go on, Harry," he said. "Everybody's listening."

*

"We didn't get all that much done," Harry murmured.

"This meeting wasn't about action. It was about establishment," Draco murmured back. "And I owe you big, Potter. That was *great*."

"Don't worry about it. You're not the only one with scores to settle."

The meeting had ended at half past two in the morning, when bed had been decreed all around. The bed had been immediately and stridently declared to be the property of the girls, though Draco had looked very plaintive about the whole affair.

"It is my bed," he had pointed out in small, wistful tones.

"And so as the host, you'll give it up to the ladies who are forced by curfew to stay in your badly equipped room," Pansy had told him firmly. "If all the ladies will go on. Does your bed fit five girls?"

"I've never had the opportunity to find out," Draco had answered, his lip trembling. "My life has been sad and empty."

All the girls had fitted on, though there had been much giggling and kicking of legs. Draco had watched the entire proceeding with huge, tragic eyes. Meanwhile, Blaise Zabini took the two armchairs and made himself a comfortable bed.

"I have to sleep on the floor?" Draco had said, appalled. "Oh, the wages of virtue are bitter and cause back problems in later life."

"You can share with me if you like," Zabini'd offered.

"Ah - no. It would be a little cramped."

"Boot?"

Terry Boot had blinked. "The floor is fine."

"Well, either Crabbe or Goyle would break the chairs and kill me. And don't even *think* about it, Harry Potter."

"Don't worry," Harry had returned.

Zabini, propped up on one elbow, had given him a venomous look. Harry had scowled back at him, and then looked at Draco, who was watching them with a thoughtful look on his face. Crabbe and Goyle were behind him as they always were, one step behind and backing him up. He had turned and tilted his head, deliberately, in Harry's direction. Goyle had moved out and away from Draco, and positioned himself at Harry's elbow.

Harry and Zabini had just stared.

"For..." Zabini'd said irritably, and then rolled his eyes in Draco's direction. "You can share if you like, Potter," he said in tones that added 'and if being smothered with a pillow is your idea of a good night's sleep.'

"No thank you, Zabini," Harry had answered, very sweetly. "Though it was kind of you to offer."

Now the remainder of the group was stretched out on the floor. The bulk of Crabbe and Goyle, sleeping snoring mountains, provided a wall against Terry Boot, and indeed the rest of the room. Harry and Draco were talking in whispers.

"One thing," he said quietly. "I want Ron and Hermione at the next meeting."

It was dark, but Draco's voice indicated that his face was twisted in that peculiarly disdainful manner. "Granger of course," he answered readily. "But I don't need the Weasel."

"Well, I always need Ron," Harry told him in a low, determined voice. "And he has been very useful in the past, and I think he'll be useful again. And even if he wasn't - what use are Crabbe and Goyle?" He stopped, and thought of the insult to Ron implied there. "And Pansy," he added hastily.

When people had begun theorising and accusing, the only person besides Crabbe and Goyle who had remained quiet was Pansy. She had helped Harry, and she was loyal to Draco, and Harry was quite prepared to like her, but he did not think she had an analytical mind.

"That's different," Draco replied sharply. "They're *mine*."

"And they're mine," Harry told him.

There was a pause. Harry heard the slight sound indicating that Draco had rolled onto his side, and when he spoke next his voice was closer to Harry's ear.

"Fine," he said crossly. "Have your nasty little friends."

"I will," Harry returned, and then felt a brush of warmth. Draco's hand must be lying curled at his side, and whenever Harry breathed there was the smallest contact between Draco's knuckles and Harry's hip.

It was nothing. It was barely contact at all.

Harry spoke quickly, desperate to distract himself and fighting to keep his voice even. "I knew you would understand," he said factually, letting slip things he had realised but not spoken aloud in his haste. "That was - something I missed. That you understood some things."

Draco sounded comfortable, on the point of sleep. His lazy voice was actually like a purr.

"Well, you understood about what I wanted for the meeting."

Keep talking and don't think. "I know how you think," Harry admitted, "and once I could see that, I wanted to do something to help. I feel better as long as I'm doing something."

"I know. And people trust you, they count on you to act and to act for the best. You reassure the others. I needed something to bring them together."

"It'd alienate the Slytherins, though, if you and I didn't-" *Understand each other.* "-get along."

"But we do. And we can create the right atmosphere of relaxation, and they can work together. It's politics."

Harry had understood all that before, but Draco's cool voice disturbed him a little. He was speaking as Lucius Malfoy's son, the son of the perfectly corrupt politician.

"I didn't want to use us getting along as politics," Draco whispered with sudden violence. "I thought it wouldn't have anything to *do* with that."

And Harry relaxed and felt ashamed, because Lucius Malfoy had never felt the slightest compunction about using people - *eleven year old innocents, his own son.* And he had remembered something he should not have forgotten.

"It's all right. You can use it if you like. I trust you."

He could hear the smile in Draco's voice. "I always said you were gullible."

"I'm not gullible."

"I hate to tell you, but the only other option is stupid."

"If I had a pillow, I'd hit you with it."

Draco poked him in the side. "Bring it on, Potter."

Harry turned on his side to protect himself and poke Draco back, but then one of his hands was on Draco's body and Draco's breath was warm on his face and *Harry, this way madness lies.*

"I need sleep, you know. Picking up *your* slack can tire a man out."

Draco's laugh was affectionate. Even though there were strange things going on in Harry's chest and breathing was this overly difficult task, and Draco's hand still just touching his side seemed like the universe playing tricks, he was happy.

"Good night, Harry."

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"Malfoy asked you to his room and you didn't tell me?"

Harry looked at Ron with some concern. He was pacing the cold floor of the Owlery and looked as if he might have an apoplectic fit.

"Of course I didn't," Hermione answered. "I'd already slapped him, and you would have killed him and ended up in a lot of trouble."

"I wouldn't have - well, fine, I would have killed him, and why not? You're my girlfriend!" Ron exploded. "People can't go around making, like, indecent proposals to *other people's girlfriends!*" After Ron had said 'indecent proposals' his ears had gone red. Harry thought he knew that, and that it was making him angrier. "Anyway," he added in truculent tones, "who'd miss him?"

"I would," Harry said mildly.

"Harry, mate," Ron said. "I know you had a rotten childhood, and I'm going to assume that it warped your mind, and so I forgive you when you say things that are mental. But *Hermione*-"

Hermione was looking out of one of the glass-less windows again, her eyes smarting from the wind. She turned back to Ron with a rather distraught air.

"Well, it turned out all right, didn't it?" she asked, obviously trying to focus. "You heard Harry. Malfoy wasn't trying to proposition me, he was trying to recruit me for this dangerous little vigilante group."

"Hermione, that's not fair," Harry said. "You know if Lupin hadn't set up the Young Order you would have been the first to think up some kind of organisation to let us help."

"That may be," Hermione returned seriously, "but Professor Lupin did set it up, and I see no point in setting up some kind of conspiratorial band. Professor Lupin is doing a wonderful job-"

"Of course he is!" Harry exclaimed. "But people are getting kidnapped, and Professor Lupin is a teacher, he can't sanction creeping around and breaking rules. And this - conspiratorial band, if you like - it could really help other houses to understand each other. We were all almost getting on last night."

Ron looked unmoved.

"I don't want to understand Malfoy," he said flatly. "I think it would bring me out in a rash. And this group is *Malfoy's* idea, and the headquarters is *Malfoy's* bedroom, and I don't want anything to do with it!"

"Ron, I know how you feel," Harry ground out. "I'm not asking you to like him. I'm asking you to give this a chance."

Ron's colour was rising again.

"Look, Harry... Hermione's right. We've got the Young Order. I don't need to get mixed up with Malfoy and I know he's your-" Ron made a face - "friend again, and you've made up

with him after some fight that I'm sure was entirely his fault, and so I don't think you're entirely objective about this situation."

Harry sprang away from the wall.

"You're not, either," he snapped. "It wasn't his fault. You don't understand-"

"Please!" Hermione interrupted in a frayed voice. "Please, you two! Don't fight. I can't take it, not on top of everything else. Can't we just sit here and wait for this damn bird!"

She stood there looking cold and tense and unhappy, her hair flying in wisps in the cold wind. Hermione hardly ever swore.

Ron sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, going over to stand by the window beside her.

"Fine," he said in a rough voice, but taking her hands gently and rubbing them between his own. "He's not worth it anyway."

"I think he is," Harry said in subdued tones.

Hermione made a sound a little bit like a laugh. "Harry, we *know* that," she told him. "Just - stop talking about it. For now."

"I will if you say you'll talk to Parvati," Harry pushed on. "Or Terry Boot. Or someone. Just think about it, think about giving it a try."

Hermione did not look pleased, but she nodded reluctantly. She and Ron stood together at the window, shivering slightly.

"It's freezing," Hermione said. "I hope the weather breaks for June."

June coming already. And if the spy isn't caught, they either go out into the world as a trusted member of the real Order and betray people, or stay in Hogwarts with new people on the Young Council and Hogwarts gets decimated.

Harry had thought that this was the perfect opportunity to try and talk Ron and Hermione around. It was a Saturday and most people were at Hogsmeade, and they were all waiting up at the Owlery on Dumbledore's orders.

All the teachers were so busy these days, and it was essential that someone get the Owl from Juno McGonagall as soon as it came. Hermione was taking the responsibility very seriously.

In retrospect, possibly it was not the best time. Harry was a bit on edge about this too.

"If Professor McGonagall's sister says no..." Ron said at last, with his unfortunate habit of saying things people were trying not to think.

"She has to say yes!" Harry replied fiercely. "She wants justice for her sister, doesn't she?"

"It's just some old witches are very conservative," Ron warned. "And this is very experimental."

Hermione took refuge in explaining what she knew, her body easing as she spoke. "It's the same principle as the Priori Incantatus spell," she said earnestly, as if the problem would be solved if she could convince Ron and Harry. "Except instead of displaying the last spell produced from a wand, you are supposed to be able to see what wand cast the last spell on the object... or in this case the..." She stopped, and swallowed, and then said "body" in a short, hurt way. "There's a margin for error," she said hastily, "But this could really lead us to the murderer. She has to see that."

A thought was taking shape in Harry's mind, dark and inevitable.

That spell has to be performed, he thought, whether or not she does.

He couldn't ask Ron or Hermione to do that. Break the law, yes, perform experimental spells on Professor McGonagall's... no. But he would do it.

He and Draco could do it. If it had to be done.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by wingbeats from above. Two owls were flying in, and they settled on the window ledge where Ron and Hermione stood.

Perhaps it would be all right. Hermione was already untying the letters, and she would open the one addressed to Dumbledore and send the owl flying to St. Mungo's mortuary with proof that permission had been received from the next of kin.

Hermione looked agitated, pushing her hair back from her face in two sharp movements. "Ron, Harry, they're both addressed to Dumbledore - what should I do?"

It was Harry who answered, absolutely sure. "Open them both. We have no time to waste."

Hermione opened the first with shaking hands. Ron held her shoulder, his knuckles white, but she did not seem to notice that his grip was too tight. She gave a little cry of relief as she scanned the contents.

"It's from Juno McGonagall - she said yes! It's all right. Ron, quick, get my bag, get out an envelope and a quill and some parchment-"

Harry never knew what made him say it. "Hermione - what's in the other letter?"

She opened it hastily, carelessly, as Ron strode back over to them with her bag in his hands. And then her fingers shook again and the letter dropped.

Ron dropped her bag as well. She knelt down and reached for the letter, her fingers scrabbling heedlessly through the straw and the owl droppings. When she looked up, her face was very white.

"What is it?" Harry asked. His mouth was dry.

Even her lips were white. "Someone took it," she said. "Someone took Professor McGonagall's body. They stole it right from St. Mungo's mortuary - God knows what they've done to it - they didn't want us to find out who did it and now we won't!"

Hermione stood up, her hair practically crackling, and the wild set look on her face that Harry had only ever seen a few times and that always alarmed him and made him feel as if he had underestimated her. Someone, her stance suggested, would pay for this.

This time he was in full, grim agreement. Someone had to.

Still, her words surprised him. "We should have had it done right away," she said furiously. "You-Know-Who and his people aren't staying within the law, are they? We should have known what would happen if we delayed. We shouldn't have cared about the stupid-"

For a panicked instant, Harry thought Hermione was going to cry. Then she began storming towards the door.

"Harry, where's Malfoy?" she demanded. "I'll join his stupid group! I'll do whatever it takes! Come on, let's go to Hogsmeade!"

She was down the stairs in a whirl of her cloak. Harry glanced over at Ron, who looked as bleak as Harry felt, but who still looked as if he needed persuading.

"Well," he said, "you're not going to let her go to meetings in Draco's room without you, are you?"

They went after her.

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They found Professor Dumbledore and Lupin and told them before they went anywhere. With that and their walk to Hogsmeade, Hermione calmed down. They were all used to absorbing shocks and going on by now.

Nothing made her waver. Harry was desperately proud of her.

They looked in several shops, and found the Slytherins in the Three Broomsticks. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be having pub lunches, Draco and Zabini had half-finished drinks and Pansy was eating a large chocolate sundae. In spite of everything, Harry smiled as he saw Draco trying to steal some of the sundae.

Pansy hit him on the knuckles with her spoon. "Draco, if you touch my ice-cream again I'll hex you," she warned. "I am a woman. It is chocolate. What part of this do you not understand?"

Hermione strode over to their table.

"Malfoy," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Pansy cast a disgusted look over her shoulder. "Oh look," she said. "It's a little pack of ravening Gryffindors. C'mon, Blaise, let's get a great big drink. Draco, don't touch my ice-cream."

She and Zabini got up, pushing past them. Draco looked up, his eyes wide as if he had only just noticed them.

"Granger," he said. "Charmed, I'm sure. If you're here to inquire whether my offer is still open-"

"Draco, don't," said Harry.

"Someone stole Professor McGonagall's body," Hermione told him shortly. "We can't perform the spell. Tell me about this group of yours."

"Someone did what?" Draco's eyes were suddenly narrowed and cold.

"Stole it," Harry said. "And someone's going to pay."

Something lit in Draco's face that had even been missing from Hermione's rage, frightening and fierce and like looking into a mirror, suddenly tilted up towards you.

"Oh yes," he answered. He and Harry shared a smile, like a furious promise.

Ron recalled them back to the pub and what had to be done now.

"They'll pay," he said grimly, taking Pansy's chair. "I'll join the group if Hermione does. I'll do what I have to do. But I don't like you, Malfoy, and I never will. And I don't think this is a good idea."

"Oh no, Weasel, you don't like me? How will I ever survive," Draco sneered. "Grant me the sunlight of your godly red-haired approval, or I will wither away and die."

"Sod off, Malfoy, because you are not funny."

Ron scowled and mashed Pansy's ice-cream with an angrily wielded spoon.

Hermione remained standing up with her arms folded. "Tell me about your group, Malfoy," she repeated.

Draco leaned forward. "It's not my group," he answered. "I'm not the leader. I just thought we should all conspire together to catch the enemy by any means necessary. Do you have any qualms about that - or about joining a group a Malfoy started?"

Ron looked at his intense face, and seemed unimpressed. He began moodily eating the chocolate sundae, but he looked resigned when Hermione spoke.

"Count me in," she said.

"I'm in if she is," Ron said steadily, spooning up another mouthful. Draco looked annoyed and Ron made sure it was a big one.

At least we're doing something, Harry thought. *It's bad but we're doing something.* He looked down at Draco, and Draco nodded.

Hermione seemed to deflate, her energy going. "I'll meet you in the library on Sunday to talk about our shared project," she said. "Ron, Harry, let's go."

It was time to go, especially since Zabini and Pansy were making their way back towards the table and Harry did not want to see his best friend die at the hands of Pansy Parkinson.

For some reason he lingered as Hermione and Ron turned to go, looking down at that bowed, silvery-blond head.

"Maybe we could do something," he suggested. "Later."

Draco looked up at him, and after a moment he smiled. "I'm a little busy," he answered. "But soon."

"All right," Harry said reluctantly, and followed Ron and Hermione as they went.

They were passing the threshold of the pub when they heard Pansy exclaim, "Draco, how could you?" There was a sound very much like someone hitting someone else over the head with a spoon.

"Ow!" Draco exclaimed.

Ron looked happy.

*

Harry arranged to meet Terry Boot in the library at the same time Hermione and Draco were meeting, anxious to see if they were co-operating.

He started laying out his parchment on a table near but not too near by, as Hermione walked up to the table Draco already had set up. Draco lifted his face to hers, his eyes dancing.

"Couldn't keep away?" he asked, a mocking caress in his voice.

"Save it, Malfoy," Hermione advised. "Harry explained. I expect I owe you an apology for misinterpreting your motives." Her tone indicated that she had no intention of offering any such apology.

"Oh, think nothing of it," Draco told her courteously. "Wishful thinking is a powerful influence on the mind."

"Please, don't flatter yourself. Can we get to work, Malfoy, or do I have to-"

Draco, who seemed to be having fun, smiled his most provoking smile. "Are you going to bitch-slap me again, Granger?"

"Maybe," Hermione said grimly.

He tossed his hair back. "Go ahead. I kind of like it."

"Malfoy!" Hermione went scarlet. She looked down at her parchment and apparently drew strength from it. "Malfoy, I promise you - there will always be countless people dying to slap you. Can we get to work now?"

Draco opened a large spell book, his face turning serious and absorbed. Harry looked over for another moment, and then Terry Boot came up to him with his bag slung over his shoulder.

Harry looked away and down fast, terrified that his face had betrayed him.

When he glanced up, Terry did not seem to have noticed anything. He took parchment and a quill from his bag and sat down opposite Harry, and seemed to be searching for something to say.

Harry had never been the type who mixed with lots of people, and all he knew about Terry was that he was shy and didn't like Quidditch. Normally he would have been at a loss for words.

He had been thinking, though, and he had something to accomplish.

"You're the Head Boy," he stated.

Terry blinked and ruffled his brown hair. Even without his reading glasses, Harry had never met anyone who looked more like a worried owl. "Yes," he said, his voice measured. "I have been for quite some time, you know."

"Yes, yes. But you're a Ravenclaw," Harry elaborated. "And you're the Head Boy. So you've got to have a certain authority there. Look... what Draco has been saying is true. We all have to start co-operating and mingling better. If the spy is a student, they're almost certainly using house prejudices. Nobody wants to think the spy is in their house, and it's much easier to distrust people you don't know. And if the spy is a teacher... we're in a situation where we have to work together. We absolutely have to."

If Sirius and Lupin hadn't distrusted each other, Sirius would never have put too much faith in Wormtail. And this isn't a few people... this is a whole school.

Terry still looked worried. "I understand what you're saying, Harry, but - well. We all know that house stereotypes don't always hold true. I mean, you could hardly call Draco's friend Crabbe cunning, and anyone would think Hermione belonged in Ravenclaw. But there are different - feelings in every house. Ravenclaws band together less than any of the other houses. We tend to decide things and act on them with individual judgements. I don't think we're the type armies are made of."

Harry looked over at Terry, and felt a flicker of resentment. *I see what Draco meant*, he thought. *He's intelligent. They must have a lot in common.*

He crushed it down because it was stupid. "Personal preferences or not," he said, "this is war. I'm talking sense. Draco's talking sense. You can see that, surely?"

"I can," Terry answered slowly. "I could last night. Draco is very astute."

"But we can't talk sense to an entire house. Draco especially won't be trusted. You say it depends on individual judgements, but you have to command a certain amount of respect. So - lay it out before them, and let them make their judgements."

Terry looked thoughtful. Harry looked over at Hermione and Draco, who seemed to be getting enthusiastic about some ancient runes together. Draco was smiling that small smile, the smile that was not for effect and that nobody was supposed to see.

A spy killed my parents. Let them try - just let them try - to touch my friends.

Terry made his decision. "I'll try."

Harry nodded. "Try to succeed."

*

It was Monday when it happened and, fittingly enough, they were all in Potions. Professor Lupin, the nicest substitute teacher ever made, was giving them tips on how to handle the upcoming practical Potions NEWT.

"The most important thing," he advised, his grey eyes gleaming in Neville's direction, "is *not to panic*."

Neville laughed, looking somewhat shamefaced.

"The most important thing is to make sure Granger's working next to you, Longbottom," Draco said in an undertone.

Harry turned around and gave him a reproachful look. Draco made an agitated gesture.

"Well he does!" he hissed. "I've *seen* her helping him! That's *cheating*!"

"I've seen you play Quidditch," Harry reminded him.

"That's different," Draco whispered back. "This is *Potions*."

"Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter," said Lupin. "I couldn't be more pleased that you two don't look like stabbing each other at the next Young Order meeting, but really, your practical is in two weeks. I'm sure your conversation can keep."

"I'm sorry, sir," Draco replied, resting his chin on his fist and undoubtedly looking up at Lupin with huge, limpid eyes. "It was all his fault. He's a bad influence."

The Slytherins snickered. Harry was pleased to see Parvati and Lavender giggle as he made a laughing protest over the noise, and then the door opened and an under-sized first year Slytherin came running in.

"Draco!" said tiny Edmund Baddock. "I m-mean, Malfoy!"

Draco glanced around. "This had better be important, Baddock."

"It is!" Edmund's words were tumbling over each other. "It *is*, he's - he's back, Malfoy! He's *back*!"

There was a stunned pause. Then Blaise Zabini gave an incoherent whoop, stood up and vaulted over his desk, displaying a flash of entirely non-uniform leather trousers, and then bolting out of the door.

"Mr Zabini," Lupin called after him mildly, "I'm sure those trousers aren't supposed to be-"

His voice was entirely lost in the sudden Slytherin racket. Crabbe got up, knocking his chair over and then stepping on it and breaking the back. He disentangled himself and made determinedly for the door, not looking back. All the others were flooding towards the door. Draco was in the lead.

They were all gone in under a minute.

"You may be excused," Lupin said in their wake. He turned and gave one of his tired, kind smiles to the others. "Come on. We can all go."

Harry made Ron and Hermione come with him quickly, although once they got into the corridors progress was difficult. Hogwarts seemed suddenly and insanely full of Slytherins, a racing, seething, brutally shoving mass of Slytherins all making for the Great Hall like lemmings for the cliffs.

Harry and the others just made it to the doors of the Great Hall when the first wave hit. Slytherins were slamming elbows into each other's stomachs to get there first, but the one who headed the rush turned out to be Pansy.

Pansy Parkinson, generally considered a hard-hearted cow, whose habitual expression was a scowl, and who now flung herself at Professor Snape and threw her arms around his neck.

"Professor Snape!" she exclaimed, "you're back! You're back! I *knew* you'd come back!"

Then she kissed him on both cheeks and burst into tears.

"A woman voluntarily touched Professor Snape," Ron said in an awed voice. "That's it, I've seen everything. I can die now."

Professor Snape looked absolutely horrified. "Miss Parkinson, *please* control yourself," he said, in his most severe tones. "This exhibition is entirely uncalled for."

Pansy released him reluctantly, stepping back and stifling a sob against her hand. No student in the history of Hogwarts, Harry thought, could ever have looked so happy to be told off.

"Me next," said Blaise Zabini intrepidly.

"Nobody next," Professor Snape said sternly. He looked around at the pushing crowd of Slytherins. "You all appear to be missing lessons," he said. "I trust this does not happen frequently. Malfoy?"

Draco was standing right beside him, looking into his face. He was not even smiling. He simply looked absolutely relaxed, and glowing. It was stupid and girly, but Harry couldn't help looking at him and thinking, *beautiful*.

"Yes, sir," Draco said, his voice calm on the surface and bubbling underneath, as if he was just about to break out into delighted laughter.

Professor Snape's unpleasant, rasping voice was even more dry than usual. "Did you happen to look up from your full-time occupation of hair care every now and then to check on the well-being of this house?"

"I did a month or so ago," Draco said earnestly, "but then I got a split end, Professor, and it required all my attention."

It was hard to tell since his face was set in those sardonic lines and behind that long, greasy hair, but Harry thought Professor Snape might have smiled just a little. "You can't take it with you, Malfoy."

Draco did smile then, his whole face lighting up. His voice was still pretending to be casual. "Then, sir, I'm not going."

Pansy was still sobbing.

"Oh, for... You may have my handkerchief, Miss Parkinson," Snape said, taking it out of his pocket. "Return it to me, and cease this disgraceful display at once."

She nodded and smiled in a way that was equally extremely bright and ridiculously watery.

Then the teachers arrived, walking past Harry, Ron and Hermione towards Snape. Lupin had Sirius' arm in a firm grip and was frogmarching him in Snape's direction. He offered his other hand cordially to Snape.

"Professor Snape, I'm almost as relieved as your students to see you back safe," he said, and smiled.

Snape darted a dark, suspicious look at him, but he cautiously accepted Lupin's hand, and shook it briefly.

"And of course Professor Black is..." Lupin shook Sirius' arm encouragingly and perhaps a little too hard.

Sirius gave Snape a baleful look. "I'm... all right with the fact that you're... not dead," he said between his teeth.

Snape sneered back at him.

"I'm very pleased that my staff are all getting on so charmingly," said Dumbledore in his genial and gently ironic way, coming up to Snape. He offered his hand, and this hand Snape took without hesitation. "Severus," said Dumbledore. "It's splendid to have you back. We have all missed you. I will, of course, wish to talk to you about your doubtless extremely instructive travels later."

There were people here who were not in the Young Order, and who had not declared allegiance one way or the other. It was not safe.

"Tomorrow will do well," Dumbledore continued generously. "Now, I believe, your return calls for a celebration. What do your students think, Severus?"

*

"We're actually celebrating Snape coming back to teach us. This has to be rock bottom," Ron remarked, making an astonished face at his Butterbeer.

Madam Rosmerta was looking surprised and thrilled. Monday night, Harry expected, was usually slow in the Three Broomsticks, and now all of Hogwarts had descended upon it and demanded drinks.

Loud music had been struck up, and people were dancing. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had secured a little table. They had all ordered Butterbeers, but Harry had thought of another occasion in this pub, smiled ruefully at himself and ordered a mead.

"Harry, you're not eighteen yet!" Hermione hissed when Madam Rosmerta left. "You're breaking the law."

"I'll live with myself somehow," Harry said, and sipped his mead.

Ginny laughed. She was sitting close by Harry on the bench, and Harry was glad she was there. She seemed honestly happy for the Slytherins, and that Snape had returned.

"Look at them," she said, gesturing. "They feel so much safer now, you can see it. I'm so glad."

Harry smiled his gratitude at her, and she smiled back. She obviously felt what he wanted to feel, just open joy, and he *was* glad that Snape wasn't dead, and he was so relieved for Draco, but... Well. He had always hated Snape and that didn't change, and besides...

He was being small and petty and absurd. But Draco had never smiled that rapt smile at *him*, and he had tried to speak to Draco as they were all going into the pub and Draco had not even noticed. Obviously, he was occupied - but then he had been occupied all weekend, too.

He was sitting on the hearth by a crackling fire, close to Snape's chair. There was a whole ring of Slytherins there, who occasionally went off to dance or to drink, but who always drifted back.

"I hope Professor Snape brought back some information," Hermione said quietly, and then shook her head and obviously tried to distract herself. "Would you look at that cow Pansy," she said. "I caught her buying drinks for first years."

Pansy, all cleaned up now and apparently dispensing threats to anyone who brought up the crying business, was walking over to Professor Snape's chair and trying to balance her large drink in the crush. Harry had to admit that her black dress was very tight and very short, which was what seemed to be upsetting Hermione.

She rested her drink against the mantelpiece and ruffled Draco's hair, which looked gold in the firelight. Draco pushed her hand away, but he beamed up at her.

Really, her dress was too tight and short. He saw Hermione's point entirely.

"All the Slytherins look ridiculous," Ron agreed. "Look at Blaise Zabini."

Blaise Zabini had apparently been drinking shots, and was now dancing enthusiastically with everybody he could corner. Theodore Nott was looking traumatised.

"I still think it's nice to see people looking happy," Ginny insisted. "There's enough bad feeling around."

Harry finished his mead. "I agree with Ginny," he said firmly, and put a brotherly arm around her shoulders. Then he beckoned for another mead.

Everyone was relaxing, celebrating, there was nothing to do now and Harry was afraid to think. He drank the second as fast as he could.

Draco tilted his face up to Professor Snape's, still glowing, and he said something soft, but then everyone around them stilled and Harry realised that he must have said something serious. He leaned forward to try and hear better.

"Yes," Snape said in his carrying, harsh voice. "I'd heard. I was - almost overwhelmed by the news. Professor McGonagall was a very... worthy colleague, and it did nothing for my peace of mind to hear that she had been replaced by one I consider not only incompetent but dangerous."

His black eyes flicked over to Sirius, who was sitting at a table with Lupin. Sirius jumped up and everyone in the room tensed, but then Lupin quickly moved his chair so Sirius was pinned in between the table, the chair and the wall. Sirius snarled something in outraged protest.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Lupin said, not moving. "Am I in your way?"

Sirius snarled something else and then sat back down and yelled for another Firewhiskey. Draco looked over at him, his eyes hard, and Harry had that feeling he had taken for granted for years - that he and Draco were on opposite sides.

He tried to catch Draco's eye, but could not. He felt a bit sick.

When he ordered his next mead, Ron decided he wanted one too. Harry cheered up slightly as they got into a bit of a competition and ordered Firewhiskey next.

Everyone was drinking a lot. Professor Snape had a really impressive collection of bottles in front of him, because every student in his house seemed set on buying him a drink.

Eventually, Hermione intervened. "Ron," she said firmly, "You're drunk."

"No, no," Ron replied with great conviction, coming back with two more glasses of Firewhiskey. "I'm not, I'm completely-" He missed his stool when he sat down, and looked up from the floor with a wide-eyed, injured look. "Hermione," he said, after a moment and in tones of great astonishment, "I think perhaps I am drunk. You're always right."

Hermione put her arm around him and helped him back onto his stool, but did not let go. Ron, who was apparently an affectionate drunk - and who would have thought it - leaned in towards her and whispered something in her ear, then kissed her under it. She relaxed a little and turned to him, their faces warm and happy.

Harry pulled both the glasses of Firewhiskey towards himself.

Blaise Zabini had finally managed to persuade Draco onto the dance floor, though he kept glancing back to the group around Snape. Still, he seemed to be having fun, and he danced well, lithe and smooth and light as a cat, slipping out of Zabini's grasp like water but sparkling at him as he did so.

Then he detached himself gracefully and made his way back to the group just as Crabbe got up from the sofa by Snape's chair. Draco took possession, curling his legs up on the sofa and looking like a happy cat.

Harry looked away desperately, and then saw Ron and Hermione smiling and kissing, and looked away desperately again.

"I'm so happy that you and Malfoy have made up," came Ginny's soft voice, putting her hand in his. It was a nice gesture of affection, Harry thought. He looked at her with relief. "I know how unhappy you were when you were fighting. Did Malfoy say sorry?"

Her warmth and sympathy was nice, too. Her red hair was going in and out of focus, a bright blurry shape around her, but her face was kind.

"How d'you know I didn't?" Harry asked.

Ginny blinked. "I can't think why you'd have to," she said. "I know you. You'd never try to hurt anyone. I don't believe you could want to hurt Malfoy. And of course he knows that, too. Anyone who knows you can see what you're like."

"Oh, Ginny..."

The enormity of her misplaced faith made Harry absolutely unable to contradict her. He didn't even want to. He *wanted* to be like that, wanted Draco to know that, wanted Draco to look at him with shining belief in his eyes, even if there was nothing else there.

"Harry, are you upset about something?" Ginny asked. There was such concern on her face. Harry soaked it up. The whole world seemed a bit blurry, and he was desperate for some comfort. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he murmured, and leaned forward without exactly meaning to and touched her lips with his own.

She leaned forward and melted into the kiss instantly, which he supposed was good. Her hands moved lightly to rest against his shoulder and his ribs, and he realised that he had forgotten to touch her, and her eyes fluttered shut, a red fringe of lashes against her freckled cheeks, and he realised that he had forgotten to do that too.

He shifted the awkward angle of the kiss, and found himself looking past her ear.

Draco was still curled up on that sofa, and he was looking straight at Harry at last. The glow was gone from his face, and he was staring blankly.

His eyes were cool grey and still, and the world came back into focus. Harry's hand came up, tilting Ginny's chin. He kept his fingers against her jaw, holding her in place, and he locked gazes with Draco.

The expression on Draco's face was unreadable but he was *there*, looking at Harry, paying attention. The fire was still playing on his hair and making it seem golden, but his eyes were as they always were, wide open and intent, and Harry was kissing harder and deeper, and...

Everything was shattered by Sirius trying to sing the Puddlemere United team chant.

Harry rocked back, shocked. *What have I done?*

And Ginny gazed up at him, her mouth looking almost bruised and her eyes huge. And Draco looked away without any fuss, turning his head to talk to Pansy.

"They're the men in purple, who no-one can withstand!" roared Sirius. "We're the men in purple, we always get our man!"

"Yes, Sirius, very nice," Lupin said patiently. "I think we should go home now. So you can still face your students in the morning," he added in an undertone.

He levered Sirius out of his chair, trying to bear the taller man, but then Sirius staggered almost into Harry's table. Harry tried to move, but he was on the wrong side of the bench and Ginny got there first, propping Sirius up as fast as she could.

"Ginny," Lupin said gratefully, "thanks so much. Would it be awful of me to drag you away? I think I need some help getting him home. I promise I won't keep you too long."

Ginny cast Harry a distressed look. Harry nodded encouragement with extreme vigour, so she slipped off the bench and went.

This exit seemed to be the cue for the other teachers to round up what students they could. The Slytherins were notably stubborn about going, but most of the students - below seventh year and thus definitely underage - from the other houses were rounded up. Harry relaxed, fairly sure that Ginny would not be allowed to come back but swept up and sent to bed with the others.

What had Draco thought of that? Oh, alcohol was a bad thing. He could see that now.

There was an arm against Harry's shoulder and a hand over his eyes.

"Guess who."

Harry pushed the hand away and grinned. "Draco," he said, turning his head and reaching a hand up to touch the inside of the arm still against his shoulder.

Draco smiled amusedly down at him. Harry was eye-level with the pulse point at the base of Draco's throat. He looked hastily away and over at Ron, who had disentangled himself from Hermione and was looking appalled by the fact that Harry was touching Malfoy and probably getting all kinds of dungeon germs.

"Did we ask you to join us?" he said.

"Like I want to," Draco answered, his tone still light and playful. "I simply want to borrow Harry. I need him." He lowered his voice and spoke to Harry. "Hey," he said. "I know you don't like him and everything... but Professor Snape looks done in, and drunk out of his mind, and all of ours are having fun. Would you mind helping me out with him?"

"Sure, of course," Harry told him.

Draco moved away, which was a good thing, because he had been warm against Harry's back, and Harry was confused enough.

He waited outside the ring of Slytherins as Draco manoeuvred Snape out of his chair and past them, to a chorus of protests and farewells.

"I'll be back," Draco promised over his shoulder. "Buy me a drink and save me a dance."

"Who should save you a dance?" called Zabini.

Draco winked. "Everyone, of course. Who else?"

Harry grabbed Snape's other arm as they went out the door.

"What an oaf that Black is," Snape remarked loudly. "Like godfather, like godson."

It came as no great surprise that Snape was a nasty drunk.

"Don't worry, sir," Draco said cheerfully. "We'll all be humming the Puddlemere United song behind his back for weeks after this. You'll see, it will be fun."

Snape brightened. Harry set his jaw and pushed on. Snape, despite the fact he looked stringy as an underfed vulture, was actually kind of heavy. Harry was taking this as a cosmic punishment. You kissed Ginny Weasley, you ended up carrying Snape for all eternity. Or something like that.

They were nearly at the gates of Hogwarts when Snape stumbled and, despite all their efforts, fell hard.

He looked up at Draco through narrowed black eyes.

"This had - this'd better never be a story you tell around Slytherin House," he said, slurring his words. "Or it'll be house points. Dimin-diminishes respect, seeing your teacher-"

Draco took his arm, gently. "Don't worry, I still respect you more than anybody, Professor Snape. Except my father," he added. "You're my role models," he added, encouragingly. "Can you stand up now?"

Something clouded Snape's hook-featured face. "Lucius Malfoy," he said, with a venom he usually reserved for Harry. "Draco, you must - you mustn't follow the example of your father. Or me." His mouth twisted on its normal bitter lines.

Draco knelt down and tried to ease him up. "But I want to," he said, soothingly. "Of course I do. Who else is any kind of decent example? It's just you and Father."

Snape's lolling head hit Draco's shoulder, but he did get up. "No," he said in a thick voice. "You're better than that." Then he glared over at Harry through his greasy locks, sidetracked. "What are *you* looking at, Potter? What are you even doing here?"

"Believe me, I'm wondering that myself," Harry replied, and grabbed Snape's other arm again.

Snape was practically unconscious by the time they got him down to the dungeons, and he could not even mumble out a last insult as they bundled him into his room and onto his bed. It was a spartan room, and the bed was the only piece of furniture in it.

Harry and Draco stood looking down at him.

"Are you, um, going to undress him?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"Um, no, no I don't think so," Draco said, sounding about equally horrified at the thought. "I told you, I respect the man. I want to still respect him in the morning." He shot Harry a laughing look. "*You* could do it," he suggested brightly. "Might help with that crisis of yours."

"Yes," Harry said, "by making sure that I never want to look at another human being again."

"He'll be fine," Draco decided. "Let's go."

They made their way back to Hogsmeade in the dark, and as they went Harry realised that this was the first time he had been alone with Draco since they'd made up.

"I want to-" he began, when Draco interrupted him.

"So, Ginny Weasley?" he said. Harry realised, with a sinking feeling, that he was going to make light of the whole thing. "Cute redheaded solution to the crisis. I highly approve."

"Ginny," Harry said, carefully. "She's-"

"She's very pretty," Draco filled in. "But if it's not serious-"

"Of course it's not serious!"

"Well, there's still Morag. And oh, you were getting on well with Terry Boot, weren't-"

Harry whirled on Draco. "Draco, don't!"

"I was only speculating," Draco told him defensively. "I happen to think Ginny Weasley is a very fanciable young thing."

At that point, Ron and Hermione appeared, on their way home. Draco glanced at Ron apprehensively, and looked quite prepared to use Harry as a body shield.

Neither of them seemed to have heard. "Harry, come back with us," Hermione said, looking a little anxious.

"Yes, you probably should," Draco agreed. "Slytherins will be the only ones left. Thanks for-"

"I'm not *going*," Harry snapped. "I want to talk to Draco."

Draco looked poised for flight. "We can talk later."

"We're going to talk now," Harry said.

"Well..." Hermione looked uncertain. Ron blinked at them.

Draco waved a hand. "Go on," he said in an imperious voice. Harry was distantly amazed when they went.

Then Draco began to walk, fast, towards Hogsmeade.

"What do you have to say?" he asked in a voice gone suddenly very casual. Harry looked over at the taut line of his jaw.

"You've got to stop doing this," he said bleakly.

"Doing what?" Draco inquired.

"You know what," Harry snapped.

Draco kept walking and Harry felt a completely unjustifiable surge of rage, and he grabbed Draco's arm and spun him around. Draco faced him, his eyes wide and cold with sudden fury. He tried to wrench his arm away but Harry hung on, and he tried to move away but Harry blocked him, and then he shoved with his other arm and Harry shoved back. There was a brief breathless tussle for a moment.

"Stop and *listen*," snarled Harry.

"No, damn it! I don't know what you're talking about," Draco yelled. "I'm not-"

"You've got to stop testing me!" Harry shouted. "You've got to stop not trusting me!"

Draco stilled and Harry got under his guard, forcing his chin up.

"You don't even look at me anymore," he continued, more softly. "You smile and then you look away, or you forget and look and then remember and look away faster."

"I'm looking at you now," Draco said in a strained voice. "You haven't changed. Good to know. Stop talking like a lunatic."

"I'm not," Harry snapped. "You know what I'm talking about. We had a fight and we only just made up and you don't have a free hour all weekend? You always did before."

They were off the path now, walking almost blind and shouting against the night wind. Harry didn't give a damn.

Draco lifted his chin. "I'm busy, and the world does not revolve around you, Harry Potter, despite what you've always believed. Besides, the fight wasn't *my* fault-"

"No!" Harry shouted back. "It was mine, but I explained, and you said it was all right. So why can't you let it be all right, Draco? Do you think I'm stupid? You pretend that it's all right and then you keep testing me. The accidental brush of a hand at night, your hand staying on my shoulder, all the stupid teasing about Hermione, talking about special company and the little trick with your hand over my eyes. I promised! So why don't you let your guard down for a change and *believe* me!"

"Why should I?" Draco snarled, fighting to get away again. "Why should I when you do things like kissing Ginny Weasley when you're *looking*... what am I supposed to do about that? That was bloody disturbing! How am I supposed to act if I don't know what to *do*?"

Harry leaned in furiously, trying to make him understand. "I don't know what to do either!" he yelled. "Do you think I do, how could you think I have any idea what I'm doing when I make horrible mistakes like-"

"Let me go," Draco said, his voice suddenly clear and very thin. Harry realised in a way that was confused at first then fast became precise and the only thing that mattered in the world, that Draco's face was very close. His eyes were cold but so focused, on Harry and only him,

like a cornered predator. "Let me go," Draco repeated in thin ringing tones. "You promised, so let me go!"

Harry let go and Draco broke away, just one step but taking it as fast as he could and then rubbing his mouth with the back of his fist for no reason Harry could see. His chest was moving up and down hard.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I promised. So I let go."

"I should have bloody thumped you," Draco said balefully.

"But you didn't," Harry pointed out. "You trusted me to let go when you said. So why do I have to push you right to the edge to see if you trust me or not?" he demanded. "Why can't you just - trust me all the time?"

"I'm *trying*!" Draco shouted. He calmed down a little after that, and looked up at Harry properly. "It's not easy," he explained, that thin cornered note in his voice again. "People have their own agendas, I can't just *be sure*."

"What if you are?"

A corner of Draco's mouth twisted. "Screw you, Potter. Then I'm stupid." He paused. "Fantastic proposition, anyway. Trust me because I make horrible mistakes all the time."

"This is how normal people behave, Draco," Harry explained, and made a superior face at him. "I understand it's hard for you."

Draco made a half-hearted attempt to hit him. "Can I go back to my party now?" he asked plaintively. "It's cold, you know. This shirt is silk. If you think it keeps out the wind, you are more stupid than even I had previously supposed."

"Can you just trust me?" Harry asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I do, Harry. You have no idea how I do," he said in a bored voice. "For you are Harry Potter, brave and righteous saviour of the wizarding world. Who is there who doubts his nobility and truth? They will answer to the people, and the people will look upon them with scorn and bid them begone, and also make hurtful personal comments."

"I knew it all along."

Draco began to walk towards the path. "Naturally you did," he said. "That's why we had to have a screaming match in the middle of the night. Because you're so confident about everything in the whole world."

"Scenes are a thing we do together," Harry said, as they found the path.

"I'd rather eat ice-cream," Draco said. "Can we do that instead?"

"All right. How does tomorrow sound to you?"

Draco put his hands in his pockets. "Fine."

They were coming up to the Three Broomsticks now, and there was light and an awful lot of noise streaming for it. Draco cocked his head towards it and suddenly looked horrified.

"Oh no, it's the song," he said. "Maybe I don't want to go inside. No, I think I'll come back to the school with you."

"What song?" Harry asked.

"No song," Draco replied hurriedly. "How about that school, Harry? Come with me. I think you'll like it. It's castle shaped."

The tune was familiar. It actually reminded Harry of that malicious little jingle Draco had thought up in fifth year when Ron had had his ill-fated stint as a Keeper. As he recalled, it had ended up getting turned around on him when Ron made a lucky catch.

The familiar tune coalesced into almost-familiar words. Something mildly obscene and ending with the triumphant chorus of 'Malfoy is our king!'

"Ah, I see you've remembered," Draco said in a mock-chipper voice. "Yes, yes, my lovely housemates changed the song, yes they embarrass me with it almost every time they get drunk, yes I am an object of public derision. Why do all my cunning plots boomerang back on me?"

"I think that's kind of in the nature of a boomerang," Harry answered.

"No," Draco corrected him. "A warrior's trusty boomerang is supposed to fly out, slay his enemies, and then return safely to his hand."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe you need to get better at throwing boomerangs."

Draco opened the door a little, and more light and noise flooded in. "I have," he answered, grinning. "Hadh't you noticed? I've just stopped aiming them at you and yours."

"He throws tantrums, he gets seasick

He does impressions of Professor Flitwick

That's why Slytherins all sing

Malfoy is our king!"

Pansy opened the door all the way, face flushed. "Draco," she said loudly and cheerfully. "We're singing your song. Come on in!"

"I hate this song," Draco grumbled at her. He turned to Harry. "I should get some people and walk back with you-"

Just then, Lavender and Parvati walked out.

"Nah, I'll go with them," Harry said. "Have fun." He paused. "We're okay? Really?"

Draco reached out, then caught himself, laughed and let his hand fall. The lights of the inn outlined his hair and blurred his face.

"Yes," he said, his voice sure. Then he said, "Goodnight, Harry," and shut the door.

Harry stayed outside for a moment, ignoring Parvati and Lavender's call for him to follow. It was just - Draco's wide, almost savagely distrustful gaze, and the stupid malicious little song he'd made up, and the malice hadn't changed, he knew that much. It was something about the feel of him, and being able to scream out bleak things in the night wind.

No matter how stupid it was, he was certain.

I want that.

Chapter Sixteen: Disaster Beckons

*Someone to need you too much
Someone to know you too well
Someone to pull you up short
And put you through hell*

"All right, Young Council, to order. There was an amazing spate of new plans last week," Lupin said, with an unreadable look around.

Harry was suddenly certain that Professor Lupin was about to mention conspiratorial meetings in the dungeons, and give out a thousand years of detention.

Instead, he said: "How are they working out? The nighttime roll call?"

"We've got the lists up in every common room," Hermione informed him, beaming. "We haven't had a disappearance since we set them up."

"And the wards around the emergency supplies?"

"The new spells are up and nasty," Draco said with some satisfaction.

He had had them all up all night sorting through Restricted Section books they had procured using the Invisibility Cloak and Silencing spells, and Hermione had had a shouting match with him over the ethics of testing them out on animals. He had then suggested Hufflepuff first-years.

"I had no doubt of the latter, Mr Malfoy," Lupin told him.

Draco straightened from his slouch and gave him a winningly innocent look. Lupin raised his eyebrows and returned to his papers.

"How about the emergency alarm idea?"

"Ah," said Harry, and grinned. "You'll like this, Professor. We've got the ghosts of each house to agree to be guards. They stand on watch in the common room every night, and if they see someone who shouldn't be there, or a student reports multiple disappearances, then they go through the walls shrieking and alerting everyone. They say they can make themselves heard throughout the castle, and once we hear it we go into our common rooms and take the roll. Then we all assemble in the Great Hall."

He was proud of that one. He remembered Peeves giving the alarm on certain other unfortunate occasions. In which of course Harry had been an unfortunate victim of circumstances, and the alarm had been completely unwarranted and unfair.

"Ingenious," Lupin murmured. "Also explains why I found the Fat Friar shouting into a vase. I was quite worried about that, I have no idea what we'd do with a ghost having nervous breakdowns."

He rolled up his parchment and gave them all a smile.

"Miss Granger, I hear that all the first years are living in terror of your organisational skills. Mr Malfoy, there's a distressing rumour that a toad in your possession somehow turned into a roast chicken. Mr Potter, the fact that I thought that my bedroom was haunted by a banshee is probably down to your guards practising in my corridor. The meeting is concluded," Lupin said. "I couldn't be prouder of any of you."

Hannah Abbott was blushing with pleasure. Hermione's eyes were shining. Draco caught Harry's eye and grinned.

"You can all go. Except you, Harry, I need a word," Lupin told him in an undertone.

Harry waited as the others filed out. Lupin leaned forward, suddenly more casual and familiar, and as he did so Harry realised he was looking even more frayed than his robes. Four years ago, his hair had been greying, and now it was silver streaked with brown.

Lupin wasn't even forty yet.

"The Ministry has ruled that the display of Pensieve-recorded thoughts to the Young Order - or the real Order, come to that - would be illegal," he said quietly.

Harry's mouth fell open. "What? But I gave *permission*!" he protested. "I told them it was all right! They're my thoughts, why can't I-"

"There is nothing I can do about it. Professor Dumbledore has endorsed the decision," Lupin told him. He shrugged and leaned back, fingers pressing against his temples. "As I understand it," he said with a small smile, "it's much like nudity. It is your body, but it is still illegal to display it in public. Your thoughts are just as personal, and as avidly protected by the law."

Harry was still outraged, but he was also distracted by the sudden, terrible thought that in that case he had sort of been voyeuristic towards Dumbledore. Moreover, there was an awful five-year-old part of him giggling that a teacher had just said nudity.

"However, again like nudity, it is entirely permissible to display it in private to an interested individual or group," Lupin said thoughtfully.

The five-year-old Harry Potter cackled.

Harry got a stranglehold on his inner child. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"If you were to ask for the Pensieve, while promising not to show it to the Young Order, it would be returned to you. They are your thoughts," Lupin said. "Naturally, we would trust you to keep it entirely secure."

"Oh," said Harry. "Oh. Yes, I could do that."

"I hear that a few interhouse sleepovers have been taking place lately," Lupin remarked. "Now that's what I like to see. Co-operation."

He stood up, and picked up his rolls.

"Please understand, Harry, that I am encouraging you to keep strictly within the letter of the law," he said. A corner of his mouth turned up. "I've never approved of students getting caught in mischief."

Harry couldn't control his broad grin. "I understand. Thank you, Professor."

Lupin nodded. "Well, I have to be off. Professor Snape is holding a teachers' meeting in his office to discuss his - adventures abroad."

Harry followed him out. He'd expected that the others would be gone by now, but most people were still hanging around, looking curiously at the spectacle.

Ron was on the floor, his face green, and Hermione was kneeling beside him with her hand on his back.

"He was eavesdropping," Pansy told the spectators flatly.

"So was she!" Ron exclaimed. "Ohhh. Hermione, I think ..."

"Pansy is a lady," Draco asserted. "I'm sure she was just passing on her way somewhere else."

Pansy and Draco exchanged smirks. "That's right," Pansy said. "While I was passing - in the spirit of all this new interhouse co-operation - I offered Weasley a cigarette."

Most people looked vaguely puzzled, and while Pansy was explaining and waving her packet of Marlboro Lights around the place, Harry and Hermione seized Ron by the arms and made their escape. He sagged in their grip, and almost fell as they turned the corner and Hermione smacked Ron on the back of the head.

"Ron Weasley! That's a filthy habit."

"Oh God, don't," Ron moaned. "I don't know what it was she gave me. I knew I shouldn't have tried it. I think I'm going to be sick. Slytherin bitch."

"Don't be sick," Harry urged. "And don't be prejudiced."

"I am not prejudiced," Ron said with dignity. "It is not my fault that most of them are complete bastards."

"Most of them?" Harry said, pleased and surprised.

Ron considered. "There might be a few decent ones," he conceded. "I quite like that Blaise Zabini. He's a friendly chap."

Harry felt his mind stop working for a brief, merciful moment. He met Hermione's eyes over Ron's head.

"That's great, Ron," he said weakly.

"I told you I wasn't prejudiced," Ron told him in a smug voice.

"Yeah - yeah, good for you," Harry assured him, and then shook himself out of the horrible daze. "Look, Ron, are you feeling any better? Lupin just told me when and where Snape's telling the teachers about what happened to him."

"He did?" Hermione asked, lifting her head sharply.

Harry nodded. "He might also have recommended that I have an orgy," he added thoughtfully. "I think we'll stick with the first plan, though."

*

Crowding together under the Invisibility Cloak had been much easier when they were eleven.

They made their crabwise way down to the dungeons with great difficulty. Harry kept his hands in his pockets in spite of the balance problem this created, because no matter what crisis he was undergoing he was not anxious to get lucky with Ron or Hermione.

He shook his head to clear the disturbing images, and then hissed: "Ron, d'you have the Extendable Ears?"

"One for each of us," Ron muttered back. "I've been deliberately poisoned by a scheming madwoman, I'm not stupid."

Even though it was bright outside, it was pitch dark in the dungeons. Harry privately thought it was a wonder that Draco and the others hadn't gone near-sighted, and then it occurred to him that this was the corridor they had found McGonagall and he went cold - and then Ron tripped over something, and they all went flying.

"Good God, the barbarians have stormed the village," drawled a familiar voice. "Take our women and our cattle, only spare our lives. I think a Weasley just trod on me."

"Draco, for heaven's sake!" Harry hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"We're eavesdropping on Professor Snape's meeting," Pansy's voice whispered from the darkness.

"Just like you lot," Ron observed, in the sour tones of one who is still feeling nauseous. "Creeping around spying on people. It's disgusting."

"What are you doing here then, Weasley?" Zabini asked.

"That's different," Ron said. "Professor Lupin practically gave us permission. This is - teacher-supported spying."

"Professor Snape *did* give us permission," Draco observed in a superior voice. "This is practically a Slytherin field trip."

The dark shapes were becoming clearer as Harry's eyesight adjusted. Zabini had his ear pressed to the wall and Pansy had a hand on Draco's arm for no reason he could see.

"How'd you get past Greg and Vince anyway?" Pansy asked suddenly.

"Well," said Harry. "We're sneaky like that."

Hermione was already hiding the Cloak under her robes. Harry saw Draco tilt his head towards her, but he didn't say anything until Ron produced the Extendable Ears and started passing them around.

"We're listening too," he said flatly then. "Or I scream."

"Oh, threats, is it?" Ron demanded, and then he gave up when Hermione nudged him.

Zabini and Pansy both put their hands out, and he glared at Pansy and gave an Ear to Zabini. They immediately curled together, pushing their ears to the Ear, and it was possibly this kind of behaviour that had made Harry think Zabini was just as heterosexual as the next man.

The next man being Draco, who was glaring at his friends.

"Excuse me, one of you should be sharing with me," he hissed.

Pansy shrugged. "You're the one who likes one of them," she pointed out. "Don't look at me. I wouldn't spit on them if they were on fire, and that involves less physical contact."

"Believe me, Parkinson, the idea of physical contact with you makes me feel sicker than your poison sticks," Ron said hotly, and Pansy was beginning a sneering retort when Draco interrupted.

"Come here and share an Ear with me, Granger," he said winningly.

"She will not be the one sharing an Ear with you!" Ron exclaimed, and everybody made frantic shushing motions.

"Gosh, Weasley," Draco drawled. "I don't know what to say. This is so sudden. Of course, you're not really my type-"

Ron backed away from Draco so fast he almost tripped over Hermione's foot.

"Will you hush!" Pansy snapped.

"Gryffindors, ladies and gentleman, masters of stealth and cunning," Draco said. "This is a corridor, the Silencing Charm is not guaranteed to be effective! For the love of - Harry, would you get over here and share your stupid Ear, then? Honestly!" He shot Ron a look Harry was pretty much certain was venomous, and then dropped to his knees.

Harry very carefully had no thoughts whatsoever, and knelt too. He put his ear to the Extendable Ear, and concentrated hard on the sound that came blaring out to him.

"-If we're talking about suspicion," Snape's sneering voice said, "we might do well to examine the fact that the Gryffindors have lost fewer students than any other house."

"Maybe," Sirius snarled back, "that's because we're better at guarding ourselves than any other house."

"Oh yes," said Snape. "I myself have always been deeply impressed by Harry Potter's brilliant 'let's all plunge into reckless danger and break a few laws' method of self-protection."

"The man has a point," Draco murmured in a teasing tone.

Harry felt the breath from Draco's mouth on his face, and Draco's hair tickling his forehead. He focused all his attention on the voices.

"You've always had a spite against Harry!" Sirius exclaimed.

"That is not true," Dumbledore's voice interrupted peaceably. "Professor Snape has always been most concerned about Harry's wellbeing. He has watched over him as assiduously as a father."

There was combined and loud protest at this. Harry could just picture Dumbledore's smile.

"That's right, of course," Snape said. "He's the son I never had, and thus never got to expose on a hillside for the wolves to feast upon."

"He's *James'* son," Sirius hissed. "And you're not fit to wipe his boots!"

"Professors," Dumbledore said. "I don't believe we are here to discuss the character flaws of a student who is, fortunately, still with us. Nor do I think that a little professional courtesy would be too much to ask for. We are all here to hear Professor Snape's report, not to listen to you two bickering."

"Let's face it, we could all do that in the staff room," Lupin put in. "More tea?"

"Two sugars, thank you, Remus," Dumbledore said. "Might we have the pleasure of hearing your report, Severus?"

There was a pause. Harry did not like pauses. Pauses made him think about things beside the voices. Draco smelled like - well, actually, Harry didn't recognise it, like a person he supposed, or maybe like expensive shampoo because he went through bottles of the stuff. The point was that he smelled good, and he was close and warm and it was wrong and unfair how much Harry wanted to do ... something about that.

He clutched the Extendable Ear as if it was a lifeline into a world where he would not want to molest his friends.

This was *important*. He had no time to be stupid.

"It was the *Captus* charm as Professor Lupin suspected," Snape said in an altogether different voice, and Harry sat upright and suddenly had no problem focusing his attention. "He's been putting them into a *Captus* sphere."

Harry cast his mind back to what Draco had said at a Young Order meeting

It's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans Voldemort can keep in his pocket, which Dementors can patrol and nobody can ever escape from.

"Are you sure?" asked a voice that sounded like Professor Flitwick's.

"I've seen it," Snape answered tightly. "The Dark Lord keeps it with him at all times. I tried everything I could think of, but I never got a moment alone with it and I eventually roused suspicion against myself. You know I'm supposed to be a spy for them here, but they won't tell me who the other spy is, and they watch me all the time."

"They don't just watch him." That was Madam Pomfrey's voice. "Headmaster, those curses have taken it out of him. He needs to be in the infirmary and he insists on not taking proper time to recuperate-"

"That's not relevant," Snape said crisply. "The point is that the *Captus* sphere is being used. Those disappearing are not dead, and there has to be a way to free them."

"A rescue team," Sirius began intrepidly.

"Some kind of spell that can reach across distances," Lupin said thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Professor Flitwick, "I've always thought-"

"I mean, if physical objects can be made to Apparate or if we could get Snape to set up a Portkey-" spoke up a voice like Professor Vector's.

"It's a rough sphere, the colour of a lapis lazuli," Snape continued in a dry voice, and then he stopped. "Set up a Portkey? What have I been telling you about-"

The voices rose and mingled with each other into argument.

"Have we put a Silencing Charm on this room?" Dumbledore inquired mildly.

There was a silence.

"Oh no, oh *please*," Draco moaned softly, pushing in closer and pressing his ear to the Extendable Ear, but that meant that he was leaning further into Harry and so was effectively moaning into Harry's ear.

He had to be doing this on purpose, he absolutely had to be, so Harry looked at him in outrage, and saw he wasn't. He was intent on the conversation inside, his eyes half-closed and his head turned towards the wall and he was oh, God, so close that the edge of his cheek had

brushed Harry's and Harry could feel his own skin heating up and he wondered for a moment if he could possibly lick Draco's throat and then claim it was a platonic gesture.

"*Silencio*," said Professor Flitwick.

"Oh, hell," said Draco, and then looked over at Harry and moved sharply back.

With the distraction that was Draco almost in his lap removed, he could think properly again. The *Captus* sphere. They were going to have to take another trip to the Restricted Section.

"Well, it's good news that they're not dead," Hermione said. She looked tired, he noticed, and Ron still looked a bit sick. They had been up too late most nights this week.

"Yeah," said Pansy, leaning back against the wall. "But what can we do about it? If even Professor Snape can't ..."

She looked tired too, Harry thought. Of course she did: of course they all were. Even Zabini's sly face was unmistakably worn, and the big boots Pansy probably thought made her look tough just made her look sort of fragile.

There was a delicate moment of balance, of almost-unity, there in the dark corridor, simply because they were tired and desperate and they didn't exactly distrust each other anymore.

Harry felt a brief flicker of triumph. All that effort had been worth it, he thought, and looked over to share the triumph with Draco. Draco did not appear to have noticed the moment. He was climbing to his feet and now he was less close, Harry thought he might look paler than usual.

Pale or not, his face was set. "Meeting in my room tonight," he said shortly.

"All right," Hermione agreed. "But if we're having another one, I need to go get some NEWTs studying done now. Thank heavens we don't have Potions on and I can catch up on my Arithmancy."

"Oh, Granger, what a thrilling life you lead," Pansy said. "I'm going on an extended cigarette break." She smirked suddenly. "Want another, Weasley?"

Ron shut his eyes. "I am going to be sick," he announced in a level voice. "Then I am going to go to sleep."

"Weasley, I am desperately envious of your glamour and charm," Draco sneered. "How even this Arithmancy vixen was lucky enough to win you for her very own leaves me at a loss."

"Don't pretend to knock Arithmancy," Harry said. "I've seen your colour-coded notes."

Draco looked disconcerted. Pansy lit up, and then coughed a bit and hit herself on the chest.

"The man has a point," she remarked after a minute. "I know about the theory books you didn't really have to read, too."

"Et tu, Pansy," Draco murmured.

Ron was grinning. "You *nerd*, Malfoy."

"I'm not a nerd, I'm well-rounded," Draco snapped.

Harry laughed. "I bet you anything that you're going to use this free class to study, too. Admit it. Embrace the notes."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Actually, I thought we might go get that ice-cream we were talking about a few days ago. But if your heart is set on notes, go study by all means. I'm sure Pansy will be happy to come eat chocolate ice-cream with me."

Harry stood up.

"I think I could be persuaded to have ice-cream," he said. "You know. Not that I'm not dedicated to studying," he added, glancing at Hermione's disapproving face.

"Please stop talking about food," Ron begged. "Hermione, she's smoking at me. I think I really might be sick."

"I could escort you into the Slytherin bathrooms," Zabini offered courteously. "They're closer."

"No thanks," Ron replied, looking apprehensive that he might catch something Slytherin.

"No thank you," Hermione replied, looking apprehensive that something Slytherin might catch him. "Harry, I really think you should study ..."

"I will, Hermione, I will," Harry promised. "I just need the sugar. For energy," he offered. "Which I will then devote to studying. Er, obviously."

Draco grinned his quick, wicked grin. "What's the matter, Granger?" he asked. "Don't you trust us?"

Zabini was glowering at Harry, Pansy was enveloping herself in a cloud of smoke, Ron looked like he might be sick at any moment and in any direction, and Hermione was looking very anxious.

"We'll be back soon," Harry promised, and grabbed Draco's arm and escaped.

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"This is a coffee shop," Draco argued. "You're supposed to order coffee."

"You're supposed to order a coffee, Draco, not the coffee menu."

"Don't quibble, Harry, it's the sign of a small mind." Draco snapped his menu shut. "My order stands," he told the waitress firmly. "A cappuccino, an espresso and a latte, please."

"I thought we were getting ice-cream," Harry grumbled. "Chocolate ice-cream, please."

"I was getting to the ice-cream," Draco informed him. "I'd like mocha."

"And the crowd is *shocked*," Harry said, grinning at him.

To his surprise, the waitress giggled. He looked up at her and, to his further astonishment, she winked.

"Got it," she said. "Nice jeans, by the way."

She walked off while Harry was still working out that she had not, in fact, been talking to Draco. He looked over at Draco and mouthed, "*Me?*"

Draco beamed at him. "You," he confirmed brightly. "She was pretty, didn't you think? And she's older. I think," he said with great deliberation, "that you should crisis her."

"Crisis is not a verb," Harry told him blankly.

Draco waved a sugar packet dismissively. "You know what I mean. Get her to use her sophistication and nubile body to clear up your boyish naivete and confusion! You know you want to!"

Harry blinked. "I think you should stop reading those Muggle romance novels."

"Stop changing the subject," Draco said haughtily. "Besides, I told you that I only read them to laugh at the imbecilic Muggle authors. I think you should crisis her right now!"

"It's not kind to laugh at the romance writers, they can't defend themselves."

"I am not kind, and I think that it's funnier to mock people when they're helpless," Draco said. "When they're crying is even better. Now crisis her like a desperate stoat in heat!"

"Keep your voice down, Draco, or she is going to hear you!" Harry exclaimed, and avoided the curious eyes of some couple who looked uncomfortable, unable to talk to each other and distracted by Draco's rising voice.

Draco threw a sugar packet at him, and apparently gave it up.

"I told you those jeans were your size," he added absently. "I am a fashion genius. Oh yes, and I'm *not* a nerd."

"I didn't say you were," Harry pointed out.

Draco glared. "It was implied. Implied in front of a *Weasley*. Just because I have some intellectual pursuits, unlike other people who are complete brainless sports fanatics, also sitting at this table, their name rhymes with 'otter.'"

The waitress came back with a tray full of Draco's coffee, for which Draco rewarded her with his slow, bright smile. She smiled at Harry again and Harry seriously began to wonder if she had vision problems.

"I'm not a brainless sports fanatic," Harry corrected him. "I have a lot on my mind. This whole defeating evil thing is just something you've taken up: it's been my job since I was eleven. I don't have time for poetry."

"Because you have no soul," Draco said placidly, obviously reduced to a state of nirvana by all the coffee. He began to stir each cup, one by one. "I mean. One hobby. Besides Quidditch. Defeating evil does not count. Go on. Name one. I dare you."

"Er ..." said Harry, and ate a spoonful of chocolate ice-cream to put off the evil moment. "I like, um. I collect Chocolate Frog cards!" he said with relief.

Draco stared at him, and then took a sip of one of his coffees, very slowly, as if he was going to need every drop and had to ration.

"Harry," he said at last, in an insinuating tone.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Harrrrrry."

The low, coaxing tones of anyone's voice were not something that could be immediately and horribly attractive.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"May I borrow your glasses?"

Harry handed them over before he realised what a very stupid thing he had just done. He squinted and blamed it on Draco, whose face was now a pale blur with wavy glasses on its nose.

Draco had the voice down.

"Er," he said. "I'm, er, Harry Potter. And my intellect hasn't really progressed from the age of twelve. I really like, um, Quidditch, and also, evil is bad. Hermione's really more into the brainy stuff. Thank you for your time."

"Fine," said Harry, and did his best at affecting a drawl. "I'm Draco Malfoy. I think I'm cool, but I have colour-coded notes, and I think I'm self-possessed, but I throw almost daily tantrums, and I think I'm God's gift to women, but the waitress is eyeing up my clearly more toned and muscular friend. I suppose I should have paid more attention to Quidditch, which I actually really like but am acting snobbish about just now, because I am also a horrible, horrible snob."

Draco tossed another sugar packet.

"I'm, er, just an ordinary boy, like every other boy," he countered. "Sorry, who did you say you wanted that autograph made out to? Okay, great. You know who're nasty? Prejudiced people! I think they should all be ostracised and then possibly killed, because, we are better than they are. Look! There's evil! Should I alert the proper authorities? No, for I am Harry Potter, and it is my sacred duty to vanquish it! I am the bane of the powers of darkness!"

This chocolate ice-cream was probably better when you weren't choking on it and laughing.

"I once made a speech about cheating as an art form," Harry drawled, "and I have a friend with the notes to prove it. I have a mental list of students who can be counted on to cry if I'm mean to them, and I talk too much - hey-"

Draco had given up on the sugar packets, and started throwing paper napkins. Harry ducked.

"You have to calm down, Sirius!" Lupin said behind them. "How can we get anything done if-"

"He started it!" Sirius interrupted, striding ahead of Lupin with his black robes flaring. "I'm not - hello, Harry!" He looked bright and pleased for a moment, and then his expression changed as he glanced over at Draco. "Here with your friend, I see," he noted.

"How nice," said Lupin, walking more sedately behind Sirius and catching his elbow. "Not all that law-abiding, but very nice. Hello, boys. Mr Malfoy, Professor Snape wants to talk to you and Miss Parkinson and Mr Zabini at the earliest opportunity. I'm going to pretend I didn't see this truancy."

"I'm sure it was all that Slytherin brat's idea," Sirius said in a not-quite-undertone aside to Lupin.

"Yeah," Harry said loudly, "because as we all know, Gryffindors *never* break the rules."

Lupin laughed, then smiled at Draco and turned away to order two coffees to go. Sirius still stood by their table, looking suspiciously down at Draco. Draco bridled under his eyes and tapped his fingers against one of his coffee cups.

Then he began to sing, quite softly. "We're the men in purple," he declared, "we always get our man ..."

Outrage bloomed on Sirius' face a split second after Harry began to sing quietly back. "That's why Slytherins all sing," he reminded Draco, and Draco broke off to make a face at him.

"*Traitor*," he exclaimed, and kicked Harry in the shin.

It being Draco, it hurt quite a lot.

"Ow," Harry said cheerfully. "Everything OK, Siri - Professor Black?"

Sirius got that blank look he always wore when someone called him Professor Black, as if he could not imagine who they meant, and then he mustered up a smile for Harry as he always did.

"Yes, fine, fine," he said, glaring at Draco and looking unconvinced on this subject. "Come and see me sometime, won't you, Harry? I hear you and young Ginny Weasley-"

Harry winced. Sirius's smile grew roguish.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about, Harry-"

"Your curiosity about the students' love lives might be, though," Lupin remarked, handing Sirius his coffee. "People might start to think you have none of your own."

"*Moony*," Sirius exclaimed in a horrified voice.

"Don't snigger, Mr Malfoy," Lupin added. "You'll be old and grey yourself one day."

Draco tossed his head. "I won't," he said, and smirked. "I'll be ash blond."

Sirius gave Draco an exasperated and still-suspicious look, then Harry a worried one, and then stalked out of the shop. Lupin told them goodbye and then followed with a resigned air.

Draco glared after Sirius, and then lounged back, very deliberately, into his chair. "I'm Professor Black," he said in a low voice. "It's never my fault if I lose my temper and act like a complete idiot. I do exactly what I want to do, because I'm better than everyone, and I'm certainly not completely socially maladjusted because of my twelve years of jailtime in which I could only get touch from Dementors ..."

Harry frowned at him, and then picked up one of the napkins and put it on his head.

"I'm Professor *Snape*," he declared. "I hate children, and sunsets, and butterflies and kittens. I have bitterness oozing out of my hair follicles."

Draco put his head to one side.

"Point taken," he conceded. "Now Harry, for God's sake take that napkin off your head before the pretty waitress sees."

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"I don't really want to talk about it," Harry said, squirming.

"Want? Want? Want does not come into it, Potter," Draco told him, making a nasty face at him. "When you refuse to crisis saucy young waitresses, your friends have to take matters into their own hands. We have to investigate the strange corners of your psyche, or condemn you to a life of bitter solitude. Now come on, there have to be some crushes."

"Yes, Cho, I told you!" Harry said in exasperation.

Draco had insisted on taking the long way back, and walking around the lake, and Harry would have had absolutely no objection to that if Draco's sole goal in life had not appeared to be embarrassing Harry horribly.

"Yes, *and*?" Draco inquired.

"Cho Chang," Harry repeated stubbornly, sticking to what he knew. "For almost three years. I'm the faithful type."

"You're the stubborn stalker type," Draco corrected him. "And that is truly sad. Come on, Harry, please! You were fifteen for a whole year! There has to be someone else. We need an array here. A crush on a neighbour, a teacher, a Weasley, your aunt. I promise not to judge you. Not even if it's horribly unnatural, not even if it's a toad or Ron Weasley."

"Hey, Ron's not that bad," Harry protested.

Draco pointed a dramatic finger. "Aha!"

"No!" said Harry. "He's been my mate for years. That would be like having a crush on Hermione!"

"Aha!"

"Stop saying that!" Harry yelled.

It was disturbing, the unholy light in Draco's eyes when he thought he was making a breakthrough. He also had to stop pointing at innocent people.

"I need a drink," Draco announced, rolling his eyes and producing a hip flask from his jeans.

"That's coffee, isn't it? You already had four cups."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I fail to see your point." He tipped the flask back.

"Besides, it's not that strange," Harry muttered. "Plenty of people didn't have crushes when they were fifteen. Ron didn't. And what d'you mean, teachers?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Every girl in Hogwarts wanted some special tuition with Professor Lockhart, remember?"

"Urgh, yeah," Harry said. "But, I mean - you never had a crush on a teacher, did you?"

He glanced over at Draco, and was amazed to see him going faintly pink.

"Aha," he said, mildly.

"Shut up, you," said Draco, going just a tinge pinker. "I was thirteen."

"Advanced of you," Harry observed. "Who was it, then?"

The flush was making its way down his cheekbones, growing brighter. Harry hoped he was not about to hear something disgusting, like Professor Trelawney.

"It was just for a little while," Draco prevaricated.

"If we're going to go over every detail of my life, I think you can share a little too."

Draco gave his coffee flask a hunted look. "You are not permitted to repeat this," he informed him. "Professor Lupin."

Then he took another swig of the coffee. Harry stopped and stared at him.

"*What?*" he said. "But you're not - I mean, are you-"

Draco gave him a single look, and then choked on his coffee. Harry watched, still in a state of shock, as Draco continued to choke and bent double. Eventually he became a bit concerned, and touched Draco's shoulder.

"You're not dying, are you?" he asked.

Draco looked up, his eyes watering. "Yes," he croaked.

"Oh," said Harry. "Er. Any last requests?"

"How can you be so stupid?" demanded Draco, his voice still rasping slightly. He straightened up. "I mean, if you didn't - Harry, you cannot go around randomly kissing boys without knowing their preferences! Someone is going to thump you. Someone should - oh, dear God," he said as another undoubtedly insane thought occurred to him. "You haven't kissed Weasley, have you?"

"*No!*" Harry almost shouted. "I haven't been kissing anyone!"

Draco gave him a pointed look.

"Except for - um, the people you already know about," said Harry, feeling himself go hot under the collar. He felt this was very unfair, since it was Draco who had been whipping out the revelations and waving them around. "Professor Lupin?" he said. "Professor *Lupin*? *Why*? Not that I don't like him," he added hastily. "Great man. One of the best."

"It was just a tiny little crush," Draco said dismissively. "He treated the Slytherins like everyone else. That's rare, you know. And he was intelligent, and a good teacher, and funny." He paused, then smirked and licked his lips. "And I liked his voice, and the way his hair fell into his eyes. Horrible clothes, though."

"All right," said Harry weakly, trying to fit some pieces back together.

"It was just one of those things. Then I got a crush on Pansy and forgot all about it."

"All right - no, wait, look, Pansy's a girl-"

"Oh, well spotted," Draco said. "You know, it is perfectly possible to like *both*-"

"I know, I know," Harry told him.

"Oh, you do know?" Draco asked, making a gesture that looked something like an overly dramatic flail. "Well, good, because I was just about to start from scratch and explain to you how babies are made."

"I'm not stupid," Harry said. "I just didn't spend my childhood writing little love notes to Lupin."

"I bet you still think it's a question of storks. I bet this whole crisis is founded on terminal bird confusion."

Harry pushed his hair back with a certain amount of agitation. Draco was gesturing and talking too fast, and this was the most surreal conversation he had ever had.

"But you talk about girls," he pointed out suddenly.

Draco lifted his eyebrows. "Naturally I do. I like girls, girls are wonderful, and also it seemed more appropriate. For instance, you enjoy Quidditch and collecting Chocolate Frog cards. You discuss Quidditch with me, but not the whole card thing, because I am not an avid collector. Similarly, I might discuss Quidditch with you, but Chocolate Frog cards with Zabini. If you follow me."

Harry frowned. "I do, but it's giving me these horrible images," he said. "Why did you never tell me?"

"I thought you *knew*!" Draco exclaimed. "It's not a secret or anything, I was being *polite*, I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, I was being *mannerly*. You never asked about the relationship I had before Christmas when I mentioned it, I assumed you'd heard the gossip."

"Please not Professor Lupin," Harry said, horrorstruck.

Draco made a face at him. "Harry, please! No, of course not. Terry Boot."

Harry was starting to get a headache. "What, him too?"

"Well," Draco stopped. "I'm not sure, actually. I might just have been an experiment, to tell you the truth. He said he'd never done anything like that before. Look, this is ... not pleasant."

Draco ran a hand through his hair, and Harry looked at him with concern. The wind had already ruffled it, but the gesture was always a sign of extreme inner turmoil.

"I'm sorry," he told him, his voice low. "I didn't mean to - you don't have to tell me."

Draco gave him a small sideways smile, and hit his shoulder against Harry's.

"No, it's all right," he said. "He got a little sentimental about it, and it was all rather messy. And there wasn't much spark there, near the end. I don't like people to be stupid, that's all. It doesn't bother me."

"I see," Harry answered slowly. He leaned back against Draco's shoulder, a little. That was comforting.

"Does this bother you?" Draco asked. "I mean, I know you're going through a crisis and everything, but you might well feel un-"

"No!" Harry said quickly. "No, no, it doesn't bother me. No, it's fine, absolutely, I'm just surprised. Even if I wasn't - even if I hadn't - er. No, of course not." Another horrible thought occurred to him. "Um. Draco, do you mind if I ask-"

Draco looked inspired. It filled Harry with dread.

"This might help you with your crisis, mightn't it," he speculated. "Ask away. I'm being supportive. Anything you like."

"All right," Harry said awkwardly. "Did you ever - collect Chocolate Frog cards with Blaise Zabini?"

"A few times," Draco answered. "In sixth year."

A friend who things happened with once or twice, Draco had said. Harry had presumed it was Morag whatshername.

"So, how'd you - I mean-"

"Well, like I said, there was the little crush on Professor Lupin," Draco began.

"Please skip ahead," Harry urged.

"Then Pansy and I fancied each other, and eventually we got around to going out, and that fell apart just before the end of fifth year. That summer I was looking for some support against the Dark Lord from the old families - just discreet questions, you understand, and there was a boy from Durmstrang who was a bit older than me. Sixth year Zabini and I messed about a few times, and then that summer I met a girl from Beauxbatons who was a daughter of one of my mother's friends. Then there was Terry, and that happens to be all five."

Draco looked triumphantly at Harry, as if he expected Harry to become enlightened and instantly pack his bags for Durmstrang or something.

"Two girls and three boys," Harry said. "That's ... more boys than girls."

"Nice arithmetic. Well done. These things just happen," Draco told him. "It's not a battle plan or anything. It's not like it matters all that much."

"Right," said Harry.

For something that didn't matter all that much, it felt a bit like his head might fall off with shock. He squinted at the choppy waters of the lake, and blamed it in an obscure and vicious way.

"I can't believe you didn't know," Draco remarked, as if all that was settled now. "Why on earth did you do it, then? Weren't you afraid that I'd go mental and thump you?"

Of all the questions. Why on earth had he done it, as if he hadn't been asking himself that since it happened. Because he had been happy, and he hadn't had to think, and he had been at a point so far away from all this confusion, and the worries and fears they all had to deal with these days, that now he could not even seem to reach back and know exactly why.

"Nah," said Harry. "I could take you."

"You *wish*," Draco told him. "Don't you dare doubt the legendary prowess in battle of the Malfoy clan. Might I remind you that I vanquished you utterly in that Muggle duel a few months ago?"

"Yes, but I beat you in no less than two fights in fifth year," Harry argued. "I can take you to the *cleaners*."

"The first time did not count, one of the Weasley brood was helping," Draco returned indignantly. "And the second time we were stopped, and it counts as a draw."

They turned away from the lake, and back to Hogwarts. Harry tried not to think about all this new stuff, tried to just relax and be happy as he'd been in the teashop. Everything was difficult enough, and most of the time they all had to think so much about survival that happiness went by the board.

"A draw? Ha," he said. "I recall distinctly that I challenged you to a rematch, and you never took me up on it. Scared, Malfoy?"

For now, he was just with Draco.

"A Malfoy knows not fear," Draco replied haughtily, and then grinned. "Well, more or less."

"A bit more when it comes to giant spiders," Harry observed.

"I need to go see Professor Snape," Draco told him. "And you are a bad person."

Harry, in keeping with his theme, mentioned the entire Forbidden Forest and indeed Hagrid himself. Draco retaliated with a comment about Dementors, and Harry felt forced to remark on how a certain person here had volunteered to go first with Hippogriffs, and a certain person had hung back in terror and then been slashed like a silly idiot.

Then they were back at Hogwarts, and Draco was gone.

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"I don't see how anyone could know that a little stick was going to be poisonous. I think it could have happened to anyone," Ron argued. "Don't you think, Harry?"

"Um, yeah," said Harry.

So - this new knowledge, did it make it better or worse? Draco had not stormed off because he was repelled by the idea of boys, but because he was not at all enthusiastic about the idea of Harry.

"Anybody with even a basic knowledge of Muggle Studies would have known," Hermione disagreed. "You've visited my house, Ron, you've seen my father smoking a pipe. And you should have known better than to take anything from that cow Pansy Parkinson. Am I right, Harry?"

"I suppose so," Harry answered.

Well, Draco had always been at pains to point out that Harry dressed badly and had horrible hair. He had glasses he kept breaking and a dirty great scar on his forehead and it was all hardly the kind of thing that sent girls into a frenzy of lust, he supposed, or boys who liked boys. Or boys who were having it off left, right and centre and fancying Lupin.

"I thought we were all supposed to play happy families now," Ron said. "I was trying to co-operate like you both asked, and I ended up poisoned. It's like I always said, you can't trust Slytherins an inch."

"Yes, that makes sense," said Harry.

So - Terry Boot. Quiet and intelligent, and he liked books. Draco would like that, Harry supposed, but then you didn't get off with people just because you both liked reading or Hermione and Madam Pince would have become an item years ago.

The thing was that it seemed wrong to think of boys as - well, attractive. Harry knew how it was supposed to go, had been taught by things Sirius and Dumbledore and everyone had said. One day he was going to be like his parents, and girls would be pretty and he would marry the one he liked best and his parents' tragedy would be redeemed and he would be happy as they were supposed to be.

He knew how to tell if girls were attractive, but it seemed off, all wrong, to be speculating on whether boys were. He knew when they were handsome, but actually adding that up to ... He knew how to tell if girls were attractive, but he couldn't seem to care about that. He could not think of whether a boy was, but there was just something about Draco's smirk or his nose or his neck that he couldn't seem to help trying not to do without.

Well, what did it matter why Draco had liked Terry Boot.

He became aware that Ron and Hermione were staring at him.

"Sorry," he said. "Did I say something wrong?"

"I don't see why we had to go trailing all over the school just so you could yell at me," Ron grumbled to Hermione. "You can do it just as well in the common room. Ginny takes it down and reads it to Mum later."

"Hush," Hermione said, and stopped by the door to the Charms classroom.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked quietly.

"I heard Professor Vector telling Blaise Zabini Snape wanted him to come here," Hermione whispered. "If Snape is anxious enough to pass messages to the Slytherins through other teachers, I want to hear what he has to say."

Harry thought it over, then nodded. If it was important, of course they had to hear it. It was as simple as that.

When he heard Pansy's voice breaking as she spoke, though, he glanced over at Ron and saw his own guilty unease written large there.

"Sir, please, you can't," she said. "M-my brother said people don't speak well of you. And we all know they're torturing you - you can't go back. They'll kill you, and then you'll be no good to anyone."

She quavered badly on those last hard words.

"She has a point, sir. Is it worth it?" asked Zabini.

Snape's voice was a harsh rasp. Harry remembered the cruel words he'd heard that voice speak, and how he had hated that voice from the first time he'd heard it say anything.

"They have my students trapped there," he said. "There's a chance I can get to them. There is no other choice."

"What about us?" Zabini asked.

"What about Draco?" Pansy demanded. "He can't go on acting like a Head of house, it's ridiculous, things are falling apart and we can't trust-"

"I'm fine. I'm handling it," Draco said sharply, sounding insulted. It was so like Draco, to be offended that people did not think he was omnipotent. "Why should he stay here and watch us all disappear too? He can't do anything about it here."

"Draco is quite correct," Snape observed, and he sounded unpleasant and grudging, and proud. "I have to be where I can be of most use to you all."

"We need you *here*," Pansy said, her voice somehow hard and distraught at once. "Sir, you're going to *die*-"

"This is a war," Draco interrupted in a furious voice Harry thought indicated he was scared and upset too.

He and Hermione were straining to hear more when Ron pulled away from the door, and looked at both of them.

"She's - I think she's going to cry," he said, in a troubled way. "We shouldn't be listening to this."

Hermione wavered. "He might have something else to tell them-"

"I don't care, I'm not eavesdropping on girls crying," Ron said flatly. He stepped back from the door, and Hermione glanced up at him and then reluctantly followed.

Harry stayed by the door, hesitating. He did not want to spy on anybody, but Snape leaving was important news, and Draco would be entirely unscrupulous if he thought keeping secrets would be best for Slytherin.

He had to think of everybody else. This was too important.

His moral dilemma was solved when Ron, still looking distressed, spoke too loudly.

"Snape can be bloody awful," he said. "Maybe it's for the best if he goes."

Inside the room, everything went still. Harry stepped back from the door an instant before it flew open, and Pansy Parkinson strode out. She did not look as if she was going to cry. She looked absolutely enraged.

"Why don't you say that to his face?" she demanded, and hit Ron in the nose.

"Ow!" Ron shouted. "You *bitch*!"

Hermione's face went cold and she looked at Draco, who had come to stand in the doorway.

"I thought you were supporting interhouse harmony?" she pointed out. "What are you going to do about this?"

Draco's face was just a touch too pale already. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Hermione's accusing face, at Pansy with her dark hair flying and at Ron with blood seeping between his fingers.

"Well," he said, stepping purposefully towards Ron, "I could break it for him."

Harry stepped between them without even thinking about it.

"Don't you dare," he snapped.

And the protective instinct for his threatened friends, the new confused outrage because Snape was leaving and Harry had never liked him but the Slytherins needed him, and the thoughts that had not stopped tumbling around his head since Draco's confession, turned into fury.

Draco lifted his cold grey eyes to Harry's face, and said deliberately, "Don't tell me what to do, Potter."

Then he shoved Harry out of the way.

Or he tried to. He tried to knock him sideways, but Harry turned, caught the blow on one shoulder and pushed the other shoulder, hard, into Draco's chest.

"Then don't threaten my friends!"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I'll do more than threaten," he promised, and hit Harry on the mouth.

Harry dimly registered that Draco was only this vicious when he was scared, in the same sort of way he noticed the blood seeping into his mouth. Most of his mind was echoing the roaring in his ears as he charged and knocked Draco against the wall.

I don't like people to be stupid, that's all.

Weeks of being ashamed and embarrassed and picturing Draco's horror, and all the time

"I think you should just shut up," Harry snarled, and swung at Draco, pushed back against the stone wall with his face flushed and just begging to be mauled.

Draco ducked and Harry's knuckles split against the wall. Before he recovered from the shock of pain, Draco grabbed his shirt as he ducked and tried to pull him off balance.

It's not like it matters all that much.

Harry let himself go, hearing his shirt rip, and grabbed Draco as he went and threw him down under him. Then he hit Draco in the eye.

"No, Harry!" Hermione said.

"Go, Harry!" Ron yelled.

"Don't interfere, Pansy." That was Zabini.

"What is the meaning of this?" Professor Snape.

Like the blood at the back of his throat, the voices were unimportant and distant. What mattered was Draco, scared and desperate and actually angry with Harry as well, lip curled back from his teeth. He tried to swing at Harry and missed, but Harry's glasses went askew as he dodged the blow and then the world was a blur. He concentrated on the pale blur as Draco struggled and squirmed ferociously under him, keeping him pinned even when Draco lunged up and slammed his forehead against Harry's. He punched him in the ribs and tried to gain a purchase on his shirt so he could hold him in place and hit him properly.

Why on earth did you do it?

"Stop this at *once*! Get Mr Potter off him!"

The harsh, small sound Draco made when Harry slammed his shoulders back down against the floor seemed much more important, but it was the voice that caused the outside interference.

Hands grabbed Harry and pulled him away, fighting to get out of their grasp and back to Draco. Draco caught him a blow in the stomach as he was pulled back.

Draco tried to jump at him, but Ron grabbed his shirt as he surged up.

"No you *don't*, Malfoy," he said.

Draco snarled something incoherent and imperious, and Hermione hurried away from Harry to lend Ron a hand.

"Control yourself, Mr Malfoy!" rapped out Snape, letting go of Harry and stepping in between them. Draco blinked and subsided, stopping the active attempt to get away from Ron and Hermione. Snape whirled on Harry. "As for *you*, Potter! You and your little cronies were not only eavesdropping on a private meeting, but you decided with your usual brilliance to make matters worse by attacking a fellow student unprovoked!"

"Yeah, I just punched myself in the nose, did I?" Ron demanded, adding belatedly, "... Sir."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Did you, Mr Weasley?" he inquired scathingly. "Well, you always were clumsy."

He was such a petty, nasty creature. Harry had always hated him, and he spluttered in outrage along with Ron, and he almost hated all the Slytherins for drawing proudly to Snape's side.

"I think that'll be forty points from Gryffindor," Snape continued with satisfaction. "I suppose you two had better be getting along to the infirmary, though I feel it would be a salutary lesson for Mr Potter if he learned that his actions actually have consequences."

"D'you think I care about house points *now*?" Harry asked furiously. "Don't be pathetic!"

"And suddenly it's fifty points," Snape observed. "Mr Zabini, Miss Parkinson, you can let Mr Potter go now. One of his lackeys should probably bring a shirt with more buttons on it to the infirmary, too."

Harry put his glasses on firmly and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring. Draco shrugged out of Ron and Hermione's hands with a great show of disdain, and proceeded to utterly ignore his own dishevelled clothing in favour of smoothing his hair.

"You should go first, Mr Malfoy," Snape urged. "Mr Potter can certainly wait around here, in order to prevent a repeat of this savage attack."

There was a pink swelling around Draco's eye. He paused while Pansy did her best to haul him off immediately, and looked at Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"We're still on for tonight," he told them, and stalked off.

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Harry intended to sneak down early and talk to Draco but Ron, who had been wandering around the place triumphantly relating tales of vicious Slytherin harpies and psychotic Slytherin attackers, caught him as he tried to slip out.

"I thought it'd be best to go down early, so there wouldn't be a scene in front of, er, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws," said Harry.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "I'll get Hermione."

So they all went down together, and the only effect of getting there early was that Draco's hair was still wet from a shower, and he looked cross.

"What a pleasant surprise," he said, flinging open the door. "I always love being caught in a state of deshabelle by Gryffindors."

Apparently being caught in a T-shirt, socks and tracksuit bottoms was an enormous comedown for a Malfoy. He scowled at them horribly and returned to vigorously towelling his hair.

Harry didn't think he looked too bad.

It took him a few moments to realise that Pansy was also in the room, entirely unembarrassed about being seen in a flannel nightshirt and eating a serving of chocolate mousse that looked like it was intended for a family. He blinked at her, and she gave him a comprehensive gesture with her spoon.

"Let me make myself clear," Draco said indistinctly through the towel. "We are all going to be absolutely, perfectly, beautifully polite to each other tonight. I bear no grudges. I plan to be the soul of courtesy. Do you understand me?"

He emerged from the towel, with his hair in soggy spikes, and gave them all a venomous look, settling on Ron.

"I'm always polite," Ron snapped. "Compared to you, anyway."

"Excellent, then," Draco said. "My room is your room, Weasley. Only don't touch the bed, or the books, or any of my clothes. It would be such a bother to have them disinfected."

Ron did not look like he was burning with the desire to handle any of Draco's possessions, but he was giving the chocolate mousse a speculative look.

"I could eat," he offered.

Pansy gave him a dark look. "Shame you didn't bring any food, then," she remarked in a stony voice.

Ron seemed to give up in the face of this incurable Slytherin rudeness, and stood protectively beside Hermione. He only gave the mousse a few furtive glances.

Hermione still sounded suspicious. "So you two aren't going to get into another punching match."

"No," said Harry.

"Because Draco would win," Pansy put in, not quite under her breath.

"Harry would win," Ron corrected her in a low voice.

She made the spoon gesture again. "Bite me, Weasley, you oaf."

"Of course not," Draco answered Hermione airily. "A fight clears the air tremendously. Men do it all the time. And we are men. Manly men. Have you seen my hairbrush?"

Draco's careful civility lasted all the time he was drying and brushing his hair, and then Crabbe and Goyle arrived. He sat behind them as the others all filed in, using their bulk to shut out everyone else, making that familiar unit of Malfoy-and-his-thugs that had existed since first year.

It had never really occurred to Harry that they were a comfort to Draco, and he felt a brief humiliating moment of envy.

He forgot about that when the Ravenclaws came in. Terry Boot gave Draco a shy smile when he came in, and even though Draco looked balefully through him for a moment before remembering that he was a host, Harry actually recognised that brief flash of possessive feeling.

God, he was jealous. This was *all* so humiliating.

He experimented with the idea of being angry with Terry, but the idea of hitting Draco was much more appealing, and this had to say something about how annoying Draco was or how twisted Harry was or quite possibly both.

He felt, once more like he should have realised all this before. On the other hand, Ron had always been furiously affected by Draco too, and if Ron fancied Draco something desperate he was hiding it astonishingly well.

Harry informed himself that he was being pathetic, and collected his wits enough to start explaining to everyone about the viewing of the Pensieve.

"Quiet," Draco said authoritatively. "We can't start yet. Where's-"

It was then that Blaise Zabini came rushing in, his face pale and open for once.

He gasped out, "They're gone. All the emergency supplies. They're just - gone. The spy has taken them."

Harry remembered when Dumbledore and Lupin had insisted on stockpiling the emergency supplies. It was at the start of sixth year, even before the first disappearances at Hogwarts, and the idea that they might need supplies, that they might be besieged by the enemy at safe, unPlottable Hogwarts had seemed so unlikely that it seemed a waste of time.

Hogwarts seemed so unsafe these days that it had become a comfort to know that the supplies were there, and Harry had not even realised that until he looked around and saw all the dismayed faces.

Parvati, beside him, made a soft sound of distress, and he spoke to try and comfort her. To try and comfort all of them.

"This might be a good thing," he said.

They looked at him with expectant hope, because they had no-one else to turn to. He was the Boy Who Lived, after all, and he was supposed to have put a stop to this sixteen years ago.

"What use are the supplies to us? I mean, we're being picked off anyway, it's unlikely we'll get to starve to death even if there is a siege," said Harry, and then realised he could have been slightly more tactful when Mandy and Lisa looked like they might faint in unison.

Well, that was how things were, and he could not sugarcoat it for them.

"But he's betrayed his hand," he went on. "I mean - he must have some secret means of going around and out of the castle, or accomplices, or something. He can't go around with tons of food stuffed up his jumper."

"Unless it's Professor Hagrid," Zabini said brightly.

"What a helpful comment, Zabini," Draco retorted. "I can see that we're falling back on the plan of defeating the Dark Lord with our dark and mystical knowledge of personal remarks. Carry on, Harry."

Harry nodded. "I know all the secret passages of Hogwarts, and I know when people are using them," he went on.

Now several people were regarding him in an awed fashion. He felt like a complete fraud for having the Marauders' Map while people thought he had arcane powers.

"And how do you know that?" Draco asked sharply.

"Been spying on all of us?" Blaise added, with just the faintest hint of insinuation.

Trust the Slytherins.

Harry looked at Draco.

"I have a ... special map," he said carefully, and then continued. "So either they've built new passages - and I think we'd all have noticed - or they've got some other method of transporting all these people and things."

"Maybe they're using the Chamber of Secrets," Terry Boot proposed. "How did Slytherin's monster get around? There could be secret passageways."

Harry had always thought that Terry contributed intelligently to discussions before, but as Draco nodded it occurred to him that he was actually an enormous, horrible show-off who did nothing but try to impress people with his cleverness.

"No," he said, a little triumphantly. "The Chamber can only be opened by a Parselmouth, and the basilisk used the pipes, snakes don't need secret passages ..."

He trailed off, and everybody looked at him.

"You're a Parselmouth," Pansy pointed out bluntly. "Should we put you on that list?"

"Leave it, Pansy," Draco ordered. "People who have been taken over by the Dark Lord can speak Parseltongue, can't they?"

"Yes," Harry said slowly. "But that's not what I meant. Voldemort can speak to snakes and they do what he wants. If it was snakes spying, it'd never show up on the Map."

There was a buzz of noise, Draco's voice rising clear above it.

"What *is* this map? And how exactly are you suggesting that armless snakes are carrying piles of supplies away?"

"They could do it," Harry argued. "Piecemeal."

Hannah Abbot's voice cracked as she spoke.

"Are you saying that the people have been carried off piecemeal too?"

"No!" Ron exclaimed, looking terrified that she would cry. "We know that they're alive in a-

"Belt up, Weasley," Pansy snarled.

"Well said, Pansy," Draco chimed in, giving Ron a poisonous glare. "How do you think snakes are kidnapping people, Harry?"

"I know it sounds stupid," Harry said crossly. "But they could. They could all be working together, there could be cobras - or they could be making sure the coast is clear and everyone is asleep before they show people the way in. The point is that they could be doing it! It needn't be a human spy at all. It needn't be one of us at all."

He did not believe that.

It seemed like such far too easy and painless a solution, when once before it had been someone trusted and loved, and there had been betrayal as well as disaster.

But he saw everybody else looked suddenly bright, and that was good. That was all he had intended.

"So what can we do?" Draco asked. "Lay down snake traps? Can snakes be trapped?"

Harry felt suddenly tired. "You don't need to do anything," he replied. "Leave it to me."

Chapter Seventeen: We All Fall

*No we can't be friends
Not while I'm still so obsessed
I want to ask where I went wrong
But don't say anything at all*

The next day, Harry chose the corridor with the stone witch in it to do the job. It was fairly isolated and quiet, and he had the spare badge from Lupin, supplies Madam Pomfrey had given him, and Hagrid's huge cage.

All he had to do was look at the Slytherin badge, and concentrate.

"Er," he said, and that was a very peculiar sound in Parseltongue. "Come here, snakes. I want you all to come here. Any snakes near or around Hogwarts - come here at *once*!"

He heard some faint questions, and comments of wonder, and simple acquiescence.

When the first small grass snake slithered into the cage, he felt a twinge of accomplishment.

He had felt so useless and frustrated for too long. He would never have allowed it to bring him down if he had felt he could do something, anything, to stop it all. But for almost a year now, Hogwarts had been slowly bleeding to death, and it had become nothing but a background of depression because nobody knew what to *do* about it.

If it was possible that it was the snakes, and this would stop them...

"Go on, come here," Harry said persuasively, the syllables sliding and hissing over his tongue.

"Oh baby, talk dirty to me."

Harry jumped, spun around and rolled his eyes in Draco's direction. Draco grinned and leaned against the wall of the corridor.

"You almost gave me a heart attack," Harry told him, and for a moment speaking English seemed strange.

"We Slytherins are masters of cunning and subterfuge," Draco said, sounding absently proud. "Look, I thought we should talk."

"Er. Right, probably," Harry answered, and added quietly panicking to his list of things he should do after he had collected all the snakes. He shifted his gaze from Draco's face to the badge on his chest, and added, "Come," once for good measure.

Draco coughed. "That's a little distracting," he commented.

More snakes were slithering into the cage, coiling together until he lost count of them.

"Well, I'm sorry, but this happens to be important," Harry said, more sharply than he'd intended.

"I know that," Draco said coldly.

"And you're not helping," Harry added. "Couldn't we talk about whatever it is later?"

"Oh, certainly!" Draco exclaimed, his voice growing sharper. "What time would suit your convenience?"

"Look, this isn't for *me*," Harry told him. "If it was for me - if it could be, then I'd make time for you. But I have to do something for everybody now. You have to understand."

"No, not really," Draco said reflectively. "What could I know about responsibility? I'm not a hero, after all."

"Don't be a brat!" Harry snapped. "I know you're upset about Snape-"

"Don't shove your nose into my business," Draco ordered, eyes narrowing at the mention of Snape. "Fine. So sorry to have bothered you. I'll be running along now."

He turned around and stalked off.

"Draco!" Harry yelled after him, but Draco did not turn around.

Harry gave the snakes a glare of exasperation, and then crushed it down.

"Come on," he said, looking at the badge in his hand again.

It was an extra call for good measure, but he thought that he had them all now. The cage was a glistening, coiled mass.

It was their only idea, and these could be the spies, or the scouts for the spy.

Harry remembered, when he was eleven, freeing a snake from the zoo.

Well, times were different now.

He picked up the poison, and began to pour it in.

*

Harry had forgotten that Draco had guard duty that night, and he told himself that he'd talk to him tomorrow.

The next morning, Draco, Crabbe and Goyle skipped breakfast, and the empty place at the teachers' table made it clear why.

Harry had not known it would be so soon.

He had to go and see Draco. Draco would be in class, and he could take him aside afterwards and tell him that... well, tell him nothing that would make him feel any better, but at least Harry would see that Draco was all right.

Of course Draco would be all right.

Harry did not want to speak to Hermione, who was clearly in the midst of some furious calculation about how Snape's absence would affect them, or to Ron, who was watching a red-eyed Pansy Parkinson apprehensively. Slytherins possessing tear ducts seemed to have come as a nasty shock to Ron, and he looked as if he was afraid she was going to explode.

He certainly didn't want to look at the teachers' table, where Sirius was being very cheerful indeed.

He just glared at his porridge, and then ate it.

Draco was not at any of his classes. Harry thought about going to the Slytherin rooms, but he didn't know how tactful it would be to insist upon disturbing all the apparently distraught Slytherins, and he certainly wasn't going to do the invisibility cloak thing - he was on thin ice after the eavesdropping already.

Which left him feeling bad and, worse, *useless*, and sulking on the stairs to the boys' dormitory with a book of defence spells.

He thought they were going to be useless, but he also thought he might accidentally score an Outstanding in his Defence Against the Dark Arts NEWT.

He was reading the chapter on cursed tombs when he heard Draco's voice in the common room below, imperiously asking where he was.

He got up at once and went downstairs.

Draco was standing with his back to him, and there was a distinctly unpleasant atmosphere, as if he had just insulted someone or at least worn a particularly disdainful expression.

The atmosphere did not appear to be affecting Colin Creevey, who had looked up brightly from his chair and was walking over to Draco.

"Hello," he said, blithely confident as if Draco had not mocked him or ignored him continuously over six years, "Look, Malfoy, I'm making a collage of the Young Council, so I'm sure you won't mind-"

He lifted his camera.

"Yes I would," Draco snapped, just as the camera clicked.

There was a flash of light, and Colin said, "I'm not sure if I got the angle right - could you-"

Draco reached out, and pulled the camera strap over Colin's head. He spoke slowly.

"I told you not to point that thing at me."

There was the unmistakable, crunching sound of the camera breaking. Colin's expression changed into an one of wounded horror. Draco tilted his head, as if he was quite enjoying the sight and wanted to get it at a different angle.

The rest of the Gryffindors were sitting in shocked immobility as Draco added smugly, "Let that be a lesson to you."

Harry found his voice.

"Draco," he said loudly. "What the *hell* do you think you're *doing*?"

Draco turned, letting the camera fall. Colin's desolate gaze followed it.

"Oh, Harry," he said in a bored voice. "There you are."

"Outside," Harry snapped. "Now. And then you're coming back in here and apologising."

He grabbed Draco's arm and hauled him towards and then out of the exit. As they both scrambled outside, Draco yanked his arm away.

"Don't order me around like a naughty child!" he snapped, sounding outraged. "And don't you dare touch me."

He could not believe the *nerve* of him.

"Don't bloody well make me hit you again," Harry snarled.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Make you?" he asked sharply. "Funny, *I* don't recall spreading my arms wide open and saying 'Please, Potter, take your best shot.' I would have been quite happy if you hadn't fought back at all. Hitting me was all your own idea."

"And it'll be my idea one more time if I ever see you bullying anyone like that again!"

"If you're so concerned about that annoying little Mudblood, tell him not to bother me again," Draco snapped.

"I will not, and you won't use that word again," Harry raged. "You can't treat people like that!"

"You're strangely mistaken," Draco informed him. "I just did."

His mouth had a mean little twist to it, and Harry was angry because it was familiar, because he *knew* this was what Draco was like and this was why he had disliked Malfoy so much, and he still...

"You're going to apologise," he said flatly.

"You can go to hell," Draco returned furiously. "I'm not one of your devoted little followers. I won't scurry off to obey your orders."

"And I'm not one of your Slytherins! You don't care about anybody else, but I do, I have to!" Harry yelled back. "I don't think that kind of behaviour is funny, and I won't let you away with anything. And that's why you're angry, isn't it?"

Draco regarded him stonily.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Harry pushed him. "Because you're so used to people dropping everything for you, to being in control."

"Oh yes," Draco said, his voice rising. "I'm always so in control of everything. I'm *so* glad you've noticed that the whole world is arranged according to my wishes-

"You want to be! You want to be just like your father and able to manipulate everyone and command respect and if people don't do just what you want them to you think it's not respect and you lash out because you're afraid!"

"I'm not afraid!" Draco yelled, and shoved him. "And don't talk about my father."

"I'll do whatever I think is right! And I won't bother to consult you about it. I know what you're trying to do, acting like your father-

"I said shut up!" Draco snarled.

"And I said no! I don't care as long as what you're doing is helping people. But if you're just going to be a malicious little *bully*-"

"I'll be whatever I like. You're not telling me what to do. I'm not here to do everything you want. What does he matter, anyway?"

"What does he - he's a person!"

Draco's lip curled. "He's not interesting, and he's not useful, and he was in my way."

"Oh, like Crabbe and Goyle are so interesting and useful," Harry sneered. "Nobody deserves being tormented, you little git, so you can go in there and apologise at once!"

He pushed Draco again. Draco was staring up at him, pale eyes narrowed and pale face malevolent.

"You *wish*," he said, and knocked Harry back against the other wall, so hard that Harry's head cracked against it and Harry saw stars.

When he could focus again, Draco was gone.

He stormed back to the common room, and met a startled-looking Ron and Hermione as he made his way towards the dormitories.

"Harry, what's the matter?" Hermione asked.

"Bloody Malfoy," he snarled. "What else?"

As he stalked up the stairs, he heard Ron say, "Just like old times."

*

Harry seethed throughout the next day, in which Draco and his thugs were once again conspicuously absent.

It was sheer stupidity for Draco to be missing meals and classes. What good would it do Snape? What good would it do anybody? But Draco didn't think of that, he just wanted to indulge himself and sulk somewhere, it was all about him, his father and his teacher and his revenge, and what did he care about anybody else.

Someone should teach him a lesson.

He broke a quill while he was thinking that, and Lupin and Hermione gave him a concerned look. He mumbled some kind of apology and dug out another one.

Someone should just punch his stupid, bigoted head in, throw him down and make him *sorry* and...

"Two in one class, Harry?" Lupin asked.

Harry looked at the mangled quill in his hand. "Must be a bad batch," he snapped.

Stupid shoddy workmanship.

He felt - itchy, uncomfortable in his own skin. Draco deserved to be punched for what he'd done to Colin, and he needed to be comforted because Snape was gone, and Harry still wanted to ask him questions about that stupid issue he shouldn't even be bothered about.

Terry Boot caught him as he was going out of dinner, which he had more sort of stabbed with his fork than actually eaten.

"Hi there," he said.

"Hello," Harry said coldly, looking at him. He was oddly satisfied to see that he was taller than Terry.

"How'd the snake thing go?" Terry asked.

He didn't talk like he was clever, either. And his eyes were quite small.

Harry had to stop this.

"OK," Harry answered curtly.

"Well, it was a good idea, anyway," Terry said absently. "Look, about - ah, Malfoy-"

He looked worried and disturbed, and rumbled back his hair.

"I really don't want to talk about him," Harry informed Terry, and walked off.

He sat on the edge of his armchair in the common room later, and turned what Terry had said over in his head and fretted over it. What had he meant, *it was a good idea, anyway?*

Neville was talking somewhere about putting Devil's Snare in the cellars. Harry blinked and tried to pay attention.

"Harry."

Someone touched his knee to get his attention, and he started.

It was Parvati, curled on the armchair next to him and looking fetching in pink pyjamas and infringing on his personal space.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I saw what happened with Colin yesterday," she said, tentatively.

She was twisting her black plait of hair as if she felt awkward, and it was very unlike confident Parvati to hesitate about anything. He supposed she was wondering how to phrase 'your friend is a nasty little git who should be smacked in the head.'

"It was awful," he said. "So was he. I know, I shouldn't have given him the password. We're changing it."

"Well," Parvati said, and hesitated again. "Well. Yes. Good."

She studied a stray thread on her sleeve, her eyes dropping so as not to meet his. Her lips looked as if she had something pink and glossy on them, even though she was dressed for bedtime.

Harry wondered suddenly if she had ever kissed Draco.

"Is there something you want to say, Parvati?" he snapped.

She lifted her dark eyes to his. "I don't think much of Slytherins," she said directly. "But Malfoy, he's always been OK to me." She laughed slightly. "I know the same can't be said for other people, and it was probably because he fancied me a bit-"

"I'm very happy for you two. Do you have a *point*, Parvati?"

Parvati looked puzzled. "It's nothing like that, Harry," she said. "He's not really my type. I'm just saying - I think he's OK, and he's your friend. Don't you think you're being a bit hard on him?"

Hermione had always said that Parvati and Lavender were a bit dim. He suddenly and fervently believed her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did you just say that you think *I'm* not being fair to him? He comes into our common room and commits vandalism and acts like a nasty little bully begging to have his lights punched out, and *I'm* not being fair?"

Parvati bit her lip. "I'm not saying that," she said. "It's just that - Harry, he's lost his two best friends."

"*What?*"

Harry was aware that Neville's voice had broken off, and people had turned around to look at them. He ignored them all and fixed his eyes on Parvati.

"What?" he asked, in a lower, more reasonable voice.

Parvati blinked. "I thought he would've told you."

"Nobody told me anything," Harry replied, trying to keep his voice level.

Nobody ever talked much about the disappearances. It was pointless, dwelling on something none of them could change. You tried to ignore it, tried to move on, because there was nothing else to do, and damn it, he'd talked about Crabbe and Goyle and Draco must have thought he knew.

"Crabbe and Goyle disappeared the night before last," Parvati said, hugging her knees to her chest. "I think it was just after Snape left."

"Oh, no," Harry said, feeling sick. "I - look, I have to-"

He left her then, getting up and out as fast as he could. He should probably have thanked her, but it didn't occur to him until he was going down the staircase to the Great Hall and he was not turning back then.

That was what Terry had meant. If there had been more disappearances, it hadn't been the snakes after all.

Harry muttered a curse under his breath and knocked on the wall in front of the Slytherin entrance. After a moment, a muffled voice said:

"Who's there?"

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

Harry heard a brief debate conducted on the other side of the wall, and something that sounded like 'bloody Potter again.' Eventually the entrance opened, and two suspicious-looking first years regarded Harry.

"Thanks," he said, pushing past them and then recalling his duty as a prefect. "Also, you're much too young to be cursing like that," he added absently.

They snorted and he moved on, through a common room full of Slytherins who more or less ignored him and then flinging the door of Draco's room open.

Draco was sitting on the pushed-together armchairs by his fire. He had his arms around Pansy Parkinson, and she was crying on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Harry said at once.

Pansy jerked her head up, and blinked back the tears fiercely as if her eyes were not puffy and red, and he would be completely deceived. She let go of her tight hold on Draco's ratty grey T-shirt.

Draco disentangled himself from her, and walked over towards the door.

"Do you want something?" he asked warily. He looked ashen and strung too tightly.

"No," Harry said.

Draco's mouth stretched in a straight line, as if he was attempting a polite smile but could not manage it.

"Well then," he said. "If you'll excuse me-"

"I just heard," Harry blurted. "I didn't know before. I'm really sorry."

Draco's mouth moved again, but again his attempt to smile failed.

Harry looked at him and felt absolutely helpless and stupid. He had no idea of what to say. Draco just stood there looking tired and ill, and he'd looked like that yesterday too, and Harry had been too angry to notice.

He stared some more. "Your hair looks terrible," he said at last.

Draco stared at him as if he had never seen anyone quite so stupid in his life, and Harry privately agreed with him.

"There are more important things than hair," Draco said, his voice sounding strange.

Pansy giggled from the sofa, a touch hysterically.

"That's it," she said faintly. "We're all going to die."

The corner of Draco's mouth turned up just a little. "Well done, Harry. You broke her," he said. "My hair looks terrible, indeed. Are you coming in, then?"

Harry did so.

"Don't close the door, I'm just going out," Pansy told him. She looked sagging and exhausted on the chairs where Draco had left her.

Draco went over and sat beside her again, putting one hand on her bowed back.

"You don't have to go anywhere," he said, his voice strained. Harry thought he was trying to sound gentle.

Pansy hunched one shoulder in what approximated a shrug.

"I want to," she answered. "I have to go plan my outfit for tomorrow."

Draco nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose we can't all be natural beauties."

"Get bent, Draco, even Harry Potter thinks your hair looks awful," Pansy said.

Harry was starting to feel very self-conscious about that hair comment, but Pansy did not look as if her leader had been horribly insulted and she would have vengeance. She offered Harry a grudging half-smile as she went out.

Draco barely spared Harry a look as he got up from the chair, and wandered around his room, almost aimlessly. He looked smaller than he should have, out of place without the bulwarks of Crabbe and Goyle to retreat to. He looked small and pale and too thin, scruffy clothes sloughing off him and hair a tangled, tired-looking mess.

Harry reminded himself that it wouldn't really be wise to touch him.

"I'm so sorry, Draco," he said instead, and put his hands in his pockets in order to effectively resist temptation.

Draco turned and looked at him. His eyes were bleak.

"Are you," he said flatly. "Why's that? You didn't like them much."

"I didn't want them to be taken!"

"Well, no," Draco conceded. "But if you had to choose who would be taken, and who would be saved..."

He looked around the room blankly, and then went and sat on the bed. His fingers closed tight around the bedstead.

"It doesn't matter whether I liked them or not," Harry said, and risked a step towards him. "I know you liked them. And so I'm sorry."

Draco let go of the bedstead, and drew his knees up to his chest.

"Father had me tutored when I was younger," he informed Harry in a distant voice.

Harry tried not to say anything horribly banal like, I hear the homeschooling system has its advantages, and nodded instead.

"They have study session groups for most wizarding children," Draco explained. "But Father didn't want me to mix with anyone undesirable at an impressionable age. I mean, traitors like the Weasleys were attending the groups too. So I got taught at home."

Harry felt obscurely that he should speak up for the Weasleys, but Draco had his cheek laid against his arm, and he kept talking in that very tired voice, and Harry did not think he'd hear him if he did speak.

"Father thought I should have some companions when I was about eight," Draco continued. "So he told some of his political friends to send their children over on some days that summer. Some of them were older and some were younger, and - I don't play particularly well with others." There was a gleam of wry humour in Draco's eyes. "You might have noticed that," he added.

There was something about the wounded curve of his mouth that made Harry come and sit beside him on the bed, a careful distance away.

"Maybe once or twice," he said.

"I might have had the occasional tantrum," Draco admitted further. "And then they didn't like me, and so I called them names. And there were these two stupid hulking boys, and *everybody* teased them, and I did too, and - they just didn't go away. Everyone else went away after I called them names. I suppose their fathers told them not to, and they... they were very stubborn when they got one idea fixed in their heads. They stood there and took it, and when I went away they followed and I hit them, and they took that too. And I didn't have anybody else, and they didn't have anybody else either, and then I sometimes tossed them a few sweets or told them what to do so the others wouldn't tease them so much, and they liked me. For something as small as that. They didn't want to go away. They wanted to stay and be with me."

He looked very far away, and sounded a little bit proud. As if nobody had ever wanted to be with him before that, as if Crabbe and Goyle had been granting him an honour.

"They were doing what their fathers wanted them to do," Draco said, his eyes wide and glittering, "but after that summer, they did what *I* wanted them to do. I never had to trick them or talk them round or do anything. It didn't matter what I did. They liked me. And they were different, too, everyone always talked as if they were the same person in two bodies but they *weren't*. Crabbe was this complete secret romantic and I laughed at him about it and Goyle was afraid of the dark when we were younger."

Draco pushed away from the edge of the bed and flung himself down on the centre of it, staring up at the ceiling with blank eyes. Harry looked at one of Draco's hands, lying on the pillow with his fingers curled inwards.

"They were different," Draco insisted, as if Harry was arguing. "And I told them we were changing sides and I didn't even explain why and they were on my side. They left their families and they didn't even ask me why. They trusted me, I could rely on them, they would never have gone away and left me-"

His voice cracked, a painful distraught sound, and Harry looked up from his hand. Draco's face was turned in towards the pillows, hair falling into it, and he only saw a twisted glimpse.

"Draco, don't," he said wretchedly, and threw himself down beside Draco, put a hand on his back and held on.

Draco's face was curved in towards him now, and he could feel him swallow and try to put himself back together.

"They were *mine*," he said, his breath damp and hot against the side of Harry's neck, "And I let this happen to them, they changed sides for me and I couldn't even protect them-"

"It's not your fault," Harry said fiercely into his hair. "Nobody can protect anyone from that. You couldn't have done anything, Draco, don't-"

Draco was trembling violently and Harry held on tighter, curving his arm protectively around him but also trying to keep his distance, lifting his other hand to brush Draco's hair out of his eyes and keep them a few inches apart.

"They were *mine*," he repeated, almost angrily. "There's nobody else and I don't know what to do!" He drew in, lips and eyelashes damp against the side of Harry's face, and Harry caught his breath as he felt Draco's fingertips settle against his ribs, and Draco said, "I-"

His eyes flickered open, and Harry looked at him. They were so close that Harry's glasses were pressing into the bridge of Draco's nose. Draco's breathing was suddenly like that of a panicked animal's.

He shoved Harry savagely away from him, and Harry almost fell off the bed.

Draco threw himself off the other edge, and onto the floor, drawing up against the wall with his knees against his chest again and his eyes, slitted and suspicious, glaring at Harry over his linked arms.

"I don't trust you either," he spat. "I'm perfectly aware that your friendship isn't some beautiful undemanding thing. Everybody wants something, and I'm too *tired*!"

Harry sat up, breathing hard.

"Draco," he said, "what on earth are you talking about? If you think-"

"Oh, don't be a hypocrite, Potter," Draco said, still raging in that small, precise voice with his arms around his knees. "My father taught me better than that. *You* didn't want to be my friend when we were younger. *You* didn't like me particularly when I broke that Mudblood's camera."

Harry got off the bed, since it seemed inappropriate to stay there, and he stood looking across the bed over at Draco.

"What, is this some sort of test?" he asked helplessly. "Look, I don't have to approve of everything you do to want to be your friend! And I'm not going to - to throw you off or anything if you do something I don't like! This isn't *supposed* to be a test, that's not how it works-"

"Sure it's not," Draco said, his mouth twisting. "Doesn't matter whether you want to admit it or not, Harry. Everyone's bought and sold. I know that much. And I'm tired of it all, I'm sick of it, I want to go home and I want - I wish-"

Draco leaned his head against his arms, and all Harry could see was that bowed blond head and the huddled figure against the wall.

"Draco," he said. "Please-"

Draco's voice cracked out like a whip.

"Go *away*!" he snarled. "Don't do this. I can't - Leave me *alone*!"

Harry hesitated. "Can't I-"

"Please!" Draco said it like an insult. "Go!"

Harry went. He didn't want to go, could hardly bear the idea of leaving Draco alone like that, but he could not stay when Draco asked him like that.

He got back and found Ron and Hermione sitting by the fire. The firelight was bright on Ron's red hair, and Harry came towards them with a huge sense of relief. They both smiled at him hesitantly as he came in. Ron had a game of Exploding Snap set up on the table that he was probably trying to persuade Hermione to play, and Hermione had an open book in her lap.

"What is it?" Ron asked, looking up into his face. "Did you have another fight with Malfoy?"

"No," said Harry. "Yes. Sort of."

To give Ron credit, he only grimaced slightly as he said, "Sorry to hear that."

The snakes weren't the culprits, and Crabbe and Goyle were gone, and Draco was sitting bitterly alone in the dungeons.

"I," Harry began. "I mean. Just so you know. You guys. I. That is."

Hermione closed the book, and looked up at him with confused eyes. "Yes, Harry?"

"Well. You know," Harry said awkwardly, and leaned down and caught her up in a hug.

It was the first hug with her that he had actually gone in for first, and he could hear the pleased, uncertain sound of surprise she made against his chest. Then she put her arms around his neck and held on for a minute. Her frizzy hair was in his face, and he held on tight.

"Yes, I know," she told him.

He let go of her, and laughed uncertainly. "You were always the smart one."

She settled back on the chair and smiled up at him. "It was never hard."

Ron glanced up apprehensively as Harry leaned against his chair.

"I don't think we should hug," he said quickly. "I think we're too manly."

"*Boys*," Hermione remarked in her old resigned way, and Harry punched Ron in the shoulder.

"Want to play Exploding Snap?" Ron asked.

Harry did.

*

Draco was back in his classes the next day, but he wasn't speaking to anyone. He sat beside Pansy or Blaise Zabini, and shied away from speaking to them. Hagrid tried to talk to him after Care of Magical Creatures, and Draco muttered a few words and then walked away very fast.

He clearly did not want to be bothered. The thing to do was respect his boundaries and his wishes, and wait until he was ready to accept some comfort. Much comfort that Harry could give him, of course, but that was not the point.

The sensible thing to do was leave him alone.

So Harry did so all day, and didn't even look at the Slytherin tables during meals. He talked with Neville and Dean instead, as Neville tried to describe and Dean tried to draw for him the plan of setting Devil's Snare in the pipes, enough to let water through but stop anything else.

He speculated steadfastly with them about plumbing for a couple of hours after dinner, and then Neville decided to broach the plan to everybody else.

It was halfway through Neville's explanation to the other Gryffindors that he broke and made an excuse, and went to go find Draco.

He almost tripped over Draco when he got to the bottom of the stairs. Draco was lying on his stomach playing marbles.

"Nice walking," Draco remarked. "Practise often?"

"That was easier than I expected," Harry told him.

Draco propped himself up on one elbow. "What was, exactly?"

Harry looked down at him. "Finding you."

"Oh," said Draco, and then with what appeared to Harry to be supreme irrelevancy, he went on: "This is what I was doing when I was twelve."

He took a marble from the pile beside his elbow, and then rolled it towards the set in front of him. The marble hit one other marble, which went red, and rebounded off it to directly hit three more. They all went red, blooming suddenly as blood from a cut on the floor, and Harry looked down at them and then sat on the floor.

Draco's face was on a level with his, and he could not possibly have become thinner within a day, but that ferociously restrained look of pain made his cheekbones look horribly sharp. His eyes were wide and tragic and furious with the world.

Harry repressed the urge to reach out.

"Wizard marbles," Draco said, sounding vaguely pleased with himself. "You try to kill as many as you can. And you can only kill the other marbles if the centre of yours hits the centre of each marble. Four is pretty good, but I was up to seven when I was thirteen."

"Er," Harry said. "I think collecting Chocolate Frog cards is a good bit less murderous sounding."

"It's a game of skill," Draco told him, offended. "And wanting to kill stuff."

"That's so you," Harry said, and laughed at him a little bit. "Because you are, of course, a terrible person."

"I stopped playing it, obviously," Draco informed him, "because I, unlike you, am terribly mature and sophisticated."

"I still collect Chocolate Frog cards," Harry informed him back, "because I, unlike you, do not give up."

Draco rolled another marble, and got five this time. He looked briefly smug.

"Tell you one thing I'm giving up," he announced. "After all this is done, I shall stop being nice to people. I hate it. In fifth year, I used to make lists about all the people I was going to be absolutely horrible to and how I was going to do it and exactly what I would say."

Harry reached out for a marble, and Draco slapped his hand away and gave him a stern look.

"I assume I was on the list."

"Forty-five times," Draco replied promptly. "My vengeance will be terrible and complete."

"Oh," said Harry. "This is still going to happen?"

"Yes," Draco said in a very definite tone.

"I thought since we're friends and everything-

"Terrible and complete," Draco repeated. "No cowardly shirking, Harry. Your life, should you not choose the better part of valour and flee the country, will be an epic misery."

Harry linked his arms around his knees and mimicked Draco's lofty tones.

"I defy you and all your fearsome threats, Draco Malfoy. You can be as nasty as you like, I'm not going anywhere."

"That's fine," Draco said calmly. "Then I shall exact vengeance on all my enemies, and also friends, and also strange passerbys I don't like the look of, and then I shall spend the rest of my life in comfort, hated and feared by all and pausing only to read a few books and occasionally sit on the balcony and look like a sun god."

"A sun god," Harry repeated sceptically. "Draco. You might freckle."

"Forty-six times on the list. Keep talking. Make my day." Draco raised an eyebrow, and paused like a challenge. Harry just about managed not to take it up, and Draco said wearily, as if Harry had been bothering him about it for so long he surrendered, "I bought Creevey a new bloody camera, if that makes you *happy*."

"Did you do it to make me happy?"

Draco sneered. "No, I'm just a giver." He flicked another marble, and only got two.

"Did you get him the same camera? He really liked it."

"I did not," Draco said, his lip curling. "I got him a better one. A Malfoy does not go into a shop and ask for substandard goods." He brightened. "Actually, I got myself one too. The shopkeeper let me see a book about photography, I think it might be quite interesting. Do you know that magical photographers don't exist, except for the papers? Think about scenery photographs with rivers still running."

"Maybe you and Colin can start a club," Harry said.

"Forty-seven," Draco told him. "I take no pleasure in this, you know. Well... maybe a tiny bit."

He levered himself up, white T-shirt stretching just a little on his shoulders, and then he got into a sitting position. Then he fished a folded piece of parchment from his pocket, and flicked it across at Harry.

"I got a letter from my mother yesterday," he remarked. "You can read the first bit of it. If you like."

"Er, all right," said Harry, wondering if this was part of a fiendish plan to make him crisis Narcissa Malfoy.

Not that 'crisis' was a verb.

He unfolded the letter, and read it to himself.

'Dear Draco,' the letter read, 'Your last received with great interest. Ths nothing like tradition. If you have made up with Harry Potter by the time you receive this Owl, please give him my regards. If not, please do not send me a Howler. I do not think they are appropriate missives from a child to his respected parent, and the last one scared the house elves.'

Harry lowered the letter, smiled and offered it back to Draco.

"I take it the last letter was along the lines of Why I Hate That Sod Potter, Volume IV, Part VII?" he asked.

Draco lifted his chin. "More or less, perhaps," he admitted. "I wrote the Owl back when we were fighting. Naturally, she only replied yesterday - and naturally, I wrote back to her right away again." His lip curled, possibly at himself. "I just - wanted to show you it. I lose my temper sometimes," he went on, "but it doesn't mean that I hate you forever or anything."

Harry squinted. "Is this a really roundabout apology for hitting me, Draco?"

"Maybe," Draco admitted loftily.

"All right, then," Harry said. "I'm sorry I hit you back."

Draco reached over, and pulled the letter back from Harry's hand. "I'm not planning on apologising to that Muggleborn Creevey, mind," he said. "I have my pride."

"I don't see what your pride has to do with him being Muggleborn," Harry stated, trying to leave it at that. "He and his brother can't help it."

Draco looked mildly surprised. "He has a brother? I *thought* he sometimes looked shorter than other times."

"Yes, he has a brother," Harry said. "Honestly, Draco."

"Oh, please," Draco sneered. "Name one fifth-year Slytherin. Just one. Go on."

"Er," Harry said. "Er. Is that Chaser, whatshisname, er, is he in fifth year?"

Draco made a creditable attempt at cackling.

"I admit it," Harry said with dignity. "I'm a little absentminded."

"You mean you're self-centred," Draco corrected him.

"I'm sorry, kettle, I *think* I just heard you calling me black."

"And you're oblivious," Draco went on blithely. "And you're just not really a nice person."

"I think I'm all right some of the time," Harry replied.

Draco smirked. "Ah, but not when push comes to shove."

He did what was necessary, what would be best for people in the end, when people like Ron turned away from the door - when push came to shove. And Draco was always pushing and shoving him to that point, and it amazed him how much he wanted to be pushed and shoved as long as it was Draco.

As long as he could push and shove back.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "I don't think nice people save the world."

"They don't get to be my friends, either," Draco remarked, as if he saw the two things as of fairly equal importance.

"Well, it's all quite lucky, then," said Harry, and thought about pouring the poison in for those snakes.

"As for the Muggleborn," Draco said, slowly. "Before we started mixing our blood with Muggle blood, wizards were safer, you know. And we used to be able to breed abilities, before the mongrel strain came in."

"I think that marriages shouldn't actually be arranged in breeding kennels," Harry said, giving Draco a look. "My mother was Muggleborn, you know."

"I know, Harry, but don't worry about it, the Potters were a very good family," Draco comforted him absently. "Natural Animagi were born in the old days, the books say. And Metamorphmagism ran in my mother's family, before so many of the wizarding families mixed their blood with Muggles, and the gene pool became too small and the line became weaker. There was only one Metamorphmagus in my generation, and she's half Muggle. She won't be breeding any more."

"I've met her," Harry said, thinking of the girl in the Order of the Phoenix. "She's nice, actually. And I'd feel much more comfortable if you didn't say the word 'breeding' ever again."

"Yes, but, Harry," Draco said with that bright-eyed fervour that Harry liked to see, even when he thought Draco was talking complete and utter rubbish. "We were creatures of myth once, we were incredibly powerful and we held the whole world in our hands, and then we were debased by Muggle blood and betrayed by Muggle talk and *burned*." He sent another marble spinning, and struck six marbles. Red flared among them. "Something to think about," he added, glancing at Harry.

Harry stole one of his marbles, and flicked it at Draco himself.

"Something else to think about," he said. "How exactly is any of that Colin's fault?"

"Well, it's not," Draco admitted grudgingly. "I just happen to think he's a twerp."

Harry laughed out loud. "*You're* a twerp," he said, affectionately.

"Perhaps," Draco said haughtily, leaning over and gathering up his marbles, "but I *could* have been a Metamorphmagus. Imagine that, I could have looked like anyone. I could have been the sex god of Hogwarts. I could've had *anybody* I wanted."

"I'm not saying you couldn't use some help," Harry agreed innocently. "Parvati Patil was just telling me how much you weren't her type."

"Well, no, Harry," Draco said, giving him that 'Potter, you hopelessly dim bulb' look. "She had a crush on you back in fourth year. I can't imagine that anyone who ever had a crush on you might have a crush on me, we couldn't be more different physical types. Unless of course," he said thoughtfully, "one of us was Millicent Bulstrode."

"Bags not me," Harry said. "Wait, Parvati had a crush on me?"

Draco resumed his prone position on the floor, and began eyeing the rearranged marbles with in a predatory fashion.

"She couldn't stop yapping about the Yule Ball and how you'd chosen her," he informed him. "Harry, you oblivious git, you do not deserve to have a love life. What does a person have to do to get your attention?" He glanced up, a wicked glint in his eye. "Aside from playing a Seeker against you, apparently."

To his horror, Harry felt himself start to go red.

"That's not true," he said. "I don't - it's not - I've never noticed a Hufflepuff Seeker at all."

"Didn't you?" Draco asked. "Not to stir up painful memories, but Cedric Diggory wasn't bad."

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed. "Did you have a crush on *everybody* when you were younger?"

"Might have," Draco conceded grandly, hitting four marbles as his ears went a bit pink. "Except for that Fleur Delacour. Couldn't see what everybody else saw in her, to tell you the truth. I absolutely hate blondes."

Harry flattened his hair absentmindedly. "Are you telling me," he said slowly, "that Veela allure is less powerful than your personal vanity?"

"Don't judge me," Draco said.

"I'm just a little frightened, that's all."

"Catch me sharing personal reminiscences with you again."

"I didn't fancy Fleur either," Harry said. "I was stuck on Cho at the time, of course. I didn't even notice that Parvati fancied me at the Yule Ball."

He stretched out beside Draco, and tried to align his eyesight with Draco's and see how he was hitting the marbles.

"Shortly after the Yule Ball commenced, she did not," Draco announced. "Because you are, and it pains me to have to repeat this, an oblivious git."

"At least I didn't go dressed as a vicar," Harry pointed out.

Draco wrinkled his forehead. "I did not go - I cannot believe you even noticed - I'll have you know that I look very debonair in black velvet."

"Like a very debonair vicar, maybe."

"Don't try to give me fashion tips, Harry. It's like the blind leading those with Omnioculars. And my robes, debonair as they were, also came second on my list since I had to persuade Crabbe out of these frightful things with Marvin the Mad Muggle lining and into Goyle's - spare-"

Draco fell silent. Harry leaned over, and touched Draco's back briefly.

"Draco," he said. "I really am so sorry."

"Yes, well," Draco said distantly, and got to his feet and began to brush himself off. "I should really be going."

"Going? Where?" Harry asked.

He had noticed, but he had not put together, the facts that Draco was wearing white jeans and a tight white T-shirt, and his hair had that softer look again.

"First Friday of June," Draco said. "Club night. God knows we could all do with some relaxation."

"Oh," said Harry. "Don't - do anything stupid."

"What, like ignore an attractive girl who fancies me all night long? More your province than mine," Draco said, winking. "Honestly, Harry, you can be so stupid. Here," he added abruptly, and put his marbles in Harry's hands. "Take these. I think you should learn how to play."

"Thank you," said Harry, looking down at them.

Draco shrugged, and closed Harry's fingers over the marbles. "It's nothing," he said. "I seem to recall you giving me a present once before, for no reason. I also seem to recall not saying thank you."

He looked white and silver in the dim light. Harry got to his feet.

"Well," he said. "Yeah. Mannerless brat."

Draco laughed. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said, and then turned and made his way down to the dungeons.

Harry went slowly up to the Gryffindor common room, where Ron was looking at Harry's copy of *Flying with the Cannons*.

"Oi," he said. "Did you know someone's been writing all over your book?" He squinted at the marbles. "Those wizarding marbles?"

"Er, yeah," Harry said.

"Mum didn't allow us to play with them," Ron commented. "She said that families like - you know, the dark wizards - used to play marbles with tiny shrunken Muggle heads."

"I don't think that's true, Ron," Harry said. "Surely you'd bowl with heads, or something."

"Could've been true," Ron said, looking obstinately determined to cling to this tale of his childhood. "It could have been."

Hermione came over to them, reaching up her hand to lean against Ron's shoulder.

"What's the matter, Harry?" she asked, looking concerned. "Weren't you going to see Malfoy?"

"Well... yes," Harry answered. "But it was club night."

"Was it," Hermione said, and her eyes narrowed. "And you're just going to sit home and mope, are you?"

"I thought I might learn to play marbles."

"You must get so bored, Harry," Hermione proceeded, regardless. "You should get out and meet some people."

"Some people who go to my school, d'you mean?"

Hermione waved this quibbling aside with her hand. "You know what I mean," she said. "Lots of people tag along on this club night. It's great fun."

"Hey, it could be," Ron agreed, brightening.

"Hermione," Harry said. "I really don't think..."

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Two hours later, he was still trying. "I'm, er, just not sure..."

"Oh come on, Harry," Ron said encouragingly. "I promise you, it'll be fun."

As Harry looked apprehensively around, it didn't seem much like fun. The club beneath the Three Broomsticks was smoky and crowded, the darkness broken intermittently by circles of garish colour. Bodies were twining around each other in revealing robes or non-existent Muggle clothes.

Harry wasn't sure this was his scene at all. It seemed more for couples, or - those who were desperate for any kind of body contact.

Harry didn't think he was quite there yet.

Ron and Hermione were looking at him expectantly, their hands joined, apparently waiting for him to jump for joy and leap into the dance fray.

"I'll get a drink," he mumbled, beginning to make his way through the crowd.

He had barely gone a few steps when he saw him.

Draco was sitting at the end of the bar, lounging on a bar stool, his fair hair slightly dishevelled and hanging above his empty glass. He looked faintly amused and deep in thought.

Harry brightened and moved through the crowd towards him.

He did not get very far before it happened. Blaise and Pansy both appeared by Draco's side, taking his arms. Draco glanced up and laughed at them, his lips moving in a brief remark Harry couldn't catch.

They were both grinning, trying to drag him off the stool. He was shaking his head, smiling at them, his face lit up and his manner easy.

That's not the way he's supposed to be with other Slytherins. That's the way he's supposed to be with me.

Blaise was speaking into Draco's ear. Harry watched the movement of his lips so very close to Draco's skin.

Draco leaned towards them, appearing ready to be convinced.

Pansy, less forbidding than usual in a small black dress with an unguarded grin, tugged on his arm. Finally Draco let them pull him up and followed them onto the dance floor.

He was absolutely at his ease, as he was when he was happy. He was smiling brilliantly as he greeted a couple of fifth years, probably ordering them to get him a drink with that absolutely Draco-like lack of awareness that he was doing something appalling.

And he was dancing, not noticing or perhaps not caring about the gazes sliding over him. Not even noticing the idiot staring at him, utterly still in the middle of the dance floor.

He danced with smooth practised grace, moving as if he loved to, shaking his hair back and smiling a shade wickedly.

His hair and T-shirt were glaring white in this light, red and blue colours shimmering on them as he moved.

Slytherins danced closer than anyone.

Pansy and Blaise were on either side of him, moving up against him, all of them moving in slow and almost lascivious sync.

Draco was laughing again, flirting shamelessly, letting Pansy fix his collar and trail her fingertips along his neck, letting Blaise slide a hand over his hip. Occasionally he let his face near one of theirs, let his cheek graze theirs and his ruffled hair brush their skin, and then leaned back watching how it affected them.

He had been trying to distance himself from Harry for weeks.

Harry knew he was just having fun, of the carelessly cruel kind he preferred. Harry knew it meant nothing.

Harry felt sick.

It didn't feel like emotion. It felt like he was actually ill, like some disease had taken hold of his stomach and in his throat was a dull ache, the precursor of vomiting.

There was jealousy, dark violent irrational jealousy that made him want to hurt one of them as he watched Blaise Zabini watch Draco. There was desire and despair, and then moving through him like a cold wind there was this... bleak realisation.

Harry moved backwards, moved clumsily through the crowds as if he was not in control of his own body. He turned his eyes from that pale face, saw the rest of the world blur as he stumbled through the throng, shoving his way out of the heated cluster half-blind to reach an exit and oh, the clarity of the cool night air.

Harry sank onto the edge of the pavement, his face in his hands. His head was spinning as if he had drunk too much, the air was *thick* and there was this intense pang centred in the middle of his chest and...

"Harry."

The cold, clear voice was unmistakable. Harry shivered at the way it said his name and shuddered because, please no, he couldn't deal with this now.

He lifted his head again, the world still swimming around him. Draco was standing under a streetlamp, the only white streak against a black empty world.

He looked thin as a blade in his white clothes and that white light. His eyes were still glittering with alcohol and excitement, his dishevelled locks were tumbling into his face, and his neck and arms were gleaming with light sweat.

Harry watched with dumb misery as Draco stepped out of the light towards him, flicking hair out of his face. He stared at the too-thin line of Draco's wrist.

"Are you all right?" Draco's voice was almost kind. "Have those wanton Gryffindors let you drink too much? You look like hell."

"I feel like hell." Harry's voice was dry in his own ears. "But I haven't been drinking."

Draco's shadow fell on Harry now. It was almost like a touch.

"Then what-" He made a small, exasperated noise in the back of his throat. "Look, you're not being stupid, are you? Because - not that it's any of your business - I don't have anything going on with Pansy or Zabini. Come back in, I might even dance with you."

There was an easing of that gnawing jealousy. It didn't really help.

"I can't come back in."

Draco's tone was irritated now. "Why not? Look, you promised that - that *it* wouldn't change anything. You said we'd be friends like before, so why can't you-"

"Because it can't be that way!"

Harry had almost shouted. His voice rang off the brick wall: Draco absorbed it with that chilly indifference he assumed when he was hurt.

"Oh." He paused, and his voice grew subtly sharper. "So that's the way you want it. Because you-"

Harry felt the urge to punch Draco again, shove him up against a brick wall and hit him for being such an idiot.

"Because I *love* you," he snarled, and then froze in horror.

He had to hand it to Draco, Harry thought distantly. He didn't exclaim anything or run. He didn't even say the "What?" which staves off the inevitable by pretending you haven't heard what you didn't want to hear.

He simply stood there, hands in his pockets, face in the shadow. Harry couldn't guess what he was thinking.

And then Harry heard a soft sound from Draco's lips, and realised with incredulous horror that he was laughing.

His head jerked up and he stared in outrage.

Draco's eyes were cold, but gleaming with an odd kind of amusement.

He said, "Harry Potter, you need a good shag."

*

Harry never knew why his eyes didn't fall out of their sockets.

"...what?" he asked in helpless disbelief.

"I said, you need a good shag," Draco repeated coolly. "But you won't be getting one from me. Honestly, Potter. You *love* me."

His attempt to keep his voice light and mildly entertained failed in that last scathing sentence.

Harry was almost grateful for this small piece of cruelty. He lifted his chin and looked Draco in the eye.

"I do," he said quietly.

Draco shook his head. "Try not to be such a Gryffindor. It's bloody obvious, Potter. You've conceived a bit of lust for someone entirely unexpected. Fine, it doesn't matter. It happens to all of us. What's not fine is this absurd Gryffindor insistence that what you feel has to be pure, that Harry Potter can't feel a twinge of nasty little lust, that you have to call it by a ridiculous name-

"It's not ridiculous!" Harry snapped.

He was on his feet with no clear idea of how he had got there.

"You don't have to like it," he stormed. "You don't have to return it. But don't you *dare* try to tell me what I feel."

Draco's eyes narrowed.

"Then stop telling me about your pathetic delusions."

"I'm not deluded!" He stepped up to Draco, furious, and Draco stepped back. "All right, I'm not experienced like you," Harry spat. "I don't know everything about lust. But I do know that I-

"I don't want to hear it!" Draco rapped out.

Harry stepped forward again, and Draco shoved him back.

"It does matter," Harry said in a low voice. "You matter to me."

He and Draco were circling each other suddenly, voices wary, as if they were about to attack.

"You're bloody insane," Draco answered quietly.

"Just let me-

Draco stopped moving, his eyes like ice.

"No. Let me tell you something. I don't care what kind of sentimentality you're spouting. What you're talking about is - just about wanting something. People say it to get what they want. It's a cliché spoken for a purpose... and it means absolutely nothing. And that means, Harry," he pushed him once more, almost carelessly, "that this friendship means nothing."

Draco stepped to the door, and Harry saw in spite of his light tone that his face was twisted with fury.

"Don't speak to me again," he ordered, and left.

*

Hermione lay tossing in the darkness, unable to sleep.

Oh God, how was she going to tell Harry?

She was tired and she'd had a little drink, and the soft sounds of sleeping around her were making her feel even more tired, but her mind kept running on what they had seen.

She had been scanning the smoky club anxiously for Harry, and Ron had been leaning against her, already a little tipsy. She smiled fondly into the darkness in spite of herself. Ron was absolutely horrible at holding his drink.

"Don't look," Ron had been saying in a protective way, as if Hermione's virgin eyes needed to be shielded from the spectacle of a massively drunk and apparently shameless Pansy Parkinson with her legs around Ted Nott's waist and her tongue down his throat.

A lot of Slytherins seemed desperately drunk and ready to grab people tonight. Fairly standard club night, Hermione remembered thinking.

And then they had seen it.

Draco Malfoy had been striding across the dance floor, shoving people out of his way. He elbowed one fifth year Slytherin in the head, and did not seem to notice, and then he stopped in front of Blaise Zabini.

Blaise stopped dancing, and looked at him.

Malfoy stood looking at him, consideringly, the coloured lights making weird patterns on his bizarrely pale hair. Then he had pushed him against a wall, and tilted Blaise's face up to his.

"Erk," Ron said, in horror and disbelief.

There was something very purposeful in it, Malfoy's hand under Blaise's chin, the other hand braced against the wall and keeping Blaise pinned. His mouth had opened over Blaise's and Blaise had responded enthusiastically, tongues and teeth and Blaise rubbing against him and angling his face so the kiss could deepen.

"I can't look," Ron said. "Hermione, don't look."

They had both stood staring. Blaise had put both arms around Malfoy's neck and Malfoy dipped his head down lower, with another direct purposeful kiss taking Blaise's mouth again. Blaise had tried to get his leg between Malfoy's.

"Look at what Malfoy's doing!" Ron exploded. "Only don't," he added hastily. "Can you imagine that? Does Harry know he likes to do that?"

Not from personal experience, I hope, Hermione had thought.

She had looked around the room for Harry desperately again, and had been devoutly thankful not to see him.

Ron had carried on ranting. "What if he fancies *Harry*?" he demanded, and brightened. "I hope he tries something."

"Ron! Don't say that!" Hermione cried.

"Harry would knock him down," Ron said with satisfaction.

"Oh yes, he might do that," Hermione agreed somewhat desperately. *And fall down on top of him*, she added privately.

They had seen Malfoy and Blaise leave shortly afterwards, and they had not returned. A close questioning of everyone had produced the fact that Harry had gone out looking ill before the incident, and presumably returned home.

Hermione had been extremely grateful for a moment, and then it had occurred to her that they would obviously have to tell him. She would have to tell him, since Ron could be trusted to do it with a perfect absence of tact.

She dreaded to think of what would happen next. If Harry hadn't realised and he had an epiphany, or if he had and he was jealous or thought he had a chance or... Oh, it didn't bear thinking about!

Hermione had to toss for a long time more before she finally went to sleep.

When she woke up again, it was still night. She wondered if a particularly bad dream had woken her, but she had the impression that it had been something in the real world.

She could hear absolutely nothing.

Hermione listened very carefully, and then was about to settle back to sleep when an idea occurred to her.

It suddenly seemed very cold in her bed.

She could hear nothing. Not the sound of shifting bodies under blankets, or the sound of Mavis's snores.

"Mavis?" she said, tentatively, and hated her own voice for sounding so uncertain. "Parvati? Lavender?"

Her hand was trembling as she reached out and pulled back her curtains, and then she screamed.

The moonlight spilled into the room and showed her everything. Every bed but hers was empty. She was all alone in the dormitory. They had all been taken.

Hermione screamed again, unable to help it, and then she felt slow cold dread rising in her chest.

Very faintly, she could hear wailing supernatural voices echoing her own screams. She counted them methodically in some part of her mind as the rest of her huddled helplessly under the blankets and shook.

The ghosts of every single house were screaming out their losses.

Chapter Eighteen: Condemned

*We are the children of Paradise
On our own now since the fall
All the things that are worth having
Were never ours to keep
I've been alone so long
That I just don't know what to do
And I don't want to lose you*

Ginny worked it out in her dreams, tossing her head on the pillow and trying to see through a tangle of hair and slumber. Someone was screaming, and it was Hermione, and it was then she realised it was real.

She threw herself out of bed before she had quite thrown herself out of sleep, and she did not feel fully aware until the moment when she burst into the seventh year dormitory.

Every bed was empty, covers lying rumpled and abandoned, except for the one in which Hermione was huddling, her mouth still open in that cry of panic.

Hermione was one of the people Ginny would have unhesitatingly counted on in a crisis, and she was so frightened that for a moment she had simply broken to pieces.

This cannot go on.

Ginny rushed over to the bed and clutched Hermione's arms. Hermione blinked at her and hugged her in a convulsive movement, so Ginny felt enveloped by trembling limbs and frizzy hair. Hermione's whisper came through the clenched teeth of returning control as her hands desperately clasped Ginny's shoulders.

"Oh, Ginny, Ginny, I thought - I thought I might be the only one left in the castle-"

Nothing less could have scared Hermione like this.

"I'm here," Ginny panted, determined. "You're safe."

The knob on the door turned and for a single terrible instant, they clung to each other. Then Ginny pushed Hermione back and strode towards the door. She did not even notice until she was halfway to the door that she had had her wand tightly clutched in her hand all this time, and when she did she only thought: *Good. That will come in handy.*

When the door opened and a shadowy figure moved towards her, her mind was empty of spells. She was still working on protective fury.

Ginny whirled her wand up and struck the figure on the face. It reeled back.

"What the hell... Ginny, why'd you do that?"

Ginny was poised for another attack, but at the injured demand she focused, and almost dropped her wand.

"Ron?"

"Yes," Ron said reproachfully.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Ginny began, when she realised that Ron had just seen Hermione and all the emptiness around her and that as far as he was concerned the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

"Ron," Hermione said in a ragged voice she obviously meant to sound normal and collected, "Ron, thank God."

She pushed herself off the bed and ran to him, and he folded her in a swift, tight hug. They both held on, pressed up against each other, until Hermione mustered up enough self-control to lean back and ask shakily:

"Who else is...?"

"A lot of people," Ron said, his hand pressed hard against her back, as if only spanning the firm space between her shoulder-blades could properly assure him of her presence. "When we heard the screams we looked around the room and-"

"Not Dean!" Ginny exclaimed, on another twist of panic. "Is Dean-"

Ron blinked. "No, he's there, but Neville-" He swallowed. "Neville isn't. Harry and Dean are checking out the rest of the boys' dormitories, Harry said he would follow me up-"

Ginny felt a ferocious longing for the ordinary, for the safe world she had been born into. She wanted to go to Ron and ask if his reddened nose was all right, because she was sure she could at least fix a nose, but all this...

"How did you get here?" she asked, helplessly. "This is the girls' dormitory."

Ron's jaw tightened and his hand flexed against Hermione's back. Ginny saw that his fingernails were torn and the fingertips looked red.

"I grabbed hold of the chinks in the stone when the stairs went out from under me," he explained. "I could hear you screaming. I had to come."

Hermione extricated herself, trying to smooth back her hair. "That was nice, Ron, but what we really need to do is get organised," she said, and Ginny saw the shift in her expression as she forced herself into briskness.

"Right," Ginny said. "What can I do?"

There was another sound, and then the door slammed open and Ginny saw a Firebolt being thrown to the floor as someone stalked by her.

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

Ginny's mind collapsed with relief as she looked at Harry. She should have known that he would come to save Hermione.

Hermione began to explain at once. Ron was looking at the Firebolt on the floor and muttering, "Why didn't I think of that? Should have brought a *broom*."

Harry might have thought to bring a broom, but he had not brought anything else. He was wearing neither glasses nor a pyjama top on this summery night, and when Ginny went up to him and leaned against him she felt the reassuring warmth of his skin on her naked wrist.

"Harry, we were so frightened," she told him.

"Ginny, you almost broke my nose," Ron exclaimed.

Ginny did not look at him, too busy clinging to safety. Harry looked every inch the boy hero now, with his black hair hanging rumpled in his face, his wide bare shoulders braced and his unfocused eyes narrowed and determined. Ginny held on with every ounce of strength she had left.

"What do we do now?"

*

Harry was at his best in times of crisis, Hermione noticed absently as she took the roll and tried not to think about the terrifying scarcity of people. It was only when he was forced into inactivity that he went stir-crazy. Now he was angry, and acting.

Sirius was having some kind of fit at fury at fate, even while he was attempting to console a crying second year. Harry was prowling around looking in control of the situation, which was much more effectively reassuring.

"Get your wands," Hermione heard him say in his grim, sleep-scratchy voice. "If there's something happening out there, we all need to be armed. We need to be able to fight: that's the most important thing."

"When do we go into the Great Hall?" Dennis Creevey asked nervously. He was looking badly traumatised and worried. His brother was nowhere to be seen, and he had a girlfriend in Hufflepuff. "Can't I just go check-"

Harry wheeled on him.

"We all have people we're worried about in other houses," he snapped. "We can go when the roll call is done. Does everyone have their *wands*?"

Hermione finished the roll call, and tried not to let her sick panic show on her face. There were less than half the people who should be here. She was trying not to think about the exact figures, but her carefully trained memory refused to fail her now.

Seventy-eight people in Gryffindor at the start of the year, slowly draining over the year to sixty-four. And now there were... Hermione clamped down on the stupid panic that had made her so useless earlier, tried not to let herself think it but could not help it. Thirty students left. Thirty.

Ron had her hand in a bone-crushing grip. She pulled her fingers gently away.

"Honestly, I'm all right," she assured him with a faint smile. She had to be calm now, she had to think and remain self-possessed.

Harry and Sirius went to check the dormitories one last time before they left for the Great Hall. Hermione was walking round the room with Ron, trying to dispense soothing Head Girl smiles at the younger people.

She and Ron were close by the portrait of the Fat Lady when they heard someone speak outside it, and saw the portrait begin to swing slowly inwards.

No more panic! Hermione ordered herself, and was right beside Ron when he placed himself in the entrance and pointed his wand.

"Who's there?"

"Oh, put away the magic stick before you hurt yourself with it, Weasley," sneered an instantly familiar voice.

Malfoy was still in his ridiculous all-white nightclub clothes, considerably rumpled, and even the faint light made the sweat on his cheeks and forehead gleam.

"What d'you want, Malfoy?" demanded Ron, eyeing him with concentrated hostility.

Hermione thought she had never seen Malfoy look quite so mean as at this moment, when he spat out his question as if he wanted it to be an insult.

"Has Harry been taken?"

"Like you care," Ron exclaimed, but Hermione leaned into him with a warning pressure.

"No," she said slowly. "No, he's all right."

Even in the shadows, she saw a certain tension going out of Malfoy's frame. The curl to his mouth stopped looking quite so nasty.

"Good," he responded, equally slowly. "Good. I - that's good. I think..." He raised his chin and spoke even more deliberately as he took a few steps backward. "I think I'll be going now. You don't actually need to tell Harry I was here."

Before Malfoy could leave or Hermione could work out what she thought of this, Harry pushed past them.

Well, that's torn it, Hermione thought crossly.

Harry was squinting without his glasses, his face looking naked and strangely older, and he walked directly into Malfoy's personal space even though Malfoy initially backed up a step. It was as if he had the right to take hold of Malfoy's arm and stand inches apart even when Malfoy was tightly-drawn as a bowstring at the contact. Hermione leaned further into Ron and was too tired for any more alarm as she thought, *So Harry's realised, then.* It was just one thing after another, and if Malfoy was planning to mess Harry around at this time of crisis she was planning to rip out his tongue and feed it to him.

"Draco," Harry said, sounding calm and factual. "Thank God, I was going out of my mind. Why are you here?"

She saw the thin curl of Malfoy's mouth again and hastily spoke to forestall him.

"He came to see if you were all right," she announced, and she was going to think about that later, if she ever had the time again. Malfoy gave her a look as if she had just killed and eaten his owl.

"Really?" Harry demanded, blinking and incredulous.

Malfoy stared up at him in defiant silence. Hermione looked at the tensed muscles of Harry's arms and back and was sure for one terrified instant that she was going to witness something as horrifying as Harry taking Malfoy into his arms, making sure that he was there, holding on or... *God*, she thought with the sudden stupid desire to laugh. *It will strike Ron blind.*

Malfoy was still tense and glaring, and he fought back against Harry's simple grip on his arm and refused with strained silent outrage to move an inch further in.

"Thanks," Harry said, almost under his breath.

"Go to hell," Malfoy snarled, casting a vicious look at Ron and Hermione. "We've taken roll call and the others are in the Great Hall with Blaise watching them. I wouldn't have left them for-"

"I know. Neither would I," Harry said. "How many of your people were taken?"

"We've got twenty-seven left," Malfoy told him bleakly. "There's nobody left in my year but me, Blaise and Morag."

There was a pause. "Not Pansy," Harry said. Malfoy was silent. "Draco, I'm sorry."

Hermione was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable here in the threshold, watching them outlined in the light so they almost looked like a drama of shadow play, intruding on emotions she had no part in. She was not, however, planning to let Malfoy distract Harry much longer.

"We've got no time to be sorry," Malfoy said harshly.

Harry hesitated, then gave a curt nod. "We've got thirty-one left," he said, which surprised Hermione. She hadn't known he'd been counting.

Malfoy stared, and rubbed the back of one free hand against his eyes. "Then we can presume it's much the same all around the school," he said. "Nobody can stay in the dormitories."

"No, of course not," Harry said. "If we all slept in the Great Hall with guards, I thought-"

"It's an idea," Draco returned. "Look - I have to get back."

"Me too," said Harry. "We'll be down soon." He let go of Malfoy's arm, and before Malfoy dropped it Hermione saw the red mark of fingers on the pale skin above Malfoy's elbow. Harry hesitated. "Draco. I'm glad you're safe."

Malfoy looked at him, eyes narrowed. Hermione thought it was definitely an indicator of character that when Malfoy had no reason for making another kind of expression, his face returned to a faintly nasty look.

Finally he nodded. "Go put some clothes on, Harry. Or else the Hufflepuffs might molest you."

How typical of Malfoy to be making tasteless jokes at a time like this. Harry grinned and turned away when Malfoy did, and Hermione looked at Harry coming towards them and Malfoy retreating with relief.

Harry still looked tired and grim, but a little eased.

"Come on. Let's go," he said.

*

Even the night sky in the Great Hall was overcast and starless. Students were crying quietly in the shadows, and they were all huddled together so closely they looked as if they were all one house. They were so diminished they could practically only make up one house, Harry realised savagely.

The only bright spot in the entire night was just after they were all assembled, when Pansy and Zacharias Smith came stumbling in, in a state of panic and undress.

Pansy took in the remnant of her house with panic draining out of her face and being replaced with something like despair. She went up to Draco, and even at a time like this Harry saw what a natural pair they were with a pang.

She stood, barefoot with the straps of her dress pushed down to her elbows and the top of her bra showing, and stared at Draco with uncertainty as if she did not know if she was permitted to reach out publicly. She put out one hand and Draco crushed her against his chest. Harry saw his hand curl almost too tight around her neck, and Pansy's half-startled, half-pained expression.

"Don't ever do anything like that to me again," he said brusquely, and then pushed her away and turned his back on her, facing the other Slytherins.

Pansy folded her arms over her chest, breathing deeply. Harry saw Zabini go up to her and put his arm around her, leaning his forehead against hers, and she smiled.

In spite of the incredibly petty and irrational jealousy, he was glad she was safe.

So many were not. Dennis Creevey had not been able to find his girlfriend, and the double loss had left him white and shaken. He clung to Harry's side almost as tenaciously as Ginny, and Harry took him by the shoulder.

"What's happened to them?" he whispered. Harry was not going to be stupid and useless enough to say, *I don't know*.

"They're not dead," he said fiercely. "And we're going to get them back."

"I know you are," answered Ginny, who had gone totally to pieces.

Harry wished she wouldn't: when he had come into the Gryffindor girls' dormitories she had been standing combatively, wand raised, and he had felt a leap of hope in his chest that she would be another ally to count on. He supposed she was only strong in that first flash of panic.

He felt embarrassed and as if he was giving her the wrong idea by letting her cling to him, but he could hardly shove her away. He stood with his arm awkwardly around her and looked beseechingly at Hermione.

"Poor Dean," Hermione said in a discreetly audible undertone to Ron. "He was still good friends with-" she swallowed and went on- "Parvati, he looks shattered."

Ginny's head came up off Harry's shoulder. She looked towards Dean, and so did Harry. Hermione was right, Dean looked alone and frightened. Harry wondered what on earth he could say to him.

"Excuse me, Harry," Ginny said in an extremely determined voice, and set off in Dean's direction. Harry saw the smile break over Dean's face as she came.

He moved over to Hermione and spoke in her ear.

"You're a genius," he murmured, wondering how she could have known appealing to Ginny's sympathy would work.

A smile flickered over Hermione's face. "Only compared to you two," she said, pressing Ron's arm. They nudged her on both sides.

People were calming down a little now, still afraid but ready to listen to reason. Lupin was on the floor with five eleven year olds from different houses apparently all trying to climb onto his lap, and dispensing chocolate as if he had set up a stall. He had snapped at Sirius until Sirius became cooler, and stopped saying things like 'Give the children knives.'

Now Sirius came over to Harry and gave him a swift clumsy hug, sideways so they could pretend they were used to gestures of physical affection. Sirius held on fiercely all the same, and Harry leaned his head down on Sirius' shoulder so he could pretend he wasn't as tall as Sirius, he was still thirteen and Sirius was going to be his salvation.

"Did I mention 'thank God you're all right?'" Sirius asked roughly.

"Nah. Thought you might've considered it implicit in 'here, Harry, *you* take a knife at least'," Harry said, giving him a sidelong grin.

"Thank God you're all right," said Sirius, ruffling his hair and letting him go.

Ruffling Harry's hair was kind of like pouring water on the ocean, but he appreciated the gesture. He started to explain his idea about sleeping with guards in the Great Hall to Sirius, and Sirius became immediately enthused.

So when Dumbledore appeared, his hat floppy, with a bobble on it and yet clearly still a wizard's hat, Harry thought they were all in a mood to listen and plan. He refused to let himself panic. They were going to fight this.

Dumbledore's face was grave and lined under the floppy hat. Harry had never seen him look so old and sorrowful before.

"I have loved this school, and believed in every student in it," he said.

Harry almost smiled when he felt Hermione stiffen beside him, and saw Draco's chin lift in the crowd of Slytherins, and realised that Dumbledore was using the past tense.

"It has lasted for hundreds of years, and it grieves me very much that I have lived to see this day. Still, we have to face facts. Hogwarts is no longer secure. We have no idea what is piercing our defences, and we are being decimated."

An eleven year old girl began to sob, quietly, into Lupin's chest. Harry was frozen with disbelief.

"Students with magical families will be allowed to go home, unless they are considered in particular danger. Their families have at least as good a chance of protecting them as we do, and they will no longer live in a place which seems to be Voldemort's main target. Those with Muggle families, no families or those at especial risk will be sent off with teachers or members of the Order, and every effort will be made to keep them safe-

They had all known Dumbledore was serious as soon as he started speaking. It was only as he went on, detailing plans in his new, dull voice, that they all began to realise this was actually happening.

Hogwarts, introduction and monument to magic, Harry's only certain refuge, was disintegrating. He looked around for the murmurs of dissent, but everyone was far too awed by Dumbledore to question him. Everyone only looked more scared that Dumbledore could consider this necessary, and even the Slytherins who did not admire Dumbledore like the

others only looked mutinous. Sirius looked uncertain, as did the other teachers. Lupin had never been one for open defiance.

Nobody was going to speak. Nobody was going to *protest*.

"You can't do this!" Harry exclaimed, and everyone turned and stared.

He tried not to pay attention to them, walking forward and concentrating only on Dumbledore.

"We're going to just give up?" he demanded. "You want me to walk away?"

"My dear Harry," Dumbledore said, blinking but not looking surprised, "if you have another suggestion to offer, I am sure we would all be delighted to hear it."

Harry saw to his growing panic that people looked at Harry as if he might have another suggestion to offer, some sort of solution and salvation. It only made him angrier.

"No, but we can't do *this*!" he almost shouted. "If we all split apart, we'll be decimated. It took us long enough to start working together - you want us to form an army if all you're teaching us to do is run?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes were dim. "I do not want you to be an army," he said at last. "You are all children. I want you to survive."

"I don't want to be a child. I'm *not* a child," Harry snarled. "I want to fight."

"I want to fight with him," Ron put in loyally, and then looked down when Dumbledore glanced at him.

"I think Harry is right," Draco struck in. "Showing an enemy weakness can't be considered a clever tactic."

Harry's heart was starting to beat faster with hope, when he saw the quiet sadness on Dumbledore's face had not changed.

"None of you can decide the fate of Hogwarts. That is my responsibility," he said. "I will not have my students placed in this danger, which none of us seem able to recognise, let alone defeat."

Harry's hands curled involuntarily into fists. He felt like this was a personal challenge.

"People are being taken outside Hogwarts too," he said loudly. "We'll still be-"

"On nothing like the same scale!" Dumbledore told him with an authoritative lift in his voice. "I believe this is the best action to take, for all of your protection. It grieves me that some of you disagree and that I must say goodbye to you all, but that cannot change a decision I have made for your welfare."

"The day after tomorrow, you will all be sent away. Hogwarts will be shut down."

*

Harry sat up with Hermione and Ron until the small hours of the morning, crowded into a small corner of the Great Hall. Ron was with Harry, upset and determined to fight, but Hermione kept rubbing uneasily at her elbows while she tried to sit still with folded arms.

"The younger ones shouldn't be here," she said. "Perhaps Dumbledore has a point-

"We could stay, though," Ron told her violently.

"We faced a lot when we were that age," Harry said. "I wouldn't want to run."

Hermione's face fell as they both looked at her. "I just keep thinking about not doing the NEWTs," she admitted thinly. "It's so stupid, I know, after all this, but... I wish I could have done them."

Eventually Ron nodded off, still sitting up against the wall, and Hermione gave Harry an apologetic look and curled up against him. He looked at her head against Ron's chest and hated a world where Hermione could not even do her NEWTs.

There was no way he was getting to sleep. He was simmering with outrage.

He levered himself up on one elbow and looked around the Great Hall. Ginny was asleep, with Dean's head in her lap. Dennis Creevey looked as if he had cried himself to sleep. Lupin had been one of the first to go to sleep, curling up on the floor with the simple ease of one used to being exhausted to the point of sleeping anywhere. Sirius was on his back and snoring.

Draco, Pansy, Zabini and - Harry thought - a couple of sixth-year Slytherins were missing.

Harry felt a flash of fear and grabbed for his pocket. As he'd shrugged on a shirt over his pyjama bottoms, he had snatched up the Marauder's Map.

Irrationally, Harry had never quite been able to forgive the Map for the time he and Ron had watched it for four nights, taking turns to sleep, and then it had showed them nothing unusual on the night Hufflepuff lost three people. He did not use it often these days.

It came in useful now to assure him that the Slytherins were still in Hogwarts and presumably safe, having run off to do - something in the Runes classroom. Harry was sure it was none of his business.

Harry almost had a heart attack when he realised that Draco's name was not actually among those in the Runes classroom. He searched the Map frantically until he saw his name, alone in the corridor with the one-eyed witch.

The corridor with the one-eyed witch, which led to Hogsmeade. What was Draco *doing*?

Harry struggled out of the sleeping bag Dumbledore had conjured, cursing. What if Draco had some sort of fondly-imagined-to-be-cunning scheme like running away and starting an

underground guerrilla group? What if he planned to live in the secret corridor on a stash of Butterbeer, lying in wait for the enemy of Hogwarts to show himself?

It was a distinct letdown to find Draco nowhere near the statue of the one-eyed witch, sitting down against the wall and morosely nursing a bottle of tequila.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked, squinting at Draco irritably. He scratched his neck, feeling the scrape of stubble under his fingers and wishing he was asleep, about to wake up and find Neville and Seamus back and everything normal, and nothing awaiting him but a shave and a companionable breakfast.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "I was looking for some privacy, actually," he said in a detached tone. "Well, alas for that lost dream." He gestured with the tequila bottle, which looked over-large and about to fall from the thin line of his hand and wrist. "Are you going to sit down?"

Harry wearily did so, leaning against the wall and carefully not touching Draco at all. He did not want to do anything to upset the delicate truce that seemed to be in place, the only good thing to have come from this attack.

"Are you going to drink all that?"

"Why?" Draco inquired. "D'you want some?"

Harry was about to tell Draco not to be so stupid. "Yeah, all right," he said tiredly. What harm could it do? What else could possibly happen, when Hogwarts was being closed and they were being shipped off like children?

Draco snickered softly and passed it over. Harry tipped up the bottle and saw the amber liquid slosh against the glass as it rose, then felt it burn in his mouth. He coughed for a moment, and then passed it back.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"Professor Black's private stash," Draco answered promptly. "Teach him to have unlocked drinks cabinets around impressionable youths. The others have another. Tell me, will you try to protect me when he comes to kill me? If it got right down to it, who would you choose?"

Harry stared stonily at the wall. "I would try to get between you."

"As the pacifist said when they asked him what he'd do if a soldier was raping his sister," Draco remarked in an amused tone.

Harry was looking at the wall, trying not to think about Hogwarts collapsing. It was a bastion against Voldemort they should not sacrifice, especially not at the whim of one man. He was ready to fight Dumbledore, if he could only figure out how.

Panic and anger had been driving him all night, and had now melded together to form buzzing energy just underneath his skin. He wanted to fight, he wanted to - something. He was angry at Dumbledore, and the world.

Draco coughed, smirked and shifted the bottle from hand to hand, then tilted it up and drank some more. Harry looked at the smooth motion of his throat as he swallowed.

He was angry with Draco too, because Draco was not helping matters. It complicated everything that he thought he would feel better if he was sure he and Draco were together on this, if he could lean over and press his mouth against the curve of Draco's lips.

"I'm weak, that's the problem," Draco said conversationally, as if they had been talking.

Harry frowned. "What?"

"I'm weak," Draco repeated, the curl of his mouth unpleasant. "I always knew that. I can pretend I'm able to do what my father would want for only so long. I'm able to be clever in little ways that make no difference. I can make them band together but I can't save them. I tried to learn strategy, persuade everyone, but what good was it?"

His look of spite was inverted, as if he felt so frustrated he wanted to bully himself.

"A lot of Slytherins wouldn't be with us without you," Harry pointed out, confused enough to be mild.

"What good is that, now everyone's being shipped back to their families?" His face was sharp with fury and Harry thrilled to it just a little, as if they were two thrumming strings on a musical instrument. "I *needed* this place! It was all useless. I'm nothing like you, Harry the *hero*-"

He spat out the word with his old hatred, and Harry's restless nerves were stung.

"I'm not a hero," he snapped. "What have you seen me achieve lately?"

"You're not afraid," Draco snapped back. "I saw you in there. You're not afraid, you're in control without trying to be, because you're made like that. Harry the hero, precious perfect Potter-"

"Shut *up*, Draco!" Harry snarled.

"I'm not like that. My father always knew it. You knew it, that time on the train-"

"When we were eleven-"

"My father didn't need approval. My father never needed anyone." Draco looked furiously at the wall, and it was only because Harry understood the fury that he restrained himself from saying something sharp on the subject of Lucius Malfoy.

He knew what it was like to want the perfect father.

"How much of that tequila did you drink, Draco?" he asked.

"Far too much," Draco said, gesturing with the bottle and with grave conviction. Harry leaned over and looked into Draco's eyes. The pupils were dilated, rings around them so slim that he would not have been able to make out the colour if he had not known already.

It was so like Draco to insist on wandering off and becoming bitterly drunk on his own, clutching his dignity jealously to himself.

"Well... what are you trying to say?" he asked absently, reaching over to try and pry Draco's fingers gently from the bottle.

Draco equally gently, but quite firmly, resisted this attempt.

"I am saying that you act like an idiot," he announced.

"So you're not actually saying anything very new, then," Harry observed.

"You act like an idiot or worse, and I try to be strong but I fail like I constantly do, and I'm weak and ridiculous but there it is. You don't even need to - I don't even want you to let me try." Draco was looking steadily at the stone, his voice brittle with anger as he went on: "The embarrassing truth of the matter is that I don't... do well without you."

Draco's face and voice were filled with so much resentment that it took Harry a while to understand what he was saying.

"Oh," he said.

Draco scowled. "I told you I was weak. And I'll have you know this is probably the fear talking."

"Or the tequila," Harry reminded him.

"Oh, don't try to make me feel better."

Harry wondered if Draco actually thought an alcohol problem would be better for him than the capacity to feel affection for other people, and then told himself that he should stop asking silly questions.

He also noticed that Draco was slurring a bit.

Draco squinted. "And don't think for a *minute*, Potter, that - that-"

"What?" Harry asked after a pause.

He glanced back at Draco, and saw that he had slumped against the wall. His head was tilted in Harry's direction, eyes shut and lips parted.

Harry put an arm around him to stop him from falling sideways. He sighed, the exasperated sound heard by no-one in the corridor.

"You stupid bastard," he said, touched and reassured and still thrumming with restless anger. "I can't do without you either."

*

Harry caught a few hours of sleep against the wall, and then went off in the grey hours of the morning to dispose of the tequila bottle. Sirius caught him creeping down the staircase.

"Harry!" he said, and then looked at the bottle.

Harry followed his eyes. "Er," he said. "I can explain..."

"No need," Sirius told him. "It's been a stressful night, but Harry, all you had to do was ask. My drinks cabinet is your drinks cabinet - what else are godfathers for?"

'Not this' was all Harry seemed able to come up with. He stared, mouth opening and shutting, and Sirius looked him over critically.

"I must say," he remarked approvingly, "you look very steady on your feet for a man who's consumed this much tequila. Chip off the old block, really." He blinked. "Not that any of us ever participated in underage drinking of any kind. Don't tell Remus I said that."

"All right," Harry said uncertainly.

Sirius reached out and took the bottle from him, giving him a conspiratorial wink. "It'll be our little secret."

They both walked away looking very relieved, and Harry found the others to instrument the plan he had come up with staring at the wall earlier.

"I want everyone left in the Young Order, everyone left who attended the meetings in Draco's room, and anyone else you think might be helpful," he told Hermione, who was awake and planning in the time it took Ron to snort and roll over. "If we're leaving, we're leaving with all the information we can share."

"Right," Hermione said briskly. "Where do we meet?"

"Draco's room again," Harry replied. "Come to think of it, I'd better go tell him about that now."

He got to his feet and back to the corridor before Draco woke up. When he shook Draco's shoulder Draco tried to blink, found his eyelids were glued together, prised them open and made a piteous plea for death.

"Can't kill you, too busy," Harry told him. "Having a meeting in your room. Come on."

"And I was not *informed*?" Draco demanded. "I am not even *dressed* for the occasion!"

"See, you're feeling better already," Harry said encouragingly.

"I feel abominable," Draco informed him. "And anything I may have said last night I entirely disclaim, and blame on the vile tequila gods."

"Right... so we're not talking-?"

Draco made a swift dismissive gesture. "We're all right," he conceded. "I am willing to let whatever I may have said stand. On the distinct understanding that I do not remember it, and it did not happen."

Harry resigned himself to his fate. "You have issues, Draco."

"More than the *Daily Prophet*, quite possibly. Is that the point?" Draco gave him a piercing and imperious stare.

"No," said Harry. "I want you to help me drag my Somnasieve to your room."

Draco considered this. "I need to get changed first."

"Don't spend ages on your hair."

*

The stone basin was not exactly portable, but he was not bringing already scared students into a dead teacher's office. He gritted his teeth and pushed as Draco tried to pull it. Draco had moaned at length about not using a Levitas charm, but Harry was afraid they might spill some of the precious silvery stuff inside.

"I'm not really made for a lifestyle of toil," Draco remarked after they had it down one corridor. "Can't we fetch Weasley? His long history of peasant forebears might come in handy about now."

"Shut up about Ron, you inbred weakling," Harry returned.

"Is that the best you can do? I'm disappointed," Draco told him. "Months now under my expert tutelage, and you consider this adequate banter-"

Harry put his shoulder to the basin and almost caught Draco off guard. Draco sneered at him and helped drag it along.

"You're one to talk," Harry said with an effort. "Every time you really get angry, you sound all of eight years old. Don't talk to me, you're mean, and your mother smells of sick goat."

"Now you question my repartee," Draco complained as they dragged the Somnasieve through the deserted Slytherin common room. He deliberately did not look around it, as if refusing to believe there would be a last time to do so. "Will you leave me with nothing?"

Once they had the Somnasieve installed in the centre of Draco's room, Harry collapsed against the wall. Draco, impelled by vanity apparently stronger than exhaustion, went to the mirror and checked his reflection.

"I thought there were more important things than hair," Harry remarked.

Draco brushed some strands into a more artistically pleasing fashion, and undid a strategic button. "There are, I suppose," he answered, sounding not entirely convinced. "But this is no time to be falling apart. This is the crisis point, and I refuse to show people I am crumbling under pressure."

Harry nodded, agreeing with the sentiment if not the excessive grooming.

"If we weren't all in so much trouble, I would have stayed angry with you," Draco went on.

Harry folded his arms over his chest. "Is that so?"

"Hey Potter! I am rubber and you are glue." Draco shrugged. "Clearly, I am a towering inferno of rage."

The door opened and Pansy, wearing a strangely bright pink jumper over her black dress, came in.

"You're also the last word in maturity, I see," she remarked.

"It's a private joke," Draco said in a peeved voice.

"It's a playground insult, Draco," she told him, and made a wide sweeping gesture that alarmed Harry and made him think of large, vehement birds. "Look! Here he is. Harry Potter, in your very own room. You don't need to resort to hatred notes any more."

Draco leaned against his dresser and looked mortally offended.

"My hatred notes were works of *genius*."

"Hi, non-Slytherin here," Harry said. "I don't know what a hatred note is."

Draco blinked at him. "My notes," he said. "Long notes, some of them, and some breathtakingly succinct in their venom. Detailing my opinion of your personal appearance, behaviour, odour, destination in the afterlife and ancestry. Notes of brilliantly expressed hatred, Harry, come on, surely you remember?"

He looked scandalised. Harry rumpled his hair and looked back apologetically.

"That's really strange, Draco. And I don't think I got them."

Draco turned his head and levelled a silently accusing look at Pansy.

She held up her hands defensively. "We had to. Draco, you were insane, you were a man possessed. Some of those notes were very scary, we had to think of the house points-"

Draco's tone was menacing. "Pansy, what did you *do* with them?"

"Well..." Pansy said, her voice small. "Well, we - threw them away."

"My painstakingly crafted hatred notes," Draco said. "My little works of art. Some of those took hours. You will pay for this, you unprincipled dabbler in Hufflepuffs."

Pansy smirked.

Harry was a bit hurt. "You hated me that much?"

Draco gave up leaning against the dresser and went over to him, patting him on the arm.

"Then, Harry, then," he assured him. "Since you wisely placed yourself under my supervision, you have been coming on by leaps and bounds. You're really quite tolerable now."

"Thanks," Harry said dryly. He gave Draco a sidelong glance. "If I'd got them, I would've answered them, you know." He considered. "Well, I might have tipped a potion on your head or something."

Draco gave a mollified sniff. "I like to feel appreciated."

Pansy, tugging at the garish pink sleeves of her jumper rather than the extremely short skirt of her dress, wandered over to Draco's bed and plumped herself down on it.

"I take it you two are getting on again," she said. "When only last night you said-"

"Stop dwelling in the past, woman," Draco commanded.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "At least the hatred notes were consistent. Nice basin, by the way. Very retro."

At that point the door opened again and Blaise Zabini wandered in, wearing all black and more obviously suffering from a hangover than the other two alcoholics in the room.

He gave Harry a revolted look. "Not again," he said faintly, and went to sit with Pansy on the bed. Once there, he eyed the Somnasieve. "I take it we're all in for a viewing of-"

He was interrupted by Ron's entry, moving carefully in case the Slytherin germs battened down on him. He relaxed slightly when he saw Harry.

"Hermione'll be along with the rest of them in a minute," he said. "I see some people have already-"

That was when he looked round and saw that the other three people in the room were all Slytherins, beside it being very definitely a Slytherin room. His eyes moved from edge to edge, eloquently beseeching Harry.

Slytherins everywhere! Save us, someone, anyone! Besieged, overwhelmed, going to catch something!

Harry gave him a reassuring smile.

Ron's expression became pained. *Poor, poor Harry, already infected. Every man for himself!*

"Oh dear," said Pansy. "The freckled wonder lacks the mental capacity to finish his sentences."

"Don't push me, Parkinson," Ron snapped, giving her a prim look that indicated, with a wealth of expression, what Mrs Weasley would have thought of her dress. "I really don't know how Zacharias *could*."

Pansy put a hand to her jumper. "Oh, well, Weasley," she said sweetly, "when a mummy and a daddy love each other very much, and aren't sharing a bed with the pigs like some poverty-stricken folk do-"

Harry and Ron were both glaring at her when Hermione came in, ushering in about a dozen people. Ron cheered up at this influx of non-Slytherins and Harry took the opportunity to give Draco, who had been smirking, a reproachful look. Draco gave him a small mock-apologetic grin.

Padma Patil had one hand on her hip and her eyes narrowed.

"I'm here because my sister was taken," she informed Draco icily. "I refuse to be at all affiliated with a subversive group that was your brainchild. I still don't trust you an inch."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"You're beautiful when you're suspicious," he told her in what appeared to be a spirit of pure mischief.

Padma huffed and Harry leaned in slightly. "Do you try to be aggravating?"

"Yes," Draco whispered back. "But it also comes naturally."

After an extended period of settling-down, Hermione stood up and addressed them all.

"These are the dreams Harry has when his scar hurts," she said in a serious voice. More than a few people looked automatically at Harry's forehead, and Draco shifted his shoulder slightly in front of Harry's. "We think they must provide some clues - particularly because Professor McGonagall was killed on the night she saw them. She may have come to some conclusion about them that meant she had to die, and if we find out what it was we may be that much closer to the identity of the spy."

"If this is so crucial," Zacharias Smith put in, "why have we not seen it before?"

"Because the Ministry prevents the public viewing of thoughts," Harry said. Draco gave Zacharias a disdainful look.

"Then we're breaking the law-?" asked Susan Bones, who was looking even more scared now Hannah had been taken.

Harry tried to muster up an awkwardly reassuring smile. "No, this is a private sharing of my thoughts. It's like..." He searched for any analogy other than the one Lupin had used, and was terrified someone would look at him and realise he was thinking about sex. "Um. Well, let's just watch it..."

"See what conclusions we come to," Hermione added, with what Harry thought was a more effective reassuring smile at Susan.

Zabini yawned, looking bored. "A special insight into Potter's mind. I'm sure it will be thrilling."

"Leave it out, Zabini," Harry snapped. "I don't have time for you."

He noticed that everyone was fairly quiet after that, so he walked forward and put his wand in the silvery liquid. He stepped back to the wall beside Draco, and kept his face carefully impassive.

Everyone leaned forward to see his dreams.

Harry kept his face stoic. He remembered it all. Draco, Ron, Hermione, blood, chimeras, griffons, basilisks and books. There were no surprises here.

Draco in Snape's robes moved through the shimmering silver liquid, backing Harry up against a wall. Harry hoped they would not see that, despite Draco's very predatory behaviour, the look on dream Harry's face did not exactly suggest being threatened.

"Well, *well*," said Zabini in a delighted voice.

Harry gritted his teeth and waited, watched as the lake dream appeared and his stomach curled up and cowered in humiliation.

It had not looked like this when he was actually having the dream, Harry blinking and confused and wet in the lake, with no evidence that he was actually wearing clothes.

"My, *my*," said horrible and accursed Zabini, and a few others like Smith and Pansy were curling their lips in agreement.

Harry held himself firm for the worst part. Hermione and Ron both went by, and in the real world they gave him concerned looks as they did. Hermione had leaned forward at the earlier point when she was searching through books with an intent look on her face and Harry remembered Professor McGonagall mentioning the book Hermione was reading, but it did not call any particular book to his mind, and Hermione did not speak.

Then Draco was there in the water, speaking, but the rush of horror in his ears made Harry briefly unable to hear him.

"Fetch the popcorn someone," Zabini appealed to the others. "This is a much better show than I'd anticipated."

"Who do you trust?" asked dream Draco, and swam backwards.

There was a gleam of moonlight on the slick wet muscles of his chest. Harry was sure that Zabini was going to start cat-calling.

"The dreams are mixed with bits and pieces of real life," Draco said in real life, astonishingly different when dry, fully clothed and faintly flushed. "This bit must be from when Harry and I went swimming in the lake."

"But you're-" Pansy began.

"What was that, Pansy?" Draco inquired coldly.

"Um, I said, er, did you?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," Draco lied smoothly. "And obviously we were both wearing bathing suits, Blaise, I can hear you."

"Shame about you," Zabini said shamelessly.

That awkward moment passed. The flashes of violence from Harry's dreams, from when Voldemort was feeling particularly murderous, were harder to bear. Harry saw Susan's eyes fill with tears, and the others watching him as if nobody could have dreams like that and remain normal. Perhaps they were right.

As earlier and more innocuous dreams began to appear in the Sieve, Draco leaned over to Harry and spoke in a soft, vexed way.

"You might have warned me."

Harry tried not to notice the pink colour he glimpsed first at the base of Draco's throat, cupped by the open collar of his shirt, and rising along his neck.

"How would you have liked me to put it?"

He refused to think about wet hair like dimmed and tangled silver in the moonlight, or the very unfair fact that he had no idea whether the details of Draco's body as shown in the dream were accurate. Quidditch teams had showers, after all, and it only made sense that the teams save on water and have common showers. It was patently unjust that he could have drawn correct pictures of Fred and George's anatomy - oh, bad thoughts, bad thoughts - and remain unsure of the exact curve of Draco's naked thigh.

Harry was relieved when the dreams ended, and he had to pay complete attention. This was a war, and there was no other choice.

Hermione did speak now, leaning forward over her knees, her pose reminding Harry of a sharply angled question mark.

"That book I picked out of the pile," she said.

Harry remembered that she had picked out one in the dream, but only remembered that it had not been *'Men Who Love Dragons Too Much.'*

"Yes?" he asked tensely, and everyone leaned towards Hermione when he added, "Professor McGonagall mentioned that too."

"It's called '*The Most Ancient Forms of Magic*,'" Hermione said, her voice certain. "I read that book in first year. Remember, I showed you both that passage about Nicolas Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone."

Memory dawned on Harry, the familiarity of that large, old tome in Hermione's small hands. He must have taken that from real life too, but why had Professor McGonagall especially noticed it?

"The spy has the Philosopher's Stone?" asked Terry Boot, his eyes widening.

"No, he can't have. It was destroyed," Harry said absently.

"That book has a lot about old magics in it," Hermione said, her brow furrowed. "I can re-read it."

"How many copies does the library have?" Draco demanded.

"What a fantastic clue. Let us all become juvenile detectives," Zabini proposed dryly.

"Do you have any great insights? No? Then belt up, Zabini," Harry ordered.

Zabini subsided, but Harry's snap silenced the welter of suggestions. Everyone looked as if they were thinking hard, but fear and unhappiness were battling for pre-eminence on most faces already.

"What does it matter? Hogwarts is finished anyway," said Michael Corner.

Harry wheeled on him. "And the spy could be sent off with a group of helpless people!" he snarled.

"Surely not," said Padma Patil, her eyes cold. "Presumably the spy is closely linked with You-Know-Who, and that would suggest he belongs to one of the old pureblood families. He'll be sent home, and good riddance."

Everyone followed her gaze to Draco, who sneered at her.

"Fine!" exclaimed Harry. "Let's see the proof. Oh, you don't have any? Well then it's lucky, isn't it," he said with savage sarcasm, "that a spy has never been known to come from an unexpected place? I'm so glad you'll risk other people meeting your sister's fate on the basis of random speculation."

Padma flinched. After Sirius' appointment as a teacher, everyone had learned the story of Peter Pettigrew. She had the good sense to change her tack.

"What about your dreams?" she pursued. "You said they were clues. Malfoy was all over them! Are you telling me that Professor McGonagall didn't comment on that?"

Harry hesitated.

"She did?" breathed Ron, sounding partially convinced.

"Maybe it's his charm. Has anybody thought of that?" asked Zabini, lazily but just a touch ferociously.

He and Pansy were leaning forward, obviously looking for a fight. Draco was tense beside Harry.

"Maybe it *is* Malfoy," Hermione said, and Harry looked at her in horror.

If she thought this was the way to defuse the situation, he had always given her credit for much more intelligence than she actually possessed.

"Maybe it is, but we can't be sure. We have to look at the dreams from all angles and gather as many suspects as we can, or we run the risk of letting the spy slip through the net. We have to remember the dreams and watch those placed in the groups with us with them in mind, just in case. Blaming anyone exclusively is counter-productive at this point," Hermione said, and finished by giving Padma a reproving look.

Terry Boot looked pleased.

"I always said that girl should be a Ravenclaw," he murmured approvingly to Michael Corner, and smiled warmly over at Draco.

If Ravenclaws were so great, the stupid Head Boy could have thought up a defence for Draco himself. Moreover, that grateful smile Draco was directing at said Ravenclaw was a smile that could have been devoted far more appropriately to more useful Gryffindors.

"Well, we've seen them," Ron said practically. "Anyone think up anything else, they should tell us. For now, we have to get ready - Dumbledore has said that today is going to be our last outing to Hogsmeade. Anyone who needs magical supplies gets them now or never."

There was an immediate bustle for the door.

"Quick," Draco said to Pansy. "Where are the younger ones? They're going to have to make me a list of what they need."

Harry was getting Draco the parchment out of his desk, and when he looked up he saw that Pansy had gone to talk to the younger ones, and he, Draco and Zabini were the only ones left in the room. Draco was sitting in his chair and Zabini was leaning over him.

"Well, goodbye," Zabini said. "I'll see you later."

"See you around," Draco told him, and then Zabini stooped down. Draco tilted his face up to his, blank of expression.

Their lips met in a soft, perfunctory and very definite kiss. Harry stood staring.

Zabini left the room.

"What was-" Harry began, and then realised his voice had been climbing. "No. I'll go."

"Harry, wait," Draco said. When Harry turned around he looked tired, and Harry felt guilty and furious.

"I know I don't have any right," Harry began. "I'll - I need to go."

Draco's voice was very sharp. "I didn't sleep with him, Harry!"

Harry held onto the door frame. He studied his fingers clenched tight around it, and saw the knuckles become less white. "Oh."

"Not for you," Draco went on, voice deliberately unpleasant. "For him. I don't use my friends. I don't use people I respect."

Why would you need to use anyone, Draco? Draco had slept with him before. What was different about last night?

Harry had a more pressing question. "Then why-?" he said, and gestured helplessly.

Draco's lip curled. "We did - things," he said, and it was warped how an innocent, unspecific word like that made jealousy snarl in the back of Harry's brain. Draco shrugged. "I owed him that much today, if he wanted it."

Oh yes, poor Zabini, Harry thought. Positively martyred by all that Draco kissing.

"Are we still talking?" Draco asked cautiously.

Draco had not even had to offer up this much. Harry had no right, absolutely no right. And Draco had not slept with the bastard.

Harry let the corner of his mouth turn up. "Yeah."

*

Harry remembered what Draco had said, and told the first and second year Gryffindors that he would get them anything they wanted from Hogsmeade. He had simply not expected them to want so *much*.

He eyed the lists sceptically. He was pretty sure some of these children were Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, trying to get in on a good deal. He bet that nobody was trying this out with Draco.

Of course, that might be because Draco had a habit of referring to the younger students outside his house as insignificant maggots.

"It's because you're the big hero," Ron said, rueful and just a little bit resentful after all this time. He looked almost jealously at Harry's big stupid list. "Nobody asked me to get them anything. I could be trusted with getting some sweets, you know."

"Course you could," said Harry. "Tell you what, you can help me with my list."

"No, mate, you're on your own," Ron said. "I don't actually want to get the midgets' sweets. But it'd be nice to be asked."

Harry shoved back a bit at the jostling crowd, sure they were going to make his lists drop. He had never seen everyone who could so anxious to rush into Hogsmeade, as if it would sell them some remedy for all this.

He almost ended up shoving Pansy backwards, and stopped himself just in time.

She stood in front of him smiling appealingly up at him, and he felt very afraid.

"Hi Harry," she said in a melting sort of voice.

Harry took a smart step backwards.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't worry about it, Potter," she said in a bored voice. "Really, everyone isn't dying to get into your heroic little trousers. I've never gone for speccy men, personally. It's just - you'd say that we're friends, wouldn't you?"

"I'd call you sworn enemies by reason of house loyalty," Ron put in.

She glared and then returned her winning gaze to Harry.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yeah, we're friends."

"I'd call us acquaintances who tolerate each other, actually," Pansy informed him, "but I was hoping you'd say that. Because I want you to do me a favour."

"Forget it!" Ron said crushingly. "You can't trick Harry into-"

"What do you want me to do, Pansy?" Harry asked.

Ron looked at him sadly, as if he were letting the side down.

Pansy looked up at him through her lashes, and then batted them.

"I'll love you forever," she promised him insinuatingly.

"That's nice," Harry said. "What do you want?"

"Some chocolate," Pansy answered quickly. "Look, Professor Lupin found me with a bottle of tequila that I did a kindness to by liberating and - for some reason he thought I'd already disposed of another, and Draco says he has too many things on his list to buy me chocolate and I've explained to Madam Pomfrey that it's a medical necessity but she won't listen!"

Harry made a small face. "I'm sorry, Pansy. I've promised too many people already."

Pansy made a distraught sound and people turned to see who was stabbing her to the heart. She clung to his arm and stared tragically into his face.

It occurred to Harry that the reason many of the Slytherins came off as melodramatic villains was because they were a house of drama queens.

"Harry! I thought you *liked* saving people from dire and life-threatening situations!"

"Ahem," said Ron.

"Can't you find it in your heart to save a damsel in - look, Weasel, have you got an insect in your throat or something?" Pansy demanded.

Ron stopped his gentle, suggestive coughing.

"I was simply pointing out," he commented with great hauteur, "that I, like some other people in this conversation but not like others, am going to Hogsmeade."

Pansy favoured him with a beaming smile.

"So you are," she said. "Well, Weasel, if you will do this for me, I will - I will try to like you for... about a week."

Ron blinked. "Excuse me? I don't think that's fair."

Pansy blinked. "Would you like money?"

"No!" Ron thundered. "I'm just saying that you offered Harry more than you offered me. Which is just typical, story of my life, thanks very much, and then you try to insult me!"

"For possibly the first time in my life, I wasn't!"

"By offering me *money*!"

"You insecure little *freak*!"

Harry looked back and forth, feeling a bit like he was at a tennis match with people lobbing little balls of crazy.

Pansy stopped and put a hand on her hip.

"Ah," she said. "I see where this is going."

Ron looked mollified. "Well, good then. Equal treatment, that's all I'm!"

"I am willing to have sex with you," Pansy declared, and then made a face. "Marginally willing."

Harry jumped, and Ron made a creditable effort to fly without his broom. He clutched Harry's arm fearfully, as if Harry would protect him, and cast a hunted look around for Hermione.

"You Slytherins are disgusting," Ron hissed, after assuring himself that no girlfriend was about to bear down on him with terrible vengeance.

He was scarlet to the roots of his hair. Pansy was smirking.

"I think it was a very generous offer," she remarked, and then sighed dramatically. "All right then, Weasley. If you will buy me chocolate, I will love you - in a few years."

"In a few years?" Ron echoed.

She shrugged. "I feel I'll need to work up to it."

"In a few years," Ron informed her, "I hope that I will be living blissfully in a world free of Slytherins, and that - I'm sorry to say it - *scarlet women* like you will be living on the other side of the ocean."

"Yes, yes, fine," Pansy snapped, "but if you buy me chocolate then I will love you very much from the other side of the ocean. Please, Weasley, please!"

Her voice was becoming frighteningly shrill.

"Fine, then," Ron mumbled, and she produced a roll of parchment from her shirt and shoved at him.

Then she turned and left without a thank you, to call a throaty hello to Zacharias Smith, who was looking with interest at her partially unbuttoned shirt.

Ron was already looking around and trying to make it very clear to everyone around him that he had a very important list, too, a list which had been entrusted to him by a public in need of Ron Weasley. He lowered his voice and spoke to Harry in an agitated tone.

"I'm holding br- er, bosom parchment!" He flushed red and made a comprehensive gesture.

"Bosom parchment! What, I cannot believe it, Slytherins are so disgraceful, can you believe it, Harry? Doesn't it worry anyone that a quarter of our school are sunk in blackest evil and - and sexual depravity?"

Harry suppressed the thought that he personally considered it a great shame Slytherins were not being *more* sexually depraved.

"I'd worry more about Hermione's reaction to you buying another girl chocolate," he said mildly.

He, Ron and Hermione spent hours collecting what the younger students and they themselves would need from Hogsmeade. Hermione tried desperately to buy out the bookshop, holding the volumes as if she would never see another magical book again. Harry spent an

inordinately long time in the sweetshop, trying to find the special treats of everyone on the list as the shop emptied at an alarming rate.

When he saw Draco across the street, diving into the bookshop Hermione had already raided, he realised that all the sweets would be gone by the time he got there. He hoped that Draco would not be devoured by tiny Slytherins in a feeding frenzy.

He did not see Draco again until they were coming back to school, and being mobbed. At the time he was smiling across at Pansy, who gave him a blank look and pushed him out of her way.

"Who wants you?" she demanded. "Where's Ron Weasley?"

Draco placed the back of his hand dramatically against his forehead as Harry came up to him.

"Spurned for a Weasley," he said. "Feeling faint with the shock. Be kind and support me until we find a couch for me to swoon upon."

Small creatures were leaping on the bundle of sweets in Harry's arms with starved sounds. He presumed that they were students and the house elves had not chosen this moment to stage the mass rebellion Hermione was always urging them on to.

"And here's me caught without my smelling salts," Harry replied, grinning. "Um. Hey. I got you something."

Draco tilted his head back, startled, and then gave Harry that slow brilliant smile he so rarely used.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Um, it's in my pocket..."

"Harry Potter, is that a line?" Draco looked distinctly amused and Harry felt himself go red.

"No," he answered, shifting his burdens to the crook of one arm and reaching in the back pocket of his jeans.

He produced the last handful of blood-flavoured lollipops - the younger students must be absolutely desperate for sweets - and presented it to Draco. Draco looked at them for a moment, smile stretching to almost become a laugh, and then took them.

He was still watching Harry from under his eyelashes when he put all but one of the lollipops in his back pocket, and absently unwrapped the remaining lollipop. Harry watched him slide the glistening red sweet between his lips and curl his tongue around it, and then he winked companionably at Harry.

"Who says you're not a hero, Harry?" he inquired. "Thanks."

He wandered off to distribute more largesse to the young Slytherins.

Lollipops were filthy, perverse objects, and should not be allowed. It wasn't decent. It wasn't right.

Harry went to the Gryffindor rooms to find Hermione on her hands and knees and almost in tears in front of the fire, trying to fit all the books she could into her luggage. He patted her on the back and assured her that he and Ron would be glad to carry the surplus.

She gave him a watery smile and mercifully refrained from one of those short, sharp bursts of tears that always caught he and Ron by surprise and horrified them.

He put an arm around her as she sniffed and smoothed the jackets of her books, and it occurred to them that they were all so busy with the impending fact of departure that nobody had protested it since last night.

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Harry stormed up to Dumbledore's office as soon as he could leave Hermione. It took him a while glaring at the stupid face of the knocker until he remembered Dumbledore's current password.

"Lime lollipops," he said. Everybody was so fixated by lollipops all of a sudden.

He came whirling into Dumbledore's office and Dumbledore looked up from his desk with an air of mild inquiry.

"Harry," he said. "What a pleasant surprise. Nevertheless, as you can imagine, I'm rather busy-"

"You shouldn't do this," Harry burst out. "There's no way their families can protect them. We should try something else, we should set up guards in the Great Hall-"

Dumbledore blinked over his half-moon glasses.

"We set up guards around the school with no effect," he said, gently and reasonably. "Many students were so afraid they stayed awake: it did no good. Voldemort seems to be concentrating on you children, and I want you placed out of the line of fire."

Harry slammed his hands down on the desk.

"I want to be in the line of fire!" he shouted. "This is my fight!"

"It is not, Harry." Harry had very seen Dumbledore so perfectly solemn. "You have not yet left school, and thus you are under my jurisdiction. I will not see you hurt. How would you even propose to fight this fight?"

"I - I don't know," Harry stammered out. "Somehow. I want to do something. I'll never do my NEWTs and properly leave school if we do this anyway, so I'm grown up. I can leave school now and join the Order of the Phoenix, I want to-"

The round office, the large grand desk, all the books and toys and the Sorting Hat and the gleaming phoenix, all blurred into a haze of anger in front of Harry's eyes. Dumbledore was supposed to be helping him.

"You have just said," Dumbledore said gently, "that you have no idea what to do. Is that correct?"

Harry stood and trembled with anger. "Yes," he said, feeling the weight of Dumbledore's hopeful, baseless expectation that he might have an answer.

Dumbledore sighed, a tired old sound. "Let me protect you to the best of my ability until you would reach the last of your school days. It is not much more than a month, and then you may join the numbers attending the Aurors' training camp in the summer. Safety may be hoped, there, to be in numbers, and I will not have to bear the responsibility for more students being hurt."

The idea of forced inactivity for any amount of time rankled with Harry, but Dumbledore's idea was a good idea. He could fight soon in that case, and Dumbledore had always been kind to him. It was little enough to ask.

"You and Ron and Hermione are of course considered as in particular danger," Dumbledore continued, sharp eyes noticing Harry's hesitation. "You will be placed under the special protection of two teachers I trust completely: Professor Lupin and Professor Black. Moreover, you will adopt the precaution of travelling and acting simply as Muggles. I think I can promise you absolute safety for the next month."

Harry hesitated some more. He did not want to be absolutely safe if others were not, but Ron and Hermione being safe was a tempting offer. The thought of either of them being taken made him feel very sick.

"They're in danger because they're my friends," he stated flatly. "There's someone else..."

"Young Draco Malfoy," Dumbledore said at once, and made a weak attempt to twinkle at him. "I'm sure his inclusion could be arranged."

"Well," said Harry.

"Thank you for your co-operation, Harry. It's taken a weight off my mind." Dumbledore touched his forehead as he spoke, and it occurred to Harry that Dumbledore must have a lot of other weights on his mind if this was how he looked when he was relieved.

He faltered for another moment beside Dumbledore's desk, and then decided.

"Fine," he said between gritted teeth. "But I still think we should keep Hogwarts open, I think we should fight now. I'll show you that I can fight sooner or later. I will."

Dumbledore picked up his quill to write what was apparently an open letter to all parents whose children were being returned to them.

"Harry," he said earnestly, "I hope so."

Harry was back in the Gryffindor common room, packing with Hermione, when the door banged open to the squawked protest of the Fat Lady.

Draco stood in the threshold, his face icy with rage.

"You complete bastard," he said. "You're coming to talk to me now. Or I'll break your neck here."

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"I don't know what you can possibly be angry about," Harry said, following Draco into the Potions classroom.

Draco slammed the door with a cataclysmic sound behind them and wheeled to face Harry. His face was a tight mask of fury.

"You don't know," he repeated. "All right then, let me refresh your memory. Did you ask Dumbledore to separate me from the Slytherins, from everything I've worked to keep together for two years? Did you do that?"

Harry understood and tried not to lose his temper, which was lurking too close to the surface as it was.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

Draco looked like he wanted to hit him. "Living as Muggles? With no way to communicate with them or offer them a refuge?"

Harry might not have thought this all the way through.

"Yes, but look, Draco, you had to trust them at some time or another. You can tell your mother to let them into your house, I'm sure she will, and you have to understand. You're in danger because you're one of my best friends. You need to be-

"I know all that!" Draco spat. "I'm a Slytherin. I considered all the risks to myself. I did not consent to being taken away from the Slytherins when they most need a leader. You go to Dumbledore, because he won't listen to me, you go to him and you tell him that I can go home-"

Draco's intentions were good. That, and the slight shake in his voice when he made his savage demand, made Harry want to comply with him. Fix it, and assure Draco that it was just a mistake made out of concern.

But this was war.

"If they have to be constantly under your eye at this stage they can't be relied on! It's best to know that now," he told him. "And do you think I could bear the responsibility of you being taken because of me without doing anything to try and prevent it?"

Draco moved forward, surging as if he was bent on hitting him immediately, but he stopped short and controlled himself with an obvious effort.

"Harry the hero," he spat. "Other people are responsible for things too, you know. It isn't just you and the army of light you were sent to lead and protect, I have responsibilities, I took them on, and how dare you step in smugly and try to take them away from me!"

It was always dark and cold in the dungeons, and now at night it was darker and colder than ever. Faint moonlight from one of the small windows was all Harry could see by, and Draco looked almost ghostly in that light. Harry shivered in the cold and met Draco's chilly gaze squarely.

"I'm sorry if you are upset, Draco," he said in a hard voice that was as even as he could manage. "Has it occurred to you that if you are a target and you insist on staying with the other Slytherins, you will make them targets too? You can't take the younger ones from their parents. You are offering the older ones a choice and a place to stay. And that's all you can really offer them, and the best way to keep you and them safe is the way I chose!"

Draco was held taut with his anger, almost vibrating with it.

"I can't leave them. I put everything I am into this, I can't-"

"You said it was useless last night," Harry interrupted fiercely. "I know what it meant to you, but Hogwarts is being shut down. Last night, you said-"

Draco's hands were curled into fists.

"I thought we agreed that we were going to forget everything we said last night," he said in a thin, cold voice.

Harry stared at him, blinking in slow realisation and feeling anger well up slow and hot at the sheer manipulativeness of him.

"I never agreed to anything like that," he replied. "I know nothing's turning out the way you want it to, Draco, and I know you're afraid-"

"I'm not afraid!"

"I can't ask Dumbledore to change things when I think I made the right decision. And I don't care if you don't believe me, I won't take back anything I said last night."

Draco was moving restlessly, eyes gleaming like a hunted and terrified animal who wanted to go for his throat.

"I swear, if you don't stop I'll-"

Harry had heard too many threats from Draco now. He was so sick of all this power Draco had over him, the power to be angry with him, to remove his presence and friendship. He was not going to be threatened because he had told the truth.

"What will you do, Draco?" he demanded furiously. "What can you do, if I want to say-"

Draco moved forward sharply, took his face in both hands and kissed him hard.

Harry had never actually kissed a boy, apart from that one brief chaste kiss with Draco before. It was violently different from kissing a girl, with Draco's teeth pressing hard through his lip, and no softness of breasts and hips between them. Draco was just there, his ribs pressed against Harry's with nothing but thin layers of cloth and skin between them. Harry was angry and restless with it and he felt as if he could feel the thunder of Draco's blood against the rush of his own.

Draco pulled his mouth but not his body away, still standing against Harry and with his teeth a whisper of potential pain almost touching Harry's lower lip.

"Feels different, doesn't it?" Draco said in a low voice. "Feels strange, you're not entirely comfortable with it, you don't know what to do-"

"Yes," Harry admitted, the breath hitching in his chest and pressing it harder against Draco's.

Draco laughed low in his throat and stepped back.

"I told you," he went on, in harsh tones. "You had a ridiculous little crush, and now you see that it was misplaced fantasy and you were absolutely wrong, and-"

Harry grabbed him and shoved him against the nearest wall. He held him pressed against the wall with his own body, aware of the cold stone and the thin warm barrier of Draco's flesh and bones. Draco was held too hard against him, too close and strange and dangerous.

He curved his hand around the back of Draco's neck.

"I didn't say stop," he told him roughly, and pressed their mouths together again.

Draco's mouth slid open for him, hot and slick. It was a viciously hungry kiss with tongues and teeth, biting and licking as he tried to push harder against Draco and Draco tried to arch into him, the bones of their shoulders and hips pressed too hard against each other and it still wasn't enough. Harry made a jagged sound that hurt the back of his throat and opened his mouth further, loved the feel of his teeth scraping against the corner of Draco's lip even as he tried to drink in the small demanding sounds Draco was making.

Harry was aware of a jar breaking, in one of the uncontrollable bursts of magic that had not happened to him since he was a child. He and Draco let their mouths separate for a startled instant and Draco blinked at him in something like awe or surprise. His pale hair was glittering with a dusting of glass.

"God, Harry," he said, but his breath was a hot presence against Harry's cheek, his eyes were heavy-lidded with lust and his lips were red and wet, and Harry was not going to stop now.

Draco saw the look of determination on his face, must have, because his eyelids fell even further. His eyes looked black under silver fringes as he leaned forward and tore Harry's glasses off, throwing them onto some desk or other with a clatter.

Harry had both his hands in Draco's shirt, fists pressed against his chest, and this close the glasses made no difference. He saw the trembling curve of Draco's lower lip with perfect clarity.

He kissed him again and it was better without the glasses, another filthy demanding kiss with his eyelashes brushing against Draco's, cheeks sliding against each other while their mouths opened hotly again and again. Harry slid one hand around to Draco's back, not caring that the surface of the stone was grazing it, wanting the feel of the muscles of Draco's back moving fluid under his palm, the only obstruction a thin layer of cloth that was clinging to Draco's back already.

He could feel the space, the instant of heat between the buttons of Draco's shirt, with his other hand. He knew in a minute he was going to tear the buttons off to get closer somehow and he could feel himself going slow, hot red with the idea of it, with all of this, as he buried his face in the long wet curve of Draco's throat. Draco made a desperate sound when Harry's lips opened at the place beside his ear, and he moaned and pressed his head back against the wall when Harry slid his mouth in a trail down his throat. Halfway down he let his teeth scrape against the skin, and Draco's moan went uneven.

Draco's hands curled ferociously tight at the ends of Harry's T-shirt and then he was in motion, a wild stumbling instinctive rush of motion that Harry went with and didn't care where he was falling or about the slam of the desk against his back because he had Draco's mouth again. He had Draco on top of him, kissing hot and frantic as his hands moved and his hips moved, locked onto Harry's and still moving. Harry heard them both moaning and his arm tightened around Draco's neck, he pulled his mouth down harder to crush mouths and moans together. Draco's hands were under his T-shirt now, fingers climbing ribs and clawing at skin, pushing the T-shirt up, and Harry moaned and arched up and let him.

Draco slid the T-shirt up to Harry's collarbone and slid his body down between Harry's open legs. Harry closed his eyes and still cried out when he felt the edge of Draco's teeth against the curve of his ribs, testing and tasting and making Harry arch helplessly up again. His mouth travelled up, hot and with teeth and leaving a cool shivery sore path along Harry's chest. Harry called out again, an incoherent approximation of Draco's name, when his teeth closed on Harry's nipple. The scrape and slide was very painful for an instant, and Harry clenched his teeth and made muffled sounds that meant he was begging for more.

When Draco twisted back up towards his mouth, they both made sharp pleading sounds at every twist. The damp material of Draco's shirt was all that was between their chests and their hips locked again as Draco breathed hard and ragged against him, starting to move even before their lips met.

"Harry," Draco murmured, breath short and voice thick with hunger.

"Yeah," Harry murmured back, dazed with the painfully good movement and the close promise of Draco's mouth.

"Just tell me it was stupid," Draco said, looking at Harry's mouth as if he was hypnotised. "Tell me you didn't mean it, and then we can - we can-"

The way Draco could not even say it was like Draco pleading for it, and Harry moved against him and thought, God yes, whatever you want, because Draco wanted this and it would be so easy and so good, so...

Harry didn't know much about it, but he knew that you didn't lie to people you loved. Not about something like this.

He remembered the soft slurred tone of Draco's voice when he was pleading for something else.

I don't even want you to let me try. I don't... do well without you.

"I did mean it," Harry almost groaned against Draco's lips, still moving under him. "I do mean it," he added, softer and in a breath against the swollen line of Draco's lower lip, feeling the beginning press of another kiss. "I..."

Draco went still. He looked down at Harry with wide, wild eyes that hardly seemed to see him.

"No you don't," he snarled. "Stop."

He was off Harry and bolting out the door in what seemed like the same motion. Harry was still lying on the desk, trying to piece his mind back together and get his breath back. He did not even seem able to pull down his shirt, and he thought with sudden despair that he was never going to find his glasses.

Chapter Nineteen: Exile

*I haven't felt the sun for weeks
So long, so far from home
I feel just like I'm sinking
And I claw for solid ground
If all of the strength and all of the courage
Come and lift us from this place...
I know I can love you much better than this*

Later that night, Harry made his way out of the showers to the dormitories and prayed to be left alone.

Because those whom the gods wished to destroy they first made Harry Potter, Ron was there and talking about the endless what-ifs of leaving Hogwarts, which Harry really didn't want to think about. He pointedly towelled his hair in Ron's direction and Ron somehow ignored this obvious hint.

"And my mum said that Muggle food can be really dodgy, I mean, they think chocolate's bad for you and - Oi," Ron said. "Harry. What happened to your chest?"

Harry stared at him, and then down at his own traitorous body. There was a trail of red marks down his stomach, and...oh *God*... his nipple was swollen.

"I er ah um," he said faintly. "Uh. Door. I walked into a door...?"

"A door with teeth," said Ron flatly.

Harry wished desperately for the days when they were fourteen, before Ron and Hermione started copping off, when Ron wouldn't have known teeth marks if they bit him and indeed when the thought of Draco Malfoy biting Harry's stomach would have induced a coronary and saved him all this trouble.

"This is a magical castle," he persisted. "Many... magical doors."

Ron looked amused. "You want me to believe you messed around with a door? Because you're my friend, Harry, and I will. *And* I'll tell Dean as soon as he gets in, and I'll tell Hermione, and soon the whole school will know that Harry Potter gets off with inanimate objects-"

Harry briefly hid his face in his towel, but when he looked up Ron was still leaning against his bedpost and sniggering like a maniac. He was beginning to think he should have stayed in his nice safe cupboard all these years.

"Bugger off!"

"Harry, come *on*," said Ron. "Just admit it. I know already."

"... What?" asked Harry. How had this happened? Where had Ron hidden the body?

"It's pretty obvious," Ron continued.

"Oh God," said Harry. "Are you really angry? Does Sirius know?"

"I would think so, Harry, since he saw you kissing her."

"Her?" said Harry. "That is - ah, he saw me?"

"We all saw you! And look, you needn't think I'll be mad just because she's my sister. I mean, you're a good guy, and Mum'll be pleased."

Harry felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. Life would be so much simpler if all he had to do was duck his head and mumble yes, thanks, and think about the promise of safety and warmth and belonging to the Weasleys now and forever. Getting into that family had been all he'd wanted when he was fourteen. It made *sense*.

"It's not Ginny," he said bleakly. "I wish it was. I mean - no, I don't, but I wish... I wish I could be someone who wanted her."

He wished he could be the simple hero he was sure she saw him as, someone uncomplicated and unafraid who would never desire anything but to save the world and sweep her off her feet. Not someone who was furious and uncertain and probably going to die someday soon, and who thought that there was some way all the jagged pieces of himself could fit against those of Draco Malfoy.

"I want someone else," he went on, quietly.

He looked up from his hands clenched around the towel to Ron's face. Ron was watching him with level eyes.

"I want an explanation," he snapped back. "What the hell do you think you're doing leading my sister on if you're shagging some other girl?"

"I'm not shagging some other girl!" Harry exclaimed. "I'm - look, okay, will you sit down?"

If Ron was sitting down, it would buy Harry a few more seconds to make his escape. And anyway, once Ron heard this he could faint and... hit his head, or something.

Ron subsided onto his bed and sat there, fists clenched and right on the edge of anger, and Harry couldn't really blame him. He hadn't thought about Ginny. He owed the Weasleys more than this, and Ron was his best friend. He owed him... the truth, or something like it.

He climbed onto his bed, stared down at his hands and took a deep breath, then looked back over at Ron. Ron was sitting still but strained, his blue eyes fixed and his big shoulders held ready, as if he was poised for the moment when he hit Harry or Harry hit him but for now, he was putting all his attention into listening.

Harry did owe him this much.

"There's someone else," he said, all in one painful exhale. "There has been for a while."

"Before you kissed Ginny," Ron stated. Harry hadn't known Ron's voice got this stern.

He pressed a palm hard against his forehead, and looked at the drapes around his bed and all the familiar shadows of the dormitory for moral support.

"Yes," he agreed. "I didn't, um. I didn't realise for a while, and then something happened, and it's - Ron, it's all weird and impossible, and I was in bits about it."

"Oh my God," Ron hissed, moved by the excitement briefly back into the territory of best matehood. "Do you love her?"

Harry cleared his throat and admitted: "Yes. But-"

"Is it a teacher?"

"No!" Harry yelped. Mind you, he thought Ron would understand Professor Sinistra a lot more. "It might as well be," he mumbled. "This person-"

"Your secret love," filled in Ron, who picked up these words from his mum.

"Well, yes, anyway - they're not interested, and they're a mess, and I'm a mess, and everything's a mess, and it would all be really har - difficult, I mean-" amended Harry, and hoped he was not going red.

"You're blushing, mate," Ron remarked critically, and then his mouth fell open. "It's someone really young, isn't it?" he demanded. "It's Natalie McDonald, isn't it? Harry, that's kind of disgusting, she's not fourteen yet-"

"It's not Natalie!" Harry snapped. "The point is that I've been all twisted up about this," he went on bluntly. "And it was even worse and we weren't speaking and I was drunk, and Ginny was there - and so was-"

He trailed off. Ron's eyes narrowed.

"That's lovely."

"Look, I'm not proud of it, okay?"

"Well, I should bloody well hope not!" Ron exclaimed. "You deserve a thumping for this, Harry. She's my little sister-"

"I know that. You can thump me if you like, I'm sor-"

Ron jumped up with his fist clenched. "Don't *say* that!" he ordered. "What does that matter? You're not the only one who's a mess, Harry! We're all in this together, and it's really bad. Hermione is in her room packing all her NEWTs textbooks and crying her heart out, and she

won't even open the door. She's in there all alone because the other girls are gone, and she won't even..."

"And that tears you apart," Harry said, low. "She can tear you apart, because you love her, you guys have done practically nothing but love each other for years. Now there's someone I love, and-"

"And I don't hurt anyone!" Ron shouted. "I don't use anyone if she makes me feel like crap. I realise I've been lucky, and it doesn't seem like you have been, but that doesn't change anything. Hermione's a mess, but Ginny is too. She's been looking to you to save her because she's too paralysed by fear to try and save herself. I know her. She's good with action, she'd never let anyone down, but this... with people disappearing and evil creeping in and nothing we can do at all - it reminds her of being helpless with that damn diary. She's no good to anyone like this, and she is in no state for you to mess around with her just because you're scared too, and all mixed up about some girl at last. You had no right!"

"I know that!" Harry shouted back, and he did know.

He just hadn't thought about it. There'd been so much to think about, and he wasn't good with touchy-feely stuff, with analysing other people's emotions. He was useless at being close, and being considerate, and now he'd really let Ron down.

"Hit me," he said. "Go on, you have every right."

Ron looked at Harry, and then at his own fist, with about equal amounts of astonishment. Then he let it fall.

"You're my best friend, and everything in the world has gone to hell," he said. "I'm not going to hit you. You were being thick, but - I can be thick, too. I wouldn't have known how she felt if she wasn't my sister. Things are too bad to fight now... but Harry, you make this right." Ron's gaze and voice had both gone level. "You go to her, and you explain, and apologise. You make things clear. You make things right."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I will."

Ron exhaled loudly. "Okay. Harry... it isn't Hermione, is it?"

It was so like Ron, to be insecure enough about Hermione to ask, and to wait until he'd sorted things out for his family before he did so.

"No, it's not Hermione," Harry promised.

"Good," said Ron. "Because you can't have her. Now go talk to Ginny, but find a shirt first."

Harry fished a T-shirt out of the general debris around his bed. He was going to have to sweep all of this up and pack it away before the night was out. Ron sank back onto his bed, and the possibility of violence in the air faded.

"Hermione'll slap her around if I tell her you thought she could've cheated on you," Harry remarked indistinctly, struggling into the shirt.

"Yeah?" said Ron. "Well, pretty soon you'll have a girlfriend and then I'll have my revenge."

"A girlfriend? Me?" asked Harry.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry, you enormously stupid prat. I don't care what the bird is saying to you, if she's also yanking up your shirt and biting her way down your chest, she's probably a little bit interested."

"Er," said Harry.

"Now go talk to Ginny. Or I will beat you up. And Fred and George will beat you up, and then Percy will beat you up - though you probably won't notice that - and then Charlie will beat you up. And he'll have dragons, so I don't think there'll actually be much left of you, which will piss Bill off."

"You're a mate, Ron," Harry said dryly.

Ron sat up fast, and almost fell off the bed. "Wait! I almost forgot to tell you something. Maybe you'd better sit down or something, this is going to be a bit of a shock. I know you like the guy-"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Even though in my opinion he's a snake and should have been sent to Azkaban at birth to save time, I'm sorry you have to find out this way-"

"What's happened to Draco?"

"Malfoy," Ron announced, "is a raving poofster!"

"Oh," said Harry.

Ron stared at him incredulously, obviously expecting something like a scream of 'He touched my shoulder once in the hall! I shall never never more be clean!' and some sort of panic attack.

Harry wondered whether Ron's system could stand the shock of one final revelation.

"About Draco," he said carefully.

"Well, what?"

"He's coming with us tomorrow," Harry said in a rush.

"WHAT?"

"Must see Ginny right away," Harry told him, and fled.

*

Harry found Ginny in the common room. She and Dean were in the common room, writing letters to their families. They were both going with Professor Sinistra's party: Dean's family were Muggles, and couldn't protect him, and the Weasleys were too much of a target for Ginny to be safe at home.

That was Harry's fault, too. Ginny looked so young in her yellow pyjamas, hair in two plaits and smiling at Dean's jokes to please him. The Weasleys had been so good to him, and he'd put them in danger, and now he was going to hurt their baby.

"Hi," he said.

She tipped up her face and gave him a radiant smile that made him feel so guilty he thought he might be sick. "Harry," she said. "Hi."

"Could I, um." Harry hesitated. "Could I talk to you?"

"I'll go," Dean said at once. He scrambled around for his papers and said airily that he'd meant to leave anyway, talking so Harry and Ginny wouldn't have to. Dean was considerate, unlike other horrible human beings currently in Ginny's presence.

He looked down at her, for once giving her his full attention. She was all yellow and red filling his eyes, the Gryffindor common room her natural background. Ginny would be so glad to be a place he could belong to: she'd be happy to be his home. It would have been so easy and comfortable.

She would never be a challenge, never be an equal, but he still wished he could be the kind of person who would've loved her. Instead of hurting her like he had to.

Dean departed discreetly, giving Harry a single undecipherable look.

Harry knelt down by the fire, at Ginny's feet. The little bunnies on her slippers fixed him with an accusing stare.

"You know how we kissed," blurted Harry, and then cursed himself.

Smooth, Potter, very smooth.

She reached out her hand to him, but if he'd taken it he would have exploded from sheer guilt.

"Yes," she said, glowing undeterred.

"Ginny," Harry said wretchedly.

"Harry," she breathed.

Perhaps he could just fling himself off Gryffindor Tower. That seemed a much more pleasant option.

He blinked up at her in distress.

"Harry," she said. "It's all right."

"It is?" Harry asked with wild hope.

She leaned forward, and the soft beauty of her eyes filled him with dread. "Of course. I know you're shy, Harry, but you really don't have to ask me."

This was so bad, so unbelievably bad. She leaned forward a little more, her freckles golden patterns in the firelight, and Harry fervently wished he'd chosen the option of Charlie, dragons and death. It'd probably be quick and everything, he could just nip up back to Ron and Ron'd be reasonable, he'd see it was for the best...

"It's not you," he said abruptly.

Tactlessness like this had to be some kind of birth defect.

Ginny blinked at him and swallowed. Harry's mouth was a runaway train, and his brain was just sitting back and observing the horrible carnage.

"It's never going to be you," he went on. "There's no way it could be, you have to forget about it. I'm so sorry, Ginny, but there's someone else. No..."

Harry paused and did not find any tact, so he went on helplessly with the truth.

"There isn't someone *else*," he said softly. "There's just someone. I can't even see anyone besides them, not like that. There's someone, and - there isn't any room for you. I know I've treated you really badly, and there's no excuse. I'm really sor-"

"Do you love her?" Ginny's voice was very small, wounded and mortified. "Does she love you? I mean - does she really, really love you?"

Harry hesitated. He had taken advantage of Ginny, and he owed her the truth - and besides, the selfish part of himself whispered, he could bear it if Ginny turned away from him. She wasn't as important as Ron.

"I love him," he said. "He's not really bothered about me."

Ginny's eyes widened to an extent where she began to resemble a house elf. Harry met her gaze squarely.

"Him?" Ginny said, her voice perfectly blank.

Harry coughed, but did not let his gaze waver. It wouldn't be right, to let her think he was ashamed of this. "Yeah."

"I am so stupid," Ginny whispered, going a dull red. "It's Draco Malfoy, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Harry answered. The look on her face made him feel lower than worms. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. I led you on, I know, I should never have kissed you. I was-"

"You were fighting with him around then," Ginny said quietly. "I remember, and he was... oh my God, he was in the pub, wasn't he?" Her voice went ragged and she pressed her hand to the corner of her mouth. "I was so happy," she whispered. "I've been such an idiot."

"No, you're not an idiot. It was my fault. Ginny, believe me, I never meant to hurt you. I - you're my friend. Your family has been really good to me, and-"

The shine of her eyes, which he had been hoping was a gleam of firelight or even homicidal rage, turned into a spill of tears.

"My family. I've never been anything but an unimportant part of the Weasleys to you, have I?"

"I - that's not true, Ginny. I like you."

She whisked away the tears with her fingers, quickly, as if she hoped he'd failed to notice them. "But not enough," she whispered. "Not more than Draco Malfoy, Malfoy, for... You'd rather someone racist and cruel-"

"Ginny, that's enough. You can say whatever you like about me, but he hasn't done anything to you."

She wasn't trying to hide her tears now. She sat up straight in her chair, the tears rolling down her cheeks and her eyes drowned and blazing at once.

"No?" she demanded. "And his father never did anything to me, either? He never slipped me something that sucked the life out of me, made me have nightmares every night for years, w-woke me up in my bed with blood up to my elbows and so frightened-"

"Ginny," said Harry, and reached for her hands.

She made a sound almost like a scream as she warded him off. "No! You were meant to save me, not... not be sleeping with the enemy!"

"I'm not sleeping with him, and he's not the enemy. He's not his father."

"No!" Ginny cried. "You saved me from his father. Who can I trust now?"

"You could trust yourself," Harry said.

She looked at him for a long moment. "Maybe I will," she answered. "Look. Just tell me why. I don't understand - you're supposed to be a hero, you're supposed to be something good - something great - why would you choose a power-hungry bully?"

"It wasn't a choice," Harry said shortly. "No-one else was even a possibility. At least he didn't see me as nothing but a hero!"

Ginny got up as soon as Harry shouted, and stood staring down at him.

"Fine," she answered thinly. "All right, fine. I understand what I have to do now." She looked down at him for another moment. "You're such a bastard, Harry Potter," she told him, and then walked away.

"I really am sorry," said Harry to her yellow-clad back. She never turned or paused on her way up the stairs.

Well. That could have gone better.

She might have had a point about that bastard thing, and now he'd declared love for Draco Malfoy to the Weasley clan more often than he had to Draco himself. And he felt sick even thinking about it. It wasn't like he had much experience with that kind of thing - you were supposed to treat the person you loved as family, and he'd never had one. It was all going to end in painful disaster, which was at least more familiar than this.

Hogwarts was closing down and he was thinking about his love life. He was *such* a bastard.

There was a tapping behind the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Sorry," said a voice he recognised as his Keeper Natalie McDonald's. "Are you done in here? Because I heard shouting, but I really need to pack-"

"Yes, of course, come in," Harry said.

Natalie came shyly in. She was a nice girl, Harry thought, and it was his second time in as many minutes to see a nice girl trembling on the point of tears. She said, "Hi, Harry" and looked as if she was just going to pass on.

Harry, out of some misbegotten desire to redeem himself, stopped her and asked: "Is everything okay?"

"Oh... yes," she said. "I'm going home to Mum and Dad, it's okay for me, but... I was just visiting my boyfriend. He's scared out of his mind, his parents won't take him home - it's very hard on him." Her chin trembled. "He'll have to go to Malfoy Manor."

"Malfoy - Natalie, who is your boyfriend?"

"Malcolm Baddock," Natalie said, smiling at the sound.

"A Slytherin?" asked Harry with increased interest, because he was the king of bastards.

"Well, Harry, nobody's thick enough to still be prejudiced against Slytherins these days."

"No, no," Harry said hastily. "Never really were, anyway. Just, um... jolly rivalry. Fun for all."

"Not what I'd heard," Natalie said, dimpling. "Anyway, you know what they say."

"Not... as such," Harry answered slowly.

Natalie began to blush. "Well, that Slytherins are better kissers," she said. "You know, it goes like this... Gryffindors plunge right in, Ravenclaws work at it, Hufflepuffs try harder... but Slytherins know all the tricks."

"Er," Harry responded.

This was shocking. When he'd been fourteen, he and his friends certainly hadn't run around the place assessing the kissing techniques of Slytherins. They'd been trying to fight evil, and - all right, he had been fixated on getting Cho Chang to come to the ball with him and getting Draco Malfoy ignominiously expelled, and Ron'd been torn between pulling Hermione's bushy pigtails and writing 'Mr Fleur Delacour' on his parchment, and Hermione - the quick study - had been seducing international Quidditch stars.

Also, based on Harry's admittedly limited experience, Natalie was absolutely correct.

"I mean, it's not about that," Natalie told him hastily. "I really like Malcolm. I'm really worried about him, he - You see, Malfoy was supposed to go with all the people whose parents are Dea - won't take them back, that is, but now he's told them that Dumbledore's making him go with you, and..." She bit her lip. "They're going to arrive at Malfoy Manor to stay with Malfoy's mother, and she doesn't want to take responsibility for them. It... it's not going to be a good situation, and I understand that Malfoy needs to be kept safe, but-" She rubbed her arms, as if gooseflesh was rising on them as she stood by the fire. "Malcolm's really scared," she said softly. "And I'm scared for him."

Guilt was cold at the back of Harry's throat. He'd done this. He wasn't sure he'd have chosen differently - Draco did need to be kept safe - but he should have considered all this, like he should have considered Ginny. He had to start being responsible.

He remembered something, took Natalie's shoulder in one hand and said: "You are not afraid."

Natalie looked at him as if he was crazy. "Oh yes I am," she returned. "I just told you so."

Sod that, then.

"Well, you shouldn't be. Because I'm going to kill Voldemort," Harry promised, "and then everything's going to be fine."

She actually looked comforted, as if she knew he meant it. And he did mean it: because he wanted to act, and he wanted revenge for everyone, from his parents to McGonagall, and with Dumbledore defeated enough to shut down Hogwarts there was no-one else. He was disgustingly inept at caretaking other people, but he'd faced danger more than they had: he had at this a better chance than they did.

Someone had to do it, and he had to do something.

It was nearly June, and after the summer of hiding he'd be eighteen and no longer a student: through the summer he could train under Aurors, and then one day, somehow, he'd be ready and able to do it. He wanted to do it, he could taste it...

Revenge or justice, there was no alternative. He had to do it, so it'd be done, and then everyone would be safe.

Until then, of course, he was doomed to be an enormous prat around crying girls.

"D'you want help packing?" he asked her, not because he had any great confidence in his elite folding techniques but because she'd probably feel better if she had someone talking to her as she packed. If she wanted, he could tell her he'd kill Voldemort again.

Natalie said okay. As he helped her, some other people said they could use a hand - or someone sure, someone reassuring, to hand - and he went to them. He wasn't sure how well he did, but he did it.

It was long past dawn when he got back to his own dormitory. He poked Ron in the side until he stirred and exclaimed, "Damn the flobberworms!"

"Um, it's me, Harry," said Harry. "I told Ginny. Um. I made a complete mess of it. Sorry."

"Wasn' really expectin' anythin less," Ron mumbled. "No offence."

"None taken."

Ron blinked blearily up at him. "Is Malfoy still coming with us tomorrow?"

"Later today, actually, yes," Harry said apologetically.

"Oh God. I was hoping it was all a terrible terrible nightma..." Ron fell asleep mid-sentence.

Harry packed his own suitcase using his time-honoured method of scooping everything off the floor and hoping he hadn't packed owl droppings. After that, he looked out the window. The sky was bleak and cold, but light, with fingers from cloud-shrouded sunlight reaching out over the hills: like the white streaks in a very old woman's grey hair. It was morning.

There was no point trying to get some sleep, and he'd spent all night giving out reassurance. He wanted...

He went to see Draco.

*

He found Draco in the common room, acting as an arbiter of justice. For a given sense of the word.

"It's not a case of finders' keepers if you didn't find it," he was telling one shamefaced boy severely. "What you did was break into her dormitory, unlock her case with a spell and take it, and worst of all - you left the lock open. And thus you were found out. Call that cunning? Give it back to her immediately, we have a reputation to keep up here."

The boy offered up what seemed to be an item of ladies' lingerie with the saddened air of one who will commit more devious crimes in the future.

"And you girls! Cassandra, it was an act of Hufflepuffian stupidity to sell her a time-share in your jade statue anyway, but it's a small item and I expect you can Owl it to each other. As for who gets first dibs, if you plan to wrestle for it I am perfectly willing to provide you with a tub full of jelly, scanty swim attire and refreshments for the undoubtedly wide audience you would collect. If you reject this idea - and I personally think there's a lot to be said for it - you could always flip a coin."

The girl he'd addressed as Cassandra, who Harry thought was a sixth year, giggled and winked at him. Draco winked back.

Draco was winking and wandering around the place in pyjama bottoms and a dressing gown. Part of his chest could be seen. It was ridiculous. People's attention was being distracted from the war effort.

"Can I get a word, or should I come back after the wrestling?" Harry asked.

Draco looked at him, eyes narrowed. "I suppose we should have a word now," he conceded. "Cassandra, Ann, feel free to start stripping while I'm gone."

He swept away and Harry followed. Harry would've suspected him of a dramatic Hugh Hefner impression if he'd believed that Draco knew who Hugh Hefner was.

"You're all taking a long time packing," Harry observed. "Must be that lack of respect for personal property slowing you down."

"All Slytherins are not petty thieves, Potter," Draco said with dignity.

"Still taking a long time to pack."

"Well, I never said none of us were," Draco answered, dignity undiminished.

He had parchment unrolled on his desk, with his handwriting on it. When he saw Harry glance at it, he gave him a sharp look and went to put it away.

"It's an Owl to my mother," he explained, and then he turned back and looked at Harry, his face sharp and unpleasant in the way it always got when he was tense. "I - look. Potter. I owe you an apology."

Harry blinked. "Sorry?"

Draco's gaze was firmly fixed on the middle distance. "Yes, that was more or less the intended word. I don't - I don't take advantage of my friends. I don't use them. And I don't try to manipulate them in order to get my own way. The rest of the world is fair game for all of the above, but... you're not. So I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Nothing nice ever happened to Harry: it was official.

"Thanks for the thought, Draco," Harry said, keeping his face a perfect blank.

Draco scowled, apparently at one of the knots in his door. "I'm still furious at being dragged away like this," he said, a fraction more relaxed as if anger came far more easily to him. "They need me. You should have asked me."

"You would've said no! And what good would you be to them dead? Be practical!"

"I'm trying to be practical," Draco said thinly. "I don't particularly want to fight. But it's been a difficult night."

"Yes," Harry said with feeling. "They're all so scared."

"Aren't you scared?"

Harry frowned. "I suppose. I'm mostly - I'm mostly angry. I look around at them all and I wish I could hurt something."

Draco's mouth turned up at one corner. "Oh, yes."

Harry let the corner of his mouth turn up too. They could both be such bastards.

The brief moment of accord, a wavering moment when it seemed as if Draco might actually look at him, was shattered by the advent of Pansy and Zabini. As soon as he was in the door Zabini gave Harry a poisonous look.

"It's the ubiquitous boy wonder again," he remarked. "Making quite sure you get to take something Slytherin needs away?"

"Be quiet, Blaise," Draco snapped. Zabini paid no attention. He walked up to Harry and tilted his face up a little to look Harry in the eye.

"You make me sick, Potter," he said with precision. "Always swanning around the place as if you owned it, Dumbledore's precious pet, ignoring us when you weren't eyeing us with that golden-boy contempt. Draco and I saw through you from the start, and now because of some sort of whim you've got him to change his mind somehow, and you're set on taking the best we have because you've never, ever thought anything was as important as yourself!"

He put both hands against Harry's chest and shoved. Harry was too tired for this.

"Back off, Zabini, I don't like you that way," he snapped. "Or at all, actually."

"Yes, pipe down, Blaise," Pansy chimed in sternly, and now everyone in the room was against him. Blaise backed down a step but continued to watch Harry with those angry, scared eyes. "Everybody's tired of the histrionics. It can't be changed now. We'll - we'll get by, and if Draco's in danger then it's right to put him where he'll be safe."

Her chin trembled slightly. Harry Potter made girls cry.

"Not that I'm happy with you at all, Potter," she continued, turning on him with a steely glare. "You interfere too much and you're always underfoot. I much prefer Weasley. Keeps his distance and brings me chocolate. You should be more like him."

"God forbid!" said Draco.

Pansy then shocked and knocked all the breath out of Harry with a fast, hard hug. She gripped too tight and it was altogether a very painful experience altogether.

"Take care of him," she whispered menacingly in Harry's ear. "Keep him safe, or I'll charm off your manly parts and keep them in a jar to experiment with."

"Um," said Harry in fear.

Pansy detached from him with a brilliantly false smile. "And you have a safe journey too, Potter. Nobody will ever shag you if you have two disfiguring scars."

"Right," said Harry.

Pansy had carefully avoided looking at Draco since she came into the room, but every muscle of her had been straining towards him and focused on him. Now she still didn't look at him, even as she went over and leaned against him, her head drooping down to rest at the hollow of his throat.

"I sent my mother an Owl," Draco said. "You'll all be quite safe."

He must be sending his mother two Owls, since he'd said the paper he'd put away was for his mother as well. That was weird. Harry wondered what he'd said.

"I know. I'll mind all of them. Don't worry about us, I can handle it," she told his neck with great conviction.

"Mind yourself as well," Draco ordered, smoothing a hand over her thick dark hair. "I'll miss you, you shameless wench," he added into her hair. "Mostly because of the daring negligees in the common room."

"I'll miss you," she whispered back. She put her mouth to his ear and said, "I love you."

It was very clear to Harry that he had to leave the room without in any way moving an inch or making a sound. What good was magic if it didn't let you do that?

Draco closed his eyes, his face tight and livid, ashen skin stretched over the bones of his skull. He'd never looked like this before: so tired and pained and frightened he was grotesque, and Harry wanted to pull Pansy away and stop her hurting him.

"I love you too," Draco said, his voice coming out calm and perfectly normal between his locked, bared teeth.

Pansy began to cry. Harry became aware that Zabini was staring at him, his black eyes filled with hatred.

"Get out," he said between his teeth. "Haven't you done enough? D'you want to stay and gloat over it? Get out!"

Neither Draco nor Pansy seemed to notice anyone was talking at all.

"I want everyone to be safe," Harry said. "That's all I'm trying to do. I want to do the right thing, even if I don't do it the right way. I'll make you all safe in the end - even you, Zabini. Even if you don't want me to."

"One day I'm going to kill you, Potter. Get out!"

"One day I might help you, Blaise," Draco said, not opening his eyes. "Harry, I know you were trying to do the right thing. Maybe you even did. But right now, it doesn't matter. I'll see you later."

"Okay," said Harry, and went.

He turned as he left the room to see them once more. Pansy was still crying, Zabini was coming closer to them and Draco, his face still shut down and ghastly, was reaching out to pull Zabini into the harsh embrace.

The Great Hall was filled with grey light as Harry came up into it, old and dull, and the defeated colour seemed to overlay Dumbledore's white beard and blue eyes as he stood waiting to bid all the students goodbye. He gave Harry a sad, subdued version of his old smile, nothing bright about it left.

"It's for the best," he said.

"It's not," said Harry, clenching his fists. "It doesn't matter what it costs, you always keep fighting. You don't give up like this. I won't."

Hogwarts was shutting down, his Hogwarts, and everybody was ripped apart and terrified. He didn't know how to stop it, or even to make anyone feel better, but angry purpose was building inside him, stronger every minute. A promise to every stone and every pang and every person he'd known here: that he would kill Voldemort.

*

Leaving Hogwarts was a very subdued affair.

Hermione had thought there should be trumpets, tears, black flags, a flaming sword barring the way. It wasn't like that at all: just a gathering so tight it seemed even smaller than it was, going to the train station and assembling in little groups around their allotted teachers. The students going home to their parents came together in an uneasy gang, almost ashamed that they were luckier. The Malfoy Manor lot, whose homes were judged magically strong enough to be safe but who knew going home meant joining You-Know-Who, were around that cow Pansy Parkinson.

The Malfoy Manor people were a larger group than Hermione had expected. She hadn't really thought so many Slytherins would desert their parents' side - it would only be natural to want safety and the comfort of home. Malfoy was smarter than she'd thought, if he'd persuaded that many that safety could not lie with Voldemort.

She hoped Pansy Parkinson wouldn't let him down, that stupid, bristling girl who wore too much make-up, too few clothes and made eyes at boys rather than pay attention to lessons. As far as she'd noticed, all Pansy was good for was making nasty little comments, not even as frankly insulting as Malfoy's but the mean kind of girls' talk, so underhand that boys never caught on and that bred spite and dislike.

Hermione didn't really have time for dislike today, though. Pansy looked stern and her eyeshadow was smudged, and Hermione looked at the pale faces of the Slytherins - some of them were first years - and wished her luck.

She felt awful for being so glad they weren't alone like that, so glad they had teachers with them. She tried not to think about how alone all the girls from her dormitory might be now, with no help coming - and she met the steady reassuring gaze of Lupin. She felt Ron reach for her hand, but she kept it just out of his reach. She didn't want to fall apart on the platform or anything.

Everyone else in their little group was standing alone: Lupin tired and silent, Sirius trying to act as if they were going on an adventure, Harry with an angry look in his eyes that scared her. Malfoy stood apart from all of them in silent rejection, looking the stupidest in his disguise.

The Muggle world was large enough to get lost in, Lupin had said. They'd be travelling by Muggle transport, receiving no Owls, wearing Muggle school uniforms and being for all the world a few Muggle students, going with their teachers on a classics trip. Hermione felt as if she'd been shut out of the world, back to the life she'd been expecting when she was eleven. She thought Harry felt the same; he'd muttered something about Stonewall High after all.

The others looked weird. Sirius seemed to be dressed in eighties chic, and Hermione did not feel up to suggesting that stonewashed jeans were not a good choice for those closer to forty than thirty: Ron kept tugging at his tie as if it was a choke chain, and the look on his face suggested that he'd indeed been dressed up in bondage gear and was very doubtful about this new lifestyle choice. She had assumed before this that because the Weasleys were modern enough to wear sweaters and jeans, they would be comfortable with all Muggle clothes, but this had turned out to be very much not the case. The trousers had confused Ron, the button-up shirt had upset him, the tie had defeated him and he had seen the blazer as pointless cruelty.

Malfoy looked as if he'd fought the battle alone. The trousers, thankfully, he'd apparently worked out: the thin white shirt was crumpled and buttoned wrong, the tie untied and there was no sign of a blazer. His mouth was the vicious little line it usually was before he said 'Mudblood' and he was not looking at anyone at all.

Even when Terry Boot had come over to say goodbye, he'd hardly seemed to notice.

It had been extremely rude of him. Terry had said: "Draco, I wanted you to know I still-" and Malfoy had blinked, looked at him blankly and said: "Sorry, what?"

Hermione was aware that she was desperately thinking about clothes and that cow Pansy and everything, anything, to stop herself from hearing Dumbledore's farewell speech. It was

ending now, it was almost all over, and the clouds made the sky seem low and dark, as if it was about to press further down and crush them all.

There was Ginny in Professor Sinistra's group, her bright hair waving around her sad face. She was whispering something to Dean, who was looking almost hopeful as he reached for her hand. She let him take it, and that was new...

They were all getting into the carriages. Hogwarts was over.

She held her head high and still did not let Ron take her hand. Harry bumped his shoulder with hers as they got into the carriage.

"I'm going to kill him, and then you can take the exams," he said in a low voice.

She looked at his angry eyes in his set face, and nodded. Felt perhaps a little bit lighter. Harry was the most emotionally dense person she knew, blundering around hurting Ginny and having disgraceful taste in boys, but you could count on him in an emergency. She knew he'd been up all night with half Gryffindor tower. You could believe in Harry. She always had.

She was vaguely surprised when Malfoy grabbed the seat beside her before Ron could do so. When he pointedly asked Lupin to sit beside him, she understood: he was sulking at Harry for some manipulative little purpose of his own. As if Harry didn't have enough to make him unhappy.

The train began to move. She could glimpse Dumbledore outside, a lone figure against the greyness. She set her nails into her palm.

They left Hogwarts station.

There was a taut, terrible silence. Hermione's throat was aching.

Malfoy broke it, because he was an irreverent bastard.

"I think they could've - what's the Muggle word? - posted our NEWTs to us. You could have supervised us, Professor Lupin. I'm sure the board would have implicit confidence in you."

Another bad quality of Malfoy's, and there were so many it was hard to keep track, was that he was a shameless little suck-up.

Ron gave Malfoy a dirty look. "Mental as well as a bloody Slytherin," he said. "So great that you could come with us, Malfoy."

"Well, it's a travesty that we don't get to do our NEWTs," Malfoy said, and Hermione could almost have liked him before he added: "Do they expect me to work for nothing? What about our job prospects? Will this affect my political career?"

"Political career? Oh, will no-one defend England?" Sirius asked under his breath.

"Would it affect our careers?" Ron asked, frowning suddenly.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Not any career you're likely to have, Weasley."

"Shut up," Harry said tiredly.

Ron was noble and ignored him. "Seriously, Professor Lupin. Because I was thinking of, you know, going into some kind of business with practical spells - I'm good at them - and then, um, kind of getting an apartment for two-

"Harry already has an apartment," Hermione said absently.

It only struck her when he flushed up to his roots that in her distracted state, she had just been incredibly dense.

"Um. I know that," Ron said. "I was thinking. Um. If it appealed to you at all, in a year or so - take as long as you like to think about it, really, if nothing better comes along... You haven't been writing to that idiot Viktor Krum, have you?"

"No, Ron," Hermione promised him, smiling. It was more or less the hundredth time he'd asked.

"Quidditch players travel a lot, and - they have groupies. It's a dodgy lifestyle, Hermione, really, I don't think you'd be happy-

Ron being a complete berk was familiar and dear enough for her to reach over and take his hands in hers, playing with them. Her hands looked lost beside his, but he let her take the lead and try to clasp them.

"I just hadn't thought about it, Ron," she said. He looked at her with his blue steadfast eyes, something to cling to as beloved and safe, with all his old insecurity in their mute appeal. She squeezed his hands and continued: "But I will."

"Yeah?" said Ron, and beamed. "Cool."

Malfoy snorted and Hermione glared as he rolled his eyes. "Gryffindors in love," he sneered. "How precious. Nobody minds if I'm sick out the window, do they?"

"Mr Malfoy, be civil," Lupin said, forestalling a snarl from either Harry or Sirius.

"Sorry, Professor," Malfoy the toady said hastily. "And call me Draco, please."

"All right, Draco," Lupin said equably.

Malfoy bestowed his slow insinuating smile on Lupin. It was the kind of smile that made you forget that he had a pointy nose and a rumpled shirt.

Lupin took out a book. Malfoy began to talk to him about it.

Malfoy's entire demeanour suggested that he'd never been acquainted with a Harry and if he had been, Harry certainly wasn't around right now. Hermione made a private resolution to

corner Malfoy as soon as possible and try to get answers about what the hell he thought he was doing.

"Do we really have to take Muggle public transport?" Malfoy asked suddenly. "I mean, they have all sorts of peculiar diseases, don't they, and we don't have Madam Pomfrey with us..."

"Oh, Malfoy, if you think we're so disgusting why didn't you run away instead of coming along?" Hermione demanded.

Malfoy looked at her, silvery lashes dropped and face more serious than she'd ever seen it when he answered: "I had my reasons."

Hermione stared at him in confusion, remembering the pale faces of all those young Slytherins. He almost looked vulnerable now, with the curve of his mouth trembling.

"Well then... why did you?" she asked, more quietly.

To her increased amazement, he made a move towards her as if he would have liked to take her hand, and spoke in a low voice.

"Because..." He stopped and looked into her eyes. "Because I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione's mouth fell open.

Malfoy sniggered. "The look on your face is *priceless*."

"You are such a bastard, Draco Malfoy!"

Malfoy just shook his head and snickered happily to himself. Hermione looked at Ron and read her own outrage in his eyes, and then looked at Harry, who was shaking his head and smiling a little.

Malfoy was the worst influence imaginable. He had to be dealt with.

They had to wait in the train until everyone else had disembarked. They were supposed to be the last to go.

The train was the last piece of Hogwarts left to them, and Hermione let Ron put an arm around her because she wasn't sure she wanted to go through the wall of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

She did, though. They all did, and then they stood in the prosaic surroundings of King's Cross station, on Platform Ten with grey-suited businessmen and sticky-faced children and a whole mass of people she was almost frightened of now.

I never meant it when I felt overwhelmed and wished I was like everybody else, she thought. I want to go back, I've learned a world structured by spells. I don't know what to do here, not for good. I want to go back.

The steel ceilings were high over them, the concrete harsh under her feet. There was no scarlet steam engine and no castle. The magic was gone.

They went to the ticket office so Sirius could collect their tickets. They were supposed to be making their way to Stonehenge, that was the story. Malfoy was walking very close to Lupin.

"Never seen this much of the station," he said, and his usual sneering tone briefly held a quiver. "The Muggle world's huge and ugly like this place, isn't it?"

"You always were a coward, Malfoy," Hermione said cuttingly.

"I'm not a coward!" Malfoy snapped.

"He's not," Harry said quietly.

Hermione looked at him sharply, but he wasn't staring at Malfoy with besotted concern or anything. He still looked angry, and he had just been speaking factually. He really believed it.

She recalled how Malfoy had held her up after finding McGonagall, and she opened her mouth to apologise, but... he was such a nasty little prat. She shut it again.

The train was a sad, loud, rattling thing in subdued shades. Malfoy was so busy complaining about the tatty covers on the seats that Sirius, Lupin, Ron and Hermione got themselves one set of four seats, and he was forced to sit with Harry.

"Tell me about the sleeping arrangements for the bed and breakfast again," he said. "I can share with you, can't I?"

Hermione refused to put the soft wheedling tone of his voice and the widening of his eyes together to form an explanation for his behaviour. Because one did not act that way with teachers, because it was wrong, wrong, sick and wrong.

"I'm not sleeping in the same room as that poisonous little - I mean, I mean, best not," Sirius said, belatedly remembering that he was an impartial educator and caretaker.

"Oh," said Draco flatly. "Would it involve sharing with you too, Professor Black? Never mind that, then."

Lupin, who Hermione was passionately grateful to for maintaining an attitude of total unawareness of Malfoy's shocking conduct, explained the arrangements again. There was one room with three beds in it at the top of the corridor, two of which Lupin and Sirius would take. There were no windows anywhere, so it was the bedroom most likely to be attacked. Then there was another room with two beds in it, and the last room with a king-size bed.

"Hermione can have the room with the big bed, and Harry will share with us," Sirius decided, pleased.

Ron made a strangled noise of protest. Hermione took 'Gyaaargh!' to mean that Malfoy was evil, he'd probably kill Ron in his sleep or - which would be so much worse! - molest Ron in his sleep, and in short, no.

"I don't think Ron fancies the idea," she said diplomatically.

"Well, Ron could share with us then," Lupin suggested.

"Yes. Please. Yes," said Ron desperately.

"No!" Malfoy said sharply. "No, I'll take Weasley."

Ron held Hermione in a death grip to shield himself from any taking. Harry did not say a word. His silence was almost deafening.

"Or Granger," Malfoy went on. "Granger'll do."

Hermione astonished herself. "Fine," she said. She'd wanted to talk to Malfoy alone. What better opportunity?

"Hermione!" Ron cried.

Lupin looked very taken aback. "I'm not entirely certain we can permit a boy and a girl to share a room..."

"Look, Professor," Hermione said, leaning forward and smiling. "Do me a favour. Honestly. It's Malfoy. Ron doesn't want to share with him, and - Ron doesn't want to share with him, and I don't mind. He knows I'd rather snog a Hippogriff."

"Admit it, Granger, you crave me."

Hermione gave him an appalled look and Sirius snorted very loudly.

"Why do you talk like that, you little twerp?" he demanded. "Has it somehow escaped your attention that you're all but an albino?"

"Perhaps," said Malfoy haughtily, "but I have a very beautiful bone structure."

"I suppose it would be all right if you two shared," Lupin said, and gave them both a small smile. "If we put a mirror in the room, Draco may not even notice Hermione's there."

Malfoy looked charmed that he'd won a professor over, and returned his smile with an engaging grin.

"Two of me, though? Is that fair to Granger? She's led a retired life: she might have a heart attack."

"Malfoy," Ron burst out, "your parents should have drowned you at birth."

Malfoy's mouth twisted. "Don't talk about my parents just because you're concerned for the sanctity of your little Mudblood's knickers."

"Oh my God, Draco," Harry thundered. "*Shut up.*"

The sound of his shout echoed through the carriage. Ron and Sirius, who had both been bristling and ready to fight, went quiet with the others. Malfoy turned his head and looked at Harry, and Hermione realised he hadn't done that all morning.

"He didn't mean it like that and you know it! Stop taking this out on everyone, we all have to go through this-"

"Oh, I doubt you have any idea what I'm going through," Malfoy sneered.

Harry slammed his fist against the plexiglass of the train window. "No? You don't think so?" he demanded. His hand closed around Malfoy's arm, fingers going so white that Malfoy's skin must be going red underneath. "Come on. Let's go."

He got to his feet and Malfoy rose with him, only to shove him backwards and stride out the door before him. Harry followed and slammed it.

"*Why* are they friends?" Ron demanded. "If they fight all the time, why did they have to be friends? Couldn't they have stayed enemies? I *liked* that!"

Muffled behind the door, there were shouts.

Sirius and Ron began to lay bets on how long Malfoy would last in a fight.

*

In the tiny corridor between the carriages, Harry shoved Draco away so he wouldn't hit him, and then hit the wall hard.

"Oh God, oh hell," he said. "I don't want anything to be happening this way! I forgot to say goodbye to Hagrid, do you realise that? He's one of the only people who's been there for me since I was a kid, and I just left."

The fluorescent light was broken, only one side of it still dimly glowing. Draco's eyes were gleaming and cold in the half-light.

"*You* just left," he snarled. "Do you have any idea what I've left? Do you have any idea of what they - I *promised* to guard them and I had to desert them! Do you have any idea at all of how much I bloody resent you?"

"I don't care!" Harry shouted. "I don't care, I don't *care*, I just want to *hurt* something. I thought it would all be okay if I could just promise myself that someday I'd kill Voldemort, but Hogwarts was home and we tried with the Young Order and the meetings in your room, we were all trying, and it was all so damn useless."

Draco took a step right into Harry's personal space.

"Don't talk to me about futile!" he hissed. "I put everything into getting them together! I don't know what I have now, I don't know what I am now and I don't want to be a coward!"

"You're not a coward, you stupid idiot!" Harry yelled at him. "And I don't care if you do resent me, I'd rather have that than have you hurt, but I wouldn't have had to do any of it if I'd been allowed to stand and fight! I *hate* this! I hate all of it!"

He moved to shove Draco away and into the wall, to do something, anything, and Draco resisted. He stood still, and Harry realised that he had one hand open against Draco's shoulder and their faces were an inch apart.

He'd already been sweating and breathing hard.

They were both suddenly very quiet.

Harry could feel the rasp of Draco's breath warm against his cheek. He could feel the thrum of Draco's beating heart under his hand, and moved his fingers along, up to his collarbone, against his neck. The skin was smooth and quivering under his touch.

Very slowly, Draco tilted his head to the right angle. Harry saw the gleam of tongue and teeth behind Draco's half-parted lips.

He could feel every inch of Draco's body against his. He could reach up and grab a fistful of Draco's hair and Draco would open his hot mouth under his own. If either of them *moved*...

And Draco was already scared. After the night full of crying women, Harry felt as if he should work on being less of an insensitive prat, and... Draco had always wanted all the attention he could grab, had always raced to fulfil people's expectations, coaxed for a laugh. Harry'd known that when he saw Draco seeking Lupin's approval. Draco needed people, and he hated feeling dependent.

Draco was desperate.

He exhaled hard, stood back and collapsed to the floor, back against the opposite wall and locked his hands over his raised knees to preserve himself from temptation.

"Oh, hell," he said again, and then took off his glasses and kneaded his brow hard. When he replaced his glasses and looked up, Draco had sat down against the opposite wall.

"I see we're in complete agreement," Draco observed, his voice the clear cool Malfoy voice Harry knew too well, even though his cheekbones were crested with faint colour. "Do you hate everything? I hate everything."

"I don't hate you all the time," Harry said wearily.

"Well," Draco conceded. "Perhaps not all the time." He hesitated. "Or even most of it. I know you were trying to - help me be safe, or whatever, but I can't forget them! And I can't forgive you, now, for being able to be the lone bloody hero."

"It's not because you're a coward, Draco," said Harry, who'd been giving it some thought. He saw how Draco flinched at the word. "It's because you've got a mind more like an army commander. You want forces for your game plan."

Draco gave this some thought in his turn, and appeared to like the idea.

"Which makes me a more modern and efficient warrior," he noted with considerable satisfaction. Harry shrugged, and he added: "Don't worry about ignoring Hagrid, anyway. I'm pretty sure I blanked poor Terry right there on the platform."

"What a shame," Harry remarked with utter insincerity.

"You don't like him, do you? Why's that?"

"Er - bookish people. Don't like them," Harry answered.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Woe upon me and Granger. The favour of Harry Potter has been withdrawn from us. A suicide pact is obviously in order."

"Shut up, you pillock."

"Oooh, Harry, I'm so sorry your noble instincts are all frustrated by everyone else's craven surrender of Hogwarts. Want to smuggle on a train back there and sing noble songs of resistance, and demand to take our NEWTs and stuff? I bet Granger will join us if we mention the NEWTs bit."

"It's probably not a very practical plan," Harry said with a certain amount of regret.

"Logic from Harry Potter," drawled Draco. "My little boy is all grown up. I think I may cry."

The train jolted and the light flickered off, and then fully on. Harry saw light strike the sweat gleaming on Draco's throat, thought about licking the soft place directly beneath his jaw.

"You do realise," Draco said, very evenly, "that we are now yelling at each other when we are basically in agreement. If we keep it up like this, we'll kill each other by tomorrow."

"Right," Harry said, thinking about the swollen curve of Draco's mouth last night. He shook his head. "Right, right, you're absolutely right."

Draco's face twisted in something that looked like regret.

"I'm brilliant, you know."

"So you keep telling me," Harry said, and smiled.

"I've made a bad situation worse. It's my fault. I am sorry, Harry, it was an irresponsible and unforgivable thing to do when you - you don't know anything about this sort of thing. I'm your friend and I should be helping you instead of messing you around."

The look in Draco's eyes suggested that he was concentrating on making private, spiteful remarks to himself. Harry was starting to feel extremely embarrassed. He'd been pretty sure that Draco was... no, damn it, he'd *known* Draco was... but it was true Harry wasn't exactly experienced.

"I mean, you haven't even decided on a lifestyle choice yet, you have no idea," Draco continued, his voice stern and his lower lip drawn in painfully.

"Oh," said Harry. "I've been thinking about that. I've decided it doesn't matter."

Draco closed his eyes as if he was in some kind of pain.

"Do you ever hear non-Dark Lord voices in your head?" he asked carefully. "Ones that perhaps, tell you to burn things because fire is pretty, or perhaps don a yellow tutu and perform a mating dance for the buttercups?"

"I'm not crazy, Draco."

"Naturally not," Draco soothed him. "But it might be an idea not to listen to the voices, Harry. Just say no, that's the ticket."

"It just doesn't seem to matter. I mean, not with everything else going on. I might not end up with a lifetime to have - lifestyle preferences in, and I don't see why I should be wasting time going over my feelings like a twit, when it can be simple." He focused hard on his own knotted hands, tried to overcome the knot of mortification in his stomach and said: "I want you. If there's anyone else-"

"*When* there's someone else," Draco corrected him, his voice thin. "When, very shortly, there is someone else."

"I don't think so," Harry said, challengingly. "If there is, then that'll clear things up. As it is, there isn't anyone else, so what does it matter?"

Draco's mouth kept shaping and reforming itself into different expressions, as if he was not even certain how to feel about this conversation. He kept trying to look at Harry and then failing.

Of course, Harry could only tell from the limited background view he had of Draco while he concentrated on the white line of his own knuckles.

"You must see that it would be sheer madness, Potter," he said at last, and made one of his sweeping gestures. "I mean - what, you couldn't want us to be boyfriends, or something."

Boyfriend. It was a stupid, stupid, embarrassing word.

"Wouldn't mind," he mumbled, and then said to hell with it and looked Draco in the eye. "I mean yes. Yes. That's what I want."

It was the first time Harry had ever made a proposition like this to anyone, and let alone the fact he hadn't expected it to be Draco, he really hadn't pictured the person addressed to rest their forehead against their arms and say: "This *cannot* be my life."

"Look, Draco," Harry snapped. "Did you like it? Last night?"

Draco lifted his face from his arm, looking warily at Harry and then down again.

"Yes," he said curtly. "Yes, but - I don't want to mess everything up because you're confused and I'm weak and excessively hormonal. I don't want to - I don't want never to see you again because we did something sentimental when we were schoolboys and you can't imagine why you did it any more."

"I'll remember," Harry said, and when Draco looked up he offered him a weak smile. "It's all about the bone structure. I have a weakness for a really good bone structure."

Draco actually laughed, which on this day of all days seemed like a tremendous accomplishment.

"All right," he said after a minute. "Go in there and tell Weasley all about it."

Harry looked at him, and then stood up slowly. "Okay."

"Sit down! Don't you dare move, are you insane?"

Harry did sit down because Draco looked panicked, though he generally did not obey barked instructions because it would only encourage Draco in his apparent belief that he was Lord High Commander of the Universe.

"Do you have no sense of shame?" demanded Draco.

"I don't think you're someone to be ashamed of," he said quietly.

Draco pointed an accusing finger. "You are crazy. I *knew* it! And everything I said before still counts," he added. "Sentiment is a lie, and then there'd be your horrible realisation, and - and I can't. I mean, I don't want to."

He hadn't really expected anything else, and he'd been quite girly enough without blithering about like a woman scorned. He concentrated on the wall behind Draco's head and forced his voice to be normal.

"All right," he said. "It's your decision. I'm glad we're talking again, anyway, and that you're looking at me."

"Quite," replied Draco, who was not currently doing so. "So now that everything's settled and the world remains a cruel and hateful place, and we'd both like to kill things a lot, shall we get back to the others? I fear Weasley may pine without me."

Harry stood up, and offered Draco a hand to help him. Draco took it, and looked briefly less tired.

Draco needed people, and all he had for now was Harry. And it wouldn't be right to like that.

"Your shirt's a mess," Harry said, letting go and touching the corner of the shirt shoulder.

"What did you do, wrestle with it? Crumple it in your hands until it begged for mercy and let you put it on?"

Draco looked lofty. "It was giving me cheek. So perish all the enemies of the house of Malfoy."

"That tie is meant to be tied, too."

"Oooh, your expertise in Muggle habits reduces me to quivering admiration, really, it does."

"I'm sorry my superior knowledge bothers you. I can't help being so learned."

Draco held open the door. "After you, oh omniscient hero," he said in a bored voice.

Harry felt a bit less like killing things.

*

When they came back, they were almost smiling. Hermione shocked herself by giving them a quick once-over and deciding she'd know if there'd been any goings-on. Not to mention that she hoped Harry would have more decency with Ron and Sirius only a thin carriage wall away from cardiac arrest.

Still, it was annoying to see Harry looking calmer and happier because Malfoy had been a racist bastard and then they'd shouted at each other. It was frustrating and inexplicable.

"Forgive me for the unkind words, gentle lady," said Malfoy, and she was pretty sure her death glare was all that stopped him from bowing. He smirked at her instead.

"It's fine," she said unconvincingly.

"Did you hit him, Harry?" Sirius asked, leaning forward. "Or did you knee him first?"

"I didn't do anything to him," Harry answered. His voice sounded more relaxed, as well, and Hermione was grateful for the informative phrasing.

"Did he hit you?" Sirius asked. "The underhanded little weasel!"

Malfoy gave him a level look. "I killed him," he said pleasantly, as he and Harry settled themselves back in their seats. "Then I Transfigured my pocket handkerchief into Harry Potter, in order to escape repercussions and completely fool you all. D'you think my hanky will be any good at defeating evil?"

"The twit is trying to say that nobody hit anyone," Harry said tolerantly.

Sometimes Hermione thought it might be quite easy to be civil to Malfoy if only Harry had kept having wistful daydreams about Malfoy being eaten by the giant squid instead of disturbing her horribly by using that tone with the affection radiating from it. She was able to accept that Harry might be attracted - some people liked that sort of thing, Malfoy was blond and swaggering. She'd never quite seen all the fuss about Cho Chang, either. And Harry was naïve, and fancying someone meant things to him, and that would account for the moonstruck look. But when Malfoy did something or said something and Harry responded to it with

warm recognition, was all lit up by the reminder that this was the person he'd, he, that this was - that person...

It made Hermione feel sick to her stomach, that was all. She and Ron had been enough for him once.

Malfoy, relaxing like a big pleased cat, got out a book from his bag and showed it to Harry.

"It's about vegetarian substitutes for blood sacrifice," he explained, managing the difficult feat of drawling enthusiastically with apparent ease. "I mean, I certainly think it lacks style, but this is a decadent age and we're running out of virgins, so innocent root vegetables are the next best thing. Besides, it's mainly technical, you'd be amazed at the arcane signatures that plants and people have. Sometimes they can be really alike."

"That's fascinating, Draco. I mean that," said Harry, straight-faced.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and snickered. He buried himself in his book - which actually did look interesting and if they were sharing a room Hermione might as well take advantage of it by picking up any stray books he left around - and Harry looked out the window.

That is, Harry looked out the window for a while, but it had been a long night for him. They all became quieter as Harry's breathing deepened, and then Sirius and Ron returned to their argument about who owed who money, Lupin returned to his book, and only Hermione was watching when Harry shifted in his sleep and his head ended up on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy blinked down at him, face startled into a softer expression than Hermione'd ever seen on it before. Then he sank down a little in his seat, reached over with his other hand and took Harry's glasses off. He slipped them in his own pocket.

At that point he caught Hermione staring, gave her a chilling and filthy glare, rested his cheek against Harry's hair and returned to his book, face back to its normal cool half-sneer.

She had to corner Malfoy and talk this out as soon as humanly possible.

Once they got to their stop, Malfoy woke Harry by saying "Boo" in his ear and passing over his glasses as he shifted, murmured and half-opened his eyes, then smiled. As soon as possible, Hermione vowed to herself again. If it was anyone else, she'd have said Malfoy was being sweet with Harry. It wasn't right.

After they were outside, looking around at the grimy, grey streets of one of the less attractive parts of Salisbury in the gathering evening, Hermione realised sharply that she'd been trying to use Harry's love life to distract herself from how very far away from home they were.

She wanted Hogwarts. Failing that, she wanted Mum and Dad.

She had Ron, holding her hand. She managed not to cry.

"I don't think we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," said Harry.

Malfoy gave him a mock-annoyed look. "We're not where? Whom are you addressing? You're so crazy, Harry Potter. Probably all that time in the cupboard did it to you, environment is so important for the young mind. Professor Lupin! He's Muggle-referencing at me. It's not kind, and it's not fair."

Harry's elbow was touching the inside of Malfoy's. Hermione clung to Ron's hand, and looked at Lupin's tired face, and Sirius' restless black eyes, and knew these people were all she had left of her world.

It was pathetic, but she was so scared.

She was scared as they trooped into the bed and breakfast, and Lupin smiled with tired charm at the landlady and gave her a credit card, which Malfoy asked to touch.

"Pretty money card," he said at last. "May I have one of my own?"

Harry took it off him firmly. Then Malfoy amused himself by making disparaging comments about Salisbury.

"Come off it," Sirius growled at last. "Malfoy Manor is in Wiltshire too, I was there for the wedding. You're a bloody local."

"I have nothing to do with dirty Muggle urban areas," Malfoy said disdainfully.

Lupin told Malfoy off for saying the word Muggle, let Ron see his credit card and suggested that they might all like an early night.

"Yes, Granger and I wish to be alone," Malfoy said, regarding the homicidal expression on Ron's face with calm joy. "She cannot wait to revel in the untold carnal luxury of my skin against hers," he proceeded.

"You're right, I can hardly wait to slap your face," Hermione informed him briskly. "Now go inside and get changed first, and Harry, you go to your room. You're obviously shattered."

Harry complied amiably enough, wandering down the whitewashed corridor with its hard brown carpet and faint smell of medicinal cabbages. The others seemed tired enough to follow suit and go into their room. Ron paused to kiss her.

"I'll come in a bit later," he promised. "Bearing with Malfoy, you're a heroine! I'll make it up to you. I'll cook you dinner or, like-" he went red - "perform crazy sexual favours on request, or something."

Hermione kissed him softly back. "A good book's always welcome, for choice," she murmured.

"Thanks very much," said Ron, and hugged her hard before he left her.

She stood in the cold little corridor and breathed. Eventually Malfoy came out and she gave a yelp of horror.

"Find a T-shirt, Malfoy!"

"Sleep in one of my shirts?" Malfoy inquired in a voice of ice. "I think not. I only submit to night attire because you are a lady. I'm not accustomed to it, and I probably shan't sleep. Then I will have circles under my eyes, and you will have nobody but yourself to blame for spoiling my radiant beauty."

"Oh God, shut up," Hermione said fervently, and went inside.

She'd worked out how Malfoy had done it. He had talked to Harry until Harry's brain was destroyed, and Harry was putty in his hands. He stole independent thought with his endless annoying chatter.

She chose blue pyjamas that buttoned up to the neck, tied her hair back severely, got into bed and pulled the covers to her chin, and then told Malfoy he could come in.

"Granger, you saucy vision of loveliness," Malfoy drawled, lounging in the doorway in order, Hermione presumed, to look louche and shirtless.

She knew plenty of nicer men who had good shoulders too.

"If you're going to bother me, Malfoy, you can sleep in the corridor," she informed him. "I could use a draught excluder."

He raised cool eyes to the cracks in the ceiling, and the worn-out spots in the brown carpet, and then the cheap white sheets of the bed.

"Anything that would make you more comfortable in this place, I feel it my duty as a gentleman to do."

"Well... good," said Hermione, who favoured the direct approach. "Good, because I want you to do something for me."

"You vixen," Malfoy said with an air of mock awe.

"You can stop fooling around, get into your own bed and talk to me."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You're breaking my heart," he declared, and threw himself dramatically on the bed with one hand flung dramatically across his brow. Hermione laughed slightly, since it was pretty clear that was what Malfoy wanted, and he did look a little bit funny.

"I think it's time for us to talk."

"So talk, Granger," Malfoy said lazily.

"I want to talk about Harry."

Malfoy went very still. "What about him?"

Hermione wanted to catch Malfoy's eye, but he lay quiet under the sheet, lying back on his elbows and looking straight ahead. All Hermione could see was his taut unreadable profile.

"I care about him, that's what. Much that you'd know about that, of course."

"Indeed," said Malfoy distantly.

He wasn't looking at her and she thought she might've been unfair, and that made her angry enough to sit up in bed and snap at him.

"Malfoy, I just want to know what's going on! You say you're on our side, well, I think things are bad enough without you messing Harry around. I want to know what you're doing with him. I want to know what you're planning."

"Something dreadful," Malfoy responded, his tone still even.

"I wouldn't put it past you! He's been up and down since you two started this whole friendship thing. I need to know that you're not trying to hurt him. I need to know that you're really his friend!"

"I'm his friend, then!" Malfoy snapped, turning a poisonous glare on her and leaning forward. "I'm his friend, or at least I'm *going* to be his friend again, after he gets these stupid ideas out of his head, and you can't stop me-"

At this inopportune moment, Ron walked into the room. Hermione had never been so very unhappy to see him.

He took her stare of reproach as a welcome, and came over and sat on her bed, putting an arm around her.

"Hey," he said. "I wanted to see how you were holding up in here with bloody Malfoy."

They'd been progressing nicely until Ron showed up, but Hermione shut her eyes and leaned in when he kissed her temple. She was so tired, and she felt so lonely. She should to be taking roll call right now.

He kissed the corner of her mouth and she sighed and snuggled in.

"Oh my God," Malfoy exclaimed. "Gryffindor mating rituals before my very eyes. Why *me*?"

"Oh, shut your trap, Malfoy," said Ron, and kissed her again.

There was a sound of rustling sheets, but Hermione kept her eyes tight shut and luxuriated in this brief illusion of warmth and security. Then Malfoy's most unpleasant voice broke the quiet.

"I'm going to go sleep with Harry," he announced, and the door slammed.

Bastard!

*

Harry lay in bed thinking about Draco.

Oh, what else was new? he thought in exasperation, turning on his side. He should be thinking about Voldemort, the danger they were all facing, or tomorrow. He was a bloody pathetic hero, letting the thoughts of Draco linger and flavour everything else.

What would Draco think about that, what would Draco say if he knew... or simply, how would it be if I had Draco with me through all this? With me, as mine.

That constant sick wanting. If this was love...

It was so bloody *stupid*!

It was so humiliating that his subconscious forced him, every night, to conjure up some image and hold onto it, trying to convince himself that it was Draco, Draco, Draco...

Draco slipped in his door.

Harry was so certain it was a dream he snatched up his glasses, and only seeing Draco through lenses and the smudge of his sweaty fingers did he believe.

Draco stood there, watching him. He was wearing only a black pair of pyjama bottoms and even as Harry's mind scrambled for explanations of his presence some part of him was being a deviant and cataloguing images.

The white swell of his shoulders, the smooth pale torso. The way the black material bit softly at his hip. Bare feet and, of course, an annoying air of assurance, as if this was completely normal.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Harry," he drawled, "but can I get into your bed?"

Harry's mouth was too dry to speak, to his everlasting shame. He simply made a 'go ahead' gesture.

He had that feeling of extreme sensitivity that one gets right after a hot bath. Every pore screamed out messages to him.

There was the draught of cool air when Draco lifted the sheet. There was the sinking of his bed beneath another weight, something which Harry had never felt before in his life and which was quite frankly marvellous. There was the heat of Draco's body, which seemed to be radiating at Harry across the bed in an indecent manner.

And there was how Draco looked lying next to him, his hair fluffed up just a little against the pillow. Harry felt suddenly and obscenely content.

"Weasley came into Granger's room," Draco explained simply, sliding further under the covers. "Whether it was for a snuggle or a shag, I didn't wait to find out. I don't need that kind of trauma."

Harry found a voice. It couldn't possibly be his, he didn't croak this alarmingly.

"It's okay."

The corner of Draco's mouth quirked slightly.

"My, my, Potter, if you get this excited about a little sleepover your head might explode if Ginny Weasley ever gives her all."

"Don't," Harry said sharply.

The small, scrunched-up face that Draco made now was sometimes indicative of regret. Harry had to combat the urge to roll over and kiss it.

"Sorry," said Draco, in his most insincere tones.

Draco liked to sound insincere when he was saying things he meant and did not want to say.

Harry sighed. He understood Draco now, he thought. He could interpret most of those signs that had frustrated and confused and finally intrigued him. He knew Hermione didn't believe it, but he would've had to be blind not to notice that he was a right bastard half the time.

And he loved him horribly, which pretty definitely made him a bastard as well.

"S'okay."

Draco's smile turned teasing.

"Well, good night, Harry. It'll be a long day tomorrow, so try not to take abandoned liberties with my person as I sleep."

"Good night, Draco," Harry replied dryly.

Draco rolled onto his side, his back to Harry, and appeared to settle down to slumber.

If he thought this would help Harry's distraction, he was grievously mistaken.

Harry lay looking at the contours of that back, the too-sharp definition of shoulder-blades and the straight line of his spine.

Stop obsessing over a back, Harry Potter. This is becoming truly sad.

He went to sleep instead.

*

The next thing he saw was a crystal with lightning and screams inside it, and then a rush of blurred, confused images and sounds.

A high-pitched laugh he knew and hated.

Black robes swirling over flagstones, shadows and the flame of torches mingling overhead. The fall of a woman on stone, a woman screaming a name. The sick thump of someone's head against the stone.

Fear running cold in his veins or someone else's, a sense of panic, urgency but most of all disbelief. Someone wondering how could this possibly be true...

Red eyes in the darkness. Red eyes with the blood of a thousand lives mirrored in them, and then a gleam of moonlight on blond hair.

Who...?

"Don't think that you won't be punished."

A woman screaming in pain this time, horrible, unbearable pain... being totally unable to help her... only bearing witness and shouting silently, shouting because if they didn't stop the woman was going to...

"No!"

Harry sat up, chest heaving and slick with sweat under his pyjama top. The world was blurred around him and for a moment he thought he was still - there - wherever there was - with that woman...

Harry blinked.

He was in bed, Draco's hair glinting on the pillow beside him. He was... It had just been another dream about Voldemort, one of those...

Harry bit his lip hard, throwing his head back until his lip bled and his neck muscles screamed in pain.

Just another one of those dreams where he was forced to know that someone was suffering, and all he could do was know about it. He could never ever do anything to help, there were no clues, there was nothing but waking up with despair and shuddering breath and crippling fear. Now that Hogwarts was shut, he couldn't even record it in the Somnasieve. Everything was *pointless*!

Harry tried to get a grip, eased himself down on the bed with the smell of his own terror in his nostrils and that aching knot of frustration and despair in his chest. His eyes were so dry they burned.

As his head fell back against the pillow Draco's voice met his ear, thick with sleep.

"Harry...?"

Harry tried to push down the ache in his throat.

"It's all right. It was just - a bad dream."

He was cold and beginning to shake with it. That woman screaming... and he could do *nothing*.

"Mmm," Draco murmured, just the sound of someone going back to sleep. He had never really been awake anyway.

Which was when Harry realised he was trembling against Draco. He must have jumped across to him when he woke. He would have to move back.

With dreamy slowness, Draco's arms went around him.

Harry went very, very still. That inner cataloguing was going on in his mind. This to remember, and this, and this...

One arm going around Harry's shoulders, locked strong against his shoulderblades. The other lying on Harry's side, fingers curled on his ribs. The feel of Draco's sleep-warmed chest pushed against Harry's.

His cheek and the light tickle of his hair against Harry's face, the whisper of warmth that was his mouth by Harry's neck.

"Hmm," mumbled Draco, his lips moving against the skin of Harry's throat and making him shiver. "Shhh. It's okay."

Harry had never been held after a nightmare before, let alone held by someone he loved. His impulse was to try and get closer, to kiss and caress and keep, but he was terrified that Draco's sleep-blurred purpose of comfort could be changed. If Draco woke up any more...

Harry lay quiet for a moment, then put his arms carefully around Draco. Draco made a tiny sound, more like a small animal getting comfortable in his sleep than anything else. His skin was soft, and Harry traced a single stroke up his spine.

He could feel Draco's mouth curve against his throat.

"Harry," he said in a low voice. Harry could feel Draco's body relaxing against him even more. It was all liquid comfort here, curled up around him, and Harry's mind was fragmenting into well-being.

Why had nobody told him how nightmares could go away, with something as simple as this?

"I love you," Harry whispered, and this time it didn't seem so terrible, or so terrifying.

Draco was already asleep. Harry kissed the side of his eye, pressed his face harder against Draco's. The pain melted away gently, leaving him loose and boneless and in spite of everything, almost happy.

Chapter Twenty: The Summons

*You can't change the way I am
I'll be the last to help you understand
Try and love me if you can
Are you strong enough to be my man?
When I've shown you that I just don't care
When I'm throwing punches at the air
Are you man enough to understand?
Are you man enough to be my man?*

Harry had not realised he was looking forward to waking up with Draco before he didn't.

Before he even opened his eyes, all he could do was lie there and think about how it would have been if he hadn't woken up alone.

The look of skin so close to his eyes that it became pale background to tiny fair hairs, making a silver sheen against the nape of Draco's neck. Warmth and peace and a certain security in being so very together, in being able to measure out time with someone else's breath.

He was beginning to have some creative ideas involving Draco's chest against his own and husky voices and hands against sleep-warmed skin when it occurred to him that having steamy fantasies with Draco in the room would be incredibly thick.

He opened his eyes hurriedly.

Draco came out of the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

He looked young and cheerful in the morning light, hair a gleaming mess, wearing grey suit trousers and a white shirt he was trying to button up one-handed. He gave Harry a brilliant smile around the toothbrush.

Harry felt the pang of disappointment in his chest ease. This whole scene was so – comfortable. Something he could get used to, far too easily.

Then he frowned. "Isn't that my toothbrush?"

"Yeff." Draco removed the toothbrush. "My mouth felt disgusting," he explained unrepentantly. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

There was a trace of toothpaste ornamenting his lower lip. Harry thought that his mouth looked anything but disgusting.

If he developed a toothpaste fetish, he would definitely be a deviant.

"Lupin left us both a new set of Muggle uniforms," Draco continued, gesturing to himself. "Apparently being on an educational trip with our teachers requires us being in our uniforms at all times, according to the cruel rules of the fearsome Muggle school from which we hail. I wanted to think up a false name for myself, but Lupin said there was no need." He looked distinctly sulky. "Spoilsport."

Harry propped himself up on his elbows, unable to stop smiling.

Draco made a face at him.

"Get a move on, Potter. I want my breakfast."

Harry yawned and stretched. "How come you're so chipper? I thought you always slept in late."

"It is late," Draco answered absently. "It's past eleven. You were sleeping like a log."

He picked up his tie and examined it doubtfully. Eventually, he put it around his neck. Then he held the two ends and waggled them vaguely about.

"Er," he said at last. "A little help here...?"

Harry wished he was less pathetic, and that he could help this constant smile.

He got up and took the two ends of the tie from Draco.

Of course, all of this involved being close to Draco, which always had an unfortunate effect on Harry's ability to think. He tried to seem composed as he stepped in and felt that hollow scooped-out sensation in his throat, as the breath left him.

Draco smelled... well, mostly like toothpaste.

Harry tied the tie as efficiently as he could, and stepped back. He could function much better at a slight distance.

"Thanks," Draco said, in his most lordly manner. "Now come on, hurry up, I'm starving."

"I've got to shave first," Harry mumbled, heading for the bathroom as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

Draco followed him, which would have been a bit tricky if Harry had needed to use the toilet. Draco also perched on the sink and got in the way as Harry tried to shave.

Harry really wished he minded, but that comfortable feeling remained.

"Hey," Draco said, peering at Harry's face in a critical manner. "You have some serious stubble. You lucky bastard."

If Draco kept looking at him, he was going to end up cutting his throat.

"Why's that?"

"Oh, I like the look." Draco looked meditative. "It's manly, and I am woefully unable to achieve it."

"I'm sorry I have so much more masculine appeal than you do." Harry kept a straight face while Draco spluttered his indignation.

Later, when Harry was putting on his socks, he reflected on how pathetic he was. It wasn't as if any hope had been offered. There had been nothing but a little sleepy comfort, a smile in the morning. Oh, but that sense of being safe and warm was pervading him, and logic wasn't destroying it.

If it hadn't been for... everything else, the furious need to do something and protect people instead of hiding away like a scared child, he might have been happy.

If it hadn't been for everything else.

*

Hermione was at one with horror. What had happened last night?

They were all standing outside the hostel, discussing plans for the day. Harry and Malfoy were a little apart from them, forming what appeared to be an exclusive little sub-group. They were talking continuously, soft snatches appearing in the chinks of Sirius and Lupin's conversation. Hermione could not make out the words, only Malfoy's amused, animated drawl and the low pleased murmur of Harry's voice, still scratchy with sleep. Malfoy had his tie in a casual sideways knot that was at once practised and not at all Malfoy's style, and he was standing so close to Harry that his hair was touching Harry's forehead.

Harry, who was rumped and had not shaved properly, turned his face to Malfoy's whenever Malfoy shifted stance or either of them spoke. From some angles, it must have looked as if his slow smiles had already become slow kisses.

In a public place!

It was no better when they decided to walk up and down the nearest streets in order to find the nearest magical spot from which Lupin could Owl Dumbledore of their safe arrival. They walked side by side, Malfoy gesturing when he talked as if all his conversations had to be subdued versions of his little mimics, and Harry's hand touching Malfoy's wrist whenever he let his hands fall.

"I think electricity is very funny," she heard Malfoy say. "They use it to make light and toast, you know."

Ron loudly forbidding anyone to say that Malfoy reminded them of Mr Weasley drowned out the happy hum of Harry's response.

"I know none of you wanted to do this," Lupin said as they walked, and Malfoy and Harry no longer looked happy. Nor did anyone else.

"That's right," Harry answered curtly.

"Since it is now a fait accompli, perhaps we can all take it as a rest before some – truly horrible things occur." Lupin's voice was serious. "A war is coming, and I know all of you will fight, but... you're young, and it's summer. A few weeks of safety can do you nothing but good. You should have a holiday, while you can still have something you want. Tell me what you all want to do."

"I want to go back," Malfoy snapped, both he and Harry still looking stern, their tense shoulders pushed against each other. Then Malfoy's eyes dropped from Lupin's, and he shrugged. "If I can't have that, I'd like to go see a shop with electric things in it. Even if I can't have a money card to buy things with."

"My father is a good man," Ron asserted vehemently.

Malfoy was looking at him as if he was crazy when Harry mentioned, "I have a credit card. Sirius got it for me: he said his family'd always had links with the Muggle government."

Sirius looked shifty under Lupin's accusing glare.

"We used to know some people – er, whom we bribed and bespelled to do our bidding," he muttered. "Look, I just thought, he could use it. The part of London his flat's in is mostly Muggle, he could use it for groceries and stuff."

Malfoy looked speculative. "I'm sure it will come in very handy."

"What do you want me to buy you?" Harry asked, in the upsetting tones of one who had Malfoy's number and against all reason, liked it.

"Me? No, no, Harry, don't be shocking, I couldn't possibly be a kept man, my mother would have fits," Malfoy said in a distracted manner, putting his hand on the small of Harry's back. Hermione privately longed to knock it away, but Harry relaxed back into the touch and let Malfoy steer him into a shop. "But there's no harm having a look around," Malfoy's voice drifted back to them.

They made arrangements to eat in the café across the road. Lupin said he would find a magical place on his own, and he was also the one who went into the shop and told Harry and Malfoy where they were going. Sirius was already off to order food, Ron claimed that electronic equipment brought back traumatic childhood memories, and Hermione did not want to look at them again until she had figured out what was going on, and how on earth she could fix it.

*

Draco kept it on his lap even when they were in the café. Harry had foreseen this from the minute he had stopped beside it in the shop, as if listening to some arcane call.

"And what do you call this?" he'd asked.

"An espresso machine," Harry had answered in fear.

"Espressomachine," Draco had repeated thoughtfully. "What does it do?"

"I'm warning you in advance, Draco, if you go into strong hysterics I will abandon you here." Harry had told him what it did.

"You don't even like coffee very much, Harry," Ron pointed out in puzzled tones.

"I forbid you to say such terrible things about Harry," Draco instructed, running his hands lovingly over the box. There was a strange and terrible look in his eyes.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I like coffee all right."

"Well, but," Ron persisted, "If it's yours, and it's for your flat, why is Malfoy holding it and – touching it like that?"

Harry could hardly blame Ron for looking disturbed. Draco was cooing to the box now.

"I am keeping it safe for Harry. All safe and sound and full of sweet, sweet unexplored caffeinated potential."

Harry reached out and stilled one of Draco's stroking hands. "It'll be safe under the seat," he promised.

The summer-morning light was soaking through the café like butter through a crumpet, and Draco's eyes were wide and appealing. The back of his hand rested warm, unmoving under Harry's palm.

"Weasley might kick it," he pleaded. There was a dent on his lower lip, slightly to the left where his smiles and sneers always began, that was pleading: kiss me, kiss me, kiss me.

Harry smiled resignedly, stretched and took the box out of Draco's hands, depositing it under his seat.

Draco brooded on his wrongs and his menu at the same time. "Weasley, your dark suspicions of me are quite correct. I do know all manner of revolting Dark Arts spells."

"Really?" asked Ron.

"Yes. I shall use them all on you if you let your oversized feet flail in the direction of the precious box."

It was hard to maintain hostility towards a man who was patently in love with an espresso machine. Even Sirius said: "Bet I know more Dark Arts spells," in a tone that was quite amiably competitive.

There was a radio in the café, and that attracted Draco's attention as well. He was pleased enough about it, and the espresso machine, that he was almost as relaxed as he might have been with Slytherins. His only trace of unease showed in the way he kept close to Harry, and it wasn't as if Harry minded.

They got plates of bacon and muffins and tea and Draco's cherished coffee, and Ron talked about keeping the plastic menu for his dad. Sirius helped himself to a lot of coffee, and Harry wondered if it might be a genetic thing. Even Hermione smiled when Draco progressed from tapping his fingers on the table to singing, in a small voice, into a spoon he was pretending was a magic microphone.

"It was the dungeons that did it," Harry said comfortably, while Draco sang quietly about how it had been so long since somebody whispered. "Full of Potions fumes. Very bad atmosphere. Turned his brain."

Ron snickered into his bacon.

"His brain wasn't that strong to begin with. The inbreeding, you see," Harry went on sympathetically.

"Hey," said Sirius.

"Shut up," Draco chimed in, and hit him on the shoulder with his spoon.

He let his hand rest there afterwards, wrist on the edge of Harry's shoulder, warm and close. He reached with his other hand for the end of Harry's croissant, and Harry stole a piece of toast in retaliation. Draco caught his eye and smiled permission, then relaxed against him further. It was a nice day, and they had slept in late, and it was wonderfully easy and pleasant to lean lazily and all murmur good-natured commonplaces between munching.

"Afterwards we can go see about renting a car," Draco announced. "Professor Lupin said."

Harry smiled at the sheer delight in Draco's tone. Draco smiled back at him, a secret gleaming smile that the coffee cup made private between them, and it struck Harry that there might be another reason for Draco staying close by.

A holiday while you can still have something you want.

The idea seemed full of real promise for a moment.

Then Lupin came in through the café door, his face drawn and grey. He had the Daily Prophet in his hand.

*

Harry and Malfoy were still making a display of themselves when Professor Lupin came in. He went to stand beside Sirius, discreetly angling the paper towards him, which manoeuvre became less subtle as Sirius leaned in to read it and hissed between his teeth.

Hermione frowned, not close enough to see, and then felt Ron go still beside her.

"What's-" Harry began on the other side of the table, but it was Malfoy the brat who reached over to take the paper.

Ron grabbed his wrist. "Malfoy, no," he said, and Hermione went cold at the sympathetic horror in his voice.

Malfoy looked pinched and spiteful suddenly in the bright light, mouth curling at the tone of Ron's voice. He shook off Ron's hold disdainfully and held his hand open, imperiously, for the paper.

"Let me talk to you outside, Draco," Lupin said in a quiet voice, looking at him as if he was a wounded child.

"I require neither your conversation nor your sympathy. I only want the paper," Malfoy returned sharply.

Lupin looked older every moment, but he nodded and gave Malfoy the paper. Malfoy held it without a tremor in his thin, grasping fingers, his face unmoved except for the narrowed eyes.

"I see," he said after a moment. "Excuse me," he added, and threw the paper down on the table as he rose.

"Draco, wait-" Harry said, grabbing the paper.

Malfoy paid no attention to him, and in a moment they saw him cross the road from the café window. Cars screeched as he strode back towards their bed and breakfast.

"What does it say, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I'm going after him," Harry said curtly.

None of them argued. Hermione had learned in first year that when Harry spoke like that, the best thing to do was get right out of the way. She looked up at the determined set of his mouth as he went and thought that perhaps, if Malfoy needed comfort, they should send someone else too.

First she snatched up the paper.

'Dark Mark over Malfoy Manor: Nobody left inside.'

The discovery, early this morning, of the disappearance of Narcissa Malfoy and the students who had taken refuge in her home, has caused widespread dismay. 'We must remember,' said an influential member of the Ministry, 'Mrs Malfoy was rumoured to be closely affiliated with You-Know-Who in her time, and most of these students belong to families who have been called into question... It is quite possible they fled to join him, to swell the ranks of his army before a decisive move against us.'

'We utterly deny these allegations,' stated Mrs Parkinson, mother of one of the missing girls. When asked why Pansy Parkinson did not return to her home after Hogwarts was closed, she declined further comment.

Whether this is a mass defection to You-Know-Who, or a kidnapping on the greatest scale yet seen in a private residence, this paper feels unable to say. There are, however, reasons to

believe that some of those missing at least were abducted against their wills. Aurors at the scene report signs of a struggle, and there are grave suspicions that the Unforgivable Curses may have been used. Readers of this paper are urged to stay at home, and strengthen their wards!"

"Oh God," Hermione said. "Oh – God. Poor Malfoy. We have to go after him."

Sirius was saying something in a low dazed voice about broomstick rides with his cousin when they were children. Hermione thought he had gone quite mad before she realised that Mrs Malfoy was his cousin.

She put her hand on his arm.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "I'm so terribly sorry – we should all go after Malfoy."

"I'll get his coffee machine," Ron said eagerly. "He'll want that looked after. I can do that: my dad taught me all about eckeltricity."

"Do you think," Lupin said, still standing and looking as old as Dumbledore, "that Draco will appreciate a whole bevy of sympathisers? Particularly ones who have, in the past, exhibited no particular liking for him? I don't know him as well as I might wish, but I know the boy is proud. He would see it as charity, and he would make himself extremely unpleasant."

"Professor Lupin," Hermione said desperately, "you don't understand. Harry is useless at this sort of thing, he's crazy – no, I don't mean that, I mean – he was brought up in a cupboard, he's not sure what to do with people! Malfoy will need someone who knows what to say."

She'd seen Harry try to comfort people - she'd been the person Harry was trying to comfort. She didn't think Malfoy needed someone fumbling for words right now.

She was ready to go, but Lupin's gaze held her in place.

"Draco is not very emotionally mature himself," he said gently. "I doubt he'd know what to do with a normal response, but I think they might understand each other. More than that, Draco has always been entirely ruled by his emotions-"

Surprise at hearing nasty Malfoy described like that must have been written all over Hermione's face, because Lupin nodded to her.

"He listened to his father and Professor Snape, and I think – I think he might listen to Harry."

Hermione still wanted to go, to fix things, to do something instead of sitting there and thinking that shutting down Hogwarts had not stopped the disappearances for a day. She felt cold in the warm sunlight streaming through the window, and only distantly heard the voices of Ron and Sirius, arguing over who would take best care of the espresso machine.

Lupin reached over and touched her hand.

"Have a little faith in him, Hermione," he said. "We can go see if they are trying to kill each other soon."

*

Harry caught up with Draco at the door of the bed and breakfast, grabbing him by the elbow and turning him around. Draco looked at him as if he could not imagine a more loathsome sight than Harry.

"Come running after me again?" he snapped. "Should have known it."

Harry kept quiet and kept hold of Draco's arm, pulling him through the door and then into the dingy little sitting room where residents could go while their rooms were put in order. By then he had fought down the urge to snap back, and deliberately looked away from Draco's expression, which invited not so much sympathy as immediate offence.

"Draco, I'm so sorry," he said, and felt suddenly sick with panic. There was nothing he could say that would make this better, and he should be able to do something – for Draco, he should be a support.

"Harry, go to hell! It's all over. Do you have any idea what it's like?"

"Well—" Harry said.

"You don't have any idea!" Draco snarled. "To be a failure? I tried and I tried, I've worked so hard, you saved the day over and over again, you always won, and I couldn't even keep them safe!"

"You're not a failure," Harry told him in a heated voice.

Draco's mouth twisted. "You call this a success, I suppose? My mother – my mother – you," he demanded abruptly. "You had bad dreams last night. Was she in them?"

Harry stopped and breathed in. He had been trying not to think of it, the swirl of blond hair and the scream that cut through the night. Ever since he had seen that paper, he'd been trying not to think of a day in Hogsmeade, and Narcissa Malfoy on the pier. He'd almost – he hadn't understood her, but he thought he had liked her.

Draco's face was the same ugly demand it had been when he held out his hand for the paper.

"Don't be kind to me," he said.

"Yes," Harry snapped. "Yes, she was there. I didn't know it was her at the time, but I think it must have been. There were screams, and I think – I think she was being tortured. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Draco stood still in the centre of the dull little room, in the midst of Muggle mundanity where Harry had never been able to picture him. His skin and hair looked washed out under the fluorescent lights, and his eyes were narrowed down further to cruel slits.

"Don't worry about what I want," he said. "At least I had parents."

"Draco, for God's sake—"

"My mother's going to be fine, you must have read the paper. She's known to be connected with the Dark Lord. She's not like one of your sainted heroes, Dumbledore's little pets, the ones who bleated the party line and-"

"Shut up about my Mum and Dad!"

"-died without ever having a thought of their own because they were pathetic and stupid!"

Harry punched him.

Draco reeled back, blood bright at the corner of his mouth, and while Harry was trying to piece together, through his anger, the thought – what have I done? – he smiled.

"Oh," he said. "I'm so glad that you did that."

He was still bent from the shock of the blow, and he simply threw himself at Harry, scoring a savage elbow in his stomach as they tumbled down to the floor. Harry sucked in a sick, shocked breath and while he was doing so Draco hit him in the face.

He registered a moment to be thankful that he had lost his glasses when Draco tackled him, and then he punched Draco in the stomach and tried to shove him off.

"I knew this would happen," Draco snarled, his voice thick with blood. "I knew, I knew this was going to happen, I knew I was going to fail, I knew they'd all be taken, and now I'm just left with you, all I have left is you, and you're going to die!"

"I'm not going to die," Harry growled, grabbing a handful of Draco's shirt and shoving his fist up hard into Draco's ribs, trying to force him up.

Draco stayed on his chest, a weight that was all vicious elbows and grasping hands.

"Yes, you are," he gasped furiously. "Yes, you are, you stupid, stupid idiot, of course you are. You have to stop believing in all of that, in stories, in lies. The side with the most weapons and the most numbers is going to win, and there are no heroes. Nobody's been able to stand against him, we're going to lose, and you're crazy and you're going to die!"

"I'm not afraid."

"I am!" Draco shouted. "I should have – I did know this would happen. They're all gone, you blind, stupid fool, and you're going to die!"

He thumped the top of Harry's breastbone hard, leaving Harry dizzy from lack of breath, and Harry swung up wildly and heard rather than felt his fist connect with Draco's nose. Draco rocked back briefly, and Harry seized the moment to lever himself into a position where he could sit up, holding the front of Draco's shirt to hold him in place.

Draco's gaze wavered, uncertainty breaking up the pain that always made his face look hateful.

Harry suddenly realised why nobody had approached him while he was depressed. It was awful, rough, too much like fury and too unlike the moderated vent of Hermione's crying. Draco had just lost his mother and they'd been hitting each other, what was the matter with him? He didn't know what to say.

He had always been paralysed whenever someone cried, though, and he didn't feel paralysed in the slightest now. The blood was pounding in his veins, he was staring up at Draco's face, and Draco's heart was hammering insistently under his closed fist. Draco had approached him, after all; Draco had understood.

"Draco," he said softly. "I'm not going to die."

He pulled Draco in hard, and kissed him. Draco made a small desperate sound and took Harry's face in his hands, tilting his face up to his own, and kissed him hungrily back.

Harry could taste the blood at the corner of Draco's mouth, the cut opening again as Draco opened his mouth, and he was dimly concerned somewhere at the back of his mind. Not concerned enough to stop, though, not concerned enough even to pause when he was biting and licking at Draco's lips, and Draco was kissing him fiercely back. They only just retained enough presence of mind to be careful of Draco's nose, and only parted because they had been panting for air before the kiss and Harry thought his lungs might explode. Harry didn't move and wouldn't let go even when he was gasping for breath, and Draco only moved up to Harry's swelling cheekbone. He licked that, breath harsh against Harry's skin, and the lick burned, it felt like a slow tease, Harry wanted it to go on and had to pull Draco's mouth back down to his at once.

When they had to pause for breath again, one of Harry's hands was inside the collar of Draco's shirt. Draco's chest was rising and falling, his skin was warm, and his breath was a steady rhythm against Harry's cheek. They were both alive, they were both safe for now, even if the brush of Draco's kiss-close mouth held him caught in a continuous wildly nervous moment.

"It's okay," Harry lied in a low voice. "It's okay, it's..."

He barely moved and he was able to kiss the soft, trembling corner of Draco's mouth. He turned his face into one of Draco's hands, bent his head a fraction and bit gently into Draco's wrist. Draco's moan was a long helpless sound.

Harry lost it completely and grasped Draco's hair in one hand, pulling his head back for another kiss and scrambling to get just a little bit closer, to have just a little bit more of him. Draco slid his arm around Harry's neck and pulled him in closer, teeth sliding over Harry's lower lip, and Draco's back was against the dingy sofa and Harry had his hand at the buttons of Draco's shirt, almost had it open and had Draco's mouth under his and Draco's skin under his hands, and... .

Lupin opened the door, stood frozen for an instant, and then said: "I'm terribly sorry, I didn't know-" and exited precipitately.

They heard his voice outside assuring Sirius that he didn't think the boys needed any help. Harry let go of Draco's shirt.

Draco leaned his forehead against Harry's and whispered: "I am so embarrassed."

"Thanks very much," Harry said, and felt himself go somehow even redder.

"I didn't mean that," Draco responded, and Harry was relieved to hear him manage something like a drawl. "It's just – caught by a teacher. It's shameful. Slytherins are supposed to be sneakier than this."

Harry puffed out a cautious laughing breath against Draco's cheek, and when Draco removed his arm from round Harry's neck he did it slowly, and only moved back far enough to get a good look at his face.

Harry looked in return. Draco's nose was swelling and his lip was still bleeding, and Harry felt a pang of guilt before he realised that one of his own eyes was sealing shut.

"How many medical spells do you know?" he asked.

"Plenty," Draco said briskly. "I spent my entire childhood dashing about the countryside on my broom, you know. After an incident with a helicopter – an incident in which I was heroic, dashing and unafraid, despite the fact the thing was quite clearly trying to murder me – my... mother made me learn all sorts of spells in case I ended up stranded miles from home with a broken leg."

He leaned into Harry as he extracted his wand from his back pocket. Harry ignored the impulse to turn his face into Draco's neck and got out his own wand.

The swelling on his cheek removed, he placed the wand gently on Draco's swollen mouth, and whispered a spell. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you even dare say anything filthy, Draco Malfoy," Harry commanded. "If Lupin's listening at the door, I'll die of embarrassment."

"Would I?"

"You'd better not, or I'm not fixing your nose."

Draco pursed his healed lips and looked considering. "Maybe you should leave that for an expert."

"So I can look like I came in to beat you up. Thanks," Harry said dryly.

"Well... just be careful to spell it straight. I'm particularly fond of my nose."

"I don't see why," Harry said, grinning. "It's not at all your best feature." He grinned wider as Draco spluttered with protest. "I've heard it called pointy," he went on affectionately. "Very pointy. Like a rat's, you might say."

"I hate you, Harry Potter," Draco said with conviction. "I've always hated you, and I hate you more every day."

Once his nose was fixed, he grabbed on to Harry's wand hand, fingers closing tight around the wrist.

"I don't want to see them," he said in a tight voice. "I don't want to see any of them."

Harry wanted to hold him back, but wasn't sure if it was allowed. "You don't have to. We'll stay here."

"I don't want them to know I don't want to see them!" Draco snapped, as if it should have been obvious. "I'm not scared. I'm going."

"I'll stay with you," Harry said, and Draco dropped his eyes and nodded, getting to his feet and letting go as he rose. He made for the door.

"Besides, I don't want Professor Lupin thinking shocking things about me," he said over his shoulder. "He might talk, and then my reputation would be compromised."

Panic set in, and Draco turned at Harry's silence.

"Um," said Harry at last. "I don't know... I don't want... I didn't, um, take advantage of you or anything, did I?"

The fluorescent lights were still glaring, the sofa and carpets still shabby and grey, and Draco still very white. Harry thought he would never forget the way Draco looked at him, for that torn tender moment.

"No, you didn't." He paused, one hand on the doorknob and the other behind him, touching Harry's sleeve. He smiled. "Pity," he added lightly.

They went out, and Harry saw the others' faces, framed over the taut line of Draco's shoulder and full of pity.

Draco squared his shoulders. "How will this incident affect the people on the field? It can't be good for morale."

*

They talked strategy, and nothing but strategy, for hours. It reminded Hermione of those nights in Malfoy's bedroom, being a group of schoolchildren trying to plan away everything.

She had almost liked him then.

He was very different now. He kept talking, in a hard, practical way, very matter-of-fact and as unlike Malfoy's usual swagger as he could have been. Hermione kept faltering when she could have replied, but Harry backed Malfoy up. He offered opinions as he always did, voice diffident and sure at once, and after he spoke Malfoy seemed to gain heart and go on.

Malfoy never looked at him, though. They never even touched, not gently, so Hermione might be guessing wrong.

They reached for a piece of paper at the same time and knocked wrists hard. They kept knocking elbows and wincing: it was obviously real, it obviously hurt.

Once Harry said: "It might help... get these parents on our side. These are their children, and they've been taken. It could make anyone reconsider their loyalties."

"Even Slytherins," Malfoy murmured. "And you don't think any of them went willingly?"

Harry met Malfoy's eyes steadily. "No," he said. "No, I don't think they would."

Malfoy smiled a thin smile, and leaned back into Harry so they hit shoulders hard.

It was a stupid idea. Malfoy at least had surely been close to someone before, at some time. They couldn't both be that tense and awkward and desperate. It was stupid to think that the only way they knew to get close was by hurting each other.

At various points through the day, Sirius and Lupin went for sandwiches. The cartons of juice and plastic straws puzzled Ron badly, and when Hermione glanced over she saw Harry had taken the carton off Malfoy before he could even try.

"I would've figured it out eventually," Malfoy claimed loftily.

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. "Of course. You're so well-versed in Muggle culture."

"I'm fairly knowledgeable, yes."

"Especially about ties," Harry remarked. Only Hermione saw the protective fierceness of the look he gave Malfoy, as Malfoy bowed his head and muttered darkly about Harry's clothing.

Malfoy's mother could be dead, and they were teasing each other and hurting each other. It couldn't mean – even these boys couldn't be this stupid.

They sat around all day, discussing tactics and trying to predict the future. Hermione wanted to say something, or wanted Malfoy to be different so she could provide a comforting touch. She wanted something normal, but Malfoy seemed to want it this way.

When Harry said he was tired, Malfoy said he was too. They got up and Hermione saw them exchange a tired smile, as if Malfoy had succeeded in something. As if they understood each other.

Hermione didn't understand. She was about to ask where Malfoy was planning to sleep, when Lupin looked over at her and gave a tiny shake of his head.

Harry and Malfoy went into Harry's bedroom together.

*

Harry woke the next morning, and did find Draco beside him.

Last night in the dark, Draco had been able to reach out, put a tenacious arm around him and say "Not a word, Harry" menacingly into the back of his neck, but that had been last night, and they had both been tired enough from pretending to be fine that they had gone to sleep almost immediately.

It was bright morning now, and Draco was curled up on the other side of the bed, clearly not used to being close to someone else. Harry had not the faintest idea what to do.

He didn't know what to do with someone in his bed. He didn't know any of the comforting, proper things to say to someone who had just been bereaved, and the worried lines between Draco's eyebrows as he slept didn't make him feel kind. He wanted to go kill Voldemort, and then come back and tell Draco. That might make him feel better.

He was useless at this kind of thing. It was pointless to just lie there and feel angry and watch Draco sleep with that miserable look on his face.

Harry reached out and touched his face, screwed-up with anxious sleep as it was. It was a stupid impulse, and he was clumsy enough about it to wake Draco instantly.

They hadn't even shut the curtains last night. The room was filled with uncompromising sunlight, tearing shadows from every corner, making every white crease of the sheets glare. Draco did not even lift his head from the pillow, just stared up with wide grey eyes.

He said coolly, "Why is it that you never try to take what you want?"

Harry didn't know what to do with that. So he answered softly, "Shut up, Draco. I am."

He still felt self-conscious, in a bed, in bright daylight, with Draco traumatised or something, but he wasn't going to back down. He wasn't going to take anything back.

He felt like he should be careful.

He looked back at Draco, and brushed his hand over the line of his jaw, his cheekbones, his forehead. The worry lines softened and disappeared under his hand, and that seemed – encouraging, so he didn't stop. He stroked the side of Draco's face, and it wasn't particularly soft or anything, it was only skin, but it was Draco's skin, and Draco was allowing this, his indecipherable gaze steadily fixed on Harry. He brushed the hair from Draco's eyes, and that was soft.

Draco reached out silently, clasped a hand at the back of Harry's neck, and drew him down. Harry's breathing came quick and hesitant as their mouths touched once, briefly, and then again more surely.

The light wasn't so bad, really. Seeing everything seemed like a really good idea as Draco let out a long sigh and let his eyes fall almost closed. His lashes were a silvery haze when he was this close, and he opened his mouth under Harry's, and stretched out. Harry hovered over him for another uncertain moment, and then somewhere in the long kiss he ended up with Draco pressed against him.

Light pooled like water in the shallow curves of Draco's collarbones as he rubbed his face against Draco's neck. He opened his mouth against it, tasted smooth skin and salt, and felt the shift of Draco's muscles as he moved under him.

Draco's hand on his upper arm drew him back up a little, back to Draco's mouth and another long, slow kiss. It was warm and almost dreamy, but Harry was still shivering, and he could feel the hitch in Draco's chest as he breathed. Heart and imagination were both racing, were tripping over themselves, and he could not stop touching him.

He touched very, very lightly, still testing to see if he was allowed and not quite believing that he could be. He ran the back of his fingers against the curve of Draco's throat, and over his warm trembling chest. He pressed his knuckles against Draco's ribs.

Draco's hands stroked over the muscles of his back, slowly, hesitating like Harry was but never stopping. The kiss was an offering, stretched out warm as Draco's body, a promise quivering in the air.

When Harry opened his eyes Draco was looking back at him, so close their eyelashes tangled together. Their lips brushed and pressed against each other, and as they looked Draco stroked along Harry's ribs too, a light touch that sent shivers chasing after each other down his skin. Draco drew his fingers down to rest on the hollow of Harry's hipbone.

He kept looking at Harry. It was almost a question.

Harry closed his mouth over Draco's again, felt Draco's body rising under his, felt the inside of his lip and the edge of his teeth slide against Harry's tongue. Draco's fingers slipped an inch under Harry's waistband, and Harry's breathing went desperately shallow.

There was a knock on the door.

"Harry? Draco? Are you up?" asked Lupin.

Draco removed his hand hastily and Harry scrambled off him, feeling all the blood come back up to flood his face. He heard Draco give a very different and exasperated sigh behind him.

"This is getting beyond a joke," Draco said crossly. "Er – come in, Professor Lupin!"

Harry crawled back to sit against the headboard, hoping that Lupin would attribute the slightly dazed look to sleepiness. He did his best to look casual and newly woken, and as he was crawling back his hand brushed Draco's and Draco glanced at him, warm as the accidental touch.

Lupin came in with a paper clenched in his fist. Any emotion but fear drained away from Harry's chest, and left him cold, waiting to hear the worst.

He heard it.

"This is an emergency Owl from Dumbledore," Lupin said bleakly. "The plan has totally failed. He's recalling us to Hogwarts – and, as far as he knows, we are the only group left."
Chapter Twenty: The Summons

*You can't change the way I am
I'll be the last to help you understand
Try and love me if you can
Are you strong enough to be my man?
When I've shown you that I just don't care
When I'm throwing punches at the air
Are you man enough to understand?
Are you man enough to be my man?*

Harry had not realised he was looking forward to waking up with Draco before he didn't.

Before he even opened his eyes, all he could do was lie there and think about how it would have been if he hadn't woken up alone.

The look of skin so close to his eyes that it became pale background to tiny fair hairs, making a silver sheen against the nape of Draco's neck. Warmth and peace and a certain security in being so very together, in being able to measure out time with someone else's breath.

He was beginning to have some creative ideas involving Draco's chest against his own and husky voices and hands against sleep-warmed skin when it occurred to him that having steamy fantasies with Draco in the room would be incredibly thick.

He opened his eyes hurriedly.

Draco came out of the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

He looked young and cheerful in the morning light, hair a gleaming mess, wearing grey suit trousers and a white shirt he was trying to button up one-handed. He gave Harry a brilliant smile around the toothbrush.

Harry felt the pang of disappointment in his chest ease. This whole scene was so – comfortable. Something he could get used to, far too easily.

Then he frowned. "Isn't that my toothbrush?"

"Yeff." Draco removed the toothbrush. "My mouth felt disgusting," he explained unrepentantly. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

There was a trace of toothpaste ornamenting his lower lip. Harry thought that his mouth looked anything but disgusting.

If he developed a toothpaste fetish, he would definitely be a deviant.

"Lupin left us both a new set of Muggle uniforms," Draco continued, gesturing to himself. "Apparently being on an educational trip with our teachers requires us being in our uniforms at all times, according to the cruel rules of the fearsome Muggle school from which we hail. I wanted to think up a false name for myself, but Lupin said there was no need." He looked distinctly sulky. "Spoilsport."

Harry propped himself up on his elbows, unable to stop smiling.

Draco made a face at him.

"Get a move on, Potter. I want my breakfast."

Harry yawned and stretched. "How come you're so chipper? I thought you always slept in late."

"It is late," Draco answered absently. "It's past eleven. You were sleeping like a log."

He picked up his tie and examined it doubtfully. Eventually, he put it around his neck. Then he held the two ends and waggled them vaguely about.

"Er," he said at last. "A little help here...?"

Harry wished he was less pathetic, and that he could help this constant smile.

He got up and took the two ends of the tie from Draco.

Of course, all of this involved being close to Draco, which always had an unfortunate effect on Harry's ability to think. He tried to seem composed as he stepped in and felt that hollow scooped-out sensation in his throat, as the breath left him.

Draco smelled... well, mostly like toothpaste.

Harry tied the tie as efficiently as he could, and stepped back. He could function much better at a slight distance.

"Thanks," Draco said, in his most lordly manner. "Now come on, hurry up, I'm starving."

"I've got to shave first," Harry mumbled, heading for the bathroom as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

Draco followed him, which would have been a bit tricky if Harry had needed to use the toilet. Draco also perched on the sink and got in the way as Harry tried to shave.

Harry really wished he minded, but that comfortable feeling remained.

"Hey," Draco said, peering at Harry's face in a critical manner. "You have some serious stubble. You lucky bastard."

If Draco kept looking at him, he was going to end up cutting his throat.

"Why's that?"

"Oh, I like the look." Draco looked meditative. "It's manly, and I am woefully unable to achieve it."

"I'm sorry I have so much more masculine appeal than you do." Harry kept a straight face while Draco spluttered his indignation.

Later, when Harry was putting on his socks, he reflected on how pathetic he was. It wasn't as if any hope had been offered. There had been nothing but a little sleepy comfort, a smile in the morning. Oh, but that sense of being safe and warm was pervading him, and logic wasn't destroying it.

If it hadn't been for... everything else, the furious need to do something and protect people instead of hiding away like a scared child, he might have been happy.

If it hadn't been for everything else.

*

Hermione was at one with horror. What had happened last night?

They were all standing outside the hostel, discussing plans for the day. Harry and Malfoy were a little apart from them, forming what appeared to be an exclusive little sub-group. They were talking continuously, soft snatches appearing in the chinks of Sirius and Lupin's conversation. Hermione could not make out the words, only Malfoy's amused, animated drawl and the low pleased murmur of Harry's voice, still scratchy with sleep. Malfoy had his tie in a casual sideways knot that was at once practised and not at all Malfoy's style, and he was standing so close to Harry that his hair was touching Harry's forehead.

Harry, who was rumped and had not shaved properly, turned his face to Malfoy's whenever Malfoy shifted stance or either of them spoke. From some angles, it must have looked as if his slow smiles had already become slow kisses.

In a public place!

It was no better when they decided to walk up and down the nearest streets in order to find the nearest magical spot from which Lupin could Owl Dumbledore of their safe arrival. They walked side by side, Malfoy gesturing when he talked as if all his conversations had to be subdued versions of his little mimics, and Harry's hand touching Malfoy's wrist whenever he let his hands fall.

"I think electricity is very funny," she heard Malfoy say. "They use it to make light and toast, you know."

Ron loudly forbidding anyone to say that Malfoy reminded them of Mr Weasley drowned out the happy hum of Harry's response.

"I know none of you wanted to do this," Lupin said as they walked, and Malfoy and Harry no longer looked happy. Nor did anyone else.

"That's right," Harry answered curtly.

"Since it is now a fait accompli, perhaps we can all take it as a rest before some – truly horrible things occur." Lupin's voice was serious. "A war is coming, and I know all of you will fight, but... you're young, and it's summer. A few weeks of safety can do you nothing but good. You should have a holiday, while you can still have something you want. Tell me what you all want to do."

"I want to go back," Malfoy snapped, both he and Harry still looking stern, their tense shoulders pushed against each other. Then Malfoy's eyes dropped from Lupin's, and he shrugged. "If I can't have that, I'd like to go see a shop with electric things in it. Even if I can't have a money card to buy things with."

"My father is a good man," Ron asserted vehemently.

Malfoy was looking at him as if he was crazy when Harry mentioned, "I have a credit card. Sirius got it for me: he said his family'd always had links with the Muggle government."

Sirius looked shifty under Lupin's accusing glare.

"We used to know some people – er, whom we bribed and bespelled to do our bidding," he muttered. "Look, I just thought, he could use it. The part of London his flat's in is mostly Muggle, he could use it for groceries and stuff."

Malfoy looked speculative. "I'm sure it will come in very handy."

"What do you want me to buy you?" Harry asked, in the upsetting tones of one who had Malfoy's number and against all reason, liked it.

"Me? No, no, Harry, don't be shocking, I couldn't possibly be a kept man, my mother would have fits," Malfoy said in a distracted manner, putting his hand on the small of Harry's back. Hermione privately longed to knock it away, but Harry relaxed back into the touch and let Malfoy steer him into a shop. "But there's no harm having a look around," Malfoy's voice drifted back to them.

They made arrangements to eat in the café across the road. Lupin said he would find a magical place on his own, and he was also the one who went into the shop and told Harry and Malfoy where they were going. Sirius was already off to order food, Ron claimed that electronic equipment brought back traumatic childhood memories, and Hermione did not want to look at them again until she had figured out what was going on, and how on earth she could fix it.

*

Draco kept it on his lap even when they were in the café. Harry had foreseen this from the minute he had stopped beside it in the shop, as if listening to some arcane call.

"And what do you call this?" he'd asked.

"An espresso machine," Harry had answered in fear.

"Espressomachine," Draco had repeated thoughtfully. "What does it do?"

"I'm warning you in advance, Draco, if you go into strong hysterics I will abandon you here." Harry had told him what it did.

"You don't even like coffee very much, Harry," Ron pointed out in puzzled tones.

"I forbid you to say such terrible things about Harry," Draco instructed, running his hands lovingly over the box. There was a strange and terrible look in his eyes.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I like coffee all right."

"Well, but," Ron persisted, "If it's yours, and it's for your flat, why is Malfoy holding it and – touching it like that?"

Harry could hardly blame Ron for looking disturbed. Draco was cooing to the box now.

"I am keeping it safe for Harry. All safe and sound and full of sweet, sweet unexplored caffeinated potential."

Harry reached out and stilled one of Draco's stroking hands. "It'll be safe under the seat," he promised.

The summer-morning light was soaking through the café like butter through a crumpet, and Draco's eyes were wide and appealing. The back of his hand rested warm, unmoving under Harry's palm.

"Weasley might kick it," he pleaded. There was a dent on his lower lip, slightly to the left where his smiles and sneers always began, that was pleading: kiss me, kiss me, kiss me.

Harry smiled resignedly, stretched and took the box out of Draco's hands, depositing it under his seat.

Draco brooded on his wrongs and his menu at the same time. "Weasley, your dark suspicions of me are quite correct. I do know all manner of revolting Dark Arts spells."

"Really?" asked Ron.

"Yes. I shall use them all on you if you let your oversized feet flail in the direction of the precious box."

It was hard to maintain hostility towards a man who was patently in love with an espresso machine. Even Sirius said: "Bet I know more Dark Arts spells," in a tone that was quite amiably competitive.

There was a radio in the café, and that attracted Draco's attention as well. He was pleased enough about it, and the espresso machine, that he was almost as relaxed as he might have been with Slytherins. His only trace of unease showed in the way he kept close to Harry, and it wasn't as if Harry minded.

They got plates of bacon and muffins and tea and Draco's cherished coffee, and Ron talked about keeping the plastic menu for his dad. Sirius helped himself to a lot of coffee, and Harry wondered if it might be a genetic thing. Even Hermione smiled when Draco progressed from tapping his fingers on the table to singing, in a small voice, into a spoon he was pretending was a magic microphone.

"It was the dungeons that did it," Harry said comfortably, while Draco sang quietly about how it had been so long since somebody whispered. "Full of Potions fumes. Very bad atmosphere. Turned his brain."

Ron snickered into his bacon.

"His brain wasn't that strong to begin with. The inbreeding, you see," Harry went on sympathetically.

"Hey," said Sirius.

"Shut up," Draco chimed in, and hit him on the shoulder with his spoon.

He let his hand rest there afterwards, wrist on the edge of Harry's shoulder, warm and close. He reached with his other hand for the end of Harry's croissant, and Harry stole a piece of toast in retaliation. Draco caught his eye and smiled permission, then relaxed against him further. It was a nice day, and they had slept in late, and it was wonderfully easy and pleasant to lean lazily and all murmur good-natured commonplaces between munching.

"Afterwards we can go see about renting a car," Draco announced. "Professor Lupin said."

Harry smiled at the sheer delight in Draco's tone. Draco smiled back at him, a secret gleaming smile that the coffee cup made private between them, and it struck Harry that there might be another reason for Draco staying close by.

A holiday while you can still have something you want.

The idea seemed full of real promise for a moment.

Then Lupin came in through the café door, his face drawn and grey. He had the Daily Prophet in his hand.

*

Harry and Malfoy were still making a display of themselves when Professor Lupin came in. He went to stand beside Sirius, discreetly angling the paper towards him, which manoeuvre became less subtle as Sirius leaned in to read it and hissed between his teeth.

Hermione frowned, not close enough to see, and then felt Ron go still beside her.

"What's-" Harry began on the other side of the table, but it was Malfoy the brat who reached over to take the paper.

Ron grabbed his wrist. "Malfoy, no," he said, and Hermione went cold at the sympathetic horror in his voice.

Malfoy looked pinched and spiteful suddenly in the bright light, mouth curling at the tone of Ron's voice. He shook off Ron's hold disdainfully and held his hand open, imperiously, for the paper.

"Let me talk to you outside, Draco," Lupin said in a quiet voice, looking at him as if he was a wounded child.

"I require neither your conversation nor your sympathy. I only want the paper," Malfoy returned sharply.

Lupin looked older every moment, but he nodded and gave Malfoy the paper. Malfoy held it without a tremor in his thin, grasping fingers, his face unmoved except for the narrowed eyes.

"I see," he said after a moment. "Excuse me," he added, and threw the paper down on the table as he rose.

"Draco, wait-" Harry said, grabbing the paper.

Malfoy paid no attention to him, and in a moment they saw him cross the road from the café window. Cars screeched as he strode back towards their bed and breakfast.

"What does it say, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I'm going after him," Harry said curtly.

None of them argued. Hermione had learned in first year that when Harry spoke like that, the best thing to do was get right out of the way. She looked up at the determined set of his mouth as he went and thought that perhaps, if Malfoy needed comfort, they should send someone else too.

First she snatched up the paper.

'Dark Mark over Malfoy Manor: Nobody left inside.'

The discovery, early this morning, of the disappearance of Narcissa Malfoy and the students who had taken refuge in her home, has caused widespread dismay. 'We must remember,' said an influential member of the Ministry, 'Mrs Malfoy was rumoured to be closely affiliated with You-Know-Who in her time, and most of these students belong to families who have been called into question... It is quite possible they fled to join him, to swell the ranks of his army before a decisive move against us.'

'We utterly deny these allegations,' stated Mrs Parkinson, mother of one of the missing girls. When asked why Pansy Parkinson did not return to her home after Hogwarts was closed, she declined further comment.

Whether this is a mass defection to You-Know-Who, or a kidnapping on the greatest scale yet seen in a private residence, this paper feels unable to say. There are, however, reasons to

believe that some of those missing at least were abducted against their wills. Aurors at the scene report signs of a struggle, and there are grave suspicions that the Unforgivable Curses may have been used. Readers of this paper are urged to stay at home, and strengthen their wards!"

"Oh God," Hermione said. "Oh – God. Poor Malfoy. We have to go after him."

Sirius was saying something in a low dazed voice about broomstick rides with his cousin when they were children. Hermione thought he had gone quite mad before she realised that Mrs Malfoy was his cousin.

She put her hand on his arm.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "I'm so terribly sorry – we should all go after Malfoy."

"I'll get his coffee machine," Ron said eagerly. "He'll want that looked after. I can do that: my dad taught me all about eckeltricity."

"Do you think," Lupin said, still standing and looking as old as Dumbledore, "that Draco will appreciate a whole bevy of sympathisers? Particularly ones who have, in the past, exhibited no particular liking for him? I don't know him as well as I might wish, but I know the boy is proud. He would see it as charity, and he would make himself extremely unpleasant."

"Professor Lupin," Hermione said desperately, "you don't understand. Harry is useless at this sort of thing, he's crazy – no, I don't mean that, I mean – he was brought up in a cupboard, he's not sure what to do with people! Malfoy will need someone who knows what to say."

She'd seen Harry try to comfort people - she'd been the person Harry was trying to comfort. She didn't think Malfoy needed someone fumbling for words right now.

She was ready to go, but Lupin's gaze held her in place.

"Draco is not very emotionally mature himself," he said gently. "I doubt he'd know what to do with a normal response, but I think they might understand each other. More than that, Draco has always been entirely ruled by his emotions-"

Surprise at hearing nasty Malfoy described like that must have been written all over Hermione's face, because Lupin nodded to her.

"He listened to his father and Professor Snape, and I think – I think he might listen to Harry."

Hermione still wanted to go, to fix things, to do something instead of sitting there and thinking that shutting down Hogwarts had not stopped the disappearances for a day. She felt cold in the warm sunlight streaming through the window, and only distantly heard the voices of Ron and Sirius, arguing over who would take best care of the espresso machine.

Lupin reached over and touched her hand.

"Have a little faith in him, Hermione," he said. "We can go see if they are trying to kill each other soon."

*

Harry caught up with Draco at the door of the bed and breakfast, grabbing him by the elbow and turning him around. Draco looked at him as if he could not imagine a more loathsome sight than Harry.

"Come running after me again?" he snapped. "Should have known it."

Harry kept quiet and kept hold of Draco's arm, pulling him through the door and then into the dingy little sitting room where residents could go while their rooms were put in order. By then he had fought down the urge to snap back, and deliberately looked away from Draco's expression, which invited not so much sympathy as immediate offence.

"Draco, I'm so sorry," he said, and felt suddenly sick with panic. There was nothing he could say that would make this better, and he should be able to do something – for Draco, he should be a support.

"Harry, go to hell! It's all over. Do you have any idea what it's like?"

"Well—" Harry said.

"You don't have any idea!" Draco snarled. "To be a failure? I tried and I tried, I've worked so hard, you saved the day over and over again, you always won, and I couldn't even keep them safe!"

"You're not a failure," Harry told him in a heated voice.

Draco's mouth twisted. "You call this a success, I suppose? My mother – my mother – you," he demanded abruptly. "You had bad dreams last night. Was she in them?"

Harry stopped and breathed in. He had been trying not to think of it, the swirl of blond hair and the scream that cut through the night. Ever since he had seen that paper, he'd been trying not to think of a day in Hogsmeade, and Narcissa Malfoy on the pier. He'd almost – he hadn't understood her, but he thought he had liked her.

Draco's face was the same ugly demand it had been when he held out his hand for the paper.

"Don't be kind to me," he said.

"Yes," Harry snapped. "Yes, she was there. I didn't know it was her at the time, but I think it must have been. There were screams, and I think – I think she was being tortured. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Draco stood still in the centre of the dull little room, in the midst of Muggle mundanity where Harry had never been able to picture him. His skin and hair looked washed out under the fluorescent lights, and his eyes were narrowed down further to cruel slits.

"Don't worry about what I want," he said. "At least I had parents."

"Draco, for God's sake—"

"My mother's going to be fine, you must have read the paper. She's known to be connected with the Dark Lord. She's not like one of your sainted heroes, Dumbledore's little pets, the ones who bleated the party line and-"

"Shut up about my Mum and Dad!"

"-died without ever having a thought of their own because they were pathetic and stupid!"

Harry punched him.

Draco reeled back, blood bright at the corner of his mouth, and while Harry was trying to piece together, through his anger, the thought – what have I done? – he smiled.

"Oh," he said. "I'm so glad that you did that."

He was still bent from the shock of the blow, and he simply threw himself at Harry, scoring a savage elbow in his stomach as they tumbled down to the floor. Harry sucked in a sick, shocked breath and while he was doing so Draco hit him in the face.

He registered a moment to be thankful that he had lost his glasses when Draco tackled him, and then he punched Draco in the stomach and tried to shove him off.

"I knew this would happen," Draco snarled, his voice thick with blood. "I knew, I knew this was going to happen, I knew I was going to fail, I knew they'd all be taken, and now I'm just left with you, all I have left is you, and you're going to die!"

"I'm not going to die," Harry growled, grabbing a handful of Draco's shirt and shoving his fist up hard into Draco's ribs, trying to force him up.

Draco stayed on his chest, a weight that was all vicious elbows and grasping hands.

"Yes, you are," he gasped furiously. "Yes, you are, you stupid, stupid idiot, of course you are. You have to stop believing in all of that, in stories, in lies. The side with the most weapons and the most numbers is going to win, and there are no heroes. Nobody's been able to stand against him, we're going to lose, and you're crazy and you're going to die!"

"I'm not afraid."

"I am!" Draco shouted. "I should have – I did know this would happen. They're all gone, you blind, stupid fool, and you're going to die!"

He thumped the top of Harry's breastbone hard, leaving Harry dizzy from lack of breath, and Harry swung up wildly and heard rather than felt his fist connect with Draco's nose. Draco rocked back briefly, and Harry seized the moment to lever himself into a position where he could sit up, holding the front of Draco's shirt to hold him in place.

Draco's gaze wavered, uncertainty breaking up the pain that always made his face look hateful.

Harry suddenly realised why nobody had approached him while he was depressed. It was awful, rough, too much like fury and too unlike the moderated vent of Hermione's crying. Draco had just lost his mother and they'd been hitting each other, what was the matter with him? He didn't know what to say.

He had always been paralysed whenever someone cried, though, and he didn't feel paralysed in the slightest now. The blood was pounding in his veins, he was staring up at Draco's face, and Draco's heart was hammering insistently under his closed fist. Draco had approached him, after all; Draco had understood.

"Draco," he said softly. "I'm not going to die."

He pulled Draco in hard, and kissed him. Draco made a small desperate sound and took Harry's face in his hands, tilting his face up to his own, and kissed him hungrily back.

Harry could taste the blood at the corner of Draco's mouth, the cut opening again as Draco opened his mouth, and he was dimly concerned somewhere at the back of his mind. Not concerned enough to stop, though, not concerned enough even to pause when he was biting and licking at Draco's lips, and Draco was kissing him fiercely back. They only just retained enough presence of mind to be careful of Draco's nose, and only parted because they had been panting for air before the kiss and Harry thought his lungs might explode. Harry didn't move and wouldn't let go even when he was gasping for breath, and Draco only moved up to Harry's swelling cheekbone. He licked that, breath harsh against Harry's skin, and the lick burned, it felt like a slow tease, Harry wanted it to go on and had to pull Draco's mouth back down to his at once.

When they had to pause for breath again, one of Harry's hands was inside the collar of Draco's shirt. Draco's chest was rising and falling, his skin was warm, and his breath was a steady rhythm against Harry's cheek. They were both alive, they were both safe for now, even if the brush of Draco's kiss-close mouth held him caught in a continuous wildly nervous moment.

"It's okay," Harry lied in a low voice. "It's okay, it's..."

He barely moved and he was able to kiss the soft, trembling corner of Draco's mouth. He turned his face into one of Draco's hands, bent his head a fraction and bit gently into Draco's wrist. Draco's moan was a long helpless sound.

Harry lost it completely and grasped Draco's hair in one hand, pulling his head back for another kiss and scrambling to get just a little bit closer, to have just a little bit more of him. Draco slid his arm around Harry's neck and pulled him in closer, teeth sliding over Harry's lower lip, and Draco's back was against the dingy sofa and Harry had his hand at the buttons of Draco's shirt, almost had it open and had Draco's mouth under his and Draco's skin under his hands, and... .

Lupin opened the door, stood frozen for an instant, and then said: "I'm terribly sorry, I didn't know-" and exited precipitately.

They heard his voice outside assuring Sirius that he didn't think the boys needed any help. Harry let go of Draco's shirt.

Draco leaned his forehead against Harry's and whispered: "I am so embarrassed."

"Thanks very much," Harry said, and felt himself go somehow even redder.

"I didn't mean that," Draco responded, and Harry was relieved to hear him manage something like a drawl. "It's just – caught by a teacher. It's shameful. Slytherins are supposed to be sneakier than this."

Harry puffed out a cautious laughing breath against Draco's cheek, and when Draco removed his arm from round Harry's neck he did it slowly, and only moved back far enough to get a good look at his face.

Harry looked in return. Draco's nose was swelling and his lip was still bleeding, and Harry felt a pang of guilt before he realised that one of his own eyes was sealing shut.

"How many medical spells do you know?" he asked.

"Plenty," Draco said briskly. "I spent my entire childhood dashing about the countryside on my broom, you know. After an incident with a helicopter – an incident in which I was heroic, dashing and unafraid, despite the fact the thing was quite clearly trying to murder me – my... mother made me learn all sorts of spells in case I ended up stranded miles from home with a broken leg."

He leaned into Harry as he extracted his wand from his back pocket. Harry ignored the impulse to turn his face into Draco's neck and got out his own wand.

The swelling on his cheek removed, he placed the wand gently on Draco's swollen mouth, and whispered a spell. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you even dare say anything filthy, Draco Malfoy," Harry commanded. "If Lupin's listening at the door, I'll die of embarrassment."

"Would I?"

"You'd better not, or I'm not fixing your nose."

Draco pursed his healed lips and looked considering. "Maybe you should leave that for an expert."

"So I can look like I came in to beat you up. Thanks," Harry said dryly.

"Well... just be careful to spell it straight. I'm particularly fond of my nose."

"I don't see why," Harry said, grinning. "It's not at all your best feature." He grinned wider as Draco spluttered with protest. "I've heard it called pointy," he went on affectionately. "Very pointy. Like a rat's, you might say."

"I hate you, Harry Potter," Draco said with conviction. "I've always hated you, and I hate you more every day."

Once his nose was fixed, he grabbed on to Harry's wand hand, fingers closing tight around the wrist.

"I don't want to see them," he said in a tight voice. "I don't want to see any of them."

Harry wanted to hold him back, but wasn't sure if it was allowed. "You don't have to. We'll stay here."

"I don't want them to know I don't want to see them!" Draco snapped, as if it should have been obvious. "I'm not scared. I'm going."

"I'll stay with you," Harry said, and Draco dropped his eyes and nodded, getting to his feet and letting go as he rose. He made for the door.

"Besides, I don't want Professor Lupin thinking shocking things about me," he said over his shoulder. "He might talk, and then my reputation would be compromised."

Panic set in, and Draco turned at Harry's silence.

"Um," said Harry at last. "I don't know... I don't want... I didn't, um, take advantage of you or anything, did I?"

The fluorescent lights were still glaring, the sofa and carpets still shabby and grey, and Draco still very white. Harry thought he would never forget the way Draco looked at him, for that torn tender moment.

"No, you didn't." He paused, one hand on the doorknob and the other behind him, touching Harry's sleeve. He smiled. "Pity," he added lightly.

They went out, and Harry saw the others' faces, framed over the taut line of Draco's shoulder and full of pity.

Draco squared his shoulders. "How will this incident affect the people on the field? It can't be good for morale."

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They talked strategy, and nothing but strategy, for hours. It reminded Hermione of those nights in Malfoy's bedroom, being a group of schoolchildren trying to plan away everything.

She had almost liked him then.

He was very different now. He kept talking, in a hard, practical way, very matter-of-fact and as unlike Malfoy's usual swagger as he could have been. Hermione kept faltering when she could have replied, but Harry backed Malfoy up. He offered opinions as he always did, voice diffident and sure at once, and after he spoke Malfoy seemed to gain heart and go on.

Malfoy never looked at him, though. They never even touched, not gently, so Hermione might be guessing wrong.

They reached for a piece of paper at the same time and knocked wrists hard. They kept knocking elbows and wincing: it was obviously real, it obviously hurt.

Once Harry said: "It might help... get these parents on our side. These are their children, and they've been taken. It could make anyone reconsider their loyalties."

"Even Slytherins," Malfoy murmured. "And you don't think any of them went willingly?"

Harry met Malfoy's eyes steadily. "No," he said. "No, I don't think they would."

Malfoy smiled a thin smile, and leaned back into Harry so they hit shoulders hard.

It was a stupid idea. Malfoy at least had surely been close to someone before, at some time. They couldn't both be that tense and awkward and desperate. It was stupid to think that the only way they knew to get close was by hurting each other.

At various points through the day, Sirius and Lupin went for sandwiches. The cartons of juice and plastic straws puzzled Ron badly, and when Hermione glanced over she saw Harry had taken the carton off Malfoy before he could even try.

"I would've figured it out eventually," Malfoy claimed loftily.

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. "Of course. You're so well-versed in Muggle culture."

"I'm fairly knowledgeable, yes."

"Especially about ties," Harry remarked. Only Hermione saw the protective fierceness of the look he gave Malfoy, as Malfoy bowed his head and muttered darkly about Harry's clothing.

Malfoy's mother could be dead, and they were teasing each other and hurting each other. It couldn't mean – even these boys couldn't be this stupid.

They sat around all day, discussing tactics and trying to predict the future. Hermione wanted to say something, or wanted Malfoy to be different so she could provide a comforting touch. She wanted something normal, but Malfoy seemed to want it this way.

When Harry said he was tired, Malfoy said he was too. They got up and Hermione saw them exchange a tired smile, as if Malfoy had succeeded in something. As if they understood each other.

Hermione didn't understand. She was about to ask where Malfoy was planning to sleep, when Lupin looked over at her and gave a tiny shake of his head.

Harry and Malfoy went into Harry's bedroom together.

*

Harry woke the next morning, and did find Draco beside him.

Last night in the dark, Draco had been able to reach out, put a tenacious arm around him and say "Not a word, Harry" menacingly into the back of his neck, but that had been last night, and they had both been tired enough from pretending to be fine that they had gone to sleep almost immediately.

It was bright morning now, and Draco was curled up on the other side of the bed, clearly not used to being close to someone else. Harry had not the faintest idea what to do.

He didn't know what to do with someone in his bed. He didn't know any of the comforting, proper things to say to someone who had just been bereaved, and the worried lines between Draco's eyebrows as he slept didn't make him feel kind. He wanted to go kill Voldemort, and then come back and tell Draco. That might make him feel better.

He was useless at this kind of thing. It was pointless to just lie there and feel angry and watch Draco sleep with that miserable look on his face.

Harry reached out and touched his face, screwed-up with anxious sleep as it was. It was a stupid impulse, and he was clumsy enough about it to wake Draco instantly.

They hadn't even shut the curtains last night. The room was filled with uncompromising sunlight, tearing shadows from every corner, making every white crease of the sheets glare. Draco did not even lift his head from the pillow, just stared up with wide grey eyes.

He said coolly, "Why is it that you never try to take what you want?"

Harry didn't know what to do with that. So he answered softly, "Shut up, Draco. I am."

He still felt self-conscious, in a bed, in bright daylight, with Draco traumatised or something, but he wasn't going to back down. He wasn't going to take anything back.

He felt like he should be careful.

He looked back at Draco, and brushed his hand over the line of his jaw, his cheekbones, his forehead. The worry lines softened and disappeared under his hand, and that seemed – encouraging, so he didn't stop. He stroked the side of Draco's face, and it wasn't particularly soft or anything, it was only skin, but it was Draco's skin, and Draco was allowing this, his indecipherable gaze steadily fixed on Harry. He brushed the hair from Draco's eyes, and that was soft.

Draco reached out silently, clasped a hand at the back of Harry's neck, and drew him down. Harry's breathing came quick and hesitant as their mouths touched once, briefly, and then again more surely.

The light wasn't so bad, really. Seeing everything seemed like a really good idea as Draco let out a long sigh and let his eyes fall almost closed. His lashes were a silvery haze when he was this close, and he opened his mouth under Harry's, and stretched out. Harry hovered over him for another uncertain moment, and then somewhere in the long kiss he ended up with Draco pressed against him.

Light pooled like water in the shallow curves of Draco's collarbones as he rubbed his face against Draco's neck. He opened his mouth against it, tasted smooth skin and salt, and felt the shift of Draco's muscles as he moved under him.

Draco's hand on his upper arm drew him back up a little, back to Draco's mouth and another long, slow kiss. It was warm and almost dreamy, but Harry was still shivering, and he could feel the hitch in Draco's chest as he breathed. Heart and imagination were both racing, were tripping over themselves, and he could not stop touching him.

He touched very, very lightly, still testing to see if he was allowed and not quite believing that he could be. He ran the back of his fingers against the curve of Draco's throat, and over his warm trembling chest. He pressed his knuckles against Draco's ribs.

Draco's hands stroked over the muscles of his back, slowly, hesitating like Harry was but never stopping. The kiss was an offering, stretched out warm as Draco's body, a promise quivering in the air.

When Harry opened his eyes Draco was looking back at him, so close their eyelashes tangled together. Their lips brushed and pressed against each other, and as they looked Draco stroked along Harry's ribs too, a light touch that sent shivers chasing after each other down his skin. Draco drew his fingers down to rest on the hollow of Harry's hipbone.

He kept looking at Harry. It was almost a question.

Harry closed his mouth over Draco's again, felt Draco's body rising under his, felt the inside of his lip and the edge of his teeth slide against Harry's tongue. Draco's fingers slipped an inch under Harry's waistband, and Harry's breathing went desperately shallow.

There was a knock on the door.

"Harry? Draco? Are you up?" asked Lupin.

Draco removed his hand hastily and Harry scrambled off him, feeling all the blood come back up to flood his face. He heard Draco give a very different and exasperated sigh behind him.

"This is getting beyond a joke," Draco said crossly. "Er – come in, Professor Lupin!"

Harry crawled back to sit against the headboard, hoping that Lupin would attribute the slightly dazed look to sleepiness. He did his best to look casual and newly woken, and as he was crawling back his hand brushed Draco's and Draco glanced at him, warm as the accidental touch.

Lupin came in with a paper clenched in his fist. Any emotion but fear drained away from Harry's chest, and left him cold, waiting to hear the worst.

He heard it.

"This is an emergency Owl from Dumbledore," Lupin said bleakly. "The plan has totally failed. He's recalling us to Hogwarts – and, as far as he knows, we are the only group left."

Chapter Twenty-One: The Spy at Hogwarts

It's always darkest in the light

Hold on so tight your fists turn white

And your soul may be blown wide open...

The train journey back was almost exactly like the one to Surrey. They were all tense and miserable, only more so. Ron kept trying to put his arm around Hermione, but she was hunched and twitching away and he flinched back every time. Lupin and Sirius looked grey.

They were the only ones left. Dumbledore had sent them away to get picked off piecemeal, and they all knew he hadn't meant it to happen but it had, and Harry had known they shouldn't do it! He had promised Natalie that he was going to kill Voldemort and that there was no reason to be scared.

He was going to kill *someone*. He was sick to the teeth of being angry and not doing anything about it. As soon as they were back they could all sit down and make a plan. They could talk about what the Aurors were doing, they could all join the Aurors. He could finally do something.

They could get them all back. They would.

Draco was drumming his fingers on the window. Harry thought he would be cheered up if he was irritating someone, but nobody had noticed. He glanced over and Draco nodded.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," Draco announced. "Because I require stretchy legs."

"Yeah, me too," Harry said.

He got up and followed Draco into the corridor. Draco started to tap against the window there, too.

"Stop it," Harry said, mostly to make him happy.

"Don't humour me, Potter," Draco returned. He gave him a half smile all the same, stopped tapping, and leaned against the window instead. "So," he said. "Dumbledore sent off Owls and got no responses, and he thinks everyone's been taken. Not the spy, though. Obviously, they turned in everyone they were with and went underground, and we will never know who it was. Unless..."

"Draco, *stop*," Harry said violently.

It had to have been that way. Someone in one of the groups had turned them all in. Ginny might have seen the face of her betrayer and it must be horrible, to see a friend you trusted turn into the spy in the night...

"Unless it was one of us," Draco continued remorselessly. "Don't you find it a little strange that we are the last ones? Nobody in the Dark Lord's gang said wait a second, hang on, who got that speccy boy - name's on the tip of my tongue-"

"Draco, shut up. None of us did it. Lupin didn't do it, Sirius didn't do it, Ron and Hermione certainly didn't do it and you-" After all this time, after everything he'd said, there was still a tension about Draco's shoulders. Harry took hold of one, hard, and shook him.

"Draco," he said. "You didn't do it either."

"Who's talking about me?" Draco asked. "It's clearly you. It's always the one you least suspect."

"Draco, shut up." He took hold of the other shoulder and shook them both. Draco and he exchanged exhausted smiles.

"You've been plotting it since first year, it's obvious," Draco continued. "Behind those round glasses works the mind of an evil genius." He took them off and through the sudden blur Harry thought he saw him peer exaggeratedly. "Yes, I see it now," he concluded.

Harry leaned in and then Draco's face was clear, much closer than he'd planned. Draco blinked once, slowly, and when Harry let one hand fall uncertainly from Draco's shoulders Draco caught it. They stood, Draco leaning against the glass and Harry leaning against Draco, and Harry realised they were breathing in time when they were both caught on a shuddering exhale.

"Definitely evil," Draco murmured.

Harry was not sure how much weight attached to his argument when he had Draco pressed up against the glass, but he thought he should try.

"Look, I don't want to - at a time like this, I know you're confused-"

Harry was confused, furious and restless and lost because Draco was so close. Draco's breath was coming fast against his cheek, and he felt like his heartstrings were doubled up, tangled in his chest. He wanted to push Draco up harder against the glass and do - something, anything, then go out and kill something, fix something, and come back to Draco and rest.

"You're the one who's confused," Draco snapped at him. "Do you remember what we were talking about last time on the train - about us - about what you wanted?"

Harry's fingers were locked over the back of Draco's hand, pressed against the slick cold glass of the window. He looked at Draco, who looked sullen and awkward, and he thought of all the things in the world worth killing to protect, worth dying for. The grey shape of Hogwarts looming in the distance like home. Sirius doing his best and failing, Hermione looking up from a book and smiling at him, Ron at eleven years old with a grubby nose.

"Yeah," he said.

"Chances are good we're going to die soon," Draco told him, thoughtfully. "Even I can't let you down in the amount of time we have-"

"Just because you think we're going to die - you know you don't have to do anything you-"

"Harry, shut up!"

Harry stared at his sharp, wilful face, and thought of all the things worth killing for in the world.

And this, he thought. And you.

"I *know* I don't have to," said Draco. "I-"

He reached out with the hand that still held Harry's glasses hooked over two fingers, and Harry felt the scrape of the glasses against the back of his neck as Draco kissed him. The kiss was forceful even if Draco was shaking.

Restraint completely failed Harry and he moved in, pushed Draco harder up against the wall, felt Draco's mouth slide open hot under his own as their locked hands held fast against the glass. He held Draco pinned against the window with the other hand, felt Draco pull his hair as they kissed.

Draco moved, struggling against being pinned, and Harry might have thought he actually wanted to get away except for the deep, ragged gasps that were Draco's breaths and the fingers tightly tangled in Harry's hair.

Harry tried to push in closer, rubbed helplessly against Draco's body as Draco writhed and trembled against the glass and sank his teeth into Harry's lower lip.

"Oh, honestly," said Hermione.

Harry spun around and felt himself go scarlet under her gaze.

"Er, Hermione. Look. Let me explain," he said, and then looked over at Draco to make sure he knew Harry wasn't going to lie. Draco was breathing hard and looked a bit amused.

"Don't bother," Hermione said. She looked tired. "This isn't the time and besides, I've known for months. If you hurt him, Malfoy, I swear to God I'll kill you."

"It hasn't been going on for months," Harry protested, outraged. "And I don't need you to look after me, either."

Hermione folded her arms. "Oh, really? We're the only group left, Harry, doesn't it strike you as a bit suspicious-"

"We're the only group left, Hermione, so doesn't it strike you as a bit counterproductive to start hurling accusations at each other?" Harry snapped.

"And then there's the possibility it's all a trap," Draco said.

Hermione glanced at Draco, and then said in a grudging voice: "What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore's an important man. You think documents in his handwriting aren't easily accessible to the entire wizarding world? I could copy his writing. That Owl could be a fake, and we could be walking right into a trap."

Hermione and Draco both looked very grave, but something about the thought made Harry smile.

Let them try. He wanted the chance to do something.

"Could be," he conceded. "But we still have to walk into it, just in case it's not. So - how're everyone's Unforgivables?"

Hermione had gestured that they should all go back inside, but she stopped with her hand on the door when Harry said that.

"Harry, besides anything else - they don't always work. You have to really mean-"

"Then I suggest we do," said Harry. "After you."

Hermione went in. Harry paused before he followed her. "Before," he said, and stopped. "Did you mean that? That you'd be - that you'd *want* to be-"

Draco looked at him almost defiantly, and then kept looking for a moment. A slow, hesitant smile crept over his face. "I did."

Harry realised they were still holding hands, and he tightened his grip. "Okay," he said. "Good."

They went into the carriage and Sirius grimly volunteered to be put under the Imperius curse.

The train journey back was almost exactly like the one there.

But not quite.

*

Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ was a still, empty stretch of concrete walkways and rail. No gleaming red Hogwarts Express could be seen, and none would come, no matter how long they waited.

Sirius and Lupin broke efficiently into the store-room where magical engineers kept brooms in case they needed to fly to a place where there was a malfunction and no Apparating possible.

A little of the seething tension within Harry was relieved by the pressure of a broom handle against his palm. A little more was relieved by the thoughtful smile that appeared at the corner of Draco's mouth.

"Follow my lead," he said softly. "And try not to fall off."

"I'm worried, Draco," Harry returned, leaning in and not kissing him, but filled with the consciousness that he could. "I could end up so far ahead I won't even see you fall."

Draco's mouth twisted with appreciation of the challenge, and Harry kicked off and into the wind. There was nothing in the sky but the gleam at the edge of his eyesight that was Draco catching up with him. Draco shouted something Harry could not hear and Harry almost laughed, the knot in his chest eased for a few moments.

As they approached Hogwarts, even that relief was gone, and he was grounded with all his fury and fear before the school doors.

*

Harry had never seen Hogwarts deserted before, but now it stood black against the dimming sky. There were no owls flying to the Owlery and no lights shining in any window and the familiar shape of towers and slanted roofs seemed suddenly sinister, far too quiet, like the still shell of someone you loved.

They stood in a small, close group outside the door, quivering as if they might fly apart at any moment. Harry felt uncertainty in the push of Ron's shoulder against him, and the press of Draco's elbow on the other side. Now they were here, they all wanted to leave.

He remembered Draco's words about this being a trap, and he remembered that McGonagall's murderer was in there, and he could lose them all.

They had lost enough people.

"What would you all think," he said, "if I went in first and - sort of had a look around?"

"Harry, no *way*," Hermione exclaimed.

"No, I'll do that," Sirius put in quickly.

"Do you have a moral objection to thinking up a plan?" Draco asked.

There was a taut sound to his voice that the others did not have, and he was slightly drawn when Harry looked around. Harry recalled that Draco had a lot less experience with life-threatening situations than the rest of them, and - for just a moment - recalled a first year in the Forbidden Forest uttering trembling complaints. He pushed his shoulder, solid and reassuring, against Draco's.

"Any brilliant ideas, Malfoy?" Ron asked, and it was a measure of his desperation that he only sounded a bit sarcastic.

"Unusually, no."

Sirius' black brows drew sharply together. "Harry's right, someone should go in. I'll do it, I want to do it-"

"Sirius-"

"I think Harry's plan has merit," Lupin said slowly.

Everyone, including Harry, stared at him.

He went on. "I'm sure it's occurred to some of you that this is a trap. If it is, there's no sense all of us walking into it. One person can go in, and if they don't come out, Sirius can get in contact with the Order of the Phoenix - or what's left of it. " He paused, and added: "Of course, I should be the one to go in."

"It was my idea!" said Harry.

"I cannot allow anyone else to go in!" Lupin returned, and it was the first sharp note Harry had heard in his voice for years. "It's right for me to be the one, at least I've lived. I wasn't trapped in Azkaban for twelve years, and I'm not a child just beginning on adult life-"

"I'm not a child-" Harry argued.

Lupin's face looked greyer and more tired than ever in the gathering twilight. "You're still a student, and you are my responsibility. I will not let anyone else go in there. *I* am going in."

"Let me go with you."

Harry saw the matching expressions of astonishment on the faces of Sirius, Ron and Hermione before he looked at Draco. Draco himself bit his lip, and met their startled eyes defiantly.

"Let me go with you," he repeated, more quietly. "I won't be mis-"

Lupin looked just as unsurprised as Harry was. "Don't be ridiculous, Draco," he said. "Of course you would be. And of course I won't allow anything of the kind. I am going in by myself."

He stopped, not uncertainly but as if waiting to answer more argument. Harry looked at him helplessly.

Lupin nodded, as he used to when all business was settled at a meeting of the Young Order of the Phoenix.

"Give me half an hour, and then get away as fast as you can," he said, with that same air of concluding everything. He walked up to the large doors of Hogwarts that Harry had rushed through a thousand times, and pushed it open. Then he turned around for the last time. "It's been an honour to know all of you," he said, and disappeared into the darkness.

The door shut behind him.

*

Draco had cursed after the door closed, and after that nobody spoke for some time. Sirius was engaged in what seemed to be a staring contest with the door through which his last friend had disappeared, and Ron was engaged in a battle not to let anyone see what everyone had already noticed, that his eyes were full of tears.

Harry sat down before the door of Hogwarts with his hands locked around his knees, trying not to punch anything. He gave up after fifteen minutes and punched the stone wall.

He hit the wall hard and felt his skin break against the stone, the hot bite of blood like getting a little of his anger out. Draco knelt beside him and took his hand, pulling it away from the wall.

"Don't do that," he said. His voice was distant, and his face looked cold.

"Why the hell not?" Harry asked roughly. "I might be in too much danger from this stupid wall?"

Draco's attention was apparently caught by Harry's tone, and when he looked properly at Harry his eyes warmed. "Let me rephrase," he said in his most condescending manner. "Don't do that, *you idiot*, because you might need your wand hand."

His fingers were biting into Harry's wrist and he was the most unsympathetic person in the world. Harry was aware, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he was ridiculously glad Draco was here.

He couldn't quite reach that feeling now. All he could think about was Lupin going through that door in his place. He could have borne anything but this, he thought, anything but being kept safe.

"You're the idiot," he said, his voice rough. "I would never have let you go in there without me."

Draco bowed his head with a small sound. "I'd like to see you try and stop me," he said, almost tenderly.

Hermione had her arms tight around herself, as if clutching herself together. Her mouth was shaping spells but she tried to smile around them when Ron glanced at her. Sirius never looked away from the door.

Draco kept his head down with his usual dread of showing the emotions he always betrayed. Harry looked around at all of them and wished he could say something appropriate like Lupin had - but what he really wanted was to do something.

Being the person he was, in the world they lived in, he'd say *I love you* by killing anything that tried to touch any of them.

He was just thinking that when, somewhere inside the castle, Lupin screamed.

It sounded close and it sounded bad, and if not for that, perhaps Sirius would have stopped a moment and done what Lupin said, taken them all away to the Order. But the scream was still in the air when Sirius dived for the door and disappeared inside.

"Sirius, wait-" Hermione cried, far too late.

"We can't let him go alone," Ron said.

Harry was already on his feet. "We don't know where the Order of the Phoenix are. Our only choice is to go after him and try to save him at least."

He would feel sick that he was able to plan for Lupin's death later. Now it was time to act.

"I hate Gryffindors," Draco said, by way of assent. He was white to the lips.

"C'mon," Harry ordered, and they all went inside. Harry felt everyone else at his back, rushing in together so they would have no chance for second thoughts.

Inside, the castle was dark. There was no sign of Sirius.

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Harry saw the others hesitating, caught in the gloom like flies in amber.

"We have to do something *now*," he said. "We have to find Sirius, he can't have gone far."

"We'll have to split up," Draco announced in a thin voice.

No, Harry thought instantly. That was how they had all gotten into this mess. You split up and the spy picked you off one by one. But Draco was talking fast.

"I know what you're thinking, but it's the only way. Like you said, he can't have gone far, but now if we all choose the wrong direction they could both be killed or - put with the others - It's not a good choice, but it's the only one we have left! If we all meet back here in twenty minutes..."

He stopped, because he knew there was a chance none of them would get back to the meeting point. Hermione gave a small, decisive nod.

"All right, then. Come on, Ron."

Harry thought fast. If he had to bet, he would bet that the scream had come from lower down in the castle.

"You go upstairs, and then up another floor if you don't find anything. I'll search here and then in the dungeons, and that will take up all the time we have. Then we all come back here. Be careful! I'll be fine."

"*We'll* be fine," Draco corrected him, on a note of steel.

Ron and Hermione nodded together, with no time left for words, and they ran up the stairs as they had a dozen times when Ron had forgotten his scarf, or Hermione urgently needed a library book.

Hogwarts was dark now, all memories tainted, and Harry thought of the third task of the Tournament and went cold. It had been another world where all your fears came true, and now fear had taken over his world.

He was so angry there was almost no room for fear. He and Draco walked through the Hall and its adjoining rooms, finding only shadows, and Harry almost wanted to stumble upon an enemy.

This was *his* place! The only place he'd ever had!

No-one had a right to take it away.

The only thing that laid claim to Hogwarts was the shadows, and Harry could not fight them. He and Draco exchanged quick glances and began, quietly, to descend the stairs to the dungeon.

They had just reached the bottom when voices and steps were heard, close by.

Harry grabbed his wand. Draco grabbed Harry, and pulled him into an alcove that Harry could have sworn was not beside the bottom of the stairs a minute ago.

"Be *still*," Draco commanded, his voice a hiss on the cusp of hearing, his mouth against Harry's ear. "We're here to *find* people, not fight!"

Harry went still, every muscle in his body protesting. Cheated adrenaline beat a hot path through his body, and he pressed his palm hard against his wand and turned his face against Draco's. They tried to breathe stealthily, and it came out harsh.

The people around the corner were Death Eaters, a bunch of them walking in the robes, hoods drawn over their heads so Harry was reminded of nightmare monks. Sirius and Lupin were not among them.

Harry's locked muscles screamed at him to move, but he stayed still, Draco's chest hitching against his back. The Death Eaters, in a few endless moments, passed on. Harry and Draco waited until even the sounds of their footsteps had faded.

Then Draco let go of Harry's arm, and gave a long, shuddering breath.

"That settles it," he said. "Let me go on by myself."

"*Are you crazy?* Lupin went in by himself!"

"And it was the right decision, if Black hadn't charged in after him! And this is the right decision. You saw me just now, Snape's showed me every secret place in the dungeons. I can hide here better than any other Slytherin I know. If Black or Lupin is here, I can find them, and I can do it fastest by myself!"

"And what am I supposed to do while you're running around alone and in danger?"

Draco gave him a look that did not so much suggest as shout that Harry was being an idiot. "We all left everything magical bar our wands at school so we wouldn't blow our cover," he said, and on Harry's puzzled nod he hissed, "Don't you think the Cloak and the Map might prove useful at a time like this?"

Harry did not waste time calling himself an idiot. "You're right. Stay right here and I'll get the Map and we can look together."

"We're a bit pushed for time, in case you didn't notice," Draco snapped. "If you have the Map, you'll know where to find me, and them, and everyone. I'm going to try here, and you're going to go there. I want to do something, I'm *not* scared-

"I didn't think you were," Harry said.

Unexpectedly, Draco smiled at him. "I'm a liar. You should know that. But I want to go anyway, and I think it's our best chance."

He could see it once he was looking, in the tight line of Draco's jaw. Draco was scared. Being scared seemed remote to Harry, with nothing but a buzzing urge in his blood to act, but... scared and thinking, Draco had remembered the Cloak and the Map.

He held Draco's arm hard. He almost wanted to bruise him.

"I'll kill anything that tries to touch you," he said against Draco's ear. "Go."

Draco stepped away from him and blinked rather than look directly at Harry. Then he stopped blinking, and did it.

"Do not do anything stupid," he said at last, his voice hard.

He took Harry's face in his hands and kissed him, and that was hard as well. There was no time and no space left on the edge of danger for gentleness, and Harry's back hit the wall as Draco's teeth grazed the inside of his mouth. He could not let himself moan, so he grasped Draco roughly against a moan and against the thought of death. He tipped his head back against the wall and pulled Draco in, so all he could feel was stone and the planes of Draco's body against him. His back under Harry's hands, under his shirt, was slick with sweat.

Harry wanted to leave bruises all over him. Harry's own back was painfully pressed against the stone and his thighs were strained, bearing Draco's weight, and he didn't care. Draco pushed him harder against the wall, as if he wanted Harry to be in pain, wanted him to ask for mercy. Harry's hips rose against Draco, his breath coming uneven as a plea.

He didn't want mercy. He swallowed a hungry sound but not the desire to eat Draco alive.

Draco might be scared, Harry thought dimly, but there was the same thrill of excitement in his blood as there was in Harry's, the same urge to do something, anything, *God*, and if Draco stayed there and shoved against him for another moment - but Lupin and Sirius were in

danger. Draco's teeth dragged light and sharp over Harry's lower lip, fingers curling tight in his hair. Then he pulled back.

"Don't you *dare* die," he ordered, and whirled away.

Harry went up the dungeon steps and towards Gryffindor Tower.

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The Fat Lady had no dust on her, not yet, but she still had a dazed look about her when Harry ran up to her and said the password.

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," he whispered, remembering the Third Task. He had said those words then too, when he should have recalled that you only needed the password to get out. He had had things backwards all along.

He knew the common room would be cold and still, with everything everyone had left behind lying like relics in the grey light of approaching night. He did not spare a glance for Hermione's discarded book, or the stairs to the girls' dormitory that he could have safely gone up to because all the girls were gone. He had other things to worry about now.

He ran up the stairs, and with his eyes already adjusted to the night, he made out the shapes of all the empty beds at once. His own looked forlorn, a corner of the sheet tucked back invitingly by house elves, and the chest at the bottom of his bed... ransacked.

Harry dropped to his knees. His books were tossed around, his broom broken, and his Invisibility Cloak was gone. His breathing harsh in that deep, lonely silence, he grabbed *Flying with the Cannons* and opened it at the place where he kept the Map hidden.

It was there.

Harry unfolded the map quickly, the parchment shaking in his hands. When the familiar black lines and dots scratched their way across the yellow parchment he followed each line avidly with his eyes.

Ron and Hermione, safe on the first floor. Draco, apparently safe in the dungeons with no-one nearby. Sirius and Lupin were there, alive, but almost lost in separate groups of Death Eaters, and clusters of Death Eaters or what Harry presumed were Death Eaters were scattered all over the castle. Wormtail was there but not near either of them and... In one of those groups Harry saw the floating words *Tom Riddle*.

Voldemort was in Hogwarts.

Harry's thoughts spun wildly out of control and into panic. It was all happening, all really happening, and there was nothing he could do and no help anywhere, for any of them...

The lines and dots chased each other to an end, and Harry saw help.

He snatched up the Map and ran, ran, ran as if all the Death Eaters were already chasing him out of the horribly deserted Gryffindor rooms and through the dark, echoing corridors to the place where a stone gargoyle waited.

There was no need for a password. The gargoyle leaped aside as Harry approached and as soon as Harry stepped onto the ascending spiral staircase he remembered the Third Task again, and the appearance of Voldemort, and he closed his fingers tightly about his wand as Dumbledore's gleaming oak door came into view, the griffon doorknocker glistening in the half light.

The door swung open, and Voldemort was not inside. There was only Dumbledore.

"Oh, Harry," he said. "I was wondering if I would get a chance to talk to you."

*

The circular room was as lost to darkness as the rest of Hogwarts. The silver instruments stood dull and silent, and the pictures of past Headmasters and Headmistresses had been stripped off the walls. Dumbledore was sitting in the dark at his huge desk, staring at a pile of ashes in front of him.

"Fawkes," he explained, misinterpreting Harry's stare. "It's very sad, but even phoenixes die and do not rise in the end."

He looked small and hunched in his high-backed chair. The moon was out now, a gibbous thing peeping through the windows, and its light made a faint, tired halo of his white and straggling hair. His chin was almost touching his chest, but the light-blue eyes that watched Harry were as sharp as ever.

Harry breathed hard. "Professor - sir, please, Voldemort's in the school!"

"Of course," Dumbledore said gently. "I invited him."

His voice was so calm that Harry's first feeling was one of relief. It was all right, Dumbledore had a plan, and as his breathing came more regularly and the first rush of adrenalin faded, he began to feel cold.

"I invited you all back to meet him," Dumbledore went on, still so serene. "Are you beginning to understand now, Harry?"

His heartbeat had slowed down now, slowed down so a terrible thought could occur between each beat. His chest felt like there was cold water dropping at regular intervals inside it, dropping and hollowing out a stone.

He remembered the images in the Somnasieve, and saw what his dreams had been trying to tell him.

When Draco was swimming in the lake in his dream, he'd whispered the first password Harry had ever heard for Dumbledore's office. *Sherbet lemon*.

The faces of the dangerous creatures in his dream - griffon, chimera, basilisk. All things that had threatened him... all save the griffon. The griffon that was Dumbledore's doorknocker.

The refrain in his last dream, the one McGonagall had seen something in, and died.

Don't you know?

Harry knew. At last, he knew.

"You're the spy," he said slowly. The words felt strange in his mouth, as if he was speaking a foreign language, a Parseltongue that would never make sense because the whole world suddenly made no sense.

"You're too late. What good does knowing this do you now?" Dumbledore asked. "You never were quite quick enough, Harry - but I'm sure you did your best."

He made a soothing gesture with his hands, pale skin twisted like crepe around the blue knots of his veins. They looked frail and old, his hands, invested only with the authority of a kindly grandparent.

Harry could not piece words together without effort. Even language seemed to have turned against him.

"But... how?"

"It was very easy, Harry."

It would have been. No matter how hard Harry had studied the Marauder's Map searching for the spy, he would never have thought to question Dumbledore's presence anywhere. No student would have been alarmed at the sight of Dumbledore, no student would have made an outcry when Dumbledore raised his wand.

He thought back, numbly, to the leaks of information. Lupin had said he was consulting members of staff. Anyone would have told Dumbledore anything he wanted to know.

None of them would ever have dreamed of putting Dumbledore's name on a list of suspects.

Only one person had, only one and why hadn't he *seen* it? McGonagall had not gone flying to the Headmaster with her revelation. She had asked Harry for Lupin, and she had said something about the book Hermione had chosen in Harry's dream...

The old book, Harry remembered now, that they had examined in first year. About Nicolas Flamel... and his partner, Albus Dumbledore.

The sick, shocked disbelief broke into rage.

"You killed Professor McGonagall!" Harry shouted. "How could you - how *could* you? We trusted you and you - you're *evil* - you've been evil all along-"

Dumbledore's tranquillity did not change. He still sat there, hunched, head down, old and untouchable and pitiless.

"Not all along, Harry. Not even now, not really."

Harry was outraged to discover in himself the furious, confused impulse to burst into tears. He wasn't a child anymore, damn it, but he felt like a child, staring in utter incomprehension at an adult he had trusted.

"How can you say that?" he asked. "You killed-" His voice broke as he spoke, and he swallowed hard. "You killed her! You took all those people!"

"You're such a child, Harry," Dumbledore said, more in sadness than in anger and as if he could read Harry's mind. "You're so very young, and you think everything is so straightforward. Do you have any idea of how long I've lived? Do you have any idea of what I've seen?"

Harry was cold again, using everything he had to swallow down tears. The night was as grey and lifeless as the phoenix's ashes.

"I am over a hundred years old, and I know there is no way to conquer evil. I conquered Grindelwald, and Voldemort rose. Before Grindelwald, there was another, and throughout history there have been evil leaders and wars in which both sides had to embrace evil and if you did not you died, and all good has ever been in the whole history of time is a dream, a wish, a fragile construct built up in a lull between two evils and then inevitably destroyed. I know this. I have learned this. I was young and stupid and hopeful, and I won so many victories, but all that fades. Evil is the only thing that lasts, and so I... decided to give up, and survive."

"You decided to be on Voldemort's side!"

"I decided to live. I stopped struggling, and negotiated a treaty. For the price of my life, I began to drain Hogwarts dry. I handed over students to Voldemort - but I never handed over you, or any friends that might help you. Even now, you have your chance to stand against Voldemort, just as the prophecy said."

He leaned forward, his eyes pale and watchful. "But you're not going to win, are you, Harry? We both know that. I set you the Third Task in the Tournament to see what you could possibly do if confronted with Voldemort, and we both know you could do nothing. That was when I lost all hope, but after all, it matters very little."

Harry remembered reading about battle fatigue in Muggle books, and tried to think of it spread over a century of struggle. He could not imagine how incredibly tired Dumbledore must be.

He could not bear the sight of this wizened old man, with all that had been glorious about him worn away.

"The best and brightest are always taken, and every generation is poorer than the last. You should have met Nicolas Flamel in his prime. You should have known your father, Harry. I

loved him. Did you ever have the strength to make anything like the Map in your hand, or become a secret Animagus? You never did. There was never any hope."

"You say you loved my Dad," Harry said, and let his voice tremble. The Marauders' Map fell from his hand and floated gently down to the floor. "And you'll let his death mean nothing?"

Dumbledore had never been the man Harry believed, all the time Harry had known him. That man had been as dead as Harry's parents, all the years of Harry's life.

"Death always means nothing, Harry. It reduces people's whole lives to nothing, and it always happens. Your parents, other students of mine, all the friends of my childhood... They are nothing now, nothing but words on a page, ashes on the wind. I was sorry to kill Minerva, but what did it really matter if she died then or a little later? I am the one with the Philosopher's Stone. I am the one who is going to live forever."

"You have the Philosopher's Stone?" Harry whispered. "But you said-"

"I said I destroyed it, but you did not see me do it. You never questioned it, though, any more than you questioned any of my convenient absences. You were never clever enough not to rely on other people."

That was because I trusted you, Harry thought. He felt he had gone through fury and betrayal, and out the other side. He wasn't cold, or hot with outrage. Everything was still, and he only felt sad.

Dumbledore sounded mildly regretful, as if they were talking about Harry's bad performance in his NEWTs.

"I am going to live, and life is better than death, and anything is better than the constant grinding struggle against something that is everywhere. I am going to live, and perhaps after a time I will forget the best people I have ever known, all destroyed by this world, but even if I do not... your death will only be a small regret next to James', next to Minerva's. I've done what I could for you. I thought you might like an explanation. It's all been very sad, but there is nothing that anyone could have done."

He seemed to be finished. He folded his hands and watched Harry with a certain incurious, weary patience. Harry knew he would not be moved by either rage or tears, by any emotion at all.

He was all that remained of perhaps the greatest wizard that had ever lived.

Harry realised for the first time that he had loved him. He had loved him, and there was something gibbering and crying inside Harry now, but all he could reach was sad certainty. He remembered, with perfect clarity, killing the snakes he had thought were the spies because they were too dangerous to be allowed to live.

Dumbledore's wand was out on the desk, but Harry had his tightly clasped in his hand.

He raised the wand and for the first time saw real emotion on Dumbledore's face.

"But there is," Harry said slowly. "There's something I can do."

*

They found Lupin in the Astronomy Tower.

Hermione had thought they should check it, since they had a few spare minutes before meeting up with Harry and Malfoy, and they were only just inside when they heard footsteps coming towards the door.

Ron seized her hand and dragged her up the stairs to the observation balcony, where some telescopes still stood at windows. They ignored them and knelt, and Hermione hoped they would be hidden by the railing even while they peered over it.

That was when the Death Eaters dragged Lupin into the tower in chains.

Hermione recognised the leader of the little group, too. It was Wormtail.

"Who else came in with you?" he demanded as they flung Lupin down on the floor.

Lupin grunted as he hit it, his hair in the dust. "Nobody. I was by myself the whole time."

"We know you were sent into the Muggle world with Harry Potter!"

How did the spy know that? Hermione thought frantically. *Who could it be?*

"They stayed there. I came alone, Peter," Lupin responded evenly.

Wormtail flinched. "You needn't - you needn't speak to me like that! I never did anything to you - I left you out of it!"

"You're most kind," Lupin said dryly, from his position chained up on the floor.

"I - I'd be happy to leave you out of it again, Remus," Wormtail quavered, "but we have to know where Harry Potter is."

He turned away, unable to look at Lupin any longer, and Hermione saw his face properly for the first time. It was twisted into weak, ugly resolution.

"Otherwise," he continued softly, "it will have to be torture."

"Then it will have to be torture. Go ahead. *I* was never a coward."

Ron jumped in horror and Hermione pulled him down, pulled him close, and felt his mouth make shapes of horror and despair against her neck. She stroked his hair with frantic gentleness, clung to him closely, and thought if they had seen Ron they would have to rip him away from her.

She shut her eyes and hid her face in his hair, trying not to think of what they were going to do to Lupin.

Then she realised she was being stupid, and she looked over the railing again. Lupin was looking up at her, his eyes wide, and her hands tightened on Ron's. But nobody else had seen them.

Perhaps she and Ron could catch them by surprise...

No sooner did Hermione feel her heart rise with the beginnings of a plan and hope, when the door opened again.

She recognised the pair who walked in as surely as she had recognised Wormtail.

One was Voldemort, and she felt her heart race like a rabbit's, as if it would burst out of her chest and flee somewhere safer.

The other, not restrained, not a prisoner, but walking willingly and casually beside the Dark Lord, was Draco Malfoy.

"Still working up your courage, Wormtail?" drawled Malfoy, his voice as unmistakable as his hair. "Let me show you how it's done."

He drew his wand and pointed it at Lupin.

Then he said easily, "*Crucio*."

Lupin's body twisted in a spasm of agony.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The End

*I recognise the way you make me feel
It's hard to think that you might not be real
I sense that now the water's getting deep
I try to wash the pain away from me*

Hermione clutched harder at Ron to keep him down. Her mind was fragmenting into panic, every shard unacceptable. She couldn't look at Voldemort - God, he didn't even look *human*, he looked like one of those creatures from the cartoons of her childhood made flesh - and she couldn't look at Lupin, writhing with his eyes shut and foam at the corners of his mouth. She tried to look at Malfoy, see his face and catch some expression that might mean there was an explanation, and realised only in the sudden rush of betrayal that she had really trusted him.

"I'll kill him," Ron snarled into her ear.

"Hush," she whispered desperately. Who knew what Voldemort could hear? How were they going to get out?

"Commendable though your enthusiasm is," said Voldemort, and his voice made Hermione shudder; it had the quality of Parseltongue when he was speaking English. "I think we can continue questioning the werewolf along with his precious friend Black. You will bring them to my room." Hermione saw Peter Pettigrew's quick look, and Voldemort explained with a note of weariness. "You might know it better as your Charms classroom, Wormtail."

Pettigrew's head bobbed nervously. "Oh yes, my Lord. Of course!"

"As for you, Malfoy-" and at that point hope drowned in Hermione's outrage - "I like to see your viciousness, but it can be put to better use. After all, I think we all know Harry Potter is close. We only have to wait for him to come to us."

He beckoned as he swept out, and Malfoy followed. Hermione watched them leave with relief, feeling horror and betrayal recede so she was left with the single urge: to find a way out of this.

Ron lifted his head incautiously again. Hermione pulled him down hard, but she saw Lupin's eyes widen and was sure that this time, at least one person had seen them.

"I will tell you one thing, Peter," Lupin said conversationally, though his voice was still weak with pain and foam lingered at the corner of his mouth. "You always thought that being a werewolf was much like being an Animagus, only - less pleasant, and less voluntary. That's not true."

Peter Pettigrew trembled, uncertain, glancing at his fellow Death Eaters for help.

"It isn't?" he said at last.

Lupin rolled, rising and breaking his cuffs in one smooth motion, and then stood facing Peter. Hermione had never seen her mild professor look like this: the set of his shoulders and glint in his reminded her of a savage animal.

"No," he said, and his voice grew thick. "I'm a werewolf all the time. And neither cuffs nor Cruciatus can slow me down for long."

He looked up for just a moment. Hermione saw his lips move quite clearly.

He mouthed, "*Run*."

Then Lupin sprang, and as Peter Pettigrew went down beneath him and all the Death Eaters levelled their wands, Hermione hauled Ron up by main force and grabbed their moment of distraction to flee down the stairs and out of the Tower.

They staggered once they had gone down a few corridors, out of the mindless desire to escape and into their own terrible thoughts.

"I'll kill that bastard Malfoy," Ron said, and sounded like he meant it. "I'll go after him and kill him. What has he done to Harry?"

"Nothing," Hermione answered. She caught Ron's startled glance and threw him back an impatient one. "He would've told Voldemort - no, honestly, Ron, I will say it - he would've told him if he knew where Harry was. They must have split up, and that means we have to get back to the Great Hall and tell Harry at once."

She suppressed a shudder at the thought of telling Harry. She, Hermione Granger, supposedly clever, had actually trusted that bastard Malfoy, and God knew Harry had done more than that.

She couldn't think about this now. She had to plan. Lupin had given up his one chance at escape to give them theirs.

They walked to the Great Hall quickly. Hermione tried not to think every noise was a Death Eater, and kept searching her mind for spells. It had never seemed so empty.

When they heard the noise from above Ron seized her shoulders and tried to push her behind him. She pushed him away and grabbed for her wand.

Then they both actually looked, and it was Harry. His wand was drawn, and one black sleeve was ripped and hanging to show a bloody gash along his arm. The set of his shoulders reminded her of Lupin about to spring, and his eyes burned strangely in a white, set face.

She had never seen Harry look like this.

For a moment she thought he knew, and found herself speaking rapidly, hopelessly, so they would not have to talk about it.

"We've seen Lupin. They have him and Sirius, they're taking them to the Charms classroom, Voldemort is there too, Voldemort is *in Hogwarts*, Harry, what are we going to do? We haven't seen Dumbledore. I don't think there's anyone here but Death Eaters."

She wished she had not opened her mouth when she heard how bleak all she had to say was, and then she looked at Harry's far bleaker face.

"I've seen Dumbledore," he said, his voice flat. "He's dead."

The enormity of this disaster swallowed everything else. Hermione stood still, all thought lost.

She tried to gather words from a sea of despair. "Then there's nobody to help us."

His white face was transformed by rage, like fire sweeping over oil. Hermione almost shied away from him. She felt for an instant that Harry was one of the things to be feared in this place of horrors that had been Hogwarts, that anything which got in his way might be consumed.

"Who ever helped us?" Harry snarled. "When did Dumbledore ever help us? We're on our own and I like it better this way. We can do this. Now where's Draco?"

Hermione had almost forgotten. She closed her hands, tight, as if she could crush this thing before it could hurt Harry.

Ron spoke before she could. "Malfoy's probably off torturing Lupin some more. We saw him do it the first time - while he was standing practically arm-in-arm with You-Know-Who."

*

Harry did not absorb the words at first. Part of him was still far away in that room looking at that withered old face, locked in that last stubborn determination to live. Part of him was still thinking, if his wand had been in his hand, I'd be...

He just stared stupidly at Ron for a few minutes, and then suddenly he was all there, in this moment, and absolutely furious.

He grabbed Ron by his shirt and threw him up against the wall.

"Take that back!" he shouted.

"No! Let go, are you crazy? We both saw him, Hermione, tell him-"

"It's not true! Say it's not true!"

"Please, be quiet!" Hermione hissed, grasping ineffectually at Harry's hands. "Please, please, stop. Harry, it's true. I saw it. I'm so sorry, Harry, but it's true."

He let go of Ron's shirt and stepped back, panting. He looked at her distressed face and wanted to run away from them - his best friends! - and put his hands over his ears. It was *not* true.

"Why would he torture Lupin?" he demanded.

"To find out where you were," Ron said.

"Don't be bloody stupid! He knows where I am."

"Yes, Harry," Hermione answered tremblingly, and he fixed his eyes on her face, praying for to think of some explanation. She only stared back at him with pleading eyes. "Only - Voldemort said they *did* know where you were, and that Malfoy was being vicious. Which he can be, Harry, you know that-"

"That's not the same as torturing Lupin! He likes Lupin!"

"Harry," Hermione exclaimed, her voice ragged. "I can't think of any other explanation. There's no reason for it to be Polyjuice, and Voldemort called him by name. He cast Cruciatus on Lupin. I saw him. It was him, and I kept trying to look at his face, to see if it was a plan, but I don't see how it could be. Harry, I know how you feel about him, but he's the spy."

"No he's not," Harry said automatically, and then stopped because he did not know how to tell Ron and Hermione who the spy was.

As he paused, doubt flooded through him.

Who was to say there was only one spy? Didn't it almost make sense? Nobody would ever have questioned Dumbledore's presence... except for a Slytherin. The Slytherins had always been more hostile to Dumbledore, the Slytherins could have been a weak spot... unless someone they trusted absolutely was helping him.

"You didn't see his face," he added, more uncertainly, but he did not need Hermione's sad face to answer his unspoken question. He remembered recognising Draco departing in the night once, in first year. Draco was pretty much unmistakable.

So there had to be an explanation.

"I know him!" he protested violently to his own thoughts.

"Yeah, you've been friends with him for what, six whole months," Ron snapped. "We've been your friends for seven years, and we're all in a bit more trouble than Draco Malfoy could make for us. We need to decide what to do."

Harry felt the clean rush of determination overwhelm all thought. He was so grateful for that: for the chance to escape thought in the call to action.

"You're right," he said briefly. "We need either Sirius or Lupin: we know that. If they're together, we can get them both - and then we'll see. I've got my Invisibility Cloak. Let's go to the Charms classroom."

As he unfolded his Cloak, Hermione's eyes lit up. "Do you have the Map?"

"I-" Harry remembered the Map, lying yellow on the floor of that room, and cursed himself. He was not going up there again, and Ron and Hermione could not see what he had left behind him. "It's gone."

Hermione looked disappointed, but she nodded. He looked into her absorbed face and saw she was already lost in calculating their chances of success.

He was going to succeed. There was no other choice.

He cast the Cloak over them all, and as he put an arm around Hermione it occurred to him what his hands had last done, and what her face would look like if she knew.

Draco would understand - but Draco was...

They walked close together up the stairs and through the corridors of Hogwarts, conscious that the very echoes of their steps could betray them, but Harry could not stop thinking of a very different sort of betrayal.

The day they left Hogwarts, Draco had been writing a letter he had not wanted Harry to see. He'd said it was for Narcissa, but he'd Owled his mother the day before.

If it had been a lie. If it had all been a lie.

Draco hadn't shown any interest until - well, until Hogwarts had broken up, and he had lost direct contact with the Slytherins. Until Hogwarts was broken and Harry, perhaps, became a more important bargaining chip with Voldemort and got upgraded from friend to...

He had to *stop* this!

Exactly why had Draco changed his mind? Dumbledore had never loved him, any more than the Dursleys had. It wasn't likely that Draco had been overcome by Harry's appeal.

Hermione's fingers closed on his arm a second after he saw the Death Eaters. He levelled his wand and Petrified the first one.

The second spun around and Hermione caught him with the same spell, Ron the third, and Harry seized the cloak of the last one as he retreated and cast the Petrifying spell one last time.

Then Harry went over to the first one, lifted his head by the hair, and smashed his head hard against the stone.

"*Harry!*"

"Anyone could come by and reverse the spell," he explained unemotionally. "I doubt they have many mediawizards, and I want every Death Eater possible out of commission. We're fighting a war here."

Hermione licked her lips. "Don't hit them too hard. You could cause brain damage."

"I don't think they'd be so touchingly concerned about you," Harry said. He felt numb as he looked at the horrified expression on her face. He didn't see why she had to look like that. He was only talking sense.

Don't think about Dumbledore. Don't think about Draco.

He drove the second man's head into the wall.

Once he was done, he got to his feet. Hermione shrank back from him slightly, but he felt a hand against his shoulder. He blinked, startled, into Ron's eyes.

"Don't take it so hard, Harry," Ron said. "We're with you."

"Of course we are," Hermione rejoined, her voice gaining strength as she spoke. "You only did what you had to do."

"I know you're with me," Harry told them. "Thanks."

It was just the three of them, the friends he could trust completely, and that felt good. It felt right. He was able to walk on, into Voldemort's lair, and be certain that they had his back.

They stopped outside the door of the Charms classroom.

"I still don't believe Draco did it," Harry said in a low voice, and opened the door.

*

The empty, darkened room was something of an anticlimax. They stood under the Cloak for a few minutes, hesitating and taking in every detail of the room. The chairs and desks of McGonagall's classroom had been cleared away, and the room looked far larger than it had before.

At the far end of the room stood a throne, and what almost looked like a sceptre, standing fixed to the floor.

Harry felt at a loss. He had expected - something to be there, something to fight, and all he could do was stand here wondering if this was a trap, or if they had moved Sirius and Lupin somewhere else.

It was Hermione who broke the cover of the Invisibility Cloak, and walked out into the Charms classroom. She glanced over her shoulder at them, her eyes wide.

"Oh my God," she said. "It can't be. The Captus charm."

"The what now?" Ron asked.

But Harry remembered. He remembered a Young Order meeting, with speculation on what Voldemort was doing with the missing students, and Hermione and Draco brimming over with knowledge about this one charm.

That didn't mean Draco was guilty. Hermione had known as well.

He could hear Draco's voice so clearly in his mind, drawling and precise. *It's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans You-Know-Who can keep in his pocket, that Dementors can patrol and nobody can ever escape from.*

He left Ron with the Cloak and walked to the spot where Hermione stood, stared where she was staring. There it was, the Captus sphere, left alone and unguarded. It was a round, dull-blue sphere, mounted on its metal plinth. Voldemort's version of a sceptre, with a stone containing hundreds of souls.

Draco's voice came back to him again. *The advantage to us is that - perhaps we can get them back.*

"If I smash the sphere," Harry heard himself ask, "are they free?"

"Harry, don't you dare!" Hermione exclaimed. "That could kill them all. This is very old magic, and I have no idea what to do to free them. We have to get it to the Order of the Phoenix: they will know what to do. This makes finding Lupin or Sirius even more urgent. All their lives depend on it. We all have to get out of here."

Ron was folding up the Cloak: Hermione was staring at the sphere. Harry looked at them both, judging their possible reactions, and then decided he didn't care.

"Yes, we all do," he said slowly. "Including Draco."

"Harry, for-!" Ron exploded. "He handed over all his precious housemates to be put in that! I know you liked him, but you have to face the *facts*!"

Yes, the facts. Draco had never been interested in making friends, until the Triwizard Tournament - which Dumbledore had engineered. Draco had written a letter and lied about it. Draco had admitted he was racist. Draco had never been interested like that until Harry was the last thing left for him to use...

He remembered Draco's face, sharp in some moment of unbeautiful intensity.

Don't you dare die on me.

He *didn't* believe it.

But if Dumbledore could betray them, so could anyone.

Harry hesitated.

"Step back from the Captus sphere, Mr Potter," said a voice from the shadows. "I wouldn't want you getting any ideas."

Harry knew the voice at once. It had been years since he heard it, years, and the hatred of years unfolded in his chest, building into murderous rage, as Voldemort stepped out of invisibility, into the light.

He stood and stared down at Harry with those unblinking, slitted red eyes. His face was almost too inhuman to register triumph.

All that Harry wanted in the world, in that moment, was to kill him.

You killed my parents. You killed Cedric. You laid waste to my world and destroyed my school and I'm going to kill you, you bastard...

Then he saw who was behind Voldemort.

Still walking into the light, his white-blond head bowed, with that characteristic saunter. He carried himself with all his usual aristocratic poise.

He could see why Hermione and Ron had been so sure, even without seeing his face. But Harry knew Draco better than that.

It came as no surprise when his eyes met icy grey ones, and he looked into Draco's face, but older, and changed, as if someone had made deliberate mistakes.

"Hello, Potter," said Lucius Malfoy.

*

The Death Eaters were slowly coming out of their invisibility spells, one by one, and growing at the back of Harry's mind was a realisation of how utterly he had been tricked, and a growing determination to take down as many as he could.

Centre stage was the one stunned thought running over and over again through his mind.

This will kill Draco.

It would kill him. Somewhere even further back in his thoughts was satisfaction that Ron and Hermione could see now Draco was innocent, but innocent or not, this would kill him.

Death was imminent and he was worrying about Draco's feelings.

At least Draco was safe - and please, let him *be* safe, because he was sure now that Sirius and Lupin were in the sphere already, and Ron and Hermione were caught in this trap with him. Everything he loved, bar that one person, was here - and the Death Eaters were closing in.

Harry drew his wand.

"Now, now, there's no need to be hasty," Voldemort told him. "Kill the other two if he moves," he added casually to the Death Eaters, who closed in tighter around them. Harry felt Ron and Hermione draw closer to him, standing warm at his back. "This is no little squabble, no secret meeting in a graveyard that could be disrupted. I've won, Harry Potter. The wizarding world is mine. And I intend to enjoy this."

"Why?" Harry shouted. "What, it makes you feel *important*? You came back from the dead to stand around in a big gang of bullies and torture people who're smaller than you? That's pathetic. You're pathetic. You always have been."

He saw Voldemort's long fingers reach for his wand, and braced himself. He almost wanted Voldemort to perform Cruciatius. It would just be another reason to hate him.

He stared into those red eyes, daring him to do it, and then heard the door behind him open.

"Harry!" Draco said, sounding irritated and ordinary. "Why on earth are you shouting, the Death Eaters might - oh."

Harry turned away from Voldemort and saw Draco, going ashen as he took in the situation.

"On the other hand," Draco said carefully, "I can see you're busy. Perhaps I'll just go away."

I will bloody kill anything that even tries to touch him.

Harry had thought that earlier, and not quite known what he meant. He knew now: he had said the words and meant to kill, and he had seen the limp thing after and known it was his doing.

He still meant it.

Nobody tried to hurt Draco. Voldemort tilted his head. "It's young Malfoy, isn't it?" he said, as if they were playing meet-and-greet at a tea party but with awful amusement behind his manner. "Do come in. This should be interesting."

Draco advanced warily. He was so pale he looked ill, and Harry remembered this was the first time he had ever seen Voldemort, and imagined that the sight would fill your eyes and thoughts to the exclusion of all else, until...

Until Draco looked beside Voldemort, and his whole face changed. Harry did not think he was aware of Voldemort any more, or Harry, or anything but the joy and disbelief chasing each other over his face and making him smile, very hesitantly, as if he thought someone might steal the smile from him if he made it too obvious.

Draco breathed, "*Dad?*"

Harry looked at Lucius' face, and was violently aware again of how alike they were, this face that he loved and the other that he hated. Lucius' face was only more composed, with features perhaps less pointed, more conventionally handsome. There was nothing of Lucius in the sharp, hungry look of Draco, like a starved animal searching for a home.

There was hunger and hope in Draco's face now. Lucius stared at him coolly.

"I - I mean Father," Draco faltered briefly, his eyes still fixed on his father's face. "I thought you were dead," he went on in almost a whisper.

"Clearly not," said Lucius. "You never did know when to shut up, Draco. I'm sorry to see the years haven't changed you."

"I'm sorry," Draco said automatically.

He still looked dazed, but he was the only one moving. Everyone else seemed caught, still in the face of Draco's utter refusal to recognise that anyone but his father existed in the world.

Harry saw a few Death Eaters move, but Draco was Lucius Malfoy's son and they seemed uncertain of what to do.

Not so Lucius. "Come here, Draco. This is no time for your incessant chatter."

Draco's face was clearing. "I thought you were dead. You - I saw you die!"

He did not say it with suspicion. *Harry* had only met Lucius Malfoy a few times, and he was certain. Nobody playing a father would think that the appropriate emotion to display toward his long-lost son was annoyance.

"Yes. You proved an excellent witness. All we had to do was create a storm, spell the boat to break up, create an illusion of the Dark Lord and you reacted quite predictably by overreacting."

It was strange. Harry had only seen them together once before, in second year when his main concern had been Draco laughing at him because he had soot in his hair. Now they were all standing in front of Voldemort and his minions, who kept appearing round the room in greater and greater numbers, and through his rising anger Harry could still see... why Draco was the way he was.

Not because Lucius was evil, but because he had a politician's trick of seeking out the weaknesses of those he came in contact with. He had not missed a single weakness in the only person in the world who loved him. He saw them all and he'd made Draco suffer for them all.

He'd missed the whole *point* of Draco, and Draco was still moving towards him, like a bird hypnotised by a snake. Why wouldn't he? Harry had sat beside him and stroked his hair while Draco poured out all his delusions about his father, and Harry had never corrected one of those statements Draco wanted so desperately to believe. He'd thought it would hurt less for Draco to believe the lies, thought it wouldn't harm anyone.

Dumbledore had thought deceit was for the best, too.

"Why would you do something like that?" Draco asked.

Voldemort spoke then, as if offended that anyone would question his decisions. "Your father had rather too high a profile and rather too black a record to be of use to me in his position. Moreover, he has never been one of my more trustworthy servants. I required him to prove his loyalty, and I required an assistant slightly more competent than Wormtail." He spared Lucius a casual glance. "I suppose he has proved his worth, such as it is."

Even the Dark Lord did not move Draco's gaze from his father, but as Voldemort spoke his face changed.

He addressed Lucius. "You faked your own death so you could act as the *help*?"

Harry almost laughed out loud. It was so absurd and so like Draco, and Lucius had raised so much more than he'd bargained for.

"Lucius," thundered Voldemort. "Will you muzzle your insolent brat, or must I?"

"I apologise, my Lord," Lucius said quickly. "Draco, I know you are not this unintelligent. You've shown me that much at least over the last two years."

"Really? I thought all I did was overreact." Draco's voice was dry, but he was still moving towards his father.

Harry could not move, could not grab the idiot and hold him back, because the Death Eaters were under orders to kill Hermione and Ron if he stirred. He could only watch.

"No," Lucius said smoothly. "You surprised me, actually. You didn't consider your actions, of course, but you did *effect* something, Draco. You rallied your peers behind you. No matter how wrongheaded your actions, you did something, and you did it well - and you did it for an admirable reason. For family, and to avenge me."

"I did," Draco answered slowly. "I did do it for you."

Harry had never heard Lucius speak like a politician before, like an orator, his voice rich, rolling and convincing. He suspected that neither had Draco - at least, not when Lucius was speaking to him.

"But you see now it was not necessary. You never wanted to ally yourself with blood traitors, with fools who sink the wizarding world in the mud with every stupid concession they make for the Mudbloods. Now is the time to leave them, Draco. Now is the time to show me what you can really do."

It was probably the most praise Lucius had ever given his son, but Harry realised that Draco's eyes had finally found something more worth looking at than his father.

The Captus sphere.

Just like Hermione, he recognised it at once.

"You people took my Slytherins," he said, pretending to acknowledge other people when really he was only speaking to his father. "You took my-"

And then another unexpected appearance was made. The invisibility spell faded to disclose another dozen Death Eaters coming into view as if invisibility was a tide receding from the room.

Narcissa Malfoy appeared behind her husband.

Harry felt another weary pang of betrayal. He had liked her. God, they had all been stupid and blind.

Only... no. In his dream, she had screamed. She had been tortured. She had not been taken willingly.

She held herself a little stiffly, as if her body was aching still, but she stood by her husband's side and her face was calm.

"Draco, please come here," she said, and the quality of her voice changed as if her throat was tightening. "I know you may not like the idea, but we have no choice. He's won, and we have a chance to survive. So do the children you sent to me - as long as we choose the winning side."

So she had not gone willingly. She was using Dumbledore's logic now, the logic of survival. Harry could not see if it was affecting Draco or not. His eyes kept moving between his father and his mother.

The Lestranges had materialised behind Draco's parents now. He could see the curl of Draco's mouth on the mad face of Bellatrix Lestrange. They were all of the same blood, and blood had always meant so much to Draco.

"Now is the time to choose your family," Lucius said in his compelling voice. "Besides - you don't think this craven bunch of Mudblood-lovers ever really thought you were one of them. They never trusted you. You've slaved for them and they all thought you were the infamous Hogwarts spy."

Draco moved then, and not towards his father. He turned and cast a look over his shoulder at Harry, warm as a kiss.

"Not Harry," he answered, certain as the sun. "He's my friend."

Not even when his father spoke did Draco look away. He still looked sick with shock and fear, but there was trust hard as steel in his eyes.

Now was the time to say *something*, to accuse Draco's father though he never had before, to say he hadn't ever really thought... Now was the time, with Draco in the balance, when Harry had to speak.

He had no idea what to say.

"Are you sure about that, Draco?" Lucius inquired. "I heard them talking. Do you think your - friend Harry Potter will tell you that he never doubted you, not even for a moment?"

A question clouded Draco's face, and when Harry did not speak, just kept staring with the intensity of a prayer, the trust in his eyes shattered.

"You were never one of them, and they knew it. You're one of ours. You're my son. You only have your family. Don't let me down, Draco. Come here!"

You have to speak, Harry thought to himself furiously, but he felt too sick of words to open his mouth. Dumbledore had talked, and Lucius, and Narcissa. It didn't prove anything. It didn't mean love.

Draco turned his face away from Harry a little, and Harry saw his face grow darker as he did so. A slow, cold smile came over his lips, like the one on his father's face, like the one on

Bellatrix's. He looked in that instant like the perfect product of their pure blood, a mirror held up to his forebears.

"I'm coming, Father," he said, and walked the few steps to his father's side.

"How very touching," Voldemort remarked. "Now, unless another of my Death Eaters feels like staging a dramatic family reunion, can we perhaps attend to business?"

Harry was still watching Draco. He had his eyes lowered, like shutters slammed hard over windows, and he was standing with his family. The only trace of expression on his face was spiteful.

He'd been betrayed over and over, and if Harry knew him at all he was seething with it and with fury, waiting to lash out at something. Draco had never been good at hiding anything for long. Harry watched, and Draco did lift his eyes. He did not look as if he was prepared to forgive Harry for doubting him. He looked helpless, and torn, and ready to kill.

Harry met his gaze with a fierce thrill running through him. *I do know you.*

"I clung to the driftwood for hours before I was rescued," Draco remarked reminiscently.

Even Voldemort looked at him when he spoke, unable to believe he had chosen this time to start complaining. Draco's eyes were still locked on Harry's over Lucius' shoulder.

Harry took a cautious step forward. Nobody noticed.

"I shouted for you until I lost my voice. I thought... since you were dead, I might as well be dead, and this was hell."

Harry took another step forward. Voldemort's eyes narrowed for a heart-stopping instant, and then they turned to the sound of Lucius' exasperated snap.

"What is your *point*, Draco?"

Another step with Draco's narrowed eyes on him, and no-one else's. Another step closer.

Harry, don't you dare!

But someone had to.

That could kill them all.

Emotion leaped into Draco's face, white-hot feeling that could have been love or hatred or sheer relief that he could act at last.

"Go to hell, Dad," he said, and hit his father in the face.

Lucius fell at the feet of his Dark Lord, who was almost knocked off balance, and Draco stood over him looking ready to hit him again. The Death Eaters surged towards their master in a disordered rush.

There was only a moment.

You made your choice, and took your chance.

Harry leaped forward and dashed the Captus sphere down from its pedestal and onto the floor. It smashed into a thousand pieces.

*

She had been Confunded. Ginny remembered that much, remembered all the lists of symptoms her mother had shown her. This is what strangers might try to do to you, this is how you'll feel, you must try to think clearly, you have to protect yourself!

Simple as Muggle mothers teaching their children not to accept lifts from strangers. Only she had not been able to protect herself.

She had seen - she would never have dreamed she was in danger, and then...

But everything else she thought she remembered was impossible. Her misty horror was the product of a spell, and their situation. She could not allow herself to get lost in dreams of horror. Not when Dean was always beside her, and needed her help. He was more disoriented than she by the Confundus charm and what had happened to them, and that made her think of her mother too.

The Muggleborn were sheltered by the lack of magic in their childhood. Their instincts were not the same, their lives were untouched by the shadow of the Dark Lord. One part of them would never believe there was danger.

It filled her with tenderness, and she held on past the fear to his hand, murmuring nonsense words of comfort. He replied in kind, and through the days they kept up a conversation that meant nothing.

It was so dark, and time passed in endless confusion. Trying to think was like trying to move underwater, and the other prisoners were almost all as helpless as Dean. She thought she heard a girl whispering to some children a few times, her voice angry and persistent, but mostly people were silent, out of despair or magic-born confusion.

She had been Confunded, and now she was imprisoned. That was all she knew.

All she felt, besides confusion and affection, was that they were being watched. That was another reason they were all crouching in darkness and semi-silence: they could all feel the malicious eyes watching them, as if they were being kept as pets, to look at.

They were like goldfish in a bowl, with prison their whole world.

Then the world was smashed. She could feel it breaking apart around her, along with the last effects of the Confundus charm, and wild fear rose inside her. She could feel the world breaking, and surely the shards of such destruction could kill them all.

Ginny kept tight hold of Dean's hand, gasping as if freedom had become an alien atmosphere, and as her eyes adjusted she saw where they were now.

There were Death Eaters everywhere, some fallen among their fallen as if they had exploded into their midst. Ginny could see Hermione and Ron, who she was absolutely sure had not been taken, and she would have run to them if she had not had to keep hold of Dean. She could see Voldemort, who looked just like the bogeyman her brothers had described him as through her childhood and nothing like Tom Riddle.

Harry Potter stood at an empty stone plinth, with glass and liquid scattered about him. Ginny stared at the pieces at his feet. They had all come out of that, she thought, amazed, and then she was more amazed that her immediate reaction on seeing him had not been relief. His face was white and grim, and ready to kill; he did not look like a boy hero any longer.

Draco Malfoy was standing beside Voldemort and beside the Lestranges. His father - *his father?* - seemed to have been one of those knocked down by the prisoners' eruption into the room, but it looked as if Malfoy had chosen his side.

As the room slowly began to arrange itself into sides, Ginny saw that the captured Slytherins had come to the same conclusion. A hush of dismay hung over them all, and they stayed in the centre of the room as everyone else chose.

Some of them were looking to Malfoy for clues, but he was staring down at his father. Some of them clearly recognised family faces beneath those black hoods.

The silent hesitation lasted only a few moments, but at a time like this moments became heavy with significance and passed slowly.

A girl picked herself up from the floor. Ginny recognised her black hair and hard face: it was Pansy Parkinson.

"I don't care," she said, and Ginny realised with a shock that the stubborn voice talking to the children in their little prison had been Pansy's. She looked at Malfoy, and then at one particular Death Eater, and then she went on. Ginny had never thought she would hear a Slytherin's voice breaking. "I don't want to-"

She stopped, face twisted as if she was holding back tears by main force, but she walked away from the little knot of Slytherins and toward the side of the room that constituted the side of light.

She stumbled as she reached them, but Ron stepped forward and caught her. Ginny's big brother kept his hands steady under her arms until Pansy was on her feet and facing the Death Eaters with the rest of them.

The Slytherins began to trail after her.

Those who were holding back hesitated again when Malfoy looked up from his father and saw them. Ginny saw the flash of pride in his face when he saw where Pansy stood, and realised she had made a mistake.

Lucius Malfoy struggled to his feet. He had a bloody lip, and Ginny wondered stupidly how it had happened for a moment. Then he launched himself at his son.

It was the cue for chaos.

Everyone broke from uncertainty into violence and the room seemed suddenly to be full of shoving bodies, and the air of curses. Ginny saw the contingent of Slytherins in the middle, being led by someone she thought was Blaise Zabini, towards Voldemort - and then she squinted and realised they were going there for Malfoy.

Someone grabbed her arm and she had her wand out in a second, before she looked up and saw that she was once again pointing it at Ron.

"Ginny," he said, and the force of her name meant that he loved her and he had been scared to death, "Are you stupid? We need to fight!"

"I will!" she shouted. "I need to get Dean to safety, he's still Confunded!"

"No," Dean replied, his voice dazed and close to her ear. "No, I'm all right, I can help!"

She turned around gladly as he spoke, and looked into his clearing eyes for one moment before a Death Eater shouted "*Stupefy!*" and he fell to the ground at her feet.

The Death Eater was closing in, sights aimed on the easy prey of a trembling girl and an unconscious boy.

Ginny was getting very tired of being frightened.

She cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx on him with the reflexes born of a lifetime with Fred and George, and when he almost toppled onto Dean she hit him very hard. With her wand.

He went over on his side, eyes closing as he fell, and she stooped and gathered up Dean half into her lap as best she could with one arm, staying crouched above him with her wand at the ready.

She thought Ron might help her, but when she looked he was going down under three Death Eaters. She had a moment of fear for him, but then she saw that one of the Death Eaters already had Pansy Parkinson on his back, clubbing him around the head with her wand, and Hermione was advancing on another with a purposeful look in her eye.

That left her without allies. She had no choice but to protect Dean herself.

People who had fallen were being crushed underfoot. Perhaps the man she had brought down was being crushed now... but he deserved it, and Dean did not. She was damned if she was going to let anything happen to him.

Ginny raised her wand and fired off every curse she could think of.

People were screaming and dying around her, there were very young Confunded students about. She saw Professor Lupin snarling as he defended eight of them, and Professor Black

laughing and cutting down whoever threatened Lupin when he was distracted. There were children gathering around Pansy Parkinson, and Ron was sticking with them. Ginny looked down once, and saw two first years, one trying to shield Dean's head, but both really just trying to be close to her.

She thought they outnumbered the Death Eaters, but so many on her side were confused, so many were helpless.

So she had to keep fighting.

She only just missed cursing Hermione, who clutched her arm as she went by. Hermione's hair was a seething mass about her wild face.

"I can't see Harry!" she exclaimed. "What's *happening* to him?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Ginny said briefly. Hermione could even look scandalised in the middle of outright war. "I mean - I do, of course I do," Ginny amended, "but... I can't help him. I *can* help them."

Hermione stared at her, then nodded and pushed her way savagely through the crowd and towards Harry. Ginny wished her luck.

"Ginny?" she heard Dean say softly from the ground, struggling back towards consciousness.

She stood over him, waiting for the next threat.

"Yes," she said, pleased to find her voice as steady as her wand. "I'm with you."

*

When Hermione saw the flash of white-blond hair her heart leaped: surely Harry would be close to Malfoy.

As she fought her way closer, she saw that this was not true. Malfoy and his father were throwing each other about the place. Locked in his struggle, he had probably not even noticed leaving Harry behind.

Someone had to protect the younger ones, someone had to fight Lucius Malfoy. But someone had to get to Harry. If he lost, the war was lost, did nobody else realise that?

Where was Harry?

"*Nox*," Hermione hissed, waving her wand in front of a Death Eater's suddenly-blind eyes.

Malfoy wasn't even using curses on his father. They were rolling together, exchanging real blows, spilling blood, as if they hated each other too much even for the distance of a wand. Hermione hesitated, waiting a moment to see if she could curse Lucius and be sure of not getting Draco by accident.

Then she saw Peter Pettigrew creeping up behind Draco, and levelled her wand there instead - only to find him going down. Narcissa Malfoy stood over him with her own wand raised.

She said, "Don't you dare touch my son."

Lucius Malfoy spat blood down onto his son's face. "So my family is a pack of traitors," he began, when Draco lunged up, catching him off guard with a blow that left him stunned.

Then Malfoy was up and hurtling towards her, and Hermione froze in shock as he pointed his wand and shouted:

"*Incendio!*"

She turned in time to see Bellatrix Lestrangle's hair burst into flame, and then turned away from the screams to the pressure of Malfoy's shoulder against hers.

"Watch out, Granger, you stupid bitch!" he snapped. His lip was split in two places, his face was bruised and there were red marks on his throat from when his own father had tried to strangle him.

There was time to hit Mr Lestrangle over Malfoy's shoulder with a Stupefying curse. She let the corners of her mouth turn up.

"Watch out, Malfoy, you stupid bastard."

Malfoy's eyes glittered and moved from his fallen father to her, quick as beetles in a sudden rush of light. Hermione was astonished to find she felt safer with him at her side, as if he was as much of an ally as any Gryffindor.

"Harry'd murder me if I let a hair of your frizzy head be harmed," he murmured, and then his voice grew sharper. "Harry. Is he *by himself*?"

"I was a little occupied! Hundreds of people exploded into the room!" Hermione shouted above the sounds of battle.

"We have to get to him. Let's go now-"

He caught the look on Hermione's face before he saw anything himself. She was frozen for a crucial instant at the sight: at Narcissa Malfoy on the ground with blood on her bright hair, and Lucius risen from the floor, his face cool and his wand pointed at his only child.

She wanted to shout out to Draco, but her throat was dry and he could see, they could both see. It was just, as she realised in this fraction of time, that there *was* no time, and Lucius Malfoy was determined.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

He did it. Draco's his son and he did it, something in Hermione's mind screamed, wanting to run back to her parents and be safe, have this whole thing a nightmare, not have to watch Malfoy die before her eyes.

Someone had seen the danger before either of them. Even as Hermione watched, sure of what she would see, the corner of her eyes registered two bulky shapes running towards them faster than she had ever seen them move before.

Crabbe was too late.

Goyle somehow got in front of Malfoy before the curse hit, and suddenly Malfoy had not died before her eyes. He was kneeling on the ground beside Goyle, and Goyle was dead.

Hermione's hand went over her own mouth to stop her scream. She bit on her palm and tried to hold her wand ready, and all the time she looked at Malfoy's white pinched face and thought ridiculously: he looks so *young*. She'd thought he could be all these sinister things, but he was only young and stunned at how much the world could hurt him, and Gregory Goyle, lying there, was just a big boy.

Hermione wanted to cry. She met Crabbe's eyes and saw her own horror reflected there: and then she looked at Draco's face again.

He stood up, leaving his dead friend on the ground. The look on his face reminded her of Harry's earlier, the look of someone who had gone through the fire and come out like steel. He didn't look young or sorry any more.

The triumph was fading from Lucius Malfoy's drained face. He doesn't have the energy to cast the Killing Curse again, it dawned on Hermione slowly. He doesn't have the magic, he doesn't have the power.

Draco looked desperate and wretched and furious and sure. He did not hesitate, out of either love or pity.

"*Avada Kedavra*," he returned.

There was a burst of green light.

It was not until Lucius was on the ground that Hermione became aware that she had never thought Malfoy could actually mean the Unforgivable Curse. Not with blood and magic, not enough to kill his own father.

He had meant it, though, and now he could never pretend to himself that there had not been one moment when he wanted his father dead more than anything in the world.

At the next moment, the Order of the Phoenix burst through the doors like a miracle, and began to cut a swathe through the Death Eaters. Snape was in the lead.

Hermione would never forget Draco's face when he realised that if he had waited an instant longer, he might not have had to do it.

She hovered, torn between fear and sympathy, which was when they heard the terrible cracking sound from the other end of the room where Harry and Voldemort stood facing each other.

Draco's eyes, fixed on some cold remote place, snapped back into focus. He grasped Crabbe's arm, fingers white as they dug into his skin.

"Stay here," he ordered. "You're not to go into danger for me!" He looked at Crabbe's speechless, mulish face and shook him. "You stay with *him*," he snarled. "Someone has to stay with him. You can't let people walk over him and crush him."

"What about your father?" Hermione blurted, and then wanted to bite out her own tongue.

"He deserves it," Draco snarled. "He deserves worse. We need to go help Harry."

Then the noise became a thunder and they exchanged looks and began to run, even though Hermione was sure there was no helping Harry now.

*

In the end, as in the beginning, it was just them.

Harry saw the memory of the beginning in those narrowed, watchful eyes, saw Voldemort's fingers wrap around his wand with lingering little touches, like a man with a long-desired lover, and over the abiding fury he felt a rush of sheer irritation.

This thing had been allowed to define his life for almost his entire life.

He'd wondered, sometimes, if he was able to kill. Now he already knew he was. He'd killed Dumbledore. He'd *loved* Dumbledore.

He'd had to do it.

This creature had killed his parents and taken his friends and caused this war that had threatened everyone he loved and he was vermin. He had to be destroyed. It was all very simple.

Harry held onto his wand and remained calm, searching the face before him for his next move.

Voldemort looked grotesque, he realised in this new, cool place. He had walked through blood and risen from the dead to become this thing when once he had been human, and he stood there looking pleased with himself. Where was the victory in that?

"I've been waiting a long time for this," Voldemort whispered, voice pitched low and almost intimate.

"I did say you were pathetic," said Harry.

His mind was empty of everything but this one urge to kill, and all the ways he could do it.

It was going to be something simple. Like a mother defending her child. Like before, when Dumbledore's wand had been just out of reach.

... and without that chance Harry would have died, because Dumbledore had been too powerful, just like Voldemort was now. This wasn't going to be some game with props and the headmaster watching, like taking a sword out of a hat. Harry had taken advantage of a small thing and then he'd wanted to shut his eyes but he couldn't, he had to keep focused, and he was looking into his eyes as he raised his wand and said...

The sound of the Killing Curse was in the air, as if providing Harry with a prompt, and Harry felt a pang of fear for who it might have struck down.

There was no way to see, and the Killing Curse was not going to work here.

Voldemort was waiting for it, and he had his wand in hand. But there was a problem Voldemort would have duelling Harry, and that might give Harry a chance.

Voldemort waited, but Voldemort had been waiting years to kill him and it must be getting old. He lifted his wand and opened his lips, and Harry, waiting for this moment, lifted his wand and spoke as well.

Then their wands were frozen, magic trembling in stasis just as it had been in fourth year, and Voldemort stood with his magic locked with Harry's and no other defences. The battle had centred in the middle of the room, and even Nagini was slithering and biting among the bodies.

He had no magic, and he had no minions.

Harry had killed Dumbledore. This was *nothing*.

It was very clear suddenly to the killing machine that had been his mind. Voldemort was physically vulnerable. Sixteen years ago, it'd been his body that was destroyed, and his new body, bought with Harry's blood, meant he was flesh and blood again.

Anything that was flesh and blood could be killed, and he was ready to do it. He wanted to do it. He thought suddenly of how people who magic had warped were killed in Muggle stories: never with magic, always physically. Push them in the oven, roll them to death in a barrel, come hurtling out of the sky and *crush* them...

A plan began to form in Harry's mind.

There were screams behind him, screams and curselight making a battlefield within what was supposed to be a classroom. People were dying. He had to stop this *now*.

The ghosts were squirming out of Voldemort's wand now, but he had killed enough people over the years so that they were strangers, pale strangers whispering encouragement he did not need, people he could not save.

Dumbledore had never expected him to try and fight him. There was one thing these people did not understand.

The line of magic between the wands was quivering. It would not hold.

Voldemort saw it too, and he began to smile, a slow, terrible smile.

"Do you have any last words?"

He didn't want his last thoughts to be of Voldemort. Voldemort wasn't worth that, so instead in that split second before pain and darkness he thought of everyone lost in the screaming tumult of war. He didn't have time to wonder if they were all right, he could only called up their names, to remember they existed as well as Voldemort, and they were more important.

Ron, Hermione, Sirius, Draco.

"Goodbye," said Harry. He broke contact by a fraction, and pointed his wand at a spot just over Voldemort's head. "*Accio* wall!"

He brought the entire south wall of Hogwarts tumbling down on them both.

*

People stopped as the stones crashed around them, when Hermione and Draco were already running toward the sound of the wall going down.

"Support spells!" Lupin shouted at Sirius and the world in general, and as Hermione and Draco ran Hermione became aware that it was the spells of their own side that kept up the stone floor they were racing along, and kept the ceiling from falling.

Ahead of them was rubble, and beyond that the night sky. Stars looked impassively in on the ruin of Hogwarts.

The Death Eaters were not casting spells. Those left alive had dropped their wands, and were holding onto their arms where the Dark Mark lay as if their master's death left an ache behind. The Order of the Phoenix, without missing a beat between battle and arrest, began to round them up.

Hermione wanted to be lost in triumph. She wanted to find Ron and punch his arm and cry and say, *He did it, I knew he'd do it!* Instead she ran beside Draco Malfoy towards the heap of stones - the cairn, she kept thinking, while her mind tried to hide from the word - that Harry had made.

They reached it much too soon. Hermione could see the huge blocks that had held up Hogwarts, a heap on the flagstones, and she knew that anyone beneath would have been crushed.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

She heard someone cry out behind them, and recognised Pansy Parkinson's voice. She must have found Goyle, Hermione thought dully.

There was only the suddenly-quiet night and this heap of huge, stupid stones. It was never supposed to be like this.

She reached out and touched Draco's arm.

"He did it," she whispered, and was suddenly fighting back tears. "I *knew* he'd do it!"

Draco gave her a cold look.

"Don't be more absurdly sentimental than you can help," he sneered. "I knew he'd do it, too. Now let's get him out."

She stared at him, not wanting to say the obvious, not when the ugly strained calm on his face was clearly the edge of despair, but others began to mass behind them and someone spoke.

It was Blaise Zabini. "What, dig him up so we can bury him again?"

"Shut up now!" commanded Draco, wheeling on Zabini with an almost relieved burst of savagery. "He's *not* dead!"

"Draco," Hermione said, and Draco looked at her.

Even with death all around them, she could see part of him was surprised at the unfamiliar intimacy of his name in her mouth. Hermione did not care. She was too busy trying not to hear what she was saying.

"I think... he's right. These stones are enormous. They would have crushed his spine - they would have broken every bone in his body-"

He would have known that, before he brought them down. Hermione pressed her hand over her mouth as she tried not to think about it, tried not to imagine what Harry must have felt. She was so grateful for Ron's strong arms suddenly sliding around her, and Ron's hands closing over hers. She felt him tremble with the same horrified grief.

Draco looked vicious. "I don't care! We're wizards, Granger, in case you forgot. It doesn't matter if his skull was caved in, as long as we can get to him on time. Now help me get him out!"

Hermione leaned back into Ron's embrace for a swift, sweet moment, as if winning meant that she could rest. Then she opened her eyes and looked at the night and the wounded and the dead, and Draco Malfoy covered in blood and dirt, cutting open his hands as he tried to lift a stone by himself.

"We're wizards," she said. "We can do better than this."

They all began to levitate stones. At first it was only Hermione, Draco, Ron and Pansy Parkinson, but others started to join in. Soon the night was full of flying rocks, some thrown against the other walls in their haste. Those crashes and the murmurs of the wounded were the only sounds as they worked on, in silent, desperate haste.

Then they came to the first body. It hung like a doll, like a huge black puppet used to frighten children at a party, and for a moment all of them hung back, not daring to touch it. He was supposed to come if you called, and he never died...

Hermione was abruptly furious with herself for being so silly.

She took a step forward, and realised Draco had taken one at the exact same time. He looked more apprehensive than she felt, but his face was grim. She felt Ron at her back, and all three of them together lifted the inhuman, broken thing and threw it aside like rubbish.

And that was the end of the wicked wizard.

Harry was beneath him, his face bloody. He was very still.

Hermione was filled with tenderness, raw as a wound. She wanted nobody to touch it: she did not want Ron to comfort her, she did not want to look at Harry anymore. He had broken his glasses again, she thought stupidly. He was always breaking his glasses.

She was crying. Draco was swearing, kneeling beside the body - *Harry* - his breathing like sobbing but his eyes tearless.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," he snarled at everyone, and grabbed Harry's arm.

Hermione screamed as the bones in Harry's arm crunched together, making the rasping sound of something too shattered ever to be put back together.

"Can't you show some respect?"

"No," Draco said. "No, I won't. He's not dead, he's not dead because I say so! Damn you, Harry, open your eyes!"

This was nothing like victory as Hermione had imagined it, with their castle half in ruins and people still dying around them.

There was no miracle. Harry did not open his eyes.

But when Madam Pomfrey pushed away a crying Hermione and a swearing Draco, took Draco's place at Harry's side and pressed two fingers briefly against Harry's neck, she said she could feel a pulse.

Epilogue

*Here is what I know now
My salvation lies in your love*

Harry opened his eyes.

He blinked and tried to focus. It was a cloudy grey morning, he saw through the infirmary windows. The sunlight did not even appear to be trying, and fell far short of his bed. He felt as if someone had been grinding his bones with a pestle and mortar.

Draco was sitting in a chair beside his bed, leaning forward and watching him with pale eyes. He reminded Harry a bit of a vulture, hunched over in a tree and waiting with intense patience for his intended meal to die.

Harry smiled at him as best he could, and the tension flowed out of Draco's shoulders.

"Draco," Harry said, testing his voice and finding it cracked but still working. "What happened?"

"Well, I don't really know how to tell you this, Harry, but after you killed Voldemort Peter Pettigrew took the leadership and won the day. We were allowed to live to be his slave boys of evil."

Harry laughed cautiously, even though he had a dire foreboding that it would re-break his ribs. Draco's face softened further, smoothing out lines of bitterness and weariness until he looked almost normal, familiar and beloved.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and in the absence of hostility or humour his tired drawl sounded almost sweet.

Harry levered himself up with great care, then relaxed into a sitting position against the pillows. "I'm... a bit surprised not to be dead," he answered honestly. "Why do you think that is?"

"We think Voldemort saved you," Draco said. "He fell on you, and the man was seven feet tall with an oversized head. His body protected you from the worst of it. Please don't die of the irony, Harry."

Harry only raised his eyebrows. He was still trying to test out all the bones in his body, which kept insisting they were broken and that being healed was a hollow illusion, liable to disappear if Harry made any sudden movements. If he had been protected from the worst of it, the worst must have...

Crushed someone to death.

Yes, Harry remembered. I did that.

Good. It had needed doing.

"Who - who else died?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Weasley and Granger are all right," Draco said at once. "So are Professor Black and Professor Lupin."

Relief was all he felt for an instant before he remembered that this time it had not been a small group in danger: that this time, it had been war.

"Who died?"

"Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown," Draco answered flatly. "Natalie McDonald - we think she and Malcolm Baddock were trying to protect each other. Neither of them succeeded. I don't know which other Gryffindors you know."

"Tell me all the names," Harry said.

He sought cold comfort in the idea that this would be the last list of people he had not been able to save.

Draco complied, his voice toneless as if he had memorised the list already. Harry listened, catching names he did know among the strangers he had not saved. People from school. People from the Order of the Phoenix.

"Wait," he said. "What? The Order of the Phoenix? How did they get there?"

"Oh, it was a miracle, they appeared in the nick of time, it is a sign from above," Draco answered glibly. At Harry's extremely sceptical look, he added: "And I Owled Snape from the Owlery when we split up. I... nobody was supposed to know where he'd gone, he cast spells so nobody would find him, but he gave me an address and I gave my word I would never tell anyone. So - I lied to you about the letter I was writing, and I lied to you about why I wanted to split up. It was stupid. You were right to doubt me."

Harry did not ask how Draco had known Harry'd suspected about the letter. He suspected that Draco had been thinking over all the reasons Harry might have had to distrust him, as well as learning lists of the dead by heart.

"No, I wasn't," he said, and reached awkwardly for Draco's hand.

Draco moved his hand away slightly, and returned to reading his invisible list. Harry let his hand fall.

Ernie McMillan. Nymphadora Tonks. Millicent Bulstrode.

"Is Pansy-?" he asked when Draco paused in the seemingly interminable list, and then did not end the sentence. If so many people could be dead, Harry felt like saying the words could make it true.

But Draco said, "She's all right. She'll be touched you care, though I'm afraid nothing is going to drop Weasley from the top of her Most Likely Gryffindors list at this point. She clearly took a blow to the head which has gone untreated."

"Ron? Really?" Harry asked, blinking.

"Don't fret. I don't believe she's planning to break up Granger and Weasley, especially considering the fact she was wondering whether she should let her bit of Hufflepuff knock her up so she could get out of the NEWTs."

"The NEWTs?" Harry repeated. "We're still having the NEWTs?"

He was too tired to muster up any real indignation, but he felt it was a bit much all the same.

"Spending all summer in school to do it," Draco confirmed. "Granger is disgustingly happy. I blame our new headmaster for everything."

Harry's head was starting to pound, as if all this new information was battering down a door in order to enter his mind.

"Who's our new headmaster?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Professor Lupin."

"Oh," said Harry, and then with faint, gathering pleasure: "Oh. Good."

"I thought you would be glad. Of course, I consider it a scandal. It should have been Professor Snape. At least he might get the Defence Against the Dark Arts job, now that Dumbledore's dead."

It was as if someone was opening and closing blinds in Harry's mind. Open, he saw this mercifully still infirmary and closed, nothing but the memory of that night when Dumbledore...

"So you know," he said slowly.

"I know he's dead," Draco answered. "I know the cleansing spell to lift the record of spells you've cast from your wand. Snape taught it to me. It comes in very handy."

He took Harry's wand out of the belt loop of his jeans and, after a moment, Harry accepted it.

"All the people taken were Confunded," Draco went on. "Nobody's quite sure of what they saw. Nobody would believe you. I didn't suspect - and I never liked him, and I suspected *everybody*. He died in battle. That's all we need to say."

Harry cleared his throat and spoke the whole truth to Draco, because Draco would understand it completely.

"I killed him," he said. "I had to."

Draco nodded, in easy acceptance of the rage that would have made anyone else back away. Something disturbed the calm of his face, but the emotion passed too fast for Harry to identify it.

"I killed my father," Draco returned. "I wanted to."

Harry wanted to say something. That he was glad Lucius was dead didn't seem appropriate, and the silence stretched on, drawing tight as a pulled string in a musical instrument until a broken noise must emerge.

Draco made it. "He killed Goyle," he went on, and his voice broke. "He meant to kill me, and Goyle got in front of me, and I don't know why he did it!"

"Your father?"

"Goyle! I can't understand. He's dead because of me and I still don't understand why he *did* it!"

Harry didn't know if he did. He certainly didn't know how to say the right thing, not with Draco drawn with pain and confusion, and looking to him angrily for answers.

"He loved you," he said.

Draco's eyes were bleak.

"I loved my father," he said. "I can't... I never knew how to love anyone else. He watched me and trained me when I was young, and I thought that - I don't know, I thought that he would love me if I could only make him proud enough! He was a bastard, and he was ready to crawl and kill to get what he wanted, and I understand killing now but I'm damned if I'll ever understand crawling. He never could have loved me, and Goyle died for me, and I had it all wrong."

Harry reached out, testing a sudden theory, and saw Draco move his hand away again.

"You understand more now."

"I'm still who I am," Draco said. He looked pinched and miserable, as if he was bullying himself and being extremely cruel about it, as if his father's voice was still ringing in his ears. "I would have been a Death Eater if he hadn't gone. I would have done it, to win some approval from him. I would have gone down that path, thinking he knew best, and by the time I learned otherwise it would have been far too late. I still don't know how to do it right. I still don't know any of the words."

"My friend died for me, because I told myself stupid, pathetic lies about my father and I didn't kill him the moment I saw him, and I don't even know why anyone would have done that for me!"

Draco avoided his eyes and tried to resume his calm. "Not to enact you a three-act drama when you're still hospitalised," he said after a moment. "I just wanted to tell you why... you know. It wouldn't work."

There was a silence. Harry waited until Draco gave him a cautious look, and then he glared at him.

"Why are you talking such total crap?" he demanded.

*

Hermione, on their hourly Harry check-up, opened the door and saw Harry and Draco in the middle of what looked like an intense conversation. Her first thought was that she was going to Stun Draco and put him in a corner somewhere to think about why harassing invalids was a terrible idea.

Her second thought was to close the door as tactfully as possible, and lean back against it.

Ron stared at her.

"Why aren't we going inside?"

"What? Nothing! No reason. Let's take a walk!" Hermione suggested brightly.

Ron eyed her dubiously. "I think I want to go inside," he said, in a tone that indicated Mrs Weasley hadn't raised a fool.

"You can't! Er, I mean, Harry's awake!"

"So?" Ron said. "That's good news. We get on quite well when he's conscious, remember?"

"All right, Ron, listen to me: you're not to get upset."

"Upset?" Ron exclaimed. "I'm not going to get upset. Why?" His voice was rising with each word. "What is there to get upset about?!"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Nothing," she answered. "I didn't like it myself - well, I'm still not sure I like it, but Harry's serious about it, and it's not as bad as I thought. They have a strange way of getting on that does seem to be working and at least now I'm sure that-"

"Hermione, if you're trying to tell me that Harry's having a personal moment in there, you only had to say."

The corridor outside the infirmary was not large enough to contain all of Hermione's surprise. Ron looked ever so slightly smug.

"I did figure it out. I'm not stupid, you know."

Hermione could not seem to shut her mouth. It hung open uselessly. "You did?"

"Well, Harry said there was someone and after that I would've thought it was fairly obvious."

"I - I suppose so..."

"And I think you're right," Ron continued blithely. "It could be worse."

"You think so?" Hermione had the horrible thought that perhaps he was considering Snape.

"I'm not crazy about Slytherins, but, well, if you chose the right side I suppose it doesn't matter which house you belong to. Anyway, Harry's been camped in the Slytherin dungeons half the time for months." He gave her a little, teasing smile. "It doesn't take a genius to put the pieces together, you know."

"Well... well, no, of course not," Hermione answered, and was able to regain control of her facial muscles enough to give him an approving smile. "You're being very sensible, Ron. I must say, I wouldn't have expected it."

He tugged down the frayed sleeves of his jumper, which she thought was the Ron Weasley equivalent of preening himself.

"I'm tolerant, that's what I am," he informed her. "Anyway, really, I quite like her. She needs to get new friends, of course, but Harry's friends with Malfoy too, so it won't bother him."

It took an instant to sink in.

"Sorry?" Hermione said. "*What* did you say? She - who are you talking about?"

Ron blinked at her. "Pansy Parkinson, of course. She's the only girl in the group of Slytherins Harry's been hanging around, right?"

In the space of two minutes Hermione came up with a hundred sentences that began: *That's absolutely true, Ron*, but...

"Are you taking my name in vain, Weasley?" asked a cheerful voice, and Hermione lifted horrified eyes from her intense contemplation of the floor to Pansy Parkinson, coming down the corridor.

Frankly, Hermione preferred Draco. At least Draco cracked a book once in a while, and didn't wear those shocking skirts.

While Hermione fought off hideous visions of Draco Malfoy in a shocking skirt, she heard Pansy strike up what appeared to be a friendly chat with *her* boyfriend. One part of her mind noted that Ron had said he quite liked her. Hussy that she was.

"I'm bringing chocolates," Pansy informed him. "I've hardly eaten any at all, too. I saw, um... girl Weasley and Patil carting their wounded around the lake in some sort of love fest for our war heroes, and I thought this would be a good time to feed the silly twit."

"You know Harry's awake?" Ron asked.

"*Is* he?" Pansy inquired. She paused thoughtfully. "I expect they're busy in there, then. I shall just have to eat these myself."

She flipped open the lid. Hermione noticed that Ron was looking even more confused than before.

So Seamus and Dean were both up and about again. They had been the last of the badly hurt, besides Harry. Seamus had been forced to re-grow the bones in both legs, and Dean had been

in bed getting over Cruciatus for two days. Ginny had slept on her cloak beside his infirmary bed.

Perhaps Seamus could comfort Padma a little. She'd been so quiet, ever since...

Hermione wrenched her mind away from the thought of Parvati, and thought about Seamus and Dean again. They were walking, and Harry was awake. It was more than they could have hoped for less than a week ago.

They were healing. They were all going to recover.

She felt fond of everyone, even Pansy Parkinson, who now seemed to be taunting Ron with her chocolate box.

"He doesn't want any," she interposed firmly.

"That's right," Ron said, staring at them with a wistful air. "I don't even want one."

Pansy had caught the edge to Hermione's tone. "Don't worry," she said, sounding maliciously amused and thus rather like Draco. "I'm quite happy with my Hufflepuff."

"Zacharias Smith?"

Pansy selected another chocolate. "Sure, whatever."

Ron's mind, briefly distracted by chocolate, veered back to his original point. Hermione had known this was coming.

"Wait," he said. "If you're here-" Pansy smiled and toasted him with her box of chocolates - "Yes, but if you're here... then who's in there with Harry?"

Hermione precipitately spread-eagled herself against the door again.

"Don't go in there!"

"Do," Pansy urged him, and then seemed struck by a pang of conscience. She held out her box of chocolates. "You'd better take a chocolate first," she added kindly. "Take one of the ones with alcohol inside. I think you're going to need it."

*

"Pardon me?" Draco said, with awful and icy politeness.

Harry looked at him, and had none of the right words. He was sure, all the same.

"You're right, you are stupid," he said.

"You're a romantic, that's your trouble," Draco remarked dryly.

"So you loved your dad. Most people do, and he was a bastard, and you did the right thing. It doesn't matter what you think you would have done if things were different. You did the right thing."

Draco looked as if he had a reply already burning his lips, but he never got a chance to deliver it. Madam Pomfrey added the final touch to the charm of the grey infirmary by walking out of her supply room with a vat of stinking liquid.

"Where's that Dean Thomas? He's not skipping his Fortifying Syrup again," he announced briskly. She gave Harry a scrutinising look, and delivered her medical opinion. "You're awake."

"Er, yes."

"Good thing too," Madam Pomfrey said severely. "Now perhaps Mr Malfoy will go to his *own* bed, and get some *sleep*. Excuse me."

She left the room, intent on fortifying Dean by any means necessary. They heard her scolding some students for loitering around the infirmary, and the door shut with a bang.

Draco was a little bit pink.

"I merely dropped by briefly on my way somewhere else. This is my first visit, as a matter of fact," he assured Harry. "The woman is mad. Stays in her supply room all day long mixing up her syrups and possets and suchlike... It's the fumes," he added peevishly. "They melt the brain. Stop smiling."

Harry didn't. It was only a small smile, all he could manage when the list of people he had not saved kept repeating in his mind, but he had just recaptured the feeling he'd had, just before that night full of death, that someday he was going to be ridiculously happy.

There was time now, all the time in the world. The lingering horror would not stay forever. He could work up to it.

He realised part of the reason the sky was dark was because there were huge stones being levitated in the air past the window. There was a noise, suddenly, like... someone playing bumper cars with enormous slabs of granite.

"Watch what you're doing, Black!" Snape's unmistakable voice snapped from below.

"Who said it was an *accident*?" Sirius crowed. "Got you again!"

Contentment rolled over Harry like a wave of warm water as he realised what they were doing.

Hogwarts would be restored. They were rebuilding.

"Anyway, someone had to stay here and prevent innocent children from accidentally seeing your pyjamas!" Draco announced, with the air of one producing his trump card. "I thought I'd burned all the things like that in your closet, but no, Granger comes up with that - that

monstrosity, and claims it's your favourite pair. I screamed and tried to rip it off, but Granger misinterpreted that completely."

Harry looked down at his pyjamas, and remembered hiding them under a pillow to save them from their fiery fate. That had been - God, it felt like years ago.

Some things were still the same.

"You're not taking it back," he said abruptly. "I won't let you. You're bloody mine."

Draco stared at him. "Tell me that I don't have to explain to you that - what I said on the train wasn't an actual proposal of marriage. Tell me that, Harry."

"You didn't really say anything on the train, you know."

"I never do. I told you," said Draco. "I don't know the words."

"Doesn't matter. I understood what you meant," Harry said. "And you did mean it. The only thing that's different is that we're not going to die. Are you scared?"

"You've seen me fail," Draco told him, with his father's mocking twist of a smile. "It's one thing I do really well. My failures are *spectacular*."

"I'll take my chances."

Draco was eyeing him as if he was a wild animal escaped from a cage. "You'll change your mind."

Harry noticed that he did not say *he* would change his mind.

"Draco Malfoy, you stupid git. You're so lucky that I'm even more stubborn than you are."

He grabbed the bedpost and hauled himself up, his back giving a silent, prolonged scream of agony. Draco got off his chair, his voice suddenly sharp with concern.

"Harry, stop that! We had to re-grow almost every bone in your body - Harry, you'll hurt yourself!"

Every bone in Harry's body shouted vehement agreement with him. Harry winced as his feet hit the ground, and then he tried bearing his own weight. It worked, just about.

Draco was standing up, looking at him uncertainly. Harry imagined he was torn between the logic that said not to touch Harry and an irritated impulse to throw him back on the bed.

Unfortunately, Draco did not give way to his impulses. Harry took a step towards him, and then faltered from mingled pain and sudden, real doubt. He was sure, but... what if...?

"Where are my glasses?" he demanded. If he could see, he might be certain.

Certainty came over him, as warm and enveloping as contentment, when Draco suddenly spoke in a more decided tone.

"You don't need glasses," he said. "I'll come closer."

He stepped into Harry's personal space, so close that Harry felt the hitch of breath in his chest. His hands were held up in a gesture of surrender, a fraction from Harry's skin.

Harry put his hands on Draco's hips and pulled him in that extra fraction. Standing up was sending a dull ache all through his body, but his palms were pressed against the hot line of skin between Draco's jeans and his T-shirt, and Draco's breath was against his cheek. It was sort of worth it.

"It wasn't your fault about Goyle," he said softly. "It's - God, it's bad, but it wasn't your fault. I trusted someone too much as well, but I'm not going to stop trusting everyone. I can't - you idiot, d'you think you're the only one who's bad at saying things? I was raised in a cupboard, I couldn't - I don't want anyone normal."

He was sure Draco was raising his eyebrows at this oddly worded compliment, but even pain was fading to the back of his mind as Draco breathed in, slowly, and then suddenly had his hands gripping tightly at Harry's shoulders. He held on too hard. Harry liked it.

Draco moved his face into alignment with Harry's, slid his mouth over his for a sudden, slow kiss. Harry's grasp of his hips turned possessive: he was sure now.

"There's more," Draco breathed into the kiss. "I'm disgusting. I'm embarrassed to know myself."

"What else?" Harry pursued. His chest felt full and warm, somehow: his blood was thrumming with the urge to act, and yet he was happy to just stand there and watch Draco fumble for his words.

"I," Draco said. "I, there's something I should - I like the stupid way you dress. I even like the way your hair is always horrible. Harry, I'm a very sick man."

Harry leaned back about half an inch as realisation of what Draco was actually saying dawned.

"You like me," he said, and almost laughed.

Draco looked mortified. "It was fairly obvious."

"Yeah, absolutely. How could I be so blind? It was so obvious that 'don't talk to me, don't touch me, don't look at me' meant 'Come to me, I want you.'"

Harry might have been snickering a bit. Draco was going more and more pink.

"Shut up. Go back to bed," he muttered. "I thought you were mad about me. Where's the adulation? Where's the worship? I thought I was going to be your *alabaster idol*."

Draco kissed him again, possibly to stop him laughing so much.

"No you didn't, and don't ever say those words again," Harry instructed him.

Draco took shameless advantage of his weakened state by taking a firm hold of his shoulders and pushing him down onto the bed. Somehow Draco ended up on there too.

Harry was extremely grateful for the softness of the pillows beneath him, but a bit more grateful for Draco on top of him, giving him a very disappointed look and fiddling with the buttons on his pyjama top.

"By the way," Draco remarked, "I've decided that since we're having a new summer term and everything, any Quidditch matches are null and void. Which leaves Slytherin still in the running for House Cup. We'll get it this year. Just you wait and see."

Harry's pyjama top was open now.

"You're a dirty cheater, Draco Malfoy," Harry said.

There was light in the infirmary now, because of the lack of flying stones in the sky. Lupin had probably called a halt to rebuilding in order to tell off Snape and Sirius. There was enough light to see something as plain as this.

He was already breathing hard, but he lifted his hand and pushed a strand of Draco's hair back for the distracted, surprised look that came over Draco's face. Over something as small as that.

Saying things deliberately was hard, but he did want to mark the moment.

"Draco," Harry said. "I-"

"Shut up," Draco told him, and at Harry's quick frown he laughed and kissed him again, teeth lingering on his lower lip as if he did not want to let go of the kiss. He was laughing and breathless and caught in the kiss as he looked down at Harry, the light turning his hair gold.

"I meant, not *now*, Harry," he murmured. "I want to learn the words."

Loved Those of Great Ambition

Likewise the bears in couples agree.

The first time Pansy Parkinson ever saw Draco Malfoy she thought, *What a little git.*

Mother had delayed the maid until Pansy had almost missed the train, and so it had been underway for ages while she was lugging around her trunk and looking for someone at all familiar.

Mother had said that all the best children were off to Durmstrang, really, but there were bound to be some children she'd met at the parties who would be in Slytherin too. The trunk was so heavy, though, that Pansy was two seconds away from sitting anywhere she could find. She'd already almost taken a free seat, when some boy with dreadlocks had produced a tarantula.

Pansy hoped everyone in this stupid school was not going to be waving around enormous arachnids. The twits. Exactly what good was a spider to anyone?

Everyone knew frogs' legs were a better alternative to spiders' in any spell.

Pansy also observed a toad hopping alone down the corridor. This train was little better than a zoo. She gave consideration to the idea of taking it, since obviously its owner didn't want it any more, but she didn't think toads' legs were good for anything either.

She was in a foul temper at this stage and she didn't much care if she squashed the toad as she heaved her trunk along, but as she did she saw a dark boy sitting alone in a carriage. He looked vaguely familiar.

Good enough, she decided, and opened the door.

"Hello, my name is Pansy Parkinson, I'm sure I'll be in Slytherin and I'm going to sit here," she announced. "Give me a hand with this trunk."

The boy looked at it dubiously. "It looks a bit heavy."

"I'm a lady," said Pansy, reduced in desperation to her mother's cliches. "Surely you won't let a lady do menial work?"

"I don't mind," the boy said.

So much for that, then. Pansy had always been intensely sceptical about it in any case.

"Give me a hand or I'll hex you," she said.

He shrugged. "All right then."

They got her trunk stowed away, and she looked at him. He seemed sensible enough, and of course he was going to be Slytherin, or he'd have said otherwise. She began to hope, rather self-consciously, that he was Draco Malfoy.

"My name is Blaise Zabini," he said as they sat down.

Well, to hell with that.

"I've got some Chocolate Frogs," she offered cautiously. "Do you have anything to trade?"

"I've got some lollipops," he said. "One for one?"

"Two lollipops for a Frog, and you can keep the card."

He mulled it over. "Yeah, okay."

He tried to pass a blood-flavoured lollipop over to her, but she gave him an oh-come-on look. She chose a kiwi-flavoured one and a milk-flavoured one, because she was a fan of the classics.

They sat eating happily enough until someone started making noise outside their door. It sounded like someone was trying to drawl and spit at the same time, and it came out rather strangled.

The spitting person came in, accompanied by two faintly boy-like gorillas.

"*Who does he think he is, anyway?*"

One of the gorillas frowned. "Harry Potter?" he offered. "You know... he's famous and everything."

The spitter, who was short and pasty-looking, wheeled on his enormous friend and looked for all the world as if he was going to smack him.

"Shut up, Goyle!" he commanded, and then got on with his rant. "That's not the point," he proceeded. "That's not the point at all, the point is that he's going to be *sorry*, the point is that he is *phenomenally rude!*"

Blaise coughed.

The pale boy raised his eyebrows. "What is it, Zabini?"

"Oh, nothing," said Blaise. "Just wanted to say hello."

"Hello," the boy said briefly, slightly distracted from his venting. "Oh - Goyle, Crabbe, this is Zabini. It is Zabini, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Blaise.

"Who's your girlfriend, then?"

"I'm Pansy Parkinson," Pansy said, loudly.

"I'm charmed," sneered the boy. "Malfoy."

"Oh," said Pansy, in what she realised afterwards was an openly disappointed way.

"*Oh?*" the boy repeated, his cold grey eyes narrowed to slits. "My father said your mother was a society beauty. You have a face like a pug dog."

"Well, you have a face like a rat," Pansy snapped.

"Why don't you - oh my God, is that a toad?"

That toad had slowly hopped by the open door again. Everyone watched it. Draco Malfoy's face twisted up.

"My father said this place was going to be a pit," he announced. "They seem to be transporting roaming livestock along with us. I bet they don't even wash the bedsheets."

"My brothers said the dormitories were quite nice," Pansy volunteered.

"You see, we don't even get rooms to ourselves," Draco told her. "We might as well all huddle under one blanket with the pigs."

At this point, a girl hurried by. She had a bush of frizzy hair and spoke in a loud, bossy tone, and Pansy wondered why their carriage couldn't be attracting people with slightly more pleasant voices.

"Has anybody seen Neville's toad? He seems to have lost it, he's in a terrible state," she said, looking at them as if they might be responsible.

"Is he? I'm all torn up inside," said Draco.

The girl's mouth thinned. "I was just asking if you'd seen it," she said sniffily.

"No," Draco said. "Don't recall that I have. Have you seen a toad, Pansy?"

Pansy shook her head. "Maybe," she theorised, "it climbed out of one of the windows."

"Probably got crushed under the train wheels," Blaise agreed with a mournful air. "Innocent little toads can just crawl away and then..."

"Splat," Draco said with a certain amount of satisfaction. "Goodbye," he added, and shut the door in the girl's face.

"I don't think that's very funny!" she exclaimed in an outraged voice, and they all broke into laughter as she stormed off in a huff.

Draco looked around, and appeared to come to a decision. "Right," he said. "I have sugar quills with me. Who here wants to trade?"

"I've got lollipops," Blaise volunteered.

Draco brightened. "D'you have any blood-flavoured ones?" He looked offended at the round of groans. "What? I just like them."

Crabbe and Goyle turned out to be dim enough to give out pasties without anything being given to them in return, and Pansy felt more cheerful about Hogwarts.

A few days later, her mother wrote that it was not particularly ladylike to bond with people over the humour of tormenting others. Pansy shrugged as she read the letter over breakfast, while Blaise read it over her shoulder and laughed and Draco made faces at the speccy boy across the room.

Apparently he was Harry Potter. Pansy was very unimpressed.

*

Nay, I like her for her faults.

By the time Pansy got to her dormitory, her dorm mates were already ranged into two groups. On one side there was a thickset person called Millicent Bulstrode and a girl with a pitted face who went by the name of Eloise Midgen, and then there was Morag MacDougal, who was a pixie-like Scottish girl, and blonde, laughing Sally-Anne Perks.

Pansy didn't know much about other girls, but she knew enough to know which group she belonged to. She felt stropy and miserable as she shook out her nightgowns, and heard Morag's little laugh.

"Very... frilly," she said in her soft Scots voice, ever so slightly mocking.

"My mother chose them," Pansy told her stonily.

"Oh sweet," said Morag.

Pansy tilted up her chin. "Well," she said. "I'm far too busy practising magic to waste my time shopping." She smiled a secretive, mysterious smile. "I've even been taught some Dark Arts stuff. You never know when somebody is going to hex you." She looked at Morag. "Do you."

Morag took a step back. "I suppose not," she said in a smaller voice.

Pansy smirked and continued laying out her pink, frilly nightgowns. Nobody commented until Sally-Anne offered her a Chocolate Frog, which she said she just happened to have lying around and didn't want at all.

So the dormitory worked out all right, and in the common room Draco and Blaise called her over and introduced her to their other dorm mate, Theodore Nott. She'd assumed that Blaise was more or less going to be the leader of their little group, and she was surprised to see, even on the first night, that Draco Malfoy tended to end up centre stage.

He just seemed to assume that he would, and somehow it worked. Even though his incessant boasting and unsubtle references to his father made him an easy target for mockery, and he rewarded mockery with spitting little temper tantrums, and he should really have ended up being bullied a bit.

It might have simply been that his father was important, but Pansy didn't think so.

"Did you hear that old man?" Draco sneered. "Nitwit! Blubber! Aren't I the most genial good old boy that ever was? Why are we being bossed by Santa Claus in a pointed hat?"

He did a very good Dumbledore impression. He had energy to burn, Pansy supposed, and it turned into a weird kind of charisma.

She liked Blaise more, but Draco Malfoy was interesting.

She inspected Sally-Anne's Chocolate Frog, broke off a leg and passed it over to him.

*

If she trusts you, then she will have you.

Pansy was horribly nervous about her first flying lesson, but would have died rather than admitted it.

"Oooh, Pansy, did Mumsy ever let you fly?" Draco whispered as they went out, swinging their brooms. "Was she afraid you'd mess up your hair? Just follow *my* lead," he bragged.

Pansy hit his broom with hers. "I know you won't mess up your hair," she hissed back.

Draco went a bit pink. He must have been flattering himself that nobody caught his sidelong checks into mirrors.

Still, she knew he had been flying, and she never had. She might be about to make an idiot of herself.

She was very relieved that somebody raised the bar of idiocy too high for her to match it. Some fat kid lost his head and ignored the teacher, kicking off into the air so hard Pansy gave a gasp of laughter.

"That idiot! He's going to go into orbit!"

They all watched with interest to see if he would while the Gryffindors ran around as if he would conveniently fall back out of the sky and into their caring arms. The kid - Neville Longbottom, Pansy thought, and richly deserving of the name - further proved his idiocy by losing his grip and falling with a thud onto the ground. Then he burst into tears.

Madam Hooch and the Gryffindors all rushed towards him. Pansy and the others strolled up to take a look.

"Oh, why doesn't he suck it up? It was his fault," Pansy muttered, rolling her eyes as the teacher fussed over him and dashed him off to the infirmary.

"What precisely did he think broomsticks did?" Draco laughed. "Did you see his face, the great lump?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Parvati Patil, a pretty girl who Pansy had met at parties and who talked about nothing but hair clips. Not that she'd talked about anything to Pansy once she was put in Gryffindor.

"Oooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" Pansy snapped. "Never thought *you'd* like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

Draco stepped forward and picked up Longbottom's Remembrall, which that extremely righteous Harry Potter seemed to object to.

Pansy, Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle all had to watch and wince as Potter outstripped Draco flying and got the ball. Draco was in a snit about that for a week, when another crescendo of outrage was reached.

Harry Potter got a broomstick and was proclaimed Seeker for his team, and said something about it being thanks to Draco.

If he was such a hero, he should've had more consideration for Pansy's eardrums.

"Can you believe this!" said Draco, stirring his porridge as if he had a personal grudge against it. "That little! A Seeker! He has defective eyesight! How can someone with defective eyesight be a Seeker! That flying was a fluke! Wait till my father hears!"

"Uh, you're not finishing your sentences," Vince Crabbe pointed out, looking upset and confused.

"Gah!" said Draco, and did a vigorous impression of someone searching for the Snitch. "Look at me, I'm Harry Potter! Where's the Snitch? Where's the pitch? Oh no, in my blindness I have wandered across the sky and now I will be eaten by carnivorous seagulls!"

Pansy ducked to avoid getting hit in the eye, and reached for the toast.

"Maybe he has radar," Blaise suggested helpfully. "Like a bat."

"Draco, please can I... have... some... coffee..." Sally-Anne looked upset when she and Draco ended up in a grim tug of war for the coffee pot.

"No," Draco said between his teeth. "I need it more than you."

Pansy picked at her toast. "You're not even twelve yet, and you're slave to a habit."

Sally-Anne relinquished the coffee pot in fear, and Draco clutched it protectively to his chest.

"So?" he snapped. "What's your point?"

"Nothing. It's just very sad."

That was when the news came that Eloise had accidentally cursed her own nose off, and would be in the infirmary indefinitely.

"I hate this school," moaned Draco, carrying on and curling himself up, Pansy suspected, as a prelude to trying to bodily insert himself into the coffee pot. "The Slytherins are cursed. There is no second coffee pot. I am going to die here."

Pansy buttered her toast. You got used to the drama queen airs fairly quickly.

He did have other qualities that offset them.

Such as when Eloise got back from the infirmary with all her acne still in place, but her nose now unfortunately off-centre. There was sniggering to her face in the common room, of course, but that was nothing to the sniggering behind her back throughout the corridors.

Her brother Pellinore had told her, in one of his rare communicative moments, that you had to watch out for your own. The other houses were all filled with subversives, people whose parents were against you or whose parents were Muggles and dangerous. Pansy understood that - the mockery directed towards Eloise was vicious, and if you let that behaviour continue towards one of your own then you were on the line when it got out of control.

She, Sally-Anne, Morag and Millicent all formed into a protective group around Eloise as they walked to and from classes. Millicent's glare alone could send their Hufflepuff yearmates running.

It was different with the older students. On their way up from Potions one day, two Weasleys popped up. Everybody's parents told them about the Weasleys, with their father who kept twisting laws to Muggle advantage and trying to enforce laws with their families that he did not think he had to keep himself.

"Wait, hold on, girl!" said one of the Weasleys, grinning broadly. "You dropped something back there. Think it's your nose?"

They all glared at him silently. Pansy stepped forward.

The other Weasley pushed her back. "Now, now, ladies, we just want to talk," he said. "Anyway, you know your friend shouldn't move too fast, who knows what would drop off next?"

They chortled and high-fived each other. Pansy hated every freckle on their stupid, superior faces.

"Get out of my way, *Weasley*," she spat, and whirled her fist into his special parts.

He looked outraged. "You vicious little Slytherin *bitch*," he said, and shoved her back. "We weren't doing anything to you!"

Pansy let her bag fall and found a centre of gravity. Then she felt the press of Millicent behind her, getting her back.

"Excuse *me*," said the imperious and unpleasant voice of Draco Malfoy, pushing between the Weasleys. "What on earth is going on here?"

"Nothing, midget," one of the Weasleys snapped. "One of your little friends just went rabid on us."

Draco smirked. Pansy wished he would get out of the way, he was an only child and she had a suspicion that he would be pathetic in a fight.

"Then let's all go," he suggested. "Unless you're keeping them here, of course."

"Yeah, go, get out of our sight. If only you'd all leave the school," the other Weasley said. "We wouldn't keep you," he added with what seemed to be genuine indignation. "We're not bullying Slytherin gits."

"Fancy," Draco drawled. "I am."

Morag, Millicent and Sally-Anne were already filing away. There was not much you could do in these circumstances, except remember and wait for an opportunity to pay them back someday.

Pansy stood between Eloise and Draco, waiting for them to go, but as Draco moved to do so he murmured, "Backing down like this is what got your father the position and salary he has today."

A Weasley slammed him against the wall. "Who the hell do you think you are, you twerp?" he shouted.

And then behind him, at the entrance to the dungeons Draco had been eyeing for some time, there came a soft voice.

"What do you think you are doing, Mr. Weasley?"

It was Professor Snape, the greasy-haired teacher who Pansy thought was funny, but a little alarming.

"He was badmouthing my father!" yelled the Weasley.

Eloise spoke up then, with a conveniently shaking voice. "They were teasing me, sir. About my nose." She squeezed out some tears, as the Weasleys glared at her.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor, I think," Snape said smoothly. "You three may go to your next class."

They all went obediently, and Draco suppressed his gleeful cackling until they had rounded a corner.

"I am king of cunning," he crowed. "I am a master of deceit! I will rule you all."

Pansy smiled, but immediately qualified by saying: "I could have taken them."

"Where did you learn how to fight?" Eloise asked speculatively.

"One of my brothers is called Peaseblossom Parkinson," said Pansy. "Where d'you think?"

She remembered this moment when Draco was embarrassing himself making jokes about Harry Potter, and moderated her snickering.

*

If I cannot bend the gods, I will let hell loose.

Not snickering was sometimes difficult in the face of the near-constant collapse of Draco's Really Cunning Plans. Things kept going so wrong, until all they should have done was point and laugh at Draco, but somehow he always bounced back.

He was a malicious india-rubber ball, or the rest of them were possessed by morbid curiosity.

Somehow, he did manage to keep a tenuous hold on dignity.

"Well, I didn't think he was going to jump on me, did I," Draco said haughtily, as Pansy tried to apply a cold compress to his swelling eye.

He'd apparently been provoking the Weasley that Harry Potter dragged around.

"Your beauty is ruined," she said, elbowing him lightly in the throat. "And I bet he got off without a scratch."

She'd try to pick a fight with him sometime, she swore it.

Draco lifted his chin. "Not at all," he said with a great deal of satisfaction. "I almost broke his horrible nose."

He shouldn't have been able to do it. The Weasley was big and had roughly a dozen older brothers, but that was Draco. He would bash his head against brick walls with absolute, bull-headed stubbornness until he made the wall say 'ouch.'

This did not, unfortunately, make him a master of subtlety. Pansy was no big fan herself, but her view was that if you wanted to do it, you should do it right, not in a way that got you detentions in the Forbidden Forest.

The silly twit deserved it, and Pansy never really understood why she got up at an ungodly hour of the night and wrapped her dressing gown around herself, and went to the common room to see what had happened to Draco.

He was sitting in one of the carved chairs by the fire, still in his cloak and huddling by the empty grate. Pansy knew he was older than she was, and had just turned twelve, but he looked about six.

"Hey. Draco," she said. "What - what is it?"

His face was pinched with fear when he lifted it. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked suspiciously.

"I wanted a glass of water," she lied promptly, and then went over to sit on the hearth. She looked up at him and wanted to say, we're the youngest Slytherins, we have to stick together, I understand, tell me and I'll help you. She said, "Did they make you do menial labour, Draco?"

His fists were small and pale and clenched.

"They ditched me and Potter and a cowardly hound in the forest," he answered tightly. "And we saw... It was dark and... Promise you won't..."

He wanted to ask her to promise not to tell, but he wouldn't. Draco did not believe people, on principle.

He got a grip on himself. "It was the Dark Lord," he said in a low voice. "It was, I'm sure it was, and he was drinking *unicorn blood* and - my father will hear about this!"

"All right," said Pansy, feeling small and threatened and wanting to attack in some directions.

He was shaking. "I had to run," he said, and bitterness twisted in his voice as with her heart. "I had to. Of course, they rescued precious Potter first. Almost forgot about me, and I was wandering around the forest alone and I'd seen him and-"

The Dark Lord, someone their parents talked about with longing and fear, who might be regretted but who was gone, not real, like the Burning Times.

Pansy had never been so aware of how very young they were.

"I wasn't *scared*," exploded Draco, with sudden vicious emphasis.

"Of course you weren't," Pansy said. She put her hand near his, not holding it of course, but close enough so he could feel some warmth. His hand was icy and trembling.

"It was just so cold out there," Draco said defiantly. "Wait till I tell my father."

He did not tell his father. She sat with him for the rest of that night and he waited, watching for something he could do to make it even between them. She made quietly sure he couldn't.

She told herself that it was better that he owed her a favour.

Nobody had protected Draco. Nobody would protect any of them. They learned that when they were sitting at the end of year feast, glowing with the rush of success, better than any of them, showing all of them.

Then that old man stood up under Slytherin's banners and spat in their faces, during *their* feast, by awarding Gryffindor just over the number of points they needed for some wild idiot reason. Like it wasn't a deliberate statement against them.

They sat down and listened to everyone else cheering for their humiliation.

"We're on our own," said quiet, nervous Teddy Nott.

Draco's hand was clenched around the goblet he'd been thumping the table with, and Pansy thought about it white and shaking.

"I like it better that way," he said, sneering at the entire room.

Pansy thought about that as they walked out of the Great Hall, Morag beside her, and she thoughtfully tripped up that bossy girl called Hermione Granger. Hermione fell on her face.

"Ow!" she exclaimed. "You - you stupid Slytherin *cow*!"

Pansy passed on. "That's right," she tossed over her shoulder.

By the end of her first year, Pansy knew the score.

*

*I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe; I told it not, my wrath did grow. And I water'd it with fears.*

That summer, neither of Pansy's brothers came home often. Even Peaseblossom had no time for her, and she was left too often sitting with her mother and her mother's friends in the pink and gold parlour.

"Of course she's great friends with young Draco Malfoy," her mother said, sounding sleek and pleased. "Which is lovely, you know, because Lucius is such a *dashing* man-"

"Oh yes, such an air of authority," agreed Mrs Pucey.

Lucius Malfoy was rich and powerful and everybody was afraid of him, which was why Pansy had been hearing about Draco Malfoy ever since she could remember.

"And we're, well, we're *quite comfortable* and our family is *well respected*," her mother said, with a discreet little titter.

"Yes," Mrs Pucey replied delicately, and touched Pansy's hair, pulling her hair back so both of them looked into her face.

Her mother bowed to the insinuation. "If only the child was prettier," she sighed. "I hear the Malfoy boy is a sweet-looking child."

Pansy got to her feet. "He's short," she said. "And he's my friend."

She ran out of the room. Her brothers were grim, and silent, and they never came home. Her father was not aware she existed. And her mother...

"Dear Pansy," her mother said, twisting her hair too tightly around her fancy comb as Pansy shut her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Do you miss your friends?"

When she got back to school, it was only better for a little while.

Draco was tense and nervous because he was practising so hard for the new Seeker try-outs. She thought it was just desperation to beat Harry Potter, until he told her and Blaise that his father had promised him secretly that the team would get new brooms if he got the place.

Then she thought of all her mother's delicate offers of dresses and jewellery last Christmas after she had made friends with Draco, and imagined how she would have reacted if she'd cared for that approval. Draco was hopelessly, unwittingly open about his father.

Pansy wanted him to get it so much that she made a grinning fool of herself when he did, when he danced in all lit up with delight, and made them all smile. It was so rare for him to be openly, shamelessly happy.

It was all ruined by Hermione Granger accusing him of buying his way onto the team.

"I wasn't the one who *special concessions* were made for," he snarled back in the common room. "I wasn't given a broom by a teacher - Professor Snape hinted as much - *I'm* going to be better. They'll all see, including that stupid little Mudblood."

It was not a word any of them had ever used before, though of course they had all heard it. It was a dangerous word to use, Pansy had thought, but Draco spat it out and they all knew some kind of line had been crossed.

He didn't beat Harry Potter, but he beat the Hufflepuffs and he beat the Ravenclaws, and Marcus Flint gave him some grudging praise and the new first years sidled around their group to listen to him when he talked.

People listened to him more when all the talk of the Chamber of Secrets started. Draco was able to swagger with success for once, because he didn't fail when things were important, and he reported that his father had told them they would all be safe if they just kept out of it.

That was not much help, of course, when nightmares about a monster faded and the fact life was becoming harder emerged.

"None of the Slytherins have been hurt," some curly-haired Ravenclaw girl whispered, and Pansy wheeled on her.

"Yes, but we haven't been hurting anyone, either," Pansy snapped, walking forward and knowing her expression was dark and forbidding. Her face was good for that much. "Isn't that nice of us."

Everyone could hear the whispering. They had always been apart, and now people felt threatened they wanted to threaten in their turn.

The only choice was to threaten back.

"We'd all be safe if the Slytherins were chunked out," said the Weasley twins in a corridor, with teachers in it who were pretending not to hear.

Flint went for them, and thirty points were promptly taken off. Pansy hung back and burned with fury until Professor Snape took points off every other house on every pretext that he could think of. She saw Draco beaming at him with proprietary pride. He was well known to be Snape's favourite.

The day he took the final ten points off Gryffindor, though, the same curly-haired Ravenclaw who Pansy had spoken to before shoved past her a touch too hard. Pansy fell down and had an angry bruise from her wrist to her elbow.

"Don't you worry about it," Blaise said, putting healing ointment on because Madam Pomfrey asked questions and dealt out justice in a way that made people vengeful. "She did it because she's got a secret thing going on with the specy Weasley. I'll make sure another of his stupid family hear about it, since they seem to be keeping it under wraps."

They were sitting in the girls' dormitories on her bed, and Pansy bit her lip against the pain. It was cold down in the dungeons, but safe.

"I wish the monster would kill them all," she said venomously, and got some comfort out of it. They huddled under her blanket, pretending they weren't scared, pretending they weren't twelve, waiting for their pretences to come true so everybody would be sorry.

Blaise's dark secretive face looked tired.

"Nott keeps waking up screaming," he said. "I won't do anything like scream."

"Nor will I," Pansy said fiercely. "Ever."

They were cold but trying not to touch, until she realised that they were chest to chest. Hers had only just started developing, and she was still unsure about her new proportions. She stopped, feeling clumsy and realising with horror that she was blushing.

Nobody touched her at home but with a purpose, and she felt lonely and scared and she knew a purpose people could touch with.

They bent forward fumbling, and kissed. Their lips were damp and unsure, but because they were kissing they could clutch at each other's shoulders and hands. There was warmth and comfort in that.

Pansy concentrated on breathing through her nose, and when it became too hard she sat back.

Blaise blinked at her, his dark shuttered eyes a little vulnerable for once.

"Pansy," he said in a low voice. "I think I might like boys."

She kept hold of his hand for an incautious moment. "That's lucky," she whispered back with awkward affection. "You're awful at kissing girls."

He laughed, and pretended to punch her. Then they went back to pretending they were not shaking, and she pretended her arm did not hurt, and both of them talked quietly about revenge.

One night Teddy Nott woke up screaming so loudly that Pansy was convinced the monster had killed one of them. She and the other girls ran to the boys' dormitories, and flung themselves in at the moment when Draco slapped Teddy and he went quiet.

They all pretended that they were going to have fun breaking the rules, and sat on Teddy's bed under the blanket, talking idly about Quidditch and feeding Hermione Granger a muteness potion.

Eventually, Teddy spoke. "It was after You-Know-Who - died," he said in a steely voice. "There was suspicion flying around and there was a mob. Things got out of hand... they burned my father and my brother. He was only fifteen. I was three."

Nobody asked whether his father had been a Death Eater. Everybody knew about Teddy's uncle.

Nobody said, burning. Just like the Burning Times, the ones their parents whispered about. They could come *back*, and then we're next to the fire.

"I wish the monster would kill them all," Teddy said, and Pansy shivered even though she had said the same thing herself. "It's not safe until they're all gone. Until then - there's always a chance the Muggles will find out, and the Mudbloods and the Muggle sympathisers will always be against us. It's us or them."

His eyes were huge and black in his thin face. Pansy was starting to learn about meaning what you said.

The threat of the monster was gone at the end of the year, and the Gryffindors were suddenly in possession of the House Cup again. Of course, that might well have no relation to the disappearance of the basilisk. Draco did several impressions of Dumbledore saying, "Another fine day, thanks to Harry Potter! Give the Gryffindors the Cup and thanks for all this wonderful sunlight!"

That summer, Peaseblossom came home one night with blood on his robes. He asked Pansy to hide them in her wardrobe, where Mother would not look.

"Yes, of course," said Pansy, sweating and confused and caught between terror and sleep. "W-whose blood is it?"

He sat on her bed and held her hand. He was her brother, and he had taught her how to protect herself. She wanted him to hug her and he had once or twice when she was small, but now he had blood on his robes.

"You have to understand, Pansy," he said in a soft, intense voice. "It's us or them. The Dark Lord knew that, that we all have to stick together and then we can stand against them. You know we need to protect ourselves, don't you? Dumbledore practically rules the Ministry. You don't want him to rule you, do you?"

"No," Pansy replied in a small, fierce voice.

"Good girl," he said back. "We all do what we have to do."

He went away, and did not speak to her for months afterwards. The bloody robes stayed in her wardrobe, and she had trouble sleeping. She was so grateful when Draco Owled her and asked her to come and stay.

He had had Vince and Gregory over since the start of the summer, because they were his best friends and admiring shadows. She, Morag and Blaise all arrived together.

He showed them off to his aloof mother and his frankly terrifying father, and they sat there and tried to look impressive.

Malfoy Manor was huge and dark and Pansy did not like it, and Draco did not belong there. He strutted around it as if he did, though, and threw his vitality at the darkness in one of those idiot battles he always plunged himself into.

He was only quiet and still at mealtimes, when his father would give speeches and talk to him sternly, and he would try to argue but eventually fall silent, convinced he had done something wrong. He would be sullen and quiet and as soon as the meal was over talking about what his father said and what his father would buy him as if they had not heard themselves.

Pansy did not like Draco's father, but she knew he was important and they all listened to him. He said what everyone else was saying, with persuasive force behind it. She could see why he was such an important politician, and now and then she would be really impressed and see, oh, this is the person Draco is trying and failing so spectacularly to be.

She liked the times when they were on their own best. She remembered those times with pleasure, like the time they were all creeping around in the dark and in their pyjamas down the portrait gallery, and one of the portraits began to scream at them and they all ran yelling down the corridor into Draco's room.

Panting under the blankets, Pansy had said accusingly, "You *shrieked*, Morag."

"I did not," Morag said. "It was Draco."

Draco scowled at all of them, muttered "Did *not*," and then betrayed his guilt very clearly by running a hand through his hair.

We all have to stick together and then we can stand against them, Pansy remembered. All six of them curled up on the bed and went to sleep together, Draco making a fuss about being crowded and uncomfortable and probably contracting rheumatism. Pansy never wanted to go home, but she knew what to do when they got back to school.

*

The spirit burning yet unbent

May writhe, rebel - The weak alone repent!

The year began badly. There were Dementors all over the place, and every time they went near them Pansy thought about blood and felt sick, and Draco began to panic, and Teddy froze up in horror.

The only bright spot was that Harry Potter fainted at the sight of them, and Draco spent many happy morning swooning dramatically into the arms of everybody around.

"All right, Draco, you're practically vomiting with glee and it's not healthy," Pansy said placidly, spooning up her cereal as he rested his fair head on her shoulder. She poured him a cup of coffee and then passed it on.

Draco smiled winningly at her. "Ah, coffee, let us be true to one another," he said. "Have I told you about my Creative Magic classes?"

"Only constantly," she answered. One of Draco's problems was that he harped on a bit.

Another of his problems was that, while it was entirely understandable to cover fear with bravado, he always went too far.

Dumbledore, typically, had proclaimed a man Pansy suspected had giant blood their teacher, and Pansy was introduced to this terrifying hulk of a man who previously she had only seen lurking around the grounds when he announced that they were going to play around with enormous, clawed monsters. She understood now why people said that you could not trust anyone tainted with inhuman blood. They were insane.

Her chest tightened as she watched Draco going overboard as usual, and swaggering up to one of the creatures, and then she relaxed as it looked as if he was going to get away with it. She turned to her own worries and let his drawling voice slip over her, comfortingly confident.

"I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he said, sounding pleased and almost caressing. "Are you, you ugly great brute?"

The scream made her freeze in horror. She kept thinking desperately, but Hagrid *can't* have put thirteen-year-olds in with things that would attack at that, Draco always talks like that, that isn't an insult, oh God, and she thought of Teddy Nott's pinched face and Peaseblossom's robes and all she could see was Draco's bright red blood.

It was only when they carried him away that she realised, to her sheer horror, that she had gone quite mad and was crying.

She scrubbed fiercely at the tears and they kept coming. Even Potter and his pet Weasley could see it, and the Weasley actually looked taken aback that Slytherins could cry. She shot him a venomous, humiliated glare through her tears and he screwed up his stupid freckled face and glared back.

"They should sack him straight away!" she shouted with the others, forcing anger into the place of fear and still not able to stop these embarrassing tears.

Dumbledore wouldn't do it. Not because a Slytherin had been hurt. They all knew that.

He'd said he was dying, Pansy recollected and suddenly felt cold with dread.

She sent one last glare at the Gryffindors and banished all pride. "I'm going to see if he's okay!" she exclaimed, and ran up the steps with her heart hammering in panic.

Madam Pomfrey said she could not come at first.

"Of course he's not dead. He's sleeping, now run along," she said sternly.

Pansy was not sure where her control had gone. She had never behaved like this in her life before. "Oh please," she said, and fought back a sob. "Oh please, can I just see him?"

Draco had to keep bouncing back, it was what he *did*, she knew him. And she had no idea why Madam Pomfrey ended up letting her in, but then she thought it was because she had been Draco for a minute, wanting something so stubbornly she got it, and she thought, does Draco care about everything this much?

When she saw him with his arm bandaged up and his face white and small as it had been in first year, against the pillow, she burst into more of these ridiculous tears, ran over and swooped down on him in hysterical relief. She kissed him four times before she realised that he had opened his eyes and was looking at her.

"*Pansy*," he said in perfectly scandalised tones.

"I'm sorry," she gasped out. "I thought you were dead!"

She put her face in her hands and then finally summoned up enough willpower to stop crying.

"What, right then? That's sick!" exclaimed Draco, who still sounded panicked.

"No, I mean before!" she yelped, sitting up and rubbing at her cheeks.

"Oh," said Draco, calming down. "Oh. Well, I *very nearly did*," he added, falling back from shock into his familiar state of outrage. "I bet I still could. Filthy looking animal. Not to mention our teacher, who is *plotting to kill me*, setting *savage animals* on me. I shall write to my father!"

"You really should, you know," she agreed, fighting the impulse to weep some more in sheer relief. "We have to get rid of him. And until we do, we've got to pay such close attention to the lessons. He doesn't care if we get hurt."

"Hurt!" Draco spluttered. "I was practically *murdered*. Why do things keep pouncing on me?"

"Only one thing-" Pansy stopped, and gave him a dirty look. "I don't think you're funny, Draco."

There was a smug smile all over his pointy face. "Nooo, you think I'm irresistible. Not that I blame you, Pansy," he added with great condescension.

It was the first time they had ever joked about things like that.

"Keep it up, Draco, and lose the use of your other arm," she suggested sweetly.

He subsided back on the pillows, closing his eyes. His voice was slightly sleep-fogged. "Good God, woman, am I to blame for my own charm?" He opened his eyes a slit to see her reaction, and they both cracked up. "Fluff my pillow," he added plaintively, trying a different tack. "I'm injured."

She had already done so before she realised what she'd done, and he smirked.

Then Madam Pomfrey came up and ordered Pansy out. She went, hearing Draco's voice ring out behind her.

"What if I need someone to feed me grapes? I am being attended by an incompetent! My father will hear about this."

When Pansy returned, she found that while she was having her brief lapse of sanity the others had been planning. She listened over dinner, and bore the inevitable and merciless teasing.

Her lapse of sanity recurred again the next day, when she saw Draco come in with his arm bandaged up and had to resist the urge to fling herself at him and wrap him up in blankets.

"How is it, Draco? Does it hurt very much?" she asked, smiling to hide the disgraceful wobble in her voice.

"Yeah," said Draco. It was only when she saw him wink from the corner of her eye that she realised he was carrying on like a poor wounded martyr, and rolled her eyes at her own stupidity.

Draco played his martyr role to the hilt and it was hilarious to see all the Gryffindors grinding their teeth to powder. When Professor Snape started delegating Draco's jobs to Potter and Weasley, she looked up and caught a glint of mischief in his eye. She grinned delightedly up at him, and really began to see why Draco liked this man.

Aside from the fact that Hagrid was allowed to keep his job, it would all have been perfect if Pansy had not been concerned about her own inexplicable reaction. Carrying on like a feeble

baby in front of the Gryffindors was totally unacceptable behaviour, and she caught Parvati Patil and her friend giggling behind her back about Draco a couple of days later.

Morag put her head close to Pansy's, and made a loud comment about Parvati marinating in her perfume. Pansy laughed and the other two glared.

It was just that - she *needed* Draco. They all did. She found herself thinking absurd things like that he brightened up the dungeons the way he had the manor, and then being quite surprised when faced with another proof of his undeniable brattishness.

There was the day she came home early from Hogsmeade and found him having a conniption about the mud Harry Potter had thrown at him.

"It's in my hair," he kept wailing, and gestured to it violently. "It's in *my hair*, it was a vile and unprovoked attack, and I will tell my father!"

Pansy reflected that the vile and unprovoked attack might be retaliation for Draco's last Really Cunning Spectacular Failure, which had involved dressing up as a Dementor. However, Draco already looked a bit wild-eyed and more than a bit brunette.

"Ah, I think you could use a shower," she said diplomatically.

He spent four hours in there. They could hear him cursing Potter from the common room.

Even when he was being a brat, she didn't need him any less.

The night before the big Quidditch Cup match, he could not sleep and kept pacing in front of the fire, talking loudly about how beating Potter would be no problem and looking sick. Blaise produced some Butterbeer bottles and they all sat out by the common room fire and talked all night long.

"The only thing the Gryffindor team has going for it," Blaise announced with a small smile, "is that the Keeper's quite cute."

"Zabini fancies a Gryffindor!" Gregory exclaimed. Faces were made all around.

"Well, who d'you fancy then?" Blaise asked peaceably enough.

Gregory seemed to be trying to catch Pansy's eye. She looked determinedly away.

Dear God, no.

Morag and Millicent yelled with laughter. "And we all know who Pansy fancies," Morag declared, and left Pansy confounded and going violently red. "Personally, *I* think that Cedric Diggory has something."

"He's a Hufflepuff, all he has is a work ethic," Draco sneered.

"If I fancied anyone, it wouldn't be one of you," said Teddy wickedly. "Let's face it, you're all a bit lacking in the chest department."

Millicent started throwing empty bottles.

"How dare you!" Sally-Anne exclaimed, and giggled. "Besides, Pansy's are quite impressive."

Pansy had never thought much about her breasts, and was extremely discomfited when everyone leaned forward to inspect them.

"Cut it out," she growled, crossing her arms over the damn things.

"They are," said Ted, looking suitably impressed. "I hadn't noticed."

"I had," said Draco with an exaggerated leer, tipping his bottle towards her in a toast. She went even redder and, to her own extreme disgust, could not quite repress a smile.

Morag leaned forward, and pecked Draco on the cheek. "For good luck," she explained, the shameless hussy.

"Don't worry," she said to Pansy later. "He's a bit too titchy and pale for me."

"Like I care," said Pansy. Clearly, she'd been warned off just in time, the tart.

She sat by Draco throughout breakfast while every other house united against them, and held her hand beside his, so she could warm it. It was cold again.

And she sat by Vincent and watched the Quidditch match, her Omnioculars held so hard to her eyes that they left red rings, his hand around hers and crushing it. She did not even notice that she was in pain until she saw Harry Potter knock away Draco's arm and grab the Snitch.

She, Greg and Vince set off to find him in different directions. She stormed through the celebrating crowds and right into an exuberantly cheering Weasley.

"Watch where you're going!" she snapped.

It was Ron Weasley, and he scowled back at her. "Sore that the best man won?" he demanded.

She kicked him hard in the shin. "You know who saw the Snitch first," she hissed. "Ask yourself what would have happened if Draco had been on the faster broom. And shove off!"

She elbowed her way through the crowds, hoping she was hurting quite a lot of people. She found Draco outside the Quidditch shed with Gregory and Vince already with him. He was still in his sweaty Quidditch gear, and staring at the wall of the shed. It looked like someone had just been kicking it.

"Why are you people still trailing around after me?" he barked, face twisted and mean. "Did you not notice? I *lost*."

Why should anyone follow me, if I lose?

Pansy stood close beside him. She would have liked to put her head on his shoulder, but that would have been unforgivably sappy and besides, they were the same size.

"We like to hang around for the entertainment value," she told him.

The condemned animal that had attacked Draco got away somehow. There was never revenge for Slytherins.

And Professor Lupin, who Pansy had quite liked, whose clothes even Draco had only mocked to a certain extent, turned out to be a werewolf. You couldn't trust anyone but your own.

"Don't worry," said Draco, in that too-confident voice he used when murderers or monsters were on the loose or while Gryffindor was winning the House Cup, which was happening again before them. "We'll get them. And I know who'll be first against the wall."

He made a venomous face in Potter's direction.

"Yeah," Teddy said. "We'll get them."

Pansy nodded with the others.

*

An apology for the Devil - it must be remembered that we have only heard one side of the case. God has written all of the books.

That summer, Pansy let her mother buy her some more clothes. She thought she looked stupid in them.

She sat in one of her frilly nightgowns and stared morosely into the mirror, more often than she ever had in her life. Mirrors made her mother's voice ring out in her ears.

Her nose turned up horribly, and she thought her skin was sallow. Her hair was long and black and she thought it should be pretty, but it just made her face look more sullen. She looked into the dark, discontent eyes and glared.

Experiments with lipstick made her think her mouth looked all right when it was red and curling, and she remembered what Draco had said about her breasts and began a daily tug of war with her neckline.

"Such a pity about the dear child's looks," her mother said to her father one day. Her father grunted, not even looking in her direction, and Pansy ran up to her bedroom and kicked her bed.

She wasn't pretty, she was never going to be pretty, and fourteen was too young to be thinking about mushy stuff anyway.

Still, she noticed there was no invitation to Draco's that summer. Invitations to a girl now would be particular, special. And she wasn't.

Peaseblossom and Pellinore did not come home that summer at all. Pansy spent most of her time in her room, wishing that she would stop growing.

When she got back to school, she found to her horror that she was a shade taller than Draco. That was it, she was huge and ridiculous and vile looking.

He still seemed pleased to see her, though. She was his friend, and that was enough, even though he was closer to Vince and Gregory, who he absolutely trusted to have no agenda but his. She wished sometimes that she was stupider and could think less about the effect he had on the other Slytherins and how he could use it, just so she could have a bit more of him. He was always saying things to them like 'remember the midnight duel that never was?' and she was irrational enough to feel left out.

Sometimes she even felt like Harry Potter had more of him than she did, and Potter made it clear that he'd rather have headlice.

She was oddly proud of the way Draco could get under Potter's skin, though. People were always whispering things about Potter, but nobody could annoy someone like her Draco.

So when she heard that they were duelling, she went running to see and instead she saw that terrifying new teacher, Professor Moody, and everybody watching a ferret that was being flung against the walls and ceiling and crying out in pain.

She saw the ferret was pure white, and she stopped and watched in a silent agony of terror. She could only watch the helpless fury on Gregory and Vince's faces, and listen to the sound of flesh against stone. She kept listening for the cracking of bones, she kept thinking *head trauma* and it seemed forever until Professor McGonagall rushed down the stairs and transformed him.

She had never seen so much blood in his face, and she wanted to run up and throw her arms around him, help him up. But he got to his feet by himself, and when she saw his one tightly controlled wince she knew how much doing so had cost him. She felt fiercely proud as she saw that Draco, master of histrionics, was refusing to let himself cry in front of them.

Professor McGonagall let Professor Moody drag Draco off to Professor Snape. Pansy should've known that there would be no retribution for someone who had just hurt a Slytherin.

Pansy ran into the Great Hall and began to snatch up an armful of rolls. A first year looked like she was going to protest about all this dinner roll theft, but Pansy gave her a look that just dared her to try it on and she snapped her mouth shut.

As she was turning to go, she looked over at the Gryffindor table. She heard Ron Weasley say 'amazing bouncing ferret' and she heard the other smug gits laugh about it, laugh like people who were safe and who won everything. She stood with her arms full of dinner rolls and hated them all ferociously. She wanted to punch Ron Weasley in the face and say, 'He's hurt, someone did it to him who is supposed to be teaching and protecting us, and it's not funny!'

They did not care if he was hurt, and teachers did not care about what they were supposed to be doing for Slytherins.

Pansy stormed out of the Great Hall instead, and went to the boys' dormitories. Professor Snape was there with Draco, applying a healing potion. Draco had his shirt off and there were angry, purple bruises forming all over his thin pale chest.

He was arguing ferociously that he intended to go to classes tomorrow.

"Very well," Professor Snape said, "but rest assured I will take this matter up with Professor Dumbledore. I will not permit the abuse of my students!"

"I brought you some food, Draco," Pansy volunteered from the door.

"Excellent, Miss Parkinson. Watch him, if you please. I am going to go speak to the headmaster," Snape said coldly.

When he straightened and turned around, she saw the impotent hatred in his black eyes, and she felt a sudden rush of kinship with him. He was Slytherin, too. He was on their side.

"Thanks, Professor," she said unsteadily.

"Dumbledore won't listen to him," Draco sneered, flopping back as Snape went out. "Dumbledore doesn't give a damn if all of us are fed to the giant squid."

"He knows that," Pansy said. "Come on, Draco, eat some rolls."

"Rolls for dinner," Draco said. "This school has now officially become Azkaban."

She climbed up onto his bed, and shoved the rolls at him. He pushed them peevishly away.

"Eat them," she said, "or I'll poke your bruises, I swear to God."

Draco, who knew her threats were never empty, reached hastily for a roll. With his mouth full, he retorted: "You just want to get your hands on me with my shirt off."

"Again you insist on believing that you're irresistible."

"I go with the majority view," Draco said smugly, and even though she knew he got laughed at for being one of the shortest boys in their class and for his total abject inability to tan, he almost made her believe it.

Then she rolled her eyes. "Draco. You're trying to be smooth, aren't you?"

"I am smooth," Draco said indignantly, then flung his head back self-importantly and went into his best Professor Lockhart imitation. "Pansy Parkinson! Are you saying you don't want my autograph, my signed book, my ravishing body?"

Pansy burst out laughing. Draco laughed too, and then looked down at his chest as if his ribs had gravely disappointed him.

"Are you sure you want to go to class tomorrow?" she asked quietly, sobering.

Draco's eyes narrowed into slits of hatred. "I am not going to give them the satisfaction," he answered.

"All right," said Pansy, and sat beside him as he carefully lay down and irritably inquired as to the whereabouts of Vince and Gregory.

She hated them all.

And she sat in Professor Moody's class, and burned with it, and she watched Potter the hero get proclaimed a competitor for the Triwizard Tournament, and burned with it, and she watched Draco and knew he did too.

She only raged inwardly. Draco, of course, came up with another Really Cunning Plot.

"Badges are not really something that'll cause wailing and a gnashing of teeth," Blaise remarked as Draco bent over his work.

"I'm starting off small," Draco said haughtily. "It's very cunning. Also I believe my message is succinct and comprehensive."

Pansy watched and smiled as everyone in Slytherin put on one of Draco's 'Potter Stinks' badges.

When Potter saw them, the outraged look on his face was priceless. She looked at him and his smug little friends and remembered them laughing at Draco, and felt something dark and delighted uncurl in her stomach and laughed so hard she thought she was going to be sick.

Potter did his nut and Pansy felt very proud, and then she watched in incredulous delight when Granger got caught by Draco's curse and her oversized teeth shot out. She could barely feel concern for Gregory, who got hit too, because Professor Snape had arrived and he would deal with it. She just pointed at that self-satisfied cow who had laughed at Draco, and laughed until tears came to her eyes.

Professor Snape looked at Granger and commented, "I see no difference," and that was going so far that Pansy stopped laughing and lifted her chin to look at him. She saw the same raging, trapped hatred she had been feeling for weeks in his eyes, and once again she felt that flash of kinship.

"That showed you lot," she whispered to Ron Weasley as she passed him on the way to the classroom, and the look of blank, righteous fury on his face warmed her through and through.

*

If I were pressed to say why I loved him, I feel that my only reply could be: 'Because it was he, because it was I.'

Then the Yule Ball was announced. Pansy almost cried when she heard about it. Boys were supposed to choose girls to take, and they would choose the girls they liked best, who would

look best next to them, and there was simply absolutely no hope. Draco was fiendishly fastidious about the very cut of his dress robes.

Gregory asked her, and she refused with a snarl and then worried that she should have accepted.

"I'll take you, if Draco doesn't ask you," Vince offered gruffly, and she wanted to thank him even more for thinking it was possible than for the offer.

Of course, she had to hold her head up among the other girls, and was just sharp enough to them so the question of her Yule Ball partner never came up, even though it was practically the only thing everyone was talking about.

Blaise and Sally-Anne had decided to go together, and they were going to make a lovely couple as long as Blaise did not stare too openly at that Hufflepuff Chaser boy he was admiring from afar. Pansy could not quite work out why Sally-Anne wanted to go with Blaise until she noticed how Sally-Anne's eyes tended to linger on that disgustingly pretty Veela halfbreed, Fleur Delacour.

Interesting, Pansy thought, and then shrugged it off. It didn't matter anymore than it had with Blaise. Sally-Anne was Slytherin, and her friend, and *that* was what counted.

Morag had chosen some Ravenclaw called Michael Corner who apparently always got the pretty girls, and they would make an even lovelier couple.

Frankly, Pansy only sympathised with Eloise, who was in a state of snarling indignation.

"That Hermione Granger is trying to fix me up with somebody," she said. "She feels sorry for me because she's heard people *teasing* me, and so she's being wonderfully nosy and condescending. Just like she is with the damn house elves."

In horror at the idea of this indignity, Teddy offered to take her, and Millicent took this moment to tell Pansy that she had been asked by the Beater Sextus Derrick, who'd said he liked to see a well-built woman. Pansy congratulated her in lofty tones and resisted the urge to bite her nose off.

"I think Pansy has a secret date, like Hermione Granger," Morag said archly. Morag always had the gossip.

Draco looked up from his copy of something called 'Great Expectations' which his Creative Magic teacher was forcing him to read and he was forcing them all to hear about.

"Does she?" he said in an outraged tone. "Well, she can bloody well tell her secret date that she's going with me. Naturally I assumed that we were going together! The cheek of this person!"

Pansy tried not to look as if she was swallowing the heart that had inconveniently jumped into her mouth and started dancing around there.

"Never assume anything with a lady," she said, managing to sound arch. "But I had pretty much taken for granted that we were going together, too."

She got out of the room and performed a little dance once the door had swung shut, then told herself she was being an idiot, then ran to the dormitories hugging herself and deciding to wear the best robes her mother had bought for her. They might look like a crazy frilled birthday cake, but Mother had told her archly that all boys liked pastels, and she had to be right about something.

She spent ages on her hair and lipstick the day of the Yule Ball, while making it clear to everyone else in the dormitory that she was bored and uninterested in the entire proceedings.

She spoiled this entirely when Draco offered her his arm, and she clutched it tightly as they went up the stairs with her heart hammering in her chest. He'd chosen her.

"You look nice," she told him quietly.

"You, er, look a bit like a birthday cake," Draco said doubtfully. "Is that intentional?"

Pansy laughed in a brittle way. "Oh, well. Who cares?"

It was Hermione Granger who was the surprise belle of the ball. It was Gryffindors who things worked out for, who got asked by a dream boy and suddenly looked stunning. She saw Draco glance at Granger almost admiringly, and she just stared enviously. Of course. Granger got the famous boy hanging all over her beautiful self, and Potter and Weasley got the lovely Patil twins, and Draco had just asked a friend he felt comfortable with and was regretting it now when he saw everyone else had asked the really pretty girls.

She felt miserable and she wanted to crawl into a hole, and she hated everyone because nobody had thought to equip the Great Hall with one of them. She even hated dancing, because Draco clearly knew what to do and immensely enjoyed it, and she was making a fool of herself. She would have died rather than let anyone else see that she wasn't enjoying herself.

They danced, and danced, and then they went for punch and sat beside Blaise and Sally-Anne. Blaise was looking entertained.

"Potter and Weasley just sneaked out together," he announced. "I always thought they seemed a bit too close."

Pansy and Sally-Anne laughed. Draco looked slightly nauseous.

"Ew, a Weasley," he said. "Even Potter could do better than that. I bet they have freckles everyw - oh my God, how could you people sit there and callously let me have that thought? I shall be sick."

Pansy silently handed him her punch. She was going to be a good date if it killed her.

He coaxed her onto the dance floor again, and she thought she was getting better at it, at which point of course the ball ended. Couples were lingering everywhere, walking each other to dormitories hand in hand.

Morag and Michael Corner had apparently gone off to the rose garden, which was apparently crawling with couples.

Draco, of course, showed no desire whatsoever to make his way with her into the rose garden. He offered his arm again, though, and she held onto it despite her sick feeling. She had been his date, and nothing could change that.

"What a bunch of idiots," Draco said in his most disdainful way as they went out of the Hall. "You were the only girl worth going with in the place."

Just like that, Pansy was smiling. "Really?" she said, and then could have bitten her tongue out.

"Naturally," Draco replied. "Did you see that Indian girl with the gold braided into her hair? What was that? If you hadn't come with me, I would have absolutely refused to attend."

Pansy was smiling wider, despite her best efforts to hold onto some dignity. "I thought my dress was like a birthday cake."

"Well, it is," Draco said frankly. "But your mother picked it, didn't she? It's not your fault. Besides, even if you *had* been wearing a birthday cake, you would have been the only girl there worth my time. Why should I care what you wear? I mean, you don't care if I'm - slightly less - looming than the oversized oiks like Weasley."

He maintained his extremely haughty tone throughout the conversation, but she understood that if he had brought it up at all he felt uncertain about it.

"I think you're the perfect size," she told him recklessly. After all, nobody else was in earshot, and she was the only girl worth his time.

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, Pansy, you've hardly had time to find *that* out," he drawled.

She looked at him and started to laugh. "You're trying to be smooth again, aren't you."

She would bet anything that his father could be diplomatically charming and flirtatious with every woman he met. Draco's face went slightly pink as they went towards the common room.

"How many times do I have to tell you, woman. I am smooth," he said, and leaned forward and promptly knocked noses with her.

"Ahhh!" said Pansy. "Sorry! Sorry! I was just looking around to see if anyone else was there!"

She was a complete romantic incompetent who did not know how to stand still when the boy was kissing her.

"Ow," Draco complained. "All right. But I'm getting better at being smooth, damn it."

She laughed and began to hope that everything was not ruined after all, and scarcely dared to breathe as he leaned forward again.

"Just you wait," he told her. "I'm going to be a Casanova," and then he kissed her.

His lips were soft and not sneering, which seemed odd, and he tasted of coffee, which was to be expected since he carried a flask around with him and was a hopeless, doomed addict. She wanted to cling onto him but wasn't quite sure if that was all right.

"Whoo! Go, Malfoy!" said Teddy, who Pansy was one day going to kill.

Draco and she jumped apart. She was sure she had turned a violent red. Draco offered her his arm again with a little flourish.

"Come, my lovely partner," he said dramatically. "I will escort you to your chamber. Thank you for an enchanted evening."

She couldn't help herself clutching again. "You know, you really are getting better at that smooth thing." She paused. "Of course, you're no Professor Lockhart yet," she added wickedly.

Draco threw back his head and laughed. Pansy loved Yule Balls. Not even Gryffindors could spoil them for her.

Afterwards, Draco acted almost as if nothing had happened. But he showed her the article about crazy Hagrid being half-giant even before he showed Gregory and Vincent, and introduced her to Rita Skeeter, when she decided that since the news was funny she was going to start having *Witch Weekly* delivered to her. So she got to show him the article about Hermione Granger the scarlet woman first, and they laughed over it together, and he turned and caught her eye and they laughed together again when Professor Snape saw the article and read it aloud in class.

Granger was sent over to sit by her, and Pansy had great fun.

"So sorry I'm not a boy," she said. "I know you're just dying to toy with more affections."

"Shut up, you utter cow," Granger said under her breath. "Accusing me of making Love Potions is possibly the stupidest thing you've ever done. Wait, no, it isn't - you're seeing Malfoy, aren't you?"

Pansy was silent, but in that moment she could almost feel fond of Granger.

It was a good year, with the articles coming in to amuse them and the excitement of the Triwizard Tournament. She even got in a dig at Weasley in stupid Care of Magical Creatures class, when a Niffler almost bit off her watch.

"Oh, no, poor thing," Ron Weasley muttered. "Wore a solid gold watch to class."

She smirked at him. "Yes," she said sweetly. "It's good to be rich."

Draco congratulated her on that.

And during the Third Task, when everyone was standing around looking without much interest at the maze the competitors had disappeared into, Draco reached over and took her hand.

"Party in the common room if Potter loses," he said. "You're going to be my date."

"Oh, am I?" said Pansy, and tried not to hold his hand too obviously. "I'm not so sure."

"Of course you are," Draco told her, his voice reaching new levels of arrogance that let her know he was uncertain. "Remember how smooth I am?"

"There is that," she admitted, and he was leaning forward to give her a kiss when Professor Snape doubled over in front of them, clutching at his wrist.

Draco dashed forward. Pansy hovered in the background, worried, and saw people starting to murmur behind them.

Panic was rising, and it exploded when Potter reappeared with Cedric Diggory's dead body. There was nothing but shouting and confusion, and when Professor Snape strode away she got hold of Draco's hand again and clung shamelessly as everyone around them started whispering.

It was evening in the common rooms before Morag came back with the full story. Potter was saying the Dark Lord was back, and had killed Cedric Diggory.

Everybody went still, and then looked at Draco. Pansy remembered that vividly, afterwards. Everybody looked at Draco.

He never allowed himself to look uncertain. "My father said that the Dark Lord had some good ideas," he said.

"That's right," Teddy agreed. "He wanted to protect us from the Muggles."

Everyone started talking at once, voices rising desperately to convince each other and themselves. If there was a choice between someone and Dumbledore, they had to pick anyone else. Everybody knew Dumbledore was not going to protect them. It would be good to get their own back on everyone, to show everyone that they had been right all along.

"Who cares what happens to someone like that Mudblood Granger?" Draco added, curling his lip, and then he reached out and took Pansy's hand with a possessive gesture that meant he could do it without seeming weak.

She held onto it tight, and neither of their hands shook because they could hold on. Everyone kept talking, reassuring themselves that they would be safe and it might be good, and Pansy tried not to think about the bloody robes in her wardrobe or Professor Snape doubling up in pain, or Draco's terror about the Dark Lord drinking blood years ago.

There was no other choice, and they did want revenge and safety. There was no other choice.

Draco talked about other people paying in a very loud voice until they all fell asleep, and when Pansy woke his hand was still loosely curled around hers.

On the train back he went so far as to say all that to Potter, and then Potter's little gang and the twin Weasley goons hexed him, Vincent and Gregory until they sprouted tentacles on their faces. She and Morag found them, and she pulled Draco's head onto her lap and concentrated on trying to get things right. Draco's father would murder him if he found him like this.

We have no choice, she reminded herself. They'll gang up on someone who is frightened and just talking.

She was so relieved when Draco opened his eyes.

"Gah," he said. "I'll kill Potter, I swear. They got the jump on me."

"You had tentacles on your face," Pansy informed him. "I have taken pictures and you will have to pay me to get them back."

That nosy little first year, Malcolm Baddock, suddenly appeared from another carriage.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Pansy and Draco stood up. "Mind your own business," Draco commanded, and shoved him unceremoniously back into the carriage he'd come from. They got back to helping Morag with Vince and Greg, and everybody looked mostly normal by the time the train came in.

Pansy looked out at the station where her mother, and the Malfoys all stood waiting. They had new expressions on their faces, and when Pansy thought about what Potter and his bunch had done to her friends she felt the same expression creep over hers.

Almost the same expression. She thought.

She and Draco stood close together. "I'll Owl you," he said quietly. "Just. You know, to let you know what's happening. My father will know."

"If you like," said Pansy, and felt a little glow of pleasure in spite of everything else.

*

Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot

That it do singe yourself.

Pansy lived on Draco's Owls that summer. Everyone in the house was always busy, but Draco kept writing. His style was officious and self-important and silly, and his insistence that he was confident made her feel better and convinced her in spite of herself.

"Is it true?" she asked Peaseblossom, on one of his rare visits. His face had become harder over the last few years, and she had not noticed until this moment.

"It might be," Peaseblossom answered quietly. "And if it was - wouldn't you feel better if you knew nothing could hurt you again, that you would be a safe and privileged member of a wizarding world nobody will ever touch again?" He leaned down. "They burned us, Pansy," he said. "They took our wands and they burned us, and now the Muggle-lovers are lying to us about it. Things have to change, don't they?"

"Yes," Pansy said. She was absolutely certain of that.

"We'll show them all, Pansy," he said. "It will be best for you, if it is true. Say you believe me."

"I do," Pansy answered solemnly, and wrote an account of their conversation to Draco.

When they all assembled on the platform that autumn, she could see they had all made the same resolution. She also saw to her horror that she was still a shade taller than Draco, who had grown a bit but still not as much as she had. He was going to laugh at her.

He didn't, but nor did he take her hand or kiss her. They all talked politics and admired Draco and Blaise's prefect badges. Draco was perfectly friendly, and now everyone in Slytherin was listening to him, and Pansy was proud of him and she still had no idea of how to proceed.

She should not even be thinking about that, not while everything was so tense and difficult, but...

In the first Quidditch match of the season, Draco got into a punch-up with Potter and one of the Weasley twins, and afterwards he came to talk to her.

They talked for a while about Quidditch, because she loved the game too and she absolutely understood the twist of frustration and despair Draco must have felt when he just missed the Snitch, his fingertips against the back of Potter's hand.

"Hey, Pansy," he said suddenly. "I know you're all aggressive and stuff. Care to teach me a few moves?"

She tried not to seem too happy about agreeing, and reminded him that he owed her a favour. He was quick and he was determined and he was as stubborn as always, and he became good after a very few lessons. It was not quite November when she announced that she had taught him all she knew.

"Now you can be manly and protect me from things," she added, smiling slyly at him.

"Like vile men trying to steal your maiden virtue," he suggested, smirking back, and he took her arm. She hesitated, thinking he might be about to take her hand, but instead he used a move she had taught him, got her off balance and threw her onto her bed. She grabbed him on her way down and he fell too.

He propped himself up on one elbow. "That was very nearly a triumphant victory for me," he announced, breathing a little hard. "You see, I'm manly."

Then he leaned down and kissed her again. She was surprised and her mouth opened, and she quickly decided that surprised kisses were the best kind. She put her hands in his hair, which was very soft, and heard his startled little gasp as she caught his lip between her teeth.

"Done this a lot?" she asked breathlessly. To her extreme shock, she was quite good at being flirtatious.

"Almost constantly from the cradle," Draco lied blithely. "You could probably tell from my skills."

At that point, Millicent and Eloise walked in. They looked startled, and Draco levered himself up on his elbow again and looked annoyed.

"Excuse me, can I get no private time with my girlfriend?" he asked.

She was so happy she hardly slept that night, and accidentally gave Ron Weasley a warm smile the next morning. She was pleased to note that he spent the rest of the day looking suspicious and unsettled, and hanging onto Granger, his brand new probably dominatrix girlfriend, like grim death.

One day when everyone was going over letters from their parents in the common room and trying to work something out and Pansy was feeling tired and thinking, when we said we wanted them to die we just meant go away and feel sorry...

Then Draco took her hand. "Come on," he said, and grinned at her. "Let's have a really romantic getaway."

"What? No, I have plans today - I have homework," objected Pansy, and went with him because while she was a practical, evil-minded Slytherin she seemed to become a ridiculous pile of mush around this boy.

He took her on the new cruiser around the lake. They stood on the stern of the boat and the wind whipped around her hair until she was blind and shrieking and he kept nudging her and saying that he was going to push her over the edge.

"By the way," he added loftily, "I like your hair," and he tried to kiss her. It was like kissing through a veil made of hair.

Then he pushed it behind her ears, and she leaned in and hid her face against the warm pale line of his throat, and had a brief moment with nothing but happiness and peace.

"Weasley?" Draco said loudly over her head. "How did you scrape up the fare for this trip? Or did you smuggle on board?"

Ron Weasley, all tangled up with Hermione Granger, did not respond, but Harry Potter almost knocked Draco over the side.

Pansy assisted with a couple of strategic kicks, and then stood innocently by while the ferryman told both the boys off sternly.

"He started it," Potter protested.

"I did not," Draco argued vigorously, and slipped his arm around Pansy's waist. "I was just trying to enjoy a nice trip with my girlfriend," he said. "Much you'd know about that."

"Oh, I'm really jealous," Potter said, giving Pansy a disgusted look.

"Thought so," Draco returned smugly, and Pansy turned and kissed him. At that stage, she really hoped that Potter wandered off somewhere all on his lonesome.

Afterwards they went to a coffee shop where all the couples went, and Draco looked around covertly at the other couples and seemed to decide that he would outstrip them all, then snogged her enthusiastically over their drinks.

When he sat back, Pansy laughed behind her hand.

"What?" Draco asked, looking affronted.

"You've got cappuccino foam on the front of your robes," she explained, trying to smother a giggle with her cup.

Draco looked exceedingly vexed.

Then they walked home, hand in hand. She was so ridiculously in love.

"I would be delighted to entertain you in my private room," Draco told her as they went into the common rooms.

She and in fact everyone in Slytherin had been shown his new prefect's private room already, but she had never been in there alone with him. Especially not after a day-long date.

He'd actually sounded quite smooth when he said it, but he ruined it by giving her a panicked glance out of the corner of his eye and adding hastily, "If you want."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, of course I do."

They went in, and Draco left her sitting on his bed with a quick, "Just one minute." He came back with the front of his robes dripping from hasty washing, his hair wet at the ends and just-smoothed, and his face damp and bright pink.

That made everything easier. She was able to laugh softly and take his face in her hands, and kiss him. He tasted of tepid water and soap, and showed her he was a quick study as he tugged on her lip with his teeth and fell forward onto her.

She felt something twist warmly inside her chest as he risked a hand down her top, and then glanced at her face as his fingers settled on her breast.

'This is all right?' said the quick glance, and she stretched lazily and happily and meant yes. He started stroking it, with mingled method and affection, as she had seen him stroke other people's cats, and to her surprise she felt the twist of warmth in her chest pool hot and come to a peak under his palm. She parted her lips in a quick breath of shock, and he smiled his victorious little smile, being a brat as usual, and leaned in to kiss them.

She got her hand in his and started stroking down his chest, trying clumsily to return the favour. His chest felt thin and delicate and quite different, and she liked it when she touched his nipple and he made a small sound, but she felt a wave of harsh fear when she stroked along his ribs and felt how fragile the skin was over it, saw his eyes widen clear grey and light-filled and endless and thought of them shuttered with fear back in first year.

"I'm afraid too sometimes," she admitted, telling him a secret she tried to hide from everybody else.

His face was serious, and he was still stroking her breast soothingly, as if it was a distressed kitten. "Don't you worry," he said in his haughtiest way. "*I shall protect you.*"

She laughed shakily, and stroked at his ribs some more. Then she stroked at the softer skin of his stomach, and heard him make another tiny sound. He touched her stomach too, and with his mouth still curled in assurance his eyes asked for permission.

She gave it by moving her hand under his waistband. The sound of his startled gasp felt like the surprise-pleasant hollowing of her insides as he moved his hand down too. His hand was questing, and still trying to be soothing, and she did feel soothed as his fingers moved against and inside her, and she held on carefully and watched for the rising colour in his cheeks.

He leaned against her, and the little weight felt nice, and he kissed her lightly, carefully, even when she tightened her fingers mid-kiss. His fringe brushed her forehead, feeling light and flyaway and nothing like her own hair, and she would not have known how to say no even if she had wanted to. She squirmed against him and breathed in, fast and then faster, and he breathed in and out quickly too, and they twisted sharply together to the breathless sound of their own breathing in another sharp hot peak of feeling.

After a minute Draco looked ruefully down his robes, his breath still short. "Foam and now this," he said, lying warm beside her. "I think I may just throw them out."

"The house elves will clean them," Pansy assured him.

"They'll return them frayed," Draco insisted softly. "Raving incompetents. I'm telling you. So - did you have a good time today?"

"Hmm," said Pansy, pretending to think about it. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Naturally." Draco preened. "I am the best boyfriend ever," he continued in a pleased voice. "It must be marvellous to go out with me."

"It's all right," Pansy conceded. "Of course, I did have to go out with you."

"Oh yes?" said Draco, and the instant pang of unease and distrust in his eyes made her remember instantly about loneliness and fear.

She leaned up and kissed him, trying to promise that he would be safe with her. "Yes," she said. "You're the only boy in Hogwarts who's as big a bitch as I am."

She even dared to tell him that she would miss him when they went home for the Christmas holidays. She would have loved to stay in Hogwarts with him for Christmas, but he was all excited about his father and their family yachting trips, and she did not even suggest it.

He kissed her goodbye and Harry Potter, nearby, made a face.

"That kind of thing should be outlawed," he said to Weasley.

Draco lifted an eyebrow at him. "That's the kind of thing that'll be outlawed," he said, nodding to Granger with his lip curling. "You'll see. Your lot will be the first against the wall."

She sat in her room, trying to hide from her mother's praise, when the news came that the Dark Lord had killed Draco's father, and Draco himself had been rescued from the freezing lake in shock.

She never waited to see if she was allowed to go to him. She just went.

*

Oh, my love, my love, wilt thou ever know how I have loved thee?

She met a house elf striding out of the fireplace, and she ordered it to take her to the young master. It looked like she was going to object, so she knelt down and took it by the ear.

"You'll take me to him," she snarled, "or I'll twist off your head."

It showed enough wisdom to obey.

Gregory and Vincent were already with him, and Vince gave her a smile. They never had any idea of what to do with Draco, apart from the most important thing of standing by him.

Draco was sitting up in bed, his face older and thinner and with the skin stretched pale around his eyes and mouth.

"Pansy," he said. "What are you doing here?"

She wanted to say, I had to come, but she was afraid of laying herself open like that when he was looking at her with those bleak eyes. "I thought it would be appropriate if I came to see how you were," she answered.

"Oh, I see," Draco answered in a neutral voice. "So you've heard the news." He cleared his throat. "All of you understand that my family's political power has been severely

diminished," he said, still in that distant adult voice. "It's something for me to take into account."

And for you, he meant. God, they had been friends for years. What had his father been telling him to make him think it was really all about the balance of power?

Pansy took power into account, but it weighed very little for her just then. "I don't care," she said recklessly, and came over to sit on the bed. "Draco. How are you?"

He cleared his throat again. It was a painful sound. "I'm well. I have a bit of a cold," he added absently. "Please don't listen to the house elf if she starts telling you about Master Draco's delicate chest. In fact, throw something sharp at her and cut her off if she tries."

He grinned, a weak attempt at his usual flashing malicious grin.

They were allotted rooms, and Draco was up soon, picking at his food but not complaining about it. Fear and worry grew so cold and intertwined in Pansy that she could no longer tell which was which.

She was searching for him one night when he'd wandered off again, when she came upon Narcissa Malfoy, sitting alone in a room. Mrs Malfoy's aloofness was legendary, and Pansy had not seen her touch, or speak a soft word to Draco since she had been here.

"I think you will find him in his father's study," Mrs Malfoy said in a cool voice.

Pansy hesitated on the threshold. "Why don't you go and try to comfort him?" she asked, her tones harsh in her own ears.

"I do not feel I am suited to that kind of task," replied Mrs Malfoy, with a small smile as if the idea was incredible. "I would be grateful if you would go and -try - to comfort my son yourself."

Pansy had never wanted to kick anyone so badly in her life. "I won't do it because of that," she snapped, and slammed the door behind her.

She behaved like such a fool about this boy.

She found him in his father's study, going over some old journal accounts and history books. He looked intent, pulled to attention by every string in his body and with his face even sharper than usual. She looked at him and tried to fight down fear, and then he turned with the candlelight on his skin, golden warmth on pale smooth lines, and she felt a sharp flash of fear for a completely different reason.

Dear God, he was going to be beautiful.

She also saw that he had a crystal decanter open on the desk, and a glass with his father's best Firewhiskey in it. He followed her glance with his grey eyes, still clear and cruel.

"Father would never let me try it," he remarked. "Well. I suppose he can't stop me now."

"Draco," she said.

"They mark you, you know," he continued, his eyes on her, cold and speculative, undressing her but not quite seeing her. "He marks you. He burns a black snake onto your arm, and he makes it burn every time he wants you. And it burns and burns, so you can never get away and you never forget. I don't need one. I won't forget." His eyes narrowed. "I'll *have* him," he said.

"Draco," she said shakily. "Are you declaring war on the Dark Lord?"

She was the most frightened because she knew him, and she knew that he never gave up, he just kept on trying and piling up horrible failures with that fierce and merciless obstinacy until a mountain of defeat became success.

"What if I am?" he asked, his voice thin and furious.

"You need to go to bed," she said weakly. She did not know how to do anything but try to shove away the new threat of his face and voice.

He got up. She could probably take him in a fight, but she backed up several steps.

"What a wonderful idea," he said. "What a kind offer."

He'd succeeded again, because for a moment he sounded exactly like his father. He offered her his arm, and when she took it gingerly it felt like an iron band.

When they got to his room, his arm had turned under hers to grasp her wrist. He pulled her in with that steely stubbornness - he was going to pull her in or she was going to break his wrist.

He pulled her in.

"Draco, you aren't feeling well," she told him, and threw a weapon. "It's your father. You're still scared and upset."

"I'm not *scared*," Draco said violently. "I wasn't scared. It was dark and cold and he was screaming, but I was never scared, do you hear me? I know what I'm going to do."

His hands on her arms were too tight and shaking, and he pushed her down onto the bed with an almost distracted air, as if he had no idea what he was doing. He kissed her too hard, with teeth that almost gouged at her lip. She swallowed down a small sound of protest with the blood.

She could have stopped him, but he was stronger than she was in every other way, and she'd always known that.

The air was cold on her breasts and his still-shaking hands were even colder, icy as they always got when he was frightened. His weight on her was hard, pressing down so she felt hurt even by the press of his ribs and the angle of his hip. He kissed her again, pushing his tongue between her lips, and she opened her mouth for him as much as she could.

He glanced up once, and she thought that was the one glance he could give, asking for permission. She looked back at him, and opened her mouth again in answer.

"Don't worry about it, Pansy," he said breathlessly, his voice still taut with pain and desperation, and his eyes glittering hot and terrifying. "I know what to do. I'm going to make a new plan."

His hands were still shaking, shaking even more, when he removed his belt, but his lips were curled vindictively. He didn't know how to do anything else when he was in pain, and she didn't know what else to offer.

He replaced them on her naked hips and the pain of his nails digging into the skin was what she tried to concentrate on. He pushed in hard and she absolutely was not going to scream.

"You know we always talked about revenge, Pansy," he said, hot against her skin even though he was cold and shaking all over. He kept pushing in, again and again. "I'm going to have it."

His jerky movements felt like shaking, and the trembling aftershock felt like shaking, and she was really shaking and when he collapsed on her they both clung to each other, cold and horrorstruck. She laid her face in the curve of his neck and held on tight, feeling raw inside and with wetness seeping over her thighs.

Eventually they crawled under the covers and curled around each other, and Draco went to sleep with the heavy stillness of an exhausted child. Pansy huddled under the blankets and did not feel warm enough to sleep, just stayed there shaking until Draco made a soft sound in his sleep and moved his head to rest against her shoulder. She looked down at his pale strained face and began, slowly, to stroke that light soft hair so unlike her own.

"Shhh," she said, and she could say anything she wanted because she was safe, and nobody but herself could hear. "It's all right, my darling. I love you. I love you so much."

Draco smiled in his sleep, and she kept stroking his hair. She didn't quite dare to go asleep, didn't feel safe enough, but she could keep stroking his hair.

"I love you," she whispered again in a small voice, perversely liking the sound of the words. She had never told anyone that before, not even as she knew other children did with their families, not even when she hadn't meant it.

She was such a fool for this boy.

*

A fiend like thee could take my soul to hell.

Draco did not touch her again for the rest of the holiday. She spent New Year's with him and Gregory and Vincent, and he kissed her, a brief perfunctory brush of cold lips. He was wrapped up in thoughts of his father, and horrified by it all, and far too arrogant to admit to any of it.

On the last day of the holidays, he took them all aside.

"There's been a change of plan," he said, so autocratic that he must have been wretchedly uncertain. "We're not going to join the Dark Lord. We're going to join the Young Order of the Phoenix."

They watched and waited, knowing Draco.

"I have tallies here of the deaths dealt out to Death Eaters at the hands of their masters," Draco continued, in the same voice, producing the papers he had been poring over in the library. "At one time or another, a third of his force were killed at his hands, and the majority of his followers are regularly tortured. Moreover, his followers will not be offered a say in the leadership and I have here records that indicate the Dark Lord may be half Muggle. He's unstable and we will not be safe. It's an unacceptable proposition.

If we join the other side, we will be granted much more of a say in future years. All of this dangerous pro-Muggle legislation has been instituted since most of the old families were discredited by their support of the Dark Lord. We can change that. We already have the money, and we can get the voice." His lips curled up, and for a moment he stopped using the stern logical tones of Lucius Malfoy. "I'm not saying we like Dumbledore and his crowd now," he snarled in exasperation, as if somebody had been arguing with him. "I'm saying we have to beat them at their own game."

He promised safety and power as if he could deliver them personally, and she knew he couldn't but she believed him anyway.

"I am doing this," he said in his most disdainful manner. "Are you going to follow me or be stupid?"

"Might as well follow you," Pansy said at last. "For the entertainment value."

He smirked as if he expected it, and then took her hand. It was held so it wasn't shaking, even without her help.

"Wait till you see their faces when we walk in to the Young Order meeting," he said. "We'll show them all."

He talked the others around. She was never quite sure how, just that the white heat of his energy swept through the dungeons like a forest fire. Safety, power, promises, the name of Malfoy and the authority of Professor Snape behind him, and the fact he made it clear where his loyalties lay.

"I won't do it!" Teddy shouted. "They killed my father, and I'm going to kill them all! You can tell them so, if you like."

"We're not going to betray each other," Draco said, his words careful because they had to be.

They were still Slytherins. Bargains were struck, as much of a coldblooded bargain as any Lucius Malfoy ever conducted, but Pansy was watching. The reason people kept those bargains was because he belonged to them with all his furious heart, and they knew it.

He went into the Young Order with two-thirds of the Slytherins at his back, and Pansy at his right hand, and Professor Lupin looked at him and smiled, and told him he could sit down. They faced the shocked and indignant faces of the others around them. It was just as sweet as Draco had promised.

"I told you, didn't I," Draco laughed, dizzy and triumphant afterwards. "You should all have trusted me."

"I do trust you, Draco," Pansy said, and gave him her hand and said the words she had said to Peaseblossom, meaning them this time. "I do."

He made a wicked little face. "You shouldn't trust yourself with me," he said. "I can be very bad."

Pansy put her arms around his neck. "Why don't you show me?"

They went to Draco's room. Pansy looked at him for a moment and shook, but he took her hand and stroked it, and then stroked her neck and the skin leading to her breasts and then her breasts and stomach, and kept stroking with light intent strokes until she was warm and shivering and undone.

"Oh," she said. "You really are getting smoother."

Draco laughed, proud of himself, and kissed her. Then he moved his mouth down her throat, and followed the same shivery stroking path. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the wet, careful tracing of his lips, and then arched up to their touch.

"Oh, Draco," she said. "Draco. Draco."

She had nothing else to say. She looked up at him when he was over her at last, moving carefully, lip caught between his teeth and focused. She smiled and thought he looked as he did when he was playing Quidditch or doing Creative Magic homework, and she kissed him and they both smiled into the kiss, and the shivering reached a hot shocking pitch.

He lay beside her afterwards, tracing the ends of her hair and the beads of sweat on her shoulders, and smiling a little.

"It's all right now, isn't it?" he asked, almost as a demand but not quite. "I mean... it was all a bit messy. We can just pretend it never happened. This can be the first time."

There was a soft indentation in his lower lip that sometimes spoiled the perfect hatefulness of his sneer. Pansy kissed it.

"Whatever you want, Draco," she said. "Well. You know. As long as you buy me a really good birthday present."

He laughed and rolled onto the next pillow. Pansy reached over when he was quiet, and stroked his hair between her fingers again.

"I love you," she whispered. She was not sure if he was asleep that time, but he smiled sleepily and she was able to go to sleep beside him.

She slept beside him most nights after that. He was always bent over papers or having spectacular tantrums in the middle of the common room, sending books and candlesticks and first-years scattering, and all she could do was be with him like Vincent or Gregory, silent and unable to help, unable not to rely on him. All she could do was scowl at the Gryffindors when they looked across the Young Order table suspiciously, or when Harry Potter whispered something about finding out what Draco was up to.

She had the nights, though, when Draco could relax and laugh and kiss her. She had all the times Draco relaxed.

"We don't quite look like the other Order members," Blaise remarked at one point.

Draco looked up from a book on ancient runes. "I should hope not," he said in a scandalised voice. "If my hair ever starts to resemble Potter's, it will be your duty as my friends to put me down like a dog."

Pansy frowned. "He's right, you know," she said. "That prissy Granger is always running around in a blouse and jeans."

"Oh. Is that all," said Draco, and a speculative look crept onto his face. He seemed charmed by some internal vision. "Not to worry," he told them. "I have a really cunning plan."

It turned out to be careful instructions to a robes shop, and then intensive shopping. Draco was a heartless taskmaster.

"Get back in there, Eloise!" he said sternly. "You think you can wear your hat crooked with that nose? Oh, please."

Pansy inspected herself in the Muggle dress. It was red, and it made her hair look blacker and her lips look redder, but she was slightly uneasy about the way it clung rather than draped. It made her breasts and hips look exaggerated, even faintly ridiculous.

"And you, Blaise!" Draco snapped. "Don't think I can't see you wondering about vinyl. Let it go."

She waited and smoothed the dress over herself, waiting for the snapped comment, and felt hands slide over her hips.

Draco sounded smug in her ear. "Hey. Look at my gorgeous girlfriend," he said, and she looked at the rumpled black hair and the red fabric stretched over her curves, and the smile on her face as Draco looked over her shoulder, his hands around her and his fair hair above her. She thought she might be pretty when he was framing her.

She also noticed that he was getting taller.

In his bedroom, he tried on some black jeans and walked doubtfully around, and she laughed hysterically because he walked like a wooden puppet. But she also noticed the long lines his

body was built on, the way he adapted to grace, the way his face was smoothing out just enough so it was more angular than pointed.

He swaggered around in his black jeans as if everybody was going to look after him, until everybody did. He was attractive, and he could convince people he was handsome.

She glared the others away, but she was not sure that a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff would understand and be intimidated. There were some very, very pretty girls in those houses, and Draco was past master in the art of being appealing - in a weird, wrong way.

It wasn't like she could make herself beautiful.

She was thinking of that when they were all supposed to be looking up protection amulets, and feeling tired. If only someone would make a move so she could act, instead of having to see covetous glances here and there and just waiting in agony. She had nobody else in the world.

She looked up, and saw Draco looking at her, and all the tired faces around them.

"Come on," he said. "We're going to the pub. I'll square it with Professor Snape."

"We won't get served," Gregory pointed out, his face wrinkling.

Draco lifted his chin. "I happen to be a Malfoy," he said. "Are you telling me that something is impossible?"

They were served, and then they went downstairs. Pansy wore her red dress and danced with her boyfriend in his black jeans, and watched the other girls watch his hands on her.

"I think Morag fancies you," she whispered, tossing her hair back and making it clear that she simply found this rather amusing.

"She's out of luck, isn't she?" Draco said, preening. "Because you're still the only girl here worth my time."

He shimmied down her body, looking around as if inviting spectators to come and witness his Malfoy-like glory. He escaped ridiculous into spectacular once more, and she kissed him with a wet open mouth and loved him absurdly.

They tumbled into his room that night in a storm of giggles and wandering hands, and she rolled him over and grinned triumphantly down into his face.

"You know," he drawled, his eyes wicked, "While you're there... you could stand with losing a bit of weight."

She rolled her eyes and hit him, and they fell into a wrestling, laughing and then moaning tangle. She liked licking his throat when she was drunk, she discovered, when it could be wet and sloppy and uninhibited.

Afterwards they went to sleep in each others' arms, and before she did she touched his hair, lightly, with her fingertips, combed it through and loved the feel of it.

"I love you," she murmured, and felt him push his face against the palm of her hand, and felt quite sure that he was only pretending to be asleep. She said it again and again to see the small smile on his face, and then laid her cheek against his and went to sleep.

It was then she realised that Draco might not care if she was pretty.

*

Friendship may, and often does, grow into love, but love never subsides into friendship.

She whispered love to him at night all through March and April, as the Young Council was set up and normalcy seemed restored by a couple of stand-up throw-down screaming matches between Draco and Potter.

Draco made up a song about Ron Weasley's Quidditch skills with fairly banal lyrics but a tune that kept everyone humming it, and while Draco flew she took his place in front of them all, and conducted them with some of the dramatic flourishes he would have insisted on.

Potter caught her elbow in the halls and said in a low, fierce voice: "You're his *girlfriend*, aren't you? You have to know what he's up to."

"Excuse me, get off," said Pansy, stepping hard on his foot.

"I'm going to find out, you know," Potter said with a dark glare, and slunk off.

Even Potter knew she was Draco's girlfriend.

Pansy got used to Professor Lupin's smiles, and they all got used to wandering around school in Muggle clothes.

"Oh nice," Granger said, looking appalled as Pansy cheerfully removed a first year from her path by the ear, and then dashed down the corridor to where Draco had appeared. She was morally sure that Granger was whispering to her red-headed boyfriend about Pansy's short dress, and she planned some small revenge as Draco swung her up into his arms.

He was tall enough to do that now, but it still felt strange and made her giggle and him lurch.

"You'll put your back out, you idiot," she murmured, leaning forward so his face was hidden by her hair.

"Only because you're so gigantic. And I happen to be a debonair, dashing idiot," Draco informed her sniffily and kissed her, and then made a face and spat out a bit of her hair.

She leaned forward and touched the tip of his nose with hers. He was so close, and it was dark, and she was happy. It felt like night.

"I love you," she whispered.

Draco dropped her. "I have to go," he said abruptly. "I need to talk to Professor Snape. I just wanted to say hello," he added with a brief smirk. "Aren't I sweet and considerate?"

He turned and walked, quickly. Draco had never been any good at hiding when he was scared.

"You love *that*?" said a familiar annoying voice.

Pansy sighed and rolled her eyes at Potter. She should have remembered that those three ran in a pack. Potter probably hung around and offered instructions while Granger and Weasley went at it.

"I have my reasons," she replied, and smiled slyly. "Anxious for the details?"

Potter went scarlet. Even his neck looked hot, and she watched with amusement.

"No, don't be disgusting!" Potter said loudly. "I don't know how anybody can bear to lay hands on Malfoy."

"Just hands? I don't know either," Pansy agreed, opening her eyes wide. "You're a man of restraint, Potter."

She was a bit disappointed when he didn't have a heart attack, but happy enough to laugh into his puce face and go on.

When she got back to the common room, she saw Draco laying down the law to some third years in his most lordly manner, and she went up to join him and he took her hand. So that was all right.

Except that when she reached out her hand to stroke his hair that night, he pushed her hand away. "I'm trying to sleep," he said crossly.

She wanted to scream at him that it was all right when he was pretending to be asleep, but she was afraid of what would happen. Afraid that they and all their plans would collapse, so she lay quiet by his side.

She told herself that she understood. She'd never really been offered love, but Lucius Malfoy, that astute politician, had promised unimaginable rewards if Draco could just meet his demands, and Draco had tried to do so and failed. He would not believe a word she said about love he did not think he had earned, no matter how much he liked to listen to it.

There was no point in making him angry. She just had to prove it, but she did not know how.

When he was sitting charting his version of a battle plan for the real Order of the Phoenix, she went to sit by him and slipped her arms around his waist. He glanced over at her, startled, and she liked the clean sharp line of his jaw.

Then he looked down at the battle plans and his face cleared. "Oh," he said, and gave her a quick kiss. "Don't worry about it, Pansy. I am going to protect you."

She narrowed her eyes at him and stomped off. She could not say that she did not want him to save her, to save all of them. She loved him because she believed he was the only one who could do that.

But she didn't want it to be a bargain, and he would never trust her if it was a bargain, and she had no way to convince him that even if she did want something from him it was different, different...

He began to be angry with her, and she was not sure how to respond to him. She snapped, scowled and left him, and he became quiet and she thought she was confirming his fears. So she stayed and bit her lips to keep quiet, and he looked at her with distrust.

When Professor Dumbledore spoke to the Young Order, they all stood back with Draco. She looked around at everyone leaning on or near him proudly, and then realised she was leaning against him herself.

I'm not like that, she wanted to tell him, but he didn't look at her.

He tried to write important letters to his mother, and received cool, warning notes and *carte blanche* on expense. She found him one day reading a letter with one hand, and cutting across the top of his desk with a letter-opener.

"Draco, it's all right," she said. "I-"

"Shut up," he said, and she did until he was out of the room, when she threw the letter-opener against the wall.

"Everybody wants something," he announced another time, trying to craft a strategy for winning over some more Slytherins.

"Everybody?" Pansy said, wishing she could deny it.

"Oh yes," Draco said, his mouth tightening. "My father taught me that. For instance, I want a cup of coffee. We have to start training the first years to be our slaves."

Later, he gave up on strategy, lost his temper and shouted the Slytherins into submission. That put him in a worse mood.

"But you got them in the end," Pansy argued with him. "That's what counts."

"It's not what counts if it won't work again," Draco snapped. "I have to do this right."

"How do you know what's right?" Pansy asked.

"I don't know!" Draco yelled at her. "My father would have known! But there's only me, and there's nobody here to help-" He stopped himself.

"I'd help you if I could," Pansy said. "Just tell me what to do."

"I have told you," Draco answered coldly. "I have no idea. Why don't you go to hell?"

"Fine. I will," she shouted back, and slammed out of the door.

She realised afterwards that she had left him when he told her that he didn't know how to save them. She sat on her bed, snarling at the others to leave her alone until they escaped to the common room, and she thought in the dark about what she could do that would be enough.

He came and sat beside her on the bed. "I'm sorry," he said, which was a big thing for Draco and which he said very ungraciously. "Look. Naturally, I know what to do. I am, after all, a superlative genius." He stopped. "I was taking some things out on you. Look, Pansy - it's not very clever to get too involved when we're this young."

There was nothing but cold emptiness inside her suddenly, sick and terrible.

He smiled at her. "After all," he drawled, "it would be a pity to waste that dress on just one man. Even if that man was me."

"Especially if that man was you," Pansy said, and smirked at him. If he wanted to be let go, she was not going to embarrass herself.

He put his arm around her, which was unexpected, and held on tight for a moment. "I've promised to make sure we're all safe, remember," he told her. "I'll keep my word."

She had not loved him because he would save them. She'd loved him because he could save them.

"I should hope so," she agreed. "I'd hate to have a liar for a friend."

She did not cry.

*

I am still thy lover true

Come once again and love me

She did not cry then. She did not cry in front of her mother, who intimated gently that she was very disappointed, and she did not cry when Peaseblossom came home to briefly inform them that Pellinore was dead. She attended meetings at Draco's house, and she came home and tersely answered questions about what she was doing. She heard a rumour about Draco and some Beauxbatons student, and she did not give a sign. She sat with him through the first Young Order meeting of the year, and agreed with him loudly about the vote for no increased news warnings for the Muggle Prime Minister.

On one of their club nights, she saw him, a slim laughing silhouette, with Morag all in glittering black robes and looking up at him with Scottish blue eyes. They were laughing and flirting and he tipped salt onto his lower lip and she licked it off and then took a tequila shot.

She broke, and ran, and he ran after her.

"Pansy! Pansy, where are you going?" he asked irritably as soon as he'd caught up with her in the street. "Don't disappoint Crabbe," he added with a smile. "He's dying for a dance."

She went to slap him, hard, but he grabbed her wrist. She stared up at him through smarting eyes.

"Not with her," she said, passionately. "With anybody but her."

Draco looked affronted. "I don't know what you're im-"

"Promise me!" Her voice cracked.

His sharp face softened. "I promise," he said, after a moment, and then he let his hand slide from her wrist to her fingers, and held on for a minute. "I do miss you, sometimes," he told her, glancing warily up at her as if even this much information would allow her to hurt him. "I do. But there's no point - there's no such - I can't."

He let her go, and she ran back to Hogwarts, home and the dormitories, and then she cried, face down on the pillow and clutching it in her fists as if she could hurt it by holding tight enough.

If she had been able to demand everything so fiercely, Draco might have given it to her. If she had needed him less, or needed him more, if she could have loved or hated or tried or screamed enough...

The next club night, she went out and did not look at what Draco was doing. She did not after shot with Sally-Anne, and they ended up clinging to each other on their way home, declaring undying friendship, two happy, happy girls. When Sally-Anne fell onto her bed with her she looked up at her halo of blonde hair, and felt cold and lonely and surprised that someone so pretty might want to be with her. She pressed closer for warmth as Sally-Anne pushed her breasts against Pansy's, felt the soft taut flesh dragging heavy over hers and shut her eyes.

She didn't want Draco to come back and be smooth and flirt with her. She wanted him to kiss her and touch her awkwardly, so she would feel safe and sure he would not leave her. It was not so different.

She woke up under her sheets with Sally-Anne the next morning. God knew where the other girls had gone.

"I have a splitting headache," she said muzzily.

Sally-Anne drew closer to her. "My mother's a Mudblood," she said softly into her ear, and then her green eyes opened wide to catch Pansy's reaction. "Do you hate me?"

Pansy held on hard to her naked shoulders. "What? No, of course not! You're Slytherin," she told her fiercely. "It's not your fault. Nobody-"

She stopped. She had no idea what the others would do, and she was not like Draco and able to order them to do what she wanted and somehow have it happen. But she did know, down

to her bone, that you stood by your own and tore down whoever threatened them, and they did the same for you. It was the only way to be safe.

"Thank you," said Sally-Anne, sounding content for some reason, and shut her eyes again, her blonde hair pooling around her on Pansy's pillow.

Pansy still could not work out why Sally-Anne had wanted to be with her.

She worked out that there was a bit of power in her curves in a short dress, and her mouth if she curled it right. Nothing warm like the fun it had been to be almost-pretty with Draco, and nothing that attracted affection like Morag, but power was power and she could use it.

She was at the bar ordering a drink on the next club night, when she recognised a familiar face. Adrian Pucey. He'd been on the Quidditch team, and his uncle had been a Death Eater, and he was watching her.

"Let me get that drink," he said.

"No thanks," she said, sneering. "I have to go through all my money and several more attractive people."

"I hear young Malfoy's on a crusade to avenge his father," he continued casually.

"I wouldn't know. We're not that close."

"I hear differently," Pucey replied. "Malfoy's really doing quite splendidly, keeping you lot together on this one. But I hear parental pressure is really going to get started, and everybody knows Ted Nott is a bit of an anti-Muggle fanatic. Might cause a nasty split if he learned that one of your dear little band isn't quite as pure-blooded as everybody thinks she is."

She met his eyes, and took the packet under his arm. There were records, photographs, birth certificates for Sally-Anne and her parents.

"I'll talk to Draco," she said in a level voice. "We might be able to do a deal."

"We might indeed," Pucey answered, his eyes travelling everywhere her dress covered.

Pansy cursed herself for a fool, and did not drop her own eyes. "How very flattering," she replied archly. "One night, then?"

"At least six months," Pucey disagreed. "You're attractive enough, and I'm not terribly interested in choosing sides just now, but do make it worth my while."

"Perhaps a week."

They shook on two months. His hand was big, and rather sweaty. She let him buy her that drink.

It wasn't too bad. He treated her quite well, and she giggled over drinks and meals, and took care to show pleasure between the sheets. Sometimes there even was some, though it was all a little mechanical.

When she got the records, she burned them one by one, sitting alone in the dark, and then went to throw the bin full of dust and ashes out the window. She saw Weasley and Granger wandering hand in hand along, and waited until they were directly underneath her, then tipped it up.

She went down to inspect the wreckage, and was amused to see that Granger's frizzy hair had turned thick grey. Weasley was spluttering.

"You bloody Slytherin bitch!" he shouted, going dark red in the patches under the grey. "What's your problem?"

She shoved him savagely away. "Looks to me like it's you who has the problem," she told the, and walked off.

Sometime in the dark cold hours of night that year, she admitted to herself that she did not want anything complex, did not want to fight for anything and wait and think it tortuously through and never ever feel secure. All Pansy really wants is to be safe and loved, and to have Draco back - which contradicts all the rest.

If she waited, though, she told herself. He was never going to let anyone as close as he had unwittingly let her. If she waited, and tried, there was a chance. It wasn't perfect, but he was bright and she was cold, and...

Oh, she loved him, and she had never loved anything else. She thought perhaps that she couldn't do it.

*

Through perils both of wind and limb

Through thick and thin she followed him.

The summer before her seventh year, her mother locked her in her room and explained that she was not going back to Hogwarts, for her own good.

She and Draco had been prepared for this contingency. She broke the window with sheets clenched around her fists, took Draco's broom from his cupboard and arrived on the platform on time.

"My baby, you're all right," said Draco, rushing up to her. "And Pansy, it is good to see you too," he added, cradling the broom in his arms.

"My God, Draco, what happened to your hair over the summer?"

"There are some things," Draco told her in freezing tones, "that are not, in fact, amusing. Shame on you, Pansy Parkinson. Shame."

"I'm going to buy some Chocolate Frogs," Pansy announced.

"Addiction is a terrible thing, Pansy," Draco warned. "Oh, and if you see a coffee pot, grab it off the trolley for me."

She had to wait in the corridor while Granger and Weasley lugged their trunks down to their carriage. Granger was discussing Arithmancy, and Weasley's eyes were glazed over.

"Excuse me, can we move on before I get so bored I lose the use of my limbs?" Pansy snapped.

There's another poor sod who's never going to be clever enough, she thinks, but then she remembers that apparently he is and Granger loves him and they're happy and everything is perfect, as things are for Gryffindors, and 'accidentally' elbows him in the solar plexus as she goes by.

She couldn't do much but stand by Draco, so she does so while he burns and splutters through another ill-fated romance and, much more important, through gathering dark whispers of suspicion.

She holds. She stays firm.

Until the day when Harry Potter comes to the dungeons and asks to talk to Draco, and then she realises that Draco was never waiting for revenge from someone who had thought he was not worth attention. He was waiting, as Draco does, pushing and insisting that he was worth it, and as Draco does, he failed horribly and thoroughly and nastily until he succeeded.

He would not love her, and now Harry Potter had decided to steal her friend.

Blaise thought that it was funny at first.

"How are you and the hero getting on, then?" he asked.

Draco sneered. "Oh, fine," he drawled. "We're *madly* in love."

Blaise soon changed his mind.

The Gryffindors, who get everything, were not allowed to have a single claim on Draco. She needed him. They all needed him, he was theirs, and she had almost held his cold and shaking hand in the night six years ago. She could do nothing but sit there and resent Potter, and hate Draco because she was so afraid. Pansy absolutely hated being afraid.

She thinks she can do nothing else, until Ron Weasley stood up at the Young Order meeting and accused Draco of betraying the whole school, and demanded that he be sent to Azkaban.

Pure, simple rage flooded through Pansy. She thought about awkward kisses and crazy promises and pretending not to be frightened and not to be in love, and she launched herself across the table at Weasley's throat.

"I'll kill you for that, Weasley!" she shouted, and she would. She would kill for him without a second thought.

She can still love Draco, still follow him, still believe in him. No matter what happened.

She has always done that.

Extended Courtship

It was during the Christmas holidays of sixth year that things became clear to some of those who had stayed at school.

Lavender Brown was the first, which would have come as a pleasant surprise to her if she had ever realised it. Lavender was used to always being regarded as silly and credulous. Even her boyfriend Seamus tended to pat her on the head and tell her not to worry about things, believing that he could reorganise the world in her sight and she wouldn't notice.

People seldom understood that she simply did not choose to notice.

It was much pleasanter to have complete faith in your teachers. To believe Professor Trelawney could tell the future, so surely she would warn you if anything truly terrifying were going to happen. To turn your face from all the fear in Hogwarts, Harry's narrow escapes, and simply trust Dumbledore when he said Hogwarts was safe.

Lavender had always wanted Seamus, and she had waited patiently while Lisa Turpin broke up with him over his wandering habits.

Now she has Seamus, and she loves and trusts him, and would never see the lipstick marks on the collar of his robes or hear the whispering behind her back.

This faith insured that she was still able to sit beside him in the circle of giggling students, hand in hand and whispering to him about this awful Spin the Bottle, a strong couple who had lasted six months and were terribly happy.

Spin the Bottle in the Great Hall, with sixth-year students from every house in their pyjamas. It was supposed to be simple fun.

"Ohmygod," Lavender said in rushed tones, "if I have to kiss someone besides Seamus, I will be *so embarrassed*."

She meant that, so she did not notice when Justin flickered his tongue in between her lips. If he had tried that, there would have to be unpleasantness, so clearly he hadn't.

She does see the shy, slight lingering of Ron's lips on Hermione's, and his anxious glance to see if that's all right in public. She thinks that's sweet.

Lavender is quick to notice the things she likes. People never seem to realise that means she has to be quick to see everything, and decide if she likes it.

"Oh Lord, it's true," Draco Malfoy drawled behind them as Hannah Abbott leaned forward to peck Seamus on the cheek.

Hannah, who had always been intimidated by Malfoy, gave a squawk and pitched forward into Seamus' lap. He helped her, and in order not to notice how comfortable they were with each others' bodies, Lavender paid attention to the newly arrived Slytherins.

It was just Malfoy's court. Crabbe and Goyle thick and awkward as overstuffed scarecrows in matching pyjamas. Pansy, in one of the slightly too frilly nightgowns her mother bought her, glaring around at all of them and daring them to comment. Blaise Zabini wearing red pyjama bottoms and a top with 'Pretty in Pink' emblazoned across his chest, because he was a scandal and a disgrace.

And of course Malfoy himself, almost bizarrely slim and elegant between his goons. Lavender loves Seamus, so she thinks it is perfectly acceptable to aesthetically admire Malfoy's pale throat rising from the nape of his black silk pyjamas, or the gleam of his slightly-mussed hair on the smooth surface of his collar.

Otherwise, of course, she would not notice.

"Look, Pansy, it's Spin the Bottle," Malfoy said with a great show of malicious delight. "Fancy. Oooh, what a wild crowd."

"I don't think anyone invited you here, Malfoy," spoke up Harry, glaring from his place in the circle.

Lavender beamed approvingly over at Harry, who was so good. Far too good for her eyes to linger on the frayed dark cuff against his thin wrist.

She always thought she might like to go out with Harry, if there was no Seamus. Because he can be trusted, and he is so noble, and not for any reasons connected with his fame or his Quidditch talent or his dark green eyes.

"Oh, no, I didn't RSVP on the Spin the Bottle party?" Malfoy retorted, curling his thin lip at Harry. "Shame on me. I hope everyone will forgive us just showing up like this. Shift your attractive pyjama-clad assets, Bones, we're coming in."

Susan Bones giggled and half of the circle looked at Crabbe and Goyle with horrified apprehension as all of Malfoy's court joined in the Spin the Bottle game.

Lavender thought there was no harm in seeing that several girls were glancing over to where Malfoy was sitting, cross-legged and oddly reminiscent of a young rajah, pale head thrown back to observe them all with amusement. He appeared smugly conscious of those glances without returning them, though he did spare a sneer for Harry.

Lavender was grateful that he didn't say much for a time. He had a habit of spoiling fun, but he seemed to be content to have made everyone uncomfortable.

He smiled almost like a normal person, almost like everyone else, when Hermione had to lean over and kiss Ernie Macmillan on the cheek and Ron looked distinctly murderous.

And they were all laughing together, like a real group of school friends, like everyone had been in Lavender's Muggle primary school with no houses or secret dangers, when Crabbe's

spin landed on Hannah. Crabbe leaned forward and Hannah gave a squeal of distress and had to be quite literally backed up against the wall before Crabbe could touch her hair with his lips, and sat back blushing as much as Hannah herself.

Malfoy looked like he was going to do himself an injury with the mirth when Pansy's spin landed on Ron.

"I'll kill him first," Pansy said, after a long pause.

"I'd kill myself first," Ron chimed in devoutly.

"Good," Pansy rejoined, with a dangerous glitter in her eyes. "Then we have exactly the same aim in mind."

After the small scuffle, Malfoy claimed that Pansy's lunge had been desperate ardour and that she had kissed Ron, and all his talk about biting was just whining.

Goyle, looking nervous after all this, spun a very little, clearly intending to get Pansy, and got Crabbe.

"Um," Terry Boot said. "I'm not sure what we're supposed to do... Should it be in the rules that you can spin again?"

"Well, yes!" Ron exploded. "None of us want to go around kissing other boys!"

"Speak for yourself, Weasley," Blaise Zabini put in sweetly.

While Ron was spluttering and the Ravenclaws were debating the logistics of Spin the Bottle, Goyle clearly looked around and weighed his options. Lavender noticed that you didn't spend six years around Malfoy without learning elementary tactics.

He tentatively pecked Crabbe on the cheek. Blaise Zabini applauded ferociously when the Ravenclaws agreed that the rules were now decided.

"What," Malfoy inquired, sending the bottle spinning in his turn, "are the rules about tongue?"

Lavender had never seen two more shocked faces than when the bottle stopped, pointing at Harry Potter.

"You know what?" Malfoy said, after a long stunned pause. "... never mind."

Pansy and Zabini were leaning on each other and trying not to collapse with laughter. Malfoy cast a reproachful look at them over his shoulder, and then returned to locking gazes with Harry.

"Er? You two?" Zabini said, once he had regained his breath. "I think that's quite enough staring deeply into each others' eyes to satisfy decorum."

"Those *are* the rules," Terry Boot added reluctantly.

Harry didn't look away from Malfoy even when he was addressing one of the few fifth years in their midst.

"Don't you dare take a picture, Colin."

Malfoy suddenly shrugged, a terribly light movement with him. Lavender was reminded as he leaned out across the circle, on his hands and knees with the black silk stretched along his back, of a predatory thoroughbred animal. The kind that really cannot seem to move without grace, because it is in their very bones.

She heard Harry swallow audibly, in the brief space in which Malfoy was in motion.

Lavender couldn't really blame him for his nervous horror.

She also noticed, which was perfectly reasonable, that Harry started just before Malfoy closed on him. The result was that Malfoy missed his cheek, and his mouth brushed the corner of Harry's.

Malfoy subsided backwards, a single fluid motion that was only made of grace and the inky colour of his pyjamas. Burning crimson was cresting the tops of Harry's cheekbones.

"Is it over?" Ron asked, his face in his hands. "I can't look."

The small, awkward silence broken, Zabini took his spin with the bottle, and seemed extremely displeased about getting Susan Bones.

There was no reason for that incident to be significant, so Lavender did not think or speak about it again.

There was no reason for Harry to remain that painful red for the duration of the game, and to be uncharacteristically unembarrassed by having to peck the several people his spin landed on. There was no reason for him to pause fractionally before spinning, and glance over in Malfoy's general direction. There was no reason for them to avoid exchanging the usual insults, and both to avoid speaking to each other all game long.

Far more interesting things happened during that game, like Zabini trying to slip poor Justin the tongue on his next spin, or indeed Malfoy succeeding in slipping Susan Bones the tongue and causing a prolonged pause in the game.

There was nothing actually interesting in a few moments of charged silence when Malfoy glanced under silvery eyelashes and there was a tiny shared stare of horror (uncertainty). Both of them looked away very quickly afterwards.

Lavender wondered, really, how she had even come to see them.

She decided not to notice.

*

Millicent Bulstrode has always liked to watch the pretty boys.

She has known since she was an unprepossessing child that they would never have anything to do with her. It is a fact known so long to her that she accepts it without bitterness.

Nevertheless, they fascinate her.

The ugly girls are her comrades, her partners in a thousand rough revenges against the world. The pretty girls, with their curls and the robes they seem to make pretty by mere contact with their bodies, are her privately loathed enemies. The boys with faces like hers in masculine form are bound to her already in silence, her kind, destined to be her mates and to lock with her under sheets in the darkness with their eyes tight shut pretending she is an utterly unattainable someone else a thousand times, and call it love.

But the pretty boys, those objects of covert watching and overt covetousness, Millicent has never been sure what her feelings are towards them. She might hate them, or love them just as easily.

She watches them, always. This Christmas Eve day, when everyone is assembling for a dancing lesson in preparation for a little party Dumbledore promised tonight, is no exception.

Millicent observes the frown of concentration on Terry Boot's smooth, clever face. She watches the fast, skilled movements of Blaise's legs. She traces the small bones in Dean Thomas' artist's hands.

The pretty boys are even prettier set to music.

Harry Potter comes in late. Millicent rather enjoys the awkward way he tries to creep in, attracting attention by his care not to do so.

She recalled second year and the feel of his hands, his gallant rush to the defence of Hermione. Hurting one of the pretty girls – even one who masquerades behind a cloud of hair – paled in comparison to the touch of a pretty boy. They so seldom touch her, almost unconsciously avoiding it, confirming everything she knows.

Of course, Harry Potter wasn't as pretty then as he is now.

Millicent looked with a distant sort of pleasure at the sooty shock of his hair, the clean line of his jaw and the darkening of his green eyes as he stared across the room.

The room was slightly darkened and he was in the shadows, which became him. The music playing was rich and dark, as if to coax the shadows themselves into the dance. But Harry Potter wasn't dancing. He was only staring.

Millicent turned her attention to a rather more interesting pretty boy.

Pansy usually resented any prolonged staring at Draco, who she was very possessive about. Millicent could retort at any time with *He's not yours anymore, you know*, but she rather admires Pansy, who is so close to being one of Millicent's own kind and yet who saved herself by some self-confident tilt to her rather heavy jaw or toss of her long black hair, and appointed herself head of the Slytherin pretty girls.

So she only watches Draco when Pansy is clearly occupied.

He well repays the wait. All that prettiness is on disdainful display, and it isn't so much about the silky-light locks of hair or the soft white line of his throat as the overwhelmingly attractive arrogance. Draco acts, moves, *breathes* as if he's annoyed that he was placed in this drab world.

He wasn't strutting now, just dancing and as caught up in it as Draco ever is in anything, but that arrogance was still in every line of him. In the way his head fell backwards, in the fluid, easy swing of hips.

Pansy was dancing with him, sinking to the floor, her hands on his thighs, and Millicent smiled almost fondly at their daring. After all, she was a Slytherin too.

She glanced back almost absently at Harry Potter, and it's only in that swift glance away from Draco that she can follow Potter's gaze, and see who he was staring at.

Oh, well. Oh my, my, my.

Millicent knows enough about watching to know when someone isn't aware they're doing it, and Potter is certainly not thinking about this. He thinks he's being absent-minded, thinks he's day-dreaming.

Pansy's hands shifted on Draco's thighs, outlining them, and Draco twisted his hips as if his bones could bend like strippers. Amazing how anyone so pale and aristocratic could seem so dirty.

Potter went deep red, and Millicent could tell that he would have honestly claimed it was because the room was hot.

And getting hotter by the minute.

Professor Flitwick interrupted then by breaking people up, expressing his horror at the behaviour of his students. (Blaise, bless him, had further distressed the man by grabbing at Seamus Finnigan as he waltzed past.)

Everybody got a good laugh at the tiny man lining up his feet with such dainty precision.

"Watch me, children. Like this. Heel, toe. I will assign new partners, if you please. Heel, toe!"

"Has anyone ever *wondered* about that man?" Blaise inquired.

Draco, leaning between Pansy and Millicent, raised his eyebrow.

"Speculating about the height, Blaise?"

Bloodshed was avoided only by the prospect of different bloodshed, when Pansy (as the scandalous maiden) was assigned to be Potter's dancing partner. Potter looked unhappy. Pansy looked enraged.

She took the opportunity of kicking him in the ankle at every opportunity, and Potter spent the chief of his time whispering to her furiously to stop it or looking at her with irritation. Yet Millicent noticed, just occasionally, him looking at her hands as if they were entirely separate from her, with something that might have been wonder.

Millicent almost forgot all her observations when Draco was assigned to be her partner. He smiled, obviously relieved that he had got a Slytherin, and she was distracted and charmed by the cupid's bow of his mouth.

He actually had a very charming mouth, one that must have been adorable when he was a baby, but he had twisted it into so many nasty shapes and used it to say so many nasty things, that a curl of wickedness seemed to linger on it. No matter what expression he wore, it always seemed on the point of a sneer.

Like the scornful sneer that immediately curled his mouth when Potter and Pansy fell out of step and heavily against them.

"Clumsy oaf," Draco said, in his utterly haughty way.

She noticed that even as he spoke, neither he nor Potter moved, staying with their sides pressed flush against each other. That wayward colour was rising to Potter's cheeks again.

Millicent suppressed a gleeful smile at the thought of how disappointed the pretty girls were going to be.

*

Dean Thomas was sitting at dinner, the day after Christmas, building a castle of sausages and mashed potatoes and pondering the people who were necessary to each other.

It wasn't a question, he thought, of being self-sufficient. He himself was independent, able to be solitary and happy with his art and his soccer books and his maintained reserve. Often he preferred being quiet and thinking things over to company.

Nor was it a question, really, of any particular resemblances or differences between the two people.

He thought it was a question of vitality – and vitality meant life, and life meant necessity, and that was why love was like an instinct for survival.

Dean often had abstracted thoughts like these, which nobody would have guessed at by his quiet demeanour. He thought his thoughts might be made of the same stuff as the dreams and hopes obvious to everyone in Ginny Weasley's dark hopeful eyes, whenever she looked at Harry.

Maybe it was fantasy made of the same stuff as reflection, or maybe it was the fact he subsided back into quietness and she leaped into bright, voluble vividness. Maybe it was that she had smiled at him when she was waiting for Quidditch try-outs, and he had not been able to forget that smile.

Maybe it was only about the bright hair and the dreamy eyes, but he thought she was necessary.

He saw no sign that she was necessary to Harry, who preferred to act than consider, and whose dreams were darker than Ginny had ever dreamed and left sweat blotted onto his pillow. He was waiting for Ginny to realise, and perhaps this entire train of thought was only unrequited love.

Dean was a sixteen year old boy, though, and hope sprang eternal. He really thought there might be something in this theory.

His boisterous best friend and Lavender were not the kind of pair he meant. Seamus' eyes were aware of that, moving from one candidate to the next, and the rest of his body followed with his mind trailing last.

Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott were different. Ernie harboured a dozen dark suspicions about the school, the Dark Lord, the war, the house elves drugging the food, every single day, and it scared nervous Hannah out of her mind. He could not have found anyone else more upset by them, and she would not have lived her life in constant apprehension without him, and yet they still sought each other's company. Dean saw them now, not looking at each other or talking to each other but to Susan and Justin, but with their elbows touching and comforted by that silent reassurance of each other's presence.

Last week, when Blaise Zabini's mother had mysteriously disappeared, Hannah and Ernie had looked for each other, blind to everyone else until they had been able to link hands, and Ernie had said not a word about disaster.

Dean had watched that even as the teachers tried not to show they were worried, as the children cried, as Ginny had held his hand and as Malfoy had caused a rather extreme distraction by throwing a soup tureen at Harry.

Neither of them was particularly attractive. Half the time they drove each other mad. But there it was.

Necessary.

Dean wasn't sure about Ron and Hermione. They seemed necessary when they were together, looking at each other, kissing or arguing with each other, but they never seemed to reach for each other when they were looking outwards at the different things which interested them. Dean wondered how exactly you could tell the difference between affection, desire and enough love to make people seem necessary to each other and being necessary to each other.

He wondered if Ron and Hermione knew.

He also wondered how often vitality in a person was mistaken for necessity.

That was why Ginny's eyes followed Harry, he thought. The energy that made him win in Quidditch, hurled him into a thousand fairytale situations and that had led him to fight a monster with a shining sword for her sake.

Dean looked quickly away from Ginny's bright head and fixed them on the excellent diversion of the Slytherin Quidditch team's arrival.

It seemed there had been yet another Gryffindor and Slytherin dispute over the pitch, since Harry and Ron in their Quidditch gear had only been eating dinner for ten minutes and Ron was clearly in a foul mood.

In contrast, the Slytherins were swaggering in with the air of bandits who had raided the village, burned the houses to the ground and then sown said ground with salt, and now were up for as many maidens as they could ravish.

On second thoughts, Dean could probably absolve Pansy of intentions to ravish.

And Zabini, actually.

As for Malfoy, he had just whipped off his Quidditch robes and was sitting, sweating and smirking in his jumper and breeches, as if he had decided not to bother and was calmly waiting to be ravished himself.

"Oh dear," Parvati said in Dean's ear. "Malfoy's smiling that 'Good evening, I am sex' smile. Oh, dear. Is it hot in here?"

"Not so's you'd notice," Dean replied. "It being December."

Parvati laughed, flicking her hair over her shoulder. She was very pretty, and a good friend. Once Dean had considered – and he thought she might still be considering...

But Ginny had turned around and smiled at Quidditch try-outs. But Parvati wasn't necessary.

"I personally don't think the Quidditch outfit ought to be allowed," she continued. "I mean, look at it. Look at those breeches, look at the leather. Look at the way-"

"Er, Parvati," Dean said.

Harry, sitting innocently a few places away in his Quidditch gear, had stopped with a spoon to his mouth looking simultaneously horrified and hunted.

"Sorry, Harry," Parvati said. "I didn't mean you."

"I'd gathered that," Harry answered drily.

At that point Dean rather expected Harry to glare over at the Slytherin table, but he was already looking over there.

Of course, that was natural enough. Dean had known Harry for nearly six years now, and he knew the Harry Potter Mealtime Ritual.

Look for Ron, nod. Glance over to Hermione, smile. Eyes lock onto the Slytherin table, glare.

There had been a time when there'd been a slot between Hermione and Malfoy: steal a glimpse of Cho Chang, blush.

But that hadn't lasted, and Dean had never expected it to. There was a case where even desire was uncertain and more like curiosity, and nothing like need.

"Even without the fact that this is Malfoy, and any thoughts like that about him are unspeakably disgusting," Ron said, scowling, "it's house treason to even look at a member of that cheating Slytherin team."

"Come on, Ron," Harry said mildly, and with a look of great secret satisfaction. "It's not like we can't take them."

Forestalling the innuendo trembling on Parvati's lips, Dean asked hastily, "What d'you mean?"

Harry grinned engagingly.

"Well. You know Dumbledore allotted our teams the hour before dinner, half an hour for each? And you know that Malfoy always brings the team down ten minutes early, so a third of our time is taken up arguing and we never get in a decent practise?"

Dean and Parvati both nodded, mentally inserting 'waging bloody warfare' for 'arguing.'

"We all had to wash our hands in Potions class, and Malfoy left his watch on his desk. I set it ten minutes slow, and we got in our full practise." Harry looked pleased. "I can handle Malfoy."

"So..." Dean said slowly, "how come you only came in ten minutes ago, and you're both still in your Quidditch gear?"

"Everyone else on the team got dressed and into dinner on time," Ron said defensively.

"Yes, but – what happened to you?" Dean kept his voice patient.

"A completely evil, typically Slytherin and totally unjustified attack," Ron informed him.

"Malfoy heard the clock strike," Harry explained, twisting his vegetables on his fork, "and he tried to make me eat his watch. So I hit him with my broom."

"...as any self-respecting Gryffindor would have," Ron nodded.

"So, you just had another fight?" Parvati asked. "And – sorry, let me guess – it ended up in Malfoy challenging you to a duel."

"I was his second," Ron put in depreciatingly, as if this made it all sensible.

"It was pretty much exactly like yesterday, then," Parvati concluded. "Good handling, Harry."

“We got in our full practise,” Harry objected strenuously.

“Yes, Harry.” Parvati patted his hand. “I’m just saying that it might be nice if you two could keep your hands off your wands at the sight of each other. That’s all.”

“That is completely unfair,” Harry argued. “I see him all the time and don’t hex him. Practically my entire life is spent not hexing him-”

“The time you spend under supervision does not count,” Parvati told him sternly.

Harry subsided into a low muttering.

“He should hex Malfoy more,” Ron proposed earnestly. “It’s good for him.”

“It might well be therapeutic for Harry,” Parvati began.

Ron stared. “I meant for Malfoy. It will make him a nicer person.”

“If he keeps it up, it will make him a *vegetable!*”

Ron looked happy. “Like I said.”

Hermione glanced up from her dinner to look reproofing, but changed her mind and simply sent him an affectionate look. He looked back.

Harry glared over at the Slytherin table. Parvati turned back to Dean.

“I wish I could handle-” Parvati began.

“Stop,” Harry said absently.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“Bet you a Galleon?”

Parvati’s mouth snapped shut. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I’m off to the common room,” he said. “I have a load of homework to do.”

“I’ll help you with it,” Hermione told him, and they exchanged a little smile. Those two were almost necessary to each other, although it was in a way that reminded Dean softly of his Muggle brothers and sisters at home.

Dean was also used to the way Harry always seemed to pass by the Slytherin table, just to frown and make it clear that being near it was unpleasant to him.

This time Malfoy, who was lounging in a chair at the table’s end, casually stuck out his broom and tripped Harry up.

The noise made Hannah Abbott cry out, and Dean glanced over just in time to see the instinctive outreach of her hand in Ernie's direction, even before she looked to see what it was that alarmed her.

He looked back and saw, almost at the same instant, Harry falling forward onto Malfoy.

He thought that Harry could have caught at the table or the chair, but Harry naturally, instinctively, used Malfoy as a support, and fell heavily against him.

"Oh no, poor Harry!" Hermione murmured.

Dean said nothing, but craned to see.

Malfoy's hand was steadying Harry's elbow before either of them had breath to talk. Once he had, he said, "Potter, you lump," in tones of deep disgust.

Harry was still gasping indignantly for breath, even as he used Malfoy's chest for leverage. Dean rather appreciated the spread of Harry's red cloak against Malfoy's green jumper; he thought it would have made for a rather festive portrait.

"Excuse me?" Harry gasped out at last. "You're the one who tripped me."

Everyone was quietly discussing the probability of another duel between Harry and Malfoy. In Dean's hearing at least, nobody mentioned the fact that the intrepid hero was to all intents and purposes kneeling in his sworn enemy's lap.

"Naturally I thought you'd have better balance than this," Malfoy said disdainfully. "Aren't you supposed to be rather good at Quidditch?"

He spoke as one who had been deceived by hearsay.

Harry pulled Malfoy's head back by his hair.

"I could take you anytime," he growled.

If either of them had shown the smallest hint of discomfort, it would have comforted Dean very much. But Harry was on top of Malfoy, and Malfoy's head was held back, and they were both acting as if this was all utterly natural, utterly...

"Any time's good for me," Malfoy answered, curling his lip.

Harry stared in what everyone agreed to be heated hatred at Malfoy's sneer and eyes and throat.

"I suppose all times are the same to you," he remarked, speaking close to Malfoy's ear. "I heard your watch wasn't working. You should get that seen to."

"Thanks for reminding me," Malfoy hissed back, lifting his head.

Harry didn't back off. His hand remained in Malfoy's hair. They were practically nose to nose.

"Keep your hands off my stuff in future," Malfoy ordered softly. "I understand, with your *deprived* background, that you may not understand the concept of belongings, but I assure you if your mummy and daddy had-"

"Oh, but that old chestnut doesn't work anymore, does it?" Harry snapped. "Where's *your* daddy, little Draco?"

And Harry was on his back on the table, Malfoy's elbow slammed down on the wooden board beside his head.

"Don't you dare talk about my father!"

Harry still had hold of Malfoy's hair, and pulled his face down.

"Then don't talk about my-"

"Mr Potter! Mr Malfoy, if you please," Professor Snape said. "Is this appropriate behaviour at the dinner table?"

They had the scarcity and occupation of the teachers to thank for the entertainment being prolonged to this extent.

Snape's mouth curled. "Or should I say, on the dinner table?"

"He started it," Potter said crossly, sitting up and banging foreheads with Malfoy sharply.

"Ow! Ow, Potter, you buffoon," Malfoy said, backing up to Dean's intense relief. "I did no such thing, professor. He deliberately sabotaged-"

"Oh, deliberate this-"

"You see, Professor," Malfoy ground out, his teeth gritted. Harry had stood up and for some reason they were nose to nose again. "He's threatening me-"

"Come along, Potter," Snape said, "I'm taking you to your head of house. She is engaged in her office, but doubtless she will deal with you as she sees fit."

Snape's smile suggested he hoped for a pit of scorpions, at the very least.

Malfoy smirked and hissed something in Harry's ear. Dean wished that Harry could have stepped back after the appropriate instant, or that Malfoy's mouth could at least have been positioned a fraction further from skin.

"And you will come with me, Mr Malfoy," Snape said.

Harry whispered something back in Malfoy's ear. They were really standing very close together indeed.

Snape seized both of their elbows. Their attention remained focused even as they were dragged out.

Parvati whistled. "That was *vicious*."

"Malfoy's a git, what can you do," Hermione said pragmatically. "I was pleased to see Harry in such good form."

Dean realised that Harry hadn't looked abstracted or depressed once during this dinner.

He remembered that festive portrait.

He supposed there were many kinds of necessity.

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Snape walked quickly down the hall, dragging the boys in his wake. He deposited that Potter boy - who, of course, gave him an extremely insolent look as he did so - in Minerva's office, and then turned to Draco with his arms folded.

"Mr. Malfoy," he said despairingly, "have you *no* self-restraint?"

Draco looked slightly abashed. Snape knew that the slight bite to his mouth was more than any other teacher would have received - he'd heard often enough complaints about the resentful scorn with which young Malfoy received every reprimand.

"I didn't start it-" he began argumentatively.

Snape sighed. "You always say that."

Draco folded his arms, but looked at Snape with a little smile tugging the corner of his mouth. The child had a way with him when he liked you, though that was the best-kept secret of Slytherin house.

"Well... it's always true," he offered.

Draco did like him, which struck Snape as nothing short of miraculous, considering what he had felt when he first saw him.

He had been dreading the children of that year. James Potter's son, who he was prepared to loathe and yet feel beholden to, and Lucius Malfoy's son, who he had to conciliate in order to keep with Lucius - because Dumbledore said you never know, one day, one day you'll need the trust of the Death Eaters again...

And he'd seen them at the Sorting ceremony, and they were all he had dreaded. Little facsimiles of their fathers, and hatred had clasped around his heart and squeezed hard. But he'd known what to do.

He had loathed and protected and watched out for and despised and still worried about that stupid Potter brat, that golden boy just like his father who never ever thought about anything,

just rushed in and won no matter what rules – *attempted murder* – he trampled, and was acclaimed. That had all gone just as expected.

So had the first five minutes of his interaction with Lucius' boy.

Flatter him, lure him to your side, and that was bound to work because flattery had always worked like a Charm on Lucius. And the boy – Draco, and that was a ridiculous name – was so like him.

He had carefully avoided looking at him, at those terribly familiar eyes, when he had called out to everyone loudly, "Everyone can come look at the way Mr Malfoy has stewed his horned slugs. At least there's *one* of you who isn't totally incompetent."

Then he'd glanced down, just for the look of listless satisfaction that assured him his mission was accomplished.

The boy was *glowing*. And the slugs were perfectly stewed.

Snape had begun to watch him more carefully after that.

Draco was more unpleasant than politic Lucius would ever have dreamed of being. Lucius always maintained a dignified distance, just tinged with distaste, towards those he didn't like... until he got the upper hand. Draco would hurl himself at a brick wall. Lucius had been deeply uninterested in school, and Draco was as competitive in that as he was in everything – not only competitive but focused, interested, the kind of student Snape always wanted. The kind of student he hadn't wanted to find in Lucius Malfoy's son.

He hadn't wanted to like him. He wouldn't have liked him, even if he was an exemplary child, for the simple reason of his blood.

He was a perfectly horrible child. Snape remembered that, remembered the reserved resentful nature that always assumed it was disliked and which had found such ample supporting evidence in Hogwarts.

Your hand turned against everyone's, and everyone's hand turned against you.

Spite and malice and lies and hatred bred in Slytherin, and your companions in that were your only comrades. Snape knew the feeling, had been born a follower and had followed into darkness as far as he could go until it was better to be utterly alone.

He had known that was all there was in store for this child, and had struggled against this stupid inclination.

Unlike Snape, unlike Lucius, Draco had not been born a follower.

Nobody in Slytherin house would have understood the oh-so-unintentional-and-purely-noble leadership qualities of James Potter or his son.

Draco bullied his chosen friends appallingly, and curled his lip at everyone else. He was a cold, calculating, selfish little brat. And he trained Crabbe and Goyle with ruthless iciness that frightened them into submission, and made sure they passed every year.

He had the charisma appreciated by Slytherins. The kind of ice-pale looks that marked him as being so pure-blooded he seemed to have a different sort of blood than everyone, the kind of mind which gloried in devious plots and the kind of easy exhibitionism which could be used for malice and win acclaim. Snape saw the way even the older students looked at him some days, with respect, waiting for his cues.

He remembered, very clearly, the day he had consciously begun to hope.

It was in Draco's third year, and Fred and George Weasley had casually hissed, "We know what our dad found in your father's basement, Slytherin" at a first year.

Snape had moved to interfere, and Draco had wheeled sharply around first, Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

"Excuse me?" he'd asked coldly.

"We weren't talking to you, Malfoy," George had snapped. "Though you're all the same."

"That's right," Draco replied. "We're all the same. So you were talking to me. So when you go for one of us, you go for all of us. So leave Slytherin alone."

"Oh, what, you're taking the high moral ground?" asked Fred, while George glanced uneasily around and saw Slytherins breaking off from their walk and joining, one by one, the mass behind Draco.

"Me?" Draco had laughed, and said it before they could say it. "Hardly. I'm saying we can make you sorry. Get lost, Weasleys."

Fred and George had left, loudly remarking it was because they were outnumbered – which of course was the only way Slytherins attacked.

Resentment. And Snape had seen one man turn Slytherin resentment to a force behind him before. And now he'd seen a child do it.

Harry Potter would have said something comforting to the first year, assuring him of his worth. Draco just turned and left.

Snape saw the way the child looked after him.

Draco never showed the least affection for anyone, but if you were Slytherin, you *knew*.

Snape knew, and felt guilty when he thought about how he'd tried to engage Lucius' son's favour, wished he were anything but Lucius' son now. And remembered the look on Draco's face, that trust, when he said: "I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir."

Snape loved many things – the idea of house solidarity, loyalty, some abstract concept of right, spells, potions – the idea of Slytherin itself.

He did not love many people. But what else was that feeling, when Mad-Eye Moody arrived at his office clutching Draco's arm too tight, with Draco too proud to cry, and Moody demanding more punishment for him? Snape stormed to Dumbledore that instant, and it would have saved them all trouble and heartache if Dumbledore had agreed to dismiss Moody.

Bounced him against stone walls, as if he was a ball. Transfigured him so he was sick for days afterwards, and when he helped Draco off with his robes there were enormous bruises, darkly purpled against his skin. Snape had given him a Potion to drink, and held his hand in front of his face so Draco didn't see his murderous fury.

"You should stay in bed tomorrow," he said.

Draco had held his chin up. "They're not going to laugh at me any more than I can help," he said in steely tones.

This boy, assaulted in the school, and the assault ratified by the authorities, the assailant unpunished. Snape saw the looks on the other Slytherin faces as they walked around for days afterwards. He heard the Gryffindor children laughing about it and wondered what would have happened if he had done such a thing to one of those golden children.

He had trembled for Draco then. He understood the impulse for revenge.

And it was for Draco and the others that he trembled most of all when Harry Potter disappeared in that maze, and when in the middle of the panic he felt the Dark Mark on his arm burst into black fire. He had sunk to his knees, and felt his children run to his side.

He'd leaned on Draco, still small then and too pale, and Draco had borne almost his full weight without flinching.

He had looked into Draco's face. Most of the others were mystified, but in Draco's eyes was unflinching knowledge. His father had shown him. He knew what was happening.

"Don't tell the others," Snape hissed.

"No, sir. Clear a space, you idiots!" Draco snapped, turning on them; they stepped back as he spoke. "Can't you see he needs air?" He spoke low and soft, the child trained in deceit. "Are you... are you going to go, sir?"

Snape had swallowed and felt a pang more than he believed he could have felt for anyone still alive. Now he would now exactly how much Draco was already compromised.

"No," he said through gritted teeth and pain.

Draco had been pale, but Draco was always pale. And he didn't know how to be anything but loyal to Slytherin. "All right, sir. Does it – hurt much?"

“Yes.” Snape had never lied to any of them.

Draco had looked briefly withdrawn, and Snape knew he was thinking about his father. “Come sit down, sir,” he said, and then he paused. His face was turned away, the glint of his eyes like winter. “Do you... think Potter’s dead?”

“I hope not,” said Snape. He hadn’t wanted James Potter to die. He hadn’t wanted to be glad about it.

There was no triumph in Draco’s face. Snape hadn’t been sure why he asked.

Later, when Potter was shivering and telling his story – little hero, caressed orphan – and had mentioned Lucius Malfoy as one of the ring around the returned Dark Lord, Snape had thought *Draco* and shivered sharply. Only Potter had glanced over at him, and he looked at Fudge to hide his fear.

He’d trembled for Draco all through the summer. Draco had returned holding fast to Pansy Parkinson, a girl who had always clearly adored him and who before that summer he’d seemed to find rather funny. Snape didn’t want to think that Draco was willing to hold onto anything by then.

Unholy triumph when Draco had returned to school from Christmas fatherless. He had watched as Draco told him, his whole body held stiff against pain, and he’d looked at the pale hair and skin and eyes and thought that they didn’t belong to anyone else on earth now. It was like a Christmas present.

His boy now.

Draco did what Snape had known he would do, what Draco had been born to do. He took aside all the Slytherins, he talked and he kept talking and he didn’t stop at trickery or intimidation.

He turned up at the Young Order of the Phoenix, the children’s federation against Voldemort, and sneered at the suspicious faces with most of the Slytherins behind him.

This year... how he had worked. Tall now and rather beautiful, which was a distant sort of triumph for Snape. Without Pansy as a crutch, without anyone. He had drawn plans and talked people down at the Order and he was too obstinate and too mean to let anyone stop him.

He had been hunched over a desk one night and Snape had come to order him to bed. He had propped his chin on his hand, hair flaring in the candlelight.

“I have to finish this plan first,” he said. “You understand, sir. You always did – even back at the start.”

His voice had been emotionless.

“When you didn’t,” Snape said, his tone equally flat.

Draco had glanced up at him. "Sorry if I disappointed you, sir."

"Malfoy. You never disappointed me." His voice couldn't have been colder.

Almost painful swelling of triumph and pride and affection that had become fixed. *My boy.*

With only one weakness that worried him.

"I think you're a most promising student, Malfoy," he told him now.

Another little smile. "Thank you, sir."

"Which is why it gives me great pain to see you behaving as if you are five years old. Honestly, how many fights with Potter have you had during this week alone?"

Draco pursed his lips. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday."

"Then... five."

"This just gets worse and worse, Malfoy. You have *responsibilities*, you know. What is it about the stupid boy that affects you so much?"

Draco flushed now, which was unusual for him.

"He doesn't affect me at all!"

"Then why, Malfoy, do these appalling displays continue?" Snape inquired icily. "They are unutterably puerile, as I hope you are aware. And I have implored you over and over again to restrain yourself. You have a fine mind, Mr Malfoy, and I have no idea why it seems to take a suicide leap every time you encounter Mr Potter."

This one last trace of childishness, and spite was all well and good but Draco's behaviour was getting entirely out of hand.

"I'm not – sir, I didn't think-" Draco paused. "Sir – I'll try."

Snape knew that Draco's word to a Slytherin was good, and he knew he took his responsibilities seriously, and he was dismayed to find he entirely disbelieved him.

"I hope you do. Mr Potter may well be exasperating, but you do realise that you are making yourself look foolish."

A fate worse than death. Draco coloured and nodded again, turning away to walk down the corridor – where Potter was emerging from his interview with Minerva, most probably unpunished.

"Watch where you're going," Draco snapped, before Potter could possibly have touched him.

“I didn’t touch you,” Potter pointed out immediately.

Draco raised his eyebrow. “Well, mind you don’t.”

“Why don’t you mind your own and stop bothering me for a change?” Potter demanded.

“I’m not the disrespector of personal property who-”

“Get bent and die, Malfoy!”

“You first, Potter!”

Potter shoved him. Snape cleared his throat menacingly.

Draco and Potter glanced over at him, distracted. Potter’s hands stayed on Draco’s arms.

“How many times do I have to say it, Mr. Malfoy!” Snape said, his voice tight. “Restrain yourself!”

He walked into his office.

Dear God, it couldn’t be true.

He slammed his door, with luck forever, on all such disturbing thoughts.

*

Of course, some people had been aware before this.

Everyone had always said Ravenclaws were smarter.

It was four days after Christmas, and Lisa Turpin and Mandy Brocklehurst were compiling their annual list.

“All right,” Mandy calculated, carefully going over their account books, “that’s last place to Ron Weasley.”

“Just like last year,” Lisa remarked. “How many?”

“Er – two,” Mandy said.

“That’s impressive for Ron,” Lisa noted. “He’s only ever received one before.”

“Blaise – bless him – scored a naughty touch going off the Quidditch pitch, and he and Draco had another wrestling match.”

“Does being the recipient of a naughty touch count?” Lisa mused.

“It does unless you punch them,” Mandy said wisely. “But he blushed.”

Lisa looked thrilled. “Well well, Mr Weasley, maybe it was all just denial after all. Maybe the boy has hidden depths.”

She eyed Ron delightedly across the tables. Ron noticed and went bright red, reaching out for Hermione’s hand.

“Ew,” Lisa said, grimacing. “There’s no call for that kind of thing. And he thinks I fancy him now. Ew.”

“Give it up, that boy is a lost cause,” Mandy said. “Not so the gorgeous Draco, delight of our hearts, who is in first place with three hundred and eighty-seven points.”

“I love him,” Lisa declared with deep conviction.

She looked over at Draco, who was wearing Quidditch robes again because they had been relegated to practise right after dinner. She tried to inject admiration into her eyes.

Draco winked at her.

Lisa looked a little disappointed. “Maybe he just has chemistry with everything,” she said doubtfully. “I mean, let’s face it, I can’t see him touch his broomstick without having to go have a nice lie down.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Mandy remarked. “Twice the fun, half the conscience.”

“Half of nothing is still nothing, Mandy.”

“Works out well for Draco, doesn’t it?”

“Who’s in second place?” Lisa asked.

Mandy looked disgruntled. “Blaise Zabini. I mean, I’m not saying anything against Blaise, he clearly deserves a place of honour all his own, but it ruins our tradition. And it’s all because you gave him so many points for that stupid leather.”

Lisa gave a cry. “Don’t say a word against the leather!”

“I didn’t mean it, Lisa. I... just said it to hurt you.”

Lisa sighed contentedly and gave Blaise a leisurely once-over. He put down his fork, scowled horribly at her and moved his chair closer to Draco’s.

Very gratifying, Mandy was sure, but it just didn’t sit well with her. It was against all the proud traditions of W.I.G.S. They had always given the top spots to those who had inspired the foundation of Women Into Gay Subtext, and this break with the norm could mean a backlash.

They could be starting a barren year, filled with nothing but men fancying women! It was too awful to contemplate.

Besides, she *liked* these two. They were her favourites.

“Who’s number four?” Lisa inquired.

“Oh... Terry,” Mandy replied, abstracted.

“*Our* Terry?” Lisa squealed. She beamed at him. He looked back, blinked in a perplexed manner and returned to his book. She wriggled in glee. “I love a man with hidden depths.”

“Mmm,” Mandy agreed. “He was very interested when Draco came in after Harry hurled all that pumpkin juice at him. Do you remember? In his Quidditch gear? I thought those breeches were indecent before...”

“Yees,” Lisa said. “But you know, that doesn’t necessarily mean gay. I mean, it could mean ‘not blind.’”

“Lisa,” Mandy admonished her sternly. “Have I ever led you wrong before? No, I don’t believe I have. I know what I’m talking about. Unlike some people, who pulled me around the entire school convinced that Percy Weasley was having it off in a secret love shack with Oliver Wood, and catapulted me into a room where he was kissing Penny Clearwater. Do you recall how many points we lost?”

Lisa pouted.

“I still can’t believe that boy is straight. His name is Percival! Percival!”

“There, there.”

“Six boys, and every one of them straight,” Lisa said wrathfully. “Mrs Weasley should be ashamed of herself. *Ashamed.*”

“Mrs Malfoy makes up for her,” Mandy soothed.

They both watched Draco, leaning close to Blaise and then leaning laughingly away, as Blaise watched him push his hair behind his ear.

“Oh, she must be a proud mother,” Lisa said tearfully. “Oh, if I could have a son like that!”

Draco got up at that point, casting them an amused and flirtatious look. They both gazed rapturously back, and hoped he’d wink at Blaise.

He didn’t, but as he was going out the door he walked right into Harry Potter, coming in late for dinner from Quidditch practise.

Lisa and Mandy squeaked and joined hands tightly.

“Ooooh, he’s all sweaty and there’s body contact!”

“Will you hush!”

“Watch it!” Draco snapped, and Harry shoved him against the door frame.

Draco’s head banged against it and he glared at Harry ferociously. Harry leaned in to glare just as furiously back.

Mandy wanted to take a picture of this, and make copies of it and put them in all of her schoolbooks. She wanted to memorise the blending of their red and green Quidditch robes, the heated gazes, the heads so close Harry’s dishevelled hair was touching Draco’s forehead and the line of Harry’s flushed throat as he leaned in, and the curve of Draco’s as he arched it back.

Lisa’s eyes darted up to the top of the door frame, and her grip almost broke Mandy’s hand.

“Mandy!” she said in an agonised squeak. *“There’s mistletoe on that door!”*

“I think,” Mandy said, very carefully, “I may die.”

“Bite me, Malfoy,” Harry said in his lowest voice.

Mandy became convinced that she was, in fact, dying.

Draco’s lip curled. “Blow me, Potter.”

They glared at each other for another moment, stretched screamingly long by the pressure of Lisa’s hand on Mandy’s.

Then they went their separate ways, banging shoulders hard as they passed.

Lisa lay back in her chair and fanned herself.

“I think we have a new second place,” Mandy said, trying to conceal her satisfaction.

Lisa could only nod weakly.

“Oh, I’m looking forward to this new year,” Mandy continued happily. “Every year those boys get more gay.”

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Flame and Shadow

"I'll have another drink."

"That'll be your ninth, and you haven't danced once," remarked the bartender. "My guess is it's a woman."

"A woman? Let me tell you something. It's not a woman," Ron said, pleased to find his voice was only a very, very little slurred.

The bar was dark and dilapidated, the ceiling above stained with dark spreading patches of yellow. The floor was crowded with cheaply and barely covered bodies, made decent only by wreaths of smoke. And Ron had just been to the bathroom, and heard someone in the left cubicle snorting coke and in the right vomiting.

Hermione would never have ventured in here, and if she had she would have shuddered and turned upon her heel.

"And I'll tell you something else," Ron said, leaning heavily on the bar. "*Fuck* women."

There was a gloomy pleasure in that, too. Saying something Hermione and his mother would never have approved of, and God, he'd been under the thumb of women all his life, hadn't he?

Outshone by his friend and his brothers and bloody well bullied by his mother and his teachers and the woman he'd... he...oh, the *hell* with it.

"And I could dance, you know," Ron added, not noticing that the bartender had turned his back on him and was serving another customer. "I could. Anytime I wanted. How can't you say I dare?"

He frowned. If there had been something wrong with that sentence - he didn't care. It just made him feel angrier and more defiant.

"I *will*," he announced loudly. "I'll show you."

And he let go of the bar. He staggered for an instant - he was probably too used to leaning against it - but then the press of bodies kept him up whether he wanted to be up or not. It even moved him, as if he'd been caught in a wave.

Dancing wasn't so hard. Well, that showed his mother who'd sent him out to dance - who could have danced in those robes? - and Hermione who'd danced with someone else, and Padma Patil who had looked at him scornfully as if she knew he couldn't dance and knew he was jealous and thought he was pathetic.

Showed them all.

Ron stumbled and grabbed onto something to keep himself upright.

It worked admirably, and the something was the waist of a woman who had her back to him.

She obviously mistook the gesture, and shimmied backwards up against him.

Ron stared, saw only a tight black dress covering very little of a back that had sweat glistening on it, a fall of wild black hair and a generous curve of hips below his hands.

He didn't let go. The woman moved into his body, and he rocked his hips along with her sway, and she fitted and rubbed against him and he leaned his head back a little and thought...

"*Fuck* women," he said again.

The woman tossed back her hair.

"How many did you have in mind?" she asked with a laugh, and turned her head to glance at him.

Considering she had insinuated herself in between his thighs, he supposed it was about time he saw her face.

That was all he thought for a minute, and then that snub nose and curling mouth hit his brain like a brick applied to the side of his head.

"Shit," he said. "Pansy Parkinson?"

Her eyes flicked up to his hair, and then back down to his face. He knew that she was probably on drugs when she laughed again.

"I don't believe it," she said. "I'm rubbing up against Weasley bits."

"I'm not too happy about this either!"

Pansy lifted an eyebrow. "Opinions seem to differ below stairs."

Ron registered this, and the fact that she was still between his thighs, with what he dimly recognised as mortification.

"Look," he said loudly, to cover it, "I can't hear a word you're saying. Come here."

He meant to pull her gently into some side room where he could be sure nobody they knew would see them, and talk to her until he was sure that this subject never had to be brought up again.

He hadn't really considered that there were very few side rooms to dank bars, and that he was far too drunk to gauge how to pull someone, and that there were things besides the subject that could be brought up.

Further up.

It ended up with them both staggering, and Ron stumbling into another room and against a wall, with Pansy Parkinson in his arms.

"Weasley," Pansy said thickly, "this is the mens' bathroom."

It had been months since he'd had a woman crushed up against him. And he was very drunk, so drunk the whole room was blurring behind her head.

And it was another thing that would disgust Hermione.

So he kissed her.

It was a sloppy drunken kiss, tongues probing clumsily and teeth clicking together, but it was a good excuse for friction. His cock was against her stomach, her breasts crushed warmly against his chest. She pulled back only a fraction; her wet lips and eyes gleaming.

"Why not," was all she said, her words rough and hurried, and kissed him fiercely.

He wasn't used to an aggressive kiss from a woman, but he liked it that it was so different from Hermione. He didn't care who she was or what she did so long as she was that, and so he liked her tongue shoving down his throat, the way she pushed him against the sink and crawled all over him, the fever heat of contact and friction and...

"Oy. Come on, get her out of here, this is the bloody men's room," said a man's voice, and they were manhandled out of there, still stumbling and almost falling over each other and their own feet.

Ron hurried her urgently out of the club before she could change her mind. She didn't seem inclined to, as soon as they were out of the club he fell against a wall and she looked up at him, his head knocked back against the brick and trying to maintain his balance.

"God, you're drunk," she said in a slurred, amused voice.

"I don't care."

He still had hold of her arms and he yanked her up against him, both of their mouths already open and soon he had her tongue in his mouth and he was holding onto her breast and he moved against her and maybe in a moment...

She pulled back. "Your place, then," she said.

Ron never really remembered how they got there. He remembered lamps shining oddly, as if they were underwater. And he remembered the dark musty inside of the taxi, and Pansy saying how Muggle, and him telling her to shut up and her ending up in his lap and how she was just about to unbuckle his trousers when it stopped in front of his apartment block.

Nothing of how they got upstairs, but vividly how he pressed her up against his door and she pulled his shirt up over his head before the door was quite shut.

He bucked against her and she was laughing again and mumbling the *Protectus* Charm as they fumbled their way to his bedroom.

Never before had he tried anything like this drunk. He'd been sober, the room had been dark, the sheets clean and specially laid out for this, he'd been awkward and considerate and it had all been tasteful and considered and it had always been intended as love, before.

He didn't bother to turn off the lights as they tumbled onto the unmade sheets. She wriggled under him to take off her dress and with his drunken vision and the lights on, her body seemed lurid yellow and indecent and he liked it, and liked her hot hands on him as she undid his trousers and he yanked them off.

No consideration as he grabbed a handful of her breast and shoved inside. She gasped and moved underneath him, like a huge slippery fish instead of a woman. His other hand was snagged in her hair as he moved, but he didn't care about that either.

She didn't shut her eyes. Hermione and Linda always had. Her gaze was fixed and bold, and maddening and he kept moving and pounding and feeling as if he'd like to spite her, and what a bitch she'd been in school and she moved much more than was decent for a woman.

"Christ, Weasley," she groaned, and arched.

He bit hard into her shoulder as he came, and then they gasped stickily together for the few minutes before he fell into abrupt unconsciousness.

*

Ron was woken by the sound of someone knocking on the door. He knew it was probably Miles with the offer of a lift to work. The bastard kept muttering about incognito and Muggles in the block and how taking the car with him was better than Flooing every day, and he never realised that Ron came close to murder every Monday.

"Go AWAY!" he bellowed, keeping his head under the covers.

The knocking continued. Damn Miles.

Which was when the covers moved.

"SHOVE OFF!" screamed a female voice.

The knocking stopped abruptly, but that didn't help as Ron moved abruptly and then a tom-tom started up in Ron's head.

Trying frantically to think past the blood pounding in his ears, he stared down at the cross, screwed-up face of Pansy Parkinson.

Last night. Oh, God. Oh, hell.

"Oh, gross!"

Pansy looked up at him, blinked in brief confusion and then grimaced.

"Oh, no," she said. "Oh, my God. I did Ron Weasley! How am I going to look anyone in the face ever again?"

"Did you cast some kind of curse on me?" Ron demanded. "I don't think your Slytherin sense of humour is very funny and-"

"So help me, if you tell anyone-"

"I don't *want* to tell anyone! I don't *want* for this ever to have happened! I was *drunk*!"

"Just drunk?" Pansy sniffed and looked smug. "I was stoned too."

"What kind of girl drinks and takes drugs and-"

"Oh no you don't, Weasley. You absolutely do *not* get to have a one-night stand with me and then lecture me on my morals."

"I DON'T have one-night stands!" Ron yelled indignantly.

Pansy gave him a long look, and then rolled her eyes. Ron clutched his bedsheet to him as if it was his maiden virtue.

"Well, I don't," he said defensively. "I mean - I didn't. I mean, that's hardly..."

"Any time you want to vocalise, Weasley," Pansy snapped, leaning over the bed and producing her dress. "And obviously, admit that I am right and you are wrong."

"We'll go out on a date tonight," Ron said triumphantly. "And then it'll all be perfectly decent."

Pansy gave him another Look.

"Are Gryffindors hit on the head with large mallets as some sort of initiation rite?"

"Wh - No," Ron snapped, making a face at her. "Do Slytherins take special courses in how to be complete bitches?"

Pansy looked smug. "It just comes naturally to me."

"Obviously."

"At least I'm not such a stupid bastard that I think I can salvage my own pathetic do-gooder self-image after making a mistake by spending *more* time with that mistake." Pansy paused. "Can I borrow some clothes?"

"Huh?"

Pansy waved her dress. "This is a bit tarty for work, which I have to get to in fifteen minutes. Can I borrow some clothes?"

And that was when Ron had his stupid idea.

He was perfectly aware it was stupid. But his urge to get one up on a Slytherin (no innuendo, don't even think it, Ronald Weasley) was much stronger than his urge to behave like a reasonable human being.

"You can if you go out on the date."

Pansy gave him a long stare. "You hate me and I hate you, and you've already had sex with me, and you're blackmailing me to go out on a date."

"Um. Yeah."

"All right, then." Pansy shrugged. "It takes me back, actually. Adrian Pucey blackmailed me into going out with him for two months in sixth year. It was this whole business with some photographs of..." She coughed. "Never mind."

"Slytherins are disgusting," Ron said with deep conviction, and then squawked at high volume.

Pansy raised an eyebrow.

"Is there a problem, Weasley?"

"You... you're... not *decent*," Ron said, and felt his ears burn as he looked resolutely away.

Pansy had slipped out of bed and was standing at his closet, completely naked.

"Did you, sort of, not notice that I was naked last night?"

"It's just not nice," Ron answered, trying to gather up his dignity.

Hermione had kept a white dressing gown next to bed. She had always tied the tie at her waist carefully, a double knot on her left side.

Pansy laughed and took his good robes out of the top shelf, shaking them out and slipping them on. They didn't fit her too badly, which was unusual. Ron was six three and in proportion, even if he wasn't as muscular as sodding Charlie.

She was tall for a woman, of course, and built on a large scale, with full breasts and hips.

Hermione and Linda had both been of middle height. Ron remembered Hermione's wrists pushing out of one of his old maroon sweaters; she'd rolled the sleeves up several times and they were bulky and made her bones look delicate.

"Do you want coffee?" Ron asked reluctantly, knowing how one should treat a lady, even if a Slytherin didn't count as a lady.

"I wouldn't touch your cheap and probably horrible caffeinated swill if I was dying of thirst," Pansy returned brightly. "See you tonight, lover. Fiwindo's. You're paying."

She left with a swirl of black robes that reminded Ron of the way Professor Snape used to make an exit.

He contemplated beating himself to death with a pillow.

*

Fiwindo's was a large, ostentatious restaurant, and Ron thought the waiters were shooting him supercilious glances. Pansy was half an hour late, and when she did arrive he gave her a horrified look.

"Did you forget to put your dress on?"

Pansy glanced down at her red dress, which was stretching over her thighs like a bandage, and slipping down off her breasts like snow in June.

"I don't know what you mean."

"People are staring," Ron said coldly.

Pansy tossed a look over at a very intrigued looking business wizard, tossed her long black hair over one shoulder and winked.

"That's sweet of you to say."

"I meant, you're making a public spectacle of yourself!"

"Weasley," Pansy snapped, "were you born with the attitude of a conservative forty year old, or have you spent years reading about wizards in tweed robes in *Horse and Hobgoblin*?"

Ron scowled. Pansy kicked him in the ankle. Ron yelped and Pansy beckoned the waiter over and ordered the most expensive meal on the menu for both of them.

Ron seized the waiter's arm as he moved off.

"Alcohol," he said hoarsely. "Lots and lots."

Pansy smirked. "I believe that was an order for two bottles of your most expensive wine. And once we're done with that - bring more."

"Wait," Ron said. "How expensive is the most...?"

"Don't worry your garish head about it, Weasley." Pansy smiled. "There's nothing you can do about it, anyway."

*

"So. I haven't seen you in six years. Something halfway interesting should have happened, even to you."

Ron scowled over their hideously overpriced appetisers.

"What do you mean?"

"What have you and your little Gryffindor buddies been doing since we left school?" Pansy elaborated. "I won't sit here for hours bored out of my skull. Pretend I'm interested, make the effort to entertain me a bit."

"Well... Dean Thomas and my sister just got engaged."

Pansy waved her fork. "Please. We were all predicting that in school. He followed her for two years with that slow-but-steady devotion thing going on. She had to get with him or beat the deliberately oblivious Potter to death with a shoe."

Ron stared. He'd actually been pretty surprised when Dean told him he wanted to go out with Ginny.

Pansy laughed nastily at his expression. "Women really do know everything," she informed him. "It isn't just your insufferable ex-girlfriend. We can all do it."

"Can you keep a civil tongue in your head?" Ron snapped.

Pansy smiled. "Oh," she said. "It's like that, is it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"All right," Pansy said. "When did you break up, anyway?"

Ron ripped some bread in half, causing crumbs to fall on the expensive-looking tablecloth and the waiter to give him a scandalised look from across the room.

"A year and a half ago," he answered reluctantly.

"So..." Pansy frowned. "You started going out in fifth year, a couple of months after Draco and I did. That's sixteen to twenty-two. Jesus, six years. Everybody thought you were going to get married, and you practically did... What happened?"

She actually looked curious. But Ron was tired of repeating Hermione's *stupid, stupid* reasons and having people nod and murmur, 'Fair enough. Hard luck.'

"It wasn't my idea," he told her irritably.

Married, he thought as their main courses arrived. Yeah, he'd thought like that. It had all been just like his parents, worked out, uncomplicated. Meeting in school, friends, childhood sweethearts and then a comfortable routine of occasional arguments and constant companionship.

He had been planning on asking her father at the holidays, and then buying the best ring he could afford. He had been thinking, in a couple of years, when her work settled down, they could choose a baby name.

"Let me guess," Pansy said. "She didn't give you a real reason."

Ron blinked. "What?"

"She said she didn't know what it was, and she loved you and you were her friend. As if that would make you happy, when you wanted to be more. And she talked about transcendence, and wanting more, and leaps, and better for both of you when she meant better for herself, and finally she said she wasn't and couldn't be in love with you and she never explained *why*. She acted as if because she was more intelligent than you, she was the one feeling the right thing, and she said you know a lot, and she walked out and you never, ever knew why."

"You don't know me," Ron snapped. "I suppose that was how Malfoy broke up with you. Swooning over rodent boy for your entire time at school, and going out with him for one year, and you're still talking about it six years later. Now, *that's* pathetic."

Pansy's eyes narrowed. "I've gone out with plenty of people," she said. "Don't talk to me about pathetic. I bet you've been hiding in your nasty little apartment licking your wounds ever since she left."

"I haven't!" Ron replied, stung. "I had a girlfriend for three months!"

Pansy raised her eyebrows. "I bet she was a Polyjuice copy of Granger."

"She was not! She was a Muggle."

"And oh, Granger was so far from being a Muggle, wasn't she? You chose the nearest person who reminded you of Granger. That's *beyond* pathetic."

"That's not true!"

Linda was a librarian, and she'd lived across the hall and had bushy hair she couldn't control with a barrette. She had liked to choose restaurants, and they were sensible places with polite staff and reasonable prices. When he had taken her home on their third date, she had eaten the cheese he kept buying because Hermione had liked it.

Ron tipped back the last of his glass, which was the last of the bottle, and motioned for more.

"Still talk to Granger?" Pansy asked. "I bet you do. I bet she calls you casually, drops in for a visit and tells you about her work."

Like they had never been anything but friends, and when she had met Linda she had sat there in that chair they'd picked out together, taken his hand and told him how pleased she was. Then she had smoothed down her skirt and left their flat as if she had always been a guest.

"Is that what Malfoy does?" Ron sniped back.

Pansy shoved her spoon into her enormous chocolate dessert. "Yeah," she said, musing. "But it does get better, over years. We also tease each other about our sex lives, and we have this little stick to poke Vince with so he'll get up and get us snacks. It's safe to flirt now - not that Draco ever did anything else - and now and then he'll put on a transparent shirt and come clubbing with me, get very drunk in that calculated way he has and have a crowd of people try to take him home."

"Thank you," Ron told her with quiet horror. "I don't want to hear *anything* about Malfoy's sex life. Ever."

"It's not all that exciting," Pansy informed him, and Ron cheered up. "Better than Vince's, of course," she added.

"Who's Vince?"

"Vincent," Pansy explained. "From school."

Ron's expression remained perfectly blank.

"Vincent Crabbe," Pansy elaborated, looking annoyed.

"Oh *Crabbe*," Ron said, enlightened. "Ew! Crabbe! He looks like a gorilla, I don't want to think about that!"

"Oh, you'd rather think about Draco?"

Ron choked on the last bite of his dessert. "I hate you," he told Pansy indistinctly.

Pansy crossed her legs, looking pleased. The business wizard glanced appreciatively over at the slender curves of her legs, the dangling necklace in her ample cleavage.

"Will you wait for the bill here, or have some sherry in the reading room?" inquired the impassive-faced waiter.

Ron glanced over at the business wizard. That kind of behaviour was just *rude*.

He grabbed Pansy's hand, none too gently, and pulled her upright.

"We'll take sherry," he said.

Pansy adopted a mock-awed look, leaning forward and pretending to whisper into Ron's ear.

"Oooh, Ron," she murmured. "You're so manly."

"Oh, sod off, Pansy," he said, and dragged her behind him.

*

The fire was blazing and the couch was too close to it, and they had had four bottles of wine and three sherries apiece. Pansy was surveying her high heels with regret.

"Shouldn't have worn these," she murmured. "Can hardly walk. But I know few men who would still have been taller than me while I was wearing them. I s'pose you have your uses, Weasley."

"Maybe one or two," Ron said wryly.

"Can only think of the one," Pansy returned.

Even dead drunk, she never let up. And it was hardly ladylike to drink all that. Hermione had always limited herself to one.

"So - whatever happened to Potter?" Pansy asked suddenly, pulling herself a little upright. "After - well, the war, and all that I know about."

"Oh... he's happy," Ron said. "I think. He's an Auror, and he belongs to all these organisations to help people understand Muggles and combat racism, and he holds Quidditch practise for some talented kids on Sundays. You know - you knew Harry. He was never happy unless he was making a difference, unless he felt he was being useful."

Unless he felt he was being a bloody hero.

"And Ned keeps him happy, I suppose," he continued. "Ned's a good guy. I guess you've heard about him?"

Pansy nodded, slowly.

"It's only been three months. But Ned's devoted to Harry, and I suppose Harry needs that."

And so he got it. Ron remembered hanging around Harry's flat, and he was still just slightly uncomfortable with the whole business, but he had seen the - passionate longing in this stranger's eyes, to have and to hold and to *make right*. He had seen it and he had thought, there's just another thing Harry has that I don't, and it all comes because he's rich or famous or because it just happens. That's the real magic, and Ron Weasley was a Squib about the kind of magic that brought you what you wanted.

"Don't talk to me about what people need," Pansy said, and her voice was only a shade thicker than usual. Her dark eyes were fixed on and filled with the fire. "People always seem to need something so special, something so right. They're never happy with - with just someone. And you get left behind, and you don't understand and you know if you could understand they wouldn't be leaving you. It's all so *stupid*."

Ron looked at the necklace between her breasts, the fine glittering chain. He heard the spoiled tone of her voice, Pansy Parkinson, the girl with the solid gold watch the Nifflers had gone for. She didn't understand why she couldn't have what she wanted.

And then he thought, damn it. He didn't understand it either. All his life, it had happened, and he hadn't understood it.

"Potter got what he wanted, did he?" Pansy asked. "And I'm sure he trampled on people to get it. These, these spectacular people with their bravery or their brains, they get their shining

reward, and some of us don't seem to be born for it and there's nothing we can do and they - they just turn away."

She sighed, and the necklace shone gold against the red of her dress, and the irony alone could have killed Ron.

And he thought of her gold watch and her sneering face under Slytherin colours, and the obvious, pathetic way she had adored that rat Malfoy. Almost as pitiful as the awkward, clumsy way he had tried to hide how he felt about Hermione. And he hated them both. In a way.

She reached out first, slid her hand up his arm and into his hair.

"Damn them all," she said, and her mouth was on his, warm and wet and uncalculated.

Her hands were tangling in his hair then and he had her on her back, sliding against the sofa, gasping and thoughtless.

Ron *liked* that.

*

Ron woke up with nobody beside him. He was still muzzily trying to sort out why he was surprised about that when he felt Pansy's mouth move down his abdomen.

"Hey!" Ron yelped, flinging the covers back. "What're you doing?"

She blinked up at him, heavy hair disarranged. "I would've thought it was obvious," she answered.

"I - but - you don't -"

He and Hermione had gone through things in stages, she had carefully mapped it all out. Those few fumbling kisses had turned into more comfortable holding and caressing, and then there had been that cautious first time, and then discreet lovemaking, all those safe traditional gestures in the sanctuary of darkness. And a few experiments in the shadows where blushing was unnecessary, after a couple of years, maybe because they felt obscurely that they should.

Not this bold touch in the light, so casual and shocking.

Pansy's lips curled.

"Maybe good girls don't," she said. "But I do."

She opened her mouth and it was casual and shocking and hot. He twisted and grabbed a handful of her hair, very very smooth and strange and it wasn't like anything before, so surely it was all right to shove up and be inconsiderate and...

Ron groaned, and Pansy sat up, wiping her mouth.

"Well, Weasley, thanks for dinner," she said briskly. "It was - interesting to catch up." She snagged and began to slip into her red dress. She was putting on her shoes before Ron had closed his mouth, and she tossed over her shoulder, "And I told you even Gryffindors have one-night stands."

"What?" Ron said. "I did not! That wasn't-!"

"No, that was a perfectly normal date," Pansy responded. "The night before was a one-night stand."

"It was n - what do you mean, a perfectly normal date? Do you normally sleep with men after the first date?"

Pansy shrugged. "Quite often, yes. Do you have a point?"

"So - so what, the date cancels out one - sleeping together and the other one is a one-night stand and-?"

"A masterly summary, Weasley."

"You're really weird," Ron said fervently. "And sick and depraved. Fine - we'll, I don't know, we'll go out again. And then we can never see each other again."

"Your logic is insane and happenstance," Pansy told him with an almost frightened look in her eye. "And I suppose I'll see you tonight. Especially since if I do that, I can borrow some more clothes."

She took another set of his good robes.

It was a good thing he would never consider ever seeing her again, since if he did he would be all out of decent clothes.

*

Ron chose a more reasonably priced restaurant this time. Not one of Hermione or Linda's places, but a place he had gone to with Harry and Miles. It served food he liked because his mum wouldn't have made it, and Harry'd told him it was mostly Mexican.

"How bloody atrocious," Pansy had said as they walked in, and Ron had cringed. But Pansy had sent the waiter a cheeky wink, and he had winked back, and things seemed to be all right. Pansy was wearing a black bandage masquerading as a dress, and Ron thought this might have helped matters.

Pansy also ate an awful lot for someone who thought the food was atrocious.

"Mmm," she said indistinctly at one point, spearing something on her fork. "What's this called?"

"Actually, it's called *my* fajita," Ron informed her.

Pansy made a face at him and polished off the last of the salsa dip with her bread.

"Are you a professional public nuisance?" Ron asked.

"Close," Pansy said. "I'm in advertising."

"Ad-" At this point in time, Ron stopped short in horror. Miles had just come in the door.

Moving briskly, sandy hair falling into his eyes, surely he would miss them, and no, what was he thinking, because Miles never missed a scantily clad woman.

"Ron!" he said cheerily, bouncing over to them, and Ron had never hated him or his garish football shirt or his loud upper-class English voice so much. "And who's this?" he asked, eyeing Pansy's breasts.

"Actually, I haven't quite got around to naming them yet," Pansy replied brightly. "But my name's Pansy."

Ron was horror-struck. That was part of her problem - all the Slytherins' problems. They came out with stuff without thinking of what was *decent*, or without caring. Longbottom, you're fat, Weasley, you're poor, Potter, you're parentless. And isn't that *funny*?

Miles actually laughed. The bastard.

"You must be something special to get Ron to miss the game."

It was like someone had hit Ron with a Stunning Spell. The game! The Chudley Cannons against the Worcester Whizzers! He'd bloody forgotten about it, and now he was missing the game, the *Game*, in order to take Pansy Parkinson out for dinner.

"Alicia and I are watching it at my place. I just ran out at the ads to pick up some take-out." Miles obviously noticed the stricken look on Ron's face. "You can watch it with us, if you'd like," he added generously.

Ron took a deep breath. There was no way to accept without being ungentlemanly. His mum had taught him how to behave with a lady, even if he didn't think Pansy qualified.

"Yeah!" Pansy answered enthusiastically. "Quick, Weas - Ron - get the bill. I don't want to miss this."

He felt the urge to seize her and kiss her, and thought they must have put something in the salsa.

*

"Advertising," Pansy explained as Ron paid. "I advertise Quidditch games. I get the posters, publicise the tours and the big matches, arrange what advertisements are put in the Telemagicking break shots."

"That's so weird," Ron said, as they hurried out into the street. "I work in Telemagicking."

Telemagicking, in Ron's mind, was the reason his brother Percy had been put on this earth. After all his rabbiting on about thin-bottomed cauldrons, all his meticulous attention to detail and flashes of brilliance about proper filing systems, his massive brain had finally come up with something useful.

If one could transpose the image of someone's head onto a fireplace, why not transpose the image of a Quidditch game? Then people could watch Quidditch in their own fireplaces, from the comfort of their own homes.

It had been a sideline diversion of Percy's, a little business enterprise, and a fiendish Muggleborn investor had come up with the idea of advertising products in the Quidditch game breaks. Percy had made a fortune, and when Ron graduated he was so excited about the prospect of spreading Quidditch around the wizarding world that he joined the team and was stunned to find out he was good at the practical spells you laid down the system with.

It was good pay, though, and satisfying work.

Whereas Percy had still not been promoted at the ministry, which caused Ron a good bit of secret amusement.

"I didn't know you were into Quidditch," Ron said as they hurried into the apartment block.

"Oh, well." Pansy shrugged. "I went to every game of Draco's for years and heard him going on about it. After a bit I got really interested. You didn't ever play, did you?"

"No," Ron said shortly, not thinking of Harry the prodigy, or of a mirror where Ron was the Quidditch captain, or what Harry had told him when he tried out... "I wasn't good enough."

"Me neither," Pansy said, almost tripping up in her heels. Ron grabbed her arm. "I hoped that it was just because Marcus didn't want girls on the team, but when Draco was captain he told me I wasn't good enough."

And they were knocking on Miles' door, Ron still holding Pansy's arm so she didn't fall in those stupid shoes, red-faced and out of breath.

"Here's Ron and his new girl," Miles shouted out to Alicia as she opened the door. "Quidditch enthusiasts both of them, I'd wager, since they ran all the way here."

"Hi," Alicia said pleasantly, clearly not recognising Pansy. Well, she had been two years ahead of Pansy and Ron both. Ron had only known her through Harry, and then through Miles-from-the-office.

Still, she was a nice, sensible girl, and she was the only reason he could put up with Miles for any length of time. Miles was a lovely chap, but he was the equivalent of Seamus Finnigan reared on cucumber sandwiches and speed, and then placed in Hufflepuff.

"Who's winning?" Pansy and Ron asked in urgent unison.

"The Cannons," Alicia replied, with a smile.

"Oh yeah, baby," Pansy said. Ron contented himself with punching the air.

And there was a rush for the couch, and it was only a small one, so somehow Ron ended up with Pansy in his lap, but he was too concerned with the game to mind terribly.

Alicia had made biscuits, and they all munched them as they watched the game, and then the Cannons' Keeper turned upside down to save a goal and Ron yelled in triumph.

"Weasley, you fool, you just sprayed crumbs down my neck," Pansy laughed.

"Ron," he reminded her in a low voice.

She turned her head and gave him a dazzling smile that made him choke on his drink, it was so exceptionally fake.

"But I forgive you, my darling Ronniekins," she added, her voice like syrup.

Ron contemplated doing away with her, but then the Whizzers made another scurrilous attempt on the Cannons' goal.

"YES!" screamed everyone, after another miraculous save.

When people were awarded penalties, Ron leaned forward and put his chin on Pansy's shoulder, and when the Cannons got all theirs in she relaxed back against him.

Somehow she got hold of his hand and almost crushed it flat while they were all tensed, watching the two Seekers dive neck and neck for the Snitch. And when the Cannons' Seeker caught it, everyone was yelling and punching the air and bouncing all over the couch and it was just a *physical reaction* and *perfectly normal* and Ron wasn't at all embarrassed about it.

She smiled at him slyly, her hair fluffed up and her face red with the excitement, and while Miles and Alicia were clearing up the biscuit trays in the kitchen they snogged on the sofa. She almost ended up going down on him in Miles' bathroom, but instead they both tumbled out shouting thanks and goodbyes.

"Come to the party on Saturday," Miles urged them. "Bring your new girl. Pansy, it was a pleasure."

They kissed once, twice, three times against the walls on the way to Ron's apartment, and then had wild, messy, exuberant sex and almost fell off the bed.

*

Ron woke up with Pansy Parkinson in his arms. Given the events of the past few days, this should not have been so surprising.

It felt - strange, though.

Hermione and Linda had been practical about it. Nobody sleeps tangled all together, it's uncomfortable, just like nobody sleeps naked. Each person has their side of the bed, and you lean across the bed in the morning to give them a kiss.

They had been right. Pansy was lying on his arm, and it had gone dead. Their skin was sweaty and stuck together, and there was going to be more pain when they moved. Her long hair was all over his face, and he had to spit some of it out before he sleepily kissed her on the neck, which wasn't romantic or decorous at all.

"Mmmf," said Pansy, before she said "Mmm," and it wasn't supposed to go like that at all.

"S twenty t'nine," Ron mumbled. "We're going t'be late..."

"Mmm," said Pansy, and batted him lightly in the face. "Inna minute. I'll get up innamminute."

"Mmm. Kay," Ron said, his eyes drifting inexorably shut again.

At five to nine, they both sprang up in a panic from the bed and conducted a brief, frenzied fight for the toothbrush, which Pansy won because Ron had stopped to grab his dressing gown. Pansy smugly brushed her teeth, and then purloined his last good set of robes and while he was searching for something decent to wear to the office, she got herself a bowl of cereal.

He came out, and it was odd, having breakfast together, even if it was leaning against the sink bolting down cereal in a mad rush. He saw her glance sideways, and think it was strange too.

"Um," he said.

"So," she said.

"I suppose-"

"It's been bizarre, Weasley," she said. "See you around."

"Well - yeah," he said.

They put their bowls in the sink, neither one bothering to clear up further. Then they stood looking at each other. Ron rubbed his neck, feeling acutely uncomfortable.

They leaned forward and kissed briefly. Ron wasn't entirely sure why.

"Give my excuses to Miles and Alicia," Pansy said.

"Oh no - I mean - you should come," Ron said, thinking that he could be just as polite as any Parkinson.

"Maybe," she said, and left.

Ron was grumpy and sleep-deprived in the office that day, and Miles chuckled and rolled his eyes at him.

"The start of a relationship, eh?" he said. "Nothing like it. Shagging all night and trying to nap all day."

Ron scowled at his reflection in a passing window. It had messy hair.

"I'm *not* in a relationship," he muttered mutinously.

*

That Saturday, he came over early to Miles' to help him set up. Of course Alicia ended up doing the whole thing, and telling them how incompetent they were.

"Is Harry coming?" Ron asked as he tried to slice cucumbers and almost made Ron-finger-dip.

"No," Alicia called from the sitting room. "He's sick. But Ned's coming. That'll be nice, he's a lovely fellow and I'd like to get to know him better."

"How about Pansy?" Miles inquired.

Ron wished he hadn't been anticipating this question. "Er - no, I don't think so."

"Shame. I liked her," Miles said. Ron wondered what Miles would do if Ron said that was more than he did. "Sporty, and a bit of fun. Plus-" he added *sotto voce*. "She has that certain *je ne sais quoi*."

"Sorry?" said Ron. "Um. She has a pug nose."

"Well yes," Miles admitted. "But she's got all that hair and that confidence and a great figure. She's sexy."

Which was a very strange word, when applied to Pansy 'Pug Face' Parkinson, and a very strange concept, which Ron thought he was going to put down carefully and never look at again.

The party began at eight, and for about an hour Ron vacillated from room to room, thinking, well, if she turns up I should at least be civil.

She didn't turn up, and so Ron ended up in the kitchen making small talk with Ned about Harry and the quality of Ron's cucumber dip.

"He runs himself into the ground," Ned said earnestly, and put another tortilla chip into the dip. He ran fingers through his white-blond hair until it stood on end, bristling with anxiety, but was kind enough not to comment on the tiny pink swirls in the dip.

One very weird friend of Alicia's had not been able to stop raving about it. Ron darkly suspected her of being a vampire.

He looked out into the sitting room to check she wasn't about to swoop down on him, and saw Pansy being cordially welcomed by Miles and Alicia.

Instantly he thought perhaps he should duck back into the kitchen.

But then Alicia saw him, and waved him over. Pansy gave him a tight-lipped smile.

"This is Pansy," Miles said to their assembled workmates. "She's Ron's new girlfriend."

Now Ron exchanged a look with Pansy that was pure panic.

"Isn't that right, Ron?"

Ron advanced very cautiously into the sitting room and towards Pansy's side, feeling like a soldier negotiating enemy territory.

"Er," he said. "Well. Sort of. In a way."

He felt Pansy gamely reach out and take his hand. It would be just embarrassing to correct everyone.

Now, though, they were standing in front of almost all his friends on the hearthrug, holding hands, and it felt almost like they were getting married. An arranged marriage like in the old days, and Ron was peering into the face of his wife and feeling very uncertain about the future.

"Try some of the dip," Alicia invited hospitably, offering it.

Pansy peered into it. "It looks like there's blood in there," she said. "Were you silly enough to let - er, Ron - try to help in the kitchen?"

Ron felt almost cross, because she shouldn't have known enough to guess that, but everyone else laughed.

And then they just mingled in the party, and the embarrassing moment was over.

But at one point Pansy was on the couch and three men from the office were sitting around her, trying to talk to her, and Ron thought again of the word Miles had used to describe her, that alien word. *Sexy*.

He crossed over to the couch, leaned over the back of it and lifted her hair, stroked her neck. He might have given the other men a slightly belligerent look, because after all she'd been introduced as his girlfriend and this sort of thing was just not on.

"Having fun?" he'd asked, a bit gruffly.

"I am now," Pansy replied, looking at the other men with dancing eyes.

The vampire lady, who turned out to be called Velma, corned Ron and complimented him extravagantly on his dip. Ron had shrunk into a corner in terror, convinced she was eyeing his neck.

"Finding fine food een zis country ees such a trial," Velma told him, staring deep into his jugular vein. "It ees a rare privilege to find a true cook."

"I wouldn't call, um, myself a cook," Ron said, clawing at the walls behind his back.

"He only has a few talents," Pansy had said, appearing miraculously to take his arm. "But he's very skilled in certain areas."

She smiled brilliantly at Velma, who pouted and bit her full lower lip with her alarming incisors. Ron had sagged with relief.

Alicia asked them at one point to get extra glasses from the high-up shelves in the cupboard, since they were both tall. Ron held the trick door of the cupboard open for her, and as she ducked under his arm to reach up he moved in clumsily towards her, and put his mouth against hers. The shadow of the cupboard door was on them, and she was held under the curve of one of his arms by his other arm around her waist. He kissed her a little deeper, and the cupboard door hit him in the back of the head.

She almost choked to death laughing, and never asked if he was all right.

But she sat near to him on the couch afterwards, and her knee and her hand were almost touching his.

"You two run along," Alicia said when Ron offered to help clear up afterwards, and they were expected to so they left together. He tried to help her on with her coat but she didn't notice, and she grabbed his hand and he gave her a startled look.

They walked in silence to his flat, and they both went in and this time he didn't turn on the light in his bedroom. But she didn't shut the curtains, or slip decorously and immediately between the bedclothes.

So like a Slytherin, he thought as they stood pressed against a mirror, skin clinging together with light sweat. He kissed her deeply as he tried to undo her bra, and he'd always been given instructions before. Things were rough and clumsy and desperate, but just a little more hesitant and thoughtful than they had been.

"This is just-" Ron said, and licked a hot trail along her terribly naked breasts.

"Mmm, convenient," she agreed, a little breathless, her hands in his hair. "There's no reason-"

"Not to," Ron continued, and the moonlight had no effect on her hair, which was such a dense constant black. "It's nothing important. Everyone needs-"

"Something," Pansy murmured, and when he lifted her to lie her on the bed her back was wet with sweat cooled against the mirror, and she felt smooth and chilled as a windowpane against the winter.

"Yes," he said, and her skin was as soft as the little sounds, and the extremely strange was becoming familiar.

She put her arms around him as he buried his face in her hair, and murmured against his neck.

"Makes perfect sense."

On Sunday morning they were able to get in a long, comfortable and unproductive morning in bed, despite the sweaty tangle. They had breakfast after noon.

"You have nothing decent in the house," Pansy sniffed disdainfully, spreading liberal amounts of jam on her toast.

"Stop being snotty," Ron said, and she made a face at him.

Alicia's face appeared in the fireplace then, smiling and asking if they wanted to go to the pub later.

"Oh, why not," Pansy had said, turning to Ron and shrugging. She was wearing his ratty dressing gown, and it had slipped down to show one bare shoulder. "Convenient, right?"

"Right," Ron replied, taking her knife to spread his jam and then waiting for her to tell him off.

She didn't notice.

*

It wasn't like having a girlfriend. Ron knew how that went.

Nothing was scheduled. No new calendar with appointments in it appeared in his kitchen. But sometimes he would come home, and she would be there. And sometimes he would go out, and she would come with him.

She didn't help him choose new clothes, just insulted his clothes remorselessly. When he bought more, she insulted those too.

She didn't bring a sensible amount of her clothes to his house to keep there. She borrowed his, and occasionally he found discarded items of her clothing in the oddest places.

When she had work to do, she didn't want peace or space. She liked to sit by the fire driving him mad by wailing loudly about all the work she had to do, until he forced alcohol down her throat to shut her up, and they inevitably ended up in bed.

Neither of them ever cleaned up. Once they spent an afternoon throwing dirty dishes at the bin from the carefully placed sofa.

Girlfriends didn't flirt with other men and leave you angry and embarrassed, and then laugh.

With girlfriends, things were covered, complicated, tracing patterns meant to be messages on skin and hoping you were coming to understand. With Pansy you kept the lights on, and everything was loud and clear.

"Good Lord, Weasley," she said, looking in the fridge one day and making a horrible face. "You don't actually like this mouldy cheese, do you?"

Ron had looked over at her. She was wearing one of his shirts and her hair was wet, tied back in a ponytail. She looked a mess.

She either looked a mess or took an atrociously long time getting ready. Girlfriends looked neat and presentable all the time, but never made too much of a fuss.

"Nah," he said. "I never eat it."

She had thrown it in the bin, which was wasteful, and stretched and smiled.

"I was thinking we should have sex in the shower," she added casually, and laughed when he looked shocked.

Two weeks into the not-relationship, they had a fight. She was worse than anyone he'd ever seen in a tantrum. She threw things at him, and girls definitely weren't supposed to do that. She tipped up the bookshelves and called him some filthy names and sent him running out of his own flat, slamming the door, going up to Miles' and telling Alicia that she was impossible, awful, frustrating, he didn't want anything like this and he certainly didn't intend to put up with it.

The next day he came home from work and she was there, and he didn't speak, braced for those still reproachful, resentful silences that always come after fights.

"You're late," she said. "Come on, I want to get a curry."

She acted like it hadn't happened, and that was annoying and off-putting and simple.

After a month, they had another fight, and Ron thought it over, and he shouldn't have badmouthed her friends. Even if she did have worse taste in friends than a male black widow spider generally had in wives.

So he came home the next day with flowers, and she had looked very surprised and asked him what they were for.

She also smiled and told him they were ugly, and then kissed him

"You're *so* weird," she added. "I kind of like it."

It was difficult and easy in entirely unexpected ways. And when the Christmas holidays came, they both went to different parties and then came home. Pansy was wearing a long formal gown and some beautiful jewellery. It made a tinkling sound when he tore it off her, kissing her and more under the mistletoe.

"I once had a lover who liked me to wear just the jewels," she remarked, breathlessly, shoved up against the wall.

"I'm not like that," Ron told her, voice ragged. Something sparkling crunched under his heel.

"I know," Pansy answered, and he had her skin bare and shining under the moonlight.

Ron's workmates sent them joint Christmas cards, which lay in a pile on Ron's welcome mat for hours before either of them picked them up. They were standard, ordinary cards, with the usual, 'Dear' and 'Have a happy' and 'Love.' But she lingered over his shoulder, and they both looked at the front of the envelopes, where these people had written *'Ronald Weasley and Pansy Parkinson'* as if they had been sent a puzzle.

Pansy threw out the cards in January, but he found one of the envelopes folded up in the jewellery box he'd given her for Christmas. She kept things like that in there, movie tickets when he took her to the cinema - she'd never been before - a fortune from the time they had fortune cookies, and she added 'in bed' to every fortune they got.

She never kept jewellery in there. Hermione had liked to keep things in their proper place.

Ron thought he understood, though.

He dropped by his parents' house on New Year's, and his mother asked him about this new girlfriend. Alicia had told Angelina, who like a dutiful daughter-in-law had duly reported to her.

"It's not important," Ron answered, telling her the words of their bargain. "It's convenient."

"I like your new clothes," his mother had told him.

"What...? They're just like the ones I bought when I wasn't - seeing anyone."

"I know," Mum had answered, and handed him two presents. "I want to see her. Bring her home soon."

He and Pansy agreed that that wasn't a good idea, but he gave Pansy her jumper. She told him it was hideous, and they had another fight.

Sometimes she wore it. It was maroon like his, and she looked hideous in it, and they looked absolutely ridiculous both wearing theirs.

A guy at the office he barely knew told him he was lucky. He didn't know what to make of it.

Harry called him, and demanded, laughing, to see his new girl. He said that Ned had liked her, and Ron thought - well, maybe, and then why not.

"What would you think of having a dinner party?" he asked. "Harry wants to see you. It'd be less difficult. Would you behave?"

"Sod off, Weasley, I have impeccable manners," she said.

"Don't be stupid, Parkinson, you're a complete bitch most of the time. Should we order in Chinese?"

"Are you suggesting I can't cook?" she snapped.

"Seen no evidence of it so far."

"I can cook. I will cook. You won't believe the gastronomic delight I will present to you and your scruffy band of friends. Potter's brain will sizzle behind his disfiguring scar."

"Don't talk about Harry that way. Kiss me."

No, it wasn't anything like having a girlfriend.

*

Ron came home from work on the day of the dinner party and Pansy seized him by the robes and tried to stuff him back in the fireplace.

"Pansy!" he spluttered. "What are you *doing*?!"

"Get out!" she hissed. "Go away!"

"I live here!"

"All right," she wailed, "then go blind and deaf! How do I put out an oil fire?"

"*What?*"

"Water just made it worse! You didn't like those curtains, did you?"

"*What?*"

"Or the wallpaper. Tell me you didn't like the wallpaper, who could like that wallpaper?"

"Pansy. What happened? I thought you said you could cook!"

"I can cook!" Pansy screamed. "I spent all day making out that menu, and then I gave my orders to the house elf that lives in the special box!"

"Oven," Ron corrected absently. Then his brain caught up with his ears. "The house elf!"

"But it wouldn't obey me," Pansy said. "So I hit it with the iron. And then I borrowed some - some cookery books from Mrs Waters upstairs, and it told me to cook stuff over a slow fire but I think you have the wrong kind of kitchen because when I lit a fire on the floor - *don't you dare go in there!*"

She spread-eagled herself in front of the kitchen door. There were crackling sounds coming from behind it.

Pansy looked quite desperate. Her hands were covered with flour and her high heels were slightly scorched.

"I've got everything under control," she panted. "It may seem a little crazy at the moment, but-"

"You set my floor on fire!"

Pansy made an agitated gesture. "Well, your house elf should work properly!"

"I don't have a damn house elf, you stupid little rich girl!"

"Well, I *don't know what to do*! And it's all *ruined*, and now your stupid friends will have to *starve*!"

Ron grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Okay. Okay. An oil fire has to be smothered. I know spells for that. Now go and call the Chinese!"

Pansy sniffed. "How do you know how to put out an oil fire?"

He took her hands and shoved her gently towards the telephone.

"I was raised in a poor family with five brothers. You think men didn't have to cook?"

He tried not to look at the kitchen as he put out the fire. When he went back inside, Pansy was sitting by the telephone.

"I ordered six chicken satays," she said. She sounded sulky. "I... did try."

"All right, then," he said awkwardly. "I know."

"I'll have it fixed," she told him, looking up. "I'll have it made *better*."

"I can afford to have it paid for," he snapped.

"That's not what I meant!" she snapped back. "I just thought I should fix it, since I broke it! Don't be an oversensitive prat!"

"Don't think you can throw around money and fix everything!"

"It's not just money," Pansy told him grumpily, crossing her arms. "You need a woman's taste. I'll help pick out the colours. It was a horrible kitchen anyway."

He softened. "All right then."

She got up and went over to him. Her green robe was too low-cut and too heavily embroidered with jet. She always went overboard.

It didn't bother him so much. He kissed her until the guests started to Floo in.

He couldn't understand why Alicia kept coughing so much, until he saw the imprint of a large floury hand on Pansy's left breast.

Then his ears burned.

Harry hadn't come. He had been taken sick at the last minute, but Ned and Ron's friends from work were all there. And it all went well. It all went *easily*.

Pansy and Alicia ended up having a confidential chat in the kitchen. He and Ned were left outside, as the others had left and Miles was being sick in the bathroom.

"I don't think Harry was really sick," Ned told him, biting his lip. "I'm not sure - he wanted to be with me. I - don't know how well things are going between us."

Ron shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "You'll work it out."

"I hope so," Ned answered. He sighed and looked at the tablecloth. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Belong together," Ned said. Ron choked. "Be happy."

"I don't know." Ron stared fixedly at the fork in his hand. "It just works out that way."

He and Pansy decided to decorate the kitchen in Chudley Cannon colours.

*

They were walking home from a Quidditch game one day, and they ran into Linda. She was clearly coming home from work, and she just barely glanced at Pansy's laughing face and short, swinging skirt.

Pansy held his hand too tight. She did that sometimes, either in an extravagant display or to crush it in moments of excitement.

"Why did you break up with her, anyway?" she asked later.

"She broke up with me," Ron said reluctantly.

Pansy laughed. "Weasley, you Casanova." He had been moving his hand across her stomach, and he resisted the temptation to punch her in it. "Well then, why did she kick your enormous ginger ass out?"

He paused. But you don't lie to ladies.

"I - said Hermione's name one night," he muttered.

"You never said her name with me." Pansy sounded thoughtful.

"Well. No. That's different."

Linda was supposed to mean something. Linda was supposed to recapture love.

"I know," Pansy said. "Linda wasn't convenient." She yanked down his head and put her lips and teeth to his neck. "Mind you," she said against his exposed throat, "if you had said her name, I would have stabbed out your eyes with ice picks."

"You're such a sweet little lady," Ron said.

She'd laughed.

Linda had called him the next day, and said, did he ever think of them...? He had been nice about turning her down, and Pansy had asked him to repeat the whole conversation and laughed again.

"My family are having a soiree," she told him about a week after that. "I need an escort."

"I hate your family," Ron responded instantly.

"You've never met them," Pansy pointed out.

"I don't have the dress robes."

"We'll go shopping for them. I'll buy them."

"You don't need to buy my clothes!"

"So you'll buy them? That's great."

Pansy had leaned against the couch and smiled triumphantly over at him. Ron had snarled and gone back to the paper.

Which was how he'd ended up in a huge manor, apparently belonging to Pansy's Uncle Casper. His dress robes were scratchy at the neck, Pansy was dressed in robes apparently made out of black gauze and lace and he spent most of the evening playing a game of 'Who here was tried on suspicion of being a Death Eater?'

Her Uncle Casper sidled up to him and said, "Any relation to the wealthy Percival Weasley?"

"My brother," Ron answered stiffly.

"Ah. Lovely chap," Casper practically purred. "So - wealthy. Planning to follow in his footsteps?"

"I don't have any interest in wasting my life being a dogsbody for the Ministry," Ron snapped, visions of his father and Percy rising before his eyes. "I'm in Percy's other line of work."

"The profitable one?" Casper asked. "Excellent. Excellent. Good chap."

"Uncle Casper was impressed with you," Pansy said on their way home.

"I wasn't impressed with him," Ron informed her curtly. "I wasn't impressed with any of them."

She hadn't argued with him, which had surprised him. She had just laid her head against his chest. He liked to see her quiet, though he suspected that was only because of the rarity value.

After a minute, she began to nibble on his ear.

The next day, he came home and found her on the couch. She was reading a paper she had twisted in her hands, a cup of coffee beside her.

"Uncle Casper's been arrested for belonging to one of those splinter Death Eater groups," she said. She had picked up her cup, and her knuckles had been white as they twisted around the handle.

He had sat by her, and taken her other hand.

"It's - okay," he told her, trying to be comforting and aware he made a clumsy job of it. "We'll get him a good lawyer. Don't be - upset. I'm sure he's innocent."

He wasn't sure, but that was surely what she wanted to hear.

Pansy threw her cup, and it shattered loudly against the wall.

"Of course he did it!" she said fiercely. "Of course he was in it. They're all like that, my whole family, the stupid - *stupid* -"

It was easier to hug a woman when she was fighting you. Ron thought so, anyway.

"You didn't like being poor," Pansy said in a muffled, furious voice. "Well, that's what I hated when I was growing up. Despising them all. They're so *pathetic* -"

"It's okay," Ron told her, rubbing her back.

He wasn't doing it wrong, this comfort thing, because so few people had tried it on her before.

"Uncle Casper was the last of us with the big money," she added. "I think your family's richer than mine now. Funny how things work out."

"I don't care either way," Ron said.

"You're so thick, Ron Weasley," she let him know in a tired voice, which he thought meant she appreciated it.

She leaned back, and looked at him closely. He wondered what she was looking for.

"I could - pretend to be Hermione," she offered at last.

"What! What are you talking about?"

"Well - I mean, it's what you want, isn't it?" she asked. "I saw that Linda woman. I could be - enough like her. I wouldn't *mind*. It's not like this means anything."

And did that mean if he didn't want to, it did mean something?

"All right," he said warily.

She kissed him then, carefully, gingerly, like a food taster or someone planning to make a map of his mouth.

They walked into the bedroom and he turned off the light and she closed the curtains and slipped in between the sheets. He couldn't see her face or her body, and he couldn't tell what she was thinking.

She didn't move or speak or give him any clue. He just tried to do the best he could, and it was over quickly.

Then they both rolled away to different sides of the bed.

He was woken up at about three in the morning by a bright light being turned into his face. Pansy had rolled over on top of him, her hair snarled around her face and the light too fierce behind her. She looked like a harpy.

"Pansy," he murmured, and reached out for her.

"Did you *like* that?" she hissed, and her face was strained. "Is *that* what you want?"

He tried to sit up and she pushed him down against the pillows.

"Is that all, just someone faceless in the dark, just, just-" She was panting and her hair was hanging in his face. He pushed it back behind her ear, to see her better, and arched up under her.

Sweat was running down between her breasts, glistening like a golden chain.

And *this* was different, but that was all right, because it was different but it was her, and he could see and he could understand.

"Is *that what you want?*" she demanded, and her thin little keening cry afterwards was good to hear, almost as good as seeing her.

"No!" he panted back. "No! Of course not!"

And then he had arched up against her again, muscles in his back screaming, calling out.

"Oh Christ. Pansy. *Pansy!*"

She fell against him, breathing hard into his ear, breasts crushed and slippery against his chest. They didn't talk.

They fell asleep again in the light, still tangled together, and it was messy and impractical and right again.

*

"Am I going to get fat if I eat pizza in bed?" Pansy mused one Saturday in February.

Ron kissed her ear and poked her stomach.

"Ah, you're already a bit fat."

"You know," Pansy said dreamily, "My friend Morag likes to enchant the bits of the men she sleeps with to be detachable, and carry them around with her in a jar. Once her boyfriend said something like that to her and she-

He put his hand over her mouth.

"Please. We're about to eat."

At that point, the doorbell rang.

"You get it," Pansy said in muffled tones. "The money's in your trousers."

He made a face at her but located his trousers, and for decency's sake, a shirt. But Pansy had to be having a bad influence on him because he answered the door still buttoning it up.

Hermione and Draco Malfoy stood in his doorway, staring at him.

"Blargh," said Malfoy, shutting his eyes. "That's more Weasley than I ever wanted to see."

"Hi, Ron," Hermione greeted him with false airiness.

He did up his shirt very quickly.

"Er - hi, Hermione. Is that better?"

Malfoy risked opening his eyes a slit, and then theatrically clapped a hand to them.

"Please do up your trousers as well," he requested in pained tones.

Ron did so, though for a moment he wanted to punch Malfoy's covered lights out and then do up his trousers.

Once he was decently attired, everyone seemed to try and start over again. All at once.

"It's nice to see you again, Ron," Hermione said.

"What are you doing here, Hermione?" he asked. "And most importantly, what is *he* doing here?"

"Hello Weasley," Malfoy said with a smile sweet as poisoned sugar. "Charmed to see you again."

As if they hadn't made every effort to avoid each other since the glorious day when school had finished and he had been released from the pain of seeing Malfoy every day.

A horrible thought struck him.

"You two aren't - you're not-"

"No Ron, of course not!" Hermione said quickly. "What an idea!"

Malfoy leaned against the door frame and drawled, "I could have you if I wanted."

"I hadn't seen you in ages, Ron," Hermione explained, pointedly ignoring Malfoy. "I set aside this lunch time specially, but then the board asked me very urgently to ask Malfoy here about his outrageous expenses."

God. He'd forgotten Malfoy was an Unspeakable too.

Malfoy scowled. "I have to have caviar for lunch every day," he informed them both. "It's a *medical condition*. Anyway, the real reason she took me along was to have something decorative around. God knows this place isn't a thing of beauty or a joy forever."

He prowled inside. Ron had forgotten the way Malfoy even moved sneakily.

"You're *not* welcome in my home," he said sharply. "Hermione, this isn't really a good time-"

Hermione was still standing politely in the doorway. Malfoy was eyeing the couch suspiciously.

"I bet I'll get a disease if I touch anything in here," he predicted darkly.

At which point Pansy came out, dressed in Ron's old, short dressing gown, doing up the tie as she did so.

"What's taking so l-" she began, and then stopped.

Hermione froze in the doorway. Framed there like the perfect guest, her hair neatly clipped back, her white blouse and pencil skirt pristine, her face frozen in a small polite smile.

Pansy was one inch away from indecency, her hair tangled long and wild down her back, the mark of a pillow still pressed against her cheek. She looked like a mistress who'd just been caught by the wife.

Ron stood there staring at both of them.

The silence was broken by Malfoy, of all people.

"*Pansy*?" he said incredulously, and sank weakly onto the couch. "You - *you* are Weasley's new girlfriend?"

"Er," Ron said.

"Not exactly," Pansy muttered. "It's a-"

"Pansy Parkinson?" Hermione spoke the words as if she was hoping to be contradicted. "Oh - *Ron*."

"Ew!" Malfoy said suddenly, apparently shocked into sitting upright. His hair had actually gone static. "It just occurred to me. Weasley bits! How could you, Pansy!"

Hermione came inside and shut the door.

"*Weasley* bits," Malfoy repeated, experimentally. "*Weasley bits*."

"Shut up, Malfoy!"

"It's preying on my mind," Malfoy replied absently. "Did you *like* it, Pansy?"

Pansy went an even deeper red than she had been before.

Malfoy decided on a course of action, and fell backwards laughing.

"Will you shut up, Malfoy!" Ron snarled, striding over to the couch with his fist raised.

"Ron, *no*!" Pansy said quickly, speeding over to him.

"What - you can't still-" Ron glared down at her. She glared silently, stubbornly, back at him.

Hermione coughed delicately.

"I think," she said. "I'll go make some tea. Pansy-" she gave her a look of extreme distaste - "Why don't you get dressed?"

"Fine," Pansy barked, and slammed into Ron's bedroom.

Hermione went into the kitchen, closing the door with a very decided snap behind her.

Malfoy sat up again, and fixed Harry with those cool grey eyes.

"So you're the new man she's been neglecting all her friends for," he said smoothly. "My, those bits must be a good bit more impressive than I ever gave them credit for."

"How's your love life, Malfoy?" Ron asked sharply. "Found someone special?"

His smile was slow and cold as Malfoy's smile had always been. "Weasley, I can find someone special every night of the week. But one just gets tired some nights."

"Ned and Harry had dinner here a few weeks ago," Ron mused. "They get on so well. They're so happy. It's wonderful to see him."

"Ah, love's young dream," Malfoy said, his expression not changing. "I'm sure it's a picture."

"Have you met him?" Ron inquired.

"Twice," Malfoy informed him blandly. "Seemed a lovely fellow. Very good-looking."

"He is, isn't he? Best hair I've ever seen."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Why, Weasley, aren't you full of surprises tonight."

Ron felt his ears burn. "That's not what I meant!"

"Oh?" Malfoy queried. "Of course. I should have known. Pansy's the only one for you, I assume? She's your little frosted crumpet, your sugar rabbit of love, the one true-"

"Malfoy, stop making a mockery-"

"Me mock such a pure and beautiful love?" Malfoy asked innocently. "Why, I-"

"Shut up!"

Ron slammed into the kitchen. It only occurred to him afterwards that this left the smug bastard in possession of the field.

Hermione was making tea in a quiet, methodical manner. Only the over-vigorous tinkle of a teaspoon in the cups gave an indication of her feelings.

"This kitchen is hideous," she told him in chilly tones.

"I like it," Ron said defensively.

The teaspoon said *Clink, clink, clink* angrily before she replied. "It clashes with your hair."

There was a pause, stretching on. He was used to these kind of silences, the ones which told him Hermione thought he should think this said more than words.

Eventually, she said, "Pansy Parkinson? This is the girl everyone's been saying is so good for you, the one you're so serious about? I didn't know I had hurt you that much."

"I don't know what you mean," Ron said.

It seemed like he had been saying that to her all his life.

She threw the teaspoon down with a little sound where Pansy would have thrown the tray full of cups.

"Well, let's face it, Ron," she said with a brittle laugh. "She's hardly your type."

"Oh, what would you know," he snapped. "Maybe it was you who weren't my type."

He had no idea what made him say that. Her eyes narrowed.

"What - so you are serious about her, then?"

"No!" Ron almost shouted. "It's - we have an agreement. It's not serious, it's just - convenient-"

Hermione looked as if she might like to slap him.

"Well, Ron, I think that's disgusting," she said icily. "Sleeping with a woman you don't even like for - what - to comfort you, to have a warm body next to you, because I broke your heart, because you just want *sex*?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Ron snarled. "This isn't about you."

"So it's just sex then, is it?" Hermione inquired. "My God, that's horrible. I'd ask what Pansy was going to get out of it," she added, walking over to the door with the sharp tap of her heels, carrying the tray with precision. "But I've heard about her. She doesn't have to care about you. The way I hear it, she doesn't even have to know you."

She said that as she was walking out the door, and Pansy was standing outside, listening as Malfoy said,

"And playing Granger's little replacement for him is no better than being Weasley's whore."

Pansy heard what Hermione said, too.

And she strode up to her and knocked the tray out of her hands. The water hissed as the cups broke against the ground and she stood there with her hair flying against the maroon sweater.

Ron had already launched himself over the couch at Malfoy.

If Malfoy hadn't moved like a snake, he would have been laid out cold on the hearthrug. As it was, he got his wand pointed at Ron's throat.

"Easy, Weasley," he said. "I'm feeling a bit testy today. It would be terrible if something happened to you like, say, someone detaching your bits and stepping on them for using his friend."

"I'm not - you don't know anything about that!"

"Oh, no? So you haven't been treating her like your personal slut?"

"You're a piece of work, Malfoy," Ron snapped. "I don't believe Harry ever-"

At that point Malfoy chucked away his wand and hit Ron in the jaw. Ron bellowed and ran at him.

They both hit the floor hard. Ron hit Malfoy in the stomach. Malfoy twisted and struck out dishonourably.

"Both of you stop before I Stun you."

Ron looked up at Hermione, who was pointing her wand at them. Pansy's fists were clenched.

"I say go ahead," she said in a steely voice. "I thought it was quite hot."

Ron and Malfoy got away from each other as fast as possible. Malfoy made a big production of dusting off his clothes.

"You would think that," Hermione said.

"Why are you making such a fuss?" Pansy asked in a thin voice. "Why is it your problem? You didn't want him."

"He's my friend," Hermione answered. "And do *you* want him?"

Pansy was silent. Ron supposed it wouldn't be polite to say 'no' in front of the person in question, or in front of the person you really wanted.

Malfoy, who moved too fast to hit and said just what he chose. The rich boy who thought he looked like sin made twice as tempting in his black jeans, and who could make all the girls and many of the boys agree.

Ron had always hated that bastard, but never quite as much as at that moment.

"And are you using her?" Malfoy asked politely, as if he was requesting sugar in his shattered cup of tea.

"No!" Ron yelled.

Pansy's chin came up. "Oh, no?" she asked. "Of course you were. Of course you are. That's all it ever was. That's what you wanted, that's what you said - don't bloody well lie in front of them to make it look-" She stopped and took a deep breath.

"I didn't mean it to be-"

"What about when I pretended to be Hermione?" she asked slowly, lifting her eyes to his face.

"Oh God, stop," he heard Hermione say faintly, from a long way away.

"Were there costumes involved?" he heard Malfoy ask.

"I didn't-" Ron said again, but Pansy wasn't listening.

"We ran into each other in a sleazy bar and we had sex," she yelled. "There's no way to make that - the kind of thing you're expecting, the kind of thing you want. That fairy tale of normality, that girl who's decent and who you're going to marry and-"

"You know, saucy as this is, I think we should leave," Ron heard Malfoy say, and somehow he was at Hermione's elbow, steering her towards the door. "Yes, definitely, time to go... I have lots and lots of work to do, caviar to eat, you know how it is-"

"I can't leave Ron-"

"I don't think it's any of your business!" Malfoy said into her ear. He shoved her towards the door, and then paused. "I, ah, I don't think much of your taste, Pansy," he tossed over his shoulder. "And you can come over later if you need consoling."

"And what the hell do you mean by that?" Ron demanded, whirling on him.

Malfoy was already leaving, dragging Hermione after him by main force. Hermione cast a distressed look over her shoulder as she went.

Pansy hadn't looked over at them, and didn't seem to hear the door slam after them.

Ron turned back to her.

"I didn't want you to be Hermione," he said in low tones.

"Oh, no?" she asked in a trembling voice. "That was all I ever thought you were doing. Measuring me up against her, thinking of how different we were-"

"Well - yes - but it's not what you think-"

"It's not what I think?" Pansy asked. "You're in love with her! You've always been in love with her!"

"And what about you?" Ron roared. "You're in love with Malfoy! That much is obvious. You're in love with that sneaking rat, and that's why you're unhappy enough to sleep with any guy you meet in a bar, or who takes you out for dinner-"

She hit him then, her palm connecting with his face so hard he saw nothing but blackness for an instant, then her furious flushed face.

"Why don't you just say whore?" she demanded viciously. "That's what you thought about what I did."

"Maybe it is!"

"Well, fuck you, Ron Weasley, what you did was no different!" She wiped her face against her sleeve. He didn't know why. "And what can come from starting like this?" she asked suddenly. "Nothing. You'd never even want anything. And I'm wasting my time here."

When Hermione left, she made a list, she packed carefully, she talked it out.

When Pansy left, she turned on her heel and she stormed out the door.

Ron stood in the centre of his living room, the sound of the door slamming echoing in his ears.

And he looked around his home, and thought of what a mess it was. And he thought of loud obvious fights and loud obvious everything, and simplicity, and things starting out absolutely wrong with absolutely the wrong person.

And he wondered when Hermione had stopped being the measure, and Pansy had become it. Because he had been thinking of that as Hermione moved around the kitchen, and maybe she had been right because she was smarter.

She didn't belong there.

Ron looked around under the light, and thought about guesses in the dark, and tried to make things clear to himself, because he wanted things to be clear...

Because he'd only *ever* wanted for things to be clear. To *understand*.

He bolted out of the door and took the steps two at a time, until he reached the bottom floor. Pansy was sitting with her back against the wall there, crying in an angry half-hidden way.

He wouldn't have left either. They weren't the types who left.

She looked up, and sniffed hard. "What the hell do you want, Weasley?" she asked.

"Come back," he said. "You know. Come home."

"And what does that mean?" she snapped.

He knelt down awkwardly to get his face level with hers. "Well, you spend most nights there anyway."

"What are you saying, Weasley?" she said in a loud, obnoxious voice.

She'd been wearing mascara, and it had run, and now she looked like a mad racoon.

And she did have a pug nose, whereas he'd never really wanted to see the physical faults in Hermione, and she drove him absolutely mad some days. The house was never going to be clean and he hated all her friends and he *understood* her, he got it, and people like Hermione or Malfoy had been smart and had left people they loved and had gone searching and were still searching and he'd just stumbled on it and he was incredibly, incredibly lucky.

Ron looked at her and thought, I'm going to spend the rest of my life with this woman.

"I'm saying that I love you, you thick bitch," he said.

Pansy burst out crying.

He could put his arms around her because that was easy, with her, because she felt what he felt and what he wanted she wanted and it was all so beautifully simple.

"Well, I'd hoped the news wasn't going to upset you quite this much," he said gruffly.

"It's not that," Pansy said, scrubbing her face with his shirt and probably ruining it.

She rested her head on his chest, sitting there in his arms on the grubby landing floor, and said quietly,

"I'm crying because now I have to move into your rat's nest of an apartment."

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Hatred

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy.

Dudley had always known that Harry belonged to him.

The certainty had been with him all his life. His parents had given him everything in the house. His toys, his air rifle, his two rooms, his stack of presents every birthday and Christmas, his television, his computer games and of course, the child in the cupboard he could take out and play with.

Harry was the best of his possessions, because he hated being Dudley's possession. Dudley had always wanted that extra kick, that extra present, something to make it better.

The flash of absolute hatred in those green eyes was it. It was an acknowledgement that he was owned, imprisoned, a pet and a toy and absolutely at Dudley's mercy. It was *good*.

Quiet, withdrawn little Harry never felt that depth of emotion for anyone else. It was all Dudley's.

Dudley made sure it stayed that way.

His gang knew that they had to keep Harry apart from everyone, torment Harry to within an inch of his life.

To see Harry looking alone and miserable, too frail in Dudley's own cast-offs, to hear Harry thumping against the cupboard door, to eat anything that Harry would have liked to eat.

To watch Harry lying on the ground, bleeding from a split lip, and see his eyes narrow as he hissed, "I hate you!"

I hate you.

Green eyes and red blood and hatred more vivid than both.

Oh yes. That was the kick.

He *had* Harry. Every day in the house, there were a thousand little fights Dudley always won with his weight advantage - and that was an extra pleasure, the very physical difference between them because thin, black-haired Harry couldn't have been more unlike his parents' adored little boy - and a thousand furious glares which warmed Dudley through and through. Harry belonged to him with every heated hate-filled stare, and always would.

Dudley knew that Harry had powers. He'd seen Harry jump and find himself on the roof of the school kitchens once, he'd seen that snake get loose and snap right at Dudley.

The racing of his blood after that had woken Dudley up at nights. Because it just made Harry more his possession, that fury at Dudley could make things like that happen.

Dudley might be going to Smeltings, but Harry would still be at home for the holidays. Harry would still be in his power. Nobody would ever have more power over Harry than he did.

Dudley held onto that through all the strange, stupid things. Even after that mad giant broke into their hut. No matter what school Harry went to, he was Dudley's creature. He wasn't getting away.

Dudley saw to that. In the month after the giant's appearance, he had acted out terror of Harry, smirking through his parents' arms as he always did, making sure Harry knew he was isolated and hated.

Forever.

And he was always rewarded with that narrow-eyed glare, I cannot imagine ever hating anyone more than I hate you, and then he was content.

*

The summer after Harry's first year at that freak school only gave Dudley a hint there was something going wrong.

The hatred was still there then. He could make needling references to Harry having no friends at that mad place, and Harry would be vulnerable and hurt and he would glare.

Oh, but it wasn't the same! There was a lack of depth in that stare. There wasn't all the emotion, all the hatred, that there could possibly be.

Dudley knew something had changed, but he didn't know what it was.

All he knew was that when Harry was locked up in his room, hungry and desperate and unhappy, Dudley would sit outside the door and listen to him cry. Every time his parents thought about letting Harry out for the sake of caution, he urged them not to. Then he drank in the soft desperate sobs, and he was able to think - I did that. He's mine.

And it still wasn't enough.

When Harry escaped, Dudley vowed, next summer, next summer, he wasn't getting away.

Next summer it was even worse.

Harry barely noticed him. He was getting letters now, he definitely had friends and he was more self-confident but Dudley could have dealt with that, that wasn't the hatred...

Sometimes when Harry looked at him, there was the flicker of that heat, that fury, and then - Harry seemed to be looking through Dudley. Looking at someone else, someone worse.

And the heat was all for him.

Dudley could not bear that.

So he had to resort to desperate measures. He found out where Harry kept his letters, he distracted Harry in the middle of writing his letters, he tried to get a picture of this stupid place and the name of this rival.

He stumbled on things like Voldemort, but even though Dudley knew very little he could see it wasn't that. Harry didn't discuss that name with the same personal hatred, that fire that comes from detesting even the tiny petty everyday actions of a person, from loathing every molecule of their being.

And then he found the name. It was in the round scrappy handwriting of that person who always signed himself Ron, and it was a casual throwaway comment. But there was dislike there, and there was something else that made the hair prickle on the back of Dudley's neck.

Malfoy.

It meant something. He went through all the letters from Ron, found references to the name again, and to 'dear old Draco' in scathing comments.

Draco Malfoy.

A weird name, a freak's name, and one of those people at that stupid place thought he could casually scoop up something which had belonged to Dudley all his life.

One day he saw the name in one of the letters Harry was writing. On the very first line, the thing he wanted to talk about more than anything else.

Dudley wasn't stupid. He could see that much.

'I don't want to talk about Malfoy.'

That absolute hatred. The open honesty of Harry's direct green glare. Hatred, and it was for someone else.

Dudley couldn't guess what this person had done. Had a bigger gang to torment Harry, hit him harder, thought of more ways to torment him, used magic? What could he possibly have done to make a lifetime of torture less important to Harry?

He was a faceless, remorseless opponent. And from all that Dudley could glean, he hadn't done much.

Small acts of petty dislike were all that people mentioned. Nothing Dudley hadn't done a hundred times over, none of the best things -

Harry's mouth bleeding as he glared up at Dudley -

But he had to have done something. He had to have some secret. If Dudley could figure that much out...

Meanwhile, whenever Harry glared at him he was glaring past him, and Dudley wasn't even there. Draco Malfoy and Harry were the only people in the room, and Harry's hatred was so thick Dudley could taste it, but he couldn't have it.

In the end, Dudley had felt viciously jealous of Aunt Marge, because Harry had seen her, had cared enough to attack her. When she had been deflated, he wanted to attack her. But his anger wasn't really for her.

It was for him.

Dudley ate even more than usual next year, mad unstoppable eating, as if he could spite Harry with every mouthful, because he had a plan.

And it worked. Next summer, the diet was declared, and skinny fragile Harry was condemned to table scraps. Dudley could visualise those eyes in that thin pale face, growing brighter with hatred as he grew hungrier.

Beat that, Draco Malfoy.

Except Harry didn't even seem to notice. Nothing Dudley could do got through to him momentarily, and even those glares he won shifted from Harry's contemplation of Dudley to that constant ghost.

The summer after that, after Harry's fourth year, had been even worse.

There had been no glares. Nothing Dudley could do provoked him at all. Harry was scared of something, and it wasn't a rival, it was something bigger and not on a personal level and that was all right, listening outside Harry's room to hear the cries he woke up with was good... but.

But Dudley gathered from Ron's letters that there had been some incident on the train. This Malfoy person had provoked everybody on some train - had provoked Harry - into attacking.

Nothing Dudley could do got through to him, but Malfoy had gotten to him.

How was he doing it? What was his secret?

Dudley had to know. But he couldn't find out, and he didn't get through, and nothing happened that summer except his own frustration growing hotter and hotter, longing fed throughout night after night outside Harry's bedroom waiting for a tiny unsatisfying cry of distress.

Longing for just one more drop of blood and hatred.

*

The summer after Harry's fifth year was just the same. Harry was even more withdrawn, untouchable. He was pale and preoccupied and there was never ever any heat in his eyes.

He never even woke up crying at night. He was tougher than that now.

It was unendurable.

Dudley could only take out that name, Draco Malfoy, and curse it, and assure himself that Harry was unhappy.

But it hardly seemed to matter. Dudley wasn't the one making him unhappy. And in the deepest watches of the night, lying awake, that was all that seemed to matter.

If he couldn't get to him, Harry wasn't caged. Harry wasn't his.

The deepest watches of the night.

Like one night in late August, when he was lying awake and he heard the soft sound of someone sliding the bolts of the door open. He was out of bed in a second, of course. If it was Harry, he could deliver him into the hands of his parents at once, he could get him into such trouble and then surely Harry would be furious...

Dudley came padding softly down the steps to the open front door, where he could see Harry's thin figure in too-large pyjamas, outlined against the night.

Where he could see three silhouettes on the porch.

And he was just about to go running for his parents when Harry's voice came cutting through the air, alive at last and like blood and hatred and everything Dudley had been dying for.

"What the hell are you doing here, Malfoy!"

Dudley wasn't moving after that. Not an inch. Not when the ghost was about to made flesh, the secret about to be revealed and Harry was about to be in his power once more.

Three silhouettes on the porch, and Dudley crept closer.

A girl with bushy hair, clearly Hermione of the compulsively neat script, and a redhaired boy with a good-humoured expression. Ron of the cheerful scraps.

So the boy leaning lazily against the doorframe...

Draco Malfoy.

He wasn't what Dudley had been expecting. Somebody huge, who could crush Harry and laugh as the blood flowed, not someone as pale and slim as Harry himself and strangely... beautiful.

Beauty was not something Dudley had factored into his calculations. He wondered what it had to do with anything, that the boy's hair was like soft moonlight and his face was narrow and aristocratic.

He suspected that the boy's presence, an arrogant overwhelming and utterly vibrant presence, had a lot to do with things. But it still couldn't account for - that. That absolute, searing, locked gaze which meant there was no-one else in the room, that blistering heat and that...

God, yes. Hatred.

"Nice pyjamas, Potter," the boy sneered.

And Harry was that vulnerable defiant boy who was supposed to belong to Dudley, crossing his arms defensively over his chest, caring again. Glaring again.

"What's he doing here?" he demanded of the other two.

They spoke at once. Dudley wouldn't have bothered if he was them. It was clear from one look at Harry's intent furious face that he wasn't listening, wasn't even really aware of them.

"It's complicated, Harry, you'll have to trust us-"

"We'll explain later, but now Dumbledore needs us and we have to go-"

"I know it sounds stupid, but he's on our side-"

"He's working with us. Dumbledore needs us all now, we have to co-operate and-"

It meant nothing to Dudley. But that fixed gaze did, that meant almost everything, and he came just a little further down the steps to see it and...

"What is that?" said the cutting voice.

Draco Malfoy. And he was coming face to face with his enemy at last.

But of course the boy didn't understand. Chilly grey eyes swept over Dudley with a look of utter disdain, and then dismissed him and returned to Harry.

"That's my cousin," Harry said tightly, barely glancing back.

"It's a relative?"

He wasn't even doing anything very much! And there the hatred was, hot and consuming and all for him, and it wasn't fair...

"Muggles aren't objects," Harry said, which meant less than nothing, but his tone...

"Whatever, Potter. Like I care."

Harry's whole body was drawn tight as a bowstring. Dudley watched those taut tense lines covertly, covetously.

"Like I'm supposed to believe you're on my side."

"Oh, I assure you I'll never be on your side."

Draco Malfoy's voice was soft and sharp as a knife stroking Harry's face. And the gathering together of Harry's shoulders was... oh, indescribable.

There it was. The secret. The reason this boy could take what was Dudley's, win all that hatred, he was using it at this very moment and Dudley could see the effect and...

He still had no idea what it was.

The boy took a step closer to Harry. Harry lifted his chin, face open and honest and blazing.

"But I'm not on his side," he whispered coldly.

"And why should I believe that?"

"Because-" The boy looked over, and one corner of his thin mouth curled. "Not in front of the Muggle, Potter. Come with us and I'll tell you."

Harry stepped forward again, coming nose to nose with Draco Malfoy.

"And what will you tell me?" he demanded.

The boy was unfazed. "Everything. What else?"

Harry made decisions fast when he was angry, every synapse snapping like the fire behind his eyes.

"Right then," he said. "Come on. Let's go."

He strode towards the door.

"Er, Harry-"

The girl called Hermione and the Malfoy boy were looking mildly amused.

"You might want to get dressed, Potter."

Harry went dark red, and then made a dash for the stairs.

Dudley heard his own voice, whining and impotent. "You can't go anywhere. Mum and Dad will-"

"They won't care," Harry snapped, barely looking at him.

"If I tell them-"

"Oh for God's sake," said Draco Malfoy. Dudley looked at him and saw him lifting some kind of stick in his hand, heard the nonsensical words - "Petrificus Totalus" - and felt...

Cold enveloping him, freezing him and making him topple to the ground. Winter paralysing him, having him, winter as implacable as the icy look on his rival's face and as pitiless as a life without Harry or hatred.

He lay there on his side, absolutely convinced that the blood would not begin running in his veins again and restore him to life and motion unless Harry looked at him with that fire of hatred again...

The front door shut behind them.

*

The summer after Harry's sixth year was different again. For the first time, Dudley worked out that this would be Harry's last summer in Privet Drive. That Harry was not shackled as Dudley had planned, that he could and would escape and Dudley still hadn't found out the secret...

Harry was different too. Even more distant, on a personal level.

As if something was preoccupying him. On a personal level.

Dudley had to break through that reserve somehow. So he tried the only way he could think of.

He swaggered up to Harry one day and said,

"So those freaks were your friends?"

Harry was staring at something Dudley couldn't see. "Yeah," was all he said, in disinterested tones.

"That Draco Malfoy character?"

At the mention of the name, Dudley saw Harry tense up. The disinterest was suddenly an unconvincing mask. And his gaze focused, intensified.

He was still looking at something Dudley couldn't see. But Dudley knew who it was.

"What about him?" Harry said sharply. Then, after a moment, he told the obvious lie. "I don't want to talk about him."

"Is he your friend?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," Harry answered, tumbling the words together. Not even talking to Dudley anymore. He stood up to go, and said under his breath, "I don't know what he is."

That night Dudley listened outside Harry's door once again.

There were soft sounds, sheets rustling, quickened breathing. And then at last there was that name, bewildered and raw, like the sound of that old childish crying.

Dudley thought it was a new kind of hatred.

*

Dudley recognised the Hermione girl's handwriting even when it came by the ordinary post. He had come to realise that their weirdo owl post might be watched sometimes, and Hermione's letters meant something special. Harry always looked apprehensive when he got one.

When he read this one, he went ashen.

Dudley loved and loathed that look, the sick winded pain in Harry's face unbelievably sweet but the suspicion rising at once.

This has something to do with him.

Dudley listened for it, that irrepressible fragment slipping from Harry's lips.

"He wouldn't - he can't."

"What are you whispering about, boy?" Dudley's Dad snapped.

"Nothing, Uncle Vernon," Harry replied instantly. "I - um. Can I be excused?"

Of course, he couldn't be. But he sat there looking at his food with a sort of horror, as if he would vomit if he was forced to eat any. And once Uncle Vernon got up, he bolted out of the room.

That frightened look on his face. God, what was this secret, what had this boy done?

Dudley waited for what he judged to be the right amount of time, and then reminded his mother that Harry should be doing the washing-up. Once she dragged Harry out of his room, Dudley crept in and found the letter.

Harry's writing was a spiky mess.

'Come and see me. Tonight. I want to know what the hell you think you're doing. You're not stupid and you have to know that - I mean - you have to know how dangerous

Just come and see me. You have to. If you don't, I'll go to Malfoy Manor. I swear I will. I don't care what happens.

Draco, you'

That was all he'd written. That was enough. That was too much.

Dudley hid himself behind his mother's prize rosebushes that night. It was already starting to rain when Harry and Draco appeared from the front of the house.

There he was again. The rival. The enemy.

Blond hair like silk pushed off his face, the first trail of rain hitting one side of his porcelain flawless cheek.

And Harry, heated imperfect human Harry, staring at him with a ferocity that burned Dudley through and through in the pouring rain.

They were already talking.

"-spying, Draco, have you lost your mind? You know what happened to Snape! You can't possibly risk it-"

Desperation edging Harry's voice, sharp and savage as a blade. And there was that life, and hatred, and that secret... and Dudley still didn't know what it could be.

"I have to! There's nobody else they could possibly believe!"

"You know what they did to Snape!" Harry's hands, suddenly clutching at the other boy's arms, and Dudley was reminded of how he used to fight back in the playground. His voice was dark. "I won't let you do it."

"I really don't see how it's any of your business."

Dudley didn't understand the words. They didn't matter. What mattered were the tones, that blackness laced with the intoxicating red of hatred and the white knuckles of Harry's hands as he held on...

The blond boy tried to wrench out of his grasp, and Harry hung on stubbornly. And it was raining heavily and they were fighting and yelling at each other, Draco's face for once open and distraught as Harry's, and Dudley felt a hot pulse of excitement as he realised that Harry was crying.

Ohhh, hatred.

"Let me go!" He was trying to twist out of Harry's grasp and Harry, mouth set and miserable as a child's, wouldn't let go, and this was all feral and yes, absolutely, hatred...

"I won't! I won't do it!"

And they overbalanced, or slipped in the mud, and suddenly Draco was on his back on the stone steps of the patio, and it must have hurt like hell but he didn't seem to care, his eyes were wide and grey and bleak and he was snarling.

"Why do you even care!"

Still trying to get away, and they were scrambling and shoving and struggling and Harry's heavy wet hair was in Draco's face and then...

Harry touched Draco's face. And the gesture was all wrong, incongruent, and Draco stilled under his touch as Dudley stilled behind the rosebushes.

"You know why," Harry was saying in a low rapid voice. "You know why, Draco, you know..."

There was stillness for a moment, and then - motion again, frantic desperate motion, lips and hands and heaving and... hatred?

Harry's mouth was red and swollen, and there was blood there but not spilled, and Draco's thin body was arching and...

The utter utter lack of heat for him froze Dudley, left him staring and so cold in that chill garden in this night storm, because he finally understood the secret and it was so horribly simple.

All he could do was watch as Harry buried his face in the rain-slicked smoothness of Draco's throat, and murmured words that had nothing to do with hatred.

Finis

Contempt

He's always had this strange craving.

Perhaps it comes from being the sickly baby, the one with Bill and Charlie for brothers, strong and popular and perfect, and becoming used to the disappointment in the eyes of the people he loved.

You'll never be worth as much as they are, compounded with all the attention the twins demanded from day one, compounded with the fact that Percy has just never been any good with other people. He bores them. They don't like him. And he's intelligent enough to see this.

He never had many friends, and the ones who accepted him did so because they couldn't get any better ones. *You'll never be worth much*.

Then when he was fifteen and realising certain things about himself, Oliver Wood realised those things about Percy too. And since Percy was the only one there, and Oliver wanted it all to be a secret and not mean anything, and Percy fulfilled his criteria, though he didn't even like Percy...

Percy was too intelligent, that was another of his problems. He was capable of self-analysis, and he worked out those secrets he discovered in Oliver's bed. Humiliation and abasement and the other person being emotionally cold and this not being incidental to the pleasure, but wrapped around it. Inseparable from it. And maybe it was twisted, that *I don't love you* meant *I love you* and empty eyes made him scream, but there it was...

You'll never be worth anything.

It was the final message, and the one he received, and the one he hated, and the one he wanted so badly he could taste it.

On days when Percy is being painfully honest with himself (and let's be honest, Percy likes pain) he would have to admit that Oliver just couldn't cut it. He was too decent, too honest, too *Gryffindor* not to lie to Percy and pretend to care just a little, and those lies made Percy faintly ill. He doesn't want sugar, he wants to drink blood.

And he always thought he might have done well in Slytherin.

Marcus Flint, now, he was much better than Oliver. But he was stupid and easily pleased, and when he was pleased he treated Percy like he was a pet. Dismissive, yes, but there was potential there for a certain amount of affection, and his stupidity made Percy despise him faintly.

That isn't part of the plan at all.

So Marcus was as over as Oliver by sixth year, and Percy was utterly deprived of his own particular brand of entertainment for the first few weeks...

He was reduced to acting as Penelope Clearwater's cover for all her illicit activities. She wanted someone she could use with no regrets, she didn't want her parents to know, and pompous unlikeable Percy was absolutely perfect.

Percy has never been interested in girls, but just now and then as he was forced to watch Penny tangle sweatily with Alicia Spinnet, as he mentioned a private get-away with Penny to others and recalled her cold amused glance over at him...

Well. Yes, now and then there were faint twinges of excitement. Now and then he even wonders if Penny was the only person who ever understood him. She knew exactly what he was getting out of helping her, and she used that. She was ruthless and cold and cruel, and if all those who Percy thinks would have done well in Slytherin had gone there, the numbers would be overwhelming.

Still, Percy was feeling... listless. All he could do was treasure up those exasperated looks his power as a prefect and his attitude towards it got him, and the treasures were cheap and unsatisfying.

They were all Percy had, though, and so when he heard a commotion going on in the courtyard he ran to interfere and stopped short, sour disappointment in his mouth, when he saw Professor Lockhart was dealing with whatever the situation had been.

Which was when it happened.

Three boys detached from the crowd, and one of them looked at Percy.

It was a single wintry look of contempt, but it shocked Percy backwards, left him still and staring at the place the boy had been as he swept off.

Because nothing had ever been so exactly *right*.

Nothing in any way to indicate Percy was special, but a particular dislike in that look, scorn that seemed to incorporate both his hair and his badge, and chill indifference and the casual cruelty of someone who is simply not very nice at all... In *one* look. One.

And it lasted for all of a second, and Percy saw it all night.

So after a couple of weeks he carefully asks his questions, and it's all laughably easy. He noticed the cool grey eyes and the Slytherin crest, and Fred and George immediately recognise the description. They have just begun fuming over Draco Malfoy, Slytherin Seeker.

Draco Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy's son, and they've all heard Father talk about Lucius Malfoy. That's what got Percy the look, dislike utterly divorced from personal feelings. A Death Eater, and poisonous from all the twins have to say, and - and perfect.

And so terribly young. Ron's age, and Percy feels a hot coil of self-disgust in his stomach, and that's horrible and perfect too.

He gathers the information that Fred and George dispense so freely, even absorbs a few comments from Ron and Ron's famous little friend. Harry Potter, Percy notes, looks angry when Draco Malfoy's name is even mentioned.

Percy places himself in a seat where he can see easily over to the Slytherin table. He notices that several other people look over there too. The boy gives them all that chilly cursory look, and Percy wants it more than food at mealtimes.

He thought he saw shrewdness behind those icy eyes, but he was afraid that this Quidditch-playing child might be another stupid Marcus. He stole that stupid map of the twins' to sneak in and get a look at his records, though, and the boy was clever.

Percy did not just look at records.

He watched Draco Malfoy. Watched his careless contempt of the world, how he used Quidditch to manipulate people because that was how he enjoyed using his skill. Just like he enjoyed expressing his scorn of people by mimicking them, and oh Percy loved to watch him do that. He was talented and callous and Percy could not get enough.

He made new rules with Penelope. Her trysts now had to be held near the Slytherin rooms, and as she had her fun with the latest girls he could wander the halls and catch a glimpse now and then.

Once he was doing just that, right after Penelope had left, and he bumped into the boy's henchmen.

It was an almost voyeuristic little thrill, gazing into the dull eyes that reflected his wintry gaze so often. Percy was hardly aware of what he was saying, lost in that thought, and then Draco Malfoy's own voice had cut into the conversation.

He'd heard his voice before, of course. He had eavesdropped for it, run it over and over again in his mind, the cool formal voice of one who has been brought up by adults. But he had never heard it addressed to *him*, never shuddered at the look which it accompanied.

Absolutely withering, and so good.

"And what're you doing here, Weasley?"

The world of addictive contempt behind that name. And Percy felt hatred, and rage, and offended pride, and consuming lust.

"You want to show a bit more respect to a school Prefect! I don't like your attitude!"

He couldn't decide whether that was a lie or not.

But when the Malfoy boy sneered at him - God, it was more than just a look, it was his whole face turned to the purpose of contempt and the corruption of it was better than all his twisted talent. Liking didn't matter. He wanted it.

If they hadn't turned away just then, they would have noticed Percy shiver uncontrollably. As it was, he leaned against the wall and listened ferociously to the disappearing sounds of his voice.

"That Peter Weasley-"

He hated him then, and still knew he would replay his voice when the lights were dimmed.

"Percy."

"Whatever," Draco Malfoy said, and God he was sort of magnificent. "I've noticed him sneaking around a lot lately."

I knew he was quick, the little bastard.

"And I bet I know what he's up to. He thinks he's going to catch Slytherin's heir single-handed."

Of course, he was still very young, and couldn't help being occasionally naïve. Or - perhaps he was very right, and the Malfoy boy was Slytherin's heir himself. Percy smiled. The idea appealed to him, for some reason.

That encounter filled Percy's nights with lurid re-enactments for weeks afterwards, and then on Valentine's Day - how oddly appropriate - he was watching the back of that fair head when he realised that he was causing trouble.

Percy couldn't believe his luck. There was a large crowd, with Harry Potter and little Ginny and excitement, and it was such a *normal* thing for him to do, to interfere and to have to look and to have to listen...

"What's all this commotion?" he demanded.

Apparently Harry Potter was getting a Valentine. Percy pretended to be dispersing the crowd as he watched Malfoy, watched that intent spiteful look on his face and finally gathered up the nerve to speak to him.

Dismissively, dismissively, he's a child just like the others...

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now." He couldn't help his tone changing, becoming more intense. "*And* you, Malfoy."

The look was better than it had ever been, and then - oh, he was so lucky and it would be so *good* to give him detention - Malfoy stole Harry's diary.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?"

"Hand it over, Malfoy," Percy said sternly.

He had never said Malfoy's name before this occasion, and now he had just said it twice, and Malfoy's venomous look made Percy's blood sing as if it were dying for poison.

Then Harry took matters into his own hands and made Percy want to put the boy's eyes out so he couldn't absorb that look.

He couldn't help shouting.

"Harry! No magic in the corridors. I'll have to report this, you know!"

Disappointment was bitter at the back of his throat, and it didn't help when Malfoy turned the look on Ginny and snapped,

"I don't think Potter liked your Valentine much!"

Ginny covered her face and ran into class. Percy hated it, but later he wove it all together in the darkness - thrills and hatred and jealousy and frustration and his baby sister crying and the sharp twist of pleasure he felt when he saw that, all bound up in one excruciatingly perfect nightmare.

The kind of nightmare where the house elves changed the sheets afterwards.

After the glow faded he forced Penelope to come out near the Slytherin rooms. He wanted to catch just another glimpse - and he was staring blatantly at Malfoy telling off his cronies when to his horror, Ginny came around a corner.

He pushed Penelope into a room and kissed her. At least her mouth against his spelled pure distaste, and he thought about the look, and at the flash of Ginny's red hair he thought about seeing her cry, about the smirk on Malfoy's face, about wanting to *hurt* him...

Ginny had fled in embarrassment, and Penelope had given him a leisurely look up and down.

"Why, Percy. What has you so excited?"

Later that day, Penelope was Petrified. It felt like a judgement which had accidentally hit the wrong person in that frozen embrace, and the worst thing about Percy's horror was that it was not as bad as the almost sickening fear he felt when he heard people discussing expelling all the Slytherins.

Self-disgust was good too. It made Percy sick and aroused at once, and when he heard George saying quietly that "Percy's in shock" he almost nodded.

Patrol duty was bad because he could no longer creep about the Slytherin rooms. Percy did not particularly fear the monster. Actually, it rather appealed to him - reptilian eyes filled with such contempt that it would freeze him, still these compulsions forever.

It might be just the kind of consummation Percy wanted.

Ginny being taken seemed precisely the kind of bleakly unjust misdirection that had turned Malfoy's eyes to her in the corridor. He had to settle for the smouldering discontent written across Malfoy's face as the term drew to a close.

Your father's been discredited and you hate everyone. Even me. Oh yes, hate me...

He was locked in a pyramid briefly over the summer. The twins and Ron had run off laughing and Mother hadn't noticed for about fifteen minutes. He'd heard their casually scornful laughs as they went and experienced a brief shuddering moment of pleasure in the hot darkness, with the smell of the long dead.

Imagining their laughs belonged to someone else.

He was made Head Boy, and there would be power now. Percy loved the idea of power, not least the power of invoking that look more, the power to torture him and have him helpless... even if that was only a dream, because part of the compulsion was that Percy could never touch him in any way.

He cherished that badge, cherished the thought of it flashing silver in those silver eyes, all the coldness and contempt in the world. He obsessed over it and guarded it jealously from the twins.

The Dementors distracted him on the train, but as he was herding the first years towards Hagrid he heard that voice again, mocking Harry. It was a soothing, familiar sound, like a lover's murmur reassuring a normal person.

At dinner Dumbledore mentioned Percy.

"I look to the Prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs foul of the Dementors."

Percy held out his chest so the badge shone and looked around at the Slytherin table. He savoured that long, loathing look, couldn't drink a sip of pumpkin juice, felt full to the brim with it. He also considered the idea of Draco Malfoy being helpless and under his protection.

Adorable notion, even though part of the boy's charm was that Percy could never ever have the upper hand. Part of the beauty was the ugly yearning for that.

He kept watching. Malfoy was so thoroughly unpleasant, plotted bloody revenge against an animal with such cold-blooded ruthlessness. Percy dreamed of him plotting Percy's own murder with a similar attitude, and woke gasping.

Yet he was never despised. Percy would never have wanted that, for him to be at Percy's level, to ever ever be despicable. He was popular and took it for granted, students in the higher classes laughed and talked with him, and he treated them with lofty superiority. He was unbearable, but he had a certain chilly charisma, and Percy's envy of that mingled with everything else, made it all sharper and better.

Like blood.

Percy used his power just as he'd planned, and oh, he likes power for its own sake but also for all it can do, and his ambition is twisted as the rest of himself.

One day he sees Draco Malfoy doing one of his impressions, imitating him, mocking *him*, his voice dripping scorn, and Percy gave him detention. And he melted the bottom of his cauldron out later that day, thinking about... thinking about...

It was then he began seriously to debate the importance of thicker-bottomed cauldrons.

Eyes like sharpened steel and a laugh like cruelty. And a gloriously awful spiral of obsession.

When the Head Boy and Girl were put in charge of the students sleeping in the Great Hall, after the first Sirius Black scare, it was the perfect opportunity to look around at every student. *He* was lying in a purple sleeping bag like all the others, smugly asleep as people panicked around him, one hand cupped under that pointed chin.

He looked about six. Percy kept staring.

It was only when he burrowed down in his sleeping bag that Percy called,

"The lights are going out now! I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

He shouted especially in Malfoy's direction, and Malfoy propped himself up on his elbows, blinking like an owl, and murmured crossly to Crabbe.

Percy stalked over to tell him off, and the sizzling effect of that look was still with him when Professor Dumbledore came in to ask him if everything was all right.

"Everything under control, sir."

Mother asked him to look after Harry Potter, and he agreed because Malfoy always seemed to turn up in the places where Harry was. Of course, that meant Harry got the look, but Percy had always known how to punish Harry for that.

"They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it's not all it's cracked up to be. All right, the sweetshop's rather good, but Zonko's Joke Shop's frankly dangerous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack's always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you're not missing anything."

He didn't want Malfoy brought down from his current position, and he desperately wanted him humiliated. He plotted against him purely to see him overcome the plots and to hate him more than ever.

Put a little pressure on Harry to win against Ravenclaw because then Slytherin will be less likely to win the cup, make up something about a bet and then hurry off because Malfoy was approaching and perhaps it was best that nobody saw Percy react, that nobody suspected.

Harry won.

"Well *done*, Harry! Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me--"

The look, that slow icy burn on Malfoy's face, was worth crawling over broken glass on his belly. Was *like* crawling over broken glass on his belly, too.

A couple of weeks later Malfoy almost ran Percy down hurtling out of Hogsmeade. His pale face was set, and he was covered in mud, and his glance was poison.

"*Watch* it, Weasley."

Percy lay awake all night thinking of the impact of those fragile bones against his body, the mud smeared against that white flawless cheek.

When the Gryffindor-Slytherin match was approaching, everyone who crossed Malfoy's path got the look. Which was so, so good, since he spent most of his time flying in those damned interminable practices and when he wasn't doing that he was glaring over at Harry Potter during mealtimes.

That happened far too often.

Once Malfoy was rushing late to yet another practice, fastening his Quidditch robes as he ran, and Percy witnessed yet another snarling confrontation with Harry.

"Get the *hell* out of my way."

"Go ahead, Malfoy. I know you need the practice."

Just a brief exchange of incivilities, utterly normal, and the slightest, most unconscious glance of Harry Potter's eyes down to the pale slope of Draco's collarbone, disappearing between fingers and cloth.

Percy had never liked that boy.

Even though he was indebted to him for winning the Quidditch Cup. Malfoy had been just inches away, inches from catching the Snitch, and then Potter had won and the stands had erupted, the whole school screaming delight at Slytherin's downfall, and the Slytherins had all looked betrayed and he had been one very lone, very small figure there on the Quidditch pitch.

He had given them all a sweeping glare, like virulent white-hot hatred, and Percy felt it like the most intimate touch. Even though he didn't even see Percy. Especially because he didn't see Percy.

Percy jumped up and down in triumph, the Gryffindors win and I am the Head Boy and *look at me*, but Malfoy simply stalked off.

Yes, Percy was indebted to Harry, but Harry need never know that. And there had certainly been no necessity for Harry to fly so *close* to Malfoy. That wasn't normal for Quidditch. You kept away from the other fliers, fearing for your own balance, but Harry's face had been set and he'd seemed for a minute like he was furiously intent on climbing into Malfoy's lap and...

Percy was distinctly cold and snappish to Harry from then on. The child, never bright, assumed that he was worried about his NEWTs.

Naturally he got his top class NEWTs, though, and Malfoy's incandescent fury over an escaped Hippogriff was a beautiful entertainment until the end of the year.

And that was where it was supposed to end.

Yes, it had been a diversion, and yes, it had been a daily fix for him and his needs, and now he was out in the world and there were new things for him, new ambitions and new people...

But once you've found the perfect fix...

Obsessions do not let go. They become traps. They were always traps. And steel teeth closing into the bone can feel like having an itch scratched. Hurting in all the right ways - and for Percy, that was every way.

Being pompous was less helpful in this world, but being annoyingly obsequious worked like a Charm. And his employer couldn't have been more ideal - caught up and twisted by bitterness, wrapped in some dark secret sorrow Percy couldn't have cared less about. He loathed Percy even as he found him barely worthy of attention, forgot his name even as he picked up on his signals and tried to erase his pain with Percy.

Yes, Percy loved that message.

I'm taking you because I've got to have somebody, but it could be any body, and I wish it wasn't your body...

Back to sex. Away from games. That all made sense, and Percy's life was very much on track, and perhaps the fact things were going well was it because that had to be it didn't it, because he'd never even thought of him that way, certainly never fantasised while pushed up against Crouch's desk, and still, and still...

"Draco!"

Crouch never thought to ask him who Draco was.

And for the first time Percy deceived himself. Because he was reaching his goals, he had exactly the kind of thing he wanted, he should have been happy - or as happy as Percy had ever wanted to be. He let his parents know about Crouch to support that, to reassure himself that this was all true, and also to see the look on his father's face when Percy said bland things at the dinner table like:

"I've told Mr Crouch that I'll have - *it* - ready by Tuesday. That's a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep... on top of things."

The wince his father could not control almost made up for the fact that he was thinking about the Triwizard Tournament, that he could not stop thinking about it and that Crouch would probably need some help.

He talked so much about Crouch that even poor dense Ron said he was obsessed, and then he tried to pry small facts about... school from Ginny.

"Draco Malfoy?" Ginny repeated, screwing up her sweet face in concentration, and God why had his two youngest siblings been born so stupid? "I don't know him well. Ask Harry when he comes, that awful boy's always around him."

Ask Harry when he comes. That calm conviction that Draco was part of Harry's life.

When Harry did come, Percy loathed the very sound of his steps on the stairs.

"Oh, hello, Harry. I was wondering who was making all that noise."

His puzzled little face. Oh yes, Harry was always so *sweet*, so *clueless*.

Percy shouted for silence from his bedroom until dinnertime, trying to reconstruct a person from bits and pieces warped by obsession. Didn't matter. Didn't matter. Eyes like frost and a face from a hated family and a cold, drawling voice, creeping over Percy like chills and ice and *heat* and...

"Percy, dear! Dinner's ready!"

Waking at ten on Quidditch World Cup day, not too early not too late, perfectly natural to go a bit before the others, and Apparating to the campsite. Father and the brats nowhere nearby, good good good, and Percy was moving to the more expensive tents, the ones with trimming and the humming magic around them which meant they were palatial inside. Moving to the one with silver trim, nearest to a meadow, and in the meadow...

Of course, they were all supposed to wear Muggle clothes. It was only a sensible precaution.

Almost equally of course, Percy had never really thought of Draco Malfoy as having a body. He had been so young, and the idea of losing control over a child was faintly horrifying, and so he had been an ideal. A sort of dream, more about emotions personified, the flash of grey eyes like disdain and thrillingly cruel sneer.

That's been changing. Changing like the flash of white skin as fingers fastened a Quidditch robe, like mid-air brawling, like the fact Percy has just remembered about sex and why he liked what he liked so much...

Draco Malfoy was older now. And Percy, who has never cared about physical attractiveness, is viciously pleased somehow that Draco has everything - as well as being furious that other people will now be watching Draco, and for no good reason.

He is also furious that he was such a fool. For watching the sneer when there was a perfectly delicious and nasty little mouth under it, watching for Malfoy features when the face was cool and beautiful. Most of all for watching for arrogant bearing when he could see that slim body now, stretched lean and taut on the grass, in exquisitely cut grey trousers and a black shirt.

The sleeves of the shirt were rolled up, and his forearms glistened like pearl. He was reading a Potions book like he enjoyed it, like he wanted to absorb it. The sun was dazzling on his pale hair, and Percy had never really noticed how extraordinary his hair was before.

"Draco!"

And that name, softly spoken, doesn't sound like it did in Percy's mouth that one time. A beautiful woman in a flowing dress with long blonde hair walks across the meadow to Draco, who gets up.

"Lunch," she says, and touches his face. He leans in just a fraction to the touch, and his face is soft and for once, utterly devoid of malice.

And Percy shouldn't be interested in this, in sweet mother-and-child moments in the sunlight, in anything beautiful and simple. But for Percy, not even perversion can be pure.

He's always known this. He's only just coming to realise it.

"Gorgeous," Charlie says behind him, and Percy spins around in horror. But Charlie's smiling, nodding. "Anyone'd look, Perce. Mind you, she's probably a bit old - I think she's the kid's mother. Come on, I'm not going to tell on you, and Bill will be along in a minute."

Charlie was always the kind one, but Percy is edgy after that. Stressing his unquestioned innocence.

"Just Apparated, Dad!" he said too loudly. "Ah, excellent, lunch!"

Doesn't taste a mouthful.

And seeing Crouch again is almost funny, his slight panic and absurd pretending not to know Percy's name. Percy thinks he might be starting to despise him, so maybe it's over, and besides no matter where he looks, it's all just jagged fragments. Like a broken mirror reflecting pale elbows and curling lips, vivid and sharp enough to cut wrists.

He's feeling in a petty mood, so he embarrasses his father in the Top Box by fawning on all his colleagues. Even that isn't enough to calm him down. He's - all messed up, distracted, and when he sees Draco climbing to the Top Box with his parents he jumps so violently his glasses fall off his nose and shatter.

Harry, who is talking to the idiot Minister for Magic, gives him a puzzled glance. He shoots a glance at Harry which is pure burning...

I'm not jealous. Percy has never felt anything so simple and innocent.

It seems a pity to mend the broken lenses of his glasses. He would like to see Draco's face through the fractured glass.

He does mend them, though, and he's so glad that he did because as Lucius Malfoy talks to Father, Draco surveys them with the most perfect and paralysing expression of loathing.

Percy would have hated to miss that. And when the Veela are dancing and everyone is distracted, he looks over eagerly to see Draco's humiliation, which will be sweet and bitter and destructive and which might just cure Percy.

Draco's hands are clasped tight around his armrests. That is the only sign of strain about him. Percy admires him, hates him, watches his young unfixed profile glow against the sky.

Those cool grey eyes narrow at the sight of Harry, poised to leap from the stands, and when Harry is forced back into his chair those eyes flicker to the shamrock pinned on his chest.

Draco abruptly removes the shamrock from his own chest. Percy hopes that the pin will pierce his flesh, but his white fingers are deft and sure. It simply floats to the ground like so much rubbish.

Percy suspects that this is what happens to everything Draco has decided he doesn't want.

"Draco, darling, what are you doing?" his mother whispers.

"I've changed my mind," Draco replies with immense composure. "I'm all about the Veela now."

He watches the match quietly, one wary eye on his father. He has never liked to look a fool, and Percy should know about Draco by now. He's been watching him for years.

And he's had *enough* of this, of stupid useless flashes like elbows and eyes, and he thinks that as he watches Draco's small smile at Krum's Feint - why should he care about that? - and he hears the click together of Draco's teeth when Bulgaria lost again, at night... And he's *sick* of watching, so he watches for as long and as hungrily as he could, and then lying in the darkness later he doesn't picture a profile or a gleam of teeth, but tumbling long pale limbs into a meadow.

The world exploded into sound and light like gunfire. For a moment Percy does not realise that it is real.

Real. And automatically, he gets up, gets his wand and pulls on his clothes, because Percy has never harboured any desire to be massacred by Death Eaters.

The children are being sent off, the twins, Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione, and Percy is running with Charlie and Bill and then he stops short, because it occurs to him...

The children are being sent off. And Percy thinks they're heading towards the forest.

Percy turns, without regret, as the sound of Muggle screaming fills the air.

He walks into the forest, following the trail of breadcrumbs, the knowledge he has so carefully gathered about Draco. Draco won't think he's in danger; he'll be cool, he'll stay near the action and watch, wary but trying to be casual.

The leap of bright hair in the moonlight is accompanied by a twist of - of something, and maybe there are no words, as he hears Harry Potter's voice.

Lower than he's ever heard it, rich and dark as blood in the night and why fancy, Mr Potter...

"Hermione's a witch!" he snarls.

Their faces are close, chins on an exact level with each other, and Draco's eyes are shining.

"Have it your own way, Potter," he says softly, malice and a promise mingled.

"Well, Percy! Darling!"

Percy whips around and there's Penelope, looking absolutely debauched with her robes falling off one shoulder and her curly hair a riot around her face.

"Be quiet," he says coldly.

Her feet are bare. "So you didn't miss me, lover? You never write." She pouts wickedly, and looks over Percy's shoulder.

To where Percy was gazing a few moments before.

Her exhalation is pure delight. "Oooh, Percy." She sounds as if she's being pleased, and maybe she is. Penny loves the very thought of pain. "So it's the little Malfoy boy. I always wondered. Are you pining for him, Percy dear? I suppose he is rather a pretty thing, if you gagged him. But then, I expect you like that thought..."

"What do you want, Penny?"

She licks her lips, her mouth an open wound in the darkness.

"Owl me, lover. My parents are starting to suspect. For now - I have my own beautiful blonde to attend to." She jerks her head towards the trees.

There's a blonde girl there, her perfectly shaped lips swollen and her willowy figure scarcely hidden in a white nightgown. She's stunning, Percy would swear she has Veela blood, and there is a world of knowledge in her deep blue eyes.

Penny's smile grows predatory. "Cold, Fleur? I can warm you up..."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Penny tosses Percy a smile, a "Good hunting" and then she's going towards the tree where the blonde girl is waiting, and Percy sees the slide of a foot up one slim Veela leg.

Then he's distracted by the ice-smooth voice of Draco.

"...I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

Hermione's pulling Ron and an obviously reluctant Harry along; he looks back, green eyes flashing darkly, and Malfoy curls his lip at him.

Then Draco's alone again. Leaning casually against the tree, and Percy's mouth goes dry because of the pitiless look in Draco's eyes as he watches the tortured Muggles. Yes, and because he's leaning against a tree, and just a little imagination and he's leaning like the Veela girl did, legs and lips parted in invitation, white as moonlit dreams of succubi.

Percy moves a little too sharply and Draco's head jerks up.

"Who's there?" Crisp and curt and yes, maybe he's a little scared. That wicked mouth still has a soft little-boy indentation on it.

Sweet.

Percy moves out from the cover of the trees, and Draco's eyes are unconcerned and like winter on this summer night.

"Lord help us, it's a hostile Weasley takeover," he sneers.

Percy's mind is going over the years and no, he doesn't think he's ever been alone with Draco like this before.

The tiny summer wind lifts the feathery ends of Draco's hair, and he's spewing venom as his eyes reflect the stars. How has nobody else noticed the long marble line of his throat, the delicate and flawless planes of his face and that glint of meanness warping it all so perfectly?

Heartbreakingly beautiful, and Percy wants something broken.

"Why don't you run along, Weasley?" Draco suggests, being immeasurably superior even though Percy's grown up and a lot taller than he is. "I'd much rather be left alone - and I can't imagine you enjoy standing here being insulted."

He looks down, and moonlight licks lasciviously along one of his cheekbones.

He's beautiful and he's unbearably twisted. Percy wants him only because he's so cold, but he watched the warm look he gave his mother and he wanted more of that too.

He's a child, and Percy has all these adult desires.

It's so wrong and Percy wouldn't have it any other way, and he loves this feeling of frustration but he's sick of flashes like glances and pale elbows, he wants to swallow this contempt whole.

"Oh, you have no idea," he breathes, and he's doing what he should never even have dreamed of.

Draco pinned up against the tree, like a nightmare. Worse. Better. Sharp bones and soft childish skin sliding under Percy's hands, and a warm wet mouth, open and outraged.

He never stops fighting and his teeth are sharp too, it's like having an animal in your arms, a child, nothing like anything permissible. Nobody could ever understand this insane assault, and Percy loves the fact that it's indefensible and he's despicable and he never wants this attack to end.

His tongue is in Draco Malfoy's mouth, his hands under his shirt and he has no doubt that if Draco had a knife, its blade would be between Percy's ribs. He thinks he might like that.

He shoves Draco into the tree again, forcing his leg between Draco's. Draco twists his arm free and hits him savagely in the nose.

Percy's staggering back. The cold force of Draco's anger has always been too much for him.

And Draco, still up against the tree and with his mouth swollen and his eyes arctic, is very much a fantasy that could keep Percy warm and cold for years.

"What was that about, Weasley?" he snarls, spitting out Percy's name. Percy vaguely wonders if he knows Percy's name by now. It doesn't matter.

Percy has no answers for him.

"I love you," he says.

He's distantly curious about that sentence.

It's appalling, of course, but things are stark as moonlight and contempt. Past one perversion and into another, and now it's not about a hateful emotion but a hateful individual, and he wants to map each trait of Draco's and memorise it. That's why he stared at his warm face in the meadow, he even wants to find out Draco's favourite book and see him brush his hair in the mornings.

It hardly matters. It's not as *immediate* as the yearning to hurt him, or the sharp sense of self-congratulation at discovering a well of pain that will never run dry.

The look on Draco's face is like a consummation, a sweet sweet twist of agony.

His hand is scrubbing fiercely at his violated mouth, and his eyes are wide with horror and nausea.

"Oh *disgusting*," he snarls, and he's away in a whirl of moonlight.

Percy's nose is swollen and painful. He savours the taste of blood running into his mouth as he walks back to the camp. He stares up at the macabre skull in the sky without curiosity. The serpent between its teeth reminds him of the sensation of Draco's tongue as Percy licked and bit at his mouth.

He kind of likes it.

He meets the others and sees Harry Potter's commiserating look at his nose. Percy is perversely amused by that, almost wishes that Harry could know how he got it. He laughs silently under his tongue, which is still tasting the velvet and metal of the blood. It's nothing but bitter, and Percy finds that nothing but sweet.

He pushes against his nose later, relishes the stabs of agony, and thinks of Draco Malfoy's body, whole and entire in his bed. Sickening pain is the means and the glorious end.

He lies there sated and feeling a certain strange pity, because Draco's looks for Harry will never be anything like contempt.

Finis

Your Every Wish

Harry saved the world when he was sixteen.

As far as he's aware, this is a record.

And he knows it was the right thing to do. He's sure of it. He reached that absolute, white-hot certainty in his fifth year, when Hogwarts became a refuge for war victims. Seamus Finnigan's pureblood mother came staggering into the castle on the first day of term covered in the blood of her family, the blood that had been judged less worthy. All of Hogsmeade came, after the first purge.

Harry reminds himself of that.

Harry remembers when Draco Malfoy came striding into the castle a few months after term had officially begun, with Crabbe but not Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson but not her friend Blaise Zabini, and his mother but not his father. He had looked white and determined and had his mother's hand in his, and had said "Sorry I'm late," and given Harry a spectacular sneer right afterwards which made Harry think if someone this loathsome had turned against it all...

It had to be stopped. It was perfectly simple and right.

And it would not stop.

Harry and Ron had to kill men defending the castle. Hermione never slept anymore, looking up spells and potions and anything, anything to keep herself in the library away from the empty beds in her dormitory. Malfoy was nearly discovered as a spy once and was almost killed before he stabbed the man who had discovered him, and Snape would not let Malfoy out of his sight for days. Nobody was allowed outside after they started hurling bolts from above.

Harry remembers a scene in the practise room with Ron, earlier on the day that would change everything. They had all been ordered to practise physical combat since Malfoy had lost his wand, and if he hadn't had a knife...

Ron had just received the news about Fred and George and he was just punching the punching bags, he punched until his knuckles were bleeding and raw and Harry dragged him back.

Malfoy was in there too, hitting another punching bag with precision and systematic nastiness. Harry hadn't even bothered to glare at him because Ron's eyes were wide and wet, and he kept saying:

"We're going to *die*. Harry. We're all going to die."

If Fred and George, the mercurial and irrepressible, could die... his eyes said.

"Don't worry," Harry answered fiercely. "I'll save you. I'll save everyone. By myself, if I have to. Someone has to."

Everyone thought it should be him. He did too, because he knew with such bone-deep certainty that it had to be someone...

Malfoy laughed harshly from across the room.

"Does nothing ever frighten you?" Ron demanded furiously.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry. Most of the time he was too sure to be scared.

Malfoy smirked and Harry whirled on him in outrage.

"Do you *mind*? What's so funny?"

Malfoy spin-kicked the punching bag. He had just come back from another month of spying, and he was terribly thin. He was wearing a sleeveless scoop-necked shirt, and Harry thought his collarbones were sharp enough to be weapons.

"You are, hero," Malfoy responded, putting a falsetto on the last word. "And if it helps, Weasley, I'm bloody terrified."

Ron's mouth formed into a weird, broken approximation of a smile. He and Malfoy had been on a recon mission together once, and had been not-quite-civil ever since.

Harry didn't get it.

"I don't find any of this amusing," he snarled.

"Well, I don't want you to save me," Malfoy snarled back, punching the bag once, twice, three times with vicious force.

"You'd rather die."

"I'm not going to die," Malfoy answered sharply. "I don't do anything that people want me to do. I do what *I* want to do."

Ron had clenched his hands with their bloody knuckles.

"So - like, you're going to be the spoiled brat of the team and Harry's going to be the saviour?"

Malfoy laughed again, and went to grab his towel, slinging it around his neck and eyeing Harry in a distinctly malicious manner, as if he thought being the spoiled brat was a much more impressive title.

Harry didn't think it was marvellous to have left the Death Eaters because Voldemort had told Malfoy he couldn't have seconds, or whatever had happened. He thought you should belong to the right side because you were certain.

"This has to be stopped," he snapped.

Ron had looked at him with something too full of pain to be hope in his face and Malfoy had leaned against the wall, shaking back sweaty hair grown too long wherever he had been.

"Well. You got that one right," he said at last.

Harry looked at him coldly and said, "Cut your hair."

After that Malfoy had strolled out, and Ron had finally - and it was the first and last time Harry ever saw him do it - broken down enough to cry. He sat down on the practise mats beside him and clenched his hand around Ron's shoulder, and thought it has to be stopped, it has to be stopped, even that bastard Malfoy can see that much.

That day Dumbledore told him that it could be stopped.

"It's basically - the Imperius curse," he'd said. "Miss Granger discovered a certain kind of archaic wards which can be put around a location. They act as foci of magical energy, but it's intensified by so much that the curse goes beyond being simply obeying commands, and beyond resistance, and - it lasts forever."

"So - when will you do it?" Harry asked eagerly, his heart thumping fast and thinking saved, saved, saved. Everybody.

Dumbledore looked up, and said, "I do not dare to do it."

Harry's fists had clenched in on themselves, as if he wanted to kill something resting in his palm, and he demanded, "Why not?"

"Have you listened to nothing I said?" was all the reply Dumbledore gave him, and for the first time Harry thought that Dumbledore looked too old to handle all of this, looked a little too weak to be properly certain.

"I'll do it," he said furiously.

Cedric murdered. The Finnigans slaughtered. Fred and George, who laughed and laughed and were killed.

Harry could have despised Dumbledore, he was so sure.

"I thought you would," Dumbledore told him softly, and Harry realised that he wouldn't meet Harry's eyes.

He shivered a little when he realised that Dumbledore had told him so Harry would make the offer, but then he thought - well, Dumbledore is just frightened, he just has to be saved like everyone else. It simply made him more certain.

*

Nobody else was told everything. Hermione was told she had to research the wards more, Snape and Malfoy told that they had to collect the Death Eaters at one specific spot - namely, the Malfoy mansion. They were all told that there was a plan for Harry to save them.

"Lovely," said Malfoy. "It won't affect the resale value of my house, will it?"

Hermione laughed and slapped him on the wrist. He shrugged, back in his school uniform now and looking even worse. Harry had thought he looked bad enough in the practise rooms, all nervously measured violence and thin as a rapier in scanty sloughing-off clothes. It was awful in his uniform, the once-impeccable Malfoy in clothes that no longer fit, sleeves pushed messily up past sharp elbows and scruffy hair curving on his shirt collar.

Hermione had also developed an unaccountable toleration for Malfoy's presence that Harry assumed was based on their shared and unhealthy adoration for lengthy footnotes.

Everyone else reacted as they should. They looked at Harry with hope and belief, they wanted to be saved, they wanted to be sure. Professor McGonagall looked tired and proud, and Harry noted with pleasure that she gave Malfoy a disapproving look.

Hermione stopped after the meeting to give him a tight hug.

"You can count on me," she said. "If there's anything more in that library, I'll find it. I know you'll be able to do it."

"Do what precisely?" Malfoy asked from the doorway. "I notice we haven't been told what it is the hero plans to do."

"Save all of your lives," Harry snapped. "God, you're loathsome."

"You love it."

"Draco, don't be awful," Hermione said absently, picking up her bag and going over to seize Malfoy's tie and pull him along.

"But it's what I do best," Malfoy protested. "Come on, wench. Are you ready to decipher fourteenth century English with me yet?"

"Oh, how can I turn that offer down," Hermione said, laughing and shaking her head.

She turned a look of shining faith at Harry over her shoulder as she went. She could be sure that Harry would save them.

*

Harry did save them. And isn't he owed something for that?

It was the first time he had ever seen the Malfoy mansion, white and pale and imposing in the moonlight. There were gargoyles on it who were grimacing at Harry in a weirdly familiar way, and Harry had a picture of a five-year-old Malfoy wandering around copying each malicious twist of their stone features with his own.

There were pale points of light around the mansion, the foci of energy, perfected to the best of their ability. Harry was sure they would work, because there was no alternative.

He stood on top of the hill and felt like - something archetypal, something sure.

He lifted his wand and spoke all the words, the string of Latin and magic that had been spells centuries ago. He never faltered. It felt like fate to speak them, felt natural as Parseltongue but untainted.

They spilled out cold and certain and the light from the foci crawled over the mansion like a glowing dome, flickering and white and inevitable. Harry kept staring at the light, and it never hurt his eyes. He felt the certainty in his chest, absolute. This was the way things were always meant to end.

Then the lights went out, slid away and fell down, and there was nothing but an ordinary mansion in the darkness and that a slow song of victory in Harry's head.

He spoke softly but clearly.

"Voldemort will come out. The rest of you will stay in there."

Voldemort did come out, quietly and with no fuss, as if he knew that things were the way they should be. Harry looked up into that pale face without fear and thought of inevitable justice. He didn't even feel angry or vengeful - he felt nothing but certain.

He stepped back, leaned against a tree and watched Voldemort come out to him as if he had been drawn out by an irresistible force. He had, of course, and the force was Harry.

Malfoy mansion was set on a cliff edge, presumably for the sea view. Harry walked calmly with Voldemort, as if he was taking a dog for a walk, and looked once more into the face of something which had chosen to be inhuman.

"I want you to walk off that cliff," he told him coldly.

Voldemort did. His thin figure was spread-eagled in the air for a moment, thin and black and spiderish against the light. Then he fell, and was just a bundle of darkness against the rocks.

Harry killed his first man when he was fifteen, and his last when he was sixteen. He has never regretted any of them, and Voldemort least of all.

It was that simple. Harry felt curiously unsurprised.

He turned back, job done, over, and even Malfoy would tell him that he'd saved them all.

He walked back to the mansion, all over bar the clear-up, and said clearly, "You can all come out now, and go to Azkaban."

Dumbledore had the transportation lined up. All he had to do was go with the masses to Azkaban, and see them shut up, and then he could go home. He stood on the foot of the hill,

watching them file past him, faces blank. Death Eaters, killers, and he wanted a little bit to kill them all but - it was enough. It was all over.

That was when he saw the flash of blond hair.

It never occurred to him that it was Lucius Malfoy. He knew Malfoy when he saw him, always had.

And then his certainty faltered and so did his footsteps as he went running over and said,

"Malfoy? What are you doing? Stop!"

Malfoy stopped and turned around at once, and for once he was not wearing that dreadful smirk but a pleasant and rather absent-minded expression.

"It's all over," Harry told him, not sure why he was doing it but obscurely wanting an acknowledgement from this stubborn brat.

"Yes, thanks to you," Malfoy replied, and smiled suddenly, a bright beautiful flash of a smile, and added: "Thank you."

"Oh," Harry said uneasily, and smiled back a bit. "Well. Of course."

"Malfoy!" Snape's shout was flung out in the night, over their heads, and he came running down to them and seized Malfoy's arm in his own. "Oh, my God. What happened? You didn't get out in time, I was - you *stupid* boy, you're always taking risks! What have you done to him?" he demanded, whirling on Harry.

Harry was outraged. He had saved everyone. He wanted everyone to be all right, he would never...

"I'm all right," Malfoy said sharply. "Harry didn't do anything!"

"Harry," Snape repeated slowly.

He gave Harry a look that made cold thoughts slither through Harry's mind, and Harry was already trying not to think. Malfoy had been in the house. Malfoy always called him Potter.

"Potter," Malfoy corrected casually.

Snape's hand stayed curled around Malfoy's arm, almost protectively.

"I'm taking you back home," he said.

Malfoy smirked that familiar smirk, tilting his face up to his teacher's.

"You're going to walk me that ten steps to my house?" he inquired. "How nurturing of you, Professor Snape."

Snape looked almost relieved as he shook Malfoy's arm.

"I mean Hogwarts, of course. Insolent brat," he added.

"Yes, take him home," Harry said.

"I'd like to go home," Malfoy agreed quietly.

Harry backed away from him, from them, from the suspicious flash of Snape's black eyes. He had to go see the Death Eaters into Azkaban. He had no time for this. He had to be certain.

*

Assurance returned soon. Everyone was safe, everyone was free, and Harry had done it. Everyone else went, and Hogwarts became a school again. Mrs Finnigan cried and thanked him as she left.

The night he came back, Hermione kept hugging him and Ron kept pounding his back. Harry looked down and Ron's knuckles were almost healed.

There was a party that lasted all night, and Harry moved through it and saw all the grateful eyes, all the safe people, and he was so happy. He had done the right thing, and he looked into Dumbledore's tired face almost challengingly.

He'd had to do it. It was right. He was certain.

He observed Malfoy from a distance, and he seemed perfectly normal. Pansy Parkinson had run across the room at least seven times to find him and give him another exuberant kiss on the cheek, and he kept tilting his mouth so she'd get that instead. Hermione had left Harry's side and Harry was almost sure he saw her hug Malfoy. He definitely saw Ron punch his arm in something that looked like a shared acknowledgement of victory, happiness, and Harry thought, he's fine, I was right, I saved him too, everything is exactly right.

Harry had walked around in a daze of relief for weeks. It was all over.

Then one day he passed by a table in the library with Malfoy sitting at it, talking far too loudly for someone in a library to a crestfallen younger student.

"No, I will not help you with your Potions homework," he sneered. "If you don't understand it, you study harder. You don't come crawling to anyone asking them to save you from your own incompetence, like a Hufflepuff. That's not the Slytherin way."

Oh, shut up, Malfoy, Harry thought with that endless irritation. Keep it down, and would it hurt you to help someone?

Malfoy paused, and then spoke in a much softer and more suitable voice. "As long as you understand that... well, Baddock, show me what the problem is."

That's more like it, Harry thought, and then realised what he was doing and dropped his book on his foot.

He couldn't do anything like that. He knew that, but it was okay, it wasn't a big deal, it wasn't like Malfoy didn't deserve it. He was just teaching Malfoy a lesson, like throwing mud at him in third year.

Harry stooped and picked up the book.

It's almost funny, he thought cautiously, as if he was afraid of telling himself that. After all, it's *Malfoy*. It's, it's right to make him do some things.

Like...

"You know," Malfoy said with a thoughtful frown, "I really shouldn't be so hard on Potter. I suppose it's because I'm jealous."

"Um. Okay," answered Malcolm Baddock.

Harry hid a smile and realised that Malfoy had cut his hair and slicked it back again.

Malfoy ran his fingers through his hair, thoroughly messing it up, so it stood up in all directions.

How about, Harry thought, if he...

"Look, are you all right?" Baddock asked hesitantly. "It's just - that you don't seem like yourself..."

That was when the horror hit Harry coldly. No, Malfoy did not seem like himself... because he was not himself. Harry had...

It was a mistake, he'd told himself. He hadn't done anything wrong. He would just be careful, he would just avoid Malfoy in future.

To prove to himself that he was right, he left the library.

He told himself he would not do anything like that again, and so everything would be all right. He only wanted Malfoy to leave him alone, and so Malfoy did. He wanted Malfoy to be quieter in classes with him, and Malfoy was. But Malfoy, by all accounts, was otherwise the same as ever.

It had all worked out all right, and he had done the right thing.

*

Everything was so right.

Harry saw that around him every day. People were so dizzy with relief that they were happy all the time. They broke into irrepressible smiles for no reason as they walked around. Hogwarts was alive with loud exuberant games.

At first it pleased him. But then it started to feel... unfair.

He had done it. He had saved them. And yet he couldn't be part of them, couldn't have this happiness, and he did not know why.

He had accomplished everything he wanted to accomplish, and still the past was not scrubbed out. He had held on to the belief that he could make everything right, he had thought he could make things fair.

Harry had believed in ultimate justice. He had been a child. He had been a fool.

Voldemort was dead, and it did not bring him back his parents or his childhood, it did not redeem anybody's suffering. He had done it and he still woke up screaming with shadowy dreams made up of blood and memories. It seemed an unimaginable cruelty, that after all the pain he could not even join in this universal jubilation.

Professor McGonagall bought herself sky-blue robes and Professor Snape paid her a compliment on them, and then looked utterly shocked at his own good mood and had to sit down and have a cool drink. Ron slipped something into Malfoy's drink and it turned his hair red as cherries. According to report, he threw cups and plates at Ron's head and then spent the day admiring how his hair contrasted with his skin in every mirror he passed. Ginny Weasley whirled tempestuously into the sixth year Charms class one day, planted a kiss on the stunned and delighted Dean Thomas, and waltzed out. The courtyards were filled with people playing hopscotch and skipping, games which inevitably ended in tragedy when Hagrid tried to join in.

They held a party in the Great Hall a few months later, a proper organised celebration of their deliverance. Harry stayed up on the balcony for most of the time, keeping to the shadows and resolutely ignoring the couples in the alcoves.

He had been resolutely avoiding Malfoy, but it was hard to miss him at the party. He and Pansy Parkinson had arrived dressed up as gypsies even though it was not a costume party. First a vicar and now this, what was Malfoy's obsession with fancy dress anyway? Then they had proceeded to cut up a rug, Malfoy appearing to lose it after one cup of Butterbeer, dashing over to the tables and doing a brief drumming repertoire with his plate and spoon, getting up on a chair and performing a shimmy.

Harry leaned on the balcony and gave up and watched it, just another display of unfairness. Pansy had slung her shawl around his waist and Malfoy was dancing energetically, leaning back against it and moving smoothly, head tipped back with the light shimmering on his hair. Harry thought, and he's horrible, he's always been horrible, but he's so alive.

There was so much spectacular unfairness, and he hated it and he knew he was right. He briefly felt a desire to spite the whole world.

*

He remembers that it was the most beautiful March for years.

The day he saw Ron and Hermione giggling and fumbling and kissing he went out for a walk in the trees at the edge of the forest. He looked up at the green leaves and the blue sky and he

realised he had never really lived a normal life, and he did not know how to be continuously happy, and it was all so brutally unfair.

The riotous sounds of people playing chasing made him irrationally angry. He could hear Pansy Parkinson's voice, and she was certainly old enough not to be so silly.

Another of the juvenile idiots crashed through the trees and practically into Harry's path, and once he did Harry saw that it was Malfoy. Bright hair spilling windblown into his face, he yelled: "You'll never catch me," and he was always vibrant and defiant.

Harry was lonely and heartsick, and could not help himself.

"Malfoy," he said. "Come for a walk with me."

"Of course," Malfoy agreed readily, and of course he would do exactly what Harry wanted, and not even stop to tell his friends.

Harry repressed his little shiver, and Malfoy walked close beside him, and it was good to have company. And Harry needed someone to understand, and Malfoy would do whatever he wanted, and surely it wasn't taking advantage if it was just one walk, and he had saved them all and surely he was owed something.

He told Malfoy about the unfairness. He even told Malfoy about the dreams. And of course Malfoy understood, because Harry wanted him to.

He didn't think about that. He just revelled in the luxury of someone telling him exactly what he wanted to hear.

They sat on a log as the sun went down and glinted red in Malfoy's hair. Malfoy was sitting so close Harry could feel warmth seeping into his side, and Malfoy said soothingly, "Of course, you did the right thing," and Harry thought, well, he wasn't doing anything which could hurt Malfoy. It didn't even have anything to do with Malfoy. He just needed to hear this, and he would never hurt anybody else.

Besides - after all this, someone owed him something.

"Thanks," he said when they were going back to the castle.

"For what?" responded Malfoy, which was exactly right.

*

Afterwards Harry felt guilty. Of course he did. He understood that it was not at all ethical to use anybody.

He might have the power, but he did not have to use it. And he had no use for Malfoy anyway.

He would just have to be careful, and to make sure he was not controlling Malfoy. He was on the right side, he would never manipulate someone else, he would make sure Malfoy was all right and he would have done the right thing once more.

He was very scrupulous about it. He paid close and careful attention.

Malfoy seemed normal and happy. Rumour had it that he and Pansy Parkinson were a couple, but Harry was pretty sure they were just friends. Malfoy flirted with her extravagantly, but he also flirted with Hermione and at one stage Harry caught him looking up through his eyelashes at Professor Vector.

He was infected with the post-war delirium that everyone else was, and more than that. He had always been popular among the Slytherins, but now he was firmly established as part of the team he seemed to have won over the rest of the school. And Malfoy thrived under the benign attention, and actually seemed slightly less obnoxious.

Harry considered the possibility that all that spiteful nastiness had stemmed from a frustrated scream for affection and approval, but he decided Malfoy was simply a spoiled brat.

He had never believed in Harry, and now he was profiting from Harry's success.

However obnoxious he was - and he was - there was something compelling about him. He brightened a room when he entered it. People seemed to be drawn to him, to make an effort to be involved in his life.

Except for Harry, of course. It was a matter of conscience for Harry to stay firmly out of that bright orbit.

This did not affect Harry at all, naturally, but it was odd. He was used to Malfoy being there, a part of his life. He hadn't realised that before, because he did not miss him precisely, but Malfoy's glittering grating presence was gone, and it had left behind... nothing.

It would be stupid to want insults and irritation back, and he didn't. But there was a peculiar void where Malfoy had once been, sitting across the Potions classroom and flicking eyeballs at him.

Harry didn't think about it. He had to focus on making sure that he had done everything right, and proving Dumbledore wrong by making sure Malfoy was all right.

He was fine, Harry was certain he was fine, but Harry kept watching - because, just in case.

Possibly he also watched because it was weird not to have Malfoy around at every turn. Harry liked routine. But that was all.

Malfoy was learning the mandolin, and he would wander around alone with it to find places to practise. Harry followed him and watched, and Malfoy still seemed fine, but then Malfoy started to play the songs Harry liked best all the time and Harry knew it wasn't safe and he had to stop.

He sat in the Gryffindor common rooms for a week trying to beat Ron at chess, and Harry looked over at his profile and he seemed fine. He would just finger the chess pieces and Harry knew that look very well from Quidditch games, that absolute determination to win. Malfoy was very focused, and he never looked up.

It was on the Friday that Harry, hunched over Charms homework it was taking him an impossibly long time to complete, realised he wanted Malfoy to look at him.

And then Malfoy did. He raised his head, rested his chin on his hand and gazed seriously over at Harry as if nothing else could ever matter any more.

Harry was shot through and through with guilt, and almost ran out of the room. As he did so, he saw Malfoy laughing with Ron as if nothing had happened and returning to his game, and the resentment was nearly as strong as the guilt.

On one of the weekend visits to Hogsmeade, Malfoy was sitting at the Three Broomsticks in a crowd of people, telling jokes and doing an impression of Madam Rosmerta which apparently overpowered Dean with hilarity and made him fall off his chair. So alive, Harry thought, and it's not fair, and I could... I could...

He shook his head and walked away, and then half an hour later came back. Malfoy came outside and they sat together and he told Harry jokes and showed him impressions, just Harry.

Afterwards Harry told himself that it was nothing. He wasn't doing anything wrong. A couple of afternoons spent in Malfoy's company - well, it wasn't like it had done anyone any harm. Nobody else could be terribly anxious for the brat's company, and it wasn't as if Malfoy was the most pleasant person in the world, as if Harry didn't deserve a few hours of his time...

Not that Harry would ever take more than that, ever hurt him.

At supper one day Malfoy was reading, not eating, looking absorbed and happy with his book. At one stage he stopped and stared into space, smiling thoughtfully at nothing. The candles and his lack of attention made his whole face glow and seem less sharp and rather sweet.

Candlelight looked very good with such pale skin. It was almost translucent and so it looked golden, and smooth, a lot of it on display because Malfoy was wearing only his shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Harry leaned forward a little and Malfoy reached down and flicked open one shirt button, then another. The light struck on the line of his chest, travelled smoothly down as a third button was undone.

"Draco, what on earth are you doing?" Pansy Parkinson asked loudly.

It was then that Harry realised this was happening because he wanted to see more.

His fork fell to his plate with a crash. People were looking curiously over at the Slytherin table but Malfoy had already done up his shirt and was saying casually, "I thought it was hot

in here, but it must just have been you." Then he leered outrageously. Pansy could only laugh.

Harry was stunned at what he had done, wouldn't even think about it.

Except that night, he did think about it. He thought, I could have made him strip in front of everybody. I could have, and he slid his hand under the covers.

He decided he was probably still in shock, and acting irrationally. Not that he'd done anything. Having this kind of power over someone was bound to make someone a little off balance, and Harry was sixteen and seeing a bit of skin was always a priority with him. Or something.

He hadn't really done anything. He was in the right. He was certain of it.

Besides, Malfoy was as unpleasant a person as Snape. He deserved everything he got.

Still, Harry would never use the power he had, because he knew what was right. He had just been confused for a minute, with the loneliness, and the odd gap Malfoy had left in his life, and the way everyone else seemed happy and united.

Ron and Hermione had taken to sitting on the couch, his arm around her. Harry would sit with them and talk absently as they got lost in each others' eyes, and he was forced to be quiet and just see them shine. Their lips would meet again and again, brief soft tokens of being alive and happy and wanting life and each other.

Harry realised that he had become a bit odd about missing the way Malfoy used to irritate him when he looked over at Malfoy at breakfast one day, and thought the pale curve of Malfoy's neck from his dark jumper was taunting him.

Everything was all right, though. He had made his decision and he was going to keep doing the right thing. He always would.

He had another of the horrible dreams one night in May, and he woke up drenched in sweat and trembling and cursing everyone and everything for being unfair. So he left the dormitory - Ron sleeping happy in his bed and dreaming of Hermione - and he made his way down to the kitchens.

He was coming back, on the bottom step of the staircase to the Entrance Hall, when a voice came ringing out behind him.

"Potter creeping down late o' nights for some food? What, you have an eating disorder now?"

Harry dropped his pumpkin juice, turned sharply and snapped, "Don't talk to me like that," before it occurred to him that he hadn't known Malfoy was there and those might be the first genuine words Malfoy had spoken to him since...

"Sure, whatever you want," Malfoy said agreeably, smiling that beautiful smile.

He was leaning against the doorway of the Entrance Hall, and he was wearing pyjama bottoms and the rumpled shirt he had worn today, all but two buttons left undone. His hair was ruffled and feathery against his cheek.

"What were you doing anyway?" Harry demanded. "Out with a girl?"

"Of course not," Malfoy responded.

Harry was oddly relieved for a moment and then he realised that Malfoy could have been out with a girl, could have been doing anything. All he was going to tell Harry was exactly what Harry wanted to hear.

Things were supposed to be all right now! Things were supposed to be easy now!

Harry shut his eyes and saw the dark bloody dreams against his eyelids. All he wanted was a little comfort.

"Hey. Harry," said Malfoy, and his voice was all soft restful concern. "Are you okay?"

His hand was clasped around Harry's shoulder, palm pressed against it. Harry felt it so distinctly through the frail cotton of his pyjamas.

"I just-" he said. "I don't... I'm *good*, you know."

"Of course. I know that. Everybody knows that," Malfoy told him. He had a beautiful voice when he wasn't mocking Harry, light and clear and Harry thought with a tiny wrench of guilt, this isn't Malfoy...

But when he opened his eyes it was Malfoy, eyes wide and curious, and things ought to have been that simple.

Harry reached up and pressed his palm against Malfoy's throat, sliding it up the smooth skin. Malfoy leaned his head back just like Harry wanted him to. Harry stroked that soft hair, tracing it over Malfoy's ear, and realised how true what Malfoy'd said a moment ago was. He still can't quite believe it.

It was with that sense of incredulity that Harry leaned forward and met Malfoy's lips, which were already parted. Of course, Harry thought dimly, but he was sixteen and frightened and desperate, and Malfoy's mouth was warm and soft and he kissed perfectly, and when Harry opened his eyes Malfoy was against the wall and his body was hot against Harry's.

Harry couldn't help wanting more, and so of course he got more.

"Whatever I want," he said slowly.

Malfoy said, "Yes."

They went into the Entrance Hall. Moonlight was streaming through the windows and Malfoy's throat and chest and limbs were all soft and white and Harry was trembling and wanted everything.

Harry can't remember everything that he said and felt that night, which upsets him because it is important.

He does remember slipping Malfoy's shirt off his shoulders and kissing his mouth greedily, running his hands over his skin. He remembers moaning and pushing himself against Malfoy and Malfoy moaning and pushing back just right.

He remembers kissing under his ear and murmuring, "I want you so much."

He pulled back just to look, and then moved back in to warmth and softness and... He remembers falling to the floor, and how much easier it was when thoughts went away and only desires remained.

Every one of them was fulfilled. Of course.

*

The next day Harry was scared and horrified. He had been - it had been... He walked to class, hands trembling as he tried to keep hold of his books and tried not to picture his hand on Malfoy's skin.

He wouldn't do it again, he promised himself quickly. Of course not. Of course not. He didn't even know why he had wanted to.

But he had wanted to, he thought, swallowing painfully. And he, and he... He still wanted to.

No sooner had he thought that that Malfoy grabbed him and bodily dragged him into the closet.

Harry thought he was having a particularly ironic hallucination until he felt Malfoy's teeth sharp against the line of his neck. His books were all over the ground and he was making a very strange needy sound in the back of his throat before he recalled that he had a conscience.

It didn't seem to matter.

Malfoy had always been so horrible. He deserved some kind of retribution, and Harry deserved some kind of reward.

It was all right. Harry would never have done it otherwise.

Harry clasped his hand around Malfoy's neck and drew him close, closer. He closed his eyes and nuzzled blindly against Malfoy's cheek, feeling his hot mouth against Harry's ear and his hands frantic and searching as Harry wanted them on Harry's body.

Harry hurt his head as he flung it back, and did not care.

"Oh God yes, Malfoy," he said as Malfoy fell on his knees and he felt Malfoy's tongue and teeth briefly against his hip and then moving.

Harry twisted and gasped.

They both missed class.

"I fell asleep in the library," he explained to Hermione later.

"You know," Ron said, "the library has just the same effect on me. Weird, isn't it?"

"Shut up," said Hermione, poking him in the side. "Draco wasn't there either," she added as an afterthought.

"Weird coincidence," Harry commented after a beat.

"Off with another girl," Hermione guessed, shaking her head. "That boy should be put in a cage."

Harry thought, I could put him in a cage and make him like it.

*

Sometimes he would do it out of spite. He would remember years of bloody nastiness and he would tear at Malfoy's clothes and set his teeth in the curve of his shoulder and hiss out obscenities. He might be angry at the world and taking it out on the only available victim, but Malfoy *deserved* it.

Sometimes he would be screamingly scared of all those dark dreams and go running to drown all that, to shiver and forget and feel Malfoy's hand curled in the small of his back. He didn't have bad dreams like that.

Sometimes - and he did not like admitting this to himself - it was erotic. He could want anything, anything, and Malfoy would want it too. Private and almost inadmissible fantasies became reality.

Sometimes it would be because Malfoy was extremely beautiful, and he liked the taste of him and he liked to smell his hair and the touch of his hand when passing in the corridors made Harry jump as if Malfoy conducted electricity.

Sometimes it was because he was sixteen, and skin was skin, and sex was sex, and it was that simple.

Sometimes it was for reasons that seemed simple but which Harry thought might be complicated, such as that he liked the way Malfoy smiled when Malfoy was thinking about books. Or that Malfoy argued hitting younger Slytherins over the head with a ruler was a perfectly acceptable disciplinary method for a prefect. Or that Malfoy was actually very bad at playing the mandolin.

These were not things Malfoy did in direct contact with Harry, but Harry ignored that.

So... it was spite and post-war trauma and hormones and fixation and curiosity, and whatever, and that was all.

Harry was beginning to see that he might be a little messed up.

*

It was during exam time that Harry heard Hermione talking earnestly about a Muggle book she was reading. Ron listened to her with his eyes glazing over.

"You see, he didn't care about Clarissa," she explained. "She was just an object to him. Whatever he said, he raped her, she was just a toy to him, and that was what he used her as."

"Shut up," Harry said savagely to her, and she stared at him in bewilderment.

It's not the same, he reassured himself. Malfoy wants this. He's happy.

But he would be happy, no matter what, if it was what you wanted...

He went and he found Malfoy, who was reading a book of Rupert Brooke's poems in the library. He sat down beside him and he knew nothing about Rupert Brooke so he didn't want anything but to hear Malfoy's opinion, so it had to be real.

"What's he like?"

Malfoy looked up. "Well, he was a bloody awful war poet because he was a romantic idiot. But he was an astonishing love poet because he was a romantic idiot. So I suppose it all works out," he said, and closed the book and smiled up at Harry, that thoughtful little smile he often wore when he had been reading.

And Harry thought, he's real now, and he's intelligent, and there's... there's something about him. I should leave him alone.

He couldn't seem to.

He pulled him to his feet and they went into an empty classroom and Harry kissed him frantically, pulling at his tie and licking at his mouth, but he kept hearing Hermione's voice in his head and then he pulled away, blinked and said,

"I want you to get out on that window ledge."

Malfoy smiled agreeably, pushed open the window and climbed out. Harry watched him with his mouth dry and his hands shaking.

Malfoy watched him from the other side of the glass, eyes fearless and hair blinding in the sunlight. Harry leaned his forehead against the glass and thought, Nobody deserves this.

"Come back in," he asked, his voice trembling all over the place.

Malfoy came back in and Harry almost collapsed against him with relief, curling his fist on Malfoy's shirt, resting his lips against Malfoy's collarbone. He smelled good.

"I don't want to be this kind of person," he said. "We won't spend any time together anymore."

"All right." Malfoy nodded, smiled and walked out.

Harry spent the last few days of the school year sure that he had done the right thing. He always did.

*

Summer at Privet Drive was agony. Even more so than usual.

Harry dreamed the first night of Sirius' death and woke up screaming. Dudley told his parents the next morning that Harry had had a nightmare, and they all laughed about how weak and stupid Harry was at their happy breakfast table, and ordered him not to disturb Dudley again.

He set his mouth and wished that they were all dead.

The next night he dreamed of killing them all, and woke up in a cold sweat because he knew he was capable of it.

He worked to stop himself thinking and dreaming. He hoed the garden before they could ask him to, volunteered to repaint the house, sweated and laboured and wished he could pray. It was the last summer. He could get through this.

He was not sure what he had to look forward to. He just wanted to push his way through torture and hatred.

He held on until his birthday. Things were always happening on his birthday.

He was seventeen and Ron and Hermione and Hagrid sent him cakes and letters. He thought he could take a day off from all this grinding toil and he ran off to the park nearby and he was running and he forgot about restraint and obligation and right and wrong, and he just wished Malfoy was there.

And Malfoy was there. He was standing under a tree and he looked handsome and well-groomed, the perfect little rich boy in a white pressed shirt and cream trousers.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"I don't kn-" Malfoy began to say, because Harry didn't even know why he wanted him to be there, but then Harry figured it out and Malfoy smiled. "Because I wanted to see you, of course," said Malfoy.

"How did you get here? You're not old enough to legally Apparate," Harry said, and he felt a pinprick of guilt and didn't know what he wanted Malfoy to say.

So when Malfoy scornfully tossed his head and replied, "You'd be surprised what a few bribes will do to make things legal," Harry thought it was real and smiled at his nerve.

They walked around the park and Malfoy tossed pebbles to the ducks, who ended up looking so aggrieved that Harry told Malfoy to stop. Which, of course, he did.

Harry asked what Malfoy had been doing all summer and he had no idea, so he wanted the truth. Malfoy told him that he had been trying to fully embrace the lifestyle of the rich and famous, and had been bullying the house elves into peeling his grapes. Harry was appalled, and laughed about it.

They stopped and bought ice-cream, and Malfoy fastidiously inquired about the quality of the toppings and then ordered them all. Then he leaned against the counter and critically examined the whipping machine.

"Precisely how many ice-creams do you make a day?" he asked. "How often do you clean out that thing? I'm suing if I get some strange ice-cream-related disease."

"Stop it, Draco," Harry muttered, and Malfoy immediately did. Harry felt guilty, and knew that no apology would make up for it and touching Malfoy's wrist in apology was ridiculous. He felt better after he did it anyway.

Then they strolled around eating their ice-creams, sat down on a bank and ruined the knees of Malfoy's trousers. Harry stared at the smudge of ice-cream on the edge of Malfoy's lip, and Malfoy leaned over and kissed him. Harry shut his eyes in the cool under the tree and explored the cool taste of Malfoy's mouth. He ended up dropping his ice-cream, staring at the faintly-green play of light and shadows on Malfoy's skin and then tasting to make sure it tasted no different.

The sun was bright as they walked around some more, and Malfoy's hair hurt Harry's eyes. It was nice.

They held hands, and an old lady gave them a scandalised look. Harry wanted to shock her and didn't dare, which was when Malfoy hooked an arm around his neck and kissed him, and the old lady tripped over her poodle.

Harry realised that he had wanted Malfoy to call him Harry for months and that Malfoy had been doing so, because it was weird to hear something like 'Potter' during sex.

He asked, "Can I call you Draco?" when Malfoy was walking him home.

"Of course," Draco said, as Harry had known he would, but Harry was finding that it was better to pretend. He kissed him leaning against the gate of number four Privet Drive, and that happens to be the one good memory Harry has of Privet Drive.

He had a dream about Draco that night.

*

The weeks went by, and he wrote and told Ron and Hermione that he thought he might be gay.

They both wrote back very supportive letters, in their own way. Hermione had compiled an impressive list of homosexual Quidditch players, and apparently Ron had gone around asking all his brothers what they would think about hypothetically having an affair with a dark younger man.

When they met on the train back to Hogwarts, Hermione gave him an extra-tight hug and poured more statistics into his ear. Ron gave him a grin, told him he thought being gay was terrific, and inquired with trepidation if Harry had ever fancied him.

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, Ron, of *course* not."

Ron looked greatly relieved, slightly offended and then proudly told Harry that he thought he was talking Percy around.

Harry went to get some pumpkin juice from the trolley and found Draco ripping the trolley lady a new one because she didn't have caviar. He pulled Draco into a storage room and Draco kissed him.

"I'm happy to see you," he said just as Harry wanted him to.

"Did you think about me over the holidays?" Harry asked.

Draco kissed him again. It was musty in the storage room and Draco tasted like cookies.

"Every day," he told him.

Harry was happy. He leaned his forehead against Draco's and thought, if it's all above-board, it will be fair. I will not feel guilty. It's all right. I deserve it.

A few days later, it happened just as he wanted it to happen.

Draco told him his scarf was crooked and so were his glasses, and asked if this was some kind of fashion theme. Then he added quickly, "And will you be my boyfriend?"

He asked me, Harry thought, so it's real. And he shouted down his conscience and said yes.

A week later, he told Ron and Hermione that he was seeing Draco Malfoy.

"Oh, you fancy *Malfoy*," Ron said with a big smile. "Not me. Isn't that great?" he asked Hermione, looking thrilled. "You never even looked in the showers," he added anxiously. "Because you fancy Malfoy."

"That's right, Ron," Harry agreed tolerantly, patting Ron on the shoulder in a very manly and platonic fashion.

"Draco?" Hermione asked, looking surprised. "I could have sworn Draco liked girls. I mean, I've seen Draco liking girls. Um, a lot. I've never heard a word about-"

"Well he does," Harry snapped, his tone so harsh Hermione looked stunned and hurt.

"Harry should know," Ron said, and then winced as the mental pictures hit.

Hermione looked happier, and started talking about bisexuality and hostility as repressed desire and Quidditch. She seemed very set on Quidditch.

Harry wanted Draco to feel that he should tell his friends, and afterwards Pansy made an effort to be nice to Harry with her face twisted in a terrible grimace the whole time. Crabbe seemed to feel this was a happy solution for his free time, and when Draco was busy with study or Quidditch practise he took to trailing Harry like an oversized guard puppy.

It became something of an open secret in Gryffindor house, with Draco showing up when Harry wanted him to.

The first time Neville saw him there, he looked terrified.

"That's right, Longbottom, quiver in your boots," Draco said encouragingly, and gave him a wolfish smile. "I bite."

Harry wished that Draco wouldn't act like that, and Draco's smile turned friendly. Neville looked surprised.

"But only, you know, in private," Draco added, and strolled over to sit down on the sofa by Harry, leaning back in the circle of his arm.

"It must be love," Dean said in an undertone to Ginny, and Harry buried his face in Draco's hair, breathed him in.

It was all right. People said that they were happy together and it was true.

He made sure it spread no further. If Dumbledore or even Snape found out, then... Well, he did not want the teachers knowing about his private life. That was perfectly normal.

"I'm really happy for you, Harry," Hermione said to him once, which she would never have said if anything was wrong.

Lupin took him out apartment hunting before his NEWTs, and Harry told him then.

"That pale Malfoy boy?" Lupin inquired. "I remember him. He was a horrifying brat, but I always thought he might have hidden depths."

Harry looked at him. "No," he said. "He was really horrible then. He was always horrible."

"Clearly, something changed," Lupin smiled, and they walked into another apartment.

Yes, thought Harry. I changed him. He was awful and he needed to be changed, I've made him better. I did the right thing, did him a favour, and we're happy now.

Harry chose an apartment in Hogsmeade. He was going to replace Madam Hooch as the Quidditch coach, but he wanted a home of his very own. He liked it, and he brought friends around the shops helping him to choose things for it.

Then he took Draco in, the first person to see it furnished. He led him in with both hands and his eyes shut and then Draco opened his eyes.

"Do you like it?" Harry asked, honestly wanting his opinion.

Draco's lip curled. "Oh my God, you're hopeless," he exclaimed. "All this furniture has to be rearranged immediately. Chintz curtains, Harry, are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

Harry laughed but frowned through it. He wanted Draco to like it.

Draco slid his arms around him. "Just joking," he whispered. "It's perfect. Kiss me."

They had sex on Harry's new bed. Draco slept afterwards and Harry propped himself up on one elbow and stroked Draco's hair. He thought Draco looked good on the bed.

Hermione had decided to take the Muggle Studies exam without having actually studied the subject, and she was panicking over the amount of Muggle literature she had to catch up on.

"Each man kills the thing he loves," she declaimed one evening, and looked puzzled when Harry slammed out of the room.

After their NEWTs were done, they all went to the Three Broomsticks. Harry, Draco, Ron and Hermione had a special table and ordered champagne.

"I think it's great that you have an obscenely rich boyfriend," said Ron.

Harry had spent years sidling around the subject of his money, and Ron had still been annoyed by it. But Draco was so blatantly extravagant even Ron was reduced to amusement, and Harry tried hard not to want Draco to be more tactful about it.

Harry had thought - perhaps hoped - that he would want a clean break at the end of school, a new life.

"What are you two planning to do for the summer?" Hermione asked conversationally.

Draco's arm was hooked around Harry's neck, and Harry felt it flex along his throat as Draco took another sip of champagne.

He said, "We thought we might go on a holiday together," and Draco agreed though they had never discussed a holiday before.

Wanting a clean break.

It hadn't worked out like that.

*

They went to Italy together. Draco spent an absurd amount of time at the museums until Harry decided that he missed him when he was gone.

As it turned out, Draco spoke flawless Italian. Harry hadn't thought to want that, and he loved to listen to it.

"My father had me tutored," Draco explained in a gondola in Venice. "I wasn't allowed to spend time with him until I had learned my lessons."

"That's disgusting," Harry said.

"Well." Draco shrugged. "He wanted me to be of use to him."

Harry felt cold in the humid warmth. Draco put an arm around his neck.

"You're nothing like that," he whispered. "I'm so happy with you."

Which was just what Harry wanted to hear.

Harry remembers crisp white hotel sheets slick with sweat and suntan lotion, and that Draco looked intensely weird in a crowd of Italian people.

He still has pictures. Draco looked brightly into the camera and posed like a model until Harry felt uncomfortable about it, and from that point in time the pictures were of them both standing there, looking awkward but pleased and ducking their heads at the flash.

Harry framed those awkward pictures and put them out for guests to see, and kept the others in a drawer by his bedside table.

He took them out and looked at them sometimes.

But never too often.

Teaching was a great success. Harry spent a lot of time with the students who loved flying, really loved it, and tried to be patient with students who were no good at it.

Draco became an Unspeakable, trained for secret projects and defence plans and government strategy, all of which Draco told Harry because Harry was curious. Harry heard from Hermione that Draco was considered the most scrupulous and trustworthy agent in his office, and tried to ask less.

What Draco really loved was research, of the secret and obscure. The various project risks his department took were his special babies.

Harry remembers dropping by Draco's apartment several times casually, unsure of what he wanted, and having Draco snap: "I'm busy," and then lean on the doorframe and expand with interest, say something like, "It's alchemy. I think we've had a breakthrough; moonlight and lead can make white gold, we've got the procedure right..." Draco would stop when Harry wanted him to, just say, "It's fascinating," and close his hand on the door.

The first time Harry wanted Draco to do his job, not get into trouble. He thought that the interested withdrawn look on his face was even kind of cute.

Every time after that, he only wanted Draco to speak a little, and then change his mind, draw Harry in, want Harry more. After all, Harry told himself, stroking Draco's cheek afterwards, he could do his job and be with Draco. It was what couples did.

Once Draco looked worried and told Harry that he was in trouble at work because he hadn't finished a job. Harry tried to leave him alone more after that, but he also knows that he sat

watching television at his flat with Draco the next night, Draco's head on his shoulder, and he did not want Draco to worry about anything. He did not want to know about trouble at work, after that, and Draco did not tell him about any.

Harry told himself that it must have worked out, and felt better about it except for late at night. Once he stayed at home and told himself virtuously that he was not going to bother Draco, but he wanted Draco there until Draco Apparated before him, and Harry lifted himself from the couch to kiss Draco and thought, it's all right, it's what he wants...

Dumbledore died the day of Harry's nineteenth birthday. The papers had made a fuss about death on the birthday of the Boy Who Lived. Harry had felt that his life had always been marked with someone's death.

"I never liked him much," Draco said, and in the midst of all the numbness Harry had thought that if Draco could say outrageous things like that he needed Harry to keep him in check. "But he was kind to me in my last year. He seemed worried about me for some reason. He used to call me up to his office and talk to me."

"You never told me," Harry said tightly.

"You don't like to talk about Dumbledore with me," Draco answered lightly and matter-of-factly.

Harry didn't want Draco to think that. He didn't want Draco to talk like that.

Draco sat with a comforting hand in Harry's throughout the funeral, quiet and respectful. Afterwards Draco took Harry back to his flat and held on, arm braced against his back, cheek pressed against his, and Harry could cry a little. Draco kissed him and told him, "It's all right, you're allowed to be upset, you two were very close, you helped save us all together..."

That was what Harry wanted.

But he wasn't able to smile until he leaned back against the sofa cushions and let his mind drift away from Draco, and then heard Draco's voice unexpectedly.

"Making you a soothing cup of tea is a lost cause," Draco said in a very vexed tone. "Your cups are chipped. How can anybody chip every cup they own? Clumsy idiot."

Harry thought, what an appalling thing to say to somebody bereaved, but he realised he was smiling just a bit. He said, "I can drink out of a chipped cup."

"And eat out of a trough, no doubt," Draco remarked dryly.

He had come out without the tea, looking distinctly irked with all those who owned imperfect china, and Harry caught his arm and said as if he needed to implore him, "Move in with me."

Draco smiled just the beautiful smile Harry wanted him to.

Draco moved in, but took very little of his stuff with him. Harry did not actually like most of Draco's things, which were austere and not homely.

It was right and exactly what Harry wanted. He told himself that he would have asked whether Dumbledore had died or not.

Draco liked to sing in the mornings sometimes. He had odd fancies about singing opera in the shower and songs about being pretty when he brushed his hair and long foreign songs that were unintelligible while he brushed his teeth.

Harry heard him and was surprised and then thought it was strangely adorable. Then he had a run of tiring days at work and was annoyed to be woken up at the weekends. Draco stopped singing for two weeks.

Harry realised it and wanted him to start again, and Draco sang Harry's favourite songs every day, but somehow that was worse.

After the first month, Draco never sang in the mornings anymore.

Harry liked to hold a lot of parties, have friends over often, once Draco came to live with him. He liked to be distracted enough to stop thinking about what Draco should do, and not to want anything at all.

And then he liked to watch. Draco liked parties, collected people around him and showed off with anything from intellectual conversation to absurd imitations. When Harry had his friends over Draco often cornered Hermione.

"I don't need to read the Russians," Draco said once with that air of knowing best Harry had once disliked so very much. "I know what they would be like, thank you. Winter, depression, musings on the emptiness of life, existential thought and cherry damn orchards."

"You're an uncultured and arrogant little pig sometimes," Hermione told him with a laugh at his nerve.

"It is a part of my considerable charm, yes," Draco answered, and she poked him and he grinned.

Draco smiled differently in company, either with a curl to his lip or in a slow, crooked way that looked oddly unrehearsed.

When everyone had left Harry had buried his face in Draco's neck and slid his hands down his skin, and thought of the way Draco smiled then.

"I think you're lovely to entertain everyone so much," Hermione told him smilingly.

"Especially since sometimes you stare at Draco all night, and I can tell all you want is to be alone with him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry had answered crossly. "I'm alone with him all the time. I *am*."

She looked at him in surprise, and said nothing more.

Harry was pleased when Draco started going out with Ron and Hermione, even when Harry himself was busy. He tried to make himself forget about how Draco Owling Pansy and Crabbe had annoyed him, and that Draco never did it anymore. It wasn't a crime to dislike some of your lover's friends, to think they were a bad influence. Lots of people did it.

Hermione brought over photographs of one night at some karaoke bar Alicia Spinnet had dragged them to. Harry looked at one picture of Draco in his jeans with his arm around Alicia's shoulders, lounging with practised grace in his seat. Harry did not altogether like the bold way Draco eyed the camera.

It did not change. Draco turned away in the picture so he was in profile, talking silently with Alicia, and then looked back to ogle the camera once more, and all Harry could see was falling hair and an insolent mouth and a moment in time where Draco was free, captured forever.

He tore the picture in two. Hermione was stunned.

He kept the pieces afterwards.

He found himself looking at them too frequently. One night he had waved Draco and Hermione off to the karaoke bar, and he wanted to see Draco like that, like that, and he left all his diagrams for his students and went.

The bar was dark and smoky, and Hermione was the first one he saw, sitting at a corner booth and giving him a hug.

"I wouldn't have thought this was your scene," he'd said.

"It's not, but it's fun," she had replied. "And Draco loves it. You know what an exhibitionist he is." She laughed with tolerant affection, and after a moment he laughed too.

Harry saw Draco and Ron at the bar, with several shots lined up in front of them.

"Playing that macho game of trying to drink each other under the table," Hermione said at Harry's look. "Well. Ron always tries to get one up on Draco, and Draco is more or less the most competitive creature in the world."

"I remember," Harry'd answered slowly.

"What," Hermione had said, "from - earlier today?"

Which was when Draco's name was called out. People clapped enthusiastically, as if they recognised it. Harry tilted his head to watch Draco move toward the stage, white-blond hair dappled scarlet under the lights and smiling with exaggerated seductiveness at almost every woman in the crowd. He smiled reluctantly, charmed.

Draco was moving onstage, swinging hips and a carrying voice and absolutely delighted to be the centre of attention. Harry remembered that.

"Bloody shameless," Ron remarked, coming back with a beer. He dropped his head on Hermione's shoulder and added, "I feel sick. Don't tell Malfoy."

"Boys," said Hermione, with the same conviction she had had when she was eleven.

Draco's eyes had slid over to follow Ron back to Hermione's booth, which was when he caught sight of Harry. He smiled brightly and waved. Harry wasn't sure of what he wanted Draco to do, wasn't sure if it was safe to want anything. Before, he'd looked so...

But he looked the same now, alive and mocking and daring, and if Harry was very careful... Draco was off the stage now, in the crowd, sinuous and showing off and somehow getting away with it, and then suddenly Draco was in the booth, with the spotlight on them all, and Harry blinked against it.

Draco had slid in with assurance, and was still singing blithely, leaning and winking and awful. He seized Harry's wrist and pulled him up, moving backwards and pulling him out of the booth. Everyone was staring at them and Draco was easy and laughing.

"Anything you want, you got it, anything at all, you got it."

Harry was laughing too, but blinking apprehensively against the light, and he wasn't quite comfortable with all this attention, and so even though he was mostly thrilling with the strangeness and vitality for just a second all he wanted was for Draco to let him go and stop.

Draco let him go, and finished the song sedately. The clapping afterwards seemed uncertain, disappointed.

Afterwards Draco refused to sing another song. He sat with his head against Harry's shoulder, slipped his arm around his waist and explained, "We're shy."

Harry leaned his cheek against Draco's hair and felt the echo of that disappointed clapping sink heavily into his stomach.

A week after that, Ron had come by the flat when Draco was out shopping. He had looked white and tired. Harry had sat him on the sofa and fixed him a series of stiff drinks.

"I think I knew it was coming," Ron had said. "I mean... relationships fall apart. You know how it is, there are always all these difficulties and both of you want different things and you don't quite fit, but you keep trying and it keeps working and it's this beautiful miracle... But it's a miracle because you're always taking the risk that it won't work out. And then it doesn't." He had stopped the flood of unusually deep thought, and then hunched over, smaller and more miserable than Harry had seen him in years. "But I wish it had," he said. "You and Malfoy are really lucky."

Harry agreed, and tasted the blood on his lower lip in his drink.

Ron insisted on staying until Draco came back.

"He's been really good about this, in his Malfoy way," he'd told Harry. "I think he knew we were having problems before anyone else did. He tried - we always got on better with him around."

Harry wondered why Draco had not told him before remembering that he would not have wanted to hear that Ron and Hermione were falling apart.

He concentrated on just wanting what was best for Ron, wanting that 'Malfoy way,' wanting not to want things.

Draco came in, tossing bags every which way, complaining loudly about the lack of aubergines, and then saw Ron. He stopped, and then came over to sit by him on the sofa quite quietly.

"Let's face it, Weasley," he said. "You couldn't expect to keep a girl as good-looking as Hermione forever. Frankly, it's amazing it lasted this long."

Harry and Ron's mouths fell open.

"Aim lower next time," Draco advised him solemnly. "As for Hermione - Hermione should move in with us, shouldn't she, Harry? And take lots and lots of showers."

Ron tackled him. It wasn't until Harry wanted Draco to stop saying such terrible things that he noticed that Ron had smiled for the first time since he'd come.

Harry tried to forget all about it.

But he also tried not to want anything, very deliberately, the next night, when he came and sat beside Draco. Draco was working at the kitchen table, writing long messy notes. Harry loved that he bought incredibly expensive quills and broke them constantly. And he loved the nape of Draco's neck, hair so pale it seemed ridiculous that the skin beneath was paler. He brushed aside a lock and kissed it, slipped an arm around him and whispered.

"You were great with Ron," he said, kissing under his ear, slipping his face into the space between Draco's neck and shoulder. Don't want anything, he had told himself. Don't.

"I am irresistibly charming and delightful," Draco agreed complacently.

Harry never let himself think certain words, so instead he kissed him again and said, "I'm besotted with you."

Ron said we were lucky. And that's true, isn't it? Isn't it?

Draco squirmed away. "Look, not now," he said. "I need to work. I want to, it's important that I-"

"I need you," Harry snapped.

And if he was trying not to want anything and Draco didn't want... It wasn't fair. Harry had suffered and he should be more important to Draco than this, more important than anything.

Harry pressed his forehead angrily into Draco's neck and wished, and Draco was all over him, both of them falling off the chair onto the floor. It was too urgent to use the bed, Draco was too urgent and desperate, but Harry still set his teeth and hated Draco's work, hated any rival.

The next day Draco had met him at the door with a kiss. Harry had kissed back and Draco had said against his lips,

"I quit my job."

Harry'd felt cold, his hands closing around Draco's shoulders, clinging onto him.

"But - you loved it so much."

"You're more important," Draco answered calmly. "I'm rich, why do I need a job? You matter so much more. You deserve my complete attention."

Exactly right.

Harry'd backed up, blood and horror slowly filling his mouth.

"That's not what I wanted," he lied. "That's not what I meant."

He was not speaking to Draco. It didn't even feel as if Draco was there. Just - this beautiful blank creature, waiting for his next cue.

Harry's mind shut that thought away.

"No," he said. "Go get your job back. Owl them."

Draco had done so immediately, seeming serene about the entire affair. Harry left and got into a punishingly hot shower, and then when he came back out found Draco hunched over the table, tried not to want anything.

Draco's face was so desolate.

"I missed so much work," he'd said. "I was so unreliable. And then I left... they won't let me come back."

Harry smoothed a hand over his back.

"Don't be upset," he said helplessly.

Draco's face smoothed. "Of course not," he answered. "What is there to be upset about? Do you want tea?"

Harry sat down in Draco's chair when Draco left it, held his knees against him as if they were someone he had to try and fail to comfort.

After that, Harry tried so hard to just want Draco to be as he was. Tried to want that more than anything. But life cheated him, little wants, the nature of human desire, fractions of

seconds where all he wanted was the last of the pumpkin juice or for Draco not to mind if he switched channels on the television.

It did not work.

Harry shut down a lot of thoughts.

Then Hermione had come one day, slammed the door behind her and demanded, "What precisely is your hold over Draco?"

*

Harry's heart had pounded frantically. He told himself, you did nothing wrong, but he could not contemplate her knowing without dread.

He also thought with a kind of cold fury, she's not taking him away from me.

"What do you mean?" he'd bluffed. "We're living together."

Hermione had sighed and took hold of the back of a chair, her fingers white against the wood. "I know. But, Harry - I have to talk to you. I'm worried. I don't think your relationship is normal."

"Don't pass judgement on me!"

"I'm not, Harry!" she had almost shouted. "I love you. You know that. But, Harry - you have an unhealthy amount of control over Draco and I don't know why. Your relationship seems so warped by it-"

Harry had felt impossibly cold.

"No. No it doesn't. We're happy - ask anybody. Ask Draco."

"And what about asking you, Harry?"

He could not reply.

"He's not even the same person when you're there, Harry," Hermione had continued, her dark eyes serious, and he knew she did not mean to be pitiless. "It can't feel right for either of you. He gives way to every little thing you want - and Draco's the most aggressively independent person I've ever met. Do you want that, to be going out with a robot instead of a person, why do you let him-"

"I don't let him!" Harry exploded, and then was stricken when he realised that the only sentence he could follow that line with was 'I make him.'

Stop, stop, stop.

"He quit his job!" Hermione exclaimed. "He loved that job. He loved it. I knew that, he talked about it with a passion I've never seen him talk about-"

"Stop it!" Harry shouted, and his skin had crawled as he realised he was thinking, I can fix that, he will...

"He's deserted his friends. The only ones he has left are yours, he Owled Pansy Parkinson saying that he and you had agreed she wasn't good for him. She came to my house crying and asking if I would just tell her how he was. They were friends all their lives, he loved her, he told me! He doesn't seem to have his own life anymore."

"He'll see her again," Harry had said. "I'll fix it-"

"That's not the point!"

"What is the point?" Harry had screamed, panic taking over. "Why are you acting like I've done something wrong? I always try to do the right thing, I did the right thing for everyone! He was impossible before, he was hateful, everyone disliked him. I made things better for him, and aren't I owed that much-"

He had stopped, in a flash of hot blackness, as Hermione slapped him hard.

"You aren't owed another person," she told him, eyes wide. "You bastard. How could you say something like that? How could you believe something like that?"

Because if I don't, if I don't...

"Is that why Draco does all this? Do you have him believing all that garbage? Is that why he - God, I can't believe that Draco would, it makes no sense, him of all people! - I liked him. I liked him before you ever went near him. I liked him because he was difficult and stupid sometimes, and he was smart but he never believed he was smart enough and so he told everyone else they weren't. I liked him because you had to work to be his friend. I liked him because he was funny even if he could be cruel, and because he constantly surprised me by having the most appalling opinions about things I was certain of, and because he was a good person! I didn't know it once, he still doesn't know it, but he's one of the best. And don't you dare say that it wasn't him you wanted, him, because even back in the days when you pretended so hard to hate him you could never take your eyes off him!"

Hermione's words were savage. So sharp they scythed away things Harry needed to keep, needed because if he lost them then...

"You helped defeat You-Know-Who because it was the right thing to do. I'm sorry for what it cost you, but you are not supposed to demand a reward. And Draco of all people owes you nothing, nothing, because without him you couldn't have done it!"

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione swallowed and spoke on defiantly. "He told me, one day. He was in the hall and some wards detected danger. Everyone was going to flee the house and he enchanted the doors, he locked himself in there with the Death Eaters and exposed himself to them at the same instant. Then he said that you saved us all with a spell, but you couldn't have done it without him. He sacrificed himself just as much as you did, he's just as good as you, and you can't justify yourself!"

Harry let the words tear at him. That Malfoy had done that, had been noble, and that that act had reduced him to this... But Harry had tried to be noble, and that had reduced him to this.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked. "Has it been some kind of guilt trip?"

"It's not like that," Harry'd choked out.

She didn't understand. She saw so much, but she was missing one crucial fact. Harry hadn't meant to, it hadn't been deliberate, it hadn't been something he could help, there had been no other way... And Draco. She didn't understand that Draco - Harry felt something like physical pain as he admitted it - had been entirely blameless.

What would Hermione say, if she knew that Draco had had no other choice. That he hadn't compromised his free will. That it had been taken from him.

Stop, stop, stop.

"But it is like that. Anyone can see that." Hermione had exhaled, her voice growing soft and ragged. "Harry, I didn't want to say it like this. It's just I've been worried for so long but I didn't want to say anything, because I know how much you love him-"

"I never said that!" Harry said painfully. "Who says I-"

He had not let the words come out. Because... because he had learned sometime, thought sometime, perhaps when he learned the truth about his parents, that love meant caring about someone more than yourself. That love meant doing the best you could to make someone else happy.

He had never said it, never let himself think it, telling himself in some part of his mind that it wasn't like that, maybe that Draco didn't quite deserve it.

Harry had not deserved the right to say it. Couldn't pay the price it demanded.

Hermione had gone over to him, hugged him with her hand pressed painfully hard against his back.

"Please don't let it stay like this," she whispered. "You'd be so much happier with the real Draco."

"I know!" Harry said back, voice tight with anguish, distantly stunned that he could want that. Did I want it all along? "I know," he repeated, holding her so hard it probably hurt.

She could destroy illusions, but she still had one of her own. She didn't know that it wasn't an option.

*

Hermione did not understand the full horror of it.

Harry tried not to realise, but a couple of weeks after he and Hermione had talked, he had woken up to find Draco awake and gasping with dread. He had lifted his hand to Draco's pale face and all he had wanted was to know what was wrong.

"What is it?"

Draco's face was too pale to lose more colour, and ashen and streaked with sweat it looked ghastly rather than handsome. Harry held on tight.

"It's - nothing," he said shakily. "I just - I dreamed - it's stupid. I dreamed that I was being rubbed out, and I was screaming but nobody noticed, and I just kept walking around doing ordinary things until I was... gone."

Gone.

No more friends, no more job he loved, no more singing, no more furniture he had chosen for himself, no more watching television programmes he had actually chosen, no more being bratty, no more drinking out of perfect cups.

"I don't mean to," Harry gasped out against his neck. "Oh God. Draco."

And a subconscious that was screaming though he couldn't know what was wrong.

His wildness was infecting an already upset Draco, who tried to pull away.

"What are you talking about?" he asked irritably. "What do you know?"

"Nothing," Harry said, clamping down on the panic. He kept a tenacious hold on Draco, pain scrabbling insistently in his chest. His hand was closed too hard on Draco's wrist. "I don't want you to be upset. I - you should go back to sleep. No more bad dreams."

Draco immediately slackened in Harry's grasp, eyes closed, face smooth and relaxed. Harry almost screamed.

What was the difference, between this body in his bed and a puppet? Oh, Draco...

The next morning, Harry saw to his further horror, that he had left Draco's wrist black and swollen.

"I didn't want to hurt you," he said helplessly.

"But you didn't," Draco replied, in all honesty.

It's not like I can do anything to him, Harry lied to himself. It's not like I can control him. If I directed all my rage at Mrs Lestrangle and wanted her to die...

The next day, news came that Mrs Lestrangle had committed suicide in her prison cell.

Harry still tells himself Voldemort was his last victim, but he is too good at lying to himself.

There had been no end to the horror.

But then, there had been. From somewhere, after a few more days of clinging, of screaming nightmares while Draco slept peacefully beside him, there came nothing but that honest, real wish.

He wanted what was best for Draco.

So he had come home one day and said, "You should move out. We should never see each other again."

And he had felt as if his mind was breaking apart at the complete acceptance on Draco's face. He had told himself that he never believed that Draco really wanted any of it, that he might care.

Lying was a terrible habit.

Harry thinks it must have been sheer masochism that made him sit in the flat watching Draco greedily as Draco calmly packed up his few possessions, knowing that he could have Draco in his arms at once and that he must not do it.

He wanted what was best for Draco. He couldn't even want him to be upset.

What was best for him.

Harry watched him until he left, watched his bright head as he walked out the street outside, and then sank onto the kitchen floor and stayed home for three days, just holding onto his knees and wanting what was best for Draco.

*

Hermione had told him that he had done the right thing, for both of them. She gave him Terry Boot's number.

Terry Boot was shy and he and Harry had a lot in common, not wanting to be taken much notice of, wanting to be happy and low profile, wanting things like home and quiet times with friends. He didn't have much of a sense of adventure, but he was honestly nice, and that meant a lot to Harry.

Harry felt better that Terry insisted on watching wildlife programmes. He told himself, this is right, this is normal.

He liked to see Terry read, too, and he thought the sex was probably good. It wasn't about having every fantasy fulfilled. Harry honestly did not want that.

The first argument was strange, a little disorienting, but Harry felt a strange sense of accomplishment afterwards.

He wanted Terry to disagree with him.

"I like chipped cups," he'd say, "and I hate being woken up on weekends, and I resent your work sometimes."

Terry was all right with that, and he looked at him a bit oddly about the chipped cups. Harry gave up, and they had disagreements over other things and got over them.

"We can get over any disagreement," Harry said proudly.

"That's good," Hermione said doubtfully, "but you don't seem to care."

"I do, I do," Harry told her indignantly, and closed his eyes and wanted what was best for Draco.

He dreamed about Draco after a month. Just dreamed a scene from his past, remembered perfectly as if his subconscious had turned it over and over, and treasured it for a long time before parting with it.

Draco back when he was a thin sharp-tongued child, and real, real, real. He had been sitting at a meeting, eyes huge and spiteful in his pointed face. They had been talking about rations and Draco had suggested that they try giving Harry none.

"After all," he had pointed out with exaggerated awe, "he is the fabulous Boy Who Lived. If a Dark Lord couldn't kill him, I shouldn't think a little thing like surviving without food would be a bother."

"Oh, just go away, Malfoy," Harry had said, the sheer hatred behind his words making it something like a prayer.

Malfoy's eyes had glittered.

"Oh, you only wish, Potter. You're never getting rid of me."

Harry woke up glad that he could finally be angry at Draco for something. Because he had lied, too.

Terry, over coffee that morning, said slowly that he didn't think he could keep going out with someone who woke up calling his ex-lover's name.

"It was enough of a blow to my pride to just have you say it in your sleep," he added, with the painful, awkward smile which was so like Harry's own, and left.

Harry was outraged that it was so easy, not wanting Terry to do anything at all.

"It's all right," Hermione'd informed him anxiously. "It's just difficult for you to have a different kind of relationship-"

"No," Harry said savagely. "No, it's not, it's not about that. I don't want someone to agree with every word I say, I don't want a puppet or a sex toy, I don't want anything like that. I want something normal, I want-"

"But that doesn't seem to make you happy either!" Hermione had exploded. "What is it that you want?"

"I just want Draco!" Harry shouted.

Then the phone had rung. Harry had felt the guilt crash into him even as he lifted the receiver, as he fought with wanting to hear his voice, and told himself that it was disgusting to use this power, not to add betrayal on betrayal on betrayal...

He only wanted what was best for Draco.

The dial tone met his ear. He clenched his hand tight around the receiver, and hung it up.

"Wrong number," he'd told Hermione.

She had gone up to him with mute sympathy, and he had let himself slide onto the floor and rest his forehead on his arms. He didn't really have to pretend to be all right.

"How is he?" he'd asked tiredly.

Hermione had been quick to assure Harry that he'd done the right thing for Draco. Draco had a new apartment - 'and it looks like him, really like him' - and he was lobbying so persistently for his old job back that it seemed like his manager would either buckle or go mad. 'You know how he is' Hermione added, and Harry closed his eyes. Draco was singing at karaoke bars again, and he was seeing Parvati Patil. They looked good together, they were happy, and she was crazy about him. Hermione knew that Harry would want that for Draco.

He did, he really did, every second of every day.

Sometimes he would go home and spend all night just looking at the torn picture, and concentrate on wanting it to the exclusion of everything else. Sometimes he would call Hermione and she would come over and stroke his hair.

"Oh God, Harry, I feel so guilty. I didn't think it would do this to you," she said. "I never saw you trying for him. I didn't think he meant so much to you."

There was only one way he could try for him.

"Tell me how I feel about him," Harry would say, because he could not tell himself.

"You love him."

"Tell me again."

"You love him," Hermione would repeat, her eyes filling. Harry liked her to cry, and to want something for him. It felt safe to want something by proxy.

Then one night she had called him and asked him to come to a big dinner with her. She had been invited, but she knew that Ron and Pansy Parkinson ('Draco set them up on a blind date for a joke, and they ended up egging his house and having a marvellous time. He's in shock,

and they're a couple.') were going, and so she needed a date. She thought it would be nice for Harry to get out of the house.

Harry would have been afraid that Hermione was in love with him, except he had a suspicion that she had been secretly in love with Draco for quite some time.

That was why Harry did not expect it.

He had gone to the dinner, and found Draco there. He'd looked over at Hermione in alarm, and she'd said, "I can't stand seeing you so unhappy. I thought you could - I thought you might talk."

Draco had been seated across the room, almost opposite Harry. He was wearing one of those exquisite, expensive grey suits that Harry had never wanted him to wear because he felt as if he would crumple it if he touched Draco, and he had always wanted to touch Draco. He had clearly been paying more attention to his hair than Harry had ever wanted him to.

It's working, Harry had told himself.

Parvati was sitting at Draco's left. She was all long graceful neck, dark melting eyes, casual insults and adoring glances for Draco. Harry hated her very much, and wanted them to be happy together.

It was sheer disgusting torture. The curve of Draco's neck into his silk shirt was like a kiss. He was fussing about his shrimp fork looking like the fork for his cheesecake, which was apparently many versions of disgraceful. Harry would have been mortified in Parvati's place. He wanted to kill her and take her place.

He wanted - he wanted what was best for Draco. He wanted Draco safe and happy and real.

He hadn't seen Draco in weeks and weeks. He couldn't bear the way Draco drank his wine, seeing the movement of his throat.

After dessert he fled to the bathroom, tried to get a grip on himself. He blotted his face with paper towels and reminded himself that Draco - that he had to, because Draco was...

He ran into Draco in the corridor. Draco moved smoothly to let him pass. The picture of politeness, and once upon a time Harry had only been able to tell that Draco'd been brought up carefully because when he insulted Harry his diction was perfect.

"Excuse me, Harry," Draco said courteously.

The sound of his impersonal voice made Harry shudder uncontrollably, his mind going blank.

They had tumbled, kissing frantically, into the cloakroom. Harry was pulling at Draco's tie, yanking it half off so he could bite at his throat. He had his thighs wrapped around Draco's, and Draco was rocking his hips into Harry's, slowly, rhythmically, until Harry screamed.

Afterwards, he told Draco that it had never happened. Draco had agreed innocently, and gone to kiss Parvati Patil with Harry's bite mark on his throat.

Harry had told himself that it was a momentary lapse. He still wanted what was best for Draco.

He'd smashed a lot of things in his flat, trying to exhaust himself so he stopped seeing Draco writhing when he closed his eyes, so he stopped trying to talk to Draco as if Draco was in the kitchen.

Eventually he had taken out old school pictures. The look in his eyes when he was fifteen as compared to when he was fourteen had disturbed him.

He might have wanted Draco because he had never felt alive again since he had killed for the first time, and he was charmed and drawn in by someone who could apparently never stop feeling alive. The waters get muddied with images of a participant in sexual fantasies and all he ever wanted, but he thinks maybe all he ever needed was impossibly sharp elbows and vitality.

Harry knows that this is entirely unattainable.

Harry had managed to hold out another week, and then he had gone to Draco's new place. He had had no excuse at all.

As soon as Draco had opened the door they had been kissing, sloppy and hard and wet and unforgivable.

Parvati had come in just as Harry wrestled Draco onto the kitchen countertop.

Her eyes had gone wide and hurt and she had fled in a flurry of long legs, and Harry had thought, he gave her a key, what does that mean, what does she mean.

Draco had moved exactly the way Harry wanted him to, and said, "She means nothing."

Harry shut his eyes against the tears and ground down so hard. They gasped low together, and Harry had thought, I'm sorry, Draco, I'm so sorry, but I can't give this up.

*

Draco had moved back in with Harry, with everyone's blessing. He has been there a week and a half.

Harry is lying in bed beside Draco and thinking.

Even Hermione had agreed happily, told Harry she believed they could make it work. She loved Harry and could not bear to see him unhappy. There was nobody who could save Draco, who had not in their ignorance helped to throw him to the wolves.

The moonlight is streaming into the room, and Draco's hair looks liquid against the pillow. Harry's hand - the one he held the wand with when he spoke the word, the murdering and enslaving hand - lies in the smooth small of Draco's back.

Harry is happy. And he understands why Dumbledore did not dare to do that spell.

He agrees with Hermione's quote, too. Each man kills the thing he loves.

"Draco," Harry says quietly, and immediately Draco is awake as Harry wants. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't let you go."

But he could have. Only he couldn't. He couldn't stop wanting Draco, but whatever happened to wanting the one you loved to be the happiest they could be?

Harry tells himself that he would stop if Draco was in pain, and is aware that slow obliteration is crueller than that. He feels a little bit beyond hope now, and does not really lie to himself anymore. The truth still contradicts itself, though.

"I'd undo it if I could. I would, I don't care about the consequences. I need you to be real. I want it to be undone. I want you."

Draco would hate him, walk away forever, press charges.

Harry does think he wants the real Draco, and is aware that this is going to be like Chinese water torture. Glimpses of him, and that's better than nothing, but this is not the best thing for Draco. Harry also knows that the real Draco would not want him, and that he would want that.

He is going to try to stop obliterating Draco with his wishes, and he is going to fail. The first step makes all the others inevitable, and he can't help modifying the person he wants until the person is crushed out of existence.

He can face this bleakly, and hold on to Draco.

"I love you," he tells Draco. "I love you. I love you."

He believes this, although he is aware nobody who knew the full story would agree.

Harry's going to kill the thing he loves, suffocate it slowly in his arms.

Draco turns his eyes to Harry's, beautiful eyes which are already emptying of life, of the indomitable will that fought punching bags looking half-starved, mocked relentlessly, sang annoyingly, smiled in a distinctly unlovely manner, would never have given up.

"I love you too," he answers in exactly the right way.

Harry has it all.

He still screams Draco's name in his sleep, and Draco watches him and wonders what he wants.

Finis

Dancing Queen

When the door opened Harry was confronted with the most bizarre thing he had ever seen.

Large roiling ripples broke the shiny surface. Lumps shimmied under the glossy blackness. Whenever there was movement, new rolls of flesh appeared as if the tide had changed and the moon was exerting gravitational pull on Dudley's buttocks, encased in skintight black leather.

Harry swallowed and stared in horror.

"Gngh," he said, and prayed he was dreaming.

He'd realised that losing his parents and facing death at school every year for the past five years had been stressful. He hadn't realised that hallucinations were looming quite this close, or that they would be quite this traumatic.

"Hi Harry," Dudley said amiably. "Like my new trousers?"

"They're, um, they're very different," Harry told him, privately thanking God, because if leather trousers had been everyday Muggle apparel then Uncle Vernon would have worn them and, and now he thought his mind's eye was burning.

Dudley sat down on Harry's bed with a groaning of the springs and a vague sloshing sound from within the mighty leather pants.

Harry gagged.

"Well, obviously I realised I was gay a while ago," Dudley said chattily.

"Oh?" said Harry, and then belatedly realised that Dudley was probably confiding something to him that he, Harry, as a loving relative, should receive in a sensitive manner.

Mrs Figg had let him watch *Oprah* sometimes, and he'd often wondered if it had brainwashed him.

"And how did this important revelation become clear to you, Dudley?" asked Harry, in what he hoped was a caring and therapeutic tone.

"It was pretty obvious, actually," Dudley said. "All that aggression and beating up little boys in the playground? Textbook case, really. Mum and Dad suspected it before I told them."

"Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon *know*?" Harry yelped, outraged.

So Dudley wasn't coming out to him, and Harry didn't have to handle it delicately. He just had to sit there and wonder why this knowledge – and those *pants* – had to be inflicted on him.

“Yeah. Mum told me that she thought Piers and I made a cute couple. And Dad told me that I should go with it through my schooldays, and then I should just marry some woman in order to further my career – Mum got a bit upset then, but I think if Dad did dabble in a bit of slap and tickle then he should-”

“Dudley!” Harry shouted. “You should *stop telling me this!* Because it’s, uh, very personal, and private, and believe me, I *really* don’t want to know. Especially not about Uncle Vernon – and – and anything of the ticklish variety. Please. Thank you. Now just – just leave.”

Dudley pouted and his leather trousers squeaked in protest.

“But *Harry*,” he said, “I need your help.”

Back to *Oprah* territory.

“Oh, you want to come out to your friends,” Harry said, attempting an understanding nod. “Well, if they’re your true friends-”

“Harry, what the hell are you on about?” Dudley asked. “All my friends know. All my friends *are* gay.”

“Really?” Harry said. “Huh. What are the odds.”

“It’s not that strange, Harry,” Dudley informed him patiently. “Hello? We’re sent to Smeltings and we’re given these massive sticks, and everyone whacks the other boys with their enormous sticks. You have to be really persistent to grow up straight in Smeltings.”

“That will be – ah, my beautiful thought for the day,” Harry assured him. “Now if you could just see your way clear to getting out of my room-”

“But Harry,” Dudley exclaimed, “I need you to come to a gay club with me!”

Harry did not know what kind of alternate universe he had wandered into, with leather pants and enormous sticks and slap and tickle, and most disturbingly, Uncle Vernon somehow in the mix.

But he knew where he stood on this subject.

“No. No, absolutely not.”

“Harry, it’s very important,” Dudley fussed. “See, I broke up with Piers, and now he has a new boyfriend, and I need to show him that my life isn’t over because we’re through, so I need to go clubbing-”

“That’s fascinating,” Harry snapped. “And very like a gay version of one of Aunt Petunia’s soap operas. But you’re ignoring the important fact that I’m straight, and thus I don’t want to-”

Dudley burst out laughing. Harry glared at his stupid fat face – carefully avoiding his stupid fat arse in those pants, because there was only so much nausea he could deal with.

“You? Straight? Good one,” said Dudley.

“I am!” Harry said, insulted and amazed.

“Oh, of *course*,” sneered Dudley. “I’ve seen you, playing around with your little stick-”

“My *wand*-”

“And polishing your great big stick-”

“My *broom*-”

“And looking at all your pictures of muscular guys and their sticks-”

“It’s my *hobby*!” snarled Harry, slamming shut his copy of *Flying with the Cannons*.

“Sure, sure,” said Dudley, waving his fat hand. “What about your total lack of interest in girls?”

“I have a lot of interest in girls,” Harry told him loftily. “I have a burning and unrequited passion for Cho Chang, I’ll have you know. And she’s very, very pretty, and nice, and terribly female. And one day I will recover from the last time she blew me off and I will ask her out again.”

“Harry, she blew you off halfway through fourth year. You’re going into seventh year.”

“I have a fragile ego,” Harry said grouchily.

“Hasn’t she left school?”

“Look, our love transcends all barriers, all right? And – and how do you know all this anyway?”

Dudley flapped his hand dismissively again.

“I’ve been reading your mail,” he explained.

“What!”

“That’s not important-”

“Yes it is! How dare you! And, and how dare you doubt my own statement of my personal preferences, I think I should know! And stop violating my privacy! Will you leave my room!”

Dudley sighed. Fatly.

“Oh, Harry, Harry. You force me to fulfill our stereotyped childhood roles.”

“Have you been watching *Oprah* too?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“This gives me no pleasure, I’ll have you know,” Dudley continued sadly.

He waddled out of the room. Harry caught a glimpse of his entire arse painted in that black leather, and said goodbye to unscarred retinas.

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuum!” Dudley howled. “Harry won’t come to a gay bar with meeeeeeeee!”

“Harry!” Aunt Petunia’s voice was thin and autocratic. “If, after all we’ve done for you, you can’t even go to a gay bar with our precious Duddykins-”

“All right, all *right!*” Harry shouted.

His world had gone mad. He still wasn’t certain that the leather pants weren’t a sign of his damaged psyche.

And now he was going to a gay bar.

He got up hastily and opened the door.

“Dudley,” he said, hoping his voice was placating. “I hate to bother you. But what does one wear to a gay bar?”

Dudley gave him a withering look.

“You? Straight?” he said. “Ha!”

*

Harry was in a foul mood.

He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt that were quite stupidly tight because, as he’d explained, he’d *out-grown* them and thus they were not suitable public attire.

He was wondering why he had Dudley let choose his clothes, when Dudley was wearing those dreadful pants and a cobweb shirt that frankly, looked like a net full of overweight flounder on Dudley. His only theory was that the pants caused some sort of horror-induced hypnosis.

He was also wondering about this neighbourhood, which was making Harry feel very very uneasy.

“Hello there,” said a man flicking his tongue stud out at Harry.

“I’m straight!” Harry squeaked.

Dudley elbowed him. “Harry,” he hissed. “That’s the *bouncer!* Sorry about him, he’s new. Here’s the cash.”

“Ah well,” said the man, accepting folded money. “At least he’s cute.”

“Straight,” squeaked Harry, sticking to what he knew.

He lurched unsteadily into the club after Dudley, squinting against the darkness and the multicoloured, flashing lights. He thought it was all most impractical.

“Isn’t this place great?” asked Dudley, bouncing up and down. Harry wished he wouldn’t do that, it made him feel seasick.

“Er,” Harry replied.

For a den of iniquity maybe, he thought, borrowing a favourite phrase of Mrs Figg’s. There were a lot of men here, and some girls he didn’t – well, there were a lot of men here, and he thought some of the girls were men, and that was all he was thinking. And whatever the sex of the person wearing it, that vinyl dress was atrocious.

There was someone bent backwards on the stage, flat smooth stomach bared and being strewn with glitter by someone else, who was licking that stomach’s bellybutton.

Harry was quite, quite horrified.

“Harry!” Dudley shouted. “Harry!”

“Huh? Yes, what?”

“D’you want a drink?” Dudley asked. “I’ve been yelling at you for the last five minutes,” he added. “You. *Straight*. Ha!”

“Will you stop saying that,” Harry yelled back.

Honestly, first Hermione and now Dudley. What was their problem, anyway?

“What would you like, anyway?”

“A lager,” said Harry, and looked stubborn at Dudley’s gasp of disbelief. “Well, I *would*.”

“I’m not ordering a lager,” Dudley told him sternly. “I have a reputation to keep up here.”

“What kind of reputation?” Harry groused. “He Shakes It, Baby – and causes earth tremors in Ethiopia?”

“Oooh, bitchy, Harry.”

“Fine,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “I’ll have a Bacardi Breezer. Under protest. And make sure it’s pineapple!”

Dudley went off, causing the crowds to part in sheer awe at the might of his leather pants’ holding capacity.

Harry stood there and took a deep breathing, trying to convert his negative energy to positive, as Oprah had in one of her more pseudo-mystical shows.

This valiant attempt was stopped in its tracks by the fact he suddenly saw a familiar face, and felt his heart slam to a stop.

“*Blaise Zabini?*”

That dark, sly-faced Slytherin it indubitably was. He turned around and gave Harry a stunned look.

Harry gave him a stunned look too, mostly because Blaise was wearing vinyl trousers and a shirt that said ‘Pretty in Pink.’

“Harry *Potter?*” Blaise yelped.

“I’m straight,” Harry said quickly. “I’m here with my cousin. Um, I’m not here here with my cousin, it’s-”

“I could care less about your sexual preferences,” Blaise sniffed disdainfully. “You have glasses and I have standards, four-eyes. Besides, everyone knows Gryffindors don’t put out.”

“Hey!” Harry said, moved to noble defence of his house. “I’ll have you know that Gryffindors can be quite, um, saucy when we put our minds to it. We’re, you know, bold and noble and, like, voracious sexual animals. Though I’m not saying we’re like the Gryffin*whores* or anything... it’s...”

“When you’re in a hole, bury yourself in it, you voracious sexual animal,” Blaise said. “And while you’re at it, push off.”

“What? Why?” said Harry, who had been rather pleased to see a familiar face. He didn’t fancy flinging himself on the mercy of this vinyl-clad and perverse crowd of strangers.

“Because he’ll go *mad* if he sees you,” Blaise snapped. “And I fancy him like mad, and it took me forever to persuade him to come here, and now after slipping him that doctored drink everything is going *perfectly*, so could you kindly not mess it up!”

“Who?”

“Harry, just because you come from a house full of prudes does not mean everyone else wants to live chaste! I’ve been trying to get off with him for three years, don’t do this to me-”

“But who are you *talking-*”

“*Potter?*”

Harry stared.

There, leaning suddenly against Blaise’s shoulder, was Draco Malfoy, pristine blond hair a rumpled mess, eyes shining oddly, wearing skintight white jeans and a silver, clinging shirt which was still riding high on his stomach, showing an awful lot of pale flesh and the remnants of silver glitter.

“*Malfoy?*”

“Well, that’s torn it,” Blaise said crossly in the silence.

Malfoy eventually seemed to get over his shock, and gave Harry a bright and extremely pleasant smile.

Which was when Harry remembered that Malfoy had been swigging doctored drinks.

“My, what a surprise,” he drawled, running a negligent hand through his hair. Harry noticed that his nails were painted silver. “What *are* you doing here?”

“I’m straight and I’m here nonsexually with my cousin,” Harry said promptly.

“Fancy,” said Malfoy, and his eyes were caught by something over Harry’s shoulder. Harry recognised the suddenly glazed look in them as the look of someone who had been blindsided by the pants.

“And this is my cousin,” he said wearily, preparing for the Great Mockery.

“Wow, Harry,” Dudley said in his ear. “You work fast, don’t you? What a pair. God, look at the *blond!*”

Harry numbly accepted the Bacardi Breezer, wondering if he’d feel better if he was drunk.

Dudley still had his eyes on the graceful line of Malfoy’s throat and – well, the graceful line of Malfoy’s everything, Harry supposed - and he said in awed tones, “Mmm, *pretty*,” which wasn’t something Harry had ever wanted to hear about Draco Malfoy’s anything.

“*Are* you straight?” Malfoy inquired suddenly.

“Yes,” Harry said in fear and with all the vehemence he could summon up.

Malfoy beamed. “What a coincidence,” he said. “Me too.”

“Oh God, not another one,” Dudley said.

Blaise made an exasperated noise. “No you’re *not*, Draco.”

“Am too,” Malfoy asserted.

“Draco, you were just dancing onstage and being smeared with glitter as a drag queen licked your bellybutton!”

Malfoy examined his silver fingernails. “So? So what? I’m experimenting. It’s perfectly normal. My father said so.”

“Yeah, *your father* would,” Blaise said. “Does he always stroke up people’s legs with his cane?”

“Look, he’s a tactile person!” Malfoy snapped.

“With his phallic symbol?”

“Good God, was everyone’s father involved in sordid matters at school?” Harry demanded.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “Don’t ask me,” he answered with a slow, rich smile. “*Your* father was Head Boy.”

“My father and mother’s love was pure and exclusive,” Harry said sternly.

“Oh, yes?” Malfoy said. “I heard they called him Prongs because he was horny all the time.”

“That’s – taken out of context,” Harry responded indignantly.

“This is so typical of my life,” Blaise muttered to himself. “All I hear for three years is ‘I’m not gay, Blaise, I’m not gay’ and now here’s Harry Potter-”

Dudley sidled up to him. “You part of the denial brigade?” he asked, winking.

“Oh no, I’m gay,” Blaise said. “I’m very, very gay. I like the boys – but I don’t like the orca whales, so keep your oversized paws to yourself.” He breathed out through his nose. “Look at them. Just *look*.”

Dudley looked at Draco. “Pretty,” he murmured.

“They’re like this all the time at school,” Blaise said. “It’s *disgusting*. Well, and hot, obviously. But it’s so frustrating. Bicker, bicker, jump on each other, roll around, and then back they come bleating ‘I’m not gay, Blaise, I’m not gay.’ I call it pathetic. It’s not like I haven’t offered to role-play. I said, I can wear glasses, we can paint on a scar, it’ll actually be kind of kinky, and he called me twisted. Can you believe that?”

“What?” Harry asked, distracted from the argument, which was denigrating to a level along the lines of ‘Yo’ pappa’s so gay...’

“Nothing,” Blaise said quickly. “Draco, want to dance?”

Malfoy looked to Harry like he was attempting to focus. “I’d like another drink,” he concluded at last.

“Brilliant,” Blaise announced with deepest satisfaction. “Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, eh?”

“Hung?” said Harry, who wasn’t really keeping up with the conversation because he was trying to work out – out of *innocent curiosity* – whether Malfoy was wearing an earring or had glitter on his ear.

“Well, yes,” Malfoy answered. “This is a Muggle club, Potter. Our parents would die if they found out.”

“Your parents might die,” Blaise said darkly. “You’re lucky, you’re the only heir. I have brothers – my parents would kill me.”

“You don’t know my father,” Malfoy said. “He’d still kill me. He’d kill me and he’d *stuff* me, and he’d say, ‘Yes, this is Draco. He’s my only heir. He’s a bit quiet recently, I don’t think he likes living in this glass case.’”

Malfoy laughed, another bright sweet sound Harry presumed was entirely drug-induced.

Which reminded Harry of what Blaise was running off to fetch Malfoy.

Oh, *God*.

Harry really couldn’t imagine what Dumbledore would say if Harry told him ‘Well, I was at this gay bar, and I saw someone taking advantage of Draco Malfoy.’ Sheer humiliation would keep him quiet, for one thing, and he’d probably have to explain about drugs, and maybe even about gayness, because let’s face it, Dumbledore...

But Harry was fairly sure that if he ever found the words, and then if Dumbledore ever understood, that Dumbledore would disapprove of Harry letting that happen.

Moreover, Harry himself couldn’t just – stand here and watch it happen. Malfoy’s judgement was *impaired*. He wasn’t responsible for his actions, no matter how dreadful his actions generally were when he was responsible for them.

Besides, he hardly thought Blaise Zabini was Malfoy’s type.

“Come on,” he instructed, seizing Malfoy’s elbow. “This way. Quickly.”

“Oh, of course,” Malfoy said readily. “I forgot to tell Blaise that I want a pink cocktail with an umbrella in it.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You? Straight? Ha!”

Malfoy put his hand on his hip. “My drink preference does not indicate my sexual preference. I am *not* gay,” he said loudly, and the people standing around them turned and stared.

Malfoy gazed beatifically back at them.

“Um, he’s just kidding,” Harry said, grabbing Malfoy’s hand.

He had never actually held hands with anyone before, and it was just his luck that his first would be Malfoy.

Naturally, it was terribly unpleasant. Well, Malfoy’s hand was cool and his fingers were long and slim, and he could feel Malfoy’s pulse skittering up his arm, but the whole idea was most unpleasant.

“Come on,” Harry said, and dragged him into the thickest throng of people.

He hadn't realised that throng was thickest because the people were dancing.

"Oh, lord," Harry exclaimed in dismay, and turned around to share a horrified look with Malfoy.

Malfoy was already shimmying between two people, tossing that arrogant white-blond head and arching backwards, someone else's thumbs in the hooks of those white jeans, until all Harry could see was exposed stomach and the glitter still dusting the taut pale skin.

"Malfoy!" Harry said, employing his 'Aunt Petunia' voice.

Such was the power of the voice that Malfoy stood up with a snap, his eyes still closed and his lashes dusting his cheekbones like some odd sort of glitter.

"Quickly," Harry said firmly, because Malfoy's eyelashes were most annoying.

"Okay," Malfoy agreed. "Oooh, can we sing karaoke?"

It had never occurred to Harry before that part of Malfoy's incessant meanness might simply be ADHD.

Alternately, this could just be Malfoy's brain on drugs talking.

"Ahhh, sure," Harry said feebly, trying to drag him in any direction other than that towards the stage.

"*Great*," Malfoy told him with enormous glee, and began to valiantly make his way towards the open mikes.

"No, no, *this* way," Harry said coaxingly and uselessly.

"Want mike," Malfoy said, pulling the other way.

It was *hot* in there, so obviously Harry's hand was sweaty, which was *natural* – but rather unfortunate, since Malfoy's hand slipped out of his and Malfoy made a dash towards the mike.

Harry made a lunge at Malfoy, attempting to grab him and pull him back before he could do this.

The spotlight blinked on, and everything happened at once. Malfoy threw back his head and opened his mouth.

Harry was bathed in bright purple light, in a gay bar, clinging around the waist of an indecently-clad and drug-crazed Draco Malfoy, who had just begun to sing *Abba*.

He was cursed. There was no other explanation. Voldemort had dressed up as an evil fairy and cursed him at his christening.

Harry had a sudden bizarre and upsetting image of Voldemort in a black vinyl dress.

This image gave him the strength to end this trauma, and drag Malfoy bodily off the platform.

The crowd looked disappointed, and Harry dragged Malfoy well away from the chorus of sighs and mutters that would only have encouraged him further, and out the door.

“We need a bit of air,” he explained hastily to the bouncer.

“Sure, sure,” leered the awful man.

Harry gave him a reproachful look and hissed, “We’re both straight! Tell him, Malfoy.”

“Stars pretty,” said Malfoy.

“Oh lord,” Harry said. Malfoy’s pupils were very, very small. He wondered what that meant.

Malfoy began to meander happily down the street. On one side, there was a scoop of dirt instead of road because of roadworks, and Harry thanked God that the moon was full and bright, otherwise they might have broken their necks.

“The moon’s pretty too,” Malfoy remarked happily.

Harry went after him, seizing his elbow in an attempt to restrain him from doing anything stupid. Malfoy turned to him with his eyes bright with discovery and Harry waited in dread.

“You’re *looking after* me, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Maybe,” temporised Harry, who was going to have to lie about this to Ron and claim he’d been waiting his moment to push Malfoy off a cliff.

“That’s so Harry Potter,” Malfoy drawled, and it was astonishing how, even on a cocktail of drugged cocktails, Malfoy remained so very much like Malfoy. “Oooh, look, it’s helpless, I’d better protect it. My God. That’s so pathetic. I’m like Gay Bar Neville Longbottom.”

No images of Neville in white jeans and glitter! wailed Harry’s abused brain. I can’t take any more!

“I’m Draco Malfoy,” Malfoy informed Harry. “I *don’t* get taken care of.” He paused, musing, and added casually, “Besides, you think I’m horrible.”

“Well,” said Harry.

“And I’m *not* horrible,” Malfoy said with sudden vehemence. “I just get angry. Things annoy me. I hate it when people are know-it-alls. And I hate it when people say ‘Oh, a Malfoy’ as if I’d given them an explanation instead of telling them my surname. And I hate it when people don’t know anything. People can be such fools.”

“Charming,” Harry commented.

“I hate losing at anything,” Malfoy proceeded blithely. “I hate it when people expect things of me. I hate it when the house elves water down the coffee at the Slytherin table, they do that you know, the sneaky little things-”

“It’s a regular coffee conspiracy,” Harry said, nodding and fighting to keep a straight face.

“It is,” Malfoy insisted. “Never trust a house elf. Centuries and they never thought of making their dishtowels into something fashionable as well as functional? Have you noticed how their eyes sort of swivel in their heads? It’s *creepy*. And they’re perverted, too!”

Harry actually laughed, and realised that Ron would never forgive him.

“It’s true!” Malfoy protested. “My family used to have this house elf called Dobby. I’m telling you, he was weird. Any excuse and he was leaping on my bed, turning up at all hours to say cryptic things just so I’d be intrigued – you look kind of peculiar, Potter.”

“Fine! I’m fine!” Harry squeaked. “Not psychologically scarred at all! Oh, urgh, my God, the socks!”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows.

“Anyway,” he said, with the air of one who wasn’t touching that sentence, “I hate mismatched socks, too. Dobby was always putting my socks together mismatched. I hate it that I can’t get a tan. I hate it when I freckle.”

Harry bit down on a grin. “You freckle?”

“Tell a soul and you die. This is not an idle threat.”

“Yeah, you’re not much for idle threats.”

“I hate people who don’t follow through,” Malfoy continued. He seemed to have a mental list. “I hate being ignored. Oooh, I really really hate that. And whenever I hate something it feels like my whole brain is going to *boil* in my skull and I just want to lash out at something.” He looked thoughtful. “I quite like it when people cry.”

“You have issues, Malfoy.”

“Duh, Daddy is a Death Eater. Anyway, rich kids are supposed to be messed up, they’re the ones who can pay for therapy.”

Harry sighed dramatically. “Now I suppose you’re going to say you hate being rich.”

Malfoy laughed. His face was much brighter when it was unguarded.

Of course, that might be the moon, or the glitter.

“I love being rich,” he said. “Of course, I hate it when Father spends money on charities rather than me. I hate attending my mother’s soirees. I hate-”

“You seem to hate an awful lot of things. Explains why you’re perpetually horrible,” Harry remarked cheerfully.

He realised that he and Malfoy had fallen into step, strolling easily down a broken path in the moonlight. It was the strangest thing.

Malfoy looked a little bemused for a moment, caught off guard and under a streetlight, face and hair bright-white, blinking and bemused and - cute.

Harry supposed. To a girl, maybe.

Probably.

“It’s not *my* fault practically the whole world is stupid,” Malfoy pointed out, sounding aggrieved.

Harry felt his mouth twitch again. “Oh, quite.”

“I hate it when I suddenly realise I have broken a rule of etiquette,” Malfoy said suddenly. “My God, I came outside with you. What *did* the bouncer think? I’m sure that’s against gay bar procedure. You should at least have asked me if I came there often and offered to buy me a drink.”

“You’ve had enough,” Harry informed him severely. A thought occurred to him. “And why should I have had to buy you a drink? Why couldn’t you buy me a drink?”

Malfoy looked prim.

“I’m the one wearing the nail polish here. I don’t make the rules.”

“No, you just hate everything and everyone.”

“I don’t,” Malfoy said vehemently. “I hardly ever hate people. Please.” He sniffed. “I wouldn’t lower myself enough to hate that Longbottom creature.”

“Aren’t I lucky, I’m one of the chosen few.”

“I don’t hate you.” Malfoy looked blank. Harry suspected that his mouth had been hijacked by the drugs and stolen away from his brain, and the suspicion was confirmed as Malfoy added casually, “I hate the way you look at me.”

Harry blinked twice, very hard, and said, “I’m sorry, what?”

“The way you *look* at me,” Malfoy explained in a condescending manner, as if to a small child. “That ‘Malfoy you are beneath contempt’ look. It’s like the time Longbottom said he was worth twelve of me, and glanced up at the sky where you were flying and I knew you’d said it and I wanted to hit you with a *dustbin lid*.”

“I didn’t mean it,” Harry blurted.

And he hadn't known it would ever get back to Malfoy, and he couldn't believe Malfoy remembered something that had happened back in first year, and what kind of bizarre wish was wanting to hit someone with a dustbin lid anyway, and perhaps Harry should have meant it, because Neville was kind and decent and Malfoy wouldn't even understand such concepts, but he hadn't then and he didn't now.

"You always looked at me like that, from the very first time we met, and it drives me *mad*," Malfoy went on, scowling.

Harry looked back and thought about a small white-haired boy, swathed in overlong black robes and making a face as he stood on a stool.

He remembered his thoughts at the time while a tiny weird part of himself stood back and went, 'Okay, you have to admit that was kind of adorable.'

"I thought you were like my cousin," he said.

Malfoy gave him one scandalised look and then looked over his shoulder, eyes straining and torso twisted unnaturally around.

Harry was entirely bemused until he realised that Malfoy was desperately trying to examine his own ass.

"Malfoy, I did *not* mean physically," he said.

"Oh," Malfoy breathed in a shaken tone. He looked paler than usual. "Oh, thank God."

"Don't be ridiculous, Malfoy," Harry said crossly. "Dudley's hideous, and you're—"

Suddenly Malfoy was looking amused. Harry stopped.

"And I'm what?" he inquired in a drawling voice.

"Um," said Harry.

For a terrible moment, Malfoy was still looking at him interrogatively, and all that was in Harry's frantic mind was Dudley's 'Mmm, *pretty*' and he'd kill himself first.

"Never mind," Malfoy said with sudden brightness, and reached out.

Harry's world suddenly dissolved into a myopic blur, but he would have bet that the white figure in front of him was grinning a manic, drug-crazed grin.

"Now you can't look at me at all," Malfoy said with immense satisfaction, putting the glasses in his pocket.

"You're mad, Malfoy," Harry said with immense conviction. "You've always been mad mad mad. Give me my glasses back."

He lunged at Malfoy, who laughed and dodged but of course Malfoy's reflexes were slow because of the drugs and Harry caught him, but he was blind and Malfoy was drugged and both of them misjudged and...

They were tumbling down into the dirt, the loose gravel spraying into Harry's eyes, waiting for the crash at the end as he fell but actually there was no sickening thump for him because he fell on top of Malfoy.

"Ow," said Malfoy decidedly, since he had obviously been hit both by Harry and the ground.

"Um, sorry," Harry mumbled quickly, and it was astounding and not a little indecent how tangled up bodies could get falling down into a bit of dirt.

"Did Blaise put something in my drink?" Malfoy asked out of the blue, and with startling calm.

Malfoy was lying in a relaxed manner, cool-pale and languid and sexy, as if falling down into dirt with someone on top of him was something that happened every day.

"Er, yes," said Harry, who was flushed and flustered and trying to rewind the thoughts he'd just had and to think them in some approximation of a heterosexual manner.

"I thought so," Malfoy nodded, and it was astonishing how matter-of-fact drugs seemed to make you. "I'm sure I'd never *normally* say I hated how you look at me."

"It, ah, isn't your style, no," Harry said, and now he was just trying to work things out.

Malfoy nodded again, and this close up his skin was oh-so-perfect, and Harry thought the vain idiot probably used Dark Magic to effect this, and there was actually some glitter in those long fair eyelashes, sticking them together.

"Even though I do," Malfoy continued nonchalantly, and added, "But I don't hate you. Actually, I think I have kind of a crush on you."

Harry's brain reeled and gave up, just as Malfoy casually reached up, curved a hand around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

Really, no more thought ever, and that was a good thing, because he preferred this, the clean simplicity of – of *this*. The cool-wet-softness of Malfoy's mouth under his, the squirm of Malfoy's body under his, Malfoy's *nice* torso flat under his hands and Malfoy's tongue in his mouth, a shock like diving into a lake on a warm day when the water was warm too and like a different sort of sunlight, gorgeously different and good and there was nothing but squirming against him and craving *more*...

Malfoy calmly sat up, and pushed him backwards.

"I don't like lying in the dirt," he explained placidly. "It messes up my hair."

Harry had had it up to here with this insane drugged logic, which made people sing and fall and steal glasses and admire the stars and blurt out crazy talk and *stop kissing*.

“Here are your glasses, Harry,” Malfoy said in a soothing voice, and when Harry had them back on Malfoy was smiling a winsome smile that he’d clearly always used as a child to get people to forgive him and like him again after he’d done something atrocious.

It was working. Stupid Malfoy.

Malfoy got up, dusted his jeans and climbed lightly back onto the broken path. Harry followed him, and he was thinking, and Malfoy was still smiling, of course, because he probably did this sort of thing all the time, with boys and girls and fish for all Harry knew, because it was just light-hearted fun. Harry flashed back on the bar – and Malfoy talking about how perfectly normal experimentation was.

Harry had a vision of this – this stupid playboy Malfoy toying with people, maybe writing in his diary ‘La la la, kissed Harry Potter, la la la, went off for an orgy with cream cheese’ and while one part of him stood aside and said ‘My God, what is *in* those Bacardi Breezers?’ most of him just pushed Malfoy up against the wall.

“Screw experimentation,” Harry said a trifle vindictively, pushing aside the fact that he had been heterosexual about three minutes ago, and put his hands in Malfoy’s pockets and drew him against him hard, and kissed him again.

Malfoy made an interesting noise and rubbed up against him, hands suddenly tangling in Harry’s hair and tongue suddenly tasting a little wickedly.

Harry moaned, basically tried to shove his tongue down Malfoy’s throat and pressed up against him, liking the sharp knock against Malfoy’s collarbone and the smooth slide of chest along chest, and then liking it all so much he felt a bit dizzy and his leg was between Malfoy’s and...

“Oh my God,” Blaise said pathetically. “Have I mentioned yet how much I really hate this night?”

Harry and Malfoy sprang apart. Harry wondered if he could get away with saying something like Malfoy had needed mouth to mouth resuscitation. Then he looked over at Malfoy, whose mouth was swollen and who looked a debauched and ravishable mess, and he realised that he couldn’t first, because of the way Malfoy looked and secondly, because he’d now been staring at Malfoy far too long for them to buy it.

Them being Dudley and Blaise. Blaise was swaying and looked faintly sick.

“Blaise,” Malfoy said cheerfully. “You look dreadful.”

“Well, I drank your drugged drink, didn’t I,” Blaise said sulkily. “I wasn’t letting good alcohol and drugs go to waste. And that would probably have gone all right, but then this – this thing was dancing. It was horrible. He swung one way and his buttocks swung the other, he practically cleared the dance floor. That was enough to make me ill, but then I drank far too much to try and make the memories go away. Have I mentioned it was horrible yet?”

“I can imagine,” Malfoy said, and then winced as he looked over at Dudley. “But I don’t want to.”

Dudley gave him a smitten smile. Malfoy's eyes widened in horror.

"I feel dreadful," Blaise wailed. "I'm going to go home and do as father says from now on. I'm going to go to Death Eaters In Training summer camp, I swear."

Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"We always do that, Blaise. We always go out and get drunk and wake up the next morning saying we wish we were dead and from now on we're going to do as our fathers say and join Death Eaters In Training, and we never do, and our fathers tell us that children today don't have the spirit they did when they were young."

"Yes, well." Blaise made a face. "I wanted this night to be perfect, Draco. Those drugs were very expensive. And you have to go off and get off with Harry Potter."

Malfoy's ears went slightly pink. Harry, who had given in utterly to the pineapple madness contained in Bacardi Breezers, thought it was rather fetching.

"Of course, I'm sleeping over at your house tonight," Blaise continued, brightening up. "I could-"

"You're sleeping on the floor like you always do," Malfoy told him sternly.

Blaise sighed morosely. Harry smiled a bit.

"Don't you *smirk* at me, Harry Potter," Blaise said darkly. "You. Straight. Ha!"

"I always said it," Dudley agreed complacently. "You know, we have a lot in-"

"Hit on me once more and I'll turn you into a radish," Blaise promised, his eyes a little wild.

"Fine," Dudley said. "It's your friend I really fancy, anyway."

Malfoy looked pained. "Going home now," he declared.

"Home already?" Harry asked.

"Well, *yes*, Harry," Dudley explained, rolling his eyes. "The bar's closed. You two were gone for hours."

"Oh," said Harry.

"Worst. Night. Ever," said Blaise Zabini, grabbing Malfoy's elbow and beginning to stride off.

"I don't know, I had fun," Dudley told Harry. "I think I stunned a few people."

"You mean you, like, knocked them out with your ass?" Harry wanted to know, but he was a bit distracted by looking after Malfoy.

He held the pineapple alcohol directly responsible for the fact he thought that he hated to see Malfoy leave, but he loved to watch Malfoy go.

Malfoy looked over his shoulder and smiled, bright and quick as a flash of glitter.

“You,” Dudley began. “Straight. H-”

“Let it go,” said Harry. “I’ve made your point.”

“You lucky, lucky bastard,” Dudley added. “Maybe I should look into playing hard to get.”

“Maybe,” Harry said tactfully, “and this should in no way be taken as advocating nudity, but maybe you should consider leaving the leather pants at home.”

*

It was exactly one month, a week, five hours and twenty minutes later when Harry saw Draco Malfoy again.

He’d been thinking about him, though, sometimes in creative and surprising ways. And he’d blushed when Dudley mentioned him, which Dudley constantly did in yearning and envious tones. And, to his eternal shame, he’d gone and looked at his school picture and picked out his sneering face in the Slytherin crowd.

He had also thought about things Malfoy had said on the broken path, and put them together to make sense, and he’d wondered why nobody had told him before, and then he’d remembered that Hermione had. She had drawn a chart and everything, with a little stick figure Malfoy and big red love hearts.

He wrote her a very apologetic letter, and tentatively called Malfoy ‘Draco’ in it a few times.

So Harry wasn’t all that surprised on Platform 10 ³/₄, when he emerged from the wall and saw Malfoy standing around with his Slytherin cronies. Actually, he just felt like his suspicions had been confirmed when he saw Malfoy’s hair was in regimental order and his robes were expensive and entirely unrevealing, and his face was typically disdainful, and Harry *still* thought, ‘Mmm, *pretty*.’

He went over to them, because he was from the house of the noble and brave and besides, Dudley had dared him to.

Malfoy saw him coming and his face screwed up in pale distaste that Harry thought was just possibly utter embarrassment. And in a minute he’d say something dreadful and Harry would want to hit him, and broken paths in the moonlight and drug-induced truths and glitter mightn’t matter anymore, and he would have lost it forever.

Harry spoke first, which he didn’t do often with Malfoy.

“Come here often?”

And incredibly, Malfoy's ears went pink. He looked over at Harry, lower lip sucked in for an instant of thought.

Then, with apparent difficulty, he smiled. "Now and then," he said.

The Slytherins were looking bewildered. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione and Ron going over a letter he vaguely recognised. Ron had a resigned expression on his face.

Blaise Zabini looked like he might cry.

"Leave," Malfoy said peremptorily to the Slytherins, and they did. Although really, the only place to go was further along the platform, and everyone could still see everything.

Malfoy shoved his hands in his pockets in an odd, awkward way Harry thought was familiar, and realised was his own way. He was unable to repress a smile.

"Er," said Malfoy, and looked appalled at the Potteresque level of communication emanating from his lips. He pulled himself together, the aristocratic boy who hated attending his mother's soirees, and said the appropriate thing. "How is your cousin?" he inquired with preternatural politeness.

Harry laughed, and it was this easy.

"He's fine," he said. "He got back together with his boyfriend – this boy called Piers Polkiss who looks like a rat, but who apparently he's attracted to." He paused, and added, "I – er – I guess it runs in the family."

Malfoy looked for a moment like he was torn between shocked indignation and laughter, and he chose the more pleasant option.

He didn't do that often with Harry.

When Malfoy laughed, even Crabbe and Goyle started to look suspicious and disturbed, so Harry laughed too.

"And he's retired the leather pants," Harry continued.

"I'm glad to hear it," Malfoy said devoutly.

Harry hesitated. "The – er – train's coming in a minute."

Malfoy put his head on one side, raising his eyebrows in a way that was either cute or annoying. Harry was planning to stick around until he decided.

"Yes?"

"There's pumpkin juice on the trolley..." Harry hesitated, and then took the plunge. "I was wondering if I could buy you a drink."

Finis

The Professional's Guide to Badgering People

The first day of sixth year was rather amusing.

Of course, Zacharias pretty much thought most days were either amusing or annoying, and they were quite often both.

Hermione Granger, the girl who thought any grade below Outstanding was an invention of the Dark Lord, and Ron Weasley, whose violently coloured hair distracted Zacharias from any personality he might possess, spent a lot of time looking anxiously out of their compartment so that Harry Potter would be left alone. Apparently the boy was still moping about something.

Ernie grabbed Zacharias as he was wandering past the compartment.

"Ssssh!" he whispered, and hauled him into total darkness.

"I can't see," Zacharias said dryly after a minute.

"It's so people will think that the compartment is empty," Hannah explained anxiously. "It was Ernie's idea."

"People will come in, wonder who pulled down the curtains, trip over one of us and think the compartment is empty?"

"Don't make things difficult, Zacharias," Ernie snapped. "Give us the password!"

"What?"

"We've decided that the password we give for going into our rooms should be given every time we meet. To establish who's a loyal Hufflepuff, and can be told our secrets," Ernie said conspiratorially.

"Couldn't we use a different system? Like, say, you could recognise me. If you didn't have the *curtains* drawn." Zacharias paused. "Also, we don't know the password yet."

There was a brief spate of deeply conspiratorial whispering.

"He's right, you know," said Susan.

"You always spoil things, Zacharias!" Ernie wailed. "Don't you realise that we're in a very dangerous situation?"

"Of course I do, I just tripped over Susan."

"He means that the Dark Lord has risen!" Susan said sharply. She seemed a bit annoyed about Zacharias tripping over her.

Vaguely, Zacharias wondered whose hand was on his ass.

"Yeah... Didn't Dumbledore tell us that in fourth year? Susan, you came with me to join Dumbledore's Army last year..."

"Yes," said Susan, "but now it's *official*. The Minister of Magic drew out a paper saying that the Dark Lord has returned. *My aunt* signed it."

"Oh."

"And he's targeted the Hufflepuffs!" Ernie exclaimed.

"I thought he was targeting Harry Potter," Susan pointed out.

Zacharias certainly hoped so. There was no other excuse for that careworn, slightly self-important expression Harry was always wearing.

"That's a smokescreen," Ernie argued earnestly. "I mean, let's face it, he killed Cedric and he didn't kill Harry, did he? He wants to exterminate us!"

Zacharias remembered Cedric. That had been a bloody shame. Hufflepuff had no chance at the Quidditch Cup without him.

Also, his parents had probably been upset, or something.

"Anyway, I think Harry might be an evil mastermind out to exterminate us too," Ernie continued. "All that stuff in the papers - no smoke without fire, eh? And he gave me a funny look, not *two minutes ago*."

Hannah squeaked in consternation.

"What's clear is that the Hufflepuffs are being hunted by dark mysterious forces which mortal man should not wot of," Ernie declared with a sort of morbid satisfaction.

"Have I told you that I was once Petrified by a basilisk?" Justin asked from behind Zacharias. "That was terrible. I was the first victim."

Ah. That explained that.

Zacharias sighed. "Justin, get your hand off my ass."

"Yes, Justin, honestly, we've discussed this," Susan said sternly.

"Well, I'm sorry, it's dark in here, I didn't know, did I?" Justin demanded.

"Justin, your hand is *still* on my ass."

"It's still dark in here." Justin sighed in a martyred way. "Oh, all right," he said grudgingly. "But everybody does it in Eton. Anyway, you should have some consideration for a victim."

Have I ever told you that I was Petrified by a basilisk? First victim."

"You see, it's proof," Ernie informed them all. "The Hufflepuffs are being closed in on! We're first in line for the slaughter!"

"I seem to remember the first victim was a cat," Zacharias put in.

"All right," Ernie conceded. "So first the Dark Lords will destroy the cats in an orgy of feline blood, and then the Hufflepuffs will be crushed! Fiendish cunning!"

"I heard Mandy Brocklehurst say she wanted to give Mrs Norris a right kick," Hannah offered.

"Aha!" said Ernie. "Clearly code. We'd better keep an eye on Mandy. She could be Harry Potter's dark, salacious consort, plotting evil deeds with him and satisfying his terrible, wanton-"

Zacharias levered up the blind an inch.

"His eyes are bulging again," he observed.

Hannah got out the paper bag. "Just take this and breathe into it, Ernie," she said kindly. "Put your head between your knees. You'll feel better in a bit."

"It's... poison," Ernie gasped. "Brothers and sisters in Hufflepuff... avenge my death..."

Justin looked introspective. "I think," he said, "we should loosen his clothes."

"Oh, really, Justin!" Susan snapped.

"Don't judge me!" Justin snapped back. "Everyone does it in Eton! It's not like I'm a bloody homosexual!"

"Wait," Susan said, struck by a sudden thought. "Have we wandered off the subject of the Dark Lord?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Then Harry Potter called a meeting of Dumbledore's Army right after the welcome-back dinner.

"Maybe he's trying to give us all indigestion," Susan whispered.

Zacharias patted her hand. "Susan. You've been spending too much time with Ernie."

"Harry," Michael Corner said plaintively, "can't we go to bed?"

"Maybe you wouldn't be so eager to sleep if Voldemort haunted your dreams," Harry

snapped.

Zacharias thought that Harry was doing the grim thing awfully well, actually, and it was a shame his trousers were so big he had to keep hitching them up. Going all gaunt with misery while wearing an obese person's hand-me-downs had been a bad mistake.

"Ginny here is going to show us how to make bat wings erupt from people's faces," Harry went on. "We have to learn every spell we can in order to face down Voldemort."

Zacharias put his hand up. "Are you saying Voldemort every time you speak to show off?"

"No, Zacharias, I'm not!"

Zacharias shrugged. "Okay."

Ginny stood in front of them and began demonstrating her curse. Lots of people wondered why Ginny had suddenly started being so much more outgoing and popular last year.

Zacharias thought it might have something to do with the fact that she had cut her robes practically down to her navel. Her freckled cleavage bobbed, on alluring display, as she gestured. Harry Potter did not notice.

"Breast her little heart," Zacharias murmured, "she tries so hard."

"Ginny used this on Malfoy last year," Harry said with a wolfish smile.

Zacharias put up his hand. "Is Malfoy evil, then?"

"Er... yeah," Harry nodded.

"Oh. Why?"

"Well... he's in Slytherin," Harry said.

"Are they all evil, then?" Zacharias asked. "Like, even the first years?"

Harry frowned. "Well, I mean, his family is evil."

Hermione Granger stood and went over to him and whispered something that sounded like 'wsst wsst wsst Sirius.' Zacharias did not think now was the time for an urgent discussion of constellations, but Hermione could be like that.

"That's different," Harry snapped. He gave Zacharias a narrow-eyed glare. "Look, Malfoy is a git, all right?"

Zacharias thought about it. "Is that the same thing as evil, though?"

"Look, Malfoy is evil because I say so! God, Zacharias, I'm trying to have a meeting here! We have to defeat evil!"

"I just thought it might be helpful to know who was evil first," Zacharias shrugged.
"Whatever."

Harry could get really ratty when people questioned him. He was generally all right, but Zacharias thought that people doubting his moral attitude gave him a migraine or something. He tried to do it often because it was funny when Harry winced, and also it stopped the grim speeches. Frankly, Zacharias found the grim bits a little dull.

Harry stared at his wand a bit too often, apparently sunk in dark thought.

"Does he remind you a bit of Ernie?" Zacharias asked Susan in a low voice.

"It's not paranoia when the Dark Lord really is out to get you."

"Huh. So Harry is Ernie in a world where Ernie is always right." Zacharias shook his head. "I love this world. It makes so little sense."

"I think the world's supposed to make sense, Zacharias."

"Ha," said Zacharias. "Where have you *been*?"

"Do you mind?" Harry frowned. "Stop talking. This is serious, you know."

Zacharias shrugged.

*

The day ended on the same amusing note when Zacharias went in to go to bed, and found himself attacked and bound.

"Surrender, spawn of darkness!"

Zacharias spat out a mouthful of blanket. "It's *me*, Ernie. Justin, stop trying to cop a feel."

People killed him.

The next morning, Zacharias ambled neutrally by the Slytherin table. Gryffindors tended to get eggs thrown at them, the Ravensclaws were tripped up while they were reading, but Hufflepuffs could slip under the radar. There were advantages to being beneath contempt.

"Shhh," someone was drawling, "I'm listening."

Zacharias was pretty sure that was Draco Malfoy drawling, because nobody else in Slytherin was really allowed to drawl, though no-one had got around to informing Professor Snape yet. Once he caught sight of the white-blond head he was sure, because everybody else had been specifically forbidden to use bleach.

Occasionally Zacharias suspected Draco Malfoy was power mad, but he might just have a thing about his hair.

"I can't believe you enchanted Harry Potter's egg cup," Blaise Zabini was saying. "This is new levels of dedication."

Draco Malfoy's voice was dark. "He put my father in prison."

Zacharias admitted that this might possibly irritate some people. After all, if Mr Malfoy was in prison, who was giving Draco his pocket money?

On the whole, he sympathised.

Harry's voice suddenly sounded from the egg cup. Draco held it up to his ear and waggled the egg cup around to improve the reception. He looked a little bit insane.

"I'm on page eight of the paper," Harry said in a puzzled voice.

"Oooh, poor me, I'm only on page *eight* of the *national* paper," Draco exclaimed. He stood up. "That's it. I'm killing him."

"No, Draco, you mustn't kill him," Pansy Parkinson said. "The teachers are here. Think of the house points."

"It's all right, Harry," Hermione told him, her voice crackling dimly from the egg cup. "Think of something cheerful. Like - you can have Quidditch practise again now!"

Harry laughed his tired, bitter and slightly overdone laugh. "Like I need to practise to beat *Malfoy*."

"Crabbe, get his legs," Pansy said in a resigned tone.

Half of Slytherin table had to sit on Draco Malfoy, who was foaming at the mouth and clawing at the tablecloth.

"I'll kill him," he said in muffled tones. "Don't stop me, he has to die! I... mmmmmph, Crabbe, be careful. Those trousers were expensive."

"Calm down, Draco," Pansy counselled desperately.

"But his *every word* fills me with dire loathing," Draco muttered rebelliously.

Zacharias supposed Harry could be a little grating. He peered down at Draco Malfoy, crushed under thirty other Slytherins, with his blond hair all messed up and still clutching the egg cup with determination. He thought all his impotent fury was kind of amusing.

"Aren't you a Hufflepuff?" grunted something alarmingly Neanderthal-looking next to Zacharias.

"Who're you?" Zacharias asked.

"Me Goyle!" said the Thing. "Slytherins superior."

"In what way, precisely?" inquired Zacharias, edging away.

Goyle's brow furrowed in obviously arduous thought. "I pound you now."

"Actually," said Zacharias. "I'm a Slytherin. I just stole some Hufflepuff's robes. Haha."

"You look like Hufflepuff. Name Smith," Goyle grunted.

"Ah, you see, I stole his face too," Zacharias said.

"Oh." Goyle laughed. "Good one! Show them. Haha. Who're you really?"

"Ah, Millicent Bulstrode."

"But you *boy*," Goyle pointed out.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Zacharias considered the matter of the amusing Draco Malfoy for a while, and then approached him. He was standing looking up at the Gryffindors practising, and he was making some notes about their practise that were quite clever, and would probably have come in useful if he hadn't missed out some crucial parts making faces at Harry Potter.

Zacharias sidled discreetly over to him, and came up with the perfect opening line.

"Harry Potter is a bit of a twit," he observed calmly.

Draco laughed. "Oh, at last a soulmate," he responded, and then turned around and jumped back. "Ew, a Hufflepuff," he said faintly. "You're not allowed to talk to me, are you?"

"It's not in the school rules," Zacharias pointed out.

"I knew I should have gone to Durmstrang," Draco muttered. "All right, go away or get beaten to a pulp. Minions!" he called imperiously. "Minions, where are my... oh for God's sake, they went off for their second brunch, didn't they?" He looked pensive. "It's so hard to find good minions."

"If I was rich," Zacharias remarked, hoping that he wasn't giving him ideas, "I'd hire assassins."

The suggestion seemed to appeal to Draco, who tilted his head in his direction in a manner that suggested he could one day accept that Zacharias was not taking up air that could be more usefully conserved for Slytherins.

"My mother has all kinds of absurd rules," he answered. "No contract killers until you're eighteen, Draco. Honestly!" Zacharias laughed, and Draco appeared to give him further consideration. "What's your name, then?" he snapped.

"Zacharias Smith."

"*Smith*. Yeah, right." Draco rolled his eyes. "Every Hufflepuff I meet tells me his name is Smith. Do they think I have a little black book where I put down names?"

"I don't know, do you?" Zacharias asked.

"Actually, I do. But I don't put Hufflepuffs' names down in it." Draco sneered. "What's your actual name?"

"It really is Zacharias Smith."

"There's actually a Smith in Hufflepuff?" Draco frowned. "Your housemates must not like you very much."

Zacharias shrugged.

"I'm-"

"Draco, yes I know."

"Malfoy," Draco corrected, displeased.

"I'm not calling you Malfoy," Zacharias said flatly. "It's far too English public boys' school. It's like Eton."

He thought of Justin, and made a face.

"I don't know what an Eton is," Draco told him, in tones indicating that Eton did not deserve this honour. "But we are in an English public school."

"Actually, this is Scotland," Zacharias corrected.

"Scotland!" Draco looked perfectly horrified. "No wonder they don't let us out of the school grounds. The natives wear kilts."

"So what? You wear robes."

"It's a question of decorum," Draco informed him. "You cannot see *my* knees."

Shame, thought Zacharias, and then wondered briefly if Justin might be rubbing off on him.

"And they have weapons called bagpipes. And red hair," Draco continued. "Savage, Muggle Weasleys."

"The hair's a bit disconcerting," Zacharias admitted.

"*Your* hair is all right," Draco said graciously.

"Thank you," said Zacharias, aware that this was the ultimate seal of Malfoy Approval.

"Excuse me," Draco said suddenly.

The Gryffindor Quidditch team had landed, and Draco apparently just had to stroll over to them. Zacharias saw his lips move a few times, and then Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Angelina Johnson leaped on him and began to pummel him.

Gryffindors always were a bit touchy.

Zacharias bit his lip as Draco went down. Ouch. That had to hurt.

"You want to help out your disgusting little friend?" someone yelled in his direction.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Harry Potter cornered him after lunch.

"Well," he said, "I hope that you see what a bastard Malfoy is now."

"Not really," said Zacharias, wondering where this compulsive urge to be agreed with came from. People who didn't agree with Zacharias simply amused him with their stupidity.

Harry frowned. "He called - my mother a Mudblood," he said in quiet, intense tones.

Zacharias frowned back. "Yeah, but... he called names and three of you jumped on him and blacked his eye and broke two of his fingers."

"I think you're missing the point, Zacharias," Harry snapped, storming off.

Zacharias shrugged.

Later on, he was slightly surprised to see Harry going up to Draco in the corridor.

"Hey," he said. "Um. I don't *forgive* you for what you said about my mother, but - I'm, um, sorry we hit you. It was wrong."

Zacharias' point had been that it had been a bit irrational, but however.

"Nothing you haven't done before," sneered Draco, after a beat.

"Oh, Christ, Malfoy, stop pissing me off!" yelled Harry the volatile. "I have enough on my plate without *you*. My godfather-"

"Yeah, well, my father, you bastard!" shouted back Draco, who definitely had anger management problems himself.

"That's different!"

"Not from where I'm standing!" Draco, having made a good point, then went on to ruin it entirely by adding, "And your mother was a-"

Zacharias coughed urgently.

"Oh look, Professor McGonagall," he said, grabbing Draco's elbow and dragging him away.

It pained him to see someone ruining a nice piece of logic. Logic was rare in this world.

"Hey, these robes are designer," Draco sniffed. "And I'm *sure* Hufflepuffs aren't allowed to touch me."

"Let it go, Draco," Zacharias said.

"Well," Draco conceded. "Why'd you drag me away? I was just about to-"

"Get hexed by a horde of Gryffindors," Zacharias said. "As you'd know if you weren't currently experiencing a rush of blood to the head. That's what always happens."

"Not always," Draco grumbled. "Sometimes teachers show up and turn me into animals or the Dark Lord appears and terrorises me. Everybody's on Harry Potter's side."

He stopped, and raised his eyebrows at Zacharias.

"I was being pounded on by those Gryffindors and you didn't come to help," he observed.

Zacharias shrugged. "Why should I go to get pounded as well?"

Draco sucked in one side of his lip. "That's very sensible," he remarked, and then smiled.

Zacharias thought that, when not completely out of his head with fury, Draco Malfoy might end up being a bit of a kindred spirit.

"What d'you think I should do to get back at Harry Potter?"

"Try not to get so angry," Zacharias advised, not terribly interested.

"But he *makes* me angry," Draco said, his eyes narrowing.

"That makes you something less than cunning," Zacharias said diplomatically.

"I suppose you have a point," Draco said, grudgingly. Zacharias thought the boy seemed intelligent, and the fact he was now agreeing with Zacharias proved it. "I am a Slytherin, after all," Draco concluded. He flashed another smile at Zacharias, this one somewhat brighter. Apparently he could be quite taking when he wanted, which was probably the case with most brats. "You're not so bad," he said loftily.

"I like to think so," Zacharias agreed amiably. "We could probably be friends after a while."

Draco frowned. "Friends?"

"A little bit like minions, Draco," Zacharias explained.

Draco rolled his eyes at him. "*Maybe* we could. I'm not making any promises, though. Anyway - why d'you suddenly want to be friends?"

Zacharias deeply approved of this mild suspicion about the motives of the rest of the world, and thought about admitting something like, I think you could be interesting. But he wasn't going to go crazy with this.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

The ranks of Dumbledore's Army swelled and swelled over a few months. People said things to Dumbledore like 'bunch of righteous little vigilantes' and 'encouraging rifts between students,' but Dumbledore just beamed his benign smile at Professor Snape and let it carry on.

Zacharias was a big admirer of Dumbledore. He thought it took a special kind of mind to walk the line between 'ancient wisdom' and 'big-headed, stubborn, school-wrecking senility.'

It made Draco foam at the mouth a bit, too, which also amused Zacharias considerably.

Zacharias suggested that the original members of Dumbledore's Army should get special privileges like first dibs at the cake, but Harry Potter was very firm about everybody being equal.

"Except for evil people," Zacharias pointed out.

"Yes," said Harry with the look of someone who suspects he is being mocked (the boy really was more intelligent than Zacharias had thought), "but there are no evil people in the Army."

"That's what you want us to think," muttered Ernie. "We're onto you, Potter."

"What?" said Harry blankly.

Thankfully, at that point Hermione brought in the Butterbeer. After about four, even Harry Potter unwound a bit and stopped looking quite so dreary. Parvati Patil giggled and suggested a game of Spin the Bottle.

"That's a very triv-triv-trivial thought," said Ernie. "We are in dark-dark-dark times."

Butterbeer always gave Ernie the hiccups.

"Let's play the Gay Game," Parvati said.

Justin spat out his Butterbeer. "I'm *not*!" he said. "Who told you? It's *normal* at Eton!"

"No," Parvati said patiently. "Say you had to sleep with someone of the same sex. Who would it be?"

"Oh, theoretically," Terry Boot said with a certain amount of relief.

Ravenclaws liked theory. You could probably get them to approve of the Theory of Ravenclaw Extermination. Theoretically.

"Ah, well, if I was a pansy boy," said Justin, "which obviously I'm not, since I practically went to Eton, Zacharias."

Zacharias unobtrusively moved his chair further away from Justin's.

"I'd have Millicent Bulstrode," Parvati said. "She's so manly."

Zacharias was interested and a little appalled by the ready way Parvati spoke up.

"I think I'd have Padma Patil," Hermione put in shyly. "I saw her reading *Hogwarts: A History* once."

"My sister?" Parvati said, looking offended. "But we're exactly alike! What does she have that I don't?"

"Er, well, you don't read much," Hermione said. "And I'm not so into your butterfly clasp - Parvati, where are you going? Parvati, don't be like that!"

Ginny leaned back, crossing her legs. She had clearly made slits in her robe, as well.

"I'd take Cho Chang," she said in a throaty voice. Harry looked unmoved.

Zacharias thought this was easy enough. "I'd take Draco Malfoy," he said casually.

Harry Potter looked like he was going to choke on his own tongue. "What? That evil - Why?"

Zacharias hoped that Harry Potter didn't have a secret crush on him. He was sure that he wouldn't be able to kiss in a virtuous enough way for Harry.

"I like the way his nose scrunches up when he throws one of those murderous temper tantrums," Zacharias observed neutrally. "I think it's cute."

"Cute? Malfoy?" Harry yelped.

Terry Boot looked convinced. "I'll take Draco Malfoy as well," he nodded.

Harry looked as if the bottom had fallen out of his world. "But you can't really *fancy Malfoy*," he said.

"This is theoretical," Terry said hastily.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Professor Snape asked for volunteers to organise his Potions closet. He did so with a look of fiendish glee, suggesting how happy he would be when nobody volunteered and he could punish everyone for doing so.

He was a strange, bitter little man. Zacharias was rather amused by him.

"Young Malfoy has volunteered already. He is the only one in this entire year who is not entirely worthless and should not be fed to rabid crocodiles."

Zacharias put up his hand and volunteered, before Terry Boot could.

Professor Snape looked disappointed.

"All right, then," he said grudgingly. "But you'd better do it right - or there will be punishment."

"All right," said Zacharias, in the placid knowledge that he was quite ready to throw Harry Potter to the wolves to save himself. You didn't need an excuse to punish Harry if you were Professor Snape.

"Punishment," murmured Professor Snape, and then added something that sounded a bit like, "I'll show you underwear."

"Please don't," Zacharias said mildly.

"Eh?" said Professor Snape. "Er - I wasn't talking to you. Now, run off, lad, or there will be-"

"I get the picture," said Zacharias, and went to find Draco.

That evening they found themselves sitting in a closet with a pile of jars around them. Justin had rather urgently tried to come along when he found out how small the closet was.

"Draco Malfoy will be there too," Zacharias had said. "And please, Justin, don't touch me like that."

"I don't mind. I think Malfoy has a certain something," Justin had answered with a terrible eagerness.

Zacharias had callously left him behind, though, with a parting bleat of 'Did I ever tell you about the basilisk?' ringing in his ears.

"Oh my God, it's dusty in here," Draco wailed, pushing his hair back.

There were now grey marks in the blond strands, but Zacharias prudently did not mention it. There was no point in inducing hysterics.

"I like the jars," he said instead. "They remind me of Hufflepuffs."

"Uh, Zacharias, they're full of mould." Draco mulled this over. "Well, I suppose you might

have something there."

"I meant they have no labels on them," Zacharias corrected him calmly. "The Sorting Hat once said we were the leftovers from the other choices."

"You're the mouldy leftovers?"

Zacharias flashed him a quick smile. "I mean we aren't chosen for specific qualities. So we're an unknown quantity - and we can choose almost anything. We're not committed to anything, bad or good, honest or cunning. We can be Switzerland."

Draco looked discontent, clearly feeling that another house having good qualities was a direct insult to his own.

"I could be Switzerland," he said crossly. "If I *wanted* to, I could be Switzerland." He sulked. "But I don't even like cuckoo clocks."

"I meant the neutrality-"

"I know what you meant," Draco snapped. "Jesus, what kind of imbeciles are you used to talking to?"

"Ernie and Justin are simply a little different," Zacharias said calmly.

"Yeah," Draco said. "Crabbe and Goyle need to go to a special school in the summer."

Draco and Zacharias exchanged discreet smiles, basking in the glow of their own superior intelligence.

"Personally, I like labels," said Draco, labelling something 'mugwort.' "Since all the things I can be labelled are, like, gorgeous and charming and wonderful and rich and great."

"And amoral and petty and constantly enraged."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "What's your point?"

"No point," Zacharias said, labelling in a peaceful fashion.

"Anyway, I could still be Switzerland," Draco said in a sullen voice. "I... met the Dark Lord this summer, you know. Just for a few minutes."

"Oh," said Zacharias. "Was he keeping well?"

"He was terrifying and revolting, is what he was. My dad said he was charismatic and alluring and stunningly handsome," Draco informed Zacharias in a cheated voice. "And he's bald and he's got red eyes and he smells funny and his manners are appalling. I'm beginning to wonder about my father's taste in men."

"He's psychotic, too," Zacharias put in.

"Yes, yes," said Draco irritably. "But I thought it might be in a kind of, you know, cool way. But I have to tell you, I don't think I want to join. He laughs in a very alarming manner." He frowns. "Of course, Dumbledore isn't any kind of poster boy either, he looks like a prune. The whole thing is a public relations disaster."

"Practically speaking," Zacharias noted, "the followers of someone psychotic tend to get hurt too. I'm not at all keen on grovelling under Cruciatus to anyone myself. That's why I joined Dumbledore's Army."

Draco looked vexed. "God, it would be such a *come-down* to crawl over to stupid Harry Potter's side. I suppose Cruciatus would be worse, though." He looked unconvinced. "And my father will kill me."

"Your father's in prison," Zacharias reminded him.

Draco looked thoughtful. "That's true. I mean - that's the terrible, terrible truth. But since he is, I suppose I have a certain leeway. And it's almost my duty to go over to the Ministry's side and campaign for his release."

"He's a politician, isn't he?" Zacharias asked. "I'm sure he doesn't have any real loyalties to anyone."

"It's the Malfoy way," Draco agreed. "And there was a very strange man in the Dark Lord's cave who asked if I wanted to see his shiny bits." He shuddered, fastidiously. "I don't really have a *choice*, do I?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

There was a bit of a fuss when Draco joined Dumbledore's Army.

There was the problem where Draco made badges that said 'Dumbledore's Army, Only Not Really, Because I Don't Like Him, and Definitely Not Affiliated with Harry Potter in Any Way' and Zacharias had to explain to him that the lettering was too small and the badge was totally illegible. Draco pitched a fit.

There was the sharp volley about racism from Hermione Granger. Draco explained that he had been thinking it over and killing the Muggleborn was just awful. Unfortunately, then he added that this was because it seemed such a waste when they could simply be the purebloods' slaves instead. Zacharias was amused when Draco got bitch-slapped around the room.

Draco stayed rather quiet after that, until the final problem, which was of course the inevitable screaming match with Harry Potter, while people hung around both their necks and kept them sitting down.

"You can't join because you're evil!" Harry shouted, completely losing it. "The whole point of this club is that you're not supposed to be evil!"

"I'm not evil!" Draco screamed back. "I'm morally challenged, you righteous little prat! There's a sodding difference!"

"You're evil!" Harry bellowed. "You do evil things to *me*! You say evil things to *me*!"

"That's not because I'm evil!" Draco yelled. "That's because I HATE YOU, you nasty, bespectacled, rotten glory hound! You drive me up the wall! You're driving me insane *this second*, and I HATE YOU, let me go so I can strangle him Zacharias, don't try to talk me out of it, he has to pay..."

"You see, he *is* evil!" Harry said triumphantly.

"Gah!" Draco howled.

"Maybe they're both evil," Ernie suggested.

"Ernie," said Zacharias, "don't make this any worse."

Eventually, things settled down to a comfortable state of seething hostility. Personally Zacharias thought that Draco added a certain something to the Army.

He did a very good imitation of Mundungus Fletcher, after Fletcher came to visit them. Even Harry looked tempted to laugh.

"The whole world's crazy anyway. We might as well laugh," Zacharias said philosophically. "I mean, has anybody noticed that our sole spy for the dark side is Professor Snape, a man who apparently can't tell shampoo and olive oil apart?"

"I *like* Professor Snape," Draco said ominously.

"Draco, you're so good at being nasty," Zacharias said. "Why waste that on only the people you dislike?"

Draco tilted his head, absorbing this notion.

"So you're saying I should be nasty to everyone?"

"Why not? The world's not particularly impressive."

"I like the way you think, Hufflepuff," Draco said, and leaned against Zacharias' knee as he imitated Professor Flitwick.

Zacharias particularly liked the way he squeaked out 'Face me or die!'

He didn't know that he particularly cared for the way Harry Potter had been scowling at him but, there you had it.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Draco in Dumbledore's Army worked quite well. It banished, once and forever, the idea that it was a place for do-gooders. Moreover, Harry Potter's private, fierce concentration on a couple of people in the world alienated all the others. Draco's universal, open-handed nastiness somehow made people feel more included.

Zacharias liked having someone who occasionally thought like he did at the meetings.

"So, what would you do if it looked like the Dark Lord was definitely going to win?" he asked Draco once, after a long night up with the curse books.

"I'd go abroad," Draco answered instantly, and Zacharias smiled.

"Already got a bank account set up?"

Draco grinned. "In Switzerland. You want to come with?"

Zacharias thought about shrugging, but nodded instead.

"We're off, Potter," Draco added, hauling his bag over his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry snapped. "I love to watch you leave."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Why, Potter," he drawled. "I had no idea."

Harry's ears went suddenly incandescent. "That's *not* what I meant! Hermione!"

Zacharias and Draco both laughed in Harry's direction, and Zacharias casually linked elbows with Draco and they went on.

The next day, Harry was telling people darkly of some of the things that had happened to him. Zacharias privately thought he should just write some books about them and let the royalties roll in.

"*Shut up*, Potter," Draco finally exploded. "God, you annoy me. You annoy me so much-" he looked at the wand in his hand, snapped finally, "that I've forgotten all the spells I know," and hit Harry on the side of the head with his wand.

"Ow! Malfoy, you big freak!" said Harry.

That was when Zacharias began to think that their constant use of each others' last names might be a bit Etonian.

He thought that even more when Dumbledore's Army was training by the side of the Forbidden Forest, in which a squad of Death Eaters daringly Apparated.

Daringly being another word for 'really, suicidally stupidly' in Zacharias' vocabulary.

Hermione set off running for Dumbledore. Zacharias and Draco stayed prudently to the back of the Army, and fired off some well thought-out spells, but then Draco got over-enthused, as

he did, and rushed forward.

Unfortunately, one of the Death Eaters got in a curse at the spot to which Draco ran. Zacharias calculated the distance, and decided that it was too bad, but he would get seriously hurt if he tried to rescue Draco.

Harry, with his usual bravery and what could be kindly described as dumb luck, lunged and somehow got himself and Draco to safety, and then Dumbledore and the other teachers arrived and the Death Eaters decided they were keen on a bit of a nature walk.

"Why'd you do that?" Draco asked in a shaken sort of tone. Zacharias was proud to see that his suspicious nature was in place.

"I-" Harry frowned. "I would've done it for anyone," he said shortly, and walked off.

Draco sneered at his back. Zacharias helped him up.

Afterwards, Zacharias realised he was neither amused nor annoyed by this occurrence. He frowned in the middle of the Hufflepuff common room as he realised he felt like... like he *cared* about something, or something.

"I don't," Zacharias muttered. "I'm not like that. I'm Switzerland."

A light appeared in Ernie's eyes. He sidled over to Zacharias.

"You know the code language, brother?" he said under his breath. "The purple spotted hippopotamus lurks in the leafy bowers on Thursday."

Zacharias stared. "I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about, Ernie."

"That's right, brother. Don't let the others know. Very clever." Ernie tapped his nose, knowingly. "Keep knocking that old fiddle, eh?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Everyone stayed for the Christmas holidays, saying that it was because they wanted to hone their skills to face down the Dark Lord.

Zacharias thought they might be motivated by the fact that Dumbledore had promised to roast a pig on the Quidditch pitch. The fire was large, and students wandered around it. Neville Longbottom had an apple magically stuck in his mouth.

"Very amusing, Draco," Zacharias observed neutrally.

Draco cackled. Zacharias had given him a pair of jeans for Christmas, because Zacharias did not believe in giving presents that did not benefit him personally. Draco was wearing them now with a dark jumper, and Zacharias had added to the list of things he rather liked about Draco. It now read, occasional wit, flashes of good sense, nose, hair, dark outlook on the

world and body.

It was the most complimentary list he had about anybody.

Zacharias was wearing black jeans and a jumper too, and they had their elbows linked again. Justin was giving them unhappy looks as Hermione described some showdown with Professor Umbridge over the fire.

"Did I ever tell you that I was attacked by a basilisk?" he asked plaintively. "That was very traumatic, you know."

"And it spelled doom," Ernie said in a sepulchral tone. "Doom to the Hufflepuffs!"

"We can only hope," Harry told him exasperatedly, getting up and walking away from the fire.

"Thus speaks a guilty conscience," Ernie told them all.

"D'you want to roast marshmallows?" Susan asked.

"Did you like your present?" Draco inquired as they went to get their marshmallows.

Zacharias took the mirror out of his pocket, and peered into it. It called out, "Look at you, you sexy thing. Dance for me, tiger. Yeah! Yeah! You're working it!"

"It's lovely," he said.

Draco beamed. "I have one just like it. It always cheers me up."

Draco became occupied with trying to steal all the marshmallows and keep them for himself. Zacharias veered away from that side of the fire because Justin kept trying to sidle in his direction.

Mindful of the fact that at any moment Justin might descend into outright pursuit, Zacharias decided to remove temptation from him and go on a little stroll around the Quidditch pitch.

Watching Justin watch his jeans, he climbed the Quidditch bleachers for a little extra distance, and slipped between them. Zacharias believed in discreet retreat before any aggressive moves were made, if this was an option.

Then he saw Harry Potter sitting in a brooding, disgruntled heap behind the bleachers, and backed up.

Harry looked up. "Wait," he said. "Please. I was - hoping to get a chance to talk to you."

Zacharias paused warily. Harry Potter might be the saviour of the world and all that, but Zacharias did not think he was a particularly sparkling conversationalist.

Still, Ernie lowered your standards after a while. Zacharias would have been all right with listening to Harry, if Harry had actually spoken to him. He just seemed to stare at the ground

and mumble a bit.

"Sorry?" Zacharias asked with a hint of a sneer. Draco rubbed off on you, eventually.

Harry looked up, in the usual direct way he did when he was about to do something really stupid. Zacharias wondered if there were any Death Eaters around. Seemed a pity to curb the boy's impulses.

"You're confusing me," Harry burst out. "You were supposed to be - different! And if you were different, you were supposed to be different in a different way! You're doing it on purpose to annoy me."

Zacharias squinted. Maybe someone had spiked the marshmallows.

"I've had a terrible time," Harry told him, angrily, and stood up. "And you keep *confusing* me, with your bloody being morally challenged and laughing at me and having a cute nose!"

He was advancing on Zacharias with the kind of purposeful look that he had when he espied evil that needed a good vanquishing.

Zacharias couldn't think of anything he'd done recently which had been particularly evil, and then he realised that he was standing against the firelight, and thus was simply a blond silhouette in dark jeans. Who had just sneered.

Panic exploded in Zacharias' chest.

"You can't *really* like that cold bastard Zacharias," said Harry in his very determined way, and grabbed hold of Zacharias' neck, shut his own eyes and pressed his mouth very firmly to his.

Zacharias made a frantic effort to get away, but Harry was significantly stronger than Justin. He also seemed to be expecting an effort to get away, and pushed closer because of it.

This was the only time in his life that Zacharias would not have been amused by the discovery that Harry Potter had a bit of a kink.

Harry opened his lips, mouth hot on Zacharias'. Zacharias panicked and finally found the strength to shove him away.

"You've got the wrong nose!" he shouted.

He was throwing a fit. He'd never done anything like this before in his life. But, well, saliva of Harry Potter!

"Don't you *examine* people before you kiss them?" he demanded. "Gah!"

Harry Potter stared at him, breath coming in short gasps. "*Zacharias?*"

"Yes," Zacharias said. "You could have checked! Oh my God, your saliva doesn't transfer anything weird, does it? Like Parseltongue?"

He realised he was having a complete spaz attack, and sounded like Draco. He tried to calm down.

"No," Harry said absently. His ears were going violent, Weasley red. "Oh my God, I don't believe this. Oh my God, I am so embarrassed."

Harry's wretched shame was making Zacharias much happier.

"I am *such* an idiot," said Harry, who was not getting any arguments from Zacharias. "I... Zacharias." His voice held a note of appeal. "You're not going to tell anybody, are you?"

Zacharias realised all this was actually very amusing.

Harry's voice was strangled. "You're not going to tell Malfoy?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Amusing as Harry Potter's total humiliation was, Zacharias also realised that the time had come to act. He left Harry in agony behind the bleachers and walked quickly back to the fire, where Draco was nursing his stolen stash of marshmallows.

"Draco," he said, "I need to have this cleared up. Are you straight?"

Draco, his mouth full of sticky goo, made a sound that Zacharias thought was pretty much the vocal version of "!!!"

"Do you like girls?" he pursued.

Draco swallowed. "Like girls?" he snapped. "Don't be disgusting!"

That was the first hurdle, and it had gone splendidly. "Good. So you like boys then," Zacharias said calmly.

"Don't insult me," said Draco.

Zacharias had never had quite so many shocks in one night.

"I hate *sweeping generalisations* like that," Draco told him irritably. "I mean, liking boys? That could include liking Crabbe. Liking girls could include liking Millicent Bulstrode. Are you mad? Obviously, being gay or straight involves a whole lot of potential for liking people unworthy of a Malfoy. The only sensible thing is to compile a select number of names who might be worthy of the supreme honour of allowing myself to be attracted to them. I'm private-list-sexual."

Zacharias considered this. "You're very strange and twisted, Draco," he told him in a businesslike tone. "And you have rage issues. Also, your nose is too pointed."

Draco made the "!!!" noise again.

"But most of the rest of the world isn't even worth my time," Zacharias continued. "And you, like your nose, have a bizarre appeal. I want to go out with you. Do I get on your list or not?"

Draco lounged on the grass, mulling this over. Zacharias had to admit he lounged well, too. There was roast marshmallow fluff on his lower and extremely pouty lip.

"Weeeell," Draco said doubtfully, "you are a Hufflepuff, you know. But I suppose I rather admire your attitude of total unconcern about the fate of most people in the world. And we might end up going to Switzerland together." He peered up at Zacharias through his silvery eyelashes, and Zacharias was amused to note that amid his many other terrible qualities, Draco Malfoy was a tease. "I suppose you might do," Draco concluded.

Zacharias reached over, and pulled Draco's sticky mouth to his. Draco's lips curved in either a smile or a sneer, and Zacharias curled his back.

Their mouths opened. Zacharias put his hands in Draco's hair, amused by Draco's small sound of protest. Draco was angular and difficult to please under his hands, and Zacharias *liked* it.

"You know, three chaps often go at it together at Eton," Justin said hopefully.

"Be careful, brother," called out Ernie. "He could have poisoned the marshmallow fluff on his mouth. Yes, that's it! Draco Malfoy is a killer! Get him, Hufflepuffs!"

Draco opened his eyes, and blinked down at him. "You taste of Chocolate Frogs," he remarked, a little breathlessly. "You don't even like Chocolate Frogs."

Zacharias shrugged.

Crouching Lion, Hidden Badger

The day they decided to stage a pre-emptive strike against Voldemort was, in Zacharias' opinion, comedy gold.

"We can't hide in here like rats," Harry Potter said impressively. "We have to do something!"

"Well, God forbid we let the adults get on with it," Zacharias murmured.

"What did you say?" Harry snapped. He was even more irritable of late.

"He was agreeing with you," Draco told Harry, wide-eyed. "After all, this is a school, isn't it? What is it for but mortal danger!"

Harry scowled at them and returned to his plan of operations. It was actually rather a good plan, until you got the part where Harry had drawn the Dark Lord and then added an artistic pool of blood, several daggers, some crossbow bolts and a few signs saying 'Die Voldemort Die!' and 'Take That You Bastard!!!'

Far be it from Zacharias to murmur 'Overkill.'

"To arms, Hogwarts," he said instead in Draco's ear, and they both snickered discreetly.

"This is a plot to imprison the Hufflepuffs between you and the Dark Lord, isn't it," Ernie said darkly.

"No, Ernie," said at least half a dozen voices.

Ernie cast a baleful look around. "Ah. So you're *all* in it, are you?"

"I said it too, Ernie," Susan informed him briskly.

"Shame on you, Susan!"

"Please focus!" Harry snapped. "If you people had been face to face with Voldemort, looking into his cruel red eyes-"

He went on for a while. Zacharias leaned forward and blew in Draco's ear.

A boy had to amuse himself somehow.

The pointer snapped in Harry's hands.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Hermione asked in the worried voice of one whose friend had Episodes.

"Fine," Harry said in a strangled voice. "Fine. Just thinking of Voldemort." He snapped the pointer in a few more pieces. "He makes me angry," he added absently.

"Harry, that was my wand," Ron Weasley objected plaintively.

"Oh, stop whining, it's not like it's the first time," Harry snapped. "You could complain if you'd ever had the only person you loved murdered in front of your-"

"Oh, write a book, Potter," Draco grumbled.

Zacharias tilted himself in the chair to speak into Draco's ear. "He could call it 'Harry Potter and the Series of Tragically Undeserved Catastrophes'," he suggested quietly. " 'Harry Potter and the Persecution Complex.'"

Draco sniggered.

"What are you two talking about?" Harry demanded.

Zacharias shrugged. "Sex," he said blandly.

Justin made a faint sound and slipped off his chair. Harry began to stab the picture of Voldemort with the broken bits of Ron Weasley's wand.

"And so," he said in a distracted tone, grinding the splintered ends down into the board, "we sneak into Voldemort's meeting in couples of spies, and we learn some secrets, which we use for the destruction of Voldemort, which will obviously end up in us stabbing his black heart over and over and over again."

Zacharias absently stroked Draco's collarbone and watched with mild interest as Harry made a hole in the board.

"Harry, be careful," Hermione admonished.

"Sorry," said Harry. "Just thinking about Voldemort again. He makes me very very angry, you know."

Draco suddenly jumped.

"Someone just felt me up under the table," he exclaimed in horrified tones.

"Whoops, I thought you were Zacharias," said a muffled voice.

Zacharias thought this universal confusion was quite ridiculous.

"Justin!" Susan said crossly.

"Leave him alone!" Ernie said. "He's practising for the time when Hufflepuffs are hunted around the globe, and we must resort to guerrilla tactics. More power to you, comrade!"

"So are you all ready to die nobly for the cause of light?" Harry asked in an exasperated voice.

Zacharias put his hand up. "Actually, we only die if we're caught, right?"

"Well, yes," Harry conceded.

"And that's a fairly spectacular failure for a spy, isn't it?" Zacharias inquired. "So it would be more a case of dying stupidly for the cause of light."

Harry looked as if he was going to grind his teeth in a minute. "Well, are you all ready to *risk death* nobly for the cause of light?"

Draco squinted. "What are the alternatives, precisely?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

They went to Professor Snape to be briefed.

"Well, an important thing to remember is to wander around constantly muttering sinister death threats against those on the side of light," he advised, peering at them through his hair.

"That must be hard to keep in mind," Draco said respectfully.

Professor Snape blinked. "What? No... no, actually I find it comes quite naturally..."

"Fascinating," Zacharias observed neutrally.

"I'm concerned about this plan," Professor Snape said. "It's reckless and dangerous and deeply pointless."

"Well, it's Harry Potter's plan," Zacharias explained. "What else did people expect?"

"I pointed this out to the headmaster," Professor Snape muttered. "I said, the children could die. He just chuckled, in that very pleasant way, 'Boys will be boys.'"

"I am somewhat in awe of that man," Zacharias remarked.

"I want him to be fired and then dismembered," Draco said.

Zacharias shrugged. "You have these little urges."

Professor Snape squinted at them, through the veil of apparently petroleum-coated hair.

"You two appear to be holding hands," he said.

"He is my boyfriend," Draco explained. "It is a great privilege and responsibility for him."

"Something like that, yes," said Zacharias.

"Happy, fulfilled little couples..." Snape murmured bitterly. "Surely it's not right. You can

never be happy at school."

"Sir, you're a teacher," Zacharias said. "You spend your whole life at school."

The nose poked out of the hair, as if scenting blood. "So?" Snape snapped. "What's your point?"

Zacharias shrugged. "No point."

At that point, Argus Filch wandered in clutching a large black book.

Snape darted a furtive look at Draco and Zacharias. "Well, boys," he said. "I think that's plenty of briefing for you. Filch and I have many things to discuss. We recently discovered many - ah - common interests."

Zacharias looked with interest at the front of the book. Inscribed on it in gold lettering were the words 'Whippings, Canings, Chainings, Thumbscrews, Ye Olde Stocks, The Top 100 Guide to PUNISHMENT.'

"What are you staring at?" Filch hissed.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Zacharias was woken up the next morning by an urgent hand on his shoulder.

"No, honestly, Justin, I'm trying to sleep," he said. "I don't care if they do demand strenuous physical exertion every morning at Eton. And I believe many of them may simply do push-ups."

"I'm not Justin," snapped Harry Potter.

Zacharias, who still intermittently had dreams in which Harry Potter had transferred his Voldemort dreams to Zacharias through saliva and Zacharias was forced to listen to speeches even in his sleep, hauled his covers up to his neck.

"What did you want?" he inquired frostily. He made every effort not to sneer, in case that was what set Harry Potter off and reduced him to a frenzied ball of lust.

"We start out now!" Harry said in low, conspiratorial tones. "You wake the others. I'll, I'd better go and, hm, I'd probably better go wake up the Slytherins."

Zacharias had a detached admiration for the creative moral mindset of the Gryffindors, which was clearly justifying Harry's attempts to steal Zacharias' boyfriend even as they spoke.

"I'll come with you," he agreed calmly.

"No, oh no, you needn't," Harry said. "You wake up the other Hufflepuffs."

Zacharias got up and knocked briskly on Ernie's bedpost.

"Doom! The end is nigh! The Dark Lord has attacked! To the root cellar!" shouted Ernie, as he did every morning.

"Justin, I'm getting changed," Zacharias said calmly.

Justin sat bolt upright, quivering like a pointer yearning for the open fields.

"They'll wake the others," Zacharias said amiably. "Shall we go?"

Harry's eyes were narrowed.

They went to the Slytherin rooms in silence. Zacharias led the way into Draco's private room, which, bless his scheming little heart, he had bribed his way into on the second day of first year.

He placidly let Harry jerk open the curtains, and only allowed himself a small smile when a crossbow was pointed at Harry's face.

Harry went cross-eyed.

Draco opened his eyes, looked irritable and tried to smooth back his ruffled hair. "Zacharias," he said, and smiled. Then his face reverted into its habitual scowl. "Why did you bring Potter with you?"

Zacharias leaned against the bedpost.

"He's not a love gift. He's here to be our fearless leader and take us off to spy."

"Coming into my bedroom to take me on a noble mission," Draco sniffed. "Fine boyfriend you are."

Zacharias shrugged. "I'm willing to take suggestions."

Draco looked mollified. "That is as it should be. Excuse me, I need to get my hair in order."

He began rummaging under his covers, and produced his ivory-handled brush, his hair gel, his lavender oil, his scented hair perfume and his curler.

"You keep hair care products in your bed?" Harry asked incredulously.

Draco's tone was very cool. "Did you have a point, Potter?"

"No, no," Harry said hastily. "So, you keep a crossbow under your pillow. In case of invasion? Maybe I should do that."

"He just keeps it under there to shoot the house elves when they're late with his morning coffee," Zacharias said casually.

"What!"

Zacharias shrugged. "He only wings them."

"That's disgusting," Harry told Draco severely.

"Don't talk to me about disgusting," Draco sniffed. "You wear corduroy. Don't try to lie to me. I've seen it with my own eyes."

Harry's voice was shaking. "You think that common humanity is less important than sartorial choices?"

Draco looked blank. "Obviously."

Harry looked like he was searching for a detailed, vocal way to describe his outrage. Unfortunately, Gryffindors were not all that creative. He snarled and lunged at Draco.

Draco tried to brain him with his bottle of lavender oil.

A brief and intense struggle followed.

Two boys in pyjamas rolling around in furious heated combat, ending up wrestling on the bedclothes. Zacharias leaned against the bedpost some more and was aware of the brief, annoyed thought that it would have been nice if Harry Potter had turned out to be a Squib and gone to Eton, where he so clearly belonged.

Then he sat on the bed and smoothed a hand down the small of Draco's back.

"Draco," he said. "These are percale sheets. His blood will mess them up."

Draco stilled, and leaned back against him. "You're right, of course," he said. "You have the best priorities."

"I like to think so," Zacharias answered lightly, and kissed Draco on the back of the neck.

He put an arm casually around Draco, who looked rumpled and sleepy and a bit like an aggravated kitten. Draco sighed and leaned against his chest and Zacharias looked over Draco's shoulder at Harry Potter, who was lying back on Draco's pillows looking frustrated. He kissed the back of Draco's neck again.

Harry ground his teeth with audible squeaks.

"Why are you making those peculiar sounds, you demented little person?" Draco asked loftily.

"Thinking about Voldemort," Harry answered in a tight voice. "The way I do sometimes."

"Ah," said Zacharias, leaning his chin in the bare, pale hollow between Draco's neck and shoulder.

"Argh," said Harry. "Voldemort makes me furious."

"He's gone completely round the bend," Draco said in Zacharias' ear. "I wonder if I can be leader when he gets sent to St Mungo's."

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Eventually, all of them were assembled in their meeting place.

"Are you all ready to face the Dark Lord?" Harry asked, with that ominous look Zacharias thought he practised in the mirror.

Ginny tipped back her head, trailing her hands sensuously up her body. "Oh yes, Harry," she murmured huskily, and cupped her breasts. "I'm so ready..."

"Excellent," said Harry in an absent-minded sort of way, and returned to his plan of operations.

Zacharias and Draco were talking idly under their breath.

"Right, so you're Switzerland," Draco was calculating in an interested way. "And I suppose Potter would be England."

"So if Harry's England, then Hermione is Wales, and Ron is Scotland," Zacharias deduced.

"But this school is-" Draco said, and squawked with horror. "Agh! I'm in Ron Weasley!"

Ron's head jerked up.

"What, he gets to join in as well?" Justin demanded. "Am I being purposely excluded?"

"Is this code?" Ernie asked.

Zacharias shrugged. Draco scowled at everyone. Clearly, the country game had been soured for him forever.

Ron was looking a little faint. Ernie's paper bag got passed down.

"So many shins to kick, so little time," Draco said darkly, and laced his fingers through Zacharias' instead.

Harry began to gnaw on his own wand.

Ginny Weasley spotted this and a sudden, disturbing light appeared in her eyes. As everyone else began to put on their Death Eater robes she wandered up to Draco and draped herself on his lap.

"I'm quite open for a three-way," she purred, licking her finger and dragging it down between

her breasts. "Anything for my man."

Draco wailed in horror.

"Zacharias, it's a Weasley! Get it off! Get it off! Surely there's some sort of vermin repellent?"

"Ginny," Zacharias said politely. "Would this be a good time for you to stop violating my boyfriend's person?"

Draco stood up, dislodging her.

"I don't care what anyone says," Ron said, staring levelly over Ginny's head, "she is my sweet little sister. She's just outgoing and vivacious."

Draco was trembling. "She's humping my leg!"

"Ginny, he really is taken."

"All right," Ginny said, thrusting energetically. "A four-way, then. I don't mind. You've got a sort of honey-blond calm thing going on. I get that."

"I'd rather not," Zacharias replied diplomatically.

"Stop *profaning my flesh*, Weasley," Draco said in a voice dangerously close to insanity.

Zacharias thoughtfully passed Draco a vase and he began to beat Ginny over the head with it.

Harry shook himself out of his clearly deep and gloomy thoughts. "Sorry, is Ginny doing something? I didn't really notice."

Zacharias shrugged.

*

They approached the lair of the Dark Lord, which was exactly where Snape and Draco had said it would be.

Apparently, everybody else was actually *surprised* to find out it was under a fast food restaurant.

"Well, I don't even know what a McDonut's is," Draco defended himself. "How am I supposed to know it's evil?"

"McDonald's," Zacharias corrected.

They continued creeping towards the dark and dreadful entrance.

"I've been thinking about our relationship," Draco said conversationally, because the stealthy pace Harry had them going at was making the trip last an awfully long time.

"Is this the time?" Zacharias asked mildly.

"Don't question me, Hufflepuff!" Draco could be like that.

"Okay," Zacharias said.

"I think you should join Slytherin," Draco said. "That would make me happy. So you have to. This is how relationships work."

"No, I don't think I will," Zacharias said placidly.

"You can still be Switzerland. Just, like, Switzerland with ruder signs on the skiing slopes."

"No," Zacharias repeated.

"Zacharias, I don't like that word very much."

"I like being a Hufflepuff," Zacharias told him serenely.

Draco's face scrunched up. "*Why?*"

"I'm loyal," Zacharias answered.

"What to?"

Zacharias considered. "Me."

He had looked around, and found himself a very worthwhile object of allegiance.

"Isn't that just another way of saying you're selfish?"

Zacharias shrugged.

It was Draco's turn to consider. "I suppose that means we are fiendishly compatible," he said in a slightly happier voice.

"That's right," Zacharias replied. "Anyway, I'm Muggleborn."

Draco choked.

"Did I forget to tell you?" said Zacharias.

"Yes," said Draco. "You're supposed to be a slave!"

"All right," Zacharias agreed calmly. "I'll be your love slave."

Draco turned this over in his mind. "I suppose that would be acceptable," he said haughtily.

That was settled just in time, as they reached the entrance to the Dark Lord's lair at this point.

"Hail, fellow... tiny Death Eaters," said the doorman.

"Hail," Harry said. "Er... we are indeed very small, for fully adult Death Eaters... Because we are all bastard Slytherins, whose growth was stunted in the unhealthy dungeons, cut off from the sunlight. Embrace the shrimplike powers of darkness! Muahahaha."

The doorman stared at him. Draco covered his eyes in shame.

"Password," he grunted at last.

"I'll handle this, you *twit*," Draco said, pushing forward. "Ah, that is, brother twit in darkness." He turned to face the doorman and intoned, "Screw Harry Potter."

"Sideways."

"Backwards."

"And upside down," concluded the doorman, heartily. He and Draco locked pinky fingers and wagged them around. "Wif wif wif."

"Plib plib plib," Draco returned, in tones that suggested all the heart had been taken out of him.

"Pass, brothers," the doorman said, and then stopped Harry. "Hey... the scar on your forehead kind of looks like Harry Potter's."

"Er, what scar?" asked Harry, nervously twitching down the hood of his cloak.

"Here, take my card," said the doorman. "Call me anytime."

"You're a Death Eater!" Harry almost screamed. "Um, as am I," he added quickly.

"Well, yes," said the doorman. "I run a celebrity impersonator agency in my spare time."

They went into the large cave full of evil people. Zacharias could tell they were evil because of all the black, and also the fact that they were nibbling tiny bits of salmon on little sticks. Fishy behaviour.

"So far things seem to be going well," he observed.

He should have known better, he realised, when a man with a silver hand grabbed him and Draco and shoved them against a wall.

"Thank God you two are here. The regular boys have cancelled," he said.

"Oh no, not *again*," said Draco.

"You two are the only ones who fit the physical description! Perform your duty as loyal servants of the Dark Lord!" The man sniffled suddenly. "I'd do it myself, but last time my

lord shrieked extremest scorn at me, and had me kicked off."

"Oh, fine," Draco agreed, looking ill.

He took Zacharias' hand and began to lead him through the crowds.

"Who was that man?" Zacharias asked.

"Wormtail," Draco answered succinctly.

Zacharias paused for a speculative moment. "Why's he called Wormtail?"

"I... don't know," Draco answered slowly.

They shared a look of fear.

Then Draco scrambled onto a large, revolving silver platform, dragging Zacharias up with him. From there, Zacharias could see a large throne with red neon lights on the top, and a bald, red-eyed man sitting in it.

He was disappointed that Voldemort was not stroking a cat, but he had more important things on his mind.

"Draco," he said. "What's going on?"

"We have to dance," Draco explained distractedly, taking Zacharias' Death Eater robes off and then tackling his own. They were thankfully wearing jeans and T-shirts underneath.

"That's why the Dark Lord is so into racial purity, of course. To breed the pretty blond boys."

At this juncture, Voldemort began to cackle. This was clearly a signal, since the spotlight went on the platform.

Zacharias spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Voldemort wants pureblood blond slave boys who dance for him?"

"Sure." Draco looked puzzled. "Well, if you ruled the world, what would *you* want?"

"I don't want to rule the world. Hufflepuff, remember? Not much with the ambition."

"But..." Draco spluttered. "But it's the world!"

"What would I do with it?"

Draco's voice was plaintive. "Get tribute?"

"Eh. I can live without tribute."

"I wouldn't call it living," Draco sniffed. "Zacharias - do you, you know, *mind* shaking your booty for the Dark Lord?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

'Like a Virgin' began to play. Zacharias wondered exactly how horrible the torture was for discovered spies, and if it could be worse.

"What should we d-" he began, and then looked at Draco.

Draco was already shimmying.

"Oh."

"My father made me take lessons," Draco explained, rolling his hips in a really mildly interesting way. "He knew it would be required. Don't ask me how he knew. I like to repress that question."

He ran his hands through his hair, pure silver in the spotlight, and rolled his hips again.

In the crowd, Harry Potter was staring, and Ginny Weasley was taking notes.

Zacharias was not entirely sure how to proceed. This was an unfamiliar feeling for him.

Draco glanced over at him, and came to his rescue. He came over to Zacharias and began to rub against him. Zacharias rubbed back, and found some sort of rhythm.

He cheered up. Voldemort hired go-go boys. People killed him.

Draco was grinding against him, head thrown back, hands sliding down his own chest. He really did dance rather well.

Zacharias co-operated in the spy effort by replacing Draco's hands with his own. Draco's throat was white in the spotlight, and so Zacharias felt it would be a good tactical move to suck on it, and then Draco twisted and there was a rather blurry and heated period of dancing.

The song ended and Voldemort thumped his fist on his chair and cheered enthusiastically.

"These slave boys dance well. Give them extra kibble!" he exclaimed.

Wormtail helped them down. "That was brilliant," he whispered. "The master is very pleased. The grinding and the kissing was a stroke of genius."

"It just came to us," Zacharias said.

"I am a genius in the arts of love," Draco announced smugly, and then began to fix his hair.

Wormtail gave him a bitter look. "You remind me of a boy I knew once," he said. "Of course, he had black hair... black as ebony... black as midnight... 'I'm sorry, Peter, I just don't like you that way...' Bastard!"

"I'm sure," Zacharias told him. "We have to be not standing next to you anymore."

They sidled towards the others, who all gave them rather odd looks.

Justin could only whimper feebly and paw the front of their shirts. Draco scowled and batted him severely away.

"Aha," said Ernie. "So the Dark Lord wants to kidnap the Hufflepuffs and make them dance. Foul fiend!"

"Are you *sure* you want to be in Hufflepuff with these basket cases?" Draco asked, eyeing Ernie and Justin dubiously.

"They grow on you," Zacharias replied composedly. "Anyway, Susan is much more sensible, and young Reena is really quite attractive."

Draco looked indignant. "Nobody is attractive but me, Zacharias," he reminded him. "That is how relationships work."

Zacharias shrugged. "All right."

Harry Potter, who had been standing around with his eyes glazed over, seemed to snap out of it.

"Right then, well done, we penetrated the dark heart of the enemy's lair. Did we get information?"

"Absolutely," said Ginny, busy with her diagrams.

"Then follow me on our retreat," Harry said. "I also kicked the back of Voldemort's chair. Of course, I stubbed my toe. I hate him! He truly is evil!"

Zacharias was faintly appalled when he ended up spearheading the retreat with Harry Potter. Ah, well.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Harry said.

"I wasn't worried."

"Even though you hate me," Harry carried on obliviously.

"I don't hate you," Zacharias said. "I'm just not particularly impressed by you. You seem to defeat evil schemes adequately, but on a day to day basis you are not riveting."

"Ah, so you're my friend with a heart of gold under a rough exterior," Harry said.

"No," Zacharias said. "I am fairly indifferent towards you. Occasionally you annoy me and I say so. Usually, I could care less."

Harry looked perplexed. "I don't understand..."

"Indifference or ambivalence are attitudes that can also be adopted towards people, Harry."

"But, wait..." Harry frowned. "Do you hate me, thus making you evil, or do you like me, thus making you good? I didn't quite-"

Zacharias shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Potter. Let it go."

Zacharias attempted to slip back through the crowd to Draco, but ended up with Justin instead. Justin was frowning.

"Dancing with another chap is a little bit, you know, *homosexual*," he said in a worried voice.

"Well spotted, Justin."

"Especially, I think, with the, er, rubbing and kissing and licking and stuff."

"You make a valid point there," Zacharias agreed calmly.

"Zacharias, I think you're letting the side down a bit. That's not very old school tie of you, is it? I mean... don't want people saying you're light on your feet, know what I mean? A shirt lifter? A pillow biter? A sausage jockey?"

"I am rather light on my feet," Zacharias observed. "I've lost weight recently. Thanks for noticing."

Zacharias felt a hand slip into his back pocket.

"If you like," said Justin, "I could give you a few pointers on how to be, ah, manly..." He breathed against Zacharias' neck.

"I'd really rather not, Justin."

Justin removed his hand with a tragic expression. "I was attacked by a basilisk, you know," he said piteously. "I was *assaulted* by a *giant snake*."

"It's left its mark on you, Justin," Zacharias told him solemnly, and slipped further back into the crowd.

That was when all the lights went out.

"Oh no, we've been discovered!" Hermione cried.

"Oh, bugger," said another voice. "The power's out again. It's the revolving platform and the neon lights in His Dark Lordship's special chair that does it. Hang on, brothers of midnight. I'll have it working again in a jiffy."

"Zacharias," said Draco's familiar imperious voice. "That had better be you holding my hand."

Zacharias cleared his throat, his in-the-dark equivalent of a shrug. "Actually," he answered mildly, "it's not."

"Oh, *Justin*," Susan exclaimed in a despairing voice.

"What?" Justin demanded. "It's not me! This time I swear it's really not!"

Harry Potter's voice was uneven. "Don't lie, Justin. You evil - liar person."

The lights went back on. Harry Potter was a very respectable distance from Draco with his cheeks flushed.

Ernie sidled up to Zacharias. "I think it's an evil plot against the Hufflepuffs' love life," he said dramatically. "But who could be trying to steal away the pointy boy of your dreams?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

That night at headquarters, Harry made it clear that he was very disappointed in all of them.

"What do you mean, *none* of you got any helpful information?" he demanded. "And no, Ginny, your dance moves don't count, so please stop trying to show them to me." He patted her head absentmindedly. "Sweet of you to try and help, though," he added. "Good girl."

Ginny squirmed orgasmically under his hand, which he entirely failed to notice.

"Well, Harry, where's your information?" Hermione asked reasonably.

"I was distracted by something," Harry answered, and then went red. "I was thinking about the wrongs done me by Voldemort," he continued, getting steadily redder. "And craving vengeance. He makes me very angry."

Reminded of this, he lapsed into gloomy, furious silence. Hermione prudently kept her wand out of his reach.

Terry Boot leaned over to Zacharias.

"He looks so full of rage," he said in hushed tones.

Draco looked cross. "I think he looks constipated," he said in significantly less hushed tones.

Zacharias smiled at him. "Maybe he's enraged about his constipation," he suggested pacifically.

Draco smirked back.

Harry told them all how disappointed he was in them again, his wronged glance around the room reminding everyone that he was a justifiably very angry and incidentally orphaned boy.

Zacharias thought he might have some of the qualities of a more subtle Justin.

"I think I have to give another speech about the terrible things Voldemort does," he said, glancing around in a tortured fashion. "You people just don't seem to understand."

"Does it make you angry, Potter?" Draco asked, *sotto voce*.

He and Zacharias kept perfectly straight faces as Harry glared at them.

"Yes, I think I will give a speech," he said vengefully.

"I think I will have a little nap," Draco said philosophically. He yawned a tiny bit and curled up in his chair, resting his head against Zacharias' shoulder.

Zacharias leaned back as Draco got comfortable, and steadfastly avoided Justin's soulful look over his head. He absently began to stroke Draco's hair.

Harry spun and kicked the wall.

"Sorry," he said between clenched teeth. "It's Voldemort. Sometimes the rage overpowers me."

There was a chorus of sympathetic murmurs and nods.

"The rage overpowers you and you go on murderous sprees," Ernie put in. "Is that what you mean? Is this a confession?"

"Please, Ernie, behave," Susan said.

She turned around in her chair to face Zacharias as Harry Potter began to describe their abysmal, utter, total failure as spies.

"The side of light seems a little bit incompetent," she said ruefully.

"It's nice to know nothing changes," Zacharias nodded.

Susan looked upset. Draco made a little sound in his sleep and Susan's face softened.

"He really is rather sweet," she said. Zacharias wished that Draco could have heard that. It would have made him splutter. "Are you going to keep him?"

"I think perhaps I will," Zacharias told her.

"Aw," Susan said absently. "Mind you, I would've pegged Justin as that one of us."

Zacharias shrugged. "What are you going to do."

"As long as you're happy," said Susan.

She paused just then to examine Ernie's parchment, where he had written 'Conspiracy Theory

#2347 - Harry Potter has forbidden questions at the end of his speech. Hufflepuffs damned to silence?'

Zacharias considered Susan's unusual proposition. Happy?

Zacharias had always been quite reasonably content, the world amusing him in fairly equal proportions to the way it annoyed him. Draco was certainly a new factor in these equations, and amused him a lot.

Zacharias supposed he was more content than usual. Also, he suspected Susan was referring to something Zacharias had caught happening in himself irregularly when Draco smiled.

It was a sort of warm trickly feeling.

Susan turned back to him, and said anxiously, "You are happy, aren't you?"

Zacharias shrugged.

How the Badger Has Fallen

Zacharias was very amused when Hogwarts burned down.

At the time, of course, it was unsettling, what with the mass panic and everyone stampeding out of their rooms, Ernie shouting that the Dark Lord was trying to smoke the Hufflepuffs out. Once they were all standing out by the lake and watching the castle burn merrily, though, Zacharias started to see the funny side.

"What a shame this is, what a shame," Dumbledore said genially. "A great big fire. And me in a nightshirt without marshmallows in the pockets."

Zacharias considered hero worship for a bit, and then decided it was too much bother.

Justin had stared at Hogwarts for a long time, apparently lost in introspection. Zacharias had been mildly startled to see that he didn't even appear to notice that Terry Boot was wandering around in boxers. He just stared, and stared, and finally light seemed to dawn.

"You know what?" he said, as the fire exploded Gryffindor Tower. "I'm gay! I'm FLAMING!"

"What an amazing thing," Zacharias remarked.

"Do you want to go out with me, Ernie? Because I'm flaming, I am! I am totally ready for a committed homosexual relationship!"

Ernie peered at him suspiciously. "Is this code?"

Justin started to unbutton Ernie's pyjama top and Ernie jumped in horror.

"I know what's going on here!" he exclaimed. "You're the Dark Lord, Transfigured into Justin, trying to get close to me because I am the only one who knows the key to the top secret code!"

"Your house mates are weird," Draco complained, and rested his head on Zacharias' shoulder. "Oh, well. At least somebody burned down the rat hole at last. Though why they couldn't burn in down in daylight, which would have been far more convenient..."

"Arson is generally a bit tricky in broad daylight," Zacharias observed neutrally.

"Don't question me," Draco scowled. "We can both go to Durmstrang, now," he added thoughtfully.

"I'm still Muggleborn," Zacharias reminded him. "It's not a phase."

Draco smiled engagingly. "I thought of that," he said. "I'm going to buy you a collar and a chain, and you can be my slave boy. Nobody will mind."

Hermione had wandered up at this point, wringing her hands. Her hair was in curlers.

"Thousands of protective wards," she murmured, looking dazed. "Wasted. Complex, ingenious charms... I feel a little..."

Zacharias thoughtfully passed her Ernie's paper bag.

"Yes, who would have thought You Know Who would work out the complex mechanisms of gasoline and a lit match," he observed.

"Curlers," Draco said, distracted from the blaze. "So... Granger, the hair is deliberate?"

"Well... yes," Hermione answered, flustered. "I wanted everyone to think I was a natural beauty." She began to sob into Ernie's paper bag. "Now that's out, too!"

"A human being did that to their hair on purpose," Draco said. He looked very young and scared, suddenly. He looped an arm around Zacharias' waist and added tremulously, "Hold me."

Zacharias did. Justin ran past, and yelled, "More power to you, rainbow brethren!"

Harry Potter ambled up, scowling terrifically.

"You mocked me before," he told them both, his expression darkening further as he looked at them. "Now what do you have to say?"

"Don't make that face," Draco answered. "It'll stick that way."

"Now Voldemort has attacked my last refuge," Harry said, over-solemnly. "I swear he will pay for this."

"For Hogwarts? Let's hope he has insurance," Zacharias observed. It was, after all, a castle.

"My hands are cold," Draco grumbled. "My hands would not have been cold at Durmstrang, because their uniform has fur gloves. Woe on the substandard places of education, which do not nurture their students tenderly or fashionably. Can I put my hands under your pyjama shirt?"

Zacharias shrugged. "Put them wherever you like."

"I HATE VOLDEMORT," Harry said with sudden violence.

"*Really*, Potter," Draco said. "Medication. Look into it."

Justin wandered past again, and gave Zacharias a thumbs-up. Then he came to stand by Harry.

"Hi, Harry," he said. "I'm gay."

"I'm not *that* oblivious," Harry told him.

Justin smiled seductively. "How about it, big boy? You and me."

"I know the Dark Arts," Harry said, hastily producing his wand. "I'm not afraid to use them."

"Oh, I don't mind a spot of Imperius," Justin purred. "I'm kinky like that."

Harry backed up. "I don't know how yet," he said in a strangled voice, "but I know this is Voldemort's fault. And he *will* pay, the bastard!"

"I love it when you talk enraged to me," Justin told him.

Harry fled.

Draco looked at Justin with a new respect. "Who would have thought it," he said to Zacharias. "Hufflepuffs do have their uses."

Zacharias shrugged.

*

They all ended up being shipped home. Zacharias knocked on his front door at three in the morning.

"Hello, Mother," he said. "The school burned down. It was evil invaders. Also, I appear to be gay."

Ivy Smith shrugged. "I'll make coffee."

Zacharias had found his mother's eminently sensible attitude to life a great relief when they had been told he was a magical being who had to go to a school complete with robes and broomsticks.

She had commented that it would be a saving on school fees, and it was lucky that Zacharias did not have to wear a pointy hat, since he did not have the nose for it.

A Howler arrived from Draco at six.

'ZACHARIAS, WHERE ARE MY DOZEN ROSES? WHERE ARE MY SCENTED MISSIVES TELLING ME THAT YOU CANNOT LIVE ANOTHER DAY WITHOUT ME? WHY HAVE YOU NOT CONTACTED ME YET? WHY DO YOU LEAVE ME HERE NEGLECTED TO DIE? YOU MUST PINE FOR MY PRESENCE AND REFUSE FOOD UNTIL NEXT YOU BEHOLD MY FACE! THIS IS WHAT RELATIONSHIPS ARE ABOUT!'

Zacharias shrugged and continued to eat his cereal. It was nice to know Draco was thinking of him.

"Is this the boyfriend, then?" his mother asked. "Good pair of lungs on him. Perhaps a little demanding but then, it's important to know what you want in a relationship. Your father and I

fell apart because he could never give me what I wanted."

"Yes, mother," said Zacharias, "but what you wanted was sex with women."

"Well, he never gave me that," his mother said. "I was forced to go outside the relationship to get what I needed. He never understood that."

"Yes, mother," said Zacharias. "If only my father had been able to provide lesbian sex, you would still be together today."

Ivy shrugged. "Well, I don't know. He also insisted on reading the T.V. Guide first."

The next Howler from Draco arrived at seven.

'ZACHARIAS, WHY DID YOU NOT RESPOND TO MY LAST? THIS COLDHEARTED ABANDONMENT WOUNDS ME! I MUST BE PLACATED WITH MANY EXPENSIVE GIFTS! MY HAIR IS STANDING ON END! SOMEONE WILL PAY!'

"Is he that loud during your little encounters?" Ivy inquired. "How embarrassing that must be. I understood you lived in dormitories."

Zacharias shrugged. "He had a private room."

"Ah. That's all right then."

The next Howler arrived at seven-thirty. Draco's patience was clearly wearing thin.

'HAVING LISTENED TO SEVERAL MUGGLE SONGS BECAUSE I WAS ASSURED THAT WAS THE CORRECT BEHAVIOUR FOR A DESERTED PARTNER, I HAVE THIS TO SAY: WHY YOU GOT TO HURT ME THIS WAY, BABY? ALSO, MY MOTHER HAS FALLEN TO PIECES SINCE MY FATHER WAS IMPRISONED. SHE CLAIMS TO HAVE NO FRENCH SHAMPOO IN STOCK. SHE HAS CLEARLY COMPLETELY LET GO OF REASON. I AM TRAPPED IN HELL WITH A RAVING WOMAN. WHERE IS YOUR HEART, ZACHARIAS?'

Attached to the owl's other leg was a reply form with the 'Please Reply' scratched out and replaced with 'You'd better reply Zacharias, reply right now Zacharias, you are in so much trouble if you do not Respond Immediately Zacharias!'

"I think perhaps your boyfriend wants to you to write to him," said Ivy.

Zacharias shrugged. "I suppose so."

Zacharias wrote back *'Dear Draco, Nice to hear from you. You seem lonely. Would you like to come and stay?'*

Draco's Howler arrived at seven-forty-five.

'LONELY? I AM NOT LONELY, ZACHARIAS. I DO NOT GET LONELY. I HAVE DOZENS OF FRIENDS, ADMIRERS AND WELL-WISHERS. DO NOT INSULT ME!'

HOWEVER, SINCE YOU ARE CLEARLY PINING FOR ME AND YOUR LIFE IS AS UNTO A BARREN DESERT WITHOUT MY SWEET SMILE, I SHALL BE PERSUADED TO EASE YOUR GREAT SUFFERING AND GRACE YOUR HUMBLE ABODE. BUY FRENCH SHAMPOO OR FACE MY WRATH!

Draco arrived in Zacharias' fireplace at eight.

"I was expecting you sooner," Zacharias said, helping him out, brushing the coal dust off his cloak and giving him a kiss.

"I had things to do," Draco answered with dignity. "I assume you missed me."

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Zacharias thought his mother was rather amused by Draco too.

"He isn't as good as Ernest, though," she remarked, rather wistfully.

Ernie had come over to stay for a week last summer. Ivy and Zacharias had been woken up every morning with two short raps, followed by the sound of a hippopotamus in the wilderness, and then finishing with a scream of 'Oh my God it's attacking me the Dark Lord has sent a robot to destroy me what is this foul thing you call a toaster?'

Zacharias shrugged.

Draco watched very carefully as Zacharias' mother made them lasagne, and Zacharias thought this was rather sweet.

Then it emerged that Draco thought that you could mix up any mess of completely stupid things, put them in the magical box and produce whatever you wished for. He applied this creative logic while Zacharias and his mother were out. He filled one tin with washing up liquid, spaghetti sauce and cheese to get French shampoo, and another with lettuce, crisps, shoe polish and marmalade because he felt like cake.

They came in at about the time the oven door flew open and spewed thick, strange-smelling bubbles. Draco Malfoy was deposited in a wave to their feet.

He looked up through wet, silvery, bubble-threaded bangs and scowled at them hideously.

"Did you two know you shrug in tandem?" he demanded.

Zacharias and Ivy shrugged.

"I shall make a cup of tea," Ivy said, keeping a weather eye on Draco. When Ernie had first seen a kettle, he had shouted 'To me, comrades! Hut hut hut!' and hit it violently. Draco merely looked at it balefully.

He seemed disillusioned with technology until that night, when Zacharias showed him the

television. He was enchanted, and carried out little unconscious mimicry of the characters.

They all watched a movie where a woman died tragically of cancer while her children and past lovers wept around her.

"Ha," said Draco. "This is *hysterical*. Could they be more cheap and obvious about trying to make me cry? People kill me."

Zacharias' mother looked faintly pleased. "I see why you like him," she observed.

"I should have hoped that it was obvious from the first sight of my beautiful face," Draco said.

"We have certain things in common," Zacharias told her neutrally, and put his arm around Draco. Draco curled up around him and fell asleep.

Draco almost immediately co-opted every item of clothing in Zacharias' closet that he fancied, and was very upset that there were no house elves to have them adjusted to his satisfaction. He wandered around, thinner and more slightly built than Zacharias, with his collars exposing a little too much of his collarbone and his jeans slipping to show pale sections of hip. He also wandered around looking sulky because of the sheer imperfection of his attire.

Zacharias considered that it was not a bad look on him.

He forced them to buy different curtains. Both of them went along with it, amused enough to let him have his way.

On the last day before their return to Hogwarts, Draco said, "Have I been awful?"

"Very," Zacharias answered. "But you always are."

Draco sat up, pushing his hair out of his eyes. He was careless about it, so Zacharias thought he might be rather serious.

"But you'd much rather have me here being awful than not."

Zacharias noted the slight hesitation in the imperious statement. Zacharias shrugged. "Probably."

Draco looked discontented, said, "And you never *did* buy French shampoo either" and went to sleep. He was curled up on top of the bedcovers with his hair getting rumpled the way he did not like it to.

Zacharias fetched another blanket and tucked it around him, and lay on the bed with his hand in the small of Draco's back. He rubbed it now and then when Draco stirred.

His mother came up, and stood in the doorway. "So it's like that then," she said.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Draco was outraged when they returned to the building site that used to be Hogwarts, and found out that while it was being rebuilt they had to eat and sleep in portacabins.

"I'll grow mould," he threatened darkly. "I'll grow mould on my *face*. I asked That Pomfrey Woman for face cream but she said she was working out of a First Aid kit and it wasn't an emergency."

Zacharias shrugged. "That is upsetting."

Their whole year had to eat meals on an enormous rug outside their portacabins. Zacharias thought this was a rather amusing prospect, and had been quite content with Draco's insistence on leaning against his chest in place of a chair back.

He thought there was little need for Harry Potter to sit quite so close, but he was basically unruffled. It was impractical to commit lustful assault in front of witnesses.

Draco frowned and glared into the distance. "I *hate* the Dark Lord," he announced.

Harry gazed at Draco in a manner that reminded Zacharias of an ice-cream in a microwave.

"I love you," he said.

"And then I asked Professor Snape, but he said we were sent into this world to suffer and anyway he had gone thirty years without hygienic products and it was high time for me to start," Draco continued woefully, and then squinted at Harry. "Did you say something, Potter?"

"I love yams," said Harry. "They're an... American thing... kind of, you know. Sweet potatoes. I wish I had some right now."

Draco glared at him. "That's right, Potter," he snapped. "We are living in cardboard shacks, there is a leak over my bed and my skin is in dire straits. And you sit here yammering about carbohydrates. Fine hero you are."

Zacharias noted that Harry looked like a kicked, although still slightly rabid, puppy. Zacharias had never been overly fond of dogs.

Of course, Zacharias had never been overly fond of anything much.

"I was thinking, Malfoy," he began tentatively.

"A likely story," Draco snapped.

"Since we're on the same side and all, this rivalry seems a little silly," Harry continued laboriously.

"Oh silly, am I? Not even worth bothering about in the enemy stakes, I suppose," Draco said,

narrowing his eyes. "Fine. I don't care. You can say what you want, but I for one am not abandoning tradition with rapid and callous cruelty. I STILL HATE YOU, Potter. And I always will!"

"I just thought it would be nice if we could get along-"

"Yes, yes, any excuse to break it off, obviously!"

"It was just a little juvenile-"

"Clearly I mean nothing to you!" Draco's mouth curled. "I wasted the best vitriol of my life on you, Potter."

"But-"

He gestured dramatically. "No! No words! Nothing you say can make a difference! I understand what you want - and now get off my picnic rug!"

"Come sit by me, Harry," Justin cooed.

Harry bit down on his fork.

"You look a little put out," Zacharias said, not looking all that put out about it.

"Thinking about Voldemort," Harry said indistinctly.

"Potter is a giant obsessed freak," Draco told Zacharias as they walked around the lake afterwards, holding hands. "I think he's fixated, you know."

"Do you?" Zacharias said in the most noncommittal of tones.

"Please. He practically has a *crush* on Voldemort," Draco sneered. "I'm telling you, Zacharias. My father and now Potter. I don't want to face it, but the Dark Lord obviously has sex appeal."

"Power is an aphrodisiac," Zacharias agreed.

At that point, Justin wandered by and tried to get them to buy badges for the Gay and Lesbian Society of Hogwarts. He had cut his shirt so his midriff showed, and was wearing cut-off shirts and a rainbow bandanna around his forehead.

"Has anybody joined?" Draco asked disdainfully.

"A surprising amount of people," Justin said, looking thrilled. "I showed the badges to Hermione Granger and she agreed to join... er, without asking me what they were for... and er, Mr. Filch and Professor Snape, but they pinned their badges into their flesh.... And Harry Potter," he added. "And then Colin Creevey immediately afterwards."

"Be off with you," Draco said sharply. "I will not touch your Hufflepuffian wares."

Justin shimmied in his roller skates. "Oooh, Draco, you're so masterful."

Draco tilted his head to share a God-aren't-the-rest-of-the-world-just-kind-of-*plebeian* smile with Zacharias, but Zacharias was thinking of Harry Potter and Draco at lunchtime.

"Is something the matter?" said Draco.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

"Zacharias."

"Yes?"

"I think you should write me a sonnet."

Zacharias considered this interesting proposition. "No, I don't think I'm the sonnet type."

"I think my beauty should be immortalised in verse," Draco said.

Zacharias shrugged. "Pay someone to do it."

Draco's smile was only small. "I suppose that's the sensible thing to do," he said. He stabbed at something on his plate, and then tried to lift it out. "Oh my God, it's a worm," he exclaimed. "Insects are crawling on and off our plates. If we have magic, why are we living like savages, like apes, like *Professor Hagrid*?"

"It's full of protein," Zacharias observed mildly.

"I'm going to get sick."

"Maybe not if you eat the protein."

"He doesn't need to. Doesn't get his protein off plates, eh?" Justin grinned, and began to mug.

Draco looked completely scandalised, and gave Justin a withering look. Justin, however, was busy talking to Colin Creevey about his photo collection.

Draco abandoned his plate and leaned against Zacharias' shoulder. Zacharias continued to eat.

"Well, I thought a collage of someone heroic would be a fine bedroom decoration," Colin explained gravely. "But, obviously for verisimilitude I had to depict every part of Harry's life, and I think he's a little camera shy. I fixed it, though. I set up self-taking cameras in his dormitory, and the Quidditch changing rooms, and the showers-"

"I can see you're just the man for me," Justin said. "Show me your collages, you tiger."

Colin looked pleased. "They have borders."

"Oooh, you naughty thing! So, Colin, do you have a boyfriend?"

Colin seemed taken aback. "Oh, I just wanted to have a badge like Harry Potter! I'm not gay. My father's a milkman, you know. Dairy products are a very manly line of trade."

Justin sighed. "You're insulting the whole world with your denial of your true self, you know."

"I'm not gay!" Colin squawked. "I'm a dairy man!"

"Your room is covered with naked Harry Potter!"

"Only the left wall!"

Harry Potter began to gnaw on his fork, but Hermione took it away from him.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. "I'm just angry. Thinking about Voldemort."

"Yes, Harry," she said. "But we're getting worried. Ron says there are teeth marks all over the new dormitory furniture."

"Probably Voldemort," Harry replied, his expression shifty. "He is evil, and bent on destruction."

"Of bedposts?"

"Don't ask me to fathom his dark mind."

"Right on, Comrade Potter," said Ernie. "The bedposts are clearly part of a deeper plan. Possibly a warm-up for the bones of Hufflepuffs!"

Harry glowered at Zacharias. "Possibly."

Draco bristled. "Don't you dare threaten my boyfriend, Potter."

The word boyfriend seemed to lift Harry to new heights of rage.

"You know what you are, Draco?" demanded the Boy Who Loathed. "You're a splinter!"

Draco sniffed. "How many devastatingly handsome splinters have you met recently?"

"You're a splinter," spat Harry. "You get under people's skin and you nag and you itch and you poison their blood and you irritate them until they want to claw you out. You're absolutely impossible and *you make me furious!*"

"So does marzipan," Draco pointed out.

But he looked taken aback, Zacharias noticed, his eyelashes down to conceal the fact he was thinking.

It was not a factor in Zacharias' equation, but for some reason he noticed that Draco's eyelashes were almost invisible against his skin, just a gleam rather than a contrast.

"Don't get worked up, Harry," said Susan. "We have things to do, you know."

Harry looked irate. "And what do Hufflepuffs do? Exactly?"

"Nothing important," Zacharias said calmly, shrugging. "They never do anything important. Even Cedric Diggory didn't do anything important. They just mark the way with little tasks, pile up a hundred little boring jobs with no glory which nobody else ever wanted to do, and in the end after all the small things the Hufflepuffs tried the hero can triumph."

It was another small thing when Draco took his hand.

"Hey," he said. "You still adore me even though I never want to do anything boring, right?"

Zacharias shrugged.

Draco looked over his shoulder at Harry, who was glaring with heated rage at a small bug crawling on the picnic blanket. Apparently something about it offended him. Possibly it reminded him of Voldemort.

"Do you think Potter meant all that?" he asked carefully, a small wedge of distance in his voice.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

The rebuilding of Hogwarts was carried on at night, so everyone could fall asleep to the soothing grind of moving stones and the conviction that Dumbledore was setting everything to rights.

Of course, in the Hufflepuff portacabin dorms Ernie woke everyone up hourly with a scream of 'They are using the noise to tunnel through the floors! Quickly! Everyone stand on their bed with their chests raised over their heads for as long as it takes and we will foil their plan, win victory and have impressive biceps!'

In between those hours, everyone got a chance to say, 'No Justin, go to your *own* bed!'

Amusing as this was, Zacharias had a slight headache, so he went outside for a bit of night air.

Stones were flying nimbly in the air, skipping about like granite swallows on crack cocaine. Dumbledore sat in front of them with a bag of cheese puffs, watching them genially.

He didn't have his wand out. Zacharias wondered if he was using the cheese puffs as a substitute.

Then he looked at the stones more closely.

"The house elves are doing it," he said, with mild surprise.

"Bless them," said Dumbledore. "They feel so lost and forlorn without their kitchen."

"But everybody thinks you're slaving through the night to rebuild-" Zacharias stopped midsentence, and settled for gazing at Dumbledore with the faint stirrings of what felt like awe.

"Bright lad. Cheese puff?" Dumbledore asked. "Do you have something to say about that?"

"No, sir. I just think you're sort of cool."

"Ravenclaw, are you?"

"Hufflepuff, sir."

"Ah," said Dumbledore. "Well, never mind. Good lad."

"I don't mind," Zacharias said. "Hufflepuffs have low expectations. Strategically, that's a good move. It means we are never disappointed and rarely surprised."

"Seems like you've given the place of Hufflepuff some thought."

"I like to have an unusual hobby," Zacharias agreed placidly.

Dumbledore nodded. "And what is it at present that you have low expectations of, lad?"

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Zacharias did not talk to Draco the next morning. He was waiting for Draco to speak to someone else.

Harry frowned at the picnic blanket. Draco noticed.

"Maybe you could defeat it instead of the Dark Lord," Draco told him, faux sympathetic. "I think it might be more your speed."

"Maybe if you spent less time whining about French conditioner for your stupid hair you might be of some use to the D.A.," Harry snapped. "Your hair isn't even that nice."

"!!!" said Draco, which Zacharias had always vaguely thought of as 'their' sound.

Harry had insulted the hair. Zacharias watched with a certain sense of inevitability as Draco flung himself at him and they began to fight.

It would of course be faintly ludicrous to say something like 'Get your hand off your wand and step away from my boyfriend.'

They rolled around for a bit.

"Can you *believe* that vicious, blasphemous freak?" Draco asked afterwards, his eyes glittering.

Zacharias shrugged. He thought it was the wisest move.

"Zacharias," Draco said, in a lower voice, and tilted his head to one side. Zacharias was not entirely sure what he wanted, but his face looked appealing.

"What do you want?"

"Sonnets, French shampoo, to be waited on hand and foot and to be the ruler of the world, but you don't have to arrange that last one."

"That's good, I have Potions homework."

Draco laughed and Zacharias did not. He was not feeling particularly like it.

"What is it?" said Draco.

Zacharias shrugged. "I'm not all that amused."

"I thought you were amused by everything," Draco pointed out. "I thought you only *liked* things you were amused by."

"Well."

Draco was biting down on his lip, and probably thinking about passion.

"I'll talk to you later," he said.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

Draco continued to have fights with Harry Potter on the picnic rugs. And in the classrooms. Once Draco was aggravated to such an extent that he kicked a hole in the portacabin wall and got his foot stuck in there.

Professor Binns blinked at it.

"My," he said. "How remarkable. It reminds me of the Half-Ghost Incident of 1854... cease squawking, foot, and take out your quills as I begin dictation, children."

Zacharias was aware, in a more detached sort of way than usual, that it was all most amusing.

It happened on Wednesday. Draco came storming into the Hufflepuff dorm room.

"Speak the password, friend, and enter!" Ernie declaimed.

"Buzz off, you freakish twerp," said Draco. "*Zacharias*. Harry Potter kissed me!"

Zacharias noticed he'd used Harry's first name. Eton always burst into flames in the end.

"Did he," he said.

"Yes, we were fighting and then he pinned me down - temporary thing, it was a strategy really, I was just about to employ my fiendish plan and vanquish him totally - and then he said 'You'll get what's coming to you' and then he *put his tongue in my mouth*," Draco exclaimed.

"Don't sound so shocked," Justin said. "Homophobe. You think you can oppress us, but we're here, we're queer, we get drunk on Butterbeer! You're never going to keep us down!"

"Did you like it?"

Draco looked at him in horror. "Aren't you upset?"

Zacharias noticed that that was not a negative. "Do you want him to do it again?"

"Do I want to *cheat* on you?" Draco demanded.

"I know you're familiar with the concept, Draco," Zacharias reminded him, and tried to share a smile. "I see you do it in Quidditch all the time."

"Why aren't you upset?" Draco asked furiously. "What, am I not *amusing* any more? Oh, it figures that I would find the one Hufflepuff in all the world with a superiority complex."

Zacharias thought about the fiendish compatibility, but Draco had not shared the last smile. He shrugged instead.

"Why don't you hit Potter? Why don't you ask me not to leave you, why don't you do something? What do you want to do?" Draco shouted, and his voice was imperious and quavering at once.

Zacharias shrugged. "What do you want to do, Draco?"

Privately, he thought Draco's "To hell with you and all bloody Hufflepuffs" was terribly melodramatic.

As he slammed out, he wondered why he was not amused.

"Did you two just break up?" Justin asked in a subdued voice.

Zacharias shrugged.

*

It was two minutes later that Justin fell on his knees.

"Zacharias!" he said. "I have always loved you, and I know that you have always loved me!"

"No, not so much," Zacharias answered.

Justin waved it aside. "Denial."

Zacharias felt obliged to point out, "Boyfriend."

"Doesn't count," Justin said firmly. "Very girly hair. Let me lead you out of the closet, Zacharias, to embrace a world of sticky boy on boy love."

"This is code, isn't it," Ernie said with conviction.

"I will wed thee, Zacharias," said Justin. "I've been reading. We can do it in Las Vegas. There's an Elvis chapel."

Ernie went off to fetch his translation book.

"I'll even look into the male pregnancy spell for you, Zacharias. I mean, for me. Not for you. That would be a crime. You svelte, saucy piece of manhood, you."

Zacharias noted all possible means of escape from the portacabin. In a pinch, the walls would crumble.

"I hear that has side effects on the morning sickness," he remarked neutrally. "Causing people to vomit for miles around."

"For you I would cause untold suffering to innocent strangers!"

"That's sweet."

Zacharias wished Draco was here to exchange a snicker.

"So, fair Zacharias, wilt thou be mine?"

"On the whole, Justin, I think not."

Justin got up from his knees, looking disappointed. "But it was a very *gay* proposal at least," he said hopefully.

"I can safely tell you it is the very gayest proposal I have ever received."

Zacharias saw Harry and Draco arguing in the corridors three days later. He saw the shouting, and the flushed faces, and the way Harry pinned Draco to the wall and slipped his tongue into his mouth. The way Draco let him.

In the end after all the small things the Hufflepuffs tried the hero can triumph.

He went back to the Hufflepuff common room, and sat down. Susan came over and leaned against him. Justin leaped over eagerly.

"Does my man need a cuddle?"

"Really, Justin. Unwanted touches," Zacharias said mildly.

Susan's voice was quiet. "Are you very upset, Zacharias?"

Zacharias wondered if that was what that was, that slightly emptier place that made things less amusing.

Zacharias shrugged.

Finis

Dark Side of Light

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks-is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.
Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.*

*Part 1: *soft sound of a door opening**

“Well, well.”

“Shut up, Malfoy.”

“My, my. Fancy seeing you here.”

“Shut up.”

“But I get so little company these days. Absolutely none, in fact. Which brings me back to the main point - what’s a boy like you doing in a neighbourhood like this? Is it some kind of outreach programme?”

“Careful, Malfoy. You sound like a Muggle.”

“Do I.” *soft laughter* “Can’t be having with that, can we?”

silence

“You’re... clean. And you haven’t got a beard.”

“Oh, it’s part of the new reforms. We all get soap and water and a razor. So humane. And of course, the suicide rate went through the roof. It’s the sort of thing that makes the tax payers feel all fuzzy and warm inside.”

grimly “Hearing about Crabbe and that razor made me feel a little warm, I have to admit.”

silence

“Get out.”

“... What?”

“I mean it. This may be a prison cell, but it’s *my* prison cell. Get the hell out!”

“Don’t you dare take a righteous tone with me. I saw what he did to the Browns!”

“He was obeying orders. He was too stupid to do anything else. He always had to follow somebody. It was his nature, and he was my friend.”

“And I suppose it was your nature, too.”

“Certainly. Law of the jungle. As long as you don’t think it was my stupidity.”

“... I hate you, Malfoy. I always did.”

“And yet you’re here. Why is that, again?”

“... I saw you being arrested.”

“Funnily enough, I caught that too.”

“There were a lot of Death Eaters in there with those children. Some of them killed the children as soon as the Aurors came in. And you - gave the order for the Death Eaters to drop their wands.” *pause* “Why?”

shrug “We were nicked. Seemed a bit pointless, really.” *knife-bright smile* “Also, I thought that it would weigh in my favour come sentencing time.”

“You didn’t... Oh. Of course you did.”

“God, Potter, imagining some kind of noble act in me is a bit too stupid, even for you. You never did that at school. Hit by too many Stunning Spells during the war?”

“I didn’t think - I just wondered. The others cursed and fought. You were so quiet.”

uncomfortable shift in the chair “You seemed almost relieved.”

“You’re naïve, Potter. You always were.”

“Not any more.” *small frown* “Since when do you say ‘nicked,’ anyway? You always used to strut around airing your sophisticated and extensive vocabulary.”

“Don’t take up mimicry as a career.” *pause* “It’s expected of me. I am an old lag, after all. I might as well act the part.” *another pause* “Guv’nor.”

“*What?*”

“D’you have a cigarette?”

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Oh, I don’t. But I think it would be an appropriate habit, don’t you? I could lean against a wall, take a drag, maybe bribe the prison guard with my ciggies.”

“The prison guards are Dementors.”

“Just because they like to suck out souls doesn’t mean that they don’t like to suck in a lungful of joyfully poisonous tobacco.”

“This isn’t a game, Malfoy.”

“I know that. I ran out of spiders to torment weeks ago. I’m off my game, Potter. I’m bored. I want to cultivate a whole new vice.”

pause “You’re... not mad.”

“Well spotted.”

“Why not?”

“Well, there are fewer Dementors than before, you know. Your lot killed quite a few of them. Hence, much better conditions for the evil Death Eaters you were fighting against than in the days of yore. Irony’s ironic like that.”

“Even one Dementor... They suck out all your happy thoughts.”

“I know. Quite homey, really.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? You just came here to hear talk. It doesn’t matter what I’m saying.”

“You think - I came here for *company*? I could get better company anywhere!”

“Maybe, maybe not. Not too many of our old schoolmates left, are there? Let me see. Longbottom, dead, Finnigan, dead, Thomas, dead, Weasley, dead... In fact, come to think of it, I don’t think many of the Weasleys are available for comment of late...”

savagely “Shut your mouth.”

“What about Granger, now? Oh, that’s sad, she isn’t doing much talking either. Comatose, isn’t she? For six months now. The mediwizards can’t do anything. Doesn’t look good at all...”

“Fucking well shut up!”

“Oh, it feels different now you’re on the receiving end, does it?”

“What’s *different*, Malfoy, is that we were right and you were wrong, you’re *evil*, and don’t you dare say their names!”

“You were right and I was wrong. I see. Those are easy words for the winners to throw around. The way I see it, you’re free and I’m not. Paying my debt. It’s all even now. And you came here to talk to me.”

pause

“It’s not even. It will never, ever be even.”

“Spare me the wounded hero routine, Potter. You’re already taking up half of my cell, I don’t need any more pain.”

“Taking up...?”

“During visiting hours, bars fall to bisect the cell of prisoners. Can’t have a repeat of the Crouch incident, can we? But nor can we deprive people of their visiting rights. That wouldn’t be quite - quite sporting, would it? There’s another of those delicious ironies.”

stonily “What is?”

“You people fought for - oh, what was it that was promised? - a better world. And you had to fight Fudge every inch of the way, and finally forcibly depose him. Now who rules over that bright, shining new world? Camden Fudge, the younger brother. Looks like Dumbledore’s promises didn’t quite work out, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t you dare say his name! Not his.”

“Still loyal, Potter? Even though every day you look around at the dead, look at the shoddy way the world is being patched up, and you think this is what you fought for, for a senile old man’s lies-”

“I fought to stop people like you! Voldemort was cutting a swathe through the world, nobody was safe, and you either had to plunge into the blood and darkness or fight against it, and what you chose was what you are, and you can never change that. Yeah. I’m still loyal, even though there doesn’t seem to be anything left to be loyal to. And you’re still a murderer.”
scrape of a chair “I’m leaving. And I won’t be back.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

*

*Part 2: *soft sound of a door opening**

croaking voice “Hello, Potter.”

“Er... hello, lump of talking bedclothes.”

shift of bedclothes “I do not find you amusing. I am about to perish. Have you no decency, Potter? A fallen and imprisoned enemy, bound to his bed of pain. And here you are to mock me. Shame on you.”

“I didn’t know you were sick! What do you take me for?”

“I don’t know. I depend on feminine intuition to make my character judgements. I’d better ask my girlfriend Pansy. Oh, wait just a second...”

coldly “Don’t bother trying to make me feel guilty.”

“Why should you feel guilty about her? She was only one of thousands.”

“I did what I had to do. And don’t act as if you haven’t done worse, as if you didn’t *choose* worse.”

“Oh, of course. You killed because you had to, you were forced into it, the cruel hand of circumstance manipulated you down that path. And I decided, very calmly and callously, to take the path that would work out best for me. And yet somehow I ended up behind bars. Don’t talk to me about choice, and don’t play the victim.”

“I wasn’t the one who brought the war up.”

“I know.” *pause* “Sometimes it feels as if the war is all there ever was. All there ever will be - for me. Now.”

sigh “For me, too.”

strained voice “Don’t be stupid, Potter. You’re not rotting in prison.”

“No. No. But everyone I love is dead - or - or dying. I’m unemployable because I’m too famous, the government won’t even let me help out because they say my image - the things I did during the war, the things that *won* the war - aren’t compatible with their new *style*. You were right about that much, at least.”

sound of a head falling back on a pillow “Right about what?”

“This isn’t the world I fought for. It isn’t what I dreamed of - it’s nowhere I want to build a new life.”

“Potter.”

“What?”

“I know I can trust you to believe I’m not saying this out of any kind of altruistic concern.”

“What, Malfoy?”

“Sod the world and its multiple imperfections. It annoys me to see anyone being so irrationally and stupidly unhappy. Go pick a cutie out from among your screaming fans and have a few revolting little brats.”

“Marry someone who’ll only like me because I’m famous. That’s - disgusting. That’s - so *like you*, Malfoy.”

“Why, thank you.”

“I’ve had real affection. I’m not planning to settle.”

“Ah. Then you have another exciting option.”

“What is it?”

“Live all alone forever, become the slightly crazy old man who tells the kiddies war stories and has dried spit on his chin, and then die and have your owls peck out your eyes.”

pause

“Has anyone ever told you that your words are like cheering sunshine?”

“Not in those precise words, no.”

“I cannot imagine why not.”

conversationally “I have been told that my voice is like sex poured onto hot waffles, though.”

“I don’t think what you tell the mirror counts.”

“Push off, Potter. I’m sick.”

“What do you have?”

“The flu. I caught it. Don’t ask me how. There’s an ogre in the cell to my left and a troll to the cell on my right, I have no method of human communication, and somehow I managed to catch the flu. I presume this is Life.”

“I’m sorry if I gave it to you.”

“Not half as sorry as you’re going to be.” *pleasantly* “If you gave this to me, I do not care how long it takes, somehow I will work out an intricate plan and bring about your downfall. Then I will paint obscene graffiti on my cell wall with your blood.”

“I’m terrified.”

pause

“Why are you here, Potter?”

“Why? Do you mind?”

exaggerated sigh “Yes, Potter. I mind desperately. All my adoring followers are forming an obstreperous queue outside my cell. You are sending their whole schedule to hell in a hobgoblin’s handcart. Begone, it’s not like you’re the only human company I’ve seen in three months and I can’t afford to be choosy about my companions.”

“... Then why are you asking?”

“I’m a nosy person.”

“Oh, hell, Malfoy, I don’t know.”

“Can I guess?”

“If you like.”

“You’re obviously all bitter and twisted about the war, and it gives you a perverted little kick to see one of your enemies crushed even lower than you are.”

“How dare you!”

“Oh, come on, Potter.” *softly* “Tell me you don’t like it.”

“I... That wasn’t what I was thinking!”

“So you do. All right, I’ll guess again. I’m the only person your age who’s still alive.”

“Don’t be stupid. If I wanted, I could talk to - Justin Finch-Fletchley. Or the Creeveys. Or Hannah Abbott. Or - Padma and Parvati Patil. Anyone.”

“Who’s Hannah Abbott?”

“She was in our year.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She had blonde hair. Pigtails. She was in Hufflepuff.”

“Ah. I see. I had better things to do in school than learn Hufflepuffs’ names.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“So I’m told. Usually in slightly more breathless tones.” *pause* “Let me see. Justin Finch-Fletchley, the only man in the world to be more interesting while he was Petrified? And the Creevey brothers, who had a shrine dedicated to your worship. What a tempting selection.”

“There were the Patil twins.”

“I admit, a matched pair of nubile Indians sounds like a good idea to me.”

“They’re also very nice people. And interesting.”

yawn “How fascinating.” *pause* “So it’s not that, then. All right. You felt the need to purge your soul by confession, and decided to start small by admitting to me that you, while in your Invisibility Cloak-

“How did you know I had an Invisibility Cloak?”

“I suffer from intelligence. I’m being given medication for it, I assure you. Now, while you were in your Invisibility Cloak, did you or did you not deliberately get an enormous trifle-”

“I cannot believe you still remember this.”

“An enormous and I might add *enchanted* trifle-”

“You incredibly small and petty and obsessive person.”

“A trifle which you then *threw* on me, *while* I was kissing Lisa Turpin, widely admitted to be the hottest ticket in our year, *which* turned my hair *red and blue*-”

“It was patriotic.”

“And which gave me, and I remember this part extremely clearly, *breasts*.”

“That was a side effect and I had no idea it would happen. I was as shocked as you.”

“Believe me, nobody could possibly have been as shocked as me.”

“Cheer up. For a week there, *you* were the hottest ticket in our year.”

offended tones “I was always the hottest ticket in our year. In a very, very masculine way.”

pause “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“And I’ve had quite enough of that amused silence.” *sneeze* “Do you have a handkerchief?”

“Sure. Here.”

“Thanks. So I take it that it wasn’t guilt over the breastful trifle then.”

“Why should I feel guilty?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Potter-”

“As I recall, you got me back. Since you fed me a Love Potion and I spent a week trying to get Professor Trelawney to marry me.”

small snort “Admit it, Potter. I was unleashing your forbidden desires.”

“She accepted! At the end of the week I had to fake my own death!”

“Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies, eh?”

“Sod off, Malfoy.”

pause “All right, then. I can’t guess why you came to see me.”

“No?”

“Well, I mean, it’s my personal opinion that I happen to be extremely easy on the eyes, but even I have to concede that that probably isn’t your motivation.”

dryly “Thanks.”

“So, are you going to tell me?”

“I said I didn’t know! I - You mentioned the Creevey brothers just now. And screaming fans.”

“If you’re planning to choose one of the Creeveys out of your group of fans and set up house, I implore you not to tell me. I don’t need that picture.”

“It’s just that the whole world’s like that now. Screaming fans - or people who are afraid of me. After - after-”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“Well. You’re neither of those things.”

brightly “I went to a meeting of your fan club once.”

“I had a fan-? And you *went*-?”

“Oh, yes. It was set up in fourth year. Lasted about a week.”

“What did you do?”

“... nothing. Who, me? Nothing.”

“Did you make anyone cry?”

“Only the girls and the Creeveys.”

“That wasn’t very nice.”

“No, but it was entertaining. Many nasty things are. So you came to talk to me because I wouldn’t, for any reason besides debilitating illness, swoon at your feet.”

“And...”

“Yes?”

“The nightmares.”

“Oh. Oh, I see.”

“When you’re back there, and there’s the blood because people had to be tortured for information on the battlefield as quickly as possible, and you’re slipping in it and you’re running, or the Muggles are hunting you again, or you sent a spell blasting into nowhere and maybe it hit someone-”

“Yes, I know.”

“-someone on your side. Someone you loved. And you wake up in the quiet night, and that’s worse because the blood and the screaming was at least familiar and peace is - is this completely alien territory. Like a place without air. A place you don’t know how to live in.”

“All right, Potter! Stop! I know.”

silence

“I thought you did. That’s another reason.” *pause* “It’s not... good, to wake up after one of those nightmares and think nobody else would understand.”

“Try waking up and seeing the Dementors outside your cell.”

“I don’t think I will. If it’s all the same to you.” *pause* “Besides, in the truce-”

“If you can call two sides calling a halt to war so they could go to war with Muggles a truce.”

“You know what I mean. In the truce, we - oh, you remember.”

“Refresh my memory. As I grow ill and feeble, my mind becomes so clouded. It’s really very tragic.”

“There were those couple of weeks we were in camp together. We were both squad leaders. There was a certain amount of enforced interaction.”

“Quite.”

“We... talked a bit, back then. It wasn’t so bad.”

“You came here to talk battle tactics and food rationing?”

“You talked about other things, sometimes.”

“Did I?”

“You once told me your greatest fear was that neither side would win. That we’d end up destroying the wizarding world until we were a few miserable remnants, chasing each other down in one last miserable scrap in the mud and blood. You said ‘This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.’ You said you didn’t want to die like that.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Come on, Malfoy!”

soft laughter “No, I’m sorry, I really don’t. I was on an insane amount of drugs by then. Most people were. You kept a clear head throughout battle, so you could live, and then the rest of the time... It ends up so all you remember is the battles. As if that’s been your whole life.”

quietly “I remember.”

“I remember... something about a lamp and moths. It was you, wasn’t it. I kept thinking that it couldn’t be, but it was. I wanted to put the lamp out, and you said if the moths were stupid enough to fly around it they deserved what they got.”

“Yes. And you didn’t listen. You put the lamp out. You were laughing.”

“One tends to laugh a lot, when one has happy little hallucinogens.”

“I don’t remember anybody laughing. Not for five years. Only you.”

“So - the case stands thus. We were able to hold some kind of communication in wartime once, we both have nightmares, I’m not afraid of nor am I fond of you, and you like seeing me get what I deserve.”

“Something like that.”

“You’re a twisted little person, Potter. And there’s one more reason, of course.”

warily “What is it?”

“Felicitations on this anniversary of your illustrious birth.”

“You know...?”

“It’s a national holiday, Potter. My nanny used to give me sweets on Harry Potter’s birthday. Recognising your birthday is a Pavlovian response by now. So - twenty-one. Now you’re legally allowed to do everything legal. Even in America, that barbarian wilderness.”

“Your mindset got stuck in 1782, didn’t it, Malfoy?”

“Push off, Potter. I hope I gave you flu for your birthday. It would make up in some small way for the breasts.”

“Let it go, Malfoy.”

soft tap at the door

“I. Um. Well, I guess it’s the end of visiting hours.” *pause* “I might see you. Next week.”

“No you won’t.”

“...Fine.”

dolefully “I shall be dead by next week. By next week, all that will remain is my piteous, drawn and yet touchingly attractive corpse.”

“All right then. Next week, I might see your piteous, drawn and yet touchingly attractive corpse.”

“Get yourself a life, Potter. But if you do happen to stop by, I wish to be buried by the old mill.”

“What old mill?”

“Oh, any old mill. It sounds so charming and rustic.”

“On that charming and rustic note, I’ll go.”

“Then go!”

soft noise of a door closing

grumpily “Nobody asked you to *come*.”

*

*Part 3: *soft sound of a door opening**

“Oh. It’s you again. Have you ever thought about the general lack of style incorporated into the traditional prison robes?”

“Malfoy. I see you’re feeling better.”

“Yes. I - expect it was you who got them to give me handkerchiefs and medicine.”

warily “Yes.”

“Very like you, Potter. Very - boy scout. Fair treatment for the helpless prisoners.”

mirthless laugh “Oh, yes? You haven’t heard the stories, then? You disappoint me, Malfoy. I would’ve thought that you’d be well up on the campfire gossip.”

“What are you talking...”

“About what the Boy Who Lived had turned into.”

snapped “I never believed that rubbish.”

softly “You should have.”

pause

calmly, conversationally “Millicent Bulstrode. She was taken prisoner in the seventh month, second year of the war. When we found her someone else had the unlocking words for our spelled perimeters, and she looked-

“I did it.”

“As if she’d been ripped apart by wild animals.”

“That was me. By myself. Hermione and I were sent out on a reconnoitring mission. We picked her up and we needed those spells quickly. Things weren’t going well. So I sent Hermione outside, and I did what I had to do.”

“The right thing.”

“It seemed like the right thing at the time.”

“How about now?”

“Eventually right and wrong no longer matter.”

“How very charming. How about good and evil?”

“They matter... You begin to wonder if one exists.”

“What a fabulously cheery state of mind. I wonder which one you could possibly doubt. No, hang on, I don’t. Nobody could see Camden Fudge’s moustache and doubt the existence of evil.”

“His *what*?”

“His moustache. I clocked it at my trial. My God, it was horrible. He waxes it, Potter, have you noticed that? He curls up the ends into pointy tips and *waxes* it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. He looks like a sea lion.”

“I meant-

patiently “I know, Potter. So why’d you send in the stuff, then?”

“It’s what I would have done - once.”

“Spare me the maudlin oh-the-lost-days-of-my-youth, oh innocence, alas if I had but known bit, would you? You would not have. You would have enchanted the handkerchiefs to turn my *nose* red and blue.”

“I would not have.”

“You would so.”

“I would *not*. I would have felt sorry for you. You were such a pathetic object. *You* would have done something awful once. I was a nice boy.”

“It was all a front.”

“It was *not* a front.”

“It was a Machiavellian plot.”

“I was *eleven* when I first met you.”

“All right, so you didn’t know it was a front.”

“How could I not know that?”

“How could you grow up into a decent, moral and well-adjusted lad with your upbringing? You were locked up in a cupboard, beaten around, starved and neglected. You were made to climb up chimneys and get soot in your lungs and then they used rat poison to flush it out.”

“That didn’t-”

“Let me have my dream.”

“You’re weird.”

“So are you. You didn’t want to be like them, did you? You didn’t want to be anything like them. You wanted to be just like all the new friends you made, and you wanted to protect them as well. And then you danced with death every year until you were fourteen, and after that you breathed death just like the rest of us. You never got the slightest chance of a normal childhood, and you bottled it all up, you walked on the edge until there was no choice but to fall and nobody to catch you anymore.”

“And you?”

smugly “I was an aggressive and randomly cruel child, and so I grew up-”

“Perfectly normal?”

“Into an aggressive and randomly cruel man. But at least I *know* who I am. I’ve always known that.”

“Have you been thinking about my psyche a lot?”

“Off and on.”

“Really.”

“I’m stuck in here, I’ve been thinking about almost everything. Have you ever wondered if alligator or elephant meat would be tastier?”

absently “Elephant. Meat eating animals taste bad.”

“You’re a fund of scary trivia, Potter. Who’d have thought it. I shall make a note in my diary.”

“You keep a diary.”

“Certainly. Very much approved of. Very therapeutic.”

“I’d... like to see it.”

“Well, it’s riveting, I can assure you. ‘Dear Diary, today I a) traced patterns onto the stone of my cell walls and imagined I was living in a herd of giraffes, b) obsessed over my collection of bad memories, c) obsessed about what prison food is doing to my waistline, d) thought the giraffes were giving me suspicious looks, e) decided that the giraffes were in a conspiracy against me and f) realised I was slipping slowly into madness.’”

“Your cell is too small for giraffes.”

“I think you miss my point.”

“Giraffes are extremely tall animals.”

“All right. Fine. I will read you an extract of my diary. I hope this will make you happy.”

“I hadn’t realised you cared.”

“I am interested to see if you can manage a different facial expression. It’s so tedious to try and differentiate between bloody miserable, brooding and morose.” *rustle of papers*

“Ahem. This is an extract from last week. ‘Dear Diary. Potter came to visit today. Not really sure why, and do not particularly care. However, I vow this. If he comes again, and he wears that revolting shade of brown, I will kill myself.’”

“You didn’t-”

“Kill myself? No, but I’m not sure that mouldy green is a good enough reason for me to live. Honestly, Potter, your dress sense is a weapon in the hands of the Dementors.”

“Shut up.”

“Aha. It’s intentional, isn’t it? You’re all in league to drive me to despair. I’m on to you.”

“You’re insane.”

“So you simply hired a Dementor as your personal shop assistant? Bad mistake, Potter. Evil leeches on despair. Also, blind.”

“You’re *insane*. I remember this.”

“You remember hiring the Dementor?”

“I remember *this*! This is how you were with the men. In our *camp*. There’d be a military strategy meeting, and we’d all realise how hopeless it was, or the kind of thing we’d have to do... and you wouldn’t ever shut up.”

“Sounds like me.”

“You made a cocked hat out of a plan for storage facilities once. You did imitations of people. You did an imitation of *me*. I wanted to kill you. But... you made the men laugh. I wished I could do that, after... the truce ended. You were - a good leader.”

“I was on a lethal cocktail of drugs.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t know who to follow. It’s a shame you weren’t - a good man.”

“Good was always more your bag than mine, Potter. As for following - I never blindly followed anyone. I made my own choices. And I don’t need your judgement of them. I’ve heard enough judgements.”

“... Okay.”

“Thank you. In return, I do not plan to bring up Millicent again. After this time. You sent Granger out?”

“Yes?”

mildly curious “Did you love her?”

“Yes.”

“In love with her?”

“No.”

cheerfully “Shame. That was my bet in the stakes on ‘Why Potter the War Hero is Oh, So Alone.’”

“What money would you pay the bet with? Who’d demand payment?”

“It’s the principle of the thing.”

“I don’t believe you people laid bets about that kind of thing.”

“Potter. We didn’t talk battle plans and the slaughter of innocents all day long. That was usually concluded well before lunch. Then we talked about sex until the cows came home and once the cows were home, we looked speculatively at them. That’s what wartime’s all about.”

“What, bestiality?”

“Aren’t you funny. People mused on sex an awful lot. And your name is hardly the first that comes to mind when one thinks of sex, but eventually we got around to you. There was a bit of conjecture on why your name had never been linked up with anyone’s. I thought being moony about your best friend’s girl but too desperately heroic to take her afterwards would be just your style.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. There was a war on for five years. I didn’t have time to think about romance.”

“Very weird and stunted of you, Potter. Oh, well. It was just a bit of discussion around lunch one day. By dinner we were on to polling the camp about which one of the other side everyone’d want to do if they were kidnapped by the enemy and had to sleep their way out.”

“We never had any discussions like that!”

“I bet they had them behind your back. Actually, Granger’s name came up quite often in those replies. She and some leather outfit and a whip featured largely in several of my officers’ fantasies.”

“Is that so.”

“I chose the Patil twins.”

“Naturally.”

“If I’d had to go through such a terrible ordeal. And of course, I would have simply lain back and thought of my country.”

“Of course.”

“It would have been dreadful, but I would have borne it bravely.”

“I have no doubt.”

“‘My body you may have, but my immortal soul you cannot hold!’ I would have said. ‘Though you may try to make me submit with your evil wiles, Indian flexibility, serpentine dances and large variety of sherbet sex play, it belongs to my cause.’”

“I can see you thought this out at length.”

“Best to be prepared, I thought.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Did the, um, Patil twins ever show any interest in belly dancing or any sort of lewd sherbet consumption?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Pity.”

“Parvati came to see me, a few weeks ago.”

“Why do you get a Patil twin, and all I get is you?”

“Clearly she was drawn to me by my boyish good looks. Seems she wasn’t drawn here.”

“I’m sorry, I was so busy howling with derisive laughter after ‘boyish good looks’ that I couldn’t hear the rest of what you were saying. Go ahead, you were about to tell me about Parvati Patil. Let me guess. She popped over to say she was your new neighbour, and wanted to know if she could borrow a cup of sherbet.”

“Leave the sherbet, Malfoy. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“She wanted to borrow a cup of quick shag?”

“She didn’t want to borrow anything! They come around, every now and then, members of the squad. To check if it’s true, and I really am cracking up.”

“You could just leave a note outside the door. ‘To whom it may concern: This day being Tuesday, I am feeling wistful, confused, slightly overweight and oddly ambivalent about dairy products.’”

“I don’t think she’ll be coming back.”

“Did you use harsh words to that delectable little *houri*, Potter? Shame on you.”

“I drew my wand on her.”

“Privacy is all well and good, but really-”

“I was having... one of those dreams. When you’re back there. I was crawling through the... God, the mud when it was slick and red with blood, and - my hand fell on tattered flesh, and then I looked up and then-”

“*Stop.*”

“There she was. She looked so frightened.”

quick breath “Ah. You were still in your pyjamas. I see. Poor girl.”

“Even if I try to reach out to someone, I end up hurting them. It’s like - all the way through the war I tried to make myself a weapon, and now it’s over. And when I touch someone I cut them.”

“You’re not cutting anyone.”

“I slept with someone once.”

“Um. Are you sure you want to tell m-”

“I don’t know who she was. I don’t even remember her face. It was last year, when it finally began to look as if I was going to win this war, when it looked as if one day there was going to be hope. There was a victory party, and she was there, and she danced and smiled and seemed alive. So I took her home. And I wanted to be normal, and I wanted to be happy like everyone else.” *strained breathing* “I woke up after one of those dreams. I thought there was a skull pressed against my cheek, I thought there was cold bone under my hands. I screamed the place down, I went for my wand and she went running and I knew... I knew...”

“Potter! Are you all right?”

“I - yeah. No. It was just like that with Parvati.”

suddenly airy “Without the sex.”

wearily “Yes, Malfoy. Without the sex.”

“Such a shame.”

“If she ever comes around again, I am so telling her about the sherbet.”

“Do. It may intrigue and tantalise her. Give me your hand, Potter.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to marry you. Idiot. Put your hand through the bars.”

...

“Now what?”

“The alarm didn’t go off. They have to give me my handkerchiefs one by one, you know, so I wouldn’t knot them into a noose. And give me my medication in a spoon, in case I broke the bottle against the bars and slashed my wrists with it.”

“Stop it!”

“You’re allowed a razor, that’s *regulation*, but nothing dangerous and not provided by our good and merciful government goes through these bars without an alarm going off. You’re not a weapon, Potter.”

“Were you always this literal?”

creak of unburdened bedsprings “I find it saves time.” *brush of skin* “You see, Potter? I’m not cut.”

“Oh, well. You. That’s different.”

“I have just the same skin as anyone else. Overlooking the pearlescent lustre.”

“That’s true. You can be cut, of course. If we’d caught you before the war was over, I would have made you bleed. Don’t think you would have been any different from the others.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t have been happy to kill the Boy Who Lived.”

“Don’t *call* me that!” *quick standing, pained gasp* “Does this hurt?”

“No! Why don’t you like that name, hmm? Are we all grown up?”

“How about this?” *small sound*

quick standing, low snarl “Still no. Like what you’ve grown up into?”

“Some days it’s fun.” *another small sound, another pained gasp* “You’re too stubborn, Malfoy. That was always your problem.”

two steps backward, voice still pained “One among many. We’re even for the medicine now, Potter.”

“You never considered anything as other than a commercial transaction, did you.”

“I’m more honest with myself than most. That’s all.”

“... I didn’t mean to hurt you. Let me look.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“I - proved you wrong, didn’t I.”

savagely “You would think that. You’re too stubborn, Potter. That was always your problem. Fine. Look. The skin’s not broken. You didn’t cut me.”

tiredly “Good. Why are those bars set to alarm?”

“All the bars are set that way.”

“So you’re not up for the broken bottle, or the noose, or the razor.”

“Maybe I should be the one asking that question. Let’s face it, if we were playing sane wizard, wacky thinks-he’s-a-pineapple wizard...”

“I-”

“Nobody’s alarmed your bars, Potter. What have you got between the dreams and your wand, your razor, a knife? Don’t worry about *me*.”

“I wasn-”

“I’ll still be here next week.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Perhaps.”

quick steps to the door

*

*Part 4: *soft sound of a door opening**

snarl “Well, if it isn’t Potter. How perfect! The perfect end to a perfect day, and it isn’t even noon!”

“... Malfoy. Why are you all wet?”

“Don’t ask me questions! Don’t expect me to be rational! I’m spitting here!”

“What, all over yourself? Quite a talent.”

“Oooh.”

“What?”

“I am quietly boiling from my insides out with sheer rage.”

“It’s not all that quiet.”

“Oooh.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“Can’t it? Oh, but I think it can. I have two words for you, Potter. Two vile, disgusting words. *Communal showers.*”

helpless laughter

“Stop it! This isn’t amusing! Larry the troll and Confucius the ogre. I have to *shower* with them. Do you know what happens when you drop the soap? Sometimes you have to open your *eyes!*”

helpless laughter

“I wish I was dead.”

“That’s constructive.”

“I wish *they* were dead.”

“What a happy thought.”

“I wish *you* were dead.”

“Saw that one coming. If it bothers you so much, skip some showers.”

“Skip some - Potter, you filthy, unwashed peasant. I don’t want to hear another heretical unhygienic word out of you.”

“Malfoy, I’ve seen you crawl on your stomach in the mud.”

“That was quite different. Mud gives the skin a fresh and youthful glow. We’re talking grime here. *Grime*, Potter.”

“A fate worse than death, I’m sure.”

“You’re bloody chipper today, Potter. I think I liked you better the other way.”

“You never liked me at all.”

“That’s not true. I liked you before I met you. I was under the grossly mistaken impression that you were going to be cool. And I didn’t mind you for the first ten minutes I knew you. And I recall being atrociously drunk in the truce camp and not minding you, but then that was alcohol-induced universal goodwill.”

“I remember that.”

“No you don’t. Shut up.”

“I remember quite clearly telling you that drugs and drink do not mix, and not to make a fool of yourself and undermine the authority of both of us as officers.”

“Well, after that, what’d you expect me to do?”

“I didn’t expect you to do a little dance.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“In front of everyone. There was a routine. And a shimmy.”

“Shut up a lot.”

“And then you hung all over everyone. You were very affectionate. And vocal. You brushed people’s hair. You brushed *everyone*’s hair.”

“I hate you. And I can’t hear. I’m not *listening*.”

“Then you sang a little song.”

“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!”

“It was very touching. Colin took a lot of pictures.”

“Oh, my God. I bet you still have them. To laugh and scorn and mock and scorn. I hate you.”

“I burned them.”

“Thank Christ.”

“After the truce was over. I burned them all.”

“You... sound almost sad about it. You liked it, didn't you. You liked that war.”

“It was - simpler. Simpler when I wasn't facing people I knew, people who I'd gone to school with. When it was us against them. It's - so much easier to kill strangers.”

“I know.”

“It wasn't about secrecy and evil and politics. It was us against them, and it was survival. It was - you said it yourself.”

“I don't remember.”

“I didn't want to be put in a camp with your side. I didn't care about co-operation and necessity, it already felt as if I had fought a thousand wars and I didn't want to do it. But everyone had to obey orders. My squad - we'd been all round the world, and I was always bone tired and everything was bitter. And I was sitting on a bench in a tent, and you came in and sat down so casually, as if it was Potions class, and you said 'I suppose we're in this together.'”

“Marvellous things, drugs. I don't really recall.”

“I remember. There were no conflicted loyalties or spies or - or anything. Things were easier, everyone had a common enemy and we were fighting for our lives and there wasn't a doubt. And there was you. I didn't have to be as good at war then. I - like I said, you were a good leader.”

“I did what I had to. But you. You loved it. The pure clean edge of desperation.”

“I... You can't be kind, can you. Not unless someone is desperate.”

“I'm never kind. Sometimes desperation makes people delusional. And you always liked your delusions, didn't you? You've been fighting something since you were born. You never even knew what peace was, you didn't know how to want it. The lack of dilemmas, the pure instinct to hunt and the blood on your hands - that was the closest you ever came.”

“And what about you?”

“Why was I good at it? You were born for it: I was brought up for it. I could taste the coming war my whole life. It was all I ever expected my future to be. And now it’s over, but in the end you forget how to live any other way. Even still, I can’t remember.”

“... Yes. It wasn’t that I liked it. Any more than I like air. It’s just that now, I can’t be anything else.”

“And what a pair we make. Enough to make a devil weep.” *pause* “Do you think Dumbledore would weep?”

“Don’t say his name.”

“I think he would, for you. He had such faith in you, didn’t he? And it was just an extension, an intensification, of that beautiful naïve faith that he had in almost the whole world. That people could be trusted to do the decent thing. You had that too. Must have been painful when it burned away.”

snarl “What about you?”

“Never had it. I would never have thrown the wizarding world to the wolves because of some stupid collection of beliefs.”

“It was because of *your* side-”

“No! I don’t care what we did. It was your leader who made the decision, who did the deed. He went to the government, went through every rank, and gave them proof of all our secrets and our existence. He *convinced* them, he had some ideal of wizards and Muggles living together in perfect harmony after they’d vanquished Voldemort forever.”

“I voted against it.”

“But you let him do it. I would have killed him before he could.”

“Go to hell. I could never have done that.”

“Couldn’t you, if you’d known the price? If you’d known about the reaction, the pronouncement that we were all dangerous and had to be exterminated, the mobs with all this new knowledge, the time when all anyone could do was panic and hide the evidence, disguise the deaths, and hope that they wouldn’t decide to tell the whole world? If you’d known that the Finnigans would all be slaughtered and that Dumbledore would be shot when he was walking into a conference in good faith?”

“I couldn’t have done it!”

“The terror made even the war stop; made us all band together like rats cowering in a single hole. So many memory modifications, we came so close to utter extermination - and it was *his decision*-”

“He had to do something! We didn’t begin the war!”

“Nobody began the war. It was always going to happen. It all started with sex.”

“... It’s so like you to say something like that.”

“I’m more observant than most. Haven’t you heard the stories, or was that dirty Death Eating propaganda? We started out different races, wizards and Muggles. Mudbloods and Squibs didn’t happen. And then we began to breed, and aberrations started occurring. How can a magical child be properly accepted into a Muggle family, or vice versa? They were changelings, and they bred hatred. Maybe people can accept a wizard in a tower, but nobody can accept one of their own flesh and blood being given something they can never match or understand-”

“Petunia.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What you people never understood was that it wasn’t like racism. Racism is the hatred that comes from unfair division of their world, more land, more rights, something that can be solved. Ours is another world, and they can’t touch it, we can’t ever give it to them and they can’t do anything but resent it and covet it and hate us, and we can’t do anything but fear them because they are so many. We were hunted once, and we had to hide until we became myths, and then well-meaning fools broke a hole in our cover and took in children who could betray us, and tried to make us believe that wizards never burned!”

“Hermione would never have betrayed us. She deserved to be in our world. She was a *witch*.”

“She shouldn’t have been! There shouldn’t ever have been a mingling. It wasn’t safe. You people always despised us for the importance we put on pure blood - it meant being *safe*. You want to know why I’m not being driven mad by the Dementors? I was born in a place that was bleak and waiting for war. The enemy was always within the gates for us, the magics used to protect us for generations had to be hidden under the dining room floor as our own kind turned against us and finally your merciful leader laid us all bare!”

“What are you saying?”

“I know all about grimness. I know all about fear. My father taught me we were in mortal danger before Voldemort ever rose again. Those Dementors can barely touch me. My memory is as tainted as our whole world.”

“We’re not in mortal danger.”

“Oh yes we are. Every moment of our lives. And you *know* it, you’ve always known it. That’s why it was good, because the endless hiding was over and we could fight. It’s always been us against them, and that was why it was simple, and that’s why it was clean.”

“I said it was better. I didn’t say it was right.”

“Nothing’s ever right. There’s no way to make any of it right.”

“And nobody’s to blame, is that it?”

“Oh, everyone is to blame. Always.”

“Dumbledore made a mistake. But he paid.”

“We all pay. We all bleed. And everything stays wrong, every mistake everyone ever made stays with us, we fought a war against them and we fought with each other and we all keep bleeding.”

“Malfoy? Did you... did you like the war against them more?”

“Certainly I did. If you’ll recall, it was the only one I won.”

“... Of course.” *quietly* “I was - looking forward to coming here. I wanted to.”

“And now you wish you hadn’t.”

“No. No. I prefer hearing you say it to thinking it. At least you’re able to bring it out in the light.”

“I have more time to think. You have to build bars for yourself. I have mine provided for me. And you’re not resigned. You still have to live.”

“Do I?”

pragmatically “Not that it can be much of a life, if you look forward to coming here. Well. At least it means you make the effort to dress somewhat decently.”

“Couldn’t drive a man to suicide, could I? Didn’t want that on my conscience too.”

“Indeed. And the cut is irreproachable. Just steer clear of olive in future, that’s all I’m saying.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Have you talked to Parvati yet?”

“I - no.”

“You should. Go to her, explain. Take a walk in a park with her. You can, why don’t you fucking well enjoy it?”

“Is this you being kind?”

“Is this you being desperate?”

soft knock on the door

“Give me a minute.”

“Get lost, Potter. You can’t bargain with Dementors.”

*

*Part 5: *soft sound of a door opening**

“Jesus, Potter. What happened?”

dully “Hello, Malfoy.”

“Sit down and tell me what happened.”

“... It was Angelina.”

softly “Who’s Angelina?”

“Angelina Johnson. She was on my Quidditch team at school. She married - she married Fred Weasley a few weeks before-”

“One of those war weddings. Little exercises in futile hope and masochism.”

“She loved him.”

“So?”

“She loved him! And he died. And she kept fighting and we won and I thought she was - I thought she was all right. I never went to see her, I didn’t want to think about any of it... And she killed herself. She did it two days ago, and they only just found her. I don’t want to understand why she did it. The war is over and things are supposed to be right and we’re all supposed to be so grateful-”

“You do understand it, though. That’s almost the worst part.”

“... Yes.”

“It never works the way it’s supposed to. It’s never like anybody dreamed or promised. It’s terrible for you, isn’t it? You like things to be so simple. Like a children’s story. You want the happy ever after.”

“Didn’t you? Is all you’ve ever thought of complicated?”

“All I’ve ever known or expected.”

pause

quietly “I should have gone to see her.”

“But you didn’t. And now it’s too late. Is that how you want to see it? There it is; that’s simple.”

“I try to stay away from them. All of them. It’s too hard to be around them. Nobody ever talks about it, any of it, and there’s nothing but empty spaces where people should be and empty spaces when the dead should be talking and empty beds where people have to lie alone and empty eyes which make you think...”

“Yes?”

“What if it’s us who died, and we don’t know it? And that’s where all the old vitality went, and we can’t touch the living and all we do is linger around in grey silence and pretend, and never speak of how we died. The dead seem so much more alive sometimes. Some nights - I could reach out and touch them. Fred. Ginny. But I couldn’t... I couldn’t reach out to Angelina.”

“It’s a quaint thought. Very pretty and melancholic. But it’s just battle fatigue, survivors’ guilt, destroyed nerves and a lack of - strength. To carry on. To rebuild.”

“It’s that simple.”

pause, soft laugh “No.” *another pause* “Oh, I remember this.”

“What?”

“The way your mind works. You can be so endlessly thick, and I can see the truth so much more often than you, but you keep looking, and then - just now and then - you can shoot it through the heart and show it to everyone. It’s a gift.”

“Lucky me.”

“I didn’t mean for you.” *pause* “What were you going to be?”

“What d’you mean?”

“If the war hadn’t happened. Haven’t you ever played this game? If there had been no war, and there had been nothing to stop you from doing what you wanted - what would you have wanted?”

“Oh. I don’t know. Maybe I would’ve been a professional Quidditch player. Or an Auror. I was fifteen - it was half way through fifth year when the war began. I was young, I didn’t have much time to plan. But I do remember wanting... a home. I never really had one. I kind of wanted that - dream home, you know. The one in picture books. With honeysuckle on the walls and a dog and the people you love.” *pause* “Something simple. What would you have wanted?”

“Oh, I always wanted a thousand things. You know me. I had a dozen different plans when I was fifteen - doctor tailor sailor soldier gentleman apothecary thief. It’s a shame only one of them worked out. The problem was to stop wanting things, to choose. Except it was never necessary, was it?”

“Would it ever have been?”

“Of course not. We don’t have many choices. You would have grown up and done what Dumbledore suggested, what Ron Weasley was doing. You would have married Ginny Weasley and never have remembered that none of it was your idea. And I would have inherited the family fortune and followed the tradition of my ancestors and married Pansy, and had an heir I wouldn’t have quite known how to bring up right. People are so good at hiding the fact they’re unique.”

“Oh, but this is the game where there’s nothing to stop you doing exactly what you want.”

“Hmm. You’re right. Maybe it would have been something to do with Muggles.”

“*What?*”

“You know how I love to feel superior. If I’d associated with Muggles, I could have felt superior all the time. It would have been a kick. Maybe I would have been a male model.”

“A male model. You?”

“I could have been! I’m pretty. Don’t you think I’m pretty?”

“Your face is too pointy.”

“I. Have. Fine. And. Aristocratic. Bones.”

“They’re pointy. And you’re a bit on the thin side, quite frankly.”

“You are so one to talk!”

“I’m not expressing the desire to market my beauty to the world.”

“It was just an idea! All right. I could have been an actor.”

“Can you act?”

“I expect so, I never tried. The point is, I always wanted something - oh, huge and bright and spectacular.”

“And involving you getting a lot of attention and your picture taken.”

modestly “Well. If it had to be... I could have borne it. For my art.”

soft laughter “God. I - I like to see you. You still seem so alive.”

“Isn’t that ironic. The man whose life is over.”

“No. I mean - you’re only twenty-one. You’re so - in control.”

"I'm not in control. I'm in prison. And they'll never let me out, not in a hundred years. I'm going to spend the rest of my life in a cell, and everyone I love is dead. There's no way for me to be strong and rebuild my life. There's nothing but - these walls, and the nightmares. Forever. So - stop being *stupid*."

"I... Sorry."

"You can still be alive, though. Have you contacted Parvati yet?"

"No."

"It's August. Go on a summer holiday, for God's sake. Ask her to go with you - she will. Go take a walk on a beach by a foreign sea and drink some cocktails and eat an obscene amount of fruit."

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"Oh yes, Potter, that's it. I have no time for you anymore. You know we have therapy sessions together. We prisoners are assigned partners and we have to give each other hearty talks. Isn't it a brilliant idea of Fudge Junior's?"

"Almost as brilliant as him deciding to build an enormous marble monument rather than trying to rebuild people's homes."

"Funny isn't it. How at the end of the war, the rats seem to be the only ones who come out victorious... and fat. But my point is, I receive all the fun I could possibly want from my weekly conversations with Confucius the ogre. Oh, you should see it, Potter. It's a feast of reason and a flow of souls."

"I see I'm now entirely unnecessary."

"It brings tears to my eyes sometimes. 'How's it going?' I say brightly. And he grunts. 'You're looking a bit peaky lately. You're half the ungodly monster you were,' I continue blithely. He grunts. 'Had any news of the wife and spawn?' I ask. He grunts. 'Isn't this intellectually stimulating?' I query. He grunts and gives me this horrifyingly blank stare. I stare back at him in quiet horror and squeak, 'Please don't hurt me.' He grunts."

"I'm sure you two are kindred spirits beneath the surface. Still, two conversations a week doesn't sound all that taxing."

"Two conversations? What are you talking about? I talk to myself all day long. I keep myself amused with my witty repartee and sparkling rejoinders. I amaze myself with my own viciousness in gossip. I never seem to stop talking, I require almost twenty-four-hour entertainment."

"Still, I don't see how your advice is helping you. Unless you're not quite as selfish as you like to believe."

"Oh, I'm more selfish than the devil himself. At least he cares what people do with their souls."

“So what’s in it for you?”

“It annoys me, to see people wasting their lives. Not doing what I’d do if I had mine. And...”

“What?”

silence

“Malfoy.”

snarl “You can’t imagine what it means, Potter. To simply hear another human voice. To have some company, to articulate what you feel until you can feel it properly again. I told you everyone I love is dead, you know I’m cut off here from anything like humanity. I knew what would happen when I went in here. I knew I was dead. If I start feeling alive again - if I start needing-”

“Malfoy...”

savagely “*I don’t want it!* I can’t be connected again, I won’t let myself. It’s too much like living and I can’t do that, I don’t want to try and then end up - do you hear me, Potter? I don’t want to be attached to anything. I can’t bear it. I’m here, I’m *dead*, and that’s the way it has to be, so why can’t you let me rot here in peace!”

“And if your life is so completely over, why don’t you do what Angelina did!”

“I’m too fucking stubborn!”

pause “That’s always been your problem.”

“Please, Potter. This is so futile. Please, please go away. Don’t ever come back.”

“It’s been... a long time since I wanted something I could have. Last night I had one of those dreams and I woke up screaming and I - I wished you were there.”

“In your bedroom? Without a *chaperon*? You shock me, Potter. I am not that kind of girl.”

“Fuck off, Malfoy, this isn’t funny. I want to see you.”

“Well, I can’t stop you, can I? I’m a prisoner here. I can’t go to a foreign beach or buy my own socks or be out when you drop by. That’s why I seem in control, because I have to seem in control, because I’m utterly helpless in here and I can’t turn you out and I can’t leave the room and I can’t do anything except ask you to please, for God’s sake, *leave me alone*.”

“I - damn it, I can’t say no and you know it. If that’s what you really want.”

“It’s what I have to have.”

“I’ll go. I’m - sorry.”

“Call Parvati.”

“Malfoy, will you-”

“Please. *Go*.”

*

*Part 6: *soft sound of a door opening**

“Potter, I told you-”

sound of a body hitting bars

“Oh my God. Get up, Potter.” *pause, then steps* “Hey. Hey, what’s the matter?”

pause

“You can’t sit here like this forever, you know. They’ll kick you out. So - ow!”

“I did what you said.”

“Ow ow ow.”

“I did what you said. I went to Parvati and I apologised for scaring her and I tried to explain - I tried to explain why I had. I tried to tell her - about some of it, tried to let any of it out and - she kissed me.”

“You lucky bastard. Ow.”

trembling voice “She kissed me just to stop me talking. Do you know what that feels like, to see that in someone’s eyes - she can’t bear to remember the names of the dead, can’t stand to let me speak them, she would rather offer up her body to smother the truth and hide away all we suffered and all we were and just have some cheap comfort and - God, the silence. It’s worse than the silence of people who died, the silence of people who should be able to speak of them - with love.”

“Sometimes people aren’t strong enough.”

“Well they should be! That kind of weakness is too horrible. And then when I was leaving she told me to go see my family. My - family. And I did, and it’s sick what kind of things you do for some comfort, and you’d told me never to come back. I went back to the Dursleys. I’d sworn never to do that, to revisit the *fucking indignity* of childhood. I swore. And there I was looking through the windows of Privet Drive and watching them. My cousin Dudley is my age, and he had his wife with him, and she’s pregnant, and ugly, and he’s disgustingly fat, and they and my aunt and uncle - they’re lolling around in comfortable, undisturbed complacency, they’re *happy* and they’ve been happy for six years while I was in hell, and I know them. They’re miserable people, petty, grinding, *malicious* little people who revel in

tiny contemptible acts of cruelty. And they're happy. And I looked in, and I thought about living there, and I thought about what they are, and what the Muggles did to all of us, and - I came so close to killing them. It seemed so right. God, I wanted to do it!"

"But you didn't do it."

harshly "But I still want to do it! And I can't go to some foreign beach and join them, all those smug people glorying in how comfortable they are, turning their faces away from everyone who was ever in pain and who ever disturbed their smooth, heartless, horrible lives! I don't - is that the price, for any sort of peace? To forget them all like Parvati has, to never speak their names, not to care any more about - about those ideas that died with them? I just... I can't do it. But I don't want to live like this, I don't want to keep waking up screaming at the shadows, I don't want to hate everyone. I just want to feel - not so alone. I want to talk with somebody who understands. It's the only company that I can bear and I can't bear being like this, and-"

"All right. Hush."

"*I want to be with you.* Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand!"

"Then don't send me away again!"

"It didn't work very well this time, did it? I won't. All right? I won't."

"You're such a bastard, Malfoy."

"You're crushing my hand, Potter."

deep breath "Sorry."

"Well, it's all right. I understand that my company and conversation hold irresistible charms. Mind, I take none of this as an excuse for not sleeping with Parvati Patil. I despair of you."

"Sod off, Malfoy."

"Murderous impulses, okay. Turning down a saucy, sherbet-bearing Patil - that's just *sick*."

"I don't even like sherbet."

"Everybody likes sherbet. You're shivering, did you know that? And you're even thinner than you were. I look better than you, and I am a wretched prisoner and I refuse food most days because the stuff is pigswill."

"They wouldn't let me in before visiting hours."

"How long were you - no, don't tell me, I don't even want to know. Sometimes I think your stupidity knows no bounds."

“At least I don’t have some kind of weird and perverted fixation on sherbet.”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it, Potter. My entire life would have been brightened if you could have come here with a report of a Patil twin and sherbet.” *exaggerated sigh* “Well. Since you’re here, you can tell me something else.”

“What?”

“How’re the Cannons doing in the League?”

startled laugh “I don’t know. I haven’t been following Quidditch.”

“Really. How... unlike you. All right, are there any good new songs? I’m very fond of the Wyrd Sisters. Weren’t they supposed to be doing some new ones?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“You useless prat, Potter. I can just imagine what you’ve been up to most of the time. ‘Dear Diary-’”

“I don’t keep a diary.”

“‘Dear Diary, which I am too boring to actually keep - Today I lay on my bed, stared at the wall, obsessed over my bad memories, felt random depression, skipped breakfast, lunch and dinner, was driven by utter tedium to lurid fantasies of Sybil Trelawney. Am angst-ridden. Woe!’”

“I could never be bored enough to fantasise about Professor Trelawney. And I did more than that. Once I bought socks.”

“I am silenced. Your life is a frenzied social whirl.”

“I remembered what you said about not being able to. I tried to appreciate that.” *pause* “It didn’t work, but then I was starting off really, incredibly small. Next I think I’ll try cocktails.”

“You bought socks because I can’t.”

“Yes. Envy my wild, sock-purchasing good times.”

“You are a deeply strange person, Potter. My mother warned me about sock purchasers. ‘Steer clear of them, Draco,’ she said. ‘They can’t be trusted. They think they can control the socks, but in the end, the socks control them. The socks always win.’”

“I can quit any time I like.”

“Keep telling yourself that. And go to a Cannons game. I want to know how they’re doing.”

“I went to one once. When the team had just been set back up. I just kept thinking about how happy Ron would have been and I couldn’t stay because he wasn’t there, I couldn’t-”

“Go to another one. You might not want to forget the dead. There’s no reason to let the dead consume you. And - God. This is another reason why you shouldn’t have come.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about *you*, Potter. I’m talking about who you are. I’m talking about what you were like - when we were both kids. I could see it, everyone could see it, the way you’d obviously been lonely all your life and the way you clung like a limpet to things now you were offered them. You were eleven years old and you were willing to die for it, because you were so starry-eyed and in love with this new kind world and your friends and your mentor figure and your thousand ideals of decency and goodness. But you can’t keep doing it.”

“Doing what?” **bitterly** “I don’t have much belief left.”

“I know that! That’s what I’m saying. You had all that faith, and it was so necessary to you, and it was burned away inch by inch. That’s why some days you want to die. Because you don’t know how to live without it, all that shining devotion, and... I’m saying you don’t have enough of that belief left to waste. You’re too close to the edge, and if you - if you believe in me, I’ll break you.”

soft laughter “And this is Draco Malfoy, more selfish than the devil.”

“Shut up, Potter. I’m serious. I’m dead, dead to all intents and purposes, and you have to stop living with the dead. Everybody bleeds, but this is draining yourself dry. You set yourself up for one more betrayal and - God - it’ll shatter you. I’ll shatter you. Is that what you want?”

“You’re not so bad.”

“You’re an utterly delusional fool. Don’t do this. Let go of my hand. Why should you, what could I possibly be to you? I was a Death Eater, I killed, I was the evil-minded brat you hated in school. There’s no reason to put yourself on the line for me.”

“Malfoy-“

“I’m nothing to you. And if you’re fucking stupid and you get attached for nothing - I’m telling you there’s no way to stop getting ripped to shreds. I’ll owe you for your life, and that’s not a debt I want to have!”

“Malfoy-”

“You’re going to be destroyed-”

“Malfoy! Stop ranting and *listen* to me.”

“I’m not ranting-”

“You’re always ranting. *Listen*. You know how, when those enchanted bombs came...”

“Yes.”

“The ones with the Boggarts in them, the spells that could make you think you were crawling through your own mother’s entrails...”

“Yes, damn you! Your side threw them too. Stop.”

“All anyone could do was close their eyes and think of something else, some image to hold against it. Ride through the nightmare and try to reach the other side. And everyone said the same thing. That there was always just one image in the end. One thing. A scene of childhood or a beautiful view or - or something.”

“Yes.”

“You.”

“What?”

“You. That night with the moths. In the officers’ - in the officers’ tent. Everyone was filthy and cold and afraid for their lives. I felt grim as if I’d seen the whole world die. And you still cared about the moths-”

“It was a *whim*-”

“You just - you just leaned your forehead against the glass of the lamp, and laughed. You laughed and sounded almost kind when I said, ‘Who cares about the moths?’ You said ‘I care,’ and you laughed again, and it was very soft, and the light was so pale. And your hair looked silver and your eyes looked gold, and the world seemed all turned upside down. And then you blew the lamp out.”

beat

“That’s what else you were. That image. You don’t - you don’t owe me a thing.”

“I see.”

“It’s time. I’d better go.”

quick steps, soft thud of the door shutting

deep breath “Christ.”

*

*Part 7: *soft sound of a door opening**

“Potter-”

slam of a door closed “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Snape’s estate. I’ve been helping with it. He left behind so many papers - McGonagall needed my help, and what else did I have to do? And besides - I remembered how you liked him. I thought there might be something, a keepsake, that you’d like, and then - Malfoy, I found the letters.”

“Oh. You did.”

“How could you not tell them at your trial? How could you let yourself be buried alive in here when you’re not guilty?”

“I am guilty.”

“Don’t pull this shit with me, Malfoy. I read the letters! I know you were a spy!”

“I was a spy. And I was a Death Eater.”

“What are you talking-”

“You think I wanted to serve Voldemort? You think I’m that - I’m that stupid, to sell my soul in service of that warped, disgusting remnant of humanity. Do you think I could ever have followed that twisted hypocrite, who killed people for having the same sort of blood which ran through his veins? I’m not a sycophant, I’m not anyone’s cringing lapdog. When did you ever see me completely without pride? When did I ever go crawling after people who were stronger than me or hurt me? I *lead*, Potter. I always have. And was never insane enough to support him.”

softly “God, Malfoy... why didn’t you tell me...”

“I’m *not done yet*. You weren’t the only one who thought the war would end with Voldemort’s death.”

“What has that got to do with-”

quietly “That was something, Potter. I was there. You were the hero everyone knew you were going to be. Voldemort had you both cornered, two scared helpless boys of nineteen, and then when Weasley fell... Nobody’ll ever know how you did it, will they? Maybe not even you. I don’t know what you did, I didn’t hear the spell, I could barely see you lunge forward but we could all see it was unstoppable and you *did* it, you did it, and I thought - and everyone thought - that it was that simple, and that beautiful, and - and over.”

muted tones “So did I.”

“But it wasn’t over. There was no chance of pleading the Imperius Curse now, not with the sheer bitterness and terror raised by war. The Death Eaters and everyone they loved were going to be stamped out with the utter lack of mercy showed by the righteous and enraged.”

“We had a right to-”

“Children from Death Eater families were killed, you know. They threw Pansy’s sister on the fire, said it was in her blood. She was five years old.”

“People were insane with grief. Worse had happened on the other side-”

“Don’t think that can wash you clean. Don’t think anything can wash any of us clean. I’m just telling you the *truth*. We were scared out of our minds - and we’d been organised into an army.”

“Don’t say ‘we.’ You weren’t one of-”

“Oh yes, I was! That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I never followed Voldemort. No. But my father took command. He was - even more unscrupulous than I can be, and he was pragmatic enough to crawl when he had to, but... I loved him. I was loyal to him. It was my family on

the line, my friends, all the people I loved. And do you think I'd ever been crazy about any of your sanctimonious leaders, ever believed in your stupidity about the Muggleborn? You think I liked them any better after I had to fight them for my life? The answer is no. I gave up being a spy. I fought for the other side, I did unimaginable things, I wanted to *win*. I'm just what you always thought me. I was a Death Eater, all right. And I'd be one again."

ragged "All of them died. It didn't make any difference, and you're rotting in prison now. Do you regret it?"

"Yes. And as I said, I'd do it again! They were the people I loved. I was fighting for their lives - and I was fighting for power, and what we all believed in. I made my choice. I'm paying the price."

"All right."

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not any kind of hero. They took Snape in, you know that. They had to have information. He was kind to me, he was - my secret leader, I - respected him. I think he loved me. I stood outside the gates and guarded them while he was being tortured. I heard him screaming and I was sick, but I still let it happen! I wanted to win. I was a Death Eater. It wasn't a pretence. Do you understand?"

shakily "Yes."

"You don't want to hear more? You don't want to hear proof? I led that squad which left Granger in a coma and her companions dead. I took the plans Snape gave me when I was his spy and I used them for the other side, and we stormed the headquarters under Rosmerta's bar and then we bolted them all in and *burned* it. People burned alive screaming, and it couldn't have happened without me, and tell me, Potter, what do you want now?"

tightly "I want to kill you."

"And what do you think I want to do to you? When I think that without you, we would have won that war. My father and mother would be alive, my friends would be alive, Pansy would be alive, I wouldn't be trapped in here like an animal in a cage... do you think I can't look at you, and think of it all, and want you *dead*?"

"I wouldn't blame you."

"Oh, but you do blame me. And I blame you. And we can't ever forgive each other, there isn't any forgiveness, and look at you, Potter, snarling and red in the face and wanting to kill me so much you can taste it, do you feel alive now?"

"Yes!"

"I thought you might. Good feeling, isn't it? Why don't you keep it."

"I - God, you're such a bastard."

"I know."

“It does change things. Knowing that.”

“Oh no, it doesn’t. If you’ll think about it, it doesn’t make any sense for me to have followed Voldemort. You knew me, at least a little. I can see that you did. You just never applied what you knew. You never had even an elementary grasp of logic, Potter. It’s lucky that you didn’t take Arithmancy.”

“I liked maths at school. I could have been all right at Arithmancy.”

“You could have been better at it than you were at Divination, anyway. I still say you only passed exams by using your dubious charms on Trelawney.”

“I wish you’d stop bringing up that disturbing image.”

“I’m telling you. If we’d ever taken our OWLs or NEWTs, you would’ve gotten your comeuppance. Served you right for picking such pathetic subjects.”

“Oh, like you were the master of subject choices. You seemed to adore Care of Magical Creatures.”

“I would have liked it just fine if it had been a proper class instead of a howling lunatic trying to feed me to his various blood-hungry familiars.”

“Hagrid was a great man.”

“He was... your first casualty, wasn’t he.”

“Yes.”

lightly “Went to the giants with his girlfriend, and when he proposed that they join Dumbledore... when he came in peace and goodwill... they tore him to pieces. Could make you despair.”

“It could. Like you said - there’s no forgiveness.”

“So what can there be?”

pause “How about a truce?”

laughter “Oh, Potter. Oh, the way your mind works. How do you do it? I never met anyone but you who cared about things more than I did. You care so much that even when you’re in despair and you think you’ve stopped caring, you care passionately about that. I was right before. You’re a secret weapon in the hands of the Dementors, and you scare me senseless. You might make even me buy in on your delusions, and start to feel like I’m not dead.”

“If I’m so scary... do you want me to leave?”

thoughtfully “No. No, I don’t think so.”

pause

“Did you love her?”

“Who?”

“Pansy.”

“Oh. Yes I did.”

pause “In love with her?”

“I don’t... know. I knew her for years. She was - funny, easy to be with, she loved me. I would have died for her. I know that much. We were going to get married. Everybody wanted it. But - I wasn’t faithful to her. And if you mean did she make my heart race and my dreams tangle around her and keeping her seem more necessary than breathing... no.”

“... I just wondered.”

“So, Potter. A truce. You think it’s doable?”

“I think it could work.” *pause* “The Cannons are second in the league, by the way.”

knock on the door

irritably “Could you go away?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Potter, but there’s been an Owl for you. I ran all the way up from the guardhouse... It’s about Miss Granger.”

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*Part 8: *soft sound of a door opening**

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“Mmf. Mrbmble. I - *Potter!* How long have you been here for?”

softly “A while.”

crossly “Why didn’t you wake me? I’m sure watching me sleep is not a terribly exciting activity.”

“You looked peaceful.”

“I was bored enough to fall asleep in the middle of the day. I was peaceful as a coma victim. Which speaking of - congratulations.”

soft, happy “Thanks. She’s - she’s doing well. Once she was out, we could help her. She’s walking again, and with her parents. I thought - I thought my heart was going to burst when I first saw her.”

“Happy ever after, hm?”

“I - oh no, not that way. But - I *am* happy, at least. I’m grateful for this. Oh. And I have something for you.”

“I get to join in the general festivities? How marvellous.”

“Well. They wouldn’t let me bring in anything but paper. But it’s the lyrics of all the Weird Sisters’ new songs. I thought you might like it.”

“... I wish you wouldn’t do this.”

“What?”

“Come in here, with fragile hope in your eyes and - looking better, and make me hate you. Make me think of what I’d do, if I had one of them given back to me, and make me want to kill you... and then make me not hate you. Maybe. As well.”

“I didn’t - mean to make you think of - anyone. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Thank you for the music.” *quietly* “It was kind of you.”

“I’m not kind. I wanted to.”

pleasantly “Why are you here, Potter?”

“I... I want to be here.”

“And why is that? I understood before. You wanted a link to your old life, a link that was strong enough and wouldn’t break. I understand that - I was your best bet. But now you have Granger back, almost from the dead. She loves you and you love her and it’s a miracle, and all you should be doing is thanking God on your knees by her bedside and feeling - happy and saved and oh, so free. So *what are you doing here?*”

“I don’t know! Did you expect me to just forget about you?”

“Why not?”

“Well, I didn’t! Yeah, it is a miracle, and yeah, I’m happy, and I wanted - to share it with you. I wanted to bring the music. I wanted to come!”

“But why? Damn you, it’s a simple question. Can’t you answer it?”

“What do you want from me?”

pause, low laughter “Ohhh, and that’s rather amusingly not the answer.”

“Don’t talk in fucking riddles, Malfoy. God, you are so infuriating.”

“Oh, you love it. Riddle me this, Potter... Come closer.”

“... Why?”

“To hand me the music, of course. I’d love to have a look.”

steps

smoothly “Thanks *so* much.” *knock of a wrist against bars*

“Malfoy, let go.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Malfoy, what the hell are you thinking?”

silky “I’m thinking I’m oh, so tired of this. Hmmm. Potter, how many men have you killed?”

“Wh - I don’t know.”

purring “Hundreds. Thousands, maybe? You ripped Millicent to shreds. Oh, there’s so much blood on these hands. And you *liked* shedding it, you know you did, oh, you always liked exacting savage revenge with your own hands. And God knows what all that blood has done to the darkest, most rotten recesses of your soul. You’re even afraid of what you might be, aren’t you? You ruthless, murdering bastard.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“I didn’t glory in it like you did. I don’t wake up wanting it now. And I really am a much more well-rounded personality.”

“You’re well-rounded like a *spike*, Malfoy. Let go of me!”

“On one hand oh, so full of black rage, capable of anything. And then...” *sing-song voice*
“*There was a war on for five years. I didn’t have time to think about romance.* That charmingly befuddled boy, oh so sweet, oh so awkward. At home in the torture chamber, but not in the bedroom. Doesn’t even know what he wants.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Maybe so. I know why you’re here. Want me to tell you?”

“Fuck off, Malfoy.”

“Shhh. Language, Potter. If your mother’s brain wasn’t dust, what *would* she think? No, shhhh, shhh. You’re going to listen now, Potter. You’re not as stupid as I thought you were.

You didn't come here for consolation or conversation. Oh, no. What did you think you were telling me, coming here week after week?"

"I *don't know*."

calmly "Shut the fuck up, Potter, please. Draco's talking here. You think that's normal, Potter? Oh, I'd like to read your diary, oh, I want to tell you all my troubles, oh don't send me away again, oh your eyes, oh your hair... I know why you remember that camp, back when we were younger, I know why you remember the bloody moths! So... tell me, Potter... why I shouldn't point out the *painfully* obvious, and stop all this... tiresome... *shit*."

swallow "Back *off*, Malfoy."

deliberately "Hmmm. No." **step in**

faltering "Malfoy, what are-"

"Shhhhh." **soft, wet sound**

feebly "Malfoy, you just - you just-"

throaty, amused "I just licked your upper lip, Potter. Pay attention. I would have kissed you, but it's a bit tricky manoeuvring with these bars. I think I got my point across - with just the lightest touch of kink. Now I'm going to do the lower lip... slower."

soft, wet, prolonged sound

heavy breathing "Malfoy... I... you..."

"Potter, you look like a virgin who's just been touched in naughty places. Try for a bit more coherence, there's a good chap."

soft sound of fingers trailing down cotton

rasp of breath, forehead against bars "Malfoy, what are - what are you *doing*?"

"I would have thought that was obvious. But if you want some kind of details... if you want some sort of game plan... I'm taking a detour in the general vicinity of your nipples. Do you like it?"

"I... I..."

"Be assured, I'm not planning to stop there."

"God, Malfoy!"

"I doubt he was one. I've heard they're all rotten to the core. And now you know that's true, don't you, Potter, so I think now I'll let go of your wrist and you can run out of here with a scream and your outraged innocence."

pause

“Potter, that was your cue to leave.”

pause

low voice “Potter, get away from the bars, or I’m going to do it again.”

strained “Don’t look at me like that. I’m trying to think.”

“What does that mean?”

snapped “I can’t think when you look at me like that!”

“Oh, no? How about when I touch you?”

pause

“Potter, are you going to move away from the bars or not!”

“... no.”

pause

knock on the door

“*Go away! We’re busy in here!*”

“What?! Shut up, Potter, no we’re not! That knock on the door means get lost, and I trust when you’ve recovered your senses you’ll see the wisdom of that-”

“Oh, God. All right, I’m going. I’m going. I’ll be back next week. Draco-”

“That’s *not my name!*”

“... yes it is.”

“Well, yes it is, I mean, obviously, it’s my name, I hadn’t forgotten, it’s what I was christened and all that, but in the sense of ‘that’s what you call me,’ *Potter*, that definitely is *not* my name!”

“Anyway, what I’m saying is we need to talk. So I’ll be back-”

“Don’t be. It is not the path of wisdom. Potter, will you listen to me! Potter, I’m telling you not to-”

sound of a door closing

“Potter! *Potter!* Oh... God.”

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*Part 9: *soft sound of a door opening**

softly “Hi, Draco.”

“Here you are, then. I suppose it won’t be any good telling you should leave?”

“Nah.”

“Nice shirt. Should I take it that you dressed up for me?”

mutter “Yes.”

“Perfect! Just perfect. Well, now you’re here - what do you want?”

mumble

“I can’t hear you.”

pause “Can - can I touch you?”

pause

“You don’t... waste time, do you, Potter? Well. Yes, of course you can.”

steps, clink of a watch against bars

“What - what are you doing?”

“I’m sorry. Is this not right?”

“It’s not that, it’s - why are you stroking my neck?”

“I like it. It - I like looking at it. It’s soft.”

“Oh.”

whisper sound of fingers against hair “I’ve been thinking about you all week.”

relaxed, lazy “Hmm?”

“Yes.” **clink of glasses against bars* *small soft sound of a kiss**

“Oh.”

low, tender “Yeah. Oh.” *quietly* “I love you.”

jump back “Oh God. Oh God. You’ve lost your mind. Get out of my cell! Maniac.”

indulgent “Come back here.”

“Ha! Ha! Muahahaha... ha... Do I *look* crazy to you?”

“Well, slightly. When you’re cackling like that. Come *back* here, Draco.” *pause* “Please.”

pause *steps*

“I am insane.”

clink of a watch against bars “Yeah. But it looks good on you.”

“Everything looks good on me. Even this appalling prison garment. Nevertheless, I am not looking my best, nor am I at my most physically accessible, so I’d like to know what the hell you think you’re doing.”

“You were right. I’ve been thinking about it.”

“I am utterly unsurprised at the thought of my being right in any and all situations. And I absolutely refuse to believe, given current evidence, that you *can* think.”

“Hush up, you talk too much. I like it, of course, but I have something to say and we only have an hour a week. You were right about the camp, but I didn’t realise - I - how could I? But I do now - and I’m glad I do.”

“You’re mad mad mad... Oh, *don’t*.”

“Shhh. I’ve been thinking about you, about having something that feels right. I’ve been thinking about what that would mean - to have someone - the right someone - to reach for after the nightmares. Something to make where I live seem like light and warmth and home.”

“A very charming idea, I’m sure, but-”

voice sharpening “Shut *up*. You’re very comfortable with the physical aspect of things, aren’t you, Malfoy? But when it comes to emotional territory-”

“We’re not in emotional territory! It takes two to territory!”

“Shut up and don’t talk about things you don’t understand. I didn’t have nightmares last night, or the night before. I dreamed about you. And the night before that, I couldn’t sleep at all, but I came to the prison and I stood on the hill outside, and I looked at your window.”

“You can’t see my window from the hill. I think you were looking at the window of Confucius the ogre.”

“I want you to stop doing this.”

“No, I want you to stop doing this! Listen to yourself, what the hell are you saying? Hearts and flowers, you’re so desperate for something sweet and light that you’ll dig yourself a grave looking for it. You come here all tremulous and honest and do you realise, this could be the last shred of honesty and dreams that you have, you can’t give it to me, do you know what I could *do* to you?”

“*Yes!*”

“You can’t - what?”

“Yes, I’ve thought about it. You have this image of me, Draco, and it’s so skewed, because that’s what you want to see. You want to see that boy who had all those high noble ideals, because you want to think that such things can survive after the war. Well, they can’t. I can only be like that... Sometimes. With you. And I *know* it wouldn’t always be like that, it’s not even always like that now! I know some days I’d look at you and see nothing but the blood you’ve shed, the blood your side shed, and your guilt and all the blackness.”

“That’s why-”

“I know sometimes it would be - we could be sharing a bed, and I would watch you sleep and think you were beautiful, and then search under my pillow for a knife.”

“You’re twisted.”

“So are you. Sometimes I would *hate* you, and there would be nothing to stop me from hurting you, I’d want it and I’d be able to do it and you’d deserve it, and the only reason I wouldn’t do it would be because despite everything, I can’t live without you!” **harsh breathing** “And you’d feel the same. I know that much. But it would all be right, because it wouldn’t be a lie, and I wouldn’t ever think you were dead in the darkness, because it would be real, flesh and bone and understanding, and it would be a life! The only life I can imagine having. And it would be hearts and flowers sometimes, and it would be blood and darkness sometimes, but it would be a life, and I have to have some kind of life. I have to have-”

shaken “You have to *think*-”

savagely “Don’t argue with me! I want you. Do you understand that? And I don’t much care what you say against it, or what I have to do. Is that unromantic enough for you? I want you. And I’m going to have you. This belongs to me, and no filthy Death Eater can take it away from me. Do you know what I’ve suffered, the pain and the blood and the filth... I’ve had a thousand nightmares. I can have this. You’re *mine*.”

“You are sick and extremely disturbed.”

sound of a body being pulled hard against bars and a zipper being undone

low voice “Yes.”

gasping “Oh God. Potter, please, stop.”

still low “No. I want you there for me when I come home from work. I want to see you listening to the Weird Sisters. I want to walk out on you on Christmas Day and be so furious and upset that I slip on some ice and fall in the gutter and sit there cursing and screaming and still wanting you.”

movement, more gasping “Oh God.”

lower, and almost menacing “I admit it, is that what you wanted to hear last week? I didn’t even think about what I was doing, but I kept the image of you back in that camp, until it became part of who I am. I’m set now, set in blood and steel, I can’t love anyone else, and I want to, I wish I could, I didn’t mean to memorise the curve of your throat...”

low moan “Please-”

tenderly, but still almost menacing “I am who I am and you are who you are. And it’s twisted, and wrong, and I still want you. As my one pure thing and as my whore. I want you. Do you understand *now*?”

“Please!”

voice sinking lower than the moans “You’re beautiful.”

strained and breaking “My - my face is too pointy.”

“I know. You’re beautiful. When I was thinking about you, oh God, for years, when I was thinking about you every night...”

“... yes...”

murmuring “I didn’t know I was thinking about this. What you’d look like - right now - just about to-”

“Yes...”

“I love you.”

“Yes!”

sagging against the bars, brush of the other hand over hair and skin

softly repeated “I love you.”

shakily “Your logic is compelling, Potter, but you overlook a few salient details. Such as the fact that I’m incarcerated for life. I can’t even kiss you properly, let alone move in with you.”

“I’ll use some pull. I’ll use Snape’s letters. I’ll do anything I have to. I’ll work it out.”

“Oh, how lovely. My life will be flung into the palm of your hand just so I can be your sex toy.”

“If that was all you were, I’d kill you within the week.”

“You’ll want to.”

“Oh, yes. And you’ll want to. Almost every second of every day, I’ll see a knife in your eyes.”

“What if you did get me out - and I did kill you?”

“Then you would.”

knock on the door

“I’ll be back next week. Don’t argue with me.”

“Even I sometimes get tired of wasting my breath.”

soft, sideways kiss “I love you.”

soft exhalation of breath, kiss back “You’re a fool.”

“Mmm.”

“Mmm.”

step back “Goodbye. Oh, and Draco?”

“Yes?”

“Clean yourself up.”

*

Part 10: *soft sound of a door opening*

“Draco - I’m so sorry.”

lazily “What? Why?”

“I... Oh God, you haven’t heard?”

“My gracious me, all the company I keep and I still can’t manage to catch all the gossip. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“Draco, don’t. Draco - the Ministry - I showed them your letters, but they... They only took them as proof that you were a traitor. Not just an honourable enemy, but-”

“The wolf in the fold, the viper they nourished in their bosoms? Quite. Well, it was to be expected, I suppose. You know how unsettled things are, and they don’t have many scapegoats left. An officer, the son of the late leader of the notorious and noxious Death Eaters - a new scandal about him is bound to provide a distraction from the latest tax hike, isn’t it?”

voice softening “So you don’t think - anything will happen to you?”

“A slap on the wrist, I expect. If I’m lucky, they’ll cut out my therapeutic sessions with Confucius. Which would be a shame, since I think we had a breakthrough this week. He told me his name. I gently pointed out that it was on his door, but still.”

“I was - worried about you.”

coolly “Your concern is touching, Potter.”

“Say Harry.”

“No, I don’t think so.” *small grimace* “I think it’s time I stopped this embarrassing little farce.”

“*What?*”

“It was amusing at first, but now it’s just descended into the realm of the - well, vile, and very disturbing. I *really* don’t want you to spout any more of the drivel you did last time.”

“You didn’t object last time!”

dryly “It’s hard to form a coherent argument when you’re being jerked off.” *pause* “Do you know how long it had been since anyone touched me, Potter? Can you blame me?”

“What have you done?”

“It wasn’t a concerted evil plot, for once. But you showed up, all wide-eyed and unbalanced and obviously, pathetically obsessed. And it had been months since someone touched me - and you’re a good deal more appealing than Confucius the ogre.” *shrug* “What can I tell you?”

“You’re lying.”

“I was desperate.”

“You’re lying!”

“What reason do I have to lie? I had a reason then - not that I did. I didn’t have to. I just had to stand there and let you talk, and you couldn’t take your hands off me. You can remember, can’t you? Did I ever once echo one of your nauseating sentiments? At least I spared us that indignity.”

“Why should it have been an indignity?”

“Because it made my stomach turn to hear you! Knives in the fucking bed, what kind of mind comes up with those things? I don’t want to have this place - my last place - defiled with the rantings of a twisted pervert. Especially since it wasn’t even worth it.”

“What - what do you mean?”

“Let me make myself painfully clear. I’ve done a much better job on myself. And with the restriction of bars, it was obvious that those amateurish fumbblings were all I could expect. And... I thought it would be easier to pretend. I thought it couldn’t be too different. But the thought of returning the favour was sickening.”

“Malfoy, what the hell are you saying?”

savagely “I’m saying I like *women*, Potter. Girls. The ones with the breasts. I thought I’d just grab for what I could take, but the idea of rummaging around in your pants for your - urch, manly parts... while your eyes bulge and you mumble out some more disgusting fantasies... Let’s just say I don’t find it appealing.”

“You’re trying to send me away for my own good-”

“Of course I think it’d be psychologically healthier for you to stay away from me! But I’m not all that concerned with your mental health, Potter, which is a good thing since it seems distinctly fragile to me. I just want you gone from my life. I can’t take this any more.”

“You’re saying this because-”

hissed “I’m saying this because you make me *ill*, Potter! Why must you cherish this persistent delusion that I care about you? I don’t. I never did. I never even said I did. I don’t care what happens to you as long as you stay the hell away from me!”

“I can’t!”

“I don’t even want to *look* at you. I *hate* you. Which part of this do you not understand?”

heavy breathing “I can’t - why would you-”

“I told you. I was desperately, painfully lonely. I would have done anything for a human touch. But for once in my life... I have to be honest. I can’t do this. I don’t want to.”

“Malfoy, please-”

“Don’t say please as if I could do something about it. I can’t. I’m trapped in a cell already - I don’t want to be trapped in your warped little fantasy. All I can do is remember my dead and

I don't want to be touched by hands red with their blood. Your touch makes my skin *crawl*. I don't want it! I don't want you."

half-way between a cry and a snarl "All *right!*" *calming slightly* "Y ou've made your point."

"Do you understand it?"

"I understand it." *coldly* "Was it fun?"

"What?"

"Manipulating me. Watching me... letting me think - I - Was it fun? Did you enjoy it? Do you like it, that old medieval Muggle torture, tearing beating hearts out of chests and watching them slowly come to a stop and letting the victim watch too, and gasp as the blood leaks?"

"I'm not the one with the sick kicks here!"

"Could've fooled me." *savagely* "I *hate* you."

"Fine."

"What?"

deliberately "I said 'fine,' Potter. As in 'fine by me.' See if I care. Your opinion means less than nothing to me and all I want from you is your absence. Have I not made myself sufficiently clear?"

"Is being cruel your aim in life?"

"No, it's just my shiny life bonus."

"Would you *stop* it!" *harsh breathing* "Fine. I'll go. If that's what you want, I'll leave and I'll never come back."

steely “That’s what I want.”

“All right. I’m sorry I ever bothered with you.”

“So am I.”

“I… Goodbye.” *clink of watch against bars* *pause* “It would be all right to take my hand. It’s a - formal ceremony. A sealing of the goodbye. It isn’t that big a deal - no matter how much my touch *sickens* you.”

light, amused “Don’t be so touchy, Potter. I daresay it won’t kill me.”

brush of skin against skin, sudden clink of sharp metal against the bars

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

attempt to pull away, shocked gasp

“Jesus, Potter, put away the knife! You’re not even supposed to have that in here!”

“Oh, I always make sure to have a weapon on me. Look - it’s even charmed not to set the alarm off. I owe you for that - you told me about it.”

“Take it away!”

“Tell me you love me.”

“… what?”

“I think you heard me.”

“Oh, I hear you, I just don’t understand you! What’s the *matter* with you? I don’t love you. I never did. Get that knife off me!”

“I don’t give a damn what you feel. I want to hear you say it!”

shouting “Why? What difference would it make?”

“I have to hear you say it!”

“Fuck off, you sick bastard. I’m not going to.”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Then *do* it! Just stop talking! I’m *tired* of all this talking!”

“If words are all I can have - I’m going to have them. I’m going to hear you tell me that. Once. Now.”

“*No!*”

pause, small cry

softly “I can sink it in. Slowly. I can do it, I’ve done it before, until you’ll tell me everything I want to hear. I want to do it.”

suppressed scream

softer “Tell me that you love me.”

sound of a door opening

incredulous “*Fudge?*”

“Now, now, Mr. Potter. I understand the news that Mr Malfoy is even more treacherous than we supposed has hit you hard. But don’t try to get your own revenge. There’s much worse in store for him.”

*

Part 11: *soft sound of a door opening*

sound of weighted footsteps

“Well, Potter. This is a surprise. I can only think of one meeting place less comfortable than a jail cell, and it’s a meeting with one person in chains, in the anteroom to...”

voice taut with pain “Don’t! Don’t say it.”

“You won’t have to undergo it.”

“... I know. As soon as I heard - I did everything I could. I-”

negligently “Oh yes, yes, your efforts were tireless, I’m sure.”

“Will you stop being such a *stupid bastard*! You know what’s - what’s going to happen to you in there, in that room, in - God, an hour, how can you be so-”

“I’ll be whatever way I like. It’s no concern of yours, or have you forgotten our last talk?”

cold, flat “You know that you’re going to be Kissed in an hour. You know that everything you say - everything! - is going to haunt me for the rest of my life.”

“And yet I really couldn’t care.”

“God. I hope you rot in hell.”

“The significant difference between rotting in hell and rotting in prison is that you’re unlikely to visit. For a while, at least.”

sharp breath “How can you be so-”

“No, how dare you come here! This is my last hour of life, do you think I want to spend it being told how to act, having you inflict your-”

“I thought you might want someone here who loves you!”

pause, then in clipped tones “Your perversions are of absolutely no interest to me. And no, I don’t want you here. Why should I?”

“I... had to come.”

“And so the truth comes out.”

“Why should I care about your feelings? You never cared anything about mine, you’ve made that painfully clear.”

“Quite so.”

“I wanted to see you again, and so I came. I don’t care if this is your last hour; I want it. I can be as selfish and as brutal as you.”

“So I see.”

quietly “But I did fight it. I would have done anything to get the sentence reversed. I did fight it.”

“Very touching.”

“Oh, Jesus!”

“You wouldn’t hit a man in handcuffs, would you, Potter?”

thump of two bodies against a wall

“Well, I suppose that answers that.” *voice sharpening* “Now get away from me.”

“Like hell I will. I don’t care if you don’t love me. I don’t care if this is your last hour. I don’t care that your malicious little mind is going to be sucked out of your mouth, I only wish that I could do it, that I had the power, so I could have your mouth and your soul at once...”

kiss

deadly cold “I said, get the hell away from me.”

intense “And I said, the hell I will. I don’t care, I don’t - I won’t even think of it. I don’t have to. Oh God, Draco, how can they do it? How can they - I hope it hurts, you bastard. I hope it’s fucking agony. Oh God, please keep looking at me, then nothing can happen-”

“Get your face out of my *neck*. You *disgust* me-”

“When I heard, I thought it serves him right, and I was so glad. Then I smashed everything in my apartment.”

“Are you crying, Potter? How unbelievably pathetic. Did you cry like this about the Weasels, about every last one of them, even little Virginia? Or do you only cry for the ones you want to-”

fist against flesh, sound of someone slammed to their knees

“Most heroic, Potter. Hitting a man who’s in handcuffs. I think my lip’s cut open, I do hope it doesn’t discommode the Dementor-”

hissed “Stop talking like this!”

“If you don’t want to hear me talk, get out. I wish you would. What did you come here to hear me say? To see the light, see your great *love*, leave you with some soft words? It doesn’t

change anything. I'm going to - I'm going to worse than die, and I still can't love you, and I don't want to." *spits out blood, slowly tries to stand* "So go to *hell*. I don't want your pity, I don't want your touch and the one good thing - the one good thing is that I never have to listen to you again."

yanks him up by his hair

hissing "I'm so glad they're ripping out your black little soul from the filthy depths of your being. I'm going to listen at the door, and remember your screaming, and it'll keep me warm at night forever."

cool "How precisely do you mean that?"

"Shut up!"

"No, *you* shut up! I don't want to leave this world with nothing but your words ringing in my ears, not as the last thing, not for always, not your endless *stupid* words-"

"I don't care what you want." *press of bodies against wall* "Have I not made that clear? I can."

"Step away from me, or I'll be sick."

"Oh God, I hate you." *soft sound of a sob*

"Get *away*!"

"... You're so pale. Are you scared?"

"... Yes, of course I am. I'm so scared I can barely stand up straight, I don't need this, please stop-"

"No." *soft, frantic whisper* "God, you're shaking. Oh God. I can't bear it. Don't stop, keep talking, I want to know you still can, I *can't* stop-"

"I don't want this!"

savagely "I don't care! Lift your face. I want to see you, I - Draco, why are you crying?"

"Because I'm scared!"

"I'm glad. I hope you are. I hope you're so scared it's twisting your intestines. Oh, damn you, don't you think I'm scared? It's been two months and I haven't been here and now you're not going to be anywhere and oh God, I hate you, how can you do this to me? I can't bear it..."

"I told you to stop this!"

hungry licking "I don't care. I said I didn't care. Oh, Draco, I *hate* you-"

wrench away *quick breathing* "No, Potter." *coldly* "I hate you."

door opening

“I’m sure your feelings are not particularly interesting to Mr. Potter, especially since you will presently have none. It’s time.”

small, dreadful pause

“Draco.”

strained “I’m ready, Fudge.”

“Draco-”

“Oh, but what are suitable last words? Those who are about to die salute you? And forever, my brother, hail and farewell?”

steps

muted “Those aren’t your words.”

softly “Well, Harry. Did you ever really want to hear what I was saying?”

sound of a door closing

“At last justice is served. We should have done this years ago.”

“I wish to God you had.”

“Are you - all right, Mr. Potter?”

“Fine. Just shut up. I want to hear - something.”

“Oh, they usually don’t get in more than one scream.”

“Oh Christ.” *thump*

“Mr. Potter... your fist is bleeding.”

savagely “That doesn’t mean I care. I *like* blood - surely you’ve heard that? I like pain, I hope to God he screams...”

silence

sound of a door opening

“It’s done.”

*

Part 12: *soft sound of a door opening*

“I really don’t see why we have to go *look* at-”

quietly “Shut up, Fudge. Just shut up. I... oh my God.”

fastidious “I know, it’s rather vile, isn’t it?”

soft “Oh God, Draco.”

“It’s the empty - Mr. Potter, what are you doing?”

brush of hand on cheek “Oh God.” *steps away, violent slam of a hand against stone* “Oh God. I can’t bear it.” *low, violent* “I can’t, I *can*’t-”

“You’ve split open your *hand*, man. Come on, let’s get away from it.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“What can happen to it, now? Throw it back into the jail. Nobody’ll bother to spoon-feed it, it might eat by itself. Usually they don’t. What does it matter? The bodies die after a while, they always do.”

pause *low sound of dry heaving*

“Mr. Potter, you’re *not* well, you’re going to-”

“Don’t touch me!” *pause* “I’ll take him.”

“What? Of course you won’t-”

“I will. Why shouldn’t I? He’s not a prisoner anymore, is he, he’s not a criminal, you have to be a person to be a criminal. He’s just a - worthless piece of rubbish you’re chucking into a cell until he dies, an inconvenience, he’s nothing and you want to be rid of him as soon as possible. Well - I’ll take him.”

“Nobody could expect you to-”

“I don’t think you’re understanding me. I’m *going* to take him.” *hard voice* “He’s nothing now. Isn’t that right? You’re done with him. All of you. It’s a - kind of safety, having and being nothing. He doesn’t own himself, he doesn’t even have a self, and you don’t want what’s left.”

“It’s a *thing*-”

“I want him. And I’m going to have him. He’s *mine*.”

“Look, Mr. Potter, I think you need to-”

whip of a knife through the air *softly* “I need you not to tell me what to do. Understand this - I’d rather like to kill you.”

faint scared sound

“I’m going to take him. I’m going to keep him. Don’t you dare even question me.”

gasp “Are you completely *crazy*?”

bright smile “Maybe.” *quick steps, helping upright* “Come on, Draco. We’re going home.”

*

soft sound of a door opening

“Here it is. This is home.”

pause

“Well. Something like home. Sirius helped me choose it. He said it was in - a good location for socialising, that it was near his house. But then - well. You know. He was killed by one of the stray Death Eaters, before we could round them up. One of *your* people. Six years and then after the surrender, after he thought it was safe... I wanted to have you all rounded up and shot.

It’s a mess. Sorry.”

sound of steps, one set shuffling and slow

“The kitchen and the sitting room have big windows. That’s what I liked it about it. I... used to like the light coming through the windows at sunset, when Sirius was alive and there was hope left. And then... when... I liked it again, I thought about you standing here with the red light in your hair, and how you would look, and I watched it - for your sake.”

silence

bitterly “And here you are. Oh, God!” *pause* “I - hadn’t bought any furniture except for a bed. But then I saw this couch, and I thought, I thought you might like to sit on it and read a book, and you might rest your head on my shoulder while you did it.” *longer pause*
slowly “I... suppose I can still do that.

Sit down, then - here - like this. And I’ll put a book in your lap. It’s about - the Dement... about people who’ve had done to them what was done to you. It says things like - they still have motor functions, like babies, like animals, and they’re disturbed by loud or unpleasant

noises - I couldn't stand reading it, I couldn't stop reading it. But it's all right now. It's just a book."

silence, sound of fingers through hair

slow, almost dreamy "It's so soft. I thought about this, too, when I could only reach to touch a few strands behind your ear. Just having all of your hair to stroke - I thought that might make me happy."

long silence, soft continuous sound of fingers through hair

rousing

"I should make dinner... I thought about that, too. About how I should feed you, because - God, you're so thin. I thought that we could learn what the other liked to eat, but not wanting to seem weak enough to ask what it was and having to watch, and I thought we could take turns cooking and you'd complain and..." *vibrato of pain* "I don't even know if you can cook. I never will know now. I could have known what you liked to eat, I could have watched you at school, but I didn't and now it's all lost and..."

choked-off sob

roughly "Come on, get up. This way. You can come into the kitchen - you're going to stay with me now, I'm not going to let you out of my sight."

hasty steps and the shuffling, the sound of a stumble and a hasty grab

"Oh, God - Draco. I'm sorry. I was angry, I wasn't paying attention. I'm sorry. I wouldn't let you fall. I never would."

careful steps towards the kitchen

"Stand here... That's right. I'm going to make - something. I don't know. Something. I could chop some vegetables or - Jesus. This is all so stupid." *sudden fury* "You don't care what I make. You don't care about anything - you never cared about anything. Or maybe you did, I don't know, it doesn't make a difference, you never cared about me and that's enough. I couldn't ever make you feel anything, and now you can't ever feel anything again, for anyone. So it's the same as it's always been. It doesn't matter."

pause

musing "I *could* make you feel again, though. Of course I could. You still have nerve endings, you can still scream. I could put this knife-" *slide of metal out of a sheath* "- against that beautiful throat and I could draw it across, I know how to do it, I've done it a thousand times before. And then you'd be nothing more than all the others. You do deserve it. You deserve anything you get - even this."

You said once that you never loved pain like I did, but you were lying, weren't you? Because you have to love pain, to be so good at causing it, you have to love it enough to have made it bloody art... You lied, and what can you say now?

voice raised “People have screamed and burned because of you before this, haven’t they, you fucking Death Eater, you who liked to crawl in filth and blood. I *should* do it and nobody would blame me, nobody would even care - but I won’t do it, because you *belong* to me, and you’re not getting away!”

pause, then soothingly

“Shhh. There. I’m sorry. Don’t flinch, I’m sorry, I forgot about the noise upsetting you. I’m just going to cook now, and we’ll just - we’ll just be quiet.”

prolonged silence, filled with the sound of cooking

“I think chicken and rice should be safe. Everyone likes chicken and rice, and besides... you should eat something. Anything. You’re terribly thin. I’ll - okay. Here. I’ll feed you a spoonful and then I’ll eat a spoonful and we’ll be eating together. That’s right. Hmm. Careful.”

sounds of eating

“There, that wasn’t so bad. I thought about our first meal, too, and - and that wasn’t so bad. I - I’m sorry, I’ll come back, I-”

running into another room, the sound of vomiting *sound of running water*

steps back

voice trembling “You’re still here. I was only gone for a second and - it doesn’t make any sense, but I thought you’d be gone. I - God, I didn’t ever mean to be afraid or to panic again. You make other people lie too, don’t you. You devil. You make me...”

voice softening “I could tell you all the times I thought about you, all the ways I thought about you here. You were supposed to sit on that couch with your head on my shoulder and you were supposed to eat in my kitchen and it was supposed to be our kitchen. I wanted you to be here in any kind of way - in every way. You were supposed to have your clothes in the wardrobe and your coat on the rack and this was supposed to be *home*, home at last, because there was *you*, and...”

raw, muffled “I hate you.”

pause

“... You’re filthy. You smell of sweat and your clothes are dirty. No wonder you’re not - that’s not right. Okay. Come on then. I’ll run you a bath.”

careful steps

“Sit here... That’s right. Now...”

taps being turned, water running steadily

“Good. Now - let me just get your shirt off - right, that’s it...” *rustle of fabric* “And... I... Oh.”

pause, hesitant touch

“I’ve never... I... Oh God, Draco.” *husky* “I thought about you so often.”

slow sucking kiss into a collarbone

pause

“Oh my God, what am I...? Oh God. Oh Christ. I’ve got to - I’ve got to get out of here, I *can’t*.”

sound of running steps

slow, constant flow of water

dull sound of a door being slammed shut

*

soft sound of a door opening

staggering, slight stumble

slightly slurred “I - Draco?”

splash

“I... oh, I *left* you here, and the water was running, and you could have... tipped forward or drowned or, oh...” *slam of a body against a wall* “How could you be so *stupid*? Can’t you even put your shirt back on, how can there be - be nothing left, how could it be so easy to lose you...”

rapid breathing

slowly “No, not lose. I never had you, did I, my darling? Oh, my darling. I never could have called you that... you would have laughed...”

slow, lingering kiss

“You made me afraid and you made me suffer, and you... Oh, you did deserve this. You deserve anything anyone could do to you, you’re so cruel and you - you *bastard*, how could you? Look what you’ve done... look what you’ve done to me...”

desperate kissing

panting “You evil bastard. You deserve everything you get. Oh God, Draco...”

steps, the creak of a door opening

creak of bedsprings

more kissing, soft slide of skin on skin

heavy breathing, soft cries

a moan

“Oh God, I love you.”

soft click of a door swinging gently shut

*

Part 13: *soft sound of a door opening*

“Hello? Harry? I found this key in the bottom of my dresser, can you believe-? Oh, there you are. Come here and give me a hug.”

steps from the kitchen

“Hermione. It’s good to see you.”

“I was worried about you. You’ve been so - and anyway, I knew you’d visited Draco Malfoy now and then, and when he was Kissed yesterday - I thought you might need a friend.”

“I’m all right... Do you know if porridge is nourishing?”

“Sorry? Oh, Harry, you’re *cooking*! That’s good, you’re so thin... You look even thinner than you did a week ago. You’ve got dark circles under your eyes and - oh, Harry, have you been sick...? You look - terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“No, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it. It’s good to see you smiling and - hey, with that dishtowel over your arm, you look awfully domestic. I’m really hap - Oh Jesus Christ!”

jump back against the door

“Hermione. I’m sorry he startled you, I know you weren’t expecting-”

“God, what is it doing here?”

“He’s sitting on a chair. We’re about to have breakfast. Well, Hermione, he had nowhere else to go after... He’s staying here.”

“It’s grotesque!”

“Hermione! He doesn’t... he doesn’t look all that different.”

“Harry, you can’t keep it in here. That’s morbid, Harry, it will give you nightmares. Give it back to the authorities, I know you must feel - you’re so decent - obliged to it or something-”

snarled “He’s not going *anywhere*.”

“Harry, look at it! Look at its eyes. They’re so - oh God, it’s *horrible*, that blank leeching emptiness. You can’t feel sorry enough for it to keep it here. You’re already not well. It wouldn’t be good for you.”

coldly “It’s none of your business, Hermione. Let anybody try to take him away from me.”

“I... God, Harry, are those your *clothes* on that thing?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. I washed him this morning and found him some clothes. The black jumper goes well with his hair, doesn’t it?”

high voice “Harry, what are you *doing*?”

“How do you mean?”

“Stop touching that thing!”

“Sorry, I didn’t realise.”

“Harry, please get your hand off its hair.”

“Sorry. Do you want some porridge?”

“No, I think I’m going to be sick! Harry, please, I can’t stand looking at it for much longer. You have to realise, this isn’t like - like someone who’s handicapped. Tending it doesn’t matter, it’s a *body*. It’s a shell. Its soul is gone forever, do you understand that? It’s not human!”

“Hermione, don’t shout. Loud noises upset him.”

voice wobbling “Harry, look at it.”

“In a moment. I have to spoon out the porridge.”

sound of porridge being poured into a bowl

“Harry, aren’t you going to have any-?”

“Oh, no, I’m not very hungry. He needs to eat, though. Come on, Draco. It’s all right. You see, Hermione? I’m looking at him. He’s eating his porridge. Everything - will be all right.”

“Harry, you can’t do this.”

tranquil “Hermione, you don’t understand.”

“Harry, no, I do. I visited Azkaban yesterday. I know all about it, but Harry, you mustn’t blame yourself. You mustn’t feel any kind of duty towards it. He was a savage killer - he was a traitor, and even he doesn’t exist anymore. He - oh, Harry, if anyone deserves this he did, and you can’t let yourself be trapped in this nightmare just because he thought he was in love with you!”

pause

blankly “What?”

“Whatever weird, perverse fascination he had with you - Harry, don’t feel guilty, it was just a part of his twisted psyche. It wasn’t - ugh, Harry, it wasn’t *normal* -”

bitterly “Hermione, I think you’ve got hold of the wrong end of the stick here. He wasn’t -”

“Harry, I’ve read his diary!”

pause

voice trembling “What?”

“They - they were clearing out his cell, and I took it, and I read some parts, and -”

“*Where is it?*”

“I have it here - Harry!” *sharp cry* “Give it -”

ruffle of pages

desolate voice “I can’t - I can’t see to read it. I - I’ll do it later. Draco has to have his food.”

shove back of papers “I’m sorry, Draco. I’m sorry. Here. Oh, it’s all right, it’s all perfectly all right, you’re with me...”

“Harry, don’t touch its face! I don’t like it - Oh, Harry, are you crying?”

viciously “No!”

“I - I’ll read it to you, if you like. Is that what you want?”

“All right.”

“‘September 21st - Today I was told that they were going to administer the Dementor’s Kiss-”

“What? No, Hermione - you’ve got that wrong - I talked to him on the 23rd, and he didn’t - he told me he’d probably just get a slap on the wrist-”

“Harry, exactly! He was lying to you. He may have had good motives, but he was deceiving you, you don’t owe him a thing-”

voice fraying “What are you *talking* about?”

“I’ll read out the rest of the entry! *‘I’ve noticed that there are a few things sheer selfishness can’t save you from - which is a shame, since then I’d be buckled in triple armour. They’re going to administer the Kiss after this whole lonely pointless struggle, and there’s the paralysing terror and panic that came upon me sometimes in the war... that chill which wraps around you like a nightmare lover. I didn’t even know about that creeping chill during the war - it’s only in the dreams that I realise I felt it. Because back in the war, there was always something you could be strong for. My parents, my friends, my men, Pansy...*

The need for a beloved talisman against nightmares. God, humans are pathetic creatures sometimes.

Harry can’t know yet.

I warned him. I tried to warn him, and if he keeps hanging onto those images he has, onto his belief that - something could be saved from all of this wreckage...

It’s much like an amputation. It’s cruel, but it will save him - and I’ve always been talented at cruelty. And after all, it doesn’t take anything real from him, even if it takes away that stupid warmth, that one last thing I’ve been hanging onto so tenaciously through the nights...

I can’t question it, I don’t want to explore the full depths of all this hopelessness. I don’t want to think about what I want or those idiotic beautiful dreams. I don’t want to end without dignity, in a screaming clinging ball of terror.

And I won’t see him destroyed. He has to be cut cleanly away.

In the end, it’s always nightmares and one image to hold against them. He does understand that.

He’ll be the talisman, and saving him will keep me from this humiliating horror and loss. And it’ll be all for the best, and he’ll forget, and I’ll won’t have the chance to disgrace myself in those last few minutes.

Oh, but I do love him. God help me, God damn him, but I do.’”

small, terrible sound

“Harry - Harry, please, don’t. I know you must feel dreadful, I know you never meant to hurt even someone like him, but you have to remember that he was evil, utterly utterly-”

savagely “Shut the fuck up, Hermione! If he was evil, what was I? You sat in your research rooms with your books, your *books*, and I drowned in blood. You would never believe that about me. *Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?* Yes I did. Yes I do. Didn't you ever wonder what happened after we captured Millicent Bulstrode and I sent you out of the room? You never asked, but you have such perfect faith in me, you must believe I did the right thing. Do you want to know what I did to her?”

“No! Harry!”

“What do you want me to do to *you*? You're lying. This isn't real.”

swift steps, shove of a body against a wall

“I don't believe you. It's not true. He never loved me, he-“ *shouting* “Why the hell did you have to tell me that, you lying *bitch*!”

terrified “Harry-”

sound of someone standing up

step back, voice soft “Draco, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Hush. There. Sit back down.”

brush hand against hand, shoulder, cheek *deep breath* *pause*

“There. Shhh... I'm sorry, Hermione, I didn't mean to scare you. Of course he wrote it.”
voice lower “It sounds like him. He's funny, did you know?” *soft laugh* “In a really infuriating way. I never really realised how funny when I was with him, it was usually when I got back home and had one of those nightmares, and then I'd sit up and think about what he'd said, and it would - he could make me smile.”

voice trembling “Harry, I'm begging you. Can't you - what's the matter with you, that you keep hovering around that thing and touching it and staring at it - can't you stop?”

“What?”

“Harry, *please* stop touching it!”

“I told you not to raise your voice.”

faintly “I - Harry, are you trying to tell me that - that you had feelings for - that thing?”

pause *sudden sharp laugh*

“*Feelings?*”

“Don't look like that-”

“I love him.”

“Oh God. Harry.”

“I love him. He’s - oh God, he’s everything in the world to me, do you understand that? I’m so ridiculously, painfully obsessed with him that I can recognise his heartbeat, I’d sell my soul for him, I’d sell anything for him, for one more second, just to hear his voice and I’m in *hell*, oh Christ, Hermione. It was nothing but bleakness before him and then he was the whole world and I can’t even get back to bleakness and it hurts so much I can’t think, I don’t want to do anything but scream and even when I’m lying right beside him he’s not there, he’s never going to be anywhere ever again-”

faint, sick “Lying beside him?”

raw “I can’t bear it. I love him so much it hurts to breathe.”

“Harry, what have you *done*?”

“... I don’t know. Oh, God, Draco, how could you think that I’d forget you, how could you pretend - oh God, Draco, please, you can’t have loved me, you can’t have been trying to save me when I-”

“Harry, it can’t hear you!”

“You *bastard*, you can’t have thrown away those last weeks - oh God, the last weeks. Tell me you didn’t do it, are you insane to think that I’d stop loving you if you did or said anything... anything at all... You destroy me even when you’re trying to save me, and God *damn* you, you have to talk to me! I hope you’re burning in hell, I hope you’re in fucking agony, how could you love me and - oh Draco, Draco, *please*...”

fall to hands and knees, violent vomiting

“Harry - Harry, you’re scaring me!”

tenderly, almost secretively “I can’t bear it.” *leaning against him* “You see why you have to be all right, you absolutely have to. I’ll kill you if you don’t speak to me, please, darling, you never even said-” *soft kiss on the neck* “I can’t have... I can’t live like this.”

“Harry, get up, get away from it, you have to listen to me-”

voice muffled against the jumper “Draco, I can’t have - Oh God, *please*, oh God, I love you so much.”

strained to the point of tears “I don’t understand *anything*, Harry, oh, you have to tell me, you have to get help...”

exhausted tones “I’ll kill anyone who tries to take you away from me. You’ll come back, Draco, you have to-”

crying “Harry... please, I’m so scared.”

“*Draco*.” *raw, choked sobbing against the wool* “I love you. Oh, I love you so much...”

“Harry! Oh, Harry, don’t do this to me, don’t leave me all alone, please look at me, please try... Harry, stop making that sound, I can’t bear it. Harry, for God’s sake talk to me!”

finis

A Distinctly Different Manner of Finding Prince Charming

It was six minutes into their fifth year start-of-term banquet, and Vivien thought that Minerva would kill someone before ten minutes were up.

“It is amazing that I only realise how stupid people can be at my place of education,” she remarked in a loud voice.

Sarcasm was not getting through to Rosemary and Poppy. Minerva looked like she was considering using a fork.

“A famous duellist!” Rosemary squeaked. “It’s so *exciting!*”

“Men, men, men,” Minerva said in her most severe voice. “The latest Quidditch star, the handsomest singer, and now even a new celebrity professor they haven’t even laid eyes on. Is that all they ever think about?”

Vivien and Minerva had been best friends since first year, on the basis that they were the Gryffindor pair who everyone thought truly belonged in Ravenclaw. Minerva was a loyal friend, a basically nice person and an excellent study partner, but occasionally Vivien found her just a little alarming.

She thought the boys of Hogwarts might agree with her, since nobody tended to approach Minerva, despite the fact she was undeniably attractive. Apart from times like these, when she wore an expression suggesting she’d swallowed a ruler.

Of course, it might be the open scorn that was putting them off.

“Well, you like Quidditch,” Vivien pointed out gently.

“Naturally,” said Minerva. “It’s a very good game, and offers great opportunities to the skilled employer of strategy. Also this year we are going to murder Slytherin, the cheating scum, and collect the Quidditch Cup wading through their scattered limbs.”

Minerva was the best Beater the Gryffindor team had ever had. She had an unfortunate habit of tapping her bat meaningfully against one boot during practise, though, and the rest of the team’s nerves were always shot before they ever played any actual games.

“It wasn’t your fault we didn’t do that last year,” Vivien commented. “We all thought you’d killed poor little Tommy.”

“He was *cheating*,” Minerva objected, violently. “Sneakily. When other people couldn’t see.”

“He was twelve,” Vivien insisted. “It was his very first match, and you hit him in the head with that Bludger.”

Tommy was the Slytherin Seeker, and he was actually quite a sweet boy. He had been as green as his robes when they carried him off the pitch.

“Served him right,” Minerva said, shrugging. She narrowed her green eyes at Rosemary and Poppy, and Vivien knew she was contemplating how she could use a bat and a Bludger this minute.

“I’ll just faint when I see him,” Poppy said happily. “The man who conquered the Unruly Unicorn!”

“I wonder if he’d sign a photo?” Rosemary speculated.

“I wonder why he’s not even at the feast?” Minerva countered. “Maybe he isn’t going to take his teaching post seriously and he plans to coast on his celebrity and make us all fail our OWLs?”

“Minerva, an earthquake couldn’t make you fail your OWLs,” Vivien said.

Minerva looked agitated. “This is a very important year for us! An incompetent teacher would be absolutely unacceptable! We certainly don’t need some useless pretty boy ruining our academic records!”

Rosemary and Poppy sighed collectively.

“He is pretty, isn’t he?” Rosemary said dreamily. “Have you seen the pictures? Have you seen his adorable puppy dog eyes?”

“I’m a cat person,” Minerva informed her coldly.

“You take things too seriously, Minnie,” said Poppy.

Minerva beat her steak and kidney pudding with a spoon. “Don’t call me Minnie,” she said in an ominous tone.

They were too busy watching the door to notice that their housemate was being driven towards insanity.

“Just think,” sighed Rosemary, “he could come through the door any-”

The doors burst open.

Framed in them was the object of every schoolgirl’s fantasy this summer, the hero of the battle with the Unruly Unicorn, the newest and youngest professor in Hogwarts.

Filius Flitwick looked almost exactly like his picture. He did seem a bit more anxious, though, with his brown eyes wide and his golden-brown hair over-long and in a bit of a mess.

There was also the fact that he was three feet tall.

“I’m so sorry!” he said in a pleasant voice that went a bit high-pitched as he looked around at all the staring students. “The Floo network in Peru was down, but it was essential that I gather firsthand information on the voodoo charms in the Peruvian eastern regions. Please forgive me.”

“Well,” Vivien said in the deep hush that followed, “that was unexpected.”

Rosemary and Poppy looked like they might cry.

Minerva was looking slightly mollified, however.

“Peru does have a fascinating history of charmwork,” she admitted. “And I suppose that having an experienced duellist onstaff can’t hurt.”

“I don’t see why you have to rub this in, Minnie,” Rosemary said in a trembling voice.

*

After this crushing disappointment, Rosemary and Poppy trailed very reluctantly after Minerva and Vivien to their first Charms class. They seemed to feel that watching Professor Flitwick being aggressively short was punishment too great for mortals to bear.

Minerva strode up the corridor ahead of them, discussing their previous Transfigurations class with Vivien, when Tommy sidled up to them with that younger boy who always trailed after him following in his wake.

“Hi, Minerva, Vivien,” he said, looking up at them under his black fringe. “Good summer?”

Minerva looked at him suspiciously, as if he had opened a conversation with questions about her Quidditch tactics.

“Yes, lovely,” Viven answered, feeling sorry for him. “Hi, Tommy. Hi, Corny. How were yours?”

“Great!” said Corny, looking thrilled to be asked. The boy must have very little excitement in his life.

“So-so,” Tommy answered, with a brief, bitter little smile. It changed and went warmer as he continued. “So... Minerva, you know that I can go down to Hogsmeade now.”

“What’s that got to do with Quidditch?” Minerva asked.

Tommy looked taken-aback. “Er - nothing?”

“Oh,” Minerva said a deeply unconvinced tone. “Then why are you bringing it up?”

“Well,” Tommy paused. “I thought you might like to go. With me? Sometime?”

He tilted blue, uncertain eyes up to Minerva, who looked horrified and scandalised.

“You’re thirteen, aren’t you?”

“I’m mature for my age,” Tommy said.

“I don’t play with little boys,” Minerva told him. “Run along, and try to grow up. And even if you do, I still won’t be interested.”

“That was harsh,” Vivien said, after Tommy and Corny had departed. “I think he’s sweet.”

“Then you go out with him,” Minerva suggested, and twitched in distaste.

Minerva could be very decided about her opinions. As they were going into the Charms room, Vivien stopped thinking about poor little Tommy and spared a thought for poor Professor Flitwick. Minerva crucified teachers she didn’t like.

She felt even sorrier for Professor Flitwick when she saw him. He was balanced on a stack of books to reach his desk, and even though he kept his voice steady he absentmindedly wrung his hands as he talked.

“Good morning, students,” he said. “I’m afraid I’m wretchedly nervous. I’ve never taught a class before, and I really want to do it right. Because Charms is such a fascinating subject, don’t you think? I understand this is your OWLs year - I do hope my inexperience won’t discommode you.”

Minerva put up her hand and Vivien had a moment of dread where she thought that Minerva was going to put on her ruler look, and say that she certainly hoped so too.

“You did defeat the Petrifying Pixies with nothing but Calm-Down Charms, didn’t you?” Minerva asked mildly instead. “I’m sure you couldn’t be called inexperienced.”

Vivien saw with immense relief that Professor Flitwick’s obvious earnestness had impressed Minerva, and she had decided to approve of him.

Professor Flitwick went pink, and rumpled back his hair.

“I didn’t know you students had heard about that little thing,” he said. “It wasn’t anything really - purest luck, I happened to be at the right place at the right time, and the Pixie Chief was very reasonable in the end. Teaching is quite different. Educating young minds isn’t something that can be left to luck, and I do hope I won’t let you down. Still, speaking of Calm-Down Charms, does anyone know who made the recent discovery that they were independently powerful and not a simple subset of Cheer-Up Charms?”

Minerva raised her hand again, and Professor Flitwick beamed at her in great relief and awarded her fifteen points.

She was quite gentle when she reminded him that she had not actually answered the question.

“I think he’ll do nicely,” she remarked afterwards to Vivien. “He just needs a little guidance.”

“And you’re the perfect person to provide it,” Vivien said dryly.

Minerva did not reply directly, but she said in a vague manner, "Being able to listen to reason is a very admirable trait in a man," and so Vivien commended Professor Flitwick's soul to God.

*

The next day she was commending Headmaster Dippet's soul to God. The poor man was obviously senile, but nobody had the heart to take his post away from him, and every so often he came up with a bright idea like this one.

"I think it would be lovely if the students embraced Muggle culture like this and got some fresh air and healthy exercise," he had reportedly told Professor Dumbledore.

"And Professor Dumbledore just smiled and murmured something about how it was extraordinarily interesting that people would arrange things for someone if he simply seemed a little vague!" Minerva exploded in rage. "And now... this!"

Vivien eyed the horse suspiciously. She had been raised in a wizarding family, and she did not see the point.

"Does it drink blood?" she wondered. "Does it fly? Does it defeat your enemies?"

At this point, they discovered who their riding instructor was. Professor Flitwick went by, perched on an enormous chestnut and looking quite happy about it.

"You simply get on them and they walk," he said, beaming. "Hello, Miss McGonagall! Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Minerva gave him a baleful look. "What's the point of that?" she demanded.

"It's fun," Professor Flitwick informed her mildly. He gave her an encouraging smile. "I think you could do with having a little more fun, Miss McGonagall."

Minerva looked uncertain, which was a very unusual expression for her. She then made an attempt to get on the horse. Professor Flitwick patiently explained to them how to do it, and they both eventually mounted the horses.

There were several teachers and several years participating in this riding effort, and almost everyone in the paddock looked impressed that Minerva and Vivien were doing so well. Vivien preened and thanked him profusely.

"Thank you," Minerva added, grudgingly. She was too independent to like being grateful to people.

"Nothing to do with me," said Professor Flitwick, with his boyish smile. "You two did it all yourself. May I say you have an excellent seat already, Miss McGonagall? I know you two will enjoy this."

Minerva was already sitting ramrod straight on her horse, but she shifted her shoulders and managed to sit a little straighter.

It was then that a scream cut the air.

Minerva and Vivien both swerved their horses to look at it. A huge black horse was running away with a shouting boy on its back.

“Oh my God,” Vivien said. “Is that Tommy? Poor thing!”

“He chose a horse that was far too big for him,” Minerva snorted. “Little idiot.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Vivien asked, panicking.

“I don’t know and I don’t ca - oh *no*,” said Minerva, suddenly straining to look. “Professor Flitwick is going to kill himself chasing after that moronic Slytherin!”

Professor Flitwick had sent his horse into a gallop, and it was running so fast Vivien could barely see the small shape on top of it. Professor Flitwick seemed to be controlling it somehow, though, turning it and urging it on until he drew exactly level with and beside Tommy.

Tommy’s horse snapped at Professor Flitwick’s, and Professor Flitwick’s horse shied. People gasped all around the paddock as Professor Flitwick grabbed the reins of both horses, drawing them in tight together, and then with his free arm pulled Tommy onto his own horse.

“Let it go, let it go,” Minerva whispered, leaning forward on her horse.

Professor Flitwick used the rein to pull the horse around, slowing its pace almost imperceptibly at first and patting its neck, speaking to it. They rode back towards the group of students and horses, and just as Vivian thought they were going to charge and send all the horses scattering around the paddock, Tommy’s horse quietened.

Patting both the horses, Professor Flitwick gave Tommy up to Professor Dippet, who was wringing his hands and murmuring about how perhaps first-hand knowledge of Muggle culture would not be so beneficial for the children after all.

Tommy sat down very abruptly and muttered, “I hate the Muggle culture.” Then he put his head between his knees.

Vivian and Minerva urged their horses in the same direction at the same time.

“Tommy,” Vivian said, trying to make her voice kindly, “Were you very scared?”

“No,” Tommy answered, sounding tremendously insulted.

“Professor Flitwick, that was incredible,” said Minerva.

“Oh, no, anybody would have done it,” Professor Flitwick said depreciatingly. “The boy was absolutely splendid to stay on for that long. Really, it’s my fault for not keeping a closer eye

on the horses I thought might be troublesome. Please excuse me. I hope you feel better,” he added to Tommy.

Tommy lifted a pale face.

“I feel fine,” he said rebelliously, but then remembered himself and said politely, “But thank you very much.”

“Not at all,” Professor Flitwick muttered, looking embarrassed. “I really must go.”

Minerva looked after him with her eyebrows raised.

“He’s actually very impressive, isn’t he?” she remarked to Vivien.

Then they were both distracted from this question by the fact that Tommy was suddenly and violently sick.

“Poor boy,” Vivien said that evening in the common room. “He really fancies you. He looked humiliated to the dust.”

“Hmm,” said Minerva, not looking up from her book.

“What’s that? Advanced Charms?” Vivien asked. “But we don’t have any homework.”

“Well, no,” Minerva agreed. “But I thought it might be helpful for Professor Flitwick if a few students read ahead. I think he has the makings of a really fine teacher, you know, and he should be encouraged.”

*

Minerva dedicated herself to this task in the weeks afterwards, and Vivien had to admit that once he got over his nerves Professor Flitwick actually was a very good teacher. Minerva continued with her policy of encouragement by academic knowledge, and Professor Flitwick was openly and terribly grateful.

Vivien thought he was sweet, too, and was glad that Minerva was not frightening him. She was certainly frightening everyone about Quidditch.

The first match of the season was Slytherin versus Hufflepuff, and Vivien drew Minerva up to the top of the Gryffindor stands because the way she was snarling had made one of the first years cry.

“Those Slytherin Beaters should be disqualified,” Minerva seethed. “Did you see them hit the end of the Keeper’s broomstick? Why didn’t the commentator call them the filthy, cheating toerags they are?”

“I think that the teacher who allowed a commentator to make personal comments might be seen as promoting interhouse prejudice, don’t you?” said Professor Flitwick.

They turned and he gave them his disarming, crooked smile. Minerva had the decency to look slightly shamefaced.

“I suppose so,” she said in a chastened tone. Vivien looked at her in amazement.

“Miss McGonagall,” Professor Flitwick said in a conspiratorial whisper, “You’ve been so helpful. Would you tell me where the teachers are supposed to sit? I’m afraid that I headed right for the Ravenclaw stand, and was considerably embarrassed.”

“Oh, were you a Ravenclaw?” Minerva asked with interest.

“Eight years ago,” Professor Flitwick said, and then smiled roguishly. “In my youth, you might say.”

Twenty-five, Vivien noted. She was fond of knowing precise ages. Numbers were soothing and definite things.

“You’re still young,” Minerva said, and then paused. “You could sit with us. If you like?”

Vivien gave Minerva a reproachful look. However nice he might be, she was not particularly anxious to sit with a teacher.

Minerva studiously avoided her gaze.

Professor Flitwick beamed at her. “That’s so kind,” he said. “I believe I will.” He lowered his voice to the conspiratorial whisper again. “The staff have all been most kind, but I think they feel I’m a little too young and flighty for the post. It will be a relief to have the company of some people below fifty.”

“Vivien and I are practically always below fifty,” Minerva promised him, and they all laughed.

“So, who do we support in this match?” Professor Flitwick asked, settling comfortably on the bench beside Minerva.

“Oh, the Hufflepuffs. Down with Slytherin!” Minerva said. She saw Tommy diving for the Snitch and suddenly leaped to her feet to scream at the Hufflepuff Seeker, who looked confused and distressed and ploughed into Tommy’s back.

“Ohhh, that poor lad,” said Professor Flitwick. “He’s always in the wars, isn’t he? No luck at all.”

Tommy ended up on the grass of the Quidditch pitch, looking dizzy. He saw Minerva on her feet and waved vaguely, accidentally hitting the Hufflepuff Seeker with his broom as he did so.

“That’ll be a concussion,” Professor Flitwick observed sympathetically. “Those broom strikes can be nasty.”

“FOUL!” Minerva screamed. “THAT WAS DELIBERATE! DISQUALIFY THAT SEEKER! BURN THE HOUSE OF SLYTHERIN TO THE GROUND AND THEN SOW THE GROUND WITH SALT!”

She sat back down and turned to Professor Flitwick with a controlled smile.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Miss McGonagall,” said Professor Flitwick, “would you mind if I gave you a piece of advice?”

“Of course not, Professor.”

“I understand you’re a prefect.” Minerva nodded. “That puts you in a position of authority and responsibility. In order to maintain that position, it might be wiser not to lose your temper and display your opinions quite so openly. You are supposed to be able to discipline younger students in all the houses, not just Gryffindor, and any behaviour indicating that you consider one house as inferior immediately makes you seem much less fair, and thus will make you much less respected. Being sternly even-handed and then sternly disciplinary when you see true cause in any individual is the path I’d recommend.” Professor Flitwick stopped the earnest lecture, and then gave them both that gentle smile again. “In other words - speak softly and carry a big stick.”

Vivien held her breath and prayed that Minerva would not consider physical violence as an answer.

Minerva paused, bit her lip and then said, a little unsteadily and with a tiny laugh, “When are you ever stern, Professor?”

“Oh, well. I’m speaking of what you can do, not what I can. I’m afraid I’m not - a terribly impressive chap.” Professor Flitwick went pink again, and pushed at his rumpled hair in what seemed to be a habitual gesture. “Whereas I think you might make a marvellous teacher one day, Miss McGonagall.”

Minerva laughed properly this time. “Oh no,” she said. “I can’t stand children.” She paused and then said, “And I don’t think you’re doing too badly as a teacher, either. In fact, we’re all very impressed.”

Vivien was impressed and amazed. She was even more intensely so later when young Tommy walked by, with a dark bruise on his forehead and leaning on little Corny’s shoulder.

Minerva cleared her throat and said, “Good game.”

Tommy smiled his extremely charming smile. “Thank you very much, Minerva,” he said. “Would you care to celebrate my victory with the rest of my house? As my personal guest?”

“Buzz off, twerp, I’d rather eat my own lower intestine,” said Minerva.

She caught Vivien’s look as she swept off.

“I’m trying,” she explained. “I’m not quite there yet.”

*

The day before Christmas holidays, Professor Flitwick held Minerva and Vivien back to congratulate them on their Outstanding Charms essays. Vivien thanked him and Minerva glowed.

“You’ve both performed excellently,” Professor Flitwick said, looking delighted himself. “I predict an Outstanding OWL for you two if you can keep this up! I am just sorry I can take so little of the credit. Congratulations, and have a very happy Christmas.”

Minerva smiled a very wide smile that alarmed Vivien a bit because it changed her face so drastically.

“A very happy Christmas to you too,” she said. “I bet you’ll be glad to go home away from all your annoying students.”

Professor Flitwick’s bright face dimmed. “Oh... well,” he said awkwardly. “Actually I’m staying here over Christmas. It’s important to discuss the question of this frightful Grindelwald with Professor Dumbledore, and besides, it will be great fun to spend Christmas with the students who can’t go home. Besides which - to tell you the truth - I don’t exactly have a home.”

Minerva looked horrified, and then Professor Flitwick looked horrified too.

“But Hogwarts is quite home enough for me,” he said hastily. “What am I thinking, to be nattering on and bothering you two? I should be fired at once. Shoo, girls, and have a very happy holiday indeed!”

Minerva strode even faster down corridors when she was upset.

“That poor man!” she raged. “Stuck in this place for Christmas! Spending it with wretches like that Tommy!”

“I hear Tommy’s home life is very sad,” Vivien said.

“It almost makes me feel like staying here over Christmas,” Minerva continued heedlessly.

“Minerva, he’s a teacher, I really don’t think he needs you to keep him company.”

“Well, of course not,” Minerva said indignantly. “But I’ve been thinking of it anyway. There’s no Quidditch pitch for me at home.”

Vivien shivered. “It’s too cold for Quidditch.”

Minerva paused and then said, her voice dripping with temptation, “Imagine all the OWLs study we could get done in the quiet.”

Vivien hesitated.

“I could lend you my Transfiguration notes,” Minerva added.

“Well, I suppose that would be helpful,” Vivien admitted.

“I’m buying you that new Arithmancy book for Christmas,” Minerva went on remorselessly. “Just think, you could have it memorised by next term.”

“Well... all right,” Vivien said.

Christmas was quiet and nice. Professor Flitwick gave every student a present chosen specially for them, and Vivien almost cried over her Muggle abacus.

“Thank you so much,” Tommy said, clutching his book on unicorns and looking almost lost for words for once. “Nobody’s ever given me a Christmas present before.”

“I bought you that book on the Dark Arts,” Corny said, looking injured. “You said you liked it. It was very expensive.”

“Well, I meant from an adult,” Tommy said diplomatically, and then his lip trembled and Vivien’s heart broke for him.

Minerva was still stroking the pretty emerald green hat in her lap and not speaking.

“You can return it,” Professor Flitwick told her quickly. “I thought it would match your eyes.” He stopped and then said apprehensively, “Was that an awfully unprofessorlike thing to say?”

“Oh, no, no,” Minerva said, jamming it on her head quickly as if someone was going to snatch it away. “I love it!”

She did not recover her aplomb until Tommy stopped her in the doorway and told her shyly that she looked pretty in her hat.

Minerva glanced suspiciously up at the mistletoe and snapped at Tommy that there was no chance.

Tommy looked hurt and bewildered. “I don’t know what you m-”

“Just try it and I’ll give you such a slap,” Minerva warned him. “I’m watching you. And we’re going to beat you in Quidditch, too, just you wait and see.”

“May the best man win,” Tommy offered.

“Don’t worry, I will,” said Minerva.

“Are you all getting along?” Professor Flitwick asked, coming up to them in evident concern.

“Just talking about Quidditch,” Minerva said. “Strategies and tactics, and so forth.”

Professor Flitwick relaxed. “And what’s your strategy?”

“Set your sights on the prize and fairly, thoroughly, methodically proceed until you get what you want,” Minerva replied promptly. “I’m very goal-oriented.”

*

After Christmas, everyone came back with dire tales of their parents’ warnings about Grindelwald. Apparently he was on the move this year, and people were sternly forbidden to go to Hogsmeade without a teacher’s supervision. Flitwick was immediately inundated with invitations to go with several different students’ groups, and the Gryffindors were extremely triumphant about the fact that they got him the most often.

Vivien told him that so he would know he was popular, and he blushed and laughed.

“Well, you and Miss McGonagall are my two best students,” he said. “I have to look after you so I can be covered with glory by your OWL results.”

“Are we your favourite students?” Minerva asked daringly.

“As a teacher, I really cannot pick favourites,” Professor Flitwick said hastily. “But if I were to do so, I couldn’t think of finer choices.”

Minerva and Vivien both proclaimed themselves heroically indifferent to Grindelwald’s menaces. Professor Dumbledore was known to be one of the most talented wizards in the world. He had even helped work on the Philosopher’s Stone, and he was the Deputy Headmaster. What harm could come to them?

Minerva was much more concerned about beating Slytherin at Quidditch, which they did once, but since the Slytherins won all their other matches and then won the Quidditch Final against Gryffindor Minerva’s ambitions were crushed. She turned to working on the OWLs so hard that even Vivien thought it was excessive, and came out with Outstanding in every subject.

Vivien visited her that summer and they compared report cards. Minerva’s booklet fell open at Professor Flitwick’s page.

‘Minerva McGonagall is extremely naturally gifted at Charms’ it read, ‘and a joy to teach. She is unfailingly polite, insightful and helpful, and has not only been a close to ideal student but one of the most pleasant people I have met at Hogwarts. I am sure this remarkable young woman will go far.’

“Gosh, he really likes you,” said Vivien.

Minerva smoothed her emerald-green robes. “Do you really think so?” she asked. “It’s my favourite report.”

*

Minerva actually listening to someone else came as a great relief to Vivien. She did not stop being formidable, since that would have required a complete change in her personality, but Vivien heard her being called the fairest prefect in school by a Slytherin, no less.

Vivien saw her smile that strange wide smile again in the Great Hall on the first day of sixth year.

Professor Flitwick was sitting beside one of the new first-years, an immense child who Vivien thought must have swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro in his youth. He was taller than Professor Dumbledore, and could have picked Professor Flitwick up in one hand.

He was weeping profusely, and Professor Flitwick was patting one of his big hands.

"I miss my dad," the boy wept.

"But you'll be happy here," Professor Flitwick assured him solemnly. "There are wonderful things in Hogwarts, you'll see."

The boy sniffed, such an enormous sniff that Professor Flitwick's hair stood up in the direction of his nostrils.

"I did like tha' sweet squid in the lake," he admitted.

"Excellent, Mr Hagrid, excellent," said Professor Flitwick, who always seemed able to learn every student's name and life history within minutes of meeting them. "And you can Owl your father every day." He turned around, and said heartily, "Miss McGonagall! What a pleasure to see you back!"

That was when Vivien saw the smile. It recurred until she got used to it, and the boys in school seemed attracted to it, combined with the black swishing hair and the green eyes she set off with her new emerald-green accessories. She was asked to Hogsmeade quite a lot that year.

She might have been asked more, but as it turned out Tommy's glares were effective and intimidating.

It hardly mattered, since she turned them all down cold and continued to scorn Tommy absolutely.

"I don't know why she won't give me a chance," Vivien heard poor Tommy say angrily once.

"I don't know either," Corny agreed. "I mean, you've got a tremendous air of authority and charisma. And - and very nice eyes."

Tommy shoved him. "Don't talk to me like that! You know it disturbs me!"

"Yes, Tommy," said Corny. "Sorry, Tommy."

"It's all right," Tommy announced in a brooding voice. "I'm used to rejection."

"Surely not, Tommy," Corny said in shock. "All the girls in Slytherin think you're so dashing."

Tommy eyed him darkly. "I know that," he said at last. "I meant by my father."

“Oh,” Corny said. “Well, I mean - I don’t judge, Tommy, you know that. If your father looked like you he must have been a very handsome man.”

“Corny!” Tommy exclaimed warningly. “We’re back to the bad place!”

“Sorry, Tommy, sorry.”

“We don’t like the bad place!”

“It won’t happen again.”

Vivien suggested gently to Tommy that it might be healthier for him to find some real friends rather than mindless minions like Corny.

“What for?” Tommy asked, and then smiled to show he was joking.

Vivien laughed indulgently. He was such a sweet boy, and he was really growing up strikingly handsome. She did not understand why Minerva would not be kinder to him.

*

Riding had become optional at Hogwarts, after Tommy had started a petition, but Minerva had persuaded Vivien to keep it on.

Minerva had become very good at it. She was the only person who could keep up with Professor Flitwick when he galloped.

She looked rather fearless and splendid on a horse, her black hair streaming and her spine ramrod straight.

Vivien never became very good, but she liked the lessons all the same. It was nice to see Minerva relax, especially when Professor Flitwick suggested, “A race, Miss McGonagall?” and she gave him that special, wide smile.

It reminded Vivien of why she liked Minerva, whenever she was in despair about Minerva’s behaviour. Such as before Christmas, when she begged Minerva not to ask teachers personal and private questions, and Minerva insisted on cornering Professor Flitwick just the same.

Vivien lingered outside the door, reluctant to eavesdrop but hoping she could create a diversion if Minerva overstepped the mark and save her from any really drastic points reductions.

“Professor,” Minerva said awkwardly. “I hope it isn’t awfully intrusive of me to ask you this.”

Professor Flitwick’s voice was warm. “I can’t imagine that anything you might do would be awful, Miss McGonagall.”

“I just wondered - I hoped that you had patched things up with your family,” Minerva said hesitantly. “You said last year that you had - no home to go to, and - I’m sorry if I’m being officious, but I was concerned. Sir.”

“That’s very kind, and very like you, Miss McGonagall.” Professor Flitwick stopped. “I - the truth is, I’m not sure I should be discussing personal affairs with a student, but since I am sure you are genuinely concerned... The truth is, as you may have guessed, I have goblin blood in me. I look mostly human - but the size is a bit of a give-away.” He laughed deprecatingly. “The fact is, my human relatives want little to do with me. Quite a few people are uncomfortable with hybrids, I do completely understand. I was raised among goblins, but I did attend Hogwarts, and I found - well, when the goblins seceded to Grindelwald, I found I could not follow them. Every man has a duty to follow his own conscience, and I do not regret doing so. Hogwarts is home enough for me, but I thought you should know, Miss McGonagall, so you would understand that there can be no returning to my family.”

There was a stricken pause.

“Oh, Professor Flitwick,” Minerva said in an odd voice. “I’m so sorry.”

“There, there,” Professor Flitwick said hurriedly. “You’re much too good. There’s no need to be sorry for me. I’m happy as a sandboy!”

Minerva went on, and Vivien realised that her voice sounded odd because she was on the point of tears, and Vivien had never heard Minerva so upset before.

“It makes no difference to me, Professor Flitwick,” she said passionately. “They’re all fools.”

“I knew it wouldn’t, of course,” Professor Flitwick said soothingly.

Minerva rushed out after that, and Vivien drew back hastily.

She was unsurprised when Minerva insisted on staying that Christmas. Nor was she surprised when, upon receiving Professor Flitwick’s gift of emerald-green gloves, Minerva shyly offered back a book on Peruvian charmwork.

Professor Flitwick looked astonished and delighted.

*

It was almost the end of the year when everything changed.

They were coming out of a prefects’ meeting at the time.

Minerva was saying, “Say what you like about that Hufflepuff Myrtle being a delicate plant, I think she’s just a whiner. And I’d lay odds she’s a secret bedwetter, too-”

That was when they heard the noises, the terrible crashing coming from the Great Hall, and they both ran towards it.

There were Dementors, and goblins, and snarling creatures Vivien thought were werewolves, and they knew some of Grindelwald's forces had managed to find and storm Hogwarts.

There were already a few bodies. That was what made them pause in sheer, frozen incredulity, despite the screaming and fleeing people all around them. Neither of them had ever seen death before. They just stood and stared for a moment, as if this was a play.

The huge first year called Rubeus had one of his yearmates in his arms and was running as fast as he could. One of the robed Dementors was advancing on Corny, and he was backing away, his eyes wide with fear.

Minerva took a deep breath and began to walk forward, and that was when Professor Flitwick came barrelling down the stairs and pushed them both aside, facing down a horde of inhuman things alone.

"Run, girls!" he shouted. "I'll hold them off! *Expecto patronum!*"

A large silver stallion erupted from Professor Flitwick's wand, and charged down the Dementor advancing on Corny. He shrank back, as did the Dementors beside him, and Vivien rushed forward and put her arms around Corny. She tried to get him upright and running, but he just clung to her and blubbered.

There were students all around trying to hide, or fight enough to get away. As she clutched at Corny and tried to pull him away, she heard shrieks from the Hufflepuff table, and saw Tommy against a wall, holding off a squad of goblins.

"*Crucio!*" he snarled to her dim horror, black hair falling into his eyes and teeth bared. He spun in a tight circle, crouched, as they fell. "*Crucio! Crucio!*"

It was only Professor Flitwick who seemed, suicidally, to want to face them.

"Run, Minerva!" he shouted.

Minerva shook her head slowly, and moved to join him. He kept yelling at her to run.

Vivien clasped Corny to her in an agony of fear, but somehow, they were not advancing. Professor Flitwick hurled curse after curse, and Minerva was backing him up as best she could.

Vivien had heard him called the most fearsome duellist of his generation, and she had even giggled a little when Poppy and Rosemary laughed about it. Now she saw it was true.

Everybody had to tire sometime, and they could not last.

"Minerva, *please!*"

"Filius, I won't!"

There was another rush of terrible noise and bodies and screaming.

Vivien squeezed her eyes shut, and then she heard the empty, echoing silence.

They had left, called back by Grindelwald's summons. They found out later that Professor Dumbledore had faked a betrayal of the Order of Defence's meeting place, and Grindelwald had called his people together in order to attack it in full force.

Later was when most people had got over their hysterics, and Vivien was trying to clean a gaping cut at Minerva's hairline. She and Minerva were both trembling.

"I thought we were safe here," Vivien whispered. "I thought we were safe."

"Well, we're not," Minerva said, her voice hard.

Tommy edged closer to offer some comfort. "I think we are," he disagreed, and looked gratified when Minerva and Vivien looked at him attentively. "You see, Grindelwald should've taken the school no matter what," he explained. "Children make the perfect hostages. Get the children, and make all their parents your slaves, on threat of their pain or death. The man is a raving incompetent."

"You're creepy. Go away," Minerva said sharply.

"Don't mind her, she's overwrought," Vivien assured him.

"I'm not," said Minerva fiercely, and then Professor Flitwick came wearily out of the infirmary and sat down on the bench beside them.

Minerva burst into hysterical tears.

"Miss McGonagall!" Professor Flitwick said in dismay, as Vivien looked on in disbelief. Minerva slumped enough to drop her head on his shoulder and Professor Flitwick astonishingly took it calmly, stroking her hair back from her face. "Shhh, shhh," he said in his kind voice. "Oh, please don't. You were so brave, Miss McGonagall, I was so proud of you."

"I was brave!" Minerva choked. "You were brave! I never thought anybody could be so brave, I never thought you were so brave, I'm sorry that I didn't know, I think I thought just a little bit that - that because you were nice you weren't strong-"

She burst out sobbing again. Professor Flitwick continued to stroke her hair.

"I'm not, I'm not," he assured her. "Really, anybody would have done the same thing. It is my duty to protect you all. You know that, of course. It was you who was brave - brave and rash, my dear Miss McGonagall, you must never endanger yourself like that again, I was utterly terrified for you."

Minerva choked. "How *stupid* of you," she raged in her most severe tones, blurred by tears, "to be scared for *me*!"

Minerva sobbed herself quiet on Professor Flitwick's shoulder. Vivien and Minerva did not talk about it, later.

When they were lying in bed that night, though, Minerva said:

“I’ve been silly... thinking about Quidditch and the NEWTs so much.”

“Quidditch, perhaps,” Vivien conceded.

“There’s something much bigger than that we have to do,” Minerva said, sounding so tired. “And we’re going to do it. But oh, I wish we didn’t have to.”

“If you say you’ll do a thing, you’ll do it,” Vivien observed, because she knew Minerva that much.

She heard Minerva turn in bed, and then say, softly: “It was... quite something, wasn’t it?”

Vivien thought about it, and realised that Professor Flitwick, standing ready to be a sacrifice to the horde and only afraid for other people, was the most valiant thing she had ever seen.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said.

*

It was on one of their last classes during the year that Poppy asked whether enhancing Cheering Charms was possible.

“Possible, yes,” Professor Flitwick said. “Charms which affect emotions, however, are tightly controlled - and for good reason. A Depressing Charm can have much the same effect as a Dementor, if cast by a powerful enough wizard, and almost anyone can be manipulated with some of the stronger Charms.”

“Like what?” Vivien asked keenly.

“Well, like the Frightening Charm, or the Ecstasy Charm-”

Rosemary giggled. “The Ecstasy Charm? What’s that, sir?”

Vivien saw Professor Flitwick make that visible effort to stop his voice going high-pitched with nervousness. “It’s - well.” He looked at Minerva for help, and then shook his head and carried on bravely. “The Charm is an extremely unscrupulous one. It induces in its victims profound pleasure, which can then be used to control the person, who will do anything during the Charm, or for the sake of another dose of the Charm’s effects. It can be used between two consenting adults in private, but a record of each Ecstasy Charm is taken by the Ministry-”

Nobody seemed interested in Ministry precautions. “Is it really that powerful, sir?” Poppy asked.

“It is a very dangerous Charm,” said Professor Flitwick. “Imagine it: feeling deep pleasure spreading through every cell of your body. It’s almost like the Cruciatus curse in reverse - robbing you of mind and reducing you to a collection of senses pushed beyond their limits. It’s wild and senseless, and - well.” He cleared his throat. “Like I said, it is a very dangerous Charm.”

Vivien understood why Professor Flitwick looked pink and flustered after this explanation, but she did not see why Minerva had dropped her quill and sat resting her chin on her hand, looking at Professor Flitwick with wide attentive eyes.

She did not take any other notes that lesson.

She also carried on with her policy of being madly over-familiar with the teaching staff at the end of the term, when she took Professor Flitwick's hand and pressed it before they left.

"Oh, *no*," Tommy exclaimed in disgust. Vivien turned and looked at him: he was looking at Minerva and Professor Flitwick with narrowed eyes. "This is not happening to me. This is not right."

"I don't understand," Vivien said.

"I hate my life," Tommy declared, and stalked away without explaining.

Vivien visited Minerva that summer. They sat on Minerva's green winter cloak and planned out study for the NEWTs next year, and Minerva talked about defeating Grindelwald, and doing their part for the war effort.

"And after that," Minerva said, and bit her lip. "I was thinking," she said, "that I mightn't mind. Being around children, I suppose, as long as I didn't have to have any of my own."

"You'd make a good teacher, Minerva," Vivien encouraged her. She wanted to be a teacher herself, and she would love to have Minerva with her.

"Yes, I think I would," Minerva said. "I think there's a lot to be said for planning out your life, don't you?"

"All our professors say you're so goal-oriented," Vivien agreed.

"Yes," Minerva said, thoughtfully. "I'm also thinking of becoming an Animagus."

*

She bothered Professor Flitwick on that subject, too.

"I'd talk to your Transfigurations teacher," Professor Flitwick said mildly. "Much more in her line. I'd hate to see you do anything rash because I gave you bad advice, Miss McGonagall."

"I don't want advice exactly," Minerva said, lingering while Vivien tried to make her realise that this was a dismissal. "I'd just like to know - what kind of animal you think I might suit best."

"Oh, my opinion's probably rather dim," Professor Flitwick said with his small, disarming smile.

"Please," Minerva said.

“Well - I’m not sure,” Professor Flitwick said. “A friendly, clever creature. You’re not like anything wild.”

She was not like anything wild with Professor Flitwick.

Minerva announced, a week later, that she had decided to turn herself into a cat.

She also asked Professor Flitwick for private tutorials. Vivien knew that Minerva was not as gifted at Charms as she was at Transfiguration, but the idea of Remedial Charms was ridiculous.

There was a little stress-relief party just before the NEWTs, and Minerva was too busy with her tutorial to attend, so Vivien drank a little bit too much Bitterbeer and ended up leaving the party early to wander around aimlessly. She had really preferred Butterbeer before all the absinthe was added. Vivien tripped as she was going around a corner, and would have fallen if she had not been caught.

“All alone without a friend?” asked Tommy. “What a shame. Is she with the tiny professor, then?”

Vivien blinked to clear her fuzzy eyesight. Tommy had his wand in his hand, she noticed, and she wondered why. Of course, these were dangerous times, and she suddenly felt much more drunk than she had. It was probably safest to have someone at the ready, and Tommy was such a dear boy, even if he had used those Unforgivable Curses. He’d been scared. She’d never held it against him.

“She says she needs tutorials,” she muttered.

“I’ll bet she does,” Tommy said, his lips curling. Vivien noticed that his mouth was sneering and rather pretty, and then was vaguely horrified at herself. He was a little boy. “Doesn’t matter, though,” Tommy remarked. “I only have time for people who appreciate me.”

“I’m glad you’re not upset,” Vivien said, with genuine concern, and then she realised that she was threading her fingers through his black soft hair. Surely that wasn’t an appropriate gesture, or one she had intended to make...

Tommy’s eyes were deep blue and endless, fringed by long lashes that cast them in shadows.

“You’ve always seemed to appreciate me, Vivien,” he murmured. “I like that.”

He kissed her then, and it was a good kiss, but just a little too forceful, and she had a worrying moment of doubt, a voice telling her that this was not a good idea, not her idea...

She let him kiss her, again and again, and then she let him take her into a room that for some reason had a bed in it. The next morning she woke up feeling dirty, and promised herself never to overindulge in alcohol again. She liked Tommy less after that, but then, he was a good boy, she’d always thought that. He was so sweet and polite, and he was a teenage boy after all, he could not have known how drunk she was. He had been made a prefect this year. He was the most popular boy in the school.

It was her own mistake. She didn't tell Minerva.

Of course, she did not get much of an opportunity. They were both busy with the NEWTs, and besides that Minerva seemed distracted.

Vivien thought she might need to talk, so she arrived to walk Minerva back from her last Charms tutorial, and then stopped at the door because Minerva and Professor Flitwick were in deep conversation.

"So... I'll be leaving school in about a week," Minerva said.

"Your company will be a great loss to me," Professor Flitwick told her earnestly. The tips of his ears went pink, and he spoke in that slightly higher voice in the way he did when he was nervous. "I hope you won't think it's too great a liberty - I got you a small gift for the occasion..."

Minerva smiled that wide smile. "Thank you," she said. "I... I'm going to join Dumbledore's Order against Grindelwald, after I leave school. I'll get Auror training."

"That's brave," Professor Flitwick told her. "Of course, I would expect no less from you."

Minerva twisted her hands in her lap. "After the war, though... I think I'll come back to Hogwarts. To teach."

Professor Flitwick's face glowed with delight. "It would be such a pleasure to have you as a colleague, Miss McGonagall. I can hardly tell you how much I should look forward to working with you."

Minerva hesitated. "So you won't run off and - and get married or go to Peru or something before I can come back?"

"Go to Peru? Oh, no, how could I have a better job than this? What's more rewarding than teaching children?" Professor Flitwick asked. "As for... well, Miss McGonagall, surely you know that only someone as kind as you would think it was even possible. A chap like me is hardly someone that anybody would consider taking on."

He smiled his boyish smile, which faltered when Minerva did not smile back at him. She looked very serious, a different and more vulnerable sort of serious than Minerva usually looked.

Vivien was at once tremendously shocked, and not surprised at all.

"And you won't forget me," Minerva suggested.

"My dear Miss McGonagall! I hardly see how that could be possible," Professor Flitwick assured her. "Whatever you do, you must remember that you have your old teacher's good wish-"

“Good,” Minerva said with headlong determination. “Because I’m coming back, and if you’re still there and single, and you haven’t forgotten me, then - I’m going to keep you for myself.”

Professor Flitwick looked as if his head was about to fall off. “*Miss McGonagall!*”

Minerva stood up, going red. “That’s all I wanted to say,” she declared.

“You must be insane!” said Professor Flitwick. “You’re a *student!*”

“I won’t be soon,” Minerva said, with her usual courage.

“But - my dear, you can’t possibly realise what it is that you’re implying - I mean, you’re so young and beautiful, you have your whole life ahead of you, you have the brains and the spirit to do anything you like...”

“And I plan to,” Minerva said, and then her hard-won composure faltered as she asked, “Do you really think all those things about me?”

“Well - well of course,” Professor Flitwick said.

“I’m so pleased,” Minerva told him. “That means that you probably won’t run away to Peru to escape me. Because-” she paused and they were both now violent shades of red. “Because you’d have to, Professor Flitwick,” she finished abruptly, and then left the room as fast as she could.

Vivien hid behind the door as she went out. She had the suspicion that Minerva would not be best pleased about having a witness to that little conversation.

When they were leaving school for the last time, as Professor Dippet was assuring Vivien that if her NEWTs were as satisfactory as he suspected, they would be seeing her back as a teacher next year, Minerva kissed Professor Flitwick’s cheek and promised to Owl him. Professor Flitwick was pink and speechless and incredulous.

She did Owl him, though, even more often than she Owled Vivien. Vivien compared the number of Owls at the staff table the next year. She was a registered Animagus, and she sent Professor Flitwick a picture of herself as a cat.

Professor Flitwick still looked disbelieving when every Owl arrived, but he was starting to look more and more pleased and expectant each time the post came.

Vivien was quite convinced that Minerva was going to get her way. She only wished that she would be able to. It was strange, trying to control students who had been practically her peers.

It was particularly hard to face Tommy, especially as Tommy’s friends had a habit of needing discipline. Tommy had found a whole group of new friends, and Vivien had to admit that she did not like them at all. She thought Tommy might be being influenced for the worse. At one stage during that year, she was fairly certain that she saw him slipping into a girls’ bathroom.

She knew that a little bit of bullying was normal for children, but she also thought the student she saw Tommy and Corny teasing looked far too frightened.

“Ten points off each of you,” she said sternly, writing down their names so she would make sure to remember to deduct them. She was just writing ‘Tommy’ as Tommy widened his sweet blue eyes at her, and she remembered gazing into them and blushed.

“Actually,” he said in his beautifully polite voice, “it’s Tom now.”

“Fine,” Vivien replied between her teeth, and wrote ‘Tom Riddle’ and ‘Cornelius Fudge’, pressing down her quill harder than she needed to. “Honestly, boys,” she added, trying for some gentle humour, “I thought Slytherins were supposed to be the ambitious ones? If you carry on like this, where are you two going to end up?”

Tom gave her his charming smile. “You might be surprised.”

She mentioned her concern to Minerva, and Minerva wrote back that she had always said that he was a creepy little child. Then she carried on with her account of the war.

The war with Grindelwald made everyone jumpier and made the whole world seemed darker, and then the business with the Chamber of Secrets occurred and there was near-mass hysteria.

Especially after Myrtle’s death. Professor Flitwick wandered around valiantly trying to comfort each student at once, and then locked himself in his room and stayed up all night writing a letter to Minerva. She saw the light under his door, and heard the scratching of his quill.

She hoped Minerva would comfort him, and she also took back everything she had ever said about Tom in her Owls to Minerva. He was a tower of strength, the only student who did not seem to be off his head with panic, and the quiet way he assumed duties made him a shoo-in for Head Boy next year.

“A born leader,” Professor Flitwick beamed, so happily confident of the worth of anyone other than himself.

That enormous child, Rubeus Hagrid, was discovered by Tom to be the culprit, and duly expelled. Vivien thought it was so nice of Tom to attest that Rubeus could not have known what he was doing, and to add that the poor child was probably deranged by the loss of his father.

Professor Dumbledore and Professor Flitwick took care that Rubeus should be provided for, and Hogwarts regained a measure of security. And outside, the war still raged.

It was late the next year when the news came of an ultimate battle. Professor Flitwick and Vivien were appointed to stay with the children, and try to protect them if all failed. Every other teacher went to join Professor Dumbledore’s army.

She had Tom and the Head Girl organise the children in the Great Hall, drilled to run for the escape routes. Then they waited, some children trying to sleep, most people just sitting and

staring into the night, as if the dim light of the stars in the ceiling above could show them what was happening in a battle miles and miles away.

Professor Flitwick looked sick with fear, which she knew he never would have if he could have been in the battle himself. She reached out at one point and touched his hand.

“She’ll be all right,” she said. “And she will come back.”

Professor Flitwick jumped. “I’m sure I can’t imagine what you’re talking about,” he said hastily.

It was dawn when the Owls arrived. Professor Dumbledore had killed Grindelwald in single combat. Most of their side had survived. And there was an Owl from Minerva for Professor Flitwick, too.

Vivien peeked shamelessly at it. It read: *‘Dear Filius, This is your last chance to run to Peru.’*

She nudged him, almost oversetting him. “See?” she said. “I told you - Filius.”

The students who left school that year went into a world of peace and shining promise. Vivien went personally to Tom, and wished him the very best in anything he might want to accomplish.

*

Minerva was appointed Transfigurations teacher, and duly arrived to take her place at the start of term feast. She chose to sit in the seat next to Filius.

She looked older than she should have, after two years of warfare. She had sterner lines around her mouth, and her beautiful black hair was pinned neatly out of the way in case of emergencies. She was wearing emerald green, and her eyes were full of hope.

Filius kept squeaking at odd moments, but Minerva was silent until the meal started, and then Vivien had to strain to hear over the ordinary buzz of conversation.

“Are you happy that I’ve come back?” Minerva asked.

“Well, of course,” Professor Flitwick stammered, his voice going up another octave.

“Do you remember what I told you two years ago?” the new Professor McGonagall continued, still in her low discreet voice.

“Well - I - I - yes,” Filius said, and added quickly: “But of course I would never presume on that. You were very young, and had no experience of the world, and - I do completely understand, Minerva. Please don’t ever dream that I might make your life uncomfortable here with unjustified expectations. I’m aware that I could never dream a young woman like you could-”

Minerva reached over, still very discreetly, and hooked two of her fingers around his.

“Then it’s settled,” she said.

“Do you think it’s really appropriate for teachers to hold hands at the table?” Vivien asked mildly, making her tone a congratulations.

“I’m not,” Minerva answered with her aggressive logic. “I am holding two of his fingers. You like Arithmancy so much, Vivien. Round up the numbers and you’ll see I’m not holding his hand at all.”

She cast an almost mischievous look at Filius, who was bright pink and looked dazed and convinced he was dreaming.

“I did give you a chance to run to Peru,” she told him.

Filius found his voice, and for a wonder this time it didn’t squeak. “My dear Minerva,” he said. “I thought there was almost no chance - and still, nothing could have made me leave Hogwarts while I thought you might come.”

*

The staff room was filled with the noise of the queue outside, and Vivien thought she had not seen Minerva look this murderous in fifty years.

“Empty-headed little fame grubber,” she said quietly, as the new professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, continued ostentatiously signing autographs.

“Oh now, Minerva,” Filius objected. “I’m sure he’s a lovely chap, under all the - the - well, I’m sure he’s just a bit carried away by all the attention. Imagine, a famous wizard teaching at Hogwarts. It must be thrilling the children.”

“I remember the last time that happened,” Vivien remarked from where she was grading papers. She looked up and grinned at Minerva. “Don’t you, Minnie?”

“I might do,” Minerva conceded. “And don’t call me that.” She pushed her emerald green hat off to one side and glared at the open door, where three students were standing abreast.

“I suppose it must have been very exciting when Professor Dumbledore joined the staff,” Filius said innocently.

Vivien thought she recognised them. They were Slytherin second years called Morag MacDougal, Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy. She’d heard stories about how they behaved in Minerva’s class. Slytherins really were not what they used to be.

Vivien idly wondered, as she had once or twice, what had become of Tommy Riddle. He had certainly been more impressive than these children. Of course, look what Corny had become...

Little Morag was bouncing up and down, her face flushed with excitement, as Gilderoy signed her textbooks. The two boys were sneering beside her. That was a really dreadful

expression on the little blond Malfoy boy's face. Someone should tell him it might get stuck that way.

"I wonder whether Professor Lockhart has a girlfriend!" Morag whispered, in a piercing hiss she probably fondly imagined was discreet.

Minerva rolled her eyes and said, "And that child calls herself a Scotswoman."

The undersized Malfoy with the foul expression said, "Don't be disgusting, Morag. Teachers don't have love lives."

Minerva reached a hand across the staff room table, with a small smile.

"How little they know," she murmured.

Filius went pink.

Vivien Vector turned to her Arithmancy papers, in order to give them some privacy.

Finis

Draco Malfoy, Ruler of the Universe

"I don't believe it," Potter said in a dazed, sick tone.

Draco sat there enjoying the combined effects of shock and the appalled look on Potter's face. He'd thought he was being dragged to the headmaster's office on account of their new school newspaper, and he still felt as if he should burst into the explanation he had prepared.

Instead of saying, "The people have a right to know! The *Daily Slitherer* cannot be silenced!" he said, very carefully: "Could you repeat that, sir?"

Dumbledore looked on the point of an aneurysm, which made Draco even more cheerful. Even though he bet he'd be blamed for it, like he was for everything, never mind that the man was a thousand years old and the strain of favouring the Gryffindors so very much had probably been murder on his heart.

Dumbledore repeated, in a brittle voice: "Professor Trelawney-

That old fraud. Evil mistress of doom or not, the best thing Professor Umbridge had ever done was fire her. The nerve of that woman, forcing Draco to drink endless cups of tea when any fool could see that if the tea was staining the inside of a cup it would eventually poison him, or dye his insides or something equally unconscionable. The whole school was filled with incompetents, it was astonishing he'd survived to seventh year...

"Her new insight into the future suggests that the word previously heard as 'defy' was 'obey.' I do not blame myself but rather Professor Trelawney's chronic drink problem, which caused her to mumble-

Drink problem. Draco made a mental note: that might turn out to be even better copy than the female Weasley.

"-which means that a prophecy spoken sixteen years ago actually designated you as the only possible rival to Voldemort-

Draco tilted his head. At this angle, you could almost see Dumbledore's will to live draining away.

"-saviour to the side of light," he went on dully, "and last hope of the wizarding world."

"*I don't believe it*," Potter said again. "I've suffered for years at the hands of Voldemort, you put me in to rot with my relatives because I was too precious to risk, my friends and I have been in mortal danger countless times, my godfather is dead, and now..."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed sadly. "It has all been rather a waste of time, hasn't it?"

"...gah..."

Potter seemed at a loss for words.

Draco felt that it was all sinking in at last, and words were coming back to him.

"So..." he said slowly. "What you're saying, basically, is that - *I am God*."

Dumbledore gave a sigh full of ancient wisdom. "No, Mr. Malfoy-"

Draco cut the old coot off. "Stop there, Professor. I'm not really up for that whole bowing to my mentor figure, oh I'm just an ordinary boy with extraordinary responsibilities, please don't take my photograph stuff. I'm not that-"

"Moral," suggested Potter. "Decent."

"Retarded," Draco shot back. "I'm the last hope of the wizarding world, you said? So this miscreant has been sucking up all my glory for years, so everyone has to obey my every command or the world is doomed, correct me if I'm getting anything wrong here but as far as you people are concerned... I am God!"

He'd always known he was special! He'd known there was something off about Potter! It had probably been the arcane knowledge born within his heroic soul.

This would show Blaise Zabini, who'd argued that it was a raging inferiority complex he was acting out.

Dumbledore sighed and rested his aged face on his desk.

"Something like that, yes," he said in muffled tones.

"I WISH I WAS DEAD," said Potter.

"Hush," Draco told him severely. "I will not permit your reckless shouting habits to continue. Don't you know I need these ears to defeat the Dark Lord?"

*

By the time Draco returned to the Slytherin rooms, everyone had heard. They had a complex and cunning system of espionage, which was to say they bribed the house elves.

"Hail, all-powerful one," Pansy said absently from beside the fireplace. "I've appointed myself your publicist, by the way. I have a four-way conversation going on here. How would you feel about me negotiating you a seven-book deal?"

"Might be nice," Draco allowed.

Crabbe and Goyle looked up from their embroidery. Draco wished they had slightly more manly hobbies, but they could stitch up a storm. He peered at their latest handiwork.

"Making uniforms," Crabbe explained.

"Be your royal guard," Goyle added, brow knitted.

Draco gave them a benevolent smile. "Carry on," he said, and waved a hand in what he thought was a very regal manner.

Ted Nott and Blaise Zabini gave him a friendly wave back.

"I'm your secretary," said Blaise. "I'm dealing with the messages. How do you feel about a photoshoot?"

"Do it, Draco, I'll get it in all the papers," Pansy put in.

"Er - naked?" asked Draco. "I don't think Mother would approve..."

"How'd you feel about dragon hide pants?" inquired Blaise.

Draco's tone was cold. "Surely you jest."

"I'm your legal aide," Nott told him. "Tell me quick, what do you want copyrighted? Obviously your name, but is there anything else? The drawling, the ice-blond good looks, the spastic fits of rage-"

"Someone else can have that last thing," Draco said.

Millicent Bulstrode, delicate artistic soul that she was, held up her latest intricate canvas for his inspection.

"Do you like it?" she asked shyly. "I thought you should have your own crest. I call it-" she paused for effect - "*Ferret Triumphant*."

"Could do with some more shading around the snout," Draco said.

She wrung her hands. "I know, I know you're right, I'm a failure..."

He reached up and patted her consolingly on the shoulder. Millicent was so sensitive.

"If you people will excuse me," Draco began.

"Farewell, Dark One," they all chorused amiably as he went for the door.

He stopped and thought. "Actually," he said. "I think I'm technically, you know, not the evil one in the titanic battle to come. Which makes us, um... the side of light."

Everyone looked hurt and uncomprehending. It reminded Draco of Goyle in Herbology class.

"I don't order people killed," he went on apologetically.

Pansy's brow cleared. "Yes you do, Draco," she said. "Remember that time Potter came into Potions all scratched up, and Professor Snape asked him what happened, and Potter did that weary noble thing and said he could read about it in the paper, and then you said-"

"I have never successfully ordered someone killed!" Draco interrupted.

They all exchanged doubtful looks.

"Farewell, your... blondness...?" Blaise offered.

Draco gave a haughty nod. "That will do," he said, and left the room.

Then he went quietly into his dorms, and then into the bathrooms. He locked the bathroom, leaned against the door and then slid down onto the floor. He took a deep breath to dispel the dizziness, and then he cackled.

Life was good.

*

Breakfast the next morning was less breakfast, and more an object lesson: The Joy of Draco Malfoy.

Draco spent a great deal of time at the doorway.

"Did you want me to flex them, Creevey?" he asked solicitously. "Should I pout?"

After three rolls of film, Ted Nott told Colin he was going to have to pay for the photographs. Colin fainted.

As Draco walked to the Slytherin table, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff started applauding. Draco lifted his hands above his head and was only restrained from calling out 'Yes, my people! You love me!' by Pansy's urgent advice.

Cho Chang, who had been held back last year (the *Daily Slitherer* had theorised she'd failed to do her exams because of an unwanted pregnancy) came over to Draco while he was eating.

"Hello," she said, in her sweet girlish way. "I was wondering if you might enjoy this blackberry jam we had over at the Ravenclaw table-"

"Ew," Draco said faintly. "Potter's leavings. Get thee back to thine own table, Chang. Your lips are defiled. And take your jam with you."

He was slightly appeased when Padma Patil came over to his table to congratulate him. Padma was rumoured to show distaste for Weasleys, which was a sign of excellent taste in a woman, and besides that Draco had heard Indians were terribly flexible.

He was making idle small talk with her and trying surreptitiously to look at his profile in his knife and see if it was distinguished today, when the post came.

That put rather an abrupt end to the conversation.

Draco breathed in and out to regain calm, and then said in what he hoped were valiant tones:

"Could somebody help me out of here, please?"

Once he was extricated from the pile, he began to sort through them. To his disappointment, Father had not yet Owled his congratulations on the great news, but he was probably trying to think of the best ways to praise Draco's glory.

The Owls were most enlightening in other ways. Everyone in Slytherin helped him sort them.

"Fanclub, fanclub, fanclub," Pansy murmured. "Naked pictures-"

Draco, Nott, Crabbe and Goyle lifted their heads.

"Not of women," Pansy went on. "Seems like someone heard those fifth year rumours, Draco-"

"They weren't *true*!" Draco protested. "It was all foul *lies*!"

"Naked pictures of several Delacours," Pansy said encouragingly, and handed them over.

Draco felt his eyes go unfocused.

"Wow, all this and Cho Chang," sighed Crabbe. "You jammy bastard."

"I took no jam!" Draco said in offended tones. "And the perception of Cho Chang as a stone fox is gone, yesterday's news, baby. Because that was when this was Harry Potter's town, and now I'm the new top cat."

A distinctly snotty and unpleasant voice cut through the air like a Hippogriff claw through delicate unblemished skin.

"Why are you talking like that, Malfoy?"

"It was just a style I was experimenting with," Draco said loftily, making a note that the tough talk might not work for him without further practise in his room.

Granger, Weasley and Potter were standing in front of his table looking at his letters, and Draco was pleased to see their eternally smug faces now simply looked nauseated.

"Oooh, how the mighty have fallen," he added to see Potter wince. "Suddenly that scar isn't looking like anything but a great big disfigurement! Suddenly it isn't such a girl magnet anymore-"

"IT WAS NEVER A GIRL MAGNET," Potter shouted, and then blushed hotly when everyone in the dining hall turned to stare and titter.

Draco thought he might die with glee. Fame was his at last! Potter was unmasked as a loud, scruffy berk with no sex appeal! Life was finally as he had always known it should be.

"I did warn you to lower your voice, Potter," he said, and looked noble and sorrowful. "Such is the hero's fate. Ever toiling for the common good, and ever seeing the foolish disregard his

wisdom and rush to their dooms. Sad, sad, sad."

"I'll kill you, Malfoy," growled the redheaded subhuman.

Draco gave him a brilliant smile. "That's minion of the Dark Lord talk, that is. Naughty, naughty."

"I'm not killing you for You-Know-Who! I'm killing you for Harry, and for my sister!"

"Look, it's not my fault that the paper printed that Ginny Weasley gave Thomas crabs. The *Daily Slitherer* feels a responsibility to the truth," said Draco, "and we received an anonymous tip."

It had been anonymous. He'd used his non-monogrammed parchment.

"Some people are so sensitive," he added.

Weasley made a threatening move towards him, and half of Hogwarts leaped.

"Minion of evil!"

"Shame on you!"

"Vengeance strikes from above!" shouted Macmillan, who always got carried away, and took a jump onto Weasley from the Hufflepuff table.

Draco backed away from the fight, rescued his naked Delacour pictures and exited with smirk and limbs intact. He was on time to receive fifty points from Snape for being the saviour of the wizarding world.

"I always knew you had it in you," Snape told him. "Sucks to be Gryffindor right now, cocky bastards."

Draco beamed up at him.

Potter was late, and was docked fifty points.

"For tardiness, and for being a dirty little impostor," Snape explained. "To your seat."

Lunch and dinner were spent composing the lyrics to Draco's theme song, which Nott was copyrighting as they wrote it.

Potter slouched past to glare at Draco as he hummed and scribbled on his napkin. Losers were always doing that, Draco reflected serenely, hanging about pestering the chosen ones in a pathetic and misguided attempt to prove they mattered.

"His shining hair is beyond compare - yes, can I help you, Potter?" he inquired.

"I never had a theme song," Potter muttered in sullen tones.

Draco snapped his fingers and beamed again. "Well, Potter," he drawled. "Guess you don't have rhythm."

*

Discomposing events began to occur on the morrow.

As he was walking with blameless heroic propriety towards his first class, he was grabbed from the back and dragged into a closet, and pressed up against the door.

"Take me, Malfoy," Ginny Weasley purred into his ear.

Draco almost died of horror.

"Don't touch me, I'll get a disease!"

"But our years of antagonism have given us such taut sexual tension, don't you feel?" she breathed.

"I don't know!" Draco exclaimed in panic. "In all this terror I've forgotten your first name!"

"Our families are feuding," she continued, a demonic light in her eyes that Draco was morally certain meant she was going to mess up his hair. "We're like Romeo and Juliet, in a way..."

"Tell me," said Draco, "is it true that living in filth is what gives you freckles?"

After Draco's merciful escape, he took the Owl from his father he'd been saving, and read it to cheer himself up.

The letter was quite short, and informed him that in the interests of his father's maintaining gainful employment (non-taxable voluntary work) as the right hand of a certain Lord of Darkness (to wit, the Dark Lord), he (Malfoy junior) was on account of his future plans (read: destiny, world salvage) summarily disowned.

It was signed by his father's solicitors, which Draco thought was unnecessarily harsh.

He stumbled in, dazed, to his Defence Against the Dark Arts class, where Professor Blackheart was - as usual - performing ritual sacrifice, practising the Unforgivables on all the students and touching Morag Macdougall in bad places.

"So I hear you're the new hero," Professor Blackheart said, around his artificially slitted tongue.

"Well," said Draco, with a bashful smile.

"I'm watching you, Draco," he continued. "Charting your every weakness..."

"Thanks Professor," said Draco. "It's nice to know someone cares."

"Pity you've never been all that good at practical lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"I prefer theory," Draco informed him. "I like to think of myself as a sheltered academic."

"Precious little shelter for you, and precious good theory will do, when my - I mean, the glorious Dark Lord comes to eat your soul!"

Professor Blackheart went into a burst of manic laughter. Draco would have ignored the whole incident - it was just Professor Blackheart's way - if not for Pansy's worried look.

"You know," she said, "you're not all that good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, are you?"

Draco looked away and said coldly, "I fail to see your point."

Molestation by Weasleys and insinuations about his prowess in the Dark Arts had discomfited Draco to a certain degree, and he couldn't get his theme song to scan. Moreover Pansy told him his being called the Slytherin Sex God was perfectly absurd and would never catch on.

So he decided to comfort himself playing his new favourite sport: Potter-gloating.

Potter looked terminally depressed (and his hair was all *over* the place) when he shambled down the steps into the Gryffindor common room, and when he saw Draco his expression suggested he had hit rock bottom and then found a drill.

"So, Potter," Draco sneered. "I hear you're not the golden boy of prophecy anymore. Not the champion. Not everybody's darling. No more signing autographs for you, no sir, you'll have to look into gainful employment. But who could this be, the one everybody wants, the new shining star? Oh yes! I do believe it's me. Me, me, me!"

Potter glared at him

"How the hell did you get into Gryffindor-" he began, and then saw Colin Creevey gazing adoringly at a whole stack of signed photographs, with the ink still wet on them. He shook his woefully ungroomed head and muttered, "Typical. Fairweather fans."

"Did you not hear, Potter?" Draco asked with great concern. "Want me to say it again? Me, me, me!"

At that point Potter wheeled on him with murder in his eyes, and Draco took a hasty step backwards. The man was mad, he'd always said so, why did nobody listen to him and institute the most basic of safety regulations to protect their hero?

"Terrific, Malfoy," he snarled. "And since it's you. What are you going to do about it?"

Draco blinked interrogatively.

"When's the duel to the death with Voldemort?"

"What was that?" asked Draco, hearing his voice rising to a squeak. "No. Look. I'm delicate. I've never really been the same since that whole arm slashing incident. My father frowns on

extra-curricular activities."

"So you haven't planned *anything*?" Potter demanded. "Just came up here to gloat, did you?"

Draco regained enough self-possession to sneer.

"Well," he said loftily, "I would've thought that would be *obvious*."

Potter was not entering into the spirit of things at all. Draco was most displeased, so he decided to cease gracing Potter with his company and departed. He then sat around and discussed ideas for his photoshoot, coming to the agreement that mink would suit him.

Somehow, though, the blush was off the rose.

When's the duel to the death with Voldemort?

Bloody, bloody Potter. He was always ruining everything.

And his father had disowned him. And he'd never been any good at any kind of practical exam, he got tense, it was his artistic temperament. He'd smashed a glass during his OWLs and he expected he'd do worse under more pressure. Not that it was his fault, but...

And his father had disowned him. His father had known who was going to win, but he'd show him, anyway, and then he'd be so...

He'd show him by winning a duel with the Dark Lord?

"Pansy," Draco asked in the uneven voice that he hadn't used since third year and what had certainly not been a panic attack over Quidditch, "Pansy, d'you think I can really vanquish the Dark Lord?"

Pansy got a comforting grip on his hand. Draco glared at her and let her keep it.

"You might do," she said loyally. "I think you might. He's quite old, isn't he? My grandma has brittle bones, you could kick him and break his leg."

Draco gave her a look. "Are you suggesting I kick the Dark Lord in the shins?" He sighed. "Oh my God. I can't even beat Potter at Quidditch."

The Slytherins all broke in at this point, sure of where they stood with Quidditch despondency, if not near-death despair.

"Don't be ridiculous, Draco-"

"-clearly cheating-"

"-Omniscialars fitted into his glasses, I'm sure of it-"

"-bribes Madam Hooch-"

"-with sexual favours!"

Draco waved a hand. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Thanks. All right. I think I just - I need to go speak with Dumbledore. Because of - heroic stuff-"

He left in a hurry.

His father always chose the winning side.

*

Draco erupted into the headmaster's office, his mood considerably disimproved by having to yell 'Don't you know who I *am*?' to a recalcitrant statue.

"I'm not having it," he said abruptly.

Dumbledore deliberately looked over his glasses at Draco. Draco was evolving a theory that all people who wore glasses were evil and lived to torment him.

"What precisely, Mr. Malfoy?"

"This whole mysterious, things will unfold the way they will unfold, walk into darkness and you shall find a light rubbish!" Draco snapped, glaring. "Where is my magic mystery super weapon of doom?"

Dumbledore blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want my magic spear," Draco told him. "Sword will do. Or lance, even. Really. I mean, there has to be something so I can win-"

"My dear boy," said Dumbledore, "Who says you are going to win?"

"Excuse me," said Draco faintly. "I need to sit down."

He did not sit down, though. He found himself still standing and bristling at Dumbledore.

"The terms of the prophecy are that one of you has to die," said Dumbledore. "Apart from that, we know nothing."

"And Potter knew this," said Draco.

Dumbledore nodded, eyeing him with a this-is-not-the-way-Potter-reacted, you-are-such-a-disappointment look. It was so typical that even though Fate had chosen Draco, *Fate*, everyone was still acting as if Potter was better than he was.

"And Potter never mentioned to you, in seven years, that this is a retarded prophecy?" Draco demanded. "I mean - with respect, sir, you must be going senile! You should be locked up in an old folks' home, you should be medicated, a seventeen-year-old with no special training going up against the resurrected Lord of Darkness! *What kind of plan is that?*" He was vibrating with outrage. "No bloody Slytherin would come up with a stupid prophecy like that,

you know."

He felt like all the portraits were staring at him and judging him, which obviously they were, but Draco always felt like all portraits gave him especially nasty looks. Which was so unfair, because he was under a lot of pressure right now and besides he'd been four and there had only been a little turpentine and it had seemed like a funny idea at the time...

Draco took several deep calming breaths.

"I quit," he said flatly. "Potter may have the job back. My father doesn't like it, and frankly it's not what I was expecting. Mind you, Professor, if you could tell him that I'm giving him the job back out of pity because I didn't like to see him moping over his pathetic, empty life, that'd be-"

"Mr. Malfoy!" said Dumbledore. "You cannot quit your destiny. No matter how much you flail and whine about it - and you do an excessive amount of flailing and whining for a boy - destiny is unavoidable, inevitable and certain!"

Draco stared at him coldly, and said: "My father will hear about this."

*

Since life and fate were unfair and hated Draco, this was by no means the end of the day.

He was in a considerable state of agitation as he went from Dumbledore's office. There had to be a way out of this business, his father has disowned him and he was going to... he was, well, what if he sustained a Quidditch injury and asked to send in a second, that might be acceptable...

Draco reflected fatalistically that the Dark Lord was probably not going to accept a teacher's note when he was grabbed by the back of his shirt, hauled into a room and thrown up against the door.

For the second time that day! He raged inwardly. His shirt collar was ruined, he just knew it.

It was at this point that he realised the person doing the hauling and the shoving was Harry Potter.

He felt his eyes go extremely wide.

"Oh, no," he said, holding up his hands to ward him off. "No, no, no. Look, those rumours weren't true. They were absolute lies of the vilest kind-"

"Malfoy, what are you-"

"I'm not like that! Anyway, really, Potter, what kind of sick glory hound are you-"

Potter moved away and Draco thanked God, and then saw the puzzled look on Potter's face.

"Malfoy," Potter asked, "are you on *crack*?"

Draco looked around the room, and saw that Granger and Weasley were also there. He was briefly relieved, and then on second thoughts even more afraid.

"No," he said, trying to dig his way through the door with his shoulder blades, "my body is my temple. What do you people want?"

Let no man say that under duress, Draco Malfoy failed to sneer.

"We've been thinking," said Potter, in his lamentably awkward and abrupt way. Granger nodded in her appallingly righteous manner, and Weasley simply looked sick.

Sudden empathy with Weasley made him feel dirty.

"Good for you, Potter," Draco sneered, and fixed his shirt collar. He lifted his chin and gave that scruffy bastard his most disdainful look. "Will that be all...?"

"Oh my God, just let me hit him once," Weasley exclaimed, and Granger grabbed his sleeve.

"You can't hurt me, I'm the saviour of the world," Draco said hastily, and as much to Potter and Granger as Weasley.

They were all vicious, deranged creatures. Every single one of them had attacked him without provocation, good God, they were like a pack of animals, feral, crazed...

"That's right," Potter said evenly. He looked as if he would have liked to punch Draco.

Draco tried to hold eye contact with him. That was what you did with wolves, he thought. Rabid dogs with grubby glasses must be much the same.

"That's why we have to help you," Potter went on. He looked tired and nauseated, so he was probably right on the edge, which was why Draco did not immediately point out that he was crazy. "We've... got experience with Voldemort-"

"Oh my God don't say his name!" Draco exclaimed.

"Voldemort," repeated Potter, either to show off or to be terminally disobliging. Draco just about managed not to claw at his own hair. "We've got experience with dark things."

Draco's mouth fell into the safe, familiar lines of a sneer.

"Oh, and I just bet you're terribly, terribly concerned about my safety." After all, his own father hadn't been.

Potter sneered back. Damn it, he'd known there was something else Nott should have copyrighted!

"Not terribly. But you're the last hope of the wizarding world, and we have to do something."

"Why should you?" Draco asked. "If you're not the hero any more, why should you?"

Potter blinked. "Because it's the right thing to do?"

"I really don't understand," Draco said blankly.

Potter was quite clearly insane, but the question was, was he currently *dangerously* insane?

Granger coughed. "Research," she offered, giving Draco a nasty look. "I could do - research."

"I know how to read," Draco informed her icily. "Do any of you have a magic mystery super weapon of doom?"

He wished people would stop giving him looks like that when he asked. It was a perfectly sensible question.

"No," Granger said at last. "Is the strain getting to you, Malfoy?" she asked between clenched teeth. "Because we're, we're here to help."

Draco threw up his hands in despair.

"Are you all stupid?" he demanded, and then remembered to whom he was speaking. "Let me put that another way," he said. "A schoolboy fighting the master of all evil, one on one, mano e mano, is a stupid plan. You cannot cobble together a defence of girlish textbook notes and wrong-headed recklessness. You cannot try your very, very best and hope it works out. You cannot all band together in a brave little group and hope to live because the universe just loves you valiant scamps! So I'm not interested in your help, and if you wish to talk to me again you must make a prior appointment with my publicist!"

Potter grabbed his sleeve as he went out. Draco did not see why his newly-discovered heroism was making people take so many liberties with his person.

"Stop, Malfoy, think. This isn't just about you any more, you have to start taking responsibility-"

"Unhand me!" commanded Draco, and gave Potter his most disdainful glare. "And stop stalking me, Potter. It's really getting quite pathetic."

He escaped while they were all still spluttering.

*

"I wish I could help you, Draco," said Pansy, "but I cheated on all my tests last year."

Everyone was in the same boat. The only people who had not cheated were Draco, whose innate sense of superiority forbade him to do so - never mind the fact that he sat beside Crabbe - and Crabbe and Goyle, who had approximately the same sneakiness as centaurs during the mating season. (The mating season for centaurs had just occurred, and images of Professor Firenze and that unfortunate table were indelibly burned into everybody's brain.)

This total lack of help for him in his direst straits was making Draco think random, hysterical

thoughts about the value of a solid work ethic.

Professor Snape offered to help him by teaching him how to read thoughts, but Draco investigated the matter and realised Professor Snape would have to read his own thoughts at some point.

"So, theoretically speaking, you could look into the details of any dirty dream I've ever had? Not that I've ever had any. It was a friend's dream. And I think I may have misunderstood him."

"Well, technically, yes, but-"

"No thank you, Professor," Draco said firmly.

He did not add 'I'd rather die' because he felt like fate was crying out for him to tempt her, and he was not giving the hussy any more ammunition.

He took out some books about what his father referred to as the Golden Age of Glory, and after he saw the pictures with those little kids in them he started having very upsetting dreams.

Eventually he accepted his horrible fate, and walked the condemned man's walk towards the Gryffindor table.

Potter had his nose buried in a book, which was further proof that the universe had gone mad.

"What're you doing?"

"Trying to deal with my anger issues, and also restrain myself from killing you for being so very annoying," Potter replied promptly.

Draco peered at the cover of the book, and read the inexplicable words: '*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.'

He shrugged it off. "Well, anyway. I have decided to take pity on your sad, empty little life. You may have the honour of assisting me to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Gee, Malfoy, thank you."

"I will ask you to sign a form for my legal assistant, Mr. Nott, stating that you do not claim any share of the profits accruing to he who defeats the Dark Lord, and also that you do not demand more than a cursory footnote in my planned autobiographies."

Potter's hand clenched around a fork in a manner Draco thought was alarming.

"Though I may reconsider this, based on your performance in aiding the non-romantic conquest of the Dark Lord," he said hastily. "So if you could get your minions to - Are you feeling quite all right, Potter?"

"I'M AT ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE, YOU FUCKER," Potter shouted with his eyes shut.

He opened them and said, "And Ron and Hermione are my friends."

Draco gave him a politely incredulous look.

"I don't wish to quibble, Potter. You can call them what you please."

"ARGH," said Potter, who had the manners of a bear.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Draco said, ignoring this barbarism. "I have to assist in the composition of a dance routine to go with my theme song."

He stopped as he turned to go, arrested by Potter's expression of sheer disbelief.

"Malfoy, I always knew you were a nasty bastard," he said, "but I had no idea you were such an incredible exhibitionist."

Draco tossed his head. "Well, that's because you're stupid," he returned. "It's always been perfectly obvious."

*

It was a long shot, but for some reason it paid off. Potter, Granger and Weasley really did - for some reason - seem concentrated on helping him. Granger presented him with notes on little-known hexes she had spent hours compiling in the library, and Draco - in the name of heroism - did not request that the sheets be disinfected before he handled them.

They also showed him something called the Room of Requirement, where they said he could practise.

"So this room becomes anything you want it to be," Draco said, looking around it.

"Yes," Granger assented. "It's most useful for secret practice, we can be quite safe here-"

"And it's never been used, say, for a romantic evening equipped with candles and a water bed and possibly some chocolate syrup. This room promises secrecy, amenities and - basically - porn, but you use it to practise the Dark Arts in."

Potter pushed his glasses up his nose and looked distressed. "It's kind of important-"

Draco cut him off with a peremptory gesture. "You people appal me," he informed them. "I need to go, I'm late for a photoshoot."

"You needn't be quite so dictatorial, Malfoy," Granger snapped.

Draco stared. "Why not? I'm too important to care about your feelings."

"Well, blue mink doesn't suit you at all!"

Draco stalked off. It was clearly beneath him to dignify such an absurd statement with a response.

Even with the imbecilic trio's total lack of social graces, Draco found himself spending an obscene amount of time in the stupid Room of Requirement, going over notes and practising all those hexes. Once he spent an entire evening with Potter beside him, holding his arm in the exact right position.

It was very unsettling, and would ruin his reputation if it got out.

Granger, at one point, began to discuss Arithmancy with him, and - the shame! The horror! - he actually answered her before he remembered himself.

"Did I ever permit you to carry on casual converse with me, Mudblood?" he asked in chilly tones.

Granger shrugged. "I don't know. I don't listen to you all the time."

"I just called you a Mudblood," Draco pointed out to her with some agitation. "Well? Don't you hate me? Aren't you UPSET?"

He took a deep breath, and pretended that last word had not reached Potteresque levels. He tried to look like an ice prince.

"Did you bite your tongue just now?" Potter asked casually.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "NO."

"You looked a bit peculiar for a minute."

Meanwhile, Granger had launched herself into a horrifying explanation. "Mudblood just isn't the same from you," she said. "You know how most people say it - with murderous contempt. It's just that you talk to everyone like that all the time. You get used to it."

Draco did not want the Gryffindors to get used to him. He wanted them to fear and worship him, damn it!

He explained this to Pansy on Hogsmeade weekend, and she said unhelpfully, "Even if you want people to worship you, I don't think you should stamp your foot about it."

"You're not a hero, Pansy," Draco sniffed. "You could never understand my pain."

It was at that point that Potter fell into step with him, and said: "They've got some new stuff in Zonko's, have you seen it?"

Draco gave him a bewildered and horrified look. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "Don't speak to me in public! When did I ever say you were allowed to speak to me in public?"

Potter glanced at him, and shook his head with what appeared to be a genuinely amused smile.

Granger somehow appeared on the other side of him. Hemmed in and desperate, Draco

looked around for Pansy, for help, but she was already talking to Weasley. Damn her fatal weakness for tall men!

At this crucial stage, the paparazzi arrived.

"Quick," said Potter, "Run. It's the only way."

"What are you talking about?" Draco asked, and pouted for the cameras.

They halted for ten minutes while Draco pouted, smiled, smirked, looked sad and burdened by his nobility, and upon request undid a few buttons and pushed his shirt open.

"That's dreadful," Potter said, apparently shocked to his honourable little boots. "Nobody ever asked me to do that!"

"Well, Potter, I have a little thing I like to call star quality."

"Shameless attention whore," put in his treacherous publicist, and they all laughed.

At him! And it was almost like - tolerance - or... something squishier than tolerance, God, Draco was nauseous, it didn't bear thinking about.

"I was thinking about the Fund for Defeating You-Know-Who," Potter said suddenly. "I'm just not sure it's very ethical-"

"I need it," Draco said coldly. "If I cannot support myself in the style to which I am accustomed, I shall go into a decline."

The stupid bespectacled prat smiled that smile again - squishy tolerance, amusement, something, it was horrible, horrible!

"Sure you will."

"I cannot defeat evil if I am not sheltered from the cold winds of poverty and privation!" Draco declared, infuriated. The bastard kept smiling.

"Of course, Draco."

This was the end.

"What. Did. You. Call. Me?" he asked in tones of death.

"Your given name," Granger supplied helpfully.

"I didn't give it to you!" Draco exclaimed in outrage. "Or you, and I definitely didn't give it to Weasley, and - stop smiling at me! All of you! Right now!"

They did not.

Draco, as was his way, thought over the advantages of this new situation.

"Will you people stop Ginny Weasley pestering me?" he asked. "Because she has a problem, she's obviously a raving nymphomaniac, and frankly the idea of her touching me brings me all out in a rash-"

"Why you-" snarled Weasley, and Draco felt a rush of relief.

Potter put his shoulder in front of Draco, gently pushing Weasley back, and pressed *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* into his hand.

"Trust me," he whispered, "it helps."

"ARGH," said Draco.

*

His plan of icy reserve from that point on was doomed to failure as well. Those dreams about people getting hurt made Draco feel terrified down to the very marrow of his bones, and made him want to take action.

Nobody was more surprised than himself that the action he felt called to was not flight to Switzerland.

People were counting on him and that was new: and besides, other people thought he couldn't do it and he was going to show them all.

"It's a matter of pride," he said to Potter while they were poring over books.

"It's a matter of conscience," said Potter.

Potter always talked in a funny way. Draco gave him a strange look, and went on reading. Reading, extracurricular work and Gryffindors - this was not the glamorous career he had pictured to himself as ruler of the school.

His dance routine was going exceedingly badly, too.

Moreover, he had not been sleeping because of that squishy conscience feeling about those dreams, and now he felt he was getting eyestrain. If he ended up wearing glasses like Potter, he vowed there would be consequences.

He woke from a confused dream in which he did have glasses and messy hair, and gave a small overwrought shriek when he realised he was asleep at the table in the Room of Requirement, and Potter was putting a blanket over him.

"Take them away! I demand contact lenses!"

"All right, Draco, hush," said Potter soothingly, and tucked the blanket up under his chin.

Once Draco was properly awake, he was deeply affronted by this presumptuous behaviour, and he expressed his indignation in the strongest terms. Granger was lamentably

unimpressed.

"Yes, it's odd we're able to bear with you, since you're such a prat," she said thoughtfully. "And yet somehow it's bizarrely endearing. I think Harry's quite fond of you, really. Like you're a pet - hmm, a twitchy little ferret."

She smiled serenely and returned to her books. Draco had no words.

He was also speechless later that night, for widely different reasons.

He heard noises coming from the drawn curtains of his bed, and dread struck him.

"Look, Weasley, I'm very complimented but I'm not into bestiality," he began, when a slender hand twitched the curtains aside.

Inside was Padma Patil, in a shocking pink nightgown with shocking cleavage. She caught his eyes with her sultry stare - oh those boys who talked about Eastern girls, they were so right - and performed a small Indian shimmy.

"Gnh?" said Draco, his customary flow of words and polish deserting him.

"I've been noticing - how hard you've been working," purred Padma. "It's time for the girls to show a little appreciation for the hero, I think."

The girls were practically falling out, Draco noticed with interest. And Pansy had said he wasn't a sex god! He was the sex god, he dazzled women, they were all but as slaves to his powerfully compelling charm-

"Aren't you going to get over here?" she asked, in a slightly impatient tone.

"Yes I am," Draco said with conviction, and he was about to get over there and show Padma Patil the time of her life when Potter came in the door.

"Hi, Draco, I was wondering if you wanted to practise those Enema Charms once more tonight."

Draco coughed. "Potter."

"D'you want a lozenge?" Potter inquired.

"NO, POTTER, YOU IMBECILE." Draco cleared his throat and went on in more moderate tones, "If you'd care to notice the sexpot behind the curtain-"

Potter looked, and blinked. "Oh."

Draco was greatly and briefly relieved.

"Oh, sorry, Padma. You must think I'm awful. How could you possibly get lost and wander into the Slytherin dorms? Never mind, I'll take you back. You must be really cold in your nightclothes, would you like to borrow my jumper?"

Draco's mouth opened and shut in stunned despair.

"... no," Padma replied faintly. "No, I'm all right... I think I remember the way back to, um, my dorms now."

"Okay," said Potter. "Bye, then."

Draco gave a small wail of protest as the vision of wanton Indian allure disappeared behind the cruel door, and reached out a yearning hand. He thought he was going to cry.

"How can you be so incredibly dense, Potter? She was offering me the bounty of her golden-brown melons!"

"She was what?" said Potter.

Draco sighed. "I was at least going to get a snog out of her, Potter, you thick twit."

"Oh," said Potter, and went red. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Draco threw up his hands. "Yes, grovel before me, but can you return to me the-"

"You probably wouldn't have liked it very much anyway," Potter said thoughtfully. "It's all wet."

If Draco had to listen to Potter talk about sex, he would consider it as proof there was no God.

"They cry, you see," Potter went on helpfully.

Draco allowed himself a short moment of thankfulness, and then let loose the wrath. "I'm sure that whatever poor helpless girls have in a moment of weakness allowed your doubtless awkward and revolting attentions did end up sobbing their horror and remorse, but that is hardly the issue! The issue is that you - as you always do - are ruining my life!"

Potter looked hurt and dismayed.

Draco raved on. "Oh, la la la, I am Potter, I am so great, it doesn't matter if I am not the one spoken of in prophecy because I'm better than that, I am so noble and everybody likes me best! Even when I get what I want it all gets ruined and now I'm disowned and I'm going to die and you still get to look better and it's like some enormous conspiracy and it's not fair and it's supposed to be me-"

"Me, me," Potter said sing-song, and smiled. "Yes, I remember the little chant."

Draco shook a finger in his face. "Don't smile at me! Don't talk to me! Stop being nice! I AM NOT YOUR TWITCHY LITTLE FERRET!"

There was a pause, in which Draco tried to get his breath back and wondered if his face was unbecomingly flushed.

Potter looked concerned. "Draco," he said. "Is the pressure getting to you? Are you on drugs?"

"I..." said Draco.

"We're here for you, Draco. D'you want us to stage an intervention?"

"GET OUT OF MY ROOM, GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT!"

Draco extracted his wand from his robes and cast a perfect Banishing Charm, to his own distant surprise.

Potter backed away. "All right," he said. "There's no need to shout."

*

"-only I can't get help from the terrible trio, because Potter and I had a row-"

"Did Harry hit you?" asked Dumbledore, perking up.

"No," Draco said, staring.

"Pity," said Dumbledore.

"So you need to help me," Draco concluded. "There is no other choice and remember, you have to, because I am the last hope of the wizarding world."

"Yes, I've been thinking about that," said Dumbledore. "And I've come to the conclusion that the wizarding world is doomed."

"... Excuse me?"

Dumbledore's tone remained sunny. "Just look at you. You're a pathetic little person whose rather manic energy seems to run chiefly on seething resentment. Defeat Voldemort? You can barely tackle your own lunch."

"Inspirational teaching style you have there."

"That's why I am retiring," Dumbledore announced. "I'm too old for all this, and frankly it does my heart no good. This time next year, I'll be spooning up my mush in the Sunshine Sanctuary for Worn-out Wizards, and I'm sure I'll be dead before Voldemort gets around to the old folks' home. Kind of sucks to be you, of course, but so it goes."

"Right," said Draco. "Right."

He stared emptily at Dumbledore for a while, then lunged forward, grabbed his bowlful of sweets and waved them triumphantly at him.

"I'm taking these," he announced.

He had expected the rat fleeing the sinking ship of the righteous cause to be him, not Professor Superpowers. He was vaguely pleased that he'd been right and the man was senile, but that in no way overcame the crippling fear.

And yet he wasn't running. Why wasn't he running?

Perhaps the Gryffindors had infected him somehow.

Draco bit down anxiously on a Cockroach Cluster, and then spotted Professor Blackheart. The man took off his blood-stained apron, cackled and invited Draco into his office.

Draco was admiring the faux bats on the ceiling when Professor Blackheart spoke.

"The Dark Lord's forces are massing."

"Oh my God." Draco looked around wildly. "Where? Where?"

"In the east," declared Blackheart. "Or - the west. Some mystically significant direction. Be that as it may! All know that the highest honours will be heaped on the head of the one who brings their dark master Harry Potter."

"Ahem," said Draco.

Blackheart waved his long-nailed hand. "Well, the one spoken of in prophecy, you know who I mean-"

"Yes. Me," said Draco. "Me, me, me."

"The Boy Who Lived and all that."

"That's not me," Draco remarked darkly.

"But you are the Dark Lord's destined foe," continued Blackheart.

Draco nodded, pleased. "That's right."

"And so on this day you shall die."

Draco began to feel as if he had misjudged this situation.

"Die for daring to stand against my lord," Blackheart continued, eyes flashing arcanelly, and then he added in a far more normal tone: "Not that you're not a great disappointment to us all as an ultimate enemy, anaemic little rat that you are."

"There's no need to be personally offensive," Draco said coldly.

The room seemed to grow darker as Blackheart took out his wand, but then Draco remembered that he'd been wearing sunglasses to preserve his anonymity and also look cool for the ladies, and when he took them off he could see his impending doom much more

clearly.

"Harry Potter would have been a far more worthy opponent," finished Blackheart. "Avada-"

"DIE, DIE, YOU SONOFAWHORE!" screamed Draco, overwhelmed by fury. Insult him and plot to kill him, would they? Bastards! "TAKE THAT BACK, I'M TWICE THE MAN POTTER IS!"

He cast four perfect hexes in a row. Blackheart staggered back, suddenly breathless, sporting warts and wearing an elegant sequinned number.

"Don't you think you can scare me just because you're an albino ball of rage," he panted. "Everyone knows you're second rate-"

"EAT WAND!" howled Draco, and made a particularly vehement gesture close to Blackheart's face.

The wand went four inches deep into Blackheart's eye. Then he fell backwards.

Draco stood over the corpse, breathing hard, for a few minutes, and then turned tail and ran out of the classroom and into bloody, ubiquitous Harry Potter.

"I just killed Professor Blackheart," he bleated.

"What? Why? Don't worry, Draco, I'll testify that you were taking mind-altering substances," Potter said at once.

"He was evil," Draco told him reproachfully.

"A Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher?" Potter asked, deeply shocked.

Draco wrung his hands. "I know, it was so statistically unlikely!" He breathed in and out, willing the black spots in front of his eyes to disappear. The hope they had simply been marks on Potter's glasses was vain. "I think..." he said. "I may be sick."

"Accio basin," Potter said, with great presence of mind.

"Oh don't be foul, Potter," Draco scorned him. "I didn't mean literally. Being sick destroys your teeth, you know, and I have a flawless smile, and I didn't even mean to kill him, he just made me angry and I-"

He was very disappointed in himself when he was sick. Potter made a concerned sound and a fumbling, well-meant effort to hold his hair back.

"That was probably because I ate all Dumbledore's sweets," he said haughtily after he was done, and sat down on the floor.

"I expect so. This is your first victory against evil, you know," said Potter encouragingly. "And you triumphed."

Draco mustered up enough energy to preen a little. "I did, didn't I?"

"Clearly your festering rage and resentment are your secret weapons," Potter said. "You're well on your way to being a hero already."

It struck Draco that the wanker was being magnanimous, but he was too tired to care. "A hero? I am the hero, Potter. And don't you forget it."

"Right," said Potter, with that annoying squishier-than-tolerant smile. "By the way, for when school's over, can I have your address? To, you know, consult on fighting evil and stuff."

Draco was perfectly aware that the correct procedure was to refer Potter to his publicist.

"Yeah, you can have it. And pass it on to Granger, too, but don't let Weasley know it. If his sister finds me, I'm leaving the country." He jerked up his head and glared. "And I'm still nobody's ferret, Potter."

"Are you in shock?" Potter asked.

*

Draco's first victory against the forces of darkness was heralded with acclaim.

Well, not by the bastards who'd been betting that he would die. The betting pool of Draco Vs. Evil had been started by the Slytherins, of course, which made Draco proud of his house.

"We all bet for you," Pansy assured him. "And we got really good odds, as well. Nobody outside our house but Potter and Granger thought you'd make it. Weasley's hundreds of Galleons in the hole."

This piece of news was icing on the cake.

Draco gave an exclusive interview to the Daily Slitherer detailing his exploit, and his early life. Draco could see Padma Patil reading it across the tables, and he mouthed the words along with her.

'From my early days I felt destined for greatness, confided the stunning young man. I spent most of my early childhood rescuing kittens from trees, and the like.'

"You know," Draco said, after several rounds of Butterbeer, "I always knew I'd be better at PR than Potter, and handle fame and wealth better, but now it seems as though I have other virtues besides being photogenic. I was never really sure."

Pansy put her arm around his neck.

"I always knew, Draco," she told him loyally. "You're also rather amusing. Besides, you're not all that photogenic, you always get redeye."

"That is a sign of my immense inner magic!" Draco protested.

Why would nobody believe him? The world was so unfair.

Dumbledore got up, and while the others oohed and ahed their delight over his decision to defer his retirement, Draco played noughts and crosses on a napkin with Crabbe.

"And this year's conquering of dark forces causes me to award three hundred points to Gryffindor-"

Draco coughed pointedly.

"Sorry," said Dumbledore. "Force of habit. Three hundred points to Slytherin," he said joylessly. "Up snakes, indeed. Congratulations, Mr. Malfoy."

There was a burst of cheering from the Slytherin table. Draco saw Potter and Granger banging their goblets, and felt strangely - touched, or something. They were like mongrel puppies, godawfully ugly and yet somehow you couldn't bring yourself to put them down.

He told this to Pansy, who rolled her eyes and said he was a hopeless case. "Nonsense," said Draco calmly. "I am a hero."

As Dumbledore sat down, he could be heard to mutter audibly: "I still say the wizarding world is doomed."

Draco got to his feet.

"Now," he announced with immense satisfaction, "I shall lead you all in a rendition of my theme song."

Quality of Mercy

Chapter One

“Fred and George bought them edible underwear,” Ron muttered in a rebellious undertone calculated to escape the ears of Ginny and Hermione, who seemed to be occupied by the china.

“They didn’t,” Harry said with conviction. “You’re making it up.”

“They *did*! They showed me. It’s not just edible, any old Muggle underwear can be edible, it changes colour and flavour according to the girl’s – er – mood. So if she’s, you know-” Ron winked – “up for it, it goes all red and tastes like cherry.”

Harry had no words.

“Well, my point is, if Fred and George have come up with something *brilliant* like that, we’re going to look like right prats if we wander up to them and say, here, Bill, here, Fleur, enjoy this tea set, I’m sure you’re getting married because you want to make tea together all day long.”

Ron cast a hunted look at Hermione as if convinced she could hear him, and when Harry looked over she was indeed glaring at them. Hermione had always been omniscient like that.

Ginny was stooped over a teacup, spinning happily in its saucer and murmuring a song about tea to her. Her bright hair was falling in her smiling face.

Harry transferred his gaze quickly back to Hermione, who had her hands on her hips.

“Can I remind you, Ron, that Fleur is shortly to become your sister?” she inquired. “Do you really think that underwear is an appropriate gift for your sister? Would you imagine Ginny in edible underwear?”

Ginny filed a very definite protest at this point, Ron went pale green, and Harry, as the only person present who quite fancied the idea of Ginny in edible underwear, avoided everyone’s eyes and stared steadfastly out the window.

Through the window he saw Draco Malfoy.

Harry thought he was a figment of Harry’s imagination for a moment. The thought of Malfoy had been occurring to him at unexpectedly regular intervals all summer, even through the wretched business of the Dursleys and Godric’s Hollow. The suspicions of a year were hard to shake off and sometimes he woke up in Ron’s room and before he was fully awake, he thought *Today I’m going to find out what Malfoy’s up to...*

Then he would remember that he had found out, and that Malfoy’s orders had been carried out, and the lingering memory of Malfoy’s ashen face would be replaced with the one unbearable image of Dumbledore going over the battlements.

He had not forgotten that it had not been Malfoy who carried out his orders, all the same, and when he'd heard that Malfoy had not gone back to the Death Eaters, that they were searching for Malfoy as a traitor who had not done the Dark Lord's bidding when the way was clear – well, he had wondered where Malfoy was with another of those strange pangs of sympathy.

Dumbledore had offered Malfoy mercy, and Harry was the only one who had been there to witness it. It had almost been Dumbledore's last wish. Harry did not think Dumbledore would have wanted Malfoy alone, on the run and hunted, with nobody to help him.

Malfoy looked perfectly all right, though. He was standing there in Diagon Alley as if he could not imagine being in danger, staring back at Harry.

Harry kept staring, absorbing the fact that it was real, and then slowly, Malfoy inclined his head, then turned and began to walk away. He was still looking over his shoulder: the message to follow was clear.

Harry spared a glance for the others. Ron, bickering quietly with Hermione over sisters and underwear and appropriate presents, had drawn closer to the girls and they were all staring at a seductive blond shepherdess. She had spread her skirts and was looking at Ron through painted eyelashes.

"Oh, sir, you look very strong and clever," she said in a tiny voice, like tea-things clinking together on a tray. "Won't you help me find my sheep?"

"She's all right," Ron conceded.

Harry moved quickly and quietly out of the shop, into the street, and put up the hood of his cloak so he could follow Malfoy without being recognised by the usual bustling crowd of Diagon Alley. Malfoy was walking fast, but Harry had no fear that he would lose him. Malfoy kept looking back to make sure Harry was there, and when at last he paused by a particularly narrow alley he smiled.

Harry stopped and stared, even when Malfoy had disappeared into the alley. It had been a – very odd smile. Not unpleasant, but distinctly alien and unnerving on Malfoy's face, lighting it up and inviting a smile back. Harry had the distinct urge to turn around and go back to the china shop.

If he could ever have talked to Dumbledore again, though, what would he have said? *You remember Malfoy? You wanted to save him once, and only I knew about it, and I saw him again and maybe I could have helped him, but he gave me a weird smile and so I ran off.*

No. He was being stupid. He stepped cautiously into the alley after Malfoy.

Malfoy was waiting for him, leaning against a wall. He looked pleased at the sight of Harry.

This was *creepy*.

Harry had wondered what Malfoy was doing, and if he was all right. He'd even thought of finding him somewhere, and telling him that Harry knew he wouldn't have done it. Face to face with him, he found that the words did not come easy.

“Hi,” he said, after a minute.

“Hello,” Malfoy responded with brilliant originality, and smiled again.

All right, Harry had seen many scarier things than a warm smile. He pulled himself together. Maybe Malfoy was just trying to be friendly. Perhaps he was trying to placate Harry, as a prelude to saying he was sorry for everything and asking for Harry’s help. Which Harry would give, and since Malfoy had learned better he would hardly say a word about how the smug bastard had brought it all on himself.

“Right,” said Harry, and tried to put together the first non-hostile words he had ever said to Malfoy. “Look. I’m glad you’re here. People are looking for you, but it’s going to be OK.”

“I hope so,” Malfoy said earnestly.

Harry was cheered by this sign that Malfoy was going to co-operate: once he had explained fully to Harry how stupid he had been and how sorry he was, he could probably be hidden somewhere by the Aurors, just like Dumbledore had wanted.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” he began.

“I’m relieved I found you in time,” Malfoy interrupted, and when Harry nodded he went on, “If you’ll just wait a moment, things will become much clearer.”

“Er – what?”

Just when Malfoy was being sensible for the first time in his life, he had to start talking in riddles. Harry stared at him with speechless frustration that lasted for all of four seconds.

Then Malfoy shook out his white-blond hair, which was falling in cascades around his face – *surely* there was a limit to how girly even Malfoy could be, and surely it hadn’t been that long a second ago? – and Harry saw the bones in Malfoy’s face change, subtly but surely, and his grey eyes go blue as the sky.

Narcissa Malfoy stood in front of Harry, breathing hard.

Narcissa, who had borne Kreacher’s tales to Voldemort and whose sister had killed Sirius. Alone with him in an alley, and obviously trying to trick him into something.

Harry grabbed his wand. “What d’you think you’re playing at?”

Narcissa lifted her hands, palm up, as if in surrender. “I am not playing,” she replied in a clear voice. “I want to make a bargain with you.”

“What do you have,” Harry spat, “that I could possibly want?”

Narcissa smiled, and Harry saw the smile for what it was on her true face: the conscious, half-flirtatious smile of a woman who knew she was beautiful and had been using it all her life. No wonder it had looked bloody odd on Malfoy.

The smile was a reflex that faded almost at once. She said, “Let me explain something first.”

“Talk, then. It won’t do you any good.”

“My whole life,” said Narcissa Malfoy, “I have never loved anything – except my son.”

Harry was aware of his steady hatred faltering, and hated himself for being so weak. It was just – mothers, and the thought of his own mother, and what she had done when he was in danger, and what she would think if she knew what was happening to him now...

It was stupid. Mrs Malfoy wasn’t anything like his mum.

She went on. “I never cared very much about politics-“ and Harry was amazed that the war, the bloodshed and all the disgusting prejudice that had won Voldemort support could be brushed aside so easily as ‘politics’ in Narcissa’s smooth tones – “but of course I have always been loyal to my family, and loyal to my husband. I have always tried to be a good wife to Lucius, and I was delighted to be of use in telling him the news Kreacher brought to me.”

“I really want to strike a deal with someone like you.”

“Listen to me! I want you to understand. I would not have broken with the Dark Lord for any reason but this – but that he has condemned my son. My Draco, who is a child and who never understood, because he had never seen, the true nature of the world in which we live. He should never have been asked to pay for his father’s mistakes! He should never have been asked to do what is against his nature! It was nothing but malice because Lucius had disappointed the Dark Lord, and I shall not forgive it.”

She stepped closer to Harry as she spoke and Harry let his wand drop an inch, but in case she thought he was giving way he kept his voice hard.

“I don’t think we want anyone like you on our side.”

“I think you need anyone ruthless enough to be useful,” Narcissa retorted. “That, however, is not why I am here. Do you think I would come creeping around the Chosen One begging to be allowed play on his precious little team? I came to you for one reason. I came to you for Draco.”

“Well, I don’t have him!” Harry snapped. “You must, if you have the hair to make a Polyjuice Potion.”

Narcissa looked coldly furious. He would have thought she’d remind him more of Malfoy if she was angry, but where Malfoy went pink and lost control Narcissa simply became paler, and calmer, and looked more ready to kill.

“You stupid little boy, do you imagine Draco has left no brushes with his hair in them at his own home? I wish to God he had come to me – then I could have taken him away somewhere, I could have kept him safe, and I would not have to lower myself to conversations with you! He has not come home... but he has sent me an Owl.”

She put her hand to her chest, but did not take a letter out. She only held her hand pressed to it, as if the touch of parchment beneath her robes helped her. Her voice was tight when she spoke again.

“He said to keep his eagle owl because it would be too conspicuous where he was. He’s keeping away from me because – he does not want to put me in danger, my son, as if I would not die or kill to save him-“

Harry was absolutely horrified to see tears in Narcissa’s blue eyes. He didn’t know what to do, whether he should curse or comfort this strange woman. All he knew was that Malfoy had said *He’ll kill my whole family!* as if that was the bottom line, the worst threat that could have been used against him. Coward though Malfoy was, he was not surprised Malfoy had chosen to shield his mother.

It made him think a little better of Malfoy, all the same. He had chosen to be out there, hunted and alone, for someone he loved.

“Why did you turn yourself into Malfoy?” Harry asked abruptly. “The Death Eaters are looking for him-“

Narcissa laughed, high and cold. “Oh, I *wish* that one of the creatures trying to harm my son had accosted me,” she said. “I would have loved to kill them – slowly.” She paused, apparently involved in a private murderous vision, and then abandoned it with visible regret. “As for why – I thought you might follow him. Draco wrote, before all this happened, that you had been following him all around the castle.”

“To see what he was *up to!*”

“Yes,” said Narcissa, looking at him oddly. “Obviously, and I thought that if you had been watching him, and since you had that old man’s confidence, you might have more of an idea of what went on that night than all the fools who have condemned him. I wanted to speak with you because of that – and because you have power, you have influence in the Ministry, you can help-”

“Help you how?”

She regarded Harry as if she thought he was unbelievably stupid, and at that point she *did* remind him of Malfoy quite forcibly.

“Help Draco,” she answered. “I haven’t the resources. I’ve searched and searched, I asked all his friends, I do not know how to find him nor how to insure his safety once I do. You can do that.”

Her certainty irked him. He might be willing to do what he could, but she talked as if he didn’t have better things to do than scour the countryside for Malfoy.

“Why should I?”

Narcissa lifted her chin. “Because,” she answered deliberately, “I can give you Severus Snape.”

After a moment, Harry lowered his wand completely and let it hang by his side. He spoke softly. "Where is he?"

"A house at the end of a street called Spinner's End, in the Muggle world, in West Yorkshire." Narcissa produced a package, wrapped in silk. "This is a Portkey that will place you at his door," she said. "You can give me Veritaserum, you can have it tested to see that I am telling the truth. You will find yourself there, and find him unprepared... and then you can take your revenge."

Harry reached for the package, but she stepped away from him.

"Why would you hand him over to me? I thought he was friends with your husband."

"He was my friend," Narcissa answered quietly, her voice going slightly softer, "and I am – I am very sorry to betray him, but he did not speak for Draco before the Death Eaters. He has shown no pity for Draco now he is condemned, none of them have, and so I must turn to your side. I want you to make an Unbreakable Vow to me that you will find and protect Draco. Will you do it?"

Harry was silent, studying Narcissa's strained face.

"Why should I trust you?" he asked, and heard the small desperate noise she tried to suppress. He held out his hand. "Give me the Portkey first."

Narcissa hesitated, and then suddenly she moved forward, so close to Harry she was a blur of blond hair and white skin that could have been Malfoy after all, and once she had stepped back he had the wrapped Portkey in his hands.

"Thanks," he said.

"Now – wait here while I find a Bonder," Narcissa ordered, voice purposeful and relieved.

"Oh, sorry," said Harry. "Did you think I was going to make the Vow? I don't think I said that."

She stared at him, her face wiped clean with shock.

"I'll do my best to protect Malfoy," Harry continued. "You have my word – as long as it doesn't interfere with anything else. I do have slightly more important things to think about, and I won't let anyone get in the way of what I have to do. But I know Malfoy needs help, and I will give it to him if I can."

Narcissa's slim body was caught in a fine trembling, as if possessed by rage too intense to allow her to speak.

Harry met her eyes with a gaze as cold as her own. "You don't care about Dumbledore at all, do you? You wanted Snape to kill him, so you could keep your precious son safe. You said that no-one has shown any pity for Malfoy... but Dumbledore did. One of the last things he did, before he died, was tell Malfoy that he would protect him."

Narcissa's gaze did not waver. "Did he? Well then... perhaps I will mourn for him." Her voice was cold as a knife. "Once you have found my son."

*

Harry waited that night for all the sounds in the Burrow to die down, for all its inhabitants to settle in their rooms. He listened to the murmurs and laughter from Hermione and Ginny's room, heard Mr Weasley's slow, tired step towards his bed and said "Good night" in response to Mrs Weasley as if he was not going to kill someone in a matter of hours.

He waited, listening until Ron's breathing had gone deep and slow, and then he slid into his clothes and crept for the door.

The passage was dark and silent, though he kept thinking that someone was going to come out of their room for a glass of water. He stopped for a second in front of Ginny's door, and pressed his palm against it. He thought of her sleeping in her bed, her bright hair spread out on the pillows, utterly innocent of what Harry was about to do.

Well, that was for later, if there ever was a later. He left the door after a minute and continued his stealthy way down the steps. He knew there were new wards all around the Burrow, and he did not plan on trying to Disapparate inside the walls. He just hoped that the door being opened from the inside would not set off any alarms.

It did not. He went past the garden as well, to be sure, and then stood looking at the Burrow. Everyone he loved was inside those slanting walls, and leaving them behind was – a wrench. Ron and Hermione had followed him every step of the way up till now, and they would be with him at the end.

They did not need to see Thestrals just yet, though, and he alone had seen Snape kill Dumbledore. Snape was his. Dumbledore would have wanted it that way.

Dumbledore had said he wasn't worried because he was with Harry, but Harry had not been able to shield him when he needed it, had not been able to protect him from betrayal. He could make Snape pay for the betrayal, though.

Harry unwrapped the Portkey, blinking back stupid childish tears. He had to do this right.

In the folds of silk lay what Narcissa had chosen as a Portkey: something she had been sure Harry would recognise, and which would remind him of the mission she had given him. It was Malfoy's broom, shrunk to fit in Harry's hand.

He was not going to forget Malfoy, but first things first.

He closed his free hand over the broom that lay in silk on the other, so his hands were clasped together as if in prayer. And Harry's stomach jerked, and he felt himself spin away, and away, and he went with the pull gratefully, to the place where he would find and kill Snape.

*

It was pitch black in Spinner's End, as if all the street lamps were broken. Harry could smell a filthy river winding somewhere nearby, and just make out something that seemed to be a mill outlined against the sky. The last house on the road looked as dilapidated and abandoned as all the others.

Harry wondered for a moment if Narcissa had tricked him: if she had, it hadn't cost him anything but his time. Besides, for all Snape's pride, this place looked like it might belong to him. It was about as grim and vile as he was.

He went around the back, stepping easily over a fence which had so many gaps and broken places in it that it reminded Harry of a beggar's teeth. The tiny garden had overlong grass that wet Harry's ankles as he passed through it: and he remembered something Tonks had said once while she was telling him and Ron about Auror business: wizards in the Muggle world could not afford to bespell everything in case they were noticed. They always did the doors, she'd said, but watch for unwarded windows...

"*Alohomora*," whispered Harry to a darkened window, and it clicked softly open. He climbed inside, the worn material of his jeans catching the edge of the windowsill and slowing him a little. It did not slow him down long, and in a moment he was in Snape's house with his wand clenched in his hand.

"*Expelliarmus*," responded a voice, and Harry's wand went flying. "*Lumos*," added the voice.

Light spread to reveal a tiny sitting room and, seated on an old armchair, Snape. He bared his yellow teeth at Harry in a malicious smile. He had not even bothered to get up.

"Do you never listen to a word anyone says, Potter?" he inquired. "You need to keep your mind closed or you will never get anything done!"

He had his head tipped back, his greasy hair hanging over the back of the chair. This was what Dumbledore had trusted, this was what Dumbledore had gambled his life on!

"I don't need my wand," Harry said. "I'll tear you apart with my bare hands. You murderer. You *coward*."

Snape's wand, levelled at Harry, trembled as he was suddenly caught in a quiver of anger. His face twisted and Harry stood, braced for whatever might come next, when he heard the slam of what sounded like the front door and then the slam open of the door behind Harry.

Snape stopped looking at Harry, his eyes widening, and Harry seized his moment of distraction by throwing himself on the ground, rolling and then coming back up with his wand at the ready.

"*Expelliarmus*!" he shouted, before he was even on his feet, and this time it was Snape's wand that hit the wall. Harry was breathing hard as he advanced on him. "Now," he said. "Let's see how brave you are, without a wand, without defences, just like Dumbledore was... I wonder what your last words will be..."

"Get out!" Snape commanded, just as someone else said, "*No*!" and ran to stand between Harry and the seated figure of Snape.

Harry blinked, not letting his wand falter, and recognised the real Draco Malfoy.

Definitely the real Malfoy, even though he was still thinner than normal, and scruffy in what actually appeared to be Muggle clothes. The very sight of him made Harry angrier.

He'd thought he felt sorry for him, even thought he might want to help him, but now he realised that he did not want to do anything of the sort. All he'd been thinking of was Malfoy crying – probably scared for his own skin – and Malfoy lowering his wand – probably just afraid of Dumbledore – but now he could see Malfoy clearly, his cold eyes narrowed and his hateful face set.

If Malfoy hadn't let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, Dumbledore would never have died. It was his fault too, and he hadn't been hiding anywhere feeling sorry about it, he had been sleeping over at the house of Dumbledore's killer! He did not even look as sick as he had earlier this year. He had his usual colouring back, such as it was. Clearly, Dumbledore's death had taken the heat off him. He was probably really glad about it.

Harry stepped forward, so close that the tip of his wand touched Malfoy's chest. Malfoy's eyes widened but, rather to Harry's surprise, he did not step back or even flinch.

"Move, Malfoy," he said quietly. "Or do you want me to make you?"

"Go to hell, Potter," Malfoy answered.

"Draco, I do appreciate the gesture, but it's not really necessary-" began Snape.

Harry whipped his wand up so it was pointing over Malfoy's shoulder. He wondered whether he should cast a curse at him now, and deal with Malfoy later.

He would have done it, but he had to pause for a second to think about whether he should try Avada Kedavra or simply say Sectumsempra and watch Snape's blood drain out of him because of his own rotten spell.

"Lower your wand!" Malfoy said sharply.

"Actually, Malfoy, I don't think I will!" Harry snapped, glaring at him. Malfoy sneered back and Harry thought perhaps he would kill them both. Maybe he would cast Cruciatus on Malfoy, like Malfoy'd tried to do to him. Might be good to see Malfoy scream.

Malfoy tilted his head up a little and began to undo the buttons of his shirt.

For a moment Harry's mind simply staggered back from the sight, as if it had been slapped. Exactly what good did Malfoy think *undressing* was going to do?

He thought he realised why when the first button was undone, and Harry saw the tip of a raised mark against Malfoy's pale skin. He remembered Snape saying, *There may be a certain amount of scarring*. Something in his mind quailed and tried to push the hideous memory of Malfoy falling away, but Harry did not let his wand waver. If Malfoy thought he could guilt-trip him, he was dead wrong.

Then Draco undid the next button, and held the points of his faded shirt collar open.

There, glittering below the hollow of Malfoy's throat, lying on the raised scar that ran along Malfoy's exposed chest, was a golden locket. Harry stared at the S inscribed on it, following the lines of the single letter that was Slytherin's mark.

Here was the locket that Voldemort had held in his hands as Tom Riddle, that held a piece of his soul. Here, hanging round Malfoy's neck, was the locket that Dumbledore had made himself defenceless to win.

"Give that here," Harry ordered.

Malfoy frowned. "Oh yes, right away, Potter. I *hardly* think so."

Harry stepped in closer, closed his hand on the locket, and pulled as hard as he could. The chain did not break.

Malfoy let out a little laugh, close to Harry's ear. "It's enchanted not to leave my neck until a certain person says a few special words."

Harry threw him up against the wall, not relaxing his hold on the locket. He felt the hitch in Malfoy's chest as his breathing was cut off and he slid his wand up to Malfoy's chin. Then he used the tip to force Malfoy to look at him, and with Malfoy staring balefully into his eyes he felt Malfoy flinch at last, and felt nothing but satisfaction.

"Fine by me," he breathed. "Now I'm going to use Cruciatius, or maybe I'll just rip you apart again, until you do what I want."

"Wait," Snape said, but he did not get up from his chair. Harry wondered what Malfoy thought of the man he'd been trying to shield now.

He did not look away from Malfoy's face. "Scream all you like," he said.

"It is not Draco who can open the locket," Snape informed him. "Only I can do that."

Chapter Two

Harry kept hold of Malfoy's shirt as he turned to point his wand at Snape.

"Then you get the damn locket off," he snarled.

"Or what?" Snape asked silkily. "You'll Crucio me? I happen to be a Death Eater, Potter, which means my well-being is constantly under threat from people who are slightly more fearsome than you."

"Yeah, you happen to be a Death Eater! D'you think I'm going to leave you with this locket so you can hand it over to Voldemort!"

Harry felt Malfoy flinch at the name, but between Harry and the wall he had nowhere to go.

"Use your brain, Potter," Malfoy said in his ear. "I've been at his house two months. Why wouldn't he have handed it over before?"

"Do not waste your breath, Draco. I had the doubtful privilege of teaching Potter for six years. He never listens."

"You didn't inspire me," Harry said between his teeth. "Fine, then. You haven't handed the locket over. Is that - is the locket insurance to keep Malfoy safe?"

The idea made him angrier. Snape hadn't cared about Dumbledore, who had trusted him so completely. Snape had killed him at Voldemort's bidding without hesitation. He cared about a worthless little rat like Malfoy, and hadn't been able to spare any feeling for Dumbledore?

"The locket is insurance," Snape answered slowly, and Harry could already taste the word *Sectumsempra* in his mouth. "We have a plan."

"Planning to double-cross his side like you did ours?" Harry snarled.

"Like we're going to tell you," Malfoy burst out, and Harry looked back at him and made a fist around the worn cloth of his shirt.

"I think you'll tell me," he said, very low.

Malfoy tried to shove his hands away without success. "What is it about you, Potter? Is every moment not spent injuring me a moment wasted?"

Harry made a show of considering this. "Pretty much."

Which was when his wand spun out of his hand and he left Malfoy, and spun around to find Snape standing at last. He had not picked up his wand.

"Silent and wandless magic," he explained, looking like a bored vulture. "It's the next logical step in what you have been taught, Potter. What did I say? You must learn to listen!"

Harry'd strangle him if he had to.

“I’m dying to listen, sir. Why not tell me your brilliant plan? After all, it can’t be that much of a secret if you told Malfoy.”

Malfoy made a small infuriated sound, but Snape appeared entirely unruffled. “I hate to point out the obvious, Potter, but with a student like you it is sometimes necessary. The fact I am hiding a fugitive from the Dark Lord might suggest to brighter minds than yours that I could be hiding something else.”

“And you think I’m going to tell him over our weekly tea and crumpets?” Harry demanded.

He knew Snape was lying. He just didn’t know why, and he felt like an animal at bay in this dingy little room, an ancient green lamp casting pale light on faded wallpaper, Snape standing over him like a vampire and Malfoy leaning against the wall as if being thrown against it was all part of their precious plan.

“I think your mind’s an open book! Particularly to the Dark Lord.”

“Whereas Malfoy-”

“Whereas Draco, unlike you, is very accomplished at Occlumency for his age.”

Harry stared at Malfoy, who looked like he might expire on the spot of smugness.

“I don’t believe you,” he said flatly.

Malfoy stopped mid-preen and scowled. “Believe what you want,” he said in a sullen tone. It made Harry think, oddly, of how pleased Malfoy had looked at Dumbledore’s praise up on the Astronomy Tower.

Malfoy was *weird*.

“Believe this,” Harry said quietly. “I won’t leave without that locket.”

Snape and Malfoy exchanged a glance. Malfoy took a deep breath, but it was Snape who spoke.

“I do not want you to,” he said slowly. “I want you to take Draco, and the locket, with you.”

*

Harry stared at Snape in astonishment. Any words he had were too small, but after a moment, feeling like he was dropping a pebble into the ocean of stunned silence, he said: “What?”

“Draco is not safe here. Death Eaters may enter this house at any time they choose, and besides - concern for his well-being might distract me from my appointed task.”

There it was again. Concern for Malfoy, when he had lifted the wand with nothing but revulsion and sent Dumbledore flying over the battlements...

Harry's voice shook. "D'you think I care if he's safe?"

"Be a funny thing to think, since you tried to kill me a few months ago."

"I didn't-" Harry began, and Malfoy was bristling and ready to retort when Snape interrupted, his voice overriding them both.

"Where Draco goes, the locket goes. If you have the locket, you have the chance of using all the powers of the Aurors and the Order in order to detach or destroy it. If you choose to let your only chance slip through your fingers - then you are a greater fool than even I had supposed."

Harry looked at the harsh lines of Snape's face. There was no clue in the sunken cheeks or the thin lips, skinned back from yellowed teeth. There was just Snape, always hateful and now so unquestionably worthy of hatred, staring down at him with black unfathomable eyes.

"This is a trap," Harry said.

"Of course," Snape whispered. "Once you enter the adult world, Potter, every choice is a trap. Your choice now is - do you consider the bait worth taking?"

Harry hesitated, and thought unaccountably of Narcissa Malfoy. He had promised her to - well, to guard Malfoy.

He would have done it, too! He would have been glad to keep his word, if Malfoy had come to him with his locket, instead of crawling back to Snape like the Dark Arts-loving little toad he was. Malfoy had not lifted the wand against Dumbledore, and his overwhelming hatred for Snape, who had been able to lift his, made all of Harry's other hatreds seem small in comparison.

He thought of Narcissa Malfoy and her drawn expression as she spoke of her son, and wondered why these people all seemed to care so much about Malfoy's life, while they thought so little of anyone else's.

Malfoy had thought Dumbledore's life meant something, Harry reminded himself, and then catching the cold look on Malfoy's face he felt the last traces of the pity he had felt for Malfoy all summer vanish. He should have come to Harry on his knees, but he had gone to Snape. He didn't deserve help.

Harry had promised, though.

In the end, Snape was right. There was nothing on earth that would have stopped Harry taking the locket Dumbledore had suffered for on the last night of his life, no matter what conditions were attached to it.

"All right, then," he said heavily. "Come on, Malfoy."

Malfoy, instead of looking triumphant, looked terrified. That cheered Harry up.

"I - right," he snapped, looking away from Harry. Harry turned towards him expectantly, and

saw that his eyes were fastened on Snape. His face looked wide open and hungry. "I'll be off then... sir," he said. "Thanks for everything."

"Yes, he's a real *prince*," Harry sneered, and had the satisfaction of seeing Snape's eyes glitter furiously in his direction.

Malfoy did not seem to have heard. He kept looking at Snape. "I won't let you down again, sir," he promised. He made a move towards Snape, one hand outstretched, but Snape did not see it and Malfoy let his hand fall.

Harry watched uncomprehending as Snape's head swung back towards Malfoy and he saw his hand fall. He did not know what the suddenly uncertain expression on Snape's face meant.

His harsh voice seemed to creak for a moment. "You never let me down, Draco."

"This is all really touching," Harry said loudly, "but can we go?"

He was pleased to see the dull blush rise in Snape's face and the murderous glint in Malfoy's eyes. He wondered what Malfoy had meant when he said he would not let Snape down. Did he plan to go through with killing someone this time?

They left Snape standing in that small shabby room, his head bowed. He did not even look around to see Malfoy go, and for a moment Harry wondered whether he had guessed wrong and Snape did not care about Malfoy at all. Maybe Malfoy was just another pawn in this plan.

The thought lent him a remnant of his old pity for Malfoy, but when he glanced at him Malfoy's pale face was turned towards Snape with a desolate look, as if Harry was a poor exchange for a Death Eater.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" Harry whispered. "Want to go back and give him a kiss goodbye?"

Malfoy's expression went from desolation to rage as if someone had flicked a switch. Harry had to stumble backwards over the threshold of Snape's house to avoid Malfoy's sudden swing. As he ducked, he went for his wand, and he found himself in the grimy darkness of Spinner's End going wand to wand with Malfoy.

Malfoy watched him through narrowed, calculating eyes. "Come on, Potter. Try to kill me - again."

"I wasn't trying to kill you!" Harry exclaimed. "I didn't know what that spell would do!"

He was assailed with the memory of the sick disbelief he had felt when Malfoy fell and he had wanted to take it back and known it was too late. He almost wanted to drop his wand, but he wasn't that stupid.

"Thought it might perhaps conjure me a little bouquet of flowers, did you?"

"Look, I wasn't the one trying to cast an Unforgivable!"

“I wasn’t the one spying on people!”

“I wasn’t the one-” Harry was stopped by the thought of Malfoy crying, and the vague feeling that it would be low to bring that up. He saw Malfoy see him falter, and for an instant he thought Malfoy understood.

Then Malfoy’s mouth curled. “I wasn’t the one who kindled a red-hot romance days after cutting someone open, either.”

“And what do you mean by that?” Harry asked furiously, a tiny strange part of his brain noticing that Malfoy had actually said ‘red-hot romance’ and thus had probably helped Rita Skeeter with some of her articles in fourth year.

“I was just stating a fact.” Malfoy looked innocent. “Mind you, anyone in possession of said facts might draw a few conclusions.”

“Like what?”

“Such as... you might like hurting people a little bit more than is healthy. That’s all.”

“Take that back!” Harry yelled. “Or I’ll-”

“Prove my point for me?” Malfoy asked, smirking.

Harry nobly restrained himself from beating Malfoy’s stupid face into a pulp, and shoved his wand into a sleeve. Then he faced Malfoy, who had not even lowered his.

“I’m not a killer,” Harry told him. “Any more than you are.”

Malfoy, enormous freak that he was, actually looked insulted. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean... I saw you, that night at the Astronomy Tower,” Harry said slowly. “I mean... I know you didn’t want to do it.”

Malfoy lowered his wand, which was acknowledgement enough of what Harry knew already. Malfoy’s stupidity infuriated him again.

“You didn’t want the kind of life Death Eaters have, and you went to Snape? What’s the matter with you? Pick a side!”

“I have, Potter. Not yours.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I didn’t want to kill Dumbledore,” Malfoy admitted reluctantly, and put his wand away. “Might’ve been quite happy to kill you.”

Malfoy’s cold drawl sounded very convincing to anyone who hadn’t actually been paralysed and at his mercy.

"I don't think so," Harry answered contemptuously, and turned his back on him. Let Malfoy trail after him for a while. He'd use the Portkey when he was good and ready.

Malfoy did follow him. He had no choice, though when Harry glanced back he gave him such a filthy look that any fond illusions about him learning his place were dispelled.

"You said you weren't a killer," Malfoy said softly, after a pause.

It sounded promising. "Yeah," Harry responded.

"So you won't be able to kill the Dark Lord, then?" Malfoy asked brightly. "I thought that was sort of the point. Wow, I'm lucky not to be on your side."

The effort of not punching him in the head and then once he was down punching every other inch of him was too great to allow Harry to form words as well. They trudged on silently through the cold dark night, and Malfoy didn't even have the decency to keep trailing in his wake but drew level with him.

Harry spared a sidelong glare for the check cloth of Malfoy's shoulder. "I bet your daddy would be really proud, seeing you in Muggle clothes."

"It isn't what you look like that counts, it's what you are."

"That's lucky!" Harry exclaimed, in a passable imitation of Malfoy's bright voice. "Since you look like shit. Had to wear them as part of this plan, or was it just so you could run Snape's errands for him?"

"Shut up making fun of him!"

Harry was so tired of hearing people defend Snape, when he'd always known he wasn't to be trusted and now there was proof, and Malfoy was still too stupid to stop!

"Why should I? Tell me, what's it like being, oh, what's the right word - *Snape's house elf*?"

To his surprise, Malfoy smiled brilliantly.

"Funny you should mention house elves," he said, and tapped the locket gleaming at his throat. "Want to know how I got this?"

"Yeah..."

Malfoy lowered his voice, eyes shining conspiratorially as if they were sharing a rather risqué joke. "Last year, I noticed this funny little house elf wandering around the place making googly eyes at me. He seemed to be spying on me sort of awkwardly - almost like he wanted to get caught, but when I questioned him he could only say... in what seemed to be the greatest pain, poor thing... that he was utterly forbidden by his master to have any sort of communication with me at all.

"I watched him quite carefully after that, and then - would you believe it? He just dropped

this one day. It was the purest accident, I'm sure he just picked it up from whatever house he was serving in before Hogwarts. At first I kept it because I thought there might be a message inside, but of course that would have been against his master's rules. I described this little incident to my mother, and as it turned out, she thought she recognised my description of the elf as a creature that used to serve her family! So I decided that the locket was meant to be a present. And I kept it."

Malfoy did up a button of his shirt to hide the locket, his voice still low and his eyes still sparkling.

"It's so lucky that whoever Kreacher's new master is decided to set him on me," he went on. "Otherwise I would never have had this beautiful locket, and we might never have come to this wonderful understanding. And that would have been a shame, wouldn't it, Potter?"

The sight of his maliciously knowing smile was making Harry physically sick at this point. He fished inside his jeans for the Portkey.

"Better grab hold of me quick," he advised Malfoy. "It'd be a shame if you were left to sleep on the streets."

Malfoy was idiotic enough to look a question at him, and Harry felt the pull of the Portkey, dragging him back to the Burrow, a second before Malfoy gave an alarmed shout and grabbed hold of his elbow. He spun away, smiling at the desperation of Malfoy's bruising grip.

*

Then they were standing outside the Burrow.

Malfoy looked up at the tall, lopsided house with emotions diametrically different to those Harry had felt the first time he saw the Burrow chasing themselves over his face. Harry glowered at him on the Weasleys' behalf.

Malfoy swallowed. "Potter," he said, "tell me this is where your family live."

"Closest thing I've got," Harry returned. "This is the Weasleys' place."

"Potter, no. Potter, I implore you to reconsider! Take me to your Muggles. I'll be good."

"You almost deserve each other," Harry said, having a pleasurable private vision of Dudley using Malfoy as target practise and then being hexed until he fell over. "But I turned seventeen two weeks ago."

"Gosh, Potter, did you? You should have told me. I would have sent a gift!"

"They won't have me back," Harry went on, ignoring him. "I live here now."

He noticed that Malfoy's face was taut and upset. "I can't live here!"

"Why not?" Harry asked coldly. "You were living with Snape. The Weasleys are brilliant."

“Oh, *brilliant*,” Malfoy agreed. “Those twins certainly didn’t try to murder one of my housemates.”

“They didn’t try to murder anyone! That - with Montague, it was just because he was trying to take house points-”

“A marvellous reason to starve someone slowly to death-”

“They thought he’d pop out sooner or later!”

“And when he didn’t, they went running to the teachers to give them the information to help him, did they? You seem remarkably well-informed, Potter, did you go and volunteer information to try and save Montague’s life? Or did you think, like your precious Weasleys, that he deserved to die because he was a Slytherin, and he’d taken your house points?”

We forced him head-first into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor... I dunno where we sent him.

Harry saw, against the friendly, funny background of the leaning house and the wild grass of the Weasleys’ front garden, that Malfoy’s thin shoulders were actually shaking. He felt a little shaken himself once Malfoy had stopped speaking: it was that ridiculous pity, that kept dying and then briefly resurrecting at the most inopportune moments.

“Nobody meant for him to get hurt,” he insisted.

“Funny how your *side*,” Malfoy practically spat the word, “have such good intentions, and keep almost killing people. A minute inside that house, and I expect there would be a terribly unfortunate incident involving a peckish Weasley and my still-beating heart.”

“Look, if we’re talking about intentions, then at least none of us *intended* to kill anyone! Can you say the same, Malfoy?”

“I’m not giving you any guarantees you’d be safe in my house.”

Perhaps it was that Malfoy tacitly accepted Harry’s point, and his own guilt. Harry had been waiting for a bit of humility, and he tried to make his voice slightly less harsh.

“Malfoy. You’re not going to get hurt. I promised to keep you safe.”

Malfoy’s shoulders went down a little, like the hackles of a dog reconsidering savagery. He did say, “Oh, Potter, you’re so heroic. Will you hold my hand?” but Harry decided to ignore this as background noise as long as Malfoy followed him when he unlatched the gate, and walked towards the Burrow. He saw there were lights on in the kitchen, which put paid to any plan of smuggling Malfoy into the attic and feeding him occasionally.

“Oh dear,” Malfoy said dramatically. “I can smell Weasley from here.”

Pity was brutally murdered by fury in about the same split second it took Harry to open the door and shove Malfoy up hard against the door frame.

“There’s another reason for bringing you here,” he snarled into Malfoy’s face. Malfoy pressed his lips together, obviously trying to look composed, but he felt Malfoy’s heart speed up under his clenched fists. “Remember Fenrir?” he whispered, and saw Malfoy’s lashes snap back, his eyes going wide. “Yeah, the one you let into our school. Remember that body you tripped over? That was Bill Weasley.”

The tension running through Malfoy’s body, suggesting he was just about to fight back, all drained out of him. “Oh.”

“Yes. Oh,” Harry said roughly. “Time to face some consequences, Malfoy.”

He grasped Malfoy’s shirt tighter and shoved him through the door and into the Weasleys’ kitchen.

They were all up, Ron with bed hair so extreme he looked almost as untidy as Harry always did, Hermione with her dressing gown buttoned up wrong, Ginny with a sweet, sleepy colour in her cheeks. Mr and Mrs Weasley holding hands and looking agitated. Bill, who was here preparing for the wedding and submitting to Mrs Weasley’s frighteningly intent coddling.

They were all up, and staring at Malfoy, who was blinking at them like a rabbit in the headlights. Harry left the door and went to his side.

*

Hermione, before she had assimilated the situation, started to say: “Harry, thank God, we were so wor-” and then went very quiet. Ron and Ginny seemed to be having synchronised embolisms.

“I can explain,” Harry told them all quickly, and then saw that they were all staring at Bill.

He looked at Malfoy, and saw that they were following his gaze. Malfoy seemed rooted to the spot but shaking violently, like a tree in a storm, and as his eyes grew wider and wider they all seemed to be looking at Bill through new eyes.

Harry had only thought of scoring one off Malfoy. It had not occurred to him what a horrible, selfish thing he might be doing to Bill.

The warm, cosy light in the Weasleys’ kitchen seemed all of a sudden far too bright. Everyone was silently staring at Bill, drinking in the scars as if they were fresh. The one that had almost taken his eye and left his eyelid sagging and pulled out of shape. The one where Fenrir had gouged a hole in his cheek that quivered livid as his cheek muscle worked. The rips and tears, the fretwork of pain, inscribed over and dominating and reshaping all of his features. Most of all there was the huge scar that crossed white over the side of his mouth, trembling and turning every expression into a hideous grimace as it did now when, under all their eyes, he tried valiantly to smile.

Malfoy broke the terrible, observing trance when he made a small uncontrollable sound and then turned tail and fled.

Harry would have pursued but it was clear that Malfoy was not going far. Outside, they could all hear - *Bill* could hear - the unmistakable and wretched sound of someone vomiting.

Bill was still smiling that brave, grotesque smile. "It's OK," he told his mother. "It's OK, it's not important. I don't blame him-"

Harry felt so guilty he wanted to die. After all the Weasleys had done for him, he had used what had happened to Bill just to make Malfoy squirm.

Mrs Weasley's hands were trembling. "I'm glad you're safe, Harry," she said, and made him feel more guilty still.

He was trying to find some words to explain when he saw that all of their eyes had fixed on a point beyond his shoulder, and he turned to see Malfoy had returned. He was standing uncertainly on the threshold, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and his expression indicated that he wanted to be sick again.

Harry wondered why he had come back. His gaze was fixed on the floor, and he seemed to be searching for words.

He kept swallowing, as if hoping some would come up. Eventually, he said to the floor:

"Can I talk to you, Weasley?" He looked up as if struck anew with the realisation he was in a den of Weasleys, and cast a wild look around the table which fixed on Bill. "I mean-" There was a terrible pause in which Malfoy obviously tried to search for a word that described Bill without mentioning scars. "I mean you," he said at last. He looked like a skull by the time he got the words out, and he looked more than ever like he was going to be sick again, but he added: "Please."

Bill got up, slowly. "OK," he said, obviously quite at sea. "If you like."

Harry was at sea himself. He crushed the urge to grab Malfoy and demand what he was planning to do before he hurt Bill again, and instead, hardly knowing why, he let Bill go with Malfoy into the darkness of the front garden.

He wanted to hear what Malfoy had to say, but now everyone was looking expectantly at him.

"Who's your friend, Harry?" asked Mrs Weasley, and Harry gaped at her before he remembered that she had only seen Malfoy twice, both times briefly, and last time must have been before fourth year.

She could only remember a pale little runt skulking behind his father, and it probably did not occur to her to compare that image to this tall boy in costume jewellery Harry had brought home.

"What the hell, Harry?" asked Ginny, and turned to her mother. "That was *Malfoy*," she explained rapidly. "Lucius Malfoy's son, the son of the man who gave me that book, the boy who let the werewolf into Hogwarts-"

“Oh!” said Mrs Weasley.

“Wait,” Harry begged, and was incredibly grateful when Ginny stopped talking at once and fixed him with a gaze that said: *I’m trusting you, Harry, so make this good*. “He has a Horcrux sealed around his neck,” he explained rapidly. “We need it: we need to remove it and destroy it. I didn’t know where else to bring him. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, in a suddenly keen voice. Ron relaxed, and Ginny gave him the smile that made his chest ache, a smile that said she’d had faith in him and it had been rewarded.

He looked away, and was caught by Malfoy’s silhouette in the darkened garden. He could hear the low, halting tones of Malfoy’s voice, different tones than he had ever heard Malfoy use before, but he could not hear what Malfoy was *saying*. He was furiously curious again.

Everyone at the table was talking at once, and Harry forced himself not to ask them to keep it down.

He was still straining to hear when Malfoy and Bill returned.

Malfoy still looked miserably sick and unsure, but he was holding his head up now. Bill, wearing a smile still pulled down on one side yet fitting far more comfortably on his face than the one he had worn before, had his hand on Malfoy’s shoulder as they walked in side by side.

“Mum,” he said. “Draco’s in a bit of a mess. Can he stay here for a while?”

Mrs Weasley started the flutter of consternation she often raised around Bill these days, full of murmured endearments and - this time - a vague comment about Fred and George’s room, and amounting to one thing: that right now, she could deny her eldest son nothing.

That was settled, then, and Harry supposed he should be relieved. Instead, he found himself watching Malfoy, still unsure of what had happened. If Malfoy was sorry, surely he would have said so to Harry. Harry had been quite prepared to... Harry would’ve...

The look creeping onto Malfoy’s face unsettled him. He looked like - like a newly lit lamp, brightness still flickering uncertainly, and he was staring at Bill with dazed gratitude.

Chapter Three

Harry woke early. He'd had a restless night, tossing and turning on the camp bed, still thrumming with the desire to kill Snape and terribly aware that a Horcrux was in the house. In the house, between Fred or George's sheets, so maddeningly close.

Having Ginny pressed up against him as soon as he walked out the door did nothing to help his general sense of frustration.

"Sorry, Harry," she said, and quickly stepped back. She was combing her long hair with her fingers, Harry saw: it was twisted around her hands like a hundred rings.

"You're up early."

Her chin went up. "I'm damned if I'm letting Malfoy see me in my nightie."

Apparently, this meant she had to do her hair right as well, in order to make it clear that she was the kind of person who always went down to the breakfast table ready for the day and barely noticed the existence of any Malfoys. Harry did not understand girls.

He understood the awesome stubbornness of Ginny, though, and he stood aside as she combed the house for a comb and explained that she'd been up all night with Hermione anyway.

"Every book in the house had to be examined in case it contained the clue to getting Malfoy's necklace off. Couldn't wait till morning. Couldn't even wait till I was asleep. But I have had an idea."

"Yeah?" said Harry, hope briefly replacing longing.

She looked up at him, eyes shining. "Yeah. So, we've got to cast spells on Malfoy to get the thing off. So, we should use any spell that might possibly work, no matter what. So, if I should accidentally turn Malfoy's nose into a jelly baby, that'd be a complete accident and all in the cause of righteousness."

Harry grinned. It all seemed ordinary for a moment, as if they were still going together, as if he could lean down, kiss her, and be warm and safe and normal.

But the Burrow wasn't his home, even if he was living there. He couldn't have a home, not yet.

He could only have a base.

He left her rummaging, put his head around the door of Ginny's room and asked Hermione if she had found anything.

"No," she said, dark circles under her eyes. "But, Harry, I'm sure I can-"

He went and sat on her bed. "I'm sure you could use some sleep. You're reminding me a bit of

Dobby - will you fling yourself from the topmost tower if you don't get your work done?"

"I have not the faintest idea what you're talking about," Hermione yawned, looking like a blurred photo of herself, smudgy around the eyes and frizzy about the hair, "but the systematic abuse inflicted on house elves by the wizarding world is textbook and no laughing matter: victims are always implicated in the crimes committed against them, all the house elves in the world are suffering from Stockholm Syndrome-"

"I'm sure you're right," Harry said, capturing the book from her hands. She made a futile grab at the air.

"Get some sleep," he continued. "Or you can't come to the Hollow."

"The answers could be in that book," Hermione mumbled. "Research is key."

Hermione vulnerable did not happen all that often. Harry resisted the urge to tuck her up. Instead, he bore the book away with him. He'd have carried the whole pile, but it was enormous and he hadn't had much sleep himself.

Of course, there was another stop to make before Harry could go downstairs. Harry had been aware of that since he got up and deliberately left Ron asleep. He'd have to go get Malfoy, who wouldn't want to venture down into Weasley territory, take him downstairs with him and lay some ground rules about manners in the Burrow. He'd brought Malfoy here, Malfoy was *his* responsibility, and the least he could do for the Weasleys was make sure Malfoy was the best guest it was possible for Malfoy to be.

Fred and George's room was empty, aside from the boxes of tricks and a neatly made bed, all of which seemed to be mocking Harry in their own special inanimate way. *He wasn't staying. That wasn't part of the plan. He's got the Horcrux and he could be anywhere...*

Harry went storming down the stairs into the kitchen, and then stopped at the threshold as if someone had hit him with a Petrifying curse.

Draco Malfoy was laying the table and chattering to Mrs Weasley like a happy sparrow.

"-no, I agree, she has far more range than cheap manufactured bands like *Wyrd Sisters*, who don't even write their own lyrics-"

"I knew they didn't," Mrs Weasley exclaimed. "I always said that!"

"You can just tell, can't you? I love Celestina Warbeck," Malfoy said earnestly.

"Oh, *do* you, Malfoy," Harry asked from the doorway.

Malfoy dropped a fork and scowled at the table. Harry was quickly recovering from astonishment now: it all made perfect sense. Of course, Malfoy was doing his usual stuff, *crawling* to Snape or Umbridge or anyone who seemed willing to favour him. He'd seen Mrs Weasley give into Bill and targeted her like a carrion bird.

And of course, he was being silent now because he knew that this whole winning ways carry-

on would cut no ice with Harry.

"Harry, dear," said Mrs Weasley. "You're up early, you must be hungry."

Harry didn't know whether it was natural or a habit formed from raising seven, but Mrs Weasley's standard greeting of 'you are breathing, so I'd better feed you' had always appealed to him intensely.

He felt the edge go off his appetite when he saw Malfoy wander away from the table and closer to Mrs Weasley, eyeing Harry as if Harry was the intruder here, as if Harry'd forced him to stop talking. Mrs Weasley wouldn't be so keen to chat about Celestina Warbeck with Malfoy if Harry'd made it clear that her eldest son had been crippled because of him.

He took a violent, petty satisfaction - for Ron, and all the things Malfoy had ever said to him - in the fact that Malfoy looked like the Weasleys' poor relation. In daylight, the faded check shirt and jeans didn't even fit well, and wherever the comb Ginny was searching for was, it obviously wasn't in Fred and George's room.

Malfoy lurked with his bad hair behind Mrs Weasley, who gave him an absent smile.

"Draco was just telling me how you two used to play Quidditch together."

"We played Quidditch *against* each other," Harry corrected.

Mrs Weasley looked puzzled, as if she couldn't really see the difference. Malfoy looked over at Harry's face and brightened up.

"It was ripping fun," he drawled.

Harry thought about Quidditch as he hadn't in a while, as suddenly present and all over him as the weather when you stepped outside. He remembered the wind in his hair and the gleam of the Snitch and the blood-pounding *triumph* of that Quidditch Cup in third year.

It hadn't even seemed important last year. Now it was like Ginny: part of the life he couldn't have.

"You're good at Quidditch, aren't you, Harry?" asked Mrs Weasley. "Did you win most matches against Draco?"

Harry smiled and watched Malfoy scowl. "Don't really remember... about how many would you say, Malfoy?"

Malfoy did not look away even as he murmured thanks for a cup of coffee from Mrs Weasley. He didn't speak.

"Roughly?" Harry pursued.

Malfoy was saved, which he did not deserve to be, by the advent of Ginny and Bill. Bill was ruining the effect of Ginny's entrance by asking her why she was up and dressed so early. Ginny's efforts to shoot him a Speaking Look were completely useless, as Bill had noticed

the usual couple of wedding presents delivered this morning and was homing in.

"Doesn't Phlegm - Fleur - *mind* you opening presents without her?" Ginny asked.

"Not really," Bill said. "Says if she sees another Time Toaster she'll top herself. Morning, Mum. Morning, Draco."

Mrs Weasley smiled adoringly: Malfoy waved his coffee cup in a tentative-looking gesture and attempted a smile, attention immediately diverted from the fact that Harry had *always* won and would have kept on winning, if only Malfoy hadn't decided to stop playing.

"... Time Toaster... a set of teacups that sings 'won't you be my guest', oh, and that hasn't been done before..."

Harry gave Ginny a vindicated glance, but she was looking at the teacups she'd fancied so much in the shop. Harry would not be overly surprised if a mysterious present disappearance occurred.

"And a letter from Charlie!" Bill said, waving it in the air as if it was a trophy.

He looked set to open it at once, but then Ron came in and tried to grab it, and Bill was forced to fend him off with the toasting fork. Harry saw Malfoy draw slightly closer to Mrs Weasley on Ron's arrival.

Bill was reading out his own summary of the Owl. "La la la I am Charlie and I made all my brothers play Dragons, Tamers and Crispy Fried People Snacks for years but I can't seem to make time for family, la la la dragons breeding fascinating I am Charlie and I have no love life, la la la I promise to be back before the day. He'd better be back on the day. I don't even know if Percy's coming, and as for the twins, no power under *God*!"

Fred and George had been very urgent in their claim to be Bill's best men, and had said 'two are better than one' and 'buttonholes' with a distinct air of menace. Bill was now threatening to elope.

"Are the twins coming here?" Malfoy asked sharply.

Everybody looked at him.

"This is their home," Ron informed him.

Bill blinked at something, and then looked around for some reason at Ron, Ginny and Harry.

"Come and sit by me, Draco," he said.

Malfoy came, performing a sideways manoeuvre round the table to get to Bill while avoiding the others, like some kind of sneering two-faced *crab*. Ginny began industriously removing all forms of breakfast from in front of Malfoy.

"Oi, I was eating that!" Bill protested, whisking at least seven pieces of toast from her hands. "Charlie's coming here too," he added to Malfoy, waving the precious Owl. "He's the eldest

next to me.”

“Oh, I - didn’t know there were more of you,” Malfoy said, looking vaguely horrified. He paused, picking at a piece of toast Bill had put on his plate, and glanced up at Ron and Ginny. Then he looked back at Bill. “Is he like you?”

Surely even Bill would see through that obvious flattery, but he just grinned.

“He’s a *bit* like me. Less handsome.”

“And, er...” Malfoy, the posh git, seemed to be trying to make conversation. Like he was a welcome guest, Harry didn’t think. “Why are they all coming?”

“Because-”

Bill’s explanation was forestalled by the back door opening. Harry reached for his wand when he saw Malfoy’s stunned expression.

Then he actually looked around, and saw why Malfoy looked as if he had been struck between the eyes with a plank. A golden vision stood outlined against the sunlight, her hair a shining sheet over her shoulders, the light chasing itself jealously over every curve of her face.

“Bill!” Fleur cried. “They ’ave let me off work early!”

She seemed to fly rather than walk from the doorstep to the point where she precipitated herself into Bill’s lap. Harry entertained the notion that she was exercising some kind of arcane Veela power when she started exercising some Veela tongue, and he hastily looked away.

Malfoy, rude bastard that he was, was still staring.

“They said that I was utterly utterly ’opeless, and no use to them at all, and I should go on my ’oneymoon and stop drawing wedding dresses on their account books!”

“You must be on the fast track to promotion, love,” said Bill, and kissed her again. He drew her against him to the sound of her languorous happy sigh, and addressed Malfoy. “I’m going to get married in four days, you see.”

Fleur leaned over and kissed Ron briefly in greeting, and then tugged Harry’s head down. Whenever the wedding was mentioned she started dispensing kisses. She leaned over to Bill’s other side and gave Malfoy an inquiring look.

“You are not a Weasley,” she observed.

“No,” Malfoy said, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a little smile. “But you can kiss me if you like. I remember you from the Triwizard Tournament, everyone thought you were really-”

Malfoy stopped and stared hard at his fork, the tips of his ears going pink. Fleur looked

pleased.

“He’s Draco Malfoy,” Harry said loudly. “He was the one who let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts.”

Fleur went white. She looked at Bill’s face, and then kissed him hard.

Malfoy was white as well, and silent now. Harry was glad. What right did he have to act like he was a friend of the family? He didn’t deserve to be treated decently: Mrs Weasley and Bill didn’t know him. Malfoy should be *crawling*.

Breakfast was mostly a silent meal after that. Malfoy kept looking cowed, eyes on his plate, and Fleur and Bill engaged in one of their sessions of intense whispering. Ron and Ginny engaged in a small game of moving anything on the table they thought Malfoy might be about to reach for.

Mrs Weasley kept coming to the table bearing muffins and scones with shaking hands, her clock tucked under her arm. She no longer looked as if she wanted to talk to Malfoy about Quidditch or Celestina Warbeck.

Malfoy broke the silence.

He said abruptly: “Your clock is stupid.”

What sounded like a snarl rose from Ron. “Malfoy, if you dare-”

“No, I meant-” Malfoy was still white, but he lifted his eyes from his plate at last and looked from Ron to Mrs Weasley, entirely passing Harry over. “I meant, all the hands point to mortal peril. You wouldn’t know if that meant generalised mortal peril, or Run, the Death Eaters are in your back garden!”

“Run, the Death Eaters are in our kitchen?” Harry suggested.

Malfoy’s mouth twisted, but he did not look at him. “I could - I’m good at messing around with things,” he said. “I think I could make it more accurate.”

Good at messing around with things. Like the Vanishing Cabinet that brought the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Harry wanted to punch him an incredible amount.

“I think that’s a brilliant idea,” Bill said in a loud voice. He leaned forward, apparently accidentally nudging Fleur.

“Draco,” Fleur said, and hesitated. “Bill and I would be vairy glad if you came to our wedding.”

Malfoy’s face softened a fraction. “Thank you, I would be very glad to come. Are your relatives travelling over from France for the wedding?”

Fleur brightened. “My sister Gabrielle is coming tomorrow! I am so relieved, for we meant to be married earlier in the summer, but with one zing and another-” Fleur’s hand indicated her

fiance's mutilation and Dumbledore's death in one dismissive wave. "So I 'ad to change all my plans, and I feared Gabrielle would not make it. You will admire her, I theenk, you Eenglish boys. She is much more beautiful than I am."

Bill kissed Fleur again and stroked her hair. She looked pleased with herself, and regarded Malfoy with kinder eyes.

"I doubt it," said Malfoy - laying it on thick as usual, Harry noticed. "One of my friends wrote love poetry about you in fourth year."

The mad urge to know whether it was Crabbe or Goyle did not mean that Harry was about to enter into civil conversation with Malfoy.

"Yes, Fleur used to be very attractive," Bill sighed. "Shame about her putting on all that weight."

Fleur gave a giggle of delighted outrage and gave Bill another kiss. Harry was never going to understand women.

"I'd be delighted if you would help with the clock," Mrs Weasley announced suddenly, and pressed it into Malfoy's hands. He barely caught it in time, and looked up at her with an odd expression on his face. "Thank you, Draco," she added. "Have a scone."

"Gabrielle is fourteen now. My grandmuzzer says the Veela strain runs strong in us," Fleur went on happily. "I 'ope our leetle girl will be as beautiful as Gabrielle."

"What little girl?" Bill asked, his voice going all faint.

"The little girl we are going to 'ave! Bill and I want 'undreds and 'undreds of children," Fleur continued, as Mrs Weasley beamed and Bill went a little bit green. "All ze girls will look like me - and all ze boys will look like me too."

"That's a beautiful dream," Malfoy said, smirking.

They launched into talk of the wedding, Fleur and Mrs Weasley and Bill and *Draco Malfoy*, it was stupid, as if he was like them when he hated everything they stood for and always had.

"I know what you're doing," Harry snarled after breakfast.

Malfoy had gone to get himself a last cup of coffee, and Harry left the table and cornered him against the work surfaces.

"Getting a cup of coffee? Sharp of you, Potter."

"Shut up, Malfoy. I mean - what you're doing with the Weasleys. Mrs Weasley and Bill are too nice to see what a little rat you are, and you're using that to your advantage."

"I'm their guest-"

"You're not their guest! I took the locket, and I had to take you with it. You're in the way -

and you're so pathetic that they feel sorry for you. Well, I don't feel sorry for you."

"Good," Malfoy said in a hard voice. He was looking at him now, his pale face pinched with fury.

Harry pushed his advantage. "Think Mrs Weasley would like you so much if she knew all you've said about her to Ron?" he asked in a low voice. "Want me to tell her you think she's fat, or her house smells, or they all sleep in the same bed? They're being kind because that's the kind of person they are, but *I* know the kind of person you are. And I know you're up to something."

Even that small victory slipped out of his hands. Malfoy looked away from him, his face smoothing out into its accustomed sneer.

"Really, Potter? You find me in the house of the man who killed Dumbledore with the a piece of the Dark Lord's soul around my neck, and somehow you guess I'm up to something? That's amazing, that is. I suppose it's some kind of awesome power that belongs to the Chosen One?"

"Malfoy, I swear I'll-"

At that moment, Hermione came down and Malfoy escaped back to Bill and Mrs Weasley, sticking close by them like the coward he was.

It didn't matter, Harry reminded himself, still glaring. Now Hermione was down, they should go back to the Hollow.

*

The first time they had been to Godric's Hollow, they had gone with high hopes and Hermione with an even higher stack of books. Harry had hardly noticed the details of the house in his headlong rush to find something that would be useful, in order to touch his parents' gravestones and sense something. This was where it had all began: this was his only idea.

Hope had faded now, and all they could do was hopelessly list all the details they had learned already. Hermione had not even brought any books with her this time.

The ruins of Godric's Hollow had been left alone, avoided either because his parents' deaths had left lingering superstition about it or because they wished to preserve the place where Voldemort had been - for such a short time - vanquished.

It was still vaguely in the shape of a house, yellow broken bricks piled up on a foundation with grass growing as thick on them as it grew on his parents' graves. The sight of the ruins stirred no memories in Harry's mind. There was nothing.

There was just nothing. In the late July sun Godric's Hollow lay, a little green scoop in the earth. The ruins looked as if some old house had simply tumbled down and been covered by the blanket of grass. That was what Harry would have thought if he had just stumbled upon it instead of being directed by Hagrid, that was what rambling Muggles must think.

It seemed impossible that this was the place, that the Dark Mark had hung in the air against this particular bright patch of sky, that somewhere - perhaps here, or here - his mother had shouted "*Take me, kill me instead-*." Harry walked over every inch in and around the ruins, so he was sure he walked over the spot where it had happened, where his father and mother had stood.

Every spot felt the same to him. He kept walking.

The sun slipped down in the sky, bringing clouds and dew with the sunset. It was a warm night, and Ron and Hermione did not suggest they go back. They never did that.

Harry never slept much in Godric's Hollow, but he watched them sleep, Hermione's head against Ron's chest, his long nose just touching her hair. His parents must have watched him sleep here, when he was a baby, and promised themselves they would do anything to protect him.

"Maybe we should dig it all up," he said suddenly the next day. "Maybe we should tear it all up and see if, if for some reason someone buried something under the foundations-"

"Harry, how would Voldemort have the chance to put something under the foundations?"

Hermione looked at him as if he was crazy. She didn't see that Harry wanted to take his revenge on the whole place, for being nothing, for giving him nothing. Somewhere here he had had parents, and a nursery, and it could have been Neville who had his life and he could have been safe. Maybe he would still live in the house that had stood here. Maybe he would have spent every summer night here.

He wondered briefly why Ron and Hermione kept coming even though they knew it was pointless, but he knew why.

They did not complain on the second night either, even though Harry had sat around frowning into space for most of the day. Harry knew he should thank them for everything, but he could not seem to stop looking for what he knew was not there long enough to do it.

Ron held Hermione while she slept, and he had held her while she cried at - the funeral, but Harry did not think they were together. A part of him wanted to tell them to stop wasting time, but the rest of him wanted this, *them*, his friends, to remain the same as they had always been. This was hardly the time for messing around.

On the morning of the third day he went alone to his parents' graves. They were small, blurred stones. If he had not known they were there, he might have passed them as well.

James Potter, said the stones. *Lily Potter*. But they themselves did not speak, and it seemed wrong that in this place where they had died their famous deaths and proved that they loved him, they remained silent. Voldemort's wand and Snape's memories had given him more than this.

Where were they? Where was - something, the something he had come here hoping to find, he had kept returning for long after all sense told him nothing was here for this whole long

summer of frustration.

The stones, grey uneven shapes in the long grass, had no answers. He seized handfuls of grass, pulling up the earth as well, and hurled them at the stones and still there was nothing. There were no answers in Godric's Hollow.

Ron and Hermione were leaning against each other when he came back. Hermione looked up at him apologetically.

"Harry," she said. "It's Bill and Fleur's wedding tomorrow."

"Yeah. We should go back. We... we don't need to come here again."

They looked set to protest, but then they saw Harry's face and shut up. Harry was even more grateful for that, and for the way they acted as if they had to pack up all the nothing they had brought with them, and gave him a few more minutes.

He looked around at Godric's Hollow, grass turning as yellow as the bricks around them. It was a pretty little place, a place to picnic. There were no answers, no Horcruxes, no hope.

Hope, appallingly, was hanging around Draco Malfoy's neck, and he had *left* it to go chasing dreams. He should go back and - and Imperius Malfoy, or wring his scrawny neck, or do anything to get that Horcrux and bring him to his knees with a confession of his and Snape's little plot. God alone knew what he was doing left unwatched in the Burrow, and that was Harry's home now - or almost.

"There's just nothing!" he said, and was surprised to find himself almost yelling. "How can there be - just nothing? How can it all be gone?"

"It's not," Ron blurted. He went red when Harry looked at him. "I don't - I mean, I know it sounds soppy, but-"

Hermione squeezed his arm. "There is something left," she said in a small voice. "There's you, Harry."

Harry did not know if he was going to be enough, but they left Godric's Hollow for the last time all leaning against each other.

*

When they returned to the Burrow, they found it transformed. Mrs Weasley and Fleur were in trees Harry did not actually remember being in the front garden before, hanging lace all over them so the trees looked like they were getting married.

"Arry!" Fleur exclaimed, leaping down from a tree and giving the impression of a dryad appearing to humans. "Ron, 'Ermione, how nice it is to see you, we 'ave been worried-"

"There was no need to worry," Ron said, blushing furiously as she took his hands.

"-Eef you were all gone, the seating at tables would be ruined. Gabrielle and my muzzer are

'ere, zey luckily found a nice bed and breakfast, only now all ze wedding guests are trying to stay zere. My muzzer says several people try to share 'er bed every night, and she is not sure they are all making a mistake, but zat is her way, she is very 'umorous."

Harry did not particularly care how humorous Mrs Delacour was. "Where's Malfoy?"

"Who is - oh, Draco," Fleur said. "I theenk - let me see, he was trying to calm Bill down, Bill says zat Charlie is not 'ere yet and the twins are coming and we must instantly go to a Muggle place called Las Vegas. I did not pay very close attention. Ginny and Gabrielle are in ze back garden. Gabrielle would love to talk to you, she 'as been dying to see 'Arry Potter again-"

"Charlie says he won't be here until tomorrow!" Bill roared, striding out into the garden. "He's cutting it entirely too fine. I am the only older brother he has, you know, and he knows Fred and George are planning something - I know they're planning something - they were *born* planning something-"

"I theenk he has wedding nerves," Fleur confided sagely.

"Wasn't Malfoy with you?" Harry asked.

Bill looked quizzical. "I must have put him down somewhere. It's good to see you three, but Harry, could you-"

"I'm very tired," Harry said. "I think I'm going to go grab a kip so I can get up really early and help do - stuff-"

"That would be very 'elpful, 'Arry," Fleur beamed, but Harry was already walking purposefully towards the Burrow.

There was a terrifyingly enormous cake taking up most of the kitchen, and such a tangled mess of streamers in the hall that he immediately recognised Ginny's more-is-more approach to decorating. He went up the stairs as quickly as he could, in case Gabrielle Delacour showed up and delayed him asking for his autograph.

Fred and George's door was closed. Harry paused, thinking he should just shove it open and catch Malfoy unawares, but finally he rapped on the door.

"Come in!" Malfoy practically carolled. He'd obviously been having a fine old time of it while Harry stood by his parents' graves.

Malfoy was standing at the desk by the small window, his back to the light. He was stooped over Mrs Weasley's clock and did not look up as the door opened.

"I'm sure Charles will arrive first thing tomorrow," he drawled, sounding typically unbothered about anything that didn't concern himself. "Anyway, come look at this, I really think I've cracked it-"

The afternoon sun was too bright, making his hair hurt Harry's eyes. It was in Malfoy's face when he glanced up and saw Harry. A smile froze and then slid away from Malfoy's mouth.

“I’m back,” said Harry.

“I’m thrilled,” Malfoy snapped. A sneer came easily to him, as if it was far more familiar than the shy smile.

“What have you been doing while I was gone?”

“Evil things. Kicking puppies, stealing lollipops, telling the Dark Lord that Ginny Weasley doesn’t want to wear a golden flower in her hair. General evil.”

Malfoy looked bored and returned his gaze to the clock. It looked a mess, and so did Malfoy. Not only was he all ruffled, but he was still wearing that cheap shirt, rolled up past the elbows as if Malfoy was working on a car rather than a clock.

“*Hey*,” Harry said. “Excuse me?”

“Potter, if you’re looking for your daily fix of attention, there are ladies dying to swoon all over your scarred self in the back garden. I’m busy.”

“Yeah, you’re busy,” Harry sneered, striding forward and grabbing Malfoy’s wrist. A cog fell out of his hand and his gaze snapped back up to Harry’s face. “You’re busy hiding-”

He stopped. The words dried up in his mouth.

Malfoy was trying to pull his wrist back, but the strength had apparently gone out of him though he was taut with distress. Harry was easily able to keep hold of Malfoy’s wrist, and turn it over.

There on the inside of Malfoy’s left arm, against white skin that looked like it had never seen the sun, was the Dark Mark.

Malfoy was watching him now, his attention captured as surely as his arm. His eyes were huge, his mouth was trembling and he was scarcely breathing.

Harry found words, spoken low. “I thought so,” he said. “I told everyone so, when you flinched away from Madam Malkin, but they all said he wouldn’t let a sixteen year old into his inner circle. I thought maybe you didn’t have it after you couldn’t do it - maybe you had to earn it - but you have it. You swore to him. You *are* a Death Eater. Nothing you do can change that.”

“Let go of me,” Malfoy said, his voice thin and brittle.

Harry didn’t. He had seen the Dark Mark before, a flash Snape had displayed to the room, but he had never seen one close up before. He stared at it, caught between disgust and fascination. What would make someone take this willingly, what kind of person would wear it proudly?

The enormous black skull was almost silly, like a skull on a pirate flag, but the serpent poking obscenely between its bared teeth was not. The whole thing on Malfoy’s skin looked

unreal, like a picture in black and white. Harry stared at the Mark.

“Why did you do it?”

“Don’t do that!” Malfoy shouted, recoiling, and Harry realised he had spoken Parseltongue.

The inclination to hiss curled thick around his tongue, wanting to get out, maybe wanting to frighten Malfoy a little bit more, but he cleared his throat and spoke in English.

“What’s the matter, Malfoy? Remind you of someone?” Malfoy only stared at him, his eyes filled with Harry’s face. “You realise that you’re branded. Like cattle. You *belong* to Voldemort.”

“That was the idea, wasn’t it?”

“What, your idea?”

“No,” Malfoy said between his teeth. “His idea. I thought like you were thinking at the time, I thought it was part of being in his inner circle, and that is the way he tries to sell it. But it’s not like that. It’s not an honour. He wanted to remind me that I was in his power, that my whole family were going to be punished. He wanted to be able to call to me, no matter where I went or what I did. This was - I was part of his revenge against my father, and that’s why he gave it to me. That’s the only reason why.”

Harry recalled suddenly how Snape had once described the Dark Mark. *Every Death Eater had the sign burnt into him by the Dark Lord. It was... his means of summoning us to him.*

He hadn’t sounded like he enjoyed having the Dark Mark. He hadn’t sounded honoured, but like a dog in a choke chain.

The skin all around the Dark Mark, Harry saw, was a tiny livid outline of pink. The colour of a recent burn, but Malfoy had taken this a year ago.

“He still calls to you, doesn’t he? For fun. Does it hurt?”

Malfoy’s mouth was pulled out of shape by some emotion, and did not form properly into the savage sneer he no doubt intended.

“What do you think?”

“I think you deserve it,” Harry said breathlessly. “You promised to hurt people, you wanted to hurt people. You became Voldemort’s animal when all he wanted was to whip you. Think you might have made a mistake now, Malfoy?”

Malfoy should have said yes. He should have admitted Harry was right.

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t know. Maybe if I hadn’t taken that, I wouldn’t have received this. It seems like I have the whip hand of someone now.”

His nasty little smile left Harry in no doubt of who he meant, and though his free hand only

brushed his open shirt collar Harry was also in no doubt of what he was indicating. There were two buttons on his shirt undone, the faded collar drooping in on itself but the locket easy enough to see. It lay against Malfoy's skin, a taunting gleaming gold in the hollow of his throat. Harry looked and Malfoy breathed out, quickly, a breath that was almost a jeering laugh.

Harry wanted to speak Parseltongue again and see him shudder, but instead he expressed desire and fury plainly enough.

"Give it to me, Malfoy."

"I wish I could," Malfoy breathed. "I wouldn't, not ever, not for anything. D'you think I'm *stupid*?"

Harry released his arm, fingers tingling from how hard he had been holding it. He glanced down and saw that there was a pink circle around Malfoy's wrist now, to go with the burnt background of Voldemort's sign. He looked at Malfoy, who stood staring back at him with short breath and cold fury, and then deliberately let his eyes fall back to Malfoy's arm.

"Yeah, actually," he said. "From what I can see, you're completely stupid."

Chapter Four

Harry woke early, with the confused thought that chickens were in the house and in distress, and then realised it was Fleur squawking. Ron mumbled something about Phlegm and hid his face under the pillow.

Harry stayed on the camp bed beside Ron's. Last night they'd had words, and Harry wanted to make sure things were all right. Ron was entitled to be tired after sleeping in the open in Godric's Hollow, night after night. Harry couldn't blame him for being irritable.

Though the news that Draco Malfoy had the Dark Mark could have been greeted with more than Ron's weary, 'You said you were *napping*, Harry.' Still, it was Ron's brother's wedding day. Harry had promised himself that they would all have this one day, and not even Malfoy could spoil it.

He shook Ron's shoulder. "Wake up," he said. "Bet you thought this day would never come, but it's time to start thinking of Fleur Delacour as your sister."

They went downstairs together and found that everyone else was up and in the kitchen. Harry looked at Malfoy, sure he would look guiltily conscious that Harry knew his secret, but Malfoy seemed occupied assuring Fleur that her wedding dress really did not make her look fat.

Mrs Weasley seemed in a state of generalised panic.

"Arthur, are you sure you locked the shed? Araminta Prewett will have hysterics if she sees her children playing with Muggle things. Harry, dear, let me try to do something with your hair. Fleur, Bill and I were talking, I never knew you meant to keep your last name!"

"I am not sure I look like a Fleur Weasley," Fleur said, studying the dress over her arm with very little attention to spare for anything else. "In fact, I 'ope I do not," she added.

Thankfully, Mrs Weasley had moved onto another problem. "Draco, you cannot let the guests see you wearing those dreadful clothes."

Malfoy looked over at her, and smirked at Harry having his hair finger-combed. Harry glared back at him.

"I can stay upstairs," Malfoy offered.

"No, no, of course not. We want you at the wedding," said Mrs Weasley, flying in the face of all the evidence. "Let me see..."

"He can borrow a set of my robes," Harry said, taking a certain satisfaction in the fact that Malfoy would have to be beholden to him, would have to take his charity and wear it next to his skin. He curled his lip as Malfoy glared. "'Course," he added, "I'll have to burn them afterwards."

"I won't wear his stuff," Malfoy snarled. "I'd rather-"

“You can have a spare set of my robes,” Bill interrupted. “It’s no problem. And let’s *all* behave today, shall we?”

On that cue, the door of the Burrow swung open and outlined against the morning sunlight stood the twins.

“Now,” said Fred Weasley, “where would be the fun in that?”

Fred and George came in, grinning, to a chorus of welcome, and then they stopped. Harry was glad to see that there would be no inexplicable softening towards Malfoy from these Weasleys.

“George, am I hallucinating or is there a Malfoy in our house?”

Malfoy stood staring at them, his eyes narrowed and his face very pale.

“I see him too, Fred,” George said in awestruck tones. “Maybe it’s a judgement on us. Perhaps we shouldn’t have held Bill’s stag party all by ourselves.”

“You did what?” yelped Bill.

Fred waved a dismissive hand. “Your invitation was probably lost in the mail. What’s this little git doing here?”

They kept moving as they spoke, every step a step closer to Malfoy. Malfoy got tenser as they came, and Harry moved forward too and put his hand on Fred’s arm. It was stupid, the way Malfoy looked: the twins weren’t going to *do* anything to him.

“I brought him,” said Harry. “Someone gave him to me. I’m putting up with him because I have to.”

The other Weasleys knew about Horcruxes. He had told the Order of the Phoenix, and of course once he had done that he’d told Ginny, but - it had never come up with the twins. He trusted Fred and George, but it might be safest if as few people knew as possible. He didn’t even know how Malfoy had found out. He’d have to get him alone later and ask him that.

Harry shot a glare over his shoulder and found Malfoy already scowling at him.

“Nobody gave me to you,” Malfoy snapped. “I’m not your *puppy*.”

“I’d have you put down if you were, Malfoy-”

“Let me clarify!” Bill shouted. “When I said behave, I meant like decent, normal human beings. Fred and George, try and grasp the concept, I know it’s hard for you. Harry, maybe it’s best if you just don’t talk to Draco. Draco, likewise. Fleur, go put on your dress, Draco, come on and I’ll find you some dress robes. This is going to be a beautiful, special day, full of love and laughter, and if anyone ruins it I will have their head on a plate. Thank you.”

Fred and George made a great show of wiping away tears.

“That was beautiful,” George said earnestly. “You’ve touched us, Bill. We’re reformed men. We’ll be the best best men you ever imagined.”

Bill went almost as pale as Malfoy. “No. No, anything but that.”

Fred looked angelic. “Accept it, Bill. It is fate.”

“Charlie’s coming!” Bill almost shouted.

The twins shook their heads in tandem. “Don’t fight it, Bill,” George advised. “Think about how very special we can make your special day.”

“It’s all I can think about,” Bill told them. “C’mon, Draco, let’s find you something to wear.”

Malfoy shoved past Harry and practically ran to Bill. There was no need to shove and correct him and act like people were plotting against him. Harry’d even stood between him and the twins, it wouldn’t kill Malfoy to acknowledge it.

“We’ll attend to him later,” murmured Fred. “First, boys, let us tell you about the Norwegian witch called Inga we met at the fifth pub on Bill’s stag night-”

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After the twins told them the very implausible story about Inga, Ginny - with what seemed to Harry criminal foolishness - asked them to come out and help her put the finishing touches on decorations. Harry, Ron and Hermione went upstairs to get themselves ready for church.

“I started with Sleekeazy’s Potion last night,” Hermione said. She patted her hair, which seemed to have hillocks in it. “I thought it would be quicker, but - I think it might have turned out a little strange-”

“No, Hermione, you look - you look nice,” said Ron, and then went as scarlet as if he had accidentally propositioned her.

“Er. About Sleekeazy’s Potion,” said Harry. “Er. Ron, I’ll kill you if you laugh. Hermione, do you think I should try it?”

Ron had to sit down on the camp bed, he was laughing so hard. Hermione pressed her lips together very hard on a smile and went to fetch the Potion, and then she helped him put some on.

Once it was done, Harry regarded himself dubiously in the mirror. He had pictured his hair looking - well, sleek, instead of like a hedgehog that had been run over.

“Never mind,” he mumbled. “I think I’ll comb it out.”

Hermione looked at him and did not argue. Ron lifted his face long enough to tell Harry that his mother always said primping only made pretty girls look cheap, and then resumed howling into the pillow.

The corridor was filling with real sunlight, the morning properly upon them. Harry met Malfoy coming out of the bathroom, dressed in Bill's second-best robes and towelling his wet hair.

They stopped and looked at each other. Malfoy's mouth curved upwards.

"Potter," he said, obviously swallowing a laugh, "what happened to you?"

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy." Harry caught the scent of flowers and sniffed the air. "You can't talk, anyway. You just used Ginny's shampoo."

"It's the kind I always use!"

"Sorry," said Harry, "how does that make things better?"

He smirked, but Malfoy had his head bowed and was drying his hair again, and he did not see. Harry looked at the exposed nape of his neck, and the thin gold chain of the locket that encircled it. He could even see the clasp: it should have been so easy to reach out, draw the necklace off Malfoy's damp neck and have it for himself.

Malfoy glanced up at him through his own wet hair, and smirked as if he had caught the expression as it slipped off Harry's face.

"Look," he said. "You're going to put Bill's guests off their wedding cake, Potter. For God's sake take it: you need it more than I do."

He handed Harry a comb and passed on. He was just in time: Fred and George emerged from below, carrying trays of refreshments to be kept out of the way until they were required.

"He sleeps in our room?" George asked, making a face.

"Fraid so," Harry said, looking at the comb.

"Something must be done," Fred murmured. "But first we must find Bill. Someone's got to hunt the bridegroom down and force him to the church, and we're the best men for the job."

Harry spared a moment of pity for Bill, and then he tried to do something about his hair. It still ended up sticking out worse than usual, with the residue of the potion clinging to it. He felt vaguely as if he had dipped it in treacle and swirled it about, but he'd made an effort, anyway. He went out into the corridor and waited at the top of the stairs, watching the sunlight come out stronger and stronger, filling the Burrow from edge to edge. It struck off mirrors and the polished comb Harry turned over in his hands.

There was a hum of activity from below stairs, but it did not sound as if there were any horrible disasters like Mr Weasley getting at the cake. Ron and Hermione were coming out to him soon, and even though Malfoy was here, Harry had promised himself this day, this one single sunlit day. Maybe Malfoy'd meant the comb as some sort of first move towards an apology.

Ron and Hermione came out of Ron's room with their hands brushing together at the same

time that Ginny came charging up the stairs.

“Harry, everyone, come and see, the Veela have arrived! Gabrielle’s really nice,” she added. Harry looked at her hair, shining red against the gold of her dress.

“I should wait for Malfoy.”

She frowned at him, puzzled. “Harry, he’s already down there. The Veela are all over him - because of his hair, you know. They think he must be part Veela.”

“*What?*” exclaimed Harry, letting her seize his sleeve and drag him downstairs. Ron and Hermione followed, their hands still half an inch apart, apparently not caring about this ridiculous news. “Part Veela? Draco *Malfoy*? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

He peered indignantly down at the hall, where there were several Veela in variously coloured robes, like a swarm of extremely curvaceous butterflies. He heard Ron choke behind him but he didn’t turn around, he looked carefully at every blond head and spotted Malfoy at last. Two women stood beside him, one so young she must be Gabrielle Delacour and the other an older, more beautiful version of Fleur. She must be Mrs Delacour.

She was caressing Malfoy’s sleeve. “You must sit with us at church,” she said throatily, her English as perfect as the rest of her.

“I’d love to,” Malfoy told her dreamily, as if she had made an entirely different offer.

Mrs Delacour looked approving and then lifted her hand to Malfoy’s hair. Harry did not see why women had to be constantly at Malfoy’s hair. “Give me a moment, dear boy, I am sure I can place you.”

“I know!” Gabrielle said brightly. “I theenk he must be Aunt Claudette’s son. Did we not ’ear, muzzer, that she went to foreign parts and ’ad a son who was deformed in the face?”

There was a pause in which Mrs Delacour looked embarrassed to be Gabrielle’s mother, and the full glory of what Gabrielle had meant dawned on Harry.

“... Excuse me?” Malfoy said faintly. He looked like he might cry.

“Pay no attention to my daughter,” Mrs Delacour said. “It’s not your fault, my dear boy, and you hardly notice it.”

“Notice what, exactly?” Malfoy asked in a thin voice. Mrs Delacour gave a last commiserating stroke to his hair.

Harry thought he might choke on his own glee. At that point, Gabrielle’s big blue eyes swung in the direction of the stairs and lit up.

“‘Arry Potter!” she squealed rapturously, and abandoned Malfoy forthwith.

Malfoy looked trapped and wretched. Mrs Delacour looked like she was putting another sympathetic question to him. Ginny was laughing beside him, and Ron and Hermione behind

him.

It looked like being a beautiful day.

*

The church was quite near the Burrow, and on a day like today nobody even wanted to Apparate. They went streaming over the fields, yellow grass tilted towards the sun, and met the other guests on their way. The sunlight poured steadily over them all, catching on bright things like Malfoy's hair and Ginny and Gabrielle's dresses.

"He's really marrying her," Ginny remarked.

"At this stage, probably, yeah," said Harry.

She grinned at him, her hand hooked on his elbow as if things were as they had been. Harry supposed he wasn't the only one who wanted one last day of sunlit normality.

"Well... I guess I should go meet her in the chapel," she told him.

From a little way up ahead, Harry heard a Veela say to Malfoy: "Were you in some sort of horrible accident?" and smiled. Ginny's grin turned into a smile too, bright and private.

"I-" she started. Then a shadow blotted out the sun.

The fields were plunged in blackness and a scream came up from the guests. Harry grabbed Ginny and threw her down before he looked up, and saw the underbelly of a beast, so close above him that he wanted to throw himself on the ground as well. He stayed up, checked behind him to see that Ron and Hermione were discreetly down, and then lunged forward in the darkness to grab the chain around Malfoy's neck and use it to haul him back and hurl him down.

Then he drew his wand.

"Wait," said Bill, and the sun came out again.

Harry blinked in the suddenly painful light, staring around. Ron, who was crawling determinedly towards him despite Hermione's restraining hand on his neck, sat up and looked at the church.

There on the church, green and gleaming and almost as big as the building, twined around the slanted roof with its neck resting on the belfry, was an enormous dragon. Impossibly small against its bulk was a saddle, and on that was a person who beside the dragon looked like a tiny doll.

"Oh my God," said Bill, with dawning joy. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted to all the prone and gibbering guests: "It's all right! It's not You-Know-Who. It's my best man!"

*

The Veela were very unhappy about their grass-stained robes. One of them asked Ron piteously if she still looked nice, and when Ron started gobbling Harry was a bit afraid that Hermione was going to hurt him.

The Weasleys had charged for the church en masse. Ginny picked up her golden skirts and took the lead. Only Fred and George stayed behind, looking distinctly displeased.

“Showing up out of the blue, stealing our thunder,” George said. “Charlie was always a very unkind brother. Hard, some might say. Cruel.”

“We had plans for this best man thing,” Fred agreed broodingly. “*Plans*. Maybe we could bribe Charlie.”

“Maybe,” George said in speculative tones, “he needs help getting off that roof. Accidents happen, you know.”

A demonic light appeared in their eyes and, grinning at Harry, they moved forward. Harry thought that dragons might’ve seemed a soft option to Charlie after growing up with Fred and George.

“That,” rasped Malfoy, “was so *cool*.”

Harry looked round and saw that he was helping up another Veela, who smiled prettily up at him. Amazing how Malfoy was failing to help up people who were not supernaturally beautiful.

Malfoy saw him looking and scowled. “Less of the grabbing and pushing, Potter,” he snapped, pulling at the locket with his free hand. Harry saw a red mark around his neck and hesitated, when Malfoy added: “I said I wasn’t your bloody puppy.”

“No?” said Harry. “Then why are you wearing a choke chain?”

“Tell me,” said the Veela to Malfoy, “I can see you’re one of our party by the hair, but... has your face looked like that your whole life?”

Harry snickered and left Malfoy in her clutches, going forward to join the Weasleys in their crowd around Charlie. Arriving on a dragon, after all, was seriously cool.

Bill was almost weeping on Charlie’s neck. “I thought you weren’t coming. I thought I was going to have to have Fred and George!”

“There, there,” said Charlie. “Charlie’s here now. Everything’s OK.”

“Charlie, dear,” Mrs Weasley asked, “Was it absolutely necessary to come on a dragon?”

“Why wouldn’t you let us help you down?” Fred demanded. “Brothers should trust each other!”

“Shouldn’t we get to the church?” Ginny put in.

Charlie, who was grinning around at everyone and had not changed in three years except to gain even more muscles and freckles, began to count off on his fingers.

“Ginny, we’ll go to the church in a minute. Fred and George, I’m not stupid. Mum, of course I had to bring Bessie.” The look in Charlie’s eyes reminded Harry briefly of Hagrid. “I thought people would like to see her,” he added in plaintive tones. “Consider her my date.”

Bill sighed. “Charlie, if we’ve said it once we’ve said it a thousand times. *Dragons are not people*. And... we need to go to the church now, because - I’m getting married.” He paused. “I’m really getting married. Right now.”

The twins brightened up. “Got those wedding jitters?” George inquired brightly. He began to fish around inside his dress robes. “Just take our completely free, practically tried and tested-”

“Is it Bessie’s feeding time already?” Charlie said, checking his watch.

The twins went very quiet.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Charlie,” Bill said pathetically. He turned and walked into the dragon’s tail, which was hanging like a bizarre drape across the church door.

Charlie put large, scarred hands on his brother’s shoulders and steered him tactfully around the tail. “Glad to be here. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Fred and George stared after them, looking betrayed by a cold, uncaring world.

*

All the guests eventually came inside, though Charlie had to come back, lift the tail and wave in some of the more nervous girls. He stopped and shook Percy’s hand when Percy came in, but for all that Percy went to sit away from the other Weasleys at the back of the church. One Veela stopped and ran her hand suggestively over the scar on Charlie’s arm, and Harry saw Fred cover his eyes, whisper “That could’ve been *us*” and break down.

“Don’t mind them,” Ron said earnestly to a Veela who was looking at the twins’ bowed heads in concern. “They always cry at weddings.”

He and Harry exchanged grins. Mrs Weasley was actually howling in the row up ahead, and Harry was fairly sure Hermione was sniffing. Several Veela had delicate lace handkerchiefs on the go.

Mrs Delacour seemed quite cheerful. She was chatting away to Malfoy, who was slumped on a pew and looked as if he had lost all will to live.

“What’s that you have around your neck?” she asked, and Harry stiffened. “A necklace, how pretty,” she went on with hardly a glance at it. “What a good idea, to distract attention from your poor face.”

Malfoy caught Harry's eye and Harry mouthed "*Your poor face*" cheerfully at him. Malfoy made an obscene gesture across the aisle.

On one side the church was covered with blond heads, pearly under the stained glass, and on the other was a sea of flaming red. Harry felt his hair might actually be more conspicuous than his scar for a change, but it made a nice picture to look at. Bill and Charlie were standing at the altar, Charlie's shoulder solidly behind Bill. Bill seemed to be twitching a bit, which was not all that romantic.

Until the church doors opened, and Bill stood up straight. He looked so happy that even his scars did not seem to matter.

Fleur stood in the doorway, her silvery hair streaming over a silver-embroidered white dress that poured down her body, the silver tracing her curves and the white lace creating the effect of a woman wrapped in a waterfall. Her face was half-hidden by the veil, her eyes and lips gleaming through it like a dream woman seen through mist, and all that you could tell was that she was beautiful and that she was smiling.

Gabrielle and Ginny, glittering in gold, followed her smiling as well. Gabrielle was a shining younger version of her sister, her eyes very blue against the gold dress, and Ginny with gold light in her red curls was beautiful - by far the least beautiful, but she was vivid and smiling and the only girl he would've wanted to sit with at the reception. It didn't matter.

She caught Harry's eye and winked. He winked back and Gabrielle saw it. She looked hugely delighted and winked at him in return.

Harry was a bit glad once the bridesmaids had moved on.

By the time Fleur reached Bill and put her hand in his Mrs Weasley was crying too loudly for Harry to make out the words. The ceremony seemed shorter than it was for Muggles, and involved Fleur and Bill giving their wands to each other, and the officiator lifting his own wand for a mutual Unbreakable Vow.

Hermione leaned over to Harry and Ron and whispered: "The Unbreakable Vow used to be all of the marriage ceremony - being faithful to each other and the woman bearing children, but a lot of people ended up dying. So now it's quite simple."

Harry made out Bill's words, because he said them so strongly.

He said: "I chose you out of all the world, and I will do my best to make you happy."

"There, there, Molly," Mr Weasley whispered. "Don't carry on like this. I thought you quite liked Fleur now."

"D'you want my hanky, Hermione?" Ron said solicitously.

"No! I'm not crying," Hermione sniffed. "It's just the flowers in this silly church."

Fleur put back her veil, her face blazing with tears and ardent beauty. Mrs Delacour let out a choked sound. Bill leaned forward, and in all the colours cast by the stained glass window the

congregation saw his red head bow to her golden one.

They kissed. Some things were the same in the Muggle and magical worlds.

And they were married.

*

The wedding reception was held in the garden of the Burrow, with the lace-trimmed trees, tents that Harry recognised from the Quidditch World Cup and sunlight shimmering on everything, turning white a dazzling and red a richer colour, bringing everything into sharper focus.

Most of the first hour was spent trying to keep Mr and Mrs Delacour apart. It had apparently been an acrimonious divorce.

Harry was on the team to keep Mrs Delacour off. She grasped his arms and said loudly: "It wasn't my fault that Eduardo was not man enough for me! I am a woman! I have *needs*!"

"Um, I'm sure you do."

She peered into Harry's face. "Harry Potter, isn't it?" she said slowly. "They say you're a very... powerful young wizard. We all have needs, Harry."

"I need to go," Harry said faintly.

As he escaped, he heard Ginny saying desperately to Mr Delacour: "I wouldn't call her a... what you said... in the actual speech, sir. I really wouldn't."

Fleur and Bill, holding hands as if they would never let go, approached him next. "Thank you, 'Arry," Fleur said quietly. "My parents 'ave always been a little... well, my mother far too like a Veela, and my father all too human. That's why I wanted the wedding 'ere, with a - a real family. Because I am going to be a real wife."

Harry would have told her she was welcome, but when Bill pounced and kissed Fleur for an increasingly prolonged moment he thought perhaps that he was not entirely welcome at this stage. He went to find Ron, who was standing outside a tent staring moodily at the band which had struck up inside.

"How're you holding up, mate?"

"Fine," Ron said in a dazed way. "OK. Only... there are so many Veela!" He looked suspiciously at Harry. "You always get through it all right."

"You can't blame yourself for being affected so badly," Harry told him sympathetically. "It's not your fault. It's probably just because you're shallow."

"Could be," Ron agreed. He looked deep in thought about something, and while he was mulling Harry looked at one of the nearby lacy trees and saw Malfoy underneath it, hunched up and obviously sulking. He seemed kind of small, his head bowed, his hair hanging in his

face.

“Look at Malfoy,” he said.

“Do I have to?”

“He doesn’t seem much affected by the Veela, either. I think it’s all the stuff they’ve been saying about him. Figures that Malfoy loves himself so much even Veela charm can’t break through.”

“OK, you see, I don’t care,” said Ron. “D’you think that Hermione would like to dance?”

“Probably. I’ll ask her, shall I?” Harry laughed when he saw Ron’s expression. “Yes, I’m sure she would! Go on, then, ask her before Oliver Wood does.”

“Wha - do you think - what is with Hermione and Quidditch players?” Ron demanded. “Is it some sort of fetish? Is there something wrong with her?”

Harry felt a bit guilty when Ron shot Wood a ferocious glare. As far as he knew, Wood was only talking to Hermione about gum-shield charms, which he hoped was not Oliver’s version of a chat-up line.

He wasn’t quite sure, of course. All Wood had said to him today was that he should not let this You-Know-Who business interfere with his Quidditch.

“Go on,” he urged Ron. “I’ll be along in a minute. I just want to tell that vain bastard Malfoy that a Veela asked me whether he’d been dropped on his face as a child.”

“You have fun, Harry,” Ron said sceptically.

“I hope you two are having fun,” Charlie said, emerging from the tent. “Since you’re being such layabouts. D’you realise that the twins are handing out refreshments, Hermione organised the band and Ginny has taken and eaten Mr Delacour’s speech?” He grinned at them. “And what are you doing? Chatting while some unfortunate French boy sits under the trees *all alone*.”

He hit Ron affectionately on the back of the head, and then returned to squinting in Malfoy’s direction. “The poor little scrap. I always said Bill and I should have beaten more manners into you before we left. I’ll go talk to him: you two stay here and think about what you’ve done.”

“Malfoy’s not French,” Harry said to Charlie’s retreating back.

Charlie didn’t seem to hear him. Anxious that this confusion about Malfoy’s piteous Frenchness should be cleared up, he grabbed Ron’s elbow and moved towards them.

“Er,” Charlie said hopefully, “parlez-vous English? Or Roumanian?”

Malfoy lifted his head from his knees, and Harry saw Charlie’s open smile falter a moment. He realised that Charlie had been thinking of Malfoy as a lot younger than he was.

“Hullo,” drawled Malfoy, who looked unspeakably relieved that Charlie wasn’t a Veela. “It’s Charles, isn’t it? I saw your big entrance. Very impressive.”

“It’s Charlie,” Charlie said, offering him a hand. Malfoy looked at him cautiously, and then accepted it. Charlie helped him to his feet.

“I’m Draco,” Malfoy said slowly.

Charlie beamed at him. “That,” he announced with conviction, “is the coolest name I have ever heard. D’you want a drink?”

Harry turned crossly to Ron. “Why do your older brothers all want to adopt Malfoy?” he demanded. “Besides, Charlie didn’t understand, he didn’t have to do anything. I was going over to talk to him.”

*

Ron did ask Hermione to dance, but before the dancing began they had to accomplish the speeches. Mr Delacour gave a confused apology for somehow losing his speech and hoped that his daughter would never sue for alimony. Mrs Weasley was crying too hard to say anything intelligible. At last, Bill himself got to his feet, and stood with light flooding through the thin white tent material, exposing every furrowed line of his scars. He was smiling from ear to ear.

“Thanks very much for coming, all of you. I’m glad you could all come and see me getting married, and... well. I’ve only got this to say.” Bill lifted his glass to Fleur. “I always dreamed I’d marry someone who was brave, clever and good. Someone who I could love for the rest of my life. You’re all looking at the woman of my dreams.” He paused. “Looks would’ve been nice too, but I suppose you can’t have everything.”

Bill’s speech was interrupted at that point by Fleur laughing and crying and throwing herself into his arms. Everyone clapped, Mr and Mrs Delacour glaring at each other and apparently entering into an applause competition. Even Malfoy took time off from his horrible little suck-up routine to clap enthusiastically, his face flushed, almost as if Slytherin had won the House Cup.

Then, of course, he returned to his mission of getting around Charlie. He probably wanted another ally now Bill was going on his honeymoon, and Charlie was easy meat.

Charlie was not putting up any sort of fight. He was sitting beside Malfoy, his back turned on his other neighbour, and while Malfoy chattered and gestured Charlie appeared to be laughing himself sick.

The older Weasleys clearly should have gone to school with Malfoy. It was apparently like getting your shots: you needed to see him at mealtimes and Quidditch so you didn’t get blindsided by an attack of him at a later age and become fevered enough to think you liked it.

Ron did not seem overly impressed with this theory, but then he and Hermione had started arguing again.

“It’s not that I care what you think, Ron,” Hermione said, putting her elbows combatively on the table. “It’s just that you have no manners. I only pointed out that Oliver Wood said that Ginny was the best-looking human girl in the place, and *you* had to go and say that it was probably Fleur’s friend Berenice!”

“Well, I don’t see why you’re so upset, it’s not like I called Ginny ugly,” Ron protested. “It’s just that she’s my sister, and-”

“I don’t know why you ever say anything at all!” Hermione exclaimed dangerously.

“I think I will... go help Mrs Weasley with the food,” Harry said tactfully. As Ron and Hermione’s voices rose, other people seemed to think it would be a nice idea to go out in the sunshine. Harry saw Malfoy dash into the Burrow, and followed him as far as the kitchen when Mrs Weasley stopped him and asked him to add ice to some glasses.

“Those Veela eat like horses,” Mrs Weasley told him in a tone reminiscent of Hermione’s. “I hear they can just eat, and eat, and never put on a pound. Thank goodness the twins have decided to be helpful for a change, and Ginny has that dreadful Mr. Delacour in hand - I do hope we won’t have to have him for Christmas dinner - and... hello, Draco.”

Malfoy was back in that stupid shirt and jeans. “Can’t stop,” he said. “Beautiful ceremony. Charles is organising a game.”

“How nice,” Mrs Weasley said as Malfoy ran out the door. “I think you added a little too much ice to that one, Harry.”

Harry looked at the glass, out of which all the liquid had spilled. “Sorry.”

Outside Gabrielle Delacour and a few of her Veela cousins had joined Charlie. Malfoy ran up to them and after a few moments’ conversation, they formed a rough sort of ring and began to toss an enormous ball around.

“Charlie was always the kind one,” Mrs Weasley said. “It makes me worry about him, messing about with all those nasty big animals. He could have got a steady job and found a nice girl, like Bill.”

“Mm,” said Harry, filling more glasses with ice. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear Charlie’s praises sung, since Charlie’s areas of interest so far seemed to include dirty great dragons and Malfoys.

The ball they were throwing in the garden stretched out like a squirrel leaping between the trees, something with a bird’s beak and little wings flapping frantically. It caught Malfoy full in the chest. Harry squinted - was it a baby dragon in a dress?

Mrs Weasley was doing the washing up, occupied with flicking her wand at the dishes. “I’m glad he’s including poor Draco,” she said comfortably. “I know you younger ones aren’t fond of him and I don’t blame you. His father is one of the most evil men I know, but... after all, he has lovely manners, and he must be lonely here. And I do wish those silly Veela would stop saying all those things to him. It must make Draco feel so terribly self-conscious. He

can't help it if he's not very good-looking."

Harry almost dropped a glass. "What?"

"That's why this strict pureblood business is ridiculous. It means that you keep inbreeding. Of course, Arthur and I aren't related, and the children are very strong, but the Black family haven't been right for generations. The strain gets weakened," explained Mrs Weasley, amateur wizard breeder.

"Right," said Harry. "But you were saying about Malfoy-"

"Yes, exactly. Look at poor Draco. His parents are possibly the most unpleasant people in the world, but they are both very good-looking, and yet they have a child who is pinched-looking and colourless. I expect he catches cold easily, too. It's not *healthy*."

"Probably not," Harry said, turning over 'pinched-looking and colourless' in his head and giving a silent cackle. "Um... Go on."

"It's a shame he got Mr Malfoy's eyes with Narcissa's colouring," Mrs Weasley said. "I remember Narcissa Black from school. She was younger than me, of course, but she was beautiful. Everyone noticed her, she had hair that looked silver and the bluest eyes you ever saw. Well, I'm sure we shouldn't judge on appearances." She paused. "Fleur really looked lovely today, though. And you look so handsome and grown-up in your dress robes," she added fondly, and ruffled Harry's hair.

Then she looked at her hand, clearly puzzled by the Potions residue. Harry avoided her eyes and looked out the window.

Gabrielle was throwing the winged thing at Malfoy. Malfoy laughed and leaped for it, grabbing it out of the air. His hair was wild, hanging in his glittering eyes, and his face was flushed.

The bird-headed little thing had blond hair as well as a dress on, Harry noticed, at the same time Mrs Weasley dropped her wand.

"Oh my God, is that a baby Veela?" she cried. "Is Charlie insane?"

Mrs Weasley went running out and caught the baby in midair. Through the open door Harry heard Charlie defending himself.

"Mum, there're loads of Veela in Roumania, I know them. The kids love it. They do, Mum, look, you catch her..."

"Charlie Weasley, I will not do any such thing. Babies are not Frisbees!"

Harry kept virtuously adding ice to the glasses. He'd be done soon, and then he could go back outside and tell Malfoy about how pinched and colourless he was.

*

He found Malfoy inside the tent again. Charlie'd had the good sense to abandon him at last - Harry saw Charlie with Ginny, talking in heated whispers - and Malfoy sat alone at a table. There were several glasses in front of him and he was slouching in his chair, looking extremely relaxed except for whenever a Veela approached, at which point he glared ferociously until she backed away.

Harry leaned against the chair beside Malfoy's. "Hello."

Malfoy closed his eyes and said: "Go away. I don't even speak French."

They'd gone to school together six years and Malfoy didn't know his voice? Harry rolled his eyes. "Actually, Malfoy, I knew that."

Malfoy opened his eyes again and for an amused moment Harry saw that even he was apparently preferable to a Veela. "Oh," Malfoy said. "It's you. This is my best day ever."

"I was just having a chat with Mrs Weasley," Harry told him conversationally.

"Gosh, Potter, you grab all the hot girls."

"She's worried about your health," Harry went on. "Seeing that you're so, hmm, how did she put it, *pinched looking* and-"

Malfoy cut him off with a short laugh and a lunge towards another tray full of glasses. Then he relaxed back with his new drink and looked at Harry with enormous disdain.

"Potter," he said. "Sorry, I'm trying to work something out... Do you think that anything anyone ever says about my looks will *ever affect me again*? I have spent all day with people asking me whether my whole body or just my face was disfigured in the accident, and I was already fully aware of the fact that I'm not exactly Blaise Zabini. However, I'm not actually *scarred in the face*, so why don't you-"

"D'you think Blaise Zabini is good-looking?" Harry asked, startled.

Malfoy put a hand to his forehead as if he suddenly had a very bad headache. "Is this the kind of conversation you and Weasley generally have up in Gryffindor Tower?" he asked in a pained way. "Who is the cutest boy in Hogwarts, and gosh, *will* he ask you to the Yule Ball?"

"I don't-"

"Hi, Draco," Charlie said, coming up with Ginny trailing reluctantly behind him. "Hi, Harry. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Please interrupt," Malfoy urged. "I beg you."

"Well, there's probably something more interesting you could be doing," Charlie conceded. "You did say you liked dancing."

Harry's head snapped up. Then he saw that Ginny looked as if she had put something horrible in her mouth.

“Malfoy,” she said, as if Malfoy’s name was a lemon, “do you... do you want to dance?”

Charlie gave her a pleased smile. Malfoy looked vaguely startled.

“Ah - no,” he said. “Don’t strain yourself, Weasley.”

Ginny folded her arms over her chest. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you implying that I’m not a good dancer?”

“No,” Malfoy answered, after a moment. “I saw you at the Yule Ball, anyone who escapes permanent crippling by Longbottom has to be doing something right. It’s just that not every boy at Hogwarts dreamed of dancing the night away with your ginger sauciness.”

“I don’t believe I asked you to dance the night away with me, Malfoy,” Ginny said. “Honestly, I’m not sure I could bear one dance.”

“You probably could,” Malfoy said. “I’m not a bad dancer. We wouldn’t have to do anything inappropriate like talking.”

“Sorry, are you saying yes now?” Ginny asked. She made a face at him and held out her hand.

“Oh, all right,” Malfoy replied, screwing up his face in his nastiest way. He took Ginny’s hand.

Harry stared at Charlie and decided that he had found his least favourite Weasley. The man had been back from Roumania less than a day and he already had Harry’s best girl out on the dance floor with Draco Malfoy.

Charlie smiled at him brightly.

The music started up and Harry recognised the opening bars of ‘A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love.’ Mrs Weasley fell on Fleur with shrieks and kisses and on the dance floor, Harry saw Malfoy smile and say something to Ginny. Ginny looked surprised.

“So,” Charlie said, leaning forward, “what’s Draco’s story?”

Malfoy had his hand on Ginny’s waist, pale against the gleam of her dress. They started to move. On a dance floor full of the Veela, they would both have had to start removing garments to get noticed, but... so they weren’t bad dancers. They didn’t look... bad together.

Harry suspected they were both on their mettle after the conversation about bad dancing. Ginny was used to being good at things, and nobody knew better than Harry how much it burned Malfoy to be outdone. They were watching each other closely and moving fast.

Harry disliked Charlie a lot.

“His story? Well, he was born, and shortly afterwards he achieved the title of most annoying person in the world. He’s managed to hang onto that title to this day.”

“Girls, stir your cauldrons! Are you doing it right?”

Ginny shook her curls back to a silent laugh from Malfoy, teeth flashing behind curled lips. She stepped away from him and Malfoy caught her hand with his free one, and spun her out and then back in, and dipped her down. Harry leaned forward and Malfoy was leaning over her, grinning a bit at her surprise. Harry saw licks of blond hair touching Ginny’s forehead, and her startled laugh, her lips mirroring Malfoy’s smile.

Malfoy let her up after a minute and she turned around again slowly under his arm. She still looked mostly bent on proving something to Malfoy, but smiles tugged at both their mouths as Ginny moved. Malfoy’s hand was back on her waist, and Ginny didn’t seem to notice as one delicate sleeve fell a little way down the pale, freckled skin of her shoulder. Malfoy’s eyes followed the sleeve: he had noticed, all right.

Charlie coughed. “You don’t like him, then?”

“Boys, stir your cauldrons! Are you doing it right?”

Malfoy moved away, beckoning to Ginny with both hands. There was a sly smile on his pale face that personally made Harry want to punch him, and his head was tilted, his eyes half closed. She moved towards him. They were both doing some kind of shimmying thing.

“Not really,” Harry said between his teeth.

Ginny, after a moment, put her hands on Malfoy’s hips as he did the shimmying thing. They were really dancing together in rhythm now. The muscles in Ginny’s back were moving, Malfoy’s long fingers had a firm clasp on her waist, and when her curls went static and flew into Malfoy’s face he had to put his hand up to his mouth and brush them off his lips.

For some reason Charlie was persisting with his Malfoy Questionnaire. “How old is he?”

Ginny grabbed hold of the locket suddenly and Malfoy let her, following her as she tugged at it. She had the gleaming thread wrapped around her fingers and Malfoy still had his eyes half shut. He was trying for a hooded gaze, Harry was pretty sure.

This song was never going to end. “He’s seventeen,” Harry informed Charlie, and added: “He’s younger than Ron.”

“Oh,” said Charlie.

“Oh, I’ll keep you warm tonight.”

As the song finally concluded Malfoy bent Ginny backwards over his arm again. They had moved quite close to the table now and Harry saw that Ginny was actually relaxed, actually trusting Malfoy to keep her up. Her eyes were shut and his hair was in her face again, gleaming strands brushing her forehead. Malfoy’s upper lip was glistening with a thin line of sweat.

They came back to the table, a little pink and breathing a little hard.

Ginny pushed her hair out of her face as she leaned against Harry's face. "I've had better," she told Malfoy with a half smile.

"Well, you've had so many," Malfoy shot back.

"I'm gone hardly any time and Ginny's turned into a heartbreaker, has she?" Charlie looked hugely amused. "Can you do an impression of her?"

He turned to Harry and Ginny. "He's really good at impressions," he told them. "He does a brilliant McGonagall. I *love* this kid."

"Take him back to Roumania with you, please," Harry said in an undertone. Charlie didn't catch it, but Malfoy did.

Malfoy's eyes gleamed and he leaned forward and slid his hand over Charlie's. He used his free hand to push back curls he didn't have, in a movement that was characteristic of Ginny.

"Oh, Harry Potter," he said with a laughing inflection like hers in his deeper voice. "You're the only boy for me, and once I find the... oh, three... maybe four... boys who will work in shifts to satisfy me while you're saving the world, we should look into making this permanent."

"Oi," Charlie said lightheartedly, taking his hand from under Malfoy's and then hitting Malfoy's head with it. "Don't imply shocking things about my little sister. She can't help it that she inherited the famous Weasley charm."

Ginny grabbed Harry's hand. "You're *hopeless*," she told Malfoy in a hard voice. "C'mon, Harry."

As Harry followed her, he heard Charlie say: "Go on, do Peeves."

*

They sat out under the lace-trimmed tree where Charlie had found Malfoy. Ginny tipped her head back against the tree trunk.

"God, what a day," she said. "I think Mr Delacour was hitting on me. He told me I looked very human and he liked that in a girl."

"I'll beat him up for you somewhere private," Harry promised. "You looked like you were having fun with Malfoy," he added.

"Yeah," Ginny answered. "He told me he'd always loved red hair and asked me to run away with him to Bali. D'you think I should go?" She laughed at Harry's expression. "It was all right. He's not a bad dancer, for a complete pillock."

"That particular pillock moment... just now," Harry admitted. "I might've slightly provoked him. The other seventeen years of pillock moments were all Malfoy, though."

“Well, you’re a complete pillock too,” Ginny informed him, punching him in the arm. “Lucky for you I like you better.”

“I can’t dance, though.”

Ginny frowned and shut her eyes. “Oh well. Then it’s off with Malfoy to Bali, I suppose.”

She did look tired, and the sun was hot. She started dozing as Harry talked, reminding him of May days with her murmuring commonplaces between kisses. Closest to normal he’d ever been.

He tried not to disturb her, and let her rest her weight against him. The sun was lower on the skyline now, the air around them warm and the colour of honey. The music drifting from the tent was slow and sweet, and more and more people came out to bask. The only cloud to be seen was the cloud of Fleur’s dress as she and Bill moved across the dance floor. They, and Ron and Hermione, were the only couples left dancing. Harry thought it might’ve taken Ron and Hermione all this time to get around to their first dance, but they looked happy.

He was watching for Malfoy, who came and lay down on the grass with the Veela girl they’d been playing catch with earlier. She was tiny and ridiculously pretty now, all thought of beak or wings banished by her melting blue eyes.

Malfoy actually looked happy enough to have her. Clearly he was not vain enough to resist Veela enchantment after all, since Harry’d never thought of him as a baby person.

The little Veela sat on Malfoy’s chest and regarded him critically. “You have a funny face,” she told him eventually.

Malfoy laughed and rubbed his sharp nose against her golden hair. “You Veela are all the same.”

Charlie came out to him and offered a glass over Malfoy’s shoulder. “Thanks,” Malfoy murmured, turning his face towards Charlie and accepting it. “Now please take the Veela away. I’m an only child and I am going to damage it.”

“She likes you,” said Charlie, and threw himself down on the grass beside Malfoy. “Never argue with a Veela.”

Malfoy made a face and then began to drink his drink. It was odd, seeing him relaxed and apparently well-disposed towards normal things like sunlight and babies.

Harry was distracted at that point by Ginny stirring against him. He shifted in case she was uncomfortable, and then realised that wasn’t it at all when she got in under his arm. He felt the press of her body soft against his side, and looked down at her face. It was sweet and sleepy under the pattern of light and shadow cast by the lace-twined leaves. Her hazel eyes were anxious and hopeful, and burning with that eager light he had never been able to believe was directed at him.

Her trembling lips were two inches from his.

“No,” Harry said violently. “No. Look, Ginny, I thought you understood!”

“I thought you were going off on some big quest!” Ginny said. “But you’re here, Harry, you’re in my house, and I thought just for today-”

No. Because he would go on a quest as soon as he had any leads to follow, and he did not want her to follow. She’d been brilliant at the Ministry of Magic but he didn’t want her with him, she hadn’t been there for years like Ron and Hermione, she would not know what to do. He was not normal, and it would be stupid to pretend.

Harry got to his feet.

“I’m sorry, Ginny,” he said, and knew he sounded harsh. “Not today. Not any day.”

He almost resented her for spoiling this sunny, happy moment. He kept hoarding the moments of this day and he didn’t need reminding that this was because it could be the last happy day.

He stamped away from her and the music of the tents, and walked into the kitchen again. There he found Malfoy hunched up on the kitchen surface with his head in his hands.

*

Harry stopped dead. Malfoy was obviously in the grip of strong emotion and Harry did not want things to get out of hand like last time.

On current evidence, maybe Malfoy frequently broke down in bathrooms and kitchens. Harry had been assuming that he’d been under extreme pressure, but perhaps Malfoy was just a crier.

“Er,” said Harry. “Is there someone I can get for you?”

“No,” Malfoy answered, his voice muffled and empty. “Who would come?”

He lifted his face and Harry saw with enormous relief that his eyes were dry, and then with less relief that he looked pale and haunted.

“I can’t bear myself,” he went on. “I can’t bear what I’ve done. And you must hate me.”

Surprise hollowed out Harry’s insides for a moment and then they came back in a warm rush to his chest. He took an uncertain step forward and bit his lip: Malfoy’s wide grey eyes were fixed on him. Malfoy looked desperately unaware that there was anyone else in the world.

“Oh - no,” Harry said awkwardly. “No. Malfoy. I don’t hate you.”

“You have to hate me,” Malfoy insisted, leaning forward. “All the things I’ve done, I - with Dumbledore, and to Ron Weasley, and... I always meant to hurt you, you know. I wanted to. You have to hate me.”

Harry took another step forward. “You wanted other things too. I saw you that night: you

didn't want to kill anyone. You wanted to protect your family, I can understand that, I would've been scared too if - if it had been my parents. I know that - that you weren't going to do it. I might be the only one, but I do know it."

"You are the only one," Malfoy said, his eyes still intent, his voice raw.

"Well, I do know and I'm here now! I can - I told your mother I'd protect you. I'll do my best."

Malfoy got off the kitchen sides in one clean movement, which placed him a bit close to Harry, but Harry stayed where he was. They seemed to be having a breakthrough, after all.

"Thank you," Malfoy said, his gaze open and unwavering. "But can you forgive me?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Yeah," he answered. "I can."

Malfoy moved forward another step, which since their chests brushed was a little bit too close. Harry moved backwards, but tried to make his voice as reassuring as he could.

"You're with us now," he continued. "Everything's going to be all right."

"I believe you," Malfoy said simply.

This really was a breakthrough, and the only problem was Malfoy's apparent lack of understanding that personal boundaries should be respected. He kept moving forward, and he was obviously looking for reassurance but actually he reminded Harry of a hunting cat.

Harry felt a slight jolt of unease in his chest when his back hit the sink, and he realised there was no place to go. Malfoy moved in and God, Harry wished Malfoy was still seeking comfort from ghosts because Malfoy would have gone right through Moaning Myrtle at this point.

He did not go through Harry, which meant Harry was pressed between the cold metal line of the sink and Malfoy's body. Malfoy put his hands on the sink, on either side of Harry, and Harry was effectively trapped. He looked at Harry, head tilted almost playfully, and what was going on was starting to sink in.

Harry heard his voice, low as it was, crack alarmingly. "What are you doing, Malfoy?"

Why didn't the Burrow have *ghosts*? Where were the departed souls to shout 'Homosexual Assault In The Kitchen!'

Harry clung for dear life to the sink behind him. Malfoy moved in that unacceptable fraction closer.

His breath was hot against Harry's cheek. "I think the question is... why aren't you stopping me?"

He was already pressing against Harry, warm and inescapable, but now he pushed him hard against the sink and his mouth brushed Harry's bottom lip.

Charlie erupted into the kitchen. “Draco, don’t!”

“Charlie!” Harry yelled. “This isn’t what you think! And also, help!”

“Draco,” Charlie said coaxingly, “why don’t you come over here?”

Malfoy had not moved. “I’m fine here,” he answered calmly, his lips far too close for Harry to be comfortable with them moving and his pale lashes showing a frightening tendency to lower. “Why don’t you leave?”

“Please don’t leave, Charlie!”

“Draco,” Charlie said, as one inspired. “Harry would really like you to come over here for just a minute.”

Malfoy hesitated. “Would you?” he asked softly.

“Yes!” Harry exclaimed. “Yes I would!”

Malfoy went, and left Harry still holding onto the sink. Harry was not planning to let go for a while. He felt like the sink was his only support in a world gone mad.

Charlie was watching Malfoy as if he was a dangerous animal, which in Harry’s opinion was exactly the right way to watch Malfoy when Malfoy was still looking at him as if he wanted to eat him whole.

“Draco,” Charlie said, laying down each of his syllables with great care. “Harry would love it if you would drink this.”

He offered Malfoy a phial and Malfoy accepted it, tilting his head inquiringly in Harry’s direction.

“Yes?” Harry croaked, and Malfoy shrugged and tossed it back.

Then he dropped the phial. It shattered on the floor and Malfoy’s head snapped back down. He stared at Harry with an altogether different expression in his narrowed eyes, his mouth twisting, his whole demeanour reminiscent of a cat who had just been drenched with cold water.

“Oh my God, how *revolting*,” he snarled. Then he broke and bolted upstairs.

“What just happened?” Harry shouted.

Charlie looked grim. “Fred and George think they are very funny people,” he said. “They think Love Potions are very funny things. They also think they are going to live to see tomorrow. I think I’m going to correct all those misapprehensions.”

He left, and left Harry staring at the kitchen wall where the Weasleys’ clock used to hang. The sun was going down.

And *this* was supposed to be his last glorious day.

Chapter Five

About twenty minutes after the most embarrassing moment of Harry's life, his only consolation was that the twins were not laughing now.

"Now, as you know, Bill and I usually tell you off together, but this is his wedding day. So I've decided to use a replacement." Charlie took a deep breath, and then smiled pleasantly. "You two have met Bessie the dragon, right?"

"Charlie," Fred said in tones of deep apprehension, "Charlie, dragons are not people—"

"It was just a joke," George added earnestly.

"It *wasn't funny*," Harry exclaimed.

They all looked at him in surprise. Harry had been maintaining a stony silence, but you could only sustain that so long before you exploded. When Hermione turned a sympathetic and understanding gaze on him, he thought he might explode anyway.

Charlie recovered first. "You're right, it wasn't. Do you realise that Draco is upstairs and he says he'll never speak to Harry again and never come downstairs again and never - get out from under the bed again... He's overwrought," he said sternly, quelling the smirks swimming their way to the surface of the twins' faces.

"He'll never speak to Harry again? Looks like we did you a favour, eh?"

Harry looked coldly at Fred. "No. You didn't."

"Just because Harry's lost his sense of humour somewhere," George began, sounding aggrieved.

"Shut up bothering him!" Ron said, leaning across Hermione to give Harry a supportive punch in the shoulder. "Neither of you got molested by Malfoy, you wouldn't think it was so funny then. Did he actually kiss you?" he asked, lowering his voice to what he must fondly imagine was a discreet whisper.

Harry glared at him. "*No*."

"Love Potions are a very serious matter," Hermione told the twins. "If it weren't for Love Potions, You-Know-Who would never have been born."

"Well, it wasn't like Harry was going to have Malfoy's evil love child," George said, mouth quirking.

Harry was going to punch him in the face.

"Anyway, Love Potions work in relation to people's attractiveness. Interesting to know that Malfoy's probably a little bit that way inclined—" Fred said.

“Since the incident occurred within a few minutes of taking the damned Potion, it proves nothing of the sort!” Charlie shouted. “And what d’you mean, interesting?”

Harry had never seen the twins quail before anyone but Mrs Weasley, but Charlie had clearly inherited her shouting voice.

“Nothing, Charlie,” George whispered meekly.

“It doesn’t matter what we do to Malfoy,” Fred announced, braving Charlie’s dragon-reinforced wrath. “He deserves it all, after what he did to Bill. And we’re sorry Harry didn’t think it was funny-”

“Didn’t think it was funny!” Harry yelled.

“I don’t understand,” Charlie said slowly. “What did he do to Bill?”

Everyone went quiet. Harry uncurled his fists and fought down this new desire to murder the twins. Even the twins looked abashed.

“Charlie,” Bill said from the doorway, “we probably need to talk.” He cast a stern gaze over Harry, Ron, Hermione and especially the twins. “Alone.”

Charlie glanced at Bill, then nodded and left the room.

Once their restraining presence was removed, the twins burst into a barrage of laughing self-defence. Ron and Hermione began to talk loudly back. Harry sat and glared until someone said something he could not let pass.

“Look, Harry may be over-reacting slightly-” Hermione started.

“Oh, that’s easy for you to say! The only physical contact you’ve had with him was that time you punched him.”

Hermione gave him an odd look. “I never punched Malfoy, Harry. I slapped him once when we were thirteen and I was in a temper. That’s different,” she explained, as if Harry was a bit dim. “You’re the one who has punched him.”

Harry felt himself go unaccountably red. “Well, he deserved it!”

“That’s what we are trying to-” Fred chimed in.

“Shut up!” Harry said fiercely. It occurred to him that while they were sitting around squabbling like children, Bill and Charlie were discussing Malfoy, and he got up. “I’m going to go wash out my mouth with - something,” he said with dignity.

“Good luck finding something,” murmured Fred. “Apparently Malfoy had to be stopped from eating the soap whole.”

Harry slammed the door.

He ran up to Ron's room and dug the Invisibility Cloak from the bottom of his trunk, shook it out and then threw it on.

Then he stopped by Fred and George's room, and was not sure why he stopped. A good part of his intestines seemed to be twisted into a knot of burning embarrassment, cringing in on itself at the mere thought of ever seeing Malfoy again.

He knocked on the door.

"I said go away, Charles!" Malfoy shouted.

Malfoy had known Charlie all of four hours, why should he assume it was him? Harry didn't have time for this, and didn't have any idea what he would have said if Malfoy told him to come in.

He went down the stairs and climbed through a window, creeping to the back door where Charlie and Bill stood, red heads bowed together, in conference.

"-I liked him," he heard Charlie say in a dazed way, and felt a sudden thrill of vindication. Now Charlie knew Harry was right, he would know to leave Malfoy alone.

"No, listen," Bill said rapidly. "Do like him. He's not so bad. He didn't - he's a kid. He had no idea what death meant, he was in completely over his head and when it all started to dawn on him he got more and more scared and tried to push it away and - it was a mess. He's a mess. His head is stuffed full of all that pureblood crap, he worships his murderous father and he's scared to death of both sides. But I - I kind of like him. He's funny in an odd sort of way. He loves his rotten parents so much. He's really sorry about what happened to me-"

"It doesn't change what happened to you!"

"It doesn't matter what happened to me. I wasn't killed. I'm alive, and I'm married to someone I love more than anything. I will kill that werewolf if I ever get the chance, but I won't blame a boy. I don't know what I would have done at sixteen if someone had threatened my parents, and I was raised to know what right and wrong is."

Charlie did not seem to know what to say. It was a shame Harry couldn't speak, because he could have said plenty. Malfoy was not stupid enough to think plotting murder was right.

As for everything else... so Malfoy hadn't been in an easy situation. Who was? Dumbledore had told them all what to do years ago - when the time came to choose between what was right, and what was easy.

"I don't want to leave him here alone," Bill said softly. "The others hate him like poison. It's frightening, the way school has changed. When we were in school everyone was still just happy You-Know-Who was gone, but once people stopped being simply glad they were safe they remembered whose parents were on whose side. I think the split got worse after all the dangers at Hogwarts, and after basilisks and escaped murderers I can't blame anyone for getting scared, but the way Ron and Ginny talk..."

“The Gryffindors and the Slytherins are at each others’ throats. It’s not like Quidditch rivalry. It’s like... another war’s coming, and everyone’s already chosen a side. It doesn’t matter that they’re all children and none of them had any chance to choose, they just know that they hate each other and anyone who’s not like them is an enemy. I bet Malfoy was a little horror to them, but he’s all alone and scared. I don’t like bullying. I don’t want anyone made miserable in this house.”

Charlie seemed thoughtful. “That explains the way young Harry looks at him. Kind of like Norbert looked at Sammy right before he rolled him over and ripped out his-”

“Charlie, dragons are not people.”

“Well, all I’m saying is that he wants Draco to show his underbelly,” Charlie mumbled.

“I’m worried about Harry, too. He hasn’t got any parents, and all this Chosen One stuff - I like him, but he has never had anything solid to fall back on. He just feels his way to what’s right, and so he thinks that his feelings are always right. He’s angry and grieving and - He won’t mean to be cruel, but he might be.”

Harry clenched his hands under the sweep of the Invisibility Cloak. Where did Bill get off, talking about him that way? Bill hardly knew him. He would never be cruel to anyone, not even Malfoy. No matter how much Malfoy might deserve it.

“Look after Draco,” Bill said. “Look after him for as long as you can stay.”

“Bill, I promise.” Charlie grinned crookedly. “As for how long I can stay... I’ve got something to tell you all. We’d better find Mum.”

*

“Fired?” Mrs Weasley said blankly. “Fired? Oh, Charlie! How?”

Charlie had asked for a family meeting, and Harry and Hermione had been included. So had Fleur, of course.

Fleur looked as if she never wanted to be included in another one.

“The usual way,” said Charlie, still grinning that determined, crooked grin. “I told them I couldn’t do the job they wanted me to do, and so - they fired me. They want to use the dragons in the war, Mum. They wanted me to put them under Imperius.”

“Oh, Charlie,” said Mrs Weasley. “Isn’t that illegal? Couldn’t you-”

“Rufus Scrimgeour passed a law saying it was legal to use it on animals, for the good of the wizarding world. Dragons can be used as flying steeds and weapons, he says they’ll be invaluable for the war effort, and I do see his point-”

“If you see his point, then couldn’t you try and keep-”

“Mum. No. I love them, you see,” Charlie said. “I love them. They trust me. There has to be

life after the war, that's why we're fighting it, and I want something to go back to once the war is over. I could never go back if I betrayed them now."

"You were doing so well-

Charlie reached out and took his mother's fingers gently between his large, scarred hands. "I'm still doing fine."

Fred and George cleared their throats on a single note of nervousness. "Charlie," George said. "If you, ah, if you need any money-

"I've got savings. What d'you think I was spending my money on in the wilds of Roumania?"

"The usual," Fred said, straight-faced. "Cards, drink, loose women-

Mrs Weasley looked horrified. Charlie threw back his head and laughed.

"It's all true, I've seen it," George whispered conspiratorially to Ginny and Harry. "He plays a mean game of Exploding Snap. Card sharp that he is."

"And they make Firewhiskey in Roumania," Fred continued. "You know Charlie can't resist a bottle with a dragon on it."

Charlie stretched lazily in his chair, easier now he had told his big secret. "I absolutely dare you to find any loose women in my past."

"I'm sure a girl like Bessie doesn't come cheap," George grinned.

"She says she loves me," Charlie said. "What can I say? And oh, yeah... thanks for reminding me. Boys, we have an appointment with Bessie - and we mustn't keep the lady waiting."

He hauled Fred and George away by their robe collars. Bill went upstairs with the avowed purpose of getting Draco downstairs for the last of the party.

"Zat is done, then," Fleur announced with satisfaction. "Come, Ron. Let me 'ave a dance with my new leetle brother."

She put her hand on Ron's shoulder and stared up at him with melting blue eyes. Ron gulped in a way that did not seem particularly fraternal.

"Come and dance with me, Hermione," Harry said quickly.

*

The dance floor was full, but it made way for the bride no matter what redhead she had in tow. Harry was glad that Hermione let him linger on the outskirts of the crowd and pretend to dance by waggling his legs vaguely around.

She patted his arm sympathetically, which turned out not to be about the dancing. "Don't let Malfoy get under your skin."

"Actually, the problem was not getting Malfoy all over my skin."

Hermione snorted. "That was just silly. You know what I mean, Harry. Don't let him distract you from what has to be done."

The song changed to a slow Celestina Warbeck song. Hermione looped her arms casually around Harry's neck, and Harry wondered whether Ron was asphyxiating somewhere in the crowd.

He looked into her concerned eyes. "I'm not distracted. He's part of it all. It's not just that he has the locket around his neck - though you don't know how angry I am that he's keeping what Dumbledore died for from me... It's that he and Snape have some sort of plan, and I have no idea what it is. Last time Malfoy had a plan and Snape was involved."

Hermione shivered. "So you-"

Across the tent, Harry saw that Bill had managed to get Malfoy down. Malfoy had a spoon and was doing a Celestina Warbeck impression in a very obvious attempt to woo back Charlie.

It was working. Charlie's mouth was curving as Harry watched, any attempt at wariness slipping away. Charlie Weasley was a very stupid man who should go back to Roumania.

Malfoy saw Harry and abruptly stopped doing his impression. Blood leaped in his cheeks so fast that it reminded Harry of wounds opening, red and painful. He looked away and Charlie leaned towards him, whispered something.

Harry whispered in Hermione's ear. "I want to know what's going on inside Malfoy's head."

Hermione sighed. "Harry, last year we thought you were crazy when it came to Malfoy. Didn't you wonder why? We've always been behind you before, and that year things were more serious than ever, but we couldn't take it seriously because..." She took a deep breath. "You were acting as if it was personal. You were always talking about him, we couldn't get you to stop, and we could not help thinking that - you were being unreasonable. I even thought that you might be acting like that because - well, because Malfoy was bothering you less, and you... missed the attention."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Harry said flatly. "Let go of me."

Hermione held on. "Harry, I'm trying to explain something! I didn't believe you before, and you were right. I'll trust you now. You say Malfoy's up to something again, I'll believe you."

"He's up to something."

Harry looked down at her, trying to see if she felt any regret about saying those ridiculous things to him, and he saw her eyes shining as they always did when she had a plan.

“Then we know what we have to do, don’t we? We have to find a way to make Veritaserum.”

Later when Bill and Fleur told them all goodbye, Bill looped an arm around Malfoy’s thin shoulders and pulled him in for a casual hug. Malfoy stood very still for a moment, not even attempting to hug him back, and then he put one hand lightly on Bill’s shoulder in return.

When Bill stepped away Malfoy let him go at once, but he kept his hand curled as if he was trying to hold the memory. There was something odd about the shape of his mouth.

“You take care of yourself, Draco,” said Bill.

Malfoy caught Harry looking and his mouth fell into its usual sneer shape. The effect was spoiled when he coloured and looked away, and his curled hand went up to touch the locket Dumbledore died for.

Fine. Malfoy could ignore him for whatever stupid reason he thought he had. Harry didn’t give a damn, he’d have him talking soon enough.

“No need to worry, Bill,” Harry said in a clear voice. “I can take care of Malfoy.”

*

The next day Harry and Hermione went to Hogwarts.

The Restricted Section would have the instructions for making Veritaserum somewhere, and there might be a spell to unlock the chain from Malfoy’s neck. They needed books.

Faced with the prospect of intensive research, Ron threw himself body and soul into cleaning up after the wedding. It did look like Mrs Weasley was going to need the help, what with Ginny folding up her handmade decorations with the air of a mother smoothing her baby’s blankets, and Charlie being slowed down by Malfoy.

“I don’t believe you were never taught any cleaning charms,” Harry heard Charlie say as they came down the stairs, his deep voice thrumming with amusement.

“I know them for clothes and things,” Malfoy said defensively. “But I’ve never cleaned house. That’s *menial labour*.”

“That’s typical of you, Malfoy,” Harry snapped.

Malfoy continued to pull decorations from the ceiling and hand them to Charlie, bright ribbons unravelling in his hands. Only the pink flush creeping up from his neck indicated that he had heard Harry at all.

Harry had not slept well, horrific visions of the near miss with Malfoy appearing every time he shut his eyes, and he was in no mood to be treated like part of the scenery.

“We’re leaving now, but we’ll be back in a couple of days,” he pursued, standing at the foot of Malfoy’s stepladder and speaking loudly. Malfoy was bound to say that it was a pity he couldn’t stay away longer.

The tips of Malfoy's ears were dyed pink now, but he gave the appearance of being utterly absorbed in clearing decorations.

"We should go, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry knocked against Malfoy's stepladder as he went.

*

Hogwarts felt cold without students in it. Without students it was not a school, and there was no reason to be here, and nothing to make it home, nothing to make it anything but a cold castle with secret rooms and ghosts wandering the corridors.

Professor McGonagall's hair was greyer than it had ever been before. She welcomed Harry and Hermione almost absently, obviously busy, but she became more focused when she heard Hermione's carefully worded explanations.

"Draco Malfoy with some kind of dark artefact locked around his neck? I can't think of any spell... It's quite common to guard an object, but guarding it by bonding it to a living person would be very dangerous. Which is interesting in itself, of course."

"How d'you mean?" Harry asked sharply.

McGonagall frowned. "There are hundreds of easier ways to keep this thing safe which would not endanger Mr. Malfoy. Whoever bound it to him did it with a very specific purpose in mind, and risked his life for the sake of that purpose. You-Know-Who would not hesitate to cut off a boy's head and take something he wanted."

"Would that work?"

God, he had left Malfoy!

"It probably would," McGonagall answered. "So Mr Malfoy and - whoever is helping him - they meant him to come to our side all along. You should take that into consideration."

"They meant him to come to me," Harry said.

Hermione's voice was grim. "And we are going to find out why."

Madam Pince was not in the library and Hermione gave a speculative look to the librarian's desk. When Harry suggested that she sit down and spin around in the chair, she looked at him as if he had suggested she engage in lewd activity with a duck.

"I couldn't! It's odd enough that we are allowed in the Restricted Section."

"I don't think we are allowed," Harry said. "It's just that we are old enough not to care if we're allowed to do something."

Hermione walked into the Restricted Section with her chin up and drew a chained book from a shelf. "I don't recall that you ever cared if something was allowed," she said, smiling.

“I don’t recall that making Polyjuice Potion when we were twelve was my idea.”

Hermione opened a book and it gave an unearthly shriek that made Harry jump back and clutch at the nearest shelf. Hermione smiled a serene smile and whispered, “Hush” as if it was her scary book baby. Astonishingly, it quieted under her stroking hand.

“Oh God, Hermione! I don’t believe it!”

“I know,” Hermione said in a hushed voice. “I’ve never seen such detailed runes.”

“That’s not what I meant. I think it might be bound with human skin.”

“Hmm,” Hermione responded, in a happy world where she had detailed runes for friends. Harry looked at her face and reflected that Ron would’ve given anything for her to look like that at him.

Harry didn’t see why she shouldn’t. Ron was bound with human skin, too.

He selected a less alarming looking book and sat himself down with it, resisting the impulse to go home to Malfoy and bite the stupid thing off his stupid neck. He started turning pages.

Hours later his head was aching and Hermione’s gentle humming was grating on his last nerve. He muttered something about getting some air and left the library. He wondered vaguely where the staff were.

There were noises rising from below. He walked down towards the Great Hall and found McGonagall on the staircase.

“I’ve been meaning to ask-” he said. “Can I take something from the Headmaster’s - from your office?”

McGonagall’s eyes softened. “A keepsake?”

Harry hesitated. “Not... exactly.”

They went upstairs. McGonagall had not changed the office much, not like she would’ve done if Dumbledore had become Minister of Magic and she’d moved in. Everything was kept just as it had been, as if he would return any moment, when he would never return again.

Harry went over to the Sorting Hat and thrust his hand inside it, searching, and felt his hand brush against metal. He closed his hand around the hilt of Godric Gryffindor’s sword and drew it out.

McGonagall’s voice was like a whip. “What are you planning to do with that?”

The sword seemed different, now. Then he had grasped it with both hands and flailed: now he held the hilt in one hand, testing the weight of the blade against the strength of his arm. It had a nice balance.

It had potential.

"I'm not sure yet," Harry said. "It might come in handy."

McGonagall drew a deep breath. "You can have it."

She bowed her head and he looked at the picture of Dumbledore, still gently sleeping in his frame and unavailable to give answers or protection. He nodded and made to leave the office.

"Harry," McGonagall said, and her use of his name was rare enough to turn his head. "I'm trusting you with it."

Her eyes were steady, and he found he was able to meet them. She stood there calmly, not seeming crushed by the absence of the headmaster or the phoenix, and for a moment it was all right if Dumbledore's sleep could not be broken.

"You can trust me."

He walked with her, back down the staircases until they were in the Great Hall and it occurred to him that all the noise in the castle was coming from the dungeons.

McGonagall answered his questioning glance. "The dungeons are the most easily defended part of the castle, and we do not have enough staff to protect four separate groups of children. Besides, there really aren't going to be enough students to keep to the house system."

Harry held the sword of Gryffindor behind his neck, leaning against the steel, and heard himself laugh oddly. It was McGonagall's turn to give him a questioning look.

"The bloody Hat was right," Harry said. "Houses, unite."

He went back to Hermione in the library. The pages of a book were nipping at Hermione's fingers and she was laughing softly, indulgently, as if the book was a playful kitten. Harry continued to look bleakly at page after page.

They slept in the library. Neither of them wanted to go up to the Gryffindor, and Harry was damned if he was going to sleep in the new all-purpose-but-still-Slytherin-tainted dorms.

"We could go see if there are any beds left in Ravenclaw," Harry whispered as they made pillows out of robes. "Ever thought about what would have happened if you'd been Sorted into Ravenclaw after all? You would probably still be in school."

"Probably," Hermione conceded. "But you and Ron would either have died because you didn't research, or failed out of school because you didn't study."

Her tone indicated that these fates were about equally dire. Harry smiled and shut his eyes.

*

He did not smile when he opened his eyes and was faced with another row of books. He and Hermione researched all that day, and the next. Ron appeared the morning after that.

“The house is very, very clean,” he said, touching Hermione’s back in an embarrassed half-hug. “I thought you two could use a spare pair of eyes. And if I stayed, I’d have ended up giving in and playing chess with Malfoy.”

“He asked you?” Harry said.

“Twice,” Ron answered. “My legend must’ve reached the dungeons. About time, too.”

“Everything’s in the dungeons now.”

Ron frowned and Hermione filled him in. He was reliably horrified. “Turning people into Slytherins against their will! I call it outrageous. What if there were more Weasleys to come, we were born for Gryffindor. Sorting Hat’s never hesitated on a Weasley for four generations.”

“I can’t even claim one generation,” Hermione mused. “Harry reminded me I was almost a Ravenclaw a few days ago. What about you, Harry? Did the Hat hesitate?”

Harry hesitated. “Nah.”

“Course not,” Ron said. “And you’re OK too, Hermione. Ravenclaw’s all right, everyone knows that.”

Harry flipped through another book on necklaces. A stern footnote unrolled before his eyes, telling him that he was a boy and shouldn’t be so interested in jewellery.

“Malfoy wouldn’t have minded being a Ravenclaw,” he said absently. “He told me once.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Fascinating as that is, I think I have a recipe for Veritaserum here... Foxglove gathered under the full moon, oh, what...”

She made the list for Veritaserum ingredients. That was their only success that day, though Ron manfully admired books covered with human skin and even one book that had a rolling, yellowed eye set in the front.

Sharing the girl’s interests. Ron might be getting cunning in his old age.

“Your sword is cool,” he added to Harry with genuine enthusiasm.

Hermione frowned. “I’ve been meaning to ask why you have a sword in the library. Shouldn’t you drop it back to the Burrow at some point? It’s not exactly inconspicuous.”

Harry seized the chance with both hands and was out the door before she could change her mind. Research was deeply important to him, but if he hurried he could be in the Burrow before dinner. God knew what Malfoy had been getting up to in their absence.

*

He stopped on the threshold of the Burrow’s back door, arrested by the sight of Malfoy

leaning against Mrs Weasley's oven and adding pepper to a pan full of sauce. He was humming a Wyrd Sisters song to himself.

Harry leaned against the doorframe and frowned. It was very odd, seeing Malfoy acting like a normal person. He more or less existed in Harry's mind as a constant irritating presence, sneering and jeering and plotting dark things. It seemed strange that he could just stand about, running a hand through his hair and frowning at dinner.

Even the terminally annoying had to eat, Harry supposed. He put down his bag of clothes and Malfoy spun at the sound. His eyes went wide.

"What are you doing with that?" he demanded.

Harry stared. "I thought you weren't speaking to me."

"Pardon me if the sight of a maniac holding a dirty great sword has me a little off balance!"

Harry followed Malfoy's fixed gaze to look at the sword clasped in Harry's hand. "Ah."

"Yes, ah. You enormous freak," Malfoy added, eyes narrowing. "Not happy cutting people up with your wand anymore? Want to get up close and personal with the victims?"

Harry lost his hold on patience and got a proper grip on his sword instead. "Maybe."

He took a few steps, swinging the sword with elaborate carelessness. Malfoy backed up against the oven, staring at the sword. Funny how he couldn't ignore Harry now. He turned the blade, watched it glitter under the light, and then looked at Malfoy's eyes. They were glittering too.

"What is going *on* here?"

Harry looked around at Charlie for the split second it took for Malfoy to lunge at him and take hold of the blade. Harry swung his attention back to its original focus, who was gripping an actual sword in his hands and staring at him with glittering eyes suddenly up close.

"What's the matter with you, Malfoy?" he snarled. "I was just messing around."

"Can you two stop it?" Charlie asked. "Not fighting. I begin to see that may be sort of your default condition, but in the Burrow fighting in the kitchen is not permitted. There are sharp things here, children. I see Harry has brought an extra sharp thing of his very own."

Charlie's amused tone defused the situation, more or less. The moment of tension slipped by, and Malfoy let go of the sword. Harry propped it against the wall.

"See how happy we can be, when we all learn to get along," Charlie said, still sounding amused. "What's all this?" he asked, his crooked smile becoming warmer and definitely directed at Malfoy.

Malfoy's mouth turned up at the corner. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "All this and he can cook, too."

“Actually, I’m still wondering why there’s a great big sword in the kitchen, but the food looks excellent.” Charlie’s glance included Harry in the general atmosphere of goodwill, but his eyes soon turned back to Malfoy. “Mum and Dad have gone out for some soppy romantic dinner because the wedding made them think of their youth, and Ginny and I were desperate before Draco revealed his secret skills.”

Malfoy always got smug and shiny when people praised him. “Mother taught me when I was small. Mostly to try and keep me out of trouble.”

Harry found himself at a loss to deal with this information. Fortunately at that point Ginny entered the room.

“Malfoy, is it time to eat yet?” she asked. “I’m starvi - Harry!” She ran up to him and kissed him on the cheek: he shut his eyes for a moment and smelled flowers. “I’m glad you’re back. Malfoy is making us dinner, can you believe it?”

“Not... really,” Harry said slowly and honestly.

“Is there enough for Harry?” Ginny asked anxiously. “Because if not, and you know I’m fond of you and everything, Harry, but you can make yourself a sandwich. I’m used to someone being around who can cook. I get fractious if I miss meals. I can’t believe Charlie’s been eating jerky by a campfire for seven years.”

“Does a body good,” Charlie claimed. “Anyway, little sister, why can’t you cook?”

Malfoy laughed, and then moved to grab the pasta and sieve it. Charlie went for some plates and Ginny swooped towards the sauce.

“Because I have six greedy brothers and learning to cook would have doomed me to a lifetime of female bondage, that’s why,” she said. “Of course, now Malfoy is the only one who can feed me and I have to be polite to him, so there really is no such thing as a free lunch. Is there enough for Harry or what?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said.

The kitchen was the same as it had always been, a rough round table, cheerful yellow lights, moving red-haired pictures on every available surface. Everyone sat around the table and Charlie dished out pasta and Ginny made Harry set the table to make it clear she wasn’t in female bondage. People made jokes and ate a lot.

The strangeness of it made Harry want to scream. Hadn’t anybody noticed that this was Malfoy?

“This is really good,” said Charlie. “Any chance you’d be willing to come to Roumania and cook for a camp full of dragon tamers?”

“I want my own tent,” Malfoy answered. “You snore.”

“How do you know that?”

“Charles and I are sharing a room, Potter,” Malfoy informed him. “Where did you think Mrs Weasley was keeping her next to eldest son, in the shed?”

“Dad would have a fit, I’d mess up his ekeltricity,” Charlie said. “So, Harry, d’you always come back with weaponry or is this a special occasion?”

“Er, it’s the Sword of Gryffindor.” This made Malfoy smirk for some reason, and Harry spoke in defence of his house. “It’s cooler than a locket.”

“Godric Gryffindor needed a great big sword for his symbol,” Malfoy said reflectively. “D’you think he was compensating for something? Out of historical interest.”

“I don’t think anything!”

Malfoy helped himself to more pasta. “I always suspected that, Potter, but I never imagined you’d come right out and admit it.”

I would just feel better, Harry thought, if you were sitting at another table at the opposite end of the room, and possibly doing a nasty imitation of me. Malfoy remained in place, and remained impersonal.

“I remember that sword,” Ginny put in. “Harry killed a basilisk with it. He was rescuing me at the time, he was the manliest twelve year old ever.”

She gave him a smile that was equal parts cheeky and affectionate. It would’ve been nice if Malfoy hadn’t also been in his line of vision, and rolling his eyes.

“Yes,” said Malfoy, “but what has he done for you lately?”
Ginny actually laughed. When they were finished dinner, Charlie began collecting the plates.

“I do not clean,” Malfoy reminded him.

“Nor do I,” Ginny said. “Must fight against female bondage. Exploding Snap?”

Charlie accepted his fate philosophically. “I’ll wash if you dry, Harry,” he offered, going towards the sink as Ginny set off in search of cards.

Harry stayed at the table, and caught Malfoy’s wrist when he tried to rise. In the yellow light, Malfoy’s hair looked almost like an ordinary colour. He deliberately caught Malfoy’s left arm to see him flinch, and dispel this façade of normality.

“Why are you behaving like this?”

“Why are you grabbing me?” Malfoy demanded icily. “I was just talking. All right? I do not find your and the Weasley twins’ practical jokes very funny, but it’s only humiliation, I’m used to it at this point. I’m not a child anymore, I’m done with embarrassing myself. I’m done with you.”

“When were you doing - what are you talking about?”

Malfoy subjected him to a long, thoughtful gaze. Then he kicked him hard in the shin, pulled his wrist free and walked out of the room without looking back.

*

He caught Ginny coming down the stairs in her nightdress, bounding down easily towards the game of Exploding Snap with Malfoy.

“Whatever happened to not letting Malfoy see you in your nightie?” Harry asked. “Come to that, what happened to hating Malfoy?”

He thought he was crabbier than he should’ve been because she looked nice in her nightie. Her curly hair was lifting fuzzily where she had brushed it, and the scoop neck and the short frilled sleeves showed a lot of pale skin and golden freckles. Bloody Malfoy was going to be looking at her, and the sight of her made Harry feel tired and grouchy.

Ginny’s lip curled. “Nothing happened. He’s still a worm, but - Charlie’s my favourite brother, you know.”

“I thought Ron was your favourite brother!”

Ginny stared at him. “No,” she said definitely. “It’s always been Charlie. Everybody knows that who knows anything about me. Charlie always had time to play with me when I was little, I’ve missed him, and if he wants me to be polite to Malfoy, I can do it. Besides...” Ginny shrugged, her expression suddenly uncomfortable. “It’s different, not liking someone you hardly know, and not liking someone who’s cooked for you and made jokes and things. It seems a bit more - real, now, if I hex Malfoy.” She grinned. “Not that I won’t, if he pesters me too much.”

“Weasley!” shouted Malfoy from the sitting room. “At your earliest convenience. Exploding Snap waits for no man.”

Ginny shrugged expressively and - this was the part Harry really noticed - went in at once. Harry followed her, feeling more strongly than ever that Malfoy needed watching. If he wasn’t stealing Horcruxes, he was making an attempt on other people’s women.

Other people’s women were kneeling by the fire, facing Malfoy. The firelight grabbed Ginny’s hair in bright handfuls and made her beautiful.

The fire made Malfoy look like someone sitting by the fire, but something caught and held Harry’s attention. He was in pyjamas. It was outrageous that he dared to act like belonged here. In front of Ginny, too!

Charlie was at his ease on the sofa, but Harry noted that Charlie hadn’t decided to wander about the house in his nightclothes. Charlie was smiling at the conversation, though, so Harry decided to glare at him as well.

“I know you’re cheating, Malfoy. Once I figure out how anyone can cheat at Exploding Snap, and why anyone would be pathetic enough to cheat at Exploding Snap, you will pay.”

“You Gryffindors are such terrible losers,” Malfoy remarked, persisting in deliberate and malicious pyjama wearing.

“It’s just that we get so much less practise than Slytherins,” Harry put in.

Malfoy glared, but even that reassuring familiar thing was ruined when Charlie started to laugh and Malfoy’s eyes flicked to him as if Harry could not possibly hold his interest.

“What is it, Charles?”

“You two are funny,” Charlie informed him. Malfoy’s gaze turned baleful.

“Well, you’re half right,” he muttered, and then slammed his hand down. “Snap!”

Cards blew up in Ginny’s surprised face. Malfoy grinned like a pyjama-wearing lunatic.

“Winnah and still champion! The kingdom of Snap and all its exploding provinces are mine, all mine!”

“I know you’re cheating, and when I find out how I am going to beat you down.”

“Baby, maybe I’m just this good.”

Malfoy preened before Ginny’s narrowed eyes, shoulders and elbows sharp against the thin white material of the pyjamas. He was practically wriggling with glee, and for a finale he stretched back on the hearthrug and shut his eyes as she began to shuffle the cards with unnecessary vigour. He put one hand behind his head and the pyjama top lifted: and there was another unacceptable thing, worse than seeing his face at the same table as Harry’s. Harry had never been forced to contemplate Malfoy’s stomach before.

“Maybe you should give up now,” Malfoy went on, voice sounding as if he wore a sly smile. “There are plenty of women in the world who would be my slaves forever without losing a bet.”

“I am not going to lose, and there are not!”

Malfoy stretched. Harry looked back at his face. “There are at least two or three,” he argued. “I may not be flashy and redheaded, but I like to think I have a certain aristocratic allure.”

“I like to think of you as deformed in the face,” Harry said. Ginny threw back her head and laughed.

Outside, the garden moved. Harry’s hand flew to his wand.

“Put that away, Potter!” Malfoy sat up sharply.

Charlie reached up and put his hand on Harry’s arm. “Calm down,” he said, “It’s only Bessie.”

It took Harry a minute to calm down, something inside him ready to hurl itself at a throat. He'd thought for a minute that - he shook his head, and left his position leaning against the sofa to get closer to the hearthrug where Malfoy and Ginny sat, safe and laughing in the warm light.

"Only Bessie," Ginny scoffed. "When is Bessie going *home*?"

"She'll pine for me," Charlie explained pathetically.

Malfoy saw Harry coming and got to his feet without comment, going to sit on the other side of the room with Charlie. He slid onto the arm of the sofa, close enough that he could have rested his chin on Charlie's head.

"We love Bessie," he put in.

Charlie cast a warmly grateful glance upwards, which landed at about Malfoy's throat area. It lingered there and Harry tensed, following Charlie's gaze with his own, sliding down smooth white skin to snag on the sudden glitter of a gold chain. If Charlie asked - were there no pyjamas that buttoned to the *neck*?

Charlie did not ask, and Ginny broke the apprehensive silence with a snort. Harry started.

"Oh, we love Bessie now, do we?" she asked. "I wonder where all this love was when we had to muck out the garden. Bessie almost drowned our chickens!"

"I've told and told you people," Malfoy said, sounding vexed. "*I will not clean*. Come on, Weasley, shall we have another round? Then we can all sit back and watch you cry."

If Harry hadn't still felt disturbed, he would not have said it.

"I've never seen *her* cry."

He regretted it for an instant, and then the sharp feeling eased when Malfoy fixed him with a familiar look, as if the only thing he wanted in all the world was to murder Harry on the spot.

"Really? I've seen her cry," he drawled, and Harry remembered all that business with the Valentines. "I made her cry."

"Well," Ginny's voice broke in on the stare, "I'd like to see you do it again!"

Harry looked at her flushed face, aggressive in her own defence as she always was, and was sorry at once. He looked back at Malfoy, who was looking at Ginny and whose face was pale. He looked briefly humiliated, and then savage, and Harry realised belatedly that he must assume Harry had told Ginny all about the crying in the bathroom.

I didn't, he wanted to say. I never mentioned it to a soul.

Malfoy moved towards Ginny and the movement reminded Harry of... that incident in the kitchen, Malfoy moving with intent. Like a predator.

He still looked savage. "All right," he whispered. "I'll do it again."

He sat on the hearthrug again, leaning towards Ginny. She leaned forward and faced him down, unafraid, and it struck Harry again that they looked like - something together. There was blood rising in Ginny's cheeks and fire in her curling hair, and she made Malfoy look like a pale, polished thing by contrast.

Malfoy spoke conversationally, only their proximity making it seem intimate. "It must be hard, playing a part all the time."

"Malfoy, stop talking complete rubbish," Ginny responded instantly. "You don't know anything about me - but if you must know, it was just that I was a little shy with Harry for-"

"Which is why you never tried out for Quidditch?"

Ginny frowned. "What's Quidditch got to-"

"So, third year. Wood's going mental, Potter's falling off his broom because of Dementors, the whole team looks ready to kidnap stray Hufflepuffs who have quick hands, and you're in second year. Which is old enough to try out for and become a replacement Seeker for the Quidditch team. I know when I was in second year you couldn't have kept me away from try-outs with a knife. But despite the fact you know they want a substitute, and you know you're decent at Quidditch, you don't try out. Because you're just not that interested."

"I like-"

"I'm sure you like it now," Malfoy drawled. "Anyone would like being the belle of the team, the life and soul of the party, with all your little impressions - which are odd, because you don't do those at home when you're really comfortable. *I* do them - I don't even think about them, I always have - but they don't quite come naturally to you. Don't get me wrong," Malfoy said, leaning in still closer, "I believe you. You were shy because you liked Potter, and because you were mother's only little girl and school came as a bit of a culture shock. And you always knew you could do better, you could really make an impression on him, and then along came an older boy who was interested in you. Maybe someone advised you to act a bit more naturally around Potter."

The quiver of Ginny's lips, acknowledging a hit, curled Malfoy's mouth into a smirk. Harry was distracted by the realisation that apparently Malfoy had known about Michael Corner before he had.

He kept talking, an almost friendly voice coming out of that smirking mouth. "So you planned to, but, well - it's easy to improve on nature, isn't it? You were a bit carried away because you'd had your growth spurt and the boys were looking, and the attention went to your head and you overdid it. Besides, you knew Potter well enough by then. You knew he hardly notices people until he *does*, and when he does he goes to town. All you had to do was try a little more, be a little brighter, and you'd have his attention. You told a joke and people laughed not only at the joke but because you were good-looking, so you told a lot more jokes. You played Quidditch because you might as well, and acting up there got you more attention. All very understandable, of course - and none of it fooled me for a minute."

There was a small scathing edge to his sympathetic tones now.

“Not really fair to go out with other boys for as long as you did when you still wanted someone else, but it was so easy to throw them away when you were done. Because no matter what you told yourself, you didn’t care like other girls cared about the boys they were seeing. It was all part of new, improved Ginny Weasley, who could drop them and pick another up anytime. Ginny Weasley, larger than life, throwing around her precious Bat Bogey Hexes-”

“You deserved it!” Ginny exclaimed, her voice uneven but fierce.

“Did Smith deserve it? He was just asking you a question. Come to that, I heard that you drove your broom into his stand because he was talking. Not that I haven’t seen Gryffindors react to words with violence before, but was that always your style, Weasley? Wasn’t all that a bit larger than life?”

Ginny leaped to her feet and he followed her, more slowly, as if it was natural that they should stand up at this point. “Shut up!”

He leaned into her space, eyes glittering, as if he was about to pull her in for a particularly nasty kiss. “So you weren’t shy and silent, Mother’s smothered little girl, anymore. You did get Potter’s attention, and once you noticed that you dropped Thomas for an even lamer reason than the one you dropped Corner for. You got the boy, and you got the attention. Everyone believed the act. But are you sure - *sure* - that you didn’t try too hard? What if he knows nothing about you? The real you. Are you afraid that he wouldn’t even want to know?”

“Here’s something you should know, Malfoy,” Ginny said, her voice trembling, her hands balled into fists. “You’re full of shit!”

She hit him, a good hard right, and then spun on her heel and dashed out into the hall. Harry saw her eyes shining with tears as she went, and then heard nothing but the angry crash of her feet up the stairs.

Malfoy’s nose was bleeding. “A Slytherin word and a Gryffindor blow,” he said, a bit indistinctly. “That’s usually how it goes, all right.”

He sneered in Harry’s direction and Harry ran at him, slamming his back into the mantelpiece. He was close enough so the blood didn’t even look like blood, just a bright splash of colour on Malfoy’s triumphant face.

A hand closed on Harry’s shoulder. “Back off,” Charlie said evenly. He added to Malfoy in mild tones: “Lucky she hit you, or I’d have had to. That might’ve spoiled your aristocratic allure. Tip your head back.”

Charlie pulled Harry backwards with little apparent effort. He continued to look at Malfoy with an unacceptable lack of anger. Malfoy obediently tipped his head back.

“It is lucky she hit me,” he said, still rather muffled. “I was expecting my nose to explode full of sharp bat shapes.”

“Is it true she did that to a kid asking her a question?” Charlie asked, then shook his head. “She’s always had a wicked temper on her. I’ll have to have a word. She can hit you if she likes, since you seem bent on deserving it, but she can’t go around inflicting bodily harm on everyone. She’ll attract the wrong sort of boys, and then muggins here will have to show them how to treat a lady by feeding them to dragons.”

He fished around in his dragonhide trousers and produced a handkerchief.

“Mop up the blood with that, I’ll fix it in a few minutes. For now, think about what you’ve done.”

“He’s not going to get the chance to think, because I’m going to kill him!”

“Look, Potter, I broke your nose for you once. I’d be thrilled to do it again.”

Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose. “You lot are making me feel my age,” he remarked in piteous tones. “Look. Harry, you said something that made Draco furious. I don’t know why and I don’t want to know, because the amount of stupidity I’m seeing now is hurting my brain and I have a feeling there may be years of back stupidity behind this. Draco, just because you’re furious doesn’t mean you can run your fool mouth off at my baby sister. If you do that again, I shall put you into Bessie’s trough and tell everyone you ran away to America. Ginny cannot hit every idiot she meets or she’ll develop arthritis at seventeen. All of you have behaved in a retarded manner, and all I wanted to do was relax after a nice dinner.”

It was a mystery how Malfoy managed to look playful with his head tipped back and his nose streaming blood.

“Thank you for the lecture, Grandpa,” he said. “How old are you, anyway?”

Charlie regarded him ruefully. “You are the worst of the lot. You are a devil child who should have been drowned at birth,” he said, and while Harry agreed with every word the tone was all wrong. “And I’m twenty-four. Come here.”

Malfoy went. Charlie got out his wand and murmured, “*Episky*.” Harry did not recall that Tonks had felt it necessary to clasp the back of his neck like that when she’d healed him.

“Potter, why are you so stupid?” Malfoy asked in a clearer voice, rubbing away the last of the blood. “Your girl is upset.”

“And whose fault is that?” Harry snarled.

Malfoy, not before time, took a step away from Charlie. “What does it matter? If you’re so concerned, why are you still here with us and not up there with her?”

Harry hesitated. He was not planning on obeying Malfoy’s damn orders, let alone that he had no idea how to comfort a crying girl, but he was concerned about Ginny. He wanted to prove it by giving her Malfoy’s head on a plate, that was all.

“Nobody stupid is allowed to speak to anyone else stupid tonight,” Charlie said while he was

still hesitating. “Draco, go to our room and fix that clock. Harry, go and-”

“Play with your Sword of Gryffindor,” Malfoy murmured.

“What did I say to you, Draco?” Malfoy smirked unrepentantly and Charlie continued. “Just - go, Harry. I’m going up to comfort my sister.”

Charlie made sure Malfoy went up before him. Harry went into the kitchen, feeling the desire to hurt Malfoy still prickling under his skin, as if his blood had literally been heated, too hot for his body to contain and burning for release. He picked up the sword and thought of killing the basilisk, thought of Horcruxes, and then realised what he had taken the sword for.

Once he had worked out how to get to the damn snake, he would use it to kill Nagini.

Chapter Six

He slept badly that night even though he had a bed, his body still seized with that prickly, heated urge to action. He came downstairs late and found Ginny in the kitchen, watching a panful of bacon and eggs as if it might bite her.

She smiled up at him, her usual unclouded, uncomplicated grin. "Hi, Harry. Malfoy said all I had to do to keep this hot for you was shift it about a bit by - sort of joggling it."

All of it was a bit brown and curly at the edges, but Harry was not one to quibble over a fry. He rescued the pan from Ginny's inexperienced hands and began helping himself.

"Mum and Dad didn't come home," Ginny said. "They Owled Charlie. I think they're in some kind of *love shack*." She looked equal parts conspiratorial and disturbed.

"Right," Harry answered. "Um - Ginny, about last night--"

"It's OK. Malfoy made this huge fry for me and Charlie as an apology, I think - saying it with bacon isn't a bad idea." Ginny looked reflective. "Also I accidentally poured hot grease on his pyjama bottoms. What a shame. The point is, I'm all right. Charlie and I had a talk and I've cooled down. Malfoy's a git, he behaved like a git, colour me shocked." She lifted one shoulder. "I do have a rotten temper, but I get over it fast. D'you think that evens things out?"

"I think you're great." Harry was so glad she was not still crying that he wanted to kiss her a ridiculous amount.

Ginny smiled wider. "Besides, he does live in the house with us. We can't try to kill each other all day long."

This was a very practical and sensible thing to say, but Harry also had a very clear recollection that Ginny had been able to keep up determined enmity towards Fleur for ages in the same house. He did not know how to say that Ginny seemed to get on better with boys - that she seemed awfully ready to be lenient towards Malfoy, who'd called her good-looking - without Ginny having a perfect right to pour hot grease down his trousers as well.

It wasn't that he thought Ginny would ever get mixed up with Malfoy. Not exactly, not really. He trusted Ginny. She'd told him how she felt.

Charlie and she had had a talk, had they? He remembered her words, accusing in memory if not at the time, *It's always been Charlie. Everybody knows that who knows anything about me*, and Malfoy's whisper, almost against Ginny's mouth. *What if he knows nothing about you?*

Ginny leaned up and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. She was gone before he had even breathed in the smell of flowers.

"I've got to get into the garden. We're playing a game, we got Bessie up on the roof and Charlie's blinding Malfoy."

"What!"

Harry went to the window, almost dropping his plate, and looked out at the garden. It was another beautiful late-August day, the sunlight aged to perfection, and Charlie had his wandtip against Malfoy's shut eyes and his hand on the back of his neck again.

"What game are you playing?" Harry demanded.

Ginny gave him an odd look. "Blind Man's Buff."

"Wouldn't it be better to put a scarf over his eyes?"

Ginny's look clearly said that Harry was very odd indeed. "Why? It's called Blind Man, not Peeking Under His Scarf Because He's a Dirty Cheater's Buff. God, it's not permanent! Is the scarves how Muggles play? Weird! You should tell Dad when he gets back."

From his love shack with Mollywobbles, Harry thought, and wished his brain would die.

"Read your Owl, I'll see you in a bit," said Ginny, and rushed out into the sunlight.

Harry was confused for a moment, and then saw that she had left an envelope by his plate. The envelope was watermarked and sealed with wax, the writing on the front looked like a woman's. He didn't recognise it.

He broke it open one-handed, forking up the eggs as he did so.

'Dear Harry,

I do hope that everything is going smoothly where you are. I cannot stop thinking about the 'talk' we had last time we saw each other. Same time, same place? If you can give me what I want, I think I will be able to give you more of what you want. I am sure we can come to an understanding.

*Yours in anticipation,
The Girl From the Alley.'*

Harry stared at the Owl in blank astonishment until he realised what was going on. It was not a saucy letter from a deranged fan. It was a code.

It was Narcissa Malfoy, and he thought she was offering him Death Eater information in return for his continued protection of her son.

What was the matter with this family?

He shook his head, finished off his breakfast and stuffed the letter into his jeans pocket, heading out into the garden. The trees were veiling half of the place, low-lying branches whipping in the wind. He could hear a shriek, and laughter.

"I have to go, I'm meeting-" he began, and saw Malfoy stumbling towards him.

Malfoy narrowly avoided being brained by a branch, and stood framed by sunlight and

foliage. The sun turned the ends of his hair dazzling white, and he was smiling a warm simple smile, as if he was happy.

This ordinary thing was as weird as all the ordinary things Malfoy had done yesterday. It held Harry for a moment, waiting for the moment when animosity returned and made Malfoy familiar again. Then he realised that the moment would not come because, of course, Malfoy could not see.

Harry moved without thinking, closer. Malfoy's hand leaped out - Seeker reflexes, Harry thought in a detached sort of way - and closed around his arm. Malfoy laughed, a low warm sound of pleasure.

"Got you," he said, in a voice to match the laugh.

His grip was tight. Harry tilted his head to see him better, squinting against the sun, but as he did so Malfoy's face changed. His hold relaxed and he pushed more than touched, he gave a series of swift pushes up Harry's arm and stopped at his shoulder.

"Potter?" he snapped. "What the *hell* are you playing at?"

He did not wait for Harry to respond, reaching up to touch Harry's face. His fingers brushed Harry's cheek and then he pulled Harry's glasses off and threw them hard.

Harry could only see a sunlight-yellow blur when Malfoy snarled: "See how you like it."

"Oi, who threw these glasses? A lens is bro- oh, I see."

"It's more than I do," Malfoy said in his most disdainful tones. "Potter's playing tricks again, he and your brothers think they're terribly amusing, undo this damned spell!"

Charlie pressed the glasses into Harry's hand and he slipped them on, saw again, though the world was changed and broken through one eye. Charlie, frowning and concerned, had cupped the back of Malfoy's neck *again*.

"I need to go," said Harry, taking a small vindictive pleasure in the thought of how Malfoy would feel if he knew about Mrs Malfoy's letter, and he went without another word.

*

After too long with the son, the mother was not much of an improvement. Harry found Narcissa Malfoy in the alley off Diagon Alley, just where he had seen her last. She was a hooded and cloaked figure but she did not look like a Death Eater, on account of it being all pale blue satin.

"Not exactly inconspicuous," Harry said by way of greeting.

She pushed the hood back, her silvery hair spilling over her shoulders. Harry was relieved to see she did not look like Malfoy again, he'd had about enough for one day.

"I always think inconspicuous people have something to hide," she said, her voice cool and

precise as a teacher's. "Why in the world would anyone not want to be noticed?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Would you? Really?" asked Narcissa, smirking.

Looking at her with her son's expression on her face, not intent on Quidditch or hexing Malfoy or murdering Snape, he saw what Mrs Weasley had meant. Mrs Malfoy was extremely beautiful for a mother, but past enormous blue eyes and a rose-petal mouth he recognised the pale narrow face that had come to her son stripped of her glamour.

She bowed her gleaming head to her gloves, which unbuttoned at the wrist. "I notice that neither you or Severus is dead," she said. "I'm glad about Severus."

"I'm touched," Harry told her. "I left with your son instead of his life."

Narcissa dropped her glove. It lay, crumpled and forlorn and small, making Harry think of a child's hand upturned in supplication. Or perhaps that was the naked look on her face, the almost anguished hope.

"Draco?" she cried, and Harry heard how loud that cry should have been, if she had not needed to be secret. "Draco. He's safe."

Harry realised that Narcissa had thought Malfoy might already be dead, his body lying undiscovered in some remote place like his uncle's had once. He hated her. She had turned Sirius in to her husband, to her sister, to die. He thought of Malfoy dead and alone somewhere because he hadn't wanted to kill, all the same, and shared a moment of sick horror with her.

"He's fine," he said, more warmly than he'd intended to. "He's quite safe, he's - well, I have him somewhere safe."

She kept watching him silently, reminding him of Malfoy again. She looked as if she was empty of all feeling but hunger, and when Harry realised he was remembering the kitchen incident he was embarrassed enough to keep talking in order to distract her from the fact he was going red.

"He's wearing Muggle clothes about the place and fixing clocks, so I'm not sure exactly how much he's fulfilling all your hopes as your only heir, but he isn't dead. He made breakfast this morning and dinner last night, his cooking really isn't bad - he's making himself useful, at least. He says he won't clean, though."

"No," Narcissa Malfoy said, her voice so very, very calm it almost fell into hysteria. "You should - see his room at home."

She grabbed Harry then, her pale hands twisted into the material of his shirt. He was quite a bit taller than she was now.

"Thank you," he said, her voice so intense that if he had closed his eyes he would have thought it was Bellatrix speaking. "Protect him. I'll give you anything you want."

Women didn't grab Harry in alleyways and promise to fulfil his every desire all that often, but if he had ever pictured it he would not have imagined feeling quite this uncomfortable.

"I said I would."

"Yes, but mean it! Swear it. He's yours to protect. Promise me."

She clung onto his shirt like a drowning woman, and Harry looked down into her blue eyes.

"I promise," he said at last. "He's mine."

Narcissa stepped back, letting go, her face putting up all its layers of calm and beauty. The calm was as different from her son as the beauty, it occurred to Harry. Malfoy tried, but he was really bad at hiding stuff. Narcissa Malfoy would smile her sweetest and put a knife in your back.

She reached inside her cloak, and pulled out parchment. "Plans of the next three attacks planned," she said. "Two Muggle towns and the Finnigan family. Save them, lay a trap, do as you choose."

"If I tore them up, it'd all be the same to you."

Her eyes were sweet melting blue from sheer habit, and she was cold. "Of course it would," she answered. "I would burn the world down to see my son safe, and think it a very small price to pay. Go to your own kind for sentimental and all-embracing compassion."

Harry had a sudden stupid impulse to refuse anything from her hand. And doom Seamus and his whole family? He shook his head sharply and reached out, taking the papers and holding them safe against his chest.

"If you fail to keep him safe, I will kill you," Narcissa informed him quietly.

He looked at her, and she had that desperate look in her eyes again. She stepped forward and caught his hands in hers, and she felt fragile against him, her eyes cornflower blue, and he knew exactly what she was but it did not seem right to push her away. He stared helplessly down at her, feeling a bit like a rabbit in a trap.

"If they come for him and you cannot protect him - tell him what I did. Tell him I would have done anything for him." She stared up at Harry, and he thought she was as unable to see him as Malfoy had been this morning. "My Draco," she said in a soft voice. "Oh, my darling."

She kissed Harry twice, to the left and then the right of his mouth. He did not dare move a muscle, in case he found himself actually touching the lips of Malfoy's mother with his own. Then mercifully, she stepped back.

"Tell him," she commanded again. She made her way to the mouth of the alley, walking carefully, a society lady caught in her high heels and a distasteful spot. "Your glasses are broken," she added over her shoulder, and departed.

“Your glasses are broken,” was the first thing Hermione said when she saw him, at which point Harry’s patience abruptly ran out.

“My glasses are broken,” he agreed. “And we are wasting time. We have all the books that might be helpful here, don’t we?” he said, casting his eyes over the heaped table.

Ron nodded, looking a little wan after twenty-four hours in the library. Mind you, a night of sleeping virtuously with Hermione on the library floor might have a lot to do with that.

“Then we’re taking it back with us,” Harry said. “Look,” he said, forestalling Hermione’s protests, “I wasted my time in Godric’s Hollow! I’ve wasted my time here! I’m done, all right? Dumbledore stayed here his whole life and he died, I have to get out there and find these things. I know where one of them is! We’re going back there, we’re going to force Veritaserum down Malfoy’s throat and we’re going to get that thing off him and crush it. Then I’m going into Voldemort’s headquarters if necessary, and I’m going to cut his snake into bloody ribbons. And I’ll find out where he has that Hufflepuff thing and I’ll destroy that too, but I’m sure there is no Horcrux in the library and so we’re not staying here another second.”

“Oooh, thanks, Harry,” Hermione said. “I forgot about the Hufflepuff Cup, there are some very interesting books on the subject-”

She went and fetched three more enormous tomes. Ron viewed them fatalistically.

“Harry, take us home,” he said. “Don’t leave me in this horrible place again. I miss Mum’s home cooking.”

“Malfoy’s home cooking,” Harry corrected him.

“Oh good, Hermione, we’re going to talk about Malfoy,” Ron said. “I know I’ve missed talking about Malfoy since yesterday.”

Harry tossed a book at him. Hermione caught it and glared at him, her eyes telling him that Ron’s skull might be replaceable but eighteenth century first editions were not.

“I mean it, though,” Harry went on. “Malfoy’s doing the cooking. Your parents have, um, gone off to a love shack or something.”

“You lie, Harry Potter,” Ron said with conviction. “You lie, or you’ve gone mental. We shouldn’t go home, we should go to St Mungo’s. Harry needs his crazy medicine.”

“We should probably go and save everyone from Malfoy’s cooking, just in case,” Hermione said, and with a wistful expression on her face she began to Shrink all the books. “I can cook,” she added proudly. “My mother taught me all of the essentials. I didn’t want to mention it before, because it would do the house elves no good at all to lower their self esteem, but the food in Hogwarts is not ideal for the upkeep of dental hygiene.”

She began to pack away the tiny books, her fingers lingering on them as if to say that it wouldn’t be long before they were together again.

“Miss Granger!” said Madam Pince. “I am surprised at you! Stealing books from *my library*! The penalties for that are-”

“Sorry,” Harry said loudly. “Excuse me. D’you know what Voldemort will do if he takes over?”

“Please say You-Know-Who in my library,” said Madam Pince stiffly. “I do not think you have washed your hands today, Mr Weasley-”

“He’ll use them to kill people!” Harry shouted. Everyone stared at him, and he took a deep breath. “He’ll use them to kill people, to make himself more powerful, and you won’t be able to tell him not to take them. And I,” he drew his wand slowly, deliberately, and tapped the cover of the nearest book. “I’d rather burn them all than let that happen.”

Madam Pince went very still.

“So I’m going to take these books,” Harry said, watching Madam Pince’s eyes follow his wand as if she was hypnotised. “We’ll return them when we’re done.”

“Yes,” Madam Pince answered mechanically. “Of course. Anything for the war effort.”

Harry put his wand away. “Thanks. Um, I’ll see you at the Burrow later?” he said to Ron and Hermione. “I have something to give Professor McGonagall.”

Ron nodded, packing away his tiny books. Hermione was too absorbed in telling Madam Pince that she was so sorry, and she would never let anything happen to the books.

He went down to the dungeons, and saw Firenze through the open door, carrying new beds about the Slytherins’ old common room as Madam Hooch shouted instructions. He met McGonagall at the door to what he presumed were the girls’ dormitories.

When he gave her the battle plans, she looked equal parts grateful and horrified. “Mr Potter,” she said in a hushed voice. “Where did you get these?”

Harry looked up at her, and knew that if he said they came from Narcissa Malfoy, the information might not be believed. Seamus might not be saved. “I don’t have to tell you,” he said slowly. “I’m not a student here anymore.”

He turned and walked away, leaving her with the plans in her hands. The Bloody Baron stood covered in silver blood in front of the door to the common room, as if barring the way. Harry walked through him, past the cold, and then out of Hogwarts once more.

*

As soon as he was past the Hogwarts grounds, he Apparated. One day he should get a Licence, he thought to himself. It had been a long day, with Malfoys and Hogwarts and threatening libraries and withholding information, one of those days when he tried not to think about what he had to do.

He could not think about what a huge undertaking this was. He had to hold on to the grim

determination to do it, no matter what.

The sun was low in the sky when he approached the gates of the Burrow, but he thought he could catch maybe a quiet half hour in the garden. He loved the Burrow, but it was noisy a lot, and if he could maybe rest for a bit in the sunlight of the garden...

Sunlight in the garden. Malfoy was probably still angry for no reason, or for the simple reason that the stupid idiot was impossible to please.

Harry's scowl died at birth when he saw Ginny leaning against the gate, obviously waiting for him to come home. She had changed since this morning, she was all in black with a cloak, but when she saw him she smiled an enormous, beautiful smile.

"Harry?" she said, and then she ran to him and put her arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you're here."

He really shouldn't, he had promised himself he would not, but she was so close and so warm, and he thought of days in sunlight by the lake. He thought of Malfoy, and all the stupid things he had said. He looked down at Ginny's soft brown eyes and for a moment all he wanted was warmth and to prove to Malfoy how utterly wrong he had been.

That moment was all it took for Ginny to pull him down into a slow kiss. Her mouth opened, curving against his, slipping her tongue languorously into his mouth. He opened his eyes for a second at the slide of her lips against his, the easy push of her hips against his and her long breath inwards. It was different, this kiss, to their usual kisses. She was kissing with her whole body, her breasts crushed against his chest, her fingers combing through his hair.

He knew why when he looked down at her shining eyes and her kiss-wet mouth, and she whispered into his mouth: "I want you."

"Um," Harry said. "Er. Is that a good idea, I mean, we're not together any-"

Yes! his entire body howled at him. Yes, it's a brilliant idea, the girl's a genius, what are you doing? The rush of blood away from his head was making him feel a bit dizzy.

"I miss you," Ginny said. "Harry. I miss you so much. I want to - I really want to. Please take me inside and-"

"Aren't your Mum and Dad back yet?" Harry asked weakly.

She smiled. "No."

"Um..."

The sun was in his eyes, turning her into nothing but a red-gold haze and another slow, squirming kiss. They surfaced when they were breathless and he took a breath against her flushed, dewy cheek, then kissed below her ear.

"Oh," Ginny exclaimed, the noise low and half-hushed against his hair. She pressed every inch of her body against him and whispered, "Please."

“Well - well, we should... talk, anyway,” Harry said helplessly. “Find somewhere private to - talk.”

“Yes,” Ginny whispered. “Inside.”

They went inside. Ginny was still pressed up against him, in the circle of his arm with her breast soft against his chest, when they went into the kitchen and found Ron and Malfoy playing chess.

Harry wondered frantically how they were supposed to get past them.

This worry disappeared at about the same time that Ginny detached herself from him, cried out: “Draco,” and hurled herself into Malfoy’s lap.

“What the-!” Ron shouted.

Harry had a sudden blinding revelation of how stupid he had been. He had taken someone past the wards around the Burrow, trusting that it was Ginny just because she’d - just because she’d... and it had to be Mrs Malfoy.

This idea collapsed abruptly at about the time Ginny put her arms around Malfoy’s neck and tried to slip him the tongue.

Malfoy went pink and made a valiant attempt to stand up. “Is nobody safe from Love Potions in this godforsaken house for a single moment?” he demanded. “Get her off me! Is this your really twisted idea of another joke, Potter, or are the twins back? I said get off, Weasley!”

Despite his best efforts, Ginny managed to press another kiss on his mouth. “Draco, you idiot!” she said. “We thought you were *dead*, I was so *worried*... It’s me, Draco.”

“Who?” asked Malfoy desperately.

Ginny looked at him with love. “It’s me,” she said again, tenderly. “It’s Pansy.”

Malfoy stared at her for a moment, and then he gave a strangled sort of exclamation. He put his hand up and touched her face, studying Ginny’s pretty features searching for someone else. He kept looking at her until she calmed a little under his gaze, staring back at him as if she never wanted to look at anything else again, and then she nodded once.

Malfoy took hold of both her shoulders and pushed her back, until she was sitting on the kitchen table. Then he took her face in one hand again, fingers brushing over her cheek, pale against her heated skin.

“I didn’t think any of you would look for me,” he whispered, and kissed her.

She moaned and clung around his neck, kissing him back. Malfoy had his other hand on the table, supporting them both as she clung and he kissed her, again and again, as if he did not need air, as her long red hair spilled onto and obscured the chessboard.

“Urgh!” Ron exploded, recovering his voice. “Urgh, what are you doing? Stop that at once!”

Neither of them paid an instant’s attention to him. Malfoy was the one slipping the tongue now, intent on the kiss, on the kiss-wet mouth Harry had thought was Ginny’s.

“Harry, stop staring like an idiot and help me make them *stop!*”

There was a piercing scream from behind them and everyone stopped what they were doing to look at the white, shocked face of the real Ginny.

“I’m *blind*,” she announced at last. “What is happening? Who are *you*?”

Pansy kept hold of Malfoy as if he might disappear again if she did not. “I’m Pansy Parkinson,” she said, smiling and shining, obviously not caring if a thousand Gryffindors felt personally violated.

“Why do you look like me?” Ginny demanded, through her teeth.

Pansy addressed Malfoy, explaining to him with the air of one who knew there were other people in the room but who was of the opinion they did not matter. “Well, you know how Millicent’s always had a thing for Zabini,” she said calmly.

Malfoy snorted. “Yeah, good luck there.”

“And he fancies Weasley a bit, so she got hold of some of her hair and mixed up a Polyjuice Potion, but then... well, you know...” Malfoy nodded. “So when I heard someone had seen you at the Weasley wedding - I bought it,” Pansy finished triumphantly. “Got a good price, too,” she added on a self-congratulatory note.

“That’s my girl,” Malfoy said, brushing a lock of hair from her face. He looked so happy. There were happy, cuddling Slytherins in the Weasleys’ kitchen.

“Oh stop, I can’t look,” Ron said pathetically.

Pansy and Malfoy exchanged a mutually delighted look. Then: “Pansy and I are going to take a walk,” Malfoy announced, and he put an arm around her waist and pulled her to his side, as she had nestled against Harry’s approximately five minutes before.

She looked so exactly like Ginny. He wanted to shout at her for that filthy, unnecessary impersonation and simultaneously strangle Malfoy for touching her.

“You’re not to leave the Burrow grounds,” Harry said, his voice scratching. “It mightn’t be safe.”

Malfoy gave him an odd glance, but only a glance. “All right,” he responded to the assembly at large and in a distant sort of way. Then, attached at the hip and possibly other places, he and Pansy went out into the front garden.

Charlie, Hermione and Mrs Weasley came in soon afterwards. Harry was already feeling too awful even to contemplate Mrs Weasley’s cheery glow.

“Where’s Draco?” Charlie asked, looking at Harry for some reason.

“Off with his girlfriend,” Ron said instantly. “She just arrived here, out of nowhere I might add, and she looked like Ginny, and they upset the chessboard-”

“I didn’t know Draco had a girlfriend,” Charlie said.

“How lovely,” remarked Mrs Weasley, and she meandered in a vague and yet quite fast sort of way to the windows, where she looked admiringly out at her own front garden. “Oh he *does*,” she said with obvious approval. “I’m so glad there are nice girls in the school who aren’t focused on looks. She’s got beautiful hair.”

“She’s Polyjuiced into me!” Ginny said in a dangerous tone.

“Well, you’ve got beautiful hair, my dear,” Mrs Weasley soothed her. “She Polyjuiced herself to get to Draco? I do think that’s romantic.”

“She’s always been *senseless* about Malfoy,” observed Hermione, who liked romance as much as the next person but who disliked Pansy Parkinson more than anyone else in the room.

“He’s never shown much interest in her,” Harry said. He coughed at Ron’s stare. “Well, apart from just now, obviously.”

Ginny went to get herself a glass of water, as if she could wash Pansy’s identical mouth clean if she just drank enough. Ron looked puzzled.

“What are you talking about, Harry? They’ve been going out for years, haven’t they? They - went to the Yule Ball together and stuff.”

“And you and Padma Patil are such a happy couple.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Boys. They never know anything. Well, in case anyone’s interested, Malfoy and Pansy have been going out since fourth year, but it’s sort of on-again, off-again. They were official for most of fifth year, but in sixth year Malfoy stopped seeing her and apart from a few rumours, mostly kept to himself. She went out with Theodore Nott a couple of times, but nobody thought she was over Malfoy, and now...”

“How do you know all this, Hermione?” Ron asked. “Is there a daily newsletter we’re not getting?”

There was the sound of another glass of water being filled. “Everybody knows this, Ron,” Ginny called from her position at the sink.

“All the *girls* know,” Ron insisted. “You’re communicating secretly. Probably in the girls’ loos.”

Mrs Weasley looked sharply around at her youngest son, and he went suddenly quiet on the subject of ladies’ bathrooms but kept on laying out his theory of a spy network that insured girls would always know everything and keep their knowledge secret for purposes of their

own.

Harry thought of secrecy, and was amazed at how stupid he was being. Of course. Malfoy was not going to keep secrets from his girl, not when he was off his head with joy because she had come searching for him. Harry had to hear what they were saying to each other.

While everyone was talking at once, he left quietly and went to get his Invisibility Cloak. Then he crept out a window, and towards the place in the front garden where Pansy sat on the fence, and Malfoy leaned with his arms crossed against her knees, and his head bowed over her lap. Harry walked softly and stood about a foot from them, trying to breathe quietly.

Pansy, still wearing Ginny's face, was caressing Malfoy's hair, the fine blond strands slipping through Ginny's fingers.

Malfoy was talking to her in a hoarse tumble of words, as if he had been talking a long time and would keep talking until he could only croak, and only then would he feel relieved. "-and I kept trying not to think about it, and then he was there, Fenrir Greyback, really there and he wasn't a name I could use, he was a killer and he likes - he wanted..." Harry stared at Malfoy's back as a shudder coursed through him. "He wouldn't care what side you were on, if the flesh was young. And I told myself not to think about it, I didn't let myself think that he might be there, and then he was there and it was all my fault!"

"Draco," Pansy murmured.

"No," Malfoy said urgently. "Don't. Don't forgive me, not without thinking about it. I let a werewolf into our school. You know how we talked about Lupin, about how Dumbledore - about how he put the whole school at risk. Lupin wasn't like that. Dumbledore didn't do that. *I* did that. And he could have killed you, he would've loved to kill you. What would you have thought of me, if he'd gotten into our common room and he'd ripped them all to shreds, the first years, everyone, and you were lying among their bodies still alive when he tore your throat out and at the same time he-"

"Stop it! I understand," Pansy said in a thin voice. She paused for a moment, her stolen face troubled, and then spoke again. "Draco. In those circumstances, it would hardly have mattered if I forgave you or not. But it didn't happen, did it? You didn't mean for it to happen, and it didn't. And I do forgive you." She looked down at him with a world of love in Ginny's eyes, and added: "It's not like you doing something stupid is a great surprise."

Malfoy laughed, a rough sound that hitched in his throat. "I'm trying to make up for it now," he said. "I really am. Professor Snape's helping me."

"Draco, forgive me, but isn't Professor Snape on the same side as Fenrir Greyback? I'm not saying that he eats children, though in the past he has looked tempted to bite off Longbottom's stupid fat head and spit it out. I'm not saying it's the wrong side either, but I thought-"

"The Dark Lord sent me off to fail," Malfoy told her flatly. "So he could kill me and my mother, so he could punish my father that way. Because he likes to see us suffer. Dumbledore wouldn't have cared much if we did, but he *wants* us to."

“So...” Pansy hesitated. “I’m with you,” she said at last. “No matter what, but... What are you going to do?”

“We have a plan,” Malfoy answered, and Harry tensed. “I can’t tell you,” Malfoy said, and Harry believed for a frustrated instant that Malfoy was being perverse on purpose. He lifted his face for a moment, and pressed his forehead against Pansy’s. “Last year, I never told you. I never told Crabbe or Goyle, even though I got them to help. It was - I kept realising how big it was, how serious it was, and I didn’t want you in that kind of trouble. I wanted all of you safe. I think I was right. If any of you had been out of the dungeons that night, I... Could you kill someone?”

“If I had to,” Pansy returned without a second thought, and Harry thought Malfoy might be doing that thing where men picked women who reminded them of their mothers.

“Someone helpless,” Malfoy said in a low voice. “Could you kill someone helpless?”

Pansy did pause then. “If they were threatening my family. If they were threatening you,” she said eventually. “Yes. I think I could.”

Malfoy dropped his face from contact with hers, and hung his head. His voice was almost too low to be heard.

“I couldn’t,” he told her. “Maybe I should have, to keep my mother safe. To keep myself safe, he even promised he’d get my father out, I should have done it for them but... I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have the guts to do it.”

Pansy let out a long dismayed breath, not quite a sigh. “Draco,” she said. “Oh, Draco.”

Tell him that it wouldn’t have been brave to kill Dumbledore, Harry demanded of her silently. Tell him he did the right thing!

She lifted his face with a finger, and dropped a kiss on his lips. Harry watched the uncertain smile blossom on his face.

“I didn’t think any of you would ever want anything to do with me again,” he confessed. “I thought - either you would hate me for bringing Fenrir to school, or you would hate me because I couldn’t do what the Dark Lord wanted. I thought - well, I mean, I knew none of you were there for that reason, but I’ve made a mess of everything. The Dark Lord wants to kill me and Father can’t be pleased with me. I don’t see any good way out of this for me, and - I wouldn’t have blamed you. I remember telling you about the Dark Lord’s plan for me on the train, when I still thought I could do it. When I thought it would be an *honour*. You seemed pretty impressed by it.”

“Silly fool,” Pansy said. “I wasn’t impressed by it. I was impressed by you.”

Malfoy laughed then, a little unsteadily. His face was growing brighter by the minute.

“This isn’t fair to you, of course,” he remarked. “You’re not thinking straight. You are in thrall to my fatal fascination, and making the worst mistake of your life.”

“Probably so.”

She agreed with the air of one humouring a child, and he laughed, tangled his fingers in her copper curls, and pulled her down for a long, slow kiss. Harry was completely humiliated to recognise it, and recognise that there was a difference: Malfoy was in charge of this one. He kissed her slowly, taking his time, savouring it. Between their slowly moving mouths Harry saw flashes of teeth and tongue. Malfoy parted from her with a last light set of his teeth into her lower lip.

“This is so weird,” he murmured, touching her hair and gesturing to her face.

Pansy looked wicked. “You think this is weird,” she said. “Guess what I had to do to get in. I expected the Burrow to be warded, I know some wards detect Polyjuice Potion, but almost all wards let people in if a member of the family invites them. So there I was, looking like Ginny Weasley, and there Potter was striding towards me doing his dour hero face-”

“Mm,” Malfoy nodded and set his mouth in a stern line, opening his eyes wide and fixing them very intensely on nothing. Harry was outraged when Pansy laughed in recognition.

“See, I didn’t know they split up,” she confided.

Malfoy’s mouth fell open. “You didn’t-!”

“I did. I snogged Potter thoroughly and I begged him to take me to bed. I wasn’t taking any chances on getting in to see you.”

Malfoy hid his face in his hands and muttered something about having already eaten the soap.

“Pardon?” Pansy said.

“Nothing,” Malfoy decided. “There but for the grace of Charles Weasley go I.”

“*Pardon?*”

“Nothing, nothing at all. I talk a lot of nonsense.”

“I did know that,” Pansy said, looking amused by him, looking love at him.

“At least I don’t do reckless things like you. Where would you have been, my girl, if I wasn’t there and you were stuck in the Weasley household having promised Potter filthy carnal pleasures?”

Pansy frowned. “Suppose I would’ve had to give them to him,” she concluded.

“I am shocked, shocked and betrayed.”

“Well, I would’ve been envied by hundreds of women,” Pansy mused. “Also, I could’ve sold the story to the *Daily Prophet*. Wonder what it would’ve been called?”

“How the Boy Who Lived Loves,” Malfoy suggested. “How the Chosen One Gave Me One.”

Pansy started to cackle. Malfoy maintained a straight face for about five seconds and then cracked up. Harry hated them both, but Malfoy the most. Possibly hatred was too weak a word.

“Pity he never played Chaser,” Malfoy said, falling about the place.

“Why?”

“Because - oh, God - because then they’d ask you if he gets it through the hoop every time!”

“That’s a dreadful thing to say. You’re a terrible human being.”

Malfoy made a very bad attempt at looking solemn. “Pansy, it is only because I respect you as a woman that I didn’t attempt a play on words using the word ‘Snitch’ and the term ‘sna-’”

Pansy hit him in the arm. “I take your point. No, Draco, please don’t make a joke about me taking Harry Potter’s point first. Please.”

“You have been soiled by Potter’s touch. You are dead to me, woman. We can never be intimate again,” said Malfoy, and kissed her three times in rapid succession. Once Pansy was out of breath, he said: “So Crabbe and Goyle-?”

“Have been worried *sick*,” Pansy told him. “And I doubt it’s because of your fatal fascination.”

“God forbid,” Malfoy said absently, at this point apparently unable to stop smiling. “And Zabini?”

“Well...” Pansy’s face fell, and the brightness of Malfoy’s face dimmed a fraction as he looked at her and saw his answer. “It’s just that - you know how close his mother is to your Aunt Bellatrix-”

“Yes. Of course. It’s OK,” Malfoy said. “Really, it is. Until about half an hour ago I was all alone in the world except for the kindness of Weasleys. I’m so ridiculously glad to see you, I’m making a show of myself.”

“I like the show,” Pansy said. “It’s the show of a lifetime. I want to buy tickets. Only - Draco, I assume since you’re not telling me much now, and you wouldn’t tell me much then, and last time you cut yourself off, that means we’re not exactly...”

Malfoy said, with difficulty, “I - No. Pansy, I can’t. And - it wasn’t only because of the going slowly insane from stress. I wanted to sort some things out. I want - I want to be fair to you.”

“I know that,” Pansy said. “Of course, I want to trap you into matrimony. I must have babies!” They laughed again, but Harry saw her clinging to him a little. “You’re my friend,” she said. “You know that. And maybe after all this is over, if you think you have things sorted out...”

“Maybe,” Malfoy breathed. “I’ll probably die in some completely shameful way, though.” He

paused, smiled and added: "Oh Pansy, it will be so mortifying."

"If you die," Pansy said, choking back either laughter or tears, "it's all off. You'll have to go back to your ghost girlfriend, d'you know she came into the Slytherin dungeons looking for you?"

"I will never know love like that again," Malfoy announced.

Then he kissed her and she looked at him, and kissing and looking were what they had been doing all this time but now it seemed edged with desperation.

"I'll have to go home soon," Pansy whispered. "Mum and Dad would kill me if they knew where I was."

She had both her arms around his neck now, really clinging, her forehead pressed against his again. He swung her off the fence into his arms and Harry saw her face as he turned her one last time, Ginny's face wearing such a look of pain, and he thought: what was it about Malfoy, stupid bratty Malfoy, that made Snape and Narcissa and now this girl Harry hardly knew love him so much? So achingly, stupidly much.

"Am I your illicit lover?" Malfoy whispered teasingly, and then saw her face too. He stopped teasing and kissed her again, mouths still brushing as they whispered to each other.

"Draco," she whispered.

"I want you to get out," Malfoy said in a low voice, coming out uneven and interrupted by kisses. "I want you and Crabbe and Goyle out. I don't want you in danger, you don't have anything to make up for. I want you to take them and run. I want you safe."

He touched Ginny's face again, eyes narrowed as if he was squinting past it, and he looked sure. He knew who she was.

"I want you safe," Malfoy said again in a thin, ferocious voice, as if saying it could make it so. "I want you safe."

Malfoy kissed her again and Harry watched the slide of his mouth on hers and thought he'd worked out what Malfoy had. He had *them*, these people that he loved, and it was sort of terrible. Because Malfoy's father could be - all that he was, and Pansy could have turned her back on him forever, and it would not have made any difference to Malfoy. Harry had never thought about Malfoy in connection with love before, but it was so obvious.

Pansy was making soft, low sounds and moving, and Malfoy stood kissing the lips Harry had kissed less than an hour ago, lips that didn't belong to Pansy, but he knew who he was holding and who he wanted to keep safe. Harry looked at him, at his intent face as he kissed her, and at his hands. He had one hand around Pansy's arm, tight enough to bruise, and the other hand clenched tight in her hair and he seemed sure, he seemed insistent, as if once he had you he would hold on with teeth and claws and love, and he would never let go.

The sun was setting, sinking in air turned red, and the light made Pansy's borrowed hair crimson and Malfoy's pale hand in her hair even paler, and soon she would have to go.

Harry stayed.

*

Malfoy did not stay downstairs once Pansy had gone. He went up without dinner, muttering something vague about clocks. Hermione patted Harry's hand in an abstracted yet comforting fashion.

"Only two weeks until full moon," she said. "Then we can pick the foxglove - I think we're going to have to buy the pixie eggs in Diagon Alley, though... Still. Two weeks, maybe three, and we'll have our Veritaserum."

"Your what?" asked Ginny, who was playing Exploding Snap on the carpet with Charlie.

Harry pictured her sitting with Malfoy the night before, and when Hermione opened her mouth to reply he said: "It's not important."

He avoided Hermione's reproachful gaze and started to read another book about ways of unlocking chains. He spent ten minutes staring at a passage about how to unlock magical chastity belts before he realised, and then thought that perhaps he should go to bed.

He was in the camp bed all of two minutes before he realised that the stupid scratchy sheets were not stupid and scratchy, it was just him again, itching for something to do. Something was bothering him, something particular, niggling at the back of his mind and speaking in Malfoy's voice.

I do not find your and the Weasley twins' practical jokes very funny

Potter's playing tricks again, he and your brothers think they're terribly amusing

Is this your really twisted idea of another joke, Potter, or are the twins back?

God! Harry bolted out of bed, found a T-shirt and almost ran to Charlie and Malfoy's room. Then he banged on the door.

Malfoy opened the door, heavy-eyed and red-mouthed and not looking like someone who was conscientiously mending clocks. "What?" he bit out.

"I didn't know about that Love Potion," Harry said in a rush. "How could you *think* that?"

Malfoy blinked, pulled himself together and managed a sleepy sneer. "I don't know. Perhaps I'm insane," he suggested in an eerily calm sort of way. "I keep having hallucinations about you pulling pranks on me. One of them involved a lot of mud and your enormous floaty head."

"All right. Yes. I did that, but you deserved it-"

Malfoy's lip curled. "Oh, I always deserve it. I wonder how your type would vent all their raging aggression if people like me didn't come around and deserve it."

“My *type*?” Harry demanded. “The type who plays pranks? What d’you call dressing up in Dementor robes at a Quidditch match?”

“Cheating,” Malfoy said, as if Harry was a little dense. “Also, I thought it would be funny.”

“The mud throwing was meant to be funny! Dementors aren’t funny.”

“Attacking ghosts aren’t a laugh a minute!”

“I wasn’t attacking you!” Harry shouted.

“Guess what, I wasn’t actually a Dementor!” Malfoy yelled.

Harry pushed his hair roughly out of his eyes, trying to occupy his hands so he would not throttle Malfoy. “Well, fine, what part of your vast experience of *my type* made you think that I’d find it hilarious to be molested in a kitchen?”

“Molested, pfft! If you think that was being molested, you need to find someone who does it properly. I bet you found all those pathetic, stupid things I was saying funny-”

Harry was still amazed and insulted by Malfoy making a funny scornful sound about Harry’s trauma, but he did his best. “You’re worried about something you *said*? I don’t even remember what you said!”

Malfoy was entirely awake by now, colour rising in his cheeks and eyes wide. He tensed and Harry, staring angrily into his cold eyes, actually saw something in there snap.

“I’m not worried,” Malfoy snarled. “I’m *furious*! They turned me into a cringing, whining little crawler to all things Potter for a joke and it makes me feel actually sick to think of the things I said. Oh, you must hate me, Harry!” he said in a savage falsetto. “Oh, all the things I’ve done! Can you forgive me? What have *you* got to forgive me for?”

“Where to start?” Harry said. “But I did, I did forgive you!” *So there, Malfoy.*

Malfoy’s shoulders bunched as if he was about to leap. “I don’t want your forgiveness,” he said in a dangerous voice. “I don’t want the patronising scraps you throw to those who fall into line. I don’t want you to tell me everything’s going to be all right. You don’t hate me? Well, I hate you!”

Harry went for his wand at the same instant Malfoy did, he could have sworn he did, but for some reason Malfoy was ready first. He pointed the wand, didn’t speak: and Harry felt his skin rip apart into a cut on his face.

“Spell’s familiar, isn’t it?” Malfoy inquired, chest rising and falling hard. “Snape taught me how to control it, but you don’t know how, do you? All you know is how to rip a bloody great hole in someone!”

Harry realised that he didn’t actually want to hurt Malfoy too badly. He didn’t want anything like the sickening remorse of last time, he didn’t want - as he hadn’t wanted on the Quidditch

pitch in fifth year - the clinical distance of wands. He simply wanted to get his hands on Malfoy and make him sorry.

"The hell with it," he said, then threw his wand down and hit Malfoy in the mouth.

Malfoy's head snapped back, blood vivid in the corner of his mouth, and then he straightened, breathing harder than ever and now bleeding. Harry felt the slide of blood down his own face as Malfoy lifted his wand hand to his mouth, touching his knuckles to the cut and then licking the drop of blood off his hand.

"Fine," he said, sneering bloodily. He opened his hand and let the wand tumble to the floor. "Let's see how good you are when George Weasley isn't *sitting on top of me!*"

Harry didn't get a chance to retort because Malfoy's fist connected with his already bloody cheekbone, going for a weak point as the little bastard always did. When Harry reeled back Malfoy threw himself bodily at him, catching him full in the chest with a bony shoulder.

Harry got a blow to the head when he hit the ground, and landed with Malfoy on top of him and Malfoy grabbed his shirt to keep him in place as he swung a leg over, sitting astride his chest. Harry's vision was blurry for a moment, and then the vague brightness coalesced into Malfoy's narrow-eyed face with the light behind it.

"I hate you," Malfoy panted, and spat a mouthful of blood on Harry's face.

Harry grabbed Malfoy's swinging locket and twisted it into a choke chain, pulling Malfoy's head forward and then throwing him down and punching him in the stomach. He avoided Malfoy's next swing as he rolled over onto him in a tangle of legs and fury, and felt his mouth curl.

"I don't hate you," he said. "You're not even worth hating." He heard steps on the stairs then, fought down panic over getting caught and frustration over being stopped, and scrambled to his feet, pushing Malfoy as he did so, his cut knuckles scraping against Malfoy's jeans. "Why don't you stay down," he added.

Malfoy sat up at once, his eyes glittering, and hissed: "Dumbledore was a stupid old man."

Harry did not know what he was doing except for raging during a few white-hot instants, but in them he must have pulled Malfoy to his feet and thrown him against the wall because the next thing he knew, really knew, was Malfoy's face close to his and Malfoy's chain wrapped around Harry's hand tight enough to break. Only it wouldn't break, it was the enchanted locket, the one Dumbledore had died for, the one that even cutting into Harry's palm was completely out of reach because *Malfoy was keeping it from him*.

"Say that again," Harry snarled into Malfoy's face, wrapping the chain tighter around his wrist and pulling that face closer.

Malfoy shoved him with both hands, even though Harry's hold on the chain meant Malfoy had to go with him when he fell back.

"He was a *stupid* old man," he shouted obligingly, and the muffled gasp and drum of feet on

the stairs might as well have been in another world for all that Harry cared when Malfoy was inches away, his mouth deliberately shaping every unforgivable word. "He was so stupid for all his cunning," Malfoy went on, eyes as bright as if he had fever. "He never told anyone what was happening, he stole House Cups and he hired werewolves and school was always full of dangers and he never gave us any answers. He was a stupid, blind old man and I was afraid of him and I never liked him and I thought it would be easy!"

The whispers and calls below and the sound of more feet on the stairs had little meaning except for the fact that Harry was now going to have to kill Malfoy in front of witnesses.

"He was a great man!" Harry shouted.

"He was a bloody terrible headmaster!" Malfoy shouted back. "He had no right to keep everything from us, to hire half-giants to terrorise us, to treat the whole school like it was the setting for a little game. He was stupid and now he's dead and I still think about the stupid things he said about Mudbloods, he was stupid and I hated him and I hate knowing that in spite of all the stupid things I hated him for he *didn't deserve to die!*"

"He wouldn't have if you hadn't let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"I know that!" Malfoy screamed in his face. "I know that and I'm sorry. I'm sorry he's dead. I never thought about what death was and now I think about it all the time and I almost killed Weasley too, fine, I did and I'm sorry about that as well!"

He shouted this in the direction of the stairs and when he looked Harry was able to look too, and see Ron at the top of the stairs with Hermione holding him back and Ginny trying to wrestle her mother back down the stairs before she really saw anything. Ron looked badly startled and as if he wished Malfoy would leave him out of this.

Harry twisted the chain and Malfoy's eyes snapped back to his.

"I'm sorry about Weasley, and I'm sorry about Katie Bell," Malfoy continued remorselessly, his voice rough from screaming. "I wanted revenge and I didn't think killing would be like that and that doesn't make up for anything. I know what I've done, and I know I can't apologise for it and *you* certainly can't forgive me for it, you patronising bastard."

He pushed his face closer to Harry's so the chain actually went slack around Harry's hand, and Malfoy put up his own hand, untangling it from around Harry's fingers, as he went on speaking.

"I don't know why you think I should apologise to you," he said. "I don't know what I did to make you so angry. But whatever it was, Potter, whatever terrible thing I did to you, I just wish I'd done it harder, and longer, and worse!"

He whirled away, breaking from the hold Harry had on him, fingernails scraping Harry's palm as he pulled the chain free. Then he stormed into his room and slammed the door shut with an almighty crash.

Harry became abruptly aware again of all the people staring at him on the stairs.

Chapter Seven

"I don't give a damn who started it," Hermione had said. When Harry began to protest she held up a hand and continued sharply "*although* I noticed it was you standing at Malfoy's door and not the other way around. I don't care. This is the Weasleys' home!"

Harry was tired of arguing that it had been all stupid Malfoy's stupid fault and that he'd insulted Dumbledore. His face was aching where Malfoy had cut him, he was still embarrassed by the way everyone had stared at him as if he was a crazy person, and Hermione had been reading him a lecture on the correct behaviour of guests for what felt like years.

"What do you want me to do, then?" he'd asked, and she'd looked thoughtful.

"Since you're up, you could collect the books from the library that Ron and I weren't been able to bring back. There were a lot of them, you know, and I do not particularly fancy facing Madam Pince again after you threatened to set fire to the library."

"Hermione, it's the middle of the night-"

"Just like it was when you went to get Malfoy from Snape's house, then. Only this time what you bring back won't be keeping us all up. Just go, Harry. Let everyone have some peace and quiet."

So Harry'd gone. He'd Apparated and stamped through the darkness of Hogwarts grounds and collected a bulging sack of those stupid books and wondered why Hermione had turned on him, aside from the fact she had apparently been immersed in extraordinarily interesting footnotes when the yelling started.

By the time he returned home, the sky was turning a paler blue by the second, and Harry made himself tea instead of going to bed. He rummaged through the sack of books and, failing to find anything called *How to Get Your Horcrux Off the Most Annoying Neck in the World*, selected one at random and started flipping through.

Hermione came down the stairs soon after. Harry hadn't realised that books actually called to her in her sleep.

The soothing sight of new books seemed to mean all was forgiven. "Ooh, thanks, Harry," she said, pouring herself a cup of tea. "Oh - I didn't even notice that last night, Harry, you should've said something. Have you lost much blood?" He stared at her, uncomprehending, and then realised what she was on about as she took his chin in one hand and healed his cheek. "Malfoy had no right to do that," she went on disapprovingly. "A cutting spell can get right out of-"

She stopped abruptly and then, with unusual tact for Hermione, went and made toast.

Harry had known that both food and Hermione called to Ron in his sleep, and was not overly surprised when he staggered down in his pyjamas, in time to grab the first lot and start liberally applying marmalade.

"So how about last night?" Ron asked. "Can you believe it? Draco Malfoy apologising to me. To *me*!"

Harry put his knife through his toast and then spoke through his teeth. "He owed you an apology."

"Well, yeah, but I didn't expect him to say it, all the same." Ron frowned at his marmalade. "I'd've thought he'd find it too humiliating, or something."

"Well, feeling humiliated about being sorry just shows what a stupid, arrogant prat he is!"

"That's my point," said Ron. "He *is* a stupid, arrogant prat. I don't think he'd apologise unless he was really sorry, and if he's really sorry then he's probably not working for You-Know-Who. I mean... d'you think he is?"

Harry looked at his cup of tea rather than Ron, and thought of Malfoy shouting *I thought it would be easy!*

He cleared his throat. "No," he said after a moment. "No, I don't."

"So if he's on our side," Ron pursued, "can't we just ask him what's going on without fiddling around with Veritaserum and stuff?"

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it again, searching for a way to say that it was easier to be sympathetic towards Malfoy when he wasn't in the room without making it sound like Harry was making decisions based on how much he was annoyed by Malfoy's face.

"Ron, don't be absurd," Hermione said briskly. "Harry found Malfoy at Professor - at Snape's house. Even if Malfoy is on our side, and I'd be much more inclined to believe he's just trying to save his own neck any way he can, he obviously trusts Snape. He let Snape lock the Horcrux round his neck, and he will keep Snape's secrets from us. And we need to know what Snape is planning."

Harry thought of Malfoy in the garden yesterday, in the gathering dusk with his forehead pressed against that of someone who looked like Ginny, his swollen mouth brushing her skin. *I'm trying to make up for it now. I really am. Professor Snape's helping me.*

Snape, who had murdered Dumbledore. He had to be found out and stopped and punished, and perhaps once he was out of the picture Malfoy would turn to the right side for help.

They all heard Malfoy's voice on the stairs, which cut off any Malfoy-related conversation abruptly and sent them to their books. "Charles, I don't want to, stop *coercing* me."

Harry kept his eyes fixed on *Chapter Four: When You Really Want In and Alohomora Just Won't Cut It* for all of three seconds after the door opened and Malfoy and Charlie came in. Charlie had hold of Malfoy's shoulders and was pushing him forward. Malfoy was rubbing his eyes, looking sleepy and cross.

"Draco, I thought you loved Bessie. I can't keep her here, I'm going for the job interview this morning and I won't be able to take care of her if I get it. I'm sending her back this morning.

Don't you care enough to say goodbye?"

Charlie sounded amused. Malfoy gave him a filthy look and wandered over to the coffee pot. "I hate whoever made tea and not coffee," he announced in a hollow voice. "*Hate them.*"

"So nothing new there then," Harry snapped.

Malfoy glanced over his shoulder at him, and then looked immediately away. He'd only been in the room two minutes and already Harry's whole body was thrumming with irritation and he was ready to believe Malfoy had inveigled his way in there to spy for Voldemort.

"Bessie will think all your sweet words meant nothing," Charlie said mournfully.

"You're just a great big bully," Malfoy informed him severely, fetching cups for the coffee. "Bessie knows how I feel. We have something between us, Charles, something wonderful. I call it the window. I want to keep it between us."

Harry shut his book and went over to get himself a fresh cup of tea. "He means that he's scared."

When Malfoy scowled Harry saw the cut at the corner of his mouth, left unhealed. "I'm not scared!" He looked at Charlie, and the scowl slipped away. "I can't go out there. I'll be cold," he announced plaintively. "I have to stay inside in case I catch a chill and die."

Charlie snorted. "Oh, you poor little thing."

How was anyone supposed to find the sugar for a simple cup of tea with Malfoy leaning all over the kitchen surfaces and trying to win over the Weasleys one by one with his horrible wheedling smiles?

"I'm a delicately nurtured soul," Malfoy claimed. "Particularly subject to chills."

"Fine," said Charlie, and grabbed the front of his own jumper. His red head disappeared for a moment, and then emerged as he pulled the jumper all the way off. Harry was a bit taken aback when a good section of broad back was suddenly on show in the kitchen, but then thin material tumbled back down and he saw Charlie was wearing a T-shirt after all. "There," Charlie said to an equally taken-aback Malfoy. "Now you'll be warm."

"Ah... all right, then," Malfoy said, accepting it and then smiling again. "But I still think you're a bully."

He struggled into the jumper and came out ruffled and flushed and looking just as stupid as Harry would've expected Malfoy to look in a Weasley jumper. Charlie was actually shorter than Malfoy, but he had the arms and shoulders of someone who bossed around dragons for a living and Malfoy's hands were lost in his sleeves.

"Suits you," Charlie remarked. "C'mon, let's-"

He was cut off by the sound of a door opening.

"Charlie, stop right there!" Ginny exclaimed. "Why did Mum have to tell me you were going for an interview? What's genealogy? Isn't it to do with books, Charlie, you'll be rotten at it-"

"It's helping with dragon pedigrees for the Cave to Kennel Association, Ginny, I do need a job-"

"It's still books, Charlie, and you hate books-"

Charlie and Ginny launched into a loud discussion about Charlie's aptitude for books, Charlie's stubbornness, and the insulting attitude of some know-it-all little sisters.

Malfoy grabbed the sugar from the shelf over his head.

"I need that," Harry said.

Malfoy slammed the cupboard door and did not look in the least inclined to hand it over. "It astonishes me how very pathetic you are."

"I'm not interested in your opinion of me, *actually*."

Malfoy opened another cupboard door purely, it seemed, so he could slam it closed again. "Of course you're not," he said, opening and slamming more cupboard doors. "I'm Harry Potter," he said in a falsetto voice. "I'm always right and pure and virtuous and too marvellous to even brush my hair in the morning!"

"I brush my hair every morning!" Harry said, and then realised that was not a retort calculated to wound Malfoy to the quick. "I'm so sick of you."

Malfoy slammed yet another cupboard door. "I'm so sick of this!"

"I think we should go see Bessie now," Charlie interposed. "Coming, Draco? Ginny?"

Malfoy threw the sugar at Harry's face. Harry caught it easily, but Malfoy had already turned away and did not see. Ginny left the door open and they were all treated to the sight of Bessie's scaly bulk moving in the garden, and the three figures moving towards her. Harry noticed Malfoy's head bent to Ginny's, murmuring something, and heard her laugh.

Harry was pleased to note that Ron was also moved to glower at them. "I keep thinking about him kissing her," Ron confided darkly to the table at large. "It was horrible. It - I hope Charlie keeps an eye on him in case he tries anything."

"Oh honestly," Hermione said. "If Malfoy tried anything Ginny would hex important things off him. Leaving aside the fact they both fancy other people, he's not her type."

"Not sure Ginny has a type. Not like you, with your *really good Quidditch players*." Ron put down his knife and got marmalade all over the table as a horrible thought clearly struck him. "Hermione, you don't-"

"No I don't!" Hermione yelped. "Ron, sometimes I think you must be going mad."

Ron looked pleased.

Hermione laughed. "If I really did fancy Quidditch players then I'd fancy Harry, wouldn't I?"

"Oi," Harry said, coming over with the tea. "It's been a long hard day already, and it's not even nine yet. Don't pour scorn on my manly charms until lunchtime."

Hermione snorted at him and Harry sat down, trying to find the place he'd reached in the book before Malfoy interrupted.

"You did say Harry was fanciable," Ron remarked, giving Harry a look full of dark suspicion.

"But I don't *fancy him*," Hermione said in an exasperated tone. "He's got the same problem as Malfoy. He's too skinny." She grinned and then added hastily: "Of course you're better-looking than Malfoy, Harry."

"Um," said Harry. "Thanks."

"I think I look quite well-fed," Ron put in, his face hopeful. "Sturdy, you might say."

"Mmm," replied Hermione, who had returned to her book with a little smile.

Harry rolled his eyes at both of them and turned a page. He would've been able to concentrate on his book much better if Ginny hadn't gone and left the door open, which he considered thoughtless. He could see, in the darkness of early morning, Malfoy reaching up to pat the dragon's neck. He didn't want to think about Malfoy not being on Voldemort's side, or feeling guilty when he wouldn't say sorry, or anything like that. He did not want to think about Malfoy's pain. All he'd ever wanted was for Malfoy to get expelled and move to Tahiti or something.

"There, there, who's a good great big enormous girl!" he heard Malfoy say. "Been a touch over-generous with the dragon feed, have we, Charles?"

"She can hear you! You're giving her a complex!"

They clattered in laughing, the crisp morning air spreading rose colour over Ginny's face and turning the end of Malfoy's nose pink.

"No wonder Hippogriffs slash you if that's how you talk to them," Ginny remarked as they came in, in far too friendly a tone for Harry's liking. "Sugar in my coffee, please."

"Can we not bring up Care of Murderous Creatures?"

"Care of Magical Creatures," Harry put in.

Malfoy didn't even turn around. "That's what I said. It was all that gigantic oaf's fault-"

"Don't talk about Hagrid that way," Charlie chided. "He's a good guy, even if he is completely mental, and you should know at your age that Hippogriffs are bizarrely touchy."

"I was *thirteen*," Malfoy snapped, "and people who are completely mental should not be teaching class!"

Charlie blinked. "Thirteen's a bit young to be thrown in with Hippogriffs, all right-"

Malfoy shrugged one-shouldered and handed Ginny her coffee. Harry watched her smile at Malfoy, and watched Malfoy smile quickly back.

He was grateful when Mrs Weasley came downstairs, though her motivation seemed to be more feeding the masses and giving Charlie extra muffins for luck than separating her youngest born from boys with dubious morals.

Mrs Weasley, Ginny and Malfoy all went to the back door with Charlie when it was time for him to go. Ginny and Mrs Weasley kissed him: Harry supposed he should be thankful Malfoy's sucking up did not go that far.

"Good luck," Malfoy said instead, leaning against the door frame. Charlie smiled at him, and Malfoy stayed on the doorstep with the others as Charlie and Bessie lifted off, her wings filling the garden and his red hair catching the sun, and flew away.

*

Harry did not care if Malfoy wasn't on Voldemort's side. He didn't care if Malfoy wanted to save the Muggleborn and spend his life caring for abandoned puppies. He was going to die of hate.

They all had to research and Charlie was gone, so Ginny and Malfoy were doing *stuff* together. On their *own*.

All right, they were playing card games in the same room as everyone else, but still. Harry had seen Malfoy kiss Ginny's *mouth* yesterday, seen his hands move on her body, and heard Ginny's voice making sounds in Malfoy's ear. It didn't help that when he shut his eyes he saw that, and when he opened his eyes he saw Ginny's hand slap down on top of Malfoy's.

"Snap!"

Harry was pretty sure he was going to.

He'd had someone he thought was Ginny making sounds in his ear yesterday as well, which did not help matters at all. He was tired and angry and the book wasn't giving him any answers, it was all utterly frustrating.

As if the situation wasn't bad enough already, Malfoy had the locket out. He was playing cards with Harry's girlfriend and he had the Horcrux Harry needed out, the locket in the hollow of his palm, the chain escaped from the collar of his shirt, lying gleaming and exposed against his neck. His head was tilted towards Ginny so one side of his neck was *exposed*, the gold links taut against his skin and then tangled around his restless fingers. He was *used* to having the Horcrux Harry needed to destroy Voldemort around his neck, comfortable enough to *play* with it, and Harry just - all Harry wanted was to...

"Harry? *Harry!*" Hermione yelled in his ear.

Harry blinked. "Um?"

"God, you must be tired. Do you want another cup of tea?"

"Tea. Er. Tea. Yes, please." Harry looked back, under cover of studying his book. Ginny had dropped the cards and was stooping to pick them up, and Malfoy had let go of the Horcrux. The locket had been slipped back inside his shirt, and lay half-concealed in the shadow of his collar. Malfoy was looking at Harry with narrowed eyes.

Harry looked back at his book. He strained to hear what Malfoy was saying, but all he caught was the sound of his voice murmuring, and the flash of his teeth when Ginny nodded and Malfoy smiled. They got up and went out.

Harry gritted his teeth and read. By the time he was through two books he had also been through eight cups of tea and it was lunchtime. Mrs Weasley had waited lunch for Charlie, and Malfoy and Ginny had been outside alone for hours.

"I'll get Ginny!" Harry exclaimed, standing up as soon as Charlie came in. Ron and Hermione stared at him and he added, "For *lunch*."

Hermione opened her mouth, but he was out the door before she could speak and into a garden that looked strangely empty without the scaly presence of Bessie.

Malfoy and Ginny were standing under a tree, looking at each other. The wind was whipping Ginny's hair around her face, but she didn't even seem to notice. They were both tense, staring at each other intently, hands outreached.

Malfoy's hand opened and released a Snitch.

Harry's small sound of surprise caught Malfoy's attention, and as his eyes met Harry's Ginny made a leap for the Snitch and caught it in both hands.

"*Aha!*" she exclaimed. "I am the Supreme Quidditch Mistress!" Malfoy nodded towards Harry and Ginny turned, flashing him a smile. "Harry! I won, did you see?"

"It's now fourteen thirty-two to me," Malfoy drawled. "Imagine how crushed I am. She'd be quite good with a bit more practise, though."

Ginny laughed, turning back to Malfoy, and said: "Quite good? I'll show you how good I am, Malfoy-"

"With Potter right here?" Malfoy asked in a dramatic, conspiratorial whisper. "*Scandalous!*"

Ginny was just laughing, but his eyes slid towards Harry with a sort of absent-minded malice. That was what worried Harry - not Malfoy being malicious, which was familiar and felt almost reassuring directed towards Harry - but the fact malice seemed to be a side issue. Malfoy's eyes shifted away, fixed intently on the Snitch, or perhaps just on Ginny.

Harry felt an urge to snap his fingers in Malfoy's face so Malfoy would look at him and away from Ginny before Harry punched him.

"It's *lunch time*," he said warningly.

"This one counts for all," Ginny declared.

She and Malfoy stared at each other, the wind dropping as if to give them privacy. Malfoy smiled and Ginny's hand opened, the Snitch bursting out into the air.

Harry moved forward and grabbed it. That had always been easy for him, just a matter of speed and control and taking something for his own, leaving everyone else standing with their hands empty.

He stood, breathing a little harder, and saw they were both looking at him. Ginny stared at him for a moment, and he could not quite read the expression in her brown eyes, but it chased all the triumph from his chest. He was left empty, and she walked away.

Anger filled the void at the sharp, deliberate slam of Malfoy's shoulder against his. He looked into Malfoy's cold eyes.

"Nobody invited you to play," Malfoy informed him, and then stormed off after Ginny.

Harry looked at the gold gleaming in his hand, so easily caught, and then at the gold visible at the nape of Malfoy's neck. He blinked, feeling the tired burn behind his eyelids, and then tried to catch up.

*

If Ginny had been angry with him, it did not last. He smiled and passed her bread she didn't want, and she smiled and took it. He looked at her smile, tried to memorise it: it *did* look different from the smile Pansy had worn on Ginny's lips, just before Malfoy kissed her.

"-can't see why you were so late," Mrs Weasley's voice came through to him, fondly chiding. "What were you doing?"

Harry looked away from Ginny at once when Charlie answered, caught by the edge to his voice.

"I was seeing Percy, actually," Charlie said. "Remember Percy?"

Harry looked around the table and saw Mr Weasley, his face very still, and Ron and Hermione with their arms pushed together for comfort. Malfoy had taken his usual place next to Charlie, and he looked trapped, and something about the set of Charlie's shoulders made Charlie look even bigger than normal, and almost menacing.

Ginny dashed in where others feared to tread. "Of course, we remember him arriving on Christmas Day, to use us because the precious Minister told him to!"

"I'm sure you remember throwing food at him as well!" Charlie said, and the edge to his

voice grew sharper, closer to a shout.

"Could I have the salt?" Malfoy burst out, looking hunted to the point of trying to turn the conversation from quarrelling to condiments.

"Could you be quiet?" Charlie snapped. "Not everything has to be about Draco Malfoy all the time!"

Malfoy looked at his plate and said, "Right," in a very low, careful voice. On an impulse Harry pushed the salt towards him and Malfoy took it, without looking up to see who had given it to him.

"I know he's being a prat!" Charlie continued savagely. "I know he shouldn't have shown up at our door just for the Minister, I know he should've believed us about You-Know-Who. But I'm sick of pretending that all the fault lies with him and none of it with Dad!"

"D'you want to go play catch the Snitch?" Harry asked Ginny in a low voice. She nodded with a swift bright smile. He got up and said, "Thanks for lunch, Mrs Weasley, it was really-"

"Don't lay this on your father!"

"He said Percy was being used to spy on us! Well, Percy didn't get fired when he turned away from all of us, did he?"

Hermione coughed and said: "Charlie, how did the interview go?"

Harry could see she thought this was a tactful intervention. It was amazing, the way Hermione's intelligence sometimes just failed her.

"Actually," Charlie said between his teeth, "I didn't get it. Scrimgeour and his people have apparently spread the word that I am not sympathetic to the war effort. Thanks for asking," he said, biting off every word as if he had a personal grudge against each one.

Hermione looked horrified. "I think I'll - I think I'll take a book and catch some air outside with Harry and Ginny," she announced in a small voice.

"I'll come with you," Ron told her, getting up and putting his body between her and Charlie's glare. "C'mon, let's all..."

While they were escaping, Harry felt a moment's compunction. Malfoy looked as if he wished his plate would eat him and save him from the embarrassment of a family not his own fighting around him, and Harry thought - he thought Ginny might ask Malfoy along. Since she seemed to enjoy his company so much. Ginny, however, was giving Hermione and Ron a speaking look, as if she was indignant about them coming along and not inclined to invite anyone else.

After a moment, Harry pushed the thought irritably away. It wasn't like he was keen on Malfoy's company.

They all went out, the door shutting fast against Charlie's shout of "Percy is *bloody good* at

his job-

Ron took off his jumper and put it on the grass for him and Hermione to sit on. Given the relative size of his jumper, this necessitated sitting rather close together. Harry had a suspicion that Ron was not going to get much reading done, and that the wind was not solely responsible for the colour in Hermione's cheeks.

Harry caught the Snitch twenty times in a row. The twenty-first time, Ginny put her head to one side and said: "What do I have to do to win here?" and Harry had a terribly unfortunate memory of Pansy's - Ginny's - *Pansy's* back arching under his hands, and then a sudden dreadful moment when he was not sure whether those had been his hands or Malfoy's.

Ginny caught the Snitch easily that time. Harry blinked at her, remembering yesterday's sunset and the exact feel of her body pressed against his palms - surely they had been - He pinched the skin between his eyebrows, feeling suddenly even more tired.

"I'd - we'd better all go in. I need to get a book too."

"Sore loser, are we?" Ginny's smile invited one back and he gave her the best he could.

"Just letting you enjoy your one victory."

"You're no fun," she grumbled. He shrugged, giving her a more genuine and unrepentant grin, and made for the house. He saw Ginny go over to Ron and Hermione, displaying her Snitch, and he shook his head in amusement as he opened the door and went into the kitchen.

There were no raised voices now, just Malfoy's voice saying on rather a high note, "Mrs Weasley, someone is going to come *in*-"

Malfoy was almost at the kitchen door, leaning against the draining board with his arms stretched along it, one hand clasping a cup of coffee. He was half naked.

Harry wished things like this would stop happening in the kitchen, or it would be utterly ruined for him.

"Now, Draco, you can't keep Scourgifying this shirt," Mrs Weasley told him, looking pleased to have something to do. "*Scourgify* is very hard on clothes, you know. Look, these shirt cuffs are all frayed already, tch, this really isn't very good material-"

"It's *fine*-"

"You'll get a lovely lemony smell with better cleaning spells, too," Mrs Weasley went on happily.

Hermione had been right, Harry thought with a bizarre sense of dispassion. Malfoy *was* a skinny bastard. Harry could count every one of his ribs, they looked like he could've played the xylophone on them if he had reached out and touched them. Malfoy's spine stuck out as well, a distinct line running from the nape of his neck where chain and fine hairs glittered, between shoulders more powerful than Harry would have expected, to the point where his jeans began. Perhaps it was good he was staying at the Burrow, at least Mrs Weasley would

feed him...

Malfoy must have noticed the cold air from the open door at last, because he cast Harry a wintry look over his shoulder.

"Oh, *perfect*," he said. "Do you *mind*?"

"Oh - sorry," said Harry, shutting the door behind him. Malfoy, unreasonably, looked even more annoyed.

"Are you *done yet*?" he asked Mrs Weasley, who smiled at him indulgently and shook out the flannel shirt.

"Here you go," she replied, and held it out for him.

There was a strange, still pause. Malfoy did not move.

Harry abruptly realised why. Mrs Weasley must have given him the coffee, and Malfoy must've accepted it with his right hand without thinking, but now Malfoy was frozen, not wanting to switch the coffee to his left hand in case she wondered why, and not wanting to reach out with his left hand... because he did not want Mrs Weasley to see the Dark Mark.

Harry reached out before he knew what he was doing, and took the shirt from Mrs Weasley's hands.

She was looking at him oddly now, and he said: "Um - you were right, Mrs Weasley, you really can tell the difference. It does have a lovely, lemony smell!"

Mrs Weasley looked gratified. Malfoy looked around over his shoulder as if he was utterly amazed that it was still Harry Potter standing behind him, and Harry had a brief moment of satisfaction that at last Malfoy knew he had something to be grateful to Harry for.

Only Malfoy had turned a little to look at him, and Mrs Weasley's eyes suddenly fixed on him.

"Draco," she said, her voice suddenly very sharp. "Draco, you can tell me - who did that to your chest? Was it your father?"

"No-" Malfoy answered automatically, and then in an angrier voice, "*No*, of course not! It was-" he stopped for the briefest of moments, and then continued smoothly on: "It was a helicopter," he said firmly. "I was about ten and I was flying over the moors on my new broom, which I wasn't technically as such allowed to do, and then out of nowhere there was this enormous Muggle thing with - well, they're called choppers and they're kept up with blades, so you can imagine what happened. There was a terrible collision. And I have this scar now," he concluded, and anyone not listening as closely as Harry would have been sure there was some connection between the two sentences.

"Well! You poor thing," Mrs Weasley commiserated at once. "Nasty Muggle machines - I suppose they're run on that filthy stuff called *oil*, aren't they, did that get in the wound?"

"May...be," Malfoy answered slowly.

"I should tell Arthur to put another lock on the shed door immediately," Mrs Weasley said, looking haunted by thoughts of her children being scarred with blades and oil. "Excuse me, boys-"

Harry and Malfoy were left alone in the kitchen, and Malfoy turned on him with a cold look that let Harry know in no uncertain terms that the only reason Malfoy had shielded him was because Malfoy never wanted to owe him anything at all.

"We're even," Malfoy informed him.

Harry said: "Oh my God, Malfoy."

Malfoy tried to step back and was stopped by the draining board. "What are you - do not *touch* me, Potter!"

Harry kept a hard grip on Malfoy's shoulder. He'd seen some of it in Snape's house when Malfoy unbuttoned his shirt, but he hadn't - he'd been taken aback and furious and he hadn't imagined, he hadn't *thought*.

The scar started just above the hollow of Malfoy's throat, and then followed the dip as if tracing it. Then it cut a jagged path across his chest, a slash written on the left because Harry held his wand in his right hand. Malfoy's chest was pale as the rest of him, pale as if not even the sun had ever touched him, and the raised, silvery ridge of the scar looked obscene carved onto his skin. It looked as if someone had tried to cut out Malfoy's heart.

Harry found his throat dry. "Malfoy-"

"Give me my shirt this instant, Potter, or I swear-"

He swallowed, felt his throat click as he did so. He remembered the sheer horror washing through him when Malfoy went down and how he'd - he hadn't wanted to think about what he'd done, hadn't wanted to give up the book because it had been a friend (when *God*, it had been *Snape*), and he pushed it away and buried it with resentment of Snape and thoughts of Quidditch and even Ginny. He'd complained about Snape's punishment, he remembered with a slow rise of horror, when if Snape hadn't been trying to conceal his part in it he would have gone to Dumbledore.

Harry was glad Dumbledore had never known. That Harry had complained about missing Quidditch, when it had been so close. The scar showed a wound that - if it had been the smallest bit deeper, if Snape had not been just outside the door... Harry was suddenly deeply, fiercely grateful for the living warmth of Malfoy, struggling in his grip.

Malfoy would have died. And Harry would have...

"Malfoy," Harry said abruptly, heard his voice rasp and went on in spite of it. "Malfoy, I'm really sorry. I didn't think - I had no idea what the spell would do. It was in that book and it said 'for enemies' and - I was angry, I've been Crucio'd before. I thought you were a Death Eater. It's not an excuse. I don't mean to make excuses. I'm really sorry. I should have told

you before."

Malfoy stared at him. After a long moment, and in a far less combative tone, he said: "Can I please have my shirt back?"

Harry snatched his hand away. "Right."

Malfoy reached out and took the shirt from Harry's other hand, still looking at him warily and looking completely off balance, and began to slip the garment on. After another long moment, the corner of Malfoy's mouth - cut where Harry had hit him last night - came up a fraction.

"It's all right," he said. "I was a Death Eater."

The breath Harry let go was almost pure relief, mingled with a small stupid bit of laughter. He did not know what to do with his hands and ran his fingers helplessly through his hair.

"Well, but still-"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth came up another fraction. "Not sure how much of a threat a Death Eater poses, weeping like a small girl in a bathroom, but-"

The door opened.

"Malfoy," Ron said in a terrible voice, "why are you *practically unclothed*?"

Malfoy's stilled hands flew to do up the rest of his buttons, but even as they did so his eyes slid to Ron's face, and took note of where Ron's eyes were going. Ginny looked extremely annoyed as Ron glanced back and forth, trying to keep both of them under his gaze.

"Well," Malfoy answered. "I'm unclothed in a vain attempt to win the girl of my heart." He grinned maliciously at Ron and walked the few steps over to Ginny, trying to slip one arm around her shoulders as he did up the last few buttons with his free hand. "I dream of her ruddy locks," Malfoy went on gravely. "Also other things. She is the other half of me. Every night I whisper yearningly into my pillow the words 'Girl Weasley...'"

Harry saw the flick of Ginny's eyes downwards, and the sudden change in her face. He was sure she hadn't seen the whole scar but it was one thing, Harry thought sickly, for Ginny to defend Harry's actions and quite another for her to see the consequences. Wizarding children were not brought up to remember scars could be left, and Ginny would never hurt anyone in cold blood.

"Get off," she said after a shaken pause, squirming but not actually trying to hurt Malfoy. "Also my name is not 'Girl Weasley.'"

"Girl Weasley is my special name for you," Malfoy told her soulfully. "It is what I call you in my heart."

"Well, try Ginny," Ginny suggested, putting both hands on his chest and pushing.

Malfoy fell back easily. "Ginny," he repeated, lingering over the name and looking gleefully for Ron and Harry's reactions.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Oh, whatever. Come on, the others are all going to read boring books all day long. Fancy another game of catch the Snitch?"

"I suppose you could use the practise."

It was Ginny making up for words Malfoy did not even know she had spoken, it was guilt and sheer boredom. Harry knew that. In spite of the knowledge and his own guilt, he found he still longed for the old days - like last week - when Ginny would have turned Malfoy's snot into bats for daring to touch her.

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When Harry's face fell forward onto his book, he realised he really needed another cup of tea. He levered himself off the bed and, murmuring offers of a pot to Ron and Hermione, made his escape. As he came down the stairs he saw Ginny and Malfoy from the window, still playing around.

In the kitchen, he found Mr Weasley watching them as well.

"About last night," Harry began awkwardly, recalling Hermione's reprimand.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Mr Weasley said at once. "I understand completely why you lost your temper. God knows, it's all I can do to tolerate the boy's presence myself. Not that I blame you for bringing him," he added hastily, misinterpreting Harry's stunned silence. "You had to do it, since he has the Horcrux. But - well, he's his father's son, isn't he? It makes my blood boil just to look at him."

It astonished Harry, how he had looked for enmity from easy-going Bill or even Mrs Weasley, who was a sucker for lonely children, and never considered that hatred might come from Mr Weasley, who had once leaped for Lucius Malfoy's throat.

"He's not-" Harry stopped. "I wouldn't have brought him here if I thought he'd harm any of you."

Mr Weasley looked cold. Harry wondered how he had never realised that Mr Weasley did not speak around Malfoy. Looking back, Harry could not remember him even looking at him.

"You think a Malfoy has scruples?"

"You don't know him," Harry said.

"I know enough," Mr Weasley answered. "Lucius Malfoy tried to murder my daughter, and before he was grown Draco followed in his footsteps, and almost murdered my son. I know that family."

"He didn't mean to-"

"What a comfort that would have been to me and Ron's mother! No, Harry, you're very good, but-"

It would have been little comfort to Narcissa Malfoy that Harry hadn't meant it, if Malfoy had bled to death on a bathroom floor.

"I'm not good!" Harry said violently. "It's just that - I do hate him, but he's not his father. If Lucius Malfoy'd had his wand to Dumbledore's throat, he would have killed him. Malfoy didn't. Lucius Malfoy wouldn't have apologised to Ron. Malfoy did. They're *different*."

"Not different enough," Mr Weasley said. He stopped, and then said: "Draco is lucky to have someone like you standing up for him."

Well you see, Mr Weasley, I did almost murder him, so I suppose I owe him one.

Harry looked at his cup of tea, which he had been stirring so hard it had turned almost black. "He's not lucky," he said in a low voice.

Mr Weasley turned away from Harry to look out of the window, his jaw setting. "He'd be wise to stay away from my children, that's all I know," he said. "Ginny - she's an innocent, she hasn't really seen much of the world, of what evil can do. She would find it hard to accept that evil can make jokes and play games with her. I would appreciate it if you could look out for her, Harry. You're not like her."

Harry followed Mr Weasley's eyes, but Malfoy and Ginny had already gone inside.

He picked up his cup of tea. "No," he said, leaving the kitchen. "I'm not innocent."

As he went up the stairs he heard Ginny having words with her mother in the sitting room, and then froze on the stairs as he heard Malfoy's voice on the landing.

Malfoy talking to *Ron*?

"What d'you have to say to me?" Malfoy asked, his voice gruff, as if he had never used a tone even approximating politeness for Ron before.

"Oh," Ron said. "Oh, well. It's about last night."

There was a pause. "Well?"

Harry heard Ron take a deep breath, and then speak in measured tones. "I wanted to accept your apology."

"You what?"

"Is it me," said Ron, "or are you not terribly quick on the uptake? I'm sure you know what the words mean, Malfoy. You said you were sorry and I said it was okay."

Malfoy sounded like he wanted to spit out his astonishment and show it to the world. "Of course it's not okay, Weasley, what is the matter with you? I poisoned you, you could have

died, you can't just say 'no harm done, what a laugh, better luck next time!'"

"Yes I can," Ron told him. "The way I see it - well, I mean, that's the way apologies work, isn't it? You'd know this if you had any brothers or sisters. You can't make up for what you did. You can only say sorry, and if you are sorry, that has to make it okay. Or nothing will. You've been trying, I can see that - I wondered about you not insulting me and offering to play chess. And you said sorry. So, all right. You're a nasty git and I don't like you, and if I ever hear you say one word about my family again I'll hex you sideways, but I believe you're sorry. No harm done. I forgive you."

Clearly, growing up with Fred and George made people remarkably easygoing on the subject of grievous bodily harm. There was another, longer pause.

"Um," Malfoy said at last, and then with an effort that made his voice scrape like sandpaper: "Thank you."

"I do have one condition," Ron informed him.

The silence that followed was very short, and broken by Malfoy's cold laugh. "Of course, I see--"

"Shut up, Malfoy, no you don't! I want you to be decent to Hermione," said Ron. Malfoy's laugh stopped as if someone had cut his throat. "I've seen the way you are with her," Ron went on steadily. "No more insults and no more 'Mudbloods,' but you don't look at her and you don't talk to her--"

"Like your father doesn't look at or talk to me," put in Malfoy, who had noticed, then.

"Yeah, but the difference is you've done stuff, haven't you, Malfoy? She hasn't done anything. And you can be polite enough to me and Ginny, and even pal around with Charlie because we're pureblood and you won't be actually soiled by contact with us, as long as you don't listen to a word we say. Hey, we're even better off now, aren't we?"

"That's nothing to do with--" Malfoy cut in sharply.

"See, I don't care," said Ron. "But I won't have Hermione treated any different from the rest of us. So for once in your life, Malfoy, if you're really sorry, you can stop doing what Daddy would want you to do and treat her as if she's just as good as you are. It ought to be easy enough, since she's approximately a thousand times better. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Malfoy answered. "I can."

"Well - right," Ron said, sounding slightly surprised by Malfoy's acquiescence. "Good. You can get back to mending your clock now."

"Gosh, Weasley, thanks ever so."

"Also touch my sister and I'll knock your stupid albino head off."

Harry heard steps, a door opening and then Malfoy said: "But she is the other half of my

soul," and prudently shut the door.

Once Malfoy was gone, Harry came up the stairs and found Ron waiting for him at the top with his eyebrows raised. "Harry, mate, I really think that Cloak has made you a bit fond of spying on people. D'you want an Extendable Ear for Christmas? Fred and George have put out a special edition."

"Oh, shut up," said Harry.

Ron cocked his head towards Malfoy's door. "What a prat, eh? But that's got his attitude to Hermione sorted."

"You're a good bloke," Harry told him. "Hermione is lucky."

Ron immediately turned his gaze to the floor and Harry saw the tips of his ears go bright red. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about," he said, in a muffled voice because his chin was pressed into his chest.

"Course not," Harry said, shoving him. "C'mon, Hermione must think we've deserted the good ship horribly dull research."

When they went in, Hermione looked up from her cross-legged perch on Ron's pillow and tapped her pen against the book. "You were away a while. Did you see Charlie? I feel terrible about what I said to him..."

Harry said no and that he was sure it was fine. Ron, settling on the end of his bed as if he had no wish at all to be near Hermione, looked doubtful.

"He won't be annoyed with you," he hastened to assure Hermione. "Charlie's a very easygoing bloke. Only dragons are his whole life. I bet he wishes he was a Parselmouth like Harry so he could talk to them, I don't know what he'll do without them."

"I can't actually talk to dragons, Ron," Harry began, and then stopped because Hermione's mouth was open and she was pointing her pen at him.

"Harry," she said, still gaping. "You can talk to snakes!"

"That was more or less the point I was trying to make to Ron, yeah..."

Hermione looked vexed at his stupidity. "Hush!" she said. "I'm thinking!"

Harry and Ron knew better than to disobey her when she got that Madam Pince look about her mouth, and they opened their books at once. Hermione picked up an entirely different book and began to make notes furiously. Harry shared an amused glance with Ron, and then tried to fix his attention on his book.

Three pages into *Stealing Enchanted Jewellery for That Special Someone*, Harry's tea was all gone and his face had just dropped onto a diagram of a magical chastity belt. He was finally ready to admit that caffeine appeared to be a very poor substitute for sleep.

At the point when he thought he might catch a quick kip on his bed, Hermione noticed that Ron was not taking notes and they launched into a full-blown argument. It went right through Harry's head.

"I'm just going to-" Harry mumbled, and went down the stairs headed for the sofa.

Just before he opened the door to the sitting room, he heard Mr and Mrs Weasley's agitated voices. He went hurriedly back, and then up further towards Ginny's room. She and Charlie seemed to be holding a soft debate in there. Which was just perfect.

Harry had always loved the Burrow as if it was his own home, but he had to admit that it was not exactly an oasis of peace. He came down from Ginny's room and looked speculatively at the door to Fred and George's.

Oh, why not?

He opened the door and found nothing but blissful silence inside. The room was warm and calm, the windows filled with the golden light of a sun that had just begun to sink in the sky, golden light that was washing over Malfoy's head and exposed forearms as he crouched by the table and squinted at the innards of Mrs Weasley's clock.

"I need somewhere to have a kip," Harry informed him.

Malfoy squinted in his general direction. "Do not talk to me," he commanded. "I am extremely close to a breakthrough and I need to *concentrate*."

That suited Harry. He chose the bed furthest from Malfoy's table, hoping it was Charlie's, and crawled onto it. Malfoy was silent, the only sound the shift of his clothes and the tiny chink of metal on metal, and in the warmth and a scent of flowers Harry fell asleep.

He half-woke, happy to keep dozing, to the sound of Charlie's quiet voice.

"-I love them," Charlie said. "I do. Only - well, Dad not having much money didn't bother me, but it did bother Percy. I think it bothers Ron, too, but he's a good kid, he tries not to show it. Percy really wanted to make something of himself, and bless them, the twins have been a bit much for anyone to handle from the word go, and Dad's - Dad loves us but he's happiest with his Muggle things. It's all... I was okay in Roumania. I just forgot how it was, always being here, and now I'm twenty-four and I'm stuck here and there are no *dragons*-"

Harry was very warm. Someone had put a blanket over him: he presumed it had been Charlie.

"You see," Malfoy remarked in a neutral sort of way, "I think you're trying to apologise to me for snapping, and I can't imagine why."

Harry let his eyes slide open a bit, in time to see Charlie (who was sitting on the other bed and there was a reason Harry should be sorry about that, but Harry couldn't quite remember it) to see Charlie look at Malfoy and blink.

"Well, I'm older than you, and I should be able to keep my temper better."

"You didn't get the job, though," Malfoy observed. "Anyone would be ticked off. So you showed it, so what. I know you're used to being everybody's big brother, but you see..." He stopped and tapped something metal against a cog. Harry slid his head on the pillow to see him, his face hazy in golden light and smiling a little. "I never wanted a big brother," Malfoy said, in a voice softer and smoother than the one he used around Harry. "I was always quite happy as an only child."

Charlie paused for a second, and then said: "Yeah, you would be," in a more relaxed sort of way. "So..."

Malfoy tilted his head in Charlie's direction and went on in that unusually warm voice. "Snap at me all you like. I'm not in the market for a big brother but - I could use a friend."

"Okay," Charlie said softly. "Okay."

Malfoy laughed. "I think you should apply to Hogwarts. They could use all the help they can get, and Professor McGonagall's not going to listen to the Ministry. Plus, if you get the job I can call you *Professor*-"

Charlie snorted and Harry cuddled his head back down into the pillow, sinking back into sleep.

He woke with the sun touching the horizon and a hand touching his hair. He made a small contented noise and pushed his head into the hand, only to freeze a moment later when he realised who the hand must belong to.

The hand had frozen when Harry nuzzled in, but after a moment Harry heard Malfoy sigh in an almost-exasperated fashion, and then push his hair back in one swift gentle gesture, the casual touch that of someone practised in affection. Harry lay very still.

Malfoy removed his hand and went for the door, and Harry half-opened his eyes only as the door came open. Malfoy looked over his shoulder as he did so, and they shared one startled glance before the door closed between them.

What the hell had Malfoy been *playing* at?

Harry sat upright as another thought struck him. Something had woken him, and from a memory of faint pain and Malfoy's hand in his hair, it was not difficult to work out what.

Malfoy had pulled out some of Harry's hair. What exactly was he planning to do with it?

*

He searched for Ron and Hermione and found them in the hall. Hermione had Hedwig balanced on her wrist, and was dictating an Owl to Ron in a low voice. She looked up as Harry came down the stairs.

"Harry, where have you *been*?"

"Er," said Harry.

She waved aside her own question as if it was a fly. "I'm writing to Lupin," she confided, sounding very pleased with herself.

Harry blinked violently several times, trying to clear the sleep away from his eyes and his mind. "Uh... why?"

Hermione made another impatient gesture and Harry came slowly down the stairs to her side. He looked at Ron and saw Ron's face was serious, too. Hermione must really have something here.

"So that Lupin can find out where You-Know-Who is."

"Hermione - it's a nice thought, but first we have to find all the Horcruxes, you know-"

"Yes, of course I know that! We don't need to find You-Know-Who - we need to find his pet snake, that-"

"Nagini?"

"Well exactly, Harry! You said she was probably a Horcrux, didn't you?" At Harry's cautious nod Hermione clasped her hands together, heedless of Hedwig's substantial weight. "So we need to kill her. And if we were in You-Know-Who's lair and you called to her in Parseltongue - well, who is she used to hearing Parseltongue from? She'd think it was You-Know-Who calling for her. She'd run to the slaughter."

Ron stared at her. "You're a little bit scary sometimes, Hermione," he told her. "I just thought you should know that."

They both looked at Harry for his reaction, Hermione beaming with pride. He looked back at them and felt sick with their disappointment.

You seem to have visited the snake's mind because that was where the Dark Lord was.

He seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth.

"It won't work," he said heavily. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I wish it would. Voldemort's really close to that snake, he possesses her all the time, they share minds all the time. She'd know it wasn't him from my mind."

Hermione paused, and then looked eager again. "Oh, but Harry, You-Know-Who's really proud, isn't he? He wouldn't share minds with a snake all the time. I bet he blocks his thoughts often enough, you can just do that, and-"

Harry was glad of the growing dark. He didn't think Hermione would have wanted to see the expression on his face.

"And how d'you suggest I do that?" he asked. "Anything up your sleeve?"

Ron frowned at him. "Occlumency," Hermione said, uncertainly. "Surely you learned enough

to..."

"Hermione, I didn't. I told you I couldn't learn it and that means I couldn't learn it. It's not that I was afraid of not getting an Outstanding in Occlumency, I couldn't do it, I couldn't do any of it, and that includes blocking my mind for any length of time whatsoever. As Snape was at pains to point out."

Ron put down his quill a moment before Hermione's shoulders sagged. "Oh," she said in rather a small voice. "Oh, dear."

"Sorry," Harry said. "I wish I did know Occlumency."

"I do," Malfoy told them.

Harry's head jerked up like a puppet whose string had been pulled hard. Malfoy was standing on the stairs, his face grave. His hair stood out, the only pale thing in the darkening room.

"I know Occlumency," Malfoy continued. "I'm very good - and I'll teach you, if you like. Part of the reason Snape wanted me here is so I could."

"And why would Snape want-" Harry began furiously.

Malfoy's face lit up with malice. "Well now, you know I can't tell you that. Do you want my help or not?"

Harry was about to tell Malfoy that he and his help could go to hell, when he caught Hermione's eye. Her lips were framing the word '*Veritaserum*' and Harry remembered. Soon, they would know everything about Snape's plan that Malfoy could tell them. Until then, if Malfoy could help Hermione's plan along...

Harry recalled Malfoy's half-smile in the kitchen. It might be possible to work together without killing each other, just about.

"Yes," he said eventually. "I'll take it."

Malfoy smirked at him. "Thought you might. We start tomorrow."

*

The next morning, despite a full night's sleep, Harry was in a foul mood and convinced that the *Daily Prophet* had been right all along. He was dangerously insane. Anyone who would let Draco Malfoy have free access to their thoughts was a candidate for St Mungo's, and as soon as Harry was sent there away from all the books and Occlumency the happier he would be.

"Are you people going to be reading all day today as well?" Ginny asked over the muffins.

"We don't really have a choice," Harry said testily, and stopped himself from asking her if she thought he enjoyed it. Ginny hadn't been Hermione's friend for going on seven years. She was not used to daily dosages of books, and she still didn't quite grasp how serious all this was.

"You two could help," Hermione suggested, casting a combative glance Malfoy's way.

Malfoy smiled at her angelically. "Why should I? I like the locket where it is," he said, tapping it with two long fingers. He proceeded to twist the chain slowly around his fingers again, while Harry watched and fought down the impulse to shout at him until he stopped playing with Horcruxes.

A welcome distraction came in the form of Hedwig with an Owl. Harry wondered whether it was a reply from Lupin already before he remembered they hadn't even sent Lupin's Owl yet, and he realised that what had been dropped in his plate was the *Daily Prophet*.

"What's that, Potter?" Malfoy asked, smirking. "Fans sending you your paper now?"

"Well, they love me," Harry told him earnestly. "The news today, some girl's knickers yesterday. It's a burden, but someone has to bear it."

"Someone's *knickers*?" Ginny asked in a dangerous way, but Malfoy turned his head a little to hide the half-smile that reminded Harry of yesterday. It was weird and made Harry feel vaguely unprotected, this business of not being actively angry with Malfoy right this second.

"He's a big star," Malfoy told Ginny. "You have to accept that you'll have to share him with all the lovestruck young things writing ballads about him."

Harry grinned a tiny bit and flipped Malfoy off, still feeling a bit off balance.

"I hear you're the one who wrote a song about Ron," Charlie put in.

He and Malfoy were apparently back to being friends forever. Charlie had his chair angled towards Malfoy, Harry noticed, and probably they were braiding friendship bracelets for each other.

Malfoy smiled properly at him. "I've written a lot of songs. When I was in fourth year me and some other people from Slytherin tried to form a band."

"No you didn't," Harry said.

Malfoy stared at him. "Yes, I did."

"I didn't hear anything about that."

Malfoy sneered at him and the rush of familiar animosity was actually a little comforting. "It might surprise you to learn, Potter, that you don't know everything about me because - wait for it - you don't actually know me that well. What, you thought I was sitting around Slytherin for years hatching evil plots for your downfall every day? We had a band," he continued, turning to Charlie without even giving Harry a chance to respond. "Goyle was on drums and Pansy was the singer-"

"That would be Pansy your girlfriend who was here two days ago?" Charlie asked.

Malfoy tilted his chair backwards, which Harry happened to know for a fact Mrs Weasley did not permit people to do at the table. "She was here two days ago," he answered slowly, "but she's not currently my girlfriend."

"Oh. So..." Charlie paused. "What were you doing in the band?"

Malfoy looked distinctly roguish. "Being the star. I wrote the songs and stood at the front and I was planning to learn to play the guitar, but then there were creative differences in which our friend Crabbe locked Goyle up in his wardrobe for playing the drums at two in the morning. We briefly re-formed to make up the song for Weasley, but our glory days were over."

"It was a rotten song," Harry said, glaring at his toast.

He transferred his glare to Malfoy, who returned it with interest. "Oh, Potter, are you jealous because someone else got some attention? I could write a song for you," Malfoy suggested, and struck the edge of his plate with a fork. "*H is for how very much I hate you. A is for how absolutely annoying you can be-*"

Charlie, after a brief struggle that involved Malfoy slapping hands like a girl, took Malfoy's fork away and Malfoy subsided. Harry was sort of amused and annoyed at the same time, and decided to hide it all by opening up the paper.

Once he did, he saw the front cover said *Ministry's Forces Drives Death Eaters from Muggle Town: Greatest Victory Yet*. He scanned the lines, searching until he found the words '*Minerva McGonagall declined to comment and refused to reveal her sources*' and then flipped through the pages until he found a report that though a Dark Mark had appeared above the Finnigans' house in Ireland, the family had been warned and gone into hiding some days beforehand.

As he looked through the paper, a single sheet of parchment fluttered to his lap. Harry opened it under the table and read it as fast as he could.

'Dear Harry,

Now you have read the paper, I trust you are assured of my good faith. I hope you are keeping up your end of the bargain - and that we can meet again soon, so that you and I may both get what we desire. I'll let you know when I can next slip away.

*Yours in anticipation,
The Girl From The Alley.'*

Harry looked at the parchment once more and then stood up, slipping it into his pocket. Ron and Hermione should see this paper. He'd go to the sitting room, where they were already researching, and tell them. Now the information had proven valuable, even Hermione wouldn't object to Harry receiving more.

He was already in the hall when he heard Malfoy's voice behind him.

"Potter? May I ask you a question?"

He didn't turn around. "What?"

At which point Malfoy grabbed the parchment in one hand, Harry's arm in the other, and slammed Harry against the wall. Harry shoved him and Malfoy didn't move an inch or relax his hold, and as Malfoy's hand closed even tighter in an iron grip around Harry's bicep and Harry looked at his cold, close eyes, he realised that this was possibly the angriest he had ever seen Malfoy.

"May I ask you," Malfoy snarled, "why my mother is writing you letters?"

He glanced at the Owl and for a horrible moment Harry thought he was going to have to protest that he had no designs on Mrs Malfoy's honour, and then Malfoy made an incoherent, furious sound and slammed Harry harder against the wall. Harry hit his head and for a moment the world went black, and then Malfoy's eyes were back again, hazy around the edges and still furious.

Malfoy dropped the letter and shoved his suddenly-free arm against Harry's throat, cutting off the greater part of his air supply.

"You have her spying for you."

Harry tried to shove Malfoy back again, but Malfoy was braced for the shove, his body not giving under Harry's hands.

"Yes," Harry rasped. "I do."

"You stupid bastard," Malfoy said. "You *stupid, stupid bastard!* Do you have any idea of what they'll do to her if they find out?"

He'd never dreamed Malfoy could be this strong.

"Do you have any idea," he said, managing to lift Malfoy's arm from his throat, holding it locked against his own, "how much I don't care? A whole Muggle town was saved by this information! Seamus Finnigan's family escaped because of it!"

"I don't give a damn!" Malfoy shouted. "She's my *mother!*"

"And she passed on information that got my godfather killed!" Harry yelled back, shoving against Malfoy again. Malfoy was forced back and then he pushed in, Harry's shoulderblades hitting the wall hard. "So she's passing information to the right side now, so she can save your miserable hide," Harry panted. "So at last she's doing something right, and it's about *time!* I don't care what danger she's putting herself in. It's worth it!"

Malfoy's nails were digging into Harry's skin mercilessly, he wouldn't be surprised if he was bleeding, but he didn't look to see. Malfoy's eyes were fastened on his face, and through the icy anger he saw fear.

"What can I do," Malfoy said quietly, "to make you leave her alone?"

Harry raised the arm Malfoy had been holding, and Malfoy let him. He grabbed the locket and twisted the chain around Malfoy's neck, and said: "You know what I want."

Malfoy looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded sharply. Then he shoved Harry away and backed up, as if he simply could not bear to touch Harry for a moment longer. He shot him one last venomous look and then threw the sitting room door open wide.

"Give me one of your damned books," he snarled to a startled-looking Ron. "Let's get this thing off me."

Harry shut the door again, shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. His heart was pounding and his breath was coming fast and he couldn't quite believe what he'd done. Threatened someone's mother, held to ransom someone that Malfoy loved, and told him that it did not matter what happened to her.

Only it couldn't matter, not compared to all the people it could save, and it couldn't matter how frightened and savage Malfoy had looked at the idea of losing her. He couldn't afford to be merciful. This was war.

Chapter Eight

Harry was quite pleased when the next Owl from Narcissa Malfoy arrived. It had been three days, and the atmosphere in the Burrow had become extremely unpleasant.

Not only was Malfoy ostentatiously not talking to him, he'd obviously gone tattling to everyone else. Charlie was looking at Harry a bit coldly, Mrs Weasley kept giving Malfoy second helpings because of his poor endangered mother, and though they were trapped in the same room going over books together all day, Malfoy refused to acknowledge Harry's presence by so much as a glance.

Even Ginny was being far too nice to Malfoy, though she'd come to Harry and told him she was sure he was doing the right thing. She kept smiling at him and sitting beside him and having *conversations* with him: Harry thought her lack of discrimination around boys was getting completely out of hand.

He was glad to be out of the house, and doing something useful, even if it meant consorting with Narcissa Malfoy.

Any even vaguely positive feelings waking in Harry were crushed when he got to the alley near Diagon, and saw that Narcissa had chosen to show up again in her guise of Malfoy. Harry was very tired of Polyjuice, and even more tired of seeing Malfoy's stupid face all the stupid time.

Not that it wasn't easy to see this wasn't the real Malfoy. This one wore robes and a calm, pleasant expression.

"Harry, dear," said Narcissa, with a sweet, false smile. "What a nice surprise."

"Don't call me Harry. Just give me some information I can use."

Narcissa's maliciously flirtatious smile looked all wrong on Malfoy's face. Harry felt this whole Polyjuice business was giving him vertigo, and he looked away at the dirty bricks and stagnant puddles of the alleyway.

Narcissa spoke very softly in Malfoy's voice.

"First give me what I want."

Harry reached into his pocket and took out the proof Narcissa wanted. He avoided looking at her, and at the pictures: he knew what was in them. He'd taken them from the wedding album himself: Malfoy with the baby Veela in his lap, Malfoy with a wine glass and smiling at something Charlie had just said, Malfoy with Ginny twirling under his arm.

Proof that Malfoy was alive and not missing any significant bits.

Narcissa was silent for so long that Harry looked over at her, and actually seeing maternal fondness on Malfoy's face could've been pretty comical, if it hadn't made him feel inexplicably grouchy and left out.

"He looks happy," she said quietly after a moment.

"I don't know," Harry told her, and heard how ungracious he sounded. "Sometimes. He's never particularly happy with me."

Narcissa did not even seem to hear him, turning the three photographs in her grasp over and over again. "Who's the girl he's dancing with?" she asked in an absent sort of way, smiling down at her son's picture.

"Ginny Weasley," Harry said curtly.

Narcissa looked a little ill. "I should have guessed by the hair. Draco's not - involved with her, is he?"

"*I'm* involved with her," Harry snapped, and then remembered that was a lie.

"I shouldn't imagine that would matter," Narcissa murmured, giving him a dismissive glance that made her look, to Harry's eyes, like a precise replica of her son after all.

He wanted to say that he trusted Ginny - but she no longer had any obligation to be faithful to him - or that Ginny would never let Malfoy touch her - but she let him touch her *all the time*.

He thought of what Hermione'd told him, said: "I'm better-looking than Malfoy," and promptly wanted to die.

Narcissa started to laugh. "And you have such quick wit. No wonder you were only able to woo a Weasley."

"Could we," said Harry. "Can I just have the information?"

"The new orphanage the Ministry has set up, for children orphaned by the Dark Lord - the Dark Lord has his eye on it. He's a little strange about children, and about orphanages, and the Ministry are using it as rather effective propaganda for their position as caring, concerned government who will save us all." Narcissa examined Malfoy's hands as if she had forgotten she was in a boy's body, and was checking her nail polish. "Anyway," she said lazily. "Children in danger. Go to it. Isn't that the sort of thing that makes all your well-meaning hearts just flutter? Don't you want to rush to the rescue?"

"Maybe in a minute," Harry said. "Anything a bit more useful? Like - where one might find Voldemort?"

Narcissa jumped violently but did not blush afterwards, so instead of the rush of satisfaction that always resulted from getting to the real Malfoy, Harry felt bad about upsetting a girl.

"No," she answered. "Oddly enough, I do not often have the man who spoke my son's death warrant around for tea. I suppose," she said after a pause, "I could ask Bella."

For a moment Harry was at a total loss as to who Bella might be, and then he remembered how Voldemort had addressed Bellatrix Lestrange.

Cute, he thought. Bella and Cissy, the two sisters who accomplished Sirius' death together.

"Fine. Go ask Bella," Harry said between his teeth. "I wouldn't mind seeing her, either."

Narcissa looked at him for a moment. "She told me you couldn't hold the Cruciatus," she said at length. "My son thought he could kill someone as well."

"Your *son* was trying to kill the greatest wizard of our time."

"Unless you succeed, you'll be remembered as the one who tried to kill the greatest wizard of our time," Narcissa remarked, curling her lip. "History is written by the victors. I suggest you do succeed."

"Thanks," Harry said. "That's really helpful."

Narcissa shrugged, as if conversations about life and death rather bored her, then produced a little sack from her pocket and threw it. Harry caught it automatically, and it clinked in his hands.

"What-"

"I won't have my son living on the Weasleys' charity, no matter what your relatives allow," Narcissa said coolly. "Give that to their blowsy matriarch. With my compliments."

Harry wanted to bring her head on a platter to Mrs Weasley with *his* compliments, but he settled for holding the sack out in her direction. "She wouldn't take it."

"Then give it to Draco," Narcissa said. "I don't want it. I don't want anything except to help him in some way. I-"

She flung up her hands, her frustration a flying shape on the air, and again Harry felt as if he was looking at the real Malfoy. Though usually after that gesture Malfoy made another ruder one, or glared and stormed.

"Can't I see him?" she asked. "Would that put him in more danger?"

"Might put you in more danger."

Harry looked at her as she spoke, Malfoy's grey eyes intent for once on Harry's face, and wondered why he did not really want her to die. She *deserved* it, she'd made sure Sirius went to his death, but she looked so desperate now and Malfoy had looked so desperate before.

"I don't care about that," said Narcissa.

"Malfoy does," Harry told her. "He - Voldemort threatened you as well, last year. Malfoy's terrified for you. I can't - I won't take you into any more danger."

Narcissa only looked at him, sharp longing for her son written all over her son's borrowed face, and when she stepped towards him Harry thought she might be about to draw her wand

and demand to be taken to her precious little Draco. Instead, she reached up and touched his face, Malfoy's fingers resting lightly on the curve of Harry's cheekbone.

"Thank you for watching out for my son," she said, almost warmly.

Harry thought of the kitchen at the Burrow. He took a step backwards and hit the brick wall.

"Don't *kiss me*."

"Don't worry," Narcissa replied, stepping back and staring at him. "You really are an extraordinarily arrogant young man. I do hope at least some of your confidence in yourself is justified."

"These meetings of ours are so uplifting," Harry informed her. He felt tired.

She smirked at him as if she was really Malfoy, tossed her head like a girl, and left him in an alleyway wondering how to protect an orphanage full of children and what to do with the bag of Galleons in his hand.

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In the end, he walked into the living room that had somehow become Hermione's stern hall of study, and threw it down on the table in front of Malfoy. Malfoy looked directly at him for the first time in three days.

He looked at Harry, he looked at the bag, and he looked as if he was doing a slow boil.

Then he slammed the heavy book shut on his own hand, and looked deliberately away.

"Passing out money to everyone today, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Sorry to disappoint," Harry said, and flopped into the chair beside Ron's. They both looked at a codex, and then exchanged looks of quiet desperation.

A stack of book hid half Hermione's face from them, but the half they could see looked happy. She was drawing up another plan and whistling happily to herself, possibly from demonic glee at the misery she was about to inflict on them.

Yesterday Ron had floated the idea that Hermione was a magical illusion created by their teachers to make them feel desperate and inadequate.

"Are you done with that plan yet?" Malfoy asked absently. "I could use a look."

"In a minute," Hermione said, appearing gratified.

"Oh my God, don't encourage her," Ron muttered. He and Harry grinned at each other, but then Ron glanced back at Malfoy and - didn't look displeased that he was being polite to Hermione.

Malfoy caught Ron's eye, clearly mindful of their bargain, and then looked back at Hermione.

"Ah - by the way, Granger," he said slowly. "Could I - borrow a pen? I read about them in Muggle Studies."

Hermione looked a little startled but still gratified, and she leaned over the table and passed Malfoy a biro. Malfoy accepted it: their fingers did not touch.

Malfoy bent his head over his book again, toying idly with his new pen. He made almost as many notes as Hermione did, his face set as he worked towards his goal, and Harry thought he knew how Malfoy'd looked when he was fixing the Cabinet now.

"You took *Muggle Studies*?" asked Ron.

"Course," Malfoy replied. "My father always said know your enemy."

Ron and Hermione both stopped looking at Malfoy as if he might one day, in another universe, conceivably be tolerable. Malfoy hunched over his book, his shoulders looking spiky with defensiveness.

He still had not touched the Galleons.

They continued to study, air thick with the tension of resumed hostilities, and the day slipped away like all the days before. Malfoy didn't go to dinner with the rest of them *again* and it occurred to Harry that this was probably how Malfoy's looks had taken their dramatic downward turn last year. Apparently at the least provocation he entirely forgot details like food or sleep.

Charlie came in with a plate for Malfoy when the rest of them were going to dinner.

"Would you do that for m-" Hermione began, and then Ron put his hand over her mouth, took her arm in his free hand and pulled her firmly towards the dinner table.

"Malfoy may be set on killing himself," he said. "That's his business. I won't let you do it."

Hermione went obligingly in to dinner, unusually quiet and a little pink.

When they got back, Malfoy had hardly touched his food.

"You have to eat," Harry snapped. "And you're not to sleep in here like you did last night."

Malfoy looked at Hermione and said: "We need more books."

"Harry and I can go get them tomorrow," Hermione offered, and then hesitated. "Maybe you can rest once we're done with this lot."

Malfoy looked surprised, and then he smiled awkwardly, as if a smile directed at Hermione would not fit comfortably on his face. "I," he said. "All right."

He nicked another biro off her that night. Harry could not believe Malfoy's idea of playing nice was kleptomania.

*

The next morning they had a lovely change from Malfoy Unpleasantness when they segued into Mrs Weasley Unpleasantness. She had not argued with Ron, but she was extremely vocal on the subject of Ginny going back to school.

"I won't do it! I want to stay and help."

"You're not helping, you're going back to school and staying out of trouble - you're our baby-"

"I'm not a baby! And I will help, as soon as Harry's worked out what we're going to do - I *will* help - Harry needs support-"

"He's *got* support - he doesn't need two of my children-"

"You should go back to school, Ginny," Harry said wretchedly, guilt pressing down on him until the words came out. Mrs Weasley'd done so much for him, he had to say something.

Everyone else, who'd had their heads bowed over their plates so they could butter toast and avoid the storm, looked at him with interest.

"I mean - I don't-"

Ginny stared at him and looked as if she was about to cry.

Harry prayed for an interruption of any kind at all, and was incredulous when Charlie marched into the room with an Owl clutched in his fist.

"I got it!" he said. "I got the job! McGonagall's taken me on as Hagrid's assistant!"

Ginny's expression of misery wavered and then, as she looked at Charlie, disappeared. She threw back her shoulders, turned her back on Harry and threw herself into Charlie's arms.

"Of course you did," she said.

Charlie laughed, radiant and incredulous, kissed her cheek and spun her off her feet. Once he'd put Ginny down Malfoy was at his side, glowing the same way Ginny was at Charlie's delight. For a dreadful instant Harry thought Charlie was going to grab him and kiss him too, but Charlie's face changed, presumably as he calmed down a bit, and he didn't touch Malfoy at all.

"Hagrid's *assistant*?" Malfoy drawled. "It's a scandal, Charles. You should be ruling him with an iron fist."

Charlie stopped hesitating and beamed at him. "Was that a very Slytherin form of congratulations?"

Malfoy shrugged.

Charlie adjusted his arm around Ginny, keeping her close. "I asked if I could live at home and come in part time," he said slowly, looking from her face to Malfoy's. "I thought maybe people could use me around here."

"What, I don't get a bedroom to myself again?" Malfoy demanded, smiling, as Ginny shrieked and kissed Charlie four times in rapid succession. "I suppose that's all right," he conceded. "Ah - Granger's going off to the library tomorrow, which means I won't have to study," he went on cautiously.

"Tell you what," Charlie said, still beaming. "Let's celebrate. I'm taking you two out on the Muggle town."

"Oooh, Mum, can I?" Ginny asked. "Oh, thank God, Charlie, I've been so bored cooped up here - Mum, *please* say yes, you know Charlie'll look after me. The Muggle world! Malfoy, have you seen the Muggle world? Mum, can I change some money - just a little money - and buy things? Dad would love an iron to add to his collection!"

The stormy atmosphere was all changed while two Weasleys ran around in transports of enormous redheaded joy, but Harry knew matters with Ginny were not resolved. He was not looking forward to that conversation.

"If Ginny wants to do something," Hermione said a little waspishly on leaving the breakfast table, "why doesn't she-"

"Ah, Hermione, it's not in the genes," Ron told her. "Our wild Weasley blood - it's for running free with dragons and Quidditch bats and things, not for reading. Ginny almost exploded just studying for her OWLs."

"Well *you* read, Ron. Sometimes," Hermione said.

"S different," Ron explained. "You caught and trained me young."

Harry saw the look that flashed between Ron and Hermione before Hermione was steeped in the joy and Ron the misery of reading, and it made him feel odd and unhappy. They hadn't even kissed and he'd gone out with Ginny and he knew she was the one, but it still made him feel jealous.

It was probably the idea of Ginny practically alone with Malfoy all day that had him on edge. It made him want to lock people up.

*

When Harry returned to the Burrow laden with more horrible books, he and Hermione walked into the sound of muffled music, lights and laughter. Charlie tried to bar their way to the kitchen and then saw who they were and laughed.

"Thought you were Mum," he said. "We're playing the racy Celestina Warbeck songs."

"I beg your pardon?" said Hermione.

"When she went off the rails and had her affair with the Minister for Magic. They're her most popular songs - some of them have been translated into Muggle," Charlie explained. "They upset Mum. She feels they're beneath Celestina."

"You had fun, then," Hermione asked, laughing, but Harry had already seen Malfoy and Ginny over Charlie's shoulder. He pushed past Charlie and into the bright light of the kitchen.

*'If I said you had a beautiful broomstick
Would you hold it against me?
If I swore you were a Veela
Would you ride me like a centaur tonight?'*

Harry had seen people wearing Muggle clothes his whole life, and never actually understood that they were *obscene*. He was used to people wrapped from neck to ankle in robes, sometimes overlaid with Weasley jumpers.

He was not used to Ginny in a summer dress, twirling under Malfoy's arm. He couldn't see Malfoy's face, but he heard him laughing: when Ginny stepped in she slid both hands to rest on Malfoy's back. Malfoy was still wearing the battered jeans from Snape's house, but the shirt he was wearing was as new as Ginny's dress: it was too tight, they both looked - this had to stop.

Ginny caught sight of Harry, smiled and twirled again.

"Look what Malfoy bought me!" she yelled over the music. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

Malfoy bent Ginny backwards over his arm and she yelped, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. Harry could see too much skin: Ginny's knees and Malfoy's back and everything was all horrible and wrong.

Malfoy looked at him deliberately for the first time in days, and it was a deliberate look. His smile was glittering with a kind of wild malice his mother would have kept caged.

"Isn't *she* gorgeous?" he asked.

The urge to fall on Malfoy screamed in Harry's veins, but hurting Malfoy in front of witnesses was even more likely to make them fall at Malfoy's feet and all over his side.

Ginny tossed her curly hair over one bare, pale shoulder, letting go of Malfoy's shirt now that he'd righted her. Instead of taking a hasty step away and slapping his face for taking liberties, as Harry would have preferred, she put her hand on his waist where there was a strip of skin showing.

Before Harry actually had an embolism, Mrs Weasley came in past Charlie and turned off the music, and while Harry glared and Ginny twirled and Malfoy smirked, she began earnestly saying that Celestina had been going through a bad time when she made this album and the lyrics were not really appropriate for young people.

*

Seeing Harry wretched apparently made Malfoy feel much better about his life: colour Harry absolutely shocked. He was almost grinning while Mrs Weasley fought Charlie and Ginny for the Celestina Warbeck album, Harry leaned against the kitchen surfaces and glared, and in the midst of chaos Malfoy made himself a cup of coffee.

"Do you dedicate your whole life to annoying me," Harry said finally, curling his lip, "or is it just a malicious little hobby?"

Malfoy looked thoughtful, and then smiled. "Hobby. But I may go pro any day now." He stirred his coffee, being deliberately noisy about it, and everything about him annoyed Harry so much he thought he might die. "While I know you enjoy the illusion that you are the shining centre of the universe, annoying you was just a side benefit."

"Oh yeah, what other reason could you have for buying Ginny-"

Malfoy's eyes and smile looked *alive* with malice at this point, sparkling like the sun on water, and if he said anything about the way Ginny looked in her dress Harry was going to hit him in the head with a kettle.

"These people put a roof over my head, and I'm not stupid enough to offer them money," said Malfoy. "Ginny doesn't have a lot of nice things."

"I," said Harry. "She always looks nice."

"She doesn't have butterfly clasps and things like the other girls at school. Probably why she likes being pretty so much."

"She's not *vain*," Harry snapped.

"I wasn't insulting her," Malfoy snapped back. "You'll know when I'm insulting someone, because I'll be talking about you. Don't blame me because you don't notice simple things about your own girlfriend."

"Oh, pardon me for not having your quick eye for accessories, Malfoy."

Unbelievably, the corner of Malfoy's mouth went up a fraction, and then he went still, looked horrified at himself and fixed his usual chilly glare on Harry. Harry resumed his own glare, feeling a little shaken.

"C'mon, Draco, this day's not over yet," said Charlie, striding over and putting his hand on the small of Malfoy's back.

Malfoy turned to him at once and with obvious relief, face softening into a real smile, and then Ginny joined him. She had the Celestina Warbeck album tucked down the front of her dress and she was *glowing*, as she had when she'd wheedled Mrs Weasley for the Pygmy Puff. If she wanted stuff, she could've told Harry: he would've bought it for her.

"Let's get brooms," Malfoy suggested. "I hear you're rather good at Quidditch."

Charlie grinned. "Oh, I get by."

"First a race on foot and then a broom race," Ginny proposed. "Harry," she said, and hesitated, looking still-hurt and a little shy. "You can come too."

"He's a busy boy," Malfoy remarked pleasantly. "He should probably help Granger unshrink those books. Or maybe he could go upstairs and play with his Sword of Gryffindor."

"I'll come race," Harry said, glaring. "I'll help Hermione in a minute - you can borrow my broom," he added to Ginny.

If Ginny liked things, a Firebolt was really a lot cooler than a stupid dress.

"Oh, thanks," said Ginny.

They all went out into the evening air and Ginny shivered once she was three steps away from the comforting warmth of the kitchen. Harry took off his cloak and settled it around her, fingers lingering against the chilly flesh of her bare shoulders, and she smiled at him properly.

"So a race," she said. "What does the winner get?"

Harry didn't quite understand, but he understood Malfoy's sudden sharp smile in the corner of his eye, and the sudden look of challenge on his face when Harry turned to him.

"The winner," Malfoy said slowly, "gets to *win*."

Harry suddenly remembered being ten years old. It was so vivid he could see the dustbins and gravel of the schoolyard in his primary school, hear the sound of Dudley and his gang in pursuit, back before Hogwarts and everything, before Harry won at anything, when he could run so fast that he could fly before he could *really* fly.

"You're on," he said.

Charlie's voice was quiet and sure, an anchor back to the Burrow and the present day. "First to the end of the field where we throw the gnomes," he said. "Ready. Set. Go!"

Harry went, far past the sound of Ginny's surprised squeak, wind in his hair and his ears. He hadn't run in years: he was startled at the sudden pleasure of it, like seeing the face of someone you'd loved once but almost forgotten, clean night air all around him and *bloody Malfoy* overtaking him, what was going *on*?

He caught the edge of Malfoy's smirk as Malfoy passed and surged forward on annoyance alone: running full out, almost expecting Malfoy to trip him up (it would've been so like Malfoy) but Malfoy didn't. He just kept running, and Harry kept running, while Harry's lungs screamed for air and he heard Malfoy panting beside him and then heard a thump as Malfoy threw himself against the fence of the gnomes field, an instant before Harry did so himself.

Harry flung himself down on the ground and breathed in deep merciful lungfuls of air, before looking up at Malfoy. Malfoy was leaning against the fence, face shining with sweat, eyes

wide.

"I won," he said, sounding blank with surprise.

"Yeah," Harry said, his throat feeling raw with the effort of getting air in as fast as possible. "I was rusty," he added, and then wished he could take it back. He sounded like a sore loser, like a bloody Slytherin.

Malfoy didn't appear to notice. "I won," he repeated. "It's probably - this summer. I never ran before, but that night at the Astronomy Tower Professor Snape grabbed me and he told me-

"Run, Draco," Harry said, Malfoy's first name strange in his mouth. "I was there."

"You were just everywhere that night," Malfoy remarked, mouth twisting, with less rancour than Harry might have expected. "Anyway," he continued, still in that disbelieving tone. "When I was living with Professor Snape. There wasn't much to do but I was allowed outside in the Muggle world, on all their - very grey streets, and I kept thinking about him saying 'Run, Draco' and I'd run and - I wasn't rusty. That's probably why."

"Right," said Harry, and stared at him. Malfoy continued to look stunned and continued not to gloat, to a point where Harry's expectations and reality felt like they would never meet again. "You're a much better winner than you are a loser," Harry said at last.

"Well," said Malfoy, looking as much at a loss as Harry felt. "It's not like you ever had the chance to find that out before."

At that point Ginny and Charlie came up, clearly just pretending still to be running.

"I tripped," Ginny explained. "*Charlie* stopped to help me up. Chivalry apparently being dead in everyone but my brother."

"She always trips so she has a reason that she didn't win," Charlie said, grinning affectionately at her. Ginny punched him in the arm.

"Charlie, I won," Malfoy announced, starting to sound pleased instead of shocked. "I *won*, Potter was *humiliatingly* defeated, you should have seen it-

"You won by a couple of inches," Harry said.

"More like a yard," Malfoy asserted. "More like a mile. Potter's totally out of condition, it was really sad to see him wheezing like an elderly carthorse."

"Excuse me?"

Malfoy shrugged, grinning slyly at Charlie as if Harry couldn't see him, as if Harry wasn't right here. "I felt bad for you, Potter," he said in a faux sympathetic tone. "Honestly."

"I have to go," Harry declared, standing up. "Hermione's waiting for me and honestly, I have better things to do."

"Aren't you going to congratulate me on my triumph?" inquired Malfoy.

Charlie was grinning and trying to hide it. Harry didn't - the atmosphere seemed wrong for snapping at Malfoy, but it was Malfoy so he certainly wasn't going to grin too. He settled for rolling his eyes.

He was reading with Hermione and trying to follow her plan when he heard the whistle of brooms going by the window, and the sound of Ginny's abrupt scream.

He was at the window before he had time to think, and that meant he was in time to see Malfoy bank and catch Ginny as she fell, to see Ginny put a trusting hand against Malfoy's chest and curl her hand into his shirt, while she shook her free fist at Charlie and yelled: "Knocking your own *sister* off her broom!"

Charlie shouted an apology into the wind and Harry watched as Malfoy said something into Ginny's ear. He watched Malfoy smile and Ginny smile, and Malfoy tuck Ginny's brief skirt more securely around her pale thighs. Ginny rested against him and let him do it.

Races be damned. Harry should've turned Malfoy into the authorities and he would have done it, too, if it hadn't been for that Horcrux.

*

The next day a Pensieve arrived for Harry, carried by several disgruntled-looking owls. They left it in the middle of the breakfast table and everyone sat around and stared at it, except for Charlie, who was so excited about going into work Harry didn't think he'd spotted the enormous stone basin.

"That's funny," said Harry, "I didn't order a great big basin for my thoughts. And by funny I mean suspicious, and by suspicious I mean I suspect Malfoy."

Malfoy looked like he had slept on a book the night before on account of sleeping on a book the night before, but he smirked as he buttered his toast.

"Oh it came," he said, as if only now observing a great big Pensieve beside the jam. "How nice."

"How - why did you order me a Pensieve?" Harry demanded.

Malfoy stared. "Be reasonable, Potter. I couldn't possibly order a Pensieve using my own name. I'm a fugitive from justice."

"Why did you order a Pensieve at all?" Harry asked, holding his last shred of patience between his clenched teeth.

"Because you need one," Malfoy answered readily. "See, from what Professor Snape told me, you have no organic understanding of Occlumency. He did, so he really didn't have any idea how to teach you - particularly since you couldn't be bothered working at it."

Harry looked at him balefully and Malfoy raised his eyebrows and continued on.

"I caught on fast," he added, sounding almost obscenely smug. "But my Aunt Bella said she'd had trouble learning at first, and given your violent tendencies, I thought your minds might work in somewhat the same way."

He said 'Aunt Bella' with deliberate malice and an almost affectionate tone: as if he was perfectly aware of how much it must sting to hear himself compared to the woman who had killed Sirius, even if it wasn't true, even if it was only Malfoy saying it when Malfoy's opinion didn't count.

"Get to the point," Harry advised him, "or get ready for some violence."

Malfoy put down his knife and leaned forward. "You've got to be shown how thoughts work," he said, almost seriously. "You've got to be shown how minds work, and then you can understand better how to barricade them, and why it's so important."

There was a silence, broken by Ron's embarrassed cough. Harry looked away.

"I'm off, wish me luck," Charlie said, wandering about the place and spilling tea on his tie.

"Good luck," said Ginny, with a smile and a kiss on the cheek.

"Mind you're home for tea and don't let that incompetent feed you to its beast minions," said Malfoy.

"Thank you, Draco, you say the sweetest things," said Charlie, reaching out as if he was going to ruffle Malfoy's hair but not quite doing so. "Maybe if I get home while it's light, we could fly some more. Have you people seen this kid fly?" he asked conversationally, not looking at the expressive faces around the table. "He's really good. Needs to study his rule book more carefully, but really good."

"I have a very good theoretical knowledge of rules," Malfoy informed Charlie, looking extremely pleased with himself. "Charles could have played for *England*," he told the members of Charlie's immediate family, and then made it clear why he was saying anything at all. "I've never seen *anybody* fly so well," he added, with an awed look up at Charlie and then a small, sideways sneer in Harry's direction. "It was *amazing*."

"Thank you," said Charlie, looking slightly flustered. "Um. I have to go."

Malfoy waved goodbye and Ron shouted out 'Good luck!' and Mrs Weasley and Ginny accompanied Charlie to the door. Once Charlie was gone, Malfoy looked solemn again: tired, pale, picking his toast to pieces in his hands instead of eating it, and focused on his task.

"We'll start after breakfast," he said.

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"Uh," said Harry. "Well. I used Dumbledore's, too. Why are you asking?"

Malfoy and Harry were sitting crosslegged in front of the Pensieve, which had been installed

in Charlie and Malfoy's - the *twins'* - room, beside the desk with the clock Malfoy was mangling on it. They were glaring at each other. Harry didn't know why Malfoy was glaring, other than his generally sour outlook on the world.

Harry was glaring because Malfoy had said "Aside from your *illicit peek* into Professor Snape's Pensieve, have you seen inside anyone else's Pensieve?" as if he was asking something perfectly filthy, and Harry saw no need for that sort of thing.

"When did you see Dumbledore's?" asked Malfoy, apparently able to say the name of the man who had been murdered for him without a trace of remorse.

"Once in fourth year, and a lot of times in sixth," Harry said. "He was showing me Tom Riddle - Voldemort, you know - his past, a lot of things about his past so I understood about Horcruxes and Voldemort and... Malfoy," he interrupted himself. "How did *you* know about Horcruxes?"

Malfoy looked disconcerted, then smirked. "Professor Snape dropped one of our enchanted coins in Dumbledore's room. We heard everything he said, all year. There were things he never told you, you know. He had a lot of secrets. What would you give to hear one of them?"

Harry looked out the window and away from Malfoy's horrible face, and thought with savage satisfaction of Hermione's Veritaserum, which would be ready in little more than a week. Then Malfoy would tell him anything Harry wanted to know.

"I wouldn't trust a word out of your mouth."

"Suit yourself," Malfoy said brightly. "That poor, poor man. I mean Dumbledore," he clarified, lingering over the name until Harry winced. "He showed you it a lot of things. He always thought too highly of you, didn't he, and he overestimated you again when he thought viewings of the Pensieve would let something of the mysteries of the human mind seep into your thick head."

"I see you belong to the Professor Snape school of teaching which involves making your students beat themselves to death with their textbooks to get away from you," Harry said wearily. "Look, Malfoy, I seriously doubt you have much to teach me-"

"Don't you dare get up!" Malfoy snapped. "You need to learn this, you've needed to learn this since *fifth year*, and unlike your precious Dumbledore, I don't intend to put up with your sulking. If I can sit and teach you while you're trying to kill my mother, you can sit down, shut up and learn!"

There was a moment in which Harry's overwhelming desire to hit Malfoy upside the head warred with the knowledge that this was their best opportunity to get rid of Nagini.

"Did you know you have a relative called Phineas Nigellus Black?" Harry asked, giving up.

"Yes," Malfoy said warily. "Why?"

Keeping his temper was almost worth it to see Malfoy look annoyed when Harry smiled an

innocent smile. "No reason."

They had another lovely moment of silent hateful staring. Then Malfoy breathed out hard through his nose.

"*Clearly*," he said, "you need to go through this step by step. So come on."

"Where're we going?" Harry asked.

"Step by step," Malfoy repeated, not answering Harry's question at all. He drew his wand, placed it at his temple and thought for a moment. Then he put his wand into the bowl, and it filled with a silvery liquid. He looked down at it, thoughtfully, said: "That'll do," put his wand in the Pensieve and tugged Harry's sleeve.

There was a moment of blurry, stomach-turning confusion, and then they were on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley, standing directly outside Madam Malkin's robe shop.

"We're looking at a memory of you going shopping?" Harry asked. "Wow, Malfoy, I knew you were kind of prissy, but this is going a bit far even for you."

Malfoy let go of Harry's sleeve and crossed his arms across his chest. "This is the first time we met," he informed him.

"I'm really touched," Harry said. "And I mean that. Why are we here, Malfoy? I know what happened here. If you don't recall, I was there."

Diagon Alley was familiar and bustling, from this year or six years ago or a hundred years ago, always the same. Malfoy still had his arms crossed over his chest, and for a moment Harry reflected that he was probably cold in that ridiculous T-shirt and served him right, until he realized they were not really outside.

"I know you were there," Malfoy snapped at him. "D'you really think I'd let *you* see any of my memories that you didn't already know about? God, Potter. They're private."

"Like I'd really want to see them anyway," Harry muttered.

For a moment Malfoy looked at him as if he was going to punch him, and Harry braced himself for a fist-fight before he and Malfoy had ever actually even met. Then he remembered Nagini, and Hermione's plan.

"So what were you planning to teach me?" Harry asked heroically.

"Well," Malfoy began, and stopped. "All right," he said in a slightly less combative tone. "D'you see the lamps and things in the windows there?"

"Yes," Harry said uncertainly.

"Right," Malfoy said, sounding encouraged, as if he'd expected Harry to be so dim he couldn't actually see things. "Well, d'you see, I'm all the way up the alley there."

He pointed and Harry squinted and made out three blond heads, one considerably closer to the ground than the others.

"Okay," he said doubtfully. "So what?"

"This is my memory, Potter," Malfoy reminded him. "I can't possibly see those lamps yet, and yet we can see them now. But I knew they were there, and I could see some shapes that reminded me of them, and when I did get close enough to them I saw that they *were* there. So people looking at my memory of this moment see what I remember, which isn't the same as seeing what I saw. D'you see how different a memory is than an experience - how different your mind makes something, as opposed to what really is?"

He made a sort of lamp or brain-shaped gesture with both hands, as if that would make Harry understand better. Harry chewed his lip.

"I think so," he said.

Malfoy looked very relieved. "Good! Once you understand that the mind is very complex - not yours, Potter, obviously, but most people's - you'll understand that to protect your mind, you have to form many levels of defence."

"It has to be sort of a strategy," Harry said slowly.

Malfoy nodded vigorously. "Yes, that's exactly - oh, how adorable."

He did not appear to be referring to the human brain or lamps, so Harry looked where he was looking, and saw that Lucius, Narcissa and eleven-year-old Draco Malfoy were approaching the robe shop. The sight of Lucius Malfoy set Harry's teeth on edge. Both the Malfoy parents looked a little bored.

"I don't see why I can't keep having you homeschool me, Mother," said eleven-year-old Malfoy, in a childish drawl that wasn't quite as cool as it meant to be, particularly since Malfoy's voice hadn't broken yet. "I'm sure you know as much as any old teachers."

"Your mother will have better things to do with her time, Draco," Lucius Malfoy remarked crushingly.

Little Malfoy looked conscious of the rebuke, but persisted. "Yes, but I don't *want* to learn with other children," he said. "I'm not *used* to them."

"Think of Crabbe and Goyle," Narcissa murmured.

"They're for holidays, not class," Malfoy informed her severely. "I'll be distracted from my lessons," he continued, watching his mother's face to see the effect of his dark predictions.

Harry didn't remember Malfoy ever being this young. It seemed unlikely.

"You'll get along marvellously with the other children," Narcissa told him distractedly. "Lucius, we're going to be late for our three o'clock lunch. If I pick up Draco's wand and you get his books and he gets his robes pinned by himself-"

"By myself?" exclaimed little titchy Malfoy.

"Certainly, by yourself," Lucius Malfoy said. "Your mother's quite right."

"I'll meet you outside," Narcissa murmured to him. She reached out as if she was going to touch tiny Malfoy's hair, but her fingers stopped short and her hand fell back to her side. Tiny Malfoy looked up at her and then squared his shoulders.

"I expect I can go in by myself," he said. "After all, it's only a *tradeswoman*."

Lucius Malfoy nodded sharply to his son, and then strode away with his wife in his wake. Malfoy went slowly into the robe shop, and normal-sized Malfoy and Harry followed him.

"Did you notice how you can hear everyone's conversations on the street though I wasn't paying attention to them at the time?" Malfoy asked. "You can piece things out of the subconscious that someone doesn't even realise they know."

"Er - yeah," said Harry. "I did notice that... very thing. So, um, so it's important to defend the subconscious as well," he guessed in a vain attempt to hide the fact he'd been quite absorbed by the Malfoys' inter-family dynamic.

"Half a point to Gryffindor," Malfoy told him, looking grudgingly impressed.

"Why half a point? What else should I have picked up on?"

"Oh - nothing," said Malfoy. "I just don't like Gryffindor."

Harry snorted and watched tiny Malfoy being high-handed with Madam Malkin. She could've murdered him and hid his eleven year old corpse in one of her capacious wardrobes and saved the world a lot of trouble.

Malfoy was swathed in robes and looked floppy and unimpressed with the world from his vantage point on a stool when the door opened again, and tiny Harry came in. Ron had been right all along: eleven year olds were freakish midgets. Harry didn't recall ever being that small, or that pale and sort of waifish looking.

"God," Malfoy said. "Were you... I don't remember you actually looking underfed."

Harry lifted a shoulder uncomfortably. Tiny Harry looked apprehensively about the dark shop, longingly at the door which Hagrid stood behind, and then ventured forward into the back. He had knock knees and his glasses were too big for his pinched little face. Harry would've felt sorry for him on the street and not wanted to meet his eyes - he didn't think of those days much. They didn't matter now.

Only someone should be taking care of that child, a voice in Harry's mind said.

He looked away from other Harry's small face and back at Malfoy. Malfoy was a weird looking little kid, he decided: it was lucky his face had become less pointed as he grew older.

He looked a bit like an inquisitive chihuahua.

He had his head tilted to one side and was regarding little Harry thoughtfully. Harry saw him square his shoulders again under the heaps of material, and clearly begin biding his time.

Once small Harry had become less small by means of a stool, small Malfoy picked his moment to strike. "Hullo," he said in a drawl that was clearly hopeful. "Hogwarts too?"

Little Harry cast him rather a panicked look. "Yes?"

Actually, Harry refused to believe his voice had ever sounded like that.

Malfoy's current voice, which had broken but which retained its quality of piercing drawl, said: "See how we can see the light behind my head, which obviously I am entirely unable to see? Layers of the mind, Potter. Remember. Of course, you couldn't go to Timbuctoo while still in my memory. After leaving the shop you might be able to go a few streets before the memory fades and you with it and out of it. The mind does have limits, but probably not the ones you think."

Harry was listening to tiny Malfoy talk about bullying his parents. It occurred to him for the first time that Lucius Malfoy was not the type who could possibly be bullied.

"Look at you," he mumbled. "Talking about smuggling in brooms... you were a little horror."

"Yes, I had such a fine smuggled broom," Malfoy said sharply. "No, wait - only one first year had a broom, and holy favouritism, that was you. I was clearly - grandstanding a little bit, and don't start on lying Slytherins with me, Potter, pay attention to the lesson."

Harry blinked and said, "Grandstanding - because I was Harry Potter, d'you mean?"

"Yes," said Malfoy. "As the first ever eleven year old Legilimens, I read your mind. Fear me, my powers are awesome: I will defeat you and the Dark Lord and reign in glory forever." He scowled and leaned back against the wall. "Could you actually drop your hobby of judging me for just ten minutes and try to focus?"

Tiny Malfoy chewed on his equally tiny lower lip and offered what he clearly considered to be a brilliant conversational gambit: "Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," said small Harry in a mortified deadpan tone.

Little Malfoy looked daunted but chattered onwards about how his father said it would be a crime if he wasn't picked for the house team. Malfoy *was* a little liar, Harry noticed, but it wasn't like Harry was going to judge Malfoy for pretending his father was proud of him. What the hell did Malfoy think of him, anyway.

"Oh my God, I am *so cute*," wailed Malfoy, apparently able to contain his perverted child-molesting narcissism no longer. "So cute. I don't know why you had to be so freaking rude, Potter, you social offence."

"I didn't know what you were *talking about*," Harry exclaimed, stung. "I had no idea what to

say."

"Mmm," said small Harry in response to one of small Malfoy's hopeful questions. His face looked shut down: Harry supposed he could see why it might've looked like a brush-off, particularly since small Harry had no subtlety and was looking at Malfoy with unconcealed distaste.

Little Malfoy, Harry noticed a bit guiltily, was looking distinctly taken aback. He looked about the robe shop slightly desperately, as if searching for inspiration, and perked up when his eyes lit on the window.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "Look at that man!"

"That's Hagrid," said small Harry, brightening. He had knowledge to impart, Harry thought with a sort of proprietary fondness. It was sweet. Not that small Malfoy appreciated it, of course, since he immediately started drawling about *servants* setting fire to their beds.

Malfoy, unabashedly partisan at this point, was cooing at his youthful counterpart.

"That's an astute little judge of character," he remarked. "Had my lapses now and then," he added, casting a baleful look at Harry, "but on the whole, very sound."

"Where are your parents?" asked little Malfoy chattily.

Midget Harry gave him a stony look and said: "They're dead."

Midget Malfoy's eyes widened fractionally, and then he said blankly, "Oh. Sorry."

"Such sweet sympathy," Harry commented. "Warms my heart."

"Oh, what was I supposed to say," Malfoy snapped. "I was eleven years old and not used to other children and you go around dropping non sequiturs like that into the conversation."

"Well, what was I supposed to say?" Harry demanded. "They *were* dead."

"I don't think there was any need to be so surly about it," Malfoy remarked peevishly.

Small Harry was at the edge of his stool furthest from small Malfoy, who was looking extremely discouraged and annoyed. Both of them looked relieved when Madam Malkin said Harry was done, and tiny Harry fairly launched himself from the stool.

Harry hadn't been aware that Malfoy had made a little face at him.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," small Malfoy drawled on like a trooper.

Small Harry disappeared behind the door at speed. Small Malfoy waited until his mother came to fetch him, and then he got off the stool and said: "Are you sure I can't be homeschooled?"

"I'm sure," Narcissa Malfoy said, casting a tender look at her son's head which he was too

short to see.

"Even if people hate me on sight?" demanded small Malfoy. "*Fine*, Mother."

Harry looked at Malfoy, and caught him staring wistfully at his mother. He snapped out of it in a second and caught Harry looking, and narrowed his eyes.

"The lesson ends here," Malfoy said, and took hold of Harry's jumper sleeve again. Harry let him pull him in his wake, mostly because staying in Malfoy's memory without Malfoy would be a little awkward and pointless, and they strode through Diagon Alley. "See how the streets get mistier and less detailed," Malfoy said, talking like a teacher again. "See the limits of memory and observation fade until finally the memory is unable to-"

He was cut off by their sudden presence in the twins' room, which led to Malfoy letting go of Harry's sleeve and both of them assuming positions on opposite sides of the Pensieve.

"Sustain itself," Malfoy finished. "There. D'you think you managed to learn anything at all?"

He stepped backwards until he was leaning against the wall and scowled as he had in the shadows of the robe shop, listening to a much younger Harry's monosyllabic replies.

Harry leaned forward, arms against his knees, and said honestly, "I think I did. It went... considerably better than all my lessons with Professor Snape."

Malfoy looked startled and gratified. Harry was oddly reminded of Malfoy winning that race and looking so pleased with himself.

He looked around the bedroom, at the pieces of mended clock, and thought of Hermione brewing Veritaserum and Malfoy stealing some of Harry's hair for purposes unknown and how *small* they'd been, and how seriously they'd taken themselves.

"Look," said Harry. "I'm sorry. I didn't get that you were trying to - make nice, or something, in your weird way. I wasn't all that used to social situations and I just thought you were a brat and actually I think I was right, but I didn't know I was right at the time, and I was a little... abrupt. So there."

"You're still abrupt," Malfoy pointed out.

"Obviously now," Harry said. "You've done stuff to deserve it now. You hadn't then. So."

"All right," Malfoy said.

They regarded each other warily, with narrowed eyes but less hostility than usual, and eventually Malfoy's eyes narrowed back into the normal amount of hostility.

"I can't hang around here all day," he said, rising. "We'll have another lesson tomorrow. For now I have to work on saving my mother. You remember - the one whose life you're holding hostage. Tell me, Potter," he continued, opening the door of his room, "Is it sheer jealousy that motivates you? You have no parents, so you try to murder other people's?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He just slammed the door.

*

"I wonder where Malfoy is," Hermione said thoughtfully, lifting her head from her book that afternoon.

Late August sunlight was oozing through the curtains, reminding Harry that there was a world out there away from this cage of useless uninformative information. He felt irritated at the very thought of Malfoy.

Hermione probably missed him because he was the only one pretending interest in the study plan, or possibly because he had stolen all her pens and she needed them back.

"Maybe he's with Ginny," he suggested dully.

Maybe he's touching her thighs some more, he thought but did not say because Ron would have had an embolism, and anyway it would have been besmirching Ginny's good name. She couldn't help it if she fell off her broom, or if Malfoy bought stupid clothes.

Harry turned a page and Hermione's head went up at the clean sound of it ripping.

"Oh *honestly*," she began, "is this about Ginny and Malfoy again? I told you he's not her type."

"Who's not whose type?" asked Malfoy, coming in at exactly the wrong moment with a book in his hand and Charlie grinning at his back. "Hail the conquering teacher. He made a lesson plan, a real lesson plan, and he's going to make Hagrid follow it. Aren't you, Professor?"

"Do not call me that," Charlie requested. "You are making me feel old."

Malfoy took a chair, apparently so he could tip back his head and laugh up at Charlie in comfort.

"If I wasn't so very expelled, you'd be teaching me in four days," he went on. "Professor."

"I said *stop*, Draco-" Charlie began, when Ron interrupted to ask Charlie how his day had gone.

Clearly Charlie wasn't all that upset with Malfoy, since he stayed leaning against the back of Malfoy's chair, Malfoy's uncut hair touching Charlie's folded arms, as he talked in a happy way about his lesson plan. It seemed to include extraordinary amounts of dragons.

"Oh," he said when he was done, "what was all that about types?"

"Nothing," Harry answered quickly. "I don't even believe people have types."

"I do," Malfoy said, clearly just wanting to contradict Harry and further make his life a misery, as was Malfoy's sacred calling. "Look around you, Potter. Look at Granger."

Everybody looked intently at Hermione. She looked rather flustered.

"She goes for the physical, outdoors type," said Malfoy. "Big shoulders, not her rivals in the academic world, but not incompetents. She doesn't fancy Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs. She wants whoever she's with to have power but not the same kind of power she does. That's why she asked that idiot Mc... Idiot-"

"McLaggen," said Ron, bristling at the thought of him.

"If you like," Malfoy said agreeably. "She asked him to the Christmas party instead of Zacharias Smith, the far more sensible choice. She's a complete sucker for the obvious - Gryffindor - type," he said, dwelling on every word for the malicious pleasure of seeing Ron go red.

He sank back against his chair, and enjoyed the effect.

Hermione went pink and hit back. "What about your type, Malfoy - those rumours true?"

Malfoy's mouth went thin. "None of your business, Granger."

The atmosphere suddenly chilly in the stifling room, people looking at their books as if they were interested in them while Harry wondered what those rumours could possibly be. He hadn't heard any rumours. Since he'd been trying to keep an eye on Malfoy all throughout sixth year, he would have thought that Hermione might have mentioned any rumours.

"Um," said Charlie, making a valiant effort to restore amity. "But, uh, but Harry says he doesn't believe in types. Can you have a type if you don't believe in it?"

"Oh yes," Malfoy returned, back to being the teacher's pet even though this wasn't a classroom and Charlie wasn't *his* teacher. "Of course. Let's examine his girlfriends."

Malfoy had been doing quite enough examining of Harry's girlfriend as it was, thank you.

"Cho and Ginny don't have anything in common," Harry said flatly, and knew that he was going red and Malfoy was smirking. "They didn't even look alike."

"*Naturally*, it's all about looks," Malfoy sneered. "Of course they're alike, are you blind? Both of them the centre of their little social whirl, both of them popular and playing for it. Always the ones to make their circle laugh, always with someone on their arms. Chang is a little more sensitive and attached to her friends and Ginny is braver, but... please. They both even played Quidditch. It's so obvious."

"He makes compelling points," Charlie said, grinning.

Harry glared at him and then returned his glare to Malfoy where it belonged, and was so richly deserved.

"I don't even know what you think you're saying," he began.

Malfoy grinned and spun the locket between his hands, flashing gold in the shadow between

his throat and chin, as if he was flipping a coin over and over in his palms.

"I'm saying you like the mouthy show-off type," he said. "And you don't even know it."

Chapter Nine

Not tiny (but still on the short side) Malfoy picked Pansy Parkinson up off her feet and twirled her around. Harry was kind of impressed: she was a little taller than he was. She laughed out loud as he did it, her pink frills whipping round them both as he executed another slow circle. He grinned cockily up at her and was obviously hugely pleased with himself.

Harry did not think it was fair that Malfoy had evidently had a better Yule Ball than he had.

The present Malfoy, taller and not currently twirling, got a firm grip on Harry's elbow and steered him away from his former self, left small forever and at the dance forever like a plant pressed in a book. He drew Harry across the floor over to the table where the drinks were available, and he knelt down, gestured to Harry to do the same, and together they peered under the tablecloth.

Under the table were Fred and Angelina, rolling about enthusiastically.

"My, these immoral Gryffindors," Malfoy said. "I call it shocking. Is that the evil twin, or the evil twin?"

"It's Fred," Harry muttered. "And he's Ron's brother, can we *not* see him snogging, please?"

Malfoy continued kneeling on the gleaming floor and looked overcome with smugness. "In just a minute, Potter," he said. "What are we *learning* from this memory?"

"Um," Harry said. "You're a pervert?"

"Not when it comes to the Weasley twins I'm not," said Malfoy. "Now, these two are engaging in Gryffindor preliminary mating rituals or whatever. Nobody's really lifted the table cloth. Watch me coming towards the table."

Smaller Malfoy was making his way determinedly through the crowds as Harry watched, looking pink from dancing and tugging at his high vicar's collar. He was holding Pansy Parkinson's hand and she was following in his wake like a helpless mass of frills caught in Hurricane Malfoy.

"I can't believe they spiked the punch!" he was saying excitedly. "Let's have some more."

"Er, Draco. I don't think it's spiked," Pansy told him.

Harry leaned against the drinks table and said: "It wasn't, you know."

"Shut up, learn and it was too," Malfoy said.

Crabbe and Goyle, dressed in green so they looked like well-forested mountains, were already standing uneasily by the drinks table. Malfoy nodded to them as he got himself and Pansy some drinks.

"Now, don't worry, Pansy," he said grandly. "Even if you become intoxicated, I promise not

to take advantage of you."

Crabbe and Goyle both looked puzzled, and Pansy gave a despairing shrug. "He thinks the punch is spiked," she said. "Er. You know how he gets when he has sugary things."

Smaller Malfoy opened his mouth, clearly about to protest indignantly, and then a small sound caught his attention and he looked down at the end of the tablecloth, which was stirring slightly.

"If you people want something that's *really* spiked," said an unfamiliar voice, "follow *me*."

Harry glanced at the face mostly obscured by Crabbe's shoulder, and recognised Blaise Zabini. He didn't ever really recall noticing Blaise Zabini at age fourteen, he'd just been a tall annoying part of Malfoy's crowd who was less weedy than Theodore Nott.

He remembered Malfoy at Bill's wedding, saying that he was no Blaise Zabini when it came to looks. Harry supposed Zabini was all right looking. Actually, he was taller and had a lot more poise than smaller Malfoy: Harry wondered for a moment why everyone always followed in Malfoy's wake, and supposed that the Slytherins must choose a leader based on sheer obnoxiousness.

To prove his point, Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy all looked at smaller Malfoy. Malfoy tilted his head and said, "Why not?"

Zabini's date, some redhaired girl Harry recognised vaguely as part of Pansy's crowd, came to his side and the Slytherins all turned and headed for the doors of the Great Hall, Malfoy in the lead even though he couldn't know where they were going.

"Now have we picked up anything from this?" asked present day Malfoy, being deliberately condescending while still on his knees. He looked strange sitting on the floor in his ratty jeans, with his backdrop the students in dress robes and all the glittering lights of the Yule Ball.

Harry exhaled. "No, but it'll be much more fun for you to look superior and tell me."

"I *didn't* see Johnson and Weasley," said Malfoy. "I did not know that they were there. I heard a rustle which, when I looked at this memory again years later, made me think that there might be someone under the table. I didn't even think of that at the time, and until I looked just now I had no idea who they were. Yet subconsciously I knew who was in the room, who had left via which doors, who was left but not visible. So by getting into my brain anyone can find out things I don't even know that I know. Things that I have no way of knowing that I know. Can you think of any other time in a Pensieve when you've received information that the person did not actually know they had?"

Harry thought through all the times he had seen inside Dumbledore's Pensieve and came up with nothing, and then recalled Snape's memory.

"Yeah, I did," he said. "I heard a whole conversation that the person whose memory it was didn't hear. There was information in there - important information that the person didn't know."

Like that Lupin was a werewolf. Snape only knew that later.

"Good, see, that's an *excellent* example," Malfoy said, his eyes gleaming. "I bet the person was close enough to make out some sounds, though. Sounds that his subconscious was able to put together to make a conversation when you approached them. There are the things that you know, and the things you realize later that you know, and the things you *don't* know but which people can find out if they have access to your mind. Occlumency means you have to protect yourself on all these levels. You have to protect knowledge you have no way of knowing you have."

Harry leaned forward, resting his arms against his knees, and said: "It's a bit of a tall order, Malfoy."

"Yes, Potter, learning is hard and life wasn't meant to be easy. Go and sulk somewhere because the world's not fair," Malfoy sneered, mildly enough for Malfoy.

Harry shook his head, got to his feet and met Cedric Diggory's eyes.

Cedric stood against the bright lights of the ball and looked right through him, grey eyes smiling at someone who was really there, Cho snuggled up to his side. Harry was startled to realise that they were the same height.

Harry was the same age, now, as Cedric had been when he died.

"Potter, you can't adopt your usual method of tuning out while education happens to other people. You are the *only student* I am teaching." Malfoy got to his feet as well, and when Harry pulled his gaze from Cedric's face to Malfoy's, Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "What were you looking at?"

"What'd you call him on your badges?" Harry asked, feeling tired suddenly. "The real Hogwarts champion."

There was a small pool of silence in the midst of all the lights and noise of memory.

"Right," Malfoy said at last. "D'you - let's go then, my old self has left already and I think we're done here."

Harry turned his eyes away from Cedric, moving through the crowds with the bright assurance of someone with his whole life ahead of him, and said to distract himself from thoughts of death: "Did you really get drunk at the Yule Ball?"

"I was already drunk," Malfoy told him. "Because the punch was *spiked*."

"Right," Harry said. "I forgot."

When he'd been fourteen, he had not slipped off for spots of illicit drinking. He'd been too busy trying not to get turned into charred lumps by dragons. He looked around for his younger self, and saw himself looking small and rather cowed as Parvati Patil talked animatedly to a French boy and gave him filthy looks.

"See how-" Malfoy began.

"Yes, I can see it happening even though *you* couldn't see it happening, human brain, fascinating and complex," Harry said.

"Well, this is true, but actually what I was going to say was 'see how pathetic you were, Potter?' Oooh, girls, they have cooties," Malfoy said. "I need to go sneak away outside with my best friend Weasley, maybe we can play a jolly game of conkers!"

"What were you doing that was so cool," Harry inquired. "Besides being drunk on sugar?"

"The punch was spiked, I keep telling you!" Malfoy exclaimed. "Wait. Where are you going?"

Harry walked across the gleaming marble floor. He did not want to think about how he was beginning to understand what he had to do to shield his mind, and how impossibly huge the task would be. He did not want to think about Cedric Diggory, who had been the first but not the last to die.

He pushed through the doors of the Great Hall and down into the dungeons, where Slytherins would naturally head, but nothing in the memory of the Great Hall had faded so Malfoy had to be quite close still - and he saw the chink of light from an ajar door.

"Potter, seriously, don't go in there," Malfoy commanded, as Harry went in there.

Inside was Pansy Parkinson, shyly undoing the front of her dress robes to show her bra. Harry immediately clapped his hands over his eyes.

"Oh my God!"

"I told you," Malfoy pointed out. "Also don't you dare look at her."

It was a fine time for Malfoy to be getting modest and protective, when Pansy was showing her bra to a crowd of Slytherins, all of whom were giggling. Harry risked a look: fourteen year old girl still in her bra, and Blaise Zabini passed her a large bottle.

Pansy took it and tipped it up, then surfaced wiping her mouth. "Where'd you get this, anyway?"

Zabini looked pleased to be asked. "*Professor* Hagrid's hovel."

Everyone giggled. Zabini looked even more coolly and immensely pleased with himself.

"Good one," younger Malfoy said, smirking, and Pansy came up to him and gave him the bottle.

He took it and slung his arm around Pansy's bare shoulders, then glanced anxiously but very swiftly into her face. Pansy smiled and leaned against him. Younger Malfoy tipped up the bottle and almost immediately came up choking and grimacing.

He gasped for air and choked out, "Smooth."

"*Really* smooth," Harry said.

Malfoy leaned against the wall, watching his younger self with eyes full of perverse disturbing narcissism, and gave Harry the finger.

"I can't believe *Professor* Hagrid took an actual woman to the dance," younger Malfoy was saying. "I was expecting a griffin called Melinda." He passed the bottle to the redhaired girl Harry didn't know and began to do a little dance, shaping his hands over the enormous bulky wings Pansy did not, in fact, have. "All ri', Melinder?" he asked in an unexpectedly good impression of Hagrid's accent. "No, no, I don't mind your big chompin' teeth at all. 'S a matter o' fact, I like 'em. And if you get a bit peckish, feel free to help yourself t'snacks any time. Wait, those aren't snacks, they're my students! Oh well, same diff'rence, righ'?"

Harry was indignant all right, but he was a bit intrigued by the way the other Slytherins all started laughing properly now, instead of giggling a bit furtively.

Pansy was laughing and leaning against him, and younger Malfoy kept glancing at her bra. He tried to conceal it with a quick impression of Flitwick cutting a rug on the dance floor.

She shrieked when he spun her in and out, doing Flitwick's tiny rapid steps, and he said in a high voice: "They say it's what you do with it that counts!" and all the Slytherins laughed and laughed.

Except Zabini, who did smile, but who did not look best pleased.

Pansy shrieked with laughter, and when Malfoy spun her out and then back in again she leaned against him, young and drunk, half in and half out of a dress that looked like a stupid pink birthday cake, and kissed him clumsily on the mouth.

"All right, Potter," Malfoy said abruptly. "That's enough. I'm teaching you, that doesn't mean you get to see my first snog. Come on."

He grabbed Harry's arm more viciously than was necessary, which served as a helpful reminder that Malfoy was not all little imitations and getting drunk on sugar. Harry scowled at him and felt a bit better as the world dissolved around them and the Slytherins' laughter faded away.

Once they were back in Malfoy's room - the *twins'* room, Harry reminded himself sharply, the twins' room, Malfoy was an *invader* - he found that he had lost his scowl in the gap between memory and reality. He and Malfoy stood there looking at each other over the bowl of the Pensieve.

"The Flitwick impression," Harry said slowly. "It wasn't bad."

"It was genius," Malfoy informed him, but he looked vaguely startled.

If the silence continued, someone was going to snap. At the other person. Just because that

was easier.

"So," Harry said. "Um. Zabini doesn't like you much, does he?"

Of course even something as innocent as that apparently made Malfoy's eyes narrow, since Malfoy was always bound and determined to be unpleasant. "What d'you mean?" he said in a clipped voice.

"Well," Harry said. "Well, it was obvious, wasn't it? He wanted everyone to pay attention to him, and everyone was looking at you."

"What?" Malfoy asked, his voice still sharp. "Potter, everyone's been saying it for years but I think it bears repeating: you're crazy. Zabini's my friend. *You're* the one who doesn't like me. Leave it alone."

He twitched and then shrugged as if he was trying to shake Harry off him, and Harry remembered something he had said a few weeks ago, in the kitchen: *I'm done with you.*

"The lesson was - fine," Malfoy said curtly when he was at the door. "You may not be quite as irredeemably stupid as Professor Snape always feared. Or possibly I'm just a very, very gifted teacher."

"Come on," Harry said. "We need to get through a dozen more books today."

*

One book down, which left eleven to go, and then he could go to bed and wake up all ready for another day of God help him books and God help him lessons with Malfoy.

God *really* help him, because he was beginning to look forward to the lessons a little bit. At least something happened during the lessons, at least he was accomplishing something, and he and Malfoy hardly tried to kill each other at all.

So far he'd seen Madam Malkin's shop, the Quidditch World Cup, and now the Yule Ball. It was funny how things looked different, seen from outside and over the distance of several years.

"Book number three. And I think I want to kill myself," Ron said. "Don't try to stop me, Hermione."

"Don't mess up my books," Hermione said absently, and then actually wrenched herself from her world of text to say severely, "That isn't funny, either."

Ron scrubbed a hand through his hair and it stood up as if he was a redheaded porcupine. "It was a little bit."

All this reading was just making Hermione glow with serene inner light, Harry thought, while he and Ron were definitely feeling the strain. As for Malfoy, he was - worried about his mother, and apparently so temperamental he fell apart at the first sign of stress, and he looked like hell.

He glanced over at Malfoy, who appeared to be pulling his own hair to keep awake, and who had violet shadows under his eyes.

Malfoy younger didn't have any shadows under his eyes. He didn't look so wretched, either. He just stood there half-smiling and looking nervous and pleased while Pansy Parkinson curved her mouth towards his own.

Well, life was not exactly spectacular for Harry right now either, Harry thought with sudden annoyance at himself, and flipped another page. And he'd had a crap Yule Ball, as well.

Ron went for a sandwich after a few hours and took Hermione with him by force, because by force was the only way she could be removed from the study room these days. Harry kept reading for approximately three seconds after they were gone, and then he drummed his fingers on the table, shut his book and said: "So, who was-"

"If you get to ask me a question I get to ask you one," Malfoy said sharply. "You're invading my privacy enough already. It's only fair."

"Wh - oh, *fine*," Harry said. "Even though all I was going to ask was who was the redhaired girl with Zabini. She looked familiar."

Harry shifted uncomfortably and fixed his gaze on the window behind Malfoy's head. There was no call for Malfoy to stare at him like that.

"Oh, she looked familiar, did she?" Malfoy said. "Probably because she's been in class with you six years. Honestly, Potter, do you live in some kind of bubble?"

"No," Harry snapped. "It was just a question, sorry I asked-"

"Her name is Daphne Greengrass," Malfoy informed him in exaggeratedly kindly tones. "Zabini's first name is *Blaise*. My name is *Draco*-"

"I know your name!"

"I'm honoured and touched," said Malfoy. "D'you know any Slytherin girls' names?"

"I know Pansy Parkinson," Harry answered, glaring while Malfoy smirked.

Malfoy's smirk softened suddenly, becoming something almost like a real smile. "Well. She is the best of them."

"I know - Millicent Bulstrode."

"And the rest is embarrassed and shameful silence," Malfoy remarked at length. "You're such a freak, Potter. I swear to God."

"Forget it," said Harry, and opened his book, and concentrated on the text and not on seething. Bloody Slytherins, they insulted you if you tried to take an interest, they insulted you for any reason at all.

"My turn now," Malfoy said with great satisfaction. "That was the deal."

"Wh - fine," Harry said, slamming his book shut. Malfoy propped his chin on his fist and regarded him with wide, curious, childlike eyes, which he was clearly doing with intent to infuriate. "Fine, ask me something as burningly important as Daffy Greengrass' stupid name. Knock yourself out."

"I believe the deal was that I could ask *any question I wanted*," Malfoy disagreed, and then looked even more wide-eyed. "Or aren't you a man of your word, Potter?"

"I actually don't have words to express how irritating you are," Harry said.

Malfoy looked bizarrely complimented. He continued to sit quietly for a while, with his innocent stare and his malicious little brain obviously working overtime, and then he said: "When you saw all that stuff in the Pensieve about the Dark Lord. I mean, obviously I heard it, because of the enchanted coins Snape so kindly popped in there-" he smirked briefly, and then paused. "The Dark Lord," he said. "What was he like, when he was human? I mean, he must have changed, there must have been a reason my f- people thought it was a good idea to..." He glared at Harry suddenly as if it was Harry's fault he was having problems expressing his thoughts, and said lamely, "I just wondered what he was like."

Harry blinked. "Well," he said. "Er."

Malfoy did not appear seem to be actively mocking him. Harry had no idea how to deal with this entirely unprecedented situation.

"Well, he - looked different, for one thing," Harry said slowly. "I suppose that some people might've been more likely to listen to him and follow him because he was really good-looking-"

Malfoy cut Harry off with an incredulous snort of laughter.

"Pardon?"

"I was just trying to answer your stupid question," Harry snapped.

Malfoy was doing a very half-hearted job of hiding his smirk with one hand. "Mmm, oh yes, yes you did," he assured Harry. "I think that's fascinating - I really, I really do." He looked at Harry an instant longer and then cracked up. "Would you," he said, sniggering. "Would you describe yourself and the Dark Lord as *star-crossed*?"

Harry felt himself go red. "Stop laughing, Malfoy - I - it's not funny, for God's sake, nothing about Voldemort is-"

Malfoy was still laughing into his palm. "D'you, d'you think that if you and he had met under different circumstances, you could have made it work?"

Entirely against his own will, Harry's mouth twitched. "Malfoy, I can't believe you're-"

"Ron, if you get crumbs on the library books I'll - tell Madam Pince you did it," Hermione said as they came in, Ron armed with a sandwich that appeared to be a mountain between two slices of bread. She stopped on the threshold and looked quizzically from Harry's face to Malfoy's. "Something funny?" she asked doubtfully.

"Nothing at all!" gasped Malfoy, and put his head in his hands and howled.

Harry almost knocked his chair backwards getting up. "I'm going to get a sandwich too," he muttered. "It was my fault for asking about that stupid Daffy's name anyway-"

"Do you mean Daphne Greengrass?" Hermione asked. "What about her?"

Malfoy lifted his flushed face from his arms and drawled, "Actually, she prefers to be called Queenie. It's a sweet little nickname."

"It's a Slytherin little nickname," Harry said.

"Well," Malfoy replied, looking proud. "That too."

Harry gave up and left the room.

*

He really wished he had not when he stepped into the kitchen just as Mrs Weasley said: "It's not too late, Ginny. Arthur can run you up in the car anytime you like, you'll only have missed a day of school-"

"No," Ginny said flatly. "I won't go anywhere. Harry needs my *help*-"

"He hasn't asked for your help!" Mrs Weasley snapped. "What can you do to help him? You're not doing anything, you're just sitting around here when you could be learning to defend yourself better, be protected by Professor McGonagall and-"

"I don't want to be protected!" Ginny snapped. "I want to fight!"

Harry saw Mrs Weasley's face go pale at the thought. They were standing staring at each other across the kitchen table, eyes on a level, both bursts of red hair lit by sunlight, and Harry realized for the first time, looking at their set expressions, that Ginny and her mother looked an awful lot alike.

Feeling acutely uncomfortable, he tried to walk backwards and get out of the kitchen as fast as possible, and then his back hit the doorframe and both of them turned and fixed him with steely eyes.

Harry did not know what he had done to deserve the wrath of the Weasley women falling upon him.

"Harry," Ginny said, advancing on him. "Don't you think I should stay?"

"Don't you think she should go somewhere safe?" Mrs Weasley asked.

"Hogwarts safe?" Ginny demanded. "You must be joking. I would've been killed in my first year if not for Harry! Death Eaters got in last year!"

"Because of Malfoy," Harry said. "Who's here. And Voldemort won't be targeting Hogwarts anymore, not without me and Dumbledore there. There are a lot of teachers there who will be doing their best to protect the students and no reason for you to be in danger - I - I think you should go."

"There!" said Mrs Weasley, panting. "There! Ginny, don't you see, you have to - Bill's already been almost killed and we never see Percy, I don't know what could be happening to him... and Ron's always going to stand by Harry and - and you're my *little girl* and I just want you to be *safe*!"

"I don't care about being safe!" Ginny exploded. "I'll always stand by Harry, too."

She stood staring them both down, hands in fists at her sides, hair curling back from her flushed, defiant face, and then abruptly she burst into tears.

"Oh my God," said Harry.

Ginny determinedly fended off her mother's attempts at comfort, and sobbed and rubbed her arm vigorously across her face as if she could wipe her expression away and be self-possessed underneath.

"I thought," she said. "When you broke up with me, I thought you were just trying to be noble, I thought you'd *see* in time, if I stuck by you - I mean, You-Know-Who didn't come after me because I was your best friend's sister, Lucius Malfoy came after me because I was Dad's daughter! You've never put me in any danger before, and if you did now, it would just be the same danger Ron and Hermione are facing. Because they love you. And *I* love you! And if you could just trust me, the way you trust them-"

She put her face in her hands for a brief, short burst of crying, and then stopped herself by twisting her lips fiercely together.

Harry just wanted to die. He'd never expected a girl to confess love in front of her *mum*, and he didn't like seeing Ginny cry, he didn't want to hurt her anymore than he clearly already had. He'd just - he'd broken up with her because he had to, that was all.

"Ron and Hermione have been - we've all been relying on each other since we were eleven," he said. "I mean, that's important. This is important, too, I can't think about romantic stuff right now-"

"Because it's not as important," Ginny said in a low voice.

"No," Harry said. "No it's not."

"Friendship's that important, though," Ginny went on shakily. "Ron and Hermione are that important to you, they're *essential* to you. And *romantic stuff*," she repeated his words with a

scathing intonation, "That can be essential too. Bill needs Fleur, Tonks needs Lupin but when things got serious you didn't need me, you wanted to put me off as if I was - as if we were a game, something stupid to do in peacetime like - like *Quidditch*!"

"You're important to me," Harry said, wincing. "You are. Only."

He did not want Ginny in danger, and he did not want Ginny along for any battles. She thought of them in a romantic way, in a way that meant she hadn't been there when Dumbledore fell off the tower or when Ron and Hermione had stood by him in the Shrieking Shack, when they were thirteen, and said that if anyone wanted to kill Harry they would have to kill them too. She didn't quite understand and that made her not take things seriously, made her careless sometimes, like when she'd almost got hit last year. She thought it was all going to be courage and heroic action - of course she did, Harry thought loyally, she was brave - but right now all they could do was stare helplessly at mouldy old books, and Ginny had never once offered to help.

"You know what? The hell with both of you," Ginny said. She'd stopped crying, by now, and crossed her arms defensively over her chest. "I'm going to stay here and I'm going to help, and neither of you can stop me!"

Harry had not noticed when the door to the Burrow was eased open, and the slight embarrassed cough was what brought him to the awareness that in the kitchen entrance, with early September sunlight soft around them, stood Lupin and Tonks.

"Ah - bad time?" asked Lupin.

"I - excuse me," Ginny said abruptly, and rushed out, banging the door behind her.

Harry was overcome with inexpressible relief to see Lupin, always more grey and tired every time he saw him, but smiling, looking quietly happy with his body angled towards but not touching Tonks', and hers doing the same.

Lupin was the last part of the past left, the last friend of his parents, the only one who had always been loyal and lived. And Harry was feeling bruised and tired from what Ginny had said and the weight of all these tasks, and now Lupin was here. He'd told Harry that he would have wanted to write, if he could have.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Good to see you, Harry," said Lupin. "Are you keeping well?"

"Doing all right," Harry lied awkwardly. "I - come in."

"I'll make us all a cup of tea," offered Mrs Weasley, smoothing out her agitated expression like an ironed shirt and remembering her duties as hostess.

Lupin went to sit in a chair by the empty fire, looking extremely relieved to be resting and looking pretty much the definition of 'run ragged.' Tonks sat crosslegged on the hearth, her pink head leaning slightly in Lupin's direction, one of her restless hands with chewed, painted fingernails playing with the patch on Lupin's left elbow. He saw her doing it and they shared

a small smile.

"Actually, I don't like tea much," Tonks said. "I drank buckets of it last year because I was - oh God, I'm embarrassing - pining like an idiot for some guy, but could I get a coffee?"

Since the arrival of Malfoy the kitchen permanently smelled like coffee anyway, so Tonks must know her chances were pretty good.

Mrs Weasley fixed them all tea and Tonks made her own coffee, bustling around the kitchen and upsetting the sugar. She took it black with four sugars like Malfoy did.

"Um, Ginny seemed a little upset," Tonks whispered once she sat down again, in what she might have fondly imagined to be a conspiratorial whisper. "I'll just - I'll just go see if she's OK, shall I?"

Clutching her coffee cup and leaning briefly against Lupin once she had stood up, hip to shoulder, she marched off on her errand of mercy. Harry moved his chair closer to Lupin's.

"It's really good to see you," he said. "How's, um-"

'Spying among the werewolves' sounded terrible, as did 'working for Fenrir Greyback.' Probably because it *was* terrible, and Harry wished he could say something that would help or at least not be impossibly awkward.

Lupin smiled. "Don't worry about me, Harry. You've got enough on your plate, and you're handling it very well. One Horcrux in the Burrow and a plan to get another - Hermione Owled me all about the plan to kill Nagini. I came as soon as I could to give you all the information I have."

Harry felt a brief twinge of disappointment that Lupin had not simply wanted to see him, but that was swallowed with the warm promise of possibly being able to *do something* for a change.

"Right," he said, leaning forward.

"I don't know where Voldemort's headquarters are, but he certainly is working from one base and he has been for some time," Lupin said, leaning forward, eyes intent. "It's mentioned quite a bit among the Death Eaters - pointedly letting us know that things are being kept from the werewolves, that they are not being fully admitted into the fold. I *do* know that every full moon, Voldemort comes to us to gloat over his pack of werewolves, guide them towards what he wants them to do and - gives them victims. He doesn't take Nagini with him. She's left behind at the headquarters, left to her own devices and as unprotected as she ever is. I'll try to find out where Voldemort is based, and then, you'll know the time to strike."

Harry's hand clenched, thinking of the sword under his bed upstairs.

"A Metamorphmagus? That's *brilliant*," said Malfoy. "There hasn't been a Metamorphmagus in the Black family since Elladora Black, and she was born in 1850. My Great Aunt Walburga's diary records the strain as having died out. Can you-"

He and Tonks came through the door, looking very pleased about something. Standing side by side, Harry could see they had the same sort of distinctive pallor, but they didn't have another feature in common, just a general air of vitality and a habit of making hand gestures as they talked. Since they were both talking and in a state of obvious excitement, it looked a bit like they were playing a game of Pat A Cake.

"Remus, look who's here," Tonks said. "And staying with the Weasleys - so that must mean-" She tried again. "It's my cousin Draco! Aunt Cissy was Mum's favourite sister, you know, before she... well. Isn't this great? Of course I know who he *is*, but I'd never met him before."

"But, Nymphadora Tonks, you were a Beater, weren't you?" Draco asked. "It's in the team records, taken off the team for dropping your bat on the audience one too many times-"

"You were *in Slytherin*?" Harry demanded.

Tonks blinked at him and smiled cheerfully. "Oh, yeah. My mum's old house, natch. I mean, no offence, Harry, but who'd want to be in any other house? They're crap, really. Nobody else has won the Quidditch Cup *seven years in a row*!"

She and Malfoy did a small air punch at each other. Harry wondered why Lupin did not immediately tell Tonks that it could never work between them.

He also wondered why Tonks was being such an idiot, although the fact she was a Slytherin might explain that. Malfoy was clearly desperate to batten onto anything like family, but did she honestly imagine that he would do anything but sneer and call her Dad a Mudblood if he was in his usual state of perfect aristocratic security?

Malfoy's face changed suddenly, lips curling back from his teeth, and for a moment Harry thought he'd just realised he'd been consorting amiably with a half-blood and was about to spit in her coffee.

"You," he said instead to Lupin, and took two sharp steps back. Whenever Malfoy turned pale he looked almost grey.

Harry looked at Lupin to see if Lupin was doing anything in particular, but Lupin was just sitting there, watching Malfoy with eyes in which the pupils were large and black, the irises narrow strips of colour around them.

"What's he doing here?" Malfoy demanded, his voice getting higher. "He eats people!"

Tonks stepped smartly away from Malfoy and then almost dashed towards Lupin and tumbled against his chair, as if she was rushing to cover his ears. Lupin leaned his head briefly against her arm.

"I," he said. "There are reasons besides simply being a werewolf that make me - not fit to be with you."

"Shut up, you silly idiot," Tonks snapped. "Don't you think I know what you have to do? I'm not a child. I'm an Auror. I know, and it doesn't change anything."

Malfoy had his back pressed against the doorframe. He was shaking.

"You *know*?" he demanded. "He - him - I saw him, at a meeting. He's the worst of the lot besides Greyback. He has Professor Snape brew him a Wolfsbane Potion so that he's conscious throughout the whole thing. Because he wants to be aware of what he's doing when the Dark Lord throws his-" Malfoy's mouth worked. "Throws the people he's displeased with," he continued in a low tone. "To the wolves."

Lupin's eyes were hollow and grey as the empty grate.

"That's true," he said quietly. "If I am conscious, I can differentiate between consuming the ones Voldemort is throwing to the wolves alive, and those which he has killed already."

How brave, Harry thought. How impossibly, terrifyingly brave, to take the Potion knowing that he would remember everything, to choose the Potion as the lesser of two evils even though Lupin knew he would be aware through everything and have to do all that - *eat people*, Malfoy had said with a look of white horror, *he eats people* - knowing that if he showed even a hint of hesitation, everyone would turn against him. This was the task Dumbledore had given Lupin, this was what he was still doing now Dumbledore was gone.

How brave.

And still, Harry could not repress thoughts of a seething pack of werewolves, the wild eyes and fangs Harry had only seen once stretching on to infinity, and Voldemort throwing screaming people and sagging corpses down to them. He thought of the circle of Death Eaters who had surrounded him once, and about how it would be if snarling and the sounds of tearing flesh were combined with the sound of Voldemort laughing.

Harry hated himself for it, but he would not have wanted to go near Lupin, just for that moment.

"Leave him alone," he ordered Malfoy. "He has to take the Potion. He doesn't want to kill anyone."

Malfoy was clearly not listening, since he was busy looking even paler and being on the point of panic. Harry wondered for a moment if he might faint, but instead he bolted. They all heard him crashing upstairs in the silence.

"Can young Malfoy really be trusted with the information that I am a spy?" Lupin asked.

"I - we think so," Harry said. "He's not going back to Voldemort: wants to save his own skin." He bit his lip, and added: "He's apologised for some things. Not enough, but still."

"So there's absolutely no chance he might pass the information on to Professor Snape, who was apparently been acting as his protector all summer?" Lupin's voice made Harry feel as if he was back at school and thirteen years old again.

"I'm sorry," Harry muttered. "I'll ask him not to. I just, it's not fair for anyone to judge you like that."

"It doesn't matter what anyone thinks of me," Lupin said. "What matters is that we get the job done and we do not take any unnecessary risks. You have to remember that, Harry. An incautious word could cost you your life, or the life of someone you love. This is your first war. If you have another, God forbid, you will know from experience that there is never any excuse to drop your guard."

"Sorry, Professor," mumbled Harry, and then felt like an idiot.

Tonks was still leaning against Lupin's chair, touching his hair with slow, loving hands, so unlike the abrupt clumsy way she touched everything else. It occurred to Harry that so much of Lupin's hair had gone grey that it looked brindled now. Like a wolf's.

He was grateful to Tonks, even if she was a Slytherin.

"I can't stay," Lupin said after a moment. "I have to account for every minute to Greyback." He hesitated, and then said: "It was good to see you, Harry. Stay well." He added, quietly: "Please."

He stood up and Harry looked at him for a moment, then Lupin went up to him and put his arm around Harry for a moment, and it was easy not to think of bodies being ripped apart by sharp teeth, or at least it was doable. Lupin smelled like books and tea and clothes, worn by sun and time.

He stepped away and took Tonks' hand. "Thank you for having us, Molly."

"Wotcher, Harry," said Tonks, and winked as they went.

Lupin paused at the door to say: "I'll let you know as soon as I have any information. And after that, Harry - good luck."

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Soon after Tonks and Lupin had left, Charlie arrived and Mrs Weasley put dinner on the table, and Harry was spared having to go to the study again. He knocked elbows with Malfoy trying to get the plates down from the high shelf.

"Lay off Lupin," Harry snapped.

"Just get out of my way," Malfoy snarled. "Or - no, fine, take the plates. Be my guest, Potter, and be about your menial business."

He threw up his hands and left Harry with the plates, wandering over to where Ginny was sitting in the summer dress he'd bought for her, looking at her knees.

"Can't make it to the kitchen table under your own speed, Girl Weasley?" he asked, with the potential for malice behind his light voice.

Ginny did not seem to take offence, though. She looked up at Malfoy and then over his shoulder, did not quite meet Harry's eyes, and after a moment she held out her hands.

"No," she said definitely, and smiled up at him. "Can't walk. You'll have to carry me."

Malfoy's voice sounded suddenly more relaxed, and considerably more amused. "All right, then," he said, and he put his hands on Ginny's waist and lifted her, against his hip, off the draining board. She rested her arms comfortably on his shoulder and Malfoy carried her as if she weighed nothing. Harry listened to the low murmur of Malfoy's voice and Ginny laughing, and almost broke a glass in his hand.

Malfoy was stronger than he looked, the skinny wretch. He put Ginny down in her chair and then smoothed her napkin in her lap while Ginny smiled and Mrs Weasley beamed at his beautiful manners.

Harry cut his steak into tiny pieces of rage.

"Harry," Ron said. "Mate. I think it's dead already."

"Is nobody going to ask me how my first day went?" Charlie inquired pathetically.

"How did your first day go, sweetheart?" Malfoy asked promptly, the corners of his mouth tilted towards a smile.

Charlie tossed a breadroll at him and Malfoy caught it.

"Since you asked, it went brilliantly," Charlie said. "Apparently nobody signed up for Care of Magical Creatures NEWTS - uh, again - but then a few girls decided they would change their minds. I promised to protect them from Hagrid."

"You're so manly, Charles," said Malfoy, buttering the previously-airborne bread roll.

"God help us, my brother's the new Professor Firenze," Ron announced.

"*He's* a very interesting chap," Charlie said energetically, letting all innuendo fly blithely over his head. "He's promised to give a lecture about centaurs to my new sixth years, providing I make it clear that he is in no way a creature to be taken care of."

"An educational lecture in Care of Magical Creatures," Malfoy remarked wistfully. "It's like a dream, it's too beautiful to be real."

"I'm sure you're wonderful, darling," Mrs Weasley said, beaming. "And a teacher - well, it's a nice settled job, isn't it, not like flying around Roumania on great big fiery animals. A steady job in England and you can start thinking about getting *married*, Charlie-

"I'm not going to get married, Mum," Charlie said, going brilliant red.

"Well," Mrs Weasley allowed. "You're young yet, but Bill met Fleur when he was younger than you are now. Ah, Fleur," Mrs Weasley sighed. "She promised to write to me the moment she suspected - well!"

"*Mum*," Charlie and Ron exclaimed in direst agony.

Hermione began to talk loudly about her research in an effort to drag everyone's mind away from Mrs Weasley's contemplation of 'undreds and 'undreds of grandbabies.

"I hear I missed Lupin and Tonks," Charlie said. "That's a pity. If you're so keen to get people married off, Mum, ask him when he's going to pop the question. My guess'd be approximately two seconds after all this is over."

Hermione and Mrs Weasley smiled in a soppy sort of way. Malfoy made an awful face.

"What, my cousin?" he said. "Marry someone who *eats people*?"

"Give it a rest, Malfoy!" Harry barked.

Malfoy's gaze homed in on him like a bird that had spotted its prey and was coming down on it out of a clear sky.

"I will not. You didn't see it," he pursued. "They're - they're a lot of baying animals and he's just standing there laughing and they threw someone down and you could *hear the sounds of them eating her*-"

Ron abruptly put down his fork.

Harry stood up and slammed his fist down on the table. The knives and forks jumped like silver fish in the air and then landed with a clatter.

"Yeah?" he demanded. "Well, you chose to go there and he didn't, all right? So I think we all know who should be judged in that situation!"

"I'm going to my room," Malfoy said, pushing his chair back so it hit the wall. "I need to work on my clock."

He stormed out and everyone looked at their plates. Harry didn't want - he couldn't let anyone talk like that about Lupin. Harry might've felt an instant's quailing, but he knew Lupin was a good person, and he didn't see why Malfoy always had to come out with the occasional terrible thoughts nobody else would say.

He looked at the mangled bits of steak on his plate, and negotiated them over the dangerous seas of his peas.

"I also read - many interesting books today," Ron said, into the total silence.

"Did you?" Charlie asked.

"Oh yes," Ron said valiantly. "There were... many."

"They sound interesting," said Charlie.

There was a crash from the stairs and Charlie stood up fast. "I think Draco's fallen down the-"

Malfoy burst into the room. "Potter!" he exclaimed. "Charlie, I - anyone! Quick, we have to

do something-"

They all stared at him and Malfoy looked desperately around for some signs of comprehension. When none came, he swept his hair back from his forehead, bit his lip and plunged into explanation.

"The clock," he said. "I was - it's half done, it's got the older half of the family on it, it's working, I'm *certain* it's working, and it's - I made it to be specific. Your brother Percy is in mortal peril. I'm sure."

Mrs Weasley made a terrible sound, stifled against her palm. Mr Weasley rose from his chair like the wrath of God.

"If this is your idea of a joke, Draco *Malfoy*-"

"It's not a joke!" Malfoy shouted. "Somebody do something!"

Everyone looked at each other. Harry saw Hermione reach for Ron's hand and squeeze it tight: he saw Ginny's eyes suddenly fix pleadingly on him. He saw nobody had the faintest idea what to do.

"The orphanage," he said suddenly. Everyone stared at him and he went on. "Mr Weasley, remember, I told you, I told you that the new place for war orphans was in Voldemort's eye and you said Scrimgeour had appointed guards. What if-"

"Of course," Mr Weasley said breathlessly. "Of course, of course - right, now, Molly, get Fred and George, everyone else - Ginny, perhaps you should stay with your m-"

"I will not," Ginny said ferociously. "Where's this orphanage? Where is it?"

"You can't Apparate," Charlie reminded her.

"I'll manage," she said shortly.

"No," Charlie said. "I'll take you. Hang on a minute, just let me get something-"

He left the table, his chair flying across the floor. All of the others looked at each other and then Harry got up too.

"C'mon," he said. "We need to get outside the Burrow wards."

They all marched outside into the gathering night, Ron and Hermione still holding hands. Ron was trembling a little. Mr Weasley was trembling a lot more.

"The orphanage is on the outskirts of Hogsmeade," he said in a low voice.

"Right. Okay, everyone, together," said Harry, and tried not to think any thoughts about the fact that he wasn't all that skilled at Apparating.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, and opened them on the roar of fire and the screams of

children.

The Hogsmeade orphanage was a big white building which might have looked more welcoming not swathed in flames. Harry stared wildly around at the witches and wizards running around, and at the white faces of his own group.

"Hey," he said, and grabbed someone's arm.

It turned out to be Oliver Wood.

"Harry?" he said, apparently perfectly ready to accept his presence at the site of fiery disaster. "D'you know any water charms?"

"Uh," Harry said. "One, but, I'm not really - Look, d'you know where Percy Weasley is?"

"Percy went in there," Oliver replied, gesturing to the orphanage. "A few people did when they heard the children screaming, it was brave, but they had to know the kids can't get out. Everyone was watching the teachers and the nurse and things, the whole place was staffed with Aurors, but they must've got one of the kids under the Imperius curse and - we think the kid just went up to the second floor and dropped a lighted match on her dress. She was too young to know how to use a wand, even - and there are the three floors above with the kids all trapped in them, we've only been able to get a few out. Some people are trying to do weather charms and until then all we have are pails and a few water charms so grab a pail, everyone, for God's sake, I can't-"

Ron strode forward and lifted all burly six feet of Oliver off the ground, then dropped him abruptly. "Are you trying to tell me," he said, his voice wobbling all over the place, "that my brother - that my brother's-"

"I don't know," Wood yelled at him. "I haven't had time to see who got out, some people Apparated right into fires and we heard them *burn!*"

Ron turned his back on all of them and they heard him be sick. Harry watched his best friend's back convulsing.

"Give me that pail," he said to Wood, and snatched it and threw it in the air. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" he shouted, and it flew up and poured itself, high in the air, over the flames.

"Uh, that's a good idea, Harry," Wood said, looking embarrassed for him. "We've been doing it for a while now."

"Oh," said Harry.

"You lot!" shouted Kingsley Shacklebolt, striding up to him as his eyes swept over them all. "Has anyone seen Auror Tonks? Are any of you Slytherins?"

"Me," Malfoy said, raising a hand. "Is there something I can-"

"Water charms, go," Shacklebolt said, pointing in the direction of a witch who Harry realised after a moment was Professor Sprout.

Malfoy went like a homing pigeon, and Hermione said: "I'm not a Slytherin, but I'm good at-"

"Well then for God's sake *go*, girl," snapped Shacklebolt. "Anyone who thinks they might be able to do anything remotely useful, do it at once!"

Hermione went after Malfoy at once, though she kept hold of Ron's hand until both their arms were stretched at full length and she had to let go.

"What's all this about Slytherins?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"They're supposed to be better at water charms," Mr Weasley answered. "We Gryffindors are better with fire, but of course there's - there's plenty of fire here - Kingsley," he said, his voice breaking. "Can you tell me what has happened to my son?"

"Which son?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Percy!" Mr Weasley all but shouted.

"Brave lad," Shacklebolt said. "He got four children trapped on the third staircase out. Neat a piece of wandwork as I've ever seen."

Ron wheeled on him. "Is he *all right*?"

Shacklebolt stared at him. "Well of course not," he answered. "You're not going to come out of a burning building all right."

Harry put his hand on Ron's arm and steadied it. Ron trembled like a wet, scared dog.

"Nasty burns the boy's got," Shacklebolt went on. "He's with the mediwitch out on the orphanage lawn."

Kingsley Shacklebolt was left in the dust as everyone went running for the lawn before the words were out of his mouth. They charged through the crowds and tumbled out onto the lawn together, where they found Percy lying on the ground being attended by a mediwitch who made a disapproving sound when Mr Weasley all but bodily flung himself onto his son.

"Percy!"

Percy, who looked strangely young and more like Ron than he ever had before with his glasses off and his calm stripped by pain, flinched and tried to focus. "Dad?" he said painfully. "Ron?"

"Yeah," Ron said, kneeling down beside him.

"M glad you're here," Percy said vaguely.

There was a scream that sounded like Mrs Weasley and Harry turned to see Mrs Weasley, flanked by Charlie and Ginny, and then coming from another direction Fred and George, who were pounding across the lawn wearing pyjamas, slippers and their flashy dragonhide jackets.

George was half in and half out of his.

"Percy!" Mrs Weasley cried, and threw herself onto her knees. Harry saw her tears fall and gleam in the orange light, on Percy's white face. "Oh Percy, Percy, my boy, my little boy-"

"Mum," Percy said faintly. "I'm sorry I brought the Minister to Christmas, it was just - the job was all I had left and I wanted... I'm sorry, Mum, it was a rotten thing to do, and I thought I was going to - when the fire rose and I thought I wasn't going to-"

"Oh no, Percy, don't, oh, my brave boy," sobbed Mrs Weasley, on her knees and wringing her hands.

"I'm sorry, son," Mr Weasley said. "I'm sorry, I should never have said you were only promoted to - you're *good* at your job, Percy, we've always been so proud of you-"

Ginny, crying and snorting against her hand and in urgent need of a tissue, was at Percy's head and stroking his hair. "I - I'm sorry," she gulped out, "that I threw po-po-potatoes at you!"

Fred and George, pale and clinging to each other, the scale on their dragonhide jackets catching firelight, looked down at Percy for a long time. There was a long, vivid burn down Percy's ribs, that the mediwitch was trying valiantly to spread ointment on while Mrs Weasley looked in danger of joggling her elbow at any moment.

"Had us worried for a minute there, Perce," George said at last.

Percy squinted up at them, and then almost smiled, though the smile turned into a grimace of pain even as it was born. "Who are you," he asked, "and what have you done with my brothers?"

Harry stepped backwards a little, to let them all have their time together, as Charlie knelt down and took Percy's free hand. There was a dark bundle under Charlie's arm.

"All right, Percy?" he asked quietly.

"All right, Charlie," Percy whispered back. "Those kids-"

"Don't worry about a thing, Perce," Charlie said. "I've got it all under control. You sit tight." He got up and turned to Harry. "C'mon."

Harry glanced at Charlie, and then back at the others to see Ginny stoop, plant a quick kiss on Percy's forehead, and race after them.

"Me too," she said breathlessly. "Give me a broom. I'm going to help too."

"A broom," Harry said, and Charlie tossed him his Firebolt. He turned it over, the worn wood scraping familiar against his callused palms. "A *broom*," he repeated, and thought.

"We thought, if we could fly up and aim the pails of water better, or catch a kid at a window-" Ginny told Harry.

Charlie was striding restlessly on ahead.

"I've got two extra brooms. We need two more people who can fly *really well* - where's Draco?"

"Doing water charms with Professor Sprout," Harry answered, and as they all moved towards that group he remembered and added: "And there's Oliver Wood somewhere around here too."

"Wood? Fine. I remember him, dedicated little Keeper that one," Charlie said absently.

They approached the group, where Hermione had her sleeves rolled up and at least seven pails of water in the air at once, and several more pails headed in the direction of the well.

"Draco!" Charlie shouted. "Catch!"

Malfoy turned and caught the broom as his pail fell out of the air and landed on its side on the ground, water trickling onto the dry earth.

"What're we doing?"

"We're getting those children out," Harry said shortly.

By pure good luck, Kingsley Shacklebolt dragged Wood past them at that point. When Charlie threw the broom at him, Wood caught it like a lifeline.

Shacklebolt stared at both of them. "Fly a broom up there?" he demanded. "Are you people mad? Has it escaped your attention that brooms are made of *wood*, and therefore highly combustible! You can't outfly fire!"

Wood stared at him. "You're talking to *Charlie Weasley*, you know," he informed Shacklebolt severely. "He could've played for *England*."

"Seems I've been out of the country too long," Charlie remarked. "Right, let's-"

"Wait," said Harry. "Look, there are a lot of kids there. If we each get one and fly them down individually, it won't be fast enough, we won't be able to save as many. In the Muggle world we have something called a chain - it's for pails of water, but - look, here's my plan."

They all stood in a tight circle and listened for a few moments, head bowed together, and to Harry's extreme surprise even Malfoy did not utter a word of dissent.

Charlie swung himself into the air as soon as Harry finished speaking. "All right then, gentlemen. Ladies," he said, climbing as he spoke. "On your brooms."

They rose into the air.

This close the fire seemed like a living thing, a hissing moving wall of flame, and the screams were almost lost against the roar of the flames. Either that, or they were growing fainter.

Harry hovered about the fifth floor windows, scanning for movement, and below him Charlie dove downward, plunging through the air like an eagle with sheer power behind him, flying like Krum did, power with muscle behind it dictating every move. He scooped a kid off a window sill and went down like a bullet in Malfoy's direction, then let the kid go.

She fell, for an endless moment, outlined against night and fire. Then Malfoy cut through the sky and caught her against his chest, skimmed down until it was safe to pass her to Oliver Wood, their man near the ground.

When Harry saw the first one safe, he knew it was going to work.

Fire hot on his face, he made out a slumped little shape on the floor within one of the windows. He flew inside, the heat a pulsing presence that filled the whole room and made his chest scream for clean air, and he hovered over the hot floor and put out his hand, met wood that seemed on the point of crackling, and then found a child. He lifted the boy up in his arms and shot out the window, the wind roaring past his ears loud as the fire at the speed he was going.

Once out and in the clear, the nearest flier was Malfoy, who banked sharply and flew under him. He let the boy go, plummeting through the air, and Malfoy caught him neatly, grinned and slanted his broom down within reach of Wood.

Back went Harry, flying so close to Charlie going the other way that he thought for a moment they would collide, up to the topmost window and in through it again, flying through rooms tumbling down with fire, and he found another child and brought her out. She was heavy, one of the older ones here: Harry would have guessed she was nine.

When he flew out the combined weight impeded the swift cuts his Firebolt could always make through the air: he was afraid he was being clumsy, but he went sliding down on a hot current of fire-warmed air just the same, and met Ginny coming down. He braced his arms to throw the child to her.

Ginny flung up her hands as if she was defending herself, and looked at him with a suddenly white face.

"No, Harry!" she burst out. "I can't! I'll drop her!"

There was no time to argue with her and nothing else to do: Harry wasted more time flying down to her and bundling the child into her arms, then flew off without another word. He tried not to pass to Ginny in future: not her fault, he thought absently, she wasn't as good a flier as the others or as used to the seriousness of holding someone else's life in her hands.

Not her fault, and there was no time to think any more about it.

The roof of the house almost fell in on Harry after he'd saved his seventh child, after he did not know how long zooming through rooms collapsing in on themselves with the heat. He heard the creaking and the crackle of flames and he made for the dim light of an open window with more urgency than he had ever gone for any Snitch, and exploded out with the crash of burning rafters behind him.

Curving through the licking flames rising like a moving maze from the charred ruins of the roof, he saw Malfoy in a heat haze coming towards him.

"Wood says you got everyone on the top floor out!" Malfoy shouted on a note of savage triumph, and Harry grinned at him. He grinned back, hair lightning-white in the glow of the fires. "Last check on the third floor and we're done!"

"See you down there," Harry yelled, and twisted his broom around. He heard Malfoy shout behind him and heard him follow fast behind him, hurtling through the air side by side.

They did find one child left alive on the third floor, curled up beside a window with his mouth turned towards the air. When Charlie hurtled out of the window with the little boy clutched to his chest and Malfoy flew to him instead of trying to catch the child, Harry thought for a moment they had been a second, two seconds too late, but when they got the boy down to the mediwizards they got air into him and his chest rose as the orphanage finally fell in scorching ruins on the lawn.

Now there was no longer anyone in there, putting the fire out was easy enough. Kingsley Shacklebolt Transfigured it into a harmless mass of stone, cold to the touch, and all the light in the night was put out like a candle.

They were all left, singed and laughing in a breathless half-hysterical way, on the lawn. Children covered in soot were wandering around looking distinctly shell-shocked and the few who had been conscious when thrown through the air were all being Obliviated, save one sandy-haired little boy who kept following Charlie around asking him to do it again.

Harry wandered around, feeling a little dizzy and dazed from the change from deathly heat to night chill, from children screaming to silence, from all the adrenaline racing in his system with nowhere to go and nothing to do. He was panting and almost laughing with every breath.

Mrs Weasley sat on the lawn with Percy's head in her lap, stroking his hair fondly. He kept protesting that he could get up now, and she serenely forbade it.

Ginny fell asleep curled up beside Percy, with her head on his knee because the mediwitch had lost her patience and said if anyone went near Percy's burned chest and arms again she was going to choke a bitch.

Malfoy tipped a pail of water over himself.

"I think my hair got singed," he said, pushing wet fair locks off his face. "Clearly, I'm ruined forever. Which is just what I deserve for flying with a bunch of Gryffindors."

Charlie picked up the pail and made a feint with it at Malfoy's head, and Malfoy dodged, laughing. He was still pale with fright or strained nerves or something, but there was the same air of exuberance lingering about him as Harry felt: when he laughed, it sounded dizzy and manic and real.

"I didn't mean you, Charles. As far as I am concerned you are the One True Gryffindor, the reason the whole house was invented," he drawled, pushing his wet collar off his neck. There

was a black scorch mark inside, and there was a pink strip across the left side of his throat. The locket glittered cold in the night, golden and untouchable, and Malfoy turned his head and asked, "Why was Wood even here? Does he live in Hogsmeade?"

"Nah," said Charlie, "but his current girlfriend does. Madam Rosmerta," he explained, and Harry and Malfoy both stared at him. Charlie shrugged. "Don't ask me, it's a mystery," he said. "His only love is Quidditch, but the women go wild for Wood." He looked at both their faces and spared them from any further comment. "C'mon. Let's all go home. I'm sure Mum wants to make sure that Percy, having escaped the fire, will definitely die from an overdose of chicken soup."

Astonishingly, it was the twins who helped Percy up and supported him, propped up between them. Percy looked back and forth at their faces, peering suspiciously at them and wincing when one of them clapped him on the back.

Percy coughed and said: "Seriously, who are you people? And George, don't hit my burns, that's very irresponsible of you."

"I'm not George," George said. "I'm Fred."

"You're George, Fred would have hit harder," Percy disagreed in a prim, feeble voice. "Just because I don't have my glasses does not mean you can take me for a complete fool."

Stumbling to the Burrow with the dawn throwing streamers of light up over the horizon, Ginny almost walking into the gate, Harry still felt lightheaded and exhilarated. The feeling was only a little dulled by the way everyone settled around Percy as if afraid that he might be taken away from them again. Ron and Hermione were still holding hands so Hermione was drawn in too, and Harry realised he was on the outside looking in, with only Malfoy for company.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him, as if this sudden moment of fellow feeling was just as bizarre and unacceptable to him as it was to Harry.

"I'm going to go read," he said to Charlie, who nodded. Nobody else paid him any attention, and so Harry thought that following Malfoy upstairs might be the most tactful thing to do.

Malfoy did not comment on Harry's tactful move, he just threw himself down on his chair and started flicking through his notes. Harry looked down at his own considerably less copious notes, and saw something very odd scribbled in the margins.

Tom and Harry Riddle-Potter. The Lords Dark-Potter. The Lords Potter-Dark. Mr. and Mr. Potter-Voldemort.

"Malfoy," Harry said. "You think you're funny, but really, really, you're not."

Malfoy threw back his head and laughed. "Can't imagine what you mean," he said brightly. "Is there something on your notes you didn't write? Or to put it more accurately, that you don't remember writing? The subconscious plays funny tricks, Potter, have you not learned from our lessons? Don't try to fight it, Potter. The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing."

"*You* have your reasons, of which reason knows nothing," Harry grumbled. "Look, Malfoy - you can't tell anyone about Lupin, okay? He came here to help us, and - you can't tell Snape."

Malfoy looked at him for a long moment. "I won't put your werewolf in any danger," he said at last. "You have my word. He was here about the plan to kill that snake," Malfoy went on, musingly. "He won't know where it's kept. Only the inner circle were allowed in the Dark Lord's lair, but... Give me a few days. I think I may have a plan."

Chapter Ten

It had been a chance remark.

Malfoy was stirring the Pensieve and making little faces at it, and Harry was wondering what was taking him so long and trying to make conversation. There was no reason to look at him as if he was an idiot when all he'd asked was how Malfoy had met Pansy Parkinson.

He couldn't help his mouth falling open when Malfoy looked at him earnestly and said: "When we were three, at our betrothal ceremony."

"I-" Harry said. "I – What, really?"

"It's a pureblood tradition," Malfoy assured him.

"You're going to get *married*?"

"Of course," Malfoy answered. "Well, think about it. Concerned pureblood parents couldn't send their children off to Hogwarts able to form unsuitable attachments, could they? So we have the betrothal ceremonies."

Harry stared at him.

"It's a big event," Malfoy told him, eyes wide. "The children all wear white and gold robes and we chant the secret rituals. Then, of course, we join hands and perform the dance."

"The – dance," Harry said.

"We call it," Malfoy went on solemnly, "the Dance of Love."

"Oh, you just think you're hilarious, don't you."

Malfoy's earnest face broke into a sly grin.

"I have my moments. Anyway, so that was how I met Pansy. We swayed to the sacred steps of the Dance of Love and vowed to have babies named Clytemnestra and Luchina and Potter

you're *so* gullible. Or I met her on the Hogwarts express, where you met your friends.” Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I just met a better class of people.”

“Go to hell,” Harry said automatically. “How was I supposed to know? You knew Crabbe and Goyle before school started.”

The white ceiling of Malfoy's – the *twins*' room – was illuminated with a sudden reflection of shifting light and liquid. Harry glimpsed a picture of Malfoy aged about six, with a pageboy haircut. The image flickered and then disappeared.

“Not very well,” he said. “Mother doesn't like children much, but Father sometimes took me to their houses. So of course when we went to school I looked out for them.”

“You looked out for them?” Harry echoed skeptically.

Malfoy looked up from the Pensieve and frowned at him. “Yes,” he snapped. “Why shouldn't I? It was a new school. They felt strange. What, d'you think I can't-“

“I just meant,” Harry said. “They were a lot bigger than you.”

“Weasley is bigger than you,” Malfoy pointed out. “Does he guard your tiny helpless little self?”

Harry opened his mouth to say something about bodyguards or thugs, and then remembered Crabbe and Goyle looking forlorn without Malfoy, before Harry left Hogwarts too.

He could also foretell the next few minutes of his life, which would involve Malfoy remarking that while he'd certainly *needed* bodyguards at Hogwarts...

“No,” Harry said. “Forget it. It was a stupid thing to say.”

“Coming from you, imagine my surprise,” Malfoy muttered. “All right, at this point it doesn't matter what memory we choose. You just need to get more comfortable with my mind.”

Harry looked at him. He had his arms propped on the rim of the Pensieve, his head bowed over it, and Harry could not see his expression, only a lock of hair that had fallen forward.

“Um,” he said. “Why?”

“Occlumency,” Malfoy said briefly. “Easier to shield from a mind that you know. Easier to get into one you know, as well. It’s like – knowing the layout of a building.”

Harry felt a little pleased that Malfoy thought he was ready for Occlumency: it had all been easy enough to understand so far. He should have known that Snape was just a bad teacher.

“That makes sense.” He paused and said: “I might not get it right the first time.”

“Oh, well, if you don’t-” Malfoy waved a hand dismissively. “I expect I’ll give up and have some tea and scones.” Harry snorted and Malfoy said: “I’ve made my peace with the fact that not everyone can be as gifted as I am. It’s not fair to hold it against you, Potter. I understand that you can’t help it.”

He made a face of enormous and enormously false sympathy. Harry snorted again.

He was actually kind of amazed that he and Malfoy got through Occlumency class as well as they did: he had to admit that Malfoy was doing his best to help.

“I suppose if you’re so curious about when I met Pansy I could show you that,” Malfoy said.

“Might be more interesting than watching you sit around doing a Little Lord Fauntleroy impression.”

Malfoy looked blank. “I don’t know any Fauntleroy,” he said. “Muggles?”

“Er,” Harry said. “Yeah, I suppose.”

Malfoy seemed to accept this without question. He reached for his wand and they both entered the Pensieve: the shimmer of his surroundings and the tug at his belly had become almost familiar to Harry.

He thought of what Malfoy had said about becoming familiar with a particular mind, and thought he might know what Malfoy had meant. It wasn’t anything Harry could put his finger on, exactly. Just that – light fell in a particular way in Malfoy’s memories, in the world he saw. With no other clue but that, he thought he might be able to distinguish Malfoy’s memories from someone else’s.

Other than Harry's odd thoughts about light, the corridors of the Hogwarts Express seemed the same as ever. The train lurched as the track turned a corner, and a door rattled as tiny Malfoy opened it and swept forward with relatively tiny Crabbe and Goyle in step behind him. Harry recalled them as mountainous, and it was strange to see them as beefy eleven-year-olds, currently both wearing expressions of apprehension.

"I've seen girls before," Crabbe said defensively. "Just not – up close, you know. Dad said that too much feminine influence is bad for a man."

"They giggle, you know," Goyle announced in a portentous tone. "They giggle at you all the time."

Little Malfoy screwed up his pointed face. Harry apologised deeply to his former self for the fact that he sometimes thought little Malfoy was quite funny.

"They might be giggling *with* you," he offered.

Goyle frowned. "I don't giggle."

Crabbe caught Malfoy's elbow. "If one of them–"

"A girl," Malfoy supplied.

"Yeah, one of them. If they talk to us, you'll talk back to them, won't you? You always know what to say."

"Well," tiny Malfoy said, looking pleased with himself.

Then the door to one of the carriages opened, and Pansy Parkinson walked out. She had butterfly hair clips in her hair, and she was walking with Parvati and Padma Patil. Harry had never noticed that they spoke much in school, but they were all whispering together now.

Crabbe and Goyle gave them looks of naked fear.

Much the same look flickered over Malfoy's little face, but then he glanced back at Crabbe and Goyle and advanced bravely on the girlish foe.

“Hullo,” he said. “Hogwarts too?”

Padma Patil giggled and Crabbe and Goyle both leaned backwards.

“We *are* on the Hogwarts Express,” Padma said. She, Parvati and Pansy were all staring down at Malfoy with their arms crossed, making it clear that they were taller than he was.

Malfoy went faintly pink. “Right. Of course. Charmed,” he added.

The groups stared at each other in polite dismay until another brilliant notion occurred to Malfoy.

“My name’s Malfoy!” he announced. “Draco Malfoy.”

Pansy Parkinson tilted her butterfly-clipped head. “I think my mum has tea with your mum sometimes,” she said, her face brightening slightly. “Are you the one – did you have a near miss with a Muggle helicopter on your broom?”

The urge to preen was born and blossomed on Malfoy’s face.

“Well,” he said, buffing his nails against the front of his robes. “Well, yeah, that was me. It wasn’t a big deal. Of course,” he added hastily, “I *was* almost killed.”

“Oh, really,” Pansy said, uncurling her arms and smiling.

Malfoy caught her smile and reflected it back at her brightly. “I don’t like to brag,” he went on, encouraged: “but if it hadn’t been for my reflexes and quick thinking, it would have meant Muggles seeing me. The government would’ve had to deal with it.”

“But it wasn’t a big deal,” Pansy prompted.

Malfoy actually tossed his head. “Oh, no. That sort of thing happens to me all the time. That’s just the kind of guy I am.” He paused, saw she was still smiling, and was moved to add: “That’s just the way I roll.”

Pansy laughed. Parvati Patil looked at her and tugged at her elbow.

“We have to go,” Padma informed them.

“Nice to meet you, Draco,” Pansy said.

“Very pleased to make your acquaintance,” Malfoy told her, speaking in homeschooled the way little Malfoy often did.

They turned and were almost at the door when Malfoy blurted: “What’s your name?”

Pansy said: “Pansy Parkinson,” and tossed him a little smile over her shoulder. Then they left. As they went, Padma murmured something about a pipsqueak and Pansy said: “Well, I think he’s funny.”

Ordinary-sized Malfoy stopped his besotted gazing at his younger self in order to throw Padma a dirty look.

Little Crabbe and Goyle gave little Malfoy awestruck looks.

“That,” Goyle said earnestly, “was brilliant.”

“She seemed nice,” Crabbe said shyly. “The one who smiled. Maybe she’ll be in Slytherin.”

Goyle paused and went a bit pale. “I expect I won’t be in Slytherin,” he said in a strangled voice. “I’m going to be in Hufflepuff, I can tell. You’ll both be in Slytherin and I’ll be all alone, I just know it-”

“Get a hold on yourself, Goyle,” little Malfoy said imperiously. “You’re talking crazy.”

Harry turned to normal-sized Malfoy, who was leaning against the wall and looking a bit wistfully at little Crabbe and Goyle. He didn’t know what he would do if he didn’t know when he was going to see Ron and Hermione again.

He wanted to say something a bit nice to Malfoy, but was interrupted by the passing of older students through the corridor, and the sound of his own name.

“Harry Potter?” Goyle repeated. “D’you think I could get his autograph?”

Crabbe reached for Malfoy’s elbow. “You’ll talk to him, won’t you?” he said. “Like the girls.”

Tiny Malfoy tossed his head again. “Of course. I expect he’ll be in Slytherin with us, anyway,” he declared. “Father says it’s by far the best house. Father says that we should extend the hand of friendship, too. He’ll need to be shown the ways of the wizarding world.”

“That’s true,” Goyle agreed. “Because he’s been raised, like a lost prince, a world away from his birthright!” The others stared at him, and he explained in an abashed tone: “It said so in Mum’s *Witch Weekly*. I just happened to glance at it.”

Tiny Malfoy gave him a sceptical look. “Be that as it may,” he said. “Father says he should be glad for a chance to meet the right sort of people.”

“The article – which I just happened to glance at,” Goyle said, “It said he was seen shopping in Diagon Alley. Said he had hair of a raven blackness and eyes like green glass, with a wisdom in them far beyond his years.”

The other two stared at him again. Goyle coughed.

“That’s what it said,” he muttered.

“Right,” Malfoy said, and then bit his lip. “Did it say anything about him wearing specs?”

“No,” Goyle replied stolidly. “Didn’t say anything about specs. Not very heroic, specs.”

“Unless,” Crabbe ventured, “Well, he’s got a scar on his forehead, doesn’t he? Pretty close to the eyes, isn’t that? Maybe he needs glasses cos he got his eyes damaged, you know, battling.”

“He was only a year old,” Crabbe said. “Don’t know that he did much battling. Not actual battling. Don’t see how much actual battling you could do, in nappies.”

“Stands to reason, he had to battle a bit,” Goyle persisted.

“Will you both shut up!” tiny Malfoy snapped. “I’m trying to think! Honestly!”

He was looking very worried by now. Crabbe and Goyle shut up at once, and stayed shut up for a couple of minutes, at which point Crabbe said: “Um – Malfoy? Everything’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Of course!” Malfoy snapped. “C’mon. Let’s go find Harry Potter, then.”

“I’m so nervous,” Goyle whispered to Crabbe. “I won’t be able to say a word. I just know it.”

Tiny Malfoy opened the connecting door with unnecessary vigour, and Harry began to follow after them.

Malfoy grabbed his elbow.

“Let’s go,” he said abruptly. “You know what happens next.”

“Yeah, I’ll just take a look,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I’d rather you didn’t,” Malfoy snapped.

Harry looked at him and saw his face was a bit strained. He wondered what Malfoy’s problem was now.

“What’s your problem now?” he asked, taking the direct approach. “Like you said. I’ve seen it already.”

He pulled away from Malfoy’s restraining hand and went through the door.

“So’ve I,” Malfoy told his retreating back. “Once was enough!”

Malfoy was touchy all the time, but this was going a bit far. Harry suspected that he was overtired.

He went inside and saw his own younger self again, a tiny gawky thing who looked too small

for his glasses and his robes and the entire world. He'd never realised when he was that age that he was bird-boned, fragile-looking: no wonder he'd set Mrs Weasley off on a holy quest to feed him.

He also hadn't realised that when he and Malfoy caught sight of each other, they wore for a moment identical expressions of frozen dismay.

Little Malfoy squared his little shoulders and plunged into the fray. The small gesture made Harry turn to the Malfoy of the present day for some reason he couldn't explain, and say: "Okay. You're right, I have seen it. Let's go."

Malfoy's face was set in determined spiteful lines and he stared with apparent interest at the carriage wall above tiny Ron's head.

"Oh no," he said. "You wanted to see it. Let's see it. Wouldn't want to deprive the Chosen One of a good laugh."

"What the hell are you talking about, Malfoy," Harry exclaimed.

While Malfoy was being frustrating and inexplicable, as was his way, tiny Malfoy was making himself known to his audience with a patently false air of grandeur. Little Lord Fauntleroy playing lord of the manor, Harry thought, and wished his younger self was not making such a horrible face.

It was weird to think that Malfoy had once been so young, so obviously affecting confidence, and that he had once been so young that he had believed it.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and Goyle. And my name's Malfoy," tiny Malfoy asserted valiantly. "Draco Malfoy."

He said the name Malfoy, Harry noticed, as if he expected it to be recognised, and to be an automatic password to favour.

Harry noticed that small Ron, whose face was a battleground where freckles had overrun all else, sniggered audibly before Malfoy said his first name.

He had a sinking feeling that he had misinterpreted something about the wizarding world again. At the time, he'd thought that Ron was laughing at what was obviously a funny name.

He hadn't realised that Ron had grown up in a place where people were routinely called Horace Slughorn and Regulus Black.

He hadn't realised the enmity that had thrown the fathers at each others' throats in a bookshop had surfaced for a moment between the sons.

Little Malfoy had, though, and his eyes narrowed as he laid down his trump card. "*My father says* that all the Weasleys have red hair and more children than they can afford."

"You're a little bitch when you're angry," Harry said lightly.

It did not lighten the mood. Malfoy was still staring straight ahead with his mouth in a thin straight line.

"And all the rest of the time, I forgot to add," Harry said, and turned his attention back to the action.

The tiny version of himself was looking positively ferocious, while little Malfoy had decided to change to an airy manner. They were so young it hurt Harry to watch them.

"I can help you with that," Malfoy finished, with a disdainful look at Ron and a grandly outstretched hand.

"I think I can tell the wrong sort for myself," little Harry said with a tilt to his chin he clearly thought was defiant and which actually made him look like a tiny carthorse straining on the bit. "Thanks."

The white look of sheer humiliation that passed over tiny Malfoy's face completely passed little Harry by, as he and small Ron were exchanging congratulatory looks on Harry's brilliant wit.

The second time around, Harry felt a bit sorry for young Malfoy, who clearly did not have the faintest idea how insufferable he was being.

"Be a bit politer," Malfoy said, losing his grip on his homeschooled tongue.

Crabbe and Goyle crowded up to Malfoy's back supportively, and Malfoy glanced back at them, realised visibly that he had an audience and started to grandstand further about stealing

Harry's food.

He was now giving tiny Harry back glare for glare. The situation had been a hair away from a food fight, Harry thought, and was embarrassed for everyone in the carriage and possibly for everyone who had ever been prepubescent.

Then Peter Pettigrew bit Goyle.

Harry had never thought about that since he'd known the truth about Pettigrew. Had Pettigrew been venting some small spite against a fellow Death Eater, he wondered now, by biting his son? What had he been thinking?

A world of adult death and betrayal lay so close to them, but they were all too busy being eleven years old.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle fled precipitately. Goyle had tears in his eyes, Harry saw, and winced. He went after them a few steps.

"Well!" little Malfoy exclaimed. "Well! I – I expect that rat was Weasley's, my father says they live in a hovel, I expect it's rat-*infested*!"

"Thought Harry Potter would be less snarly than that," Crabbe grunted. "Taller, too."

"Don't even talk to me about Harry Potter," tiny Malfoy said with icy resolution. "I don't intend to talk about him. In fact, I don't intend ever to even *think* about him again."

He was striding, as far as four foot and a half of enraged boy could stride, down a corridor.

"All right," Crabbe said, hurrying after him. Goyle trailed behind, finger in his mouth.

"I don't suppose we'll see much of him, anyway. He didn't strike *me* as Slytherin material," Malfoy went on, clearly under the impression that he was being cutting. "I expect he'll be in *Hufflepuff*."

Goyle removed his finger in order to give a wounded cry. "Don't make me think of Hufflepuff!"

“Oh for God’s sake,” Malfoy said, still storming along at a good clip. “You’re not – *walk much?*”

He collided violently with eleven year old Neville Longbottom. Neville blinked at him, up at Crabbe and Goyle, failed entirely to gauge Malfoy’s mood correctly, and said: “Have any of you seen my toad?”

Malfoy, who had instantly disengaged himself, stopped smoothing his robes and crossed his arms over his chest. Crabbe and Goyle fell in behind him as he drew himself up to his full, not terribly impressive height.

“Let me tell you,” he drawled, “exactly what you can do with your toad.”

“Got your kicks for today, Potter?” the current version of Malfoy inquired sharply. “Could we go?”

“Um – if you want,” Harry said.

Malfoy tugged imperatively at his wrist, and the close dark corridor, Malfoy’s small furious young face, the windows overlooking green hills and a view six years old, all melted together and vanished.

Harry found himself again in the twins’ room, looking across the Pensieve into Malfoy’s eyes, which were blazing with rage.

*

“Right,” Malfoy said, pushing violently away from the Pensieve. “I’m sure that reminds you of all sorts of good times you can go laugh about with Weasley, so go enjoy yourself, I need to get some work done-”

“Malfoy, why are you talking so fast?” Harry asked. “What are you upset about now?”

“Upset? I’m not upset about anything,” Malfoy said, staring at Harry with wide eyes for approximately one minute before they became slits of venom again. “I enjoy being humiliated at least once a day. Clever of you to guess. Thank you, really, for seeing to that for me so often.”

“Malfoy, for God’s sake-“ Harry stopped. “You can’t be angry with me over something that happened six years ago. I barely remembered it- ”

“Is that so?” Malfoy snapped. “I remember it quite well.”

Harry remembered suddenly Malfoy saying something about - the train, when they were in fourth year. If Malfoy had been brooding about imagined slights for six years, Harry would – Harry supposed it made sense, given that this was Malfoy.

“Look, I wasn’t the one talking about coming to the same end as my parents if I wasn’t a bit more mannerly to the precious purebloods, all right?”

“All right!” Malfoy yelled. “I certainly came off best in that little conversation! I’m sure you’ve felt burned about that one for years! And I’m not angry!”

“Then why do you keep shouting?” Harry shouted back at him. “And weren’t we supposed to do some Occlumency today?”

“Fine!” Malfoy screamed. “Yes! Whatever you want! After all, what am I doing trapped here if not to serve Harry Potter’s every whim? Go ahead, then, defend yourself! *Legilimens!*”

“*Protego!*” Harry shouted at him, and realised as he did so that Malfoy’d had no defences up at all.

Malfoy’s mind hit him and enveloped him like a tsunami, dragging him under.

It was different from the flashes of Snape’s mind, where there had been a distance that Snape had always managed to keep in place, had wanted in place when he was looking at Harry’s memories and managed to preserve even when Harry had broken through to his.

It was like it was Harry, only it wasn’t. Harry didn’t feel things like this.

It was like a storm of emotion rather than a series of snapshots. It was all so different.

A father whose face was like the face of God, which if you were deserving enough might just be turned to you with approval. And Mother who was always distant, and a teacher always at a remove even though he was supposed to be Father’s friend, and friends who believed in him and couldn’t be disillusioned, and an enemy who had somehow worked out your secret unspoken fear, that somehow you weren’t good enough. That there was a fatal flaw in you

somewhere that meant you would let everybody down.

And God was taken away, as if one day the sun was blotted out of the sky, and nobody cared. They'd all been in on it, they were laughing about it or indifferent or busy with other people they thought were worthwhile but you were going to show them all.

Being able to block off sheer screaming horror at the sight of a white reptilian face with red eyes, the same way you could block off pain and turn it into rage. Father had said it was an honour, Father had said this man was the only way forward. And you'd been chosen, and everyone would know that you were good for something, that you were good enough, and you'd know it, too.

And then learning, slow and cold, that being chosen meant less than nothing. That all those people you couldn't let down were in danger. That your enemies had been right all along, that you were weak, that you were never going to be good enough, and hadn't you always known?

And-

"That's *enough!*"

Malfoy's voice in his ear or in his mind, shrieking like the wind in a storm. And Harry was back in the twins' room again, and his knees had gone out from under him. He was on the floor, Malfoy kneeling in front of him, hands locked on each others' arms.

He glanced up and caught Malfoy's unguarded eyes, which on top of everything else felt like seeing indecently too much.

Malfoy let go first, pushing him back violently and scrambling up and away. He got his back against the wall like an animal who felt threatened.

"So you aren't endangering my mother just because she's my mother, or because you hate her for betraying Black," Malfoy threw at him at last. "You think you have to – and you're able to do it because you're a cold bastard when you have to be. That's nice to know."

It took Harry a few minutes to register exactly what he was saying.

"I – what, you were in my mind?" he gasped.

“You don’t think it can work both ways?” Malfoy asked. “I slipped past your shield while you were otherwise occupied. Learn some defence, Potter! Don’t let curiosity or anything get the better of you. On your guard before anything else, and don’t let anyone, ever, have access to your mind! That’s *private*!”

Harry drew his knees up to his chest and stared up at Malfoy.

“Right,” he said slowly.

“Now, if you feel I’ve been tormented sufficiently for one day,” Malfoy said, doing a bad attempt at his usual drawl. “I have some God-damned reading to do!”

He made for the door, the locket around his neck jangling angrily on its chain. Harry let him go.

*

“We’re half-way through all our books!” Hermione told them, glowing. “That’s excellent!”

“I am losing the will to live,” Ron informed her. “That good, too?”

He and Harry exchanged rueful grins. Ron looked a bit too big and vivid for this small dark room, hunched with his red head drooping over a book. Harry recalled for a clear moment exactly what Ron’d looked like when he was eleven, before his face had grown into his freckles.

He’d always been the best mate anyone could ever have. And Harry didn’t regret defending him for a second.

“Don’t complain, Ron,” Hermione said. “I still can’t believe Malfoy’s been the best research assistant.”

Malfoy looked up from his book and beamed. “*Thank* you, Granger.”

He was so transparently pleased by compliments of any sort that Harry couldn’t quite believe what he knew: the way Malfoy could divert feelings so even he didn’t know he had them. He could be really, really obvious sometimes: it didn’t make sense.

Only he'd seemed obviously and immensely self-confident when Harry was eleven.

Malfoy did not look like he was trying to be an international man of mystery. He was sitting under the brightest lamp in the room, peering at some small print. He was absently clutching at his hair with one hand, fingers loose in it, the lamplight making his rumpled hair look white. He looked too exhausted to care what he looked like.

Over the past few days, Harry'd seen Malfoy be eleven and fourteen and eleven again: now he watched him being seventeen and tried to see it at the same distance, in case that too seemed new.

Lots of kids looked like their bodies had too many elbows: Malfoy had been unfortunate enough to have a face that was all angles crammed into too small a space. He'd mostly grown out of it, though the line of his nose and chin were still too sharply cut to be good-looking. Mrs Weasley'd described him as overbred and he did sort of have the nervy look of the greyhounds Uncle Vernon laid bets on sometimes: his pale face had to either close down or show every emotion clear as day, it was marked by every strain.

Last year was gone, but Malfoy would carry signs of it besides the Dark Mark for as long as he lived. He had a small fan of lines at the edge of each eye that showed only when he was squinting like he was now: he had the heavy-eyed, care-worn look of a graduate student, maybe, going sleepless in his early twenties. He didn't look seventeen.

He certainly didn't look eleven. Neither of them were eleven anymore.

"Take a picture, Potter," Malfoy suggested, looking balefully up from his book. "It won't punch you in the face."

Harry returned to his book without comment.

When Ron lifted Hermione by the elbows out of her chair and down to dinner, Malfoy slammed his book shut and moved at once to follow them, without looking at Harry.

Harry said: "Malfoy, wait."

Malfoy was already half-way to the door, but he stopped. He fixed his eyes on the floor, kept his arms crossed and said with no inflection: "What."

“We were kids,” Harry said. “And you were being a total little brat. I’m not sorry.”

Malfoy lifted incredulous eyes to Harry’s face and demanded: “Is there something wrong with your *brain*?”

“No, would you just – give me a minute here, Malfoy, okay? But you know, I can, I can tell you meant well. Sort of. And we’re grown up now, and on the same side – sort of. I think so. So – look, here.”

Harry had been moving towards Malfoy cautiously as he spoke. Now he held his hand out for Malfoy to shake.

Malfoy looked at it as if Harry might produce a biting rat from his sleeve at any moment. He kept his arms crossed over his chest and he stared at Harry until Harry felt very uncomfortable indeed.

“Sorry,” Malfoy said at length. “Are you serious?”

“Um.” Harry could feel his face getting hot. “Yeah.”

“It’s been six years,” Malfoy said. “I tried to get you expelled. You beat me up on the Quidditch pitch. I tried to get you expelled a lot more. You hexed me into jelly. You eviscerated me on a bathroom floor and I tried to kill the headmaster. And now it’s what, well played everyone, shake hands and forget about it?”

“Not exactly,” Harry told him. “I meant, more sort of-“

“I don’t care,” Malfoy said. “I mean – no, I mean I don’t care. You think six years don’t change things for everyone? I didn’t even know you when I offered you my hand. Did it ever occur to you that I really don’t like you? Did you really think I was going to fall all over myself to accept your hand whenever you graciously chose to extend it?”

“No,” Harry answered. “Look, I’m not crazy about you either, Malfoy, in case that hasn’t been blindingly obvious. I meant-“

“I do not care!” Malfoy repeated. “You look. I’ve had plenty of time to decide what kind of people I like, and in the words of a rather well-known person you might’ve heard of, I think I can tell the wrong sort for myself. *Thanks*.”

He drawled out the last word, dwelling on it with obvious satisfaction. Harry realised that for some stupid reason he still had his hand held out and snatched it back, his cheeks stinging with the rush of blood to them.

Malfoy tipped his head back and laughed.

“I’ve been wanting to say that for six years.”

“Well, I hope it was everything you dreamed of, Malfoy,” Harry growled, busying himself shutting up his books so he wouldn’t have to look at Malfoy’s stupid smug face.

“It was, Potter. It was a beautiful, special moment, and I shall remember it always,” Malfoy assured him, practically purring with satisfaction. “And now I do believe it’s time for tea.”

He left. Even the way he closed the door was obnoxious: the hinges squeaked victoriously at Harry.

Harry threw himself back in his chair in order to fully contemplate all the horror that was bloody Malfoy, and the full stupidity that had been him in softening the slightest bit towards him.

The door opened again five minutes later.

“All right,” Malfoy said. “I’ve had my gloat out. It was good for me: I hope it wasn’t any good for you. Shake hands?”

Just looking at his face suddenly gave Harry a migraine. He was still smiling, looking absurdly pleased with himself, eyes lit up with triumph, and Harry actually wanted to murder him.

“If this is a joke, Malfoy,” he said. “I don’t think you’re funny.”

“It’s not a joke,” Malfoy said. “Oh, come on! You exposed me to irresistible temptation. I had to do it.”

Harry stared at him.

“Get out,” he ordered after a moment. “I don’t want to kill you in the Weasleys’ house, but I might forget that any second.”

“Oh no, come on, really,” Malfoy protested, and extended his hand.

Harry looked at it. “Really, Malfoy. I’m so close to killing you. You have no idea.”

Malfoy dared to actually give a long-suffering sigh, and leaned one elbow against the back of a chair, keeping his other hand outstretched.

“All right,” he said. “I admit it: you hurt my pride. I wanted to hurt yours. There. Happy?”

“It’s been *six years*, Malfoy!”

“Well, exactly,” Malfoy said, and fixed Harry with an implausibly wide-eyed, earnest gaze. “I can’t take another six years, Potter. I swear. I have plenty to be getting on with as it is. I can’t do it.”

Harry thought about looking back in six years and thinking that he hadn’t moved past eleven.

He was going to kill Malfoy if he wasn’t serious. He was going to kill him, and hide him in the pile of already-read books.

He reached out, expecting Malfoy to pull back and laugh his stupid head off. Malfoy didn’t. They shook hands, very carefully, eyeing each other in a wary sort of way.

It was very strange.

“Well – right,” Malfoy said, in his most polite way and with his eyes still wide. “I’m going to let go now.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

Malfoy drew his hand away and folded both his arms over the back of the chair he was leaning against. Then he glanced down at nothing in particular, and smiled a tiny bit.

“So, Ginny,” he offered. “Not half as friendly with me when you’re not around.”

It took Harry a few minutes to realise that Malfoy wasn’t criticising Ginny: that he was, in fact, just telling Harry that he didn’t need to worry.

“Oh,” he said. “And – that doesn’t bother you?”

“My God, no,” Malfoy answered. “She’s good-looking and everything, but what would we do as a couple? It’d be like performing together in front of an empty theatre.”

“You prefer Pansy Parkinson,” Harry said, not quite able to grasp the idea.

Malfoy’s small smile broke out into a brilliant one. “I do prefer Pansy Parkinson. So that’s me sorted out, Potter, as regards your girl. What you’re going to do about your unspeakable attraction to the Dark Lord, I don’t know.”

Harry laughed, feeling distinctly incredulous about life as he did so. He pushed his closed books away and got up to go downstairs to dinner with Malfoy.

“So the Occlumency, it went pretty well, right,” he said experimentally. “I mean, I could do it a bit.”

“A bit,” Malfoy conceded agreeably, holding his fingers together about an inch apart. He followed Harry out the door.

“So it shouldn’t take too long before I can convince the snake that I’m Voldemort,” Harry went on. “And then I cut it up with the sword and we’re down another Horcrux.”

“Well, all right,” Malfoy said. He sounded a bit doubtful: Harry glanced at him and he shrugged. “It seems a very complicated way of getting his attention, that’s all, Potter. You could probably just ask him out.”

Harry laughed incredulously again. “Shut up, Malfoy.”

He saw Hermione staring at them from the bottom of the stairs, and stopped laughing. She was looking at them as if she suspected they’d got a touch of the sun while shut up in the

study all day.

“Er, Harry,” she said. “I was wondering if I could have a word.”

“Shocking,” Malfoy remarked cheerfully. “I shall go and tell Weasley how he is betrayed.”

He wandered down the stairs and Hermione looked after him with total incomprehension, and then shook it off.

“Harry. I just wanted to tell you that the Veritaserum’s ready. We can use it anytime.”

She looked at him, clearly expecting him to be pleased. He looked back at her and hoped it wasn’t too obvious that he’d completely forgotten about the Veritaserum.

“Ron’s being silly and says he won’t slip anything to a guest in his own home or something,” Hermione said dismissively, “but I think you or I can slip it to him in-”

“About that,” Harry said slowly, working it out as he spoke. “I – I think Ron’s right. I’m sorry you went to all that trouble, but we’ll keep it around and I’m sure it’ll come in handy.” He looked at her blank face, and shrugged helplessly. “I mean – you’ve got to trust someone sometime, don’t you?”

“Yes, but *Malfoy*? *Now*?”

He looked at Hermione’s unyielding face, and at his own hand, and then back at her. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I think so.”

Hermione stood firm as he passed around her, heading for the kitchen, and before he went in she said:

“Harry. I think you’re making a big mistake.”

Chapter Eleven

The next morning was bright as June, even though it was September. Harry woke early to the sight of a sky washed clean clear blue, and the sound of music downstairs.

He found some clothes, refrained from waking Ron, who looked worn and broken down by the regime of book-reading, and went downstairs pulling his jumper over his head and grinning a bit.

Charlie was wearing a big dark-purple Weasley jumper and poking suspiciously at a panful of eggs, and Malfoy and Ginny were dancing around the kitchen to ‘You Charmed The Heart Right Out of Me.’

Everyone grinned at him and got on with what they were doing. Ginny was wearing her little sundress, and Malfoy was in his pyjamas, and Harry maintained complete calm and congratulated himself on some personal growth.

Besides, Malfoy’d said she was this friendly towards Malfoy when *he* was around, so she was still interested, and she couldn’t be too upset about him siding with Mrs Weasley. The important bit was that all this swaying across the kitchen floor with her arm around Malfoy’s neck was in fun.

“Oh I never thought that such a sweet charm would do me such, do me such harm,” Malfoy carolled plaintively, using a wooden spoon as a makeshift microphone.

Ginny laughed and Malfoy laughed with her, hers bright and his deep, and it went with the music. Their mingled hair was bright in the sunlight.

“Draco, I think the eggs need to be – made to go on the other side,” Charlie announced doubtfully.

Malfoy forsook Ginny at once and she gave Harry a sideways sort of look: he grinned at her.

“We all love Saturdays,” Malfoy informed the kitchen at large. “Saturdays mean Charles is safe at home.”

Charlie leaned against the sideboard and grinned at him. “Your girl was asking after you,” he

said after a pause.

Malfoy's voice was sharp. "Not when anyone could hear her?"

"No," Charlie said, and sounded amused despite himself. "She gave the impression that she wanted to have, ahem, a private word with the new teacher."

"The scandalous wench," Malfoy commented with obvious pride.

"So," Charlie asked, and hesitated. "Should I give her your love?"

"Tell her I'm thinking about her," Malfoy answered, and reached behind to adjust his pyjama collar. "Please, thank you, Charles," he added, and smiled winningly at him.

Charlie rolled his eyes and Malfoy got them all plates. Soon Ron, called from his book-worn sleep by the call of food, joined them and they all settled in to eggs leaning against the kitchen surfaces.

"You see how my Levitation Charm is so perfect," Malfoy said, demonstrating how he had been wronged and cheated and distracted during his OWLs.

Harry caught his glass of orange juice, floating on the air at a dangerous angle, and took a drink. "I see how it's a good thing I have the reflexes of a Seeker."

"The best Seeker at school," Ginny put in loyally.

"Pfft!" Malfoy said comprehensively.

"Youngest in a century," Harry said. "I just mention it."

"I believe I just mentioned, pfft!" Malfoy said. "Slytherin was lulling you people into a false sense of complacency. This year will be our year."

"Oh my God," Ginny exclaimed. "D'you know, they don't have a Seeker now we're both not there! And, with Ron – Cormac McLaggen's left school – we've no Keeper, either!"

“Slytherin’s year, what did I tell you,” Malfoy announced. “Heh heh heh.”

He floated a glass of juice over at Charlie, who snagged it while lying on the floor, and thus made Malfoy look very pleased with himself.

“You see how my Levitation Charm is so p-”

“Proves nothing!” Charlie said, through a mouthful of egg. “Could’ve played for England!”

“Gryffindor ingrates,” Malfoy grumbled.

When Pigwidgeon brought in the paper, wobbling slightly as he came, Ron took it and unrolled it peacefully. Harry didn’t really notice it arriving, since everyone but Ron was lying on the floor by this time Levitating empty glasses over their heads.

Then Ron said: “Harry...”

The tone of his voice made Harry sit up and hit his head on a floating glass.

“Sorry,” Malfoy said, sitting up too. “What’s wrong?”

“You-Know-Who’s broken everyone out of Azkaban,” Ron said slowly. “Everyone who was actually a Death Eater, that is. Everyone else – Stan Shunpike – they were found dead.”

Harry was standing up and holding the paper in under a second. It was all there: all the people that idiot Scrimgeour had used to help encourage the public killed. All the innocent people in Azkaban, put in Voldemort’s path by their own Minister.

“So-“ Malfoy exclaimed, and even that one word was jarring, was hopeful in the sudden gloom of the kitchen. “So – Dad’s out?”

Harry stared over at him. Ginny’s face changed and she moved away from Malfoy, suddenly, got up and went to stand beside Harry.

He dropped the paper beside Malfoy.

“See for yourself,” he said shortly.

Lucius Malfoy was free.

Harry watched the look of wondering brightness creep over Malfoy’s face, and wondered how this changed Malfoy’s plans, or if perhaps it did not change them at all. He couldn’t be trusted, even if he meant well, not with loyalties to Snape and Lucius Malfoy. He wore the Dark Mark under his fragile pyjama sleeve, burned on the skin of the arm whose hand Harry had clasped only hours ago. He’d stolen some of Harry’s hair for God knew what purpose.

Harry put his arm around Ginny’s sundress-clad waist for a moment, and then he left them all to go wake Hermione, and ask her for the Veritaserum.

*

Harry got his chance at midday. He went downstairs to make tea and coffee for everyone while they studied, and added the Veritaserum to Malfoy’s coffee.

It would be for the best, he thought. Malfoy was being stubborn because he’d promised to keep a secret for Snape, but he’d see once they all knew what was going on, how much better it was. He wouldn’t be tempted by any loyalties to his father, and he might even see that Snape couldn’t be trusted.

That was if Malfoy wasn’t for Voldemort already, but – he wasn’t. Harry’d seen what he thought of Voldemort. He was almost certain.

He stirred the clear liquid into the coffee, and slipped the vial into his pocket just when Malfoy came in.

“Hi. Thought since everyone was having tea, I’d make myself a-“

“Coffee,” Harry said, offering it over his shoulder so he wouldn’t have to see Malfoy smile. “Four sugars, no milk.”

“Thank you,” said Malfoy, unfairly slipping the smile into his voice.

“No problem,” Harry responded, and busied himself with the teacups and the sugar basin to let Malfoy have time to drink some of the coffee.

It would be for the best, he thought. This was a war: he had to have all the information.

Besides, Malfoy could keep all those secrets, shove them away even from himself. If he wanted to understand Malfoy – which he might, he might want to do – well, that would be helpful, too. For the war.

Hermione had said to lead up with small, innocuous questions, to make sure the Veritaserum was working, to lull Malfoy into a false sense of security so he would answer the questions calmly.

Harry tried to think of something small to ask. Something he wanted to know the answer to. He abandoned the pretence with his tea tray, and turned around, bracing himself against the kitchen surfaces. Malfoy looked to have drunk more than half his cup already.

Harry said: “What do you want?”

“My mother,” Malfoy answered, and then he froze. They looked at each other for a long moment, and then furious realisation crystallised in Malfoy’s eyes. “You *bastard!*”

He threw his cup, so agitated that the throw went wide and so violently that the cup shattered against the wall. Harry barely glanced in the direction of the noise, at the slide of dark liquid down the wallpaper.

He let go of the side, and took a step towards Malfoy. “Your father, you’re really glad he’s out? Why? Don’t you know the things he’s done?”

“Yes, I don’t care, he’s my father, I *love him*–” Malfoy went white with mortification. “I can’t believe you’re doing this. I won’t tell you anything else.”

“I’m sorry to break it to you, Malfoy, but you don’t really have any other choice.” Harry came closer. Malfoy was white and braced as if he was about to undergo torture: he didn’t need to make such a production of things, Harry wasn’t going to hurt him. Harry just wanted the answers to a few questions.

“I’m not going to!” Malfoy shouted at him. “I’m not going to let everybody down again!”

Harry stared at him, let another precious moment slip by in silence. Malfoy’s jaw was

working: Harry's throat felt dry.

"Do you really think," Harry asked, his voice rasping in his own ears, "that not murdering someone means you failed?"

Malfoy looked at him, eyes clear and seeming almost tranquil for a moment, though that could have been a trick of the sunlight, one of the sunbeams all around the kitchen catching his pale eyes and filling them with light. Harry'd always thought of them as Lucius Malfoy's eyes, but Sirius had had grey eyes too.

Malfoy opened his mouth and blood gushed down his chin.

Harry jumped back. "Oh, God," he said. "God, Malfoy, what have you done?"

Malfoy made a low wounded sound, lips bloody, and staggered back against the wall. He held himself up for another minute, long enough to give Harry a bright, savage look, and then he fell down.

The sound of him falling obviously attracted attention, and Harry barely registered the movement at the door before he was suddenly flying backwards, slammed up against the coffee-stained wall with Charlie's hands clenched in his jumper.

"What did you do?" Charlie growled, dark eyes burning. "What did you do to him?"

"Charlie!" Ginny was kneeling beside Malfoy, her voice a high wavering thing. "Charlie, come here, help me – he's bitten his tongue half out!"

*

"Well, I think it's obvious you just let the opportunity slip through your fingers," said Hermione. "You had a chance to ask him three questions, and you let your personal agenda with Malfoy come first – something you do far too often with Malfoy, I might add."

They were all sitting in the study with their books open, because it was that or sit around downstairs while Charlie, Ginny and Mrs Weasley fretted around Malfoy. Hermione was talking a little nervously, her tone demanding agreement, and Harry stared at his book without seeing it and let her speak.

It was Ron, unexpectedly, who slammed his book shut and answered her. "I think you're completely missing the point."

Harry looked up at Ron, startled, and saw he looked pale and determined.

"I'm sorry?" said Hermione, as if she was not sorry but she was very surprised.

"I know this is a war," Ron said, slowly. "I know the stakes are high. I know we're going to have to do a lot of things we don't want to do. But I think both of you are willing to do too much."

He looked at both of them, blue eyes moving steadily from one face to the other, and when neither of them spoke he seemed to take this as an encouragement to go on.

"Harry," he said. "You need to decide what you want to do with Malfoy. Either he's evil as well as a prat, and we can drug him or – or tear his chest open in bathrooms, or whatever."

"He almost poisoned you," Harry muttered.

"I know that!" Ron shot back. "Because he was on the wrong side. We're not, and now maybe he's not either. If we think he is, like I said, let's drug him with Veritaserum and tie him to something so he doesn't carry the locket back to You-Know-Who, and let's not give my brother and sister a chance to go all soft about him and go into fits when someone harms a hair of his precious head. If we think he's not on You-Know-Who's side, if we're going to trust him to study the locket and make friends with people here, then we don't get to pretend to be all pally with him and then slip something into his drink."

"That's not how it was!" Harry exclaimed. "I wasn't-"

"It's how it looked to me," Ron told him stubbornly. "And I bet it's how it looked to Malfoy. You can do a lot of damage without meaning to! Decide whether you want to or not. And you, Hermione-"

Hermione folded her hands in front of her and managed to look like McGonagall and Pince's secret love child for a terrifying moment.

"Yes?" she said. "What are you going to lecture me about, and why do you think you have the right to do it?"

“Why shouldn’t I?” Ron demanded. “It’s not like you’ve never lectured me. What’s the difference?”

Hermione looked as if she could think of so many differences that the sheer number of them choked her.

“The problem with you, Hermione,” Ron said, staring at the cover of his book rather than at her. “I mean, you know when someone else is wrong. You didn’t trust that Half-Blood Prince book, and you let Harry know he was out of order after the whole Malfoy thing. You mind about the house elves and you told Hagrid how to make his lessons better and – you’re good at all that. But just because something is your idea doesn’t make it right.”

“I never said-”

“I didn’t know Marietta would be scarred for the rest of her life because of something you did! I didn’t want you doing anything to help me with Quidditch – and yeah, you dropped enough hints, I know you did! And now you made this Veritaserum and I told you what I thought of it, but of course you were totally convinced you were in the right! I love you, Hermione-”

Hermione made a small sound and Harry wondered if he should throw himself out the window to give them some privacy.

Ron went dark red. “Well – well, you knew that,” he said. “I do. But sometimes you’re completely wrong. And both of you need to stop assuming whatever you do is right, and if it ever occurs to either of you that you might be doing something wrong then you need to cut it out! And – and that’s it,” Ron finished, looking at his hands. “I’m done.”

Harry had no idea what to say, but neither he nor Hermione got the chance to say anything before Malfoy came in.

“Malfoy!” Hermione said, still looking pink and shaken. “Er – how are you feeling?”

“Oh, absolutely fine,” Malfoy assured her. He looked a little white and he had changed from the T-shirt with blood all over it into the shirt Snape had given him, but he was speaking normally, at least. He was also carefully and entirely avoiding Harry’s eye. “I’m trapped here and I may have to go on hunger strike because I can’t even trust the food and drink, but if you don’t mind, I also need to study until I drop because if I don’t Potter will kill my mother.”

Not surprisingly, this caused a bit of a lull in the conversation. Malfoy placed himself in a

chair as far away as possible from Harry, and opened his book.

Harry waited until Ron went downstairs to make a sandwich, and Hermione made an utterly unconvincing excuse before leaping from her chair and rushing to follow him.

“I’m sorry, Malfoy,” he said as soon as the door shut behind her.

“I’m not listening to you,” Malfoy answered.

“I – look, I didn’t mean to do it, I wasn’t going to do it until this morning-”

“I’m not listening to you but I *do* know exactly how long Veritaserum takes to make,” Malfoy snapped.

“Well, all right, I did mean to do it but I changed my mind,” Harry admitted, realising that this was unlikely to make Malfoy cry that all was forgiven. “I meant it yesterday when – I wasn’t going to do it. But then this morning, you looked so pleased that Malfoy had escaped-”

“He’s my father!” Malfoy shouted.

“He’s a Death Eater!” Harry shouted back. “He tried to kill Ginny!”

“He did – When would he have done that?” Malfoy demanded. “Why would – no, never mind. I’ll ask her. I can trust her more than I can trust you, which is not at all. I told you I wasn’t listening to you. You had your second chance, all right, Potter, and I don’t care what your reasons were, you spat in my face again. We’re done. I’m not going to listen to you ever again.”

“You don’t think that the escape of a *convicted Death Eater* might-“

Malfoy looked at him steadily for a few moments, and then slowly began to roll up his shirtsleeves. His mouth had an ugly sort of curl to it as he did so.

When both his forearms were exposed, he settled back down to reading his book in absolute silence. The sun filled the study from edge to edge: the Dark Mark could not have been plainer, the black lines of the sign they had floated over Harry’s dead parents and hundreds of other victims stark against Malfoy’s white skin.

It was a deliberate, vindictive gesture: throwing murder in Harry's face just to satisfy Malfoy's spite. It was typical of Malfoy to overreact in the vilest way possible.

Harry'd been an idiot to offer the bastard his hand, or to imagine that there could ever be peace between them.

*

Ginny hovered over Malfoy a little, but she told Harry she believed he'd only done what he had to. Harry held onto her hand and was glad that she understood, at least.

Charlie certainly did not understand, and when in the same room as Harry for any prolonged length of time looked sorely tempted to hit him.

Dinner would have been a deeply awkward occasion, except for the fact that Percy and the twins stopped by. There was an edict out against discussing political affairs in front of Percy, so the twins turned the conversation to the joke shop. Percy was extremely courteous about it, and used words like 'commendable entrepreneurial spirit.'

"Yeah," George said, beaming. "That's us. Enterprising."

It was a strange world, when Percy and the twins were the ones carrying the conversation. Ron and Hermione seemed to have taken Ron's declaration of love as a cue to be unable to pass the salt to each other without blushing, demanding why the other one wanted it, and spilling it everywhere. Mrs Weasley seemed to want to cut up Malfoy's food for him.

Charlie and Malfoy held themselves apart from the general conversation. Malfoy kept tugging at Charlie's jumper and when he did so Charlie leaned towards him and Malfoy spoke in his ear. Once or twice they both laughed.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Ginny asked as they washed up.

"Fine," Harry said. "Absolutely fine."

"You're not," She hesitated. "You're not planning to do anything else to Malfoy, are you?"

Harry slammed a soapy glass down on the draining board. “No, I’m not! Why would you think that? D’you think I hate him?”

“Well – yeah,” Ginny answered. “But I said I didn’t blame-”

“Well I don’t hate him!” Harry said. “I didn’t do it because I hate him! I did it because I needed to know things, I – if he’d just tell me everything then I wouldn’t’ve had to ask, would I?”

“No,” Ginny answered. “No, you’re right. I’m sorry. Of course you know what you’re doing.”

Harry realised he was breathing hard. “Right,” he said. “Right.”

Out in the gathering evening, Charlie and Malfoy were walking alone together in the garden. The moonlight turned Malfoy’s hair silver: he was gesturing wildly, and Charlie was laughing again.

“Would it help,” Ginny asked, “if I got Charlie to talk to Malfoy? Malfoy trusts him, I think: he might tell Charlie something.”

Harry did not answer Ginny one way or another, but later he saw her perched on the sofa beside Charlie, their red heads bent together, deep in discussion. Harry wondered where Malfoy was.

He got his answer when Malfoy slipped in through the front door. As night fell, so must have some slight rain: he was shaking a few raindrops from his hair.

Behind him, coming through the door with the cool night breeze, was Snape.

Harry leaped up and grabbed his wand.

“You!” he shouted. “What’re you doing here?”

Malfoy’s eyes were glittering maliciously as he replied: “I invited him.”

*

Harry's mind worked with a calm that had gone past rage. This time, he was going to kill Snape. He'd got through the Burrow's defences. He'd killed Dumbledore. There was no other choice, and that was fine with Harry.

Behind Snape came another dark-cloaked figure, and for a moment Harry imagined a legion of Death Eaters. Then the figure pushed his hood back, and revealed Lupin's face.

"Hello, Harry," he said. "Snape's come to tell you something. I think you should hear what he has to say."

"I don't want to hear anything *he* has to say!" Harry spat.

He stared at Snape's sallow, sneering face with more loathing than he would have thought possible.

"I can't believe you came here with him," Harry said. "I can't – no, I bloody well can believe you let him in," he said to Malfoy, hovering at Snape's side like an attendant demon. "You treacherous little snake."

"Charlie, Ginny, if you could," Lupin said softly under the sound of Harry's own voice. "The fewer people who know about this the better–"

Charlie and Ginny nodded and climbed to their feet, leaving the room. Ginny glanced back at him, as if looking for some signal: Harry didn't have a clue what she wanted him to do, so he let her go.

"I don't know what lie you told Lupin," he snarled to Snape. "But I know what you did, you murderous bastard. And I'm not going to let you get away with it."

"Don't you dare talk to him like that," Malfoy snapped.

"I'll talk to him any way I damn well please," Harry snapped back. "What do you want here?"

Snape drew his hood back smoothly from his greasy head: the hanging curtains of his hair still left his thin face in shadow. "Not to see that you are still the bumptious, overbearing child you've always been," he replied. "I had every confidence you would be. You never

learn, do you?"

"What would you know about what I can learn?" Harry retorted. "Who ever learned anything around you? Bloody *Malfoy's* a better teacher than you'll ever be!"

For a moment Harry could have sworn Malfoy looked thrilled with himself, and then his brows drew together and he said: "Shut up!"

"Draco, believe me, I understand the temptation," Snape told him, "but Lupin and I do not have much time. We took a great risk coming here, and I have every faith you and Potter can and will be sniping at each other tomorrow. If you would leave us for a moment."

Malfoy looked briefly hurt, and Harry wondered if Snape realised that Malfoy was probably the only person in the world who actually liked him, and he might not want to go alienating him like he had the rest of the human race.

"Of course, sir. Sorry," Malfoy said after a pause, and he turned and went upstairs, leaving Harry almost alone with Snape.

"Now, Potter," Snape began. "I understand from Lupin-" he sent a faint sneer Lupin's way, as if he needed to make Harry hate him even more "-and from Draco that you need the location of the Dark Lord's headquarters. Draco has explained your plan to me-"

"How? When?" Harry's mind was racing: God, he'd been a fool to trust Malfoy with anything, he'd gone and told everything to Snape, he should have known.

"Exactly how many times does Draco have to mention that he uses enchanted coins to communicate with people before you realise that he, in fact, uses enchanted coins to communicate with people?" Snape inquired. "My God, if it was possible, I would say that you are even stupider than that preening idiot, your-"

"Enough," Lupin said, very coldly. "Did you send Draco upstairs so that you could snipe at Harry yourself, or do you want to tell him where Voldemort is? There will be questions asked about our whereabouts, you know this! We cannot afford to waste time."

"Forget it," Harry told them both. "D'you think I'm going to believe a word he tells me? I don't know what you were thinking-"

"I seriously doubt you can think," Snape cut in. "Shut up for once in your self-obsessed little

life and listen to me! Draco thought that he could give you the information and you might simply accept it, but he no longer thinks that you'll be inclined to accept his word. I do not imagine you will question that I know the Dark Lord's whereabouts?"

"No, and I don't question that you'll set a trap to kill me, either," Harry snarled. "The same way you killed Dumbledore. I'm not going to make a mistake like he did – I can't believe he ever trusted you."

Snape's face looked even thinner for a moment, lips skinned back over his teeth, so his whole face looked like a skull and made Harry think of the Dark Mark.

"And I cannot understand why he had such faith in you!" he hissed. "He never wanted you to know, and I thought you were totally incapable of keeping any important information secret, but if you must know everything then I am delighted to tell you."

"Know what?" Harry demanded.

"Snape, be gentler-" Lupin began.

"I will not!" Snape shouted. "I am done with being judged by Potter and his kind, with people who have no idea what I have had to do! Dumbledore destroyed the Horcrux ring at severe cost to himself. He found it mere days after he had to save you and the rest of your stupid little band from the Dark Lord at the Department of Mysteries, and he would not husband his failing resources when there was evil to be combated. Despite all I could say, he poured all his energy into destroying it, and he ended up corrupting his own flesh!"

Harry remembered, with a sudden violent clarity, Dumbledore's twisted and withered hand. He opened his mouth and nothing came out for a moment.

"You killed him," he said. "I saw you. You – you swore a Vow to do it."

"Dumbledore knew he did not have much time," Snape pursued. "He wanted to save Draco: he asked me to make the Vow. But do you imagine that I would not have died – gladly died – rather than sacrifice the greatest wizard this world has ever seen, if he could have been spared to us for a year, for another month? And he could have been! He could have been!"

"Yes!" Harry shouted. "If you hadn't k-killed him – hit him with the curse that killed my parents and – and I saw him tumble off that tower, I had to stand there and see him fall, and I'll never, I'll *never* forgive you!"

“No,” Snape answered, his voice low and compelling.

“Severus!” Lupin said. “He’s a child!”

“No,” Snape said again, and threw each word at Harry like a weapon. “We’d been working to heal him for a year. He could have lived. If he had not been so determined to take everything on, to spare you everything he could, he would never have gone down into those caves where you poisoned him!”

Harry stood and shivered like a wet, sick dog. He thought of his own voice, in the cold depths of the cave with the dead, saying as Dumbledore pleaded for someone to kill him: “This one will. Just drink this. It’ll be over... all over.”

“No,” he said. “No, Dumbledore said it wouldn’t – he thought it wouldn’t work like that-”

“Oh, it might not have been fatal for someone in full health,” Snape said dismissively. “But for a man already worn out in your service, a man already on the point of death? You could have drunk it yourself!”

Harry could not think: he could not believe it. His breath kept hitching in his chest. He was blind with his own sweat, rolling down his forehead and making his eyes sting. “I wanted to – he made me promise-”

“You could have gone to me when he asked you to come with him!” Snape raved. “I knew Regulus was looking for the Slytherin Horcrux. I suspected he had found it! I would have come, I could have helped, I could have saved him. But no, you always have to know better, Potter, and the result was that Dumbledore was dying from the moment you, *you* forced that Potion past his lips! And then I had to stand there under the eyes of foul, gloating Death Eaters and see him beg me to end it when his death might save Draco, see him beg to be put out of his misery. I had to do it! And my God, Potter, I will never forgive you!”

“Snape, be quiet!” Lupin shouted, and Harry turned to him, wanted to hear him say that it was all a lie, that Snape had killed him, he had. But Lupin said: “Harry, you couldn’t know-”

“No,” Harry said, stumbling back from Lupin’s outstretched hand. “No – no...”

He couldn’t stay with them, he could not look at the truth in Snape’s glittering, hateful black eyes for a moment longer. He couldn’t stand there and think of Dumbledore shaking and leaning against him as they left the cave, shaking like a dying man...

He turned and ran up the stairs. He ran away.

He burst through Malfoy's door and found him stooped over his clock, a little commonplace task that was almost done, metal gleaming in his hands, light falling on his hair. When he looked up at the slam of the door light fell on his startled face.

"Potter?" he said, and then his voice changed. "Potter, what's – what's happened?"

Harry stumbled forward. "Nothing," he said, and then found himself laughing. It was a terrible, ragged sound.

Malfoy left clock and desk with one abrupt movement. "I'll," he said, his voice sounding distant to Harry's ears and vaguely panicked. "I'll get someone. Stay there."

Harry laughed again: it hurt his throat. "Turns out you have something to thank me for," he said, shaking and laughing at once. It was horrible: his head hurt with thoughts of Dumbledore falling, falling.

"Sit down," Malfoy ordered, and Harry slid down to the floor, sitting there, heard Malfoy make a small stunned sound and fall to his knees beside him. "What's-" Malfoy paused. "I don't know what you're talking about, Potter, you're clearly overwrought, look, I can – Weasley or someone-"

Harry was laughing so hard he was hiccuping, and then suddenly he was laughing, hiccuping, crying and raging all at once. He had seen it: he'd known how it was, it wasn't supposed to be this way.

"You were supposed to kill Dumbledore," he said, his voice wild and strange in his own ears. "And you couldn't, but I could – I did."

Malfoy looked even more stunned, arm propped against one knee and peering into Harry's face. "No you didn't," he said flatly. "Don't be more of an idiot than you can help, Potter. Of course you didn't."

"I *did*!" Harry shouted. "And he begged me – he begged me not to and I kept on giving him the potion – I kept-"

He made an ugly sound, stifled it with his hand, and Malfoy said: "Oh, God. Come here," and then reached over, patted him on the back, lightly touched his hair a few times, the kind soothing touches of someone gentling an animal gone wild. "Shh," Malfoy said. "Shh. Calm down. You didn't do it. Tell me what you did."

He poured out the whole story, how he'd gone, how he'd promised. How Dumbledore had writhed and screamed and pleaded and Harry had given him the Potion, all for the sake of a false locket, a useless toy, and how when Dumbledore stumbled back to the school he had been already doomed.

"So it was me," Harry gasped. "If it wasn't for me, he'd still be alive. It was me."

Malfoy stilled in his patting, hand on Harry's shoulder. "Sounds to me," he said, slowly, sounding a bit shaken but still sure, "that it was him. He made you promise, didn't he?"

"Yes," Harry said between his teeth, "but I would never have kept the promise, not if I'd known-"

"Well, no, 'course not," Malfoy replied. "But you didn't know, did you? Since he didn't tell you. He knew what he was doing. You couldn't know, he did know. He did it to himself."

Malfoy's determinedly cool voice, crystallising into a drawl as he went on, made Harry feel a bit calmer. It wasn't like Malfoy was going to go easy on him. He forced in a proper, not hysterical breath, and managed to stop crying. There was an empty-feeling space in his chest, but at least he wasn't falling into pieces on Malfoy's floor.

Malfoy looked into his face, removed his hands and sat back. "Your glasses are all foggy," he said in a neutral tone. "Hand them over."

Harry handed them over blind. "Thanks," he said unsteadily.

Malfoy made a noncommittal sound. "Sounds to me, too, that I was wrong before," he said after a moment. "When I said I didn't owe you an apology. I suppose I do. Because you never meant to hurt Dumbledore, but I – I did, and – well. I didn't know you loved him. So."

Harry took the glasses when Malfoy handed them back: he could feel himself flushing: he hadn't exactly thought of it as... though Dumbledore had said once, that he did love Harry.

"So?" he said, because he didn't really know what else to say.

Malfoy shrugged. "So. D'you want me to go down there and get the Dark Lord's address?" He raised an eyebrow. "You've got to have some idea where to send all those love poems."

Harry laughed: it came out sounding still too close to hysterical, and he stopped himself. "Right."

Malfoy got up and Harry's eyes followed him: he looked back at Harry slightly warily, as if he was expecting Harry to explode. When he opened the door there was the sound of hushed voices in the corridor and then Ron and Hermione were at the threshold.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione exclaimed as soon as she saw his face, and ran across the floor to fall into his arms. She hugged him tight, and Ron strode across the floor to join them.

At the open door, the view half-obscured by the cloud of Hermione's hair, Malfoy turned and glanced back at him: then he nodded and disappeared from sight.

Chapter Twelve

Harry didn't sleep that night until the sky dawned pale September grey, but Ron and Hermione stayed with him.

When he woke up they were still there, Ron having clearly thrown himself sideways on his own bed, and Hermione curled up like a gigantic cat on Harry's pillow. Harry'd somehow managed to fall asleep with his forehead resting on the bedpost.

It was still really early so he hadn't slept long, but he felt quieter after the sleep, wrenching guilty grief turned into feeling simply tired, and sorry, and a little hollow.

He didn't want to wake the others, so he crept out as quietly as he could. The Burrow was quiet in the early morning, the wooden stairs looking a worn silver in the cool light, and Harry was planning on a cup of tea and trying not to think very much.

Malfoy was already in the kitchen. Harry - wasn't entirely displeased.

It was pretty embarrassing, that he'd cried and everything, but Malfoy had helped. He'd been really good about the whole thing, actually.

Harry glanced cautiously over at Malfoy, who was rubbing his eyes and making himself coffee and looking generally cross, and felt startled and grateful.

"Hey," he said, quietly. "You're up early."

Malfoy looked up from his coffee for the single moment it took to shoot Harry a death glare, and then looked instantly back.

"Well, you see," he drawled, "In this house people tamper with my food and drink. I have to sneak down early in order to eat. Next time, you know, it might be *poison*."

He said the word *poison* with a certain savage satisfaction and Harry flinched, then saw Malfoy catch the movement out of the corner of his eye and smirk.

Harry opened a cupboard door so he would have something to do with his hands, and he wouldn't hit Malfoy.

"Look, I said I was sorry about that."

"Gosh," Malfoy said, his voice full of awe. "Did you really? You're such a big man, Potter. Of course that makes it all better."

Malfoy did not have quite the most hateful expression Harry had ever seen on his face. The effect was a bit spoiled by the fact that Malfoy's face was still sleep-flushed and pillow-creased, but he was doing his best.

It didn't make any sense. Malfoy hadn't been hateful last night.

"I thought," Harry said evenly, holding on hard to the cupboard door lest he be tempted to strangle Malfoy, "that everything was okay-"

Malfoy threw his coffee cup at him.

If Harry hadn't been dodging Bludgers for six years it would have got him. As it was Malfoy was at extremely close range, he had a split second to get out of the way, and he had to throw himself on the floor so it wouldn't hit him.

He was on his feet and furious the next minute.

"What the hell is the matter with-"

"What the hell is the matter with you, Potter?" Malfoy demanded. "You unbelievably arrogant-"

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you-"

"Shut up!" Malfoy ordered. "You just - you're just dying to believe everybody likes you, aren't you? Everything's going to be okay, everything you do is perfectly justified, people really *enjoy* being drugged and eviscerated-"

"I said I was sorry about that as well! And it's not like you didn't try to cast *Cruciatius* at me."

"I didn't do anything this time!" Malfoy shouted, his face flushing even more. "I didn't do a single bloody thing. You shook my hand, and then you drugged me, and *now* you think that everything's all right?"

"Well, no," Harry bit out. "By now I've picked up on your subtle hints that everything's not all right."

"And on what evidence did you think everything was all right?" Malfoy proceeded, apparently deaf with rage. "You had a *pathetic* little breakdown-"

"The hell with you, Malfoy, like you don't weep in the loos!"

Malfoy heard that one, but apparently only gathered from it that the insult had stung. "A *pathetic* little breakdown," he repeated, eyes glittering. "Over an old man who - who I planned to kill, for whose death I am partly responsible, and I was supposed to do what, exactly? I'm not *weak*, I'm not one of your devoted little followers. I'm still angry. I still hate you. If you'd been having your *pathetic* breakdown over something else - if you'd accidentally got hold of a girl you couldn't drop and pick up at will and she'd chucked you - I'd have loved it. I'd have laughed in your face."

"Right," Harry said in a tight voice. His hands were clenched in fists at his side. "Yeah. You've made it all very clear, Malfoy. Thanks."

Malfoy wavered, looking torn between more yelling, actually hitting Harry and storming off. He chose secret option four, which was turning his back on Harry and getting himself another cup of coffee.

"There were a lot of reasons for me to give you the Veritaserum," Harry said to Malfoy's stiffly held shoulders. "I need that Horcrux, your father the Death Eater - no, wait a minute, sorry, your father the *other* Death Eater - has escaped from Azkaban, you've told me that you have a secret plan, you *stole* my hair-"

He had very little hope that Malfoy was going to listen to reason, but he didn't get the chance to finish, because Mrs Weasley cut him off by coming down the stairs. She was wrapped in her purple quilted dressing gown and smiling around bemusedly.

"Harry, dear," she said. "Draco, I heard a noise-"

Malfoy turned around and, even though his mouth was still pinched with fury, gave her puppy dog eyes. "I spilled it," he said. "I picked up the cup and it was too hot."

Mrs Weasley made a sympathetic sound and turned Malfoy's hands over in her own to check that he was all right. Malfoy shot Harry a venomous little glance over her head.

"Also," he continued. "I have a surprise for you."

Mrs Weasley straightened up and beamed. "For me?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, smiling at her properly. "Wait here. I'll go get it."

He turned and bounded up the stairs with not another look at Harry. Mrs Weasley continued to beam.

"It's amazing what a beneficial effect a real home is having on that boy," she said, and then patted Harry on the arm. "Can I whip you up some scones?"

Malfoy took long enough getting whatever the surprise was. Harry suspected he was waiting for more people to get up so he'd have a proper audience to show off for.

His plan was clearly working, since Ginny came down next. She got herself a cup of tea in silence, and then came quietly to stand behind Harry. Harry looked down at her and realised she seemed nervous.

"Mum said you were - a bit upset last night," she said at last.

"I'm fine, really," Harry told her.

"Well," Ginny said. "You'll tell me if there's anything I can do, won't you?"

"Sure, yeah," Harry answered, and then looked down at her anxious, pretty face. "Thanks," he said, speaking lower.

He wanted to put his arm around her, a bit, but it didn't matter what she said, he'd made up his mind: he couldn't afford any distractions and he didn't want to endanger her. There'd be time for that stuff, later.

He looked up from his awkward contemplation of his own cup of tea when Malfoy came down the stairs at last. He was proudly carrying the Weasley clock.

"All done," he announced, and presented it to Mrs Weasley with a flourish.

"Hey, Malfoy," Ginny said in an impressed way, wandering over for a closer look. "It's really pretty!"

Malfoy put his arm around her. "It's not meant to be pretty, woman," he said loftily. "It's a very tricky and intricate little piece of magical design geared towards every eventuality! The fact it's so aesthetically pleasing is beside the point."

Ginny elbowed him. "Sure," she said. "Next make me some jewelry."

The clock *was* much prettier now, with things that looked like filigree work, and the clock hands pointing at several things at once. There were places like *Home* and *Work* and *School* on one filigreed tier, and then in the next there were descriptions like *Safe* and *Danger* as well as *Mortal Peril*. The last set, in a gleaming circle around the clock face, said things like *Working*, *Cooking* and *Battling Evil*. Most of the clock hands said *Home*, *Asleep* and *Safe*. Percy's said *Work*, *Mild Discomfort* and *Working Too Hard*.

Harry wasn't much interested in filigree or Percy's overachieving. He was mainly looking at the clock hands and experiencing a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

There was an extra clock hand. It was labelled 'Harry Potter.'

"I can put Fleur on it, too," Malfoy was saying, looking gratified as Ginny and Mrs Weasley admired the clock. "Only I need something personal of hers to do it. Like a lock of her hair."

He gave Harry a look of complete and enormous hatred. Harry winced and Malfoy smirked to himself.

He'd felt peaceful, he'd been all right, until he'd walked into the kitchen and found Malfoy, and now he was angry (because Malfoy was a *prat*) and guilty (because damn it, he'd been wrong, against all odds Malfoy'd been doing something *nice*).

He sat down to the breakfast table with his stomach a tense, angry knot.

His day was not improved by receiving another Owl from Narcissa Malfoy.

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Harry was extremely glad when Narcissa turned in the alleyway and put her hood back, and he saw she was wearing her own face for a change. He'd had a surfeit of Malfoy for the moment.

Not that Mrs Malfoy was much better, since she had the same trick of haughtily tilting her chin as Malfoy did, and was currently doing it and staring disdainfully up at Harry.

"How is he?" she asked at once. "I heard you let him go to the scene of a fire. Suspended

thirty feet in the air above an uncontrollable blaze is not my usual definition of 'safe and protected.'"

It was starting to rain, a chill drizzle that seemed to be settling in for the long haul. Narcissa put up her hood again and Harry crossed his arms against the cold, leaned against the damp wall and tried to ignore the fat drops of water trickling at intervals down his neck.

"He helped save a lot of people."

"If anything happens to him," Narcissa went on, apparently supremely indifferent to the lives of orphaned children, "I will hold you personally responsible."

"Oh, I'm really scared," Harry said.

Narcissa's cornflower-blue eyes narrowed under the hood, into small gleaming slits in the shadows. "You promised," she reminded him in a dangerous voice. "He's your responsibility. You swore."

"I remember."

"You," Narcissa remarked, "had better. Now, to business. The Dark Lord has freed Lucius from prison. He has sent word for me to come to him. Should I go?"

Harry did not really feel qualified to make decisions about the Malfoys' marriage. The chances were good that Narcissa Malfoy liked pure evil in a man.

"Er," he said. "Er. If you... want to?"

"To clarify," Narcissa Malfoy said. "I am not Molly Weasley, writing to my local agony aunt pleading for relationship advice. If I go to Lucius, I will be very much in the Dark Lord's eye and it will be much more difficult to get away. On the other hand, currently I keep very much out of the way of the Death Eaters, and my sister Bellatrix is my main source of information. As your informant, which course of action would you prefer for me to take - going to Lucius, which means better information less often, or not, which means second-hand information on a more regular basis?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Well. Don't you have any, sort of, more personal reasons?"

"My personal life is *absolutely* none of your business," Narcissa told him in a cutting voice. "This is our business." She tipped back her hood a little, so her hair was still covered but Harry could see her face better, pale and calm. Her mouth curved around a whisper. "This is a trade. You guard my son and, in return, I provide you with whatever service you desire. Choose."

"Go to Voldemort, then," Harry ordered. "I want a map of his headquarters and any details about the activities there. That's what's most important."

The air was cold and his voice sounded cold in his own ears, giving commands to Narcissa Malfoy. He was doing what he had to: this was war.

"As you wish," replied Narcissa. "Provided you are open to negotiation about the price."

"The - price."

Narcissa pushed her hood off all the way, blue satin sliding away from her smooth golden hair. She tipped her head back so she could look Harry full in the face, and moved forward two steps.

"The price," she echoed. "If I go to the Dark Lord, if I infiltrate his inner circle and betray his location. Then can I see my son?"

She put a hand, quite gently, on Harry's chest. She was close enough that the rain and the chill of the air were both blotted out, made irrelevant, by the warmth of her body.

"If I deliver the location," she said in a low, throaty voice. "If I do anything else you want. When can I see my son?"

Harry looked down at her, and thought about Malfoy making that stupid clock hand, thought of Malfoy last night.

He thought about the Veritaserum, about asking Malfoy, "*What do you want?*" and Malfoy's helpless response, "*My mother.*"

"You can see him now," Harry told her abruptly, stepping to one side away from Narcissa Malfoy and the wall. He caught her wrist as he went, and once he had a hold on her he Apparated.

They appeared on the grass outside the Burrow. Harry looked at Narcissa, expecting some kind of comment or a look at the dilapidated state of the house at least, but she was silent, her breath coming fast. He could not see her face because as they had Apparated she'd put up her hood again and was holding the material close in one hand.

Harry held open the gate for her. "Come in, then."

She went in, down the crazy paving and into the house, and did not speak a word until the door was closed behind them. Then she took off her cloak with carefully controlled motions, nodded coolly to a staring Mrs Weasley, and asked Harry in a very calm voice: "Where is he?"

Harry was saved from the necessity of answering her by the advent of Malfoy himself, coming down the stairs with several large books in his arms.

"Granger says," he began, and then he stopped for an instant, and stared.

Harry had to look away from Narcissa's face, from the sudden violent blaze of what was clearly a very private emotion. She put out her hands and she said in a thin voice, "Draco."

"*Mother!*"

Malfoy threw his books precipitately in the air and himself down the remaining steps. There

was a split second more of hesitation when Malfoy was face to face with his mother and looked briefly taken aback that he was decidedly taller than she, and then it didn't matter. She was in his arms, Malfoy lifted her off her feet and laughed a little hysterically into her hair.

"Mother," he said, again, his voice catching. "Oh, Mother, Mother."

Narcissa stroked his hair, slid an arm up around his shoulders. "Come, my darling," she said, still in that thin voice, balanced on the very edge of control. "Let's walk in the garden. You can tell me everything, now."

They went out, Malfoy's arm still locked around his mother. The door shut with a final sound behind them.

*

Harry might've sort of loitered about the place with a book, going from the kitchen to the study to the corridor as others came and went. In case - well, in case Malfoy wanted to come by and say everything was okay. Then things would be sorted out.

Malfoy came in a little after dinnertime, when the sky was just starting to look darker, as if someone had dribbled a little blue ink in and stirred. He leaned against the wall and looked at Harry. His face was a little tired.

He waited a few minutes, and then spoke.

"I'm trying to decide whether or not to punch you in the head."

"Beg pardon?" said Harry.

Malfoy's thin mouth worked a little, and did not quite form a sneer. "I get it that this was some sort of clumsy idiot apology," he said coldly. "But you had no right to bring her here. I don't care if it made you feel better. I don't care if it made me feel better. What if someone had seen her coming here? You had no right to endanger my mother any more than you already have."

Harry opened his mouth and found he had nothing to say.

He'd told Narcissa Malfoy himself that it was too dangerous, last time. Only she hadn't cared, she was Malfoy's mother and she would have sacrificed anything for him, and Harry hadn't known how to say no.

He'd wanted to give Malfoy something that Malfoy would like.

He wanted to ask what it was like to throw yourself down the stairs at your mother, to have her hold you, to be that sure.

He didn't say anything. Malfoy didn't hit him.

Malfoy stayed leaning against the wall for a few minutes more of silence, and then his eyes narrowed. He pushed off from the wall, and pulled the Horcrux out from his collar.

"I'm going to get this off," he said. "I've almost worked it out. And once I have, you're never allowed to go near my mother. Not ever again."

Paying Malfoy back was not going according to plan.

*

Harry stayed with the books - Malfoy'd *better* almost have the Horcrux worked out, Harry had nothing and all of his brain cells were staging a revolt - until he heard the shouting.

Malfoy's mood had obviously not improved.

He met the others in the hall, and they all went downstairs together to find Lupin and Tonks talking with Mr and Mrs Weasley, while Charlie tried to calm Malfoy down.

"It's an insult!" Malfoy said as Harry came in. "How dare they?"

"Well, he *is* a Death Eater, and they have Harry's testimony that he did indeed murder Dumbledore," Lupin murmured to Mr Weasley.

Harry closed the door behind him and said: "What's going on?"

Lupin turned and smiled at them all in swift acknowledgement. "The Order is - in the midst of a rather violent disagreement about whether we can trust Snape and his information."

"Those *imbeciles!*" went on Malfoy, sounding disturbingly like Snape. "After all he's done for them - after all he went through this summer, after - none of you saw him. None of you understand."

"Well, Draco, we're speaking for him," Tonks said. "Don't get your knickers in a bunch. Remus has been arguing for him all day. We just need Molly and Arthur to come in case there's a vote."

"And me," said Charlie, suddenly. "I know I've never been to a meeting, but I belong to the Order. I've Owled from Roumania, I've let Bill use my vote before. So I have one. I can come and help."

Malfoy stopped shouting and leaned back against Charlie's hand on his shoulder. "Thanks," he said in a lower voice.

Charlie and Malfoy were standing at the kitchen table, under the brightest light in the room and with the new and improved Weasley clock ticking over their heads. Malfoy gave the distinct impression that he'd just been hitting the table with his fist. Charlie had one knee up on a chair, and he was leaning against the knee with his free arm. Something about his stance struck Harry: he was standing beside Malfoy but, in leaning forward, he'd also been able to put himself and his big, squared shoulders between Malfoy and the rest of the room.

Malfoy looked tired and furious, but a little comforted.

"I didn't know you knew Snape," Tonks put in, sounding vaguely surprised.

"Well - he taught me," Charlie said. "He was pretty okay, as a teacher. Got very shirty when you didn't pay attention to the instructions, but - Draco trusts him. So I do, too."

"I trust him as well," said Lupin earnestly to Mr and Mrs Weasley. "I and Snape have been alone in a sea of Death Eaters for much too long. I have been given unique opportunities to observe his behaviour in the vipers' nest, as it were, and in every instance possible he has tried to slow down the Death Eaters and control the number of kills. There are reasons I trusted him enough to come with him and give information to Harry: there is every reason to believe the man is on our side."

Mrs Weasley already had her cloak on, but she was fiddling with the buttons, looking doubtful. Mr Weasley was giving Malfoy a decidedly cool look.

"Shacklebolt and Moody," Mr Weasley said at length, "are both very sound men. Dumbledore placed the utmost confidence in both of them."

"My father says that Kingsley Shacklebolt has been corrupted by Muggle politics and it's turned him into an attack dog," Malfoy began, and Mr Weasley wheeled on him.

"You will not dare parrot Lucius Malfoy in my home," he snarled. "And as for corruption-

"Dad!" said Charlie.

"Arthur!" said Lupin. "We're wandering from the point! Lucius Malfoy is not on trial here. We're discussing Snape, and the fact the Order seems willing to spit in his face and refuse to trust information that may very well win us the war. We need to go now."

"And we'll go, Remus," said Mr Weasley. "But I may well side with Kingsley on this one."

Charlie, with a look backwards at Malfoy, went to get his cloak. Malfoy was white-lipped, and he hadn't spoken since Mr Weasley turned on him. Harry did know that the words 'my father says' were more or less Malfoy's version of Harry saying 'Er.' He hadn't meant to say it, not in front of this crowd. He wasn't stupid.

"I'll go, too," Harry announced.

Everyone turned to look at him.

Harry took a deep breath. "What I said about him killing - about Snape, that's part of the issue. So I should go, too."

"All right," said Lupin.

"Oh great," said Malfoy, and sat down, apparently too full of hatred to support himself on his own two feet a moment longer.

"Can Ron and Hermione come?" Harry asked.

"No," Lupin answered at once. "We will not be taken seriously if we have a gang of teenagers in tow. You may come, though, but Harry - your animosity towards Snape, it's not unjustified. I admit that. And you should be allowed to say your piece, but I honestly believe-

"Let Harry make up his own mind," Mrs Weasley put in firmly.

Harry looked at the adults in their cloaks, looked back at Ron and Hermione behind him, and Ginny advancing a few steps towards Malfoy, who was sitting at the table alone with his head in his hands.

"I'll make up my own mind," he said. "Let's go."

*

Harry realised he had never seen the Order of the Phoenix assembled before.

There were more than forty of them arraigned in the drawing room, around a large age-stained black table that had clearly been enchanted larger, since it almost filled the room. Still some Order members were standing up, saying their piece pressed up against the mouldy green curtains.

And at the top of the table, where Dumbledore must once have sat, in a place now not a position of honour but reminiscent of the dock, was Snape. His black eyes were snapping like lit coals.

"I will not defend myself," he snarled. "I refuse to be put on trial. I never was: there was only one man I answered to, only one man who had the right to judge me. I will give you information. The choice whether or not to act on it is yours. I am not answerable to this order for anything!"

Brilliant defence from Snape, Harry thought. He might work up from the Order condemning him to the Order getting him Kissed if he kept going like this.

"Severus," Lupin said from the door. "If your information is not used to help us, then Dumbledore died for nothing. Isn't that so?"

Snape's greasy head swung to the door, where his glittering eyes moved from Lupin to Tonks to the Weasleys, to rest finally and balefully on Harry.

"Don't call me Severus, you wretched, craven excuse for a werewolf. I'm in no mood for your politic grovelling-

"God help us, he's not making things sodding easy for himself, is he," Charlie whispered. "How long has he been like this?"

"Since about ten in the morning," Tonks whispered back, though she didn't look at Charlie. Her eyes had been fixed coldly on Snape since he started railing against Lupin.

Snape was making it very easy for everyone to hate him, Harry thought. Harry'd never had

any trouble with that one, himself. Just seeing Snape here made him think of Dumbledore flying over the battlements, of the years of hatred that lay between Snape and him, between Snape and his father.

"It might be an idea to be more politic yourself," Lupin said sharply. "Whatever happened to using any means to accomplish your ends?"

"That's just it, Lupin," said Kingsley Shacklebolt from the other end of the table. "We have no possible way of knowing what Snape's desired end might be. We *do* know that he is most accomplished at deception."

Snape seemed to reach some sort of rage plateau, and said in a chilly voice: "A spy who is accomplished at deception. Imagine that."

"Ah, but *whose* spy?" Moody roared, his eyeball swivelling in all directions, as if he expected Death Eaters hanging from the chandeliers. "Seems to me it makes sense a spy for our side would've killed the *other* side's leader!"

Snape began to deliver his opinion of Moody's mental prowess. The table erupted in chaos. Everyone looked frightened, Harry thought, too frightened to accept Snape or turn him away, on the verge of sheer panic. This was the *real* Dumbledore's Army, and it was dissolving without him.

Harry stepped forward and said, "I'd like to - I'd like to say something."

"Oh, good God," snarled Snape. "Yes! I admit it. I killed Dumbledore. If I had to do it again, I would. I killed him. Now send the brat away."

Harry recognised a few of the faces turned towards him now: Dedalus Diggle, Hestia Jones, but most of them were strangers, and now as he moved forward there was a rustling sound as everyone turned to him and stared, and started whispering.

"-the Chosen One-" said a woman three times Harry's age.

God, they were *desperate*. Dumbledore was gone and Harry was all they had left.

He could do anything he liked with them, he realised as he stopped near Kingsley Shacklebolt, at the opposite end of the table to Snape. He could pay Snape back for every horrible thing he'd ever done, for last night when he'd said that Harry was responsible for Dumbledore's death, when he *wasn't*, when *Snape* was-

Malfoy's voice in his head said, *He did it to himself*.

Harry didn't want it to be true, not any of it, but it was.

"Snape *did* kill Dumbledore," he said. "I saw him. And, uh, given that I don't think the Death Eaters will be popping along to offer their testimony anytime soon, that makes me the only witness you have."

A few people gave little laughs. Snape gave Harry a look of boundless hatred.

Harry set his teeth and went on. "I was also the only one who saw Dumbledore taking a Potion that he thought would help us get a weapon against Voldemort. It was - it was really bad. He was sick already."

"We know that, Harry," Hestia Jones put in. "We have heard Madam Pomfrey's testimony on Dumbledore's condition, and insofar as it goes, it fully supports Professor Snape's story."

She nodded pleasantly to Snape and Snape looked a little bit less like a cornered, maddened animal.

"We have also heard Snape's testimony that he made an Unbreakable Vow promising to kill Dumbledore at the request of Narcissa Malfoy!" pointed out Dedalus Diggle, adding somewhat unnecessarily, "A known sympathiser with the Death Eaters!"

Harry could have mentioned that Narcissa Malfoy was currently a spy for Harry, but - well, Peter Pettigrew had been in the Order last time. He wasn't going to put Malfoy's mother in any more danger.

"Something you *don't* know," Harry said loudly, "was how it was in that cave. You all knew Dumbledore. You all knew what he was - how he was - the only wizard Voldemort ever feared. He took that Potion. He insisted on taking the Potion so I wouldn't have to, even though I wanted to. And it left him on his knees, crying and-"

There was a lump in his throat and the Order of the Phoenix's interested faces blurred before his eyes. He bit down hard on his lip. Snape wasn't worth this.

He went on anyway. "He was crying and begging. At - near the end he asked me to kill him, and I told him - I would've said anything - I told him that the next drink of the Potion would. None of you were there so you can't know how strong that Potion was, how badly off Dumbledore was when we got back to Hogwarts."

Harry took a deep breath. "I believe Snape."

There was immediate uproar. Snape was staring at Harry in the same way as all the others were: in total shock.

"In the light of this new evidence," Lupin said quietly, "I believe we can now put this question to the vote. All those in favour of accepting Snape's services to the Order?"

"Aye," said Charlie, holding up his hand at once.

Snape looked at Charlie as if he had no idea who he was.

Harry folded his arms and looked out over the Order. Hestia Jones had raised her hand only a moment after Charlie: hands were going up all over the room. Even Dedalus Diggle had lifted his hand and, after some time, first Mrs and then Mr Weasley.

He was vaguely triumphant and more than a little panicked: all these people were counting on him, he did believe Snape, he hated Snape and he'd had to stand up for him, he didn't know

what to do with all this.

Snape was reinstated as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and after the vote was done people crowded around Harry and thanked him for coming, asked him how things were getting on.

Charlie made his way through the throng to get to Snape, and Harry edged towards them.

"Bilius Weasley, is it?" Snape asked, looking perfectly blank and like he wanted nothing more than to crawl back to his dungeon and stew in his own hateful juices for a year.

"Charlie. Younger brother."

Snape's lip curled. "I do find it so difficult to pick out any particular Weasley from the enormous crowd."

Charlie'd looked like he was about to offer Snape his hand, but evidently he reconsidered. He folded his arms over his deep chest and regarded Snape thoughtfully for a few minutes.

"Glad the vote went our way," he said at last. "D'you want to come back to the house and see Draco? He talks about you all the time."

Snape looked very taken aback, then glared at Harry for some reason - not that Snape ever needed a reason - and said stiffly: "I must be about my duties. The Dark Lord will need an explanation for my absence today."

His eyes swept the room, clearly plotting his swiftest mode of escape, and then Harry stepped deliberately into his line of vision.

"Before you go," he said.

Snape looked down his nose at him. "If you are looking for humble thanks, O magnanimous Chosen One, I must warn you that you are about to be disappointed."

"I don't want your thanks," Harry said flatly. "I don't want anything from you but your help with this war. And now we've got it sorted that we're on the same side, you can tell me your little plan and unlock the damn Horcrux from Malfoy's neck."

Snape's whole aspect changed. He put his hunched tensed shoulders back and a sudden smile spread over his face, cruel and very pleased with himself.

"The same side, Potter?" he asked softly. "Why, whatever gave you that idea?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "You were Dumbledore's man-"

"Oh, I was. But Dumbledore's dead now," Snape said, with only a momentary tightening of his lips against his yellowed teeth, "And if you think I cherish any warm feelings whatsoever for this bunch of vigilantes and devotees to the cult of the Chosen One, you are sorely mistaken. I certainly will not surrender my Horcrux, or tell you any of my plans. I am on my own side now. I do not owe anybody a thing."

God, he hated Snape. He shouldn't have spoken for him, they didn't need his help.

"So - what?" Harry demanded. "Want to elbow Voldemort aside and be the next Dark Lord?"

"Perhaps," Snape answered at once, sneering. "Though I was not the one holding *court* just now. Perhaps I should be asking you the same question."

"I *helped* you," Harry snarled. "I was just trying to do the right thing."

"Your father said that to me once," Snape said coldly. "I don't trust your motives for a second. Any more than I trusted his."

He spun and left the room in a flurry of black, like an unkindness of ravens all making for the door at once. Harry watched him go and regretted speaking for him, regretted all of it, regretted not telling the Order to hex Snape and shut him up somewhere, so he wouldn't be wandering around weaving his secret little schemes and getting in Harry's way.

He'd *had* to tell the truth, though.

Lupin couldn't stay long since he had his own duties to return to, like Snape, and when he left Harry went with him. He'd had enough of Dedalus Diggle shaking his hands and the pressing weight of all those eyes on him, expectant, almost pleading. He intended to leave all the Weasleys to it: Mr Weasley was deep in conversation with Shacklebolt, Mrs Weasley with Moody, and a girl Harry vaguely remembered as one of Tonks' friends had Charlie cornered.

Charlie escaped as courteously as he could, though, and followed Harry out the door.

Lupin dropped them off at the Burrow. Harry had been, kind of, a little, expecting Malfoy to be in the kitchen. Since he was so *worried* about Snape and everything.

Only the kitchen was empty, and Harry certainly wasn't about to chase Malfoy over the house. He was going to - he'd make himself a cup of tea and then he'd go to the study and crack another book.

He had the kettle on and he was searching for the milk when Malfoy popped his head around the kitchen door.

"Hi," he said, which was an unusually innocuous thing for Malfoy to say. He was breathing a little quickly, and from what Harry could see, in his pyjamas. They were blue.

"Hi," Harry said cautiously.

"So, Charlie told me what you did," Malfoy went on, leaning against the doorframe and still not opening the door all the way, his eyes on the floor rather than on Harry.

Harry obviously could not read any expression in Malfoy's lowered eyelids, so he was left without a clue on how to proceed.

"Yes," he said. "Well. Er."

Malfoy lifted his eyes from the floor to the door by which he was standing, which he examined with apparent interest for a moment, and then he looked properly at Harry and, somewhat hesitantly, he smiled.

Clearly, Malfoy had smiled while in Harry's presence before, though smirking was more his thing. It was just Harry couldn't remember when, exactly, and it certainly hadn't been directed at him. Malfoy's smile was a little lopsided, the left corner of his mouth higher than the other: there was a tiny dimple in his left cheek.

"Thanks, Potter," said Malfoy, and then stepped back and shut the door.

It was stupid, but Harry found himself smiling as he made the cup of tea.

*

Tea made, he went up and told Ron and Hermione the whole thing. Hermione patted his arm and told him he'd been very mature.

"Will Snape go back to teaching?" Ron asked. "Oh, Harry, mate. Dozens of teeny midget Gryffindors will curse your name."

"I think he's too busy being a Death Eater," Harry said.

"Oh, well," said Ron. "That's all right then."

Eventually Hermione went up to tell Ginny the news, besides which all of them were yawning and fancied an early night. None of them had got much sleep last night, after all.

Harry was planning on a bit of a sleep-in, but it didn't work out that way. He was drifting through deep dreamless sleep, and then suddenly he'd got tangled in his sheets and fallen out of bed, his scar throbbing, the whole world a sudden twist of agony.

Voldemort was pleased about something, then. God damn it. God *damn* him. Harry fought his way out of the sheets and lay on his back for a few silent, furious minutes, heart thudding too fast in his chest, staring up at the ceiling.

There was nothing he could do about it. Not yet.

He unclenched his fists, got up and got dressed. It was seven in the morning, and he wasn't getting back to sleep, so he crept out so as not to wake Ron and washed his sweaty face in the bathroom. His scar stung a little from the cold water.

He went downstairs and was mildly surprised to find Malfoy there already, fully dressed and making his inevitable coffee.

"Don't you sleep?" he asked, putting on the kettle.

"Morning to you too, Potter," Malfoy said. "No, I creep about of nights. Sometimes just to cackle to myself in the stilly watches. Sometimes, of course, I do my hair nicely and then I go

out and have myself a good time."

"Course you do."

Malfoy's eyes looked bruised and his face was white, and Harry doubted if he'd had any sleep at all, but given that Malfoy actually and astonishingly seemed ready to be civil Harry was not about to ruin things by pointing this out.

"One day I'll have to change my ways," Malfoy said with a dramatic sigh. "But for now I'm young, and life is all about hard drinking, fast brooms and loose witches. D'you fancy pancakes? I think I do."

"Um, yeah," Harry said. "That'd be nice. Thanks."

Once Malfoy was occupied with finding flour and eggs, and thus had a legitimate reason to be looking at cupboards and away from Harry, he said: "Actually sometimes this-" he tapped the inside of his left arm, "It keeps me up at nights, sometimes. It was particularly bad last night and - I don't want Charles to know."

Harry remembered the inflamed skin around the Dark Mark, the one time he'd seen Malfoy's. As if Malfoy didn't waltz about forgetting food and rest enough on his own.

"I won't tell him," he offered after a minute. "But I think that you're just making up stories to hide the truth about your hard-drinking lifestyle."

Malfoy looked up from the mixing bowl to slant a bit of an incredulous grin over at Harry, which Harry thought was a bit much: Malfoy couldn't possibly have believed he was entirely humourless.

"Have you given thought to that?" he inquired after a moment.

"Er. Hard drinking?" Harry said. "Not really, to tell you the truth."

"Not hard drinking *per se*," Malfoy corrected him. "Just the incredible amount we're all going to be able to get away with once all this is over."

"How d'you mean?"

The garden was filled with mist, Harry saw: it was going to be another grey day. He might be all right with staying inside reading, as it looked like there were going to be tea and pancakes.

"Well, all this war, it's very stressful. And traumatic. Especially for impressionable young people. It would only be natural that after our stern, grim times of travail and obviously the great triumph, people should fall into wild ways. Go off the rails. Dance," Malfoy went on, showing every sign of satisfaction, "with the devil a little."

Harry hoisted himself up to sit on the draining board. "Maybe people will just want a quiet life."

Malfoy looked quite stern. "No, Potter. That wouldn't be very dramatic at all."

"Sort of the point of a quiet life, yeah," Harry said dryly.

"No, no, no! What I think will happen is that - well, Charles, he'll lose a lot of money betting on dragon races, and he'll have to earn his living by taking Bessie, running away to the circus and calling himself the Amazing Charleston. Pansy, now, she'll be driven to seek out authority figures, and that'll mean a wild love affair with Professor Firenze. A fine figure of a centaur, certainly, but when he loves and he rides away what will Pansy do? Single-parent families can be very hard on a colt."

"Malfoy," Harry said, not really trying to suppress a laugh, "Can you hear yourself when you talk?"

"I myself," Malfoy proceeded relentlessly, "will of course take to liquor. Nervous system shattered, you know. But artistically shattered. There'll be lots of crystal decanters and me vaguely forgetting what year it is. Not to mention the times I get out on windowsills and declare that I'm the Minister for Magic. I'd rather that than Granger, who I predict will take her fascination with house elves to the next level. If you know what I'm saying, and I think you do. On the other hand, there are more pleasant paths to choose, like that of Parvati and Padma Patil. I feel that they may well open a house of exotic pleasures."

Malfoy really shouldn't get all involved and try to talk with his hands while he was making pancakes. There was flour on his face.

"Parvati and Padma haven't even been traumatised," Harry pointed out.

"I just like to think of them opening a house of exotic pleasures," Malfoy said. "Don't spoil my dreams."

Harry wasn't even trying to pretend he wasn't laughing at this stage. "I'm not sure I want to know this," he said, "but what about me?"

Malfoy put the first pancake on. "Your downfall will obviously be the loose women." He shook his head sadly. "We could all see it coming. The hysterical stalking fans. You, a bitter jaded youth. Them, stealing items of your clothing and possibly your pets. You'll make some terrible, shameful mistakes, Potter. And retribution will surely follow when Professor Trelawney files that paternity suit."

"Malfoy, are you sure you haven't already taken to hard liquor?"

Harry was a little curious about everyone else, especially since Malfoy had now run out of Divination teachers with whom people could have illicit offspring, but at that point Ginny came down the stairs.

She gave them a very funny look.

"Morning," Harry said.

"Morning, Girl Weasley, my bird of paradise," said Malfoy. "Come to me and cheer my lonely heart."

Ginny went over to him and peered into the pan, giving up on the funny looks and looking disappointed instead.

"I was hoping for eggs," she said. "Can there be eggs?"

"To prove my eternal devotion," Malfoy said, "there will be eggs. Do you want my eternal devotion scrambled or fried?"

Ginny decided on fried, and then Hermione came down with damp hair and a roll of parchment.

"I've been thinking that we need to vary our study routine," she announced. "We need to give some thought to the other Horcruxes. And maybe," she stopped and frowned, "Maybe make a pie chart."

Ron came down next to find them all writing on the parchment in turns and between forkfuls of pancake.

"So," he said. "Just to clarify. We're not going to have to read any more of those books right now, *and* there are pancakes? This is a beautiful, glorious day."

Harry conceded, "It's not bad."

*

By about eleven, the parchment had a lot of scribbling on it, but the headings were still the part that caught the eye.

Written in Hermione's firm clear hand were the words *Ring* and *Book*, both crossed out, and then *Locket*, *Cup*, *Snake* and *Ravenclaw or Gryffindor Object*.

Unfortunately, none of those were crossed out, but at least they had plans for the locket and the snake.

Malfoy was frowning at the last item.

"How can we have no idea what it is?" he said. "I don't know anything about Ravenclaws. They could have millions of Ravenclaw relics stashed away, they probably do, I know Mandy Brocklehurst is mad about archaeology. There has to be some other clue to what the object is. Why did you go to Godric's Hollow at all?"

The segue from rambling to a direct question caught Harry somewhat off guard. He looked up and met Malfoy's eyes.

"Well," he said. "I sort of felt like I should go there."

"You sort of felt like you should go there," Malfoy repeated, in an accurate imitation of Harry's voice, and then laughed to take the sting out of it. "Yes, Potter, but these hunches, they're usually based on something, aren't they? Come on. I'm trying to have a little faith in

you, here."

"Is Malfoy feeling all right?" Ron asked in an undertone.

Harry thought. "Well," he said. "Voldemort left the ring in the ruins of the Gaunt House, after he killed his uncle. And when he came to kill - my parents and me, he thought that would be a big, important murder. Like when he killed his family."

"And Godric's Hollow is, of course, associated with Gryffindor," Hermione put in thoughtfully. "Yes. It would seem like an ideal place to put another Horcrux. Especially if he had a Gryffindor one. And he wouldn't exactly have got the opportunity to ward it about with spells, now would he?"

They all looked at each other with dawning hope.

"See, I told you you had a reason, Potter."

"Uh. That's great, and everything," Ron said. "Good work, everyone. But we did go to Godric's Hollow already and we didn't find anything. We looked for days. I'm just pointing this out."

Depression settled over the table like the mist on the garden.

"Only," Hermione said, and her voice suddenly rose with excitement. "Something *was* taken out of Godric's Hollow the night Harry's - that night, you know. Voldemort's wand. Someone took it away that night, and gave it back to him. That must've been a Death Eater. They could've taken the Horcrux as well."

"Which means that You-Know-Who has it again," Ginny said, looking briefly pleased to have something to contribute, and then biting her lip when she realised what she'd actually said.

"Well," Harry said slowly. "Well, someone took something else out that night. Our people got to Godric's Hollow first, because they took me. And - they might have taken something else with me. It's possible."

He looked around the table, Hermione concentrating fiercely, Ron frowning to make out someone else's handwriting, Ginny looking excited and Malfoy kind of - pleasanter than usual, smiling at him a little, flour still on his face. Harry felt torn: he'd wanted something he could do, some action he could take instead of all this endless reading.

Only he'd promised himself that he would never go back to Privet Drive again.

Chapter Thirteen

"You're wearing a jumper, that *is* Muggle clothes," Ron pointed out.

"I don't care!" Ginny yelled from the other side of her bedroom door, in front of which they were all assembled. "We're all finally going out and I want to wear my dress!"

"Yeah, Weasley, you heard her," Malfoy said, looking terribly pleased with himself. "She wants to wear her dress. It's stylish. Actually, I think I'll go put on my nice shirt."

Everyone else seemed to be looking forward to the outing. Harry wished he could say the same, but he just kept quiet while everybody debated on proper attire in the Muggle world and thought, again, that he'd promised himself never to go back. It wasn't his world, it never had been, he was never going to be trapped there again.

It would only be for a little while. He'd search for the Horcrux and then go.

They had to wait a bit more and then Ginny came out smoothing down her little dress and her curls, tiny earrings winking in her ears, and Malfoy joined them at the bottom of the stairs wearing that ridiculous shirt he'd bought with Ginny's dress. Harry wondered if he should actually be letting them loose on an unsuspecting Muggle public.

They all trooped outside the gate, Malfoy and Ginny still looking jauntily happy about their outing. Harry doubted they'd be this pleased if they knew what kind of place they were going to.

"Everyone sort of - Ron and I know where we're going, so try to follow us," he said.

"I cannot Apparate," Ginny reminded him, and he and Malfoy flanked her and solved that problem.

He didn't want to go, didn't want to go, but he had to, and slowly but surely, Privet Drive came more into focus. Grey streets he hated, neat hedges he hated, people's nice little cars zipping by and no place for Harry, and there never had been. There was a prize-winning flowerbed in Privet Drive Number One. Harry wanted to be anywhere else.

Ron seized Hermione's hand as soon as they had all arrived, and got her to point out things like lamp posts. Hermione looked as if she was having fun telling him things, and Harry suspected Ron might not be impelled by deep curiosity about all things Muggle.

Ron *was* impelled by brotherly protectiveness, however. He looked over his shoulder and saw Malfoy with his arm around Ginny, and immediately came back to collect her.

"C'mon," he said. "Hermione knows loads of interesting stuff."

Ginny rolled her eyes at him and Malfoy said, "Don't part me from Girl Weasley, it tears my soul" but they let go of each other easily enough. They were both apparently too enraptured by the exotic picket fences and semi-detached houses to mind.

Without really thinking about it, Harry fell into step beside Malfoy, who was busy gazing

around with an air of great interest and did not even look at him.

"This isn't like the pictures in my Muggle Studies book," Malfoy announced. "There were much nicer houses in my book. My favourite was called Buckingham Palace. Why couldn't you live somewhere like Buckingham Palace?"

"Er. Sorry to disappoint," Harry said.

He slanted a look over at him. "And I'm teasing you," he added, rolling his eyes. "God. So," he added, "What're your Muggles like?"

"They're not," Harry began, and then gave it up. "There's just my uncle and my aunt and my cousin Dudley. They're-" he looked at Malfoy, who had his eyebrows raised interrogatively and seemed only a little distracted by the sudden advent of an ice-cream truck. Malfoy still wore his jeans and too-tight shirt like a costume he was having a spot of fun with, not to mention the Horcrux, gleaming in plain sight against the dark blue material. It seemed impossible suddenly to explain the Dursleys or anyone like them to Malfoy, impossible to relate one to the other, and then he suddenly remembered a time when he had done just that. "When I first met you," he said, "you reminded me of my cousin."

"Oh," said Malfoy. "So you don't get on with him, then."

Harry remembered, for a vivid moment, being eight years old and having Piers Polkiss holding his arms while Dudley punched him in the stomach. He'd fallen afterwards, the tarmac scraping his hands and knees, and vomited on the playground.

"Not really," he answered.

He stopped and wanted to say something about how Malfoy had never actually made him vomit, or something, to soften the starkness of the way Malfoy had been immediately able to say 'so you don't get on with him,' but the thought of Number Four Privet Drive was dragging on all his thoughts like chains.

"Oh, a letter box!" Malfoy exclaimed, instantly distracted. "I've always wanted to see one. I think they're so sad."

"Er - what?" Harry asked, and found himself smiling somehow. "What are you talking about, Malfoy?"

"Don't you *know*, Potter? Muggles have to deliver letters to people in these boxes. They have to go from house to house delivering them, they're no better than owls!"

"I - I hadn't ever really thought of postmen as oppressed before," Harry said.

Malfoy turned his head to keep the symbol of postmen's miserable degradation in view, and Harry looked back with him and then looked ahead, and saw Number Four without expecting to. The smile snapped off his face.

There was the smooth grass of the lawn in front, there was the door with its bright fresh paint, and the doorstep where Harry had fetched up, like a piece of driftwood washed up by the sea,

something totally unexpected and unwanted from another world. He didn't belong there, never had, didn't want to go back. He did not want to see them again. He'd cut all ties.

He'd had no ties to cut.

"You look a bit funny, Potter," Malfoy said. His voice was cool: Harry thought it might just be an observation.

Even if Malfoy did not feel inclined to mock him, Harry did not want to be any weaker in front of Malfoy than he had been already.

"Right," he said clearly, and the others all turned back at the sound of his voice. "My aunt stays at home and Wednesday is my cousin's half day, but with any luck Aunt Petunia will be out at her tennis club and Dudley will be on the streets with his gang of yobs, so I'll just knock on the door twice and then spell it open. Let's be quick and try to get through this before they come back, they won't be happy to see me."

He looked at Ron and Hermione while he said that, because they already knew and they were sympathetic without making him feel bad about it: he could count on them.

"Wait," Malfoy said, his voice still cool and unreadable. "If they won't - will they let you in? Don't Muggles have little, I don't know, spyholes?"

"You suggesting we just break in, Malfoy?" The idea had a certain appeal. Harry could picture Aunt Petunia's face if her door suddenly flew open and wizards poured into her hall.

"No," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "How old's your cousin?"

"Seventeen," Harry said warily. "So what?"

Malfoy held out his hands like a ringmaster in the circus, presenting his next act. "So - step forward, Girl Weasley."

When they rang the doorbell of Number Four, then, it was Ginny standing in front, beaming, curls glinting in the faint misted sunlight, her sundress flaring around her legs in the slight breeze. When the door opened a crack, on the chain, she beamed and said, "Hi, my name's Ginny and I'm collecting for-"

The door was thrown open really, really fast, and Harry leaned over Ginny's shoulder to slap a palm against it.

"Hey there, Big D."

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Dudley almost got the door closed. He put his weight behind the shove, and while Harry was used to Dudley outweighing him, he wasn't used to the weight being composed mainly of muscle. He grunted and stuck his foot in the door and if Ron hadn't pushed forward and lent his weight against the door, it would have closed in their faces.

"Go away!" Dudley panted. "You said you were going away - you said you were never coming back-"

"Don't think I wouldn't rather be anywhere else," Harry snarled. "I won't stay long. I might've left something here I need. Let me come in, and-"

"You must be joking!" Dudley snapped. "Five of you? Let five of you - things in here, especially that one - the redhaired one, one of those who left sweets meant to kill me? Fat chance!"

"Fred and George were not trying to kill you," Ron said indignantly.

"I wouldn't bet any substantial sums of money on that," Malfoy said from behind them.

"You know," Harry said, pulling out his wand with his free hand. "I don't actually have to ask."

"Oh, yeah, that's just like you!" Dudley shouted. "Waving around your stupid freak stick, you think you're so much better than the rest of us-"

"No, of course we don't!" Hermione exclaimed. "Harry, put that away! Really, Dudley, I'm Muggleborn myself-"

"You're what?" Dudley said. "I don't speak freak and I don't care what you are, either, just get - off - my doorstep-"

He made a redoubled effort to shut the door and Harry and Ron had to shove back, swearing, just as hard, and Hermione spoke over the sounds.

"What I mean," she explained earnestly, "is that my parents can't do magic and that none of us would ever dream of using magic against you - Harry, put that away! - and of course none of us would dream of considering ourselves superior to you-"

"I do," Malfoy put in. "I'm just saying."

"You see!" Dudley said, sounding somewhat hysterical. "You see, I knew it!"

"You're not helping us at all!" Hermione hissed. "And Harry, please put that away! None of the rest of us think-"

"That's rich," Dudley sneered. "Every time one of your lot breaks in here I almost choke to death or get a tail or some crazy old codger tries to throw drink at our heads-"

Hearing Dudley talk about Dumbledore like that made Harry go cold with rage. He stopped shoving.

"Let us in right now, Dudley," he ordered. "I can open the door anytime I like, and you know it. Besides, you think your mum would be pleased if all the neighbours saw me and a group of other kids making a scene on your doorstep? Let us in. I swear we'll go away as soon as we find what we want. I wouldn't stay if you paid me."

Harry wasn't sure if it was the threat of magic or the neighbours that made Dudley stop shoving at the door quite so hard.

"Okay. Okay, then. You can come in. If you give me all your wands," he said after a minute.

"Oh, you must be joking!" Harry snapped.

At that point he was grabbed by the back of his t-shirt and pulled backwards for an urgent consultation with Hermione.

"Harry," Hermione said in a low voice. "Clearly, Dudley's scared - this would be a good time to have some wizard and Muggle co-operation, you know, we shouldn't terrorise him-"

"Us terrorise him?" Harry demanded. "He wants our wands so he can bloody well terrorise us!"

"Harry," Hermione said. "We're on the side fighting for the Muggles. I won't force my way in when I can be let in. Not when all he's asked is that we make ourselves equal to him."

If Hermione'd grown up with Dudley, she'd know that he wasn't trying to even any odds. He liked them all stacked in his favour, but currently the odds were stacked in *Harry's* favour, and Hermione, who'd hexed McLaggen, would never have argued for him if she wasn't being soft on him like she'd been on the house elves, because she didn't think it was fair-

He looked at Hermione's set, stubborn expression and thought: because it wasn't fair. Any more than Dudley beating Harry up because he was bigger.

"Fine," he bit out. "Fine. Dudley, we'll give you our wands, but if you try anything-"

"I won't," Dudley said from behind the door. "You can't want to get out any more than I want to see you leave."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny silently handed Harry their wands. Ginny had apparently stuck hers down her bra, and everyone raised their eyebrows at her when she slid it out and handed it over.

Then Harry turned to Malfoy. He was expecting a fight, but Malfoy only hesitated for a moment, then sneered: "Like I'm really afraid of a Muggle" and handed it over.

Harry pushed all the wands around the door to Dudley. "Don't mess with them," he said. "Or I'll get the twins back to get you. And come back and open the door quick, or I'll get everyone to start singing the songs with obscene lyrics Aunt Petunia's always talking about."

The thought of their wands clutched in Dudley's meaty paws actually made Harry feel a little ill. He left the doorstep to Ginny and Ron, and stood a step back, and concentrated on how this would all be over soon.

Malfoy pushed a shoulder against Harry's, because he'd never known when to stop pestering. "Hey," he said. "Hey," he said again, so Harry looked at him, and Malfoy grinned. "So, these

songs with obscene lyrics," he said. "Shouldn't you teach us them? I think it's important to be prepared."

"I think you're ridiculous, Malfoy," Harry returned, rolling his eyes and grinning back a bit.

He was about to expand on this theme when Dudley opened the door. He was standing there wiping his brow.

They'd clearly interrupted him on one of his marathon weight-lifting sessions. There was music playing louder than Aunt Petunia would've liked blaring from the living room, Dudley wasn't wearing a shirt, and his big shoulders and broad chest were shining with sweat.

He was eyeing them all with dark suspicion. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw that for some reason Malfoy was still grinning.

"Like me?" he said in an undertone. "Well, I must say, Potter, I'm kind of flattered. Actually - I hope this isn't too much of a shock for you - I don't really, you know, work out-"

Harry elbowed him. "Shut up."

Dudley crossed his arms over his chest. "Ron and Hermione," he said, nodding to them as if they'd confirmed his worst fears. "Harry yelps about you guys sometimes when he's talking about real friends and so on. And - you look like one of the big redhaired lot as well-"

"I'm Ginny Weasley," Ginny said dangerously.

Dudley ignored her. Their love was clearly not going to be the kind that lasted a lifetime.

"And you," he went on, giving Malfoy a scathing once-over. "You must be Cedric."

"Beg pardon?" Malfoy asked. "Who's Cedric? My name's Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

Dudley stared. "That's not a name. That's like saying you're Podfrond, king of the elves. What is the matter with you people?"

Malfoy scowled. "I happen to like my name. And the elves have no king. The elves need no king. They're ruled from the outside: elves are included in the wizard hierarchy."

"I disagree entirely, they only need our support to become entirely autonomous-"

"Jesus *wept*," said Dudley.

"What do you think he should call himself?" Harry put in. "Big M?"

"Oh, get in here before someone sees you people," Dudley said, opening the door. "Thank God you're not wearing your dresses."

"What're you even doing here?" Harry muttered as they moved in. Dudley clearly hadn't been at school all day: he wasn't in uniform.

Dudley's mouth twisted. "Suspended," he said shortly. "Bloody Smeltings. Caught me smoking hash."

"Clever," Harry remarked.

Once they were all in, Ginny and Malfoy sidled towards the noise of the music. Dudley went into the living room where, thankfully, he found and put on his shirt.

Malfoy and Ginny were staring in awe. Not, again thankfully, at Dudley's toned physique.

"It's called a television," Malfoy whispered.

Ron passed Harry to stand beside Ginny in an enraptured line. "Amazing," Ron whispered. "How do they shrink the Muggles without magic? How do they pick out the ones to shrink and keep behind glass?"

"It's not rocket science," Dudley said, looking very uneasy. "It's Top of the Pops."

"Top of the Pops," Ginny murmured, as if it was a mantra.

They all drew closer to the television, like moths to a flame. Ron knelt down and tapped at the glass.

"Hi, little Muggles," he said. "Hi, tiny little Muggles, over here."

"Oh don't be ridiculous, Weasley," Malfoy said. "Obviously the glass is soundproof, otherwise how could they concentrate? Think, man!"

"Get these people out of my house," Dudley hissed.

"Right, everyone, honestly!" Hermione said. "We need to split up and go through the house. Remember, we're looking for anything that might possibly be associated with Gryffindor! And if anyone sees anything that looks at all Ravenclaw, we take that too."

Dudley looked lost, and the three in front of the television looked terribly bereaved and betrayed. Harry went over and turned off the television, to piteous sounds of appeal.

"C'mon."

"You're a mean person, Potter. I've always said it. You're a mean person who is just being mean," said Malfoy. "I'll look in the kitchen."

Everyone started to hunt properly, Hermione going for the bookshelves and Ron starting to look under sofa cushions for a Horcrux. Ginny called out questions from the bathroom, like whether she should tip out the pot-pourri.

Dudley went into the kitchen to fix himself a snack, and once Harry was done narrowly examining every ornament on the Dursleys' mantelpiece he thought he should go in and make sure he wasn't killing Malfoy.

Malfoy was rifling through the drawers and Dudley was making a peanut butter sandwich. Malfoy appeared to have struck up a conversation. Harry was amazed for a moment, and then he realised how Malfoy was being: he was being a guest, like he was at the Burrow.

"Of course magic isn't just about people choking you to death on sweets, that was the Weasley twins and there's something wrong with them, like the fact they're completely out of their horrible little minds. Magic is useful for everything." Malfoy gave up briefly on his search for a lion-shaped corkscrew or whatever, and tilted his head in Dudley's direction. "I can show you."

Dudley dropped his knife. "You're not supposed to be able to do magic without your little stick!"

"Well, wandless magic is hard," Malfoy agreed, "but everyone can do little things. Didn't Potter, when you were younger - didn't anything odd ever happen?"

Dudley's eyes met Harry's, and Harry could see they were both thinking of the time at the zoo, with the snake.

Malfoy sat on Aunt Petunia's meticulously cleaned kitchen counter, drawing his long legs up after him. "Well, obviously proper wizarding children are brought up with a little more control. We're taught to do a few tiny things."

"I found a little yellow - object," Ginny announced triumphantly, marching in.

Harry tactfully removed the air freshener from her hands and shook his head. Ginny looked briefly chagrined, then cocked her head and said, "What're you up to, Malfoy?"

"Doing a Safety First Charm," Malfoy answered.

"Oh, that's kid's stuff," Ginny said, looking disappointed.

"Well, I know, but he's a Muggle, and anyway I don't have my wand. Besides, Mother drummed it into me: I was always off somewhere and she used to have the horrors thinking I was going to crash my broom in a quarry and lie there for days with a broken leg. Right, let me remember-" Malfoy frowned at his cupped hands, pale brow scrunched up.

Dudley had put down his sandwich and was watching, warily but closely.

"Call for water," said Malfoy, and then there was a play of light on water, coming from his cupped hands and playing over his intent face. "Call for food. Call for fire." Bread and then a lick of flame wavered between his fingers. "Call for help." There was a little scarlet light, suddenly, beamed up to the ceiling. "And wait for me to find you," Malfoy finished.

Ginny, examining a wooden spoon for any Gryffindor qualities it might possess, said, "Mum used to add 'and don't you dare play with that fire this means you Fred Weasley.'"

At that point, Harry had to put his head in the cupboard and clatter around distinctly non-Gryffindor pots and pans. When he looked up, Ginny was squinting doubtfully into a bottle of washing up liquid, and Dudley and Malfoy were gone.

"Malfoy went to search upstairs," Ginny said distantly, squeezing the bottle so iridescent bubbles came out. "Your cousin followed him: I think he has the wands hidden up there somewhere and he doesn't want to risk us finding them, the wimp."

Harry'd better get up to them: Dudley wouldn't hit girls and Ron was big enough to take care of himself: Malfoy was the skinny one with the big mouth on him. He paused a moment and told Ginny that there probably wasn't a Horcrux in the Fairy liquid.

"Nah, I know," Ginny said comfortably, elbows resting on the sink and bubbles in her hair. "I just think they're nice."

When Harry bounded up the stairs, he found Malfoy in Dudley's room, not exactly being beaten to within an inch of his life. He was standing on one of Dudley's chairs, rifling through his bookcase - which was mainly filled with video games - and Dudley, while not looking exactly friendly, had his arms crossed over his chest and an expression of cautious interest on his face.

He seemed to be attempting manly bonding.

"So that redhead," he said. "You seeing her?"

"Not my type," Malfoy answered absently.

"I'd have her with a side of chips any day," Dudley remarked. "Fancy the one with the big hair, then?"

"More my type, yeah," Malfoy said. "Still wouldn't, though, and not just because Weasley would smother me in my sleep."

Malfoy would pick Hermione over Ginny? Malfoy was so weird: Harry'd had no idea.

"Why're you wearing a great big necklace, anyway?" were Dudley's next words. "It makes you look like a fag."

"A what? I'm sorry, I don't speak Muggle," Malfoy said placidly. "And this is a very important piece of Dark Magic, I'll have you know. It's a part of the Dark Lord's soul, and it's enchanted so I can't take it off."

"Not even in the shower?"

"That's why I'm glad the Dark Lord didn't put his soul bits in anything that was just gold-plated," Malfoy said.

Dudley looked entirely nonplussed and not a little disturbed by the talk of souls and Dark Lords, but he wasn't blocking his ears or anything. He bit his lip and after a pause for intense thought, spoke again.

"Can you - show me a little more magic?" he asked.

"Ahem," said Harry, and Dudley looked as if he'd just been caught soliciting.

Malfoy looked entirely unruffled. "Oh, Potter," he drawled. "Look, I found something. It's a book about magic! And it's got a lion on the front!"

He picked out a volume from of Dudley's large selection of unread books, high on the shelves he didn't care about reaching, and displayed it proudly.

Harry regarded *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* with some amusement. "Uh - no, Malfoy, I know what that is."

"I didn't quite catch before - Is your name *Mallory*?" Dudley inquired, his tone indicating that he found this even more sketchy than the great big necklace.

"Malfoy," Malfoy corrected.

Dudley didn't look as if he found this much better, but he apparently decided that Harry was the one who needed glaring at. "Should've known you'd come up here," he said. "Looking for your little freak stick, are you? Well, you can't have it!"

He rummaged around his chest of drawers and came up with their wands clenched in his big hands, stalking out to find another cunning hiding place.

"Whatever, Big D," Harry said, rolling his eyes. Malfoy was scanning the shelves, frowning a little. He had the locket out, the chain twined around his fingers, nibbling absently on the gold oval of the locket. "Hey," Harry said. "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to put Dark Objects in your mouth?"

He froze in dismay immediately after he said it: he'd just meant it as - sort of a joke, Malfoy was always at the locket, Harry didn't mind it so much anymore, but what had possessed him to mention Malfoy's mother?

There was a long pause. Then Malfoy said, "Frankly I think she'd have let me put anything in my mouth when I was younger if it would have shut me up for a second. I think that's why she taught me how to cook, it was sheer desperation. I was hyper, I had to be stopped. Dark Objects. Baking scones. She'd have resorted to anything."

Harry couldn't exactly see Narcissa Malfoy baking scones, but - he was glad, grateful almost, that Malfoy hadn't made an issue of it.

"You can do scones too? You've been holding out on me, Malfoy," he said, and Malfoy smiled his funny lopsided smile. Harry smiled back, and Malfoy and he glanced at each other, caught in a startled moment: this couldn't be them actually getting on, not *them*.

It was, though.

Malfoy looked away and returned to his perusal of the shelves, mouth still a little curved. "Your cousin's - it's funny, I thought Muggles would be - different," he said after a pause. "More different, I mean. My father - I mean, I thought they would be, that's all. They can't do anything. I would've thought they'd be more angry about - not having magic." He paused and

said: "Is that why he doesn't like you?"

"Don't know," Harry said. "Don't care, either. I think it's just that he's a prat and I was -- a lot smaller than he was, he loved making me a punching bag when we were younger and he's burned because he can't do it anymore. He's more your sort of person, I suppose," he went on, and then clarified hastily: "I mean, not - not like you, but he's sort of like Crabbe and Goyle, isn't he?"

At that point Malfoy tipped a shelf full of Dudley's video games onto his head. Dudley, re-entering at this entirely inappropriate moment, looked hugely delighted.

"Ow! What the hell, Malfoy?"

"What the hell would you know about Crabbe and Goyle?" Malfoy demanded. "You can keep your stupid mouth shut about them. When - when have they ever hurt anyone who didn't go for them first?"

Harry looked up into Malfoy's icy, narrowed eyes and tried to think of a time. Well, they'd - they would have gone for Neville that time he'd gone for Malfoy. And they hadn't - well, they always gave the impression that they'd go for anyone at a moment's notice.

"They always throw their weight about," he explained. "Cracking knuckles whenever anyone says a word against you-"

"Because they're my friends!" Malfoy snapped. "My best friends. Crabbe's one of the kindest people I know, and you, I don't think you've ever even spoken a word to them - just because they watch out for me when I'm running off at the mouth, them throwing their weight about, what about *you*-"

"I don't!"

Malfoy's mouth twisted. "Sorry for chucking your things about, Dursley," he said, turning suddenly to Dudley.

Dudley grinned. "Throw anything you like at him."

"D'you want to know," Malfoy went on smoothly, "what your cousin's like at school?"

Dudley obviously recognised the rallying call to a taunting, even though Dudley's usual preference in opening lines went more like 'Look at the midget squirm!' "Sure."

Malfoy sat down abruptly on the chair, tipped backwards on two legs in a way Harry recognised as a trick of Sirius' - he supposed he'd done it once or twice, sort of picked it up from him, he didn't do it that often, it wasn't really a *habit* - and then adjusted glasses he wasn't actually wearing. "You have to understand," he said in a deeper voice that was - all right, it sounded a bit like Harry, Malfoy's impressions were always savagely accurate, the bastard - "I get special treatment because I *am* special, that makes it fair. Besides, I can't be doing anything like my own Potions homework, I have so many things to do. Five p.m., think sadly about my dark destiny. Oh no, woe is *me*, I'm a marked man-"

"Shut up," Harry snapped.

"Five thirty, a consultation with the teachers. 'Oh Harry,'" Malfoy squeaked, crossing his arms over his chest and doing Professor Flitwick. "'I just don't think we're favouring you enough, I don't ever feel like it's enough!' Oh well, says Potter, sighing heavily. That's true, but you try your best. Don't worry about it. I bear my burdens bravely."

Malfoy gave a world-weary sigh. Harry didn't sound like that.

"That's classic!" Dudley said, almost crying with laughter. "That's just like him. Wait till Piers sees this."

Malfoy shot Harry a venomous triumphant glare. Harry returned the glare with interest.

"I heard a crash!" Hermione's voice said sharply. "Harry, are you all right? Is Malfoy all right?"

"Oh sure, I'm fine, Malfoy just tipped a shelf on me, that's all," Harry shouted downstairs.

There was a very long pause, one that indicated Hermione taking a deep breath before she tackled the stupidity of the world.

"Is having a bit of a tiff with Malfoy really the cleverest thing to do right now, Harry?"

"No it's not," Malfoy said sharply, pushing by Harry with a decided shove of his bony shoulder. "Sorry, Dursley. Maybe later I'll show you Potter and his first girlfriend, wasn't *that* a joke-

Since Dudley had just gone to the loo, he obviously wasn't even talking to Dudley. He was just storming down the stairs full of rage the way he often did at school, but then he was always flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, anchored by them, and Harry hesitated at the top of the stairs and tried to swallow his fury.

"Look," Harry said, and then stopped because he had to fight down 'shut up or I'll punch you in the face,' 'what in God's name is the matter with you?' and 'you were the arrogant git at school, *you* were.' "Look," he said again. "Crabbe and Goyle. I wasn't really thinking - I was just talking. I didn't mean to offend you. I don't know what they're like. Sorry."

This clearly threw Malfoy for a bit of a loop. "Oh," he said. "Oh, well."

Malfoy at a loss for words was good enough that Harry was really glad he hadn't punched him in the face.

Harry took a deep breath. "Now could you stop being such a malicious git? If you're at all capable of that, I mean."

Malfoy lifted his shoulder. "I suppose," he said, sounding a little sulky but mostly surprised. "If you stop being such a judgemental prat. If you're at all capable of that, I mean," he added, mimicking Harry's voice again, but smiling properly again too.

Dudley came charging down the stairs with an extra jump on the step over Harry's cupboard, a habit at least seven years old. He looked around the hall, obviously sensing a change in the atmosphere, and looked disgruntled that he wouldn't get to see Malfoy's version of Harry and Cho.

Harry was crying for him on the inside.

Ginny came out of the kitchen and smiled vaguely, obviously entirely unaware that there had ever been a disagreement or that Dudley would have her with a side of chips.

"Nothing in there," she reported. "Should I look in this cupboard?"

"No," Harry said sharply. "No, I'd know if something was in there."

Ginny laughed a bit. "Well, Harry. If you didn't know what was in the kitchen, how would you-"

He'd never - said anything about it. It wasn't that he was ashamed of it, or anything, or that he didn't think Ron or Hermione would be sympathetic, but that was just it, he would've told *Ron and Hermione*, not Ginny. Or Malfoy, who might laugh.

"I slept in there until I was eleven," he said in a clipped voice. "There's nothing in there but spiders."

Harry looked at the wall. He didn't want to look at any of them, didn't want to see their expressions. Fine, Malfoy'd been right all those times he'd talked about Harry hanging onto the Weasleys, talked about Harry's family not wanting him for Christmas.

He only looked away from the wall because there was a noise, and he saw Malfoy's long legs vanishing inside the door, realised that Malfoy had actually climbed into the cupboard and shut the door behind him.

"Ow, I banged my knee," Malfoy said in a muffled voice. "It's too small for a child in here."

"Malfoy, you lunatic," Harry said. "Get out of there."

The cupboard door swung open and Malfoy got out, shaking dust from his fair hair, which went flying in all directions. His eyes were narrowed and fixed on Dudley.

"Were *you* kept in a cupboard?" he demanded.

"Well," Dudley said. "Well, no."

"Just the wizard, then," Malfoy went on in a cold voice. "Nice."

"They didn't do it because I was a wizard," Harry said. "They did it because - I wasn't their real kid, they didn't want me, they never liked me, they never thought I was-"

"Mum and Dad were just trying to stamp it out of him!" Dudley exclaimed. "And I didn't do it, so you can stop - *looking* at me that way. I might've given him a few slaps because he

cheeked me, but-

"Stamp it out of him?" Malfoy asked, his voice still arctic. "What was next - were they planning to *burn* it out of him? My father was right about Muggles, they *aren't* safe around our kind. Professor Snape can't talk about his father, either, I - Give me my wand back!"

Dudley didn't answer in words. He just shifted his big shoulders and looked very ugly for a moment, and Ginny moved from her position beside Harry to get closer to Malfoy.

"Hey, Malfoy," Harry said hastily. "Calm down. It's not - it's not worth it. All Muggles aren't like that. The Grangers, they love Hermione. It's not - it's just them. They're, it doesn't matter why they didn't want me, I'm shot of them now. We just need to - find the Horcrux and then we can get out of here. Right, Malfoy?"

Malfoy stopped glaring malevolently. "Right," he said after a moment.

Harry went through the cupboards in Aunt Petunia's pantry, listening to Malfoy and Ginny bicker amiably enough about whether Rowena Ravenclaw could have owned a case for quills, and if so, whether it might have resembled one of Aunt Petunia's vases.

Malfoy had all sorts of wrongheaded ideas about Muggles, and he hadn't meant - it hadn't been a personal defence of Harry, just Malfoy's 'kind', which was kind of terrible.

It had been a personal defence of Crabbe and Goyle, though. It was all right to have it confirmed that Malfoy would stand up for something or somebody he believed in: made Malfoy somewhat more understandable.

"I am the Muggle Studies student around here," Malfoy argued. "And I got an O in my OWLs, too. That's not a Horcrux. They call it a *microwave*."

That was when the noise erupted from the living room.

"Attack!" Ginny exclaimed tensely.

Dudley, slouching against a wall, stared at her. "No," he said, as to a slow child. "It's the television."

*

The sound of Top of the Pops was blaring louder than ever. When they came in Ron was standing in front of the television and looking a bit embarrassed.

"Hermione," he said unconvincingly. "How *could* you?"

On the screen, there was a band singing and purple and blue glitter around the edges of the stage. The song was just getting started.

Ginny, her arms crossed, started tapping with one foot, and Malfoy laughed and held out his hand to her.

"Come here, Girl Weasley," he said, and she grinned.

Malfoy grinned back at her as he led her out into the middle of the living room and twirled her out and then into his arms. Ginny laughed and he tipped her backwards: all Harry could see was her mane of red hair touching the carpet and Malfoy's neck, the feathering of his blond hair against the glittering gold chain at his nape.

They were singing a bit, not really knowing the words, Malfoy's voice low and Ginny's sweet. They were playing together. It was funny because Harry'd never really thought of Malfoy as playful before, though it seemed obvious now.

Even Dudley's grinning a bit, and then everyone jumped and Ron leaped to the television set, because the front door had opened, and in came Aunt Petunia, wearing her tennis gear with a small green visor.

"Diddy, dear!" she said. "Who are your fr-"

She stopped when she saw Harry, and went quite pale.

Ron dived for the television and started pressing buttons to make it turn off, and Ginny stared at Aunt Petunia while upside down. Malfoy straightened her up quickly.

Hermione held up her chin, held out her hand and said: "Hello, my name is Hermione Granger. Let me explain why we're here-"

"Get out," Petunia said sharply. "Dudley, are you all right? Did they hurt you? Did they force their way in here?"

"No," Dudley admitted. "But they *would've*, Mum, so I took their freak sticks-"

Aunt Petunia came over to Dudley, who now topped her by half a head, and put her thin, shaky hands p on Dudley's beefy shoulders. "That was - very good thinking, Diddy, very clever. Well done. Are all these people - you-know-whats?"

"Yeah," said Dudley.

Petunia lowered her somewhat piercing voice. "Have any of them done anything? Anything at all? Of course you couldn't know, Diddy, but they can, without their wands - Lily-"

Dudley hesitated fractionally. "No."

Petunia lowered her voice further. "And they didn't - entice you in any way, did they? I don't like the look of that red-haired floozy at all-"

Harry glanced over but nobody in the living room seemed to have heard.

"Uh, no, Mum."

Petunia gave Dudley another searching, concerned look, then straightened her back and turned to Harry. "What are you doing here?" she asked in a colourless voice. "You said you

were going away forever - I thought it was all over-"

"It's not over," Harry said. "It's just getting started."

The soberly painted walls, with the small still decorous pictures, seemed to be closing in on him. He just wanted to escape.

Petunia's mouth thinned. "What do you mean by coming here threatening me?" Her voice became stronger. "Threatening my family, with your tagalong band of freaks? You're not welcome here. You never were."

"I am not threatening you!" Harry snapped. "You know Voldemort has risen. You know that he's a threat to all of us, not just wizards, don't you? You must know his attitude to Muggles. Particularly any Muggles related to me. I'm trying to save everyone, here-"

"Don't your people have a Ministry?" Petunia demanded. "Doubtless they are all slackers and Tories, but surely they can handle things without the aid of a seventeen year old boy?"

"We all have to do our part," Harry said. "I think you might have something that could help-"

"Something magical - freakish?" Aunt Petunia looked utterly amazed and affronted. "I do not have anything of the sort! All of you, get out - leave my house at once, at once, you should never have come-"

Her voice had risen to a shrill command: Hermione, whose outstretched hand had dropped, looked almost frightened by such hysterical rudeness from an adult and Harry's relative. The other three just looked frozen, though Ron was still pressing buttons.

"He killed your sister!" Harry shouted. "Doesn't that mean anything to you at all?"

Aunt Petunia slapped him.

The crack of her open palm against his face was almost deafening in the sudden silence: Ron had finally manage to turn off the television. Harry stood shaken: he'd been hurt much worse, the sting on his face didn't seem to matter. It was just that she had never done it before.

"How *dare* you," Aunt Petunia exclaimed. "What would you know about Lily? You never knew her, you're not even like her. When I took you in I thought - it was a chance to get it right, make sure that Lily's son wasn't taken away to that *disgusting* world she thought was so marvellous, so special, the world that got her killed. Only you never understood that, did you, you were always alien - strange - you look just like *him*, that awful boy. You were always from that other world. And even when I failed and you went, I kept you here, didn't I? I kept Lily's son here. I did my duty, and now it's over. I never wanted you, not for a second. Get out of my house."

"And if Mum could see all you did," Harry said between his teeth. "She'd be grateful to you, would she? She'd think you treated me really well." Aunt Petunia didn't answer, and he went on. "It wasn't the wizarding world that killed Mum, it was Voldemort, and I want to make sure he won't hurt anyone else. So can you just tell me if there was anything on me when you found me on your doorstep? A little - a piece of jewellery, perhaps, or a cup or a dagger or

something?"

Aunt Petunia stared at him. "Your sort leave daggers on babies frequently?" she inquired, apparently regaining some composure. "Explains a great deal, I suppose. Wait until I tell Vernon. No, of course there was nothing of the sort, and had there been any daggers I would certainly have thrown them away, we had two young children in the house. There was only the letter."

Harry heard a sharp intake of breath: he thought from the direction it came from that it was Hermione.

"The letter?" he asked. "Can I see it?"

"Then will you go?" Aunt Petunia bargained sharply.

"I'll go," Harry said. "I won't come back. I swear."

Aunt Petunia looked at him for a moment, then pursed her lips and nodded briefly.

"Come with me," she instructed. "The rest of you stay here," she said in a clear voice. "Diddy, go lock yourself in your room." She ran her eyes over the others, and Harry saw that past her instinctive fear and disgust she was making the judgement that they were a scruffy lot who probably listened to songs with obscene lyrics in them. "Please do *not* touch anything in my home. I may well," she added significantly, "be counting the spoons when I return."

They had all been still and silent mostly out of sheer ghastly embarrassment, Harry presumed, at having to witness a family scene. At this, however, Malfoy's mouth twisted and he opened it, obviously about to say something cutting and quite possibly along the lines of being surprised that lowly Muggles had invented spoons.

Possibly he was still trying to be a polite guest, possibly he did not want to see any more hysterics or delay the business they had come here on, possibly he recalled that Dudley had just lied for him. He shut his mouth.

Aunt Petunia turned sharply and made her way up the stairs, setting her tennis shoes on each step as if she was wearing heels and expected a decisive click. She led the way across the landing to her and Uncle Vernon's room, and with Harry on her heels she walked over to a cupboard placed high on the left side of the pale-blue walls.

She opened the cupboard, and wordlessly took out her jewellery box. Harry had seen it before, but he had never seen Aunt Petunia lifting out the whole thing, contents and velvet bottom and everything, to reveal a secret compartment.

Aunt Petunia sat down on the floor with her box of secrets, and Harry sat across from her.

On the top was a photo, discoloured with age. Two adults Harry did not recognise were standing up in front of a couple of chairs with two girls in them.

The girls were, quite clearly, Aunt Petunia and Harry's mother. Aunt Petunia was a gawky-looking adolescent and the girl who would be Lily Potter was a young girl, with bobbed red

hair and a roguish grin. Even though she was still a child it was obvious she was going to be the pretty one, but Harry noticed something he never had before, having never seen them together anywhere. They had several features in common - the shape of their jaws, their mouths and foreheads, though the features were put together in a way that made up two entirely different faces.

Petunia had her arm around Lily, one hand pressed flat against her slim shoulder, and Harry remembered how Aunt Petunia had put her hands against Dudley's shoulders downstairs.

Aunt Petunia caught him looking, gave him a cold glance and turned the photo over. Harry read the scrawl on the back. It said *Lily's 10th birthday*.

Before the Hogwarts letter, then. Before anything.

Aunt Petunia sorted through the little compartment with fingers that shook a little. She tipped a yellowed birthday card's edges and Harry heard a young girl's voice he remembered from a Pensieve call out: "Happy birthday, Petunia!" Aunt Petunia froze, looking over her shoulder not at Harry but at the door, as if Uncle Vernon might appear there suddenly. Then she flushed, eyed Harry coldly again, and produced a piece of parchment, rolled up in a circle, and handed it to Harry without looking at him.

It felt oddly heavy.

"The letter explained what had happened to Lily," Aunt Petunia told him in a thin voice. "Your sort wouldn't send police around to tell us - or whatever you have instead of policemen-"

"Aurors," said Harry.

"That sounds positively Bolshevik," Aunt Petunia said, her tone clipped. "Well, they did not come. I suppose letters are all they think *Muggles* deserve. The letter told me about some outlandish way of keeping you safe that I certainly did not understand, and a barely veiled threat that I did not appreciate. It was signed by that old man who picked you up last year and weighed down by the seal on it, I suppose to keep it from blowing away. I doubt that there's anything you do not already know in it, but there you have it."

The seal? Harry thought, and unrolled the letter quickly.

There it was, a slim silver stick with a round device on one end, that could be gripped and pressed into wax. On the circular shape was the depiction of a lion, chased-silver mouth open in a roar.

The seal of Godric Gryffindor.

Perhaps Dumbledore had not been quite sure what it was, and elected to leave it in an already safe place for Harry to find. Perhaps, since Voldemort had never had a chance to seal his Horcrux round with charms, Dumbledore had never realised it was important and simply sent it, as a natural addition to a letter, as a present for Harry.

He had it now. Another Horcrux, the last unidentified Horcrux, and a step forward at last.

He looked over and said, out of the fullness of his suddenly-triumphant heart: "Thanks, Aunt Petunia."

Aunt Petunia seemed badly startled, looked and then looked at him again. "You have - you have her eyes," she said after a moment. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

Maybe Aunt Petunia would have realised it before if she'd ever looked directly at Harry.

Harry clenched the seal in one fist. "It's good to know." He wanted to say something to her, though, for giving him the Horcrux and keeping his mother's picture, so he said: "She died for me, you know. Voldemort, he - he came for me and he said she could step out of the way and she could live, but she wouldn't."

"That was like her," Aunt Petunia said immediately. "She was always fearless, Lily. Thoughtless as well, could never keep a guard on her tongue, and when she was little she was always dashing into things, falling down and - and getting hurt." Aunt Petunia seemed to realise what she was saying, and broke off with a sniff, lips going thin again. "Besides," she added. "Any mother would have done it."

"Okay."

Harry hesitated, not sure what to do or say next. Aunt Petunia was still looking at him, or to be more specific looking into his eyes. He had a thought for a second - he'd never thought of it before, never wanted her to, or if he had he'd been too young to remember - the thought that she might give him a hug.

It wouldn't erase anything, not being scared sometimes in that dark creaking cupboard, not Aunt Petunia carrying Dudley off to give him treats and pointedly excluding Harry, not that summer the year after he first went to Hogwarts when they didn't even feed him enough, but it would have meant - something. He would've let her.

Aunt Petunia did not do anything of the kind. She looked down at her box and said in a brittle voice: "You have what you came for. And I have your promise to go and never come back."

Harry felt as if she'd slapped him again. "Right," he said, the chance of redeeming anything slipping away, if it had ever existed. "Yeah. I will."

"Good," Aunt Petunia said. "Get out. I will not help you again. I will not have my family mixed up in this, not in any way."

"Right," Harry said again.

He got to his feet and left her on the floor, the box of secrets in her shaking hands, her head bowed over the blank side of her first family's picture.

Chapter Fourteen

Harry stopped for a moment with his back against Aunt Petunia's door. His chest felt a bit cold and his throat hurt: he wanted to do something but he didn't know what.

He went downstairs, to the sound of Dudley saying: "No it's not a guard amulet for our house. It's a barbecue."

"Looks like a guard amulet," Malfoy argued. "Very handy, guard amulets. A must for every home."

"You're mental," Dudley returned, and then they looked up to the sound of Harry coming down the stairs. Hermione and Ron were already at the door, and Ginny standing behind Malfoy eyeing Dudley warily while Malfoy talked to him.

"C'mon," Harry said heavily. "We're going. Dudley, we need our wands."

Dudley shoved past him on his way up the stairs. Hermione opened the door at once, while Ron came over to the bottom of the stairs to knock shoulders with Harry as soon as Harry reached him: the solid push of Ron's shoulder made Harry feel a little better.

When Dudley came down, he was awkwardly clutching the cluster of wands like a bouquet of flowers he was supposed to present. He looked warily around at all of them, at Ron beside Harry and Hermione beside the door, and he went over and gave the wands to Malfoy.

"Uh," Dudley said. "Bye, then."

"Bye," said Malfoy.

Ginny said nothing, and walked quickly over to the open door. Malfoy was barely able to keep up with her, and as soon as they went out Ron and Harry followed them. Harry closed the door of number four Privet Drive behind him.

It was not until they were a little way down the street, Malfoy silently dealing out the wands as they went, that Harry noticed Hermione hovering near Ginny, and realised that Ginny was almost in tears. "What *horrible* people," she said. "What horrible, cruel people, no wonder you were always so glad to come to our house, Mum would have a *fit*-"

Hermione nudged Ginny and she fell silent. Harry was grateful to Ron and Hermione, who obviously knew he didn't want to talk about it, and wished Ginny would stop looking at him with tear-shiny eyes.

He looked away from her to Malfoy, who might have become completely distracted by letter boxes and their inherent tragedy. He found Malfoy looking at him as well, but there was neither Ron and Hermione's concern nor Ginny's tears in his cool grey eyes. He just looked measuring.

"I've hassled you a lot about your family," he said when Harry looked at him. His voice sounded cool, too.

"Well," Harry said. "Yeah. Are you saying," he stopped and wondered why he felt a bit hopeful. "If you'd known what they were like, you wouldn't have done it?"

Malfoy's mouth twisted, a little ruefully. "Oh no," he said. "I would have done it. I would have been all *over* doing it. But I - don't think the others would have laughed at it. It isn't - actually very funny."

"Right," Harry said.

They walked on, searching for a spot with no cars whizzing by where they could Apparate without being seen, and after a while Hermione began to speak, doing a very bad impression of being casual.

"Well, good job everyone! I think the next place to look is-"

"We don't need to look," Harry said.

Everyone stared at him. Hermione, very carefully, said: "Harry, what do you mean? Of course we have to-"

"Nah," Harry said, kind of enjoying everyone's blank faces and the thought of how they'd look once they knew, feeling a little warmer. "We don't need to look. Because," he slid his hand into his pocket, and took out Gryffindor's seal. "Because I've got the Horcrux."

Their reaction was everything he could have hoped for. There was a sensation on that grey Muggle street.

Ron whooped, hit Harry on the shoulder again, and when Hermione was making for Harry either to hug him or grab the Horcrux and study it, he picked her up and swung her around and she laughed and let him, breathless. Ginny stared and then flung herself at Harry, arms tight around his neck, her red hair in his eyes tinting the world to look like sunset.

Malfoy in sunset did not seize anyone, perhaps unsurprisingly, but he crossed his arms over his chest, eyes flicking from Harry to the seal, and he smiled.

*

The sensation continued in the Burrow, warm and dear in the light of the immediate memory of Privet Drive.

On their return Mrs Weasley hugged them all around except for Malfoy, who stepped somewhat hastily to one side, and then started making a celebratory Found A Horcrux cake. Charlie was greeted from the window by Malfoy yelling: "Charles! Charles, we have another Horcrux! And I saw a letter box!" and he threw his case in the air and his lesson plans went everywhere, fluttering in the yard, being walked on by chickens. Mr Weasley, once he got back from the office, dashed off at once to tell the Order of the Phoenix and get them on finding ways to destroy the Horcrux. He came back a few moments later to collect Charlie to be consulted about dragonfire for that purpose, and to wring Harry's hand once more.

Celestina Warbeck was put on maximum volume and her voice rang through the house.

Hermione, who had books out and was already on the mission of researching what might destroy a Horcrux, tapped idly on her book page with a biro, and Ron, composing victorious Owls to Percy and the twins and trying to stroke Pigwidgeon into a state of calm so he could deliver them, started to sing along offkey.

Malfoy seemed distressingly inspired by Celestina Warbeck, and he got out a piece of parchment and a quill, after fruitlessly trying to nick one of Hermione's last biros, and sat down at Hermione's table with Ginny.

After a few moments' intent discussion, bright heads together and words like 'Top of the Pops' drifting over to Harry, Malfoy looked up and said: "Come here, Potter, I want you."

Harry paused, tying an Owl to Bill onto Hedwig's leg. Malfoy beckoned impatiently.

Had a bit of a masterful way with him, Malfoy, Harry reflected, rolling his eyes and going to him. Malfoy and Ginny were staring at a piece of paper with the words *Addicted to Love* written on it, the song Ginny and Malfoy'd danced to at Privet Drive.

"You were raised by Muggles," Malfoy said, in much the same tone as he might have said 'by wolves.' "So you must know about this Top of the Pops music. Girl Weasley and I want to know more. In fact, we want to know everything. Tell us some songs."

"Are you *serious*, Malfoy?"

Malfoy tilted his chair back and smiled, the end of his quill feathering against his curving mouth. "Yes. I'm musically inclined, Potter, and you wouldn't want to *deprive* me or Ginny of knowledge about the Muggle world? That would be cruel."

"Well," Harry said as Malfoy nodded at him encouragingly. "Well, okay."

He leaned his chin on his hands and tried to think of the songs Dudley used to blast all over the house. Malfoy looked happily expectant.

"Er," Harry said. "*You and me, we come from different worlds-*"

"No, no, no," Malfoy exclaimed, waving the words away like bothersome flies. "We don't know the tunes, you do, and we want them. *Sing*, Potter."

"Malfoy," Harry said, feeling his face go hot. "I don't really-"

Malfoy threw his hands up in despair. "Sing us a song!"

"All *right*," Harry said, took a deep breath, and sang. "*You like to laugh at me when I look at other girls. Sometimes you're crazy-*"

It was actually horrifically embarrassing to sing in front of four people, two of whom were paying rapt attention. His voice cracked after a minute and he paused.

Ginny said, "Wow, Harry, you're really good!"

Malfoy, chair still tilted back and playing with his quill, grinned and said: "Yeah, not bad."

Harry felt a bit better. He sang a few things for them until Ron, finished up with his letters, came over and started to try and copy him to mass hilarity. Ginny did so better, and Malfoy scribbled everything down on parchments and interjected into the singing, "So is living in a *yellow submarine* a state of mind?"

Hermione tapped her pen against the pages some more, smiled, and eventually said: "You lot do know you're wasting your lives."

"On the contrary, Granger," Malfoy said promptly. "Someday - maybe at Durmstrang - I'll do my NEWTs, and then, oh then, my O in Muggle Studies is going to be the most Outstanding, Outstripping all others and Obviously Overpoweringly intelligent O of them all. Sing us another, Potter."

Harry grinned. "*Oh Malfoy, why don't you have some sense? Please do something-*"

"Wait, wait," Malfoy said, looking thoroughly overexcited. "Is a Malfoy really mentioned in a Muggle song? Really?"

"Well, no," Harry admitted. "I changed it."

Malfoy looked crestfallen. "From what? It scans," he pointed out sadly.

"Er. Mary."

"That's a girl's name," Malfoy said, looking both amused and aggrieved. "I'm not a *girl-*"

"You might start looking like one if you don't cut your hair soon," Ginny put in amiably. She got up to peer at Malfoy's song parchment, and ruffled Malfoy's hair. "I could cut it for you, if you like. I cut mine."

"No," Malfoy said, suddenly looking alarmed. "No, let's go to a real hairdresser's. You come with me, I'll treat you."

"Thanks, Malfoy!" Ginny beamed and twisted her curls around one finger. Being no fool, she glanced at Ron saw his suspicious expression, and said hastily: "He owes me for nicking my shampoo all the time. Honestly, he uses quarts of the stuff-"

"I became used to luxury in the prefects' bathroom," Malfoy informed her plaintively. "Everything comes out of the taps there. I loved it there."

Everyone looked reminiscent.

"Yeah, it was brilliant," Ginny said. "All the purple and silvery bubbles you could get, and the-"

"Wait a minute," Ron said, his eyes narrowing until they looked entirely closed. "You're not a prefect."

It was Ginny's turn to look alarmed. "Ahahaha. Um. No."

Ron's almost-shut eyes opened in order to fire a look of dark suspicion at Harry, who put down the Horcrux and said, "Ron, I swear I never-

He hadn't, either. She was Ron's sister and she was important to him: he'd thought they would have loads of time and it wasn't like he had any experience aside from that disastrous kiss with Cho. He hadn't wanted to mess up with her and it had all been so comfortable, anyway, sunny days by the lake and Ginny letting him feel her up a bit. He'd never even suggested anything like that.

"Do not try and tell me that Dean Thomas was a prefect," Ron said. "Because Hermione and I were the only prefects around, and neither of us had any interest in taking a bath with you-

Ginny was scarlet. "Dean wasn't a prefect," she admitted. "But - but Michael was."

"Michael Corner?" Ron exclaimed. "That-! I'll kill him!"

Malfoy took advantage of the scene by reaching over and sliding the Horcrux towards himself, holding it up to the light. "Ah, the prefects' bathroom," he said. "Good times. I remember Pansy and I, in the second week of fifth year - anyway, Weasley, you're not telling me you didn't use the prefects' bathroom with Brown, she was all over you-

Ron made a frantic gesture for quiet, but Hermione had already looked up from her book. "Is that so, Ron Weasley?"

"Hermione, it meant nothing," Ron tried, and then with increasing desperation: "And we were in our bathing suits the whole time!"

"Well, *so was I*," Ginny cried.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Malfoy, who paused, then let the corner of his mouth go up. "Not so much," he admitted cheerfully.

The battle royal over bathing suits and the rules of decent behaviour for Weasleys in full swing, Malfoy seemed to decide it was time to introduce the Horcruxes to each other. He picked up Gryffindor's seal and clinked it against Slytherin's locket.

"Hello, tiny piece of the Dark Lord's soul," he said in a small voice. "Well hello, other tiny piece of the Dark Lord's soul. How's tricks?" He paused when Harry laughed and said in his normal voice: "Fetch us some more parchment, Potter, and then you can tell me everything about yellow submarines."

Harry went and got parchment from the cupboard by the window, but as he did he lifted his head and saw there were people coming through the gate: Mr Weasley and Charles coming back, obviously, and with them Tonks and Lupin.

He was pleased for a moment, and then it occurred to him that last night had been a full moon. Indeed, from the glimpse he got of Lupin before Lupin disappeared inside the Burrow, he looked very pale and Tonks' arm around him seemed like it might be actually supporting

him.

It might be nothing. Lupin might just be coming to see the Horcrux and congratulate Harry, that was probably it.

He straightened up. "That cake should be done," he said. "I'll go get us all a bit, will I?"

"Good idea, Harry!" Ron said enthusiastically.

"Fine, I will perfect my plans for getting this Horcrux off," Malfoy said, tugging at his chain and reaching for a book at the same time. "Come back ready to sing!"

Harry smiled briefly and without real feeling at both of them, and then left the room. His mind was working busily as he went down the stairs, giving himself a thousand reasons why he'd feel completely stupid when Lupin just smiled and said well done Harry, Sirius would've been proud-

When he opened the door he saw Lupin slumped against the wall, Tonks' arm still around him, and Mr Weasley with his arm around Mrs Weasley, who was crying and saying in a very soft voice: "How horrible - how horrible-"

Charlie was standing as far away from the others as he could get, his back bowed, leaning against the kitchen table as if big, strong Charlie could not bear his own weight.

"I can't," he said. "It'll kill him."

Harry, standing in the doorway, stepped into the room and let the door creak inwards behind him. Everyone looked up at the sound. Lupin's eyes were hollow and his face looked exhausted.

"What's happened?" Harry asked. "Tell me."

"Oh, don't!" Mrs Weasley cried.

Lupin did not hesitate. "They'll all have to know, Molly. I would prefer Harry to hear - certain things from me."

When Lupin said that, Harry saw Tonks make an anguished face, expression fiercely, painfully contorted under all that spiky pink hair. She did not say a word, or move from supporting Lupin.

"You know, I think," Lupin said, "that Lucius Malfoy recently escaped from Azkaban with Voldemort's help."

"Yeah," Harry answered hoarsely. He could see the way everyone looked. He knew suddenly that whatever had happened, he did not want to know.

"Voldemort was determined to make Lucius Malfoy pay for being the unwitting agent of his first Horcrux's destruction. He let Lucius languish in Azkaban, and next he used Draco's willingness to serve him as a psychological punishment. I believe he intended to lead the

entire Malfoy clan on with false hope and then have a pretext on which to kill Lucius' only son, while still keeping Lucius around in case he proved useful. Of course, Draco upset all Voldemort's calculations by succeeding in his task to a degree, and then vanished - as Voldemort still thinks - from the face of the earth.

"I'm telling you this so you'll understand, Harry, the position Lucius Malfoy was in when Voldemort plucked him from Azkaban."

Harry nodded and slowly realised what must have happened. It was no better than the man deserved, but - but Charlie was right, it would *kill* Malfoy-

"I understand," Lupin continued, "that you have been receiving information from Narcissa Malfoy. I regret to say - that Voldemort knew this from the first. He had Death Eaters watching Narcissa in case she found her son, and instead - they saw her with you. Voldemort could have acted at once, but he wanted the proofs to pile up before he condemned Bellatrix Lestrange's sister."

Voldemort called Bellatrix 'Bella,' of course, Harry thought, his mind running away desperately from all other thoughts. He'd known all along, though, so Harry had not endangered Narcissa any further by bringing her to the Burrow, at least there was that.

His scar and Malfoy's Dark Mark had burned last night, burned with Voldemort's triumph.

"And as he collected evidence, I believe another - fitting punishment for Lucius occurred to him," Lupin said, and his tired voice wavered at last. "When he took Lucius out of Azkaban, he told him to summon his wife. And then last night, in front of a court of Death Eaters and wolves baying for blood, he had Lucius execute her."

Mrs Weasley gave a low moan as if hearing the news for the first time all over again, and Charlie shuddered. Harry stood there and felt dizzy. It was too horrible, even Lucius Malfoy couldn't.

Harry had told her to go to her husband. Harry had sent her to her death.

"He had very little choice," Lupin said, fair even now. "Tell Draco that, Charlie. Voldemort was not going to let Narcissa get away, he would have simply killed Lucius as well. It might be - a little easier, if you make him see that."

"But why Charlie?" Mrs Weasley demanded. "Charlie hasn't even known Draco three months yet, there has to be someone closer to that poor boy-"

"Severus asked for Charlie," Lupin said, still sounding bone-weary, his voice without much affect at all as he continued this terrible, unbelievable story. "Snape protested the murder of Narcissa Malfoy most strongly. He argued that the balance of her mind was upset by fear for her son, argued for punishment that would fall short of death, bargained for clemency. Voldemort did not take kindly to what he saw as Snape's defiance and - he cast Cruciatus on Snape. For a rather prolonged period of time. Currently Snape is in Voldemort's stronghold, recovering as best he can. He will not be able to walk for several days, if then, and he was determined that Draco be told before he could find out in the papers or from common gossip. Apparently Charlie spoke kindly of Draco to him, at the vote in Grimmauld Place. He asked

that Charlie tell him."

Charlie managed to speak, with an effort. "I will," he said thickly. "Of course I will, but God - God, what will I say?"

Harry spoke loudly. "I'll do it. I'll tell him."

"Don't be ridiculous, Harry, you can barely be civil to him," Charlie said, his voice rough. "I-"

"Can't you do it, Remus?" Mrs Weasley asked, still weeping.

Lupin's face fell into the lines of a death mask suddenly, and tears rose and fell silently down Tonks' face. She turned to bury her face against Lupin's chest so he would not see them and Lupin, as usual, spoke quietly.

"I am the last person who can tell Draco," he answered slowly. "Once Lucius Malfoy had cast the Killing Curse on his wife, once it was all over - Voldemort threw Narcissa Malfoy's body to the wolves."

"No."

Harry spun to the door, which had not fallen quite closed. It stood ajar, and in the small space, in the fading light, stood Malfoy. As Harry turned he saw a book slip from Malfoy's nerveless fingers, saw his hands twitch empty at his side.

Malfoy looked perfectly normal for a moment more, and then he began to speak and his mouth twisted, trembled on the words.

"No," he said again, and the line of his mouth was savage, his expression breaking up behind it. "No, it's not - it's not true, that filthy werewolf is *lying*-"

Harry heard steps behind him, but he did not turn around and he did not know who it was until Charlie was by his side and then a step closer to Malfoy, hand outstretched.

"Draco," he said. "Draco, don't-"

Malfoy gave a convulsive shudder. "Don't *touch* me!"

He stepped back, into the hall, and stood staring, holding himself like an animal at bay, his eyes travelling desperately over all of them.

"Draco," Lupin tried, quietly. "I'm sorry. I swear it's true."

"And why should I believe you?" Malfoy snarled. "Why should I *want* to believe any of you, that my - that my-"

He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth hard, as if he had to force the words back. He was trembling continuously now, thin shoulders braced as if one of them was going to attack him.

The only sounds were Malfoy's ragged, harsh breathing and the noise of Mrs Weasley weeping.

Harry felt frozen, as he had when he'd caught Malfoy crying, only this time was a hundred times worse. This time everything Malfoy had feared had come true, and there was nothing anybody could possibly do to help.

"Son," Mr Weasley began hesitantly.

"I'm not your son!" Malfoy shouted. His chest was rising and falling too fast, and suddenly there were brilliant spots of colour in his cheeks. He was staring at them all now with an odd blankness, as if he had gone blind with rage or distress. "I - I don't believe it, I won't stay here, I - I want to go-"

He turned and almost blundered into the doorframe, hand out as if he really was blind, and then turned fast, faster than Harry had ever seen him move even when he was flying, and went for the door. The door of the Burrow slammed behind him with a crash and he was gone.

"God," Charlie said, his voice scraping. "God, Draco. We can't let him go - but if he needs to be alone-"

"You should leave him to it, Charlie," Mr Weasley counselled.

"I - right," Charlie said, pushing a rough hand through his hair. "But he might - if he Apparated or did anything - I'll go get my Omnioculars. I need to make sure he's all right."

Charlie pushed past Harry and went for the stairs, taking them three at a time. Just then there was a sound in the kitchen and Harry turned fast to see what else could have happened.

Lupin's knees had gone out from under him. Tonks was doing her best to hold him up by himself, and the Weasleys were rushing to help her.

Harry went into the hall.

He still felt frozen. His mind didn't seem to be working properly and he had no idea, less than no idea, of what to do. He couldn't possibly do anything, nobody could, and him the least of all, but - but he'd stayed frozen in the bathroom, and look how that had turned out.

And Malfoy - Malfoy'd even gone to Moaning Myrtle when he was upset. Harry did not think he would want to be alone, not really, not when he was more alone than he'd ever been before.

Harry stared at the door, and then reached out. Then he'd opened the door and was running down the crazy paving without another thought, cold wind in his face. He saw Malfoy, disappearing up a hill sparsely strewn with trees, going at a dead run, and he went after him without another instant's hesitation.

The sky was slate grey with clouds and approaching night. Someone had been following

Malfoy's mother, Malfoy's mother had been *killed*, it wasn't safe for him to be running around outside the wards of the Burrow. Harry had to get him back.

On the rise of the hill, among the trees, Malfoy had stopped.

Harry stopped and watched him. Malfoy raked his hair back with his hands, pulled his head back so he was looking up into the dark sky, and then made a low sound and whirled, hit a tree with a loose fist, the blow clumsy and doing nothing more than rip his knuckles bloody against the bark. He sagged against the tree he'd just hit, face buried against his arm, back arched tight as a strung bow. Harry could see his shoulders shake. The terrible low sound continued and Harry realised Malfoy was sobbing.

"Malfoy," he said, helplessly.

Malfoy whirled around, fast as a striking snake, and when he saw Harry his wet face contorted into ugly ferocity. His expression worked for a few minutes, trying to resolve into nothing but fury, and he spat out: "You. I bet you're really pleased, aren't you?"

"No, I - of course not," Harry stammered.

Malfoy put his hand over his eyes for a moment, sobbed for another moment, a terrible choked sound he was clearly trying not to make, and then turned, back on the attack, his eyes glittering.

"I bet you are glad," he went on, his voice jagged, tumbling over itself. "Come on. Secretly. A little. Don't tell me you don't think a little poetic justice has been - has been served. All those times I talked about your parents, your dead parents, your ever so *pathetic* orphaned state, and now I - oh God, not my mother, not *Mother* -"

He turned his face aside as if he could not bear for Harry to see him, let out another low half-strangled sob, and then another suddenly, a whole round of hacking dreadful sobs he couldn't seem to control. He trembled and shook and before Harry could move forward, help him somehow, Malfoy was on his hands and knees in the dirt and still sobbing.

He looked up, his face crumpled and wet with tears, his nose running, and swiped savagely at his face as if he wanted to rub himself utterly away.

"Do you have to *be here*, Potter?" he snarled. "Must you be here for every single humiliation of my life, it doesn't even matter anymore, you've won, go the hell away! The only thing I ever had you didn't was a family, and now - I have worse than no father, don't I, because Dad - Can't you just *go*?"

Harry knelt down in the dirt and dead leaves.

"No," he said. "No. Look, Malfoy, I - when your mother agreed to spy for me -"

Another shudder wracked Malfoy's whole body. "*Stop it*," he said between his teeth. "Don't - I *hate* you, shut up about her, stop -"

Harry spoke rapidly, trying to make the words as forceful as he could. "All she wanted was

for you to be safe. That was what she wanted, and you are safe, I promised her-

He remembered Narcissa's face, wearing the expression of a woman underwater, who knew she would never break the surface again.

"Swear it. He's yours to protect. Promise me."

"I promise. He's mine."

He *had* promised.

He cleared his throat. "I'll be your family," he said. "If you want."

Malfoy lifted his head and stared at him. Then he burst out into hysterical laughter. It sounded tight, anguished, too much like his sobbing, and Harry just felt alarmed and uncomfortable and at a loss.

"What," Malfoy gasped out at last, still staring. "What, are you crazy? You, my mother's dead and you're *crazy*, I can't even - You don't even like me."

"Well," Harry said, looking at his knees. "Well - I don't like my real family much, either."

That sent Malfoy into another round of hysterical laughter, this one less like sobbing, eased down from the edge a little. He was able to straighten up a fractional amount, get into a sitting position even if he did look more miserably curled up in the leaves than anything else, and then the quieter hysteria turned into nothing but crying. Malfoy's hand was over his face, he was still unable to look at Harry, and his breath kept hitching as he struggled for control. Harry would've told him to go on and cry, but Malfoy obviously wanted to pretend it wasn't happening at all.

Harry sat there until full night was almost upon them, and Malfoy determinedly choked off the crying. He straightened, set his mouth and was able to look Harry in the face again, even though his mouth wobbled out of shape the next instant and he was trembling in an exhausted sort of way.

He gave Harry a look that dared him to say anything about crying. Harry felt no temptation to say anything of the sort.

"Will you come back to the Burrow?" he asked quietly. "It's not safe for you out here."

"Not like there are many other options," Malfoy answered, his voice a ruin. His throat must have been raw with sobbing.

He had agreed, though. Harry climbed to his feet, stiff with how long he'd been sitting there on the cold ground, and offered Malfoy a hand up since he must be in an even worse condition. Malfoy hesitated for a moment, and then took his hand. Harry helped him up.

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Malfoy did not say much on their return to the Burrow. He stood with his arms folded over

his chest, looking cold and brittle and as if he might bite if anybody touched him.

Lupin and Tonks were gone. Everyone had clearly been told.

Mr Weasley had absented himself from the scene completely, and Ron and Hermione were looking wary, as if they wanted to ask Harry exactly what was going on before they committed themselves to a line of action.

"Sorry, Malfoy," Ron said in a low voice.

"Yes, I'm terribly sorry, Malfoy," Hermione murmured, equally subdued.

Malfoy looked at them and nodded, mouth still set in a tight line.

Ginny said nothing, just looked scared that something this terrible and irreparable could have happened within her own personal orbit, younger and smaller than she usually did. She did sidle a little nearer Malfoy, and half-extend her hand, as if she wanted to pat him or something without having to talk about it, but Malfoy shied away. Ginny let her hand fall.

Mrs Weasley fluttered around and said: "Is there anything - any food I could fix you, Draco?" she asked, and added almost on a note of pleading: "Dear."

Malfoy tightened his arms around himself. "No."

It was not until Malfoy had wandered, perhaps aimlessly but still with that air of tight control, into the study and sat in an armchair far away from the table where all his songs notes lay, that Charlie spoke to him. He had been watching since Malfoy got back in the house.

He came over, touched Malfoy very deliberately, one big hand resting soothingly on Malfoy's back for a moment, and then knelt down in front of the chair.

"Draco," he said. "You need sleep. Come on up."

"I'm not tired," Malfoy said in a pinched voice, and then something in Charlie's earnest face made him add: "I can't - I couldn't sleep. You go, Charles, you have teaching in the morning."

Charlie paused. "Do you," he said. "Do you want to-"

"Don't ask me to talk about it." Malfoy's voice went stony. "I won't."

Charlie straightened and backed off. "All right," he said. "All right, I'll go. But Draco - I am sorry."

Malfoy shivered and looked out the window. "I know you are."

After that there was silence, broken only when Mrs Weasley came up and cast *Lumos* so they would not be sitting in the dark. Malfoy gave no sign he even knew she was there. His eyes were blank again and distant, as if all he could see, over and over again, was the imagined fall of Narcissa Malfoy's body being thrown to the wolves.

After a while in the silence and flickering light, Harry began to feel a bit stupid. He'd been sitting near Malfoy's armchair, with his back against the wall, for hours now, and Malfoy had given every indication to the others that he wanted to be left alone. He'd told Harry to go away, before. Maybe Malfoy really did want to be by himself and he was silently ignoring Harry because he thought Harry just wouldn't leave him alone.

Maybe he wanted his vigil to be private.

Harry uncurred from the floor, putting a light hand on one side of the armchair so he could lever himself up, and then Malfoy's hand shot out and he felt a tight grip around his wrist. He looked down: Malfoy's knuckles were white. His grip on Harry's wrist hurt.

Harry lifted his eyes. Malfoy's face was ashen and strained in the low light.

He licked his lips and said in the same pinched voice, with even more difficulty. "Don't-"

"No," Harry told him at once. "No. Don't worry. I won't leave you."

Chapter Fifteen

Harry did not think he had ever made a mistake so fundamental as that of comparing Draco Malfoy to Dudley.

He hadn't thought much about the words he used trying to comfort Malfoy. Malfoy's mother was dead and Harry was just desperately talking nonsense that could not possibly help. They were just words, and they didn't make any difference. Narcissa Malfoy had asked Harry where she should go, and Harry had sent her to her death. Nobody could bring her back.

Malfoy did not sleep for a couple of nights. He sat around, speaking politely when he was spoken to, and looking ashen the whole time. Whenever someone spoke to him sympathetically he recoiled as if they had hit him. Perhaps the thing that distressed Mrs Weasley most was that he would not eat.

Then he did sleep, because he had to. He started to talk in a more normal way, even though he wasn't insulting anyone so it wasn't entirely normal, and he wasn't entirely better.

He had made his wishes clear enough, so nobody talked about it at all. People talked about Quidditch, and Ron achieved a half hour of comparative normality by getting all worked up over the Chudley Cannons' chances. It turned out Malfoy was a Tutshill Tornados fan. He called Ron delusional and everyone felt a little better.

It took Harry a while to notice something else.

It was just a small thing, subtle, nothing really noticeable in the midst of all the changes in Malfoy's behaviour. Nobody but Harry noticed at all.

It was just that - Malfoy didn't like Harry. He never had, and he never failed to show it, even when he wasn't making a big ostentatious Schoolboy Nemesis display of himself. He always chose the seat furthest away from Harry, and sometimes went to sit on the carpet. He seldom addressed him in everyday conversation about passing the butter, if two groups were involved in something he chose the group Harry wasn't in, he didn't like him. It was as simple as that, and not something Harry'd had cause to think about before.

Only, now there was a change. Malfoy was not talking much, but when he was things like 'pass the butter' were addressed to Harry more often than to anyone else. Malfoy chose the seat nearest to Harry in any room, and, well, he made gestures.

It wasn't a big deal: they weren't big gestures. Harry brought Malfoy a cup of coffee six days after Narcissa Malfoy died. Malfoy was sitting at a table listlessly turning the pages of a book about dragonfire, which looked like everyone's favoured method of destruction for the Gryffindor seal Horcrux, and Harry'd made tea for the others, and he'd thought that Malfoy could probably use some coffee.

Malfoy turned and said, "Thanks, Potter," and took the cup in one hand, circling Harry's wrist to steady the cup with the other. It was not something he would have done last week, and the cup hadn't really been unsteady. Also, Malfoy's light clasp on his wrist lasted an infinitesimal moment after he'd taken the cup.

Malfoy was doing things like that. Now and then he'd reach over and pluck Harry's sleeve for his attention instead of barking out "Potter!" and possibly throwing something. Once when Harry was reading the paper and frowning Malfoy patted him on the shoulder as he passed.

That was odd in itself. Another odd thing was that clearly Malfoy was not being spontaneous. Harry saw him instinctively going for the chairs further away, and checking himself. He watched more closely and Malfoy looked tense and a bit self-conscious when he was making one of his little gestures, and he relaxed afterwards as if he had completed a task he'd set himself.

This latest float in Malfoy's parade of weirdness left Harry at a loss at first, and then he remembered what he'd said when he'd been doing his best to comfort Malfoy - what he'd meant, what he'd promised Narcissa Malfoy and what he now owed her son - and he realised that this might be Malfoy's way of letting Harry know that Malfoy accepted.

Malfoy was trying to make him his family.

When he realised that, he felt ill at the thought of how lonely and desperate Malfoy must be.

He'd known already that Dudley and Malfoy were different, but he hadn't considered how very different their views on family were. He didn't understand Malfoy's position on family, or on much of anything, but it had suddenly become a matter of urgency to find out.

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"Well, if you ask me," Charlie began.

Harry hadn't asked him anything. Charlie, in fact, didn't actually know he was there. Harry had been thinking over the Malfoy problem, and come up with the thought that considering Malfoy had a marked lack of ability to take care of himself and alarming talent at wasting away like a romance heroine, a good start might be hauling Malfoy down to dinner.

Except now Malfoy and Charlie were talking, and Harry had, well - paused in his errand. So he could find out something that might help him work out what to *do*, it wasn't just idle curiosity so it was all right.

Harry's hand rested on the doorknob. The door was a little ajar and Harry held it in place rather than pushing it all the way open.

"It's not like he has any proper family of his own," Charlie said. "I mean, you saw Privy Drive or whatever, it was a nightmare, right?"

"Yes," Malfoy answered, his tone neutral.

"Not that comes as any sort of surprise," Charlie said. "I remember the letters Mum wrote me when she first saw him and - well, pretty much since then. Wandered around looking like an underfed kitten for too long, and in fact - Draco, you're not to repeat this or laugh at him or anything, all right? Even if you get into a strop?"

"All right," Malfoy agreed.

"The twins and Ron had to rescue him from there before the start of their second year. He clearly hadn't been - they were keeping him locked up and not feeding him much of anything." Charlie cleared his throat. "He's well out of that. And of course Mum's heart melted and trickled into her boots at the thought of, you know, the little Boy Who Lived being mistreated and everything. She's done her best for him, Mum, but it's not the same, and he has to know that. It's like-" Charlie paused. "I'm not saying it's brilliant to be yelled at by Mum or anything," he said finally. "But she does it because we're all comfortable. We know that she loves us, and she knows that we know, no matter what. Mum's got her own children. It's not the same."

There was silence behind the door, as if Malfoy could not think of anything to say about mothers, or could think of too many things. After a moment Charlie went on, his voice a little rougher with sympathy he was trying to hide. Charlie was the worst at it, since he was the one who liked Malfoy the best.

"He hasn't got anyone else," Charlie said. "If you ask me, he meant it."

Malfoy spoke abruptly, in the full sentences he'd seemed to be avoiding all week and a bleak flood of words he'd perhaps been trying to control all week. "I haven't anyone. Not any more. And I have to - I can't-" He stopped short, as if he had bitten his tongue to keep the words in, and then said in a sore sort of voice: "If you're right, that's one thing. But I won't take pity."

"Charlie!" Mrs Weasley called, coming up the stairs. "Draco - Harry, what on earth are you doing?"

She was staring at him. Harry let go of the doorknob as if it had burned him.

"Er," he said. "Er. Coming down to lay the table for you!"

She beamed at him tenderly. "You're always so thoughtful," she said, and when Harry went by her and down the stairs she gave him a misty smile.

It's not the same,, Charlie's voice repeated in his head. Well, he'd always known that, really.

He'd promised Narcissa Malfoy, though, and that was why. It was not because he didn't have anyone himself.

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At dinner, Malfoy pulled a piece of bread into smaller pieces and drizzled them artistically over his food, creating an impressionistic painting that might have been secretly titled *Snow Over Mountains of Snowy Peas: Draco Malfoy's Entirely Unconvincing Rendition of a Person Eating Dinner*.

Everyone looked at their food a lot. Charlie had seemed able to talk to Malfoy up in their room, but now he was just a solid uncomfortable presence on Malfoy's left. Mr Weasley preserved the silence of someone who had nothing nice to say to a Malfoy, and nothing bad he could say to a bereaved son. Ron clearly felt he had shot his bolt with the Chudley Cannons.

Ginny, who had not been able to look Malfoy in the eye since it happened and could not seem to address a word directly to him that was not supremely awkward, glanced around in panic and took on talking duty. She began to relay the details of a letter from Dean Thomas she'd got via Pigwidgeon today.

"Dean Thomas?" Harry asked with dark suspicion.

"Yes," Ginny answered, smiling at him brightly. "Well, Harry, we're still friends, you know."

"Didn't know," Harry said.

"If that Dean Thomas is trying to get around you again, trying to cozen his way back into your good graces by pretending he's not after you, you shouldn't trust him," Ron warned.

"Very interested in - that football thing, Dean. You can't tell me that's natural."

Mr Weasley leaped on this chance to talk Muggles, and while Harry, Hermione and Ginny - who was equipped with knowledge learned from Dean - tried to explain football using pepper pots and a salad spoon, most of dinner went by comfortably enough.

Malfoy kept pulling apart his bread. Harry looked up from the pepper pot and blurted: "You should have some milk."

It had sounded more natural in his head. Milk was healthy and - soothing, probably. People heated up milk when they wanted to go to sleep and it built healthy bones.

Malfoy stared at him as if Harry had lost his mind. "But I don't like milk."

"Right," Harry said. "Never mind."

"I could put some milk in my coffee," Malfoy offered, in an experimental sort of way, but also with a blank air about him that implied he thought Harry was unforgivably crazy. "If it is required."

"No. I mean fine. Whatever. Do whatever you want," said Harry. "Don't move that, Ginny, it's not a player, it's a goalpost."

People were clearing up and washing up when Malfoy slipped a sensation into the remains of the conversation by remarking: "I quite like Thomas."

Harry stared at him. "You do?"

Charlie glanced back at them, looking as if he wondered whether he should abandon the serving dishes on the floor and hurry back to Malfoy's side. Malfoy kept his head bowed over his full plate.

"You do," Harry inquired. "You do know he's Muggleborn?"

"Yes," Malfoy answered, with a strong suggestion of rolling his eyes about his voice.

"Naturally, I know he's a Mud-" he cut himself off sharply. "-leborn."

"Oh," Harry said. "A Muggleborn?"

He didn't mean it badly, and for a wonder Malfoy didn't take it that way. He looked up from his plate, light from the kitchen falling full on his drawn face, and a corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"I'm very enlightened about the Muggleborn," he claimed.

"Oh, I see," said Harry. "So-"

It was then that Hermione came to collect the impromptu goalposts and football players, and caught the tail end of their exchange. She took them to task for allowing prejudiced language to be a laughing matter, stopping at intervals to say "No, Mr Weasley, the equivalent of Man U wouldn't be Wizards U, that's not right at all."

Malfoy made himself some coffee and put milk in it. It was a start.

*

Next morning Malfoy went off to the bathroom. It was normal enough for Malfoy to spend hours in the bathroom using Ginny's hair things, but Harry happened to notice that there was no sound of the shower going. Maybe Malfoy was upset. Maybe Harry should do something.

Last time Harry had surprised Malfoy being upset in a bathroom, however, things had not gone well.

Harry twisted a page between his fingers, crumpled and tore it, and then looked up into Hermione's appalled face. He escaped before she could get over the shock.

It was dark on the landing, the lights off, the morning overcast. There was not the slightest sound from the bathroom, but Malfoy had been in there for over an hour. Harry tried to think it over, doubted, wondered, gave it up and knocked on the door.

"Malfoy?" he said. "It's, er, it's me."

There was no answer. Which meant there was no vicious snarl of "Go away!", which Harry took as a promising sign. He frowned at the unhelpful blank face of the door, twisted the doorknob and shoved it open before he could change his mind.

Malfoy was huddled on the floor, knees drawn up, head buried in his arms, and Harry promptly changed his mind and wished he was anywhere else. It was too late now, though: had been too late since he'd promised Narcissa Malfoy to protect her son, and meant from Death Eaters and Aurors and random passersby who were deeply annoyed by him. Malfoy had ended up needing and Harry had ended up owing something else.

All the same, he meant to keep his word.

"Malfoy?" he said with extreme trepidation. "Are you okay?"

Malfoy's wand was drawn and already in his hand, fingers tightly clenched around it. Harry did not think this was very promising at all.

"Malfoy," he said, stopping a discreet distance from Malfoy and ready to draw his own wand at any minute. "What're you doing?"

Malfoy lifted his head from his knees. His hair looked silver in the morning gloom, and his face looked ghastly, skin a greyish pale colour. He looked at Harry in a way so tranquil it looked desperate, and dropped his wand. Then he cupped his hands and said in a quiet, hoarse sort of way: "Call for water." The trapped gleam of light on water reflected on the dim, small ceiling of the bathroom. "Call for food. Call for fire. Call for help." The scarlet light was brighter than it had been in the Dursleys' kitchen, a vivid lick of colour, growing brighter and brighter as Malfoy concentrated, as if it was a silent scream for help rather than a beacon. Then abruptly it extinguished between his palms. "And wait for me to find you," he finished in an exhausted voice. He turned his face away, mouth twisting, and then added: "Only she won't, will she? She won't ever come to find me again."

"I will," said Harry.

He turned quickly to the sound behind him, and saw Ginny, clearly on the way down to the kitchen where Charlie was, and looking as if she devoutly wished she'd stayed up in her room. She gave Harry a brief agonised glance, and then her eyes slid over Malfoy, and she began to sidle around the horror of this situation on her way to the stairs.

Harry turned away and did not see the moment where her rush was diverted and some impulse other than embarrassment sent her flying past him, launching herself at Malfoy and collapsing beside him on the bathroom floor.

"Malfoy," she said in a rush, voice muffled by putting her face against his shoulder. "Malfoy, I'm really sorry, I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

Malfoy stared down at her bright head, looking extremely startled but also a little touched. He unclenched one of his hands, and smoothed her tumbled hair with fingers doing their best to be gentle.

"Thanks, Girl Weasley," he said in an uneven sort of way. In an uneven sort of way, she laughed. Malfoy's face sharpened with sudden resolve. "There's one thing you can do for me," he told her. "Will you?"

"Yes," Ginny said at once.

"Potter-" Malfoy paused and looked up at him: Harry couldn't quite read his expression. "He told me that my father tried to kill you. I said that I'd ask you about that, but - I didn't. I don't think - I didn't want to know. Now I do. Will you tell me what happened?"

Ginny kept her head buried in Malfoy's shoulder, and for a moment did not move or speak. Malfoy, moving stiffly as if he had been sitting too long on that cold bathroom floor, put his arm around her, held her to his side and did not press her, even though Harry saw the almost savagely impatient line of his mouth.

Slowly, Ginny said: "It was my first year at Hogwarts."

Malfoy jumped and Harry was almost frightened by his face, but of course Ginny couldn't see it. He kept gently smoothing her hair. "You were eleven," Malfoy said, his voice only shaking once. "Oh - I see. Go on." He lifted his eyes to Harry again. "Could you give us a moment," he said.

"Right," Harry said. "Yeah. Of course."

"Thanks, Potter," said Malfoy.

Harry backed out of the room, leaving them on the bathroom floor together. He paused, considering listening - just so he could know, for Malfoy's own good - but instead, he went back to the living room where Ron and Hermione were studying, and he opened a book.

He waited until he heard Ginny talking to Charlie downstairs, and the clear sound of her laughing. Ron saw him get up as soon as he heard her and smiled at him knowingly: Harry shrugged, and they both let him go.

Malfoy wasn't in the bathroom, and wasn't in his room. Harry looked all around the house, and the gardens, and he came to the decision that if Malfoy had run off somewhere dangerous he had to be fetched back so he could damn well be endangered here. Then he heard the noise from the attics, and took the flights of stairs two at a time.

The door was locked, so Harry forced it, and was immediately hit with spectral flesh and chains.

He shouted, Malfoy fractionally lowered his wand, and the ghoul shrieked and fled into a different corner of the attic. Harry was left with the wind knocked out of him and his temper up.

"Malfoy," he said, trying to keep his voice measured, "Are you hexing the Weasleys' ghoul?"

"I don't blame you for being surprised," Malfoy told him, his eyes alight. "Quite a departure for my family, isn't it? When we usually try to murder the Weasleys' children!"

Oh, good.

"Malfoy," Harry said, still trying to be careful, "It's, um, it's all right. Ginny knows it wasn't your-"

"I've grasped the situation, Potter. I almost killed Ron Weasley. My father almost killed Ginny Weasley. I can tell the difference."

It was pitch black up there in the attics. The light from the stairwell was all Harry had to see by: it was lucky Malfoy's hair was pale, so he could track his movements around the attic. He was moving restlessly, and when he came closer Harry saw the flash of his eyes.

"I understand-" he began resolutely.

"Oh I'm sure you do, Potter," Malfoy replied. "Your father was a real let-down, wasn't he? Professor Snape told me how pathetic he was."

Harry stilled and looked at the cruel curve of Malfoy's mouth.

"What?"

"He tortured Professor Snape like a cat with a mouse, and then he lost his courage at the last minute before he finished him off," Malfoy went on breathlessly. "But maybe it doesn't compare, after all, you didn't know your father. But - forgive me if I'm wrong - you did know dear old Sirius Black, didn't you?"

"Shut your stupid mouth, Malfoy."

"Poor Cousin Sirius," Malfoy said, licking his lips and sneering. "Only Black who was ever in Gryffindor, you know. Of course, that makes sense: he was the only member of the family who was spectacularly dim."

Harry abruptly went from trying to look away from Malfoy and control himself, fight down the rush of rage, to being carried away by it and glad about that. The hell with Malfoy, anyway: the hell with any stupid ideas about trying ridiculously and awkwardly to build something that should be organic anyway, something that should be easy.

"Aunt Bella told me all about him!" Malfoy shouted. "He went down because he was too arrogant and stupid to pay attention, didn't he? He went down laughing like an idiot. Sounds like a true Gryffindor!"

Harry punched him in the face.

Malfoy snarled, dragging the cut in his mouth open further, and laughed as blood spilled down his chin. He threw himself at Harry and caught him in the stomach. Harry cracked his head going down and Malfoy's face above him went blurry for a moment, voice sounding indistinct in his ears as if he was hearing sound underwater. Malfoy, the scrappy little bastard who had gotten in a lick at George Weasley with Harry and George both on him, hit Harry scientifically in the stomach and then elbowed him in the throat.

"And what was he up to before that?" Malfoy snarled. "I heard he was drinking himself to death and throwing tantrums. What a hero, Potter. You want to grow up to be just like him?"

Harry grabbed a handful of Malfoy's hair and pulled it. Some of the hair came away in his hand as Malfoy screamed and Harry got the elbow off his throat with a shove, punched Malfoy in the face again and rolled him, getting an elbow in his stomach as Malfoy yelped and fought back, a fist missing Harry's eye by an inch.

"What about your hero?" Harry rasped. "What about the guy still crawling to Voldemort after Voldemort tried to get his son killed? What about the guy who targets people through their children, the one who tries to murder little girls? You want to grow up to be just like him, Malfoy?"

Malfoy punched him properly in the face this time: Harry felt his lip cut open against his

teeth. Blood filled his mouth and he swallowed it down, struggling to pin Malfoy down and let the bastard have it.

"Shut up!" Malfoy panted. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"Take it back and I will!" Harry shouted. "My father wasn't a murderer! My father wasn't a coward!"

"That's not what I hear," Malfoy shouted back.

They rolled and hit the wall. Harry almost got Malfoy up against it, crushed between the wall and Harry, and he did get a few good blows in. All he could hear was the clanking of the ghoul's chains somewhere in the distance, the harsh sound of Malfoy breathing and the sound of his heart pounding in his ears.

Then Malfoy twisted, slippery little bastard that he was, and threw Harry backwards, enough to get away from the wall. Harry grabbed the locket to bring Malfoy with him and the chain tightened around Malfoy's neck so he choked. Malfoy tried to spit in Harry's face. Harry used his free hand to punch Malfoy in the stomach, locked one leg around Malfoy's and hit him again, hardly noticing when Malfoy swung and caught him in the eye. He was going to win this and he was going to make Malfoy shut his foul, lying mouth.

Malfoy was hitting him everywhere he could reach, hair flying and eyes wild, face flushed with fury. Harry thought for a confused moment that the eruption of the Weasleys into the attic was just the ghoul, and tried to hit Malfoy again.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted. "Malfoy! Stop at once!"

Ron and Charlie rushed at them and Charlie grabbed Malfoy by the back of his shirt. Ron locked an arm around Harry's neck and dragged him backwards across the attic floor. Hermione rushed to help Ron, sticking her wand into the side of Harry's neck.

"Don't move, Harry," she said. "Really, I mean it. I don't know what you could have been thinking!"

Malfoy fought Charlie while Charlie tried to get a hold on his wrists: he only stilled when Ginny assisted her brother by trying to leap on Malfoy's back. She didn't quite make it, but Malfoy stopped moving and Ginny kept a tenacious hold on the shoulder of his shirt.

Mrs Weasley was weeping. "Harry, really, at a time like this, I don't know how you could-"

Harry didn't listen at first, glaring at Malfoy, who was glaring back. His shirt was torn and Harry saw the livid red mark where the chain had wrapped around his throat.

Then Mrs Weasley's words seeped in, and he remembered Malfoy's mother, and began to feel a little cold.

"Maybe Harry was provoked, Molly," Mr Weasley put in.

"He was," Malfoy said unexpectedly. Mr Weasley swung around and stared at him, and

Malfoy shrugged, wincing as he did so. "I provoked him. I meant to do it," he went on, with a cold, studied politeness. "Sorry for disturbing all of you."

There seemed to be no answer to this, unless you counted everyone staring at both of them as if they thought Harry and Malfoy were both irredeemably insane as an answer.

"It was my fault," Ginny announced suddenly. "I upset Malfoy."

"No, you didn't," Malfoy snarled.

"I shouldn't have hit him," Harry said.

Charlie, alone of them all, looked like he wanted to laugh. "So it was everyone's fault," he said. "You're a pack of culprits."

"Oh, be quiet, Charles," Malfoy muttered.

There was a total silence. Even the ghoul seemed to have wrapped his chains around himself and started sulking.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione said at length. "I've a good mind not to heal either of you, but, Harry, that looks like it's going to be a nasty black eye-" She lifted her wand from the side of his neck, and said: "Somebody help Malfoy. Not Ginny, you know you're useless at healing charms-"

"I've been practising!" Ginny protested vehemently.

"I can do it," Charlie said. "My specialty is burns, of course, but I'm okay with all healing charms. C'mere, you."

Hermione began to murmur healing charms, her intent face close to Harry's and her air completely businesslike until Harry flinched and she apologised all over herself. Malfoy's eyes travelled from Ginny to Charlie.

"You try," he suggested to Ginny, and then with suicidal recklessness in the presence of Ginny's father: "You know you can do what you like with me."

Ginny burst out laughing. Mr Weasley looked like he wished he had been struck deaf before he heard a Malfoy addressing his child in that way. Malfoy winked at Ginny, and then listened with unusual patience to her telling him that he should not have provoked Harry. Ginny pulled off most of the healing charms perfectly.

*

Guilt and adrenaline kept Harry up that night. He knew they'd all been right to stop him, he wished he hadn't started it, but that didn't change the fact that his blood was coursing restlessly in his veins and he wished he had something to do.

He went to make himself a cup of tea, and found Malfoy in the kitchen making coffee.

"Kettle's boiled," Malfoy told him.

"Um," Harry said. "Right."

Malfoy arched an eyebrow at him as if Harry was behaving oddly: as if nothing had happened earlier, and maybe, Harry thought slowly, as Malfoy regarded it, nothing really had. He felt slightly better as he realised that neither of them had crossed that unforgivable line. Harry had not mentioned Narcissa, and Malfoy had not mentioned Dumbledore.

He made himself tea so he could think before he said anything else.

Malfoy'd been angry so he'd run off at the mouth: nothing new there. And yet, and still. He didn't think Malfoy enjoyed being hurt. He'd never seen Malfoy initiate a fistfight in his life. He just talked and talked and threw spells when he felt he'd been insulted beyond the possibility of remedy. He didn't like being hurt, and yet he never could shut himself up, which meant he wanted - attention or something. Malfoy wanted to be somebody's priority.

Harry would've thought that seeing into someone's mind would have made them easy to work out. Apparently this was not the case, though without that Malfoy might have been utterly bloody impossible.

"About what Ginny told you," Harry began.

"I'm thinking about that," Malfoy told him. "I'm trying to come up with a plan. When I'm done working at my plan-" he paused, and looked around the kitchen as if a diversion at this embarrassing moment would have been very welcome, but none came, so he took a deep breath and said: "Will you help me with it?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Yeah. I will."

Malfoy finished stirring sugar into his coffee. "All right, then." He lifted the cup to his lips, and between the rim of the cup and the small cut Ginny had missed at the corner of Malfoy's mouth Harry was almost sure he caught a smile.

He gestured to it as he made tea. "Ginny hasn't quite managed those healing charms."

"Well, she may not be Granger," Malfoy admitted. "Granger's talented," he went on reluctantly, and then his half-hidden smile leaped out again between cup and lip. "For a Muggleborn."

Harry laughed. It was ridiculous, he and Malfoy had been doing their level best to kill each other a couple of hours ago, and now they were back to that sort-of not-unpleasant place where they'd shaken hands. Maybe, it was possible that-

"Smarter than you," he said. "Or me."

"Well, obviously smarter than you," Malfoy remarked loftily. "You're practically a Muggleborn yourself."

"You said that a lot down in the Slytherin dungeons, didn't you?" Harry asked. "I can just tell.

Probably my Chosen One powers."

He watched for another smile and got it.

"Do you really get on with Dean Thomas?" he asked suddenly.

"Well," Malfoy said. "That's a bit of an exaggeration. We had a conversation once. Do you know how to sort through someone's thoughts?"

Harry blinked and felt somewhat at a loss.

"Er," he said. "No?"

"That's where you're wrong, Potter," Malfoy informed him with satisfaction. "What were the chances of you stumbling into a memory of Professor Snape's that involved your father and his friends?"

"How d'you know that?"

"He told me all about it this summer, you invading someone's privacy, imagine my surprise, let's move on," Malfoy said, waving a hand and almost hitting his own coffee cup.

"Subconsciously you wanted something that would be of interest to you, so you got that scene. You need to be able to do that consciously, so you can look into the snake's mind. While keeping yours shielded."

Harry remembered the sensation of his fangs sinking into Mr Weasley's skin, and almost knocked over his tea. "I think I'm fine without looking into the snake's mind, Malfoy, thanks."

"No you won't, Potter, you dimwit," Malfoy said with his well-known tact and charm. "What if you say 'Come, Nagini' when what the Dark Lord usually says is 'Daddy loves you, Snugglefangs'? Then where will you be?"

"Not experiencing the terrible mental image I currently am," Harry said, grinning. "Which will be nice."

"Don't try to distract me with unexpected wit," Malfoy said. "Come to the Pensieve and try to pick out the memory where I talked to Thomas."

"Isn't the Pensieve in with Charlie?" Harry inquired.

"I moved it to the study in case we talked tonight," Malfoy said. "Come on, you."

Harry came after Malfoy, still absently clutching his cup of tea. "So - you, er, planned this?"

"It's true, I'm a plotter," Malfoy said. "I scheme and I connive. Don't feel bad because your kind is strategy retarded."

It was impossible to understand anyone who could boast about scheming, but it seemed to be up to Harry to try.

"Speaking of planning," he said, suddenly and a little too loudly. Malfoy turned on the stairs and looked at him inquiringly, and Harry found it much harder to proceed than he would've with Malfoy's back turned. "It's just," he said. "I don't have any plans to hit you again. I mean, I won't do it."

Malfoy looked like he was going to speak, checked himself, hesitated and then said: "Well, that's excellent news. Can I still hit you?"

"Wh - oh, for God's sake, Malfoy," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "C'mon."

They went up to the study where Hermione's books lay in heaps on the table, and the Pensieve looked distinctly out of place. There was a ray of moonlight shining on it like a spotlight falling on an actor isolated from the rest of the cast. Malfoy went and leaned his coffee cup on the edge, which rather spoiled the whole picture.

"Don't tip coffee in your thoughts," Harry warned.

Malfoy looked rather intrigued by the idea, but then seemed to think better of it, and put his cup on the table, drew his wand and made a gesture indicating that Harry should go first. Harry put his cup beside Malfoy's, and drew his own wand.

"Concentrate," Malfoy advised. "Dean Thomas."

Harry shrugged, shut his eyes, and slid his wand into the silvery lake of thoughts, and as he did so he fixed his mind on the friendly, somewhat withdrawn face of Dean Thomas.

When he opened his eyes he was standing on the tree-covered slope of ground that led down to the lake at Hogwarts, sunlight dappling the grass through the branches. It was summer at Hogwarts, and Malfoy was standing beside him looking surprised and rather pleased.

"Got it on your first try. Ladies and gentlemen, he can be taught!"

Harry was about to point out that only Professor Snape had ever said he was unteachable when Dean Thomas, apparently in a state of great agitation, walked right through them.

It was an odd feeling, leaving Harry with the distinct impression it should have been painful, and so he was somewhat distracted while Dean kicked at the ground, and then was called sharply to attention when Dean spoke, and said: "Oh, to hell with Harry Potter!"

"*What?*" said Harry.

"I beg your pardon," drawled a familiar voice from the slope, "but isn't that my usual line?"

Another Malfoy stirred from the shadows under the trees. Harry had got used to thinking of the Malfoy in the Pensieve as little Malfoy, but this Malfoy was pretty nearly as tall as the one beside him. Aside from the school robes, the only way Harry could tell them apart was that the Malfoy beside him, though he hadn't been looking well since the news about Narcissa came, did not have the look the other Malfoy wore, the look of prolonged strain starting to seriously tell on someone's health. The other Malfoy was almost grey in the face, and had

dark shadows under his eyes.

Harry'd remembered him looking bad, but he hadn't remembered him looking quite this bad. But he didn't think he'd looked at Malfoy properly, now he came to think of it, after the - after he'd found Malfoy crying in the bathroom.

"Can I," Harry began, and then said it anyway: "Why were you out here alone? I mean, I would've thought - the Room of Requirement, or your friends-"

He glanced at Malfoy, whose face was turned away a little towards the image of his past self, pale profile untouched by the light of last summer. He glanced at Harry before he spoke, mouth making an indecisive shape, and then said: "Because I was just out of the hospital, and I couldn't bear everyone fussing around. I wanted to go somewhere and be quiet and not move very much because - because I felt like if I did, the new scar would split open."

"Oh," Harry said, his voice hoarse in his own ears.

"Don't worry about it, Potter," Malfoy said. "Just pay attention to what's going on."

Dean looked very startled, and said: "Malfoy!"

"Thomas!" Malfoy mimicked him, and sat up. He winced as he did so, going even more ashy pale for a moment, and Harry put out his hand and closed it around the other Malfoy's arm.

"What do you want?" Dean asked, getting over his surprise and starting to eye Malfoy with suspicion.

"Nothing," Malfoy said, narrowing his eyes at him. "I heard you say the only sensible words I've heard from a Gryffindor, so I thought I'd speak. Obviously, I shouldn't have expected politeness from-"

Before Malfoy could say 'a Mudblood' Dean, always the calmest in the dormitory, said mildly enough: "All right, I wasn't implying anything. I'm just in a foul mood."

"Because of Potter?" Malfoy asked, cautiously lying back down. "Welcome to my world."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Look. I'm - I've been - a lot of people were wondering. About that. What did he do to you? Parvati talked to Madam Pomfrey and she said that you were covered in blood-"

"Yeah," Malfoy answered shortly. "I was."

"It's not like you're a little friend of all the world, Malfoy," Dean said, bristling. "It's just - from what Madam Pomfrey - would you have died?"

Malfoy pressed his lips together for a moment, and then answered, in a voice trying and failing to be curt: "That's what they tell me."

The Malfoy beside Harry remained silent, but the muscles of his arm went tense under Harry's palm. Dean bit his lip.

"I don't know what to do with that," he said. "I don't - I don't know what to think of Harry, to tell you the truth."

"Personally, not his biggest fan," Malfoy said. "Try not to expire of shock."

Dean almost grinned, and then looked at the ground and scowled. "Maybe it'd be a nice change, talking to someone who isn't a big fan of Harry's."

Harry didn't know what Dean was doing. All right, so Malfoy, Malfoy and he'd always been at daggers drawn, and all right, just then Malfoy might've had the right to say anything about Harry he liked. But Dean hardly knew Malfoy, and they'd always got on pretty well: he didn't know what he was on about.

"I always thought Harry and I were pretty friendly," Dean said abruptly. "I mean, he's kind of - withdrawn, sometimes-"

"Full of himself," Malfoy supplied, looking at Dean as if eager to encourage these novel Gryffindor sentiments. "Struts about the school like he owns it-"

"I *don't*," Harry said vehemently.

"Shhh," the other Malfoy whispered.

"I didn't think that," Dean said. "Not a bad guy, you know, just kind of - one track. Insular. A bit hard to be real friends with, but I thought we sort of were, anyway, and when he and Seamus had a blow-up last year I tried to get Seamus to make peace. I thought, you know, he thought we were friendly. I didn't think - you know Ginny Weasley?"

"Small, red hair, shrill?" Malfoy shrugged. "Sure."

"She's not shrill," Dean said, scowling harder. "Shut your mouth about her. We used to go out." He paused, and seemed to consider what he was doing, and then apparently his indignation knew no bounds and not even house divides, because he went on in a rush: "She chucked me, and yesterday Harry grabbed her and snogged her right in front of me. Right in front of everyone. And now they're going out, and he - if it had been Seamus, or even Neville or Ron-"

"That might've been a little weird," Malfoy put in, and he and Dean both made a little face.

"Well, but you know what I mean! We'd just broken up," Dean said. "I thought he was a friend. And I - when I saw them together, I broke a glass in my hand. He saw me do it. And he just grinned. And he kept grinning that night, and never acted like he'd done anything, or asked me if I was okay about it. Any of the others would've asked, or at least - I'm not *stupid*, I know she chucked me, and I know she'd always kind of had a crush on him, and I know none of us are old enough to be serious about things. But - but I really liked her, you know? And he could've told me he liked her. Or at least not rubbed my face in it. None of the others would have done something like that. He came in late enough last night, and I just looked at my hand where it was cut up from the glass, and I wanted to punch him in the face." He stopped, took a deep breath and mumbled: "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"Possibly because I think it would be excellent if you had punched Potter in the face," Malfoy said. "Please do. Feel free. Anytime. At dinner tonight, if you like."

Dean laughed, sort of awkwardly. "Nah. I don't want her to know I'm feeling sore about it. There's no - you have a sort of feeling about not losing dignity in front of them, even if they've already chucked you."

"Yeah," Malfoy said. "I know."

Dean looked disconcerted. "Um." He looked wildly off into the distance. "Um. If you don't mind my asking, Malfoy. Those rumours true?"

Malfoy looked up from the grass and Harry saw his mouth curve in the sort of way it had before he launched a snake at Harry. "Actually," he answered decisively, looking up at Dean as if defying him, or something, at least. "Actually, they are."

"Ah," said Dean.

Just then, a distraction came in the form of a laughing couple, talking and obviously oblivious to everything else. Harry did not let go of Malfoy, but he turned his head to watch his former self go by.

He was laughing, hair ruffled but looking as if he didn't care about that, and Ginny was glowing and beautiful under his arm. It occurred to him that he hadn't seen her look so happy in ages. As Harry watched, Ginny laughed again as if Harry had said something hilarious, and Harry leaned down and kissed her. They stayed locked together for a moment, and then proceeded on towards the lake.

Harry looked back from the sight of Ginny's curls in the sunlight, with a sinking heart, back to the mismatched pair in the shade. They were staring bitterly after Harry and Ginny of the past.

"Well, I can't stay here all day long," Malfoy said. "I can't afford to waste any more time. I've got - somewhere I need to be, and something I need to do."

"Right," Dean answered. "Um. It was - surprisingly all right talking to you, Malfoy."

That shocked Malfoy's rare crooked smile out of him. "Same here, Thomas," he said, a sliver of warmth in his cool voice. He got up, a little shakily, and for a moment he put his hand against his chest and fear closed up his face like a slammed door. Then he shook it off and made his way up the slope.

"All right," Malfoy said. "Now you know about how Thomas and I had our little talk. And you know how to choose the thought you want. Shall we go?"

They went, and left Dean staring at the place where Harry and Ginny had been.

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Harry took out his wand and rested it against the edge of the Pensieve for a moment. "Did you do that just to make me feel rotten?" he demanded.

"No," Malfoy answered, voice sharp at once. "No, I didn't. Though I thought it might be useful for you to know how you lose people. You do want to win this, don't you, Potter?"

"That's not what I feel rotten about!" Harry shouted, and slammed his hand on the edge of the Pensieve. The surface of Malfoy's thoughts shuddered. "I mean. I would've - I didn't think of Dean, all right?"

"All right," Malfoy said, smiling faintly. "I didn't think you had. You're not malicious for no reason."

"Thank you for that ringing endorsement, Malfoy," Harry said, and subsided all the same. That might well be the only positive thing he ever got out of Malfoy, after all. "And I didn't," he stopped. "I think I tried not to look at you, or think about what'd - I told myself that everyone was talking about me and Ginny, all right?"

"Well, a lot of them were," Malfoy said fairly. "I heard some girl called Romilda Vane tried to throw herself off the battlements of the castle." He looked at Harry and his mouth made another indecisive shape, and then closed on a sudden resolution. "Don't fret about it too much, Potter," he said. "You were just being an insensitive prat and casting stupid Dark spells. I was the one plotting to set Death Eaters and werewolves loose on the school."

Well, Harry knew that, but he'd always assumed - he'd always thought of himself as behaving better than Malfoy, at least.

"I thought about the talk with Thomas, you know," Malfoy said suddenly, stowing away his wand and moving away from the Pensieve. "He seemed - nice enough, enough like all the other boys I knew. I thought about it up on the tower, when I didn't-" He looked over at Harry, and Harry nodded to show he understood. Malfoy laughed a short laugh and rested back against the wall of the study, by the window. "So you see. You being an insensitive prat worked out well in one way."

"Oh well, in that case," said Harry, and then threw up his hands and put away his wand. "Thanks, Malfoy."

"I wanted you to see the memory for another reason," Malfoy told him with a nasty abruptness that jarred with his tone before and brought Harry's head up. "If we're going to do this-"

He cut off the sentence as if he had bit his tongue, and Harry thought perhaps Malfoy's new manner only meant that he felt they should - talk about this agreement, awkward though it might be. Malfoy did talk an awful lot, for a boy.

"We are," Harry said shortly, and hoped that would settle that.

"No," Malfoy said, his voice going a little thin and impatient. "I meant, I thought if we were, you should know. In case you were going to be stupid about it, in which case I'd rather not be bothered-"

"I should know what?" Harry asked blankly.

Malfoy spoke through his teeth. "That the rumours were true."

Hermione had mentioned rumours, and now Dean had: Harry had remembered there were rumours, but he hadn't seen any immediate prospect of finding out what they were. Hermione would've wondered why he wanted to know, and - well, now Malfoy seemed prepared to tell him.

"You see," Harry said. "The thing is. I don't know what the rumours are."

There was a silence. Malfoy's jaw was set and his eyes were fixed on some entirely uninteresting spot on the wall. He bowed his head and the moonlight from the window made it look white.

In a nasty voice and without looking up at Harry at all, Malfoy said flatly: "The rumours that I was mad about Blaise Zabini."

"That you were what!" said Harry.

Malfoy said nothing at all.

"With - Zabini who's a-" Harry hadn't heard the rumours. And if he had heard the rumours, he would have laughed at them, and been completely sure they weren't true. Only Malfoy had just said that they were, and now Harry should be - supportive, or something. "Right," Harry said weakly.

"If you're going to be a bastard about this, Potter-" Malfoy had his arms crossed defensively over his chest, and it was the thought of what he'd said, hesitating to move in case the new scar split open, that made Harry want to be better at this.

"No," he said hastily. "No, I'm not, it's fine, it's absolutely, it's - fine, good, I don't mind at all. Only, uh, I didn't know you were - uh-"

He had a sudden vivid recollection of Malfoy slipping Pansy Parkinson the tongue on the Weasleys' dinner table. Malfoy hadn't seemed that way at all, just then.

"Well," Malfoy said in a voice entirely shut down as regarded expression. "I might not be."

Harry resisted the urge to start throwing things at Malfoy until he started making some small amount of sense. "I don't," he said. "I don't really know what you're saying at all here, Malfoy-"

Malfoy kept his eyes fixed on the floor and Harry tried to listen to him and not to think of Fred and George talking about how the Potion probably meant Malfoy was that way, or the look on Hermione's face when she mentioned the rumours, or the way Malfoy had snapped at Harry when he'd said Zabini didn't like Malfoy. What a Godawful situation.

"I broke up with Pansy at the end of fifth year," Malfoy said in a hard, rapid voice. "I wanted

to be free enough to - I was going to the Dark Lord as soon as I could. I wanted my father out of that place. Besides, it was - it was like this. She's the only girl I've ever thought about - in a serious way. She's still the only girl. Only I did think, on top of all the other reasons, that perhaps there was something more - I didn't think of *that*, you know," he said sharply.

"I know!" Harry said in a horrified way. "I mean! I'm sure you didn't!"

"So then there was the summer, and after that there was the Cabinet," Malfoy went on relentlessly, as if he was setting his teeth and ripping off an enormous bandage. "And it didn't take long to get over myself and realise - what was really going on with the Dark Lord, what I'd let myself in for, what I'd let M-mother in for, and I panicked like an idiot. And then - I don't want you to think that Blaise is a bastard."

Harry wanted to say that he had never really thought about Blaise Zabini at all, and would have been delighted never to have thought about him at all, ever again, but Malfoy had been throwing down hard words about himself as if throwing stones down at the earth, and now he was making his first appeal for understanding.

"I'm sure Zabini's - a Slytherin-" he said, since that was about the sum of what he knew about Zabini. Aside from the fact that his mother was reportedly a scary femme fatale, and that he'd said he didn't fancy Ginny but according to Pansy Parkinson he did - and what was that about, now - and that Malfoy'd said he was the best-looking guy at Hogwarts - and well, Harry was getting an unpleasantly clear idea on what *that* was about, now.

Incredibly, this seemed to be the right response. "Yes, that's just it," Malfoy said, not lifting his eyes off the floor for a single moment. "He's a Slytherin, and he's like a Slytherin. Like we are. It's not as bad as it's going to sound. D'you remember what you said about Blaise not liking me, because of - I always had Crabbe and Goyle, of course, and I had Pansy too. And Nott never liked Blaise much, I don't know why, and the point is that maybe, for once in your life, you had a point. Blaise always wanted to be - bigger in Slytherin than he was. Than he should've been, I suppose, since he had everything it took to be popular. Anyway. I don't think he liked it. I don't think I would have liked it. And he saw that I was - that I was all over the place, and he took the chance to - I think he liked having some power over me. And he did and that was that, I don't want to discuss it but I was being stupid about everything last year. He chucked me. That's all it was. I had time to think about that, over the summer."

Harry wished Death Eaters would launch an attack so this conversation could be over.

"I'm sure that wasn't all it-" he began hopelessly.

"Please stop," Malfoy snapped. "This is absolutely the most mortifying moment of my life, all right? So stop making it worse. That was it. And it was different from how it was with Pansy, and that was probably just because I was in one of the worst states I'd ever been in, but I owed it to her at least to work out - well, to work it out. But I was a little occupied, and I've been a little occupied ever since, and it just doesn't seem like a very urgent matter just now since there's a war on and my mother's been murdered and I might die at any moment. So I don't know. But I thought you should know what there is to know, since I have no idea how you were brought up - except that you were dragged up by negligent Muggles, of course - and so there it is. Now you know."

"I don't have a problem with it!" Harry said instantly. "It's fine! Fine! Whether - or not! It's up to you, completely up to you, doesn't make any difference to me, none at all. Can we never talk about this again?"

"Oh God, please," Malfoy answered at once and in a tone of deep thanksgiving. He looked up and his face relaxed: and they both laughed awkwardly, so Harry thought on the whole he had not made a complete mess of it.

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"Well, I had heard the rumours, of course," Hermione said. "But I didn't want to spread reports about it, because even someone like Malfoy doesn't deserve to be teased."

She seemed to feel that was all that needed to be said on the subject, and returned placidly to reading her book in the morning sunlight. Harry had been expecting a bit more in the way of a reaction, or failing that, advice.

"I had no idea," Ron said.

"Thank you!" Harry said. "Neither did I! No idea!"

"Oh, well," said Ron philosophically. "Not like I'm going to get all weird about it, is it, since my own brother's that way."

"I - what?" Harry asked, wishing people told him things. "Which one? It's Percy, isn't it?"

"It is not," Ron said. "I'll have you know that Penelope Clearwater stuck with Percy through everything, and given the war, I expect they'll be the next lot to get engaged. Fred and George are already saying dark things about being best men."

Harry suppressed the urge to ask in a somewhat distraught manner whether it was Fred or George. On the whole, he suspected George.

"It's Charlie, of course," Ron said. "We've all known for years. Except Mum," he added, worrying at his lower lip. "She's still expecting him to bring home a nice girl one of these days. But it's never been an issue, really, since he pretty much went right from school to Roumania, and he hasn't been back often - except for now, of course. Maybe he's met someone up at school."

"I heard that there's a new boy waiting tables at the Hog's Head," Hermione put in helpfully.

Before Hermione could be carried away by matchmaking fervour, Harry felt there was an urgent point that needed to be made.

"Sorry," he said. "But if Malfoy's... Well, and if Charlie's - should they really be sharing a room? I mean, Malfoy's confused, and-"

He was stopped short by the look in Ron's blue eyes.

"Harry," Ron said, in quite a different and colder voice. "I want you to shut up for a moment

and think about what you just suggested about my brother. Are you actually implying he'd take advantage of someone who's eight years younger than he is and confused? Someone who would've been his student if he hadn't gone off his head and got expelled? You're my mate, and I want to be quite clear on this. Are you suggesting that my brother Charlie would make a move on someone who's just lost his mum?"

"No," Harry answered. "I - no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"All right then," Ron said, calming down at once and looking like his usual steady, friendly self. "Anyway," he said, relaxing further and making a face. "Are you implying that my brother would fancy Malfoy? Yeeeeuch. I hope Charlie has better taste."

"I really don't know how he got involved with Blaise Zabini," Hermione said, propping her chin on her hand and looking slightly dreamy. "Blaise Zabini's very handsome." She straightened up in her chair after a moment, and said: "Speaking purely objectively, of course."

"Yeeuch," Ron and Harry said in unison.

"I never liked him," Harry added.

"Harry," Hermione said. "I had to tell you his name in fourth year."

"After that, I mean," Harry returned, and retreated to his book.

It was a nice Saturday morning, the sun out even though it looked cold outside. Harry wondered where Malfoy was. If he was upset in the bathroom or the attic, someone should probably go and fetch him.

"Tea," Harry said after a carefully measured period of time. Hermione made a vague noise that seemed more like she was purring to her books than responding to him.

Harry went and checked the bathroom, and then Malfoy's room, and then went down to the kitchen. As he was going, he saw that Ginny, Charlie and Malfoy were all sitting together on one sofa in the sitting room, and he diverted his course and went in there instead.

"Hi, Potter," Malfoy said, glancing around. The other two muttered greetings, but Ginny did not lift her head from Malfoy's shoulder, and Malfoy soon returned his gaze to where hers was fixed - namely, at a blank wall.

"What're you doing?" Harry inquired, advancing cautiously in case they had lost their minds en masse.

He came over and leaned on the back of the sofa: Malfoy tipped his head back to give him an amiable if upside down look, which confirmed Harry in the opinion that last night, aside from Blaise Zabini related awkwardness, had gone rather well.

"Playing a game," Malfoy returned serenely. "It's a good game."

Ginny spoke in the same serene voice. "That's where our television would be if we had one."

"And it would play Top of the Pops," Malfoy said in a happy way.

"Every day," Ginny further elucidated. "All day."

"I don't know why I'm sitting here," Charlie said, glancing good-humouredly back at Harry. "I don't want a television at all."

"Hush, Charles, don't talk like that about the television!" Malfoy chided. "You didn't see it. You don't know how it was."

Harry couldn't help laughing: Malfoy was too ridiculous. "I'm sorry to break it to you. Top of the Pops doesn't play all the time."

At this point, Ginny did look around at him, her face eager. "What does it play, Harry?"

"Well," Harry said. "Well, the news and things."

Ginny returned to resting her head against Malfoy's shoulder and contemplating the glories of imaginary television, and there was a moment of quiet before Malfoy apparently registered what Harry had said. "The news!" he said in a thunderstruck tone.

"Yes," Harry answered, looking down at Malfoy's ruffled blond head and wondering what madness was going on inside it now.

"And we have to *read* the *papers* to get our news," Malfoy said in a voice of deep bitterness.

They all laughed and Malfoy and Ginny started to earnestly discuss the news as aired on television. Harry looked down at Malfoy's hair and thought for a bit about Malfoy's wrist-touching shoulder-patting business. They'd sorted out all that last night, he thought. Maybe some sort of reciprocal gesture was in order. He didn't think he could've managed anything if Malfoy was actually looking at him.

He nerved himself, reached out and patted Malfoy on the head a couple of times. He felt a bit weird about it, and patted a little harder than he'd intended to.

"Ow," Malfoy exclaimed in an ominous sort of way, and twisted around. "What the hell, Potter? I wasn't even doing anything, why did you feel the urge to *thump* me on my *head*?"

Harry stepped back from the sofa and said: "My hand slipped."

It had been a stupid idea: he saw that now.

"What d'you mean, your-" Malfoy said, staring at him with his cold grey eyes wide and affronted, and then he looked at Harry properly and his face changed. "Oh," he said. "Oh, all right." He turned back around at once, and spoke to Ginny. "We should probably get back to lessons."

"Lessons?" Harry asked.

Malfoy stood up, and then gave Ginny his hand and pulled her up beside him. She smiled up at him.

"Malfoy's not going to be reading with you guys any more," she said. "He's going to keep me company instead, and thank God, because I thought I was going to die of boredom."

"Malfoy's not-"

Malfoy nodded. "I like the Horcrux where it is," he said. "And there's no reason for me to try and get it off any more, is there?"

Harry hesitated. "Well, I suppose-" He'd almost forgotten the fact that he'd said he would let Malfoy's mother off spying if Malfoy got the Horcrux off. Malfoy was right, in a way: she was utterly beyond all their reach now, and Harry couldn't find it in him to tell Malfoy off just now.

"Ginny's missing out on sixth year and she should learn some things," Malfoy said. "I'm going to teach her."

"Malfoy's completely awful at Charms, but luckily I'm good at most of them," Ginny went on. "And he's completely awful at Care of Magical Creatures, but Charlie's going to teach me that."

"I'm not awful," Malfoy said, offended. "I had substandard teachers. And a lack of inspiration in regard to the subject."

"He's going to teach me to make Polyjuice!" Ginny went on triumphantly. "I'm going to transform myself into Phlegm and go out and wow the neighbours."

"The neighbours aren't very close," Charlie reminded her.

Ginny said with determination: "I can walk."

They went off with their arms linked comfortably together. As Malfoy went by Harry he hit him twice, pretty hard, on the shoulder. Harry winced and then grinned a bit ruefully after him, but he didn't look back. He lifted Ginny up and twirled her as they went along, and Harry didn't see Malfoy's face, but he saw Ginny's, and was a bit surprised by how happy she looked.

"She's a sweet kid, my sister," Charlie said, as if he'd caught Harry's puzzled look. "I know she must seem a bit boyish and stuff. We brought her up in a rough and tumble way amongst our lot, but she really wants to be kind to people. She wrote me all about reaching out to - and I quote - some misfit called Luna Lovegood at school, and I was overcome with cold horror at how condescending she might be coming off."

"She didn't," Harry said. "I never thought she was."

"I'm glad," Charlie answered absently, looking after them. "She does try her best, even if she doesn't know how to and she forgets it all when she has a temper on her. She's really thrilled she seems to be helping Malfoy."

He crossed his arms over his broad chest, and met Harry's blank look with a patient one.

"I'm just telling you, there's no need to be jealous of Draco," he explained. "He's not at all her style. She feels bad for him, and she wants to help. Don't hassle him just because my little sister has a good heart."

"You're very concerned about Malfoy," Harry remarked.

The tips of Charlie's ears went brilliant red. He got up, gave Harry a look that reminded him of the way Ron had looked at him earlier, and he said: "Yeah. I am," and slammed the door going upstairs.

Harry knew Ron well enough to know that his ears only went red when someone had hit home.

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Charlie'd explained Ginny's behaviour well enough, and Harry thought it was probably true. She had been kind to Luna, he thought, she was kind, he'd never really thought about it but he was certain she was.

It took Hermione to explain Malfoy's behaviour to him.

Malfoy preserved an appearance of normality most of the time now, but he was usually quiet enough, and looked tired. Whenever Ginny came into the room he lit up and danced with her and talked to her and made her laugh. If it hadn't been for the Blaise Zabini talk, Harry would really have assumed that Malfoy had simply fallen for her and was being really obvious about throwing himself at her feet.

He somehow got Harry to half-mutter another Muggle song for them, and they danced in the kitchen a couple of days after the Blaise Zabini Talk. Malfoy spun Ginny, smiled against her ear, and then whispered something to her that made her go off into a peal of laughter.

If it was so funny, Harry didn't see why Malfoy couldn't tell everyone.

Hermione came down for dinner and while she was getting out the water glasses, she looked over at Malfoy sparkling determinedly at Ginny while they made the table, and she looked a little sad.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I feel bad for Malfoy," said Hermione, reluctantly. "Ginny said to me that she'd told him - about what his father had done."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I knew that."

Hermione looked up into his face and shook her head, the girl who'd known just what Cho was thinking and what advice to give Ginny to get Harry, even smarter about this subject than she usually was. "Well, Harry, don't you see," she said quietly. "Lucius Malfoy tried to kill

two women. Ginny was the one who lived. Malfoy will do anything she wants him to."

Harry felt like he had when he realised Malfoy was lonely enough to accept his offer.

On the whole, he liked it best when Ginny was off somewhere and Malfoy did not have to put himself out to please her. Three days after the Blaise Zabini Talk, Malfoy and Harry were alone and Malfoy was drawing a diagram to convince him that they should use dragon fire to destroy the seal Horcrux.

"It can melt sheet metal at four hundred yards! Also, if we use a Norwegian Ridgeback-"

"All right," Harry said. "We'll try it. The day after tomorrow."

"Oh," Malfoy said. "All right." He stopped, looking somewhat at a loss, and then his face fell into the strained look he wore too often these days.

"What're you thinking about," Harry asked.

"Professor Snape," Malfoy answered. "I wish - I wish I knew he was all right. I need to talk to him. But he'll come when he can."

It was the weirdest thing in the world, someone missing Professor Snape. This whole business was the weirdest thing in the world. Harry reached out all the same, and hit Malfoy twice in rapid and quite hard succession. For a moment he thought Malfoy'd forgotten and he'd just hit him again, but then the corner of Malfoy's mouth came up.

"Um. It'll be all right," said Harry.

Malfoy smiled properly. "If you say so, Potter."

Chapter Sixteen

The next night Harry found Malfoy climbing out of a window.

Malfoy squawked when Harry came in and almost lost his grip on the window frame. Harry rushed forward but by then Malfoy had already recovered himself, knee up on the sill, and was regarding him with a look more resigned than annoyed.

"Charles is spending the night at Hogwarts with a little girl who got hurt because of your gigantically brilliant professor," he said, with a sneer. "I did think I might have one night to myself."

"Don't talk about Hagrid that way," Harry said automatically. "And where d'you think you're going?"

Malfoy did not answer for a moment, and then he said: "Out to see my friends."

"You're not doing anything of the sort," Harry told him. "Get back in here. Don't be stupid. Do you think that Voldemort's not looking for you, too?"

Malfoy looked mulish. "We're going to a Muggle place."

"No you're not," Harry said. "Because you're not going anywhere."

Malfoy's mouth took on a peculiarly ugly twist. "Yes, I am."

"No," Harry answered. "You're not."

For a moment he was pretty sure that Malfoy was going to hex him and drop out the window, and he steeled himself to duck and draw his wand. Then Malfoy shook his head and said: "How would you feel, if they were your friends?"

"I," Harry said. That was different. Harry's friends were different.

"I like my friends quite as much as you like yours," Malfoy announced combatively. "And if you were stuck with my lot, and then if - I want to be around people who understand me," he said, his voice almost vicious as he went on. "I want to be with people who like me."

"Look, Malfoy," Harry said. "I see, I do, but-"

"And I might've forgot to mention," Malfoy said with a lot more firmness than Harry would've assumed someone could attain, half in and half out a window, "I'm going. I may do some things, Potter, but I won't take orders from you."

Harry recognised this unyielding look on his face, but he'd never before been pledged not to turn away or turn violent. He was, now. He didn't think any of his friends had ever looked at him with this much defiance on their faces. He felt a bit uncertain about what to do.

"What would you do?" Malfoy demanded.

"I'd go," Harry answered at once, and came to a decision. "And I'm going now. Wait there."

"What?" Malfoy said. "Wait. No. I don't want you to come."

"I don't want you to go," Harry said. "Too bad for us. I've got an invisibility cloak and that will help. This is the best you're going to do, Malfoy. I'm not letting you go alone."

Malfoy did not say a word, and then when Harry'd almost closed the door on himself he heard him yell: "Get a move on, then!"

Harry got out his Invisibility Cloak, thought about writing a note for Ron and Hermione, assumed that 'gone to a Muggle hang-out with Slytherins' would just be taken as proof of insanity, and grabbed the Cloak and ran back in case Malfoy'd decided to slip away. Malfoy was still waiting on the window sill, though he was looking imperious and impatient about it.

"Come on, then," he said, and dropped from view.

Harry came out the window, landing on his feet beside Malfoy, and Malfoy glanced to make sure he was there and then made for a small flowerpot in the middle of the Burrow's garden.

"Portkey," he said. "Easier than Apparating."

"How long have you been planning this?" Harry asked.

Malfoy just smirked.

Harry muttered: "Schemer," remembering how Malfoy had spoken about it the night of the Blaise Zabini talk, and was rewarded with rather preening grin from Malfoy.

"Be polite," Malfoy said, suddenly. "Even if - they don't like you much. And Crabbe actually thinks you're a psycho."

"What?" Harry said. "Why?"

He hadn't been aware that Crabbe really formed opinions independent of Malfoy. He didn't, now he came to think of it, recall Crabbe saying a single notable word the whole time they'd been at Hogwarts together.

"Crabbe's protective," Malfoy said, sounding a bit anxious but mostly annoyed. "And he came to visit me in hospital, all right? I don't think your boyish charm is going to win him over anytime soon."

Harry was going to snap at him, but then Malfoy caught the flowerpot in one hand and Harry's elbow with the other, and in the whirl of colour he remembered the trip to the Pensieve, and how Malfoy had looked catching his chest as he got up.

"Crabbe's protective," Harry repeated. "So what does Goyle do?"

"So Potter," Malfoy said in a conversational tone, "the bushy-haired one, she's clever and female, so that's what she brings to the team: but what does the other one do? Surely you built him for a purpose?"

Harry looked around. It was a dark, somewhat gloomy night, the clouds pressing low upon the earth in a damp, sulky-looking grey mass. There was a hill, and beyond that there were some lights in the distance, bright yellow and refracting in the night air.

"That's not how I meant it!"

"That's how it sounded," Malfoy informed him. He gave him an odd look: Harry was caught by it for a moment. He'd known what Malfoy's eyes were like, he'd thought: cold and grey. It had not struck him before that they were particularly clear, but that was what held him for an instant. "You don't usually mean it, do you, Potter? The things you do."

Harry thought of Dean, who he had apparently hurt. "No," he said, and then feeling defensive: "You mean them. That's worse."

"Maybe so," Malfoy said. "But at least if I know what I'm doing, I can control myself."

"Do you?" Harry demanded.

"Maybe I will," Malfoy said. "If you intend to think about things once in a while."

"Maybe I will," Harry said, mimicking Malfoy's tone. Malfoy rolled his eyes. "What's this place, then?"

"The Crow and Council," Malfoy answered. "Nearest Muggle pub to Hogsmeade there is. We've been here a few times, when we could get away and felt like slumming it."

"Get under the Cloak, will you?" Harry asked, glancing around. The hills looked deserted, but there was no sense in Malfoy risking himself.

Malfoy shook his head and Harry noticed that Malfoy looked tense, on the edge of happiness or pain. He thought about what Malfoy had said: if it was Harry, and if-

They reached the crest of the hill and on the slope downward, almost but not quite mingled with the lights of a village below, stood a little grey inn. It had its doors open and a coloured sign flashing on and off, a few old men smoking outside it, and in front of them the two large shapes of Crabbe and Goyle. Beside them, looking nervous in a short denim skirt, stood Pansy Parkinson.

Malfoy set off down the hill at a run.

They did not see him until he was halfway towards them, and then Pansy let out a little shriek, and Crabbe and Goyle's faces lit up. Pansy hit him first, throwing both arms around his neck, and Malfoy laughed and spun and kissed the side of her face, then put her down to meet the charge of Crabbe and Goyle. For a moment Harry couldn't even see Malfoy between the two bigger boys, and then he realised that Malfoy had an arm around Crabbe's neck and Goyle was thumping his back.

"Stop trying to break my ribs," were the first words Malfoy said, in his most autocratic tone, and Goyle made a gleeful sound and lifted Malfoy, tall though he was, off his feet for a

moment. After a moment, Malfoy said: "I didn't mean, stop trying and just do it. I meant let me go."

Goyle put him down and Malfoy gave a last rough affectionate squeeze around Crabbe's neck.

"Come over all girly and sentimental, haven't you," Crabbe said, with the same rough affection. The way he spoke was almost as if he was adding a silent 'boss.'

"Oh, sentimental? Who's been teaching you words of four syllables?" Malfoy demanded, beaming at him.

"Millie," Crabbe said, grinning back. "But don't worry. I still can't spell them."

He thumped Malfoy on the back. Harry'd expected them to be pleased to see him - but they were so pleased to see him. He was smiling helplessly at them all, and they kept thumping him or patting him as if he might disappear at any moment. How would you feel, Malfoy had said, and he was glad that he hadn't stopped Malfoy coming.

"Slipped away from those Gryffindors all right, I see," Goyle said, proudly.

"Ah," Malfoy said. "About that. Someone interfered. I had to bring him." He sighed dramatically, and stepped back from his friends a little. "Come on, take it off."

Harry, quietly cursing Malfoy's dramatic turn, took off his cloak and draped it over his arm. "Hi," he said, avoiding their eyes.

"Potter?" Pansy exclaimed, in the tone of a woman unexpectedly slapped in the face with a live fish.

"This is one of those jokes of yours I don't get, isn't it," Goyle said in a forbearing sort of way. After a pause, he added: "I don't get it."

Harry looked at all of them and saw they had immediately ranged themselves against him, like soldiers at the approach of an enemy. Though they didn't look much like soldiers: Pansy was wearing her short skirt and looking distinctly conscious of it, and Goyle was dressed in red shorts, a black and red jumper, and a red cap. Crabbe was dressed in jeans and a shirt and looked fairly normal, aside from the fact his expression when he looked at Harry was nothing short of murderous.

"Don't make a fuss," Malfoy said, and added carelessly: "To please me."

It was only the expression on all their faces that told Harry this was Malfoy asking a particular favour rather than giving an order. It was hard to tell the difference with him.

"Let's all go get a drink," Malfoy proceeded, in the face of blank silence.

"With him?" Crabbe asked, his voice stern.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "Why not?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Crabbe said.

"Forget them," Malfoy said in a tone of command, and after a moment Crabbe grunted, and nodded with extreme reluctance.

That settled, they proceeded onward into the Crow and Council. Harry took up the rear, which he wasn't particularly used to doing. Nor was he exactly used to being totally alone and looked down on. He had the weird sensation that Privet Drive had just turned into a Scottish pub.

Malfoy, he thought, must've had a bad time of it at the Burrow at first. On the other hand, Harry hadn't ever planned to kill the headmaster and didn't deserve this.

"I'll get the first round," Pansy said as they all sat down at a round table in the midst of the throng, mysteriously vacated when people Crabbe and Goyle's size wanted a seat. She ducked in under Malfoy's arm, pressed a kiss to his cheek and darted off.

Harry noticed that Crabbe and Goyle scooted their stools as far away from him as possible. Malfoy scooted his stool, with a long-suffering expression on his face, so it was equally placed between Harry and the other two. Then Crabbe and Goyle scooted their chairs closer to their chief.

Musical Chairs was really not a very dignified game for seventeen year olds.

At this point Malfoy created a welcome diversion by leaning across the table and saying in tones of profound horror: "Gregory Goyle, what d'you think you are *wearing*?"

Goyle looked modestly proud. "An authentic 1960s Marvin the Mad Muggle costume."

"I misspoke," said Malfoy. "Why. Why on earth are you wearing it?"

"You told us to wear Muggle clothes," Goyle protested, looking injured. "These are Muggle clothes."

"Are any of the Muggles here wearing clothes like yours?" Malfoy inquired.

"Ah, well, they wouldn't be, would they," Goyle said logically. "They're not like Marvin. He's mad, he is!"

"You're mad," Malfoy informed him witheringly. His tone was not quite convincing when he could not conceal how completely delighted he was to see him. Harry did not remember seeing Malfoy this simply happy often: he was pink and smiling and looked comfortable in this crowded little pub, utterly relaxed in the company of those he trusted.

Crabbe coughed. "By the way," he said. "You know that thing, over the summer, that you told Goyle not to do under any circumstances?"

"Oh my God, no," Malfoy exclaimed, and dropped his head dramatically on the table.

"What?" Harry asked. "Does it have something to do with the Death Eaters?"

"No!" Crabbe rapped out.

"No," Malfoy said in an easier way. "What Goyle, poor lost soul that he is, has done over the summer is - go to a comic convention. Where people dress up like Muggles and carry on."

"It was brilliant!" Goyle said. "I wish you'd been there, Malfoy, you would have enjoyed it, there were some really clever people-"

"There is not enough mockery in the world for you, Goyle-"

Malfoy and Goyle were engaged in a laughing exchange when Harry became aware that Crabbe was fixing him with the evil eye.

"Death Eaters," he said. "Of course, that's all we talk about."

"Leave it, Crabbe," Malfoy said sharply. "Someone tell me some news that isn't about Goyle's alarming comic orgies. How is Nott?" He cast a laughing look Harry's way, and Harry felt a bit cheered up. "You do know who Nott is? About so high, smart, weighs about six stone soaking wet?"

"Sure," Harry said, resisting the urge to stick his tongue out. "He saw Thestrals."

"I have high hopes for you as a normal member of society one day, Potter," Malfoy assured him brightly. "Nott, how is he?"

Crabbe was still glowering, but Goyle seemed prepared to cheerfully follow Malfoy's lead and included Harry in the answer by - well, by not glowering at him.

"He's not at school," he said. "Remember how he always used to say if the war got out of hand he was packing off to Switzerland? He's packed off to Switzerland."

"No!" Malfoy said. "Well, good for Nott. He's well out of this mess."

It was news to Harry that anyone in Slytherin aside from Malfoy wasn't currently running to the Death Eaters' camp. He listened with all his ears.

"Sent us a postcard," Crabbe said. "Got a cabin. Learning how to ski. Left you a message." He smiled, a fleeting smile directed entirely at Malfoy. "Said you were a tit, and he'd see you after all this was over."

Malfoy laughed. "Maybe he will."

"But that's terrible," said Harry. "If he isn't for Voldemort, why isn't he on our side?"

"Well," Malfoy said slowly. "Because it isn't quite as simple as that, Potter."

"It is that simple," Harry said. "You either want a murderous lunatic to take over Britain or you don't. And if you don't, you have no right to run away from the fight and let other people

suffer in your place.”

Malfoy looked across at him, and for a moment the noise and jostle of the bar seemed to grow still, or at least not to matter any more.

“A lot of our families have been raided at random intervals year after year since the Dark Lord was conquered,” he said. “My father had some Dark things. Most of these families haven’t. Dumbledore set up an old boys’ network that was four times the size of Professor Slughorn’s. D’you know the things Mad-Eye Moody was allowed to get away with? A little sneak thief called Mundungus Fletcher was grabbed at the Parkinsons’ two years ago. D’you know who got him off? His approval was a step up for anyone, anywhere, and his disapproval held you back no matter who you were. How long did Fudge last after he stood against Dumbledore? You lot might want to fight for this regime. The rest of us don’t see any way but the Dark Lord to get rid of it.”

Malfoy’d certainly picked up a lot of information from his father.

“Dumbledore had his reasons for everything he did,” Harry said hotly. “Besides, you can’t think *Voldemort* is a step up from him. Voldemort murders people in their beds!”

Malfoy smirked. “Not purebloods, he doesn’t. Look at the choices we have. Goyle and Crabbe’s fathers are Death Eaters.”

“Hey!” Crabbe exclaimed.

“Oh, he already knows and told the papers, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Malfoy said impatiently. “Pansy’s brother Petrel is a Death Eater: he joined last year. Look at it this way. In a choice between killing our families, and killing strangers who we don’t even believe belong in our world, I think the choice is pretty clear. I think you’re pretty lucky that some of us don’t want to kill anyone and moved to Switzerland. I think Nott was being smart.”

“Maybe he won’t think so when we’re all dead, and Voldemort comes for Switzerland,” Harry snapped. “He’s a maniac and he’s a killer, and none of us are safe until he’s dead.”

“Potter,” Malfoy said, narrowing his eyes. “Don’t you think I *know* that? You don’t see me in Switzerland, do you?”

Harry felt prolonged exposure to Malfoy might reduce him to a state of gibbering madness. “Then why were you – why-?”

“He gets his back up,” Goyle said comfortably. “And then he goes on and on and on and-”

“I was making some very good points!” Malfoy protested vehemently. “And I was trying to show Potter something which never seems to have occurred to him, which is that other points of view exist in this world besides his own. Didn’t you think I was making some good points?”

“Tell you the truth,” Goyle said. “I wasn’t really listening.”

Malfoy let out a small heart cry.

“Don’t much like talking about politics,” Goyle went on. “I’ll do whatever you think, Malfoy. You know that.”

“Oh, well that’s brilliant,” Harry said. “Can’t you think for yourself?”

Crabbe and Goyle said nothing for a moment, but pushed their massive shoulders together, and suddenly looked a good deal larger.

“Yes,” Goyle said. “I can.”

“Seems to me,” Crabbe said. “Your friends follow you a lot of the time. What, Slytherins don’t have friends? We’re all supposed to follow *you*?”

Harry felt the scorn in that ‘you’ could have been dispensed with, since the only reason he was here was to help keep their precious leader safe.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “That’s not what I said. I just – it was the way Goyle put it, that’s all.”

Goyle’s hackles went down, and he seemed about to say something when Pansy returned with the drinks. Harry’d been expecting beer and not glasses of whisky.

“Thank you,” Malfoy said. “You’re a cuter bar wench than Madam Rosmerta. We’re all catching up on the news. How’s your little brother?” He clutched at the edge of the table. “Tell me he was Sorted into Slytherin.”

“Peaseblossom is settling into Slytherin very well,” Pansy said proudly.

Petrel, Pansy and Peaseblossom Parkinson. Harry was not making a single comment.

“The midgets are missing you, though,” Crabbe put in. “Zabini’s the new prefect, and he’s doing fine with fifth and sixth years, but the little ones have taken against him. You know how high-handed he can be.”

There was a certain reserve in Crabbe’s tone when he spoke about Zabini that raised Crabbe a notch in Harry’s estimation.

Malfoy looked a little pale, and Harry thought someone should say something before all their eyes turned to him as they kept doing. Since Crabbe had gone up that notch, he found it easy enough to sound good-tempered.

“High-handed? As opposed to Malfoy’s well-known humility, d’you mean?”

Goyle at least responded to the tone and grinned: when Harry looked at Malfoy he’d pulled himself together enough to grin too.

“It is my pure soul that draws the little children to my side.”

“He bullied them like mad,” Goyle translated cheerfully. “They liked it. Zabini’s

condescending with them and the little blighters all want to eat his liver for it. Anyway, Malfoy did impressions for them. Oh!” A thought struck him. “Do one now. I miss them. Do Potter fainting on the train, I love that one!”

Harry coughed.

“Oh,” Goyle said. “Oh, right.”

The music in this place was mostly blasting noise, the words hard to catch, but just now something a little more tuneful was playing. Harry only noticed because he saw Malfoy tapping his fingertips against the table.

“Pansy,” Malfoy said, the instant after Harry had noticed. “Will you dance with me?”

The look on Pansy’s face made Harry think for a moment that she was pretty.

“Will you be all right, Potter?” Malfoy added casually.

For a moment Harry didn’t quite understand why he was asking, and then he remembered Crabbe’s words about Harry’s friends following him. Not that they did: not all the time, but – he understood a little about how Malfoy stood in relation to his friends, because of how Harry stood in relation to his own.

Malfoy saw himself as protecting them: even, weird though it was, massive Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was offering protection.

Harry didn’t need anything of the kind, of course, but he was touched. “Fine. Go ahead.”

Malfoy nodded at him, then slid off his stool, walked a few paces and held his hand out to Pansy. She took it and he spun her to his side, and together they made their way into the middle of the floor. Trust Malfoy to pick centre stage.

Pansy wasn’t as good a dancer as Ginny, and they looked less showily good together. Ginny was so little, and light: she could toss her curls around and Malfoy could toss her around. Harry’d got used to seeing that sight. It was strange seeing Malfoy dance with someone else.

Pansy was tall, and looked awkward in her Muggle clothes, and when she put her arms around Malfoy’s neck she looked like she really meant it.

Malfoy had to bring Pansy with him, instead of having Ginny keep up with him: but there was something different about it in another way, as well. He pressed his forehead against hers, and spoke to her a few times, looking serious about it. It looked a little more real, and a little more intimate.

Considerably more intimate, actually, Harry saw as Malfoy’s hands lingering at the space between Pansy’s skirt and her light top, long fingers brushing the inch of skin. Malfoy’s sharp nose was almost touching Pansy’s cheek, his legs guiding the movements of hers. Pansy was laughing, whispering back, her face bright: they looked like they were going to snog any minute. It occurred to Harry that it was almost certain, especially given the amount of time they’d gone out and Malfoy’s little comment about the prefects’ bathroom, that Pansy

and Malfoy'd-

Harry looked away from Malfoy and Pansy apparently having a wonderful time shaking what their mothers'd given them because of Crabbe's voice. "Hey. How about giving them a little privacy, all right?" He looked at Crabbe, and saw the bloke was glowering again. "I don't know why you felt you had to come spy on him-"

"I'm not spying on him," Harry snapped. "I came here to look out for him."

"We can look out for him," Crabbe argued.

"Weeeell," said Goyle. "I dunno. Not if, like, a lot of Death Eaters come after him. I don't really think we'd win. And obviously, Potter's concerned about Malfoy's – you know, great big necklace of evil."

"Right!" said Harry, feeling quite grateful to Goyle. He hadn't really been looking forward to explaining things like the promise to Narcissa Malfoy, and the somewhat fragile understanding between him and Malfoy.

A girl came up and asked Harry to dance at this point, eyes sparkling and Scottish accent beguiling. Harry said he didn't dance.

"Anyway, it's obvious they're getting on better now," Goyle proceeded placidly. "Why shouldn't they? Malfoy's easy to like."

Harry didn't quite share this opinion on Malfoy's charm, but he was distracted by another girl asking him to dance. He did his best to explain that he was flattered but there might be casualties.

"He cut Malfoy up!" Crabbe snarled.

"I apologised for that," Harry said.

"Really," Crabbe said. "Don't recall seeing your fruit basket with the card of apology on it at the infirmary. Seemed to me you were busy celebrating slicing up Slytherins by snogging that bad-tempered Weasley girl."

Another girl approached the table with a shy look.

"I don't want to dance," Harry said loudly.

"That's – nice to know?" she answered, seeming somewhat taken-aback. Then she turned her shy smile on Crabbe. "I was wondering if you did?"

Crabbe laughed and went a bit red. "Um," he said. "I'd love to, but my girlfriend would have me for breakfast."

"Ah well, worth a try," the girl said, and with another odd look at Harry, she swung jauntily away.

Harry resumed the conversation. "I apologised this summer," he said.

"Bit late, don't you think?" Crabbe demanded, at which point Malfoy and Pansy rejoined the table, flushed and breathing hard and smiling all around until Malfoy caught the end of Crabbe's question.

"Lay off," he said. "It's just – let's put it behind us, all right? I may have provoked Potter slightly more than I let on. All right?"

Crabbe regarded him narrowly. "How?"

"Might've been about to use Cruciatus," Malfoy said. "Slightly."

"Malfoy!" Goyle exclaimed. "You could've been expelled!"

"Why? Potter wasn't expelled," Crabbe said, looking a little shaken but still sticking to his point.

"Oh, for – Come with me, Crabbe," Malfoy said. "You too, Goyle. We're going to get the next round of drinks."

He knocked back his first glass. Goyle and Crabbe, in spite of the impatient look Malfoy was giving Crabbe, seemed happy enough to go with him.

As they went towards the bar, they closed in on him at either side with a movement that seemed like a slotting into place.

Harry looked away, and met Pansy's dark eyes. She wasn't beaming adoringly at Malfoy any more. She was giving Harry an extremely unimpressed look.

"Not really in the mood to take any more," Harry warned her.

"Fine," Pansy said. "Draco asked me not to insult you to your face anyway."

"Great," Harry said.

"Fine," Pansy repeated.

She crossed her arms under her breasts and glared. Then her face changed.

"Potter," she said in a quiet voice. "Blaise is here, and he's coming towards us. He can't see Draco. We have to do something."

Before Harry could even reply, there was a voice behind him, and he turned around to face Blaise Zabini.

He was curious enough, after the terrible Blaise Zabini talk, to get a proper look at Blaise Zabini, and now Zabini was standing in front of him.

Harry didn't think he was anything special. He wore his Muggle clothes with a bit of an air,

and he held his head high. He was good-looking and he looked as if he knew it. Harry didn't see what Malfoy had seen in him.

"Well, Pansy," Zabini drawled. "This is a bit of a surprise."

"Fancy seeing you here," Pansy said defiantly.

"Hi there, Zabini," Harry said in a cold voice.

"I wonder why you're meeting him?" Zabini pursued, keeping his eyes on Pansy. "Maybe he's come here with news of a mutual friend of yours and mine? If he is, Pansy, you should tell our friend that he's likely to find more favour with the other side these days." Pansy stared at him speechlessly, and Zabini saw his advantage and added a few more words. "I'd trust me sooner than Potter. He *is* my friend too, you know."

"If you mean Malfoy," Harry remarked in a bored way, "why don't you just say so? And why d'you think I'd care enough to come running around England over what Malfoy's doing with himself?"

Zabini gave him a long dark look. "You seemed pretty interested last year."

"Last year he was planning to murder the headmaster," Harry said. "This year he's on his own, he's on the run and he's pathetic. I have better things to do with my time than to look for him. Or to talk to you."

Pansy gave him a look of open admiration and he felt quite pleased with himself.

"Sure," Zabini said. "Then why are you *here*, Potter?"

There, Harry was uneasily aware, Zabini might have him.

"Er," he said. "Well—" and then he felt warm fingers slip into his own, taking the place of his empty glass.

"Honestly, Blaise," Pansy said. "A girl. A boy. A bar. I thought you had experience with this sort of thing."

Harry tried, very carefully, to keep his face expressionless.

Zabini's lip curled. "Oh *really*," he said. "Whatever happened to Ginny Weasley?"

"We broke up in June," Harry answered, with the strictest truth.

Pansy laughed, a low sweet sound. "And in August Potter and I had a little – encounter," she said, sticking to truth in her turn.

Harry cautiously put out his arm, and found Pansy there so he could put it around her shoulders. "So here we are!" he said with enormous cheer. "Now get lost, Zabini."

Zabini's eyes travelled from Harry's face to Pansy's, mouth twisting. Eventually, he said in

his deep, unhurried voice: “I don’t believe a word of it.”

Harry was out of ideas. Apparently, Pansy was not.

“I don’t really care what you think, Blaise,” she said, her sweetness unimpaired. “But I do wish you’d give me and Potter some privacy.”

At which point she turned in the circle of Harry’s arm, and when Harry glanced at her, startled by the movement, she captured his mouth with hers.

Blaise Zabini was there to be fooled. He couldn’t pull back. Pansy’s fingers were tightly knotted in his t-shirt, so it might be a little difficult to do in any case. He shouldn’t have had that whisky. Pansy Parkinson was a very good kisser.

Her lips were damp, from whisky or possibly from Malfoy’s mouth. They parted easily against Harry’s and the kiss went deep, Harry drawing his tongue against the inside of her mouth. He put his hands at the spot where Malfoy had put his, the small space of skin where thin shirt ended and before her skirt began, and he felt Pansy’s breath catch in her throat.

“Um?” said Goyle’s voice.

Harry came up for air to find Pansy standing between his legs, and Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle all staring at them in horror.

“You know, two girls asked him to dance and now this,” Goyle went on. “Obviously, Morag was right and Potter’s got something.”

Malfoy turned eyes of scorn on Goyle for this reaction, which he clearly did not consider appropriate for the occasion.

“Pansy,” Malfoy announced. “You have betrayed your house, and broken my heart!”

“Zabini’s here,” Harry said while they were all still startled, to get Malfoy’s reaction over as soon as possible. One of Malfoy’s hands clenched in a fist, and that was all. Crabbe and Goyle closed in on him tight. “Let’s go now,” Harry added, and tossed Malfoy his cloak. “Put that on.”

He hadn’t even realised he was giving orders before Crabbe looked to Malfoy to confirm them. Malfoy shrugged before he was invisible, and the Slytherins went where Harry went.

He held the door open for Pansy as anyone might for a girl, and kept holding it while Crabbe and Goyle smuggled Malfoy out. As he did so, he scanned the crowded bar to see the too-calm, too-handsome face of Blaise Zabini. He wanted to know why Zabini’d been out that night.

He was the last one out the door. He was the only one who saw the man Zabini was with.

It didn’t matter. None of the others, save perhaps Malfoy, would have recognised Peter Pettigrew.

*

It was cold out on the hills. Pansy began shivering and Malfoy took off his Invisibility Cloak and wound it around her, putting his hand under her chin so he could smile at her about how massively invisible she was.

“As bobbing heads go, you’re my favourite,” he said, raising his eyebrows at Harry and putting his arm around her. “Now. What was Zabini-” his voice was not quite steady for a second and he looked furious with himself, which was much more noticeable than the tremor. “What was he doing there?”

“Meeting a Death Eater,” Harry answered. Everyone looked at him and he said shortly: “Trust me. I know the man.”

“Oh my God,” Malfoy said. “What - *what* - is he getting into?”

“Trying to do one better than you,” Crabbe suggested in an unimpressed sort of way. “Like he always wanted to, and because he doesn’t know what else to do. No more do any of us. He’s gone to the Death Eaters. We’ve come to you. Tell us, Malfoy. What’s it going to be?”

Malfoy wrapped an absent arm around Pansy’s invisible shoulders. “I’ll tell you what it’s going to be,” he said fiercely. “You three are going to pack your bags and join Nott in Switzerland until I tell you it’s safe to come back.”

They were all silent for a moment, and then Crabbe glanced with a heavy sort of appeal to Pansy. From the look on her face, she straightened her shoulders under the Cloak and felt herself appointed spokeswoman.

“We’re not going to do that, Draco,” she informed him.

Malfoy gave her a look of blistering outrage that reminded Harry quite forcibly of Lucius Malfoy, and made him think Malfoy must be scared.

“Well,” Pansy said, gaining encouragement from Crabbe and Goyle’s silent support, “Well, we’re not. Potter’s right, even though he’s an idiot. This is our country too, and – and these people want to kill you, and they already- What we’ve got now is better than this, and besides, people are saying that if we help the Ministry now, they’ll listen to us more later. There won’t be any talk of Death Eaters who got off this time.”

Malfoy looked as if he was about to launch into a tirade, but then something that Pansy had said seemed to register.

“What,” he said slowly, “What are people saying?”

“My mum always said it was a lot of nonsense that Dad should’ve given up when he got married,” Goyle put in. “Did her a lot of harm with the Unspeakables, Dad’s carry-on. And she was – Mum always liked – Mrs Malfoy.”

“We didn’t want to talk about it while Potter was here,” Crabbe said. “But you know – you know-”

Malfoy's face was white, but he pushed his shoulder against Crabbe's and said, "I know."

"The Dark Lord made a mistake there," Pansy said. "Everyone's talking about it. Your mum gave a lot of dinners – she had a lot of friends – she was a Black and she wasn't a Death Eater and everyone thought she was clever. They're saying that if Narcissa Malfoy was killed, anyone could be next. People aren't happy."

"Besides that," Crabbe said stolidly. "Last year, we didn't ask you what you were doing. We helped you. We're going to help you again. You can't tell us to go away. You can tell us how to help you."

Malfoy's pale narrow face seemed to grow narrower, as if it was shutting up on itself. He said at last: "I'll – I will. I've got the beginnings of a plan. It's going to be a big one. I'll tell you."

Goyle beamed. "I knew he'd have a plan. Didn't I tell you both he'd have a plan?"

Crabbe grinned back at him, both of them apparently content to place perfect faith in Malfoy. "Whatever it is," Crabbe said. "We'll do it."

"If it could not involve girl bodies," Goyle added, "that'd be great." Something seemed to occur to him, and he looked suspiciously at Harry. "Tell me," he said. "First things I hear – about in the corridors – and now Pansy. Are you some sort of *sex fiend*?"

Malfoy looked almost hysterically relieved to burst out laughing. Goyle looked rather pleased to have amused him.

They all looked much less pleased the next moment, when Malfoy said: "You lot have to go now. Zabini needn't know you two were out at all, if you get back before him."

Crabbe and Goyle stopped smiling entirely, but nodded at once. Pansy's face betrayed a little more. Harry looked at her and was suddenly, painfully reminded of the girl on the train who'd held Malfoy's head in her lap and gazed at him as if he was just having a rest after hanging the moon.

At the time, he'd just thought she was stupid to take such pride in Malfoy.

"Draco," she said, and then reached out from underneath the Cloak and held his hands. He looked down at her, his face pinched, as if he would've liked to do something to make her happier but he couldn't think of anything.

"If you have any messages for me," he said. "Give them to Charles when no-one can see you."

"Who's Charles?" Goyle asked blankly.

"He means Professor Weasley," Pansy interpreted, and smiled as much as she could. "It does seem odd, to hear you calling a teacher Charles."

Malfoy looked a little taken aback. "I suppose – I don't really think of him as a teacher. I

mean. He's not much older than we are."

"Have you made *friends* with a teacher, Malfoy?" Goyle inquired, and looked admiring.

"He doesn't teach me," Malfoy said, looking somewhat ruffled. "We share a room, for God's sake."

"Really," said Pansy. "If you accidentally take any pictures of him with his robes off, then I've already arranged that Daphne will pay top Galleon for them."

Malfoy burst out laughing again. "In spite of your filthy goings-on with Potter, you are the only girl at Hogwarts worth thinking about," he said. "Come here."

He tilted her chin up and kissed her briefly, a lock of his hair touching her face as lightly as his lips did.

"Crabbe, you tell Millicent to take care of you until I get back," he said, turning to the others. Pansy busied herself taking off the Invisibility Cloak, head bowed so nobody could see her expression.

She put the Cloak into Harry's hands and said: "You were pretty good in there, Potter," but she was obviously too wretched to summon a smile.

Goyle looked more and more gloomy as Malfoy made his goodbyes. Crabbe's face was expressionless, but he gripped Malfoy's shoulder in one hand and did not let go for a long moment.

Once he had let go, Malfoy turned and Harry joined him, over the crest of the hill to where they'd left the flowerpot.

"Don't talk to me for a minute," Malfoy said, his voice brittle.

"Bye, Potter," Goyle called out.

"Um," Harry said. "Bye?"

Malfoy's face wore that look, shut up on itself, that meant he was unhappy. He picked up the flowerpot, and tossed it from hand to hand, until the whirl occurred and they were back in the Burrow with a fine rain falling.

In the Burrow there were lights in every window and the sound of Mrs Weasley shouting.

Malfoy cast the flowerpot aside and sat on the rain-slick steps at the kitchen door. The little porch over them was made of latticework, and the rain dripped in all around them as Harry sat a couple of steps down from him.

Harry had made a promise, and now it seemed to him that it meant he should make Malfoy happy somehow. Whatever strange things would make Malfoy happy, only now he was sitting curled up in the rain missing his friends, and that was something Harry understood.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“What for?” Malfoy asked roughly. “I saw them. That made things better. It’s just I’m used to – they were always with me, before. Just be quiet a minute.”

Harry was quiet. Malfoy held onto the wooden latticework at the side of the steps with a wet clenched hand, and the rain pattered down on their heads. Mrs Weasley’s voice was raised higher than a Howler.

At last, Malfoy said: “I’d rather be out here than in there.” There was a ghost of a smirk on his face.

Harry glanced up and said cautiously: “Yeah.”

“Probably they’re glad we’re not there as well,” Malfoy said. “It’d be awkward. *They’re* not family.”

Harry thought of a few occasions on which Mrs Weasley had scolded her own up and down, and then turned to him with a smile. It warmed him a little, the almost unconscious stress Malfoy had laid on ‘They.’

“Hermione’ll be with Ron,” he said. “And we may be stuck out here for a while.”

Malfoy leaned his sharp chin on his hands. “D’you want to play Beater and Chaser?”

“Sorry?” Harry said. “I don’t really – I’m a Seeker, you know.”

Malfoy started to look a little amused. “No!” he said. “Are you any good?”

Harry rolled his eyes and grinned.

“You have to play other positions,” Malfoy said. “So you know which one you’re best at.”

“I just caught a Remembrall in first year,” Harry reminded him. “I didn’t try out.” He didn’t want to seem to be turning Malfoy down, though, so he added: “Last summer at the Burrow we played with two of us on each team – I guess I did a bit of Chasing then, sort of.”

Malfoy got up. He had a trick of dusting himself off as if preparing for something whenever he did get up, even if the something was apparently going to be going out in the rain. “Well, I can play a Beater,” he said. “I trained with Crabbe and Goyle for hours to show them how the Beaters before them used to play.”

It occurred to Harry that he hadn’t thought of training with Ron, but neither had he made up a song titled ‘Goyle Is Our Overlord’ so perhaps it evened out.

When they opened the broomshed and he saw Malfoy hefting a bat thoughtfully in his hands, Harry felt a touch alarmed.

“Exactly how is this played?”

“One Bludger, one Quaffle,” Malfoy replied. “You try to get the Quaffle in the hoop. I try to stop you.” He hefted the bat again. His smile was bright and sharp.

“You’re on,” Harry said.

The first time Malfoy whacked the Bludger with his bat, it almost took Harry’s head off. He had to bank sharply in the blasting wind and rain. If he’d been wearing robes they might have slowed him down too much.

“You don’t have to actually kill me!” he shouted.

Malfoy shouted back: “You don’t have to let me!”

The second time Harry was close to the hoop, and had to sheer off to escape another blow. It occurred to him that the Slytherins might always have regarded Bludgers as weapons against the enemy.

He grabbed the Quaffle, aimed and threw it like a cricket ball at Malfoy’s head. It connected and Malfoy fell off his broom.

“Oh my God!”

Harry swooped down and saw that Malfoy’d landed on his feet, and looked relatively unharmed. The fact he was still holding his bat was forcibly impressed on Harry when Malfoy looked up at him, smiled brilliantly and said: “That’s more like it!” and from his position on the ground, smashed the Quaffle up into Harry’s face.

Harry had been hit unmercifully hard in several places and they were both soaked to the skin when they staggered back into the back-door steps. Malfoy collapsed dramatically with his arm over his face.

“Oh, Quidditch,” he said, and with satisfaction: “Crabbe and Goyle says Gryffindor are being killed this year. Seeker and Keeper and a Chaser and their captain gone in a bunch. They’re *dying*.”

“What’re Slytherin doing without you?” Harry asked.

Malfoy scowled. “They’re not doing well. Looks like Hufflepuff is going to win the Quidditch Cup.”

Harry and Malfoy sat and contemplated this bleak prospect.

“I know it’s not important now,” Malfoy said crossly. “I knew it wasn’t important last year. But... Ravenclaw had some trouble replacing Chang, too. It’s complete fluke luck for Hufflepuff.”

“Not enough Ravenclaws ever try out,” Harry said. “That’s their problem. They knew Cho was leaving: they should’ve been prepared.”

He felt himself flush a little when he mentioned Cho. Well, they’d both left school now, and

that entire hideous episode was well behind them.

“Ah, Cho Chang,” Malfoy said, somewhat dreamily. “Had a terrible crush on her in third year.”

“Really?” Harry almost laughed. “Me too.”

“For about two weeks,” Malfoy went on in a more practical tone. “Then I moved on to the Patil twins. Ah, the Patil twins.”

Harry snorted and Malfoy tried to get his hair, which was plastered all over his face, out of his eyes. He soon gave up and collapsed dramatically backwards again.

“What I said earlier,” he said in a muffled tone from under his arm. “About the Weasleys, and being awkward. Was it all right? I suppose the Burrow is more like home to you than anything.”

“No,” Harry said. “No. Hogwarts was more like home than anything.”

Malfoy put down his arm, but did not sit up. Harry looked over and saw his clear eyes, wide open and looking at the rain. “Potter,” he said, and his voice was a little strange. “Hogwarts is a school.”

Harry shrugged awkwardly, with one shoulder.

“And that Privy Drive place,” Malfoy said, and paused. “When I was – before I was born,” he said abruptly. “Father had a lot of rooms made into a nursery in the south wing of the manor. Because Mother was not – she didn’t like babies much, she thought, and she might not want to be bothered with me when I was little. The house elves were meant to do it. Then I was born and she – she did like me, after all. So the nursery was near her. But I never liked to go into the south wing. It was far away from them both and I didn’t like the thought of – being trapped there.”

It was odd, hearing talk of manors and south wings, and having it mean something a little like understanding. Harry linked his arms around his knees and nodded.

“I thought that Sirius Black left you his house?” Malfoy asked suddenly. “Mother was very annoyed about that. Isn’t that like home? I remember it, when it was Great-Aunt Wally’s home. Isn’t it – I thought it was all right.”

Harry thought of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and how wretched Sirius had looked there.

“It’s nothing like a home,” he said.

Malfoy was quiet for a little while longer. Then, still flat on his back and staring at the sky, he said: “Maybe we can do something about that.”

Chapter Seventeen

Mr Weasley had received an anonymous Owl asking him if he knew Malfoy's whereabouts.

"Someone's been talking," Mr Weasley said to Harry. "I don't know who the Owl was from. Could've been someone in the Ministry. Could have been the Death Eaters. It was all right before Lucius Malfoy was back in favour, but now people are talking about the parents, and starting to remember there's a son."

"I can take him away," Harry said. "I won't put all of you in danger."

"I'd be delighted to see the back of him, Harry, to be frank with you," Mr Weasley said tiredly. "But we all discussed it. Molly's very set on keeping him, at least until he's a little – and Charlie and Ginny are, too. Besides, don't worry too much about danger. We have you in the place, don't we?"

Harry thought it was meant to be a joke, but it felt a little flat. "I'd go, too," he said quietly.

"Harry, I didn't mean that!" Mr Weasley looked extremely harassed. "You're always welcome here, you know that, and besides – Ron would go with you. His mother and I want to keep him under our eye. Everybody stays for now. I just thought you should know."

Malfoy came down the stairs at that point drying his hair with a towel, which gave his hair the general shape and appearance of tinsel that kittens had been playing in. Harry grinned at the sight of him, but Malfoy looked very serious.

"What should we know?" he asked.

"Nothing," Mr Weasley said in that quick way he spoke to Malfoy now, as if he was afraid he might slip up and say something unkind if he did not get the words out fast.

He walked out and Malfoy looked after him with an odd expression. It occurred to Harry that what Mr Weasley had to say mightn't have come as much of a surprise to Malfoy.

Harry hadn't thought much about the whole Cabinet incident when it was going on, since the fact Death Eaters were in Hogwarts and Malfoy was working for Voldemort had been the things occupying his mind. He remembered now, though, how Dumbledore had praised him: how Malfoy, unsupported by the side he had chosen, under the eye of the only man Voldemort ever feared, had come up with his plan and worked to accomplish it.

Malfoy was already talking about Grimmauld Place. Malfoy was already planning.

Harry was going to talk to Malfoy about said plans later that night, but he found Charlie already in the room sending last-minute Owls about the importing of the Norwegian Ridgeback into the country, and Malfoy curled up in his blankets like a damp kitten.

"Please bore me to sleep, Charles," were the first words Harry heard through the half-open door.

Charlie said, grave and a little tender: "The Spotted Four-Wing dragon is bred as a curiosity,

and is no good for practical purposes. Rimbaud Bones bred it originally as a racing dragon, and thought to make his fortune when a litter of four-wing babies were produced, but the breed was found to have so few brains that the four wings have an unfortunate tendency to get tangled up in flight.”

Malfoy smiled and tucked his cheek against his hand, eyes falling closed.

Harry left them, and went downstairs. He was still trying to turn matters over in his head properly – what they hoped would be the destruction of the seal tomorrow, where they should look for the Hufflepuff Cup, when Malfoy thought he’d be ready to face down Nagini. And then on top of that there was this new, odd thing. It had happened so suddenly, and yet – he’d promised Narcissa a while ago, and he didn’t think he would mean to keep the promise the way he did, before the Pensieve or the handshake or Malfoy being stunned about winning a race. Only here was the promise, and here was the problem: how to make Malfoy happy.

The answer came with a knock on the door, and Harry opening the door on the chain to see a wild night, rain silver against the black sky, and the black glaring eyes of Professor Snape.

For a moment he just wanted to close the door, but he opened it.

“Potter,” Snape said with a sneer. His thin face looked almost gaunt now, and the sneer reminded Harry of a skull, his lips skinning back to show violently yellow teeth. He limped into the hall.

He limped, and in spite of the fact Harry was there and so he was sure Professor Snape was trying to look as strong as he could, he winced with every step. He was reminded of Lupin telling them how Snape had protested Narcissa’s execution, and got the Cruciatus for his pains, again and again. He wondered how much it had cost Snape to get away now.

Snape kept staring at him, and Harry realised he did not intend to ask for Malfoy. He might have come crawling here from Voldemort’s stronghold in order to see him, but he was too bitter and too proud even to make a simple request addressed to Harry Potter.

Harry hated him. He always had. And he’d spoken for Snape, already: he owed him nothing. But there was this new responsibility to think of.

“I’ll get Malfoy,” he said, between his teeth, as Snape stared balefully and silently at him. “And you should – go sit down in the kitchen.”

He bounded up the steps before he had to see Snape’s no doubt hateful reaction to his words, and promised himself a reward. Two flights of steps and then he opened Malfoy’s door.

Charlie broke off mid-sentence, and Malfoy’s eyes flew open.

“Malfoy,” Harry burst out. “Snape’s here. He’s here!”

He got his reward. Malfoy’s whole face was illuminated with a sudden wild light. He sprang up from his bed, threw his covers on the floor and ran from the room without saying a word to either of them.

Harry went to warn everyone not to disturb them in the kitchen. Then he thought it over, and wondered if Snape was going to be exactly comforting. He thought he might just check.

He put on his Invisibility Cloak and he went and pushed the kitchen door open. Malfoy was sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his arms, and he said as Harry looked, in a fierce muffled sort of way: "Go on."

"I could not walk by then," Snape said precisely, as if pity did not occur to him. "I lay on the ground and watched them. She wept and she knelt and she begged and she performed every trick she could think of, to get them to spare her. She would have lived, if she possibly could have. I do not want you to think she ever gave up."

Harry did not see why Snape was telling Malfoy awful things about his dead mother. But Malfoy lifted his wet face and looked almost uplifted.

He remembered the screams the Dementors had brought back for him. His mother had begged, too. Narcissa Malfoy had not wanted to leave her son.

Besides – he remembered the cold practical look her beautiful face used to wear. She would have thought she could be more use alive than dead. She would have knelt. She would have promised anything.

Harry didn't know what he thought of that.

"When she saw it was no use, she gave it up," Snape said. "She stood and took the Curse full in the chest, looking directly at your father's eyes until she died. She did not betray my position. She did not look at me. She passed no message on to you. She endangered nobody for the sake of sentiment, she stood alone and took the punishment alone. She claimed to the last that she had no idea where you were, and she claimed to the last that she was loyal to the Dark Lord, and that she would have betrayed you if she did know. There was no last stand. There was no open defiance." His pitiless voice grew no warmer as he said: "Your mother was a very wonderful woman. Wonderful. She had them all fooled."

Malfoy's shoulders gave a convulsive shudder.

Snape's hand hovered over his shoulders but did not land. He had dragged himself all this way, still racked with pain, to see this boy and tell him how his mother had died, and now he was here he was not able to give him the slightest sign of tenderness.

It felt very strange, for a moment, to pity Snape.

"If you want me," Snape went on in his dry hard voice, which gave no sign that he had ever lifted a hand and almost touched Malfoy's shoulder, "to tell you how your father took it—"

Malfoy lifted his face again, and did not look even slightly uplifted. He looked insulted.

"Him!" he said, like a cat spitting. "No. I don't want to hear anything about him."

"Draco—" Snape began.

“He did it, didn’t he?” Malfoy demanded. “That’s all I need to know.”

His whole face quivered with fury and despair, moving like water which could utterly change its face as it moved.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said with a painful effort, his cheeks going brilliant pink. “I’ll pull myself together. I have things to say to you – real things. Serious things.”

He got up and banged out of the room, going for the Weasleys’ bathroom, almost barging into Harry on his way and never being aware of Snape’s hovering hand on his shoulder. Harry stepped away when Malfoy came out, and then took a moment to think. As a result, he took off his cloak and stepped into the kitchen.

“Making a cup of tea,” he said, smiling but not looking in Snape’s direction. “You know,” he said, clattering about with cups and sugar tongs. “Malfoy thinks a lot of you. I’m sure I don’t know why. It wouldn’t kill you to – be a little kind to him.”

He chanced a look at Snape, who was standing possessively clasping the back of the chair where Malfoy had sat. Snape gave him a look that was pure poison.

“Your concern for Mr Malfoy is deeply touching,” he said. “Doubtless you were displaying your tender care for his wellbeing when you slit him open from his throat to his gut, and left him bleeding out on a bathroom floor.”

Harry dropped the sugar. Tongs, metal bowl and spilled sugar all fell at his feet.

“Professor Snape,” Malfoy said, his voice very quiet. “Don’t.”

He stood in the doorway, his face damp, and looked steadily at the teacher he most admired though the colour in his cheeks was rising fast. Harry remembered what he had seen earlier that night: that one of Malfoy’s instincts was to offer protection.

“Potter,” Malfoy went on, still quiet. “Go.”

Harry went because it was costing Malfoy something to stand there and speak for him against Professor Snape, and he did not want Malfoy to pay any more. He went up the stairs and he clenched the shimmering material of the Cloak in his fists. Malfoy was totally incomprehensible so often, and now Harry understood and wished he didn’t: *he* didn’t want to be protected, unless he could protect in his turn.

If he wanted to do that, and he did, then he needed to know more. He went back downstairs, and he found Malfoy standing up and arguing with Snape.

“Don’t tell me he pitied me,” Malfoy was saying about someone. “Don’t tell me he valued my life over the life of Katie Bell or Ron Weasley. I don’t believe it. I don’t believe he felt it, and I don’t believe anything he felt ever affected what he did. He never liked me. He never pitied me. He never dropped a kind word to me or anyone in my house until he had a use for me.”

“He was a remarkable man!” Snape said, his voice ringing.

“Oh, he must have been,” Malfoy said. “You loved him. Potter loved him. I’ve never seen you two agree on anything else. But I didn’t love him, and all I want to know about him now is: am I right? Did he have the use for me I think he did?”

Snape spoke between his teeth, and answered: “Yes.”

Malfoy looked at him with clear pleading eyes. Harry’d always thought that Snape and Malfoy got along well because they were, in essentials, alike: loathsome and malicious. He’d dismissed them, as a pair, easily enough. Now as he looked at them it struck him how different they were, Snape dark and lonely and reminiscent of a hungry, ragged vulture, and Malfoy standing there with his vivid pallor.

Malfoy had never seen fifteen year old Snape, but Harry had. It struck him that greasy, lurking Severus Snape would have wanted very badly to be a pureblood, to be popular, to have charisma to draw people to his side, and that it must have meant a lot to Snape even now he was past wanting those things, to be admired by someone like that.

“Will you help me?” Malfoy asked beseechingly.

“I wish to God you would keep out of this!” Snape said. “You’re wearing the Horcrux. I have a plan for you. You have a part to play, and until then you could be completely safe. That’s what she would have wanted. Isn’t that enough for you?”

Malfoy said: “No. Not any more. Will you help me?”

Snape answered hoarsely: “Yes.”

Malfoy closed his eyes and said, “Thank you very much, Professor Snape. Will you-” he stopped and looked awkward now. “Will you sit down now, sir, and have – a cup of tea or something? You’re not – you don’t look well.”

“No, Draco, I cannot stay in order to regale myself with the Weasleys’ tea,” Snape said, dryly. “Every moment here is another moment of danger.”

“Then go,” Malfoy said at once. “Do you think I want someone else to die for me?”

Snape nodded, and began painfully to limp his way out of the Burrow. Malfoy stood and looked at the place where he’d been.

“Thank you for coming, Professor,” he said in a bleak sort of way.

Snape glanced at him, nodded and went to the door. Not by word or look did he betray the feeling that had lifted his hand and kept it hovering over Malfoy’s shoulder. Malfoy stood with his back turned until Snape’s shuffling, halting footsteps on the crazy paving outside faded into silence.

Harry waited a decent amount of time until he could go in and clear up the sugar.

“Potter,” Malfoy said in an odd voice. “You talked to Blaise, earlier.”

Harry wanted to say that Malfoy had enough on his plate without worrying about some crush on some horrible smirking Slytherin, but he just nodded.

Malfoy's face was pinched when he asked: "Did he mention me?"

"He said," Harry said reluctantly, "that you were likely to find more favour with the other side these days."

He expected Malfoy to look disappointed, or worried, or upset. Something like that – he didn't see why so many people tortured themselves about romance and things, when there were so many more important things to deal with.

Malfoy smiled, and said: "That's what I thought."

*

The next day was the day set for destroying the Horcrux.

Ron and Hermione were coming, of course, and Charlie was needed. Ginny had demanded permission to come too, and Harry had asked Malfoy.

"No," Malfoy said, sitting poring over some papers that he guarded jealously with one arm whenever people approached. "No, I can be more useful here. Good luck, Charles. Hurry back, Potter."

The day at was cold but the sky was clear, the conditions as good as they were likely to get in early October. They all walked towards the dragons' camp, set where it had been in the Hogwarts grounds in the time of the Triwizard Tournament, and felt as optimistic as they could.

Ginny had her hand tucked in the crook of Charlie's elbow. Ron and Hermione walked in step together. Harry felt a little apart from the rest, with the weight of that little silver seal in his pocket.

They were met by the other dragon keepers, spare, scarred and leather-clad people who looked at them with cheerful inquiry and clapped Charlie on the back, welcoming him as one of their own.

"Chosen lad, aren't you?" asked a woman with an eyepatch, as their group all went into the copse.

"Well," Harry said. "Yes."

"Don't worry about a thing," she went on comfortably. "Charlie can keep any beast he likes in check. He's our little prodigy."

"You're making me blush, Melisande," Charlie called over.

"He's got a grip like iron and thighs that could crack coconuts," Melisande went on blithely.

“Not in front of my baby sister I don’t,” Charlie said.

“Even our bad-tempered little one won’t be much of a problem.”

Harry wished he shared Melisande’s confidence, but just then three dragonkeepers brought out an enormous black animal. He towered above them all, chains binding him in all their hands, and it looked as if it would be about as much good chaining a castle. Harry stared up into fiery nostrils, like the turrets of a castle set on fire, flames licking out through the windows.

Hermione quavered: “N-Norbert?”

“Is that what you called him?” Melisande inquired. “We call him Bugger.”

“He’s changed a bit since we saw him last,” Harry observed weakly.

Charlie put down Ginny’s little hand, and strode over to the massive, heaving bulk of Norbert. He looked approximately the size of pea beside him, as he took the reins of Norbert’s harness in two strong hands.

Holding the dragon’s harness seemed to light up his whole face. He wrapped the reins with one swift motion around his forearm, and then he called out in a strong joyous voice.

“Let him fly, boys!”

The dragonkeepers let go of Norbert’s chains and he shot upwards at once, like an enormous rocket into the sky. Charlie took out his wand, spelled himself firm on the ground, and when the reins tautened Charlie pulled on the harness, cords standing out in the muscles of his arms. Charlie grunted with the effort, and every line of the harness on Norbert’s body quivered. Norbert’s flanks heaved.

Then he plummeted back down to earth. Charlie laughed as Norbert hit the earth, lightly for such a huge beast, and leaped sideways fast as lightning when Norbert slammed his heavy tail against the ground.

There was a storm of clapping from the other keepers.

“We’ve missed you, Charlie boy!” yelled Melisande. “Mind you, it was worth coming back to get these modifications on the dragon harness. The kid who helped you with that must be quite something.”

Charlie, grinning and feeding a sulking Norbert jerky as big as his arm, grinned even wider and said: “He is.”

“Nice to hear about a wizard who can do something practical for a change,” Melisande said. “You’re a bit like helpless babies, sometimes.”

“I beg your pardon?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, I’m not denying the burn salve comes in handy,” Melisande went on. “I’m a Squib, myself.”

“And you work with dragons?” Hermione asked faintly. “Big huge enormous – those dragons there?”

“Thinking I might get myself burned up or tossed off?” Melisande grinned. “Nah. It’s all luck, with dragons. Don’t have to be magical. You’ve got to be lucky. And you’ve got to be good.” She clapped Harry on the back and Harry almost fell over. “Now it’s your turn,” she said. “Don’t worry. Charlie’s the best.”

Charlie grabbed a wing and hauled himself up on a haunch, running along a dragon’s back as big as a wall. Harry got on his Firebolt and kicked off.

He mounted up, then turned spinning in the clear cold air, and watched the dragon spread its wings out like two great banners from a castle, and launch all that scaly majestic mass out into the sky. His wings beat, huge and black, blocking out the sun, and Harry hovered in midair, squinting to make out the small dark shape of Charlie against the scales.

Norbert’s eyes as he flew directly at Harry were enormous slabs of quivering jet: his nostrils were tunnels, and through his half-open mouth his great teeth glittered.

“Harry, now!”

Harry grasped the seal of Gryffindor in his fist, held it tight against his palm for a minute, and then threw it up into the air as hard as he could.

The seal flew up, glittering in the cold sunlight, as if it could never fall.

It never did fall. Charlie did something with the harness that infuriated Norbert, and he opened his mouth and let out a fierce jet of fire, a moving crackling surge that seemed to consume half the sky. Harry flew his broom down as fast as he could, racing the heat, and he still felt the hairs on the back of his neck scorching.

In spite of that, he looked up, and saw the tiny silver glint of the seal swallowed up in red fire. By the time the sky was clear of everything but ashes, the seal was gone.

Harry circled lightly down for the last few feet, and when he landed on the ground he was still looking up at the gently drifting ashes.

“Two down,” he said out loud.

Two down, and one more safe at the Burrow, and a plan to kill another. They were making some progress.

Ron reached him first, and pummelled him enthusiastically on the back. Hermione flew at him, enveloping him in the cloud of her hair, and then let him go almost immediately so Ginny could take his place.

Then Norbert came crashing down to earth, with Charlie cheerfully swearing and using

endearments by turns. The other dragonkeepers rushed to help him and clap him on the back, and then somehow Charlie sprang off the dragon and their two groups had become one hysterical happy gang. Harry was pretty sure Melisande kissed him.

Norbert had finally come in useful.

They all went down to the Hog's Head, and Melisande bought a round of Firewhiskies. Harry waved his away, not wanting to get into kissing Pansy Parkinson for the war effort in front of Ginny. They all sat around a little table and talked a great deal about very little. Ron and Hermione were on either side of Harry, Ron making jokes and Hermione earnestly talking about the scientific nature of dragonfire and how they had achieved success. Ginny sat on a stool beside Charlie and grinned over at Harry and looked pretty as a picture.

It was all a good time, until he remembered Malfoy saying, Hurry back. He'd addressed Harry specifically. It sounded, now Harry was calm and taking the cunning Slytherin mindset into account, like a message.

Part of the understanding that they had now, as Harry saw it, was that if Malfoy wanted him Harry had to go to him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I have an – errand."

Ron and Hermione caught the tone of his voice, and did not question him. Ginny looked at him with bewilderment and some distress, and he stooped and awkwardly kissed her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said again, for her ears alone. "I'm sorry – you look nice today."

She looked nice most days, but these days he was too busy to think about things like that. Today he'd done enough so he could, and he was enjoying it, looking at her, being with his friends – but he'd made a promise.

He left for the Burrow, and he saw that he'd been right to come when Malfoy met him at the door and said breathlessly, "Come on, before they all get back. You promised to help me."

"I did," Harry said warily.

"Then I want you to loan me a t-shirt," Malfoy told him.

"I was expecting something a little more dramatic," Harry said, but they went upstairs and Malfoy came into Harry and Ron's room, making a dreadful face at the mess on the floor. Harry opened the wardrobe to find something Mrs Weasley had ironed, since he had a feeling Malfoy would be horrified if Harry offered him something off the clothes heap on the chair.

He doubtfully offered him a white t-shirt, hoping that Malfoy would then explain what part a shirt had to play in his fiendish plots.

Malfoy undid his own shirt without comment - thin, pale, strong shoulders, glittering necklace, raised scar - and pulled the t-shirt on. He emerged looking ruffled and more determined than ever.

"Now," he said. "I want you to take me to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. And once we're there - I want you to trust me. Can you do that, Potter?"

Harry answered: "I can try."

They Apparated to Grimmauld Place, and Harry told Malfoy how to find Number Twelve. Number Twelve burst softly into existence as Malfoy stared.

Malfoy tilted his head at the tall stone steps, and did not comment on the shabby flaking black paint of the door. He did look rather appreciatively at the twisted serpent doorknocker.

Malfoy strode up the steps, seized the knocker, rapped imperiously on the door and said, "We're here to see the Order of the Phoenix."

The great door creaked open a chink, and a voice from the gloom beyond said peevishly, "Well, you can't. They're all in a meeting. Go away."

And the door began to creak shut.

Harry caught Malfoy's elbow and said, "That's all right. We'll break a window."

Malfoy looked utterly affronted. "We will not!"

"Why not?" Harry asked. "It's my house."

"It's the principle of the thing," Malfoy informed him, and rapped on the door more imperiously than ever.

The voice behind the door said: "I *told* you-"

"What's your name, man?" demanded Malfoy, and reminded Harry of nothing so much as Lucius Malfoy talking to Mr Borgin in his shop.

The voice sounded somewhat taken-aback. "Cyril Prenderghast. I'm the doorkeeper for the Order of the-"

"Do you know who we are?" Malfoy swept on, sounding on the verge of an aristocratic tantrum. "This happens to be my ancestral home. This happens to be his *actual* home. How dare you not let us in!"

Cyril the doorkeeper said uncertainly, "Well-"

"Besides which," Malfoy added crossly, as if he'd just remembered: "this is the Chosen One. Standing out here in the rain. D'you want to take responsibility for that? What if all the Chosen washes off?"

Harry made an inquiring face at Malfoy, but Malfoy was too busy being a lunatic to respond.

Malfoy rapped on the door a third time, apparently just to make his point. "Do you want to be reported?" he demanded, and did not mention to whom he would be making this report.

Cyril Prenderghast, who turned out to be a small wizard with eyes that looked like they were constantly peering over walls or through chinks, opened the door.

"Or we could do it your way," Harry allowed.

"Please sign your names in the ledger, then," he said in a plaintive tone.

Malfoy grabbed the large, dusty book Cyril was holding and tucked it under his arm. "We'll announce ourselves," he said.

"I didn't say anything about announcing-"

Malfoy swept past him, Harry walking fast to keep at his side. He saw Malfoy was breathing fast and was a bit worried he was about to have a panic attack.

"You knew they were having a meeting," he said in a low voice.

"I eavesdropped on Mr Weasley," Malfoy answered, his voice sounding a little tight. "And I knew Charlie wouldn't be here."

"What," Harry said. "What are you going to do?"

Malfoy tried to smile at him, but the smile quivered and failed on his lips. "You'll see. You're going to help me?"

Harry reached out, awkwardly, and hit Malfoy twice, in rapid succession and too hard, on his shoulder. Malfoy managed to hold onto his smile more firmly.

Then Malfoy crashed through the doors into the room which Harry and his friends had spied on with Extendable Ears more than two years ago. As the Order of the Phoenix turned and stared he made quite sure of their attention by taking the ledger from under his arm and hurling it on the table. It slid down the smooth oak and almost hit Kingsley Shacklebolt in the chest.

Malfoy stood at the end of the table, looked around at them all with a cold eye and demanded: "Do you know who I am?"

Shacklebolt stared at the ledger in front of him, then said in a deep, calm voice: "Certainly. You're Draco Malfoy, the young Slytherin who let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. And you're a fugitive from justice."

"That's right," Malfoy said. He was still breathing hard, but there was colour in his cheeks now, his eyes were glittering, and he looked as if he was almost enjoying himself, or at least caught up enough in the reckless moment not to care whether he was afraid. "Ask me why you're not going to turn me in."

"Because you have the Horcrux!" Mr Weasley said hotly.

Malfoy flicked the chain out from under the collar of Harry's t-shirt with a small smile, and

let the heavy gold locket slide down the thin material of the shirt until it hung suspended around his neck, the snake of Slytherin carved there for all to see.

“So what?” Malfoy asked. “You can lock me up in prison, you can watch me night and day. You can turn me in and keep the Horcrux quite safe. The Ministry would thank you for it. You’re not going to leave me loose because of the Horcrux. You’re going to keep me because you have a use for me.”

“Oh, lad,” Mad-Eye Moody sneered from the left hand side of the table. “I don’t *think* so.”

“Don’t you?” Malfoy inquired, tilting his head towards Moody. “Dumbledore thought so.”

Mad-Eye Moody climbed heavily to his feet and almost roared. “Don’t you dare talk about him!”

“Let Malfoy finish,” said Harry.

“Potter,” Mad-Eye said, bristling. “This scum is the reason Death Eaters, for the first time, got into Hogwarts! He betrayed his school. If it wasn’t for him, Dumbledore could have died with some dignity, if he had to die!”

“Sit down,” Harry said. “Shut up. And listen to him.”

He pushed Mad-Eye with both hands and, perhaps out of pure astonishment, Moody fell backwards into his chair.

“Thank you, Potter,” Malfoy said. “He’s right, you know,” he went on to Moody. “You really should listen to me. You’re seriously under-rating me. You don’t know half what I’ve done.

“I sent a cursed necklace into Hogwarts, and it caught a girl called Katie Bell. I sent a bottle of poison to a teacher, and it almost killed Ron Weasley. Either of them could have died. It would have been my fault. And all the time, Dumbledore knew – Dumbledore *knew* - I was responsible. He kept me in the school. He did not tell me he knew. He let me go on with my plans, with the proof before him, with first Bell and then Weasley before him showing him that if he let me go on, someone innocent might be killed.”

Mr Weasley had gone first red, and then white. “If you’ve come to speak evil of Dumbledore-”

“No,” Malfoy said, leaning forward with his arms folded. “I’m not. He was very clever. He had a reason for everything he did. I let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. I met Dumbledore on top of the tower – and I meant to kill him. He offered me mercy. He offered me protection for myself and my – and my mother. He told me he had kept me at school so I could be safe from the Dark Lord, and could make my choice.”

“He was a great man,” Shacklebolt said in his even way. “I am afraid I do not have his compassion.”

Malfoy laughed in his face. “Compassion,” he said. “Why should he feel more compassion for me than he did for Ron Weasley? Why should he pity the guilty enough to risk the lives

of innocent people? It's monstrous. It's unfair. It makes no sense. He didn't act out of compassion. He acted to win a war – to win a weapon for the war. He wanted me spared, he wanted my loyalty, because he had a use for me. It's the only reason that makes any sense!"

"What use," Mad-Eye Moody asked, his scarred lip curling. "What possible use could Albus Dumbledore have had for a creature like you?"

Malfoy laughed again, a wild little laugh, as if he was almost out of control, but not quite.

"What use did he have for Severus Snape?" he asked.

There was stillness, and in the encouraging silence Malfoy pursued his point.

"Do you know how hard a spy is to find?" he went on. "Not just any spy. Not someone who could go in by virtue of what he is, like Lupin. A Death Eater. If you carry the Dark Mark, you're trusted. When he puts the Dark Mark on you, he can see into your mind. You have to mean it, when you take it. You have to promise to be his body and soul. Not one of you could do it. Not one of you could believe it. And having believed it enough to sign away your freedom, to have your body branded with your master's name, who could change their mind enough to serve another master?"

Malfoy lifted his left forearm, held it above his head like a trophy so they could all see, and as Harry saw the black snake and skull in the light he realised why Malfoy had wanted to borrow a short-sleeved shirt. The Order drew in its breath at the sight of the mark, in horror or simply in outrage, but in silence. Malfoy stood panting and triumphant as he looked at them and said:

"There's been only one person in thirty years. There's only been Snape."

He had them now, caught serious as the older students had been caught laughing when Malfoy was young and acting out for them.

"And even Snape," Malfoy said, his mouth twisting. "He's not a pureblood. All the Dark Lord's favourites are purebloods, because he wants so badly to be one. My Aunt Bella is his pet. My father has just proved his loyalty beyond question and been taken back into favour. I have a pureblood friend, a new Death Eater, who sent me a message that I would be taken back into the fold. I have connections Snape couldn't make. I have connections I was born into.

"Dumbledore wanted a new spy. If Snape was ever caught you would be lost. Dumbledore wanted to recruit me. He kept me in the school because he knew I could be very, very useful. And I will be."

"And we're going to trust you, just like that?" Mad-Eye scoffed. "Let you walk back to Voldemort with his trinket around your neck? You'd be like a dog bringing back a bone! You're the image of Lucius Malfoy."

"Funny," Malfoy returned. "You're the image of a Death Eater who tortured me when I was fourteen years old. Does that make you the same person?"

It was Hestia Jones who spoke next, her small voice clear. Harry looked at her neat, shining black hair and remembered that she had seemed to admire Snape: she did not have such an unfriendly look about her. She simply looked practical.

“Your point is taken, Mr. Malfoy. Leaving aside your father’s record, all the same – I cannot say yours inspires confidence. You admit you swore yourself to You-Know-Who. You say you almost killed two people.”

“Snape will speak for me,” Malfoy said. “And-”

“I will, too,” said Harry, and looked around the room. “If anyone’s interested in what I have to say,” he said lightly, into the ensuing quiet.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, sitting like a judge at the top of the table, spread both his hands and delivered his judgement.

“What you say may well be true. What you offer could be very valuable,” he said, in his gravelly voice. “But by your own showing, even though Dumbledore knew what you were up to, you got the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. You seem to be a young man of great resource, Mr. Malfoy. And it has all been used for the other side. You were sly enough once. Can you give me – not a witness – but a single reason why we should trust you now?”

The room which held the Order of the Phoenix seemed to hold its breath. Malfoy, playing his part to the hilt, did not hesitate for a moment.

“I can,” he said. “You can trust me because you will be paying me for my services. Dumbledore would have kept my mother safe. That’s what he would have used to insure my obedience. None of you can reach my mother now. I have a new price.”

“I might have known it,” Mad-Eye growled, and across the board Harry saw people’s faces change in agreement with him. “Take the boy out of the Death Eaters, but you can’t take the Death Eaters out of the boy. We’re not the side you want. We’re not the sort who offers fame and riches and eternal life. Those are Voldemort’s promises. None of us fight to be great, to be placed above the others. That’s the kind of dirty ambition you see all on the other side.”

Malfoy’s face changed, went livid for a moment, and Harry wondered why and then remembered the way Malfoy had talked on the train to Hogwarts in sixth year, saw that Malfoy knew he’d had those ambitions, and knew what had come of them.

“All on the other side?” Harry asked, lifting his voice to distract attention from Malfoy. “You wish. I’m not saying Umbridge was one of us, but she wasn’t working for Voldemort either.”

When he looked back at Malfoy, Malfoy had recovered himself.

“Anyway,” he said in a quiet voice. “That isn’t the sort of price I meant. That isn’t what I want at all.”

“Mr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt said. “May I ask, then, what you do want?”

Malfoy leaned forward, his right hand on the table with his left still hanging, the Dark Mark

there to be glimpsed by anyone who cared to look. The Horcrux was still out and glittering. Malfoy's voice was deadly soft, and cold.

"I want Lucius Malfoy," said Draco Malfoy. "And if you can't deliver him to me whole, I want his head on a plate!"

Chapter Eighteen

Malfoy did not win himself any friends by insisting that he wanted to join the Order of the Phoenix. Possibly, this was because the way he put it was that he wasn't going to spy for them unless they let him join. At that, Moody made a noise like a very annoyed elephant and pointed out that spying for them had been entirely Malfoy's idea.

"Well, I rescind my generous offer," Malfoy said, who seemed to have taken a dislike to Moody. Harry thought the feeling was intensely mutual. "I want to join and have a vote. I think I should have a vote, since I'm *risking my life* and everything. I bet Potter has like, a presidential veto or something, and I don't even get a vote, it's-

"Malfoy," Harry said, interrupting before Malfoy really got on a roll. "I don't even belong to the Order."

"You don't?" Malfoy said. "Well, you only came of age four bloody months ago. Why are you frittering away your time?"

Harry thought it might be tactful not to mention that he'd thought he had more important things to do than sit in at meetings. Like finding Horcruxes.

"I demand that we both get to join, then," Malfoy said.

"And Ron and Hermione," Harry added.

"Well, of course that won't be a problem, Harry," said Mr Weasley.

"Oh, good," said Malfoy.

He hadn't increased his popularity by asking for parchment and a quill, either. Harry wasn't really used to having the whole order directing silent judgement his way, so he folded his arms over his chest and decided to get through this in silence. He tried to ignore Malfoy on his left, doing what looked like a deliberate impression of Rita Skeeter, Intrepid Reporter.

When Moody was listing the suspects for new recruits to the Death Eaters, Malfoy started to scribble ostentatiously and at several points said in a bland tone, "How interesting!" and gave Moody pause.

Harry felt like he had to say: "There's Petrel Parkinson. I heard he joined."

Malfoy's cold gaze turned on him, and the rest of the Order looked rather pleased. Harry glared back: what did Malfoy expect him to do? This was war and Malfoy himself was supposed to be a spy now. They had to hand over this kind of information.

"How interesting," said Moody, echoing Malfoy. Malfoy scowled at him.

Harry plucked the quill from Malfoy's fingers and wrote: *Look, I don't have anything against Pansy, all right? Her brother chose this, so he's the enemy.*

Malfoy grabbed his quill back and scribbled *It's not that simple.*

Harry took it again and said *It has to be that simple.*

For a moment Malfoy looked as if he was going to argue, but he let his shoulders slump slightly and simply tapped the quill against the parchment. He didn't glare at Harry again, but he didn't look at Harry again either, he looked around the table to see who would make the next remark.

"Then of course we come to the question of You-Know-Who's banshee," said Hestia Jones.

"Sorry," said Harry. "Voldemort's *what?*"

"His banshee, Harry," said Hestia, giving him a look that reminded Harry slightly of Professor McGonagall. "You were the one who gave us the information about the orphanage burning. Did you not wonder why the fire didn't respond to basic water charms?"

"Didn't really think about it," Harry said. "I just sort of got on with it."

Malfoy nudged Harry and Harry looked at the parchment, where freshly gleaming ink spelled out the words: *Think about it? But you're a Gryffindor. This Order will crush you underneath the weight of their unreasonable expectations!* Harry snorted, and took this as an olive branch about the whole Petrel Parkinson business.

"Voldemort's recruited at least one banshee," Hestia said, folding her hands in front of her. "The fires don't respond to anything but advanced water charms and we need to figure out a pattern before there are mass casualties. We also need to find a way to combat the banshee. I have been in correspondence with Severus Snape and we have pooled our resources on the subject. There is not much information about banshees. They are creatures indigenous to Ireland, whose scream causes fire, and they cannot be touched unless they choose. They can make fire and then turn themselves into air."

"So our odds aren't what could be called good," drawled Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"They also have a propensity for seduction," said Hestia briskly, at which point several men around the table went red. "They like to start a fire in a man's heart," Hestia went on, looking rather amused. "Quite literally. Of course, there are male banshees as well and those prey on women, but generally the men stay in isolation and care for the hatchling banshees, so I think we can presume if You-Know-Who's banshee is straying far afield she's a female. This might indicate that we should use female Order members to patrol places where the banshee fires might occur."

Malfoy was scribbling furiously and Harry peered over his shoulder: when he saw comments like *Smoking hot banshees?* he raised his eyebrows and almost laughed out loud. Hestia Jones looked at him coldly.

"Shut up, I'm summarising," Malfoy muttered.

"Another order of business is a report from France," said Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Bill and Fleur Weasley have been very successful in recruiting French goblins to stand against the Dark Lord. I suggest that this is partly the result of the more relaxed laws about goblins in

France, as compared to our far more oppressive measures here. I think that if someone put this in the right way to Scrimgeour we might all receive the benefit-

"Scrimgeour won't listen to me," Mr Weasley said, "but possibly my son Percy-

Everyone started talking over each other, mentioning the names of people in the Ministry who Scrimgeour might listen to, and in the middle of the debate Malfoy raised his hand, the members of the Order ignored it, and Malfoy shrugged and said loudly: "What about Sextus Baddock?"

Moody turned one icy human eye and one swivelling, magical, but still ill-disposed-towards-Malfoy eye in Malfoy's direction. "Sextus Baddock," he said precisely, "is a consort of known Death Eaters and one of the more prominent lobbyists against muggleborn equality."

"Yes I know," said Malfoy. "But I don't think he's a Death Eater. I never saw him at the meetings. Anyway, what does it matter? He's been working with the goblins for fifty years: they've increased his money a hundred times over. My-" he swallowed slightly and Harry moved his chair a bit closer to Malfoy's. "My father," Malfoy said. "He used to say the goblins respected Baddock. There were rumours he'd taken tea at some prominent goblin houses. He's said publically that it's appalling that real magical creatures get treated like dirt while the Mud - the muggleborn are treated like proper wizards."

"And you suggest we go to a man like *that*?" demanded a woman Harry didn't recognise.

"Why not? He hated Dumbledore and the muggleborn like poison, but he'd speak for goblin rights. He's rich and influential enough for Scrimgeour to listen to him." Malfoy smiled in a way that was kissing cousins with a sneer. "You don't have to tell him you're doing it so you can recruit for the Order, you know."

"Of all the opportunistic-

"Now, Moody," said Shackbolt. "The boy's here so we can use his information." He gave Malfoy a slightly less hostile and more appraising look. "None of us know about the dirty politics which were clearly dinnertable conversation at his house. Let's consider the question of Sextus Baddock."

"My people can have a dossier on him by tomorrow," said another woman Harry didn't recognise, this one dark blond, spare and apparently in her late thirties, with very calm grey eyes.

Malfoy nudged him again and wrote: *That's Megara Prewett. She used to come to my mother's dinner parties because she was Mrs Goyle's colleague. She's an Unspeakable.*

Harry nodded and gave him a smile of thanks.

"And now to the question of the missing tea money," said Mr Weasley. "I know it's not terribly important, but Cyril's becoming really distressed about it. Can we ask Minerva to have a stern word with Mundungus?"

Malfoy started writing furiously again and Harry leaned against him to look over his

shoulder. *I wish people wouldn't say things like that*, Malfoy wrote. *Why are they asking Professor McGonagall in particular? What special disciplinarian skills does she have? I don't want to picture the new headmistress telling someone that they've been a very naughty boy, but-*

Harry confiscated Malfoy's quill for his own good and bit back a horrified laugh. Malfoy tried to snatch it back.

"May I ask what you're doing now, Mr Malfoy?" asked Kingsley Shacklebolt, who no longer looked approving in the least.

"All I want to do is record your words of wisdom, sir," Malfoy told him, with a limpid look that had only ever worked on Professor Snape. "But Potter stole my quill."

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"That went well," Harry said. "I think the first order of the next meeting will be to burn you in effigy."

"Messing with dolls doesn't work," Malfoy told him confidently. "Burn the thing, stick pins in it, pull out the stuffing. It's all a great big delusion and a snare."

"You stuck pins in a little doll of someone?" Harry asked, staring. "*Who?*"

As they went out into the hall Malfoy became extremely occupied with folding up his parchment very small. "I forget."

"Right," Harry said.

"I have a very bad memory," Malfoy claimed. "It's tragic, in one so young. I expect it's my riotous lifestyle."

"Or the inbreeding," Harry suggested.

Malfoy smirked, as one fairly acknowledging a hit. Considering there were God knows how many little Harry dolls who had met their doom in the Slytherin dungeons, Harry thought it was richly deserved.

"It was - you know, good of you to say all you did in there," Malfoy said unexpectedly. "I didn't expect - Well. Thanks."

He made a face about it, as if thanks tasted bad in his mouth.

"That's okay," Harry said, feeling rather startled.

He felt considerably more startled when Malfoy reached out his hand to Harry and waggled it about imperiously, as if he expected Harry to go down into the kitchen and fetch a tea tray or something. "Now," Malfoy said. "Come on. Tour."

"Beg pardon?"

"Tour," said Malfoy. "Of the house. I presume you know your way around it, since it's yours and everything. I was four when I was last in it. When I was four I was notable for many things," he added reminiscently. "Among others, my great charm and the unfortunate decision my parents made to grow my hair to my shoulders. However, I was not noted for my keen observational skills, since I was four years old and everything. So I want to see Great-Aunt Wally's place, please."

"Well," Harry said. "All right. If that's what you want."

Malfoy glanced upwards at the dusty snake-shaped chandelier. "I like the decor already," he remarked.

"You're entitled to your opinion," Harry said.

They went upstairs to the first floor and into the drawing room, upon which Malfoy had a conniption fit over the fact that the glass-fronted cabinets against the wall were empty.

"I remember these!" he exclaimed. "They had some really good stuff in there! Where's Great-Aunt Wally's bottle of dragon's blood, do you know how much that stuff costs?"

"We threw it out," Harry said curtly.

He'd never liked it here, and Sirius hadn't, either. He remembered Sirius with a sudden vivid flash of memory, stalking around these dark, dilapidated rooms like an angry ghost, and then shoved the memory furiously away.

Malfoy stared at him, eyes wide, and it struck Harry that Sirius had had grey eyes, too. "Why?"

"We had to decontaminate the house," Harry answered. "There were Doxys and murderous ghouls and-"

"Family photos," Malfoy said, running a hand over the empty mantelpiece. Harry looked at his long fingers in the dust, and became unpleasantly aware of how bare and desolate things must look to Malfoy. "Where did they go? I remember Great-Aunt Wally showed me my great-grandfather's First Class Order of Merlin every time I came - I mean, I tried to put it in my mouth because it was shiny, but still - where did everything go?"

Harry remembered Sirius throwing out that Order of Merlin. "Sirius said that his grandfather got it because he gave the Ministry a load of gold."

"Yes!" Malfoy snapped. "To set up a new wing of St Mungo's. Did *Sirius* happen to mention that part?"

"No he didn't," Harry snapped back. "And don't talk about him like that, all right?"

Malfoy looked like he was about to talk about Sirius in considerably harsher terms and Harry was just reminding himself that he'd promised not to hit Malfoy, but then he tilted his head and perhaps had some idea of how suddenly wretched Harry was feeling. "All right," Malfoy

said, more quietly. "But still, this is all - this is a bit much."

Malfoy turned around and walked through the room with an air of being lost in the wilderness. He went and stood beside the casements of the windows where the long moss-green curtains hung, looking out through the dusty panes of glass. He was staring straight ahead, and then the curtains moved. Harry was about to shout out a warning about Doxys, but no hairy winged creature sprang from the material. The curtains just swayed a little towards Malfoy, as if on some impossible wind, and like a cat wanting to be noticed, a velvet fold rubbed against his cheek.

Malfoy jumped, but he didn't jump away.

"Potter," he said. "Am I having hallucinations, or do these curtains seem to like me?"

"I thought they only moved because they had Doxys in them," Harry said blankly, and then remembered the way the curtains had hung after Doxycide had been sprayed all over them, with a distinct reproachful, fainting-maiden air about them.

The curtains kept timidly rubbing up against Malfoy and Malfoy, staring at them and looking more than a little taken aback, lifted his hand to them and stroked them for a minute in return. The curtains spilled lovingly all over his still-dusty fingers.

"I suppose they can tell I'm a pureblood," Malfoy said after a moment. He sounded almost awed.

"They can tell more than that," Harry answered, trying to get over the drapery petting Draco Malfoy. "I remember a set of purple robes trying to strangle Ron, and he's a pureblood. They can tell you're one of the family."

"Oh," said Malfoy.

He regarded the curtains thoughtfully and Harry realised that Malfoy was probably going to get fond of them, as he usually did when something liked him. This foreboding was more or less confirmed when Malfoy ran a hand down the curtains, creating a long stripe of cleaner, paler green, and making the whole curtain give a pleased sort of movement. The curtain on the other side of the window started in a sneaky sort of way to shut itself, creeping inch by inch along the curtain rod in order, presumably, to get in on some of the Malfoy-stroking action.

"Look," Harry said. "I hate this place."

"All right," Malfoy said, frowning at him and pausing in his display of curtain affection, "D'you want to go? We've only seen one room-"

"No, that's not what I meant. The thing is," Harry took a deep breath. "I always hated this place. Sirius hated it too. He was so unhappy here and when Dumbledore told me that he'd left the whole place to me I didn't *want* it, I didn't want anything from Sirius' death, and I didn't know what to do with it. I still don't. I mean, the Order of the Phoenix use it, I couldn't give it to Death Eaters and I wouldn't anyway, but you're a member of the Order now, so-"

Malfoy seemed to have forgotten the curtains completely so that he could stare at Harry as if Harry was the lunatic bonding with the furnishings.

"Potter," he said in tones that implied Potter was a synonym for every word meaning 'insane' that Malfoy knew, "are you trying to give me your *house*?"

"Well," Harry said. "Well, yeah."

Malfoy made a sound like a tea kettle on the boil. "You can't just - you can't just give somebody your house! If you want to give away your house you *sell* it - well, I'd wait a bit, actually, the property market's gone down the drain because of the Dark Lord - it's a house, it's not a cast-off jumper. And curtains do not get to make decisions about real estate!"

"Okay," Harry said. "You don't need to yell. I just thought you might like it."

Malfoy'd seemed to like the house, Harry certainly didn't want it and he was supposed to be making Malfoy happy now. He'd thought this might do it. He didn't know what Malfoy's problem was.

"I really don't understand how your brain works half the time," Malfoy said.

"Right back at you," Harry muttered. "D'you want to go on, or should I give you and the curtains some privacy?"

Malfoy made a terrible face at him and left the curtains with a final pat. They trailed after him until brought to a halt by having their connection to the curtain rod, whereupon they drooped like puppies chained to kennels when they wanted to go walkies.

Harry showed Malfoy around the first floor, and then once they were sure everyone for the Order was gone they went over the ground floor. Malfoy refrained from making any further remarks about missing priceless heirlooms. Just as they were wandering around the hall, about to go up to the second floor, Malfoy spotted the curtains at the bottom of the stairs.

His sudden affection for curtains led him to make a fatal mistake, which was twitching open said curtains to reveal the portrait of Mrs Black.

"Malfoy, don't!" Harry yelled too late.

Mrs Black opened her eyes and the yellow skin around her face snapped taut as elastic as she gave her first scream: "*Get out of my house! Half-blood scum, traitors-*"

"Great-Aunt Wally?" Malfoy asked, staring.

Mrs Black looked somewhat put off by being interrupted mid-diatribes, and she opened her mouth, and then shut it again. Then Harry saw her hands, yellow and clawed into the resemblance of talons if not for the black-edged lace handkerchief caught between them, go up to her mouth and wipe the spittle from the corners. She did it slowly, as if nothing but the mad urge to scream remained to her as instinct.

"Draco?" she asked faintly, her voice hoarse from screaming. "Little Draco?"

Malfoy said: "Yes."

"Oh," Mrs Black said, as if he'd hurt her. Then she narrowed her eyes and said: "Why on earth are you wearing those frightful clothes?"

Malfoy paused, looked rueful, and then said: "It's a long story."

"I see," said Mrs Black. "My darling boy, I'm delighted to see you, but you must get away at once. This house has been taken by invaders, despoiled and ruined, vandalised-" She looked as if she was going to start screaming again, but she clenched her fingers around her handkerchief and did not. "You need to run home," she said. "It's not safe."

"I don't have a home," Malfoy told her. "I know who comes here. I'm with them now."

"No you're not!" Mrs Black snarled, her eyes crazed once more. "No, you're not, you're not to be like Sirius, I forbid it, you're your mother's only child. He said he didn't have a home but it wasn't true: you do have a home, you do have a family. Don't do this. Do you know what happened-"

Harry remembered something someone had said, once: that Sirius had broken his mother's heart.

Maybe he had, but so what? Sirius couldn't have stayed in this house where the family believed in Muggle hunting and would've wanted to kill Lupin or Harry's mum just for being what they were: who thought that their son Regulus was a hero when he joined the Death Eaters. Maybe it had hurt Mrs Black, and that was a shame, but Sirius'd had to go.

"I know what happened," Malfoy said. "I'm not like Sirius Black. I never wanted to leave. But I don't have a home any more. Great-Aunt Wally," he said, and Harry was surprised by the depth of cold hate in Malfoy's voice. "That upstart half-blood who calls himself the Dark Lord has gone too far."

"Half-blood!" Mrs Black exclaimed. "Well, he certainly kept that quiet, didn't he - and no wonder - but while I'd agree his methods are verging on beyond the acceptable, I have to say his policies are-"

"He murdered Narcissa," Malfoy snarled.

There was a long pause, and then from her shadowy alcove, behind the frame, came a voice colder and more hateful than Malfoy could ever have managed. "He did what?"

"He killed my mother!" Malfoy said. "He made my father do it."

"Lucius Malfoy never had any guts," Mrs Black said. "Nice-looking boy and clever enough, but not someone you can count on. I warned Narcissa, but she said that she could rely on herself-"

"He murdered my mother and he murdered Regulus," Malfoy said. "Don't you remember that? Don't you remember Regulus?"

Mrs Black wrung her handkerchief. "It's hard for me," she said. "I was painted before he died and once I woke up nobody would speak to me, I was alone, alone, and then enemies closed in on me - he murdered my son? How dare he? How dare he assault my family? A filthy little half-blood-"

"Raised Muggle," Malfoy interjected.

"Muggle!" Mrs Black spat. "He's no better than a Mudblood! How dare he? *How dare he?*"

"Go to the other portraits," Malfoy said. "Tell them all. Wake the house up. He's not going to get away with this. We won't let him."

Mrs Black threw up her handkerchief and vanished. For the first time, Harry saw Mrs Black's portrait silent. Malfoy stood looking at it for a moment, and then he started climbing the stairs, making for the second floor.

"Some of the present company are half-bloods who were raised Muggle," Harry said behind him. "And I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of."

"You're not a half-blood, your mother was a witch," Malfoy said absently. "Learn the terminology. And also learn how to talk to portraits, you idiot."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"I suppose I mean I don't have a very high opinion of your intelli-" Harry shoved at Malfoy's back. "Oh, all right," Malfoy said, sounding quite pleased to have information to divulge. "Portraits aren't alive, right?"

"Right," Harry said. "I'd actually gathered that on my own, thanks."

"Don't you know what not being alive *means*?"

"Being, er. Dead?"

"When you stop living," Malfoy said in a measured voice, "you lose all capacity for change. I mean, we see pictures, and we can see them interacting with the real world. They can see the present, but they're not personalities. They're echoes of personalities. And you can't teach echoes a new song. If I'd said, oh no, aunty, how can you talk like that, the Muddleborn-" he glanced back and he and Harry exchanged a flashing grin - "are our friends, let us join together in peace and love, she'd have started screaming her head off. I know how to talk to portraits. I've been doing it since I was little."

"I understand," Harry said. "But what do *you* think? Really?"

Malfoy was silent, taking the steps to the second floor two at a time. Then he said: "Well, I mean, I wouldn't support a bill for Muggle hunting."

"That's very big of you, Malfoy," Harry said dryly, but he thought about Malfoy's definition of portraits and considered the fact that the reverse was true, as well, that while people were

living, there was always capacity for change. He recalled Malfoy amiably stealing Hermione's biros.

Malfoy strode across the floor of the second-floor landing with the easy confidence of one who was at home. He immediately went over to the Black tapestry and began to run his fingers along it, murmuring happily to himself and saying things like, "I had no idea they were cousins thirteen times removed!" and "I heard he went a little odd in his old age. Well, I tell a lie, I heard he had house elves carry him around the streets in a litter and caused a sensation among the Muggles." Harry had to admit, it was slightly more fun to listen to Malfoy's views on his family tapestry than Sirius' comment about his dead brother. Malfoy seemed to know a lot of gossip which was centuries old.

"And I heard he ran off with a dancing girl," Malfoy added triumphantly. "And that she still gave private shows after they were married. Cytherea Black, she was called. Lived to be a hundred and forty-two. Hopefully didn't give private shows when she was a hundred and forty-two, of course."

"This place," Harry said suddenly. "We had to chuck stuff away. It felt like - like invading enemy territory."

"It's a house," said Malfoy. "And it's not Voldemort's house, or a Death Eater's house. It wouldn't have gone for Sirius Black if he hadn't gone for it, and it's *not* enemy territory. I won't let it be."

Harry leaned against the wall and looked at the tapestry with him. It occurred to him that, actually, he wasn't having too bad a time.

Malfoy abandoned the tapestry at last and went over to the first door he saw. It swung open to reveal a four-poster canopied bed and an enormous wardrobe. The carpet was black, and Harry thought it was worn in places until he saw the patches were actually tiny silver snakes.

"Potter," Malfoy said urgently. "Can this be my room?"

"If you like," Harry said, and Malfoy beamed at him.

"Good," he said, and narrowed his eyes speculatively. "I have plans for it."

Harry resigned himself to hearing all about these plans when Malfoy glanced over his shoulder, and Harry turned, and they both saw the little figure creeping across the floor.

"Hullo," Malfoy said. "That's a house elf. Why isn't someone using him?"

"*Kreacher*," Harry snarled.

"Oh I see you know each other," Malfoy said. "Oh - so this is - that house elf-"

"Yeah," Harry said. "That house elf." He strode over to Kreacher, a wizened shape crouching on the ground like a toad and staring up at him with bulging malevolent eyes, and demanded: "Didn't I tell you to go to Hogwarts?"

"Master did tell me to go to Hogwarts," Kreacher said, muttering at the floor: "and consort with filth under the sway of a blood traitor, oh yes, Master said so." He transferred a menacing gaze to Harry's knees and went on, "But since the master had left Hogwarts Kreacher could not serve him so Kreacher thought it was best to return to the family home and await further orders." Back to the floor went Kreacher's gaze and he proceeded blithely: "Not that this is your family, not that this is your home, you loud-mouthed ill-bred son of a-

"Yeah, that's enough," Harry snapped, resisting the urge to kick Kreacher. "I didn't tell you to come here, all right?"

"Kreacher profoundly apologises, master," said Kreacher. "Even though his master is lower than dirt and has impure blood and an unprepossessing face," he informed the floorboards.

Behind him, Harry heard Malfoy snicker and he whirled on him.

"What d'you think is so funny?"

"Nothing," Malfoy said, then looked at the floor and said: "Well, maybe the bit about your face."

"Master Malfoy!" said Kreacher. "I see you have captured one of your enemies, master, my congratulations," he said in a flat monotone, and then in a much more urgent voice to the floor: "If the brat were to fall down the stairs and break his horrible little neck, Master Malfoy could make his escape. Kreacher would suggest taking a broom that he has concealed in the attic - it used to belong to Master Regulus, bless his sweet heart - and escaping from the roof, there are enemies who may come at any time-

"I'm sure you'd like to murder me like you helped murder Sirius," Harry snarled. "Maybe I'll tell you to break your own neck. You'd have to do it too, wouldn't you?"

He hadn't realised quite how he sounded until he saw Malfoy go pale.

"I won't do it!" he said. "Of course I won't. I wouldn't."

"All right," Malfoy said. "I know that." Harry looked up at him, and saw Malfoy looking a bit concerned. "I do know that," Malfoy said, and Harry felt a bit better. This state of affairs did not continue, because the next words Malfoy spoke were addressed to Kreacher. "I'm quite safe," he said. "Kreacher, is it? It's - it's nice of you to be worried about me."

"Kreacher would die for the son of Miss Narcissa," Kreacher told him promptly. "Or kill for him," he added, giving Harry's knees another death glare.

He made Harry feel sick to his stomach.

"That's fine," Malfoy said. "I don't require the services of an assassin house elf just yet, but I'll let you know. I," he paused. "I got that locket, too. Thanks," he said in a casual, lordly way, as Malfoy would probably have addressed any house elf.

This wasn't any house elf, though. This was the disgusting creature who had betrayed Sirius. Narcissa Malfoy had done that too, Harry recalled, and for the first time felt a moment of

gladness about her death.

Kreacher, while giving Harry a wide berth, was creeping determinedly towards Malfoy. "How is Miss Narcissa?" he asked in a much softer, humbler voice than Harry had ever heard him use before. "Oh, she was lovely when she was a girl, very gracious, she never even soiled her pretty feet by giving Kreacher a kick. We had the wedding party here, Master Malfoy, for your parents. She was seen as a daughter of the house - a daughter - my mistress always wanted a daughter-"

Harry didn't care about Kreacher for a moment because Malfoy's mouth jerked like he wanted to cry, and Harry was sorry about what he'd thought, and wanted to take it back, even though Malfoy couldn't know about it.

"She's dead," Malfoy said in an almost gentle voice, as if he had to touch a wound and even doing it lightly made him want to scream. "The - Voldemort," he said with sudden decision. "Voldemort had her killed for trying to protect me."

"Miss Narcissa!" exclaimed Kreacher, and then began to moan. "Oh no, oh no, not Miss Narcissa. No, no, no. Miss Bellatrix would never have allowed it. You've been listening to liars, Master Malfoy, yes you have-"

"You know as well as I do," Malfoy said emptily, "that Aunt Bella wouldn't have lifted a finger for my mother. Not against Voldemort. She's as much of a blood traitor as Sirius Black."

"Stop it!" Harry snarled. "Don't call him that. And stop talking to Kreacher as if he's - as if he's anything but a little monster."

Malfoy, who had been looking at Kreacher's slow progress towards him, suddenly whirled to face Harry. His expression was icily furious.

"Why shouldn't I call him that?" Malfoy demanded. "He was proud of it, wasn't he? Your Sirius. He was proud of leaving his family. You know, if you have any thoughts about me being like that, Potter, any thoughts of someone you people will graciously accept as long as they reject everything they were. I'd never have turned away from my mother! I'd never have turned away from my father, if he hadn't betrayed us. They were mine!"

"Sirius was *mine*," Harry snarled. "So shut your mouth. Have I asked you to - I never-"

"What about him?" Malfoy asked, pointing a finger at Kreacher. "They were his, too. You heard him. He loved my aunt, he loved the Blacks, he loved them all! He's lived here his whole life and he was one of the family. He felt like one of the family!"

"He's a slave," Harry snapped. "It's not the same."

"You were brought up by Muggles," Malfoy said, his eyes narrowing. "And you don't understand about portraits, and you don't understand about house elves, and you don't understand about *anything*. House elves are bound to a family, bound to obey them because their magic is too powerful not to be harnessed in service. Wizards and house elves have existed like that for hundreds of years and he was part of the family if he felt like he was!"

"Your dad's house elf Dobby, he was thrilled to be one of the Malfoys," Harry sneered.

Malfoy looked like another few feet had been added to his towering rage. "He was an anomaly! Have you ever met another house elf like him? Have you? Or has every single house elf you ever met been inextricably bound up with their owner?"

Harry thought, suddenly, of Winky weeping on the floor for Mr Crouch, and swore.

"I don't care!" he announced violently. "I don't care if he did feel like he was part of the family. That doesn't give him any right to go off and tell your mum stuff that got Sirius killed!"

Malfoy's eyes glinted coldly, and they stared at each other as if it was hatred between them all over again.

"If *I* was part of a family," Malfoy said succinctly, "and someone in it left the others, abandoned them forever and betrayed them, and everyone else in the family died except for an old woman who sat with me going slowly mad over her memories and her broken heart, and then she died too and I was all alone except for the lonely screams of pictures but at least I was home, at least there was no more of the sheer torture of when all these things were happening. And then the person who had betrayed us all came back and brought the memories alive with him, if he started throwing away every last remnant of those I had loved and lost, and he held me for the first time in my life - for the first time! - in real slavery and let me be tortured by seeing all that, then I'd betray him. My God, I'd betray him. I mightn't even wait to betray him. I might kill him myself."

"Don't harm the wizards," Kreacher sighed, in a desolate crazed mutter to the wind. "Don't harm the wizards. Never raise a hand to the Blacks-"

"It wasn't like that!" Harry said. "You wouldn't betray your friends either, Malfoy. Sirius had different friends: he had a werewolf friend, his best friend had a Muggleborn wife. There was no way not to be - a traitor, if you like. He went with what he believed in. He wasn't-"

"He didn't have to throw away everything!" Malfoy snarled, breath hot on Harry's face. "He didn't have to spit on his family when they were down. He could have freed Kreacher as soon as he walked in the door, before he had anything to betray. He wanted to hurt the elf, he wanted to hurt the whole place, he's practically disembowelled it-"

"So d'you think he felt nothing?" Harry shouted back. "You don't disembowel something if you don't care about it! He was in a foul mood all the time, he was drinking too much, because he could hardly bear to look around him. Do you think that's the way someone would behave if they'd put their family behind them forever and never felt a thing?"

"It went wrong for everyone," Malfoy said, teeth flashing behind a curled lip. "It went to hell for everyone. The Blacks went to the wall. But your Sirius came back after fifteen years, and he resumed hostilities, didn't he? He didn't have to torture Kreacher. He didn't have to be cruel!"

"Like *you've* never been cruel?" Harry shouted. "I don't care what he did, any more than I

care how Kreacher feels! If Sirius did anything wrong then he paid for it, didn't he? He paid for it with everything he had left, and now I don't even have him, and I hope that evil little thing is suffering. It deserves to suffer, it deserves to die like Sirius died!"

Malfoy stepped away from Harry, and made a sweeping gesture towards Kreacher. His face shut like an abruptly slammed door.

"All right then," he said. "Fine. He deserves to die, you say? You're the judge, jury and executioner. Go on. Tell him to kill himself."

There was a long pause, and then from the floor Kreacher said: "Master Malfoy must do as he wishes, but he is not really helping Kreacher here."

"He can't fight you any more than he could fight Sirius," Malfoy went on. "Just like the Imperius Curse, isn't it handy? Go on, then! Punish him."

"Go to hell," Harry said, shoved Malfoy against the doorframe of his new bedroom, and turned and ran into the next room he saw.

It turned out to be a bathroom, which was a bit of an anticlimax. Harry thumped the wall, and then he thumped the wall again. Malfoy had never even met Sirius. He didn't know what he was talking about. And that thing had killed Sirius, or as good as, he'd conspired to murder him. Dumbledore might have preached about how Sirius should have treated Kreacher but that didn't matter either, Harry'd hardly listened past the roaring in his ears and the desire to be a lot crueler to Kreacher than Sirius had ever been.

Just because Malfoy had decided to identify with a house elf too much, that didn't have anything to do with Harry. He hated this whole house, just like Sirius had hated it, and he'd go on hating it.

Like Sirius went on hating it, a small voice in his head went on, so he went half mad raging at dead people? Will you hate it like that? Harry had the impression that the small voice was sneering at him in a way that was terribly reminiscent of Malfoy.

A voice that *was* Malfoy's, from the recent past, told him that only living people were capable of change.

Harry thought of Sirius and cursed and ran the taps in the sink, took his glasses off with one hand and splashed his face with water cold as stone. It left a bitter taste against his lips.

He went outside and found Malfoy standing exactly where he had been when Harry left. Kreacher was still edging towards him, and had almost reached his side.

"I can't forgive him," Harry said bleakly. "I can't stop hating him. I don't even want to." He took a deep breath. "Your rules on giving away house elves the same as the rules for giving away houses?"

Malfoy, whose head had been down studying the slow progression of Kreacher, looked up, looked startled, and even while he was still looking stunned he smiled like the sun coming up. "No," he said, his voice almost wondering, and Kreacher stumbled against him and he

reached down absently and patted Kreacher's bald head. "No, this present I'll take."

Kreacher curled himself like the most nightmarish lapdog in the world around Malfoy's legs, and to Harry's amazement, he heard a soft low sound, and realised Kreacher was crying, in a tired, happy sort of way.

He didn't like hearing Kreacher sound happy. He let it go.

The crooked slant of Malfoy's mouth made the memory of his first startled smile linger on and on. That was all right.

"Oh, master, master," Kreacher said, his voice wet. "I will be good. Oh, I will be very good, now."

"That's nice," Malfoy said.

"And if I serve my gracious master faithfully all my days, perhaps when I am dead you will do me the great honour of cutting off my head and placing it on the Wall of Glory?"

Malfoy looked aghast. "If that will make you - happy?" he said doubtfully at last.

"Oh yes, Master Draco," Kreacher said. "It has been my dream since I was a little elf. I could show you where they put my dear mother's head when she passed. It is placed high on the wall, for she was a pearl among house elves!"

Harry thought that Malfoy might have stopped identifying with a house elf rather quickly.

"You must have been so proud," Malfoy said in a distant and horrorstruck tone. "Would you go away now?" he asked, glancing over at Harry. Kreacher clung to the bottom of Malfoy's jeans for a moment, and Malfoy said in a kinder voice: "I will come back. I promise."

"Kreacher will ready the house!" Kreacher announced, his face brightening as he lifted it to Malfoy's. "Oh, there is much work to be done, I will make it perfect, yes perfect, for my master, for my dear master..." He went away and then came back to hug Malfoy's leg one last time. "Master is a true Black," he added adoringly.

A pin-scratch frown appeared between Malfoy's brows, as if he was thinking this over. Harry stood and looked at him standing against the door of his new bedroom, with the whole house turning towards him and opening like a flower.

"Yes," Malfoy said eventually. "I think I'd better be."

Chapter Nineteen

After Kreacher had traipsed away happily to clean the toilets for the glorious advent of Malfoy or whatever, Malfoy insisted that they go immediately to the attics.

"It's obviously where Kreacher has all the good stuff stashed," he said. "We need to go get it down."

"It's easy for you to say," Harry grumbled. "The whole house wants to have your pureblood babies. I might get murdered by a temperamental Black family teapot."

"I shall protect you," Malfoy promised grandly.

After they climbed several more flights of stairs and one very small, clearly tailored for house elves, flight of stairs, they found themselves in a dark, vaulted room. Harry scanned the ceiling for bats, and then lifted his wand and said "*Lumos*" just as Malfoy reached out in the shadows and brought a whole stack of boxes toppling onto their heads.

"That was brilliant, Malfoy," Harry said, struggling free only to find Malfoy collapsed sideways on a pile of boxes and laughing his fool head off. "What? What is it?"

"Um, I think we upset a box of clothing," Malfoy said, biting his lips.

"No, really?" Harry said, throwing off some kind of strange over-robcs waistcoat affair. "Do tell."

"And, um, I think you have Great-Aunt Wally's delicates on your head," said Malfoy, and threw back his own head and laughed like a hyena.

"Oh my God!" Harry tried to knock off Mrs Black's yellowed-lace brasserie, which then got caught on his glasses. Malfoy laughed and laughed. "I'm glad you found that so amusing," Harry said, once he'd got it off.

"Oh, me too," Malfoy agreed blandly.

Harry rolled his eyes. It was funny, actually, this whole business of having Malfoy be relaxed, and having the option of both of them ending up laughing. It was still new enough to surprise him - look at this thing we can do! - and weird, but it was more than all right to know that when Malfoy, as he inevitably would, did an impression of Harry Potter With Bra On Head, Harry would probably be able to laugh.

"Anyway, don't complain," Malfoy said. "This is the most action you've got since you last saw my girlfriend."

"She's not your girlfriend, Malfoy," Harry reminded him. "Er," he said hastily. "Not that I'm trying to steal Pansy away or anything. I mean, I'm sure she's - great, but she's not really-"

Malfoy tipped up another box and a gleaming river of metal poured out with a few faint chimes. They'd apparently found the family silver.

"Yes, yes," Malfoy said dismissively. "I understand, you're all about Girl Weasley and her radiant red hair and all the millions of babies you'll have. And Fleur and Bill will have. And Granger and Weasley will have, world of redheads without end, every Weasley a multitude-

"Except for Charlie," Harry said absently. He'd found a whole lot of family photographs he'd thought Sirius had thrown out, and he was trying to find Cytherea Black the dancing girl.

He looked up to find Malfoy with dust rising from his ruffled hair like a halo, looking rather offended.

"Why not Charles?" he demanded. "He's the best of the lot, in my opinion. I mean, certainly, he does have his dragons thing, but I'm certain there are a lot of women who would enjoy Roumania. Roumanian women, for a start," he added thoughtfully.

Harry seriously wondered why he ever opened his mouth. "Er," he said. "Sure. If, um - I thought you knew - Charlie liked women. Roumanian or otherwise."

"What?" Malfoy asked. "Really? I had no idea! I wonder why Charles didn't tell me?" He scowled. "He is a false friend. I like to know things. You know, Pansy tells me there's a new boy working in the Three Broomsticks, maybe Charles should be informed-

"I'd heard that, too," Harry said.

"And since when do you know everything?" Malfoy asked. "You don't even know people's names! The world's all gone wrong! Oh, this is a real cobra snakeskin, we should put it in the drawing room."

"Well, Hermione told me everything, actually," Harry confessed, leaving alone this revelation that Malfoy believed a snake skin was every drawing room's must-have accessory.

"The world makes sense again," Malfoy said. "Still, I do think Charlie could have told me."

"Have you told him?" Harry asked thoughtlessly.

Malfoy turned the snake skin over in his hands, not looking up, but Harry saw a blush crest the tops of his cheeks. "No I haven't, because there mightn't be anything to tell," Malfoy snapped. "I told you I'm not *sure*, Potter."

"Okay," Harry said. "Sorry." He found a picture of Malfoy, who looked about three, and a Mrs Black who looked older than her portrait. Malfoy was sitting in her lap and he did indeed have hair down to his shoulders, which Harry thought probably accounted for a lot of Malfoy's attitude problems in later life. "So you never guessed," Harry said, turning the picture over in his hands. "About Charlie. I mean, he never-

"*What?*" Malfoy said.

"Oh, um," Harry said. "Never mind."

"You know," Malfoy observed rather testily, "the common misconception that men of a certain persuasion will just make random leaps at anyone is actually an ignorant and indeed

offensive-

"That's not what I meant!" Harry protested. "I just thought, you know. Charlie likes you."

"Are you trying to set me *up*?" Malfoy demanded in a sudden burst of random and baseless paranoia.

"No!" Harry exclaimed. "Of course not, I mean, you said you were confused-

"You said we were never going to talk about this again," Malfoy said rather plaintively.

"-Actually I think it would be a terrible plan, he's much too old, it would be - terrible-

"I would have liked to never talk about this again," Malfoy went on wistfully.

"I just wanted to, you know, sort of put you on your guard, well, in case Charlie did-

"Oh, so what you're doing, in actual fact," Malfoy said, "is trying to protect my virtue."

"That's - no," Harry said definitely, because that sounded incredibly stupid.

"Because I have to tell you, Potter, you've kind of already missed the boat on that one," Malfoy went on. "Sorry to ruin any illusions. Furthermore, this entire big-brother idea you seem to have picked up is absurd, since I am a whole month older than you."

"I do *not*," Harry said between his teeth, "think of you as my little brother."

"Good," Malfoy informed him shortly. "Cousins will do. And I think it's true, to some degree," he went on. "Chances are, anyway. The Potters were purebloods."

Harry was about to mention that this purebloods all being related thing was freakish and terrible, when the awful thought he might be related to Ginny occurred to him and struck him momentarily dumb.

Meanwhile, Malfoy returned to the subject of Charlie. "Besides which he *is* older, and used to *teaching* people my age."

"Well, not used to it," Harry said. "He can't be. He's just started doing it. And I think-

He was trying to think of some non-horrifying way to mention the way Charlie's ears went red when someone said Malfoy's name, but Malfoy cut him off with a dismissively waved hand.

"Clearly, you haven't been thinking all that much. Or possibly it's just that you've never had much practise," Malfoy said pityingly. Harry made a face at him and Malfoy wrinkled his nose back before airing out an old lace tablecloth and becoming lost in the material. "I realise that you may not have noticed," Malfoy said in a muffled voice from under the lace, "but your suggestion is a blithering one for yet another reason: Charles and I are not exactly playing in the same Quidditch league, if you take my meaning."

"Well," said Harry, in dread that this was going to be some sort of explicit homosexual euphemism, "well - no. I don't, er - take it." He stopped and then said in a horrified rush: "Your meaning! I don't take your meaning!"

Malfoy emerged triumphant from the tablecloth, folding it up and adding it to the drawing room pile along with the snakeskin. Then he found a tiny alarm clock with a silver snake for a clock hand, and added it to a pile which Harry thought was probably for Malfoy's new bedroom. "Charles," Malfoy said, "and God help me I thought that I would be preserved from ever saying such a thing about a Weasley, is very attractive. I mean, not my type," he added hastily, "I really honestly hadn't ever considered it-"

"I didn't think you had!" Harry said.

"Well, good, because I hadn't. But objectively, yes. Certainly. With the rugged and the dragons and the arms and so on. Very nice," Malfoy said in a flat sort of way, sounding either deathly embarrassed or bored enough to make an observation on the weather. "So you needn't fret about my *virtue* anymore," he said, flashing an exceptionally wicked grin at the word 'virtue.'

Harry really did not understand why Malfoy thinking Charlie was good-looking was supposed to help at all, but he went no further with it because discussing the whole business was mortifying and terrible. At about the same time that Malfoy found a snow globe with four sides - and thus technically more of a snow square - Harry remembered Malfoy's little 'not exactly Blaise Zabini' comment and Mrs Weasley's constant 'funny-looking' comments and realised that what Malfoy in his circular way was trying to say was that Charlie was out of his league.

"Potter," Malfoy said. "Potter! Pay attention to me!"

"Sorry," Harry said. "What?"

"Look at this," commanded Malfoy, and threw himself easily backwards on the folded tablecloth, head hitting a table-cloth-covered spot by Harry's elbow. He turned the snow cube around in his hands and Harry saw the little wizard inside move, as Malfoy turned the cube, into each of the four seasons. On one side there was snow falling like it might in any snow globe, and then on another side there were autumn leaves falling, then sun shining, then rain and budding plants. "Pretty," Malfoy said, turning it over and over between his palms. Summer side up, it spilled light over his face and he smiled. "Do you want this?"

"No," Harry said indulgently. "You have it."

Malfoy looked pleased with himself and added the square to what was now definitely his bedroom pile. Then he got up and went over to a shape Harry couldn't really see: in the dimness he thought there was a big canvas rectangle, and then Malfoy flipped it around in one hand, and wiped the dust carefully off, so they could all see the portrait underneath.

Under the dust were four sleeping children in fancy robes. Malfoy stepped away from the picture as if it had burned him and Harry scrambled up to get a closer look, because he could not believe what he saw.

Close up, some of them were not children at all. The older ones were girls, one with black hair and one with gold, in their mid to late teens. The boys, one with black hair and one with gold as well, looked about ten or twelve at the oldest.

Harry didn't have to look Malfoy's suddenly grey face to recognise Narcissa. She hadn't changed that much. It wasn't the sight of her that made his heart sink, though, it was the older boy, the one with black hair falling into his face in an artistic sort of fan even though he was fast asleep and snoring a bit. Harry would've been hard put to recognise him if he hadn't seen inside Snape's Pensieve, but he had.

Just then Narcissa's delicate painted face stirred into wakefulness, and she hid a yawn behind one small hand. "How do you do?" she asked in a cool sort of way.

Then she reached out and gave the blond boy's shoulder a quick shake. He looked like Narcissa, only since he was a boy he made Harry think of Malfoy, except he didn't have Malfoy's sharp nose and when he opened his eyes they were calm sweet blue.

"Hi," he said, and smiled Malfoy's getting-around-people bright smile, then yawned impossibly wide.

"Regulus, have some manners, we're on display," Narcissa Black reprimanded him in a low voice. "And stop Sirius making that fearful racket."

Regulus obligingly elbowed Sirius in the face.

"Wh-what? 'M awake," Sirius mumbled, his voice surprisingly deep for a twelve year old. "Oh look, people!" he added brightly. He shook the dark lovely girl sleeping in his lap. "Bella," he said. "Bella, wake up, we have company."

Bellatrix Black, beautiful and serene as if she had never had an evil thought in her life, slept on.

"Cissy," Sirius said in a voice edged with panic. "She won't wake up."

"Don't worry, Sirius," Narcissa said calmly. "She's probably not dead yet."

This seemed to cheer Sirius up. "Ha!" he exclaimed, bestowing a white flashing grin on one and all. "She must be ancient if we're all dead. She must be a *crone*. I bet this is hundreds and hundreds of years in the future, I bet she looks like a wizened old monkey in a dress." He squinted out cheerfully at Harry, who felt his throat contract when Sirius' face lit up. "You know," he said, "that boy looks like James. I bet he's James' descendant. Hi, James' descendant!"

"Hi," Harry said, and his voice cracked.

"My God," said Narcissa, forgetting her manners. Her schooled expression broke and she looked vital and lovely. "Did one of us marry into the Potters? That's what happens when you consort with wishy-washy bleeding heart liberals, Auntie Wally says. Look at their clothes!"

"They're Muggle clothes," Sirius informed them with an air of modest pride. "My friend

Remus has some in his trunk. They're not wearing any bell-bottoms though," he said, looking dissatisfied. "I think bell-bottoms are wicked." He paused and then said: "Hey, I bet there was a war!"

"Sirius!" Regulus exclaimed, looking distressed.

"I bet there was," Sirius insisted. "I bet there was a war because the muggleborn rose up and cast off their chains-"

"They're not in chains," Narcissa said.

"Chains of oppression," Sirius went on, scowling. "And there was a glorious revolution and after that everyone was treated equally and everyone wore Muggle clothes and Remus could come round for tea. Vive la revolution! I hope they waited until I grew up, so I could be a soldier too."

"I wouldn't want you to be a soldier, Sirius," said Regulus. "You might get hurt."

"I don't think so," Sirius said, tossing his proud boy's head. "I'd be much too brave." He looped an arm around Regulus' thin shoulders and said: "You'll see when you get to Hogwarts, squirt. You'll be in Gryffindor with me and I'll teach you to be brave. Maybe James and I can get you on the Quidditch team," he added, in the tones of one promising a great treat. "James and I going to be on the Quidditch team this year," he confided to Harry, who he seemed to have taken a fancy to. "I expect we'll be magnificent."

"Don't be absurd," said Narcissa, reaching over and holding Regulus' hand. "Aunt Wally would have a fit. Regulus is going to be in Slytherin with me, and I shall take care of him. Someone has to be the good son, you know."

Sirius tilted back on his chair, hands careful in Bellatrix's hair, holding her balanced. "I don't see why," he mumbled.

Regulus looked from Narcissa to Sirius and looked unhappy.

"Hey," said Sirius, "You people are from the future - I mean, the future is now - so *do* James and I make it onto the Quidditch team?"

"Yeah," Harry answered.

"And we're good?" Sirius prompted.

"Yeah," Harry said, hearing his voice scrape at the sight of Sirius' face, just starting out, just *young*. "You were both - you were both really good."

He was going to embarrass himself in some way, he was going to have to leave the room, but before he could do either of those things Regulus said: "Are you all right?" and looked at Malfoy.

"Fine," Malfoy said in a thin voice.

Narcissa gave him an uninterested look and said: "Perhaps you should sit down."

"I - I can't-" Malfoy continued, still in that thin taut voice, and then he bolted. One moment he was at Harry's side, and then the next he was a streak of blond hair and long legs throwing himself at the exit. Harry hurtled after him.

"Wait!" Sirius called. "Don't go! Tell me about all the things I do when I'm grown up!"

Harry slammed the door.

Malfoy sat down on the tiny, rickety house-elf-sized steps and put his face in his hands. Harry thought for a terrible moment that Malfoy was crying again, and thought for another terrible moment that he didn't know if he could stop himself joining in.

"My mother never let my portrait be taken," Malfoy said hoarsely. He lifted his eyes, dry but desperate-looking, and went on: "She said - she said there was time enough when you were grown up. She never said anything about that picture, but she - she didn't like the idea of me waking up somewhere alone in the future, and being afraid-"

"I didn't think of him as loving them," Harry said. "I thought he was like me - that he didn't have anyone, ever. I thought maybe they were - they didn't like him, or something."

"He was theirs," Malfoy said. "They wouldn't have - how could they have not liked him?" He stopped, leaning with his elbows against his knees and his fair head hanging as if sitting up straight was too hard just then. Harry realised he was hunched up too. "If I tell you something," Malfoy said, "will you take it as hating Muggles or something? Because if you yell at me right now, I swear-"

"No," Harry promised. "I won't, I swear."

"The history books at school tell lies," Malfoy said. "That whole business of Wendelin the Weird, enchanting herself so the flames wouldn't hurt - it happened, all right, but it wasn't all that happened. It's like Defence Against the Dark Arts, everything all polished up to look *nice* - there were too many Muggles. There always have been. And they're not stupid. Of course they got hold of people's wands, and they snapped them, and they burned the witches and wizards. And we didn't laugh."

"What - I don't understand," Harry said. "What's that got to do with-?"

"That's why the wizarding world is hidden," Malfoy said. "That's why, and from then on we learned we had to band together. That's what - that's what family is supposed to be. And Mother and your Sirius and - they all just fell apart, and yet at some time, in *that* time, they were-"

"What?" Harry asked, softly.

"This isn't the way the House of Black were supposed to be," Malfoy said. "*Toujours pur* wasn't all about blood. They were supposed to be willing to go to the *stake* for each other!"

Harry thought of Sirius' brown child hands, careful, gentle, in the tumbled locks of Bellatrix's

black hair.

"Well," he said. "I don't - I don't mean to make you feel bad about this, Malfoy - your mum did go to the stake for you, didn't she? My mum went to the stake for me."

"How - I didn't know that," Malfoy said.

"Voldemort said she could live if she stepped aside," Harry said. "She didn't have to die. She chose to do it. For me."

Malfoy frowned. "I wonder why the - why Voldemort said she could live?"

"I don't know," Harry said, startled. "I never thought of that."

"Professor Slughorn was always yapping on about your mother being good at charms and things," Malfoy said. "So - I bet she was the type who researched. I bet she knew what would happen if she shielded you. She invoked your name, right?"

Not Harry, she'd said. Harry nodded.

"That was clever," Malfoy said. "She couldn't have known he'd offer to let her stand aside. She must have worked out a trap for him in a second. That's *Slytherin* thinking, that is."

Harry fought the impulse to ask Malfoy to kindly stop insulting his mother, since it was obvious Malfoy thought of it as a compliment.

"I didn't know Mud - the-" Malfoy floundered for a moment.

"The Muggleborn will do," Harry said, and lifted his heavy-feeling head enough to catch Malfoy's smile.

"I didn't know they saw things like that," Malfoy said. "Not - going to the stake." He stopped, and said: "Regulus went to the stake alone, too, and brought this back to his home."

He touched his locket, and Harry thought of Regulus in the portrait, the only Black face he had ever seen - including Malfoy's, including Sirius' - that was kind.

"Sirius was," he said, and cleared his throat. "Sirius was like that, too. He just - he chose a different family."

He remembered Sirius, saying to Peter Pettigrew, *Then you should have died. Died for us, as we would have died for you.* Lupin hadn't spoken the same way. Harry hadn't thought about it, then, as a language that Sirius had learned at home.

Malfoy turned and looked at Harry properly for a moment, cool eyes searching. "You really liked him, didn't you," he said. It wasn't a question at all: Malfoy got it.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I did, but." He stopped. "I didn't," he said, and every word was like pulling out a tooth, he didn't want to go on but he did: "I didn't - I didn't know him that well," he admitted at last. "But he was there and he asked me to live with him and - once Mrs

Weasley said that he acted like he'd got his best friend back, and I said, what's wrong with that, because I thought-

He'd thought, *well, I can do that*. He'd wanted to be like his father, and Sirius had loved James, and Harry had - wanted Sirius to love him.

"I wanted him for my family," Harry said at last. "But he died."

"I see," Malfoy said. "I mean, I understand. I think I understand."

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry about you - about you having to see your mum like that, and - unexpectedly," Harry said. "If you want, I mean, after you get used to it, you can have the picture for your room."

Malfoy took possession of this pause in order to breathe, deeply and deliberately, and then he leaned half an inch closer to Harry and sort of jostled him, but gently, so his sharp elbow rested on the inside of Harry's elbow for a minute.

"If you want to have a bedroom on the second floor too," he said, his voice sort of sharp. "We could put it in the hall."

"I'll do that," Harry said. "When we're - when we get used to it."

"I have to go back in anyway," Malfoy reflected, leaning away and speaking in a lighter voice. "I want my seasons square."

"I'll get it for you," Harry said, getting up.

"No!" Malfoy snapped, looking up at him as if he was crazy and then, as if he were afraid, at the attic, where the dead were talking behind the door. "Don't go in there," he said. "Not yet."

"D'you want to go back to the Burrow?" Harry asked, and was surprised to find that leaving Grimmauld Place, for once, would mean something besides a simple escape.

Malfoy got up, cracking his back. "Yes I do," he said. "It's time for dinner."

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"One more rather depressing point is how good-looking those Blacks were," Malfoy said as they went to get the Portkey flowerpot. He seemed to have got enough of a grip on this, and now of course he was determined to add his particular Malfoy spin on it. He looked disconsolately at the flowerpot at his feet. "It's very lowering. A different quirk of genetics and I could have been beautiful as the morning and ruled the school. Everyone would have given me everything I wanted."

"I would not have," Harry said very definitely.

"Ah," said Malfoy, "but you see you would have run away from school at the age of twelve

after a chance meeting with my cousin Nymphadora, who by a similar quirk or genetics would also have been beautiful as the morning - a very, very nice morning - to pursue her, do her bidding and be her devoted slave. And troubador," he added after a second's thought. "You would've had a guitar."

"See, we've been in a gloomy house half the day," Harry said, "so I know you haven't been out in the sun too long." He picked up the flowerpot, caught Malfoy's arm and went on as the whirl started. "Which leaves me wondering - *what the hell is going on?*"

The Burrow was ablaze. The little, leaning house that Harry had thought of as a refuge for five years, the Weasley's *home*, was burning. Harry looked at the flames licking through the little windows for a moment and then started towards the back door.

Malfoy grabbed his wrist. "Where are you going?"

"Into the house," Harry said curtly.

"The house," Malfoy repeated. "That house? The one that's on fire?"

"Someone might be inside it," Harry said.

"Yeah, like us," Malfoy said. "If we go inside and get burned to death by a banshee. Look at that fire, Potter! We need to get someone-"

"There isn't time," Harry snapped. "One of the Weasleys could be in there."

"They might not be! Everyone was out before, they might not have-"

"I won't take that chance," Harry said, and pulled his wrist sharply out of Malfoy's grip.

He heard Malfoy curse and then come after him. He was still grumbling, but the sound of his voice was lost as they got closer to the fire, joining all the other whispers to become a roar. Harry threw open the door and ran inside, up the stairs. The wallpaper was on fire, and he stamped on the carpet to put it out. If the stairs really caught, they would collapse: he needed his Firebolt.

That'd do as a good first place to look. Ron could be in their room.

He nodded in the direction of charge forward as he ran down the hall. He was inside the room before he realised Malfoy was not with him, that he'd peeled off on some mission of his own while the house burned. That was Malfoy for you. He'd be all right, though, he might've even decided just to leave. He hadn't been caught by smoke or fire like Ron could have been, or Hermione, or any of them.

The room was filled with smoke. Harry coughed against it, feeling he was using smoke for air as he shouted hoarsely: "Ron! Ron!"

The floor was clear. Ron wasn't there. Harry stopped, eyes smarting, to rummage around his chest and gather up Firebolt, Invisibility Cloak and the sword of Gryffindor. He chucked the Cloak out of the window and tucked the sword in his belt.

Next he went to the living room. Ron and Hermione weren't there, and nor were Hermione's books. Harry felt a leap of hope at seeing that. So they had got out, then.

The wall next to Harry's ear tumbled half down in a sudden leap of fire, and under the roar Harry heard a girl's voice screaming.

It came from high above. Harry ran up the stairs until suddenly there were no more stairs, just a charred absence, and he kicked off on his Firebolt through the flames. He smelled crackling as he rose and thought in a strange distant way that since Hermione could waterproof his glasses surely she could fireproof his broom, and then he landed hard on the roof and all thoughts melted away.

In the thick of the smoke, on the edge of the roof, stood a girl. Harry saw her red hair flying like a banner through the smoke. He dropped his broom and ran towards her.

"Ginny!" he said. "Thank God, I was worried sick-" His hand closed tight on her arm.

The girl turned and Harry saw her eyes flash red in her thin white face.

"I'm not Ginny," the banshee whispered, her voice still holding the edge of a scream.

"See," Harry said. "Actually, I knew that."

The Order had said that she could not be touched unless she chose, and that she had a penchant for seduction.

He held fast to her arm, and brought the sword down hard.

The banshee turned to smoke and a last scream when she died, and a few bones that looked like bird bones in the fire, which was still hot but suddenly, clearly dying. And from his position on the roof Harry saw red hair from beyond the garden. He ran across the roof, seizing up his Firebolt, and was among the Weasleys in an instant.

"It's all right," he said as Ron and Hermione ran to him. "The banshee's dead, I killed her, the house will be all right, but-" He suddenly realised what was missing in this sea of red.

"Where's Malfoy? Was he here?" Nobody answered and Harry tightened his grip on his singed broom. "I'm going back for him."

"There are Death Eaters in there as well as a banshee!" Mr Weasley said. "I've Owled for help, but-"

Charlie's voice cut across his mother's, and said: "Where's *Ginny*?"

Voices rose into a collective roar just as the roar of the fire was simmering into silence.

"Oh God," said Ron.

"She was right behind me," Hermione said. "I swear, she was right behind me, she just said she was going to get some books - I thought-"

"I'm going back for both of them," Harry said.

It was not a sound but the sudden complete silence of Mr Weasley, who was the first to see, which silenced them all and made them turn around to see what he saw. Emerging from the smoke and dying flames of the Burrow came Malfoy, and he was carrying Ginny in his arms.

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"I think I cut a terribly heroic figure," Malfoy said. "Pass the sandwiches."

"While I am grateful for being saved," Ginny said, "Really, I am - I think it's traditional to, you know, battle the enemy as well. And I did that." She tilted her chin and looked proud of herself. Harry couldn't blame her: taking down two Death Eaters when you were taken by surprise in your burning house wasn't bad at all. It was just bad luck the last Death Eater had managed to Stun her before he went down.

"I was heroic," Malfoy insisted. "I had to jump over an enormous sizzling pool of that Bat Bogeys stuff to get to you. I really think that's the most disgusting spell I've ever seen."

"Only because I've caught you with it, too," said Ginny, holding up her hand for Harry to slap. He reached over and did so, grinning.

"No, it's because it's disgusting," Malfoy said severely. "It's enormous piles of snot. D'you know what snot is? It's not attractive, is what it is. If you ever had a chance of stealing my impressionable heart and making off with the Malfoy millions to a tropical island, your plan is now doomed to failure, because forevermore the sight of you will remind me of a puddle of snot with little bats drowning in it. The young men will fight shy if they think you're going to turn their face into snot bats when they chuck you."

Not that Ginny had done it when he chuckled her, but the thought gave Harry a little pause. He sort of regretted the hand slap.

They were all sitting companionably in the remains of the Burrow garden. The Order and the Ministry had both arrived rather quickly, along with a mediwitch. Ginny's scorched cheek being the only casualty, she'd started dispensing sandwiches and now everyone was having an impromptu picnic. There were already sounds of repair coming from the Burrow.

"Scrimgeour will want you in the papers even more now you killed You-Know-Who's banshee," Ron commented.

"Tell him my people will Owl his people," said Harry, and they all laughed, even Malfoy, who was mostly occupied keeping his left arm clamped down against his knee and a weather eye on Mr Weasley. Mr Weasley had been giving him odd looks since he came out of the house, and Malfoy looked acutely aware of the fact that all his shirts had burned, and his Dark Mark was exposed.

Harry wondered if he should offer him his jumper, or if that would make people look for the Mark.

Malfoy was also avoiding Charlie's eyes.

"Malfoy," Ginny said in a hopeful voice. "Um. While you were in my room-"

"Stepping over seas of snot," Malfoy said in a pained, reminiscent tone.

"Yes, but there was a big sack of - of things in my hand, or near my hand. You didn't happen to notice it, did you?"

"Hmm," Malfoy said. "A big sack, you say? Sort of sacklike? I think I dropped it out the window."

Malfoy looked extremely startled when Ginny leaped forward and hugged him, then jumped to her feet and ran for the side of the house. She hadn't shown that much delight about being rescued from a fiery death.

She came back with the sack cradled in her arms.

"What's in it?" Hermione inquired, and Ginny hugged the sack closer to her.

"It's private," she said, and then glanced over at Harry, a swift look from under her lashes, and said: "I'll show you sometime, if you like."

"Er - okay," said Harry.

"Private," Malfoy said in a thoughtful tone. "And you'll show it to him, will you? All right, I'm going to hazard a guess: I heard there was a new line of that flavoured un-"

"Malfoy, don't make me smack you around on the day you saved my life," Ginny told him, while Harry felt himself go red and avoided everybody's eyes. For God's sake, Mr Weasley was right there, and Mrs Weasley could be right behind them.

"The repairmen say we'll have to spend at least a couple of days in a hotel," Mrs Weasley said from right behind them, and Harry was pleased to see Malfoy jump. "After that, though, it should really be as good as new."

She was holding her clock under one arm. Harry could see that Malfoy was massively gratified she had chosen to save this from the burning wreck of her house, and had decided not to mention that Mrs Weasley'd carried the clock around before Malfoy had fixed it up.

"Of course you shouldn't stay in a hotel," Harry said. "You'll all come to Grimmauld Place." He remembered a second after he spoke that he had a duty now, even though he couldn't figure out what it was besides the vague feeling that he was responsible for making Malfoy happy. "Um," he said, and tried out: "That's all right with you, isn't it?"

It had better be all right with him, because Harry was damned if he would ever let the Weasleys go to a hotel when they could stay with him, particularly since there was a good chance that the Burrow had been burned because of Harry and Malfoy and the stupid Horcrux. Still, it'd felt like a gesture worth making.

"What?" said Malfoy, looking around as if Harry was speaking to someone else. Then he said in a rush: "Oh. Yes! It's - it's all right with me?"

He gave Harry a doubtful look, as if he thought Harry was completely insane and the wrong answer might set him off, but one corner of his mouth was tucked up and he didn't look entirely displeased. Harry thought this was a good sign.

They all gathered together what stuff they could, Ginny clinging to her sack of mystery.

Harry looked back at the Burrow as they went, standing blackened but familiar and crooked against the sky. He wouldn't come back here until the war was over: he wouldn't risk the Weasleys again, and besides he didn't think Malfoy would want to.

It was almost November, and he'd brought Malfoy here in August. He was looking at the house, trying to arrange thoughts in his mind about what had happened since then and what he felt about all of it, but just then everyone yelled at him to come on, and he stopped lingering and turned his back on the Burrow.

Chapter Twenty

Redecorating the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black was very different from cleaning it.

It was a lot more fun.

The house did not seem like a war zone anymore, though it did seem unsettlingly like it wanted to get Malfoy alone and cuddle him to its walls a bit. The whole question of the house's strange desires, in any case, sort of faded in comparison to Kreacher's.

Harry came into the kitchen the first morning in Grimmauld Place to find Malfoy sitting at the kitchen table staring at a tatty, yellow heap of parchment which reached to his chin, and looking at a loss.

"What's this?" Harry asked.

"The list of all the things Kreacher's done wrong and needs to be punished for in the past, oh, fourteen years," Malfoy answered. He was looking faintly desperate.

"Kreacher has been saving it until he had a proper master again," Kreacher commented from under the table.

"Oh?" Harry said. He nobly only smirked once at Malfoy's expense and then made him some coffee. "Um. Dobby used to punish himself. Iron his hands and stuff."

"Dobby is a lower caste house elf and does all manner of ill-bred things," Kreacher sniffed. "It would be an indignity for Kreacher to receive punishment from anybody but the master," he went on insinuatingly.

"Right," Malfoy said, his tone quietly appalled. "Well, obviously. This is actually a lot of stuff, so what do you say as a special treat we let you off it, and start the punishment schedule from scratch?"

"Kreacher is a low unworthy worm undeserving of his master's kindness!"

"Oh, well," said Malfoy. "I'm gracious like that."

There was a cough from under the table. "What Kreacher meant to say was, Kreacher is a low unworthy worm so undeserving of his master's kindness that he cannot possibly accept it. Oh master, see item one on the list, this day Kreacher allowed the second drawing room mantelpiece to bear dust. Kreacher suggests the scourge."

"I really have a lot of things to do, Kreacher," Malfoy said. "And punishing a house elf really isn't, uh, how I envisioned spending my life."

"If the master would but give his noble command for Kreacher to starve himself, or go without sleep, or perhaps if Kreacher were to be put in the Chains of Shame-

"Look," Malfoy said, surrendering to desperation and pushing out his chair so he could kneel

on the floor beside Kreacher. "Just now I need you to help me get settled in, so let's leave the question of - punishment alone for now, and I'll, I'll get back to you."

Kreacher gave a heavy sigh. "Master is very young," he said in a forgiving tone. "He will learn the old ways. Kreacher will teach him. Everything will be lovely, yes lovely, and Kreacher will go shine the chandeliers as master wishes, and not spit on the head of the Mudblood as master has commanded, and-"

He went out of the room still muttering to himself. He probably was going to shine the chandeliers. Everything else about the house sparkled already, mildew and age wiped clean as if it was as easy as rubbing the mist off a glass and seeing everything clearly. Harry presumed it was house elf magic. It occurred to him that Sirius would have been gratified to know that his suspicions had been correct, and Kreacher was a fraud.

Malfoy accepted his coffee and drank it down. "The Chains of Shame," he said at length. "Should I ask?"

"I wouldn't," Harry said firmly.

Malfoy looked pensive. "I like chains, though."

"I really didn't need to hear that, Malfoy," said Harry.

Malfoy tipped his chair back so as to face Harry rather than the list of Kreacher's misdeeds, and looked amused. "I didn't mean that," he said. "I mean, they're - I used lots of chains as props for ghosts in the talent show."

Harry leaned back against the ancient old stove. "I don't understand."

Malfoy put down his coffee cup so he could gesture at will. "Oh, well, it was a play involving all the ghosts at Hogwarts, and we used all the flour in the kitchens, and the house elves went on strike and refused to wash our clothes for a week. It was about the Bloody Baron's great and tragic love for the Grey Lady, with comic interludes involving a coarse knight - that'd be Nearly Headless Nick, obviously-"

"I'm sure it was brilliant, Malfoy, but when did Slytherin have a talent show?"

"It wasn't just Slytherin," Malfoy said. "It was Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, as well. Near the end of fifth year."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Oh, it was Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff as well?"

Malfoy widened his eyes. "I sent all of Gryffindor invitations," he informed Harry earnestly. "In the spirit of house unity. Damn those unreliable owls, I expect they used the parchment to line their nests. I'm *certain* that's what they did with all the pressing invitations to join Dumbledore's Army Slytherins should've received."

"That wasn't - fine," Harry said. "Okay, fine. Tell me about the talent show."

Malfoy beamed. "It was one of my most successful cunning schemes of all time," he

informed Harry. "I was aided by my beautiful and brilliant stage manager at every turn, but mine was the presiding genius-"

"This'd be Pansy, then?"

"No, actually," Malfoy said, and looked deeply amused. "Cho Chang."

"But she was," Harry exclaimed, and finished lamely: "-part of the DA."

"Seemed a little annoyed with you," Malfoy observed with a beautiful calm. "Personally, I can't imagine why. I mean, given your notoriously sweet temper-"

"Oh shut up and tell me about the talent show," said Harry.

"Well," Malfoy said, "I admit that on the road to my glorious success there were a few hiccups. Araminta Eckhart tried to shrink herself so she could dance on the head of a pin, and it took us several hours to find her. It wouldn't have been so bad if Crabbe hadn't convinced himself he was going to step on her and got up on the piano. Pianos should be more sturdily made, Potter. I'm sure you've thought this yourself."

"Almost daily," said Harry.

Malfoy, shaping what was possibly a broken piano with his hands, flashed a careless smile and went on: "The worst thing that happened to us, however, was a bit of a misunderstanding - it could have happened to anyone - involving some teacups, some butter, Professor Flitwick and a dance that I now accept was too ambitious for an eleven year old-"

The narrative was cut off by the advent of Charlie, walking in looking sleepy in teacher's robes. Malfoy stopped talking and picked up his coffee.

"Morning," Charlie said, looking puzzled.

"Morning," Malfoy returned.

"What're you guys talking about?" Charlie asked, eyes travelling from Malfoy to Harry as if he would be able to find a clue somewhere if he looked closely enough.

"School stuff," Malfoy said with an air of studied disinterest.

"How, um, is the school going?" Harry asked suddenly, because this was a bit awkward. "Is Hufflepuff really going to win the Quidditch Cup?"

"Looks like," Charlie said glumly. "Pretty weak Chasers, though, maybe Ravenclaw can seize an opportunity-"

"The only thing a Ravenclaw can seize is a library card," Malfoy said woefully.

They talked Quidditch casually enough until it was time for Charlie to go to work, but Malfoy being casual about Quidditch was a far cry from vivid laughing Malfoy holding forth. Once Charlie was gone Harry raised an eyebrow and inquired: "What was that about?"

Malfoy frowned at his second cup of coffee. "It's just," he said. "Well, what you said about Charles. He could've told me." He paused, bit the side of his lip for a minute and then went on: "I thought we were friends. I told him - a lot of things."

Harry could think of one reason why Charlie wouldn't have told Malfoy, but he'd already suggested it and been laughed to scorn. Anyway, Harry thought it'd probably be best if Malfoy distanced himself from Charlie a bit. He was confused, Charlie was older, and it was Harry's job to look out for Malfoy now.

He took the chair beside Malfoy and said: "Tell me something."

Malfoy stole some toast off his plate and looked quite pleased to be asked. "All right," he said, smiling. "What do you want to know?"

"You know," Harry said. "A thing. Like one of the things you told Charlie. Anything."

"Ask me a question," Malfoy said. "And I'll tell you. Anything."

"Well," Harry said, and stopped, trying to think of the right sort of thing, and something that wouldn't upset Malfoy. "Well. Er. All right, so you keep getting me to sing things and you had the talent show and you hum things all the time. So - why don't you ever sing something? I mean, um, when you're dancing around with Ginny or something. It just - seems the sort of thing you might do."

He didn't think he'd ever said the word 'thing' so much in his life.

"Ah," Malfoy said. "Okay, I'll tell you. But you have to promise not to tell anyone."

"I promise," Harry said, amused.

Malfoy leaned forward and lowered his voice. "When I sing," he confided, "I sound like a parrot being kicked to death."

"A parrot," Harry repeated, half-laughing.

Malfoy leaned back and half-laughed himself. "Being kicked to death," he said. "Brutally," and made a sweeping gesture that almost brutally knocked over the salt, to prove it.

*

Malfoy and Ginny went shopping in the Muggle world again, this time without Charlie, and they came back with lots of new clothes and with Malfoy having made a rash promise.

"D'you like my hair?" Ginny asked once she'd twirled in her new dress.

"Oh," Harry said. "Um. Yes. It's shorter, which is - the point. And nice," he added hastily.

"So Malfoy says I can decorate the parlour," Ginny went on in high spirits.

"Oh," Harry said again. "That's nice, too."

Ginny was great in many ways, but Harry had actually seen her idea of Christmas and wedding decorations, so later Harry went and found Malfoy, who was sitting in the sofa he'd dragged up to the green curtains and reading a book. The green curtains were playing with his hair, which had gone static from all the velvet, so any evidence that he'd had a haircut, or indeed ever not borne a striking resemblance to a dandelion, was gone.

"D'you think that was a good idea?"

"Mmm?" Malfoy said. "Well, somebody has to do it. And I don't know what to do about curtains and wallpaper and things, not being an enormous girl. If you want to go pick out curtains with her, have at it. She'd love it."

"She did Fleur's wedding decorations. The stuff in the hall," Harry warned him.

"Oh my God, my beautiful house," Malfoy said, and petted the curtain in a distraught fashion. "What is she going to do to it? But I still don't know how to pick curtains. Though of course if I did pick any curtains, I would pick you, Ernestine," he added soothingly into the velvet.

Harry was momentarily diverted. "What did you just call that curtain?"

"Ernestine," Malfoy said with not a trace of shame. "And the other one is Maud."

Harry stared at the curtains. They remained, in spite of the unusual amount of movement, basically curtains and thus intrinsically nameless.

"Malfoy," he said. "Don't have any children, all right?"

"I happen to think Ernestine is a lovely name," Malfoy informed him haughtily. "And she likes it, too."

He returned to his book, which was in fact *Hogwarts: A History*. Harry didn't see why Malfoy felt the urge to read this now they'd left school, but a couple of days later Malfoy disappeared into his bedroom and soon after there was the sound of hammering and the smell of turpentine. Harry was researching with Ron and Hermione, and they listened for a puzzled five minutes.

"Maybe he's nailing Kreacher's ear to the wall or something," Ron said at last. "Kreacher'd like that. Be a little treat for him."

The hammering went on, though.

"Maybe he's crucifying Kreacher," Ron speculated further. "Best not to interfere."

Eventually Harry was curious enough to go knock on Malfoy's door. Malfoy answered, holding the door open a tiny chink so all Harry could see was one eye bright with manic glee and a paint smear on Malfoy's cheek.

"What's going on in there?"

"You'll see," Malfoy said. "Oh, you'll see. And it's going to be perfect, and marvellous, and you'll think I'm a genius, but right now, you have to go away. I'm very busy." He slammed the door.

Few things could distract Malfoy from his mystery bedroom project, but when Ginny asked everyone to come look at the new parlour he came too. She threw open the doors and beamed at them all.

"What do you think?"

"Oh, well, um," said Ron.

"It's really," said Harry. "Great."

"That's it," said Ron. "Exactly the word I wanted. Great."

Ginny beamed. "Are you pleased?"

"Pleased is too weak a word," Malfoy said faintly.

"I always wanted a room like this one," said Mrs Weasley, looking fondly around at the puce-coloured sofa and the mantelpiece crowded with china people, who were making a bit of a racket. She seemed to mean it.

Harry tried to catch Malfoy's eye, but Malfoy had his eyes fixed on the curtains. After a moment of staring at them, too, he could see why. They were salmon-pink and purple, and had enormous frills, and they moved in the wind, like the flickering inside of a Venus flytrap. At first sight they just looked like the most ridiculous curtains in the world, but then Harry recalled Maud and Ernestine, and they began to look sinister.

One of them fluttered in the wind and Harry and Malfoy took a step back.

"You'll have to deal with them if they're killer curtains," Harry said in a low voice. "Curtains are your thing."

"I don't think so," Malfoy hissed. "You're the big hero. You're meant to vanquish evil. If the curtains turn out to be maneaters - and they will, I know they will - then you have to vanquish them!"

Ginny saw where they were looking, and walked over to the curtains. "Don't you love them?"

Malfoy stared at her in horror, and when the frills continued billowing in the wind and did not eat her, he gave them a dark look. "I see their little game," he said. "Biding their time, are they?"

Harry coughed. "Okay, you might be over-reacting a little, Malfoy."

"Don't come crying to me when you're eaten by ravening curtains," Malfoy muttered.

They told Ginny the room was too good for everyday use, and they were going to keep it for special occasions.

The next day Harry and Ron got a door in the cellar unstuck, and found the garden. They went and got Ginny, and then Hermione and Malfoy were both dragged away from their respective reading and hammering so they could see too.

Outside it looked like some gardening spells had been left too long, and gone a bit wonky. The trees filled almost the entire garden, so that only patches of soil showed between their entangled roots, and their leaves were all mingled together in showers of yellow and orange, like girls with long hair and their heads bent close together. The tree trunks, winding towards the sun, formed a sort of labyrinth so Harry had to keep glancing around to make sure he could see everyone. Ron, Ginny and Hermione's hair stood out against the leaves, but he kept losing Malfoy.

"Where are you?" he called in exasperation for the fourth time.

"Here," Malfoy said, sounding like he was laughing, and he reached out and grabbed Harry's wrist from where he stood hidden in a shower of gold-coloured leaves.

They all came in laughing from the garden after hours of getting lost in the trees, and collapsed into chairs around the kitchen table. Once Malfoy had thrown himself into one chair, he raised his head fractionally and Harry recognised the gesture from latter days at the Burrow: Malfoy'd just remembered that he should go sit nearer to Harry.

It took a moment for Malfoy to realise that he was already sitting next to Harry, and when he did he looked a little surprised, then grinned ruefully and relaxed back in his chair.

*

Harry was in the hall on his way to the kitchen for an urgent sandwiches errand when he ran into Snape and decided he hadn't been that hungry after all.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't know there was a meeting on-"

"There isn't," Snape answered. "I have come to get Draco."

He sneered at Harry, not elaborating further, and Harry scowled at him. "What for?" he snapped.

"I don't believe it's any of your business, Potter," Snape said. "Particularly since Draco did not decide to inform you. Now, if you could be on your way and stop your endless snooping-"

"I'm not snooping, I'm just asking!"

"Out of pure concern, I'm certain," Snape said silkily. "Naturally. What kind of person would I be, to disbelieve in this sweet solicitude just because of one silly little murder attempt? Everyone has already informed you that you're the image of your father, haven't they? It amazes me, that there should be two creatures so exactly alike."

Harry set his teeth. "Where're you taking Malfoy?"

"Could it be that your apparently impenetrable denseness during lessons are due to a tragic hearing deficiency?" Snape said, and Harry noticed that Snape looked more on edge than usual. His voice had more of an edge than usual, as well, as he went on: "I'm not going to tell you, you loathsome spoiled brat, so stop putting on a lordly show of consideration for lower beings."

If Snape wanted a fight, Harry decided, he could have it.

"Dad checked up on you after he saved you from getting eaten by a werewolf, then?" Harry asked coldly. "Bet you hated that."

"Take yourself off, Potter. This night will be quite unpleasant enough without having to endure the sight of you," Snape said. "You know nothing about me, and certainly nothing about Draco, who showed his excellent character judgement from the first by despising you. In this world, nothing gives me more satisfaction than the fact that Regulus Black's nephew saw you for what you were. You two are made of entirely different material. It was inevitable that you hate each other, so do not bother pretending it can be otherwise."

"But it is," said a voice from behind Harry.

Harry glanced behind him and saw Malfoy coming down the stairs, looking too pale. He nodded at Harry all the same and came to stand beside him, close enough so Malfoy's elbow brushed the inside of Harry's.

"We don't hate each other anymore," said Malfoy. "Right?"

"Right," said Harry, after a moment of being extremely startled.

Snape looked like he had bit into a pear and found a lemon.

"Where are you going, Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"The Dark Lord," Malfoy answered in a distant, cool voice that Harry suspected meant he was absolutely terrified. He took a deep breath and said: "So I can be accepted back into his inner circle, and taken to the bosom of my loving father and Aunt Bella, and I can actually be useful as a spy. I'll see you later."

"When's later?" Harry demanded.

"Sometime?" Malfoy said. "I don't know, the Dark Lord didn't hand out a schedule?" His voice rose, and cracked while rising. "What do you want me to say? Possibly never, if he kills me? Sometime."

Harry looked from Snape's dour face to Malfoy's ashen one, and came to a decision.

"All right. You're not going."

Malfoy stared. "Oh yes I am."

"No, you're not," Harry said. "I didn't think this through. You're not going to do it, there are other ways to find out things. Snape's doing it. You don't have to."

"I'm sorry," Malfoy said, not sounding sorry at all. "Why do you think *you* get to decide? I don't take orders from you."

"*I'm* the one who's going to kill Voldemort," Harry told him between his teeth. "This is a war, and you're on my side. So I think you do."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Well, you can think again. I'm done with taking orders from people, and I'd *never* take orders from you. What do you think I am? One of your precious DA, tagging after you to do your bidding and then being dismissed whenever you don't have a use for them? The hell with that!"

"How dare you," Harry said.

"Oh, how dare I what?" Malfoy sneered. "Have a mind of my own? I realise you're used to slavish little toadies, Potter, but not everyone in the world is going to fall in line behind you. I'm doing this, I decided this, and you can't stop me."

"Watch me," said Harry.

"I'm going upstairs to change into my robes," Malfoy said, turning away and deliberately addressing Snape. "I'll be right down."

With another venomous look at Harry, he stormed up the stairs. Harry was left staring at Snape, who was smiling.

"Stepped right into that, didn't you, you arrogant little weasel," Snape murmured.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"He came down the stairs to defend you, and you sabotaged yourself all on your own," Snape went on, seeming horribly happy. "Just like your father. Couldn't bear anyone but his own special little gang of admirers-"

"Oh, *shut up!*" Harry shouted. "He's been dead for sixteen years. You've been hating someone who's dead for sixteen years! That's pathetic. You're pathetic! Get out of my way."

He shoved past Snape, who'd got between him and the stairs, and went up to the second floor to find Malfoy. He turned the handle on Malfoy's bedroom door and found it locked, and then he heard the sound of a window opening and a thump.

He ran for the back door and out into the garden, and under Malfoy's window he found Malfoy's broom.

Harry cursed, whirled around and ran back into the hall and straight into Ginny, who upset her glass of pumpkin juice on his shirt.

"Where's Malfoy?" he snarled.

"He just left," Ginny said, staring. "He and Snape Apparated somewhere. Where are they going, d'you know?"

Harry cursed again, more comprehensively. "To see bloody Voldemort," he answered tightly, after some time, and then cursed Malfoy for the sly, underhand, stupid bastard that he was.

"Oh," said Ginny, and her freckles stood out suddenly from her pale face. "Will - will he be all right?"

"How should I know?" Harry snapped. "If he isn't it's all his own fault. I tried to stop him. If Voldemort does kill him then he bloody deserves it!"

He wheeled away from Ginny, who looked white and scared and was making him feel sick. Malfoy'd looked scared, too. Even Snape had been scared, he thought. He didn't know where to go, or what to do. Malfoy'd better get back alive, because Harry was going to strangle him.

He walked into an umbrella stand and then threw it against the wall. A portrait fell off the wall and Harry heard a round of cursing come from inside the frame. Bloody Malfoy had hung up that picture, too, strewing his godforsaken ancestors around the house. Harry felt tempted to smash it.

He should have thought about this at the Order of the Phoenix meeting when Malfoy had made his idiotic suicidal suggestion, but he'd just been thinking - well, that it was something they should do against Voldemort, and that Malfoy was making sense, and it was so *stupid*, it hadn't really sunk in that Malfoy was planning to go do this dangerous, dangerous thing, and Harry couldn't possibly be there.

Malfoy'd been a spiteful little git to call Harry's friends what he had. He *was* a spiteful little git, and he deserved whatever happened to him. Only - well, it was true that Harry'd been the leader of the DA, and Ron and Hermione had always been with him when he'd done things, or he'd done them on his own. Ron and Hermione hadn't gone into danger without them. He'd never have let them.

He remembered suddenly being twelve years old, and separated from Ron by a rockfall. Harry'd had to go on and face the basilisk.

He'd never considered before how it must have felt to be Ron on the other side of the rocks, but he thought now he knew. It felt terrible.

He was *not* used to staying behind when other people went into danger. God, and Malfoy had been so scared of Voldemort last year that he'd cried, and now he'd just walked off to let Voldemort get a clear shot at him, what was the matter with Malfoy, was he the stupidest person on earth?

Harry went up to the second floor and didn't want to go into his room: it was just some room, Malfoy had said a bedroom on the second floor and Harry'd picked that one at random and he didn't want to look at it. He caught sight of himself in a mirror on the landing, green eyes

shocking in a white face, and he wrenched it off the wallpaper and threw it against the next wall. It smashed loudly.

He stormed up the rest of the stairs to the attic, not thinking about why he was doing it, and once he was in that dim crowded attic he looked around helplessly. He couldn't do anything here. He couldn't do anything at all, and that was the worst part.

He swore and whirled to face the Black family portrait, where three of the four Black children were awake and staring at him. Narcissa looked disapproving, Sirius looked interested, but it was Regulus who spoke.

"Where's the other boy?" he asked.

"Be quiet!" Harry said. "You're dead. You're all just dead, and - and stupid, and you don't even know what happened to you, you don't even know what you were and so you can just be quiet! That's what dead people are, isn't it? They're just quiet, forever. So be quiet!"

Sirius and Narcissa narrowed their eyes at him, looking at him with identical Black hauteur. Regulus went pale and looked scared, and Harry turned the picture around, so all he could see was the blank expanse of the back of the canvas, and all he could hear was silence.

Regulus' nephew, Snape had called Malfoy. That was stupid, too, Harry thought, banishing the thought of Regulus' pale child's face. It wasn't as if Malfoy even looked that much like Regulus: he looked far more like his father.

His father was going to be there, too, with his mother's blood on his hands. Malfoy was going to have to face him, all alone. Oh damn. Oh hell.

Harry stood braced and trembling when a noise came on the stairs, and Ron and Hermione emerged into the attic.

"Hi Harry," Ron said. "We heard you kind of thumping around the place, and we heard you bit Ginny's head off, so we-"

"We came to be with you," Hermione said, and sat on a pile of folded tablecloths, hugging her knees.

Harry looked at them both, safe and concerned-looking, and felt a little better and a little sick.

"It's all right," Hermione went on. "We understand. You've taken Malfoy under your wing since the - since his mother. That's really - it was a really good thing to do, Harry. And with that and - your saving people thing - we understand that you're upset."

Harry felt a bit deflated. "It's not just," he said. "Mrs Malfoy gave him to me."

"Well," Ron said. "I'm sure she didn't exactly - well, he's not a cat or something. She couldn't exactly-"

"She did," said Harry. "And now she can't come back and take him away."

There was a long pause, as if neither Ron or Hermione quite knew what to say.

"I understand you feel responsible for him," Hermione said at last, in a gentle voice. "He'll be all right. The Order wouldn't have let him go if they thought he didn't have a good chance."

"I don't know," said Harry.

"He'll be all right," Ron said, as if he was sure.

Harry gave up and sat suddenly on the pile of tablecloths beside Hermione, and Ron sat on his other side, shoving his shoulder against Harry's in a supportive kind of way. They all sat together for a while.

"I sort of like him," Harry said at length. "Not just now. But when he isn't in the process of making me bloody furious."

"Every first Tuesday in the month and not otherwise, then," Ron said, and Harry didn't laugh but he felt the furious squeezing ball in the centre of his chest ease a little.

They didn't say much else, but they stayed up with him past midnight, and it wasn't until Hermione yawned and almost fell off the tablecloths that Harry told them both to go to bed.

"You'll be all right, mate?" Ron asked.

Harry looked at the back of the Black family portrait and said: "I'll be fine."

When they were gone he picked up the little pile of stuff Malfoy had wanted for his bedroom and threw it inside the door without looking. He'd like it, once he got back.

Then he went into the room on the first floor, and sat at the window. It was freezing beside the window, the glass wet and cold with the November chill, and there was nothing alive out there on the grey streets of Grimmauld Place.

Maud or Ernestine quietly folded itself closed over him, a frail green shield over the world, and Harry shut his eyes and leaned his head forward and thought *Please. Let him be all right.*

*

The sky bled miserably into grey as the hours went on. Malfoy'd been gone for nine hours when Harry saw the two dark, hooded figures coming down the road. One of them was leaning heavily against the other. They were crawling along.

Harry got up too fast, felt the blood rush to his head and stumbled because he was cold and stiff, but he didn't let it stop him, and he got down the stairs just as the door to Grimmauld Place opened and he saw Snape only just manage to save Malfoy from falling forward.

He didn't remember crossing the hall, but he was suddenly propping Malfoy up, a hand against his chest to keep him upright and his other hand at the back of Malfoy's neck, trying to steady his lolling head and get a look at him. Malfoy's skin felt cold and he was a terrible, stony white colour.

"Malfoy," Harry said, urgently. "Look at me. Malfoy, are you all right?"

Malfoy made an obvious, painful effort and focused on him, his fogged eyes narrowing. "No," he said in a low, exhausted voice. "Obviously I'm not all right. Try to have some sense, Potter."

If Harry'd been able to let go of Malfoy he would have grabbed Snape and shaken him like a rat.

"What's happened to him?" he demanded.

"Oh, now Potter," Snape said in a tone that was clearly as nasty as he could manage while nine-tenths of his attention was focused on Malfoy. "Bellatrix Lestrange has informed me you're quite familiar with the Cruciatus curse."

"The Cruci - what the hell were you thinking, to let that happen to him?" Harry shouted.

Snape's lips curled. "Let it happen to him? Why, Potter, what are you talking about? I did it to him myself."

I am going to kill him, Harry thought quite clearly. I don't care in the least about tearing my soul. I am going to kill him. He let Snape see the thought in his eyes, and then Malfoy muttered "He had to," and almost fell forward again. Harry put some more force behind propping him up: Malfoy's breath was hitching with pain against his cheek.

"Of course I had to," Snape said sharply. "You would perhaps have liked the Dark Lord to delegate it to someone else? Bellatrix, for instance? Do you know what happened to the Longbottoms, you stupid boy? It had to be convincing, but this way he'll recover in a few days. Trust me." Snape's lips curled again. "I knew exactly what I was doing."

"I bet you did," Harry said contemptuously. "Let go of him: I have him. You've done enough."

"Don't start pulling me around, this isn't a tug of war," Malfoy said in a thin voice. His eyes were rolling to the back of his head even as he spoke. "Leave it, both of you!"

"Malfoy?" said a small voice from the stairs.

They looked around and saw Ginny, looking a little horrified that Professor Snape had just seen her in her nightie, and more than a little concerned. "I heard a noise," she said. "I - what happened?"

"The Cruciatus, Miss Weasley," Snape said dryly. "Ask your little boyfriend about it some time."

"Malfoy, are you all right?" Ginny asked.

Malfoy turned his face in the direction of her voice, and said: "Yes," in an unconvinced way.

"Can I," said Ginny, looking as if she wanted to turn and run. "Can I do anything?"

"Help me upstairs," Malfoy requested.

"It's all right, I've got him," Harry said.

"I want *Ginny* to help me," Malfoy insisted, and Ginny looked pleased to be chosen. She tripped over to Malfoy, who shook off Snape and Harry with feeble vehemence, and then almost collapsed against Ginny. "And you two can try being civil to each other for a change," he added over his shoulder.

Ginny was sturdy, but she was pretty small. Malfoy was a lot taller than her and Harry could see her struggling with his weight already: she was going to drop him, but Malfoy looked determined and if Harry tried to intervene he'd try to stand on his own, and then he *would* fall down.

"Thanks," Malfoy said, still in the small voice that sounded compressed by pain.

"It's all right," Ginny answered, squaring her shoulders under his arm. "Lean on me some more: I've got you."

They began to make their slow way up the stairs. Malfoy got a death grip on the banister and after a few wobbling moments of uncertainty it looked as if they might make it after all.

Harry looked back at Snape, and realised that Snape too had been poised for a spring to help. When he saw Harry looking, he leaned back against the door and bared his yellow teeth.

"A report for the Order," he said in a flat voice, like a machine. "Mr Malfoy was accepted back into the Death Eaters, and punished as the Dark Lord thought fit for his insubordination. The Order will be pleased to know that both his father and his aunt requested a private audience with him, but at the time he was in such a condition that I felt justified in taking him away. The groundwork is done. Mr Malfoy will be called for Death Eater meetings and given assignments. Tell them I hope they're all satisfied with that, and if they're not then they can rot."

"Fine," Harry answered, just as flatly, and then paused. "Do you want to be Owled about how he is?" he asked stiffly.

Snape paused in his turn. "I'd appreciate that," he said in a wooden voice.

"Fine," Harry said again, and then Snape wheeled around, walking as if he had been made into a clockwork soldier, and Harry slammed the door after him and then took the steps two at a time.

He found Ginny outside Malfoy's bedroom.

"Harry, thank God," she said. "I really don't think he's okay. I think we should wake Mum. I think he needs to go to St Mungo's."

"With a Dark Mark on him and the evidence of an Unforgivable?" Harry asked. "Sure, if we

want him to go to Azkaban afterwards. What did Malfoy say?"

"He said he was fine and I was to go to bed," Ginny told him shakily.

"Okay," Harry said, and thought. "Yeah. Go to bed," he said. "I'll take care of it."

Ginny hesitated, then nodded and fled. Harry hesitated himself, and then opened the door and looked inside Malfoy's room. The heap he'd left on the floor was untouched, the bed was swathed and hung in canvas covers, and on top of the canvas-laden bed was Malfoy, fully clothed and twisted in on himself.

He opened his eyes a slit and croaked, "Go away."

Harry stood, and put his hands in his pockets. "Er," he said. "Um. No."

Malfoy was silent for so long that Harry thought he might have fainted, but then he said: "All right. Then bring me a basin."

"*Accio* basin," Harry said, and one hit him in the elbow. He went over and put it by the side of the bed.

"Thank you," Malfoy said with difficulty, and then leaned over and was quietly, tidily sick into it.

Harry hovered by the bed, feeling uncertain. Malfoy was obviously in miserable pain, but Harry didn't know anything about healing charms, and if there ones which would help he presumed Snape would've already cast them. He thought he should possibly say something like 'I'm glad you're not dead' or 'You're not going back there' but Malfoy didn't look really in the mood for conversation.

"Saw my dad," Malfoy said hoarsely. "It's been a year. More than."

"Oh," said Harry. "Um. How did he look?"

He cursed himself comprehensively for making it sound like Malfoy and his father had been mingling at a cocktail party.

Malfoy said: "Smaller," and then got sick again.

Harry went around to the other side of the bed and scrambled on top of the canvas covers, so he could crawl over the bed to Malfoy and make a clumsy effort at holding his head while he vomited.

"Stop it," Malfoy said crossly. "Ow - ow-"

He moaned, grimaced and then screwed up his eyes and turned his face into the curve of Harry's arm, which was some protection from the moonlight coming through the window. His whole body was seized with a fine trembling.

Harry felt utterly and horribly helpless, until he remembered something that he'd seen once,

when he was very young, watching through a door as Aunt Petunia nursed a sick Dudley. He was going to feel completely stupid, but he was desperate enough to try it.

He stroked Malfoy's thin, trembling back with his free hand, leaned over him and murmured: "Shh. Shh. Everything's going to be all right: I'm here."

In a quiet sort of miracle, Malfoy's trembling eased, and Harry kept tentatively stroking his back until another miracle happened, and Malfoy finally slipped into sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

Harry woke with a crick in his neck from sleeping sitting up against an overly ornate headboard. He thought that the carved wooden eagles had left imprints on his back.

He also woke with a distinct desire to stretch and get out of this really uncomfortable position, which intention lasted until he looked down at Malfoy's ruffled blond head laid against Harry's white shirt, and remembered why he was in this really uncomfortable position in the first place.

Harry really doubted that Malfoy was awake, but decided he should check anyway.

"Malfoy," he said in a low voice. "Malfoy, how are you feeling?"

"Finble," Malfoy grumbled, screwing his eyes up tight and turning his face into Harry's ribs.

Not awake, then. Harry was an investigative genius.

Harry felt extremely disinclined to wake him. Last night had been - sort of spectacularly horrible. Malfoy had kept moving in his sleep, and waking with a moan of pain.

He was sleeping quietly now, breathing even and warm against Harry's ribs. He'd actually drooled a little on Harry's shirt.

Only a thought was trying to kick down the door of Harry's reluctant, still-sleepy brain, and it went like this: Ginny was undoubtedly going to tell everyone about Malfoy's current state of health, and Mrs Weasley and Charlie at least were undoubtedly going to check on him. And Malfoy would find sleeping curled up against Harry an ignominious position and then he would have fourteen fits.

"Malfoy," Harry said, still quietly. "Um. Malfoy?"

"Griffle," Malfoy complained, screwing up his whole sleep-pink face.

"D'you want some coffee?" Harry tried.

"Yes," Malfoy said sleepily, opening his eyes up a slit. Then he sat up and pushed Harry summarily away, and almost off the bed. "Get off," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

Harry cracked his neck and was thankful about it. Malfoy sat on the bed squinting sadly around at the world, looking still-floppy from sleep and more or less like a martyred bunny rabbit. Harry decided not to share this revelation.

Eventually, Malfoy had rubbed his eyes enough to torture them into opening all the way, and he said: "God, I feel like *sh-*"

"Draco, dear?" said Mrs Weasley, opening the door.

"A little peaky," Malfoy corrected himself. "I feel a little peaky."

“I brought you breakfast,” Mrs Weasley said, beaming at him maternally. “With your favourite marmala - oh, good morning, Harry. I didn’t know you were here.”

“Morning,” said Harry, still cracking his neck and trying to work out if the carved eagles had permanently damaged his spine.

Mrs Weasley carried the tray in and put it on Malfoy’s bedside table.

“Draco, why is your bed all covered with canvas?” she inquired, trying to smooth down the covers.

“Don’t touch it!” Malfoy squawked. “It’s a special secret project. I’ll show you when it’s done.”

He let Mrs Weasley tug the canvas over him obediently enough, possibly because of the lure of the heaped tray she placed on his knees. She kept up a running monologue on how she planned to give Severus Snape a piece of her mind, and how Malfoy was very creative but he wasn’t to ruin the antique furniture, and ended up checking Malfoy’s forehead for fever.

Malfoy turned his face away from her hand a little, and looked sadly into his cup.

“Tea,” he said hollowly.

“All that caffeine isn’t good for you, dear,” Mrs Weasley said. “There’s lovely pumpkin juice too.”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows at her, and then after a moment’s pause said in a subdued voice: “Thank you.”

“You’re to stay in bed today,” Mrs Weasley said, as if Malfoy was about six. “Call me if you need anything.”

She bustled out. Malfoy started on his eggs.

“Didn’t you say something about coffee?” he asked Harry. “I distinctly remember something about coffee. Don’t try to weasel out of it.”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry said, and stole a piece of toast off the tray. “How’re you feeling?” he asked, frowning. “Aside from like sh - a little peaky.”

“M all right,” Malfoy said. “Seven sugars, please.”

“It’s usually four.”

“I could be on my *death bed*,” Malfoy pointed out. “I need seven. And stop stealing from my personal breakfast tray. All right, no, have the pumpkin juice, I think that stuff’s revolting.”

Harry took the glass and drained it, and took another piece of toast and the marmalade.

“Can I use your knife?”

“You can’t use my marmalade,” Malfoy said.

Harry took the knife. “Thanks.”

He ate his toast while Malfoy squiggled his eggs around his plate, looking queasy but territorial about his tray. He was thinking about the way Mrs Weasley had reached out, in an easy motherly way, to feel Malfoy’s forehead, and Malfoy had turned away. She wasn’t Malfoy’s mother: Malfoy didn’t have a mother anymore. He just had Harry.

Harry put down the knife and reached forward to press a hand against Malfoy’s forehead. Malfoy looked at him with shocked-wide eyes, but did not turn away. Malfoy’s skin was warm, but people typically were warm. Malfoy’s hair was kind of tickling Harry’s hand, and Malfoy was distracting him by making a face.

“I don’t, um,” Harry said. “How warm are people supposed to be? How d’you know if they have fever?”

Malfoy picked up the marmaladey knife and waved him away.

“Get going,” he said. “Before I die of old age or lack of caffeine.”

Harry stole the last piece of toast on his way out.

*

“I said I was all right!” Malfoy snapped.

“You also said you might be on your death bed,” Harry pointed out.

He’d got Malfoy a cup of coffee and himself a new shirt, and now he’d come back to find Malfoy waffling on about being perfectly able to get up. Harry’d had enough. It wasn’t like he’d slept particularly well last night.

“Give me one good reason why I can’t get up,” Malfoy said.

Harry said: “Because I say so.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed and he grabbed hold of the bedpost and hauled himself immediately out of bed and to his feet. Which lasted all of three seconds before he let go of the bedpost, gave a sharp cry and Harry saw his knees go out from under him.

Harry moved fast: he was on the other side of the bed with his hands under Malfoy’s elbows before Malfoy could fall. Malfoy tried to shake him off and then grimaced.

“Everything hurts, I *hate* this,” Malfoy said, in a furious whisper between clenched teeth.

“I know,” Harry said, at which point Malfoy’s bedroom door opened again and Charlie came in.

"I'm absolutely fine," Malfoy declared loudly, grabbing the bedpost and then shaking Harry off with decision.

Harry let him do it and leaned back against the wall, within easy distance if Malfoy decided to do something stupid like walk on his own. Charlie stood at the door, looking larger than he usually did, and unhappy.

"I didn't come to ask if you were fine," Charlie said quietly. "I came to ask you what the hell you thought you were doing."

He paused, took a deep breath and made a helpless gesture.

"I just," he began. "I come home from work and Ginny's talking about spies and You-Know-Who and then, God help us, this morning the *Cruciatius* curse, and I had no idea about any of this. What have you got yourself into, Draco?"

"It's my own business," Malfoy said.

Charlie pinched the skin between his eyebrows as if he was getting a bad migraine. "Harry," he said. "Could you give us a minute, please?"

Harry looked interrogatively at Malfoy.

"I need him," Malfoy said. "He brings me coffee. I may require more at any moment."

"Seems I couldn't," Harry said.

Charlie looked like he might explode from frustration or anxiety. "I - look, Draco, I don't know what the hell is going on. Why didn't you *tell* me? I thought we were friends!"

"We are," Malfoy said. "But friends don't tell each other everything." His voice sharpened. "Do they, Charles?"

Charlie ran a hand through his curly red hair and looked harassed. "Draco," he said. "I don't really understand what you're saying. I don't understand what you're doing, either, which is slightly more important since the *Cruciatius* curse is apparently involved-

"It's not your concern," Malfoy informed him.

"It *is* my concern," Charlie exclaimed, obviously losing his tenuous grip on patience.

"Because I'm *concerned* about you. I don't want anything to happen to you, so you can't do things like this-

"I have to!" Malfoy hurled at him. "I'm going to. Nobody's going to stop me!"

"You can't do things like this without telling me," Charlie said.

That seemed to defuse Malfoy, or else he had already shot his bolt of defiance. Harry saw his shoulders sag and pushed off the wall easily, waiting in case Malfoy needed someone to catch him.

“Just leave me alone,” Malfoy said in a worn voice. “I can’t argue now. I hurt all over. We are friends and I will - I’ll explain everything. Just not when I’m like this.”

Charlie hesitated, and then said: “All right.” He looked at Malfoy properly for the first time since he’d come in, and his face changed. He reached out and then checked himself: he walked forward until he was standing on the other side of the bed and looked closely into Malfoy’s face. “God, Draco,” he said. “You didn’t have to do something like this. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“It’s taken care of,” Harry said.

Malfoy abruptly gave up on the effort of standing, and crawled onto the bed.

“I don’t need anything,” he said. “Thank you. I just want to sleep. And I’d like to be alone.”

*

There were two things that had always been immediately obvious about Malfoy which were no longer true. One was that he constantly had a smug, sleek look about him.

Harry had presumed this was because Malfoy was prissy and besides that his self-satisfaction formed a kind of force field around his hair and clothes. Now it occurred to him that Narcissa Malfoy, miles away in Wiltshire, must have constantly sent fresh supplies of clothes and ordered haircuts and tucked combs into suitcase linings, must have been thinking of her son every day from a distance, with the same care that had made up Malfoy’s parcels of sweets every week.

Now it was clear Malfoy had a fairly normal boy idea of self-maintenance, and a habit of chewing on his jumper sleeves. He cut and brushed his hair and everything, but he no longer had the sleek, pampered look of a meticulously cared-for pet.

There was nothing to be done about it. Harry tried, but when he threw Malfoy a hairbrush Malfoy stared at him incredulously, said he’d never been so insulted in his life, and hurled the brush with extreme force back in Harry’s face.

Far more important and upsetting was the other thing that had always been true about Malfoy, and which no longer was.

Malfoy used to swagger about the place with easy grace. It hadn’t been a side-effect of the Quidditch because Harry was better at Quidditch, and he had all the grace of a wild boar. It was just something else Harry had taken as a product of the force field of self-satisfaction, a lordly sort of air which made every movement smooth as he swaggered or lounged round Hogwarts. Harry’d used to wish Malfoy would just stop.

Now he moved with painful care, as if he was old. Harry wished his wishes would stop coming true.

It was a bit of a comfort that Malfoy was milking it for all it was worth. That at least was familiar, and reminded Harry of Malfoy’s Buckbeak-related theatrics and not the patient

grey-faced endurance of last year. If Malfoy was making a fuss, it couldn't be so bad.

"I'm not *comfortable*," Malfoy complained sadly, lying on a picnic rug out in the garden while the others were getting on with some work.

The garden with its crazily tangled growing spells needed quite a lot of manual labour, and despite the fact it was late November after about ten minutes of trying to shovel up roots, Harry and Ron both had their shirts off. Malfoy was lying at his ease with Hermione beside him. They were doing what they did best: Hermione was reading, and Malfoy was going on and on.

"I don't care," Hermione said, making a careful note as she balanced parchment on her knee. "You're not putting your head in my lap. I don't like you enough." She paused thoughtfully, and then said: "Actually, I don't really like you at all."

Ginny, emerging from under the trees where she was collecting ingredients for some Potions Malfoy was teaching her to make, came and sat down, shooting Malfoy a covert anxious look. Since Malfoy had asked her to help him up the stairs, Ginny had apparently decided that a trust had been placed in her and she was going to be responsible.

She was the youngest of them all, of course. Harry recalled how she always tried to cosset Pigwidgeon and Arnold the Pygmy Puff.

"You can put your head in my lap," she said, and Malfoy did.

"I like you, Girl Weasley," he confided. "If romance doesn't work out for us, do you want to come with me to a villa in Tuscany and give me a heir while you spend my millions?"

"Don't know," Ginny said. She petted Malfoy's hair a bit awkwardly, her small calloused tomboy's hands moving uncertainly. "How many millions are we talking about?"

"Lots," Malfoy promised, shutting his eyes.

"How many heirs?" asked Ginny.

Malfoy opened his eyes a slit, and smirked at her upside down. "Tell you what," he said. "Just one to start with, and then depending on whether you think it would be fun-"

"Hermione," Ron said over his shoulder. "Hit Malfoy, would you?"

"You can't, I'm very sick, I might die," Malfoy said hurriedly, though he did not open his eyes or move an inch.

"I'll write a memorandum to hit Malfoy later," Hermione said, and kept writing. Ginny kept petting Malfoy. Harry and Ron kept digging.

The intention had been to loosen the earth around the tree roots, and think about seeds and flowerbeds and so forth later. The only flaw in this plan was that the earth seemed to be composed entirely of tree roots.

“Looks like you two could use some help,” Charlie said when he came home.

Harry had no idea how he’d picked that up from Ron hitting the tree roots with his shovel and muttering: “Just stop being roots!” as if his shovel was a wand and he was in Transfiguration class.

There was a note of constraint in Charlie’s voice when he addressed Malfoy. Harry was pretty sure that Malfoy and Charlie hadn’t had their promised talk yet, since Malfoy was persistently avoiding Charlie, but Charlie was obviously making an effort to be casual.

“Why aren’t you helping, Draco?”

“Can’t move,” Malfoy claimed with his eyes shut. “Very unwell. So sad, when menial labour is my passion.”

“If I hit you,” Ron said. “Do you promise you’ll die?”

“Don’t hit him, Ron,” Harry warned. “Think about how long it would take us to dig a grave.”

Malfoy laughed.

“Chuck me a shovel, Ron,” said Charlie, and pulled off his jumper.

Malfoy opened his eyes. Hermione looked up from her book. They both looked at Charlie’s extremely broad shoulders and then they glanced at each other, Malfoy raised an eyebrow, and they shared a small smile.

Charlie didn’t notice. Ginny hit Malfoy in the side of his head.

“Ow,” Malfoy said comfortably, throwing a hand over his eyes either to express his enormous tragic pain or to shield his eyes from the sun.

The long sleeve of his jumper was already all frayed, and slipped down his arm. Harry saw the edge of the Dark Mark appear.

So did Ginny. She pushed Malfoy’s sleeve up as far as it would go, until it almost covered his fingers, and Malfoy blinked up into her face.

“I *do* like you, Girl Weasley,” he said again, reaching up with his sleeve-covered fingers and briefly clasping the back of her neck.

When Harry caught Ginny’s eye he grinned at her. Ginny ducked her head, blushed and grinned back.

*

If Malfoy wasn’t locked up in his bedroom with his mystery project, he was either in the kitchen wheedling Mrs Weasley into making his favourite things, in Ginny’s room teaching her Potions, or in the drawing room being entirely too friendly with the curtains.

The next day Mrs Weasley was occupied writing an Owl to Fleur, and Maud and Ernestine were hanging around looking lonely. Harry made his way up to Ginny's room, but just before he opened the door he heard a round of girlish laughter, and he stepped hastily back. He hadn't known Ginny had friends over: he could deal without a pack of girls giggling at him.

He was halfway down the corridor when the door opened. He looked around apprehensively, but it was Ginny.

There was a window behind her, turning her hair into a mass of gold. Her dark eyes were wide and she looked rather startled to see Harry. Then her bow mouth quivered on the edge of what looked like laughter, and she smirked over at him.

"Excuse me," she said. "I need to go see something."

She swept by him down the stairs. He noticed she was wearing jeans.

Before she went into the drawing room, she looked back over her shoulder at him, her eyebrows raised. Her mouth trembled again as if she wanted rather badly to laugh at him, but she winked instead, and then disappeared behind the door.

Harry followed her.

He found her with her elbows propped up on the mantelpiece, making faces in the mirror. She made another face when she saw him.

"Oh. You again," she drawled, sounding distinctly unimpressed. Then she touched her nose with the tip of her tongue and went off into a fit of laughter.

"Um," Harry said, half smiling at her and lingering in the doorway. "Ginny? What are you doing?"

She looked both disconcerted and amused, and shrugged. Her grey jumper was sliding off one of her small shoulders. Something about it struck Harry as familiar.

"Ginny," he said cautiously. "Are you, uh. Why are you wearing Malfoy's clothes?"

"Ah," said Ginny, turning around and looking guilty as a child caught in a misdeed.

Then she seemed to decide this was funny too, and leaned back against the mantelpiece, propping herself up with her elbows and stretching easily. Harry noticed that she wasn't wearing a bra.

Ginny seemed to come to a decision. "The thing is," she said brightly. "I'm leaving you. Harry," she added, grinning as if his name was a bit of a joke as well.

"Um, well, we're not really together, Ginny," Harry reminded her.

Ginny looked at him with extreme disapproval. "That's very unchivalrous of you to mention, and not at all in keeping with the noble traditions of house Gryffindor," she remarked. "The point is. The point *is* - what was I saying?"

“Malfoy’s clothes,” Harry said.

“Oh yes,” Ginny drawled. “Well, Draco was in my room just now, and did things that no man has done to me before. And now I’m wearing his clothes. So I’m sure you can put two and two together. Don’t be sad, Harry,” she added. “Nobody can fight fate. The better man won. And what a man he is!”

The fact Ginny seemed to be on the point of collapsing with laughter made sure that Harry didn’t exactly take her seriously, but one thing did puzzle him.

“Draco?” he repeated sceptically.

“That is his given name,” Ginny informed him peevishly. “And I happen to think it’s lovely. Distinguished.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Um. I heard - there were at least two girls behind your door. I thought you had a friend over.”

“You were listening outside - my door,” Ginny said slowly. “Okay. That’s nice and creepy. Try not to be such a stalker.” She waved a dismissive hand and continued: “Besides, so what if there were two girls in there? Draco could totally handle two girls.” She paused and tilted her head thoughtfully. “Or three,” she said. “Me, obviously, and the Patil twins. I would be totally into that.”

“Er,” Harry said. “Did you, er, hit your head recently?”

Ginny seemed to lose interest, and heaved a massive sigh. “My God, Potter,” she said. “I can certainly see why you’re such a devil with the ladies, you silver-tongued charmer, you. Get lost.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Ginny pulled at a glittering chain around her neck until the necklace popped out of her jumper collar, and produced a locket. Then she smirked and spun the Horcrux between her palms.

Harry jumped back and fetched his head a hard thump on the doorframe.

“Oh my God, *Malfoy*?”

“I wasn’t exactly trying to hide it,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. “Has anyone ever insinuated that you’re a little slow, Potter? No, wait, that question may be too difficult for you. Has anyone ever come right out and said it?”

“Urgh, that’s disgusting,” Harry said faintly. “What - why-”

“Polyjuice Potion,” Malfoy answered. “Ginny, untrusting Weasley soul that she is, insisted I take some first. It’s okay. I quite like it.”

“Urgh,” Harry repeated.

Malfoy made a terrible face at him. “Because I enjoy not being in constant pain,” he explained in what was unmistakably Malfoy’s icy drawl. “Not because I enjoy being a girl. You idiot.”

“Oh,” Harry said weakly. “Oh, no. ’Course not. That’s good. About the pain. I’m glad about that.”

Malfoy stretched again and Harry looked hurriedly and fixedly up at the ceiling. His distracted mind hit on what was bothering him.

“You winked at me!” he exclaimed accusingly. “Why. Why would you do that?”

“It was just a joke, Potter,” Malfoy said. “Sorry. I didn’t know it was, like, your couple code for ‘take me savagely on the drawing-room floor.’”

“Urgh!” Harry said, on a note of appeal.

There was a long pause. Maud and Ernestine, recognising their true love even in his current terrible and disturbing disguise, gave a come-hither rustle. Both of them ignored it.

“Well,” Malfoy said at length. “I think I’ll go and - take a shower.”

Harry’s eyes snapped down from the ceiling. “You will not,” he said in a voice of great conviction.

Malfoy’s suddenly-dark eyes sparkled. “I think I will. Cleanliness, you know, it’s next to godliness, so obviously-”

Face alight with mischief, he began to edge around Harry, on a mission to slip through the door.

Ginny was a lot smaller than Harry, and not as fast. It was easy to catch him.

“No,” Harry said against Malfoy’s ear. “No, you’re not.”

Malfoy let out a small startled gasp, and then slammed an elbow into his stomach. Harry could’ve sworn Ginny’s elbows were not as sharp as this.

“Let me go!”

“No showers,” Harry stipulated.

“Let me go this instant,” Malfoy commanded, struggling vehemently and obviously unused to only having a girl’s upper-body strength.

“Harry, let her go!”

The door opened and Harry found Malfoy lifted summarily out of his arms, and found

himself instead staring into the outraged face of Oliver Wood.

“Um,” he said. “This isn’t what you think. There’s an explanation-”

“I always knew you had a bit of a temper, Harry, but this is completely out of order,” Wood said sternly.

Malfoy, standing behind Wood’s burly left shoulder, looked massively delighted with the unexpected turn things had taken.

“My hero,” he drawled. “Let me explain.”

“Course, Ginny,” Wood said at once.

Malfoy widened Ginny’s eyes. “It’s not that Harry is a bad person,” he explained, and then batted his lashes for good measure. “He just flies into these dreadful rages - I suppose he’s been through a lot-”

“That’s absolutely no excuse,” Wood told them both, and fixed Harry with a severe look.

Harry squirmed. “That’s not-”

Malfoy tucked a hand into the crook of Wood’s elbow. “Don’t leave me. Oliver,” he pleaded, grinning over at Harry like a fiend. “I fear him in his Black Moods.”

“Of course I won’t, Ginny,” Oliver said instantly, and glared at Harry some more.

Life was unfair, and deeply horrible and disturbing.

There was another long moment of silence. Then Malfoy drummed Ginny’s fingertips against Oliver’s arm and said: “So. Oliver,” he added quickly. “What are you doing here?”

“Came to see Charlie,” Wood answered.

Malfoy beamed up at him. Even with Ginny’s mouth, his smile came out crooked. “*Really*,” he said.

“I heard he’s teaching at Hogwarts,” Wood said. “And not even Quidditch, either. It’s a disgusting waste. He could’ve played for England. Puddlemere United want me to sound him out about joining us.”

“Oh,” Malfoy remarked in a slightly dispirited manner. Harry wouldn’t have pegged him for a matchmaker, but apparently so it was.

Also, apparently Malfoy had been telling Charlie the truth when he said that he was still Charlie’s friend, if he wanted to set Charlie up.

Wood seemed to realise he had a responsibility to keep up a pleasant conversation with the lady.

“So,” he said. “I hear you joined the Quidditch team.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said. “Well. Yes.”

“A Chaser, aren’t you? How are you liking it?”

“Oh, well, Chasing,” Malfoy said, looking a bit lost. “Chasing, it’s - the thrill of the chase, isn’t - Frankly, Oliver, I find it very dull,” he concluded decisively. “The position I like is the Seeker.”

Wood looked intrigued.

“Yes, that’s it,” Malfoy said, gathering enthusiasm as he went. “I’ve substituted for Potter several times,” he went on. “And that’s definitely the position for me. I mean, if Quidditch was a one-man game, it’d obviously be the Seeker, but that’s not all. I mean, Quidditch is like a weapon turned into a game, isn’t it? That’s why all the houses go mad about it.”

“That’s a very good point,” Wood said, his eyes shining.

“Right!” Malfoy said, sounding pleased with himself. He started to talk with his hands as he usually did when he got carried away. “And the Seeker is the point. If I was part of a weapon, I’d want to be the point.” He smiled again. “I’d want to be the part that does the most damage.”

Wood looked wonderingly down at him and said: “Are you single?”

Malfoy looked alarmed. “Ahahaha,” he said. “Beg pardon?”

“I thought you were going out with Madam Rosmerta,” Harry put in.

“It’s over between us,” Wood said, still staring avidly at Malfoy, who was edging away. “She could never truly understand me.”

Malfoy looked extremely distressed.

Charlie opened the door and said: “Olly, Mum said you were looking for me-”

“Charles!” Malfoy yelped hysterically. “Charles, thank God!”

Charlie’s head snapped around and he went quite pale. “Urgh,” he said in a low voice. “What are you - Never mind. Later. Come here, Olly.”

“Can I Owl you?” Wood asked Malfoy in an undertone.

Malfoy stared at him with blank horror.

Wood was led firmly out by Charlie, asking him audibly as they went whether his sister was available.

Malfoy collapsed laughing in a chair once he was gone, and mid-laugh his exposed throat

went longer, freckles fading like invisible ink and curls chasing themselves out of existence, and was Malfoy once more. He tried to stretch, and winced.

Later at dinner, Ginny was quite pleased by her reported conquest.

“I’ve always thought Oliver Wood was cute.”

“Oh, me too,” Hermione said casually.

“Urgh,” Malfoy said. “Gryffindors.”

They all turned and gave him a meaning look.

“Oh, what?” he said. “None of you want to go out with me.”

“That is so true, Malfoy,” Ron agreed, serving up the potatoes. “It’s just the implied insult to Gryffindors, who are obviously the finest house-”

“Oh sure,” Malfoy sneered. “Aside from the anger management issues. And the entitlement. And the hypocrisy.”

“We’re not hypocrites!” Ginny exclaimed furiously.

“Oh, of course not,” Malfoy said. “Let’s take Quidditch. You’re the team who hardly speaks to people if they beat you, am I right? And who was it who dumped Michael Corner for being a bad loser?”

“There were other reasons too,” Ginny mumbled.

“The Ravensclaws wouldn’t touch a Gryffindor with a ten-foot pole after fifth year,” Malfoy went on. “No wonder you people are reduced to dating each other.” He paused, and added casually: “Speaking of, actually, I thought Wood was here for Charles at first.”

The pause after he’d spoken made the sentence meaningful. Ron and Ginny looked for their mother, but she was out of earshot. Charlie put down his fork and stared at Malfoy.

His point made, Malfoy looked at his plate. “I would, however, make an exception for Parvati Patil,” he said. “But I feel her sister could dilute her Gryffindor spirit with her winsome Ravenclaw reason.”

Harry resolutely avoided making eye contact with either Malfoy or Ginny, all through dinner.

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Malfoy was getting better, and that was the important thing. He was moving more easily, and at one point he chased Hermione around the house trying to get her to explain rockets to him.

“They’re like cars with no wheels that go straight up into the air,” Hermione said at last. “Now leave me alone.”

“Straight up in the air,” Malfoy echoed reverently. “Whoosh.”

He locked himself in his room, and came out with paint on his nose. Harry felt that if Malfoy was acting like a complete lunatic, things were getting back to normal.

He tried to dismiss the other incident entirely from his mind, because it had been weird. He felt a certain amount of trepidation outside Ginny’s door even a week afterwards, and he knocked though he could hear Malfoy’s normal masculine voice drawling and then laughing his rather deep laugh, and Ginny laughing too.

“Can I come in?” Harry asked. “Or are you doing something else perverse with Potions?”

“Come in, Harry!” Ginny called, sounding pleased.

Harry went in and found Malfoy stretched out on Ginny’s floor while Ginny perched on her bed. Ginny’s room in Grimmauld Place was quite nice. It was yellow and white, and her shelves were lined with little ornaments she obviously thought were cute.

One shelf was crowded with gleaming hardback books. Harry was a little surprised. He hadn’t thought Ginny was a big reader.

“What’re these?” he asked, coming in and examining them.

“Oh, well,” said Ginny, and looked a little flushed and embarrassed. “They’re actually - what I took out of the Burrow in that sack.”

Hermione’d said that Ginny was getting books. Harry just hadn’t believed her.

He looked at the gold inscription on the books, and made out a name in curling gold letters. It was Gilderoy Lockhart.

“Oh,” Harry said, and grinned. “Didn’t know you were a fan.”

“I’m not,” Ginny blurted, and then she went even redder.

It reminded Harry of when she was eleven, and used to put her elbow in the butter dish when he walked into a room.

Ginny looked at her hands, twisted together in her lap. “You gave them to me,” she said in a muted voice. “When we were little. Mum was worried about affording all our books, and Professor Lockhart gave you his complete works, and you tipped them into my cauldron. I thought - it was the first time you ever seemed to notice me. Don’t you remember?”

“Er,” said Harry.

He remembered wanting to get rid of Lockhart’s stupid books as quickly as possible.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Ginny said in a rush. “Obviously. I mean - it was five years ago-”

This was an awful situation.

Malfoy levered himself up on one elbow, and saved the day unexpectedly by drawing: “*I remember.*”

“Do you?” Ginny asked.

Malfoy glanced in Harry’s direction, and nobly diverted the fire towards himself.

“Sure. Potter swaggered into the bookshop like he owned it and immediately called a storm of attention down on himself-”

“He didn’t mean to!” Ginny exclaimed fiercely.

“Oh, he did too,” Malfoy said, while Harry sat on the floor by Malfoy’s head and mouthed a discreet *Thank you*. “He was always at it. Never happy unless he had his fan club trailing after him. Who were the fan club again? You, of course, and that kid Creevey-”

“Hannah Abbot and Melissa in Hufflepuff,” Ginny said.

“Wait,” Harry said. “What? There was really a fan club?”

Ginny immediately resumed blushing.

“It was just when I was in first year,” she muttered.

“Um,” Harry said.

“And it was a secret club,” Ginny went on, her eyes suddenly lighting with suspicion. “So how did *you* know about it, Malfoy? Were you the one responsible for those Dungbombs and that really *not amusing* drawing we found over Colin’s photos?”

“What?” Malfoy said. “Me? Oh, no. Surely not. Those deeds sound like acts of vandalism. That would be very wrong.” He smirked in Harry’s direction. “I expect I just knew because - I’m also a fan. Yes. Big fan.”

“Really,” Harry said, grinning. “Funny how you never mentioned that.”

Malfoy smirked some more. “I’m shy.”

“You sabotaged our club!” Ginny said indignantly.

“Not just me,” Malfoy protested. “Crabbe and Goyle helped too.”

“Colin worked really hard on that collage,” Ginny said. “He’s a lovely guy, you know. Well, he’s a little intense, I admit, but once he met Francois from Beauxbatons he really settled down-”

“Francois?” Harry repeated.

“Did you never wonder why he stopped chasing you, Potter?” Malfoy drawled. “Or - don’t

tell me you really thought it was your autograph he was after.”

“I,” Harry said. “What?”

Malfoy burst out laughing and after a minute, Ginny did too.

Harry thought that was most unfair. “I don’t see how I was supposed to know,” he muttered. “I don’t see why everyone was running around Hogwarts being secretly gay.”

“Secretly?” Malfoy said. “Creevey took at least two hundred pictures of you.”

“There were far fewer after the collage got vandalised,” Ginny pointed out, looking at Malfoy with narrowed eyes. “With all those drawings that were not funny.”

“Come on,” Malfoy said. “They were a little funny. Anyway, where were we? I was on twenty points.”

Harry was quite relieved to be off the subject of collages and Colin Creevey.

“What’re you two doing?”

“Playing a game of how well do we know each other,” Ginny said. “It was Malfoy’s idea. D’you want to play?”

“That would be completely unfair,” Malfoy said. “You two went out for months. The odds are stacked against me. Yet I cannot refuse a challenge.”

“You and Harry are in the same class,” Ginny pointed out. “That’ll mean points.”

“Um,” Harry said. “All right. How do we play?”

“It’s Malfoy’s turn,” Ginny said. “He can ask me a question, and you’ll see.”

Malfoy sat up. “Very well, Girl Weasley. Prepare to meet thy doom. Name - in full - my two best friends.”

“Oh,” Ginny said. “Oh, I know this. Those two big guys. They’re on the team. Um, Crabbe and Toyle. Foyle. Goyle!”

“Full names, please,” Malfoy said.

“Vincent Crabbe,” Ginny said readily. “And, um. Oh, no. I can’t remember. I don’t know.”

“For two and a half points, Potter?”

“Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle,” Harry said.

That’d show Malfoy who remembered names.

Ginny snapped her fingers. “Oh - fine. All right, Harry. Same question, for my two best

friends.”

“Er,” said Harry. “Er, Hermione?”

Ginny’s face fell. “Well, no, Harry. She’s not even in my year. She’s your friend.”

“Um,” Harry said. “Dean Thomas?”

“He is my friend,” Ginny agreed, softening. “I’ll give you that one.”

Harry thought hard. He recalled Ginny having a few girls giggling around her at one time and another, but she’d always sent them off quickly enough and he’d been grateful for it.

“Well,” he said, and hesitated before light dawned. “Luna Lovegood.”

“Loony!” Ginny exclaimed, and then looked unhappy. “I mean. I didn’t mean to call her that. Of course not. But Harry, I feel sorry for her, I do, but you can’t honestly think she’s one of my best friends-”

“No,” Harry said hastily. “Obviously not. Er. I mean. Well - Ron?”

Ginny’s face darkened. “He’s my *brother*, Harry,” she said with a touch of menace.

“Colin,” Harry said in desperation.

Ginny was looking more and more upset. Harry didn’t know what to do.

“Stop letting him guess, that’s cheating,” Malfoy said in a deceptively casual voice. “My turn for two and a half points. Let me see, what’s her name? That one with the spiky dark hair. Very cute.”

“Jemima,” Ginny said. “We call her Gem for short.”

“Of course,” Harry said. “Gem. Obviously.”

The name was completely and utterly unfamiliar to him. He hoped his voice did not make that too clear.

Malfoy’s sideways glance said it did. “All right then,” he said. “No points for anyone. Potter, it’s your turn.”

Malfoy guessed Harry’s favourite class easily enough - “Defence Against the Dark Arts, you only started a clandestine club” - and then it was Ginny’s turn to guess Harry’s favourite book, which she got too. It was *Flying with the Cannons*.

“Second-rate hacks,” Malfoy mumbled. “The Tutshill Tornadoes will beat them hollow. Same question you asked me, then.”

Harry thought about it for a minute. “You’d say Potions,” he said eventually. “But it’s secretly Muggle Studies.”

Malfoy bit his lip, and then grinned. "All right, you have me there. Five points."

Malfoy did not guess Ginny's favourite colour, which was pink. Harry was devoutly grateful he hadn't got that one. Ginny did guess Malfoy's favourite drink at lunch, because it was coffee.

Then Ginny said to Harry: "How about my favourite class?"

"Er," Harry said. "Which classes are you taking?"

He could tell from the frozen look on Malfoy's face that this was entirely the wrong thing to say.

"Charms," he said quickly.

"No," Ginny said, looking as if someone had pulled a rug out from under her.

Harry remembered that she'd gone with Neville to the Yule Ball, and took another stab at it. "Herbology?"

"It's Defence Against the Dark Arts, actually," Ginny said in a low voice. "Like you."

"Oh," Harry said.

Oh God, this was horrible.

"I need to go," Malfoy said, climbing gingerly to his feet. "I have - my secret project to be getting on with -"

"It can wait," Harry said tersely.

"Well, I should talk to Charles," Malfoy went on.

"He's not home yet," Harry said.

"I want to leave," Malfoy informed him. "You two are having a relationship crisis and I feel awkward." He reached down and grabbed the back of Harry's shirt. "You come with me," he said sternly. "I'll bring him back once I've taught him a lesson, Ginny."

Ginny did not look at either of them. She was looking at her Lockhart books.

Harry followed in Malfoy's wake and felt absolutely terrible, and guilty, even though he hadn't done anything at all.

*

Malfoy took Harry's wrist and led him solemnly down to the kitchen, where he started to make coffee with an absent and rather distraught air.

“All right,” he said. “You have a dreadful problem, but it’s all right, because I can help you. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Malfoy talking like a lunatic was a little soothing, but it didn’t help with the current problem.

“Help me?” Harry repeated.

Malfoy looked up at him with frighteningly wide, innocent eyes and nodded. “With girls.”

“Er,” Harry said. “Um. I don’t mean to seem big-headed or anything, but-”

“You’re doing the everyman routine. I have been duly warned,” Malfoy said, looking pained. “I’m about to have an arrogance migraine.”

“I don’t do a routine-”

“Just get it over with,” Malfoy said.

“The thing is,” Harry snapped, “there were a lot of girls last year. Sort of hunting me down. I don’t really think I have a problem there.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said, clasping his head in his hands dramatically. “It hurts, it hurts.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Cut it out.”

“All right,” Malfoy said, suddenly miraculously able to drink his coffee without pain. “Listen to me. This is the way I see it. You don’t have a problem attracting girls, because you’re famous.”

“Thanks, Malfoy.”

“Also, you don’t talk to them that much,” Malfoy said. “Which is also fine, since girls often like the strong but silent type. There’s just one problem. Eventually, if you keep a girl around long enough, you have to talk to them, and it’s going to come as a shock to them when their famous and slightly taciturn boyfriend turns out to be the lamest person on the face of the earth.”

“Thanks a *lot*, Malfoy.”

Harry was actually starting to feel a bit low about this whole situation. He leaned his elbows against the kitchen table and tried not to think about Ginny’s hurt face.

Malfoy was sitting cross-legged on the table, which would have made Mrs Weasley faint for reasons of hygiene. He absently ruffled Harry’s hair back.

“I said don’t worry. I shall take care of you,” he promised. “You see. The thing is. You’ve been able to get by on the strong but silent gig, but some of us - well. You may have noticed that I talk a lot.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, I have noticed that once or twice.”

“This means that I had to learn the right thing to say,” Malfoy explained. “It was taught to me young. D’you remember in third year when Granger slapped me?”

“Yes?”

“I was slapped in the face five times that year,” Malfoy said reminiscently. “Ah, third year. It was a big year for me. I was slapped by Granger, and I was slapped by Hannah Abbot, and I was slapped by Professor Sinistra, and I was slapped by Pansy twice before she ever kissed me.”

“Um, Malfoy. I’d rather not get slapped in the face, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Being slapped in the face is not the important part,” Malfoy said. “The important part is that Pansy did eventually kiss me. The important part is learning to say the appropriate thing in the appropriate situation.”

“Like what?” Harry said. “For instance?”

Malfoy slid off the kitchen table and put down his cup. “C’mon. I’ll show you.” He hesitated. “Personal question,” he said.

“Yeah, all right.”

“Do you want her? Because if you don’t, I’m not helping. I owe her.”

“Yes, I want her!” Harry snapped. “Just - just not right now. I’ve got - other things to do. Can’t you understand that?”

“No,” Malfoy said, casting his coffee cup a wistful look. “Whenever I want something, I want it right now oh God yes please. But I’m prepared to accept that Gryffindors do things differently. Follow me.”

Malfoy left the kitchen and after a moment’s hesitation, Harry went after him.

“Why did Hannah Abbot slap you?” he asked.

“I was trying to pay her a compliment,” Malfoy said. “I might’ve said that her plaits really helped to offset the roundness of her face. I was young!”

“Why did Professor Sinistra slap you?”

Malfoy paused on the stairs, fixed Harry with a solemn look, and said: “I don’t talk about that. Ever.”

*

Malfoy frowned down at his Pensieve, obviously lost in thought, and then seemed to come to a conclusion.

“All right,” he said. “Fifth year. Watch as the young Draco becomes the innocent victim of a terrible misunderstanding, and has to get out of it using only his keen wit.”

Harry snorted.

Malfoy looked nettled. “What, you don’t believe me?”

“I don’t believe you were innocent.”

“You’ll see how horribly you have misjudged me, Potter. Just you wait,” said Malfoy, and he put his wand into the Pensieve. Harry leaned over and dipped his in too.

A silvery, whirling world coalesced around them into a stone corridor in Hogwarts, where Malfoy, obviously right in the middle of a growth spurt and wearing his glittering Inquisitorial Squad badge, was standing extremely close to Cho Chang.

“Our scene opens,” Malfoy announced, and curled up placidly on the floor. “Our hero’s girlfriend is about to walk in on what she thinks is a flirtation between me and Cho Chang. Of course, it’s nothing of the sort.”

It didn’t look like nothing of the sort to Harry. He presumed this was fairly late in fifth year, or else he’d have been quite annoyed.

They really were standing very close together. He’d forgotten how pretty Cho was.

“Beautiful woman!” younger Malfoy declaimed, taking her hand and pressing it to his heart. “Ask me to do anything to win you, and I will!”

“Oh,” Cho murmured, her glowing cheek close to Malfoy’s pale one. “Fair knight. I do not know what to say.”

“Ask me to murder your whole cruel family, wading knee-deep in blood and intestines, and I will do it and bring you a single perfect rose afterwards,” Malfoy announced, and then in a considerably lower voice added: “It’s to be hoped that I’ll have changed my clothes as well.”

Cho laughed and took Malfoy’s free hand in hers. They looked as if they were about to start dancing.

“No, I could never ask you to do such a thing!” Cho declared. “If you did, you would be forever cursed for the murder of a whole family!”

“I care not,” Malfoy informed her superbly.

“I will care for you!” Cho said, her mouth close to Malfoy’s ear. “If you were to do such a thing, I would take the grey veil and the vow of eternal silence, and walk these halls forever praying silently for your soul. I would spare you from the curse!”

“I would walk the halls with you,” Malfoy swore. “I would rather walk the silent halls, a shade stained forever with blood, than be parted from you!”

“We would walk together,” Cho whispered.

“We would always walk together,” Malfoy whispered back.

Cho gazed into Malfoy’s eyes. “I will not speak, but weep, and wear the tears proudly to prove my love.”

Malfoy made a dramatic gesture. “I will not speak, but will always be marked by blood, and wear the stains proudly to prove my love.”

“And nobody,” Cho whispered, now practically into Malfoy’s mouth, the whisper almost a kiss. “Oh, nobody-”

They spoke together. “Nobody will remember our names.”

Malfoy, sitting on the ground, burst into applause. “The Tragic Love Ballad of the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron,” he explained. “Rehearsal went quite nicely, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” Harry said. “I also think she was flirting.”

“She was not,” Malfoy said firmly. “You are strangely mistaken. I had a girlfriend.”

“She has a ribbon in her hair,” Harry pointed out.

“So? So what?”

“She had a ribbon in her hair when we went out for Valentine’s Day,” Harry remarked. “I’m just saying.”

Also, younger Malfoy and Cho were now staring into each others’ eyes.

“And then cue Goyle’s dance routine,” younger Malfoy said happily, and dropped Cho’s hands. “Followed by the masked ball.”

“About that,” Cho said slowly, as they began to walk down the hall. “I really appreciate you putting in the masked ball. For Marietta’s sake.”

“Oh, well,” Malfoy said, looking a little embarrassed. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend.”

“I don’t know about enemies,” Cho said, looking at the floor and then shyly at Malfoy again. “But I could use a friend.”

“She was flirting with you,” Harry said flatly.

“She was not!” Malfoy exclaimed. “Do you know the kind of boys Chang goes out with?”

“Actually,” Harry said. “I do have some idea.”

Malfoy propped his chin on his knees. “Cedric Whatshisface was very good-looking, and Michael Corner is the second best-looking in our year,” he explained. “Of course, she was

letting her standards slide when she went out with you, but after all, you are famous.”

Being friends with Malfoy was doing wonders for Harry’s self-esteem.

“I heard you were a fan of the Tutshill Tornadoes,” Cho offered. “I’ve liked them since I was little.”

Malfoy smirked. “I’ve liked them since they started winning.”

“Maybe we could go to a game sometime,” Cho said, smiling her lovely smile.

Malfoy was visibly affected. “Um,” he answered.

“I have to go to Charms,” Cho said.

“Yes, Potions,” Malfoy said. “That is, I have Potions. It’s a class. That I take. Potions,” he added helpfully.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want any advice about girls from you,” Harry said.

Malfoy on the floor made a rude gesture.

“If you want to come to rehearsal early,” Cho continued, “We could go over our lines again.”

“I’ll be there. Show business is in my blood,” Malfoy said. “Seriously. I had a great-aunt who was a showgirl. I have her costume.” He reflected on that statement. “It’s in a glass case,” he added. “I don’t wear it. I wanted you to know that.”

Cho laughed. “See you later, bloody baron.”

“In a while, grey lady,” Malfoy answered.

Cho ran the other way down the corridor. Harry saw her glance back over her shoulder at Malfoy, but neither Malfoy saw that.

They were looking straight ahead, to where Pansy Parkinson had stepped out of a shadowy alcove. Younger Malfoy was looking enormously caught in the act.

The current Malfoy winced sympathetically.

The younger Malfoy said: “Pansy, I thought you were still in the infirmary!”

Malfoy winced some more. “Potter. You know how I’ve brought you here to teach you the right thing to say to girls? Well. That wasn’t it.”

“Yes, Draco,” said Pansy in a voice of ice. “I was in the infirmary. I had antlers. I have only just been let out. I still have tiny little horns where those people hexed me for being on our Squad. And now I have found my boyfriend canoodling with Potter’s leavings! This is not a good day!”

“Horns?” little Malfoy asked. “That’s really cool - I mean,” he said, as justifiably homicidal anger leaped to Pansy’s face. “I mean,” he floundered visibly and then struck out wildly for shore. “We’ll get everyone who dared to touch you. I mean it. This is war.”

“Is it,” Pansy said.

“Not just war,” said Malfoy. “Umbridge is an idiot, but she’s from the Ministry and she’s on our side, and Dumbledore’s finally gone. This is a war we’re going to win.”

“In my defence,” older Malfoy pointed out, “I did not know she was clinically insane. Although all the kittens in her office should, in retrospect, have tipped me off.”

Malfoy held out his hand to Pansy, and after a moment she took it.

“You sweet-talker,” she said, rolling her eyes at him.

“Hey,” Malfoy said, and drew her towards him. “Nobody gets away with touching my girlfriend.”

Pansy tilted her head backwards and was almost able to look down her nose at him.

“And who’s that?” she inquired coldly. “For a moment there I could’ve sworn it was Cho Chang.”

“Pansy,” Malfoy said loftily. “I think you’re forgetting who I am.”

“And who are you, Draco?” Pansy asked. “A complete idiot who is about to get his face slapped once again?”

Malfoy pulled at her hand persistently, and after a moment she let him.

“I’m a Malfoy,” he said. “And a Malfoy always wants the best.”

Pansy pushed Malfoy against a wall. “Really? And that’s why I find you alone with the best-looking girl in school while I have antlers, is it?”

Malfoy reached up and pushed Pansy’s thick dark hair away from the little stubs of bone where antlers had been, and touched them lightly.

“These are cool,” he said. “And you should trust me.”

“Should I,” Pansy said.

“Sure,” Malfoy said, then smiled and kissed her lightly. “Always trust a Malfoy,” he whispered, smirking against her lips, “- to pick the best first time.”

Pansy went a little red. “You mean that,” she said in her hardest voice.

Malfoy said: “I mean it,” and she pushed him against the wall and kissed him. It went on for a long time.

Harry looked over at older Malfoy, who looked wistful. "I miss her," he said, and avoided Harry's eyes. "But I think you take my point. If a girl is upset with you, you compliment her. And the most important thing is to mean it."

The younger Malfoy and Pansy parted at last. Malfoy's blond hair was mussed, his eyes bright and his mouth swollen.

"I was hoping you'd be around to celebrate my return tonight," Pansy murmured. "But if you're going to be at rehearsals--"

Malfoy made a grandly dismissive gesture. "I have every faith in my little thespians," he said. "They can take care of themselves for one night."

"All right, then," Pansy said, smiling up at him.

Malfoy checked his watch and did a double take. "Oh my God, we couldn't be later for Potions, Professor Snape is going to pickle our heads and keep them in jars."

"Nah," Pansy said, and patted his shoulder. "I'm under strict orders from Madam Pomfrey to go back to my dormitory and lie down until the horns go away. Your head is going to be pickled and kept in a jar. I'll come and visit it every now and then."

Malfoy looked at her with a certain amount of awe. "You are the heart of blackest evil," he commented, and reached forward to catch her mouth in a last kiss. "I like that in a woman," he added, and then whirled and ran.

"I will now demonstrate another way in which you misjudged me, Potter," Malfoy declared. "After him."

He got up and Harry saw he was running easily as they made their way to the dungeons. They caught up with Malfoy just as he had stopped, panting, at the door of the Potions classroom so he could smooth down his hair.

Then he burst into the room in a flurry of robes and apologies.

"I'm so sorry, Professor Snape, there was a - rockfall of some sort in a corridor, it was mysterious and inexplicable."

"That will be a mysterious and inexplicable five points," Professor Snape commented dryly. "To your seat."

Still grinning, Malfoy swept through the desks, overturning someone's inkstand on the way.

"Oh, s--" Malfoy's mouth shaped a silent 'sorry' the instant before a black head came up, and a younger Malfoy found himself looking down into a younger Harry's baleful gaze. Malfoy closed his mouth on the apology, regarded him thoughtfully, and said: "Ha!"

"Professor Snape, Malfoy just knocked over my ink on purpose," younger Harry said. "Again."

“I didn’t, Professor Snape, honestly,” Malfoy said, looking down his nose at Harry. Younger Harry’s glower intensified.

“All right, Mr Malfoy, to your seat,” Snape said. “Mr Potter, I doubt that your notes were valuable enough to make a fuss about.”

Malfoy smirked triumphantly and slipped away to a seat beside Theodore Nott.

“Pansy back from the infirmary?” Nott murmured, and Malfoy nodded and beamed.

Harry watched his younger self scowl and start to try and blot away the ink. Ron leaned over to him and whispered: “Don’t worry, Malfoy will get his.”

“How right Ron was,” Harry remarked dryly.

Malfoy threw back his head and laughed.

“But you see my point,” he said. “Complete accident. Could have happened to anybody. I am so misunderstood.”

“You knocked over my inkstand four times in fifth year,” Harry said. “How many times was on purpose?”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “Two and a half times,” he decided.

“A half?”

“I was just in a bad mood that day,” Malfoy explained. “Anyone’s ink would have done, but I suppose I was used to passing by your desk.”

*

He met Ginny in the hall. She was standing at the open front door and watching the London traffic pass by. The afternoon sunlight turned her curls gold.

“Don’t go,” Harry said.

“Don’t go where?” Ginny asked distantly.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Harry said. She glanced over her shoulder, and he came towards her, came to stand beside her. He felt much as he had when he was looking at Cho earlier: he’d somehow forgotten how pretty she was. “I’m the one who has to go,” Harry said. “But I’ll come back to you. You know that.”

Ginny looked up at him. “Do you know who I am?” she asked. “You don’t know my friends, or what I like, or anything about me, really. But that’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” Harry asked helplessly.

“I thought,” Ginny said. “I really liked you. I mean, I loved you. I love you. I thought - I think maybe I thought that - if you liked me back, I didn’t mind who you liked. I like Quidditch, but I acted like I liked Quidditch more than I did. I sent my friends away to spend time with you. I saw how things went wrong with Cho. I tried to make - liking me easy for you. I wasn’t - I wasn’t very fair to Michael or Dean. I liked them, but it was the same as Quidditch. I acted like I liked them more than I did, because I thought you’d notice that. I-”

Ginny stopped, and swallowed. Harry saw that she’d been crying.

“I don’t want you to come back to me,” she said. “Unless you know who you’re coming back to.”

“Well,” Harry said. “I can learn. I mean - can’t I?”

Ginny smiled at him, her bow mouth a perfect curve. “I hope so.” She held out her hand to him, and he took it. “I’m Ginny Weasley.”

“I’m Harry Potter,” Harry said. “And I think - that you’re cute. And I know you’re brave. And-” he weighed her small hand in his, and thought of Malfoy asking: *do you want her?* “And I’ll try to find out the rest,” he finished.

He drew her closer, and Harry recognised the look on her face: it was the same look Pansy Parkinson had worn, in a corridor in fifth year.

He touched Ginny’s cheek, and leaned down to kiss her, just once. He closed his eyes and her face disappeared, but he felt the warmth of her mouth, and floating behind his eyelids he could still see the golden shimmer the sun had called from her hair.

*

Harry absorbed a couple of things from that incident. That girls were fiendishly complicated, he’d kind of guessed already.

There was also the fact that Malfoy was getting better, and that Malfoy’s attitude towards him had changed yet again when he wasn’t aware of it.

Harry thought that it stemmed from the night that Malfoy’d come home after the Cruciatus. Malfoy should’ve known that Harry would take care of him - Harry had promised - but apparently he hadn’t, and now he did. He seemed surer now, confident enough to rumple back Harry’s hair as if such gestures were the easiest thing in the world.

He was also, and this was the strange part, trying to take care of Harry *back*. That was what showing him all that rather personal stuff had been about. Nobody had ever tried to do that before except Sirius, unless Mrs Weasley counted, and she tried to take care of everyone.

Harry wasn’t sure what to do with it.

It wasn’t like it was an isolated incident, either. They were all studying in the kitchen, the radio was blaring, Ginny and Mrs Weasley were bickering and so were Ron and Hermione, so Harry’d said he had a headache and stormed off to the study.

After about ten minutes, the door opened and Malfoy came in, holding a steaming cup in his hand. He pushed it across the table towards Harry.

Harry expected coffee, but when he looked into the cup there was a purple Potion.

“What’s,” he began.

“It’s a Potion,” Malfoy sneered at him, raising his eyebrows. “For your headache?”

“Oh,” Harry said.

“Mum used to get headaches,” Malfoy said, more quietly.

“Oh,” Harry said again.

“Three kinds of headaches,” Malfoy went on. “Your father had a bad day at the Ministry headaches, I have a son who won’t shut up headaches and I just get headaches headaches.”

Harry stopped himself from saying “Oh,” once again. He looked at the Potion, which looked absolutely foul, and toyed with the idea of telling Malfoy that he’d been lying and didn’t have a headache at all.

He drank the Potion instead. It was absolutely foul.

“Thanks,” he said.

Malfoy looked uncomfortable, and then Hermione came in. “Oh good, you’re here already,” she said. “Ron is being impossible today!”

Harry made the decision not to comment.

“Malfoy,” Hermione said. “I’ll give you a biro that has green ink if you help make notes.”

“But I want to keep my Horcrux,” Malfoy objected, though he was already preening over the implied compliment.

“I know, I know,” Hermione said. “But you can do research on the other Horcruxes, can’t you? I have some books on the Hufflepuff Cup.”

“Well,” Malfoy conceded. “If you need me so desperately, Granger-”

“Here’s the pen,” Hermione said. “Here’s the book. Sit down. Start researching.”

Malfoy took them both, and lay on the sofa admiring his green biro for a while to make a point. The point might’ve been that he was obnoxious.

Harry made another scroll’s worth of notes on the possible hiding places for Horcruxes from Voldemort’s youth. Then he sighed and cracked his neck.

“Shove over, Malfoy,” he said, getting up. “I want to sit on the sofa too.”

Malfoy ungraciously levered himself up on one elbow, and when Harry cautiously sat down, Malfoy let his head fall back.

It was obviously a - family sort of gesture. Malfoy was still casually reading his book, his pen in his mouth. Harry touched his hair lightly, as if he was one of Mrs Figg’s cats, and at least this time Malfoy didn’t tell him to stop hitting him.

“Here’s something interesting,” Hermione said, leaning forward.

“What,” Harry exclaimed, and stopped petting.

“The Hufflepuff Cup is in some way connected to the descendants of Helga Hufflepuff,” Hermione said. “It is thought that they would be able to tell if the cup was destroyed, and possibly that if the cup was stolen they might be able to trace it.”

“Hepzibah Smith - that old woman who Voldemort stole the cup off - she was a descendant,” Harry said. “Um. Of course, he killed her.”

“Smith,” Malfoy said. “Like, Zacharias Smith? They’re the only pureblood Smiths there are.”

“Are you sure Smith’s a pureblood?” Harry asked.

“Look, do you ask Granger if she’s quite sure what’s in the book? I know purebloods,” said Malfoy. “I know Smith a bit, too.”

“Well,” Hermione said. “Well, well. I think we’re going to have to pay Zacharias Smith a visit.”

“I’m sure Smith will be *delighted*,” Malfoy observed, smirking. “He likes you.”

Hermione did not look particularly surprised. Harry remembered that Hermione’d been considering asking Smith to Slughorn’s party. She must have been fairly sure that he would say yes.

He didn’t like Smith, and was abruptly not looking forward to tomorrow. But then Malfoy and Hermione dropped the subject, and everyone got back to their books. Malfoy seemed to be trying to chew his sleeve and the end of his biro simultaneously.

After a bit, Harry started carefully smoothing Malfoy’s hair back again. He could, if he liked. He was supposed to. What he’d told Ron was true, after all. Narcissa *had* given Malfoy to him. And she could never come back to take him away.

So it was for keeps.

The next day, before they went to see Zacharias Smith, Snape came to take Malfoy back to Voldemort.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Harry heard the yelling from the kitchen. Mrs Weasley was telling him about how the Burrow was fixed now and better than ever with a new oven, and that she wanted to get back as soon as possible but he'd be welcome for dinner any time when he heard the first scream.

He came out pushing the door open with his mug of tea and slopping a bit on the floor, and was slightly disgruntled to see that there was no emergency.

"Potter!" Malfoy shouted, coming down the stairs with Ginny clinging to his back and laughing her head off. "Where have you been? We've been shouting all through the house."

"Harry," she called in a lower and much sweeter voice than Malfoy's, her arms locked around Malfoy's neck. "You have to come and see!"

Harry answered Malfoy. "I was in the kitchen."

Malfoy frowned. "Well, you shouldn't go in there. That's menial labour: you should send Kreacher in there for you."

"I will not," Harry said darkly. "Kreacher gobs in my tea."

Malfoy smiled the cheerful smile of a man who, if he'd ever asked for tea, would've got it in a silver chalice with 'For Master, Love Kreacher' written on the tea tray in rose petals. "I'll tell him not to."

"Yeah, great," Harry said. "I can't wait to see what he comes up with instead."

Ginny plucked at the material covering Malfoy's shoulder. "Malfoy, let's show him now."

"Your lightest word is law to me, Girl Weasley," Malfoy said. "C'mon, Potter. It's my secret project, it's finally done and you are privileged to be among the first to witness this latest and greatest display of my genius--"

Harry put his cup down on the side table in the hall, bounded up the stairs and said agreeably: "Put a sock in it, Malfoy," just as Ginny put her hands over Malfoy's mouth.

Malfoy bit her fingers lightly, Ginny shrieked, let go, windmilled for a moment and then fell backwards. She grabbed Malfoy and he went down with her, and if Harry hadn't been there she would've caught herself a nasty crack on the stairs.

He dived and caught her instead, and everyone landed in a relatively unharmed heap.

"Gryffindors are the epitome of grace and dignity," Malfoy said, leaning back against Ginny's knees and kicking Harry amiably in the ankle.

"Thanks for saving me," Ginny said, tucking her head in under Harry's chin.

"Um – that's OK," Harry said, and kicked Malfoy back.

That was when the front door swung wide open and Snape stood, cloak and robes billowing around him as if he'd transported himself to their door on a black cloud, and Malfoy went from easy and relaxed to taut and upset in a moment.

"Off me, Gryffindors," he ordered, and scrambled to his feet. "Sir?"

"Mr Malfoy," Snape said. "It's time."

Malfoy swallowed and his chin came up. "I'll get my stuff."

Harry picked Ginny up, stood and put her on her feet, and then started down the stairs just as Malfoy turned to go back upstairs. Malfoy shoved him as he went past, and Harry was about to snap at him when he saw the unhappy twist of Malfoy's mouth.

Harry glared at Snape instead.

"He's not going *anywhere*," he growled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Don't listen to him, sir," Malfoy said over his shoulder.

"It is my constant endeavour," Snape assured him in a bored voice. Malfoy disappeared onto the landing.

The drawn-together nervous tension of Malfoy's back before he vanished from sight only made Harry angrier.

"You're not *having* him," he snapped. "Last time you put him under the *Cruciatus*. That's enough. He's not going again."

"I have given him all the time I could to recuperate," Snape said coldly. "If he's recovered enough to be rough-housing on the stairs with a pair of Gryffindors, he's recovered enough to do his part. Do you have any idea the kind of questions which are being asked about his continued absence among the Death Eaters? Do you want the Dark Lord to think that he has been deceived in Mr Malfoy *twice*? Do you realise what kind of vengeance he would take?"

"He won't get to him," Harry said. "I won't let that happen."

"Mr Potter," Snape said, ceasing to drawl all of a sudden and drawing himself up to his full height. "The rest of the Order is unaccountably under the delusion that you can do anything. Let me assure you that I have no faith in your supposed omnipotence, particularly since you continue to be entirely incapable of standard Occlumency or basic good manners. I certainly will not trust you with Mr Malfoy's life, especially since all you've done with Mr Malfoy's life so far is *attempt* it. I suggest you walk away from this ill-considered little scene you're staging, because I am not enjoying this errand and I do not have the patience."

"When is he coming back?" Harry demanded. "You can't take him unless you tell me when he's coming back."

"Do try not to behave like the stupid child you are, Mr Potter," Snape said. "We are going into the service of the Dark Lord. There is no guarantee that either of us will ever come back."

There are never any guarantees.”

“*Shut up*,” Harry said savagely. “I’ll go talk to him. He’ll listen to me-”

“I very much doubt that,” said Snape, but Harry didn’t have time to deal with him. He stormed up the stairs. Ginny made a grab for his sleeve as he went past, but he didn’t have time for her right now either: he left her and hoped she’d keep Snape down there as long as she could: he’d explain to her later.

He pushed the door of Malfoy’s bedroom open, only to find Charlie in there with him.

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“What d’you mean, you’re going?” Charlie snapped. “You said we were going to talk!”

Since Charlie was yelling at Malfoy, Harry was delighted he was there. He leaned against the doorframe and let Charlie have at it.

“Well, I can’t right now,” Malfoy said, tight-lipped and packing with a sort of vicious intensity. “If I live, we’ll talk. For now I have to go back and be an undercover Death Eater and I’m not particularly looking forward to it, Charles, so you needn’t shout at me.”

Charlie’s sigh seemed to be dragged out of him. He clawed his hand through his curly hair and it stood up all over his head like a dozen dragon’s horns. Malfoy was throwing his things into a bag on the bed, and did not even look at him.

“Look,” he rasped, in the manner of a very patient man much tried. “I can’t – you’ve barely said a word to me in weeks, I don’t know what I’ve done. I can’t let you go somewhere and – not if you’re angry with me, all right? Why don’t you just tell me what’s wrong and how I can fix it.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Malfoy said. “We’re fine. I have to go.”

He went to grab his bag and Charlie caught his arm. Malfoy looked down his nose disdainfully at Charlie, which he shouldn’t have been able to do since Charlie wasn’t that much shorter than he was. Malfoy had made looking disdainfully down his nose at people into a fine art, though, and he managed.

Harry was just about to make it clear in no uncertain terms that while he had every sympathy with Charlie being annoyed about Malfoy leaving, Charlie still wasn’t allowed to *grab* him, when Charlie said: “Don’t go,” in a hoarse voice, and Harry was in such enormous agreement that he let Charlie away with the grabbing.

Something about Charlie’s face or his expression must’ve got to Malfoy, because he threw back in a voice Harry recognised, a voice that said a nerve of Malfoy’s had been hit hard: “Why do *you* care?”

Malfoy tried to pull away and turn away, but he only half managed it because Charlie hung on. Harry couldn’t see Malfoy’s face now, just the back of his head.

He could see Charlie's face, though.

He started to get a bad feeling about this. Maybe he should interrupt.

"I do care," said Charlie, voice rough and scraping in his throat. "You're being ridiculous, you *know* I – of course I–"

"Don't call me ridiculous," Malfoy snarled, his voice when he was hurt and sniping a familiar and, under the circumstances, almost comforting thing to Harry. "I'm not ridiculous, I thought we were friends, but since you don't tell me the least little thing I suppose we're not, and that's fine, but it means you can't wander around being all concerned and *parental*–" he spat the word. "I don't need taking care of, I'm *fine* on my own–"

"You're not on your own!" Charlie shouted. "And as for – if you're talking about what I think you're talking about, there were reasons!"

"What reason?" Malfoy demanded, and by the tone of his voice Harry could tell he was narrow-eyed.

He must be narrow-eyed enough to be blind if he couldn't see Charlie's face and what it so obviously meant, if he couldn't feel that the atmosphere in this room had gone dark and waiting, like the sky when a storm was coming.

He must be blind and stupid, because he raged on and said in a thin voice: "What reason could there possibly have been?"

Just as Harry thought, I should do something *right now*, Charlie said with the quiet of a man driven utterly beyond endurance: "This one," slid his fingers into Malfoy's fair hair, dragged his head down and kissed him hard.

Harry slammed the door all the way open, so it hit the wall. The crack of the wall denting spun Malfoy around and Malfoy broke away from Charlie and dashed to him. Harry shoved his shoulder in front of Malfoy's and glared at Charlie, whose face was wiped clean of expression by shock. Harry didn't know whether he was shocked by Harry's appearance or his own behaviour, and he didn't much care.

"Snape's waiting for Malfoy," he said in tones that would've probably been better suited to the words 'I have a sword in my room. Just give me a reason.'

"You're right," Malfoy said in a voice that seemed to be squashed flat with astonishment. "I should go. Bye, Charles," he added helplessly. "I – we'll – talk later, or something. Bye."

"Bye," Charlie said, looking at the floor.

Harry shoved Malfoy out into the hall. Charlie looked up as he was closing the door, but he didn't get a last glimpse of Malfoy or whatever he was looking for: he just caught Harry glaring at him, and then Harry shut the door.

To Harry's immense relief, he did not have to forcibly restrain Malfoy from running down the stairs to Snape and the Death Eaters. Malfoy looked around a bit wildly and then headed

for the narrow attic stairs.

For a moment Harry thought he was going to go up to that attic with the Black portrait in it, and he steeled himself to follow him, but Malfoy just sort of collapsed on the stairs. Harry sank down on the step beside him.

“I don’t *believe* it,” Malfoy said.

“It’ll be OK,” Harry said.

He tried to think of something to say that involved his complete sympathy with Malfoy who was obviously traumatised by older men mauling him, a promise to watch out for him without making it sound like he was protecting Malfoy’s virtue, and an offer to sort Charlie out without committing himself to actually having a gay talk about Malfoy’s virtue with Charlie.

“I cannot believe you were actually right about something that involved human interaction,” Malfoy said. “My whole worldview is collapsing in on itself.”

“Thanks very much,” Harry said. “*I* can’t believe you didn’t notice. It was obvious. Anyone else would’ve noticed before he did something – not that I’m saying you deserved that,” he added hastily. “I mean, you clearly weren’t – you didn’t ask for it or anything, *of course not*, you were-”

Thankfully Malfoy interrupted him before he could say anything supportive and entirely ridiculous about Malfoy being taken advantage of, or the innocent victim of Charlie’s predatory advances.

“Was it, was it really obvious?” Malfoy asked, and sounded like he was panicking. Harry was going to kill Charlie. “Oh my God, does Mrs Weasley know?”

“Um,” Harry said. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, thank Christ,” said Malfoy, and then put his face in his hands.

Harry was left at a bit of a loss. He wasn’t sure of what he should do. It occurred to him that he should pat Malfoy on the back and tell him Charlie was a bad man, but frankly he really didn’t think he could do it.

“Oh my God,” Malfoy said, and then in a slightly less blank voice: “Oh my *God*.”

“What?” Harry said tensely. He didn’t like Malfoy’s new tone.

“I had no *idea*,” Malfoy informed him. Harry had sort of gathered that. “D’you,” Malfoy looked down at his hands and rubbed at his left wrist a bit. “D’you actually think he fancies me?”

“I more or less got that impression, yes,” Harry said dryly.

“Oh my *God*,” Malfoy said again. “I had no *idea*.” He paused, and then said in a testing

voice: “D’you think I should-”

“No!” Harry almost shouted at him. “I mean, Malfoy, for God’s sake – he’s years older than you – you’re going through a difficult time – anyway what, I thought you said you weren’t sure – taking advantage-”

As his words spun out of control and he actually heard himself saying the actual words ‘taking advantage’ he was relieved to notice that Malfoy was frowning, clearly deep in thought and not paying attention.

He spoke and cut Harry off, which was probably for the best.

“I told him about Zabini,” Malfoy said thoughtfully.

“About... I – um,” Harry said. “Oh. Before you told me?”

“Yeah,” Malfoy answered. “Ages before. I mean, when nobody else in the Burrow would talk to me. I was – lonely,” he said in an unpleasant voice, as if he was sneering at himself. “I was really angry when you told me about him. I thought maybe he’d just felt sorry for me, thought of me as some helpless kid.” He laughed and there was definitely a tinge of pleasure there, this was no good at all. “Guess not.”

“He should’ve told you,” Harry said severely. “He should’ve let you know how things stood without-”

“Really, Potter,” Malfoy drawled. “I heard the stories about you and Girl Weasley. Did you let her know how things stood without-?”

Harry felt himself go red. “That’s different. Ginny’s not-”

“A man?” Malfoy asked in a somewhat dangerous tone.

“She’s not miles younger than me,” Harry said firmly. “Or confused. And I might add that if you were sending Charlie Weasley singing Valentines when you were eleven, you were really sneaky about it.”

Malfoy smirked. “That was a great song,” he said. “We all sang it in the Slytherin dungeons over and over and over again. I had a really great imitation of that dwarf who sang it to you. It was one of my best impressions ever.”

“I’m surprised I didn’t see it.”

Malfoy made a face. “I couldn’t have sung it to *you*, that would’ve been really gay,” he said. “Uh. Fitting in nicely with the general tenor of this conversation, oh my *God*, a Weasley hit on me. I’ll never get over this, never.”

Harry had the thought at this point that he should probably try to heal Malfoy’s emotional scars and ask him to talk about his feelings. He felt as if he was staring into the abyss.

“Did you actually say the words ‘taking advantage’ earlier?” Malfoy asked.

“No,” Harry lied. “I still think Charlie should’ve told you. I mean, *I* would’ve told you, when you told me. If I’d had anything to tell. Which I don’t. Because I’m not. Uh.”

“Except for the Dark Lord,” Malfoy said, and cackled.

Harry shoved Malfoy’s shoulder a bit. He couldn’t manage to move much since they were squeezed up slightly on these stairs and he was afraid that the flimsy-looking banister might go and take Malfoy with it.

“Charlie was right,” he said loftily. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Oh God, I left my bag in there,” Malfoy said despairingly. “I have to go get it.”

“I’ll get it,” Harry said. “Actually, no I won’t, you don’t need your bag. I don’t think you should go.”

Malfoy looked extremely irritated. “Not this again.”

“Seriously,” Harry said. “Look, it’s dangerous.”

“You don’t say,” Malfoy drawled. “Look, Potter, what if someone told you that you couldn’t go defeat the Dark Lord because it was dangerous?”

“That’s different,” Harry said at once. “I have to do that. It’s me or no-one: there was a prophecy.”

He refrained from saying that he was the Chosen One, because it always made Malfoy laugh like a hyena.

“But there’s no prophecy about you,” Harry said.

Malfoy scowled. “There could be. Maybe it’s just that nobody’s happened to mention it yet. There could be dozens of prophecies about me for all you know.”

“Just listen to me, Malfoy. It’s not the same. There’s no prophecy for you, there’s no reason for you not to be safe. Snape even said that you were doing your bit, you have the Horcrux and your little plan and – you can stay here and you’ll be safe and the Horcrux will be safe-”

“The Horcrux is safe anyway,” Malfoy said in a distressingly distant voice. “That’s part of the spell. If anyone kills me, it destroys the Horcrux too.”

Harry thought of Mad-Eye Moody, felt a twinge of panic and said: “Don’t tell the Order that, Malfoy.”

“Of course not,” Malfoy answered, still in that distant voice. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you.”

“Well anyway I *don’t want you to die*,” Harry said desperately. He added in a defensive tone: “I promised your mum.”

“Right,” Malfoy said, still looking at his hands. “Well. What you say makes sense, Potter.”

“Yeah?” Harry said, and grinned. He should’ve known Malfoy would see reason: that would show Snape, Malfoy *did* listen to him, and now he’d be safe.

“I won’t go,” Malfoy said. “I promise.”

“Great,” Harry said.

“I will of course expect the same thing from you,” Malfoy added casually.

“Wait,” Harry said. “What?”

“Well, I understand perfectly that you have to go and face the Dark Lord in the final confrontation,” Malfoy said in a very reasonable voice. “There’s a prophecy. I quite see: you explained it *so* well.”

“Yes,” Harry said uncertainly.

“But until then, you have to stay in Grimmauld Place,” Malfoy said.

“Hey!” Harry said, outraged. “I can’t-”

“Oh yes you can,” Malfoy said. “No more of this dashing off to kill banshees or save orphans from burning buildings or going out to find Horcruxes. There are other people who can do it, you know. You can’t possibly, because I don’t want you to die either and *it’s dangerous*.”

“No,” Harry protested. “No, look, it is different. Voldemort-”

“What?” Malfoy demanded, glancing over at him for a moment, grey eyes close and sharp. “Killed your parents?”

“I,” Harry said, his mouth dry.

“Your problem, Potter,” Malfoy said, adding out of long habit: “One of many – is that you’re too used to people following behind you like sheep. This isn’t just your war: sometimes people have to do things on their own.” He leaned forward and spoke into Harry’s ear. “Potter.”

“What?” Harry said quietly.

“I’m going,” Malfoy whispered. “Get the hell out of my way.”

Oh, fine, if Malfoy wanted to put it like that. It was true, Harry would’ve punched Malfoy if he’d tried to get in his way when he knew there was something to be done. He still didn’t think Malfoy needed to do it, it wouldn’t do the war much harm if Malfoy stayed safely where he was and it would make Harry feel a hell of a lot better, but short of Stunning him there was nothing Harry could do.

And Stunning him wouldn’t be practical in the long term.

“I’ll get your bag,” Harry said grudgingly, and climbed to his feet.

“Oh, hey,” Malfoy said, and reached out to catch his wrist. “Snape said the next time he came back for me, he’d drop me off and then come back and test your Occlumency again.” He smiled up at Harry. “I’ve told him how well you’re doing.”

Harry was torn between despair at the idea of an Occlumency lesson with Snape, delight at the prospect of finally getting a step closer to Nagini, and being a bit flattered.

“OK,” he said.

“I’ve left my Pensieve in the study, you can practise on it,” Malfoy said. “Make me proud, Potter. Failing that, please try not to embarrass yourself.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, I’m not promising anything here,” he said, and Malfoy laughed and let him go.

He fetched the bag and they went down to where Ginny was valiantly telling Snape about a wonderful hairdresser’s she and Malfoy had been to recently, and Snape favoured Harry with a poisonous look and several poisonous observations about timeliness before sweeping out with Malfoy in tow.

Malfoy squared his thin shoulders under the weight of the bag and glanced back for a moment before following Snape down the steps and into the street.

He said: “I’ll come back soon.”

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Harry got everyone else rounded up to go see Zacharias Smith as soon as possible. The alternative was sitting at home feeling panicky and generally miserable: he wanted to get something done.

He left it to Ron to explain to Ginny that she couldn’t come because Zacharias Smith had thought she was a raging harpy ever since the incident with ramming the Quidditch stands and wouldn’t let them inside the house. He found Ron’s remark that they’d be lucky if Smith let Harry in the place totally unnecessary.

Hermione, of course, had secured the address for the Ancient and Noble House of Smith after about ten minutes’ research, and then remembered that Smith had sent her a postcard last summer with the address on it anyway.

“What’s he doing sending you *postcards*,” Ron said in a revolted tone.

“Really, Ron, because we were all friends together in the D.A.,” Hermione told him, looking rather pleased with herself. “It was very thoughtful of Zacharias to ask how I was during the summer.”

“I write you during the summer,” Ron muttered. “And I invite you round our house.”

He looked triumphantly at an invisible Smith.

“Yes, but you do the same thing with Harry,” Hermione said impatiently. “I wouldn’t call *that* thoughtful.”

She stopped and checked her postcard again, steering them down another small suburban road in Kent. They’d approximated the distance when they Apparated and hadn’t been quite as accurate as they’d hoped.

“I should really have invited Zacharias Smith to Professor Slughorn’s party,” Hermione continued dreamily. “He would’ve been a perfect gentleman.”

Ron’s mouth fell open. “What did that McLaggen try,” he said. “I’ll kill him.”

“I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Ron,” Hermione informed him.

“Yeah, well,” Ron mumbled, scuffing his trainers in the dusty road. “I know that, of course. Only I’m your mate – I mean, Harry and I are your mates – and we’re, er, concerned about you. Aren’t we, Harry?”

“Deeply,” Harry said.

Hermione went pink and cross. “I thank you and Harry for your *friendly* concern,” she said. “I’m so touched, I just don’t know what to say! Except that I should have chosen some friends who were girls because sometimes you two are so dense it’s unbearable!”

She stormed on up ahead, bushy head bowed and churning the dust furiously underfoot. Ron hung back with Harry.

“That’s stupid,” he said unhappily. “I don’t think the girls at school even like Hermione. Lav certainly didn’t, she was always complaining about her.”

“There was a reason for that, though,” Harry pointed out.

“Well – yeah,” Ron said, his ears going red. “But Celandine doesn’t like her, either.”

Harry wasn’t sure who Celandine was, so he didn’t comment and sort of hoped she wasn’t actually in their year.

“What do women want, anyway?” Ron asked, somewhat wildly.

“What, *I’m* supposed to know?”

“You seem to keep Ginny happy enough!”

“We’re broken up,” Harry said. “And anyway, yesterday she pitched a fit at me because I didn’t know the names of her friends or something.”

“What, Gem and Lucy and Alsatiana and that lot?” Ron asked, sounding puzzled.

Harry eyed him coldly. "You couldn't have come through with that information sometime before yesterday?" he said. "You're supposed to have my back, here."

"I can't help you with stuff with Ginny," Ron protested. "She's my sister."

"Well, Hermione is *like* my sister," Harry said. "But I think probably what she wants is, you know, for you to ask her out."

"Ask her out," Ron said experimentally, and panic instantly flooded his face. "What, you know, walk right up to her and ask her. Hermione. *Her*."

Ron never used to say Hermione's name in reverential tones when they were twelve.

"That's the one, yeah."

"I think I'm going to need a bit of a run at it," Ron said after an introspective pause. "I was thinking maybe I wouldn't have to. I thought perhaps we'd, you know, get into some really life-threatening situation and she might – er – grab me in the heat of the moment and snog me passionately or something."

"That's – also a plan," Harry said. "What am I supposed to do while you two are snogging passionately?"

Ron thought that one over. "You can defeat whatever's threatening our lives," he said eventually. "We'll be a bit occupied."

"Oh thanks," said Harry.

Ron grinned at him. "We'll really appreciate it. Once we surface."

"I see you've thought this through in detail."

"I have," Ron admitted gravely.

"Good luck with that one," Harry told him.

They drew level with Hermione because she'd stopped and figured out they were going the wrong way, so she worked out which was the right way, Ron said something about how she was good at knowing directions and smoothed her ruffled feathers, and Harry got back to scowling at the road.

"Hey," Ron said quietly after a bit. "Um, Harry, mate, I don't really know how to put this."

"What?"

"You're – pining a bit, aren't you," Ron said, looking as massively uncomfortable as he had when they'd had the 'a bit obsessed' conversation in sixth year. Stupid Malfoy, making things awkward with Ron and plotting to kill the headmaster and going *away*.

“No,” Harry said sullenly.

“Right,” said Ron. “OK. Hey, anyway, soon we’ll see Smith!”

That seemed such a complete non sequitur that Harry stared at him. “What? We don’t even like Smith.”

Ron scratched the back of his head, looking dusty and lost and as if he wished he hadn’t started this conversation but he was determined to carry it through to the end.

“Well, no,” he said. “But he’s a bit like Malfoy, isn’t he?”

“No he is *not*,” Harry and Hermione said in steely outraged unison, and then they exchanged startled glances.

Hermione cleared her throat. “As I was saying, Ron, that’s a terrible thing to say,” she scolded. “Zacharias was a part of the D.A., you know. I admit that Malfoy hasn’t turned out to be so very bad, but after all – he took the Dark Mark and he almost killed people, he’s *extremely* morally reprehensible. Zacharias may be a little outspoken, but he’s never done anything wrong in his life!”

“Why don’t you just *marry him*,” Ron said in an undertone that wasn’t quite under enough. Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Well, anyway,” Ron said with some haste. “I wasn’t meaning to compare their morals or anything. I just meant, you know. Smith and Malfoy look sort of – similar on paper. Kind of, you know, both snotty to us and complete gits and blond.”

“Malfoy’s not a git,” Harry said furiously, and then caved at Ron’s stare. “Oh all right, he is,” he said. “He’s a complete git but it’s not the *same*, he’s *different*.”

“Zacharias Smith,” Hermione said with the calm of a woman who had found her perfect vengeance against her chosen Weasley, “is much better-looking.”

“No he isn’t!” Ron and Harry said in outraged unison, and they exchanged really startled looks.

Ron suddenly looked as if he had a bit of a headache. “Not that I have any opinion on that at all, really,” he added. “They’re both ugly gits. I don’t know. I don’t care. I’m not having this conversation. Are we there yet?”

Hermione stopped in front of a large gate with honey-coloured collie dogs barking outside it and a badger carved on the front.

“Yes,” she said with some surprise. “I think we must be. These guard dogs are very expensive, you know. Madame Maxime breeds them in the kennels at Beauxbatons.”

Ron looked appalled. “He’s rich? Oh, he would be,” he added, rolling his eyes. “See? Rich snotty blond gits. They’re exactly the same.”

“They’re not,” Harry said. “Though Malfoy did once say he’d pick Hermione over Ginny.”

“They are the same,” Ron said darkly. “And I will kill them both.”

“Hello, doggies,” Hermione said in the same crooning tone she used to address Crookshanks. “Will you please tell Zacharias that Hermione Granger is here to see him?”

The dogs perked up their ears and ran across the gravel, their bodies sleek twists of sunlight.

“They can communicate with humans through a system of barks that sends the necessary information right into the human brain,” Hermione told them both as if they cared at all. “The story goes Madame Maxime had to breed dogs to follow a particularly accident-prone student around. They were trained to go and tell people whenever Timmy fell into the well.”

Hermione kept talking about the fascinating history of Beauxbatons while Harry and Ron peered through the gates. They saw the front door to the big house open: the house itself was a severe building with a couple of stern-looking gargoyles and pillars, and painted an incongruous bright yellow.

Zacharias Smith came out in very nice robes and began striding over the gravel, dogs at his heels yapping happily.

“Hermione,” he said, and smiled. “What a nice surprise!” His gaze flickered over Ron and Harry. “And you two,” he said, scowling at Harry.

“You cannot kill Malfoy,” Harry said in an undertone. “But if you’re actually overcome with the need to kill Smith, I will understand.”

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Smith let them all in, though for a moment it looked as if he was seriously considering doing otherwise. He probably realised that Hermione would be hardly likely to nip in the gates and then let him close them on Ron and Harry.

He led them into what was apparently The Conservatory, a stifling room which was all glass walls and fancy parlour furniture, and a house elf brought them all tea on a tea set that was all paper-thin china and metal with swirls on it. They all sat down, Hermione looking appreciatively around with her hands folded in her lap, and Ron and Harry mostly trying not to break anything.

Then they all sat around. Smith was silent and irritable-looking: nothing like Malfoy, Harry thought, the insult rankling with him. You could never shut Malfoy up. He bet Smith couldn’t do impressions either.

“Hermione, don’t think I’m not pleased to see you,” Smith said with what appeared to be a very poor attempt at charm. “But I think perhaps you’ve come here to use me for something.”

“Why would you think that?” Hermione inquired, her face freezing.

“Because I’m not – really stupid?” Smith said. “And because you brought your goons.”

He gave Harry and Ron a look as if they were actually Crabbe and Goyle, or possibly a

couple of monkeys Hermione had trained.

“Keep dancing around your point, Smith,” Harry said in a bored voice. “I could use a nap.”

Thinking about Crabbe and Goyle reminded Harry that Malfoy had friends, lots of friends, and Smith was kind of a bitter loner. He didn’t know what Ron was talking about.

Smith glared at him. He didn’t know what Hermione was talking about, either, Harry thought. It should’ve been obvious to anyone that Smith had a horrible hateful face, whereas Malfoy had quite a nice face once you got him to stop all the scowling and sneering and so forth.

“Is this about the Hufflepuff Cup?” Smith asked.

“What do you know about it?” Harry demanded.

Smith looked stropky. “What d’you want it for?”

“Look, this is for the war,” Harry said shortly. “So get on with it, get over yourself and tell us everything you know.”

“I don’t think so,” Smith said. “You people are the end of enough! What d’you think you’re playing at? You need people to stand against Umbridge so you form the D.A. and then once you don’t need a big club anymore it’s all, sorry chaps, we’re back to being the super special ones and heaven help you if you ask what happened at the Ministry in fifth year because this war affects everyone’s lives and the whole school is terrified. You set your crazy harpies on us!”

“Don’t talk about Ginny like that,” Ron snapped. “I’ll just *bet* you walked up to her and asked her politely, did you?”

“Why should I have to go begging for information?” Smith snapped. “I joined your club. I’d join this war if I could. I’m no supporter of You-Know-Who, I want to help, and I don’t appreciate being kept out in the cold!”

Hermione leaned over the table and said: “I told you – some of what happened at the Ministry, Zacharias.”

Smith regarded her with a little more warmth. “I know you did,” he said. “I’ll help *you*.”

“All right,” Harry said. “You don’t like us much? Fine. We don’t like you much, either. And maybe we could’ve told you more than we did, but actually someone I loved died in the Ministry and it was a little painful to talk about, and also if you don’t know things you might feel a bit left out but if I don’t know where the Horcruxes are then Voldemort might win this war. So tell me where the Cup is. Right now.”

“What’s a Horcrux?” Smith asked.

Hermione started to explain and Smith started firing questions at her. Harry and Ron reached for tea and biscuits.

“Great-Aunt Hep’s kind of a legend in our family,” Smith said at last. “I didn’t – uh, I didn’t know she was murdered by You-Know-Who, though.” He looked a bit shaken by the information. “The Cup’s in Albania,” he said at last. “We can – when we made it we built in a tracking charm with Smith blood in it. But Dad heard rumours that there was dark stuff going on in Albania, and then there was You-Know-Who, and we thought it’d be best to wait and – bide our time until we went to get the Cup.” He looked around at them all. “I know everyone thinks Hufflepuffs are stupid,” he said, a bit aggressively. “But we’re not. We just play a long game.”

Harry didn’t know what kind of long game Justin Finch-Fletchley might be playing, but unlike Smith he remembered what was actually important and didn’t comment.

“Can you tell us where in Albania the Cup is?” Hermione asked eagerly, going for a quill, parchment and ink that she’d somehow managed to conceal in her light jacket.

“No,” Smith said, and looked honestly sorry to disappoint her. “The closer I get to it, though, I’d know,” he offered. “It’s like – feeling something is hot and cold. If I could go scouting around Albania, then I’d find it. I’m sure I would, if only my Dad would let me.”

“Oh, your daddy won’t let you?” Harry said, raising his eyebrows. “Is he one of the other side?”

“Of course he’s not!” Smith yelped. “He’s just really protective, that’s all.”

“I thought you said you wanted to help,” Harry said, leaning forward across the table and the stupid tea-tray. “This is your chance, Smith. You don’t want to be left out? Then don’t be.”

“Travelling overseas by magic takes ages,” Smith informed him. “Apparation won’t work properly, and Portkeys are too conspicuous. Not to mention I’ll have to pretend to be a Muggle half the time in Albania, and deal with God knows what stuff You-Know-Who’s put up to guard it.”

“What’s your point, Smith?”

“I want help,” Smith said flatly.

“What d’you want us to do?” Harry demanded. “The war’s on here in England. Voldemort’s taking England first, the Order is busy here, I have to be *here*—”

“Who wants you?” Smith asked. “I need someone with brains. I want Hermione to come with me.”

He looked at Ron for a moment after he said that, and looked very amused. Harry didn’t dare look at Ron.

“I,” Hermione said. “The three of us, we really need to – we always stick together.”

“Then no deal,” Smith said with finality. “You want me to walk into God knows what by myself because you three snap your fingers?”

“No,” Harry snarled. “We want you to walk into God knows what because *it might save the world*.”

“Fat lot of good it’d be if I didn’t get the Cup and got torn to pieces,” Smith said. “I want help. If it’s that important, Hermione can come with me.”

“Alone with her in *Albania*?” Ron roared. “And what would you be planning to do with her there, may I ask?”

“Find the Cup,” Smith said. “Remember?”

“I,” Ron said, and opened and shut his mouth like a fish. Harry thought he might be about to make good on his plan to kill Smith when Hermione spoke. Her hands were clenched into fists in her lap now.

“I’ll go,” she said. “It’s a Horcrux, I have to. Someone has to.” She smiled around at all their stunned faces. “I’ll be back in no time.”

“You have to *search Albania*,” Ron exploded. “You could be gone for months!”

Hermione gave what was clearly supposed to be a dismissive tinkling laugh, even though it came out more like a gasp. “I’m sure I can figure it out before that.”

“I,” Ron said. “Then I-”

“Can I have a word, Ron?” Harry asked, and nodded towards the doors of the conservatory. Ron nodded dumbly and followed him out into a considerably less intimidating hallway.

Harry was trying to think past the screaming fury in his head. He wanted to strangle Smith because this was *Ron* and *Hermione*, they’d always been there, right there, Hermione’d just said it. *We always stick together*. They were his friends, his first friends, his only real friends. He needed them.

Only Hermione was going. She’d said so, and they both knew it was easier to turn back the sea than Hermione when she’d made up her mind.

Hermione was going and they couldn’t let her go alone. Not into a strange place filled with the traps Voldemort has laid, with only that unknown quantity Smith at her side. But Harry couldn’t go, he couldn’t: he thought of burning orphanages and the great snake who might be a Horcrux and Voldemort’s laughing red-eyed face. He couldn’t concede the battleground. He wouldn’t do it.

Ron couldn’t let Hermione go alone. He loved her – well, Harry loved her. But Harry knew, had known for some time while trying not to know because surely that would change things between the three of them, that Ron might be – well, really *in love* with her.

He’d want to go with her. But it would hurt him to have to ask Harry that, to think of himself as deserting Harry. They’d meant to stick together, Harry thought with a twist in his chest. The three of them. Always.

“What is it?” Ron asked, putting his back against the door of the conservatory as if waiting to be shot.

You're too used to people following behind you like sheep. This isn't just your war: sometimes people have to do things on their own.

Harry cleared his throat and said: “You should go with her.”

Ron blinked. “What?”

“I mean, you have to,” Harry said, speaking with less difficulty now the first words were out. “You can't let her go off with just Smith. You guys can get it done quickly and come back with the Horcrux. I know you can.”

Ron kept looking at him directly for a moment, then tearing his eyes away, then looking back. “But Harry, mate,” he said, and sounded eleven years old again: it broke Harry's heart. “What about you?”

“Oh, me,” Harry said. “I'll be fine. I've got Malfoy, and your mum and dad and Ginny back at Number Twelve. Spoiled for choice, really. Not that you shouldn't try to get back pretty sharpish.” He tried to grin and felt it was a ghastly failure. “You don't want to miss all the fun.”

“No,” Ron murmured. “No, we don't.” He stopped and said: “But Malfoy's gone.”

“He'll be back soon,” Harry said. “Told me so.”

“Oh,” said Ron. “Oh. That's good.” He looked at Harry for another moment, at him and away, at him and away, as if he was pausing for necessary breath between gulps of water. “I don't like it,” he said. “Are you sure?”

“Ron, I hate it,” Harry said. “I'm really sure.”

“I-” Ron said, and exhaled sharply, as if he'd been hit. “OK. I guess. I suppose we don't have any other choice.”

Hermione argued in much the same way, but she did so while clinging to Ron's hand as if she would never let go.

“Then that's settled,” Smith said, looking less than pleased. “We'd better get out of here quick before my dad comes home from work.”

*

Smith was pretty insistent about getting started right away. He was right too, of course: the sooner Ron and Hermione left, the sooner they could get back to him.

Harry still found himself walking down dusty roads in Kent while the sun sank and the sky turned darker and colder, with Ron and Hermione pressed solidly on either side of him. Smith was trailing sulkily behind.

Harry was clenching his jaw so tight it hurt. They all kept walking into each others' legs: they didn't want an inch of space between them. Harry felt like he was twelve again and he thought his friends weren't writing him letters, had somehow been pulled out from under him, leaving him alone again.

"We'll be back soon, Harry," Hermione whispered, her voice sweet and soothing in his ear. "Soon, I promise."

"You'll hardly know we're gone," said Ron, and punched him in the shoulder hard enough to bruise.

"OK," said Harry, who already knew they were going, gone, down to his bones.

"It'll be dark by the time we Apparate to the port at this rate," Smith said from behind them.

"Shut up Smith," Ron said savagely.

"No, he's right," Harry said thickly. "You should-" He cleared his throat. "You should probably go."

He stepped forward, away from them, and felt the cold night air where they'd been surrounding him.

"Oh, *Harry*," Hermione wailed, and threw herself into his arms. She almost knocked the breath out of him and he gathered her up off her feet and against his chest, hiding his face in the mass of her hair. She was shaking with silent sobs.

"It's OK, Hermione, really, it's OK," he murmured, holding her so tightly he thought he might break her ribs. She gasped and sobbed until he worried he really was depriving her of all air and then he put her down and pushed her back so he wouldn't grab her again.

She stepped further away, uncertainly moving towards Smith. "We'll be back soon," she said again, blinking back more tears as others rolled down her face unchecked. "Really soon, oh Harry, I promise."

"I believe you," Harry said.

"Yeah – we'll be back in no time," Ron said, hovering in front of him. He punched Harry solidly in the chest.

"Yeah," Harry said, and punched him back.

"Right," Ron said, and moved towards Hermione, and then wavered. "Oh hell," he said, and went back and grabbed Harry in a rough hug.

Harry took a sharp breath and tried not to lose it.

"Catch you later, mate," Ron said, thumping Harry on the back with one hand while the other held Harry's shirt clenched in his fist. "Tell Mum I – love her and everything, and you, you –

take care of yourself, OK?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Yeah. I will. Catch you later.”

Ron stepped back and then stepped quickly towards Hermione, who was crying and who Smith might slide in to comfort any moment. They all stood together with their wands out, and Harry stood watching them.

“I always thought you two were overly close,” Smith said, eyes flicking between Ron and Harry.

“Shut *up* Smith, I swear to *God*,” said Ron, and they Apparated.

Harry was left standing alone in some Godforsaken road in Kent, he’d never been to Kent before and he never wanted to go again, taking deep wet-sounding breaths. He wasn’t crying: he wasn’t a little boy howling because he was all alone. He was *fine*.

He remembered being six years old in school. Dudley was home sick, and Aunt Petunia had become worried about his temperature and decided to take him to hospital and she’d called Uncle Vernon and he’d gone to join them. Nobody had thought to call the school. Harry had waited outside the gates until it was dark and cold and deserted, crisp packets floating around the playground like lonely ghosts, until he was absolutely sure that nobody was coming, that nobody would ever come. Then, weary before he began, he’d started the long walk home.

He Apparated to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and found all its windows dark.

*

He wandered through the empty, shadowy house and found Mrs Weasley’s note on the table. He cursed himself for not listening to when she’d said they were all going back to the Burrow, and he thought about going to the Burrow tomorrow and breaking it to them that Ron and Hermione were gone.

For now, here he was – alone in the Black house, with dead people in portraits whispering to each other upstairs, every inch of the place cold and deserted and tainted by evil and misery. He thought of Sirius trapped here, going mad – he was just like *Sirius*–

Not yet, a voice in his mind said coldly. Sirius’ best friend was dead.

Not yet but maybe soon, and Harry wouldn’t *be there*. He was supposed to be there, they were all supposed to be together.

Harry couldn’t bear thinking about it, he wasn’t going to. He crumpled up Mrs Weasley’s note in his fist and threw it against the wall. Kreacher was here too, Kreacher who’d betrayed Sirius, somewhere lurking around and Harry was damned if he’d give Kreacher a laugh at his expense.

He had the sudden mad impulse to burn down this whole horrible place with Kreacher inside it. Kreacher would deserve it, and Harry could do it, too. The house was his, he could do what he liked.

Only Malfoy loved this bleak terrible house, and he was coming back.

Harry left the kitchen and went running up the stairs to stand on the landing in the dark. He didn't want to go into his own room, try to sleep while the house whispered and creaked around him and know that he was alone. He didn't want to *stay here*, but where was he supposed to go? Was he supposed to go to the Burrow when Ron wasn't there to invite him, when he'd have to tell them their son was gone into danger and Harry wouldn't be there to watch his back?

He crossed his arms over his chest. It was freezing in this stupid house.

At least Charlie wasn't here, he thought. He didn't know how he was going to deal with Charlie: mostly he didn't want to see him and he didn't want Malfoy to see him either. Maybe he was a little freaked out by the whole gay thing, but he wasn't letting that matter. Harry wasn't prejudiced or anything, he just wasn't really used to it, but he wouldn't let that stop him, he was going to be accepting and understanding. And Charlie was going to back off.

Harry tried to put his thoughts together so they made any sort of sense, but it was like breaking glass in a dark room and trying to pick up the pieces. It just hurt, and everything continued to make no sense.

He stood, arms locked around himself, and didn't think, and then bolted for the study. He didn't look at the book Hermione had expected to come back and open at the right page by memory, or where Ron had made himself a miniature fort of cushions to study in. He went straight for the Pensieve, drew his wand with trembling hands and slid it into the silvery waters of memory.

*

He found himself in a place that he recognised: the Slytherin common room. It looked different in near darkness and total silence. Malfoy was sitting in a chair beside the dying embers of a fire, reading by the light of his wand.

The sight of him uncoiled something tight and hurting in Harry's chest. He took a deep, shaky breath and he went and sat on the floor, close by, pretending that Malfoy at least was here and that he was all right.

Malfoy didn't look very different, and he did look drawn and tired from lack of sleep. The fine lines Harry knew were etched at the corner of his eyes now had just started to grow: he was reading a book about magical repair, and Harry thought it might be late autumn or winter in their sixth year.

This darkness was different: Malfoy was here. Harry felt better.

Malfoy made a small pained sound and shut his eyes, leaned his face briefly into his open palm.

"You too, huh?" Harry asked. Malfoy, not hearing him, drew a determined breath and

returned to his book.

“Up late reading again, Malfoy?” drawled Blaise Zabini, lounging in a suddenly open doorway.

“Oh, go *away*,” Harry snapped, but of course Blaise Zabini couldn’t hear him either.

“Bothering me again, Zabini?” Malfoy snapped. He sounded really tired: he should go to bed.

“Just concerned,” said Zabini smoothly.

Malfoy laughed, a sharp swift sound. “Sure you are.”

“We all are,” Zabini said. “Word has it that Pansy cries herself to sleep every night. Quite the heartbreaker, aren’t you?”

“*Shut up*,” Harry growled at him.

Malfoy made another small pained sound, lifting a hand ostensibly to cover his eyes from the light issuing from the door Zabini had opened, but really to hide his face from Zabini. Harry saw his face: it looked like Malfoy was close to breaking his heart himself.

“That’s supposed to make me feel better, is it?” he asked through locked teeth. “Your concern is really touching, Zabini.”

“No,” Zabini said thoughtfully. “I can’t imagine her mooning over you is making you feel better. You’re trying to do something really important here, and you don’t need that. What you need, Malfoy, is to have some fun. That’s what *I* think.”

Malfoy looked up, caught by something: whether it was the implied flattery, the idea of relief or both.

His voice wavered on the edge of interest. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well – a Muggle pub,” Zabini said. “Not one near Hogwarts. A proper one. Maybe a club. I know a few places. What d’you say, Malfoy? Are you up for it?”

Malfoy had his head tilted in that way he had when he was questioning the whole world, trying to put it in the correct perspective, but he was smiling a tentative, crooked smile. “Maybe.”

Zabini walked towards Malfoy in a *weird* way, flowing, deliberate and actually Harry thought he looked like what he was, which was a *total git*, and it was then – somewhat belatedly – that Harry realised what was going on. He’d gone into the Pensieve with some part of his mind still thinking about the weird gay stuff, and now here it *was*, this was how it had started, and Malfoy was such an idiot, how had he fallen for this, and God, he looked so tired.

“Then c’mon,” Zabini coaxed, reaching the side of Malfoy’s chair, and he offered his hand.

Malfoy took it.

Harry had to get out of this stupid memory, he had to, but he didn't want to leave and go back to that house. He couldn't leave – if he just concentrated on a different memory, on something *else*.

The scene before him, Malfoy with his hand in Zabini's, melted and blurred like a series of images going by him on film too fast for Harry to see, and Harry had a moment of great relief right before he saw the other picture, the new memory resolving in front of Harry's eyes, which was Malfoy and Zabini on a bed, somebody's wand glowing on a pillow.

They were kissing.

“Oh my God, *what?*” Harry said. “This had better not be the same night, Malfoy, because if it is you're kind of easy!”

He stopped telling off a Malfoy who couldn't hear him about his loose morals, and realised he felt kind of hysterical. They were kissing, not like with Charlie when Malfoy was frozen with shock but actually kissing, *guys kissing*, Ron would've had a fit. Harry could only see anything because they'd left the curtain at the foot of the bed half looped up, which was careless in the extreme.

“Is this the Slytherin dormitory?” Harry demanded. “I hope you've cast a Silencing Charm!” He was overcome by a rush of pity for Crabbe and Goyle and the other one. Nott.

Malfoy once again couldn't hear him and in any case was otherwise occupied, leaning against either his or Zabini's pillows while Zabini kissed him, *really kissed him*, and Malfoy made small soft sounds and moved underneath him, hands stroking up and down Zabini's back.

Actually, Harry told himself, it was fine. Harry was fine. Not freaked out at all, he was very understanding about the whole gay thing, and it could've been a lot worse. They were both fully clothed. Well, Malfoy was wearing pyjamas. Fully clothed in pyjamas.

Zabini pushed up Malfoy's pyjama shirt, skimming a hand up along his ribs, and all right, Harry had been fine before Zabini's *wandering hands*, but now he thought it was time for the next memory, please.

Malfoy sat up, pushing Zabini off a bit, and pulled off the shirt. Harry was caught by a vague sense of – something wrong there, something not there – and then he realised.

Malfoy was breathless and flushed, the blush following Zabini's mouth down his neck, down his chest. Which, of course, had no scar.

Harry hadn't given it to him yet.

The cold realisation held Harry there, and then blessed relief came when Zabini stopped taking advantage of Malfoy or whatever and started talking.

“I thought you hadn't done this before,” he murmured.

“Uh,” Malfoy said, distracted and blinking, breathing hard: “You did? Then Pansy's been

telling lies to protect her virtue.”

Zabini laughed, sounding impatient and a little distracted himself. “I meant with guys.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said, sounding more uncertain. “Yeah. That’s right.”

He looked a little bit anxious and a little bit pleased that Zabini hadn’t been able to tell. The crazy things Malfoy’s vanity led him to, Harry despaired, and Zabini should’ve known better than to confuse someone who was supposed to be his *friend*-

“Maybe,” Zabini said slowly, and sat up and moved back, away from Malfoy, towards the foot of the bed. “Maybe we should call it a night.”

“What?” Malfoy said.

“Good decision,” Harry said.

Zabini almost made it off the bed too, though Harry thought he was moving unacceptably slowly, when Malfoy moved – not in a stupid obvious way like Zabini had moved, but like a predator, which was a ridiculous thought considering Malfoy was on his hands and knees on a bed. He had Zabini pinned on the mattress before Zabini could blink.

“Hey there,” Malfoy murmured, shoulders and ruffled hair gleaming in the wand’s light, smiling a familiar crooked smile with an unfamiliarly swollen mouth. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He glanced up for a moment and saw the curtain, still half looped up. He laughed, almost in Harry’s face, said: “Whoops,” and drew it down, obscuring the bed from sight.

*

Well, that hadn’t helped with anything, being understanding or *anything*, and now Harry was kind of too afraid of what memory he might see next, so he left the Pensieve.

He blinked around the darkness of the study. That’d been weird. Gay stuff was weird. Blaise Zabini was a terrible person and an awful friend.

He saw the book Hermione wouldn’t open on a table, and had to leave. He could cope with anything, really, he felt, anything besides a reminder that Ron and Hermione were gone and going further away every moment.

Harry went and checked in Malfoy’s bedroom to see if he’d come back yet.

He hadn’t. It was dark and still in there, just like it was in every room in the house.

Harry remembered this morning, which in clichéd fashion seemed a very long time ago, and Malfoy and Ginny babbling about his secret project being finished. They’d been about to show it to him.

He couldn’t see anything that looked like a work of genius, even considering Malfoy’s talent

for exaggeration. Then he realised that the bed was covered with actual covers, and not with canvas.

Harry went over and sat on it, examining it. He wondered if Malfoy had, in wild emulation of Mr Weasley, made a flying bed.

Something caught his eye and Harry tipped his head backwards, lay backwards and thought: that was why Malfoy'd been reading *Hogwarts: A History*. He'd wanted to read about the Great Hall.

Above Malfoy's bed was the sky, stars glittering in an endless wash of blackness, hemmed in by Malfoy's bed curtains. It was the sky, just like Harry had eaten under at school every day for years, and how had Malfoy *done* it, and Harry was staring when suddenly a little figure on a broomstick broke into the quiet peace of the sky, careening through the stars with a tiny helicopter in hot pursuit.

Harry laughed, a soft incredulous sound, and eased himself up on the bed, head on the pillow and hands behind his head. Of course Malfoy hadn't left it at that: of course Malfoy had done *this*.

There was a flying car, and random clouds in the night sky shaped as no clouds in the world had ever been shaped according to Malfoy's whim, and a weird thing that looked like a corkscrew which Harry thought might be Malfoy's idea of a rocket.

"Harry," Ginny's voice said softly from the door. "You found the sky canopy. Do you like it? Isn't it cool?"

Harry levered himself up on one elbow. Ginny was standing in the doorway, freckles dark against her moonlit-pale skin.

"I thought you'd all gone," he said in a low voice.

"We have," Ginny said uncertainly, walking from the door towards the bed. "Mum was really set on going home, she made me promise, but I thought – well, I hadn't said bye in person, and I thought – where are Ron and Hermione?"

"*Don't*," Harry said sharply, and then at her look of fear: "It's just – they're not here, that's all. Ginny, come here."

She came over and sat on the edge of the bed and Harry sat up and pulled her towards him, warm and real in his arms, and she was there, he wasn't alone, and he kissed the curve of her neck.

"Harry?" she said on a gasp, sounding startled.

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled, his blood simmering, moving slow and hot in his veins. He wasn't cold anymore, either. "I know we're – we're not-"

"Harry, I can't stay," Ginny whispered. "I promised Mum I'd come home. I have to go home."

“Yeah,” Harry said, thumbing a curl off her neck, kissing the place where it had been, and then looking up at her troubled dark eyes and kissing her soft mouth urgently.

He used his light clasp on her neck to pull her down to the pillows, just beside him, just kissing her. She was kissing him back now, mouth opening for him, hands sliding lightly down his chest.

“Yeah,” he said, eyes closing, kissing her deeper. “I’m sorry, I understand. You’re going home.”

Must be nice.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ginny hesitated, and then sighed a long slow sigh into Harry's mouth. It felt like her breath turned into a warm coil of comfort in his chest, easing the empty ache there.

He'd been holding on to her too hard, hands closed around her curls almost in fists. He opened his fist and stroked a curl, then the material of her jumper. Mrs Weasley had made this, he knew. She was a little piece of the Burrow, a home opening to him when he was twelve years old, not quite his, never quite his, but welcoming.

She looked at him like she might want to be his. Harry kissed her again. Her mouth was soft and yielding, opening easily against his. He opened his eyes a little to see her: her eyes were warm and her hair was glorious in the faint light of Malfoy's stars.

She shifted under his stroking hand, guessing what he was thinking or misinterpreting it, he wasn't sure which, and she pulled off the jumper. He helped her tug it over her ruffled head, touched her bare white arms. Underneath she was wearing her Muggle summer dress, even though it was too light: she must have been cold.

Ginny *was* shivering a little. Harry didn't think it was from cold. She tucked herself against him, lying almost on his chest, and he eased all her weight onto him. She was small, light, but she seemed like an anchor.

He leaned up and kissed her again, a slow slide of his mouth against hers. Her long slow sigh had been broken into a dozen tiny, taut breaths, breaths they were sharing from lip to lip. He felt her take her hands from his chest and looked in case that meant – but Ginny's hands were only lifted to the front of her dress.

Harry stared as one small, yellow button slid from the material. He looked up quickly, as if he'd stumbled in by accident and wasn't allowed to see, to Ginny's face. She bit her lip and smiled at him, looking nervous and excited, and then she nodded.

Very carefully, he reached up and undid the next button. His hands were trembling and he tugged at the dress, the material pulling tight, and he ended up almost yanking the button out. He looked at Ginny again, in brief uncertain agony, and she laughed a little shakily and undid the next button.

Harry's hands looked large and dark against her skin: like some adult stranger's hands.

He tried to stop them shaking as he slid the light material off one shoulder, revealing skin that looked pale and smooth under the gentle light of the stars. Light turned her freckles into a dusting of gold and Harry kissed the freckles. Her skin was satin-soft and warm under his mouth. He could feel her heart pounding against his lips.

It was such a relief not to think.

He pressed kisses along the slope of her collarbone, rested his mouth against the hollow of her throat and pulled her in closer against him, one hand on her hip.

Ginny pushed the dress off the other shoulder by herself. The cotton pooled at her waist, he

felt it brush the back of his hand like a whisper, and he drew back a little to look at her.

She was almost shimmering in the starlight, his familiar Ginny and yet suddenly different, mysterious, a stranger made of shadows and curves. He looked at the swell of her breasts over pink lace, thought of the way she loved pink and purple and over-decorating things. The realisation that she over-decorated even herself in secret made him smile, and he reached up and kissed her mouth, felt it curve in answer to his smile. He leaned back and saw her smile at him properly, all warmth and comfort, her brown eyes lit up.

“Harry,” she said in a low wonderful voice. “I love you.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Er. Thanks.”

Warmth and comfort fled from the room. Possibly they were as embarrassed as he was. He twisted the fallen material of her dress awkwardly in his fist, thought briefly of just tugging her down and pretending the entire exchange hadn’t happened.

The expression on Ginny’s face indicated that any such tugging down might result in Harry learning about the joys of the Bat-Bogey hex firsthand.

“Thanks,” she repeated. “Yeah, that’s-”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, horrorstruck. “What d’you want me to say?”

Ginny’s face twisted. She scrambled out of his lap, crouched on the bed across from him as if he was an enemy.

“Harry, I would’ve thought it was *obvious* what I – I don’t want you to say anything you don’t mean, but I thought... You said that we could’ve had years and that you wanted to – what else is that supposed to mean? What did you mean?”

Her mouth went all out of shape for a moment and Harry thought she might be going to cry.

“I didn’t – it’s not that I don’t mean it,” Harry said. “I don’t know. I’ve never said it to anyone.”

“Well, Harry, nor have I!” Ginny gestured helplessly and then seemed to remember she was half naked. She changed the gesture into a grab, pulling the fabric up over herself like a sheet. “It’s a big deal to me too. I wouldn’t say it to anyone else-”

“Of course you have.”

“I *haven’t*!”

Ginny looked amazed and indignant that he was accusing her of lying. Harry was so bad at this.

“I mean, like to your Mum and Dad and Ron and Charlie and people,” Harry said. “You’ve said it to your family.”

“Yeah,” Ginny replied, and then stopped and looked at him with dawning understanding.

“I’ve never said it to *anyone*,” Harry repeated stupidly, as if he could make her see by saying it often enough. Her face softened and for an instant he thought it would be all right, but then her eyes narrowed.

“You’re right, I’ve said it,” she said. “To Mum and Dad – and *Ron*. You didn’t answer me before. Where’s Ron?”

Harry’s hand, half-raised to get her back, closed into a fist, and all the coldness and despair rushed back. He didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to think about how far away Ron and Hermione were by now.

“Harry!” Ginny’s voice was almost a scream. “Where’s my brother?”

Harry looked away from her, into a dark corner of the room. “In Roumania by now, for all I know,” he said in a low voice, hating every word. “He and Hermione and Zacharias Smith went to find a Horcrux.”

“And you didn’t go with them?”

“Don’t you think I *wanted* to?” Harry roared, his head snapping back around to glare at her.

Ginny glared ferociously back. “And just what did you think you were doing, not telling me, snogging me and – how d’you think I would have felt if we’d, if I’d found out after – Ron’s my brother! I love him! And you didn’t tell me right away. Exactly what am I to you, Harry, some prize you get after the war? Something you snog and put away in a cupboard when you’re too busy to snog, something you don’t even *talk to*?”

“I couldn’t talk about it,” Harry ground out. “I didn’t even want to think about it.”

Ginny looked ready to spit. “You never talk to me about anything!” She was shaking with fury so badly that she was fumbling, unable to button her dress. When she lifted her face her cheeks were scarlet. “I didn’t want a holiday when I decided not to go back to school, you know, Harry. I wanted to be part of this. I wanted to *help*—”

“Yeah?” Harry snapped. “When d’you help? Ron and Hermione and Malfoy and I, we were clawing through books to find out stuff about Horcruxes, and you never touched a book. What did you think this was going to be, did you think it was going to be glamorous and exciting like, like you thought meeting *Harry Potter* was going to be back on the platform when we were kids? What am I to you, if it comes to that! What good are you?”

Ginny had her buttons done up now, all but a couple. Her fingers stilled on the front of her dress. Her whole body seemed to go still.

“I would’ve helped,” she said, very quiet. “I hate reading.”

“I’m not mad about it myself,” Harry said impatiently, trying not to think about the way Hermione was so happy surrounded by books, the way she could put in a bookmark as if she was patting a child’s head.

“You don’t understand,” Ginny said, her voice so small it seemed stifled. “I used to love books. A book. I used to save up opening it like a treat last thing at night, smooth out the pages, use my best quill to write out things I would have never told a living soul and – and it was the Dark Lord and I almost killed and I almost died! In second year I had panic attacks whenever I had to go into the library. I’d make sure to take so many notes in class, so I wouldn’t have to open a book, I – I got control of it, of course I did, but – there were so many piles of books in there and everything was so claustrophobic, you were all so desperate, and I didn’t want you to see me... I didn’t want you to know. It’s stupid. I know that.” She lifted her chin. “You’re not the only one with some issues, Harry.”

“Well – you should’ve told me,” Harry said, and then winced. “Wait, I mean. You think too much about how I see you...”

He meant that not showing stuff like being afraid of books, the way that Ginny couldn’t catch a child in midair with the pressure of his eyes on her – that the pressure must’ve been horrible. He meant that what he’d seen of her was fine.

He was saying this all wrong, and she was becoming even more furious.

“You’re right,” Ginny said, trying to sound calm when he thought her burning rage might actually make her hair burst into flame. “I’m done worrying about how you see me. I’m done waiting for you to talk to me, or to let me help.”

She practically threw herself off the bed, landing like a bristling sure-footed cat, and faced him with her eyes blazing.

“Ginny,” Harry said, terrified by what a mess he’d made out of this, feeling hopelessly tangled: he was still cold and desperate, and hadn’t they been going to, and he didn’t know what to do or say.

“I’m going to do something *by myself!*” Ginny shouted. “All that talk about coming back to me – well, maybe if you’re lucky, I’ll come back to you. And once I do, Harry Potter, you’d better talk – no. No. You’d better come on your knees ready to *listen* to me!”

She whirled like an astonishingly mobile volcano and slammed out of the room. The crack of the door echoed through Harry’s skull and clenched teeth, causing an instant headache. He held onto the bedpost until his fingers ached and thought about following her to the Burrow, having to explain to the Weasleys about where he’d let Ron go...

Best to give Ginny a chance to cool down and a chance for him to think up some way to tell the Weasleys and make things up with her. If he could make things up with her. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her so angry before.

It appeared that Malfoy might actually have been right when he said that Harry was the lamest person on the face of the earth.

When it came to girls.

He’d also offered to help with that but of course Malfoy, being Malfoy, was nowhere to be

found when you actually wanted him.

Harry lay back down on the bed, hands linked behind his head, and gave the stars a dirty look. "I blame *you*, you git," he muttered, and tried very hard not think about what might be happening to Malfoy this minute.

He lay awake for hours, listening for sounds in that silent house. The stars were the only light to be found all through Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place that night.

*

The next morning Harry was eating burned toast – he knew Kreacher sneaked in and fiddled with the toaster settings when he wasn't looking – when his morning was made complete by the advent of Professor Snape.

Harry stared at him blankly, wondering if he was some sort of punishment from God for upsetting girls.

Snape stared back at him. Judging from his expression, he was wondering if Harry was some sort of punishment from God for upsetting – everyone he'd ever met.

Then Harry remembered that Malfoy'd said Snape would come back to test Harry's Occlumency. He was torn between his usual cold dread at the thought of a lesson with Snape and the burning urge to do something, anything, so he wouldn't have to think.

"Hello," he said at last. Snape's lip curled in a silent sneer.

Harry pulled his toast to pieces and ate the smallest piece. It left an ashy taste in his dry mouth.

"Emptied the place so nobody would see you make a fool of yourself attempting Occlumency, did you?" Snape inquired silkily.

"No," Harry said, and tried to think of some way not to utter the awful truth that Ron and Hermione were gone. "I sort of had a fight with Ginny-"

Snape actually took a step backwards. "I have no interest in the details of your dalliances with whichever Weasley you are romancing this week. I realise that thinking about yourself is your favourite pastime, but could you possibly turn your attention – just for a minute – to the small matter of saving the wizarding world from the threat of the Dark Lord?"

Harry pushed his plate of ashes away. He was starting to feel better, actually.

He knew a challenge when he heard one.

"You want to see what I can do?" he snapped.

Snape leaned in the doorway and regarded Harry with steady, cold hatred. His expression did not change as he nodded slowly, not breaking their gaze.

Harry stood up, the legs of his chair scraping against the floor as he pushed it back. He put one hand in his pocket and with his free hand, he beckoned.

“Come on, then,” he said. “Read my mind.”

Snape struck like a snake, one Harry couldn’t talk to and had no weapon against, and for a moment Harry just felt blind panic. Snape was going to hit a memory in a minute, Ginny by starlight or this bleak tearing loneliness or something humiliating and Harry couldn’t *bear* it, he couldn’t think.

He attacked back, tried to strike out and hit something. He could only see – walls, high black blank walls in Snape’s mind being shoved higher and pushed farther back as Harry attacked.

Then he realised that Snape had stopped attacking to protect himself instantly, defensively, as if he was afraid. Snape, so used to hiding behind a slick curtain of hair and a sharp torrent of words, so bitterly resentful of anyone intruding on his privacy, remembered the last Occlumency lesson. He didn’t want to risk Harry getting so much as a glimpse of his mind.

Harry tried to – sort of feint, with his mind, take advantage of Snape’s wariness, and thought of sorting through Malfoy’s memories, heard Malfoy saying “Concentrate” and saw in Snape’s memory Narcissa Malfoy’s face.

Mrs Malfoy at night, scared and in pain and trying not to show it. Malfoy’s mother and a traitor to Sirius and someone Harry had not quite hated, golden hair streaming in the wind of a lost, past night.

He remembered with a shock that he’d told her to go to Voldemort: he’d sent Malfoy’s mother to her death.

He was thrown violently out of Snape’s mind, felt the shock reverberate through his body, but he’d seen something and he’d stayed shielded.

Harry grasped the table and did not look away from Snape, even now. “Well?” he ground out.

“There may have been a *slight* improvement, Mr Potter,” Snape conceded. “I put it down to Mr Malfoy’s tireless efforts in what seemed to everyone an utterly hopeless task.”

Harry bared his teeth at him. “Student’s only as good as the teacher, I guess.”

“Well, I have many things to do and more pleasant people to see, so I think I will be going.”

Snape had actually turned when Harry said: “Hey!”

He looked over his shoulder, one black eye peering coldly. “Yes?”

“Aren’t you going to – I passed, didn’t I? I showed you I could do it. Aren’t you going to tell me how to get to Nagini?”

“Mr Potter,” Snape said, in the tones of a man whose patience had frayed while holding him over an abyss. “You have – for the first time, I might add – showed some bare sliver of

competence at the most basic form of Occlumency. And you wish me to wave you merrily on your way to the stronghold of the most powerful wizard in the world. Have you ever heard of hubris?"

"D'you want me to just do nothing?" Harry demanded. "People are dying. I can't just wait here in this tomb of a house!"

Snape hesitated, then nodded his head.

"A test," he proposed. "Get some of the Order members to go with you in case you stumble in over your head. Did you know that the Dark Lord is contemplating making more Horcruxes?"

Harry felt as if he'd been hit over the head. More – he'd never find them all, how could he-

"I suppose," Snape said thoughtfully, "a soul is much like a precious vase. Once shattered, what does it matter to the owner how many pieces it is broken into? But how difficult would it be for someone seeking to destroy every atom of the vase, if the vase was ground into dust and scattered to the winds? We have to stop this, Potter."

He strode forward, took a lump of black stone from his robes and tossed it onto the table in front of Harry.

"The Dark Lord has sent some of his men to perform a ritual which will – set up formidable wards for his Horcruxes. They meet at midnight this day week. This Portkey will take you to the place. And if the Order reports that you did well, then – perhaps we can try for the snake."

The thought of being able to do something real and useful, being able to stop thinking and simply act, made Harry smile. Snape looked vaguely startled and then severe, and Harry didn't even care.

"Sir," Harry said for the first time this morning. "Is – how is Malfoy?"

"He's alive," said Snape coolly, though he relapsed into looking startled. Perhaps it was feeling off guard that made him add: "He asked me to ascertain that you were in the same state. I don't particularly care to be made the bearer of messages between grubby schoolboys – if you have anything to say to Mr Malfoy, you can write it down. I suppose simply dropping a note into his hand would take less time than this dancing about."

The offer sounded so like an insult it took Harry a moment to process.

Then he said: "Yeah. Yeah, OK. Wait here!" and brushed right by Snape's sneer to get to the study where there were quills and parchment and where it occurred to him that he had no idea what to write to Malfoy.

Hi, he wrote, and then stopped, looking at the black ink, stark against the white paper. He'd never noticed before, but his writing was kind of straggling and stupid-looking, really young.

He couldn't write about Ron and Hermione. He couldn't.

I'm OK. Had a bit of a fight with Ginny. I hope that you're OK. Snape said that you were alive and that was all he said, because he's a git even if he is giving you this letter.

Harry had a brief flash of satisfaction at the thought that Snape might read this over. He squinted and tried to think of some random innocent facts, something that sounded normal.

Kreacher is burning my toast. It's really quiet here. You'd better not be taking any stupid risks.

Oh, and Malfoy would be really pleased about this.

Snape actually said my Occlumency was good. Sort of. Not really. So I get to go on this dark ritual mission with some of the Order of the Phoenix.

There was the faint possibility that Malfoy might worry, so Harry added firmly:

Shouldn't be a problem. I'll handle it.

Snape probably wouldn't wait that long.

Come back any time you like. Kreacher is probably missing you.

There. It was stupid, but it would do. Harry rolled it up and marched back down the stairs to Snape, and to his enormous surprise found him in the hall talking to Hestia Jones.

"I'm so glad to have caught you," Hestia said, nodding her sleek dark head in Snape's direction like a friendly, encouraging seal. "You know, I have read all your contributions to *Potions Unleashed*. Do you know you hold the records for most potions invented by a living wizard?"

"Well," Snape said, sounding completely bewildered.

"Such an impressive achievement, especially considering the fact you hold down a full-time job! Do you have a passion for teaching?"

"Not what you might call a passion," Snape said slowly, "...no."

"Are you very fond of children, then?"

"They have their uses," Snape said, still sounding at a loss. "Mainly as potions ingredients, I often think."

Hestia laughed lightly. "Do you know, I think it's criminal that a mind like yours isn't entirely devoted to research. Imagine the benefit to future generations!"

"Oh dear me, here comes Mr Potter now," Snape said flatly. "One of my students. To whom I must attend."

He cast a slightly hunted glance towards Harry. It made a nice change from the usual stares of absolute loathing. He also took the parchment from Harry's hand without a glance or a

sarcastic comment: Harry kind of wished Hestia Jones would come admire Snape more often.

“It must have been such a privilege to learn Potions from the foremost expert in the field,” Hestia remarked, smiling at him.

“I can’t tell you how I appreciated it,” Harry said dryly, and Hestia patted his arm.

“I understand that you return quite often to Hogwarts,” she said, returning to Snape. “So an Owl there would find you? It would be so enlightening to have a few conversations about – practise and theory. If it wouldn’t be too much bother.”

Snape scowled in what seemed to be a reflex. “I can hardly deny you knowledge which you might apply to the war effort.”

“Splendid!” said Hestia, smiling warmly, and Snape hurried out with barely a nod. Hestia gazed at the door closing behind him. “Brilliant mind, you know,” she confided to Harry. “Absolutely the genius of his generation. Do you think he looks well?”

“Same as ever,” Harry said cautiously.

“So often geniuses neglect their own health,” Hestia told him gravely. “They can’t concern themselves with practicalities. Imagine what an honour it would be, though, to help such a man and know you were influencing the course of history!”

Hestia Jones had never struck Harry as stark raving mad before but admittedly, he hadn’t spent that much time in her company.

“I can’t actually imagine what an honour that would be,” he said in a firm voice. “Um, so Snape was telling me that Voldemort – uh, You Know Who is planning a ritual in a week...”

This piece of news diverted Hestia from contemplating Snape’s great genius. That added to the prospect of action gave Harry enough courage, once Hestia was gone, to Floo to the Burrow.

Mrs Weasley fell on Harry’s neck before Harry was properly out of the fireplace.

“Oh Harry, thank God,” she said. “Please-”

Harry squirmed uncomfortably, aware she must be getting soot on her, not sure how to say it, that Ron was – that he’d let Ron – that her son could be...

“Harry, please, you must tell me,” said Mrs Weasley. “Where is my daughter?”

*

Harry sat numbly, with a cup of tea untouched and growing cold between his palms, and stared at the clock Malfoy’d made.

Ron’s hand said *Foreign Climes*, *Annoyed* and *Battling Evil* and in the light of her other fears Mrs Weasley seemed almost philosophical about Ron’s situation. He was of age and he’d

done this kind of thing before and he was with Hermione, smart girl, Mrs Weasley had always liked her, and another friend, very nice, and Harry knew where he was and why he was going there and was Harry sure Ginny hadn't even dropped a hint?

"No," Harry said, clinging to the cup. "Sorry. I had no idea – I thought she was coming straight home, I swear-"

Mrs Weasley made a valiant effort to pretend she wasn't sniffing tears away. "She just left a note," she whispered, her voice shaking. "She said not to worry – she said she'd be in touch, she'd be absolutely all right-"

Her voice begged Harry to tell her that all this was true.

Harry stared at Ginny's hand on the wall. It said *Unspecified Location (Underground)*, *Scared* and was poised half-way between *In A Rather Ambiguous Situation* and *Battling Evil*.

Harry's own stupid hand was pointing to *Home* and *Fretting*, which was completely untrue anyway. He wasn't fretting.

He'd done this. He'd let Ron go and he'd upset Ginny enough to make her go – God knew where – on some insane quest to – He had to find her. He had to find her but she'd gone of her own free will and she probably wouldn't want to see him and he couldn't tie her up and carry her back home, oh God, how had he messed up this badly, if only he hadn't kissed her or he had said he'd loved her or something, if only he'd done something right.

The thought that had kept him awake all night, moving like a burglar in the darkness of his subconscious, finally arrived in the front of his mind, stark and terrible.

What if they all died, and he lived?

"I don't know what to *do*," Harry ground out, and Mrs Weasley looked frightened – for her children, of the dark possibilities of war, of him.

"I know you're doing your best, Harry."

But what if his best got them all killed?

He couldn't stay. He couldn't face Mr Weasley or Charlie when they came home, couldn't have them all looking at him and wondering what had happened to their baby brother and sister, all because of him. But he couldn't bear being in Grimmauld Place either.

The house felt like it was shrinking down to cupboard size. He was doing nothing and it was killing him, it could kill a lot more people than him, and he was going to go as mad as Kreacher.

Ginny. She'd been right, too, not that he wanted to put her in a cupboard but he had wanted to – keep her safe. He'd wanted her at school, really, not part of this. He'd wanted summer by the lake and her kiss in the Gryffindor common room waiting for him, warm and perfectly preserved, wanted the life he'd had to leave waiting for him exactly where he'd left it.

But Ginny had her own life.

He had no idea what she was doing, except that she was scared somewhere. But then he had no idea what any of them were doing, really.

He tried to read up about Horcruxes but not a word sunk in. He went to bed and couldn't sleep.

He was had fallen into a sweaty, troubled daze by early morning. It was broken by a scream.

*

It wasn't a particularly manly scream. When Harry opened his eyes for a second he thought Malfoy was going to have an attack of nerves.

Malfoy was frozen in the act of grabbing a pillow, face white and tired by starlight and looking down at him incredulously, as if it was strange for *Harry* to be in Grimmauld Place.

"Jesus God, Potter," he said, his voice sharp. "What are you doing in my *bed*?"

Oh, that.

"Er," Harry said. "I was looking at your canopy."

He left out the part where that had been last night and was pleased to see Malfoy accepted his story without question. The implied compliment did the trick: Malfoy immediately looked charmed and delighted and a little less wan.

"It's brilliant, isn't it?" he said, lovingly admiring his own genius in a way that reminded Harry disturbingly of Hestia Jones.

He collapsed onto the left side of the bed, one hand carelessly tucked under his head, in order to better admire his handiwork. Harry had seen the sky before: he looked at Malfoy instead, alive and here, all right, *back safe*. Warmth and feeling made a sudden return in him.

"You look strange," Malfoy added, looking at his canopy. "Stranger than usual. And by the way, that letter you sent me was insane."

"No it wasn't," Harry said thickly, fighting the urge to grab Malfoy and maybe cry, or scream himself, or put his head down on Malfoy's shoulder and sleep properly.

"It was, even for you, Potter, it was impressively crazy. I came back to make sure you hadn't set the house on fire. Or Kreacher: he is mine. You're not allowed to set him on fire. I don't care how much he burns your toast."

"I haven't set anything on fire," Harry said. "But I make no promises. You should probably stay and guard your house elf."

Malfoy snorted softly. "As if I could. There's so much to do, Potter. Snape gave me your missive of lunacy this morning and this was the first chance I got to slip away. The D -

Voldemort watches me every minute.”

Harry started and his elbow knocked violently into Malfoy’s. Harry was sort of glad about the pain: it proved Malfoy was solid and here, for now.

“Does he suspect something? You’re not going back!”

“No, he doesn’t suspect anything. I’m not an idiot,” Malfoy said in a voice which clearly would have been combative if he hadn’t been so tired. “But my mother was a traitor and my father lost one of his Horcruxes, and he’s got – a nasty sense of humour, besides. Got the idea somewhere that I’m delicate or something and thinks it’s fun to – poke around in my head for something that scares me. I had to throw a lot of things at him so he wouldn’t see anything important.”

“Things,” Harry said darkly. “What. What things?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Malfoy snapped. “It’s good. I amuse him. I’m learning a lot being his favourite scared mouse, it’s – I can’t fight about this, I’m too tired. I wanted to sleep in my own *bed*. I didn’t know that it had been invaded.”

The reproachful look and the Potter-is-crazy eye-roll soothed Harry almost as much as the casual way Malfoy had said *my own bed*, had come here for comfort. It would be all right. He could sleep now, he thought, really sleep.

“OK,” he said awkwardly. “We can fight in the morning.”

“I suddenly recall an urgent appointment elsewhere,” Malfoy mumbled. “Actually, I really might have to...”

His voice became a sort of incoherent slur, which actually went on for some time. Evidently Malfoy liked the sound of his own voice so much that it sent him to sleep, even when he was talking total nonsense. Well, he was probably used to that.

Harry shut his eyes and listened to the weird gurgling near his ear, filling up the bleak silence.

When it stopped he looked over at Malfoy, at his sharp face tucked into the pillow. He was curled in on his side in a way that didn’t look relaxed and his grip on the pillow was white-knuckled even in his sleep, but at least he was curled in towards Harry. He felt safe enough here not to sleep facing the door or the window.

Voldemort’s favourite scared mouse, Harry thought with slow-burning fury and something awfully like panic, and thought at the same time of the clock hand saying Ginny was scared.

It wasn’t that Malfoy was a coward – he wasn’t a coward, he’d gone to *Voldemort*, this had all been his idea – but *Voldemort* had Occlumency, didn’t he, and Malfoy had admitted to throwing a lot of things at him. Anyone could see that Malfoy was easily hurt. You could score a direct hit and really hurt him and he’d let you see it, *Voldemort* probably really enjoyed that, and then he wouldn’t give up and you could hurt him *again*. Just as much. More.

Snape wasn't protecting him. His stupid father wouldn't lift a finger for him.

Harry had the urge to reach out and touch him, but he wasn't – it would be a bit odd, and it might wake him. He just wanted to be sure he was here, that he wouldn't leave.

This was all right, though. He could feel Malfoy's warmth and weight on the bed, hear his breathing in his ear. He wasn't alone in this house anymore. He could sleep.

Harry did sleep, instantly and deeply. He woke up feeling lighter, relaxed, so relieved that was almost happy.

That lasted for about a second until he realised that Malfoy was gone. The house was empty again, Malfoy was with Voldemort again, they were all in danger except for Harry. Again.

Harry didn't sleep properly again for the rest of the week and obviously he had to stay in Malfoy's room. What if Malfoy came back again – to sleep in his own bed – and left before morning, how would Harry even know he had been there? It made perfect sense to stay.

Besides, Kreacher made Malfoy's bed beautifully every day, and Harry suspected the house elf was plotting to slip dead mice into Harry's. He hadn't done it yet, though. Harry thought perhaps that seeing the Ancient House of Black silent and shadowed again might be bringing back old, mad memories. The house elf crept about in the dark like a cringing ghost and did not speak to Harry, just mutely performed the tasks which kept the house ready for Malfoy's return.

*

"Don't you see, Harry?" said Hestia Jones. "We can't possibly let you go."

Megara Prewett, Kingsley Shacklebolt and even Tonks, that traitor, all nodded agreement. Harry felt like a cornered animal.

"But I have to," he said. "Snape said I had to, he won't tell me where Nagini is otherwise and anyway I want to, I have to *do something*."

He stopped because his voice had risen into something that was alarmingly like a wail and he didn't want to sound like a child, not helpless and lonely. He had to convince them not to do this.

The band of chosen members from the Order of the Phoenix looked at him soberly.

"Try to understand, Harry," said Megara in her cool, well-informed voice. "Recent reports from young Mr Malfoy indicate that the ritual You Know Who has planned might involve children. You are absolutely essential to the war: we cannot possibly risk you."

"I'm not a *child*," Harry snarled. "I'm the same age as *young Mr Malfoy* and I can help. I saved those kids at the orphanage."

"Your death could mean the death of us all," Hestia said, her voice measured. "We will have

to guard you and that won't help us. This situation might well be a trap for you. Your sympathy with the Muggles is well-known and your rather spectacular rescue of the children may well have given You Know Who an idea for how to trap you. You Know Who has emptied a Muggle orphanage for his ritual, and I fail to see why he would be interested in Muggle children unless-

"Was the orphanage in London?" Harry asked grimly, seeing a building as grim and square as a vast brick, hemmed in on all sides by high railings. On Hestia's bewildered nod he said: "He wasn't doing it to get to *me*. He was doing it because he's – a creature of habit."

It always came back to Voldemort's past, to Hogwarts, to his father's grave, and now to his orphanage.

Megara Prewett's voice was gentle but firm. "We cannot risk your life on conjecture."

"But I know things – about Voldemort, about his past. I can help you!" Desperate, Harry wheeled on Mad-Eye Moody and gave him a look that he'd meant to be beseeching but which he thought might've turned out demanding. "Sir, I have to-"

"I agree with you, boy. No better way to test your abilities than in the field," Mad-Eye rumbled. "But I've been over-ruled."

He swivelled an accusing magical eyeball around at Shackbolt and the two witches. Harry thought about Snape, who wouldn't listen to any excuses and wouldn't let him do anything if he didn't do this. He thought about another night in this house with Kreacher lurking in the attics, thinking about Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Malfoy, all in danger, waiting to hear...

Harry looked at the concerned, treacherous faces surrounding him. He could help, he knew he could. He had information about Voldemort that nobody else did.

He couldn't bear to wait in this house another minute longer.

"We cannot and will not let you go," said Kingsley Shackbolt, speaking for the first time.

"Yeah?" Harry said. "Try and stop me."

Before anyone could act, he strode over to the table and seized the Portkey that Snape had laid there seven days before.

No sooner had his fist closed around the black stone than their horrified faces whirled away from him and he found himself standing on a cold cliff. He stood paralysed, not by the chill wind, driving rain or the roar of the sea, but by how familiar this was.

He was on top of a cliff that he and Dumbledore had stood at the foot of, once, six months ago. On the night Dumbledore had died.

A creature of habit, he'd called Voldemort, and he was amazed by how true it was. The place he'd taken children to terrify them was the same, everything was the same, but God knew how many children he'd taken or what he would do to them. This was real: this was serious, Harry had to go back and let the Order deal with this. It wasn't just his life he was gambling

with.

That was when Harry realised that, fingers numb from cold and shock, he'd dropped the Portkey.

He fell to his hands and knees on wet rock, the icy chill seeping into the knees of his jeans and the stones scraping his palms as he scrabbled through them and cursed Snape for choosing such a stupid Portkey and kept searching until he heard the noises under the howling and forced himself to be still. He forced himself to accept that the Portkey was lost and that there was no way to bring the Order here.

Harry could have Apparated back, but he didn't know where *here* was. There would be no way back. This was up to him.

Harry inched forward, found a fissure in the rock and lay flat on his belly with the ice water seeping through his t-shirt, and waited.

He could see points of light that meant lit wands, coming towards him from the little village along the cliffs that Dumbledore had spoken of. He could see movement.

The sound he had heard under the wind was children crying.

*

Leading little children in the dark, it took the Death Eaters a while to reach Harry. Once they did, Harry did nothing. He just lay there and tried to observe everything from his admittedly terrible vantage point, where really all he could do was count feet.

There were thirteen kids and half of them had no shoes on, must have been taken from Voldemort's orphanage in the night. Their feet were mottled white and blue. They kept sliding on the slick rocks and Harry had to grasp the stone hard, cutting his hands, to stop himself leaping up and grabbing children who looked like they must fall.

They were stumbling but their feet were trying to march in a file: they were terrorised into obedience. At least some of them might be under the Imperius Curse, and if Harry tried to do anything at least some of them would get hurt. The Death Eaters wouldn't hesitate to use them as hostages for Harry's good behaviour. Or it could be even simpler and more horrible than that – if there was a scuffle here in the darkness, the children might be knocked off the cliffs and into the hungry sea below.

Harry counted seven Death Eaters. Too many to risk it.

“Right,” said a rough voice Harry didn't know. “So what we do is, we Apparate the kids down to-”

“Are you *completely* stupid?” said a voice that made Harry's heart leap for an instant and then plummet a long way down, a supercilious snotty voice with every vowel extremely distinct and only a little deeper, now, than his son's.

Lucius Malfoy.

“The Dark Lord was extremely specific about the fact that we could not use magic at any time, he’s set up very delicate spells for the ceremony. Even the knives were enchanted beforehand, as you know very well, Amycus, so please do not make any more inane suggestions!”

The knives, thought Harry, and remembered a knife in a graveyard years ago, and the blood spurting from Pettigrew’s wrist.

He did not dare close his eyes. He just closed his hands over and over on the sharp little rocks. His hands felt a little warmed by his own blood.

“I will climb down,” said Lucius Malfoy with dignity. “Then you can lower the children down on the ropes and climb down yourselves after me. Do *not* drop either a knife or a child, or the Dark Lord will be most displeased.”

Harry was scared that if he lifted his head even a fraction, the light of the wands might reflect off his glasses. The rain had washed over the glass a hundred times by now: the whole world looked drowned.

He waited, planning, as Lucius Malfoy set up ropes and he watched Malfoy’s father disappear, going carefully but with what seemed to be a certain amount of expertise, over the cliffs. They didn’t have that many ropes, Harry saw.

He wanted to act, he was gripping his wand so tightly it hurt, when he saw Amycus put a rope around the first child. But he couldn’t. Not yet.

One by one, the children were lowered over the cliffs, held above the raging sea and drawn down to the stone and the tender mercies of Lucius Malfoy and his knives.

A little boy screamed, the sound carrying thin and despairing over the wind, and Harry swallowed and locked his muscles, refused to move.

Eventually, at long last, all the children were gone from the clifftop and Lucius Malfoy’s imperious voice rang out, telling them that he’d secured the rope down below and telling the other Death Eaters to hurry up.

Just as Harry had thought, the other Death Eaters didn’t seem to be all that familiar with mountaineering. He saw one man grab the rope in clumsy hands, saw the way they went down close together, for the comfort of nearness.

Only one Death Eater remained at the top of the cliff. He turned and Harry saw his profile, recognised the scared face of Avery.

“I’ll come down when you fellows reach the bottom,” he called down, his voice quavering, and Harry struck.

His body was stiff and cold from lying on stone in the rain, but he would only have one chance, he wouldn’t let himself be weak. He was behind Avery in a single determined movement and in the exact voice he’d planned, quiet but distinct and surely not loud enough

to be heard over the storm: “*Stupefy*.”

Avery crumpled and collapsed, just as Harry had planned.

He hadn’t planned the way Avery fell, his long slow fall over the cliffs. For a moment Harry just stood there, the limp figure spinning down into the waves burned into his sight, seeing Dumbledore hurtling over the battlements of Hogwarts.

No time, there was no time to think of that! There was no time to think of anything.

There were five Death Eaters climbing down a single rope, and this was Harry’s one chance. He couldn’t think. He knelt down on the terribly cold stone and took hold of the rope, feeling the scrape of the sodden fibres against his cut palms. He could barely see and his lips felt numb, but he said the words to sever the rope in a calm voice.

Not all of the Death Eaters fell into the sea. He heard the screams and the sounds as their bodies hit the rocks.

Harry didn’t let himself think then. He just Apparated, found himself standing at the foot of that terrible stretch of cliff and facing Lucius Malfoy, who looked so stunned by Harry’s sudden appearance that he didn’t even lift his wand.

“*Stupefy*,” Harry said, feeling his mouth stretch into a horrible grin.

The last Death Eater fell, this one safely to the ground. Harry left him there on the rock and strode forward to the children. About four of them, he judged, were under Imperius and stayed absolutely still, their little faces blank, but the other nine gave faint cries, as if by now they were exhausted by their own terror, and cowered away.

“No, don’t,” Harry said, and knew his voice sounded rough. He still felt numb all over. “I’m here to help you,” he told them. “I’ll – I’ll take you somewhere safe. Where do you want to go? The, the orphanage? Would that be a good place?”

A little girl with black braids who couldn’t have been more than eight visibly screwed up her courage and blurted: “No!”

Harry knelt down on the rock, trying to look less threatening. He tasted the bitterness of salt spray between his lips. “Where, then?”

The girl looked slightly encouraged by this. “The v-village,” she said. “There were people there who wanted to help if – if – and they could call the police! They didn’t have... sticks.”

Harry saw her eyes go to his wand and he felt ashamed, suddenly, as if he should hide it. He couldn’t, though.

“I’ll take you to the village,” he said instead, promising them adults and a removal of the magic which had come upon them so terribly. “And I’ll go away. ”

They stared up at him, a tiny cluster with huge, watchful eyes. He wondered what they saw when they looked at him, aside from the wand, a stranger with a white, scarred face and an

awful resolution in his eyes.

“Please,” Harry said, and was horrified to hear his voice breaking, like ice breaking. He made a useless gesture. “I can take you two at a time – if you’ll just come-”

They stared at him and then made for him in a rush, almost knocking him over, but it didn’t feel like a joyful rush. It wasn’t trust, it was desperation, and he felt as if he was being dragged underwater by the pull of all those tiny grasping hands.

“Stop – stop,” he gasped, and held them off, held a small fragile arm and tried to be gentle. “Only two of you at a time. I’ll have to leave the rest of you alone – I’m sorry-”

There was a wordless wail of protest from every throat. Harry focused on the girl with the black braids: something about the tilt of her chin reminded him, a little and painfully, of Hermione.

“Can you keep the others calm if I leave you in charge?” he asked in a thin voice, and after a moment she nodded.

Harry beckoned to two children, a boy and a girl, and took them up in his arms. The boy twined his legs around Harry’s waist, the coldness of his small freezing feet pressing against Harry’s soaked t-shirt. The little girl was like a wooden doll in the crook of his other arm, if dolls could shake.

Harry closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see the children he was leaving behind and Apparated, trying really hard to get it right, into the midst of a village he had never seen. There were people standing at a window who ducked out of sight when they saw him – no, he realised. Not him. When they saw his wand.

He walked over to the window and knocked, with an armful of children, on the wet windowpane.

“Will you take the children in?” he asked in a loud voice. “Hey! Open the window. Can you take these children and call the police?”

There was a pause, and then a cry of alarm as a tall woman stood up and, despite another woman’s efforts to stop her, opened the window. Harry passed the little, still girl in to the woman, and saw the girl put out her arms and slip them around the woman’s neck.

“Catherine, what are you doing,” the other woman said in a strangled voice from the floor. “He’s one of them-”

“He’s just a boy,” said Catherine, her eyes cold on Harry’s face, and held out her other arm for the little boy.

“So was the other one!”

“The other one,” Harry said. “Was he – oh God. No, there isn’t time, I can’t – I have to get the other children. Can you take them in? Will you call the police?”

Catherine hesitated and then nodded.

Harry Apparated back and forth, from bare rock and screaming children to Catherine's window, in a daze. He tried not to think about – they'd had their hoods up, but he would surely have known, surely, surely he would have known.

He kept seeing the rope fraying under the touch of his wand, hearing the sound of the bodies falling, breaking against the rocks.

When he took up the last little girl, the one with the black braids, she held onto his neck in a stranglehold that reminded him of Hermione's sudden fierce hugs. He closed his eyes and tried not to hold her back too hard, and when he was back at the woman's window, at Catherine's window, he felt a sudden terrible reluctance to hand the girl over. She hung on a little as he passed her through and he was grateful for that much.

"Can you tell me where this village is?" Harry asked. "I can send people to – to watch over all of you. You'll be safe."

"This is St Deodatus's in Cornwall," Catherine answered, and then swallowed. "Do you want to come?"

"No," Harry said. "No. I – I scare the children. I'm sorry this happened to them, I'm sorry this happened to all of you. This isn't your war."

"Is it your – your war?"

"Yes, mine," Harry said, holding onto the window sill hard. "The other boy – the one with, with the men in hoods – did you, was he blond? About my height?"

Catherine gave him a long look. "No," she said at last. "He was black. Very handsome. There was a tall blond man – older."

"Yes," Harry said with an impatient gesture.

" – He sent the boy back – somewhere. He disappeared into thin air..." Catherine's lips pressed shut. The woman on the floor, who had not risen in all this time, moaned.

"Oh," Harry said. "Oh. Thank you."

He had not killed Malfoy, nor even Blaise Zabini. He was aware somewhere in the midst of all the whirling terrible thoughts that were so painful he could not bear to touch them, like open wounds, that he would be grateful for that one day.

"Thank you," said Catherine with another long look, and then she shut the window.

He stood out there in the storm, so tired that he couldn't seem to think, he had to Apparate back to Grimmauld Place, only it was Unplottable so he should Apparate back to... He tried to think, and made a hopeless useless gesture with the hand that held his wand.

Ridiculous in this storm, purple and impossible in this dark remorseless night, the Knight Bus

screached to a halt between two thatched white houses in a Cornish village. Harry stumbled up the steps, dripping onto the floor, and stared into the face of a stranger.

Of course Stan Shunpike had been replaced, he thought. He was dead.

“Can you take me home,” Harry said, his teeth chattering. “Please.”

*

They didn’t speak to him on the bus. Maybe they were scared of him, too. He curled up on one of the beds and was grateful to be out of the rain he saw slapping against the windows. He couldn’t see very much else, just the silver points of rain and the opaque night. He couldn’t seem to get warm.

They dropped him off on a corner a couple of streets away from Grimmauld Place. He could see the house from here, even though he knew they couldn’t, the door with the snake doorknocker and every window empty and dark as dead eyes.

Except there was a light in one window.

Harry was on his feet suddenly, uncoiling from his chilled miserable curl. It was an upstairs window. Surely Order members wouldn’t – it might be Mrs Weasley or Lupin, of course it would be good to see them...

The bus lurched and he almost lost his footing trying to get off fast, his feet slipping on the rain-drenched pavement as he ran. He fell on the steps and scrambled up, finding his key with numb hands, opening the door and dashing into the dark hall, up the stairs in pitch blackness.

The door to the drawing room slid open, showing a sliver of shining light. Harry had to stop then, and hold onto the rail, his heart hammering too hard in his chest and leaving it aching.

Malfoy opened the door all the way, standing with the light behind him. The chandelier was bright enough to make his hair look white, there was the sound of a fire crackling and he looked a little sleepy and a little grouchy, hair ruffled and jumper askew, as if he’d been dozing off in the warmth of his drawing room in winter, a world away from storms and long falls into the sea.

Harry’s heart turned over – it really felt as if it did, wrenched out of place, and he almost fell to his knees.

“Who’s there,” Malfoy began, sounding cross and suspicious, and then he stepped out into the hall and his voice changed. “Potter?” he asked, and he sounded suddenly terrified.

“Potter, oh my God-”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Harry said, and the darkness was rushing towards him and the cold, roaring and enveloping him like the sea must have swallowed all those bodies. He felt his head knock against the stair rail, and then he felt nothing else, nothing at all.

*

He woke lying on the rug beside the fire. His head hurt, and Malfoy was hovering over him squawking, which did not help at all.

“Potter, what have you been doing? What happened? You look like death, you actually *fainted*—” His voice trembled. “What’s happened?”

Harry tried to sit up, failed and felt his throat closing. He didn’t think he could say the words if he waited a moment, so he said: “I’ve been killing people.”

There. That was over with.

Malfoy paused and then swallowed hard. He said: “You haven’t been eating, have you?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Or sleeping, by the look of it,” Malfoy rambled, refusing to meet his eyes. “What have Granger and Weasley been doing, letting you get in this state—”

“Oh, they’re gone,” Harry said, faintly surprised that Malfoy didn’t know. He sat up and Malfoy caught his elbow as a rush of dizziness tried to drag him back down into the dark. “Ginny too. They’re all gone, I’ve been thinking they might all be dead and the Order wanted to keep me in here penned in like an animal waiting to be s-sacrificed, thinking about what might be happening to them, but it’s all right.”

“I can see that,” Malfoy said in a voice that was shaking too much to be properly sarcastic.

“I saved the children,” Harry told him. His own voice sounded really stupid, trembling all over the place, which was so absurd because everything was fine, he was telling Malfoy good news. “They’re all okay. I didn’t let anything happen to them. I murdered six people. It really wasn’t so bad. There was this woman called Catherine and I think she’ll take care of them, we should tell the Order, will you tell the Order that I was fine and I didn’t let anything happen to them and—”

He was talking too much, maybe saying the wrong thing again because Malfoy looked scared. He was shivering uncontrollably with the cold, it shouldn’t be so cold in front of the fire.

“OK,” Malfoy said, his voice still shaking but trying to be soothing now, too. “OK, hush. Right. I can – I’ll tell the Order. Come here – let me—”

Malfoy had a fluffy white towel in his hands, Harry saw, and was mildly curious about it until Malfoy pulled off Harry’s heavy, soaked jumper by main force and started towelling his hair dry. Harry stopped shaking so much, felt a little warmer, and Malfoy kept up brisk, efficient drying and Harry tried to breathe deep, regular breaths and stop Malfoy looking so scared, words tumbling over each other as he tried to explain that everything had actually turned out all right.

“Yes, all right, I understand,” Malfoy told him.

He let the towel fall in a damp pile on the hearth and Harry leaned his forehead against

Malfoy's shoulder and shut his eyes. He remembered wanting to, a week ago, and wondered why he hadn't: there didn't seem a reason why not to. Malfoy had almost stopped shaking, now, though his heart was beating fast and hard like something caged and battering against the bars. Harry thought for a moment that Malfoy had kissed his brow, the skin at his hairline, but that didn't really make any sense. Harry curled up close.

"I keep thinking of something that Dumbledore said," he whispered. His throat was burning, it was so dry. He hadn't realised he was talking that much.

"I hate Dumbledore!" Malfoy said with sudden, shocking violence, but the arm he put around Harry's shoulders was comforting, he didn't seem angry. "What was the matter with him, he raised you to fight a war and he never even suggested that there would be casualties! That you'd – that you would have to –"

"I can, though," Harry said, almost calm now. "You're not a killer. But I am."

"Slightly different circumstances there, Potter," Malfoy told him. His voice sounded really strange, like he was going to cry. Harry's face was already warm and wet: maybe Malfoy was crying already.

"Don't be sad," he muttered.

Malfoy was silent for a moment, and then said: "I'm not sad, I'm just terribly disappointed. I was led to believe you had a Hippogriff tattooed on your chest."

Harry laughed, the sound shocking in his mouth and all wrong for a laugh, like a wet, startled hiccup. Malfoy made a humming sound and stroked Harry's hair. Malfoy was kind of girly like that.

"What Dumbledore said, what he said was – killing someone tears your soul."

"And he told you that you were going to be the one to kill the Dark Lord, as well!" Malfoy said, his voice torn between soothing and savage. "Very helpful, I must say."

"Not just Voldemort," Harry said, and felt a shudder course all the way through Malfoy's thin frame at the name.

Malfoy didn't stop stroking his hair, though. Harry burrowed his head into Malfoy's shoulder, held on tight to his jumper, and kept telling him what he was thinking in a weary, cracking voice. He was so tired. He'd sleep soon.

"You're right. This is a war, and I have to – I have to be in the middle of it. I just wonder..." Harry's voice stuck in his throat. "I wonder how many pieces my soul will be torn into, by the time all this is over."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Harry woke to light and warmth, and the vague impression that Malfoy had turned into a girl.

He mumbled something interrogative, and with the turn of her head he recognised the face under the shock of currently white-blond hair, and realised it was just Tonks. She was sitting at the foot of his bed: as she turned she had to catch at the bolster to stop herself tumbling off onto the floor, but after a precarious moment she regained her balance.

“Thank God you’re awake,” she said. “Now I can smack your silly head. What were you thinking, Harry, snatching up that Portkey? You’re in terrible trouble.”

“So nothing new there, then,” Harry said sleepily. “Where’s Malfoy?” Tonks hesitated and Harry sat up and said in a far sharper tone: “He is still here, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s downstairs talking to Charlie Weasley,” Tonks informed him. “And we were all grateful when Charlie showed up, I can tell you. My baby cousin has a bloody nasty tongue on him when he likes, doesn’t he? D’you know, he pretty much insinuated you were mental.”

“If he didn’t come right out and say it, he must’ve been in a pretty good mood,” Harry remarked.

Tonks snorted. “Um, or not. He descended on a meeting of the Order like a tiny blond hurricane with a mincing machine inside: tore strips off Moody and sent them flying about the room.” Harry and Tonks shared a wince at the mental picture. “Didn’t do much good, though. The Ministry still has a hearing scheduled for you.”

“Another?” Harry said. “What fun.”

“This one’s for reckless endangerment of Muggle lives and acts of wanton and criminal violence,” Tonks told him, her voice low. “It’s serious, Harry.”

“That’s rid-“ Harry began furiously, and then stopped at the troubled look in Tonks’ eyes.

“Did you *really* kill those people, Harry?”

Harry’s mouth was suddenly dry. “I had to.”

“That was a terrible thing for a kid to have to do,” Tonks said, and for a moment Harry heard *That was a terrible thing to do*. It was just for a moment, before he realised that her voice was quiet and sympathetic, that she was wearing her white-blond hair like a flag of allegiance and that she was on his side.

“It was all right,” he said huskily. “I had to do it and so – it’s all right.”

Tonks reached out and patted his hand in a rough, friendly way, as if it was a puppy’s head. The little tomboy gesture reminded him with a pang of Ginny, who had always thought Tonks was brilliant.

“You said Charlie was here,” Harry said, scowling at the thought of him shut up somewhere

with Malfoy, who was confused and did not need to be confused further by irresponsible older men. “Did he – was there any news from the Weasleys?”

“Ah,” Tonks said, and looked even more sympathetic. “No.”

She and Harry shared a silence much like their earlier wince, except more prolonged.

“Didn’t know you and Ginny were seeing each other,” Tonks said after a bit. “Draco told me. I’m – I’m sure that even if you did have a tiff she had other reasons for going off like that.”

“We weren’t,” Harry said. “Seeing each other. I thought – until Voldemort – I explained to her that we shouldn’t.”

“Ah,” said Tonks. “I remember when Remus did that with me.”

Her tone suggested she was far less sympathetic about this than about the killing people.

“Um,” Harry said. He really didn’t mean that as encouragement for Tonks to proceed, but Tonks either misread him or did not care.

“He sat me down and told me that he’d always care but there were a thousand reasons, and he explained them all very carefully. Damned if he didn’t number them in order of importance at some point. He was patient and understanding and so bloody reasonable that it took me months of carrying on like an idiot until I realised that I hadn’t had the chance to say anything. And that made me good and mad.”

Tonks’ mouth twisted wryly, the thin shape of it familiar and comforting. Harry had never seen how like Malfoy she was before, somehow: perhaps she was making her features seem more like his in another unconscious show of loyalty or perhaps it was simply that he’d never really seen Tonks wearing the family sneer before.

She spread out her hands. “Eventually I did get my say, even if it was, um, at an inappropriate time.”

“I,” Harry said guiltily. “I don’t think I let Ginny have her say. And now she’s – I don’t know where, and God knows what’s happening to her!”

Tonks crawled up the bed and determinedly wrestled Harry into a hug, one of her thin muscled arms squeezing his shoulders too tight and her new pale hair tickling his nose.

“She may be happening to other people,” Tonks observed, with pride in her protégée. “Look, Harry. Maybe this is none of my business, but Ginny did tell me how things fell apart with, um, what was her name, Chi-“

“Cho.”

“Okay,” said Tonks. “You wanted someone who thought like you do about things. But what in God’s name would be the point of someone who told you that you were right and what, waited in a tower like a damsel in distress for her knight to come back home? That sounds like something from a soppy fairytale. Real women don’t act like that: I have battles of my

own to fight while Remus fights his. Ginny believes in what you're doing and she wants to do something too. You might consider letting her get on with it."

She thumped Harry on the back. It kind of hurt.

"You might also consider that she's trying to tell you something by doing this," Tonks said. "Since you wouldn't let her have her say. Maybe you can learn something, eh?"

She tried to detach from Harry and found her watch was caught in his hair. There was a moment of brief intense struggle, and Tonks came away with her watch and a clump of Harry's hair thrown in for free.

"Don't worry too much," Tonks added kindly as Harry checked for a bald spot. "She's still trying to tell you something. That means she hasn't given up on you."

So according to Tonks, when a girl stormed out of your house in a fury, ran away and left you out of your mind with worry with no way to contact her, it meant she really fancied you.

On the other hand, he could see her point about not wanting the soppy fairytale girl. He *was* glad that Ginny was doing something, even though he was frantic and he wanted to stop her at the same time.

Romance was a whole hell of a lot more complicated than he'd ever thought. He'd kind of thought everything was sorted once you knew she liked you.

"Let's not borrow trouble," Tonks said. "First thing on the list is keep you out of Azkaban. We can work on your love life afterwards."

That was when Hurricane Malfoy swept in and announced that Scrimgeour, after what reading between the lines Harry thought might've been a flurry of acrimonious Owls, had agreed to see Harry for a private, preliminary hearing. In which he hoped, direct quote-

*

"-that we could work something out to our, ah, mutual advantage," said Scrimgeour.

He looked even more like a lion than he had last year. Now he looked like a sleek, well-fed lion, mane-like hair smooth and his whole air serene. Until you looked into his eyes. They darted around his large, calm face, the face that looked so convincing promising the wizarding world a stalwart defence against the Dark Lord, as if they were desperately hunting for escape.

Harry did not know how Malfoy'd convinced him to come here. He glared at the Minister for Magic from his place leaning against the mantelpiece – he'd refused to sit down – and transferred his glare briefly to Malfoy, who had not only sat down but accepted tea and scones.

"Just call off your dogs and let me get on with things," he said shortly. "I *saved* those children--"

“Yes, but the Aurors would have been able to do so with far more efficiency and probably less loss of life had you not taken matters into your own hands.”

“That was rash,” Malfoy agreed sycophantically.

Harry glared down at Malfoy’s head some more. Right when he would’ve appreciated some mincing machine in a hurricane action, all of Malfoy’s sound and fury had evaporated and as soon as they’d walked into Scrimgeour’s office he’d found himself stranded there with Lucius Malfoy’s son, sitting at his ease and murmuring unctuous little phrases.

“While the Ministry appreciates your quick thinking, we feel that – especially considering the rumours about your mental health and dangerous temper which have been going around for some years now – your behaviour was-”

“Oh come *on*,” Harry almost yelled.

“Ill-judged,” murmured Malfoy. “Hasty. He’s always been very volatile, don’t you know, acts without thinking, refuses to consider consequences-”

“What are you going to do?” Harry demanded. “Lock the Chosen One up in Azkaban for killing some Death Eaters? That’ll go over really well.”

“ – Makes very good points occasionally. Doesn’t he,” Malfoy said, speaking with a gleam of satisfaction in his smooth voice and looking over with a gleam of approval in his eye.

Scrimgeour regarded them both with dislike. “The Ministry held out the hand of friendship to you once, Potter.”

“And I asked you,” Harry said bitterly, “when you were going to release Stan Shunpike.”

“Wasn’t the poor chap killed by Death Eaters in the big break out of Azkaban?” Malfoy asked *sotto voce*. “Embarrassing, that. Mistakes seem to have been made on both sides.”

“Will you shut up, you misbegotten whelp!” Scrimgeour snarled. “I have not the faintest notion what you’re doing here. Your whole family is a nest of Death Eaters. I have half a mind to detain you and have a little check for the Dark Mark-”

“Oh, you just try it,” Harry said, and his furious step towards Scrimgeour was checked by Malfoy lunging from his chair and grabbing Harry’s wrist.

“Calm your volatile self, Potter,” he said, and in a louder voice: “I am here as a general interpreter – an administrator, if you will. I record these little meetings for posterity, smooth out small misunderstandings, alert the press-”

“This was meant to be a private meeting!” Scrimgeour thundered.

“Oh yes, a strictly private meeting between the Minister and our Chosen One to discuss the co-ordination of the war effort,” Malfoy said. “Every paper I contacted was most interested. Oh dear, have I misunderstood something? I feel *such* a fool, I do apologise, oh well, can’t be helped, shall we proceed?”

Harry grinned. He couldn't help it.

The grin switched itself off right about when Malfoy said: "Potter will be happy to have his picture taken with you and to make a public announcement that you two have come to a mutually satisfactory agreement."

"The hell I—" Harry began, at which point Malfoy's grip cut off all the circulation to his hand.

"Provided you *have* come to a mutually satisfactory agreement, of course. Now, you cannot possibly arrest Potter, not without panicking mobs and blood in the streets. But you can inconvenience him, refuse to help him and present him in the worst possible light to the press. And in turn, you can watch morale hit rock bottom and make us all easy prey for the Dar – Voldemort."

Scrimgeour was sitting a little forward in his chair now, his eyes stilled enough to be watchful.

"The prospect's not tempting," he admitted gruffly.

"Whereas a few statements, a few nice pictures of the valiant boy hero and our wise leader—" Malfoy made a small, careless gesture with his free hand. The relentless pressure of his grip on the other wrist did not slacken. "Instant morale boost. It would be so easy. All we ask for now is a dismissal of charges and the best face we can put on this situation." He lowered his voice. "We win this war and you can be the minister of a grateful wizarding world for fifty years. Leave it up to Potter to win it – and we'll leave it up to you to spin it."

"Malfoy, you are crazy and you always have been," Harry informed him comprehensively. "I don't agree, and I won't."

"Could I possibly have a moment to interpret for Potter in the hall, sir?" Malfoy asked hastily, and dragged Harry out by main force. "Thank you."

It was dark in the hall, none of the Ministry officials or even the cleaning staff around this early in the morning. Someone had kicked a cream-coloured rug to one side and it lay in a little crumpled heap in a corner.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?" Harry demanded as soon as they were out there. "You sounded just like your *dad*!"

Malfoy flinched and went red as if Harry had hit him on both sides of his face. He dropped Harry's wrist.

"I'm trying to help," he said in a stifled voice.

"I know," Harry said. "I do know. Don't look like that. It's just that – we don't need to make bargains with a man like that, we shouldn't compromise—"

"What the hell d'you think war is?" Malfoy snapped. "Did you just – did you just picture it as finding the damn Horcruxes and then killing off Voldemort in some suitably noble way? You

already know it's not like that. It's killing people you don't even know and making compromises with people on your side even when you don't like them or agree with them on a single thing, it's - it's messy and you're damn right I sounded like my father. War is about politics. Have you never heard of propaganda?"

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "It doesn't matter what lies they write about me in the papers."

"Yes it does," Malfoy snapped, looking despairing. "It bothered you enough when it was just me telling lies in the paper-"

"When it was just Rita Skeeter-"

Malfoy met Harry's faint smile with one of his own. "She took all her best lines from my reports. But this, Potter. Think about this. You've actually killed people. The papers take their cue from Scrimgeour and talk about a seventeen year old butcher, a future Dark Lord – no, listen, *listen!* They won't stop you doing what you have to do. But your life afterwards, it'll be ruined-"

"Do you think I care about that?" Harry asked, his voice softer because he was touched and surprised that Malfoy did.

"Okay, think about this instead," Malfoy said rapidly. "You and some of the Order are cornered by some Death Eaters and you send off an Owl to Scrimgeour for men but he stops to verify your situation is as you say it is or to drive a bargain with you and Tonks dies-"

"Stop it!" Harry shouted.

"Dies," Malfoy repeated, and looked sick. "Slowly. I – I'm not saying that you were wrong, that you shouldn't have stood up for Shunpike or Dumbledore or who the hell ever, I'm sure you were very heroic. But you can't win a war just being heroic. Sometimes you have to be practical!"

Harry sort of wanted to hit Malfoy for making Harry think about doing this. He hated Scrimgeour, he didn't think he was a good man, Harry was *Dumbledore's* man and no-one else's, this all sounded like a stupid game to him.

But – Tonks dies, Malfoy had said, and it made sense. And Harry knew about playing games to win.

Besides that, he thought, and remembered crying and having Malfoy panic and towel his hair dry. Malfoy might be scheming and devious and not heroic at all, but he knew that Malfoy was being scheming and devious for him. They were family: Malfoy had no-one else. Harry could trust him, and did.

"What do you suggest, then?" he said tiredly.

"Well," Malfoy said, and looked encouraged, his face all lit up. "Well – go in there and make an agreement with Scrimgeour and then both of you can tell the press that you look forward to working together to bring down Voldemort. Oh, oh, and you might want to mention that

Scrimgeour promised you full access to all his resources in your fight. Mention that to the press, mind, not Scrimgeour.” Malfoy blinked because Harry was staring, and smiled a tiny bit. “What?”

“Nothing,” Harry said. “Just, you’re sneaky.”

Malfoy beamed as if it had been a compliment. “You’ll do it?”

“I guess,” Harry said. “If he does something wrong enough – I break all ties. I’m warning you. There are some things I won’t stand for.”

Malfoy’s hands flew out to trace some soothing insane pattern on the air. “Of course, of course. As long as you get your story to the papers first. Tell them exactly why Scrimgeour is a scheming opportunist and you’re a hero. Really quickly. Promise me.”

“If I’m not doing something more important,” Harry said. “I promise you.”

“Okay,” Malfoy said, and took a deep breath. “Okay then. You’re going to do sensible things and you’re feeling all right and – and I have to go.”

“No,” Harry said, and couldn’t make it come out as anything that wasn’t a command with an edge to it. “No, *don’t go*–”

“I have to,” Malfoy said, and his voice shook a little. “I wasn’t meant to stay out all night, I – I’m going to be in trouble already, but I couldn’t – look, I have to go. *I’m* not heroic at all.”

“You keep mentioning that word,” Harry said slowly. “So – you think I’m heroic, then?”

Colour started up in Malfoy’s cheeks.

“I didn’t say that.”

“And as I recall, I’m going to be a great man in a few years,” Harry said thoughtfully, and watched Malfoy stop looking pale and frightened and start looking indignant and pink. “It’s all right, Malfoy. Lots of people admire me. Lots.”

“Not me!” Malfoy declared. “I’ve called you many things in my time, Potter, and just because your *overweening vanity*, your *overwhelming arrogance*, leads you to remember the only vaguely positive things I have ever said about you–”

“It’s okay to think I’m brilliant, Malfoy,” Harry said calmly. “I’m not embarrassed. I will even give you my autograph.”

“You’re a freak,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. “Totally mentally unstable. Everyone knows. I read it in the paper. I’ll see you in – I’ll try to come back within the week.”

“Okay,” Harry said, the cold weight on his chest lifting a little. “Good. You should, anyway, this time around you talked to Charlie Weasley more than to me.”

“You were unconscious, crazy person,” said Malfoy loftily. “Besides, Charles and I had

things to work out. I like Charles. He's so sane. I find that restful."

He had to almost yell 'restful' because he was walking backwards, hands in the pockets of his jeans. Harry wondered if he would try to leave the Ministry without turning away.

"Malfoy," he said, and Malfoy tilted his head in what Harry was fairly certain was an unconscious gesture, the one he used in class when he was interested. Harry cleared his throat. "You're – you said that you weren't, you know, heroic. But you're doing okay. You're doing better than okay." He stopped and added: "And you're the freak."

Malfoy made a deliberate sweeping gesture this time, a big swooping shape that seemed to indicate birds swooning in midair. Large birds.

"Your opinion naturally means *everything* to me, Potter."

Harry made a rude gesture and then turned away before he had to watch another one leave, again, and faced the polished wood of Scrimgeour's door. Never had wood seemed so unfriendly, or so complicated.

War was about politics. Girls left you because they liked you. Sneaky liars were absolutely trustworthy.

He hadn't thought this would be easy, but he hadn't realised it would be such a tangled mess. He couldn't see his way clear to anything and he had the sudden thought that this feeling must be why some people just gave up.

He squared his shoulders and pushed open the door. Scrimgeour turned at the sound and looked at him with those hungry, hunted eyes.

"Let's get this done," said Harry.

*

"Now you see," Snape remarked, pacing the kitchen floor in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with a long, slow stride that was only broken when he had to stop and duck his greasy head under the hanging pots and pans. "I seem to recall that I said you could try for the snake if the Order reported you had done well. Refresh my memory, if you would – I *don't* seem to remember saying that I would be even more impressed if your crazed, unthinking recklessness almost got you thrown in Azkaban for murder."

Harry's eyes hurt from flashing cameras and his teeth hurt from gritting out the stupid words that stupid Malfoy had thought he should say and his shoulder hurt, especially, from where Scrimgeour had been grasping it in a fatherly way for the papers. He could feel the places where Scrimgeour's fingernails had dug in even now, as if the man really was a lion and had claws.

He didn't have time for Snape.

"The ritual didn't get completed, did it?" he ground out. "The children were saved. How about you judge me by my results?"

“I’m not an examiner, I’m a teacher,” Snape snapped. “I will watch you step by step, I will judge you by the whole process, and I will not allow you to become lazy just because you happened to get lucky!”

Harry was sitting on the stone step that led into the kitchen, watching Snape with hatred. Snape was standing at the kitchen table, his fingers closed around a heavy wooden chair like claws. The legs of the chair ended in large wooden claws, too: Snape seemed to fit this house much more than he did the tiny shabby hole in Spinner’s End.

Harry remembered to hate Grimmauld Place again when he saw Snape in it.

“The ring and the book and the seal are all taken care of. Ron and Hermione will get the cup. We’ve already got the locket.”

Snape sneered. “Correction, Mr Potter. *I* have the locket.”

“Malfoy has it,” Harry said. “All I need is to get the snake and Voldemort. I only have to be lucky twice more.”

“And there is no guarantee you will be lucky even once more!”

“I killed people to stop that ritual,” Harry said. “I-”

Snape’s eyes glistened, a shiny unwholesome black like insects found scuttling at the bottom of a pit.

“Do you want to make this a contest?” he inquired. “Do you think it is like Quidditch? Have you any idea, you stupid boy, of how many people I have killed?”

Harry remembered Snape’s last victim, shuddered and had to look away, and hated himself for that weakness.

“What do you want me to do? You want me to sit here and rot like Sirius did? I bet you loved seeing that: I bet you do!”

“If you feel the urge to do something instead of sitting in the old Black place being supremely adolescent, you could go back to school. The Dark Lord ordered me to place Amicus and Alecto Carrow in Hogwarts, you know. The students are having an extremely unpleasant time of it, if that appeals to your melodramatic instincts.”

Harry thought that Snape talking about anyone else’s melodramatic instincts was a bit much.

“Stop messing *around*,” he said, his voice cracking. “I wish I could go back to school, but I have to do this and you can’t stop me. Will you tell me where that snake is or not?”

Snape’s mouth was thin and straight as a brandished wand. “I will not. I am not going to let you kill yourself!”

“Oh please.” Harry was on his feet and snarling in Snape’s face before he realised it himself.

“Like you care whether I live or die!”

He whirled away and slammed the door before he pulled a wand on the man. The sound echoed through the house, sharp and final as Harry imagined a gunshot might sound, and Harry ran up the stairs with his heart pounding with sick fury. He hadn't felt this way when he cut the rope, but this was how he should have felt. This felt like the killing rage which would have left him with no regrets.

Suggesting he go back to-

Harry stopped and caught the banister, feeling as if he was trying to get into the girls' dormitory and the stairs had collapsed away from him.

Ginny.

If people in Hogwarts were in trouble, if one of her friends had written to her – The idea was simple and the relief was unutterably sweet. If Ginny was at Hogwarts, no matter what was happening there, McGonagall was there, and teachers and friendly ghosts and the guarding presence of the very walls. Harry thought with longing of school and Ginny safe in it, of *knowing* one of them was safe.

He went upstairs and got his Cloak, and Apparated just outside the Hogwarts grounds. It was a cold trek to the school, frosty grass crunching like glass under his feet, but it was all worth it to see Hogwarts in front of him at last. The castle was lit at every window and Harry thought of Ginny seeing the brightness, seeing something almost like home.

He slipped inside and made his way noiselessly towards Gryffindor tower, and before he was half-way there he saw Neville Longbottom. Neville was walking with what seemed to be great purpose in a different direction: Harry put back the hood of the Cloak so Neville could see his face.

Neville stilled, wary as a soldier – so there *was* something going on at Hogwarts, then – and said quietly: “Put your hood back up, and follow me.”

*

The Room of Requirement looked like another library. Hermione would've been so happy. There were tables with maps and plans spread out on them and between every table was a bookcase. It looked like someone had acquired the entire contents of the Restricted Section: there were a few first years who Neville said were on detail to keep whacking the more recalcitrant books with broomsticks.

On a side wall, over the heads of several Ravenclaws who were all screaming at each other about Julius Caesar – Harry didn't know, Ravenclaws were weird – there were three flags hanging, bright strips of yellow and red and blue.

“Where's Slytherin?” Harry asked as soon as he stepped into the room.

“Oh yes,” said a girl's voice behind him. “Because when the Carrows do finally find a way in, which they will since the Inquisitorial Squad worked out a way to do it in half the time

they've had and really, even they can't be that stupid – I for one really want a great big piece of cloth on a stick handily there to incriminate me. Very cunning, I don't think."

Harry turned around and saw, with equal parts pleasure, surprise and awkwardness because of all the kissing her he'd been doing this year, Pansy Parkinson.

She flashed him rather a complicated smile. "Potter. What brings you here?"

"I was looking for," Harry said, and stopped. "Ginny Weasley."

Pansy's heart did not appear particularly crushed by this sign he loved another. "Haven't seen her," she said. She had a clipboard that she looked at now and called out: "Eustacia, Vervain, Melvin! You're on book beating duty. Legia, go find Christine and bully her in front of one or both Carrows, make sure she cries and really hurt her this time. Tuesday's performance was wretched, think of what Malfoy would say about your dramatic abilities." She turned back to Harry and Neville. "Are we meant to know where Ginny Weasley is? I thought she never came to school."

"I haven't seen her, Harry," Neville said, looking pale. "Was she on her way here? We could send out a reconnaissance team into the Carrows quarters-"

"No," Harry said, and tried not to sound disappointed enough to cry like some lonely, deserted child. "I – I thought she might have dropped by here on her way somewhere else, that's all. Don't worry. Uh, this place looks great!"

Neville beamed. "Yeah, it's good, isn't it? Luna and I got started on it, we set up the Room and all, and then we sort of – got into trouble a few times, and then Pansy and Vince started on about tactics and Cho got a few ideas and Marietta was brilliant, she has Alecko Carrow completely convinced she's on the Dark Lord's side because of what Hermione did to her face and she gets peeks at Alecko's paperwork. We've been able to pass on information about Death Eater raids to the Order!"

"Neville here had a very nice little school revolution going on," Pansy said, giving Neville an approving smile. "But these are big picture times."

Neville, moving with a great deal more assurance than Harry had ever seen him show before, leaned against the wall and said: "Well I know that now, don't I? Don't forget whose idea it was to blow up the kitchens."

"Blow up the kitchens!" Harry exclaimed.

That news had better not get out: it'd be bad for morale. Ron and the twins would be heartbroken.

Neville grinned with modest pride. "Found out where the house elves keep the flour," he said. "Flour barrels are like dynamite if you heat them enough – dynamite's this great Muggle thing, ask Justin Finch-Fletchley to explain it to you. It's such a struggle to keep us all fed that they can hardly find any time to educate us about the pureblood agenda."

Harry blinked and said: "You blew up the house elves?"

Hermione would be heartbroken too.

Neville Longbottom, the Che Guevara of Hogwarts, shook his head and looked upset by the idea of such waste. “Of course not. They’re digging us all these different tunnels that we can use to escape if it comes down to it – and the Order can use to get in.”

“We’ve only got one done right now,” Pansy put in, more practically. “But it’s lucky you showed up, Potter, McGonagall had no idea how we were going to pass word about it. The Carrows have worked out there’s a leak on their side and we’re all being watched pretty carefully.” Pansy smiled dreamily. “They haven’t figured out that their side is pretty much all leak. We’re saving that up as a surprise...” Her smile turned vicious. “And what a surprise it will be for Amycus Carrow and his busy hands. I’m going to hex them off.”

Harry looked at Pansy’s smile and thought about what an unprincipled man with too much power over schoolgirls might be up to.

“I’ve told you, Pansy,” Neville said, his voice unusually grim. “Let me and a team deal with him – I’ve got a plan that’ll make him regret the day he was born.”

“I’ve told you, Neville,” Pansy returned. “I don’t like the Gryffindors planning things, the explosions keep us up all night. And Amycus Carrow is *mine*. Wait there for a bit, Potter, and I’ll get you some maps and plans for the Order.”

She waved her clipboard in a vague gesture of farewell and strode over to the Ravenclaws. Everyone was so busy they didn’t seem to have noticed Harry at all, and Harry felt weird about that and yet almost relieved.

Scrimgeour had told him today that he was the only hope of the people. But here at Hogwarts it looked like there were a lot of hopes, and a lot of plans.

Not to mention a lot of exploding flour barrels.

“So have you blown up anything else lately, Neville?” he asked.

“It wasn’t just me,” Neville said. “Justin’s kind of a devil for explosions. Tell you the truth, I don’t think Eton could’ve handled him. We’ve got this plan to drain the lake and flood the Great Hall – I’m not sure what we’re going to do with the Giant Squid, Pansy keeps saying sushi but I think that would be unkind – we’re going to talk it over once he gets back from being tortured by Vince in the Great Hall.”

“Er,” Harry said. “Tortured?”

“Amycus loves the Cruciatus curse,” Neville said, his voice going grim again, and then a bit more amused. “Vince is his star pupil.”

The door opened and Justin Finch-Fletchley walked in, flanked by Cho Chang and Crabbe.

“I wasn’t overdoing it!” Justin protested vehemently. “He was completely fooled. That bit where I writhed on the ground and knocked against his boot was a brilliant piece of

improvisation. The trouble with you, Chang – and I noticed this when we were doing the play, and Malfoy noticed it too – is that you're not spontaneous enough!"

"The trouble with you, Finch-Fletchley," Cho yelled back, "is that you don't take direction!"

Crabbe scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "I liked the bit where you upset that jug of iced pumpkin juice on Carrow."

"*Thank* you, Crabbe," Justin said. "I think that was the best torture you've done yet. It's a pleasure to work with someone who can remain professional about things."

"I volunteer to torture you next," said Cho.

That was when they all saw Harry and stopped. Cho and Crabbe smiled at him: Justin looked vaguely panicked.

"Oh my God, did you kill Voldemort already? Is the war over?"

"Er, no," said Harry.

"Oh, what terrible news," Justin said with what was clearly relief. "Oh well. Got to keep building those catapults, I suppose. Don't worry about a thing, Harry. We're rallying round you."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley, you crazed warmonger, we are not building any catapults!"

"That's all you know, Chang, you lily-livered pacifist!"

Cho gave Harry an apologetic smile and dragged Justin off into a corner where Harry heard heated whispering, occasionally rising to a shriek on phrases like 'lab in the prefects' bathroom' and even more worryingly, 'lasers.'

"Cute couple, aren't they," Crabbe said with the tolerant, amused fondness that Harry had only really ever heard him use when talking to Malfoy. "How's Malfoy?" Crabbe asked suddenly, as if he could read minds.

Harry was prepared to believe Malfoy was an Occlumency whiz, but this was a little much.

"He's – good," Harry said. "He's okay. He's with Voldemort but – but I saw him today. He's all right."

"That's what I thought," Pansy said, coming back and hiding her vast relief about as well as Justin had. "That press conference you gave had Malfoy written all over it. He used those exact same turns of phrase when he was trying to excuse himself from McGonagall's lessons in third year."

She might as well have just said 'God bless his duplicitous little heart' since it was in every word anyway. Harry smiled at her.

"What?" Pansy said, smiling back at him. "Shut up, Potter. Here, take these to the Order."

They'd better do something useful with them. And I suppose you can tell Malfoy that we're all doing fine, too. You know – as well as can be expected, since we're lumbered with a catapult-happy loon and a pack of Ravenclaws overdosing on Muggle books of war. Not to mention our leader, General Fat Crybaby."

"I'm not fat," Neville said calmly. "And I could call names too, but Gran told me it wasn't clever."

"And what do Gryffindors know about being clever, may I ask?" Pansy inquired. "Besides which, I saw you crying that night we blew up the kitchen. Don't even try to deny it."

"They were manly tears," said Neville. "Manly tears. Ron would've understood. How is-

"So where's this tunnel you guys finished?" Harry asked quickly, feeling like Neville had been about to touch an open wound and Harry'd only just managed to twist away in time.

Crabbe cleared his throat. "I'll show you."

"And I'll show you that Gryffindors can be bloody clever," Neville said, and then winced as only Neville would have because of swearing before a lady. "Sorry, I mean – jolly clever. Wait 'til you see what Dean and I came up with as a design for Justin's catapults."

"Justin has no catapults. Justin needs no catapults-" Pansy let Neville take her arm anyway, and gave Harry another brief complicated smile. "Fairly tolerable to see you, Potter."

"Uh, you too," said Harry. "Bye, Neville."

"Take care," Neville said. "Listen, Pansy, I can handle Justin. See what we do is, we use the Astronomy Tower..."

The last he saw of Neville and Pansy, they were leaning over a table with a little matchstick prototype catapult on it. Neville had crouched down to admire it at eye level, and Pansy was flicking at it thoughtfully with a scarlet fingernail, looking almost ready to be won over. Harry left the Room of Requirement with Crabbe, putting his Cloak back on, even though he was sort of curious about the catapults plan.

"Nice guy, Longbottom," Crabbe said. "Doesn't ever seem to cop that Pansy swears like a sailor, but still. Makes me feel bad about judging all Gryffindors by your lot."

"Oh thanks," said Harry.

Crabbe was silent then, both of them realising that chatting to invisible people was liable to attract attention. Harry watched Hogwarts as they went, even the stone corridors dear to him and making him think that perhaps Ron was in the Gryffindor dormitory, perhaps Hermione was in the library. He remembered being eleven years old here, dizzy and delighted and home safe.

The Slytherin dungeons were far more crowded than Harry remembered them, and that was when he remembered about McGonagall's plan to move everyone down here because the dungeon would be the easiest place to defend. What had seemed like a terrible idea then

seemed a bit less stupid now, after seeing Cho and Justin and Crabbe walk in step and argue about taking direction.

It did look a bit cramped, though. There were twelve unmade beds in what had been the Slytherin common room. One had a black lace negligee lying on the pillow.

“That’ll be one of our girls,” Crabbe said, breaking the silence.

“Really,” said Harry, wondering if everything Ron had told him the twins had told *him* about Slytherin girls was true after all.

“They’ve been leaving their delicates around ever since Longbottom saw someone’s knickers on the floor and had this sort of bashful seizure,” Crabbe said. “They think it’s hilarious.”

The kitchens were gone and Slytherin girls were only interested in showing Neville their underwear. He could never tell Ron any of this: it would hurt him too much.

Crabbe jerked his head for Harry to follow him and, scrambling a bit over beds, Harry did, until he found what looked to’ve been the seventh year boys’ dormitory. One of the beds had Neville’s alarming plant beside it: Harry supposed he should be thankful that Justin had not made a really disgusting weapon out of it.

There was also a poster of Celestina Warbeck wearing several scarlet ribbons and not very much else on the farthest wall. Crabbe nodded towards it.

“Malfoy’d kill us if he saw it,” he said. “He thinks this was the period where Celestina was selling herself short as an artist. But we need it.”

He almost had Malfoy’s haughty inflection as he said the line about Celestina: it made Harry smile. Then he paid attention to Crabbe’s remark about needing the saucy poster, and wondered what exactly Neville had gotten himself into with this crowd.

“Oh?” he said weakly.

“Yeah,” Crabbe said, “No. Millie’d kill me.” He went over to the poster and lifted it.

Underneath was a perfectly ordinary stone wall.

Until Crabbe tapped it with his wand and murmured a spell, and Harry saw the dark tunnel beyond. He whistled and Crabbe gave one of his rare smiles – at least, Harry presumed they were rare. He couldn’t really remember seeing one before.

“Splits off three ways,” Crabbe said proudly. “The one on the far left is booby-trapped. We let Justin do it. It made him happy. Don’t, um, go down that one if you want to live.”

“I see,” said Harry.

“Terry Boot says that Justin is acting out because of the psychological trauma inflicted on him by being held captive by a basilisk stare and thus rendered helpless and also, symbolically castrated,” Crabbe said, and then frowned. “I don’t really understand half the

stuff Terry says. But Malfoy will, when he comes back.”

The tone of perfect confidence made Harry feel a little better.

“I expect he will,” Harry said. “It’s a great tunnel. Where do the other ways lead?”

“Hogsmeade and to a Portkey that’ll take us all to Finland,” Crabbe said promptly. “Pansy’s idea.”

He sank down onto a bed that wasn’t Neville’s. Harry squinted over and saw that it must be his own. There were photographs stuck up above the headboard: Crabbe and Millicent Bulstrode holding hands at the beach, Crabbe standing between two people who must have been his parents and an older boy who looked enough like him to be a brother. There was a picture of two large boys who looked about five, who Harry wouldn’t have recognised if he hadn’t seen Crabbe and Goyle at eleven in the Pensieve, not so long ago. The boys were watching solemnly as a little girl made a silent speech to them, wagging her finger and occasionally gesturing expansively.

It was the gesture that made Harry squint harder and see that the little girl was in fact Malfoy with a horrific pageboy haircut and wearing what appeared to be sailor suit robes.

Near the centre of the makeshift collage was a picture that showed Crabbe and Goyle in what were obviously brand-new Quidditch robes, looking quietly thrilled with themselves. Malfoy stood between them as he always did, slightly to the front, leaning his wrists against their shoulders and not looking quietly thrilled at all. He was beaming, his pointed face brilliant with a smile and his grey eyes clear and bright in a way they hadn’t been in – a while. He was laughing and fearless and all of fifteen years old. His father and mother were safe at home, and he’d never been marked by death or Voldemort or Harry.

“I want to,” Crabbe began, and Harry jumped and realised that they’d been having an awkward silence without him noticing. He looked at Crabbe and saw Crabbe was frowning down at his own clenched hands. He waited and Crabbe swallowed, and then said: “I want to thank you.”

“Me? What for?”

“I,” Crabbe said, and swallowed again. “I’m not – clever.”

“Um,” Harry said.

“And I’m not very brave either,” Crabbe said, the words tumbling out. “And I get – I get mad and I used to – we were playing with some kids once when we were eight and this boy said something to me and he kept talking and I punched him too many times and he was really hurt and Malfoy had to go get sick in the bushes. And I was angry with Malfoy because he – he was meant to be able to handle everything, he always said he would, and last year I was angry with him again because he seemed *lost* and I didn’t know what to do. And then he was gone and I thought even if – if we found him he might still seem lost and – this stuff at school is scary. And Mr Carrow taught us how to perform Unforgivable Curses.”

Crabbe lifted his head now and looked at Harry steadily. The look reminded Harry of Snape

earlier, talking about killing.

Crabbe's voice was soft. "And I'm *really good*. I've never been any good at – at anything in class before. But I'm good at hurting people."

He took a deep breath, his big shoulders going slack.

"But you and Malfoy met up with us, you were already getting on, you were protecting him and Malfoy had a plan and he told us to do all sorts of things. And then Longbottom was trying to set up his res-resistance and Pansy said, let's talk to him, if Malfoy's talking to Potter, and some of them wouldn't listen but Longbottom did, and – everything's okay. I'm not hurting anyone really. It all – none of it turned out as scary as I thought it might."

Another deep breath.

"So – thanks," said Crabbe. "If you hadn't – if you two hadn't – I don't know what would have happened. I don't know what I would have done."

He looked about done in with talking so much and something about his eyes was pleading, but Harry wasn't Malfoy, glib-tongued so-many-assurances Malfoy. He couldn't be the kind of leader Crabbe needed.

"I'm sure you would've done okay," Harry told him awkwardly at last. "You're not a bad guy. You would've worked something out. And you don't owe me for anything, but – I'd like a favour."

Crabbe looked puzzled but willing.

At this extremely unpropitious moment, Goyle bounced in.

"Hi, Potter! Pansy said you were here and then she said she had to get back to helping Cho beat Justin to death and so I thought I'd come say hi!"

"Hi," said Harry, and smiled cautiously. Goyle smiled back.

"Did you see the tunnel?" he asked, looking eager. "Will you tell Malfoy?"

"Yeah. Yes," said Harry, trying to pretend even to himself that he was sure of seeing Malfoy, absolutely safe and sound and very soon. "He'll be thrilled. He's really – relying on you guys."

"And tell him I've been practising my Beating," Goyle said. "He gets very narky about that."

"I definitely will," said Harry. "Can I have that picture?"

Crabbe and Goyle gave him identical blank stares and Harry lowered his hand. There was a silence, blank and polite on one end and absolutely horribly mortified on Harry's end.

"That photo?" Goyle asked, brow wrinkling. "Well I mean, I suppose you can – I mean, it's not mine, it's Crabbe's, but I don't see why you shouldn't – I mean, will the photo help save

the world? Why d'you-"

"Shut up, Goyle," Crabbe said briefly.

He'd been sitting looking at Harry and squinting, but now he moved fast for such a big guy. He got up, plucked the photo off the wall and handed it to Harry. Harry folded it and put it in his back pocket so he didn't have to hold it or think about the humiliating fact he'd asked for it, or why.

"So I – have to go," he said. "Good to see you guys. Thanks. Bye."

"Good to see you," Goyle said. Crabbe just nodded. "Take the right turn to Hogsmeade," Goyle continued anxiously. "Don't take the left. Justin did an experiment with a doll. We still haven't found the head. You need your head."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"Have a good Christmas," Goyle continued as Harry started down the dark tunnel.

It was Christmas Eve tomorrow, he remembered. It didn't seem particularly important, with Ron and Hermione so far away. Ginny wasn't at Hogwarts. She could be anywhere in the world. She seemed more lost than they did.

He was still glad he'd come. He was glad he'd seen the whole thing. Seeing Hogwarts like this – it made him think of what Malfoy had said, about war. War wasn't just finding Horcruxes or just politics, it was – a dozen little wars inside one big war, his school against Voldemort's people and his school was going to *win*, he was sure about that.

The Sorting Hat had been right on the money with that song in fifth year. It was enough to make Harry wish he hadn't missed so many of those songs over the years.

*

There was supposed to be a meeting of the Order on that evening, but when Harry returned to Grimmauld Place he found the house dark and empty. It was strange – he was sure Tonks had told him it was on today.

Harry didn't turn the lights on. He was used to the house being dark and silent but he didn't trust this darkness, this silence.

He felt there was a threat in it.

He pushed open the door of the meeting room, hearing the hinge's long thin moan, and saw the parchment lying on the table. He saw it first in the dusty mirror reflecting the dark wood of the table, the letter pale in the pale light and bearing only a few lines in Tonks's untidy scrawl.

That was when he saw he was wrong. There was no threat here. The threat was somewhere else.

He Apparated instantly and saw the Dark Mark, livid green and twisting in the sky above him, tattooing the night sky and distorting the whole world. The tidy little pavements with their neat hedges had all turned green and wavering under the light, as if they were underwater in some terrible sea.

Harry stopped for a moment and swallowed down horror. He only felt the rage he'd felt with Snape today, the rage he'd wanted to feel on the killing night so there would be no regrets and no thought, simply blind furious action.

He ran into the hall and through a fight – he saw Tonks's set face in the green light and didn't stop to help her because he thought he recognised a voice above and he did, he had. He almost ran into Lupin, facing down two Death Eaters at once, and then shoved past them too to what the two Death Eaters were defending, another Death Eater about to finish off the little task the Dark Lord had set them.

The Death Eater was bleeding where Dudley had punched him in the eye. Harry didn't know him.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry said.

It was that simple, when you really meant it.

He whirled away from Dudley when the man fell and advanced on one of the Death Eaters bearing down on Lupin. There was no time.

Later when there was time, a mediwitch had already sedated Dudley. Harry could be of no further use to the living so he walked around and looked at the dead in the swimming green light. Number Four Privet Drive had never looked like this before: what would the neighbours think?

Uncle Vernon was lying on the rug by the boarded-up fireplace and Aunt Petunia was in the hall, beside the door of the cupboard. Maybe she'd been trying to crawl in there and hide, or go in there to curse him.

They hadn't loved him, but they'd died for him. Harry went into the kitchen and thought about frying bacon in there, thought about lying outside in that green and midnight garden counting the days until he could return to Hogwarts. Aunt Petunia had taught him how to write at this kitchen table, scolding him when his pencil slipped onto the white shiny surface. She'd guided the tip of the pencil, concentrating so that for once her face was not resentful. She'd helped him make a little, wavy 'g.' He'd always written them the same way she did, ever after.

There was a card from her sister in her jewellery box upstairs. He had thought she might hug him, the last time he'd seen her. But she hadn't. She never had.

They'd been afraid of him and they'd been right to be afraid, and if they hadn't been afraid maybe they would have loved him and he would have loved them and he would be destroyed now, his heart broken and living for revenge.

Harry sat at the kitchen table and Tonks came and sat by him, her hair still white-blond and

looking luminous green. She looked ridiculous and very sad.

“Harry,” she said, her voice a long way away for some reason.

War’s killing people you don’t even know, Harry thought and did not say. He didn’t tell her what Dumbledore had said about his soul or ask if she could possibly get Malfoy or even tell her about the time Uncle Vernon had shaved off his moustache and Aunt Petunia had told him he looked perfectly dreadful and Uncle Vernon had taken them in the car and driven them around and around in circles until Aunt Petunia calmed down and he and Dudley had played I Spy in the back seat for hours.

He’d never liked living with them, always dreamed of going away and never coming back. He’d known he didn’t belong with them and they’d known it too and he’d *wanted* them to love him, so badly, and never been able to admit it even to himself until now.

He didn’t tell Tonks that either.

He said: “It’s all right, Tonks.”

His voice was calm, even if it sounded far away too.

“It was easier this time,” he continued, so distant, so very calm. “Much.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Harry found Dudley standing awkwardly in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place. He'd spent the early hours of the morning in conference with Scrimgeour. The Minister had talked for some time, words sliding smoothly into each other as if each one was greased, about spinning this and using the story for pathos and how perhaps Harry now saw that this alliance could be of great mutual benefit. Harry was so tired he hadn't even wanted to punch Scrimgeour in the face. Much.

They'd given a press conference, cameras flashing too bright and hot right in Harry's face, and Harry had thanked Scrimgeour and the Ministry very much for their understanding and support.

"Just let us know how we can help you, Harry," Scrimgeour said in the fatherly voice he used for addressing Harry around the press. "Anything you want."

"I want to go home," Harry said.

One of the reporters caught it and scratched a note, eyes gleaming like a hunting bird's through the long sweep of her quill. Harry didn't see how that was news, but he'd let it all go, and he'd finally stumbled home only to have Tonks tell him that his cousin was in the drawing room.

Tonks's father was a Muggleborn. She was used to Muggle relatives who treated you like real family: she thought that Harry and Dudley would be able to comfort each other, or

something.

There was no prospect of comfort, but Harry still had a responsibility. He tried to press out the creases between his brows with his thumb and shoved the door open before he could hesitate.

Dudley was standing with his back to the door, facing the bay windows. His big shoulders were set in a way that reminded Harry of how Uncle Vernon would hold his on the morning of a day when he had an important presentation to make. Harry was so familiar with Dudley, with Uncle Vernon: he felt vaguely that this familiarity should have carried some other feeling with it.

He just felt tired. But he was the only person Dudley had left now. If Dudley needed him, he had to be there.

He cleared his throat. “Hey. I’m – I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier.”

Dudley spun around, a flash of fear on his face, and Harry held up his hands hastily in a gesture that said he surrendered and showed he wasn’t holding his wand. After a moment, Dudley relaxed.

“That’s okay,” he said at length. “Your cousin Draco stayed here with me.”

“Who?” Harry said blankly, and then remembered that Malfoy and Dudley had strangely almost got on at Privet Drive, and the extremely technical and possibly nonexistent

cousinship he and Malfoy had decided on. “Oh, right.”

“He said it was all right to call him Draco,” Dudley offered, obviously noting that Harry was taken aback. “And I can’t call a guy Mallory, for God’s sake.”

“He’s not – Never mind. ’Course it’s all right. I’m glad that he was with you. Is he – is he still around?”

“Yeah,” said Dudley. “Some redhaired guy asked for a minute.” Dudley thought this one over, and added: “I’d like to know about the redhaired guy’s weights regime.”

“Er,” Harry said. “He’s a dragon trainer.”

“Jesus,” Dudley exclaimed, in a sharp, disgusted voice. Harry stared at him and Dudley looked quickly away. “I guess that’d do it,” he said, his voice going back to a muted tone.

“This is all so – you killed some of those guys, didn’t you. The guys in the masks. With your-”

He gestured with one big hand at Harry’s wand, tucked into the belt of his jeans. Harry didn’t know what to do with Dudley, so obviously out of his natural environment and so dazed: he seemed like a bear stumbling around a circus ring, confused by the lights and colours.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I killed some of them.”

“Draco seemed to think you might get in trouble for that.”

“No,” Harry answered. “No, I worked it out.”

Dudley nodded jerkily. “The – the bigwigs in your pretend government, they must know all about it,” he said, clearly trying to sound like Uncle Vernon and sounding shaky and young instead. “Draco explained it to me. The way this guy, You Know What or whoever, he’s going after families who sometimes have fr- people like you. Since Mum was Aunt Lily’s sister, and Aunt Lily could do fr – magic. He’s, he’s coming for all of us. And we can’t do. Well. You know.” Dudley knocked his fists together in a convulsive movement. “There isn’t much my left hook could do against magic, is there?”

“I suppose not.” Harry tried to think about this story Malfoy had fed Dudley: he didn’t know what to do about it. Voldemort’s motivation sounded plausible. Voldemort probably did want to do that, one day, but the thing Malfoy was concealing was that here and now Voldemort hadn’t been trying to eliminate families who might produce the Muggleborn.

Dudley’s parents had died because Voldemort wanted to strike a blow against Harry. Surely Dudley was owed the truth.

“But you and this lot,” Dudley said. “You’re all working against that guy, You Know Whatever.”

“Yeah,” Harry said cautiously.

Dudley swung around in a movement that Harry thought at first was a lunge. He went for his

wand only to release it a minute later when he realised Dudley was simply pacing, in heavy uncoordinated strides, as he tried to sort things out.

“I know we didn’t always – get on, all of us,” Dudley said in a rough voice at last. “But you won’t let this guy get away with what he did. You’ll make sure he gets what’s coming to him. For Mum and Dad.”

Harry took a breath. “I will.”

“Even if they weren’t,” Dudley stopped. “If we weren’t all that great. They were just scared.” He laughed, a sudden short horrible huff of laughter. “They had something to be scared of.”

“I’m really sorry, Dudley,” Harry said. His voice came out stiff and as if he didn’t mean it at all.

Dudley stared at the curtains, which rustled sympathetically to him. He jumped violently and then glared at Harry as if daring him to comment on Big D, afraid of curtains. When Harry said nothing Dudley exhaled and shoved trembling hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“When do I leave this place?”

“Oh – no,” Harry said. “This is my home. You can stay here as long as you like.”

Dudley was staring. “You have a house?”

Dudley probably had a house himself. Harry had heard Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon talking about insurance policies, the mortgage and doing right by Dudders. He doubted Dudley would be any more pleased by home ownership than Harry himself had been.

“Yeah.”

Dudley looked doubtfully around at the room: Malfoy had put the cobra snakeskin in the glass cabinet and Kreacher had polished the snake-shaped chandelier until it gleamed.

“Don’t think much of your décor,” he said at length. “So I’m not – I’m not being kept here for questioning? I can go?”

“Where would you go?” Harry asked.

“I’m going to Piers’,” Dudley said instantly. “Of course. We’re like brothers.”

As soon as he’d said it he and Harry realised what, exactly, he had said. They stood staring at each other.

The moment stretched on, long and cold and a little horrible, until Maud the curtain rustled again and Dudley flinched and went pale.

“I can’t stay here,” he said, low.

Harry remembered Dudley in Privet Drive, marvelling at Malfoy doing wandless magic. He’d

thought it was cool then: but this was an alien world, and it seemed threatening to him.

Magic had made Aunt Petunia sick: well, it had killed her sister. Now magic had killed Dudley's parents, and he would never feel safe, feel wonder or curiosity or anything at all about magic, ever again.

"If that's what you want," Harry said. "You can go right now."

Every line of Dudley's body was taut with eagerness, like a dog straining desperately to break his leash. "Please. I – Tell Draco thanks for staying with me."

"I will."

"And you'll make that guy pay for what he did to Mum and Dad," Dudley said again.

"I'll kill him myself," Harry said. "I swear."

Dudley went still when Harry said that, looking scared and reassured at once. He took a step backwards when Harry reached for him and Harry had to explain about Apparating, and when they got to the Polkiss house he ran through the gate and pressed the bell.

Harry stood outside the gate looking in at the white stucco front of the house, the neat front garden, and Dudley standing on the doorstep next to the morning milk bottles.

Dudley looked over his shoulder. "Thanks," he said. "I know I can – I know you'll keep your

word. Thanks.”

“That’s okay, Dudley,” Harry said, soft and tired, and he Apparated away before the Polkisses could see him. They would have enough questions without an appearance by the delinquent cousin. It was better for Harry to just disappear from that world, to become another thing to be discussed over the hedges as a footnote in the Dursley tragedy: and that boy. Heard he came to a bad end.

Grimmauld Place came back into view, Number Twelve bursting into existence between two other houses in a way that had probably upset Dudley badly when he’d seen it. Harry looked at the twisted serpent doorknocker, the great black door, and the way the house seemed to have risen slightly off-kilter from the pavement, a shadowy crooked neighbour to its adjoining houses. He’d called it home to Dudley without even thinking.

Harry went up the tall stone steps of home and on up the stairs to Malfoy’s room. He crawled onto the bed and then just sat there, staring blankly at the carved eagles on the headboard, loath to sleep in case Malfoy was back with Voldemort by the time he awoke and trying so hard not to think about Privet Drive that he felt dizzy.

When the door creaked open he knew who it was. The tension did not so much drain from his body as fall away, like a weight he could not have carried a moment longer.

“Hey,” Malfoy said, and walked over to stand by the side of the bed. Harry didn’t turn around, but he leaned back and Malfoy was there, solid and warm. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said. “I talked to Scrimgeour. Said all the – right things. I think.”

“I know, you were all over the morning papers,” Malfoy said. “Quite a triumph. Your hair has never looked so horrible before.”

His fingers in Harry’s hair were like his tone rather than his words: gentle and a little tentative. The sky over Malfoy’s bed was morning-grey but clear, it looked cool and tranquil as if there was no possibility of rain. Harry kind of liked it.

“Will you sleep?” Malfoy continued.

“Will you stay?”

“Oh, naturally,” Malfoy answered, mocking and tender. “Say what you like about the man, the Dark Lord is very understanding about me taking days off. I also have regular tea breaks.”

“Come off it,” Harry mumbled. “You don’t drink tea.”

Malfoy laughed, a little uneven sound. “You have me there. Seriously, Potter, are you all right? Talk to me. I know they were – but they were your family.”

“They weren’t,” Harry said on an exhale. He shut his eyes and turned his face, leaned his cheek against the soft wool of Malfoy’s jumper. “You are.”

“Well,” Malfoy said, heartbeat fast against Harry’s ear. He sounded uncertain, but he kept

stroking Harry's hair, so perhaps he was just concerned.

"Dudley said thanks for staying with him," Harry said. "Thanks. I mean – from me, too. I'm grateful."

"I should think so," Malfoy told him. "Do you think I permit Muggles to call me by my Christian name for just anyone?"

He pushed Harry away a little and then pushed him down, lightly but firmly. The pillows felt indescribably luxurious and Malfoy leaned over him fussing with them, pale narrow face even paler in the grey light.

Dudley had thanked Harry, too. There was a chasm of magic and fear between them, there always had been, they had different worlds and different homes and Harry had never been anything like Dudley's brother. But he could be Dudley's avenging arm.

It wasn't anything more than the entire wizarding world expected of him, but it felt strange that the only comfort he'd had to offer was a promise of revenge and death.

Harry looked again at Malfoy through inexorably falling eyelids and saw him leaning against the bedpost. Harry wondered distantly how much of his thoughts he'd been saying aloud, since Malfoy looked so worried.

*

Harry must've slept for almost twenty-four hours. When he woke there was morning light filtering through the curtains, the sky in the canopy still grey but darker now, with the shadowy quality that said it was very early morning.

Clear in the absolute silence was the sound of the front door softly opening and closing.

Harry sat up in bed and stared at the door. Curled like a cat beside him Malfoy murmured "Shh" apparently in his sleep, and reached out to give a random pillow a soothing pat.

"Shh yourself," Harry said quietly to his ruffled blond head, then reached for his wand on the nightstand and slipped silently out of bed.

He padded on socked feet out onto the landing, and looked over the rail where he could see the stairs stretching down to the hall, and in the hall – Charlie Weasley stood with a bag over one burly shoulder, squinting up at him.

"Up early, Harry," Charlie observed, flashing him a grin.

Harry only realised all his muscles had been tensed for a fight when they relaxed. "I suppose I am," he said warily. "What are you doing here?"

"Well," Charlie said. "Well – I thought I might come stay for a while. If that's okay with you."

"Sure, I guess," Harry answered. "Any particular reason why?"

“Oh,” Charlie said. “I thought that you might be having a tough time with Ron-” his voice softened appreciably on his baby brother’s name – “and Hermione gone, and all that stuff happening with your family. I thought this big old house might get a bit lonely and I thought maybe you could use the company.”

“I see,” Harry said slowly. “*You* thought all that, did you?”

Charlie’s next grin was slow too, white teeth gleaming in his freckled-to-a-tan face, warm and rueful and inviting Harry to smile with him.

“Something like that,” Charlie murmured.

“Charles!” Malfoy said behind Harry, sounding sleepy but delighted. “You here! What a surprise, and yet how excellent. Come and see your room.”

He charged down the stairs and dragged Charlie up them by his wrist, telling Charlie earnestly what a pleasant but definitely surprising surprise it was to see him and how as soon as he had seen him he’d immediately thought of what room he should occupy.

“Don’t bother about me,” Charlie said, low and pleased, obviously charmed to be in the centre of Malfoy’s bright whirlwind of attention again. “I can bunk anywhere.”

“Don’t tell me about sleeping in the crook of a dragon’s elbow in Roumania, Charles,”

Malfoy said absently. “It makes me worry that the fumes in dragon breath have affected your

brain.”

Harry followed them up to the third floor where Charlie had a bedroom up high with large windows, bevelled glass glinting even in the pale morning light, the view clear across the rooftops of London as if seen flying.

“It’s great,” Charlie said, looking at Malfoy, and Malfoy beamed all over his pointed face and Harry thought that whatever conversation Charlie’d finally persuaded Malfoy to have, it must’ve gone really well.

*

Harry was cheered by Malfoy saying he could stay awhile and Charlie saying he had to get ready for work, even though Malfoy’s idea of a good time was to make him read books on the theory of Occlumency.

“Wow, Malfoy, this looks like a thrilling read,” Harry remarked, turning *Being Insert-Name-Here: A Guide Inside the Minds of Others* over in his hands.

“Pay attention, there will be a quiz later,” Malfoy said sternly. “Also if you fail at Occlumency the Dark Lord’s giant killer snake will eat your head.”

“I mostly fear the quiz,” Harry said.

“Take care, you guys, I’m off to work!” Charlie shouted through the door.

“Bye!” Harry shouted back, which he considered quite enough, but Malfoy, who had been leaning easily against Harry’s chair looking at the book, straightened up.

“Hang on a minute.”

“What?” Harry said, twisting and half-rising from his chair.

“I’m just going to say goodbye,” Malfoy said, already at the door. “Stay where you are. Read your book!”

He vanished, shutting the door firmly behind him. Harry gave his book a look that said this wasn’t over, then got to his feet and followed to make sure Malfoy didn’t get himself into any trouble.

When he opened the door he heard Malfoy say: “Charles.”

Malfoy was standing at the top of the stairs and Charlie at the foot: Harry leaned against the rail and was about to speak when Charlie said: “I can’t stop. I’ll be late for work.”

Charlie’s story checked out. He was looking at his watch and dressed in work clothes: old cloth and scuffed leather, his arms bare.

“I’m sure all the students won’t instantly kill themselves if you’re a little late,” Malfoy said loftily. “Maybe they’ll be a bit downcast, but think about how happy they’ll be when you

arrive. Anyway..." His voice went soft. "I just wanted to thank you."

Charlie's voice went softer in what might have been an involuntary response. "You're welcome."

Malfoy came down the stairs towards Charlie, moving slightly differently than normal, and Harry was shocked by a jolt of recognition, like a bolt of lightning striking somewhere between his stomach and his spine. It was – the way Malfoy was moving was the way he'd moved half a year ago, a lifetime ago, with the easy animal grace of something on the prowl. When the twins had fed Malfoy that Potion at Bill and Fleur's wedding.

It was terribly strange to remember that, now so much time had passed and so much had changed, now he felt so differently. He remembered Malfoy's face, close, his eyes intent under lowered lashes.

He could see Charlie's face now but not Malfoy's, and on Charlie's face was the dawning of alarm and something else under that.

"Really," Malfoy said. "I didn't have anyone to ask: not somebody I could count on."

Charlie reached out and put his hand gently on Malfoy's shoulder, palm up as if blocking him.

"Hey, Draco," he said. "I said you were welcome and I meant it. You're welcome to ask me for help, any time, and I'll help you. I wouldn't ask – I don't want-"

He stopped, eyes searching as if he was fumbling around for words he was sure he'd put down somewhere close by.

"Which is it?" Malfoy asked, warm and a little playful, his voice curling around the words the way his fingers could curl around hair.

Charlie sounded extremely distracted. "What?"

"You wouldn't ask?" Malfoy repeated, turning the echo into a question. "Or you don't want to?"

Charlie's hand fell away from Malfoy's shoulder.

"You see," Malfoy went on, light but relentless. "You caught me off guard before. I wouldn't like you to think that was an example of how I usually go about things."

The air seemed charged. Charlie looked like he'd found words but he was afraid to put them together in case they were explosive.

"What are you saying, Draco?" he said at last.

Malfoy laughed a little, low and pleased, his voice still holding that caressing playful note.

"I'm saying, come-" He reached out and looped slim fingers around Charlie's belt loop, tugged him forward, and his voice changed to a whispered promise on a single word, "Here."

Malfoy's free hand flew up, fingers light on Charlie's jaw. He tilted Charlie's face up slightly and kissed him.

There was silence, a long slow moment of uncertainty, and then more silence but the moment *changed*, Charlie and Malfoy both moved and they were pressed up against each other, the separate lines of their bodies melding into a sudden fierce curve. Charlie's scarred dark hand was at the nape of Malfoy's neck, in a possessive clasp.

Malfoy pulled his mouth away, stepping back and using his hold on Charlie's belt loop to push him back a little, into the stair rail.

"Hey," he said, slightly breathless and sounding as if he was smiling. "You can't stop. You'll be late for work."

Harry uncurled stiff fingers from their death grip on the rail, and stalked back into the room where his book lay waiting for him. If they were planning on any more kissing, he certainly didn't need to be there to see it. He slammed the book open, the calfskin cover hitting the table with a thump, and began to read the pages at speed.

He was angry. He wanted to be angry with Charlie, which he could reluctantly admit made no sense: Charlie certainly hadn't been making the advances this time, he wasn't confusing Malfoy. Malfoy didn't seem confused. He actually seemed pretty clear about what he wanted. So Harry shouldn't be angry with Charlie and he didn't want to be angry with Malfoy, which left him with unfocused but definite rage and no idea what to do about it or how to make

himself feel better.

Not too much later, though still not soon enough for Harry's liking, Malfoy came back. He was humming a little and looking generally pleased with himself as he took a seat at the other end of the table.

"How are you getting along with the book?"

"Fine," Harry said in clipped tones. "Are you planning on sitting around feeling pretty all day, or do are you going to be useful at some point?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed to cold slits. "You know, I can't believe I told your Muggle-" he said the word as if he'd be washing his own mouth out with soap later – "relative that I was your cousin when it's quite clear you've appointed yourself my *maiden aunt*."

"Look, I can have an opinion-"

"No you can't!" Malfoy snapped. "Because it's none of your business. It's not a big deal so you don't need to know anything about it and you can keep your opinion to yourself. But yes, since you asked, there are plenty of useful things I could be doing and none of them involve sitting around here while the freaking Dark Lord wonders where the hell I am and I wonder what the hell I'm doing hanging around here for you to snarl at me!"

"I didn't mean – don't go," Harry said.

Malfoy's eyes were flashing by now. "I'm putting this down to a screaming abandonment issues grief-stricken no normal concept of privacy thing," he raged on, making for the door even as he spoke. "I'm not – I don't want to fight with you. But I'm not staying."

Charlie had left the house unobtrusively. Malfoy shut the front door with an apocalyptic slam.

*

Charlie came back just as quietly. Malfoy did not come back. Harry almost took pleasure in how Charlie looked when Harry told him that Malfoy was already gone. He didn't only because it was impossible to take pleasure in anything that meant Malfoy was with Voldemort.

Things were awkward, especially since Charlie stopped going to work over Christmas: Harry sort of resented Charlie's presence. Harry didn't need a keeper and he hadn't invited Charlie into his home, didn't need Charlie messing about with his family, but Charlie was an okay guy, he had to grudgingly admit. He was cheerful and patient and he took his turn cooking while Kreacher was off hysterically weeping into the tapestries about Malfoy's absence, and he never betrayed by look or deed how much he would've preferred to be back at the Burrow.

More than that, Charlie was a *Weasley*: his slow cheerful laugh reminded Harry of Ron and sometimes he caught a glimpse of red curls in gold light and thought that Ginny had returned. He missed them too much. He couldn't hate Ron and Ginny's brother, couldn't be awful to a member of the family he'd always thought of as the best family possible, who had been so kind to him. Even if he sort of wanted to.

Harry tried to get through it. Surely, he thought, surely, surely there would be some word from Ron and Hermione at Christmastime. Surely Malfoy and Ginny would come back for Christmas.

On Christmas Day an Owl from Ron and Hermione came, the owl that came with it looking bedraggled. The card was nothing but a piece of Muggle paper folded in two, almost transparent with damp, but Hermione – Harry was prepared to bet – had enchanted the stick figures on the front to start carolling tunelessly as Harry opened it.

Inside was Ron's scrawl, wishing Harry a Merry Christmas and adding that they'd had loads of wicked adventures and wait until Harry heard about the poisonous leaping lizards. *'It's not the same without you, mate'* he added in writing so hurried that Ron was either scribbling a hurried afterthought or embarrassed. *'Nothing is.'*

Hermione wrote that they were all right and she calculated that they were getting very close, and she was sure Harry would have been horrified by Ron's foolish behaviour with the poisonous leaping lizards. She said that she really missed Harry: that they both did.

'I don't miss you, Potter,' Zacharias Smith had written in smug round letters. *'I don't see why I should, as I barely know you. Still, Ron insisted that I write something, so here it is: happy Christmas, I suppose. Z.S.'*

Underneath Ron had written: *'Don't mind Zach, that's just his way.'*

Hermione was calculating something and Ron was dealing with leaping lizards and Zacharias Smith was still a git, halfway across the world. Harry couldn't seem to put the card down, even though he knew cards belonged on the mantelpiece. He ended up keeping it in his pocket with the picture of Malfoy, just until he decided what to do with them.

The Weasleys came over, all save Bill and Fleur who were apparently planning a love nest Christmas. Charlie was obviously deeply thrilled to see them and Mrs Weasley gave Harry a hug, arms soft and forgiving, as if he hadn't lost her son and daughter. Then she had to go off and direct Percy, who was staggering around with a four-foot jelly obscuring his face as Fred earnestly told him where to go and Percy earnestly told Fred that he didn't trust him an inch.

It was nice, the bustle of a Weasley Christmas, but Harry didn't have the links to the Weasleys he needed, the links to normalcy: Ron, Hermione and Ginny were all gone. He offered to help with the cooking, though, and he laughed at all Fred and George's jokes. He watched the door.

They were half-way through dinner when Malfoy finally arrived. Harry took his habitual glance at the door and found himself automatically looking away before he realised what he was seeing and his gaze swung back. Malfoy was leaning against the doorframe, not lounging but leaning gracelessly, as if he was very tired. There were circles under his eyes that looked like bruises.

His eyes took an inventory of the room and settled on Harry. "Hello, everyone."

"Draco," Charlie said, standing up and knocking his chair over. "God, you look awful."

“Thank you, Charles,” Draco said gravely. “Well, that’s the Death Eater lifestyle for you. It gets so crazy at Christmastime: more presents for the Dark Lord! More egg nog for the Dark Lord! Let’s start a conga line for the Dark Lord! Sometimes it’s hard to cope.”

The twins made a sound of disgust that seemed to come from a single throat.

“Cut it out,” Charlie snapped.

“Leave him alone,” Harry snarled.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Thank you for this chivalrous protection. Will one of you kind gentlemen lead me to the fainting couch?”

He headed for the chair beside Harry, which Harry had managed to keep empty, and reached out and started to snag all the food within reach. Even Fred and George couldn’t get too upset about Malfoy staying quiet and eating, and besides that Percy drew their fire by lifting his voice to tell a long involved story about the new filing system at work. Mr Weasley and Charlie both tried to get Fred and George to shut up as they valiantly pretended interest, and Harry thought that Percy’s dreary monologue was the sweetest thing he’d heard in weeks.

He slid a glance over to Malfoy, who was eating cauliflower and did not seem interested in looking up from his plate. Harry touched his left arm to get his attention and Malfoy jerked violently away, a shudder going through his whole body, eyes wide and blazing terror for a moment before the blind emotion was pushed away and Malfoy saw Harry again.

Gently, giving Malfoy time to stop him, Harry turned Malfoy's arm over so he could see the Dark Mark.

It was still there even with the room hung with Christmas decorations, even at the festive table: the black vile mark that Malfoy had taken willingly, the mark of loyalty that Malfoy had *meant*, once. The skin around it was livid and raised, as if the snake was trying to burn Malfoy's arm away and crawl off the blackened bone. Harry wondered whether Voldemort had inflicted this on Malfoy purely for staying away more than a day without permission or whether he liked to do it a lot to his favourite scared rabbit. He wasn't sure which was the better choice, that Malfoy got hurt a lot for no reason or that Malfoy had been hurt because of him.

Malfoy made a small uncomfortable sound, and Harry lifted his head to see the Weasleys en masse staring at the Dark Mark. They all looked sickened, except for Charlie, who looked simply sad.

Harry lowered Malfoy's arm to the table, not letting it actually touch the table. He kept hold of Malfoy's wrist and glared furiously around at all the horrified faces, wishing he could do something violent in order to fulfil this impulse to cover and protect. Disgusting, tragic, terrifying, whatever they thought he wanted to make one thing clear: he was laying claim. This was *his*.

Malfoy pulled his arm sharply away. "I shouldn't have come," he said, low, and he slipped out of his chair, damned slippery *slithery* Slytherins, before Harry could force him back

down.

“He did take the Mark,” George said in his most reasonable voice. “So really, whatever happens because of it-”

Harry threw him up against the wall. His wand was at George’s throat and George’s eyes were on him, wide and stunned, before he even realised that he’d moved. George hadn’t had a chance to defend himself: he wasn’t fast enough, he was used to school fights. George had never killed anyone.

“Don’t you dare even say it,” Harry hissed, and then because George was a Weasley he let him go.

“Have you two gone completely *mental*?” Fred demanded, leaping up and getting his shoulder in front of his twin’s. “I mean, it’s pretty clear what the problem is with Charlie, although I can’t imagine anyone having a crush on that little worm-”

“Charlie?” Mrs Weasley exclaimed, the sound coming out of her like a loud startled hiccup.

“What?”

Charlie looked at the tablecloth, arms crossed over his broad chest. “Thanks, Fred.”

“Ooh.” Fred winced. “Sorry, Charlie.”

Mrs Weasley looked almost determinedly uncomprehending. “Charlie, what on earth is he

talking about?”

Charlie directed his words, very softly, to the tablecloth. “Sorry, Mum.”

“I’m sorry,” Percy said, terribly polite. “But I really haven’t been able to keep up with current events in the family. Does Mum still not know about Charlie, or is this about that Malfoy boy? Because really, Charlie, I have to say, he’s very young and, well, very obnoxious-”

Colour flooded Charlie’s face, drowning the freckles in a crimson tide. “Leave Draco out of this!”

“Do I *still* not know?” Mrs Weasley repeated, her voice rising. “Do *I* - Arthur, what do you know?”

Mr Weasley whipped off his glasses and started industriously polishing them. “Me, dear? Nothing, dear. I mean. I suppose it’s possible that I may have had my suspicions, possibly.”

Mrs Weasley started shouting at her husband, even as her hand went out to catch one of Charlie’s large, scarred hands. He linked his fingers with hers and grinned as noise erupted around him, Mr Weasley saying: “Dear, don’t overreact,” and Fred saying “Oh it’s *Draco*, is it?” and Percy saying: “Really, Mother, statistically speaking there was going to be at least one of us!”

Harry took the opportunity of all-out Weasley warfare to leave the room and go upstairs to Malfoy’s. He found Malfoy sitting on the bed, his knees drawn up to his chest and his head in

his arms.

Harry crossed the room in two strides with the demand to know exactly why Voldemort had hurt him and the following demand that Malfoy promise never to go back on his lips. Both demands died when Malfoy lifted his head, face flushed and eyes glittering, and said in a desperate voice: "I didn't go home for Christmas last year."

Harry climbed up on the bed. "Er," he said cautiously. "Yeah. I know that."

"I – I thought, I wanted more time to fix that Cabinet," Malfoy said rapidly, mouth twisting in an ugly shape. "I thought if I could fix it then by next Christmas - *this* Christmas – Dad would be out and we could all be together again, I told Mother that it wouldn't be a real Christmas without him, she asked me to come back and I said I didn't want to." He swallowed, a thick sound that meant he was struggling ferociously not to cry. "I would have – I should have gone home for Christmas. I didn't know she was going to die!"

"Course you didn't," Harry said, helpless. This time last year Malfoy'd had what Harry hadn't ever had: what Harry didn't know how it felt to lose.

"My f-father's back there with the Dark Lord," Malfoy said, strained. "It's horrible. He keeps trying to talk to me. He killed her and he keeps trying to talk to me! I didn't want to be there. Sometimes I think I can't stand it there a minute longer."

"Well – good," Harry said.

Malfoy stared at him, blinking like a startled but disdainful owl. “Good?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m glad you came here. I wanted you to.”

Malfoy stared for another moment, then bowed his head back over his knees. Harry felt a flash of panic, thinking that Malfoy was going to actually cry and all Harry could do was say how sorry he was, but Malfoy only sucked in a deep breath, his back hunched up sharply as if he was trying to sprout protective spikes. Harry leaned over and patted the spot in between his shoulderblades awkwardly, and the spike attempts smoothed out. Malfoy lifted his head, looking considerably more composed.

“What are that lot up to?” he drawled. “Still all atwitter over seeing that stupid Mark again?”

“Uh, actually no,” Harry answered. “Fred accidentally outed Charlie. Bit of a scene going on down there.”

Malfoy snorted and eased himself back a bit, so he was leaning against the eagle-carved headboard. “Accidentally?” he repeated with withering scorn. “Of course, all that horrible mayhem that follows the atrocious twosome everywhere they go, a strange series of accidents. You know, since twins run in the family, why couldn’t *Charles* have been twins instead of the two-headed monster?” His expression became contemplative. “I’d have liked that.”

Harry scowled. “You know, twins do not mean there’s two of the same person around.”

“Really, then how do you explain the Weasley horror show, tell me that,” Draco muttered.

“Anyway, don’t judge me. Are you telling me you wouldn’t like Ginny to be twins?”

The sound of her name spoken casually aloud sliced through Harry, as if his whole body was a sore tooth that had just been prodded. “Why, so they could both run away from me at once?”

Malfoy said “Hmm,” in a regretful sort of way and reached out to touch Harry’s shoulder, touch light and absently smoothing the tension out.

Harry wished abruptly that he could do that: be casual and comfortable enough with touch that it made things better, when Malfoy’s mother was dead and had left him to Harry, who didn’t know what to say or do.

“I got you a present,” he offered abruptly.

Malfoy brightened. “I like presents.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “Uh, it’s in my room. I’ll go get it.”

“Be careful not to get lost,” Malfoy called after him. “I realise you don’t go there very often.”

Kreacher was letting dust gather in his room, it was true. Given last Christmas and the maggots, Harry felt lucky that it was just dust. He rummaged around in his chest of drawers and got out the gift. When he came back to Malfoy’s room, bright and familiar, a parcel flew

at him unexpectedly through the air. He caught it automatically.

“I got you a present too,” Malfoy said, standing by his wardrobe and trying out a smile.

“Oh, thanks,” Harry said. It had fancier wrapping paper than Harry’s did, and a ribbon.

“Okay, mine now,” Malfoy said, clapping his hands in a peremptory manner. “Come on, hand it over.”

Harry threw and Malfoy caught it neatly, then turned it over, shook it and finally unwrapped it with care. Then he turned it over in his hands, silver and gleaming.

“I like it,” he decided. “It is so little and Muggleish. What does it do?”

“Well, it’s a Walkman,” Harry said.

Malfoy’s face remained a polite blank.

“Little titchy Muggle radio,” Harry explained. “Uh, you put the little earpieces in your ears and you can hear Muggle songs and nobody else can.”

“Voices that no-one else can hear, this is your gift to me,” Malfoy said absently, smirking to himself and occupied with his Walkman.

Harry took a step forward, about to take it and show him how to use it, but Malfoy batted him

irritably away.

“It’s mine and I shall learn how to work it. I am perfectly capable: I did Muggle Studies, unlike some.”

“You seemed to like Muggle songs,” Harry said.

“Yes, I did. I do,” Malfoy said, and looked up from his Walkman long enough to give Harry a real smile, crooked and flashing out like another gift. “I like it a lot, Potter. Now open yours.”

Harry did so and frowned at what he had in his hands with considerable puzzlement.

“Malfoy,” he said. “Uh. I hope this doesn’t come as a surprise, but I actually do own a comb already.”

“This is different,” Malfoy told him proudly. “This is an enchanted comb. I made up the spell myself, you know. It wasn’t easy. In fact, this comb may represent the pinnacle of my unparalleled genius.”

The comb which was the pinnacle of Malfoy’s unparalleled genius looked like a fairly ordinary comb to Harry. Well, a bit fancier than Harry was used to, but that was only to be expected.

“Go to the mirror,” Malfoy ordered impatiently, “and brush your hair.”

Harry went cautiously over to the mirror, and saw his own face frowning in slight bewilderment back at him. He brushed his hair a few times with the comb and then looked at his reflection: his hair was a bit flatter, he supposed, but that meant it got in his eyes. He didn't look all that different.

"Oh that's much better," Malfoy declared.

"Er," Harry said. "Okay."

He was worried about the Weasleys. This was his house: he should be a host, sort of, and he'd just left them, but he didn't want to leave Malfoy up here alone.

"Do you think we could maybe go back downstairs?"

He'd forgotten about Malfoy's rules of courtesy, possibly because Malfoy had never been courteous to Harry once in seven years.

"Yes, we should," he agreed immediately, even though he looked loath to part with his Walkman. He went over to the bed and hid it under a pillow. "There," he said to the pillow. "You'll be safe there. The Weasley twins won't get you. I'll come back soon."

"The Walkman talks to you but you don't actually have to talk back to it," Harry let him know.

"Your suggestion is noted," Malfoy told him loftily.

The Weasleys were in the sitting room when Harry and Malfoy came down: Mrs Weasley had got Charlie to hang boughs and little fairy lights up over the door, and there was a fire crackling in the grate. Harry had his shoulder pre-emptively before Malfoy's in case anyone tried to hassle him, but Mrs Weasley made a point of taking Malfoy's hands and giving him a kiss.

"You look pale," she said. "You've been sleeping, haven't you?"

"Practically every night," Malfoy told her, squeezing her hands back.

There was no sign of his earlier distress: he was good at this, at slipping back into the role of the perfect guest for Mrs Weasley. Harry was only just starting to realise how extremely uncomfortable he must have been at the Burrow.

Malfoy, Harry noticed, lost no time extricating himself from Mrs Weasley and making his way over to Charlie. Malfoy started talking, low and concerned, head tilted to catch Charlie's reactions. Charlie flushed a little as he spoke.

"Harry," Mrs Weasley said suddenly. "Do you know, you've never looked so handsome! Have you done something to your hair?"

Harry could actually feel Malfoy's intense smugness explode and radiate through the room like some kind of emotional supernova.

“Er,” he said.

That was when they heard the sound of the door opening and someone falling heavily onto the hall floor. Harry already had his wand out when he heard Tonks exclaim: “Was that mat always there?”

“Merry Christmas, Tonks!” George yelled out.

“Shut up, whichever twin you are!” Tonks yelled back.

Harry put his wand away before the door opened, Lupin ducking under the bough with Tonks’s hand tucked safely into the crook of his arm. He was looking down at her and murmuring something, teasing her a bit, and Harry smiled and then he felt the smile slip off his face, lost in the jarring sensation that the world had shifted slightly, become a different world with a smile and all reason lost in the shift.

Under the boughs stood Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry’s hand was on his wand again, the weight hitting his palm soothing as a whispered promise of revenge.

Then she moved out of the shadow into a bright spot cast by fairy lights, her hair catching gold the way Bellatrix’s never could have, and she was Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry’s eyes went to Malfoy, whose eyes were fixed on her with hope and fear and an intensity that made Harry aware that as far as Malfoy was concerned, nothing else in the world existed but her.

“Mo-” Malfoy began, then stopped himself with a vicious effort, and stood trembling like a hurt animal.

When Harry turned back to her she had stepped into the room and out of shadows and light she was neither Bellatrix nor Narcissa. She had dark brown hair with golden lights in it and such pale brown eyes that sometimes they looked light-coloured, and she looked kinder than either of them, softer, not willow-wand slim like Narcissa or haggard like Bellatrix but with curves under her jumper and jeans. She was staring back at Malfoy and suddenly she smiled, and it was Malfoy’s exact smile: lopsided, the left corner of her mouth higher than the other, unexpected and sweet.

“Merry Christmas, Draco,” she said. “I’m your Aunt Andromeda.”

*

Fred and George insisted that Percy play on the piano so they could sing carols. Percy played diligently and tried not to flinch at every note the twins missed, and Mrs Weasley requested the Celestina Warbeck cover of Magical Christmastime.

Under the cover of the noise, Tonks leaned forward and said cheerfully: “You look great, Harry! Did you do something to your hair?”

“Er,” Harry said.

“About the Dursleys,” Lupin told him. “I’m truly sorry, Harry.”

“I’m okay,” Harry told him, and Lupin nodded and smiled, always tactful, and quietly changed the subject to how excellent Mrs Weasley’s mince pies were.

Malfoy generally kept his distance from Lupin, but Harry didn’t have to worry about him. He was sitting beside Andromeda and she was holding his hand. He occasionally stole glances at her face, reverent and discreet, as if he had been permitted to look on the holy of holies but he was not sure how long the privilege would be extended.

Eventually she said she was going to wash up everyone’s wine glasses, and Malfoy tried to get up and follow her. “Sit down, Draco,” Andromeda told him. “Perhaps Harry will help me?”

“Sure,” Harry said, taking the tray from her.

Andromeda’s place on the sofa did not remain unoccupied for more than a moment when Charlie slid into it, and Draco smiled though his eyes followed Andromeda out of the room.

Kreacher would probably have had palpitations seeing Miss Andromeda doing the dishes, but he was off somewhere sulking about the amount of Weasleys in the house and she filled the sink with bright bubbles with a practised flick of her wand.

“My husband is shocking at domestic magic, and it took me years to learn how to do without house elves,” Andromeda said comfortably. “I have a theory that’s why Nymphadora is so

clumsy: she spent her formative years in a house where the floor was always littered with things in the most unexpected places and embraced tripping over herself every other minute as a lifestyle. Will you dry?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Harry said.

He picked up a dishcloth and she rolled up her jumper sleeves.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Andromeda continued after a moment. “Nymphadora told me all about you. I must say, I was expecting someone a little less grown-up.” She held up a soapy teacup in a moment of dismay. “Not that Nymphadore said anything uncomplimentary about you. It’s just that you’re very – self-possessed. Mature.”

She gave him that beautiful smile again. Harry grinned at her.

“That’s me,” he said. “Um. Manly.”

“Can I ask you something a bit cheeky?” Andromeda asked, her voice more like her daughter’s than anyone’s, casual and friendly with just a ghost of Narcissa’s careful precise diction behind it. “Would it be all right if I stayed here for a few days? I’d like to get to know Draco a little better.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Yes. Absolutely. That’d be fine. You’d be – very welcome.”

If she stayed, Malfoy would stay. He could hardly bear to let her out of his sight. He’d stay

and he'd be happy.

"Great!" Andromeda told him. "I don't know why I waited so long to come here. I suppose I was afraid that he'd be – well, more Lucius Malfoy's boy than Cissy's, but once I heard what Nymphadora had to say about him I couldn't resist leaving Ted with the clean-up and coming to see him. I'm so glad I did: he's so like her. It feels like having a part of my family back."

She looked out of the window, clear amber eyes staring at nothing. Harry remembered Narcissa Malfoy vividly for a moment, her ice-blue eyes: nothing warm about her, but fierce and loving and lost, now.

"I was thinking of asking Draco to come and live with me," Andromeda said.

Harry dropped his wine glass.

The ring and crash of the glass, the splinters falling in a sharp pattern that made no sense, filled Harry's mind as he muttered an excuse about being clumsy and Andromeda, amused, whispered a spell that made the glass vanish as if it had never been.

"Learned that one in the early days with my baby girl," she said, turning back to the sink. Harry stared at the floor: she'd missed a spot, one sharp glint of glass still visible in the crack between the floorboards. "It's very quiet at home these days without her, you know. I'd be happy to have Draco there. He seems to have a lot to say for himself: he was telling me all about how he'd taught the portraits to do a little production for us? I must say, I'm looking forward to it."

“I don’t think you quite understand,” Harry said carefully, as if there was still broken glass to be dealt with. “Narcissa, she gave-” he paused and considered. “She asked me to promise that I’d look after him.”

Andromeda looked at him, her face warm and glowing, the good sister, an obviously good mother. “And I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. I’m sure you’ve been very good to him. But Narcissa would have wanted me to take him, I know that: Narcissa would have wanted him to be safe, to have a real home.”

Andromeda spoke with certainty, and of course she was right. Of course that was what Narcissa would have wanted.

The dishes were done and Andromeda passed her wand over the dishwater, water drying up and bubbles bursting softly until the sink gleamed, clean and empty. She reached over and patted Harry’s arm.

“I’m sure you did your best,” she told him. “But you couldn’t be like family.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Malfoy sat beside Andromeda during the portraits' Christmas play. Harry heard his voice at certain lulls in the action, saying "That setting makes the scene, don't you think?", "He needed careful direction, he's the sensitive artistic type" and "I am not responsible for that shocking display! That was improv!"

The lights were still out and the twins were still yelling for a repeat of the shocking display when Malfoy left Andromeda's side and crawled over towards Harry.

"Something wrong?" he asked, cool grey eyes raking over Harry's face. Harry remembered a couple of times at school when he'd been nervously convinced that Malfoy was seeing some particular embarrassing flaw in him that someday would be exposed to the whole school.

"You weren't laughing at any of the jokes."

"Your jokes aren't all that funny, Malfoy."

"You lie, Potter." Harry had his knees drawn up to his chest and an arm around them: Malfoy bowed his head, fair hair falling into his eyes, and picked at the fluff on Harry's jumper sleeve. "Seriously, though."

Harry looked at his sharp nose and bowed head, shadowed gold in the low lights - *you couldn't be like family* - and then out the attic window, a tiny rectangle of pitch black tucked at the top of the triangle that was the slanted attic wall. "It's not snowing."

“Of course it’s not snowing, this is England,” Malfoy said. “Endless grey rain, two days of summer in July, fish and chips and God Save the Queen. That’s our glorious national heritage. Not that I consider any Muggle the queen of *me*.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, realising he sounded all of four years old. “Seemed like it always snowed at Hogwarts at Christmastime.”

“Really, though,” Malfoy pursued, and then he made a low sound of pain and Harry forgot about looking at the window and grasped his elbow.

“What? What is it?”

“What d’you think,” Malfoy said between his teeth, and then winced and bit down on a moan, his arm held carefully against his chest as if he was cradling a kitten. He pressed his forehead hard against Harry’s arm for a second and Harry’s free hand lifted, fingers curled to cup the back of his head. “Jesus,” Malfoy said at last in a ragged voice. “Okay. Show’s over,” he said loudly. “I have to go see a bad man about a Dark Mark.”

He scrambled to his feet and Harry pulled his hand away. Malfoy stood beside him for a few seconds more.

“Potter. Promise me,” he said, voice soft. “Use that comb every day. I mean it.”

“I don’t look any different,” Harry told him.

“Once more you lie, you lie and lie, just to hurt me. I don’t think it’s kind.”

Harry didn’t get a chance to respond, because Malfoy went over to Andromeda and was occupied looking disbelieving but terribly pleased as she gave him a goodbye kiss. He looked considerably less thrilled about Mrs Weasley’s kiss.

“I’ll help you get your things together,” said Charlie the Least Subtle Weasley.

As Malfoy and Charlie went out, Harry wandered over to Andromeda. It wasn’t – he wasn’t proud of what he was thinking, but he remembered the way all the Weasleys had looked at dinner, with the evidence of Malfoy’s mark before them. If he saw any shadow of that instinctive recoil on Andromeda’s face, then it would be all right to – Narcissa wouldn’t have wanted that.

She did look troubled. She crooked her finger and Harry knelt down beside her so she could talk to him in a low voice, eyes dark and solemn in the dim attic lights.

“Poor Draco,” she said. “Does that happen a lot?”

“Now and then,” Harry said. “Yeah.”

“And he has to keep going off to - *him*,” Andromeda said with lip-curved disdain, for an instant every supercilious inch a Black.

“Yeah.”

“He needs a home to come back to,” Andromeda said with sudden resolve. “Everyone needs that.”

“Everyone needs what?” Tonks asked, crawling over the cushions on the floor to her mother. Andromeda reached out and hugged her hard, Tonks’ boyish, reed-thin body pressed against Andromeda’s curves so tight that the two very different women looked for a moment like two halves of the same thing.

Andromeda turned her face into her daughter’s hair. Tonks looked mildly confused but pleased, her mother loving her something that she took for granted, something that Narcissa Malfoy would have wanted her child to have.

Narcissa had simply wanted Harry to keep Malfoy safe from the Death Eaters. Considering the fact Malfoy had just left to go see Voldemort, Harry had not done a spectacular job keeping that promise. She hadn’t meant anything else by it: he’d barely known her and they hadn’t liked each other much. He’d meant to do the right thing, he’d meant to keep faith with Narcissa after he’d sent her to her death, but somewhere along the way he’d started using his promise as a *stupid* excuse.

“You’re right,” Harry told Andromeda. “I think – I think he’ll be happy.”

He didn’t particularly want to look at Andromeda anymore, so he went to the door and murmured “*Lumos*” as if that was what he was doing standing up, and left.

Malfoy's room was already empty. Harry went to the stair rail and saw that the front door was already open: Malfoy was holding it while Charlie talked.

“Just,” Charlie said, voice rough and shaky and strange, coming from Charlie who was always so reasonable and cheerful. “Just be careful, all right? I hate thinking about-”

Malfoy leaned forward with his free hand, shifting his bag on his shoulder, caught Charlie's shirt and said: “So don't think.”

Then he kissed him. After a long moment he drew away and took a step outside, over the threshold. Charlie grasped his arm and pulled him back, close, Malfoy's arm sliding around Charlie's neck, Charlie's head held in the crook of Malfoy's elbow. The winter night coloured them both shades of black and grey, shadow and silver.

Malfoy broke away and said, a little breathless: “I have to go.”

“When – when d'you think you'll come back?”

Malfoy laughed, still a little breathless, with a note like something tearing behind the amusement. “I don't know. I never know. I hope – I hope I'll see you soon. Watch Potter. Goodbye.”

He moved out of sight and presumably, since Charlie closed the door, Apparated as well.

Harry went back to Malfoy's room. Apparently when Malfoy had said ‘not a big deal’ he

hadn't meant 'won't happen again.'

The clocks were striking twelve and it was cold clear midnight over London. Christmas was over with no word from Ginny.

The Weasleys were all here. Harry'd been so sure she would get in touch, that she'd have to, that she'd want to. He hadn't even realised how much he'd been relying on it, the way he'd relied on her as something to come back to, something to fight for, but she hadn't wanted to be that and now it seemed that she didn't want to be in touch.

Either that or she couldn't.

Harry dug the Christmas card out of his pocket just to look at the familiar, beloved slant of Hermione's handwriting. He would have done anything, made any bargain, to have them all back safe.

*

The next morning an Owl from Hogwarts came with the news that Professor McGonagall was dead.

It was from Neville. The kitchen was filled with light, Harry was eating toast with jam on it, and there was this letter lying beside his plate and just the first line made everything around him seem fragile, a fake made of the world that wouldn't stand up to rough usage, that would start showing little cracks until it all fell apart.

Professor McGonagall died last night. One of the Carrows did it, but we don't know which one. We need your help, and your Invisibility Cloak. N.

The door creaked open and Harry glanced over at Charlie, looking horrified by whatever was written on Harry's face. He looked honest and open and absolutely dependable: a Weasley, and more than that a Weasley with the entrée into Hogwarts.

"You've just heard the news that Professor McGonagall is dead," Harry said, throwing the words at him. "So you're going to Hogwarts to see what you can do to help."

Charlie flinched like he'd been hit by someone strong enough to make him feel it, but he said in a voice that was almost level: "And after that?"

Harry looked down at his plate full of crumbs, and the letter beside it. "I'll let you know."

*

Harry had Charlie send Neville an Owl saying that if any of the students wanted to come confide in him, he would be at Hogwarts in half an hour.

He'd trusted Neville to understand that, and Neville hadn't let him down. When Charlie and the Cloaked Harry walked into the Great Hall, Neville came towards them both equipped with several good excuses for Charlie to stay in the Hall until Harry knew exactly what they had to do.

Which was to say, Neville came flanked by weeping girls.

Pansy Parkinson was the first to fling herself at Charlie. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and for a horrifying moment Harry was pretty sure she was going to wrap her legs around his waist, but she decided to be discreet.

“Professor Weasley!” she screeched in the voice that could give teachers a migraine in the first five minutes of class. “Thank God you’re here!”

Given their cue, the girls swarmed around Charlie like a dozen bees assaulting a single sunflower. Harry heard Cho say that she’d always felt what Hogwarts needed was a grief counsellor. A Slytherin girl Harry suspected of being part of Malfoy’s dramatic enterprises fainted spectacularly. Twice.

“There, there, Pansy,” Charlie said absently, patting her on the back as he scooped up the other Slytherin with one hand.

“Oh Professor Weasley, you’re like an uncle to me!” Pansy wailed, smoothing a speculative hand up Charlie’s chest.

“I’ve heard rumours about the traditional pureblood families,” Charlie said in an undertone.

“There, there!”

Pansy giggled, a wet sort of sound that made Harry think the consolation was not all fake,

and Neville said: “The girls need you more than I do, Professor Weasley – we’ll talk later, right?” and backed away.

Harry followed him in silence up the stairs and along the corridors. He did not break stride when Neville darted into the Room of Requirement: he was expecting it and wheeled with him, and once the door swung shut behind them he drew back his hood.

Dean Thomas and Luna Lovegood were in the Room of Requirement, Dean taking notes and poring over a book as Luna spoke. She fell silent and smiled when she saw Harry.

“All right,” Harry said. “Tell me what happened.”

Neville sank into a chair, hands clasped between his knees. He looked tired to death, as if he hadn’t slept all night, and he obviously hadn’t shaved in days.

“Professor McGonagall was – trying her best,” he said at length. “But Professor Snape can’t support her – he has to be seen to support the Carrows – and now that you’re not here, Scrimgeour and everyone, their eyes aren’t on Hogwarts, and I think You-Know-Who likes the thought that he controls it.”

Harry remembered Tom Riddle’s face as he asked Dumbledore for a job: knew what the possessive hunger for home felt like, the knowledge deep in his bones. It was like finding out he’d been born with a sickness, something that had been lurking in his depths waiting to devour him all his life, to feel a kinship with Voldemort.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I bet he’d love it. I’ll talk to Scrimgeour about Hogwarts.”

Neville inclined his head in acknowledgement. “McGonagall was always run off her feet. It was too easy to slip things past her: we knew that much. So did the Carrows. Natalie McDonald was sent up to their rooms to discuss her homework. We had a plan to get her out after a bit, once she’d learned something, but McGonagall found out and she went mad. She went storming up to the Carrows’ quarters and next thing we knew... next thing we knew she was dead. And we don’t know which one of them did it.”

“There are certain herbs you can take which will replicate the effect of the Avada Kedavra,” Luna piped up, her eyes fixed as usual on something in the middle distance. Harry looked at her and saw with a shock that she looked *normal*: tired and thin as they all did, but with her hair neatly tied back and her robes not in disarray. Then he looked closer and saw that she was wearing one sprig of holly and one of mistletoe as earrings, in what she no doubt thought was a very appropriate festive touch.

“Yes, Luna,” Dean said, his tone fond even if the words were impatient. “But I imagine that the Carrows probably just got their Avada Kedavra on rather than popping down to see Sprout and asking to borrow some death herbs.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right,” Luna admitted cheerfully. “I just thought you’d think it was interesting.”

Neville was not paying attention to Dean or Luna. He was looking at the floor, obviously deep in thought.

“Scrimgeour’s sending an Auror to get to the bottom of this,” he told Harry. “Snape’s vouched for the Carrows: he had to, to satisfy You-Know-Who. We’ll only have one chance to accuse one of them, and we have to accuse the right one! D’you see?”

“Of course I see. You want me to get the Carrows’ wands and find out which one recently cast Avada Kedavra,” Harry said. “No problem. When the Auror comes to question people, I’ll want a diversion.”

Neville whistled. “Cutting it pretty fine, Harry.” Harry nodded, and Neville raised his eyebrows. “I’ll go see to it.”

He left the Room of Requirement with a long, easy stride. Harry really thought that this war was doing Neville the world of good. It didn’t look like anything would stop him, except naturally for the Slytherin girls being scandalous. This was still *Neville*, after all.

This left Harry staring across the room at Luna and Dean. He didn’t recall ever seeing them ever speak before, but now Dean was hovering around Luna with a distinctly protective air and Luna looked happy to have him hover.

Things had been a little distant between Harry and Dean since Harry’d got with Ginny and been – in retrospect, he supposed, since Malfoy had pointed it out – a bit insensitive about Dean’s feelings. He remembered Malfoy’s Pensieve memory of Dean: they hadn’t seemed unfriendly, back then.

“Malfoy’s doing pretty well,” Harry said abruptly. “I know you two – talked.”

Dean looked startled. “Glad to hear it,” he said after a moment.

“I heard you and Malfoy were friends now,” Luna observed brightly, cupping her chin in her hand and idly leafing through Dean’s book. “I always thought he was a perfectly horrible boy. He did an impression of me, you know. Mind you,” she continued, fair-minded: “It was a very *good* impression. But friends are nice to have.”

“Er,” Harry said, having forgotten what it felt like to talk to Luna. “I suppose they are?”

“I used to think of you and Ron and Hermione as my friends, you know,” Luna informed him. “But you weren’t, of course. You never spent time with me just for fun. You were always kind to me, though, and I suppose we did go to that party as friends. That was fun!”

“Um,” Harry said. “Okay.”

“It’s nicer to have real friends, of course,” Luna continued placidly, giving Dean’s arm an absentminded pat. “I’m going to find a book about poisons. I think I have an idea.”

She wandered off dreamily, but Harry saw a little Ravenclaw girl stand respectfully aside as she approached the bookshelves. Dean looked after her.

“She has good ideas, you know,” he said a bit defensively. “I mean, nine times out of ten they’re totally deranged, but the tenth one’s a doozy.” His face softened. “Anyway, it’s good

– in times like these – to have someone around who makes you laugh. Know what I mean?”

“I do,” said Harry.

Something about the way he said it seemed to catch Dean’s attention. He gave Harry a considering look and Harry remembered that in his quiet way, Dean usually tried to be kind.

“I guess,” he said after a moment, “that if you and Malfoy are managing to get along, we should too. How about it, Potter? You save the wizarding world from destruction, and I’ll give you a pass on being a git about Ginny.”

Harry let himself a smile, just a bit. “Sounds fair.”

That was when Neville came back with the news that Kingsley Shacklebolt had arrived to start the interrogations over Professor McGonagall’s death, and Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe were in place to create the distraction Harry needed.

*

“Marietta?” Harry repeated doubtfully, as he and Neville walked quickly – but not too quickly – back down the corridors towards the Great Hall.

Neville spoke without looking in his direction, lips barely moving. “We couldn’t do without Marietta. Hermione shouldn’t have marked her face like she did, but – Marietta’s turned that into an asset, too. She’s got the Carrows convinced she hated Dumbledore and Dumbledore’s

Army so much she's already half on the side of the Death Eaters. The fact Cho spoke up for her and broke up with you over it – that's what got Cho in, too. They wouldn't have been allowed to stay in Hogwarts if Marietta hadn't pulled it off. Amycus has them both down as teaching assistants. They hear all sorts of things we don't hear. Don't doubt Marietta. Not for a second.”

Harry didn't have a chance to respond to that. He and Neville reached the top of the stairs and they saw everyone assembled, McGonagall and Dumbledore's places empty and Snape's face hollow-eyed as a skull at the teachers' tables. The students' tables were pushed to one side, the students all jostling together in a big unhoused mass, and Kingsley Shacklebolt stood in the centre of the room with the sun from the ceiling gleaming off his bald head.

Pansy met Neville at the bottom of the stairs, showing no sign of any urges to weep or molest teachers. They exchanged a brief smile and she took Neville's arm: Neville's shoulders eased a fraction, which was the only thing that showed Harry how tightly Neville had been wound before.

Harry left them and moved forward, winding his way through the milling crowds, careful not to let anyone even brush by him.

“Anyone who knows or thinks they know anything about Minerva McGonagall's death,” Shacklebolt said in his sonorous voice, “is urged to come forward.”

Everyone looked around at each other, captured in a moment of silence that twanged with nervous tension. Harry's eyes searched the crowd and he found Marietta with no difficulty,

the letters a livid red scribble among all the pale scared faces. He felt a shift of unease in his stomach at how clever he'd thought Hermione was being, once.

Marietta broke the moment of silence by throwing herself bodily at Shacklebolt's feet and announcing at the top of her lungs: "I killed McGonagall!"

Sensation.

"No you didn't, Marietta!" yowled Cho, flinging herself to the floor beside her friend.

Shacklebolt looked extremely taken aback and as if he was nervously anticipating a third hysterical schoolgirl at any moment. "Don't listen to her, sir! She doesn't know what she's saying!"

"I hated McGonagall!" Marietta insisted vociferously. "I resented her for not punishing her students when they m-marked my face! She t-ried to talk to me and I ignored her to be with the Carrows, b-because they understood me and they were on my side and now she's d-dead and I'll never know what she wanted to say to me!"

Harry darted forward to where Alecko Carrow sat, plump and pleased with herself like a cuckoo sitting smugly in the nest, and slid her wand out of her belt. His breath caught in his throat as he felt her shift: he prayed she wouldn't look down.

Her eyes shifted to the stairs as a dramatic explosion rang out from the dungeons.

Shacklebolt looked like he wanted to run as far and as fast away from this crazy school as he

could.

Harry slid away with Alecto Carrow's wand in his hand as Justin Finch-Fletchley emerged from the dungeons, face covered with black soot marks and his curly hair a wild scorched mass.

"So sorry!" he said in his bright, most upper-class voice. "I was experimenting a bit with fireworks for McGonagall's send-off, don't you know. Don't be alarmed! They're perfectly safe! Well, I mean, they would be if they were set off out of doors. But we were able to put out Baddock's hair almost immediately."

"You idiot, Finch-Fletchley!" Pansy said with fine prefectorial rage, striding away from Neville. "Have you hurt one of my Slytherins with your stupid schemes?"

"No no no," Justin told her earnestly. "He's fine. Practically entirely fine!"

Pansy's harangue gave Harry time to do what he needed to do. Then he went back and replaced the wand, and went to Pansy. She barely hesitated in her lecture to Justin about indoor manners and outdoor explosives as Harry brushed back her black fall of hair, gentle as if it was the air doing it, and whispered in her ear: "Alecto."

Pansy caught her breath. "Make sure you don't ever do it again, or it'll be the last thing you do," she commanded, blithely dishing out death threats in the presence of an Auror, and she walked back to Neville and whispered what looked like a reassurance in his ear.

What looked like a reassurance, unless you were watching her lips carefully.

After a moment, ever so casually, Pansy wandered over to join a group of Slytherin girls.

Shacklebolt suddenly found Cho and Marietta far more amenable to reason. Harry almost felt sorry for Shacklebolt, who looked so encouraged: looked as if he thought the interrogation might proceed smoothly from now on.

As soon as it was quiet, Neville got to his feet. Harry noticed how all the students turned to him as he rose, waiting for his word. It made Shacklebolt turn too.

“Something to say, son?” he asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Neville said, looking slightly abashed by all the attention but totally determined. “Professor McGonagall was last seen going into the Carrows’ quarters. I accuse Alecto Carrow. Will you test her wand for the Avada Kedavra curse?”

Shacklebolt tilted his head towards Neville. “Are you sure about this?”

“Quite sure,” said Neville steadily.

Alecto and Amycus Carrow both stared daggers at Neville, and Harry realised something he hadn’t realised before: that no matter which one of the Carrows was taken, the other one would remain in power at Hogwarts, and would be sure to punish the accuser.

No wonder Neville had been so set on doing it.

Over the vicious protests of the Carrows and the extremely token protests from Snape, Shacklebolt took Alecko Carrow's wand and spoke the words that proved the last curse the wand had used was the Death Curse.

Harry didn't wait to see the rest of the interrogation. He wanted to see McGonagall.

*

Everyone still at school was attending the interrogation and besides that, Gryffindor tower was no longer used by the students to sleep in. Harry had not expected to encounter anyone as he used the password Neville'd given him, and he didn't.

They'd carried McGonagall's body up to the Gryffindor common room while they were waiting for an Auror to come. Someone had made some attempt to lay her out in state: she was lying on a table draped with a Gryffindor flag. Her black robes were fanned out on the bright material and her hair had come loose from its pins, black and silver. She should have looked ridiculous, lying in a childish room on a garish flag, but somehow she didn't.

She'd always had a lot of dignity, McGonagall.

Her face was a little slack in death, the mouth which had usually been severely compressed in life relaxed enough to look kind. She looked small, lying there, small enough that Harry could have picked her up by himself if he'd wanted to. Easily. Harry remembered her as being awe-inspiringly tall when he was eleven.

She'd died trying to protect one of her students. That was like McGonagall. She'd even gone running to Malfoy's aid. Harry had felt that her presence would make everyone at Hogwarts safer.

Another guard removed, more people he knew vulnerable. He didn't like to think about it. He'd just wanted to – pay his respects, somehow, to do something that indicated he was grateful that she would always have wanted to be a shield for any of them, for Transfigurations classes and for trying to fight with Dumbledore when Fudge came to arrest him and for getting to fly when he was in first year.

He didn't have any flowers or anything. He stood there for a few moments with his head bowed, and then he said, his voice loud and stupid-sounding in the silence: "Thanks."

She lay there, her dead face unchanging. Harry left the tower, shaking out his Cloak before he put it back on, and almost ran right into Pansy.

"Well done, Potter, if I'd been a Carrow the whole game would've been up," she said.

"C'mon, the interrogations are over, let's get Professor Weasley to get you out."

Harry stilled. "They've taken Alecto away?"

"They have," Pansy said, with immense satisfaction. She turned away a little to hide her smirk, as if she couldn't quite suppress it but felt it wasn't entirely decent so close to the dead. "Have you paid your last respects?"

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Something like that.”

Pansy looked back at him, the swing of her head sudden: the look in her eyes like a challenge.

“I never liked her,” she said. “She never did think much of Slytherins, and she never bothered not to show it, in spite of all the rubbish people talked about how harsh but fair she was. I’m sorry she’s dead. I was looking forward to proving her wrong!”

Harry said nothing. He was used to the way Malfoy threw nasty things at people when he was upset, enough so that all Pansy’s words did was make him think about Malfoy: with Voldemort and soon to be with Andromeda, lost as surely as all the others were lost.

The feeling he’d had looking at Dudley and remembering Uncle Vernon, that his familiarity with them should have meant something, was back. He could see Malfoy in Pansy, small gestures that came from being close since they were little, echoes of intimacy they’d learned together, and it did mean something. But that didn’t matter. *You couldn’t be like family.*

The ugly twist to Pansy’s mouth worked itself out, unravelled to a smooth and not unsympathetic shape.

“I might have a few other reasons to be sorry,” she admitted. “You look like absolute hell, Potter,” she continued slowly, and put up her fingers to touch the edge of Harry’s eye, careful so as not to knock his glasses. “I think you’re getting crows’ feet at seventeen. And you’re worrying Malfoy sick.”

“He writes to you?”

“Of course he does,” Pansy said, looking annoyed by Harry’s denseness. She drew her hand back down, but she did not draw away. “Isn’t it funny, Potter. You’d think that with McGonagall dead and an Auror coming, the Carrows would both take care to cast another spell so that the Death Curse wouldn’t remain the last thing their wand had done.”

“Guess they weren’t forward-thinking like us,” Harry answered quietly.

“And isn’t it lucky that it was Alecko Carrow who did it, since Amicus wasn’t sitting at the end of the table and you couldn’t have got his wand?”

Harry watched her eyes, dark and near in the shadows. He would’ve thought he’d be reminded of other dark-eyed women he knew, Andromeda’s pale and clear and kind, Ginny looking at him with love. Pansy’s eyes just looked like her own, darker than both, amused and not unfriendly.

“I’ve always been lucky.”

“Enough to make you wonder if someone might’ve taken Alecko’s wand and cast the Death Curse with it at the last minute.”

“I wouldn’t wonder anything like that,” Harry told her firmly. “I don’t have a suspicious Slytherin mind.”

“Really,” Pansy said.

“Anyway, it was only a spider.”

“Pity it wasn’t Finch-Fletchley,” Pansy remarked. “That fireworks stunt wasn’t even meant to be part of the diversion, you know.”

Harry grinned and she grinned back at him. “Thanks, Potter.”

Harry shrugged. “What for?”

Pansy leaned forward and caught the front of Harry’s shirt, another little trick that was so familiar Harry was caught off guard: surprised by Pansy’s other hand on the back of his neck, bringing his head down a fraction.

He could feel her mouth curve against his as she whispered: “For leaving Amycus Carrow to me.”

Then she was kissing him, lazy and slow, as if she had all day to do it. She used her whole body to do it, too, arm around his neck and curves crushed against him. Harry’s hand was at her waist, pressing her to him, before he’d even had time to think.

He didn’t want to let her go when she pulled away, but he did anyway, and turned his face away from her watchful amused eyes and the swollen curve of her lips.

“Third time’s the charm,” she murmured.

“Er,” Harry said. “Look, Pansy, I’m very – I’m really flattered, but I – there’s Ginny, you see. I mean, not in the sense of me knowing where she is or her communicating with me in any way right now, but... there’s Ginny in the sense of – I can’t forget about her. I don’t want to.”

“Who wants you to?” Pansy asked him lightly, and he looked back at her only to see her gaze lowered, tucking strands of her disordered hair behind her ears. “You looked like you could use a morale boost, Potter. And it’s nothing that hasn’t happened before. Forget about it.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Harry said, and she laughed.

“C’mon,” she said, and he thought she might’ve taken his arm if he hadn’t had to be invisible. But he did, so he put the Cloak back on and Pansy walked as if she was alone, humming a little tune, until they both ran into Neville.

“Came to see what was keeping you,” he said with a meaningful look at Pansy. She did take his arm and he swept her a little forward with him and lowered his voice, but either Neville wasn’t all that good at discretion or he’d just misjudged the distance, because Harry could hear pretty clearly when Neville whispered: “What were you *doing*?”

“None of your business,” Pansy returned, and then laughed at the expression on his face.

“Nothing, Longbottom. He was expressing his enormous devotion to that Gryffindor goddess, Ginny Weasley. One of the things I find most appealing about Draco is that he’s immune to

her ginger fascinations.”

“So’m I,” said Neville, and laughed, looking a little embarrassed by Pansy’s inquiring glance.

“I took her to the Yule Ball and she caught Michael Corner’s eye and I just – it wasn’t a big deal, or anything. Ginny’s a nice girl. I like her. But she’s not my type.”

“Your type looks more like your horrible plant, doesn’t it,” Pansy said lightly. “Come on, Longbottom. You can tell me about your hideous fetish. I won’t tell a soul. All right, I might tell Daphne, but only so she could make a hilarious green costume to surprise you. And only because that’d be hilarious.”

Neville threw his head back and laughed. “You dare,” he said, blushing so even the back of his neck was pink. “I don’t wish to say a word against Daphne, but she scares me to death.”

They had to stop talking about Daphne and her possible interest in either Neville or plantlife, because they’d reached the Great Hall where Charlie was talking to Natalie McDonald, whose face bore the traces of tears. There was no sign to be seen, anywhere, of either of the Carrows.

Charlie got him out without a hitch, and as soon as they were past the Hogwarts gates they Apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

“Not such a bad day’s work,” Charlie said, looking tired and pained but calm, and Harry was able to nod back to him and say: “I guess not.”

*

Harry was so tired that night he slept well for a change, and woke curled up under a sunny sky, helicopters and clouds careening across it in mad pursuit of each other. He found his jeans and a shirt, tucking the photo and the card carefully into his back pocket like always, and he went lightly down the stairs.

He went a lot more lightly when, about half-way down, he smelled pancakes and rushed for the kitchen.

The day was clear as yesterday had been, the kitchen filled with yellow light, but instead of bad news there was Malfoy in the kitchen, singing low and tunelessly along with his Walkman and making pancakes with his shirtsleeves rolled up.

Harry was happy suddenly: filled with a sense of wellbeing as the kitchen was full of light, calm with this one weight lifted, the relief so great it seemed for just a moment as if there were no weights left at all.

He crept up behind Malfoy, put a careless hand over his eyes and said: "Guess who."

Malfoy leaned back against him easily, casual and trusting and graceful in a strange way too, melting against him as if Malfoy's body was liquid. Then Malfoy turned his face towards him, angling his jaw in a certain way that sent the hot flash of realization through Harry that he was about to be kissed.

It was only a second. Malfoy blinked and jerked away as if he'd been burned, going instant brilliant pink from his hairline to the scar that showed at his partially-unbuttoned shirt.

"I am *sorry*," he said at once.

Harry put his hands in his pockets. "That's okay." He tried to put the whole tiny incident into a pocket as well – or a box somewhere in his mind, where he could put a lid on it and not think about it, since it wasn't important.

Malfoy pulled out his earphones and glared at them as if they'd betrayed him. He'd dropped his pan slice and he picked it back up again and glared at the pancake batter.

Harry leaned back against the kitchen sink, folding his arms. "I'm glad you're back," he offered, voice still a little raspy with sleep. "Did you just get in?"

"Came back late last night," Malfoy told him absently, rubbing a red spot on his wrist where a spatter of oil seemed to have hit him.

Harry frowned. "Then where did you-"

"Hey, there you are," said Charlie, his voice lazy and happy. He was leaning against the doorframe, barefoot and shirtless. He stopped looking so relaxed when he met Harry's gaze.

"Oh," Harry said.

“Ah,” said Charlie. “I think I’ll go – um, find a shirt.”

“Okay!” said Malfoy.

“Don’t do anything on my account,” remarked Andromeda, wafting into the kitchen like a summer breeze in her gauzy wrap and patting Charlie on the cheek as she went by. “I like waking up to a nice view.”

She exchanged a roguish smile with Malfoy, who had brightened up as soon as he’d laid eyes on her.

“And a nice breakfast,” she added. Her face did the same thing Malfoy’s did when he was happy: went sort of hyper-alive, all lit up and sparkling. “Thank you, Draco.”

“It’s no problem,” Malfoy boasted, playful and pleased with himself. “I have amazing culinary skills. Besides, the house elf spits in Potter’s food, and I hardly ever do. Except for when he riles me.”

He slanted a bright look over at Harry, who would’ve rolled his eyes any other day but today. It was all right: Malfoy’s attention was diverted by Andromeda sliding an arm around his shoulder in a light little hug. Every golden thread in Andromeda’s hair was shining bright in the sun and she was looking fondly at Malfoy, no doubt imagining pancakes at home with him every morning. She looked like Narcissa Malfoy come back to life sweeter and better.

Charlie was looking a little jumpy, his eyes searching to meet Malfoy’s as they ate, and

Malfoy was deliberately laying out plates and serving and not looking at him, but that was nerves and embarrassment. Underneath that there'd been a certain tension in Charlie and Malfoy, nerves strung so tight they thrummed and felt like breaking, a feeling that'd had Harry on edge for months now. It was gone in them, at least for the moment. They moved easily, limbs loose and a little languid. Andromeda and Malfoy tossed jokes back and forth to each other and Charlie laughed at them, looked at Malfoy, and did not look away all throughout the meal.

There was no reason to be angry. There was no way to even *think* about all this, because Harry wasn't family, none of it was his business, Harry didn't want to eat and just twisted his pancake around his fork and told himself: *Let him go*.

That's what he'd promised Narcissa, really, to do what was best for Malfoy: to make sure Malfoy was taken care of.

"Can I see you upstairs," Malfoy said when breakfast was over, his voice clipped, and he grabbed Harry's elbow and hauled him out of the kitchen and upstairs to Malfoy's room.

Harry went with him. It was dark on the stairs and bright again in Malfoy's room and Malfoy looked unhappy and angry, which Harry couldn't work out either. Harry headed for the window seat rather than the bed, going over and turning away from Malfoy, resting his forehead against the glass.

"Something you wanted to say?"

“What’s wrong with you?” Malfoy demanded.

As well as angry and unhappy, he sounded concerned, which was kind of nice. “I don’t know,” Harry said. “You once told me you’d have to make a list.”

Malfoy sat on the bed, head bowed. His hair was all messy in a way it seldom was except right after he’d been flying: too fine to stick up, it just fell every which way. He leaned forward and Harry noticed that he could really use a haircut, strands falling over his collar and gilded in a sudden flash of sunlight.

“You went all quiet,” Malfoy said, trying to keep his voice measured. “It’s not – it’s really not your business, but if you don’t approve or something-”

“I thought you said you were *confused*,” Harry said accusingly. “You don’t seem all that confused.”

“Well,” Malfoy said, patience obviously strained but trying to talk to him all the same, trying to work their way out of this. “I’ve had some time to think.”

“Really, and you’ve come to this conclusion.”

“I don’t – I don’t know,” Malfoy said, his voice starting to turn savage. “I think so, all right? I thought it would be – it should be clearer than this, it should make more sense. I’m still attracted to women, I still think Pansy’s, that she’s one of the most attractive people I know, but – yes. I think it’s men, it’s more men, more of the time, and it’s not what I would have

chosen and I hate talking about it and it doesn't help to have you being a git about it!"

"I'm sorry," Harry said at once. "I don't – I didn't mean to make anything more difficult. I want what's best for you."

You couldn't be like family. Let him go. Harry didn't know what to say, there were some things he couldn't put into words even for himself and then all the rest of it, if he said it Malfoy mightn't go with Andromeda. He might at least be sorry, going, and if Harry really did want what was best for him then he shouldn't say any of it.

Malfoy took a shuddering breath, head still bowed. "I know that."

"He's a lot older," Harry continued, careful to stick to facts.

"Twenty-four is hardly old," Malfoy said. "And it's not like – it's nothing *serious*, is the thing. When this war is over, he's going back to Romania. Nothing could ever come of this, it's not like that. It's just, I'm just having this awful, terrible time and it's, with Voldemort, with my Dad, it's like a nightmare and then I come home and I'm barely in the door when Charles tells me that Professor McGonagall is dead. I don't know how to cope with all of this! I don't. But if that's what you're worried about: well, then. No. It's not like with Blaise. I'm not about to get my heart broken."

Malfoy sounded relieved to have worked the puzzle out, voice softening. Harry only found his little speech more puzzling. Malfoy was inexplicable, that was the problem. And Charlie was at least nicer than Blaise Zabini.

“Were you, er. Did you love Zabini, then?” Harry asked, finding it hard even to pronounce the words with anything but incredulity.

“No,” Malfoy said without hesitation, and looked up, blinking a little in the winter sunlight.

“But I thought I did. For a while.”

“Not Charlie, though.”

“No,” Malfoy said again without hesitation. “But I like him. I trust him.”

“As long as,” Harry was hesitating enough for both of them. “As long as you’re all right, then.”

Malfoy laughed then, relieved and with something more behind it, the laugh curling like caressing fingers as he lay back on the bed. “Better than all right.”

Harry stared out the window. He didn’t like it, even if Malfoy was so sure he knew what he was doing. He didn’t like it at all. But Andromeda would only be staying two more days, and that meant Malfoy would be gone soon. Maybe he’d have to go back to Voldemort before that. Harry didn’t think Andromeda had asked Malfoy to go home with her yet. Malfoy would have told him, he thought, and Malfoy would have seemed happier. It would probably make Malfoy really happy, once she asked.

It had been good of Malfoy to try and straighten things out between them, with Charlie and

Andromeda both wanting his attention. Harry was grateful for that.

“Let’s go back down,” Harry said quietly.

*

Malfoy spent most of the day with Andromeda, talking about old family stories. He hung on her lips when she talked about Narcissa. Harry presumed he would be spending the night with Charlie again, and so he told himself he had no need to break the habit of spending the night in Malfoy’s room. It could be Harry’s room once Malfoy was gone: it would be a shame to waste the sky canopy.

Harry spent the day reading up on how to unlock magical chains. If he could get that Horcrux off Malfoy, too, then he and the Tonks family would be safer. Even with the invisibility charm on it, there was always a chance of discovery, and besides that Harry was in no mood to see what Snape’s little plan for the locket was. He wanted it off Malfoy and he wanted, with a savage craving for violence and to do something at last, to destroy it.

It came as a surprise when he came down from the study, walking softly in the night so he didn’t wake anybody up, to find Malfoy sitting in the window seat reading a letter by moonlight. He looked serious and pale, wrapped up in his thoughts, and Harry was tiredly, terribly pleased to see him: it felt like a shadow of the same feeling he’d had when he came down this morning and saw Malfoy in the kitchen.

He walked over to him, still softly, and moved to touch Malfoy’s shoulder when his eye fell

on the letter in Malfoy's hand.

A second later he pulled Malfoy bodily to his feet and slammed him up against the wall.

"What the hell," Harry snarled, "is Ginny doing writing letters to *you*?"

Malfoy did not struggle and did not speak in his defence. Instead he pulled his wand and pointed it at the letter which had fallen from his hand, the paper pale against the snake-embroidered carpet.

"*Incendio*," he murmured, his breath from the spell warm against Harry's face.

Harry shoved him so his back hit the wall again, hard. "Where is she?"

"I can't tell you that," Malfoy told him, his eyes narrow.

"What's she doing?"

"I can't tell you that."

"How long has she been writing to you?"

"All along!" Malfoy snapped, eyes flashing. "Since she disappeared. Do you think she's a monster? She didn't want her family to worry. As soon as I could get back from the Dark Lord, I went to the Weasleys and I told them she was all right."

“I don’t believe you,” Harry whispered, low and threatening. Malfoy’s eyes narrowed to icy slits and he shoved back, trying to loose Harry’s grasp, but Harry kept his arm hard as an iron bar against Malfoy’s throat, kept him pinned to the wall with a hand against his shoulder. Every time he pushed forward, Harry slammed him back. “Why wouldn’t she want me to know that? I’ve been worried sick, I haven’t known what to do with myself, and all this time she was writing to you! Why would she write to you?”

The fight seemed to go out of Malfoy. He turned his face away from Harry, towards the wall, and when he spoke it was in a quiet voice, strained and a little sad.

“Because when she told me that my father tried to kill her and almost succeeded,” he said, “I told her that she only had to ask me and I would do anything she ever wanted. And she didn’t want me to tell you.”

Harry remembered now, how Ginny had sat beside Malfoy when he was close to breaking down over his mother, and how he’d asked her about what his father had done. He remembered Hermione saying that Malfoy would do whatever Ginny liked. Because Lucius Malfoy had tried to murder two women, and Ginny was the one who lived.

He wondered how he could have forgotten it.

He let his arm fall away from Malfoy’s throat and just stood there, hand against his shoulder, not pushing him anymore but still touching him. Harry had the stupid, childish impulse to cling. Malfoy just stood there: Harry couldn’t read his face.

“I wanted to tell you,” Malfoy said at last.

“I don’t understand,” Harry told him, and he let go of Malfoy long after he should have and stepped away from him.

“So I’ll find out,” Malfoy returned. He left the room, walking with quick decided steps, and Harry went to sit on the window seat, not feeling sleepy at all now, just replaying the moment when he’d looked over Malfoy’s shoulder and seen Ginny’s handwriting. He’d felt – betrayed by both of them, shocked and sick, and now... he didn’t know.

She was alive. She was well. She didn’t want him to know anything about her.

Harry didn’t know how long it was before Malfoy returned and pressed a piece of parchment into Harry’s hands. Malfoy’s own hands were cold from the winter night and his eyes were gleaming.

“There,” he said, and then he was gone. Harry heard him storming up the stairs to Charlie’s room.

I’m sorry you’ve been worrying about me, the letter began, in Ginny’s sprawling writing that looked like Ron’s, a bit, but smaller and more uneven. *Don’t be angry with Malfoy. I told him not to tell you anything. I still almost wish you didn’t know anything.*

It’s not that I want you to worry.

Do you remember the night at the orphanage, Harry, when you wanted to throw one of the children to me and I didn't dare let you? I thought I could do it. I know how to fly, I know how to catch. But the thing is that I didn't want to risk you seeing me fail. I wanted you to think I was perfect. I wanted you to believe I was the ideal girl.

I'm not, though. What I'm doing now is what I wanted to do – something really important. I'm really helping. I might fail and I might die. But it's important, and I don't want it to be about something I'm doing for you. I want it to be something I'm doing for me, and for the war, and for something I believe in.

I think about you all the time. I don't want you to come rescue me, though. I don't want you to see me until I'm sure that I can do what I want to do, and it won't matter if you're watching me.

With love, Ginny.

*

Harry stayed up so late thinking about Ginny's letter that by the time he was up Malfoy had already gone back to Voldemort. When he went downstairs to find something to eat he saw Charlie looking relaxed as well as worried, and heard Andromeda say that she was leaving tomorrow morning.

He couldn't think about either of those things. He went and looked at magical unchaining

spells again, reading until the words blurred before his eyes and his head hurt fiercely. He went to bed early and when he woke, Malfoy was sleeping curled up beside him, only one earpiece in Malfoy's ear, the other making a buzzing noise like a very tiny bee was trapped in Malfoy's hair. Malfoy made a small grumbling sound as Harry sat up in bed, an everyday sound as if he'd be making it just that way, morning after morning from now on, and it was hardly fair.

Harry said his new mantra to himself again, trying hard for patience, trying not to be furious and selfish. *You couldn't be like family. Let him go.*

He went upstairs to the attic and didn't know whether he wanted to talk to that portrait of Sirius, see him young and as if he was alive, or whether he hated the thought of it. He didn't want to see Narcissa. He knew that much. He left the painting turned around as it was, and looked at the back of it.

Even morning sunlight looked dusty in the attic, the glints of light in the little window silvered down from dawn gold. There were still cushions strewn all around the place from Malfoy's little dramatic entertainment.

Harry was sitting on one, knees up to his chest and his arms locked around them, when he heard steps coming up to the attic.

Of course, he thought and steeled himself. Malfoy would want to say goodbye.

He was kind of hoping it would be Charlie asking him if he wanted a cheese sandwich all the

same. But it was Malfoy, hesitating at the sight of the Black portrait and then walking over to Harry, negotiating all the various cushions in his way. He looked down at him. Harry didn't particularly want to look up and meet his eyes, so he looked at the floor instead.

"D'you fancy something to eat?" Malfoy inquired, which as an opening to 'I'm leaving, take care of yourself, thanks for everything except being judgemental about my love life and yelling at me all those times' left something to be desired.

Was this going to be some kind of last meal, oh *God*, this was like a nightmare.

"What's everyone else having?" Harry mumbled.

"Well, Charlie's gone to Bill's house and Aunt Andromeda's already left, so I don't know, what do you feel like?"

For a moment it didn't register. Then it did and Harry still didn't understand. He looked up quickly at Malfoy, who was frowning down at him as if he found Harry's behaviour bizarre and somewhat worrying.

"Didn't she," Harry said, and swallowed. "Didn't she ask you to go with her?"

He had a full terrible moment in which he could not look up at Malfoy again, because if Andromeda had decided not to ask him, had decided that he was too much of a Death Eater and too much his father's son and now Malfoy knew that he'd let her down somehow then Harry couldn't bear the idea of how Malfoy would look as he said no, she hadn't asked.

“Yes, she asked me,” Malfoy said. “I said no.”

It seemed to Harry as if there should be some sort of significant pause after that, some acknowledgement that what Malfoy had said was important, but Malfoy swept on as if it hadn't been and sounded mostly vaguely irritated.

“I didn't know she'd even mentioned it to you. Look, d'you want something to eat or not?”

His voice changed at last, sounding tentatively pleased, and he said: “Is *that* why you've been so moody since Christmas?”

Harry thought of that mantra again, thought of his promise, and said abruptly: “You don't owe it to me to stay.”

“Yes I do,” Malfoy snapped. “Of course I do. I owe it to you to do anything I can for you, and you owe me the same thing: that's what family means. It's not like – you think I'd go with Aunt Andromeda? She waited to see what side I was on, she waited to be sure. She did the reasonable thing. You didn't do anything like that, and you didn't even like me. She's – I like looking at her. I want to hear more about – I want to hear anything I can about Mother. She may look like your image of an ideal mother, but she's not mine. I had one. She wasn't like *that*.”

Harry thought of Andromeda smiling in the kitchen, sweet and good, and Narcissa who had plotted and lied and flirted and calculated, blue eyes wide all the while. He hadn't thought about the differences between them before. Not this way.

If Malfoy – was gone, and someone like him came who was all sweetness and light, Harry couldn't see himself being glad about the change.

“I never even considered going away, Potter. God, what's wrong with you,” Malfoy said, sounding impatient and unhappy at the very idea. His voice changed again then, the air around them seemed to change, and he said in a voice that was viciously, coldly unpleasant as Malfoy always was when his feelings were hurt: “Of course, if you don't *want* me-”

Harry lunged. He wasn't really thinking, he just did it, tackled Malfoy onto the heaps of cushions and hung on to his shoulders a bit too hard, gripping until he felt bones beneath the clothes and skin. Malfoy blinked up at him, obviously a bit stunned by the sudden attack and in a mild amount of pain.

“I do,” Harry snarled. It was such a relief to say.

“Okay,” Malfoy murmured, face smoothing out into a bit of a smile. He leaned back on one elbow and used his free hand to pry Harry's death grip off one shoulder: he let Harry keep the other, even though Harry was aware he was probably cutting off the circulation. He'd let go in a minute.

Malfoy was still looking a little surprised, but he was mostly smiling. Harry felt blessedly calm. It was all right, then: it didn't have to be about a promise to Narcissa that had meant something different, or gratitude, or even Malfoy not having anyone else. It had been Malfoy's choice. Malfoy'd chosen him.

Malfoy had not quite let go of Harry's hand: he was running his fingers along the back of it, eyes lowered, lashes silver in the dusty light. "Potter," he said suddenly. "I heard about how you got Alecto Carrow's wand. You can handle yourself. You're going to have to against the Dark Lord one day, that's what we're all counting on, but Snape's never going to think the best of you. He can't help it."

"That's a pity, isn't it," Harry said, not too grimly because he was happy just now, but grimly enough. "Since Snape's the one who won't tell me where Voldemort is hiding. Him and that stupid snake I have to kill."

"Oh," Malfoy said, and raised his eyes to look at Harry.

It had never once occurred to Harry to ask Malfoy: Malfoy knew it was Snape's decision. Snape was the one who had put Malfoy with Harry in the first place. Malfoy was on Snape's side. It was understood that he was on Snape's side.

Somewhere along the line, though, loyalties had shifted. Malfoy's eyes were clear and untroubled. This wasn't a set of different decisions for him: alliance, loyalty, family. It was all the same choice. And the choice was made.

"But Snape isn't the only one who knows where the Dark Lord is," Malfoy said softly, eyes fastened on Harry's face. "Is he?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Voldemort's headquarters were in Wales. Harry hadn't been sure what to think about that, other than speculating that possibly Tom Riddle's orphanage had taken him there on another school trip, and then Malfoy had told him that the headquarters were located somewhere called the Black Mountains and he'd decided that Voldemort was simply grandstanding.

The countryside was quiet below Harry in the twilight, all green curves and shadows. There was a mountain at the east end of the range that looked as if it had been broken in half by some cruel or clumsy monster, and that was the one where Malfoy had told him Voldemort was hiding.

Invisible but moving as quietly as he could through the sliding sandstone all the same, Harry climbed. He tried to remember what Malfoy had told him: that he had to go past the Devil's Table before he reached the entrance. According to Malfoy, the Devil's Table was a weirdly shaped rock and Harry would know it when he saw it.

Harry wasn't sure why Malfoy thought he was such a geology expert, but it turned out he'd been right. There was a rock outlined against the slate-grey sky, massive but giving the impression of something squatting. It looked like a vast dark toadstool with obscene growths that appeared as Harry drew closer: there was a sickly tree beside the stone, leaning away from it as if it was afraid.

He felt incredibly uneasy about touching it, but Malfoy had been quite specific. So he laid his hand against one side of the stone, feeling the grey, rough stone catch at the calluses on his

palm, and said: “Castigatus.”

He understood that much, at least, the urge to have a password to get into his place and even the choice of password. He remembered being in second year and hearing Malfoy say ‘Pureblood’ to get into the Slytherin common room.

So much of Voldemort’s motivations had to do with Hogwarts.

On the top of the mountain there was a haze, a shimmer as if something was changing. Any Muggle tourist, even any wizard who didn’t have the password, would have seen only the remnants of a hill fort and an ancient church. But now moving from invisibility into Harry’s sight, like a tall stone flower unfurling, there was a tower.

Harry forced himself to remember caution and went with care up the mountain, no more than a whisper of wind as he went past hill-walking tourists. He saw one shiver as he passed and then say it was nothing: someone walking over her grave.

The door to Voldemort’s tower was shaped like a church door. Harry stared at the stone curve of the top, like a swallow’s wings spread and set in stone, as he waited. The cold of night falling was dull, as if stone was pressing all around him, and then the door creaked open and a Death Eater ducked out and suddenly Harry’s blood was running hot with savage anticipation.

He caught the door, carved wood almost slipping out from under his grasping fingers, and slid in, seeing his shadow clear for a moment and betraying him, then blending with all the

darkness inside.

It was a stone corridor, rough sandstone that looked scooped out of the rock by careless magic, not even trying to look like it was Muggle-made. Torches set in little hollows in the wall made the stone look red as if each light was being cupped in a bloody hand. Corridors spanned out from the hall, fanning out like the legs of a monstrous spider. Harry chose one at random and went down from shadow into blood-tinged light, deeper into the earth.

He walked for a long time, passing by Death Eaters who went through the corridors talking in loud cheerful voices about their families or their Quidditch games on Sunday, as if they were not in the heart of evil. He was listening for a voice like the voice in the walls during his second year at Hogwarts, some basilisk whisper of death, but he didn't hear anything. He wondered if he should turn back: there weren't even any Death Eaters anymore, he'd gone so far. The doors had the look of store rooms rarely used.

Then he saw a door creak open, and out of the darkness into a gleam of red-tinted light stepped a moving shadow. When the light hit it the gleam turned rich red, as if there was a blaze being kindled under the earth. Harry's heart was suddenly racing and so was he: he was flying down the corridor, feet pounding, and if any Death Eaters heard him and came he'd just run right over them.

She whirled around the instant before he was on her, wand suddenly at his throat, and then she hesitated, her dark eyes widening. Harry didn't even care about the wand. She could hex him if she wanted.

“Harry,” she whispered, and he had his hands on her. She was real, slim waist under his fingers, and he just lifted her off her feet so he could have her full weight in his arms, against his chest.

“Ginny,” he whispered back, and kissed her like he’d never kissed her before, hand at the small of her back, his other hand cupping the curve of her jaw. He kept his eyes open so he could see her, really there and safe, wild curls the colour of sunset and the orange freckles all over her nose, her mouth sweet and hot on his.

She was kissing him back, arms tight around his neck, the wand pressing into the back of his head now. He laughed, breathless and desperate and so relieved, so happy, and Ginny made a small glad sound and moved in closer to him, her legs wrapped around his waist. He kissed her mouth and her chin and her cheeks and her freckled nose.

“God, I was so worried,” he said. “I was going crazy. What are you doing here?” He froze for a moment, her weight suddenly seeming heavy in his arms. “It is you,” he said in dread. “Isn’t it?”

Ginny laughed a fraught little laugh and kissed Harry again, mouth soft and tongue touching the corner of his lips. “My dad calls my mum Mollywobbles. What are you doing here?”

Harry relaxed and hastened to reassure her. “It’s really me, too.”

“I know,” Ginny said, her mouth curving against his. “Everyone else asks before they pounce.”

“I am so happy to see you,” Harry said, shutting his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see her think about what he was saying, so he’d get it all out, “I’m so relieved you’re all right. I’m so-”

“I know,” Ginny said again, sounding happy and relieved and as if she hadn’t known at all, and she kissed him, her free hand curled in his hair.

They clung to each other. For a moment he thought that his knees might give out, and then she pulled her face away, breathing hard against his cheek, and said: “Put me down. I have things to do.”

Harry blinked at her in the low lights, possibly too obviously startled, and Ginny grinned at him. Carefully, he did what she wanted and put her down. Once she was a few steps away he saw that she was wearing a pair of jeans that looked like cast-offs and a Weasley jumper with a pattern of large, clearly mutant daisies on it. She looked well, and Harry looked at the jumper and felt a few things slot into place in his head.

“You’re living with Bill and Fleur, aren’t you,” he said. The first-time couply Christmas at home, the way Mrs Weasley hadn’t looked worried that there was no word from Ginny or aggrieved that there was no sign of Bill, and just the way Weasleys *were*: of course she’d gone to family.

Ginny gave a cautious nod. “Some of the time.”

“How’re you getting along with Fleur?”

“Not too bad,” Ginny said. “All the French food gets on my nerves a bit. She’s been really good about having me, especially since I don’t – I think I was a bit bratty to her at the wedding. Not that she can’t be a snotty cow sometimes, and I still don’t get all the fussing about dresses and hair...” Ginny shrugged, the tomboy who’d always been so much less concerned about shabby robes than Ron was and who’d worn them so casually nobody even noticed they weren’t new. “But I feel bad about slagging her off. I shouldn’t have done that. I won’t be calling her Phlegm again.”

She looked a bit uncomfortable about admitting she’d been at fault: shrugged and looked off into the darkness. Harry let the subject drop.

“Does wherever you are the rest of the time have anything to do with why you’re here?”

Ginny relaxed, leaning against the wall and giving him a mischievous smile. “I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.”

“I’m here to kill Voldemort’s little pet,” Harry said.

“I’m here to steal Voldemort’s records for the goblins,” Ginny said. “So we can try to persuade some of them that they’ll be better off not going with Voldemort: so we can show them Voldemort doesn’t keep his promises.”

And what would Voldemort do to her, if he caught her sneaking around in his damn headquarters?

“Does your Mum know about this?” Harry demanded, and instantly felt an awful fool.

“Well,” he said defensively at Ginny’s level glare. “Well – you’re underage.”

“That might sound a little more convincing if the person saying it to me hadn’t been endangering his life having crazy adventures since he was *eleven years old*,” Ginny said, maintaining her glare. “Mum doesn’t have to know everything about me. I asked Bill to introduce me to the goblins. I knew they could use a... well, a human representative. People are prejudiced against them, that’s the whole problem, that’s why some of them are siding with Voldemort. I told you I wanted to help with the war, and – helping them seemed the best way.” She looked slightly uncomfortable again. “It’s not like with Hermione and the house elves. The goblins are – well, they’re independent. And kind of stropky.” She smiled suddenly. “I like them.”

“So you’re working for the goblins,” Harry said slowly.

He supposed he’d pictured her as their leader, or something: he supposed they had leaders of their own who wouldn’t have appreciated that.

“That’s right,” Ginny said. “I’m happy to help. And if I get caught here, I’ll say I’m a pureblood and I’m Draco Malfoy’s girlfriend. Any goblin gets caught here and they die, so don’t try talking to me about how dangerous this is. Even if it didn’t sound rich coming from you, Harry, I wouldn’t listen.”

Harry’s mind had been slightly distracted from the danger Ginny seemed hellbent on putting

herself in, even if he hadn't been feeling a bit hypocritical about objecting to it. Now that she'd pointed that out.

"Malfoy's girlfriend?"

"Ours is a secret love," Ginny told him solemnly, and then grinned. "He told me to say so. And to say that I'd left my family home to be with him. Just like a creepy, bigoted, pureblood killer Romeo and Juliet."

"Just so you know, he's messing around with your brother."

"That kind of thing never happened to Juliet," Ginny said. She didn't look surprised, so Harry wondered what Malfoy and Ginny were writing to each other, and whether Ginny was writing anything about him that Malfoy could let him know.

"What did you mean," he said suddenly, *"everyone else"* always asks before they pounce?"

Ginny smiled, not triumphant but amused, looking up at Harry with those warm brown eyes. She lowered her voice and Harry leaned towards her, wanting to kiss her again, and Ginny said: "Oh yes. I've been meeting some *very* sexy goblins."

They laughed a bit, and even here it was great to laugh with Ginny. She wasn't doing impressions like she had been in sixth year or trying to get him to pay attention while he was sitting in the Burrow attempting to focus. She was just a little busy and happy to see him, as it had been by the lake in Hogwarts once she was sure he liked her and they could sit around,

her doing her homework and Harry lying with his head against her knee. Harry was so glad to see her.

“Will you come back with me?” he asked her. “I’ll help you with the goblins, I’ll do anything you want. Come back. Please.”

Ginny looked at him with her heart in her eyes and Harry smiled at her, eager and glad, and then Ginny looked down and fiddled with the loop of her jeans.

“I guess Hermione and R-Ron aren’t back yet, huh,” Ginny said. He hated hearing her voice break like that and then he remembered Cho in fifth year.

“I am not at all interested in Hermione,” Harry said. “I mean, romantically. She’s very interesting. Obviously. Which you know. Not romantically.”

“It’s Ron you’re after, isn’t it,” said Ginny. “Hey. I know that. It’s not that. It’s just that – I don’t want to go back and let myself fade into the background while you do the hero bit, even though I know you’d be happy to do it. And I won’t do it because you’re lonely and you want someone back. It has to be *me* you want back-”

“It is,” Harry said, desperate.

Ginny stared at the floor. “And I have to be sure who that is. I’m doing really *well*, Harry,” she said with a note of desperation in her own voice. “Please don’t ask me again. I’m scared I’ll come.”

So come, Harry said in his mind. She wouldn't regret it. He'd fix whatever she wanted with the goblins, or – let her do it, obviously, if that was what she wanted. Maybe he could smooth a few things out for her: she'd be glad.

He looked at the ground himself, and got the words out between his teeth. "I won't ask you."

"Thanks," Ginny said, a little awkwardly. He glanced at her and found her glancing at him: their eyes met and caught. "I didn't want you to know anything," she said in a quiet voice. "But I'm happy to've seen you."

"Yeah," Harry said, and reached out. Her fingers curled around his, small but tenacious, and he stood staring at her. Eventually he smiled. "You go steal stuff for the goblins."

Ginny went up on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek and pulled her hand out of his. "You go kill Voldemort's evil snake."

She had to pull her hand out of his quite forcibly, and then she walked down the corridor and into the darkness, her red hair lost in shadows, unexpected and beautiful as a gift he could not keep. Harry tried not to look after her like a child who had been forgotten and abandoned at school: he tried to understand where she was coming from.

That was when he heard the voice of the snake.

*

She was talking to herself, her whispering hiss curling in the air and through the dark honeycomb of corridors. Harry expected to hear words about ripping and killing.

“Lonely,” he heard instead. *“Bored, all these fools, perhaps the Master will let me scare another one of them, lonely, I’m alone, alone...”*

Harry shut every thought in his mind into boxes, thought of defence, built walls and made himself calm, and then he called: *“Come here.”*

She was close and he walked back the way he’d come, nearer and nearer until he could hear the slide of her scaly body against the earth and he willed her to come closer, closer, thrilled because the plan was working.

The plan failed from the very start. Any other snake might have failed to differentiate between the only two humans who could speak Parseltongue, but Nagini had been with Voldemort for years. Once they were face to face she lifted her head, eyes glinting jet in the low light, tongue flickering out from her mouth. She was – he could see she was - *curious*.

“Who are you?” she asked him, in a way that seemed prepared to be friendly. *“Why are you invisible?”*

Harry felt a little at a loss. He had expected to be reminded of Slytherin’s basilisk, and not the snake he’d met in the zoo years ago and had a better conversation with than he’d had with most people. He wished she wasn’t a *girl* snake.

"I can't tell you," he whispered back, and in one way the words seemed so clear, clearer than English even, every word coming out like it was supposed to and meaning what he wanted it to. On the air hung an alien hiss, and Harry could almost taste the language, rich and strange, heavy on his tongue.

Nagini seemed to appreciate the sound. She leaned in and nosed his invisible hand, tested the skin with her tongue. Then she eased her way up his arm. Harry held his arm steady and let her slither up it, winding sinuously until she was wrapped around his shoulders, settled cool and heavy around him, trusting.

Harry reached behind his back to the sheath he wore for the Gryffindor sword. He closed his fingers around the hilt.

"I didn't know there were more of you," said Nagini interrogatively. *"There are hardly any snakes here, there were so many more where I come from. But that was a long time ago. There's only the Master to talk to now."*

She nudged his cheek, inquiring and happy, and Harry slid the sword out of its sheath, listening to the tiny sound of steel sliding free.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"The Master said I was to kill any intruders," Nagini continued. *"But not you, little chatterbox. I wouldn't kill you."*

It didn't *matter*, Harry told himself. She did kill people, and she was Voldemort's, and it didn't matter if she was lonely or felt strange in a strange land or that this wasn't her war. She was a Horcrux. He had to defeat Voldemort: she had to die.

He held the sword drawn under his cloak. Nagini curled around his neck, nosed at the opening of the cloak, and he laid the blade along her scales, braced himself to cut down and kill her.

The sound of voices in the corridor brought Nagini's head up sharply: moving faster than he would have dreamed, she slithered out of his grasp and into the shadows. Harry clenched his fists in silent frustration and what he was ashamed to realise was relief.

"All I'm saying is that you're going to get into trouble," said Blaise Zabini.

"And you care?" Malfoy drawled, walking ahead of him in the same impatient striding way he used to walk with Crabbe and Goyle. "Really."

Harry hesitated and then followed them. They didn't go far: the next door they reached Malfoy opened, and he and Zabini went inside. Malfoy didn't seem all that keen on letting Zabini in, and the scuffle when Zabini shouldered his way in anyway gave Harry time to slip inside.

It was a little bedroom like a monk's cell. There was no sign to show whose it was, aside from Malfoy's glare.

“I don’t understand you,” Zabini said, looking furious. “Are you antagonising the Dark Lord – the damn *Dark Lord* - on purpose?”

Malfoy went to sit at the tiny desk in a corner of his room. He flipped it open and took out his Walkman.

“Not – exactly,” he said.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Zabini exclaimed, making a sharp, disgusted gesture. “Stuff like that stupid Muggle machine – where did you even get it anyway – and, and carrying on when he makes you do things that have to be done! We all saw you get sick that one time. It, I’m not saying that it’s great, any of it, but it’s what has to be done to be on the winning side. Doesn’t it ever occur to you that by acting the way you do, you’re making it all worse?”

Malfoy leaned away from Zabini, face distant, locked up the way he was when he absolutely couldn’t bear to betray himself and he wasn’t fooling anyone. “Doesn’t it ever occur to you,” he said slowly, “that the Dark Lord hates us all?”

Zabini’s handsome face showed a flash of pure terror. He swung around as if he expected to find Voldemort sitting on the bed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Malfoy’s mouth curled, half way between malice and thoughtfulness. “Don’t you think that

the whole time he was at Hogwarts, the Dark Lord spent all his time wishing that he was a perfect pureblood boy, of perfect pureblood lineage? And doesn't his general behaviour indicate to you that he has a whole lot of rage and resentment to share among his lucky followers? He wants to kill the Muggleborn. And us – he wants us to crawl on our bellies like his precious snakes, every day of our lives, so he can tell himself he's better than any pureblood."

"And your plan is to show weakness so you're his *favourite* focus for all the rage and resentment?" Zabini snapped. "That's brilliant, that is. You always *do* this!"

"I always do what?"

"You act like you're in control when anyone can see you're not!" Zabini said. "I don't know how you fool all those people. You never fooled me, and I've seen you act like such an idiot-"

"Quite," said Malfoy dryly.

Zabini looked away from the bed and at Malfoy properly. He blinked and rested his hand on his hip.

"I didn't mean that," he said, his voice softer.

Malfoy turned the Walkman over and over in his hands, jaw tight. "Okay."

“It’s an honour for both of us, you know,” Zabini said abruptly. “Being allowed into the Death Eaters so young.”

“That’s how I feel,” Malfoy agreed, his voice cool. “Honoured.”

There was a tiny window high up in the bedroom, that showed grass and stones and let in very little light.

“If you’d just keep your head down and stop saying stupid things, we could both get past this and get rewarded! You won’t get anywhere showing weakness to Voldemort. He’ll only exploit it.”

Malfoy cleared his throat. “He likes to have me around,” he said. “To terrorise. I hear a lot, that way. You know how I like to keep up on the gossip.”

Zabini looked completely dismayed. “Oh my God, Malfoy. You don’t have a plan, do you? Tell me you don’t have a plan.”

Malfoy bridled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My plans are all gold.”

“Do you remember that time I said Harry Potter suspected something and you said you had it all under control and the next week he cut you open and almost *killed* you?” Zabini demanded. “Quit playing around, we’re not having little power struggles at Hogwarts any more. This is real life. People are dying.”

“Yeah, people are dying,” Malfoy said. “Mostly because our side are killing them.”

“There’s one thing you should keep in mind,” Zabini told him. “People are dying. But we’re not. We’re on the winning side, Malfoy. We’ve got every chance. Don’t mess it up.” He took a step towards Malfoy, and then another, reaching out and running his fingers along the back of Malfoy’s chair. Harry was outraged and alarmed when Zabini’s voice and eyelashes began to lower. “And I’d rather,” Zabini said in his new voice. “I’d rather you survived.”

“Thanks,” Malfoy said, going pink and pushing Zabini’s hand away. “But no thanks,” he added. His air of studied indifference might have been convincing if it wasn’t for his still-pink cheeks. “You said it. We’re not having little power struggles at Hogwarts anymore.”

Zabini looked puzzled and offended, as if the git thought he was so attractive all he’d have to do was crook a finger.

“Seem to recall you thought it was more than that,” he said, his voice deliberately nasty.

Malfoy’s eyes lit up with answering malice. “I think finding you attractive was one of the first signs that I was going insane from stress,” he confided. “I feel much better now.”

Zabini snorted and said in his most disdainful tones: “I suppose that means there’s someone else.”

“Yeah, since you mention it,” Malfoy said, looking at the desk. “There is absolutely someone else. And you don’t even compare.”

Zabini didn't like that one much. "Nice. I only wanted to see that you were all right after what-"

"We're not *talking* about that!" Malfoy's voice lashed out, attacking viciously as the best form of defence even when there was no defence possible.

"I only wanted to give you a friendly warning. But I expect you want to be alone, to get sick or cry or whatever, like you have in front of the Dark Lord a dozen times. You always think you're so *smart*, Malfoy. Why can't you just do what needs to be done?"

"Oh, I will," Malfoy said, all ice. "Why can't you get lost?"

Zabini made a low, frustrated sound deep in his throat and looked at Malfoy with spite and fury and maybe, weirdly enough, a touch of concern. He hesitated and then bit out "Fine" and strode towards the door, slamming it after him.

Malfoy took a deep, slow, shuddering breath and put his face in his hands. Harry shook off the cloak and went to him.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, Malfoy, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

Malfoy looked up, his face white. "Oh my God," he said, as if he'd just been told the apocalypse was due tomorrow. "What are *you* doing here?"

*

“Er, Malfoy,” Harry said. “You did tell me to come here. And how to get here.”

“Er, Potter,” Malfoy said, doing impressions even while in what seemed to be a state of shock. “I hope it doesn’t come as a surprise to you, but the Dark Lord doesn’t keep his snake in my bedroom!”

Harry frowned. “Yeah. I already saw Nagini. We talked for a bit. She, uh, she knew I wasn’t Voldemort. But I used the Occlumency. She didn’t know who I was. She seemed to want to be – friendly. I think she’ll come to me again. And then...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. The weight of the sword on his back was enough: he bit his lip.

“She is an evil, scary, vicious, fanged killer,” Malfoy said. “She is death in scales. Do not, do not tell me you have bonded with her.”

“Of course not,” Harry snarled. He remembered Mr Weasley, even though of course really that had been Voldemort. It just seemed – it seemed hard luck on an animal. He’d never killed anything that had come to him, friendly and trusting, before. He wasn’t like that.

But he’d be however he had to be. He’d do whatever had to be done.

He looked down at Malfoy, forgetting defensiveness for a moment.

“What,” he asked softly, “does Voldemort have *you* doing?”

There was a knock on the door. Lucius Malfoy’s voice rang out behind it a moment later.

“Draco,” he said. “Let me in.”

Malfoy erupted from the chair, running over to lock the door with greyhound speed, every line of his thin body tense with nerves and misery.

“No!” he shouted at the door. “I’ve told you before. Leave me *alone*!”

“Draco, I must speak to you,” Lucius said, an edge to his voice that made Harry extremely uneasy.

Malfoy curled his hand into a fist and held it against the door, as if Lucius was planning to break it down and Malfoy was planning to hold him off with the sheer force of his determination.

“No,” he said. “I don’t want to talk to you. Not ever.”

“You leave me with no choice, Draco,” Lucius said, and when his voice was thin and desperate he sounded almost young, almost like his son, and it pulled at something in Harry’s chest until he reminded himself that this was Lucius Malfoy, who had tried to kill Ginny and who had murdered Narcissa.

And who was currently making Malfoy unhappy.

“Do you want me,” Lucius panted behind the door, “to go fetch the Dark Lord? He’ll come, Draco. You know that he’s told me that he has witnessed your insubordination: you know he’d-”

“No!” Malfoy exclaimed and cast a hunted look at Harry.

Harry wasn’t sure if the sudden terror stark on Malfoy’s face was for Harry or for himself. Probably it was for both of them: God, this was such a mess.

“Okay, look,” Malfoy said in a trembling, bargaining voice. “I’ll let you in. We’ll talk. But not now, Dad, please, give me an hour and then I’ll-”

Lucius’s voice was almost shrill with desperation. “I know you better than that! You’ll slither off somewhere. Let me in right now, Draco, or I swear-”

Even the fist Malfoy had clenched against the door was shaking. He controlled himself and strode over to Harry, picking up the cloak and swathing him with it like a mother covering up her child against the cold. His face was close, his eyes gleaming.

“You’re crazy,” he whispered, hand clasped hard at the back of Harry’s neck for a brief moment and then gone. “You’re *crazy*, God knows why I – I’ll get you out of this. I promise. Stay still. Be quiet. I’m begging you.”

Harry nodded the instant before Malfoy pulled up his hood and Harry was lost from sight. Then Malfoy squared his thin shoulders and opened the door for his father.

Malfoy had said that Lucius Malfoy seemed smaller now: Harry had kind of thought he meant metaphorically. But it was literal, too, Lucius stripped of all his self-importance was thinner than Harry'd thought. He seemed a little shrivelled, even his Death Eater's robes seemed wilted. It was hard to tell with the Malfoy hair, but it looked like it was going white, long and limp and drifting in the air like a drowned man's.

His face looked so like his son's, but degraded, like seeing the same profile on a new coin and an old one, darkened by years and ill usage.

"Draco," he said, and reached out his hands to try and embrace him. Harry thought again of drowning. "I had to say I'd bring the Dark Lord. You wouldn't talk to me."

"Don't touch me," Malfoy spat and recoiled, bristling like a badly hurt cat.

"Draco, Draco," Lucius said, as if he was talking to an injured animal, soothing and smooth with some fragment of the politician showing.

Malfoy backed up. He backed up towards the bed and away from Harry, carefully not looking anywhere near the corner where Harry was, and then the back of his legs hit the bed and he had to stop moving away from his father.

Who reached out and grabbed Malfoy's face in both hands, inescapable, touching with an

obvious and absolute feeling of ownership and, even though Harry hated to admit it, with tenderness as well.

“You’re going to have to forgive me some time, Draco,” said Lucius Malfoy. “It’s what she would have wanted.”

“Would she?” Malfoy said, his voice tearing on the edge of tears. “Pity I can’t ask her, then. Since *you killed her!*”

“I had to do it.”

“Oh yes,” Malfoy said, the words tumbling out of his mouth, “to save your own miserable skin, of course-”

Lucius’s hands were gripping Malfoy’s face so hard they must have hurt, leaving livid white fingerprints against the furious hectic red of Malfoy’s cheeks.

“If I had not done as the Dark Lord commanded then he would have killed us *both*,” he said, voice rising over Malfoy’s. “And then there would have been nobody left to look after you, Draco. She would have wanted me to do it. I know that! You knew her, Draco. She would have killed me in the same situation. You know that as well as I do. She would never, never have left you on your own. She would have done whatever she had to do.”

Malfoy grasped his father’s wrists and dragged his hands down, stared at him and then turned his eyes to that tiny window. Faint light gleamed on them: he was obviously fighting back

tears.

“Maybe so,” he said. “But I know you, too. I could have – I could’ve believed her if she’d said she’d done it all for me. But you – I can’t be sure that you didn’t just do it for yourself.” He swallowed. “She was the ruthless one. You’re the one who chooses little girls to do your dirty work. You’re as big a coward as I am!”

For a moment Harry thought Lucius was going to hit his son, and in that moment he thought about how easy it would be to kill him.

“Be that as it may, Draco,” he said with a thread of rage in his voice. “This family requires your cooperation to stay afloat. The Dark Lord may not have much good to say about the Malfoys now, but we can prove our usefulness to him. You still have Bellatrix Lestrange’s blood in your veins. He’s certainly taken an interest in you.”

Malfoy laughed, a harsh crackling sound. “Lucky me. Look at you, still trying to turn everything to your advantage. You’ve lost it all, haven’t you, power and position and you’re just desperate, that’s why you’ve come to me, that’s the only reason, because there’s nothing left for you!”

“There’s you,” Lucius said, sudden and rough somehow, the politician truly drowned. “I love you. If you forgave me, there’d be something left.”

Malfoy stopped short, his face shocked and sick, as if his father had hit him after all.

“You’ve never said that before,” he said, and laughed a horrible pained laugh. “I wish – I wish you had. I would have believed you once.”

“And you don’t believe me now?” Lucius asked.

“I don’t – I don’t know,” Malfoy said. “I can’t. You were always such a good liar. I used to wish I could lie like you, but I never could. And now I can’t afford to believe you, I can’t, I can’t.”

“We’re on the same side, Draco, stop being so impossibly foolish and melodramatic,” Lucius shouted, and he sounded more like the man Harry remembered and it was easy to hate him again, and then his shout cracked like thin ice. “We’re on the winning side. That has to mean something. We have to be able to build something once all this is over!”

“Oh, maybe not, Father,” Malfoy said. “Maybe we’ll both be dead.”

He shoved his father and Lucius Malfoy actually staggered back.

“Will you believe me now when I say I don’t want to talk to you?” Malfoy demanded.

“Ordering me around, persuading me, it doesn’t, it can’t work anymore. I want you to *go*.”

Lucius Malfoy went, but he stopped at the door. “This isn’t over, Draco,” he said, the politician surfacing. “I won’t stop. And I know you’ll see sense in the end. I know you’ll want to make me proud.”

He shut the door quietly. Malfoy collapsed, sitting on the bed like a puppet with its strings broken. Harry flung off the Cloak and went to his side, kneeling on the floor. Malfoy still wasn't crying, just holding onto his own left wrist in a death grip.

He'd said he wanted his father's head on a plate. Harry had believed him: Malfoy had believed it himself. But Malfoy had said that he wanted to get Harry too once, and he'd changed his mind. Blaise Zabini seemed to be his friend: Lucius Malfoy was his father, was real family, not an aunt who'd just waltzed in but the man who'd brought him up. It was all complicated. And Malfoy felt things so much.

"Voldemort tells me to torture people," Malfoy said abruptly. He said in his nastiest voice, spitting out the name 'Voldemort' rather than saying 'the Dark Lord' as he usually did, with a mixture of contempt and fear. "Muggles. The Muggleborn. Blood traitors. He needs to have them tortured, needs to create the – the climate of terror, and he likes doing it himself but he likes telling the people who obviously really hate it to do it even more. Two birds, one Cruciatus curse."

"Right," Harry said unsteadily. "How – how do you get out of it?"

The marks of Lucius' fingers stood out now, faint red marks that would be bruises, against the paper white of Malfoy's face.

"I don't," Malfoy said, very low. "I do torture them. I have to do it, I can't let him suspect me, it helps me to be a better spy. And I think – sometimes I think – if it hadn't been for Snape rescuing me and you and everything, I still would've done it. I'm so scared of him, it

makes me sick. And I don't want to die. But those *people*—”

Harry grabbed Malfoy's right wrist, not the other because he knew it would hurt him.

“Listen,” he said, leaning in, and Malfoy's eyes snapped up from the floor and fixed on his face. “Listen, listen. All this stuff with your dad and – and your friends, and if that bastard's – what I'm trying to say is that it's all right if you can't cope with it. I – I understand. If you wanted to just – leave the country. Go somewhere else. Until all this is over. I'll understand.”

Malfoy looked bewildered, as if Harry was speaking a foreign language that Malfoy could not possibly understand though he was trying hard.

“And what would you do?” he said at last.

“Oh – well,” Harry said, looking at Malfoy's wrist rather than at his face. “When it's over, I'll – I'll come find you.”

“Oh,” said Malfoy, and then irritably: “That's not what I meant. Everyone else is gone, and you – you are *killing people*. I have told you before. I have no intention of leaving.”

“I'll be fine,” Harry assured him.

“Shut up,” said Malfoy. “Just shut up. Ginny's right to do what she's doing, you know. You're so keen to save people that you'd *eat* them, and you wouldn't mean to but you would, just because you think it has to be you all alone who saves the world and everyone in it. Well,

fortunately for you I have no crippling five-year habit of dependence on you to break. I know precisely who I am. I hate all this, I hate it, but I refuse to be rescued.”

“I was just trying to help,” Harry muttered.

“Well, you are helping,” Malfoy said in a practical tone. “I said before. If there wasn’t – if I wasn’t on your side, I’d still be doing all the things I’m doing. Only none of it would mean anything. And I don’t – I don’t like to think of how I’d feel.”

“That’s not really the kind of proper help I had in mind,” Harry said.

“It’ll do,” said Malfoy.

There was a moment of silence, and then Harry remembered who Malfoy had been talking about before.

“I saw Ginny,” he said. “I suppose that you’d say that the two of us happening to be in touch with you and in here at the same time was a complete coincidence.”

Malfoy drew his wrist away with sudden decision and leaned back on his elbows, managing a very faint rendition of his usual smirk. “It’s a big fortress of evil,” he said in a funny voice.

“The chances of running into anyone in it are not good. Unless you’re fated soulmates. I expect that’s it. Anyway, I owe her, and you seemed – upset about the letters. Did it go okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry said slowly. “Yeah, it went really well. It was good to see her.”

“Good,” said Malfoy. He sounded tired. “And next time you’ll get the snake. Everything’s going to be okay. Good.”

“If you want,” Harry offered, “If you want to sleep, I could stay with you for a bit. If you want.”

He more or less expected relentless mockery as a response, but Malfoy shot him an unreadable look and said finally: “All right.”

Malfoy shifted a bit and hit the pillow. Harry uncurled from the floor and sat on the bed, and reached out on impulse and stroked Malfoy’s hair back from his face, a bit. He was still clumsy about it, but not as bad as he had been.

Malfoy’s eyes drifted shut. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said, distant and a little sad. “But you’re still crazy.”

*

Harry did not feel particularly light of heart when he got back to Grimmauld Place. Malfoy’d refused to come back with him. The snake wasn’t dead and Harry didn’t particularly want to kill it but he’d have to anyway, and Malfoy was in *trouble* and Harry didn’t know what to do about it. He’d seen Ginny, that was the one real bright spot, but she hadn’t wanted to come back.

He'd only had a couple hours of sleep: it hadn't been particularly comfortable, tangled up with Malfoy on the single bed with Malfoy murmuring sleepy complaints and shoving his sharp elbows in Harry's stomach. Though it had been more comfortable than Harry might've thought.

He thought he could sleep more, but from outside on the street he could see there were lights on in the kitchen, though nowhere else in the house. Probably some of the Order had stopped by: God, Harry hoped there was no bad news.

He pushed open the door and almost tripped over the welcome mat, which used to say 'Only Purebloods Welcome' until Charlie'd beaten it into submission. He recovered his balance and made for the kitchen, where he could hear a male voice holding forth: he wasn't sure if he recognised it or not.

He shoved the door open and the world went still and bright, as if it was captured in a golden bubble. He couldn't even think for a moment, he was so happy, he didn't know what to do with himself.

Hermione glanced around, the lights of the kitchen pale gold on her bushy hair, and she knocked over her teacup springing from her chair. The tea spilled all over the table and the cup clattered to the floor and she was in his arms, laughing and crying and saying "*Harry*" and he held her tight, so tight he might've been crushing her but she wasn't complaining, she just kept saying "*Harry*." Ron, tall and hair blazing under the kitchen lights, taller and brighter and more real than Harry had remembered as if the memory of him had faded like an

old photograph, came over and started pounding Harry on the back so hard it hurt and Harry was glad it hurt, it made it all seem more real. Hermione's hair was in his eyes: he couldn't see properly.

He unclenched one hand from around Hermione and reached out, and Ron grasped it in a tight hold.

"All right, mate?" Ron asked, voice rumbling a bit as if he was embarrassed about being all emotional.

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice cracking. "All right."

"Things are better than all right," said Zacharias Smith, who was still sitting at the table with his cup of tea. It must have been his voice Harry heard, Harry thought dimly, most of his thoughts lost in the whirl of happiness and the much more important matter of holding Hermione close.

Smith looked much the same as ever: blond, nose in the air, annoying sort of face. It didn't matter.

"You can show him, Zach," said Ron. "Go ahead."

Smith smiled and reached on the floor for an old brown rucksack. He put it on the table and it gave a metallic clunk, and Harry stared. He supposed he'd known, Ron and Hermione would never have come back to him without accomplishing what they'd set out to do, but seeing it

was something different.

Under the warm kitchen lights, Smith drew it out, gleaming and perfect: a prize the way the Triwizard Tournament Cup hadn't been, a grail. The Hufflepuff Cup.

"Sorry we took so long, Harry," Ron said.

Harry tucked Hermione against his side, still bawling. He loved the way she cried like an exploding tap: he loved Ron's determinedly casual smile. He grinned at him. "Didn't really notice you were gone," he said. "Hope you didn't put yourself to too much trouble."

"Nah," Ron said, suddenly beaming, all pride. "It was a piece of cake."

*

They all went to the sitting room, where they started to tell Harry stories about the forest and the leaping lizards and a very irascible barkeep.

"Mind you, I wish we'd had more inns," Ron remarked. "We spent ages camping out in the woods. Not my idea of a good time."

"Sounds a bit dull, yeah," Harry said.

Ron did not seem deeply thrilled by the idea of Ginny among the goblins, but Harry thought he would've been a good bit less impressed with what Harry could've told him yesterday,

which would have been that Ginny was off in an unknown place facing unknown but deadly dangers. He left out the part about getting Ginny's clothes half off before she left.

"Chased her off, did you, Potter?" Smith asked, sounding highly amused. Harry glared at him.

"Zach," Ron said reprovingly.

"It's fine, Ron," Harry said, and might've tried to carry off something like Malfoy's bored drawl. "Not like Smith would know much about having a girlfriend. So, tell me more about-"

Ron was frowning suddenly. "Yeah, um," he said. "I bet you could do with more tea, Hermione."

"And biscuits," Hermione said firmly. "We ate a leaping lizard once, Harry. We had to roast it. It was horrible. Ron had two."

"It wasn't so bad," Ron said. "They were buggers to catch, though. C'mon with me, Harry."

At the moment Harry would have gone with Ron into a fire if he'd asked, but he was still pretty surprised to receive a lecture from Ron as soon as he'd come home and of all things, about the tender feelings of Zacharias Smith.

"I might point out that he started it," Harry said.

Ron buttered some bread for Hermione. “Yeah, well,” he said. “That’s kind of Zach’s way. The thing is, he’s not a bad guy. He’s just got a bit of an unfortunate manner. I think he’s a bit shy.”

“He seems shy,” Harry said dryly.

“Like,” Ron said. “Remember how he joined the DA, you know, listening in on other people’s conversation and inviting himself along and behaving like a prat once he was there? He just – he doesn’t think of the best way to do things, is all. He hasn’t got many friends and he can be a bit awkward.”

As far as Harry had ever seen, Smith didn’t have any friends, but he suspected Ron meant that and was just trying to be tactful.

“A lot of his family died in the last war,” Ron said. “He told me, this one time. It was late. He was the youngest by a lot. He used to have three older brothers. He doesn’t really remember them. His dad doesn’t want him to have anything to do with the war and he doesn’t think he can live up to those war hero brothers and he’s a bit difficult. But he’s not a bad guy.”

Harry bit his lip. “Okay.”

Ron stared at the plate, which he was piling high with biscuits. “He’s going to have to stay here,” he said. “He can’t go home, he’d be dragged off to Switzerland or something, and he wants to fight. Is that okay?”

“Course it is,” Harry said. “You know that. Any friend of yours is – er, someone I’ll put up with.”

Ron grinned. “Cool,” he said. “He saved my life three times.”

“Um,” Smith said from the doorway. “Hermione wants bread and butter. Oh, I see you’ve got it.”

“I am totally learning to anticipate all her needs,” Ron said with some pride. “Grab the biscuits, Harry.”

“Um,” Smith said again. “And that first time, with the life-saving. That was kind of an accident.”

“I know,” Ron said. “Get the door.”

“All right,” Harry said as they all trooped back upstairs to Hermione. “That’s a story I want to hear.”

He didn’t get to hear it, though, because just then the front door opened and Charlie came in, and he made a dash at Ron and only Harry’s Seeker reflexes saved Hermione’s biscuits.

Hermione looked very pleased to see the biscuits. She looked pleased to see Charlie as well, but mostly Charlie was occupied by thumping Ron on the back.

“My little brother, back like a bad penny,” he said. “And with a Horcrux. Mum’ll be so proud, she’ll burst.”

“Well,” Ron said, bright red and looking thrilled.

“Putting Bill and Percy’s noses properly out of joint,” Charlie went on indulgently. “Head Boy’s nothing to this. Can we go and tell her? She’s been sick with worry.”

Ron looked like he was about to nod, and then he looked at Harry, and after a second at Smith. “Couldn’t you bring them all here?” he asked.

Charlie did. Mrs Weasley tried to keep hugging Ron and make dinner at the same time, and they had to eat burned food and Percy arrived late from the Ministry and looking so tired that when Smith said: “Hi, Paul,” Percy nodded and said hello back. Then he asked Ron many questions about Albania that Hermione had to answer. Harry thought this might be Percy’s way of telling Ron he was proud.

The twins arrived and gave Ron a present tied with an enormous bow that Ron utterly refused to open.

Hermione watched all the Weasley furore and looked a little sad, and Harry reached out and took her hand. She could go back to her parents once the war was over: they couldn’t risk leading the Death Eaters to them.

Hermione smiled at him gratefully, then reached out and touched the corners of his eyes with

cool fingertips. It didn't feel at all the same as when Pansy Parkinson had done it: just peaceful, just unutterably comforting.

"Oh, Harry," she said. "You look so tired. But everything's all right now. We're back. We won't leave you again."

"Good," said Harry, drawing his chair closer to hers. "Because I'm counting on you to come kill a snake with me."

*

The other Weasleys went home. Mrs Weasley asked Ron to come sleep in his own bed and Ron looked wretched but resolved about refusing, and at last it was just Harry, Ron and Hermione. And Smith and Charlie. Harry supposed he understood about the necessity of Smith, but he thought that Charlie should perhaps understand that it was okay to go home now.

Only of course it was obvious why Charlie was staying. Harry realised that when Malfoy showed up late that night.

They were talking about a distressing incident at a gipsy camp where Ron had not made a terribly convincing woman at all, when Harry heard that swift step in the hall and looked up the instant before the door opened. Malfoy stood there for a moment and looked terribly surprised, shock wiping out even the signs of tiredness from his face.

“Oh hi, Malfoy,” Ron said, not sounding enormously thrilled.

“Hi Malfoy,” Hermione said with more warmth.

“Oh right, you live here too,” said Smith. “Slytherins on our side. That’s pretty funny.”

Malfoy’s gaze turned wintry and fixed on Smith. “I try to pretend that Hufflepuffs don’t exist at all,” he drawled. “Though I admit, sometimes seeing them run after Gryffindor girls? That’s pretty funny.”

“Hey,” Ron said. “Leave it out.”

“I can’t help it that your house is, oh, the house of evil,” Smith snapped.

“And I can’t help it that your house is the house of being terribly pathetic,” Malfoy replied, smirking. “But cheer up! Seems you’ve been adopted by a member of the house of being incredibly patronising.” His scornful gaze swept them all. “I’ll leave you to your emotional reunion,” he said. “Charles, d’you want to play cards?”

“Maybe if you’d like to acknowledge the fact my brother came home alive before getting all snippy,” Charlie said in an affectionate voice that made Ron blink.

“Weasley, Granger. I’m glad you’re not dead,” Malfoy said, not sounding terribly sincere, but Charlie rolled his eyes and went to the other side of the room where they curled up on the sofa and Malfoy could be near his precious curtains.

Charlie had not looked terribly impressed with Malfoy's behaviour, but Malfoy was obviously and deliberately laying himself out to please. Harry was forcibly reminded of Bill and Fleur's wedding, but it went beyond that.

Malfoy tilted his head and smiled slow caressing smiles in the moonlight, and Charlie softened and started to look like a man besotted, and Ron looked like he was going to be ill.

"Yeah," Harry said, frowning. "A lot's happened since you were gone."

"That's appalling," Smith said, gawking at them. "Isn't Bill the one who's married? He shouldn't be doing that with Malfoy if he's married!"

"That one is Charlie," Hermione told Smith.

"Oh," Smith said, looking apologetically at Ron. "Sorry. I get confused. There are a lot of them. Paul seems pretty nice."

"Who's Paul?" Hermione asked blankly.

"The one with the glasses," Smith told her. "See, it's easy to get confused."

Harry was mostly glaring over at the spectacle. Malfoy hadn't seemed all that anxious to make a show of this whatever-it-was in public before: Harry wondered just exactly what the Malfoy definition of 'not a big deal' was anyway.

“You’re absolutely right,” Ron informed Smith, who looked gratified. “This is appalling.”

“Well, it’d be worse if it was the married one,” Smith pointed out.

Over on the sofa Malfoy said something and they both laughed, Charlie throwing his head back. Malfoy reached over and smoothed the collar of Charlie’s robes with careful, clever fingers, not moving too fast. It was clear that Charlie wanted pretty badly to kiss him. Malfoy smiled.

The whole Charlie and Malfoy thing did not please Harry at the best of times. Least of all now, when if Malfoy wanted to make an effort and be charming he could be directing it anywhere but at Charlie. This should be a celebration.

Harry understood that Malfoy couldn’t have been thrilled, coming home after the time he was having at Voldemort’s headquarters to Smith sniping at him. It wasn’t like Harry didn’t think that Smith was a pain too.

Only Hermione and Ron could have been dead and now they had come back safe, beyond all hope, with a Horcrux. Malfoy could have congratulated them: he could have seemed even a little bit pleased to see them.

Charlie and Malfoy went upstairs after a bit. Ron expressed his deep horror at some length. Harry tried to forget all about it and almost did because of how nice it was talking to Ron again, having Hermione tell him interesting facts she’d learned about Albanian magic.

Eventually everyone had to go to bed. Ron helped Smith choose a room, and Smith carried the Horcrux up to bed with him. Hermione gave Harry a last warm hug before she went inside her room, her arms tight enough to strangle him, and he laughed and let her go. He'd see them all at breakfast. It was wonderful just to know that.

He still wasn't happy with Malfoy, and when he woke to the sound of the door opening he levered himself up on his elbows, grabbed his glasses and gave Malfoy a not all that friendly look through them.

"What do you want?"

"This is my room, Potter, you idiot," Malfoy snapped.

He had his arms crossed and was leaning against the wall in a beam of moonlight, his face blanched by the light, his eyelids lowered. Harry couldn't tell much from his expression, except that the corners of his mouth were drawn down. He didn't look happy, either.

"I'm – sorry," Malfoy said, the words coming out with obvious difficulty. "I should have – I know how worried you've been and I'm not – I am glad they're all right. I suppose..."

He stopped then and Harry would have let him stop there, would have accepted the peace-offering without asking any questions. He didn't want to ask any questions. This was enough.

But Malfoy looked away from him to the window, his jaw tight, and continued.

“I suppose I got used to having you to myself,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Harry woke alone the next morning, blinking hard to convince himself that he wasn't as tired as his aching eyes and muscles were trying to tell him he was. The first thing he focused on was the vacant pillow next to his own, white and crumpled, the lines of it sharp in the morning sunlight. He could smell breakfast.

He grinned and went to find clothes. He was pulling his jumper on over his head as he came out the door and found Ron giving Smith the grand tour.

“-and that's Malfoy's bedroom,” Ron said.

“And Potter sleeps in there too, does he,” said Smith. “Well, that's-”

“*Zach*,” Ron exclaimed in warning tones.

“Perfectly normal. As I was just about to observe,” Smith said.

Somehow, Harry found him unconvincing. He raked his hands through his hair and gave them both a smile anyway, because he was happy and Ron and Hermione were here and what did Smith matter, after all?

“Morning.”

“Morning, mate,” Ron said, and they knocked elbows amiably as they went down the stairs to

breakfast.

Malfoy was cooking, though this obviously broke Kreacher's heart. He was standing as far away from Hermione as he could, looking tragic and reproachful on top of the chest of drawers. Hermione was at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and Malfoy was drawing her out about Albanian runes.

"Less of a Latin base for the spells, don't you see," she said, tracing a funny little squiggle on her crumb-covered plate.

"Fascinating," said Malfoy in his terribly posh talking-to-visitors voice. It was impossible to tell if he meant it or not, but what mattered was that he was laying himself out to be charming: that he was making up for last night.

"Morning," said Harry, leaning against the kitchen wall and sliding his hands into his pockets.

Malfoy glanced over his shoulder, sunlight turning his grey eyes gold, like the dazzle of light on the surface of water. He smiled his bright lopsided smile.

"Morning."

"Harry," Hermione said, and reached out as if she could grab him. He went and sat down beside her so she could if she felt so inclined. She ruffled his hair. "You look exhausted."

“I’m fine: Malfoy and I went flying last night, that’s all,” Harry said.

Hermione said “*Boys*” in the same tone she’d been using since they were eleven years old and Harry grinned at her because he was so helplessly pleased to have her back.

It wasn’t bad that he had to take Malfoy into account, too. That was what Malfoy had meant last night: that Harry had to consider Malfoy, remember to spend time with him, show him he felt – well, the way he did.

That was what families did.

Hermione slid her arm around his neck and Harry leaned in, a bit awkwardly but glad to be close, and touched foreheads with her. It could only last for a moment or Ron would become indignant that he didn’t get forehead-touching action with Hermione.

“And you look happy,” Hermione told him.

That was when Charlie came into the kitchen, to a chorus of greetings. He nodded to everyone and walked over to the stove, where he put his hands on Malfoy’s waist. Malfoy leaned backwards into him and Charlie kissed him on the mouth.

Then he stepped away from Malfoy and glanced at Ron to see how his point had been taken.

Ron decided that he hadn’t seen anything and started a loud conversation with Smith about how delicious cheese was.

“I mean it’s just basically the best food in the world, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Smith said uneasily. “Cheese is nice.”

Apparently Charlie thought this was good enough. He sank into the chair beside Ron’s and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Glad you’re back, little brother.”

Harry looked at Hermione.

“Of course I’m happy,” he said. “You guys are back, and today we destroy another Horcrux. Can’t see any reason not to be happy.”

*

Charlie’s dragon tamer friends brought Norbert to a designated location in Dartmoor. Most of them were in the skies already making sure that no hikers were able to get back to the authorities with stories of a dragon sighting. Malfoy had offered to help out with that.

Hermione hadn’t come. She said she had to catch up on her reading, disregarding Ron’s plaintive cries that she couldn’t possibly have reading, did she not remember they were taking the year off school to fight evil?

Which left Charlie and Harry to witness the Smith and Ron ‘no really, you go first’ argument.

“You know, you should be the one to destroy the Horcrux,” Smith told Ron. “You’re the one who-”

“You’re the one with the Hufflepuff blood, idiot, we couldn’t have done it without you.”

“But you killed that troll,” Smith said. “And you wore that dress-”

“Yeah, we don’t talk about that. Zach, get on the dragon,” Ron ordered.

Smith looked embarrassed and pleased and didn’t need all that much persuasion. Ron looked indulgent and promised to go stand with Melisande, the Muggle dragon tamer, where he could see it all.

“That’s nice,” Charlie said, nodding at Ron as he walked off. “Ron’s not used to – well, you and Hermione aren’t really the follow-my-leader type.”

“I guess not,” Harry answered warily, not sure what Charlie was driving at.

“Ginny had a whole bunch of us to look up to and copy, and anyway it’s different with girls. Ron always used to ask Mum if he could have a little brother,” Charlie said. “Of course we would’ve had to raise another one in the garden with the gnomes, so all Mum did was give a hollow laugh. It’s just nice to see someone look up to Ron. It’ll help him out.”

Harry was about to say that there was absolutely nothing that Smith could help Ron out with,

but he remembered Ron looking into the Mirror of Erised and seeing himself as the leader of the whole school, Head Boy and holding the Quidditch Cup and everything. He remembered how pleased Ron had been when he was made prefect.

Even then, Dumbledore would have chosen Harry first.

“Then I guess there’s one reason to be glad Smith’s around,” he said at last, and shrugged. He shielded his eyes with one hand and looked up at the sky.

“You’re not – you’re not jealous?” Charlie asked.

“Uh,” Harry said. “No?”

Like there was any reason to be jealous. They were – Ron and Hermione were his, solid as bedrock. Smith didn’t matter, any more than Ron going off sometimes with Dean and Seamus mattered. Nothing could touch them.

“The thing is,” Charlie said with great care, as if each word was a dragon egg he was afraid of dropping. “You’ve always struck me as sort of – the jealous type.”

Harry dropped his hand and looked at Charlie instead of the sky. He stood looking at him for a bit too long, until he realised that he couldn’t really claim that he didn’t know what Charlie was talking about anymore.

“It’s not that I’m *jealous*,” was what he said.

“Possessive,” Charlie suggested.

“I am not possessive *either*,” Harry snapped. “It’s that you’re too old for him. I mean, if it wasn’t for the fact that Malfoy was run out of school you’d be his teacher right now, doesn’t anything about that strike you as wrong?”

Charlie went white beneath his freckles and tan. Harry felt a certain satisfaction, as if he’d thrown a punch when he was mad and seen it connect just as he’d wanted it to.

“Well, he did have to leave school,” Charlie said at last. “He’s been through things that’ve made him mature-”

“He’s not that mature,” Harry said, and bit his lip as he recognised that right now he didn’t sound all that mature himself.

Charlie didn’t seem to notice. The colour was back in his face, a rising tide of crimson which almost drowned the freckles, and he looked angry.

“You know, I’m – I’m sick of this,” he snarled. “I’m twenty-four, I don’t see why I should be treated like a dirty old man and I don’t see why he has to leave in the middle of the night and I don’t see why I’m expected to put up with you glaring at me as if-”

“Maybe,” Harry said in a loud voice, “you shouldn’t be sleeping with a seventeen-year-old!”

There was another long silence. Up above, in the grey cold sky, Harry could hear the call of curlews and the whistling furnace breath of the dragon.

He was suddenly furious. He realised, even though it was stupid and unrealistic, that he had kind of expected Charlie to deny it.

“He’s of age,” Charlie said at last. “We’re both adults. There’s a hell of a lot less difference between us than there is between Tonks and Remus.”

“That’s different, Tonks has a job and stuff, and anyway she and Lupin are in love,” Harry said impatiently. “He’s not just messing around with her until he goes back to Romania and his real life. Don’t pretend you’re not going: I know you are, as soon as the war’s over you’ll be out of here.”

Just another reason to end the war fast.

“Well,” Charlie began, and halted. “Well. Yeah. But I was kind of – I was hoping he’d come with me.”

“*What?*”

“I’m not,” Charlie said, and swallowed. “I’m not messing around with him. It’s not like – God, as soon as I left school I went out to Romania. Dragons were all I wanted, but I didn’t even speak the language and it’s not like you can have much of a social life there anyway, the locals can’t be allowed near the giant magical flame-breathing creatures and the other dragon

tamers – it's a tiny closed community. And at school I was – Percy was there, my little brother, and everyone was talking about Quidditch Cups and looking up to me and expecting stuff from me and I didn't want to let anybody down. You treat me like I'm some kind of vile seducer, whereas in fact Draco's quite a bit more-

"Shut up," Harry snarled. "I don't want to hear this! It's none of my business."

"It *is* none of your business," Charlie said. "But since you've apparently decided you're sitting in judgement on me and since Draco seems to care what you think, maybe you should know what's really going on."

"What's going on is Malfoy is not *moving to Romania*," Harry said. "Have you lost your mind? What would he do in Romania?"

"Get a fresh start, maybe," Charlie said. "He's – people in England, they're going to know what went on last year and they're going to judge him for it. His dad's here, whatever happens about that. His mother died here. And he doesn't really have anything to tie him to this country."

"Is that so?" Harry asked softly.

"Yeah," Charlie said, a Weasley, used to normal family life and being so sure, all the time, of what family was: even if you moved to another country, even if you didn't speak to them for a year, the family would still be there. The family would still be an institution and an anchor. "Look, I know you two are pretending to be like family. And I think that's fine. I think it's

great, even. But it's not real. It's not something that's going to last beyond being a – temporary comfort in all the stress and misery of the war. You two knew each other for six years and couldn't stand each other, for God's sake. Don't be ridiculous. Of course it won't last."

Charlie sounded calm again, more like the reasonable Charlie who was usually right. Harry drew in a deep breath.

"I really – I'm serious about him," Charlie continued. "I'm not going to hurt him. I would never. So now you know."

Harry looked away, up into the sky again, at the huge bulk of Norbert suddenly visible and the flash, very high up and far away, of a cup being tossed into the air. Flame jetted out, a blazing trail that must be visible for miles, and Harry had to turn away and shut his eyes, orange and black snapping on and off behind his eyelids.

"Now I know," he said, and when he looked up again, the Horcrux was gone.

The air was suddenly full of people, touching down on their broomsticks, guiding Smith and Norbert back towards the ground. Ron and Melisande could be seen running back to them.

"We did it!" Ron yelled as soon as he was in earshot.

He came thundering up to them a moment later and Harry thumped him on the back.

“*You* did it.”

“Nah,” Ron said, beaming wide. “Hermione and Zach did most of it. I was just along for the ride.”

“You were the one who wore the dress,” Harry said, smirking.

“Yeah, you’re not allowed talk about that either,” Ron informed him. “Nobody is allowed talk about that ever again! Just so we’re clear.”

The dragon tamers were helping Smith down from Norbert in a jubilant mass, everyone talking and smiling. Even Malfoy smiled at Smith, and then directed a significantly brighter smile at Charlie, who was shouldering through the crowd to be at his side. The air which had been filled with fire seemed filled now with energy, buzzing with excitement. The very colour of the sky seemed brighter.

Harry leaned against Ron’s back and said: “The snake’s next. Are you in?”

“Do you even need to ask?” Ron shouted back.

“No.” Harry grinned. “I know where you stand.”

*

As soon as they got back Harry took Ron and Hermione up to the parlour where he told them

his plans for that night. Including the information about where Voldemort's lair was. He drew a little map of what he'd observed from his last visit and told them about meeting Nagini, how he thought she'd come to him if he called.

He did not say anything about wanting them there for moral support.

He also let Hermione look up details about that area of Wales and read out to him local folklore about giants and deals with devils and God knew what else, because he knew that he had to talk to Malfoy about what Charlie'd said and he wasn't looking forward to it at all.

This family thing would be a whole lot easier if Malfoy would just stop having stupid *boyfriends*, or whatever Charlie thought he was.

"Hermione," Ron said at last. "That's really great and interesting and – great. I mean that. And now I have to go get a sandwich."

"I'd better go get the sword," Harry said, and made his way upstairs.

Malfoy wasn't in his room, and Harry considered going down to the kitchen, but Smith was lurking down there somewhere. It occurred to him that he could check with Charlie first, and he bounded up the stairs and pushed open the door of Charlie's room.

Malfoy was in there. They were kissing.

They were – it was *worse* than the Pensieve with Zabini, this was kissing with intent in broad

daylight, Malfoy was in Charlie's lap, hand fisted in Charlie's red hair, as Charlie sat up on the bed and tried to push Malfoy's all-but-unbuttoned shirt down further. It was hanging off his shoulders already.

"Er," Harry said, and then said "Sod it," in an undertone and slammed the door open with a deliberate bang. "Sorry. Can I talk to Malfoy?"

Malfoy turned his head and Charlie snarled into his dishevelled blond hair "Could you *give us a minute?*"

"A minute? I think I'm very offended," said Malfoy in a rather breathless approximation of his usual drawl. "What is it, Potter?"

"I need to talk to you," Harry said. "Alone."

"Okay," said Malfoy. He was sitting on the edge of the bed now, back to Charlie and doing up his shirt.

Charlie appeared to have lost his somewhere. He didn't seem all that bothered about finding it: he was busy staring at the back of Malfoy's head with what seemed to be disbelief.

"*Okay?*" he repeated.

Malfoy lifted his shoulders a little: a gesture halfway between a shrug and setting his shoulders, bracing himself for an attack. "I'll be back soon."

He went and joined Harry at the door, pulling him outside. Malfoy was standing between him and Charlie, so Harry couldn't see Charlie's face as they left.

He could see Malfoy's face though, even in the sudden darkness of the landing.

"I have this cunning idea," Malfoy said, his mouth twisting into a shape that was a little wry and a little amused. "Stop me if you think it sounds crazy, but I think it might save us all a lot of trouble. What if we had a sort of system whereby when people are behind closed doors, other people – I don't know, close their hands somehow and thump on the closed door in a certain way? Possibly several times? And then the people inside could answer the door and rearrange their clothing beforehand, if required. Can you think of a good name for this door-thumping idea of mine?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're hilarious, Malfoy. C'mon."

Malfoy followed him willingly enough, and they went into the sitting room. Harry thought they wouldn't be disturbed there: people tended to be a little put off by Maud and Ernestine.

Malfoy went to them at once, smoothing a hand over the velvet as Maud leaped for him with a rattle of curtain rings.

"Stay. Hang. *Good* curtain," he murmured, and turned an inquiring gaze on Harry.

Harry leaned against the sofa and tried to think of a way to put this. Malfoy looked stupid, he

thought irritably: his hair had gone all flyaway and his mouth was a kissed-pink mess.

“You’ve done up your buttons all wrong,” he said, folding his arms and looking at the ground.

“I can go back upstairs anytime, really,” Malfoy said. “Don’t feel you have to keep me entertained.”

“Charlie,” Harry began loudly, and then forced his voice down. “Charlie thinks that you might go back to Romania with him.”

There was a silence interrupted only by the hushed sound of moving velvet. Eventually Malfoy said, soft as the curtains touching his hand: “And you think that too?”

“No,” said Harry. “No, I know you won’t.” He glanced up and met Malfoy’s eyes and added, a little awkwardly: “He doesn’t understand, you see.”

Malfoy nodded. “So…” he drawled. “So since you already know that I’m not going, what is this about?”

“I thought – you should know,” said Harry. “Because you didn’t, did you? And if you went on thinking that it wasn’t a big deal, well. It didn’t seem very fair to Charlie.”

“You don’t even like Charles,” Malfoy pointed out, a little helplessly.

“Well, no,” Harry said. “But still.”

He cleared his throat and re-folded his arms a different way, and Malfoy sat at the window with his buttons done up wrong, the curtains playing over his hand, looking bewildered and a little flattered and mostly distressed. Harry hadn’t liked the whole Malfoy and Charlie thing, didn’t like it now, but he hadn’t wanted to upset Malfoy.

Only Charlie was a Weasley, and he owed the Weasleys his loyalty, owed them anything he could do for them. And Malfoy liked Charlie, and Charlie had looked after Malfoy at the Burrow, and Harry owed him something for that as well.

Besides, this was the fairest way.

“I can’t *believe* you’re ruining my fantastic fling with the hot dragon tamer,” Malfoy said at length. “You’re such a pain, Potter. I always said so.”

Harry shrugged. “You always said such a lot of things, Malfoy.”

“That you were a pain and a prat and a nuisance and an insufferable arrogant git,” said Malfoy, which was pretty rich coming from him. “It was all true, as well.” The left corner of his mouth came up, the first reluctant hint of his smile. “And you’re a good guy,” he added. “I may have mentioned that one less often.”

Harry shrugged, feeling his face flush a bit.

“I’m going to go talk to Charles,” Malfoy said at length. “That should be fun. It might take a while, as well. So in case I don’t see you, I’m going back to Voldemort’s this evening.”

“Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Malfoy looked up at him sharply. “Yeah?”

Harry just nodded, and saw understanding and fear cross Malfoy’s face, wiping out all the other, lesser considerations. After a moment his face went blank, everything locked up tight with the icy façade in place because with Malfoy to betray one feeling was to betray all of them. Harry understood that now: that look on Malfoy’s face didn’t bother him anymore, though he wished it wasn’t necessary.

Malfoy looked away, fiddling with the chain around his neck. The locket was a glint of gold in the shadows between his rumpled shirt collar and the hollow of his throat.

“Good luck,” he said at last.

Harry bowed his head. Malfoy pushed off from the window, ignoring the longing flutter of the curtains behind him, and made for the door. He paused when he was passing Harry, their shoulders brushing, and looked at him. Harry felt a certain urge to lean in, touch foreheads like he had with Hermione this morning, take some comfort from being close, but – with Malfoy being a boy, with Charlie and everything, it would have been a bit strange.

After a moment Malfoy said: “Good luck” again, his drawl icier and more drawn out than

before. He broke the gaze and walked out of the room.

*

Going to Voldemort's lair was easier this time around, now Harry was certain of where he was going and had companions to go with. The sword did not feel as heavy on his belt and even though it was a crush under the Invisibility Cloak, it was a warm comfortable crush. It was raining a little, the sort of drizzle that could hang around all day and looked set to keep falling into the night. That made Hermione's hair fluff up, apparently on some kind of mission to choke them all.

"Seriously, it's like having a poodle in here with us," Ron muttered. "It's still in my face."

"Harry just said it was in his face," Hermione hissed back. "It can't be in both your faces!"

Harry coughed. "Want to bet?"

There was a small silence, if you counted it as a silence when Hermione was saying "Hmph!"

"Er – an attractive sort of poodle, though, I mean," Ron said. "Shiny, I mean. Well-groomed. Sort of – smells nice."

"Ron Weasley, you silver-tongued devil," said Hermione, sounding very unimpressed.

They climbed through all the loose debris of the Welsh mountains, stumbling and grumbling

about Hermione's hair and happy, or at least purposeful. It felt like old times.

Harry walked up to the Devil's Table and spoke the password with Hermione's hand on his arm, and was unsurprised to see the door to Voldemort's tower standing open for them.

Whether it was Malfoy or chance, things tended to go well for them when they were together.

Ron closed the door carefully after the three of them, and they stood together in the stone corridor and stared around in the blood-stained light of the torches.

"I have to give Voldemort points for the creepy, creepy ambiance," said Ron. "I mean, this could be on postcards. 'I'm in the lair of an evil overlord – wish you were here!'"

"Perhaps these were originally mines," Hermione suggested. "The Welsh countryside is full of abandoned mine shafts, you know."

"Shh," Harry whispered, hand straying to the hilt of his sword. It fit his palm comfortably, as if it was meant to be there.

They went down a different tunnel than the one he'd been down before, this one a little more level and with disturbing noises from behind some of the doors. Harry didn't hear anything like a snake's voice, and so he tried not to think about what they could be and passed on, until they reached a dead end. Harry stopped short and tried not to feel frustrated, as if he'd tried and failed to solve the puzzle of a maze.

"We're going to have to retrace our steps," he whispered to the others. Hermione sighed a bit

and leaned against his back briefly.

“I like a bit of a hike,” Ron said unconvincingly. “I think it’s jolly.”

They went back and he chose another tunnel, this one going deeper into the earth. Maybe Nagini liked it where it was darkest and coolest, and she could move about with the most freedom.

“*Come here,*” he whispered as they walked. “*Where are you? I’ve come back to talk to you – I want to see you again.*”

Hermione, still pressed up against his back, shivered. Harry felt a trickle of unease. Like the feeling he would get as a child, imagining horrors in the highest corner of the cupboard that he could never quite make out and knowing that if there really was something terrible out to get him, there was absolutely no chance anyone would ever come to his rescue.

“Sorry, Harry,” she whispered. “It’s just the sound is a bit alarming.”

“It’s a cool thing to be able to do,” said Ron.

“Oh, I wish I could talk to Crookshanks,” Hermione rushed to agree. “Though of course it already feels like he understands every word I say.”

“Funny how he never seems to understand ‘get off that chair, you rotten cat,’ when *I-*” Ron began, and then Harry drove an elbow into his ribs.

“Hush, I think I hear-”

“Little chatterbox?”

And she was coming to him, he could hear the slither of her scales against the earth, the heavy shushing sound as if she was warning the others that they should be quiet, too.

“Don’t go away,” she called out, sounding a little anxious. *“I’m coming as quickly as I can.”*

And she came, huge and with her eyes like lamps in the darkness, great and golden, her tongue flicking out uncertainly as she sensed Ron and Hermione. And Ron and Hermione drew in a deep scared breath as the monster advanced on them.

“You came back to see me?” she asked. *“I was hoping that you would.”*

And she sounded happy to see him, glad and relieved, as if someone had come to pick a child up after school long after the child had lost hope that they would come.

She was so lonely. He remembered that.

“Yeah,” Harry whispered in that thick monstrous tongue, and he knelt down on the ground and held out his hands for her. *“Yeah, I did.”*

Nagini came to him trustfully, a heavy weight against his hands, scales delicately scraping his

skin.

“Who are these others?” she asked. *“The Master says-”*

“They’re my friends!!” Harry exclaimed, quick and harsh and feeling as if he could hurt her now.

Only she fell silent then, and offered no more threats. She did not offer him a promise they would be safe, either. She just put her great snake’s head up to his, and he closed his eyes and tried to make himself do what had to be done. She flickered her tongue over his eyelashes and the corner of his eyes. The sensation was so strange.

“I’ve always wanted to know, do you humans blink for fun?”

“Harry,” Hermione whispered. “Harry, do it now!”

“I *can’t* do it,” Harry exclaimed, and when he heard the despairing note in his voice he realised that he meant it.

“What do you mean, you can’t do it?” Ron asked. The loud sound of his voice made Nagini hiss and sway threateningly close to him: he moved back and the Invisibility Cloak dropped from Harry. “That’s Voldemort’s snake, you know! That’s the thing that almost killed my dad!”

“I know,” Harry said. “Yeah. I mean, I know, you’re right, but-”

She would obey Voldemort, if it came down to it. She was like a guard dog trained by someone evil and it wasn't her fault but that didn't mean she wasn't dangerous. And she was a Horcrux, and that meant she had to be sacrificed.

But she was so lonely. And it had felt right, it'd felt noble, to decide that he wanted to stand against Voldemort even if it meant dying, but killing something that had come trusting to his hand...

"She can talk to me," he said, low. "She doesn't mean me any harm."

"What's happening?" Nagini asked. *"You're not being very polite, you know."*

There was a silence then and Harry *knew* how they were looking at him, what they saw when they looked at him now, talking in Voldemort's language to Voldemort's pet.

"She looks like she might mean us harm," Hermione said, sounding resolved. "Give *me* that sword, Harry, honestly-"

"Wait a minute!"

"Did you hear something?" a cool man's voice asked. "I'm sure I heard something."

They all froze for a moment: for the barest fraction of a moment. Then Ron and Hermione crept forward, a shimmering barely-there mass, and draped Harry and Nagini in the Cloak

with one accord. Harry held onto Nagini tight and prayed that the urgency of his grip would communicate to her that she mustn't move, that none of them could risk moving a muscle.

"No," drawled Malfoy, and for an instinctive instant Harry was simply glad he was there, close by, and then he realised that there were three people to be protected at all costs now, and he was scared. "I don't hear a thing. And I don't much relish being sent out to find the Dark Lord's errant pet, either."

"Watch your mouth or you'll be the pet's lunch," said the man. They turned the corner and Harry recognised Bellatrix's husband, Rodolphus Lestrangle, and another man who looked rather like him. "Besides, better this than the way you spend most of your time. Honestly, you idiot boy, can't you keep your mouth shut? You're making the whole family look bad."

"Oh, don't worry," said Malfoy. "I don't consider you my family."

"That's right," said the other man. "No trace of weakness in the Lestrangle blood. If you were mine, I'd Crucio you into some better manners."

"Leave him," said Rodolphus. "The Dark Lord likes to deal with this one personally."

Rodolphus might have been speaking to protect Malfoy, a little. Harry wasn't sure. But the other one laughed a dark malicious laugh at that comment and Harry saw one brief tremor run through Malfoy, as if someone had drawn a sharp nail up the small of his back. He looked smaller in the company of Death Eaters, lost and pale in his black robes, and Harry had to fight the urge to reach out and take him home at once.

“I was sure I’d heard something!” Rodolphus resumed. “Here, snake, your master wants you-”

Nagini stirred at that and Harry pressed his fingers into her scales hard, imploring. Rodolphus Lestrangle and the other man who must be his brother obviously registered the movement. Both of them looked right at the place where Harry, Ron, Hermione and the snake stood concealed.

“Maybe it wasn’t the snake,” said the man who could be Rabastan Lestrangle slowly. “Didn’t it seem to you that there were human voices – and everyone’s in the hall for the meeting but us.”

“I heard Harry Potter had an Invisibility Cloak,” murmured Rodolphus.

“You’re imagining things!” Malfoy said, his voice going extremely sharp and uneven. “I’ve heard dementia comes with age, but this is ridiculous. I – I’m going back!”

He spun around and started to walk, then stopped dead as Rabastan Lestrangle lifted his wand and intoned, gazing at the wall: “*Avada-*”

“Stop it!” Malfoy shouted, his voice ringing throughout the corridor. “There’s no need for that.”

He still didn’t turn around, as if he was afraid of what he was going to see next. His shoulders

were set: the torches made the ends of his pale hair look crimson, as if the strands had been dipped in blood.

“Maybe you’re right, boy,” Rabastan murmured, and Malfoy’s show of cowardice had obviously been exactly the right move. Now he was just playing with Malfoy, tormenting him, which was obviously a favourite game. “What was that spell of Snape’s that the Dark Lord plucked out of your little brain? The one you have the dreadful dreams about – oh, I know...”

The shadow of his wand was on them already, such a narrow, flickering bit of darkness in the torchlight. Hermione’s fingers were digging into Harry’s arm, she was curled warm and tight and terrified up against him. Ron’s breathing was ragged and barely controlled in his ear.

“*Sectumsempra*,” said Rabastan Lestrangle, and everything was still.

Malfoy let out a quick breath and looked over his shoulder as if he was leaving hell and knew he shouldn’t look back, but he had to anyway. His whole body relaxed when he saw nothing.

For a moment Harry thought the curse had missed them all. That they’d gotten away with it.

Then Ron let out a wet, terrible gasp and lurched forward. The Cloak went flying and Ron fell on his face, they were all exposed, they could all be seen, but the only thing Harry could see was Ron and the blood that was already starting to spread and soak into the ground.

“Rodolphus,” said the man who might have been Rabastan Lestrangle, and Rodolphus

Lestrangle turned to run, to give the alarm that would kill them all.

“Oh no, you don’t,” snarled Harry. *“Avada Kedavra!”*

Rodolphus Lestrangle collapsed in a heap. Before Rabastan could move – Harry was coldly sure of it, icily certain that he was faster and he was more dangerous – Harry wheeled on him and watched his eyes widen. He even backed up a step, the terribly scary Death Eater who had so enjoyed making Malfoy tremble, who had gutted Ron. He didn’t look so forbidding now.

“As for you,” Harry whispered. *“Sectumsempra, wasn’t it? Sectumsempra! Sectumsempra!”*

It didn’t matter whether it had been Rabastan or not. He was nothing now, just the bloody rags and fleshy tatters of something that had once been human, spread out all over the tunnel like grisly Christmas decorations.

“Nicely done,” Nagini said from the ground, slithering through blood and entrails to his side. She sounded impressed.

Hermione and Malfoy, kneeling beside Ron, did not look at all impressed. They looked sick, but most of all they looked terrified.

“Ron,” Hermione begged, trying to close the gaping wound in Ron’s belly with one hand while she murmured spells and waved her wand with the other. Some spells seemed to be stopping the blood flow and some seemed to be making the wound bleed faster: Hermione

shook bloody hair from out of her eyes and drew in her lower lip, concentrating, trying to learn in the midst of a nightmare. “Malfoy, *help me!*” she shrieked.

“I am trying to think!” Malfoy screamed back at her. “God, I’m trying, I-”

Ron made a small, terrible sound, like something rattling and gurgling at once. His face was so white that his cheeks seemed faintly blue under the freckles. There was so much blood: Harry couldn’t tell which blood was Ron’s.

Harry remembered when Snape had healed Malfoy’s wound, how he’d said a string of words smoothly, almost melodiously. It had sounded like a song.

Malfoy started to speak, stumbling over the words, and it didn’t sound like a song. Perhaps like someone speaking a song he’d heard sung once, in a tongue he didn’t understand. The words were all probably wrong, the rhythm was off, it wouldn’t work... but it did. Under the combined weight of Hermione’s barrage of spells and Malfoy’s mangled attempt at Snape’s song, as if the sheer weight of their not inconsiderable determination was knitting flesh and bone together, the blood flow ceased. There was a huge ridged scar running along Ron’s stomach. It looked like there was a silver snake, bulging and grotesque, lying just under the skin.

“Is he-” Malfoy said, his voice trembling. He sounded like a child.

“Hermione,” Ron got out with difficulty, “Don’t-”

Hermione gave a scream that was frankly a bit scary, like a triumphant Valkyrie, and she fell on Ron, bloody and shaking as they both were, and kissed him ferociously again and again.

Malfoy leaned away and backed up from this action rather quickly. He stood up, looking rather unsteady and unnerved, and took another step back, clearly intending to lean on the wall.

“I wouldn’t,” Harry said huskily.

Malfoy looked at the wall again and recoiled, obviously registering for the first time that it was slick with blood. He looked over at Harry, eyes wide, and Harry couldn’t read his face. If it had seemed locked before, it seemed barred and chained now, as if Malfoy was putting up every barrier he could think of to stop Harry seeing what he felt.

The moment was broken by the soft, incredible sound of Ron laughing.

“If I’d known that all it would take was getting sliced up by a Death Eater, Hermione,” he said, his voice still rattling a little. “I would’ve done it *years* ago.”

Hermione laughed in return, helplessly, bowed over him and touching his face and his stomach as if her constant touch was all that was keeping him alive.

“Help me up,” said Ron weakly.

She did it, gasping a little as she took almost his full weight, and Harry hurried to help her.

When Ron took his hand, there was so much blood on Harry's that Ron's fingers simply slipped out of his palm. Harry quickly grabbed the sleeve of Ron's jumper and hauled him up that way, but Ron was already looking at him with new, amazed eyes.

"You did," he said, and his gaze slipped away from Harry like his hands, to the mess around them – "All that."

"He never even hesitated," Hermione said, and she might've meant it to sound supportive but it came out scared.

"I had to," Harry said.

He'd felt the way they were looking at him with Nagini in his hands, speaking Parseltongue, but it was nothing compared to the way they were looking at him now, to seeing what they saw. They had gone and he had cut the ropes away from Death Eaters on the cliffs, planned out their long cold fall to death, he had killed in the Dursleys' house and found it so easy, and now he saw how he had changed in the eyes he loved.

He wasn't what they had left behind. He was something else, now.

Ron's eyes were steady, and very blue. "Give me that sword, Harry."

Harry didn't even think. He just drew the sword from its scabbard and handed it to Ron, gleaming and untouched in the bloody lights, in the bloody tunnel. He saw Ron get a grip on it and he held himself braced for a blow: held his head high.

If he hadn't been thinking – some stupid thing, he didn't know – he would have realised what Ron intended. If Nagini hadn't stopped to look a question at Harry, she would have been fast enough to get out of the way or to strike herself.

Harry could have moved fast enough to save her. He already had his hand on his wand, but he caught himself: he didn't draw it.

She said plaintively: “*Why-*” and then the sword came down and carved her in half.

Harry looked away and closed his eyes, the sight of her last sudden writhe a movement of shadows behind his eyelids, the question only he had heard echoing in his ears. Just his.

When he looked back again, Hermione looked almost wondering. Her eyes said, you had to look away from that. Then they travelled the tunnel and returned to Harry, saying: but you could do all this.

Harry looked at the patch of ground where Ron's blood was still seeping.

“We all have to get out of here,” he said roughly. “Come on, we're Apparating. We're doing it now.”

Hermione came, helping Ron to limp over with the sword still in his hand. She leaned against Harry tentatively, possibly because of the mess on Harry's jumper. Harry did not look to see if Malfoy was hesitating, he just reached out and caught a rough handful: the collar of

Malfoy's robes and the hair at the nape of his neck. He got a solid grip. He was not about to let go: they were all going home now.

There was a rush of cool air, and it was night time and Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was looming over them against the night sky, windows bright and yellow. Blood loss and Apparition together were too much for Ron: he stumbled and sagged, boneless, in Hermione's arms. Harry went to support him on the other side and the bloody sword clattered to the broken pavement.

Malfoy went running up the steps to thump on the door, which flew open. Smith's horrorstruck voice rang out, saying: "What's happened – Ron? *Ron!*"

"Get Charles," Malfoy snapped. "Get the Order, we need mediwizards, we need dittany!"

Smith paid no attention, charging down the steps, and Malfoy snapped a curse after him and went rushing inside. Malfoy would handle it, Harry thought with exhausted faith, his job was to hang on to the dead weight of Ron. He couldn't let him fall.

"What's happened," Smith cried, voice panicked. "What's happened – what have you let happen to him?"

"Be quiet, Zacharias," Hermione said. "Harry killed the man who did this. He ripped him – ripped him apart."

This time Harry was certain that Hermione meant to defend him, and this time it didn't

matter. He could only hear the horror and fear in her voice as she described what he had done.

*

Once the mediwizards and mediwitches had arrived everything became a blur of efficiency, the sudden imposed order unsettling and confusing after so much chaos. They got everyone to describe the effects of Sectumsempra and tried to make Malfoy recite Snape's incantations again, taking notes all the time. They spent a great deal longer getting Hermione to list every healing charm she had tried and complimenting her on keeping a cool head in a crisis.

Harry didn't pay much attention: couldn't, beyond numbly answering all questions addressed to him in as few words as he could manage.

"I suppose he can be kept here if you promise to sit up with him tonight and report to us at once if he takes a turn for the worse," said a thin mediwizard, reminiscent of a pelican with a comb-over. "At once, Miss Granger."

"Oh yes," said Hermione. "I promise. I will."

"I can sit up with him too," volunteered Smith.

"Me too," Harry said, forcing himself out of his reverie. "I want to – as well."

"No, Harry, Zacharias," Hermione said. "That's not necessary. You both need your sleep."

And I'd – I'd like some time with Ron alone. Thank you, though. I'll call for you – I'll let you know – you do understand, don't you?"

She looked beseechingly at Harry.

"Oh yes," Harry answered, and tried to smile for her because she looked so distressed. "I understand."

Hermione seemed eager to get them all out of Ron's room and Harry wanted to oblige her. The mediwizard who looked like a pelican turned to him and said: "Lad, you could *really* use a change of clothes" and Harry took that as an excuse. He said goodbye to Hermione and just left everyone else, and went to Malfoy's room. Half of his clothes had ended up there somehow.

He changed wearily, the dried blood on his hands cracking as he pulled off his old clothes and pulled on the new. He left small rusty fingerprints on his new white T-shirt, but he put it on anyway. It was a lot cleaner than the old clothes.

Then he stood with his forehead against the night-cool glass of the window for some time.

"Hey," said Malfoy from the door, his voice soft.

Harry turned around and looked at him. He was obviously freshly showered, skin pink as if he had scrubbed to wash all traces of blood away. His hair looked a little damp and was standing up a bit: he was back in his Muggle clothes, jeans and a favourite jumper with

frayed sleeves.

“I can go to my own room.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Malfoy said, hesitating.

“I wouldn’t blame you,” Harry said. “I saw – I saw how they looked at me. And you hadn’t seen me kill anyone before either, had you?”

“No,” said Malfoy, and swallowed. “But I knew you had.”

“I don’t think they really realised it,” Harry said. He laughed. “They’ve – they’ve been all I had since I was eleven, all I ever had, I’d never had anyone before. And they looked at me like they didn’t know me.”

“They know you,” Malfoy told him with an edge of irritation to his voice that, stupidly, made Harry feel a little better. “They love you. It’ll all be okay in the morning. You can hardly blame them for being a little taken aback.”

“No, I can’t,” Harry replied, and turned away from the window, leaned against it and stared at Malfoy, *daring* him to contradict him. “I was – I was down on the floor with a snake in my arms, whispering evil-sounding little words and then when Ron was hurt, your first instinct – both of you, you rushed to help Ron! And I went for the kill.”

“You had to,” Malfoy echoed his words from the tunnel, but that only reminded him of how

Hermione had looked at him then. “We would all have died-”

“But I didn’t even think of that,” Harry whispered, the words sliding out easy and natural as Parseltongue. “I just thought about killing him. And I really – Malfoy, I really *enjoyed* it.”

The words were dark and low. Harry let his eyes rest on Malfoy, challenging him to find anything to say in response to that.

He should’ve known better than to think Malfoy would refuse a challenge.

“Well of course you did, he’d just gutted one of your best friends,” Malfoy snapped back with barely a quaver. “All the world knows you have a rotten temper, Potter. Colour me stunned.”

Harry was speechless for a moment. Malfoy took this as surrender, and he turned away to close the door behind him.

“Hermione didn’t want me in the room with her and Ron.”

“Yes well she didn’t want Smith either and it’s not because she thinks he’s shaping up to be the next Dark Lord,” Malfoy tossed over his shoulder. “I know you three are joined at the hip, but really, there are some things they need their privacy for. Granger’s obviously decided to seal the deal. I could find it in my heart to pity Weasley: I hope she’ll take the blood loss into account when she tots up the points for his performance.”

“That wasn’t all there was to it,” said Harry.

“Oh, maybe not,” Malfoy bit out, determinedly casual and dismissive. “But it’ll all be *okay* in the morning, or maybe not exactly okay – it won’t matter as much as all that. They’re your friends. They’ll stick with you through anything.”

“I *know* that,” Harry said savagely.

It was just the thought that they might not want to, that they might think terrible things about him. That Hermione might look at him with dread in her eyes. That he might become – might be all wrong, his instincts all wrong, soul already torn beyond hope of mending, those uncanny resemblances Tom Riddle had mentioned once signs after all.

And after that, an existence so distant from either love or fear. It might be *easy*.

Harry looked over at Malfoy, who was fussing with the bed curtains in a transparent attempt not to look at him. He went over to him, padding silently and then reaching out to touch him, suddenly, at the base of his throat.

Where the scar started.

Malfoy looked up with a swift indrawn breath, skin and the differently-textured, raised shape of the scar sliding under Harry’s fingers before Malfoy stepped away.

“And you?” Harry asked.

“I’m not following you, Potter,” Malfoy said, a little breathless. “Perhaps this is because you are insane.”

“You remembered the spell because you were scared it would happen again, right?” Harry demanded. “You have dreams about being cut open – so bad that Voldemort can torture you with them, can make you his *favourite scared mouse*. But you were mine first. I did that to you.”

“You said you were sorry,” Malfoy reminded him.

“But you were scared,” Harry said, intense, willing him to just give in and admit it. “I scared you.”

Malfoy stared at him and then deliberately took back the step he’d taken away. He was close enough so Harry could feel the heat of the shower still on his skin. Harry leaned back against the bedpost and glared at him. Just say it, he thought, get it over and done with, look at me like she did. Say yes.

“Yes, *obviously*,” said Malfoy, narrowing his eyes. “Oddly enough, almost dying scared me. And yes! Yes, fine. Sometimes you’re terrifying. But you always – you try to do the right thing. You came after me when Mother died. You kept your promise to her, you did more than she could’ve dreamed you would. You let your friends and Ginny go, even if it killed you. You’re fighting this stupid hopeless war. You even minded about what was fair to Charles, for God’s sake. Stop being stupid, if you think you *possibly* can. Your dimwit

friends adore you.”

He’d turned the *yes* Harry’d wanted against him, in that slippery cheating way Malfoy had. Harry felt a little less steeled against the pain, a little less frozen solid, and he felt irrationally angry. He didn’t want to feel better: then he’d just feel scared to death about what had almost happened to Ron. It was easier to be angry, in a way, easier to take bloody revenge.

“And you?” he repeated, low and dark again. After all, Malfoy had admitted that he was scared.

Malfoy looked scared, he thought. He looked all pinched and pale, jaw held at a certain tense angle that made it look sharper than ever. Harry looked at him, at his eyes wide and clear with moonlight in them, and tried to see what Malfoy saw.

He was taken utterly by surprise when Malfoy reached out and touched him, fingers curling at the spot where he’d touched Malfoy a moment ago. Then Malfoy slid his hand around, to the back of Harry’s neck, fingers resting lightly in his hair. His eyes were very bright.

“You are so *completely* stupid,” he said quietly. “I adore you, too.”

Malfoy had leaned in to kiss him twice before. This time, nobody interrupted, this time, nothing stopped him. The third time worked like a charm. Malfoy leaned in and pressed up against him, warm, and kissed him on the mouth.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The kiss lasted for a single warm, lingering moment. Then Malfoy stepped back fast, out of Harry's reach, and sat down abruptly on the bed. His back was against the bedpost and the back of his hand was against his mouth, as if contact with Harry's mouth had burned him.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a voice so shocked it was subdued and totally unlike Malfoy. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Er," said Harry, brilliantly.

He was still trying to process what Malfoy had done. Well, of course, he knew perfectly well what Malfoy had done, he'd – Harry's mind wrenched away from contemplating it. But he knew.

He didn't know why, or what Malfoy had meant by it. He didn't know much of anything right now. He felt a little punch-drunk, the world spinning, as if he had just been punched instead of kissed. Except without the pain.

"I was trying to reassure you." Malfoy's mouth twisted. "Obviously that got a little out of hand."

"You thought," Harry said, his voice tentative and the world still in a whirl. "You thought I *wanted* you to-?"

“No,” Malfoy said sharply. “No, of course I didn’t think that. I know you *didn’t* want me to: don’t concern yourself about that. It was just that I wanted to – comfort you and I wanted comfort too. I’m allowed to be upset by the horrific slaughter as well, you know!” He glared at Harry defiantly for a moment. “It was very traumatic.”

Harry blinked. Night was brimming outside the windows of their house. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was humming the little midnight melodies of an old house to itself, creaking floorboards and old pipes: sounds that had once seemed ominous in the dark and now seemed friendly and companionable, as if the house or Harry had changed. Malfoy was making no sense at all.

Everything should have been familiar, and somehow wasn’t.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said at last, and winced at how lost he sounded. “I thought – we were family.”

“We *are*,” Malfoy said, immediate and intense. His hand dropped from his mouth and he seemed about to reach out for an instant, then the gesture wavered and his hand fell to the coverlet. “That’s not really a deterrent for purebloods. You may have heard.”

The feeble attempt at a joke fell flat. Even Malfoy’s attempt at a smile didn’t work properly on his face.

Even though nothing made sense Harry felt a bit better, the foundations of the earth unshaken, the ground solid under his feet again. He could proceed from here and work out

this new madness.

“Did *you* want to-?” he began carefully.

“No,” Malfoy snapped. “I just have these impulses sometimes. Yesterday I kissed Mr Weasley. With tongue.”

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second. “I’m taking a special moment to be appalled by that mental image.”

He noticed that Malfoy had gone all spiky and defensive, which was never a good sign. When he opened his eyes, Malfoy’d sagged against the bedpost and was looking helpless: Harry could empathise with that.

“Oh look, I’m sorry again,” Malfoy said, sounding wretched, possibly because he liked admitting he was wrong about as much as Harry did himself. “What a mess. I’ll have you know it was *not* my intention to pursue this thing. I mean, even if I thought it was possible, which I don’t. So you can rest assured in your Gryffindor manhood or whatever. I happen to like Ginny, and more important than that I owe her. And I think you two could work together, if you managed to control your stupidity impulses for more than ten minutes at a stretch and she learned to question you more and occasionally beat you senseless. Not that it’s any of my business. But I didn’t want our lives to be any more complicated, so I think perhaps we should chalk this up to excessive zeal in comforting people and try to forget about it. I’m like Florence Nightingale, in a way. She was a famous Muggle nurse. I read about her in Muggle Studies. I’m like Florence Nightingale with making out.”

“This is a thing?” Harry asked.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “You don’t *listen*, Potter.”

“I do listen,” Harry said, the shock finally starting to wear off and his teeth suddenly on edge with how incomprehensible all this was. “Which, let me tell you, is pretty hard to do what with how much you talk and how little you say. I’m trying to sort out the important bits from your blithering-”

“I don’t blither,” Malfoy said hotly, which was just a ridiculous lie.

“Some days you do nothing else,” Harry told him. “And I actually think I’m taking this pretty *well*, so don’t start getting all annoyed at me. Lots of guys would have – would have hit you, or – or-”

Malfoy bared his teeth. “You want to hit me? Feel free.”

“I’m not going to hit you.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and looked away, at the shadows and moonlight writhing mingled on the wall. He’d had enough of violence today, enough of blood to last him a lifetime. He didn’t want even to be angry with Malfoy, not really. He just wanted things to make sense.

“Lots of people would be flattered,” Malfoy told the wall in darkling tones. “The correct response, as all those not raised by bears or octopi or *dust balls under the bed* know, to someone else having a crush is to say you’re very flattered and turn them down nicely. Tactfully. I realise tact may be a concept unknown to your people, and the basic elements of it include-”

“You have a crush on me?”

The words sounded foreign and unreal coming out of Harry’s mouth, like a new kind of Parseltongue. Colour flared in Malfoy’s cheeks as if someone had just delivered him two stinging slaps and run away, leaving nothing but the faint stains of blood rising under his skin behind to tell the tale.

“I didn’t say that.”

Harry thought of another thing that might be important in all that Malfoy blithering about Florence Nightingale, like finding a gleam of gold in the sand.

“You want to make out with me?”

“*Not at the moment*,” Malfoy said, with the air of a man on the edge.

“But before,” Harry said. “Like, ten minutes ago. Did you-”

“Is that all it was, it seems like years that I’ve been listening to you talk about hitting me and

other things that are stupid and obvious,” Malfoy snarled. “Do you remember the bit where I said we should try to forget about it? I’d like to do that.”

“I heard. Look, this is a lot to deal with,” Harry began, and then stopped because he did not know what else to say.

“So don’t deal with it,” Malfoy said, sounding almost desperate. “It’ll go away. It’s probably just – some sort of weird mental breakdown. People get those, from strain. I’ve been under a lot of strain lately. Maybe it’s battle fatigue. I haven’t been in a battle, that is true, but I probably will be. I’m probably having some sort of mental breakdown related to anticipatory battle fatigue.”

“You’re being a little insulting now, actually,” Harry muttered.

Plenty of people had crushes on Harry without being actually crazy from stress. There was Ginny, and there was Cho. Well, Cho had been under quite a lot of strain after Cedric had died, he supposed, and the crush on Harry had seemed bizarrely connected to that. Which was pretty disquieting now Harry came to think about it. That Romilda Vane had seemed to like him, though, what with trying to sneak him Love Potions and stuff. Only it was probably just because he was famous. There’d been a lot of girls out on the Quidditch pitch in sixth year, he thought, trying to recall any specific name or face. At least one of them must have liked the look of him as well as being impressed by the celebrity.

Anyway, there was Ginny.

“Anyway, there’s Charlie,” Malfoy rambled on. “It’s hardly fair to him to have this conversation. So let’s not.”

“I thought you broke up with Charlie,” Harry said sharply.

He didn’t know what to think or even how to think of the other stuff, it was so unbelievable, *Malfoy*, a crush – but he did know what he thought of this.

“No,” Malfoy answered, sounding rather surprised. “Why would I do that? We just had a talk. Confirming that our relationship isn’t serious and that it won’t be lasting beyond the war, which is just what I thought about it anyway. There’s no sense throwing away a good thing in the midst of all this chaos. I’m not an idiot. I was perfectly honest with him,” he added, voice rising as he looked at Harry. “What d’you expect me to do, sit around pathetically and *pine-*”

“That never even occurred to me,” Harry said hastily and with perfect truth.

There was a silence that stretched out, long and uncomfortable. Harry wanted to lie down and sleep, wanted Malfoy to be there, wanted Malfoy not to have said or done anything to make him question the way things were.

“I want us to be all right,” Harry said at last, when it became clear that Malfoy wasn’t going to say anything else.

Malfoy stirred as if he’d been startled out of a daydream. When he glanced over at Harry his

eyes looked like he was a thousand miles away: like there was an uncrossable distance between them.

“Yes,” he said, and after a pause: “I want that too. So let’s just forget about the whole thing.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

“I think I’m going to go sleep in the other room.”

“You don’t have to-”

“I think I’d rather,” Malfoy said with finality.

He swung himself off the bed, skirting Harry as if he was dangerous territory which might contain minefields. Harry hadn’t moved from the time Malfoy moved in towards him, but he did now. He turned his head and watched him go.

At the door Malfoy tossed a smirk over his shoulder.

“Bet that distracted you from worrying about becoming the next Dark Lord, didn’t it?” he asked. “No need to thank me, Potter.”

Harry had time for a surprised laugh and a rude gesture before Malfoy shut the door.

The urge to laugh faded when the door shut and he sank down onto the bed, lying flat on his

back and staring up at the sky canopy where there was, as always, a lot going on. There was a helicopter with its searchlight on, scanning the bedclothes, and fireworks like bright pale flowers against the night. Harry didn't notice that the canopy moon was behind a cloud until the cloud passed, lifting like a shadowy veil. The curved shape of a crescent moon was revealed, bright and white and sharp.

*

Harry wasn't asleep when the owl tapped against his window a few hours later that night. He wasn't thinking: he was having a hard time mustering up something as coherent as thought in his mind. He just – wasn't asleep.

The owl came as a welcome distraction from the thoughts he wasn't having. Harry rolled off the bed and made for the window, undoing the latch and pushing it wide. The owl outside was a breed he wasn't familiar with, very small with darker markings than he was used to, and there was a large dark seal on the letter.

When he opened it, he saw Ginny's writing, a big sprawling curling mess over the parchment. Just seeing it made him smile: it made him think of her riot of curly hair in the mornings.

Malfoy wrote and said perhaps I should be in touch, her letter began without a greeting. He mentioned that some people had died.

He mentioned that you saved my brother's life.

It's funny how sure I am which one of those two things you're dwelling on.

Remember I told you in my last letter that I wanted to seem like your ideal girl? I also thought that the ideal girl would be supportive. And I still want to be supportive. Only I don't want to be the girl who said it was okay to cut up Malfoy. I don't think that it was okay anymore. I want to really look at what you're doing and decide whether it's okay, not think it must be because I'm still ten years old and you're my hero.

Remember me yelling at you about you not being possessed by Voldemort in the library that one time? I knew about possession. I knew what I was talking about then.

I know what I'm talking about now. I've been in a few – my friend Acwela calls them skirmishes. I killed a couple of people. And I know that Ron and Hermione and Malfoy haven't, yet. It's different once you have.

If you want to write to me about it you can. I'd like to talk about it, one day. I'm not much good at writing, but I wanted you to know two things. Afterwards, when I was trying to cope with what I did, I thought about you and the way you cope with everything that gets thrown at you because you have to, because the only other thing to do is give up and you don't know how to do that.

You get it wrong sometimes. This time, you didn't. When it's important, I trust you to do the right thing.

This is a really disgustingly sappy thing to end the letter on, Harry, but I'm tired and I can't

think of a better, cooler way to say it.

I'm not ten anymore. Some days I feel a lot older than sixteen.

You're still my hero.

She hadn't signed it. Harry folded up the letter and held it in his hand like a talisman, like a kid clutching a security blanket. He was glad she'd written. He was glad Malfoy'd thought to write to her. He couldn't quite... thinking of Ginny seemed dangerous, somehow, almost as dangerous as thinking of Malfoy. He couldn't help thinking of Malfoy possibly – sacrificing his own apparent feelings, God this was so *weird*, and he could see no way to get through this without everything changing.

He folded the letter and put it in his back pocket with her other letter, and Ron and Hermione's Christmas card, and Malfoy's picture. Then he pulled a pillow over his face so he couldn't see Malfoy's sky, and finally he was able to get to sleep.

*

When he woke he rolled off the bed and made his way up the stairs to check on Ron. That was clearly his first priority, and he didn't have to think about anything else until he'd done it.

He took the stairs two at a time and was turning the corner to Ron's bedroom when he heard Malfoy's voice and froze.

“Listening outside the door, Smith?” Malfoy inquired. “That’s – kinky and distressing of you.”

“God, Malfoy,” Smith snapped. “You have a filthy mind.”

“That’s true,” Malfoy conceded.

“What are you doing here – just on your way down from Charlie Weasley’s room?” Smith sneered.

“That’s right,” Malfoy said. “Ten points to Hufflepuff for making two really obvious observations in a row. And yet you have still to explain why you’re lurking outside Ron Weasley’s bedroom. Now I realise I may not *want* to know the answer to this, and in fact it may scar me for life to hear that you’re hoping to be invited to join them, but-”

“Oh my God, what is wrong with you?” Smith demanded. “I am guarding this door.”

“Oh guarding the door,” Malfoy repeated. “Oh, well, now everything makes sense. Thank God you were here: someone might have come in and assaulted them with breakfast in bed.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, Malfoy, but I am guarding them from interruptions,” Smith said. “Ron talks to me, you see-”

“Lucky you,” Malfoy drawled, sounding deeply unconvinced.

“He’s had terrible luck with getting time alone with Hermione and explaining exactly how he feels,” Smith said, sounding absorbed in the doomed romance of it all. “I think that Potter was always around putting his nose in.”

“Don’t blame Potter for Weasley’s poor romantic performance,” Malfoy said. “He should take responsibility for his own lack of skills at the wooing. And shouldn’t you be pleased by them, anyway? I thought you had an interest in the object of his clumsy affections yourself.”

There was an edge of malice to Malfoy’s voice, as if he would’ve liked to tease Smith, but if Smith noticed that it did not make his reply any less earnest.

“Yes. I did. I mean, I still do. I still like her, but – Ron really deserves her, you know. He’s a hero. And there’s no time left to mess about. They like each other and it’s right, it being that way. I can accept it. I can be perfectly happy with it – I think it’s the way it should be. And you’re not going to mess it up, Malfoy, so don’t even think about playing some kind of mean joke-”

“As you have observed, Smith, there is no time left to mess about,” Malfoy said, the edge to his voice considerably less sharp than it had been. “I think I’m good.”

Harry left Malfoy to bond with Smith, if he could possibly manage it. He felt it was too early in the morning for him to have to deal with Smith without snagging a cup of tea first.

He was extremely amused to find Hermione in the kitchen, briskly spreading strawberry jam

on a piece of toast and reading the paper. She looked up and smiled as he came in.

“Hermione,” Harry said, and couldn’t suppress a grin. He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her upturned face. “Smith’s guarding your privacy with Ron upstairs.”

“Oh, is that what he’s doing?” Hermione asked. “I wondered why he was sleeping outside the door. I had to step over him.” She took a bite of toast. “That’s very thoughtful of him,” she remarked approvingly once she’d swallowed.

“Wanted your privacy, did you?” Harry inquired, going to the counter and rifling the cupboards on his quest for tea.

“Harry, I do not know what you could be implying, Ron had suffered dramatic blood loss,” Hermione said primly. “However, if you are hinting about the status of our relationship, I might go so far as to say we’re – official.”

She went a faint pink and buried herself in the papers.

“Congratulations,” said Harry, and meant it with all his heart. He added: “Not before time,” and meant that too.

Hermione looked up instantly and indignantly from her paper, and then caught Harry’s grin and smiled a tiny bit back.

“None of it would’ve been possible without you,” she said in a quiet voice, the half-smile

fading away. “Without you, Ron would’ve been-”

Harry made an abrupt dismissive gesture and tried to busy himself at the counter, flicking on the kettle, throwing the teabag in a mug, doing anything rather than look at Hermione’s face.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But I do worry about it,” Hermione said. “I worry about you. Harry, I know I was pretty clearly – horrified last night. And I still am. I’m scared that you were in a situation where you had to do that, and I’m scared that you could do it so easily. I’m worried about how we’re all going to end up.”

“You won’t have to,” Harry said, and the words stuck in his throat. “I’ll take care of you.”

He glanced over in time to see Hermione tilt her chin and give him a look that made him feel eleven years old and not particularly bright.

“I can take care of *myself*,” she said. “I’ll do what I have to do. And so will you. But you can worry about me, if you like. And I’ll worry about you.”

“Okay,” Harry said, put in his place.

He made Hermione a cup of tea the way she liked it and brought both cups over to the table. He wanted to say something to her: he was thinking of the way Smith had said there was no time left.

“It’s good to know that you won’t be – judging me,” he said at last, awkwardly.

“Oh, but I will,” Hermione told him, and Harry spilled a bit of tea on her paper. “It’s what I do,” she continued, and then she reached out and pulled at his hair with a rough sisterly hand, drawing his head down towards hers. “But I love you,” she said. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, and took her hand out of his hair and into his, lacing their fingers together. “Er. Me too.”

“Yes, I know,” said Hermione, and turned a page of the newspaper with her free hand.

Harry held on and read the stretches of print with her, the subtly anti-Muggleborn measures mysteriously being passed at the Ministry by a majority despite Scrimgeour’s best efforts, the unexplained deaths. The explained deaths. Amycus Carrow had been made the new High Inquisitor of Hogwarts – because the last one had gone over *so* well - despite the fact his sister had been taken away to Azakaban for the murder of Professor McGonagall.

There was an article today that said the Death Eaters had broken her out. Well, at least she wasn’t at Hogwarts.

“Do you happen to know how the others are getting on at Hogwarts?” Hermione asked after a while.

“I do,” said Harry, and prayed things had got no worse. He didn’t like to think of Amycus

Carrow with any more power over the girls than he'd already had. "It's not so bad. Neville and Pansy are handling things pretty well. Luna and Dean and Justin Finch-Fletchley are pitching in, and Cho and Marietta Edgecombe-" he watched Hermione flinch at the mention of that name – "they've stayed on as teacher's assistants and they're in with Carrow and reporting back. But Neville and Pansy are in charge."

"Pansy *Parkinson*?" Hermione's nose wrinkled. "I hope Neville's not getting mixed up with a girl like *that*."

"Pansy's not so bad," Harry said, stung.

He thought of her sitting on a fence with Malfoy's fingers in her hair, looking down at him with love. He thought of her kissing him in a Muggle pub in front of Blaise Zabini, her mouth whisky-slick, and of Neville relaxing when she took his arm.

"Actually," he continued. "I quite like her."

Hermione sniffed and said: "Boys."

"Hey, I am trying to like Smith," Harry protested, and on Hermione's look he admitted:

"Okay, not really. I think he's a prat. But I think Malfoy's bonding with him upstairs: that should count for something. Like five points for Number Twelve Grimmauld Place."

"Malfoy cannot earn you points," Hermione said sternly, and then she hesitated. "About Malfoy."

Harry stared at their linked hands and wondered frantically if Hermione had perhaps learned to read minds out of *Hogwarts: A History* and just never bothered to mention it.

“What about Malfoy?”

“I couldn’t help noticing,” Hermione said, and paused delicately. “I’m pretty certain. I’m just not sure that it’s the right thing to tell you.”

Harry looked at her warily, feeling as if she was a scorpion. A scorpion who was his very good friend and who he would defend with his life, of course, but who might sting him all the same.

“I… probably know,” he said reluctantly.

Hermione moved her hand in his as if she wanted to pat him soothingly without letting go.

“He seems a bit – smitten.”

“He’s – I wouldn’t say – not *Malfoy*,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“Well,” Hermione said. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t – I don’t know how to feel about it,” Harry answered, staring at the table. “I wish I could be angry. I’d understand that. But I’m not: I don’t know what to do.”

He looked up, hopeful suddenly that she could offer a solution, tell him that naturally all they had to do was make a potion or break a few school rules and everything would be fine. She was frowning thoughtfully.

“How did you know about it, anyway?” he asked. “Wait, why am I even asking? You always know everything. Have done ever since we were eleven.”

“No, I didn’t,” Hermione said, but she smiled all the same. “I was just a bit more grown-up than you two. Which really, Harry, it wasn’t hard.”

“Oh, being grown up,” Harry said. “Wonder when I’ll manage that.”

Hermione leaned into him a bit. “I think you’re almost there.”

Harry picked up his cup of tea and swirled the brown liquid around without drinking. “And then I’ll understand things, will I, and I’ll know what to do. Well... I’m looking forward to it.”

Hermione paused for a long moment, and then observed quietly: “It’s better than him still being hung up on Blaise Zabini.”

That hadn’t occurred to Harry.

“You know,” he said, slowly and with gathering conviction. “That’s *true*.”

Hermione blinked at him and nodded. “There won’t be any question of wavering loyalties.”

Harry pulled his hand abruptly out of hers. “His loyalties aren’t in question.”

She opened her mouth and Harry just knew she was going to say something that would remind him of Malfoy’s father or Malfoy’s face when Lucius said that he loved him: he didn’t need this, not now.

He was saved by the advent of Ron and Smith, Ron striding into the kitchen in his blue worn pyjamas looking terribly pale and terribly happy, and Smith running after him like a mother hen whose chick had just declared aquatic ambitions.

“Oi,” he said. “Making time with my girl when my back is turned? Some best mate you are.”

Harry was pretty sure he said it just so that he could say ‘my girl.’ He bent and kissed Hermione’s cheek, nervously proprietary, and beamed when she went a little pink and let him.

“Well, I tried,” Harry said. “But she told me I didn’t have a chance with her.”

Ron grasped Hermione’s hand and she smiled up at him. Then he ended up jostling her when Smith pushed him down on the chair beside hers.

“Sit down,” Smith told him sharply. “I can fix you breakfast.”

“All *right*,” said Ron, in the tones of one who had achieved breakfast, his best girl and the pinnacle of human happiness. Harry caught his eye and grinned.

“I’d like an egg please, Zacharias, if you would,” Hermione told him.

“I was thinking more kind of toast,” said Smith apologetically. “I’m good at toast.”

“I like toast,” Ron said.

“Where’s-” Harry began.

“He’s getting Charlie,” Smith said absently, messing about with the bread bin as if he was not the toast master he’d claimed.

Harry tilted his chair to one side so he could look out the kitchen door Smith had left open and confirm Smith’s words: Malfoy and Charlie were standing in the hall, looking deep in discussion. Harry couldn’t see Malfoy’s face but he could see Charlie’s, grey in the shadows of the hall: Charlie looked wretched, in pain but resigned about it, and tired. Malfoy said something and Charlie shook his head, and when Malfoy kept talking Charlie smiled, a faint but real smile.

Harry looked away and after a moment Malfoy came into the kitchen, hand in hand with Charlie. Ron looked faintly ill: Harry could hardly blame him.

“How are you feeling, Ron?” Charlie asked.

Ron shrugged and smiled in Hermione's direction. "Can't complain."

"Do let me know if you feel faint anytime, Weasley," Malfoy said solicitously. "I will be standing by. To take pictures and distribute them around our school."

"Fine by me," said Ron. "The ladies like a vulnerable man. Not that I'm interested in the ladies. I mean, other ladies. Though I'm sure they're nice. I really haven't noticed."

Hermione patted his hand and he subsided into a grateful silence. Malfoy raised his eyebrows and slid his hand out of Charlie's, going off to separate Smith from the bread before one of them could be harmed.

"Draco, we want eggs," Charlie called over to him, taking the chair to Ron's left.

"Do I look like a house elf to you, Charles?" Malfoy asked, fetching eggs.

"You kind of look like one to me," said Smith, in a different sort of way than he usually spoke to Malfoy but still being basically obnoxious. He had no social skills at all, and Harry was never going to take to him.

He'd been right about Malfoy and Smith bonding, though, because Malfoy regarded him tolerantly and simply said: "I demand clothes," before pushing Smith in the direction of the table and away from the toast.

As if conjured by the mention of house elves, Kreacher appeared, and almost had a heart attack seeing his precious master performing menial chores. He started to make a sumptuous breakfast while muttering darkly about how it was going to waste and might as well be served in a pig trough.

“I have missed his sweet little face,” said Ron.

Malfoy insisted on making the eggs just to torture Kreacher. He put in pepper while Kreacher wept and begged him to stop demeaning himself, tossing cruel comments about omelettes over his shoulder to Charlie and laughing, and eventually sat down and started complaining about how much food Ron had already polished off.

“You’re going to get fat,” he predicted.

“No he isn’t, he has the Weasley metabolism,” Charlie said, with a very creditable attempt at his usual grin. “Never runs to fat. All the fuel gets converted to hard, lean muscle.”

“That’s so true,” said Ron.

“You’re going to look just like Professor Slughorn,” Malfoy persisted. “And when he went by the windows of the dungeons we used to think it was an eclipse.”

“Ron and Harry always ate a lot,” Hermione commented in a voice which nicely combined fondness and disapproval.

“You’ll get fat too, Potter,” Malfoy said, not meeting his eyes at all. “Horribly fat. Brooms will break like matchsticks under you. It’ll be very sad. There goes the Boy Who Lived, people will say, and other people will respond, Where? I can’t see, that fat gent’s in the way.”

And apparently this was Malfoy smitten. Harry didn’t think he could be blamed for not having noticed before. He couldn’t believe it now. It didn’t seem real but he should have been happier, all of them safe and laughing together in the kitchen. Any other day, and this breakfast would have made Harry happy.

Only he wasn’t happy, because Malfoy didn’t seem happy.

He saw Malfoy start to reach for the salt and made a move towards it himself: Malfoy withdrew his hand immediately and leaned closer to Charlie, as if he was a refuge.

“I’ve got to head out to Hogwarts after breakfast,” Charlie said, his voice gentle. “Want to send a note to Pansy or the boys?”

“Can’t,” said Malfoy with a grateful, crooked little smile. “No time to write one. I’m heading back to Voldemort after I’ve eaten.”

“*What?*” Harry exclaimed violently. Smith jumped.

Malfoy did look at him then, and it was terrible. It reminded him of the way he used to look before and during Quidditch matches against Harry, ashen and already beaten, always.

“Back to Voldemort,” he repeated, as if Harry was hard of hearing.

“No, you aren’t,” Harry said. “Are you stupid? Do you think Voldemort will just welcome you back with open arms? You went off with two men who were found messily dead and vanished for the night. Where the hell will he think you’ve been?”

“I expect,” Hermione said, her voice cool, “that he’ll think Malfoy’s been here.” There was a pause broken only by the clink as Hermione put down her fork. “That’s the only thing that makes sense,” she told the table. “He keeps disappearing and none of the Death Eaters ever question it? Don’t make me laugh. They know he was taken in at the Burrow. They think we’re all friends from school. They think he’s a spy for them. And we think he’s a spy for us.”

Harry felt abruptly and extremely sick.

“Are you wondering,” Malfoy asked in a rather ugly way, “which one of them is right?”

“No,” said Hermione. “I think you’re on our side. But I also think it’s very clever of you. No matter who wins, you’ll be able to say you were on their side all along.”

Malfoy was white to the lips. “That’s *not* why-”

Harry reached out while Malfoy wasn’t paying attention to him, knocked over the salt heedlessly and grabbed him by the wrist. Malfoy’s attention snapped on to him like an outraged grey spotlight.

“C’mon,” Harry said. “We’re talking. Alone.”

“I beg your pardon,” Malfoy began, and Harry stood up and wrenched Malfoy to his feet.

Charlie made an angry sound and grabbed Malfoy’s elbow, but Malfoy shook him off without looking at him: he was still glaring at Harry. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Harry was already at the door, but he stopped there because it occurred to him that this was Malfoy, smitten or not, and he’d learned the hard way that he had to compromise with him to be with him. Looking at the door, he barked: “Please,” and stormed out.

Malfoy followed him and they went into the front room where the Order usually met just because it was closest: as soon as they were in the door Malfoy whirled on him in rage like a lightning storm indoors.

“Don’t you dare ask me if I’m on your side, Potter. How *could* you-”

“Oh, shut up!” Harry shouted at him. “I know perfectly well you’re on my side. How could you not tell me?”

Malfoy shut up, which was a miracle that had to be taken advantage of, so Harry kept shouting.

“Letting Hermione have time to discover it, which you must have known would take less than a week and make you look bloody suspicious and me look like an idiot. What the hell were

you thinking?”

Malfoy muttered something.

“Don’t bother, I know what you were thinking,” Harry said. “You thought – with your father and all – that I wouldn’t ever have been quite sure. You idiot. I think you must be the stupidest person I know.”

“How funny,” Malfoy said in a strained voice and almost on automatic. “I always thought exactly the same thing about you. I had to keep coming back here.”

“Yes of course you did, I would’ve gone completely mad otherwise,” Harry snapped. “But God, you didn’t have to keep all these secrets. I don’t want to be shocked every other day. I want to know what’s going on and – and how to *fix* it.”

“You can’t fix everything,” Malfoy snapped back, his face averted.

Harry leaned back against the window casement and said, with a sort of furious despair: “*I trust you.*”

It was fairly clear Malfoy did not trust him: didn’t trust Harry not to hurt him or doubt him, trusted him so little that he’d kept important things from him so they could strike like lightning bolts at the worst possible time.

“And you’re still stupid,” he added angrily.

Malfoy still wasn't looking at him, but he looked a little comforted. "Well," he said quietly.

"So's your face. And I'm still going back to Voldemort."

"I can't stop you, can I?" Harry asked.

Malfoy looked like he was wavering between being absolutely terrified and completely smug, but Harry never learned which he was going to settle on, because just then the front door banged open and Hestia Jones strode into the room.

"Thank heavens I caught you," she said, looking so pale that she was more like a china doll than ever. "Mr Malfoy, you can't possibly go back to Voldemort. It's not safe."

For a moment Harry was simply and profoundly relieved. Then he looked at Malfoy's face, and at Hestia's.

"What – what's happened?" Malfoy asked, fear making him stumble over his words like a child in the dark.

Hestia put her arms around her body, hugging herself. "Severus has been found out," she answered. "I imagine they're torturing him as we speak."

*

It did not take very long for most of the Order to assemble in the meeting room. Hestia had to

tell her story half a dozen times, looking lost in a huge carved chair, her face growing paler and paler under the black cap of her hair.

“Severus was so very kind as to help me with my research into esoteric potions,” she said. “We were in regular correspondence. He’s a very, very brilliant man, and he shared his thoughts with me on-” Her voice caught. “On many never before heard-of uses for frogspawn. I – the Owl wasn’t even finished, he knew they were coming for him. His one concern was for Mr Malfoy.”

She took a moment then to hunch herself up a little, a handkerchief clasped tightly in her hands. She wasn’t crying: she just had to keep taking little moments.

“Our chief concern, of course, must now be keeping Mr Malfoy safe,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt. “Undoubtedly by now Voldemort knows everything about the location of his last Horcrux. His every effort will be bent towards taking possession of the locket and, by extension, Mr Malfoy. More than that, his pride will be hurt by the fact he had Mr Malfoy in his power for so long without suspecting a thing. He will stop at nothing to get to him.”

Malfoy looked sick, but he’d been looking sick since Hestia had announced the news about Snape. Harry hoped by now he was feeling numb.

“So we distract him,” Harry said.

Megara Prewett sent a frowning glance in Harry’s direction. “Excuse me?”

“Snape must still be alive, mustn’t he, he’s the only one who can speak the word to get the locket off Malfoy,” Harry said. “I imagine he’s locked that one up with all the Occlumency he has. They won’t kill him until they have all the information he might possibly have, and they might still let him live even if they learn the word he needs, just in case it has to be him saying it. So we need to rescue him: once we’ve done that I bet it’ll seem like a good idea to finally speak the word for us so we can get the locket off at last and destroy it. And we need to distract Voldemort from pursuing Malfoy or torturing Snape.”

“So what do you think we should do?” Hermione asked, close by him. There was not a trace of doubt in her voice: she knew he would have an answer.

“Attack,” said Harry.

Malfoy laughed, a soft little sound, and Harry caught his eyes fixed on Harry. The word *smitten* flashed through him, a memory that was more feeling than thought, and suddenly it did not seem quite so impossible that Malfoy really might be. Only Harry still didn’t know what to do about it, and there was no time for it now.

“Attack his stronghold?” Mr Weasley repeated in a dismayed voice. “Harry, if you’ll consider-”

“No,” said Harry. “We’ve got to get him out of there.”

“And how do you think we can possibly do that?” Megara Prewett asked, her voice thin and distinctly unimpressed. “I cannot imagine that anything would distract Voldemort from

pursuit of the last Horcrux. Nothing else is of any importance to him!”

“Can’t you?” Harry asked. “I can. I know him. That’s what will finish him: I *know* him. There’s one thing.”

*

It was still morning by the time Harry got to Hogwarts, a bit before lessons would start. He came in with a bunch of Ravenclaws fresh off the Quidditch pitch from an early-morning practice and walked as quietly and as quickly as he could across the stone floor with grey morning light streaming in through the windows. One girl started, looking at his shadow, and then carefully looked away again.

He knocked sharply on the stone wall that hid what had been the Slytherin common rooms and was now the dungeons where everyone slept. Goyle answered the door and peered in confusion out at the empty corridor. He was still staring as Harry slipped by him.

“Who’s at the door, Greg?” Neville asked.

He wasn’t dressed for lessons yet, just wearing a worn shirt and jeans. He was standing in front of a map of the Forbidden Forest that someone had magically suspended in midair.

There were three girls sitting on the beds in front of him and the map. Harry suspected they were all Slytherins: they were all still in their nightclothes.

If you could call them clothes of any sort.

“Nobody,” said a blond girl whose face was vaguely familiar: he thought she was one of Pansy Parkinson’s crowd. She leaned forward and her face seemed extremely unimportant, for two reasons which were pressing against the lace of her nightdress. “Do go on, Neville.”

“Yes, Neville,” said a throaty-voiced girl with chestnut hair. “We’re all fascinated.”

Neville looked unconvinced but turned back to the map, pointing out an area that said ‘Here Be Centaurs’ with his wand. “Sometimes I think you girls aren’t really listening.”

“Oh, Neville, we are, we’re transfixed,” said the blond girl, who was not in any way looking at the map.

Neville coughed. “Well, do you have any, um, questions?”

“I do,” said the third girl with conviction. “It’s about your wand. Indulge my girlish curiosity, how many inches-”

“Er,” Harry said, taking off his Cloak. “Sorry to interrupt.”

Neville spun around. “Harry!”

“Hi, Neville,” said Harry. “Favour to ask you. Mind getting the others?”

Neville nodded sharply to Goyle, who stared at Harry for a moment and dashed off into the next room.

Neville was staring at Harry too but, being Neville, it didn't take him long to remember his manners. "Uh, Harry. You know these girls, they're in Slytherin. They're with us-"

"I don't think I've had the pleasure," said Harry absently.

The chestnut-haired girl glared at him. "I'm Daphne Greengrass, Potter," she snapped. "I'm in your year. We had Potions together every day for many, many years."

"Ah," said Harry.

"Queenie's very good at the more experimental Potions," Neville offered helpfully.

"You may call me Daphne," said Queenie coldly to Harry, and then turned back to Neville, her voice melting right back into its throaty purr. "And thank you, Neville. You're such a gentleman. Naturally you may call me *anything you like*."

"Um," said Neville.

The Slytherin girls gazed at him with what appeared to be rapture. Neville looked direly uncomfortable and fiddled with his wand.

Harry was about as relieved as Neville was when Goyle came back with a lot of people in

tow, including Cho, Marietta, Crabbe and Justin. Pansy was in front, wearing a black T-shirt and nothing else. She had, Harry couldn't help noticing, very long legs. And she painted her toenails purple.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," she drawled in a way extremely reminiscent of Malfoy. "Is this favour going to involve deadly danger to us all?"

"Er," Harry said. "Yeah."

"Well, I like being right," said Pansy. "What are we going to do?"

"I want you to stage a revolt in Hogwarts," Harry told her. "Throw Carrow and anyone on his side in a room and throw away the key. Take a stand. Cause as much fuss as you can. Threaten to burn the whole place to the ground before you let Voldemort have it."

They all looked at him for a long, serious moment.

"This means using the catapults, doesn't it?" Justin asked at last, in a voice of unholy joy.

"With careful supervision, Justin," Cho said warningly. "My eye will be on you every minute."

The room erupted into pockets of loud discussion about tactics. Luna was in the back somewhere, her voice piercing in the cacophony, talking about using invisible horses as attack dogs and probably confusing everyone within hearing. Dean's voice followed hers as if

they were singing in harmony, trying to explain what she was going on about.

Harry explained to those still listening to him about Snape. The news made Crabbe and Goyle square their shoulders and Pansy's mouth go thin. Neville reached out and put his hand under her elbow.

"We'll get him back."

Pansy took a deep breath. "Of course we will, Longbottom, I know that. Do get on with planning the revolt. Queenie, you could get into Voldemort's headquarters still, couldn't you?"

"My mama would welcome me with open arms," Queenie said with satisfaction.

"Excellent," said Neville. "All right, you get in there and wait until we've got things underway. We should start at nightfall, since it'll take us a while to get ready and the plan is confusion. Crabbe, can you round up anyone who – might be scared to be part of this and get them out with the Portkey?"

Crabbe ducked his head in assent and went for the door. Pansy grabbed Neville's wand unceremoniously out of his hand and started using it as a pointer for the Forbidden Forest map.

"So we think the giant spiders are in here," she said.

“No,” Harry put in. “Further up. Near the grove - there.”

Pansy positioned the wand correctly. “Justin, do we still have those barrels of flour?”

Justin beamed. “I keep them in the Charms classroom, we pretend they’re stands for Professor Flitwick.”

“So,” said Pansy. “We set off the barrels of flour and we send the spiders out in the direction we want them to go...”

While Pansy was talking, Queenie Greengrass slipped off her bed in an interesting rustle of very little lace.

“Off I go,” she said to Neville. “Alone. Into deadly peril. Kiss me for luck?”

“Um,” said Neville again, then bowed down awkwardly and kissed her cheek.

He straightened up going brilliant pink. Queenie flashed a triumphant look at the other two girls and went to find her clothes.

“Longbottom, if you’ve *quite* finished romancing the admiring multitudes, you might help with our little plan for revolution,” Pansy said sharply, and Neville muttered a confused defence and then, on surer ground, started talking about fire spells from the walls.

“I can see you have matters well in hand,” said Harry. “The Order’ll be helping you out from

the rear. Put some guards on the Astronomy Tower, but I and a few others will be flying up there: let them know not to knock us out of the sky.”

“Anything else?” Pansy asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Just one thing,” Harry said. “Leave Voldemort to me.”

*

When he went home the Order only had more questions, and then Hermione had a couple dozen of her own. Ron only had one question, which was if Harry was sure becoming a guerrilla leader had made Neville irresistible to women, but he asked it several times.

Number Twelve was in a riot, the Order making plans and sending a couple of careful Owls to Hogwarts. Smith seemed to be having an attack of nerves and insisted every other minute that he was not scared. Harry had to pull Charlie aside for a conference about dragons. The twins were urgently trying to arm everyone in sight with things that they claimed were practically all tested.

Harry couldn’t find Malfoy, and didn’t have time to look. The first thing he did, as soon as he could get away, was go up to his room and write to Ginny.

Hi Ginny, he wrote to her after a long period of thought. Thank you for your letter. It meant a lot.

I'm writing to ask you to come back to me and Hogwarts. Bring all your friends.

I thought we might fight a war together.

*

The house did not start to subside into quiet until day started to slide slowly towards evening and darkness. There were only a few hours to go.

Harry found Malfoy in the parlour. Maud and Ernestine were drawn together, touching him with fond lingering touches, as if they were loving old aunts bidding him goodbye before he went back to school.

“Oh, good, it’s you,” Malfoy said. “I want to talk to you.”

“Me first,” said Harry.

Malfoy looked up at him and for an instant it was like the look across the kitchen table, scared and dreadful. Then he waved his hand for Harry to proceed.

“I want to be with Ginny,” said Harry.

“Mm,” interrupted Malfoy, trying for a drawl and having his voice come out unmistakably in pain. “Well, actually, I knew that. So thank you very much for that stunning news, but really, I find it totally unnecessary-”

“Let me *finish*,” Harry said. “I want to be with Ginny. I really like her and – and I think I’ll like her better, the more I get to know her. I never really gave myself the chance to know her before. I see that now. You both kept trying to tell me. But I’m doing better now, I think. And I want to be with her all the more because I think I didn’t – do it right before, didn’t give us a chance to be something real. I want to do it right. I want to give it a real chance.”

He took a deep breath and leaned against the wall to look around his parlour, the crazy animated curtains and the snake-shaped chandelier, all the things that had so implausibly grown familiar and dear, and then back at Malfoy’s face.

“And I want us to be family, I don’t want anything to mess that up. Nothing’s more important than that.”

“Yes, of course,” Malfoy responded, his voice strained. “I told you. I want that too. It was never – it was never about-”

“And I,” Harry said, and choked on the words, and tried again, and choked again. “I, you know I-”

“Yes,” Malfoy said almost desperately. “I know.”

Harry straightened his shoulders against the wall, feeling as if he was about to be shot. “In spite of all that, and since it’s possible we’re all about to die,” he said with difficulty. “I don’t – I don’t know what it means and I’m not sure I want to know. But I thought you should

know something.”

“Well, what is it?” Malfoy demanded, his voice fraying.

“I’m jealous of Charlie,” Harry said. “I mean - *really* jealous. I don’t know what to do with it, I don’t want to do anything. I haven’t got anything worked out and I really do want to be with Ginny and I really do want to – not risk being family. But I thought you should know. This isn’t like that damn handshake, not at all. So. There. Now you know.”

“Now I know,” Malfoy echoed. He sounded faintly stunned, his voice fading away like the daylight.

Harry let his breath out, long and slow, and looked at the carpet. Then he went over to the sofa and sat beside Malfoy. The curtains gave his hair a little pat. Oddly enough, it made him feel a bit better.

Malfoy was quiet for a long time.

Then he said: “I have another secret.”

“What?” Harry asked, feeling suddenly, terribly calm with dread.

Malfoy gave him an unreadable look. Then, sitting there in the gathering twilight surrounded by a circle of living velvet, he bowed his head a little, pale hair gleaming at the nape of his neck, mixed with the cold glitter of the necklace. Hands moving slowly, he undid the chain,

and the necklace came free as simply as that.

Malfoy held out the last Horcrux, cupped golden in his palm, towards Harry.

“Remember when I told you that I was close to finding out how to undo the spell?” he asked.

That had been long ago, before they were family, when Harry had been holding Narcissa over Malfoy’s head to make him help. Harry had chosen not to think about that time, had been happy to make it seem impossibly distant and remote.

He did remember that now, though.

Malfoy’s eyes were steady on his: his voice was steady, too. “I was coming down to tell you I’d cracked it,” he said. “When I heard Lupin tell you about – what had happened to my mother.”

Harry remembered, in a vision from memory so vivid it was like seeing it again, Malfoy standing at the open door with his face wiped clean by horror, a book falling out of his hands.

“There didn’t seem like a reason to tell anyone,” Malfoy said softly. “And I knew what Snape wanted to do, I knew he wanted to wait for the right moment and call the locket and close it around his own neck, so when Voldemort killed him for his treachery he’d be destroying his last Horcrux along with Snape. I – after Mother died, it didn’t seem terribly important to keep... I thought I shouldn’t let Snape do it. I owe him a lot. So I kept the secret to myself.” He tilted his head, face calm and eyes silvery in the moonlight, and Harry held his gaze.

“Nobody knows but me,” Malfoy said. “And now you.”

The paralysing fear about what Malfoy’s plan had obviously been, at the thought that he could have been lost so easily and so deliberately on his own part, made it hard to breathe for a moment. Harry reached out and took Malfoy’s hand, holding on tight as if he were trying to pull him out of cold waters, their fingers locked and the locket caught between their palms.

“Thanks for telling me,” he said hoarsely.

He bowed his head and then reached out because he had to, because all complications aside they had to still be able to be family, it had to be possible for it to be that simple, or he did not know what he would do. He ended up with his head pressed against Malfoy’s shoulder, his eyes shut.

And it was that simple, as well as being complicated. After a moment Malfoy breathed out, and Harry felt his fingers brush through Harry’s hair.

“You’re not going to do it,” Harry continued through gritted teeth.

“Oh really, Potter,” Malfoy drawled, trying to sound superior and ending up with simply fond. “So what’s your cunning plan?”

Harry laughed shakily. “Well, since both of you so-called Slytherins seem determined to be reckless and noble and sacrifice yourselves,” he said, ignoring Malfoy’s yelp of protest. “I think it’s past time for me to come up with a cunning plan.”

*

It was black night by the time they Apparated away from home and into Hogsmeade. It was just Harry, Ron, Hermione, Malfoy and Smith, who was sticking determinedly by Ron. They all had their brooms in hand.

Things were already underway at Hogwarts. They had left Number Twelve Grimmauld Place deserted and still, waiting for them to come back again.

It was Ron who scanned the horizon, whistled and let out a shaky breath. "We sure this is going to work?" he asked.

Harry thought about life before Number Twelve or even the Burrow, back when the gleaming towers of Hogwarts against the sky were his only hope of salvation, lingering in his dreams like a promise of heaven for a dying man. He thought about the way Voldemort kept coming back to it and back to it again, about the basilisk left like a dog to guard its home until its master's return. He thought about what he would have done, if things had been a little different.

"Don't know," he answered. "But I know Voldemort will come."

Against the black sky the white towers that he loved were circled with leaping colours, scarlet and gold. Hogwarts was burning.

It had begun.

Chapter Thirty

The night sky in the real world was different than the sky in Malfoy's canopy: there was a full moon sailing in the air over Hogwarts.

It seemed to be gleaming gold in a pale reflection of the flames.

They flew towards the towers: Harry felt the usual kick of exultation he felt flying hit him twice as hard, blood burning with adrenaline and the night wind in his hair like cold fingers trying to catch him and never quite able to manage it. He looked back at Malfoy and caught his flashing wild grin. Even that idiot Smith flew well.

He landed first on the stone flags of the Astronomy Tower, dark shapes whirling in the shadows to face him.

"Hi, Potter," Goyle said brightly. "Nice to see you. Did you see the explosion of stones just now? I think that was Longbottom blowing up the Charms classroom."

"Hello Harry," Luna said, her voice dreamy and serene. "Our job is to blow poison darts at people from here. I'm very good at it."

"Um," Ron said, landing. "That's, um, that's really excellent, Luna."

Malfoy hit the stones and curved even in his landing so he was directly beside Goyle, who looked like he might cry or hug Malfoy. He ended up just thumping Malfoy on the back so

hard that Malfoy staggered and almost fell.

“I *knew* you’d come.”

“I thought about staying home to do a crossword puzzle,” Malfoy told him. “But I was told this was a good time.”

“I *knew* you’d come,” Goyle repeated, as if he hadn’t heard Malfoy. “D’you have a plan?”

Malfoy threw Harry a look. “Yes, actually we do,” he drawled.

Goyle looked ready to collapse from relief. “Thank God. Justin kept saying he had a plan, but I don’t think that ‘blow up Scotland’ counts.”

“Don’t listen to Hufflepuffs, I’ve taught you better than that,” Malfoy said with the absently autocratic air that had annoyed Harry for six years and seemed to be comforting Goyle now. “Keep the poisoned darts coming.”

Goyle’s manly hand on his shoulder was clinging a little, and everyone else was lingering and pretending that they weren’t. Smith was even worse at faking casual than Ron. Malfoy snapped a glance around and squared his thin shoulders under Goyle’s hand.

“Enough dawdling, you people,” he drawled. “Let’s go.”

As they went down the winding stone stairs in the shadows Harry heard Luna’s voice saying

calmly behind them: “He was pleased to see you, Greg. You could tell.”

Even through the stone walls Harry could hear the sounds of battle. He heard shouts and bangs and crashing and one long scream: he wished he knew who had screamed and then realised that there would be a lot of screaming tonight and he couldn’t worry about it. People were going to die, on his word and because of his plan.

He kept walking. Ron and Hermione were a warm and solid presence behind him.

“How’re you doing?” he asked Malfoy softly.

“Fine!” Smith said, his voice a little high and rising, balanced on a sharp edge. “Fine. I don’t even know why you’re asking.”

Panic was so clear in his tone that Harry didn’t mention he hadn’t been asking Smith. He didn’t say anything at all.

“Bit of a worrier, our Harry,” observed Ron. “Always asks about our feelings before we defeat evil. He has leadership qualities that way. We know you’re fine.”

Smith’s breathing went a little more even and Harry kept quiet. He watched the silhouette in the shadows in front of him and saw Malfoy flinch every time they heard a noise louder than the others. When Malfoy pushed the door open on the war the first thing Harry saw were his grey eyes, wide and filled with the reflected light of the fires.

“Are you scared?” Malfoy asked.

“No,” Harry said. “Why?”

Malfoy laughed a short involuntary laugh. “Uh, because you and the most powerful and fearsome wizard in all the world have an appointment to discuss your imminent horrible death? Sometimes I think you might be a little slow, Potter.” He tilted his head in Harry’s direction. “It’s a serious concern.”

Harry couldn’t tell him not to be worried or promise him that everything was going to be fine, but he jostled elbows with him harder than necessary as he passed over the threshold and into the storm.

He saw the battlefield his beloved school had become for all of a second when he was tackled to the ground. A huge piece of masonry went flying by to bury itself like a meteorite in the lawn.

Ron rolled off Harry and to his feet.

“Thanks,” Harry said, getting up.

Ron grinned. “No problem. Just watch where you’re going in future.”

There were Death Eaters in black robes and students in the same, everyone struggling and blending in the night. Harry thought he could see colour in the distance: Hermione was beside

him suddenly, one hand shielding her eyes and the other holding her wand.

“The Order?” she asked.

“Or Scrimgeour’s people,” Harry shouted. “I wrote to him and told him he didn’t want to miss the public relations opportunity of a lifetime.”

That made Malfoy smile, even shaking in a whirlwind of noise and horror. It made Ron frown.

“Just think, if we make it through this we’re never getting rid of him.”

“Oh I don’t know,” said Hermione, pausing to hex a black-robed man as he went by. “Think about Winston Churchill.”

“Er, I hardly ever think about anyone else,” said Ron. “Er. Was he in Hufflepuff?”

Before Hermione could tell Ron how sadly ignorant he was about Muggle culture another chunk of Hogwarts went hurtling through the air and they scattered. Harry thought he saw Ron yank Smith to safety as the dust rose: he grabbed Malfoy’s elbow and pulled him back, stumbling when Malfoy overbalanced and knocked into him.

Someone else knocked into him: Harry spun with his wand at the ready and met Pansy Parkinson’s glittering eyes.

“I love catapults!” she screamed in her ear-splitting voice, ignoring Harry completely. She lunged for Malfoy and grabbed his shirt in both hands, drawing him close to her and kissing him on the mouth.

He grabbed her back, pale fists curled tight in her tumbling black hair. The kiss lasted a single fierce instant and then he pushed her back, hands going to her shoulders. He shook her a little.

“Don’t you dare die,” he ordered her.

Pansy smiled at him. She’d worn makeup to go to war and it was already so irrevocably ruined that the kiss had made no difference: she wore her smeared scarlet lipstick like a battle flag.

“Don’t you dare die either,” she said, their shared smile bright and sharp. She kissed him again, shook him in return and repeated: “I love catapults!” before she whirled away into the night.

Justin came running after her and caught what she said on the wind. “I love catapults too!” he yelled, eyes gleaming bright in his soot-dark face.

Malfoy took one look at him and stepped sharply back. Justin blinked at him, looking politely puzzled and totally insane.

“You on our side?” he inquired. “Good show.”

He dashed off in pursuit of Pansy. Malfoy stared after him in dismay.

“I knew the Hufflepuffs would start running wild the moment I turned my back on them,” he said. “I knew it.”

Harry grabbed his wrist and dragged him towards the school. He would have bet anything that Voldemort would’ve headed straight for the castle, not just to crush the rebellion at its heart but to take possession.

That was what he would’ve done.

It meant getting through the battle. Harry should’ve brought his Invisibility Cloak, but he had to keep hold of Malfoy and two of them under the Cloak in this loud, struggling mass of people wouldn’t have worked. Besides that, he couldn’t have let other people do all the fighting. It would’ve felt cowardly.

He threw a hex every time he saw a Death Eater mask. One woman in the robes but without the mask looked at him and tried to back away, eyes wide: it was strange to see someone so much older, looking at him with what seemed to be fear. It took Harry aback for a moment, long enough for Malfoy to cast a Jellylegs curse and bring her down instead.

It was the only time in the whole long furious ordeal that Malfoy cast before Harry did: he kept hesitating.

“You’ve got to hex them!” Harry roared as Malfoy flinched and hesitated again, and then had to duck to avoid the resulting curse. “Not bat your eyes at them!”

“I’m sorry!” Malfoy shouted back. “I just – I know them, all right?”

It was a horrible disadvantage for the Slytherins, the fact that some of these people were their family and friends, that feeling disloyal was added to the fear and panic as the Death Eaters descended on Hogwarts.

It had advantages too.

Harry saw two Death Eaters to all appearances bearing down on Millicent Bulstrode and raised his wand, when one of the Death Eaters shouted: “Don’t you dare touch her, that’s my daughter!” and hexed the other from behind. She snatched at Millicent, mask slipping to show a worried and worn face.

Across the battlefield that had been Hogwarts Harry saw Death Eaters turn into spots of colour where there had been darkness, as they tore off their robes and turned to defend children they knew from their comrades.

It didn’t always work. Malfoy stopped in mid-hex and even Harry hesitated when they were faced with a tall man who was, dark blazing eyes and pug nose and all, unmistakably Pansy Parkinson’s brother.

He began: “*Avada-*” and then stopped abruptly and crumpled forward.

Neville stepped over him, sweaty and grimy from the battle, and said: “She’s going to give me hell for that.” He nodded as he wiped his face, leaving a slightly cleaner streak across his brow. “Harry. Malfoy.”

“We’ve got to make it to the castle,” Harry shouted.

“I know,” Neville told him. “We’ll get you through.” He raked an eye over faces in the darkness. “Oi, Vince! Hey, Anthony, Terry! We’ve got to get Harry to the castle as fast as we can!”

Two Ravenclaws and Crabbe turned, fighting through the crowds.

“Whatever you say,” Crabbe yelled.

“I beg your pardon, *what?*” demanded Malfoy, hexing an elderly lady in Death Eater robes and looking completely scandalised by this new turn of events.

Crabbe’s eyes caught on him and he stilled for a moment and beamed. “Hey, boss.”

“Sorry, are you talking to me or Longbottom?” Malfoy inquired, trying his best to infuse a sneer even into his panicked shout.

“You guys should go *now*,” said Neville.

Barely perceptibly, Crabbe's eyes flicked over towards Malfoy, who shrugged irritably at him.

"Oh, for God's sake, he's in charge for now. Tomorrow's a different story, though! I am seriously displeased. There will be words!"

"Yeah?" said Crabbe, casting the Cruciatus in two different directions with fluid ease it was strange to see him moving with, as if the Unforgivables for him were like flying or Parseltongue for Harry. "Looking forward to it."

He gave Malfoy a solid push between the shoulderblades and Harry dragged him along, keeping his fingers locked around Malfoy's wrist. He refused to let his grip weaken for even an instant, lest they be separated in the screaming mass and Malfoy lost.

They were making good headway when the howls rose up to the moon, thin and cold and eerie, and they saw silvery and brindled fur in the moonlight as Fenrir Greyback's pack came racing through Hogwarts students and the Order alike. Fenrir was in front, recognisable even in wolf form, huge jaws hanging open in a fanged grin. Even as Harry watched he saw his haunches bunch as he launched his body into a spring: he saw Orla Quirke go down in a mess of blood.

They must be forcing Snape to make the Potion for them all. These wolves weren't attacking at random: they were thinking. And they were acting like predators, circling, wheeling, searching for the weakest creatures to pull down. Fenrir was going to pick off the youngest children.

Even as Harry watched he saw Fenrir leave the remains of what had been Orla and lead his pack, snarling, towards a knot of people who Harry recognised as fourth years.

Harry turned and started to struggle through the crowds towards them.

The Order got there first. He saw Kingsley Shacklebolt hurtling into the midst of the children, and Tonks, blond hair white in the moonlight, throwing herself into the midst of the wolves.

Fenrir gave a yelp vibrating with dark harmonics, part furious surprise and part a low promise of death. His quarters bunched for another spring.

He was hit from the side by a pale-grey wolf and went tumbling over in a flurry of fur and teeth: after a short barking, snarling roll both wolves regained their feet but Fenrir, the leader of the pack, was limping and blood was pouring over one eye.

Tonks, crouched low and circling as the wolves circled her, lithe strong body braced for the first attack, laughed a laugh louder and more carefree than Harry'd ever heard before and yelled: "Hey, baby."

Lupin the wolf cut through his fellow werewolves to go to her and they moved together, a weaving circle of fur and flesh.

"C'mon, they have it sorted, we have to move," yelled Crabbe, and Harry turned and plunged back into the battle, into the direction of the castle.

The closer they got, the tighter the knots and the more furious the fighting. A spell rebounded or possibly just missed and Harry cried out, his entire left side going numb for a moment. He might've fallen if Malfoy hadn't taken his weight and thrown a furious hex in the direction the spell that'd hit Harry had come from.

"I'm fine!" Harry shouted, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

"Oh, *clearly*," Malfoy shouted back, bearing some of his weight for a little while longer, until Harry's vision cleared.

There were waves of Death Eaters coming up to the castle, wave on wave of them. Harry could see the steps in front of them, but when he glanced over his shoulder he could also see another wave of Death Eaters bearing down on them. They'd lost the two Ravenclaws somewhere behind them: Harry hoped they were fighting somewhere behind them and not cut down.

Crabbe shoved them and Harry, still a little shaky, had to lean on Malfoy for another instant.

"What-" he began furiously, but Crabbe shook his head at them.

"Go," he shouted. "I can hold them back."

There was a moment of stillness, when the noise of battle seemed drowned out by the quiet horror that came over Harry as he realised what Crabbe meant.

“Crabbe,” Malfoy faltered out, his voice suddenly very young and breaking. “I – *Crabbe*.”

“Better go, Malfoy,” Crabbe said shortly. “Like you said. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He turned to face the oncoming band of Death Eaters and Harry stayed frozen another second, when Malfoy dragged him forward and up the steps of Hogwarts.

“Come on,” he said through gritted teeth, his best autocratic drawl blurred by tears. “I believe we were told to go.”

They pounded up the steps. Harry looked back over his shoulder one more time as they pushed the great doors open, and wished he hadn’t: he saw Crabbe’s tall body crumple and fall under the black tide of Death Eaters.

He banged the door behind them fast and looked to Malfoy to check if he had seen, and found Malfoy staring straight ahead, an arrested look on his face.

“Hello, Dad,” he said, and they watched Lucius Malfoy hurry forward, pale hair gleaming like old bones under the false moonlight of the Great Hall’s ceiling.

*

“Draco,” said Lucius. “Oh, thank God. Is it true – do you have the-?”

Malfoy sighed and flicked open his shirt collar: against bloody, filthy material and skin, the last Horcrux shone like buried treasure.

“This is wonderful, Draco,” Lucius said. “We can use this to bargain our way back into favour – its safe return will be such a relief to the Dark Lord. I’ll be able to spin a plausible story for him, don’t you worry, we can put the whole blame on Snape where I am sure it lies anyway, I should never have trusted that man with you, I know how impressionable you are-”

“Father,” Malfoy drawled. “Would you stop talking for a moment? Would you stop for a single second and look at who I’m standing beside?”

Lucius Malfoy’s eyes slid over to Harry’s face. The man looked paler than ever, older and frailer, as if strain was bleaching him into a white dried husk. In spite of that he was immaculately put together, touched with none of the dirt or blood of the battlefield. He stared down at them with a touch of his old hauteur, the air that was never quite so convincing on his son, and Harry was aware they must look like filthy tired children, and Lucius must look like he was in control.

Harry let his lip curl. “Hello there, Mr Malfoy.”

Lucius’s lip curled unexpectedly in return, and he gave a sharp cold laugh. “Oh, is that the reason for all your extremely recalcitrant behaviour of late, Draco? Befriended the Potter boy at last, a long time after it could ever have been useful. How ironic.”

“Isn’t it?” Malfoy asked. “I know, I’m always such a disappointment.”

Harry'd been expecting that they'd have to face this scene at some point: he knew it was going to be difficult for Malfoy, and Harry would have to try and not kill Lucius. He was expecting it to be a mess.

He wasn't expecting it when Lucius's icy demeanour melted and he was suddenly all heat and hatred. "No, Draco," he said, low. "That's not what I meant. I mean that I find it ironic you chose to ally yourself with the other side, all because you blame me for what happened to your mother."

"Blame you?" Malfoy shouted, always easily able to outmatch his father in heat if nothing else. "Blame you – you *did* it, you killed her, you threw her body to the wolves, how dare you even-"

"*He* did it," Lucius interrupted savagely. "He was blackmailing Narcissa by holding your safety over her head. And he commanded her to go to Voldemort, he did it knowing the risks she would be taking, he didn't care what happened to her. He sent her to her death! She told me so herself, and she told me that her death would mean Potter owed you protection forever. He isn't being kind to you, Draco. He isn't on your side. He owes you a blood debt. He's the one who killed your mother, not me!"

Malfoy's presence was suddenly gone from Harry's side as abruptly as if Malfoy had fallen off a cliff, or if Harry had. Malfoy had removed his support and his wrist from Harry's suddenly slack grasp that fast.

Harry looked across a distance into Malfoy's eyes, wiped clean of expression, like an empty winter sky.

"That true, Potter?" Malfoy asked, and his voice wobbled. "It is, isn't it?"

"It's – it was – I didn't think of it that way, it wasn't *like that*," Harry said. His stomach felt as if he was still in the process of falling off a cliff, and his mouth was dry with dread.

"What was it like?" Malfoy wondered aloud, almost hushed. "So – you never felt like you owed me, then? You didn't tell her to go? Is he lying, Potter, or isn't he?"

Harry swallowed down protests and the lump in his throat. "No. I guess he's not."

"Oh," said Malfoy.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Draco," Lucius put in eagerly, his face flushed suddenly with sudden life, anticipating victory. He reached out, and there was no way to know whether he wanted to grasp the Horcrux or his son.

Malfoy recoiled a few more steps back. "No, you'd just speak the Killing Curse and throw my mother's body to the wolves!"

"Maybe I would," Lucius said softly, plausibly, and Harry wished he could talk like him but right now the look on Malfoy's face was making it hard to think of anything to say at all.

"But the ultimate responsibility, my boy, it lies with-

“Oh, maybe you both killed her!” Malfoy shouted. “And maybe I hate you both!”

His voice echoed like a cry for help off the false sky. Nobody came, of course.

Malfoy clenched his fists at his sides, one holding his wand and one empty. He looked sick and scared and alone.

“You want to be on the winning side, don’t you?” Lucius asked.

“Yes,” said Malfoy through his teeth.

“It’s the Dark Lord’s. Trust me: you have to trust me, my boy. I love you,” said Lucius, and he was able to say it, and able to make it sound true. “I’m the only family you have left.”

The tight line of Malfoy’s shoulders eased a fraction as he looked at his father.

“If I – if I did trust you,” he said. “Would you promise me not to hurt Potter? He may have – lied to me and worse, but he was kind enough in a time when I needed someone to be kind. I wouldn’t – I couldn’t watch you-”

“Of course,” Lucius hastened to agree. “Of course, we can leave right away. Draco, I won’t harm a hair of his head. You can trust me. I’ll prove it.”

He held his hand out again. It shook slightly.

Harry tried to catch Malfoy's eye but Malfoy kept looking away, face determinedly averted and jaw tight. He didn't know what Malfoy was going to do or what he could possibly do to make things right. There was no way to make things right, really: none at all.

"I'm – sorry," Harry said. "I'm sorry it happened, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Do whatever you want."

Harry threw himself at Lucius Malfoy's throat, lifting him by the collar of his robes clean off his feet with the power of pure rage.

"As for you... You're not going to hurt me?" he snarled. "What if I want to hurt you?"

Lucius threw his laugh in Harry's face. "I see," he said. "So you're absolutely determined to leave my son an orphan just like you?"

Harry released him abruptly and shoved him backwards, taking savage satisfaction in the way he tottered. He looked around for Malfoy and saw him standing with his back to them, as if he could not possibly bear to look at them for a moment longer.

"Ready to go, Draco?" asked Lucius, his voice kind and fatherly, as if they were going out on an excursion he'd promised his son, as if it was a treat.

"Ready, Father," said Malfoy, his voice only wavering on the name. He turned abruptly and held out a hand to Harry. "It's been – eventful, Potter."

Harry took it. He wanted to hold on, but he didn't. He let him go. Lucius put an arm around his son's shoulders as they went down towards the dungeons, pulling him close as if he was terribly glad to have him back and would not let him slip away again.

Harry took the stairs up from the Great Hall two at a time. He couldn't stop now, couldn't think. He could barely feel anything, not sick or despairing or desperate. He didn't have time: there were people were dying outside. He had to hunt through the castle until he found Voldemort.

*

The second floor seemed to be where the revolt had begun. The place was in ashy ruins, what had been the Charms classroom was a look into infinity, and the Death Eaters who had reached the castle all seemed to be on detail to capture and disarm the students. Four ran by in pursuit of Marietta Edgecombe.

"Hey!" Harry shouted, and threw a hex before they turned.

"Hey, it's Potter, get reinforcements!" shouted Amycus Carrow. "Bring him down!"

Harry grinned, the pain at the back of his mind soothed by the promise of this, of clean furious action. "I'd love to see you try."

There was the thunder of far more Death Eaters than he'd expected arriving, emerging as if

they were dark phoenixes from the ashes around him. Well, it was too late to run: he threw the Killing Curse and wheeled to fire it again, and kept grinning.

“Leave him alone!” screamed Marietta, throwing herself in a flying tackle at Amycus’s massive back. He threw her off, brutally hard, and she hit the wall and slid down to the floor.

“I’ll deal with you later, you little traitor,” he told her limp body. “You think your face is a mess now? I-”

“*Crucio*,” said Harry.

He hesitated about throwing Unforgivables less than the Death Eaters did, he noted dully in the back of his head, in the same place he was keeping pain. And yet if it saved Marietta another hex or a kick in the ribs, it seemed worth it.

“*Crucio*,” screamed a woman’s voice behind him.

The pain hit hard, especially in his still-sore left side. It felt as if he was being flayed, bones aching and his insides twisting as if they could possibly get away from the agony. Harry kept his feet somehow, and wiped cold sweat off his face afterwards, tasting blood in his mouth again.

“That all you’ve got?” he demanded, and killed two more before another Cruciatus hit him, and he went down with that strange woman standing over him.

He lay in the ashes, his vision blurring, blood and ashes mingling together in his mouth now, and as if underwater he saw a tide rise at waist level and hit the Death Eaters, as a goblin army raced up the stairs of the Great Hall.

Ginny stood out because of her blazing curls as always, because of her height which was new, and because she had just thrown herself on the back of the woman standing before Harry and was trying to throttle her with her own hair.

After a moment she remembered she had a wand in her other hand, hit the woman on the side of the head with it and shouted something strange in what must have been a goblin tongue. The woman collapsed with blood coming out of her eyes and nose, trying to form shapes, and Ginny launched herself over her body to where Harry was trying to sit up, and offered him her hand. He took it and she hauled him to his feet, and he cursed another Death Eater at her shoulder.

“Thanks for saving me,” he yelled at her.

“No problem,” she said, grinning a bright triumphant grin. “Turns out you’re cute when you’re helpless.” She surveyed him with sparkling dark eyes. “You could maybe use a bath, though!” she shouted over a fresh roar from the goblins.

She was covered in masonry dust and blood: there was black ash in her bright hair.

“You on the other hand are spotless,” said Harry. “God, I hope Justin didn’t blow up the prefects’ bathroom.”

“Saw Justin on the way up here!” Ginny yelled, casting another of those disgusting blood-forming-shapes hexes: it looked like she’d mixed some dark goblin rite with the Bat-Bogey hex. “Apparently he loves catapults!”

“I’ve heard that!” Harry yelled back.

He threw another hex over her shoulder and they exchanged grins: sympathy bright between them. She liked to fly into Quidditch stands and he lost his temper and threw punches and curses without thinking, and it wasn’t ideal but it was, just now, a furious reckless bond.

“We’ll talk later!” Ginny screamed on his glance. “Go find Voldemort now!”

“Talk?” said Harry. “What about that bath?”

Ginny laughed and Harry ducked another hex, dodged and scythed his way through the fighting masses. The goblins had the Death Eaters on the run, and there was help on the way, students thundering through the far corridor with Pansy Parkinson at their head. Ginny nodded at them and Cho paused on her way to Marietta to bump fists with Ginny and exchange a bright smile: Harry didn’t know if the girls had ever spoken before. It didn’t seem to matter.

He saw with massive relief that Marietta was being helped to her feet, unsteady but with purpose alight on her face.

Her purpose caught fire in the other girls' eyes. They circled in the same smooth way the wolves had outside, all with apparently the same target in mind.

Amycus Carrow took a step back, only to bump into Marietta. "Girls," he began uneasily.

Pansy had her wand levelled at his throat. "I have a question, sir," she said sweetly, and then her voice went cold. "Any last words?"

"Harry, for God's sake *go!*" yelled Ginny.

Harry went, up onto the third floor, stairs moving smoothly as if they wanted him to get to where he wanted to be faster, as if they were on his side, the whole beloved castle fighting on their side, and then like staircases moving into a different pattern in his mind he realised how stupid he was being, and where Voldemort was.

He charged back down the stairs, and down the next flight of stairs, and was almost at the bottom when Ron, Hermione and Smith burst into the Great Hall.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted, and broke away from the knot to grab him and hug him hard.

"Harry, thank God. We lost sight of you – is everything-"

"Hermione, thank God," said Harry back, and released her after a clinging instant. He thought of Malfoy's face when Lucius had told him, the icy devastated distance in his eyes, and put a closed fist up to the hollow of his throat. "Fine. Everything's fine." He grinned at them, Ron and Hermione safe, and almost meant it when he added: "I'm with you guys. What could be

wrong?”

“Ginny should be in here somewhere,” Ron told him. “She and Mum killed Bellatrix Lestranger!”

“Let’s see her later,” said Harry. “Let’s go to the Owlery now. That’s where Voldemort is, of course,” he said, to the inquiring look on Ron and Smith’s faces and the dawning comprehension on Hermione’s. “Receiving bulletins from all over about how the battle is going. Let’s go bring it to him, shall we?”

“Ready when you are,” said Ron, and thumped Smith on the back in what could have been congratulations or reassurance. “Be a pity to quit now. Zach here accounted for – what was it, let me see-”

Smith beamed. Harry gave him a nod of recognition and then they stopped talking and left the main castle, running for the Owlery and throwing curses as they went.

They reached the courtyard and found it alive with Death Eaters, and there near the back, tall and pale, with green light surrounding him as if he’d cast the Killing Curse so many times the light of death hung around him like a miasma, was Voldemort.

Harry’s heart started beating so fast in his chest that it hurt.

He was outside already. That was good: he wouldn’t have to be lured out.

“Let’s get you to him,” said Ron, his two best friends in the world solid at his back and his enemy in front of him, and they charged.

Peter Pettigrew was the first to duck one of their hastier curses, and he came face to face with Hermione, who whispered a spell and watched him start to scream as his silver hand suddenly turned to boiling liquid and melted down his arm.

“Things created by magic are very susceptible to magic, he should’ve known that,” she said after she’d hexed him again. “People don’t *read*.”

The crush was insane, it seemed fair enough that the Death Eaters were trying to murder him but the amount of shouting and elbows involved seemed crazy. Harry shoved at one man and killed another, and turned his head when Smith said: “Ron, look out-” pulling him a little to one side, and then was struck full in the chest with a Killing Curse himself.

Ron stopped cold with Smith at his feet. Hermione deflected a curse aimed at him hastily and Ron choked, Harry’s hand under his elbow, and then the crowd surged and they were all shoved irresistibly apart. Smith’s body was being trampled somewhere on the ground behind them, Harry could still hear the little sound of horror and disbelief rising in Ron’s throat, and then a voice cut through the roar of battle like a scythe.

“All right!” said Voldemort. “Let’s end this. Bring him to me.”

The path was clear before Harry suddenly. All he had to do was walk it, across the stones of Hogwarts, under the fire-lit sky, to where his enemy was waiting.

It seemed so simple for a moment.

Then he looked away from Voldemort's red eyes and saw Malfoy sitting at his father's side, knee drawn up to his chest and arm around it. There was a dark bruise like a stain across his face that hadn't been there the last time Harry saw him: seemed like Voldemort had not been as forgiving as Lucius had promised. He hadn't been totally unforgiving either, Harry saw: he must want to save Malfoy to torment for later.

Malfoy's eyes were fixed on him, clear and cold. Harry's heart seemed to trip, feeling as if he were at home in the dark, stumbling unexpectedly in a place he had counted as familiar and safe.

Snape was on the other side of Voldemort in chains, standing between a tall chestnut-haired woman and Queenie Greengrass, who had her chin balanced on his shoulder. He glared at Harry, so he was probably okay.

Harry's gaze swung back to Voldemort like a compass to due north. Voldemort's gaze was steady and red, like tiny openings to hell. Harry thought he looked taller, his eyes redder and his skin chalkier than before, as if there was no fixed point even when you were a creature made of nightmares. Just a path: you chose one and you had to keep walking.

"Been getting up to quite a few adventures since I saw you last," Voldemort said, voice like a cold breath at the back of your neck when you thought you were alone. "Developing a bit of a taste for blood, I hear."

It felt as if that voice was getting into every pore of Harry's skin, gloating and crawling, making Harry like him and less than him.

"Just one more before I quit," Harry said. "Just you."

Voldemort laughed. Harry shot red sparks from his wand and Voldemort stiffened and then laughed again.

"Sending up a little plea for help? Who's going to come?"

"Just letting people know I'm here," Harry said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

They'd all see those lights on the battlefield, they'd all come running, and if Voldemort won then everyone would see and all the disparate pieces of Harry's strange, wonderful army would be torn to shreds. There were so many ways this could go wrong.

"Argent," barked Snape.

Everyone turned to look at him for a moment. Nothing happened.

Then Malfoy laughed softly and said, "I broke that spell a while ago, Professor."

"Not quite as stupid as he usually acts, I see," Voldemort commented. "I might even let him live, Lucius." He raised his voice. "Do you people think this is entertainment? Kill them all!"

Fighting broke out around them, sudden and furious, but it did not touch them. It was like being in the eye of a storm.

“Here we are at last,” Voldemort said. “Scared?”

He saw Neville and Pansy in the struggling crowd, fighting back to back. He saw Hagrid and Grawp and Fang at his heels tearing people to shreds, and Lupin and Tonks cutting a swathe of destruction: the Weasleys in a tight, flame-haired, fighting knot. Bill was fighting his way over to Ron and Hermione, Fleur a hissing tower of Veela fury beside him, and Ginny was a flicker like firelight in the distance and among the goblins. Malfoy was close and very still, waiting with the tension of a creature that was either hunted or hunting something.

They could all die. Harry knew he was probably going to die, not some time soon but now, and he didn't want to with a sick, passionate ferocity. He wanted to go home and be with everyone he loved. He wanted an end to this.

Voldemort stood, spectral with burning eyes, in this school he'd never outgrown and waiting for Harry's answer.

“Yeah, I'm scared,” Harry said. “But scared of *you*? I don't think so.”

“Do you know how tired I am of you?” Voldemort asked. “Let's finish this.”

“Sure,” said Harry.

He kept his grip steady on his wand, a sinking feeling in his stomach. Voldemort would want to talk and posture, he'd known this, he thought he'd waited long enough. He watched Voldemort step back, his robe swishing with a sound like shadows whispering, and looked up for the last time into red eyes.

"One more thing," said Harry. "I wanted to show you something."

He reached up and undid the top button of his shirt, and showed Voldemort the last Horcrux hanging around his neck, where it had been ever since Malfoy passed it to Harry in his last handshake.

As if far away he could hear someone calling Malfoy a traitor and the sounds of a fight breaking out in the midst of the Death Eaters, and Queenie screaming at Snape that the time to run was now. All he could see were those narrowed red eyes.

He broke their gaze and broke the chain on the locket and threw it as high and as hard as he could into the air, then looked up and saw the shape of the dragon blotting out the moon.

Bessie and Charlie had seen Harry's signal and come right on time.

Fire cut through the night and made it burn bright as day, the last Horcrux nothing but a point of light like a falling star and then nothing at all.

The time before the second blast of flame was a single instant. It seemed longer: Harry knew

it was going to have to last him as a lifetime.

He'd told Charlie he would run as soon as he'd tossed the locket, that he wouldn't wait, that he'd risk Voldemort breaking after him. But of course he wasn't going to. He wasn't risking their one chance at a clear shot.

He was glad Charlie'd been the one to explain about the dragon, telling them about trajectories and the heat of dragonfire, since Ron, Hermione and Malfoy would surely have been able to tell Harry was lying.

Voldemort was irrelevant as long as he was still, unreal, a nightmare that had to be banished from the world and not part of it. Malfoy was fighting in a crowd of Death Eaters in that desperate no-holds-barred way he sometimes could, face flushed pink and eyes glittering, his father unbelievably fighting alongside him, Ron and Hermione were hand in hand, Ginny was crossing the battlefield like a comet.

They were all fighting to get to him. None of them would make it.

This was all worth dying for.

Harry got back a little, knowing it wouldn't be enough, just wanting to be away from Voldemort in the last few moments, and the firebolt hit like lightning and then like a bath of flames, filling the world to the brim with white and blue and crimson and gold. The pain was so huge, lightning running along his bones and burning his skin, that he felt nothing.

It was all just light and - in the end - so very, very worth it.

Epilogue

“You are cheating,” Harry said at length. “You are cheating horribly, and I know you are doing it, and in a moment I will figure out *how* you are doing it, and then you will be completely shamed, because nobody should be cheating at Exploding Snap.”

Malfoy smiled, sunny as the weather and innocent as a child with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Gryffindors are such sore losers,” he said. “Snap!”

This was a particularly violent explosion. Malfoy burst out laughing as cards rained down on his hair like confetti.

“Possibly you have cards hidden up your sleeve,” Harry said. “Cards or gunpowder.”

They were sitting on the lawn outside Hogwarts on the finest day of spring so far, using a chunk of what had once been the Charms classroom as a pavilion to recline and play cards upon.

It looked like it was going to be a beautiful summer, which was lucky as they had to have so many classes *al fresco*. This didn’t cheer up most of the student body, who were appalled that they had to pretty much start the school year from scratch in spring and spend this summer being taught.

It all made Hermione very happy, so Harry supposed that was good, and none of the classes were too ghastly. Even Potions class was no longer a trial, since Hestia Jones was now teaching it and she liked to spend most of her time talking about Snape's interesting invalid

period and how his brilliant mind needed womanly nurturing. Harry thought himself that it was a nice idea to have one more school year at Hogwarts. Just *one* more year: he was already starting to think of jobs after school, Auror training, maybe a long trip right after Hogwarts was done somewhere really interesting, and living in Grimmauld Place in a definite and settled way. Malfoy wanted to buy a piano.

He could feel himself outgrowing Hogwarts in a comfortable happy way, in the way you did a much-beloved old coat, holding onto it a bit longer than you should. This was the way to end it, with sunshine and peace and Exploding Snap on the lawn.

There was a little pale tender grass growing in the hollows torn in the lawn where the catapults had done their worst. Justin liked to lie in them sometimes and talk about his glory days.

“Where would you like to go, if we did all go somewhere after Hogwarts?” Harry asked, since he was thinking of it.

“I don’t know where you’re going, Potter, but *I* am going to Romania. I hear the place is crawling with scorching hot dragon-tamers.”

“That’s a very classy holiday plan, Malfoy, I mean that,” Harry told him gravely.

Malfoy tipped back his head and laughed, hair blinding in the sunlight. Harry still wasn’t used to seeing his throat bare of the locket: it looked strange.

“Well, I do have to see Charles, he was wounded and I was awful and distracted, I need to apologise,” said Malfoy, which was the closest he could come yet to reproaching Harry for that week-long stay in St Mungo’s and all the spell casting and the dim memories of how bad the burns had been. Harry thought by June that it would become an epic tale of how inconsiderate Harry was, and then he’d know Malfoy had got over the scare.

Someone had tried to hex Charles and Bessie out of the sky after Voldemort’s death. Charlie had been wounded: Bessie had been enraged.

Even being wounded hadn’t kept Charlie in England long. He wrote a lot of Owls about how fantastically happy being back doing his real job made him: Harry felt if he was so wrapped up in his job he needn’t neglect the dragons by writing Malfoy such long letters.

“What does Pansy think about that, then?” Harry asked darkly, and also with some curiosity: he wasn’t quite sure what was going on with Malfoy and Pansy.

“Stop fishing, Potter, I’ve told you it’s complicated,” Malfoy said.

“Oh, everything’s *complicated*,” Harry said, mimicking Malfoy’s voice.

“Yes, I know, it’s terrible, isn’t it?” Malfoy asked seriously. “Here we all are being young and carefree in the summertime, when I was so hoping that we’d get some sort of Time Turner in a telescope so we’d know exactly how our lives turned out and who we ended up with and who’d look good in middle age. We could get a good view of the nursing home too, maybe some mediwitch in the future yelling about the Boy Who Lived always misplacing his

false teeth.”

Harry had sort of thought things would seem a bit more settled after defeating Voldemort: life being smooth sailing from now on, making things right in some indefinable way, maybe learning to be certain about everything.

He wasn't certain of much of anything: nobody else seemed to be either. Ron and Hermione were getting off to a rocky start with Ron being down and Hermione nagging him about choosing a career, but then there were other time they looked surer and happier than Harry had ever seen them. There was Malfoy and his letters from Charlie and his carrying on with Pansy and his occasional looks at Harry, the ones that made Harry feel a hollow place under his ribs and several other things, chiefest of which was the worry that Harry was hurting him.

Things were going well with Ginny, though. Really well, even though she was so busy with the goblins. It was just that old thing again – expecting everything to be sorted out in the world after Voldemort and surprised there was so much still left. Harry still thought about kissing Pansy sometimes, and about Malfoy and being smitten. And there were other times when he couldn't think of anything but Ginny, and waiting until things did feel more settled until any trips to the prefects' bathroom, since Ginny deserved that.

It was all kind of a mess, and then Harry would think about the details of the mess, the people involved. He didn't want it changed. He was pretty happy.

There was all the time in the world, and everyone said it was going to be a beautiful summer.

Malfoy elbowed him with one of his unacceptably sharp elbows. “What are you smiling about, Potter?”

“Not your jokes,” Harry said. “I don’t think they’re funny. And I think Neville’s going to nab Pansy in the end, too.”

“I do not see why Longbottom feels the need to collect the whole set,” Malfoy said firmly. “I call it greedy. Bloody Gryffindor, swanning into our dungeons, stealing our women: he doesn’t fool me with that shuffling ever-so-modest demeanour. Neville Longbottom,” Malfoy declared with finality, “is a secret Viking.”

“The words all make sense,” Harry said. “And then you put them together.”

He didn’t pursue the summer thing. There was always the chance, no matter how remote, that Malfoy was going to want to see his father.

Lucius Malfoy had been fighting Death Eaters when the final blows of the war were struck. People were confused about most things in the weeks following the last battle, but they hadn’t been likely to buy another Imperius defence, even if someone had wanted to put it forward. They’d asked Harry what he thought, and he’d gone with Malfoy to see his father. It was something he could do, he’d felt. The way Lucius Malfoy saw it, Harry had taken his wife and his son, and there was no way to save one or contemplate giving the other back.

He just went to be with Malfoy in case Malfoy needed him, and to tell him that he could do whatever he wanted.

Malfoy had wanted his father's head on a plate three months ago and his father's freedom more than his own life a year ago. He'd looked white in the fluorescent lights of that bare little room, Lucius's eyes fixed hungrily on him, and said: "I don't know."

Harry had just waited.

Eventually Malfoy had knelt down by his father's side, taking his hands as if he felt sorry for him, as if Lucius was already an old man. "I can't forgive you," he said. "And – and I don't want to look at you right now. And I don't want anything bad to happen to you. Can you just go somewhere? If you went abroad nobody would follow you, we'd make sure of that, and you have accounts, and..."

He wound down then, like a worn tape recorder, stuttering to a stop. He just held his father's hands.

"Will I see you again?" Lucius asked. Harry had to look away, embarrassed and sad for Malfoy and even a bit sorry for Lucius, his pride broken like an expensive statue, once impressive and now nothing but dust and fragments.

"Yeah, Dad," Malfoy told him, low. "But I don't know when."

Lucius Malfoy hadn't deserved to go free. Blaise Zabini hadn't deserved to come back to school, and nor had a few others, and yet they had. It was all a mess, but Harry couldn't bring himself to regret even that part of the mess. He'd killed a lot of people. He'd had to, but it

wasn't like his hands were completely clean. It wasn't like Malfoy's hands were clean, or Ginny's, or anybody's.

It was a good time to try and be gentle with each other, Harry thought.

"Hey, Goyle!" called Malfoy in a voice with the thread of gentleness in it that they all used sometimes when speaking to certain people, and Goyle came ambling happily up to them across the lawn.

"M not intruding?"

"Of course not, you complete imbecile," Malfoy said, which seemed to soothe Goyle more than the gentle tone. "I'm glad you're here. I wanted to tell you about my signal victory over dangerous and experimental Muggle technology. You know my Walkman stopped working last night."

"Of course I know," Goyle said. "You shrieked the place down."

"I may have given a startled shout," Malfoy conceded. "You know the acoustics in the dungeon are strange. Anyway, Potter showed me how to fix it. Not that he fixed it: I fixed it. My experience with Muggle Studies means that I was the only one qualified to insert the new *batt rays*."

Goyle looked extremely impressed and Harry smirked at Malfoy, which Malfoy made a point of ignoring completely.

“We’re going down to the lake in a few minutes.”

“Pretty much everyone’s down there,” Harry said, and checked his watch. “And Ginny should be back from her interview any time.”

“There was some thought of playing a pick-me-up game of Quidditch,” said Malfoy. “You will be on my team: try not to mess up and make me look bad.”

“Whatever you say, Malfoy,” Goyle told him, smiling faintly.

He seemed to be cheering up a little now they were back at Hogwarts, smiling when Malfoy bossed him around. He’d stopped standing tilted slightly to one side, as if expecting Crabbe to come and push his shoulder strong against his. He and Malfoy did not look lopsided when they stood together, either, though sometimes Malfoy would glance over his shoulder at someone who wasn’t there and flinch, and go white.

Scrimgeour had made Harry talk to a lot of bereaved people – good public relations, he’d said, and Harry had bravely refrained from punching him in the nose. Harry hadn’t done it because of that, but he’d adopted Scrimgeour’s stock phrases because it was always so awful and he never knew what to say.

“He died well,” he’d said to Mrs Crabbe. “He was a hero.”

“It doesn’t matter how he died, does it?” Mrs Crabbe had asked. “I mean, people come to me

and say they're sorry and nobody says it to the Parkinsons, but it doesn't change anything. It doesn't matter. He's still dead."

"I think it does matter a bit," Malfoy'd said, trying to hide his eyes. Neville and Goyle had been crying openly, and Malfoy wasn't fooling anyone with his voice cracking like that.

Neville started talking earnestly about how brave Crabbe had been and Malfoy had started insulting Gryffindors and Mrs Crabbe had kissed all three of them before she left, but not Harry.

Everyone said they'd been lucky with casualties. Harry supposed it was true. A lot more people could have died. It was hard to feel lucky about something like casualties, though.

Malfoy got up from the makeshift pavilion with a long, lazy stretch. "You'd better have been practising, Goyle," he said. "Or there will be consequences."

They made their way slowly down towards the lake, which was a circle of dazzling rippling light on the horizon when Ginny's broom veered off course seeing them. It landed on the grass and Ginny leaped for Harry about two seconds later. He caught her with ease and picked her up off her feet and spun her around, so for a moment the whole world was just flame-bright hair and dark eyes.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Harry back, and kissed her.

“Quite nice,” said Ginny, “and now put me down.”

Harry did, but he kept his arm around her shoulders and she slung hers around his waist.

“How was the interview? I still don’t see why they’re making you do all that goblin public relations stuff.”

“Because ours is a prejudiced and stupid world, Harry,” Ginny told him. “And people think I am cuter than a goblin.”

“Which is ridiculous,” Harry said. “Acwela’s really good-looking. I’ve noticed that. You should let her know.”

“Oh, he remembers my friends’ names now and he hits on them, my ideal boyfriend, gentlemen, behold him,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes and grinning up at him.

“She did learn about diplomacy quicker than you did,” Malfoy drawled. “Of course, that’s like saying she learns languages faster than rocks do, really.”

“It’s nice when you’re in the papers,” Goyle remarked. “My mum keeps them because you’re a friend, and it’s like you’re famous.”

“My mum keeps them too,” Ginny said. “I think she may be papering a room with them. I think I may never go home again.”

“I remember when we were younger and Potter was in the paper, Malfoy used to draw hilarious little faces on them,” Goyle said, reminiscently.

“Really?” asked Harry.

“Yes, we had a whole little comic one time,” Goyle continued, brightening.

“*Really?*” Malfoy asked meaningfully.

“No,” said Goyle. “I just made it up. Sorry, Malfoy. I don’t know why I do these things.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Malfoy.

“I’m pretty impressed that you’re a celebrity,” said Harry mildly. “I always wanted a famous girlfriend. I’m selling a story about your tattoos to the papers.”

“And oh, how the tables have turned,” said Ginny, laughing, and she stood up on her tiptoes to kiss him. She was warm against him and her mouth was sweet: she tasted like the coming summer, and maybe more summers to follow.

They crested the hill and saw Ron sitting by the side of the lake, looking a little forlorn. Hermione was sitting with Marietta Edgecombe going over spell books and researching ways to heal Marietta’s face the way she often did these days, because studying was Hermione’s preferred method of apologising.

They all drifted over to Ron, and Ginny started telling him about her interview and Malfoy did a little hair-tossing impression of Ginny the Celebrity.

Harry just sat down beside Ron and leaned against him: he didn't know what else to do. Ron had taken Smith's death pretty hard. Harry thought he blamed himself.

Harry'd said the same useless thing to Smith's stern father, looking less stern now and very old. He'd said that Smith was a hero.

The old man's hands had clenched and he'd looked away. "My sons were all heroes," he said, sounding very tired. "I wish Zacharias had done what I told him. I wish he'd run."

"Zach was my friend," Ron had blurted suddenly, and Hermione had chimed in, holding Ron's hand as tightly as she could. Mr Smith had looked at them and looked a little comforted. Ron had said a few stumbling things about Smith that made him seem real again, nervous, a little obnoxious and pleased and proud to be among friends and praised.

Harry was terrible at comforting people. He thought it might be because he felt that they were looking at him wondering why *he'd* lived, against all the odds, again.

It might just be because he hadn't lost the people he loved. There were moments, seeing Ron or Hermione or Malfoy or Ginny sometimes, in which they looked like miracles: he couldn't stop looking at them and being overwhelmed with deep silent gratitude.

"We're thinking of playing some Quidditch," he said to Ron after a bit. "Could use a good

Keeper on my side.”

“Yeah?” Ron asked after a second. “Well, you can always count on me.”

“Knew I could,” said Harry. “Play really well, and we’ll sing your song again.”

Across the smooth expanse of green and the glittering waters there were people sprawling, sitting up and playing: Harry couldn’t help noticing it was a much bigger cross-section than usual. The twins were there pestering Malcolm Baddock with their gratitude for saving Fred’s life, and Malcolm was showing good sense by not opening the latest brightly coloured box. Neville was wading in the lake, his trousers rolled up around his ankles and his bevy of Slytherin ladies trailing adoringly after him making filthy innuendoes about water weeds.

“Where’s-” Malfoy began, and his question was answered when the waters rippled and Pansy broke the silvery surface of the lake, emerging soaking wet in a yellow sundress, black hair hanging in a wet rope down her back.

“Is this the kind you meant, Longbottom?” she asked in a world-weary tone of voice. “It’d better do what you say it does in a potion, or I will have words with you. And then I’ll give Queenie the Gryffindor passwords.”

“You don’t have them,” Neville said, laughing and throwing her the towel he was carrying.

“You think not?” Pansy asked. “Seamus Finnegan is a weak man. Hey, Malfoy!”

“Hey, beautiful,” Malfoy called over to her, and then he went splashing into the lake to slip an arm around her soaked yellow waist, and wrap her hair around his wrist.

They smiled with the impure joy of two people who knew they were crushing Neville Longbottom’s hopes, and did not kiss. Harry didn’t think they were going out, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t: it didn’t mean Neville’s case was hopeless, either. He supposed he’d see how it turned out.

“That girl is shameless,” Hermione remarked, coming over to sit by Ron and ruffling Harry’s hair on her way by.

“I was just thinking, Hermione,” said Ron. “It is a very hot day. You wouldn’t happen to fancy a dip, would you?”

“I thought we were playing Quidditch,” Ginny said. “Come on, Ron, shift your lazy self, I want to get a game in before dinner. And I want to play Seeker, too. Want to play against me, Malfoy?”

“I’ll sit this one out,” Malfoy yelled over to her. “I’ll play you if you win.”

Ginny glanced over to Harry. “Well,” she said cheerfully. “Let’s see what you can do.”

Harry felt the corners of his mouth tug up to reflect her smile. “Let’s see.”

People were getting up now, Malfoy and Pansy wading out of the water, Neville going to get

his shoes, calling to each other cheerfully about a game. Funny how now they were all associating with Slytherins more there seemed to be so much betting going on. Goyle nodded over at Blaise Zabini to join them, and Harry tried not to mind.

“You’re on my team, Dean,” he told Dean, who was sitting talking to Luna and looking a little wistfully at Ginny, and then back at Luna. That was another complicated situation, Harry thought, and drew Ginny a little closer to him.

She grinned. “Race to the Quidditch pitch? No tripping people, Malfoy!”

“Sometimes people stumble, this is not a perfect world,” said Malfoy. “It is useless to blame me.”

“Ready!” said Ron. “One, two-”

The Slytherins and most of the other houses, who were wise to Slytherin ways by now, broke and ran on two. They all went racing across the lawn, over the hills, towards the place where the posts of the Quidditch pitch stood gleaming. The sun was hot on Harry’s hair and his bare arms, the wind in his face, and he wasn’t certain about anything except that he was happy.

“I have a good feeling about this game,” Ginny yelled.

“I may bet on you, then,” said Malfoy: Harry glanced behind him and Malfoy was slowing himself down trying to trip people up. He threw Harry a laughing glance. “I have a feeling Potter’s reign of terror is over.”

“Nah,” Harry shouted, breaking ahead, all of Hogwarts running and laughing a step behind.

“I’m just getting started.”

The End

Sirius Black, Super Genius

"I have been a fool," James declared, striding into the dormitory and throwing his Quidditch robes to the floor. "A mad fool!"

He stood in the centre of the floor, his pose that of a Strong Man Overcome with Emotion. Peter looked awestruck, Sirius did not appear to notice James at all, and Remus put down his quill.

"That's nice," he said. "D'you mean in life generally, or-"

"On Valentine's Day!" James exclaimed. "Last year, remember, when I sent Evans those fifteen cards?"

"If only I could forget."

Most of the cards had landed on Lily's head all at once, but the singing one had unfortunately landed in her tea and begun a bubbling, drowned rendition of 'I Like You Bleary Bleary Mush.' James had been quite chuffed when Lily sent him an Owl in return, until Remus reluctantly explained the exact meaning of a Muggle restraining order.

"It was a stupid thing to do, I see that now," James announced, pacing restlessly like a distraught hero on the moors.

Remus often thought that James' mother was to blame for him turning out a bit of a poseur.

She was a little old for a mum, and interested in Muggle things. James couldn't help it if he had learned how to be a man from daytime soaps.

"I'm... glad you see that."

"I thought it was romantic, James," Peter put in.

"No, it was foolish. I'm older now, a man of the world, I know a girl shouldn't be pursued like that. It's wrong. Are you even listening to me?" he snapped in Sirius' direction.

Sirius was mostly lounging on his bed like an Eastern prince expecting sherbet and slave girls, but he waved a languid hand for James to proceed. "Sure. Evans, her red-haired sauciness, you must have it, you will have it, you will swim in a pool of freckled delight... I have the speech memorised."

"Actually," Remus interrupted, "Maybe you should listen. James says he's decided to stop pursuing Lily."

James beamed at Remus. "Right, Moony! You're the only one who understand me, and you will be my best man when we are married."

"Sorry, I thought you said you were going to *stop* pursuing Lily..."

"Yes! Sending her cards, pshaw! It was the action of a boy, too young to understand what it takes to win a woman. What I shall do is woo her. Cards are not enough, you see," James

explained, his eyes gleaming manically. "Women don't want cards. Women want flowers, and chocolate, and serenades. Or perhaps - wait for it - *singing chocolate flowers*."

James leaned back to observe the full effect of his words.

"Pure genius," Peter said promptly. "It can't fail."

"It's a very nice thought," Remus told him, "but perhaps you should reconsider."

"You know," Sirius remarked, "I think Evans fancies girls."

"Sirius, don't be ridiculous!" James said irritably. "Anyway, Evans is perfectly free to fancy girls once we are married. When I come home and kiss her and stare into her green, green eyes and then lead her up to the bedroom where she already has the latest *Broomstick Monthly* model installed, I won't mind at all. I'm open-minded like that."

Fabian coughed. "Evans is definitely not a lesbian," he remarked. "Believe me."

"WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?" James bellowed. "Because I know you don't mean to *talk disrespectfully* about a decent witch who happens to be the one soul who is destined for mine and if you laid one finger on her, Prewett-"

Fabian shrank back, clearly regretting his rare foray into the Marauders' affairs. James looked down at him in darkling fashion for a few moments, and then returned to his great plan.

"I'm thinking roses," he said dreamily. "Beautiful milk chocolate roses, opening their little chocolatey mouths to sing 'You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me.' Because she's good at Charms, you know! So I'm being thoughtful, which birds totally like, and then she'll melt and see how insane she has been to reject a good man's love all these years and she will fling herself on me and we'll have five redhaired babies called Lily and Lila and Lilian and Lilabet and Chudley Cannons Potter."

He began to hum 'You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me' with a terrible, glazed look of happiness on his face. He began to gather up paper and quills and headed for the library, pausing only once to ruffle up his hair, which was an all-time record in the James Potter Styling Annals.

"That's amazing," Sirius said as the door shut behind him.

"I *know*," Peter agreed fervently. "How can one woman be so *blind*?"

Sirius swept on, treating Peter as so much coloured confetti in the Great Parade that was the Life of Sirius Black. "James has gone completely mental over this bird. I suppose we should've seen it coming, but... I mean, how can one tiny girl be all this trouble? They're all, like, pretty much the same, aren't they? Moony, you said I could get one if I wanted, didn't you?"

Remus coughed. "Well, yes I did, but that was two years ago, Sirius." Sirius gave him a wide uncomprehending stare. "Two years in which you have relentlessly and callously ignored the advances of the girls at Hogwarts-"

"They were making advances?" Sirius asked. "I call that thoughtless. Imagine if one of them had managed to distract me and ruin one of my pranks. The girls of Hogwarts need to learn to keep their distance, the filthy wenches."

"Well, they have learned, that's what I'm telling you. They're a little more mature now," Remus said patiently, "and they've seen past the, the cavalier attitude and the superficial good looks-"

Sirius looked greatly gratified. "Thank you, Moony!"

"I don't think you're taking my point."

"He's trying to tell you they call you Sirus 'Crazy Eyes' Black in the common room," Fabian said casually.

Sirius looked deeply offended. "Well. *Well*. Every one of those wenches are getting pranked, you wait and see. I'll give them Valentine cards. I'll - I'll - but we should put friends before revenge, unless we're talking about revenge on that greasy piece Snape or any of my foul relatives or Filch or... but I digress. Marauders, Prongs needs our help!"

"I can't believe we're in sixth year and you guys are still using your queer little nicknames," said Fabian Prewett, who apparently didn't talk much for a reason.

"I can't believe how much you're getting pranked until you cry for your mother," Sirius

returned sharply. "Now will you be quiet? You're not part of our gang. You couldn't even pass our *initiation rite*."

"Sirius, we never had an ini-"

"Moony, priorities, yeah? First we help James out with his lesbian bird, then we prank Prewett and all the other little yapping girls-" Sirius gave Fabian a severe look - "and then we have the coolest initiation rites ever. We're going to have robes and vows and Firewhiskey shots, it'll be wicked! But first I need my trusty second in command in possession of all his mental faculties. Quiet! I must hatch a devilishly brilliant plot."

Sirius sat up on his bed, meditating like a Buddha and grinning like a fiend.

"I thought James was leader," Peter whispered.

"Someone hush that wittering fool," Sirius commanded.

Peter gave Remus an anxious look - he's crazy, Moony, crazy! We should fetch James! He is manly and will protect us - and Fabian rolled his eyes. They were both so lucky Sirius had his eyes shut.

In the lovely, peaceful silence Remus began to cherish a beautiful dream about finishing his Arithmancy homework. Peter collected up James' Quidditch robes. Fabian returned to his copy of *Witch Weekly*.

"AHA!" screamed the scion of the Most Ancient House of Black at the top of his voice.

Remus' quill sputtered on the page and Peter yelped. Fabian remained determinedly immersed in his magazine.

"What Prongs loves is the chase!" announced Sirius, who had obviously been dipping into

Witch Weekly

himself. "That is what excites him, what drives him into a spiralling frenzy of madness and despair. All he needs to do is get some action from Evans, and then the scales will fall from his eyes!"

Sirius looked triumphantly around for applause.

"Sirius, Love Potions are not allowed, and what's more once it wore off Lily would kill us dead."

"Ah, dear Moony, sweet innocent Moony, therein lies the cleverness of my scheme! Lily won't be involved at all. We need someone who can follow the right script, who is a part of our plans. It's so obvious, so brilliantly simple. All we need to do is brew some Polyjuice Potion to turn one of us into Evans!"

"..." said Remus, and was alarmed when no sound came out. He tried again. "..."

"Then fake Evans snogs James, and James sees the light, dumps her, comes back to us and we reign forever as kings of chaos!"

Sirius raised a clenched fist to the sky. Fabian lifted his eyes to heaven.

"Okay, Padfoot," Remus said weakly. "It's not your fault. Insanity runs in your family." He ignored Sirius' wounded and affronted look, and went on. "I mean, think about it. Not only would it be deceiving Prongs-"

"For his own good! For the greater good. For the *pranks*, Moony, please think of the pranks."

"But whichever one of us drew the short straw would have to snog James. Would have to snog *James*. Please think about that, Sirius, take all the time you like. Imagine James being your first snog!"

"Better Prongs than a girl," Sirius opined firmly. "Girls smell funny and they giggle and they bounce and I can't be having with it at all. Anyway, wouldn't he be your first too?"

"Well..." Remus paused apologetically. "...well, no."

"I hate this conversation," muttered Fabian from the depths of his magazine. "I hate you all."

"*Moony!* Moony, I can't believe you didn't tell me! Whatever happened to the oath of open confession between pranksters? It's in our Marauders' Scroll!"

"We don't have a Marauders' Scroll, though."

"We *nearly* do," Sirius pursued in an aggrieved sort of way. "It's a *work in progress*."

Remus surrendered, which was the only sensible option for those besieged by the Forces of Black. "Well, be that as it may, Sirius, what with you being... pranksexual and me liking to kiss girls, exactly how do you plan to-"

"GIRLS!" Sirius shouted. "In the plural? How many of them are we talking about, Moony, you enormous harlot?"

"I'll do it," said Peter.

Remus rubbed the back of his neck and thought yearningly of Arithmancy. "A few..."

"Why didn't we know about this? Were you sneaking around behind our backs - I knew it!" Sirius announced, thumping his bedstead with an emphatic fist. "I knew you couldn't really be in the library all those times! *Traitor!*"

Sirius fixed him with a gaze of outrage and amazement. Remus wilted under the heat of Sirius' intense stare and wondered if he was supposed to say that it had meant nothing and he'd been thinking of pranks the whole time.

Peter took advantage of the silence to repeat his bombshell. "I'll do it," he offered. "I'll be Evans."

Sirius and Remus both turned to look at him. Peter reddened under their gaze.

"Are you sure, Peter?" Remus asked gently.

"Yes! Yes, absolutely, I want to do it," Peter said, still red and speaking very fast. "For, um. The Marauders, and all."

"Well, good for you!" Sirius exploded genially. "Excellent! Good show! That's brilliant, that's noble, that's brotherhood, not wandering off faux-studying with girls like some Marauders I could mention. See? *This* is the kind of devotion we need, if we are to become truly legendary."

Sirius gave Peter a look of pride, and then Remus a look of reproach. Remus was mildly pleased to see Sirius paying Peter some attention for a change: Remus knew that Sirius would've died for Peter, but sometimes he could have sworn Sirius forgot Peter's name.

"Then it's settled," Sirius said, smiling beatifically. "All we need is for Wormtail to snog Prongs back into some sense, and then it's all systems go for the Valentine Pranking of a Lifetime! I am overwhelmed by my own magnificence!"

He crowed and uncurled from his lotus position, fist raised to the ceiling, and then overbalanced and fell on the floor, bringing his scarlet counterpane on top of him.

"I wish I'd been Sorted into Ravenclaw," Fabian muttered. "You guys are crazy."

*

A few weeks later with Valentine's Day drawing inexorably nearer, it began to dawn on Remus that this did not appear to be one of the daydreams Sirius toyed with and then forgot about, like the time he wanted Dumbledore and McGonagall to get married and have superchildren.

This time it was happening, and it was infinitely more terrifying even than Sirius waylaying him after every class to whisper 'Think of the babies, Moony! Think of their enormous throbbing *brains!*' Sirius had the Polyjuice Potion almost ready, Peter was blushing constantly and clinging to the plan like a limpet, and every time Remus suggested the plan might, in fact, be utterly insane, Sirius accused him of wanting the Marauders to disband so he could kiss girls all day long.

"Why are you trying to crush my dreams, Remus? What did I ever do to you?"

The answer was lots of things, including crashing through Remus' parents' bedroom window on his new flying motorcycle and probably high, and offering not only Remus but his mum and dad a lift over the city, then giggling and passing out in his parents' bed. Since Sirius was also one of the best friends Remus had ever had and surprisingly hard to stay mad at, Remus did not bring it up.

"I'm not trying to crush your dreams, Sirius. I just think you're a mental patient."

They were walking down the halls, away from Quidditch practise to dinner. Remus had just been on the benches, because James got fretful without an audience and Remus needed

someplace to do his homework since Sirius had placed a total embargo on the library. Remus would've ignored it except that Sirius - damn his soul! - had actually gone to Madam Pince and explained that Remus liked to do filthy things in the library, and now Madam Pince kept wandering up to him and hissing 'I'm watching you!' in his ear.

Sirius waved away the issue of his mental health. "Right. So you'll help us, won't you? Wormtail and I are doing all the work, Remus. It's not right and it's not fair."

"What do you want me to do?" Remus asked warily.

"Nothing! The littlest, tiniest thing. All you need to do is get me a teeny strand of Evans' hair. Go on, you know you'll love the girl touching. It'll be so simple, so easy, please please, just for me!"

Remus turned and stared at Sirius, who gazed beseechingly back, a picture of pleading innocence in a Quidditch robe.

"Why can't you do it? Why can't Peter do it?"

"Because Peter fears her," Sirius replied, "and because she won't let me near her on account of being morbidly oversensitive about that little filling the girls' dormitories with brie incident. Three whole years ago, and it's nothing but hurtful yelling of 'Back, Black, back!' I think she must have, like, hormonal issues."

Remus made a noncommittal sound, since the moment he had been waiting for was almost

upon them. He knew from experience that the only way to avoid disaster was to distract Sirius at the crucial moment. So here they were, coming into the Great Hall at just the moment Regulus usually chivvied Snape and Narcissa up from the dungeons to dinner.

"-very intense potion making," Remus heard Snape say, right on cue. "This interruption may prove fatal!"

A broad smile spread over Sirius' face as he strolled forward, Remus hated himself for being a bad person, and the three Slytherins saw them and froze.

"C'mon now, Snivellus," Sirius drawled. "Reggie here needs you at dinner. What if he ran out of olive oil?"

Snape reached for his wand, but Narcissa put her hand on his arm and Regulus went faint pink and stepped between them. "Don't call him that. And don't call me that, either."

"Sirius has to call people by nicknames, so he can pretend they're not real," Narcissa remarked, her voice cold. "So he can see them as toys, to abandon in a cupboard whenever he feels like it. He has little nicknames for all of you, doesn't he, Lupin? Watch out. If he can betray his family, he can betray anyone."

"Shut up," said Remus, master of repartee.

He should've tried to set up something with just Snape. Snape was a git and they'd always hated him, and one on one would have been fair, and they'd have just gone for each other and

then Sirius would've been in too much detention to pursue his James-related insanity. Only Narcissa always talked before she went for her wand, and made things worse and dragged Remus into things.

Sometimes... things had been easier when they were younger, before everyone started talking about Dark Lords and Sirius had graduated from 'I hate my parents' to 'no, really, I hate them, they are evil, I'm moving out this summer.' Remus remembered when Narcissa was polite to all of them because Sirius was her cousin and family was an obligation, even if you were a) crazy like Bellatrix, b) crazy like Sirius' mum or c) crazy like Sirius. They'd sat beside the lake a few times and Remus had, well, it'd been third year and he'd sort of looked at her hair going warm gold in the sunlight, lashes curving the same warm gold over the deep blue of her eyes. She was Slytherin and pureblood and even if he hadn't been a werewolf, he wouldn't have had a chance.

But things had been different, then. Sirius had spoken to Narcissa politely enough as well, and while he regularly called Regulus an idiot he also kept shoving people into walls and whispering dark pranklike threats to anyone who looked sideways at his little brother.

"Also Sirius wet the bed until he was six," announced Regulus, and Remus was glad for a moment that things had not frozen completely into adulthood.

Remus had kind of liked Regulus as well. It was weird in the Black family, how cousins were like siblings and siblings like cousins, and Narcissa and Regulus had come out white-blond and capable at times of calm, while Sirius and Bellatrix had black hair and no concept of anger management. Remus put it down to the inbreeding and the one Black trait they all had in

common, which was an operatic tendency to go to extremes.

Not that Remus had ever liked Bellatrix, because she was a lunatic. Of course, so was Sirius, but he was their lunatic and it was different.

"Shut up!" yelled Sirius, graduate with honours from the Remus Lupin College of Snappy Comebacks.

"And once he made Mother a birthday card out of dried gnomes!" proceeded Regulus, sudden contender in the Running His Mouth Off Olympics. "And he's claustrophobic - scared of enclosed spaces!"

Regulus stood panting between Sirius and Snape, attempting a ferocious stare and considerably shorter than both of them. Sirius stepped in and Regulus blinked, blue eyes uncertain. Remus was so sorry: this had all been a terrible idea, he wanted to take it back right now.

"Right, that's *it*," said Sirius, and went in for the kill.

Only it wasn't it, because Sirius was hardly going to pull a wand on Regulus, and though he was perfectly capable of efficiently twisting Snape's arm behind his back he'd never touched Regulus that Remus had seen, except in the early years, in a sort of rough affection. Now they both gripped each other with fists, bewildered and angry.

"Leave him alone!" Snape said icily.

Sirius' mouth lifted, curling in savage relief. At this point Remus vowed never to have a plan again.

"Now Snivellus," he said in a silky tone, "I know you didn't just try to interfere between me and my brother. Why are they even hanging around with you, anyway? Just because Bella finally managed to pass her NEWTS without sleeping with the examiners-"

"She didn't sleep with the examiners to pass the NEWTS!" Regulus said hotly. "She slept with the examiners because she has complicated feelings about authority figures!"

Narcissa looked embarrassed to have Regulus on her side.

"Snivellus is nothing but a Bella replacement," Sirius sneered. "But I suppose it works. Snape's never even had pretend friends before, have you, Snivellus? And I suppose he's pretty girly - though just a tip? Bella washed her hair more than once a year. And whatever Bella's issues, I never saw her looking at Cissy like you do."

Snape, who had been tensed to deal out what was probably going to be that cutting curse again, went dull red and still.

"Pathetic," Sirius said, triumphantly. "As if anyone would ever-"

"As if you understood anything at all!" Narcissa snapped. "You don't have the faintest idea what to do with girls, do you, Sirius? Is it simply that you're pathetically immature, or are you

more into your ragtag little band of *blood traitors*-"

"Can't we all just get dinner?" Remus asked desperately and utterly without hope. Sirius had never been one to retreat.

"Okay," Regulus said, very quickly. Remus looked into Regulus' face and saw desperation there too: he'd never seen a Black displaying anything like fear before.

Narcissa looked briefly annoyed, then decided that Remus had backed down first and tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"Regulus is right, Gryffindors aren't worth missing dinner over." The light grip of her fingers pulled Snape away from Sirius when Remus had been pretty sure it would take a Stunning Spell and then a few people dragging.

Regulus stayed behind for a minute, looking twitchy and upset. "You sent back Dad's letter," he said, not looking at Sirius. "You could've opened it, I didn't even think you were angry at Dad-"

"It's not about being angry at anyone," Sirius said angrily.

He was right, in a way. It was not just about being angry.

Regulus spoke as if he had a bad toothache. "Are you really not coming home this summer?"

"I'll come by to tell them what I think of them," Sirius said in a hard voice. "And to get my stuff." He paused and said, "Look, if you didn't keep hanging around that twisted little git Snape, we could, I mean, I'd leave you alone-"

Regulus had two brilliant pink spots of rage in his cheeks. "He's my *friend*," he bit out. "I'm not going to abandon him. I'm not going to abandon anyone. I'm not you!"

With that, Regulus turned and fled. Sirius looked after him and looked as if he was going to explode and cost all of Hogwarts their eyebrows.

"That's. Well. I'm going to go live with the Potters, you know," Sirius said. "I have a whole plan. I'm. James is going to be my brother now. So it's important that he's happy," he added, fixing Remus with a needle-eyed glare.

Remus reached out cautiously, because an upset Sirius was more a danger to others than himself, and gave Sirius a brief squeeze on the nape of the neck which he hoped was a brisk, we're-walking-here equivalent of the manly hug.

"Yeah," he said. "All right. Okay. You're like a dog with a bone, you know that?"

It worked, the stormy expression lifted fractionally from Sirius' face. "I did know that, yes."

They walked to the Gryffindor table, Sirius calling in a lordly manner for his slaves to fetch him pumpkin juice, and Remus congratulating himself on the brilliancy of his plans. He'd sabotaged himself and made himself a party to lunacy.

He glanced at James, poor unsuspecting victim of all this. James was bleary-eyed from Valentine-related studying all night and Quidditch all evening, and as Remus watched he saw James' face fall slowly into his plate.

"Wake up, Prongs!" said Sirius, giving him a sharp shove in the back.

"Wh... wh... mfff," decided James, sitting up and automatically ruffling his hair. It did not look dashing with the added mashed potato. "Evans," he murmured dazedly. "She will be mine."

Remus had to admit that he was getting just a touch worried about James.

"Yes, yes, of course," Sirius soothed him, and shot Remus a look which informed him righteously that he'd told him so.

"I still think you're a mental patient," Remus whispered.

Sirius snorted. "Stop being such a buzz kill, girl kisser."

*

Remus found Lily in the common room, reading a book called *Advanced Charms* which he happened to know Professor Slughorn had inscribed with '*To an advanced charmer*' on the inside cover. Really, Lily was being unreasonable about James, he told himself bracingly.

James was a much better prospect than Professor Slughorn. For one thing, he was extremely svelte.

He still felt like a complete wretch. Lily looked peaceful by the fire, her dark red hair lit up, her green eyes intent on her book, Sirius was plotting about an innocent, defenceless girl...

"GET BACK, BLACK!" Lily ordered from the depths of her book. "Or I'll turn your intestines into ladies' underwear."

"It's, uh, not Sirius," Remus said.

Lily lowered her book and grinned. "Ah. Sorry about that. Only your friend Crazy Eyes-"

"He really prefers Sirius."

"Does he? *I* really prefer Crazy Eyes," Lily informed him. "He's been stalking me for days now. Trying to touch my hair, if you can believe it. Why don't you get yourself some better friends, Remus?"

"I'd be far too scared. Sirius would prank me if I tried to leave him."

Lily's smile became less perfunctory. She was an easy girl to talk to, Remus thought, he didn't see why James always made such a complete shambles of it.

"So... is Crazy Eyes following me around for Potter, or what?" she asked after a moment. "I

haven't seen him around for a while. Is he keeping me under surveillance?"

"No! No! Nothing like that!" Remus assured her. "I, I think Sirius just - likes your hair. Yes. It's very shiny. Er. Anyone would want to touch it," he added, filled with horror at the words coming out of his own mouth.

He reached over, and tugged vaguely at her hair. Then he saw the tsunami of rage rising in Lily's eyes.

"Remus Lupin," she said in a voice of ice. "Is this some kind of perverted group activity?"

Remus blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"What - Potter's tired of me so it's Black's turn to pursue me, and then it's your turn to follow me about trying to touch me? Do you people have a system? Where exactly," she asked icily, "does James Potter get off-"

"James hasn't done anything!" Remus protested wildly.

"You don't need to tell me that!" Lily exclaimed. "I suppose he's off stalking some Hufflepuff. Well, I wish her joy of him! Good riddance, I say! Though I call it sick."

Remus took a deep breath and tried to re-group. Lily was annoyed about nothing, which was very strange. She also thought James fancied a Hufflepuff, while all this time James was on a psychotic quest for her love. Sirius was right. Girls were most peculiar: it must be a hormonal

thing.

He searched for something helpful to say. "I think James is sick," he said carefully. "I mean, ill. Yes, that's why he hasn't been around, I really don't think he's stalking Hufflepuffs."

"I really don't care," Lily told him quickly. She paused. "Sick," she said, as if testing him. He nodded, filled with the dire suspicion that she knew all, but then she nodded. "I suppose he could be sick. He did answer 'whipple weeble scrum' to a question in class today. And his hair has gone strangely flat at the back."

"Yes, he has been looking peaky lately," Remus agreed with fervour.

"So you and Black aren't trying to win me with creepy touching or collecting my stuff for a shrine?"

Remus put Lily's hair behind his back. "I promise we're not."

"And Potter is just ill."

"Very poorly," Remus babbled. "Sickly from a child."

For a moment, he thought Lily looked relieved. Then she put her book back up and said, "I hope he has ebola."

*

"You see, she hates Prongs forever and she'll probably become Mrs Professor Slughorn and have fat babies and Prongs will linger at her garden gates and sing her love songs until Professor Slughorn gets peckish and, in an awful misunderstanding, makes him into venison stew. Think of Prongs all covered in gravy because of the cruelty of a woman. Think of it!"

Peter went all wide-eyed, so Remus presumed he was thinking of it.

Sirius was gloating disturbingly over Lily's single hair. Remus was trying to pretend all of this was happening to someone else far, far away.

"There are just two more steps to this plan and then I, Sirius Black, will have achieved my greatest victory to date! Moony, you need to distract James while Wormtail gets ready."

"Leave me out of this," Remus said. "Do it yourself!"

"I can't, I need to get the real Evans out of the way. I'm going to provoke her into a duel and land us both in detention. You can't do that, you alone in a room with a girl for hours, you couldn't control your depraved, wanton urges."

Remus tried to control his depraved, wanton urge to smack Sirius upside the head.

"But first!" Sirius said, eyes glittering, "we must make Wormtail a girl!"

"I thought that was already sorted," Peter put in, his voice small.

"Well yes, obviously, we're going to make you look like a girl. But first we should teach you to act like a girl. Your act needs to be flawless, Wormtail, you need to give Prongs the vamping of a lifetime!"

Peter's eyes and mouth formed three perfect Os.

"Sirius," Remus said in measured tones. "You are not a girl. You cannot teach Peter how to give James the vamping of a lifetime."

"But you forget one thing, Moony. I am a very great genius." Sirius paused and then added, "Besides, being a girl can't be very hard. Girls manage it, and I don't think they're very bright. They almost never prank people at all."

Remus put his head in his hands.

"First," Sirius said in a judicious tone, "you should walk about a bit swishily."

Remus did not dare lift his head.

"I think you should probably waggle your hips a little more," Sirius announced after a moment.

Remus could have been so happy living in a world where he'd never heard that.

"Now watch me."

Remus lifted his head to the sound of the door opening, so he and Fabian were both treated to the sight of Sirius standing on the bed, tossing back his hair coquettishly and saying lasciviously to the bedpost, "Why, James, have you been working out?"

"I am losing all will to live," Fabian informed them.

*

"James, when was the last time you slept?" Remus asked.

"Sometime. On a book," James added helpfully. His eyes kept sliding shut. "It was nice," he remarked in a wistful way.

Lily, from the other side of the table, watched James narrowly over the salt cellar. Remus presumed she suspected something, but she was Sirius' job. His was to get James on to the Quidditch pitch for seven o'clock, at which point Sirius had promised all their problems would be over and they would never speak of this again.

Clearly, the sheer persistence of Sirius' madness was hypnotic. Remus could think of no other explanation.

"What you need is some time out in the fresh air," he proposed brightly. "How about going off to the Quidditch pitch and showing me how often you can catch the Snitch?"

"I thought it was Peter who liked me to do that," James said.

"I like it too," Remus assured him. "It's very, very impressive."

James thought about this for a moment and then nodded. "Mum always said I had style."

"Er. Right."

"It's not your fault you admire me so much," James went on. "I have a lot of charisma.

Feelings of confused envy and admiration are perfectly normal."

"Are they?" Remus asked. "Um. Good."

"This was all encapsulated in the third verse of 'My Special Little Hero' which was a song Mum used to sing to me when I was very..." James coughed. "Actually, never mind. I don't like to talk about that. I think I'm a little overtired."

Lily coughed from behind the salt, not overly discreetly.

"How are you feeling, Potter?" she asked, her eyes on the salt.

James' eyes immediately fixed on her, his face going glazed and happy as if someone had hit him in the head with a stick and the brain damage had given him a warm glow. His hand moved to fluff up his hair, but in his current state of exhaustion he poked himself in the eye.

"All the better for seeing you, Evans," he said in a deep, rich voice, and then spoiled the effect with a frantic cough at the end.

Lily pursed her lips. "I thought you were ill."

Remus was convinced that all was lost when James said, "Perhaps I am ill. Do you have nurturing instincts? Do you have a nurse's uniform? I could be ill if you want me to be ill."

"Could you?" Lily asked, her eyes wide.

"I'll do anything you want me to do, Evans," James informed her, putting on a slight, manly American accent.

"Excellent," Lily said, and got up. "Drop dead," she told him, and wandered off with a bit of a smile playing about her lips.

The depths of Lily's hatred for James were clearly increasing. Sirius' way was not the way Remus personally would have chosen, but something had to be done.

"C'mon," Remus said encouragingly. "Let's go to the Quidditch pitch."

*

After catching the Snitch five times and performing eleven broomstick somersaults, James

was having fun and indeed singing 'My Special Little Hero' at intervals. Remus wanted to die of boredom, and it was only six thirty.

"Who's My Special, Special, Special Little Hero!" James carolled, launching into his third rendition of the chorus. "Who's my Special, Special, Special Little Man?"

"If you people go near Severus again," said Regulus Black, "I'll tell everyone that Sirius used to have a teddy bear he called Mr Addlypants."

What with the intense boredom and the sudden potential for Sirius mockery, Remus was quite glad for the interruption. He made a gesture and Regulus sat down, sharp elbows pressed against his knees as he looked around.

"Why are you talking to me?" Remus asked.

"Because Sirius is a mental patient, I don't know the other one's name, and James Potter is a freak who thinks about nothing but Quidditch. Which is a stupid boring game, by the way, and I don't see why Severus wants to play it so much."

If Sirius ever heard Regulus call Quidditch boring, he'd definitely disown him. Remus tried to phrase this tactfully.

"I don't care, it is boring," Regulus insisted, and Sirius' expression of furious obstinacy looked very odd on his unfamiliar face. "Everybody zips about busily for no reason at all, when ninety times out of a hundred all you need is for someone to get the Snitch. The rest of

the team could sit around on the pitch. They could have *tea and crumpets*."

"Sirius is a very good Beater," Remus said, feeling obscurely called upon to defend his friends. "He hardly ever throws his bat at the crowd anymore."

"He comes and laughs at Slytherin try-outs," Regulus remarked in a distant sort of way. "Severus still tries out. Every year. I like him," he added. "Severus. He's cool. He's really clever, he knows a lot of brilliant stuff. He's just as clever as Sirius."

Which was a fairly horrifying thought, because Remus was fairly sure that if Sirius wasn't so easily distracted by shiny things he could rule the world with an iron and pranking fist.

"Do you like Potions better than Quidditch, then?" he asked, curious about this entirely original world view.

"I don't like much of anything at school," Regulus answered, and then paused. "I like people. I think they're interesting."

They sat for a few minutes looking at the Quidditch pitch, silver in the moonlight, and the crowing figure of James, so high in the sky he was nothing but a witchy silhouette against the moon. It reminded Remus of Muggle perceptions of magic, and that made him think of other Muggle things. Muggles who were interested in people became psychologists or philosophers, but neither of these careers were really open to Regulus Black.

"Look," Regulus said in a thin voice. "You've got to get Sirius to come home. Mum and Dad

are going spare, and him running away from us... it just makes them think that something needs to be done to change the world, if schools are allowed to turn their children against them."

"Sirius made his own decisions," Remus told him slowly.

"We're his family! It shouldn't be this easy to turn away, I couldn't do anything like that, and he's the clever one, I don't know how to make things better for Mum and Dad. Sirius was always saying you were the sensible one. You have to talk sense into him, *I don't know what to do-*"

Remus did not know what to say. Because - well, because the Blacks were Sirius' family, but there was going to be a war. Difficult choices had to be made, and Remus was glad he had not had to make this one, between the parents he loved and the only friends he'd ever had.

He was uneasily aware that even if he had thought Sirius should stay with his family, he wouldn't have wanted him to. Remus only had three friends in the world, and that was enough of a miracle. He was not likely to find any more, and if Sirius turned back to his family and away from them...

"I can't help you," he said, and felt like a coward and a traitor.

There was another pause. "I should've known better than to think a Muggle-loving blood traitor might think it worth his while to try," Regulus said at last. "It's fine. I don't need your help, and my parents won't need Sirius. I'll make them proud."

He got up, turning a baleful blue gaze on Remus, and said: "Also Sirius won a Cheerful, Chubby Babies Grand Prize when he was eight months old. Our house elf entered him for it, and I have pictures."

"You wouldn't," Remus breathed.

Regulus smirked as he turned away. "Why d'you think they call it *Blackmail*?"

Remus watched Regulus' narrow back, growing smaller and smaller as he ran for the castle, and thought of the happily brain-damaged look on James' face when he looked at Lily. He didn't want to think of hurting or betraying his friends. He wanted to help them, even if it was in an insane, sexually dubious way.

He checked his watch and it said seven, so he left the pitch and left James to his fate.

*

"Remus," Helen Montgomery said, "Thank heavens you're here, do you have the library copy of-"

"Come away, Moony!" Sirius commanded. "Before your baser nature overcomes you. And you, miss, library copies indeed, you should feel *ashamed*."

Helen looked very puzzled.

"Er - do *you* have the library copy of-

"I am not interested in your filthy minxlike wiles," Sirius informed her sternly. "Please go away, we have important business to discuss and I can't have you shaking your library books in Moony's face."

Helen backed away slowly, trying to maintain eye contact, and Remus noted that Sirius had scared off another one. It was very lucky Sirius was devastatingly attractive and a lot of girls tended to swoon at the Byronic face and fail to notice the mad, mad brain behind it.

"Just think," Sirius hissed delightedly. "As we speak Wormtail is pouting and swishing and kissing Prongs!"

Remus stared at him. "Every day, you make me die a little more inside."

"And Evans got an hour's more detention than me because she made my eyelashes into tiny tentacles," Sirius said with satisfaction. "I wanted to keep them but I was forced by the vile, prejudiced anti-tentacle agenda of this school to give them up."

"Don't ruin your face," Remus advised him. "One day some lunatic woman will marry you for it and carry you away to exotic climes and I will finally be left in peace."

Sirius made a scrunchy face. "You keep saying stuff like that. *Am* I very attractive? Am I more attractive than Prongs? Am I more attractive than you?"

"Um, yes," Remus said cautiously.

Sirius looked pleased. "I wonder how I can use that for pranks. Do you think I could seduce McGonagall?"

Remus tried not to faint with horror. "Do you want to?"

"Well, no, but we'd never get detention again if I was McGonagall's *red-hot lover*," Sirius pointed out with satisfaction.

Remus tried not to faint with horror some more.

At that point Lily Evans rushed through the door and flung herself into Remus' arms. Remus was mildly stunned until she whispered "Help me I'm changing back!" in his ear and in Peter's reedy, terrified voice.

"Oh my God," he said. "Sirius!"

"Make way, you people!" Sirius yelled. "Give her air! Evans has the vapours and a hot flush and it is her womanly time!"

Remus bundled Lily/Peter against his chest, really trying not to touch his breasts and have horrible sexual problems for the rest of his life. Sirius crowded around them, though Remus noted that the coward was touching Remus far more than he was their weird sexually hybrid

friend, and began to chivvy them unobtrusively towards their dormitory.

Fabian met them on the stairs.

"Are you people drugging girls and taking them to our dormitory for orgies now?" he demanded. "Remus, for God's sake. It's the night before our Arithmancy test!"

They ignored Fabian in favour of getting Peter into the dormitory before they were caught and summarily expelled for being dirty boys. Then Sirius pushed Peter away too hard and he fell onto the carpet, red hair flying out as he fell and then shrivelling up into brown.

Instead of apologising, Sirius nudged Peter in the ribs with his toe. "Well?" he said. "How did it go? How brilliant am I, on a scale of normal brilliant to me?"

Peter lifted his round face from the carpet and grinned blindingly. Sirius grinned the exact same grin, though because of cosmic unfairness it looked better on him.

"He kissed me under the stars!"

"Brilliant!" said Sirius.

"He pushed my hair behind my ear and said he'd been thinking about this forever!"

"Fantastic!"

"He also held onto my ear and kind of hurt me but it was still really romantic!"

"Wormtail, you have made me proud today. I could kiss you, only that would be weird group activity like Fabian gave us a lecture on last year."

Peter gave a long sigh from his place on the carpet. "I think he's going to ask me to go to Hogsmeade with him for Valentine's Day."

"Wait," Sirius said. "What?"

Remus, who had seen this coming since Peter started talking, watched with some concern as the two powerful engines of Reality and Sirius' Insane Disturbing Glee collided and exploded. He'd known. He'd known this would end in tears and also carnage. He should have done something, like tried to defect to Ravenclaw with Fabian.

"Maybe when he's a professional Quidditch player he'll give me the Snitch he won in the World Cup just like in that story in *Witch Weekly*," Peter went on, his face soft and glowing.

"Moony," Sirius quavered. "I'm scared. Please hold me."

"This is all your fault, Sirius Black," Remus returned. "And I will not."

"It is not my fault! It is not my fault that Wormtail has gone mad and is running amok. I could not have predicted something like this, I was kicked out of Divinations on the first day because of the exploding crystal balls, you know that! Wormtail, you cannot go to

Hogsmeade with James on Valentine's Day because you are *not a girl*."

"I could be if you make the Potion again," Peter argued.

Sirius looked lost and betrayed by a cruel world. "People will notice an extra Evans! She's all redheaded and shouty!"

"I thought you'd come up with a plan for that!"

"Well," Sirius mused. "I suppose there are a few things I can think of... no! No, no, no! This is madness and I will not help, I will not. Moony is right and how can you want to snog Prongs anyway I don't understand how can this all have gone so horribly *wrong*?"

He gave Remus another piteous appealing look and sidled closer. Remus narrowed his eyes at him.

"Peter," he said, as gently as he could while still trying to ward Sirius off. "You can't honestly want to take a Potion every day for years and years that - honestly, Sirius, I said no - turns you into a woman?"

Peter looked sulky. "Don't mind," he muttered. "Makes me feel pretty."

"Moony," Sirius said urgently. "I really *need a hug*."

"I thought this whole thing was about making James happy! And he is happy and I'm happy

and we could move to Honolulu to get away from the real Evans and I don't see why you two are getting so upset, he'll never know the difference!"

"Honolulu?"

Sirius gave a soft keening sound. "I am not in a happy place right now. I want to feel *reassured and cherished*."

"I am censoring *Witch Weekly* from now on," Remus said dangerously. "And I am putting an end to this. Get up, Peter! I have been pushed too far. We're going to find James and tell him all and throw ourselves on his mercy."

This seemed like a good plan until they met James, floating through the common room wearing a dreamy expression, and Remus remembered that he was an appalling coward.

"Hi Prongs," he said basely. "Good night?"

"She kissed me!" James exclaimed rapturously.

Peter glowed with pride and Remus felt a little sick and Sirius clawed at Remus' shoulder, beyond words but still pleading for a cuddle.

"Gosh, what a surprise," Remus said faintly. "Was it, er, fun?"

At which point James frowned and said, "Bit weird, really."

Sirius made a faint disbelieving sound of hope and Peter gave a heart cry.

"I mean she was still gorgeous, still the freckled vessel of all my hopes and dreams and the future mother of my children," James assured them all, which had the effect of having Sirius try to crawl up Remus' arm. "But she was all sigh-y and fluttery and weird. I missed all the snapping. And the way her freckles leap from her nose when she's angry like a beautiful pop-up book."

He sighed at the thought. Peter was wailing on a feeble but continuous basis now, and Sirius had his face buried in Remus' shoulder, but Remus kept listening as the awful grown-up truth began to dawn on him: that James was not crazy, or obsessed, or crushing, or drawn like a moth to flamey red hair. That James was...

"I think she's shy," James concluded. "But I can wait. She'll start acting more like herself again."

At which dramatically convenient moment Lily arrived, looking stormy from hours of detention, and Remus experienced a moment of blinding terror as he realised that Sirius had not made a contingency plan for what to do if James called the real Lily his girlfriend and tried to kiss her and she killed him to bits.

"Black," Lily said in a voice of loathing as vast as the ocean.

Sirius made a small traumatised noise into the juncture of Remus' neck and shoulder by way

of reply.

James ignored everyone and stared at Lily with that idiot look again, like a besotted toad. "Hi, Lily," he said in his normal voice.

Lily squinted as if she didn't actually recognise James' normal voice. "What is it now?" she asked, adding "Stalker," out of long habit.

"Well... about what happened tonight," James said.

Lily squinted at him some more. "When I told you to drop dead over the salt cellar...?" she said dryly. "Yes. Good times."

James smiled at her as if she was a tiny little kitten instead of a tall angry girl. "Whatever you like to call it," he said indulgently. "I can wait, you know. I'll just think about tonight and wait until you tell me you're ready and then I'll ask you out on a proper date."

"Think about tonight?" Lily said, making a face Remus couldn't quite interpret. "Have you gone crazy?" She paused and then looked almost worried. "Do you fancy me so much you've *actually gone crazy*?"

"Maybe," said James, and just when Remus thought he was doing rather well he unfortunately grinned and drawled, "Does that... excite you, Evans?"

"Oh my God!" Lily exclaimed. "Do you know I have turned you down for a date sixty times

now?"

"Sixty-two," James told her helpfully.

"Listen to me. Very carefully. Potter," she said. "It is time to stop. You can't ask me again until next year, by which time I hope you will have grown up a little. Or at all, really. Stop. Please stop."

She looked at James, who looked back at her with an expression of undying love reminiscent of a sick cow. Then she walked away, shaking her head and mouthing 'Mad as a *brush*' at Remus as she passed.

"Did you hear her?" James said excitedly. "She's going to go out with me next year!"

"That's not-" Remus paused, as Lily's little speech, her questions to him and her watchful eyes over the salt cellars suddenly lined up in Remus' brain and presented him with an entirely different perspective. "Well, that's not exactly what she said."

"Baby, I'm so good," James said seductively to the air. "I knew that one day she would see what she'd been missing out on. I think... I think I can go to sleep now. I should be well-rested to absorb the look on my darling Lily's face when she gets her singing chocolate flowers."

James, walking like a cowboy with rickets and looking more like himself than he had in days, began to whistle 'My Special Little Hero' to himself as he walked to the dormitories. He met

Lily coming back down with her books and informed her that what with all the excitement he had forgotten to tell her she looked nice today.

Which would have been fine if he had not become carried away by the cowboy walk, and added that she was a fine-lookin' woman.

Sirius lifted his face fractionally from Remus' shoulder and said in a low voice, "Has it ever occurred to you that Prongs is a complete tool?"

"More than once," Remus agreed. "Get off me, Sirius, the crisis is over."

At this point Peter gave Remus a betrayed look and stamped off to nurse what might have been - oh how much Remus didn't want to think about it - a broken heart.

"But I'm not *happy*," Sirius moaned. "Prongs is all mad over that girl and soon he'll have a girlfriend and since he fancies such terrifying women I bet he likes to be spanked. And soon one of those librarysluts won't give you back. And then I'm going to *die alone*."

"Regulus is blackmailing you into being nice to Snape," Remus announced.

Sirius perked up at the challenge as he'd hoped. "Ohhh. I shall do something terrible to Snape, just you wait and see, Moony, my next plan is going to be even better."

"This one went so well."

Sirius disengaged from Remus at last, to Remus' profound relief, and made a gesture of amazement, or possibly showing him how pelicans took flight. "It did! The main objective was to make James happy, was it not? And it worked, did it not? And thus I am Lord High Panjandrum of Plotting, and... and all the cannibals in the world want to eat my fantastically brilliant brain!"

"Sirius, you're a mental patient," Remus told him.

Above their heads, they heard James singing 'My Special Little Hero' at the top of his voice, and Remus remembered Regulus Black's unhappy face, and why he'd agreed to all this madness in the first place. He caught Sirius' eye, and the corner of Sirius' mouth came up and then suddenly they were sharing a warm, uncontrollable grin.

"OH YES!" carolled James beatifically from above. "You're your mother's pride and joy, you're her own, oh her own, VERY SPECIAL LITTLE BOY!"

"All things considered, Evans," said Remus. "You could probably do better."

Lily lifted her head from her book to observe, "I'm deeply aware of that," but Remus was watching her out of the corner of his eye, and he saw that she was smiling too.

If You've A Ready Mind

Chapter One

It all happened because Draco was a little *distracted* that day. Things had not been going well. Father had been very cutting about Draco's plan to smuggle a racing broom into Hogwarts, Crabbe had sat on his lunch on the train and Harry Potter had turned out to be a rude, insufferable gitface. It was not how Draco had pictured his first day.

It also happened because Draco had a tendency to babble when he was nervous.

So he sat in complete blackness, a stupid threadbare hat covering his eyes and its stupid voice ringing in his ears, and started to talk.

"Malfoy - that'll be Slytherin, then..."

"Yes, please," Draco said. "Or Ravenclaw, you know, that wouldn't be bad either. Not Hufflepuff though, because otherwise I shall instantly transfer to Durmstrang."

"Ravenclaw." The Hat paused. *"Interesting. Haven't heard a Malfoy ask for another house for decades."*

"Er," Draco said. "Actually, on second thoughts, scratch that, Slytherin, please. Just Slytherin, no also-rans, no second guessing. Slytherin!"

"Perhaps it's time for a little diversity. RAVENCLAW!"

"I *changed my mind*," Draco hissed, and then felt hands tugging at the hat brim. "Just a minute!" he said indignantly to the old woman in green. "I need to get something cleared up, this incompetent piece of haberdashery has entirely misunderstood me-"

"Mr Malfoy, it is time to join your new house!"

Draco blinked in the light, glared and held onto the hat. All the people at a table decked in *blue* were clapping, this could *not* be happening. He glared at them and the clapping faltered, at which point Professor McGorgon glared at him.

"Mr Malfoy!"

Draco got off the stool with extreme reluctance. "My father will hear about this," he informed her, and stomped to the stupid table in stupid blue.

"Hi," said a boy in the seat next to him, blinking behind glasses that reminded him of The Boy Who Was A Real Letdown, Actually. "I'm Terry Boot, I-"

Draco glowered at him. "Don't talk to me, this is all a horrible mistake. You wait till my father hears about this. You just *wait*."

"Um," said Terry Boot. "Okay. Do you want the pumpkin juice?"

"I told you not to talk to me!"

Draco saw the rest of the Sorting through narrowed eyes. The Sorting Hat took an awfully long time with Harry Potter - probably it was getting his autograph or something - and Draco vowed that if that prat got into Slytherin instead of Draco somehow Draco would find a way to end him.

The Hat eventually said "*GRYFFINDOR!*" Potter never knew what a lucky escape he'd had.

"Don't look so unhappy, little boy," a curly-haired girl with a Prefect badge whispered. "We'll take care of you here."

"I don't belong here," Draco sneered. "So you're not the prefect of me. And I am only slightly below average height for an eleven year old!"

"Isn't he a cheery little ray of sunshine," the girl, whose name turned out to be Penelope, murmured to her friends.

"I can *hear* you," Draco announced loudly. He considered staying put in the Great Hall until they were forced to make up a bed for him in Slytherin, but it was draughty in the hall and probably the house elves would come and clear him away and put him in a rubbish bin. It had been that kind of day.

So he stamped up to the stupid Tower on the west bit of the castle, away from everything. It was draughty there too, and they were put in a room that was all blue and Draco felt as if that

stupid Squid had dragged him underwater and was holding him hostage in a place where he couldn't *breathe*.

"Are you homesick?" asked a boy with an eerie amulet around his neck. "I'm Anthony Goldstein, the moving staircases made me feel wretched. I think I'll ask my mum to write me a note excusing me from using them."

"Of course I'm not homesick, you imbecile!" Draco snapped. "Don't think you can talk to me just because you have a demon around your throat."

Anthony Goldstein gave him a wary look. After a moment, he ventured: "D'you mean my inhaler?"

Draco was sick and tired of these fools. Crabbe and Goyle would never have kept bothering him like this, he was all alone in an icy blue tower and what his father would say when he heard of this didn't bear thinking...

He sat at the window with his arms locked around his knees, trying to tell the world how very displeased he was through the medium of icy, disdainful silence.

Clearly his icy disdain needed work, because that speccy twit Terry Boot came and sat on the window ledge beside him, comfortably propping an arm against Draco's drawn-up knees. Draco was in the middle of swallowing his rage and made a funny noise that the idiot utterly misinterpreted.

"You can cry if you want," he whispered. "D'you miss your mum?"

Draco drew himself up. "Obviously, being *practically twelve*, I do not miss my mother, and even if I did I certainly would not weep like a woman about it. I am not upset. I am outraged! I have been placed in this house against my will and I feel that a case could be made for that hat kidnapping me. I shall inform my father, and he will sue."

Terry blinked, which people often did when Draco launched into one of his tirades against injustice. Draco felt that the blinks signalled agreement, and regarded Terry with slightly less hauteur.

"You wanted to be in Slytherin?" Terry ventured. "Well, I mean - I don't think Ravenclaw is so different."

Draco wanted to demand how it was the same, when none of his friends were with him and he was stuck up in a tower and his father was going to be disappointed in him again, but Lucius would've called that snivelling, so he glared ferociously at Terry and hoped he would proceed.

Terry gazed at him earnestly, eyes wide behind his glasses. "Well, Slytherins are the ambitious ones, aren't they? They like power. And knowledge is power, so..."

Knowledge is power. The words rattled around Draco's head for a minute and then seemed to find somewhere to fit. His father would like that, he thought. Knowledge is power.

Besides, even if Terry did have stupid glasses and stupid hair like stupid Potter, he was clearly trying to be friends, and that helped. Draco felt a slight easing of that tense fear - born when he couldn't even make friends with some boy in a robe shop and multiplied by about a thousand when said boy turned out to be Harry *stupid* Potter - that nobody but his old companions would want to be friends at all in this strange, enormous place.

"I suppose there is some merit in what you say," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"D'you always talk like that?" asked Anthony Amulet Boy Goldstein. "Like a lawyer? I suppose it's because all you purebloods are homeschooled."

Good God, they let the Muggleborn into this benighted house! Draco tried to remain calm: he had no idea whether he was outnumbered or not, after all. He cast an intensely suspicious eye over Michael Corner and Kevin Entwistle, who were lurking on their own beds and looking, to Draco's mind, rather shifty.

"I liked home school," Terry said wistfully, confirming Draco's favourable Terry Boot impression. "I miss my mum and my sisters, a bit." He brightened slightly. "But I hear there's a wicked library here."

"Thrill me, why don't you," Draco drawled, and was a little bit pleased when Terry laughed.

*

Draco got his first real taste of Ravenclaw life when everyone adjourned to the library

immediately after classes. He might've preferred to go exploring around the castle, but he thought *Knowledge is power*, and that his father might still be proud as long as Draco did well, and besides everyone was doing it and it wasn't like Draco was going to be the only one left out.

Once in the library, he strolled casually about peeking at other people's homework.

"Do you *mind*?" hissed Michael Corner indignantly.

"Not at all," Draco replied, and decided that Corner was on his black list. He'd deal with him later, though - right now he was on a Ravenclaw mission.

He studied everyone's homework with care - after initial protests he found everyone just submitted - and found a clear winner. To his surprise, she was a Gryffindor. She was also sitting quite alone, and Draco thought it was probably typical of Gryffindor to shun intelligence as if it was infectious.

He beamed winningly at her, a tactic that always worked with Mother's friends. "Hello," he said. "I'm Draco Malfoy. D'you want to be study partners?"

The girl also had hair like a nest of mad squirrels and unattractive teeth, especially when she was gaping like that.

"Yes!" she exclaimed after a moment, and began to assiduously clear the space next to her.

"That would be lovely! Please sit down!"

This rabid anxiety for his company gratified Draco. Clearly she was a woman of superior taste. Or lonely, of course, but whatever it was, it meant she wouldn't realise Draco was only interested in one thing.

Her flow charts.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she whispered, beaming back at him. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you-" *and your flow charts*. "Working on Charms?"

He discovered that she had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all their text books already, and he congratulated himself on picking the best study partner with his usual brilliance. He was also happy to note that she didn't know a few perfectly elementary things, and was grateful for help. He foresaw a beautiful symbiotic relationship, and having the most perfect flow charts in the land.

He went to dinner with Granger at his elbow, happily pouring information into his ear, and dropped her to her table like a gentleman.

Harry Potter and his pet Weasley glowered scruffily in their direction.

"Told you she was a nightmare," Weasley mumbled.

"Can't *believe* he's not in Slytherin," Potter said.

Just as Draco had thought. They were rude even to members of their own house, the barbarians. Poor little Granger, stuck with them all day. Rendered charitable by flow chart love, he gave her another smile before he left.

Ravenclaw was not turning out as badly as Draco had feared. Terry continued his winning streak as Draco's favourite dorm mate, and he decided Anthony was quite harmless after Anthony laughed so hard at one of Draco's impressions that he upset gravy over the whole table and got five house points taken from them. The worst of it was that they all refused to be called by their last names, though Draco explained at length that it was more decorous.

Michael Corner was a useless prettyboy and Kevin Entwistle never talked at all, which meant Draco's dark suspicions of him evolved daily, but on the whole things were all right. Teachers combined to shower him and Granger with praise, except for that imbecile Madam Hooch who didn't know good flying when she saw it. Draco would have torn a strip off the incompetent if everyone hadn't been distracted by Anthony's mum sending a letter excusing Anthony from Quidditch on account of his vertigo.

"It's okay, Draco," Terry said soothingly as Draco fumed. "It's not like most people in Ravenclaw even take Quidditch all that seriously. The other houses are insane about it: they let it *affect their marks*."

"We don't play *Quidditch*?" Draco demanded.

"Oh, you can if you like, but it'd probably be better to concentrate on your studies."

"I think Terry's absolutely right," Granger announced, slipping into the desk beside Draco's.

"Flying is ridiculous and requires no real cleverness. After all, Harry Potter was the best at it and he'd never done it before, he never even tries at anything."

Draco sneered. "I bet he doesn't. I bet he's *really stupid*. Isn't he stupid, Granger?"

"Don't call me Granger, Draco."

"Pah, Quidditch," scoffed Draco, suppressing a pang. "He can keep it." He paused. "Weasley wasn't any good at it, was he? Hermione! Tell me Weasley wasn't any good."

"I'm sure I didn't notice," Hermione sniffed. "Ron Weasley is the most unpleasant boy I've ever met and I do not look at him more than I can help. You know, he's from an old pureblood family. *I* think he must be one of those wizards who are prejudiced against the Muggleborn."

"*Are you Muggleborn?*" Draco felt like he might faint. He sat beside her in the library every day! He'd actually touched her plenty of times, the whole school knew they were friends, his father was going to have a fit!

"Yes, my parents are dentists," Hermione said, as if Draco could have any idea what unearthly Muggle thing a dentist was. She looked over at him, her face screwed up with sudden anxiety. "Does that - does that bother you?"

Draco looked at her stupid hair and thought about how long she'd spent with his flow chart, helping him make it perfect and not complaining when he'd bossed her around. And he hadn't thanked her. Her stupid face was making him feel funny.

"Ahahahaha," he said unconvincingly. "Why would you think that?"

He composed a letter to his father in his head, saying he was using a Muggleborn to get ahead in class. Surely Father would appreciate that.

Hermione looked uncertain but happier, and at that point all conversation had to cease because Professor McGonagall came in. Naturally, Potter and Weasley kept talking and got house points taken off.

Draco smirked.

*

Some days were considerably worse than others. The day Draco got his first Owl from his father, remarking that Draco *would* go for the soft option of Ravenclaw and discussing a move to Durmstrang next year already, was also the day they found out that Hogwarts was *crawling with trolls*.

"It's only one troll, Draco," Terry consoled him.

"This is a place of education, Terry! There shouldn't be any rampaging trolls, we don't have

any classes in being agonisingly smushed to death!"

Draco's vehement gesture connected with Padma Patil's butterfly clasp and she gave him a cold look.

"Oh get over it, you look like a ninny anyway," Draco snapped.

"I am so sorry," Terry told her. "He gets all agitated, let me help you with-"

"I am not agitated! I am - no, wait, I am agitated, it's a perfectly reasonable response to having trolls frolicking about our school. Maybe it'll have babies. Maybe we'll stay up here in the tower until we die, hearing the hopeless cries of the Hufflepuffs as the trolls crunch their bones..."

Draco noted with macabre satisfaction that most of his house had started paying attention to his dramatic rendition of their future woes. They might perish, but at least he would perish given the adulation that was clearly his due.

Once the troll was contained, another nasty surprise was on the way, because apparently Granger (who was *his*) had bonded with Weasley and Perfect Potter. The next time he saw her, she was chatting away to them as if they'd been civil to her the whole time.

Oh Draco, put not your faith in Mudbloods!

He gave her a betrayed look and stomped off, only marginally appeased when she

immediately hurried after him.

"Draco, wait-"

"Traitor!" Draco flung over his shoulder. "Fickle, wayward woman! Potter, of all people!"

"He's really quite nice," Granger said, adding blasphemy to her list of crimes. "Sort of sweet."

"I don't have to stand here and listen to this filthy talk, you know."

Granger poured a frenzied tale into his ears, becoming overexcited as Draco supposed women were wont to do. Eventually she wound down and stood facing him, frizzed hair aquiver.

Draco gave her a long look. "So those lackwits locked you in a room with a troll. For which they should be expelled. And then someone stuck their wand up the troll's nose - what *finesse* you Gryffindors have, what grace under pressure - and then you lied to a teacher, Granger, for shame! For those two!"

Her eyes softened. "Ron was really brave."

"Who is - oh my God, Weasley? I feel extremely unwell."

"They explained to me, they just thought I was bossy-"

"Oh, why shouldn't you be bossy?" Draco demanded. "You know better than they do."

"Draco," Hermione said. "Please. This is a big deal for me, having friends in my house." She gave him an imploring look. "Be happy for me. We're still study partners, right? I wouldn't want anyone else."

Draco's eyes dropped from hers to the floor. "Don't try to get around me," he muttered. "With all your girl wiles. I'm not happy. I am horrified at your taste, I am shocked and appalled. That Potter's *so* arrogant and spoiled, strutting about the school, he thinks he can just pick you up and drop you at any time-

"Harry's not going to drop me!"

"Little Hermione," Draco said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "So sweet. So naive. You can't trust people like that, you know."

"He thinks you're arrogant as well," Hermione told him.

"You see! You see how he prances about the school, passing judgement on all its hapless students, thinking he's *cock of the walk*..."

Hermione shook her head. "You're hopeless."

"You misspoke," Draco informed her kindly. "He's hopeless. You'll see that, in time. You're a clever girl, Hermione, and I have every faith that he will not hoodwink you for long."

Potter (damn his devilish wiles, Draco could see right through him) managed to keep her hoodwinked, just the same. She palled around with him and Weasley all the time, it was like a triumvirate of bad hair with Potter as its king. It was typical of Potter to go around coolly nicking other people's friends, he had no shame.

She was still *his* study partner, though, if only because Potter was too thick to find his way to the library. And Draco had other friends.

Plenty of friends. He'd been leaving the library when he bumped into Crabbe, Goyle and Blaise Zabini. He'd known that Crabbe and Goyle liked having someone to follow, but *really*, Blaise Zabini? Draco's mother said the way Mrs Zabini carried on was a scandal.

"Nose in a book like a good little Ravenclaw?" Zabini inquired.

"If I had a mother like yours," Draco remarked sweetly, "I wouldn't talk about where anyone put any of their body parts. Those in glass houses, you know..."

Both mean and pleasingly grown-up-sounding. Draco was proud.

"You two! Get him!" Zabini snapped.

Crabbe, Goyle and Draco all looked at him as if he was insane.

"You must be joking," Crabbe said at last. "Malfoy's been our friend for years."

"Besides," Goyle added with a glare, "I am very anti-violence. There is no excuse but self-defence - or the defence of your friends - for hurting another human being."

"So there," Draco put in.

"Expecting other people to do outrageous things like that!" Goyle said sternly. "You cannot be happy in yourself. You should have a long hard think about your personal issues. Malfoy may say a lot of stupid things-"

"I am standing *right here*!"

"-but he'd never ask us to do anything like that. Because he's smart," Goyle added, giving Draco a proud look. "That's why they put him in the *smart house*."

Draco mostly resisted the urge to preen.

"You two are hopeless dolts," Zabini said. He strolled off, apparently able to maintain his calm without effort, which Draco rather admired.

Draco was left looking at Crabbe and Goyle, who looked a little hopeful. There had been so much to do in Ravenclaw, so much to get used to, he hadn't had much time, and Draco hadn't been sure if Crabbe and Goyle would want to be on terribly friendly terms with someone who hadn't even managed to get into Slytherin.

"He's wrong," Draco announced. "You're only mostly hopeless dolts. Behind on your

homework already?" He waited for the guilty nods and grinned. "C'mon, let's go back into the library. I know a girl you two should meet."

As they were going back in some twerp called Longbottom knocked into him and Draco considered casting the Leg-Locker curse, but then he'd mastered it weeks ago and was a bit bored with it now. Besides, Terry and Hermione would give him hell.

*

"Psst!" said Potter.

Typical, thought Draco. Potter the star, always assuming he could get someone's attention even if everyone was clearly trying to concentrate on Professor Snape's homework. Like he'd even be in the library if it wasn't for Hermione. Like anyone wanted him in the library. He just thought he owned the place, didn't he? Draco's hate was as deep as the ocean.

"Psst! *Malfoy!*"

"Psst, some of us actually do our homework!" Draco hissed. "I'm not helping you with it!"

Potter's homely scarred face twisted. "Shut up, Malfoy. I can't *believe* Hermione's friends with you. I bet you're just using her for her brains."

"Potter, I'll have you know that I, unlike you, have some brains of my own."

Potter sighed as if Draco was the one bothering him, which Draco certainly was not. Draco had rules: he didn't bother anyone but Hermione in the library. Potter was fair game at mealtimes and during classes.

"Fine," he said. "I told her what would happen if I *tried* to talk to you."

"Why did she tell you to talk to me? What! Is this a *conspiracy*?"

"She said you were OK underneath it all-"

"Underneath what all?" Draco asked dangerously.

"And I thought at least you weren't in Slytherin, so-"

Draco's eyes narrowed until Potter was the only thing in a dark, slitted world. "Because being in Slytherin is so terrible," he spat. "Because being in Slytherin means you're such a mean, horrible person."

Potter blinked and Draco took it as agreement. He balled up a perfectly good piece of parchment covered with valuable notes, and threw it hard at Potter's scar.

"OW!"

"As far as you're concerned, Potter, I will *always* be mean." He balled up another piece and threw it hard, but Potter was quicker than he expected and caught it, an inch from his face.

"And horrible!"

Hateful staring was interrupted by Madam Pince bearing down on them with librarianly wrath. She threw them out of the library and informed Draco that she was surprised and ashamed.

"Look what you did!" Draco erupted as the library door shut. "A whole evening of study ruined by the Boy Who Wouldn't Shut Up!"

"You're mad," Potter said flatly. "You threw things at me, you arrogant sod, how could you-"

"What's going on here?" asked Professor Snape, and Draco spun around to face him.

He could not believe Professor Snape was here, and would know that Draco had been thrown out of the library. Professor Snape was the best teacher in school, and Potions was the coolest subject ever, and Draco's mother said she'd mentioned Draco to Professor Snape personally. Was there no end to the torments Potter introduced to his life?

"Sir, I was doing my homework in the library and Potter got us thrown out because he wouldn't stop pestering me. He called me *names*."

"You little rat, I'm going to-"

Draco fixed Professor Snape with a limpid gaze. "Also," he added earnestly, "he threatened me."

"Well, well, well. That is serious," Professor Snape remarked. Draco smiled wanly and appealingly up at him.

"That's total rubbish," Potter began in furious tones.

"Is it?" Professor Snape asked silkily. "As far as I'm aware, no Ravenclaw has ever been thrown out of the library before, whereas Gryffindors have a long and disturbing history of bullying students from other houses."

Draco gave a vigorous nod. "I felt victimised, Professor. Honestly I did."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Professor Snape said.

He was a Solomon come to judgement, yea, a Solomon!

Potter, such a dark red you couldn't even see his disfiguring scar, opened his mouth.

"Rising another point with every syllable you utter in my presence, Potter."

Snape raised an eyebrow and Potter made a noise like a dying fish. After a moment, Snape continued his progress down the hall.

"He is so cool," Draco breathed. "I wish he was my head of house."

"I hate you so much," Potter told him devoutly.

"Oh snap," said Draco.

*

As if studying all the hours God sent and trying to cope with living in the same castle as Potter and not exploding of hate was not enough, Draco made the discovery that those two-bit hooligans had lured Hermione into a life of crime.

"Don't try to deny it, woman," he said. "Terry, talk some sense into her. There was a dragon in that oafish servant's vile little cottage, which looks combustible by the way, and is right beside the Forbidden Forest. There's clearly going to be a forest fire. How jolly, perhaps we'll all be killed!"

"I can't believe you saw," Hermione murmured unhappily. "Harry said he saw you looking in the window, but-"

"He certainly did not see me! I was sneaking about. Sneakily."

Hermione looked anxious. "Please don't tell anyone, Draco. Hagrid really loves his dragon, we're going to get it out of the country-"

"Aha! Potter's a smuggler, I knew it! That's *piracy*, that is! Dragon piracy!"

Hermione and Terry stared at him as if he had gone crazy. "Don't worry, Hermione," Terry said. "You know how he gets. Once he's calmer, I'll talk him around."

Draco gave a cry of righteous outrage.

"You sound like an enraged teakettle," Terry told him. Draco should've known better than to get chummy with a speccy boy, they were all tarred with the same evil brush.

"Draco, if you tell you'll get me into a lot of trouble," Hermione said. Women were also a delusion and a snare. "D'you want to get me in trouble?"

"I wouldn't mention your part in it at all," Draco offered. "A little detention would be good for them, Hermione. Break their spirits. Then they could be your slaves."

"They would be expelled!"

"Then they can go live with Oafy," Draco soothed her. "And be your little squib slaves."

"His name is Hagrid!" Hermione exclaimed, and ran off looking upset. Draco was sure eleven was too young to be having her time of the month already.

"I'm good to her, Terry. I offer her slaves. What more could a woman want?"

Terry coughed. "Maybe you could try to get on a little better with her other friends."

"Get on with Potter?" Draco exclaimed. "Never!"

He was just evolving a cunning scheme which would mean he could catch Potter and Weasley in the act and have them disgraced and turned away like so many house elves who deserved clothes, when Hermione sent him an Owl telling him when and where they were planning to commit their heinous crime, and added that she trusted him.

He was on his way to tell a teacher when Terry wrested the Owl from him and read it.

"Draco! You don't want to get Hermione expelled, do you?"

Draco took a deep breath. "No, no. Of course not, you're right, I'm weak, it's just that I want my revenge against Potter-"

"What'd he do?"

"It's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean," Draco said, not wanting to get into being humiliated on trains. "Look, Terry, you have to help me. Don't let me leave this room tonight. No matter what I say. No matter how much money I offer you. Get Goldstein to help."

"Don't call me Goldstein," Anthony said. "What's going on?"

"I must be kept away from the outside world," Draco informed him. "Invoke the power of your amulet to bar the doors!"

"It's an inhaler, Draco, for the last time."

Draco didn't know why Anthony insisted on using fancy words for his demon of the air, but he had more important things on his mind. He clung to the arms of the chair and stared at the arms on their clock. Sweat was dripping down his face; he could *taste* Potter's expulsion.

"I can't help it, I have to tell!" he exploded at last. "I'll bribe Hermione's way into Beauxbatons or something, Terry, Terry, let me go, it's for the best, it's a sacrifice for the greater good, Hermione will understand-"

"Can't let you," Terry said between his teeth, pushing him into a bedpost. "You'll hate yourself in the morning."

"But I hate Potter *now*!" Draco howled. "So much! So much!" He grabbed Terry's robes.

"You have to stop me, Terry. I'm a man possessed. I can't help myself. No, don't listen to me, I'm raving. Let me go, and you can buy all your sisters pretty things."

Terry looked consideringly at Draco. "It's sweet you're trying so hard to be loyal to your friend," he said slowly. Draco stiffened in mortal offence at the word *sweet*, but Terry wasn't done yet. "I think you were incorrectly placed, Draco. You should've been put in Hufflepuff."

Draco roared and lunged for his throat. Terry's glasses went flying as they hit the floor.

"I kill you, Boot!"

"Anthony, help me!" Terry shouted.

Anthony turned a page of his book. "Sorry. My mum told me I wasn't to participate in strenuous physical activity of any sort."

"Kill you dead!"

The next day, everyone had cast '*Reparo*' on Terry's glasses and they were still hopelessly crooked, and Draco's nose was still tender but not actually bleeding anymore. Hermione told him she was very, very proud, and Draco told her that the thought of seeing Potter for the next six years had drained away his will to live.

She went and poured out the tale of Draco's nobility to her dim little matched set, and Draco felt obliged to stop by the Gryffindor table and set things straight.

"This changes nothing," he announced. "I'm going to get you."

Potter glared at him, hastily swallowed a mouthful of toast and mumbled, "Not if I get you first."

Draco grinned at Terry and Anthony. "Hear that, boys? A Gryffindor is planning to get me. Oooh, I'm so scared. However will I outthink him?"

"You should definitely be in Slytherin," Weasley said in his snotty Weasley way. Draco was

pleased to see Hermione elbow him in the ribs.

Terry slung his arm around Draco's shoulders and Anthony pushed into his side.

"Aw," Terry said. "But we'd miss him."

That day Draco wrote an Owl to his father to say he didn't want to go to Durmstrang next year. He'd made friends in Hogwarts, he wrote. He liked it there.

*

It wasn't long before Potter and Weasley had dragged Hermione into another of their illicit little schemes: Draco caught them talking furtively and going through books, they were the least subtle plotters in the world.

He had a plan to learn lots of really cool Dark Magic, challenge Potter to a duel and beat him so comprehensively that he moved to Bermuda in shame. He also had a plan to get Hermione transferred to Ravenclaw where she would not be lured away from the paths of virtue.

These plans all had to be put on hold when he realised that the end of year exams were mere months away and Hermione looked likely to beat him in every subject. Draco could not imagine what his father would say if his son the Ravenclaw came in second-best.

He stayed in the library, reading even when Madam Pince put the lights out. He lit his wand and read under the bedclothes until Terry took his books away and hid them. He perfected a

system of walking and reading at once, which worked when he got Crabbe to walk in front of him to all his classes, but did not work when he was walking towards the library and an inconsiderate prat strode into him.

"McGonagall won't listen and Snape knows how to get past Fluffy and - *walk much, Malfoy?*" Potter snarled.

Draco shut his book and wistfully contemplated hitting Potter sharply on the side of his fat head. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to," he said coldly, and was gratified when Potter froze. "You're planning to do something unlawful again, and you're talking about it in cunning code!"

He was pleased to see by their very still faces that he had guessed exactly right, and then he got back to studying. He imagined that all this activity would distract Hermione from her studies, which was all to the good - not that he wanted Hermione to do badly, but nobody had the same expectations of her. Draco's father was a politician and on the school board and managed the estate and he was one of the most respected wizards in England, whereas Hermione's father was just a dentything.

When the summer exam finally came around, everyone in Ravenclaw was so tired they wandered around like studious tortoises. Draco switched all of Michael Corner's book covers and it took Corner thirty minutes to realise and then thirty more minutes to tell Draco exactly what he thought of someone low enough to sabotage someone else's study. Draco nodded, triumphantly counted off the minutes as Corner talked, and congratulated himself on the entire hour of study Corner would never get back.

"I've learned my lesson," Draco promised, and left a window open near Kevin Entwistle's notes.

Finishing the exams was a beautiful and triumphant moment that Draco probably would have appreciated more if he hadn't been so exhausted he passed out on the lawn with his head in Goyle's lap. He forbade anyone to talk about that ever again.

At the end of year feast, Draco looked blearily and bitterly over at the Slytherin table, and then at the hall draped with Slytherin colours. This should be his celebration, he thought, his moment of triumph at the end of the perfect school year that would make Father proud of him. That was what he'd planned for.

When Dumbledore announced he was arbitrarily giving the House Cup to Potter, Draco thought for a moment that he must have heard wrong and that the yellow and red flags dancing in front of his eyes were a hallucination caused by stress. Then Terry had to hold him down.

"Just because the man's president of the Geriatrics' Harry Potter Fan Club doesn't mean he can dangle the House Cup in Slytherin's face and then snatch it away!"

Hermione came over to him, flushed with victory. Draco had never been less happy to see her.

"Perhaps Dumbledore could have explained things more," she said, cutting Draco off mid-

tirade. "But I think - we really did something that helped the wizarding world."

"Did you? Did you? Then you should get a shiny medal," Draco snapped. "This is a school. People should get house points for classes, not for helping the world. Slytherin deserved that cup!"

Potter arrived to take Hermione away from their bad influence (ha!) and favour Draco with a glare. "You're not in Slytherin. Get over it!"

"Have a good summer, Potter. Die a painful death," Draco advised.

Once Potter was gone, he made a small piteous sound and let his head fall onto Terry's shoulder.

"Take me away from this awful place," he moaned. "My eyes hurt."

*

"I'm afraid someone's strained their eyes reading in the dark!"

Draco looked around with the hopeless hope that the healer was speaking about someone else, and met his mother's raised eyebrows.

"That happens?" he yelped. "Nobody ever told me that could happen!"

"Well, Draco, to be fair, we never thought it was going to be an issue," Mother remarked dryly. She glanced at the healer and added graciously, "Surprise Sorting into Ravenclaw" as if she was giving an actual reason for Draco's horrible sickness, like: "Mice bit him in the eyes."

The healer nodded. "Happens all the time." Then because she was talking to Draco, she switched back to her air of manic happiness and disconnection from reality. "Someone's going to need glasses!"

Draco's mouth opened and closed soundlessly as he realised this devil woman was seriously proposing to disfigure his face with an unholy contraption.

He stared up into her merciless smile and croaked: "Can't I get a seeing eye dog?"

"A seeing eye dog that reads for you?" Mother asked, sounding heartlessly amused.

Draco curled up sulkily in his chair. "It could be a magic dog. Can't Father buy me a magic dog?"

"You're a funny little man, aren't you!" said the healer, and gave him a roguish wink. "Now, I think I know what kind of glasses you'd like. The Harry Potter frames are very popular this year!"

Draco's glare made her back away, but it did not make her die slowly under the sheer power of his remorseless hate.

"I don't *want* the Harry Potter glasses," he said in a voice of ice. "I don't want glasses at all. But if I must have them, you might want to show me something tasteful."

The healer still looked shaken from Draco's murderous gaze. "Isn't he a dear little lad," she said nervously.

Mother smiled serenely. "I like him."

"By tasteful," Draco said, "I mean expensive."

*

On the third hour of their trip to buy school books, Draco had received four quelling stares, eight glimpses of Dark Objects concealed in his father's robes, fifteen sharp lectures on what a disappointing Ravenclaw son Draco was and no actual school books.

"We shall go to the bookshop *momentarily*, Draco," said Father. "Try to contain all of this Ravenclaw spirit. Quite frankly, it makes me nauseous."

With that, he swung into Borgin and Burke's. Draco trailed sullenly after him, and a horrible little shopkeeper leered at him and had the temerity to remark that Mr Malfoy must be proud of such a fine lad.

"Positively overcome," Father said. "Sorted into Ravenclaw, and allows a Muggleborn to beat

him in every examination. It gives me a warm glow."

Draco thought of long, long hours of grinding work, and his back aching, and his current state of being disfigured around the eyes. He glared up at his father.

"I came second in my entire year," he said coldly. "Most people would think that's pretty good."

"Pity you didn't work just a little harder."

"I did work hard!" Draco snapped. "I worked as hard as I could and she beat me because she's-" The words *smarter* and *better* hung on the air between them, but Draco swallowed them unspoken. Admitting something like that would be... Father wouldn't like it.

"Try to behave, Draco," Father said at length. "Once we're done here, I shall take you to your precious bookshop and then home."

The fact Draco was being punished was unspoken, too. Father had said he might buy him a broom today.

Draco looked around the small, dingy shop full of creepy things, where even the light was dyed pale brown, and tried not to care. He'd deformed his eyes studying last year: if he wanted to beat Hermione this year, he would have no time for flying.

Knowledge is power, he could say to his father when he came first, and his father *would* be

proud. Knowledge is power, Draco repeated to himself, and wandered over to something he recognised as Hand of Glory from library books. A Hand of Glory sounded pretty powerful to him. He could smite Potter with it, probably.

Oooh, or a shiny cursed necklace. He could send it to Potter, with the clever pretence that it was from one of his fans, and then - no, wait, Potter only thought he was a rock star, he probably wasn't interested in bling.

His father's icy disappointed-in-only-son silence left only the sound of a cabinet breathing.

Draco choked down a scream and reminded himself that it was probably just a Boggart, just a Boggart, nothing to worry about at all, not at all! He looked around to see if his father and the shopkeeper had noticed his panicked leap backwards, and they seemed occupied, so he went cautiously closer to examine the Boggart. It'd probably get him extra points in his Defence Against the Dark Arts essays if he'd seen one, they were third year material.

There were eyes gleaming in the slit of the cabinet. Eyes! His greatest fear had eyes!

Draco pulled himself together sharply right about the time he noted the familiar glint of glasses, and worked out that inside the cabinet there was probably a *mirror*, and Draco had been hearing his own breathing. Draco rolled his eyes, thankful that nobody had seen him making a twit of himself, and flung the cabinet door wide.

Instead of a mirror, there was Potter, looking guilty and grubby. Draco clung to the cabinet door as his only means of support.

"Are you *stalking* me?" he asked in an agitated whisper.

"No! Malfoy, don't be such a freak!"

"Are you stalking Mr Borgin?" Draco pursued.

"No, I... why are you wearing glasses, Malfoy?"

"Why are you wearing what appears to be the contents of the inside of a chimney? Do you roll in your own filth?"

Draco composed a newspaper article in his head about the way Potter dirtied himself up and then launched his befouled form on Knockturn Alley. Potter glared at him, glasses broken, and Draco would have sold his soul for a camera.

"I knew you'd be an ass about this! That's why I got into this stupid cupboard!"

Potter was hiding from him! The campaign of terror was working brilliantly and he, Draco Malfoy, was the best there had ever been. He could feel a truly spectacular sneer coming on.

"Really? Because I've heard rumours about your home life, and I just assumed you moved from cupboard to cupboard as you made your way about the world."

Potter went a little red under the grime. "Well, you're pretty stupid. Even your dad thinks so."

Draco was going for his wand when Father strolled over to them, and interrupting Draco's plan of attack was a cruel deed that Draco was sure qualified as parent/child abuse.

"What is *that*?" asked Father, lip curling.

"I can't tell you," Draco said. "You told me never to talk about him in your presence ever again."

"Ah, Harry Potter! Charmed," said Father. Potter remained quiet because he was a sulky little cupboard-living gnome. "I am Lucius Malfoy."

"I know who you are," Potter said coldly. Father's practised smile flickered and died on his face. Potter kept glaring. Nobody was paying any attention to Draco at all.

"I know who you are too, Father. Can we go to the bookshop now, or should we continue to mingle with the lower classes?"

Potter looked at him, but Father's eyes stayed fixed on the precious Boy Who Lived's filthy face.

"Do you wish to make purchases here, Mr Potter, or do you need an escort to the bookshop? Draco and I would be so pleased if you could accompany us: Draco has talked about nothing but you all summer long."

Draco made a strangled sound of denial and rage. Father gestured for Potter to lead the way and Potter, very slowly and keeping a weather eye on Father, climbed out of the cupboard. Father gave Draco a small, unnecessary push and breathed in his ear, "Try to have a little dignity, Draco."

The push left him walking beside Potter, who muttered: "What's it like to be so rotten your own father doesn't like you?"

Fury made Draco's teeth hurt, but Father was watching and so he said in a pleasant tone, "I'm sure you would've found out if your father had lived. But he didn't, did he?"

Potter went dark red under the dirt and Draco, cheered by this small victory, put the maneuver he'd been practising into effect. He slid his glasses down to give Potter a withering look over them, and then pushed them up and looked away with elaborate indifference.

When he looked back Potter was glowering. "You got those glasses just to mock me, didn't you."

"You are so self-centred it makes my brain hurt," Draco told him. He felt almost fond of his disfiguring ocular device for a change.

His and Potter's charming tete-a-tete was interrupted at this point by a cloud of hair, which once Draco stopped being overwhelmed by its sheer volume turned out to be attached to Hermione. She flung herself in Potter's direction.

"Harry, we're all looking for you, Mr Weasley's cornered my parents and he's talking about plugs - where have you been? Your glasses are broken."

"Letting him off his leash was a bad idea," Draco sniffed. "See how he rolls in nasty things when you're not there to tell him firmly to sit and play human?"

She turned to him, glowing, and he stepped back sharply, aware of his father's eyes. "Not when you have Potter all over you, please."

"It was nice of you to bring Harry back," she said, looking mistily proud.

"He *didn't*," Potter yelped over Draco's assertions that he had planned to drop Potter into the Thames.

"Draco," Father said icily. "We need to get your books. I have no desire to stand here prattling about plugs. We and this young lady clearly move in widely different social circles: I am happy to say I have never seen a plug."

Draco did get a chance to talk to Hermione when Father and Mr Weasley actually brawled in the bookshop. It would probably be in the papers, that father-of-fifteen would probably give Father rabies, but there was little Draco could do about it.

"Good summer?" he asked in a low tone. "These Lockhart books look like so much wastepaper."

"Oh, no, Draco, I think they'll be a terribly valuable class guide and a fascinating insight into the life of one of our most celebrated wizards," Hermione told him. "Also he signed mine, look!"

"What is it with you and idiot celebrities?" Draco inquired, pitching his voice so Potter could hear the question.

Hermione rolled her eyes, Potter continued with his lifestyle choice of looking grumpy and unwashed, and a bit of redheaded fluff that looked Weasleyish in origin narrowed her eyes.

"Harry's not an idiot," she said in combative tones, and then returned to eyeing Potter hungrily. Draco couldn't blame her: probably the Weasleys couldn't afford to keep her fed.

Draco practised his new glasses maneuver again, and was pleased when both Potter and the Weasley girl went red. He was planning to follow up on the look, of course, but at that point he had to go home with his father nursing a black eye, as if he was a Quidditch hooligan, and he only had time to tell Hermione he hoped she'd remember to hose her pet down.

They sat in the cold carriage and glared at each other all the way home.

His father said: "How many times have I told you it is not wise to appear less than fond of Harry Potter? And that consorting with Mudbloods is vulgar?"

Draco crossed his arms over his chest and said: "Wrestling with a Weasley? Try to have a little dignity, Father."

His father did not speak to him from that point until Draco went back to school. Draco went back and forth between pretending not to care and being so angry that he almost didn't.

Still, the whole incident left him reconciled to his glasses.

*

The year began well, it really did. Michael Corner snickered at Draco's glasses and Draco cast Jellylegs on him, at which point Terry looked stern.

"Take that curse off, please. Though they suit you."

Draco eyed Corner's twitching form. "I think that suits him," he said wistfully, but he let Terry have his way. Damn Terry and Draco's own extreme weakness in the face of compliments!

Of course, the world was out to get Draco, and everything was downhill from there. Potter tried out for his Quidditch team and immediately everyone was wandering around raving about the best Seeker since Charleston Weasley or something, as if Quidditch was as vital and important as the breath in your lungs and the wind in your hair and he hated that stupid glory hound so much it interrupted his studies.

"Harry really loves Quidditch," Hermione prattled. "I do hope it won't interfere too much with his studies, but it's nice to see him happy."

Yes, fans and fame and the ability to pick and choose and reject friends all over the place, and on top of all that, Potter had Quidditch too. How nice that he got everything.

Draco stared at his book and thought hard about how much he disliked Lockhart in an attempt to distract himself from choking and dying on Potter hatred. This became more difficult every time he emerged from the library and almost tripped over some boy begging for Potter's autograph, or the Weasley girl and autograph boy indulging in a competition to get his attention. Because Potter deserved for everyone to love him. Really.

The girl twit even got in the way stumbling around and looking pale when Ravenclaws were trying to see what all the commotion on Halloween night was about.

Draco solved this problem with a hard shove and an "Out of my way or die, Potter Fan 93!"

It turned out to be a silly frozen cat, which Draco did not think was as exciting as bodies, but then Terry made a soft, sharp noise of concern and Draco looked to see Anthony's pale face.

"Ah," he said, and then saw them looking and tried to smile. "I... think my mother would probably write a lot of letters if she thought I was going to be murdered by the Heir of Slytherin."

"It could be a bad joke," Terry said, his voice wavering.

Draco elbowed Anthony sharply. "Pull yourself together," he said, his voice sounding harsh

and odd in his own ears. "It might be the Mudbloods next, but it's not going to be one of *my* friends."

Terry looked aghast at the word, but Anthony gave a faint, reluctant smile. Draco adjusted his glasses and his blue scarf, crossed his arms over his chest and repressed the urge to kick the stupid frozen cat all the way to the lake where it would sink and everyone could forget and Anthony could stop looking like that.

*

He kept getting Owls from his father talking calmly about the Heir of Slytherin and telling Draco to just watch things unfold. He didn't write back, because while purebloods were obviously superior and Hermione was probably an aberration or perhaps had been switched at birth, he still didn't see why the bloody Heir had to come along and ruin everybody's lives. *His* house didn't have any stupid Heirs in it.

"If we did," Anthony said, "they'd probably just wander about the place being really good-looking."

Draco lowered his book interrogatively.

"Oh, yeah," Anthony went on. "I've been looking at pictures of Rowena Ravenclaw, she was really fit. We're the house of attractiveness."

"How on earth did you get in?"

Anthony flipped him the bird. "I don't know, but I know how you did. You'd be very attractive to any number of little female rodents."

Draco thought being in the house of attractiveness and powerful knowledge was cooler than being in the house of being an animal-torturer and upsetting the already fragile balance of Hermione's mind, anyway. She was darting about the place dragging her twits into ladies' bathrooms (Potter and Weasley were utterly, utterly lost to decorum) and muttering dark things about Blaise Zabini. The only thing that cheered these winter days was Potter hurting himself at Quidditch. Oh, he must be utterly top notch, since he couldn't keep his scrawny orphan frame intact. *Draco* had never hurt himself at Quidditch.

Autograph Hunter got frozen next, and Anthony got more and more tense and ate less and less, and hating Potter became almost a welcome distraction from shouting at Anthony when Anthony looked unhappy. (Draco was not exactly a nurturing person.)

Draco thought about stupid Potter and his stupid Quidditch now and then, off and on, until the moment where Professor Snape said Draco could have the pleasure of hexing Potter, and by the way, this snake spell he knew might be of interest to a dedicated student like Draco.

Professor Snape should be made first headmaster and then king, and it was not his fault that Potter turned it all around by suddenly (of course, because he was so super special) knowing snake language. That was Potter's fault, warping the universe and spoiling Draco's life, just to make himself look better.

Draco assumed it was also Potter's fault that Hermione (on Christmas Day, no less) fetched up in the infirmary with fur on her. He was either a drug dealer or a heartless, cruel prankster, why wouldn't Hermione petition for a removal to Ravenclaw?

"They're my friends," Hermione said from under her bedclothes, "and I love them."

Draco made a truly terrible face that unfortunately she could not appreciate, and said, "I think you have Stockholm Syndrome."

She didn't get out until *February*. Draco was outraged at the incompetence of so-called magical healers whose only solutions were to slap glasses on innocent people's faces and wait till the fur went away, but he did have a few thoughts about how Hermione's absence was improving his chances of coming top.

A few very tiny, minor thoughts. Now and then.

Every time he thought them, he made sure to trip up Potter as a sign that he was Hermione's friend and righteously enraged by Potter's cavalier treatment of her, and then Valentine's Day came and with it, his chance to avenge her properly.

From dawn to dusk of Valentine's Day, Potter was hounded by singing dwarves, singing pixies, and singing First Years Draco had ordered to fill in the gaps. Through a method of careful observation, Draco noted how Potter's face changed from bemusement to embarrassment to despair to weary annoyance, and cackled to himself as he went to and from class.

"Draco, I think you're very disturbed," Terry told him. Draco flapped a dismissive hand at him and dragged him closer to see the effect of the forty-ninth Valentine.

Oddly enough, Potter took one look at the advancing wave of Ravenclaws and went bright red. Draco'd thought he'd stopped being embarrassed in front of other students after Valentine Twenty-Five, but there Potter was, whispering urgently to the dwarf, all red and not meeting Draco's eyes.

A very simple method of getting the attention that Draco required was to yell "I don't think Potter liked your Valentine!" to Potter Fan 93.

"Draco!" Terry said reproachfully. "That poor girl was crying!"

Draco was almost crying with laughter himself, and the burden of feeling almost-glad about Hermione was gone.

Guilt was quickly replaced by horror and disgust at the most traumatic sight of Draco's young life. All he was doing was walking along happily with Potter Fan 93, idly discussing how she'd probably named her dolls Harry and Ginny and conducted a wedding ceremony, watching her lip tremble, and Potter Fan 93 opened a door and then Draco's eyes *burned*.

Inside the room Penelope Clearwater, one of *his* fine, upstanding, intelligent and attractive housemates, was canoodling with a *Weasley*!

The Weasley girl gave a thin shriek. "Oh my God, Percy, I'm so sorry!"

"Penelope!" Draco exclaimed. "How *could* you? You wanton trollop!"

"Draco, go away at once! It's not what - he's my boyfriend," Penelope said, going red.

"I want to hear no more about your deviant pursuits," Draco informed her severely. "I am off to inform the rest of our house about your spiral into madness."

Penelope and the Weasley leaped after him with pleading naked on their faces, and Potter Fan 93 righteously informed Draco that nothing would make her tell on her brother while Draco negotiated for half of Penelope's Charms and Transfigurations notes throughout her school years, for his own private consumption.

Potter Fan 93 paused, and then said: "Actually, if that git's getting notes, I could use some Potions help."

Draco laughed. "I like a girl who resorts to blackmail," he said, and she half-smiled, and after that he thought of Potter Fan 93 as Ginny.

He still thought she had unfortunate taste in men and did not cease to mock it, however.

Those poor, poor Gryffindors. The girls were all right and the boys were blights upon the earth, it was terrible to even contemplate. Draco distracted himself with thoughts about the horror Gryffindor girls faced every day and tried not to think about ghosts and Hufflepuffs being left frozen in the halls.

He laughed when Anthony looked to him. "God," he drawled. "If I'd known he was set on eliminating Hufflepuffs and Gryffindor idiots, I'd have offered the Heir some help."

Terry kept quiet, having worked out that it comforted Anthony when Draco talked like - well, Draco called it talking like a sensible person and claimed he meant every word.

Then the bloody Heir went and Petrified Hermione.

Potter was supposed to defeat evil. That was what they kept him around for! Surely someone would have killed him out of sheer annoyance if there hadn't been any reason to keep him around, but now evil had Petrified Hermione and she'd been Draco's study partner for almost two years and she was lying horribly, horribly still in an infirmary. She was one of the stupid Boy Who Lived's *best friends* and he couldn't keep her out of the infirmary for *two freaking minutes?*

Draco organised people to read class notes to her every day, and tried not to listen to any voices in his head murmuring that now his chances of coming top were very, very good.

Because she was his friend, and precious Potter would probably never have terrible thoughts like that, and Draco wasn't going to either. Whenever the thoughts started to arise, he went to the infirmary and looked at her, and he was sure he would not have wished anything like this on her, no matter how proud he might make his father. There were more important things.

Then one day, he saw a piece of paper trapped between Hermione's fingers. It looked

random, and he was quite sure it wasn't. He sat there staring at it, trying to make sense of it, and wondering what to do.

At that point, Potter showed up, Weasley lurking behind him with his freckled face twisted into an identical expression of hatred.

"What're *you* doing here?"

"Catching her up on her studies," Draco said. "The rest of her friends can't do it: they're all hopeless dullards."

He crumpled the piece of paper from Hermione's hand into a ball, and tossed it at Potter's head. And with the bloody Seeker reflexes Draco had been counting on, Potter caught it, glanced at it and began to unfold it.

Draco got up and left, banging his shoulder hard into Potter's as he went. The Boy Who Lived could figure things out from there and save her: that was what he was supposed to do. That was all he was good for.

Which begged the question of what Draco was good for.

Once Potter had done some mysterious thing and suddenly the Malfoys didn't have a house elf, and Father was in a towering rage, the abrupt cessation of Father's letters indicated he didn't think Draco was good for much.

As if this wasn't enough, Dumbledore decided to make an entire year of work worth nothing by announcing that the examinations were all off. Draco thought of his months and months in the library while stupid Potter played *stupid* Quidditch, and wanted to rip off Dumbledore's head and spit down his neck. He tried phrasing that in more polite tones.

Not very much more polite ones.

"You remind me very much of a student I used to teach here at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said, his mad eyes twinkling at something over Draco's head. He'd probably taken a headmaster's post to support his *drug habit*.

"Students used to be taught here?" Draco snapped, whirling away. "Lucky old them."

It was all Potter's fault somehow: he just knew it. But Hermione could move again, and Anthony didn't look scared anymore, and Terry asked him to come stay that summer. They could go visit the Muggle world with his parents, Terry said, and since he and Hermione were supposed to take Muggle Studies together next year Draco agreed.

He thought next year looked promising.

Chapter Two

On the whole, third year was very strange.

Draco'd already felt unsettled by a summer of not talking to his father, and seeing the Muggles with Terry, and having to make his own hot chocolate without the house elf. Dementors on the train did not help, though hearing that Potter had swooned (some hero he was, the faker) brightened up his first day considerably.

Everything was destroyed with his first Care of Magical Creatures class. That incompetent Dumbledore had actually made Oafy a teacher - and hadn't he been expelled in third year? How would he have any idea how to educate students sufficiently to a NEWTS level? - Draco felt sick about it before he saw the stupid Hippogriffs.

"Remember not to insult them," Anthony said edgily, as Draco approached Potter's Hippogriff, who had bowed to Potter and thus could damn well bow to him. "Remember he said not to insult them, Draco, so control yourself for a change - oh, they look *vicious*, I'm sure Mother would want me excused from this-

"Don't be an idiot, Goldstein," Draco said briskly, and tried to conceal the thrill of triumph when Potter's Hippogriff bowed down to him with a careless: "See, it's not dangerous at all, the great stupid thing..."

One minute he was tickling behind its ears, the next he was in *sheer agony* with blood *everywhere* and screaming at the top of his lungs. In a manly way.

In a manly, outraged way.

"It's killed me!" he howled as Oafy picked him up as if he was a baby. "Put me down at once, you lummo! Hermione, I'm dying, tell my mother that-

"Yeh're fine," grunted So-Called Professor Hagrid. Draco was pleased to notice that Hermione was running along beside them. She was white-faced and clearly understood the gravity of his plight.

"How would you know?" he snapped. "You are *not* a qualified healer. Take me to the nurse at once, you *murderer*. Hermione, stay with me!"

"Of course I will," Hermione whispered.

"Good," said Draco. "He's probably planning to dispose of the evidence by throwing me into the lake."

His first thought was to write to his father about this insanely dangerous class where he would learn nothing and everyone would fail their NEWTs. Except for Potter, probably, since the overgrown lout loved him like his own dwarfed offspring.

Then he lay back against the white sheets, wincing, and remembered that his father was not the sure refuge he had once been. Draco was not going to risk the humiliation of running to Father and having him turn away. Draco was going to have to do this on his own.

When he and Hermione sat in their first Muggle Studies class and Draco heard the terms 'labour' and 'union' for the first time, he had a truly brilliant idea.

Draco went to Hogsmeade on his first trip and bought a pair of handcuffs, which earned him a very offensive look from the shopkeeper. Then he found out where Dumbledore's office was, examined the griffon doorknocker, and decided it would do very well.

He handcuffed himself to the doorknocker, and murmured all the wards he'd looked up over the handcuffs.

When Dumbledore came out, even the Head Fruitcake himself looked slightly less amused and omniscient than usual. "Mr Malfoy... what are you doing?"

Draco glared at him. "I am staging a protest. The students of Hogwarts are being deliberately endangered by the appointment of an ill qualified teacher, and someone has already been hurt with no consequences for said buffoon. I have students who will testify to my claims! I have appointed myself their representative, and our demands are as follows: Fire the imbecile!"

Dumbledore stared at him. "Certainly not!"

"Right," Draco said. "Then I'm not moving. This is a peaceful protest and you can't make me. I will overcome!"

Terry came up to him with food four times a day. Anthony did not come for three days, and then arrived with a placard that said 'Free the Ravenclaw One!'

Hermione came at once and raged at him (as was her way) that Hagrid was a very good person.

"Doesn't make him a good teacher," Draco snapped. "Do you think anyone'll want to take that class for the NEWTs? Just because you like him, doesn't mean we don't have the right to proper classes. Don't go all Potter and partisan on me now."

Hermione breathed out hard through her nose and said, "I don't see why you hate him so much."

"Er, because his poor teaching skills got my arm gutted like a fish?"

"I was *not* talking about Hagrid," Hermione flashed, and stormed away.

She came back with all of her notes from all of their shared classes, and told him that he might as well give up because she was going to help Hagrid with his lesson plans and make him a better teacher, which was a much more constructive approach.

Once Hermione broke the news of impending 'Blast-Ended Skrewts' to people, Draco woke

from an uncomfortable doze on the stone floor outside Dumbledore's office to the shouting of quite a lot of students. He looked around and saw people from every house assembled there.

"What do we want?"

"To keep all our fingers and toes!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

"Free the Ravenclaw One!"

On the fifth day, Draco was told that a Professor Grubbly-Plank had been moved by the students' clear and urgent need, and had replaced Professor Hagrid. Oafy was to stay on as her assistant, with the view to replacing her in a few years, once he was properly trained.

"You certainly have the strength of your convictions," Professor Dumbledore said dryly as Draco unlocked the handcuffs.

Draco privately suspected that what he had was the strength of his burning rage, but he smirked and said: "Free the Ravenclaw One," for the last time, before heading off to his dormitory and a lovely twenty-hour nap.

He awoke to a world gone mad for Quidditch. Apparently nothing on earth, let alone Draco's signal victory over the forces of oppression, was as important as Potter taking the House Cup from Slytherin by winning every single one of his games.

It took Draco all of four minutes to come up with a brilliant plan.

"You're mad," Terry said flatly.

"I wish you would stop saying that," Draco said. "It'll give me a complex."

"I wish you'd stop *being mad*," Terry told him. "We're not helping you. We're not *enabling* you."

Draco looked appealingly at Anthony, who gave him a serene smile. "Mother wouldn't like it."

Several weeks later, Draco went to Crabbe and Goyle, who were his true friends and never questioned him and anyway had much broader shoulders to stand on. They told him his plan was brilliant. They knew how to properly appreciate his very great genius.

And when he stood on Crabbe's shoulders and saw Potter tremble on his broom for one moment, he knew that he had finally and comprehensively won.

Then Potter raised his wand and sent a ghost stag to run them down, and Draco was crushed by the entire weight of Crabbe's body and humiliated in front of the entire school.

Not only that, but Hermione did not exactly come rushing in with the womanly sympathy, either. "I can't believe you'd try to sabotage Harry's game!"

"I can't believe nobody cares that he can make ghost stags!" Draco shouted, batting away Terry's cold cloth. "He's not learning that in normal lessons, you know. This means private tutorials! That's cheating, that is!"

"You were cheating as well, Draco," Terry said, persisting in his cold-cloth activities. "And you were cheating in a very silly way, too. *Try* to think like a Ravenclaw."

Draco's triumphs always ended like this, and it was always all Potter's fault.

*

As far as Draco was concerned, anyone after Potter's blood was welcome at Hogwarts. Sirius Black was a relative, as well. Possibly wanting Potter dead was part of Draco's genetic heritage. Draco regarded it all rather in the light of a Christmas present.

Another Christmas present was that Potter and Weasley finally did what Draco had been expecting them to, and threw away a pearl greater than all their tribe. They fell out with Hermione, using the completely implausible excuses of cats and rats and brooms and whatever else they said to conceal the fact that Hermione's intelligence obviously made them feel small.

Hermione and Draco studied together for five days after the Great Schism before she broke down and wept on him. He tried not to die of terror.

"I always thought that they'd change their minds about being friends with me," she said in a low voice, twisting her inky hands together. "I always thought they'd remember all the reasons they had - not to like me." She swallowed and looked up, her eyes round and wet. "I never had any friends until I came to Hogwarts."

Draco wondered exactly how insensitive it would be to tell Hermione that emotional displays made him feel all panicky and dizzy.

Hermione laughed, a sharp bark of a laugh, and began to ruffle through their notes. "I waited for them to get annoyed with me, and for you to - I know the way you were brought up. I know you're supposed to hate the Muggleborn."

"Well, I do," Draco said automatically, and then was amazed and relieved when Hermione laughed a bit more normally. "I mean... I was just using you for your notes," he said, and it was all true but there were other things that were true as well, and Hermione laughed again and leaned against him and sniffled as if she'd heard them, too.

Draco patted her on the back and said: "You're weeping onto our schoolwork, woman. If you were in Ravenclaw you would learn more respect for your studies than this."

He gave her a very severe look over his glasses and she choked laughing. Madam Pince gave them that Mr. Malfoy You Are My Least Favourite Ravenclaw Ever look, but Draco accepted her undying librarianly hatred in a good cause.

Potter and Weasley's total lack of ability to appreciate Hermione meant she was always around, and Draco was fairly certain that Anthony developed a little bit of a crush on her. Actually, once they'd all seen her flow charts, he was fairly certain Padma Patil had developed a little bit of a crush on her. Ravenclaws knew how to value a scholarly woman.

Whenever they passed Potter and Weasley in the halls, Draco slipped an arm around Hermione's shoulders, smirked pointedly in their direction and began to use words they could never understand like 'lexicon.'

Those were good times, despite the fact Potter sicced a ghost stag on him. Draco took his revenge with more Sirius Black jokes.

Certainly, you had to give the man props for making sure Potter couldn't go to Hogsmeade. Once Hermione unwisely let that slip, Draco made sure to mention in every class he shared with Potter just how delicious Butterbeer was, just how much he was looking forward to Zonko's, and just how terrible it would be to be kept away from Hogsmeade as if you were a scared child.

"Did you see his horrible scarred face?" he asked, almost skipping with glee as he, Anthony and Terry explored every inch of Hogsmeade.

Terry sighed. "I don't see why you need a nemesis at thirteen, Draco. You've got to control these operatic instincts."

"After three years, it would be nice if we could stop talking about Potter," Anthony said. "We could talk about this house instead! It's called the Shrieking Shack because it's haunted, you know."

Draco surveyed the place and was unimpressed. "Surprised your mother will let you near it, then."

"Oh, my mother thinks ghosts are a very interesting psychic phenomenon," answered Anthony, who often babbled on meaninglessly like that for hours.

At that point Draco saw Weasley all alone, and insisted they go over to pay his disrespects.

"Wandered up here all by your lonesome to see a house, Weasley? Bet you'd love to live there. Is it true your whole family sleep in one room, or does poor little Ginny get some privacy in return for putting up with you louts?"

"Shut up about my *sister*," Weasley said, going an alarming shade of puce.

Weasley was so easy. Draco had high hopes of inducing cardiac arrest before he turned seventeen.

"Tell me," he said chattily, "how long do you think it'll be before you drive her away, too?"

At that point, there was a soft noise like the spirits of the damned all rushing for Draco at once, and then he was badly startled by an arcane fall of mud from hell. All over his *hair*.

"It's ghosts!" said Anthony, looking unacceptably pleased. "Proper poltergeist activity! My mum'll be thrilled, she doesn't think Peeves is a good example of his kind at all."

"Fleh," Draco protested feebly, trying to speak through dribbling mud. "Where did it come from? Terry!"

"Don't worry about a thing," Terry said at once, trying to scrub Draco's face clean. "I'm, I'm pretty sure it came from the left! No, right! No, left!"

"Terry! This is no time to panic!" Draco yelled, another lot of mud going all over his new winter cloak. He spun to the right and then the left, and Terry tried to follow him and tripped over something.

Potter's disembodied head appeared out of thin air.

"ARGH!" Draco screamed.

"Ah," said Anthony, reaching forward and taking something silvery out of the air, revealing Potter's whole, unghostly form. "An Invisibility Cloak."

"I knew that," Draco said quickly, and tried to slow down his speeding heart.

Anthony examined the Cloak. "Fascinating to get an opportunity to study one up close. They're really rare, have you read Truttlehorn's thesis on them?"

"Er," Potter replied, looking around rather wildly. "Er. No."

While he was looking around and Anthony was looking at the Cloak and everyone else was looking surprised, Draco's heartrate slowed and terror began to crystallise into cold fury.

"Well, well, *Potter*," he said. "You turned my hair brown. Prepare to die!"

With that, he stooped, scooped up a handful of mud, and threw it at Potter as hard as he could. Potter just stood looking at him for a moment, mud sliding down his cheeks. Then he smiled.

"Right then, *Malfoy*," he said. "It's on."

With that, everyone was diving for mud except for Anthony, who was clutching the Cloak and saying something about his mother and physical exertion. Draco didn't really hear on account of the ringing in his ears, and after a moment on account of all the flying mud. Weasley was big, and Terry was clever, and neither of them were as fast as Potter. Or as Draco.

He could hear Terry laughing, which didn't suit his idea of a battle to the death, and Father would be horrified at anything so childish and silly, and Draco wanted to win more than anything. When Potter got him full in the face with mud and he went blind, he staggered, remembered accurately where Potter had been standing, lunged and pulled him down by his collar into the biggest mud puddle, just about avoiding it himself.

Potter surfaced laughing and shaking mud out of his shaggy black hair like a dog, and Draco would have pointed and laughed if Potter hadn't been holding a fistful of mud tightly as he might've held the Snitch, waiting for the moment to let it fly.

He let it fly in Draco's face and Draco was fairly certain he swallowed some. He hoped Father would sue Potter when Draco died of mud poisoning, but before his tragic death Draco planned to get a few more hits in. He lunged at Potter and caught him in the stomach, and he had Potter on his back and was shoving mud down his collar when Weasley interfered, Terry jumped on Weasley, and everyone was almost killed in the muddy crush.

Despite Potter's cowardly fleeing behind a bush at one point, and Draco's masterly strategy of retreating behind a tree to regroup at another, victory was practically certain when Anthony spoiled sport.

"Uh. Not that all of this vigorous exercise hasn't been appalling to watch and everything, but it's time to go or we'll be in trouble. Lots of trouble. All of us... Terry, drag him if you have to."

Draco declined to be ignominiously dragged home and went back to Hogwarts with an ill grace. Potter and Weasley followed, each group putting enough space between the other to make it clear that while walking in the same direction, they were certainly not walking together.

Terry kept laughing as if it had all been fun: Draco was merely smiling because of the greatness of his almost-completed victory, and a little breathless. Terry and Weasley yelled a few insults at each other that almost sounded friendly, which meant Terry would get a talking-to once they reached their dormitory.

Professor Snape found them all coming up the Hogwarts stairs.

"Ah," he said. "Mr Potter... why, how strange. Here you are in the company of other students who were all in Hogsmeade, when I know very well that you are not allowed to be in Hogsmeade. Would you like to get clean before you see the headmaster or after?"

Draco hoped he could be like Professor Snape when he grew up, even if he wasn't a Slytherin.

"We met Harry coming back to Hogwarts and we all had a fight," Weasley lied promptly.

"Yes," chimed in Terry, to Draco's incredulous disgust. "A friendly fight."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Is that your story as well, Mr Malfoy?" he asked, and when Draco looked up at him he saw Snape knew Potter was their common enemy, and he opened his mouth happily to drop Potter in the soup.

Then he caught Terry's reproachful eye, and saw Potter trying to clean the mud off his glasses so he could see Snape properly. Potter didn't look exactly like the calm triumphant hero with mud all over him and his eyes anxious and peering, and Potter'd laughed through the mud, and all of Draco's friends were *staring* at him...

"Yes," Draco muttered, casting venomous glances all round. "Something like that."

When Professor Snape stalked away, Draco got the distinct feeling he'd disappointed him, which made him feel almost as wretched as the idea he'd let Potter get off scot free.

Once he was gone, horrible Potter smirked at Draco. He was always smirking and sneering, though this smirk was - more hesitant than before. "Sorry for turning your hair brown."

"Sorry for beating you into the ground," Draco scoffed, and swept away with the others while Potter protested vehemently that he had won, which anyone could see was absurd.

You could not go encouraging someone like Potter, of course, it only added to his incredible temerity, because the next day he actually came up to Draco after class and actually spoke to him.

"Malfoy, I was thinking-"

"Don't try to impress me," Draco sneered. "I'm a Ravenclaw. We think every day."

"-about what you said in Transfigurations class earlier this year. About Sirius Black, and how you'd want revenge." Potter looked at him, uncertainly, and Draco didn't know why Potter was asking him this now. "What did you mean?"

Draco put his books into his bag carefully, one by one. Clearly, the mud incident had misled Potter and he thought that Draco'd been condoning his above-the-law attitude to school life: clearly, Potter thought Draco was, he didn't know, another *secret fan*.

"Why, Potter. I thought everyone knew something like that. The details of precious Potter's life are public domain and everything, or don't you keep up with your press cuttings?"

Potter's lips set in a hard line. "Stop talking like such an idiot, Malfoy."

"Oh, I'm an idiot, am I?" Draco snapped. "At least I know pertinent facts, like that Sirius Black was best friends with your dad and that he was the one who gave him to the Dark Lord. *Everyone* knows that, and now that you know, maybe you'll be a bit cautious around Weasley, eh? That lot are blood traitors already. You sure you can trust him?"

Potter was white as paper and actually looked a little intimidating, not that Draco would ever have been scared of Potter in a million years. It was just that he was late for Muggle Studies.

"You're lying," he said in a thin voice. "You're making up a rotten lie just to get me angry or something, aren't you? I don't know why I bothered to talk to you."

"Why don't you check with Professor McGonagall or Professor Lupin?" Draco demanded. "Everyone knows. It's a pity you didn't go to them, I doubt you'd accuse *them* of lying."

Just Draco Malfoy, who told lies and whose hand people didn't take on trains. Just perfect.

"Why don't you just *shut up*," said Potter, slamming out of the classroom.

Draco told Hermione all about Potter's disgraceful and indefensible behaviour, and after a mere hour long rant he saw her lip start to tremble. He knew from long experience that she could listen for three hours as long as she had something to look at, and came to the conclusion that all the extra classes were really getting on top of her. He sent her off to get *Hogwarts: A History* as a special treat, even though he knew he would just end up having to save her from herself and take it away again.

"Only one chapter," he said indulgently as he heard her come back to the table. "You know all that 'Draco, I wouldn't keep reading it if I was *addicted*' stuff doesn't work with me."

"I really don't think that's going to be a problem," said Potter.

Draco pulled off the amazing double withering-look-over-glasses and sneer in record time.

"Of course not, Potter. You don't read books, do you? You're more concerned with the pretty pictures."

"Just because I don't lurk in the library like a creepy little animal in its lair-" Potter stopped. "Wait. I didn't - I'm not here looking for a fight."

"Are you here looking for a book?" Draco suggested brightly. "That is what people usually do in the library. I realise you may be unfamiliar with this whole concept, but people do not lurk in here. They go in here to look at these ingenious contraptions called *books*" - he illustrated his point with generous use of air quotes, and also several more withering looks over his glasses - "which they, wait for it, *read*. This in turn helps them with their *studies*-"

"I have no idea how the Ravenclaws resist killing you in your sleep," said Potter.

"I'm so sorry," Draco said. "Was I going too fast for you? Should I use smaller words?"

"I'm here to talk about Sirius Black!" Potter hissed.

Mandy Brocklehurst at the next table looked up at this and whispered, "Oh my God, *where*?" Potter ignored her because he was a self-centred, oblivious git.

"I asked Professor Lupin and you were right," Potter said slowly, as if this was some kind of big admission, as if Draco wasn't a Ravenclaw and thus almost always right. Of course, Potter didn't have the decency to apologise or anything like that, apologies were clearly for lowly mortals, but he frowned and said: "It was all true. He killed one of my parents' friends, too."

Draco had no idea what to say, but he raised both eyebrows and he hoped it looked scathing. Did Potter have no *friends* to talk to? Draco failed to see how he could have made his epic hatred more clear.

"Ron says - I mean - what would you do? If you were me."

Run screaming to a hairdresser was Draco's first thought, and he should have said it, but for some unfathomable reason he said: "If it were my parents? I'd want revenge."

He looked up: Potter was leaning against Hermione's chair beside Draco, his brow furrowed. He saw Draco looking and said, slowly: "Yeah. That's... yeah."

Well, everyone wanted revenge and they were done here. Harry Potter needn't think that Draco was forgiving like Hermione, that he could be won with a troll fight or a mud fight or a beckon from the hero. Draco didn't make things easy for people and he didn't hand out second chances and he certainly wasn't planning to make exceptions and crawl for Potter like everyone else did, so he'd be charmed if Potter could go away before anyone saw them and thought something filthy, like that they were having a civil conversation.

He gave Potter a look over his glasses, but Potter did not appear to get the hint. Draco breathed out hard through his nose.

"Run along," he clarified, and then saw Hermione coming towards them with a book in her hands. Draco saw the look on her face, and thought he might as well get something out of this very strange encounter. "Potter! Get your fool Weasley to let the rat business go. Hermione *misses* you pathetic wretches."

Potter blinked at him and Draco took it as agreement.

Then he decided to make himself very clear. "Afterwards you should go find Sirius Black. Personally, I hope he kills you a lot."

He smirked and Potter's face went even darker, with fury that was almost like surprise, because really, why shouldn't everyone in the world be on Harry Potter's side? He glowered murderously down at Draco for a moment and then stormed away.

Draco was pleased things were clear.

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Sirius Black did not kill Harry Potter. He managed to evade capture by Dementors, the Ministry and even Professor Snape, but he couldn't use his near-miraculous powers to do a *tiny little thing* like killing Potter. No wonder Potter was strutting about smirking even more than usual, glorying in his amazing powers of not dying and winning the Quidditch Cup by beating people who were frankly not very good.

In the midst of a rant on that topic, Draco got a very dirty look from Cho, and immediately backtracked. "And you," he said hastily. "People who were not very good and you, but you were having an off day. You probably felt sick. You did look directly at Potter's face, which I for one feel was unwise."

"You're horrible," Cho said, but she smiled and looked slightly mollified.

He winked. "I'm lovely."

Actually, he thought that Cho could really have used some advice on her turns and her focus, but he never paid all that much attention to Quidditch, anyway, it wasn't like he was stupid Potter. He was much too engrossed in his studies to notice anything about Quidditch at all.

Besides, Cho always laughed at his jokes and was extremely pretty, which were two things Draco deeply approved of.

It was utterly typical that Draco had to lie to girls so they wouldn't hurt him, and Potter and Weasley could waltz back into Hermione's good graces with nary a word about how they'd cavalierly dropped her. Apparently she'd wept in Weasley's arms, and then the stupid rat hadn't been dead after all, and then the rat was dead again or at least Hermione refused to talk about it. Hermione's confused explanation made Draco jumpy about Inferi rats for days.

"You'll notice I'm not dead yet," Potter took the trouble to inform him on the train home. Apparently that little library conversation had rankled: who knew why, since Draco had been openly hoping for Potter's death since first year.

"I live in hope," Draco returned. "Maybe next year."

Once home, he found out that Hermione's enormous study load had finally defeated her: an Owl came congratulating Draco for coming first overall in his year. He sat with the letter, loving even mad Dumbledore's signature for a moment, one hand pressed against his glasses, and then he went to his father as he'd pictured doing and gave him the letter.

He was all prepared to smile modestly and murmur, "Knowledge is power."

He could *taste* the words on his tongue when Father smiled and said, "Well done, Draco." He was just about to utter them when Father continued: "And I hear that Potter won the Quidditch Cup this year. You used to be rather good at Quidditch, didn't you? What happened - couldn't face the competition?"

Draco looked at him and lost his grip on words. He just left, and walked through the halls of his home, and thought of all that stupid effort, and all of the stupid coldness between him and Father that he'd thought might just go away, and how stupidly *stupid* he'd been, never to realise that he was never quite going to be good enough.

Could've been worse. He could've never realised.

The only thing which redeemed that summer was looking forward to the Quidditch World Cup.

Chapter Three

The Quidditch World Cup began with *Weasleys*, which was so typical of Draco's life.

Father and Mr Weasley exchanged words about Mr Weasley's extreme poverty while Draco tried to make out Hermione's face in a blazing sea of redheads. Once located, she smiled at him. He smiled back, and when Father noticed and frowned Draco made a special effort to smile at Ginny too.

He refused to smile at Potter, no matter what the circumstances, and indeed once he got a look at the shamrock on Potter's robes he quickly discarded his own. He'd support Bulgaria, he thought, and then thought it even more enthusiastically once the Veela came out to dance.

They were so pretty - so shiny - like women Snitches, and if he could just...

"Draco, sit down," Mother instructed firmly.

The burning humiliation arrived a few moments later.

"And don't worry," Mother continued. "Look at your father."

He looked at Father and was perfectly horrified to see him perform a shimmy of his own, presumably to match the Veela in a kind of mating dance.

Mother smiled serenely. "He's always had a terrible weakness for blondes. Every-Flavour Bean?"

Draco looked around and was cheered to see that Potter and Weasley were not laughing themselves sick at his father's expense, but rather making total prats of themselves trying to leap to the Veela. Poor, long-suffering Hermione had her hands full.

After that, with nothing but filthy Father-seducers and Potter-supported Irish peasantry on the field, Draco decided to be sternly neutral, and cheered indiscriminately for every foul. Once or twice he heard Weasley say "Can't *sodding* believe he's not in Slytherin' but he was confident that Hermione was administering elbow jabs every time.

It was a good match, in that it wasn't a satisfactory win for anyone. Draco was in rather a good mood until Death Eaters swept the pitch and made him upset his hot chocolate and step in his marshmallows and beat an undignified retreat to the woods.

They gave him a nasty turn when they first appeared, and by the time he reached the woods he was in a full-fledged temper. He didn't think it was very clever to get drunk and make Muggles fly about the place. The stupid idiots could have caused pureblood children to get trampled. Nobody was as intelligent as Draco: that was his cross to bear.

He was very relieved indeed to see Hermione, and less pleased that she had Tweedledee and Tweedledum with her, though it cheered him up when Weasley fell over a tree root.

"With feet that size," he drawled, "hard not to."

"Oh, look who it is," Weasley spat. "Your parents out there playing Death Eaters?"

"I'm sorry?" said Draco. "You'll have to speak up, you're so low down the income scale that I can't hear you."

"I said, are your parents out there in cloaks and masks!"

Weasley's face was flushed with anger and he towered over Draco, which was mortifying and Draco wished his growth spurt would hurry up. Mother told him that all the Blacks were tall, even crazy Aunt Bellatrix who didn't like sunlight.

"They're certainly out there in cloaks," Draco hedged. "Are your parents not able to afford cloaks? Mother gives to charity quite regularly-"

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Potter snarled.

Some days Draco felt that was all he heard, ever.

"Oh my God, that was so insensitive of me," he declared in dramatically hushed tones.

"Having people talk about their parents must be really hard for you."

"Draco Malfoy!" exclaimed Hermione. "All of you stop it at once, we need to find the others, not stand around saying terrible things to each other! Ron, have you gone mad, we don't even know where Ginny is - come *on*..."

"Hey," Draco said. Potter banged his shoulder going past and he returned the shove with interest, but when Hermione turned he mustered up a smile for her. "Hey," he said, more quietly. "Keep that big bushy head *down*, Granger."

She ran back and gave him a hug. Someone was going to have to teach the girl to control these overwrought emotional displays, Draco almost suffocated in her hair.

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As if having his father get drunk and play dress-up wasn't humiliation enough to last Draco nicely all year, almost as soon as he got back to school he was assaulted by yet another brilliant addition to the teaching staff. He saw the paper talking about Weasley's father, looked at the sort of thing they had to say about the World Cup rioters (*Draco's father*) and he was angry and *Potter said something about his mother* and the next thing he knew, Professor WildMoodSwings had turned him into a ferret and played squash with him.

Not even the news that Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick had joined forces and stormed up to Dumbledore's office like twin whirlwinds of fury cheered Draco up, but Madam Pomfrey let Terry stay in the infirmary once she had put the ointment on, and that helped a bit.

It did not help when Hermione sneaked in under the Invisibility Cloak and almost induced spasms in Draco's already delicate frame.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed, looking frantically about for his shirt. "I'm not dressed!"

"I'm not all that interested," Hermione said briskly, and then her eyes went wide when she looked properly, and saw the bruises dark against Draco's shoulders and ribs. "Oh, Draco."

She got up onto the bed along with Terry, and Draco did not reprimand her for indecent lusts because he felt too sick. Instead he curled up, concentrated on the fact Madam Pomfrey had said he'd be fine soon (that *charlatan*) and was not sure if the cool hand resting gently on his back was Terry's or Hermione's. He felt dimly grateful for it all the same.

"I do not like that man," Hermione announced in the steely way that frightened younger students and made Draco proud. "He could have really hurt Draco."

"I am really hurt," Draco said piteously into his pillow. "I fear I may die."

"Yes, yes, quite," said Terry, who never understood the gravity of Draco's many awful plights, nor appreciated the constant threats Hogwarts posed to his safety and wellbeing.

"Maybe it was because of your dad, but - he had no right. Maybe Professor McGonagall will talk to him..." Hermione's anxious, bossy voice was rather soothing, Draco thought. As was the hand rubbing slow circles into his sore back, which by now he was fairly certain was Terry's.

"No m'gonngull..." Draco mumbled sleepily. "Leave it to me. 'm goin' to plan a hor'ble revenge. Hor'ble revenge!"

"Is that so?" Terry asked.

"Muahahahaha...mm," said Draco decisively, and drifted into sleep with happy, cosy thoughts of mayhem.

Later, he was forced to tell Terry and Hermione that he would lock them in a dark, deep dungeon if they ever disclosed what he was like drugged to the community at large.

As if this was not pain enough and to spare, there was the entire Triwizard Tournament fiasco. At first Draco thought it was going to be cool. No people taunting him by playing stupid Quidditch, and they had World Cup stars and shiny Veelalike girls to brighten up the gloomy old pile. It seemed like nothing could go wrong.

Except of course it could. Of course, Potter had to cheat his way into the Tournament because he was a fame junkie, and instead of getting him help people gave him a super special extra-Champion spot in the Tournament. Which meant the whole school, in an exciting change of pace for everyone, was buzzing about Potter.

Sometimes Draco thought Potter plotted to give him migraines. If Draco had to get a new prescription and ended up with Butterbeer-bottle glasses he would not be held responsible for his actions.

Hermione and her flow charts had always been an oasis of peace for him, and now at this critical time they let him down. Weasley and Potter had some violent lovers' tiff and

Hermione started carting Potter around with her to the library. The library!

"I can't believe you're doing this," Draco said. "After all we've meant to each other. In our *special place*."

"Would you hush, Harry's very upset," Hermione hissed.

Draco was sure that with the whole world at your feet, the loss of one Weasley was *devastating*. He cast a sour look over at Potter, who was mooching unhappily about the bookshelves, looking hurt and bewildered by the lack of Quidditch pitches and screaming fans in the library.

It was not just that he hated Potter, which of course he did, with a pure and holy hatred that would burn forevermore. It was that Potter was utterly impossible to study around.

Even though he wasn't playing Quidditch this year, it *felt* like he was always storming in fresh off the pitch. He was always rumpled and breathing hard or talking too loudly, with no more manners in the library than Crookshanks would've had, if Hermione had decided to drag her cat along. He'd sit down with a book and it would be all of two minutes before he was doodling with his horrible scratchy quills, or sighing loudly, or humming to himself, or in some other restless stupid Potter way *driving Draco to distraction*.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you," Draco remarked coldly on the third day of this torment. "*Saboteur*."

Potter flattened his hair with malice aforethought. How could a person who wasn't even very tall have elbows all over the table? It was too much for anyone to bear.

"What?"

"Look, I need to concentrate, so you have to stop!"

"You're actually quite mad, aren't you," Potter said.

He gave Potter the Glasses Look, and Potter appeared unimpressed, so Draco gave it up and tried to focus his mind on Arithmancy. His mind was a clear, blank slate. His mind was a cool, serene ocean.

Potter began to tap against his teeth with the nib of his quill. If Draco sharpened his ruler he could stab Potter with it repeatedly before anyone had a chance to summon medical assistance. He heard Azkaban was lovely and peaceful this time of year.

He forbore, reached out and firmly drew Potter's arm down to the table, then let go of Potter's wrist.

"This? Must. Stop."

"Look," said Potter. "I'm not shouting in the library or anything, what am I supposed to do, drop dead?"

"Yes," Draco replied instantly. "That would be super."

"I'm really bored! This is - having Hermione as your best friend involves a lot of hanging around in the library, and I'm just not used to-"

"Hang on, hang on, who said *you* were Hermione's best friend?"

Potter stared at him. "Well, you're not. You're Terry Boot's best friend."

"I fail to see what that has to do with anything. I have a lot of love to give."

The blank incredulity of Potter's stare made Draco realise that his competitive nature had led him too far astray. Again.

"Well," Potter said, leaving the subject of Draco's love pointedly aside, "I'm not weirdly built to enjoy all of this, like you and Hermione. It's not easy for me."

Easy for him, Potter said. Draco thought of the long nights in first year, reading in the dark when everyone else had gone to bed because they all seemed to have some sort of inner discipline he lacked, some motivating force that kept their eyes from straying to the clock or the Quidditch pitch or anywhere but the page. He thought about beating Potter to death with *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Obviously you ought to give up now, then, since everything *should* be easy for the wonderful and amazing Boy Who Lived. You can feel just as martyred as you like because your pet Weasley bit the hand that fed it, and now people in your school are actually asking you to read the nasty books, but you have *no right* to martyr me-"

"And it all comes back to you!" Potter shouted. "Why am I not surprised? And shut up talking about Ron that way!"

Hermione's head turned and she began to hastily collect her books from the shelf she'd been lingering at.

"Look, Potter," Draco snapped. "Here's what you do. You try really hard to study and to keep quiet, focus all your energy on it until you're really tired, and then if you're still restless even though you're exhausted, if you genuinely feel that you can't stand it for a minute longer, go out and run around the stupid halls until you have to lie down on the stone, and then come back here and study some more! And now go away and leave me alone," he said in calmer tones, opening a book and taking refuge behind it. "I hate you," he added, to clarify matters. "I hate you, and I hate your face."

Potter was silent for a change, though this minor miracle did them no good. Madam Pince was already bearing down on them, and Draco was chucked out of the library for the second time in his life. Like so many terrible things in Draco's life, it was all Potter's fault.

Something had to be done, and so Draco did it. He stayed up half the night re-writing his study schedule.

The next day when Potter was still there, Draco put up with his fidgets that filled the room.

He put up with the hair-flattening and the doodling and the table-tapping and the alarming number of elbows. He waited, still as a studying panther, for the moment when the clock hit five minutes to.

Then he put down his quill and said: "Potter, you are a constant disappointment to me and to everyone who grew up with the myth of the Boy Who Lived. Your relentless twitching is probably a sign of mental retardation, and I'm sure you only pass your classes because the teachers favour you. Stop humming, stop moving and if possible, stop breathing at once. You cheated to get into the Triwizard Tournament and I am glad you did because it will put you in terrible danger, but I imagine your ego is too massive for you to have even considered that. I hope that the Triwizard Cup feeds you to its young, and in conclusion, your parents are dead."

Potter looked badly startled. "What the hell is the matter with-"

"Shush," Draco commanded. "It is vital that I study. Vital!"

"But you - you-!"

"Spoke to you, yes, because I had to tell you off or combust, which would not have been productive. And you could have interrupted me earlier, but you didn't, which is a shame for you because my next break isn't for another hour."

"Your next break. What are you *talking* about, Malfoy?" Potter demanded, fixing him with wild, staring, crazy eyes.

"It's all in my study plan," Draco informed him, reaching for that deeply important piece of parchment, his many-coloured plan. It was adorned with leaves and ravens, because even though Draco had made it at four in the morning there was no reason to do a shoddy job.

Potter took it, his face filled with a sort of absent horror. "I'm in your study plan. I'm in your study plan in *red letters*."

"Yes," said Draco. "I hate the colour red, and I hate you. My studies cannot be interrupted, and this was the only thing I could come up with at such short notice. Please be as quiet as you can, and perhaps I will go easy on you next hour."

"Malfoy, you complete mental patient, I do not need you to *go easy* on me-"

Madam Pince stopped by their table and fixed them with eyes cold as winter.

"Give me a reason," she breathed. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Potter opened his mouth like a fool, but Draco glared at him and he shut it. Then he opened it again right away, to give one of his unacceptably noisy sighs. Draco buried himself in his book and tried not to picture burying Potter in quicklime.

He could feel Potter's eyes sliding around to rest on him more than usual: like Potter's sighs and Potter's humming, his gaze seemed to have an incredibly irritating physical presence all of its own. He caught Potter at it a few times and gave him the Glasses Look, and Potter just

looked away from Draco to his watch, and then when Draco looked away, he looked back at Draco again! It was impossible to work under these conditions!

Draco broke after fifteen minutes. "What is it, Potter? What do you want?"

"Is it time for you to talk again yet?" Potter asked, and then at Draco's outraged stare he said defensively: "I'm *really bored!*"

Draco had told everyone that Potter was a shameless attention whore, so anxious for love after the tragic demise of his parents that he would prostitute himself for the media and take any attention anyone was willing to offer him, and here was the proof. With nobody to see it but Hermione, who seemed blissfully unaware of aught but Arithmancy in the world.

Life was so very unfair.

*

By the fifth day, Draco's insults had to become more creative. He'd always thought he had a bottomless pit of insults available for Potter, but he'd never thought about being trapped with Potter in an endless cycle of dusty library days.

"Your hair is like a wasteland after war, with no survivors, thorns where fields should be and despair all around. Know that," was probably going too far.

"Right," said Potter. "Why don't you play Quidditch anymore?"

"Time's up!" Draco announced.

"No it's not," Potter replied, trying to lord it over Draco just because he had a silly Muggle contraption watch thing. "I remember - you asked if I played Quidditch, in the robe shop. You said you wanted a racing broom."

Potter was deliberately reminding Draco of the first time they had met so Draco would remember how it was the first of many times Potter had been so very clearly unimpressed by him. Potter's ploys to make Draco feel small were pathetically transparent, really.

Draco dug his quill spitefully hard into the parchment and it broke. "I liked Quidditch when I was very young," he said. "But now I have put away childish things. I need to study: it's pathetic that you have so few friends your only choice now is to be somewhere you hate with someone you hate. What's it like to be so pathetic even Weasley's dropped you?"

Draco saw Potter flinch. That one had stung. "Your mother and father didn't look all that happy together at the World Cup," Potter said, cold and deliberate. "Are they both disappointed in you, or is it that only one of them has seen the light?"

Draco was moving to hit Potter in his stupid fat head when Madam Pince bore down on them like the wrath of God and threw them out on their ears for the second time that week. Draco and Potter glared at each other and then Draco stalked away to his common room, where he could, of course, study all he wanted. Only the library was his place.

His, and Potter'd taken enough away from him. If Potter would just stop existing everything would be fine, and Draco would never have had to sit through Potter winning the Quidditch Cup, seeing his stupid Firebolt cut through the air and knowing, even if he took it up again right away, even if he practised and practised, there was no way on earth that he would ever compare.

One of the reasons Draco was a Ravenclaw was that he did not like to be outclassed. It was stupid that Potter could always manage to make him feel it, and make him feel it was personal.

*

Apparently, the only thing Potter liked more than judging and dismissing people was having some excuse to act instead of think. That was the only reason Draco could come up with for Potter continually shutting books he hadn't read and pestering him.

"What d'you know about dragons?"

Draco didn't even bother to give him the Look at this point, but he felt it was implied. "Big scaly fiery monsters of death," he said. "Are you still involved in your *dragon smuggling ring*? If you have made Hermione your *moll*, there will be serious consequences!"

Potter made a funny sound. "I don't even know how to talk to you."

"Don't talk to me," Draco said. "Because I hate you."

Five minutes to every hour in the library became an odd sort of truce, loath though Draco was to admit it, a truce Draco was forced into because if he got thrown out of the library three times in one year he was pretty sure his housemates would lose all respect for him.

Still, that was no excuse for the time Potter said: "Fancy the Chudley Cannons' chances this year?"

Draco should have looked reproving and paid attention to his book, but instead he found himself saying, "Either you are mad, or you are stupid, or quite probably you are both. The Tutshill Tornados are going to win this year, they have the best record and the best training and their Seeker is the best in the field. Besides, the Cannons' Keeper's wife is having a baby."

"So what? Maybe he likes babies."

"Maybe he'll be up nights all season," Draco pointed out, and then saw the looks Terry and Hermione were giving him and hastily hid his face in his book. "I hate Quidditch and I hate you and I hate Quidditch," he said flatly. "Go *away*."

"Only you don't," Terry said that evening, while Draco was absorbed in creating something that would finally humiliate Potter to the dust.

"I don't what?" Draco asked. "Is the other guy called Digby?"

"Diggory," said Cho, who, like several others, was craning from their spots around the fire to see what Draco was doing. "Cedric Diggory. Draco, I don't think that's really very kind."

"You don't hate Quidditch!" Terry said loudly. "I've seen the magazines under your bed."

"*Terry Boot!*" Anthony exclaimed. "You should be ashamed! Draco has a right to his privacy."

Draco did not dare lift his face and meet Cho's eyes. He hated all his dormitory mates so very, very much.

"The *Quidditch* magazines, Anthony," Terry said in his best weary way. "You could try out, you know, Draco. If you wanted."

"I'd like flying with you," Cho put in. "You've got the build for a Chaser."

"I don't want to," Draco said coldly, and did not mention that if he'd wanted any spot - which he *didn't*, he was much too busy with his studies - he would've wanted hers.

He straightened up and pressed the badge, and *POTTER STINKS* leaped out against the blue walls.

"I don't know what your *problem* is," Potter said angrily the next day, having the temerity to look betrayed and the gall to obviously, deliberately shove into Draco as he was sitting down.

Draco's ink bottle was upset and his shoulder hurt, and Potter glared at him in an unacceptably righteous and aggrieved manner.

"No problem," Draco said icily. "I'm just a big fan of Whatshisface."

Unexpectedly, Potter's mouth twitched. "*Cedric Diggory.*"

"Sure, him," Draco said dismissively. "Big fan. I just know he's going to win the Tournament!"

"Probably," Potter muttered.

That single word jarred so much with everything Draco knew about Potter that Draco put his book down and stared openly. Potter looked intently at his book, which was clearly nothing but a foolish pretence, but after a moment Draco decided to let it be. He had no idea what to do with it, so he lifted his book back up to his face, still watching Potter warily in case he exploded, and then relaxing when he was safely behind his book once more.

*

Draco realised that the entire Potter issue had gotten out of hand when library started overlapping into life, as on the occasion of Anthony's glorious surprise party.

He and Terry had been utterly silent on the subject of Anthony's birthday this year, leaving Anthony wandering about crestfallen. Stupid Corner had hammed it up ridiculously but

fortunately Anthony hadn't suspected, and Kevin Entwistle had been creepily, disturbingly quiet like he always was.

Everything went exactly to plan. Anthony slouched dispiritedly down the steps to the common room, everyone held position, and as soon as his feet hit the last step they released the strange air-filled balloons.

"Happy Muggle birthday!"

"What? Ahh! What?" said Anthony. "Mother doesn't like me to be subjected to shocks like this. What have you done?"

"We know you miss your mum and the Muggle world," Mandy said, giving him a hug. "So we brought the Muggle world to you. See, we're all dressed up, and look at all the Muggle things Terry's dad got us!"

"The cake was baked in an *oven*," Draco announced with satisfaction, from his place against the sofa back. "I watched the house elves do it myself."

Anthony looked touched and delighted, as well he should, by all their wonderful gifts. Not least of which included Mandy wearing jeans, a teakettle with a real plug attached, a picture that stayed still no matter how long you watched it, and a T-shirt Terry's dad had had specially made with 'EXCUSED FROM LIFE' on it.

The party was in full swing and Draco was wearing Anthony's amulet when Hermione skipped in and Potter shambled in after her. He was invading Draco's turf now, it was too much!

"What is he doing here?" he hissed at Hermione, who only smiled and gave him a hug.

"I wanted to give Anthony his present," she said, as if that explained Potter's invasion of Draco's sanctuary. "Hi. You look funny in jeans."

"Funny debonair?" Draco asked, waggling his eyebrows.

She laughed and behind her, Potter dared to snort. Draco hadn't been addressing him, *actually*. He'd know when Draco was addressing him from Draco's sneer of hatred.

Hermione, false friend that she was, abandoned Draco and left him lumbered with Potter, who was looking around with an air of vague alarm, as if he totally failed to recognise the people he'd been going to class with for four years. He was also giving Draco strange sidelong glances.

"You're asthmatic?" he said after a moment, gesturing to the amulet.

"Don't call me names when you're in my common room, Potter."

At that point Anthony, bless his heart, saw Draco's predicament and came to rescue him. Which was lucky, since Potter's lips were twitching again, clearly as he thought up another mocking name.

Potter went back to looking vague. "Happy birthday, Alan."

"What?" said Anthony.

"*Unbelievable*," said Draco.

"Hi, Harry," said Cho, who was too nice for her own good.

Potter crushed birthday cake against his chest, the clumsy fool, and Draco took umbrage at seeing him spoil the cake that Draco had personally supervised.

He also took umbrage at the way Potter looked at him when Draco sang 'Happy Weird Muggle Birthday To You' to Anthony, puzzled and a little cross, as if Draco were - jigsaw pieces that had stuck together, or something. He wasn't, and he took offence.

He blew energetically into the amulet as he'd seen Anthony doing, and wished for the air demon to come and suffocate Potter to death, but nothing happened except for Potter calling Mandy Melanie, and generally acting like a huge dolt. Which was normal enough that Draco let it be normal, and did his Flitwick impression when Cho asked. He wasn't letting the side down, or anything. He still had his Potter Stinks badge on his funny Muggle shirt.

That was the last day Potter had anything to do with Draco's normal life, anyway. He fought a dragon like a big stupid show-off and Weasley was apparently so overcome by Potter's manly, dragon-defeating ways that all was forgiven. Which meant the library almost-truce of dire necessity was off. Over and done with.

Draco said he wasn't wearing any SPEW badges unless Hermione wore his Potter Stinks badges, and proceeded to corner a reporter and feed her a story about Potter's tragic, hopeless love for Hermione. Potter'd had his chance on the bloody train in first year, and he'd made it clear exactly what he thought of Draco then.

*

With the scourge of Potter removed from his studies, it had obviously been foolish of Draco to hope his life would get better.

"Ask a girl to the Yule Ball! I... is it legal to force us to submit ourselves to this kind of humiliation? I don't even know any girls!"

Hermione put down her quill and gave him an outraged look. Sometimes Draco wished she had a better sense of humour, particularly at times when it would have saved him from being eviscerated with the sharp edge of her tongue.

"Any girls who aren't taken," he said much more quietly, and slyly flicked his eyes to where Viktor Krum was lurking about, pretending he could read.

He had been doing this for a while. On the whole, Draco approved. Krum was rich and famous and a pureblood, which was precisely what Hermione deserved and meant if they had babies they'd be practically pureblood and genius athletes. Though if Krum tried anything

fast with a youthful, innocent lady Draco had a plan of dire vengeance just waiting to unfold into Krum's world of pain.

Meanwhile, Draco was trying to work out some way to get the attention of that Slytherin girl, Pansy Parkinson, some way which didn't involve throwing things at her. He liked the sneer on that one.

"I'm not taken," Hermione mumbled, and rubbed her wrists as if they were sore from writing and holding heavy books. Draco looked at her sharply, because he knew Hermione had arcane powers and her wrists were *never* sore from writing and holding heavy books, and Hermione blushed. "I just thought I'd wait a bit longer," she said, her voice sinking further. "In case Ron's getting ready to ask me."

"WEASLEY?" Draco shouted at the top of his voice, and was promptly thrown out of the library. He saw Pansy Parkinson sniggering at him and crossed her off his list: unfortunately, this left him with a list of nobody.

"I am embarrassed even to know you," Hermione told him sternly as they went down the corridor trying to manage armfuls of books.

"*Weasley*?" Draco asked. "Hermione, Hermione, I thought better of you than this! Potter was the one I was afraid of, at least he's better-looking and has some money, but *Weasley*?"

"I don't care about any of that," Hermione told him, and Draco looked at the severe line of her mouth and realised that this was one of the times that Hermione had entirely and irrevocably made up her mind.

Weasley. God in Heaven!

At least the menfolk of Hogwarts were not the only ones writhing in humiliation, however. Hermione's anxious waiting for Weasley to ask her to the ball suggested this, and Draco eavesdropped on some older Ravenclaw girls to confirm it.

Fortunately Draco sitting alone with a book did not arouse suspicion, since Terry was sitting with Anthony and Corner trying to console them over their terrible ordeal asking out Fleur Delacour. They'd both done it at once and she'd made them cry: on the whole, Draco liked her a lot.

"Bloody Beauxbatons lot," Marietta Edgecombe sighed, toasting her slippers by the fire. "French hussies everywhere, ensnaring all the decent Ravenclaw boys. I can't believe they sit with us, it's like Dumbledore is deliberately trying to ruin our Yule Ball. I can't believe we're going to have to go looking for boys outside our house."

"Fleur is awfully popular," Cho said, hugging her knees. Her face was just peeping up from a red woollen comforter, dark hair shining against the material. Draco liked the effect: she looked cute as a button.

"Ha, like you have to worry about going looking," Marietta laughed. "Cedric's been asking to, ah-ha, talk to you about Quidditch, for days."

The dusky red flush in Cho's cheeks matched her comforter. "He's nice-looking," she allowed in a shy sort of way.

"And then of course Harry Potter's been mooning over you all year," Marietta went on. "Spoiled for choice if you want Triwizard Champions, really."

"I don't, of course I don't!" Cho exclaimed. "They both seem really sweet, and - well, obviously I'm flattered, but it *would* be nice to go with someone I actually know."

Marietta murmured agreement and both girls stared into the fire and looked depressed at the thought of French hussies.

Cho smiled a tiny bit. "Of course, I could *get* to know Cedric."

"Not Harry?" Marietta asked. "Well, Cedric is better-looking."

"I didn't say not Harry," Cho said. "Only I know Cedric a little more, and besides, Draco hates him, he'd be awful about it for days."

"Ohhh, awfully worried about what Draco Malfoy thinks of you, aren't you?" Marietta murmured in a lower voice.

Draco leaned in to catch the last bit, and the movement caught Cho's eye. She went bright red. "Shut up he's right behind you," she whispered, sounding horrified, and then Marietta and Cho burst into that indecipherable girlish rush of whispers and giggles which no man could hope to make sense of.

Draco had heard enough, anyway. He unleashed the full force of his outrage on the boys' dormitory.

"So not content with taking our dignity, not content with taking our land, Harry Potter is now trying to take our women!"

"What land?" asked Terry.

"What dignity?" asked Anthony, grinning at him.

"Would you all please focus?" Draco demanded. "Cho Chang - *our* Cho - is being hunted down by that ruthless predator, Potter! Oh, he thinks he can just have everything he wants, doesn't he? The nerve of him! A Ravenclaw - I honestly don't think he can read, I really don't. This makes me terribly, terribly angry."

"We're getting that," Corner said, rolling his eyes in that stupid Corner way he had. "Why don't you just ask Cho yourself? She's pretty fit."

"And Cho, bless her heart, she's too soft-hearted to see that Potter is a - what did you say?" Draco stared at him. Then he slid his glasses down his nose to give him the Look, and when Corner did not flinch he pushed his glasses back up and studied him again. "Hmm," he said. "Interesting idea."

"I think it's a stupid idea," Terry spoke up sharply.

Draco deflated at speed. "You're right. What was I thinking, she's really attractive and she's older and all the precious *Triwizard champions* are after her, just another thing Potter can have that we less favoured mortals-

"Shut up!" Terry very nearly yelled, and Draco stood stricken.

Terry looked peculiar and Draco thought he might be angry, which was weird and wrong. With anyone else Draco would have attacked as the best form of defence, but he felt sort of frozen in disbelief. This was the way their dorm worked: Kevin Entwistle was creepily quiet, Corner was a swaggering pretty boy, Anthony forbade everyone to do everything and Terry, no matter what the circumstances, was never, ever angry with Draco.

"That's not what I meant," Terry said quietly after a minute, and Draco relaxed. "Cho likes you: most people do, you - with the impressions and everything, you make people laugh. Everyone knows who Draco Malfoy is, and she said she'd rather go with someone she knew. I just didn't know you fancied her."

The relief of it all made Draco beam at him, instantly mollified. He pictured Cho, flushed by firelight and wrapped in her red comforter, and then he pictured Potter's face when he saw that Draco had what *he* wanted.

His wooing campaign started the next day. His plan of action involved abandoning the library for the common room, which would also give Krum time alone with Hermione to wean her off unfortunate Weasley notions. After all, Draco had to use the advantage of being in the same house for all it was worth, since Digby was far too good-looking and Potter was far too famous.

He sat beside Cho around the table, looking at her squinting at her Arithmancy homework, her nose scrunched up in distress.

"I'll do your homework for you," he offered.

Cho looked scandalised. "Draco, no you won't!" Draco had a moment to fully appreciate how terrible he was at this whole girls lark, and how much he wished he'd been Sorted into Slytherin and made more cunning, when Cho raised an eyebrow. "I can't *believe* you said that," she went on, shaking her head. "Have you *no* shame?"

Draco noted that she was smiling just a tiny bit, showing a dimple, and he smiled quickly back. "Not much."

Cho smiled some more and Draco felt warmed by it, and even more warmed when she said thoughtfully: "If you wanted... you could help me with it. You're really smart, aren't you?"

Draco slid his glasses down his nose, looked at her, and then smiled instead of sneering. He was rather self-consciously hoping that it was sexy.

He looked at Cho smiling back at him and said: "I'm *brilliant*."

The next day, he carried her books to class. About halfway through the day, he ordered a first year to carry them instead, but Cho got that half-amused, half-scandalised look again and Draco decided to keep doing it himself.

At dinner a very good-looking bloke from the Hufflepuff table was glaring at him. Draco glared back.

"So there he is," he said. "My rival, Cedric Digby."

"His name is Diggory, Draco," Terry said, rolling his eyes. "You've got his name on your badge. Read your badge."

As far as Draco was concerned, his badge said *Potter Stinks* and that was all that mattered. That, and the fact Cho had heard him calling Cedric his rival, and smiled about it a bit.

Since he was getting into this wooing thing, he debated writing poetry that compared her to the Triwizard Cup, but the mockery this idea generated was so intense he gave up and sat around sulking about being a tortured and misunderstood artiste.

Then he went downstairs and told Cho that his favourite Quidditch team were the Tutshill Tornados.

She looked up with a smile from her homework. "Really? Me too."

And then it was easy to slip into the chair beside her and discuss the Tornados' excellent chance at winning this year, and the dead cert that was them getting into the finals, and Cho threw down her quill and ink went all over her homework.

"You really do like Quidditch," Cho said, sounding pleased about it.

"I like your voice," Draco said, and wished the floor would open up and drop him into the Slytherin dungeons where Crabbe and Goyle would shield him from mocking eyes forevermore. Since this didn't happen, he went on desperately: "It's - exotic."

"It's Scottish," Cho told him. "Oliver Wood had the exact same accent."

"Well," Draco said. "Well... it's cuter on you."

Cho smiled and bit her lip to hide it. Draco drummed his fingers on the table and then realised they were now covered with ink, and was extremely vexed.

"D'you need a tissue?"

"Er - no, I am Malfoy of the Black Hand, feared throughout the Spanish main. Look, Cho, d'you want to go to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Yes!" said Cho. "Wait. What?"

"Hogsmeade. There are shops."

Cho waved this enticement aside. "I - I know that, but - we're not going to Hogsmeade again until after the Yule Ball." Cho stopped and looked mortified. "N-not that I'm, that I'm hinting anything - I - oh my God."

She abruptly put her face in her hands. This conversation was spiralling into madness.

"I want you to go to the Yule Ball with me!" Draco exclaimed.

Cho relaxed considerably. "Oh thank God. I mean, yes. I mean..." She stopped, and lifted her red face from her hands, caught his eye, and then looked away again.

"I wanted to work up to the Yule Ball," Draco confessed, because she looked uncertain and she had such long eyelashes. "I hear that I've got a lot of competition for you and your cute voice."

"Well," said Cho, and looked pleased.

After a moment, Draco said thoughtfully: "I'd hold your hand, only mine are an inky ruin."

"You could go wash them," Cho offered in a discreet whisper. "I'll still be here when you get back."

"Right, then. Mind you are. My people have ways of finding you."

Draco was smiling and Cho was smiling, and as Draco made his way to the loos he looked back and saw her pick up her ink bottle and start to blot, smiling more broadly now she thought he couldn't see, and he almost tripped over a chair.

*

The next days brought more beautiful tidings on the mountains.

"Wangoballwime?" Draco gasped, and had to put his head down on the Ravenclaw table at dinner. "He didn't. He didn't say that. It's too good, I can't take it."

Cho hit Draco's shoulder with her fist. "Stop it. I *knew* I shouldn't have told you. Don't be awful to Harry, please. He looked so embarrassed, and I thought his eyes were going to drop out of his head when I said I was going with you."

"You told him that?" said Draco. "Right. Come here, beautiful."

Cho laughed and rather to Draco's surprise, did not object, so he ended up with his arm around Cho Chang. He wasn't exactly used to having an armful of pretty dark girl warm against his side, but he felt that he could become used to it quite quickly.

"Promise," Cho said in his ear, and Draco promised because girls apparently had powers.

His promise in no way precluded him from enacting, with the varied range of Potter expressions he'd thought up (sad, sad, so sad, and crying for his dead mother) all the versions of 'Wangoballwime?' he could think of for the boys that night. Eventually they asked him to

stop cackling and go to bed.

He continued carrying Cho's books to her classes. She seemed to like it, and he'd always thought girls would have strange requirements like that.

As he walked her up to her Divinations lesson, talking idly about the Wronski Feint, he planned to kiss her. Oh yes, it would be a glorious and spectacular kiss, possibly on the dance floor at the Yule Ball, surrounded by chandeliers and rustling gowns and punch bowls, it would be fantastic. She would be utterly enraptured.

He gave her her books and an absent smile, still plotting the astonishingly wonderful kiss to be, and Cho moved in and knocked against him.

"Careful, you'll spill your books," Draco said.

"Er. Yes. Silly me," Cho mumbled.

Draco wandered down the spiral stairs happily musing on chandeliers and his shining brilliance, when it occurred to him forcibly that he was the stupidest man who had ever lived. He raced back up the few steps and found Cho still standing there, and when she saw him her dark eyes lit up. He stood in the shadowy stairwell and saw chandeliers already.

"Terribly sorry," he said. "Please forget the last two minutes of our lives."

He wanted to add that he was new at this, but he was afraid he was making it excruciatingly clear already, so he stepped onto the step above hers so he could feel tall and manly (instead of the same height as she was, when would the growth spurt come, *when?*), threaded his fingers through her black hair and brought her mouth to his. Cho's mouth opened soft under his, warm, as if she was happy to be kissed, and her free hand came up to touch his face. He felt her Quidditch-callused fingertips graze his cheek.

He stepped back, and her dark eyes and wet lips shone in the low light.

"See you later," he murmured, and was horribly late for Transfigurations. Potter glared at him as he came in and he just smiled, not even wanting to taunt him, feeling his whole body thrumming with satisfaction.

It was like that at the Yule Ball. Cho stood beside him, glowing in the circle of his arm, as they watched the Champions dance, and he didn't care if other people were in the spotlight. Though he was glad he and Terry had done Hermione's teeth and hair before the ball.

"She looks really nice," Cho whispered as Krum and Hermione floated across the floor. Somewhere, Draco thought that he could hear the faint chomping sounds of Weasley eating his heart out. "Don't you think so?"

"Suppose," answered Draco, who might be new to this girl thing but was not a born fool. "*You* look brilliant. I like your hair and I like your nose and I like your eyelashes. Good job, Chang. You should be on the arm of a Champion."

"I like it here," Cho said, and leaned against him comfortably.

She lifted her arms and twirled as he turned her, laughing, and they danced well together. Other people, people his father would've considered more important, had wanted her, but she'd chosen him. She liked him best.

It was a novel feeling, like the feel of her smooth hair when he tucked it behind her ears, and her laugh when he kissed her on the dance floor, just as he'd planned. He danced with her and he fetched drinks and then he danced some more: she clasped her hands round the back of his neck.

"I like your dress robes," she said. "You look like a very debonair vicar."

"I've been waiting my whole life for someone to call me debonair," Draco told her. "And I mean that."

She put her lips to his ear. "D'you, um. Want to go someplace more private?"

Draco heard later that Potter and Weasley's dates ran away from them and left them pouting and alone, and that Weasley managed to upset Hermione into the bargain. He heard Anthony got dizzy from all the spinning and vomited on Mandy's dress, and that Terry and Crabbe and Goyle all bonded over not having dates.

He did not actually see any of this, because he spent the later half of the Yule Ball night alone in his dormitory with Cho Chang. The curtains were drawn and there was blue-tinged light all around, and Cho panted out, "I don't want to go all the way," and Draco wanted to ask which way they were supposed to be going, but he had a misty sort of notion and he hoped that he would be able to figure the rest out while convincing her that he'd known all along.

The lots of snogging was excellent, and then Cho removed the top bit of her robes, and Draco froze.

"Er, Draco," Cho said. "You look a bit... Should I put them away?"

"No!" Draco answered sharply. He was quite, quite sure about that, they were extremely easy on the eyes. He was just a little bit terrified of doing the wrong thing, and it occurred to him that if he did all the girls in Hogwarts would be laughing at him tomorrow.

It occurred to him again that attack was the best form of defence, and he was tempted for a wild instant to tell Cho that these breasts were not up to the usual standard presented to him and he dismissed them with scorn.

Then Cho reached up and clumsily pressed their palms together, interlocking their fingers after a brief fumbling moment, and he saw her lip tremble and remembered she had chosen him. He felt like he could love her for that.

"Draco," she whispered. "Do you have any idea what to do?"

"Well," Draco said. "Well - no."

He paused and then reached out with his free hand, traced her collar bone and let his fingers

slide down a golden curve, spilling taut into a cup of black lace. The lace was threaded through with pink ribbon, and the ribbon trembled and the curve of her breast swelled slightly, meeting the hesitant curve of his palm.

He glanced up at her when she sucked in a sharp breath, and smiled.

"But I am a Ravenclaw," he added. "And I love to learn."

A little later, she laughed because his hair was tickling her stomach, and he tried to push it back but she reached down and fluffed it up again, and really Draco would have objected if Cho had not been offering up such a wide expanse of golden skin for him. Since she was, she was welcome to take any personal liberties she liked. So his hair feathered against her skin, and his glasses touched the smooth spot just under her belly button-

"Cold," she said, and then wriggled and laughed a little, which Draco took as encouragement.

She pulled him up to kiss him a significant amount of time later, the material of his robes crumpling and sliding against her damp skin. She had been very pretty in her robes but she was *spectacular* out of them, and when she pushed at his clothes Draco indulged in the brief prayerful hope that his growth spurt would come right this minute. Or some muscles, perhaps. Or a tan. Anything, really, anything would do, for once he was abandoning his Malfoy right to be choosy.

When she pushed his dress robes off to his waist, Cho didn't actually seem to care that he was skinny - she loved him for his *mind*, he thought smugly, Ravenclaw girls were the best *ever* - and she pressed her hands along his ribs, covered over his shoulder blades as if she was worried he'd be cold, and held them there as he kissed her, carefully, lips pressed dry together because she was not really dressed in his bed but Mother said gentlemen didn't presume.

Then she arched against him, and he completely and utterly humiliated himself.

He froze, supremely embarrassed and with his dress robes *ruined*, trying to think of some way to blame her, but she held him closer and said, "I like you, I *really* like you," and he kissed her cheek and her neck with enormous gratitude.

It was cold so he drew his blankets over both of them and got a look at her on his white pillows instead of his blue sheets. She wore them both well.

"I wasn't even sure you fancied me," she said in a low, pleased way. She liked compliments: Draco thought they were pretty good himself.

"Be sure," he said, and kissed her again. Their stomachs stuck together a bit and she rolled over on his arm while she was trying to get to sleep, and then it took him ages because her breath was whuffling against his ear. He slept pretty well, all the same.

"I didn't mean to stay here all night," she whispered, sitting bolt upright at some indescribably early hour of the morning. "Oh my God, I am so embarrassed!"

Draco tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes. "Don't be," he said. "Not like you're here with Kevin Entwistle."

"Draco, you're *terrible*." She put a hand up to her mouth to hide her smile. "I. Quick. Where are my robes? I have to go-"

"No, stay," Draco said dramatically. "I am Malfoy of the Black Hand. Stay and be my captive!"

She laughed again and kissed him with messy, laughing morning breath. Then she escaped despite his protests that he wished to keep her as his ship's woman, and Draco heard her small horrified sound and poked his head out through the curtains to see that all his housemates had just witnessed the exodus of a crumpled Cho Chang from his bed.

"Well," Corner said after a pause. "I copped off with Ginny Weasley, *anyway*."

"You lucky, lucky bastard. How was she? How was it? Tell me everything," said Anthony, whose mother would not have approved.

"Do not," Draco said with hauteur, "talk about my girlfriend that way." Then he grasped the curtains, lowered his voice and said: "It was *fantastic*. I am *king* of *everything*."

*

Draco and Cho did go to Hogsmeade together, though that involved a lot of shopping with her friends. Draco understood that girls liked to congregate together for a good mass giggle, and amused himself by spending money on himself and her, nobly not thinking that if he'd known friends were invited he could have brought his.

Eventually she said goodbye to them, though, and they went to a place called Madam Puddifoot's that was cramped and over-decorated, but served really, really nice coffee. Draco ordered extra foam and sprinkles and chocolate buttons and a shot of espresso in his, and then said they would like some little pink cakes to be romantic.

Girls liked that kind of thing, he thought, and held Cho's hand over the table.

"I love this place," she said, smiling at him, and he leaned forward with extreme care because of the foam, and kissed pink sugar icing off her lips.

"Interesting, raspberry," he remarked analytically. "Can we kiss lemon next?"

She laughed and they kissed raspberry, lemon and strange blue flavour before they left the shop holding gloved hands.

"I liked the Yule Ball," Cho told him shyly.

Draco assumed this was a lead-in to talking dirty, which he had been thinking about and making a few notes on, but this was a public street and she'd caught him off guard, so he stood there and wondered if just calling her baby would count.

"I like dancing and lights, and romantic things," Cho went on, and Draco abruptly stopped rehearsing calling her a naughty, naughty girl in his head. "I wish we had the Yule Ball every

year."

"We can have the Yule Ball any day you like," Draco told her. "Because I say so. Watch." He used Cho's hand to spin her around down the path, humming his favourite Celestina Warbeck song energetically as he did so.

She put her free hand over her mouth. "You're crazy!"

"No, I'm very spontaneous and romantic," Draco informed her. He was also on a quest to show her he was the best boyfriend ever, so much better than Potter or Digby would have been.

Also receiving more sexual favours would be nice.

It was also nice that she was laughing and looked interested in nobody and nothing but him, which was the way he decided he liked his women, and even dancing on cold streets was a little fun. Other people were looking - admiring his brilliant girlfriend, no doubt - and Draco swayed her and dipped her and laughed when she shrieked, his hands on her hips and his name on her lips.

They passed Potter, Weasley and Hermione as they went by. Hermione looked touched and Potter looked like he wanted to bite.

Four years, and finally Potter's opinion seemed unimportant compared to some things.

Draco took off his gloves so he could take Cho's face in his hands, and she copied him, and they kissed at the end of the street in the freezing cold, with her making a soft sound, moving into his body heat and pushing Quidditch-rough fingers under his shirt.

"You're like a *Firebolt* of girlfriends," Draco told her. "Which is not to imply that you're fast, not at all," he added hurriedly.

People living sadder and darker lives than Draco were wandering about prattling about dragon eggs and Krum's slightly too busy hands and so on, but Draco resolutely did not care, and went a whole week once without insulting anyone.

Naturally, it was Potter who broke what could have turned into an Malfoy record. Draco realised he was getting behind in his revision and went to the library, where there was so much revision to do that he nodded off on his books.

That was quite a normal event, as was Hermione shaking him out of it.

It was *not* normal for the nodding off and the being shaken out of it to have three hours of precious study time in between them, nor was it normal for Potter to be calmly reading in the chair beside him.

"You should have told me he was asleep, I couldn't see from the table across," Hermione scolded.

"He looked tired," said Potter.

"How long have you people been here?" Draco demanded.

Potter did not answer, but fortunately Hermione was there to tell him the dreadful truth.
"Almost three hours."

"While I've been... I kept trying and trying to tell you people that he was mentally disturbed, but would you listen, *no*," Draco muttered. "Everyone knows to wake me when I'm asleep, everybody does!"

"You fall asleep in the library often? I think you study too hard."

"I think that's probably the first thought about studying you have *ever had*," Draco observed, and looked at the blurry bit on his essay that would have to be re-done, and that meant he had *drooled* while Potter was there to watch him sleep. Oh, vile.

Draco realised he was peering at the notes more closely than he usually had to, and fixed Potter with a steely, accusing glare.

"Did you *steal my glasses*?"

"No!" said Potter. "They're right there," he added, gesturing to the desk.

They were indeed right there, but Potter needn't think that was getting him off the hook. Draco snatched them up and, vision fully restored, gave Potter a look that demanded explanations.

"I just thought you'd be more comfortable," Potter said, looking at the table. "Look, I'm just here to find out how to breathe underwater, I didn't know I was supposed to wake you, I'm not in the library all that often!" His eyes left the table and darted briefly to Draco. "You haven't been either, lately."

"You were looking for me?" Draco asked. "How precious."

Potter knew he'd been with Cho and he was *jealous*. Ha, he could covet Draco's girlfriend all he liked, but she would never, never be his!

"I don't need this," Potter said crossly, because he had the soul of a grizzly bear. "I preferred you asleep."

He was so creepy. He'd really get on with Kevin Entwistle.

"Let's see what you have there," Draco suggested, on a quest to be as annoying and intrusive as possible so he wouldn't have to think about the drooling. He whipped a piece of paper out from Potter's elbow and said: "What you'll miss the most... Did they take your Firebolt away?"

"I don't think so," Potter said, looking very alarmed.

"Could they mean *people*?"

Potter went pale, and Draco remembered sharply that this was not a crossword puzzle with Terry in the Ravenclaw common room, this was Potter, and the truce was long gone. And *he* wasn't something for Potter to condescendingly figure out and judge as unworthy again: he didn't need Potter or his father's approval, he had *Cho* now.

"Wow," he said brightly. "It's a real shame you're in the Tournament, because you'd be totally safe otherwise. Nobody's going to miss *you* the most."

He waited with a sneer in the wings for Potter to tell him that his entire fan club would be diving into lakes for him, and saw Potter's face go dark and furious.

"I don't need you to tell me that," he said, his chair screeching back as he got up and started slamming his books together. "I don't need you to - I thought you'd only asked Cho to be a bastard, but-"

"I really *like her*," Draco snapped.

"I know! I saw you two together at the ball and Hogsmeade and - but you're still a *bastard*, Malfoy, and just when people think they can tolerate you, you-"

Draco almost shouted at him. "I don't want to be *tolerated*!"

Thrown out of the library, four times in one year.

"You're a rebel," Cho told him, huddling with him against the cold as they watched the lake anxiously for developments.

"Mmm, bad to the bone," Draco said against her ear. "Kind of hoping that excites you - hey, there's Digby with his dad! He's first by miles - *True Hogwarts champion! Go, Digby!*"

"Diggory," Terry and Cho chorused in unison.

"If you like," Draco allowed generously.

*

It was shaping up to be a pretty good year, what with excellent investigative journalists who were beetles and listened to every word Draco chose to make up about Potter, nobody flaunting Quidditch in Draco's face, and Cho.

Which meant naturally that everything had to go very, very wrong in the most dramatic way possible. They were all sitting in the stands getting very bored watching the fuzzy hedges and eating candied nuts, Marietta was flirting with Terry and having a notable lack of success and Anthony was trying to seduce away Draco's woman by showing her how to work his amulet.

Then there were sparks and people were saying something about disappearances, and everyone was talking loudly and then in the confusion there Potter was, hunched over and...

"God!" said Cho. "God, no, Cedric..."

She turned and put her cold face against Draco's and Draco numbly stroked her back and thought: Dead, someone's actually dead. Cedric Diggory's dead.

Draco could remember his name now that he was dead.

He still felt numb in the common room, when everyone else was whispering *You-Know-Who* and Cho turned to him, her face tear-damp in the firelight, and said: "I might've gone with him to the Ball... we could've... and now he's..."

"Shhh," said Draco, "I know," even though he didn't at all. He pushed back her ruffled black hair and kissed her as she cried, because she was his and nobody should be allowed to hurt her. She kept crying and the kiss was drowned.

Cho cried again at the Leaving Feast when that old man Dumbledore finally made a decent speech, if you counted the rampant Potter favouritism, and said the Dark Lord had risen. Which his father had always said he wanted, and which would *show* Potter, but Cedric dying had made Cho cry, and Anthony was being very quiet, and Terry looked sick as well. At the Gryffindor table, Hermione had obviously been crying too.

At the Gryffindor table as well was Potter, looking dreadful, his face white as a bone and his eyes empty. He saw Potter look at Cho and him, as he wiped the tears away from Cho's cheeks with his thumbs, but then Potter looked away without changing expression. He leaned his forehead against Cho's and sort of wished the Dark Lord hadn't bothered.

He felt awful and itchy on the train ride home, waiting to see his father and know what he thought of all this, trying not to think about death - death in *his school*, in his place, affecting his people - and he thought it might make him feel an enormous amount better to go taunt Potter about all this. Since Potter was supposed to have conquered the Dark Lord, wasn't he, couldn't he do *anything* right?

He couldn't leave Cho, though. She was upset and she was his responsibility. He wished they could sit with Terry and the others, or maybe go find Crabbe and Goyle, but she wanted to be with her friends. Draco would've wanted to be with his friends if he was upset, so he moodily bought himself an obscene amount of chocolate and let Cho take as much as she liked.

When that hussy Marietta tried to nick some as well, he gave her an arctic look over his glasses. There was such a thing as pushing a man too far.

He sat with Cho for the whole train ride, his cheek pressed against her hair, the window a little steamy with their breath and her muffled crying. He was quiet mostly because his terrible brain kept coming up with inappropriate jokes and comments like they'd be all right even if the Dark Lord had risen. He heard Marietta and Padma mention the words 'his father' and 'Death Eater' when he went out to get more chocolate, but he refrained from tearing a strip off them because Cho would be upset. She was very loyal to her friends, it was one of the things he liked best about her, and besides what else could you expect from a Ravenclaw who was so lost to all propriety that she'd gone to the Ball with Weasley, anyway?

When he positively couldn't bear it any longer, he went outside the carriage and told a passing first year that she was the least promising Ravenclaw he'd ever seen and he expected

she would get a Troll mark in all of her future exams. The cheeky brat told him she was in Gryffindor, as if it was something to be proud of.

He went back in and Cho leaned against his chest, her steady breath against his shirt collar. He kept a firm arm around her while the train jolted to its destination, and when they left the train he was holding her hand.

He saw her parents hurry towards her when they caught sight of her tear-stained face, and he saw the way her parents looked at his father. The Changs were respectable pureblood wizards, and they didn't seem to want to look at his father's face, or be able to whisk their daughter away from his father's son fast enough. He looked after her as she went, pressed against her mother's side, and raised a hand to wave goodbye, but she didn't look back.

Then Draco looked at his father.

"Pretty girl," Father said, and there was an edge to his voice that was trying to be triumph but didn't quite convince Draco. "At least you're getting something good from that house, hmm?" He waited for the eager cue Draco would've given him once, and when Draco stared at him silently he went on all the same. "Exciting things have been happening, Draco. Lots of opportunities for a smart boy are coming up..."

Draco almost warmed to the flattery, but he had to wonder why it was coming now and never before. He kept looking at his father and kept silent, examining his face as if he were one of Terry's puzzles.

He found he had nothing to say, apart from the absurd thought he would not permit himself to utter in front of Father, which was, "Your Dark Lord made my girlfriend *cry*."

So he adjusted his blue-and-bronze scarf, continued to say nothing, and dragged his chest by himself all the way down the long platform. He followed his father because there seemed to be no other choice.

Chapter Four

Draco spent most of the summer lying about the Manor grounds sulking in the flowerbeds, trying to get the news without speaking to Father and reading his Owls.

He bet *Potter* was having a cooler summer than he was.

Nobody seemed to know very much about this whole Dark Lord business. Cornelius Fudge was saying it hadn't happened and there was no evidence it had, but he'd said the same about those allegations about him and Celestina Warbeck last year. ('Happy birthday, Mr. Minister,' *indeed.*) Terry and Anthony mostly commanded him not to correct the spelling of his girlfriend's Owls.

Not that Cho often made mistakes, but she did it now and again. At first it made Draco's eyes burn, but then the letters became less and less frequent, and Draco started to miss the way she could spell out all the quadratic enchantments he was helping her with perfectly, and then fall down on the word 'recieve.'

It was easy enough to avoid Father that summer. He was always busy, and Draco didn't want to think about why he was busy. He spoke to Draco sometimes when he was at home, in the new conciliatory way that made Draco's stomach clench with hope and disbelief and the unbelievable thought that his father might be afraid.

Draco wanted to go back to Hogwarts. He looked forward to the start of school all summer, but then Father took him to the station and went with him to the platform, which he'd never done before, and Draco wanted to go back and live the whole summer again and differently.

"Goodbye, Draco. Make me proud," said Father.

Draco hesitated, standing in the train door, about to be carried away. "I could-" he said. "I'll try," and then the train was rattling off and he felt like he'd made a promise he had no way to keep.

It made him feel tired and cross. He wanted to see Cho, so he went wandering like a sad little orphan around the train, his chest banging into things. After his arm started hurting, he changed his mind: he wanted to see Crabbe and Goyle. They would carry his chest, and he could go find Cho.

Of course the person he ran into was Potter. This was how Draco's life always worked. If life gave you lemons you made lemonade, apparently, but when life gave you incredibly annoying boy wonder celebrities putting them through the juicer was frowned upon.

"Why aren't you in the *prefects'* carriage?" he asked, and was deeply chagrined when Potter asked the same question at the same time, and in the same tone.

Ginny, who was with Potter, snickered, and Draco noted that despite her superior appearance and intelligence she was still a horrible treacherous Weasley at heart.

"Ron's prefect," she said, glancing at Potter as if afraid that Potter would die from not being

chosen for once in his ever so special life.

Mind you, this time at least he had an excuse. "Weasley?" Draco exclaimed in horror. "Given a position of honour in my school? In my school! Did he bribe Professor McGonagall? Did he offer to give her sexual favours? No, wait, this is Weasley we're talking about here. Did he offer *not* to give her sexual favours?"

"Go to hell, Malfoy, that's my brother you're talking about," Ginny said, amiably enough but with an edge to her smile that suggested Draco's body could be lying beside the train tracks for days.

"Good Lord, is it? You have so many, it's hard to keep track," Draco returned, and refrained from further insulting clan Weasley. It was too easy, anyway.

"How was your summer?" Ginny asked, relenting.

"Bloody terrible," Draco said shortly. "How was yours?"

"Eh," Ginny replied.

"Bloody terrible," said Potter, as if he had been asked. Draco took another look at him and saw he was looking even more like the surliest gnome in the garden than usual.

He noticed something else after a minute, because he was so used to Potter being at his own eyelevel, but then he recalled he'd been looking *forward* to lording the Growth Spurt That Finally Came to Daddy over him, and now Potter was taller too. Draco'd known those tales about Potter's family not feeding him were too good to be true.

Draco didn't know why Potter had to suck every drop of joy from Draco's life, but he assumed he did it out of spite.

"Did all those newspapers saying you were insane upset you, you poor little thing?" he asked, making a mock-sympathetic face as he studied Potter over his glasses. "The media can be so harsh." He paused. "Harsh, but fair. I'm glad they've finally caught on: I've been saying you were crazy for years."

Ginny rolled her eyes in Draco's direction, showing the hereditary Weasley lack of appreciation for genius. "I know you two could go on like this all day, but I'd quite like to sit down."

"I will not sit with him!" Draco exclaimed.

"Suit yourself, Malfoy," Potter growled at him. "Afraid I'm going to kill you like they say I killed Cedric?"

Draco stared at Potter's furious green eyes. "Don't be stupid," he said. "I don't want to sit with you because I don't like you. Also you are bad company, and you smell like feet." He paused, letting go of his chest to tilt his glasses and give Potter a proper disdainful look. "Try to resist the urge to over-dramatise yourself," he drawled, and hoped very much that he sounded like Professor Snape.

"I cannot believe you, of all people, just said that."

"I cannot believe that under your *totalitarian regime*, people are not allowed to talk."

Potter was in a bitch of a mood, Draco noticed. Usually by now he was stalking off in a righteous huff or going for his wand. Much good he'd be fighting Voldemort if all he did was stand about complaining all year.

"I'm walking now," Ginny said in a loud voice. "Anyone who feels like following me can do so."

Draco followed her after a moment because he entirely refused to be left alone with Potter, but the moment cost him dearly because it meant he was trailing behind Ginny and *that* meant he was actually walking alongside Potter. Oh, the indignity. Someone would see him and his reputation would be *ruined*.

"I thought you'd be a prefect," Potter said to him, the sullenness in his voice lightened by something like curiosity. Clearly he wanted to mock him about it, clearly he was determined to fill Draco's life with pain to the very brim.

"Fat chance," Draco mumbled. "Madam Pince probably cornered Flitwick in the staff room. She hates me with a dark passion: it's not fair, it's a *vendetta*."

"Of course you never thought you might just not be good enough."

"Never," said Draco, who had wondered about that for a week after he got Terry's fumbling, apologetic letter. "Why don't you go to hell, Potter?"

"After you," said Potter, and then looked irritably at Draco. "I wasn't - I mean, you can go into the compartment first."

Draco looked at him and then into the compartment where poor, mad Ginny, who had been raised by her family to crave low company, had taken up with Longbottom and Loony Lovegood. The girl needed watching, Draco should not have allowed himself to be temporarily distracted.

"I'm not going in there! That girl's mad. Mad, I tell you. We were up two nights with Anthony persuading him the Snorkacks weren't going to get him. He tried to write home and get his mother to take him away."

Draco had stolen the idiot girl's newspapers in an attempt to cool her fevered imagination. It had not worked.

"What's the girl's name?" asked Potter, eyeing her askance.

"Potter. She's quite friendly with your best friend's sister. She's a school character. People were talking about setting up a school counselor - not before time - just for her last year."

Potter looked honestly bewildered that the world contained anything beyond his own big fat

ego.

Draco gave up and muttered, "Luna Lovegood."

She looked up at him with horrifyingly empty eyes. "Hello, Draco."

"Stop reading your paper upside down," Draco snapped. "You're in *Ravenclaw*, I know you can read properly."

"You're rather unpleasant," Luna remarked serenely, and returned to her improper reading. Draco was vexed.

"She seems all right to me," Potter said, fighting a smile. How nice, that all Potter demanded of a person was that they summarily judge and dismiss Draco.

Draco looked at him coldly and the smile on Potter's face worked through a series of hesitating lines to become a frown. "Look-"

"I'm not staying here," Draco bit out. "I'm going to find my *friends*. Maybe I'll leave my chest here-" he deliberately addressed himself to Ginny - "but he is not allowed to touch it."

"Oh no," Potter sneered. "Oh *please*, Malfoy, let me touch your chest."

Ginny started to laugh. Draco'd been wrong about her for years, a Weasley couldn't change its unsightly orange spots.

Potter went red and started talking to Longbottom about his birthday present, which was apparently a slimy plant. Draco wondered if it had come with a card that said 'I saw this and thought of you.'

He also wondered what the hell Longbottom was playing at, prodding at the filthy thing, and he ducked behind the compartment door just in time. When he peered back out, everyone was covered in slime and Potter was actually spitting it up, which was the best thing Draco had seen all summer.

The best thing he'd seen until the next minute, when Cho popped her head in and said shyly: "Oh... hello, Harry. Um... bad time?"

Potter looked stunned under the slime. "Oh... hi."

"Um, well, I just thought I'd say hello," Cho began, and then Draco stepped out from the shadow of the door.

"Hello," he said.

She blinked up at him, her velvety dark eyes startled.

"Hello Draco, darling, light of my life," Draco prompted her. "You're looking dashing today - how did you manage to become even more filled with masculine allure over the summer?"

She smiled up at him, hesitantly. "Hello, Draco."

He forgot about fathers and prefects and stupid Potter mocking him, because he was able to go up to her and take her hips in his hands, ease her towards him. Her bones felt more fragile against him this year, she seemed smaller and more delicate, and Draco praised the Great Growth Spurt with exceeding praise.

He bent towards her, looking at her lashes flutter, brushing his nose with hers as he caught her mouth, softly at first and then more deeply, taking the moment when her lips shivered open, gathering her to him with a possessive hand on the nape of her neck. She breathed in a little, sharp and sweet, and he felt the warm thrill of being chosen again.

He let their lips part and looked at her, brushed his fingers along her jaw. "Hi there," he murmured, smiling. "Missed you."

She looked around uneasily, at which point he realised he'd made a crashing fool of himself in front of Potter and everybody. He looked around suspiciously, and Ginny and Longbottom were both looking out the window as civilised humans should. Luna was regarding them with bright curiosity, and Potter was staring without blinking, with lips parted and a look of hazy, unfocused yearning.

Draco glared and gathered Cho jealously against his side. Potter could've had any girl at school: Draco did not see why the bastard had to be so set on poaching Draco's one and only.

Potter went red up to his slimy hair and stared at his hands, clenched in his lap. Draco was glad to see he was ashamed of himself, at any rate.

"C'mon," he said to Cho's ruffled black head, and was mildly appalled to hear his voice come out tender. He didn't bother looking back at any of them, and thought he'd trust Ginny with his chest.

Once he was alone in the corridor with Cho, it occurred to him forcibly that they hadn't seen each other in almost three months. She was looking at him uncertainly, as if she wanted to please him but didn't quite recognise him, and his hand left her elbow, hovering, waiting for her permission to settle back.

"You were with your father at the station today," she said.

He snatched away his hand. "Thanks for coming over to say hello."

"My parents say things-" Cho began. "It's just - you can't be in sympathy with him, Draco, he's-"

"He's my father," Draco said, backing against the wall as if she was coming after him. "I won't discuss this."

"Fine," Cho said, looking very offended. "I - I suppose I'll just find my friends, then. Are you coming?"

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "No. I do have friends of my own, you know. I want to see

them, too."

"Fine," Cho said again, and spun on her heel.

Draco stood alone in the corridor. He *wasn't* going to go back into the compartment so Potter could laugh at him, and he wasn't going to stand here looking after Cho like an abandoned child, either. He'd thought - he'd thought she would stand up for him to her parents, stand by him like she stood by her friends, but... but they were her parents and she loved them, and she'd been scared when she went home. And she was sixteen, and all bound up in her friends. Draco could see why she might be less loyal to a boyfriend.

They were just a little strange to each other, after the summer. Once they got used to each other again, with Cho away from her parents, everything would be all right.

So he'd wanted her to feel tied to him, as close as she was to her friends. She would in time. They'd be *fine*.

He found Crabbe and Goyle and was systematically horrible to them until he felt better, and arrived in Hogwarts to find the Sorting Hat was bibbling a new song: Draco listened with half an ear and personally thought he could have written better, but it seemed to reach Potter. Though not in any soothing the heart of the savage beast capacity, it appeared, since he was scowling about the place.

Draco was tired of glancing across the table at Cho and having her fail to meet his eyes, so he got up early from the table and almost walked into Potter, who was storming away from some frightened-looking brats who'd obviously been reading those stupid news stories.

Potter was clearly concerned about this depletion of his fan base, because he looked ready to kill things and Draco was in his path. Which was just Draco's usual luck.

"Heard all that about the houses being friends?" he growled.

Draco was really not in the mood to deal with Potter on top of everything else. He adjusted his glasses to give him a coldly dismissive look, and then pushed past Potter, with intent to sulk.

Potter made a noise like rage, and Draco looked around to see him standing braced, like an animal unsure whether he wanted to attack or just threaten.

"Sometimes I wish you had been Sorted into Slytherin," Potter snarled. "At least then we'd be - *something*."

"Something you should know, Potter," Draco said. "I wasn't teasing you. I really do think you're mentally unbalanced."

Everyone had become strange over the summer, whether it was shouty and strange, or strange and distant, but Draco had a plan to push Potter down a well as soon as he found a well, and he was hoping he didn't need a plan to win back his girlfriend. He waited a little and then wandered up to her in the courtyard, not making an issue of the fact she had been talking to Potter a second before.

She looked at him and he looked over his glasses and smiled slowly at her, which he remembered she liked.

"Hi," she said, and then: "Ron Weasley accused me of liking the Tornados because they've started winning."

"Don't talk to idiots like that, Cho, they might be catching. The Tornados' rise has been slow and sure, a triumph that has unfolded to all true fans through the years. And Weasley has a stupid face."

Cho smiled a bit. "And the Quibbler said they were cheating, did you see?"

"I don't call blackmail cheating," Draco said thoughtfully. "Cunning stratagem. Good idea. I mean, don't listen to me, Cho, I don't know what I'm saying, I think I may have a slight fever."

"Oh, really?" Cho asked, properly smiling now. She reached up to Draco's secret delight and put her hand briefly on his forehead.

"Really," said Draco. "I feel most unwell. I require nursing back to health. And I think Madam Pomfrey has a spare uniform you can borrow."

At which promising moment Potter intervened to ruin his life.

"Don't you *have Potions*?" Draco demanded. "Are you too famous to go to class now, or something?"

Cho frowned at him and Potter snapped: "Don't be more stupid than you can help, Malfoy. I'm just going to Potions. Only I saw you two had stopped here, and I just wanted to - um - Ron didn't mean it about the Tornados, Cho, he's just really into Quidditch, so..."

"It's no problem," Cho said warmly. "Who isn't into Quidditch? Does, um, does Ron plan to try out for the Quidditch team this year? He's got a Keeper's build."

Actually, he had the build of an anorexic gorilla, but Draco had made the judicial decision not to get involved in this conversation. He was going to concentrate on the sky and wait until Potter went away and stopped trying to steal his girl. He was painfully aware of the fact that he didn't show his best side around Potter: it was enough that Potter made him look stupid and there seemed to be no help for it. Cho didn't have to see.

"Don't know," Potter returned, and then, probably because his scar hurt if he didn't have all the attention in the world: "Are you going to try out, Malfoy?"

"No," Draco ground out, glaring at him. Potter *knew* about Draco and Quidditch, he *clearly* knew...

"What position would you try out for if you were going to?"

"Seeker," Draco answered automatically, from long thought and childish dreams, and then

wanted to bite out his tongue.

Cho was glaring at him again and Potter's eyes were glinting strangely: clearly, because his devilish plan was succeeding, Draco was walking right into the trap, he knew it and he couldn't help himself.

"*Why* don't you try out, Malfoy?" Potter pursued. "Is it that you're afraid you're not good enough?"

It wasn't that Draco didn't know better, because he did, because most of his brain was engaged in screaming at him to stop at once, to think about Cho and what he could lose, but one wild maddened part of his mind had broken away from the rest and was running the show, screaming 'I *am* good enough, I *am*, I'll *show* you' and before he knew it-

"Go to hell, Potter," he said. "I'm very, very good. You'll see."

"I-" said Potter, and stopped. "I'm really late for Potions," he said. "Uh. Bye, Cho."

He shambled away and Cho's eyes followed him, and Draco was committed to doing something very, very stupid.

It felt even stupider when he was standing in front of Roger Davies clutching a school broom and Davies was giving him a very sceptical look indeed.

"You play Quidditch?"

Draco had a sinking feeling at the disbelief in Davies' voice, and it made him toss his head and sneer harder than usual. "I *own* Quidditch."

Davies still looked doubtful. If Draco hadn't already told everyone about how he'd cried when Fleur Delacour left him, he would have done it now.

"Right then. Let's see what you can do."

Anger and worry and inadequacy lasted for all of two minutes before Draco kicked off and they fell away, easily as the rest of the world. The wind ran through his hair and he spun as Cho tried to follow him, he felt as if he and broom were the still point of a turning sky, safe here, anchored here and never having to come back down or do anything but win.

Clean and simple, after years of reading and pushing himself harder, everything back in place, as if he was ten years old again and he was going to be in Slytherin and friends with Harry Potter and sometimes Father looked proud of his flying. He banked sharply, bringing it down, and watched Cho careen helplessly through the air on her own momentum with a smirk.

Just having one thing to do, and being able to do it *well*. The broom turned easy between his thighs, on his side, everything was on his side, and nobody in the world could catch him. He banked again and slammed his shoulder deliberately into Cho's, knocking her away and off balance again, and he looked around for a gleam of gold.

There it was, and it was his. Cho just didn't know it yet.

He dove, in entirely the wrong place, watched her follow him and once she was committed to her dive - she should be more careful, she should always think about every move - he veered left and the beautiful struggling winged thing was pressed tight against his palm.

He came off his broom with a sharp pang of triumph and regret, and Roger Davies came running towards him.

"Draco, you idiot! Why did you never say - look, I'm sure Cho wouldn't mind playing reserve-"

Draco saw the fury flare in Cho's face, but he'd already known what he had to do. He wasn't ten any more, and he'd chosen a different life. "Sorry," he drawled. "I'm a little too busy with my studies to join in your game, but you kids have fun, okay?"

As he turned to the sound of Davies' outraged spluttering, he felt enveloped in a lovely warm glow, like a comfy blanket of supreme victory.

This was more or less immediately cut away by Cho's sharp tones. "I can't believe you did that! It would be all right if you'd *wanted* to play, but you clearly don't-"

"You don't understand-" Draco began. "I-"

"Did you enjoy making me look like an idiot?"

"I did a little," said Draco, and then stopped in horror.

This was what Terry meant when he went on about Draco thinking before he spoke. Terry just hadn't added 'lest your girlfriend put her broom through your eye in rage.'

Cho looked sorely tempted, but she whirled around to rejoin her team-mates and left Draco to leave the pitch alone, trying to keep the feeling of being safe and free and flying in his mind.

It was well and truly lost when he saw Potter coming towards him from the stands, wearing a garish jumper that abused Draco's eyesight and a funny look on his face. Draco abruptly wanted to commit suicide, but there was only a school broom to hand and they were too horrible and common, he wanted to die with dignity.

"Look at you, Malfoy," said Potter. "You weren't lying. You *can* fly well."

It suddenly occurred to Draco why Potter's mouth was on the verge of a grin and the urge to suicide swiftly transformed into the urge to kill. "What are you doing up early on a Saturday, Potter? As if I didn't know."

Potter crossed his arms defensively over his chest and Draco saw split skin, half hidden by a sleeve. There were words freshly cut into Potter's hand that said *I must not* - oh, what did it matter?

"I just thought I'd come see-"

"I know what you thought, Potter," Draco snarled. "*Stop trying to sabotage my relationship.*"

Potter could try all he liked, but even though he always got everything he couldn't have this. Draco could fix this: he and Cho were going to be *fine*.

They broke up four days later.

She came to him still a little angry, and resentful because she had to cause him pain, and she twisted her hands together and looked up at him with the uncertain gaze that he might one day have loved. She said things about taking time off, and not getting too serious, and perhaps they should, and he realised something he had known all along. Laughing with each other, liking each others' faces and little ways, all of the things that could one day have been something more, were not going to be enough in the face of being fifteen and sixteen in the middle of a war.

He wanted to come out of this with some dignity, but dignity was one of those things he always wanted and which hardly ever happened to him.

When Cho was done she looked at him with pity, and he didn't need pity and he'd make her know it, for a moment all he wanted to do was hurt her for choosing him and then taking it back.

"Will you be all right, Draco?"

He laughed in her face. "I'm all right now. It's a relief, to tell you the truth. You must've noticed you gained a bit of weight over the summer - I certainly did."

Cho stared at him disbelievingly. He would have stared at himself disbelievingly, but he couldn't seem to stop talking.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I hear Potter likes tubby women. They remind him of Weasley's mum, you see."

Of course all he wanted to do after that was apologise to her, but somehow he couldn't, he just stared at her hatefully and she backed away, and said: "Don't you ever talk to me again, Draco Malfoy" and she was crying, but he wasn't allowed to comfort her anymore.

He heard she and Potter had been spotted bonding together in the Owlery together, and supposed she had someone else to comfort her now, or she would soon.

Hermione, instead of ministering to his broken heart in the way a sympathetic woman friend should have done - Draco had vague thoughts about cups of coffee and massages involving scented oil - told Draco he was better off while penning a love note to Viktor Krum, and then descended into an invective against Professor Umbridge.

"I don't know, as Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers go, she isn't so bad," Draco said. "So she's a little theory oriented, that's not as bad as setting pixies on us like Lockhart or casting Imperius on us like Moody. Personally, I'm looking forward to a bit of quiet theory. I think everyone else is too."

"What about all this High Inquisitor business?" Hermione hissed.

"People are saying the Dark Lord has risen, Hermione, in case you hadn't heard. The Ministry's got to do something. This school should be run better anyway, I hope she fires half the staff." Hermione gave him an outraged look and he said defensively: "You know other people's misery makes me feel better!"

"Then you'll really love Umbridge," Hermione snapped. "Did you know she made Harry keep cutting *I must not tell lies* into his own hand for detention? Do you *want* a teacher who tortures her students?"

Draco concealed his surprise behind a book. So that was what had happened to Potter's hand. Draco preferred his own guess, which was that Potter had resorted to self-harm in a desperate bid for more attention.

"I don't know, Hermione," he said gravely. "If she promised to only torture Potter, I think I could just about bear it."

"You and Harry may not get on, but that's a terrible thing to say! She did Lee Jordan as well, and I don't know how many others. Besides, the Dark Arts is supposed to be a practical class. She's not a good teacher. You have to know that, Draco."

Well, Draco did know it, but Hermione was not carrying on any campaigns against Professor Trelawney. He quite liked Umbridge. She was dreadful to Potter and had a nasty sense of humour and really, he required no more from a person. Also, he was fairly certain she wasn't a werewolf. He couldn't imagine a werewolf in a frilly floral blouse.

"You're in Ravenclaw and this is our OWLs year," Hermione said quietly. "If someone's not teaching us correctly, if they're interfering with all our classes, you should want to do something about it. Not laugh because people you don't like are getting hurt."

Draco lowered his book slowly, grudging every inch.

"Oh, *all* right. What did you have in mind?"

She told him. He was appalled.

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He was appalled, but he went down to the Hog's Head anyway, even though it was a low, vulgar establishment that probably had fleas and his mother would be horrified. Hermione could get very emphatic when she was upset, and anyway without him the whole thing would probably descend into raving madness and Potter worship. Those poor little Potter fans were victims of the media and their own feeble minds: they needed Draco's *help*.

Draco imagined helping the Creeveys by putting them in a sack, in a river and out of their misery. From the looks on their faces when he arrived, they could read his mind.

"You invited *Malfoy*?" Weasley yelped as Draco made his grand entrance.

"He is one of my best friends, Ron!"

Draco was tempted to add "So there" but contented himself with a sneer and a fastidious shudder at the grim horror of their surroundings. He cast an apologetic look to Terry, Anthony, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott as they came in.

"You invited Slytherins?" Potter demanded.

Because of the poor lighting conditions and Cho's presence, Draco made sure his sneer and glasses look was invested with the maximum possible level of contempt.

"No, that was me," he said. "Oops. So sorry. Was I not supposed to?"

Potter made a terrible noise, like he was trying to snort through his throat. Nobody else seemed to notice how very awful the noise was, so Draco gave him another glasses look which clearly said 'what was *that*?' and began to settle his people around him. Potter looked embarrassed and Draco was very glad.

He leaned back against a chair, crossed his arms over his chest and prepared to judge everybody.

Weasley's brothers the Sociopath Twins attempted to order Butterbeers for everyone, a devilish ploy Draco saw right through, he'd had all of Ravenclaw trained to refuse anything from the hand of Weasley since second year. He sent Crabbe to get them eight Firewhiskies, and was greatly heartened by the Sociopath Twins looking offended and Weasley looking wistful.

"Terry Boot, you're a prefect," Hermione exclaimed.

Terry put his glass to his mouth to hide his guilty face and mumbled, "It was Draco's idea. It's *always* Draco's idea," and drank up.

"You're very dear to me," Draco told him, "but you're a complete scaredy cat mother's boy, and I hope you know that."

"My mummy doesn't send me sweets every week," Terry said *sotto voce*, which meant Draco was engaged in a quiet but furious attempt to stuff Terry's own jumper in his mouth while Potter made some kind of idiot-faced speech.

He would have succeeded, too, if Hermione had not interrupted herself to say - "Because - are you even *listening* to me, Draco Malfoy - because Lord Voldemort is back."

Terry shuddered at the name and Draco let his jumper go, and reassuringly hit him on the arm. And then, before he could do anything else, something perfectly holy beautiful happened.

Zacharias Smith, who Draco had only known before as some Hufflepuff who was decent at Chasing and who'd been study partners with Terry last year, began *questioning Potter*. The look on Potter's face was priceless.

Of course, Potter's ego had the resilience of diamond, so he was soon up and running with his wounded hero routine, but Draco dismissed it as dreary rubbish, leaned back further in his chair and studied Smith thoughtfully. Smith had put up a really good fight before he'd let Potter put him down: with work, Draco felt he could have real promise.

His contemplation of Smith was interrupted by Susan Bones and Longbottom and *Cho* all trying to outdo each other with fulsome tales of Potter's extreme brilliance at flying and evil-defeating and tournament-winning and life.

Draco was aware of how stupid he would look if he started to bicker with Cho over Potter's glory, so he waited until Potter said, "Look, I... I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be modest or anything-"

"You don't sound like you're trying terribly hard," Draco murmured, sweetly and just loud enough for Potter to hear.

Potter stopped and would have stayed stopper if Corner, imbecile that he was, had not started babbling worshipfully about Potter's 'seriously cool flying.'

"Oh my God I *know*," said Draco. "I am so glad someone started this group, he's needed an official fanclub for years. Tell me, do we get signed autographs with the weekly Potter newsletter? I sure hope so!"

Potter's deeply unconvincing protestation to Corner that he wasn't quite as special as they were all making out, they would have to keep talking to convince him, stopped again, and then Zacharias Smith said: "Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?"

The resulting hysteria at seeing a Hufflepuff daring to question Harry Potter was deeply and wonderfully thrilling. As Potter stared incredulously, Weasley blustered and the Sociopath Twins threatened him with all manner of bodily harm, Draco deliberately moved his chair to the edge of his little group and as close to Smith as he could manage.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," he said.

Smith, who was looking rather beaten down, muttered: "I know who you are."

Draco winked. "Thought you might. Here's another thought: I like your style. Let's be friends."

He held out his hand and, after a moment, Smith reached out and shook it. Draco saw Potter watching the forging of this unholy alliance with narrowed eyes, and he smiled a smile of sweet, all-embracing evil.

Everyone started talking about meeting times and places and Potter being ruler of the universe or something, Cho as energetically as everyone, and Draco felt the warm glow of everyone for once not being on Potter's side fade. Because *Cho* was on Potter's side, and it made sense, she was scared and he was the big hero who she could count on to live and win, and it made Draco's chest hurt in a way that irritated him.

Then Hermione passed out her little sign-in sheet, saying "If you sign, you're agreeing not to tell Umbridge or anyone else what we're up to."

Smith looked very doubtful.

"If I know my girl, she's put a jinx on that thing," Draco said, not bothering to keep his voice down. "You don't have to sign it."

"If you don't want to sign, Malfoy, you're out," Potter snarled, scrawling his name in horrible undisciplined script like a child's.

Draco sneered and snatched the paper from his hands.

"I'm not going to turn Hermione in, am I? I'll sign it."

Hermione's face softened as he did so and Smith looked persuaded. He took the paper and signed it next, and then everyone signed, with varying levels of enthusiasm. Draco looked around and placed a private bet on Marietta, who looked deeply uncomfortable in this Dark Arts club, as the most likely tattletale. Not that he thought she would tell, not when her best friend was clearly doodling love hearts with 'Cho Chang and the Scruffy Future Leader of Terrified Guerrilla Forces' on her notepaper.

Draco lingered outside the pub afterwards to make sure Cho left with Marietta and not Potter, and felt so pathetic it made his throat hurt as well as his chest.

She left but she'd obviously been trying not to, and he stayed in place and tried to be normal, tried to stop the chest and throat ache, and then went flat against the wall as Potter, Weasley and Hermione came out into the sun, chattering about Ginny and Corner - older news than Cornelius Fudge and Celestina Warbeck if you were a Ravenclaw - and then about Cho.

"She couldn't take her eyes off you, could she?" Hermione said. She sounded disapproving, because she was a loyal friend and Draco was going to buy her presents of appreciation, he was going to buy her all the anthologies she'd ever dreamed of. "You're going to have to decide what to do about that, Harry."

"What's to decide? He fancies her, doesn't he?" asked Weasley. Draco vowed to trip him in the halls tomorrow.

"I think I may have mentioned this before, but Draco is one of my best friends!" Hermione exclaimed. Draco wondered if she would like a pony.

"Well, he's not one of my friends, is he?" Potter asked roughly. "Since he's made it perfectly clear he hates the sight of me."

"Did you hear the little ferret and that wart Smith," Weasley began to grumble, but Draco couldn't have cared less and obviously Potter couldn't have either, because he cut in at once.

"Besides," he said, and cleared his throat. "I really-" and he stopped there because his voice *rasped*, rough with discomfort even in front of his best friends, and then he went on even with his voice rasping because he couldn't stop. "I liked her and then I *saw* her, with -

dancing in Hogsmeade and on the *train*, and I can't stop thinking about it. I think - I really want her."

Hermione's voice went softer, businesslike but with a blanket over it, the same voice she used when she saw Draco really did have a headache. "Harry, I didn't realise..." She stopped and Draco was morally certain she was patting his arm. "I'm sorry, Harry. She obviously likes you, and they've split up: you should do whatever makes you happy."

Draco's hand was in the same painful knot as his throat, and actually he wanted to hit Potter in the face, because everything always did come to pass as Draco feared: Potter was taking Cho after all, and in the end, even Hermione liked Potter better than she liked Draco.

He went home and lay on his bed in the dormitory, and felt betrayed by the world because even Terry was being weird.

"You seemed to be getting on awfully well with Zacharias," Terry said in his weird voice, being strange when all Draco wanted to do was lie there bemoaning the horror of his life and have Terry say soothing things while he did his crossword.

"He seemed cool," Draco said, giving up on woebegone while Terry was preoccupied with being all twitchy. "Don't worry, I'm not going to steal your study partner or anything."

"He's not my study partner anymore," Terry almost snapped, and suddenly it became so clear. Smith and Terry had had one of those tragic studying arguments about flow charts and Venn diagrams in which unforgivable words like 'I never found your notes concise anyway!' were uttered. Terry dropped his eyes under Draco's all-seeing gaze, and then said: "I thought he was a bit like you."

Draco flopped back on the pillows in a tragic way, and said thoughtfully: "I suppose he is rather a handsome devil."

"He's not," said Terry, and paused. "He's very petty. I don't think he cares much about anyone, and he can be really mean-"

Anthony frowned. "So he's *exactly* like Draco, then?"

"I kill you, Goldstein," said Draco, and made Anthony's bed into an apple-pie bed with him inside it, which was one of his very favourite spells. He turned back to Terry while Anthony was howling in protest and said: "Was he mean to you? Because if so, say the word and he will pay for it."

Terry frowned. "No, he wasn't *mean* to me."

"Well, then," Draco said, reassured, and shut his eyes and thought about Cho. "If he sticks to being mean to Potter, I think we'll be great friends."

Terry made a small discontent noise, but Terry'd always been a bleeding heart and Draco was fairly sure he thought Potter was quite a decent chap. He had never said so, of course, because Draco would've been forced to injure him, and causing Terry bodily harm hurt Draco's feelings.

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For a while, Draco thought Potter was too busy making eyes at Cho and spazzing out about Umbridge's crack-down on Quidditch to bother with his little gang. Which was fine, it left Draco more time to ponder the great stupidity of women, and the great stupidity of Quidditch, and the great stupidity of everyone in the world but him.

Then Potter gave them directions to some mysterious room, and out of sheer morbid curiosity Draco went along. After all, in a school where lessons attacked you and staircases moved, what could possibly go wrong?

The room being full of books cheered him briefly, but then Potter explained that the room gave you everything you wanted and he had to devote ten minutes into thinking of all the ways Potter had probably created an idyllic loveland for Cho before he tipped off the rest of them.

Potter had Cho, and her smiles and her golden skin, and Draco had a pile of books.

He only perked up a tiny bit when Potter let something slip about the room.

"What did you say the house elves called it?"

"The Come and Go Room," Potter answered, blinking, and then went red when Draco snickered.

He was pleased to see Zacharias Smith snicker too. It further confirmed the impression that Smith was a boy after his own heart.

Kindred spirits were forgotten when Hermione said, "I think we ought to elect a leader."

"Harry's leader," said Cho, staring at Hermione. Draco thought the words 'and king of my heart' were implicit, and the look on her face made his teeth hurt.

"Oh, *is* he?" Draco asked.

Potter glared at him. "What, d'you want to be leader?" he asked. "What do you want to teach us - the art of note-making, calculated to strike fear into Voldemort's heart? How to look down your nose and over your glasses at the entire world? What do you know, Malfoy?"

Draco folded his arms. "Good question," he said. "Right back at you. What do you know?"

"What do you mean?"

Draco leaned forward and grinned. "Susan," he said. "Didn't you have to introduce yourself to Potter last time we met?"

Susan Bones blinked and ventured a "Yes?" as if introducing herself had direr consequences than she had ever imagined.

"Didn't you think that was a bit odd? You're in class with Potter. Potter, are you too busy thinking about yourself and your shining fame to listen to the *roll call*? They have it every day!"

"I don't think about my *fame*," Potter spat.

"Mmm, 'course not," Draco said. He pointed at Nott. "Would you do me a favour? Would you tell me his name?"

Potter looked wildly at Nott, and then at Hermione, who looked embarrassed and wisely did not mouth the answer, because she knew Draco would've shopped her.

"Um," Potter said.

"He's in Slytherin," Draco went on, bright and helpful. "He's been in your Potions class every year for five years."

"Er," said Potter. "Er. Knight?"

"It's Nott."

Potter looked deeply confused. "Uh - what is it then?"

"All hail our leader," Draco announced, and put his head in his hands. "I rest my case."

"Who d'you think should be leader, then?" Potter asked, red as fire but not giving up because he never did and he never would and one day Draco would die of hatred.

"They'll all vote for you," he sneered. "You'll do it. I just wanted to shed some light on the situation. You're not their hero. You're not their saviour. You're some idiot who got lucky and who doesn't even know their names."

"I just want to *help*," said Potter. "And you just want to pick at me, Malfoy, so why don't you shut up or say something useful for a change!"

Draco shrugged. "Let's vote, then."

He didn't trust himself not to make an idiot of himself in front of Cho. He could feel the last shreds of dignity slipping through his fingers and he hung onto them furiously: it wasn't *fair*, he'd had a point, he'd be right if this was a normal school and everything wasn't about life or death.

Everyone voted for Potter, even Anthony and Terry (oh they would pay once they were back in the dormitories) except Crabbe and Goyle and of course Draco, who would not have voted for Potter even if it was the only way to keep his hand.

Even Nott voted for Potter, despite Potter not knowing his name. Nott was a soft touch as well, it made Draco sick.

Zacharias Smith looked around, half raised his hand, and then slowly lowered it. Draco was

very proud. Potter was leader by a vast majority, but Draco was still very proud. He leaned over and whispered various suggestions about their club name to Smith, feeling that 'Dolts Anonymous' and 'The Doomed Association' were better choices than Ginny's fatuous 'Dumbledore's Army.' Because they all loved Dumbledore so much, almost as much as they loved sounding like mad extremists. Poor Ginny, she couldn't help it, sometimes her inherent Weasleyness got the best of her.

Continuing the wonderful Weasley themed evening, the Sociopath Twins tried to hex Smith when he wasn't looking, but Draco gestured to Anthony and both of them cast the same spell the twins had been trying and left them mouthing silent curses.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Potter snapped.

"Saving Smith!"

"I wasn't actually talking to you, Malfoy," Potter said, to Draco's mild surprise.

Draco couldn't actually tell the Sociopath Twins apart, but one half of Frenzied plus Giggling grinned and said: "Sorry, Harry. Couldn't resist."

"Nice leadership skills, Potter," Draco said.

"You're not helping, Malfoy!"

"Sorry, Potter. Couldn't resist."

Draco was turning away and congratulating himself on a small victory when Potter, as he always did, snatched it away from him. He poked Draco in the shoulder with his wand (Assault By Maddened Boy Who Lives! Innocent Victim Crippled For Life! read the newspaper print in Draco's mind) and said: "Nott, you take Neville. Malfoy, c'mon. Let's see what you've got."

And Draco found himself facing down the Boy Who Lived, who spoke to snakes and battled Dark Lords and threw off the Imperius. He just stood there with his stupid hair and his stupid glasses, and he heard Hermione saying as she had once, quietly, in the midst of one of Draco's rants: 'Harry is a great wizard.' Which hadn't been the point at all. Which Draco knew, already, and that was part of the problem: it wasn't fair to have to go to school with a living legend. There was no way to measure up, or prove him wrong when he judged you unworthy.

Not that Draco being out of his league and out of his depth was any reason to give up.

Draco pointed his wand, and then instead of casting a spell he began to speak.

"Just because they're on your side doesn't mean they're funny. People on your side can be evil-minded little gits."

Potter tilted his head, still watching the wand. "You're one to talk about evil-minded little gits."

"At least I *know that*," Draco said sharply. "At least I don't think I'm always right."

"I know I'm not always right!"

He was still watching Draco's wand. "Have you ever admitted that about anything specific?" Draco inquired. "I heard you're ostracising Finnigan because he didn't believe you a hundred per cent when it's your word against the Minister of Magic's."

"I'm telling the *truth*," Potter said dangerously, and Draco could hear the simmering anger in his voice. He was aware he could be biting off a lot more than he could chew, but it was that or back down.

"And he's supposed to know that because everyone should know you're always right! Your problem, Potter, is that you're such a precious little hypocrite. You want to be always right, always the good one, and so the people who don't agree with you aren't even *people*. You're an arrogant, judgemental git."

"*You're* an arrogant, judgemental git!" said Potter, who had descended to the 'I am rubber you are glue' stage of argument alarmingly fast, and who had just looked away from the wand for a brief instant.

"I'm quite comfortable with that," Draco told him. "You should either accept it or change, but stop strutting about the school acting like-"

"I don't *strut*," Potter said, and by now he was looking at Draco's face and had apparently forgotten the wand entirely.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Draco came so close. So close. Potter only just ducked in time, the spell ruffled his insane hair, but it wasn't good enough and sometimes Draco felt like he tried and tried only in order to be closer to winning and thus even more frustrated.

Potter came up breathing hard. "Very good," he said, as if he was a real teacher, the unspeakable bastard. "You just need to be a little faster." He paused before turning away, studying Draco again (as if that did Draco any good now, the bastarding bastardous bastard) and said: "So that's what annoys you most about me, is it?"

Draco looked at him balefully, and said: "Also your face."

Potter at that point seemed to recall he had other students - only in fifth year and teaching class already, it must be difficult to be so fantastically skilled, poor little thing - and went off to hear Cho tell him how nervous he made her. Draco thought of Cho's smile and her hands and had to close his eyes because he needed the effort he was wasting on vision to fully experience his Potter hatred.

"He gets on my last nerve," said Smith, popping up at Draco's elbow.

Draco gave him a weak, thankful smile. "You are the only bright spot in the bleak horror of these classes."

*

Draco wished other people were less pathetic. He made up a beautifully horrible song about Weasley's Keeper skills and gave it to Crabbe and Goyle to distribute among the Slytherins, only to find that they'd distributed their Potions homework instead.

Then Blaise Zabini failed to goad the Weasley twins to an act of violence, which was a little like failing to turn the sky blue, even though it was clear Umbridge was just dying to kick everyone off the Gryffindor team and see them cry. The state Potter was in these days, Draco bet it wouldn't have taken much to make him lose it either.

Sometimes Draco wished he'd been Sorted into Slytherin so he could've been useful there, instead of being reduced to snatching Loony Lovegood's idiot lion hat off at mealtimes.

Potter beat Slytherin at Quidditch, Oafy Hagrid returned from what had apparently been a holiday at his sadomasochists' club and was overheard muttering about Chimearas to Professor Grubbly-Plank and Cho continued to look lovingly in Potter's direction during DA sessions.

When the last DA meeting before the holidays rolled around, all Draco wanted for Christmas was to go home. His father hadn't abandoned him like Cho had, and any kind of existence without Potter had to be better than this.

Only first he had to listen to Potter yapping about how much they'd improved at jinxes and things, especially sweet little Longbottom, wasn't it darling, he was colouring practically within the lines and everything.

"And you, uh, Theodore, your Impediment jinx is perfect," said Potter, at which Nott beamed and Potter, for some strange reason, looked at Draco.

Was he trying to imply that Draco's Impediment jinx was *sub par*? That bastard!

Finally it was time to go, and surely this year could hold no worse in store for him than Potter telling everyone maybe they could try Patronuses when they came back, in the tone of one promising children lollipops for being so terribly well-behaved.

"He's ever so gracious, isn't he, almost like an ordinary person," Draco whispered to Smith, nudging him.

Smith grinned. "I feel all privileged just being in the same room as him. Merry Christmas, Draco."

Draco smiled. "Merry Christmas."

Potter caught the smile and it must have led him to think Draco was feeling well-disposed towards the world or something, because he decided to try the patronising act on Draco. "Uh," he said. "Merry Christmas, Malfoy."

Draco brought the smile up a few notches and watched Potter blink at him like the idiot he

was, probably thinking his plan to subjugate the school was working and Draco was falling in line.

Then in a voice of great charm, he said: "I hope mutated holly eats your brains," and left the room.

Even Draco's best ideas always had a fatal flaw, because while he was sweeping out of the room he brilliantly left his wand behind, and had to leave Terry and Anthony to go back and get it. He should've left it there over the holidays.

He would have left it there forever rather than seen what he saw on his re-entry, which was Cho stepping into Potter's embrace, his hand large and sun-browned at the small of her back, drawing her in, and the sheer blinding rage that engulfed Draco when he saw Potter look at him and go red, but not draw back. Potter *let* Cho kiss him, while Draco was just standing there *watching*, that complete, utter, irredeemable bastard!

Draco picked up his wand and said loudly, "Don't let me interrupt," and even Cho's horrified face didn't make him feel any better as he slammed out the door.

When Draco got back to the dormitories, Terry took one look at him and said: "Anthony, go down to the kitchens and get the house elves to raid Professor Trelawney's secret stash *now*. Draco, what happened?"

"Trelawney has a secret stash and nobody told me?" Draco said wanly. "I can trust no-one. This world is an empty bitter place. I saw Cho kissing Potter and I would like to first go blind and then lose my memory and then die, thank you."

"Get the Firewhisky," said Terry.

*

"I'm pretty sure it was their first kiss," Terry said an hour or so later, once Draco was ensconced on the window seat with the Firewhisky bottle cradled to his chest like his alcoholic child.

Draco found this slightly cheering for a moment, since Cho had been eyeing Potter all term and this must mean Potter was terminally bad with women, but then he recalled that despite being awkward around girls Potter was still going out with *Draco's* girl, and he lapsed back into melancholy.

Terry saw this was doing no good, and tried a different tack. "I never thought she was good enough for you, anyway."

"No!" Anthony said. "Certainly not! I don't know why everyone thinks she's so wonderful and good-looking, anyway."

"I hate you so very much," Draco told him in a dreamy way, and had some more Firewhisky. He felt better, like he was sitting back observing his own sad thoughts instead of actually having to feel sad. Ah, sweet Firewhisky. Terry was so clever, which was why he was in Ravenclaw, where people were clever. When Draco should clearly have been put into an

entirely new house where the only qualification was to always, always lose out to stupid Potter.

"She just wanted a boyfriend," Terry said. "She liked you but I don't think it *had* to be you. It could've been Cedric."

"The worst part is-" Draco began, and then stopped.

The worst part was that Draco couldn't *hate* her, as he'd always hated people before when they made him feel small or rejected him. He'd paid attention because he'd wanted to understand her, and now he understood that she was scared and he understood that she'd liked him and he understood why she'd picked Potter.

He wanted to be angry with her but he wasn't really able to, because she had chosen him, once, and nobody had ever really chosen him before.

"Do you want her back?" Terry asked, softly.

Draco thought it over, and thought about what Terry had said about Cho wanting a boyfriend. She'd been willing to consider Potter or Cedric last year. She'd been flattered and pleased and they had been good to each other, and Draco kept thinking about that place on the nape of her neck Potter was probably kissing now, and the way she used to smile at him.

Only Draco didn't want to be the best choice for now. He wanted to be irreplaceable.

"No," he said at last. "But that doesn't make it any better."

If Terry or Anthony had descended to these maudlin levels, Draco would have slapped them, but they both looked at him sympathetically because they were nice people who would never have dreamed of torturing Potter until he begged for mercy.

"It's okay, Draco," Terry told him. "You're just not very good at letting go."

Which was just a stupid thing to say, because why were you supposed to be good at letting go of people you cared about? Why didn't people hang on as hard as they could, prove they weren't letting go, make the other person care?

"I don't want to let go," Draco snarled through the Firewhisky. "I don't understand the concept."

Once most of the Firewhisky was gone, Draco did his favourite impression, that of Potter asking Cho to the Yule Ball.

Anthony frowned. "Is that still funny, now that Potter's-"

Draco cut him off by making an imperious gesture with the Firewhisky bottle. "Wangoballwime will always be funny, Anthony. It will *always be funny*."

He and Cho might be over, but he still had mockery left.

*

For Christmas Draco got everything he wanted, including a brilliant homework planner from Hermione and Father's approval. Father had actually talked to Professor Snape about Draco and told him Professor Snape predicted great things for him.

Father brought him to the station again, and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"If you happen to have another run-in with Potter," Father said, "-and boys will be boys, won't they? - you might want to mention I spotted his little *dog* at the start of the year."

Draco thought that mocking people about their pets was scraping the bottom of the barrel a bit, but it seemed to make Father smile. Draco'd *known* the studying would pay off eventually.

Smith helped continue the New Year in promising style by telling Draco after lunch on the first day that Potter did Remedial Potions.

"You've made me so happy," Draco said. "I think I might cry."

"And he says he can't do the DA tonight," Smith continued, scowling.

"Oh no, what a terrible shame," Draco said. "So happy I really might cry. Just a little. In a manly way."

A few days later, Sirius Black helped break out Aunt Bellatrix and some other people Father said had been convicted without trial in the old days. Anthony seemed upset and that made something in Draco's stomach shift, but - well, if the Dark Lord wasn't doing anything much besides freeing members of Draco's family from durance vile, that wasn't so bad, was it? Father and Mother were both really pleased. No aunt of his was going to hurt Anthony, for heaven's sake.

Terry and Anthony were both very keen to get to the next DA meeting, though, and Draco humoured them because he was looking forward to a nice hour of Potter-mockery with Smith. Potter must know they were his deadly foes, because every time Smith whispered in Draco's ear Draco caught Potter frowning.

"If you don't listen you will not know how to do a Shielding Charm," Potter snapped at him.

Draco adjusted his glasses and gave him a long, wide-eyed stare. "Oh my gosh. Would that mean I'd have to do Remedial Defence Against the Dark Arts? That'd be really embarrassing, that would."

Draco was certain Potter was just concealing his deathly embarrassment really well.

"I'm sure that's it," Smith told him, lingering as Draco took the time to pack his bag into categories according to his study plan. He did not see why more people didn't do this: it was both efficient and aesthetically pleasing.

"I suppose," Draco said disconsolately. "Well, I'd better go off to the library. I swear, if this

whole business doesn't improve my Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL, I shall exact a terrible vengeance."

"You don't need to go yet," Smith urged.

Everyone else had already gone and they were probably getting a head start on studying. This wasn't the kind of sensible talk Draco was used to from Smith. He glanced up inquiringly, and was startled to see that all the books had disappeared from the Come and Go Room.

"What-" he began, and then noticed that Smith was actually standing rather too close to him. Draco took this special moment in his life to feel uncomfortable.

"Let's stay here," Smith went on.

Hufflepuffs had no concept of personal space, that was interesting, Draco thought wildly. It must be a house trait, he would tell Anthony about it for that thesis he was planning, provisionally and saucily titled *The Space Between Helga and Rowena: Closer than Close-*

Draco's thoughts were cut off by Smith taking hold of his shirt.

"What-" Draco began, and then his words were cut off by Smith's mouth.

Draco had no time to recover from the shock of this closer than close Hufflepuff experience of his very own, because at that precise unpropitious moment in Draco's life Potter came in, clearly with a psychic premonition that he could thus make Draco's life even worse.

"Look, Malfoy, I was waiting-" he began, and then though his mouth was still moving, he stopped making any sounds whatsoever.

Smith pushed Draco violently away and yelped: "I'm not gay!"

"*What?*" exclaimed Draco, who wished his verbal skills would stop failing him in times of crisis.

"I'm so sorry. It's none of my business. I'll go," volunteered Potter, without moving a step away from the scene of Draco's horrible, confusing humiliation.

"You can do what you like," Smith snapped, shoving past Potter as he stormed away. "I'm not staying here with *him*."

With another mystifyingly venomous glare at Draco, Smith left, though that was no consolation since Potter was still there and still staring. Draco glared at him.

"Right," Potter said. "Uh. I'm really, really sorry," and then fled.

Why did such horrible things happen to Draco, when he was only a mildly bad person? Why did they *keep happening*?

Now this new year was completely shot as well.

Chapter Five

Draco had always loved the Hogwarts grapevine as a beautifully efficient way to spread awful rumours about Potter, and he could not believe it had turned against him to become a whip in Potter's hands. As soon as he came down for breakfast the next day, leaning on Terry and weary from silent hysteria through the night, everyone giggling at all the tables in school stopped giggling and started looking around innocently.

"What is going on?" he hissed, seizing Anthony's arm as they went to Astronomy class. Terry had already said he hadn't heard anything, and why did Draco ask?

"I respect but do not share your lifestyle choices, Draco, don't grab me!" said Anthony, and then: "I mean, I, ah, haven't heard anything about you, Draco. Not a thing. Not a thing!"

"I will kill Potter," Draco snarled.

"Sorry," Anthony said, "did you say 'kill'?"

"YES," said Draco.

Anthony fumbled for his demon amulet. "That's all right then. For a minute there I thought-"

"I KNOW WHAT YOU THOUGHT," said Draco.

"Good. Good. So it's just Smith and no other boys, is it?"

"I will *kill Potter*," Draco said.

"Well - er, if you'd caught Potter molesting Smith, you'd have told the whole school, wouldn't you?"

"That's not the point," answered Draco, imagining the glory of putting such a thing in the papers, and then his ears caught up with his fantasising brain. "*Molesting* - I really am going to kill him!"

"So it's not true, then," Anthony said. Draco looked at Anthony over his glasses and Anthony wilted. "I was just checking!"

Once in Astronomy, Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley moved tables pointedly to get away from Draco. Draco could not understand why they thought they were in danger of lustful assaults when Hogwarts, no matter what its other failings, provided its students with ready access to several mirrors.

In Care of Magical Creatures, Weasley laughed his head off when he saw Draco and Draco was too busy hating Potter to even insult his family. Potter went red with guilt as soon as he set eyes on Draco, and Draco was almost too busy hating Potter to breathe.

"Be my partner," Hermione said, and took his arm. "Draco, I don't believe a word of it."

"I should hope not!"

"I know you'd never sexually assault someone," Hermione said. "And - you didn't use any Dark spells or anything, did you?"

Draco gave her a long look. "I am deeply touched by your limitless faith in me."

"No, of course you didn't, I am sorry. And you aren't-"

"Nothing is true! None of the vile lies being spread about me are *true*!" shouted Draco, and the rest of the class turned around to give Draco 'wethinks the gay gentleman in back doth protest too much' looks.

He made a sound of hatred and Hermione soothingly did all their work.

At dinner Michael Corner went and ate at the Gryffindor table, where Ginny charmed Draco by telling him off at great length. Draco spent his dinnertime glaring at everyone and plotting to run off to a tropical island, where he and Mother, Father, Terry, Hermione, Anthony, Crabbe and Goyle could all live, and never ever let anyone else come to torment Draco. Particularly Potter.

Once dinner was over, Draco knew everyone would go to the library, so he went to the dormitories and tried to study and enjoy some time without everybody whispering about him. It might've made him pity Potter, if he hadn't hated the filthy little gossip.

He studied by the light of his wand to properly enjoy the dark and woeful atmosphere suitable to his mood, so when Terry loomed out of the darkness *hours* before the library was due to shut Draco's heart hit the back of his teeth.

Once he had swallowed his heart painfully back to somewhere around the throat region, Draco opened his mouth to tell Terry off and then saw the odd look on his face.

"Ah," Terry said. "I, ah. I heard what everyone's been saying."

The expression on Terry's face was so peculiar Draco was sure for a dry-mouthed moment that Terry believed it all and hated him.

"Of course you didn't assault Smith," Terry said scornfully, and Draco praised the Lord and leaned his forehead against Terry's arm. "He would tell a foul lie like that. He couldn't bear for anyone to find out he likes boys."

"Yes!" Draco said with hysterical relief, clawing at Terry's wrist. Terry ran his fingers soothingly through Draco's hair. "Yes, he, I, Potter saw us, and he *lied* and besides he-"

"I'm not surprised for a moment," Terry told him slowly. "What does surprise me-"

Clearly, Potter's nasty little gossiping ways had come as a shock to Terry's system. Poor sweet Terry, he was so trusting.

Terry's fingers were slow and careful in his hair. He paused for so long that Draco looked up

at him again, and saw Terry's shadowed face. His eyes were wide and filled with wonder.

"I had no idea that you'd ever," Terry murmured, and the enormity of Terry's mistake made Draco's mind spin out of control.

He had no words, just panic and a frantic urge to tell Terry that this was all Potter's fault, so if Terry could just go and shove this incredibly awkward situation onto Potter, that would be great. Only Terry did not move, he just stood there and looked down at Draco with that wondering tenderness, and Draco tried not to actually have hysterics.

Terry leaned down and the light went dim, blocked out by his anxious face. His lips met Draco's, dry and careful, brushing them, and Draco urgently needed to borrow Anthony's amulet because breathing was too difficult for him to manage on his own.

Then Terry straightened back up, still looking at Draco, and smiled a shy crooked smile that usually made Draco go through anthologies for hours until they had whatever notes Terry wanted.

"So," Terry said softly. "Wangoballwime?"

Draco laughed a little, and the huff of amused breath made breathing come back to him, and with it some desperate way of processing that could pass for now as logical thought. Because Terry was staring at him, wide-eyed and hoping and wondering, and Draco needed answers now.

His head was filling with answers, just not the right ones. He thought he knew the answer to why Terry never dated anyone, why Terry and Smith were no longer, ahem, study partners, why Terry acted weird sometimes. He had all these answers, and he still didn't have the faintest idea what to do.

Only if he did not do something soon, Terry would snatch his hand away from Draco's hair and he would be hurt and Draco would feel awful and irritable and right now he felt more panic at the thought of losing Terry than anything else.

It hadn't been. There had been no instant recoil, with Smith or with Terry, only surprise and confusion, and looking at Terry's face, Draco considered for a spiky, uncertain moment what it might feel like if he was neither surprised nor confused, but giving this new idea a chance.

He didn't come to a decision, because Terry's face changed subtly and he began to pull away and Draco panicked harder and said, "Wait, *wait*-" and grasped Terry's thin wrist in one hand, stood halfway up and took Terry's face in the other, and brought Terry's mouth to his.

Terry breathed out, a ragged nervous sound, and his lips parted under Draco's. The kiss went deeper, more deliberate, as Draco tried to put what he knew about kissing together with this, with Terry's flat chest hitching nervously against his, his shoulder sharp and pressed against Draco's, almost hurting, rougher than Draco was used to but still very slow and very tentative, since this was Terry.

This was... not bad.

Draco let go of Terry's wrist, and put his hand on Terry's side instead, feeling the rise and fall of his ribs, testing the idea that this could be - what it was becoming, and for once the voice in his head screaming *this will be a terrible disaster* when he acted on impulse was not swiftly being proven right, for once balance was restored to the universe, or a new balance was achieved. The kiss went deeper, and deeper, and Draco pushed Terry backwards until Terry's back hit the bedpost.

Terry's bed, that comfortable familiar place, and how strange that it too suddenly seemed like an exciting new idea.

Draco's wand, lying fallen on the desk, was their only source of light, and the blue bedclothes looked black with Terry lying on them. His shirt had ended up crumpled and discarded on the pillows, and Draco tried to work out what you did with a boy under you, and settled for stroking the skin of Terry's quivering stomach, following the dark, wiry line of hair until it stopped and left his fingers on the waist of Terry's trousers.

Terry shuddered and looked at Draco. "Draco," he said, sounding awed. "What do you like?"

For another sharp moment of panic Draco wanted to shout that he didn't know, he had no idea what he was doing, wasn't that obvious, and then he looked at Terry's concerned, concentrating face and felt the panic which had kept rising as he kept thinking '*what are you doing? Why are you doing this?*' recede because he had an answer, now.

He ran his hand deliberately down Terry's stomach again and murmured, "I like *you*."

The next morning he was putting on his shirt, not quite sure what to say to Terry, when Anthony opened the curtains and then fumbled for his demon amulet.

"Good Lord, Draco, are you doing the *rounds*?" he demanded.

"No," Draco said. "No, I'm done," and he looked at Terry, and saw that Terry mostly looked uncertain of Draco's reaction, and not anything else.

Which meant - well, damn Zacharias Smith for making Terry look like that anyway, and Draco reached out and took Terry's hand, lacing the fingers bossily with his own. Terry's palm was damp and his crooked smile was back.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Oh for heaven's sake don't argue with me, Terry Boot, you know that gives me a migraine," Draco commanded, still feeling a little shaken and unsure and so making his voice as autocratic as possible.

"Okay," Terry said, smiling and still looking awed, which Draco found hard to believe even when he was looking at it, because privately he knew he was nothing awe-inspiring.

He was able to pull Terry off the bed using the hand he already had possession of, though, and once Terry was beside him Terry pulled him in, and rested a tentative cheek against his. Draco closed his eyes, and thought that if someone who knew him as well as Terry did still wanted to... this, then somehow everything would be all right.

"Actually this may be no bad thing," Anthony said thoughtfully. "My mum said that the environment of boarding schools is a homoerotic one. Two in one dormitory, that means the rest of us are safe, right?"

"Shut up, Goldstein," Draco said against Terry's hair.

"I'm speaking statistically," Anthony said, sounding injured.

*

The news that Draco Malfoy was going out with Terry Boot was, to Draco's sheer outrage, accepted with a collective sigh of relief by Hogwarts, who had apparently decided Draco was some kind of insatiable predator who, unless provided with a suitable sex toy, was liable to make sudden leaps. Draco suspected Hogwarts was addicted to drama, it had basilisks and tournaments and stupid Potter, his classmates simply were not going to get het up about homosexuality unless people had the decency to spice it up with crazy fictional Hufflepuff assaults.

"The other stuff about Smith still isn't true," Draco informed Hermione grouchily.

She smiled and dipped her quill in ink. "I'm very pleased, Draco," she said. "I think Terry is a *much* better choice than Zacharias Smith."

Draco was struck by something. "You don't sound awfully surprised," he noted with dark suspicion.

Hermione looked smug and dropped a single word as neatly as she would have closed a book. "No."

"So you suspected I - how do you know everything, Hermione? How do you always know everything? Why do you study with me if you're an *all-knowing super being*?"

Hermione patted his arm. "I like the company."

Never let it be said that Draco wasn't easily won by compliments. "Well, I suppose I come as a welcome relief to the rest of your friends."

"Don't start on Harry now, Draco," Hermione said in a pained sort of way. "We have a lot of work to get done tonight."

Draco spared her on the topic of her perfect little friend's inability to keep his trap shut, but only because it was OWLs year. Otherwise his wrath would have overflowed, it was a testament of his devotion to his studies that he contained it and contented himself with being relentlessly horrible to Potter in person, he deserved a prize.

He got one that night when he came back from the library, and found Terry standing about looking shy, and it was so much easier than Draco would ever have thought to slide a hand inside his shirt, curl it around his neck and kiss him into a smile.

The next day Draco had to face Crabbe and Goyle, and in the midst of a horribly convoluted sentence about the less lying lies that lying Hufflepuffs lied about, Crabbe put a kindly hand on Draco's shoulder and said: "It's okay. Hermione already told us."

Draco almost collapsed with relief.

"She gave us a pamphlet and told us to study it carefully," Goyle said, beaming proudly.

"And we are here to tell you-" he fished around in his pocket and produced a crumpled pamphlet, and began to read out loud laboriously - "that we fully support you in what must doubtless be a trying time for you. We only want your happiness and of course an assurance that you and your life partner are engaging in safe-"

"Stop! Stop and never speak again!" Draco commanded.

"Okay," Goyle said amiably. "I like Boot, though. Good choice."

"Would somebody please act a little bit surprised? Just for me?" Draco implored, wringing his hands tragically and dramatically.

"I'm a little surprised about you," Crabbe allowed, because Crabbe was the kind one. "But everyone's known about Boot for years and years. He told us at the Yule Ball when we asked him if the Ravenclaw girls all said no to him."

"You *knew*? Why did nobody tell *me*?"

"We thought you knew! Everybody else knew," Goyle informed him. "Really, Draco, you might learn to be a bit more sensitive. Especially given your valid and special lifestyle choice."

That nightmarish conversation aside, and Draco woke up at night with visions of Goyle chasing after him yelling 'Talk to us about your feelings!', things were easier than he would ever have dreamed. If he'd dreamed of things like this, and there seemed no good reason not to've, now.

"I'm still *never going to DA meetings again*," he informed Terry, two weeks in and able to read in great comfort with his head on Terry's stomach.

"Okay," Terry said amiably.

Draco hoped for a shining moment that he could brainwash Terry with sex into agreeing with everything Draco said, and thus finally have an ally in his great Blackmail Flitwick Into Giving Us the Exam Tips We Deserve scheme, but then Terry went on, sweet and reasonable and crushing Draco's dreams.

"Only I'm sure Potter was just taken-aback, he's not too bad, really-"

"Silence, blasphemer," Draco grumbled, seizing Terry's worn jumper in his hands and fluffing it about as if it was a pillow beneath his head, as a pleasant alternative to listening to the Potter babble.

"Even Zacharias - I don't think he would have been such a prat about it if it hadn't been Potter," Terry said thoughtfully. "He's always had some sort of resentful hero worship thing going on there, and until this year Potter probably didn't know his name, and-"

"Potter doesn't know anyone's name," Draco mumbled, turning into the soft jumper and rubbing the material against his cheek. Then he actually got Terry's drift and squawked his indignation. "No, wait, *what* are you saying to me? Smith fancies Potter? Smith fancies *Potter*?"

"Er," Terry said meekly. "I think so, yes."

"And what am I," Draco demanded, full of righteous outrage, "chopped *liver*? Chopped liver that gets, that gets *pounced on* because Smith is so hot and bothered after spending an hour in Potter's autocratically unkempt presence anyone will do?"

"Sorry, Draco," Terry said, fighting a smile. "Did you think you were irresistible to all men?"

"Of course not," muttered Draco, who had been rather hoping this was the case.

"Think of it from poor Zacharias' point of view," suggested Terry, who was far too sympathetic for his own good. "There he is, so ashamed of it, with his hopeless crush, and then who out of the whole school has to walk in and catch him at it?"

Quite frankly, Draco did not care about Smith's pain, especially since apparently Draco's first homosexual experience had been more about Potter than it had about Draco, and given that and the fact Potter was seeing Draco's ex-girlfriend, well, Anthony's mum had said boarding school could be an incestuous environment too but this was getting a bit ridiculous.

Not that Draco wanted Smith, the molesting Terry-hurting liar, but it was a little much that Potter had beaten him at something again, and this time Potter definitely hadn't even been trying.

"He's an idiot, anyway," Draco grumbled rebelliously, twining Terry's fingers with his own. "If he *likes* Potter, why isn't he nice to him? I call it weird. Weird and creepy. Stupid Smith," he went on, his voice dipping lower. "Hate hate hate."

"I-" said Terry, his breath catching as Draco nuzzled his face into Terry's stomach again. "At least he didn't use you for your looks."

Draco slid his face to the strip of skin where Terry's jumper and trousers didn't quite meet, and let his teeth graze the curve of Terry's hip.

His voice came out even lower, soft against his skin. "I have no real problem with being used for my looks."

"Well, that's not what I meant," Terry said, his Arithmancy book sliding out of his hand as he grasped the sheets instead. "I meant - well, I think that's why Zacharias liked me, last year. Because I'm dark and skinny and I wear glasses and - I suppose I have a superficial resemblance to Potter-"

Draco bit down on his hip, and then abruptly sat up, leaned over and held Terry's shoulders back against the bed, hovering over him, mouth an inch away from his.

"Hush," he said firmly. "I will not have anyone saying such atrocious things about my boyfriend."

Terry smiled. They were *good* together, still friends but more, and life was good again, with Terry, and Umbridge threatening to chuck Hagrid out of school and Draco taking every opportunity to rub this into Potter's tattling face, and no D.A., and more Terry. When Valentine's Day rolled around all the Ravenclaws went down to Hogsmeade as a group, and Terry looked hopeful and so Draco held his hand. Corner looked like he was going to object until Ginny pushed him in the head a couple of times.

"I don't see why you have to keep hurting me," Corner hissed.

Ginny smiled. "I do it out of love, Michael. Out of love."

Rain poured down on Hogwarts that Valentine's Day, leaving Draco soaked and cold and trying to climb bodily inside Terry's clothing and leech warmth from his skin. They all prowled around testing the new Hot Sauce Gobstoppers, and found they did make you warmer but they unfortunately didn't make you any drier. Draco insisted to Terry that this was simply because they weren't eating enough at once.

"Moderation is as bad as a famine!" he shouted, with the water sluicing down his glasses and one arm around Terry's shoulders, one hand under Terry's sodden jumper, and then put five Gobstoppers in his mouth.

He was laughing with his mouth full when they passed Madam Puddifoot's and saw Potter and Cho on the doorstep, bodies stiff with anger and not touching at any point.

"-can't believe you want to go see Hermione Granger on our first date!"

Cho's face looked pinched with fury and Potter looked wretched and uncomfortable, his hair laden with soggy pink confetti. Both their eyes followed the Ravenclaws and Ginny as they went past, and Draco rubbed his nose companionably against Terry's rain-slick cheek, and realised in a startled sort of way that he had by far the better deal.

*

"I am really pleased you're getting laid again, Malfoy, it makes you so much less bitter and snarly," was Padma's frankly vulgar and shocking verdict on one Friday night.

Padma was Draco's least favourite Ravenclaw girl, she did nothing but swan around on the arms of Weasleys at balls, and have the bad taste to have an actual twin in Gryffindor. Draco disapproved of twins.

"Don't scowl at me like that, you know we need peace and quiet for our OWLs," Padma went on, and as Draco began to pack books for the library, he'd known trying to study in the common room was stupid, she said very quietly: "We miss you a bit at the DA. You haven't been to a meeting in over a month."

"Well, I'm not going to go to horrible Potter's horrible fanclub when he can't even keep his mouth shut about my love life, am I?" Draco snarled, shouldering his bag.

Before he made his getaway, Padma said casually: "Was it Potter who started all those rumours about you, then? Funny. I thought it was Smith."

Her little comment rankled unsettlingly all the way to the library, bouncing around his head like a roll of parchment not filed away in his bag's class compartments. By the time he was in the library, he was in enough of a state to dump his bag on top of Hermione's notes.

Hermione went from Arithmancy absorption to Arithmancy outrage in a terrifying instant. "Draco, you know better than to do that!"

"Did Potter tell you about Smith kissing me?" he asked in a loud voice. Madam Pince's head went up like a bloodhound catching a scent, and Hermione pulled him hastily into a chair.

"Hush, Draco, for heaven's sake! What are you saying about Harry now - did he *know* about Zacharias kissing you?"

"He saw us!"

"Well," said Hermione, breathing hard out of her nose. "Well, since he's supposed to be one of my best friends and you're supposed to be one of my best friends, you wouldn't think I'd have to hear it from Parvati Patil, now would you? Honestly, he could have told *me* -"

"Oh God," Draco exclaimed, and fell forward on the table in an attitude of despair.

Well, that was bloody perfect, now wasn't it? He'd gone and misjudged Potter, and one of the great prides of his life was that Draco always saw Potter with perfect clarity for what he was, unlike the rest of the school. Potter might have seen and judged Draco in a split second, but Draco paid attention and collected evidence about what a prat Potter was, and thus was always right and entirely justified in anything he did.

If he'd known that Potter had forbore from even telling Hermione, he might not have done that impression of Oafy starving to death in the Forbidden Forest once Umbridge chucked him. Wait, no, who was he kidding, that had been a masterpiece, he could never have deprived the world of such hilarity. He might have done it with less malice, though.

"Is that why you wouldn't come to DA meetings? Draco, I think you owe Harry an apology!"

Draco writhed in torment. "I won't, I won't! You can't make me!"

Hermione looked very stern. "The DA means a lot to me, Draco. If you'd told me the real reason you weren't coming, I would have sorted everything out."

Draco opened his mouth to tell her all the reasons why the DA was a horrible little vigilante group and Potter an imbecilic future dictator with a swelled head so bad it probably explained his hair, and then shut his mouth.

"I'll sort everything out," he said at last. "DA meeting Saturday night. We can all..." he forcibly reminded himself that it had been quite nice of Potter not to tell, and utterly loathsome of Smith to do so. "Celebrate Gryffindor beating Hufflepuff at Quidditch," he said finally through his teeth.

Hermione looked very proud of him. Draco resisted the urge to go and wash his mouth out.

Gryffindor did beat Hufflepuff, though not spectacularly. Weasley continued to be frightful at Keeping, which provided Draco with endless amusement, and Potter only just scraped a win by grabbing the Snitch when it appeared for an instant at Kirke's ankle.

Marvellous, Potter had saved the day again, and now Draco had to arrive with a peace offering. Oh, it made him want to die.

He had promised Hermione, though, and he would try to be civil. He put on Muggle clothes as a sort of flag of truce, though stealing Anthony's jeans and 'EXCUSED FROM LIFE' shirt would probably lead to war, breathed out hard through his nose and made a point of entering at a stage in the proceedings late enough to make an entrance, and early enough to be polite. Since that seemed to be his dark fate.

Everyone turned when Draco came in, except Potter who for reasons Draco assumed were connected with his dark fate, was already looking at the door. Everyone put on very, very false expressions of surprise, and Draco glared accusingly at Terry and Hermione, who began a guilty conversation about flow charts.

"Malfoy," said Potter. "Been a long time."

Retorts rushed to Draco's lips and begged to be let out. *I'd get my mother to write you a note but you're not a real teacher*, Draco thought urgently. *Potter, it hasn't been half long enough.*

"I'm sure you missed me," Draco said, using the minimum amount of sarcasm he felt necessary to support life. "And since this place has obviously been cold and bleak without my presence, I thought I'd bring a room-warming gift."

He produced same from under his cloak. This was part of the plan he hadn't told Hermione.

"Firewhisky?" Weasley said. "*Excellent!*" He paused. "You didn't... poison it, did you?" he asked suspiciously.

Draco waggled the bottle and smirked. "Only one way to find out."

"Sorry, you brought *alcohol* to a place where we're all meant to be learning *constant vigilance*?" Potter asked.

Draco's mouth opened in soundless indignation and Potter suddenly looked alarmed.

"Um. Malfoy," he said, in a quieter sort of way. "I was teasing you."

Draco raised an eyebrow, but refrained in the interests of peace from a glasses look. "Let you in on a little secret, Potter. You're not very good at it," he said, sitting down - not next to

Potter or anything revolting like that, but not as ostentatiously far away as usual.

"I'll make sure to practise," Potter said dryly.

Draco half-smiled and unscrewed the bottle cap on the Firewhisky. "Now," he said. "Who wants some?"

*

Weasleys could not hold their drink. Draco was deeply, deeply unsurprised.

He noted smugly as Ginny Weasley did a slinky dance and Corner looked like the happiest man in the world, that Malfoys handled their drink quite well. He had a bit more practise than the Gryffindors, of course. He was just a little buzzed, the world slightly soft-focus and glowy. This really was an excellent room, not only because of its hilarious alternate name, but because it really did give you what you required.

Music had started about halfway through the bottle, and when it ran alarmingly dry the cabinet appeared and when Draco opened it he found a dazzling array of bottles stretching far inside. And a stepladder.

He rested his hand affectionately on the wooden inside of the wardrobe, and wondered if he dared risk the stepladder. Its edges looked comforting and glowy as well, but something in Draco's brain felt this might not be a good thing.

"Hermione says not to bring out the absinthe," Potter said, stepping hesitantly inside. "Also, um, I don't think you should try getting up on that stepladder."

"You are not the boss of me," Draco informed him, and then remembered he was being civil. "But you could be right," he said, giving the stepladder another look. It waved at him. He did not trust it.

Potter cleared his throat. "Hermione told me," he said abruptly. "That you thought I'd told, but. I didn't tell anyone."

Draco studied the bottles before him. It was a really awe-inspiring selection: he didn't think he could choose. "No," he said absently. "I should've known better. It wasn't really your style, but how was I supposed to know Smith would try to convince the whole school rather than look bad in front of you?"

Potter blinked. "I'm sure that's not what it was about. I hardly know Smith."

That was Potter for you: so self-absorbed he didn't notice half the attention poured all over him. Lucky for him there was so much of it, Draco thought, shaking his head and smirking to himself. Oblivious git. Draco supposed he could thank heaven for the small mercy that Potter wasn't vain as well as arrogant.

"You're not missing out on anything."

"No, I didn't think so," Potter said. He paused for a moment, and then coughed. "The rumours

said that you started it. It - didn't look that way to me."

While an eyewitness report would have been more useful in January, Draco was still pleased: at last, someone who acknowledged that Smith had succumbed to Draco's charms and pounced all on his own.

"Wasn't that way. Smith leaped at me from out of nowhere, it - don't *laugh*, Potter - it gave me a nasty shock."

Potter of course should not have laughed at Draco's traumatic experience, but Draco was gratified to see that his Face of Leap was just as hilarious as he'd thought it was and Anthony had claimed it wasn't.

Laugh fading on his lips, Potter glanced at Draco and pushed his glasses further up his nose. "But you are, ah. I mean. With Terry Boot."

"Yes, I am ah, with Terry Boot," Draco said, mimicking Potter's inflection and wondering if Potter was a dreadful secret homophobe. "I wasn't ah then. I'd never even thought about ah then."

"But you seem fine with it now," Potter said. "I mean, not that I was-"

There was trifle-flavoured rum on the shelf. Draco marvelled at that and also at the total incoherence of Harry Potter.

He frowned. "What did you expect me to be? Ashamed of him? He's *mine*. I don't let down people who're - people who I-" He shook his head and reached out for the apricot brandy. Apricots were a pretty colour.

"People like Terry and Anthony and Crabbe and Goyle," Potter said.

Alcohol was nice, Draco thought. It made the hard edges of everything go away, it even made Potter seem like he wasn't judging you every minute, taking the sharpness from his voice to leave it soft and rough.

He smiled. "Yes. Look at you, Potter, you know all their names. Why's that?"

"Because they're your friends," Potter answered.

"Oh," Draco said uncertainly. Possibly his campaign of terror had worked too well and he had made his loved ones targets for Potter's righteous wrath. "What d'you think of vodka?"

"What's it like?" Potter demanded.

"Well, it's a clear sort of alcohol, burns a bit when it goes down, not much taste, we could mix it with pumpkin juice-"

"No, I mean - ah-"

Potter looked red and desperately uncomfortable, his hair practically standing up in clumps in

agitation, and suddenly everything became very clear to Draco. Poor little Potter, his saviour complex had impelled him to have a supportive chat with the member of an oppressed minority group. If only he'd picked Terry, Terry would have been so much better at this, while Draco was desperately fighting off the urge to suggest Potter try it with Smith and watch him swoon with heterosexual horror.

He said lightly, "Come on, Potter. Things can't be going *that* badly with Cho."

Potter shoved his hands so suddenly into his pockets that Draco thought he was angry, but when he glanced at Potter's face the corner of Potter's mouth came up.

"Care to put money on that?"

Draco thought back to Potter looking like a socially awkward robot in the rain. "No," he said at last. "That's all right. Ah is all right too, by the way," he said, humouring Potter's apparent desire to comfort poor deviant folk such as himself. "Going very nicely. Thank you for the inquiry."

Saint Potter, supporter of house elves and homosexuals and small children who really wanted his autograph everywhere. Draco smiled and tucked a bottle of vermouth into his pocket and thought he might be done here, but stopped for a minute. The civility hadn't been *quite* as painful as expected, though that was probably because of the alcohol and the dim light in the cabinet, which let Draco pretend that this wasn't Potter, or at least that they weren't what they were to each other in the clear light of day - a thing of torment and a chore forever.

"So you don't - miss anything about girls?" Potter asked quickly, and Draco couldn't go before he answered the question, but he looked back at the shelves rather than look at Potter.

"I mostly miss talking about Quidditch."

Because alcohol was so nice, and made everything in the world nice too, he thought he would take just one more bottle. This turned out to be a mistake when he reached up for it and almost overbalanced.

Potter caught his elbow at once, steadying him, his grip surprisingly strong around Draco's arm.

"I," said Potter. "You're drunk, aren't you?"

"Certainly not," Draco replied with hauteur. "Ravenclaws never get drunk. Ravenclaws become inebriated."

Potter laughed, a low sound against Draco's ear which reminded Draco rather forcibly that Potter had not stepped back and that Muggle clothing was upsetting because it exposed things like elbows and you ended up having all kinds of weird skin contact with the oddest people.

"Are you drunk?" Draco asked, with a measure of self-preservation.

"No, I haven't touched the stuff," Potter said, his voice going darker now as well as lower. Draco looked at him and he looked angry: he said slowly, "I'm not keen on not being in

control of my own mind - especially lately."

Whatever was making Potter look so homicidally upset, Draco wanted no part of it, but what with this being a cabinet and Potter still holding onto his elbow, there was nowhere to go.

"I do not have the faintest idea what you're talking about," he said, very sharply, because it seemed like a clever idea to be aggressive with the insane boy. He turned away from the bottles and glared: Potter blinked, his face too close for Draco actually to tell whether he looked murderous and enraged.

"Course you don't," Potter said roughly. "Look, d'you remember last year and the truce in the library?"

"Yes," Draco answered, and then hurriedly and in a much more normal voice: "It wasn't a truce, it was me talking to you because you were annoying every hour at five minutes to and ten minutes to on Friday-"

"Because I'm especially annoying on Fridays. I remember," Potter told him. "I want - I think we should have another truce, for - for the good of the DA and everything. Because - it's important and - Crabbe's really getting better at jinxes and-"

"I don't know, Potter," Draco said, a bit wildly. "Are we going to have any DA meetings on a Friday?"

Possibly he was consenting to something without his consent, because Potter looked triumphant for a moment and Draco wasn't sure what he was even triumphant about.

"Not if you don't want to."

"Draco, are you trying to get *all* the drink out of that cabinet?" asked Anthony, opening the door wider. Draco blinked in the light and Potter, not before time, snatched his hand away from Draco's arm. "I - oh, hi, Harry. Draco, you don't want to miss this, Ginny Weasley has her top off!"

"No!" Draco said. "Really? Excellent!"

He leaned over to where Anthony stood, both for comforting Ravenclawyness and to get a proper look at Ginny. She was in a bra and singing a song about how her cauldron was full of hot, strong love.

Anthony and Draco gave consideration to this sight. As a Ravenclaw, Draco felt bound to analyse it thoroughly.

"Where's *Ron*? And I thought you were gay!" exclaimed Potter, who could apparently say the word after all and was pink to the tips of his ears.

"I'm equal opportunities," Draco said happily, the alcohol still making him feel at peace with all the world. "If any boys want to take off their tops, I'll be very interested to see that."

"Interesting you should say that," Anthony remarked, and threw back the cabinet door all the

way.

Ron Weasley, who should never be permitted around Firewhisky again, had his top off and was twirling it around his obscenely red head.

"OH I MAY NOT BE A WHIZ ON THE QUIDDITCH PITCH," he sang at the top of his lungs, "BUT I'M CHASED OVER TOWN BY EVERY WITCH-"

"Oh my God, I take it all back, so many freckles, I can't think," Draco murmured in delirious horror. "Someone make him put them away."

"WHO KNOWS THAT I'M A LEGEND IN THE CHANGING ROOM," Weasley bellowed. "BECAUSE BABY I'VE GOT AN ENORMOUS BR-"

"Ron!" Hermione shrieked commandingly. *"What would your mother say?"*

"I should go help," muttered Potter, though whether he meant stop Weasley or stop Hermione from killing Weasley was unclear. He brushed by Draco as he went out.

Draco began to share the apricot brandy with Anthony, who giggled at him and said: "Mum would *so* not approve."

People were dancing, though aside from the Weasleys they were doing so while decently clad. Hermione and Potter were wrestling Weasley's top back on, to Draco's immense and abject relief.

The Sociopath Twins, typically, were shouting: "Shame!" and "Take it off again, Ron, baby!"

It was a good party, Draco thought with immense blurry self-satisfaction, and then saw Zacharias Smith, recently beaten at Quidditch, lurking about the outskirts of the party like a hungry hyena. Draco saw the way he was glancing sidelong at Potter, and felt a sudden pang of fellow feeling. He knew what it was like to be ignored and furious, after all.

It didn't mean he would betray one of his friends, though.

When Hermione was done wrestling Ron into submission - which Draco was privately and horrifyingly convinced she enjoyed on some unspeakable level - Draco went up to her and slid his arms around her waist, felt the crisp cloth of her blouse against his arms and the press of her bushy hair. Alcohol was nice, he wished she would have some.

"Come on, dance with me."

"You're behaving appallingly," she said in her prim tones. "I cannot believe there are drunken prefects about me, this is all your fault."

"I know how you hate breaking the rules."

Hermione faltered and then smiled, because she hadn't been friends with Draco for years without learning someone was going to call her on everything, and she might as well relax about it.

"I'll dance with you," she said at last.

"Course you will," Draco said comfortably. "You're my girl, aren't you?"

She put her arms around his neck and they were comfortable together, with nothing confusing going on about this, not like there sometimes was with Terry now, with all this new boundary-shifting and second-guessing.

"Only if you'll be good," Hermione said, and Draco was possessed with a sudden fear that she meant it. He held on hard to her stupid blouse through the dance, and tried not to think about choices.

Several rounds of apricot brandy later, Anthony stole his glasses and pranced about the place like a demented house elf, cackling and saying he couldn't wait to tell his mother that he was the cleverest of them all. Draco felt that though the alcohol prize went to the Weasleys, the Ravenclaws were not covering themselves with glory tonight.

He caught Terry as he went by, fingers light but moving with intent inside his shirt and up his collarbone, and then just before he pulled Terry into him he had a horrible, terrible moment of doubt. Because Anthony had taken his glasses and Draco was very - inebriated, and all he could see against the light was dark hair and glasses.

He hesitated and was amazingly relieved when Terry let out his familiar and dear nervous laugh. "Where've you been all night? Looking for someone else?"

He brought Terry into focus, always-worried hazel eyes and Draco's fingers slipping into curly hair.

"No," he murmured. "I've got the right one," and when Terry sat down rather abruptly Draco crawled into his lap.

He woke up the next morning tangled with Terry and the sheets, a monster trying to break free from the fragile eggshell of his skull. Anthony was moaning from the next bed for them to get his mother and tell her he wanted to die.

"I am an unspeakable *thing*," Draco said, burying his face against Terry's narrow chest.

"No, no," Terry said soothingly. "You gave it a good school try, but I didn't let you commit public indecencies on a chair. It's all right."

"It's not," Draco declared. "It never will be. I was polite to Potter. We had a whole conversation."

"Uh - there, there?"

"I think," Draco opined darkly, "that he's trying to recruit me for the side of light. I will *never* drink again."

"Er," quavered Ginny from behind the curtains of Corner's bed. "Er. Has anyone seen my

top? Recently?"

Corner seemed to be in an alcoholic coma, so they found Ginny one of Terry's jumpers and Draco put on yesterday's Muggle clothes and volunteered to walk her to her own tower because he had been raised correctly and he wanted to see Weasley's face.

Unfortunately, once they were there Weasley was too busy yelping in distress at Hermione and Potter to notice Ginny at all. "Why do you keep smiling, Harry? What did I do? *What happened last night?*"

Ginny escaped thankfully up the stairs and Draco made his way out of the Gryffindor common room, feeling duty bound to say over his shoulder: "Weasley, baby, you know how to shake it."

Weasley went pale. "Shake - shake what? What? Why will no-one tell me?"

"You wild thing," Draco added with cheerful cruelty.

Potter looked up, caught his eye and raised his hand in an awkward sort of greeting, as if not being hostile used up all of his pitifully few social graces. Draco removed his hand from his neck, feeling his rather self-conscious attempt to conceal a love bite was doomed to failure anyway, and waved back a tiny bit. Potter's mouth quirked and, deeply nonplussed, Draco smiled too.

Going back up to bed and Terry, he caught sight of himself in a mirror and stopped in mild horror. His hair was not, as he'd fondly hoped, rakishly dishevelled, his Muggle clothes looked silly with his Ravenclaw scarf and his glasses were smudgy. He had a sudden feeling, as if Father was looking over his shoulder, that this was not how he'd meant to end up.

He smiled and looked over his glasses at his reflection, and felt like he might not care.

Until Monday came, and with it the March *Quibbler* in which Harry Potter named his father and Crabbe's father and Goyle's father as Death Eaters.

Draco read it and shook with fury, while the whole table was buzzing with excitement that slowly, as they looked at him, began to die down. Terry touched his arm but when Draco got up and went over to Crabbe and Goyle, he didn't try to stop him.

Crabbe and Goyle met his eyes with grim understanding, and all he could think of was that he and Father had been *better* recently, that Father was a politician and had worked for years doing damage control, claiming Imperius, he told Draco he'd never reach the position he deserved because of people's prejudices. What was this going to do to him? Why should some stupid boy be allowed to wreck his father's reputation?

He saw Potter and Hermione laughing about it in the library and saw a very intense shade of red.

"The best bit," Hermione began gleefully, but he never heard what the best bit was because he strode up to their desk and threw the stupid *Quibbler* in Potter's stupid, startled face.

"You can take this rag and choke on it," he snarled. "If it doesn't kill you, try choking on your stupid DA. You don't think any of us will be back after you badmouthed our fathers, do you?"

Potter went white and stormy looking. "It doesn't matter to you that it's the truth, then?"

It had been the truth when Potter had run around the school spouting it and Dumbledore had supported him: everyone had known what he thought and made up their own minds. Truth didn't need dramatic airings in newspapers, especially not when it was about Father, especially not when it could wreck his career.

"Oh, we've only got your word for that," Draco spat. "It didn't occur to you that my father is a politician and relies on his reputation, did it?"

"No, but I can't say it would have stopped me," Potter sneered. "He's no great loss to a system of truth and justice. He's no great loss to anyone."

"He's my father!" Draco said. "And none of the people you've slandered will have any choice now but to - to-"

"You don't honestly believe he hasn't made his choice already!" Potter shouted, standing up. "What about *you*, Malfoy? Why don't you pick a side?"

Draco stepped up to him, close as the desk between them would allow, and shoved him backwards.

"Fine," he said coldly. "Any side but yours."

Chapter Six

Terry didn't talk about the *Quibbler* interview. Draco supposed it was reassurance, that Terry didn't want to hear anything about Draco's father that would make him change his mind about Draco, but Draco might have preferred some shouting and arguing and an open assurance that nothing would make him change his mind about Draco.

He had no right to expect that kind of assurance, though. It wasn't like Terry had chosen him, not really, not when the other options were Zacharias Smith and celibacy. He and Terry were friends and Draco didn't believe it was a matter of convenience or anything, but there was no evidence that Terry would have chosen him from all the world, let alone wanted him enough to keep choosing him, no matter how inconvenient it might become.

Those were uneasy thoughts that stirred only briefly, on nights dark enough to seem lonely despite all the others in the room or when everyone else was at the DA and April kept making the skies open and weep. Even the fact Dumbledore had hired a teacher more horse than man hardly cheered Draco up on those days, since there was nobody to see his 'classroom complete with trough' routine.

Even Hermione was too busy for the library some days - probably off planning her next expose on Draco's father - and one day, on his way back from the library, he ran into Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini and that girl Pansy Parkinson. They were laughing and called him over.

"Some girl called Marietta told us Dumbledore had organised a secret army of students and we got to chase them down!" Zabini exclaimed. Draco raised his eyebrows at Crabbe and Goyle inquiringly, and they shrugged. Zabini, still beaming uncharacteristically, said: "We got fifty points for Slytherin!"

Draco shifted his heavy bag from one shoulder to the other. "Congratulations."

"They say they're going to expel Potter!"

Draco smiled properly then. "Not before time, if you ask me."

"Come down to our common room," Pansy said. "We know where Trelawney keeps her stash."

"What a coincidence," Draco told her. "So do I."

Potter was unfortunately not expelled, which relieved Draco's mind a bit because he hadn't seen how Hermione would escape the same fate, but somehow Umbridge managed to get Dumbledore not only fired but on the run from the law. Draco thought he might've misjudged Umbridge - she wasn't much of a teacher, but clearly she was brilliant at administration. Anyone would be an improvement on Dumbledore, and there might be some order in Hogwarts now.

Draco was in quite a good mood all that day, until the next morning when they all made a trip to the infirmary, and he saw Marietta's face, and realised Hermione - *his* Hermione - had actually cursed someone to be scarred for life if they spilled the beans about her precious little club.

"How can you even think about that when Dumbledore's gone?" Hermione demanded later, in a fraught whisper. "I wanted to keep us all safe! I thought it was a brilliant idea-"

"Yes, brilliant," Draco said coldly. "Shame you didn't just put the mark on her arm where it'd be less conspicuous, though. Otherwise there isn't much to choose between you and the Dark Lord."

Hermione stood up and looked older, suddenly, old enough so Draco was aware of a cold space between them. "I'm sorry you think that," she said. "But you have to take harsh measures in a war, Draco. This is life or death."

"Marietta didn't think she was in a war," Draco snapped. "Marietta thought she was at school!"

Hermione stared at him and then, looking furious with him and herself, began to cry, and even though she'd attacked one of *his* house, he didn't - he wasn't all right with seeing Hermione cry. He hissed exasperatedly between his teeth and then sat back down beside her, at the table where all their books were fallen and chaotic, and leaned his forehead against her angry hunched back as she cried.

He thought about his father saying, *They're not stable, Draco. You can't trust them.*

"Miss Parkinson says that you seem to have a very sensible attitude to all of this upheaval," Professor Umbridge told him after Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Change is difficult, but things do have to change in order to get better, and in trying circumstances, well - the stronger characters prove themselves."

"And those of weak mind get run off by the law," Draco said, still lost in happy thoughts about never having to listen to Dumbledore's end of year speeches again.

Professor Umbridge smiled girlishly, as if they were sharing a confidence. "Exactly. Draco, I think you would be *perfect* for a little scheme I'm setting up."

Which meant that Draco was chosen by the new Headmistress, who no matter how absurd her taste in clothing seemed to be an excellent judge of character, to be part of the Inquisitorial Squad. It was better than being a prefect, Father wrote. He was really proud. And that meant Father was in favour of the Ministry, too, it meant Draco didn't have to choose between extremist individuals like Dumbledore and the Dark Lord.

"We're a select group supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge," he drawled when he came upon one of their little insurrectionist groups, willing Hermione at least to understand that this was the intelligent choice.

Hermione looked at him with her mouth set, and Potter stared at him as if he'd betrayed him. As if Draco had ever been on his side.

"You like that power-mad, crazy old bat?" he demanded.

"Good Lord," Draco said. "Have I been misinformed? I thought Dumbledore had left

Hogwarts. That's five points for denigrating our new headmistress, Potter."

"You can't do that!" exclaimed Ernie Macmillan, the cheeky bastard.

Nice to have some power for a change. "I believe I can," Draco answered. "Five points for contradicting me, Macmillan. Weasley, your shirt's untucked, either lose five points or give us all another show."

Weasley went for his wand and Hermione grabbed his arm, saying: "Don't" in a subdued voice, and Draco smiled at her.

"Five points to Gryffindor for being the only one with any brains."

Hermione looked at the floor. "I don't want them," she said. "Draco. You're making a terrible mistake."

He stared at her bowed head and she kept staring at the floor, and Potter stopped staring at Draco long enough to check the house hourglasses in the wall.

"Noticed, have you?" said the Sociopath Twins as they strolled up.

Potter didn't glance at them, turning from the hourglasses back to his intent gaze on Draco. "Malfoy here just docked us all points."

"Montague tried to do us during break," a Sociopath Twin said, his voice very ugly. "Best not to tell you what we did to him, with one of Umbridge's little sneaks around."

"Montague hasn't been seen since break!" Draco exclaimed. "What did you do, kill him and hide him away because anyone who took *house points* from Gryffindor doesn't deserve to *live*? Yeah, Hermione, I can see you're right, I should be aligning myself with lunatics and murderers!"

The Sociopath Twins stepped forward as one, which was when Draco realised his fury had led him to be very, very unwise indeed.

"Leave him alone," Potter said unexpectedly, shoving his shoulder hard in front of Draco's. "I'm sure they didn't do anything too bad to Montague," he went on to Draco, his words tumbling hard against each other. "Even if they did, it's more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Oh, that's perfectly all right then. I'm so glad that just because you think you're right, everything you do is justified!"

"I swear to God, Malfoy, you have to listen to me!" Potter said. "You're aligning yourself with lunatics and murderers now! You know better than this!"

Possibly one of the reasons Potter was so unbelievably arrogant was that he had some sort of trick that made the rest of the world fall away into unimportance, even the imminent threat to Draco's life posed by the Sociopath Twins, in comparison with the desire to hit Potter very, very hard.

He tilted his head and Potter followed the motion. "Maybe I'm bringing the system down from the inside, Potter," Draco said. "Five points for not thinking of that."

"Are - are you?"

"Maybe I am," Draco drawled, and he was so sick and tired of Potter (and the universe) measuring him and finding him wanting. "Maybe I'm not." He stepped back sharply, and said: "Five points because I don't like you, Potter," and walked away.

*

The next day he found Cho crying in the common room and felt that old urge - it seemed very old now - to put his arm around her and keep her safe. Instead he leaned his arm against the mantelpiece and asked her distantly what was wrong.

"I broke up with Harry," she said. "I think. If it could be called breaking up, I don't know, we only ever kissed once and - I couldn't. Marietta's face, and he defended Hermione Granger-"

"She meant it for the best," Draco found himself saying.

This did nothing to stop Cho's tears, and so Draco stopped talking, because Terry had told him sometimes when he talked things just got progressively and unbelievably worse. He stood there at the mantelpiece and waited until she was done crying.

At last, Cho said: "I don't think he even noticed we were breaking up," and Draco, carefully so as not to cheat on Terry, touched her shoulder.

"I think you did the right thing," he said, and then left her in a hurry to go tell Terry not to be jealous, was he jealous?

"Madly jealous," Terry said, his eyes small with amusement even though he wasn't smiling, and Draco sat down beside him and dropped a kiss on his neck.

"I'm glad you don't have to go rushing off to that idiot DA anymore," he whispered.

"I don't want to talk about it," Terry said at once, and Draco told himself that was because he was scared of losing Draco, and that it was stupid to expect Terry to hold on too ridiculously hard, to refuse to countenance the possibility of ever losing Draco.

He leaned against Terry's side, taking comfort in his warmth and the arm that slipped readily about his shoulders, and began to read a letter from his father.

Having Cho and Marietta distraught in the common room was no good if you urgently needed to study for OWLs, and of course studying for the OWLs was so vital Draco did not even consider going home for the Easter holidays.

Fat chance anyone had of studying when Harry Potter was traipsing around the library like a discomfited gremlin. Draco wished they had some moors around so Potter could go wail on them and satisfy his melodramatic instincts, instead of badly startling people who were merely in search of helpful indexes and not expecting Potter to loom out of nowhere.

"I'm sorry," Draco said pleasantly. "I don't know where the Little Harry Learns To Read books are."

"Do you love your father?" was Potter's idea of a reasonable conversation opener.

"What are you planning to do to him?" Draco snapped.

"No, I mean - if you found out he did something awful."

"What's he going to do?" Draco asked, trying to keep the thin edge of panic out of his voice.

"No, it's just - Malfoy, you have the worst father I know, and I just wanted to know if - if you loved him. If you'd love him no matter what you found out about him, what he did when he was younger, or-"

"Yes!" Draco exclaimed. "Yes! All right! Have you rubbed it in sufficiently? Do you feel better now? Do you want to hear it again? Yes."

Potter looked a little startled to be backed up against a bookshelf by the sheer power of Draco's rage, but he also looked a little less angry. "I feel a bit better," he said, quietly.

Draco threw up his hands and stalked away. He wondered if Potter wrote 'Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater' all over the walls in Gryffindor tower, did he have nothing else to think of? What had got his mind on fathers in the first place?

He sat down and tried to stop simmering and start studying, only to see Potter not so very far away, engaging in a spot of illegal chocolate and conversation with Ginny. Really, the girl had been on the receiving end of some Ravenclaw love, how was she still Potter's enthralled slave?

"It's not Cho I want to talk to," Potter grumbled through his chocolate and his very sad and angry face.

"Please talk to someone," Ginny said. "I know something's bothering you, you haven't even let us talk to you about Dad, all you do is look confused or angry all the time and-"

"I'm not confused about *ANYTHING*," Potter snarled at her. "And you'd be angry too if Voldemort was possessing you and you had to watch-"

Draco picked up his Arithmancy textbook and hurled it viciously at Potter's head. Everyone in the library looked up.

"SHUT UP," said Draco. "I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR PAIN."

He stood up, picked up another book and threw it. This time Ginny had to dodge out of the way, for which Draco was a little sorry but too angry to apologise.

"Nobody here cares about your pain!" he shouted, throwing the third book. "We just want to read! AND ALL THIS SHOUTING IS NOT CONDUCTIVE TO A LEARNING

ATMOSPHERE!"

He paused, wondering how best to achieve a killing throw with an encyclopaedia and whether it would pass as an accident, and then said: "Also unless you are experiencing regular amnesia, nobody is possessing you, you melodramatic twit. And even if you are I'd put it down to psychosis. Don't you *read*?"

At that point nobody was allowed to read, because Madam Pince threw them out of the library and gave Draco a look which indicated that she did not know until she met him how full of hate her world could be .

Potter was blinking at Draco like a man dazed. Draco wondered how hard he'd thrown those books, and hoped the brain damage would be permanent. "Really?" he said.

"Yes, really," Ginny told him, rolling her eyes. "I was about to tell you so myself, before this one went all Ravenclaw on a Rampage."

Draco made a noise of despair and rage, and stalked off. As he went, he heard Ginny say tentatively: "Is there anyone you *would* like to talk to?"

*

Draco wished the world would stop consistently spiralling out of control and comprehension. He would have thought the Sociopath Twins quitting school (and showing the world what value Gryffindors placed on traditional schooling) would have made things better, but it seemed to have given everyone ideas.

Montague was found, half-starved and disoriented, and the Inquisitorial Squad wanted blood. The rest of the school were taking Filch and Umbridge far too seriously, and everyone was walking warily. Ravenclaw was the quietest house, because nobody was going to attack Draco, and Draco certainly wasn't going to attack any of his housemates, even if he felt like punishing the world when Pansy Parkinson spent all night weeping because she had horns, and Goyle spent all night telling her she was pretty anyway.

Draco gritted his teeth and told himself that once the final match of the year, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw (*his* house versus Potter's) was over with, the worst would be over with as well. He'd have loved to think Ravenclaw would win resoundingly, but no matter how much Weasley messed up, Cho was not going to get to the Snitch before Potter.

That match was worse than he had ever dreamed.

Draco sat in the stands, disbelieving, clawing at Terry's shoulder and begging him to say it was all a nightmare, as Weasley made save after spectacular save. He looked for Hermione's face, thinking her wrongheaded happiness might console him a bit, but she was mysteriously absent and the whole world was a bleak, barren, disgusting wilderness of Weasley triumph.

By the time Potter got the Snitch from right under Cho's nose, Gryffindor had beat Ravenclaw by the largest margin ever seen in a school Quidditch game, and Draco didn't actually trust himself not to turn on people and rend them. He stalked off, away from Terry, to the fields past the pitch and with some vague notion that he'd like to find something in the

Forbidden Forest and kick it to death.

"Malfoy!"

And to top this most perfect of all perfectly awful days, there was Potter. Draco wheeled around and saw him coming across the grass, panting, still clutching the Snitch and wearing his horrible sweaty Quidditch robes, with his hair not just wild but actually savage from the wind.

"In what way," Draco asked furiously, "do you want to make my life unbearable today?"

"So you haven't cooled off, then," said Potter, at his most redundant. "Look, I just wanted to talk, I've only *ever* wanted to talk to-

Which was the biggest lie Draco had ever heard, because all Potter had wanted him to do when Draco was trying to be friends was curl up and die. Of course, he *would* be gracious now, since he was the big winner at Quidditch and everyone loved him in spite of his rage fits, he might condescend because after all, Draco wasn't in Slytherin.

"How's your little dog, Potter?" he asked suddenly, and the sudden fear on Potter's face made him breathless with triumph.

It wasn't a dog, not if Potter looked like that about it. It must be a person.

"My father saw your dog at the start of school - careless, were we? My father knows all about it," he went on.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Potter said unevenly, his chest rising and falling hard.

Draco didn't, really, but he was enjoying himself all the same. "Maybe," he suggested, "my father could help have it put down."

He realised he had gone too far when Potter roared and charged at him, the world suddenly and terrifyingly went flying out from underneath him, and Draco's head hit the earth and Potter's fist hit Draco's stomach at approximately the same sickening time.

The bastard was hitting him with a fist that still had the Snitch in it. Draco yelled his rage and struck out, wildly, wishing he'd spent more time flying or doing anything but sitting in the library getting *soft* because the only thing that mattered was causing Potter a lot of pain right away - and perhaps, the cowardly part of his mind added, not getting his nose broken. He twisted underneath Potter, scrabbled at his stupid robes, lost his glasses as he tried to tumble Potter over and didn't manage more than getting a grunt of pain. There was still roaring and victory songs for Weasley going on somewhere in the distance but Draco didn't care, didn't care, he grabbed hold of the front of Potter's robes and pulled him down, trying to co-ordinate strangling him and getting him *off*, and then Potter made an urgent sort of sound in his throat, and Draco made the bad mistake of going still for an instant.

Potter's hands, still almost in fists but not quite, went to Draco's face, touching carefully for a moment as if Potter were blind. Draco thought confusedly that that must be it, since Potter

had lost his glasses too, but then Potter cupped Draco's face roughly in one palm and kissed him. Draco's blood was still roaring with adrenaline and Potter kissed *hard*, like he was angry and confused and desperate, his face a close, blurring vision of black lashes against heated skin, and Draco raged and fisted a hand in Potter's hair and kissed him back. Potter's mouth opened hot and demanding against Draco's, teeth cutting into his lip, Potter braced and shuddering over him, and Draco pulled his hair and made a demanding sound of his own, and when he heard it Potter moaned.

Draco arched up and Potter's hands were all over him as if arching was permission, under his shirt, large hands sliding up his back as if in an attempt to touch every inch of Draco he could reach. Draco felt Potter's fist curl empty against the small of his back before he felt the fluttering at the nape of his neck and realised Potter had let the Snitch go up Draco's shirt.

He shifted and made a 'you *idiot*' face at Potter, who looked at him, smiled and moved one hand out from under Draco's shirt to push hair out of his eyes. The moment for reflection was all Draco needed.

"Wait!" Draco said sharply, shoving Potter away. He felt suddenly ill. "Stop. I'm *with* someone."

He reached out and snatched up his glasses, and saw Potter look as if he had been slapped awake.

"I didn't-" Potter began. "I'm not-"

"Sure you're not," Draco snarled, scrambling to his feet. "Leave me alone."

*

He crawled onto Terry's bed and also Terry as soon as he got back to Ravenclaw Tower, burying his face in the worn material of his jumper, hiding from the world but mostly from Terry and how Terry would look when he told him.

"Potter kissed me," he said. "I let him, I was confused. I'm so sorry."

Terry almost jumped off the bed, but Draco held onto his jumper with both hands, kept him anchored. "What," Terry said weakly, "What - *Harry* Potter?"

"If he has an evil gay twin called Larry Potter," Draco growled menacingly into the jumper, "I feel I should have been informed."

Terry laughed, which was neither breaking up with Draco or going mad from jealousy. "But I - but why?"

"I don't know! That's why I was so badly *startled*, but I, but I was thinking," Draco said, lifting his face a little from Terry's jumper, "that it might be because things were going so badly with Cho. And I used to go out with Cho, and things went okay, and there's been all the talk of boys recently, and Potter misses Cho and isn't exactly the most balanced wand in the shop and it was all a terrible, messy mistake and let us never speak of this again!"

"You should breathe, Draco," Terry advised him.

"Don't break up with me," Draco said. "Not over this. Don't."

"No," Terry answered softly, and Draco kissed him, shook and kissed him, and then took off his own shirt and Terry's jumper, and then kissed him again.

Terry didn't break up with him over that, and if he didn't become possessed with jealousy, well, it wasn't as if anyone was challenging him to a duel over Draco's affections. Draco was fine with it. Draco was grateful.

Draco made a point of avoiding Potter afterwards, and thought he might like to avoid Potter forever and ever. As if blackening his father's name wasn't enough, he thought furiously at mealtimes when he was forced to be in the same room as Potter, and smashed his egg into tiny inedible bits and tried to listen to all the gossip about Ginny dumping Corner. Potter went silent and red whenever Draco was around, as well he should, and Draco scowled and concentrated ostentatiously on his OWLs. Father knew people on the committee, he said Draco would fly through the tests. Draco meant to fly through them, just as easy and simple as that.

When OWLs did roll around, malicious fate put him next to Potter while he was trying to perform a Levitation Charm. Professor Tofty was already talking of Potter's very great fame and Draco could not help throwing a venomous look over his shoulder, but then he remembered how important the OWLs were and how Terry and Hermione would scream if he became distracted.

He went back to his wine glass, which wavered in the air but did not fall.

OWLs triumphantly completed, Draco had imagined he would find some measure of peace left on earth, but no sooner was he comfortably settled in an armchair and contemplating having first years fan him with palm leaves, there came an urgent message from Professor Umbridge with the news that Potter was trying to break into her office.

When he came downstairs he found Umbridge with her hands in Potter's hair, which was the most disturbing thing he had seen in a good long while.

She looked at him, her eyes glittering oddly, and said: "Take his wand."

Taking extreme care not to touch Potter more than necessary, Draco slid a hand into Potter's chest pocket and removed the wand he was thankful to find there. The inside of his wrist banged against Potter's shoulder as he backed hastily away, but when Draco looked up the look of indignation on Potter's face was priceless.

Draco grinned, threw Potter's wand into the air and caught it one-handed. Looked like Potter was finally going to face the consequences for breaking rules everyone else had always had to live by.

Then he saw Millicent Bulstrode was pinning Hermione to the wall, and saw several other Inquisitors march in manhandling, amongst others, Ginny. His mouth went dry and he lowered Harry's wand, feeling as if he had been caught red-handed instead of they.

Still, they *had* been breaking the rules, and surely Umbridge could see Potter was the ringleader. She could see enough to call Weasley a buffoon, which made Draco snicker and all of them glare at him. She told Draco to fetch Professor Snape, which meant that she was obviously planning to be reasonable and take the best advice available.

"Doesn't surprise me," Snape said when informed of the situation, and Draco felt immensely soothed by his cool tones. "Potter has never shown much inclination to follow the school rules."

Snape had such a masterful and complete understanding of Potter. He should write a book.

He should have some Veritaserum but he didn't, and Potter was going mad and shouting something about Padfoot, and Draco could see Snape was badly shocked by that. And then Snape made his apologies, and left them all with Umbridge, who was shaking and pulling out her wand.

Suddenly Draco wanted Professor Snape back very badly.

"I am left with no alternative," Umbridge said. "This is more than a matter of school discipline, this is an issue of Ministry security... yes... yes..."

She'd call in the Ministry, of course, Draco thought with relief. He hoped Potter would be completely and horribly expelled.

"I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice," Umbridge said softly, and Draco watched her carefully, his heart still beating fast, just wanting to hear that Potter was expelled and everyone else had detention forever, or something, something...

Umbridge's face set, until every drooping line made her look like a toad carved from stone.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," she breathed eagerly.

Hermione started to scream and Umbridge started to pant and Draco's mind reeled as he realised that there was no safe place, no middle ground left in the world, and against all reason bloody Dumbledore (where was he, it was all *his* fault) had allowed another insane teacher to run wild in his school. What had Dumbledore been thinking? What had the *Ministry* been thinking?

What was he going to do?

Draco held Potter's wand so tight it hurt his hand, and noticed that Potter was standing still, unmoving as Umbridge trailed her wand to rest on different places on his body, not looking in the least afraid.

Hermione began to sob and Draco thanked God, because he knew Hermione would never cry from fear, and he was suddenly filled with the warm, comfortable knowledge that Hermione had a plan and that she was about to lie through her teeth.

That idiot Weasley started yelling at her and Draco resisted the urge to choke him. Hermione,

unfazed and hiding her tearless face, kept talking about looking for Dumbledore to tell him about a weapon and Draco would forgive her for Marietta and everything if she could only get them all out of this.

"Let them see it," Hermione said dramatically, looking for an intense moment at Draco. "I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you'd invite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th - that would serve you right - oh, I'd love it if the wh - whole school knew where it was, and how to u - use it, and then if you annoy any of them they'll be able to s-sort you out!"

For a moment Draco intensely wished there was a weapon and they could. Most unfortunately, Umbridge looked at him and caught the wish written all over his face.

"All right, dear, let's make it just you and me," she said. "And we'll take Potter too, shall we? Get up, now."

Hermione could not possibly think Draco would let her go off somewhere with an insane teacher and Harry Rage Blackouts Potter.

"Professor Umbridge," he said loudly, "I think some of the Squad should come with you to look after-

The students you might accidentally kill.

"You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these escape," Umbridge said sharply. She looked at Draco until he nodded grudgingly, and then said: "And you two can go ahead and show me the way. Lead on."

Before Draco could think up any less suicidal plans, they were gone, and he was left with all the other students looking at him.

Weasley started cursing through his gag.

"Pipe down," Draco said, beginning to pace the room. "I know the concept is hard for you to understand, but I am trying to think."

Hermione and Potter were in the hands of a lunatic, but if he alerted the Ministry - Umbridge was theirs and they might not believe him. If he told Father, he was very unlikely to see why Hermione had to be kept safe, and besides that there was no time, no time to alert anyone.

Draco hated to admit it, but until he thought of something better, it was going to have to be the vigilantes.

"Let them go," he said sharply.

"Beg pardon?" said Zabini, and Draco wheeled on him.

"Use your brain, or am I the only one here that can? You think the Ministry will be passing out trophies to people who let some woman torture the Boy Who Lived? Think! Or don't bother because I'll think for you, and I say *let them go*."

Crabbe, Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode all stepped back from their captives at once, and Zabini and Warrington hesitated, looking around at the others in a vaguely betrayed way. Draco looked at them scathingly over his glasses and Zabini stepped back.

"I'm sorry," Warrington said, "*why* are we all taking orders from some titchy little Ravenclaw?"

"I have had *enough*," exclaimed Ginny, grabbing her wand and casting a Hex that made Warrington fall down with his face covered in bats. She whirled around and Draco was quite thankful to be spared the wrath of Weasley as she pushed her hair out of her face with her wand. "Thanks, Draco. C'mon."

"Don't take the gag off Weasley!" Draco called out as she left, but with little hope she would listen.

"What - what should we do?" Crabbe asked. "Should we go help them - I mean we learned a lot of stuff at the-"

"At the what?" Zabini asked quickly.

"Nowhere," Draco responded, very firmly. "And we're not going to do anything of the sort. We're going to go find some teachers."

"Why?" Warrington demanded.

Draco tilted his glasses down his nose and gave Warrington a look he usually reserved for Potter.

"Because," he explained slowly, "it's the smart thing to do."

*

He went to Professor Snape and Professor Snape told him it was all under control. Then he looked at Draco again, and told him that he had done well. Draco went upstairs after that, comforted and tired as if he had been studying all day, and crawled into bed beside Terry.

Terry looked at him with wide eyes. "Draco," he said, his voice fearful. "Draco, what have you done?"

Draco curled his hand into a fist against Terry's side, and saw Terry had been afraid he would do something terrible all this time. "The right thing," he said at last. "I think."

Terry looked surprised and inexpressibly relieved, and Draco curled into him, face light against the curve of Terry's neck even if his hands were still curled into fists, and slept with some approximation of peace.

Until he woke up in the cold light of day, with Terry dead to the world and all his other friends still and far away in his bed, and heard his owl flapping frantically outside the window, its talons scrabbling desperately at the glass and whispering thinly of disaster before

Draco had even wrenched himself from his bed to let the cold world in.

It was an Owl from his mother, saying that Father had been thrown in Azkaban.

That was all that came through to Draco on the first reading, as he left the window open and let himself slide down the wall, sat on the cold space of carpet and held the parchment carefully, trying to concentrate on it, trying to memorise it because that was all he knew to do with things he read, that should make it better.

Father had been sent to get some idiot Prophecy or other, and Potter and his gang had caught him. Not over anything important, over a stupid *Prophecy*, as if anyone would refuse to go get a prophecy when the Dark Lord told him to. Draco thought of Dad's tense face and his relenting towards Draco: he'd been afraid, he'd been trying to mend bridges before it was too late, Draco *knew* it, and in return Draco had let Potter's henchmen go free to capture his father.

And it didn't seem to matter anymore that Father hadn't liked him being Sorted into Ravenclaw, that nothing had been quite as Draco had hoped, because Father had been thrown down so low - he hadn't had his career hurt or his things confiscated, he, Draco's proud father, had been thrown in a *prison* and that was too huge for any of the rest to matter. He was God again, as he'd been in Draco's childhood, attainable one day if Draco could just be good enough.

Only Draco'd helped throw him in prison instead. That was where trying to walk the middle line got you, that was where even a split second of sympathy with Potter got you, and nobody read letters in Azkaban so Draco couldn't even write at once and confess it all and say *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...*

He didn't want to talk to anyone for a while, but a few days later he went down to Crabbe and Goyle, and they looked at him with grave scared eyes, and he said the words to them at least.

"I was wrong. I did something and look what *happened* - we're going to make it right. Will you trust me?"

They both nodded and Draco stopped holding his breath and looked down at his hands. He hadn't even noticed his fists were so tightly curled that his nails had cut into his palm. He went upstairs with them, talking quietly, and when he saw Potter the rush of hatred he felt made him feel for a moment as if he was going to choke, all the air pressed out of his lungs.

Potter looked terrible, white and drained, but he was still free and Father wasn't.

"You're dead, Potter," he said quietly.

Potter looked startled to see him, softer for a second and then grim. "Funny," he said. "You'd think I'd have stopped walking around. What's the matter with you, Malfoy? Ginny told me what you-"

"Shut up!"

Potter's eyes looked much colder, more far-away than Draco was used to. Draco expected he

was gloating over his little triumph.

"You're going to pay," Draco promised him. "*I'm* going to make you pay for what you've done to my father. You said pick a side, but I don't have to, do I? You've picked it for me."

"What, going off to join Voldemort?" Potter demanded, going whiter and whiter by the second. Draco flinched and felt the other two flinch behind him, and saw Potter's cold eyes narrow. "Not scared of him, are you?" Potter asked.

Draco moved forward and hated him for five years' worth of reasons, and most of all for this moment. "You think you're such a big man, Potter. You wait. I'll have you."

At which point Potter went a slow, dull red. "Er..."

"I mean I'm going to *kill* you, Potter!" Draco yelled, fury and humiliation sharpening to a spike inside him, and he went for his wand.

Potter was faster as he always was, always, and Draco was going to beat him to death with his bare hands if he had to, but then Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall both interrupted them in succession. Draco would not even look at Professor Snape, who had told him he'd done the right thing. He didn't want to look at anybody or think about anything. He was just biding his time.

*

He wrote a letter to his mother by the lake, so none of the Ravenclaws could see it, and he promised to do his best from now on, to do *better* from now on, to take the destiny his father had always meant for his son and make it his own. He bit his lip savagely as he wrote and managed not to actually cry.

Then he watched the owl fly away, a small shape in the sky, becoming smaller by the minute. He wanted to go home, and he wanted Dad to be there when he got back.

He was packing his things in his trunk when Terry said: "Look - Draco, we need to talk about what happened to Harry and the others that night-"

"I wasn't aware anything had happened to them," Draco replied in a chilly, distant voice. "The way I hear it, they happened to other people."

He felt distant enough that he was surprised he couldn't float away and see them, Terry sitting unhappy at the edge of his bed and Draco hunched over his chest, but he was still there and still had to live through this, folding clothes and scarves, material rough under his hands.

"I know he was your father and I'm sorry," Terry said. "But isn't it better this way, so you won't be forced to do anything you don't want to do-"

"My father's in prison and nothing is better this way!" Draco shouted, and he saw Terry flinch from his voice out of the corner of his eye, knew this was the side of himself the other Ravenclaws didn't want to see and wouldn't understand, the side he'd buried in books, the side his father might have loved, and he was glad. "And you don't know anything about what

I want."

"Surely you don't want anyone to get hurt," Terry said in the soft, reasonable voice that was driving Draco slowly insane. "I heard Neville came back with blood all over his face-"

"Oh, and what a loss he would have been!"

Draco's voice went out like a whip and he saw Terry flinch again.

"You don't mean that."

Draco was panting. He felt like he'd like someone else to suffer a bit, actually, for a change. "Oh? And what if I do?"

"If I thought you really meant that," Terry answered, even more slowly than he usually spoke, "then I guess I couldn't-"

"Fine!" Draco said loudly.

The word rang conclusively around the room, final as a slammed door. Draco was sure Terry was doing what he was doing, looking back at the conversation, searching silently and frantically for the fragments of what had suddenly broken and working out a way to put them back together. Draco was sick and tired of all this thinking.

"I'll be too busy anyway," he went on harshly, still not feeling quite as if it was him speaking. "I've got *plans* for next year."

He saw Terry swallow out of the corner of his eye, and he hit the inside of his wrist hard. The pain brought him back to the room, feeling every little stupid detail and wanting to take it all back, go crawling for some comfort, but it wouldn't save his father, would it?

"Okay," Terry said, his voice wavering.

And it was irrational and stupid and too much to ask for, but Draco banged his wrist against the edge of his trunk again and thought, he could've *fought* for me.

*

He didn't plan on hexing Potter on the train home. It was just that he walked by, looking remote and untouchable as he did these days, and Draco thought about what he was going home to and nodded to Crabbe and Goyle and sprang out.

Immediately afterwards a carriage full of Hufflepuffs sprang out at Draco, and then Weasley, Ginny and Hermione came rushing out to see what the commotion was, and everyone had their wands out. There was a tight, taut moment when they realised that. Macmillan raised his wand.

"Don't!" Potter said sharply, and he lowered it like a good little minion.

"Draco," Ginny said, her hand on her wand and her voice aggressive. "You can't do this to

yourself. It's not Harry's fault, your father belongs locked up. He tried to kill me when I was eleven-

"He can't have tried very hard. You seem pretty healthy to me," Draco spat, and Ginny's face hardened.

"Forget it," she said. "It's no use talking to him. You're your father's son after all, aren't you?"

"Who else's son was I going to be?" Draco shouted at her back as she retreated into the carriage, but she didn't answer.

Hermione tried next, putting her hand on his arm as she usually did when she was trying to explain something to him, looking up at him with familiar brown eyes. He looked down at her and didn't want any explanations, didn't want to think any more.

"Think about this logically, Draco," she said in her confident way. "Your father deserved everything he got-

And he was *sick* of people badmouthing his father when he was in Azkaban and couldn't say a word to defend himself, when he didn't want to hear reasons or accusations or anything but the reassurance that his father would be there when he came home. She hadn't cared about the *Quibbler* or about Marietta or about him, she didn't care what happened to his father now, and his father had been disappointed in him for being friends with her-

"Nobody asked your opinion," Draco said through his teeth. "You filthy little mudblood."

Hermione snatched her hand off his arm as if it had been burned, and Draco looked at her face. He felt numb again, he would have thought he'd enjoy seeing someone else hurt for a change but he didn't, he just kept thinking that she'd never heard anyone use that word before, never, because if someone else had said it to her he would have *killed* them.

"Don't, Ron," Hermione said when Weasley went for his wand, her voice trembling. "Don't - he's not even worth it," she finished in husky tones, and then she turned back to Draco and slapped him as hard as she could about the face.

It stung. Draco kept his face to the side and felt his skin burn as she walked away, Weasley at her side, and Crabbe and Goyle slunk away as well and now it was just him and Potter left, this new Potter who was paler than before and looked haunted and who Draco hated more than he would have thought possible.

"Showing me some mercy back there?" he asked. "I'm sure it gave you a warm condescending glow. Excuse me."

He would have turned away, but Potter said without expression: "Actually, I wanted to hex you until you didn't even look like a person anymore."

"Well, why didn't you?" Draco demanded.

"What would have been the point?" Potter asked. "You'd still have been a person. It wouldn't have changed your mind about anything. Nothing ever seems to change your mind about

anything."

Draco felt as if his mind had been changed completely and into something new and it had *hurt*, so he had no idea what to say to that stupid statement. He stepped aside silently for Cho and Marietta as they went by, Cho blushing because of Potter and Marietta wearing a balaclave because Muggles and their Mudblood kind always hurt you unless you got to them first.

"She's with Corner now," he blurted, out of the sheer aching desire to hurt Potter, and then winced at how childish he sounded.

Potter looked blank. "I don't give a damn who she's going out with," he said. "I shouldn't-" he made an angry sound in the back of his throat, which was the first sign of emotion Draco had seen him show. "I *don't* care about anything like that. Not now."

Draco looked out the window at the landscape speeding by, too fast for him to really take note of what was going on.

"Someone died in that attack on the Ministry," Potter said suddenly, harshly, as if his throat hurt. "He was - he was a cousin of yours."

Draco wondered desperately what the hell Potter thought he was going on about now. Was he trying to rub it in that Draco had convicts in the family, had he never heard of Aunt Bellatrix? What did Potter care that Sirius Black was dead?

"And he was - you'll never get a chance to know him now," Potter said, his voice still sounding like it was scraping his throat. "Other things happened in the Ministry that day besides-"

"I don't care!" Draco yelled, horrified that he thought he could see tears in Potter's eyes and horrified that this did not inspire any desire in Draco to mock him until he fell down. He felt something tangled and sharp in his own throat and he wanted to get *away*. "I don't care about - about anything, I just want my father back!"

Potter leaned his head back against the window and visibly got a grip on himself. "Fine," he said, his eyes shut. "Go to hell, Malfoy."

Draco walked backwards, catching himself before he stumbled. "You first."

He found Crabbe and Goyle and walked with them through the train corridor, not able to sit still, wishing he could run to some remedy and feeling that even if one existed, he would not be able to run fast enough. He passed one carriage and saw Terry and Anthony inside, obviously deep in conversation and going quiet, staring out at him as they saw him pass.

Crabbe cleared his throat. "If you want, you could-"

"No," Draco said at once, knowing that he could not sit there and see Terry look sad, see Anthony and think about the consequences if - when he went home and saw the dark figure his father had spoken about, not when he had to go prepared to do what he had to do for his father, when he had to go prepared to kneel. "No," he said again, and he sounded more

certain. "I'm where I'm meant to be."

He was more certain than ever when the train pulled in, and he saw Potter get off and be surrounded by a mob of people, Weasleys and their old teachers and random pink-haired fans, saw him swallowed in an enormous loving crowd. His mother stood on the platform, tall and poised and looking very alone, and when she saw Draco her face changed and then smoothed almost instantly, but the moment of disturbance was enough to send Draco stumbling off the train towards her. He hadn't held her in public and without compunction since he was ten years old.

"Oh, Draco," she said against his ear. "Draco."

Draco met Potter's eyes for some reason, in the midst of his crowd, and their gazes held, caught looking at each other for a moment without blinking, until Draco closed his eyes and hid his face, only wanting to hold his mother.

"Don't worry," he whispered to her, locking his arms behind her back so she would not feel him shaking. "Mother, don't. I'll fix things. I'll make everything right."

Chapter Seven

It was, hands down, the worst summer of Draco's life.

He wanted his father to be there when he got home but failing that, he expected peace and quiet. He did not expect the manor to be filled with people who Draco vaguely felt must have used the tradesman's entrance.

There was a short, creepy man with an alarmingly shiny hand who giggled at Draco and ran away, and a strange sad man with a look of resigned despair on his face. He was sitting next to a woman who looked too Gothic to be quite sane.

An alarmingly large man in tight robes and in dire need of a manicure was the first to speak to Draco.

He was also the first to touch Draco in unwanted ways, since he apparently felt that trailing sharp yellow nails down the side of a total stranger's face was acceptable behaviour. "Hello there, little boy," he rasped. "How old are you?"

"Almost seventeen," said Draco, who had been sixteen for weeks now.

The man grimaced in what looked like disappointment, showing pointed teeth. "Ah well," he said, giving Draco's cheek a final stroke. "I'm sure you were stunning in your day."

Draco went backwards so fast he knocked into his mother, and then he gripped her arm to keep his balance and held on because he needed an anchor in a world gone mad.

"Mother," he said in a small, tight voice. "Who are these awful people?"

"Bad news, Draco," she whispered. "They're family. That is your Aunt Bellatrix."

The woman who looked like a Gothic banshee stretched on their sofa and gave Draco a little wave. Draco saw that she had the Black bone structure, though she clearly did not keep to the Black skin care regime.

"Please tell me *that man* isn't a relative!"

The grey-haired man with the sharpened teeth grinned. "Not technically. But I'd be delighted if you called me Uncle Fenrir."

Mother spoke softly into Draco's ear. "Do not go anywhere alone with that man."

"Don't worry," Draco said.

Aunt Bellatrix waved a hand in the direction of the sad-looking man. "This is your Uncle Rodolphus, worse luck," she said in much the same tone as Mother spoke of house elves these days. "I had to get married, you see," she went on. "In case there were Dark, lordly, glorious children."

"Yes, dear," said Rodolphus, in the tones of one lost to all hope.

Fenrir started ordering around a pack (Draco tried without success to think of a different word) of rather feral-looking men and women, and in the mill Draco went over to the sofa and sat as far away as he could from Aunt Bellatrix. Mother began to talk to this new aunt in a low voice, adjuring her not to say such things in front of the children.

"Come now, Narcissa," said Uncle Oh Please God No Fenrir. "Draco's not a child. More's the pity."

Draco looked at Uncle Rodolphus because he preferred this to looking anywhere else, and met a look of bleak understanding. "I liked forceful women," Uncle Rodolphus explained in an undertone. "That didn't work out very well for me."

"Shut up, Rodolphus," said Aunt Bellatrix.

"Yes, dear."

"I might prefer boys," volunteered Draco.

Uncle Rodolphus looked mistily approving. "I never tried that," he said. "Life without women sounds lovely and peaceful."

Later in Mother's private rooms, Mother explained that providing a base for some of the Dark Lord's followers was the only thing she'd been able to think of.

"I am not..." she said, and stopped unhappily, Draco's beautiful poised mother, sitting at her mirror trying to fit broken words together. "I always thought it was wiser to observe from the sidelines, to provide support and information, but it has not worked out that way. I passed on what information that house elf gave me, and it ended with Lucius in prison and Sirius dead."

"Potter's godfather the *blood traitor* dead," Aunt Bellatrix corrected, her voice rasping in a way that reminded Draco of Fenrir Greyback and upset him badly.

"*Sirius*," Mother said sharply, and then looked at her own reflection. Her reflection looked back, paler than Mother and trapped under ice, and Mother's face smoothed as if she was imitating it. "Still, that had to be done, and with some luck it will lower the Order's morale."

"Wait," Draco said. "I don't - I don't understand. Why should - Potter-"

Bellatrix looked at him, her eyes black as ink in the low light. "Oh yes," she said. "You go to school with him, don't you? What do you think of him?" She did not wait for him to respond. "I was a little disappointed, myself. I killed his godfather before his eyes and he couldn't hold a Cruciatus on me for more than a few minutes. Good for his age, of course, but it hardly makes him a being of preternatural power."

Normally Draco could sit and listen to the music of Potter being disparaged all day long, and in fact he was starting to warm up to Aunt Bellatrix, but there were more important things than that right now.

"What side," he said, very quietly, "was Sirius Black on? What happened?"

So his mother told him, quietly too, while Bellatrix sat in the dark and laughed at them. She told him about his cousin, and the information she had passed on, and what had happened next, and Draco sat near her in the low light, listening to her low voice, and thought, *that's it, then*. Not that he hadn't been sure before, because he had been, but this made things even clearer. No matter how close Potter had been to crying on the train, how much it had almost seemed like he had meant it when he said *You'll never get the chance to know him now*.

He would never have abandoned his father or taken Potter's pity, so he was glad that Potter would never forgive Mother for sending Sirius Black to his death.

"It's perfectly all right, Mother," he said, trying to sound like Father at his most calm, which made him miss Father so much he wanted to hurt someone. "You did absolutely the right thing, and you shouldn't *have* to do anything but observe. I can-"

"*Draco*," Mother said, sounding not at all reassured.

"Of course you can," said Aunt Bellatrix.

When she started to move towards them Draco almost scooted away, as he would have if a wild animal had approached him, but she was Mother's sister and Mother had talked about her and Andromeda (the one who died) and it hardly seemed polite. So he stayed still, and Mother's hand pressing painfully tight around his thanked him for that, and Aunt Bellatrix came over to them and knelt by their chair, and Mother and Draco bent their heads towards the shadow of Aunt Bellatrix's dark hair.

"He deserved to die," Aunt Bellatrix murmured. "He walked out the door and never thought about any of us again, his *family*, we've been dead to him for years."

People like the Weasleys were blood traitors and hardly minded the name because they were all in it together. They didn't understand that blood meant family, and that no matter what excuses Sirius Black might have thought he had, a traitor was a traitor.

"I'm glad to have met you properly, Draco," said Aunt Bellatrix, her face softening.

Up close she looked tired, and he could trace his mother's features in her face. More than his mother she reminded him of Grandma Black, who had not really been his grandmother but had that title by grace of being the Black matriarch. Father used to say she was a shrill virago, but Draco's only memories of her was when he was three, and Mother used to put him on Grandma's lap. She was very old by then and she never spoke loudly to Draco. She held him in her lap and rocked him, and she smelled like mothballs but she held him so carefully and he would sit with her quietly, as he hardly ever liked to sit with anyone, because she knew that he was special.

When Draco was three, Grandma Black died.

It wasn't until later that he learned he was special because of Sirius and Bellatrix who were gone, and Andromeda and Regulus who were dead. Everything had seemed assured, and then disaster had struck so quickly and his mother had been the only daughter left of the ancient

house of Black. Grandma Black was the matriarch of that great pureblood fear, a dying line.

It was not until Draco was eight that he understood he was special because he was all that was left.

He looked at Bellatrix's dark, intense eyes and strong jaw, and he closed his eyes and pretended he could smell mothballs. She would help them. They were family.

"You'll want to see the Dark Lord, of course," Bellatrix whispered in his ear.

Draco swallowed and said, "Yes."

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Draco walked carefully in the Manor that summer, with the werewolves crawling over his father's land. They scared him and that made him resent them, and resentment did not help with his lingering, persistent fear every time they moved oddly. Draco was not sure how much they were naturally different from humans and not bothering to conceal it, how much they were trying to be like animals or how much they were trying to be like Fenrir, but he was sure that every time he found himself in a room with the pack, he felt like prey.

He was trying to sidle by a couple of them and not meet their eyes when his eyes found someone new.

"Professor Lupin!" he exclaimed, absolutely scandalised.

Professor Lupin, dressed even worse than usual and moving with the fluid, rolling grace of the animals. He looked at Draco and was suddenly different, his head on one side as if he was nothing but a kindly professor anxious to answer Draco's questions.

"Dumbledore fired me," he said, just a trace of Fenrir's rasp in the voice Draco remembered as soft. "What did you expect me to do?"

Draco stared at him and answered: "You could have become a *librarian*."

Professor Lupin looked amused for a moment, but then he saw Draco's face change and his own went grave a second before Fenrir's arm landed about his thin shoulders.

"Catching up, are we?" Fenrir asked. "You must have taught him in school. Perhaps I should've been bookish like you, Remus. I think I'd have loved being a schoolteacher. How old was Draco when you saw him last - sweet thirteen and never been mauled?"

"I follow your lead, Fenrir," Professor Lupin said quietly. "Doesn't mean I'll laugh at your bad jokes."

Fenrir leered. "Who was joking? Tell me, was little Draco here your favourite student?"

"No," Draco answered at once, remembering who had been.

Professor Lupin caught his eye as he was turning away and smiled, like the Professor Lupin

who Mandy and Padma and Lisa had made fools of themselves over years ago.

"He might have been my favourite Ravenclaw," he said, and then tiredly knocked away Fenrir's arm.

Clearly Professor Lupin had superior taste Draco had never noticed, on account of his extremely poor taste in clothing. Draco smiled back a tiny bit before getting hurriedly out of Fenrir's way, and after that he was able to tolerate Professor Lupin better than the rest of the gaunt ragged things who wandered like strays under the high marble ceilings of his father's house.

Aunt Bellatrix brought him to see the Dark Lord after a week in the manor, and he was almost glad to go. It was the first step to getting his life back.

The Dark Lord was living in a tumbledown old house that under normal circumstances, Draco would have scorned, but that day he scarcely noticed it. He tried to feel awed by the great destiny his father had said fate would have in store for him one day, when he was worthy of it, but mostly he was sweating and hoping the Dark Lord would not notice, feeling the bite of Aunt Bellatrix's fingernails in his shoulder and feeling the pit of his stomach shift sickly.

When they reached their goal, the pit of his stomach flipped and tipped him over into a different world.

Forget the werewolves, *that* did not look human, but it was sitting on a carved chair and the centre of the room. Aunt Bellatrix was looking at it and did not seem to be breathing anymore, the giggling oddball with the shiny hand was scurrying to do its bidding, and there was no way this was anyone but the Dark Lord.

He had a high voice that left cold echoes around your head. "This is the Malfoy boy? Do you know how much your father has disappointed me?"

Draco wanted to defend his father but actually he didn't know anything, except that the Dark Lord had red eyes.

There was an enormous snake winding through the carvings of his chair, and the Dark Lord stroked its massive coils with one long white hand. He spoke slowly, in the way Draco knew his father talked to business associates, and perhaps Draco would have been impressed by all this showmanship if his father had kept impressing him with it, or if Anthony and Terry's great common sense had not rubbed off on him enough that it was hard for him to concentrate on anything but *red eyes*.

"He wants to make up for it, my Lord," Bellatrix said, shoving him forward and onto his knees.

The floor was cold and his knees ached, and Draco swallowed and tried to force words into his dry mouth. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I do. Uh, my Lord."

He wondered whether 'Your Darkness, Sir' would be appropriate, and then wished his mind would not scatter into a dozen panicked fleeing pieces when he was scared. He wanted out of

here, and away from this, but the other side had taken his father and the Dark Lord was the only way to get him back.

Besides, Father had always said the Dark Lord was the most powerful wizard in the world and that he would change the world. And the world *did* need changing.

When Draco looked at the floor, it wasn't so bad.

"Well," said the Dark Lord. "A student in Hogwarts. Dumbledore's always been so very... soft about his students."

Draco felt that Dumbledore assigning murderers to teach them was an interesting definition of soft but the Dark Lord sounded like he thought Draco was going to be useful - which he *was*, of *course* the Dark Lord was going to recognise it, was going to appreciate him and Father was going to be proud...

"Look at me, Draco Malfoy," said Voldemort, and he leaned forward as Draco looked up. The Dark Lord licked his thin lips and whispered: "I can read minds, you know."

Draco tried hard not to recoil and not to think about red eyes anymore.

"You want your father back," the Dark Lord went on, his voice a promise Draco's father had followed before him. "You want his failure to serve me pardoned, and the Malfoys restore to a high place in the world, and for you to be acclaimed as the greatest of them all."

Yes, and yes, and yes. "Yes," Draco breathed.

The Dark Lord looked mildly puzzled. "And you're in Ravenclaw, apparently. How odd. We don't get many of your kind here."

Perhaps because you have *red eyes*! thought Draco, and then hastily tried to think about something else.

"I could use someone with some intelligence," said the Dark Lord, sneering towards Shiny Hand. "I think perhaps I could be persuaded to make a bargain."

"A bargain," Draco echoed helplessly, feeling as if he had very little on the table.

"Respect. Glory. Your father and your family honour restored. All the rewards that my most loyal followers will receive."

"Yes," Draco said.

The Dark Lord leaned back in his chair, his eyes glittering.

"Do you think you could kill Albus Dumbledore, Draco? He might let one of his students get close enough to try."

Draco did not think about Professor Dumbledore's power. He thought about his father instead, thought that if Voldemort was ready to give him this important a job he must see

something in Draco, and once Father saw that, once Father was free because of Draco...

He *hated* Dumbledore anyway, Dumbledore who never protected any of them for anything, who was meant to watch over a whole school but only had eyes for Harry Potter. He hated Dumbledore, and it would be worth it to trade him for his father. Draco thought those words, thought *trade, exchange, bargain*, and refused to think about the word *kill*.

"Yes," he said, very low.

"How very satisfactory," Voldemort told him, his voice just as low. "You understand that the penalty for those who fail the Dark Lord is death. Since you would be the second of your family to disappoint me, I believe I might count the entire Malfoy clan as... a dead loss."

Mother, thought Draco, and looked up into a pitiless red gaze.

"Exactly," the Dark Lord murmured. "Think of it as an incentive. I do not tolerate failure. And I *will* have absolute loyalty. Tell me, Draco, are you willing to take my Mark?"

Draco thought of being very young and seeing his parents get ready for parties, and seeing Father's sleeve slip to show something Draco had not recognised.

What's that?

The mark of something that should have been.

Father would want him to have it. Draco wanted to have it: it would mean there was no going back, save him from any backsliding and failing Father, make his choice final and mark him as valued, and chosen.

Draco opened his mouth to tell the Dark Lord yes one more time.

"I do not want you to have it," the Dark Lord told him. "It would be far too likely to get spotted in school. I wanted to know that you would take it." He leaned back, the snake crawling up his thin chest to curl around his neck, and added: "I want you to earn it."

Father. Fame. Glory. And in the balance, his life and his parents' lives.

Draco got up, and then bowed. He tried not to tremble. He was going to do this, going to be the man of his house, the man his father would have wanted. Voldemort had *chosen* him. It was an *honour*.

He lifted his chin and met the Dark Lord's eyes for the last time. "I will."

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The next day, Aunt Bellatrix started Draco's Occlumency lessons.

She started them in typical Aunt Bellatrix fashion, which was to say insanely and with a lack of regard for others. She came striding into Draco's bedroom when he was sleeping, and it was only thanks to his enormous terror of Fenrir Greyback that he was fully clothed when she

stripped off the bedclothes.

"You didn't handle your first meeting with Our Lord too badly," she told him as a light conversational opener, "but do you think that Dumbledore won't take one look at you, read your mind and kill you where you stand?"

Draco blinked and thought fuzzily that if Dumbledore could in fact read minds, which seemed to be a far more popular spectator sport than Draco had ever dreamed, then he had been reading Draco's mind for years and would know Draco wanting him dead was par for the course.

"Very amusing, Draco," Bellatrix said, and when he stared at her she bared her teeth. "You start off by casting *Legilimens*, but in the end... it's a mindset. You hardly need to be able to master wandless magic to read a mind."

"Master wandless magic?" Draco heard himself bleat.

"First you must learn how to block your mind," Bellatrix told him, and suddenly she was not just glancing, he could feel her *in* there, rifling through his memories, feel the edges of her savage smile at the insides of his mind as she rifled through everything he had never wanted seen. Outrage well and truly woke Draco as his aunt went over the feeling of Cho's smooth thighs, the taste of the back of Terry's neck, and then panic took a running leap and knocked outrage down because in a moment she was going to see *Potter*.

Which had of course been nothing, a moment or three of insanity because Potter had gone mad from his lack of skills with the ladies and Draco had *hit his head*, but she'd want to talk about it and she wasn't seeing it and *it was private*.

"Occlumens, Draco. Empty your mind," whispered Aunt Bellatrix. "And *mean* it."

Draco thought fast. Nobody could empty their mind, nobody could, but you could shut off bits of it enough to seem empty, lock away thoughts from yourself because *you* didn't want to see them, that was easy, he did it all the time, oh God, he could feel her getting close, he could *feel* her feeling Potter's hair knotted around his fingers-

"*Occlumens!*" Draco shouted, and Bellatrix actually, physically, fell back.

She smiled when she looked at him, bright and triumphant, and came to sit on his bed, putting her hand on his shoulder. She always gripped too tight. "Draco, on your first try," she breathed. "That's *very* good. Our Master will be so pleased-" she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his forehead. "We'll all be proud of you."

Draco closed his eyes and thought about putting his arm around her neck. She was frightening and familiar at the same time, she was family, and he wanted her to go away forever but perhaps to love him, as well.

His train of thought was cut off by his mother's voice.

"Our Master?" said Mother, and he opened his eyes to see her standing on his threshold, thin and golden and almost wavering like a candle flame as she spoke. "*Proud?* Bella, what have

you *done*?"

Aunt Bellatrix let go of Draco, her eyes glowing with missionary zeal. "Cissy, wait until you hear-"

"I don't want to talk about things like - like the Dark Lord in front of Draco," Mother said, swallowing. "I want to speak with you alone - and I warn you, if you have endangered my son-"

"Mother, I'm not a *child*," Draco interrupted. "I can help you, I want to help you-"

Mother did not look at him, but repeated in an imperious voice: "Bella!"

Aunt Bellatrix looked at Mother's cold face and reluctantly got off the bed and went towards her. She and Mother left the room, and Draco was tempted to go after them and demand to be included in the conference, but his head hurt and his heart was still beating fast. Aunt Bellatrix could read his mind any time she liked, he would not be safe for a moment, that had been a *very close thing*, and he didn't want her to *know*. He was going to have to get good at Occlumency in a hurry.

He sat in bed with his arms locked around his knees for a long time, and when he ventured outside Professor Lupin saw him, and immediately offered to make him a cup of tea. Draco noticed almost absently that he looked ill, and had a feeling that while Lupin said he only took two sugars, he would have preferred more. He hoped Professor Lupin wasn't coming down with anything.

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It was almost evening when Mother called Draco to her room.

He stood uncertainly in the middle of the floor as she sat by her dresser, her reflection paler than ever in the mirror. Her wand lay thrumming with energy on the dresser, and one of her hands was clasped tight around it, the knuckles white, but when she spoke her voice was icy calm.

Mother always had an air of distance about her, all her acts like tableaux instead of like Father, who seemed really warm sometimes, who seemed able to mean it and feel it. Draco stood watching her watch him in her mirror and thought with insane detachment that this might be why he never tried so hard for Mother, even though he never doubted that she loved him, and he doubted Father all the time.

"Draco," said Mother. "I forbid you to do this. We can - I have offered the Dark Lord the manor, Bella is a favourite of his. Or we can find some other way. I am trying to use your father's contacts in the Ministry."

All of whom are not going to help, as Draco can tell by his mother's pinched mouth when she receives her Owls in the morning. Father had such pride in his contacts, in the way the Malfoy name had become currency, and now the currency is worthless, like that of a conquered country. All his life Draco heard about the power of his name, and now that they need power, it has failed him. He did not realise so many things would be lost along with

Father.

"Mother, don't do this. I'm not a child, the Dark Lord chose me-"

Mother still looked at the mirror, a silent spell arranging her hair, lifting up long light swathes of pale gold. Her eyes in the mirror looked cold and desperate.

"He chose you so he would have an excuse for getting rid of us, so Bellatrix would not see it was all spite, spite because Lucius failed him. He is not giving you a chance."

She was just saying this because she did not think he could do it, as Father would have thought he couldn't, because everyone thought he wasn't quite good enough. She didn't see that he *could*, that he was going to *save* her.

"He *is*!" Draco insisted. "Mother, think about what he's offering. He'll give it all back - he'll give *Father* back. You want Father back, don't you?"

He threw that appeal at her because he knew it was too powerful to meet with anything but a positive response, and he felt cold when her mirrored eyes met his. Her hair was still lazily arranging itself, drifting on the air, catching the candlelight, and her voice was still cold.

She gazed at him in the mirror and said: "I would rather have you."

For a moment, Draco was confused and pleased, and then he realised what she was saying. That she would leave Father to rot in Azkaban, that she didn't really care about him, that she was abandoning Father like everyone else in the world was and Draco was the only one left.

Mother got up suddenly, stowing her wand away, breaking the spell so her hair fell loose around her shoulders. "I need to go out," she said. "I need to - I need to find..." She walked about her room in a few swift steps, taking up her cloak, putting the hood up over her gleaming hair. She stopped beside him for a moment, her face in shadow, and put her hand up to his cheek. "Everything will be all right, Draco."

"Yes, I know," Draco said obstinately, not wanting to look at her for very long.

She Disappeared without another word, going somewhere else as she liked to do, when she left the room when Draco had childish tantrums, when he suspected she was glad he was going to Hogwarts so she could write him letters and send him parcels with all her love from a distance and under wraps.

Aunt Bellatrix came storming in almost as soon as Mother had gone, and looked around the room with a sort of expectant demanding, as if Mother was hiding under her bed and Aunt Bellatrix could force her to get out.

"Where has she - oh, no she hasn't," Aunt Bellatrix said through her teeth. "I won't have it. I won't have her interfering with my Master, or with you, and I certainly won't have one of my family beholden to a miserable half-blood of doubtful loyalties!"

While Draco appreciated Aunt Bellatrix's support, he hoped she knew she was raving like a loon.

Before he could tell her that, she had Disapparated as well. Possibly they had nowhere to go, possibly they were just taunting Draco with the fact that because of idiot laws he couldn't legally Apparate *quite* yet, even though he was all but seventeen.

Draco left his mother's room and slammed the door, walking along the corridors to his room in the gathering dark, and saw Professor Lupin looking even sicker than usual. The man needed *vitamins*.

"Mr Malfoy," he said hoarsely. "Where's your mother?"

Draco scowled. "She went out. So did Aunt Bellatrix."

"And left you *alone*?"

"I do not actually require a nursemaid," Draco informed him. "Besides, I think Mother quite likes you."

Professor Lupin appeared to be getting all worked up, his hackles rising, his voice rasping, and Draco was forcibly and horribly reminded afresh of Fenrir. "Do none of you *think*?" he snarled. "Do none of you *realise*? Tonight is the full moon!"

Draco felt abruptly as if he was going to faint, and forbade himself to do so very sternly indeed.

"You're alone," Lupin said softly, "in a house full of werewolves."

Draco felt that rubbing it in was very insensitive. Teachers were supposed to make children feel reassured, damn it.

Lupin's face in the gathering dark was suddenly very sinister. All the hairs on Draco's arm were standing up as if they wanted to run away up to his neck, and in this light Lupin's greying hair didn't look like age and illness, it looked like the brindled, silvery fur of a wolf. Draco remembered the way he had moved that first day, before he knew someone who would expect to see *Professor* Lupin was watching.

Draco stumbled backwards.

"Fenrir will be able to smell it. Smell you, and that there's nobody else to protect you," Lupin continued. "Look... There's a potion I take, the Dark Lord arranges for me to have it, and it lets me keep my mind when I transform. You need to go to your room and barricade yourself in there."

"I'm way ahead of you," Draco told him, going back another step.

"Draco," said Lupin. "Listen. I don't want to put myself between you and Fenrir overtly. Challenging his authority is no part of my plan. Putting myself at your door to guard you would be an offensive move, but if you would allow me in the room with you-"

Draco tried not to tremble. "Don't like sharing your food, is that it? Fat chance."

"I'm *safe* with the Potion," Lupin snarled at him, looking very dangerous indeed. He paused and then said: "I promise you. Professor Snape makes it."

"Oh," Draco said uncertainly. "Why - Aunt Bellatrix told me about the things werewolves do for the Dark Lord, for the cause... why would you want to be conscious through it?"

"Because," Lupin said evenly, "it means that I will only do exactly as much as I have to, to stay with Fenrir, and nothing more."

Draco thought about that: about being aware, about feeling human, when the Dark Lord tossed Amelia Bones to the... He stopped thinking about it at once.

He crossed his arms protectively over his chest, and said: "Why should I trust you?"

Lupin's voice stayed even, with just a whisper of a snarl behind it. "Because you have no other choice."

Potter'd liked him, Draco thought suddenly, but then Potter had liked Professor Madly Abusing Other Students Moody. Potter was a complete idiot.

"I..." Draco said, and cursed himself for sounding feeble-minded. "Yes. All right."

They went into Draco's room as his knees tried not to knock and his throat tried not to seize up and his brain utterly let him down by picturing the way his room would look once a werewolf ate him and scattered the bones and gristly bits on the floor.

Lupin helped him push his chest of drawers in front of his door. It was heavy, but Lupin was apparently much stronger than he looked. Draco did not find this even a little bit soothing.

"Sure you had that Potion?" Draco inquired tensely. "It doesn't wear off, does it? Wouldn't you fancy another nice cup of it?"

"It's all right, Draco," Professor Lupin told him wearily, and then doubled up and screamed.

Draco screamed too, going backwards so fast he'd hit the wall before he realised, and his back was aching, but he kept working his shoulderblades as if he could dig his way out of brick with his *back*, his harsh breathing was tearing the world ragged around him, he couldn't see for panic, only he could see too much. Lupin was screaming, his head thrown back now, and his face and chest were moving, bones crunching and shifting, into a monster.

Draco took a deep breath and a flying leap at his wardrobe, scrambling on top of it, and then knocked his head against the ceiling craning to get a better view of the werewolf.

There was howling from outside the door, almost human voices mimicking werewolf howls with Fenrir's mad laugh topping them, and then the howls were turning animal, and mingled with screams, and this was his home and the animals had overrun it. Draco's furious resentment was going to take over as soon as he stopped shaking.

The werewolf was at the foot of the wardrobe, staring up at Draco with empty wolf eyes. If

Professor Lupin was in there, the eyes were not the windows to the soul and everyone had lied, because Lupin looked just like a wolf, an enormous wolf with sharp teeth and animal eyes.

He was not leaping. He just sat at the foot of the wardrobe, unblinking gaze fixed on Draco, and Draco slid his hand into the chest pocket of his robes and curled his hand hard around his wand. He tried to get his breathing under control because it was hurting his throat, and his eyes felt dry because he could not look away from the werewolf. He lay curled on top of the wardrobe, his stomach twisting with terror, and listened to the wolves baying through his house, through his Father's house, and he knew things had to change.

A body hurled itself against the door and when Draco screamed it growled, a sound that sent the door and Draco shuddering, and then the werewolf at the foot of Draco's wardrobe growled too. There was an almost considering pause from behind the door, and then silence.

Draco held hard onto his wand and scrubbed at his wet face. Someone had to control the werewolves, Fenrir had been on the loose for years, but he was the Dark Lord's now. The Dark Lord had power over him, he could solve the problem the Ministry could not.

This nightmare would be over soon, and everything would be better.

Mother came home that morning, and they were both so tired that they curled up on a sofa together, Draco's bones aching from finally moving out of the huddled shape on top of the wardrobe. She stroked his hair, being wildly demonstrative for Mother, and when he turned to look at her he saw her face. It must have been a trick of his tear-smudged glasses, but she almost looked as if she had been crying too.

"Everything will be all right," she whispered to him again, her voice like steel.

"I know," said Draco. Everything was becoming clearer and clearer. Something needed to be done.

That was when he remembered hearing the Inquisitorial Squad talking about what the Sociopath Twins had done to Montague, and remembered that cabinet. His mother was sleeping by then and he did not move, he did not want to disturb her, all he did was clench a triumphant fist against his leg, and then start stroking her hair.

*

When Professor Lupin came limping painfully down the stairs, his face white as a sheet, Mother took a long look at him and Draco knew she was schooling her face not to betray her distaste.

Then she said, "Thank you."

Lupin gave her an even more exhausted smile than usual. "It was my pleasure."

Then they all went downstairs to the kitchen because the manor was in such a state Mother did not want to sit in any of her good rooms and see what werewolves had done to her carpet. Draco made tea for everyone, but really mostly for Professor Lupin. He was starting to think

Professor Lupin had a disturbing tea fetish.

Lupin might have a tea fetish, but Draco had an intact jugular and a plan. Mother seemed happier, too, and the light was streaming through the windows and everything was going to be all right.

"Tell me," Draco said, because he was quite sure these people would not instantly dob him in, "why does the Dark Lord's face look like that?"

Lupin's face went completely blank but Mother answered casually: "I believe it's to do with living forever."

"He did it to *himself*?" Draco demanded, and at Mother's nod he smirked at them over the teapot. "You know, with no nose and red eyes, I bet he hasn't had any love in a long time," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe it just seems like he's living forever."

Lupin smiled, forgetting to be so tired for a moment, and Mother looked perfectly horrified.

"Do not let Bella hear you talk like that!" She smiled her hostess' smile as Draco poured the tea. "Professor Lupin has been telling me how good your essays were in third year."

"I tell you my essays are brilliant every year," Draco protested. "Specially that one, remember, I did a dramatic reading-"

"It's nice to hear it from the teachers," Mother said. "I wish that frightful man would arrange some kind of interaction between parents and teachers, I hear the Montagues' poor child was missing for days before they were contacted-"

"I could run the school better than he could," Draco suggested. "I think I would be a brilliant Headmaster. I would have a staff made of gold and be called Headmaster Malfoy and rule with justice and wisdom and cane all the people who were stupid at me. How many sugars, Professor Lupin?"

"I'd like two," said Professor Lupin, who would clearly have loved four.

"My friend Anthony says they have teacher and student meetings in the Muggle world," Draco said without thinking, and then when his mother stared he said hastily, "Very keen on Muggle Studies, Anthony."

It was not exactly a lie.

Professor Lupin, who Draco imagined knew perfectly well that Anthony Goldstein was Muggleborn, said thoughtfully: "Yes, I remember."

Draco put six sugars in Professor Lupin's tea and then gave it to him.

"Anthony," Mother said, delicately interrogating.

"Mother, no," Draco exclaimed. "No, really, I won't have you talking about my love life. Parents can't know anything about their children's love lives: it is a law. If you did know

things my head would explode like a teakettle with a firecracker in it."

"I merely asked," said Mother.

At that point Draco seized the teakettle and began to fly it around, making screeching and popping sounds as he imagined a firecracker would. Mother and Lupin were laughing at him a bit, and then he was surprised by a bark of laughter from the door.

He spun around, thinking it was Fenrir, but the rusty disused sound belonged to his Aunt Bellatrix. She came in and poured herself a cup of tea. "What are we talking about?"

"Me being headmaster," Draco replied promptly, feeling Aunt Bellatrix already knew far too much about his love life.

Aunt Bellatrix tilted her head to one side, and smiled a wild but very charming smile. "You can be. Once we're through with you, Draco, you can be anything you like."

"I think if I were headmaster, I would have to grow my hair," Draco said thoughtfully. "That looks wise."

He had a tea towel on his head and was doing a Professor Dumbledore impression when Fenrir walked in and he whisked it off and wished he really was a million trillion years old like horrible Dumbledore.

"Aw, how sweet, a family tea party," Fenrir cooed. "Mummy, auntie, baby and their pet dog. Shame you didn't come out to play last night, Draco. We could've had... fun."

Draco felt himself blanch, and heard the low, rising growl from Lupin. Mother's eyes had narrowed.

"You know," Aunt Bellatrix said, drawing her wand with a flourish, "I'm getting very tired of seeing you victimise my nephew."

Mother rose and Aunt Bellatrix rose with her, and for a moment they stood with their lids lowered and their wands drawn, like a matched set, a photograph and its negative just poised to move. They looked like the Black sisters in that moment, like they were meant to stand together, and Draco suddenly knew how much Mother must have missed that.

"Meant no offence," Fenrir said, backing up a step.

Lupin growled again, deeper, and when Fenrir glared he innocently sipped his tea. Werewolf with a cuppa, nothing to see here.

"Cissy, will an Unforgivable spoil your kitchen?" Bellatrix inquired considerately.

Fenrir retreated and Draco beamed around at all of them. This was what the Dark Lord was about: stronger people banding together to make the world better and control everything that was going wild. Nobody had ever stood up to Moody for him.

Draco *knew* he'd made the right choice.

*

Occlumency lessons kept going brilliantly, because Draco was obviously a very great genius. He was able to block his mind completely from Aunt Bellatrix's by the third lesson, and on the fourth lesson he was able to throw Legilimens hard enough to crash into her mind for a moment.

All he saw was a dark handsome man who was obviously not his Uncle Rodolphus, and the fat face of some woman who looked a little like Neville Longbottom.

"Oh, the brat's your age, is he?" Aunt Bellatrix asked. "What do you think of him?"

Draco shrugged. "He's an idiot."

Bellatrix smiled. "His parents were blood traitors, and they deserved everything they got."

He had no idea Longbottom's parents had received anything, and he did not want to know about anything Aunt Bellatrix had done. He heard her screaming in her sleep some nights, heard his mother hurry into her room to wake her from dreams of Azkaban.

Only the knowledge that the Dementors had left Azkaban - because the Dark Lord was more in control than the Ministry, just as Draco had thought - stopped Draco from leaving the house and somehow finding a way to Hogwarts to kill Dumbledore at once, to get his father out of that place.

"Where's Uncle Rodolphus staying?" he asked, to check his aunt was not involved in any scandalous love affairs beside the one in her head with the Dark Lord.

"How should I know?" Aunt Bellatrix responded, looking irritable. "I was married to him for four years of war, and then had to listen to him dribble and moan for fourteen years more. I'm back with my family now - I don't need a keepsake from Azkaban."

She looked at Draco and Draco wondered why Aunt Bellatrix always looked starved, even though Mother made sure she ate. She leaned forward and pushed the hair from Draco's brow.

"You're doing remarkably," she said. "I wish I had a son like you, to give into the service of my Lord."

Draco put a cautious arm around her, because he thought her crazy talk meant love. She was right, after all: they were family. In comparison, nothing else mattered.

"You let some things slip, those first few times," Aunt Bellatrix said in his ear, and he thought of Potter and almost had a panic attack. "That girl Hermione," she went on. "She looked familiar - and she's a Mudblood, isn't she?"

Draco went cold.

"Don't think I blame you for a moment," murmured Aunt Bellatrix, sounding almost like his

mother, but warmer. "You were placed in that atrocious school, surrounded by the wrong sort when you were an impressionable child. They're tricky, those Mudbloods, sometimes they do seem just like us, that's why they're even more dangerous than the Muggles. You're a little too soft, Draco, you became fond of a couple of them, that's all. Your breeding won out. You made the right choice."

The worry he was going to be asked to cut off Hermione's head the next time he saw her relieved, Draco relaxed a little further against Aunt Bellatrix.

"We're not going to kill them all, you know," Aunt Bellatrix murmured. He looked at her quickly and she said: "Of course not, there are billions of them. It would be a waste. We just need to set our rules and weed out the rebels, put Our Master on the throne to change the world. And which Mudbloods more likely to be shown mercy than the favourites of the Dark Lord's favourite, the one who removed a significant obstacle from his path?"

She sounded lazy and indulgent, as if she was promising him a treat, and not the lives of his friends. Draco closed his eyes and leaned against her, thought of Hermione's face just before she hit him. He could save her too, as well as Father.

He'd *known* he made the right choice.

*

"Did you know Sirius Black?" he asked Lupin the next time they had tea.

Lupin put down his cup. "He was a friend at school," he said quietly.

"You know he's..."

"Yes," said Lupin. "Yes, I know that."

Draco rattled around with the teacups and the sugar basin instead of continuing with this stupid conversation, but Lupin carried it on all by his stubborn werewolf self.

"Why do you ask?"

Draco looked at the kitchen surfaces. "Potter mentioned him," he mumbled.

Lupin clearly cheated by using super wolf powers to hear him. "Harry? Harry mentioned him to you?"

If Lupin persisted with this cruel interrogation, Draco was only going to put one spoon of sugar in his tea. "Yes," he said into the cups. "He said - on the train home this year, he said I'd never get the chance to know him now."

He thought of the rattling train and Potter's eyes gleaming with tears, without the haze of rage he had experienced the first few dozen times around.

"He said that," Lupin said, giving Draco an odd look. "You two are getting on better these days, then?"

Draco had an extremely ill-timed and vivid flashback to the incident of insanity. He banged the sugar basin and spoon about some more and felt his ears burn. He hoped to God Lupin did not notice, damn Potter anyway. He thought everyone else were such little unimportant people, clearly boys were to be used as a sort of practice kit until he was ready for girls.

"He hates me," Draco answered. "He always hated me, remember?"

Lupin's mouth twisted. "He didn't mention it so often after the mudfight incident. Apparently you - didn't turn him in to Snape, or something?"

"Hermione would've had my head," Draco muttered, and compromised by maliciously only adding three spoonfuls of sugar to Lupin's tea. He handed it over and hoped sugar-light tea added sorrow to Lupin's wretched werewolf life.

Once he was sitting across the table from Lupin, he thought an adroit segue from things that were very much his own business was appropriate.

"*You* liked Potter," he said. "I remember that. In a shocking turn of events in this world where everyone is obsessed with his mop-headed loathsomeness, he was teacher's pet. Doesn't it bother you that-?"

Draco stopped and had some tea.

Lupin laced his fingers around his cup. "It does bother me," he agreed. "I liked Harry very much. I would have loved him, if - his parents had lived, if things had worked out. Only it bothered me to be around him. In the end, he was too painful a reminder of a world I lost, and then I had no job, I knew I would have no job under the Ministry's rule, and a lifetime going hungrier than I have already gone did not seem worth it, just for the sake of some old memories that hurt."

"Besides, he'd probably hate you if he knew everything you'd done," Draco said, thinking of how judgemental Potter always was, how they had both gone too far already, and then he saw the look on Lupin's face and he realised Terry would not have considered that a sensitive comment.

"He would have every right," Professor Lupin said, and he sounded so tired.

Draco made a restless movement, unsure of what to do, and knocked over his teacup. Tea went everywhere and Lupin started to laugh. "Sometimes," he added, "you remind me very much of your first cousin."

Draco looked up from his efforts to salvage his mother's tablecloth from death-by-tea. "You must be thinking of someone else," he said, blinking. "I don't have a first cousin."

Lupin leaned forward. "Draco," he said in a low voice, "It's very easy for Harry to dismiss evil as inhuman, and to view people he has no sympathy with as evil. That is why I was pleased he seemed - less inclined to dismiss you in third year, since you have a very different-"

The word *dismiss* stung enough for Draco to interrupt with a short, bitter laugh. "Well, you were wrong. He's always dismissed me."

"Your situation," Lupin said softly, "is quite different. Evil is almost always human. You can live with evil, laugh with evil, undiluted evil is very hard to find, but irredeemable evil is not. Listen to me, Draco-

"Draco," Aunt Bellatrix said from the door, "it's time for your Occlumency lesson."

Draco grinned an apology and left Lupin with the rest of the mess. Professor Lupin wasn't so bad, Draco thought: he didn't deserve to be starved to death. They should not let him be a teacher or anything, what if he got too complacent and forgot his Potion, but Draco thought they should let him be a librarian if he would promise to lock himself up in a cellar every full moon and not chew on the books.

Sensible people like Lupin and Professor *Snape* were Death Eaters. It was the only choice.

Draco rubbed nervously at his left wrist and Aunt Bellatrix caught him at it. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said guiltily.

"We'd best get on with Occlumency, then. I mentioned how talented you are at a meeting the other day," she added. As Draco subtly, coolly preened himself on being a complete genius, she said: "I'd watch out for Severus Snape, if I were you. He likes you, but he was a little miffed - he's used to being the Occlumens prodigy, and he's jealous that you have been trusted with such an important job, at your age. He might want to steal some of your glory."

Prodigy, Draco repeated to himself, and tried to keep his smirk to acceptable levels. Then he said, "Wait - what? I *like* Professor Snape!"

Aunt Bellatrix lifted one shoulder. "Perhaps I am wrong."

Later that day, Draco sat on Mother's bed and watched her do her hair. "Do you like Professor Snape?" he blurted, and saw her raise her eyebrows in the glass.

"Yes, I do. Very much. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing," Draco muttered. "No reason. That's what I thought."

His mother continued to watch him in the mirror. He saw his own reflection in the mirror, and he looked smaller and unhappier than he imagined himself.

"If Professor Snape gives you any advice," Mother said suddenly, "Take it. He wants to help you, he know you're still very young-

Draco curled in tighter on himself. "I'm not a *child*."

She thought he was weak, and that he could not be trusted, but he wasn't. He had made his decision, he was going to save his father, and she would see then, and she would be so happy.

She'd be proud of him, then.

Aunt Bellatrix had told him about Regulus, as well. Draco knew what happened to people who were weak enough to lose their nerve when they had chosen the right path and found it difficult. It was the same thing that happened to people who betrayed their family and lived cut off from them in order to win the love of people like Harry Potter.

They died.

Draco was going to be stronger than that.

*

With the summer days growing shorter, the time when Draco was going to have to effect his plans came closer. It was perfectly normal to be nervous, he was sure even Father was a little nervous before every great political victory.

He did what he knew, and studied. The books available at home did not have as wide a range as Hogwarts library, but there were a few volumes that would have been in the Restricted Section at school. Draco found a few things on the Come and Go Room.

For instance, if you took an object which belonged to the room outside the room, you could control what happened inside it to an extent. If Potter or someone came sneaking around, Draco thought it would be extremely amusing to present him with an empty room, and then perhaps remove the door for a bit.

Aunt Bellatrix got restless when he spent too long reading, and asked him if he wanted to learn some terrible Dark curses. Draco gave her a look over his glasses for being unappreciative of serious research, but agreed after a while that terrible Dark curses might come in handy.

"I can't believe you don't play Quidditch," Aunt Bellatrix said after Draco successfully turned a frog upside down in the air and left it hanging.

"Yes, Harry Potter, but why do you look so alarmingly like my aunt?" Draco asked.

Aunt Bellatrix looked at him as if he was crazy, which was a little bit like the frog looking at him as if he was green.

"I liked Quidditch in school," she said suddenly, as if she had just remembered. "I was a Beater."

"I'll bet you were."

"Of course, *I* was in Slytherin," Aunt Bellatrix added.

Draco could not imagine the Sorting Hat placing her anywhere else. Everything else aside, he imagined that if Aunt Bellatrix had thought the outcome was in doubt she would have held down the brim in two tight fists and growled, 'Don't make me *choke* a bitch.'

He smiled at the thought, and at Aunt Bellatrix.

"*Levicorpus* is very useful when you already have the rope around their neck," Aunt Bellatrix said thoughtfully, her eyes caught by the frog, and she put an absent arm around Draco's shoulders.

Draco thought suddenly of Lupin saying, *Undiluted evil is very hard to find, but irredeemable evil is not.*

Draco turned his face into his aunt's shoulder. Lupin had obviously meant to warn him against Fenrir Greyback.

He was in the bookroom again when Mother came in and proposed that they go to Diagon Alley and pick up his things. Mother had not gone to Diagon Alley with him since first year, because she said the place was always crammed with vulgar shopkeepers and low company. Father had always gone with him, and neither Draco nor Mother mentioned that at all. They looked at each other and knew it.

The continuing ache of Father's absence was not the only problem. Draco had been rather counting on shopping by himself, so he could pick up a few needful things in Knockturn Alley.

"You'll hate it, Mother. I'll be fine by myself, I'm *practically* seventeen, you know."

"I want to go," Mother lied. "I am sure rubbing shoulders with bargain hunters will be tremendous fun."

"The sociopathic Weasley twins quit school in the middle of the year and started up their own business in Diagon Alley," Draco informed her rebelliously.

Mother smiled at him. "Draco, tell me. Why are you talking about the behaviour of ill-disciplined rabble as if it has any relevance to our lives?"

That was apparently that, and they were set to go to Diagon Alley together.

*

Diagon Alley was very different, with purple Wanted posters of his aunt plastered on every surface. Draco felt as if this would not be happening if Father was there with him.

He conceded that even Father would not have been able to stop this woman who called herself a tailor from mistaking him for a pincushion and ruining his dark-blue dress robes. Draco had chosen the colour to show support for his house, and he was starting to have dire doubts about them bringing out shadows under his eyes.

He ignored this important and pressing concern while he tried very hard to get Mother to go and have a refreshing lemon ice while he did the rest of his shopping by himself.

"The ice-cream shop is closed, Draco, didn't you notice?" Mother asked.

"They say the *Death Eaters* got Florian Fortescue," the shop-busybody said in tones of sepulchral satisfaction.

Mother and Draco both gave her a quelling look. Mother had more experience, but Draco had his glasses. The woman subsided, overcome on all fronts.

Draco resumed persuasion. "Look, I'm a Ravenclaw, I can buy my own books. I'm not a child, in case you hadn't noticed, Mother."

The woman clearly did not learn, because she started a homily on how none of them were safe wandering alone. Draco thought about how safe it was in his own home, and he shivered and the woman stabbed him again.

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

If she practised voodoo, she should have set up shop in Knockturn Alley, Draco thought crossly, pulling himself away from her pins and her evil reaching hands. Freed from the toils of her voodoo tailoring, he went over to a mirror and checked carefully to see if his dark suspicions about the shadows under his eyes were true.

After a few moments, he realised that Potter, Hermione and Weasley were standing behind him. Him and Potter in the robe shop again, he thought with a nasty little shock. To complete this moment, he even had Oafy stationed outside. Nothing over the years had changed, except now Potter had collected himself a minion and *Draco's* Hermione, and Draco was not going to make any effort at polite conversation.

He and Potter stared at each other for another moment, and then he called out: "You were quite right about meeting low company in Diagon Alley, Mother. A Weasley just walked in."

Potter frowned and Weasley went for his wand, and Hermione, who had been slightly behind them, reached out to stop Weasley. Which was when Draco saw her face.

He was across the room in a second, his hand under her chin. "Who blacked your eye?" he demanded. "I'll kill them."

Hermione looked up at him, and he saw the set expression on her face soften.

Weasley shoved him. "Don't you touch her!"

For a horrifying instant, Draco was grateful to Weasley. He couldn't afford to be distracted, Hermione was too clever, she might suspect and she would not understand. She would see one day that it had helped to save her life, and until then - Weasley would protect her, he wouldn't get distracted by heroics like Potter might be. He supposed he could be grateful to Weasley for keeping her safe for him.

"Ah, I see how it is," he said. "You two had a little fight. Opened her smart mouth one too many times, did she? Getting a bit of violence in before the domestic part?"

Hermione and Weasley both went red, and Weasley went for his wand again. Potter grabbed Draco's arm.

"Stop it," he said softly - he thought he could command anyone, like he thought he could grab anyone, apparently. "That's not funny."

Mother stepped out from behind the clothes rack, and Draco saw her look at them, and saw the fear that had been haunting her all summer pass swiftly over her face, leaving it blank and tight-lipped.

"I suggest that you put your wand away and that you take your hands off Draco," she said icily. "If you attack my son, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

Potter glared at her, and Draco saw it was just as he had thought. Potter knew Mother had handed over Sirius Black, and Mother - she was only worried about *him*...

"Want to Owl one of your Death Eater friends and tell them where to find me?" Potter asked. "That's your usual style, isn't it?"

Madam Maladroit Behaviour was squawking like a distressed chicken, but all Draco was really aware of was Mother's pale face and Potter's low, dangerous voice.

"I wouldn't need any friends to - dispose of you," Mother said, her lips still thin and her eyes still on Draco. "Let go of him."

"Try it," Potter invited her. "I'm sure you'll really enjoy Azkaban."

That clear reference to Father made Draco step forward, sense taking a short vacation as blood rang in his ears, to wipe that smug look off Potter's face *somehow*.

Because no good ever came of incidents in Draco's life that involved robe shops and Potter, he actually tripped over his overlong robes. For a moment he wanted to stumble right off a cliff and away from the shameful pain of life.

Potter's grip on his arm went hard, automatically steadying him, which made the humiliation even worse.

"You heard my mother," Draco spat. "Let go of me, you can't keep my arm as a trophy."

Potter looked at Draco's left arm, and some emotion turned his green eyes very dark indeed. Draco was suddenly and terribly aware of the place on his arm where the Dark Mark could have been, just cloth between the leering snake and Potter's fingers. He flinched and Potter's hand, not relaxing its grip at all, slid down to his wrist. His fingers were callused, rough on the inside of Draco's wrist, and his intent was clear: he was going to look for-

Draco yanked his arm savagely away.

"Mother," he said, trying to force his voice not to shake with fury, "I don't think I want these any more-"

He made to yank the stupid blue robes over his head.

"Malfoy, you're wearing something under that, aren't you?" Potter asked, going dark red.

Draco stared at him in amazement. "You're extremely weird and creepy," he informed him, and pulled the robes off. Naturally, he was wearing black robes underneath: as if he would let a shopkeeper see him in the altogether, let alone (and God forbid) Weasley.

He threw the robes at Potter's feet and pulled his disarranged collar together, feeling obscurely uncomfortable, and drew tight against his mother's side. She put her hand in his and held on so hard he knew she had been actually afraid for him.

"I think we will do better in Twilfitt and Tatting's," Mother announced with decision, as the tradeswoman twittered indignantly. She raised her eyebrow at Potter. "What very unfortunate hair you have, dear," she said smoothly. "It's a wonder your mother lets you out looking like that. Oh, wait, I forgot-

She lifted a hand in mock dismay to her mouth. Draco did not have to look to know that Potter was looking murderous. He thought suddenly of the Dark Lord saying, *I might count the entire Malfoy clan as a dead loss...* and shuddered, holding her hand tighter as they left the shop.

Mother let herself tremble once, when she was sure they were out of sight. "That brat should have died when he was a year old," she said coldly. "Then we would not be in this mess, then Lucius would be at home and you would be *safe*-"

Her face smoothed at once when she caught sight of Mrs Zabini, a particular friend of hers, who she greeted with an air kiss on each cheek and told her summer had been tolerable. Mrs Zabini launched into a frankly embarrassing story about her fifth summer of sexual discovery to date.

After ten minutes, Draco judged his mother was sufficiently involved in the story, and his slow backing away became an outright run, out of sight, past the Sociopath Twins' Super Sadism shop, and towards his goal of Knockturn Alley.

He had made his choice - the *right* choice - and made a plan. Now was the time to carry it out.

Chapter Eight

Mother didn't really talk to him on the journey to the train station. She sat in the carriage opposite him looking pale and beautiful and a hundred cool miles away from him, and Draco wanted Father to criticise him, or Aunt Bella to ramble lovingly about decapitation in his ear, or something.

"Take care, Draco," she said on the platform, and touched his sleeve. He stared at her.

Then a tall woman with the build of a carthorse and wire-rimmed spectacles and 'Muggle' written all over her strode up to them and said, "Hello, I'm Pamela Goldstein. Our boys are such good friends: I thought you and I should get acquainted."

Draco and his mother stared at her with varying degrees of shock and horror. Then Mother, manners impeccable as usual, held out her hand and said in a faint, colourless tone: "Charmed, I'm sure."

Pamela Oh My God A Muggle Is Touching My Mother Goldstein smiled and Anthony peeped out from over her shoulder, looking embarrassed but in a normal parent way, as if there were no social conventions, no taboos, being horribly defied as they spoke.

"And this is little Draco," Pamela said, smiling at him cheerfully. "He's a cute kid. Looks a bit anaemic, though."

"I am sixteen years old," Draco informed her, "And tall. Tall for my age. And I have a - refined complexion."

"Anthony's right, you can tell he was homeschooled," Pamela said, elbowing Narcissa in the ribs. Mother looked on the point of death by scandalized dismay. "He should take iron pills."

"I thank you for your kind recommendation, but in the wizarding world we are not accustomed to medicating our children with metal," Mother said stiffly.

"How was your summer?" Anthony asked.

Draco thought of the Dark Lord's red eyes and the werewolves prowling his house and his Aunt Bellatrix talking about the best way to torture the Muggleborn to death. Filthy halfbreeds, she'd said once. Diluting our blood. It won't stop unless we make it stop.

She'd also said, *which Mudbloods more likely to be shown mercy than the favourites of the Dark Lord's favourite?*

Draco looked at Anthony's friendly, inquiring face and said, "Fine."

"So Draco's a homosexual," Pamela said. "I think that's so interesting, I always wanted Anthony to have artistic friends. Besides, really, making boys wear dresses and play with brooms in their formative years is bound to leave a mark. Have you joined PFLAG?"

"I'm afraid I do not quite understand you," said Narcissa's mouth, and her eyes said "you

terrible, incomprehensible woman."

"Mum, stop," Anthony pleaded.

"Oh hush, Anthony. Draco's not embarrassed! Are you embarrassed, Draco?"

"I only wish I was dead a little bit," Draco said, for Anthony's sake. "Oh, listen, did you hear the train - it's leaving, we'll be very late, must dash, imperative that we be in our places and - commence studying at once! For we are Ravenclaws, and that is what Ravenclaws do."

"Don't you think that the division between houses in this school promotes a sort of gang mentality?" inquired Pamela Goldstein. "I find it most psychologically peculiar. It's almost like the loyalties in the Mob."

"My child is not part of any sort of mob," Mother said with dignity. "If you're going, Draco, take care of yourself - mind you write," and her hand trembled a little on his sleeve.

Draco wanted to hug her, but surely she would have hugged him if she'd wanted to, and Anthony and his mother were watching.

"I'll write," he said. "Don't fuss, Mother."

"Naturally I shall be somewhat concerned," Mother responded, and then smiled and let go of his sleeve.

Draco turned away, and turning saw her cool smile go all out of shape. He whirled back and hugged her, her back thin under his hands. He was almost taller than her now, his mother, and she'd always been lovely and cold and perhaps fragile as an ice sculpture: it was Father you could count on to be interested in you, even if he was disappointed. She put a hand on his shoulder, returned his embrace cautiously, and Draco burrowed his face against her, glasses pushed into her shoulder.

"It'll be fine, Mother," he told her, "it'll be fine, fine, I'll take care of everything."

"You don't have to," Mother said.

She didn't know, of course. She had no idea that the Dark Lord had said, *I believe I might count the entire Malfoy clan as... a dead loss*. Draco did have to take care of everything, including her, but he would, he could, it was an honour and everything would be all right.

She would never have to know. Draco was going to protect her.

He kissed her cheek, glasses bumping against her cheekbone, and then stepped back and avoided her eyes. "You needn't worry, I have everything under control," he assured her, and then he and Anthony ascended the steps into the train.

Behind him he heard Mrs Goldstein say: "Do you frequently have bouts of separation anxiety?" and his mother murmur: "I do apologise, I have an appointment to - have an appointment, excuse me."

"Thanks for gossiping with your *mother* about my love life, Anthony Goldstein," Draco said severely as he dragged his trunk along the corridors. He wasn't getting stuck talking to Loony Lovegood this year. "You total old biddy at sixteen, you."

"I needed to work things out," Anthony said cheerfully and unrepentantly. "Because you and Terry were all close and the break-up is going to impact on the dynamic of our friendship, which is a serious emotional issue for me even though my interest in the matter is strictly platonic. The homosocial bonds we develop in school and their outcome affect us for life, Mum says."

"You're really weird, I just thought you should know," Draco informed him.

"I want there to be as little conflict as possible," said Anthony, "but of course if it comes down to it I'm on your side."

"Are you," Draco said, blankly. "Why?"

"Because we're closer than Terry and I are, of course," Anthony said. "You know where you are with you: you always speak your mind. Anyway you're a big spaz, and I empathise with that."

Draco had always assumed that Terry was better friends with the entire dorm than Draco was: Terry had tact, and he'd been made prefect, and Entwistle and Corner certainly liked him best, imbeciles that they were, so it seemed to make sense that the third in their group liked Terry best too. He had Crabbe and Goyle to like him best, *anyway*, he was in the habit of telling himself.

Apparently not just them, though. He favoured Anthony with a warm smile.

"Where're we going to sit, then," Anthony said. "Every year I get scared I'll end up sitting with Loony Lovegood. I still have nightmares from that time she told me about Snorkacks, you know. I told Mother I think she's verbally harassing me."

"I'll verbally harass you, Goldstein, you enormous baby," Draco said.

Pansy waved to him from down the train corridor and came up with Crabbe trundling both his and her bags. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Draco sometimes thought she fancied him: probably on account of his animal magnetism.

He tried to give her the glasses look in an alluring way, recalled that animals didn't wear spectacles at all, and fell into some confusion.

"Let's go find a carriage," she said, taking his arm. "D'you have something in your eye?" She looked slight askance at Anthony, clearly bent on accompanying them, and extreme askance at his amulet.

"I know," Anthony told her. "I'm a filthy Muggleborn. You can degrade me and crush my spirit by making me your sex slave if you like."

Pansy laughed and said: "Clearly, Anthony Goldstein, you are reading far too much *Witches*

Gone Wild."

Goyle's look of incredible guilt was lost on nobody. Draco happened to know that sometimes he cut his comics out of their covers and hid *Witches Gone Wild* inside them.

They all went and found a compartment. Getting the trunks onto the racks was hard work if women were being lazy and not pulling their own weight, and afterwards Draco collapsed artistically with his head in Pansy's lap. She stroked his hair amiably enough and called him a gigantic baby.

"Oh, you want me *bad*," said Draco.

"I'll tell you who I want bad," Pansy told them all. "Anybody seen Potter yet? The summer did him a lot of good - he's so tall."

"I'm tall," Draco put in, offended and shocked.

"And he's so tanned," Pansy went on, at which point Draco lapsed into grouchy but no less horrified silence. "I saw him on the platform wearing one of those sloppy jumpers and I wanted to pour honey on the golden hollow of his throat and then lick it off."

There was a pause, indicative of the fact that everyone thought Pansy should stop reading *Wizards Gone Wild*.

"I want to be sick," Draco said at last.

"Potter is nice enough," Anthony said, and Draco levered himself up on one elbow to give him the Not Sexy Glasses Look of Reproach because he was a Traitor, "but I've never had any - breakfast spread thoughts about him. I have to say."

"Pity Chang says he's the worst kisser she's ever kissed and can't string two words together," Pansy said. "If he had any sort of acceptable personality at all, I would ride him like a wild pony all night long."

There was a long pause. Draco wrenched his mind away from ponies tamed or untamed, and concentrated on the deliriously amusing Cho revelations.

"You know," he said at length, "In many ways, Cho Chang is the love of my life. What else did she say about Potter?"

"I think she was wrong about Potter, though," Pansy said thoughtfully. "He said more than two words to me. He asked if I'd seen you."

"Yes," Draco said, "because he *lives to torment me*."

"And to battle You-Know-Who," Anthony put in brightly. A distinctly uneasy silence fell until Anthony went on: "And I bet he's Quidditch captain this year."

Before Anthony and Pansy started filling out forms to join Colin Creevey's Harry Potter Fan Club and receive the photograph-filled newsletter, Blaise Zabini came into the compartment

and crashed about apparently having trouble with the door. Draco was slightly more concerned with the flash of movement in the corner of his eye after Blaise swung the door open.

For a moment he thought he'd imagined it, but then he caught Anthony's eye and saw Anthony'd spotted it too.

They looked at the luggage rack and nodded to each other. Then they nodded to Crabbe and Goyle, who since third year had periodically leaped at empty air and shouted 'Got you, Potter!' as it was. Then he gently elbowed Pansy.

"I expect Slughorn would've invited me," Draco said in a clear, carrying voice; "if some complete bastard hadn't got my father arrested."

There was shifty silence from the luggage rack.

"Which is to say that the Ravenclaws are quick-witted and keen-eyed and we've totally spotted you, Potter," Draco said, more loudly. "Come *out* of there, you're embarrassing us all."

Taking his sweet time about it, Potter did so, and he removed the Invisibility Cloak and looked around in a blushy but determined sort of way. Draco examined him: he supposed he was taller and browner and stuff, but his mere presence in the world was a complete offence. And Draco *would* have been invited to Slughorn's get-together if it hadn't been for Potter, Father would still have the position he deserved, everything would be all right. Potter had ruined Draco's life and didn't even care, and the only thing Draco wanted to do with him was tear him apart with his bare hands.

"I didn't know you had an Invisibility Cloak," Zabini said at length. "That's pretty cool."

"Thanks, Zambini," said Potter.

"*Zambini*?" said Zabini: Potter wasn't paying attention.

"So," he said. "So - here you are, Malfoy. With - you know, on the train. With Pansy Parkinson," he added, for some reason.

Mad. He was mad.

He was mad but clearly he suspected something, clearly Draco'd given himself away somehow before school had even properly started. Draco was horrified and appalled at himself, and - and not afraid, but uncomfortable. He didn't... Anthony shouldn't hear from Potter, he wouldn't understand. Later, once it was done. Draco would think of something.

He sat up, even though Pansy's stroking his hair had been very soothing and therapeutic, because he was already at quite enough of a miserable disadvantage with Potter without addressing him while lying flat on his back.

"Well spotted," Draco observed. "Why're we being graced with this enormous invasion of privacy, Potter?"

"I want to," Potter said. "I want to talk to you."

"Oh really? I was under the impression that you wanted to spy on me from a luggage rack," Draco snapped.

"Failing that," Potter said dryly, though he was still blushing ferociously. "I need to talk to you. Um, privately."

"And if wishes were horses then Weasleys would ride," Draco sneered, and then thought, *ride*, and also, *wild ponies*, and entirely lost his train of thought and damned Pansy Parkinson to hell.

"Are you blushing, Malfoy?" Potter asked uneasily.

"No!" Draco snapped. "*You're* blushing!"

It was true: the idiot was scarlet under his stupid tan, and still not leaving.

"I'm not leaving," Potter told him mulishly, as if Draco could not see that perfectly well.

"Since you're the Chosen One now and everything," Draco commented, "You'd think you'd be able to find some people who might *choose* to be in your company."

"Oh shut up, Malfoy," Potter said.

Draco was deeply dismayed that he actually had the words "*You* shut up" on his lips before he remembered he wasn't eleven years old anymore. He decided that the really mature way to handle this was to ignore Potter totally and proceed to give him the silent treatment.

He went back to lying with his head in Pansy's lap. She was a kind girl, she had lovely soft hands even if she did have terrible horrible taste in men.

Potter sat down and Crabbe and Goyle moved over as far as they could and gave him funny looks from the corner of their eyes. Potter crossed his arms over his chest and his legs at the ankles, with all appearance of settling in. Draco could not believe him: he was the most stubborn and unmannerly person in the world.

"So, how was your summer, Potter?" Anthony asked at last.

Potter blinked. "It was okay. I spent it with the Weasleys," he said. "How was, um, your summer?"

"It was great. I went to a Young Psychologists' Camp," Anthony confided enthusiastically.

Potter blinked and said, "Cool," in a rather unconvinced way.

There was another long silence, broken only by Zabini muttering "*Zambini*" under his breath, and Goyle getting out his comic book again. Everyone was more or less just staring at Potter, who had gone a dull red. He clearly suspected something, maybe he'd tracked Draco down to

Borgin and Burkes in that damned Cloak. Anyway he was staring at Draco, he needn't think he was going to break Draco's nerve, no matter how much Potter looked like he wouldn't leave until he got what he wanted.

"So what did you want to talk to Draco about?" Anthony asked, frowning.

Draco despised himself completely, because he cast a pleading look at Potter, and Potter looked startled.

"Um," he said. "Stuff."

Pansy's fingers were gentle in Draco's hair. Maybe he should marry her for daily head massages. "Are you going to just sit here glaring at all of us and being incoherent all journey long?" she inquired.

"Maybe," Potter shot back. "Are you going to just sit there all journey long grooming Malfoy and looking smug about it, as if anyone would-"

He stopped. Draco had no idea, Potter was apparently too much of a freak to even talk properly anymore, he was just babbling gibberish like his Big Crazy Giant adopted father.

"Where's your *boyfriend*?" Potter asked suddenly, investing the word with a lot of hatred. Enormous hypocritical homophobe that he was.

"He's," Anthony began. Draco gave him a quelling look: there was no reason that Harry Potter needed to know that Draco had been ignominiously dumped.

"If you mean Terry Boot," he said coldly, "He's in the prefects' carriage. With, you know, the only two friends you have in the world?"

Potter glared at him. He thought about Hermione and felt sick and unhappy and glared back. They all just sat there. Not much farther, Draco told himself, but as the train jolted on and Potter *just stayed there* Draco felt himself getting angrier and angrier. Potter came snooping around after Draco, which was fine, they were enemies, Draco would be a Death Eater before long and *show* him, but to have the utter face to impose himself on Draco and all Draco's friends, fresh from an exclusive party with Slughorn where precious Potter was invited and disgraced Lucius Malfoy's son was not, and be rude to Pansy for no reason, and... He was just the limit.

Dad had been in Azkaban all summer while Potter had been reclining on the freckled bosom of the Weasleys and getting his stupid tan.

"How was," Potter said, and cleared his throat. "How was your summer, Malfoy?"

Draco turned his head and gave him a look of loathing. "How d'you think it was," he said icily.

The room went silent again. The atmosphere was extremely chilly. Potter looked away at last, but did not move an inch.

When the train finally pulled into the station, Anthony, Crabbe and Goyle almost killed each other trying to escape from the carriage at the same time. Pansy waited so Draco could scramble up and Zabini paused so he could say: "It's Blaise Zabini, all right? Blaise Zabini!"

Potter looked at him as if he was insane. "Okay," he said. "Whatever."

Then he said: "I only want a minute, Malfoy."

Calm settled on Draco, cool and logical. "All right," he answered. "All right."

He closed the doors on the retreating backs of the others, and then leaned against the door and took a deep breath. He heard Potter take a step behind him.

"Look, Malfoy," he said. "You're smarter than this."

"I'm smarter than *you*," Draco snapped, and whirled on him. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Potter went down hard, and Draco stooped over his frozen form to get in a good gloat.

"Now, Potter," he murmured. "You taught me to be quicker on the draw than that." He was about to proceed on this theme when he looked at Potter's face: it made him uncomfortable. "Stop looking at me like that," he said, and felt like an idiot.

Right. There was no point lingering, he should just do as he'd planned. Potter had put his father in prison and he was going to break Potter's nose and leave him there paralyzed. It would be fun. It would be revenge: Dad *deserved* that.

Stupid Godforsaken Potter had said last time they were on the train together, *You'll never get the chance to know him now*. Like he minded that a Black was dead. Draco wondered how his summer had actually been.

Potter wouldn't have cared, if the Black in question hadn't turned his back on everything that made him a Black. Draco should stop being such a child, he wasn't a child, he could do this. For his father.

Draco glanced back at Potter, cursed and hit the wall. Then he just draped Potter's Invisibility Cloak over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you until the train's back in London," he said, with all the frustrated malice he had. "See you around, Potter... or not."

He got up and rejoined the others on the platform. Anthony was apparently trying to chat up Pansy and she was staring at him blankly. When Draco appeared they both grinned at him.

"You were right," Pansy said. "Potter's good-looking, but he's an enormous weirdo. What the hell was he doing? Acting like you're the prime suspect in a murder investigation!"

Draco felt briefly cold.

Anthony cheered him up by saying: "I really hope that You-Know-Who doesn't have to be

defeated by stealth. Because Potter? Not stealth."

*

The Hat sang another song about the houses uniting, and Anthony talked wistfully about how much he'd like to unite with Pansy Parkinson.

"I thought you had a crush on Hermione," Draco said at last, saying her name to show he could.

"She's so stuck on Ron Weasley there might as well be glue involved," Anthony sighed. "Mother says I should move on. I like Slytherins," he went on dreamily. "They're sassy. Uh, not Greg and Vince, of course."

Terry was oddly quiet for most of the meal, not looking at Draco. Draco didn't care or told himself he didn't care, which was just as good, until Terry said: "Harry Potter's not here. Anthony said - what did you do to him?"

It was nice, that his ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend thought he was murdering people on trains. Really nice.

What was even nicer was that it had passed through Draco's mind, somewhere between sneering down at Potter and hitting the wall. It had made him feel sick, and he'd been too feeble even to break stupid Potter's stupid face for his father's sake.

Another thing making him feel sick was Dumbledore. The old man looked like death, looked aged another century to add to his millions of centuries, his face yellowy-grey, one of his hands a twisted ruin. He looked almost like an evil overlord as well now, but a frail one, decaying.

I could really do it, Draco thought, and felt a chill down his spine. He had to do it: for Father, for Mother, for himself. He had to.

Potter came in just before dessert was served, and Draco was gloomily unsurprised. Of course Potter was going to escape somehow, get out of his predicament in some unlikely hero way like he always did, forever come out on top.

Draco should've broken his nose when he had the chance. He scowled significantly at Terry, then scowled less significantly at the treacle tart.

To make himself feel better, he told Cho, Mandy and Lisa how he'd tricked Potter and covered him with the cloak. They were all laughing and reproaching him as he made his I Am Frozen Potter face, and then in the midst of it he saw Potter's eyes fixed on him, intent, like he wasn't going to give up or let Draco get away with it.

Draco shuddered and turned his face away. He didn't have time for Potter now.

When the night came, and he went to the Room of Requirement with the cabinet and looked at it, and looked at it, and had no idea what to do next, he knew he didn't have time for anything.

"What've you been doing?" Terry asked, when he got back to bed late.

"Oh, off killing Harry Potter as usual," Draco sneered, and turned away in bed. Last year Terry would have joined him.

This year Terry sighed, and turned out the light.

*

It seemed like the ideal solution when Professor Slughorn offered Felix Felicis as a prize for the winner of his little potion-making contest. Draco stopped whispering to Anthony and evading Potter's fixed gaze, and felt his heart beat in his throat. If he could win, it meant Father free, Mother safe, himself honoured and special and given everything he wanted - Hermione and Anthony safe - and everything all right, the crushing cold burden of fear he'd started to feel pressing down on him heavier last night gone, vanished like a miracle.

Of course, Potter won instead.

God damn it, Draco thought. God *damn* it. Potter'd never even been particularly good at Potions, it felt like he was doing it just to spite him.

Added to that Professor Wobbly Bottom looked at Draco like he was something the cat had left on the stairs and would be disciplined for later, and at Potter like he wanted to lick honey off him, in a manner entirely improper within a student and teacher relationship.

Draco actually felt sick with fury and envy and disappointment.

"How did you do that?" Weasley whispered to Potter.

Potter looked at Draco, didn't look away. "Got lucky," he said.

Draco swept out of the room and tried very hard not to destroy the entire Ravenclaw dormitory in a fit of rage. He wanted to study with Hermione: she'd sit with him and touch his hand and calm him down, but she wasn't there, she hated him and she had to stay hating him, too. He couldn't have someone as smart as Hermione close to him while he was trying to...

She didn't want to be friends with him again anyway. She was too busy telling Potter how attractive he was, Ginny Weasley told him. She frowned slightly as she said it and Draco marvelled that these Gryffindor girls should waste so much of their time. Apparently now they were telling Potter things that His Chosen Arrogance, the Boy Who Had A Swollen Enough Head Already Thank You, already knew perfectly well.

It was nice that Ginny was still talking to him, though. He was sitting in the library once reading everything he could lay his hands on, the little statue he'd taken from the Room of Requirement in order to control it burning a hole in his pocket, and she walked over to him and put her hand on his forehead and said he looked tired.

He was so grateful he could have cried.

"I'm never too tired for you, redhaired vixen of my heart," he said wearily, in order to see her brother go red and furious at the table across. Potter wasn't there, no doubt his ever-expanding crowd of fans had cornered him somewhere and were in the process of having their way with him like crazed jaguars.

Oh yes, life was fair.

He was grateful for Ginny Weasley, though, and he was grateful for Anthony, and he was very grateful for Crabbe and Goyle, who were the best friends a would-be plotter could have. They couldn't guard the Room in their actual bodies, Draco'd explained to them. They were great big hulking bodies, they always looked dead suspicious. Everyone was always accusing Draco of having thugs even though Crabbe was a Child of Peace.

So he told them about little girl bodies and pinafores.

"I will not pander to your disturbed sexual fantasies!" Crabbe exclaimed, scandalised. "Homosexuality is one thing, but this! Have you read *Lolita*? It does not end well, Draco Malfoy!"

It took Draco three hours to persuade them that he was not trying to feed his own dark sexual fantasy life, and then four more hours to get them to accept the pinafores.

They were good friends, the best. They never even asked Draco what he was doing. He was grateful to them, inexpressibly impossibly grateful. They trusted that he knew what he was doing.

He wished he did. He kept following Borgin's directions but nothing was working, nothing seemed to be going right, and the first time he had to report back, in the village at Hogsmeade, there was Fenrir Greyback. He wished it was Lupin, God, how he wished it was Lupin.

"Looking a little under the weather, Draco?" inquired Fenrir, and touched his face. Draco stepped back with all possible speed.

"Feeling fine!" he said. "In the pink!"

"Your auntie sends her love," said Fenrir, and Draco breathed a little easier, thought of Aunt Bellatrix, who would serve him up to her Dark Lord with a cut throat but who did love him, who *did* love him, and felt pathetic and desperate to be relieved by such a message and such a messenger. "Little Rosmerta's under the Imperius curse, if you find her useful for anything," went on Fenrir Greyback, and while Rosmerta the barwoman stared at Draco, her face blank as a doll's, Fenrir traced a suggestive line between her breasts. "Not really my style," Fenrir drawled. "But if you like her..."

"God, no," gasped out Draco, and felt dizzy and sick with horror. "God. No."

But he looked at her and he thought of that cursed necklace in Borgin and Burkes. Simple, a curse, death, it didn't even have to pass through his hands. He wanted it to happen, of course he did, but he would prefer if it happened from a distance.

He didn't want to examine why too closely. He might be weak like Dad had always thought, but if he could just get the job done and not have to think about it anymore. If he could just do that.

He had the cursed necklace passed through Madam Rosmerta's hands. She gave it to some Gryffindor girl Draco only knew by sight, someone called Katie Bell.

She almost died.

Draco spent that night in the bathroom, being sick, crying, being the weak stupid idiot he'd tried not to be, knowing that if Anthony and Terry and Hermione knew, now, what he was and what he'd done, they could never forgive him. He'd reached the point of no return.

The only way was forward.

There was a ghost there who was very nice to him, but he couldn't look at her, because she was a murdered girl, and he'd almost. He would have been responsible.

"We just have to pretend not to hear him, Ron," he heard Hermione say on the stairs the next day.

"But he won't stop," Weasley was raving, like he thought he had problems. "He won't stop talking about it and it's not actually healthy, he's a man *obsessed*-"

"We just have to ignore him," Hermione repeated, so patient with her chosen dolt. "We pretend we're deaf every time he starts talking about-"

They both saw him at the same time, and Weasley gave him a filthy look. Draco gave him one back with interest, and then swept on his way. He wondered what the hell they were talking about, anyway. Potter being a freak about something, clearly, which was hardly groundbreaking news.

He didn't have time to think about Potter, anyway, he really didn't, and so he usually forced himself to stop whenever he did.

It was familiar and sort of comforting to hate Potter, but Draco preferred not to think words like grisly murder any more, and whenever he steered away from the beaten and beloved 'die, Potter, die' track he had terrible thoughts about not breaking Potter's nose, or Potter talking about Sirius Black, or the Truce That Lasted One Day, or God forbid that incident where Potter was Temporarily Deranged and Sexually Confused For Love of Cho Chang and Draco was Quite Possibly Concussed.

He tried not to think about Potter, which was hard to do when Potter was everywhere, watching for the time Draco betrayed himself, obviously, waiting for Draco to slip up so Potter could turn him in. Well, nothing new there. They'd always been enemies, and always would be.

He wished the new Potter fans were quieter, though, with Potter following him like a private eye and them following him like besotted ducklings, Draco had a constant migraine and they kept talking about mad things like how many showers Potter was taking. Draco could have

gone his whole life without those mental images, but *no*.

One day, with that Katie Bell girl still in St Mungo's and not even the news that the Gryffindors' Quidditch practise had been sheer mayhem able to cheer him up, Draco broke. Anthony, who had brought him the news and looked up hopefully at him, like a dog bringing slippers or something, for some returning cheer, looked very alarmed.

"Draco, are you going to hyperventilate," he said anxiously. "Should I get a paper bag, do you want my inhaler-"

"Don't put your amulet anywhere near my mouth!" Draco exclaimed hastily. "I - God, I - Where's Terry?"

What he wanted, he realized dully, curled up in a chair and thinking about nothing but cabinets, papers slipping through his fingers like his marks at school were slipping down, was some comfort. He was too weak, like Dad said. He wanted something like when he was in the infirmary and Hermione and Terry came to comfort him.

Terry'd rubbed his back. He's never collapsed in front of Anthony, wouldn't in front of Crabbe and Goyle, because they *trusted* him to be stronger and smarter than they were. But he did have Hermione and Terry, or he used to have them.

He could not go back to Hermione, but he could find Terry. Even with all he suspected, Terry would be kind.

"Er," Anthony said. "Terry. Terry Boot?"

"Yes," Draco said.

"Who knows?" Anthony said airily. "The prefects' bathroom, I expect, yes, Draco, that's where he is, the prefects' bathroom, into which tragically you cannot get. Not having the password. Uh. Not being a prefect. Because of the unjust system of this tyrannously cruel school, like you always said. Best to stay here. Perhaps we could write my mother together, Draco. Perhaps we can get you some iron pills."

Draco did not want Anthony's crazed mother to feed him iron or any other sort of metal, but he did want to see Terry.

"I'll go wait," he said, and left to the faint, dying-duck sounds of Anthony's protests. Anthony was a funny little man sometimes.

Draco was scared for him. He was scared for a lot of people. He wasn't scared for Terry, Terry was a pureblood, and Terry always knew the right things to say - well, mostly - and he'd liked Draco a lot, or seemed to. Draco was frantically aware as he walked down the corridors that he was in a terribly unstable frame of mind and he should go back to Anthony and not do this, but he was doing it anyway.

He went down to the prefects' bathroom and as he walked towards it, he saw Terry's back walking away from the closing door.

"Wait up," called Draco, and ran, dizzy with glad relief that it was so easy. "I've been looking for you."

He caught up and saw that there were several thin dark-haired boys in school, and one of them was indeed Terry, and another was bloody Potter. He was even wearing Muggle clothes. Either Draco was the stupidest man who had ever lived, or he was too delirious with exhaustion to think.

"So sorry," he said, and he must be in shock if he was being polite to Potter. "I thought you were Terry. I'll - go away now."

"Don't go," said Potter, and caught his wrist.

Draco realized with a sort of weird shock that Potter, for all he was thin, was pretty strong. Stronger than Draco was, because Potter spent all his time playing sports and Draco spent all his time in the library, very useful, like the library was helping him much now.

Draco felt vaguely blasphemous thinking that way, but mostly he felt panic-stricken, like Potter could read his mind and knew what had happened to Katie Bell. He tried to pull his wrist away but Potter held on tight. He's not an Occlumens, Draco thought frantically. He's not an Occlumens.

"Sorry I'm not *Terry*," Potter said, with his mouth making a funny shape - he was mental, that's what he was. "Only. I want to talk to you."

I won't tell you a thing! Draco shrieked like a hysterical girl in his mind. Jesus, maybe Potter would let him into the prefects' bathroom so he could weep there. Again.

Trying to think about anything but death and cabinets and failure and its consequences, his thoughts scattered and fell in unexpected and terrible places. Like light on water, unfocused and then suddenly so bright and sharp it hurt to look at, Draco realized what he'd sort of known before: that the fans were onto something, that Potter *was* attractive.

He was fresh from a shower, clearly: black hair damp, the new annoyingly tanned skin damp too, with that damp sort of sheen about it. There were wet little bits of hair clinging to Potter's neck and ears, his white worn T-shirt - why did Potter never have any decent clothes, Draco thought in a bid to distract himself - sticking a little to damp skin beneath, chest and shoulders. His grip on Draco's wrist was warm and strong.

This, Draco thought with the impulse to hysterics bubbling up again, must be what *madness* feels like.

"Right," Potter said, catching an even firmer hold of his wrist and stepping into Draco's personal space. Draco enjoyed his personal space, he was fond of it, up close and personal with it, he had not invited Potter to invade.

He recalled the history lessons from Muggle Studies. His personal space was like Poland: Potter shouldn't invade, it would mean war. Potter stepped in again, green eyes bright, intent - oh my God, Draco thought in a moment of purely selfish panic, is he going to torture information out of me?

He'd Crucio'd Aunt Bella.

Draco took a step back and into a wall, and Potter just followed him. Brilliant tactics, Draco, corner yourself, that's genius, he told himself. He should've been Sorted into *Hufflepuff*.

Potter was talking about doing a lot of thinking over the summer in his low, rough voice. Had Potter always had a voice like that? Maybe it was the insane voices in Draco's head talking.

"I would rather not talk," he announced to the voices in his head, or possibly Potter.

Potter's grip on his wrist became actually painful. "Yeah?" he said. "Too bad."

At that moment Draco knew it was Potter because nobody besides Potter, not even the voices in Draco's head, could be so extremely single-minded and irritating. He looked at Potter's black-fringed, serious eyes and felt a bit light-headed, the thoughts he was thinking were so reckless and insane.

Well, he thought. Potter owed him one moment of sheer insanity. And this might put him off all the snooping.

"No, really," he said, and grabbed a handful of the faded fabric of Potter's shirt, twisted. "I don't want to talk."

He used his grip on Potter's shirt and pulled him forward, kissed him hard.

Or that was more or less the intention, but then their glasses hit together and Draco touched his mouth against Potter's and then there was the little clink and frankly he felt like an idiot, albeit an idiot whose heart was going too fast and breath was coming too fast. All he'd had was a glasses-clinking awkward *instant* of insanity.

Potter stared at him and Draco realised he was quite possibly about to die. Everyone would definitely forgive Potter for doing it: maybe they'd hide his body in the cabinet, it would be the most ironic cover-up ever.

Then Potter, so close his nose was still touching Draco's, drew off his glasses - *his* glasses, leaving *him* defenceless and not Draco, Draco could *totally sucker punch Potter right this minute* - and drew Draco back against him, almost gently, mouth open and hungry against Draco's.

Draco put an arm around Potter's neck and kissed him back. He kissed him properly, angry and desperate and afraid and confused and this was *Potter*, he'd never known how to do anything half-way with Potter. What am I doing, he thought with terrible clarity somewhere in the recesses of his mind, as he kissed Potter and kissed him, leaned back against the stone wall with Potter's warm hands up his shirt, shirt lifting so the stone and Potter's calluses were both rough against his bare skin. He twisted one hand in Potter's damp hair and got him closer, teeth light in his lip, face curved towards Draco's *exactly right* and the kiss making fire curve sharply down in Draco's stomach, hit the base of his spine.

Potter broke his wet mouth away to breathe and moan against Draco's lips for a moment.

Draco had exactly one second to panic before Potter kissed his cheek, and his chin, and his jaw, and then Draco tilted his head back and Potter leaned in, his ridiculous sticking-up hair sort of rough against the underside of Draco's chin, and bit on Draco's neck. The bite was quick, good, tingling, and Potter's lips were warm and trembling against Draco's throat.

Draco, because he wasn't *used* to not being on the sort of terms with people he was kissing that would make gestures appropriate, drew his hand through Potter's silly hair and was surprised at the reaction he got: Potter pressed his face against Draco's wrist, as if hardly anyone had ever been affectionate with him before.

Then he bit down on Draco's neck again.

Draco made a sharp, helpless sound. Potter kissed his ear, and then said into it: "Let me-"

"What, God, I am letting you, Potter, keep up," Draco said, deeply and very briefly annoyed. He kissed Potter's mouth again.

Potter's chest rose and fell, sharply, against his. "Yeah, okay, um, yeah," he said - clearly the Chosen One wasn't Chosen after any kind of vocabulary test. "Just, let me, I need to make sure-"

He bit the side of Draco's jaw and Draco moaned and let his head fall back against the stone and Potter pushed his sleeve down his left arm and...

Pushed his sleeve down his left arm. To get a look at his left arm.

Draco shoved Potter back violently.

"What," he demanded, "what the hell is *wrong* with you?"

He stormed off, he didn't look back, it would take Potter a minute to put his glasses back on and Draco needed that minute for storming. When he got back to the dormitories Anthony looked at him fearfully and said: "All right, you've found out, I'm really sorry, I just didn't know how to tell you about Terry and Smith, again-"

"What," Draco bit out.

Anthony gulped. "I - need to consult my mother on this subject," he said. "Hold that thought for tomorrow's Owl post."

Draco went and lay on his bed and thought of Cabinets and Potter and how his life was in irredeemable ruins around him. Terry and Smith. Well, well, well. Maybe he'd been second choice all along: nice how things worked out.

Obviously Anthony and Terry had a word, because Terry came and sat by his bed, looked down at his hands.

"It's not that," he said in a low voice. "It's not like, with you. But I can, I can trust him not to - I'm really afraid for you, Draco. I'm really afraid that you'll do something terrible."

Draco looked at Terry's profile, familiar and dear in the low light, and thought of Dad and everything else. It made him want to hurt things, or possibly cry again. "The hell with you," he said, rolling in bed and turning his back. He thought of Katie Bell, and speaking into the darkness before him, continued: "How do you know I haven't already done something terrible?"

Terry said nothing. After a while, he left Draco alone.

*

The next day, apparently Weasley had caught Ginny and her current boy toy kissing and was having knicker fits about her very hypothetical chastity. Ginny came and sat beside Draco and fumed.

"Just because he's sexually retarded!" she said.

"Well, to be fair, face like that, it's hard to find partners," Draco murmured. "Not the poor lad's fault. Tragic, really."

"Don't you talk about my brother that way!" Ginny flared.

Weasleys and their tempers, you'd think they would be ashamed to be such a cliché, but no. Draco poked uninterestedly at his porridge.

"Draco, what's that on your neck?" Ginny asked.

Draco's hand flew to cover it. "Er, paperweight," he said. "Yes, Anthony, he gets - riled. He's a terror when he's roused, flings paperweights willy-nilly but with deadly accuracy. It is a painful subject. Let us not discuss it. Let me walk you back to your table."

Ginny stared at him for a minute, her brown eyes worried, and then she put a hand against his back. He wondered why.

"I think you should sleep more, Draco," she said, and he wanted to put his head in his arms and have her stroke his head a bit.

He wanted Hermione, whose compassion was all-enveloping and wrong-headed and sometimes involved actual violence, but enormous. He liked Ginny, pretty well, and she was kind to him because she'd noticed him, but she could be thoughtlessly unkind to anyone she hadn't noticed. He wanted the way Hermione cared about everyone, even the house elves, even when she was showing it all wrong and making everyone want to strangle her with her own bushy hair.

Next to her Ginny was like a cup of water when a man wanted a well, but he was parched anyway. His mother's weekly letter had arrived today, careful and polite and written for the censors. It began 'my dearest Draco' and asked him to re-think staying over Christmas.

He had to stay over Christmas. He had work to do, and no idea how to do it.

He took Ginny over to her own table. He was wearing Anthony's Excused From Life t-shirt

on purpose: he helped Ginny to a seat next to Potter, for which she gave him a grateful glance, and Potter looked at him and looked at him, and Draco deliberately showed him the white, unmarked skin inside his left arm.

He bent down and spoke into Potter's ear.

"You think Dumbledore would let a student in who had the Dark Mark?" he said. "Be serious! Of course it's not there, but listen up, Potter... that doesn't prove anything. And you can't prove anything. You were wasting your time - and you didn't have to bloody do that!"

He gave Potter a terrific shove in the back for being a vile whore in the cause of spying for righteousness, and stalked off before Potter could talk to him.

While Potter was winning yet another Quidditch match, this time against Slytherin, Draco was cursing and weeping and hitting a cabinet. Oh, life was grand.

*

Anthony kept coming to Draco with news he thought might please him, since he knew Draco's gossip fiend ways all too well.

Apparently Ron Weasley, a man too stupid to be permitted to live but Hermione'd probably want to kill him herself, was going out with Lavender Brown. They made octopuslike displays about the school and Draco caught one himself: he felt glad he'd forgotten to eat anything that day. He watched Hermione furtively from the library shelves, and she seemed furious but more or less all right.

Potter had asked Loony Lovegood to Slughorn's dance - he was crazy, here was the proof, Draco had known it all along. Terry and Zacharias Smith were still creeping about, and Ginny was starting to get tired of Dean Thomas because of all the qualities that made him, more or less, Not Harry Potter. Pansy Parkinson was still gloriously on the market and would attend to Anthony's wooing one fine day.

"Oh really," Draco said with enormous scepticism. "Well, I - I need to go to... study."

"You can study here," Anthony offered. "I'll be quiet, I'm writing Christmas cards, a lot of people are at the party."

"I need to get a - thing," Draco said.

He knew perfectly well a lot of people were at the party, which meant this was an ideal time to go and work on the Cabinet.

Or it was an ideal time if you did not happen to be Draco Malfoy, born under a cloud of ill omen, and Filch caught you sneaking around, utterly and cruelly disbelieving your brilliant lie about being invited to Slughorn's party, and dragged you by your *ear* in front of all your professors, chosen classmates and of course the Chosen One himself, Harry Potter.

Potter was standing beside Loony and Professor Wobbly Bottom, laughing at something, clearly having the time of his life.

"So I wasn't invited," Draco snapped. Filch could take him away to the dungeons for all he cared, as long as he took him away from Potter. "I was trying to gatecrash, happy?"

"Let him stay," Potter said suddenly.

God, he was now an object of charity for the Gracious Chosen One, on top of everything else, Draco thought savagely, as Professor Wobbly Bottom rushed genially to comply with every wish of his darling Potter's heart. He stood there, avoiding Potter's rude staring, and tried to use Occlumency to kill Potter with his mind.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Professor Snape.

Draco was filled with extreme dismay. He'd been managing to steer clear of Professor Snape all year, since Mother had been egging him on to interfere with Draco's plans and Aunt Bella had warned him. He didn't need this, on top of everything else. God, his head was aching, he was bone weary.

"I want to talk to him first," Potter snapped. Potter's disrespect to authority figures was yet another sign that he'd been badly brought up.

"Aren't I the popular one," Draco drawled. "I don't know, I do declare, my dance card is almost filled right up, perhaps I could squeeze one of you in for the waltz-"

Potter grabbed his wrist and Draco went still. Wrist-grabbing had not gone well last time: Draco wasn't going to spill any information, Potter could bloody well give it up. He wished he'd eaten today, instead of spending lunchtime with the Cabinet, composing an Owl to his father.

He couldn't send any Owls and they were always the same anyway: *I'm sorry I disappointed you, I'm trying harder now. It's still not enough: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

"Don't," Draco said, and tried to wrench his wrist unobtrusively away.

Potter held on. "Don't do this," he said. "What. What are you doing?"

"Why, Potter, I think if I *told* you, it might not be a *secret*," Draco explained, and tried to twist his wrist away again.

He wouldn't look at Potter, so he looked at the other people, at the brilliant lights and the party food, at everyone staring curiously at the boys who were making a scene. Draco was too tired for this, too angry, too ready to snap.

"No," said Potter. "I mean, what are you doing to yourself?"

Nights up thinking about Katie Bell, about Dad, about what the Dark Lord had promised their family - death or glory, no in between, not for any of them. Nights up with the Cabinet, and nobody to talk to or lean on, nobody at all, and how it didn't seem to matter sometimes, and then it all mattered too much for anything else to matter ever again.

Maybe he might, he should eat or sleep more. He remembered catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror recently and being vaguely stunned, horror slipping through his fingers.

"You look - terrible," Potter told him, quietly.

Resentment burned, dull in the hollow pit of his stomach, at that. Of course he looked terrible, he was standing about looking terrible at some party he hadn't been invited to while everyone else had a good time and Draco was alone and he didn't know how to protect anybody or solve anything, and Potter carried on meanwhile with his charmed, charmed life.

"Sorry I'm not pretty enough for you," Draco responded sharply. "Let go, Potter."

"That's not," Potter said, and cleared his throat. It sounded painful, which was strange: Draco couldn't see what Potter might have to feel bad about. "That's not what I meant."

His grip went gentle and that made Draco look up, startled. He hadn't had much gentleness, these past few months, it felt strange, and of course it was strange coming from Potter. What was he supposed to do with that?

He looked at Potter and the world turned over and over. He felt sick and changed: incredulous and sick again. He'd spent half his life wanting to hurt Potter, as badly as he possibly could, planning detailed scenarios of the same. He'd never planned anything like this. He took it back. He didn't want it after all.

"It's just," Potter said, his voice wavering a fraction. "You're so thin."

"Leave me alone," Draco snarled, and pulled his wrist free of Potter's grasp at last. "I can't - I can't."

He stopped, as if he'd forgotten what it meant to be free to move, and then he was in motion again, away from Potter and Professor Snape and anyone else who might try to stop him doing what he couldn't do anyway, what he had to do somehow.

"My dear boy," Professor Slughorn said, eyes moving between them. "I had no idea - you must come to my next little gathering, both of you, naturally-"

"Leave me *alone*!" Draco repeated, shouting at both of them, shouting at the whole room.

He had to go, he thought even as he was going, running, from all of them towards the Cabinet which was his family's only hope. He shoved people away, out of his path, desperate to get away from all the laughing crowd and the shining lights and Professor Snape's stern face and Harry Potter, *Harry Potter* of all people, looking at Draco as if Draco was breaking his heart.

Chapter Nine

Draco came stumbling from the Christmas party to find Anthony sitting alone in the boys' dormitory. He looked pleased when Draco entered the room, and then saw Draco's face and fetched him a chair as if his inhaler amulet gave him the power to read minds. Draco collapsed into it thankfully.

"Where've you been all night?" Anthony inquired.

"Crashed Slughorn's party," Draco lied promptly.

"Was it brilliant?" Anthony asked in an excited tone. "Do Hermione and Blaise Zabini do dark sexual spells like the Hufflepuffs say?"

"I will not have you smirching Hermione's reputation," Draco said indignantly. "The worst thing you can accuse her of is having an unfortunate freckle fetish. She is more to be pitied than blamed."

"Did Harry really go to the party with Luna Lovegood?" Anthony pursued, and on Draco's nod looked awed. "Wow, I don't dare talk to her in case she brings up those Snorkacks again. Truly, he is the valiant Chosen One."

Draco would really have appreciated it if Anthony could have refrained from mentioning Potter's name. He actually felt ill when he thought of how Potter had looked at the party. More ill than usual.

He had - things to do. He couldn't think about it now.

"Draco, are you feeling all right?" Anthony asked, and felt his forehead. "D'you want an iron pill?"

"I've told you time and again, Anthony, I am not going to take that kind of risk," Draco said. "I could break all my teeth on that metal. Where is everyone?"

"Well, Terry's - you know," Anthony said awkwardly, and Draco felt too tired to even hate Zacharias Smith. "And Michael's with Cho, and I think Kevin - well, you know, the Christmas season can be lonely, Draco, let's not be too quick to judge, but I think I saw him sneaking up to the teachers' quarters with a fresh bottle of sherry."

Draco absorbed this in silence for a moment, and then said at length, "You don't need Divination to know that Entwistle is a very disturbed man."

"Well... I'm sort of glad they're all gone," Anthony said. "It gives us a chance to talk. You've just - been acting very odd lately, Draco."

Oh God, no, Draco thought desperately, not tonight of all nights, not when Potter had just - looked at him, he was doing this for everyone, for Anthony too, because Aunt Bella'd *said* the only way Mudbloods would be spared was if they had someone to speak up for him, but Draco couldn't, couldn't tell him now. He couldn't look at Anthony and tell him.

He could hardly hear Anthony through his panic, as if he was drowning and his ears were filling and his mouth was filling, he couldn't hear or speak.

Anthony finished detailing the particulars of Draco's strange behaviour and said, "So I concluded, after the break-up with Terry and all, you've become a self-loathing homosexual and, obviously, an anorexic."

Draco stared at him. "Are you *insane*?"

"Mother and I agree that all the evidence points that way," Anthony informed him. "I know, Draco, it's a common misconception that the disease is exclusive to women. Don't worry, though. You're not alone in this. The first step is to admit that you have a problem. Tell me the truth, Draco: do you hate your body?"

"No!" Draco squawked.

"You're in denial, then, that's okay too," Anthony said. "I got a pamphlet. Denial is very common. Er. I'm to help you get over your body issues and admit your own very human weakness."

"Have you shown Crabbe and Goyle this pamphlet?" Draco asked, touched by cold fear. "Don't show Crabbe and Goyle this pamphlet."

Anthony moved his chair to touch Draco's.

"Er," he said. "No. Er. Okay, Draco, you are a dear friend, and your sexuality does not make you, whatever you may think, unworthy of love."

"Anthony, I really don't hate my body," said Draco. "Really. I swear. I'm quite attached to it."

"I wish," Anthony ploughed on, "to show you that there are people who care for you and are in no way repelled by you. Er. So. You may kiss me, if you like."

Draco sat petrified by astonishment, staring at Anthony's earnest face in the darkness. Anthony looked nerved for a homosexual leap at any moment.

"Are you *serious*?"

"Yes," Anthony said bravely. "But! I want to say, Draco, I would not feel comfortable with any... wandering hands."

"Anthony, I thank you," Draco said as seriously as he could. "You are a true friend. But I'm all right for kissing just now, honestly."

"Oh," said Anthony, almost collapsing with relief. "Oh, well, thank God for that. My next thought was this," he went on, cheering up. "I have decided to find you a boyfriend, to help with your self-esteem issues and also contribute to your recovery with positive physical reinforcement. My first thoughts were of Justin Finch-Fletchley, who as you may know has taken up quilting, or Theodore Nott, who was seen the other day discussing a serial romance

featured in *Witch Weekly*, but then I struck on a better plan. You may think it's crazy, Draco, but hear me out!"

Draco waited in dread to hear about Professor Firenze's enormous capabilities of pleasing a man.

"Harry Potter!" Anthony announced triumphantly. "Cho said she definitely got that vibe from him. And he does kind of eye our table and turn up in the library a lot. I don't know, Draco, I know you have a holy hatred for him and everything, but I think you should investigate the possibility. You could, like, use him for his body."

Draco started to laugh, partly because Anthony was insane and partly because his life was surreal and it hurt and he didn't want to cry about it in bathrooms again. He laughed, and laughed, until it became a little hysterical, and then he kept laughing until he found it hard to breathe.

Anthony helplessly offered him his amulet.

*

"I still don't see why it was so funny," Anthony complained the next morning, which was the morning everyone but Draco was going home for Christmas.

Anthony had insisted, with a terrifying light in his eyes, that he wanted to see Draco eat a hearty breakfast, so they were shoving through the crowds of girls who had planted themselves under the mistletoe waiting for their last chance with Harry Potter.

"Coming through," Draco said, administering a judicious push in the back. Anthony followed in his wake, since he wasn't vicious with his elbows like Draco. "Can't the cult of the Chosen One, I don't know, commit ritual suicide or something? Out of my way, I don't care how tall he got over the summer, I want my *porridge*!"

"Malfoy!"

"Hide me," Draco said urgently. "Anthony, if you ever loved me at all-"

"Hi, Harry!" Anthony said brightly. "Over here! Nice to see you! How are you? So, you're still single, aren't you?"

"I hate you," Draco muttered. "I've always hated you. I just wanted you to know."

Potter shambled through the crowds of girls as if they were so much mist and he, frankly, had no idea why the mystifying mist was there or what it could possibly want.

You know, the clues had all been there for a long time. Draco probably should have known.

"I - yeah," Potter said. "Yeah, I am. Hi, Malfoy."

There was a pause.

"Hi, Anthony," Potter added.

He was hopeless, hopeless and unbelievable, Draco should have withered him with a look of scorn and passed on his way. Only he found himself staring at the floor and not able to look at him at all. Draco was enraged with himself for being such a complete pathetic idiot.

"Hi, Harry!" Anthony said again.

"Yeah, hi, Anthony," said Potter.

"Hi, Potter," Draco muttered in order to end the madness, and stared at the floor some more.

"Oh, *look*," Anthony said ingenuously. "Mistletoe!"

"I don't really like you that way, Anthony," Potter said gruffly. "Uh. Malfoy. Look, I'm going away - to the Weasleys', you know, because, um, it's Christmas - and I wanted to, before I went-"

"Anthony, I need to go eat! At once!" Draco said imperiously. "I feel very faint. Faint with the hunger pangs," he added out of sheer shameless desperation, and actually now he came to think about it, it was true.

"I'm sorry, Harry, we must go. Let us continue this fascinating conversation later!" said Anthony.

"Yeah, you should - eat," Potter said. Only the warning bells in Draco's head saved him: he looked up, saw Potter was reaching out, and stepped smartly away using Anthony as a human shield. Unfortunately then he was looking at Potter. "Happy Christmas," Potter said. "Don't - do anything you might regret."

"I have to go," Draco told him, and hauled Anthony off to the Ravenclaw table.

Potter was ridiculous, ridiculous, he could barely get out *words*, and he was going to die. And Draco had always hated him. And he should *want* him to die.

Once at the table, Draco had to feebly resist Anthony's attempts to feed him. Terry joined in since apparently it was okay to encourage Draco to eat, though Terry preferred boyfriends who were, who hadn't almost killed Katie Bell.

Yes, well, put that way, it was understandable.

Draco put down his spoon. His reverie was interrupted by a girl with dark hair and a prominent chin, who leaned over and grabbed the front of his robes.

"You," she said. "Do you know how to make a Polyjuice Potion?"

"Unhand me!" Draco ordered in ringing tones.

She did not seem to hear. "No matter," she informed him, "that part should be easy enough." She fixed him with a bright smile. "My name's Romilda Vane," she said. "I want to buy a

lock of your hair."

For a Potion? Draco had always felt he had an interesting and individual face, but really, wanting to wear it was going a little far.

"You must be mad," he said flatly.

Romilda Vane leaned across the table with a frightening glint in her eye. "I'll pay good money."

"I am independently wealthy, thank you," Draco sniffed. "Now run along."

God preserve him from Gryffindors.

"Have some lovely custard," Anthony coaxed.

"Anthony," Draco said, "it is *breakfast time*."

"Well, I thought you might fancy some custard," Anthony wheedled. "It's lovely, you know."

Terry buttered him a piece of toast.

Draco missed them both when they were gone and he had nothing but the Cabinet, hours and hours of working on it and not getting it right, and trying not to think about anything else. He had a mission: he had something to concentrate on, he didn't *have* to think about anything else.

The only real break was a trip to Hogsmeade, where he met Aunt Bella. At first it was a great relief to see her: she wasn't Fenrir, most importantly, and she kissed Draco on his aching brow and gave him a Christmas present.

It was a tiny guillotine.

"Portable, you know," she said. "And you can just shrink the Muggles and carry them about with you and take out the whole set when you're bored!"

"Thank you," Draco told her. "I'm very touched."

So was she, but he was too tactful to mention it. They sat together in the pub and she bought him a Butterbeer.

"How's Mum?" Draco asked.

"Oh, well enough," Aunt Bella said vaguely. "Worried about you." Her fine black eyes fell on Draco's face. "You do look a little ill," she said, and leaned over the table and kissed Draco again. "My little nephew," she said. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Draco said hopelessly.

"None of this suffering matters," Aunt Bella went on in an encouraging tone. "For soon the

Dark Lord will triumph. Then he will make us all immortal and we will crush the world beneath our feet. Our future is glorious, Draco!"

"It sounds nice," Draco answered, to be polite.

Then Aunt Bella sat with him and asked him how the plan was progressing and didn't seem terribly disappointed that it was not yet successful. She recounted the failure of several of the Dark Lord's darkly ingenious plans to Draco in what seemed like an attempt to cheer him up.

She was truly mad.

After a couple of hours, Draco said: "Which plans actually *worked*?"

"Well," Aunt Bella answered. "That plan of the Dark Lord's to resurrect himself in his present darkly wondrous form and kill Harry Potter was sheer brilliance."

"But," Draco pointed out. "Potter's not dead."

Aunt Bella looked shifty. "It nearly worked," she told him. "It was a moral victory."

Draco's headache got worse.

When he had to leave, he hugged her and she held him back, and that was nice, and everything was hopeless, and afterwards he trailed into the bathroom where he knew that ghost was, and he sat in it and cried, once again.

*

By the time Potter got back from Christmas Draco had grimly thought that one out, at least. After all, it was common knowledge that Terry and Zacharias Smith were secretly seeing each other, and Justin's penchant for quilting aside, nobody else really *knew* about anyone but Draco.

So obviously, who else was there for Potter to pursue, whatever, it was just one of those things, Draco wasn't going to think any more about it.

There wasn't anyone else, that was all it was. It didn't matter. Potter didn't even actually like him, he'd proven that often enough. Or - said it, or implied it, or something.

Draco found it particularly easy to hate Potter while he was acing Potions with such perfect ease and bezoar stones and Slughorn's heaping praises, while Draco found himself covered in cat sick at the end of one lesson. He was so furious with Potter, who'd never been any good at Potions before, who seemed bent on rubbing it in that he'd be getting all the breaks, thank you very much.

He saw Hermione looking furious in Potions, too, and wanted to sit with her and have a discussion on the importance of application in academics so badly that he almost vomited all over the cat vomit on his robes.

He shoved past Potter that day with the best cold sneer and disdainful glare over his glasses

he'd ever managed to muster. He was doing fine.

Only ignoring Potter only seemed to make him worse: he kept staring, he was always in the library hovering near Draco's favourite shelves, Draco was sure people weren't meant to be stalked *by* celebrities and he had enough to worry about without trying to work out whether Potter wanted to send him to Azkaban or take him to Hogsmeade.

His father had been in Azkaban for over six months, and the cabinet wasn't working. Draco had been blind with desperation enough to send out poison, as he'd sent out the cursed necklace, and that had failed too.

Then word came back that Ron Weasley had been poisoned by some mead, and almost died.

It was Katie Bell all over again, and Draco actually waylaid Weasley's idiot girlfriend to get the story, and it had been so close, and if Potter hadn't been near a bezoar stone - to think he'd almost hated Potter for knowing about bezoar stones.

Ron Weasley. Draco'd never liked him. But he was Ginny's brother, and Hermione loved him, and if Potter knew what Draco had done, now, he'd hate him, really hate him, and Draco would deserve it.

Only Lord Voldemort had said that he might write the entire Malfoy clan off as a dead loss.

Draco had to be able to kill, he had to be able to do it. He went to the bathroom of the dead girl and he wondered who had murdered her, and if they had ever been as sorry as he was, as afraid, or as ashamed.

*

Then Crabbe had to have a crisis about his sexual identity.

"I want to help you, Malfoy," he said, speaking in a discreet tone because they'd already been told off by McGonagal. "I honestly do. But so far you just look sick and yesterday Goyle asked me which he thought was his nicest pinafore - we have pinafores in our wardrobes, Nott is starting to ask all sorts of *personal questions* - How long is this going to last?"

"I don't know how much longer, all right? It's taking longer than I thought it would!" Draco exclaimed. God, it would never be done, and he couldn't let Crabbe be any more complicit than he already was, and he snapped before Crabbe could ask, "Look, it's none of your business what I'm doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you're told and keep a lookout!"

"I tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Potter said quietly into Draco's ear.

Draco's heart almost exploded in his chest from guilt and fear - how long had Potter been there, why was he *always there*? - but before he could do anything they were all called to order by the Apparition Instructor.

Potter's best efforts at following Draco around at school all day were curtailed by one thing, though. Blessed, blessed Quidditch matches.

On the day when Gryffindor played Hufflepuff, Draco went towards the castle with Crabbe and Goyle, mutinous but disguised, behind him, and he knew he'd have hours and hours to try and get it right, blissful uninterrupted hours.

Naturally he ran into Potter at once. He directed a hollow and unamused laugh at the mocking heavens.

"Where're you," Potter said, almost dropping his Firebolt. He was a wreck, he even looked dishevelled in his Quidditch robes *before* he played the matches. "Where're you going?"

God, Quidditch. Draco had played Quidditch when he was a kid. He'd loved it, he remembered distantly, as if it had all happened in a different life.

He sneered. "Yeah, I'm really going to tell you, because it's your business, Potter. You'd better hurry up, they'll be waiting for the Chosen Captain - the Boy Who Scored - whatever they call you these days-

Goyle laughed, and then all laughter in this world was cut short.

Potter scowled darkly. "What're you doing going up to the castle all alone with a pair of girlfriends?"

Goyle squawked with outrage. "Malfoy!" he said. "He just, he just cast aspersions on our maiden *virtue*! Beat him up!"

"Uh," said Potter. "Sorry, I didn't-

"You cad!" exclaimed Goyle.

Crabbe might be onto something, with how Goyle was being affected by this.

"Actually, we're, going up for tea and a chat," Draco informed Potter, improvising madly. "You know how I'm, er, of a certain persuasion, and these are my... hags. Yes, hags, and what we do is, we go to tea and we talk about - boys. It's um. Liberating for me. Excuse me, I need to be liberated, you need to go greet your adoring audience, we both have lives to lead-

Potter looked at Draco searchingly, and then straightened his shoulders. "Right," he said. "Okay. Fine. I'll come too."

"You can't come too," Draco reminded him. "There's a match on. That's why you're wearing the special clothing and carrying the broom. As I understand, it flies in the air, and the fans all scream, and you catch this pretty ball with wings on it-

"I'm getting bored with Quidditch," defiantly uttered Potter, Captain of the Gryffindor team and holder of a record (as Draco knew purely by chance, purely by chance) on how many times he'd taken out *Quidditch Through the Ages*. "I'll come and talk about. Um."

"Are you - liberated too, then?" Crabbe piped up. "Oh my God! Wait'll I tell Pansy!"

Potter looked briefly diverted. "Who're you?"

"Ah," Crabbe said. "Ah. Ah. My name is - Vincentina."

"That's a nice name," Potter said abstractedly.

"You may call me Elspeth Moonfeather," announced Goyle. "For! That is what my name is."

"Okay," Potter said. They were all lucky Potter even had trouble with the teachers' names, Draco reflected with dull despair. He felt much the same emotion when Potter went deep red under his tan and attempted to answer Crabbe's question. "And. Uh. Yes. Maybe. I've - I think so, I've had - thoughts."

"How dare you talk in that unbridled way in front of unspoiled young girls," hissed Draco, who could feel himself becoming a bit unhinged.

Potter's neck was all red and he was walking away from Quidditch, his basic *raison d'être*, and the world had gone mad and Draco with it.

"Or perhaps," he said, in maddened defeat, "Now I come to think of it, perhaps school spirit moves me to attend the game. Yes. Yes, come, Vincentina, come... Elspeth, to the stands! Potter, I wish you-" He stopped and brought himself down to sanity. "I hope you get knocked off your broom," he snapped, and stormed away leaving Potter behind him.

Then Potter did get knocked off his broom.

Anthony was just saying, "Where do you lovely ladies come from?" and Crabbe replied firmly: "We are exchange students," and Goyle added brightly, "We are from the New World! We wish to learn all about the fine wizarding traditions of England!"

And Potter was just flying, looking a little annoyed about the substitute Keeper - because Weasley couldn't play, because Draco had almost killed him - and then the bloody idiot incompetent (clearly, a born Gryffindor) Keeper McLaggen hit him in the head with a Bludger.

It made a sickening sound. Potter dropped like a stone.

Draco was on his feet. "Oh my God!" he said. "Is he all right? Can anyone see?"

Terry looked at him oddly. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," Draco said automatically, still on his feet. God, stupid Potter with his stupid stalking and his stupid inability to talk and his stupid crazy stubbornness and they'd had a *truce*, once, for exactly one day in fifth year, and couldn't he keep his stupid fat head out of danger for one minute?

Terry kept looking at him, with the shrewd look Draco knew so well and which Terry had seemed afraid to turn on Draco this year. "So it's," he began, and sounded uncertain. "Is it - like that?"

"No!" Draco answered violently. "I mean, I don't know what you're talking about," he added belatedly, and then in a cold voice: "Not that it's any of your business if it was. You *made* it not your business. Remember?"

That got Terry to look away. Draco was glad, even if he felt bad making Terry upset: it wasn't that Draco blamed him. Terry had it right, Terry had made the sensible decision, Terry'd got away from the boy who was going to do something terrible.

Draco couldn't have made the sensible decision, in his place, but obviously Terry had morals and things, Terry would've been horrified and sickened if he knew half of what Draco had already done.

Anthony turned to them and said: "It's just a concussion, they're taking Potter to the hospital wing!"

Draco felt absurdly relieved, considering that it didn't matter at all. Draco still had to kill someone. Potter was still going to die.

*

"I think I'm going crazy," Draco said a week later. "I keep hallucinating house elves. I see them out of the corner of my eye, and then... and then they're not there."

"Hmm," Anthony answered, which was not the reassurance Draco had hoped for. "You know, that Elspeth would be very attractive if she was a little older," he went on dreamily. "If only I could find her again. I like a lady with mystery. I like the chase!"

"Trust me," Draco told him. "She's all wrong for you."

They were walking back from last class to the Ravenclaw tower, and Draco bit his lip as he tried to explain why he was worried.

"It's not that I'm surprised I'm having hallucinations," he said. "I've been under a lot of stress lately, and I've always been-"

"A screaming spaz of a man," Anthony supplied.

"A *little high-strung*," Draco corrected coldly. "It's just I don't know what I may hallucinate next. I mean, house elves, that's weird, I wouldn't mind a nice hallucination-"

"Like dancing girls or dancing boys," Anthony suggested.

"Exactly!" said Draco. "But not, um, dancing house elves." They paused to consider this picture for a moment. "I'm very upset," Draco said at length. "If I see dancing house elves, I shall." He stopped. "I shall have the vapours."

"You're so manly, Draco."

"Oh, what about *you*?" Draco shot back amiably. "Willing to compromise your sexual preferences out of friendship, that's Hufflepuffian, that is, you're as manly as Justin Finch-

Fletchley-"

"Take that back!" Anthony said, hitting him with his schoolbag. Draco winced a little: Ravenclaw schoolbags were no joke. "Well, we all know you wouldn't make a Gryffindor," Anthony proceeded.

"God forbid!"

"I mean, you probably wouldn't be hallucinating house elves if you were getting it daily and nightly and *ever* so rightly," Anthony said. He talked like this sometimes because of the pernicious influence of Muggle television shows, Draco just knew it. "I told you that you should make a pass at Harry." He sighed elaborately. "I put it all down to your poor self-esteem."

Draco hit him with his own bag, which besides books had screws and bolts and things in it for the Cabinet, and was made happy by Anthony's yelp of pain.

"For the last time, Goldstein, I do *not* hate my body!"

"You have been losing your looks, such as they were," Anthony went on blithely, as Draco belaboured him with blows. "I mean, maybe you're right, people who look like they've got the consumption couldn't bag the Chosen One-"

Draco hit him over the head. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, I could too. I could have Potter anytime I wanted-"

"Uh," Anthony said, stopping dead. Draco's bag caught him on the ear. "Ow," he added. "What, do you have, like, *tools* in there, Draco?" he asked, still staring ahead.

Draco had not needed Potter's presence at this point in his life. He was sorry for complaining about the house elf hallucinations, sorry, sorry. He wanted them back. He would make that trade.

"Hi," said Potter, who looked flushed from a sprint, Draco thought mordantly, from whatever his last class had been (all right, Defence against the Dark Arts, but shut up, brain!) to someplace conveniently near Ravenclaw. "I just happened to be - passing by," Potter added, as if he was fooling anyone. "Around."

Draco was practically being *waylaid*; if you thought about it logically, Potter was no better than a *highwayman*.

"Oh is that the time?" Anthony asked, looking at a blank and clockless wall. "I must away, I have an appointment with - Pansy Parkinson! Yes, we have a *rendez-vous*."

"You wish!" Draco yelled after his treacherous retreating back.

God, he had stuff for the Cabinet in his bag, and nobody but Potter was here, Potter could grab it and search through it, God. Not to mention what he'd *said* - this karma of always being humiliated in front of Potter, Draco thought wildly. It could let up while he was trying not to die of stress.

"Right," he said, fixing his gaze on a point beyond Potter's ear. "I, er, I was just joking. Well! You know me, always - full of japes..." He found his eyes moving and firmly repositioned them: *past* Potter, don't look at him. "A merry jokester!" he added. "Ahahaha. I have to go."

"No! Can't you just," Potter stopped, possibly because his voice had cracked. Draco sneaked a look at him: normally, Potter had no problem being loud, whatever other difficulties advanced conversation had for him. Potter met his eyes and said more quietly, "It's really humiliating, running after you everywhere."

Draco's mouth was dry: he shifted his bag on his shoulders. "Then," he said. "Then - stop."

"I have to," Potter said. "I can't help it." He moved forward an inch: Draco saw his hands were in fists. "I'm not *stupid*, Malfoy," he told him tightly. "I know you're up to something. I know you were angry and - and upset when your dad was put away, I was so - I was so angry after Sirius died, but you have to-"

"How long had you known the man?" Draco yelled at him, furious suddenly because - because how dare Potter, comparing himself when there was no comparison and - and sending out confusing signals, damn it! "Wasn't he a prisoner practically your whole life? It's not the same!"

"I'm *trying* here!" Potter shouted back. "It's not like you even got on well with your dad, Hermione told us-"

Draco remembered, of course, always and now: how Dad had never looked at him the same since he'd been Sorted wrong, how Draco had been nearly resigned to a life with Dad mostly cut out, but he was still Dad and he was still in prison. He had nobody else to help him.

"I loved him!" he screamed, and then wanted to bite out his tongue. "I mean, I love him," he corrected himself, the word scraping in his throat. "I always did. I do."

"I *know that*," Potter ground out. "But you're not like him. And you don't have to - I want to find out what you're doing," he said rapidly. "And I want to, I want to stop you doing anything stupid, I want you to understand that you can't do this, and I want." He stopped and swallowed. "I want."

Draco looked at him, green eyes in the shadows and face set. He was blushing again and he did look humiliated, Draco thought distantly, how amazing and impossible, but he also looked even more determined than usual.

"You can, you know," Potter said, voice shadowed as his eyes. "Have me. Anytime you want."

Draco couldn't help himself. He stepped forward before he even had time to think about it, stepped towards Potter and smacked his stupid head.

"I think you must actually be the stupidest person alive," he exclaimed. "I - God, do you, what's the matter with you, do you know what I could do with - I could - you know I'm doing something, you *know* I'm mixed up with, with *Voldemort* and you say something like that."

You could *really die*, Potter!" He'd almost killed two people already, he thought, trembling and thinking about death, God, he didn't want to die. "Do you," he said. "Do you want to die?"

"No," Potter answered, smiling at him faintly - he was mad past house elf hallucinations, past Draco's wildest lunatic dreams. "So, um, thanks for warning me."

This called for drastic measures.

Draco advanced. "So," he said. "I can have you anytime I want, can I? That's - interesting." Potter looked at his mouth: clearly a cunning ploy on his part, Draco refused to be distracted! "I have this big, dark plan," Draco went on. "It's - large and full of darkness. I could be here to kill you for Voldemort. Who, P.S., in case you'd forgotten, killed your parents. I could very *well* have had something to do with the poisoning of your friend-

"Did you?" Potter demanded. "Who were you trying to get to-"

"I'm talking now, Potter! So I can carry on all of this evil plotting, and you know, if I should happen to get bored, need a little restful amusement, I can have you anytime I want! Is that it? Or is it, why yes certainly, anytime you want, as long as you betray your father and your whole family and never have them speak to you again presuming they survive - which they *wouldn't* - and eventually, probably after you run off with some Beauxbatons boy, I get hunted down and killed by the Dark Lord! That kind of anytime you want? Forgive me, Potter, if I am something less than tempted!"

It struck Draco that he was awfully close to Potter for someone who was something less than tempted, so he shoved Potter back and said viciously, "You're so full of *shit*," and then ran.

He got to his house and slammed the door shut after him, leaned against it, in full possession of the fact that Potter didn't have the password and couldn't get him here.

It was all such a mess, and he was so tired. When he went up to his dormitory he saw himself in a mirror and his skin actually had a greyish tinge. Clearly, Potter was such an enormous Gryffindor that what turned him on was a freaking challenge. He was obviously out of his mind.

Draco hallucinated arguing house elves, all night long.

*

Potter found out about the Room of Requirement.

He came twice. Once Draco heard him swear and went still, and stayed still while Potter said things in a low, frantic voice like *'I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you'*. Which, frankly, sounded a little obscene even though Draco was too panicked to be amused by it.

He just sat there and put down his tools, rested his cheek against the wall, and waited for Potter to go away and stop talking on the other side.

The second time, he'd just received a letter from his mother and he was reading it while he worked on the Cabinet.

It said:

'My darling Draco,

I write to tell you something that I think you should know. Your Aunt Andromeda is not dead.

She married a Mudblood and they had a child who is now grown-up and an Auror. I saw her once, on a raid of the Manor, and she called me Aunt Narcissa. At the time I was angry.

Andromeda and I were very close. I have been angry for a very long time.

Draco, nothing in the world means as much to me as you do. There are people who have split off from our traditions and survived. I think your Aunt Andromeda is happy. I would like, I think, to talk to her again and find out.

You have friends who are not all from our way of life. You have, no matter what you decide to do, a loving mother.

Your Aunt Andromeda is not dead, and she never has been dead to me.

Yours, with all my love,

Narcissa Malfoy

Draco finished reading the letter just when he heard the clash of Goyle's dropped scales and a scream. He froze for a moment, and then before Potter could start to speak Draco picked up his tools and grimly got back to work on the Cabinet.

Potter might have wanted to forget: even his mother might have wanted to forget.

So Aunt Andromeda wasn't dead. Neither was his father, and even if everyone else did, Draco would never give up on him.

Draco worked into the night, until he was aching and swaying, and then he made himself check on Goyle before he went to bed.

"Harry Potter hit on me!" Goyle declared in an anguished whisper. "I knew those robes were too form-fitting. I looked like a loose woman! They'll say I led him on."

Draco stared and said, "Get ahold of yourself, man."

*

The Cabinet, impossibly, seemed to get more impossible to fix every day. It should have been simple - a fluid combination of easy Muggle repair and some spells - Draco knew how to fix *bones*, he should be able to fix a cabinet!

He even spent hours sanding all the wood to make the transition smoother, but it was just a cabinet, and Draco was left sweating and limp and in despair. When Anthony and Terry tried to force dinner on him that day he snarled at them until they both looked scared.

They didn't let him try to get his Apparition license because he was too young. He felt like a not very sprightly two hundred year old.

He felt like an embittered and not very sprightly two hundred year old when he and Potter and Ernie McMillan, Draco's least favourite Hufflepuff, had to sit in class with Slughorn and watch him fawn on Potter and suggest making hilarious joke potions.

Draco wasn't aware that there was an exam called 'How To Be a Weasley Twin' featured in the NEWTs.

"And your Hiccoughing Solution," Slughorn went on, sweeping over to Draco's side of the room.

Draco glanced at the stuff: it was passable, he supposed. He'd been thinking about the Vanishing Cabinet and trying to fight off a migraine, if Slughorn wanted his attention he might try teaching actual classes. God, he missed Professor Snape in here, the Potions classroom was being *desecrated*.

"It's superb, Draco!" Slughorn went on, stroking Draco's sleeve in a distressing and inappropriate caress. "But I suppose our talented boy's been giving you some tips, ahahaha!"

It took a moment to sink in that Slughorn was actually implying that Draco needed Potter's *help* in class.

"That," Draco said between clenched teeth, "is the worst thing anyone has ever said to me."

"You're a funny lad!" Slughorn slapped him on the shoulder. Then he peered into Draco's face. "My boy, you look very peaky. I know Gryffindors, well, traditionally they have a lot of stamina, but you really mustn't let him keep you up at all hours of the night."

Across the room, Potter looked like he wanted to die of mortification. That was the only bright spot on Draco's life.

"At about the point you said 'Gryffindors traditionally have a lot of stamina'," he informed Slughorn distantly, "I vomited a little in my mouth."

Draco got out of that room about as fast as humanly possible, closely followed by Ernie McMillan, who looked panicked about being the only student in the classroom who Slughorn thought was romantically available.

Draco actually walked instead of running from class as usual, because he was tired and Potter looked like he was going to be in the room with Slughorn for a while. Given that Potter had recently hit on a twelve year old girl and now he apparently wanted Slughorn to taste his potion, Draco could feel a complex about himself coming on.

Walking was a mistake, since Potter caught up with him before he even got out of the

dungeons.

"Sorry about that," he said, still red. "But, I mean, he was right. You don't look-"

Potter stopped. Draco wearily supposed the mystery was solved now: the list of Potter's turn-ons included child molestation, morbid obesity and people who looked like they were dying of TB.

Potter reached out and sort of clumsily touched Draco's hair. Draco would have violently protested this unwarranted intimacy if it had not occurred to him that Potter was exactly copying the gesture Draco had made, that time outside the prefect's bathroom.

God, God. Potter was hopeless, he was like a robot trying to copy human behaviour, no wonder he'd been such a ruin with Cho, the Muggles hadn't hugged him or something and now he was broken. And he was definitely going to die. Draco's throat felt all closed up.

Potter continued to toy with his hair with a sort of determined and horribly awkward tenderness. He said, "You need to take better care of yourself."

Potter's eyes continued to be very green, Draco's mind rambled hysterically. If he and Voldemort stood beside each other, their combined eye colours would make it look like Christmas!

"Potter," he said with difficulty, "I've practically told you-"

"Well, that's just it. You did tell me," Potter said.

"You make no sense, no sense at all," Draco snapped. "It's not like evil is very stealthy. It's not like the Dark Lord is exactly hiding his light under a bushel. Evil people, they like to laugh and taunt and mock others. That's all I was doing. The pain of others, it amuses me, it fills my black heart with joy."

Potter stared at him as if he was insane, which was an unbearable indignity.

"You don't," Potter said. "You don't look very happy."

"Look," Draco shouted. "I'm dangerous, so can you just stay away?"

It took him only a moment to realise that saying that to a Gryffindor was more or less the equivalent of taking all his clothes off and doing an enticing dance.

"Anyway," he said quickly. "I don't fancy you."

The faint shocked sound made Draco spin: he wondered for a frantic instant why he had been stupid enough to linger in the dungeons, when he knew Professor Snape lived there.

Professor Snape advanced on them. "Potter," he said. "Deeply, *deeply* as I would have loved to tell your father in enormous detail all about this most recent development in your romantic life-" Professor Snape's eyes misted over wistfully for a moment - "I must ask for a word alone with Draco."

Potter retreated, stomping furiously, and left Snape to tell Draco that he'd made an Unbreakable Vow to protect him.

There was no reason for him to have done it, no reason at all, Draco wasn't a child and he didn't need protection and this meant that Snape's life hung in the balance too, along with Mother's and Dad's and Aunt Bella's and Draco's own. He was responsible for all of them, now.

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then!" he yelled, and fled back to the Cabinet.

After a while, his hands stopped trembling, and he was able to work again.

Chapter Ten

Draco meant to go back to the Cabinet after dinner, but Ginny decided to corner him and talk his ear off about her love life. It was almost soothing while he was trying not to think about death. Apparently she and her man had been having trouble for a while.

Draco wasn't surprised. She'd experienced Ravenclaw loving, it was obvious Dean Thomas could never satisfy her.

"It's just," she said. "You know, Hermione said to me, last year, that if I - you know, got over being freakishly shy around Harry and maybe dated a few other boys, he'd - he might notice me. He kind of likes people who stand out, you know."

Draco felt a little guilty and also had an extra-strong pang of missing Hermione, scheming wench that she was.

"And I don't know, I've just, I've fancied Harry for so long," Ginny said hopelessly. "I get all irritable with Dean and it's not his fault, I *know* that-"

"It's probably his fault a bit," Draco soothed. "Very irritating, Gryffindors."

"I don't," said Ginny. "I don't really know what to do."

"Well," Draco hesitated. "I mean, personally I think the relationship is doomed. Gryffindor men, you know, they're savages. Professor Hagrid used to be a Gryffindor, they should all be put in huts and kept away from drink and matches. But you *might* try giving the relationship a try as a proper relationship in its own right, and give up on using it to attract Potter."

Ginny bit her lip. "I suppose I might."

"Or you could try Ravenclaws again," Draco suggested. "Kevin Entwistle is a lonely, lonely man."

Ginny laughed and hit him. About then Dean joined them and gave Ginny an awkward kiss and Draco an awkward nod of acknowledging that he was friends with Dean's girlfriend. Draco gave him the glasses look of moderate disdain.

They all started talking about the Tutshill Tornados and why Dean was a madman, Ginny said fondly, for still minding about football when none of the players were allowed to fly. They were still talking when they reached the door of the Gryffindor common room.

"Want to come in, Draco?" Ginny asked hospitably.

Draco peeped in and saw no sign of Potter, but Ron Weasley being ferociously upbraided for sexual misconduct by his girlfriend.

"All right."

As they were getting in, Ginny thanked Dean for helping her in. Draco thought they might be

able to stagger on for a while, even if they were handicapped by Gryffindority.

It turned out that Lavender believed Ron had been having it off with Hermione in the boys' dormitory. Everyone watched Weasley splutter indignantly with interest.

"Harry was there the whole time!" Ron shouted.

"Scandalous!" Draco murmured, highly entertained.

Lavender slapped Weasley in the face. Draco loved a girl with spirit.

Unfortunately, then Lavender started weeping and Weasley started apologising and everything got rather tedious, and Draco's exhaustion made his eyelids droop. He would just close them for a minute...

He woke up to the sound of someone climbing into the portrait hole at four o'clock in the morning. He yawned and stretched and found Potter staring at him.

"I guess the luck hasn't totally worn off," Potter said quietly.

"You're raving," Draco informed him. "Did you know?"

"Not that I'm complaining," Potter said, "but what're you doing here?"

Draco scorned to tell a lie, and couldn't think of one anyway. "I was advising Ginny Weasley on her love life," he explained with dignity. "Applying to me was an obvious sign of Gryffindor intelligence, since Cho and Terry both chucked me with a thud that could've been heard in Wales."

Potter looked immediately interested. "I didn't know Boot had chucked you."

"Last *year*," Draco answered. He suddenly remembered making sure Potter didn't know on the train, but honestly, did gossip sail clear over the man's head? "Wait," he said severely. "You thought I was messing around behind my boyfriend's back? With-" he made a distressed gesture that could've meant 'you' or 'alligators' - "and with twelve year old girls? My God! I wish I had the energy."

"I just," Potter said. "I don't know how the - the guy thing works, I'm glad-"

"Terry's with Smith now," Draco went on, determined to show Potter exactly how much he missed while staring off into space and thinking of his celebrity or whatever. "Whatever," he added, in case Potter pitied him. "Good call. Chose the blond who wasn't losing his looks."

"*Smith*?" Potter demanded, sounding revolted. "Don't be thick. Smith can't possibly be compared with you."

He stopped and looked horrifically embarrassed.

Draco cursed his own vainglorious passion for compliments. "I wish," he blurted. "I wish you weren't Harry Potter."

Which would leave Potter just as some incredibly self-centred person with terrible hair and problems interacting in normal human society. Which Draco wanted because, what, in that case he'd consider - no, no. Of course not. He wasn't *insane*.

"What's wrong with me?" Potter asked, sounding upset.

"How long d'you have?" Draco inquired. "Because I could compile a list."

"You never let up for one minute, do you?" Potter demanded.

Draco looked at him and realised he was angry. Draco had blithely walked right into one of Harry Potter's enormous legendary strops.

Draco should've been Sorted into Hufflepuff. It was becoming very clear.

"I don't understand you at all," Potter raged. "And I'm trying to, I really am, but it's hard-"

"It's not my fault you were born without empathy!"

"And tonight I was talking to Dumbledore and I was thinking about killing Voldemort-"

"Killing the Dark Lord?" Draco demanded. "The powerful immortal Dark Lord who's killing people all over the countryside? That Dark Lord? You're sixteen years old! You're not even old enough to Apparate! Don't be *insane*, you'll only get yourself *killed*-"

"Like you care!" Potter shouted. "Anyway, I have to do it, Voldemort will keep hunting me, but it makes a difference that I'll face him - that I'll choose it-"

"No it *doesn't*," Draco yelled. "It doesn't make any difference! Because either way you'll be dead, and whether you chose it or not won't matter! And I don't-"

He didn't want anyone to die. But that was just as unrealistic as Potter's dreams.

"I'll kill him," Potter said. "I want to. And I'll-" he stopped, and swallowed. "I'll kill anyone who stands with him. I have to. Do you have any idea how worried I am that you'll do something stupid and you won't have - I've been trying to understand and maybe I would understand, and I - but it couldn't make any difference! Not if you do something unforgivable. It can't."

"Oh, what," Draco demanded, trembling. "You can do all this for the *memory* of your parents and I can't do anything for mine? What's there to understand? You want revenge, and I want revenge, and I want them to be safe-"

"He's killing little kids all over the country!" Potter shouted. "It's not just about revenge! He has to be stopped! And your choices, they're all bad, it's all bad and it's hard but - there's a right choice and a wrong choice. I don't know how you can't see that."

"You've never been able to see anyone's point of view but your own!" Draco snapped, and slammed out of the stupid portrait door.

He didn't want to stay there arguing with Potter. He didn't want to think about Voldemort killing little kids. Draco supposed he was, and that he wouldn't hesitate to kill Mother, or Draco, or anyone. Did Potter think that was some sort of incentive to stand up to Voldemort?

Draco had to fix the Vanishing Cabinet or they were all doomed.

As for Potter, he was doomed no matter what.

*

He couldn't get Potter's stupid words out of his own stupid head. It was more proof that he was going insane. The house elf hallucinations had only been the beginning.

Do you have any idea how worried I am that you'll do something stupid?

Draco thought of that about when he was using a saw, and almost cut off his own hand. Then he swore and threw it at the wall.

God, God, God.

He was happy for a moment when Katie Bell came back to school, completely healthy, but on the whole May was hell.

And then he got a letter from Aunt Bella, saying that the Dark Lord was growing impatient, and he knew what that meant. She added that she wanted to see him next Hogsmeade weekend.

Draco felt a pang of sheer, physical terror.

Aunt Bella would do anything to him that Voldemort told her to do. And the Cabinet wasn't working, wasn't even close to working, he didn't know how to make it work, and he was tired all the time.

He sat through classes that day in a daze, finding his hands shaking when he turned over books. Terry and Anthony united to form a protective front between him and the world, and he wanted to speak and tell them how much he appreciated it, but he was afraid that if he opened his mouth he would be sick.

He sat through lunch and the smell of food, and the sound of everyone's cheerful unsuspecting voices, made him feel even more like being sick. He felt cold, too: he wished he was sick, and his mother was here, and he wasn't just alone and disgustingly, contemptibly frightened.

Instead of dinner, he went and he found the ghost of the murdered girl. She was kind to him, seemed lonely and terribly glad to see him, and Draco thought maybe that was what death was like, far away from any exchange of love, cold and lonely. Like being in prison: like life was for Dad.

He opened his mouth to say hello and burst into fierce, ugly tears. He couldn't stand up by

himself: had to stand braced against the sink and cry as if he was vomiting, in a helpless jerking stream, choking on them and trying to talk at once.

"I can't, I can't think of what to do," Draco gasped, and his voice came out shuddering like his whole body was, shaking like a hurt trapped animal. "I have to do it and - Mother's there in a *nest* of them and I'm - I'm letting everyone down, and I'm so confused all the time and I don't want to *die*-"

"That would be a pity," crooned Myrtle. "But if you did, you'd be welcome to share my toilet."

Draco was so desperate he was grateful. He would've said so, but he couldn't stop crying, huge hacking sobs. God, if Dad could see him now, he'd be so ashamed.

"Don't," Myrtle whispered kindly. "Don't. Tell me what's wrong - I can help you-"

"No one can help me," Draco cried out. He gripped the sink with shaking hands, couldn't let go, or he'd fall down. "I can't do it, I can't! It won't work and unless I do it soon, he says he'll kill me..."

He hiccupped, shuddered and tried to meet his own swollen eyes in the cracked mirror.

That was when he saw Potter.

Potter, standing in the doorway, Potter who had started all the humiliations of Draco's life. Draco was snivelling like a little girl and Potter was there like he was always there.

Draco wanted to kill him, or to die, or something. He wheeled around with his wand and he just wanted to Obliviate Potter or hurt him or somehow make this *not have happened*...

A lamp broke beside Potter, and Potter's eyes narrowed - famous Potter strops, Draco thought dimly, and that was *fine*, he wanted Potter to be angry and not confusing him, he wanted to be angry and not confused. Potter threw a jinx and he blocked it with a sort of savage satisfaction.

Myrtle was screaming somewhere behind the roaring in Draco's ears. He couldn't care, he just watched Potter's face wiped clean of worry and fear by fury, and dodged a Leg-Locker curse that hit the cistern. Water erupted into the room and Potter went down, and all Draco wanted to do was shut his mouth, take advantage of this moment of weakness and show him that he *was* sure, he'd *made* his choice.

He lifted his wand and cried, "*Cruci*-"

Potter roared: "*Sectumsemptra*!"

There was no pain.

Just a moment of sheer, blinding shock and the terrible sick sound of skin tearing, the feeling that the world had been torn in half like a piece of paper.

Then he wavered, fell back and fell down. He didn't feel the impact when his back hit the floor, either, just saw the ceiling and then Potter's face. His wand was gone, somewhere: there was blood in his eyes, veiling his sight. He gasped, couldn't breathe, clawed feebly at his chest and found torn skin, his fingers touching something slippery.

God, he was so scared, and he couldn't stop shaking and shaking, every jerk a violent move away from the pain and panic that came roaring in. He wasn't going to get a chance to try and save Mum, he wouldn't ever be able to save anyone, he was going to die here on a bathroom floor.

"No," Potter was saying. "No, I didn't - oh God, Malfoy! Help! Help!"

The ghost was screaming, Potter's desperate face was receding, and then Professor Snape was there, his wand out, and Draco felt the pain flare out, much worse, a moment of screaming agony as skin knitted and the blood was squeezed to an ooze. He felt Professor Snape's hands, oddly gentle, wiping his face.

He whispered the charm three times, and then put his arm around Draco and got him to his feet. The whole world still seemed distant and Draco clung to him, unashamed. Professor Snape put a strong arm around him and said something about the hospital wing and how it might be possible to avoid scarring.

Scarring. Draco wanted to have hysterics but he was terrified that his chest would split open again if he moved incautiously, that the miracle of being saved would be undone.

"And you, Potter," Snape snarled. "You wait here for me."

Potter scrambled to his feet. "Forget it!" he said. "D'you think I'm leaving him? God, Malfoy, tell me you're all right. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, I had no idea what the spell would do-"

"You knew that it said 'For enemies'! on it!" Snape bellowed.

Potter halted in his fumbling efforts to reach for Draco while catching himself, looking afraid to touch him. "How did you know that?"

"It was I who invented that spell!" Snape roared. "I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd dare to root through my book and take my spells for yourself, would you, use them against children, like your filthy father before you-"

"You're the Half-Blood Prince?" Potter asked, and then sharply: "Sir - Malfoy!"

Draco didn't know what they were talking about, possibly Snape's secret drag name or something. The world made no sense, it was fragmenting hopelessly around him and he'd wanted to hang on, save some last shred of dignity by not fainting in front of Potter, but here it was and he could feel his knees sagging, hear Potter and Professor Snape shouting, and then the world went black and quiet.

He woke up in the infirmary. He woke gasping, sure there was something terribly wrong, and found that his chest hurt, and Potter was asleep in the chair beside him, holding his hand.

Draco held on and tried to measure his breaths by Potter's, tried not to scream or panic or ask for his mother.

The pressure of his hand made Potter stir, blink and twitch awake. "God, Malfoy," he said. "You're awake."

"I'm awake and I'm being manhandled, apparently," Draco snapped, pulling his hand away. "Which part of you almost eviscerating me to death made you think we were going steady?"

Potter went white. "Malfoy," he said. "I'm so sorry. I - God, I thought I'd killed you."

Draco thought about staring up at the bathroom ceiling and knowing that it was all over. He'd been so scared, so scared. He never wanted to make anyone else that scared.

"Yeah," he said, a little shakily. "Me too."

Potter's clothes were still wet and bloody, Draco saw with a horrible lurch. He looked as scared and as weary of it as Draco felt. He moved and Draco wondered warily if he was going to try for Draco's hand again, but Potter only leaned forward and rested his head in his arms on Draco's bed, near Draco's chest. Draco stared at the top of Potter's messy black head and his folded brown forearms.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Potter said, in a rough, muffled voice. "I don't know what I'd have done."

Sent expensive flowers to the funeral from Azkaban was Draco's thought, but Dumbledore would probably have gotten the Chosen One off. Said something like 'Harry's so manly, he couldn't be having with sissy boy crying. It was the only thing to do.'

Then it occurred to Draco that he'd never get the chance to say sorry to Katie Bell or Weasley, though he was, he was.

He reached out and touched Potter's arm. "It's all right," he said. "I mean. I know you didn't mean it."

Potter looked up, a fearful sort of glance: seeing Potter scared was a very novel experience and Draco didn't like it as much as he might've expected. Though that could have been the recent chest wounds talking.

He put his hand over Draco's, still looking up. "Malfoy," he said urgently.

Then Hermione broke into the room. She did not pause for a glance before she hurled herself at the bed, and Potter had to move back sharply to avoid what could have been a disastrous collision.

"Oh, Draco!" she exclaimed, showing alarming signs of wanting to throw herself upon his manly breast. "Oh, Draco, darling, you could have been killed!"

"Never mind, no harm done," Draco said in a desperate attempt to ward off the inevitable.

The inevitable happened. Hermione burst into explosive tears. He'd missed the way she cried, actually, like an exploding tap spraying water in every direction.

"Draco," she sobbed out. "I'm sorry for saying bad stuff about your dad, I really am, I'm sorry, I m-might never have got the chance to tell you!"

Draco looked at his bedclothes. "I'm sorry for calling you a you-know-what," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry for slapping you in the face," Hermione proceeded tearfully.

"I'm sorry for stealing your OWLs notes to study in bed one night last year," Draco went on, getting into the spirit of things. "And for telling you Weasley used them to line his owl's nest. That was a naughty fib."

"Oh, Draco!" she said, and collapsed very carefully on his chest, kissing him and bedewing his face with tears.

It was all deeply humiliating and awful and Draco patted her back thankfully, put his face against her shoulder.

"Oooh," Hermione said, disengaging. "I'll go fetch Terry and Anthony and Vincent and Gregory, they're in the staff room trying to get the whole story from Professor Snape. And - d'you want me to tell that Pansy Parkinson one? She was asking after you, apparently." Hermione's mouth formed a disapproving line. She did not like the fluffy pink quills Pansy used in the library.

Draco brightened. "Yes, do. I like her," he added defiantly. "She's a minx."

Hermione kissed his forehead again, said in a stern voice "Don't run off" as if Draco was just dying to spring from his bed once her back was turned and embark on madcap adventures, and left.

Draco lay back on the pillows and felt painfully glad.

"I've never liked Pansy Parkinson," Potter said darkly.

"What d'you know about her?" Draco inquired.

Potter scowled. "Stuff. She's in Slytherin. She's - she's obviously all hands. No good, no good at all." He began to fluff Draco's pillow in an inexperienced but proprietary manner.

Draco smirked. "I see." He lifted himself slightly so Potter could carry on - Draco liked being ministered too, that was all, he wasn't particularly fussed over who was ministering. Then he looked at his chest.

"Oh my God," he said in a high voice. "I'm scarred."

Potter's hands stilled. "I know," he answered with difficulty. "The dittany - didn't work. I'm sorry."

"Fetch me a mirror," Draco commanded. "Oh my God! Mother will have a fit. Is my face scarred?"

"The-" Potter hesitated, looking wretched, and gestured. "The underside of your chin. It is."

"I like my chin!"

"I'm sorry," Potter said hopelessly.

"I wasn't saying it to make you sorry, I told you it was all right, I did attempt an Unforgivable on you, I was saying it because I feel somewhat hysterical! I'm ruined! Ruined!"

"You're not," Potter said, still sounding upset for some reason. Draco didn't see what he had to be upset about.

"I am, too," he told him. "It's not like your scars. When people ask you how you got yours, you can say 'battling evil.' I'll have to say 'in a men's bathroom.' Won't have the same *cachet*. Besides, scars, they need a certain skin tone, I don't tan, I go a peculiar mauve shade in the sun, it just won't work-"

Potter made an odd sound, which turned somehow into laughter. Draco stopped and realised that Potter was clearly more than somewhat hysterical.

He laughed for a few terrible minutes, then gave a sort of groan and buried his face in his hands. "You're so weird," he said.

"I beg your pardon," Draco returned, much affronted.

"You're so weird," Potter repeated. "I don't, I don't understand you at all. I don't even know why I like you so much but God, *God*, I do."

Thankfully Draco was saved from having to reply to that by the advent of his friends en masse. His relief was only slightly dimmed by Anthony exclaiming, "Oh my God, Draco, are you *cutting*?"

*

Aside from almost bleeding to death, the incident in the bathroom sort of improved matters. He had Hermione back, and no matter how afraid he was of her shrewdness it was still so nice to have her feeling his forehead and psychotically assembling his notes.

Terry, too, was worried enough to forget all Draco's possible iniquities and he spent a lot of time making Draco hot possets. Draco liked that.

Potter's stalker tendencies, however, were exacerbated by knowing exactly where to find Draco.

"Well," he said when Draco brought this up, "I do always know where to find you. I have this map that shows me."

Draco gave him an extremely unnerved look. "Does it have pop-up pictures?" he asked suspiciously.

"That'd be a real help," Potter said thoughtfully.

Draco's voice rose dramatically. "In developing your obvious and unsettling voyeuristic inclinations, I imagine so!"

Potter just seemed entirely unaware of when he was being really disturbing. He also did not seem worried about invading the privacy of someone who had never evinced any particular fondness for his company. Every time Draco looked there was Potter, untidy head propped against something, watching him with the intentness of a slightly savage stray who wanted somewhat desperately to follow you home.

He even, somewhat unexpectedly, had the beginnings of a sense of humour. It was very disquieting.

It was easy enough, in the hospital bed, to forget that everything else in the world existed, to feel safe. It wasn't true, though.

When he was out of the infirmary, he went back to the Room of Requirement.

Potter came after him and instead of shouting and kicking the wall as usual, he said quite quietly, as if he was leaning his head against the wall and had shut his eyes, as if he was tired: "Malfoy. Whatever it is, don't do it. Please."

Draco thought of his mother, but he sat down and tried to write Dad a letter instead. He ended up just saying the same thing as he always did when he wrote those letters he couldn't send: *I love you. I'm worried about you. I'm scared.*

Please tell me what to do.

*

Potter couldn't play Quidditch but obviously he'd transferred his luck to Ginny Weasley via some sort of osmosis, because she won the game by three hundred points and Gryffindor won the House Cup.

"Gryffindor triumphs against all the odds? Well! I for one am shocked, *shocked*," Draco remarked.

Ginny seemed to feel that the appropriate way to celebrate was to spend her time constantly snogging Dean Thomas. Draco objected to that sort of thing *on* the breakfast table, but it was pretty funny seeing Ron Weasley stagger about declaring he had been struck blind.

Apparently what she got up to in the Great Hall was nothing compared to what she did down by the lake.

It was nice that she was happy, he supposed.

He came in one day tired and aching from working on the Cabinet, and found Cho leaning against the mantelpiece and looking rather pleased with herself.

"Hi, Draco," she said, and blushed.

"Something up?" Draco duly inquired.

"Well," Cho said. "Well, you know how possessive Michael can be, and I think he was a bit worried about him being still in school while I was out, so he - well, we decided to make it official."

She showed him her ring. Draco thought it was sad they'd already played Gryffindor. Ginny might well have mistaken the enormous glitter for the Snitch. Corner was so tacky.

"It's very," he said, and searched for one of Anthony's funny little words. "Bling."

Cho dimpled. She was still cute, Draco thought, far too good for Michael. He hoped the babies would take after her.

"I want to keep my own name, though," Cho carried on happily.

"So," Draco said, and paused in horrified fascination. "So you'll be Cho Chang-Corner, then."

"Yes!" Cho said.

"Oh," Draco said. He looked at her sparkling brown eyes, got up and put his arm around her. "Congratulations," he told her, and kissed her.

For old times' sake, for choosing him once, for the priceless look on Corner's face when he walked in. Whatever. He let her go and she smiled at him, and he said, "I hope you'll be happy."

They all seemed happy, seemed to have plans: they wanted all sorts of things, and the mist was endless even in summer, and sometimes Draco's chest hurt and he was not sure if it was in phantom pain or panic. All he wanted to do was escape.

Then he figured out the Vanishing Cabinet.

He was staring at it as he had for the entire year, and then somehow, as a nonsense pattern will coalesce into a familiar, recognisable shape, he saw how to do it. He just needed to align it a little differently - it was so simple...

It was better than coming top in class, better than his first kiss. It was escape, him safe, Mother safe, Dad out, everything solved.

The constant weight off his chest lifted: he could have eaten now, or laughed, or slept. He leaped to his feet and went whooping around the room.

Then he got back to work, his hands shaking with the dizzy relief and with his haste, with nothing else. He worked with his mind a blissful blank until it was fixed, done, and then he

used the enchanted coins to tell Rosmerta. He knew that on the other side of the cabinet, in Borgin and Burke's, the Death Eaters were beginning to assemble an invading force.

He kept calm, kept talking into the coin, kept planning. Dumbledore would be back soon, and he had to be lured in. The Dark Mark, then. He cast it and he came back to the room, to pace around inside, to wait.

He'd done it. Nobody had thought he could but he'd *done* it, and Dad would be so proud, and soon...

They'd be in the school.

The first hint of unease was like a chill, a little quiver he felt he could ignore, a tiny whisper in his mind he wasn't listening to.

Voldemort had said that Draco should kill Dumbledore, but maybe - maybe he wouldn't have to, and even if he did, Draco *hated* him. They'd have a better school without him. If it was only Dumbledore, maybe...

Potter and Ginny and Hermione could get themselves killed tonight. Anthony and Terry could get themselves killed. Anyone could get killed, Crabbe or Goyle or anyone, if they brought Fenrir.

Only surely they wouldn't. Not to a school.

There was no time for doubt! He and Dad and Mum would all be killed, *definitely*, he'd been working on this all year, he couldn't let them all down. He wasn't a child and he wasn't a coward.

Draco remembered some of the summer's research: an item from the Room of Requirement gives you control of the inside of the room.

Draco looked around frantically and seized up a book. He dashed out of the Room and slammed the door behind him, leaned against it for a moment.

He just needed a moment to think.

He was going to do it, of course he was, for Dad, for them all, but perhaps he could warn Anthony at least, Anthony would listen, he could tell him to run. And if he told Crabbe and Goyle to barricade the Slytherins inside, oh, he was going crazy, Professor Snape was a Death Eater and he'd never let anything happen to any of them.

There was a sound from inside the Room. The Death Eaters were coming.

Draco leaned against the wall and put his face in his hands.

There was a voice from inside, saying: "Draco!"

It was Aunt Bella. Draco should let her out. Draco had to open the door, had to do it, for his whole family.

Andromeda is not dead.

What would his mother have wanted him to do, what did it matter. She'd said she would love him no matter what, and she was in danger. Dad was in danger: Dad was counting on him.

"Draco?" called Aunt Bella.

Malfoy, don't do it. Please.

Shut up, Potter, shut up!

Draco raked his fingers through his hair, pulled at it. He had sworn to do this, he had to, he had no other options. Voldemort would kill his whole family.

He'd succeeded. He'd shown them all.

Aunt Bella's voice was puzzled, but still glad, loving and glad. "Draco? Open the door, Draco."

Open the door, Draco.

He was blind with sweat or tears, shaking up against the wall. He did have to do it, he knew he did. Only - Potter, Terry, Hermione, Anthony, Ginny, he had to stop, he had to make a choice, he had to make a sacrifice!

A blood sacrifice. Draco thought of his own blood on the floor of the bathroom, and swallowed down rising bile. His throat stung, his eyes stung.

He threw down the book. He was going to open the door.

Then he was running, running as fast as he could, trying to outrun the possibility of changing his mind, trying to outrun all thought.

He ran up the stairs to the tower, his lungs burning, his mind racing, and burst through the door to the chill of the Astronomy Tower, the cracked flagstones and the sound of Dumbledore's voice. He was breathing as if he had run the race of his life.

"Do not remove your Cloak," Dumbledore was saying, just as Draco walked in.

As soon as he did, Potter threw down his Cloak, emerging against the night as if someone had conjured him from a wand.

Dumbledore looked faintly exasperated, but all he said was: "Good evening, Draco."

Draco was afraid his resolve would fail or his knees would go out from under him, so he said it at once.

"Get the Order of the Phoenix. I have about twenty Death Eaters trapped in the Room of Requirement. Take them - take them to Azkaban or something. That should help, shouldn't it?"

And - and it should mean you owe me something. Get my mother. Get her out fast, hide her. You owe me that."

And then he stopped, and shook.

Dumbledore looked even more ravaged than he had all this year, cold blue eyes fixed on Draco, black hand curled at his side. Draco had never liked him, and never wanted him to die.

"Well, Draco," he said. "I must confess you have surprised me."

Draco wanted to be sick. "Don't call me that," he spat. "I'm not one of yours. I never wanted to be one of yours. I don't like the way you treat Potter: I have no desire to be another of your projects. Just - get on with it. Take them away."

He wanted to crouch on the floor, put his head on his knees, wait until his mother came.

"Then why did you do it, Draco?" Dumbledore asked.

Draco swallowed again, wiped his wet face. "I don't know! They were both bloody bad choices," he said shakily. "But - but one was right."

He dared to look at Potter for the first time since he'd spoken, afraid he wouldn't get it out or he'd have a revulsion of feeling or he'd run as far and as fast as he could.

Potter's face was all lit up. Draco, unexpectedly, felt a little steadier.

"My mother," he demanded, looking back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore said, "I'll see to it now. You have my word."

He looked at Draco again, slightly puzzled, like a master who had won a game by pure chance, and then he strode, his steps weaving a little, to the door. Potter rushed forward to help him, and Draco stood back and reflected that Dumbledore having a drinking problem would actually explain a lot.

"No, no, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I assure you this unexpected triumph has greatly heartened me. I shall find Severus myself."

Draco opened his mouth to speak and then decided Snape wasn't fool enough to blow his cover, and Draco had sacrificed enough people today.

Had sacrificed *Dad*. He felt ill again, ill and desperate at the thought of the enormity of what he had done.

But if he'd done the other thing. If he had.

Dumbledore no sooner shut the door behind him than Potter was there, hands under Draco's elbows. It was unclear to Draco whether Potter was trying to support him or grab him: Potter's face was close and his eyes were still lit up, his smile bright and trembling at once, weighted with the awkward tenderness he did not seem quite able to master.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Draco said with difficulty. "Gryffindors, I swear. You can't just leap at people, you can't assume things like... I could pull my wand on you."

"Go ahead," Potter said, sounding intensely happy.

Draco was not happy, not at all, he was still all over the place, but for the first time he couldn't find it in himself to resent Potter for having something he didn't: he was sort of glad.

Still, it did not become a Ravenclaw not to follow through. He took his wand out, even though it trembled in his hands. Potter watched it tremble.

"So - all right," he said, watching the wand and Draco at once, with concern. He reached out. "Can I?"

Draco lowered his wand a fraction and Potter, who always somehow had a million miles before you even decided to give him an inch, moved in. Draco looked at his intent face, cast green in the light of the Dark Mark, shadows cast on his face by his falling lashes.

"I didn't think you'd use it," Potter murmured.

"You've always been too freaking arrogant," Draco told him, hearing a hysterical note in his voice. "That's - that's one of your problems. One of many. I told you, I have a list - and, and you have to be polite to my mother!"

He didn't realise exactly what that conveyed until Potter looked at him again, almost awed. It made no sense that Potter would look at him like that, no sense, no sense at all: Draco didn't want him to stop.

"I can do that," Potter told him, his voice low and almost incredulous. "And. Can I-"

They were angling their faces together already: Draco was still shaking, his face was still wet, he was not sure if he was feeling relief or if he was in shock. He held onto Potter as if Potter could anchor him.

He said in a breath, "You can," and then he was kissing Potter, kissing him, hands still shaking, Dark Mark glittering in the cold summer air. Potter's mouth was warm, hands sure, touching Draco's face, his hair, shoulders, the curve of his hips, swift pressing touches that were almost chaste, as if he wanted to make sure that Draco was really there.

The kiss went slow but no less desperate and Draco was gasping with one hand clenched in Potter's shirt and one holding onto his hair. Potter pressed his lips against Draco's throat, soft mouth sliding with sudden gentleness over the scar.

Draco shut his eyes and relaxed into Potter's hands, stopped shaking, and did not stop holding on.

*

It could not last, clutching Potter on the top of the Astronomy Tower. He had to come down,

and see Aunt Bella led away. She went first, her head held high, as was her way: he had to watch her go, watch every step as she refused to look at him. As if he was as dead to her as her sister Andromeda.

He also had to watch Dumbledore smiling benignly at him, which filled him with a sort of dizzy rage, only made worse by the fact he was a little gratified by the man's attention. Potter had to go and bend solicitously over him, he was all to pieces, he must have been putting back Firewhiskey by the tumbler. At his age!

Snape, though, put down whatever hangover cure he was working on, and turned and looked at Draco.

"Draco," he said. "I'm very proud."

Draco smiled bitterly. "Of course you are," he said, to show Snape he wouldn't give him away.

Then Snape took him aside and explained matters. Draco was torn between complete indignation and total awe - because, seriously, a double, no, a triple agent playing a dangerous bluff? Snape was already the coolest teacher in school and now he was a *super spy*?

"Are there any others?" Draco asked excitedly. Possibly there was a fraternity of spies, possibly a network!

"Only Lupin," Snape replied in a dismissive tone.

"I really think this information would have made things easier if given to me, oh, *any time* before tonight," Draco informed him sternly. A sudden thought occurred to him. "What about your Unbreakable Vow?"

He'd forgotten about that, he thought with a chill. If he'd remembered, he might have opened the door, and then... and then.

Snape looked at him with his opaque black eyes. At last, perhaps because he had lied to Draco enough, he said: "Look at the man, Draco."

Draco turned and looked at Dumbledore, frail, his face almost skull-like with the skin papered too lightly and drawn too tightly over it, that black ruined hand trembling at his side.

"There's been poison working in his system all year," Snape continued in a low tone. "Now he's taken more. We're doing all we can, but it's - it's holding off the inevitable. He's unlikely to last another six months, and when the time comes - when it comes, I have promised him that I will be the one to end it. The Vow will be kept."

Draco looked away because he did not want to see Snape's face, and looked instead at Dumbledore, only to see Potter stooping over him.

"It'll kill Potter," he said, with a shock. "He loves him."

"I must say, when I think of the situation as a whole, Potter's plight does not inspire me with fluttering solicitude," Snape said dryly. "That boy is perfectly well able to take care of himself."

Snape went on mixing potions for his true master, and Draco looked over at the old man's face until he saw Dumbledore was asleep, and Potter standing somewhat helplessly beside his bed. Then he left Snape's side and went over to Potter.

Potter hadn't stopped fighting or let go this whole year. Draco didn't think, privately, that he was all that good at taking care of himself.

"How's he doing?" Draco asked, and reached up to tuck back Potter's hair, which stuck up and tumbled heavily into his eyes, somehow at the same time.

"D'you care?" Potter returned, looking startled. He leaned his face a little into Draco's hand.

"Certainly," said Draco. "Don't you know this whole business was a cunning plan to make him award Ravenclaw the House Cup?"

Potter's mouth worked and Draco tugged at Potter's hair a little and then dropped his hand and didn't really try to hide a tired smile.

"C'mere," he added, and tugged Potter forward for a light kiss.

Snape dropped his potion.

Potter smiled. "What was that for?"

"It's my birthday in two days," Draco informed him. "As you are my new gentleman friend, I'm expecting a really brilliant present. But I realise it is short notice, and so I am prepared to offer incentives to brilliance."

"I already got you something," said Potter, smiling a bit more.

"I enjoy ponies and rare first editions," Draco let him know. He tapped Potter's hand imperiously and Potter gave him a mildly baffled look. Draco sighed heavily: poor Potter, not his fault, the way all those girls were, he probably just expected a significant other to deposit themselves at his feet. "This means you should hold my hand," Draco explained. "It's a gesture."

It pulled his mother up short for a moment. She arrived with some pink-haired Auror and Professor (Super Spy!) Lupin, clearly having been pulled from her bed. Very clearly, since she was wearing a black negligee.

She'd been taken from the Manor and the promise of honours among the Death Eaters, the return of her husband, and now she was standing in Hogwarts with nothing but her life and a skimpy nightgown.

Draco felt ashamed for the moment when she was staring at him, and then she had him in her arms, pressing her mouth to his hair. "Draco," she whispered. "Draco. Thank God. Oh, thank

God." An instant later she cast a look over at Potter and said in a much more normal tone, "Really, darling?"

"Sorry, Mother," said Draco.

That was a good moment, a calming moment.

The only moment of the night when he felt sure, certain beyond a doubt that he had done the right thing, was when they led Fenrir snarling past him.

*

There were bad moments. Mother said she was filing for divorce and Draco felt so ill and guilty and resentful that he and Potter had a screaming fight and broke up the next day. They got back together eighteen minutes later, when Draco almost tripped over Potter. Who was sitting sullenly on the steps outside Draco's dormitory.

That night Draco wrote a letter to his father, the last of a year of letters that he would never send.

He didn't know how to let go: never had. Didn't want to learn. Didn't want Potter to learn either.

Romilda Vane cornered him at his birthday party on the lawn and asked if it was true Potter had a Hippogriff tattooed on his chest.

Draco regarded her limpidly. "Oh yes," he replied. "And he can flex his muscles and make it do a little dance."

Anthony and Terry had to forcibly prevent Draco from staging a dramatic re-enactment of a Hippogriff dancing. Draco might've been a little tipsy: well, he was legally an adult that day, after all. It was cause for celebration.

It was probably not cause for celebration that Pansy now had many incriminating pictures of him attempting a song using a spoon as a magical microphone, or that he tried to spin Hermione on the lawn and sent her into the lake.

Everyone came to his party, though. Draco even allowed the Hufflepuffs, since Terry's secret boyfriend was one and all.

Terry ruined this magnificent gesture by dropping Zacharias Smith the day before Draco's party.

"He was - I was using him," Terry said to Draco before Draco's enormous inebriation had fully taken hold. "It wasn't okay."

"Sounds okay to me," Draco remarked, and then became sentimental. "But it wasn't like you."

"I was really scared for you," Terry continued. "I wish - I wish I'd trusted you more."

Draco looked into the middle distance. "I wasn't trustworthy," he answered. "Anyway. It turned out for the best."

He smiled, and Terry smiled his hesitant familiar smile back. About that moment Potter gave up on ominous lurking around them, and came to put his arm around Draco's shoulders. "Hi, Terry," he said, his voice full of dark suspicion, and tugged Draco closer against him.

Potter was absurd: it was probably incurable at this point. Draco leaned back on his elbows in the sun and tipped his face up.

Somewhere in the distance, and receding fast, Weasley muttered about how he'd known it was coming and he would've preferred it if Potter was going out with anyone else. Anyone! He would have accepted anyone!

Fortunately at this point Draco got Crabbe to slip Weasley some more Firewhiskey and the Great Six Year Weasley/Granger Foreplay reached a happy conclusion through the beautiful magic of alcohol.

Weasley was even drunk enough to dance with her and, given the crowd of people dancing on the lawn by then, was able to hide his shame in the crush of other bodies. Ginny was dancing with Dean, Cho with Michael, Pansy (surprisingly) with Anthony and Blaise Zabini (terrifyingly) with Elspeth Moonfeather.

Draco, seated comfortably on the lawn where he could observe his party and be quite sure it was the best one ever, was starting to get very concerned about Goyle.

Meanwhile Potter was talking to Zacharias Smith. Well, Potter was looking away abstractedly while Smith gazed at him with barely concealed longing, but still!

The force of Draco's narrowed eyes over the glasses glare clearly shamed Potter out of his wandering ways, and he came over to sit by Draco. Draco was about to bring up the subject of Potter being a vile philanderer, but Potter forestalled him by asking if Draco wanted to dance.

He looked steeled to make the endeavour. Draco laughed and laughed.

"Spare me," he said. "I saw you at the Yule Ball. I've been through a lot of traumatic experiences already this year: I want to live."

Potter shoved him. Draco promptly shoved him back. Potter, who was a vicious Gryffindor and might not have realised how much Draco'd had to drink, shoved him too hard and Draco tipped over.

The lawn was soft, the sun was shining, Potter was hovering over him with his breath coming fast.

Wasn't a bad birthday, by any means.

"C'mon," Draco said. "Don't you know what to do with a boy on his back in the grass when you've got him?"

"Well - no," said Potter. "But I've got a few ideas."

*

Everything got messy near the end of term. Always had, really. For Dumbledore's end of term speech Draco supposed they'd all return to the correct house tables.

"D'you think Pansy would like me to sit with her?" Anthony asked wistfully on the morning before the last day of term. "Or - tolerate it, even."

"Oh baby, baby," Draco said. "Tolerate me harder."

Anthony elbowed him in the ribs. "I'd hurt you. Only it'd be a shocking waste of our House points."

The mention of House points sent Draco into beautiful contemplation of Ravenclaw's upcoming glorious victory, and the Great Hall's soon-to-be beautiful swathing in cool delightful blue. Hahaha! Death to Gryffindor!

Metaphorically speaking.

"I still think Slytherin should've got house points," Crabbe said, spooning up porridge in a decided manner. "We helped. Not that I was sure which side we were helping, but I suppose it turned out for the best. I suppose I wouldn't want to see Goldstein lynched. Not actually *lynched*."

"Thank you, sweet Vincent," said Anthony.

"Or Hermione," Terry put in.

Crabbe looked thunderstruck. "Hermione's Muggleborn? Well, I think somebody could have mentioned that to me before!" He glared accusingly around, and then said: "Anyway, if you'd just worked out a way for us to be animals instead we could've told Professor Dumbledore about helping. I'm not telling the headmaster that I wore a pinafore for great justice."

Everyone seemed to be labouring under the delusion that this had been Draco's plan all along. Draco suppressed a pang of guilt and tried to soothe his conscience with jam.

"Look, I couldn't arrange you being an Animagus on such short notice," he informed Crabbe, industriously spreading. "Ravenclaws are only omniscient gods *in training*. Anyway, maybe that was my plan. To take all the credit for myself. Devilish cunning!"

Crabbe waited until Draco was finished with his dramatic cackle.

"Not supposed to be cunning, are you?" he pointed out. "That's our lot. Pass the honey."

"Well, you know, Vincent," Anthony said. "I don't think you and Greg *are* all that cunning. Sorry."

Crabbe considered this. "I don't know," he said at last. "Goyle's been wearing really subtle make-up for half a year now and nobody's noticed. That's pretty cunning."

There was a terrible silence. Draco really needed to have a talk with Goyle.

The silence was interrupted by the arrival of Potter, whose presence at the Ravenclaw table had become a much more frequent thing since the Great Granger and Weasley Alliance. Oh Hermione, it broke Draco's heart to see her throwing herself away like this.

Of course, the resulting effect had its benefits. Potter had a funny way of sitting sideways on a bench that had distressed Draco at first (hadn't even been taught how to sit correctly, probably the story about Muggles was a smokescreen, probably he'd been raised by *bears*) but which Draco had come to accept. Since it provided Draco with comfortable leaning-against-chest opportunities.

He took one of these opportunities now, and a kiss that left a bit of jam on Potter's jaw. "Hi."

"Hey," said Potter, grinning at him and tucking him in closer. "So. I finished the reading list."

Draco put down his knife. "Oh, Potter. Oh, you've made me so happy. Oh, talk to me about literary criticism, it gets me all hot and bothered."

"Are you two ever going to, um, start calling each other by your first names?" inquired Anthony, who had no sense for Private and Sexually Charged Reading List Moments.

"Silence, Goldstein," Draco said with a wave of his hand. "Potter here clearly has a natural sense of decorum." He paused and rubbed his nose against the side of Potter's throat. "No-one," he added, "could be more surprised than me."

Kevin Entwistle at this point caused a sensation by clearing his throat, putting down his spoon and actually focusing on someone. Namely, Potter.

"I've never liked you," he announced, and then returned to his rapt contemplation of the Hogwarts ceiling.

Potter said into Draco's ear, "Who is that guy? He's not in our year, is he?"

Draco turned his head and murmured back, "D'you think - before you vanquished him, I mean - the Dark Lord might have dropped you on your head as a child?"

These sweet nothings complete, Potter returned to the topic of his reading list. "Some of the books were - quite good," he said warily.

"Go on," Draco purred.

Potter went a little red, and then said: "And I didn't have anything else to read. All the copies of *Quidditch Through the Ages* are out of the library."

"Oh," Anthony said with an enlightened air, "*that's* what that big pile of books beside your bed is!"

"You're right, Ravenclaws aren't cunning," Draco admitted to Crabbe. "I think now is one of those times you should put your amulet in your mouth, Anthony. I did it out of love, Potter."

Anthony muttered about *inhaler, for the last time, Draco* and for some reason, Potter flushed even more and stared at Draco until Draco became uncomfortable.

"*What?*" he inquired.

"Nothing," said Potter, ducking his head and smiling at him somewhat helplessly. "So I finished the reading list. So, that means we go flying. That was the deal, right?"

Draco smirked. "Yeah."

Potter wasn't bad at the presents side of things, either. Draco did want to try out his new broom.

*

"Heh," Draco said. "Horcrux."

"You should probably stop saying that," Potter remarked.

They had maps of Godric's Hollow spread out on the tables of the Room of Requirement, and their brooms in a corner. Draco had anticipated spending less time in the Room now things were settled, but what with the out of house relationship and the having to plot to win the war and everything, that was not turning out to be the case.

"All right," Draco said, "but don't believe Romilda Vane if she tells you she has a Horcrux for you in her pants."

The corner of Potter's mouth twitched. "This is serious, Malfoy."

"Well, I know," Draco answered. "Mother wanted us to go to a villa in Greece this summer, I'll have you know, and I turned her down. Such is *my* commitment to the cause."

Well, apparently there were several more Horcruxes - heh heh - to get. And there was bloody Dumbledore, who was failing fast. And Draco wanted to be in England, anyway, it didn't particularly matter why.

"That's - good," Potter said. "Um. We'll be Owling and things, won't we?"

"I'd assumed so," Draco answered with intense suspicion. "Why, what are you trying to say?"

Maybe Potter was all about the chase! Maybe he'd developed an inappropriate attraction to Kevin Entwistle!

"Only - well, Bill Weasley and his girlfriend Fleur are getting married," Potter went on, looking studiously at the map while his neck went red. "I thought you should come. Um. As my, um, date."

"Fleur Delacour and a Weasley?" Draco demanded. "Inconceivable! She could speak four languages and had an innate grasp of Magical History, not to mention her transcendent beauty!" He stopped and reflected. "Oh. I mean, yes. But it's still a wicked waste."

"Bill's pretty cool," said Potter. "He's got an earring. And long hair, it's kind of-"

Draco eyed him coldly. "If you leave me for a Weasley, I will hunt you down like a dog in the street."

"I'm not leaving you for anyone," Potter said, then flushed, cleared his throat and said hurriedly: "Also will you come with me to Godric's Hollow?"

Draco, musing on the mysterious allure of the Weasleys, said "Yes," before he thought about it. Then he did think about it, about parents and Dumbledore and Dad and Mother, and the way Potter was going to get badly hurt, and the war was coming.

"I didn't," he said, and almost choked on the words. "Everyone thinks I meant it to happen the way it did. But I only decided to turn over the Death Eaters about-"

"About twenty minutes after they were in the school," Potter said quietly. "Yeah, I know."

Draco met his eyes over the table filled with maps, the false locket lying on the table between them. Potter's gaze was steady.

"You wouldn't have done anything like that," Draco said.

"No," Potter said. "But we're - different. It's okay. I get that. Um. I'm trying to get that."

Draco wondered if it had occurred yet to Potter that Ravenclaw was winning the House Cup, and if he would be as understanding about that. He suspected he might be in for another case of the Potter sulks tomorrow.

He grinned. "So you've been hiding my iniquity from general knowledge. Very sneaky."

"Well," Potter said, grinning back and smoothing out another map as he did so, looking down and then quickly up at Draco again. "The Sorting Hat did say I'd've done well in Slytherin."

"Oh, *really*," said Draco.

They exchanged another smile and Draco pushed up his glasses to see a map better or conceal from himself they were having a sentimental moment or something. He felt tired in a good way from all the flying, tired so when they'd gone through the maps they could relax and he'd have earned some rest.

Not, he added hastily to himself, that they were going to cuddle. Ravenclaws didn't cuddle. They curled up with a good book and any other good things that came to hand.

The clock struck midnight and, in the name of it being the last day, Draco let himself smile properly at Potter and then, despite all weariness, attempted the sexy glasses look.

"I always thought I'd've done well in Slytherin," he remarked. "But I suppose things worked out all right."

The End

The Way We Get By

Chapter One

“Kingsley Shacklebolt’s trying to kill me,” Draco announced, as he tossed his cloak, marched into the kitchen and found Crabbe and Goyle snogging against the sideboard.

He gave a martyred sigh, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “Tell me when you two are done. Don’t rush on my account,” he added. “I’m only going to die in the bloom of my youth, cruelly abandoned by my best friends. Don’t give it a second thought.”

“We’re done,” Crabbe said.

Draco opened his eyes cautiously, and saw Goyle peering at him critically.

“You weren’t home last night,” he commented. “Again.”

“The Patil twins Owled me when I was coming home last night,” Draco told him. “They said ‘We have sherbet and we must have you.’ I had to go. I’m an Auror. I have to help citizens in need.”

“I don’t think it’s good for you to spend all night working,” Goyle said. “I’m going to fix you a meal.”

Draco opened his mouth to protest being coddled like a five year old, and then remembered who the chef in the house was. He closed his mouth and subsided unhappily into a chair by the kitchen table, in an attitude of pure despair.

After five minutes it didn’t seem like they’d noted his attitude of pure despair, so he said irritably: “Don’t you want to know what happened?”

“You said Kingsley Shacklebolt was trying to kill you,” Crabbe said. “Is he trying to ration the coffee again?”

“No,” Draco said dramatically. “Much worse. He’s assigned me a new partner.”

“You didn’t tell us your old partner dumped you,” Goyle remarked as he started chopping vegetables.

“Jenkins didn’t dump me!” Draco said indignantly. “It was mutual. Sort of. Anyway, he had rice pudding for brains and if I’d had to put up with him another moment I would’ve set him on fire.”

“Who’s your new partner?” asked Crabbe, a single-minded man.

Suddenly the image of Jenkins was bathed with a gentle golden glow in Draco’s memory.

He wasn’t even in the mood to pause for effect. He just said miserably: “*Potter*,” and waited

for the explosions to follow.

“Oh dear,” Goyle said, and went hunting for the soy sauce.

“Oh *dear*?” Draco repeated, his voice rising. “Harry Potter. You do remember the name, don’t you?”

“Yes, you mentioned it every day in school,” Crabbe said.

“I most certainly did not,” Draco told him with hauteur. “And anyway that was because he was unbearable, and guess what, he has not improved. He’s just the same as ever, strutting around the office just like he used to strut around the school, with swarms of horribly misguided and visually impaired women running after him, thinking he’s so special. And he’s still crazy. And he’s still got a filthy temper.”

“Sorry, are we still talking about Potter?” Goyle asked over his shoulder.

Draco made a horrible face at his back. “He goes on *suicide missions*,” he added forcefully. “Probably just to show off, the enormous git. Which means I have to go on *suicide missions* too. I’ll be killed. I hope that makes Kingsley Shacklebolt happy.”

“It probably will if he’s trying to kill you,” Crabbe agreed dryly.

“You’ll be sorry for those heartless words once Harry Potter kills me,” Draco said darkly, and put his head in his arms. “I made a plan to bait and trap a sea monster today,” he added. “And Shacklebolt looked at me as if I was insane. He’s always doing that, it’s because he’s surrounded by Gryffindor lunatics and Hufflepuff cretins, I swear there are more paper clips in our office than original thoughts-”

“Your plans are always good, Draco,” Goyle soothed him. “I’m sure it would’ve worked.”

Draco lifted his head from the table. “It will work,” he said. “It’s getting made. Potter spoke up for me. Which, I admit, gave me a moment’s false hope before I realised he was probably planning to throw me off the pier.”

“Maybe not,” Goyle said.

Goyle was the optimist. Draco gave him a long look to tell him what Draco thought of optimism.

“The only reason he likes the plan is because it involves him speaking Parseltongue to that great big underwater snake,” Draco drawled. “Which in turn leads to him being – yet again – the great big hero.” He rumbled up his hair with both hands, looked vacantly into the distance and said in a deep, bored voice: “Oh, I’m Harry *Potter*. I never *wanted* all this attention, but by the way, this side is my best side. I’m so *burdened* - by the bodies of my hysterical hormone-crazed fans. What d’you mean, I should actually captain the Quidditch team? Baby, I *am* the Quidditch team.”

Goyle made a contented sound. “I’ve missed the Potter impressions,” he confessed. “They were always my favourites.”

Draco looked mordantly around the big kitchen. When they'd all been searching for a house together in London Goyle had insisted on a really spacious kitchen, and just now it was filled with August sunlight. It was nice and warm here. Draco wondered if Goyle would let him go to sleep on the kitchen table.

Crabbe patted him on one of his slumped shoulders. "I'm sure he won't drop you off the pier, Malfoy."

"I bet you anything he will," Draco said. "Think about all the horrible things he did to me in school. Think about the insane mud assault and the insane Quidditch pitch assault and the insane bathroom assault. They were insane, Crabbe, and they were assaults. In fact, Crabbe, now I come to think of it – Potter *bullied* me when we were at school."

Crabbe made an amused noise at the back of his throat. "No, he didn't."

"He did," Draco insisted, alight with this new idea. "I felt victimised. School bullies can ruin your life, Crabbe, they can scar you forever. Psychological studies have shown that--"

"If he was bullying you, you were bullying him *right back*," Crabbe said.

"Fine," Draco said. "Suit yourself. Ignore the anguish and torment of my past. I don't care."

"Also he did sort of make up for things when he killed the Dark Lord and saved the world," Goyle put in brightly. "That worked out well, I thought."

"Oh no," Draco told them. "No, you see, because in actual fact, that was just another thing Potter was doing to make himself look good."

Crabbe grunted and left the room, heading upstairs. Goyle put a plate of food in front of Draco and lingered for about five minutes in an effort to pretend he wasn't going to follow Crabbe upstairs as soon as possible.

Draco stabbed at his food vengefully. "I feel victimised by Potter saving the world," he told Goyle. "I really do."

*

Outlined against the grey morning skyline was Brighton pier, a huge cage with a sea monster in it, and about a hundred people.

Draco walked down the pier with all the boyish enthusiasm of a man walking towards his execution. He elbowed some people pretty sharply out of his way as he struggled towards the front of the crowd where he saw Shackbolt, looking impassively off into space, and Potter, being interviewed by the paparazzi.

Typical.

"Er," Potter said, staring at his shoes and doing his bashful routine, pretending he didn't love the attention. "Well..."

He looked up from his shoes at that point and saw Draco.

“Malfoy designed the whole thing,” he said abruptly. “He can explain it to you.”

“I – what?” Draco said.

Potter smiled a cheerfully cruel smile at him, turned the woman reporter’s shoulder so she was facing him and stepped back with the heroic air of having well and truly thrown someone else to the wolves.

“I’m not really at my best in the mornings,” Draco said.

The woman reporter looked somewhat unhappy as well. She must’ve been enjoying talking to Potter. Women did. Draco put it down to the interference of evil gods, or Potter using Love Potions as cologne.

“Do you feel inspired by Harry Potter’s courage?” she asked him at last.

“Not so’s you’d notice,” Draco said. “I am wondering why he doesn’t get a *move on*, though,” he added in a louder voice. “That cage is only going to hold for two hours. Approximately. And then the sea monster will start eating fishing villages again and won’t be in the mood for a chat.”

“We were waiting for you, Malfoy,” Potter snapped. “You were late.”

Draco had no answer for that, but he wasn’t going to apologise when Potter said ‘Malfoy’ as if it were several insults all rolled into one, and anyway, Draco was always late because he hated his job. And now thanks to Potter, he hated his job even more. So really, when you thought about it, everything was Potter’s fault.

Draco just sneered. “Well I’m here now.”

“Well great,” said Potter, and took off his shirt.

The cry of a woman turned Draco’s chivalrous head, and he saw the reporter had become extremely flushed.

“... my mouth’s gone all dry,” she said in a breathless whisper.

Draco stared.

She took out her quill and started scribbling. “Would you describe his back as sleek and golden?”

“No!” Draco said, appalled.

Potter glanced around and gave no sign of noticing reporters developing lust-induced epilepsy. He undid his belt and a sort of faint sound rippled through the crowd, like wind through a cornfield.

“Are you coming or not, Malfoy?” he asked, kicking off his shoes. His jeans hit the pier.

The reporter made a sound mangled beyond all human understanding.

“Oh for God’s sake, woman,” Draco said. “Pull yourself together. I’m sorry, Potter, *what* was that? Coming where?”

Potter dived off the pier.

He emerged shaking back hair gone flat and black as seal fur just as Draco said: “In there? In the water with the *sea monster*? Oh no, no, no, Potter, I don’t think you quite understand my part in all this. I devise the brilliant plans, you see, and then I don’t endanger my brilliant brain by leaping into sea monster-infested waters.”

Potter shook his head again. “There’s water in my ears,” he told Draco. “What was that?”

“I don’t plan on joining you, Potter,” Draco said. “Bear it like a man.”

Potter squinted up at him, obviously not seeing all that well without his glasses. The myopic git could see well enough to sneer at him, though.

“Fine,” he said, lip curling. “If you’re scared.”

“Excuse me?” Draco asked, finding his voice a long, outraged way away. “I’m not-”

Potter shrugged a wet shoulder and turned away, swimming into an oncoming wave. Draco lost his hold on rational thought and his sense of self-preservation, feeling them scream as they went, and said ominously to the sea air: “*Right*.”

He felt the crowd would not be particularly appreciative of him stripping after Potter’s little show – Draco suspected that he’d got those muscles from *steroids*, he’d read about those in the drugs manual and really it would explain a lot of Draco’s school years if Potter had *roid rage* - but he did kick off his shoes and glare at Kingsley Shacklebolt before he went.

“I hope you’ll be sorry when I’m lost to the deep.”

“Not particularly,” replied Shacklebolt, and returned to peacefully contemplating the horizon.

Draco gave him a glare of hatred and reproach, and then threw himself into the sea. It was just as freezing cold and unpleasant as he’d expected, but he didn’t have time for that because he had to catch up to stupid Harry ‘If-you’re-scared’ Potter. He closed his eyes, cut through the waves and surfaced only to find Potter miles behind.

“Hey!” he shouted over the stretch of sea. “What’re you playing at?”

“What’re you talking about?” Potter demanded. “I’m – I don’t swim that well, okay? Jesus,” he added.

Draco squinted at him, scrunching his eyes shut against the stinging spray to watch him

properly, and saw that he was telling the truth. He was sort of clumsily dog-paddling. Through the *sea*. Towards a *sea monster*.

He wondered why Potter hadn't mentioned the whole swimming thing yesterday when they'd been discussing trapping the sea monster. Then he remembered that Potter was a crazy person, and besides that an arrogant git who probably thought that he'd discover super swimming powers in his time of need.

Draco cursed, put his head down and swam back. Swimming was easy, once you got used to the numbing cold and the imminent being devoured by monsters from the darkest depths of the ocean.

"All right, come on," he said irritably. "Put your arm around my neck."

"I will not," said Potter flatly, looking annoyed and astonished. "I'm all right."

"Sea monsters have pow-er-ful magic," Draco told him, as if explaining to a child. "That cage – see the cage? – is not going to hold it for long. If the monster escapes, it will eat us. I'm not getting eaten because Muggles don't teach their children how to swim properly."

"Most Muggles do," Potter said, looking even more annoyed. He didn't argue the point when Draco grabbed his arm, slung it around Draco's neck and started forcibly hauling him towards the sea monster, though. He was probably dying for his moment in the spotlight. "Don't make assumptions about-"

"I don't care!" Draco said loudly, and put his head under the water. A few steady strokes in blissful silence, and he popped up from the waves. "See?" he said to Potter. "Wasn't that easier? Now here we are, and here's the nice-"

Then Draco got his first proper look at the sea monster.

It was huge and terrifying. It had eyes the size of caverns and filled with blank hunger, and fangs the size of pillars. Its great green body was doubled up dozens of times within the cage, and the bars creaked as it moved.

Draco became suddenly convinced that he hadn't carried the one in his calculations, and the cage wouldn't hold the monster for two minutes.

This thing should have been fought by battalions. This thing should have been fought by *armies*.

Instead it was just him and Potter, and Potter, Draco thought hysterically, didn't even have his clothes on.

"You all right, Malfoy?" Potter inquired.

Some crazed defiant part of Draco's mind rose from the crippling terror to answer at once: "Absolutely fine! Never better!"

"Okay," Potter said doubtfully, and then he took a deep breath, looked up at the monster and

hissed long and low.

Sound carried horribly well over water, and besides Potter was practically talking in Draco's ear. Draco took deep calming breaths and tried not to think of red eyes in the darkness. It wasn't him. It was just stupid Potter. If Draco could understand him, he'd probably hear him saying 'Er' in his stupid snake language.

The soothing familiarity of reflecting on how annoying Potter was soothed Draco. He was also distracted by the fact that Potter was leaning on Draco more heavily as he spoke to the snake, and the stupid muscles he'd probably worked on to impress overly impressionable young girls weighed a ton.

Draco tried to get a better grip on him, and then the sea monster answered, its hot breath blowing the wet hair back from Draco's face. The sea monster's breath smelled overwhelmingly of rotten fish.

Draco tried hard not to breathe himself, and also tried not to imagine that the monster was saying 'I will eat you up and crunch your bones' and Potter was saying 'Eat the blond one, the Dark Mark makes him extra spicy.'

After a moment, Potter stopped and cursed. "She's under Imperius," he said shortly. "It was Dolohov."

"Son of a *bitch*," Draco said. "I knew Dolohov was dirty. He never should've got that pardon."

"He won't get another one," Potter said in a particularly grim tone.

The monster hissed again, and Draco's sense of smell shut down.

"What's it saying now?" he asked in a stifled voice.

"She," Potter corrected absently. "Just thank you."

"Oh I *see*," Draco said. "It's a girl monster. How silly of me, I shouldn't have worried at all. She's just tossing her gills coquettishly and saying 'oh however can I thank you? Harry Potter, you're my hero!'"

Potter bit back a laugh, and Draco was rather gratified.

"Stop raving, Malfoy," Potter said, and Draco was considerably less gratified. He considered leaving Potter to drown, but there were hundreds of witnesses on the pier and anyway, Draco probably would've gone down with him.

They climbed up the steps of the pier and went to report to Kingsley Shacklebolt. The reporter performed rather a complicated dance trying to stop Potter getting to his clothes and Draco despaired of womankind.

"Sorry," Potter said. "Could you – you're kind of in my way."

“Move it along,” Draco drawled. “I’m catching my death here in these wet clothes. I can feel the chill settling into my lungs. Then the pneumonia will come. And I will die.”

“Maybe you should’ve taken your clothes off before jumping into the ocean,” Potter muttered, snatching his jeans out from under a dancing heel.

“Potter,” Draco asked in an innocent and conversational tone. “What’s Parseltongue for ‘Screw you’?”

Potter looked up from doing up his jeans, grinned faintly, and hissed at him.

“... oh my,” said the reporter.

Draco hissed experimentally and Potter shook his head.

“You’re just kind of – sneezing at me in Parseltongue,” he said, grinning wider.

Draco was still hissing quietly when Shacklebolt walked up to them and asked for their report, which was just Draco’s luck. Nevertheless, he seemed pleased with the report and he even said they could interrogate Dolohov.

“As long as you don’t try to feed the prisoner Veritaserum again,” he said levelly to Draco.

“I didn’t!” Draco protested. “It wasn’t Veritaserum! It was a cunning ploy. I was trying to *psych him out*.”

“And as long as you don’t punch the prisoner again,” Shacklebolt said to Potter.

“Sir,” Potter said, which Draco noticed wasn’t a yes or a no. He almost approved: it was sneaky.

The reporter tried frantically to interview Potter while Draco scanned the pier for Katie Bell. She wasn’t there.

“-Look,” he heard the woman say. “Here’s my address. Owl me if you ever feel like – a private interview. Any time. Day or night.”

Potter chucked the address into a bin as everyone headed back for the Portkey.

“God,” he said. “Anything for an interview, right?”

Draco scanned his face incredulously for a sign of sarcasm, and found none. Then he put it together: of course, Potter didn’t notice. After all, every woman in sight had been diving for Potter with a yowling sound since he was sixteen. Why would he ever have to notice someone was flirting with him? He obviously conducted his affairs much like Blaise Zabini, who occasionally glanced over the swooning crowds and picked out someone who couldn’t believe their luck.

He narrowed his eyes at the back of Potter’s scruffy head and was disgusted by the blatant unfairness of life. At least Zabini had classical features and was impeccably groomed, he

thought. Also, there was the whole part Veela thing.

With Potter it was obviously just the celebrity. And possibly the muscle-enhancing steroids. And quite probably the Love Potion cologne.

These reflections did not make Draco feel any better, since Potter was clearly ravished every night by a lust-crazed horde and he couldn't work out how to make Katie Bell give him a smile.

*

That night when Draco got home he crawled onto the sofa, moaned, threw his hand over his eyes and commanded Crabbe and Goyle to leave him lest they see a strong man weep.

"Take your shirt off," Crabbe ordered, every inch the healer. "What happened?"

"Well, we interrogated a sea monster and then we caught the bad guy and then we squeezed a confession out of him," Draco said triumphantly.

"Today at work I made a really nice risotto," Goyle volunteered, and looked thoughtful. "Your day was probably better, though. But why are you covered in bruises? Did the bad guy resist arrest – really, really hard? Did the sea monster?"

"Well, no," Draco said. "Potter made these. Be careful, Crabbe, I fear I may have internal bleeding."

"Oh, that's *it*," said Crabbe. "No. Absolutely not. If he's punching you now he'll be cutting you up in the Aurors' bathrooms by Monday. I'm going to go talk to Shacklebolt."

"What?" Draco said, sitting bolt upright and ignoring the agony in sheer horror at the idea of Crabbe going to his boss' office and saying that Harry Potter had been cruel to his little Draco. "No, you're not. No, look, it's not like – we weren't fighting. We were sparring," he explained helpfully. "In the practise rooms. Aurors do that. To, you know, test their reflexes and build up their strength and they heal each other afterwards."

"Yes *but he didn't*," said Crabbe, angrily.

"Ah well," Draco said. "About that. He did fix the bloody nose. He might've – not known about the covered in bruises and so forth."

"Malfoy," Crabbe said, in his slow, heavy, explain-this-to-me-carefully voice. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"I couldn't do that," Draco told him, outraged. "That would've been admitting he'd won!"

"I'm fairly sure he was able to work that out!" Crabbe shouted.

"Now, Vince," Goyle scolded. "Malfoy's hurt. Please use your indoor voice."

Draco looked for a way to escape, but both Goyle and Crabbe were totally capable of

blocking any doors and windows, and he wasn't at his speediest right now.

"I landed a few good punches," Draco argued. "He didn't know he'd won by very much. And next time, *I'll* win!"

Overcome by the force (Draco presumed) of his argument, Crabbe tottered into a chair and put his face in his hands. "I'm getting these terrible flashbacks to school," he told them in a hollow voice. "And a migraine."

"You should go to bed, Malfoy," Goyle told him kindly. "I'll bring you up something to eat."

Crabbe lifted his head. "Malfoy," he began in a reluctant voice.

"Vince, not when he's like this," Goyle hissed.

Draco sat up again, more carefully this time. He'd had enough of hissing for the day. "What," he said. "What is it?"

"It's an Owl from Azkaban," Crabbe said.

Draco got up without another word and took the Owl, and sat on the stairs and read it. It was just the normal Owl, saying that Lucius Malfoy had requested and received permission for a visit from his son. Draco turned it over and over in his hands, paper pale in the dim light.

He couldn't go. He couldn't go.

He'd gone once, right after the war ended. Dad had sat, skeletal and wearing worn prison clothes, and talked in a brittle politician's voice about how Fudge could be manipulated and bribed into letting him out, and inquired how Draco's mother was doing, and carefully outlined his plans for the future.

Draco had shook and sweated, and said very little, least of all that Scrimgeour was in office now and he didn't have any truck with Death Eaters, that Dad would never leave the prison, and that Mother had been dead for years.

He was almost sure his father knew, but not sure enough to tell him. He just sat there and let Dad tell him what to do.

He hadn't been able to go back.

There was a mirror set in the wall of their hall, gleaming slightly in the low light. Draco saw himself in it, hunched and desperate on the stairs.

He'd never cared much about the way he looked – he knew he wasn't spectacular and he didn't mind particularly. He didn't find good looks all that interesting. He'd known that he was like his father and he had minded about that, but it was always in a smaller, paler, less significant way.

His father's face had been sharpened by starvation in Azkaban, pale with never going outside, an air of desperation clinging to him despite the way he strived for confidence. He'd never

been more like Draco.

Draco looked at the mirror now, and then turned his face away from the hungry ghost inside it.

He burned the Owl.

The next morning he rolled out of bed at a disgustingly early hour and went out for a run. He was going to have to start going to the gym with Crabbe too, he realised as he ran in the cold rain. He had to get faster and stronger, he couldn't visit his dad and he couldn't seem to convince Katie, but he could do this. He thought he could.

Potter had said: "Good fight," when they were done yesterday.

Of course, he'd also fought with systematic, concentrated fury, edging on actually terrifying at certain points. Draco might've been scared if he had not known down to his bones that whatever else he might be, Potter was a complete twerp and it was Draco's sacred mission to show the world.

He did wonder why Potter, who had everything, seemed to be so angry at the world. He blamed it on the roid rage.

*

The first time he was on stakeout with Potter, he brought a huge thermos of coffee and about a thousand sugary snacks. It was very important that he stay awake.

Not a lot of his partners had wanted Draco out on stakeout, which had suited him fine, but he knew he had kind of erratic sleeping patterns and all this running and weight-lifting wasn't helping him keep awake at nights. He really didn't need to fall asleep on the job in front of Potter: for one thing, he was told he murmured pretty constantly in his sleep and Potter would never let him live it down.

He was distracted by the fact they had a real Muggle car that was enchanted to go invisible to sit in. Usually Aurors had to huddle in their cloaks.

"This is *great*," he said, trailing his fingers curiously over what Potter told him was called the 'dashboard.'

"It's not bad," Potter said. "Ron sold it to me. It's a thing he's doing – you know, just while he's waiting to get through the Auror exams."

He gave Draco a look that dared him to say anything, but actually Draco'd had his gloat out the first time Weasley failed the Auror exams. Anyway, he was out alone in the dark with Potter. Potter could kill him and there'd be no witnesses.

"I bet lots of people want an invisible car," Draco said instead of gloating. "He should advertise. Pansy's in advertising," he added with a certain pride. "She's excellent. She's in Bulgaria doing something about talking furs right now, but he should Owl her when she gets back."

“Pansy,” Potter said carefully, as if he found it rather hard to recall one of their classmates of seven freaking years. “Pansy Parkinson. Your girlfriend.”

“Yes, when we were sixteen,” Draco agreed cautiously.

He was tempted to say ‘Ginny Weasley. Your girlfriend’ but he didn’t because of the alone in the dark and being killed without witnesses thing. Not to mention that they couldn’t actually have a fight, because they had to sit in the car and watch this man’s house. Hours alone with Potter and forbidden to fight. Draco found it unnatural and perverse.

Ginny Weasley, as everyone in the Aurors’ gossip pit knew, had left for Paris under a cloud. Draco believed the rumour that she’d discovered Potter in bed with the Patil twins. These things happened at war. So Draco had heard.

Mostly what had happened to him at war were terrifying sessions with the Dark Lord, lots of hiding at Professor Snape’s house and even some hiding at the old Black house, and escaping actually having to kill people by dissecting bodies of war victims for Professor Snape’s Potions. Draco did not treasure these special memories.

“So, um, what happened to Crabbe and Goyle?” Potter asked abruptly. Seeing Potter try to make polite conversation was like seeing a bear at a tea party.

“They live with me,” Draco said. “We all share a house in Knightsbridge. Goyle is a chef in a restaurant in the West End where they say the food is magic,” Draco permitted himself a smirk, “and Crabbe works in St Mungo’s. He’s a nurse.”

“A nurse,” Potter repeated.

“It’s actually a noble calling and allows for much more personal interaction with the patients,” Draco said sharply. He hadn’t gloated over Weasley but oh, he could. Let Potter say one word about Draco’s friends, that was all he asked.

Potter blinked. “Er. I’m sure.”

Draco relaxed a bit. Potter studied the house, which entirely failed to do anything criminal.

“I don’t go out on stakeout much,” Potter said at last. “People generally say that it’s okay and I’ll be bored and I can go home. Not that I’m saying – I mean, I’ll stay.”

“They send you home too?” Draco asked. “Huh.”

Potter frowned, profile outlined in the dim light becoming somewhat less than perfect. “What d’you mean, they send me home *too*?”

Draco held up his left arm with the shirt sleeve open. Potter turned his head and looked at the Dark Mark, green eyes sharp but not betraying much. A lot of people shivered and looked away when they saw it. There weren’t many alive and free who bore the Mark these days.

Draco hadn’t expected Potter to shiver or look away. He’d seen plenty of Marks in his time.

“Alone in the dark with a Death Eater,” Draco explained, smirking. “They get a little scared.”

“Oh really?” said Potter noncommittally.

“Sure,” Draco said, and smirked some more. “Why, aren’t you scared?”

Potter threw back his head and laughed. “Yeah, Malfoy. I’m terrified,” he said in a lazy, amused voice, and reclined his seat.

“Show me how to do that,” Draco commanded him. After some difficulties he made his car chair lean back too, and was even more pleased with the car. “It reminds me of the movies I have watched about Muggle Aurors,” he told Potter, which was high praise.

“Um – cop movies?” asked Potter.

“I go to the cinema to see them,” Draco informed him. “I blend in with the Muggles like a snake in the grass. I can do this, because I came top in Muggle Studies and I know their Muggle ways. It’s research, you see.”

“Right,” Potter said. “Of course.”

“That is why I like this car,” Draco said. “Also I want a gun, but Shacklebolt said I couldn’t have one.” He brooded about this for a moment. “I think Shacklebolt might secretly be an evil robot sent from the future to destroy me.”

Potter blinked. “What?”

“Do you know what a robot is?” Draco inquired.

“I – do,” Potter answered slowly, as if he was afraid to encourage Draco. Draco got that a lot.

“Well, think about it,” Draco said. “The inhuman stillness of his face. The flat monotone voice. The obvious evil intent to destroy me so I cannot benefit future generations.”

“Malfoy,” Potter said, biting back a laugh in the middle of Draco’s name. “Are you *joking*?”

“I’m mostly joking,” Draco replied in a thoughtful way. “Before my first cup of coffee, though, I really believe it.”

Potter laughed again, sounding slightly incredulous about it. “You are terrifying me a bit now, actually,” he said. “Are you opening that bag of marshmallows?” he added after a moment, and Draco did.

The next day at work Draco walked around with his cup of coffee humming Muggle songs to annoy people and trying to overhear gossip the way he did, and thought about what Potter had said. People had sent him home at stakeout time too. Draco couldn’t work out why.

They couldn’t be scared of him. He was their big shiny hero who’d saved the world.

After thorough surveillance of the room, he came to the conclusion that they were, and that was why.

Draco rested his coffee cup against the gurgling water dispenser and watched them all. He didn't think the other Aurors would've thought of themselves as afraid – that wasn't quite it. They all probably thought they were just intimidated, or being respectful.

A couple of the ones who'd been Potter's previous partners, and thus had presumably sparred with him, were afraid and knew it.

It wasn't like – everyone'd had to do things in the war, but most people their age had parents to protect them, had still been in school when the worst things were happening. Nobody had been in the thick of it quite like Potter had, because there'd been a prophecy and there was no-one else.

Draco hadn't been in the centre of the war, but he'd been close enough to know what people in the centre had to do, and how it changed them.

He supposed he could see how people might possibly be afraid of Potter.

But he is such a *twerp*, his soul cried, and he had to remind himself that for some reason people didn't see that. People were so blind.

People even avoided touching Potter, he noticed. They kept their safe respectful distance.

Draco shook his head at people and went over to the stupid two-person thankfully-with-a-partition desk they were supposed to share. He shoved Potter's shoulder by way of greeting. Potter froze for such a brief moment that afterwards Draco wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it.

"You're late again," he said, scribbling at his report.

Draco picked up the new cup of coffee on his desk and drained it before he thought about why it was there, and where exactly it had come from. Then he stared at the empty cup, hoping to find an epiphany at the bottom. The cup failed him.

He glanced over at Potter, saw an inky straggle of bad grammar, and forgot about epiphanies and forcibly seized his report. "Give that to me," he said. "You're not writing reports like that any more. Oh my God, what does this even say? Are you one of those functional illiterates they tell us about in the papers?"

*

As a reward for the sea monster case, the next case Shacklebolt gave them was brilliant.

Typically, this meant Potter had to try and ruin everything.

"No," he said, going red. "No, no, no."

"Yes," Draco interrupted. "Forgive him, sir, he's crazy, his war wounds are acting up. He doesn't know what he's saying. We'd be delighted to go to that club. I promise to stay there

all night, night after night, until the heinous trafficking in drugs is well and truly foiled.”

Potter looked mutinous. “I could be out there *fighting*.”

“There is more to being an Auror than fighting,” Shacklebolt told him. “Not that one would know that from your record, Mr Potter.”

Potter’s fingers closed on a lamp.

Draco knocked his hand away. “Don’t even think it, Potter,” he said. “You’re not having a tantrum in the boss’ office. Have some dignity, my God.”

Potter made a growling sound and crossed his arms over his chest.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat. “And Mr Malfoy,” he said. “If you could please refrain from taking bribes or acting in any way inappropriate for an Auror.”

“I was not taking bribes that time,” Draco snapped at him. “I happen to be independently wealthy, thank you so much. I was pretending to be an Auror who could be bought so that we could infiltrate-”

“You shouldn’t have pretended so well that your partner reported you,” Shacklebolt said in his emotionless bass.

“Is it my fault that Jenkins had all the intelligence of an exceptionally backward squirrel?” Draco demanded. “No. No it is not. It might be the fault of whoever is hiring these wretches, who are a danger to themselves and others and who I might add-”

“Now who’s having a tantrum in the boss’ office?” Potter asked, *sotto voce*.

Draco lapsed into furious silence, crossing his arms over his chest. Shacklebolt looked at them both a bit oddly and then told them to get out of his office. Draco suspected he had some quality pacing to do.

“He was giving us a funny look,” Draco said darkly once they were back at their desk and he was showing Potter how to draft a proper initial report. “I told you he was an evil robot.”

“Yes,” Potter said gravely. “Everything makes sense now.”

Draco laughed and then bit down on his tongue. “Stop that,” he said. “You’re not allowed to be funny. You were never funny at school.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” Potter muttered.

Draco looked up from the report in outrage. “I beg your pardon?” he said coldly. “I’ll have you know I was hilarious at school. Everybody thought so.”

“I didn’t,” Potter said cheerfully.

“And what do you know?” Draco inquired, narrow-eyed. “I had the whole Slytherin table in

stitches every day. I was a *laugh riot*.”

“Maybe they just felt sorry for you,” Potter suggested, mouth quirking.

“Slytherins know a good thing when they see it,” Draco said. “Anyway, if I wasn’t funny, why did Ginny Weasley *steal my routine*?”

“She what?” Potter said. “Your what?”

“Stole it,” said Draco, who would neither forgive nor forget. “Right out from under me. The whole thing, except for my impressions of you since she was courting you at the time, and let me tell you, that wasn’t much to build on. Obviously once she’d started using my impressions I could never use them again. They were all tainted by Gryffindor.”

“I remember Ginny used to do impressions,” Potter said slowly.

“In *sixth* year she did impressions,” Draco informed him bitterly. “Mine. I was a little distracted at the time and then I turned around and suddenly she was doing my impressions as part of her, I don’t know, big self-reinvention as the life and soul of the Quidditch team. Don’t ask me. Women are incomprehensible, and also thieves.”

Potter cleared his throat, frowned and said: “Don’t talk about Ginny that way.”

He leaned over the report again, his face set in bitter, tired lines. It was possible, Draco thought, that one of the other rumours about the great Potter and Weasley split was true. Perhaps Ginny really had run off to Paris to be with Gabrielle Delacour, and Potter’s heart was broken.

Oh well, Draco thought. The strip club would cheer them both up.

*

The strip club was in a basement lit only by pink and purple spotlights, which lingered mainly on the stages. It seemed to be a place to dance as well as a strip club – there were people on the dance floor about as well-clothed as the people on the stages, though considerably less well lit. The bartenders appeared to be bartending in the dark. Muggles were weird.

It was a wonderful place.

Frankly, it had been four years since Draco had seen breasts, on a handful of shining occasions involving Pansy and the prefects’ bathroom. He’d been starting to worry that he’d forget what they were like.

This was the best assignment ever.

“This is the worst assignment ever,” Potter muttered. He was looking at the floor.

Of course he was, Draco thought. Naturally Potter was entirely unimpressed: he probably saw breasts better than these every night.

Just as Draco was thinking about the unfairness of the universe, he realised that the club was stirring around them: that people from the dance floor and the bar had spotted Potter and now gently but inevitably, like waves to a bespectacled shore, they were making their way towards him.

Not fair, Draco thought. They didn't even *know* he was famous.

Not to mention, it was going to be pretty hard to scope out the terrain while trying not to be crushed by the oncoming surge of Potter's misguided admirers. Unless whoever had contacts in the magical world and thus access to certain very unsafe substances became besotted enough to lay their magical stash at Potter's feet, it was all up to Draco.

He patted Potter on the back. "I won't be a minute," he said. "Have fun. Don't let anyone ravish you, we're on duty."

"*Excuse me?*" Potter said, sounding scandalised. He took a look at the oncoming masses, took a step back and said: "I'll come with you."

"You'd only cramp my style," Draco told him, and dashed away. He saw Potter attempt to follow him, only to be intercepted by three women.

Some people's lives were so difficult.

Draco went to the bar.

He was putting back a fourth shot glass when, to his mild surprise, the come-hither glances he'd been sending actually worked and the woman he'd been looking at approached.

"Hi there," she said. "I'm Susan."

Draco smiled, slow and charming. "Hi, Susan. I'm Draco."

"That's a cool name," Susan told him, smiling slowly back. "I haven't seen you here before."

"I heard this was a place where you could have a lot of – fun," Draco said.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Usually it is. Tonight nobody can go downstairs, because-" she dropped her voice discreetly. "Do you see the gorgeous guy over there?"

Draco looked over at Potter, who was not waving but drowning in a sea of women. "I suppose," he said grudgingly.

"Could he *be* more obviously a cop?" Susan asked.

Draco was cheered by this clear evidence that Potter was terrible at covert operations and the worst Auror ever. He gave Susan a much more genuine smile and Susan smiled back again, her teeth sliding over her lower lip in an obviously deliberate gesture.

"What do you do, Draco?"

Draco thought frantically back to Muggle Studies and the songs that made up their culture: he thought *tinker tailor soldier-*

“Sailor,” he decided, and then smiled again because he was pleased with himself. “I’m a sailor.”

Susan laughed, throwing her head back. “Well, sailor,” she said. “Do you want to dance?”

Draco smirked and took her hand, then drew her close to him on the dance floor. She was about as tall as he was, but he still managed to smile down at her, reaching up to push her hair off her forehead.

“I like your tattoo,” Susan whispered. Draco’s gaze flickered to his left arm as alarm flickered instinctively inside him. A witch would have screamed at the sight of it. Susan pressed close to him and whispered: “Where did you get it?”

“In a cave with a very evil man,” Draco whispered back, his breath on her mouth. She angled her head to catch the curve of his mouth as he continued: “I’ve led a wild life, Susan.”

“It’s about to get wilder,” Susan told him, and dragged him that fraction towards her, so her mouth - and her whole body - was pressed against his.

She kissed him forcefully and Draco smiled in triumph, mouth curving against hers, and kissed her back, easing the kiss down, smoothing it out and making it long and slow and sweet. Susan paused, seeming startled, and then she smiled too and Draco slipped her the tongue over the lipstick-slick curve of her mouth. She turned into moving liquid under his hands, and he stroked up her back, along her shiny red dress, long soothing strokes, and then he said: “Sorry – I have to go to the bathroom.”

Susan pushed herself up against him and said: “I could go with you.”

“Interesting idea,” Draco said, and smiled. “But no. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” Susan whispered.

Draco made sure he was lost in the crowd before he moved towards Potter. He had to elbow quite a lot of women in the back on his way there.

A predatory redhead seemed to be leading the charge and Potter had his back to the wall. Draco wasn’t sure why: surely predatory redheads were Potter’s type.

“Go away,” Potter said in a clipped voice, looking over her head.

“Your conversational skills never fail to amaze me,” Draco drawled, at which point Potter thrust the redhead away bodily. He looked very irritated and he’d gone all red.

“There you are,” he snapped. “What did you think you were *doing*? We’re supposed to be-”

“Come away at once,” Draco ordered, and he seized Potter’s wrist and dragged him off

before he could tell an entire army of women about their mission.

“Come back soon,” the redhead called after them forlornly.

Once they were out in the empty street and the cool moonlight, Draco dropped Potter’s wrist and Potter turned on him.

“Are you completely drunk or are you insane?” he asked. “Why were – what were – We’re on a mission! And you were making out with a man!”

Wonderful, Draco thought. As if there weren’t enough glaring problems with Potter’s personality. He had to be a homophobe as well.

“Oh, I was not,” he snapped.

“I-” Potter stopped and looked vaguely horrified. “Okay, you’re drunk,” he said. “But that – that was a man. Kind of obviously a man. In a dress. Obviously you weren’t aware of-”

“If you are talking about the fact that Susan was biologically a man,” Draco said. “Naturally I was aware of it. I did, after all, get the opportunity to observe her much more closely than you did. I think it’s kind of tasteless of you to mention it, though.”

Potter’s mouth sort of opened and shut a few times.

“She was dressed like a woman and acted like a woman,” Draco said. “So obviously she should be treated as a woman. It isn’t easy for the Muggles,” he added reprovingly. “When one of them is born feeling they’re the wrong sex, they can’t just take a Potion to fix it.”

“There are Potions to fix – what?” said Potter, staring blankly.

“Poor little Muggles,” Draco said, feeling much more virtuous and understanding than Potter. “I heard they need horrible invasive surgery. It must be very hard for them.” Potter was still staring, so he added crossly: “Come on, Potter, it’s not like someone *in our year* didn’t turn into a woman.”

“They *did*?” Potter said, and stared some more.

“In sixth year,” Draco said, and stared back. “Did you not notice? How could you not notice?”

“I was busy in sixth year,” Potter said defensively.

“No, *I* was busy in sixth year,” Draco snapped. “But I still noticed when one of the Hufflepuffs started sleeping in the other dorm!”

“One of the Hufflepuffs,” Potter said. “Uh – which one? Was it Ernie Macmillan?”

“No,” Draco said.

“Well, I know it wasn’t Smith,” Potter said, with a funny bitter smile. “Um,” he said. “I don’t

know all their names.”

Maybe Ginny Weasley had run off to Paris with Zacharias Smith, Draco speculated. What a comedown for Smith: Draco had quite liked him.

Then what Potter had said actually registered with him.

“What? Oh, I don’t believe this. How can you not know all their names?” Draco demanded. “We were all in school together for *seven years*! You shared classes with them! There was a *roll call*!”

“You don’t need to shout,” Potter said coldly.

“Part of our job is information gathering! Do you know who Stephen Cornfoot is?”

“No I don’t,” said Potter. “Is that the one who turned into a woman?”

“No, that was Finch-Fletchley,” Draco replied absentmindedly. God, Potter was crazier than Draco had ever realised, this was so *weird*.

“What?” Potter squawked. “*Justin* Finch-Fletchley?”

Draco eyed him disapprovingly. “*Justine*.” He thought for a minute and then laughed. “I can’t believe that’s one of the only names you know, and she changed it.”

“Oh my God,” said Potter, looking poleaxed. Because he was crazy stubborn, however, he shook his head, apparently dismissing important facts about their world and all of his classmates’ names. “Anyway you shouldn’t be getting drunk and making out with anyone,” he persisted. “It’s totally unprof-”

“Who’s drunk?” Draco asked coolly. “Do I seem drunk to you?”

“You seem crazy to me,” Potter said after a pause. “But-”

“I put the bartender under Imperius so she’d give me water in shot glasses,” Draco said. “And I made eyes at someone who was obviously in the know about the drug trade and on the lookout for Aurors. I mean cops,” he added, pleased with the word. “And...” he fished inside his pocket, and beckoned Potter with one finger. “Look at this.”

Potter leaned forward to see, and Draco opened his hand to show him a tiny key.

“It was taped to the back of her bra,” Draco said with modest pride. “She mentioned going downstairs. I bet there’s something locked up down there that we might be interested in seeing.”

Potter’s face was impassive, and then Draco realised what exactly he’d just said. Admitted to using Imperius, and also engaged in unprofessional behaviour with a suspect, and oh God, this was going to be another one of those times with the reports and having to Explain His Actions and – no it wasn’t, because this was his last chance and he was just going to get *fired*-

Then he realised that Potter had slowly, wickedly, started to smile.

“Wow, Malfoy,” he said, and actually laughed. “Excellent.” He took the key. “Let’s go break in now.”

“Yeah?” Draco asked, and sounded incredulous even to himself. “Yes,” he said. “Obviously. You don’t need to tell me I’m a genius,” he added. “It’s been clear to me for years.”

“You have lipstick on your mouth, genius,” Potter said, rolling his eyes. He tossed the key and caught it, glittering in the light of a street lamp.

Feeling weirdly light in the chest area, Draco scrubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Gone?”

“No.” Potter turned and looked at him, then took a swift step towards him. He hesitated, black lashes lowered, then reached out and touched the edge of Draco’s mouth roughly. “There,” he said, looking away and stepping back.

“You might at this point be thinking, but Malfoy, how are we going to break in?” Draco said brightly after a moment. “Well. I have a plan.”

The corner of Potter’s mouth came up. He said: “I thought you might.”

*

Draco had obviously won the club case, and he decided that he’d actually won the sea monster case as well.

“On points,” he explained. “I thought of the cage and I helped with the swimming. So I’m ahead six to four.”

“Malfoy, nobody knows about the points system but you,” Crabbe said. “It doesn’t count if he doesn’t know.”

It did count: Crabbe and Goyle were so wrong. They were also acting all twitchy and strange these days. When the news came in that Potter had gone off and defeated some ghouls all on his own Draco felt his eyes narrow and saw hunted looks being exchanged over the dinner table.

“Excuse me,” he said in a strangely peaceful tone, channelling his inner Kingsley Shacklebolt. “I need to go.”

When he came back, Crabbe said at once: “Malfoy, what did you do?”

“I chained him up,” Draco said. “It was the only way. He urgently requires to be restrained, and thus – restraints!”

“You didn’t,” Crabbe said.

Draco smiled brilliantly. "Oh, I did."

"You cannot keep doing this, it is crazy," Crabbe told him. "You need to change partners."

"I don't want to change partners," Draco snapped, and stole the last piece of bread.

He hadn't told Crabbe and Goyle how bad things were at work: hadn't told them that this was his last chance with the Aurors. He'd never meant for things to get this bad, but everyone was so stupid and most of them disliked him, and he didn't react well to that and he'd started coming in late, and the rules were so stupid that he'd started breaking them just to spite people, and before he'd realised it everything had just spun out of control and he felt almost too trapped and miserable to care.

He couldn't tell them because then they'd tell him to quit, and he couldn't quit because this was what Katie wanted.

He remembered perfectly well that there'd been a time when what Katie wanted had not been the most important thing in the world. She'd just been this Gryffindor girl he hardly knew and then he'd almost killed her and he hadn't been able to stop himself running around after her, terrified that she was going to break somehow and he would have killed her after all.

He carried her books to class and watched her all the time in frozen terror, and it was only slowly that he realised she thought he had a crush on her. He didn't care, really: Katie was kind to him because of it, and let him hang around and he had to hang around and watch her in case she died. His libido had been pretty much switched off at the time, what with the constant nightmares about his parents dying edging out more pleasant dreams.

Then he hadn't killed Dumbledore and he'd had to flee the school and Snape had saved him and his nightmares had all come true.

He remembered being told that his mother was dead, carelessly, by Mad-Eye Moody on the steps of the Black house. "These things happen at war," Moody said, eyeing him with distaste, and Draco wanted to scream at him: not to my mother, not to me.

But they did: to Mother, to him. He opened the door and almost fell into the hall but someone caught him, almost automatically, and then Potter said in disgusted tones: "Oh it's you," and somewhat irritably: "Are you all right?"

"I'm perfectly fine. Get off me," Draco had snapped, pride rising somehow out of the endless wretched misery, and he was going to collapse, he was quite aware of that, but he could hold onto control for a moment and Potter wouldn't see it. He could do that much.

He stalked up the stairs with an appearance of absolute calm, and then went into the nearest room and cried as if he was four years old, a stupid howling, screaming thing who wanted it all to stop, wanted it to go away, wanted his *Mother*.

He woke up to find Katie in the room, sitting beside the window and looking at him with quiet concern. He blinked swollen eyes and she told him to rest, told him she was so sorry, and her blue eyes were soft with sympathy and her hair was lit gold by the sunlight and she was the most beautiful thing in the world and he loved her impossibly.

And he'd almost killed her, he'd thought, then and now, sick at the thought of what he could have thoughtlessly destroyed. He'd wanted to save her somehow, save her a hundred times and make up for everything, but he couldn't save her, he was left trying to save strangers he didn't care anything about and he couldn't see the point.

She'd said, though: "I hear after the war Harry is joining the Aurors. I think that's so brave – it's really, it's admirable, you know, that after all this is over he still wants to help people."

With anyone else Draco would have dismissed this as raving, but this was Katie and he loved her, and he listened intently. Well, he'd thought, he could do that too. Just as well as Potter. Better. She'd be proud of him.

He was less sure about that when the ravening ghouls Potter had defeated turned out to be just the front runners of a plague of ravening ghouls.

Potter took him to the graveyard this time. Draco was glad Potter had learned his lesson.

Draco was less glad when he was walking through a misty freezing graveyard and four ghouls lunged at him, teeth snapping and faces bloody, and he killed one with the standard issue flaming sword and then fell over a gravestone in the mist and dropped his sword in a slimy puddle.

He scrambled for the sword as the flame died, stared up at the ghouls' teeth, and cursed his luck.

At that point Potter pulled the nearest ghoul away by its hair and sliced off its head. The other ghouls snarled and turned on him and Potter snarled right back at them, looking lit up as if facing bloodthirsty ghouls was the most fun he'd had for weeks. They came at him and he swung again and again, sword bright in the darkness, mist bright white with the sword's light and crowning his black hair.

They were all dead in seconds. Some of their blood got on Draco and it smelled really terrible.

Potter still looked elated and in his element, chest rising and falling hard, as he offered Draco his hand. Draco took it and glared.

"Oh, you may have won the battle, Potter," he said as they washed their hands. "I admit you're ahead on points. But you have not won the war."

"Points?" Potter said interrogatively, and Draco explained. "Oh," Potter said, resting his chin on the pommel of his flaming sword and looking thoughtful. "So I get ten points for this," he said.

"No, nine points, because I worked out the pattern and established which graveyard they'd be going to. One point to me," Draco told him sternly.

"But I still won," Potter said. "I should get something. For winning."

“You may be right. I will have to think more on this,” Draco admitted. “The points system needs refining.”

He went triumphantly home to tell Crabbe and Goyle that now Potter knew so the points system totally did count, and found Pansy having tea with them.

She looked beautiful, expensively dressed and extremely unhappy. Goyle was hanging solicitously over her, offering her scones. Crabbe looked embarrassed.

Draco went over to her immediately and leaned against the back of her chair, wrapping her black hair around his fingers and wrists like ribbons. “What’s the matter?”

“Viktor broke it off with me,” Pansy said, and kicked a chair with a pointed black toe.

“What an idiot,” Draco said. “We should have him killed.”

Pansy sniffed. “No. I cast a really complicated curse on him, and I want him to live so he can suffer the full effects.”

Draco played cat’s cradle with her long hair, lifting it to kiss her ear. “Well, if you insist on letting him live,” he said. “What can we, as your friends, do for you?”

Pansy sniffed again. “I was thinking you could get drunk with me.”

“Sure,” Draco said. “We can do that.”

Pansy brought out some Bulgarian vodka and they all got well and truly toasted. Pansy told them all in detail about Viktor Krum’s prowess in the bedroom or lack thereof, and Draco did vicious impressions of Krum’s accent.

“Vy do you say zese theengs to me?” he was saying as Crabbe and Goyle went upstairs to do unspeakable things. “All zer Bulgarian ladies, they admire my manly broomstick.”

Pansy snorted and hit his chest, her legs looped over his. She’d kicked off the pointed shoes, and now she hid a yawn against his shoulder. “Can I stay over?” she asked, yawning again. “I don’t think I can move.”

“You don’t have to,” Draco told her smoothly. “I’ll carry you.”

“Don’t be ridi-” Pansy said, and shrieked, throwing her arms around his neck, when he got up and made for the stairs.

It was considerably easier than the last time he’d tried it: he’d suspected the weightlifting was paying off. He was now up to two to eight in the sparring sessions with Potter, which wasn’t great but was considerably better than the starting point of half a point (on a technicality) to nine and the other, less technical half.

Once he got her on his bed, though, things were a little awkward, since he recalled she was now a single woman.

“I’ll take the sofa,” he said as soon as her head hit the pillow.

She pulled him down beside her. “Don’t be an idiot,” she murmured, and curled up close to him.

She smelled rather wonderful, and her breasts were crushed against his chest. Draco tried to be a gentleman and ignore it, as well as ignoring her warm mouth lying a breath away from his jaw.

Then she pressed that warm mouth to the spot between his ear and his jaw, and slid her mouth down to nip at his neck. Draco froze.

The tricky wench, he thought miserably but with a certain amount of affectionate pride. She knew perfectly well he had a neck thing.

She didn’t even need to use the tricks she’d found out in all the fourteen-to-sixteen year old rolling around they’d done, because Draco was *desperate*. Now that the job was less grindingly miserable and far more filled with adrenaline and strenuous physical activity, now that he’d kissed someone for the first time in two years... Before Susan the last time had been Mandy Brocklehurst when he was eighteen. She’d grabbed him in a shelter with the Potion bombs falling and snogged him wildly until it became clear they were going to live, at which point she never spoke to him again.

He tilted Pansy’s chin up and kissed her, stroking her hair, and she rolled easily on top of him, stretching so that their bodies fitted together at every point, and laughed when he groaned. He reached up blindly and traced the curve of her shoulder, the line of her collarbone with a light, light touch, slow and pausing every few minutes so she caught her breath, and by the time he traced a hand over her breast she’d made a noise of her own, and bit down on his lip.

He kissed her and kissed her, and she pressed down against him and kissed him back hungrily, both their hands roving, until her hands found his belt, and undid it.

The metallic clink stopped Draco for a moment, held him still and looking into her eyes.

“What is it?” she whispered, her mouth red. “Do you not want to?”

He looked up at her in disbelief. Of *course* he wanted to, he was dying for it, he was twenty years old and sometimes he worried that nobody in the world was ever going to want to with him. He was so, so tired of his manly purity. He wanted to right now.

Only-

“I love her,” he said in a low voice, and hated himself.

He looked at Pansy’s face change, and wished passionately for a moment that he was sixteen again and had never thought about any girl but her.

“It wouldn’t be – a big deal,” Pansy whispered finally.

Oh in that case, said Draco's libido, and almost leaped at her. But this was Pansy, and he knew her: they'd known each other a long time. He touched her face instead of anything else and said: "Wouldn't it?"

Pansy looked away, and then rolled off him, collapsing onto the pillow beside his.

Draco was afraid that there would be a long terrible wait into the night while they couldn't speak to each other, but he'd forgotten how much Pansy'd had to drink. She slung an arm over his chest in a gesture of peace, and was asleep almost at once.

He lay on his back staring up at the ceiling, obviously unable to go have any cold showers or whatever else came to mind since she was holding onto him, and contemplated his love life with despair. He had to prove himself to Katie, he had to prove he could be good enough and he could make her happy, that was all. He could do it. Things had been getting better lately. He wouldn't fail again.

He closed his hand over Pansy's arm against his chest, trying to settle into sleep with very little expectation of it happening any time in the near future, and grimaced to himself as he recalled that somewhere out there in this deeply unfair world, Potter was undoubtedly having a wild time with the Patil twins. Or something of that sort.

Unfair, Draco told his ceiling. It showed no sign of sympathy.

Chapter Two

Draco's reward for the preservation of his manly purity came the very next day. Though he had to get beaten up first.

He promised Potter a sparring session that morning as long as the reports were done, which – in illegible Potter fashion – they were. So it only seemed fair.

Draco noticed as they entered the sparring room, walking through people resting on benches and lifting weights, that the practise mats cleared as they came towards them. He and Potter were already circling each other, round the benches and weights, watching each other and ready for what was coming.

"Tell you what, Malfoy," Potter said, voice curling round the air in the same sort of way that his hand had curled around the hilt of his flaming sword. "You can have first swing."

Draco was aware, somewhere in the back of his mind, that it wasn't very clever to keep fighting with someone who massacred him every day and whose idea of a good time was killing ghouls wholesale. He certainly didn't like the bruises, he'd never been the type to start fights though when they started he didn't hold back.

"That's so kind," he drawled, and punched Potter hard, catching him off guard so that he fell backwards and sent a bench crashing. "So sorry," he said when Potter stared up at him with wide green eyes and made an incoherent snarling sound. "Were you not ready?"

He was getting *better*, though, every day. And it was a challenge, Draco thought as he watched Potter get up and stalk towards him, deliberately falling back so they reached the practise mats where any landing would be soft. Potter was very good at this, and Draco was damned if he was going to have it all his own way.

Potter hit him, quite lightly for a start, and Draco fell. He'd been learning to fall for the past few weeks and he could do it now, landing easy and rolling and pulling Potter's legs out from under him before Potter realised that Draco had meant to fall all along. Once Potter was down he kicked him in the stomach, but missed and kicked his ribs.

It was kind of like Quidditch, the way it should have been: no horrific anxiety about people watching, letting down your team, who happened to have a professional Quidditch broom in school: just racing blood, one on one, seeing who was really, truly better.

"You're getting better," Potter said in a low voice, possibly because he had just been kicked in the ribs.

Draco got to his feet. "I know," he answered, and then Potter moved like a snake and scythed his legs out from under him and he realised as his back hit the practise mats that he shouldn't have got to his feet while he was anywhere within range.

Potter was on him in a second, one hand pinning down his shoulder and one knee on his chest, the other hand planted beside Draco's face to brace himself over him. Potter grinned down at him. "You're not good enough," he murmured. "Not yet. Surrender?"

“I don’t *think* so,” Draco said, and bit down hard on the wrist by his head.

Idiot Gryffindor: he kept forgetting that Draco was perfectly prepared to bite. And pull hair.

Potter shouted, and Draco elbowed him in the throat. He remembered his lesson about rolling out of range this time and then he was up again, tasting blood in his mouth. He grinned this time.

After a moment Potter, crouching on the ground and looking ready to spring in any direction, grinned back. He sat waiting for Draco to move, which Draco calmly did not do.

“I can wait around here all day,” he said. “I really like it here. It’s peaceful. Nobody’s hitting me.”

“Things change, Malfoy,” Potter said, and lunged for him.

Draco just about managed to dodge the blow, then tried to kick Potter’s legs out from under him again, at which point Potter grabbed his arm, almost wrenched his shoulder out of its socket and Draco ended up on the floor with his arm twisted around and Potter’s knee in the small of his back.

“Mmmf,” he complained into the mat.

“Well if you’re going to *bite*,” Potter pointed out. “Some of us are bleeding, here.”

Draco lifted his face a crucial fraction of an inch from the mat. “Some of us *aren’t breathing*, here,” he said, testing the strength of Potter’s grip. It was pretty strong.

Potter leaned down closer to his ear and said: “So surrender.”

“Oh fine,” said Draco. “For now. Let me up.”

Potter did, and Draco scrambled to his feet and felt every muscle scream at him in despairing reproach. Potter was nursing his bleeding wrist.

“Good fight,” he said, like he’d said the first time.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Next one will be better.”

Potter laughed, a small slightly breathless sound in the back of his throat, and said: “Looking forward to it.”

*

It was after that the reward came.

He was filing away his and Potter’s case records – since he suspected that filing was yet another thing beyond Potter’s deeply limited abilities – and as did so Katie came in. She smiled when she saw him, and he wanted to take her smile and keep it in his pocket all day

long.

“Hi there,” she said. “I haven’t seen you around much lately.”

“My devotion is unaltered and unalterable,” Draco said, and laughed as if he didn’t mean it. He was aware the laugh wasn’t all that convincing.

She laughed too, a little uneasily as if she was joining in with him to be polite.

“I’ve – you’ve been doing really well,” she said in her soft voice. “You and Harry. I heard all about the sea monster and the drug bust.”

“He is a burden to me, but I soldier on,” Draco told her.

“Could you grab down that file for me?” she asked, walking in and standing close to him. She pointed upward and he smelled her hair, her flowery perfume at once very sweet and very faint, like summers long gone.

He realised he was acting like a twelve year old boy with a crush. (When he actually was twelve he’d never had a crush, unless you counted the picture of a Firebolt he had taped over his bed and which he’d burned when he was thirteen.)

He stretched up and got the report down for her. Oddly enough, this gallant deed did not make her fling herself into his arms and promise to be his forever.

She did tilt a glance at him he couldn’t quite interpret, and said: “Have you been working out?”

“Ah,” Draco said. “Yes?”

Katie patted his arm. “I could tell.”

“Do you want to go to the movies with me?” Draco asked.

“Sure,” she said, and for a moment he thought she wouldn’t add what she always added, but she did. “But just as friends, Draco.”

Sometimes in the cold hours of the night when he thought things like *you deserve this* he thinks that Katie has only ever pitied him, and he could hate her for that but she’s so gentle and he’s already done so much to her, so much he can never make up for half of it.

“I live in hope,” Draco told her.

She raised her eyebrows, that look he couldn’t really work out flickering over her face again. “You don’t look like you’re exactly pining away,” she said, and he understood it was a compliment: it came with a smile. “Thanks for the file, Draco,” she added, and left.

It had never occurred to him that working out might be a step on the road to Katie. He’d always thought of it as having to prove his true love and shining virtue, but now he came to think of it the only person she’d ever mentioned fancying was Oliver Wood.

Draco paused to have vicious thoughts about Oliver Wood, an entirely pointless human being who had as much brain as a Bludger and also, Draco would grudgingly concede, a magnificent physique.

Obviously, though, a crucial part of making people fall in love with you was inspiring them with frenzied passion. Draco congratulated himself on making headway there and speculated on whether he should get an Oliver Wood haircut.

Since it was actually due to Potter that Draco was now apparently in possession of a physique that found favour with Katie Bell, and since Draco was in the kitchen making himself an urgently needed ninth cup of coffee anyway, he made Potter a cup of tea as well. And smiled at him when he pushed it over.

Potter raised an eyebrow, but he smiled back. "You're in a good mood."

"Is that not allowed here?" Draco inquired. "We are entering Potter land, people. Look grim. Make your jaws as square as they'll go. Heroing is *serious business*."

Potter laughed and tried to hide it, not all that successfully. Draco nicked the report he was trying to write and fixed it. It was shaping up to be a good day.

Until Potter said abruptly: "Can we go out for coffee or something?"

"Yes," Draco said automatically, because Potter had said coffee, but then he actually heard what Potter had said and started to worry as he followed him to the café. Potter couldn't actually chuck him as a partner because Shackbolt had made clear that they were fired if this didn't work out.

Maybe Potter was going to tell him he was quitting the Aurors. No, Draco thought, ordering several coffees to alleviate his distress, that couldn't be right. Potter never quit anything.

He tried to find some clues in Potter's face, but it was kind of hard to see him since they were sitting at the window, the sun turning their white table into a blinding disc of light, and all he could really tell was that Potter was scowling.

"If you are a bastard about this," Potter informed him, "I will kill you."

So this was an elaborate murder plot in which Potter planned to drop poison in Draco's coffee. No, surely even Potter wouldn't tell his intended victim. Maybe he would, though. He really wasn't good at covert operations.

Potter was sort of weirdly hunched and clearing his throat. Draco peered at him suspiciously for a moment, and then against his better judgement made a vaguely encouraging sort of gesture.

"I like men," Potter hurled at him like a hex.

Draco's brain did not process this for a minute. All it did was sit there and offer Draco inane suggestions such as 'D'you collect them?' and 'To eat?'

He said: "Oh?"

For a heart-stopping minute it occurred to him that this might be a pass. Then he remembered that they'd always hated each other and also that if Potter was saying what Draco thought he was saying - and Draco was still open to the whole thing being a terrible misunderstanding - then he could probably just go off and sleep with Oliver Wood.

"Remember that partner I had a while back, what was his name, Grant," Potter said.

"Do you mean Gillam?" Draco asked. He scented gossip, forgot confusion and gripped the table. "Wait, the one you almost put in hospital? Oh my God, were you having inappropriate relations with him, was it a *lovers' tiff*?"

"No!" Potter snapped. "It's just that he found out and was a bastard about it, all right? Which is why I punched him," he added. "So I thought I should tell you and get it out of the way."

He glared at Draco. Draco stirred his coffee with a spoon and tried to process. Mostly he felt puzzled: the world made less sense when Potter wasn't secretly having orgies with the Patil twins.

"Well?" Potter challenged him.

"Oh?" Draco said again. He didn't have any soothing responses for twitchy outed guys. When Crabbe and Goyle had told him he'd had screaming abandonment issues and sulked at them for three weeks straight, but they had understood that he did it out of love. "Okay," he tried. "I don't care."

Potter looked extremely taken aback. Draco tried to remind Potter about hi, *Crabbe and Goyle*, but apparently Potter hadn't known about them any more than he'd known about Justine Finch-Fletchley.

Draco made him pay for coffee, since he'd made Draco think he was planning to poison him and everything.

While watching Potter pay, it occurred to Draco that *this* might be a way to make the points system work, but then he remembered that he'd rather chew his own hands off than spend time with Potter in a social context, so that was that.

On their way back to the office Draco realised there could still be gossip in this for him, and he inquired with interest: "So do you have a boyfriend?"

Potter looked intensely uncomfortable talking about this on the street, which rather amused Draco. "No," he said gruffly.

Of course he didn't, Draco thought. Really, Draco had been right all along, except for a few tiny details that he couldn't be expected to have figured out. Potter obviously indulged in orgies with – the male equivalent of the Patil twins.

Unfortunately at that point Draco's mind, searching for men twins, presented him with the

idea of the Weasley twins. This mental picture upset him too much to continue with that line of questioning.

*

As soon as he got home, he shouted out in the direction of the kitchen: "Guess who's a homosexual!"

Crabbe emerged, eating one of Goyle's from-scratch spring rolls. "Right, we heard too," he said, and Draco stared in outraged disbelief.

"Who told you?"

"He told us himself," Goyle called from the kitchen.

"*What?*" Draco demanded. "I was not aware you were in any sort of contact with him!"

Crabbe gave him a reproachful look. "Slytherins have to stick together, Malfoy."

"You're raving, Crabbe," Draco informed him. "Tell me why you're raving. Have you been out in the sun?"

"We've promised to support him," Goyle said. "Take him to a gay bar. You should come too."

Draco found himself too appalled by this sudden turn to the dark side by his best friends to speak, when Goyle added: "Poor little thing," and Draco flatly refused to believe that anyone under any circumstances could refer to Harry Potter that way.

"Who are we talking about?" he asked piteously.

"Malcolm Baddock, of course," Crabbe said.

"Oh Baddock," said Draco, much relieved.

He remembered a small curly-headed blond boy who'd cried because the Weasley twins had teased him at his Sorting, and followed the bigger Slytherin boys around a lot.

"Well that makes sense," Draco said after a moment's pause. "I suppose."

"He's got a Muggle dad who's not pleased about that kind of thing," Crabbe said, a little bleakly.

"Poor little thing," Draco said. "I was his prefect, you know. He was always very good about doing his homework once I'd made him cry a few times," he added reminiscently. "We should take him to your favourite bar and get him drunk."

Goyle emerged, wiping his hands on a tea towel. "Wait," he said. "Who were you talking about?"

Draco became gleeful again in short order. “You’ll never guess,” he said. “Go on. Try to guess.”

Crabbe frowned, and said: “It’s not Potter, is it?”

“... well, yes,” Draco answered rather flatly.

“Huh,” Crabbe said. “So Cho Chang was right about that, then.”

“Cho Chang? I’m sorry, this rumour was being spread around five years ago and I’m only hearing about it now, what kind of friends do you call yourselves, why did you not tell me?”

“Well, the thing is,” Goyle admitted, looking rather shamefaced. “The thing is we were pretty sure you’d instantly start, like – a homophobia club. Which we didn’t want for obvious reasons.”

“I would *not* have!” Draco protested violently.

“Malfoy, you would so,” Crabbe said. “We all had to wear badges supporting a *Hufflepuff* because of your epic hatred. A *Hufflepuff*.”

“Cedric Diggory was the one true Hogwarts champion,” Draco muttered rebelliously.

“Plus you were racist in school,” Crabbe said.

“*We were all racist in school*,” Draco yelled. “It was our thing.”

“We didn’t all use the M word,” Goyle said primly. “My mum says that’s vulgar.”

“Especially since you started using it because you were trying to upset Potter’s friend,” Crabbe said.

“This is outrageous calumny,” Draco mumbled. “I am outraged by your calumny. Because it is outrageous.”

“So does Potter have a boyfriend?” Goyle asked with interest.

“He says not,” Draco said. “I bet he has orgies. With twins. But not any twins we knew in school,” he added hurriedly, and went off to get changed for the club.

Malcolm Baddock met them outside Rick’s, Crabbe and Goyle’s favourite bar. Draco quite liked it too. Since his devotion to Katie was unalterable he didn’t go to bars to pick people up, and at Rick’s he always had company and the bar was quiet even if the club downstairs got crowded.

Little Malcolm was wearing glittery eyeshadow, Draco noted. Had Potter taken to wearing glittery eyeshadow, Draco probably would’ve guessed his dark secret before now. Also, Draco would have found it hilarious.

He smiled involuntarily and Baddock smiled shyly back at him.

“Hi Malfoy,” he said. “It’s nice of you to come too.”

“Of course,” Draco told him grandly. “I am deeply concerned about the welfare of all my former midgets.”

“I had a terrible crush on you in school,” Baddock continued, going pink.

“*Did* you?” Draco said, delighted. And people said he hadn’t been a good prefect! He bet nobody’d ever had a crush on Weasley.

Crabbe nudged him in the back. “Malfoy.”

“Oh right, of course. My devotion to Katie Bell is unalterable,” Draco said. “Sorry.”

“But she’s a *Gryffindor*,” Baddock pointed out, looking slightly horrified. “And a girl,” he added in much the same tone.

“I like girls,” Draco explained. “I admit the Gryffindor part is a drawback, but it can’t be helped.”

“Didn’t you make out with Blaise Zabini that one time?” Baddock chirped.

“Well yes,” Draco admitted. “But that was *Blaise Zabini*, he has insane Veela powers, I cannot be held accountable.”

“Is Zabini coming here tonight?” Baddock asked, a look of wild hope in his eyes.

“He’s in Milan with his lovers,” Crabbe said.

“What?” Goyle said. “All of them?”

Despite the lack of Blaise Zabini on the bar menu, Crabbe and Goyle managed to make little Baddock fairly happy. They left him talking to a benevolent-looking leather queen, widening his eyes and telling him how much he liked men to be masterful.

“See how your prefecting ways have marked him,” Goyle said.

“Children need a firm hand,” Draco informed him. “I stand by my methods. Hi, Rick,” he added to the bartender. “Three vodkas with lime.”

They spent a pleasant couple of hours leaning against the bar and watching with a certain amount of awe as little Baddock tore his way through the room like a tiny sparkly whirlwind.

Then Crabbe and Goyle went off to dance, and since leaning against the bar alone when you didn’t want to be picked up was an unwise move, Draco went outside for a bit of air. He stepped out through the back door, walked exactly two steps down a darkened alleyway and then realised exactly how stupid he was being when someone grabbed his wrist in an obviously violent rather than amorous way, and twisted his arm behind his back.

He had the brief yet familiar thought that the universe was unfair, since Crabbe and Goyle never got hassled like this. Which might've been because they were the size of small countries.

While he was having that thought his body moved smoothly, without his permission, without any thought at all, in a way he'd become used to. He stepped back into the grip, knocked the guy off balance, ducked down and kicked his legs out from under him, and then threw him over his shoulder into a brick wall.

Then he stood waiting for Potter to get back up and charge at him, only of course this wasn't Potter, it was a total stranger, and he mostly lay there in a heap.

Draco stood looking down at him for a few minutes. He was *really* still: Draco was starting to panic.

He made his way back into the bar pretty sharpish, and elbowed through the crowd to find Crabbe and Goyle, who were romantically slow-dancing.

"Okay, don't get upset," Draco said. "But I think I killed a man."

"Oh my God, I knew you were going to become a homophobe!" Goyle shrieked.

Draco made a distressed sound. He and Goyle trailed after Crabbe talking over each other in loud voices, and then Crabbe said the man was just concussed.

"I didn't know you could do that," he added, looking from the heap to Draco in bemusement.

Draco found himself looking at his own hands as if they'd betrayed him. "Neither did I."

*

He was going to tell Potter all about his display of astonishing battle skills, but then he came in the next day and everyone was having triple heart attacks because someone had kidnapped Scrimgeour's sister-in-law's cousin's children and were threatening to take other politically connected kids.

Potter was pacing the room like a caged tiger, ready to snarl and leap if anyone approached him. The cautious way the other Aurors always dealt with him was starting to look a whole lot more like fear.

When they found a location Potter seized his cloak and headed for the door.

"Stop," Draco ordered, and Potter ignored him. Draco looked around for support and saw none, so he cleared his throat and shouted. "Hey, *idiot*! Do you want those kids to die?"

Potter whirled to face him. "What did you say?"

"I said don't walk into an unstable hostage situation without a plan," Draco said. "You idiot," he added, in case Potter hadn't got it the first time.

“We don’t have time,” Potter snarled. “He’ll kill those kids.”

He’d probably already killed those kids, but Potter was clearly on the edge and Draco thought it best not to mention that.

“He’ll kill more,” Draco said. “We need to know who he’s working for, how they get into the houses, and what their agenda is. Now sit down because I have absolutely no compunction about hexing you when your back is turned. We need a *plan*.”

A muscle in Potter’s jaw twitched. He threw himself into the chair across from Draco, green eyes narrowed and suddenly feline, fixed on his face.

“Come up with one, then,” he said, his voice rumbling in his chest like a giant cat’s.

Draco had actually meant that the entire department of the Aurors should piece together a massive wonderful plan, with him obviously contributing vital parts of it and being lauded for his genius, but not actually being responsible for the whole thing. Potter, however, did not look open to reason or aware that there was anyone else in the world.

“Oh, help me, then,” Draco said with irritation born of panic, and thrust a whole pile of notes and maps into Potter’s hands.

“We should look at the pictures of the help,” Potter said suddenly after half an hour of silence, voice hoarse as if he’d been screaming the whole time. He added: “Kreacher,” which made no sense at all to Draco, but it was a good idea and so Draco started sorting through the pictures of the help. He didn’t let Potter do it, Potter had a lousy memory for names and faces and would be no use.

There were distinct similarities between some of the faces. Clearly, this was a family kidnapping affair.

Once he’d seen the common link he was able to send Owls ordering arrests across the board, and then the kids were safe. The nearest detachment of Aurors got sent to the family home and the last of the kidnappers were rounded up. The kids who’d been taken were dead as expected, but on the whole Draco thought they’d done pretty well.

Until Potter threw a chair at the wall and tried to throw a punch at Draco. Draco hit the floor and rolled out of range. He noticed his fellow Aurors conspicuously failed to rally to his aid.

This was probably because they were all gossiping in the kitchen. Draco found them there when he stamped in to make his fifteenth cup of coffee and think about ways to get the drop on Potter and then strangle him.

“-Best just to stay out of his way,” Chrysanthemum said wisely, because that would certainly teach Potter how to interact normally with society, it wasn’t like the lone wolves were the *crazy ones* or anything.

“I heard it was the orphanage,” Dawlish said in a conspiratorial whisper. “The one You-Know-Who was raised in, he went and found it and I heard Potter was the first one on the scene and saw what he’d done-”

“I heard he killed You-Know-Who right afterwards,” someone else said.

Draco put his coffee cup down, pushing it away sort of blindly, and walked out of the kitchen.

He’d seen the orphanage. He’d been one of the last on the scene, just there for the last of the clean-up and to get a few body parts for Snape’s potions. He’d still been sick and had screaming nightmares for weeks.

Nobody who still had parents was allowed on that scene.

He saw that the entire office had been cleared by the awesome force of Potter’s insanity, and was a bit impressed.

Potter was sitting at his desk with his head in his arms.

Draco went up to the desk, paused for a moment and thought about the wild furious way Potter had swung at him and wondered what on earth to do, and then something about the way Potter was sitting reminded him of the way Crabbe had sat, head in *his* arms, after losing the first patient he’d ever set his heart on saving.

Draco abruptly stopped thinking, reached out and smoothed down Potter’s hair.

Potter hadn’t been moving before and didn’t move now, but nevertheless he froze. The whole room seemed to freeze, as if what Draco had mistakenly thought was a safe, normal floor was an iceberg about to tilt and tip him off.

Draco realised slowly, point by point, that a) Crabbe was his dear friend and thus certain gestures were appropriate with him which were not appropriate with your psychotic former schoolboy nemesis, b) Crabbe was not insane and twitchy and liable to take Draco’s head off with one swing and c) Goyle had come in the very next moment and saved Crabbe and Draco from having to deal with being emotional and unmanly.

Goyle was not going to come in now.

The memory of all those idiots crowded in the kitchen saved Draco: he remembered that they were afraid, but he wasn’t.

He recovered himself from the small check in his movements and smoothed Potter’s hair down again, and again. It took a lot of smoothing down.

“Those kids were dead before we heard a word about it,” he said in Potter’s ear. “Don’t be such a twit.”

Potter swallowed thickly. “I should’ve done something about it.”

“What could you possibly have done?” Draco demanded, and added: “Cretin,” because it just felt right. “You couldn’t have done anything.”

“I should’ve been *able* to do *something*!” Potter snarled.

“You did,” Draco said. “You thought with your actual brain. I was very impressed. It is possible, Potter, that you are not as stupid as I’ve always supposed. I am an Auror: I plan to investigate this further.”

Potter made a choked sound between a snarl and a laugh.

Draco felt a bit like he was trying to take an enraged wolf out on a walk, with his control of the situation extremely tenuous and only existent at all because Potter wasn’t trying to break it. This feeling was rather exacerbated by the feel of Potter’s atrocious hair, thick and wild under his fingertips: he thought that at any moment it was going to bristle.

He wondered wildly if Potter had been personally acquainted with any of these children, to take on like this, but of course he hadn’t been. Of course it wasn’t just about the orphanage – Draco felt the iceberg in his mind tilt and tried hard not to think about that, and found himself tipped into understanding instead.

Potter’s whole crazy life had been built on the weird terrible responsibilities the world had piled on him, and the conviction that the children should live.

Not fair, Draco thought, and the thought was clean and uncomplicated by all the cold midnight doubts he had, when he thought *yes, but you did deserve it, and your father deserved it, both of you deserved it, deserved worse*, because this time was different. Potter was a twerp, but that didn’t mean he deserved being turned into a weapon to win a war and then feared because he’d become what everyone had wanted him to be.

“Ease it down a notch,” Draco commanded. “I’m going to make you one of your horrible cups of tea, and then we still have reports to write. The day isn’t over yet just because you want it to be, Potter. Stop being such a slacker.”

“I’m not a slacker, Malfoy,” Potter growled, but he kept his head down.

Draco wondered why he was still frozen, being so obviously careful not to move even a fraction, but then shrugged and put it down to the general lunacy.

“You are so,” he said. “You’re completely spoiled and you always have been, but you’re doing these reports.”

He took his hand away from Potter’s hair because it was high time he did, and put it in his pocket so he wouldn’t have to think about that. Potter straightened up in his chair but Draco was already whirling away, back to the kitchen where he collected his coffee and made the stupid tea.

When he returned and pushed the tea towards Potter, Potter was already looking at the initial reports page in despair. He looked sidelong at Draco as he came in.

“So,” he said, a little awkwardly, and Draco prayed for the roof to fall in so they wouldn’t have to have an emotional moment. “Um,” said Potter. “Exactly how many points did each of us get for that one?”

Draco was immediately both hugely relieved and rather thoughtful. "I think I won."

"We'll have to sort this points thing out properly," Potter said, his mouth on the brink of a smile. "Otherwise you'll cheat."

"It's not *cheating*," Draco told him severely. "It's being smarter than everyone else."

"Everyone else thinks it's cheating."

"That's because they're *stupid*," Draco said, and realised Potter had fed him that one. He glanced across the desk and Potter was looking at him already, smiling properly, and Draco finally accepted what he'd already sort of known: the Potter fans weren't crazy. Well, they were crazy, but they weren't blind, Potter *was* sort of supernaturally good-looking.

Loyal to Slytherin until the end, Draco assured himself that Blaise Zabini still had infinitely better hair. Hell, even Oliver Wood had better hair, which reminded Draco that he'd been thinking of an Oliver Wood haircut, which made him think about why.

Oh my God, he thought with sudden cold fear, what if Katie fancied Potter? It was completely possible. It was even likely.

It was a great relief to remember that Potter was gay.

*

Not all of their cases were the brilliant successes they should have been, considering Draco's awe-inspiring genius. The infamous time when they were both captured and utterly defeated got them zero points each.

They were on surveillance detail, trying to find out if Scrimgeour's mistress was just his mistress or a spy for the French, and Mademoiselle Madeleine was meant to have gone out that night but instead she'd stayed home with a headache. She'd switched the lights on and screamed, Potter had gone into attack mode, Draco had been half blind and lunged at him, and she'd somehow shoved them both into an enclosed space, barricaded them in and presumably gone off to Owl the Aurors.

"Why did you have to grab me?" Potter demanded.

"Because you were about to hit the Minister for Magic's mistress!" Draco hissed. "You can't hit the Minister for Magic's mistress!"

"I've hit the Minister for Magic," Potter said thoughtfully.

"I have no words," Draco told him. "No, that's such a lie—"

"I knew it was too good to be true," Potter said.

"*Shut up Potter* - where are we?"

Potter shifted, and almost asphyxiated Draco with his shoulder. "I think it's a cupboard," Potter said.

"Please do not move," Draco said coldly once he could speak again. "I am extremely uncomfortable."

"Really, are you, because I feel fine," Potter told him crossly.

"All right," Draco said. "Don't move. I am a trained investigator, and I am going to investigate this."

"What are you-" Potter began.

Draco pushed Potter up against the wall, which meant he was a fraction of an inch further away. "I said don't move," he said into his ear, and he reached out with his other hand and felt tile. "This isn't a cupboard," he said. "Cupboards aren't tiled. This is a shower cubicle, and if I can find the door and maybe get to my wand-"

"Malfoy," Potter said in a strained voice.

"Hold *still*," said Draco urgently, and since Potter did not take direction well he bolted backwards like a wild horse, which was not a good idea.

He hit the opposite wall hard, and the shower came hissing on. It was freezing cold.

Draco cursed at the top of his voice. "I told you to *stay still*!"

"Calm down, Malfoy," Potter said, sounding far calmer himself now Draco was enraged and soaking wet.

Draco shoved him. Potter shoved him back. They both fell out of the shower when Kingsley Shacklebolt opened the door and looked down at them with a sort of endless, solemn despair.

It was all hideously embarrassing.

The only reason Mademoiselle Madeleine did not register a complaint was that Potter took off his shirt and started wringing it dry, while blinking up through wet black locks and apologising earnestly.

"... oh that's all right," Madeleine said, switching tones rather abruptly. "I feel so safe knowing that fine upstanding Aurors like you are... mmm... keeping the streets clean. If my Rufy ever needs bodyguards, I know who to rechest. Er, request."

"Whew," Potter said afterwards, when they were squelching towards the car. "Lucky she was a good citizen."

"Ahaha," Draco said. "Sure."

Potter gave him a look that suggested he found him incomprehensible, and Draco just threw him a rueful smile. If Draco could hypnotise women by taking off his shirt, he thought, he

would've worked out a way to rule the world by now.

"Have you given any thought to ruling the world?" he asked.

"Er," Potter said, still looking at him as if he found him incomprehensible but smiling. "No. But I imagine you have a plan."

"I might do," Draco conceded.

"Get in the car and you can tell me how we're going to do it."

Draco actually did award Potter one point for getting them out of trouble with his sexual wiles, but then he took the point away again for getting them both wet, so it was zero points all around.

*

Not only was it zero points all around, but Madeleine remembered them, and at the next function for the Ministry and the Aurors to all mingle and get along, they both got a special invitation. The kind that meant getting into real trouble with Shacklebolt if they refused.

Draco always went to the functions anyway. They were awful and people looked at him and a few slimy desperate men, clinging to the edges of a social circle they used to rule, always came up to tell him he looked just like his father. Katie went to them, though, so he went too.

That particular night he searched the crowd for her, and saw her wearing blue – she wore a lot of blue – and on some other man's arm. Draco looked him over and dismissed him as nondescript and uninteresting, and wandered over to her to assure her that his devotion was unalterable.

"Hi, Draco," she said. "Um, I'm here with somebody-"

"Mm, I saw," Draco drawled. "I know competition when I see it. Trust me, that's not it."

Katie looked a little upset, and Draco wished he could take it back, but her date was returning from the bar and he couldn't think of the right thing to say and then to cap it all over her head he saw Scrimgeour corner Potter.

Oh, that had worked out really well last time.

"My devotion is unalterable. Excuse me," Draco said. She looked confused and unhappy and pleased, all at once, but he couldn't stay to see which won out.

He cut through the herd with minimal elbowing since he was being discreet, and arrived in time to hear Scrimgeour say: "A show of unity would really benefit both the Ministry and the Aurors – and of course your own career, my dear boy."

"Is that so," Potter said, throwing each word a like a punch.

"Potter," Draco said from behind him, quietly. Potter turned at once.

“We were talking, Mr Malfoy,” Scrimgeour said, looking like a lion robbed of its prey until Potter turned and looked back at him, at which point he started looking a lot more like prey.

“Not about anything important,” Potter said contemptuously.

“Instead of having a *scene which will get you fired*,” Draco said in a low voice, exactly as if neither of them had spoken at all. “How about having a drink? At the bar. Let’s go to the bar and *away from here*.”

He grabbed Potter’s arm, which felt like iron until Potter let out a small frustrated breath and then said: “I could use a drink.”

Scrimgeour’s expression changed into one Draco could not quite make out.

“By all means go have one,” he said. “Might I have a word with you, Mr Malfoy? I won’t keep you long.”

Draco’s eyebrows rose dramatically.

“I’ll be at the bar,” Potter said, and stalked away from them both.

So here he was, alone with the Minister for Magic. Draco’s father had of course trained him for precisely such a situation. He’d said ‘Persuade him to introduce anti-Muggleborn legislation.’

Draco stared at him and sort of made a face.

“So glad to see you here, Mr Malfoy,” said Scrimgeour, who had never spoken to Draco once in two years.

“It’s a real thrill to see you too,” he drawled.

Scrimgeour only looked very briefly irritated. “Of course, you’re aware that in the current political situation – the economy having never recovered from the war, the general low morale...” he said. “You’re aware of how valuable a figurehead such as the Boy Who Lived could be.”

“I bet he could be,” Draco said cheerfully. “Good luck with that one.”

“It’s most unfortunate that the man seems entirely unable to listen to reason,” Scrimgeour said, impatience flicking like a lion’s tail and then hidden again.

“Bad luck,” Draco agreed, nodding placidly. “Mad as a brush. Can’t be helped.”

Scrimgeour seemed driven to plain speaking, which made him look rather testy. “I put it to you, Mr Malfoy, that if anyone were to exert their influence with Mr Potter in order to persuade him to adopt the right course for all concerned... that person would not find the Ministry ungrateful.”

“Okay,” Draco said. “Well, if I ever see anyone with any influence at all over Potter, I will certainly let them know. It’s been lovely chatting to you.”

“Let me give you my card, Mr Malfoy,” Scrimgeour said, proffering it between two gloved fingers. He looked at Draco, their eyes meeting over gilt edging, and said: “I’m sure that Lucius Malfoy’s son can be convinced in... some way to do his civic duty.”

Professor Snape had tried very hard to teach Draco wandless magic. Some spells had taken, and some hadn’t. He thought of one now.

“When you put it that way,” Draco said, smiling a slow charming smile, his father’s smile, and took the card.

He held the card between two fingers just like Scrimgeour had, as they smiled and smiled at each other. “I think we understand each other,” said the Minister for Magic.

“I doubt that,” Draco told him smoothly. “*Incendio*.”

The card began to burn, the whispering sound of the flame audible in a suddenly quiet room. Draco kept his eyes locked with the Minister for Magic’s and after a long moment, he leaned forward and blew on the fragile remnants of the card, as if he was blowing on a dandelion clock.

Ash burst softly into Scrimgeour’s face. Draco watched with interest to see if his leonine beard would go up in smoke, but Draco had never been that lucky.

He was still coughing when Draco said: “Enjoy the rest of the party,” and walked off towards the bar.

As he went he realised exactly what he’d done. Shacklebolt seemed to be having a stone-faced aneurysm, Katie looked very upset, and a lot of the other Aurors looked either shocked or disgusted.

Potter was leaning against the bar laughing, his black head thrown back.

“I’ll buy you a drink for the look on Scrimgeour’s face,” he said.

“I’ll have anything alcoholic,” Draco said numbly. “A double.” He shook his head to clear the madness out of it. Potter was a bad influence on him.

He wondered where Scrimgeour had got the idea that *he* had any sort of influence over Potter at all.

*

That weekend Katie took him and her six year old niece to the movies. Draco was pretty sure the six year old was meant to be a chaperone to insure that Draco didn’t get fresh, but Draco quite liked kids. They hardly ever took offence, no matter what he said.

He did some impressions for Mary and she wanted Katie to marry him by the time they were

at the top of the popcorn queue.

The Bells hadn't told the younger children about Katie being a witch, so Mary was also under the impression that Draco was the most fabulously imaginative person she had ever met.

They went and saw a movie in an old theatre which Katie apologised for, and which Draco thought was the most brilliant and perfect thing he had ever seen. Then he walked them home. He got to hold Katie's hand as long as he held Mary's too.

"Tell me another story about *Potter*," Mary said as he attempted to woo her aunt. "He's my favourite."

Katie smiled up at him and Draco was pretty sure she looked charmed. "I didn't know you were so good with kids," she said.

"I have so many good qualities, I forget to mention them all," Draco said, and prayed that Mary wouldn't repeat the things he'd told her about Inferi while Katie was in the bathroom.

He didn't try to kiss her at the door and she didn't invite him in, but he also didn't actually say: "Do you love me yet?" like a crazy person, so he gave himself one point for that.

Then he realised that he was awarding himself points in his actual life like a crazy person, and he had to take it away again.

*

"I saw the most amazing movie in the world," he told Potter when he scrambled into the car Monday morning. "It had a beautiful lady in a Gothic Castle. She was being seduced by a large animal in a frock coat."

"What kind of movies are you *watching*?" Potter asked in scandalised tones.

Draco was too distracted by the fact there was a new contraption in the car to respond. He poked at the contraption. "What's this?"

"It's a car radio," Potter answered casually.

"Ohhhh," said Draco. "Show me how to work it."

Ten minutes later, Draco had mastered the car radio – he was quick and skilled with all Muggle artefacts – and he was in love.

"I shall call her Gilda," he said, and touched it again to make it change sounds.

Potter kept his eyes on the horizon, and said lightly: "I thought you might like it."

They were supposed to patrol the sea coast in their car that morning, and Gilda came in very handy for the long drive. So many Aurors had seen the usefulness of their car that Shacklebolt was ordering one of them for every pair.

“I shouldn’t imagine Weasley needs to be an Auror any more,” Draco said. The idea of Weasley actually on his way to earning a competence struck him as bizarre, but with the new light of Gilda in his life he felt he could be charitable.

“I don’t think he does,” Potter said, and looked a bit gloomy. “Hermione wants him to do something more – ambitious with his life. They fight about it all the time.”

“That must be *such fun* for you,” Draco said, and refrained from asking when Weasley and Granger had ever done anything else.

He got on all right with Granger these days, actually. She was an Unspeakable, and a couple of times their paths had crossed doing slightly nefarious things that their departments should probably not know about. Their system of mutual blackmail had sort of made Draco warm to her: it was so Slytherin.

Plus, as he’d noticed when he was thirteen and had broken up with his Firebolt picture, the girl had something. Unfortunately that something came with a strong slapping arm, terrible hair and the worst taste in men conceivable.

“Right, so these mermaids have been robbing yachts,” Draco said. “So in short – they’re *merpirates*.”

“I suppose you could put it that way,” Potter said, grinning.

Draco tried out this new word in a variety of ways, such as ‘Let us apprehend these dastardly merpirates’ and ‘I wonder if any of the merpirates are fiendishly though aquatically attractive.’ Potter laughed at him because he was filled with mockery and cruelty.

“There was someone in my movie who reminded me of you,” Draco said darkly. “He fell off the Gothic castle.”

“Did he have a broom at the time?” Potter asked.

“Knowing you,” Draco said. “Probably.” Which made Potter look pleased with himself, so Draco was forced to use his secret weapon. “Who taught Muggle Studies?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Potter said, frowning.

“Hmm,” said Draco. “Can you name me any of the Ravenclaw girls in our year?”

“Er,” Potter said. “Padma Patil.”

“Someone who your best mate didn’t take to the Yule Ball,” Draco said. “That shouldn’t even count!”

Potter scanned the seas for merpirates, turned the car around with the curve of the coast and said: “Malfoy, are you giving me points for this?”

“Maybe,” Draco answered shiftily.

Potter's brow furrowed. "How am I doing?"

"I don't want to tell you," Draco said. "I'm afraid you might cry. Any of the Slytherin girls apart from Pansy?"

"Millicent Bulstrode," Potter offered.

"That's very good! And?" Draco said encouragingly.

"Um," Potter said. "Er. No. Sorry. I've got nothing."

"There were three others," Draco told him in sad, disappointed tones.

In retrospect, the fact Potter preferred men should have perhaps become clear years ago, since he was apparently capable of remembering most of the boys' names at school. He knew quite a few Ravenclaw boys.

"And, um – Entwistle, I think," Potter said. "I don't know his first name."

"Hmm, well, that's better," Draco conceded, and then a terrible thought occurred to him.

He was dumbstruck by it. He was silent for so long that Potter began flicking him slightly concerned glances out of the corner of his eye.

"Potter," Draco said at last in a portentous voice.

"Yes?" Potter asked apprehensively.

"What's my name?"

"Er, *Malfoy*?" Potter inquired, looking at him as if he had gone insane.

"Yes, but my first name, what is it?"

"Well," Potter said, and hesitated.

"Oh my God," Draco said. "You don't know. You actually *don't know*."

He was overcome by the sheer enormity of this revelation, and the fact that he should've thought of it before. Potter couldn't remember any of his other schoolmates' names. Or his partners' names, come to think of it. Why had he simply assumed that Potter knew *his*? God, this was actually humiliating: he'd spent a lot of his school years hating every letter in Potter's name, and Potter didn't even know his. Crabbe and Goyle had been right that time in fifth year when they'd told him that the whole deal with Potter was unbalanced.

Though possibly that wasn't quite what they'd meant.

"Of course I know," Potter snapped.

"Why?" Draco demanded. "Why of course? You don't know Kevin Entwistle's! Entwistle

actually *liked* you! Which I never did,” he added, in case Potter had failed to notice that as well.

“I didn’t like you either,” Potter growled back instantly.

“I don’t feel like *talking* to you anymore,” Draco informed him, and knew he was being ridiculous but simply felt too insulted to stop.

He turned Gilda on high and listened to her soothing voices until he felt calmer. Gilda played hundreds and hundreds of songs to him, and eventually he was seduced into singing along with her.

“I would chase old ghosts and watch them scatter, drop old dreams and watch them shatter,” Draco sang to Gilda. *“Lose myself and all I own, to find-”*

“There,” Potter said, and sent the car into a dive.

Draco switched off Gilda. *“Merpirates!”*

Potter had to drive the car, so Draco had to be the one to work the enchanted fishing net. It wouldn’t have been a problem if he hadn’t always had a bit of a problem with Levitation charms.

Potter ended up having to land the car on the yacht and do it himself. At least the net Draco had thought up worked and the merpirates didn’t actually escape, but the owners of the yacht had to be Obliviated and by the time they had the net attached to the boot of the car Draco was wet from seaspray, had been hit with a trident, and was in an absolutely foul mood.

“So you were just, er, stopped by the Coast Guard or something,” Potter told the yachting couple.

“Yes, officer,” they both agreed. “Thank you,” the woman added with shining eyes.

“Say it again, who’s a man amongst men, and then say it once more, who’s a hero next door, who’s a super success, don’t you know, can’t you guess, ask his friends and his five hangers-on,” Draco said in a mocking undertone. That movie had got Potter down all right.

Draco strode back towards the car, yanking the door open, and noticed to his extreme irritation that Potter was leaning against Draco’s side of the car and not getting into the damn driver’s seat so they could both go *home*. He glared furiously at Potter, but Potter was looking at the ground and probably didn’t even see.

“Draco,” Potter said in a low, rough voice.

“*What?*” snapped Draco, and then realised what Potter had actually said.

A corner of Potter’s mouth lifted. “I know your name.”

Draco would probably be all right with it if Potter didn’t fall off a Gothic castle.

After a few minutes in the car, Potter said: “Wait – the movie was *Beauty and the Beast*? You are *so weird*.”

“Shut up, it was deep,” Draco said.

They flew over and over the coast, the sea hemming the land like shining silver ribbon under the moon, searching the waters for any more bands of merpirates so they could be sure they’d caught them all. Draco was exhausted because he’d been up all night making that stupid net, and he listened to Gilda and tried not to let his eyes fall shut.

He half-woke at some sharp gleam of moonlight on water, warm and blinking at the world and feeling a general lack of interest in it, wanting to turn back to sleep. A small part of his mind was awake and taking notice, though. The possibility of deathly embarrassment rose at him through sleepy confusion, as he realised he was sleeping with his head on Potter’s shoulder.

He flinched and became aware of the hand on his neck, clasp gentle, keeping him in place.

“Shh,” Potter said in a quiet, automatic way, as if he’d said it before and didn’t actually expect Draco to hear it.

Draco frowned, puzzled but reassured that mockery was not about to arrive, and half-decided that since he’d already gone to sleep he might as well – and then he went to sleep again before he could reach a decision.

*

Sometimes there actually were cases which did what Draco believed they should all do, and showcased Draco’s brilliance for the whole world to see.

Every Auror wanted to catch Sextus Forsythe. They’d been trying to get something definite on him for years.

Draco had just been flipping through *Witch Weekly* while he monitored Potter finishing his reports Friday evening. He’d read the Sextus Forsythe In Love Nest story with interest, but it wasn’t until he’d turned a couple of pages that he had a thought, flicked back and thought to wonder who owned the property that the love nest was built on.

“Very good, excellent, some days you show almost human intelligence, go ahead, have a good weekend,” he muttered to Potter, and fled to the archives room.

At six in the morning he lifted his face from the tiny, dirty trail that led from a mansion given in security for a bad risk to the real deal under the bad risk and connected Forsythe squarely to the worst people in the magical drugs for Muggles business.

He seized the papers, shoved them in his bag, stopped in the kitchen for a restorative cup of coffee and scared the cleaners, then Apparated straight to Potter’s flat. He walked right in the bedroom door.

On the bed were the entwined forms of Granger and Weasley.

“*Malfoy?*” Weasley exclaimed, as Granger dived for a bedsheet.

“Augh, my *eyes*,” Draco exclaimed, and dived for the door.

The door shut, the full hideousness of his situation descended on him. There was really no guarantee that Potter was not also occupied, since everybody in the whole world besides Draco had a sex life, and since *Weasley* of all people could convince an attractive woman into bed, Potter could well be in there with boy twins. Triplets, even.

‘Don’t interrupt your partner’s orgies’ had never been covered in the manual on maintaining a civil partnership. Possibly they had felt it was self-evident.

Draco knocked. There was no answer.

Potter might be over at the twins’ house. Or the triplets’. It was obviously imperative for Draco to find him, but even his Auror’s courage shrank at the idea of going back into the bedroom of freckles and horror to inquire where Potter’s lovers lived.

He inched the door open, eyes mostly shut, and squinted around so that he wouldn’t see much of the orgy. Mostly he just saw morning light dimmed by curtains, white sheets and brown skin, and he opened his eyes properly and saw that Potter was alone.

Much relieved, Draco walked in and said: “Hey Potter! Get up.”

Potter made a complaining sound and turned his head into the pillow. Draco walked up to the bed and leaned against the post at the foot of it, noting that Potter seemed to have actually twisted his bedsheet into a rope in his sleep.

“Potter, wake up!” he said, and contemplated shaking him, but really, Potter was in bed and not wearing very much, and that would be inappropriate. “Oh come on, Potter,” Draco said, becoming somewhat growly and irritated: they had things to do and Draco had a glorious triumph to enjoy, here. “Wake *up*. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Potter opened his eyes a fraction, yawned, stretched over the rope he’d made of the bedsheet and grabbed Draco’s wrist.

“Mm?” he said, his eyes barely open.

“Um,” Draco said. “Morning?”

“... Malfoy?” Potter rasped, clawing his free hand through his hair so it all stood up in spikes. “What’re you – why are you here?”

“I have something to *tell you*,” Draco said. “Wake up. Also, let go of me.”

Potter looked at his hand and then let go very abruptly, without an apology because the triplets had obviously taught him to grab but not taught him any manners. He lay back against the pillows and frowned up at Draco, looking more awake but considerably confused. He looked at the bedsheet in a way that suggested he might’ve pulled it up if it wasn’t more rope

than sheet.

“What is it?”

Draco luxuriated in this moment of triumph. “Oh, you are going to love me,” he drawled. “Guess what?” He paused for effect, and then said: “I’ve got Forsythe. Dead to rights.”

First Potter looked as if he’d been slapped awake. Then he smiled, a sudden fierce smile that he usually only broke out during a sparring session.

“No,” he breathed.

“Oh yes,” Draco said. “Yes.” They locked eyes, and then Draco made an impatient gesture. “Get *up*,” he said. “Let’s go arrest him right now!”

“Oh, hell yes,” Potter said, and scrambled out of bed. He found his jeans on the floor and started pulling them on.

“Not one of those jumpers,” Draco said, still leaning against the bedpost and enjoying a spot of enormous smugness. “It looks like it’s going to be a nice day, and they make me sad.”

“Fine, whatever,” Potter said, and grabbed a green t-shirt. He looked at Draco as they were going out the bedroom door and said: “You haven’t changed clothes... oh, *Malfoy*, you’ve been in the office all night.”

“So?” Draco demanded. “I think perhaps you didn’t hear me, perhaps I need to say it again, because *we’ve got Forsythe*.”

“You could’ve said,” Potter said. “I would’ve stayed and helped out, and then maybe you’d have got some sleep or had dinner or breakfast or one of those other normal people meals.”

But what about the triplets, what would they have done? Somebody had to think of the triplets.

“Oh Potter, you’ll make someone a beautiful wife one day, but can we please go arrest Forsythe *now*?”

Unfortunately they couldn’t, because between the door out and Potter’s bedroom was the kitchen, where Granger and Weasley were sipping tea dressed in full-length dressing gowns, the collars of which they were clutching tight. They looked traumatised and reproachful.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Weasley said, glaring at Draco.

“What?” Draco demanded. “Oh, for God’s sake. I wasn’t hassling him because he’s gay, I was hassling him because he’s Potter.”

“I see you haven’t changed a bit,” Weasley said.

Draco bared his teeth. “I wish *I* hadn’t seen anything.”

“This is very mature, boys,” Granger said, eyeing Draco and Weasley with about the same amount of distaste.

Draco certainly sympathised with distaste for Weasley, but since she’d chosen Weasley as her King of her own accord, even he thought that look was a bit much. He recalled Potter indicating that all was not well in the Weasley and Granger dream of love, and broke ahead of Potter in a determined sprint for the door.

“D’you want some coffee, Malfoy?” Granger asked.

“Yes,” he said automatically, and then froze. “I mean – I mean yes,” he said, and cursed his only weakness. “Go get the car, Potter. I want Gilda to see this.”

Potter shrugged and made for the door.

“Don’t order him around,” Weasley snapped.

Draco was about to snarl something back at Weasley, but Potter turned back and caught his eyes. “Who’s ordering me around?” he said lightly. “I always drive. Malfoy always takes the passenger seat. You know - like a girl.”

Draco knew exactly what he was doing, but the hell with it: as if he’d ever choose Weasley to spar with over Potter anyway. “I think of you as - like a chauffeur,” he said thoughtfully.

Potter laughed and made a rude gesture, and was out the door. Draco took a big swallow of coffee in order to get it down fast and get himself out of here. It was only when he’d swallowed that he noticed the aftertaste, and Granger’s glittering eyes.

Unspeakables could carry Veritaserum, and administer it at their discretion.

Draco took another swallow since the damage was done, and said: “You must be really damn worried about Potter.”

“I think he’s doing better,” Granger answered softly. “How do you think he is? How’s the partner thing going?”

“He’s the best I ever had,” said Draco, and gave his cup an appalled look. “I’m going now, because I’m really embarrassed,” he said to the coffee and Veritaserum.

“Wait,” Granger said. “Are you going to tell Harry about this?”

“No,” said Draco. “My friends were worried about me, too.”

That was it, he had to get *out* of here.

He paused at the door and looked back at them. Both of them looked more relaxed: maybe even a little relieved.

“Granger,” he added. “I’ve always thought you were kind of hot.”

He laughed out loud at the expression on Weasley's face, and then went easily down the stairs to Potter and the car.

Once in the car, he mostly tried to think about figures and not embarrassing things that he might conceivably tell Potter. He counted up points and case records, since Potter knew about those, and then when Potter was about half-way to Forsythe's he realised something.

"Potter," he said. "Do you know what our case record is?"

"Sure," Potter said, but he looked over at Draco because of the tone in Draco's voice.

"But do you realise what it means?" Draco asked. "With Forsythe too – we're going to get Aurors of the Year. It's in the bag."

Potter looked about as stunned as Draco felt. They stared at each other, and Draco saw the same thought as Draco was having clear on Potter's face: *but five months ago we were going to get fired*, and then they were both laughing, amazed and glad, as the car sailed on to Forsythe's arrest.

Draco's laugh went a little hysterical, but he blamed that on the lack of food and sleep and the getting drugged before breakfast.

Chapter Three

On the award night for the Aurors of the Year, Harry Potter shook his hand and Katie Bell slept with him.

It was pretty much the best night of his life.

The hall the powers that be had rented was glowing and cream-coloured, looking like they were inside one of the masses of lit candles all over the walls and the tables and set in the chandeliers. A lot of people came up to Draco and congratulated him. He kept having more champagne, until the whole world was the champagne-whirling inside of a lit candle.

He danced with his cousin Tonks. She was his cousin, and it made him uneasy that he didn't know her, had never been allowed to speak about her during his childhood and felt like he should be close to her now but didn't have the faintest idea how to be. She looked pink all over, her dress and cheeks matching her hair, and was apparently going to have a possible werewolf litter any time now.

She kissed him and told him congratulations.

Draco had thought that Potter might come to the hall with his triplets and cause a scandal, but he brought Granger instead. Even that caused a lot of speculation in the cloakroom debating whether he'd stolen her from Weasley.

He seemed to be mostly at the party with a glass of champagne, so Draco stole it from him. All the champagne should belong to Draco: that was only right.

Potter let him take it. He was looking a little weird: possibly the volume of women who had noticed him in his formal clothes and were now closing in like vultures had alarmed even him. He was looking at the floor a lot.

He said "Congratulations," and offered his hand, and Draco remembered in precise detail being eleven years old, outraged, confused and wanting more than anything in his life before to make this almost-stranger *pay*.

He shook Potter's hand.

Potter continued to look at the floor, and Draco surveyed the circling women with some amusement. Then he saw Katie Bell walking through them. She was smiling right at him.

She agreed to dance with him. She agreed to go out with him.

When they were dancing and he asked if he could kiss her, she agreed to that too.

Later he didn't remember the kisses in detail, though there were a lot of them, soft, not pushing, though they seemed to have pushed enough because later he was in her room, helping her off with her robes, having her touch his chest and trying to pretend he knew what he was doing, still not quite believing it was real.

He mostly remembered the disbelief, every candle in the room seeming to lose gravity and float around like the bubbles in champagne, as he realised that he'd never really thought it would happen. He'd expected to fail but here she was in his arms, and around him there were – the people who'd congratulated him watching, and Granger in red looking approving, his cousin looking proud, Potter who had shaken his hand. The world was all golden, and whirling.

It wasn't fair. He would do his best to deserve it.

*

Draco woke up with a headache and under an atrocious rose-patterned duvet, and was extremely confused for a moment before he saw Katie's sleeping face on the pillow next to his, at which point the wonder and disbelief came back.

She woke up stretching, and reached her hand out to him. "Hey," she said, and smiled.

He kissed her hand. "Hey," he said, which seemed safe. "Good morning," he added. "You're beautiful. Thank you. I'll send flowers. I respect you. Do you want to go out with me? Please God, stop me."

He felt the urge to babble even more strongly than usual because he didn't have any clothes on, but crushed it in a death grip lest Katie decided she never wanted to take her clothes off with him again.

"Good morning," Katie said, kindly overlooking all the rest of it.

"Can I kiss you?" Draco demanded. She nodded and he reached out, carefully, brushing her hair with his fingertips as if she was a bird he didn't want to scare away. He touched her mouth with his, and she kissed him back gently, and after a paralysing moment of self-consciousness he realised that the naked thing had its benefits.

Her mouth was warm and soft, as was the rest of her, and he shut his eyes and enjoyed the warmth. By the time he opened them she was lying under him, fitting against him wonderfully, and he was thinking about his second time in a creative manner.

"Draco, we have to go to work," she said, a little breathlessly.

"Nonsense, I am an Auror of the Year, I rule that place with an iron fist, we need to stay," Draco told her.

"No, but really," Katie said.

Draco recalled a certain terrible episode of his life, after the discovery of Blaise Zabini's Veela powers, when Professor Snape had rounded everybody up and told them that no meant no, the answer should be no until they were at least sixteen, and anyone with follow-up questions would be poisoned.

He blinked hard to make the memory go away. "I respect that," he said quickly. "Your decision!"

She reached up and touched his chest again, her hand small and warm and lingering. “Draco, I’ve been meaning to ask-”

Draco was absolutely certain she saw the look of complete panic on his face. He recalled in terrible detail a few things he had tried last night in an attempt to be romantic and dramatic and not obviously inexperienced.

“Oh no, Draco, you were lovely,” she assured him.

Draco was inexpressibly relieved. Though he had hoped a little for ‘Draco, you’re an animal.’

“It’s just,” Katie said, and frowned slightly. “Where did you get that scar?”

Draco looked down at the twisted knot of scar tissue running from the base of his throat to his heart.

“Oh,” he said. “Ah. You know, a case.”

“It must have hurt terribly,” Katie said, still frowning.

Draco remembered his back hitting the wet bathroom floor, the cracked ceiling dissolving into darkness before him, Potter’s horrified face floating away, and the cold certainty that he was going to die.

“No,” he answered. “Hardly noticed it. I’m heroic that way.”

“You’re not bad,” Katie said, and her frown turned into a smile, and he had to kiss her again. “Draco,” she said once he was done. “I can’t promise you anything. Let’s just – give it a chance, shall we?”

“Let’s,” said Draco.

She was giving him a chance. He couldn’t blow it.

*

Katie had some strange notion about getting in to work on time, so Draco kissed her goodbye and went to find early morning coffee in a café. While there, he re-ran the highlights of last night in his mind and thought about getting a chance and also getting to have sex and his mood was improbably fantastic for such an ungodly hour of the morning.

Lisa the receptionist gave him one look and said: “Well, *somebody* had a good night.”

Draco clutched at the receptionist desk. “You can *tell*?” he demanded. “How? How can you tell? I mean, I don’t know what you mean! Your words are incomprehensible to me!”

The shock upset his nerves enough to force him to the coffee before he went to his desk. While he was adding heaped spoonfuls of sugar he thought about kissing Katie this morning, and Dean Thomas elbowed him in the side and said: “Had fun, then?”

Draco went into the bathroom and checked, but he didn't look all that different to himself. A little wild about the eyes because he felt hunted, of course.

Damn the Aurors' trained investigative skills! And Lisa the receptionist's, too.

He went to his desk and got some reports out, not daring to meet anyone else's eyes.

Potter was pretty quiet that day. Draco was profoundly grateful.

*

Katie taking him home to meet the family could have gone better. Draco was slightly distressed about being surrounded with Muggles who were looking at him with judgemental eyes, and enormously distressed about being confronted with Katie's father when apparently everyone could tell he'd had sex.

Katie's father hated him on sight. The others followed in short order.

They all ate outside and Draco made polite conversation.

"I like your garden ornament," he said, nodding at a particularly intriguing-looking contraption.

Katie's mother looked at him strangely and said: "Do you mean the lawnmower?"

Draco reached for the sangria.

"So, d'you like sports?" Katie's brother Carl asked a little while later.

"Yes," Draco answered promptly and delightedly, and he reached out for Katie's hand over the table. "Katie and I both played Quidditch at school. Different teams, of course, but-

"Draco, please!" Katie's sister Anna said, giving him a shocked look. "Don't talk about that kind of thing in front of my children!"

Draco looked at Mary, who was hovering at his elbow hanging on his every word, and then at the baby, who was asleep.

"Oh, of course," he said.

"My husband doesn't know," Anna continued. "So if you could just – not mention things like that-

Draco thought about the statistics for domestic violence and how they skyrocketed in Muggle families with witches and wizards in them, and then crushed his father's voice saying *we didn't create the fear* in his head.

"Oh quite," he said.

“There were four teams in your school, right?” Carl asked. “What were the dirty cheaters called again, Kate?”

Draco gave him a cold look and said: “My team.”

“Do you like football?” Carl inquired hurriedly.

“Um,” Draco said, and had a sudden flash of empathy for Potter being asked ‘Play Quidditch at all?’. “What’s that?”

Later, he overheard Carl telling Katie that he was ‘totally home-schooled.’ Draco remembered with a pang of longing cool days in the Manor with the house elves teaching him his times tables, and wondered what on earth else he was supposed to be.

“What does your father do?” Katie’s father growled suddenly, his eyes narrowed at the defiler of his daughter.

“Well, he’s incarcerated,” Draco answered, and reached for the sangria again. Katie was utterly silent at this point, and looking more distressed by the minute.

Later, walking in the garden in the evening light, he saw a chance to ingratiate himself with the mother. “I see your garden needs de-gnoming,” he said chattily. “Not a problem.”

He swung the nearest gnome overhead and Mrs Bell’s expression told him something was very wrong, even before the sickening crash.

They all went inside and Draco collapsed on the porch steps, and gave Mary a forlorn smile. “You like me, don’t you, little Mary?” he said in tones edging on desperation.

Mary leaned against his knees, gazed up at him with big blue eyes, and said with the intensity of a fanatic: “Will you tell me another story about Potter?”

“It wasn’t so bad, Draco,” Katie said doubtfully as they walked home. “I know you did your best.”

He knew he’d done his best too. It just wasn’t good enough.

*

It was as if they had two malfunctioning Time Turners and kept trying to meet at the right time, but he kept skipping ahead and sometimes she forgot to use hers.

“Can’t we just be *still* for a minute?” Katie asked one night with what was obviously exasperation, and Draco stopped his demonstration of his new brilliant juggling skills. They read books together that night, and Draco didn’t tell Katie the best bits of his like usual. He could tell by her slight frown that it wouldn’t be appreciated.

Then there was the terrible talk in the café.

“Am I,” Draco said, and tried viciously hard to sound neutral. “Am I doing something

wrong?”

“No, Draco!” Katie assured him. “No, it’s – no, it’s really great. It *is*. Only – just not every night, maybe.”

“Ahahaha,” Draco said. “Obviously. Not every night!” He wondered if he could possibly claim that he’d known that, and he’d just been testing her.

It was wonderful sometimes. He got things right and she laughed, she seemed happy, and he could lose sight of the thought that he was failing, that he would fail.

He tried not to think about it. He tried to concentrate on casework.

That was still going well, mostly. There were times when it wasn’t – the time they caught the wizard who’d been stealing those Muggle kids and keeping them to use as ingredients in his Potions, he’d thought Potter was going to *kill* that guy, but Draco had Stunned him and Obliviated the guy and despite Potter’s violent protests when he woke up he thought he had done absolutely the right thing.

“Don’t *do it again*,” Potter warned him as they were walking out of St Mungo’s.

“*You* don’t do it again,” Draco shot back. “And I won’t have to.”

He learned to recognise and be ready for things that would set Potter off. He didn’t think that something would set *him* off, not until he went onto a crime scene that should have been the same as any crime scene, and saw what was left of the mother on her bed, and the daughter’s face.

He had to go outside and sit on the edge of the pavement in the cold moonlight, hands clasped together between his knees and *force* himself down before he said or did anything that would alarm the grieving terrified family. He shied away from the noises of several sets of Aurors and the neighbours closing in like vultures and he just wanted nobody to talk to him, nobody to even come close to him, until he could make himself all right again.

After many, many deep fraught breaths it occurred to him that this was exactly what was happening.

For a moment he did not know why and then he realised that Potter, who he’d just thought was walking around aimlessly, was in fact prowling around an invisible perimeter, looking at everyone who approached as if daring them to come closer. Nobody did, because Potter looked bristling and scary and Draco remembered how he’d reminded Draco of a wolf and he somehow still did, only now he seemed to be a wolf somehow turned sheepdog with only one sheep to guard.

At any other time Draco would’ve been grievously insulted at his own brain comparing himself to a sheep. Just then all he could do was gulp grateful lungfuls of the cold night air and reach for calm, putting himself together in the circle of quiet created for him, with Potter keeping the world at bay.

Not that Potter in any way became less of a moody bastard, of course. The next day Draco

was detailing his and Katie's plans for a weekend away – he wanted to go white water rafting and she wanted to go somewhere sunny and relaxing, they were trying to find some way to combine the two – and Potter almost shouted at him to shut up.

Draco's outraged stare must have let Potter know that he had the manners of a wildebeest, which was a good thing because if the stare hadn't worked Draco might have thrown a chair after it.

Potter pulled a handful of his own hair, and Draco wanted to throw a comb as well. "I have a headache," he explained shortly.

"Oh," Draco said. Much like Katie last night, a voice in his head sneered at him. "Sorry," he added in a tone that he knew sounded uncertain and hated Potter for, and pulled out a report.

Potter made a snarling sound at the back of his throat, then got up and stalked away. Sometimes Draco thought the stepped-on-xylophone noises Potter made augured something a little not-human somewhere in his ancestry: right then he thought it might be a talking pig.

He took that back when Potter came back and shoved a coffee at him. "Sorry," he said, and shoved at Draco's chair as well, as if meaning to back-pat but being too crazy to do it. "It's not your fault."

Draco eyed his coffee lovingly and assumed that Potter must've had a fight with the triplets. "That's all right," he said, and offered: "D'you want to spar later?"

Potter relaxed a little. "Yeah," he said, and his voice sounded human again.

They had to stay late that night, but it was worth it. Later Shacklebolt expressed quite strongly his feeling that nothing was worth all the destroyed benches or the burned practise mat, but he was so wrong.

Draco had to admit the practise mat was his fault, but he felt that was worth it too. He'd had to do it, anyway. Potter'd had him down with both hands pinning his shoulders, a knee between Draco's, and a frighteningly intent look in his eye, as if nothing in the world would distract him.

"*Surrender*," Potter snarled. It didn't sound like a question.

Draco bared his teeth and said: "*Incendio*."

Turned out having his hair set on fire distracted Potter quite effectively. He shouted and it went out, because Potter's wandless magic was weird and erratic but when he needed it to work it *really* worked, but by then Draco had twisted under him, rolled him over and pinned him down.

"You never used that before," Potter remarked breathlessly beneath him.

"You didn't know I could do it before," Draco informed him. "That wouldn't have been fair."

"You do play by your own rules, Malfoy," Potter said slowly.

Draco smirked. "Who else's would I play by?"

Potter answered by throwing him into a wall.

It took hours, the effective destruction of the practise room, a short break when they actually noticed the practise mats were burning and had to put them out, and ignoring a broken wrist, but Draco hadn't believed he could do it all and when he did he felt rushing screaming triumph in his veins overwhelm even the fact he thought he was going to pass out.

"Well?" he demanded, holding Potter up against the wall and staring at his ear with that insane triumph. Potter looked as if he was going to pass out too, but he was still straining against Draco's hold, almost but not quite managing to break it. "*Well?*" Draco insisted.

Potter turned his face towards the wall and Draco saw his face close up, eyes shut and black lashes long against his cheeks. "I surrender," Potter rasped.

"Oh thank God," said Draco, and promptly collapsed.

Potter slid down the wall into a sitting position, and Draco commenced cradling his wrist and bitching Potter out thoroughly for breaking it. Potter told him to shut up and find his glasses so he could fix it, then, and it took forever to find the glasses under the splintered ruin of a bench.

"I *do* hope I didn't hurt you too much," Draco said solicitously. "I know you're delicate."

Potter looked both amused and extremely cross at being defeated, which was just how Draco liked him. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"I wouldn't like to think my resounding victory had damaged you in any way," Draco continued blithely. "I'd just *hate* to think of your ego taking a hit. You must promise me you won't have a crisis of confidence."

"Shut *up*, Malfoy," Potter said, holding onto the doorframe as they went out.

"Potter," Draco said, and Potter glanced at him. Draco grinned. "Good fight."

Potter hesitated, and then grinned back slowly. "Yeah."

They never said it again. It always was.

Later that night Draco was stretched out comfortably with his head in Katie's soft lap, and she was petting his hair and reading. "Draco," she said in a lovely voice, and Draco felt a pang of sheer fear that she would ask him to actually move and do something.

"What?" he asked, doing his very best to sound like an indomitable stallion.

"Nothing really," Katie said, smiling down at him. "This is nice."

He lay there quietly, inexpressibly relieved and totally exhausted, and started to have the

beginnings of an idea.

*

He'd known from the beginning that living with Crabbe and Goyle had to be a very temporary thing. They were lovebirds in their first nest, after all, even though Draco's mind sort of refused to dwell on that. He couldn't keep butting in.

Katie went with him to look at lots of flats, and he took the one she liked best and asked her to move in with him.

"Oh, Draco," she said, looking very taken-aback. "I don't think we're quite there yet."

"You're probably right," Draco said at once, and tried not to panic at the thought of having to live by himself.

The stupid Muggle flat was huge when he was sitting in it while Katie was in the bathroom, its trappings alien to him, the pictures on the wall still as the dead. Draco told himself it was just that he hadn't lived on his own before. He bet he'd really enjoy it. Carefree lifestyle of gentleman of means. Answering to nobody! It would be great.

"You don't have to go," Goyle fretted as they were moving Draco's stuff out. "You won't eat, I know you won't eat."

"I eat," Draco said, pointing his wand at his chest of drawers.

"Coffee is not a *food*," Goyle cried passionately.

Crabbe poked his head around the door. "Uh, Malfoy," he said. "Potter's in the drive for you. Crime scene." He nodded at Draco's belongings scattered around the place and said kindly: "We can finish moving you."

"Oh, I want to see Potter!" Goyle exclaimed. "I haven't seen him since you stopped hating him."

"I *still hate him*," Draco protested vehemently. "Sort of."

He went out into the drive shaking dust out of his hair and wondering how it'd got there and also how he'd apparently acquired twenty-seven coffee mugs, and saw Potter in the car. Draco shook his head vigorously to get the last of the dust out and Potter half-laughed.

"What have you been up to?" he said, lazy and pleased as he generally was on a Saturday morning crime scene. Goyle made a faint sound behind Draco.

"One moment please," Draco said, and pushed Goyle back inside, shutting the door behind him. "No," he said sternly. "No, no, no. Think of school!"

"He didn't look like *that* at school," Goyle said, looking mildly stunned. "Though come to think of it, I guess the potential was always there."

“No!” Draco said. “I am your leader and I command you!”

“Oh yes, yes,” Goyle said. “My devotion to Vince is unalterable,” he added, doing a very bad impression of Draco himself.

Nobody should ever do impressions but Draco. He considered writing a postcard to France and telling Ginny Weasley.

“Oh, here,” he added as he bolted out the door.

Goyle took the crumpled paper in a distracted way as he concentrated on trying to get Draco to take his cloak.

Draco flung himself into the car and Potter revved the engine, launching it into the air. “Stop!” Draco said in ringing tones. “Quick, make us invisible and then stop and stay stopped!”

Potter flicked the invisibility switch. “Why are we doing this?”

“Because,” Draco informed him with great satisfaction. “I have just given Goyle the title deeds to this house, and I want to see his and Crabbe’s faces.”

“Oh,” Potter said, sounding startled. “That was – nice of you.”

“It was only practical,” Draco told him quickly. “Renting is not very cost-effective. Besides, a chef and a nurse, they don’t make much, it would’ve been stupid. It doesn’t matter to me, I’ve got lots of money. People annoy me when they’re stupid.”

“It’s okay to be nice,” Potter said.

“It’s great!” Draco responded. “I’m sure. It’s just that I wouldn’t know myself. Now shush.”

Goyle, standing at the open door, was unfolding the crumpled ball of paper. His face changed slowly from normal to a rictus of surprise. He looked completely ridiculous: Draco laughed with glee.

“*Vince!*” Goyle shouted dizzily. “Vince, come and see what that madman has done now!”

“Madman?” Draco exclaimed, much offended. “Is that any way to refer to their glorious leader when his back is turned? I ask you!”

Crabbe appeared at the door in his shirtsleeves, and took a look at the paper. Draco watched him blink.

He said: “My God.”

Draco felt a warm glow at the success of his surprise. The warm glow faded at once when Goyle grabbed Crabbe and started making out with him wildly.

Draco gave a small scream. “Drive! *Drive!* We’re all done here, why won’t you *drive?*”

“I can’t drive,” Potter said in a strangled voice. “I’ve got my eyes shut.”

Draco reached out desperately and grabbed the wheel. Once they were turned around Potter opened his eyes and began driving properly.

“That was weird,” he said in a shaken sort of voice.

Draco instantly took umbrage on his friends’ behalf. “I’ll have you know Crabbe and Goyle are actually very attractive,” he snapped. “In some cultures. In a big-boned sort of way.”

“I’m - sure they are,” Potter said, not sounding very sure at all.

“Hmm,” Draco said. “Well, if you’re sure.”

They drove on for a short time in silence while Draco plotted his revenge for this slight to his nearest and dearest.

“Potter, do you know what?” he asked at last.

“What?” Potter asked, in the slow encouraging way he had. Poor fool, how he would regret egging Draco on.

“Goyle thought you were good-looking,” Draco said with calm delight.

Potter swallowed.

“And since you agree that they’re both so very attractive,” Draco went on serenely, “Maybe *they’d* agree to a threeso-”

At that point Draco had to stop, because Potter almost drove into a tree and Draco was cackling too much to go on.

“You’re not having much success with this driving thing today,” Draco said after he was done cackling. “Maybe I should have a go.”

“No,” Potter said firmly.

“But you know I’ve seen lots of Muggle Auror films!” Draco protested. “I know exactly how to do it! I’m an *expert*.”

“Shacklebolt told me never to let you drive,” Potter said. “Never under any circumstances, even if I was dead. He said that.”

“He’s an evil robot,” Draco said passionately. “You shouldn’t listen to him. You should fight evil, it is your sacred calling. You should listen to me.” He gazed at Potter and bit his lip, not with much hope since this never worked on anybody but Goyle and then only when Draco wanted to be fed. “*Please*, Potter.”

He was surprised and thrilled to see a flicker of hesitation on Potter’s face.

He tried to think about what he did when he wanted Goyle to make something extra special, and swiftly cast his eyes down, then looked beseechingly up through his eyelashes and bit his lip some more.

“*Please.*”

“Oh *all right*,” Potter said, in the voice of a man goaded beyond endurance.

Draco cackled and relaxed into his seat. Potter was a soft touch. Who knew?

“I can’t believe you bought your friends a house,” Potter said after a moment. “How much money do you *have*?”

“I don’t know,” said Draco, who tried not to think about it. They’d unfrozen his father’s accounts a while ago. “Why, do you have a gambling problem you want me to fund?”

Potter grinned. “I gave up on gambling years ago.”

“Ah,” Draco said, nodding sagely. “I see. You’ve moved onto hookers and blow.”

“We have a stressful job. Got to relax somehow,” Potter said, and spun the car right around in the sky, heading for a flat rooftop to land on so they could change seats.

Some time later, after the damage to the office building had been mostly repaired and the screaming people inside had been Obliviated, Draco looked woefully at the bits of the car that the other Aurors were carrying away and tried to think of some way, *any* way, to blame it all on Potter.

“You shouldn’t have let me drive,” he said finally, in a lost voice.

“I’ve come to that conclusion on my own, thanks,” Potter said grimly.

“I’m *sorry*,” Draco said wretchedly.

“Oh, no – look, it’s all right,” Potter said.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Draco burst out, and Potter followed the line of Draco’s vision to Dean Thomas with a piece of the front seat and the mangled remains of Gilda. “I murdered her,” Draco said in a voice of bitter self-loathing.

He didn’t have a home, his girlfriend’s family wanted him dead, and now he had lost Gilda too.

Potter patted him on the back. “No you didn’t.”

“I did!”

“You didn’t mean to,” Potter pointed out. “So it was manslaughter.”

And his partner was a crazy man. There was that, too.

“I want a coffee,” Draco exclaimed.

Since they weren’t going to the crime scene, they went to a café. Draco sat down at the table and realised that once he left he would have to go to that terrible flat. Katie was with her family and Crabbe and Goyle were undoubtedly doing depraved things to each other and he could hardly Owl one of his friends and explain he was terrified of going home.

“Look,” he said desperately. “Are you keen on getting back right away?”

“God no,” Potter said, and his mouth twisted downward. “Ron and Hermione are at each others’ throats.”

Yes, Draco thought, but what were the triplets doing? Maybe they were with their family too.

“Fine then,” he said. “We might as well get something to eat. After coffee, of course.”

The twist of Potter’s mouth turned in on itself, going upward. “Of course.”

Sometime after midnight (there had been wine at dinner) they were walking through Piccadilly Circus and Draco became intrigued by a busker. The music pulled him up short because it reminded him of Gilda, but before he could become too sad the musician started playing a song he knew.

Several songs he knew later, the busker looked very puzzled by the Galleons in his guitar case and he was sitting on the edge of the pavement, arms linked around his knees. Potter was sitting with him, legs stretched out in front of him, but Potter was not singing.

Possibly this was because Potter was a spoilsport or possibly it was because Potter was laughing at him too much. Possibly it was both.

It was about three when Draco got home, and by then he was tired enough not to hate it so much.

*

Draco and Katie went on their holiday to a quiet seaside resort in Brittany. Katie was happy and peaceful, wore her bikini a lot and read books on the patio. Draco was happy about the Katie in her bikini bit, and also that apparently the not-every-night rule was relaxed on holidays.

For the rest of it, he spent a lot of time at the bar.

He was at the bar when someone said “Oh my God, there’s an owl in here! ... How much have I had to drink?” and he turned to find an Owl lying on the bar by his hand.

It was from Shacklebolt and it said COME QUICKLY. CHILDREN, and gave an address.

Draco Apparated from the bar. People could always be Obliviated later.

He found himself on another and entirely different seaside, this one with huge jagged rocks instead of sand, and the sea a grey crashing invader. Seaspray hit his face and four Aurors darted at him through the rocks.

“Thank God!” said Dawlish. “There are eight trolls, a family of them, they’ve been taking human children and keeping trophies and – where’s everyone else?”

“Everyone else who?” Draco demanded. “Where’s *Potter*?”

“The reinforcements, Shacklebolt went to get them,” Dawlish said, and noticeably did not respond to Draco’s other question.

Draco grabbed the front of his robes and hauled him off his feet. “Where is he?”

“In the cave,” Dawlish choked out.

“*Alone*?” Draco snarled.

“Shacklebolt said that none of us should go in!” Dawlish yelled at him. “It was orders – Potter should’ve-”

“I’d kill you but I don’t have time,” Draco said, and ran.

He had to scramble over the rocks and kept half-falling down, heart pounding, crashing against his ribs like the sea against this harsh shoreline. He was still a little drunk, aware that his reflexes weren’t quite what they should be, a little too removed from everything, but he couldn’t stop.

The cave was an interconnected series of caves, like big rocky rooms. It was scattered with human belongings, most from children but some not, some looking like the trolls had taken whole families. There were little child-sized shoes, a big green coat and a hat-stand.

There were also a lot of troll bodies on the floor.

Draco counted them even as he was scrambling over them, one two three four five six seven *eight* and he’d done it, the crazy bastard had done it, and then he heard a snarl and wondered how certain Dawlish had been about that figure.

There was another troll, smallish which still meant huge, and its huge body was crouched over its motionless prey. Draco stood frozen for a moment and watched it worry Potter’s arm. There was blood. There was a lot of blood.

Draco had killed exactly one person during the war. It had been when the war was all but won, when Voldemort was dead and they were trying to round up the remaining Death Eaters and Snape had taken him on a low-risk mission and the man had come from nowhere, Draco had simply thought *No, not him too* and screamed “*Avada Kedavra!*” and the man had gone so easily and Draco had stood over him and thought: If he’d done that, with Dumbledore, maybe – but that was wrong.

He hadn't seen Snape much, since the war. He supposed he was busy.

He felt the same strange kind of calm now. It was so easy.

Draco seized up the hat-stand in his left hand and ran at the troll, swinging the stand down hard on its head.

"Get away," Draco snarled, and swung again, "from *my partner*."

He brought the stand crashing down over and over on its head, casting spells from his wand and without his wand at the same time, setting the troll on fire and casting Unforgivables on it and hitting it, again and again, teeth gritted, until he became aware that it was very still, and that was because it was in pieces.

He Levitated the pieces, sent them crashing into the wall, and fell to his knees beside Potter.

"Wake up," he ordered his still face, because nothing else was a possibility and he was quite certain about that.

Potter frowned under the blood, opened his eyes a slit and said: "Malfoy, what?"

He tried to sit up and Draco grabbed hold of his shoulders and made sure he didn't fall back, brought him forward instead so that Potter's face hit Draco's shoulder and Draco held onto Potter's hand, which was the only part of his arm which was relatively whole, and made sure he didn't move it an inch.

"... I think I got a bit hurt," Potter said thickly. "Do you mind healing me?"

"Idiot," Draco raged. "That's exactly what I'd do if I never wanted you to have the use of your arm again, you stupid, stupid – don't move, please don't, you're going to be all right."

"You're really bossy," Potter whispered. "Did you know that?"

"You're an idiot," Draco shot back, his voice furious and trembling. "Did you know that? We're going to the hospital. I hate you. You're going to be fine."

He was pretty sure that was around when Potter lost consciousness. Draco stroked his hair with his free hand, thought desperately and Apparated onto a cold floor in a corridor of St Mungo's.

A nurse looked extremely surprised to see two blood-covered men crouching on the floor. Draco fixed his gaze on her over Potter's head.

"Go get a doctor," he snarled. "Do it *now*."

When the mediwitches took Potter away he went to the waiting room, where Shackbolt and Dawlish were already having a fight. He told them that there were eight unconscious trolls and one very dead one in the caves. Apparently they already knew that. He sat down on a chair and waited.

Crabbe came in after a few hours and told them that Potter would keep his arm, and the full use of it, and that he hadn't died of blood loss during the operation.

Shacklebolt nodded at him, face entirely unmoved. Draco suspected that Shacklebolt's face would be entirely unmoved during an earthquake.

Then Crabbe came and knelt by Draco's chair. "Malfoy," he said in his quiet way. "You're covered in blood. Go home."

"I don't want to go back there," Draco said in a low voice.

Crabbe cut his shift short and took Draco back to his and Goyle's. The next day Potter was back at work because he was apparently more insane than even Draco had supposed, and Draco had to go to the kitchen and make himself a coffee before the tide of insanity swallowed him too.

He stood in the doorway of the office with his coffee and tried to think. He had to apologise to Katie for abandoning her in France. He had to not strangle Potter for being an idiot. He had to work things out.

Potter was going to die. He'd keep taking insane risks and doing it by himself because that was what they'd trained him to do since he was eleven and one day no matter how strong or lucky or chosen he was by fate, strength and luck would run out and fate would give up on him. Everybody would mourn him and say his name in hushed tones and put him in the history books and be relieved, just a little, not to have to see him and deal with what they'd made every day.

Draco wouldn't let it happen. It would be all right. It would all fall into place, the points system and Katie getting what she wanted and Potter not dying. He was starting to fit the pieces together.

He took a deep breath, felt a little calmer and went over to where Potter was trying to write his report left-handed. Potter glanced at him as he walked up.

"You've got that look on your face," he observed. "Like you're planning something."

"I am," said Draco. "It's sort of a – structural plan. I'm currently refining it."

"Oh well," Potter said, smiling. "Tell me about it once you're done."

*

The plan took on another level when Potter showed up at the door of Draco's horrible flat soaking wet and saying that Weasley and Granger had broken up.

While Draco's first instinct was to mock anyone who had thought that disaster train was going anywhere but off the rails, he thought about Crabbe and Goyle breaking up and the horror that might follow that and he started pouring Firewhiskey and ended up saying as much.

“They have to still talk to each other,” Potter said hoarsely after two cups of Firewhiskey. “They have to. I need them. It’s not like – none of the Weasleys but Ron will talk to me now.”

“Why not?” Draco demanded.

“Because,” Potter said through his teeth. “Their daughter moved to France because she thought I was going out with her and then she walked in on me sleeping with Zacharias Smith.”

“... that might do it,” Draco conceded.

It was while Potter was still talking, in a strained continuous way that said it was so difficult he had to keep going or he’d never start again, that Draco realised there were no triplets.

The realisation stunned him and made him almost tune out Potter talking about his relationship with Smith, which sounded as if it had consisted of a lot of rolling around and then staring at each other hissing like upset cats and – reading between the lines – Potter totally ignoring Smith’s existence. Draco had assumed that Potter, given the ridiculous good looks and the fact he always got everything he wanted... well, he’d assumed triplets, but he had not taken into account the fact that Potter and normal human interaction did not get along.

There were certainly no triplets right now, otherwise obviously Potter would have gone to them instead of Draco. In fact, he should’ve gone to someone else anyway – but if he didn’t have the Weasleys and he’d apparently hardly known the Gryffindors aside from Weasley and Granger, then who else was there?

The realisation that Potter was alone hit Draco at about the same time as the thought that it was just possible there had never been anybody but Smith, which had been *years* ago.

No wonder Potter was so moody half the time.

In the midst of these bleak revelations Draco had rather hoped that Potter would be hilarious when drunk, but he was just kind of quiet and unhappy, smaller than he seemed when sober. He showed Draco how to use his new, beautiful television which Draco was planning to keep on all the time for company, and Draco gazed at the television with rapture and secretly plotted to himself, and Potter totally failed to do anything embarrassing. The only strange thing was when Draco glanced away from the television and saw Potter, closer than he’d thought he was and with his head bowed, lightly touching the cotton collar of Draco’s shirt.

So Potter had a strange fascination with material when he was drunk. Wonderful. Draco had been hoping at least for a fit of the giggles.

Nevertheless, Draco had a plan to carry through.

A few weeks later at the next Slytherins’ poker evening, held at Crabbe and Goyle’s house, he refused to take part in the game and sat around gossiping with everyone, watching the door.

“-So I’ve decided that what I need is a really terrific meaningless fling,” Pansy said.

“I’m really busy right now,” Zabini told her, frowning. “I can slot you in for next October. Possibly next October.”

“*Not* with you, Blaise, and if you try the Veela thing I will slap you stupid,” Pansy said, and bared her teeth for an instant. “You wouldn’t do at all. I don’t share well.”

The thought of monogamy sent a flash of pure horror over Zabini’s perfect features. “Oh no, then I wouldn’t do at all,” he said hastily.

“I’m thinking someone, you know, big and uncomplicated and good in bed,” Pansy said. “Possibly extremely well-endowed. But it’s hard to ascertain that first.” She paused and added: “Oh, and a Quidditch fan. Can anyone think of someone who might do?”

Draco shook his head absently and continued lounging in his chair, watching the door, until it opened and at last Malcolm Baddock came in. He looked chipper, was carrying a bottle of Firewhiskey – definitely a sign – and was wearing a glittery blue t-shirt that said *It’s Gonna Take A Superman To Sweep Me Off My Feet*.

He was the only gay person Draco knew, unless Potter wanted that threesome with Crabbe and Goyle after all.

“Oh *Malcolm*,” Draco purred as if he was going to award points, and when Baddock whipped around he smiled and crooked his finger. “Come.”

Baddock looked thrilled.

“You’re coming to my birthday party, aren’t you,” Draco said as Baddock leaned over his chair. He took hold of the glittery t-shirt.

Baddock swallowed. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“Good,” Draco said, as if Baddock had just *been* awarded an enormous amount of house points and the Cup was shining before them. “Because I have a mission for you,” he said, and grinned. “Should you choose to accept it.”

“Are you sure this is a good *idea*?” Goyle asked in an agitated tone later, while deftly chopping up more vegetables for dip.

“Yes I am,” Draco said, who wasn’t going to be persuaded out of this now.

“I like Baddock, but he’s very – little and sparkly,” Goyle said.

“He’s like a very little sparkly Zacharias Smith!”

“He doesn’t look *anything like* Zacharias Smith,” Goyle said.

“He’s got blond hair,” Draco said.

Goyle reached out with one hand, chopping with the other, and pulled Draco's hair.

"Don't do that," Draco said. "I am your fearless leader, don't pull my hair. Also, my hair is not curly." He paused for a speculative moment, and then said: "I think the curls make them more gay. Anyway, Goyle, don't worry about it. This is my plan, so it is a brilliant plan and cannot fail."

It didn't exactly *fail*.

Potter seemed mostly distressed and confused by Baddock's sparkliness, but Baddock remembered Draco's dire perfectly threats and threw himself into the chase. All the same, for most of the party it seemed like the chase was going to fail and possibly that Baddock was going to get thrown off the balcony.

Potter had brought Weasley with him and Weasley, who unlike Potter seemed to have a normal person's instincts towards getting laid, spent all his time at the bar with Pansy.

The sight of such horror forced Draco to get drunk. Well, it was his birthday. It was a sacred duty, or something. It was a nice birthday despite the presence of Weasley, tequila smoothing the edges off everything and making Katie's face glow under the streetlamps when they finally emerged from a bar. Draco shut his eyes and kissed her in order to pretend he didn't see Weasley actually going home with Pansy, who seemed to have actually decided that Weasley was her Fling. There were no Weasleys in his world, Draco decided, held upright mostly by a lamp post. Everything was safe and warm and clouded by enormous glorious clouds of tequila.

Then he heard Potter snap: "You want to go home with me?"

"Yes I do!" said Baddock.

"Fine," Potter growled, and then stalked away down the street.

Baddock cast a questioning look over his shoulder and Draco gestured over Katie's shoulder – go, go! – and Baddock scurried after Potter's retreating form.

Draco rolled his eyes at the world. "And here we all thought Potter had no game."

"Hey Draco," Katie said, close to him in the lamplight, warm and sweet. "You want to go home with me?"

Draco raised his eyebrows and grinned at her wickedly. "Yes I do."

They actually went back to Draco's place, since he lived in it by himself and Katie liked it. Which turned out to be lucky, as otherwise Malcolm Baddock would have rung the door of an empty apartment at *four in the morning*.

Draco tore himself away from a warm soft bed and his warm soft girlfriend, found his pyjama bottoms and found Baddock, dishevelled but still sparkling bright, on his doorstep.

"What happened?" Draco said in a panic. He'd sent poor little Baddock home with a crazy

man who was quite possibly into all sorts of weird stuff and had frightened him away. He was the worst prefect in the world.

“Mission accomplished!” Baddock said proudly.

“And you came all the way here to tell me *that*?” Draco demanded. “It is *four in the morning*.”

“Oh no,” Baddock said. “Can I sleep on your sofa? Potter chucked me out and I can’t go home, my dad goes crazy if I come in late.”

“Wait,” Draco said. “The mission was accomplished. And then Potter chucked you out.”

Baddock nodded.

“*Rude*,” said Draco. “Poor little Baddock, I am so sorry. I’ll give him hell for this tomorrow.”

“It was okay,” Baddock said, bouncing a little. “I mean, yeah, he doesn’t talk much and when he does talk it is kind of rude, but that’s okay because *the sex was awesome*.”

“...Okay,” Draco said.

“Nice chest, Malfoy,” Baddock informed him. “Did you get that filthy great scar from the time Potter attacked you in the bathrooms? I remember everyone talking about that, Pansy said that Potter tried to kill you!”

Baddock said that as if, while not supporting the idea of Draco’s murder, he still found it sort of dangerous and cool that Potter had tried. Draco despaired of the younger generation.

The next day Draco came into work with a vicious hangover and fully prepared to tell Potter exactly what he thought of his ungallant behaviour, but Potter was hunched over his desk looking quiet and miserable, the way he had the night Weasley and Granger broke up. Draco didn’t know what the problem was: self-hating homosexual, hopelessly in love with Zacharias Smith, depressed by glitter, but he knew one thing, and it was that Goyle had been right.

“Sorry,” he said, nudging at Potter. “I honestly thought it was a good idea.”

*

“So you said that sometimes you played Quidditch,” he said to Potter one day in the car.

“Uh – yeah,” Potter said. “Sometimes Ron and I go out and toss a few Bludgers and the Snitch around.”

“That sounds like marvellous fun,” Draco said in an unconvinced tone. “So I suppose you wouldn’t be interested in a *real* game.”

“With you?” Potter asked, sounding interested.

“I said a real game,” Draco said softly. “Seven players each side, a proper pitch. Real Quidditch, no waiting.”

Potter’s face was that of one who has found water in the desert.

“Mostly Slytherins and Ravenclaws,” Draco said. “See what comes of planning? We have a match every weekend in the summer.”

He told Marcus Flint to prepare the Seeker on his team for the reserves bench, and showed up the first week of May with Potter at his shoulder.

“Malfoy, I don’t know what you think you’re playing at,” Flint began, striding towards him, and then he saw Potter and, going by his expression, choirs and angels and heavenly light. “Oh my God, Malfoy, you are a *good person*,” he said fervently.

Draco smirked. “Not really.”

That was Saturdays sorted out during the summer. In the afternoon it was easy to be quiet with Katie, the way she liked it, because he was tired to death.

It wasn’t just that, though. Quidditch was always fun, but he was used to having Potter there, a stinging sort of challenge. Losing was miserable, but not in the same grinding way it had been when there was the Cup and the thought of Father and Potter sneering behind that. Now it was more like sparring, except with the clean rush of flying, and afterwards drinks at the pub.

“Go buy me a drink,” Draco said, collapsing on the sofa. “I’m three points up after the last case.”

“Oh, fine,” Potter said, and that was settled: the points system finally had rewards organised.

This generally had a sort of round-up after work on Friday, and Katie came along sometimes too, and Weasley joined Potter at some point with Pansy glowing on his arm in a way that she should not have been glowing since Weasley was a fling. And then Potter asked Granger along, and Draco asked Crabbe and Goyle to provide a buffer zone if there was violence.

He sternly forbade them to interfere if Pansy and Granger decided to wrestle, though.

Granger pointedly talked to everyone but Weasley and Pansy, and this haughty façade became actual interest when Crabbe misread a bar sign and Granger decided to get all excited about Overcoming Dyslexia.

“There should really be a program in Hogwarts,” she confided to Crabbe, eyeing him as if he was a great big house-elf. “Someone should do something. I’d be happy to help out. Someone,” she added with the light of battle in her eyes, “has to Right Social Wrongs.”

“I could make you pie if you want to come around our house,” Goyle offered. “What’s your favourite kind of pie, Hermione?”

Hermione. Goyle, Draco reflected darkly, had always been the weak link.

Their defences once breached, after a few weeks it got to the point where Crabbe actually called Potter Harry when he asked him if he wanted a drink. Draco closed his eyes and waited with dread for Potter not to know Crabbe's given name.

"No thanks, Vince," Potter said.

Draco blinked at him. "Goyle," he said in a testing way.

"Gregory," Potter shot back.

"Nott?"

"Theodore."

"And Zabini?"

"Blaise," said Potter, flicking him a smile of triumph.

It was both the right answer and, of course, answered the question of how he knew all the Slytherin boys' names, a record that beat his previous record of three and a half Ravenclaw boys' names hollow.

Clearly Zabini's Veela charms had caught Potter's eye. Who could blame him, Draco supposed, crushing a small eleven-year-old part of himself that had wanted Potter knowing his own name to be special. The man was only human.

*

By Monday Draco had been kidnapped by insane Muggles who wanted to know the secret of his powers.

"It's in my *blood*," Draco snapped, still cross with himself about them getting the jump on him while he examined the crime scene.

The leader of that little Muggle band stroked his knife, and Draco tried hard not think about what the last victim had looked like.

"We're willing to torture you," he said.

"Well, that's – terrible news," Draco said.

"One of you will talk, sooner or later," the Muggle whispered. "I know it."

Draco told himself he was a valiant Auror and would not scream, and screamed anyway when the knife laid open a path along his ribs. He told himself he would not pass out and when they put him in his small locked room he kept that promise, keeping the lips of the wound pinched closed with one hand and listening for the sound of the people in the other rooms. He thought

he could count five people besides himself, which was useful to know.

He was disgusted to realise that pain was clouding his mind too much to think up a plan, and he had to resort to waiting for Potter to come rescue him.

When he heard footsteps outside his door fear rose inside him, about to swallow him, he was sure he was going to beg and cry, but then the door broke down and Potter came crashing through it.

“It took you long enough,” Draco snapped.

He was sorry he’d said it after a moment. It didn’t even seem to register with Potter, who was standing there looking at him, eyes raking over every inch of him. Potter’s chest was rising and falling hard. There was a lot of blood on his t-shirt: Draco didn’t think any of it was his.

“Are you all right?” Potter asked finally, his voice a strange growl.

“Well, I’m actually in quite a lot of pain, it wasn’t pleasant, but – anyway, there are five other people in here, I should mention, they’re all alive and I don’t think any of them are too badly hurt-”

Potter walked towards him with a stride that seemed unstoppable or at least as if anyone tried to stop it they would really regret it. There was a look on his face that made Draco panic a little – he hadn’t heard any children’s voices-

When Potter’s knees hit the side of the bed, he stopped and knelt abruptly on the floor, put his face down on the covers. Draco stared warily at his tense shoulders.

“Yes, fine,” Potter said, still in that alarming voice, his fists twisting in the sheets. “But *you* - *you* - are *you* all right?”

Draco was holding one side of his chest closed with his free hand, so he reached out with his chained one and managed to touch the ends of Potter’s hair. His fingers came away wet with blood.

He didn’t think that it was Potter’s blood, either.

“Yes,” he murmured, slightly afraid that his answer was somehow going to hurl Potter over the edge of whatever precipice he was balanced on.

For a moment he thought it had. Potter looked up and the line of his shoulders changed, bunched as if he was going to leap. “I *can’t*,” he said, and then he looked at Draco properly instead of staring with blind blazing eyes and his voice changed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We need to get you to hospital.”

In St Mungo’s they said that the wound had been open too long and would leave a faint scar. Draco was fairly calm about that: now when people asked him where he got his scars he could say on a case and not be completely lying.

He was back at work the next day. As soon as he was in the door Shacklebolt called him to

his office.

“I wished to notify you that you have now been Mr Potter’s partner for a year and your period of probation is over,” Shacklebolt said. “You may now choose another partner or, God help us all, proceed in the same way that you have been.”

“I think I’ll keep him,” Draco said cheerfully. “God help us all.”

“I’m very shocked,” Shacklebolt said with no inflection to his voice at all, and then he hesitated.

Draco had never seen him do that before.

“Mr Malfoy – there’s something else.” Shacklebolt very nearly had an expression in his voice. Draco was filled with dread. “It’s in regard to the prisoner Lucius Malfoy,” he said, and stopped. “Now all his appeals to the courts have failed, Scrimgeour has seen fit to make a final judgement on him. The country – could use a morale boost, and I fear that Scrimgeour has decided to make your father an example. He’s recommended the Dementor’s Kiss.”

Draco held on to the arms of the chair: he looked down and saw that he’d been holding on until his knuckles were white, but he couldn’t feel a thing.

“I assume you’ll be fighting that,” Shacklebolt said, still sounding weirdly, terribly human.

“Yes,” Draco rasped.

“I need hardly say that as one of our own, anything the department can do to help you will be done.”

“Thank you,” Draco managed.

“I have to call in Mr Potter to inform him about the ending of his probation in any case,” Shacklebolt said. “If you would find it easier, I could tell-”

“No,” Draco broke in. “No, I’ll do it.”

He’d have to do it. He was going to have to ask Potter for help. The idea made him feel sick, but he felt sick already and he thought that Potter could make that better, could do that thing he did and guard him for just a little bit, until Draco could be strong enough again.

He left Shacklebolt’s office and made himself a cup of coffee with shaking hands. It was going to be all right, he told himself, controlling his hands and trying to summon calm. He and Potter were – friends, now. They could solve this, too.

He still felt in need of some consolation, so he went to listen at Shacklebolt’s door and catch Potter’s answer before he had to sit him down and tell him.

He leaned against the doorframe casually, tilting his head towards the door, and heard Potter say: “I do. I want another partner.”

From a distance, Draco heard Shacklebolt's careful voice saying: "May I ask who?"

"Anyone," Potter said, his voice cold. "Anyone but him."

Draco felt rather cold as well. He stopped listening at the door: he didn't think there was much left to say in there, nothing that would be of interest to him. He went back to the kitchen and poured his coffee down the sink. His throat felt tight, and his hands were shaking again.

Chapter Four

Draco was very calm about changing partners. He certainly didn't want anyone who didn't want him, and he was sure that Theophilus Cardross would be a great partner, and anyway he didn't have time to think about it.

He had to save his father.

Scrimgeour wasn't likely to listen to him after that *stupid* stunt he'd pulled, and there was no question of having influence with Harry Potter. So that left money and politics.

There'd be a council appointed to decide Lucius Malfoy's fate. Draco had to find out who the five members on it were and get a unanimous ruling.

He approached two of them and established that they could be bribed. He sat in that terrible empty apartment with papers spread before him, deciding whether he had to sell the Manor or not.

"Our house is yours really-" Goyle began when he heard the news and came over to force-feed Draco.

"Don't be stupid," Draco snarled. "It wouldn't make any difference."

"Draco, are you sure you need to resort to bribery?" Katie asked, her face anxious. "Surely a just sentence will-"

Draco stood from his pile of papers and prowled towards her. "A just sentence," he repeated, and threw back his head and laughed. He saw her flinch. "Scrimgeour's got to have a scapegoat for the country if he can't have a hero, and I antagonised him. And what better scapegoat than a Death Eater who was caught attacking precious little Potter when he was fifteen years old, who the Weasleys will testify tried to kill their precious little daughter when she was eleven? He did it, Katie. He did all of it. A just *sentence* is the Dementor's *Kiss*. The last thing I want is justice!"

He didn't add: *For him, or for me.*

Katie stepped away from him, her back hitting the wall. Her face was beside one of the awful Muggle pictures, and for a moment it looked just as still.

"Your father," she said in a small voice. "He doesn't sound like a very nice person."

Draco laughed again and saw her recoil with nowhere to go. He leaned in, traced the line of her collarbone and said in her ear, his voice vicious and shaky: "*I'm* not a very nice person."

A voice in his head told him to stop it, he was scaring her.

He left the flat abruptly and went for a run in the rain, splashing through icy puddles with feet turning numb, resisting the urge to strike blows at random lamp posts. He ran until it was cold grey evening, and then he sat on a rain-slick pavement and put his face down on his

knees and tried to breathe deeply through his raw throat.

He couldn't do that again.

He couldn't lose her too.

*

That night Blaise Zabini dropped by Draco's flat. Draco looked up, surprised to see Zabini without an appointment or his entourage, but with his head aching too much to care.

Zabini looked down at Draco and the papers on his floor, every line of his face breathtakingly handsome and inscrutable.

"There's a man called Everett on that council," he remarked distantly. "You've got his vote."

"You sure?" Draco asked.

Zabini grimaced. "After the day I've had, you do."

"I-" Draco said, and stopped, touched and tripped up by the feeling, left helpless. He knew that Zabini, insofar as he had a preference in the free-for-all sexual buffet that was his life, preferred women. "Thank you," he got out at last, scowling around the words.

Mission of mercy complete, Zabini relaxed against the wall and assumed his usual air of comfortably enjoying the position of most attractive man in Britain. "You look *terrible*," he remarked lazily. "Worse than usual, I mean."

"When you get syphilis," Draco told him. "I will laugh and laugh."

"Hmm," Zabini said, and reached out to stroke an idle finger along the line of Draco's neck. "Are you still doing that funny monogamy thing?" he asked. "Sex with a Veela is really calming, I'm told, since it paralyses your brain with pleasure and everything. I could-"

"Sex is not the answer to all life's problems, Zabini."

"Then you're doing it wrong," Zabini told him, flashing a perfect smile. "Do you have Firewhiskey?"

They had a drink together and then Zabini checked his watch and said: "My God, I've left the quadruplets waiting and the chocolate sauce must be cooling by now," and Apparated at once.

Draco felt a little comforted by that until he had to go into work the next morning and Theophilus said: "Are you aware that every single one of those suggestions is completely and impossibly illegal?"

"You're such a Hufflepuff, Theophilus," Draco snarled, and went into the break room.

Potter tried to speak to him there, but Draco hardly heard him through the thrum of rage. He

was fairly clear through the haze that Potter was making some kind of gesture, no doubt figuring that if Weasley and Pansy continued their unholy union and Granger persisted in making a project of Crabbe then they should be civil to each other.

No doubt Potter could manage to be civil, as long as he didn't have to deal with Draco all day, every day. Big of him.

He'd grabbed Draco's arm. Draco stared at him and decided in a cold distant way that he'd never hated anyone so much before in his life.

He snarled something at him, yanked his arm away and strode out of the break room and towards the nearest door, anywhere for escape, and found himself in the ladies' bathroom. Where he saw Potter's new partner Chrysanthemum sitting on the edge of the sink and howling into a handkerchief.

"M-Malfoy," she said, and his vague hope that he could slink out unnoticed died quietly.

He was tempted to just raise an eyebrow at her and leave anyway, but a vague sore sense of fellow feeling made him walk over to the sink.

"What's, ah, the matter?" he asked reluctantly, hoping he was not going to hear anything about mood swings and her Womanly Time.

"You must think I'm *ridiculous*," Chrysanthemum wailed, and collapsed back into her handkerchief.

"No," Draco said, and essayed a vague wave that might, had he been nearer, been a back pat. "No, no. Sometimes you just have to cry. In bathrooms," he added, and then said quickly: "Not me, of course. I'm too manly. But people. In general. I've noticed." He felt he was wandering and fixed her with an accusing stare. "What is it? Out with it, I don't have all day."

Chrysanthemum waved her handkerchief like a distress beacon.

"It's *Harry*," she exclaimed. "He's *awful* - I don't know how you put *up* with him, he - he won't *talk*, and he's so moody, and sometimes he *scares* me and he just seems really miserable all the time. Malfoy," she said, blinking back tears. "Wouldn't you *please* take him back?"

Draco felt his expression twist, sharp and swift, into a sneer. "Afraid I can't help you there," he drawled. "He was the one who chucked me. And since he said he'd rather have anyone but me as his partner," he said, rolling the words around as if he was savagely picking at a scab, "I don't think I could really do that, no."

"Oh," Chrysanthemum said, staring at him with wide eyes. Then she buried her face back in her handkerchief. "Oh, and you were my only *hope*," she exclaimed woefully. "And it's torture working with him when *I love him so much!*"

Draco blinked. "But I thought you said," he said, "that he was awful and moody and scary and-"

“What has that got to do with anything?” Chrysanthemum demanded, her handkerchief billowing like the sails of a ship in the wind. “He reminds me of *Heathcliff*,” she continued tragically.

“I don’t believe I’m acquainted-”

“And I don’t think he even knows my name!”

“I’m sure that,” Draco said. “Uh.”

Chrysanthemum sniffled and then fixed him with a watery, accusing glare. “Malfoy, what are you doing in a girls’ bathroom?” she asked. “Do you *hang around* them?”

“Not lately.”

“Are you some kind of *pervert*?” Chrysanthemum demanded, her voice hitting a high note.

Draco left.

It occurred to him as he left the bathrooms that Potter had generally had female partners or married partners like Gillam, which since there were strict rules about partners Fraternising meant that Kingsley Shacklebolt probably had a very good idea which way Potter’s preferences lay.

Of course, Draco was neither female nor married, but he’d been a last resort and besides that Potter’s contempt had hardly been a secret. Shacklebolt would’ve been aware that the chances of Potter going for him were about the same as the chances for the earth randomly collapsing in on itself.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Draco reflected, was a dark horse.

He was not, however, an evil robot. Draco decided that with finality later that day when Shacklebolt called him to his office and informed him that the fourth vote in the council was secure, because it belonged to him.

“I,” Draco said.

“There is no need to strain yourself, Mr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt said, and nodded at the sign on his wall that said *No man alone*. “Though it pains me every time I remember the fact, you are one of my men. Good day to you.”

*

That night Draco, combing through old papers of his father’s, found something on Septimus UMBER, the last member of the council. He Owled a lot of the men he could remember from his father’s trips to Knockturn Alley, the trips Father had taken him on trying to groom him, trying to get information. He said he would pay for it handsomely.

Then he arranged the sale of Malfoy Manor as fast as he could. It was the only practical thing

to do, he hadn't been near the house since he was sixteen anyway.

Crabbe came to be with him that night, bringing Firewhiskey with him to replace what Zabini'd drunk. Draco put back stinging shots between going through papers and thought of his mother and her elegant robes swishing against the carpets of home, his father tall and authoritative as God striding in through the great echoing hall, and his own bed.

Whenever he was able to wrench his mind away from that he remembered *Anyone but him* and found himself searching wretchedly through the events of the last year to see what he'd done so wrong.

At about four in the morning the Firewhiskey loosened Crabbe's tongue and he said: "I don't *get it*. I thought he liked you."

Draco threw the next shot down his throat, coughed as it went down the wrong way and went on coughing until his voice was weak and he could let himself say: "So did I."

The next day he was dizzy with lack of sleep and miserable, and Granger actually had the gall to turn up and confront him over his lunchtime coffee.

"Malfoy," she said, and hesitated. "You should have told me about your father."

"Oh, *really*?"

"I think that Lucius Malfoy is scum," Granger said, her dark eyes very cool and hard, and for a moment Draco had great respect for Weasley since he'd actually dared put his manly parts in her ruthless hands. "But since it matters to you that he be executed rather than Kissed, I would've helped you."

"I've got it under control," Draco snarled.

"Or you could ask Harry," Granger suggested.

"Don't *talk to me* about *him*," Draco said savagely. "He's made it perfectly clear that he wants nothing more to do with me, and I couldn't be more delighted about it. I have to get back to work."

He got up and then stood looking down at her, not trusting whatever was going on in that bushy head. She looked up at him and he tilted her face up, leaned down and almost whispered in her mouth.

"Don't you dare tell him one word about this," he said, looking deep into her eyes. "I *won't* take help from him. I know enough to break you at work, *Hermione*, so for once keep your mouth shut."

"I know enough to break you at work, too," Granger reminded him calmly.

Draco straightened up and laughed down at her. "Do you think I care about that?" he demanded. "Now?"

That night, with Katie sitting on the edge of the sofa like a visitor unsure of her welcome, an Owl came that promised Draco the dirt on Septimus Umber at a price. He wrote back that he would pay the price gladly.

“Draco,” Katie said. “I know you’re upset, but you cannot just *blackmail* somebody.”

Draco stared at her. “Do you think it won’t work?”

“That’s not the point-”

“You’d better hope it does work,” Draco said. “If it doesn’t, I don’t think you’ll want to see what I do next. I’m sorry, I know this is disappointing you, I know I am, but-”

“It’s not about disappointing me, it’s about right and wrong! Draco, it might be time to accept that – that the things your father has done are unforgivable-”

Draco crawled over to her over the moonlit papers on the floor, over the deed of sale for his home, and said softly: “I know that already.”

Katie whispered back: “What?”

“He can’t be forgiven,” Draco said. “He doesn’t deserve it. And nor do I.”

Katie said nothing. Draco leaned his elbow against her knees and felt her body trembling against his. He was scaring her again: he couldn’t seem to help it.

“I promised to kill the headmaster,” he murmured.

“I know that, Draco,” Katie said. “But you didn’t, and you were very young-”

“I promised my loyalty to a madman and I put the whole school in the hands of Death Eaters and I *killed my mother*,” Draco almost shouted.

He’d killed his mother. He’d been too weak to do anything for or against the Death Eaters and his mother had been forced to protect him. She’d promised the Order that she would spy for them if they kept him safe. She’d been caught.

He’d killed her, he’d almost killed Weasley and his brother, he’d almost killed Katie. It wasn’t due to him that they’d lived and it would have been his fault if he’d died, and he’d done it all for a man he’d *known* was evil, he’d been scared and stupid and he’d wanted glory and he’d wanted to *save his father* - and now he was failing at that, too.

He looked up through cold moonlight and shadow to Katie’s horrorstruck face.

“I took the Mark and she died,” Draco said, voice soft. “I took the Mark to save him and they’re going to take his soul. There’s nobody left who can forgive me – except you.”

“Draco,” Katie said, and she reached out trembling and put her arms around him. “I do.”

Draco put his face against her wet cheek. She felt warm. “Oh, my Katherine Bell,” he

whispered, and kissed the tears rolling down her face, drew her tight to him and clung to her. She felt small under his hands, fragile as a bird, and he tried to be careful even though he didn't want to be.

Her mouth tasted of tears as it opened for him. "Not the floor, Draco," she said, and he picked her up and carried her to the bed, laid her out on the white moonlit sheets and did not stop touching her for a moment. She was all he had left.

"Do you love me?" he whispered against her neck. He hadn't meant to ask that, he remembered, but he was so tired and if she could he had to know.

It was possible. His mother had loved him. She'd said so, once, before she died.

The tears were still shining on Katie's face as he kissed her, and she whispered again: "Draco, I do."

He woke beside her to the sound of an owl tapping at his window that morning, with the news that blackmailing Umber had worked and the council had voted unanimously against the Kiss.

He stood with his back against the window, head fuzzy and aching from days without sleep and thought that he had won, and his father was only going to be executed.

He wanted to crawl back into bed beside Katie, but he had to go to work. He was investigating an arson case with Theophilus that day, and Theophilus seemed to be bent on purposely aggravating him.

"Malfoy, that's illegal *too*," he said for the fourteenth time.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I know you're just making up laws to annoy me."

"Christ help me," Theophilus said.

While they were going over yet another burned-out shell of a house, some builders turned on a radio and it started playing a familiar song. Without even thinking about it, Draco turned and knocked it to the ground hard.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Theophilus demanded. "Why do you hate *radios*? Are you utterly insane?"

"Let's go look at the Unspeakable files on firestarting," Draco suggested.

"That's illegal," Theophilus said.

"You're just mocking me now," Draco informed him. "I don't think it's kind."

He stamped off to go look at the Unspeakable files himself and found what he thought was a pattern, and dragged Theophilus off to the next site.

While Draco was trying to make a plan to secure the perimeter and perhaps order in a few

more Aurors the place went up in flames.

Sheer instinct made him reach out a restraining hand. “Don’t you dare rush in there, you freakish maniac!”

“I *beg your pardon?*” Theophilus cried. “Of course I’m not going in there, and – and what did you call me, I cannot believe-”

Draco cursed, mostly at his own stupidity, and there was a scream from the window. Draco looked up and cursed again.

“Go get some other Aurors,” he snapped at stupid Theophilus, and Apparated inside the building.

It was a mess of fire and falling rafters in there. Draco strode through smoke to the sounds of screams, and it wasn’t until he’d already been hit that he realised how much the past few days had told on his reflexes.

He woke up in enormous pain to the sight of Katie and Crabbe leaning over him.

“Hi,” Katie whispered, and held his hand.

“Hello, my Katherine Bell,” he said. “I love you, too.”

Katie’s face went pink. “You’re going to be all right,” she told him. “And I’m sure now that this has happened – I’m sure Harry will come to see you-”

“No he won’t, and who wants him?” Draco snapped, and brittle misery combined with pain and drugs were too much for him: he turned his face into the pillow and went back to sleep.

He woke up warm and safe to the sound of Katie’s voice, and when he opened his eyes Potter was there. He was looking tense and twitchy but determined, and he said he wanted to come back.

Draco was – happy, embarrassingly so, until pain woke him up in the middle of the cold night and he realised what was really going on.

Potter had his hero complex and Draco had been hurt without him. And Potter’s new partner hadn’t been working out. Potter must have figured that at least being partners with Draco worked to an extent. Well, it could work again.

Draco just had to make a plan, back off and be professional, and never make the mistake of thinking they were friends again.

*

Draco was back at work the next week and at his old desk, beside Potter. It was a little awkward at the start and Potter was obviously paralysed by how uncomfortable it was and kept staring at him.

“Good morning,” he said like a good professional partner. “May I see that file?”

“Morning,” Potter said, and handed him the file.

Draco opened it and read it carefully and did not make any withering comments about Potter’s notes – though, oh, there were withering comments to be made.

Every now and then he looked up and Potter was still staring. *Rude*, Draco thought. Potter had invited him back, after all, Draco hadn’t done it on his own: he needn’t look like he couldn’t believe Draco was here.

“Thank you, that was very helpful,” Draco said, and went to get himself some urgently needed coffee. Two cups later he came back and said: “Did you get a chance to read my points of information?”

“Um,” Potter said. “Yes.”

“Wonderful,” Draco said with great politeness. “Did you have anything to add to them?”

“Not – really,” Potter told him, looking at the desk.

“Not to worry,” Draco said cordially. “I think that the perpetrator lives in Bath, so the first thing to do might be acquire some aerial information about the water sources near the city. Don’t you agree?”

“I guess,” Potter said. He looked like a whipped dog and Draco wanted to beat him to death with a ruler because what was it that he wanted, anyway?

Draco did not beat his partner to death with a ruler. Draco was very charming and entirely professional, even though it kind of made his teeth hurt.

“Do you want to turn on the radio?” Potter asked him at one point, in much the manner of someone asking if Draco wanted to hand over his money or his life.

“Certainly,” Draco said, and turned it on. “Is there a particular station you prefer?”

“*Stop* it, Malfoy,” Potter exclaimed.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Draco said obstinately, and looked out the window.

He didn’t know what was wrong, he was behaving *perfectly*. He tested his perfect manners on Katie that night and she seemed extremely charmed.

“Good morning,” Draco said to Potter the next day, persisting.

“Morning,” Potter said in a stifled sort of voice. Draco wrote reports and carefully did not look at Potter’s, giving him his space.

“Do you want to spar?” Potter demanded after a couple of hours.

“If you’d like to,” Draco said.

Draco fought with studious attention to the rules and got in a few punches that would have put Theophilus out. Potter barely seemed to notice them and fought like a crazy man, as if he was fighting something other than Draco at his most lukewarm. At about the point when a furious coil of muscle hit him in the chest Draco actually felt a burst of panic and struggled properly, but by then Potter had hold of both his wrists and Draco was pinned on the floor.

He was completely helpless, in actual fact, Draco realised with slow indignation. Not that he’d been anything else for a while, with Potter’s stupid random decisions and trying to be so God-damned polite.

“Well done,” he said calmly from underneath Potter, turning his face away and looking at a wall. “Good show. I surrender completely: let me up.”

“No,” Potter said violently, his breath erratic against Draco’s jaw and his shoulders pressing Draco’s down.

No? Draco wanted to repeat scathingly. You’re not allowed to say no! You make no sense! Let me up right now or I will kill you!

“Mind if I ask why?” Draco inquired, most reasonable and polite victim of a madman in the history of time.

He felt Potter’s muscles shift and tense against his body and wondered for a moment if human teeth could tear your throat out. His hands were completely trapped between Potter’s chest and his: this was no good, he was totally at Potter’s *mercy*, this was so *humiliating*-

“Please,” said Potter, low against Draco’s jaw.

“What?” Draco asked, and turned his face back, which turned out to be a mistake since Potter was very close, face hovering over Draco’s as he had his psychotic episode. Draco tried to glare and couldn’t actually focus, Potter was that close, and when Draco’s mouth brushed the edge of Potter’s Draco thought it was high time to reverse that face-turning decision and concentrate ferociously on the wall.

“Please,” Potter said again, breath hot on the skin of Draco’s throat. “I know you’re mad or whatever, that’s all right, you can be as stroppy as you like, but you can’t – Just *talk*, Malfoy, for God’s sake.”

Having people beg him to talk was not something that had ever happened to Draco before, though having people beg him to stop had happened a few times.

Of course, Potter seemed to be more threatening than begging him.

“I talk,” Draco said crossly. “Here’s something I have to say: Let me up right now.”

As soon as Potter’s grip on his wrists slackened he pulled them back, shoved Potter viciously away and scrambled to his feet and out of the damned practise rooms.

The next day in the car, after careful observations about the weather, he thought for a long time and said: "If I'm up on points when you become the ruler of the world, I think you should let me be king of England."

Potter's fingers clenched on the steering wheel, but his voice came out sounding almost normal. "If I become ruler of the world," he said, "and you still haven't said how I'm supposed to do that-"

"The plan will be revealed in due time," Draco said grandly.

"Well, anyway, I live in England," Potter pointed out. "I don't see why you should have it."

"But you won't live in England then," Draco told him. "You'll live in distant Araby. The sunny climate in the East will be much more appropriate for your dancing boys."

"But," Potter said. "I don't want dancing boys."

Draco wondered why Potter had bothered coming out when he obviously had *no interest in sex at all*. "You're going to have dancing boys whether you want them or not," he said sternly. "The ruler of the world has a certain position to keep up. Can I be king of England?"

"Yes, Malfoy," Potter said with a sigh he meant Draco to hear and a smile Draco was pretty sure he didn't mean Draco to see. "When I become ruler of the world, you can be king of England."

Draco was content. After a moment, he started singing very quietly.

"Everybody look left, everybody look right, everywhere you look I stand in spotlight-"

"Who shows you these movies?" Potter asked. "Why?"

Draco was banished to the children's room with little Mary every first weekend of the month, but he decided not to mention that. "You've clearly seen them," he pointed out haughtily.

"Yes, because I grew up with Muggles, I saw them on Dudley's old TV-"

"Who's Dudley?" Draco asked idly. "Boyfriend?"

A look of unspeakable horror passed over Potter's face. Draco watched it with interest.

"...no," Potter said at last, and then tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "I've changed my mind," he added. "I don't want you to talk after all."

"Don't give me orders. I shall do exactly as I please," Draco informed him, and then he informed Maurice the radio that he just couldn't wait to be king.

He couldn't change with Potter because he had no idea what Potter wanted him to change to, and besides that he was terrified it would tip the balance he'd achieved, the balance that had made being an Auror bearable, had made Katie love him and had made receiving the Owl telling him the date of his father's execution was set something he could live through.

He wasn't going to let Potter know: it was nothing to do with being partners. Draco could deal with it on his own.

When Potter mentioned dreading Christmas, Draco weakened enough to drop a hint, but that wasn't so bad, he just didn't want to get drunk on Christmas by himself, he didn't want to think about his father alone. He wasn't going to burden him with it or anything.

He and Potter got quietly trashed on Christmas Day, the knot of misery in Draco's chest easing under the influence of Firewhiskey. Late in the evening Draco actually managed to drink himself unconscious and woke up on the sofa slumped against Potter: Potter's arm was around him, a little hesitantly, and Draco abandoned all shame for the moment and turned his face into Potter's shoulder, pretending to be still asleep.

The last Owl from Azkaban came the day after, and for the first time in three years Draco went to visit his father.

When he came in the door of the prison he saw that his father was much too thin. His back was hunched, and the sharp bones looked like the stiffly folded wings of a starved vulture. His long hair was straggling and dry. It took Draco a moment in that dim light to realise that it had gone white.

Dad looked up and Draco saw his father's eyes in a sunken, unrecognisable face, and he realised something else. Nobody had told him. Who would have told him, when he was surrounded by lunatics and Dementors?

"It's not going to be the Kiss," he blurted out, a clumsy stupid child who couldn't control his tongue once more.

His father's shoulders eased all the same, as if released from the hands of a torturer, and Draco thought with a rush of panic and despair that he should have known nobody would tell him, he should have told him at once, he should have come to see him every day, he should have *saved him*.

His father coughed like sandpaper on wood. When he spoke, his voice was thin and weak and almost gentle. It didn't sound like his father's voice at all.

"How are you doing, Draco?"

"I'm – I'm," Draco said, stammering and hating himself for it, trying to think past the burning knot of pain in his chest and tell his father something true, something that would be good enough.

He thought about Katie loving him and Potter coming back, about the Aurors and Crabbe and Goyle being happy in their stupid house.

Draco found his voice and let go of the door, and said almost steadily: "I'm doing the best I know how."

*

The day of his father's execution Shacklebolt sent Potter to Draco's flat and Draco decided he was an evil robot after all.

He could do this on his own, he *could*, he knew he could, but Potter was there and it was safe to – Draco thought about sparring when it was an explosion of rage and misery and violence, and didn't hit Potter because he didn't know if he could've stopped.

He tore apart his flat instead. He tore down every one of those dead, staring pictures and stamped them into glass and splinters as his father died, and all the time he felt grounded, anchored, by Potter's utter lack of shock, his calm understanding of blind rage and then the methodical way he put everything back together again.

Then his father was dead, and Draco had to sit down. He felt his legs go out from under him and he hit the sofa and he couldn't think, he couldn't do anything, he just put his face in his hands and thought *Dad*.

Which was stupid. He'd never called him that.

Potter's hand on his shoulder came as a shock. Draco's head jerked up and he found himself staring at Potter, who was too *close*, and Draco felt as if the balance was tipping and he was going to cry or tell Potter about the sheer screaming misery of the past or do something that would let Potter know he couldn't, couldn't do it on his own.

Then Katie came home and put her arms around him, and told him she wanted to move in. Draco put his face down into the curve of her neck and felt rescued.

Four days later after fighting a house full of what had once been a family and were now Inferi, Draco was spelling a bloody gash in his own shoulder closed and Potter said: "You OK?"

Draco stopped with his wand resting against new skin, and answered: "I think so."

*

He felt less okay at the next Slytherin poker night, when cruel fate turned the conversation towards the sexual prowess of Gryffindor males.

"I'm just going to keep him for a little while longer," Pansy said. "It means nothing." She was scribbling very bad lyrics to the new song 'Weasley Is My Fling' onto her napkin with lip pencil. Draco had refused to help her compose them. Her lips curled as she wrote, as if at a pleasant memory. "And he is *extremely*-"

Draco recoiled. "I beg you," he said in a shaken voice. "No."

Pansy shrugged and started whispering to Millicent Bulstrode, and Draco turned around to hear Malcolm Baddock say: "Potter? He's like a panther. A *sex panther*."

"Let's talk about women!"

Baddock stared at him blankly. “Why?”

Zabini looked amused, which always filled those around him with an arcane dread.

“What if I don’t want to talk about women?” he asked in a husky voice, and leaned over towards Draco.

“Nobody thinks the Veela stuff is *funny*, Zabini,” Draco said. “Don’t-”

Zabini leaned in closer, dark, heavy-lidded eyes hypnotic, voice taking on a weird undercurrent that twanged every nerve ending in Draco’s body.

“You’re a good kisser, Malfoy,” he whispered, closer and closer, his mouth almost touching Draco’s ear. “I want to do it again.”

Draco had a sudden vivid, tangible memory of tumbling onto his back with Zabini stretched out on top of him, blood rushing and mouths touching, his hands pulling down Zabini’s shoulders in a mad effort to get him closer. He could feel the carpet burn at the small of his back.

He slammed up the image of Katie like a wall between himself and the memory.

“No,” he said. “Quit it.”

Zabini leaned back, grinning engagingly. “You’re really getting good at this Occlumency thing,” he said. “I gave that one all I had.”

Everyone tossed napkins and crisps at Zabini for using Veela wiles on poker night, and Draco sidled over to Nott and said pathetically: “Can we talk about women?”

“Absolutely,” Nott said in a placid voice. “Millie is Viking in the sack.”

Draco blinked. “Are – are women Viking-?”

“There are women in Viking mythology,” Nott said. “Valkyries. They wear horned helmets and bear warriors off to their deaths.”

“I see,” Draco said, staring with morbid fascination.

“Millie has a horned helmet at home, I don’t mind telling you,” Nott continued in his usual neutral voice. “Sometimes she pretends she’s bearing me off to my death. What a way to go, eh?”

“I have to go... over here now,” said Draco.

*

Draco thought that even if he couldn’t change the balance he wanted could be achieved by Potter being *happier*, perhaps, so he took him to Rick’s and then watched in dismay as everyone totally failed to hit on him.

Perhaps they could sense the madness, Draco thought, and inspected Potter closely to see if he had crazy eyes.

Potter leaned over the table towards him, pitching his voice low. "Uh, Malfoy," he said. "I think this might be a gay bar."

"You *shock* me," Draco said flatly, and stabbed the olive in his drink.

This obviously required a better plan.

Draco acquired a valuable piece of information that summer when they were staking out a beach to see if this particular cove was the meeting point for another band of merpirates.

It was late June and the sun was a burning pit of fire in the sky, the sand absorbing the fire and the car was turning into a sad little oven with music playing to soothe them as they roasted to death.

Draco lasted for about five minutes after the iced coffee ran out and then announced: "I'm going swimming."

"We're watching for merpirates," Potter reminded him. Draco was pleased about how that word had caught on.

"You can do that," Draco said. "I realise you have defective eyesight, but even you can spot nefarious befinned pirates if they happen to appear. And you can go swimming next," he added graciously, and then kicked off his shoes and undid the button on his right sleeve with his teeth.

Potter took a quick breath and did not speak, which Draco took as capitulation.

Draco climbed out of the car, bare feet sinking into baked sand, leaving his shirt and shoes behind him. The water was sheer sweet relief, like Katie's mouth after one of those dreams. He submerged in it, swam a few strokes and circled back, trying to tire himself out so he could work off his energy here and not go crazy in the car. He came out of the sea and took a detour before he slid back into his jeans and into the car.

"I feel *much* better," he sighed, closing his eyes and leaning his damp head against the car seat, arching his back from the static-hot material.

Potter said: "Freckles."

"Oh hi, you're insane," Draco observed, and opened his eyes. Potter looked back at him, eyes all pupil, and Draco blinked at him and leaned over to him. "You've clearly become overheated," he noted. "Here, let me get the window-"

"No, *I can do it*," Potter snarled. His body language could not have screamed 'Get away!' any louder, so Draco shrugged and leaned back.

He frowned. "You - did you just say 'freckles'?"

“Yes,” Potter said sullenly, glaring at nothing.

“What about them?”

“I *like them*,” Potter said between his teeth.

“Oh,” Draco said blankly. He scanned the horizon and saw a guy who he thought might have freckles, and then said: “Ah.” He paused, and ventured: “I really haven’t had one of these conversations before.”

The line of Potter’s jaw was tight as he snapped: “What?”

“Well, you know, manly bonding about – attractiveness,” Draco said, waving his free hand to emphasise his point. “I mean, I tried to have this talk once with Goyle in fourth year and he talked wistfully about how much he liked strong muscular creatures and I spent a distressing amount of time trying to set him up with Millicent Bulstrode. And then Nott almost assassinated me. I’m not sure I’ll be very good at it, but - Freckles, you say?”

Potter looked torn between amusement and murder. “I don’t want to talk about it!”

“You could go talk to that guy,” Draco suggested.

“What guy?”

“The – freckled one?” Draco said, searching the horizon and not spotting him again. “Then we’d both be happy,” he continued placidly. “You could have the freckles, and I could have two ice-creams.”

He passed one over philosophically, and began to eat his own.

Nevertheless, he took this information into account. Freckles, apparently. Also, he reflected, thinking about Cho Chang, Ginny Everyone Said So Even If Draco Couldn’t See the Appeal Himself Weasley and Zacharias For A Hufflepuff Smith, very attractive. Someone who liked Quidditch. Given Malcolm Baddock’s lack of success, any house but Slytherin would probably do.

Draco was in rather a bad mood one particularly fierce day in July, since Oliver Wood had another crazy fan swearing that she’d kill first him and then herself, and he and Potter had to track Wood across the pitch all day long. The combination of Wood and Potter in such close proximity had all the women looking twitchy and crazed, so their chances of finding the perpetrator were not looking good.

That was the point at which Draco saw the answer to keeping Potter happy walking across the Quidditch pitch. He was freckled, carrying a Quick-Quotes quill that meant *sports journalist*, dazzlingly handsome in a the-boy-next-door-does-modelling-part-time way, Draco didn’t remember his name but he was pretty damn sure he’d been on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and he was staring at Potter as if Potter had just descended from Sports Journalist Heaven.

“Oh look, the press,” Draco drawled, making his voice go right through innocence and out

the other side. "What larks. I must go over to him and tell him this new story I just thought up!"

"No you won't," Potter said firmly.

"It's a very funny story," Draco assured him.

"I will talk to what's his face, stay there," Potter ordered, and stalked off.

"Oh, if you insist," Draco murmured, and cackled to himself until he noted that the Freckled Beauty was not making much headway, and was starting to look discouraged. So he went over and arranged matters so they all went to Rick's.

"Oh look, alcohol," he said as soon as they'd all sat down. "I must go commune with it, excuse me."

Potter looked bewildered. Freckles looked at Potter with barely concealed yearning. Draco waved a little and sauntered off to the bar.

"Tell me about your cocktail menu, Rick," Draco invited the bartender. "What inspired it? Did you always want to write a cocktail menu, was it your dream when you were a little boy?"

"There's no time for that," Rick told him crisply. "Go back to your table, Draco, someone's trying to steal your beautiful boyfriend."

"My who?" Draco said. "My what?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Freckles and Potter, caught Potter's eye briefly and had a sudden stunning answer to the eternal question of why nobody ever hit on Potter at Rick's.

Draco laughed, partly at his own stupidity and partly out of embarrassment. "Uh, he's not my," he said, and found himself entirely unable to pronounce the word. "We just work together," he explained, and thought of Potter leaving and added viciously: "We're not even friends. And I would like a drink."

The important thing was that Potter, for the first time in known history, got himself a date. To Draco's slight surprise, the date apparently worked out and Potter took to coming into work a little calmer about his cases, movements lazier, sex-languid, through that summer.

Draco couldn't say *Are you happier?* but he decided that Potter must be.

*

Katie liked Ritchie Coote, which was apparently Freckles' name. She'd had to mentor the little ones on the Quidditch team, since God knew Potter was not the most nurturing captain in the world. She suggested a double date.

So they went to the zoo. Katie liked the zoo on Sundays, often with little Mary, and Draco was familiar with the whole place by now, the twisting paths by the pelicans where he could

kiss Katie in the shade.

Things were so much better with Katie now the difficult balance had been struck, now that she lived with him and loved him. Draco was trying to work out when would be the correct time to propose.

Potter and Coote were waiting for them. Coote looked happy and excited, and Draco made a mental note to smack Potter around for not bringing his boyfriend anywhere.

On the path to the pelicans Katie detached herself from Draco and went to make kind small talk with Coote, since he and Potter didn't appear to be talking.

"She mothered him in school, apparently," Draco said when Potter fell in step with him. "This is what comes of me having a Glamorous Older Woman and you having a Toyboy."

Potter's mouth twisted upwards slightly. "You like him, then," he said in a hesitant voice.

Draco didn't. "Well--"

At this point Katie rescued him by coming back and taking his arm again. "Stop this outrageous flirting with deviants," Draco told her, pushing her hair out of her eyes and stooping to kiss her. "Remember you're my sweetheart."

Coote had his hand hanging freely, fingers fanned in a quiet hopeful appeal. Potter didn't seem to have noticed: his hands were in his pockets and he was staring grimly straight ahead.

Draco wondered how to tell Coote that Potter was incapable of normal social interaction and that Coote should just grab him, and then they passed the fountain near the tigers' cage and the picnic area. It was large and deep, the bottom clear green, and Draco stared at it thoughtfully and started to have an idea.

"Potter," he said slowly, and when Potter looked around he smiled.

Potter smiled back, gradual and bright.

Draco let Katie's fingers slip out of his hand, and stepped easily over the rim of the fountain, into water up to his knees. A jet of water hit his head and streamed down his face as he walked a few steps backward, feeling his smile spread, and he crooked his finger and said: "Come."

Potter laughed, sounding shaky and relieved, and came. He stepped into the water with a small grimace, looking like a big animal unused to swimming and not overly comfortable with it, but willing to tolerate it since he had a definite goal in mind.

Draco knew he wasn't comfortable with it, of course. You took your advantages where you could get them.

"They're sparring," he heard Katie tell Coote beyond the circle of water, as they set out a picnic. "Something they have to do for training."

The falling water was a sparkling veil in the sunlight before Draco's eyes: he shook his head to send the drops flying and Potter lunged at him. Draco caught at the statue in the centre of the fountain on the way down and twisted, moving more smoothly in the water than Potter could, and brought an elbow crashing gleefully down on the back of Potter's head. He was just about to hit him when someone shoved him into the statue.

"Hey!" Coote said, fist clenched in Draco's shirt. "You can't-"

Potter's hand shot out and grabbed Coote's wrist, throwing him off none too gently. "Leave him," Potter snarled, surfacing from the water with his hair dripping. "Stay out of this."

Draco slanted a sneer Coote's way. "You heard the man."

He was dimly aware this was no way to win over Potter's boyfriend, but Coote shouldn't be interfering, anyway. This gleaming circle of water was *their* space: this was for Draco.

Potter tackled him into the water once he looked away and Draco went under the surface struggling and trying to wrestle his way out of Potter's grip. He got to the surface gasping and almost managed to win by banging Potter's head against the statue, but Potter's wet hair slid out of his grasp and then he was underwater again, laughing and choking on it, Potter's eyes and teeth gleaming above him.

"I surrender," Draco managed breathlessly, breaking to the surface with an elbow to Potter's throat. He healed the bleeding wound on the back of Potter's head as soon as he'd stopped coughing up water.

Once he'd climbed out of the fountain, he collapsed by Katie's side and stretched out on the grass.

"That was a – bit violent, Draco," she said.

"Was it?" Draco asked, blinking water out of his eyes. "Sorry. Come kiss me."

Katie smiled and shook her head. "You're all wet."

From across the picnic blanket, Coote was staring at Potter with eyes that said he personally wouldn't mind getting a little wet. Potter sat dripping and glaring at his own hands.

"I know that," Draco said softly, coaxingly. "Come kiss me anyway." He tugged at Katie's sleeve and she smiled, surrendered, leaned towards him and he reached up, clasped the back of her neck and drew her down into a long, soft, slow kiss. Sun shimmered in the drops caught in Draco's eyelashes: he made a small sound.

"Get a *room*," Potter snapped.

Draco forbore to mention that obviously Potter's problem was that he was panicking that Coote might expect similar public demonstrations of affection.

"Sorry," he said easily instead. "Someone pass the lemonade."

It looked like being a nice day after all, until the Owl came from Shacklebolt calling them back to duty.

“Man’s an evil robot,” Draco said, scrambling to his feet and dropping a kiss on Katie’s upturned face.

“Bye,” Potter said tersely to Coote, and got up as well.

Draco stared his hardest, raised his eyebrows and tried to generally convey to Potter the idea that Potter was the worst boyfriend in the world and was going to get *dumped*, possibly off a tall building without his broom. Potter scowled, stooped down and kissed the man, properly, brown fingers held against Coote’s jaw to keep him still, mouth opening with a slide of teeth to it.

He came out of it red-mouthed and breathing a little fast, and started walking away fast. Coote stared after him as if he’d seen the light of God, and Draco had to hurry to catch up.

When he did, Potter was wiping his mouth savagely with the back of his hand, as if Coote had been wearing lipstick.

“You happy?” he snarled at Draco.

That’s not the *point*, Draco wanted to say. The point was for *you* to be happy, you stupid, stupid git.

What he actually said was: “If *I* was your boyfriend, I think I would kill you in approximately three days.”

“Yeah?” Potter said, mouth twisting. “Well, you’re not.”

Draco thought it was past time to have a little chat with Coote.

*

“How dare you?” Coote demanded.

The talk was not going well.

“Harry is not a *twerp*,” Coote continued, eyes blazing. “The only thing wrong with Harry is *you*.”

Draco blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“You work him too hard and *make* him irritable,” Coote proclaimed. “And the ways you deal with investigations, *I’ve* heard stories, you’re blackening Harry’s good name! I wouldn’t expect anything else from a Slytherin, but let me tell you, as soon as Harry and I – understand each other better, the *first* thing I’ll do is get him to ditch you as his partner!”

“Is that so,” Draco said, perfectly cold.

Coote got up and threw money down on the bar for his drink. “I pity Katie, having to deal with you.”

Draco stared at his drink after Coote was gone. Typical Gryffindor, letting Draco know everything in advance: he’d given Draco a perfect opportunity to go lie to Potter until all this new-boyfriend business was soured. Only Draco couldn’t do that: this was the first human connection Potter had reached out for in years. Draco thought of the way Potter always reached out and grabbed when he woke up, and felt mistily and generally miserable.

Coote was young, that was all, he told himself. He was fresh out of school and the air in school was all choked with competitiveness, it made you crazy.

Except for the air in Slytherin, of course. Slytherin ruled!

When Shacklebolt asked him to infiltrate the last pocket of Death Eaters, who were set on kidnapping the Boy Who Lived, it was finally an order that Draco wanted to obey, because he had the sudden thought that if Potter was presented with evidence that Draco was a Death Eater, if he was and he still didn’t believe it, then it would be proof he wasn’t – going anywhere. Draco could feel safer. Draco wanted to know what Potter would do.

Infiltrating the Death Eaters was easy. Using Occlumency so they knew only what he wanted them to know was a snap. Directing the Death Eaters in the kidnap mission was a breeze.

Walking into Potter’s cell the first day was hard, but only for the first few moments. Potter stared at him but didn’t try to kill him, which meant he knew what was going on.

It was such a relief.

Then the Death Eaters started to get restive about the small matter of the ransom, and Draco still didn’t have all the names and he was starting to get edgy every time one of them approached Potter’s door. It was such a near thing that Draco had one of them tied up and Stunned in the cellar while he was getting the last names.

He was tired enough to collapse when Shacklebolt and the others sent word that the Death Eaters were being rounded up, and then he let Potter out and it seemed that Potter hadn’t known after all, and Potter was so tired that Draco couldn’t even bawl him out for it.

He dropped Potter off at his flat and Owled Coote to come be with him, sitting on the table beside Potter’s sofa with his face in his hands. Every time he came up with a plot to dispatch Coote, Potter (in his *sleep*, Jesus) made a loose grabbing movement towards Draco and Draco felt instantly and hideously guilty. He couldn’t do it.

“Shhh,” he said to Potter’s worn, sleeping face. “I didn’t mean it. I won’t.”

Coote appeared and glared at him, and Draco stood up and let Coote take his place at once. Coote hovered protectively over Potter and glared.

“I know this is somehow your fault,” he said accusingly, and what could Draco say? He was right.

“Take care of him,” Draco said, and left.

The next day he came in and found Potter and coffee at his desk, and steeled himself for – something, he didn’t know what, and asked how Coote was doing.

“We broke up,” Potter said, looking at his report.

“Oh,” Draco said, and quickly, before he could think about what he was saying, he said: “Is it my fault? Was it about the case? I can explain to him, I’m sure you can work it out-”

“I broke up with him,” Potter said curtly. “I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want you to explain anything, and I don’t want *him*, so just – leave it, all right, Malfoy?”

“All right,” Draco said, on an exhale.

That was that hex dodged, anyway, even though he didn’t know how or why. Draco felt pretty good about that, until he was going out the door that evening and happened to look around and see Potter still at his desk, head down, and the line of his shoulders reminded Draco of his *father*, and he wanted to go over to him and say, *Tell me*, whatever it is, whatever’s making you so unhappy, and we can make a plan to *kill it*.

He didn’t, though. He had to preserve the balance: he walked out the door.

*

On the anniversary of their third year of partnership the vampire incident occurred.

He and Potter were leaning over the mission report, plotting a way to get into a nest of vampires. Well, Draco was plotting, Draco was fairly sure Potter was mostly thinking about the enormous beheading swords they got to carry.

“Aha,” Draco said, with gentle triumph. “I have a plan. It involves using you as bait.”

Potter frowned. “No, it doesn’t. Why can’t you be bait?”

“Because the bait will be in the line of the sword,” Draco pointed out reasonably. “I could be killed!”

Potter gave him a look over his glasses.

“I use my head more than you do,” Draco said. “I need it more.”

“I use a *sword* better than you do,” Potter said. “So I’ll be using the sword, and you’ll be bait, and we can both keep our heads.”

“Fine,” Draco said sulkily. “But if you behead me, I will come back as a ghost and a member of the Headless Hunt, and I will haunt you and throw my head at you a lot. You’ll be really scared.”

“Not now you’ve told me, I won’t.”

“You will. My ghostly severed head will be *ghastly*,” Draco informed him with sepulchral satisfaction. “It will drip *ectoplasm*. That’ll show you.”

Potter hit him lightly over the head with his report. “Go running in Ashvale Street tonight,” he said. “Dress like a victim.”

Draco cursed Potter and went out that night to court lurking fanged death.

Lurking fanged death appeared in the shape of a heavysset vampire who leaped out at him from the bushes with his eyes and eyeteeth glittering.

“Oh gosh, you’re sinister,” Draco said in the voice of an Innocent Victim. “I do hope you mean me no harm!”

Apparently vampires were not only immortal, but immune to sarcasm. Draco mused on how utterly at a loss Professor Snape would be with a vampire student and waited for Potter to spring out, swing his enormous beheading sword and kill the vampire.

The vampire grabbed Draco in a bear hug, gave his neck a big sloppy lick and bit down hard.

Potter sprang out, swung his enormous beheading sword and killed the vampire.

Draco shoved the headless corpse away and fixed him with an accusing glare. “*Eurgh*,” he said with decision. “That vampire *licked* me.”

Potter gave his bleeding neck a speaking look.

“And it bit me, yes, how horrible, I have been marked by the undead, I stare into the abyss,” Draco said in an unconvinced tone. “You should feel very guilty. But at least I was psychologically prepared for a vampire to bite me. That is their vampire way. I did not know they licked you first. I wonder if it’s to tenderise the meat or clean it or something.”

“Tell you what,” Potter said indulgently, stooping and picking up the severed head. “I’ll keep one of the vampires alive so you can ask it.”

Potter tossed Draco his own sword, which Draco caught a little awkwardly by the hilt. Then Potter paused and gave Draco a once-over.

“Er,” he said. “What are you wearing?”

Draco looked down at his red shirt bearing the legend ‘HUFFLEPUFF ’98.’

“You *said* dress like a victim.”

Potter went up the stairs to the vampire hideout, and gained entrance by the expedient of holding the severed head up close to the eyehole.

Draco congratulated himself on the brilliant effectiveness of his plan as the door opened and Potter beheaded the doorvampire. Then he counted up the number of cloaks piled on the coat

rack and realised that the vampires must be having some kind of party.

“I think we could take them all,” Potter said.

“I think I would like to declare today National Not Getting Our Throats Ripped Out Day,” Draco said. “Let’s come back another time, when they don’t have guests. It’s only polite.”

At that point a step sounded outside one door, and Draco and Potter darted through another. They found themselves in a small dark room.

“Potter, there really are about forty vampires out there,” he said. “If we try to Apparate they’ll sense us, and if they find us, we are in *trouble*.” He thought for a moment. “Right, if anyone comes in, pretend to bite me.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Pretend to be a vampire,” Draco said impatiently. “I’m bleeding already: clearly somebody bit me, and the scent of blood will cover a lot. If there are forty vampires here chances they won’t all know each other. It’ll buy a second so we can kill whoever comes in.”

Potter looked extremely doubtful, which was outrageous because by now he should know Draco’s plans were all gold. He was still looking doubtful when a step sounded near the door, Draco stepped back against the wall, and Potter made up his mind and lunged.

He tilted up Draco’s chin with strong fingers, turning it to the side so that the bite on Draco’s neck was exposed, and closed in. His wild hair tickled Draco’s face and made him want to laugh until he realised that Potter was shaking a little, he must be upset about having to do this, and Draco curved a hand around his shoulder reassuringly, meaning *It’s okay, I know you won’t hurt me* and Potter sort of nuzzled at his neck blindly, and Draco was holding him and Draco – didn’t want to laugh anymore.

The small shadowed room seemed to lose a lot of air suddenly. Draco almost pushed him away, but then a floorboard that sounded like it was directly outside the door creaked and Draco didn’t know exactly how to tell Potter that they had to die bloodily because Draco had a neck thing.

Potter’s breath was erratic against Draco’s skin, his mouth warm: he leaned in an inch and licked lightly, above the bite mark, along the curve of Draco’s throat, and then when every nerve in Draco’s body came to screaming attention and his shoulderblades tried to dig through the wall and *out* of this situation because how embarrassing, and he resisted the urge to bitch-slap Potter for taking the stupid role too *far*...

Well then, thankfully, a vampire leaped across the room and grabbed Potter by the hair as a voice cried: “Die, evildoer!”

It turned out to be Edred Worple and his friend Sanguini, the writing duo who after the success of *Blood Brothers* had begun a career of vampire hunting so that the really undesirable element could be removed before they wrote *Blood Lovers*, the tell-all sequel about vampire society. Draco conceded that since it was now four against forty, he would permit the kill-them-all plan to go ahead.

The battle won, they made their way back to headquarters to report the cleaning of the vampire nest. Worple was tottering a little from the fight, but he clung to Potter's arm and talked to him earnestly about how the world was waiting for his story.

"So you're a vampire vampire hunter," Draco said brightly to Sanguini. "What's that like?"

Sanguini, greatly to his alarm, was looking rather fixedly at his neck. Draco was about to reach for his sword when Potter made one of his strange sounds, a growl with odd harmonics in it, and Sanguini took this as his cue to look away.

*

It was actually all Potter's fault when Draco tried stuff out of the evidence locker.

He was sitting outside on the Bells' front porch with little Mary, feeling banished. He'd just let it slip that he didn't want kids.

He had a dangerous job, he'd pointed out, and he'd already told her that he couldn't quit – there was a balance to be preserved, she'd told him what she wanted him to be, it wasn't *fair* that she seemed to have changed her mind – and even if he hadn't he wouldn't want kids.

What if a child came and he couldn't love it, he didn't say. What if the kid tried and tried to make him and he just *couldn't love it* and he had to see what it was doing to the kid.

Another thing he hadn't said was that he didn't want children who weren't purebloods.

It was a relief when Potter's car materialised out of the air and pulled up outside the gate. He leaned across the passenger seat and swung open the door under Mary's incredulous eyes.

"C'mon, Malfoy, drugs bust. Shackbolt thinks some of them will resist arrest."

Draco got up and Mary decided on a course of action.

She said: "*Potter*" and collapsed on her face in what appeared to be ecstasy.

"She does that with everyone," Draco said. He stooped down to check that Mary had not actually expired of joy, and then climbed into the car.

The bust was pretty quick. Nobody resisted arrest all that hard. Possibly they'd spotted Potter's crazy eyes. Draco was still feeling a little low as they examined the glittering packages, and he had the sudden thought that he was pretty sure they had the day off.

Potter saw him speculatively eyeing a particular package.

"Go on," he said, rolling his eyes. "I dare you."

He said later that he hadn't meant it, but why would people say things they didn't mean?

"I don't feel any different," Draco said after a moment.

“Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter,” Shacklebolt said, striding up to them. “-What’s wrong with your pupils, Mr Malfoy?”

“Sometimes I think you’re an evil robot,” Draco told him dreamily. “But sometimes not.”

“Malfoy’s feeling a little – peaky,” Potter said, and seized Draco’s arm and dragged him back to the car forthwith. He told Draco off all the way there, but Draco was listening intently and he didn’t think he was really cross. That was good. “Just go lie down in the back seat. Idiot,” Potter said, and steadied Draco when that didn’t quite work out.

Once Draco was lying down he found he was looking up at Potter upside down, which was most amusing. “Hello,” he said, and laughed.

“Hi,” Potter murmured, and touched his hair, which was odd but seemed to mean Potter was feeling fond of him.

The car starting was nice too, the sound of Maurice the radio mingling with the steady purr of the engine, and when the car launched itself up into the sky sunlight filled the whole small purring space. Draco thought about Katie and realised that everything was all right there too: she loved him, she’d said so, and this talking about kids meant that she might consider marrying him.

“I’m happy,” Draco announced, and saw the edge of Potter’s smile as he glanced back at him.

“Yeah?” Potter said. “That’s good.”

The car was rising higher and higher, filling with golden light. Draco meant to ask Potter if he was happy too, since that was just as important, but then music, warmth and contentment overwhelmed him.

The car climbed higher and higher, as if they were going to fly into the sun, and Draco fell asleep.

Drop Dead Gorgeous

Chapter One

"I'm laughing so hard I think I'm dribbling a little," Malfoy said from under the table.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "Could you... could you maybe explain that again? This time so it makes sense?"

He looked with a mounting sense of despair at Kingsley Shacklebolt and the former Professor Slughorn. They were sitting at the top of the boardroom table, Slughorn looking softly pleased with himself and generally benevolent. Shacklebolt looked grim, but Shacklebolt always looked grim.

Five minutes ago Harry had thought they were maybe going to get a commendation for the Gringotts case, but Slughorn had been sitting with Shacklebolt when they came in, and then Malfoy had taken one look at the genealogy charts and slipped off his chair, laughing like a hyena.

Shacklebolt frowned. "We've been through this, Potter."

"Just one more time," Harry said desperately.

"Of course, my dear boy," Slughorn told him, beaming. "I realise this may come as a shock to you, but our investigations have been going on for some time, and we're quite sure. Your mother Lily Evans was not, as we had all previously believed, of pure Muggle stock. One of her ancestors was a Veela."

Malfoy's laughter came with renewed vigour from under the table. Harry kicked him in the ribs.

"Look," he said. "Surely there's some mistake-"

"Oh no," Slughorn said genially. "Actually it explains a lot. A pureblood boy like James Potter, prejudiced or not, might well have been expected to steer clear of a Muggleborn girl. Yet for five years he pursued her, as the saying goes, as if he was a lad on his first trip to Hogsmeade and she was carrying Honeydukes around in her knickers."

"Because he *loved her!*" Harry shouted. "And - and who says that, anyway? I don't say that!"

"Oh yes," Slughorn said, in a sleek, satisfied sort of way. "He loved her. And Peter Pettigrew loved her, and Sirius Black loved her, and Remus Lupin loved her. And Regulus Black loved her, and I myself yearned for her, and Severus Snape too was possessed by secret passion for the lovely Lily. Don't you find this list of lovers a little odd? It's practically a roll call."

"Your passion wasn't all that secret, sir," Malfoy said from under the table.

"Shut up Malfoy, God, you are not helping," Harry snapped. "Well, I - my mum was a bit of a catch, I suppose - I - Really, Professor Snape?"

“Even You-Know-Who himself, we suspect, no sooner set eyes on Lily than he knew he must have her as his own. That was why he offered her the chance to step aside, that night in Godric’s Hollow. His desire to carry your mother off to a sweet sugar palace of carnality was, it seems, his downfall.”

Slughorn nodded almost sadly to himself, as if Voldemort was more to be pitied than blamed.

“Sweet sugar - Urgh,” Harry said. “Urgh.”

“We have investigated this thoroughly, Harry,” Slughorn assured him. “I went to visit your relatives, who I understand you have not seen in six years-”

“Dudley is not part Veela,” Harry said flatly. That could not be, or surely the world would crumble.

“A most personable young man,” Slughorn said. “What a physique! But of course, the Veela blood was even more evident in your Aunt Petunia. She has the blond hair and swanlike neck of the Veela, I never saw a Muggle with such a strong strain of Veela blood in them. Your Uncle Vernon is a lucky man. The Veela, of course, can sometimes be a little rough in the marital bed, but with their wild ministrations comes unimaginable ecstasy-”

Malfoy howled laughing. “Stop it,” he said, and Harry heard him pounding the floor with his fists. “I can’t take it. It’s too funny. I may soil myself.”

“Yes, stop it,” Harry said feebly, trying to banish the mental pictures. “Um - okay - well, I don’t ever intend to see my family again, and I don’t plan on having children, so I can’t see that this matters. You’ve told me, and one day Malfoy may shut up about it-”

“Don’t count on it,” Malfoy warned.

“-And then I can proceed with - forgetting this entire conversation ever happened,” Harry said. “Thanks. Bye.”

“Sit down, Potter,” Shacklebolt barked. “There’s more. God help us all,” he added after a moment’s thought.

Malfoy made a quiet sound of glee into the carpet.

“Another thing, which by now you may have realised, is that You-Know-Who himself had a Veela strain,” Slughorn said. “His beauty and charisma had a great deal to do with the origins of his army, and of course his Veela wives enslaved some loyal followers like Bellatrix Lestrange to the last.”

Harry thought back to Tom Riddle in the Pensieve. He supposed he’d been quite easy on the eyes. If you liked them tall, dark and mind-blowing.

“And I believe you know that when You-Know-Who’s spell on you backfired, he transferred some of his powers to you,” Slughorn went on, as if lecturing a classroom with a special twinkle for his favourite student. “Such as Parseltongue. And saucy, salacious Veela charms.”

“Beg pardon,” Harry said.

“I said, saucy-”

“I heard what you said!” Harry shouted. “I’ve never heard anything so stupid in my life.”

“Consider, Harry,” Slughorn said. “I knew it myself the moment I saw you, though of course the fact you were a student in my care made it impossible for me to fully express the deep appreciation - well, well, perhaps later. Surely you see Harry, that with your own Veela powers added to You-Know-Who’s, you became a powerfully alluring creature.”

Harry was already a large table away from Slughorn, but he moved his chair anyway out of principle and sheer horror.

“There are hardly any male Veela,” Slughorn went on, eyeing Harry dreamily, “and of course your own strong magic unconsciously enhances the Veela lure. Why, even when you were young, we have reports of the very sensitive being badly affected - poor young Ginny Weasley, of course, and a little chap called Colin Creevey-”

“What?” said Harry. “*What?*”

“And when your sexuality-” Slughorn rolled the word on his tongue like a sweet - “became more fully developed, there was quite a sensation in the school, wasn’t there?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Harry said coldly.

“Women crowding the Quidditch pitch when you practised,” Slughorn reminded him. “Droves of women following you hypnotised through the corridors. Surely you didn’t think this was normal behaviour?”

“Uh,” said Harry.

“Have you ever felt a little clawing, growling thing in your chest when you were in a sexual situation?” inquired Slughorn, as if he was asking if Harry took milk in his tea.

“Er,” Harry said.

Slughorn nodded with satisfaction. “That would be your Veela powers trying to manifest.”

“Manifest,” Harry said, and began to panic a little. “Like, um, how the Veela did? With wings and - and beaks and things? I’m going to do that?”

He was never going to have sex again.

“Say he’s going to grow a beak,” Malfoy said prayerfully from under the table. “Say we’re all going to see him balance his glasses on a beak. Make my life complete.”

“No, no,” Slughorn said. “The little monster in your chest should remain just a feeling, I imagine. And quite enough too. No, that’s not the problem.”

Harry gripped the table. “What’s the problem?”

Slughorn smiled beneficently. “Tell me, my boy,” he said. “When was the last time you were sexually intimate with someone?”

Harry stared.

“I absolutely refuse to answer that question. I’m - I’m an adult, and I’m in my *workplace*, and - and that’s an entirely inappropriate thing to ask me-”

“Has it been that long?” murmured Shacklebolt.

Harry redirected his stare. “What?”

“Nothing,” Shacklebolt answered.

“It’s been eleven months,” Malfoy announced cheerfully. “Since the Christmas party.”

Harry felt himself go red under Slughorn’s interested eyes. “I told you that in confidence,” he muttered.

“Everybody knows,” Malfoy said. “It was the Christmas party.”

Shacklebolt nodded. “This is quite true. I know myself.”

“Oh my God,” said Harry, and resisted the urge to put his head in his hands.

Slughorn made a pyramid of his fingers and stared over them at Harry. “Well, that explains everything,” he declared. “Eleven months is a long time for any young man, particularly such a specimen as you are. Really, you should not let your dedication to your work interfere with your duty to indulge yourself - and, if I may say so, to give pleasure to others.”

Harry cringed. Slughorn’s gaze caressed his biceps.

“You’re twenty-three, are you not?” Shacklebolt asked briskly.

Harry gave a weak nod and Slughorn looked pleased. “A fine ripe legal age!” he said brightly. “At which most young people are regularly intimate, or at least take most opportunities offered. Of course, most young people are not part Veela, and their feelings of sexual frustration will have no consequences.”

“I am not sexually fr - What consequences?”

“Consider this,” Slughorn said. “At the age of sixteen, you wrought havoc in Hogwarts, and then got yourself a girlfriend. Which was lucky, since it probably prevented a riot. Why, my boy, people had taken leave of their senses! They were slipping you love potions!”

Now that Slughorn put things like that, all of it did start to sound a little weird.

“Fleur Delacour, while she has less Veela power than you and is trained besides, caused

much the same havoc when she was visiting Hogwarts at the age of seventeen. However, Miss Delacour married when she was twenty.”

“I’m not getting married,” Harry said forcefully.

“No, no, my dear boy. I wouldn’t dream of suggesting you tie yourself down in that way. Feel free to explore the world and all its carnal delights!” said Slughorn. “But do find yourself a regular sex partner or partners, or there will be consequences. Your powers are already starting to manifest quite dramatically. I hear Lisa the receptionist fainted in your arms yesterday?”

“It was a hot day!”

“It’s November,” Malfoy pointed out.

“I just,” Harry said. “I can’t hear any more of this. Or my brain will explode. Um, and I don’t think you can order me to have - to be - I don’t care if you are my boss, you don’t get a say in my private life,” he said, avoiding Slughorn’s avid eyes and addressing Shackbolt.

“Naturally not,” Slughorn crooned. “We just wanted to give you a warning, that’s all-”

“Consider me warned,” Harry snapped. “Come on, Malfoy.”

Malfoy crawled out from under the table. There was carpet fluff in his hair, his face was brilliant pink with laughing, and he still looked highly amused.

“I never get called to the office so people can tell me to have more sex,” he said. “Life is so unfair.”

*

Harry was not used to getting bad news from the boss’ office. Even when he’d thought he was getting bad news, once before, things had turned out pretty well.

That was when he was twenty, still on the wild violent edge he’d had to go over after killing Voldemort, still trying to cope with Ginny’s absence and the reason for it, and on top of all that worried about his job. He knew it wasn’t going well and he couldn’t work out why. He’d passed all the tests with flying colours, but in practise everything seemed to be falling to pieces.

It was the only thing he’d ever thought he might be able to do. Voldemort was gone, Ginny was gone, and this had to work out.

“Frankly,” Shackbolt had said, “I won’t wish either of you on anyone else.”

“That’s not fair,” Harry argued. “I’m not - look, I know things aren’t, I know I’ve had a few problems, but I’m not like *him*. He doesn’t do the job.”

“I’m aware you two have some bad history between you,” Shackbolt said.

“Yes!” Harry said. “Yes we do, and so I really don’t think we can-”

“You need to get over it,” Shacklebolt continued calmly.

Harry’d thought of himself as over it already. He’d learned his lesson, after the incident known as the Incident Where Harry Potter Almost Lost The War By Almost Killing Severus Snape Who Had Vital Information, A Horcrux And As It Turned Out Had Most Improbably Been Innocent All Along. It’d been a strange lesson for him to learn, that really unpleasant people who hated him could nevertheless be on the right side. He thought of the day he’d learned that as the day he’d grown up.

He hadn’t grown up the day he killed Voldemort. Killing was just killing. It hadn’t taught him anything, though it’d made him feel better at the time.

With Snape had come Malfoy. Harry’d had too much to do to think about that at first, and then the whole realisation that infinitely unlikeable did not mean evil had made him uneasy enough to keep away deliberately.

Malfoy had mostly been with the Death Eaters anyway, gathering information, though after a while Harry noticed that Malfoy was avoiding him just as deliberately. It was a while before Harry could really accept his uneasy epiphany, and it was an even longer while before Hermione told Malfoy that Harry had not, that time in the bathroom in sixth year, planned to murder him in cold blood.

By then they were used to avoiding each other. They worked better that way, and certainly if Harry’d ever been able to schedule his classes at school so he never saw a Slytherin again, he would’ve done it. Adult life was like that.

It had been a shock when Malfoy was in Auror training camp too, but Harry’d still been too busy - there were the screaming dreams about Voldemort’s death, and none of the Weasleys save Ron were talking to him because Ginny had moved to France to get away from him, and Ron was in the process of slowly, inexorably failing out of Auror training.

They weren’t in the same training group or the same dormitory. Malfoy remained what he’d always been: a face at a different table, doing an impression for a bunch of other people laughing their heads off. Malfoy, in many ways, was the greatest anticlimax of Harry’s life.

Until Kingsley Shacklebolt called Harry to his office and assigned him to be Malfoy’s partner.

“But he’s-” Harry began. “He’s not reliable, and he’s-”

Unreliable was the first word that sprang to mind. Malfoy was always in late to work unless he’d gone off on one and spent the night in the office, and he kept letting slip details about Dark magic that no decent wizard should know. That one time he’d been forced undercover in the Muggle world had left him with a tendency to hum Muggle songs that drove the whole office quietly mad and he often came into work in jeans, apparently totally undeterred by all the black slips for being improperly dressed. They were all trying to catch a sea monster terrorising the coast, and Malfoy’s attention could be distracted from the mass casualties by coffee running low in the office kitchen.

Harry did not feel that adding 'basically horrible, and I hate his face' was the argument that would win Shacklebolt over.

"Do you think you're reliable, Harry?" Shacklebolt asked. "Your last four partners insisted on a transfer, or said they would leave the service altogether. One of them was convinced that after a month, you couldn't remember her name."

That Annabella or Arabella or whatever her name was had always given Harry nasty looks, he knew that.

"You have anger issues that seriously concern the board, and you always choose just one suspect and hang onto your idea like a bulldog and drive everyone else up the wall. Malfoy does the exact same thing, except that I note-" Shacklebolt riffled through some parchment - "that you two have never once suspected the same person. Yet most of the time, one of you has been absolutely right. It's just that it's impossible to know which one of you is right at any given time, and the rest of the department is sick of you both. From now on you two can argue it out, and if you come to me and tell me that both of you suspect the same person, I promise you you will receive my serious attention."

"I thought I had your serious attention already," Harry said.

"No, for the past six months I've dismissed your reports as the ravings of a crank," Shacklebolt told him serenely.

Harry said: "Oh."

"Please realise that this is your last chance, Mr Potter," Shacklebolt said. "Your recklessness has endangered some of my best men. You lost the department a lot of funding after you punched the Minister for Magic. And if you keep shouting at meetings I think Miss Bell might have a nervous breakdown."

Harry suppressed the uncharitable thought that Katie Bell, fine Chaser and all as she'd been, was a bit of a scared mouse.

"Sir," he said, a bit desperately. "Do you really think I'm on the same level as Malfoy?"

Shacklebolt frowned. "Of course not. You're the saviour of the wizarding world, and he's the despicable spawn of a Death Eater."

"Well, then-"

"What do morals have to do with the efficient working of a department?" Shacklebolt inquired. "Good day to you."

Harry had left Shacklebolt's office because there seemed to be no other choice, and approached Malfoy's desk with enormous trepidation. Malfoy was at his desk, and looked at Harry's approach as if Harry was the first wave of soldiers coming at him from the trenches.

"Look," Harry said. "I can't get fired."

“Well, I don’t want to get fired, either,” Malfoy snapped.

“Oh really,” Harry said. “Got a vocation, have you?”

“Not really,” Malfoy drawled in a way that brought Harry right back to the good old school days and the good old constant desire to haul off and punch Malfoy in the face. “I’ve got two reasons for not wanting to be fired, though, and one of them is that I’m damned if I get fired before you do.”

“Malfoy, this is not *Quidditch*,” Harry snapped.

“I know, there’s all this paperwork,” Malfoy said. “Pull up a chair and show me your report on the sea monster. Mine’s over there.”

Malfoy’s was about four times the size of Harry’s, and Harry had forgotten how much Malfoy’s handwriting looked like the flailings of a drunk spider.

“I’d forgotten that your writing looks one step away from a tiny tot’s fingerpainting,” Malfoy said, frowning at the pages.

Harry began a partnership which required mutual respect and civility by saying: “Bite me.”

Some pages later, he found a tiny drawing in the margin of Malfoy’s report which showed the sea monster and a little speech bubble coming out of its mouth saying ‘Quail before me! I am the terror of the high seas!’

He sort of grinned, and then looked up in dread that Malfoy had seen it, but Malfoy seemed absorbed in the report.

“Play Quidditch at all?” Harry asked suddenly. “Anymore, I mean?”

“Sometimes,” Malfoy said, writing something doubtless mocking in Harry’s margin. “You?”

“When I can,” Harry said.

The next day Harry came in and found Malfoy had pulled one of his all-nighters, and his desk was spectacularly untidy and covered with what appeared to be a child’s project.

“What’s this?” Harry asked.

“Well, okay,” Malfoy said, gluing lollipop sticks together. “There are lots of sea monsters in the sea, as we know, right? And generally they’re shy and don’t, you know, eat whole villages. So - if you’re following me here - I think the sea monster is being controlled. We just have to find out who by, and I know how to do it. All we have to do is ask the sea monster!”

He looked up at Harry with a shining, triumphant face.

He truly was insane.

“Oh, ask the sea monster?” Harry said. “Speaks English, does it?”

“No,” Malfoy said, his eyes glittering madly. “But it’s the equivalent of an aquatic basilisk. And you speak Parseltongue.”

Harry looked at the broken rubber band he thought was meant to represent the sea monster, and said: “Huh.” Then he shook his head back into sanity, and said: “How’re we supposed to interrogate a sea monster as a witness for the defence, anyway? Leaving aside the fact that, oh, I don’t know, *it’s a sea monster*, how do we catch it?”

“Aha,” said Malfoy. “That’s what this is for.”

He made a brief gesture to the child’s project on the desk. Harry looked carefully from Malfoy’s face to the project, and then back.

“We’re going to defeat the sea monster with lollipop sticks?” he asked.

He tried to remember what to do with lunatics. All that came to mind was humouring them, and not making any sudden movements.

Malfoy looked at him as if he was insane. “No,” he said. “This is a model.”

Harry looked at the mess of lollipop sticks and then drew out a chair to sit in. He said: “Explain.”

An hour later they were in Shacklebolt’s office. Malfoy wasn’t being all that intelligible, since he’d apparently eaten all the lollipops that had come with his lollipop sticks and was on the sugar high of a lifetime.

Harry said: “Look, I know it sounds like he’s insane, and possibly he is insane, but sometimes, trust me on this, insane stuff can really work, and it’s possible he’s come out the other side of insanity and come up with something good, and all we really have to do is use this fishing village for bait - I mean, I understand things could go a bit wrong-”

Shacklebolt looked at them, his face its usual grim blank.

“I know I did this to myself,” he said musingly. “But it still hurts.”

*

“I’m not doing it. Shut up,” Harry said.

“They gave you orders, though,” Malfoy argued, frowning at the bathroom mirror and picking the carpet fluff out of his hair as he spoke. “I think you can totally put a prostitute on expenses.”

A couple of other people left the bathroom with great speed, casting horrified looks at Harry and Malfoy as they went. Harry raised a hand to protest that he had nothing to do with this madness, but nobody ever believed that.

“I don’t *need* to hire a - Jesus, Malfoy, shut up,” Harry said, seeing himself go red in the mirror and scowling.

“Oh, of course not, I forgot,” Malfoy said, beaming at himself manically in the glass. “You’re Harry Potter, Veela Extraordinaire. Watch out world, this one can’t be tamed!”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up.”

“You know, I think Slughorn was giving you the eye a bit,” Malfoy continued with perfectly feigned innocence. “You could be in there. Unless you’re afraid he’s too much man for you.”

“I can’t believe that you won’t shut up,” said Harry.

“Is it all gone?” Malfoy asked, making an inquiring face at his reflection.

“No,” Harry said. “Here, let me.”

Malfoy turned towards him, his left eyebrow and the left side of his mouth both flying upwards in that lopsided quizzical look he got sometimes. Harry ran his fingers through his hair twice, and only twice.

“All gone,” he said. “Now let’s get down to some real work. We’re interrogating Dixon today.”

Malfoy glowed. “I’d forgotten.”

Dixon was the culprit in the Gringotts case. He’d held some goblin kids hostage and asked for millions in gold for their ransom: when the goblins had refused to betray their trust, he’d slaughtered them all. Harry and Malfoy had been following his trail for weeks.

It wasn’t often they got to do an interrogation. Shacklebolt only let them do it if everyone was sure the man was guilty, and they needed a confession quickly.

Dixon was in one of the Auror holding cells. Harry and Malfoy entered quietly.

“Shh, you idiot!” Malfoy hissed. “What if someone hears? Nobody can know we were here.”

Dixon lifted his head from the table and looked extremely alarmed. Malfoy smiled at him brilliantly.

“Hi there,” he said.

“Don’t talk to him,” Harry barked. “He doesn’t deserve it. Do you, you piece of slime?”

He looked at Dixon the same way he’d looked at Death Eaters, in the days when they needed information, and got it whatever way they could. Dixon trembled.

“I see you’re not very brave when you’re not faced by children,” Harry snarled. He started to prowl after Dixon, who knocked over his chair and started edging towards one corner of the

room, then another, while Harry followed him.

“It’s not like they were human,” he pleaded, and Malfoy had to catch Harry’s elbow to stop him actually punching Dixon in the face.

Malfoy did it so Dixon wouldn’t see, though. All he saw was the expression on Harry’s face.

“You can’t-” he said.

“There wasn’t much left of Voldemort but a red mist,” Harry said truthfully. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. You have no idea.”

Dixon looked around to Malfoy for help, but actually Malfoy and Harry had sort of a unique take on the good Auror/bad Auror trick.

Malfoy had righted Dixon’s chair and was lounging in it. When he caught Dixon’s eye he smiled in a truly horrible way he’d perfected, rolled down his sleeve and showed him the Dark Mark.

Dixon’s breath hissed out through his teeth.

“I know,” Malfoy said. “Those Aurors will just hire anybody who walks in off the street, won’t they? I call it shocking.”

He looked brightly from Harry to Dixon, and then said encouragingly: “Don’t mind me.” His voice went utterly cold. “I like to watch.”

Dixon made a break for the door. Malfoy got there before him, sliding easily between the door and the desperate man, flashing him another smile.

“You can’t do this,” Dixon almost sobbed.

Harry looked over Dixon’s shoulder at Malfoy, and they grinned at each other.

“Trust me,” Harry said softly. “We do this a lot.”

“Of course,” Malfoy drawled, “there *is* another option.”

*

It was after the sea monster as witness business that they had first used what became their interrogation technique. They’d swallowed several pints of sea water that day, and Harry’s throat was raw from bellowing Parseltongue up at the creature, and Malfoy kept complaining that he’d caught a chill. When they caught Dolohov, neither of them were in the mood to be merciful.

“Not that you ever are,” Malfoy remarked the next day.

They were in the sparring room, and Harry’d just been feeling fairly good about getting Dolohov, and the fact that he could beat Malfoy hollow.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a bully,” Malfoy said, breathing hard with his fists still up.

“No I’m not,” Harry said frostily.

“Sure, you are,” Malfoy answered. “Random unjustified bursts of aggression. Not letting anyone have a word in-”

“Just because I don’t let *you* talk your fool head off,” Harry began.

“And Finnigan,” Malfoy said. “Back in fifth year? Listened to his differing point of view with patience and respect, did you? Don’t make me laugh. I saw how you were with the troops. I see how you are now. I bet I know how you were with the DA. A leader’s just a bully who has himself under control.”

He feinted and Harry dodged easily. Harry was just better.

“Look, Malfoy,” Harry began angrily.

“Shh,” Malfoy said out of the corner of his mouth. “Here comes Shacklebolt. Try to look like we’re getting along.”

Harry turned and said “Where-” just before Malfoy sucker-punched him.

Harry’s head snapped back and he saw stars, but braced his body and refused to let himself fall. The stars cleared and he saw Malfoy’s intent face, sweat shining above the curved shape of his upper lip.

“If I’m a bully,” Harry said indistinctly, “It takes one to know one.”

Malfoy looked away then, cracking his neck, and answered: “I know.”

*

“Victory,” Malfoy said. “Success. Triumph. So perish all our enemies! Let’s go have a drink.”

“It’s four in the afternoon, Malfoy,” Harry said, swinging the roll of parchment which was Dixon’s signed confession. “I think you have a problem.”

“I work a very high-stress job, it’s natural,” Malfoy said dismissively. “Anyway, we have our perpetrator. Besides which, today we found out that you are, according to genetics and Slughorn, a love god.” He looked deeply amused once more. “I think we deserve a drink.”

Harry considered. “I’ll go drop this on Shacklebolt’s desk.”

“I’ll get my cloak,” Malfoy said.

Harry had long ago given up pointing out that wearing a cloak with jeans looked weird, so he just nodded in Malfoy's direction.

"Oh, hey," Malfoy said, obviously struck by a thought. "We should go to a gay bar."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"We just got told half an hour ago that it was our duty as Aurors to get you some loving," Malfoy said. "I know you remember, and the whole conversation is written on the tablets of my memory in words of glorious golden fire. I bet if we go to a gay bar we can expense our drinks."

"Stop talking about expensing stuff," Harry said. "Stop talking at all."

He was starting a migraine, he could feel it.

"Oh come on," Malfoy coaxed. "It'll be good for you. You know I don't mind."

"It's four in the afternoon," Harry pointed out again.

"Love knows no schedule!" Malfoy declared. "Time and unbridled carnality wait for no man. Or Veela," he added, smirking. "Let's get going."

*

It was the first time Harry actually saw Malfoy outside of work that he told him.

He'd realised, after four cases, that embarrassingly enough Malfoy had lasted longer than any other partner Harry had ever had. And he'd remembered that one of the former and never-regretted partners had accidentally found out and been a bastard about it, which had prompted Harry to punch the bastard in the face four times.

Since this actually seemed to be working out, Harry had felt that Malfoy should be told. Malfoy could be a bastard about breakfast cereal, after all, and it was better to know now.

He didn't go into the whole thing, didn't discuss war and confusion and then the terrible added confusion of Zacharias Smith tackling him at random intervals. That had been another thing he had learned and never wanted to learn, another of those grown-up things, that you could be attracted to someone you didn't particularly like, that there was a reason it had been easy to dismiss Cho and the reason wasn't that Harry had morality so strong it could turn off his sex drive.

He especially didn't discuss the way Ginny had moved to France after she found out. The whole miserable thing was behind him, and it wasn't Malfoy's business. He just took Malfoy out for a coffee at lunchtime and told him.

"Oh," Malfoy said. "Okay. I don't care."

Frankly, Harry had expected a bit more by way of a response.

Malfoy seemed to realise this, and he stirred more sugar into his coffee and added vaguely: "I have friends who are."

"Yeah," Harry said, snorting. "Everybody says that."

Malfoy reached across the table and smacked Harry over the head, which Harry did not feel was very supportive of Harry's alternative lifestyle.

"My God you're an idiot," Malfoy informed him. "I mean it. I have friends who are. Did you ever *meet* Crabbe and Goyle?"

"What?" Harry said. "What?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes and made a sweeping gesture to the rest of the coffee shop, as if to display to the world the imbecility he had to deal with on a daily basis. The rest of the coffee shop stared at Malfoy as if he was insane.

That happened a lot.

"You're about as quick as an arthritic donkey," Malfoy drawled. "They did go to the Yule Ball together. What did you need, a very special announcement from the teachers?"

Harry was still absorbing this when Malfoy nicked Harry's biscuit and went on thoughtfully: "I used to worry about it. That once they were going out, they wouldn't want to spend time with me any more."

"Yeah?" Harry said. "I used to worry about that with Ron and Hermione."

The left corner of Malfoy's mouth went up, and then curled when he said: "Wait, you took me out to lunch just to tell me *that*? We have perfectly good coffee in the office, you know. You could've just written me a very special memo."

"It's kind of personal, Malfoy."

Malfoy eyed him coldly. "You're paying."

"Fine," said Harry. "Speaking of personal things, since we *are* here, you said once that you had two reasons for not wanting to get fired."

He raised his eyebrows. Malfoy raised his eyebrows back at him.

Harry gave up. "I was just wondering what the other one was."

Malfoy turned his empty cup around in his hands, and said after a moment: "I'm trying to impress someone."

"Oh," said Harry. "Is it working?"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth went into a curve that was almost a smile again. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll let you know."

*

“Aren’t you a bit freaked out by this stuff?” Harry asked when they were on their way to the bar. “Urgh. You would be if you’d ever seen my Aunt Petunia. Urgh.”

“I don’t know, Slughorn seemed to like her, maybe I would too,” Malfoy said, winking.

“Don’t ever talk to me again,” said Harry.

They walked in silence along the quays by Blackfriars Bridge for approximately four seconds.

“Course I’m not bothered,” Malfoy said. “It’s not all that unusual, you know. Veela do a lot of breeding.” He paused. “Probably that has something to do with their insatiable-”

Harry recoiled. “Please skip ahead.”

“Have it your way,” Malfoy said. “Blaise Zabini was part Veela, you know. That’s why he spent so much time in the hospital wing in the first few years of school.”

Come to think of it, Harry didn’t really remember seeing Zabini around much.

“His mother’s side, too,” Malfoy went on blithely. “That was where Mrs Zabini got her fatal allure from. People don’t generally keep marrying women whose last rich husbands died mysteriously. Of course, come to think of it, maybe they died as a result of the well-known Veela propensity for rough-”

“I will drop you in the Thames,” Harry warned.

“You’re no fun,” said Malfoy. “Anyway, we all got used to it. Which should come as a relief, since Pansy’s not likely to jump you next time you go round to Weasley’s for tea.”

“So, um,” Harry said. “All people have to do is get used to it?”

Malfoy frowned. “Well, that helps. So does - let me see, being in love with someone else helps, and so does the Veela descendant not being someone’s type - colouring, gender preferences, whatever. Also the smell of peppermint. I don’t know why.”

“I still think it’s *weird*,” Harry said. “Come on, don’t you think it’s weird? Snape fancied my *mum*.”

“Hey, can I tell everyone?” Malfoy asked suddenly. “I mean, they all have to know, and you don’t want to tell them, do you? Oh, let me. Oh please, please let me. It would bring a ray of light into my lonely and desolate life.”

Harry pictured telling the office about his saucy, salacious Veela charms.

“You can tell whoever you want.”

Malfoy beamed, which drew Harry's attention to the fact that he hadn't been smiling much this week. Aside from today, naturally.

"Hey," he said. "Um. She'll be back soon."

Malfoy smiled again, this time a secret smile for himself, and put his hand in his jeans pocket, where he thought Harry didn't know he kept the box with the engagement ring inside it.

"I know she will," he said.

*

The night six months after Malfoy became Harry's partner there was an award night for Aurors of the Year.

They'd won. One day Kingsley Shacklebolt would get over the shock.

Shacklebolt had already given them a lecture on proper dress robes, which had been mainly directed at Malfoy. Malfoy's gaze had been directed towards a window at the time, Harry recalled, and grinned.

An award. Everything going well, for a change. And.

Well, it was nothing, really. It was Malfoy, and that was weird. They worked together. He was kind of a complete bastard. He wasn't even that attractive. It was nothing, and if it was something, it was something that didn't matter.

"Ready?" asked Hermione, who he'd borrowed off Ron for the evening. She'd straightened her hair for the occasion, and was wearing red robes. She looked beautiful as she took his arm, and squeezed it slightly. "I'm proud of you," she said.

"You know you'd be Unspeakable of the Year if it wasn't, um, a super secret organisation."

"You know that I'm not allowed to talk about work, Harry," Hermione said, and then allowed herself a small smile. "Except that this is true."

Hermione'd been forbidden to ever go near a live patient again after two weeks as a practising mediwitch, and then she'd joined the Unspeakables. She seemed to be doing pretty well and she got involved in Auror work sometimes. She'd told Harry that if they were in the Muggle world, her work would be called 'forensic.'

Ron had thought the word sounded kind of dirty.

When they entered the ballroom, the array of candles blinded Harry for a moment. They were approached by Penelope Weasley, and the flash of her diamond ring left him seeing yellow shadows behind his eyelids for five minutes.

"So I hear that thing of which we cannot speak at this time went well," Penelope said to Hermione.

“Yes,” said Hermione, “but it’s nothing like as important as that affair of which of course we can never speak, since the files are closed. You did very well in that, I thought. Not that I can even recall what you did, and if I could I certainly would never speak of it.”

“Understood,” said Penelope.

Harry left them to their Unspeakable shop talk, and went for the drinks table. He looked around for people he knew, and hid from the bureaucrats crowding the place.

It wasn’t until he had a drink in hand that he saw Malfoy. He was indeed wearing jeans, and he was dancing with Tonks. It was quite a feat to dip a heavily pregnant woman until her pink head touched the floor, Harry thought.

When Malfoy returned Tonks to Lupin, Tonks reached up and ruffled his hair. Harry heard Malfoy laugh from across the room, and he moved towards them.

“Hey there, Potter,” Malfoy said, stealing Harry’s drink. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

He was a little out of breath, fair hair tumbling into his face and catching the candlelight, but he looked well-pleased with himself and the whole universe. Harry seriously wondered how it had taken him years to notice that Malfoy was a praise junkie.

“I heard they were for you too,” Harry said, and offered his hand. “Congratulations, Malfoy.”

For one reason and another, Harry had never offered him his hand before. He didn’t realise the significance of this until he saw Malfoy hesitate.

Then Malfoy smiled and took his hand. “Thanks, Potter.”

Harry let go after a minute, and looked at the floor. It was weird, he told himself. And unprofessional. Very, very unprofessional. Worlds of unprofessional. His breath kept snagging in his throat.

When he looked at Malfoy again, Malfoy’s face had lit up, brighter than the candles. Harry blinked, stared at his eyes, and then looked around in the direction Malfoy was looking.

He saw nothing but that shy mouse, Katie Bell, coming towards them in demure blue robes. She was smiling a little awkwardly.

“Hi, Harry,” she said. “Draco. Congratulations.”

“Hi,” said Harry, and thought: *Draco?*

“Hello,” Malfoy responded, his voice warm and somehow tender, as if he was talking to a kitten who could by some miracle understand him. Harry had never dreamed Malfoy could sound like that. “I didn’t,” said Malfoy, and actually blushed. “I didn’t know if you were coming.”

“Well, I work here,” said Katie, and looked at her hands. “And you invited me. So you could say I was invited twice.”

“Clearly, you are in demand,” Malfoy observed.

He was smiling at her and smiling at her. Look up, you stupid woman, Harry thought almost dispassionately. You should see the look on his face.

“Well, I came over here,” Katie said, and took a breath. “When you invited me to the ceremony,” she went on. “You also invited me to dinner. Well - I’ll come.”

“You will,” Malfoy said, and sounded so happy. “Well,” he said, and his voice went playful. “I invited you to dinner on Friday or Saturday. Which can I have?”

Katie did look up then, and did see the look on Malfoy’s face. She went scarlet.

“Both,” she answered. “If you want.”

Malfoy took her hand and pulled her in towards him, as if they were going to dance. “I want,” he said.

When Katie made no objection, Malfoy gathered her in properly, an arm around her waist, looking down at her brown head with that incredulous joy still written all over his face. He glanced up and Harry quickly looked away.

“You may well stare, Potter,” Malfoy said loftily, and then delight burst out and made his voice all soft and funny again. “I don’t think anyone in the room believes how lucky I just got.”

“*Draco*,” Katie exclaimed.

“Come dance with me,” Malfoy said to the top of Katie’s head. “Come on. You have to dance with me, you’re going out to dinner with me. In fact, you’re coming to dinner with me twice, so you have to dance with me twice.”

“Do I,” Katie said.

“At least,” said Malfoy.

He led Katie out onto the dance floor, candlelight sweeping over the curve of his head as he bowed it down towards her, sharp nose brushing the side of her face. Somewhere behind Harry, Tonks was talking about how romantic it was.

“Would you look at that,” Hermione said, rejoining Harry’s side and speaking in a voice of mild surprise. “Seems like Malfoy got Katie Bell at last.”

“At last?” Harry asked in a wooden sort of way.

“Oh yes,” said Hermione. “He’s been chasing her since he was sixteen. Of course, there was a bit of a gap in there while he was, you know, expelled from school for the Death Eater stuff, and then he was a little busy working for Professor Snape, but - since he was eighteen, anyway. I think he only joined the Aurors because she worked in archives.”

“It wasn’t just that,” Malfoy said the next day, in response to a question Harry tried to word tactfully. “Katie works here because she thinks it’s worthwhile. She thinks the Aurors are doing the most important job in the world.”

He was writing a report in the most desultory way possible. Occasionally he yawned or smiled at the parchment for no reason.

“So it was meant to be - a knight killing dragons for his lady, that sort of thing,” Harry said because he had to say something.

“More like a dragon killing dragons for his lady,” Malfoy said. “But it - well, it seems to have worked.” He smiled at the parchment some more. “By the way,” he added sternly. “That wasn’t a joke about my name. I don’t make jokes about my name.”

“Isn’t it a little awkward,” Harry began, and then stopped.

They never talked about those times, by silent agreement. They never talked about Dumbledore’s death or the white, raised scar on Malfoy’s chest Harry had seen a few times in the locker room after sparring. So Harry didn’t see how he could say, isn’t it a little awkward that your new girlfriend once spent months in the hospital because of you?

Malfoy’s voice was cold. “Isn’t what a little awkward?”

“Um,” Harry said. “Nothing.” He fought not to seem ungracious. “She’s nice,” he said. “Katie.”

Malfoy was instantly smiling again. “I think so.”

*

Harry went up to the bar while Malfoy found them a table and ordered two beers. He was looking around in his wallet for Muggle money when a man at the bar said: “I’ve got it.”

Harry glanced up just as another man said: “No, *I*’ve got it.”

“Um,” Harry said, looking between the two men, who were glaring at each other. “No,” he said doubtfully. “I’ve got it. Thanks, though.”

He gave the bartender the money.

“That’s two beers,” the guy said, sliding them over to Harry. “And my phone number.”

Harry looked up from the drinks to the bartender, and saw him wink.

“Thank you,” he said carefully. “Er. Bye.”

He gathered up drinks and change, and was heading towards Malfoy when he was brought up short by the sudden advent of a chest vaguely reminiscent of a wall, and covered in black leather.

Harry looked up at a glinting nose ring, and noted that either the leather scene was starting up early this Wednesday, or someone had walked into a bar intent on picking a fight. If he wanted one, he could have one. Harry glanced around for a place to put his drinks.

"I have something to say," growled the guy.

Harry saw some people coming towards them. Obviously, this was a regular troublemaker. Well, if he had to spill the drinks he had to spill the drinks.

The man put a hand on his shoulder. Harry steeled himself.

"The world is changed because you are made of ivory and jet," breathed the massive biker. "The curve of your lips rewrote history."

Harry clutched the beers like a chastity belt.

"Right," he said. "Well. I have to go... over there. Now."

He went as fast as he could, and did not look back to see if anybody, massive bikers or otherwise, was checking him out. When he approached the table, he saw that Malfoy was tilted back in his chair, smiling winningly up into the face of some strange guy, who was murmuring something at him.

Harry thought this was the outside of enough.

Malfoy beamed charmingly up at the total stranger. "No I'm not his boyfriend," he answered. "Yes actually he *is* available. I'd be delighted to take your number and give it to him. Got a pen? Thank you."

He started to scribble and Harry flattened himself against the wall so the man would not turn around and see him, but the man seemed more interested in murmuring to Malfoy.

"Um, what does he like?" Malfoy said. "Er. Sports, for choice, and cups of tea, and really horrible jumpers. I don't really know about whips - but, well, actually-" Malfoy made an expansive gesture. "Why not? I'm sure he'll come to love them. Nice talking to you."

Harry slipped into his chair once the man was safely off. "What is the matter with you?" he hissed. "Also don't flirt in gay bars, Malfoy, God."

"Oh, I was not," Malfoy said easily. "So this man was called Frederick." He reached over and tucked a coaster into Harry's shirt pocket. "He seemed nice," he added absently, breath against Harry's cheek. "He likes long walks in the rain, and dogs. You like dogs, right? It's a perfect match."

He leaned back in his chair and looked expectant. Harry covered his face with his hand.

"I hate you," he mumbled.

"While you were at the bar chatting up bikers," Malfoy said.

“I was not!”

“Whatever,” Malfoy said. “I have come up with not one, not two, but, wait for it, three brilliant schemes to take advantage of this whole Veela business.”

“You,” Harry said earnestly, “are just basically not a good person.”

Malfoy waved this away. “One,” he said. “You could be the next Mrs Zabini. Marry lots of rich men and then, um. Well, you could marry lots of rich criminals, and then killing them would be all right, now wouldn’t it?”

“No,” Harry said. “Shacklebolt already had that talk with us. Besides, I won’t do it.”

“But we are living in a material world,” Malfoy said, his eyes wide. “And you are a material - well, boy.”

“Stop learning Muggle songs by heart,” Harry commanded him hopelessly.

“All right, two,” Malfoy said. “You use your powers to fight crime. In a hostage situation, you could just stroll into the building, perhaps twirling a piece of hair around your finger, and all the criminals will simply give up and pursue a life of virtue in hopes of winning your heart. Hey, you could be a sex vigilante!”

“I could have gone my whole life without hearing the words ‘sex vigilante’,” Harry said pathetically. “I would’ve been happy.”

“Fine, *three*,” Malfoy said, narrowing his eyes as if Harry was spoiling all his fun. “I realise you may not want to commit to any wealthy criminals, or to the dangerous life of a vigilante, which anyway would involve a costume. Which might be a little embarrassing. So I have another scheme, which involves no commitment at all, and coincidentally solves your current problem, and puts us both in a position to retire before we are twenty-four.”

Harry waited in dread.

“I will use my considerable inheritance to build a - how did Slughorn put it - a sweet sugar palace of carnality,” Malfoy proceeded. “And then you can choose - it’ll be totally up to you - a select number of wealthy men, who will then be asked to start the bidding at-”

“Stop, in the name of all things holy,” said Harry. “I beg you.”

“I think we could retire off the proceeds from Slughorn alone,” Malfoy proposed. He caught Harry’s eye, torn between amusement and horror, and smiled wickedly. “Come on,” he said. “I’ve got the money. You’ve got the honey. Let’s cut a deal. Let’s make a plan.”

Harry gave up and smiled back. “You listen to some horrifying songs.”

“Um,” said the bartender, and Harry looked up.

The man was carrying a tray loaded with drinks. There were at least seventeen of them. Harry

wondered if this was some kind of joke.

The bartender started laying out the drinks before Harry.

“This one’s from the guy in the green jumper to the left of the bar,” he said, as one reciting a lesson he had been forced to learn by heart. “This one’s from the biker. This one’s from the girl in the corner booth with, she wants you to know, a tongue piercing.”

Harry looked over at the corner booth, and saw a woman with a shaved head and wearing a flannel shirt and Doc Martens. When she saw him looking, she waved and blushed.

“My God,” Harry said faintly.

Malfoy threw back his head and laughed and laughed.

By the time he was done laughing, the bartender had departed. Malfoy began to gather some of the drinks towards himself, still smiling, as Harry looked around and felt like a hunted man.

“I love you being a Veela,” Malfoy informed him, starting on his second drink. “I see no possible way in which this can go wrong.”

Chapter Two

“This is a stake-out,” Harry said. “Put that book away because it’s your duty. And because it kind of makes me want to cry.”

“It is my duty to read this book,” Malfoy announced virtuously. “I am your partner. Your danger is my danger, your case is my case, and your crazy Veela charms are my crazy Veela charms. Except technically not, which is such a shame, because I would put them to good use.”

With that, he returned to the awful book he’d found in the Unspeakable library. It had a picture Harry found very distressing on the front, and it was called *Virgins and Vixens: A Veracious Version of the Vicissitudes of the Veela*.

Harry returned to staring over his dashboard at the house occupied by Halperin, Dixon’s silent partner, the man who they suspected of making the plan that had got four goblin children killed. In four hours, they had gathered the important evidence that he recycled.

Malfoy had gathered some other things, but none of them were relevant to the case and all of them upset Harry on many levels.

At this point Malfoy gave another delighted cackle, and Harry braced himself.

“Potter, look,” he said, flashing a brilliant and evil smile, and he showed Harry the picture.

After a moment Harry shut his eyes, because it was shut his eyes or go blind.

“It’s the ceremonial nightgown of the Veela,” Malfoy told him in hushed tones, as if he did not want to scare his own unholy glee away. “All Veela have to wear it on their wedding nights.”

“Not going to be an issue,” Harry said between clenched teeth.

“I like the organdie,” Malfoy observed, still in those hushed tones, and then he laid his face down on the book and laughed and laughed. He emerged from the book wielding a pencil, and made a mark beside the horrible picture. “That’s your Christmas present sorted out, then.”

“I think this is an appropriate time to mention that I am actually licensed to kill,” Harry said.

It turned out that since ninety per cent of Veela were female, their traditions tended on the feminine side. With the organdie.

Malfoy hummed happily to himself as he turned the pages.

“So,” he said after a bit. “Let’s talk about this monster in your chest.”

“Let’s not.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Malfoy said. “Since Slughorn was the man who discovered it, I’ve decided to name it Horace.”

In the darkness, illuminated by a single far-off lamp post, Malfoy’s eyes gleamed manically. Harry waited in dread for what was to come.

“And since Horace is a civilian in the line of fire, I feel he should get compensation for the risks he has to run, living in an Auror’s chest. Since you’ve been an Auror for three years, Horace is actually owed quite a lot of back pay.”

“Have you been sniffing stuff in the evidence locker again?” Harry inquired.

“Horace is going to be a monster of means,” Malfoy said.

“As my partner, I feel you should know I’m out in the dark with a maniac,” Harry said. “Help. Help.”

Malfoy laughed and returned to his book, upon which he laughed some more. “Wait until you hear about the ritual dances!”

“Really, I’m all right with never knowing. Really.”

“They are celebrations of *beauty* and *sensuality*,” Malfoy drawled, infusing both words with as much deep amusement as he could muster. Then he made a sort of arm gesture which indicated that celebrations of beauty and sensuality greatly resembled the dance to Walk Like An Egyptian.

“Please stop,” Harry said.

“Well,” Malfoy said. “Maybe I wouldn’t have to impart useful and educational knowledge on the unworthy if I could drive once in a while.”

“I let you drive once,” Harry pointed out. “Against the orders of my boss and the urgent advice of half the department. You drove into a high rise building. We had to Obliviate over a hundred people. I drove better than you when I was *twelve*.”

“Filthy Muggle things, cars,” Malfoy muttered.

“We only got another car because Ron’s my best mate.”

“You only got special treatment because you were using your connections?” Malfoy said. “But that is so unlike you, Potter! I am deeply, deeply shocked.”

Harry hit the back of his head. Malfoy raised his eyebrows and returned to the book. He kept smirking meaningfully, which somehow conjured pictures even more appalling than the one of the ceremonial wedding nightgown.

He looked at the deserted, darkened back garden, and tried to think about the car instead. He liked the car, actually. It was better than the one Malfoy had crashed into the building. Ron had let him pick and then charged as if it was a standard Auror car. Ron did pretty well with

the standing Auror order.

It wasn't what they had pictured going into Auror training camp, but as the only flying car salesman in the world, Ron was one of the richest wizards in England, so it had worked out OK for him.

Harry supposed Ron had liked that Ford Anglia a lot, especially after it had saved them from giant spiders, but Harry hadn't thought it would actually rule Ron's destiny.

Still, richest wizard in England, and Harry got discount cars.

Malfoy yawned and stretched like a cat. "I hate stakeouts," he complained. "I'm tired."

"Malfoy, it's ten thirty."

Malfoy snapped his book shut and placed it carefully on the floor of the car. Then he curled up in his car seat and rested his head against Harry's shoulder.

Malfoy seemed to store sleep like a camel stored water. He required a mad amount of it most of the time, and then he pulled his crazy all-nighters when they needed him to come up with something really good, and it seemed to sort itself out. Of course, if they had one of those nightmare cases that meant nobody had enough sleep and they were all stumbling around in a daze, around day three Malfoy went all ashen and got his Old-Fashioned Romance Heroine With Wasting Disease look.

Hermione said he was highly strung and it was probably due to the inbreeding.

"I haven't been sleeping well lately," Malfoy said crossly. "I miss Katie. What kind of people need an archivist in Germany, don't they have their own archivists, why do they have to nick mine?"

His voice was running together a bit, low and lazy. Malfoy always talked himself to sleep.

Harry kept his voice calm and low as well, so as not to disturb him. "What if we are surprised by desperate criminals and killed?"

"On the Chosen One's watch?" Malfoy said. "That'd be really embarrassing, that would. The media would have a field day. Wake me if there are desperate criminals, or when it's time for pastries."

After a while Malfoy's breathing evened out, and he became a warm relaxed weight against Harry's side. He began to make a soft cooing noise in his sleep.

It was the same bloody absurd sound he always made. Harry hadn't thought much about it, besides feeling obliged to tease Malfoy about it now and then. Once the Aurors' office had been under siege, though, and they had all been trapped in there for four days. Malfoy had worked flat out for two and then fallen asleep abruptly by his desk. He'd started to coo, and Katie, with circles under her eyes, had knelt down and kissed him into silent sleep.

She'd looked up and seen Harry watching, and given him a rueful smile.

“It’s the only thing that keeps him quiet,” she said, and then laid down beside Malfoy. Even sleeping, he’d slid his arm around her.

Malfoy cooed, sighed and shifted in his sleep. Harry reached out and cupped the back of his head, holding him steady, but did not look at him. He looked over the dashboard and across the darkened garden, towards a window with the curtains closed and a low light on. Someone was home, and safe and warm. Harry didn’t think they were coming out anytime soon.

*

He’d never thought that Malfoy and Katie Bell would last.

After the night of the ball almost three years ago, they had been an official item and a topic of much interested conversation in the break room, especially since about the only time Malfoy did not get coffee was at his coffee break.

In his coffee break he went and found Katie, and spent fifteen minutes kissing her slowly in some secluded corner until she broke away and went back to work. Harry found them twice in the archives room, and once behind the door of the office supplies cabinet.

Katie said that kissing in the office was forbidden after Shacklebolt had a word with her.

He had a word with Malfoy, too. “Do you realise that you have other duties besides swilling all the coffee and romancing Miss Bell, Mr Malfoy?”

“No, do I?” Malfoy said, and smiled lazily with his swollen mouth. “Do I have to do actual work? You’re supposed to be my partner, Potter,” he added in a reproachful aside. “Shame on you for not telling me.”

Katie had obeyed the boss’ orders, however, and soon after everyone was complaining because the coffee was always running out.

They were just - odd together, that was all. When Malfoy was with her he was gentle and considerate, and it seemed incongruous, as if he was a lynx trying very hard to pass for a housecat.

Harry hadn’t thought they would last, and they had. He’d thought that Ron and Hermione would last forever, and they had fallen apart.

Harry and Ron had still been living together then, even though that got a bit more strained every time Ron went in for Auror training and flunked out. He’d done it three times.

Things got a lot more strained between Ron and Hermione when Ron said that he wasn’t going in for it again.

Things had been strained between Ron and Hermione for a while before that, Harry could admit now. At the time, he’d done a lot of coughing and looking away and starting bright conversations about the Chudley Cannons.

He couldn't ignore it when the screaming was echoing around the flat, and Ron had started to shout back.

"I do not understand, Ron," Hermione said thinly but very loudly. "Please explain to me. Why are you doing this? What are you going to do with your life? Do you have absolutely no ambition?"

Ron yelled: "D'you know what, Hermione? I don't want to spend my life with someone who can't stop acting like she's my *Mum*!"

Hermione had hesitated, and Harry had seen real hurt before she started screaming again, hurt that meant what was happening was serious, and what was said tonight would not be forgotten. Harry had bolted from the flat. It was raining, he recalled, raining hard on an April night two-and-a-half years ago.

He had gone to Malfoy, who had opened his door in socks, jeans and a half-unbuttoned shirt, and said: "In the middle of the night? They're slave-drivers," and then looked a bit more closely at Harry and said: "It's kids again, isn't it? You always look like this when it's kids."

Harry, dripping wet and breathing hard, had realised that he'd gone running to Malfoy.

Malfoy made things right. The first time they had worked on a case with murdered children together, they'd found the man who had killed them, and Harry had hit him, and hit him, and then he'd stopped and realised that he'd done it again and he was out of the Aurors this time for certain.

At that point Malfoy had Stunned him. He'd woken up in St Mungo's and found Malfoy staring at a no-smoking sign as if it was tempting him to start.

"What," he began.

"Ah, you're awake," Malfoy said. "Good job on subduing that man desperate to escape. Shame he sustained so many injuries, but they say he'll be all right."

"But that's not what-"

"Now, Potter," Malfoy said. "I'm sure the man would remember if events had transpired any other way. After all, it's not like someone cast Obliviate on him, now is it?"

"You didn't," Harry breathed, and then tried to rise from the bed. "I wouldn't," he began. "I wouldn't ever do anything like cast Obliviate on a prisoner-"

"Well, I wouldn't do anything like hit him!" Malfoy snapped. "Let's keep our voices down about being unique lawbreaking snowflakes, shall we?"

After that, Harry had to control himself, because if he didn't he knew Malfoy would fix things and do something terrible in the process. Somehow it worked better than knowing there would be disastrous consequences.

Somehow it made him feel better about the whole mess.

He'd got used to Malfoy being there when things got bad, but that was because things got bad at work. Malfoy was around at work: this wasn't work. What this was, was stupid.

Harry dripped on Malfoy's welcome mat and said: "I'm sorry. I'll go. It's not - it's nothing."

Malfoy gave him his narrow-eyed glare of judging someone and finding them stupid. "It looks like nothing," he drawled. "When you go off and die of despair in a gutter, it'll be such fun to tell Shackbolt that I was the last one to see you alive, and you were all wet and looked like hell, but you said it was nothing so I let you run along and I do hope he doesn't think any less of my trained investigative abilities. Come in, you imbecile."

He pulled Harry in by his wet t-shirt, and then ordered him into the bathroom to change into some dry clothes of Malfoy's. They were more or less the same size.

When Harry came out, Malfoy shoved a cup of tea into his hands. Harry took a sip and it went down, scorching his throat. He coughed frantically.

"Sorry," he said. "I think someone slipped a spot of tea in my Firewhisky. I don't know how it happened."

"You were raised by Muggles, weren't you?" Malfoy demanded, and on Harry's cautious nod he said: "Good. Come here and show me how to set up my television."

It wasn't hard to do. Malfoy had apparently been foiled by the complications involved in taking a television out of its box and plugging a few things in.

When the picture jumped into vivid flickering life, Malfoy reached out and placed his hand against the screen.

"Success!" he said, glowing. "Victory! Tiny people in a box just for me!"

"You're welcome," Harry said, feeling steadier because of the stupid little task or the Firewhisky, he didn't know which. He looked around the flat, which he had only seen before in half darkness when he had to pull Malfoy out of bed and haul him to a case. It was big and white and expensive-looking. There were pictures on the wall which were not moving, and some shining, clearly-unused appliances on the low countertops. "Malfoy," he said. "Why did you buy the TV?"

"I like it," Malfoy said. "But if you are unsubtly referring to my décor, you blatantly obvious twerp, may I remind you that I have a Muggleborn girlfriend and I am trying to woo her with my soon to be complete mastery of Muggle machinery."

"Katie's Muggleborn?" Harry asked blankly.

"Weren't you on the same Quidditch team for six - oh, what a fool I am, I'm applying the normal people rules to you again," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "Yes, she's Muggleborn."

"How long have you known about that?" Harry asked.

“Four years,” Malfoy answered in a level voice.

“Ah,” said Harry.

There was a slightly awkward silence.

“Now that you’ve implicitly accused me of being prejudiced against the Muggleborn, which notion of course horrifies me right down to my Dark Mark, why don’t you tell me what has you all worked up?”

Harry looked up, and Malfoy looked mainly amused and a little carefully blank. He looked back down at his hands, twisted around a mug full of tea-diluted whisky.

He said in a low voice: “Ron and Hermione are splitting up. Er.” He started to speak faster. “Look, I know how that sounds. I mean, obviously it’s none of my business if they break up or not. Only they’ve been together for three years, I mean, since Voldemort - I thought they’d get married, and after I knew - about me, I mean. Well. I thought it would be a bit like a home, since I wasn’t going to - anyway. They’re my best friends. They’re sort of - my only friends, and it looks like they won’t want to be anywhere near each other, anytime soon, and - they’re all I’ve got.”

“Oh, Potter.” Malfoy’s voice was very kind: Harry looked up. “That’s because you’re obnoxious,” Malfoy explained gently, and Harry almost smiled.

He went on, haltingly. He blamed it on the Firewhisky.

He talked about Lupin, and how he’d been discovered as a spy and they’d all thought he was dead, and the horror of what should have been Harry’s seventh year at Hogwarts. Everything had just seemed so - well, Malfoy had been there sometimes, he knew what it had been like. And Zacharias Smith had tried it on and - Harry had let him. He’d put it down to adrenaline or despair or missing Ginny or anything, he’d used every excuse he’d been able to think of.

He’d said it wouldn’t happen again. Every time.

And while terrible realisation was dawning and he was trying to escape it but it just kept dawning, merciless light filling every corner of his mind, Ginny had shown up to surprise him, and seen them.

“I’d broken up with her!” Harry said defensively. “I mean, when I did it, I thought if I lived I’d go back to her, but we were broken up. I thought of it that way. She didn’t - she thought of us as still together. She thought I was being noble and it didn’t count or something, and then-” He swallowed.

“And then gingery wrath, I imagine,” Malfoy said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Yeah, there was a lot of that. And the Weasleys really - well, they had to be on Ginny’s side. She’s their daughter, and I’d - I was to blame. Ron, he forgave me after a bit, but the others - well, I used to see them on the holidays and things, stay with them, but I couldn’t anymore. Not with Ginny there. I didn’t - I haven’t tried. I haven’t seen them in two years.”

“And Smith?” Malfoy inquired. “I’m quite impressed with his sneakiness: I knew him a bit, back then. I never had a clue he even liked you.”

Harry tried to smile, but he felt it come out a little twisted. “He didn’t, I don’t think. We didn’t like each other.”

He’d tried to, after the whole mess occurred, for a bit. Even Ron hadn’t been talking to him for a while, and he’d been desperate.

Only people had been dying, and plans were frantically being made, and Zacharias would have a fit if he thought he was being left out or ignored. Like he was in some special circle now, but that was not how it was, there was no special circle, they were all just doing the best they could and Zacharias was still acting as if they were playing Quidditch or being invited to take tea with Professor Slughorn.

Harry thought now of the way Malfoy had given up on Quidditch and everything in their last year of school, taken a sharp step back as soon as he’d needed to and done what had to be done.

Of course, he had been working for the side of evil.

“He was - he was petty,” Harry said eventually.

“And you were obviously extremely non-judgemental,” Malfoy observed, who was one to talk about being judgemental.

“Anyway,” Harry said. “After a while, I couldn’t bear to be around him. And then Ron started talking to me again, and Voldemort was sorted out, and there was the Auror training camp, and I just thought that I could get on with things, and at least there’d always be Ron and Hermione.”

Malfoy took Harry’s mug away from him and went to the kitchen where he started pouring more Firewhisky.

“I’d rather have some tea,” Harry called out.

Malfoy poured a tiny drop of water from the kettle into both mugs. “See?” he said, sliding easily over the low counters. “Came from the kettle. So it’s tea.”

Harry took the false tea. “Malfoy, you don’t make any sense. And you never did, either.”

“I am too exalted for Gryffindors to comprehend, it’s true,” Malfoy agreed serenely. He looked down at his own false tea. He drank it down as if it was real tea, and then said, mouth travelling between a smile and a smirk: “Hey, are you secretly in love with Weasley?”

Harry choked. “No!”

“I was just checking,” Malfoy said. “Good. And you’re coming to my party.”

“What party?” Harry asked.

“My birthday party,” Malfoy said, lifting his eyes heavenward. “Next month. Debauchery, necessary. Presents, costly.”

“Er,” Harry said. “OK. Thanks.”

At that point Malfoy got distracted by the television, and pointed out many interesting things to Harry about how miraculous volume control and channel changes were. Harry kept drinking false tea and feeling, inch by inch, a little better.

At the time, he hadn’t known about Malfoy’s penchant for matchmaking.

*

The day after the stakeout, Harry came into the office trying to pretend to himself that he’d had more than four hours of sleep. He smiled at Lisa the receptionist as he went in, and heard a thump behind him as he went inside.

He presumed Lisa had dropped something.

Then he sat writing the official report on the Dixon case until Shacklebolt prowled by his desk.

“Where is Mr Malfoy?” he inquired.

“Sir, he’s out of the office collecting data on a case,” Harry said promptly.

“Strange how he always is, before ten o’clock in the morning.”

“Sir,” Harry said. “It’s in the Auror charter that an Auror must always be accounted for by his partner. And Malfoy always is. Sir.”

“Some days,” Shacklebolt said, his face an impassive blank, “I feel that I am slowly falling into the abyss.”

“Sir,” Harry said.

“Have you, ahem. Done anything about the matter we discussed yesterday?”

“I was on stakeout,” Harry pointed out.

Shacklebolt straightened up and gave a heavy sigh. “You will never know how much it hurts me to admit this,” he said, still in a flat monotone, “but you and Mr Malfoy are the best we have. We cannot have you working at less than maximum efficiency. So. Ahem.”

He took out a card and slid it onto Harry’s desk.

“Good morning, Mr Potter, I’ll want that report on my desk by the end of the day,” he said in a carrying voice, then nodded crisply at Harry and was gone.

Harry looked down at the card. It was black, with a pink drawing of some lingerie.

The card read: *Sinistra's Sinnen' Spot: Exotic Erotica, Naughty Nuns and Bootylicious Banshees*. Harry kind of shoved at it until it fell into the bin, trying with quiet horror not to think of Professor Sinistra, or indeed his boss and any bootylicious banshees.

"Hey there, handsome."

Harry glanced up and saw long legs and a soft-looking shirt with two buttons undone and a lazy smile, all adding up to someone lounging against his desk and peering at his report.

"Morning, Malfoy."

"I wasn't addressing you," Malfoy said. "I was speaking with Horace." He grinned. "Where's my coffee?"

"It's on your desk," Harry said. "And it's cold, because it's ten minutes to ten."

"I knew I could've had another ten minutes in bed," Malfoy remarked, and leaned down and swiped Harry's report from under his nose. "No, no, no, stupid, bad procedure, you can't say we did that-"

It was entirely forbidden to have another Auror tamper with your reports. Harry leaned back in his chair.

Malfoy sat down at his desk and started making corrections with his red ink, grabbing up his coffee with his left hand.

"Ugh, I can't drink this," he said, drinking it. "What are we doing today?"

"Well, this morning we have Cuthbert," Harry said, making a face.

Cuthbert was their trainee. It was a new feature of the Auror training camp, assigning the students to be taught by Aurors in the field and making the students hand in a report on the process.

Malfoy had been dodging it for two years, but doom had come upon them, and its name was Cuthbert. He was small, extremely earnest and wrote down everything they said.

"I hate Cuthbert," Malfoy said gloomily.

Cuthbert, coming up behind Malfoy, looked very hurt. Then he wrote it down. He had a little notebook that Harry was planning to drop into a toilet at the first opportunity.

"Morning, chaps!" said Cuthbert. "I'm excited to learn more about the process of combating injustice!"

"Go make me some coffee," Malfoy ordered.

Cuthbert trailed sadly away.

Malfoy handed Harry back his report. "Now do it again," he said. "And do it right."

"I don't see why you can't write it, since you know everything."

"Because that is what Hermione would have done, and it is Hermione's fault that you are barely capable of stringing coherent sentences together," Malfoy said sternly. "Anyway, I have my own report to do."

He pulled down some parchment from the tangled shipwreck of his desk, and started to write very quickly, looping flourishes obscuring some words completely.

"I was thinking," Harry said, writing his own report in a more leisurely way. "When Cuthbert gets back, we should take him to the sparring room. Teach him a few things."

Malfoy smirked his best smirk at his parchment.

"I do feel called to teach," he said. "The best part is the look on their little faces."

The sparring room mysteriously emptied soon after Malfoy and Harry went in, trailed by Cuthbert, who seemed to be taking notes on the corridors and the changing rooms as they went.

"We've done the drills in the camp, of course, but of course you two will be much more advanced," Cuthbert said happily. "We're only halfway through the rulebook."

Malfoy, in practise clothes and socks, padded around until he located his favourite blue mat. "The rulebook," he said distantly. "Yes. Shall we start?"

Harry grinned at him. "Let's."

They threw away their wands.

"Sometimes an Auror will find himself disarmed," Malfoy said to Cuthbert, who nodded enthusiastically. "At this point he will have to defend himself. One thing which is very important to remember is not to fight by the rulebook. The other person won't be."

Cuthbert looked deeply crestfallen. "But the rulebook is very-"

Malfoy prowled around Harry, watching for a weakness, and Harry stood still and let him do it. Stillness unnerved people, and it was easy to capitalise on fear.

It was harder to stay perfectly still with Malfoy's eyes travelling over him, slow and intent, but it was good practise. He controlled his breathing and did not move a muscle.

"Here is an interesting statistic, Cuthbert," Malfoy said. "Do you know that ninety per cent of all Aurors on record have been Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs?"

Cuthbert beamed. "Yes I did. I was in Hufflepuff, you know, and-"

“I never doubted it,” Malfoy remarked. “The thing is, this means that our superiors are from the ranks of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. We can’t start obeying all the rules, because then we’d start obeying all the orders, and then we would undoubtedly be killed.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Harry said. “It’s perfectly OK to obey the rules. I mean, most of the time. Now and then you have to do things on your own because - well, the others have misunderstood something, or there’s no time to tell them, or something, but most of the time it’s fine.”

He caught Malfoy a light blow on the jaw. Malfoy turned his head to absorb it, caught it and fainted in return: when Harry leaned back and away he punched him in the stomach. It was a nice move.

“What Potter is trying to conceal is the well-known fact that he’s never met a rule he hasn’t stamped on,” Malfoy remarked, drawing back a little. “Whereas I would be delighted to obey the rules if we only had some sensible leaders. Like Professor Snape, for instance.”

He said the name in the tone of one who, had he not chosen to be an Auror, might have opted to stand on street corners passing out pamphlets which said ‘Have You Accepted the Love of Professor Snape Into Your Hearts Today?’

“Were you a Slytherin, sir?” asked Cuthbert in a slightly appalled tone.

Malfoy cast him a scathing look. “I should hope that was obvious!”

Harry took advantage of Malfoy looking away to punch him twice in the body and then twist his shoulder around to throw him down. Malfoy hooked a leg around Harry’s ankle and Harry fell hard on his face.

He couldn’t stop for a moment or Malfoy would have his elbow in his back: he rolled and punched out, and got Malfoy in the throat.

Malfoy choked, and Harry grabbed him by his shirt and held him down. Malfoy said, his voice rasping slightly: “The reason that Aurors are all Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors is that becoming an Auror is suicidal and insane.”

“But sir, you’re an Auror,” said Cuthbert, much taken aback.

“Oh don’t bother me with stupid questions, Cuthbert, can’t you see I’m busy,” Malfoy snapped. He looked up at Harry, smiled sweetly and then reached up, pulled Harry’s glasses off and threw them with some violence against a wall. “It’s very important to take advantage of every weakness,” he called over to Cuthbert, and punched Harry in the mouth.

Now Malfoy was just a blur of wild blond hair and exertion-pink skin. Harry had to keep hold of him or the fight was lost. Not that it was hard to keep hold of Malfoy when Malfoy was punching him in the mouth, scientifically, four times. Harry hesitated when he tasted his own blood, and Malfoy wrenched out of Harry’s grip and rolled Harry so he landed hard on his back.

Malfoy lost no time in pinning Harry's arms over his head. Harry did have a weight advantage, since whenever a bad case hit Malfoy tried to live solely on sugar and caffeine, and that meant the weight and the muscle kept sliding down.

Harry waited his chance to use it. Malfoy was breathing hard, his hair a soft fall brushing Harry's face.

"Surrender," he suggested calmly into Harry's ear, and Harry felt the curve of Malfoy's mouth as he smiled.

Harry shifted his weight slightly. "Are you watching closely, Cuthbert?" he asked, and twisted violently, using more solid hips to get Malfoy slightly off balance and then throwing Malfoy over one hip, throwing him exactly right so Malfoy fell half off the mat and hit his head against the wood floor. Harry was on him in a second. "The thing is," Harry said conversationally, imprisoning one of Malfoy's wrists easily in one hand and wrestling Malfoy for the other, "most Aurors will hold back in the sparring room. It's natural not to want to hurt your partner too badly."

"Funny," Malfoy said breathlessly. "I never have a problem with that."

"That's a serious mistake," Harry informed Cuthbert. "If you don't give it everything you have, then an Auror could get a very nasty shock when he gets into a real fight. Holding back can get your partner killed."

Malfoy snarled something incoherent: Harry kept tight hold of the one wrist he had, pinned tight against Malfoy's chest, which was hard muscle under a soft, worn t-shirt. Malfoy's heart was hammering.

When Malfoy spoke, Harry could tell he was smirking. "If at all possible," he told Cuthbert, "you should surprise your opponent."

That was about when Harry realised what Malfoy was doing with his free hand, and he felt the spare wand, aimed and pressed against the centre of his own chest.

"Who left a spare wand in this t-shirt?" Malfoy asked. "Dear, dear. What an unfortunate turn of events for Mr Potter."

Cuthbert sounded extremely distressed. "Sir, this is supposed to be wandless combat, the rulebook is very clear--"

"What have I told you about the rulebook, Cuthbert?" Malfoy demanded. "You must try to listen."

"You must try not to talk so much," Harry told him. "It gives your opponent a chance to do this."

He let go of Malfoy's wrist, grabbed the wand in both hands and snapped it in two.

Malfoy sat up, shoved him off and punched him. "Potter!" he squawked. "Those are expensive!" He punched him again before Harry had time to let go of the broken wand ends,

and rolled away and to his feet. "Though he illustrates an important point," he added to Cuthbert. "Don't assume things about your partner. For instance, most men will try not to go for another man's more, ah, sensitive areas, but a woman will have no such compunction. A Muggle will instantly try to break a wizard's wand - and so, of course, will any truly ruthless bastards you have the misfortune to meet."

"That isn't true, Cuthbert," Harry said. "I'm the nice one."

Malfoy kicked out at Harry, but did not take into account that kicks simply were not as powerful without shoes on. Harry grabbed his leg and rose still holding it, despite Malfoy elbowing him in the throat.

He boxed Malfoy's ear and then caught him under the chin with the edge of his palm. When Malfoy stumbled back, he managed to catch him, turn him and lock an arm around Malfoy's throat.

He found his voice past the persistent impression that it had been knocked out of his own sore throat, and said: "Surrender?"

"I think it's quite clear I'm the nice one," Malfoy remarked. "Comparatively speaking. I surrender."

He leaned his head back against Harry's shoulder, breathing soft and tired-sounding. Harry looked affectionately down at his ruffled hair and kept his arm like an iron bar against Malfoy's larynx. Given any opportunity Malfoy would twist and bite, treacherous little weasel that he was.

"Surrender and don't attack from behind to prove that no matter what, you have to neutralise your opponent," Harry stipulated. "It's an important point, but we don't have all day."

"Oh, fine," Malfoy said sulkily.

Harry let him go, and Malfoy went over to fetch Harry's glasses and their wands. He murmured a repairing spell over the glasses before he could return them. When Harry could see, he saw Cuthbert looking as sad and betrayed as he usually did at the end of a lesson.

He and Malfoy used a few healing spells on each other, and then Malfoy tucked his wand into the band of his trousers and started pulling off his shirt.

"I hope you have learned something today, Cuthbert," he said in a muffled voice. "Another interesting fact about Aurors is that fifty per cent of them retire without the full complement of limbs."

He sighed tiredly, bunching up his t-shirt in his fist.

Malfoy still had all his limbs, but Harry'd been right: he'd shed weight again during the Dixon case and Harry could see his ribs. He hadn't lost any muscle off his shoulders, though.

He had fairly broad, strong shoulders. They were nice.

Harry had seen better, he reminded himself irritably.

“I need a shower,” Malfoy said. “This afternoon we get to go see Dixon sentenced to life in Azkaban, hurrah. I hope he cries. What was the end result of the points for the Dixon case?”

“Six to you, four to me,” Harry said.

“Points?” Cuthbert said. “That’s not in the rule-”

“Your monomania on the subject of the rulebook is very tiresome, Cuthbert,” Malfoy said, wheeling on him.

All the Aurors had scars. Harry didn’t mind it, because it made him feel rather less conspicuous. Malfoy had a burn scar on his left shoulder blade and a long, white line from a Muggle knife along his right side.

Then there was the twisted scar that started out as a light, almost invisible line on his throat, and ended up silver and knotted over his heart. But Malfoy had come into the Aurors with that scar.

“I could use a shower myself,” Harry conceded, and pulled off his own shirt.

He looked up to the sound of Cuthbert’s notebook falling on the ground, and saw Cuthbert advancing with a glazed look spreading over his face.

“What,” Harry said, and took a step back.

“Easy there,” Malfoy said, and grabbed Cuthbert by the collar of his robes. “Come back here, little molesting tiger, because being killed and having your body hidden by trained Aurors often offends. I think we’ll take our showers in another room, OK?”

“Right,” Harry said, feeling a bit shaken.

Malfoy frogmarched Cuthbert off, and Harry was upset when Cuthbert cast a yearning look over his shoulder. He went off to the other showers to wash himself clean.

He threw shirt and trousers over a bench, and was just stepping under the spray, shower door still open, when he heard a most alarming sound and looked up to see Auror Dawlish, a rather portly and elderly man, charging like a rhinoceros.

Harry gave a scream of horror and slammed the shower door shut. Auror Dawlish connected with a nasty crunching sound.

Harry realised that shutting the shower door had been a bad move when he saw, through clouded glass and steam, a wall of pink flesh start to gather.

Melodramatic thoughts started to rise to the front of Harry’s mind, like: I’m alone. They’re closing in. They’re all around me!

“Let us in, Harry,” murmured Auror Dawlish seductively.

“*Malfoy!*” Harry yelled at the top of his voice. “Malfoy, *help!*”

The others took up Dawlish’s words and began a terrible, hypnotic chant. “Let us in, Harry... Harry...”

“Malfoy, come quickly!”

A chorus of long moans started to come after every chanted repetition of his name.

“Yes, what - oh, my God.” Malfoy’s irritated drawl had never been such a beautiful relief.

“Malfoy,” Harry appealed, keeping his voice low so as not to incite anything. “Could you just. I really feel that right now, I need my trousers. Please.”

“Oh, my God, do you know who’s out here?” Malfoy asked, starting to sound very amused.

“Malfoy, I am *begging* you,” Harry said, and was very upset when another moan followed the word ‘begging.’ “Trousers!” he cried. “For the love of heaven!”

“You don’t need trousers, you idiot,” Malfoy said, and threw in Harry’s wand.

It landed with a clatter on the tiles of the shower. Harry seized it up in wet, shaking hands and Apparated back to his flat. The sound of moans and the blurred sight of flesh thankfully spun away, and Harry ran into his bedroom and found a pair of jeans.

Malfoy was wrong. He felt the very urgent desire to be fully clothed at once.

*

He’d moved into the flat he was living in now not long after the night when Ron and Hermione had broken up, and Malfoy had invited him to his birthday party. Ron had moved back home, and Harry had found a single bedroom place.

He still saw Ron and Hermione a lot, though separately at first. In fact, he took Ron with him to Malfoy’s birthday party. He’d been a bit nervous about a place crawling with Slytherins, and Ron was enthused about the idea of meeting some new girls.

Malfoy had rented out a pub for the occasion. It was packed with people by the time Ron and Harry got there, and they had to fight their way to the bar.

“I’m not looking for much,” Ron said. “Just, you know, someone easy-going, maybe, and maybe a fan of the Chudley Cannons. And maybe large breasts.”

The bartender gave Ron a shocked look and Ron’s ears went red.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said. “I didn’t mean that. I don’t know what I was thinking. Uh.”

He abandoned his beer and fled to the bathroom soon afterwards.

Harry looked around for Malfoy and saw him, dancing with Pansy Parkinson. He was twirling her and they were eye to eye, laughing, Malfoy's bright hair close to her black head. He recalled that they'd seemed like an item, back at school.

The dance ended and Malfoy led Pansy off the floor, swinging their linked hands. He leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then went off, like an arrow aimed for the bull's eye, cutting through the crowd to where Katie Bell stood waiting.

Pansy, in much the same fashion, went straight for the bar and the only seat empty, which was next to Harry.

She looked unhappy, and some vague sense of fellow feeling prompted Harry to say: "Buy you a drink?"

"Sweet Jesus, it's Harry Potter," she said. "Look, you're not my type."

"You're not my type either," Harry said. "What with the breasts, and everything. No offence meant."

He wondered if mentioning a woman's special places was an enormous social faux pas, but Pansy's robes sort of drew attention to them, which was why they had come to mind.

"Oh," said Pansy. "In that case, sure. Bacardi on the rocks."

Harry got it for her. She sat there stirring her drink for a while and then said: "So, the partners thing is going well? Draco doesn't talk about it much, so I assume it is."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Yeah, pretty well."

"This Katie works where you guys work, doesn't she?" Pansy said, looking at her drink.

"Yeah," Harry said again, and then after a pause: "I was - kind of surprised when they got together."

Pansy snorted. "Who can blame you." She stirred her drink. "He didn't fancy her at the start," she said suddenly. "How much do you know - about sixth year?"

"Everything," said Harry.

"Well, then. He just - when she got out of hospital, he was always hanging around her, looking - oh, he's a man and hopeless - all worried and helpless and trying to carry her books and things. Especially after some demented freak, I'm being polite and naming no names, carved him up and he had all the fellow feeling as well as the guilt. He was chasing her all around the place, and what else was she going to think? And I suppose he got used to the idea." Pansy crushed an ice cube rather viciously with her stirrer. "She felt sorry for him, I think, and tried to be friends. She was with him when the news about - his mother came. By the time I saw him again - after You-Know-Who - well, by then it was real. But if he hadn't been such an idiot in the first place..."

Pansy, her feelings given vent to, seemed to realise who she was talking to and smiled a

crimson, casual smile.

“Well, it’s all worked out, hasn’t it?” she drawled, rather reminding Harry of Malfoy. “He has her, and he’s wanted her for five years. And he has you, and he’s wanted you for ten years. Though in a rather different way, obviously.”

She laughed.

“Obviously,” said Harry.

“I’m going to touch up my face,” Pansy said. “If you see anyone touching my drink, eviscerate them. You like that, don’t you?”

Pansy was obviously not a girl who let things go easily, even if she seemed to be prepared to be friendly otherwise. She went off before Harry could respond either way.

Ron took her place a few minutes later.

“Someone’s been using Katie Bell’s neck as an all you can eat buffet,” he said. “D’you know who?”

“Malfoy,” Harry said, jerking his chin towards the dance floor. “They’re an item.”

A new song had started, with a whirling fast tempo. Katie couldn’t quite keep up with it, and she was trying to escape Malfoy’s hands, laughing, until Malfoy scooped her up and danced with her in his arms, his head curved down towards her.

“Oh,” said Ron. “That’s weird. I always thought Katie was so nice.”

Harry made a noncommittal sound.

“Plus, you know, not saying a word against Katie, but Malfoy was seeing Pansy Parkinson in fifth year, wasn’t he,” said Ron. “I always thought she was hot, in a Slytherin sort of way. Talking about breasts, did you ever notice the ones on her, they were huge, and you always got the impression she was kind of-”

“Ron shut up,” Harry said urgently from the corner of his mouth.

“Kind of what?” said Pansy from behind Ron.

Ron jumped like a shot hare. Red flooded his ears and then staged a hostile takeover on his face, drowning all his freckles in a relentless tide.

“I am,” Ron said. “I am really. I am so sorry. I didn’t know. I shouldn’t have. Ladies. Mum would-”

“You stole my seat, Weasley,” Pansy said. “And since you were also insulting me, you can buy me a drink.”

“Right,” Ron said. “Absolutely. As many as you want.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Pansy said. “You may have buried potential, Weasley. Deeply, deeply buried.”

She slipped into the seat Ron had hastily vacated for her, and Ron took one look at her cleavage and then looked very quickly away.

Then Malfoy, having somehow torn himself away from Katie Bell, popped up and Harry gave him his present. Duly thanking him, Malfoy slanted a horrified glance Ron and Pansy’s way. Ron, still very red about the ears, was saying something that was either going over well or going embarrassingly wrong, because Pansy was laughing.

“Oh, that’s horrible,” Malfoy said. “You brought Weasley here to steal our women? That’s - well, never mind. Come with me.”

He took Harry by the elbow and dragged him through the crowds to some particular destination he had in mind, which turned out to be a boy with fluffy golden hair, wearing glitter and eyeshadow. He turned at Malfoy’s call, and gave Harry a bit of a once-over.

Harry tried to edge behind Malfoy, but Malfoy kept a firm hold of his elbow and said superbly: “This is Malcolm Baddock.”

“Hi,” said Malcolm, batting his eyes. Mascara too, Harry saw.

“He likes boys,” Malfoy added happily.

“Really,” Harry said in a low voice. “How could you tell? Look, I don’t know what gave you the impression that I go for twelve year olds in glitter, but- ”

“He’s *eighteen*,” Malfoy said brightly. “That’s legal!”

“That’s legal,” Harry repeated. “Well, your brilliant arguments have convinced me.”

“I have to go be with my guests,” Malfoy said, scowling at Harry. “I’ll leave you two boys alone. Talk,” he said, and made a terrible face. “Or whatever!”

“Don’t leave me,” Harry said.

Malfoy walked backwards a few steps, beamed and then became lost in the crowd. The next time Harry saw him, he was dancing with Vincent Crabbe and laughing his head off. Harry looked around for Ron’s assistance, but Ron, that traitor, was absorbed by Pansy Parkinson’s conversation and cleavage.

“Soooo,” said Malcolm Baddock, smoking in what was clearly meant to be an alluring fashion in Harry’s direction. “Malfoy tells me that you like boys.”

“Malfoy is a dead man,” Harry said.

“I remember you in school,” Malcolm said. “You were all scowly and attractive then, too.”

“I don’t want to be rude,” Harry told him. “But stay away from me, all right?”

“Malfoy said you were going to be a challenge,” Malcolm remarked, rolling his eyes at Harry like a mad pony.

“Look,” Harry said desperately. “I mean, I know Malfoy was your prefect and everything, but really, that’s not the same as letting him be your - pimp or whatever, so-”

Malcolm gave him a long look. “Of course, you weren’t in Slytherin,” he said.

Harry spent the next couple of hours trying to talk to Ron, who was apologetically but firmly ignoring him, trying to talk to Malfoy, who divided his time between kissing Katie and informing Harry of all Malcolm Baddock’s good points, trying in desperation to talk to Gregory Goyle, which amazingly succeeded for a while until Crabbe came to collect him, and hiding from Malcolm Baddock.

Hiding from Malcolm in the men’s bathrooms had turned out to be a terrible mistake. Only Harry’s height and weight advantage had got him out of that one.

Another terrible mistake was staying when most people were going because Malfoy asked him to, apparently so Malfoy’s select group could stay and take tequila shots. Pansy had reached the stage where she was taking tequila shots off Ron’s wrist.

“I may quite possibly never forgive you for this, Potter,” said Malfoy, sitting on the floor with his arm around Katie. “Look, darling, it’s against all laws of God and man.”

“Shh,” said Katie. “I like Ron.”

“I am mad with jealousy,” Malfoy said easily, and kissed her again.

“I may quite possibly never forgive you for this, Malfoy,” Harry said grimly. Malcolm was lurking: his trained Auror senses told him so.

“I thought it would do you good to loosen up a little,” Malfoy said in a plaintive voice. He had another tequila, licking salt off his own wrist: tongue and pale skin gleamed for a brief wet moment, and then he tipped head and drink back, exposing his throat.

Harry had another tequila. Then another.

He still wasn’t as sloshed as Malfoy when they all tumbled out into the street. Malfoy had his arm looped around Katie’s shoulders, and was singing, soft and off-key, in her ear as she ducked her head and laughed at him.

“Harry, I’m going to - I’ll er, catch up with you, um, tomorrow or something, right,” Ron said, as Pansy Parkinson stood impatiently to one side.

“Are you waiting for my rash offer to expire,” she said. Harry noticed she was no longer wearing any lipstick.

“I’ll see you later,” said Ron, and ran.

Ron and Pansy were another thing Harry had never thought would last, and which had anyway.

“Miss Kitty, have you ever thought about running away and settling down?” Malfoy sang, and Katie laughed some more.

Crabbe and Goyle peeled off home, and then Harry found himself on a lamp-lit street at four in the morning, head spinning and a knot in his chest, with Malfoy and Katie and Malcolm Couldn’t Take A Hint Baddock. Malfoy was standing against a lamp post kissing Katie again, eyes closed, face golden and intent in the lamplight.

“You want to go home with me?” Harry demanded, wheeling on Malcolm.

Malcolm brightened. “Yes I do!”

“Fine,” said Harry.

The cigarettes turned out to be herbal: they tasted bitter in Malcolm’s mouth. Malcolm was small and not very athletic and after the fact Harry was a bit worried that he’d hurt him. Harry went without sleep altogether to have a long and punishingly cold shower.

At work the next day Malfoy, sharp edges rubbed away a bit by an atrocious hangover, saw something on Harry’s face and leaned against him, and said quietly: “Sorry. I honestly thought it was a good idea.” He looked at his rolled-down shirtsleeves, to his left arm. “Mind you, I think a lot of stupid things are good ideas at the time.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Harry said, and smiled tiredly at him.

He knew that Malfoy had meant it for the best. Malfoy, though he hid it well what with all his oceans of steely hatred whenever he thought you didn’t like him, was a soft touch as soon as he thought you did.

Still, even after the incident in the showers, Harry didn’t consider Shackbolt’s suggestion. He was aware that nothing would be worse than just trying to solve the problem, in as fast and brutal a way as possible.

*

Malfoy arrived in the flat soon after Harry was fully dressed and making himself a soothing cup of tea.

“This is more serious than I had supposed,” Malfoy said.

“No, really?”

“Dean Thomas was out there,” Malfoy said in an awed sort of way. “Dean Thomas hates you.”

Harry had been mystified when Dean spent all his time avoiding Harry in Auror training

camp and after at the office. Eventually he'd got Malfoy to take him out for a drink and see why. Malfoy had reported that since Harry had kissed Dean's ex-girlfriend in front of him and then smirked when Dean broke a glass in his hand, Dean had thought he was a complete git.

Apparently Malfoy had enthusiastically agreed, and they'd had several more drinks.

"Perhaps," Malfoy said thoughtfully, "Dean Thomas is the answer. After all, you did realise that you, ahem, fancied the female Weasley when you saw her locked in Thomas' manly arms. Considering everything, perhaps it is Dean Thomas you crave!"

"I do not," Harry snapped. "And don't say crave, ever again."

"All right," Malfoy said. "I suppose we need some ground rules. Apparently your naked Veela flesh is as catnip to the Aurors, so you should probably keep your kit on at all times. We don't want a riotous orgy in the office. People would talk."

"I cannot believe this is happening to me," Harry said.

"Maybe you should wear your Weasley jumpers at all times," Malfoy suggested. "I cannot believe that anyone could find anybody attractive wearing one of those things. If Fleur Delacour and the Patil twins all arrived at my door wearing shreds of one and nothing else, I would plead a headache. Yes, that's it, the Weasley jumpers. The Weasley wool is death to love!"

Harry put his head in his hands. Malfoy went over to the countertop and slid onto it, from which vantage point he put a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder.

"There, there," he said. "Dawlish won't get you. I am your partner, and I will solve this. Come on, it's time to go see Dixon sentenced. Won't hearing a man's despairing screams as he gets sent to Azkaban cheer you up? You know it will."

"I suppose," Harry said.

Once they were in the court room, Harry did feel a little better. They had drawn Marianne Frippplewhit as a judge, and word was she was severe. When Dixon was led out to the dock, Malfoy made a terrible face and then laughed.

No matter what madness was going on here, at least they had done that.

Then it was Harry's turn to make his report on Dixon's confession, and at one point the defendant turned to Dixon and said: "Did you say that?"

With slow, cold horror Harry saw the glazed look on Dixon's face.

He said, staring worshipfully: "I'd say anything he told me to."

"Objection, your honour!" rapped out the defendant. "My client has obviously been tampered with by enchantments or-" he squinted narrowly at Harry - "Veela charms," he said finally.

Judge Frippl whit pursed her mouth and gave Harry a once-over. Then she paused, and gave Harry a much more lingering and appreciative once-over.

Harry's mouth went dry with dread.

"I am determined to get to the bottom of this," Judge Frippl whit announced. "I shall take this young Auror into my chambers where I have whips, and question him thoroughly." She paused. "Did I say whips?" she asked. "I meant, ah. Papers."

Shacklebolt strode over to where they sat, leaned forward and spoke to Malfoy.

He said: "Get him out. Now. This case can go to Thomas and Louison."

They protested in one voice. "Sir, this is our case!"

"You are strangely mistaken," Shacklebolt snapped. "Now get him out of here."

Once Shacklebolt was out of court himself, he hauled them over the coals. Malfoy violently protested that it wasn't his fault.

"I have sex all the time!" he said, and on Shacklebolt's appalled look he added hastily: "Within the context of a loving, committed relationship. Sir."

"Mr Malfoy! What on earth gave you the impression that I care?"

Shacklebolt's voice was level as ever, and his face a blank mask, but he was pacing up and down the floor of his office. That little groove in the carpet had not been there on Harry's first day as an Auror. Sometimes he felt a bit guilty about that.

"Now, Mr Potter, it is clear which way your duty lies," said Shacklebolt. "To Sinistra's Sinning Spot."

"Beg pardon?" said Malfoy.

"Sir, I really do not feel I can do that," Harry said, and looked at the floor and shrivelled up and died inside a bit more.

"Mr Potter, I do not care what your tastes are, I assure you that Sinistra's Sinning Spot can cater to them. The management will even provide house elves on request." Shacklebolt paused and added: "You might want to ask for my favourite, Nasturtium."

There was an awful pause.

"Your favourite... house elf?" asked Malfoy, a man whose curiosity led him to mental images which other men feared to dwell on.

Shacklebolt fixed him with a level stare and said: "I don't think that's really any of your business, Mr Malfoy."

"Right, sir," said Malfoy. "Sorry, sir."

“You have to be a professional about this, Mr Potter.”

“Nasturtium will be,” Malfoy remarked, *sotto voce*.

“Sir, I really can’t,” Harry said. “I won’t. I refuse.”

“If you object so strongly to the ministrations of trained professionals whose service it is totally natural for the busy man of affairs to use,” Shacklebolt said, giving him a cold stare, “Do you not have any friends who - I believe the term is ‘booty Owls.’”

There was another horrified but strangely speculative pause.

“Er - no, sir,” Harry said. “Sorry, sir.”

“Sir,” Malfoy said. “I think perhaps there’s a way to counteract the, ah, powerful Veela allure of Mr Potter.” He got all the words out without laughing, but his mouth twisted on a smile and it was obviously a close thing. “If I could have a day.”

“This is going to be another lollipop sticks sea monster thing, isn’t it,” said Shacklebolt. There was something strangely hollow about his deep voice, like a sad kitten crying all alone in an echoing cave.

“Er - yes, sir,” said Malfoy. “Sorry, sir.”

“It was a bitter and shameful day for the Aurors when you passed the psychology tests, Mr Malfoy,” said Shacklebolt. “All right, both of you, out of my sight.”

They were going out when Shacklebolt lifted his head again.

“Mr Potter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“If you change your mind, do consider Nasturtium.”

They went out into the street feeling a little dazed.

“I now know at least eight things I never needed to know,” Malfoy said. “But on the bright side, I have enough gossip to make me king of the break room for a month.”

He headed for the nearest coffee shop like a salmon heading upriver. They were sitting down while Malfoy cooed over two cappuccinos when Harry asked him what his diabolical plan was.

“Well,” Malfoy said. “The thing is, I’m not entirely sure it will work.”

He reached into his pocket and touched the ring uneasily, like a good luck charm. It had been a hard day, and Harry lost patience.

“I know you have a ring in there,” he said.

“Oh,” Malfoy said. “You could’ve said. I would’ve asked you if you thought she’d like it before.”

He took it out. It was a small, plum velvet box, and the lid snapped open with a creak in his hands.

Inside was an elaborate silver ring, with a design of two snakes, one with its head in the other’s mouth, on top of which was a great glittering emerald.

“Um,” Harry said.

“It’s been in the family for generations,” Malfoy explained, a bit anxiously. “I had to get it altered, though. It was, er, originally designed to... bite the finger off anyone who was Muggleborn. More or less.”

“More or less,” Harry repeated.

“Sometimes it got a little carried away, apparently,” said Malfoy. “There’s a story about a woman who was concealing her Muggle heritage, and it sort of - jumped up and bit her in the eyeball. But the jeweller assures me it’s quite tame now.”

“Oh, good,” Harry said. “I, um-” It had been a long day, and he was tired, and Dixon might get off, and Malfoy was marrying Katie Bell. “It’s a lovely killer ring, Malfoy,” he said wearily. “You’ll be - really happy. I’m sure.”

“That sort of depends on her saying yes,” said Malfoy, and turned the ring so he could see it. He made a face, as if the snakes were sticking out their tongues at him.

“She’s mad about you,” Harry said. “She’ll say yes.”

Malfoy slipped the ring into his pocket, and smiled a slow sweet smile.

At that point the waitress, whose legs Malfoy had been admiring since they came in, threw herself into Harry’s lap and pressed her lips to his.

“Don’t marry him,” she breathed, and tried to slip him the tongue. “Have me.”

Harry shoved at her and they ended up tipping up the coffee table. Malfoy gave a heart cry when his coffees were upset into the woman’s lap. Harry stood and looked on helplessly as Malfoy helped the waitress to her feet.

“Sorry about that,” Malfoy said. “Excellent service you provide here. We will definitely leave a generous tip.”

He steered Harry out of the shop. Harry felt sort of numb with despair.

“It’s all right,” Malfoy told him. “I am your partner and I will solve this. I have a cunning plan. *Trust me.*”

Harry wanted to, he honestly did. It was just that he was perfectly aware of how all Malfoy's cunning plans had worked out at school.

He was really dreading tomorrow.

Chapter Three

The next day, Harry found himself coming into work at the same time as Dean Thomas. He looked at him in panic, because it was hard to talk to Thomas at the best of times since Thomas hated him, and today was even worse since the only conversational opener Harry could think of was ‘Molested anyone else in the showers lately?’

After Dean Thomas gave him a look of enormous embarrassment which seemed thankfully not tempered with crazed lust, Harry opened the door and a gust of warm peppermint scent wafted out to them. It smelled as if the Aurors’ headquarters had been busily brushing its teeth all night.

“Malfoy’s done something mad again, hasn’t he,” Thomas said in calm, fatalistic tones that brought to mind Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“Amazing investigative skills you have there,” Harry said, and took the steps two at a time. “Are you trained at all?”

At Lisa the receptionist’s desk sat Malfoy, calmly talking to Lisa’s installed fire. “Aurors’ head office, how may I help you?”

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Hold please,” Malfoy purred pleasantly into the fire, and looked up. “Good morning, sir!” he said to Harry, with a bright professional smile.

“What are you doing,” Harry repeated, though ‘what are you taking’ also occurred to him as a reasonable question.

Malfoy propped his chin on his linked hands. “Well,” he said. “Lisa needed to go for some odd Muggle thing called CAT scans, on account of falling down and sustaining all that repeated head trauma. So I offered to fill in for her, in order to make the transition to the new state of Veela emergency more smooth.”

“Veela em-”

“Emergency,” Malfoy supplied helpfully, and pointed to the enormous bucket on his desk. “Take a few peppermints, please. The peppermint buckets are positioned all over the building, no more than three yards apart. In case of immediate and pressing sexual urges, please get to your nearest peppermint bucket as quickly as possible.”

Malfoy looked tired. He’d pulled another of his all-nighters, and here was the lunatic scheme to prove it.

Dean Thomas had caught up with Harry, and he was currently looking around, taking in the peppermint bucket and Malfoy dealing with a customer’s complaints.

“I am so sorry about Mr Malfoy,” Malfoy said. “Sometimes his professional manner can be inappropriate, I agree. But then he’s so dashing. I assure you he’ll be suitably disciplined.”

“Making a note of that for Shacklebolt, are you?” Harry inquired.

“Shacklebolt’s a busy man,” Malfoy said. “I can’t bore him with every little triviality that comes up. Good morning, Mr Thomas. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

Dean was starting to look highly amused. He and Malfoy got on very well, even though insulting Harry seemed to be their only common interest.

“Lovely,” he said, grinning. “I always like to see pretty blond receptionists about the place.”

If it wasn’t for the fact Harry was fully aware that Dean, a man who played a long game, was in regular correspondence with and sometimes visited Ginny in France, he might’ve put this and the shower incident together and come up with some dark suspicions.

Malfoy batted his eyelashes. “Oh sir, don’t. It’s as much as my job’s worth to flirt with the Aurors.”

Dean grinned again, and took some peppermints. Then he opened the door to the headquarters proper.

Peppermint buckets gleamed at regular intervals along the carpet. There was an enormous peppermint, hung up on a hook on the wall, and a sign above it reading ‘IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES, THROW TO VICTIM OF VEELA. DO NOT APPROACH THE VEELA.’

Hanging on the ceiling were peppermints in bunches of little bags, swaying in the air conditioner.

Harry said weakly, “I love what you’ve done with the place.”

Malfoy looked very pleased with himself. “Think of the peppermint as the anti mistletoe,” he suggested.

Dean Thomas looked a little scared as he ventured into the palace of peppermint, and once he was gone Malfoy turned sternly on Harry.

“Let me see what you’re wearing,” he said. “Oh good, the orange Weasley jumper. Oh my God, you look like you ate a ginger cat and then vomited on yourself, it’s wonderful. I can’t imagine anyone but a necrophiliac into bestiality would find you attractive.”

“Thank you, Malfoy,” Harry said. “That means a lot.”

“Put this on just in case,” said Malfoy, and slipped something over his head that seemed to be another bag of peppermint on a string. Harry bowed his head and let him, like a horse going into harness.

“Of course,” Shacklebolt said later, crunching a peppermint, “while Mr Malfoy’s sterling efforts are appreciated, this can only be a stopgap. Sooner or later we will have to think about putting you on compassionate leave, and perhaps finding Mr Malfoy a different partner.”

Malfoy, sitting in the chair beside Harry even though he hadn't technically been invited into the office, let his eyes narrow in their boss' direction.

"I don't want another partner," he said in his coldest voice. "This isn't up for debate. I will not have another partner."

*

He kissed Malfoy once, but since Malfoy doesn't know about it, it probably doesn't count.

Harry used to get angry at Malfoy. Well, he still does get angry at Malfoy, for a lot of reasons, like all that perjury and slacking off and making racist comments to the press and cuffing Harry to his desk that one time.

It was just that - Malfoy wasn't even all that good-looking. He *knew* that. Malfoy had a long nose and he was too skinny half the time and, what with the pale hair and the pale eyes and the pale skin, he looked washed-out. He was snotty and immoral and Harry felt infiltrated, Harry felt invaded: it wasn't fair.

Nothing ever beat Harry, not in the end, and certainly not Draco Malfoy. Malfoy hadn't ever managed it at school, and he wasn't even trying now.

It was stupid, and it had to stop, and a year after Shackbolt paired them together, he let Harry know he was no longer on probation and he could choose a different partner if he so wished.

"Though I'm assuming-" Shackbolt said, when Harry interrupted him.

"I do," he said. "I want another partner."

Shackbolt laid down his quill. "May I ask who?"

"Anyone," Harry said. "Anyone but him."

Shackbolt looked impassive and masklike as ever, but in the depths of his eyes was a man sinking into madness. Harry's new partner, Clementine or Clarabell or whatever, was enormously in awe of Harry and flinched a bit if he moved too quickly. Malfoy's new partner Theophilus was urgently moving to have Malfoy put through the psychology tests again.

It was worth it, not to have to see Malfoy every day, all day.

By the third day Harry missed him brutally enough that he approached him during the first coffee break of the day, when everyone knew that interrupting Malfoy meant taking your life in your hands.

"Look," he said. "I mean, even though we're not - I didn't think we should go on working together, it doesn't mean I don't want to be-"

Malfoy turned around and looked at him with cold fury.

“Let me make one thing very clear,” he said, white-lipped. “We were never friends. I had to put up with you in order to keep my job but now, to my enormous relief, that is no longer the case. Thanks very much for that. And now never talk to me again.”

He wrenched his arm out of Harry’s grasp, stormed away and slammed the door behind him so hard that the sugar bowl fell off the sideboard and shattered into a dozen pieces.

That Friday night at the pub was bleak and horrible. Only Hermione was there, because Malfoy was at home with Katie Bell and hating him, and Vince and Greg were at home hating him, and Pansy was at home hating him, and Ron was at home because if he came out Pansy would follow him and murder Harry on his barstool.

“You hurt Malfoy’s feelings,” Hermione said, spearing the olive in her drink.

“No I didn’t,” Harry said flatly.

“Oh honestly, Harry, you obviously have,” Hermione told him. “You didn’t want to be friends with him in school. For which I do not blame you, since he was an extremely nasty little boy, but you didn’t want to be friends for years and years, and - looking at it from Malfoy’s point of view - you got all the glory and all the attention, you were the special one, and you went out of your way to show that you would rather be friends with anyone than be friends with him. And then you changed your mind.”

“I didn’t,” Harry muttered. “It was all Shacklebolt’s fault. He forced us to be partners.”

It was true, as well. Kingsley Shacklebolt had ruined his life, and he hoped that his boss got fired for unusual cruelty to his subordinates and ended up driving the Knight Bus.

“Did he force you to go to each other’s birthday parties and drag your friends down to the pub together on Friday nights and for us all to go watch things on Malfoy’s TV?” Hermione asked. “Harsh taskmaster, that Shacklebolt.”

It hadn’t exactly been that way. Harry had been forced to invite Malfoy to his birthday party, since Malfoy had invited Harry to his, but Harry only had so many friends and he’d never really got used to birthday parties and he’d thought Malfoy would feel awkward so he’d told Malfoy to invite anyone he liked.

Then Hermione had found out that Vince was dyslexic and made him her special project, and both Vince and Greg seemed to like her bossing them around because Malfoy had broken their spirits when they were six, or something. And Pansy and Ron were going out, which wasn’t Harry’s fault either.

Malfoy wanted them all around because Katie liked them, liked not being surrounded by Slytherins, and Malfoy liked not being stuck with Fred and Angelina as Katie’s particular friends. Fred hassled Malfoy whenever he got the chance, and Malfoy put up with it because Katie loved and looked up to Angelina. They’d all been at a dinner party one day, and Malfoy had been getting more and more close-mouthed and furious, until Harry caught one of those dinner rolls tossed so playfully at Malfoy’s head and took Fred outside and reminded Fred about how Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes had got their start and told Fred not to ever even look

funny at his partner again. Or else.

Well, it was all because Shackbolt had forced him to be Malfoy's partner anyway. It was his duty to look out for him.

Only it wasn't. Not anymore.

"Everything was going so well," Hermione said. "And then you said you'd rather have anyone for a partner but him."

"I wasn't - that's not what I - Hermione," Harry said. "*How did you know that?*"

"I am an Unspeakable," Hermione told him calmly. "We have ways of making you people talk. Malfoy knows you said it, too."

It was about then that Harry realised, no matter how frustrated and furious he got at Malfoy, no matter how much he resented him for never noticing and not caring and ruining Harry's life, the thought of hurting Malfoy made him feel sick and miserable.

"Ron is seeing Pansy Parkinson," Hermione said quietly, and then added from what seemed to be sheer force of habit: "Not that it will last, of course. I tutor Vincent every Tuesday and Gregory makes us pie. Malfoy is the only one of us who has a television. You are the one who wished a parcel of Slytherins on us, and now we're all attached!"

Harry sat staring mutely at his beer, and then Hermione reached out and closed her fingers over Harry's hand: the people around them probably thought they were a happy couple, out for a drink.

"You weren't - all right after the war," she went on, her voice still quiet. "I was worried about you. But being partners with Malfoy seemed to really work. You were doing so well, Harry. What were you were thinking? Why did you do this?"

Harry could not tell her it was self-preservation, pure and simple. He'd never told anyone about Malfoy. What would he have said?

It wasn't love. Harry had thought about that, in a vague unspecific way, once Zacharias and Ginny were both gone and the war was over and the hopelessness had sort of faded a bit. He'd thought about someone who liked sports and was good-looking and thought about things in the same way Harry did. Someone sensible and uncomplicated and good in bed, who had his head screwed on right and who let Harry get on with things.

That was the kind of person Harry should be with: that was the kind of person who would make him happy.

He was saving himself from a lot of misery, he told himself. It was for the best. He and Hermione had one desultory drink, and then a man in black drew Hermione away and Harry felt relieved because he could go back home and lie on the couch and think grimly about Clementine or Clarabell or whoever, the aching strained shoulder he'd got in his first case with her, the look on Malfoy's face in the break room, and he could congratulate himself on being saved from a lot of misery.

He had only just laid back on the couch when an owl tapped at his window. It was one of the Unspeakables' black-hooded birds. It was an Owl from Hermione.

It said: My sources have just informed me that Malfoy was badly hurt in a banshee fire a couple of hours ago. He's at St Mungo's and he will be all right. Don't do anything-

Harry did not read the rest, because he had dropped the Owl and Disapparated. He Apparated with a crack into the Aurors' office. Shacklebolt would question any Auror about letting their partner go down.

Sure enough, Theophilus was in Shacklebolt's office, looking totally unharmed and saying: "Sir, I'm sorry, but I really do think Malfoy's mentally unstable. I think possibly he's schizophrenic. The first thing he did was turn on me and tell me - in highly insulting terms, I might add - that I wasn't to go into the building. Of course I told him I had no intention of running into a banshee fire, and then he looked around - I think he hears *voices* - and then he swore, and then he went running into the fire himself. I couldn't stop him. He's completely unhinged-"

"I'll show you unhinged," Harry said. Then he spun Theophilus around with a hand on his shoulder, and punched him in the face.

Theophilus fell back so hard that his head cracked against the wall. He twitched and then made a visible decision to stay on the floor. Harry wheeled on Shacklebolt.

"Excellent practical demonstration, Mr Potter," Shacklebolt said in a level voice. "You are suspended from your duties for a week. And may I remind you that, saviour of the wizarding world or not, if you hit me you are fired."

Harry swore.

"You are driving me to early retirement," Shacklebolt proceeded. "Do not drive me to an early grave. Go to St Mungo's and leave me in peace, I have a weak heart."

"No you don't, sir," Harry said. "The Aurors require complete physical fitness-"

"I can feel it growing feebler by the instant," Shacklebolt assured him. "Now go."

He had gone, not because of Shacklebolt's order but because of the sudden thought of Malfoy, who he'd hurt and who had got hurt because he wasn't there, who he'd let down and who he could have lost. Harry Apparated without taking out his wand.

The crack of Apparition and pull at his stomach almost made him stumble into a wall: he couldn't think. He grabbed a scared-looking nurse and he demanded directions, and maybe he Apparated and maybe he ran, but he was suddenly in a darkened hospital room, and Malfoy was sleeping in a narrow hospital bed, and Harry leaned over the white hospital pillow and kissed his worn, pale face.

He was still leaning over the bed looking at Malfoy when the door opened, the light came on and he straightened up and stepped back. Katie Bell had her arms full of flowers.

“Harry, how good to see you,” she said. “He didn’t think so, but I was sure you’d come.”

He looked at Katie, obviously worried and tired, her brown hair coming out of her plait in wisps. He hadn’t always disliked her. He didn’t dislike her now: he distantly knew she was a nice person, a good person, but all he could think when he saw her was *Get out of my way*.

He stopped looking at Katie when Malfoy moved, eyes scrunching up in the sudden light.

“Is that my Katherine Bell?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m here,” Katie said, coming over to him and taking his hand. “Open your eyes: here’s a nice surprise for you.”

“I do hope you’re wearing a nurse’s uniform,” Malfoy said, and opened his eyes. His face went even whiter, turning the dark shadows under his eyes black by contrast. “I really would have preferred the nurse’s uniform,” he said. “Get out, Potter.”

Harry didn’t move, but he didn’t speak. He couldn’t figure out what to say.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed, cold and hateful like his voice when he spoke. “Have you become lost and confused while kind people were committing you to the psychiatric ward, Potter? Or let me see, have you come here to crawl and beg me to take you back, in which case my answer is-”

In a moment of great clarity, Harry recognised the curl of Malfoy’s mouth. He’d seen Malfoy look like that all the time in school. He looked like he was expecting to be interrupted, expecting to have scorn thrown at him and preparing to hurl back not only scorn but any malicious, horrible thing he could think of.

Harry fulfilled his expectations, and interrupted.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s it.”

Malfoy scowled up at him, looking as if he was in pain and now confused as well. “What’s it?”

Harry didn’t want to humble himself. He never did it and didn’t want to start now, but he had to remind himself that as far as Malfoy knew Harry had hurt him, deliberately and for no reason at all.

“I’ve come here to crawl,” he said, looking at the wall and not Malfoy’s face, which made his chest hurt. “And beg you to take me back.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said, his voice small and uncertain.

Harry looked down at him and he actually looked uncertain as well, face lifted to Harry’s, and Harry’s chest hurt some more. It was wretched.

“Only I can’t work for a week,” he said, remembering. “I punched Theophilus.”

“Harry, you did what?” Katie exclaimed.

“My darling, he is obviously a lunatic, do not be afraid, I will protect you,” Malfoy said, using the hand he held to draw her close to his bedside. “I only ask in return for your eternal devotion, and perhaps for you to get a nurse’s uniform. As for you, you crazy git, get out of my sickroom. You are clearly a danger to yourself and others, and I am obviously forced to accept the terrible post of your nursemaid only because I fear for Chrysanthemum’s safety.”

“Chrysanthemum, is that it,” Harry said. “I keep forgetting.”

“Harry,” Katie Bell said. “Chrysanthemum was in Gryffindor.”

“Right,” Harry said.

“Harry,” Katie continued, looking a little taken aback. “She was in your year.”

“Do us all a favour and drop by the psychiatric ward on your way out,” Malfoy said, smiling at him. “You’re a very sick man. I’ll see you in a week.”

*

That day at the office was distinctly horrible. People kept looking at him and then blushing and running in the opposite direction, or towards the peppermint buckets. Harry was not sure which was the most horrifying.

He took to writing his reports leaning against the receptionist desk. Malfoy let him do it if Harry brought him coffee.

“People are embarrassed,” Malfoy said easily. “I mean, people like Thomas or Dawlish, straight guys, they’re kind of horrified that their bodies have betrayed them. Dawlish is married, for God’s sake. They’re embarrassed and they’re scared, but—”

“Oh great,” Harry said.

“But they know it’s not your fault,” Malfoy continued. “It will be all right. Calm yourself, you’re probably communicating your feelings to Horace and upsetting him. He must feel unwanted. Anyway,” Malfoy said speculatively. “Maybe some of those people aren’t attracted to you. Maybe some of them took one look at your jumper and knew they were going to be sick, and they went to the buckets so they could be sure of minty fresh breath afterwards.”

“If all this drives me mad,” Harry said solemnly, “it will be a comfort to know I will always have you by my side. In the next cell, possibly.”

Malfoy made a rude gesture and went off to the bathroom. Harry went to make him more coffee as a bribe so he would not force Harry back to that huge terrible room where nobody would speak to or look at him.

He was stirring in the fourth sugar when the door opened, and he glanced over his shoulder

and saw Katie Bell.

His heart sank. She was back, then, and Malfoy would be a complete fool about it because he was so glad to see her, and God, Malfoy was going to ask her to marry him. They were going to get married.

“Hi,” said Harry, woodenly. “Just back?”

“I got back last night,” Katie said. “Draco wasn’t there, so I thought I’d come in today and surprise him.”

She was looking a little dazed. Harry wondered if she’d got in late, if she was maybe still tired from the flight. He hadn’t really let himself think about what a luxury it was, having her gone, because if he did then he would have started to think about planes crashing and German counts who might elope with Katie and anything, anything at all, if only she would stay gone. But here she was.

“He’ll be really pleased to see you,” Harry said flatly.

“What’s going on outside?” Katie asked, moving forward, her voice dazed and almost dreamy. “It looks so different - I’m sorry, Harry, I feel a little-”

Harry looked up, startled, and saw the dazed, dreamy blue of her eyes close up. He stepped away and his back slammed into the wall.

Katie looked at him uncomprehendingly, and whispered: “Were you always this beautiful?”

Harry stared at her in blank horror, and then Malfoy came up behind her, scooped her up and held her cradled safe against his chest.

“Welcome back, my Katherine Bell,” he said, his voice soothing. “Have a peppermint. I beg you.”

“But,” said Katie.

“Have a peppermint and come with me,” Malfoy continued, his voice still soothing. “This way. Perhaps to a nice cold shower.”

Katie looked yearningly over Malfoy’s shoulder as they went. Malfoy looked over his shoulder, too.

With a cool stare, he said: “This just stopped being funny.”

He left Harry standing there, the cup of coffee that was meant for Malfoy growing cold in his hand.

*

Christmas came not long after Harry’s disastrous attempt not to be partners anymore. He’d spent the last two Christmases with Lupin and Tonks, which was always kind of terrible.

Andromeda Tonks was always there, and always looked like she remembered Harry had killed her sister Bellatrix, and looked like she blamed Harry for Sirius' death as well, and avoided speaking to him much at all.

"I wish we could just work right through Christmas," he said gloomily, staring at his latest report on the Romantic Rogue who'd put Love Potion into the waters of Bath.

To his surprise, Malfoy frowned and said: "Yeah, I'm with you there."

"Aren't you," Harry said uncertainly. "With Katie's-"

"Katie's family hate me," Malfoy informed him. "They're all Muggles, and her brothers think I'm a freak and her mother once saw me hit the floor because of an electric mixer-"

"Constant vigilance," Harry said sagely, and Malfoy laughed and made a rude gesture.

"And her father's a little deaf, and he asked me what my father did, and I said: he's incarcerated, sir, and he thought I said in Chancery, and then I had to shout and say: no, incarcerated, in the clink, for trying to kill schoolchildren. And I have never been back since. Katie's trying to win them around, but it'll take more than three days. I plan to spend Christmas drunk because my family is dead, like any reasonable person would."

Harry wondered why Malfoy didn't ask Professor Snape, who was bound to be free, and who Malfoy had followed around like a scared puppy during the war, and then he realised that Malfoy would never dream of asking directly for something he wanted.

He put his quill down and said: "Can I join you?"

And Malfoy smiled.

Malfoy hadn't been joking about getting drunk. He was already a bit drunk when Harry arrived, and by the time they realised they were hungry and nobody was going to deliver at Christmas they were both too drunk to cook properly and made something that was a weird collection of toast and eggs and lasagne, and it tasted quite good. Malfoy insisted on watching Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* because he thought it was deep and moving. Then he fell asleep on Harry's shoulder, which was the same as most nights on stakeout, only different because there were no gear sticks in the way and Harry was drunk and the couch was soft, and Harry settled in the back of the couch and put his arm around Malfoy, a bit.

It wasn't a bad Christmas. For New Year's Harry forged Malfoy's handwriting - it wasn't hard, just a million loops and a joke in bad taste - and Owled Professor Snape. He spent New Year's at Lupin and Tonks, and he never knew exactly what Malfoy did but Andromeda was gracious and talked to him at length about her nephew and her daughter and the noble profession of the Aurors. And at about eleven, the Weasleys all poured into the house, Ron in the lead holding Pansy's hand.

"Well - Ginny's staying in France and Charlie flew over to keep her company, and we thought we'd come spend New Year's with - with you, Harry dear," said Mrs Weasley, and then kissed Harry's cheek as if the past three years had never happened.

She spent the rest of the night fussing over Harry and telling him she'd kept all his clippings. When midnight arrived, though, Mr Weasley took her hand, and Bill grabbed Fleur and Fred grabbed Angelina and Percy politely grabbed Penelope and Ron and Pansy grabbed each other.

George tried to grab Harry for a joke, and it took all Harry's elite Auror training to fend him off.

It looked like being a pretty good year since the Weasleys had forgiven him, but that showed how much Harry knew, because he came into work on the first day of the new year and Malfoy didn't show up at ten as he usually did, and Shacklebolt told him that Malfoy had compassionate leave because Lucius Malfoy had just been sentenced to death.

"We all knew it was coming, Mr Potter," said Shacklebolt. "The Ministry's determined to wipe out all of the Death Eaters this time. Mr Malfoy had to fight long and hard to make sure it was not the Kiss."

"I'll be out of the office today," Harry said.

"You surprise me," Shacklebolt told him, his voice entirely flat.

Harry remembered when they were all seventeen and trying to fight a war from the Black house, which he had shut up afterwards and never looked at again. He'd been - well, he and Zacharias had, a few times, Harry had been resolutely trying not to keep count, and as well as being constantly tired and hungry and going without sleep, Harry kept trying to deny a lot of things to himself and was in a state of almost perpetual fury.

He couldn't be, he kept telling himself. He would have known, and he pushed away all thought of thoughts he might've had. He would have *known*, and he looked at Ron a few times and the idea was bizarre and disgusting, and so there it was, he wasn't, it wasn't true, and he didn't have to think about it.

And still when he caught a glimpse of blond hair by firelight, he went straight into the room.

It hadn't occurred to him that it might be Malfoy. Malfoy wasn't around that much, and when he was he was usually in a group, that had started out as the Slytherins and come to be people from all the houses, and he was gesturing or talking and they were laughing, and sometimes Harry felt a tired impulse to join in because there was little enough to laugh about these days and he really would have liked to, but he couldn't and didn't want to really because he and Malfoy hated each other and they always would.

Zacharias was usually alone. Harry was sure it was Zacharias. He was thinking - Zacharias-related thoughts when he went in, and closed the door carefully behind him.

It was Malfoy, and he didn't look up because he was tipping a jar of eyeballs carefully into a bubbling Potion. The fire was warm on his pale skin and hair, glinting light making it clear that his pale lowered eyelashes were long, his cheekbones sharp, his mouth a mobile thoughtful shape that could resolve into a sneer or a smile at any moment.

Harry's back hit the door. It was just because he'd been thinking - it wasn't-

“I can’t talk right now,” Malfoy said, his voice clear and pleasant since he wasn’t talking to Harry, and then he did look up and ice immediately formed over the warm current of his voice. “Oh,” he said. “Let me rephrase. I can’t talk ever.”

“What are you even doing here, Malfoy?” Harry snapped.

“Making. A. Potion. It’s for Professor-”

“This is my house, you know,” Harry went on, blindly furious. “I don’t recall inviting you. Oh wait, you have to be here, don’t you, because you don’t have a home of your own. Your daddy’s in jail and your mummy’s on the run, and-”

At that point Malfoy threw his jar of eyeballs with extreme force. They hit the wall directly beside Harry’s head and shattered, the glass cutting Harry’s face, eyeballs rolling down Harry’s shoulder in a soft sickening fall. Malfoy stared at him, chest rising and falling sharply, face alight with the same blind bloody fury that Harry kept feeling, and then Harry saw on Malfoy’s face, about the same time as he recalled himself, the realisation that they were on the same side now, that this was a waste of time and energy and resources, that last time Malfoy had almost died and this time someone really might.

A sharp voice in Harry’s mind, the one that was good at rationalising everything to do with Zacharias, told Harry that anyway he shouldn’t touch Malfoy right now.

Harry swore and slammed out of the room, and then leaned against the door in the dark corridor with his eyes shut, telling himself there was nothing wrong even while he thought, that was *Malfoy*, and that he was disgusting, and was it going to be just anybody from now on, any *boy*, God, what was he going to *do*, and Hermione came down the corridor and asked him, in that terminally anxious voice she’d kept using during the war, what was wrong.

“Fight with Malfoy,” he said tersely.

She looked even more worried. “Oh, Harry,” she said. “I hope you didn’t say anything awful to him.”

He stared at her blankly, stunned into silence because it was just Malfoy, since when did Hermione care.

Hermione, her dark eyes unusually soft, explained in a hushed tone: “His mother just died.”

Harry was older now, and not at war and not in denial, and he and Malfoy were different. He could do better this time.

He Apparated into Malfoy’s flat and found Malfoy lying on the couch with his arm over his eyes.

Without looking, Malfoy said: “Potter. Fetch me a drink, and then leave.”

“I can’t leave,” Harry told him. “My partner’s out today, and I’ve got nothing to do. I’m at a loose end and I told Shacklebolt I’d be out of the office all day.”

Malfoy was silent for a heartbeat, and then he said: "Yes, but what about my drink?" and Harry went and got him one.

Malfoy drank the drink. Harry sat on the coffee table and looked at Malfoy and Malfoy lay there with his arm over his eyes. Eventually Harry went to get him another drink. Malfoy drank the drink.

Malfoy removed his arm from his eyes, looked at the ceiling, and said: "It doesn't seem fair. He wasn't even in the war. He was in Azkaban all the way through it. The last time I saw him was at Christmastime, when I was fifteen years old. The courts say he tried to kill Ginevra Weasley when I was twelve, but I don't know anything about that and I still had him for three years after that and it doesn't seem real, that he's being punished for that and for being in the Ministry for Magic when Bellatrix Lestrange killed Sirius Black. He didn't kill anyone. If he did, he killed them more than twenty years ago. I miss him. It doesn't seem fair. It makes me hate everybody."

He removed his eyes from the ceiling, and looked at Harry. His gaze was empty and bleak.

"I know it is fair," he said. "But I still hate everybody."

"That's OK," Harry said. "You can hate everybody if you like."

Malfoy laughed, a little bit, but he didn't sound happy about it. He was silent, they were both silent, as they waited for the clock to strike noon. The executions at Azkaban had been going on for years. They both knew what time the executions happened.

The chimes for twelve struck, and then stopped striking. The memory of the sound held them in silence.

Then Malfoy jumped up and began, methodically, with quiet blind rage, to destroy every picture in his flat.

"I hate these," he said conversationally, breaking a frame apart in his hands. His voice was calm except for the slight tremble which edged into violence, like the small tremble in his hands as he tore the canvas. "I hate them," he repeated. "They never move. They look *dead*!"

He threw another picture against the opposite wall. He did not stop until they were all thoroughly wrecked, and then he sat on the couch and put his head in his hands.

"I can't believe I did that," he said. "I'll have to fix them all. Katie can't know."

"Don't worry about it," Harry told him, and he got up and started to cast *Reparo* on them all, picking up the broken wood and torn canvas, arranging the shattered glass. He could help Malfoy this way, and this way he'd have seen this, and Katie wouldn't have: Katie didn't get to know.

It took a while. When he looked over at Malfoy, Malfoy still had his face in his hands.

"Thank you," Malfoy said, in a tired, muffled way.

“That’s all right,” Harry told him awkwardly, and he went over and sat on the coffee table again. He wasn’t sure what to do. Malfoy kept sitting there: his shoulders looked too thin, hunched like that.

After a bit, Harry reached out and put his hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. Malfoy looked up at the touch, looking startled, but Harry was never sure if it was the right thing or the wrong thing to do, because just then the door opened, Harry snatched his hand back and Katie Bell came into the room.

“They let me off work early,” she said, and came over and put her arms around Malfoy.

Malfoy laid his face in the curve of her neck, and said: “Hello, my Katherine Bell.”

“Hi,” Katie whispered. “Draco, I’ve been thinking. I will move in, if you still want me to.”

“I have to go,” said Harry.

*

Malfoy did not appear for the rest of the day. Harry sat alone by his desk while everybody made enormous circles around him lest they fall prey to his siren song, and he ate peppermints until his jaw ached and he wrote reports until his hand ached, and as soon as five o’clock came he went to Hermione’s house.

Hermione always knew what to do.

Unspeakables often worked from home, and Harry was unspeakably relieved when Hermione opened the door, ink-stained and looking intelligent and poised even in an enormous fluffy cardigan.

“Harry!” she said. “Come in.”

Of course she’d heard about the Veela charms, since Unspeakables knew everything. She’d also heard about the mass attack in the shower, and about the headquarters being decorated along a more peppermint scheme than usual. She’d even heard about Katie Bell.

“How do you know all this?” Harry asked tiredly, nursing a third cup of tea. “Do you have tiny invisible fairies in your employ who report everything everybody ever does and says?”

Hermione laughed, a bit too loudly. “No, Harry!” she exclaimed. “That’s just silly!” Her voice went cold and frightening for a moment when she asked: “Who told you that?”

Harry stared. “Nobody,” he answered. “It was a joke.”

“Ha ha,” Hermione said. “Obviously. I mean, how ridiculous! You won’t be repeating your silly joke to anyone, will you?”

Harry stared some more. “No, you’re all right.”

“Good!” Hermione said. “Good! Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes, your irresistible sexual wiles.”

“Katie Bell,” Harry said. “Of all people, the irony alone may kill me, and Malfoy’s going to be upset, maybe he’ll be jealous, God, I really can’t deal with that. I can’t deal with any of this. I don’t want it. What am I going to do, Hermione? How am I going to get rid of it?”

“Well,” Hermione said. “Let me think. They say that regular sexual intimacy should diminish the effect of the Veela charms, didn’t they?”

Harry wondered miserably if Hermione too was going to recommend Sinistra’s Sinnin’ Spot. He supposed she was a bit busy for a boyfriend these days, and then he had a mental image about Hermione and house elves and cursed the day he was born.

“If you think about it,” Hermione said, in her practical knowledgeable way, “Ron was always just the sidekick, wasn’t he?”

Harry blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“He was always just following in our lead,” Hermione said, her breath warm against Harry’s cheek.

Harry wondered when she had got out of her chair. He hadn’t thought he needed to be on his guard here, of all places. His shoulder blades tried to dig his way out of the back of his armchair, towards freedom.

“Oh God, Hermione, please,” he said, despair threatening to swallow him in a cold wave. “Not you.”

“You and I were the hero and heroine of the story, really,” Hermione whispered, her voice less practical now, her dark eyes alight. “We were meant for each other. It’s inevitable. It’s fate.”

“But Hermione, we have nothing in common,” Harry pointed out helplessly. “Also, I am gay.”

“You can’t fight destiny,” murmured Hermione, curls soft against his face as she leaned in to kiss him.

Harry wrenched off his peppermint necklace and shoved it in her mouth, and then held her shoulders and kept her back as he escaped. He was trained for extreme physical exertion: he was pretty sure he could outrun her.

Then he remembered that she knew where he lived, and he could not go home.

He went to a late-night shop with only one clerk, keeping his face averted, and took his time doing his grocery shopping. He felt lonely and wretched, and thought that Malfoy’s book had been grossly exaggerating when it described the life of a Veela as full of glamour.

*

Harry met Ritchie Coote again on his twenty-second birthday. He thought about it as meeting him again, even though Ritchie'd had to remind him that Ritchie had been in third year when Harry was in sixth.

"You were Quidditch captain and you picked me to be a Beater because I aimed well," Ritchie reminded him, beaming.

"Oh, sure," Harry said vaguely. He didn't remember much about Quidditch in sixth year: Malfoy had lost interest because he was evil, and Harry had lost interest because he'd had to prove Malfoy was evil, and Quidditch had more or less lost its savour. Besides, at try-outs Harry had been somewhat alarmed by the volume of shrieking girls on the pitch, and thus too occupied to really notice a new Beater.

He talked to Ritchie, though, because Ritchie was a sports journalist and thus assigned to write about the case of Oliver Wood's latest stalker. Harry usually tried to talk to the press, since otherwise Malfoy told them terrible lies because he thought it was really hilarious.

Malfoy, after extensive and absolutely unnecessary interviewing of the dancing girl mascots, joined them and mentioned in passing that it was Harry's birthday.

"Oh, let me buy you both a drink, then," Ritchie said instantly. "After all, this is more or less my first scoop, thanks to you guys."

"Well," Harry said.

"We'd love to," Malfoy interrupted. "Thank the kind gentleman, Potter."

Then, out of sheer absent-mindedness, they went into the gay bar near the Auror headquarters. Harry realised where they were when he sat down, the surroundings comforting and familiar, and looked at Ritchie with great apprehension.

Malfoy excused himself at once to go talk to the bartender, and Harry damned him to hell.

"So, um," Ritchie said. "Is it you, or Malfoy? Or both of you?"

"Not both of us," Harry said, since if he was clear on nothing else in the world, he was clear on that. "Me."

"Oh," said Ritchie, and then smiled. "Cool." He paused, and then added, going a bit red: "I had a terrible crush on you. When you were Quidditch captain."

"Oh," Harry said, somewhat bewildered.

He looked for Malfoy, who was leaning easily against the bar, laughing at something the bartender had said and looking like he had no intention of coming back any time soon. Harry began darkly to suspect that Malfoy had known exactly what he was doing when he steered them into this bar. Slytherins were untrustworthy and treacherous. He'd always known it.

Malfoy laughed again, looking sun-warmed and tired from a long July day spent trailing

Oliver Wood around the Quidditch pitch, hand on the back of his neck and mouth crooked around a smile.

Harry transferred his gaze back to Ritchie, who, it occurred to him, had a good smile too. A better smile, he hastily amended to himself. It wasn't all shifty and crooked and he didn't look like he smirked often, either.

Harry had a misty recollection that Ritchie used to be a bit weedy, but being a Beater for the last few years of school had obviously done him some good. He was still thin but he looked muscled, which was what Harry liked. He had light-brown hair streaked with gold, probably because of the summer sun, and freckles - Harry had always liked freckles, and Malfoy didn't have any - and he seemed nice and sensible and interested. He was good-looking, too, Harry thought, and with a certain vicious satisfaction: he was *much* better-looking than Malfoy.

He went through all the things he'd thought about love, the same way Hermione, since Ron, had a checklist to run through for her men. Malfoy had helped her write it in the bar one Friday.

He focused more intently on Ritchie, who obviously liked Quidditch, too. He'd do, Harry thought.

"Do you want to go out with me on Saturday?" Harry demanded.

"Yeah," Ritchie said, and smiled that better-than-Malfoy's smile again. "That'd be great."

Ritchie was very nice. Everybody agreed on that. Hermione said he was really perfect for Harry, and the sex was good, and Malfoy came with Harry to pick out a present for Ritchie's twentieth birthday party, and at the party Ritchie introduced Harry to his parents as his boyfriend. Ritchie was a pureblood, so his parents knew exactly who Harry was. They seemed pleased about it.

It wasn't quite - Harry knew he should touch him more, out of bed. Malfoy and Katie did, and Pansy and Ron did, even Vince and Greg did, but it was weird and awkward. Harry didn't touch people all that often, and Ritchie was a bit overawed by the whole Boy Who Lived thing and Harry didn't know what to do.

"It's because your stupid family never hugged you as a child, and you're very disturbed," Malfoy told him in a matter-of-fact way. "Don't worry about it. Ritchie just needs to get to know you better. It'll become more clear to him that you're a complete maniac." He flicked Harry a sly smile over his coffee cup, and Harry had to remind himself that Ritchie's smile was better. "I'll tell him, if you like."

Malfoy's attempt to talk with Ritchie made Ritchie take a dislike to Malfoy.

"Do you know your partner insults you behind your back?" he asked Harry indignantly.

"He needs to keep in practise for insulting me to my face," Harry said.

"Well, I think it's outrageous," Ritchie declared. "Maybe there's something wrong with him. There's nothing wrong with you!"

That was Harry's opinion as well, actually, so that was all right. Harry and Ritchie agreed on most things, which was great.

Ritchie did not like to dance, which was a great relief to Harry, much better than Malfoy who always made a complete exhibition of himself on the dance floor. Ritchie was unfailingly kind, unlike Malfoy, would never have dreamed of making racist comments, unlike Malfoy, he was law-abiding and considerate and better than Malfoy in every way possible, and one day Harry would be able to stop himself making those constant comparisons.

After they had been going out six months, Ritchie told Harry that he loved him.

Harry said: "Right." Then he said: "Thank you."

He thought about it the next day, and he was working himself up to a "Me too" on the way home, when somewhat to his relief he was kidnapped by rogue Death Eaters.

He sat in a dark cellar somewhere recovering from being Stunned, and worked out a plan to escape that involved killing the guard who came in to feed him. Possibly he'd have to lure the guard in, but that shouldn't be too hard. They'd taken away his wand, but he didn't think much of this operation's intelligence. They hadn't incapacitated him. He was an Auror, and he could break a man's neck with one hand free.

Then the guard came in to feed him, and it was Malfoy.

Harry stared at him, and Malfoy smirked. "Don't look so betrayed," he drawled. "You people betrayed me first. You killed my father."

He put down the food, and slammed the door. Harry sat numb for a while in the darkness, thinking of Malfoy breaking Muggle pictures and saying that he hated everybody.

It wasn't impossible. Malfoy wore the Dark Mark. They had killed Lucius Malfoy, and they had done it with very little evidence against him, because the Ministry was under pressure to wipe out the Death Eaters. Harry had never really got a handle on how Malfoy felt about Muggles and the Muggleborn. He wore the Dark Mark, and he didn't have much regard for the law or the way things worked, and he had loved his father: Malfoy's love and rage had led him to do crazy things before now.

It wasn't impossible.

It was possible that it was a trick, though. Not Polyjuice. Harry knew Malfoy, and that had been Malfoy.

Malfoy wore the Dark Mark, and so he alone of all the Aurors would be able to infiltrate. It would be worth it, to capture the last remaining Death Eaters. They might be using Harry as a way to test him, as part of a plan. That was possible, too.

It might be a trick, but it might not be. It might all be real.

Harry decided to wait and see. Either it was a trick, and all he had to do was wait it out, or it

would become clear that it wasn't a trick and then he would break Malfoy's neck and escape and nothing would matter very much.

He didn't feel hungry, but he ate as much as he had to in order to keep strong and be able to break Malfoy's neck. He didn't sleep much. He couldn't tell if it was day or night, except when Malfoy opened the door and light either was or was not limned around his fair hair.

He occupied himself thinking about Malfoy. Not about whether Malfoy might or might not have betrayed him, that made his head hurt, that didn't help at all, but just small disconnected thoughts to follow, moment after moment, in the darkness. Just the way Malfoy smiled, the crooked sweet shape of his mouth, the way he sounded and felt when he was asleep, loose and relaxed with that low cooing sound rising from his parted lips. The constant restlessness of his thin hands, the way he doodled on paper and made little nonsense things out of pens and lollipop sticks. His shoulders and his scars and the way he threw his head back to laugh, surrendering to it completely, always doing everything with all he had.

He was thinking of the turn of Malfoy's head, his long neck, when the door burst open and there was Malfoy, kneeling beside him, and a lot of Aurors very far away in the background, and it had been a trick after all and Harry was so relieved he wanted to cry.

He didn't, of course. He hadn't cried in years.

Malfoy took one look at his face and said: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought you knew. I came in with the food on purpose and you didn't try to kill me, so I thought you'd worked it out."

"What do you mean, try?" Harry said. "I could've done it. I would have done it, too - but I wasn't - you should have known I wouldn't do it unless I was sure. I thought you might have done it. I'm sorry."

"No, I understand," Malfoy said. "It was meant to be plausible. That's why Shackbolt chose me. I was ordered not to tell you, of course, so it'd look more real, but I think - I didn't want to tell you. I thought - maybe you'd be sure even if I didn't. I had no right. I'm sorry."

"No," Harry said. "I understand."

It was dark and cold in that cellar, he realised properly for the first time in days. He was chilled: his bones were aching. Malfoy reached around, perhaps to help him up, his hand sure and supporting against Harry's back, and Harry just leaned forward and put his head against Malfoy's shoulder, laid his face in the curve of Malfoy's shoulder and neck. It was very simple.

"I'm so tired," Harry said, in a low voice.

After an instant's surprised stillness, Malfoy put his arm around him properly, stroked his back and his hair a bit. It was so nice: it was so simple.

"I'm sorry," Malfoy whispered, fingers light against Harry's hair. "I'm sorry. You can go home right now. Can you stand up?"

“Yes,” Harry said, and grabbed Malfoy’s shirt, held him firmly so he wouldn’t move. He’d seemed far away, for days now, but now he was here and everything was all right. He burrowed his face against Malfoy’s neck and did not move.

“I should have thought about how much you hate not being able to do things,” Malfoy said, almost to himself, his voice calm and lovely, soothing in Harry’s ear. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry for everything.”

“Why do you keep apologising,” Harry said. “I could have killed you: you gave me the chance. You’re an idiot.”

“You couldn’t have killed me,” Malfoy said, sounding offended. “I am an Auror. I have received special training in the arts of war.”

“You always hesitate,” Harry told him wearily, and closed his eyes, warm and safe. “I could have done it. It would’ve been easy.”

He went to sleep right there, leaning his head on Malfoy’s shoulder. He woke up on his sofa at home to the sound of Malfoy’s voice, still low but no longer sweet and suddenly retreating into the distance.

Malfoy said: “Take care of him,” and Harry opened his eyes and lifted himself on one elbow, reached out to have Malfoy back, and saw the door closing behind Malfoy and Ritchie’s face, close and looking concerned.

He realised with a sinking sort of feeling that he had not thought of Ritchie once, not remembered Ritchie’s existence, since he had been taken.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

*

It was dark and raining when Harry came out of the grocery shop, holding a couple of plastic bags. He walked along the rain-slick streets, following the wet orange light shimmering down the pavement, reflected from the streetlights.

Things hadn’t been so bad, since he gave up on the idea of escaping via Ritchie or anyone else. He was a bit lonely sometimes, it hurt sometimes, but he was getting on with it, he was helping a lot of people, he always had so much to do he couldn’t think much, and Malfoy was almost always there. Before this madness started, things hadn’t been so bad.

He looked up, stopping his long aimless walk, and realised that his tired treacherous steps had of course led him to the building where Malfoy lived.

Malfoy’s flat was three floors up on the left, and Harry looked at a shadow in a lighted window there, felt stupid about looking, it was stupid and pointless and hopeless, and kept looking. He reminded himself that he was a Veela and could have anyone he wanted, but it didn’t mean much. It made him think of some god or goddess who was the moon, or something, and how they had looked at some mortal when he was sleeping. As he recalled, they could not have him, not ever.

The rain pounded on, until even Harry's hair was plastered flat against his head, dripping into his eyes. It was fairly cold outside.

A taller shadow moved in the yellow square of the window. Harry realised he had been standing in the rain staring up at Katie Bell's shadow, and felt a complete tit.

Malfoy stooped over her, perhaps to kiss her or give her a cup of tea or something, Harry didn't know, and then he was gone. Harry shook his head at himself, and then trudged off along the wet streets towards home.

On his way, a Muggle woman in a raincoat took one look at him and then threw herself in his arms. He almost dropped his grocery shopping.

"Oh, you're beautiful," she whispered, her wet lips close to his wet cheek. "I love you."

Harry pushed her back, perhaps with too much force. "No, you don't," he said, his voice echoing through the dark streets. "Trust me."

He found his key with numb cold hands, and came into his dark silent flat, dumping his shopping bags on the floor of the hall. The smell of wet wool was in his nose, and his jumper was dragging on his shoulders, so he pulled it off and left it in a wet, sad pile on the kitchen counter.

He didn't bother turning on lights. He felt tired, bone weary with this day and everything it had brought, weary of himself. He went into his bedroom and fell sideways on the bed, and shut his eyes.

His curtains weren't closed. After a moment an insistent dart of light made him open his eyes, moonlight striking off his mirror. He blinked, and looked.

A stranger looked back at him with hooded eyes, making sleepiness look like sex. Harry tried to open his eyes properly, and the stranger's lids lifted, showing clear dark green like the depths of a hidden pool. His winter tan hadn't faded this year, and his body gleamed pale gold in the moonlight, still wet from the rain. His hair was damp, too, falling black as a crow's wing into his eyes. He stared, and the stranger's full mouth formed a brutally perfect sneer.

Harry turned his face away.

"Go away," he whispered to the mirror, and heard his voice rough and scraping in his throat, like sex dragged over broken glass. "You're ruining my life."

Chapter Four

Harry woke up with the warm conviction that all was right with the world. Winter sunlight was pouring through the windows, he wasn't cold or tired any more, and best of all, Malfoy was there.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, get a move on," Malfoy said.

Harry smiled and reached out without thinking to grab Malfoy's wrist and hold him there. Malfoy, leaning against the bedpost, looked amused and let him have it, and for a moment Harry was tempted to close his eyes and go back to sleep, and pretend that things were exactly as he wanted them to be.

Malfoy poked him in the shoulder. "This constant slacking-off must cease, Potter. Get up."

Harry opened his eyes reluctantly.

Under Veritaserum or extensive torture, Harry probably would've admitted that he found Malfoy attractive, but looking directly up into his nostrils was not really his most alluring angle.

"What're you doing here?"

"Stopping you from sleeping your life away, apparently," Malfoy said. "This is no time to succumb to despair. I have another plan."

"Sounds like it's time to succumb to despair to *me*," said Harry.

"Release my wrist, please," Malfoy said, saying 'please' in a tone of lofty command. "I need it for all sorts of things. Also I worry about the way you always grab when you wake up: it suggests to me a fundamental insecurity about the world. You should've absorbed after three years that you have a genius partner who will always make everything all right."

"What have you done now?" Harry asked, as cold fear struck his heart.

"You'll see," Malfoy promised, beaming at him manically. "Get up, and for God's sake get dressed, what if a cat burglar broke in and ravished you? The way things have been going lately, I wouldn't put it past Shacklebolt to hire someone to break in and ravish you, and we can't have that."

"No," Harry said with feeling.

"The man seems to have terrible and disturbing taste," Malfoy said. "If it comes down to that, and I'm not ruling it out--"

"I am," said Harry.

"Sinistra's Sinnin' Spot does a good brochure," Malfoy said. "It comes with pictures. And

coupons.”

“How do you know this?” Harry asked. “Do I not want to know?”

“I investigated,” Malfoy informed him. “I am a *trained investigator*, after all.”

Harry maintained a skeptical silence.

“I Owled Marcus Flint,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. “He owns some shares in the business. I require no thanks for my tireless efforts. I only ask for my wrist to be returned to me.”

That was probably a fair request. Harry let go and sat up, rubbing his eyes and trying to reconcile himself to waking up and dealing with things the way they were. Malfoy walked over to his wardrobe and after a determined rummage emerged ruffled and threw the dark purple Weasley jumper at Harry’s head.

“Wear that,” he said. “It’s perfect. It makes you look like a rotting grape that died of plague.”

“You have a very odd definition of the word ‘perfect,’” Harry muttered, and struggled into the jumper.

As he did so, Malfoy exited his bedroom, and Harry heard him starting to open and close cupboard doors. Malfoy seemed in a good mood, Harry thought: he seemed to be overlooking the terrible Katie incident, and he was smiling, and he was up early, and Harry had forgotten how enormously obvious it was when Malfoy got laid.

Three weeks, and he’d let himself forget – he’d *wanted* to forget – how, at least twice a week, Malfoy spent the mornings enveloped in a warm content glow, bestowing faintly smug smiles on everyone. He’d even smiled at Cuthbert once. Cuthbert had made a note of it.

Harry was used to it. There was no reason to be moody about it, none at all.

Harry scowled at his rotten-grape reflection and opened the door to find Malfoy putting away Harry’s groceries and humming to himself.

“I think you may be going overboard with your carefree bachelor lifestyle,” Malfoy said, in a distracted sort of way. “You left your groceries on the floor, and also, I think something crawled onto your sideboard and died.”

“That’s my jumper,” Harry said, looking doubtfully at the sodden orange heap.

“And also, I think your jumper crawled onto your sideboard and died,” Malfoy amended agreeably. “And also, you’ve run out of marmalade.”

“I don’t like marmalade,” said Harry.

“Don’t you? Huh,” said Malfoy. “But people could drop by. Requiring marmalade. And then where would you be, it’d be awfully embarrassing. I counsel you urgently to acquire emergency marmalade reserves.”

“If you want marmalade, Malfoy, it’s in the fridge.”

“You should keep it in the cupboard,” Malfoy said. “People usually require their marmalade to be room temperature. I’ve noticed this. Come on, are you ready? We’re going to that pastry place you like.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I don’t like it all that much.”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows back. “Don’t you?” he said. “Huh. Get your coat.”

They were going down the stairs when they met some girl, coming upstairs and sorting through her mail.

“Hi, Draco,” she called out, and then she lifted her eyes from the envelopes and said in a considerably lower and more interested voice: “Hi, Harry.”

“Hi, Fiona,” Malfoy said, as Harry mumbled something inarticulate and kept walking. “So,” Malfoy said once they were in the street. “So, last night there was an outbreak of Owling. I was Owling Marcus Flint and a few other people necessary to Plan B, and - Hermione Owled me.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

He had a vivid and dreadful picture of Hermione leaning in towards him, and having to assault her with mints in self-defence.

Malfoy sort of elbowed him consolingly. “She’s really embarrassed,” he said. “She says sorry.”

“No, she – that’s all right,” said Harry.

“She says she’s never thought about you that way,” Malfoy went on helpfully. “She says she did her best for Ginny’s sake, but she’s suspected you were gay since fourth year.”

“Since *fourth year*?” Harry repeated incredulously. “She did not!”

“I bet she did,” Malfoy said. “She is all-knowing. It’s time to face that and move on. I wish she’d let something slip, though,” he added with a martyred sigh. “Rita Skeeter would’ve been very interested in how the Boy Who Lived entered the Triwizard Tournament to get closer to Cedric Diggory.”

“Cedric was dating Cho,” Harry exclaimed, outraged.

“Ah, classic transference,” Malfoy said. “I can read you like a book, Potter.”

“Can you?” said Harry.

“Attractive bloke, Diggory,” Malfoy added encouragingly. “Kind of Hufflepuff in the face, but you like that, don’t you, with Smith and everything.”

“No I *don't*.”

“I bet Sinistra’s Sinnin’ Spot has Hufflepuffs,” Malfoy went on. “Caters to every perversion, Marcus assures me.”

“I think I hate Marcus Flint,” Harry said. “I thought you should know. Malfoy. Look. I don’t want to – it’s enough, having Shackbolt go on about that. I’m not going to, and I need you to be on my side about it.”

“Then I am,” Malfoy said at once. “Only when Hermione told me, I thought you might want to – do something drastic. So I came to see you and say that, you know, nobody would think you had dishonoured the house of Gryffindor or anything. And,” he added, sounding very noble and sad, “Nobody would make fun of you. Or even mention it again. Even if they thought of a really brilliant and hilarious thing to say, they still wouldn’t.”

“Tell them thanks,” Harry said. “But no.” He hesitated. “And you and Katie. Did you, um, have words?”

Malfoy smiled reminiscently. “Sure. I got her a peppermint and said ‘welcome back’. And that was about it for words.”

“Right,” Harry said hollowly.

Other people had sex and didn’t make a big production about it. They didn’t go around with a glow about them for hours: their faces weren’t transparent as glass when they were happy, or shut and bolted like a prison door when they were upset.

Other people were really great, Harry thought with a distinct lack of conviction.

“And then I Owled Marcus and the others, and Hermione Owled me, and I went to see her, and look what I found,” Malfoy proceeded.

He rolled up his sleeve and showed Harry something that looked like a tiny fire, trapped under the glass of a watch instead of a clock face.

“I was talking to Nott and Millicent in Switzerland with it,” he said reverently. “It’s brilliant.”

“Wait,” Harry said. “So this is a top secret Unspeakable device, and you nicked it out of Hermione’s flat.”

“No!” Malfoy exclaimed, and looked shifty. “I mistook it for – my own watch.”

“Except you don’t wear a watch.”

“I mistook it for my own... watch-shaped thing,” Malfoy said.

“Hermione is going to come for you and kill you,” Harry said.

“I don’t care,” said Malfoy. “I am an Auror, I live for danger. And it won’t matter as long as I have Sparky with me.”

He looked at his little fire watch with love. Harry resigned himself to holding Hermione back while Malfoy fled the country, and then let Malfoy go in alone to get the pastries so Harry wouldn't have to deal with amorous waitresses.

He hadn't ever thought that being a Veela meant feeling like a child outside a shop window, staring in at the world.

Behind the glass, Malfoy beamed at a waitress. Harry could tell he was making a joke because he saw her throw her head back and laugh. Malfoy looked pleased as he collected their pastries and his inevitable coffee.

"What did you say to that waitress?" Harry asked when Malfoy came out.

Malfoy frowned briefly. "Don't remember," he said. "Nothing much. Why?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry answered.

"Today I thought we'd go investigate the Dixon case, and get him and Halperin dead to rights," Malfoy remarked conversationally.

"How can we do that?" Harry demanded. "If you'll recall, I can't leave our peppermint-lined office."

He was sorry as soon as he'd said it. It wasn't Malfoy's fault, the Veela thing or anything else.

Malfoy just smiled and regarded him with a sort of anticipatory indulgence, as he did when he'd got someone a really good present. "Ah," he said. "That's where Plan B comes in."

Harry's cold dread was somewhat alleviated when he got into their peppermint-lined office and, aside from the dozens of co-workers diving for the peppermint buckets, the only thing to see was Vince and Greg.

"Hi, Harry," said Greg. "Malfoy said you'd come over all Veela."

"Um," Harry said. "Hi, Greg. Yeah."

He looked at them in alarm. Neither seemed about to make any sudden leaps.

"If it's any consolation," Vince offered, "I never believed that you were slipping Love Potion into the girls' pumpkin juice during sixth year. But this one was set on the idea, and he squawks if you contradict him."

"I *don't*," Malfoy squawked. Vince elbowed him affectionately and rather hard in the side, and Malfoy winced and grinned at once, leaning against the desk and settling instinctively between them, just like he had at school. "Anyway," Malfoy added. "I still think it was a viable working hypothesis. How could I know all the gay Veela details?"

"Speaking of those," Harry said. "What's going on? I mean, I presume this is Plan B, but I

don't understand-"

"It is hard for many mortals to understand my shining brilliance," Malfoy said. "It dazzles them, you see. Not their fault. Allow me to explain. Last night I sat down and made a diagram," he explained. "Because the problem with you going outside is that massed hordes of people will fling themselves at you bodily, and this will impede you in the line of duty. And I can't stop massed hordes, but I thought several people could! Like a seduction bodyguard."

He smiled winningly up at Harry.

"And then I thought, well, *I'm* all right," he proceeded. "So I started collecting people with the same immunities as me. Professor Snape is the head of Slytherin house, and he was called into every Blaise Zabini emergency, *and* he can do Occlumency, which can be a guard against magical influence. So I asked him first, but he sent a rather hurtful Owl in response."

"You Owled Snape," Harry said, and sat down and put his face in his hands. "And you told him that you needed him to come guard me from people's sexual advances."

"He did seem amused," Malfoy put in. "I think we brightened up his day."

"Yeah, that really helps, Malfoy, thanks."

"And then I read in my book that if people've already had sex with you, it helps with the immunity," Malfoy went on. "Like an inoculation. So I asked Smith, and he said he wouldn't spit on you if your trousers were on fire. He's doing fine, though. Went into his father's business. We're having a drink sometime next week."

Harry did not lift his face from his hands. "I'm so glad my complete humiliation has brought you two back in touch."

"And I asked Malcolm if he'd help, and he said he'd be delighted and he swore not to let you out of his sight, and, I, er, had a change of heart and put him on the reserves bodyguard team."

"Thank you," Harry said in a faint voice.

"So I asked Crabbe and Goyle, and here they are, because they are my favourites," Malfoy said, looking around at Vince and Greg with a lordly, approving air. Vince and Greg looked simultaneously tolerantly amused and pleased. "Then I went and liberated Sparky-"

"He stole stuff from Hermione," Harry said, turning Malfoy in without a moment's guilt.

"She's going to hit you again," Greg said in a voice of deep foreboding.

"Sparky wanted to go with me, I could sense it," Malfoy insisted. "And I used Sparky to get Nott and Millicent in Switzerland. Nott laughed at me, and he called Millicent over to laugh at me, and then he asked me to repeat myself so they could laugh at me some more. I didn't ask Zabini, because I thought perhaps having two Veela in one room might cause a riot."

“Plus you might faint again,” Vince said, and he and Greg both looked very amused.

Malfoy flushed.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Oh, well,” Vince said, with an easy smile at Malfoy and an air of preparing to tell an old favourite. “So it’s fourth year, and Fleur Delacour is spreading the charm around with a spoon, and Blaise hasn’t really got a handle on his powers yet, and he gets territorial, and our dormitories were a mess for weeks, and at one point Blaise came in all lit up from a fight with Fleur and Malfoy swoons on the floor and doesn’t wake up for *hours*.”

“I hit my head,” Malfoy said sulkily, hitting Vince on the shoulder. “Anyway, our hard-won immunity to the Veela can now be used in the cause of truth and justice. Where in God’s name is the rest of Plan B?”

“He’s in the loo,” Goyle said helpfully.

“He?” Harry said in a panic. “He? Who? You said you told Malcolm-”

He jumped and turned when the door of the bathroom opened, and was inexpressibly relieved to see Ron, standing framed in the doorway and looking rather puzzled.

“You look OK,” he said. “Malfoy said you were in desperate trouble and to come at once.” He turned to Malfoy and added accusingly: “I *thought* you’d been at the stuff out of the evidence locker. *Again*.”

“I have not and it was just that one time and I don’t see why everyone has to keep bringing it up,” Malfoy said. “I have a question for you, Weasley. Take a good long look at Potter. Take as long as you need.”

Ron tilted his head and looked Harry up and down. He also looked bemused.

“Pansy won’t let me wear Mum’s jumpers in public,” was his final verdict.

He kept looking at Harry, and Harry felt his mouth go dry with dread.

“Okay, that’s long enough,” Malfoy decided. “So, do you find Potter irresistibly sexually attractive?”

“Oh my God,” said Ron. “I *knew* you were high.”

Malfoy looked very pleased with himself. “Prolonged exposure to the Veela, and his sexual preferences go the other way, and I *think* he’s in love with someone else. And here we have your sexual bodyguards!”

“Hey, my personal feelings are – are none of your business, Malfoy,” Ron said, his ears going red.

Harry stared at Malfoy, shook his head slowly and ruefully, and burst out laughing.

“Told you,” Malfoy said. “I’m a genius. Now, I think it’s time to go to the Murimble house, and ask a few more questions.”

*

The Dixon case had started pretty well. They’d all been called in to Shacklebolt’s office for a general meeting where they could collect their next caseloads. The Dixon case had been the Snitch everyone was trying to catch.

Harry and Malfoy were owed it, of course. Their record was the best, but Malfoy’d also taken an illicit look at their files, and there was a note in them that warned Malfoy was crazy when it came to dead parents, and Harry was crazy when it came to dead children.

It was true, but there were no dead parents in this case, and besides, they did their best work when they were crazy. Harry’d seen the pictures of the dead goblin children, and he knew he wanted the case.

He and Malfoy weren’t allowed to sit next to each other since the incident during the Augusta Longbottom scandal, but they sat opposite each other across the table, and exchanged looks that promised trouble if Shacklebolt gave the case to anyone else.

He gave the case to them. Malfoy raised his eyes from whatever he was sketching, lifted his eyebrows, and they exchanged a small grin.

Shacklebolt told them, without much hope, to be discreet.

“Don’t hit anyone, Mr Potter,” he said in a tired way.

“He can’t help himself, he has rage,” Malfoy said, looking at his parchment and still smiling over getting the case. “He has Fists of Fury.”

“I’ll show you rage,” Harry said in an undertone, and Malfoy grinned and made a rude gesture that should technically have got him fired.

“Try not to talk too much, Mr Malfoy.”

“I shall conduct the entire investigation in mime,” Malfoy promised, and they pushed themselves to their feet at the same time. There was no point hanging around at a meeting when there was a case to be solved.

Their information was that the bereaved parents lived at Murimble Manor with a housekeeper called Mrs Gorringer.

Goblin manors, of course, were a little different from humans. It was an underground extension of Gringotts bank, with only gilt-edged chimneys sticking out from the earth, and a door at an angle.

It was such a traditional-looking goblin mansion that Harry was a bit surprised to find the housekeeper was human. It happened more these days, of course, with so many down-and-out

relatives of Death Eaters. Wizards wouldn't hire them.

He put down the severe-looking, black-clad Mrs Gorringer as the widow of a Death Eater. She looked very pale, and he wondered if she'd cared for the Murimble children at all.

"Mrs Gorringer, I presume," said Malfoy, and after a moment's hesitation she shook hands.

"Mr Shackbolt said he would send his best," she said in a cool voice, and for a moment Harry saw them as she must see them: two young men in their early twenties wearing jeans and t-shirts, one of them scruffy and one of them smirking.

Malfoy smirked some more. "And here we are."

And they were. They'd got the man who killed the Murimble children, and now because of a technicality, because of an unfair twist of fate, he'd gotten away.

*

"Hermione did what?" Ron demanded, staring.

"I'm so glad you're not attracted to me, Ron," Harry said. "You have no idea."

"Any time, mate," Ron said. "Really, Dean Thomas?"

Harry was mercifully saved from having to answer by the arrival of Malfoy, flanked by Greg and Vince and looking like a blond thundercloud. In his wake trailed Cuthbert.

"If you're recruiting civilians, Mr Malfoy," he mimicked in Shackbolt's deep tones, making himself sound like a very stern bullfrog. "You might at least take your assigned trainee with you.' Goyle! We hate Cuthbert, and if he makes any sudden moves towards the Veela, you know what to do."

"Yes, you wrote down instructions," Greg said, and Cuthbert eyed the three new, taller additions to the team with a fearful eye. He wrote something on his notepad that might have been 'Now I have seen the face of my death.'

"Let's get going," Malfoy said.

Then a voice rang out and said: "Ron Weasley! Where d'you think *you're* going?"

Heads turned as Pansy Parkinson swept down through the desks towards, bearing down on them in a black robe in a way as reminiscent of Professor Snape as a young and attractive woman in vivid red lipstick could possibly be.

"You tell me you're going to work, and you sneak off to work on the field with Aurors," Pansy continued, her voice a low snarl. "D'you think Vincent and Gregory tell me nothing? Do you imagine I don't have spies in your office?"

"She's a Slytherin, Weasley, honestly," Malfoy murmured.

“I’m sorry, Pansy,” Ron said promptly. “I didn’t want you to worry, or – or to-”

“Or to stop you doing it,” Pansy put in, tapping her foot. “I don’t know where you get these ideas from. You’re a grown man and you can make your own decisions. Why the hell would I want to lead you around by the nose?”

“Oh,” Ron said.

“But don’t lie to me,” Pansy snapped. “I’m your girlfriend. I deserve the truth.”

“Right,” Ron said. “Yes. I won’t lie. I – I didn’t want you to worry. That bit’s true.”

Pansy’s face softened a fraction. “I know that,” she said, and for a moment she looked up at Ron the way she used to look at Malfoy, as if he’d hung the moon. “You’re a silly idiot and you don’t need to protect me,” she added. Then she turned away from him, making an effort to look practical, in the same way she’d pretended not to like unicorns at school.

Malfoy stood and took her hand. “Oh Pansy,” he said. “Every time I see you, you are more beautiful.”

She gave him a grateful look, and settled into a familiar routine. “Draco,” she drawled. “I notice you’ve changed your hair product again. As ever, that makes me an animal.”

The tips of Ron’s ears went almost violet with rage.

Malfoy settled a hand in the small of Pansy’s back, and bent her backwards. “If I wasn’t otherwise committed, which tragically I am,” he murmured, lips close to her cheek, the edge of her mouth. “I would of course immediately take you. Right here. On this desk.”

“Hey!” Ron exclaimed.

“You’re mistaken, Draco,” said Pansy, at which point Ron’s shoulders relaxed. “If I were not otherwise committed, which sadly I am, and I believe he’s even around here somewhere, I’d take *you*. Right here. On this desk.”

Malfoy let her go, and leaned back smirking. “Sure,” he said. “I’m easy.”

“I remember,” said Pansy, and Malfoy slid a glance over to an ever more scarlet Ron. He fell for this every time. Harry could understand that he didn’t like it, but it couldn’t have been more obvious that they were playacting: Malfoy could flirt easily with anyone.

It was different with Katie. He got shy.

“See you later, boys,” said Pansy. Then she grasped Ron by the front of his robes and kissed him, not for long, but with feeling. She let go and whispered, with her lipstick blurred: “I love you, you lying twit. Come home safe or I swear I’ll kill you.”

Pansy stepped back, and then swept out. She ruined the Professor Snape effect by looking over her shoulder at Ron as she went.

“I’ll see you at dinner!” Ron called out.

When she was gone, he looked down at the desk vaguely, and smiled.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Nothing,” said Ron, and then grinned a bit more. “She loves me.”

Malfoy opened his mouth to say something about how a woman had never before lowered her standards so much, so Harry reached out and put a hand over his mouth. Malfoy raised an eyebrow, removed Harry’s hand and kept quiet.

“Okay,” Ron said. “Where’re we going, and what car should we take? We won’t all fit into yours, Harry. We can do better than that.” He shoved his sleeve up to show Sparky’s twin, and Malfoy gave an outraged squawk. “Like it?” Ron said. “Next year everyone will have one. Now, I’m thinking a limousine.”

Malfoy, who had looked appalled that his new toy was going to be common, cheered up. “A limousine,” he repeated with interest. “Is that a good kind of car?”

“It’s a conspicuous kind of car,” Harry said. “What if we need to follow someone?”

Ron, Vince and Greg all looked thrilled at the idea.

“Not a problem,” Ron said. “Follow me.”

They all did, and in a few moments a sleek black limousine materialised, flying from the clouds to land neatly in the street before them. A keen-looking young man leaped out of the car to place the keys reverently in Ron’s hand.

“Here you are, Mr Weasley.”

“Thanks, Dennis,” Ron said. “And call me Ron.” He clicked a button on the car keys, and the car instantly transformed into a shabby blue Ford. “Anti-theft precaution in case you have to land in a bad neighbourhood,” he explained proudly. “So, who’re we going to follow?”

“Well, nobody just yet,” Harry said.

Dennis Creevey turned at the sound of Harry’s voice, and that terrible glazed look came over his face.

Vince and Greg flew into action. Vince put his hands heavily down on Dennis’ shoulder, rendering him effectively immobile, and Greg sprayed the contents of a small metal canister into his face.

“Eat mint!” He looked inquiringly over at Malfoy. “Was that right?”

“You’re a credit to my teaching, Goyle,” said Malfoy. “Cuthbert, your job is to get into the front seat with Dennis and make sure he keeps driving and doesn’t try to crawl into the back seat and molest Mr Potter. Think you can handle it?”

Cuthbert nodded, sucking on a mint, but his woebegone expression indicated that holding back molesters was not how he had pictured the Auror Lifestyle.

Harry had very little pity. He and Malfoy had been assigned to four of the Wood stalking cases, and once Harry had almost been clubbed to death with a plastic replica of the original Wood broom. You did what you had to do.

Right now, what they apparently had to do was climb into Ron's flying limousine and have champagne.

"We're on duty," Harry began, but Malfoy seized a glass and Harry gave up on the idea of remonstrating.

He didn't take a glass, though. Someone had to be on full alert.

Greg and Vince were extremely admiring of the limousine, and Harry caught Malfoy glancing around with a speculative and acquisitive air when he thought Ron wasn't looking.

"You can't drive it," he murmured.

"You could, though," Malfoy murmured back.

"We can't afford it," Harry said.

"Sure we can," Malfoy disagreed. "The way we're going, Shacklebolt will be forced to retire in a couple of years. The way our record looks, one of us will be promoted to his place. Today the Aurors' department, tomorrow the world! I've got the brains and you've got the looks: let's make lots of money."

"Your brains are deranged," Harry told him as they pulled up outside the Murimble mansion.

"All right. We're going to question the parents, nobody's allowed to talk but me," Malfoy announced, when he knew well enough that Harry would talk if he felt like it.

"This takes me back," Greg said. "He always told us not to talk in front of Gryffindors. Because we were mortal enemies involved in a battle of wits, and I'm not very quippy."

"Mortal enemies," Harry repeated as Malfoy knocked on the Murimble door. "Involved in a battle of wits."

"Obviously Hermione was my only real opponent there," Malfoy said.

This time, the door was opened by Mrs Murimble herself, wearing an apron and looking rather flustered when they greeted her.

"I'll just go fetch – won't you come this way," the goblin woman squeaked, not even questioning the sudden addition of three other people to an Auror pair.

She led them through the labyrinthine passages which most goblins favoured, and they all

took care to walk where she walked. Goblins liked to keep their hand in with anti-theft booby traps.

She led them to a large dark parlour, where Mrs Gorringer, tall and grave and still all in black, was sitting by Mr Murimble.

“What have you come back for?” Mrs Gorringer demanded imperiously. “You let the murderer escape. Perhaps you’d care to explain that they were only goblin children, and you have more important crimes to solve?”

“Don't be stupid,” Harry snapped.

“Shhh,” Malfoy said, looking from Mrs Murimble to Mrs Gorringer. “I’m starting to think we got the wrong end of the stick here.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Malfoy addressed Mrs Gorringer. “You’re not the housekeeper, are you?” he said softly.

She straightened, tall and proud. “No,” she said. “I am Mrs Murimble. This goblin is my husband. The victims of the crime you were meant to solve were my children. And you, a trained investigator, strolled into my house and assumed I was the housekeeper.”

“Oh, no,” Malfoy snapped. “Don’t even try that. Ninety-four per cent of goblins marry their own kind: it was natural enough to assume. If you’d corrected me at the time I would’ve apologised, but you let me believe something that wasn’t true out of sheer wrongheadedness, and that means we had to investigate your children’s deaths without knowing all the facts. You sabotaged our investigation because you were *stupid*. So don’t try to make me feel guilty.”

Mrs Murimble reached out a hand, and her husband took it in both of his.

“Some people - have views on unnatural halfbreeds,” she said. “The children could have passed for pure goblins. I thought lying was the best way to avenge them.”

“My partner’s part Veela,” Malfoy pointed out. “We don’t care about that sort of thing.”

“Yes, I read it in the paper,” Mr Murimble said, speaking for the first time. “If I’d known, I would have made Demeter tell the truth.”

“The paper?” Harry asked, and Malfoy elbowed him unobtrusively.

“The money was a pretext, then,” he said, thinking aloud. “Unless someone thought that a human mother might have been more willing to give up the money for her children-”

Demeter Murimble flung up her head. “Anyone who asked a few questions at the bank would know that wasn’t true. I have held to the Gringotts ways since I was married.”

“No man ever had a better wife,” said Mr Murimble, still holding her hand.

“They were your children, though,” Harry said.

Her eyes narrowed. “I would have thought that your life was a more than fair exchange for my children’s lives,” she said. “That doesn’t make it mine to give.”

“Very commendable sentiment, Mrs Murimble,” Malfoy said. “Now we have evidence suggesting that this crime was racially motivated, may we have another look at the children’s bedroom?”

“Yes,” Mrs Murimble answered slowly. “I suppose you may.”

The children’s bedroom was at the top of the house, the airiest room possible in that half-underground mansion. It was like being in a human house: Harry could see that there was a long drop outside, and he could see the roofs of other houses nearby. He wondered if they’d built an extra floor for the children: if possibly one of those half-human children had been claustrophobic.

“Well,” he said. “That was a little weird.”

“Why?” Malfoy asked, standing on a little chair and looking at the disturbed bookshelves on a top shelf.

“Well, you know,” Harry said uneasily. “That woman’s – married to a goblin-”

“So what?”

“Well, it’s a little – anatomically – weird,” Harry said.

“Ever consider how that idiot Hagrid’s parents had him?” Malfoy said.

A sort of deep hush settled over them, the quiet of people who could not possibly be brought to utter their thoughts.

“Well, now I am,” Ron said at last, and with a rather bitter edge to his voice. “Thanks for that.”

“Physically doesn’t have to matter that much for wizards,” Malfoy said. “There are always spells you can do to make that side of things work.”

“Look,” Harry said. “You were the one who was always so against Hagrid-”

“Naturally,” Malfoy said. “Giants don’t have magic, and they’re extremely stupid and violent. That’s worse than sleeping with Muggles.”

“There is nothing wrong with sleeping with Muggles!”

Malfoy shuddered a little, and didn’t seem to be faking. “I couldn’t do it,” he said. “Someone who can’t do any magic? Someone who can’t understand your whole world? That sort of thing can’t be cured with a spell, you know. I’d much rather have a nice goblin girl than a Muggle.”

Harry wanted to tell Malfoy that he was being appallingly racist, but had an idea that suddenly this could be turned around on him.

“Hagrid was stupid and had no proper idea of appropriate risk to children, which is why,” Malfoy’s voice went rich with glee, “he got fired. Enough children had been warned and everybody refused to take Care of Magical Creatures and he got fired!”

“It’s been two years, Malfoy,” Harry said. “Let it go. Hagrid mayn’t have been the – the best teacher, but he was a good guy.”

“That wasn’t my point,” Malfoy said, scowling disagreement. “Hagrid inherited some bad stuff from his mother. He was a danger. You never saw me cheeking Professor Flitwick, did you? He was part goblin.”

“Was he?” Harry said.

“He was a good teacher,” Malfoy said. “Goblins are magical and intelligent. That sort of thing doesn’t bother me at all. And let’s not forget, Potter, at some point one of your ancestors was willing to have children with something that grew wings and a beak.”

“Yes, but Veela are, well, they’re attract-”

“Not always, they’re not,” Malfoy said. “A human who stuck around would see a lot of the nonhuman in her. And it works both ways – she’d have to put up with a human, no wings or beak or defences against her magic. That sort of thing doesn’t have to matter. For God’s sake, one of our classmates married a centaur.”

“They *did*?” Harry said. “Who?”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. “Lavender Brown. Lavender Firenze now, of course.”

“*What?*”

“I hear they’re very happy,” Malfoy said calmly. Then he smiled. “If you think about it, it’s a real compliment to Weasley.”

His eyebrows performed a terrible dance of innuendo, and practically written in the air in letters of fire Harry saw the words *Hung like a-*

He wrenched his mind away from the subject. Ron was bright red.

“So who do you think did this?”

“I think the Muggleborn did it,” Malfoy said. “There’re a few underground groups like that. Saying that at least they’re human, and it’s disgusting that the purebloods are readier to accept magical animals.”

“But the Muggleborn faced their own prejudice,” Harry said helplessly. “What about Voldemort, for God’s sake, don’t they remember him?”

“I imagine prejudice looks very different depending on whether it’s directed against you or not,” Malfoy said. “Just because someone’s a persecuted minority doesn’t mean they can’t be a thoroughly unpleasant person.”

There were times when his job really upset Harry. Things had seemed simple, once upon a time: even in the war there had been a neat division of sides, and now it seemed like there was no steady place to stand on.

“Besides, these books got knocked over in a struggle, and a goblin shoulder wouldn’t have struck this bookshelf,” Malfoy said. “So it isn’t goblins getting rid of the halfbreeds. So it’s humans. So we need to find out what group Halperin and Dixon were employed by, and if Dixon is Muggleborn.”

“He is,” Harry said. He’d noticed that.

Malfoy nodded and looked pleased with himself. Greg and Vince looked admiring.

Harry looked over at the roofs out the window. Years of Quidditch and then Auror training had made him trust his instincts about what he saw.

“Everybody get down,” he said quietly.

They all hit the floor, including Malfoy, while Harry walked slowly towards the window, trying to find the source of that gleam among the chimneypots he’d seen out of the corner of his eye.

To his horror, he heard a voice not coming from the floor.

“You’re going to let Harry stay in danger while you hide?” Ron demanded, climbing to his feet.

Harry said, “Ron, *no*,” but it was Malfoy who leaped up, grabbed Ron by one shoulder and ordered, “Get *down*, civilian.”

He threw Ron onto the floor, the second before the sound of a shot rang in their ears.

There was a small, circular hole in the window.

There was a small, circular hole in Malfoy’s shoulder, and blood spreading from it all over his shirt.

“Oh, my God,” said Ron.

Malfoy crumpled backwards but Vince caught him, broke his fall and put his hand over the wound. Harry looked at the roofs, and then questioningly at Malfoy, who was engaged in swearing and informing Ron that if both the Aurors were standing up being targets, it meant they might both go down.

“I’m fine,” Malfoy said between clenched teeth. “Go.”

Harry flung the windows open and threw himself out.

Falling, he could see the streets and look for movement in the windows of the house beyond. There was nothing, so they were not escaping in any Muggle way. Harry Apparated before he hit the ground, and hit the roof of the other house rolling. The rooftops were empty. He Apparated back to the room where Malfoy lay.

"They Apparated," he said shortly.

"They can Apparate but they have guns," Malfoy said in a low, laboured voice. "And they didn't shoot at the Boy Who Lived, but they shot as soon as they saw the Death Eater. Told you it was the Muggleborn. Two points to me."

Vince had his wand out and he was starting a healing spell when Harry knelt on the other side of Malfoy and caught his wrist in a grip that he hoped hurt.

"Don't do that," he said, his voice a low, reverberating snarl. "There's a bullet in there. Do you want to heal the flesh around a bullet?"

"What's a bullet?" said Greg, looking panicked.

"You stay back," Harry growled. "And you let *go*," he continued to Vince, snaking an arm under Malfoy's back and glaring at them all. There was a small part of him that was panicking because he could hear weird harmonics in his own voice, hissing and snarling, and Vince, Greg and even Ron were backing away, but most of him was too angry to care. "Don't you even think about coming near him," he continued, seeing Ron only through slitted eyes and a haze of rage. "You got him *shot*."

He drew Malfoy possessively towards himself, and Malfoy grabbed hold of his shirt and let him. Harry bowed his head, and saw only Malfoy's white face and the spreading blood.

"Get the bullet out," Malfoy said in a low voice, holding on tight. "It's in my shoulder, you won't be damaging anything important. Get it out and then you can heal me and I won't have to go to St Mungo's and be useless."

"I could tear something," Harry said. Malfoy's body was tense with pain in his arms: he wanted to kill someone.

"Well, if you do I'll have to go to St Mungo's and be useless. Change my life," Malfoy snapped. "Get it out."

"All right," Harry whispered. "All right."

He murmured, "*Accio* bullet," with as little force as he could, and caught the bullet against his palm when it came out, like a small bloody Snitch. Malfoy made a low involuntary sound as it came, and curled in towards him. "Shhh," Harry said desperately, and used a spell to rip the ends of the hole in Malfoy's shirt, so he could see the damage. He didn't think he'd torn anything. Malfoy would have screamed, wouldn't have been able to help it.

He whispered healing charms over the wound, and when he wiped at the slick blood flesh and muscle had knitted together. Beneath the blood the shoulder was whole.

Malfoy let go of Harry's shirt. "I'm all right," he announced. "I can get up." His eyes narrowed after a moment, and he said: "Let me up," in a tone that brooked no argument.

Harry helped him up. Malfoy stood and looked around the room, bristling like a cat. Then he used Sparky to call the Aurors and get people to take the Murimbles and their housekeeper to a safe house, since there were still people watching the Murimble mansion and they might have unfinished business.

He was standing and bossing people around, so he was probably more or less all right. Harry felt his hackles go down, and he moved across to Ron.

"Sorry about that," he muttered.

"Don't worry about it," Ron answered. "As long as you don't do that voice again. I won't lie to you, it sounded kind of horrible. Like Fleur when she really loses her temper with Bill, only – I think there were a few Parseltongue sounds in there, too."

"Wow," Greg said brightly. "You're a bit like a patchwork quilt, really, aren't you?"

Harry eyed him coldly. "No."

Once the other Aurors arrived, they went to the limousine fairly sharpish so nobody would notice that Malfoy had obviously been wounded.

"Let's all go to Potter's," Malfoy said. "I want my coffee, and Katie can't see me like this. Anyway, I need to keep an eye on you three. I need to see how long you can be around Potter without being attracted to him. Then I can start to make real plans."

Nobody was going to argue with Malfoy when he'd just been shot. Ron gave the orders to Dennis.

Malfoy looked around carefully as if there might be evil spies lurking, saw none and then collapsed artistically against Vince. "I've been *shot*," he said piteously. "I've been grievously wounded."

"You're fine now," Harry said, wretched and irritable at the reminder.

"I've lost a lot of blood," Malfoy disagreed, as Vince patted him on the back. "I hate getting shot," he added. "I'm always the one who gets shot. I hate this case. Will the next one be better?"

"Yes," Harry said rashly.

"My favourite case was the one when we went to Italy and I got the full ten points," Malfoy said. "Potter got zero."

He put his head down on Vince's shoulder and Vince patted him on the back some more.

“You’re cleverer than anyone,” he assured Malfoy. “Most of the time.”

“That is so true, Crabbe, you understand me so well,” Malfoy said, and yawned.

“You were doing a lot of stuff last night, oh brilliant one,” Harry remarked, suddenly suspicious. “Did you find time for any sleep?”

“I’ve decided sleep is a fallacy,” Malfoy declared.

“You always decide that, right before you *fall over*.”

“Could you not stop bullying me and go arrange another holiday case for us?” Malfoy asked. “Then the Veela problem would be solved as well.”

He yawned again, obviously under the impression that everyone knew what he was talking about, and was so pale Harry couldn’t be angry with him even while everyone was staring at Harry inquiringly.

“What?” Ron said. “What are you talking about, Malfoy? And what’s this points stuff you keep talking about?”

“I shall tell you,” Malfoy said with dignity. “But you cannot tell Cuthbert. He doesn’t get to play.”

*

The last time Malfoy had been shot, he’d almost died.

Some witch had come clean to her Muggle boyfriend with very bad results. He’d freaked out, she’d been too softhearted to Memory Charm him or report him to the Aurors so they could do it, and he’d come to her family home with a gun and caught them sleeping. The Aurors had approached the house with extreme caution because they didn’t know how many of the family were still alive.

Harry hated it when the children were killed. He always thought there was hope as long as the children were alive. Malfoy hated it when the parents were killed. He always looked so sorry for the children, as if he thought it would be better not to be left behind.

They usually knew what kind of situation they were getting into, but this time they didn’t, and they were both jumpy.

Harry took a risk, the kind of lone mission that Malfoy usually cut off or planned out for him. Harry rolled out through the shadows of some long grass, towards an open window.

Malfoy followed him. One person might have made it: two made too much noise.

The Muggle boyfriend leaned from an upper window and fired, four times in quick succession. Harry was on his feet, holding his wand, in an instant. He sent the boy flying through the air and didn’t much care if the other Aurors caught him before he fell.

Malfoy's fair hair in the moonlight had been a target. All four of the bullets had hit him: he was lying on his face, his back a bloody tattered mess, in the dark grass.

There had been nothing a normal wizard could do, even trying to take the bullets out could have killed him, and Harry had knelt and shook and roared for a Mediwizard and not been able to do anything, not a thing, as he heard Malfoy's breathing come ragged and wet with blood.

The mediwizards had come running. If they'd been on the other side of the house, it would have been too late, but they weren't and it wasn't, and after a few terrible bloody minutes they rolled Malfoy onto his back and Harry saw his face grey in the moonlight, but he was breathing properly again. He made a wild snatch for him, but the mediwizards had to Apparate with him to St Mungo's, and then they would not let Harry in because he wasn't a relative.

Katie Bell arrived in jeans and what looked like a pyjama top, saying: "I'm his partner," and Harry had been hard put to it not to snarl *No you're not*.

They'd let her in. Harry had waited in the stupid waiting room until Katie came back, looking scared and happy, and said: "He's lost a lot of blood – they're going to keep him in a private room for the night so you can't see him, but he's going to live – the mediwizards say he'll be OK. He's awake," she added. "He says it's the Christmas party tonight, and you should go to it."

"What?" Harry laughed, and the sound was terrible in his own ears. "Oh, of course," he said roughly. "You want to come as my date? What was he thinking?"

"He thought you might have fun," Katie said, looking puzzled. "Of course he didn't suggest that I go. He knew I'd be much too upset."

"I," Harry said, and found he had no words. She had no idea. Malfoy had no idea.

He went to the stupid Christmas party, because he was supposed to be able to go to a stupid party and have a good time, because he wasn't supposed to care if he saw his partner shot in front of his eyes. Katie was the one with the privilege of being upset.

The noise and light of the party were a jangling nightmare. He shied away like a spooked horse when a few of his colleagues spoke to him, and eventually he went into the archives room and sat down in the dark, leaning his head in his hands and seeing it, again and again: Malfoy sprawled on his face in the grass, killed because he'd followed Harry. It hadn't even mattered, at the time, that it was Harry's fault, it had only mattered that Malfoy was dying and nothing mattered at all anymore.

He felt cold, and sick: the couple of drinks he'd taken because refusing them meant talking were curdling in his stomach. He wanted to go see Malfoy, and he couldn't.

The door had opened, and the light had been switched on, and Harry had looked up, dazed and blinking and sick, to see the head of the Italian Aurors department, there to facilitate international Auror co-operation. He locked the door behind him.

“I saw you at the party,” the man said, his voice soft, accent strange and almost incomprehensible in Harry’s dulled ears. “You looked unhappy.”

Harry blinked and swallowed. Most of him still felt as if he was in that garden, watching Malfoy die.

“Someone as lovely as you shouldn’t go without comfort,” the man continued.

“What?” Harry asked, his voice thick in his own ears. “Go away.”

But he didn’t. He walked across the room towards Harry, and stood over him looking down at him with dark eyes that saw too much, and in the end Harry did it. That was his fault, too. He grabbed the man’s wrist too hard, grasped his black hair too hard later, and reached up blindly for some comfort.

Afterwards, he still felt cold.

That March, Shacklebolt called them in and gave them a case in Italy that apparently the Italian head of affairs felt Harry would be ideally suited for. There was an embezzler evading capture. His one weakness, Shacklebolt managed to indicate in a circuitous sort of way, was personable young men.

Harry had refused, but Malfoy had laughed and laughed and said he wanted to go to Italy.

They found the man in Florence, part of a wild, dancing group outside the palace of the Medicis, with one man fiddling and the whole crowd singing along.

“Go get him, tiger,” Malfoy said with a terrible look of glee, and leaned against a statue preparing to enjoy the fun.

Harry drew back. “I don’t dance.”

Malfoy looked impatient, looked over at their mark dancing in the middle of the crowd, and gave up. He joined the dance, twisting and laughing, making his way over to the mark, and when he got there he looked down at the man through his eyelashes and whispered something.

He emerged from the crowd two minutes later, his and the mark’s wrists joined with his charmed handcuffs.

“You are the worst gay man ever,” he declared to Harry. “Ten points to me. You owe me three dinners and a drink. Let’s Stun this one, put him in your hotel room, and go get that drink now.”

Over the drink, Malfoy paused in his crowing to say: “What I can’t work out is how the Italian guy knew you were that way inclined.”

There seemed no way around it, so Harry told him, and Malfoy tipped back his head and laughed, throat golden and exposed in the Italian sunlight.

“Well, well,” he said. “What was his name again?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said blankly.

Malfoy laughed some more. “I expect,” he said speculatively after a moment, “we don’t have to turn in that nefarious criminal just yet. We should probably have a few more days in Italy to, you know, tie up loose ends.” He looked around the piazza, sun-warmed and pleased with himself, and said: “This is all due to me: I sent you to that party.” He smiled and added, “I thought you’d have fun.”

*

“Wow, a points system,” Ron said. “You two may not have noticed, but we left school a while ago. I’m just saying, is all.” He stopped and added: “Harry, you usually win, right?”

Cuthbert looked badly upset.

“Being an Auror is supposed to be about helping the innocent,” he said as they got out of the limousine. “Not winning a game.”

“One wins the game by helping the innocent,” Malfoy said, yawning some more as he stumbled and Harry moved forward, but Vince and Greg were flanking Malfoy again. “Everybody wins! And you can go home now, Cuthbert. Shoo.”

“You’re dismissed, Cuthbert,” Harry said in a kindly and official way, which seemed to cheer Cuthbert up.

Malfoy watched Cuthbert go with a jaded air.

“Shacklebolt actually suggested to me I take on my trainee as an emergency partner,” he said. “He’s plotting to kill me. I always suspected as much.” They all began to climb the stairs towards Harry’s flat as Malfoy added moodily: “If they actually succeed in foisting Cuthbert on me, I shall quit. I never wanted to be an Auror anyway.”

Harry swallowed. “Didn’t you?”

He unlocked the door and Malfoy went in and lay down on the sofa. It was possible he should actually be in St Mungo’s, but forcing him to go would only make him worse.

“No,” Malfoy said, as Vince and Greg came to sit on either end of the sofa, still flanking him. “I wanted to be a professional Quidditch player in first and second year, and a politician in third year, and a journalist in fourth year, and an actor in fifth year, and a spy in sixth year. I never wanted to be an Auror.” He sighed tiredly, and then added in a slightly anxious voice: “It’s all right now, though.”

Harry brought him some coffee, and Malfoy smiled a wan smile and sat up to drink it.

“We’ve all done things we didn’t expect to do,” Ron said philosophically. “Anyway, Malfoy, it’s done you some good. You *threw* me: I had no idea you were that strong.”

“I had to work on that,” Malfoy said, too tired even to be smug. “Your best mate was beating me up in the practise rooms three times a week. I tried every trick I knew. I had to get stronger.”

“You could’ve said to go easy on you,” Harry said, stricken.

Malfoy sneered and looked twelve again, and full of competitive fury. “Hardly, Potter.” He brightened up as something occurred to him. “So, Weasley,” he said, face alight with mischief. “Since I was shot saving you, let’s talk about things you didn’t expect to do. Such as Lavender Brown. Did you or didn’t you?”

Apparently, since they were all going to be trapped here until Malfoy had measured everyone’s attraction to Harry, Malfoy felt this was time for a proper gossip. Maybe it was the blood loss talking.

“Er,” Ron said, and went red. “Er. Yeah.”

“You owe me four Galleons,” Malfoy told Vince, and looked smug.

Harry sat on the chair next to Ron’s. “You never said,” he said mildly.

“Well,” Ron said. “I was kind of – using her, and I felt pretty rotten about it. I didn’t need to gossip about her as well.” His eyes narrowed. “So, Malfoy, if we’re asking questions. Pansy. Did you or didn’t you?”

Malfoy, who ventured occasionally into fair play, grimaced and took another fortifying sip of coffee. “Actually,” he said. “I didn’t.”

“Oh,” Ron said, and looked very pleased.

“Came pretty close, though,” Malfoy said in a reminiscent tone.

“That’s enough, Malfoy,” Ron snapped, and then resumed looking very pleased. “So, is there any chance, d’you think, that Pansy-”

“That her scorecard reads only one, and that one ginger?” Malfoy asked, and shuddered theatrically. “I really doubt it. After all, you’re a Weasley, and even your scorecard reads three. I think.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “So? What about yours, Malfoy, if it comes to that?”

“One,” Malfoy said, looking both slightly rueful and slightly amused.

“*One?*” Harry repeated.

“I don’t see the point in going after anything but what you really want,” Malfoy said. “You people wouldn’t understand, you’re Gryffindors. Nott and Millicent got married right after school finished. Crabbe and Goyle have been together for nine years. And we all keep in touch. I’d say we’re loyal, but that’s a dirty Hufflepuff word, so just – there was a bit about Slytherin in one of the Sorting House song. *‘Perhaps in Slytherin, you’ll find your real*

friends, These cunning folk use any means to achieve their ends.””

There was a long pause.

“You know, really,” Ron said. “Where did that Hat get off telling us all that we shouldn’t be prejudiced and should unite, when it said stuff like that.”

“Trust a Gryffindor to miss the important part,” said Malfoy.

“And what’s the important part?”

Malfoy smiled and said, “Real friends. All of us, not just the ones we picked for our favourites.”

“Except Voldemort,” Harry said. “Not a friendly bloke.”

Malfoy scowled. “He was insane. That doesn’t count.”

“And Blaise is kind of – well,” Greg said. “His scorecard kind of looks like Weasley’s bank account.”

“He’s a Veela, they can’t control themselves,” Malfoy argued.

“*Hey*,” Harry exclaimed.

“Well, you do sleep with people without knowing their names,” Malfoy pointed out.

“Anyway, it was a general point. Slytherins are single-minded! It’s not about what you can get when you can get it. It’s about having a great ambition.”

He yawned and put his head down on Vince’s shoulder again, and once more Harry’s urge to shout and throw things at his head evaporated. He looked terribly tired.

“What is your scorecard, anyway?” Ron asked, sounding curious.

“Four,” Harry said shortly.

“One,” said Vince, at the same time Greg said: “Two.”

“*What?*” said Vince.

There was a distressing silence.

“Um,” Greg said. “We were on a break.”

Malfoy’s eyes snapped open. “What, you didn’t know about that, Crabbe?”

Vince looked even more enraged. “Are you saying that you *did*?”

“Nooo,” Malfoy said, with something less than Slytherin cunning. “I – I’m going to go – don’t break up,” he said, and Harry felt a pang of empathy: the same kind of panicked unease

as he remembered when Hermione and Ron were together had crossed Malfoy's face.

Malfoy got up, eyeing both of his friends as if they might explode, and went over to sit by Harry's chair.

"You should lie down," Harry said. "You lost a lot of blood, and you're exhausted."

"Sleep is a fallacy," Malfoy murmured, and laid his cheek against Harry's knee. He was asleep in about a minute.

Vince and Greg were having an urgent whispered conversation and Ron was eyeing them with extreme discomfort. Harry reached out and brushed Malfoy's hair back, gently: he didn't want to wake him, he only wanted him to be more comfortable.

"A *Hufflepuff*?" Vince shouted.

"Don't *wake him*," Harry snarled, and heard the weird harmonics back in his voice.

"I have to go, anyway, I can't stay, I – I'm too attracted to Harry!" Greg announced.

"Really?" Ron asked incredulously.

Greg darted a desperate testing sort of glance at Harry, and then looked stunned. "Actually, yes."

"Please go," Harry said, and his voice was his own again, and rather small.

"I'll talk to you later," Greg told Vince, and fled.

He left a rather awkward silence behind him, which was broken by Malfoy cooing in his sleep.

Vince, who had been looking tense and unhappy, cast a reminiscent glance at Malfoy.

"I'd forgotten he does that," he said. "And Greg snores like a bellows, and Blaise talks dirty in his sleep because you know how Veela are."

"Harry never did that," Ron said earnestly. "And for that, I am thankful."

"Sometimes I had to go sleep in the common room," Vince added, in the manner of a man brooding over his wrongs. "It was draughty in our common room."

"Neville used to snore," Ron said. "And Harry was always waking up yelling that his scar was hurting. Wasn't any picnic in our dormitory either. And now Pansy elbows me in her sleep."

"Greg still snores like a bellows," Vince said gloomily.

"I sleep alone," Harry said grimly. "Count your blessings."

The other two instantly looked more cheerful, which really didn't help Harry's mood. Vince admitted that he and Greg had been on a break, and Ron talked about how delighted he was that Pansy had never slept with Malfoy, 'not that there's anything wrong with Malfoy, nothing at all' he added hastily when Vince shifted his shoulders into a slightly more massive shape.

It was six o'clock when Vince abruptly winced, sprayed his mint container into his mouth, and left without looking at Harry again.

"Nice bloke, Vince," Ron said. "Can't imagine what he sees in the other two. Greg's not the brightest, and Malfoy's still kind of unbear-"

Harry stared at him icily.

"I get on fine with them all, really," Ron said hurriedly. "I just like Vince best. Well, I like Pansy best, actually, but you'd probably guessed that." He paused. "I really am sorry about getting him shot. I just – you were on your own. I wanted to have your back."

"He had my back," Harry said. "But it's OK. I mean, I know you didn't mean it. I'm sorry. This whole Veela thing has me on edge, it's a nightmare. I don't know what to do."

"Er. Harry," Ron said, in a suddenly conspiratorial voice. "There is one thing."

Harry leaned forward. "What?"

Ron went red. "Well, Seamus Finnegan told me once about this place called Sinistra's Sinnin' -"

"I've heard of it," Harry said flatly.

"Oh right," said Ron. "Well, it was just a thought. Look, I swear I'm not attracted to you, but I told Pansy I'd be home for dinner, so-"

"Yeah, go," Harry said.

"See you tomorrow," Ron said, and clapped him on the shoulder before he left.

Darkness bled into the sky, as if ink was leaking into it and dyeing the blue darker blue, and then grey, and finally black. Malfoy stirred as the stars came out.

"Where did everyone else go?" he asked, and yawned.

"Home," Harry said.

"I should go to that place too," Malfoy said, his voice still a little rough with sleep. "Can I borrow a shirt? Katie won't like seeing the blood."

"Sure," Harry said.

Malfoy scrubbed at his face with one hand, and pulled off his shirt and threw it in Harry's

dustbin. It lay there, shredded and bloody and looking a little abandoned.

Harry went and stood in the doorway as Malfoy rummaged in his wardrobe for the second time that day, this time casually shirtless and insulting Harry's taste in clothes.

"You can't dance and all your clothes are horrible. Maybe you're not gay," he said. "Maybe this is all a terrible misunderstanding and you only meant to tell people you were feeling cheerful in a rather old-fashioned way and then you were too embarrassed to correct them. If that's it, you can tell me."

He wrinkled his nose at another Weasley jumper, and finally stretched, long and lean, and pulled on a black and entirely nondescript shirt. It was pretty loose on Harry, and so on Malfoy the sleeves covered half his fingers.

"I'm fairly sure I'm gay," Harry said dryly.

"I suppose Crabbe and Goyle aren't exactly dancing devils either," Malfoy said. He looked over at Harry, and normal teasing brimmed over into what seemed to be nervous excitement. "Want to know a secret?" he asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, and smiled back at him.

"I'm going to ask Katie tonight," Malfoy told him. "Getting shot puts things in perspective. Life is fleeting. Delay is fatal. Wish me luck."

Harry looked at Malfoy, too pale, still obviously tired, fair hair gleaming in the low light, and swallowed. His mouth was dry: when he spoke, his voice had all these strange sounds in it, like hissing snakes and hunting birds.

He said: "Good luck."

Chapter Five

Harry was told the first rule of the Aurors during his first class in training camp, but he wasn't really paying attention at the time because the seating was alphabetical. He and Malfoy had taken one horrified look at each other and then spent the entire class almost falling off either side of the desk.

The problem had been solved by mutual and urgent application to the teacher after class, but it hadn't really been how Harry had pictured his first step on the way to becoming an Auror.

He *learned* the first rule of the Aurors when he was twenty, in circumstances that also involved Malfoy and a desk.

They'd been partners for two months. It'd been going fairly well, Harry thought. They had a good case record, and Malfoy had some good ideas, and when they forgot to fight Malfoy was even almost all right to talk to.

He was rubbing his eyes and trying to finish a report when Malfoy burst through the double doors and bore down on him incandescent with fury, like an enraged light bulb.

"What," he snapped, "the hell is wrong with you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harry snapped back instinctively, and then added: "I think you left a dent in the walls."

Malfoy went in for gestures like that. It was kind of a pity they hadn't had a drama club at school. Harry thought it would've helped Malfoy to have an opportunity to vent.

"I don't care about the walls," Malfoy said. "Now I'm going to recite a few words for you. Stop me if they begin to form a familiar pattern. Ravening ghouls. Graveyard on fire. *Last night-*"

Yes, Harry thought. Drama club would've done him a world of good.

"Oh, that," he said. "Yeah. What's your point?"

Malfoy looked like he was about to punch Harry, so Harry dropped his quill and clenched his fist so he'd be ready to punch him back. "My *point* is," Malfoy said between his teeth. "Where was I?"

"I don't know, in bed?" Harry said. "It was pretty late."

Malfoy looked at Harry down his nose. Since Harry was sitting down and Malfoy had perfected the art of looking down his nose at people when he was eleven and shorter than the entire world, it was pretty effective.

"Look," Harry said. "We weren't on the clock. It was kind of a hunch. I get those."

"I *know that*," Malfoy said. "Why didn't you tell me? I would've gone *with you*."

“Listen,” Harry said. “All my partners so far, we’ve had an understanding. I can follow hunches to whatever— usually violent and messy — “conclusion they reach, as long as I don’t drag them into the whole mess. That works for me. I don’t really have time to stand around explaining situations to people who’ll just tell me I’m crazy and refuse to go and report me to Shacklebolt. I do best on my own.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “Not any more you don’t.”

It sounded more like Malfoy was threatening Harry’s life than offering to defend it, so Harry glared back at him and said nothing.

“Now, Potter,” Malfoy spat. “You look, and you listen. I don’t like you and I don’t like this *stupid* job, but I’m going to get it right and you’re not going to mess it up for me. The first rule of the Aurors is *No man alone*. It’s on a sign. Right above the no-smoking sign in Shacklebolt’s office. Which means you have to learn to read, and also that I’m going to be along every time you have one of your *stupid* hunches, watching your *stupid* back!”

Malfoy gave him a crazed and somehow resentful look, as if Harry had just won the Quidditch Cup again instead of staying up all night fighting horrible ghouls.

“Fine,” Harry bit out. “You can come along and almost get killed. I’m sure you’ll really enjoy it.”

“I’m not scared!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Who said you were? I get it. You can come along. I won’t take up smoking. Did you have anything else to say?”

“Not really,” Malfoy said in a suddenly calm voice, and he reached down and snapped a handcuff around Harry’s left wrist.

“Hey!” Harry exclaimed, outraged. “What are you—”

He cut himself off because at that point he looked up at Malfoy and became distracted. Malfoy had leaned close to get the handcuff on him, his lashes were lowered and his face intent, and Harry had a sudden flash of memory of himself back in the Black house, back in the war days, looking for Zacharias and finding Malfoy.

For some ridiculous reason he became very aware that Malfoy’s jumper was blue.

Harry seldom gave much thought to which way people tended: it was their own business unless they made it his business too, and he realised he really had no idea about Malfoy. On one hand, there was the drama club vibe, and on the other hand, there was the evidence of Pansy Parkinson. He was pretty sure they’d been an item in school.

Of course, so had he and Ginny. Malfoy had snogged a drag queen at that club once, too, but that had been part of Malfoy’s plan and resulted in a drug bust. He’d whistled at Katie Bell once, but Shacklebolt had reprimanded him so severely for inappropriate behaviour in the workplace that Malfoy’d spent the rest of the day whistling at everyone who went by. Especially Shacklebolt.

Harry had no idea, but they were alone and Malfoy'd suddenly whipped out handcuffs of all things, and turning him down was going to be hugely, enormously awkward-

Of course, Harry thought slowly, he could - *not* turn him down.

It was a mad thought, because really, they worked together and Malfoy was a twerp, the consequences would be terrible, but Harry had never really cared all that much about consequences. Right now, what he cared about was the sudden difficulty he had just breathing and waiting to see what Malfoy would do next.

Malfoy passed the links of the handcuffs between the wooden latticework partition that separated their desks, then leaned closer to Harry. For a moment he was very close. Harry sat and stared at the intent gleam of his grey eyes, the bridge of his sharp nose.

Then he snapped the other cuff around Harry's right wrist and stepped back.

"Ha," he announced, his voice tentatively gloating.

Harry tried to stand up. The handcuffs held him where he was.

"Malfoy," he growled, all trace of any - thoughts gone with a rush of familiar fury. "What d'you think you're trying to pull?"

"Well, it's like this," Malfoy explained to him, obviously getting more comfortable with the whole gloating thing. "I noticed something while I was in our idiots in training camp. Gryffindors don't listen. They really don't. They do much better with practical demonstrations, so I thought I'd provide one." He grinned like a wolf. "You don't leave your partner behind. Without your partner, you are *chained to your desk*." He paused for effect, and then added sweetly: "You don't need to thank me."

"Thank you?" Harry exclaimed. "I am going to *kill* you! Uncuff me right now!"

Malfoy laid down the syllable with the transparent glee of someone laying down an ace. "No."

Harry wrenched at the cuffs and felt something like an electric shock bite around his wrists.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Malfoy warned him. "They're enchanted. I saw them in a - movie-" he pronounced the word carefully - "about Muggle Aurors that I went to. Then I got some and I made them better. It took ages," he added with pride. "They're brilliant, aren't they?"

Harry spoke quietly and clearly, so even the insane could understand him. "I am going to hex you until your eyes fall out of your head and into your lap."

"I'll let you out in the morning once you've learned your lesson," Malfoy promised.

"I'm going to punch you in the morning."

“Yes,” Malfoy said, viewing him with immense amusement. “I thought you might. But this is all kinds of worth it.”

“Malfoy, what if I need to go to the bathroom?”

Malfoy shrugged. “I guess you should’ve gone before I chained you up.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” Harry exploded. “You don’t make any sense!”

“Hmm. I’m going to go now,” Malfoy told him. “See you in the morning.”

“Uncuff me right now or I’ll make you regret it! I damn well will go places without you. I’ll go everywhere without you, I won’t even let you in the *car*, if you don’t uncuff me right this minute.”

Malfoy’s amusement faded and his eyes narrowed again, until they looked like chips of ice. “Don’t push me, Potter,” he warned, and fished around in his jeans. He tossed a small, gleaming key up into the air, and caught it with his other hand. “Or I swear I’ll *swallow* it.”

Harry wrenched at the cuffs again and again the electric shock bit at his wrists. He felt trapped and extremely stupid and entirely furious. He didn’t know what he’d been thinking. Malfoy was unbearable and in the morning he was going to kill him, no jury in the world would convict him, and he’d have a new partner. Any partner would be better.

“This is for your own good,” Malfoy added in a sanctimonious tone, his eyes dancing with glee once more. “We’re learning and growing together.”

“I’m chained up and you’re full of it,” Harry snapped. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Well,” Malfoy said, and burst out laughing. “Yeah, I really am. Sometimes working can be fun!”

Harry snarled another threat to Malfoy’s life. Malfoy was still laughing as he went out the door, throwing a glance and a wink over his shoulder.

Harry spent the night picturing a bloody and vivid revenge, getting cold and getting cramp and getting steadily more furious. Malfoy came in early enough that even the cleaning staff didn’t see Harry cuffed to his desk, and let him go. Harry, just as he’d promised, hit Malfoy in the face.

Malfoy was a crazy person who handcuffed people to desks, but he wasn’t wrong. Harry remembered what he’d said, tried to keep to it, ended up finding comfort in it.

No man alone. You don’t leave your partner behind.

*

“If you are here for sex, go away!” Harry said, and slammed the door.

He’d been opening the door on the chain since an unfortunate incident with the milkman, and

now that he'd opened the door a fraction and seen Dean Thomas' face in the chink he was even more aware that this was a wise precaution.

It was very late, and he just wanted everyone in the world to go away so he could try to deal with things. Malfoy, getting married. It wouldn't be so different. He already lived with Katie, already loved her: it didn't *matter*, not really. It wouldn't change anything.

He heard Dean Thomas snort from behind the door.

"You're such a tool, Harry. I swear to God."

This did not exactly strike Harry as the language of love.

"What?"

"Let me in," Dean said. "Look, I think I need your help. Open the door." He paused, and then added in a voice that was cringing away from the words it had to use: "I won't – leap at you. I've got peppermint."

"You'd better have peppermint," Harry told him. "Because I'll kill you if you try anything."

He unchained the door and opened it. Outside, Dean Thomas stood. He looked cross and embarrassed, he wasn't looking at Harry, and he had a black eye and a bloody nose.

"What happened to you?"

"Oh, this?" Dean asked. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. I don't care. I'm not sure if I was right to come here," he said abruptly. "I mean, it's not like you give a toss about anyone outside your special little circle."

"I did save the world that one time," Harry pointed out coldly.

"I didn't mean it that way," Dean said. "I mean, obviously you care about other people's lives, it's just other people's feelings you don't notice-"

"Look, I'm sorry about Ginny, but that was a long time ago and-"

"Who's talking about Ginny?" Dean snapped, starting at the name. "I'm talking about *Malfoy*. Maybe you hadn't noticed, but normal people don't chuck partners who've helped them get from the bottom to the top without so much as a word of warning, and then expect to pick them up again whenever they feel like it."

"That's not how it was," Harry snarled.

"That's how it looked," Dean snarled back. "You know, before I was assigned Louison, I told Malfoy I'd be happy to have him for a partner."

Harry went still and looked at this partner-poaching menace with sudden cold rage. He was glad he'd kissed Ginny in front of him, he thought. If it wasn't for the fact that every Weasley including Ginny would kill him if he tried, he'd do it again.

“Did you,” he said. There were no sibilants to hiss in those two words, but he gave it his best shot.

“We get on well and I can cope with him when he gets weird. Sort of. I thought it’d be for the best. But he said no. Don’t ask me why, but he likes you. That’s why I came.”

“And why did you come?”

“Because Malfoy’s tearing up the Auror headquarters and I don’t know what to do!” Dean burst out.

“He’s what? Explain,” Harry ordered. “Quickly.”

“I was in after hours doing a report I should’ve finished weeks ago, and he came in and started smashing things,” Dean said in an exaggeratedly slow voice. “There were desks and plants and giant peppermints flying around. When I asked him what was wrong, he threw a chair at me. He’s gone crazy and he’s going to get fired. Do you know what’s wrong with him? Can you do anything to stop him?”

“I can Stun him if I have to,” Harry said. “Get out of my way.”

He strode back into the room and snatched up his wand, which was lying on the table. Dean followed him inside.

“Do you know what happened?” he pursued.

“He was proposing to Katie Bell tonight,” Harry said tersely, the wand locked in his fingers. “But I don’t understand why that would – she’s crazy about him-”

“Is she?” Dean asked. “I’m not so sure about that. He’s crazy about *her*.”

Harry could barely hold onto his wand and he certainly couldn’t think. He’d never really thought about it from Katie’s point of view, he’d just assumed that she wasn’t completely stupid and knew what she had, and he didn’t have time to think about it now.

“Do you think we should-” Dean began, but Harry cut him off.

“He’s *my* partner,” he said, and this time he did hiss the words, the sound heavy and curling around his tongue. “Leave him to me.”

He Disapparated with a crack and appeared in the Auror headquarters in time to dodge an oncoming filing cabinet. He dropped and rolled, the cabinet hit the wall with a crash, and the next minute he was on his feet and staring at Malfoy.

Malfoy’s face was grazed in several places, possibly by flying shards of glass and possibly by flying shards of peppermint. His hair was wild and there was something distinctly frightening about his eyes.

He said: “So Thomas went running to fetch you, did he?”

*

Malfoy had his wand out and was standing in the middle of a storm. Even as he spoke, there were pieces of furniture flying through the air, hitting one wall and then picking themselves up and hurling themselves against the next wall, as if they were on a furniture suicide mission and would keep on doing it until they were battered into dust and fragments.

Harry raised his own wand and deflected lamps and chairs to get to the moving eye of the storm, where Malfoy was. Malfoy shied away and Harry kept coming.

“What happened?” Harry shouted over the sound of the furniture whirlwind.

“What do you care?” Malfoy shouted back. “Go away!”

“I care,” Harry said. “Tell me.”

Malfoy gestured with his wand and a desk crashed through a window. Glass exploded outside and a faint crash was heard from the street: he took a deep breath and said in a fraught voice: “I – asked Katie.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

“I thought,” Malfoy said and swallowed painfully, as if the broken glass was in his mouth. “I thought I should tell her – I’ve never told her – about the necklace. That I was sorry it hurt her. How much I – how much I loved her for forgiving me. I thought I should tell her.” He laughed suddenly, as if he was choking on the broken glass and trying to spit it back up. “Turns out she didn’t know.”

“Oh Christ,” said Harry.

“Telling your girlfriend you almost killed her is not a good way to start out a proposal,” Malfoy informed him. “It’s also not a good idea to go on with the proposal afterwards. I said to her, I nearly killed you, I didn’t mean to, I meant to kill someone else. Then I said, no wait, I’m sorry, that came out wrong, I love you, marry me.” He stopped and laughed that terrible laugh again. “It didn’t go well.”

“I’ve gathered that,” Harry said.

A potted plant hit the door of Shacklebolt’s office, and fell with a sad slithering sound. Harry thought it was dead.

“She doesn’t want to marry me,” Malfoy said. “She wants to break up.”

“She’s just – she’s just a bit shocked,” Harry told him. “She’ll change her mind. And – even if she doesn’t, Malfoy, it’s not the end of the world.”

A desk almost hit him in the face. He threw himself down, the mass of wood flying over his head and ruffling his hair, and hit the floor behind him with a crash of splintering wood.

He looked up. Malfoy stood above him, looking as if he wanted to cry or murder someone.

“Yes it *is*!” he shouted. “Yes, it is. For me it is. I – you don’t get it, do you?”

Harry climbed to his feet and shoved Malfoy in the chest. Malfoy stumbled back and then caught himself. “Tell me, then!” Harry said. “That’s what I keep saying! Tell me.”

“I,” Malfoy said, his voice trembling and raging. “My dad. I always tried, I tried to be like he wanted me to be and I could never manage it. I always failed. And then – I couldn’t kill Dumbledore and he was in Azkaban and – Mother died and it was all because of me, it was because *I* failed.”

He clawed through his own hair: there was a streak of blood in the blond strands.

“Only Katie was so good to me when Mother died, she was so *good*, and I thought – I thought maybe it was all right that I’d failed. Because people like Katie shouldn’t be killed. Dad was wrong, I was wrong, but I could make up for it. I could be like Katie wanted me to be and she’d love me and that would make everything right, I wouldn’t have failed after all, but if I did, if I failed *again*, then what good is anything?”

He looked at Harry. He looked bleak and fierce and young.

“If I’m not what she wants,” he said. “Then I’m still that stupid sixteen year old kid who tried to kill Dumbledore and got my parents killed instead. So tell me again that this isn’t the end of the world.”

“It’s not,” Harry said. “You’re still you.”

“I know I am!” Malfoy almost howled at him. “That’s the whole *problem*. I’m not, I’m never good enough and now there’s nothing left!”

“There is,” Harry told him. “There’s me.”

Malfoy stared at him, caught in a moment of stillness, as if Malfoy was a bird and Harry’d just shot him and this was the moment before Malfoy fell.

Malfoy did fall. He collapsed onto the broken heap of desk as if his legs couldn’t hold him anymore, his clenched fist pressed against his forehead, his arm hiding his eyes. It took Harry a moment to realise that he was laughing again, that spitting up glass laugh, though this time it was quiet.

“How can you,” Malfoy said at last in a torn sort of voice. “How can you just say things like that? How can you be that sure?”

“I don’t,” Harry said. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m sure about some things.”

The Aurors’ headquarters was still now, even if it was all broken. Harry wasn’t sure what he had said, but it seemed to have worked. Malfoy was just sitting there, hunched over himself. His shoulders weren’t shaking, but Harry knew that it was only because he was pulled together so tightly.

Harry knelt by the broken desk, reached out and took hold of Malfoy's wrist. Malfoy's hand was still clenched around his wand.

"C'mon," he said gruffly. "Come back to my place. You can get some sleep, and in the morning you can get her back."

"In the morning," Malfoy echoed. "Right."

He got a hand under Malfoy's elbow and helped him up. There was a deep gash scored right beside Malfoy's eye: he reached up and touched it before he thought.

"Don't do that again," he commanded softly. "You could've really hurt yourself."

Most of Malfoy seemed lost in misery, but for a moment a bit of him surfaced from misery and looked slightly startled. "Right," he said again, sounding uncertain, and then glanced around the room. "Hurt, I hardly think so," he scoffed. "I can take any room. I beat this one to a pulp."

It wasn't one of his best efforts, but Harry smiled and relief eased his shoulders down a little.

"Yes, you certainly showed it. Let's-"

"We're making a stop," Malfoy said.

Malfoy insisted that they go to a grocery shop and he bought a bottle of vodka, thin hands trembling in the fluorescent lights.

"I'm sorry to say that I can't offer you any, Potter," he said once they were out in the night, unscrewing the red cap of the bottle. "I need it. If you wanted some, you should've got your own."

He tipped the bottle up, his mouth wrapped around the glass neck, and Harry watched the clear liquid swirl away under glass and shadow.

"Quite a week we've had," Malfoy said between swallows. Harry shrugged.

Malfoy was quite clearly using the alcohol as a tranquiliser for himself, so he didn't collapse and betray anything else or do something other wild thing like destroying their headquarters but worse. He drank deliberately and methodically, his shoulders still taut with the effort of not shaking, and Harry hated it.

He didn't want Malfoy to have Katie back, not at all, but suddenly in the cold of night and with Malfoy's pale closed-up face before him, he did. If Malfoy was going to look like this – like a house that had been condemned and was being torn down, then she had to come back.

He'd torn down Number Twelve Grimmauld Place after the war was over and the Order didn't need it anymore. The line of Malfoy's shoulders now made him think of his last sight of that house.

He took Malfoy home. Malfoy sat on the edge of his sofa and kept grimly drinking until he more or less passed out and then Harry put him to bed.

After he'd done that he Apparated back to the headquarters and found Dean Thomas already tidying up.

Dean nodded at him. "I see you got him calmed down, then."

"Sort of," Harry said.

He started tidying alongside Dean in silence. Dean didn't ask questions. He'd always been quiet, Harry remembered: quiet, artistic, a good solid guy. He'd talked Seamus down in fifth year. Harry remembered him crushing a glass in his fist when he saw Ginny and Harry together and he couldn't remember why he'd smiled: it all seemed impossible and faraway. He'd been sixteen and thoughtless and riding on adrenaline and thinking of sunny days, triumph, a lot of things beside the people Ginny and Dean actually were and what they might feel.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I shouldn't've smiled. I mean, back then. I just – I wasn't thinking."

Dean straightened up from trying to fix a desk.

"Oh," he said, and then smiled. "That's okay."

They didn't talk any more after that. Harry kept thinking of Malfoy's wild, desperate face. He didn't know what Dean was thinking about, though at one point he gave Harry an apologetic look, stepped over the carnage of what had been a filing cabinet and picked some pieces of peppermint up from the floor. He put them in his mouth.

"Um," Harry said.

"You can't find it any weirder than I do," Dean muttered.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Want to bet?"

*

He got home at about six and kipped on the sofa for a couple of hours. Then he woke to a rainy Saturday morning, made a cup of coffee and went into his room.

The heap of the covers on the bed emitted a terrible sound, like an ostrich with its head in the sand and in its death agonies.

"Is that coffee?" Malfoy asked hollowly. "Give it to me."

Harry leaned over the bed and offered the cup cautiously: the fact Malfoy had said that in no way proved he was actually awake, it just proved he was alive. However after a minute, Malfoy struggled out of the covers, hair ruffled and static and bright in the morning light. He looked kind of grey.

“Where am I?” he said, and then frowned up at Harry and the ceiling. “Oh, I’m in your bed,” he announced in tones of revelation. “Huh. I’m the envy of thousands of women,” he added, sounding mildly pleased. He snagged the coffee cup, caught Harry’s frown and continued consolingly: “Several men also, I’m sure.”

“Oh thanks,” said Harry.

Malfoy tipped back his coffee. “*Why* did you let me drink so much?” he asked once it was all gone, sounding considerably less lost and confused. “How am I going to win Katie back feeling like someone hit a Bludger into the back of my head and then it came out of my face?”

“How d’you think I should have stopped you?”

“Fair point,” Malfoy allowed. “All right. I’m going to borrow some clothes I haven’t slept in, and then we’re going to go to Katie’s and pretend we’re there to move my stuff out. And you’re not going to let me say anything stupid, and I’m going to-”

He shook his head and climbed out of bed.

“What?” Harry asked. “What are you going to do?”

Malfoy looked over his shoulder at Harry and Harry saw he’d been wrong after all: Malfoy did still look lost. “Beg,” Malfoy said. “Plead. I don’t know. What does it matter, as long as it works?”

*

It was raining by the time they arrived at the building where Katie and Malfoy lived. Malfoy pressed the buzzer as if he hadn’t been endlessly puzzled by it three years ago.

“Katie,” he said, his voice changing as it always did when he spoke to her, all the sharp edges smoothed away. “Can I come in? Potter’s with me,” he added. “I’ve come to get my stuff.”

She met them at the door. Her braid was messy and she’d been crying, Harry noticed, but all the furniture in the flat was intact.

“Hi,” she said quietly. “Look, Draco, you don’t have to move out – it’s your flat-”

Malfoy’s eyebrows drew together, a faint line appearing between them. “It’s yours,” he said. “I bought it for you.”

“You can’t just give me a flat,” Katie told him.

“I can,” Malfoy said. “I don’t want it: I hate it. It’s yours.”

“You hate it,” Katie repeated, and then she took a deep breath. “See, Draco. That’s what I was talking about.”

“I think I’ll go pack up stuff in the bedroom,” Harry said, brandishing a cardboard box as evidence of their good intentions.

He didn’t want to: he didn’t want to leave Malfoy there in the hall, looking like a soldier going into battle and scared stiff about it, didn’t want to leave her to hurt him again, but this was obviously a private moment and Harry couldn’t insist on hanging around every time Malfoy and Katie were alone together.

He walked into the bedroom, which he noted was cream-coloured with pale roses on the bedcovers. He’d never really thought about it much, but it *didn’t* look like Malfoy lived here.

Those were his clothes in the wardrobe though, and Harry began piling them haphazardly into the box as he tried to listen and wondered how he was supposed to stop Malfoy saying something stupid.

“Do you not like the flat?” Malfoy was saying. “If you don’t like it, we can move.”

“I do like the flat and I want you to stop it,” Katie told him. It sounded like she was fighting back tears already. “We’re not – we’re not moving anywhere. We’re not doing anything. We can’t. I don’t want to.”

“Okay,” Malfoy said, sounding strained. “Okay. I realise that I – that last night didn’t go well. Pretend I didn’t say anything. You must have known about – what I was talking about last night – you knew I was trying to kill Dumbledore. You can’t have thought there were two killers wandering the school. I mean, that’d be a bit much, even for *our* school.”

“No,” Katie said. “No, I knew. I suppose I knew. I just didn’t – I never wanted to talk about it. You can’t – you can’t just *say* things like that, Draco, not just before you propose. That’s crazy.”

“All right,” Malfoy said after a pause. “I won’t do it again.”

Katie took a deep, shaky breath. “I know you won’t.”

Malfoy took a deep breath too, as if he was copying her. “I’ll say anything you want me to say,” he said. “You just need to tell me. I can do this-”

“No!” Katie screamed.

Harry had never heard her scream before.

“No,” she said, in her usual soft voice. “Draco, no. Just – just stop. It’s my fault – I – a lot of girls think about something like this, about a guy coming to her and loving her more than anything, loving her like mad and doing everything to please her. I thought about it. I thought that was something I wanted, but Draco, it’s not. It’s too much pressure. It’s all too much.”

“All right,” Malfoy began again, but she kept talking and he stopped.

“I don’t want this,” said Katie. “I don’t want to be living in some – epic romance or tragedy. I don’t like it, I was stupid, what I want is – is some guy who’ll ask me out for a drink and not

ask me for the rest of my life, someone who'll like me and then maybe love me after a bit and never scare me with it and never – I don't want to feel like avalanches could happen any minute. I'm – I'm tired of it. I want it to stop."

"I can stop," Malfoy told her, with a tone in his voice that said an avalanche could happen. "I will. I'll do anything you want."

"I don't want you to do anything I want!" Katie snapped. "And – and you won't, anyway. I asked you last Christmas when you almost died. I said that I admired the Aurors but if we were going to be serious I'd prefer it if you found a less dangerous line of work. I asked you to quit. And I know you won't quit."

"I can't quit," Malfoy said savagely. "He'll die."

Harry stopped throwing clothes into the box and just started listening shamelessly.

"He's grown up," Katie said, her voice shaking. "He's perfectly able to take care of himself."

"He *isn't*," Malfoy growled. "He'll go off and he won't have a plan and he'll do some big hero thing and his luck will run out and nobody will have his back and he'll *die*, and anyway, I have to be an Auror, I have to-"

"It's fine," Katie said. "I'm sorry, I wasn't – it wouldn't matter if you quit."

"Okay," Malfoy said, apparently recovering his calm. "Okay, good. Thank you. I'm sorry you've felt – pressured or whatever," he said, pronouncing each word as if he was talking a foreign language. "We'll – we can take it easy. I'll move out for a while if that makes you happier. We love each other and we can work this out."

There was a long pause. Harry could picture Malfoy's face, and was trying not to.

"Draco," Katie said in a whisper. "I don't love you."

"...Oh," said Malfoy quietly, as if someone had stabbed him. There was another long pause and then he spoke again, and he *still* sounded like someone had stabbed him. "That's – strange," he said with difficulty. "Since you said that you did."

"I mean-" Katie said, and the words tumbled out of her, words falling all over each other, not that any words were ever going to be enough. "I mean, I do love you, of course I do, but I'm not – I'm not in love with you. I thought, I thought I could be, and you were always there and you were good to me and you asked me if I did. Draco, you asked me, and I couldn't say I didn't."

"Why *not*?" Malfoy demanded. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. Why would you say something like that, if you didn't mean it? I don't understand-"

"I don't understand you either," Katie said in a low voice. "I don't think we ever understood each other very well."

"I see."

“Draco,” Katie said, her voice almost reaching a scream again. “Draco, please don’t look like that. I didn’t mean to hurt you, I never wanted to. I kept trying – I kept hoping – I did think-”

“But you don’t,” Malfoy said, his voice very calm. “No. I see. I understand.”

“Think about it, Draco,” she said, her voice suddenly hopeful, as if Malfoy being calm was ever a good sign. “It’s better this way. I mean, I know you had to – I know you used to tire yourself out on the job or in the practise rooms with Harry on purpose, so we could relax together. That wasn’t a healthy way to live, Draco. We can be friends now. Things will be much better-”

Harry tucked the box in the crook of his arm and lunged for the door before Malfoy killed her.

He found Katie and Malfoy standing on either side of the hall. Katie’s face was flushed, tears clinging to her eyelashes, and Malfoy was leaning against the opposite wall looking like a vampire: his face dead-white and his eyes slitted, searching for a way to hurt her.

“Things will be much better,” he drawled. “I agree completely. I don’t know how I could ever have thought about lowering myself enough to marry a Mu-”

Harry didn’t really recall walking to him, but he suddenly had him pressed up against the wall. Malfoy’s eyes snapped fully open and he glared at him.

Harry glared right back. “Come on, Malfoy,” he said into his ear. “You’re better than this.”

Malfoy cursed, equally low. “No I’m not,” he snarled, eyes glittering. “I’m *not*, I’m *not*.”

“We can go,” Harry said. “We can go now.”

Malfoy clenched his fists and pushed Harry back, gently. He closed his eyes for a moment and then straightened up, pulling away from the wall, and walked over to Katie. She stared at him with her eyes full of tears and he reached out and touched the side of her neck, a curl of hair, gently as well.

“I’m sorry,” Katie whispered.

Malfoy bowed his head in an almost formal gesture. When he spoke his voice sounded formal too, like a gentleman bidding a lady goodbye after an evening party.

“You made me very happy,” he said. “I hope you’ll be happy now. I do.”

He lifted his head and stepped away from her, moving for the door.

It was open when Katie asked helplessly: “What should I – what should I do with the rest of your things?”

Malfoy’s moment of grace had obviously been used up. He snarled: “Burn it all,” strode out and slammed the door.

Leaving Harry trapped inside with a crying girl.

“I’ve got to-” Harry said, his voice curt with awkwardness, but also with his entire lack of sympathy or understanding. “I’m going after him.”

Katie blinked back tears with an effort, to his enormous relief. “Take care of him.”

“Oh, I will,” Harry said.

“Do you,” Katie asked suddenly, hands clasped tight together. “Do you think I’m awful?”

“No,” Harry said ungraciously, opening the door with one hand. “I just think you’re an idiot.”

He closed the door behind himself and went down the stairs after Malfoy, fast. He caught up with him as Malfoy was going out the door of the building and Malfoy turned to him, his face still white and desperate, and seized the box out of Harry’s hands.

He threw it in a wild arc across the street, and as it landed in the gutter he shouted:
“*Incendio!*”

Even under the steady rain, the box exploded into flames. Malfoy stood and watched it burn, shoulders shaking in Harry’s thin white shirt.

“I’m glad,” he said at last, and totally unconvincingly. “I’m glad, I’m glad – I always hated that place.”

He turned and ran down the street. Harry left the box burning behind them and pounded after him in the falling rain. They both ran until Malfoy stopped, chest heaving, looking vicious and amazed, as if he’d expected outrunning his own pain to work.

“It’s okay,” Harry promised him. “It’s okay, it’s okay. You’ll – I’m sure you can get her back.”

“No I can’t!” Malfoy shouted at him. “Of course I can’t. Didn’t you hear? Were you not listening? I tried – I tried everything I could think of, I tried every way I knew how, and she doesn’t love me!”

Harry swallowed. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I heard that.”

Malfoy was in his face, looking as if he hated him. “Maybe you don’t understand completely, being a *Veela* and everything,” he said, spitting the word. “But in the real world, for everybody else, this is how it works. You can’t make someone love you if they don’t. You can’t do a God-damned thing.”

“I *know that!*” Harry snapped. “And don’t talk to me about the stupid *Veela* thing. That isn’t – you’re not stupid, even if you are upset. What good is it? It’s pointless and stupid and I hate it, it doesn’t even work, not in any way that might do any good, so shut up about it right now!”

Malfoy looked wild, as if he wanted to punch Harry. Harry wished he would.

Then Malfoy folded up, literally, and sat on the rain-slick pavement with his knees drawn up and his head in his arms.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was rotten of me. You haven’t done anything. Nobody’s done anything wrong, actually. She’s not obligated – so I should, I should be fine.”

He swallowed audibly and stared out at the wet, grey expanse of tarmac.

Harry felt useless and helpless. “Come on,” he said. “You can’t – sit out in the rain. You’ll – catch cold.”

Malfoy gave him a weird look, as well he might since Harry was fully aware that he and Malfoy had spent fourteen hours up to their necks in bog water once on a stake-out. Of course, Malfoy *had* caught cold then.

“All right,” he said, and Harry took his hand and helped him up. Malfoy trailed in a disconsolate manner to a café, where he asked the puzzled waitress for an extremely Irish coffee and to keep them coming.

“More and more Irish every time,” he said. “Now leave us, we would be alone.”

The waitress gave Harry the eye, but was apparently one of those with natural immunity and didn’t make a leap. Luckily the rest of the café was deserted, since everyone normal and sane was staying home in the warm today.

Malfoy stirred his Irish coffee and stared out the rain-splattered window of the café.

“Look,” Harry said at last, forcing the words out. “Look, if you think it might help with Katie – I’d be fine on my own. If you wanted to quit. Katie was right. I can look after myself.”

“I have counted twenty-seven times when I think you would have died if I hadn’t been there,” Malfoy said in a distant voice.

“I’m sure something would’ve turned up. Several of those times.”

“I’ve got it, thanks,” Malfoy bit out. “You don’t need me. I know. Only I really would prefer it if you didn’t die, and I don’t think it would help with – I don’t think it would help, and besides that...”

He gave a paper napkin his most lethal and disdainful stare.

“I couldn’t kill Dumbledore,” he said to the paper napkin. “But it wasn’t because I thought it was wrong or anything. I just – I couldn’t do it. It was only when Mother died and Katie was the only one there for me and I thought, I could’ve killed her without even meaning to. That was when I thought it was wrong. That was when I felt guilty. That’s what I’m like. I don’t care about people I don’t know. I don’t know how to do it. That was why I was so bad at being an Auror before you, it was because it was all files and strangers and stupid people and stupid rules and all I could do was make fun of everything and hate it, but I wanted Katie and

I wanted to make up for – for everything. And you,” Malfoy said, and glanced up at Harry. “You care about justice and strangers living and things. You don’t stop. And if you minded about them and I minded about you and neither of us minded about the stupid rules-”

“I mind about the rules,” Harry said. “Sometimes.”

“Oh, you do not,” Malfoy said with a slice of a grin, disappearing like a crescent moon behind a cloud. “Anyway. That was – that’s how it was. The Aurors worked out. I *did* make up for some things. I know how to do that now, as long as things stay the way they are. I don’t want to quit.”

“Okay,” Harry told him. “Good.”

“I’m going to ask you for something now,” Malfoy announced, staring off into the distance. “You can say no if you like,” he added, mouth curling.

“Um, all right.”

“If you could,” Malfoy said, glaring harder at the napkin as if making a simple request affronted him in some way. “Promise me to stick around for the next – three weeks,” he said.

“Stick around?” Harry repeated. “I mean, I will, I just don’t-”

“At work,” Malfoy told him, transferring his glare from the napkin to Harry and back. “As partners. Stay,” he added, as if talking to a dog he suspected of being badly trained.

“Right, yes, but for three weeks,” Harry said, feeling an edge of panic. “Um – what are you planning to do after those three weeks?”

“Me? Nothing,” Malfoy snapped. “You can stay after the three weeks too, obviously. I just wanted to be sure you won’t go away for some reason I don’t understand. Not for three weeks, I’ll be all right after that, but right now I’m just a little off balance and,” his voice growing sharp as a needle – “I’d appreciate it if you’d just promise to stick around.”

“I promise,” Harry said, bewildered. “It’s just that, uh, we’ve been partners for three years. What exactly makes you think that I’m going away?”

“Why not?” Malfoy drawled. “You did before. And I don’t know why and I don’t particularly *want* to know why, either. Katie’s gone: you’re staying, you have to. For three weeks. Then I’ll be fine.”

Now Harry had traded being bewildered for being a little pleased, but mostly hurt.

“Malfoy,” he said. “I won’t do it again.”

“Fine.”

“No, but really, Malfoy. I mean – I can’t explain about before but I won’t do it again. I swear-”

“I’m not really in the mood to believe extravagant promises just now,” Malfoy said in a clipped, brittle voice. “I know that I’m in bits and you’d swear to protect me and do your big hero thing, just like you came rushing back when I was hurt, but I won’t be in bits forever. I’ll be fine. You can leave anytime you want.”

“But I don’t want to,” Harry almost yelled.

“Fine,” said Malfoy, using his new favourite word. “But if you do, you can. Only not for three weeks. You promised.”

He glared at Harry again, this time a little anxiously. It was a bit like a spike seeking reassurance.

“I did,” Harry said steadily. He was sure of that much. “I will.”

Malfoy did not look at him again. He was looking out the wet window of the café. The flaking letters across the window were red and looked superimposed on the cold grey sky.

He did reach out, neatly and with little fuss, as Harry had seen him apprehend a criminal a thousand times, and grabbed Harry’s wrist. His fingers were strong, and the clasp felt about as easy to get out of as his damned enchanted handcuffs.

He was gripping too hard, actually, and it hurt. Harry didn’t mind.

*

Crabbe and Goyle came to get Malfoy that evening. Harry opened the door to find Goyle holding blankets and a thermos and a frantic expression, and Crabbe looking slightly embarrassed to be in Goyle’s company.

“Thanks for watching him, Harry, we’ll take over from here,” Goyle said, and pushed past him busily.

“But,” Harry said.

“I am not *five*,” Malfoy said, giving Goyle the evil eye as he tried to settle the blanket around his shoulders.

He looked distinctly small and woebegone under the blanket all the same. He’d had a lot of Irish coffees, and Harry thought a double hangover and melancholy were setting in.

“Of course you’re not,” Goyle said. “You’re our fearless leader and you come up with all the plans. Come home with us and I’ll make you chicken soup.”

“He gets like this,” Crabbe said apologetically to Harry, and nodded at Malfoy. “All right, Malfoy?”

“Not really,” Malfoy said. “More sort of abjectly miserable. I don’t want to move.”

“Just hold on to me while I Apparate,” Goyle encouraged him. Malfoy glared up at him and

Harry stared over at him.

“He has a nurturing soul,” Crabbe said loyally.

“Okay,” Harry said.

Crabbe walked over to Malfoy, looked down at him with poorly concealed anxiety and patted him on the back a bit.

“C’mon,” he said. “Up. You’re better off with us, we know how you can be. Come away from Harry before he never wants to see you again.”

“Your silver tongue has convinced me, Crabbe,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes and trying to get up and away from the Goyle-anchored blanket.

“He can stay,” Harry blurted.

They all turned and stared at him.

“If he wants to,” Harry said. “I mean. I don’t mind.”

There was a pause, the sort that always happened when Crabbe and Goyle tried to think of a way to phrase something exactly right.

“You see,” Goyle said kindly at length. “You sort of don’t know what you’re getting into here. You weren’t around for such, um, highlights as after the Quidditch Cup match in third year or after his Dad – I mean, at the end of fifth year, or... for pretty much all of sixth year. It’s kind of a test of friendship.”

“I don’t mind,” Harry said again. “I’d – it would be fine.”

Now Malfoy had *him* saying it.

“After all,” he said awkwardly, putting his hands in his pockets. “It’s not like I can leave the house much, because of the whole Veela thing. I wouldn’t mind if he sticks around.”

“You don’t have a guestroom,” Crabbe observed noncommittally.

“I could sleep on the sofa,” Malfoy suggested slowly, after a moment.

“Well,” Goyle said uncertainly, peering into Malfoy’s face. “If that’s what you want.”

“I don’t mind,” Malfoy said.

To Harry’s great relief, that seemed to be arranged. Crabbe and Goyle hung around for a while, Crabbe nodding at Malfoy and patting him a lot and once venting his feelings in the kitchen by telling Harry that he’d never liked that girl.

“*Not* a Slytherin,” he said savagely. “No offence meant.”

“None taken,” Harry said, peering out of the door with horrified fascination at Goyle fluttering, inasmuch as a fifteen-stone man could, around Malfoy in the sitting room.

“If only this had happened with Pansy’s Gryffindor,” Crabbe continued. “She would’ve just castrated him with a spoon and then we would’ve killed him and thrown him in the river. Not that we would,” he added hastily.

“Course not,” Harry said.

Malfoy looked angry and ill with misery and he was telling Goyle exactly how much of an idiot he was making of himself, but when Goyle pressed his hand to Malfoy’s forehead Malfoy told him he was an idiot again and leaned in tiredly. Just a little.

When they went, Malfoy kept the blanket and the thermos, which he unscrewed and looked into. To his great disappointment, it wasn’t coffee.

“I don’t even like chicken soup,” he said, peering. “You don’t mind, do you?” he asked Harry.

“No,” Harry said. “I said I didn’t.”

Malfoy leaned his head against the arm of the sofa. “Good,” he said in an exhausted way. “I can’t – I don’t want to see them being happy together. I’ll start to break things again. It’ll be okay here. You’re all upset about this Veela thing, aren’t you?”

“Well,” Harry said. “It’s not much fun.”

He leaned against the sofa and looked down at Malfoy’s pale unhappy face. He wanted to touch him but he couldn’t work out how, so he settled for patting the blankets around him a bit. Goyle had done it, so it was all right.

Malfoy didn’t seem to object. “Then it’s all settled,” he said. “We can be miserable together.”

Chapter Six

Harry was extremely startled when he emerged from the shower and Malfoy bolted up from the sofa and stared at him, transfixed.

It was even weirder since Malfoy had not really risen from the sofa for days, except when absolutely necessary. He seemed to have decided that lying with his arm over his eyes and delivering a monologue to Harry on his eternal misery was a completely reasonable lifestyle choice. Harry was kind of wondering if he needed to go grocery shopping for smelling salts.

Aside from the smelling salts issue, it was – not bad. Not that he liked seeing Malfoy unhappy, but years of partnership had convinced Harry that once Malfoy was *talking* about it, which he always needed to do whether it was to Harry or to his friends or to ghosts with secret peeping agendas, things were on their way to being all right.

Besides, and Harry felt bad even thinking this, but weekends without cases were always – hard to get through. Ron and Pansy and Malfoy and Katie were always doing couple things and Hermione was always working and sometimes Harry felt trapped in that empty silent apartment, so restless it felt like the walls were closing in, closing down into a cupboard.

It was worse since the stupid Veela thing. Now every time he left the flat for a walk he had to deal with protestations of undying love and, in extreme cases, duck flying underwear.

With Malfoy here the apartment didn't seem empty, and it certainly wasn't silent. It was almost okay that he wasn't at work, though Shacklebolt was becoming extremely suspicious about the Owls claiming that Malfoy had a wasting illness and even more suspicious about Harry leaving the office on time and taking work home. Harry wondered if he should be offended by that.

Things were almost okay, and now Malfoy was giving him a funny look.

Harry's back hit the bathroom door hard. He thought several things at once, *oh, no* and *what do I do now?* and very carefully did not think several other things which lingered at the back of his mind anyway: temptation, speculation and almost panic at how little he might be able to trust himself if...

"Potter," Malfoy said slowly, that strange intent look in his eyes. "*What have you done to your hair?*"

Harry blinked. "What?"

Malfoy's tone had become distinctly ominous, though he still looked shell-shocked for no reason Harry could see. "You've been using my shampoo, haven't you?"

"Er – maybe?" Harry said. "Sorry. I didn't really look. Does it matter?"

Malfoy made a helpless gesture, then subsided onto the sofa with his head in his hands. "Go look in the mirror," he said in a resigned tone.

Cautiously Harry went over to the little mirror in the passage between his living room and his bedroom. His face looked back at him, frowning and perplexed under a damp shock of hair that looked a little-

"Malfoy," Harry said. "I realise I've been under some strain recently, but - enough to turn my hair grey overnight?"

Malfoy had raised his head a little, but he seemed far more interested in studying his own hands than looking at Harry.

"I thought you were a natural blond," Harry went on.

At that Malfoy did look at him, and he looked amazed and offended. "I am! The shampoo merely *enhances* and adds *subtle silvery tones* to my natural hair colour."

"Uh-huh," said Harry.

"Proper hair care is extremely important," Malfoy muttered. "Especially if one carries bad genes."

"Malfoy, you're not going to go bald," said Harry, who had heard this one before. "Your dad was a lot of things, but bald wasn't one of them."

Malfoy looked grim. "My Great-Aunt Jemima went bald. You *never know*."

"I know that my hair now has not-so-subtle silvery tones. What am I supposed to do about that?"

"It should wash out," Malfoy said, his eyes shifty. "After a few tries."

Harry looked at his reflection again, frowned at himself some more, and came to a decision. "You know what? This is fine."

He looked back in time to see Malfoy blink. "What?"

"It's fine," Harry repeated. "Might even be a good thing. Like the Weasley jumpers. Stop people - leaping."

"Oh God, you can't, don't do it," Malfoy said, wringing his hands. "It is not like the jumpers. It is your *hair*. Has your hair not inflicted enough pain on the world *already*?"

"Don't carry on, Malfoy, it makes sense," Harry said, and went into his room.

Behind a closed door and as he struggled into a Weasley jumper, he heard Malfoy say darkly that nothing about his hair made sense.

Malfoy still looked martyred by Harry's hair when Harry came out, but he seemed to have accepted his dreadful fate. He was up again, which pleased Harry, and seemed to be giving serious thought to the toaster.

“Doesn’t it strike you that this could work more efficiently?”

“Sorry?” said Harry.

“Nothing,” Malfoy decided, turning a brilliant and therefore untrustworthy smile on him. “Off to work with you. Don’t you dare do any paperwork without my supervision. You’re having lunch with Blaise Zabini. I will be alone here with my endless pain as usual. Can we have Chinese food?”

“Why am I having lunch with Blaise Zabini?” Harry asked.

“He’ll help you with Veela things,” Malfoy said firmly. “You need coping tips. I’ve been trying to sort some things out while you were at work. You’re having lunch with Fleur Delacour the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and weighed his vague distaste about lunch with Zabini against the fact Malfoy had bothered. “Okay. Thanks.”

Malfoy sneered. “It’s just because I get bored being cooped up. It’s not because I care.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Malfoy was tapping a fork against his palm and giving the toaster a meaningful look, and did not see.

When he went into the office Lisa the receptionist gave him a strange look and Harry, pleased that the hair was working, gave her a smile. Lisa sighed heavily.

“Um,” Harry said. “Something wrong?”

“No,” said Lisa. “It’s just – you look so *distinguished* today, Harry.”

Harry sighed a bit himself, and passed on.

*

Zabini arrived late for lunch in the stupid fancy restaurant he’d chosen, and when he did arrive he didn’t come straight over to the table where Harry was looking darkly at the fancy silverware and the crystal glasses.

He paused and lounged beautifully against a pillar first. His sleek black hair fell across his face like elegant shadows, the lamplight sparked amber glints from his hooded eyes and everyone in the restaurant looked terribly distracted by his leather trousers.

Harry was overcome by what a complete pillock he’d gone to school with.

Eventually Zabini stopped posing against his pillar, and walked beautifully up to their table. The other customers in the restaurant gave collective sighs at every roll of his hips, so it sounded like the tide was coming in with each step he took.

Harry was embarrassed even to be in his company.

“Hello there,” Zabini said, rolling the words under his tongue as if they were delicious and he was inappropriately delighted to be speaking each one. “How’re *you* doing?”

Harry gave him an appalled look, and Zabini glared at him and subsided into a chair.

“I see you’re just as charming as ever, Potter.”

“Oh, what?” Harry demanded. “How would you know? I don’t think I’ve ever even had a conversation with you before.”

“That,” Zabini said, opening his menu with a snap, “is more or less exactly what I mean. God, the things I do for that fool Malfoy.”

Harry scowled. “Don’t talk about him that way.”

Zabini winced and then said: “Sorry, I think the sudden excruciating pain I just experienced was the memory of my school years hitting me in the back of my head with a big ironic thunk.”

Harry and Zabini glared at each other until the waiter came and said: “I hate to interrupt while you’re smouldering – I mean, busy! – but is there any chance I can take either of you in the cloakroom? I mean, take your order!”

Zabini tipped his chair back to give the waiter a slow smile. “My order’s just dying to be... taken.”

The waiter went an alarming blotchy mauve colour.

“Oh my God,” Harry exclaimed. “What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with your hair?” Zabini demanded. “Why is it that horrible dishwater colour? Just looking at it makes me want to die! I’ll have a Greek salad, please.”

“Of course,” said the waiter. “Your sophisticated glamour is almost as overwhelming as your friend’s wild beauty. Um, I mean – do you want bread with your salad?”

“No, I feel that exposing my perfect body to unnecessary carbohydrates would be a crime against humanity,” Zabini said absently. “What d’you mean, *almost*?”

“Can I have a club sandwich?” Harry asked in a quiet voice. “And, er, if you come any closer to me I’ll hurt you.”

To his horror, the waiter looked intrigued. Zabini looked toweringly indignant when the waiter slipped Harry his phone number and wandered off.

“You know, Malfoy was right in school, even for a Gryffindor you are especially annoying,” Zabini remarked, watching narrow-eyed as Harry burned the number with the candle on their table. He made a visible effort to shake off his irritation, and then said: “All right, so – I’m part Veela, ask me how!”

Harry stared at him. Zabini nodded thoughtfully.

“I suppose we can start slower. Of course, I’ve known you had Veela blood since I first saw you. Two Veela in close quarters can lead to nasty territorial issues, which is why I always avoided you at Hogwarts.”

“Did you,” Harry said vaguely. “I didn’t really notice.”

“Also none of us liked you!” snapped Zabini, which Harry felt was needlessly rude. Zabini closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Right. Okay. Well, now that you’ve discovered your Veela heritage, the first thing you need to do is quit your job.”

“I will not!” Harry snarled. “I can still do it, I *can*—”

Zabini opened his eyes and regarded Harry with a look of wonder. “I’m sure you can,” he said. “But why would you want to? You clearly have no idea what a drain emerging as one of the most beautiful men in England and seducing thousands will be on your time.”

“I don’t *want* to be one of the – or – I don’t want any of that,” Harry said between gritted teeth.

Zabini paused. “I don’t think I understand.”

“I just want to do my job and not have to deal with all this. Can you tell me how to make it go away?”

“Why would you want to do *that*?”

Their food came in. Zabini looked too distressed by the workings of Harry’s mind to do anything but stab at his salad with languidly lovely motions.

“Well, I suppose you could try – not exuding an air of raw sexuality?” Zabini offered, sounding lost and rather forlorn.

“I’m not!”

Zabini squinted. “Wow, that’s not on purpose?”

Harry resisted the urge to clutch at his napkin like a Victorian lady snatching the sheets up to her neck.

“Are there any – meditation techniques or anything to control this?” Harry asked in the gruff tones of the almost terminally mortified.

Zabini shook his head. “No. It’s pretty much down to the sex.”

He would really have rather had lunch with a resurrected Voldemort. It had never occurred to Harry to be appreciative of the fact that his dead nemesis had not once tried to have any humiliating sex conversations with him.

“What kind of system is that?”

“Uh, I don’t know, a really good one?” Zabini suggested. “Most people *enjoy* sex, you know.”

“I do,” the waiter interposed fervently. “Sorry to interrupt again, but this arrived for you.”

He dumped a large chocolate cake beside Zabini’s salad. On top of the cake was a candy heart and swirly pink frosting which read *You Are A Dark Chocolate Love God*.

Zabini regarded it fondly. “Ah, Hortense,” he said. “I do enjoy these small tokens of her appreciation. But back to you, Potter. All right. I understand. Malfoy is going to owe me so big for this one, but I suppose we could have sex.”

“I don’t want to have sex with you!”

“I wish you would stop saying all these things I don’t understand!” Zabini wailed. “I don’t know why Malfoy couldn’t come to this lunch *he* set up and interpret for you. He should have known that you would make no sense!”

It was Zabini who made no sense, but Harry wished Malfoy was there too. He would’ve been able to pry useful advice out of Zabini if Zabini did in fact possess any, and he would’ve thought that Zabini’s carry-on was hilarious and maybe would have done an impression. If things were normal and he was here, like Harry was used to.

“Malfoy hasn’t really left the house since he and Katie broke up,” Harry said moodily.

And then Zabini stopped his stupid posing in his chair, leaned forward and said: “What? That girl dumped him?”

He was frowning in a terribly unflattering way. It made Harry like him slightly more. “Yeah.”

Zabini frowned even more intensely. “You know, I never liked her. I always knew she was going to do something that’d make him crazier, and another thing like his Godforsaken father will kill him and – do you think I should have sex with him?”

“No I don’t,” Harry said, his voice all ice.

Zabini looked woeful. “Maybe you’re right, he has weird monogamy ideas anyway.”

He pushed away his salad and started eating his cake. Then he looked up through long lashes and artistically falling locks to Harry, and pushed the cake slightly towards him.

“You’re always with him,” he said after a couple of forkfuls. “Is he going to be okay?”

Harry thought for a while about what to say, because clearly Blaise Zabini knew far too much about sex and Harry did not want to be pathetically obvious about anything. He discarded the idea of saying that he would take care of Malfoy or that Malfoy was his partner, or that if Zabini tried to sleep with Malfoy Harry would kill him.

“Yeah,” he said eventually.

He picked up a fork and started to eat. The cake wasn’t so bad.

“All right then,” Zabini said. “You did save the world that one time: ensuring even *Malfoy*’s mental health won’t be much harder.” He paused, stole the candy heart from off his cake and added: “I don’t have many friends. I mean, people I see and don’t sleep with.”

“Wow, Zabini, you make being a Veela sound so great.”

“It has its ups and downs,” Zabini admitted, trying to balance the entire chunk of cake with ‘GOD’ scrawled across it on his fork. “For one thing, the grooming schedule is punishing.” He eyed Harry’s hair. “Not that you’d know much about that, obviously.”

“Shut up,” Harry said, amicably enough.

“I’m – sorry I couldn’t be more help,” Zabini said. “I’ve never tried to control it: I work with it, it’s part of who I am, I couldn’t do without it. Tell Malfoy I tried.”

The waiter was lurking, trying to catch the eye of either one of them. The candle was making a tiny whispering sound and Harry was mostly staring at a smear of chocolate on the white tablecloth. He didn’t want to go back to the office, where Malfoy wasn’t and where things were getting worse.

“Yeah,” Harry told him. “I will. Thanks.”

*

When he got home Malfoy was playing a country song about heartbreak. He’d run through all the songs which were even slightly appropriate a week ago and now he was playing something about a woman whose man was apparently slow-dancin’ with a bleach blonde tramp.

He was also standing up against the kitchen counter, reading his horrible Veela book and tapping along to the song with a fork against the toaster.

“Evening, Potter,” he said, looking elaborately indifferent. “Hard day? Fancy a piece of toast?”

“Zabini’s leather trousers actually almost made me lose the will to live,” said Harry.

“Feeling a bit down, are we? I hear toast is good for that.”

Harry grinned and played along. “The toaster isn’t even plugged in.”

“No?” Malfoy was smiling as he hadn’t for almost two weeks, the simple crooked smile that flashed out and told Harry he had an insane thought he was going to share: a smile that said, this is for you. “Perhaps because it’s a *magical* toaster now.”

“I’m so happy,” Harry said dryly, “that you have decided to invade my flat and spend all your time making magical toasters. I hope you realise that tomorrow I will expect a magical kettle.”

The toaster looked very peculiar now. Its plug seemed to have been twisted up into a weird kind of antenna and Harry had a dark suspicion that the new bulging metallic extras were the sad remains of his sieve and his cheese grater. He reached up and took the bread down from the cupboard, popping a slice in.

“Hello Potter,” said the toaster in what Harry felt was an understandably tinny voice. “I am an advanced piece of magical technology created by a very great genius!”

“Oh *really*,” said Harry, leaning his arms on the sideboard and watching the toaster as he pulled his shirtsleeves up and felt relaxed, at home. Malfoy leaned on the sideboard across from him and smirked delightedly all over his pointed face.

“No more of this fiddling with dials like a muggle! How do you want your toast? We offer it in several exciting varieties: lightly done, a manly vigorous brown, or full of delicious cindery flavour! Which do you prefer?”

“Um – brown?” said Harry.

“Okay!” said the toaster. “And a spread? Butter? Strawberry, raspberry or rose-petal jam? Or that spread of the gods, jam full of glorious golden heaven, marmalade?”

“Uh – butter?”

“Not marmalade?”

“No,” said Harry. “Sorry. Oh God, now you have me apologising to toasters.”

“I call him Cyril,” Malfoy said proudly.

Harry snorted. “Of course you do.”

The toast popped out, brown with the butter melting on it. Harry ate it: it was very good toast, and seeing how little bread they had left made him steel himself and come to a decision.

“I need to go grocery shopping,” he said. “Want to come with me?”

At least he could floo to the office and wear his Invisibility Cloak when he was out for a walk. People got freaked out by invisible beings, even ones who just wanted to buy toilet paper.

Malfoy glanced over and though Harry tried to make his face betray nothing, Malfoy must’ve seen something in the set of his shoulders that made him simply nod and get his cloak, as if this wasn’t the first time he’d left the flat for almost two weeks.

*

It helped that it was dark already, streetlights white on the black waters running under Blackfriars bridge. Once they got to the brightly lit shop Harry had to put up the collar of his coat and keep a sharp eye out. Malfoy was rather quiet, though he did take advantage of Harry's distraction to add a lot of sugary cereal with brightly coloured cartons to the trolley.

He also shoved the trolley sharply into people's knees when they started to stare, so Harry was prepared to forgive him for the cereal.

Once they were outside with their shopping bags, Malfoy said in a tone of command: "Put those down, we're not going to be so plebeian as to carry our shopping all the way home."

"If you're planning to eat coffee beans in the street, Malfoy, then all I can say is – I knew this day would come."

"Hush," said Malfoy, jostling Harry's shoulder with his own, and then he knelt down and began whispering to the shopping bags. Harry put his hands in his pockets and resigned himself to being pointed at as that guy with the crazy man.

Malfoy straightened and the bags began to move until they were all lined up behind him like white plastic ducklings. Malfoy looked over his shoulder at them with pride.

"Now go! Your mission is not to be seen," Malfoy instructed the bags, and they peeled off in different directions, flying down dark alleyways. He smirked over at Harry. "And now we no longer have to be beasts of burden. So – this isn't going away, is it, and Zabini was no help."

"He tried," Harry said.

Malfoy seemed to turn this over in his head for a while as they walked down by the bridge. Shadows and the light striking off the water fell across his face in strips, making him look like a black and white drawing. What Harry could see of his expression was tense and unhappy.

"Let's all go to Rick's and go dancing tomorrow night," he offered at last. "I mean, all this will be solved if you just meet someone you like, right? Let's do the simple thing."

Harry opened his mouth to protest and Malfoy held up a hand.

"I'm on your side," he said. "But you can't keep acting like the most obvious spy in the world every time you go shopping. Let's try it, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Anyway, I could use a drink and Crabbe and Goyle need somewhere to practise their waltzing."

"That sounds so incredibly tempting, I can't tell you," Harry said, and Malfoy threw back his head and laughed.

When they got back Malfoy opened a window and one by one all the plastic bags found their way back home. Malfoy collected them all in a heap and began rooting through them to check their contents.

"Someone stole our Rich Tea biscuits," he announced darkly. "I realise that some losses are sustained in every mission, but I wish it wasn't always my biscuits."

Harry snorted at him because he was crazy and saw him go still for a moment.

“Sorry,” Malfoy said, so carefully it made Harry think of someone moving very gently because they were hurt, and swallowed. “I know this is a bit much for – some people. I can stop.”

Harry thought about Malfoy asking him to stay for a tiny and specific amount of time, the grip he’d had on Harry’s wrist in a coffee shop a fortnight ago, and looked around at the flat: at the pile of books and the stupid Veela one on the counter, at his mutant talking toaster and the last plastic bag creeping triumphantly through his window. Then he thought about Katie’s flat and her rose-patterned bed.

Anyone who saw Harry’s flat now would know Malfoy lived here.

He picked up a bag off the floor and began putting things away, and asked as lightly as he could: “Who wants you to stop?”

“Oh,” said Malfoy. “No, don’t put the marmalade in the fridge, Potter, what can you be thinking?”

“One thing I’m thinking is that my own toaster calls me by my last name,” Harry said. “That’s weird. Isn’t that weird?”

“I don’t see why,” Malfoy said, reaching up to put away all his bright boxes of cereal. “I’ve known you for twelve years, and I still call you by your last name. I think Cyril just has nice manners.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Nice manners come so naturally to me,” Malfoy remarked in a placid tone. “My mother used to call me her perfect little gentleman.”

Since Malfoy had in fact unwittingly taught Harry several obscene gestures, in that he’d made them from the Slytherin table and Harry had turned to Ron and demanded to know what they meant, Harry thought this was a bit rich. He let it go and concentrated on the important point.

“I meant you don’t have to call me by my last name. If you don’t want.”

“Ah,” Malfoy said, the left corner of his mouth going up uncertainly. “I should call you Harry, d’you mean?” His airy manner failed him at the crucial point, when his voice wavered on the name. “Sounds a little weird. I think I’ll stick with what I know. Plus if we get any less professional Shacklebolt really will have a coronary and die, and that would be sad. He’s earned his retirement.”

Malfoy leaned down and took the marmalade out of the fridge, placing it high on a shelf. After they’d unpacked the groceries Malfoy found some of the clothes he’d asked Harry to pick up and declared his intention to go running.

“Don’t you run?”

“Er, no,” said Harry. “I suppose I could.”

“Well, you could go and lift weights or whatever,” Malfoy called from behind the bathroom door, where he was changing. “You don’t need to babysit me, I must be ruining your workout schedule-“

“I don’t really work out,” Harry said. “Well, I punch people sometimes. Does that count?”

“It should, it’s usually poor innocent me,” Malfoy said, emerging. “But if you don’t – then the sparring, and the amount you eat, and your stupid *shoulders* - wait a minute.”

He dived for his accursed Veela book and leaned against the counter and flipped busily through the pages, then tilted up his face to Harry’s, suddenly grinning.

“You *cheater*.”

“I *beg* your pardon?” Harry asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just that Veela blood insures better chest and shoulder muscles to better support the transformation to a winged creature. Not to mention that the whole winged creature deal means greater comfort in the air, which would explain Our Little Flying Prodigy, *and* another thing. The reason Veela evolved the supernatural attractiveness is because they used to eat live prey.”

“Eurgh,” said Harry.

Malfoy waved a hand dismissively. “Human prey!” he said, as if he thought this was a brilliant and fascinating idea. “Veela would first seduce and then eat live humans, which means their metabolism had to be excellent to deal with such large meals and to remain svelte in order to attract the next meal. Which is why you can eat such an enormous amount and never exercise and oh my God, I really can’t believe I took up running and practised and spent all this time trying to compete with you.”

“So...” Harry said. “So – what? You’re going to stop trying?”

Malfoy looked at him for a minute, and then headed for the door. He opened it and the fluorescent lights of the hall flooded in, and Malfoy looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Nah,” he said. “You *wish*, Potter.”

Harry relaxed. “All I wish is that you would stop telling me distressing facts about my ancestry.”

“I can’t talk now, Potter. I have to go running. I maintain a valiant struggle, you see. Against my partner’s many and totally unfair advantages.”

“Whiner,” said Harry.

“Cheater,” said Malfoy, with immense and terribly smug satisfaction, and closed the door quickly so he’d have the last word.

Harry smiled and put on some more toast. He felt fine until he looked at Malfoy’s still-open book, and saw a picture of a Veela half-way through changing. He remembered the winged and clawed Veela at the Quidditch World Cup, how many savage worlds away from beauty they’d been, and thought about live prey.

He slammed the book shut and made himself a cup of tea. He just wasn’t used to the flat being this quiet anymore.

He sat down with the tea and some files, and started comparing notes on all the disappearances of part-goblins in the last year with the details of the Murimble case. He saw that Malfoy had written out some notes on a part-merman teenager who’d disappeared eight months ago.

He’d just reached out for another file when it occurred to him Malfoy had been gone for an awfully long time.

He looked out the window and went outside. Malfoy was sitting on the pavement under the window of Harry’s flat, his head bowed. It was real night now, dark and terribly cold: the pavement crunched under Harry’s feet with a sound that suggested frost, and Malfoy was shivering in his light shirt. He looked up at the sound of Harry approaching, and the blank look on his face made Harry think for a moment that he didn’t recognise him.

Then he realised that Malfoy was just bleakly miserable.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” Malfoy answered. Even his voice sounded shivery. “I was just – I was coming back and I just started thinking.”

“Come think where it’s warm,” said Harry.

Harry offered him a hand and Malfoy took it at once, climbing to his feet and pushing at Harry’s shoulder with his own, as he did when a case started to look dangerous. He stayed leaning in. Since he was clearly absolutely freezing, it was probably for the body heat.

He didn’t really talk as they went upstairs, stumbled a little on the top step, and Harry thought of him grinning and surrounded by his stupid plastic bag army and felt sick at how quickly things could change, how he’d only been thinking of *keeping this* when... Malfoy was only here because he was destroyed. He wasn’t going to stay.

He wasn’t going to stay and it was really wrong to be glad he was there, glad that his heart was broken and he could barely leave the house.

Harry lay awake that night and thought about it, about Malfoy smiling and leaving and the walls closing in, and that stupid *book*.

When he finally closed his eyes he dreamed about a dark wood, and wings, and blood.

Even in the dream he knew it wasn't real, that the wood was made up of bits and pieces of the Forbidden Forest, that the wings looked more like Hippogriff wings than anything else, but he knew about blood and he knew about longing. He *wished* it was as simple as hunger, as dark wings in the night and wanting, taking, having.

He wished it was wind rushing through feathers and leaves in the dark, and blood pounding in his ears. He thought he could smell blood on the wind, and see movement – a shape – he just *wanted*-

He brought the prey down hard, got a strong grip on his shoulders and twisted so the prey was pinned underneath him and wasn't even struggling. Harry opened his eyes, blinking, and Malfoy *wasn't* struggling, even though Harry knew he could have done a ruthlessly efficient job of it. He was simply lying there, hair mussed against Harry's pillow and eyes wide in the low light. He'd gone down easy, trusting Harry.

Harry had one fist clenched in Malfoy's shirt, he realised. Malfoy's heart was beating rapidly under the thin material, but he didn't look scared. He wasn't scared. He was all right, trusting and warm and lovely and right here. Harry could keep him exactly where he was.

Harry leaned down and whispered, low, his voice thick with snakes hissing and wild with bird call: "Don't move."

"Potter," Malfoy said, sounding faintly exasperated. "It's *me*. Wake up."

Harry threw him into a wall.

Malfoy landed gracelessly, his head hitting the window sill and his eyes narrowing with pain as well as fury. "Ow," he said portentously. "My *back*. What is wrong with you, Potter?"

Harry knelt panting on the bed, fist still clenched. That distorted voice had left his mouth dry, with a terrible taste lingering. "Something," he rasped.

Malfoy's look of annoyance softened: he climbed to his feet, wincing. "Bad dream?"

"Why do you stay with me?" Harry said. "I mean, it's not that – aren't you scared?"

"Scared?" Malfoy repeated. He looked as if he was going to laugh. "Scared of what?"

"I was dreaming about," Harry said, and swallowed. "Being a Veela."

"Oh," said Malfoy. "Oh my God. I'm an idiot. You're an idiot too, of course," he added, as if to reassure himself, and then he came and sat on the bed. Harry actually felt himself shying away like an animal. "Hey," Malfoy continued, his voice soft and suddenly almost sweet. "Hey, I'm sorry. I should have remembered you were raised Muggle. To you, it must've been like I was showing you pictures of monsters and telling you that you'd become one. But you *can't*, Potter, don't be an idiot, I'd be very surprised if you had more than an eighth of Veela blood in you. You're not going to grow wings and you're going to continue to be your insane self and responsible for your usually insane actions. It was just a stupid dream."

Malfoy reached out and touched Harry's hair as if Harry was a child having nightmares. Harry shivered at the first touch of Malfoy's fingers at the nape of his neck and then felt himself relaxing, almost against his will. It was nice. Malfoy was always so easily, physically affectionate, and it always felt strange and simple and so nice.

"And of course you're not going to turn into a monster and *eat* anyone, Potter. For heaven's sake."

Malfoy sounded like he was smiling. Harry shut his eyes.

"I cannot believe that you've decided to make being the most attractive man in England an epic tragedy," Malfoy said gently. "You're such an attention-seeker, Potter."

He stood up, his hand falling away from Harry's hair, and made for the door. He stopped once he'd opened it, leaning against it and not quite looking back at Harry. He looked pale and rumpled by moonlight, his face sharp and tired but not bleak just now.

"Go to sleep," he said eventually, and shut the door.

*

The next day Shacklebolt called a general meeting. Harry always enjoyed those because it meant that everyone got told off, not just him and Malfoy. Even the fact that half the room was crunching peppermint and he'd left Malfoy sleeping on the sofa again didn't manage to spoil this.

"Mr Dawlish, it was a perfectly simple singing teapot problem, may I ask you how exactly you made such a mess of it?" Shacklebolt demanded.

He was marching up and down the room, eyeing everyone grimly. He looked supremely unimpressed by his entire department.

Harry had a suspicion that Shacklebolt enjoyed general meetings as well.

Dawlish rubbed the rising bruise on his forehead. "That candlestick came out of nowhere, sir."

"I shall be so glad to report to Scrimgeour that my trained Aurors can be eliminated by common household goods," Shacklebolt said flatly. "And Miss Bell, can you imagine that the fact you are sneaking out of work early every day is going unnoticed?"

Katie winced. "Not anymore, sir."

"As for you, Mr Thomas, may I ask if it was your intention to write me a little love note and if so, may I say that I would have preferred to receive your report on exploding Scottish mud fairies?"

Dean looked horrorstruck. "Oh my God, don't tell me I Owled the wrong parchment to Ginny! Some of those fairies got stuck in my robes, sir, they really stung when they exploded. She'll never let me hear the end of this."

Shacklebolt raised his eyebrows. “Do you mean to say that you have sent a confidential report from this office to a civilian in France?”

“Um,” said Dean.

“May I ask Mr Malfoy where he is? Oh no, I can’t, can I, because he is once again not here despite the fact that he and Mr Potter are scheduled to give a demonstration of synchronised Apparition for the department next week. Mr Potter, can I ask how you plan to synchronise Apparition with yourself?”

“I’m still sort of working on that, sir,” said Harry, sinking a little in his chair.

“Marvellous,” said Shacklebolt. He stopped right beside Harry’s chair, singling him out. Harry felt this was completely unfair. “And much though I hate, and I do mean loathe with all my being, having to ask this – there is the Veela issue.” Shacklebolt winced, ever so briefly, and then intoned: “Mr Potter, how are you handling the problem of your sexual frustration?”

Harry closed his eyes and wished for death.

“I sort of,” he mumbled. “I sort of – handle it on my own?”

He opened his eyes a bit and was horribly traumatised to see Dawlish looking at him with speculation in his eyes.

“In the shower?” he asked dreamily.

Harry felt his whole face go red. “That’s not what I,” he squawked. “It’s none of your business!”

“Indeed, Mr Dawlish, I ask the questions here!” Shacklebolt said sternly. “And I have another one for Mr Potter.”

Harry looked up at him apprehensively. To his undying horror, he found Shacklebolt’s face far too close to his, and realised that his boss was about to climb into his lap.

“You look very distinguished today, Mr Potter,” said Shacklebolt, his voice still completely flat. “May I ask – do you work out?”

“Augh,” said Harry, and shoved at the man’s massive chest as Shacklebolt made his move and tried to leap for Harry’s lap.

Three seconds of the most nightmarish shoving session imaginable ensued, during which the only options Harry could see were strangling his boss or letting him get to third base. A few other people were shrieking in dismay, which Harry totally understood. Dawlish was yelling encouragement, because he was a sick man.

Then Malfoy grasped the back of Shacklebolt’s collar in one fist and pressed his wand underneath his chin.

“Sir,” he said, eyes glittering. “Have a mint.”

He spun Shackbolt and sprayed his can of mint spray directly in Shackbolt’s face. Shackbolt spluttered and staggered, and Malfoy, because there was a devil of mischief in him, sprayed him again.

“I just have to make sure,” Malfoy told him cheerfully. “You’ll thank me later!”

“Okay,” Harry said. “That’s enough. Stop.”

Malfoy looked disappointed, but he slid the can into his pocket anyway. Shackbolt blinked minty liquid frantically out of his eyes.

“Mr Malfoy,” he said in the loudest monotone Harry had ever heard – “thank you very much. You have saved me from an utterly horrifying fate.” He straightened his clothes and said: “Now may I suggest you catch up with your work?”

Even Malfoy looked a bit taken aback at that. Shackbolt looked around at the amazed ring of Aurors and clapped his hands once, decisively.

“Witnessing a sexual encounter between your head of department and his most rampantly insubordinate Auror is no excuse for *slackness*. Return to your desks immediately!”

The mass stampede for their desks took all of four seconds. Harry never wanted to be in that room again. He kind of wanted a shower, but with Dawlish on the premises that would obviously be madness.

“I think I’d like a cup of tea,” he said once they were at their desk. “Maybe something stronger.”

“Why, you rampantly insubordinate devil,” Malfoy remarked, tilted back in his chair. He was smiling and at ease, obviously in high good humour about assaulting his boss and getting away with it, and then everything went away like a door closing when he saw Katie Bell walk by without a look in his direction.

Then he was still: his face got that grey look about it and Harry moved his chair slightly, so he was between Malfoy and the whole room, glaring at anyone who might even think about speaking to him. He’d learned this at bad cases early on, that Malfoy could always talk except for these times, when he needed just a few minutes to construct some gleaming chattering front for the world so people couldn’t see anything behind it.

“D’you want to know why I came in?” Malfoy asked after a bit, his voice tired. “I was – I was bored. It feels stupid that I was bored. I was – I’m really unhappy, and – the guy Katie wanted, the right guy, he wouldn’t have been bored as well as unhappy but *I was* and I wrote all those Owls and made a magic toaster and I still wanted to come in and do my freaking *job*. That’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“I don’t care,” Harry said. “I’m glad you’re here.” He cleared his throat and changed the subject to work. “When were you planning to tell me that you think the person who killed the Murimble children go after other mixed bloods as well? Someone part-merman vanished.

You think this wasn't an isolated incident. You think there's a group going after halfbreeds."

"Maybe," Malfoy said.

"And you didn't tell me because?"

"Maybe," Malfoy said, "I don't want you risking your stupid neck."

That shocked Harry silent, not because Malfoy was worried and certainly not because he was scared. It just – it hadn't occurred to him that this group Malfoy thought existed, a group of the *Muggleborn*, might have heard this new fact about him, this fact that didn't even sit comfortably with him yet, and hate him as an alien interloper.

"What d'you suggest we do?"

"I am acquiring more information through vaguely illicit sources," Malfoy admitted brightly. "After I've done that, then we can make a plan. It might even involve risking your stupid neck – but don't get your hopes up."

He slanted a grin over his shoulder at Harry, and Harry smiled in return, slow and pleased.

It was good to have him back.

*

It was considerably more fun at work than it was at Rick's. The whole place was crowded and there were funny flashing lights, and there was no room on the table for the drinks idiots kept sending Harry's way. Ron seemed to appreciate them, since his look of vague heterosexual alarm had melted into a fuzzy happiness.

"There are a lot of blokes here," he observed. "I think there should be more girls snogging each other."

Harry had hoped Ron would be slightly more use as moral support.

"How're you doing with Malfoy?" Goyle asked in what he clearly imagined was a discreet whisper. "Has it been awful? Has he done that thing where he talks through the night and won't let you go to sleep and wakes you at four in the morning to show you his best impression yet?"

He looked around apprehensively for Malfoy, but Malfoy was on the dance floor with Crabbe, twisting Crabbe's tie around his finger and flirting outrageously because he thought that kind of carry-on was hilarious.

"Well – yeah," Harry said. "But I didn't mind."

Goyle crunched on his ice. "I wish you'd been Sorted into Slytherin," he remarked, blissfully disregarding the faces that Ron and Harry made at the idea. "The rest of us could've had so much more sleep."

“Well, well, well, Harry Potter,” said a voice from behind them, and Harry froze like a hunted deer.

When he turned around he saw tiny Malcolm Baddock in a sparkly t-shirt that read *I’m Bad – Send Me To Your Room!* and felt extremely embarrassed.

“Go away and don’t try to sleep with me.”

Baddock rolled his eyes. “Yeah, been there, thanks,” he said, stirring his cocktail with his umbrella. “Not that I’d object to going again, but I’ve had my Veela shot.” He leered atrociously. “Twice, as I recall.”

Not for the first time that day, Harry wished for death.

“You are a very sparkly little man,” Ron told Baddock gravely. “Why is that?”

“Because I am so fabulous,” Baddock replied. Ron nodded as if he found this comment deep and meaningful, and Baddock said: “Sooo, what are you guys doing here sulking in the corner with fifty-eight drinks?”

“Malfoy broke up with Katie Bell and wanted to get drunk about it,” said Goyle, and Harry was grateful to him for not mentioning the whole horrible thing Harry brought to a club so he could sleep with a stranger idea, until Baddock’s face lit up.

“Oh *really*,” Baddock drawled. “How is Malfoy?”

“You know how he gets,” Goyle said. “He’s all insane and talky and high-pitched like a crazy consumptive squirrel.”

“Hey,” Malfoy said, coming back to the table with Crabbe behind him.

“Our crazy consumptive squirrel *leader*,” Goyle corrected himself.

“And don’t you forget it,” said Malfoy.

He looked loose and pleased from dancing and from enough alcohol to numb him a little, rub the sharp edges off his voice. Baddock gave him a predatory smile and he smiled back, lazy and sweet.

“Malfoy,” Baddock said, sparkling in his direction. “Do you want to dance?”

“I suppose,” Malfoy answered slowly, and let Baddock tug him onto the dance floor.

Harry didn’t care at first, aside from vague resentment at Baddock for occupying Malfoy’s time, but Baddock was smaller and sort of fragile, and Harry didn’t *like* the way Malfoy danced with him. It looked like real dancing, the dancing he’d done with Katie. He looked around a bit anxiously to make sure Baddock wasn’t jostled and he had his hand in the small of Baddock’s back. He leaned in to hear whatever Baddock was whispering to him, and his hair fell into Baddock’s face, shock white in the changing lights.

The way Baddock was looking at him made Harry suddenly and completely furious.

“Little Baddock is so sweet with his crush,” Goyle said indulgently.

Then Baddock tried to kiss Malfoy, just like that, as if it was the most natural thing in the world and he had a perfect right, and Harry thought about – about his flat and the toaster and thinking that since Katie was out of the picture he could *have* this, but of course there was always going to be someone trying and eventually there would be someone succeeding and Baddock really had to stop looking at Malfoy right now.

Malfoy laughed and pushed Baddock gently away, then came back to the table shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck.

“Push over, Potter,” he said, and eased in and onto the bench. “Which of these twenty million drinks can be mine?”

“Whichever one you want,” Harry answered, skin still prickling with the desire to hit Baddock, to do - *something*.

Malfoy reached for a drink and swallowed its contents in one go, and Harry was looking at the faint sheen of sweat on his upper lip and the smooth movement of his throat. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was worried about how much Malfoy was drinking, but all he could really focus on was the lean shape of Malfoy and the warmth of his body resting against Harry’s side. Malfoy turned his head and spoke to Harry, his breath hot against Harry’s ear and his drawl slower and more deliberate than usual, choosing his words carefully.

“You’re hopeless, Potter. Why don’t you dance with someone?”

Harry reached out and slid his fingers around Malfoy’s wrist and held on. He felt blind except for the curve of Malfoy’s throat and mouth, numb except for the urge to have this.

“Fine,” he said, and didn’t care about how his voice sounded. “Dance with me.”

Malfoy started and then laughed, affectionate and light. “That’s cheating, Potter. I don’t count, and nor does Weasley and nor does Crabbe or Goyle, the whole point of coming here is so you can *meet* someone.”

He seemed pleased to be asked all the same, his hand curling briefly around Harry’s arm before he reached for another drink. The music was too loud in Harry’s ears: he just wanted to go home, and for Malfoy not to move, and for Baddock not to *look* at him.

“Uh, you two,” Crabbe said. “Could we have some of that famous constant Auror vigilance about now?”

“Everyone is looking at you really funny, Harry,” Ron said brightly.

Harry looked away and realised with a sinking feeling that the club had become not so much a club as a ring of people closing in with their eyes glazed. Baddock wasn’t looking at Malfoy anymore, that was for sure.

Malfoy swore comprehensively, reached under the table and threw Harry his Cloak. “You go,” he commanded. “Weasley, go with him. Crabbe, Goyle! Got mint?”

Ron, looking slightly sobered, kept close by Harry as they made their way out through the gathering riot. Harry kept bumping into people who looked around, dazed and searching, and he kept a death grip on his wand. The room was stifling all of a sudden, the sounds rising were horrible, and he’d done it.

God, this had to *stop*.

They got out into the alley beside Rick’s and Harry sank, still invisible, onto the cold cobblestones.

“You know,” Ron said, in the voice of one making a huge revelation, “I think that Malcolm Baddock tried to kiss Malfoy!”

Harry’s mood was not improved by the fact that Malfoy ushered out Baddock with Crabbe and Goyle.

“Thank you, Malfoy,” Baddock said, eyes shining up at him.

“It is no part of a prefect’s duty to allow his charges to be stampeded in the rush for Veela charms,” Malfoy told him, but he looked gratified. “Besides, it is my duty as an Auror to protect the public. The bits of the public who haven’t annoyed me or looked at me funny or done something indecent like be in Hufflepuff, that is.”

“You are my *hero*,” Baddock assured him. “Can I buy you a drink sometime? Just to thank you. And to cheer you up, you look like you might need cheering up!”

Malfoy seemed amused. “Yeah,” he said. “I suppose I could do with some cheering up.”

*

Harry met Fleur for lunch in a courtyard. She fed the pigeons with the crumbs from her plate and occasionally Muggles stopped and took pictures of her, and Fleur waved at them graciously and thus showed off her wedding ring.

“Of course you shouldn’t behave anything like Blaise Zabini,” she said, pursing her beautiful lips. “That poor boy needs to settle down. He has a good heart, even if he does wear terrible trousers. I think it’s all down to his mother not giving him enough affection when he was a child: eet has left him unable to distinguish between good attention and the kind of attention that gives you a nasty rash. All you need to do is find someone who can handle ze occasional vicissitudes of being a Veela’s companion, and someone who can, ah, help to regulate your behaviour.” She smiled a discreet smile. “Bill, ’e is very vigorous about regulating my behaviour. The Weasley family breeds strong men.”

“Um,” Harry said. “That’s nice. But, I mean, before you met Bill, things weren’t, you didn’t have people going crazy-“

“*Au contraire*,” Fleur said, looking a little offended. “People fought duels over me, you know. And I received a great deal of poetry written by boys who could not possibly have been in their right minds.”

“Yes, fine, I’m sure the poetry was loony,” Harry said desperately. “But there weren’t riots.”

“There *could* ’ave been riots.”

“I mean,” Harry said, absolutely refusing to play Veela Seduction Death Match. “When you were single, you were able to go outside without being assaulted!”

“Well, yes, because *I* released my energy in acceptable amounts, and when things became overwhelming there was always someone to drag into the shrubbery. So to speak,” Fleur said delicately. “I, unlike some people, did not indulge myself by having fits of reckless chastity.”

The idea of reckless chastity left Harry opening and closing his mouth a bit.

Fleur’s severe expression softened, giving her a Madonna-like air that made several cameras go off in their direction. “There, there.” She reached over and patted his hand. “I understand it can be very overwhelming when you’re trying to court someone. Unfortunately the people around are adversely affected. I remember it was quite tricky when I first met Bill, we really couldn’t go out in public much. Not that thees was much of a drawback,” she added, reminiscently smiling. “Being a Veela ’as many advantages, ‘Arry, all you need is control and self-awareness.”

Harry felt enormously and unspeakably doomed.

“*Courting* someone?” he repeated.

“Is it not going well?” Fleur inquired. “Sometimes that happens. I remember poor Cedric Diggory, I tried for him, but I had to stop because others were being caught up and he wanted someone else. Even Veela can’t get what they want all the time, Harry.”

“I know that,” Harry said, his mouth dry. “It’s just – courting someone – I’m not-”

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed, Harry,” Fleur said serenely. “It is perfectly common for a Veela to heighten their allure in order to attract a desirable partner. I do think the levels you’re going to are a little excessive, but-”

“Excessive?” Harry almost shouted. “I’m not doing anything!”

Fleur, who was lifting a cup of tea to her lips, put the cup back down. She looked down at her lap and spent a moment more perfectly pleating her napkin. Harry had known Fleur a long time, and he knew when she concentrated on the tiny details of her appearance she was either thinking hard or very worried.

“You’re not doing it on purpose?” she asked, her charming there-and-gone-again accent becoming more pronounced. “Oh dear. Zen... I think we may ’ave a problem.”

Chapter Seven

“*Courting?*” Malfoy repeated.

Harry leaned forward in his chair, pressing his forehead against his clenched hands. “That’s what Fleur said. She said that it’d be all right, though, all I need to do is practise to achieve control and clarity of mind, and-“

“Oh my God, we are so doomed.”

Harry lifted his head to glare.

Malfoy saluted the glare with his glass of Scotch. “How’s that Occlumency coming along?”

“It’s - I’ll get the hang of it one day,” Harry muttered.

“I cannot believe how doomed we are,” said Malfoy. He was lying stretched out on the sofa, his head pillowed on his arm. He rested the glass on a spot just above his belt buckle. “D’you recall the slight hostility I may have shown towards you in school?”

“Oh, vaguely,” said Harry.

“Clearly, I foresaw from the first that my end would come trampled under a mob of your admirers. Somehow I always knew you would be my death.” Malfoy took another sip, making a slight face which smoothed out like cotton under an iron as he relaxed. “Who are you even supposed to be courting? Just turning on the charm full blast at the world until your true love arrives on your doorstep?” He raised an eyebrow. “Actually, that does sound like you.”

Harry concentrated on trying to smooth out his own forehead with his hands, trying to pummel the tension out through his temples. He wasn’t planning to relax with a drink like Malfoy: he thought Malfoy was doing that too much.

Not that Malfoy was getting drunk every night or at all. He was just making a continuous effort to distance himself from pain, smooth away his own sharp edges, and Harry didn’t like it and wasn’t going to encourage it by drinking too.

Malfoy seemed to have distanced himself from pain right into an oasis of eerie calm. He was staring up at the ceiling.

“Shacklebolt has called for a review by Unspeakables of the Veela situation in the office,” he said slowly. “I know this whole thing is ridiculous, I know that you feel backed into a corner and you’ve come over all stubborn about it, but fairly soon we won’t be able to do our jobs. We won’t be *allowed*.”

Harry said nothing. After a moment he saw Malfoy’s mouth twist into a smile.

“So our boss tried to feel you up at a staff meeting and your sexual allure is on the verge of

creating a national crisis, I only go to the office when I'm bored and we're still getting Aurors of the Year. Makes you wonder what the rest of them can be up to. I'm obviously not getting all the gossip here. Maybe Dawlish is carrying on an inappropriate liaison with the office house plant and Thomas is stealing the tea money."

"I'm sure Dean wouldn't steal the tea money," said Harry. "...I'd rather not speculate about Dawlish, thanks."

Malfoy was silent for another moment. His fair hair was feathered out against the dark green of the sofa, the black cloth of his arm.

"If this is a question of nerves or something," he said eventually, "I could go with you to Sinistra's Sinning Spot."

"*What?*"

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably. "I could bring a book and stay in the waiting room. I mean, I imagine they have their own reading materials, but I was strictly brought up and I don't think I should take any chances. Or if it's about pride rather than nerves, you don't have to go to Sinistra's, you can just go to the Lengthy Wand in Hogsmeade."

He smirked a bit when he said the name. Harry was appalled.

"I will not!"

"Don't be judgemental," Malfoy said primly. "It is a refuge for lonely men whose honesty about what they want I for one find touching. Little Baddock tells me - did you just snarl?"

"No," Harry lied through his teeth.

Out of the corner of his eye, Malfoy gave him a considering look. Harry was overwhelmed by the sheer horror of this conversation, of what Malfoy was asking and what Fleur had told him. He wanted to hit things: he thought from something about the line of Malfoy's mouth that he might want to hit things as well.

He thought it mightn't be safe, just now, to hit each other.

Malfoy turned his glass around and around, held in long fingers. "There's always Baddock," he said. "Nothing you haven't done before."

"Malfoy, *will you leave it!*"

Malfoy sat up fast, as if he was uncoiling to lunge: Harry could almost taste the promise of violence, of blood and some release of tension, at the back of his throat. It was sweet.

"But I don't understand," Malfoy said instead, his voice tight.

"Would you do it?"

"No, of course I wouldn't!" Malfoy almost shouted. "But it's clear our views on that sort of

thing are rather different, now isn't it? You don't like Baddock, you never even knew that Italian bloke's *name*, and frankly you never seemed all that pushed about Coote either."

Harry stood up and realised as he did that his fists were already clenched. "Listen to me—"

"No, you listen!"

Malfoy's face was flushed, his eyes alight with delighted malice, and Harry knew that this was another of those things that Crabbe had warned about, that Malfoy tried to stave off with alcohol, that when Malfoy was hurt he got savage, he just wanted to lash out and see other people hurting too. Harry knew that and he didn't care, he wanted it too, as long as he could lash out in return.

"Last year I was shot and almost died," Malfoy drawled, drawing out each word with a certain chilly pleasure. "It was really... very unpleasant. There was the pain and then there was the shock, I was so cold. I didn't care that you went to the Christmas party — I told you to go, we've already established that you don't stay and I don't care that you don't, but I was *pretty surprised* when Thomas told me the far from seeming even slightly bothered you had a marvellous time at the party with a mystery man."

"Oh, you must be mad," Harry yelled, but Malfoy shouted him down.

"I don't *care*," he repeated sharply, "but if you could do that then I really don't see why, when our jobs are on the line, you can't bloody well sort it out and stop being pigheaded just because someone gave you an order and you don't feel like obeying. It didn't matter then. Why should it matter now?"

"Because it should matter," Harry said.

His voice sounded flat in his own ears. The desire to hurt Malfoy had drained out of him abruptly when Malfoy'd recalled the memory of that night, of Malfoy bleeding on the ground. He wanted to hit him, but he didn't want him hurt. He was hurt enough already.

This was all such a mess.

He took a deep breath, his throat feeling raw, and looked away from Malfoy's cruel furious face. "I was trying to care about Ritchie," he said. "But I didn't. And I'm sick and tired of sleeping with people I don't care about. It always — I feel rotten afterwards and it doesn't help. And, *you blind stupid git*, that thing at the Christmas party wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been—" He swallowed. "Upset. And acting like an idiot. Though not as much of an idiot as you, so why don't you belt up? You said you were on my side. Is it too much to ask for me to just sleep with people I actually *like*?"

He stopped there, and reached out for the mantelpiece. He looked at that, at the chipped white paint and the bad carving of leaves and fruit, and the grey hollow where in almost three years he'd never once burned a fire. He held onto it until his knuckles were white as the paint and the urge to punch something had passed.

He heard Malfoy let out a shaky breath and then Malfoy reached out and touched Harry's hair as he had the night before: fingers at the nape of his neck saying the nightmare was over.

Harry wished it wasn't so easy to make everything right again, wished that he could hate Malfoy for a bit longer instead of immediately feeling comforted and just wanting the comfort to continue.

"Sorry," Malfoy said in a subdued voice. "It's not too much to ask. I was – Sorry."

His hand dropped away almost at once. Harry subsided into the armchair and was tiredly pleased that Malfoy came and leaned against the chair, half-sitting on one of the arms instead of immediately resuming his usual lounge on the sofa. It was like he might want to be close.

He had another flash of memory, this one distinctly more pleasant, of the first time he'd consciously felt this way. It was early on, before Katie. He'd been at some stupid Ministry party and he'd escaped Scrimgeour's pestering and seen the Minister present his card to Malfoy, watching him with a calculating look in his eye.

Malfoy had laughed and burned the card, grinned like a devil and blown the ashes in Scrimgeour's face. It had been truly excellent, and when Malfoy'd headed for the bar like a homing pigeon and ordered a double and Harry was almost done laughing, the urge had struck. He'd looked at Malfoy, leaning carelessly against the bar, and thought very specifically of taking Malfoy's smirking face in his hands and kissing him.

He'd almost done it.

Malfoy *could* be close. He wasn't close now. All Harry had to do was reach up and grab Malfoy's shirt and pull him down. Malfoy wouldn't even have time to speak.

"So you were in shock from a scene of frightful carnage," Malfoy said, sounding faintly but distinctly pleased about this, "and of course, you quite understandably got drunk and then a dreadful man took advantage of you. Those Italians are shameless. It's a scandal."

Harry held his hands in fists, one clenched around the other.

"You do make life difficult," Malfoy continued. "Someone you actually like? So we're pretty much down to Granger and Weasley, then. Not that I didn't hear rumours about your little trio in school."

"No you didn't," Harry said. "Or if you did, you started them."

"I saw chemistry there," Malfoy said loftily.

When Harry looked up he caught the edge of Malfoy's smile, and then Malfoy got up and went back to the sofa, snagging his drink and stretching out easily.

"Anyway, I don't see why you were talking about Baddock for me. I wasn't the one he seemed interested in."

Malfoy took a drink and looked amused. "He was just messing around," he said lightly. "He always does it. It's a joke of his."

"Didn't look like he was joking."

“He’s got a boyfriend,” Malfoy said. “Besides which, like I would. Don’t be ridiculous. He’s a boy. What is he, twelve years old?”

“Hey!” Harry exclaimed.

“That’s different,” Malfoy said, making a gesture of appeasement with his empty glass. “You were never a prefect. Being a prefect is a high and noble calling, don’t you see, it instils responsibility, wisdom and maturity beyond our years in its chosen ones.”

“Yes, those are the first words that come to mind when I think about you.”

Malfoy smirked. “It’s nice of you to be concerned, Potter, but I don’t believe I shall be indulging in any weird sparkly rebounds. So I haven’t gone insane, which is one bright point in all of this-”

“Which is a matter of opinion-”

“And the Unspeakables team will be coming to review the office, too,” Malfoy said, brightening. “I like it when they do that.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I know you do.”

“You know what else would be a bright spot in all this darkness,” Malfoy continued, his voice becoming insinuating. “I was watching a film about a secret Muggle Auror.”

“A spy. I know you know this word, you used it yesterday. A *spy*.”

“He had a special fancy Auror suit thing. We should get some for the Auror of the Year ceremony.”

“D’you mean a tuxedo?” Harry asked.

“Sounds about right,” Malfoy said. “Sure. One of those. Two of those! That’s what I want. Then we can be like James Blond.”

He closed his eyes and stretched some more. Everything was a mess, there was going to be an investigation at work, and Harry didn’t know what he was going to do, but for a moment there was peace.

“Wait,” Harry said, and smiled. “What?”

“James Blond,” Malfoy repeated, smiling back with his eyes shut. “He is extremely famous. You really should learn more about the ways of your people, Potter, and stop being a cultural illiterate. Where would you be without me?”

*

“Not that it’s not good to have you around,” Harry said to Ron, “but what is the business doing without you?”

“Beauty of delegation, mate,” Ron said, reading Harry’s confidential paperwork. “Besides, Malfoy said that if I didn’t drop by whenever I could he’d tell Pansy that I copped off with Millicent Bulstrode at his twenty-first.”

“I don’t know where he gets this stuff from,” Harry said. “I think his brain is warped.”

Ron coughed. “Well, actually I did. It was a bit of a misunderstanding, and it was twenty minutes before I saw Pansy, and, um. I was young!”

“Isn’t Millicent married?”

“It’s a friend’s part to be supportive, Harry,” Ron said reproachfully. “I’m not feeling supported here.”

Harry flicked a quill in Ron’s direction. Ron batted it away with his wand. The whole office was in a bustle of activity preparing for the Unspeakables, his best mate was here and Ron was offering a dish of peppermints to people who came too close, and it was almost ten and time for Malfoy to come in.

Almost on cue, there was Malfoy. He walked in beside Dean, who was hovering somewhat anxiously by the door for some reason: Malfoy was talking and Dean was laughing as Malfoy looked around, saw Harry and smiled. This is for you, the smile said, and then he hung up his cloak.

There was a terrible sound from Ron, stunned and hurt at once, as if he’d leaned against the desk and burned himself. Harry swung around and stared at him.

He wasn’t looking at Harry. “*Quick*,” he ground out. “Mints!”

Harry gaped. “What? Oh my God, really? Are you sure?”

“Less talk, more mints!”

“Right, right,” Harry gabbled, fumbling for the dish and almost dropping it in his haste. “Sorry. Oh my God. Here.”

Ron took a huge handful of mints and shoved them in his mouth. He shut his eyes and chewed them. The sound of him crunching the mints was like ice breaking underfoot.

When Ron opened his eyes, Harry winced and returned the look. Ron’s eyes were clear.

“Oh, yuck,” Ron said. “No offence.”

“None taken,” Harry replied, massively relieved.

Ron frowned. “What happened just there? I mean, you just—“ His eyes moved from Harry, very slowly, to Malfoy. “Malfoy walked in,” he said in a testing, incredulous sort of way, as if he was begging Harry to correct him. “And you just...”

“Shut up,” Harry said, very low.

Ron looked stunned. “You – and *Malfoy* - you’re-“

Harry leaped to his feet, seized Ron’s arm and pulled him into the supplies cupboard. Ron banged his head on a box of the good letterhead parchment, cursed and then resumed his blank staring at Harry. Harry clenched a fist and looked down at the floor.

“You,” Ron said, his voice more certain this time. “And Malfoy. But he only just – with Katie – you’re not-?”

“No.”

Ron calmed fractionally. His eyes still looked wide and a bit crazed. “But you’d like to be?”

Harry was silent.

“Since when?” Ron demanded.

“A while,” Harry said shortly.

“Who else knows?”

“Me. You,” Harry said. “He doesn’t know. Don’t you dare tell him. Don’t tell Pansy!”

“No, no, ‘course not,” Ron said, his best friend, solid as a rock, and then his eyes widened even further. “Oh my God, Hermione doesn’t know? Do you realise that me knowing something when Hermione doesn’t is probably one of the signs of the apocalypse?”

Harry started to laugh, sounding a little wild even to himself, and by the time he could stop Ron was still.

“Jesus, mate,” he said. “I’m sorry. What a mess.”

Harry leaned his head back against the cupboard door. “Yeah.”

Ron cleared his throat and looked like he was going to say something else, when the door opened and Harry almost fell out. He grabbed at the door to catch himself and found himself glaring at Malfoy, who looked somewhat amused.

“And here you two are in a cupboard,” he remarked. “Weasley? D’you need a mint?”

Ron looked indignant, looked at Harry, and then looked resigned to a dark fate. “Yeah,” he said heavily. “Er. Couldn’t help myself. Sorry, Harry.”

“That’s okay,” Harry said with enormous gratitude.

Malfoy cackled. “You Gryffindors are so weak-willed. I’ve always said it. All that bravado, so little strength of mind. A Veela just has to bat his eyes and you people buckle like cheap belts. I can’t say I didn’t have my suspicions, Weasley, there were so many rumours at

school...”

Ron glared. “You started those rumours, Malfoy!”

“I’ve always been very observant,” Malfoy told him smugly. “Well, I need my coffee. Do try to keep your hands off Potter while I’m gone, won’t you?”

Ron made a comprehensive gesture.

“I simply cannot wait,” Malfoy said, ignoring him and smiling a bright smile, “to get back to my desk and write my dear friend Pansy, to whom I am so close, a detailed account of my day so far. It’s the kind of thing pals do.”

“What a git,” Ron said fervently in his wake, and then glanced at Harry.

“You’re not wrong,” Harry said. “It just – it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh my God,” said Ron. “We are so doomed. He is living with you! Okay, okay. No. Don’t worry about it, I, let’s see. He can come stay with me and Pansy.” Ron shut his eyes with horror at the thought, and then continued to make his noble sacrifice. “For as long as he – needs to. We’ll be – there for him.”

“He’s not going *anywhere*.”

From Ron’s startled and appalled look, Harry saw that he’d noted the hissing and bird notes in Harry’s voice as well.

“What, he’s going to sleep on your sofa forever?” Ron said. “He’s not a pet: you can’t keep him because he followed you home.”

Harry bit his lip. “No. Of course not. It’s just – it’s fine, he can stay as long as he needs to, that’s all. He wouldn’t want to be with you, you two don’t get on and – it’ll be fine. He can go once he’s over it and until then things will be fine. I’ll think of some way to sort all this out.”

“Right,” said Ron, and leaned back against Harry’s desk a bit weakly. “Okay. Look, d’you mind if I – I think I might like to go to work and have my secretaries bring me cool drinks.”

“Go ahead,” Harry said, and dropped his eyes.

Ron reached out and gripped his shoulder. “I won’t tell anyone,” he promised. “This is – a hell of a shock and I can’t think of a single bloody thing to say, but you can count on me.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry. “Always have.”

Ron clapped him on the back and departed. When Malfoy came back armed with coffee and pushed Harry’s tea towards him, he looked inquiring.

“Fled from your fatal allure, did he? Oh, those Weasleys. Must be a family weakness.”

“Um,” Harry said, and then saw a foolproof way to distract Malfoy from harping on about Ron or the Weasleys in general, and pointed. “Oh look, Unspeakables.”

Malfoy subsided into the chair behind Harry’s, stretched out and made a contented sound. “I like Unspeakables.”

The double doors to the Ministry both swung wide to admit the entrance of three witches walking in step, expensive robes rustling as they went, hair flaring behind them. Hermione was wearing her hair sleek today and as she walked in the middle her hair mingled on one side with Padma Patil’s jet-black sheet of hair and Penelope Weasley’s gleaming curls. They were all wearing red lipstick but not one hint of jewellery: they looked stern, official, and only incidentally very attractive.

Since so much Unspeakable work was done under cover of darkness, Harry thought they might be enjoying this chance to be on display.

Malfoy was certainly enjoying it. He almost cooed as they approached. “I love Unspeakable days.”

“Hermione is a friend, Malfoy.”

“Usually she is,” Malfoy agreed, “but today, she is a fantasy.”

“Malfoy, what a totally inappropriate thing to say when I am at work,” said Hermione, but she looked a little pleased and touched her hair in that slightly self-conscious way she always had when it was all straightened out.

“Good morning, ladies,” said Malfoy. “We are honoured to have you here and graced by your presence. Would you care for tea or coffee? Can I offer you a seat? When will you be mine? Don’t answer all of my questions at once, take all the time you need.”

Padma and Penelope did not look at all self-conscious or pleased. Malfoy seemed to like them stern.

“I’m married,” Penelope remarked dryly.

“I am utterly single and completely uninterested,” Padma said. “I like extremely handsome men.” She cast Harry an unimpressed look. “Ones who take care of and pride in their appearance.”

Harry smiled at her and she looked contemptuous, then very quickly took a mint.

Malfoy just smiled besottedly at them all. Women who were strong-minded and swept around being disdainful at people always completely floored Malfoy: Harry tried not to think about Malfoy’s mum and any complexes Malfoy might have because of her. He also tried never to consider Pansy or the fact that Hermione might’ve slapped Malfoy into a crush in third year.

He was pretty all right with the fact he couldn’t see how Katie fitted into any of it.

“We are here to evaluate the impact that uncontrolled Veela allure is having on your working

environment,” Penelope said in a careful voice, “and see what measures we have to take to alleviate this impact.” She gave Harry a small, apologetic smile.

“He’s not doing anything wrong,” Malfoy said combatively. “It’s not illegal to be attractive. Otherwise you three would be in serious trouble.”

“I’m taking a note about the fact that you are trying to impede the investigation by being flirtatious,” Padma informed him. “Again. You do realise that when the Auror headquarters were levelled during the war, it was Unspeakable money that funded the rebuilding. Do you want to work in an underground den again? Keep pushing me, Mr. Malfoy.”

Malfoy smiled an inappropriately flirtatious smile. “Will you push me back?”

Padma sniffed and she swept Penelope away with her to interview Dawlish. Hermione stayed behind.

“So that unauthorised exhumation and autopsy of goblin children you wanted,” she said in a calculatedly indifferent tone, playing with the quill lying on Harry’s desk that Ron had thrown an hour ago. “Obviously I couldn’t possibly countenance such a thing. And your attempt at blackmail had no effect on me.”

“Clearly,” said Malfoy. “Well, it was worth a shot.” He paused and added: “Was my guess right?”

“Absolutely right,” Hermione said. “And the next time I need investigators or muscle with no questions asked, you two have to be on hand.”

Harry nodded. Hermione and Malfoy seemed to enjoy blackmailing each other and talking in riddles, when they could’ve just done each other favours and thought no more about it. He supposed whatever made them happy was all right.

Hermione gave them a small, official-looking nod back and went off to join the other Unspeakables.

“What was all that about?”

“I had the Murimble children dug up and examined without their parents’ consent,” Malfoy said cheerfully, and if someone else had heard him it would’ve been five years in Azkaban. “And guess what, Potter – they weren’t the Murimble children.”

“Beg pardon?”

“The merman kid I was investigating was never found. We usually find bodies in the end, and that made me think: the children’s bodies weren’t identifiable, but we were working on *one* assumption that turned out to be wrong. The Murimble children weren’t pure goblins. The bodies we found were.” Malfoy leaned across the desk toward Harry. “Someone is taking halfbloods and either selling them off as curiosities or as potions ingredients. This isn’t just a hate crime. Someone’s running a halfblood racket.”

“The Murimble children might still be alive,” Harry said.

“Oh yes,” Malfoy agreed, sounding as if that was rather unimportant in the grand scheme of things. “And there’s that. They’ve mostly targeted children so far, so I’m looking at the next possible victims.”

“And who’re they?”

Malfoy tipped his chair back and looked extremely pleased with himself.

“Firenze and Lavender Brown’s two half-centaur children, of course. Fancy a trip back to Hogwarts?”

*

Harry realised why Dean had been lurking around the door a few minutes after he was called into Shacklebolt’s office. Malfoy had been specifically forbidden to come with him, and Harry kept looking over his left shoulder and feeling vaguely uneasy about the absence there as he came in and shut the door.

Shacklebolt was sitting at his desk rather than pacing on the worn area of carpet, and there was someone in the chair across from him. Harry saw the sunset-red cloud of hair and felt his heart stutter in his chest.

She turned and he saw a freckled, heart-shaped face and worried hazel eyes.

“Hello, Harry.”

“Ginny,” Harry said, and swallowed. “Hi.”

Shacklebolt looked determinedly indifferent to any emotional moments that might be going on in his vicinity. “Ms Weasley has come all the way from France to offer her expertise in building resistance to Veela charms.”

Ginny offered a small smile. “They offered to pay my fare for the flying carriage, and it’s been a while since I saw Dean.”

“You and Dean,” Harry said, and coughed.

She shrugged. “Sort of.”

“That’s great,” Harry said. “I mean – he’s a great guy. That’s great.”

“Excuse me,” Shacklebolt said. “I mysteriously have a craving for peppermint tea every ten minutes. I’ll be right back.”

He closed the door carefully after himself. Ginny got up and leaned against his desk. She picked up his paperweight shaped like an enormous heart and turned it over and over in her hands.

“This is,” she said, and laughed a little. “This is weird. I look at you, and I – before I ever met

you, I was a little in love with the idea of you, and then I did meet you and I was just.” She shrugged. “I was kind of swept away. They say that’s what the Veela stuff does to impressionable people.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, low.

“It’s not your fault,” Ginny told him. “And it’s not my fault that I thought you were wonderful. I – we never really even talked, and I was offering you love. I see why you couldn’t turn it down.”

“I,” Harry said. “I liked you.”

Harry thought of her doing a vivid laughing act, doing impressions, just to please him. He thought of little normal things that had been real, the way when she was tired she put an elbow in her plate and she’d seemed like a way of being part of the Weasleys and she’d liked Quidditch and he’d always been perfectly, wonderfully sure she liked him. She was the only girl he’d ever really liked.

Ginny laughed more easily. “I thought you were *it*,” she said. “And now I look at you and you’re not – really my type. I like artistic guys, you know? And, um, no offence, but you’re kind of – now I know a bit more about the world – sort of – really gay.”

“Well there’s that,” said Harry.

“But,” Ginny said, ducking her head and smiling. “The bits of you I did get to know... I liked them. I did.”

“Yeah?” Harry grinned at her. “Thanks.”

“I need to go say hi to Dean, he’ll be worrying about me being shut up in the room with a fancy powered-up Veela,” Ginny said, and passed him by with an easy indifference that she must’ve worked on and which must’ve become habit, just like her bright act meant to catch his eye had become second nature to her.

She wiggled three fingers to him in a little wave as she went by.

He was happy for a moment, painfully glad because this stupid thing could be overcome, could be beaten with enough stubbornness, and then wrenchingly sad. She’d been – he’d thought she was what he’d come home to, once. She’d been his last dream of home, of something normal.

He went back to his desk and saw that Malfoy wasn’t there, felt desolate for a moment, which made no sense. He sat down and hunched over the desk, over pictures of mermaids and centaurs, and thought about the only girl he’d ever really liked.

“You’ll never guess what’s happening in the supplies cupboard,” came Malfoy’s drawl, familiar and beloved, and then he put his fresh cup of coffee down on a mermaid and said in a different voice: “What’s wrong?”

“I was thinking about – you were talking once about parallel universes,” said Harry. “All the

different ways things could've gone."

"I was probably the worse for drink."

"Probably," said Harry, which was as much as he would say about the drinking. "I just, I saw Ginny and I want to think that – it'd be nice if there was some way it could've worked out."

"Sure," Malfoy said. "That's the theory of parallel universes. Everything happens somewhere and – I used to think about them a lot. Ways I could've got my parents out of the war alive, mostly, and lately other things. But..."

He stopped for long enough that Harry looked up and saw him leaning against the desk close by, face sharp and thoughtful, not something to dream of. And still.

"What?"

"I'm not brave," Malfoy said abruptly. "I have to get really angry to be brave. If Mum hadn't... died, then I wouldn't – I mightn't have been on the right side and I wouldn't have been with the Aurors and I would've been something quite different, we wouldn't be anything at all."

"You're," Harry began, and then they were interrupted by Hermione coming up to them.

She was carrying some strange hybrid of a clipboard and parchment: Harry could *see* Malfoy's bone-deep urge to take it away and fiddle it into something extraordinary.

"Don't worry too much about this, Harry," she said. "If the worst comes to the worst, we can put peppermint in the drinking water."

She crunched on a mint and looked happy to be with statistics and reports.

"We'd have to memory charm everyone in England so they'd forget what plain water tasted like," Malfoy said. "Which I support, by the way. Don't think I'm trying to find fault."

Hermione gave him a look that was part fond and part exasperated, and part solemn conviction that she should have slapped him harder and more often in school.

"How are you doing, Malfoy?" she asked.

"Not – so well," Malfoy said, and after a pause: "But I imagine there are worse universes."

Hermione gave Malfoy a different look, this time one that accused him of drinking before lunch, and went away. Harry felt calm enough to say: "What *is* happening in the supplies cupboard?"

"Ginny Weasley just tackled Thomas into it, is what," Malfoy said, with the supremely happy air he wore when gossip appeared before him. "And you'll never guess what I heard her say to him! She said – wait for it – she said 'Oh, Dean! We could have had years.'"

Malfoy laughed like a hyena.

“I think that’s a bit romantic,” Harry muttered.

*

Ron flooded into Harry’s flat without warning that evening, looked around the room and found it free of Malfoy, and said: “I just had a really interesting talk with my sister-in-law. Courting?”

Harry was mercifully spared from having to reply by Malfoy coming out of the bathroom towelling his hair dry.

Ron made a weird yelping sound. “Malfoy, put a *shirt* on! Have you *no* shame?”

“What?” Malfoy said blankly.

“Just clothe yourself decently, that’s all!”

“I knew you’d succumb to a drugging lifestyle,” Malfoy told him at last. “The *nouveau riche* always do.”

Harry was actually kind of insulted that Ron thought Harry was going to be overcome by the sight of a bit of skin. He and Malfoy had been partners for years. Harry was completely used to and totally unmoved by Malfoy with his shirt off, hair silvery and tangled at the nape of his neck, too thin, with a scar from a knife running along his ribs and muscles moving sleek under pale wet skin.

Mostly totally unmoved.

“What are you even doing here?” Malfoy demanded.

“I came to see how the Unspeakable investigation went,” Ron said promptly. “How did it go?”

Malfoy glowed. “With your sister proving that resistance can be built up through willpower and the help of Gabrielle Delacour, and with our plans to pursue an investigation out of the office, Shacklebolt is giving us another month clear to get out of this. I win again!”

“You didn’t do anything, Malfoy,” Ron pointed out. “Except for lose your shirt, apparently. Wait, Ginny’s not in France? Where is she?”

Malfoy smirked. “I think she’s with Thomas. I imagine he’s-”

“Respecting her,” Harry put in hurriedly.

“I imagine he’ll be respecting her all night long,” Malfoy said, grinning like a fiend. “Potter, may I borrow a nice shirt? Do you own one? I’m going out in a bit.”

“Yes, clothe yourself, for God’s sake!” Ron commanded.

Malfoy gave Ron a look that said Malfoy found this behaviour strange even for a Gryffindor, then he continued drying his hair as he went into Harry's room.

"He needs to move *out*," Ron hissed as the door swung shut. "You need to tell him. Do something! You have no idea how traumatised I am to be saying this, but you got more attractive every second he was walking around without his shirt!"

"Tell him," Harry echoed. "About five minutes after the love of his life chucked him, d'you mean? When he's looking to me for help, to be a *friend*, you think I should come out with something like that? Not to mention whenever I did it, it'd ruin everything at work and everything – no."

"Okay, when you put it like that," Ron said after a minute.

"Put it like what?" Malfoy said, emerging buttoning a white shirt Harry thought Hermione might've bought him for Christmas one year.

He snagged *Virgins and Vixens: A Veracious Version of the Vicissitudes of the Veela* off the counter as he went by headed for the sofa, idly fiddling with his shirt collar.

"Aren't you going to do that shirt up properly?" Ron demanded.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "You're weird, Weasley."

He stretched out easily on the sofa, one arm behind his head, sighing and getting comfortable, and Harry had to admit Ron had a point. Malfoy'd always worn things with long sleeves and high collars when he was still with Katie, always made sure the Dark Mark didn't show and kept his coat done up so strangers wouldn't see the scar on his throat.

He didn't seem to be bothering about that now, sleeves rolled up and a couple buttons undone. He looked relaxed and it was nice, Harry was glad about it, but it was – distracting.

"Can I borrow that book?" Ron asked suddenly.

"I don't know, Weasley, some of the words are pretty difficult," Malfoy told him, but he let Ron tug the book out of his hands. "Don't lose my place," he commanded. "I'm reading up about courting. A Veela called Gytha attempted to court a monk and her attractiveness started crossing all sorts of species barriers. I want us all to be prepared for the day Potter is suddenly passionately wooed by a pigeon."

Harry had already decided not to go round Hermione's place for a bit, but it was horrifying to think that another reason to stay away was a possible romantic advance by Crookshanks.

Ron started flipping through the book and made a face. "Oh, urgh, there're illustrations in here." He turned a page. "Huh. Some of them aren't so bad."

"Dear Pansy," Malfoy said. "It is my sad duty to tell you that today Weasley came round and looked at pictures of Veela instead of coming home to you. Due to the great affection and esteem I feel for you, I am absolutely willing to either hold the chest of thumbscrews so it is within easy reach or – if you prefer – make out in front of him."

Malfoy reached out for the bowl of mints on the table, took one and put it in his mouth. Ron's fingers froze as he was turning a page. Harry's head came up with a jerk.

"Well," Ron said slowly. "I'd better be – getting back to Pansy. Now. Right now – because, um. I cannot resist Harry any longer."

"God, Weasley," Malfoy drawled, sucking on his mint. "Twice in one day. You should be ashamed."

"Yeah, well, he's – a handsome devil," Ron mumbled, sounding supremely unconvinced. "Okay, bye!"

"Bye," Harry said absentmindedly.

It was perfectly possible that Malfoy had just wanted a mint. He didn't look any different than usual. Harry didn't think.

"Would you bring me my new centaur books?" Malfoy inquired from the sofa. His voice didn't sound any different, either.

Harry went and fetched the pile on the counter, taking a look at the covers and titles as he leaned against the sofa and passed them down. "You've got *Running Under the Constellations*, *Common Ground with the Centaur* and, uh, *Searching for a Support Bra in the Forbidden Forest: A Lady Centaur's Tale*."

"Support bra, please," said Malfoy, and they snickered because they were five.

Harry stayed leaning against the sofa. "So – where're you going out? Is Goyle taking you on another trip to see the Christmas shop windows?"

"I like the ones with lots of silver and lights," Malfoy said reminiscently. "No, Baddock's taking me out for a drink."

"Oh," said Harry.

The buzzer rang out and Malfoy said: "That'll be him now," and got up to let stupid Baddock in. He was wearing another stupid sparkly shirt: this one said in purple ...*And Then They Made Me Their Queen*. He was a guest in Harry's flat and Harry should be polite.

Baddock was staring at Malfoy. Staring wasn't too polite, last time Harry had checked.

Harry cleared his throat. "How's your boyfriend, Baddock?"

"Hello to you too," Baddock said, as Malfoy accepted a light hug and Baddock stayed leaning against his chest for no good reason at all. "My boyfriend's very understanding," Baddock told Malfoy's chin. "He let me make a list of people I was totally allowed to sleep with. You were on it," he added confidently.

He toyed with one of the loops on Malfoy's jeans. Harry thought about throwing him out the

window and wondered exactly how many questions Malfoy would ask if he did.

“That’s sweet,” Malfoy said, and patted Baddock’s spiked and gelled hair. There were purple sparkles in that, too.

“You know,” Baddock told him. “I’m double-jointed.”

“Are you,” Malfoy drawled, lazy and warm as a morning in late summer. “So’m I.”

Baddock looked thoroughly overexcited. Malfoy looked nothing but amused, because he thought that flirting was a game everyone played without being in the least serious, because he was a total idiot. Harry gripped the back of the sofa and heard the wood creak.

Baddock glanced around at the sound, and looked very approving,

“You’re positively smouldering today, Potter! Has anyone ever told you that your body is a festival?”

Harry released the sofa from his death grip. “Um. No. I’m okay with that,” he added quickly.

“Maybe we should all stay *in* together, what do you say, boys,” Baddock said with an intrepid air.

“That’s not funny, Baddock,” Malfoy said, still sounding tolerant and faintly amused by this carry-on.

“Oh all right,” Baddock said, snuggling in closer.

Malfoy looked vaguely startled, but he let him do it, with the air of one being molested by a kitten: surprised that it was happening at all but thinking the kitten was cute and helpless enough to get away with this behaviour.

“So where d’you want to go?” Baddock asked happily, drawing purple-painted fingernails down the faint scar running along Malfoy’s throat. “We could floo to this great place called the Lengthy-“

Malfoy pushed him away abruptly and hard enough so that Baddock’s back cracked against the counter.

“Don’t do that,” he said sharply, eyes narrowed for a moment, then shrugged and said: “We’ll go to Rick’s. Come on.”

His voice had that ring about it which had made Hermione sure he was abusing his powers as a prefect, and Baddock looked cowed.

“Okay,” he said humbly. “Will you tell me more about those Muggle suits you’re going to wear? I bet they’ll look dashing. I wish I could see them!”

Malfoy relaxed and looked charmed at this opportunity to talk about his James Blond costume. Baddock was a conniving little snake.

“You can see them if you want,” Malfoy told him grandly, with the air of a bigger boy promising the midgets sweets from Hogsmeade. “You can come to the ceremony, if you like. You can be my date.”

Baddock looked thrilled. Harry thought of seventeen ways to kill him with his bare hands and then dispose of the evidence.

*

The award night for Aurors of the Year was a bit different this year: the tables all had delicate silver bowls of mints nestling beside the champagne bottles. Even the chandeliers were adorned with mints, hanging from the loops of silvery ribbons tied here and there amid the crystal and the lights.

It was all completely embarrassing, but Harry kept his eyes averted from the mints and his hands in his pockets, and tried to enjoy the evening.

It wasn't as hard as he would've thought. Hermione was looking stunning in red and entertaining the whole table with her Muggle date, who seemed dazed by everything and kept asking questions about people's funny little sticks.

“We use our wands to perform magic,” Hermione said. “Because I'm a witch, remember?”

“I find your straightforward manner very charming, darling,” Reginald Whateverhisnamewas assured her. “Good Lord, look, that chap just seemed to appear from the fireplace. Funny the tricks the mind can play on you.”

Malfoy was breaking Baddock's heart by obviously not realising they were really supposed to be on a date, and being kind of more into showing off his tuxedo than talking to him. Malfoy was off at another table showing his cufflinks to Dean and Ginny, and Baddock was drooping in his bright silver robes like a sad tinfoil flower.

Harry was quietly pleased by this turn of events, and had some champagne. A few people had looked a little alarming when they'd first caught sight of him in the tuxedo, but after he'd fielded a few comments like ‘I am the Empress of Sheba, and I want your babies’ the susceptible were giving their table a wide berth. Things were all right.

They were even better when Baddock whisked away in glittery dudgeon and Malfoy returned to the table eventually looking very amused indeed.

“Faithless is the heart of man,” he remarked, and poured himself what must have been his ninth glass of champagne. “Do you know what Baddock is doing right now? He's messing around in the supplies cupboard. With – wait for it - *Cuthbert*.”

Harry laughed.

“Cuthbert,” Malfoy said in brooding tones. “The indignity! I think I would've preferred Dawlish. One of my Slytherins, so lost to all pride that he consorts with Hufflepuffs. It really doesn't bear thinking about.”

He fiddled with his napkin ring, fingers always restless, and Harry could tell by the line of his mouth that he was thinking of Katie. She'd been beside him at most of these ceremonies: they'd hooked up at the first one.

Then Malfoy glanced up and smiled, his face smoothing out. "What people must think of us, Potter," he drawled. "Aurors of the Year, and I lose my date to a Hufflepuff and you don't have one at all. We must look absolutely pathetic. Though extremely well-dressed."

"That is a great comfort," Harry said gravely.

Malfoy seemed to really like his tuxedo. He had a couple of buttons undone on his dress shirt, in what seemed to be growing into a new habit, and his hair looked very pale against the black suit. Harry supposed it suited him: he was trying not to think about it.

The loss of Baddock did not seem to've dismayed Malfoy all that much. After a minute he asked Hermione to dance and she went with him and he played around, pretending to tangle them both up in her red wrap, dipping her despite her protests.

"Hope you don't mind me mentioning it, but you're weirdly attractive for a man," Reginald-Hermione's-date told Harry. "And I didn't even think this kind of thing in boarding school."

"Um, I have the blood of magical creatures which makes me supernaturally appealing," Harry explained, feeling himself go red. "Have a peppermint, you'll feel better."

Reginald had a peppermint. "Funny old thing, this magic business," he observed. "Had no idea it existed. Explains a lot, though. Still a bit of a shock when Hermione told me, mind."

"Er," Harry said, trying to take an interest. "How long've you and Hermione known each other?"

"Oh, we met this morning," Reginald told him. "Saw her having a coffee with some papers. I rather fancy smart women, so I asked her to have a drink with me, and she invited me to this little shindig. Told me about your whole magical world doo-dah while I was fetching her coat." He had another peppermint. "Yes," he said. "Bit of a shock."

Harry stared.

"I believe in total honesty in a relationship," Hermione said, coming back to the table with her hair in disarray. "There is absolutely no chance for us unless we are completely open with each other, and of course I cannot tolerate any prejudice about the magical world."

"Oh quite," said Reginald comfortably.

"Let me tell you about the oppression of house elves," Hermione said, beaming at him.

"Sounds fascinatin'," said Reginald.

Hermione's latest attempt at dating Muggles was obviously going pretty well, Harry thought. The last bloke had tried to have her committed, and that had really made her lose her temper.

He forgot about Hermione and Reginald at about the time Malfoy slid into the chair next to him. He was laughing and flushed from dancing, hair gold and eyes bright in chandelier lights that Harry saw as ever so slightly blurred by champagne, and he clinked his glass against Harry's.

"To being tragically alone but extremely well-dressed," he said, and then the light and laughter left his face entirely.

Katie was trying to go discreetly by, and like most people trying to be discreet she was failing miserably. She'd just bumped Malfoy's chair.

She was hand in hand with a redhaired stranger.

Harry looked at the way she was tentatively glowing, and suddenly the way she'd been late in the morning and early to leave the office these days made a terrible kind of sense. Malfoy was white to the lips.

"Oh, er, Draco," said Katie. It was the first time she'd spoken to him since she had told him she didn't love him. "Harry. Congratulations."

"Thanks," said Harry, leaning against Malfoy's back. Malfoy was trembling a little, not enough for her to see, and he leaned back into Harry's touch.

"Have you met Conleth Frexley?" Katie asked, trying valiantly to pretend that Malfoy wasn't staring at her and being terribly silent. "He's – he's a friend."

"Hello," Harry said coldly. He reached over Draco's shoulder and took the redhead's hand, shook it briefly.

"Pleased to meet you," said Conleth. He had a strange voice, low and crackling like a fire and then rising in certain places with almost the quality of a scream. "Heard a lot about you both."

"Oh, *have you?*" Malfoy demanded.

His voice was very, very calm. Harry could still feel him trembling, and he moved his hand on Malfoy's back, trying to soothe him, but Malfoy jerked away abruptly and was on his feet.

"Can I talk to you outside for a moment, Katie?" he snapped, and strode towards the double doors without waiting for an answer. Katie looked uncertain, and then slowly followed him.

Conleth and Harry were left looking at each other.

"Will she be all right?" this stranger asked in his funny voice and Harry hated him too, hated the whole world for that slight trembling Malfoy hadn't been able to suppress.

"Oh, *she'll* be fine," he snarled, and he was on his feet too, champagne glass still clenched in his fist, making for the double doors behind which Malfoy and Katie had disappeared. One door was still slightly ajar.

The corridor outside wasn't done up at all. It was just a normal corridor at headquarters, something not transformed by the festivities, and it looked like another world. Malfoy in his tuxedo and Katie in her blue robes looked totally out of place.

Malfoy also looked as if he was going to be sick.

"-of course not, Draco," Katie was saying, her voice shaking as if she was going to cry. "I would never cheat on anyone. I wouldn't, you *know* me, you know that I wouldn't-"

"It's been three weeks!" Malfoy shouted.

Katie swallowed, hugging herself. Harry could see the side of her face: it was wet.

"I know," she whispered. "I – I knew Con before. I swear, I didn't think anything was going to happen, I just met him in Germany and the way I felt about him let me know that – that I wasn't ever going to feel that way about you. I didn't think he felt the same way, it just helped me come to a decision, but - but then he came after me."

"That's so romantic, I could cry," Malfoy said, his voice savage. "But I see you're doing that enough for both of us."

"I'm sorry," Katie said.

Malfoy's mouth worked convulsively. "He's obviously part banshee," he observed. "Bet your family love that, they never liked magic at all and I kept-"

"It doesn't matter what my family thinks!" Katie told him, still crying. "None of that matters because it's right with him the way it wasn't with-"

"Yes I've absorbed your point, *thank you*," Malfoy snarled at her. "I wasn't right. I perfectly understand. And-"

He moved towards her and she flinched, and he stopped dead.

"I'm sorry," he said unexpectedly. "You don't – this isn't my business, and I'm causing a scene, and you don't have to put up with me anymore. I apologise. Go back to your date."

"Draco, you don't have to be this way," Katie told him, and reached out.

He grabbed her wrist before she could touch him.

"No I don't," he said, his voice very soft. "I can be this way, or I can be another way, I can tell you just what I think of your family and this new man you don't even know, I can tell you just what I think of you and what I think will happen to this ever so sweet new love, and I can tell you some of the things I'm *capable* of. Do you want one of the stories from work I never told you? Do you want me to talk about my parents? Do you want me to *scare* you or do you, maybe, want me to apologise so you can go back to your date?"

Katie wrenched her hand away and ran, through the doors, brushing by Harry without even

looking at him. Harry caught the door as she flung it open so that nobody else would see Malfoy slump against the wall, and then he stepped out into the corridor and shut it behind him.

Malfoy looked up, eyes gleaming in the dim light.

“You,” he said, his voice extremely unpleasant. “Don’t you have anything better to do than follow me around?”

“Not really,” Harry said.

Malfoy arched an eyebrow. “In that case,” he said, and his voice like a knife and Harry was suddenly sure that if he could’ve touched Malfoy at this point without losing a hand, he would’ve been able to feel Malfoy trembling. “Shall we spar?”

Harry cleared his throat. “All right.”

Malfoy walked briskly through the corridors towards the practise rooms and away from the sound of dancing and music. His voice was taut as he spoke and walked, the words tumbling out as if he couldn’t stop them.

“She’s stupid,” he said. “I mean, she thinks she’s in love! She doesn’t know the guy, you cannot be in love with someone if you don’t *know* them, but do you know what’s worse than anything? It’s not that she feels more for him than she ever did for me. I can understand me not being enough, that’s – but she’s being stupid. And I can see it. I don’t want to see it, I don’t want to think of her as stupid, I did not expect to be able to still live and want to live and get bored and – there’s this poem.”

“A poem,” Harry said carefully. “Well, this isn’t where I thought the evening was going.”

Malfoy laughed, a sharp bark of a sound. Malfoy’s words had carried them both blind through the halls, so *used* to going through to the practise rooms, and now they were here. The fluorescent lights bleached Malfoy’s hair and eyes so they looked as dead-white as his face. Harry put his glass down on the mats.

Malfoy hit him in the face.

“The poem ends,” Malfoy said once Harry’s ears had stopped ringing, Malfoy’s mouth trembling out of shape. “It ends with ‘Alone, most strangely, I live on.’ It feels all wrong, to be able to go on, I always thought that – with Mum and Dad and Katie gone, I’d be gone. I thought.”

He fainted and Harry ducked away, lunged again and caught Harry as he was ducking so they hit the floor, Malfoy knocking all the breath out of him. Malfoy hit him again and he grabbed for Malfoy’s wrists even as darkness flashed on and off before his eyes: he’d hit his head.

Malfoy’s panting sounded almost like sobbing in Harry’s ear. Harry had gained possession of one wrist but Malfoy could and did hit him with his free hand, they were a panting struggling tangle on the floor and Harry didn’t know when they’d left the mats, didn’t know who was going to win or what was going to happen.

“I think I can live with this,” Malfoy raged. “And I can’t bear it.”

That was when a Stunning Spell hit Harry.

It only glanced off him but it made him black out for an instant and by the time he was aware he was sitting up, Malfoy had a hand curled protectively around the back of his neck and a wand in his other hand, he must’ve rolled them onto the mats and grabbed the wand. Harry focused and cursed.

“Who was *that*?”

“I don’t know,” Malfoy said, sounding much calmer now that someone was out to get them. “I just threw a hex at the balcony and it didn’t hit: my guess is they ran. Are you all right?”

“No,” Harry said. “I have a headache. It really ticks me off when people try to kill us when we’re not on duty.”

“Oh, poor baby,” Malfoy mocked him, that possessive protective hand still at the nape of his neck, stroking his hair. “Here’s a riddle for you, Potter: who knows us well enough to know where we might go even at a party and wants to get us?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Yet.”

Malfoy half-laughed, crouched together and alive, adrenalin racing and Harry felt good despite the sick headache. They were *them*, and they were all right, and then Malfoy made a horrible horrified sound and pulled his hand away.

“What,” Harry said, full of dread. “What.”

“You didn’t hit me back.” Malfoy was white again, and he looked like he wished he could hit Harry just one more time. “You should’ve hit me back, you have to hit me back, what if I’d *hurt* you, I really could have-“

“We’d both been drinking and you were upset,” Harry said flatly. “I wasn’t going to hit you. Things could have got really out of hand.”

“Yes, *they could have!*” Malfoy looked almost terrified.

Harry reached out for him, but Malfoy leaned away. “It’s okay-“

“No,” Malfoy said. “No, it’s *not* okay, God.” He reached out and deliberately tipped over Harry’s glass of champagne. “That’s enough,” he said, and shut his eyes. “I’m done.”

“That was mine.”

“Shut up, Potter, it was a symbolic gesture.”

“It was still mine.”

Malfoy laughed a stumbling, broken little laugh and said: “I can’t believe I – I am crazy. You should run away, you know. Crazy people, they kill you. They kill you and your household pets, because they are insane.”

“I don’t have any pets and I’m not going anywhere, you idiot,” Harry said. “And the three weeks are up, in case you didn’t notice. And I’m still not going anywhere. If you thought I was, you *are* crazy.”

Malfoy laughed again, still holding his wand in one hand, and Harry reached out and took hold of his wrist. Malfoy wasn’t trembling now, just laughing shakily with his eyes shut. He didn’t pull away and they sat there, four minutes after an attempt on their lives, sitting on old practise mats under fluorescent lights and in rumpled Muggle suits. Harry held on.

Chapter Eight

Working outside the office had its advantages. For one thing, Harry didn't have to face Dawlish every day.

For another, Malfoy liked having his workplace about four inches away from where he slept. He decided that this meant Shacklebolt meant him to sleep in until half past ten every day, because he wanted him to be happy.

It was typical Malfoy that, with the everyday presence of Shacklebolt removed, he decided that Shacklebolt was his wise and all-knowing mentor.

"It is at difficult times like these that I think of my dear sensei," Malfoy said soulfully three days after they'd started working from home, "and I ask myself – What Would Shacklebolt Do?"

Harry could hear the capital letters in his head. He also came to the belated realisation that he shouldn't let Malfoy watch karate movies.

"Malfoy, I just asked you what you wanted in your sandwich."

"Shacklebolt used to eat sandwiches," Malfoy said. "Oh, I remember. Through the mist of years, through the veil of tears. Don't you remember? Those were happy days." He indulged himself in a wistful pause. "How I miss our glorious leader's guidance. I think he had tuna on rye."

"Okay," Harry said. "Just so you know, I'm smirking at you and finding you generally ridiculous."

"No you're not," Malfoy said, curled up serene under his quilt with his eyes tight shut. "You can never muster up a proper smirk. It's almost a disability. It makes me so sad for you."

Harry came and put the sandwiches down on the coffee table, next to the case files.

"Get up," he said. He meant it to be a simple command, Malfoy was being disgracefully lazy, but he was looking at Malfoy's sleepy face and it came out low and almost – if his voice didn't snag on that kind of thing, like a rough hand on silk – tender.

Malfoy smiled slowly and did not open his eyes. "Mmm. I am up."

"I'm shaking my head at you," Harry informed him. He sat cross-legged at the coffee table and dragged over a report on a troll highwayman.

After a few minutes he heard the small familiar rustling sounds of Malfoy dragging himself the few crucial centimetres out of his blankets and felt the weight of Malfoy's head hit his shoulder. Malfoy dug his sharp chin into the muscle reprovingly.

"You're spelling nefarious wrong."

“You barely have your eyes open,” Harry said, not turning even a little towards him. He knew Malfoy’s face was close: he could see the tangled and sunlit blond movement in the corner of his eye. He felt rather than saw the smile.

“I can *hear* you spelling things wrong at this stage,” Malfoy drawled.

He leaned against Harry while Harry wrote, his chest against Harry’s back warm and solid under a thin t-shirt. It always took him a while to summon up the energy to snatch at his coffee cup: after that he was able to shower and dress and set to work with twice the speed of a normal person, vibrating slightly like a tense, held wire.

The mornings were nice. Harry tried to pretend everything else was fine, too, even though they couldn’t spar and the endless paperwork was mind-numbingly dull and either he or Malfoy was pacing the floor half the time. Harry couldn’t really go for a walk anymore without his Invisibility Cloak and the neighbours all thought Malfoy was talking to himself and utterly mental, which wasn’t really a significant change in the neighbours’ views on Malfoy. They tried to spar in a local gym and had to climb out a window and escape when someone called the cops.

For New Year’s they went to Andromeda’s house and Harry had to answer Mrs Weasley’s well-meaning questions about his love life and Malfoy had to answer Andromeda’s well-meaning questions about Katie.

They had to leave early when Mrs Weasley got an upsetting gleam in her eye and suggested what Harry needed was the love of a good woman ripe in years and comfortable in her own skin. They rang in the New Year with Malfoy sniggering uncontrollably into the sofa cushions and Harry feeling traumatised for life in the armchair.

Harry knew that it was strange and warped to want the adrenalin of pushing his body almost to breakdown limit, of escaping death at least once a week and of breaking every rule and every law in the book, but he didn’t much care. He just wanted the job *back*, with a restless uneasy longing that made him resent everyone in the world.

Sometimes when Harry was up hours early and Malfoy was fast asleep on the sofa, Harry would lean over and brush a lock of hair out of his face, as gently as he knew how. It was just – he’d be more comfortable that way and it made Harry feel better, stilled the wild urge to do something for a little while.

Malfoy never had to know.

*

Malfoy mostly did the grocery shopping by himself now. Harry was leaning in the threshold, door ajar so he could hear his return, when he heard Malfoy taking the steps two at a time and a woman’s voice – that Scottish girl, what was her name – say: “Hi, Draco.”

“Hi, Fiona,” said Malfoy. That was it.

“I was wondering,” said Fiona, and stopped. “Could I talk to you for a minute?”

Harry leaned his head back against the door frame and frowned. What did she want? Oh God, *could* she be going to ask Malfoy out?

Harry had pretty much no doubt that Malfoy's anti-Muggle prejudices would probably evaporate if any Muggles were to show a pro-Malfoy bias and he reminded himself again that Malfoy hadn't chosen to be here, didn't want to be here: that he was here because his heart was broken and Harry couldn't *keep* him.

He'd always disliked Fiona. She had a shifty look about her. He suspected her of stealing the internet from the couple on the third floor. You couldn't trust someone like her.

"This shopping bag in my hand was not moving of its own accord," Malfoy told her. "That was an optical illusion. For as you can plainly see, it is in my hand. As it is inanimate and I must carry it from place to place."

"Okay," Fiona said, and sounded like she was smiling and finding Malfoy strangely charming. Which was idiotic, as Malfoy was quite obviously insane and she should stay away. "That wasn't what I wanted to talk about. So, you've moved in?"

"Er," Malfoy said doubtfully. "I suppose you could say that."

"Things are going well?"

"We haven't had any trouble with the pipes or anything, if that's what you mean," Malfoy said. "Are you having trouble with the pipes? Oh my God, don't tell me we have rats, I hate rats. The common rat typically carries at least eleven potentially fatal diseases. So do pigeons. Lots of people think pigeons are harmless, you know, but they're really not, they're just vermin with wings. Nasty tempers, too. If pigeons had shark teeth London would be a scene of carnage."

When exactly had he got comfortable enough with Fiona to chat to her like a maniac?

"You know I like you, Draco," said Fiona in a rush. That hussy.

"Do you?" Malfoy's voice warmed. "I like you too."

Malfoy, Harry reflected irritably, was a lot like one of those dogs who looked fierce and was secretly anyone's for a pat on the head.

"And I know you're different," Fiona went on.

"I swear to God that shopping bag was *not* moving--"

"I mean different from the others," said Fiona. "To Harry."

There was a deep, deeply puzzled silence.

"But I thought you should know there *are* others," Fiona told him, sounding distressed.

"There was this good-looking boy with freckles around all of one summer, and this sparkly

little guy, he was around again quite recently. I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you this but - he's *not* faithful."

"Ah," said Malfoy, his voice all funny and distant. "Well, you see, he's not-" There was a pause, and then Harry was horrified to hear him speaking in the calm, delighted tones he used when he'd thought of something he believed was funny. "He's not to blame," Malfoy informed Fiona. "He has a problem."

"What?" said Fiona.

"Oh yes," said Malfoy smoothly, sounding inappropriately thrilled about this. "He's a sex maniac."

"What?" said Fiona.

"He could never be satisfied by just one man," Malfoy told her with gathering glee. "Which is sad for me," he added as an obvious afterthought. "Yes. But I'm very brave and patient about it. I recognise that it's a disease."

"*What?*" said Fiona.

"Well, I must be off," Malfoy said. "But I want to talk more about this later, all right? I'm so glad to finally have someone to confide in."

He came in, stepping neatly around Harry, and Harry caught a fleeting glimpse of Fiona's shocked face before he shut the door. Malfoy went over to the kitchen sink and leaned against it as he burst out into hysterics.

"Oh my God, I hate you," Harry said. "You're evil *and I hate you.*"

"Serves you right for cheating on me," said Malfoy, and howled laughing at how absolutely absurd he obviously thought Fiona's mistake was.

*

They saved up visiting Hogwarts until it was almost February and they were going stir crazy and Malfoy was talking about fixing their showerhead to talk like Cyril the toaster.

Cyril the toaster was always making helpful remarks in the kitchen and Harry found that pretty entertaining, but he really didn't think he could handle that kind of thing in the shower. So he got Malfoy to Owl the school and warn them to stock up on the peppermints, and Malfoy became overexcited about seeing Snape which in Harry's opinion was a bit like being excited about going on holiday in one of the lower circles of hell.

They got the car and Malfoy spent the first hour passionately telling the radio, which he'd named Maurice, how much he loved and had missed him. Harry spent his time feeling peaceful, with even the turn of the wheel under his hands sweet and familiar to him, the car sailing through clear air on their way to a job and Malfoy's voice going on and on and on, endless as the sky.

“I think you should like Professor Snape now we know he liked your mother,” Malfoy decided randomly at some point.

“I don’t see why,” Harry said. “Doesn’t have anything to do with me. Besides, I think it’s kind of weird and disgusting.”

“Not disgusting,” Malfoy protested. “Professor Snape is a very striking man! And your mother was-”

“Malfoy, if you finish that sentence I will push you out of the car.”

“What?” Malfoy said, outraged. “I don’t mean it personally. God, you know me better than that, not a *redhead*.”

“Nothing wrong with redheads,” Harry said. He liked bright hair: he liked the way it lit up a room, made places seem warmer and more like home.

“Your sexual preferences are bizarre and distressing,” Malfoy told him, very solemn.

Harry made a rude gesture and then saw Hogwarts appear on the horizon, turrets bright gold in the afternoon sunlight and making Harry catch his breath as it always did, like seeing someone you loved unexpectedly. Gardens and hills and Quidditch pitches and dark forests spiralled out from it and the castle stood, the serene unchanging centre of it all. His first home: his only home so far, and for a moment it felt like Ron and Hermione were waiting at the Gryffindor table and he was safe, he belonged at last and he always would.

The feeling lingered long enough for him to say, as he brought the car in a descending circle and parked outside the door: “Sometimes I wish we’d never left school.”

“I can insult you at every opportunity and look at you with purest loathing if that makes you happier,” Malfoy said, and shut his door with unnecessary force.

“That’s not what-“ Harry began, but Malfoy was striding ahead, shoving the doors open and walking out into the Great Hall, where he was intercepted by a woman’s voice.

The woman was descending the staircase. She was tall and sturdy-looking, her face freckled and her grey-flecked brown hair cut short. Harry didn’t recognise her: she was beaming at Malfoy.

“Draco,” she said with obvious pleasure. “I just nipped down before class to see you. You’re looking well.”

She came over to him and kissed him on the cheek. Malfoy put his arm around her waist and practically glowed in that way he did, so all the coolness of pale face and grey eyes kindled and blazed up in something less like colour than light.

“And Mr Potter, nice to see you too.”

“Harry,” Harry said, wondering who on earth she could possibly be.

“But you were never one of my students, were you,” said the woman, which didn’t help Harry a whole lot. “While Draco here was a bit of a favourite of mine.”

Malfoy glowed some more. “I was an engaging child,” he told them all as if he was about to launch into a dramatic performance of his autobiography. “Everyone thought so. I was blond like a little angel and always impeccably well-behaved. Not to mention my quick wit.”

“I can say with total honesty that this is not how I remember you,” said Harry.

“You were very sweet,” said Professor Who the Hell Knew, and squeezed Malfoy’s arm. “I’ve never seen anyone in my class with such a bad case of the purebloods. You talked too loudly to nobody in particular and you acted like touching the desks with your elbows would contaminate you and how I longed to smack that stupid smirk off your arrogant little face. And then your first bit of homework came in and it was the best piece of work I’d seen in years, and I remembered that you had chosen Muggle Studies.”

“I always did superbly at school,” Malfoy decided, ignoring the rest of it blithely. “And I *was* very sweet.”

“You’re wasted being an Auror,” Professor – Muggle Studies, Hermione had definitely told him this, possibly Burbling. No, Burbage, that was it – Professor Burbage said, and leaned up and kissed Malfoy on the cheek. “Come to the next reunion.”

Malfoy pressed her hand and was silent, and then Professor Burbage nodded pleasantly at Harry and walked back up the stairs. Harry was startled to see a shadow pass over Malfoy’s face and he moved closer to him, put a shoulder in front of him and gave him an inquiring look.

“It’s nothing,” Malfoy snapped at him, and then in a lower voice: “I was just – I was always afraid something would happen to her, during the war. But I asked Professor Snape and – he saw to it that she was safe.”

They didn’t talk much about the war, except for a few times when they’d both been really drunk and Harry had talked about blood and Malfoy about fear. Harry cleared his throat and pressed his shoulder back into Malfoy’s.

“I wonder if she’s single,” Malfoy said meditatively.

“Malfoy! She must be fifty years old!”

“I don’t mind,” Malfoy said. “I found Mrs Weasley’s speech at New Year’s very convincing, actually. How did it go now, *oh yes-*”

“Time’s getting on,” Harry threatened him. “Maybe we’d better skip seeing Professor Snape.”

“Oh fine,” Malfoy said. “I’ll be good. Let’s go now, come on, this way-”

It made Malfoy happy and he was in a weird mood, so Harry went and prepared to do that thing he and Snape did where they carefully pretended that they weren’t in the same room as

each other but that they'd taken a random dislike to a certain spot of empty air.

As they opened the door to the Potions classroom, they heard Snape say: "Ten points from – what house are you even in, boy?"

"Hufflepuff," said a small dark boy promptly.

Harry was relieved to see that Snape was teaching first years: Malfoy'd had to send warnings ahead for the staff to eat mints and keep anyone who'd gone through puberty out of the way.

"Nice try, Ratcliff. Twenty points from Slytherin," said Snape dryly, and Malfoy broke into a smile.

"Sir," he said, and rapped on the doorframe. "We're from the Aurors? I was wondering if you might help us with some questions."

Snape turned, and his lip curled away from his yellow teeth in what Harry recognised was half-surprise and half almost a smile. That changed when his black eyes moved over Malfoy's shoulder to Harry.

"Mr Malfoy," he said, and his voice hitting a flat note: "Mr Potter. Of course: come in."

Malfoy strolled in and leaned on the desk beside Snape, his whole body an easy, liquid slump, never more graceful than when he wasn't thinking about it. He started talking about getting a list of all the mixed-blood students, his voice low, hands making small shapes.

Harry leaned against the doorframe and studied the first years, small and excited in the gloom of the Potions dungeons. Some of them were looking at Harry in awe or fear, depending on what their parents had told them about the war. Some of them were obviously thrilled by the mention of Aurors and were gazing as if he and Malfoy were rock stars, and some of them were looking at Malfoy's close proximity to Snape with the air of people watching someone juggle flaming torches next to dynamite.

One of them, the little dark one called Ratcliff, was looking deeply alarmed and waving his hand around urgently.

Snape slanted a more than usually irritated glance towards him. "Well?"

"Sir, I think I may have raised my slug from the dead, sir!"

Snape's narrow-eyed gaze caused the small boy to shrink even further in his seat and murmur pleadingly: "*Accidentally*, sir!"

Snape sighed. "Mr Malfoy, I believe you have just about sufficient Potions expertise to deal with this: I really do not have the heart."

His tone was cold and his manner contemptuous, but Malfoy smiled as if he had just been presented with a lollipop by an indulgent uncle. There was a slight lessening of hostility in Snape's face once Malfoy had turned his back, and Harry thought that it was possible that this was how Snape had meant it.

Harry also noticed that there was no smell of peppermint lingering about Snape as there had been about Professor Burbage, and clutched the doorframe in complete terror.

“Oh please, Mr Potter,” said Snape, not looking at him but wiping the instructions from his board to the accompanying faint moans of students who obviously hadn’t transcribed it all. “Let me assure you that I do not stand in the least need of peppermint. I am considered rather skilled at Occlumency, I would find a large arachnid more my type than anyone even vaguely resembling James Potter, and the other obstacle before your Veela charms-” he only just got those words out past a terrific sneer – “is also in place.”

There was a silence broken only by Malfoy and Ratcliff anxiously begging a slug to go into the light as Harry thought: in love with someone else.

“Is it,” he said, and looked at the floor. “Still?”

“Always,” Snape answered, and spoiled the pathos of the moment by adding: “Not that it is any of your business at all.”

“It was just, I meant,” Harry said. “If it was all about the V – I mean, it wasn’t real, was it?”

“I fail to see why anyone would be dense enough to imagine that the origin of a feeling is all that a feeling ends up being about,” Snape said crossly. “The right moment, a particularly attractive dress, the right word, a shared interest or magic – what does it matter? It has been over twenty years: the effects of Veela magic last about five minutes when out of the Veela’s immediate presence. A Veela can inspire real feeling as well as any other creature.” He paused and added: “Given your singularly unappealing personality, I doubt you will ever do so, of course.”

“Oh thanks,” Harry said dryly. He was about to inquire how much lasting devotion Snape himself had inspired when real curiosity stopped him and made him ask instead: “So was it all – the war and the spying business – was it all about... that?”

“Certainly not,” Snape barked.

“Oh,” said Harry, who’d been tentatively thinking that really was a bit romantic, after all.

“It may have started out like that,” Snape admitted grudgingly, as if he ever did anything any other way. “But what is a feeling worth if it shuts out all other feeling? Not living life as fully as I could would be an insult to-“ He swallowed the name. “If a life is lived in memory of one feeling – it would have made it a smaller life, and me a smaller person, not to do other things with that life. I fought the war for *many* reasons, Mr Potter, including the fact I have felt both respect and affection for several people. Never you, I might add.”

“You shock me,” said Harry.

He thought of the way Snape had guarded Malfoy through the war as he knew he had, how he’d listened to Malfoy’s concerns and saved Professor Burbage. He could have been a smaller person, with smaller concerns: it all could have gone much worse.

Not that Snape the way he was had a big soppy heart overflowing with love, of course.

“Sir!” a girl said at the top of her voice. “Ratcliff’s undead slug is trying to eat my stewed slugs!”

“It isn’t!” Ratcliff snapped, glaring.

“Ratcliff’s undead cannibal slug is ruining my Potion! This always happens!”

“It does *not*,” said Ratcliff, turning eyes of appeal to Malfoy. “How could it? I’ve never even had an undead cannibal slug before. She’s talking rubbish!”

“I have never yet heard any of you talk anything else,” Snape snarled, wheeling from the blackboard towards the students, who leaned back in their chairs like trees in a gale. “Mr Malfoy, I see you have let the whole situation spiral out of control, please step back and let me handle it. Miss Varley, cease complaining: I have no doubt your shrill tones are only aggravating the slug. Mr Ratcliff – words fail me.”

“Don’t kill him!” Ratcliff screeched. “Mr Malfoy named him Eustace!”

“My stewed slugs are all gone,” Miss Varley observed, fixing Ratcliff with darkly accusing eyes. “This is what comes of sharing Potions class with *Slytherins*.”

“Eustace didn’t mean any harm,” said Ratcliff, sharing a conspiratorial look with Malfoy. “I can’t wait to leave school,” he added with growing conviction, “and be an Auror and never have to mix with Gryffindors anymore and not have women messing with my slug!”

“Hey,” Malfoy said lightly. “My partner’s a Gryffindor.”

“Oh my God,” said Ratcliff, sweeping Harry an appalled look from head to toe. “You mean you *never get away from them*?”

Ratcliff made a lunge and Varley seized her schoolbook like a weapon and Snape roared: “Mr Ratcliff, unhand Miss Varley’s crucible at once – do you hear me? At *once*!”

“I was thinking of dropping by for tea around your birthday, sir,” Malfoy said tentatively.

Snape hesitated and then said: “Bother me any time but now, Mr Malfoy,” which sent Malfoy practically floating up the stairs. The sound of an all-out war for the undead cannibal slug followed after them.

Harry was a bit distracted by unexpectedly feeling empathy with Snape. He was thinking of Ron and Hermione and, well, Pansy and Crabbe and Goyle and Dean and Ginny, his friends, and the job he loved and the people he’d helped and having Malfoy with him even if he couldn’t have anything else. Making his life about one thing *would* have been making his life small, and himself a smaller person.

He’d been able to accept not having what he wanted. But now this stupid ridiculous Veela thing was messing with his job and his friends and – if it could just go away, everything would be all right. He could go on with his life. He *could*.

*

Lavender and Firenze lived in the hut that Hagrid had lived in before he gave up his job – “Was fired,” Malfoy insisted every time – and went to live in sin and in France with Madame Maxime.

Lavender had added a lot of extensions, though. Her daughter had a little pink bedroom and she had a separate kitchen and her husband had a platform to star-gaze from and a paddock where they exercised the baby.

She was pleased to see them at first. She shook hands and passed around peppermint tea that Harry refused and Malfoy accepted, and offered extremely embarrassingly congratulations about being partners. Malfoy corrected her without turning a hair and then told her that she might want to call in her husband.

The little girl, Jasmine, was small and sweet and fit in her mother’s arms when Lavender snatched her up as they kept talking. She had brown hair tied with two ribbons and the only thing that suggested her mixed blood was the fact she had little hooves instead of feet. Lavender had put pink socks over those.

The baby, Fornax, looked like a full centaur except apparently his upper half had matured slowly, like a human’s. Lavender told them shakily about how they’d still had to keep his head supported while his legs were able to run a mile.

“It was a bit of a nightmare for the first six months,” she said, “Some people thought we should’ve stopped with Jas since we got lucky and there were a few nights I agreed with them - but, oh, we love him.”

She looked at Harry almost pleadingly, as if her moments of doubt had put her child in danger and Harry was the judge who’d decide if her love could redeem him. Harry looked away.

“There’ll be four Aurors watching the house day and night,” Malfoy promised, already sitting on the floor and amusing Fornax with floating spoons. He stumbled forward, a little top-heavy and almost toppling flat, but Firenze reached down and arrested the fall with gentle hands and what was obviously long habit.

“He’ll grow into this,” Firenze told them both. “In a few years, nobody will be able to tell he had a human mother. But he will know, and always remember these years of helplessness, and – he will be a great man one day.”

Harry wasn’t sure if this was fatherly fondness or weird prophecy, so he said “Oh?” and took one of Lavender’s scones.

“Of course I always knew that Lavender was the one soul destined for mine,” Firenze added, apropos of nothing very much. “I read it in the stars. But I felt it was inappropriate to inform her before she had left school.”

Lavender looked at him with a radiant face, so obviously I-read-it-in-the-stars was the

language of love in the Firenze-Brown household. Harry supposed this made sense.

“Similarly, I knew my children were in danger before this,” Firenze said. “The danger has not passed yet.”

“Have the stars given you any names or addresses?” Malfoy inquired.

Firenze gave Malfoy a disapproving look and told him that was not really how the stars worked. Malfoy subsided into muttering about how taking Divination would have made him develop an ulcer.

“I know the Murimbles,” Lavender said, looking steadily more upset. She reached out a hand and Firenze caught it without even looking to see it was there, the gesture speaking of the same long habit he’d shown catching his son. “We all belong to LAST – the Love Above Species Team, d’you see?”

“Could we get the names and addresses of everyone in that group?” Harry asked, and took them down. “And Professor Snape is making a list of all the students of mixed ancestry, if you could look it over and add any names he may have left out-”

“Of course, anything we can do,” Lavender said, and Malfoy did what Harry couldn’t do and said all the right things, soothing and smooth and like the politician he’d wanted to be in third year. He made jokes until she smiled weakly and told her there was no reason to believe they were specific targets, that she would be well looked after.

At the door Lavender took Harry’s hand and he looked down into her scared face.

“I won’t let anything happen to your children,” he blurted out. “I swear.”

She smiled a little less weakly then, and gave him a hug. He patted her back a bit awkwardly.

“She’s cute,” Malfoy observed as they walked across green hills and back to the car. Harry could see the school Quidditch pitch in the distance, tiny flying figures and the faint sweet sounds of children yelling obscenities about a foul. “I don’t suppose you ever had a tiny fling on one of those long boring evenings in the Gryffindor common room?”

“We mostly played Exploding Snap.”

“I am so thankful I was in Slytherin,” Malfoy told him. “Not even a tiny crush?”

“I never had a crush on anyone in school but Cho Chang and Ginny,” Harry said firmly.

“That Exploding Snap must hold off hormones like nobody’s business,” Malfoy observed. “I had dozens of crushes. I liked Cho Chang too, mind you.” He sounded a little wistful. “She had such pretty hair. And the way she flew...”

“Did anything ever happen?” Harry asked, not sure how he felt about that.

Malfoy scoffed. “Oh sure, with you and Michael Corner and Cedric Diggory after her. No, she never noticed. Of course, I usually expressed my affections by cheating in Ravenclaw

games with what I fondly imagined was a debonair grace.”

Harry looked back at what he remembered of Slytherin and Ravenclaw games. He mostly recalled being on his feet cheering determinedly for Ravenclaw a lot. He supposed there had been moments when the blue and green flags turned into an aquamarine silk sea in a sudden gust of wind, when he’d seen other players whirled about in the air like falling leaves and Malfoy riding the currents, face a pale intent blur, and he’d been able to appreciate that when Malfoy wasn’t cheating like a fiend he could still fly well.

“A lot of school was wondering why I never seemed to get what I wanted,” Malfoy said, more thoughtful than bitter. “Of course, I didn’t know then that’s how life is. I mostly blamed you.”

He had, too, Harry thought, recalling about a million instances of Malfoy behaving towards him in the way he did with people who disliked him, furious, bewildered, and exactly calculated to make people dislike him more. Harry wondered what he would’ve done if – oh, if something had happened: if they’d never had a bad start and worse to follow, if Harry had been Sorted into Slytherin or if Harry had worked Malfoy out miraculously or more likely if Hermione had and told Harry about it. Maybe they could’ve fought a troll together.

The castle was dark grey against the pale grey sky of afternoon turning to evening. There were lights inside and voices, children running past the windows.

“It might’ve been nice if we hadn’t hated each other at school,” Harry offered slowly.

Of course if they hadn’t, if he’d got to know Malfoy who flew debonairly to impress Cho Chang and pretended not to like Muggle Studies and fooled absolutely nobody, well, then... Well, actually, Harry had a clear memory of his past self and if past Harry had been assailed by some helpless schoolboy longings for Malfoy, he definitely would’ve put it down to Voldemort influencing his mind.

“Yes,” Malfoy agreed. “Right up to the moment when the world favoured you so much that I had to restore karmic balance to the universe by punching you in the nose. Or right up to the moment I said something racist and you punched me in the nose.”

Harry frowned. “Yes, right up til then.”

“So that would’ve been a beautiful and harmonious four minutes,” Malfoy said, but he was smiling a little. He raised his eyebrows when Harry glanced over at him, glad he was pleased, and said: “Only Cho Chang and Ginny Weasley? God, the world *is* unfair. You’ve never wanted anything in your life that you didn’t get, have you?”

Malfoy stopped and looked over his shoulder at the Quidditch practise, shielding his eyes with a hand. The setting sun flattered him: turned his hair gold and made his eyes look like hazy, liquid mirrors. The sun even touched his thin, expressive mouth with light and made it look almost kind, which Harry knew it never looked on its own.

If this was karmic balance, Harry hated it. It was all so difficult, with this stupid Veela thing, he had only Malfoy, all the time, and Malfoy was alone so he could have him all the time and it wasn’t helping at all and he didn’t want it to stop.

He put his hands in his pockets, in fists, so he wouldn't reach out.

His voice scraped on birdsong and a hiss again as he said: "Guess not."

*

"WE WANT WOOD!" screamed a hundred voices. "WE WANT WOOOOOOD!"

Harry had wanted to stake out Hogwarts but they were only allowed to pull some night shifts. Malfoy, that traitor, had nodded at the orders and murmured that seeing teenage girls swarm Harry had been bad enough when they were actually at school.

But they had been desperate and pleaded, and Shacklebolt had decided to send them somewhere where everyone loved another.

And that other was one man.

Oliver Wood, singlehandedly responsible for making Quidditch a sport overwhelmingly dominated by female spectators and holder of a world record for received love letters and death threats, smiled around the dressing room.

"Looks like they're eager to start the match!" he said brightly. "So'm I, boys! And not to worry about the lads who say I've stolen their wives' hearts and they'll kill me for it. Or about the ladies who say that if they can't have me nobody will. Because these fine Aurors are here to protect us. You can trust Harry, lads, he could've played Quidditch for England if he hadn't decided that being an Auror would, uh, what was it you said again, Harry?"

"I wanted to help people and combat the injustices of the world," Harry said.

Wood blinked, obviously completely uncomprehending, and said: "Um. And it's your right to choose, I suppose. Since the government haven't been responding to my letters about Quidditch conscription." He cleared his throat. "Let's go get them!"

His team, who loved him passionately to a man despite the fact their team headquarters had been blown up by crazed fans seven times, all cheered desperately.

"You don't have any Veela blood in you, do you?" Malfoy asked in an undertone.

"Nah," Wood said, white teeth flashing in his tanned face. "I'm all man."

"And what a man!" murmured an adoring teammate.

His teammates were nothing compared to the fans. He and Malfoy took brooms and flew over the screaming, rioting masses as the match went on. They didn't see a trace of a threat and Wood's team won the game with four hundred points to spare.

Harry and Malfoy followed Wood up onto the winner's platform amid a rain of flowers and underwear.

“WHAT DO WE WANT?” shrieked the referee, who seemed to have completely lost his head. “WOOD! WHEN DO WE WANT HIM? NOW!”

“You’re a beautiful man,” said the woman presenting Wood with his trophy. “Make love to me.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed the game,” Wood told her. “Always pleased to meet a fan.”

Harry was outside and he’d been flying and the job had gone as smoothly as cream. He was in an wonderful mood. He shook the woman’s hand and she told him that he was gloriously handsome but no Oliver Wood, and he almost wanted to kiss her.

He and Malfoy fell into step beside Wood as he walked away from the Quidditch grounds.

“Excellent guarding,” Wood said. “Nothing got blown up even a little bit. And more importantly, there were no assassination attempts! Those always put me off my game.”

Malfoy was occupied grumbling about how one elderly wizard’s yellow pantaloons had hit him in the face, so Harry gave Wood a warm smile and told him he was glad and it’d been a great game.

“Thanks, Harry,” Wood said. He beamed and Harry smiled back again, feeling relaxed and happy for the first time in weeks, and Wood blinked at him. “Harry,” he said slowly. “I, um – you’re *really* good-looking.”

He sounded mildly puzzled, as if this was the first time he’d ever noticed this about anything but a shapely and aerodynamic broom.

“Thanks,” Harry said, very short, all his pleasure in the day fading. “Malfoy, where’s your mint spray?”

“I mean – really, really good-looking,” Wood told him, still looking puzzled but with his brown eyes becoming warm. “And a marvellous flier, of course,” he added, sounding on firmer ground there. “You move like a dream in the air.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said urgently.

“You know,” Malfoy remarked in a thoughtful voice, “I think... maybe you guys should talk some more about dreams in the air and so forth. I’ll be in the car flipping through some Quidditch magazines or something. Take your time.”

“*Which* Quidditch magazines?” Wood asked, his eyes turning to Malfoy for a second.

“You’ve read them, Wood,” Malfoy told him firmly, his voice retreating.

“Oh,” said Wood, and his eyes swung back to Harry as if he was a compass finding true north.

Harry was rooted to the spot with horror at how quickly the day had turned on him and by Malfoy’s desertion: by what Malfoy so clearly wanted him to do.

And why shouldn't Malfoy want him to do it? What difference did it make to Malfoy, except the difference between being able to do their jobs and not being able to do them? Everything could be okay.

Not living my life as fully as I could would be an insult, Snape had said.

It was nearly March, and the sky overhead was a bright overbearing blue and he was standing by a Quidditch shed with Oliver Wood looking at him with soft warm eyes. The Veela thing was only getting worse. This would make Malfoy happier. It would make *Harry* happier.

Harry looked at Wood directly for the first time since this had started. Wood in a rumpled Quidditch uniform, big shoulders, strong jaw and sweet dark eyes. There was a sprinkling of golden freckles on the bridge of his nose. He was very, very attractive. Harry could see that. And this wouldn't hurt Wood, he didn't think Wood could ever love anyone more than Quidditch.

Harry could do it, he thought.

He'd done it before, he remembered: Smith's teeth too hard in his lower lip, the ashy taste of Baddock's cigarettes in his mouth, Ritchie really good and really trying and really not touching a single chord in him, and even that stranger he couldn't recall any details about.

"Would you like to go flying sometime?" Wood asked, and then less certainly: "Or – or kiss me, now?"

"Yes," Harry said, his voice defiant and violent, and he grabbed Wood's brown wrist and drew him towards Harry.

The wood of the Quidditch shed was rough against Harry's back. He curled his fingers around a slat: uneven, the paint flaking, splinters biting into his palm, and shut his eyes and concentrated on that instead of Wood's body against his, Wood's wide mouth suddenly pressed to his. Wood felt *good*, Harry told himself, he was strong and his muscles were hard against Harry's and he was surprisingly gentle and he smelled good, too.

It was just – he was confused by spending so much time with Malfoy, that was all. His mind was all tangled up, it kept presenting him with thoughts of things that made no sense at all like – like Malfoy resting against him in the mornings, sleepy and lovely, his hair tickling Harry's ear and feeling as if Harry could just turn and slide his fingers lightly along Malfoy's sharp jaw and how was he supposed to ever want anything else?

Harry paused, shocked still by Wood's startled noise, and realised he'd just grabbed Wood, whirled and pushed *him* up against the shed, and begun to kiss him for real.

And why not, he thought, sweat trickling cold down the back of his neck as Wood kissed him with even more eagerness. This wasn't anything he hadn't done before, either, about a thousand times in the shower or alone in bed or with Baddock, Malfoy's face in the lamplight before his closed eyes, or sometimes with Ritchie when he was too tired or desperate to stop himself.

If he shut his eyes and just thought about something, like – like one stifling summer day in the car when Malfoy'd been swimming and crawled back into the car. He'd stretched shirtless against the hot seat, head tipped back, pale throat bared and cool drops of water – Harry could feel how cool they were just looking – sliding down to the waist of his jeans and Harry had thought *oh Jesus yes, please* and had to hold onto the car door to stop himself lunging at him.

Wood made a low sound of approval deep in his throat, and Malfoy and the car slipped out of Harry's mind. He was just standing here, fingers at the waist of Wood's trousers under his Quidditch robes, and he didn't feel like he was with Malfoy or even with Wood but with Malcolm Baddock again, with the taste of ash and despair in his mouth.

Harry stumbled backwards, wiping his mouth, and saw Wood reach out to have him back.

"God, no," Harry said, feeling blind and sick as if someone'd hit him. "I can't, I *can't*, I don't want to."

He turned and ran before his body could make clear its protest that it'd actually been far too long and maybe he did want to, and fled for the car. He slammed the door behind him and sat in the driver's seat, blood thumping in his veins as if it was running somewhere still, his muscles still tense with the urge to escape, to go anywhere-

If Malfoy had been in the passenger seat Harry would have done something, hit him possibly but far more probably just have really lunged like he'd wanted to years ago, held him against the window and kissed that stupid mouth, what had he been thinking of deserting him like that, God.

Malfoy was lying in the back seat flipping through a Quidditch magazine. Harry leaned against the steering wheel and put his head in his arms and heard Malfoy scrambling to sit up, to get to him. He wanted to hit something, wanted to *spar*: his muscles were locked now and screaming at him. He could still smell Oliver Wood on himself, the scent was all over him.

"I'm sorry," Malfoy said instantly. "Look, I'm sorry. You two get on well and you have lots in common and he's very handsome and I thought it might be a good solution. You should've said. I'm sorry."

"What," Harry snarled, and he could hear his voice going all wrong, trying to threaten Malfoy and call him closer at the same time, splintering in every direction. "What did you want me to say, I don't..."

"Shhh," said Malfoy, his voice *so* soothing, and Harry almost hated him for the fact it was going to work and Harry would feel better and calmer and then it wouldn't last.

He lunged. Malfoy completely misinterpreted things, the stupid idiot, and there was a brief nightmarish struggle which ended in Harry's head being forcibly shoved onto Malfoy's shoulder. Harry'd hesitated, torn between grabbing him and throwing him into the car door and running, and lost.

His muscles still felt tight, strained to the limit. Malfoy stroked his back, a long smooth motion that made Harry relax under his hands like a cat, and Harry shut his eyes and leaned

into Malfoy. "I hate this," he snarled into Malfoy's neck.

"I know," Malfoy murmured, when he didn't know anything. "I will work this out. Hey. Hey, Harry. It's going to be all right."

Malfoy's voice went a little soft and tentative on his name and Harry did feel better and calmer, happy in the same ridiculous way he was in the mornings, for the sheer animal comfort of being close. Malfoy petted his hair a bit, which he did sometimes when he thought Harry was being particularly crazy. Nobody else ever touched him like this. Harry breathed in, deep and ragged and trying to collect himself. He didn't have to convince himself that this felt good, his hand braced against Malfoy's waist, knowing the precise feel of him, Malfoy warm and always slightly too thin, whipcord muscle and not enough flesh. He was practically in Malfoy's car seat, breathing in and out and trying to concentrate on nothing but comfort.

"Everything's all right," Malfoy almost hummed, and Harry believed him. He made a small sound of agreement, contentment, and nuzzled the smooth warm line of Malfoy's neck.

The back of his head hit the car window so suddenly he almost blacked out and did bite his tongue, darkness filling his head and blood filling his mouth, angry and amazed and feeling mostly like a starving animal allowed one bite to eat and then having it taken away, bewildered and ready to howl.

When he could see Malfoy properly Malfoy had turned his face away and all he could see was icy profile.

"That's enough," Malfoy drawled, using the drawl like a knife. "I'm not your mum. That ought to be easy for you to remember, shouldn't it – considering you never had one?"

"What?" said Harry blankly.

"Nothing," said Malfoy, sounding a bit guilty for a moment and he didn't make any sense, that was his problem, "Can we go now?"

Malfoy was fairly silent for most of the journey home, seemingly intent on re-bonding with Maurice. Harry watched him carefully touching the controls, fingers light and almost loving, and told himself that it would be insane to be jealous of a car radio.

When they got home Malfoy went for a run and Harry had a shower. Once he was dressed again and left his room, towelling his hair dry, he found Malfoy apparently recovered from his weird fit or regression to school or whatever it had been, leaning against the kitchen counter and eating sugary cereal in his running clothes.

"You know, considering my broken heart and everything, I think a truly good partner would have used his Veela charms for something useful," Malfoy remarked.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yes. All you would have to do was sparkle a bit or whatever it is you do, and then you could bring me the Patil twins and I would be happy. Don't you *want* me to be happy?"

“I don’t think Padma Patil killing you and eating your liver would make you happy.”

“I don’t know,” Malfoy said with a sigh. “I bet she’d do it very attractively. Would you bring me just one Patil twin, just one tiny one? Padma for preference, of course.”

Insofar as Harry was aware, being totally unmoved by the Patil twins, most people preferred pretty, laughing, butterfly-wearing and not scary like her sister Parvati. Which was just more proof that Malfoy was weird.

“No,” he said flatly, and went to sit on the sofa.

“Fine,” Malfoy said, sounding terribly wronged and not all that heartbroken. “If you want me to die all wretched and alone, so be it. You’ll be sorry one of these days.”

Harry snorted. “Bet you one million Galleons?”

Malfoy laughed and poured himself another bowl of cereal, then shook the box. “If I can’t have the Patil twins, I should at least have Cheerios,” he said sadly, and wandered over to see what was on TV.

*

Naturally, Malfoy being Malfoy, he decided that the whole Oliver Wood thing was an enormous joke in approximately two days. They were driving to the Auror headquarters where they were due to perform their long-delayed display of synchronised Apparition.

“You’re just spoiled, that’s your problem,” Malfoy said. “Poor little Oliver Wood. He’s terribly attractive. Katie always thought so.”

It was the first time Harry had heard Malfoy say Katie’s name casually, so he said a little encouragingly: “Oh?”

“Oh yes,” said Malfoy, a little vicious. “Quidditch-mad imbecile that he is. I thought about getting an Oliver Wood haircut for a while. Maybe I should, now that I’m back on the dating scene.”

Malfoy flipped down the mirror and Harry glanced over, trying to see what Malfoy saw, and saw cool grey eyes under soft falling hair.

“Do you think I should get an Oliver Wood haircut?” Malfoy asked speculatively, tilting his head this way and that. “Would it look dashing?”

“No,” Harry said.

“Oh fine,” Malfoy sighed, flipping the mirror back up. “Probably best not to encourage any mad wenches with Wood obsessions, anyway. They’d only want a threesome or something. Katie and I were reading this book on – well, personal matters, I trust you understand – and we were meant to write down lots of different imaginary scenarios and once I was out of parchment I looked up and the only thing she’d been able to come up with was a threesome with Oliver Wood.”

Malfoy wittering like a maniac and occasionally saying truly inappropriate things was par for the course, and he was still saying Katie's name casually enough, so Harry made a noncommittal sound and let the sound wash over him.

"I didn't mind," Malfoy assured him, a touch too quickly. "I'm very open like that. Jaded, you might say. A man of the world. The time I made out with Zabini, I don't mind telling you that - *oh my God, stop!*"

Harry had just lost control of the wheel and the car had kind of – flipped over in midair, in a screaming circle, and Harry had barely noticed but Malfoy bolted upright from his idle, chattering slouch.

"You did what?"

"Park the car," Malfoy commanded in a shaken voice, and when Harry parked in an empty building site he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the dashboard. "Oh my God," he said hollowly. "My whole life just flashed before my eyes. You were even crazier the second time around."

"You did what?"

"What?" Malfoy blinked over at him, looking distinctly woebegone about the cars flipping and life flashing business. "What are you – oh. The time I made out with Zabini? Did you not know about that?"

"No," Harry snarled. "What – when?"

"In school," Malfoy said, his voice wondering at this new madness. "Sixth year, you know, when everyone with Veela powers was going completely haywire. It was a dare, Slytherins do that kind of thing because we can't handle the excitement of Exploding Snap, and it sort of got out of hand-"

Malfoy's voice, beginning to be amused and always enjoying telling a story, cut off when Harry reached out and cut off all circulation from his wrist.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think this was a sudden outbreak of homophobia," Malfoy remarked, letting Harry keep his wrist without comment. "What's the matter?"

"How out of hand?" Harry demanded. "What happened?"

He'd thought that he didn't mind Zabini. He'd been wrong, he saw that now: he wanted to tear him into tiny bloody pieces before he could ever even look at Malfoy again.

"Not much," Malfoy answered. "A bit of kissing, a bit of rolling around on the floor. We did have an audience, after all, and besides that I know precisely where Zabini's been and also, am I territory?"

"What?" Harry snapped, the thought of Malfoy kissing and – it went through him like toothache flashing through every bone in his body. He let go of Malfoy's wrist and almost

threw his hand back at him. “What are you talking about?”

He turned the car ignition on with a vicious twist, the engine snarling to itself, and spun it in a circle through the grey rubble and up into the air.

“Well – territory,” Malfoy offered the word again as if it wasn’t nonsense. “Like, it made Zabini upset when Fleur came to Hogwarts and Fleur’s the worst house guest in the world because it makes her irritable not to be on her own territory. And Zabini’s weird and unhappy about his mum all the time and Fleur didn’t even like having Bill’s family about much at first and you got all cranky and trailed Granger to the library like a pet bear cub when Weasley was hanging around with Thomas and Finnegan in fourth year. I suppose I might count as territory, with the partners thing and all. Veela are very territorial: other Veela mean a threat to the food supply, don’t you see, so-”

Harry had a headache and was fighting an urge to murder Zabini and all Malfoy could do was talk like a teacher. The clawing at his chest was making him feel breathless and scared of himself. His fist closed around the gear stick and he looked down at his own hand, knuckles bone white, and tried to breathe.

“Well – that’s okay,” Malfoy said after a moment. “I won’t do it again? Not that I was planning to.”

“Okay,” Harry ground out.

“And Granger and Weasley haven’t ever made out with Zabini,” Malfoy told him, evidently hoping this would appease Harry. “Gryffindor was up in a tower and safer, you know. I wish I could say the same thing for every Hufflepuff who went to school with us. D’you know, Zabini was voted Most Likely to Be Killed in a Crime of Passion *and* Most Likely to Die Young and Syphilitic in our yearbook.”

“We didn’t have a yearbook.” Harry made this point feeling tired and a little less furious, and wondering why Malfoy seemed pleased about something.

“Sure we did,” Malfoy said. “I made it. Did I forget to send the Gryffindors their copies? Oh, that’s a shame. *You* were voted Most Likely to Be Killed in a Crime of Annoyance. Won by a landslide, I don’t mind telling you.”

He reached over, casually but happy as if he was changing channels on Maurice, and his fingers played lightly over Harry’s white knuckles. Harry’s grip eased a little.

“Don’t worry,” said Malfoy, warm and light as the touch. “I’m not anybody’s partner but yours.”

*

They were standing on the rooftops when Shacklebolt let the prisoners in the Auror headquarters go. It was a day so clear the grey air was almost shining.

“Ready?” Shacklebolt said.

There were fourteen wandless but still dangerous criminals flooding over the roofs and down alleys, and the entire Aurors' department standing around them taking notes. Harry felt lighter than he had in months, his spine easing out in a rush of adrenalin. He turned his head to catch the slow curve of Malfoy's smile.

"I don't know, Potter, are we ready?"

"I think so," said Harry.

"Go!" said Shacklebolt, and Harry and Malfoy's eyes met: Harry jerked his head towards the man farthest away, shinning down a drainpipe.

Malfoy nodded briefly and Harry Apparated smooth and sure, onto the edge of the roof. He grinned down and the man lost his grip and tumbled right into Malfoy's arms, where Malfoy had Apparated directly below.

"Tch," Malfoy said, efficiently putting his enchanted handcuffs to use. "Try to be more of a challenge, will you? We want this to look good."

The man on the drainpipe down, next was a man trying to climb in a civilian's window who swung in to see Malfoy and back out hurriedly into Harry's grasp. The man trying to hide in a dustbin Harry dealt with himself as Malfoy lounged against the wall and declared he wasn't even going to bother. Then there were a few who just ran and he and Malfoy ran with them, the March air cold and sweet in the back of Harry's throat, Apparating and weaving and laughing with Malfoy always in the right place, always knowing exactly where he was.

It took less than ten minutes.

"Very good," said Shacklebolt, a shade closer to an expression than usual. "And now I trust we all see the benefits of teamwork and practise, don't we, ladies and gentlemen? How many times did you have to practise this?"

Malfoy, breathless and eyes shining, was sitting casually on the back of one of the prisoners and examining his nails. "This time counts, so – once?" he drawled.

Harry swallowed down a laugh. "Sir," he said instead of yes. "Can we use the practise rooms to spar before we make a report?"

Shacklebolt made the despairing gesture they always took as permission and so wonderfully soon after they were in the empty rooms, prowling around each other and pretending to be lazy and casual about it. He watched the turn of Malfoy's body as he circled, Harry's every muscle singing: Malfoy's eyes were all pupil, almost black.

"Been too long," Harry said, and even the hissing song of his voice was right then. Everything was.

"Feeling rusty, are we?" Malfoy asked in a challenge Harry was dying to meet.

Twenty confused painful beautiful moments later, Malfoy surrendered and Harry stopped trying to break his collarbone and rolled off him and flat onto his back, arm over his eyes. He

was covered in sweat and so tired, his whole body aching, and all he wanted was to crawl home and sleep for a week.

“Ow,” Malfoy complained, trying to lift up from the mat and collapsing face down. “I can’t move.”

“Whiner,” said Harry.

“I hate you,” said Malfoy. All that Harry could see of his face was Malfoy’s eye and the corner of his mouth, and sweaty hair in that single glittering eye. The corner of Malfoy’s mouth was turning up and Harry laughed, so happy, and thought wildly that he should have with Wood, that it was worth anything in the world not to lose this.

Chapter Nine

When they came back from the practise rooms, Harry at least feeling tired and relaxed in every muscle, there was almost a festival feeling about the headquarters. Harry found himself weirdly touched by the fact that nobody had taken down the mints.

“We didn’t realise how much *work* you two did,” Dean’s partner Louison said, lazy sod that he was. “There’s that old tobacco shop in Knockturn Alley, your contact there seemed to want a *bribe*-“

“It’s a cover,” Malfoy said, looking very guilty.

“And the bouncer in front of that dodgy Sinistra’s place, he looked like he thought he was going to get hit-”

“It only happened one time,” Harry said, feeling his face flush. “And he deserved it.”

“The Unspeakables are complaining. That terror Miss Granger called us all incompetents – when are you guys coming *back*?”

“When you can be in Potter’s presence without chewing peppermints,” Malfoy said absently, as Harry wavered, torn between avenging Hermione’s honour and stepping hastily away from Louison. “Shacklebolt’ll want all this stuff from Hogwarts filed and I only have half an hour before I meet Smith for lunch,” he added. “Give me your notes, Potter. I bet the imbecile archivists have been messing with my records again. When will they learn not to tinker with godlike perfection?”

Malfoy leaned in and snatched the notes before they were out of Harry’s bag and then strode off quickly, so Harry was still sitting dazed by the sudden onslaught of closeness, warmth, damp fair hair and shower-flushed skin when Malfoy was at the door thrusting Cuthbert out of his path.

When he finally looked away, he was outraged to see his hopeless yearning mirrored on Louison’s face.

“I wish I had a partner who’d do my filing for me,” Louison sighed.

Harry fixed him with a look that promised him death by claws some bloody night - *mine* - and then Louison’s mouth went slack around his peppermint and he said, terrifyingly: “Make me yours before you kill me” and Harry was about to yell for Malfoy when Ron tapped Louison on the shoulder and got him full in the face with the mint spray.

“Thank you,” Harry said, and meant it with all his heart.

Ron shrugged. “Well, I had a spare couple of hours. I thought I’d drop by.”

After Louison had stopped complaining that he thought he was blind and wandered off to be louche and French elsewhere, Harry looked over at Ron and saw him fiddling with things:

laying Harry's ruler straight, zooming a quill in the air, and hiding Malfoy's morning paper under a file. He wasn't looking at Harry.

"What," Harry said. "What is it, what's gone wrong?"

"Oh nothing, you know, nothing," Ron answered, and at random: "So Malfoy's still living with you, then?"

"Yeah," Harry said, staring.

"Been a while, hasn't it," Ron said, and he still sounded distracted but Harry hardly cared. "Like, three months sleeping on someone's sofa isn't what you'd call normal, exactly."

"Malfoy isn't what you'd call normal, exactly."

"True," said Ron. "But he could, you know, buy somewhere enough like Malfoy Manor to live in – well, okay, on a dramatically smaller scale, but somewhere all white and posh like a stupid wedding cake, you know the kind of thing he likes–"

"Or he could live in actual Malfoy Manor," Harry said.

The silence clanged between them as if someone had dropped a metal bowl on a marble floor.

"Ron," Harry said.

"I don't want to be having this conversation," Ron said loudly. "You live with each other, you live in each other's pockets, how can you not–"

"Ron, what happened to Malfoy Manor?"

Ron crossed his arms over his chest and stared into the middle distance, wincing a little as if he was envisioning himself talking to Pansy about this situation and getting slapped upside the head.

"Malfoy sold it a couple of years ago," he answered in a low voice. "He was buying votes so his father wouldn't get the Dementor's Kiss. It was during the time when you'd ditched him: I kind of – I thought he would've told you about it."

"Oh," Harry said, hollow.

He thought of Shacklebolt saying that Malfoy'd had a fight on his hands making sure that Lucius Malfoy didn't get the Kiss, and of Malfoy's face when he tried to talk to him in the kitchen (*during the time when you'd ditched him*), not just bleached by the fluorescent lights but sickly pale, faint blue and purple around his eyes like ghostly bruises. Harry hadn't thought about it then. He wanted to have something to do so he wouldn't have to think about it now.

He wanted someone to hit, so he wouldn't have to feel – he didn't even know what the word for it was, feeling helpless for someone else.

Harry remembered the first time Malfoy had fallen asleep in the car seat next to him. Malfoy had just been talking and talking, in that way he was only starting to get used to, and then Malfoy's forehead had hit Harry's shoulder and Harry had leaped right from lulled calm to surprise before he realised Malfoy was out cold.

Nobody had ever really slept with Harry before. He'd always thrown out Zacharias right afterwards and he'd been in that cupboard downstairs when Dudley used to climb into bed with his parents and even in Hogwarts people had slept behind curtains, so it was – it was strange. Malfoy was warm and relaxed and vulnerable. He was even noisy in his sleep, and that was familiar, and Harry just hadn't wanted him to wake up or knock his head or anything. He'd put his hand up to the back of Malfoy's neck, steadied him, kept him safe and felt a little steadied himself for some reason as the night sky streamed past their windows and Malfoy's breathing in his ear became a rhythm: as keeping Malfoy safe became something he could measure time by.

When Malfoy needed to be kept safe, though, he hadn't been there.

"It's okay," Ron said. "He had Katie, and all that."

"Great," Harry snapped.

"I don't know why we're even talking about this," Ron said. "This wasn't what – but that's why Malfoy should move out, anyway. That's the thing. What with the way you are, and the way Malfoy is. He knows he's a little much. He didn't tell you about the manor and he wouldn't be living on your sofa if he wasn't completely slammed and I really don't want to be having this conversation at all. But I'm the only one who knows this stuff. Unless Hermione's figured it out by now. Please tell me Hermione's figured it out by now!"

"Sorry," Harry muttered.

He didn't know what the hell Ron was saying. First he said that Harry hadn't been there and God, how Malfoy must have felt, and now he was apparently suggesting that Harry not be there again for some crazy reason. And apparently this wasn't even what Ron had come for. He'd come to – not talk about something else.

"What's going on?" Harry rapped out, and Ron stared at him. Of course, Harry thought slowly. He hadn't ever heard Harry's interrogation voice before. "Does this have something to do with–"

"Out to lunch," Malfoy's voice said behind them. "Later, Potter."

It might have been Harry's imagination, but he thought that Malfoy's voice sounded funny and clipped. He almost whirled around to face Malfoy and demand to know what was going on, but Harry knew how to conduct an interrogation on his own if he had to. Malfoy was tricky, he could slip or twist his way out of almost anything. Ron was the easy mark.

"Ron, don't keep something important from me," he said.

He didn't lie in interrogations. Malfoy was the one who did that. He used the truth like a weapon.

“Okay, look,” said Ron, and his hand moved in a restless, useless gesture that revealed as it tried to conceal. To the empty file which lay over Malfoy’s morning newspaper.

Harry snatched at the paper as if it was the Snitch, far too quickly for Ron to even dream of stopping him. He spread the paper out over his desk and his breath snagged and caught in his throat. He didn’t recognise the picture, but it wasn’t a nice one.

He was with Ritchie. He didn’t know where they were or what they were doing. His face was in profile, dark hair and clean lines and so intent on something outside the frame that it seemed cruel. Ritchie’s face, always handsomer in reality than Harry ever remembered it, was tipped up to his: he looked starry-eyed and adoring, enchanted.

It was very clear that someone could have taken a knife and cut Ritchie out of existence for all Harry cared.

Those of us who wondered how Harry Potter won mass adulation through his reputation as the Boy Who Lived, by this time worn incredibly thin, and the doubtful glory he gained in the last war need wonder no longer. Recent revelations concerning this very questionable hero’s ancestry have provided us with the answer.

Harry remembered Malfoy asking if he could break the story to the press, and Malfoy at school whispering to Rita Skeeter, held like a secret in his palm. Under his fingers the ink smeared the black and white of the paper into a grey mess, and he wondered numbly if Malfoy had thought this was funny.

This also explains the luck in love enjoyed by Harry Potter, a notoriously sullen and reclusive man. Several of the lovers he so casually acquires and tosses aside have reported both Potter’s contemptuous attitude towards them during affairs and a feeling of being compelled. One must of course give Potter the benefit of the doubt and assume – or at least hope – that he exerted this influence unconsciously.

He remembered Malfoy saying, It’s clear our views on that sort of thing are rather different.

“Yeah, I’m going to,” Harry started, and then had no words to finish with.

He shoved the horrible paper away and got to his feet, ignoring Ron, not even hearing whatever sharp thing he was saying. He went after Malfoy, shoved past lunch-going crowds and ignored Dean and Ginny holding hands at the door and saw a blond head. He went to the rail of the balcony, the steel pressed hard against his palms before he’d even known he’d grabbed it, and he was about to yell down at Malfoy to stop and wait for him to come yell at him some more when he saw it wasn’t Malfoy.

The real Malfoy, unmistakable once you really looked, was cutting through the crowd with even more vicious elbow-work than usual. He reached Zacharias Smith and Harry only actually registered the way he was walking, that slow practise room prowl, when Malfoy stopped walking and punched Smith in the mouth.

Smith almost spun falling and his head cracked against the marble floor. Harry wasn’t at all surprised: Malfoy usually pulled his punches just a bit, but he hadn’t pulled that one.

When Smith tried to get up, Malfoy kicked him. He staggered and almost fell back down and then launched himself at Malfoy in a clawing rush, succeeding in doing injury only to Malfoy's shirt before Malfoy hit him again.

Dimly Harry heard Dean's low dismayed noise and saw him rushing downstairs, Louison sliding down the banisters after him. Ginny gave a roar of enthusiasm about the fight, her elbow knocking Harry's as she came to the rail.

"Hit him!" she yelled with indiscriminate approval. "Hit him again! Go – are we for Malfoy? I hope we are. I hate being on the losing side, and he's beating the hell out of Smith."

Dean and two security guards were holding onto Malfoy now. He was struggling, lip cut in the scuffle and truly appalling insults pouring from his bloody mouth. Louison was not holding onto Smith terribly hard, but then Smith was not trying terribly hard to get away, so that seemed fair.

"Yeah," Harry managed, blood pounding in his temples so hard that he couldn't think, so relieved he didn't care. "Yeah, we're for Malfoy."

*

Unfortunately assaulting people in the Auror headquarters turned out to be a fairly serious offence, so Malfoy and Smith were put in the Aurors' holding cell for offenders with some official standing.

Fortunately Harry was pretty familiar with this place. He nodded to the guard, who seemed extremely and rather insultingly surprised that Harry wasn't the one behind bars this time, and told him to fetch the usual judge and tell him it was Mr Malfoy who required his assistance. The novelty of the situation would probably get Umber here faster.

He strolled into the dim room and towards the bench from which Malfoy usually delivered his speeches about Harry being an idiot. Smith and Malfoy were in separate cells, little box rooms separated from each other and Harry only by bars. Malfoy was giving Smith a filthy look through narrowed eyes. He glanced over as Harry came in, but looked back almost at once.

Smith looked at Harry, and looked confused. Of course, it was possible he had a concussion.

"The author of the lead article in the Prophet, I presume," Harry said. "What an honour."

Smith flinched.

"People get sued for slander," Malfoy mused aloud.

"People get sued for assault too," Smith pointed out.

"That wasn't assault," Malfoy scoffed. "When we get out of here I'll give you a demonstration of real assault-"

“Are you threatening me?”

“No,” Malfoy said, and smiled a sharp smile that always upset the interrogation subjects. It looked even worse when his smiling mouth was stained with blood. “I was making a generous offer. Threatening you would be saying, oh, for instance-”

“Don’t bother, Malfoy,” Harry said. “He’s not worth it.”

Smith made a choking sound and Malfoy’s mouth did something funny, twisting in on itself as if he hadn’t liked that for some reason. Harry leaned forward and tried to catch Malfoy’s gaze with his own.

“I don’t even care,” he said. “What does anything that git has to say matter? When I thought for a second it was you, that-”

Malfoy’s gaze turned to him then with a vengeance. He just looked wide-eyed, just shocked, for an instant. Then he looked like he was trying to gain perfect control of wandless magic in order to cut Harry’s throat with his eyes.

“You - thought it was me?” he said, voice icy after that startled beat. “Thanks, Potter.”

“No,” Harry said. “Wait. That’s not what-”

The guard came in and said: “The judge is on his way, so I was thinking you might as well come out and have some cocoa or something-”

He had the key turned in the lock and Malfoy’s door was opening when Malfoy stood up and seized the bars, swinging the door shut with main force.

“No,” he said, suddenly and horribly polite. “Thank you, Vespasian. Would you Owl the judge – I’m sorry to trouble you – and say he needn’t bother coming in? I can wait for justice to take its course. And its time.”

“Malfoy, don’t be ridiculous,” Harry exclaimed.

The guard – Vespasian, Harry had known his face was familiar – blinked, and said: “You *want* to be-”

Malfoy nodded with a decisive air, as if he was not obviously and self-evidently crazy. “I insist on being incarcerated.”

“No he doesn’t!”

“You shut up,” Malfoy snarled at him. “What’s the difference between this place and your stupid flat, anyway?”

Harry shut up, stung, and Malfoy saw that he’d hit him on the raw. His lip curled, a smug malicious curve of satisfaction, and Harry wanted to hit him on the nose.

“Okay I’ll just be outside,” said Vespasian in a rush, obviously deciding they were crazy and

might turn dangerously crazy at any moment.

“You shouldn’t kick someone when they’re down, anyway,” Harry muttered as the door clanged shut behind the guard. “That isn’t a fair fight.”

“Of course you’re right, not the done thing at all,” Malfoy said, his voice like a knife he was playing with, which might slip and hurt him or someone else in a flash. “What I should really have done was have George Weasley sit on him while I hit him. That would’ve been the truly Gryffindor way to handle it.”

Smith snorted. Harry didn’t spare the time to glare at him.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, I was fifteen years old!”

“Well, I was fourteen when I told Rita Skeeter a few things for her rag, and as a fourteen year old it was my moral duty to behave like a twerp at all times. But of course you still do that, don’t you, so you think it’s perfectly okay to assume that I’d still – after nine *years*, as if nothing had-”

“I thought you’d think it was funny, too,” Smith put in sullenly.

“You can shut up also,” Malfoy said, gaze wheeling like a hungry vulture. “Don’t think you’re off the hook. You’re both on the hook. There is plenty of room on the hook!”

Smith gave him a look that said he thought Malfoy was insane. Harry kind of saw where he was coming from, but he bristled all the same.

“Can we please talk about this at home,” he said, giving Smith a warning glance.

“I don’t have a home,” Malfoy said flatly. “And I’m going to Crabbe and Goyle’s after I get out of here. *You* may go to *your* home immediately. I wish you would.”

“I wish you’d make more sense,” Smith said, and Harry was appalled to feel a moment of wholehearted sympathy with Smith’s opinions. “Every time we meet up we talk about how useless Potter is and you obviously can’t stand the sight of him, so what are you doing hitting me-”

“Am I the only one here,” Malfoy demanded, “who thinks that you should treat people you’ve slept with, with just a tiny bit of respect? You both make me sick.”

There was a pause in which Harry carefully did not look at Smith and felt too unhappy to look at Malfoy. He tried to ignore the reel of memories Malfoy’d set playing in his head.

It was *Smith* who’d made the first move. He’d always been around Grimmauld Place being useless, like some kind of circling hyena, and Harry was so tired that the whole world seemed dark and he couldn’t cope with the things he had to do and all the blood he had to spill to get to Voldemort. He’d just been studying maps one day, and looked up into a kiss. To this day he didn’t know why he hadn’t hit Smith. He’d been too desperate to lie to himself, he supposed, and it’d been the only relief on offer.

It had never been anything more than a relief, a release from tension, with Smith or with anyone else. It hadn't even ever been fun. And he wasn't good at being – soft, or anything, and he'd had no time or patience for it back then. He'd had the world to think about.

And he hadn't liked him.

"You don't understand," Smith said hoarsely. "It's – horrible. Don't tell me that you haven't noticed how he twists the world around him, how people like him and think well of him when he can't even remember their names. I know you hate it as much as I do! Every day, the whole school, the whole world seemed to revolve around him and resound with his name, everyone looked at him and – and I did too. He always got everything he wanted-"

"No I *didn't*," Harry broke in violently. "Are you *stupid*? I never wanted any of that, I wanted-"

He'd wanted his parents back: wanted love. He'd wanted never to go back to the Dursleys and they'd always sent him back. He'd wanted to be one of the Weasleys but he could never quite manage it. Even before Malfoy, there had been a thousand things he'd wanted and never had a chance of getting.

Malfoy gave him a cool look. "I see your point," he told Smith, his drawl a long distance away from any expression of feeling. "It always made me furious, too. But it wasn't his fault. And you're not telling me everything." He pointed this out with the same air he always used during interrogations, cruel and lazily pleased by his cruelty. "So you really liked him and he didn't like you back," he said, mocking as if Smith was a child. "It happens. But once you care about someone, you do the best you can for them. No matter what they do to you."

"It wasn't like *caring*," Smith spat. "You don't know what it's like to do things and then not remember why you did them, not remember deciding to do them."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Sure I do," he said, all ice and not giving an inch. "Happens all the time."

Harry thought about the glazed warmth in Wood's eyes, and the way Ginny had loved him long before she knew him at all. He wasn't looking at Smith or at Malfoy anymore: he was looking at his own hands, rubbing the wrists convulsively. He hadn't meant to do any of it. Malfoy knew that.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "If you did anything you didn't - want to do."

"Don't apologise to people who slander you, you imbecile," Malfoy ordered.

"It was what I did want to do," Smith said in a low voice. Harry still couldn't look at him. "That's the problem."

"Oh, cry me a river of blood tears," Malfoy sneered.

Smith was a git who'd blackened his name in the national newspaper. Wood liked Quidditch so much he didn't really make time for people. Baddock was kind of glittery and horrible, and that Italian stranger hadn't seemed any better than he should be. Even Ritchie had been

really nasty to Malfoy on occasion, and Harry'd had to pretend not to hear because Ritchie was his last chance and he didn't know what else to do. But none of them had deserved anything that would have made them less than the people they were.

He was very grateful he'd stepped away from Wood. Saving himself at the expense of others wasn't what he did: it never had been.

"Vespasian!" called Malfoy, and Vespasian appeared like a jack in the box.

"Do you want to leave now?" he asked with pathetic hope, and Malfoy frowned at him.

"No," he said. "I'd like a rubber ball. I wish to keep amused."

Vespasian threw his eyes up to heaven or Shacklebolt in the floors above. Neither came to his aid, so he went and fetched Malfoy a rubber ball. Malfoy began throwing it with great force at the walls, eyes intent on it rather than anything else. He made sure that the bars nearest Smith and Harry got hit with resounding thwacks.

"You are so annoying," Smith said after a while.

"Really, are you going to make up lies about me in the paper?" Malfoy demanded. "Or do I have to sleep with you before I get so lucky?"

"I don't know," Smith said. "You offering?"

Actually Harry kind of hoped Smith died.

"I am not." Malfoy threw his ball three times at Smith's bars to emphasise this.

"Everyone knew about you and Blaise Zabini."

Smith could really die any time that was convenient.

Malfoy threw the ball at his bars with even more force, smirked, and caught it. "You're no Blaise Zabini."

"Come on, we're leaving," Harry said, trying to put in his voice his absolute refusal to let Malfoy stay in the cells with awful encroaching Smith a moment longer. He heard his voice come out like a whip and he didn't care much, because it made Malfoy turn away from Smith.

Malfoy spun and threw the ball at Harry's face. It rang against the bars and sprang back to Malfoy's hand. "No."

Harry should apologise, he knew, but he didn't want to right now. He was glad to have Malfoy looking away from Smith and right at him, to be at the centre of whatever storm Malfoy happened to be causing.

"Malfoy, can't we just—"

“What do you *think* of me?” Malfoy burst out. “That bloody disgusting article, and you instantly believed – I can’t-”

“The article made it pretty clear the writer knew what you were like in bed, too,” chimed in Smith, who seemed to have decided he was on Malfoy’s side despite the fact that half his face resembled an aubergine.

Harry thought it was probable that *his* whole face suddenly resembled a pomegranate.

“I didn’t read the whole thing,” he said quickly.

“Anyway, I do know what you’re like in bed,” Malfoy said, examining the ball as if he wished he could throw it both ways at once. Harry made a choking sound and Malfoy looked vaguely smug. “Baddock told me,” he clarified. “Said you were athletic and bad-tempered. Imagine my surprise.”

“I’m not-”

“Masterful summary, I’d say,” said Smith.

“You shut up! God.”

“Yes, we’re both thoroughly despicable and unpleasant individuals, we are not worthy to talk to you. So as the only free man in the cells, why don’t you get *out*?” Malfoy demanded.

“I’m not going,” Harry said flatly. “I’ll sleep here if I have to.”

“You’ll have to,” Malfoy informed him. “Because I really like it here. I may never leave.”

Harry answered him by lying back on the bench, one hand pillowing his head. Malfoy resumed throwing his ball and Harry shut his eyes, listened to the incessant thump that said *let me out, let me out* while Malfoy’s lips said he refused to leave, and tried not to think about all the people it was possible he’d hurt.

Because he knew Malfoy well enough to recognise viciousness as a response to pain: he’d hurt Smith, all right.

Add viciousness to arrogance and blond hair, and Harry supposed it was possible he had a type.

While he was trying not to think he managed to sleep, measuring the sound of Malfoy’s throws as he’d become used to measuring his breath, and half-woke to the sound of Smith’s voice in the dark.

“-think of it as a public health warning,” he was saying. “He’s not like other people – other Veela – not controlled, he never has been, and he doesn’t care what he does. He could enslave people. You could be next.”

With his purple bruises lost in shadows, Harry could see something he didn’t care about: Zacharias Smith was handsome. Handsomer than Malfoy, he supposed. Probably handsomer

by quite a lot, objectively considering the honey-blond curls catching glints of light and the sculpted curves of his face. Smith's eyes moved now, furtive under lowered lids, and he looked at Harry and saw Harry looking at him. Harry felt almost ashamed of catching the look of naked want on Smith's face, as if he'd seen some secret he had no right to see.

He looked away to Malfoy, who was concentrating ferociously on throwing his ball. His arm must be starting to ache but he showed no sign of it, pacing the floor of his cell like a caged tiger. Moonlight didn't catch glints in his hair, it just made it white, a stark colour against the sharp uncompromising lines of his face and falling into the dangerous glitter of his eyes. Compared to Smith, he didn't look handsome and he didn't look peaceful and he certainly didn't look safe.

Harry supposed that if Smith was still looking at him, he could probably see Harry's secret quite easily. He looked away.

"Not me," Malfoy drawled, very calm. "I'm immune."

"You sure?" said Smith, and then Vespasian broke through the door and said that the Firenze-Brown house was under attack. Harry bolted upright on the bench and Malfoy dropped the ball, grabbed Vespasian through the bars and demanded to be let out.

*

The Aurors posted to Lavender and Firenze had been distracted by two things: the attack on Hogwarts and the fire. The kidnappers had broken into the Gryffindor dormitories first, Firenze and the Aurors had been summoned away, and then they'd set the fire. Using banshee fire, which couldn't be extinguished with a spell.

At least that was what Harry had gathered, but it was hard to hear through the crackle of flame and the thump of falling beams.

"Lavender?" he shouted, striding past the other Aurors into the burning house. He tried not to choke on smoke. "Lavender!"

"Harry!" she exclaimed and came running, baby Fornax scooped awkwardly into her arms. She was bent double with his weight. "I can't leave, the Auror went upstairs to get Jas-"

"The Auror?" Malfoy repeated on a cold note, and Harry looked over his shoulder and met Malfoy's eyes. "Get out now, Lavender, we'll deal with it."

He almost ran headlong into a fire and then grabbed at a rail and hauled himself over the smoking ruin of the stairs, smelling his shirt start to scorch as he moved, walking along rafters that were burning and unsteady towards the noise that wasn't fire.

Until he found little Jasmine in her pyjamas on the burning floor, and a dark figure stumbling away from her, limping and bleeding.

There was blood all over the floor and Jasmine looked scared but unhurt. Obviously nobody had expected the little girl to kick like a horse.

She shied away from the figure, panting, and saw Harry through a loose mane of hair, rolled like a human and sprang like a goat into his arms. Harry lost his breath at the smack of her full weight against his chest and thought for a moment that the guy was going to get away.

But of course Malfoy was there, able to follow him like a shadow, like a second self, when they really needed it. The man stumbled backwards right into his chokehold and Malfoy met Harry's gaze over his captive's shoulder, fierce and almost laughing by firelight.

"Please struggle," Malfoy advised the prisoner. "Do it as much as you like. I'm in the mood for some brutality."

The man sagged, limp, and they were both glad later when they found out he was under Imperius. The real kidnapper – assuming that he or she didn't always just send out people under Imperius to do his bidding - had got clean away with a little girl from Gryffindor.

"Don't go crazy," Malfoy said, taking Jasmine away and holding her with far more ease – Katie'd had a niece or something, Harry thought. He pressed Harry's wrist hard as he did it and then bent his head over Jasmine's, murmuring something to her about being sorry. "His ancestors seized sheep up in their talons," he said. "That's why you were handled like a sack of meal. The Aurors in general have wonderful child-rescuing skills, I know you'll find your next rescue experience with us more satisfactory."

"Thank you, Harry," said Lavender, once she'd put down her son. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, smelling like burned hair. "You said you wouldn't let my children be harmed and you didn't: thank you."

"Sure," Harry said. That little girl had been taken, though. He hadn't kept her safe.

"Don't *go crazy*," Malfoy said again, once Lavender had carried Jasmine away and Harry was leaning against the cold black skeleton of the Firenze-Brown house. "Think instead," Malfoy continued, arms crossed over his thin torn shirt as some small protection against the night air. Harry looked a question over to him, and Malfoy answered it without glancing at him, his eyes ranging over Hogwarts in the distance. "Eugenia Varley doesn't live with her mother – the nonhuman parent, apparently. Nobody knew about her except other members of that LAST organisation, and anyone who got a look at our list sometime between two and ten today."

Harry nodded towards Firenze, running towards Lavender and the children. "You don't seriously believe it was one of them."

"Probably not, considering you were attacked at the Aurors' ball," Malfoy pointed out. "No. I think it was one of us."

"Oh well," said Harry. "That's just great."

*

They were silent for a while. Harry was thinking over a list of suspects and he knew Malfoy was doing the same, and neither of them offered a name they wanted to discuss. Harry suspected that Malfoy felt much like him, too tired to analyse this.

“Think about it in the morning,” he said at last. “Come on.”

“See you tomorrow,” Malfoy said at the same time, his voice colliding with and not yielding to Harry’s. “Or no – tomorrow’s Saturday, isn’t it. Meet you at the office Monday? We’ll need to go through everyone’s files.”

“What?” Harry asked. “No – look, *no*, you’re coming back with me.”

Someone had taken a child: he wasn’t letting Malfoy go, he didn’t have to now, there was no Katie Bell for him to go back to and Harry could need him, could insist on keeping him.

“I’ve been imposing on you too long in any case,” Malfoy said, in very polite tones. “I’d rather go to Crabbe and Goyle’s, honestly.”

Harry knew that voice, all right, and it struck real fear in him for the first time today. Malfoy’d used that voice for a while after the time when they hadn’t been partners, he’d been on his best behaviour and Harry had felt desperate as an animal locked out of home.

“I’m sorry,” he told Malfoy, and remembered why he hadn’t told him before, remembered he’d wanted Malfoy to look at him and remembered too what had happened to Malfoy while they weren’t partners.

There was another lesson to be learned from Smith, then, besides the fact he shouldn’t go near people he couldn’t be kind to. He shouldn’t be like Smith, either: shouldn’t let the fact he couldn’t have what he wanted make him cruel.

“Are you,” Malfoy said, his voice colourless.

The first time Harry’d been thrown into the Aurors’ cell, some time when Malfoy was off at a dinner with Katie and Harry had recklessly decided not to disturb him and got into trouble without him, Malfoy had come still wearing his suit. He’d fetched Septimus Umber, who he had some kind of blackmail information on, to get him out. He’d stayed with Harry and told him he was stupid until Harry stopped shaking with fury.

You care about someone, Malfoy had said, you do the best you can for them.

Malfoy started to move away and Harry grabbed his wrist on instinct and then gave a moment’s thought to this and grabbed his other wrist too, pushed him up against the blackened wall, held on tight so Malfoy wouldn’t be able to hit him and pressed in close so Malfoy wouldn’t have leverage to shove him.

Malfoy leaned his head back against the charred wood in order to glare at Harry better. “Let me go. Or I’ll thump your thick head with my head so hard your skull cracks and I’ll kick you in the kneecap so-”

“Yes, yes, in a minute,” Harry said, his voice low because Malfoy was so close, muscles straining against his and it reminded him suddenly and vividly of Oliver against the Quidditch shed... only this time it was really Malfoy. But that wouldn’t solve anything. “I mean, I’ll let you go in a minute. Just listen.”

“Let me go now!”

Malfoy looked so mad he was ready to spit, vicious and furious and hurt, too, and Harry said: “Shhh, shhh,” in a cracking voice he was trying to make gentle, the way Malfoy could make his voice gentle, and Malfoy swallowed. “I’m sorry,” Harry repeated. “It didn’t - that article didn’t sound anything like you. I never thought you’d do something like that. I didn’t think at all. If I had I would’ve known it wasn’t you.”

The article hadn’t been funny or playful, not at all, and almost everything Malfoy did had a touch of that mad creativity or the way he always pulled back. He’d been stupid.

“It was just that – you’d talked about the press and I was,” Harry said, and drew in a breath and then kept talking, voice still helplessly low against Malfoy’s ear, cheek brushing his. “I was scared. I *tried* to tell you: it was Smith, so it didn’t matter. But if it had been you, it would have mattered so much and I was too scared to think and – that’s all. It wasn’t you. It was me. And I’m sorry. Come back.”

“For the last time let go,” Malfoy said, his tone taking on a wild edge.

Harry let go and stepped back. The night air was very cold now he wasn’t pressed up against Malfoy: it was pathetic how much he missed how warm he was, after contact for a handful of minutes. Malfoy was still furious and he didn’t know how to fix it.

He heard Malfoy take a shaky breath. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. That makes – that makes sense. I couldn’t work it out, how you could think that, you know how I feel about you, but that makes sense. Let’s go back.”

“Actually, no,” Harry said.

Malfoy, leaning against the wall and looking shaken, looked suddenly exasperated.

“No?” he repeated. “Do you have some sort of illness, Potter, because you just said-”

“No. I mean, that’s not what I meant.” Harry stopped, aware that sentence was going nowhere good, and there was a moment of quiet where he summoned up the words he wanted.

He looked around, Hogwarts with every window blazing distress signals and people running over the grounds, and thought that this was spectacularly bad timing for a talk and didn’t stop. He tilted his head, trying to see Malfoy from a new angle, but Malfoy looked the same: tired and pale and infinitely desirable.

“No, I don’t know how you feel about me,” Harry said, still quiet. “Tell me.”

“What?” Malfoy snapped, eyes suddenly narrowed and furious. “Oh, for – is this the time? I’ve had a really bad day, Potter. I’d like it to be over now. In fact, I’ve had a really bad few months, and I’d appreciate not being asked ridiculous questions at the dead of night. I’ve had enough-”

Harry stood and did not speak. He was looking at Malfoy, his whole body focused on that one act.

Malfoy did not say what he'd had enough of. He pushed away from the wall and paced a few steps, as if he was still in the cage, frowning as if he had a headache. Harry didn't like seeing him in pain, not again, and he opened his mouth to say it didn't matter, forget it, they could go home now.

"I don't know," Malfoy spat, the words bitter in his mouth. "The same way you feel about me, I suppose. I mean, we're – we're friends, aren't we? Sort of."

Harry willed his shoulders to keep straight, not to give in to weariness until he'd done something to wipe out that trace of uncertainty in Malfoy's voice at least.

"Yeah. Yes," he said, low and defeated. He reached out the way Malfoy had when he'd had a bad dream and touched the nape of Malfoy's neck: the gesture felt too clumsy, wrong, and he dropped his hand after an instant. "God, Malfoy," he said. "Of course we are."

"Now that's cleared up, can we go home?" Malfoy asked, taking several steps back and changing his tone dramatically. "I'm exhausted, I'll have you know, and I'm starving. I can't believe they don't feed you in that cell. I shall definitely register a complaint."

"Okay," Harry said.

Malfoy was already making for the gates to Hogwarts, but glanced inquiringly over his shoulder. "Coming?"

Harry came, knocking shoulders with Malfoy to tell him silently that he was inexplicable and infuriating, not that Harry minded all that much.

"I think I shall use the telephone," Malfoy informed him, "and order Chinese. Do you fancy Chinese food?"

"I can ring for it," Harry offered.

"No, I am best at the telephone," Malfoy said. "I took Muggle Studies, you know, and I got top marks in telephoning people. I am a highly trained expert. I'm aware that you're a gifted amateur, obviously, and that you used telephones frequently as a child, but I feel you miss some of the subtler nuances."

Harry laughed, soft and relieved. "You're mental."

"Just because you're not master of your own telephone, don't take it out on me," said Malfoy.

In the end, despite Malfoy's masterful telephoning, they were too tired to eat much of the Chinese. Malfoy put it in the fridge.

"I still feel better having eaten," he said, coming back to the sofa. "Poor Smith: I hope they let him out. Or at least gave him a sandwich."

“Yes, you seemed really sorry for him around the time you were beating him to a pulp,” Harry said slowly, arm over his eyes. His shoulder ached where a rafter had just missed it: his bones were aching, he was so tired. “For which, I should mention, thanks.”

There was a creak as Malfoy settled back against the sofa too, and then a pause. Then: “I do feel sorry for him,” Malfoy admitted.

“I never,” Harry said, “I never led him on. I didn’t – I was never even nice to him.”

“Well, that hardly matters,” Malfoy said, and Harry lifted his hand from his eyes and looked at him. Malfoy’s always-restless hands were playing with the edge of his quilt, kept on the floor beside the sofa. Harry frowned a question at him. “You’re part Veela,” Malfoy said, very matter-of-fact. “The point isn’t just to be supernaturally attractive so you intimidate half the prey. You don’t want them to stare in awe and not approach you: that’d mean not eating. Think about it – part of the lure is that the magic makes them think it’s possible for you to like them back. That’s what Smith thought. He thought he could have you.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and felt sick.

“Also the fact that you were sleeping with him might have been taken as some kind of expression of interest,” Malfoy said, sharp and not so terribly distant.

“I didn’t mean to,” Harry told him.

“I know,” Malfoy said, a little warm for the first time today. “And none of it excuses what Smith implied about you, for God’s sake. That was an outrage. I shall write a very strongly worded letter of complaint to the paper, you see if I don’t.”

“Hm,” Harry mumbled, warmed but only reminded by comfort of how tired he was. He didn’t want to get up, he realised. He wanted to go to sleep right here, for Malfoy to curl up against him and sleep on his shoulder. Malfoy’d done that twice, when it wasn’t in the car. Harry liked that.

Malfoy shoved at his shoulder instead.

“Get up and go to bed, I want to sleep here,” he commanded, and Harry hauled himself up off the sofa and went towards his bedroom, almost walking into the stool at the kitchen counter on his way.

He opened the bedroom door and looked over his shoulder for a last glance at Malfoy, just to be sure he was here and he wasn’t going anywhere, and saw Malfoy reaching for the bowl of peppermints on the table.

Malfoy looked up at Harry’s quick intake of breath, and as Harry looked at him, sleep struggling with a sudden feverish speculation, Malfoy’s eyes narrowed.

“I hadn’t brushed my teeth, *God*. I just wanted a mint!” he snarled, and threw the bowl.

Harry stepped quickly into his bedroom, and heard it hit the door.

*

When Harry came out of his room the next day he found Malfoy already up, coffee and Chinese food steaming at his elbow. Malfoy looked up from his newspaper and smiled at him briefly as he came in, making a gesture that said he was invited to share the Chinese and giving him a stern look that said he was forbidden to touch the coffee.

Harry was a little puzzled, but Malfoy's sleeping habits often went weird during a case. He put on the kettle for tea and poked doubtfully at the sweet and sour chicken with his fork.

"Is this breakfast food?"

"It's breakfast time and it's Chinese. So it's dim sum," said Malfoy, with the air of one making an unshakable argument. "Delicious dim sum."

He strained his mouthful of delicious dim sum with a swallow of coffee, and then returned to his newspaper. Harry got his cup of tea and leaned against the counter across from Malfoy, his head bowed. Malfoy sometimes reached out and ruffled his hair: he didn't today.

"What's in the paper?" Harry asked. "No more articles from Smith?"

"Not in the property section," Malfoy returned.

Harry looked up and saw Malfoy's face, which was arranged to look absolutely calm, though searching morning light revealed a pin-scratch frown between his eyebrows.

"Not this again," Harry said with dread. "I said I was-"

"Yes, I heard," Malfoy told him. "I'm not angry with you. It's just something that I should do, I think. It's been three months. I'm much better. And frankly if I sleep on a sofa any longer I am going to get back problems, and that would be tragic in the bloom of my youth."

Harry looked desperately at his tea and stopped himself telling Malfoy that really, the bed was available anytime he liked. He tried to think of some way out of this awful situation.

"I'm moving in somewhere wizardly this time," Malfoy said with great conviction. "Not anywhere like that horrible flat. But I would like a television and it would be a shame to let my elite telephoning skills get rusty. Do you think I could get them installed? I suppose given the fact that I can Apparate anywhere I want, I don't need to worry about a commute. Do you think this place in Hogsmeade looks nice?"

"No," Harry said firmly.

"It would be good to be in a wizarding community," Malfoy said wistfully. "Professor Snape could come for tea on the weekends. Not that I'm not looking forward to living by myself, obviously. I never have, not really, and actually I think it will be brilliant. I'll have a swinging bachelor pad. Maybe I'll get a house elf. Do you imagine that you can interview them before you buy them and check out their conversational skills?"

Harry imagined that Malfoy had no idea that apprehension was showing clearly in his voice.

The idiot must also have forgotten how many times he'd dragged Harry out after work in the time between when he'd bought the flat and when he'd managed to install Katie, not that Harry had ever minded.

"I never meant to live alone," he said slowly, turning his cup of tea between his hands and not daring to look up. "I never – I never wanted to. Ron and I thought we'd live together until he and Hermione got married, but then Ron went for other things and had to move home and then he was the richest wizard in England and – it all fell out differently from how I'd thought it would. It was never – living alone wasn't ever what I had planned. I don't like it. I'd rather live with you."

He looked up at last, and was dazzled and amazed by Malfoy's smile.

"Really?" Malfoy asked. "You want to?"

"Yeah." Harry smiled back, helpless, and then cleared his throat and looked away before his face betrayed him. "So – you can start looking for a place with two bedrooms, then."

Or not. Whatever.

"I already was looking for a place with two bedrooms, I refuse to live in miserable squalor," said Malfoy loftily. "Now I shall look for a place with three. Oh good, we can bring Cyril to live with us. I feared he would pine for me. Do you not want to live in Hogsmeade?"

"I like London," said Harry. "Also, I do not think Snape will want to come for tea at my house."

"He could slip hilarious Potions into your teabags," Malfoy suggested brightly. "He knows I don't touch the stuff. That might make him happy. Well, anyway, come here and look at this one. It's terraced and period and those are good things, aren't they?"

Harry looked at the shine of his bright head over the newspaper, the lingering curve of his smile.

"I like it," he said.

Chapter Ten

Sunday morning started with the bang of a football against Harry's headboard.

"Wake up!" Malfoy commanded, retrieving the ball and throwing it at Harry's head again.

This registered an instant later, after Harry had bolted upright in a tangle of sheets and convinced they were under attack, and then almost fallen out of bed.

"I am up," he said, blinking at Malfoy, who was blurry but noticeably glowing. "Oddly enough, I wake up whenever someone throws things at my *head*."

"I see, I see, so you're saying that my methods are foolproof and I should employ them more often," Malfoy said, and gave Harry his glasses.

By the time Harry was focusing properly, Malfoy had turned to his wardrobe and wasn't looking at him even as he threw him jeans and a football shirt.

"I've told you, you must start wearing more to bed," Malfoy continued in a reproving tone. "Shacklebolt will send us that house elf one of these days, I just know it. And don't think I'll help save your virtue. I won't. Shacklebolt is like a god to me. I submit to his ineffable will. I will just laugh and laugh."

"I'm not actually listening to you," Harry felt obliged to inform him. "This early on a Sunday morning, all I hear is 'la la la I'm crazy.'"

"That's all right," Malfoy said placidly. Apparently he was unable to tear his horrified gaze from Harry's Weasley jumpers and would never look at people while conversing with them ever again. "Before my coffee all I hear is 'yes Malfoy, it's all so clear now, you're a genius.'"

"That'd be Cyril talking to you, then."

"Cyril understands me like no-one else, it's true," Malfoy said soulfully. "Are you decent yet? Can we go play some Quidditch?"

"Oh," said Harry, warmed through and through by the surprise. He usually counted the days until Quidditch in the summertime, but that was partly because it meant a weekend with Malfoy, and now he had weekends with Malfoy all the time.

It would be good to have Quidditch too.

"Mm, Flint Owled me last week," said Malfoy, obviously pleased at the success of his surprise. "I made sure everyone was fully briefed. They'll all have mint. I planned this, so naturally everything is going to be perfect. Can we go?"

"Sure," Harry said easily, pulling on the football shirt, pleased with the company and the day and the promise of Quidditch. They'd spent all Saturday making lists of suspects, of people he *knew*. He wanted a break.

Malfoy turned away from the much-contemplated wardrobe and made for the door. "Take your football," he said sternly. "It's an essential prop."

"We don't need props, Malfoy," Harry said, agreeably scooping up the ball and following him with it tucked in the corner of his elbow.

"We do need props to maintain our cover story and secret identities," Malfoy argued loudly. "We are wizards living undercover in this mundane Muggle world and we do not dare let them suspect us. We are just like spies, except even more magically glamorous."

"We could just Obliviate them if they suspected anything," Harry pointed out, and grinned when Malfoy scowled at him.

"You have no romance in your soul at all, Potter."

Malfoy bounced his football enthusiastically on the landing and Fiona caught it as she went by and tossed it back to him. She smiled at them both, having apparently decided that their perverse fictional love life was none of her business.

Malfoy was evidently charmed by this opportunity to air his cover story.

"Potter and I are going off to play a pick-me-up football game with the lads," he declared, and watched Fiona to see if she was buying it.

"Football fancier, are you?" she asked, smiling. "What team d'you support?"

Harry cast Malfoy an alarmed look, but he'd forgotten Malfoy was a crazy person who researched his roles. "Aston Villa," he said firmly.

"How about you, Harry?"

"Er," said Harry, as Malfoy smirked the triumphant smirk of someone whose cover hadn't been blown.

"Him?" he drawled, and flashed Fiona a brilliant smile. "He supports Man United."

He bounced the ball in high good humour all the way down the stairs, because he thought he was hilarious.

"The word you're searching for is ridiculous," Harry told him as they went out the front door, shaking his head at him. Malfoy tilted his face up to the sun as he stepped outside, and then threw his brilliant smile back at Harry as if it was something shining he expected Harry to catch.

"You should speak with more respect to the reigning Quidditch champion," he remarked sadly, his manner suggesting that he was much disappointed by the youth of today.

"Malfoy, you won one game."

"The last game," Malfoy pointed out sweetly. "Which makes me the winner until you take

back your crown – if you can.”

“You won one game out of *sixteen*.”

Malfoy dismissed this with scorn as mere quibbling. Harry told him he was ridiculous again. He was laughing, the sun warm on his head and his bare arms, as Malfoy explained to him that at least three of the sixteen games had been a moral victory for Malfoy’s side.

They found Flint outside the barriers, setting up the illusions that made a Quidditch pitch look like a football field to a casual observer and suggested that the casual observer had better pass on without observing anything more.

“See you went a bit Veela on us,” Flint observed, cracking gum Harry devoutly hoped was peppermint. Harry nodded and Flint dismissed this trivial concern in favour of truly important things. “Been practising, boys?”

“We watched a wonderful professional match,” Malfoy baited him, trying to speak in a deeply impressed voice and fight the wicked smile tugging up the corners of his mouth all at once. “Oliver Wood played. Now there’s a flier.”

“Useless prettyboy,” Flint snarled.

“He has so much more going for him than stunning natural good looks,” Malfoy urged, casting a swift amused look under his eyelids at Harry, eyes dancing, while Harry bit down on his own smile and looked into the middle distance. “I feel he has raw talent. Those schoolboy rivalries, Flint, one has to move on from them. That’s the mature thing to do.”

“Harry, get that babbling idiot out of my sight,” Flint said tolerantly, casting another illusory charm to be on the safe side, and Harry put a hand between Malfoy’s shoulderblades and steered him out into the Quidditch pitch to get their brooms.

As they went Malfoy solemnly told Harry that Flint was getting old and with Malfoy installed as reigning champion, he obviously feared that he would never be on top again.

“That makes sense,” Harry said gravely. “After all, he is almost thirty years old.”

“I know, he might as well be dead!” Malfoy said. “Quidditch years are like dog years, you know. It’s a saying.”

“Funny that I hadn’t heard it before.”

“You’re very young,” said Malfoy. “If you had lived as long as I have, my boy-”

“It’s nice to think that in a month I will achieve supreme wisdom,” Harry remarked. “Gives me something to look forward to.”

“It’s practically two months,” Malfoy told him. “But you mustn’t feel intimidated by me.”

“I’ll try not to let myself become overwhelmed.”

“I like you, my boy,” Malfoy informed him graciously. “You shall be my protégé.”

“I’m trying to think of a phrase,” Harry said. “I’ve almost got it, it’s on the tip of my tongue. Something about pupils, and outstripping masters?”

Malfoy frowned. “I haven’t heard that,” he decided, and then called out a greeting to Adrian Pucey. “Excuse me, I have to go explain my masterful strategy plan to the underlings,” he said briskly. “You’ll see it in action soon. And the Snitch.”

“I have no doubt I’ll see the Snitch,” Harry said mildly, and Malfoy made a rude gesture and loped easily over towards Pucey.

Most of the Slytherins had somehow ended up on Malfoy’s side that first summer, and most of the Ravenclaws on Harry’s. Harry could have wished for more Gryffindors on this pick-up team, but the Ravenclaws were nice guys. Besides, Flint was on Harry’s team and he said that he would take a Beater’s bat to Wood or any of his people if they showed their faces on his pitch.

Technically Harry was one of Wood’s people, but he and Flint never spoke on the painful subject.

The Slytherins were a bit less than cunning, always going with Malfoy and on a steady losing streak despite their creative cheating, but Pucey said it was worth it for the entertainment value and besides it was beautiful to see Malfoy cheat, he was a true artist.

Not to mention the fact that nobody but Malfoy would have even won once last summer.

Harry lay back on the warm grass while Flint described his strategies, and waited until it was time and then, laughing and joking with the Ravenclaws, he grabbed his broom and someone blew a whistle and he kicked off into the endless blue sky. It was clean and clear for miles and he felt balanced, natural in the air, all of it coming sweet and instinctive as breathing after a long time holding his breath. Malfoy was in the air too, casting a glance Harry’s way that was bright and challenging at once, and if this was part of the Veela legacy, this shining serene moment in the sky, it was the only part that was worth anything.

That was when screaming Muggles broke through the barriers and ran rioting through the Quidditch pitch, lifting yearning hands towards the sky and Harry. Harry banked in midair and stared down at the spectacle in horror.

Malfoy cursed at the top of his voice. “Oh my God, what a disaster.”

A woman below tore off her shirt and implored Harry to take her savagely on the Quidditch pitch.

Malfoy peered down and said: “Well, I admit there’s a silver lining to be found here.”

“Malfoy, focus,” Harry snapped. “I can’t fly this broom over half of London and staying here indefinitely will get a bit chilly and uncomfortable. What if I-”

Malfoy began doubtfully: “We could Stun them all-”

Then Harry felt himself banking for no reason but instinct. Sky and thought and Malfoy's voice were all knocked out of Harry's head. Pain and darkness followed in a sickening swoop and he felt his broom become a stick plummeting to the sky under his hands. He bowed over the broom and tried to fight himself back to consciousness, his head throbbing. Once he'd shoved the rush of blackness back for a moment all he was aware of was that he wanted to be sick. Then he realised that Malfoy had grabbed his arm, Malfoy's chest a solid presence against his shoulder, and Malfoy was cursing at great length.

Apparently the Muggles had got into the box of balls and they were throwing Bludgers, trying to knock Harry out of the sky.

"Because nothing says romance like broken limbs and serious head trauma," Malfoy drawled. "If you hadn't swerved – if you'd been anyone but you, they would have got you. Potter! Can you hear me!"

"Yes," Harry said, frowning and wincing as he got each word out. "I – don't shout."

The screaming below was a nightmarish sound, hungry and ready to swallow them like a storm.

"Let go of me," Harry said, and shoved. "I'm going to – the trees."

He slanted his broom downwards, hearing the screams rise to meet him, and towards the chestnut trees at the end of the pitch. Behind him he heard Malfoy yell: "Potter, if you dare fall-!"

He didn't know why Malfoy was yelling. He was a bit too excitable, that was his problem.

He crash-landed the broom deliberately into the leaves, let the broom fall and heard the thump as it hit the ground and he grabbed a branch and swung himself to the other side of the tree.

Malfoy landed on the ground below, a neat light landing that let Harry know it was Malfoy before he looked down and saw grey eyes through green leaves.

"I'm going to get our wands, stay there," he commanded, and fled.

In the distance Harry could hear Flint shouting hexes and audibly wondering if this was some plot of Wood's.

Much louder, he could hear people shrieking that they loved him so much they wanted to eat him up. He shut his eyes and held onto a branch as if it was a broomstick and there was a long terrible fall waiting.

Malfoy was back quicker than Harry would have thought possible, panting and then hauling himself up into the tree with the ease of what seemed to be long habit, moving with grace and ease. Harry wondered if Malfoy had climbed trees a lot as a kid, and then Malfoy grabbed him by the arm, fingers strong, and the noise of the crowd faded into blissful quiet.

Harry went and sat heavily on the kitchen stool, put his head in his arms on the countertop and wished to be unconscious. His head was really hurting quite a lot, the darkness behind his eyes tearing itself into pieces, split with jagged lines of white.

“You’re bleeding,” Malfoy told him, still breathing hard but speaking softly. “I’m going to make you a Potion.”

Harry listened to him moving about the kitchen. Every sound Malfoy made was painful, but he sort of liked hearing the sounds. There was someone else here and they were going to take care of him. Not that he needed it, not really, but it was – it was nice.

“Did you climb trees when you were a kid?” he asked randomly when Malfoy coaxed him to sit up and put the truly awful-smelling Potion into his hand, in his favourite mug.

“Sometimes. There were a lot of trees around the Manor,” Malfoy said distractedly, and pushed the mug towards Harry’s mouth. Harry lifted it obediently to his lips and drank.

“I bet you were a cute kid,” he said, and shut his eyes.

Malfoy laughed a little, body tilted to support a little of Harry’s weight, shoulder an inviting support against Harry’s. “Wow, you are concussed,” he drawled, voice still soft and going a little sweet. “I was not a cute kid,” he told him, breath ruffling Harry’s hair. “You were there, remember. I was sooo obnoxious. Hey, don’t go to sleep, not when you’re concussed, not until the Potion takes effect. Where was I?”

“Sooo obnoxious,” Harry mumbled. “Now that you mention it, ‘s all coming back to me.”

“Do you know,” Malfoy said confidentially, “I used to leave nasty notes for the house elves in my bedclothes. And I started a school paper called The Daily Slitherer that insinuated Hagrid was having a torrid affair with one of the students.”

“Which one?” Harry asked.

“I forget,” said Malfoy, and patted him on the back a bit in apology. “Also I didn’t so much insinuate as come right out and say. And I did this brilliant impression of Granger, but it involved wearing two dusters on my head because of her hair and that wasn’t too manly, so I only did it in the common room. It was a wonderful impression,” he added sadly. “It made Goyle laugh so much one time he peed himself a little.”

Harry sighed and rested his forehead against Malfoy’s collarbone. “You must have been very proud.”

“You know, I really *was*. Oh, and when Pansy showed me her dress for the Yule Ball I told her it was so hideous that word was bound to get out about it and nobody would ask her, so I was prepared to save her the embarrassment of arriving without a date and take her myself. I couldn’t think of any other way to ask her. That was not a good way, though. She was not happy with me at all.”

She’d *looked* happy with Malfoy, all right, hanging on tight to his arm and glowing. At the time Harry had been amazed that anyone would voluntarily spend time with Malfoy. Of

course at the time he also hadn't realised that Crabbe and Goyle were on a date.

Those people on the Quidditch pitch had been baying like animals.

"I hate this," Harry said. His head wasn't aching anymore: thank God for Malfoy's Potions.

"Hmm, I know," Malfoy murmured, casting the cuts on Harry's head closed with a few soft spells. "This is all some sort of cosmic joke, of course. All that endless and one might add ostentatious discomfort about the fame, and now you get to be all tragic about being supernaturally attractive. I don't think you have a talent for happiness."

Harry would have taken exception to this if Malfoy hadn't said it rather quietly, as if he really had thought about it and it did make him sad.

"It's fine. I'm happy now," he said reassuringly, and tucked his head in the curve of Malfoy's neck and shoulder.

"Oh what, fine, you're happy now. Lots of people would appreciate the fame and good looks, but n-no, not you, you enjoy *head trauma*," Malfoy said, his voice sharp and a bit uneven, not even slightly soothing anymore. He pushed Harry away, gently, because Malfoy was always careful when Harry'd been hurt.

There'd been a time when Harry had wanted to get hurt just a little more often, to have that, until he realised that was actually a pretty good way to get killed.

"Go wash that blood out of your hair," Malfoy commanded.

He didn't sound happy right now, that was for sure.

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"You called us into your office, sir," Malfoy said to Shacklebolt with the reverent air of one admitted into a shrine.

Shacklebolt gave him his usual flat stare, and said: "Yes. I have something to say. What on earth are you two doing here? Go straight home."

Malfoy looked tragically disappointed in his mentor for a moment, then visibly changed from his attitude of hero worship to his secret theory that Shacklebolt was an evil robot. "Sir, we can't possibly. We have reason to believe that an Auror is involved in the halfblood kidnappings: the attack on Hogwarts was clearly based off our list, which only people working here had access to."

"Aurors, archivists and Unspeakables, then," Shacklebolt said. "Very disquieting. Go home."

"Sir, listen to me when I tell you quite reasonably, *oh hell no, what?*" Malfoy snapped. "Nobody else can be trusted with the investigation, it isn't safe."

"I'll put Thomas and Louison on the case," Shacklebolt said. "Louison went to Beauxbatons: I understand that they are very open about taking in mixed-breed students there. And Thomas

is, I believe, a particular friend of yours.”

“He’s a Muggleborn,” Malfoy said, his voice hard. “The Muggleborn are responsible for ninety per cent of any attacks on magical creatures or mixed-breeds. And Louison’s family are not famous for their tolerance.”

“Nor were yours, I believe,” said Shacklebolt.

There was a silence, which Malfoy spent looking at his left wrist.

“Well, it isn’t Malfoy,” Harry said. “And it isn’t Dean either.”

“Why, just because you say so?” Malfoy muttered. “The lordly Potter spoke and lo, all was as he wished it. Sir, we’ll be really inconspicuous-”

“I will reluctantly admit that you and Mr Potter have certain talents,” Shacklebolt said. “Neither of you has ever displayed the least aptitude for being inconspicuous. Particularly not of late. Mr Potter, you may be interested to know that you are the first Auror ever to be the direct cause of a riot. This must be extremely gratifying for you.”

“Yeah, he loved it when they almost brained him,” Malfoy sneered. “Sir, that’s not fair-”

“I am perfectly aware it is not fair, Mr Malfoy,” Shacklebolt said. “I simply do not find the fact particularly interesting. Fair or not, I cannot permit anything to interfere with the orderly working of my office.”

“It was quite a small riot,” Malfoy argued. “More a sort of – rabble. A mob. A mini-mob.”

“Thank you, Mr Malfoy, how I wonder what tomorrow’s word of the day will be,” said Shacklebolt. “Mr Potter, I must ask you not to enter the premises until you are absolutely certain that you will not be inciting any - mini-mobs in Auror headquarters.”

Harry thought about the screaming crowds on the Quidditch pitch below as the world tipped sickeningly around him.

“All right,” he said.

“Then I quit,” said Malfoy. “I told you I would and I *will*. I shall quit and go on a Grand Tour.” He mulled this over. “I shall enjoy travel,” he decided. “I want to meet exotic Brazilian ladies and I want to become a shaman in the East and – I don’t know. I want to drink tequila in Tijuana and say why not when someone says, do you want to?”

He half-smiled in the way he did when he was quoting stupid Muggle songs and for an instant before the expression of fatalistic calm reasserted itself Shacklebolt looked like he might possibly be plotting their deaths.

“Indeed?” he said, all expression apparently pounded out of his voice by a big flat rock.

“He doesn’t mean it, sir.”

“Shut up, yes I do.” Malfoy scowled.

“Mr Malfoy, my all-consuming concern is the smooth running of the Aurors,” Shacklebolt said. “Your all-consuming concern may be Mr Potter, but-”

Malfoy flushed and tilted his sharp chin to hide it, ending up emphasising it. “My concern is Tijuana,” he muttered. “I feel Tijuana needs me.”

“If we put a watch on the archives, perhaps,” Harry suggested.

“And who guards the guards?” Shacklebolt inquired.

They lapsed into a silence that was really unusual for them in an interview held in Shacklebolt’s office, which usually consisted of shouting and protesting and very loud drawling and sometimes lamps crashing against the walls.

“I think,” Malfoy said, in a voice of deep foreboding, “I may have a cunning plan.”

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“And so that, Cuthbert,” Malfoy finished with what, if he had been writing instead of speaking, would have been a flourish, “is why you are our only hope.”

Cuthbert sat with his notebook and his mouth open. He looked about as impressed with Malfoy’s brilliant plan as Harry was.

“Cuthbert?” he’d repeated with outrage when Malfoy had made the suggestion. “We’re trusting Cuthbert instead of Dean?”

“You’re the one with the alibi,” Malfoy explained to Cuthbert now. “For the time in which we were attacked. I asked little Baddock and he swears you were, hem hem, fully occupied the entire time. And Baddock is the only person who has no personal or professional reason to give a false alibi, since he’d never met you before in his life.”

Cuthbert gazed sadly at his notebook. “I thought we maybe had a connection,” he said in a small voice.

“You should just think yourself lucky that your date-stealing ways have come in useful this time,” Malfoy told him severely. “Otherwise you would have faced my wrath. Now, you are going to be our eyes and ears in this office. You are going to make notes like you’ve never made notes in your life before!”

Cuthbert looked tiny and determined. “I won’t let you down, Mr Malfoy!”

“Now who do you think might possibly be an insane midnight assailant and kidnapper?”

Cuthbert blinked. “Er – aside from you and Mr Potter?”

“No,” Malfoy said. “You can put us down. I wish to be strictly impartial. After all, Potter’s known for his nasty temper.”

“I am part Veela,” Harry pointed out coldly.

“Self-hatred is a tragic thing,” Malfoy said, shaking his head. “And put Ginny Weasley down, she was here at the ball and she was at Headquarters Friday. What’s she really doing back from France anyway?”

“You dare,” said Harry.

Cuthbert looked from one of them to the other and dropped his quill in an agony of indecision.

“And put down Ron Weasley too!” Malfoy said. “He was here Friday as well. And he’s a rich man now, moves in very corrupt circles by necessity. Believe me, I know. And put down Kingsley Shacklebolt!”

“The *b-boss*?” Cuthbert breathed, looking scandalised.

“You can’t believe that Ron or Ginny had anything to do with this!” Harry exclaimed.

“Maybe I don’t, but it’s always the ones you least suspect,” Malfoy told him darkly. “Besides which, my mentor has become corrupted by high office and betrayed my youthful and innocent hero-worship. Or he’s an evil robot, I can’t decide which. Put those names down!”

“Put those names down and I break your quill.”

Cuthbert’s eyes leaped from one face to the other like an agitated frog unsure which resting place was the lily pad and which the alligator’s head.

Eventually he wrote *Kingsley Shacklebolt* in an agitated scrawl and looked hopefully up for approval.

Malfoy looked betrayed and Harry rolled his eyes. Cuthbert looked piteous.

“Katie Bell in archives has been seeing a banshee type,” he offered beseechingly. “Didn’t they use banshee fire at Hogwaaa...”

His voice trailed off into a wail as he saw Malfoy’s face.

“It’s not Katie Bell,” he said with great finality. “Don’t even *think* about putting down Katie Bell. I – look, we’re very busy and important, we can’t spend our whole day hanging about at work. Send us a list of all Aurors, archivists and Unspeakables, and anyone who was seen at headquarters this Friday. Anyone at all, do you hear me? Except Katie Bell.”

“Or the Weasleys,” Harry put in, before Malfoy almost hurled himself out of his chair and Harry followed right after him.

He snagged Malfoy’s cloak and his own jacket and left Cuthbert looking tiny and panicked at their desk, staring at a notebook that held only the names of his assigned mentors and the head of the whole department.

Harry found Malfoy waiting for him outside headquarters. It was starting to rain, a fine drizzle that turned the whole sky dense grey, and Malfoy was shivering a bit.

“Thank you,” he said in a subdued voice, and added: “I’m sorry I mentioned the Weasleys. I’ll take them off the list.”

“They’re not on the list,” Harry reminded him.

“I know they’re yours,” Malfoy said. “Katie’s mine. There are certain people who – it’s not about – even when the Weasleys weren’t talking to you and you didn’t know if they ever would, you would have protected them. Never let anyone say a word against them.”

“Course,” said Harry. “No. I understand.”

He understood a whole hell of a lot better than Malfoy did, he thought. Malfoy only understood it one way – always burningly ready to shield his parents, his friends, his stupid ex-girlfriend, but he seemed stunned and pleased whenever someone stepped up for him.

The Weasleys weren’t his family and had never quite felt like one no matter how much he’d wanted to, but they were his and he was theirs in the way Malfoy meant. He was sure of them.

“No matter what they thought about you,” Malfoy continued, low and uncertain.

“Did you ever,” Harry said, abrupt with misery. “Have you ever stopped loving anyone?”

Malfoy gave him a small unhappy smile. “No.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

They looked out into the rain. The sky above them was so cloudy it looked like it was sagging, like they were trapped in a soggy cardboard box.

“I,” said Malfoy, a little hesitant. “I stopped hating someone once, though.”

“Oh,” Harry said, warmed.

It was cold and the rain was falling faster and yet they were walking home. Harry thought perhaps it would be nice to walk a bit close, especially since Malfoy looked sad and as if he could have used it, but Malfoy was keeping his distance.

“Shacklebolt was right about that riot,” Harry said. “And we’re running out of work at home, the one who took that little girl is in *there*.”

Malfoy offered him another small smile, washed away almost at once by the rain. “Not much of a day, is it, Potter?” he asked, at least three steps away all the time. “Never mind: it’s Pansy and Weasley’s dinner thing tonight. That should be fun.”

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Malfoy insisted on stopping for a coffee on their way to Pansy and Ron's. Harry waited outside because last time he'd been tackled into an espresso machine and Malfoy had almost wept with horror at the waste.

"You're an addict and it's sick," Harry told him as he emerged from the shop with a giant styrofoam cup.

"It keeps me sane," Malfoy asserted, waving the cup at him like a trophy. "You wouldn't like me without it."

"What d'you mean, keeps you?" Harry asked.

Either the soothing spell of his coffee or the evening chill led Malfoy to abandon his earlier three steps away policy, and he walked shoulder to shoulder with Harry, bickering amicably until they reached Ron and Pansy's.

The mansion was decorated in Chudley Cannons colours. The neighbours had written a lot of letters of complaint but it still stood in its expensive neighbourhood, like a defiant pumpkin among wedding cakes.

Malfoy winced whenever he saw it and Harry had to admit he wasn't crazy about it, himself, but inside the house it was warm and there were lights in every window. He could hear people laughing as they came up the path.

"I'd like our place to be like this," he said as Malfoy knocked on the door.

Malfoy looked perfectly horrified, but the door opened and Pansy was in Malfoy's arms before Harry had a chance to explain. She put her arms around his neck and Malfoy lifted her up off her feet and spun her.

Harry nodded to Ron in the doorway.

"Obviously I'd pick you up and spin you," Harry said. "But you've put on some weight recently."

"That's the good life for you," Ron said, and gestured them all into the bright hall and beyond into the dining room.

There was a lot of food on the table: it was obvious Goyle had cooked, and Hermione had made it on time for a change. Harry slipped into the chair beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She'd brought that Muggle bloke with her. He gave Harry a friendly enough nod.

"Oh, it's the weirdly attractive chap, isn't it?"

"Most people just go with Harry," said Harry.

"Reginald, wasn't it?" Malfoy asked, which saved Harry having to ask. He reached over and shook hands, and informed Reginald solemnly that he was very open-minded about his people.

Reginald blinked. "Me too," he said heartily. "I think that you should be allowed to get married and all that stuff, absolutely. Live and let live, say I."

"Muggles don't want magical people to get *married*?" Malfoy demanded, looking horrorstruck.

"Er, that's not what he meant," Harry said.

"Your sparkly little man couldn't come today, could he?" Reginald asked.

"Ah," said Malfoy. "I – he left me for another," he concluded. "My heart is broken. I will never find a love so sparkly again."

"Oh dear," said Reginald, looking extremely sympathetic while Malfoy smirked behind his wine glass. "Oh that's a shame. But those two chaps who look like twin peaks seem very happy, so there's still hope. Buck up!"

Malfoy eyed him coldly, as did Goyle, who said in a loud voice: "I've been *slimming*."

"You can tell," Dean said.

Harry wondered a bit what Dean was doing there before Ginny came out of the kitchen and planted the potatoes in the middle of the table and a kiss at the corner of Dean's mouth.

It was nice having Ginny back, he thought, grinning at her. She grinned in return, warm and easy, as if things could be as simple as that, at least for tonight.

And he was used to Katie at these dinner parties and Malfoy hovering at her side, a little tense and anxious to please her, to make her feel included. Malfoy often made a brief escape from the awkwardness by volunteering to do the washing-up, and a couple of times Harry had slunk in after him and offered to do the drying and Malfoy had played the radio too loud and tried to make Harry sing along until Katie ran out of conversation with the others and came to find Malfoy, and Malfoy switched off the radio at once and all would be silence, and he would kiss her.

Now she was gone and it made Harry feel guilty, what a relief it was, how good it was to simply have Malfoy beside him and be happy to be here.

"You look well," Hermione whispered to him.

She looked incredibly well, hair obviously straightened but gone fluffy in the rain, golden in the candlelight. Her eyes were shining.

"So do you," said Harry, and then because he'd learned to, in the time when he'd only seen Hermione by herself and crying over Ron: "I mean – beautiful. That's how you look. Er."

She went pink and smiled.

"And things must be going well with that chap," Harry observed. "I don't notice any

peppermint on your person.”

“Yes, well, clearly the only thing needed was willpower,” said Hermione, sneaking a glance at Reginald. “A little positive thinking and the thing was done.”

“I don’t blame you for any of it, Hermione,” Harry said gravely. “Who could resist all this?”

He made a small gesture towards his dark, frayed-at-the-sleeves Weasley jumper, and Hermione tilted back her head and laughed, elegant and gleaming and just a little warmer and happier than usual. Given half a chance, Harry thought he could come to like this Reginald bloke.

Malfoy was detailing an elaborate plan for Crabbe’s career advancement which involved stealing a hundred cups of jelly and (not fatally, Crabbe, not fatally) poisoning half his patients.

And Pansy came in and sat at the foot of the table, hands clasped and pearls at her neck, and looked like a prim lady of the house for all of three seconds before her red lips curled up and she started asking Ginny how Dean measured up to Frenchmen.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, entering with a bottle of champagne.

“I never touched her!” Dean said instantly, and then pretended he had dropped a fork and hid under the table talking loudly about how he had to find it.

“You Gryffindors are so smooth,” Pansy said, raising her eyebrows with a supercilious air that lasted the second it took for Ron to smile at her.

Everyone started pouring themselves champagne and Reginald beamed around at them with the usual air of a bloke massively relieved that his new girlfriend’s mates were not crazed axe murderers.

“You’re a nice group,” he said affably. “So how do you all know each other? Were you all at the same magic school? What was the name again, Gryffindor?”

“No!” chorused four perfectly appalled Slytherin voices.

“It was called Hogwarts,” said Goyle, who was the good-natured one, but even he sounded reproachful.

“That’s an awkward sort of name,” Reginald observed. “I like the sound of that other one, what was the word, Beauxbatons. That sounds elegant, darling. You should have gone there.”

“I liked Hogwarts,” Hermione said firmly, but she looked pleased.

“So were you all friends at school, how jolly,” said Reginald.

A rather blank silence followed.

“Well,” Ron said, with the air of a host whose duty it was to assign placements. “I’m best

mates with Hermione and Harry here, and Ginny's my sister, and she's going out with Dean – except she used to go out with Harry-”

“I was young and he dazzled me with his Veela charms, but I saw the light in the end,” Ginny put in cheerfully.

“Thanks very much,” said Harry.

“And I am best mates with Crabbe and Goyle and they are going out, and I used to go out with Pansy,” Malfoy said helpfully.

“Must have been very hard for you when you found out,” Reginald murmured sympathetically to Pansy.

Pansy looked as if she wondered whether Reginald drank.

“And now you and Ronald are going out, so all's well that ends well!” Reginald said in a pleased sort of way.

“Well,” said Ron, and coughed. “Well, actually. Actually, well. We're not going out. She's going to be my – I mean, sorry, I'm going to be her. Right, I knew I was going to be crap at this. We're going to get married.”

“Thank you, darling, that was beautiful,” Pansy told him, very dry, and then she lifted her glass and she just beamed at him, Pansy Parkinson, the sullen-faced girl who could just about pretend she didn't like baby unicorns, looking silly and glowing and almost melting with it.

She'd stopped clasping her hands and they could see her engagement ring. The diamond was the size of a Quaffle, but she wore it well.

Hermione leaned over Reginald and gave Ron a kiss, and Goyle started to cry because it was all so beautiful, and Ginny thumped Ron on the back at the same time Hermione kissed him and Hermione ended up biting her lip, and it didn't seem to matter.

Harry said: “Congratulations, mate,” and Ron, blinking and amazed and delighted as if faced with snapping cameras after single-handedly winning the World Cup, said: “Thanks – yeah, thanks, thanks!”

Then Reginald said brightly: “We should have a toast, what do you say, chaps!”

They had several.

*

“If I had known,” Malfoy said, speaking very slowly and distinctly as he sat on the hearthrug in Pansy and Ron's parlour, hugging his knees to his chest and trying to balance a decanter of brandy on his knees, “that Ron Weasley was going to end up the richest wizard in Britain and marry my best girl, I would have topped myself.” He frowned, and then corrected that. “I would have first killed you and then myself,” he told Ron earnestly.

“I’d like to have seen you try, you were a shrimp for half of school,” Ron told him, lying back against the sofa with Pansy cradled tenderly in one arm and a vodka bottle cradled tenderly in the other.

“I think it is very touching that you were all friends in school,” Reginald said soulfully. “I wish I had gone to Hoggleworts.”

“That is so beautiful,” said Goyle, who got maudlin on liquors and was getting ready for a fourth bout of weeping. “I wish you had too! You could have been in Slytherin!”

“I would have been charmed, old boy, absolutely charmed!” said Reginald. “What is a Slytherin?”

“We are a cunning folk,” said Crabbe, and laid his head down on the table with great care.

“Was it one of the teams in that flying cricket game?” Reginald inquired.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “The rest of us were in Gryffindor. We played Quidditch too. We had, er, sort of a rivalry going on.”

“That is exactly how I would’ve described it,” Dean said. “I hear the sky is also sort of blue.”

“We didn’t *actually* get on all that well at school,” Harry said, resigned to spoiling Reginald’s beautiful vision. “But, er, Malfoy and I started working together-”

“I started tutoring Vincent,” Hermione said, smiling over at Crabbe.

“I think I need a glass of water,” said Crabbe.

“I started using Ron for sex,” Pansy said blandly, and stole Ron’s vodka while he was spluttering.

“-we get on now,” Harry said. “We’re flatmates.”

“Temporarily,” Ron said, abandoning his quest to wrest alcohol from his promised bride.

“No, actually,” Malfoy said, and he sounded glad, and Harry smiled and leaned back a little against his shoulder.

He was a bit drunk, sitting with his legs stretched out on the rug in Ron and Pansy’s ridiculous orange house, and Pansy and Ron were getting married and there was a bloke treating Hermione like gold, and Malfoy was right here and going to live with him. It seemed possible for a moment to be perfectly happy with just this.

Malfoy took the leaning as a request for the brandy and passed it over, and after a burning mouthful Harry said: “We’re going to look for a bigger place.”

“Hermione,” Ron said in a low moan.

“Hmm?” Hermione asked, looking away from Reginald.

“You know everything, right?” Ron said desperately. “Right? You wouldn’t fail me now, would you?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Ron.”

Harry wished that Ron would stop talking about it. He tried, with a crawling sensation of dread, to calculate exactly how drunk Ron must be.

“I mean, you knew that Harry was gay in fourth year, right?” Ron pursued.

“Well, yes,” Hermione said, preening a little.

“The Daily Slitherer had a lot to say about people who left the Patil twins and sneaked off into the bushes with their best friends,” Malfoy said smugly.

“Hey!” said Ron. “What?”

“It’s boyish experimentation, Weasley, perfectly natural, nobody judges you for it,” Malfoy said, and Harry could tell by his tone he was smirking.

“I would understand,” Pansy told him. “You could tell me all about it. That time Draco kissed Blaise was smoking hot. Draco was making these noises-”

Harry shifted and glared, hating even thinking about it, and Draco moved away and he hated that too, and Ron mercifully got Pansy to drink instead of finishing her sentence.

“I would understand if you ever kissed Seamus,” Ginny told Dean, apparently feeling this was the supportive thing to do.

“Uh,” Dean said: “no, I never – I never did that. I mean, I was artistic, sure, but that’s a stereotype... You know, I knew Harry was gay too.”

“Did Cho Chang tell you as well?” Goyle inquired with interest.

“Cho said that?” Harry asked, outraged.

There was a series of nods around the room. Just because she happened coincidentally to have been right, Harry saw no reason why Cho should leap to wild assumptions based on one kiss that he certainly could have improved on. Given time.

“Actually I meant in sixth year when you were stalking Malfoy,” Dean said.

“Er,” said Harry.

“He wasn’t stalking me,” Malfoy snapped. “I was evil.”

“Yes, but nobody believed that at the time,” Hermione said reminiscently. “It was quite funny, really. Professor McGonagall kept trying to work out a way to have a sensitive heart to heart with him.”

“Professor McGonagall?” asked Harry, in a voice gone all faint and thin with horror.

“She got the wrong end of the stick after you made that big embarrassing speech to her,” Hermione said.

“I wasn’t-”

“I know you weren’t,” Malfoy said. Harry looked over at him and he’d actually left the rug in search of his styrofoam cup. The coffee must have been ice-cold by now, but he drank it anyway.

“You were evil?” Reginald asked blankly.

“It was a youthful phase,” Malfoy said, and smiled winningly over at him. “Tell me all about cricket.”

“*Can I have a word with you please, Harry?*” Ron asked, apparently driven to desperation. “In the kitchen.”

“Okay,” said Harry, and stood, because what else was he going to say even though a few moments ago everything had been all right, he’d been *happy*, and now everyone had stopped talking like idiots and Reginald had got started on Lord’s and Malfoy was smiling again, coming over to the carpet to sit near Reginald’s chair and hear all about the strange Muggle games.

“I took Muggle Studies, you know,” he told Reginald.

“What’s a Muggle?” Reginald asked.

Malfoy looked appalled at the state of ignorance that Muggles lived in. “You’re a Muggle.”

Reginald’s brow wrinkled. “I don’t *feel* like a Muggle.”

Harry reached out because – because he’d had too much to drink, not for any reason but that he felt better when he could – just reach out and touch the collar of Malfoy’s shirt, something, to prove he was there and safe and close.

Malfoy shied away.

“*Harry*,” Ron said, and Harry went into the kitchen with Ron. “Harry, you can’t do this, you can’t *move in with him*, are you mental?” Ron said as soon as they’d shut the door behind them. “He’s not one of my favourite people but he’s one of Pansy’s and I can’t – I can’t let you. It’s not good for you: don’t tell me he wasn’t there during the riot on Sunday.”

“It was quite a small riot,” Harry muttered, looking away.

“Look,” Ron said. “I really – I think you should tell him. Then he’ll know what’s going on, it’ll be fair, and-” Ron swallowed and looked direly uncomfortable about the idea. “He really likes you,” he added. “That’s obvious enough. Maybe it’ll – all work out.”

“He won’t realise unless you tell him,” said Crabbe from the sink, finishing his glass of water and putting it down with a tiny clink against the metal that rang through Harry’s head like a bell.

Harry and Ron both spun around and stared at Crabbe. Crabbe made a face at them and shrugged.

“I had a bit of a crush on him in third year,” he said. “He never got that, either. Not good at picking up that kind of stuff. Pansy pretty much had to hold him down and kiss him for him to get it: it was lucky he had that wounded arm.” Crabbe frowned some more. “He’s very clever otherwise, though,” he added, loyal to the end.

Ron crossed the floor in two strides and grabbed Crabbe by the arms.

“You know?” he asked, sounding awed. “Oh, thank God! Someone else knows! Okay, okay, we need a plan! What’s our plan?”

“I don’t know, Malfoy comes up with the plans,” Crabbe said crossly. “Of course I know. I’ve known for years. I don’t think it does much good talking about it, though.”

“Exactly,” Harry said, even could feel himself going a dull red and he was torn between never looking at Crabbe directly again and grabbing Crabbe like Ron had, demanding to know where he’d slipped up. “Exactly. It’s – it’s no good talking about it at all. He’s still in love with Katie Bell.”

Malfoy had said no when Harry asked if he’d ever stopped loving someone. He wasn’t going to fall out of love with her, not Malfoy, impossibly tenacious Malfoy who half killed himself doing a job he’d chosen solely to please Katie. And even if he did, what good would it be? He liked women. They were just friends: Malfoy had said so.

“But you can’t live with him!” Ron exclaimed, returning to his original point and looking to Crabbe for support.

“I wouldn’t do him any harm,” Harry said. “He’d like to. He said so. He was happy.”

“Who cares about him?” Ron demanded. “Uh, sorry, Vince. What about you? What, you’re going to be alone forever at twenty-three with this stupid Veela thing making messes everywhere you go just so you can moon over Malfoy of all people – sorry, Vince. How are you going to find someone else?”

“I don’t *want* anyone else,” Harry said savagely. “And yes. Yes, I’d rather have that. I’ll find some way to sort this Veela thing out and then it’ll all be fine, I don’t want to find another Smith or God forbid, another Ritchie, someone who’ll just be perfect while I feel nothing and – hurt them and can’t even care about it. I want to live with him and I don’t care about anything else. I want to be happy.”

Ron stared at him for a moment. Harry realised that he wouldn’t have been able to get all that out without the drink, and considered going on the wagon.

“I want you to be happy too,” Ron said finally, helplessly. “It’s just I don’t – see a way for this to end well.”

Harry thought about Malfoy shying away from him like a startled animal.

“You’ve ended up well,” Harry said. “It only happens to some people. And speaking of that – Malfoy was really quiet when you announced it. And then he started drinking. He’s been acting funny since – it probably wasn’t great for him to see you two, all engaged, when he’s – I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Look, I waited for months so Pansy wouldn’t feel bad about telling Malfoy. I was keeping the ring in my sock drawer. Pansy told me when I asked that she’d seen it on the third day!”

“I’m not blaming you,” Harry said. “I just want to make sure he’s all right.”

That was when Pansy came in, looking a little distressed and so coming to Ron as she always did, her hands out and his always there to catch them. She leaned into Ron and surveyed them all with an air of hauteur from her place of safety.

“What are you talking about in here, boys?”

“Malfoy,” Crabbe answered, stolid as ever while Harry and Ron both flushed.

“Should we have waited?” Pansy asked. “He just left. He said, apologies and congratulations and he just had a hangover coming on too soon, but – oh, damn it.”

“I’m going to,” Harry said. “I’ve got to go.”

“He said nobody was to bother,” Pansy informed him in a noncommittal tone.

“He says a lot of stupid things,” Harry said. “I – congratulations again. I know you’ll be happy. I’m happy for you. I-”

“Oh go, fine, get lost,” said Ron, and clapped him on the back before he Apparated and found Malfoy in their flat, stuffing all his belongings into a bag.

*

“What are you doing here?” Malfoy demanded, looking up from his bag with wild eyes.

Harry felt somewhat wild-eyed himself. “I live here,” he said. “What are you doing?”

He knew what it looked like Malfoy was doing, but he was trying not to think about why Malfoy was doing it. If Malfoy had guessed, or if he had simply changed his mind, or if he’d decided that without Katie what did it all matter and he did want to go to Tijuana after all. He couldn’t stop him, if Malfoy wanted to go. He had absolutely no right.

Malfoy grabbed up one of the books that he always started reading in the supermarket, breaking the spines and ending up having to buy them, and thrust it into a side pocket of the bag. He looked up from throwing all his worldly goods into some stupid bag and his eyes

were wary under his falling hair. He looked like he might bolt at any minute and Harry was too terrified by the idea to even try and be gentle.

“I was going to leave you a note,” said Malfoy.

“Well what would it have said?” Harry almost shouted. “If you don’t want to live together, then...”

“I do want to!” Malfoy yelled back. “We will. We’re going to. I just, I need to go to a hotel for a while, I need to sort some stuff out, I’ll come back-”

“Don’t go,” said Harry. “Why are you-”

“Stop asking me *questions*,” Malfoy snapped. “Don’t hang over me like that. Would you just – sit down and listen.”

He shoved Harry with the bag, let the bag drop on the coffee table and Harry stared up at him, felt he was like water slipping through Harry’s fingers, always, and barely registered the soft sound of a styrofoam cup falling on its side until he followed Malfoy’s gaze and saw water spilling all over the table.

It wasn’t water. It wasn’t coffee, either.

Malfoy went still and silent for a terrible moment, defeated, as they both watched the peppermint tea spilling over the table top. Malfoy made a move as if to right the cup and then stopped before he touched it, hands trembling slightly. Harry couldn’t think: his brain seemed to have frozen in the same way Malfoy had. Everything was so still, and he couldn’t think.

Malfoy swallowed. The small sound echoed in Harry’s head like a door closing.

“I’m not immune,” Malfoy said.

“What?” Harry said, helplessly.

“I’m not *immune*,” Malfoy repeated in a different way, fraught and a little desperate. “I thought I was and I tried to be and I’m not, I’m sorry, I know how much you hate it. I know it’s not real. It – seems real but I know it’s not. All I need is a break, I can – work on my Occlumency, something. It will be all right.”

That last tone of voice, frantically soothing, always came with a touch but Malfoy wasn’t touching him. Malfoy was scared to touch him, and he’d shied away and he’d walked three steps away because – because he thought-

It wasn’t good, because Malfoy’s face was pale and a little sick in the dim light of the reading lamp. Malfoy was upset and only just not shaking and Harry didn’t want anything like that, but there was still a sense of exultation, of disbelief so intense it made him feel dizzy, rising in Harry’s chest. It almost hurt.

“It’s not *real*,” Malfoy repeated in that strained miserable way.

Malfoy grabbed his bag and Harry didn't need to think. He lunged forward on the sofa and grasped Malfoy's wrist, held on as hard as he could.

He could feel Malfoy's pulse beating frantically. Harry looked up and could not make out an expression in his eyes: his lashes were lowered, he was breathing fast.

"I don't care," Harry said, his voice hoarse, scraping painfully in his throat. "I want you too much to care."

Malfoy's eyes snapped open then, but there was no real expression to be found anymore. His whole face looked wiped clean, suddenly shocked and pained, as if Harry had punched him in the stomach.

"Wh-what?"

Malfoy's jaw was held tight, more angle than curve. His mouth was wavering, as if uncertain what shape to form next, and Harry couldn't take his eyes off him: it was as if he had been created new in front of Harry's eyes this moment. "I said-"

"I heard what you said," Malfoy told him, his voice starting on a whisper and rising fast. "Let go of me!"

It was a convulsively sharp movement but deliberate too, calculated. Harry had to let Malfoy go or, at that angle, break Malfoy's wrist.

Even if he was in blind shock, Malfoy trusted him enough to know he wouldn't do that.

Malfoy took a step back, almost stumbling as if he *was* suddenly blind, and he picked up the bag. "I have to – I have to go," he said with sudden decision.

"Don't," Harry said, his mouth dry.

Malfoy took several more steps, these ones more decided, towards the door. "I have to go," he repeated, and his hand fumbled at the latch.

That was when Harry thought about it another way: Malfoy shying away and saying *it's not real*, because he was fighting it, he didn't want to.

The door was open and Malfoy stood in a square of light, still looking shaky. His whole face was in motion, changing, like the face of a pool someone had thrown a stone into. And he was leaving.

"I have to go," he said a little more firmly, and his eyes caught on Harry's and stilled.

In one sure, graceful movement, the one movement like him that he'd made since Harry came back to the flat, he threw the bag down by the door.

"But – I'll come back," Malfoy said, soft, and then there was nothing but the door closing behind him.

Chapter Eleven

It struck midnight before Malfoy came back. Harry jumped at the sound of the clock, surprised that it was only twelve. The night had gone slow, time dragging its heels as if reluctant to leave that still moment when Malfoy had knocked over the peppermint tea.

Harry had no idea how he was going to get through the night. He did not expect Malfoy to return.

Malfoy did, though. He came in with very little fuss, swinging a shopping bag and giving Harry a mildly concerned look.

“Have you been sitting there like that for an *hour*, Potter?”

“Felt longer,” Harry muttered.

Malfoy blinked at him, slow and a bit startled for some reason, and said: “You should at least have turned the lamp on.”

He did it for him, clicking the little switch and then retreating behind the counter that separated the kitchen and the sitting room, as if he was moving into safe territory. Harry blinked, stranded in a pool of sudden yellow light.

“I didn’t know you were coming back tonight,” he said.

He was about to say that he was glad Malfoy had, that they could *fix* this, but Malfoy interrupted him.

“But I left my bag,” he said, looking honestly puzzled. “And all our friends are still at Pansy’s. Where did you think I was going? I would not wander the streets like a *vagrant*: that is not the Malfoy way.”

“Well, I thought Professor Snape, or maybe – Zabini, I don’t know.”

Malfoy looked scandalised. “I hope you’re not suggesting that I would ever borrow nightclothes from Zabini,” he said. “You should’ve seen some of the stuff he wore at school. That man’s not right.”

Harry did not care what nightclothes Zabini had worn at school. “Then – where did you go?”

Malfoy put the shopping bag on the counter, where it landed with a thunk. “I went for a walk,” he said. “Then I bought some tequila. I felt in need of some. I wasn’t going to leave you alone.”

The way Malfoy said it, a little belligerently but also as if it was perfectly obvious, made Harry remember they were partners: made him remember he’d told himself, a hundred times in that endless hour, what he should say as soon as he saw Malfoy again.

“I didn’t mean what I said,” he burst out. “I’m really sorry.”

Malfoy frowned at him, a pin-scratch line appearing between his eyebrows. He leaned forward, elbows on the counter, and did not look as relieved as Harry had thought he would. He did look a bit relieved, but the chief thing he seemed to be feeling was massive bewilderment.

“Then why would you say it?” he demanded. “Are you completely *insane*? Was it some sort of joke?”

“No, I don’t actually think taking advantage of people would be a very good joke,” Harry snapped, and realised he shouldn’t be snapping at Malfoy when he’d said something unforgivable to him, and fell wretchedly silent.

“Sometimes you make extremely bad jokes,” Malfoy said, in the distracted way he spoke when he was thinking about something else and yet for the life of him couldn’t stop babbling. “It makes me sad for you.” He bit his lip and said: “Taking advantage?”

Harry leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and tried to catch Malfoy’s eyes. Malfoy swallowed slightly and looked determinedly away.

“Well – when I said-”

“I remember what you said.”

“I didn’t *mean it*,” Harry repeated hopelessly. “Not that I wouldn’t care. I mean, of course I would, I would never just-” He thought of that Veela dream, of hunting in the woods, the hammer of Malfoy’s heart in his bed, and had to look away himself. “Take,” he said at last, low.

“Right,” Malfoy said. “Well, I didn’t think you would.”

Harry’s gaze lifted to Malfoy again and Malfoy looked back for a moment, looking calm and a little quizzical.

“Of course I am very concerned at all times about the preservation of my maiden purity,” he said. “You idiot. I know you wouldn’t intentionally use this on anyone. I’ve *seen* you with the enraptured masses, you know, there were plenty who were easy on the eyes-”

“I don’t,” Harry said, who hadn’t really noticed. “That wasn’t – I wouldn’t-”

He choked on the absolute impossibility of trying to explain that he hadn’t noticed and wouldn’t have cared if he had, that other people weren’t a temptation, without making it sound as if he’d been lying before when he’d said he hadn’t meant it.

It’s not real, Malfoy had said, and Harry understood that it had to be real. It wouldn’t be right, otherwise. He wouldn’t do that to Malfoy.

He *had* been lying when he said he hadn’t meant it. He had meant it, at that moment, with Malfoy before him saying impossible things. He hadn’t cared about anything else.

Then Malfoy had left, though, and he remembered that it mattered what Malfoy thought on

the subject, what he thought when he was in his right mind. What he'd think of Harry: what Harry had to lose.

"You didn't mean that. I know," Malfoy said, soothing, surer than Harry was himself. "But the rest of it," he said, and hesitated. "Did you mean that?"

Harry was confused for a moment. He hadn't said much, he'd thought: just enough to indicate he didn't care and send Malfoy away forever. Only Malfoy had come back.

I want you too much to care. I want you.

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice rough and breaking at once. "Yeah, I meant that."

"Oh," said Malfoy.

He was studying the kitchen counter. Harry remembered something he wanted Malfoy to know.

"And that time when – when I asked for you not to be my partner," he burst out, and ignored the sudden warning bunch of Malfoy's shoulders, as if faced with an unexpected threat. "That's what – that whole thing was about. You didn't do anything wrong. It was – it was me."

Malfoy looked at him then, head jerking up. He looked stunned and utterly lost, as if the world had betrayed him by turning out to be so different than he'd thought. It broke Harry's heart.

"What?" he said, and sounded completely dismayed. "But that – Potter, that was years ago."

"Yeah," Harry said, and when Malfoy didn't look any less dismayed he said: "It seemed – I thought it was unprofessional," because it was true, and so that Malfoy would know being Aurors and being partners mattered.

It seemed to help. Malfoy's shoulders eased a fraction.

"I want you to know," he said in a shaken voice. "I'm starting to doubt my elite Auror detective skills. This is very worrying. It means neither of us has them."

"Maybe Cuthbert has them," Harry offered.

He was terribly relieved when Malfoy laughed, a little sound like the amusement had been surprised out of him. It felt for a trembling instant as if everything might really be all right.

"I should ask," Malfoy said in a voice that was suddenly hard with resolve. "This isn't – it isn't a big deal, is it? It's not going to change anything?"

Harry took a deep breath and tried to sound reassuring. "No, Malfoy," he said, and his voice managed to be almost gentle. "Nothing has to change."

Malfoy nodded and Harry told himself he was glad. Malfoy knew everything, now, and he'd

come back, he'd shown no signs of wanting to keep away. The solid ground of partnership was under their feet: there were no more revelations to be made. They were safe, now. Nothing had to change.

"You must have a hardcore thing for blonds or something," Malfoy said in his funny, stunned voice.

"I don't know," Harry muttered, looking at his hands. "Never really thought about it."

There was a little space, a little silence in which Harry tried very hard to be glad, and Malfoy busied himself taking the tequila bottle out of the plastic shopping bag, a tawny bottle that went briefly golden in the light. Malfoy twisted the cap off and then fiddled with the cap, a metallic gleam between his restless hands. He was always fiddling with something.

Malfoy said abruptly: "So I have a plan."

"Jesus, Malfoy. There is no need to make things any worse!"

Harry was combing with unfocused dread through a list of possibilities, all the while knowing that Malfoy would come up with something far more ridiculous and unbelievable, and then Malfoy proved him right by saying: "It would solve all our problems if we slept together," and Harry's train of thought went off the rails and exploded, leaving nothing in his mind but ringing shock.

"Oh my God," he said. "You're *crazy*."

"With chat-up lines like that, Potter, no wonder we're having such a hard time finding someone for you to sleep with," Malfoy snapped, and opened the cupboard where they kept the glasses. "D'you want a glass?"

"Of tequila, no," Harry said.

"Suit yourself," Malfoy told him. "Personally, I think you're making a mistake."

"I thought you weren't going to drink like this anymore."

"Under normal circumstances, no," Malfoy said, pouring himself a shot and then taking it, pale throat glinting in the fluorescent light as he swallowed. "But I have a lot of – a lot of new information to process and I am feeling somewhat shaken, so I think under these particular circumstances I am allowed to have a damn drink. And I think you should have one too. Or several."

"Well, I'm not going to," Harry said. "And stop being insane."

Malfoy scowled. He seemed a little calmer after the drink, restless hands playing with his shot glass now. Harry looked at his hands and thought about how familiar and dear it was, being able to glance across his desk and see Malfoy play with quills or doodle on his parchment. It was one of the sights in the world that grounded him, that made him feel as if it was possible to be at home. He forced himself not to think of anything else.

“I’m not insane,” said Malfoy, who was wrong about that and not making this easy for Harry. “I think – I think it’s a good solution. You can’t keep going like this, riots and not being able to go out to the shops, and I said I’d help and I will. I want to. And we have to be able to do our jobs, especially with the halfbreeds going missing and the Aurors under suspicion. And I’ll get my Veela vaccination and everything can be like it was.” His voice became calmer as he went on, became almost the easy drawl he always used when he’d convinced himself of his own brilliance. “It’s not a very sophisticated plan,” he admitted. “But it’s not like you gave me much time to think it up. I blame you.”

If Malfoy had intended to turn the tables and make Harry as stunned and incredulous as he’d been, he could stop it now. He’d already succeeded. Harry couldn’t even think of an argument why this was a terrible idea, because if he thought about it then he’d have to think about what Malfoy was offering.

He was wretched enough to plead. “Malfoy, *don’t*. I can’t – please.”

He stared fixedly at the floor. He heard the sound of Malfoy pouring himself another glass of tequila and then the sound, much more hesitant, of Malfoy coming out from behind the kitchen counter, into more dangerous territory.

Harry looked up and Malfoy was leaning, his back to the counter, his expression distinctly worried.

“There’s more to this, isn’t there,” he said.

Harry looked at him, mute.

“I should’ve known,” Malfoy said. “You’re into something weird, aren’t you?”

Harry kept staring at him. It was a different sort of staring now, that was all.

“What?”

“This whole time, you were making a giant fuss because you have some terrible secret fetish you don’t want anyone to know about,” Malfoy said. “That’s it, isn’t it? Come on, you can tell me. I guess we can-” He waved his glass around in a conceding gesture and finished doubtfully: “Work something out?”

“Malfoy, I do not and you must be joking.”

“I’m joking as long as it’s not true,” Malfoy said, breathing a sigh of mock relief. Harry looked up, meant to steal a glance and look guiltily away again but Malfoy was smiling, a pale shadow of his easy teasing smile but trying, and he caught and held Harry’s eyes.

Don’t, Harry thought, and: *Please*. He didn’t say it this time.

“I’d rather go to Sinistra’s,” he said instead, in a low voice.

Malfoy’s eyes widened. “I think I’m a little bit insulted, but if you think that would be best.”

“I didn’t mean I was going to Sinistra’s,” Harry said hastily. “I’m never going to Sinistra’s.”

Insulted, Malfoy said. As if that was what this was about, the stupid, *stupid* idiot, with his ridiculous plans and his willingness to sacrifice anything for people he liked. Well, that wasn’t how things worked: people didn’t sacrifice themselves for Harry. He wouldn’t let Malfoy do it.

“Well, you have to do something!” Malfoy burst out. “I’m – I’m sure you’d rather find someone who-”

“That’s not it-” Harry said.

“The point *is*,” Malfoy said, glaring about having been interrupted. “You can’t go out and meet anyone while you’re like this. And so we will be trapped here forever unless we find a solution involving someone you already know. This is the solution and actually, I think that it’s all very convenient.”

“Oh, do you,” Harry said in a hollow voice.

“Yes I do,” said Malfoy. “We’re both single. You have your blonds fetish or whatever, fine. You said you wanted – someone you liked and you *said* we were friends.” He looked angry, as if he suspected that Harry was going to snatch something away from him and he’d had to point out that Harry’d given it to him in the first place.

“And what about *you*?” Harry snarled.

Malfoy blinked. “What about me?” he asked, as if he was truly puzzled that he was an issue at all. Harry felt a pang of despairing protectiveness that was about even with his desire to hit Malfoy around the head. “I’m not like you, I don’t have to beat off admirers with a stick and a scowl. I don’t see why you keep expecting me to be angry with you and – and you’re my friend, too. It’s not just - I care about you,” he spat out, as if the words had a terrible taste, and went instantly pink and cross. “Can we please stop talking about this?”

“Oh, you’d rather have gay sex than talk about your feelings,” Harry said.

He meant the words to come out scornful, meant to make Malfoy see that it wasn’t just wittering on about his brilliance and trying to convince Harry that his latest plan was gold, trying to make what he was suggesting seem real to him.

Except saying it made it seem real to Harry. He looked at Malfoy for a moment and remembered how it had felt, seeing the tea spill, before he’d had a chance to think about what this could mean and how he could mess up. He looked at the line of his throat, the sharp angle of his jaw, details Harry had memorised but which seemed new now, because they seemed possible.

But they weren’t.

Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. “I’d rather have gay sex with Professor Slughorn than talk about my feelings,” he claimed. “I am manly and stoic like that.”

“This isn’t funny,” Harry said, low. “I wouldn’t – I won’t do anything that might hurt you. I won’t let you do anything you don’t want to do.”

For an instant he thought Malfoy was going to move towards him: he had that look he got sometimes, when he thought Harry was being crazy but he felt fond of him all the same. Usually he touched Harry’s hair when he looked like that, but not this time. This time he stirred, but he walked across the floor and to the window rather than to Harry. He leaned against the window casement, staring through the glass and into the darkness, and he said: “It’s what I do want to do. That’s the problem.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

“I’m not being altruistic,” Malfoy continued in a tone that seemed to sneer at himself, at the very idea. “That wasn’t why I was running off to some hotel. I’ve had – thoughts.”

“Really,” Harry murmured, and Malfoy glanced over at him involuntarily, startled as Harry was by the way that one word had come out. He hadn’t heard that note in his voice before, rough but coaxing too, threatening and promising at once.

He wasn’t horrified by it, like he should have been. He was too busy looking at Malfoy, wondering if it would work.

“Yes,” Malfoy said in a clipped voice, not elaborating. “But – my plan will solve that, too, and then we’ll be fine. Everything will be fine. Everything will go back to normal. We can live together just like you said and nothing has to change.”

There was always a moment when Malfoy’s lunatic schemes started to sound sensible. Harry had to fight against this one, but it was horrific how difficult it was. They could live together just like they’d planned. What was the other option, that Malfoy would have to go away again? Malfoy had offered. Harry hadn’t asked. He *did* want everything to go back to normal.

He tried to crush down the thought of what else he wanted. The other choice was nothing, but this way – Malfoy’d offered – he could have one night. Just one night. *We’ll be fine*, Malfoy had said. He’d promised.

Maybe, if Malfoy liked it, Harry thought suddenly. Maybe. Ron had even said that maybe things would work out. It was possible.

Harry was terribly, forcibly aware of Malfoy’s presence in the room, as he hadn’t been even a moment ago. He’d been glad about his return, concentrating on not saying anything wrong, not losing him again. He was used to crushing down anything else, trying not to betray himself, but now everything was betrayed.

Now he could look at Malfoy the way he’d looked at him three years ago, as someone who might be attainable. Only three years ago he’d still been able to be reasonable, he hadn’t wanted to be unprofessional, he hadn’t really known who Malfoy was. Three years ago he’d never spent days in a cell with the prospect of death and the thought of Malfoy, never felt protective of him as something terribly valuable and unquestionably his own. Never wanted him to the exclusion of almost everything else.

It was all different, now. It was Malfoy's idea. Harry wouldn't hurt him.

Malfoy made a slight sound, his profile ice-pale and indifferent, his fingers nervously moving on the window catch. "This prolonged silence is very ominous," he said, trying to make a joke of his words.

"What do you want me to do?" Harry asked abruptly. He didn't mean it to come out as a demand.

"I think to start with you'd better use the Veela sparkles or whatever," Malfoy drawled, making a gesture that was apparently meant to indicate sparkliness but which looked more like a sick duck. It was the drawl he always used when he felt uncomfortable, the gesture one of his silly extravagant ones. Harry felt his heart twist with familiar longing, with how well he knew him and how much he wanted him.

He was still looking out the window. Harry leaned forward a little more, as if trying to persuade a shy animal to come closer, except instead of reaching out a hand towards Malfoy he reached out with these powers. He'd never consciously tried to use them before, this remnant of some creature with wings in a wood, but they were there, lying coiled. He could send them out like snakes, like vines to wrap around someone – Malfoy – if that was what Malfoy wanted, if that was the only thing that would bring him close.

Malfoy turned around suddenly, face blazing and cold. It was like having a door slammed on all the power, a sword wielded, his eyes the glittering colour of steel. Harry straightened, shocked backwards by having Occlumency thrown in his face, relieved and savagely disappointed and wanting him more than ever.

Malfoy's chest rose and fell on a sharp breath. He raked fingers irritably through his hair, and said: "I'm sorry, that was – I was a bit taken aback. Go again, please."

"No," Harry snarled.

"Why not?" Malfoy demanded, and then shut his eyes. "Okay," he said, leaning back against the glass. "No. I should know better than that, when you hate the whole stupid Veela thing anyway."

He stopped talking with an exhalation of breath. For Malfoy, silence could be one of his rare admissions of defeat.

It was a good thing, Harry told himself. It was for the best. The whole idea was crazy.

Malfoy drew the breath back in, slowly, and said: "Why don't you come over here?"

Harry was standing before he realised that he'd moved, with no trace of stiffness after sitting so long in one position, in fluid instant movement like a river rushing naturally and inevitably to its destination.

He was only half-way there when he realised that Malfoy had only opened his eyes a fraction: he thought that Malfoy might be tracking Harry's movements under his lowered eyelids, but he couldn't be sure. He certainly hadn't moved an inch towards Harry, and he was holding

his body tense as if waiting for an attack.

If Malfoy was dreading this...

Maybe he was simply nervous, though. He'd had to argue about this and he was utterly inexperienced and he was so very proud. And in that case the worst thing Harry could possibly do was turn this down.

And maybe Harry was being selfish, lethally, terribly selfish, and he was inventing excuses so he could have this.

The room was dark except for the lamp Malfoy'd switched on, the pale yellow light outlining his face, those glinting lowered eyelashes, the sharp line of his nose. Light went soft on his pale skin. The only sound in the room was his breathing, catching a little.

Harry would have liked to be gentle, if he'd known how. He felt a rush of that awful compunction again, the fear lest he was going to ruin everything. He'd never touched anyone in his life who he hadn't been certain wanted to be touched. He didn't know how to do this. He wished – he almost wished – that he could be someone better, nobler, someone who wouldn't want this so desperately.

Harry took a step, and then another. It felt like an impossible distance covered at last and Malfoy was close, now, so close that Harry could feel how close he was, the nearness of his body heat, the almost-medicinal smell of his funny shampoo. He was so *close*, but it felt like there was another impossible distance to cross.

When Harry reached out, he saw his hand was shaking. He drew it back.

"I don't know what to do," he said in a small, fraught whisper.

Malfoy's eyelids lifted a little. "You don't?" he asked, lurking amusement in his low voice, as if he was about to make a filthy joke about hearing otherwise at the Slytherins' poker night. "Then we're both in trouble."

Malfoy didn't know what he was doing at all. Harry hadn't forgotten that, not for a moment, but it hit him with double force hearing Malfoy admit it, even cautiously. Harry lifted his hand again, saw the flicker of Malfoy's eyes under those lowered eyelids, watching carefully and covertly. He was being sneaky and trying to scheme something out, even now. Harry looked at the faint lines, laughter and pain, around that thin expressive mouth, looked at the veiled eyes and the pulse beating wildly at his throat and thought, this one.

He didn't know how to start. Malfoy might break away or he might obviously hate it, Harry would stop then, he *would*. It might only last for a moment.

Malfoy's hands were behind his back, probably still playing with that damned window catch. Harry's heart was beating too hard: he could feel a burst of adrenalin in his chest, the wild urge to do *something*, and yet he was held still by sheer terror. If he dared move, even this would be taken away.

He reached out and touched Malfoy, knuckles running lightly over the scar that snaked silver

along Malfoy's white throat, letting himself touch and trying to remind himself not to hurt Malfoy, not ever again. A long slow shudder ran throughout Malfoy's body and Harry shut his eyes, hopelessly selfish, he didn't want to see revulsion and have to stop.

He found Malfoy fumbling in the dark, leaning in until the smell of his hair and skin flooded through Harry, the collar of his shirt fisted in one of Harry's hands. His nose brushed Malfoy's nose, his lips slid over Malfoy's cheek.

"Tell me if you hate it," he murmured, and his mouth met Malfoy's mouth.

Everything was quiet now, the world hushed. He kissed him and it was slow, slow and wonderful. Malfoy's mouth was so warm. Harry concentrated for a moment on his lower lip, the soft, sometimes-mocking curve of it. He tried to memorise the taste.

Malfoy's mouth parted suddenly and Harry felt the graze of teeth against his mouth, the curl of cool fingers firm on the back of his neck, and knew that Malfoy had just given him permission.

He slammed Malfoy up against the window, the last distance breached, Malfoy's fingers tight in his hair. Harry was shaking and did not care at all, the torn sounds of Malfoy's breathing the only important thing in the world. He kissed Malfoy again and again, not able to ever really break the kiss, desperately trying to swallow every little sound he made, drink the noises down and keep them. It felt like someone had laced Harry's blood with little shards of ice, so cold it burned and made him shiver, made him want to beg. Malfoy tilted his head back against the glass and dragged him a crucial fraction nearer, the kiss deeper, and Harry tried to shove Malfoy's thin shirt aside and get closer, have the feel of sleek skin over whipcord muscle under his hands. This one, Malfoy at last, he thought. Please.

He felt a sort of random despair at himself. This was unacceptable, he couldn't do this. He'd always been perfectly able to keep in the correct amount of control before. He was supposed to be gentle with Malfoy, he'd promised himself he would be. He had to give him a chance to say no. He had to stop.

The shirt tore, a couple of buttons hitting the ground, and Harry tore his mouth away from Malfoy's.

"Sorry," he gasped out.

"What?" said Malfoy.

Harry's chest hurt a bit, he wasn't sure why: it might have been from not breathing much. So much for being gentle, he'd tried to tear Malfoy's clothes off, if it hadn't been for the window they would have been on the floor... but at least he'd managed to stop. He opened his eyes and saw Malfoy, shoulders rising and falling with each laboured breath, mouth red in his pale face, hair silvery and dishevelled, and he had to kiss him again. One more, and then he shut his eyes and breathed in, forehead against Malfoy's. He wasn't quite kissing him right this minute. That felt like an achievement.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I shouldn't have – I shouldn't-"

Malfoy caught his mouth and kissed him, carefully at first. Then less carefully, mouth searching, fingers combing through Harry's hair.

"Er," Harry said when Malfoy pulled a fraction away, speaking only to distract himself from the urge to pull Malfoy back at once. "I don't – do you remember what I was saying?"

Malfoy laughed, breathless. "No. Do you want to go to bed?"

"Yes," Harry said, and remembered there was some sort of insane objection to that. He couldn't work out how to force his thoughts into order, so they'd make sense in his mind again.

Malfoy slid away from his place between Harry and the window. Harry followed him automatically, would have done so even without Malfoy's tight familiar grip on his wrist, and somehow they made it to the bedroom door.

Malfoy hesitated on the threshold. He was probably panicking, Harry thought. They should probably stop.

"Shh," he said, trying viciously hard to be soothing, and reached up and touched Malfoy's face, fingers light on the sharp line of his jaw. And then they were kissing again, which wasn't exactly stopping.

"I don't," Malfoy said, his new rough breathless voice driving Harry insane. "You'll have to, I've never-" He stopped, frustrated.

"If I ask for anything you don't want," Harry said. "You have to tell me."

He slid his hands to the small of Malfoy's back, arms around him for the first time. He was bad at this holding back stuff: maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise but it was. It had always been easy before, easy not to want very much.

"That's not what I meant," Malfoy told him, mouth brushing against Harry's as he spoke. His lips curved under his in a sudden smile and he murmured, in a slow, dark way that made it excruciatingly clear that he had no idea how little control Harry had right now: "Ask me for anything you like."

That was it, this was all some insane plot to drive Harry mad. Harry didn't care, sliding a hand under Malfoy's shirt and feeling the warm skin at the small of his back, following the line of his spine. Malfoy's back arched against his hands and just the touch of bare skin was making Harry feel dizzy and desperate. He buried his face in the curve of Malfoy's throat, nuzzling a little. This time he did it deliberately, his cheek rasping against the skin, and he felt shocked and thrilled by Malfoy trying to press in closer.

Malfoy said; "Take off your shirt."

He said it in that rough new voice, commanding, and nobody had ever tried to command Harry before.

It should have been easy, but he found he viscerally hated being separated from Malfoy,

hated having to move back even far enough to take off his stupid shirt. He did it, though, struggling out of it with hands that seemed to have stopped working, threw it in some random direction and reached to have Malfoy back.

Malfoy was looking at him funny: a slow considering look under lowered lashes, a look that felt like a touch.

“What?” Harry asked, ready to panic.

Malfoy smiled and did touch, just his fingers against the side of Harry’s face. Harry turned his face into the touch and shut his eyes.

“Nothing,” Malfoy said, tender. “I think I’ve ruined your hair forever. We’re going to have to shave it off and start from scratch. Don’t worry about being bald, it will be awesome! You’ll look like Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

“If that’s what you’re into,” Harry said, hopelessly honest, and leaned in and kissed him again, holding him pressed up against the doorframe and kissing his mouth, the curling corner of it, and his jaw and a place near his ear. Malfoy made a little sound, broken in the middle, that made Harry’s heart stutter in his chest.

Malfoy moved, a little hesitant, and touched Harry’s bare shoulders, a deliberate sort of gesture. Harry tried to stay still, breathing quietly against Malfoy’s ear, trying not to shake apart. Uncertain, his touch not quite steady, Malfoy stroked up Harry’s ribs and he turned his face in against Harry’s and Harry kissed him, felt a wild thoughtless rush of possessiveness and happiness, this man, this mouth, *this one*, and only the clink of metal brought him back to his senses and he realised that he’d gone for Malfoy’s belt buckle.

Malfoy started and Harry moved his hands up fast. He’d meant to move his hands away but didn’t seem able to manage it, didn’t seem able to ever quite stop touching Malfoy, so he rested his hands on Malfoy’s arms, which were a little tense.

“Sorry,” he breathed, getting the word out against Malfoy’s mouth.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Malfoy said, sounding determined and still breathless. “Bed?”

Harry fought the urge to say helpfully that he had one, and it was right there, and that going to it was a great idea. Because this was new to Malfoy, he was obviously a little unsure about how to deal with it, Harry had to be careful.

“If you don’t,” he offered, and Malfoy pushed him back a step and he brought Malfoy with him by main force, keeping his grip on Malfoy’s arms, keeping him chest to chest, hips brushing his. He kissed Malfoy and forgot exactly what he’d been trying to say. “I know it isn’t – familiar-”

Harry felt sudden black rage at the thought of Malfoy getting through this by thinking about Katie or, God, even Zabini. He remembered having to see Malfoy with marks Katie had left on him, made a snarling sound and kissed Malfoy again. She wouldn’t get the chance to touch him, not ever again.

“Sure it is,” Malfoy told him, with his sudden bright mad smile, and now Harry knew what the shape of that smile felt like against his mouth.

Then Malfoy pushed him back, not gently, shoving him and making sure with an ankle hooked around his that he’d fall, and he fell backwards onto a soft mess of blankets and pillows. Malfoy hovered over him, a warm weight against his legs, eyes bright.

“Surrender?” he inquired, making a sound too breathless to be a laugh.

“Come here,” Harry ordered, desperate, and Malfoy shook his head, smirking, and pulled off Harry’s glasses, holding Harry pinned with his free hand and folding them shut with his teeth on one of the earpieces. Then he tossed them over his shoulder. “Come *here*,” Harry repeated, gathering a fistful of Malfoy’s shirt.

“Make me, Potter,” Malfoy said. “I dare you.”

He pulled Malfoy down, close, and Malfoy tried to wriggle away and Harry threw him over his hip, there was a sudden tangled scramble in bedclothes that Harry probably would’ve straightened out if he’d known this was going to happen. It was like sparring and yet nothing like, they weren’t trying to hurt each other, all Harry wanted was his hands knotted in Malfoy’s soft hair.

Well, that wasn’t all he wanted. But it would do for a start. He got it, and Malfoy’s mouth under his, opening slick and soft and mouth curling, still a little teasing, maddening. Harry’s heart beat wild and harsh in his ears. He kissed him again, slow, and then kissed the underside of his sharp chin, licked the long smooth line of his neck and felt the skin heat under his tongue. Malfoy moaned, low in his throat, and arched up as if the sound wasn’t bad enough, so Harry groaned and pressed down on him and said, muffled into his throat: “Don’t.”

“What,” said Malfoy, warily. “Why?”

Harry shut his eyes. “Why d’you think, Malfoy, you idiot?”

“Oh,” Malfoy said, sounding a little startled and a little pleased for no reason Harry could see. “I must have been misinformed. I read that Veela-”

“Shut *up*,” Harry said and bit him, teeth scraping his pulse.

Malfoy did not shut up, he kept making soft sounds and it made perfect sense, of course Malfoy would be noisy because he always was. Harry kissed the hollow at the base of his throat, his collarbone, opened one of the few buttons remaining on Malfoy’s shirt with shaking hands and kissed his chest.

“Hey,” Malfoy said, struggling up. “Um.”

He reached out and touched Harry’s hair, in that lingering gentle way Harry liked best, and Harry turned his head and kissed the inside of his wrist. Malfoy started and Harry blinked up at him, realised why: it was his left wrist, the one that bore the Dark Mark.

God, it was impossible, it was so strange. They always were, though. He'd *given* Malfoy that scar, Malfoy'd *taken* that mark, Malfoy was supposed to like women, he'd never gone to bed with anyone who bossed him around and then touched his hair like that.

Harry looked up at him, trying to focus: Malfoy, leaning back on his elbows, thin white shirt pushed off his shoulders, hanging on by exactly one button now, hair the colour of moonlight in this light falling into his flushed face.

"Can I?" he asked, his voice rasping in his throat.

"Well – I mean, well, you *can*," Malfoy said, voice soft and lovely and terribly distracted. "Obviously, my mother didn't raise any fools, those rumours about another son who lived in the attics and was crazy from the inbreeding weren't true."

"I always thought of you as the son who was crazy from the inbreeding," Harry said, able to laugh somehow through the haze, and he kissed Malfoy's chest again.

Malfoy stroked his hair, a little less gentle, and said: "You don't h-" and then Harry ran a hand up Malfoy's taut, quivering stomach, the smoothness of his skin and the interruption of scars, the faint little line of hair. He touched it, ran his fingertips along it, felt Malfoy's stomach contract under his hand with a sharp breath.

Malfoy stopped talking.

Harry wanted to get it right, exactly right, but he wasn't exactly practised and it was so difficult to think, he was shaking, blood burning in his veins and Malfoy making those long, low, soft sounds almost like breaths but not quite. Harry stroked his hip as he got his jeans open and Malfoy's hands were tight in his hair, holding on too hard so he could keep still, and Harry had to be gentle with him and wanted to forget every careful thought he'd ever had, torn between the instincts to protect and possess. It was driving him mad, but not as fast as the rising sounds, blurring into incoherent words, and the arch and change of Malfoy's body.

Malfoy dragged Harry up by the hair, pulling. Harry would've thought hair-pulling might hurt, help ease the hot urgency instead of intensifying it and the world was a sort of wild melting blur and Malfoy was undoing his jeans, fingers moving fast but fumbling, and Harry moaned and kissed the damp side of Malfoy's face.

It was like Harry hadn't ever done this before and he hadn't, really, it wasn't the same, Malfoy's voice in his ear a continuous soothing maddening stream of words, curling in the air, the way Malfoy always talked and talked as he was working something out but his tone changed, words becoming nonsense again as Harry twisted and hit his head on the headboard and didn't care as he caught Malfoy's mouth, the kiss long and hot and frantic, never quite broken.

It was so different.

"You're *brilliant*," Harry said as soon as he could remember how to form words again, his heart still going far too fast. He felt unreasonably happy.

Malfoy laughed, a soft dazed sound. “I’ve been telling you that for years, Potter.”

Afterwards – always before that had been that, it made no sense to fuss about these things. Harry had been known to turn his back a few times, just because – it was more sensible, everyone had to sleep. He was surprised that this had changed, too, and he was possessed by the wondering urge to keep touching, wasn’t sure exactly how, Malfoy’s hair and the inside of his elbows. This one.

Malfoy propped himself up on one elbow, eyes suddenly suspicious. “This isn’t some sort of tactful prelude to making me sleep on the sofa, is it? Because I’m not going to and actually now I think of it, poor little Malcolm Baddock a few years back, did I ever tell you how extremely rude throwing him out was, your manners are-”

“No!” Harry almost shouted, cringing away from the mention of Malcolm Baddock’s name as if he’d been burned and someone was advancing with a hot poker. “No, I wasn’t. I – I want you to stay.”

“Okay, then,” Malfoy said, voice mollified and soft again.

He seemed to know how to do what Harry had wanted to do, drawing up a sheet over them and settling it rather gently over Harry, curling against him, easy. “Sorry,” he murmured, dropping a kiss on Harry’s shoulder.

“Don’t be sorry,” Harry murmured back, helplessly happy again. Malfoy’s face was tucked between the pillow and Harry’s shoulder, eyes sliding shut as Harry stroked his hair, trying to do it the same way Malfoy did it, fingers straying to his neck and his face.

Until Malfoy was asleep, breathing light and untroubled in Harry’s bed, and Harry felt calm as well as happy. Moonlight was streaming in through the windows, the curtains open, turning the sheets into silvery-white ridges and hollows around them, icing the side of Malfoy’s face that was not shadowed by Harry hanging over him, and in the silence Harry was able to find the words he’d been wanting to say, stumbling over them but carrying on until he reached a kind of momentum and was able to pour it all out.

He kept his voice as soft as he could, so he wouldn’t wake Malfoy.

Eventually he was hoarse, it hurt to speak, and he lay with his arm around Malfoy, a jealous guarding circle. Malfoy stirred, shifting a little closer, and started to make that low murmuring sound he always made, familiar to Harry from a hundred stakeouts and that one time they’d been trapped in that ice cave. It sent a wave of just as familiar longing through Harry and then it struck him that he could do what he always wanted to. Now he could. He bent down to Malfoy’s mouth, fingers curled beneath his jaw, and kissed him, made it slow and long and sweet, body a careful arch over Malfoy’s, until he felt Malfoy’s mouth curl into a gradual smile beneath his.

Harry’s eyes snapped open. Malfoy’s already were, wide and startled and hazy silver in the moonlight. He was still smiling faintly, and as Harry looked at him Malfoy stretched, wonderfully. He slid an arm around his neck and drew Harry back down for another kiss.

*

It was almost morning, the sky pale bright yellow and dark blue fading into grey, when Harry finally fell asleep. He didn't want to fall asleep but he was so comfortable, body humming with contentment and exhaustion, and his eyelids were so heavy, they seemed dragged down without his consent. He was drifting into darkness, easy and warm, and then he got a little jolt that woke him for an instant.

Years ago now, he used to wake up finding himself reaching out, his hand closing on nothingness and falling open onto an empty pillow and shadows. He'd thought he'd stopped doing it, or got so used to reaching out and finding nothing that he slept through it.

That must have been it, because he was woken by the startled new feeling of reaching out and having something: his eyes opened a little at the surprise to see pale gold morning on Malfoy's face, wakeful and watching, and feel Malfoy's fingers laced through his, palm against his palm.

Harry went to sleep happy.

*

He woke up earlier than Malfoy because he always did, he'd learned to wake up early during the war and never lost the habit, and besides that except on Quidditch days nobody ever slept later than Malfoy.

He woke feeling terribly surprised, Malfoy's light fine hair against his shoulder. Harry didn't risk moving.

Last night, he thought, looking up at the ceiling and feeling thoroughly awake. Well. A lot had happened last night.

Now Harry had to – he had to make a plan, because Malfoy might be a good deal more unpleasantly surprised by his awakening. Especially considering the fact – and oh God, why hadn't Harry considered this before – he'd had more to drink than Harry had last night. Even before the tequila shots.

Malfoy'd said, Malfoy'd asked him to promise, that nothing would change. If Harry could prove to him that – that the plan had worked, and they could be partners just like before, and then Malfoy could be calm and pleased and maybe have a chance to think about all this.

Harry was certain Malfoy'd liked it. He was almost certain. And if Malfoy had the chance to think about it and he didn't seem upset, then maybe – Harry could ask-

The first thing to do was not allow Malfoy to panic. Which meant getting out of bed. Harry moved slowly so as not to wake Malfoy, which was easy enough since every cell in his body protested leaving the warm bed. He didn't even let himself look at Malfoy in case his resolve broke.

He found his jeans all right. His glasses had somehow ended up on the chest where he kept his broom. His shirt was out in the kitchen, where he started making coffee still in a state of almost dreamlike shock.

He dragged in a chair from the kitchen and placed it what he thought might be an appropriate distance from the bed, sat in it and said, softly: "Hey. Hey, wake up."

Malfoy stirred, turning in bed, and reached out sleepily. His hand fell open on an empty pillow and every cell in Harry's body came to burning longing life and screamed, *you idiot, we told you not to leave that bed.*

It was too late now. Malfoy was already blinking and sitting up, hair a soft mess in the morning light, sheet held just below the scar on his chest. Harry looked away and held out the coffee as a peace offering.

"Here."

"Thanks," Malfoy said automatically, his fingers brushing Harry's as he accepted the cup. Harry came within an inch of tipping coffee all over the sheets.

"I thought," he began and realised he couldn't explain his line of thought about Malfoy panicking lest Malfoy take offence. "I thought you wouldn't want to be late to the office today."

He was already greatly heartened by the fact Malfoy did not look angry and had not started talking about moving out, breaking up partnerships and people who took advantage of other people when they were drunk and deranged.

"The office," Malfoy repeated, and sounded pleased by the sound of it, if still a little startled. "Yes. We should go." He hesitated and added: "D'you know where I left my-"

Harry risked a look at him and nodded towards the windowsill, then looked away from the long lean line of Malfoy's back as he reached for his jeans.

"A day at the office, this is very exciting and new," Malfoy said. "Can we stop at that pastry place I like beforehand?"

"Course," Harry said.

Malfoy smiled at him, a faint but real smile, as he cheerfully stole and then buttoned up one of Harry's shirts.

They took the long way and walked to work in a grey but dry London morning, traffic rumbling and rattling by them on Blackfriars Bridge while Malfoy speculated on the possibility that the pastry place was slipping addictive substances into the raspberry tarts.

"If they are I think it will be my duty as an Auror to shop them," Harry said.

"You won't do it," Malfoy said, this smile brighter and more real. He stole a piece of Harry's croissant despite Harry's half-hearted attempt to slap him away and popped it in his mouth. "You would never hurt me like that."

They got to the steps of the Auror headquarters and Malfoy's smiles were still hesitant and

Harry'd had to fight off the urge to kiss Malfoy on Blackfriars Bridge but they were still them, that much was salvaged, and Harry was painfully, terribly relieved. And maybe, after work, depending on how the day went. Maybe he could work out something to say.

"Hi Harry," said Lisa the receptionist, not looking up from her files at first. Then she did look up and her whole face lit and Harry's heart sank. "Oh, good!" she exclaimed. "You got fixed."

"Er," said Harry, instead of expressing how very unfortunate he found Lisa's choice of words.

"What a relief," Lisa said. "Lisa was getting pretty annoyed about me flirting with some guy I work with."

"Speaking of yourself in the third person is generally considered a bit of a danger sign," Malfoy observed.

"My girlfriend Lisa," said Lisa the receptionist. "You two were in her year at Hogwarts, weren't you? Lisa Turpin?"

"I don't think so," Harry said.

"Yes of course we were," Malfoy said. "Very, very attractive girl. Well done. You must tell me all about how you met and everything some other time."

"Don't harass me in the workplace, Mr Malfoy, I've seen your record and it doesn't need that on it on top of everything else," said Lisa, and returned cheerfully to her files.

Harry's deep and overwhelming delight at the Veela stuff apparently being dealt with was dimmed by the sudden realisation that Lisa had not taken one look at Malfoy and known how. Usually with Katie he'd – but it was different, Harry knew that, and besides Malfoy was strained and still a little anxious. It didn't necessarily mean things were hopeless. It didn't.

"Lisa and Lisa," Malfoy murmured as they entered the office. "Wouldn't that get a little confusing?"

"Maybe not," Harry said.

Malfoy laughed. "Well, obviously it wouldn't for you. You'd solve the problem by cunningly forgetting the other person's name."

"I just didn't really get to know the Hufflepuffs that well," Harry said, not caring much since Malfoy was laughing at him and telling him wrong answer, and that he should try again.

"There were four houses," Malfoy said, leaning against Harry's desk, playful and almost the same as ever. "I'll give you a hint: one was–"

"Draco!"

He was cut off by the scream. Malfoy's face went pale and Harry tensed, out of his chair but

keeping his muscles locked so he wouldn't move in front of Malfoy and keep her away.

He couldn't keep her away. Katie Bell came running, around desks and paperwork as if she barely noticed they were there and the only thing she could see was Malfoy. Her blue robes were crumpled and her eyes red, and she flung herself into his arms.

Malfoy put his arms around her at once, holding her close without an instant of hesitation, as if it came naturally. He stroked her hair with one hand, pushing the tumbled locks out of her face, and he said into her ear: "What is it, sweetheart? Tell me."

Katie was crying, gulping into Malfoy's shoulder. Harry was ashamed to realise that all he wanted to do was hurt her more, get her away. He did nothing, holding onto the chair, his hands clenched into fists.

"It's Conleth-" Katie sobbed.

Malfoy's voice took on a cold, dangerous edge. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing," Katie said, sobbing harder. "Nothing, nothing. He's been taken by – by those people, the ones who take halfbreeds. You have to find him, Draco. Promise me that you'll find him!"

"Of course I will," Malfoy said, head bowed over hers. He wasn't looking at Harry: he probably wasn't aware Harry was there at all. "Anything you need," he went on, careful and gentle, loving. "You know that."

Chapter Twelve

After Draco melted away with Katie tucked under his arm, off on a mission to prove his love or win her back or kiss her crystal tears or possibly all three, Harry went home.

Once home, it was clear that he would have to move. He couldn't look at the window and he certainly couldn't go into the bedroom: he couldn't even look at the fridge because there were brightly coloured magnets on it spelling out 'MARMALADE DOES NOT BELONG IN HERE POTTER.'

He sat on the sofa and read through all the missing persons reports the Aurors'd had on the file. He found a few cases that he put to one side for Malfoy to look at when he got home. He was scribbling 'Half phoenix or crazed pyromaniac? Discuss' on a post-it when he heard the door click open and shut, and the crisp cold sound of Malfoy's voice.

"I'm trying to decide, Potter," he said. "Is the problem with you just that you're completely thoughtless, or is it that you're so self-centred that you can't bear it when your life's not one big miserable drama?"

Harry's head snapped up.

"I beg your pardon?" His voice came out as icily affronted as Malfoy's.

Malfoy tossed his cloak in some random direction, Harry didn't care, leaned against the kitchen counter and glared.

"You're *so* destroyed by not being able to work," he said, every word stabbing in with what seemed to be deliberate cruelty, like shoving splinters under someone's fingernails. "It's so important to get everything sorted and get you back to work, and on the *first day* you leave at lunchtime without a word to anyone? What's wrong with you?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Harry demanded. He stared at Malfoy's white furious face and came up with one reason: that Malfoy regretted what he'd done, that he resented it and everything was ruined between them, and then he looked away and bit out: "Is this something to do with Katie?"

"Katie?" Malfoy echoed, sounding blank. "No. What are you talking about? Stop raving."

"I'm not raving, you're raving!" Harry said. "What, she made you miserable so you come home and tell me off?"

"*She* made me miserable?" Malfoy repeated, sounding blank again but with fury gathering behind the surprise. "She didn't make me miserable. She made me happy, I was *glad* she trusted me enough to come to me when she was in trouble and I was glad she asked me to do something for her. I was fine until I came back from the Bells' and nobody knew where you were and I thought you might be in packets!"

So his first thought had been the right one. So Malfoy had come to the conclusion that the favour he'd done him was too much for partners, too much even for friends. Harry opened his mouth to remind Malfoy that he'd *tried* to say no when the last thing Malfoy'd said sank in.

"Packets?" he repeated. "What?"

Malfoy glared at him as if he could bear Harry's stupidity no longer.

"I found – there were Unspeakable files on packets found in the sea tied with twine bought in Knockturn Alley. They seemed like fish guts and parts of a boy, but since they were all in similar packages and wrapped with the same paper it was on file. I checked it against the records of the part-merman boy who disappeared and it was a match, so these people – so turning halfbreeds into ingredients is at least one of their hobbies." Malfoy set his jaw and gave the mantelpiece a distant and disdainful look. "The pictures were quite unpleasant."

"Oh," Harry said. His mind was still running in every direction, but this new kind of confusion hurt a good deal less than the old. He looked at Malfoy's strained cross face and felt suddenly warm. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"Worried me, you didn't *worry* me, I wasn't worried," Malfoy informed him grumpily. "I was enraged at your sheer stupidity in traipsing off God knows where when there's a killer on the loose. Honestly, Potter. You deserve to be in packets."

He was still glaring the mantelpiece into submission and did not see Harry get up. Confusion was dissipating as Malfoy rambled on, drawling and annoyed and so familiar, almost unbearably dear.

"I'm sorry for enraging you, then," he said, low and pleased, and moved past the counter.

Malfoy did notice how close he was then. He started and moved away, but he didn't go far. Harry was pretty sure he was just surprised.

"Yes, well," he said, his voice slightly softer, though remaining haughty and making it clear he wasn't entirely mollified. "I've invested enough time in this partnership to prefer that someone doesn't ruin all my hard work by putting you in packets."

He glanced up at Harry and away, then back as if his gaze was a thread he'd snagged on a nail and would have to detach with care. His mouth was a curled uncertain shape, balanced unevenly somewhere between anger and nervousness. He might be about to say something appalling in five seconds or less.

It made Harry happy just to look at him. He reached out and touched the side of Malfoy's jaw with the back of his hand, testing.

"That would be a shame," he murmured.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was saying. Malfoy didn't look like he was sure, either: his gaze kept moving away a little and then back, as if he was tugging on that snagged thread and soon it might snap.

Harry moved before it could and caught Malfoy's mouth with his own. He was tense, ready to pull back, but Malfoy's mouth opened warm and hungry at the first touch of his. Everything was suddenly all right and better than all right, bright colours behind Harry's eyelids and a roaring in his ears, as if someone had set the flat on fire and he was happy about it.

He had Malfoy pushed against the fridge, Malfoy's head tilting back a little and his fingers clenched in Harry's shirt, always holding onto things too tight. Harry kissed him with a hot thrill of elation running through him, recognising all the details: God, how he knew him. He had his fingers curled at the base of Malfoy's throat, feeling his pulse flutter and his skin warm.

His mouth and Malfoy's parted for a moment, still brushing, Malfoy's breath heated and uneven against Harry's cheek. He drew in another breath and his teeth slid lightly over the lower curve of Harry's lip, drawing it in too. Harry's own breathing hitched, a jolt running sweet and strong through bones and blood, chest rising and falling sharply against Malfoy's. Harry made a soft snarling sound of desire and went for Malfoy's mouth again, Malfoy's head going back against the fridge door and the magnets all getting knocked off.

Malfoy's hand against his chest seemed like part of it all for a minute, until Malfoy pushed him away so hard his back hit the counter.

"What," Malfoy said, and swallowed. "What are you doing? You can't do that."

"Oh," Harry said, and suddenly found his throat tight and the countertop fascinating. He clenched his fist around the end of the counter and felt the edge bite into his palm. "I thought – I thought maybe I could."

"No," Malfoy returned. "That wasn't – I didn't mean-"

Harry looked over at him and saw him trying to think his way out of this, jaw sharp and tight with concentration. The expression was so familiar it sent a fierce irrational pang through Harry, not sadness but the furious feeling that he was being robbed. He knew it was stupid and terrible of him to feel such a right to Malfoy, as if just because he had him memorised that meant he could keep him.

He knew it was stupid, but he snapped: "You kissed me back."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed into cold slits and Harry should have expected what he said next: cruelty was the only way Malfoy knew how to defend himself, but somehow he didn't.

"Of course I did," Malfoy said. "You're a Veela."

Harry thought if he held onto the counter any tighter, it would cut his hand. He must have looked some version of dreadful because Malfoy dropped his eyes, never able to follow up on being cruel, and said quickly: "That came out wrong."

He was interrupted, and looked profoundly thankful for it, by the sound of a beak tapping on glass. Malfoy muttered something that pretended to be irritation and looked entirely thrilled

by this excuse to leave the kitchen and stride towards the window, throwing it up briskly to let the owl in and get the message into his hands.

He slid the envelope open and cursed.

“What?” Harry asked, suddenly intent. “What is it?”

“Blaise Zabini was attacked,” Malfoy answered shortly. “He’s asking for me.”

Harry picked up Malfoy’s cloak and threw it at him. “I’ll go with you.”

*

The Aurors’ holding cell might’ve housed Harry a few times, Malfoy and Smith one memorable time, and an assortment of murderers, people of questionable virtue and wizards so drunk they’d done unspeakable and unfortunate things with fireworks, but Harry didn’t think it had ever contained anything as flamboyant as Blaise Zabini before. The twit was sitting in a chair running his hands through his hair to achieve maximum beautiful dishevelment, and he seemed to be wearing nothing but a pair of leather trousers and a lady’s scarlet silk dressing gown.

Harry’s lip barely had time to curl at how ridiculous he was when Zabini looked up, caught sight of Malfoy and said in tones of deep and desperate relief: “Oh, thank God!”

“Blaise,” said Malfoy, using Zabini’s Christian name for the first time that Harry’d ever heard, and then he was no longer standing where he always was during investigations, to Harry’s left and close enough to lean on if Harry’d ever needed that. He ran over to Zabini’s chair and knelt down. “Are you all right?”

“No!” Zabini exclaimed, as if Malfoy was being extraordinarily dense. “Of course I’m not all right! It’s been horrible, Malfoy, absolutely horrible. They’re all Gryffindors here, did you know, and Hufflepuffs! I will not answer personal questions addressed to me by Hufflepuffs. I utterly refuse.”

Malfoy laughed, relaxing a little and seeming happy. He slid a hand, casual and possessive, around the back of Zabini’s neck and Zabini leaned in a little, in a certain way. It was an animal gesture Harry recognised, that sent warning signals coursing through him, waking all those strange savage instincts.

Zabini was laying claim to Malfoy’s protection, his care and attention. But Zabini couldn’t have him.

“Yes, Zabini,” Malfoy drawled. “But about the small matter of that attack earlier?”

“That was horrible too,” Zabini declared.

Past the prickling feeling Harry was getting at the back of his neck, the hot sensation behind his eyes, he realised that Zabini might be putting on a show and genuinely scared.

That didn’t stop him snarling when Zabini gripped the front of Malfoy’s shirt and said: “All

these men came in and tried to kidnap me. If the lady I was with hadn't had assassin training I don't know what I would have done. I'm a *lover*," he almost shrieked, drawing Malfoy closer. "Not a fighter!"

"Er, Harry," said Dean, who was one of the guards posted at the door. "I don't like to ask personal questions or anything, but did you just snarl?"

"No," Harry ground out between locked teeth.

"Okay then," said Dean, who knew when to pick his battles. "Must've been the pipes."

"Probably," Harry said. He tried to look away and couldn't, Zabini didn't have a shirt on or anything and that idiotic silk robe was hanging open, he was half naked and twined around Malfoy. "What – what happened?" he asked thickly, trying to fight past this, to be professional if he couldn't be entirely human.

"'Bout fifteen men tried to grab him," Dean said briefly. "Louison's seeing to them now. All of them seem to be under Imperius. Half of them are Muggles. One of them's Walker."

"Oh?" Harry said vaguely.

"He's an Auror, Potter," Malfoy tossed over his shoulder.

"Ah," said Harry, and felt the hot grip of unease slacken a little because Malfoy was paying attention to him. "Damn it."

An Auror, and someone had gotten the jump on him. It was definitely an inside job. There was no other possibility.

"An Auror?" Zabini screeched. "Do you mean to tell me I'm not even safe in this Godforsaken hole crawling with Hufflepuffs, I'm liable to be attacked at any moment? I am not accustomed to being assaulted."

"Sure you are," Malfoy said.

"Lustful assaults are different," Zabini told him. "I have experience with crimes of passion, not crimes of crime!"

The bird-high edge of panic in Zabini's voice was hurting Harry's head, setting his teeth on edge. It made him want to bite.

"They won't even let me out of here," Zabini continued. "Not even to get a shirt or a comb or some hair product."

"You look great," Malfoy told him, sounding amused.

His fingers might be in Zabini's hair. This was just – it was like the unhappy need to be close to Hermione at all times when he and Ron were fighting in fourth year, it was like the building fury when he'd seen Dean with Ginny in sixth, and it was a hundred times worse than that. Harry couldn't take very much more of this.

“Well *obviously*,” said Zabini. “But I don’t just have transcendent and unearthly beauty, you know. I have standards!”

“Harry, do you maybe want to step outside and have a glass of water,” Dean offered tentatively.

“No,” Harry growled. “I do not want a glass of *water*. I want-”

“Can I go home with you?” Zabini asked imploringly, and Malfoy said at once: “Of course.”

He wanted to rip out Blaise Zabini’s throat. He could taste the sleek metallic hit of blood against his tongue already, thought about it with the same longing as he thought about the taste of Malfoy’s mouth. There was a roaring, not in his ears or his chest but through all the veins and bones in his body.

Harry made a soft sound, a quiet little promise of death. And Blaise Zabini’s head came up, head tilted at a certain birdlike angle, dark eyes glittering in a way that was not quite human. Dean was wittering something and forcing mints on the other guard, Harry didn’t have time for them, because Zabini was uncoiling from his chair. He didn’t want to fight, Harry could tell that much, but they were in an enclosed space: there was no way to surrender territory, no way to escape. He’d fight. Harry would win.

How dare he, Harry thought, watching him move, weaker, softer, all his natural instincts bent to seduce instead of attack. How *dare* he?

“Oh, hey, what,” Malfoy began in what seemed to be genuine puzzlement, climbing to his feet. Not before time, he looked Harry’s way and said: “Oh hell, no.”

Harry couldn’t pay proper attention to him: he’d be distracted.

“Zabini, stop it at once, I am the prefect of you!” Malfoy commanded, and by sheer bizarreness he turned Zabini’s head.

Harry tensed to spring in Zabini’s direction while he was distracted.

Then Malfoy was in front of him, face wavering in Harry’s vision, eyes gleaming and cold. “Potter,” he said, low and dangerous. “Cut it out!”

Then he punched him in the face.

Harry threw himself at him, crashing to the stone floor in a tangled heap. He brought Malfoy down with him, under him, and was confused for an instant because of all the things Malfoy was, prey and enemy and territory, and then Malfoy twisted under him and hit him again and things were simple, clean: it was just the fight, just them, like always.

He punched Malfoy in the ribs and had him still for a second, heart beating fast and Harry’s mouth hovering over his throat, waiting for him to say the word. Malfoy was saying a lot of things but none of them sounded like surrender, and then he elbowed Harry in the nose, threw him down and got a good handful of his hair so he could bash his head against the floor.

“Are you listening to me, Potter?” he snarled. “Because I can do this all night, I swear. Stop it right now!”

“Don’t – don’t order me around, Malfoy,” Harry got out between his teeth, the first word coming out in a thick, distorted growl and every one after that clearer and more human.

Malfoy stopped bashing his head against the floor, though he held himself ready to do it again anytime.

“I can if I like,” he said.

Harry shut his eyes for a moment, letting the world slide away and his aching head rest on the stone. The animal fury was fading and Malfoy was close, grounding him. Everything seemed all right for a moment.

Then he realised that he’d just attacked a traumatised assault victim. In a lady’s dressing gown.

“How are you feeling?” Malfoy asked eventually, his voice clearly concerned and even more clearly annoyed about showing it.

“Horribly embarrassed,” Harry mumbled.

“Good, keep it up,” Malfoy told him, flashing him the inappropriately bright and pleased grin he always grinned when Harry was shamed.

He let go of Harry then but stayed kneeling beside him on the floor as Harry sat up and saw Dean, the other Auror whose name Harry couldn’t quite recall at present, and Blaise Zabini all staring at them as if they were crazy.

“Please never punch a Veela in the face again,” Zabini said at length. “A Veela’s face is a work of art. It is like punching a delicate porcelain vase.”

Harry made a face. “It is not.”

“Don’t contradict me when you were almost at my flawless ebony throat, Potter,” Zabini said in a drawl they’d obviously evolved as some sort of common tongue down in the dungeons.

Harry glanced at Malfoy and Malfoy was staring at him with an eyebrow raised. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Oh, you can apologise to me,” Zabini said. “But how would you apologise to the women of England?” When Harry had stared at him and been obviously at a loss for words long enough, Zabini sniffed. “And what sort of person has a prison cell as their territory anyway?”

Harry stared some more, opened his mouth to explain and envisioned the explanation. He settled for saying: “Er.”

“Well, he’s in here a lot,” Malfoy said, resting a hand against Harry’s shoulderblade. Harry

leaned back a little and Malfoy went on, voice mocking and fond: “Aren’t you, my delicate porcelain vase?”

“Shut up,” Harry said, every muscle relaxing a little more. “You complete prat.”

Zabini leaned against the wall and examined his fingernails. “Consorting with Gryffindors grows more alluring by the second. It’s nothing but hurling insults and punching people in the face. Can we go now, Malfoy?”

“Well,” Malfoy said. “The thing is – I’m staying at Potter’s. If the holding cell’s territory, I kind of fear that every day ending in y will be Ruining Your Beautiful Face Day.”

Zabini’s beautiful face was a picture of horror.

“Let’s go to a safe house,” he said. “Do Gryffindors understand the concept of safe?”

“I sometimes wonder,” Malfoy murmured, slanting a look Harry’s way. “But – I mean, I can’t-”

The first thing Harry thought of was Malfoy in the kitchen earlier, saying *You can’t do that*. Then he remembered what Malfoy had said to Katie, what he couldn’t do.

I can’t leave. He’ll die.

Good, Harry thought. He shouldn’t leave. He wasn’t going anywhere with bloody Zabini.

Only Malfoy had already scuppered things with Katie at least partly because of this, hadn’t he, and he was standing there looking pinched and upset. He’d been such an insufferable bragging idiot about being a prefect: he’d been so proud of it. Zabini was a Slytherin, and Malfoy’s friend as well. Harry knew better than anyone what that meant.

He leaned back a little more and said, low and ignoring the sibilant current just beneath the human words: “You should go with him if you want. I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, that’s what you always think,” Malfoy snapped, which was not exactly the gratitude for Harry’s sacrifice he’d been expecting. “I think you must be the stupidest man alive,” he added, which was even less what Harry’d had in mind.

He looked strained and unhappy, not at all as if Harry had just solved a dilemma for him. Harry didn’t know what he wanted.

“The lady who, er, implemented your daring rescue has offered you the safety of her home if you want to accept it,” Dean said quietly. “Not sure how she’d feel about Malfoy, mind.” He sent him a wry smile. “He has that effect on a lot of women.”

“Men dating gingers shouldn’t throw stones, Thomas,” Malfoy sneered, beaming all over his pointed face. Harry hadn’t actually thought that he would ever feel jealous of Dean again.

“She seemed nice,” Zabini said, brightening. “I noticed how lithe and flexible she was when she twisted a man’s arm out of his socket. Perhaps we do have unfinished business I should

attend to. She deserves to be thanked, after all. On my behalf and, naturally, on behalf of all the women in England.”

He looked suddenly like a brave, determined and extremely attractive soldier. Harry rolled his eyes as Zabini got up, letting the silk of the dressing gown flow behind him like a scarlet flag. The Auror with Dean swallowed and looked away.

Malfoy uncoiled from the floor and was on his feet.

“You sure you’ll be all right?”

“Oh fine, fine,” Zabini said. “She was pretty feisty, I won’t deny it, but you know it takes seven people before I start to feel overstretched. Anyway, it would only make me anxious to see you fretting like a weird angry mother hen over what stupidity Potter was getting up to without you, and if you made me get a worry line I would be forced to kill you.”

“You’d be forced to try,” Malfoy said, smirking. “And then I would be forced to punch you in the face. Owl me if you need me, and don’t annoy me by taking any stupid risks.”

“I would never: it would be too much of a blow for the nation,” Zabini drawled, and then he added casually: “Do something about Potter, will you?” He glanced over at Harry, dark eyes flicking over him with a measured and unexpectedly intelligent gaze. “Good job on getting him sorted out, however you managed it. Did that Oliver Wood plan work out?”

“Er,” said Malfoy.

“Well, whatever. The thing is, he shouldn’t still be getting into a tizzy about his holding cell territory and attacking people. Whoever you got couldn’t have been much good. Try someone else next time.”

There was a perfectly terrible silence.

“Don’t talk about me as if I’m a badly trained *dog*,” Harry snarled, not even daring to look at Malfoy. Dean and Whatshisface were there, Dean and a total stranger: he couldn’t say a word to him. Malfoy had made it very clear that he wanted everything to go on as normal: he didn’t want anyone to know.

“But that is how I think of you, Potter,” Zabini said, turning away from them both to the Auror Harry didn’t recognise. “Excuse me,” he said with a melting smile. The Auror made a sound like a distressed kitten and bolted up the stairs. “Could you possibly remind me of the name of the nice lady I’ll be staying with?” Zabini asked in dulcet tones as he followed him up.

“Huh,” Malfoy drawled. “Do you think your problem with names might be some sort of Veela thing, Potter? I always put it down to you being world-endingly self-centred.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I don’t have a problem with names,” Harry said, climbing to his feet. “C’mon. Zabini’s safe and out of Auror territory. Let’s go home, I have some notes to show you.”

And some things to say as well, away from Dean's mild, curious gaze. Malfoy was not looking at him or Dean: his eyes were fixed on the door.

"I don't want to go home," he said. "It is vital that I see Cuthbert at once."

*

Cuthbert looked thrilled to see them as they approached. It was a nice change from his usual expressions around them, which ranged from quietly disappointed to truly appalled.

"Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter," he said, bouncing a little in his seat. "I think you're going to be terribly pleased with me. I have a Suspect."

"Good. Who is it?" Malfoy demanded, throwing himself into a chair in front of Cuthbert's little desk. He crossed his arms over his chest and fixed Cuthbert with a glare.

Harry would've felt a bit sorry for Cuthbert, but he wasn't having a great day himself and his head still hurt. He sank into the chair beside Cuthbert's and gave Cuthbert a look that made his bouncing falter and then stop. It was like seeing a little balloon, bobbing in the air, come into sudden contact with two thorn bushes.

"I've been taking notes," he offered in a small, hopeful voice. "Would you like to see them? I recorded my impressions as I was sleuthing. That's how I came up with my Suspect."

"Who is?" Malfoy snapped.

"Well, I *deduced*," Cuthbert looked proudly from Malfoy to Harry and back again. "I *deduced* that it was Louison."

Malfoy frowned. "What? No it's not. Who else d'you have?"

"I have a list of reasons why he is my Suspect," Cuthbert said, looking extremely crestfallen. "Could I read them out? I think my deductive reasoning might convince you!"

"Go ahead," Harry said. He was trying to remember something about Louison besides the fact that he was French, Dean's partner and Malfoy had once said he'd made being louche an art form.

"Well he emigrated to this country barely speaking English, that's why he had to be partnered with Dean Thomas," Cuthbert told them excitedly. He stroked his upper lip as if he had a invisible moustache. "Why did he leave France? Perhaps he was involved in a Scandal which had to be Hushed Up."

"His family were known supporters of Grindelwald back in the day and he was trying to get away from that connection," Malfoy said crisply. "Do your research, Cuthbert."

"Well blood tells, you know," Cuthbert said earnestly.

"Does it?" asked Draco Malfoy, in a voice that could have turned the desert into an ice rink.

Harry said nothing. He just looked at Cuthbert and Cuthbert looked convinced he was going to be murdered with an inkpot. They sat in silence for a while as Dean and Ginny breezed past on the way home, Cuthbert's small distressed face a silent cry for help that they cheerfully ignored.

"I've seen him watching you two," Cuthbert offered weakly at last, and then with a feeble gleam of hope: "*Covertly*."

"People watch Potter all the time," Malfoy said with a dismissive hand wave. "Anything else?"

"He's French, you know," Cuthbert said darkly.

"Give me that scroll, Cuthbert," Malfoy said in a very calm voice.

Cuthbert brightened. "Why, do you want to keep it for your records?"

"No," said Malfoy, still extraordinarily calm. "I am going to roll it up and beat you with it."

*

"He looked like he was going to cry," Harry said as they went down the steps towards where the car waited, a silvery gleam on the evening streets. "You shouldn't be a bully."

"I'm not a bully," Malfoy claimed, which was just a complete lie. "I'm encouraging him."

"You were shooting down every word he said, Malfoy."

"I'm encouraging him to be smarter," Malfoy drawled. "Strongly."

They swung into the car, Malfoy's hands going for the radio station as they always did, fiddling until the volume and station were all according to his satisfaction. He sighed and leaned back when he was done, tilting his head back against the leather and shutting his eyes. This ridiculous case was really getting to him: he was starting to get that ashen consumptive look he got again. Harry made a mental note to force him to eat.

"Why don't you want it to be Louison?" Harry asked casually, flipping the invisibility switch on the car.

A Muggle turned, startled, at the rising purr of a car launching into the sky near her ear. Harry saw her wide eyes catching moonlight and then she was lost below in the darkness.

"I like Louison."

"Since when?"

"Since always," Malfoy said irritably. "He's always been friendly, which is more than I can say for most, and he didn't have to be. His family *is* connected with the Dark Arts and it wouldn't take much to make people suspect him – as you can see – but he still doesn't steer clear. Besides, I think this person is Muggleborn. Remember, he shot me."

“Could’ve been a strategic move,” Harry said. “Trying to make us think that. Or maybe you just annoy him.”

He felt he should try to be logical since Malfoy obviously was never going to suspect Louison: he was glad that not many criminals ever discovered Malfoy’s secret weakness and pretended to like him.

“Hmm,” said Malfoy in an unconvinced way, which meant ‘I am right and you are wrong and also, when have I ever liked anyone evil aside from most of my family and friends, shut up.’

The sky was laid out in front of them, clear and cool, a sheet of still dark pierced with tiny points of light. Malfoy’s breathing was even, he seemed tired but calm, and they were going home.

“About what Zabini said,” Harry said tentatively.

“No.” Malfoy’s voice lashed out like a whip. “We’re not having this conversation. I don’t want to hear it. Don’t be concerned about my feelings, do not try to reassure me, I am absolutely fine and besides, Zabini was right.”

“No he *wasn’t*,” Harry snarled.

“That’s not what I meant,” Malfoy said, sounding a little amused but mostly bitter. “Though you’re a gentleman. I meant you were all worked up and you certainly shouldn’t have been. I don’t know what to do about that right now. But I’ll think of something.”

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, his arms crossed and his eyes falling shut, a lock of fair hair in his face. He looked so tired.

“You always think you can fix everything,” he said.

“I can,” Malfoy told him, not as if he believed it at all but as if he was quite determined that Harry should. “I can fix the Veela thing and sort out this case and find Katie’s stupid boyfriend. No problem is too terrible. World hunger. War. Your hair. I am *that* brilliant.”

He didn’t fall asleep in the car. If he had, if he’d leaned against Harry and murmured in his sleep, Harry was certain as their course home, sure down to his bones and singing blood, that he would have kissed him. Then they would’ve had to have something out.

Malfoy didn’t fall asleep. He was just quiet and when they got home, he headed straight for the sofa as if he’d never dreamed of sleeping anywhere else.

He didn’t want to talk about it. Nothing was going to change.

Harry went into his room and looked at the tumbled sheets in the moonlight. He was definitely going to have to move.

*

It *was* good to have the Veela thing sorted out. It was excellent getting back to the office, and getting down the street without being mobbed and going to the post office without receiving indecent proposals. That was why Malfoy'd done it, and Harry tried hard to show him that everything was great now.

"Just so you know, I have no questions," Ron told him one day when they caught dinner in a local pub. "There is no judgement here. If you went to Sinistra's, I support that."

"Appreciate your support, Ron," said Harry.

"How are things with Malfoy? Are you two still going to live together?" Ron continued, lowering his voice and looking shiftily over to where Malfoy was leaning against the bar and talking to Pansy, his hands forming expressive shapes in the air.

Malfoy instantly looked back at Ron, eyes sharp. There was possibly a reason why Ron had never made it as an Auror.

"Course," Harry said, looking at his glass. "Why wouldn't we?"

Things were much better. Things were *fine*.

"We'd really like some results," Padma Patil told them, leaning against Malfoy's desk.

Hermione and Penelope stood beside her, looking rather sorry for Malfoy. Malfoy looked quite pleased: apparently Padma was welcome to come lean and scowl in his direction anytime she liked.

Padma scowled some more. "Now that we know that there are at least three children missing and adolescent boys are being found in packets, the Ministry would really like to see some results, Mr Malfoy. Sooner rather than later. I thought you two were supposed to be the best?"

"Oh, I am the best," Malfoy drawled, face all lit up and delighted, his eyes shining at her.

Padma's eyes narrowed. "Then I suggest you prove it."

"Would you like to spar with me sometime?" Malfoy inquired.

"I'd kill you," Padma told him.

Malfoy looked thrilled. "I'm prepared to take that chance. D'you know, I can't imagine why people think your sister is the pretty one. I think-"

Padma suddenly looked a lot more frightening. Malfoy looked taken aback.

"My sister *is* the pretty one," Padma told him. "We're extremely close. And I might add that after being separated from her for seven years by a stupid Hat and the stupid Sorting system, I am not interested in hearing some man badmouth her. Particularly a man who can never shut up and can't seem to deliver the culprit the Ministry is clamouring for. Do you think you can handle this case, or do the Unspeakables need to handle it for you?"

Malfoy looked a lot less charmed with her. "This is *our* case."

"We can handle anything," Harry told her calmly. She raised an eyebrow in his direction and he raised one back at her. "It'd be easier to work without all these interruptions, mind you."

Malfoy snorted, their eyes meeting and gleaming over Harry's file. Hermione gave Harry a reproachful look.

Padma straightened up and Malfoy looked faintly disappointed.

"I want to see something in three days, or we're coming back."

"Promise?" Malfoy asked.

"You're in there, mate," Harry said dryly as the Unspeakables made their way out.

Malfoy nicked a file off his desk. They were at a point where he wasn't even watching the Unspeakables leave or correcting the grammar on Harry's notes.

"Mine is a hopeless love," he agreed. He didn't sound terribly heartbroken.

Harry leaned over and pushed Malfoy's sandwich pointedly towards him, then returned to his file. Three days, and the only person who had a suspect was Cuthbert.

"You know what we could do," he said slowly.

"No," Malfoy said.

"Think about it, Malfoy," Harry urged. "This guy tried for me once. I'm the perfect bait. We could-"

"I said *no*," Malfoy told him.

Harry looked at his fair head bent over the hundredth file, and thought of how little time they had before the Unspeakables tried to pull the case, and how little time those goblin children and that girl from Hogwarts might have.

He picked up a quill and turned it over in his hands, hating what he was about to do.

"Anything could be happening to Conleth Frexley right now," he said, watching Malfoy go paler with every word. "You promised you'd save him."

Malfoy looked white as salt, and sick. "You're not doing it."

Harry broke the quill in his hands and held the broken pieces in one fist. "What about Katie?"

"The hell with Katie," Malfoy snarled.

While Harry was staring at him, struck speechless, Malfoy drew in a sharp frustrated breath

and tried to smooth out the line between his brows. “That’s not what I – you’re terrible at being bait, you always get involved and something awful happens. You remember that time we had you Polyjuiced as Oliver Wood.”

“I had to defend myself,” Harry said, his voice strangely distant in his own ears. “Those women were crazed.”

Malfoy looked up from his file and met Harry’s eyes. He had that look on his face, pushed to the point of desperation until he hit some crazy Malfoy wall and bounced back with a plan. Harry hated seeing it, but it did work.

It might not work in time for Conleth, though, and Harry didn’t like to think about what Malfoy would feel about letting Katie down. It might not work in time for those kids.

“There’s another way,” Malfoy said. “I can do this.”

“I know that,” Harry answered, and watched Malfoy’s shoulders ease down, comforted and calmer.

Malfoy would think up something. But they didn’t have much time, and Harry had a plan already.

He couldn’t do much under Malfoy’s eye, though. So he settled back down to his files and tried to stop himself thinking about what Malfoy’d said. So maybe he was getting over Katie, a bit. It didn’t necessarily mean anything.

We’re not having this conversation.

The Murimble kids and Eugenia Varley had been at home and at school. They were hardly ever anywhere else: the halfblood kidnapper had no choice than to target them there, even though they were warded around by spells and guardians.

Zabini hadn’t been at home, though: he’d been in a hotel. The half-merman boy had been taking a walk in the rain. That had apparently been a habit of his. Zabini’s habit of going to a variety of hotels was pretty well-known, too. Harry and Malfoy had been attacked at a crime scene and at the Auror headquarters when the kidnapper had known no other Aurors would be around.

The kidnapper was watching. All Harry had to do was be alone and away from home, somewhere the kidnapper would be expecting him.

And Malfoy couldn’t be with him. It was funny how hard it was to think of a reason for Malfoy not to be with him: it was strange and a little amazing, how natural it felt to have him there.

Harry glanced over piles of paper and quills at Malfoy, who was absorbed in his file, pale hair tumbling into his eyes. He had his lower lip drawn into his mouth and he was leaning back in his chair, body loose and relaxed, with the kind of weary, lovely grace he achieved at the point of exhaustion.

Something about the line of his body made Harry see him another way for an instant, muscles straining and then relaxed, body spilling in a long lean line over the pearl-white bedclothes. He thought of the silvery sheen of sweat on Malfoy's skin and the low, beautiful sounds he'd made.

He realised Malfoy was looking at him with shocked-wide eyes.

"Hey," he said, bristling and unhappy as a wet cat. "Don't."

"I," Harry began, and found his mouth dry. "I didn't mean to."

Malfoy rubbed the back of his neck as if it suddenly ached. "I'm sorry," he said, which Harry didn't understand at all. "I'm going to get some new files, all right? And maybe a bowl of coffee."

"Drink from a cup as God intended," Harry said automatically.

Malfoy gave him a strained smile pretending to be his usual smile, still looking wretched, and fled for the archives room. Harry took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to tell himself that things were better, fine, that everything was going to be okay. Somehow.

Then he saw Louison slip into the room after Malfoy. He looked around carefully, his usual lazy air so very lazy it seemed suddenly forced, ducked his shaggy dark head and then went into the archives room and shut the door behind him.

Harry got up from his chair. The hair on the back of his neck was prickling, his hands involuntarily closing into fists, and a little voice at the back of his head was saying that if Cuthbert had cracked the case he and Malfoy were going to be deeply shamed.

It was a bit harder to move unobtrusively towards the archives room, since even without the Veela thing at full power people's eyes seemed to drift over to him a lot these days. Harry tried to look buried in his file and as if he was making his leisurely way towards the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

He was closer, then closer, and then he was easing open the door and he heard Louison say: "Well, it's the logical conclusion, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Malfoy asked vaguely. "Can you help me with this box? Thank you."

He leaned up for a tatty cardboard box filled with scrolls and Louison grabbed the other end of it. Malfoy pretty much had it, but Louison held on until Malfoy had lowered the box to the floor. Malfoy knelt down and rummaged in the box for whatever he was looking at: he remembered to look up after a second and reward Louison with a flashing smile.

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Nobody's going to mention it or anything," Louison said. "You don't need to worry."

"What aren't people going to mention?" Malfoy asked absently.

“Uh, the office kind of figured you helped Potter out with his, you know, problem,” Louison said, and Malfoy looked up with his face transformed by sudden horror.

He was suddenly sorting the scrolls without looking at them, pushing them together one by one like a praying soul telling rosary beads.

“Uh-*huh*,” Malfoy said, his voice cracking. “Right.”

“Well, you two are good friends and you’re living together, and Potter was being determined about things in that way of his, and suddenly – voilà! It’s pretty clear what went on, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” Malfoy asked, his expression edging on the hunted. “Indeed.”

“Everyone thought it’d be more tactful to just get on with things and not mention it,” Louison told him chattily.

“Only you thought a day spent not humiliating me to the dust was a day wasted?” Malfoy inquired. “Excellent. Thanks for that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to – run away and join the circus.”

He seized up a scroll at what Harry was pretty sure was random and stood up.

“Wait,” said Louison. “Hey. No. That’s not what I meant to say. What I meant was...” He paused. “Do you want to go out with me?”

Malfoy promptly dropped the scroll.

“Beg pardon?” he asked in a funny, stunned voice, as if Louison had just produced a large salmon from his pocket and slapped Malfoy around the face with it.

“Want to go out with me?” Louison repeated, sounding amused. “You swing that way. So do I. I think you’re cute in this sort of very excitable fashion. What do you say?”

Malfoy stared some more and then his mouth tugged up a little at one corner. Malfoy’s weakness for flattery was frankly getting ridiculous.

“I’m not that excitable.”

“You kind of are,” Louison told him, head tilted to one side, sounding encouraged. “But that’s all right. So do you want to?”

“Well...”

Harry realised, to his incredulous horror, that Malfoy was actually hesitating. He looked pleased.

“You’re not with Potter or anything, are you?” Louison asked.

“No.” Malfoy threw the word at him, fast and cold as a knife in the air.

“That’s what I figured. Well, you know what Potter’s like.”

“Tell me, Louison,” Harry said, his voice twice as cold as Malfoy’s and wrapping sleek as a snake around a hiss. “Since you’re *such* an expert on the subject. What am I like?”

Louison jumped. Harry was viciously glad to see it. He wasn’t a Veela like Zabini, wasn’t a real threat like Katie, but Malfoy’d looked at him and looked as if he was considering it. Harry didn’t understand what Louison had done to make Malfoy respond like that. He didn’t know how to steal that power from this relative stranger, reach out and have it for himself. It wasn’t fair, the thought that someone might be able to casually reach out and take what Harry wanted so much.

“Oh, mon Dieu,” Louison said, being suddenly and deliberately French as he sometimes was when Shacklebolt had questions about his reports. “Is that the time?”

He eeled out between Harry and the door. Harry let him go, lip curling, because if he went then he would be far away from Malfoy. He could stay away, too.

“When all our colleagues come up with a plot to assassinate you at the Christmas party,” Malfoy said. “I can’t honestly say that I’ll blame them. There was no reason to be rude.”

“I guess that’s just what *I’m like*,” Harry said. “Anyway, what are you like, Malfoy? You were considering going out with him!”

The dark little archives room was too small: Harry’s voice echoed, far too loud, against the walls. Malfoy wouldn’t look at him. He was looking at the box of files very closely, as if it was the only possible thing of interest in the room.

“I don’t really think that’s any of your business.”

“No?” Harry spoke with some difficulty. “I’m your – friend. We did say that much. You don’t think that I should know if you’re suddenly-”

“I don’t know,” Malfoy said. “I just hesitated for a second. I never really thought about it before. I was always – it was Pansy and then Katie for so long. I occasionally had thoughts about Zabini but I put it down to the Veela thing. Maybe it was. But I – speaking purely physically, from my side, the other night was fine. So I don’t know. And it’s still none of your business. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked. “You don’t want to talk about much, apparently. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” Malfoy said bleakly. “There’s too much to do. I can’t think of any way to save Frexley for Katie, or those kids. I can’t think of a way to solve this whole Veela thing. I have to *think*: I can’t talk. I don’t know what to say.”

His head was still lowered. Harry remembered how unhappy he’d looked when he went into the archives room.

He’d smiled at Louison.

“You want to take this box home?” he asked. His voice came out a little rough, but he didn’t want it to. “I’ll make you a cup of coffee there.”

“A bowl,” Malfoy corrected him, sounding a little less wretched.

“A *cup*,” Harry said. “Here, let me get that.”

Malfoy waved him away without looking up. “I’ve got it. Go start the car.”

Harry had actually left the office and got the car started, the invisibility switch flipped and the car hovering about a foot above the street, when it occurred to him that Louison – who Harry had never liked, Cuthbert was right, he *was* shifty-looking – had done something that Harry hadn’t.

Louison had asked.

Malfoy went to the car without having to see it, throwing the box into the back and catching the invisible door as Harry leaned over and opened it for him. He climbed in and Harry sent the car in a sharp slope up into the sky.

“At least we know why Louison’s been creeping around,” Harry said neutrally, trying to show he wouldn’t be rude about that again.

“We don’t know anything,” Malfoy said. “He could be trying to allay our suspicions. If I were the kidnapper, I’d definitely know to go for my vanity. I’d also cunningly confuse you by giving you a different name every day. If Louison does that, we’re arresting him.”

“We’re not arresting Cuthbert’s suspect, Malfoy, for God’s sake,” Harry said.

“It would be a blow, but I’m prepared to do it,” Malfoy told him. “And I’m getting into the kidnapper’s mindset. So, my name is Engleberry.”

“Suits you,” Harry said.

Malfoy made a small content sound and leaned his forehead against the window. Harry looked at his hands on the wheel. He was holding on too tight: his fingers were white on the black wheel, the sinking sun hurting his eyes a bit.

“We could go out,” he said.

His voice sounded all wrong, abrupt and almost angry, but at least he’d said it. He glanced over at Malfoy and Malfoy was staring at him. He just looked lost.

“What?” he said. “Who?”

“Us,” Harry said, clearing his throat. “You and me. We could go out. If you wanted.”

“What?” Malfoy asked again.

He'd picked up on what Louison was asking easily enough, and he'd been pleased. He didn't sound pleased now.

"You were saying you wanted a solution," Harry said uncertainly. "That's a solution. And I'd – I'd like it. We could-"

"No," said Malfoy.

Harry wanted to say something, but he had nothing: he had absolutely no idea what to say, how he could make this better. There was no way. There were no words that would help.

In the corner of Harry's eye he saw Malfoy, hair gold in the setting sun and far away across the car. He was leaning his forehead back against the glass and watching the clouds drift past.

"I just don't think that would be a good idea," Malfoy continued quietly.

He said nothing more. They drove on in silence.

Chapter Thirteen

Malfoy was still looking out the car window when Harry, motivated by the sheer horror of spending another night in the flat reliving a night he couldn't have back and that wouldn't ever be repeated, said he was thinking of stopping by Ron's.

"I'll drop you off first-"

"Oh, you think I'm letting you go anywhere by yourself until the kidnapper is caught?" Malfoy demanded, not taking his eyes off the city skyline. "Good luck with that. Drive."

Once they were there, Pansy took Malfoy away to see her wedding dress.

"Wow, the case must be driving Malfoy mental," Ron said with a measured amount of sympathy. "He didn't even make one crack about seeing Pansy with the dress off."

Then he looked at Harry properly and sent the house elf down to the cellars for Firewhiskey. It was from the year 1589 and had probably cost more than Harry's flat. It burned as it went down.

"Okay," Ron said. "What's going on? It's not the case."

It was the case too. Harry had promised himself he'd keep all the children safe: it shouldn't have been just Lavender's children. He should have been able to shield all of Hogwarts: he'd promised himself, once, that it would never be touched again. Hogwarts had been his shining refuge and his starting point and children should be *safe* there. He remembered Eugenia Varley's prim red bun and her small, terribly young face too clearly. He was getting her back, and not in any packets.

He took another swallow of the whiskey, until all he saw was crystal at the bottom of the glass. Then he leaned forward, head bowed over the empty gleaming thing.

"It's not just the case," he said.

"Is it about Sinistra's?" Ron asked. "Is it about – er. Is it about Malfoy?"

He sounded deeply and definitely uncomfortable talking about this, but determined to do it all the same.

Harry laughed. "It's not about Sinistra's."

There was a silence. Ron took a deep but careful breath, as if he was afraid the air around him might be poisoned, and then Harry felt him rest a hand against Harry's shoulder, grip strong and comforting.

"I thought it had to be something like Sinistra's because – because you didn't seem happy about it," he said. "But it wasn't, was it?"

“No,” Harry said.

“Oh my God,” Ron exclaimed. “I am not cut out for this. If only Hermione wasn’t so busy with her new bloke, I *know* she would’ve spotted something by now. And then she’d have a plan!”

Harry looked down to see that his glass had been refilled. Ron and Pansy had trained their house elf to be sneaky so that Hermione would never suspect they owned one. Malfoy’d watched some film that’d given him ideas the week they got the elf, and he’d decided to start calling her Ninja. The name had sort of stuck.

“Thanks, Ninja,” said Harry, and took another burning swallow.

Even moving out wouldn’t solve this. He couldn’t stay away from Ron and Pansy’s house, or from Hermione, or from the bar every Friday night. He couldn’t disentangle his life from Malfoy’s and he didn’t want to: he’d never meant anything to turn out this way but it had, and it would make him *happy* to be hopelessly, wonderfully tangled up with no way out if only Malfoy could’ve said yes: if he’d thought it would be a good idea.

“So it was Malfoy, then,” Ron said. “Yeah, I’ll be wanting a little more of that too, Ninja.”

“It didn’t mean anything,” Harry told him. “He was just trying to find a way out of the whole mess.”

“Um,” said Ron. “Right. Look, I consider myself a pretty decent friend, but I have to say, Harry, you want licentious sexual favours, you’re on your own. Maybe you should-”

“I asked him out,” Harry said, the words stark in the air, coming out too loud and too real. “He said no.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “Um. Right.” He paused and then said tentatively: “Could we just give Hermione a tiny, tiny hint-”

“No.”

Ron looked moodily into his drink. Harry drank his drink.

“We should remember,” Ron said at last, “that Malfoy is crazy. There is no telling what he will do, because he is crazy. Dribbling and frothing and rejecting Veela: there is no end to the crazy things crazy people will do. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

“No,” Harry said again. Ninja refilled his drink a third time.

They spent the night stretched out on two sofas in one of Ron’s sumptuous parlours, and got through the whole bottle of Firewhiskey.

“There are plenty of other crazy fish in the sea,” Ron said at one point, lying prone and regarding his crenelated ceiling with grave interest. “I mean, if that’s what you’re into, and I don’t judge, I know lots of annoying people. I employ lots of annoying people. I mean, all right, I admit Malfoy may be hard to beat in those stakes. He is sort of *spectacularly*

annoying. But maybe you'd hit it off with my accountant. I really hate him."

"I think I'll pass," Harry said. "Thanks."

"But Harry, the thing is," Ron said. "The thing is, this can't go on. I mean, now that he knows. They can't. Can they?"

Harry sighed and tipped the glass back again. He was getting good at drinking lying down: only a little spilled over his chin.

"No," he said, low. "I have to think of a plan to get Malfoy away from me."

"Sensible decision," Ron told him. "You're doing the right thing. So – I guess maybe you should switch partners?"

"*What?*"

"Temporarily," Ron said hastily. "Just a preventative measure. You said yourself-"

"I didn't mean that," Harry snarled, fighting the urge to go find Malfoy right now and keep him close. "I meant – I have to get Malfoy away from me tomorrow night."

"Um, I'm not really sure one night's going to cut it, Harry."

"No, you see, tomorrow night's Friday," Harry explained, making a vague gesture with his free hand towards Ron's fancy chandelier. "It's our pub night. Everybody knows about it. And if I set off without Malfoy, I'm hoping I can get kidnapped on my way."

There was a long silence.

Then Ron said, very gently: "Harry? I think maybe you've had enough to drink."

"No," Harry said, cross at himself and the stupid alcohol for stopping him from explaining this to Ron so he would see it was perfectly reasonable. "The thing is – all I need is a plan."

"I would love a plan," Ron said fervently. "I dream day and night of a plan. But, uh, how do I put this, Harry? You have many strengths. Like Quidditch. You're brilliant at that. But plans are not exactly your forté. Plans are what Hermione does. Your thing is getting really, really angry until... evil is defeated."

Ron was obviously considering this, looking doubtfully at Harry as if he expected Harry to be insulted. Harry felt slightly distant from the whole proceedings: from unhappiness and his frantically working brain. He felt a little as if he was floating up on that high ceiling. The corners of it looked like the twirly bits of icing on a cake.

A thought floated up to join him.

"Getting really, really angry," he murmured, shutting his eyes. The glow of the chandelier lit tiny fuzzy lights behind his eyelids. "Sounds like a plan to me."

*

Harry woke up calm, content and with a good grip on Malfoy.

Malfoy was leaning against the back of his sofa, forearms folded and head bent over Harry's, a hand on his shoulder. He'd obviously been in the process of shaking Harry awake, and then Harry must have reached out – the way he did – out and up, not for Malfoy's wrist but for his neck, clasp firm at his nape and fingers in his hair. He should let go, he supposed.

Malfoy was looking down at him with a funny expression on his face, eyes wide, looking fond and exasperated and – something else, flickering just before he turned away. Maybe anger.

“As I was saying,” he said, face averted. “Wake up. And let go.”

“Sorry,” Harry murmured, voice rusty with sleep. He let go, the hollow of his hand missing the warmth of Malfoy's neck as if it was suddenly so cold it ached.

Malfoy leaned back against the glass bookcase full of leatherbound volumes Ron had never read, face still turned determinedly away.

“Splendid idea to drink on a work night, Potter,” he drawled. “We're almost late for work.”

Harry glanced at the ornate clock and saw that it was ten minutes to ten. “We are late, Malfoy. Work begins at nine.”

“You know I will never accept that,” Malfoy told him. “Why must you keep hurting me by bringing it up?”

He spoke distractedly, trying to pretend everything was normal, which was the stupidest thing Harry could imagine. Malfoy knew how Harry felt, now. He'd turned him down.

On the other hand, they absolutely had to pretend everything was normal, because otherwise everything would fall apart, and Harry did not know how to piece together a life in which Malfoy was not essential. He didn't want to.

He sat up and cracked his neck.

On the other sofa Ron rolled over and mumbled: “Not the elephant feather.”

Harry didn't look at him. He kept his gaze fixed on Malfoy, the determinedly averted eyes and lifted chin, the tension running all through his body leaving it taut as a strung bow and as easily snappable. He was daring him to look back.

“You want to spar when we get into the office, Malfoy?” he demanded.

The challenge turned Malfoy's head as he'd known it would: Malfoy met his eyes in that same abruptly fearless way he'd met them that night right after Harry'd turned on the Veela charm. There were cold walls behind his grey eyes: it was like he was daring Harry to storm them.

“Sure, Potter,” he said. “Let’s go.”

*

It was one of those days when they whirled into the office and everybody, even Shacklebolt, knew not to say a word: knew to just get out of their way. Malfoy threw his cloak over Harry’s desk and Harry grabbed a bottle of water from the cafeteria, pouring it down his throat to drown out the slight nagging headache and the constant sense of unease: to drown out all thought.

When he stalked out onto the practice mats he found Malfoy already there waiting. His back was to Harry, the line of his spine under his worn t-shirt just as taut as before.

Harry did not say a word to indicate he was there, but as he approached Malfoy swung around just the same, eyes too bright and too big. He was shedding the weight faster than he usually did, the idiot, Harry thought with what distant reason remained to him. He needed a keeper.

Far more immediate was the thought that Malfoy’s reflexes would be slower, that he’d be weaker. It would be easier to win and then Harry would feel better somehow, he *would*, he’d be exhausted enough to relax with all this miserable thrumming tension drained away and Malfoy safe under him saying he surrendered.

“You took your time,” Malfoy drawled, and Harry punched him in the face.

“I’m here now.”

Malfoy touched the bloody side of his mouth delicately with the back of one hand, testing, and grinned a sharp bright grin. “And is that all you’ve got?”

“Guess we’ll have to see,” Harry said, low.

They circled each other, wary and slow, eyes running up and down each others’ bodies watching for the tiny giveaway signs showing which way they would lunge. Occasionally their eyes met, locked, and then Malfoy looked away.

Didn’t matter. Harry could still feel his gaze running over Harry’s skin like burning-hot fingers, his attention never wavering. It was like it had been the night Malfoy destroyed the office, being in the centre of a storm: quiet, so quiet, with electricity and chaos a whisper away.

He could hear Malfoy’s harsh breathing in the hush, and his own. There was nothing else in the world that mattered at all.

There was a lightning-flash of intent in Malfoy’s eyes for a moment and no more. Harry evaded Malfoy’s charge, only to get tripped up and have to roll even as he hit the mat, fast and to the side to avoid a kick, and get a kick of his own in directly below the knee. Malfoy staggered and Harry hit him at waist height, snarling, and they tumbled backwards onto the mats in a tangle of legs and fists. He heard Malfoy snarl back, soft, in his ear: the noise sent a

hot thrill chasing down his spine. Malfoy's chest rose with the sound, hard against Harry's, and it would be so easy to curve over to him, find his mouth, and oh God, what was he *doing*?

Harry stopped moving. He was breathing hard and he had one hand curled, fingers almost touching Malfoy's face, in a gesture that wasn't anything like fighting, and Malfoy who had learned to take any blow was looking up at him, eyes wide and scared. His eyes weren't just scared, they were a little hazy, like sudden heat blurring summer air: they were still glittering.

It should have been all right. Harry was used to sparring, he'd had years of training in sparring, doing what they did best together and moving like two essential parts of the same machine. He wanted what he'd always wanted: so what? It shouldn't have been any different.

But it was. It made no sense, one night shouldn't be able to overwrite years of habit, but Malfoy's touch and Malfoy's body were changed now, stood in a different relation to him, lay shaking in small, tightly controlled bursts underneath him. Malfoy's hands were clenched in fists at his sides, Harry thought with sudden and almost terrible clarity, not to hit Harry but to stop himself touching Harry.

If he knotted his fingers in Malfoy's hair, if he kissed him now, Malfoy wouldn't stop him. Harry was sure of that, down to the blood moving slow and burning through his veins. He had the material of Malfoy's t-shirt still clenched in one hand. He'd grabbed it to hold Malfoy down, but Malfoy wasn't struggling anymore. He could feel the heat of Malfoy's body through worn-thin cotton and it would be so easy to wrench the shirt off. He remembered with memory more visceral than vivid, more body than mind, the sleek movement of muscle under bare skin and the hungry slide of Malfoy's mouth against his own.

He could do it, get Malfoy home, get him into bed, and then Malfoy would be furious with him and Eugenia Varley might end up in packets.

Harry pushed himself up and away, sitting with one knee drawn up and one arm dangling over it, forehead pressed against his arm. He was disgusted with himself for being tempted, even for a moment.

From the floor Malfoy was cursing in a soft fervent flow. Harry agreed with him, except for the words he didn't know and guessed were ancient pureblood curses or dark spells.

Actually he probably agreed with those too.

Once he'd exhausted his supply of curses Harry heard Malfoy rise and walk towards the showers. He didn't look up.

When Malfoy was gone he climbed wearily to his feet and went to see Cuthbert.

*

Cuthbert was sitting at his little desk murmuring spells to shred used parchment. When Harry said: "Hey," he jumped violently.

Harry supposed he had kind of barked it out. He wasn't in the best of moods.

“Augh, Mr Potter,” he said, and then looked up at Harry, sweaty and looming in his practice clothes. “Don’t kill me?” Cuthbert added in a weak voice.

“I want you to do something for me,” Harry said.

Cuthbert still looked vaguely apprehensive, but he brightened as a thought crossed his mind. “D’you want to see my notes on my Suspect now, Mr Potter?”

“No I don’t,” Harry told him, and Cuthbert resumed looking crushed and afraid for his life. “I want you to do something else that’s important for the success of the mission,” Harry said, and Cuthbert looked up with hope in his eyes. “If you do this right, I’ll – commend you, or something,” he added.

He wasn’t sure exactly how you went about that. Malfoy handled most of the office stuff. Well, Malfoy would know how to do it on Monday.

“Just doing my duty is an honour, sir,” Cuthbert chirped helpfully.

“Well – okay. Good. Keep it up,” Harry told him. “I want you to follow Malfoy for a couple of hours after work tonight.”

“Won’t he be with you, sir?” Cuthbert inquired.

Dean, Ginny and Louison passed a little too near their desks. They were possibly on their way to lunch and Louison was possibly trying to listen in. Harry wouldn’t mind at all if he was the kidnapper, actually. He gave Louison a dark look and Louison raised his eyebrows and made a beeline for the door.

“No, he won’t be with me,” Harry snarled. “I have something else to do. We don’t spend every waking moment together, you know.”

“All right, sir,” said Cuthbert, his tone politely doubtful. Then light appeared to dawn and he suddenly looked delighted. “Do you suspect Mr Malfoy of being the kidnapper, sir?”

“What?” said Harry.

“It might make sense,” Cuthbert told him, warming to his theme. “I’ve studied psychology, sir, and he’s a classic case. Volatile temperament, egotistical, and has a lot of issues when it comes to breeding, plus the troubled background-”

“Cuthbert, stop being ridiculous,” Harry snapped. “If you can. Just follow Malfoy around for a while. Don’t let him out of your sight.”

Cuthbert looked dejected about being told off, but underlying that Harry thought he seemed a little excited by actually having an assignment. The poor kid, Harry thought. He’d hate hanging around being taught all the time himself. They should take Cuthbert out into the field when this was all over.

Of course, he might end up getting them killed.

“After it’s dark,” Harry said, throwing the letter down on Cuthbert’s desk. It landed with a solid *thunk* amid the debris of destroyed paper. “I want you to give him this.”

Cuthbert looked like he might be considering a salute. “I won’t let you down, sir!”

Harry sort of wanted to say something kind to the kid, or at least not crush his soul again, but he didn’t manage it. He was frustrated and tired and sick with dread about what he had to do next, so he just said curtly: “See that you don’t,” and stormed off to find Malfoy.

*

He found Malfoy sitting at his desk, hands hanging empty and palms down over his knees. His hair, still damp from the showers, had fallen into his eyes. He seemed to be looking fixedly at the floor. He did not even glance up at Harry’s approach.

Harry sat down in chilly silence he made no attempt to break and took out some files. He leafed through them without looking up for the better part of an hour, and then realized he was looking at them upside down. He righted them hastily and hoped nobody had noticed.

The words didn’t seem to make any more sense right way up. There was a bad taste at the back of his mouth. He wished he could take back what he hadn’t even said yet, and what he had to say anyway.

Malfoy broke the silence at last.

“I’m sorry,” he said abruptly. “It was a terrible plan.”

“I tried to tell you,” Harry said without looking up.

“I know you did,” Malfoy snapped, and then wrenched his voice down to a softer note with an audible effort. “I didn’t – I couldn’t think of any other way to solve things, but I expect my mind was clouded and I didn’t want to and I certainly should have taken that factor into account. It was impulsive and wrong of me. Sometimes I – are you ever going to say anything?”

“Are you done?” Harry asked.

“No. *Yes*,” Malfoy said. “I want you to tell me everything’s not ruined!”

The sharp appeal in his voice brought Harry’s head up involuntarily, attention drawn as surely as it would’ve been if they’d been fighting trolls or at a crime scene where there were dead parents or at a political party when someone could bring up Malfoy’s dad.

That was a terrible mistake. Now he was looking at Malfoy, and Malfoy looked desperate and miserable. He was wearing a black t-shirt, the shirt a little damp from the showers too, and it made him look dreadfully pale, the dark circles under his eyes standing out more than ever. He was making himself ill, it was obvious, it was worse than the cases, this was like it’d been with his parents and Katie and Harry just wanted to make him feel better and tell him anything he needed to hear. He couldn’t go through with the plan. He’d explain to Malfoy.

You think I'm letting you go anywhere by yourself until the kidnapper is caught?

Only he had to go through with it, and he couldn't afford to reassure Malfoy.

"But maybe it is," Harry said, voice scratching in his throat like a trapped animal. "All ruined."

Malfoy flinched.

Harry looked away and forced himself to remember seeing Malfoy with Katie all those times, seeing Malfoy hurt or walking away from him, hearing Malfoy say no. None of it had been Malfoy's fault and it hadn't been fair for Harry to feel furious, helpless resentment, but there it was. And he could use it, now.

"How do you think things are going to go back to normal?" he demanded. "If we can't spar, if we can't even touch each other. I can barely look at you without – it *is* all ruined. There's no way back."

He looked back in time to see Malfoy's back hunch in on itself, like the wings of a cold tired bird.

"Look," he said, voice brittle. "I admit that right now I can't think of what to do, but that's just – that's just because I'm distracted and – and unhappy. The thing with Zabini in the holding cell and in the car yesterday caught me off guard and I'm not exactly sure how–"

"Well you can be sure of one thing," Harry snarled. "It wasn't about the damn holding cell."

"I know that, I am not *stupid*," Malfoy snapped. "Did you want me to bring it up in front of other people, or should I have waited for that incredibly horrible conversation in the car? When would you have preferred, Potter? What did you want me to do? I'm aware that I'm – territory, and recent events can't have helped much, but once I've thought of a way around the Veela problem then I think we can–"

Harry got out of his chair and threw down the nonsensical files and all at once found it utterly, terribly easy to be angry.

"Do you ever just shut up?" he shouted. "You are stupid. You're *so* stupid I can't even bear to look at you right now. I don't want to. Would you for God's sake stop yapping on about the Veela thing?"

"What?" Malfoy asked, sounding lost and uncertain and preparing to be angry right back.

"Why? What else are we talking about? That's the whole issue: that's why everything's gone wrong. If we can just fix that everything will be all right."

"No," Harry said flatly. "No. It won't. Everything will still be terrible. I wish you would stop talking about Veela. I'm not one: I'm mostly human. Nobody's trying to jump me anymore. The problem's solved and everything's still *terrible*!"

The shout rang out through the office. Harry noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that people

were unobtrusively but very quickly moving towards the kitchen. Sometimes they stayed in there for quite a while.

Malfoy sat and bore the onslaught with his face growing whiter every second.

“I don’t understand,” he said at last.

“Oh, open your *eyes*,” Harry said. “That – with Zabini, it wasn’t about territory. Any more than it was with Louison. It was never about territory.” He sucked in a deep breath, reminding himself why he was doing this, trying to force himself to be calm. “I was just jealous,” he told Malfoy quietly. “That’s all.”

He grabbed his jacket and whirled out of the room.

“*Wait*,” Malfoy said in a strangled voice when Harry was on the threshold, when it was almost too late.

Harry’d been really hoping he wouldn’t have to do this.

He didn’t glance around. “What part of ‘I can’t even bear to look at you’ did you not understand?” he demanded, still softly, staring out at the corridor.

There was silence behind him.

Harry left and walked through the London streets, trying to clear his head, trying not to remember Malfoy’s pale shocked face. He took care to walk past that pastry shop Malfoy liked, to pass Rick’s, to stop by the grocery shop on the corner, visiting places that were familiar to him and would be familiar to anyone who knew his routine. The spring air was warm and pleasant, and Harry lifted his face to it and tried very hard not to think about anything but the case.

It was almost a relief when evening began to fall, the sky bleeding into darkness like blue ink spilled on wet paper, and Harry caught sight of a clock set above a restaurant and saw it was time to go to the pub.

He walked slowly and softly enough so that he heard the footsteps as they fell into a rhythm behind his. He waited long enough to be sure that it wasn’t a coincidence.

He longed to whirl around and lash out at whoever it was following him, to beat answers out of someone and make them pay for a half-merman boy in packets, for Eugenia Varley lost and the way he’d had to make Malfoy look. Only the kidnapper had a lot of tricks up his sleeve: this person following Harry could simply be under Imperius, and then Harry would’ve beaten up a victim and gained nothing.

He had to be taken.

The steps were coming closer and clearer, every one distinct. Each sounded like the closing of the office door when Harry had left Malfoy today, like the click of a cupboard door being shut on him. They were like the echo of his slamming heart. The skin at the back of his neck was prickling: he wondered how the few people passing by could fail to notice the steps that

seemed so obvious, the fact he was being tracked, hunted down like prey, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

He heard a heel crunch on the pavement directly behind him, set his teeth and willed himself not to betray his violent awareness of that lurking presence.

Behind him there was a laugh. The incongruity of that low sound broke his nerve and he jumped, and twisted around at last.

The blow fell like thunder crashing down on him, breaking the world into splinters and darkness. He lost consciousness without seeing his attacker's face.

*

Harry woke on a freezing stone floor and heard a clink beside his head. He wasn't able to make sense of the sound until he pulled himself slowly up on his hands and knees, and found himself stopped short by the tug of steel at his throat.

There was a choke collar around his neck, the metal biting coldly into his skin. There was a chain leashing him to the floor.

With care, he was able to stand up anyway and see where he'd been taken.

It was a warehouse, steel rafters and concrete in the shadows. There were small windows high up that could not have let in any light even when it was daytime and the room was filled with cages. There were shapes huddled in most of them. From across the room Harry saw a blaze of red hair under the flickering fluorescent lights.

"Conleth?" he called out. "Conleth Frexley?"

Malfoy was going to be able to return this man to Katie, just like he'd promised. That would make him happy.

"Harry Potter, isn't it?" asked Conleth, in a voice far more like a banshee's than the one he'd used at the awards ceremony, as if years of careful civilisation had been torn away from him and left wild sound behind. "How's Katie?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Harry said. "Er, I mean. Distraught."

Conleth paused to digest this. He was standing facing Harry now, at the length of his chain. Harry saw his eyes glitter like shards of moonlight on the water.

"Sorry to see you here," he said at last, his voice rough, balanced on some serrated knife edge between a snarl and a scream.

Harry grinned at him, feeling content for a moment even in this steel trap as he'd done with his companions in the war and still did with Malfoy in the field, belonging in the presence of dangerous creatures.

"Are you?" he said. "I kind of like it here. It's homey."

Then he saw a smaller heap in the cage next to his stir. What had seemed like shadows turned into a pale little pointed face and solemn eyes, with wings of russet hair springing from her ears.

Eugenia Varley said: “Mr Potter?” and without waiting for confirmation she swept on: “Are you completely insane?”

Harry’s confidence wavered, faced with a child. He wanted to save her, to shield her from anything that might harm her and protect her with his life, but he didn’t have the faintest idea how to talk to her.

“There,” he said awkwardly. “There. You’re all right.”

“Mr Potter,” said Eugenia. “I am chained up in a cage. So are you,” she added, as if he might have failed to notice.

“Ah,” Harry said. “Yes. But the thing is—” he *wished* Malfoy was here – “It’s all part of my plan.”

He wished Malfoy was here. Malfoy soon would be.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and thought about the letter he’d left with Cuthbert. He knew Malfoy would come, but the question was how mad Malfoy was going to be when he arrived. Harry had *tried* to explain.

He’d written: *Hi, Malfoy. I’m sorry for whatever I said to you so that you’d let me leave alone. I didn’t mean it, or at least I suppose I didn’t. I don’t know exactly what I’m going to say yet. You’ve probably guessed I’ve been kidnapped by now. This Galleon is a Portkey that should take you right to where I am. Make sure to take some back-up along, we don’t know how many of them there are. And bring me your spare wand. H.*

So there was a good chance that Malfoy was going to be mad as hell.

But there was no chance that he wasn’t coming.

“The being chained up in a cage plan?” said Eugenia Varley skeptically.

He’d thought of her as Eugenia, he supposed, when he’d been thinking of her as a victim, as a soft-eyed child who needed his help. Now she looked at him, small and accusing as a tiny judge, and she seemed more like a Varley.

“I knew they’d take me,” Harry said. “I wanted it to happen.” He felt in the pocket of his jeans for a Galleon, the pair to the one he’d made into a Portkey, and felt a moment’s sinking fear that it was lost and all hope with it. But it was there, like a tiny anchor in his pocket: it would act like a magnet and Malfoy’s coin like an iron filing, moving inevitably until they were together. Harry flipped it and caught it in midair. “My partner’s going to track me through this. And then I’m going to make whoever took you sorry.”

Varley’s composure, perfect when she’d thought she was doomed, wavered a little at the first

sign of hope.

“Was your partner the sneaky-looking one who named Ratcliff’s slug?” she asked, and sniffed. The noise could have been either disdainful or distressed. It was hard to tell.

“Er, yeah,” Harry said. “That was him.” He leaned towards her, resting his forehead against the bars. “You can trust him,” he promised her. “You can trust me. I’m going to get you out of here. Less than an hour, and all this will be over. You’ll be back at Hogwarts.”

He used the word Hogwarts like a charm, as it had been to him when he was a child, hanging in the air golden and shining as the most precious Snitch in the world.

Varley looked distraught. “Oh my God, Mr Potter, I don’t ever want to go back to school again!”

“What?” Harry asked. “Why not?”

“Because my mother was a *phoenix*,” Varley said, sounding at the end of her tether. “My dad met her when he was – he was a bird Animagus and well – look, he’s my dad and I love him and I believe him when he says it was a magical night!” Varley fixed Harry with eyes that defied him to believe anything else. “Only now everyone at school knows that I was born from an egg,” she said, her voice suddenly forlorn. “And when my eyes start watering in Potions class I end up accidentally resurrecting slugs. It is *so embarrassing*.”

Harry didn’t really know what to say, but he took the fact Varley was dreading her return to Hogwarts as a sign she believed that she would be returning to Hogwarts. He tried to give her a confident and comforting smile.

She looked back at him in flat despair. “That slug has grown to be the size of a spaniel, you know,” she told Harry with a brooding air. “I shudder to think what Ratcliff must be feeding it.”

“Er. Sorry to hear that,” Harry said.

“He’ll never let me hear the end of being *hatched*, you know,” Varley continued dismally. “Not that I care what he thinks.”

“Better your little boyfriend teasing you than being shipped off down the Amazon,” said a woman’s voice.

Harry looked over at her and saw her sitting a few cages away. She had tumbling brown hair and a wry mouth, and she looked perfectly normal until you noticed that her long legs, crossed daintily at the ankle, were faintly patterned with iridescent scales.

“Down the Amazon?” he asked.

“He is not my *boyfriend*,” Varley said in tones of deep and dark offence.

Tall, dark and scaly paid no attention to Varley’s mortal affront. “That’s what I heard. The Amazon,” she said coolly. “Those of us who are unique enough. There was a boy when I was

first here – he was part mermaid like me, but he looked a lot like a full-blood merman.” Her eyes sought Harry’s. “Did they find him?”

“They found him,” Harry said.

He said no more because of the child, but he could see in the woman’s ocean-coloured eyes that she understood well enough. She bowed her head.

“There’s already been one shipment sent up the Amazon,” she told him, her voice less clear. It had sounded like a bell pealing over the waves and it still did, but now it sounded as if there was a storm rising behind the ringing of bells. “I think they’re getting ready for another.”

Sounded like someone had a buyer for curiosities, then. There was a menagerie being built God knew where, for God knew what purpose.

It was better than children being made into potions ingredients. But possibly not by much.

“I don’t see what could have given you that impression,” Varley muttered on.

“I for one,” said Conleth, “am extremely relieved to see you. When do you think D – your partner will be here?”

Harry appreciated Conleth changing from the name he must have heard from Katie, but even hearing it begun made him scowl.

It was black night outside the high windows. Cuthbert must have given the letter to Malfoy by now, and Malfoy wouldn’t hesitate, no matter how upset he might be or how much he might want to be spiteful and let Harry stew. Not with Conleth here. He’d promised Katie, after all, Harry thought, and felt his mouth twist.

“He should be here to save you any minute.”

Malfoy had said *the hell with Katie*. Of course, that had been before Harry decided to engineer an argument with him, but there’d been a reason for that. Malfoy would understand.

Malfoy would probably be nasty about it for weeks, but he’d understand.

Harry wished he would just come so that the child would be safe, and Harry could be let out of these chains and could see exactly how much damage he’d done. He wanted to pace but every time he moved his chains clanked, the collar around his neck tethering him to the floor. He had no idea how everyone else seemed to be enduring it so patiently: he wanted to strain against it until his neck broke or he could rip it out of the concrete.

When exactly was Malfoy going to get here?

“He didn’t give you an estimated time of arrival?” inquired the scaled woman.

“He’ll be here,” Harry snarled.

Harry had just started to calculate precisely what time it was and what time he could reasonably expect Malfoy when he heard the footsteps, and his heart sank.

They came from outside the door, measured and careful, and there was clearly only one set. That idiot hadn't brought any back-up.

There was another step, and then another. There was a stir of unease in the centre of Harry's chest. Surely Malfoy wouldn't be moving so slowly, not with what was at stake. And then there was something else bothering him. He wasn't quite sure what.

The door handle turned, the door opening with a gritty, creaking sound against the concrete. For a moment all Harry could see was a dark shape against an even darker night, and he didn't care because he'd just figured out what was bothering him. He recognised those steps from when they had echoed behind him and he had refused to let himself turn around, forced himself to become captured prey.

Then the kidnapper stepped from darkness into the fluorescent lights.

"You!"

Harry found himself at the other side of the cage without even thinking about it, his chain stretched to full length behind him, his collar biting deep into his throat. His fists were closed so tight around the bars of his cage that they ached and his heart was sinking, his mind suddenly dizzy as he realised how incredibly stupid he had been.

"I'm afraid he won't be here, you know," said Cuthbert, all mock regret.

He grinned and tossed the Galleon Harry had left sealed in Malfoy's letter into the air. It caught the light, gleamed, and fell.

"I just plain forgot to give him your letter, Mr Potter," Cuthbert continued. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I hope this won't cause any trouble for me at the office."

Chapter Fourteen

“You,” Harry said again, the snarl tearing at his throat as the collar bit into his flesh. He had no time for despair: he was filled with sudden furious purpose. “I’m going to *kill* you.”

Cuthbert looked a little taller and a whole lot more self-assured in this cold warehouse than he did at the Auror headquarters. Maybe it was that he’d dropped his humble act. Maybe it was that Cuthbert needed the people around him caged and at his mercy before he could feel tall.

“Threats and arrogance from you, Mr Potter?” he asked. “Wish I could say I was surprised. But that’s you people all over, isn’t it?”

“You... people,” Harry repeated slowly, caught off guard by the venom in Cuthbert’s voice. He expected that tone coming from a Death Eater, not from a Muggleborn’s lips. Even this Muggleborn.

“You have no idea,” Cuthbert said. “how much I hate you. Do you? You and that preening pureblood partner of yours, strutting around the Auror headquarters as if you own the place. Too good to obey the rules, and *certainly* too good for any Mudbloods. I’ve seen it happen my whole life. I was a freak as a kid and then the letter came, I went to Hogwarts and I was *still* a freak. All the purebloods turned their noses up at me. But you people, *you people*, the real freaks, the twisted disgusting offspring of half horses and half fish and nightmare bird creatures, you were all accepted without *question*.” Cuthbert paused for a moment, and then took a swift, deep breath. “Well. You’re probably not feeling quite so pleased with yourself now.”

“My mother was mostly Muggleborn,” Harry said. “One of my best friends is. I don’t think I’m better than the Muggleborn.”

“No, you really don’t think about other people much at all, do you?” Cuthbert asked. “But you always *act* like you’re better than everyone. You never had to think: you never had to deal with anyone looking down on you, not Harry Potter the gorgeous celebrity. You just carry on with your charmed life, never noticing the little people.”

“Yeah, my life’s always been pretty fantastic, you have me there,” Harry snapped. “We all had our problems at school. Not all of us decided to nurse a crazy grudge until we could use it as a reason to kidnap and sell and murder *children*. You lose the moral high ground about when you start putting people in cages!”

Cuthbert just smiled, running his fingers along the bars of a cage. A man snapped in his direction with tusks like a troll’s. Cuthbert simply smiled again, and did not take his eyes off Harry.

“Oh, I’m not doing this because of a grudge,” Cuthbert told him. “I’m doing it for the money. There’s a buyer who’s willing to pay top Galleon for you creatures, don’t ask me why. But I won’t deny that when I found out about you – I knew I had to get you. I wanted you to know it was me. I wanted to see the look on your face when you realised. You never thought much of me, did you? Not even enough to suspect me. I was little more than an owl you were sending to deliver a letter to your precious partner, but now...”

“Oh yes,” Harry said, and let his voice run through a wild wood, snakes in the undergrowth and birds calling overhead. “Imagine what I think of you now.”

It fazed Cuthbert for a moment, but only a moment. He walked around in silence, shoes crunching against the gritty stone of the warehouse floor, and surveyed his caged kingdom. He was soon smiling again.

Harry wished he could hold onto the bright hot rush of anger, and he would’ve been able to if it had just been him in the trap. But there was Eugenia Varley to think of, and Conleth Frexley. There was a sea of caged strangers he had a duty to protect, and a buyer of exotic curiosities he had to catch and punish.

“I do wonder how you got your alibi for the night of the Aurors’ party,” Harry said.

“Why should it matter?” Cuthbert asked.

Harry smiled lazily and purposefully, watching Cuthbert shiver with sudden uncontrollable longing and then look abruptly away. “Call it professional curiosity. Had to put Malcolm Baddock under Imperius to get some action, did you?”

“I certainly did not!” Cuthbert barked, eyes snapping back to Harry’s face and blazing.

Harry had been too occupied with fury and Cuthbert to hear approaching footsteps again: this time he only heard the door open, and at that sound he wheeled around thinking *Malfoy* and feeling a sudden burst of hope.

“He didn’t have to,” said Malcolm Baddock, standing on the threshold and sparkling gently under the fluorescent lights. He smiled a little apologetically at Harry. “I did *say* I had a boyfriend.”

*

“Oh, you have to be kidding me,” Harry snarled after an instant of stunned silence. “You didn’t say you had an *evil* boyfriend!”

Malcolm made a tiny conciliatory gesture, a ring of his catching the light.

“We-ell, I am a Slytherin. You had to know the odds were good.”

Harry was speechless, and Malcolm turned to Cuthbert and gave him a reproachful look. “I asked you to get Zabini instead.”

“Well, I tried to get him, it didn’t work out,” Cuthbert snapped. “And besides that, the buyer wanted Potter and so did I. He’s much stronger, and much more of an exotic specimen, and besides that – I *wanted* to bring him down.”

He shot Harry another furious glance, the longing burning in his hot eyes and fueling his hatred instead of replacing it. Then Malcolm walked over to him and touched his face: Cuthbert’s eyes softened a little.

“I know you did,” Malcolm said. “I know you only went after Zabini for me.”

“That’s so romantic,” Harry drawled.

Cuthbert’s jaw tightened and his head swung in Harry’s direction again, but Malcolm kept a hand against Cuthbert’s cheek and made Cuthbert look at him. Then he kissed him, slowly.

Even murderous kidnapping racist madmen had better love lives than Harry. Because that was fair.

After a while Malcolm detached from Cuthbert, Cuthbert looking dreamily after him, and then looked over at Harry himself and bit his rather swollen lower lip.

“Malfoy’s going to be so upset.”

“Good,” Cuthbert said with finality.

“I know the purebloods are just as bad and oppressive as the halfbreeds and everything,” Malcolm said, as if repeating a lesson he’d learned and found convincing, if a little dull. “But I like Malfoy. He’s nice to me. Well, incredibly snotty and supercilious to me, but that’s his way.”

“You don’t have to be grateful to Malfoy for the scraps he throws to the little people,” Cuthbert said, reaching out and stroking the back of Malcolm’s neck. “You’ve got me now. And Malfoy was the one who tossed you to Potter like a bone to a mad dog so that Potter could throw you out of the house with the rubbish.”

Harry opened his mouth to say that wasn’t how that was, before he remembered that it had been. He didn’t have to justify himself to these people, though. And he didn’t need to blame the Veela blood for being a jerk: he could be a jerk on his own.

“Yeah, that was terrible,” Malcolm said, sounding supremely unconvincing. “I felt used.” He glanced across at Harry and mouthed: “I regret nothing!”

Then he flashed him a grin. Harry didn’t feel in the mood to grin back.

“So… what,” he said. “You just sit back while your boyfriend kidnaps and sells people?”

“I love him, I have to support him,” Malcolm told Harry, eyes wide and guileless. “My dad wasn’t exactly thrilled with his gay magical son either, and Hogwarts wasn’t any kind of safe refuge. Besides – no offence meant – it’s not like you’re exactly people, now is it? Centaurs and mermaids and Veela things, it’s all a bit weird. And Cuthbert’s right, you do act like you think you’re better than everyone. D’you remember Ritchie Coote? You did a number on him. He was all broken and vulnerable and – I thank you for that, obviously, we had a magical weekend in Brighton-”

“Malcolm do you *mind*,” Cuthbert snapped.

“But I never loved anyone until you, darling,” said Malcolm, and flashed him a brilliant

smile. "My theory's that you don't have feelings like proper people do," he told Harry. "So it's okay to sell you really. And it means Cuthbert can keep me in the style to which I fully intend to become accustomed."

"I have feelings," Harry snarled.

"Oh really?" Malcolm asked, eyes bright with interest as a bird's. "For who?"

"It's none of your business!"

Harry was in no mood to talk about boys with Malcolm Baddock, currently the Bonnie to Cuthbert's Clyde, of all the ridiculous things in the world. He almost hated Baddock more than Cuthbert, for being so blithe about the whole thing. He wanted to kill them both with his bare hands.

Malcolm's eyes narrowed into pale slits. "On reflection, I think you were absolutely right to take Potter, Cuthbert. I can always console Malfoy. Happy to do it!"

Harry made a low rumbling sound of threat. Cuthbert looked like he agreed: Malcolm closed his eyes and shivered a little.

Oh, Harry thought.

He wanted to kill Cuthbert and Malcolm. He wanted to beat them up. But he couldn't do that. He only had one way to get to them. Either of them would do: they both had keys at their belts.

Harry and Malcolm had spent a night together: Malcolm should have a little extra immunity, but he didn't hate Harry the way Cuthbert did. He also seemed more likely to be susceptible, in that he seemed to be a bit of a sparkly harlot.

"So," Harry muttered. "Why don't you come over here?"

Malcolm blinked long mascara-black eyelashes at him. "Uh, no thanks," he said warily. "Why're you blushing?"

Harry Potter, irresistible love god, was starting to believe everyone had considerably overestimated the power of his Veela allure.

He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to recall that night with Baddock. It'd been years ago, though, tainted at the time and even more tainted in memory now that he knew what Baddock was. He'd been drunk and it had all been dark, the sheets tangled and the bitter taste of Malcolm's cigarettes on his tongue and he'd been so desperate, been too rough because it'd seemed like there should be some way to shove through all this confusion to reach the clear bright image of Malfoy drunk and laughing by lamplight. He hadn't wanted Malcolm then. He didn't want him now, he knew exactly who and what he wanted, and he didn't feel like pretending anymore.

He wanted to rip Baddock apart. But, it occurred to him slowly, wild Veela wanted to attract humans so they could eat them.

Harry opened his eyes and saw things clearly. His blood was running hot with pure rage and he was remembering a dream about a wild wood. Everything was almost shimmering in his vision, steel and yellow lights all in bright sharp colours. He lifted one hand and curled it, beckoning.

“Hey, Baddock,” he hissed, letting his voice wrap around every syllable, sweet and tight. “I said, come over here. To me.”

Baddock’s eyes drifted almost shut at the sound of Harry’s words and Harry leaned against the bars and willed Baddock to come over. He was a Veela, wasn’t he? That was why they’d locked him up in here, why they thought it was all right. So he’d be one, as hard as he knew how, and when a Veela wanted you to come, you *came*. You didn’t even care why.

“Right now,” Harry growled, and Baddock almost tripped over himself in his sudden rush to the cage.

He was stumbling, runners sliding on the concrete, and then he had the door of the cage swinging open and held in his shaking fingers. Harry leaped for his throat.

Agony hit him like lightning striking at the base of his neck, the collar around his neck suddenly seeming transformed to electrocuted barbed wire. The shock drove Harry to his knees outside the cage, panting and scrabbling at the concrete, blind with pain for a moment.

When Cuthbert strode over and kicked him in the stomach he went down hard, tasting blood in his mouth.

“I suggest you don’t try that again,” Cuthbert snapped. “You think it’s the first time we’ve seen one of you attempting your monster tricks? I gagged the half-siren bitch and she didn’t eat for a week: what do you have to say about that?”

Harry squinted up at him until pain stopped blurring his vision and Cuthbert’s face coalesced into something that made more sense.

“Nothing much,” he rasped. “I already told you I was going to kill you.”

Malcolm was trembling by Cuthbert’s side, held close against him. The glittery letters on his shirt spelling out *Queen of Tarts* wavered into a shining mess before Harry’s eyes: he pulled all the broken drifting pieces of himself together with an effort. He couldn’t afford to pass out yet.

“You misunderstood me,” he said, spitting out blood. It shone vivid scarlet against the grim grey stone. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I just wanted you to come closer so-” He shut his eyes and continued, very low: “Malfoy.”

Cuthbert made a disgusted sound.

“What about Malfoy?” Baddock asked, sounding startled and a little curious.

Harry clenched his fists and pushed himself up off the ground a little, so he was on his hands

and knees instead of knocked flat. It made a tiny bit of difference.

“If you ever got the chance to say something to him,” he said hoarsely. “You could say I’d told you – oh, anytime. There’s something I just-” He swallowed, his throat slick with blood. “I really want him to know.”

“Let’s get going, Malcolm,” Cuthbert said.

“Just a minute,” said Baddock, sounding rather distracted. He knelt down by Harry, his face wavering before Harry’s eyes. “What?” he asked, a little gently. “What do you want me to tell Malfoy? I will.”

Harry reached out and took hold of Baddock’s stupid sparkly t-shirt in one hand, drawing him close, and whispered in his ear. Then he let himself sag, even though it made him sick to collapse with his head on Baddock’s shoulder. He couldn’t last a minute more. He just slipped, sick and aching, into a long cold darkness.

*

Harry hadn’t been awake all that long when the morning light outside one window was suddenly obscured, as if there was a very localised eclipse happening.

Harry’d been listening to Eugenia Varley describing how she might really rather go up the Amazon than face the remorseless teasing in store for her back at Hogwarts.

“He’ll probably call me Eggenia from now on,” she said morosely.

“This’d be Ratcliff, then?”

Varley eyed Harry coldly. “I don’t see why you decided to bring him up.”

Harry didn’t have much practice talking to children, but he thought that Varley might be especially difficult. She was more like a rather prim hedgehog than his idea of a victimised child, and she was so *real*, they were all so real. He couldn’t believe how stupid what Baddock had said was. He was getting every one of them out.

“So now that your partner’s not coming,” began the part-mermaid. “Should we just-”

“Oh, he’s still coming,” Harry said absently. “I just don’t know how long he’ll be. So instead of waiting around for him, I suggest-”

That was when the sun was blotted out in one window. Harry looked up at the shadow speeding towards them and relaxed a little, filled with sudden warmth. He’d known Malfoy was coming: he hadn’t known how he’d get there or when, but he’d known. Still, it was good to be proven right, to have the world as he’d known it must be.

His shoulders eased down as the flying car came blasting in, obliterating the window and most of the wall. Chunks of masonry littered the floor suddenly, rolling between the cages, and Ron popped his head out of the driver’s seat and shouted: “Everyone all right down there? Yell if anyone got hurt, okay?”

The passenger door slammed open in midair and a figure threw himself out, a blur of dark clothes and bright hair in the shadow of the car. He hit the floor rolling just as Harry had taught him, rolled to his feet and raked his eyes across the cages as if his line of sight was a searchlight with only one target. His gaze met Harry's and locked.

"You," snarled Malfoy.

He strode through the warehouse as if steel cages and their occupants were something he barely noticed at all, irrelevant obstacles in his path. His eyes didn't leave Harry's, his focus absolute and furious. He stormed through the halfbreeds until he was upon Harry, and then he grabbed the collar around Harry's neck, seeming to find it perfectly natural it was there, twisted the leash around his own wrist in one economical movement and pulled.

"You are so stupid I could *kill* you," Malfoy raged, and kissed him.

It was possibly the worst kiss of Harry's life. Malfoy was obviously too frantic and angry to think about it at all, it was just a crush of mouths as if Malfoy had decided that hitting Harry with his face was the way to punish him, and it made every muscle in Harry's body relax abruptly and completely as if someone had unwound every tight knot in him at once and everything could go smoothly, could be simple, for a moment.

Harry drew in a breath and leaned in against Malfoy, resting along the sharp planes and angles of his body. Malfoy's other hand, the one not knotted around the choke chain, was suddenly there and gentle at the back of his head, fingers curled in Harry's hair. Malfoy opened his mouth a little, lips parting on a breath that was either resigned or relieved, and Harry was finally close enough. He was kissing Malfoy back, holding on tight to the worn warm material of his t-shirt, morning light brimming in his almost-shut eyes.

He opened them when Malfoy pulled back, just a bit, blinked and stared at Malfoy's kissed-pink mouth and cool accusing eyes.

"You idiot. How dare you do something so stupid?" Malfoy demanded, sweeping on with his raging indignation and superbly ignoring any small interruption that might have occurred in his tirade. "What is wrong with you? You know better than this by now, Potter!"

"I had to," Harry said quietly. He leaned in and kissed Malfoy's angry mouth again: it helped him think. "You weren't listening – you were hell-bent on solving it all yourself, and there wasn't time, there were children involved and you weren't listening."

"I *would* have listened," Malfoy argued, sounding a little startled but mostly insistent that he had absolutely not been wrong, oh no, because all his plans were so brilliant. "If you'd told me what you were planning and told me you were going to do it no matter what, I would've helped, I would have stopped you being so unforgivably stupid, that's what I *do*."

Harry hadn't been sure that came before all else, not when Katie was involved, but he didn't know how to put that and it didn't matter anyway. He was sure enough, now, and all the explanations he could think of seemed unimportant and were fragmenting in his mind. He was vividly aware of Malfoy's body under his clothes, so close, strength and warm skin a fragile layer of cotton and denim away.

“You were all over the place,” he mumbled. “I wanted to solve it: I didn’t want you upset any more.”

Malfoy laughed somewhere in between the slide of their mouths, sounding slightly desperate. “Yes, this was much better. Thanks for being so considerate, Potter. I only thought you might be *dead*: nothing to concern yourself with. If you ever, ever do anything like this again-”

“No,” Harry said, soothing. “No, I won’t.”

“I’ll kill you,” said Malfoy into another kiss. “I swear I will.”

“Hem *hem*,” said Eugenia Varley, in tones appropriate for a disapproving and possibly sixty-year-old schoolteacher.

Harry realised what he was doing and where he was doing it at about the same time that Malfoy whirled away from him, scarlet flooding his face, looking out on the steel sea of cages and the hovering car.

The half-mermaid woman had her faintly-scaled legs crossed before her. She looked highly amused and as if all she had to wish for in the world was popcorn.

“Don’t mind us,” she said.

Even the back of Malfoy’s neck was pink. He did not, however, let go of the chain. It stayed wrapped tight around his wrist, the link between him and Harry held taut. He’d know if Harry even moved.

From on high in the car came Ron’s plaintive voice. “Are they done yet?”

Harry was vaguely horrified to see a face peeping out of the rear window of the car, and to realise that Crabbe and Goyle were in the backseat.

“I think so,” Goyle called back to Ron. “Did you see that, Vince? That was adorable. Vince? Vince, why don’t you look surprised? *What have you been keeping from me?*”

“Oh my God,” Malfoy muttered. “I wish I was dead.”

The car maneuvered in midair, Ron clearly searching for a place where he could land and park without crashing into a cage. He eventually found one, his face in the window looking dismayed over getting a dent in back, even though the entire front of the car was pretty much destroyed.

“Quite the rescue party,” Harry observed. “Er – how’d that happen?”

“I was a *little upset*,” Malfoy said in a voice that made Harry wonder whether the Auror headquarters or Harry’s flat were currently in ruins. “So Crabbe and Goyle were with me. At first they were just trying to get me to come to the pub and then when I realised you were nowhere to be found – they were trying to calm me down. I found Weasley and he told me your little plan – not that it deserves to be called a plan, it was some sort of mutant hideous

hybrid baby born of lunatic scheming and good old straightforward lunacy-”

Harry reached out and touched Malfoy between his shoulderblades, reminding him that this might not be the ideal time to go off on one.

Malfoy’s shoulders eased down a fraction. “Anyway, I had some – spies Hermione loaned me watching Malcolm Baddock, among other people. Nobody else did anything suspicious during the night, but they reported back that Baddock had come here, so – I came here.”

“Didn’t know you suspected Malcolm Baddock,” Harry said mildly.

Malfoy must still have been terribly off balance, as he did not claim that everything had been part of an enormous overarching plot of his or start with any ‘Elementary, my dear Potter’ posturing.

“I didn’t, really,” he answered. “But it couldn’t be discounted. He was always hanging around, and acting like he wanted to sleep with me was a laughably transparent pretext. Besides, he’s Muggleborn, and I knew he had issues with his father. Oh, well. A Slytherin was the evil mastermind behind all of this.” Malfoy sighed. “I wish people wouldn’t play into stereotypes so much, but I suppose I’m not surprised. Only a Slytherin would have been able to lead us astray for so long.”

“I gave a letter for you to Cuthbert,” Harry said.

“Also, you slept with someone who was evil,” Malfoy continued. “Ha!”

Then he looked over at Harry and frowned, a line appearing between his brows. His face was already strained, terribly tired with shadows marked under his eyes: he clearly wasn’t coming up with any more brilliant leaps until he got some rest.

“So Cuthbert is Baddock’s puppet?” he asked tentatively. “Just one of the many puppets in his circus of evil?”

“Fraid not,” Harry said. “Cuthbert’s an evil mastermind. They, uh, seem to be in - involved. Romantically.”

“Oh my God, a Hufflepuff? He should kill himself out of shame,” Malfoy announced. “And oh my God, a Hufflepuff is our - *Cuthbert* is – Maybe I’ll kill myself out of shame.” He cast Harry a despairing glance. “Well,” he said. “You still slept with someone evil.”

“It was your idea,” Harry said. “I blame you.”

Ron, Crabbe and Goyle were wending their way through the forest of cages. Goyle stopped to chat with an unfortunate soul who looked like he might be part-Hippogriff, but Ron and Crabbe came steadily on.

“Harry, mate,” Ron said. “Glad you’re okay. Possibly not as glad as some people, or at least I don’t plan on expressing it the same way-”

“Oh, bite me,” Malfoy snarled, re-commencing looking like he wanted to die of shame. The

fading blush went violently pink again.

“No thanks,” said Ron. “Okay, so I didn’t bring a crowbar or anything and I presume these cages are magically reinforced. How are we going to get everybody out?”

That was when the door to the warehouse swung open, and Cuthbert and Malcolm Baddock stepped inside.

*

“Baddock,” Malfoy said in a voice of such menace that Baddock stepped back, “I am *so very* disappointed in you.”

“Um,” said Baddock, shoulders hunching inside his inevitably sparkly *Mine’s Eleven Inches – And My Wand’s Not Bad Either!* t-shirt.

Cuthbert looked surprised for a moment, then visibly pulled himself together. “I’d suggest that you shut up,” he suggested. “Unless you want Potter to get another little shock, that is.”

Malfoy glanced over at Harry’s collar, and then the side of his face that he thought might’ve got a bit bruised falling down. Then he returned his gaze to Cuthbert, where it rested cold as any spoken threat.

Harry coughed and said: “About that.”

Everyone looked at him and Harry smiled, then snapped off the collar around his neck and tossed it to the ground.

On that signal the other halfbreeds swung open their cage doors, and all of them stepped out free.

Harry tilted his head to enjoy the sight of Cuthbert and Baddock’s faces.

“Why didn’t you do that before?” Malfoy asked, dropping the chain and grabbing his wand in one movement.

“I was perfectly happy where I was,” Harry said.

Malfoy blinked at him, taking another moment to be startled for some reason, but he did not pass any comment. What he did was pass over his spare wand from its sheath under his t-shirt.

“Thought you might have a use for this.”

Harry grinned and Malfoy grinned back, fierce and simple. “Thanks.”

“Malcolm,” Cuthbert said in a small voice. “Is there any particular reason you didn’t notice that Potter had stolen your keys?”

“Well it’s not like I kept my clothes on long after we left, I just thought I’d misplaced them

somewhere in the rush, Veela pheromones do not leave your head clear enough for much rational thought!" Baddock burst out. "Also, I'm sorry." He took a long look at the halfbreeds, all moving gradually closer. "Really sorry."

There was almost a hush as the halfbreeds closed in, except for Malfoy snickering.

"Veela pheromones?"

"Had to get Baddock closer," Harry explained briefly. "Used the Veela thing. Almost worked, and then I got him to come the rest of the way telling him I had a message for you."

"What did you say?" Malfoy asked in a sharp voice.

"Don't remember, I was kind of losing consciousness at the time," Harry said. "Something sappy." He flashed Malfoy another grin, this one triumphant. "Got the keys."

"Well, that is the important thing," Malfoy conceded.

"Then when I woke up I got everyone free," Harry said. "I knew you'd come, but I didn't know when and there was no point sticking around. We thought we'd surprise them when they came in."

"Sort of like this," Malfoy murmured.

Cuthbert and Baddock had their backs to the door now, the halfbreeds surrounding them like a magically-growing wall of thorns with grasping hands and bared teeth. Cuthbert opened the door with a wrench and a boy who looked about thirteen in the back spoke a single word in a language Harry didn't know but that sounded like the howling of the wind in a storm turned to words. The door slammed shut, and did not open when Cuthbert scrabbled at it.

"Just like this," Harry breathed. "Yeah."

Conleth gave a long terrible cry that echoed in Harry's bones and reminded him that the scream of a banshee was supposed to herald death. Conleth's red head was cocked back, like a bird about to strike.

Cuthbert lifted his wand and yelled out a spell that knocked Conleth back a few paces. Baddock took advantage of the distraction to make a break for it and hurl himself through the crowd, parting in shock, towards what Harry saw in an instant of crystal clarity was his target: the youngest halfbreed there and the least likely to be able to protect herself. Eugenia Varley.

Who promptly burst into flame.

"I don't think so!" she hissed, crackling and not burning at the heart of fire, her red hair loose now and streaming in the fire as if it was water, as if this was her element. "I've had enough! I'm going *home*!"

Harry tackled Baddock to the ground at her blazing feet.

“You heard her,” he said, and punched him.

Then he punched him again. Baddock tried to twist away and speak the words of a spell: Harry hit him in the mouth. Baddock was weak, they were both weak and pathetic, preying on children, turning on prejudice with prejudice but they’d be sorry, he’d make them sorry, and they would never ever touch another child again.

He stopped punching Baddock when a hand grasped his wrist in an inexorable hold, and he looked up into Malfoy’s eyes.

“Maybe you don’t want to do this,” Malfoy said, his voice icy-cool but with effort behind it.

“Malfoy-” breathed Baddock through bloody lips.

Malfoy did not even spare him a glance, but he curled his lip in contempt. “Maybe you do,” he continued, and there was chill fury behind the words, born of protective rage that must have been building all night. “You decide.”

Malfoy would understand, no matter what he did. They both knew enough about hatred and the almost-irresistible desire to lash out that Malfoy would get it: that probably a large part of him wanted Harry to murder Baddock right now.

Harry wanted to murder Baddock. He wanted to kill them both, and he wanted it badly.

Only Malfoy had stopped him and given him a moment to think. Varley was there, very close, and at the heart of the flame she was a scared child. Ron was here too, and Crabbe and Goyle, people he respected: and he thought the halfbreeds would follow his lead. Cuthbert and Baddock had caged them like animals. But they weren’t animals.

He was an Auror.

He shut his eyes, pushing down the screaming impulse to leap, feeling sweat running down under his shirt. For a moment he thought about catching Malfoy’s wrist and pulling him in close, even over Baddock’s body, being able to hide his face in the curve of Malfoy’s throat and have a moment of peace.

He pulled his wrist out of Malfoy’s grip and climbed to his feet. There was a sound behind him like Baddock reaching for his wand or moving to attack him, and Harry did not even glance around.

Sure enough, Malfoy’s voice behind him said “Oh no you don’t,” and, unless Harry was very much mistaken, there was the sound of another punch being thrown.

Before him stood the sea of halfbreeds, and Ron, Crabbe and Goyle with their wands out. Conleth seemed to have recovered and hurled Cuthbert to the ground. As Harry watched the half-mermaid woman broke Cuthbert’s wand over one iridescent-scaled knee. Some of them were hanging back, but there were enough halfbreeds closing in, in a beautiful deadly ring, forming an ever-tightening noose.

Harry pitched his voice, commanding as snakes striking or birds of prey dropping from a

clear sky, to carry above banshee cries and siren song.

“Stop!”

Conleth didn't look like he was going to. Then the half-mermaid woman sighed and shook her head, hair flaring out like seaweed caught in the waves, and grabbed his arm. A man with little horns and a ring through his bull-like nose – half-minotaur, Harry presumed – stepped aside to let Harry pass.

The halfbreeds opened their murderous little knot to let Harry slip through. They did not close again, just stood there, all tensed to move but not moving, all of them watching. A boy with a few snakes growing among his dreadlocks nodded so the snakes all hissed and Cuthbert shuddered. They stood there furious but controlled – and controlled, not tamed.

The half-mermaid passed Harry the broken pieces of Cuthbert's wand.

“I'm going to take him down to Auror headquarters,” Harry said, forcing his voice to sound calm and authoritative. “We're going to get the name of his buyer. You can all testify against him. You can all come to see him locked up in a cage for the rest of his life.”

Cuthbert lay there silently, eyes huge with shock or fear. Harry didn't care much which it was. He tossed the broken remains of Cuthbert's wand down as if they were so much rubbish: they landed on Cuthbert's chest and Cuthbert looked down at the pieces, still silent.

“I would've thought you'd be happy, Cuthbert,” Harry said, baring his teeth. “See? Sometimes I do follow the rules.”

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The paperwork was going to be a massive and horrible undertaking: that was clear. They were going to have to go over all of the reports about Cuthbert's traineeship, which in Harry's case meant he was going to have to actually write those reports first. And the Auror headquarters was crammed to bursting with half-breeds and their families, and there was a stack of release forms a mile high that said their statements had been taken and they were free to go.

Harry wanted them all free immediately, and was doing his best to make it happen.

A few of them seemed content enough to stay. The half-mermaid woman, whose name had turned out to be Araminta, seemed perfectly happy lounging against office desks and flirting in a leisurely way with Louison. Conleth Frexley had made a leap at Katie and Harry hadn't seen them for a while.

Until now, as Katie had just appeared beside Malfoy's desk. Wonderful.

“Hi, Draco,” she said. She was fiddling with her brown hair, which was more disarranged and fuzzy than usual, catching gold in the light. She looked distressed and happy and terribly

grateful, and Harry couldn't imagine anyone who loved her looking at her without feeling something.

Harry hated her, utterly and completely, even though she had not done a thing wrong.

Malfoy tipped his head back to look up at her, leaning away from his desk and the stacked papers and into his chair.

"Hi," he responded.

"I just wanted to-" Katie made an expansive movement. "Thank you. Draco. For – for everything."

"You're welcome for everything," Malfoy told her.

Katie sighed and tucked her hands into her sleeves in what seemed to be a forcible effort to stop herself fiddling with her hair. "I was hoping that maybe it's been long enough," she began. "I wanted – I'd like very much to be friends."

Malfoy hesitated. "Maybe," he said. "You might decide you don't want to be. I'm not very nice."

Katie made a little face, as if she was pleased but confused. "Well – I'd like to try."

"All right, then," Malfoy said, and chucked a file at her head. Katie only barely managed to catch it and not sustain a concussion. "Go file that in the archives, Bell," he said cheerfully, returning to his stack. "Do try not to lose this one, sometimes I think archives are secretly run by a flock of rather unintelligent ducks. They don't hand out awards at the ceremonies for incompetence, you know."

"Er," said Katie.

Malfoy lifted his eyebrows at her with an extremely pureblood expression. "Sometime today would be ideal, Bell," he told her coolly, and then grinned. "I told you I wasn't very nice."

"Well," Katie said, still looking shocked but smiling faintly back. "All right. I'll go file this away."

She wandered off. Malfoy returned to his papers with a slight smile playing about his lips. Harry wasn't sure whether what had just happened was good or bad and he frankly wished that Katie had announced she was moving to Germany with Conleth, but there was work to be done and people to be freed. He put his head down.

He lifted it some little time later, when Shackbolt told them that Eugenia Varley's father could not be reached at the moment and he and Malfoy had been detailed to take her back to Hogwarts.

"Oh," Harry said, and smiled at Shackbolt. Shackbolt's face remained as perfectly wooden as ever.

“Don’t hang around and make me change my mind about letting you two go off without supervision,” he said, and five minutes later Harry, Malfoy and Varley were in the car, sailing out into what was still a very early morning.

Varley drooped in the backseat, not exactly the picture of a joyfully liberated child. Her hair still smelled faintly of ashes. Malfoy tried to cheer her up by showing her Maurice the car radio, with very limited success.

They landed the car on the Hogwarts lawn. The first person to arrive was Lavender Brown, who came running out of her house to sweep Varley off her feet in an exuberant hug. Then came a trickle and after that a flood of students, obviously seeing some commotion out the windows they hoped would be more interesting than morning classes.

Varley clung a little to Lavender. Malfoy was engaged talking to Snape as usual. Harry went to meet a short dark boy in pyjamas, easily recognisable because of the giant slug he had cradled in his arms.

“Ratcliff?” he asked.

“Mr Potter,” Ratcliff said. “Varley back, then? D’you see how Eustace has grown?”

“Er – very nice,” Harry said doubtfully. “Look, I wanted a word. The thing is, and you might not have realised this yet, but Eugenia Varley is half phoenix. That would be how she, er, heals slugs on the brink of death with her tears, and uh – occasionally bursts into flames. What I think you should remember is-”

He had an awkward sort of speech worked out about not bullying her and definitely not mentioning the born out of an egg thing she seemed so sensitive about, but he stopped, startled, as it dawned on him that the expression Ratcliff wore was very strange.

“Seriously, sir?” he asked.

“Er – yeah,” said Harry.

“So – so *theoretically* she could raise an entire undead slug army,” Ratcliff said. “And sometimes she goes on fire. That’s what you’re saying to me.”

“Er – yeah,” Harry repeated.

Ratcliff’s face shone with a look of pure unholy delight.

“My dad told me that I’d figure out what girls were for about now,” he confided, apparently so overcome that he could only speak in a whisper.

Then he turned and made purposefully for Lavender and Varley. Varley looked at him with intense suspicion as he came.

“And what do you want?” she inquired, letting Lavender’s hand drop at last.

Ratcliff sidled up close to her. “Eugenia,” he said with an ingratiating smile. “I’m so glad

you're back." He paused and added, in the tones of one making an offer no woman could refuse: "Would you like to hold my slug?"

Harry shook his head as he turned away from them and towards Malfoy. Possibly he should have predicted this, but even after all the practice he'd had Slytherins were still pretty hard to fathom.

Malfoy was still talking to Snape, right hand making some sort of gesture no doubt illustrating Malfoy's own extreme brilliance. Harry caught his left, hand sliding up to fasten on his wrist.

"Hey," he said. Malfoy leaned back against him a bit, in a small gesture he'd made a thousand times, that meant he was tired and glad Harry was there.

"Hey."

Snape regarded them in a way that suggested he was hating life just a little more than usual today.

Harry smiled at him brightly, since he'd learned that was what bothered Snape the most, and turned to Malfoy.

"Let's go home."

"You certainly look as if you could use some rest," Snape said grudgingly, with possible concern hidden behind all the heaping contempt for the entire world. "Go, then."

The 'And take your monkey with you' was, Harry felt, implied.

Snape turned with his robe billowing in the wind and morning sunlight silver on the new grey in his hair, and started to herd the students back up towards the school. He looked rather like a large crow who had adopted the duties of a sheepdog, not fitted for it but doing his duty anyway. The students went willingly enough with him and back into the castle.

Harry and Malfoy went home.

*

What Harry would have done, if he could've had exactly what he wanted, was crawl into bed with Malfoy and sleep for about twelve hours. He might've settled on putting off sleep for a bit.

What he actually did when they got to the flat was make some tea. It seemed a neutral and not-presumptuous sort of thing to do, since kissing Malfoy against the fridge had gone so badly. He made coffee for Malfoy as well, stirring the dark liquid, hearing the spoon clink against the china.

Malfoy, who'd slid up on the kitchen counter when Harry went for the kettle, accepted it from him without comment. He started slightly when their fingers brushed but kept his head down, bowed over his cup, and Harry turned back to making himself tea.

Silence was never a good sign in the land of Malfoy. It was more along the lines of a sign that warned for both quicksand and dragons.

For a moment Harry wished with all his heart that they were back at the warehouse where everything had seemed so simple, with Malfoy's hand in his hair.

He turned with the mug of tea in his hand, intending to go for the sofa, and then Malfoy kicked up a leg against the fridge and effectively blocked Harry's way.

Harry stared at him and Malfoy lifted his chin almost defiantly.

"I think – I need to apologise," he said, hesitating on every word as if he had to choose just the right one.

"What?" Harry asked blankly.

Malfoy wasn't quite meeting his eyes. "For earlier," he explained. "I was overwrought."

"For-?" Harry made an incredulous sound and shoved his mug onto the draining board. It upset and fell into the sink, sloshing tea everywhere. "For God's sake, Malfoy, it's not like I *minded*."

"No," Malfoy conceded, his mouth suddenly at a strange angle as if he were tasting something he was unfamiliar with and uncertain about. "I know that. It's just that it wasn't – I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea."

Harry leaned back against the stove, holding onto the edge with fingers suddenly clenched tight.

"Oh," he said. "Right."

"We were going to live together," Malfoy said, and Harry flinched at his use of the past tense. "And be partners, and I'd much – I'd much rather do that. I'd like to live with you."

"Who ever said anything about *not* living together?" Harry demanded, rough with misery and then regretting it when Malfoy's face shut up even further. "I want to live together too. It was my idea. What has living together got to do with anything?"

"Well, we couldn't-" Malfoy began, voice wavering.

"Why *not*?" Harry exclaimed, and felt immediately guilty.

It wasn't Malfoy's fault if he didn't feel the same way. Just because having Malfoy touch him seemed necessary as air didn't mean it was: it didn't mean that Harry could demand to have him as a right. This was probably pretty unpleasant for Malfoy, too. Harry knew that Malfoy didn't like hurting him.

He looked up from the floor, expecting to see Malfoy feeling at least a little sorry for him.

Malfoy looked blazingly angry.

“You don’t understand me at all, do you?” he asked, voice cutting with the precision of a surgeon’s knife. “Either that or you don’t care, or you’re totally crazy. You may think that would be a terribly convenient solution, but do you have any idea what it would do to me – I don’t work like that! It would be horrible and – and insane, living and working and... it’d be putting all my eggs in one basket and there’d be no reason to do it, no way it couldn’t fall to pieces. You must be mad. Don’t you see what a disaster it would be?”

“You’re right,” Harry said, and watched Malfoy’s shoulders hunch in and wanted to smash something. “I don’t understand you,” he went on. “Are you – all I got from everything you just said was that you think I’m a demented egg basket.”

A smile ghosted Malfoy’s lips, faint and not quite there, and Harry felt a hollow place under his ribs: he wished he could summon a smile back and Malfoy’s smile could become real, that they could fix things and go back to what they had been.

“I think...” Malfoy swallowed, tipping his head back and shutting his eyes.

Harry had the unacceptable impulse to just cross the space between them – it wasn’t much, it would be so easy – and bury his face in Malfoy’s throat, just press into the long lean line of his body and slide his mouth up to Malfoy’s ear, find his lips.

Malfoy’s eyes opened, clear cold grey. Harry held onto the edge of the stove hard.

“I think we should just be friends,” Malfoy said. “Okay?”

Harry gritted his teeth. It was up to Malfoy. He had absolutely no right. “Okay,” he said hoarsely.

“Okay.” The word trembled on a sound Malfoy made that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Okay. Good. I’m glad that’s settled.”

Harry looked at the floor. Malfoy lowered his legs from the fridge, clearing the obstacle from Harry’s path so he could move past, and slid off the counter.

“We can forget this whole thing,” Malfoy said without much conviction. There was a pleading note in his voice. “It’s not like you’re in love with me,” he added, and managed a real laugh at that, as if he had found the one supremely ridiculous thing in the world to say.

Harry lifted his gaze from the floor.

“But I am,” he said, his voice still far too rough. “I mean – I think I am.”

He felt angry and helpless: it wasn’t like it was going to make any difference, but Malfoy didn’t have to laugh. He didn’t know where to look after saying it – he’d never said anything like that in his life before – so he shoved his hands, still clenched tight, in his pockets, and looked anywhere but at Malfoy.

“You – think you are,” Malfoy said slowly, his voice colourless. “When will you be sure?”

“I am sure!” Harry told him violently. “I mean, I know how I – how I feel. It’s just I was expecting it to be a bit – different. More like people say or you read in books. Something, something more – something nice. More polite – I’m saying this wrong.”

“How new and different that must be for you,” Malfoy observed, his voice shaking. “And what happens to me when you find this nice polite version of things?”

Harry reached up and clasped the back of his own neck to keep from doing anything else, the movement abrupt and frustrated. He wanted to do something, he didn’t know what.

He looked at Malfoy because he was helpless to do anything else, he couldn’t even go five minutes without looking. Malfoy was staring at him with wide eyes, hair standing up like a dandelion clock, looking as if he’d just received an electric shock or been scared to within an inch of his life.

He was so infuriating that he was probably going to kill Harry one day, but for some reason looking at him edged Harry slightly towards calm.

“Nothing,” he said abruptly, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as if he could erase all these words and make them come out right. “It wouldn’t change anything, all right? I’d still want you more.”

Malfoy swallowed again: there was a little click as he did it, as if his throat was very dry.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Harry said, despairing. “I didn’t mean want like – I want *you*, that’s what-”

“All right, I understand, shut up,” Malfoy said sharply, which was a profound and enormous relief. “I’m thinking. Oh my God, the courting.”

“Er,” Harry said. “Yeah. That was – I’m sure I can control that now.”

“Oh my God,” Malfoy said in a weak voice. “And when were you planning on telling me any of this?”

There was an edge to his voice now, a peremptory and very Malfoyesque edge that always let Harry know it was pretty important to fight his own corner or else he was going to be blamed for anything and everything in the entire world.

“I thought I’d made it pretty clear,” he snapped.

“Oh–” Malfoy made a sound that indicated he was at a loss for words, which lasted for all of a minute. “Oh no you did not, you raving lunatic! What in God’s name – how was I supposed to – you said it was no big deal!”

“No I didn’t,” Harry said flatly. “What are you talking about?”

“Right here,” Malfoy told him, speaking with the care of a man skirting the edge of madness. “I was standing right here in this kitchen, and I said ‘*This isn’t a big deal, is it?*’ and you said

No. Were you speaking in some kind of insane person code? Because I did not get that!”

Light dawned for Harry. He remembered that night perfectly well: he could even see what Malfoy was talking about, though Malfoy had clearly been taking apart the pieces of that night and putting them together so they made no sense at all.

“You asked if it was a big deal and if it was going to change anything. And I said that no, nothing had to change.”

“No, you said no, as in it wasn’t a big deal, and then that-” Malfoy possibly realised that telling Harry he hadn’t meant what he’d said was a losing proposition, and pinched the skin between his eyebrows as if he was getting a headache. “Oh my God,” he repeated in hollow tones. “We are meant to be specially trained for communicative and interrogative skills. We are meant to be the *crème de la crème*. I think I am going to cry.”

“So,” Harry said, and his voice stuck in his throat. “So you didn’t know any of this. I mean, you didn’t have any idea. Then what – what did you think I was suggesting, for God’s sake, moving you in as some kind of useful-”

“Solution?” Malfoy filled in, saying the word in very much the same way someone might say ‘Checkmate.’

Harry shut his eyes.

“All right, I put that badly.”

“Yes you did!” Malfoy exclaimed, sounding almost desperately pleased to have something he could be sure of. “And how was I supposed to know anything, when it sounded like it was Coote all over again, like you just wanted some easy and convenient solution-”

“Malfoy, nobody in his right mind would think you were an easy solution to anything!”

“So what?” Malfoy yelled. “I was supposed to sit down and think to myself, why, Draco Malfoy, you’re enormously difficult to cope with, so Potter must be in – in-”

He seemed to run down on that one like a clockwork toy, mouth forming a soft and almost helpless shape, as if he did not know how to form words in a universe where something like that was possible.

He really hadn’t known. It was terribly clear: it broke Harry’s heart.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, and took his hand out of his pocket and reached out. “Something like that.”

He hadn’t been going to grab or anything, just – touch him somehow, but Malfoy shied back a little, drawing his legs up onto the counter and locking his arms around his knees. Harry let his hand drop.

“I have to think for a minute,” Malfoy told him in a stifled voice.

“Sure,” Harry said. “Obviously. ’Course.”

He just about stopped himself from telling Malfoy to take as long as he liked. He didn’t know whether this was a good sign or not. Maybe not: Malfoy might just be thinking of a way to let him down easy.

Maybe, though.

Harry looked over at Malfoy, who was staring at his knees and apparently lost in thought: at his intent profile and his lowered eyelids. He looked tired, probably on the verge of being ill, looked like all Harry wanted in the world.

“You really have to learn to leave the plans up to me,” Malfoy said abruptly, and more as if he was thinking aloud than addressing Harry.

“Sorry?”

“You know, that is exactly how I would describe your plans,” Malfoy agreed smoothly. “If I didn’t use a stronger word. I mean, think about it. Everything I said before was true. You are a demented egg basket. If I was living with you and working with you and – and – what would I do if you died?”

“What would I do if *you* died?”

Malfoy looked badly disconcerted, as if it had never occurred to him that the thought would make Harry sick and keep him up at nights. It didn’t change anything, and wouldn’t: they were both in too deep already, there would be no way to fix that or go back even if Harry wanted to.

“So we just move right into living together and working together and – sleeping together. Forget about that whole dating nonsense.”

“We could date,” Harry said. “Where do you want to go? Malfoy, Jesus, isn’t it obvious-”

Wasn’t it obvious that he would’ve done anything. That he still would.

“I’m not saying I don’t want to,” Malfoy said, sounding like a potentially dangerous lunatic. “I’m saying that – that it’s an insane plan. I mean, I wasn’t even – I’d never, before – and you’re the way you are, and it would all be bound to crash and burn. It wouldn’t work.”

“Right,” Harry said.

He supposed he had his answer, then. He didn’t see why Malfoy had felt the need to draw it out and torture him like this. He supposed Malfoy had some stupid reason like trying to convince him, as if he could persuade Harry to feel a different way. As if anything could do that.

“We’re going to have to go up the Amazon,” Malfoy said suddenly. Harry blinked at this wildly inappropriate change of topic. “I mean, we have to, to catch the guy buying the halfbreeds and free the ones he already has,” Malfoy continued rapidly, as if what he was

saying made any sort of sense. “We have to go up the Amazon. It could take weeks. That wouldn’t – wouldn’t be living together.”

Harry went still.

“We could try it,” Malfoy went on, low and still a little uncertain. “We could try and see. If – if you think that’s a good plan.”

“You’re brilliant,” Harry said, and lunged at him.

He didn’t kiss him: he stopped himself before he did that. Apparently he’d done everything wrong so far, but he could try to do this right. He was pressed up against Malfoy just like he’d wanted to be, Malfoy trapped between his body and the kitchen counter, suddenly and wonderfully close. Harry could smell him and feel him: Malfoy’s heart was beating wild and fast against his chest. Harry was astonishingly, stupidly happy.

He wanted to get this right. He took a deep breath, ducked his head and wondered if he should’ve said something else rather than just going for Malfoy like a starving man offered food at last.

Malfoy touched his hair, lingering and a little hesitant, in that way he had. It was so familiar and so good it sent a pang through Harry’s chest, sharp and strong: it hurt. He drew in another breath and leaned against Malfoy, closer, dipped his head and nuzzled up along Malfoy’s throat, felt Malfoy shudder against him.

He was stopped by the touch of Malfoy’s hand, under his chin, bringing his head up. Malfoy smirked at him hesitantly, their noses brushing.

Malfoy whispered: “I’ve been telling you that for years, Potter,” and kissed him, hands closing hard on Harry’s arms suddenly, pushing him so Harry stumbled backwards against the fridge.

It was strange, feeling himself pinned, feeling that Malfoy was strong enough to hold him. Harry let out a startled sound and felt Malfoy smirk against his mouth.

“This is *me*, Potter,” he said, held tight and sweet against Harry, the curve of his mouth tantalising even while it was touching Harry’s. “If you don’t want-”

“God, I do,” breathed Harry, between kisses in morning sunlight turning gold, laughing at himself and at absurd, impossible Malfoy: his hands came up to grasp handfuls of Malfoy’s worn t-shirt, cup his face, run through his soft hair. He wanted everything, all at once. “I do,” he insisted, finally able to tell him, barely able to draw in a proper breath by now. Malfoy’s mouth was hot and trembling on his. “I do. I do.”

Epilogue

“Hey,” Harry said, propping his forearms up on the counter. “Could I get a table for, um, eight?”

He looked around the café in Hyde Park a bit anxiously as he did so: it was white and washed clean by sunlight. This was the first day of the year really promising summer, and it had called people out to the park in their droves. The place was pretty packed.

When he looked back, the waiter was looking at him: friendly, and with that all-too-usual touch of appreciation.

“I think you could,” the waiter said, flashing a bright-white grin. “You could also get my phone number, if you’re interested.”

He was pretty good-looking, Harry noticed. He had freckles. Good for him.

“Taken,” Harry said cheerfully. “I’ll take the table, though.”

The waiter shrugged philosophically and went to fetch Harry some menus. Harry was pretty sure they were just going to get lemonade and scones, but it did no harm to take a look. Goyle was pretty keen on reading menus everywhere they went.

He looked over at Crabbe and Goyle, but they were still talking to Blaise Zabini, who they’d found unexpectedly and unusually alone at a table for two. He’d been reading the paper and looked happy to be interrupted, and he was also wearing a shirt that was see-through in the sunlight and that made Harry volunteer instantly to be the one to go ask for a table.

Harry didn’t have to go back over and be exposed to the shirt that exposed far too much of Zabini just yet. Ron, Hermione and Reginald were coming in the door of the café. Harry beckoned them over and told them there was a table waiting.

“Oh excellent,” said Reginald. “Good job that man.”

He gave Hermione a loving glance, as if she was responsible for this and everything else that was right with the world. Hermione beamed back.

“Pansy and Malfoy will be along,” Ron said. “They’re feeding the ducks some duck pie. Malfoy keeps saying ‘Soylent Green is people.’” Ron frowned. “I don’t want you to be worried, but he may be having some sort of mental breakdown.”

“It’s a Muggle thing about cannibalism,” Harry said, grinning.

“Those crazy cannibal Muggles, I guess,” Ron said, and shrugged. “Are we eating now? Excellent. Jesus, is that Blaise Zabini? They used to make him wear clothes that actually clothed him at school.”

“Hang on just another second,” said the freckled waiter, coming back and pressing the menus solicitously into Harry’s hand.

“Sure,” Harry said, smiling. “Thanks.”

That was when Malfoy walked through the door, holding it open for Pansy like a courtly gentleman and with a mocking look over at Ron. Pansy was wearing Malfoy’s jacket over her short black sundress, so Malfoy was just in Harry’s shirt, light material rumpled by the spring wind, a couple of buttons pulled loose.

They strolled towards the group at the counter holding hands. This might have made Ron jealous more effectively if Pansy hadn’t kept pulling up the jacket sleeve to show her sparkling engagement ring to the world.

“Hello, Malfoy,” said Reginald, who seemed to approve of the surname thing Malfoy was so into.

“Hey, Cholmondeley-Featherstonehaugh,” Malfoy said. “Weasley. Granger.”

“Er,” Harry said, a bit pointedly. “Hey.”

Malfoy let go of Pansy’s hand and curled two fingers around the belt loop of Harry’s jeans, tugging him in. He leaned over and kissed Harry on the mouth, a slow long kiss that made light shiver behind Harry’s falling eyelids.

“Hey,” Malfoy murmured, leaning back. “Stop flirting with freckled waiters.”

Harry laughed, body moving naturally after Malfoy’s when Malfoy moved away. Malfoy’s fingers slid out of Harry’s belt loop and he caught Harry’s hand. “I wasn’t-”

“Oh, certainly,” Malfoy said darkly. “I am watching you, Potter. My eyes are everywhere!”

It was about then that Draco My Eyes Are Everywhere Malfoy noticed Blaise Zabini and his terrible shirt. He went over to ask Zabini how he was doing – and, Harry presumed, what he could be thinking to wear such a thing in public – and since neither of them had let go of the other’s hand, Harry came too. He left the waiter’s menus with Ron.

“Malfoy,” Zabini said, with a lift in his lazy sex operator’s drawl that suggested he might be pleased. His voice dropped back to the normal drawl when he said: “Potter.” His dark eyes touched on their linked hands. “So that’s true, then.”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“I am so torn,” Zabini told him. “I am torn between being heartbroken to see a Veela throw himself away on Malfoy, and being heartbroken to see Malfoy throw himself away on a bloody Gryffindor.”

“You’re lucky you have that supernatural appeal going on,” Malfoy told him. “You win no points for charm.”

“I hope you’re very happy and all that,” Zabini told him with great condescension. “I find myself very mellow, these days.”

“Really,” Harry said dryly.

“Really,” Zabini said, and hesitated, which was a strange enough thing for Zabini to do and made everyone stare at him. Zabini ducked his head a little shyly and Harry became worried that he was, in fact, possessed. “I’ve settled down myself,” he confided. “We’re in love.”

“You are?” said Malfoy blankly.

“Do not force me to remind you that I have in my possession a detailed plan of yours chronicling the future expulsion, disfigurement and death by humiliation of the man you’re currently holding hands with,” Zabini said.

Harry glanced at him and Malfoy smiled fondly at the memories and said: “Tell you another time. It was a good plan.” He cleared his throat and continued: “Sorry, Zabini. Congratulations. Who is she?”

Zabini gave him a scathing look. “As if I would ever deprive the world so completely as to focus all I have to give on a single individual,” he said reprovingly. “She is, of course, a ‘they.’”

“Ah,” drawled Malfoy, and raised his eyebrows at Harry. “So who’re they, then?”

Zabini’s face lit up and he adjusted himself in his seat for the best possible display of his indolent lounge and his shocking shirt.

They all looked around to see Padma and Parvati Patil walking through the door together, Parvati laughing and flower-delicate in pink, Padma in severe black and red but smiling at her sister.

“No way,” breathed Goyle.

“Blaise, darling!” said Parvati, and the sisters went over to him. Parvati settled light as a butterfly on Zabini’s lap and pressed her candyfloss-pink lips to his. Padma leaned against the back of his chair, hands settled firmly and possessively on Zabini’s shoulders. She stooped and laid her scarlet mouth onto the exact spot where Parvati’s had rested.

“I am beyond speech,” Malfoy announced to the world.

“That’ll be the day.” Zabini was smiling brilliantly. “After Padma saved me from those terrible kidnappers and took me home, a bond was formed between us,” he drawled. “And once I saw Parvati – well, who could resist such a beautiful creature? I was quite taken by her, too.”

“Someone needed to shop with Parvati and make sure she didn’t buy any more butterfly ornaments,” Padma said, with a fond look at Zabini’s head. “And I can rely on you, Blaise, can’t I?”

“Of course,” Zabini said, looking pleased as a child to be praised.

“We’re going to hit the markets now,” Parvati said, and cast her dark eyes around the group. “Sorry to steal Blaise and run. You must all come around for dinner some day!”

Padma’s red mouth curled, but she did not dispute her sister’s invitation.

“Stop standing around with your mouth open, Malfoy,” Zabini said, looking terribly impressed with himself, which was nothing new, and extremely happy, which was. “You bagged a Veela: you’re not doing badly for yourself at all. And Potter, please cut your hair, you bring shame on our race.”

Zabini rose with a catlike stretch, looking as if he’d got the canary, the cream, and feline worship reinstated in Egypt, and sauntered out of the door with a Patil twin on each arm.

“My God,” Malfoy said faintly.

“Stop standing around with your mouth open, Malfoy,” said Crabbe, looking highly amused. “I hear you’re not doing badly for yourself at all.”

He and Goyle went over to their table, which was ready at last and already spread out with lemonades. Malfoy pulled at his hand but Harry stood still and Malfoy glanced inquiringly back at him.

“Shame about your friend going out with the Patil twins,” Harry said. “Otherwise I suppose I could use my Veela sparkles to get you one.”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. “No you wouldn’t.”

“I might,” Harry said. “I’d like to make you happy.”

Malfoy made a face. “Potter, you *know* this.”

“Sure, I know,” said Harry, who had been witness to Malfoy’s capacity for single obsessive focus for going on thirteen years now. He brushed a lock of hair out of Malfoy’s eyes and said, low: “I want to hear you say it.”

“I don’t want either of the Patil twins,” Malfoy said crossly, going pink. Harry kissed him.

Then he let Malfoy pull him across the floor to the table. The freckled waiter gave Malfoy a

slightly incredulous glance as they went by: Harry gave him a cold glare, decided not to tip and rested a hand on the back of Malfoy's neck, stroking the soft fair hair at his nape.

"Took you long enough," said Ron, who got cranky when not fed.

"Sorry, Potter was offering me a threesome with a Patil twin of my choice," Malfoy said, and Ron and Harry both choked on their lemonade.

"Sure he was," Pansy snorted.

"Would I lie to you, baby?" Malfoy drawled.

Pansy did not even dignify that with a response. They all ordered their scones, Ron asking for a sandwich as well and Goyle asking gloomily for a salad because he was still on his diet.

"You're looking *very* well, Harry," Hermione said with judicious approval. "A tan looks good on you. Did you get a chance to observe any of the flora of the Amazon?"

"Er – we were occupied catching criminals, Hermione," said Harry virtuously.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "And on the way back?"

Harry thought about light filtering in through the drawn curtains over the single window on the boat, the rocking of the vessel in the waters and Malfoy under cool white sheets.

"Not really," he said at length. "Nah."

"Ah well," Hermione said philosophically. "Not to worry. I do feel a little bad about not realising all of this was going on, Harry, though Ron seems to have done a sterling job handling it."

"*Thank* you, Hermione," Ron said, beaming.

"To tell you the truth, I was rather occupied trying to find out my new boyfriend's secret," Hermione continued, shooting a mildly ferocious glance Reginald's way. He reached over and squeezed her hand.

"I do admire your intellectual curiosity, darling," he said. "So enterprisin'."

"What, Reginald has a secret now?" Ron asked, looking a little wild about the eyes. "Are you handling it, Hermione? I mean, I'm getting married in four days, I don't have any time to handle another one – though it was no problem, I was totally in control – do you know what Reginald's secret is, Crabbe?"

"No," said Crabbe.

They all looked at Reginald with interest. Harry thought he might be immune to shock after the Patil twins revelation. Besides, looking at Reginald's mild, kindly face – reminiscent of a very high-class rabbit – it was hard to believe he had any terribly startling secrets to impart.

“You should have told me as soon as we met,” Hermione said severely. “I told you.”

“Yes, dear heart, but I can’t Obliviate you, now can I?” Reginald asked. He cast a conspiratorial glance around. “You chaps are trustworthy, aren’t you?”

“On my honour as a Slytherin,” Malfoy said, leaning forward.

“Well, then – besides, my cherished, you only have to answer to the Minister of Magic,” said Reginald, and smiled around at them all with sudden debonair charm. “I answer directly to the Queen.”

“What!” yelled Ron.

“Hush, Ron,” Hermione scolded. “They call it Her Majesty’s Secret Service for a reason, you know.”

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, whose face was shining as he mouthed the words ‘James Blond’ in Harry’s direction. Harry leaned against his shoulder before he could demand to know all about it.

“I’ll say no more,” Reginald said. “Keep it under your hats, fellows, all right?”

There was a dazed chorus of agreement. Hermione smiled up at Reginald and looked stirred to her depths by his life of secret and dangerous glamour.

The owl distracted the attention of everyone at the table and, indeed, everyone in the café. Harry unfolded the Owl while Malfoy cast Obliviate on the nearby tables.

“Great,” he said. “Someone’s released giant alligators into the sewers of London again. On a Sunday.”

“These people have no decency,” said Malfoy, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet. “See you all later.”

“You’re coming to the fitting for the bridesmaids’ dresses,” Pansy instructed him without looking up from her lemonade.

“Well,” Malfoy said cautiously. “I did say I’d come supervise the fitting, yes.”

Pansy snickered around her straw. “That’s what you think.”

Harry took Malfoy away from Pansy before she could disturb him any further. It was just alligators in the sewers again, there was no real need to rush, and they walked leisurely around the lake to the side of the park where they’d stashed their car.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Malfoy said, interrupting his own fevered speculation about Reginald’s possible duties.

He smiled charmingly over at Harry, sweet and dear in the leaf-filtered light of the trees, and Harry was instantly and deeply suspicious.

“You are as beautiful as a god,” Malfoy told him solemnly. “Maybe the god of really horrible jumpers. Still, a god. What do you have to say about that?”

“Er,” Harry said. “Thank you?”

Malfoy beamed at him. “I gave you a compliment and you accepted it,” he observed. “So you’re the girl. Ha!”

Harry rolled his eyes and grinned, reaching out for Malfoy’s hand. He wasn’t really good at that sort of thing, not yet: he forgot or was rough sometimes, had caught his watch in Malfoy’s hair on one embarrassing occasion, but it was getting easier. Malfoy’s fingers fit linked through his.

“Neither of us is a girl,” he said dryly. “That’s sort of the point of a gay relationship.”

Malfoy nodded seriously. “I see your point, Potter,” he said in a grave voice. “That’s exactly what I would say, if *I* were the girl. Ha!”

Harry had to let go when they reached the car. The rules about Auror partners not fraternising were pretty strict, and neither of them needed the extra black mark on their records, which kind of looked dipped in coal already. It was their rule not to touch when on duty.

It turned out not to be a giant alligator in the sewers. Some wizarding kid must have been very bored that Sunday, and messing around with Potions and their hamsters. Harry could have gone his whole life without seeing a hamster the size of a rhinoceros charge Malfoy. Harry had to draw his wand pretty fast.

It was kind of worth it when they got back to the top of the building where they were parked and Malfoy used his own wand to send a jet of water over his head, washing away any trace of the sewer. Malfoy’s shirt was pretty much transparent when it was soaked: it looked much better on him than Zabini.

“My hero,” Malfoy said, teasing, and then he looked up through his wet hair to where Harry was lying on the car bonnet waiting for him to finish up, and watching. “What are you lo – oh.”

He went faintly pink, still a little startled every time. His eyes met Harry’s, hand closing tight on his own soaked shirt collar, and Harry drew his lower lip in between his teeth.

Malfoy licked his lip, tongue visible for an instant. “Later,” he promised, low, and then smiled like a devil from hell.

Harry made a small sound. The noise of birds and snakes was in there, but it was mostly a growl.

Sometimes he liked the work rule, since Malfoy was still – pretty new at this, uncertain occasionally, and the work rule gave him a little breathing room so that he could feel confident enough to flirt a bit and be a horrible tease. Sometimes he didn’t like the work rule for pretty much the same reason.

He wouldn't push Malfoy, though, and he didn't want to get fired. They climbed into the car and flew to the Auror headquarters to fill out the magical and dangerous animal paperwork while the shrunk hamster scurried around the desk and head-butted Malfoy's coffee cup.

"I feel someone else could have done this," said Malfoy, rescuing his cup and giving the hamster the evil eye. "People who have not just been risking life and limb on the Amazon for six weeks in a daring search and rescue mission, eventually bringing all criminals to justice. People not us."

"I think Shacklebolt was a little annoyed that Septimus Umber turned out to be the one buying the halfbreeds, honestly," Harry said. "Since you've been blackmailing the good judge for a few years now. Possibly we could've looked into his business before."

"Look," Malfoy said hotly. "If we arrested everyone who occasionally messes around with a house elf at Sinistra's, we'd be arresting--"

"Almost finished?" asked Shacklebolt austerely, walking by on his way to his office.

They waited for him to go by before they started laughing.

"Well *exactly*," said Malfoy, and went off to the archives room to find a folder for their report.

He was there a while, so Harry went to find him and found him in deep conversation with some girl who used to be in Gryffindor, Clarabell or Cressida or whatever.

"Thanks, Chrysanthemum," said Malfoy – ah, that was it – and Chrysanthemum glanced at Harry, giggled and left the room. Malfoy pulled down a green folder without looking at it, face bright with interest. "Guess what."

"What?" Harry asked indulgently.

"Conleth Frexley and Katie split up," Malfoy said. "I knew they wouldn't last, you know. Those banshees, very unreliable, their flame burns brightly but not for long and so on. If you understand what I'm implying right there, and I hope you do."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling a little sick. "Yeah. Sure."

Malfoy looked at him, chucked the folder over his shoulder and reached Harry in two strides. He reached out and then remembered the work rule, fingers a fraction away from Harry's shirt collar.

"Hey," he said, voice soothing as if he was stroking Harry's hair and whispering in his ear. "Katie doesn't want to get back with me."

"Okay," Harry said. "I didn't mean--"

Malfoy didn't kiss him, because of the work rule. But he did lean in, close but not quite touching in the shadowy little archives room. Harry felt his body heat as if being grazed by a

warm and much-wanted ghost. Slytherins could not be trusted with rules: they could not be trusted at all.

“And I’m,” Malfoy’s mouth almost brushed Harry’s, agonisingly near. All it would take was Harry moving a fraction, and then he could catch that mouth with his. “I’m happier with you,” Malfoy said, and looked away, hand going to the back of his neck, seeming a little embarrassed. “That’s not new, either,” he muttered, still looking away.

“Oh,” said Harry, in a different sort of way.

He slammed the door shut with one hand and then pressed Malfoy up against the wall, really there, really touching, and kissed him for a deep sweet second, the sharp curve of Malfoy’s jaw in his palm. Malfoy made a small sound that made Harry kiss him again, his mouth, the curling corner of his mouth, the line of his jaw and the spot where he hadn’t quite shaved. Malfoy tipped his head back against the wall, breathing erratic.

Harry shut his eyes and caught Malfoy’s ear between his teeth for just a second, his teeth sliding, and then whispered: “Later,” and stepped away.

He opened the door of the archives room and left. He obviously shouldn’t be trusted with rules, either.

“I will get you for that, Potter,” Malfoy told him when he came back with the folder and threw it on Harry’s desk.

“Really?” Harry asked, and Malfoy grinned at him with intent, almost as if they were about to spar. But not quite.

They were almost done with the paperwork. It was almost later. Harry wrote quickly given an incentive, and his quill scratched rapidly across parchment in the unusual silence of the Auror headquarters, even here sunny and still on a Sunday afternoon. It was just them and Shacklebolt now, Harry thought: Shacklebolt never went home, though sometimes he might go to Sinistra’s Sinner’s Spot.

“He probably just puts himself in a cupboard when he winds down,” Malfoy said, leaning against Harry’s chair to supervise his report writing and catching Harry’s glance at the boss’s office. “He’s an evil robot, you know.”

“I heard that somewhere,” Harry murmured.

“So a vital question occurs to me about the whole Veela thing,” Malfoy said, leaping between topics like a frog jumping from one insanely inappropriate lily pad to another.

“Oh?”

Harry tensed a little. He thought they’d had that out, one night a couple of weeks ago, just after the return from the Amazon. The television had been on in a darkened room, casting a silvery light and buzzing because the volume was turned down low. Harry didn’t really need the television with the toaster imploring them to try marmalade and Malfoy’s voice, going on and on, beloved and ridiculous and always there, always company: the sound of it in a room

like being told you never had to be alone again.

Just then, Malfoy had been lying with his head against Harry's knee, head tilted so that the silvery light of the television reflected off his eyes. Harry's fingers were tangled in his hair, and he'd been waiting a bit anxiously for Malfoy's response.

"I don't know," Malfoy had said slowly. "The Veela thing – maybe it helped. I don't know. I'm glad it did, does that make a difference?"

"I don't know," Harry said. It didn't matter, he supposed: it wasn't like he was letting Malfoy go.

"It's just – a bit of you, like the bad temper and the jumpers. I can't – separate it out from the rest of you," Malfoy said. "Well, I can separate you from the jumpers, thank God. But... I know I wanted to be with you, even if I didn't want to be – well, when there was Katie. And also when we were kids and I wanted to be friends. That wasn't impelled by Veela urges, since you were eleven. And such a complete little git."

"Takes one," Harry murmured, laughing.

His hands slipped out of Malfoy's hair as Malfoy sat up, face pale and eyes intent in the flickering light streaming from the television, and kissed him.

Harry'd thought they'd settled that then.

"What is it?" he asked reluctantly now, not looking at Malfoy.

"Well, it's Horace," Malfoy told him. "The chest monster," he supplied helpfully, lest Harry had forgotten. Harry had certainly been trying to.

He groaned. "What about him?"

"Well, he just hasn't been consulted in this decision-making process at all," Malfoy rambled, talking like an earnest maniac and obviously on course to ramble away for hours. "I wonder what he thinks of it. Maybe he doesn't even like me."

Harry tipped his head back so it rested on Malfoy's forearms, folded against the back of Harry's chair and bare since he'd rolled his sleeves up in the sunlight. It was almost time to leave the office, Harry told himself, he could wait another few minutes, but he reached up and clasped the nape of Malfoy's neck anyway, turning his head in towards Malfoy's, breath against the curve of Malfoy's throat. Harry heard Malfoy's own breath catch. He shut his eyes for a moment, warm and safe: ridiculously happy.

"You're an idiot," he whispered in Malfoy's ear. Veela and human sounds were blending together in his voice, making it rough and tender at once. "Of course he loves you."

The End

Coda To An Epilogue: Twenty Years Later, Or The Kids Are All Right

“I want to be absolutely clear on this,” Harry said. “You’re telling me that you lost my children in the *sewers*?”

Professor Araminta von Bosau, headmistress of Durmstrang, looked confused and distressed by how badly Harry was taking this.

“Does this happen *often* in Durmstrang?” Harry demanded.

“Every now and then,” Professor von Bosau said. She looked up at Harry’s face and added quickly: “It’s very regrettable, of course.”

“They’ve been gone for twenty-four hours and you haven’t sent a search party after them!”

Professor von Bosau gave him a reproachful look. “Be reasonable, Mr Potter. My staff are extremely busy and besides that, what use would they be against giant alligators?”

“Yes, about that,” Harry said between his teeth. “Why does Durmstrang have giant alligators in its sewers?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. Why does Hogwarts have giant spiders in its environs? These things happen.” Professor von Bosau was starting to look distinctly miffed. “Mr Potter, I understand that you’re upset-”

“You lost my children in the sewers! The sewers which are crawling with giant alligators!”

Harry paced the room for the fourth time, giving the portraits of Durmstrang’s former headmasters and headmistresses a filthy look. The portraits looked at Harry as if they thought he was making a big fuss over nothing as well.

“Let us hope this experience will be character-building,” Professor von Bosau said with an attempt at cheerfulness. “Meanwhile, I have contacted the Aurors’ department, and I have no doubt that they will send a splendid team along shortly. Would you care for tea?”

“Professor,” Harry said. “You can take your teapot and-”

“Mr Potter, I beg you to be calm!”

“I’m not calm,” Harry snapped. “I – I’m wasting time here. I’m going after my boys. Send the Aurors after us when they arrive. Don’t let them wait for tea.”

“I cannot possibly allow you to go on your own!”

“I’m a trained Auror, Professor,” Harry said with much-tried patience.

“Yes,” said von Bosau. “But you’re not as young as you once were!”

“I’m *thirty-seven*.”

Von Bosau peered up at him. “Are you really? You look older. You must have a very stressful lifestyle.”

“Not lately,” Harry said.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but decided he’d just be wasting his time some more. Al and James were lost somewhere under this great damp maze of a school and they would be waiting for him to rescue them.

He knew he shouldn’t have let them go on this exchange programme. But Al had been so set on it. And of course, he knew why that was.

“I do hope that this won’t affect your opinion of our exchange programme,” Professor von Bosau said, looking genuinely concerned for the first time. “I do think that international magical relations should be improved through our children and that inter-school co-operation is vital in working towards that end. Boys will be boys, after all, and if we all got worked up every time children went on a little midnight expedition to investigate the alligators where would we be?”

Harry made for the door.

“I do hope you won’t hold Durmstrang responsible for this unfortunate incident!” Professor von Bosau called after him.

“No,” Harry said grimly, wrenching the door open. “I know who’s responsible.”

*

He’d been worried before he ever sent Al off to Hogwarts. It wasn’t that Harry had favourites – he would never, a good father loved all his children equally and of course he did – but Al was different. Al and Harry were special with each other.

Al wasn’t like James and Lily, who had always been OK, who had never been or seemed to have a problem. James and Lily were good-looking and athletic and made friends easily and Harry was very proud of them. Just glimpsing their heads from his study window, James’ black and Lily’s red hair flying, seeing them race around the Quidditch pitch in the garden, made him smile.

Al was usually in the study with Harry, though. He was quiet when Harry needed to get work done.

He’d been a sickly baby, which had worried Ginny and made Harry panic. He wasn’t the best with babies and their alarmingly fragile heads, and he’d been afraid to go near Al in case he broke him somehow. But Ginny had handled that: Ginny had been brilliant with them all when they were babies. Al had been fine, though he was more – delicate than the others, always catching colds and nervy. He was fine with family, of course, but whenever guests

were around he got all shy and didn't talk, and things weren't quite right between him and Ginny.

It was Hermione who clued Harry in on what was wrong.

"Al reminds Ginny of how she used to be when she was little," Hermione'd said one day, when they had a barbecue going in Ron and Hermione's garden. "You know, awkward and shy, too many elbows."

She gave Ron an affectionate smile from across the garden and Ron tucked Hugo under his arm and waved at her.

"It unsettles her a bit – she feels like she's come a long way and she doesn't like to be reminded of how she was," Hermione went on. "Plus I think she's a little – afraid to be fond of Al. There was that whole business with Tom Riddle's diary – I think she felt she wasn't safe being that way, and what with Albus being a bit more fragile and easily hurt than the others..."

"Well," Harry said, frowning over at Al's tufty dark head. "What should I do?"

"You have to be there for him," Hermione said gently.

"Course," Harry told her. Of course he would – that was what fathers did, he'd always been determined to be there for all of them, whatever they needed, but they were all so young and Ginny was so good with James and Lily, and he wasn't sure – but of course, whatever it took. He'd do it.

It had been easier than he thought it would be. James and Lily, they preferred to sit on Ginny's lap or beside her while she read to them, Harry had offered to do it a few times but it'd seemed to fall a bit flat. He tried with Al, asked him to sit with him or walk with him sometimes, it didn't seem like enough, he wished he could've done something bigger, more dramatic, and made all Al's problems vanish – but it seemed to work.

Al blossomed under the attention. From then on he stuck close to Harry and poured out everything to him, went to him and took his hand rather than his mother's when they were all out for the day.

Harry still remembered the first time he'd come home from work late – which happened too much, he knew that – and found Al passed out on the stairs. Ginny had come out of their bedroom and watched him scoop Al up.

"Waited up for me," Harry had explained, trying to sound casual and not terribly pleased. "Little rascal."

He didn't think Ginny had been fooled.

James and Lily had both spent lots of nights away from home before Hogwarts, but Al found it hard to make friends, and being away from home made him anxious. He'd stayed over with Rose once, had a nightmare about the house burning down without him, and Harry'd had to come over at two in the morning and collect him. Harry had spent a lot of time worrying

about how he'd get on in Hogwarts, had talked it over with Ginny night after night.

Al had been really excited to go, though. Of course, when he became too excited he tended to get sick. Harry'd spent a lot of Quidditch games with Al vomiting in the bathroom.

Al had been sick pretty much all night before he went to Hogwarts, and then James hadn't helped teasing him about being put in Slytherin. He'd been a bag of nerves when he'd walked onto that train. Harry knew he'd be all right: he'd been sure that Al would love Hogwarts, that it'd be good for him, but he was still relieved when the first letters from the boys arrived home.

There were three: one from James and one from Al to the whole family, and then another from Al marked *To Dad: PRIVATE!* which Harry had put into his jacket to keep for later.

James' Owl had begun: *Dear Mum and Dad, You never listen to me even though I am always right. That little nit Al got himself Sorted into Slytherin.*

"Oh, my God," Harry'd said. He'd told Al there was nothing wrong with it, and of course there wasn't, but he'd been counting on James to look after Al in Gryffindor and – and anyway, Al in Slytherin, it was ridiculous, how did they even do the Sorting these days?

He'd calmed down a bit when he and Ginny read Al's letter. Al seemed perfectly happy, saying that he'd made friends and he really liked Hogwarts and he was wearing the jumpers Ginny'd knitted for him over his robes like he'd promised.

Harry was barely out the door, though, before he tore open Al's private Owl and glanced over it: to his relief, it was long and it all seemed to be little things, like the breathless chattering way Al talked when he was happy, stories he'd thought up and dreams he'd had and adventures with his new friends.

Harry had let out a deep relieved breath, then started the letter properly and wished he could take the breath back.

Dear Dad, Al had written. *Don't listen to whatever James has written. I'm really glad that I got Sorted into Slytherin. It's brilliant here, and Dad, it was just like you said, making friends was so easy. On the train there I met the coolest boy.*

Harry's headache had started on the next line, which was: *His name is Scorpius Malfoy.*

It wasn't that Harry held a parent's mistakes against a child. Or a grandparent's, considering that Lucius Malfoy had been a considerably nastier piece of work than Draco Malfoy had ever managed. It was just the thought of his Al in that house of all houses, friends with that boy of all boys. He couldn't have been well brought up.

Al was so trusting, so prone to wandering right into danger after James. He still had a white scar across his eyebrow from the time James persuaded him to walk the mantelpiece as if he was a pirate's captive walking the plank. It would be so easy for someone to hurt Al. He'd never had a proper friend if you didn't count Rose, who talked to him as if she was a teacher.

Mind you, Rose talked to *Harry* as if she was a teacher.

If Scorpius Malfoy was at all like his father – and he'd been the spit of him, as Harry recalled with a vicious twisting feeling somewhere in his intestines – the thought of Al's face at the first piece of malice, the thought of how destroyed Al would be if someone he admired was cruel to him... Harry couldn't quite deal with the thought. He didn't know what to do.

Al's letter was so happy. Harry read it with an increasing sense of gloom. He was brimming with news about Slytherin and he and Scorpius had bagged beds next to each other, and the prefects were really nice and Scorpius had told him a story about Portugal that he was sure Dad would be interested in, and he was going to have Quidditch lessons tomorrow and he was nervous but Scorpius said he needn't be because Scorpius was excellent at Quidditch and he would show Al how and Harry's headache really wasn't getting any better.

There was nothing he could do, except wish that Malfoy had sent his boy to Durmstrang like half the Slytherins from Harry's year had done with their kids and wait to see the slightest sign of unhappiness in Al's letters, ready to rush in and pick up the pieces. Harry wrote him careful letters about getting to know everyone and making lots of friends.

Al wrote back long, long letters detailing, basically, how the Nations of the World Had Gathered Together To Acclaim Scorpius Malfoy As Their God King. Harry started skimming them a bit because it made him feel a bit nauseous.

He'd been so worried about how Al would cope in Hogwarts that he hadn't considered how he would cope without Al.

To his surprise, he missed him a lot. He'd got used to Al on the stairs waiting for him, Al in the study telling him long stories while he filled out the pointless reports that the Aurors' department were so keen on. Sometimes he wished Ron hadn't asked Hermione to help set up the new system: apparently the efficiency was devastating but sometimes Harry was tempted to run amok among the filing cabinets.

He worked slightly longer hours – well, he had to make sure he was ahead of the pushy young up and comers, after all – and he quietly arranged for Al's favourite Quidditch team the Tutshill Tornados to visit Hogwarts. Al wrote him an enthusiastic letter of thanks.

It was good to see him at Christmas. He looked well and happy still, as if he was eating regularly. He assured Ginny that he hadn't caught any colds and leaned against Harry at the dinner table while James talked. James, apparently inspired by Teddy Lupin's romance, had discovered girls and would not shut up about them.

"And this one in Hufflepuff, she's got these cute pigtails, Mum," James was saying, when Lily told him to pipe down and asked Al to tell her all about Hogwarts.

Al leaned forward and said: "Well, the Quidditch is *very* exciting."

"Is it, Al?" Harry said, smiling fondly.

Al turned to him, bright-faced. "D'you know, Scorpius is on the Quidditch team! Even though he's in first year! Isn't that amazing!"

“... Amazing,” Harry said flatly.

“Everyone says he’s really really good,” Al said. “I helped make banners for him. He’s the *Seeker*.”

“He’s a git,” James said in a bored voice. Harry gave his eldest-born and right-thinking son an approving look. At least James hadn’t been fooled: at least someone was looking out for Al.

“You’re just saying that because our team *beat yours*,” Al said hotly. “Ha ha ha. Scorpius said you weren’t even a *challenge*.”

“Sounds a lovely boy,” Ginny said dryly.

“Everyone calls him Score now because of him being so excellent at Quidditch,” Al said proudly. “Which is a pity,” he added after a moment. “Because I think Scorpius is a really nice name.”

Everyone gave Al a funny look then. Al seemed blissfully oblivious.

“So when a couple of the houses had an inter-house dance, I danced with the most girls of anybody,” James reported.

“Score says that we’re going to win the House Cup,” Al continued.

“Bet you won’t!” James said.

Al gave James the calm look of a man with a trump card. “Score says,” he repeated patiently.

James would look after him, Harry told himself again. There was a possibility, however slight, that Malfoy’s offspring wasn’t completely loathsome. Little Scorpius had a mother, after all.

Al’s letters home stayed happy, and he came home for the summer looking better than when he’d left.

And promptly stopped eating.

Ginny was worried and a bit insulted about Al’s sudden aversion to her cooking, and Harry panicked in the study and tried to work out what was wrong until he saw Al woefully refusing to play a pick-up Quidditch match with James and James’s friends Carl and Vespasian, slumping back into his chair in Harry’s study, too tragic and malnourished even to chatter, and Harry finally realised that Al was *pinning*.

“Mum wrote that James could invite anyone home he liked,” Al said in a small voice. “But neither of you wrote that to me.”

“Er,” Harry said. “Well, what a shame. Maybe you can have a friend over next summer, I’m sure that – that everyone has plans now.”

“They *do*,” Al told him. “Score is going to stay with Marvin and Claudius, and they’re all going to have fun and *maybe Score will decide he likes one of them better than me.*”

Harry cleared his throat. “I’m sure he won’t.”

Al brightened fractionally. “That’s true. Score and me are *best friends*. I asked him if he wanted to be and d’you know what he said, Dad?”

“What did he say, Al?”

Al glowed. “He said okay!”

“Big of him,” said Harry.

On Al’s birthday in mid-July a present arrived via eagle owl. It was a grey cashmere jumper and Ginny said she knew from just looking at it that it was hideously expensive, and added that it was kind of inappropriately fancy for a twelve-year-old boy. Particularly one as small and inclined to get stuck in hedges and fireplaces as Al.

Al wore it all the time. He even wore it to bed. Scorpius Malfoy, Harry noticed, hadn’t even enclosed a note. Al had been writing him letters all summer.

“Dad,” Al said shyly at one point. Harry was so used to Al’s wistful silence that he jumped. “Would you take me to Knockturn Alley?”

Harry almost choked. “No, Al, I will not! Why do you want to go there? Who told you about that place?”

“Score,” Al said, infusing one syllable with a world of passionate yearning. “He said it was really cool. His birthday’s in August, you see, and I was thinking-”

Harry looked over at his small son. He hadn’t known that Scorpius Malfoy was even younger than Al: Al was clearly unhappy, and Scorpius had sent a present, inappropriate and all as it had been, and maybe – maybe Scorpius didn’t even like his parents. Maybe he was like Sirius.

“Tell you what, Al,” he said. “Owl him and ask him to come stay after his birthday, and you two can pick a present out together.”

Al lit up. “Really, Dad?”

“Not in Knockturn Alley, mind,” Harry said.

“Oh *thank you*,” Al breathed. “Dad, it’s going to be so much fun. You’ll really like him, I promise! I’ll be really good till then!”

“Just let your mum wash that jumper a bit more often,” Harry said. “That’s all I ask.”

Al had scampered off to write Scorpius upon the instant. Harry had comforted himself thinking that summer was well advanced, and Scorpius probably wouldn’t come. He couldn’t

even be bothered to write, after all.

But Scorpius did come.

*

The grille that separated the dungeons of Durmstrang from the sewers lifted easily. It was as if they wanted children to go climbing into it and meet alligators, Harry thought grimly. He pulled it back over him as he landed in an inch of dirty water with a splash, and stared around the slimy dark tunnels, trying to think of which way Al and James might have chosen to go.

Of course, this wouldn't have been Al or James's idea.

Harry drew his wand, holding it at the ready in case of giant alligators, chose a tunnel at random, and completely and entirely blamed Score Malfoy.

Scorpius had written that he'd arrive in the early morning of August the fourth, so of course Al had spent the night of August the third getting sick. In between violent bouts of vomiting he'd run to the windows, because James had been awful and told him that the next day technically started at midnight.

Harry gave up on the attempt to persuade Al that Scorpius was unlikely to arrive at three in the morning and, seeing that nothing would convince Al to give up his vigil, he gave him hot milk and went to bed himself. He woke up at eight and went down to find Al passed out on the kitchen sofa, which was exactly what he'd expected, and a tall blond boy making coffee, which wasn't.

Harry's first outraged thought was that little Scorpius Malfoy wasn't little at all: he'd shot up in the last year. He looked *fourteen*: what was he doing hanging around with Al?

Then Scorpius Malfoy slanted a wintry grey glance over his shoulder at Harry. He looked distinctly unimpressed.

Harry was very forcibly reminded of his father.

Scorpius came over and formally offered a hand. "Hello, sir. I'm Scorpius."

Harry felt a complete fool shaking a twelve year old's hand, but he did it. He noted that Scorpius' voice had broken with the growth spurt, and the boy's drawl was so pronounced that it was practically a speech impediment. When he said his own name it sounded like Parseltongue.

"Hello there," Harry said awkwardly.

Scorpius went back to making coffee. "Potter's asleep," he remarked in that deep drawl, which Harry actually found a bit tricky to understand. "Are we doing something special today? He always gets like this when he's overexcited."

Harry wondered darkly if Scorpius was actually amused by the fact that Al made himself sick.

“You should’ve seen him when the Tornados came to the school,” Scorpius continued. “He was so ill that he had to spend the whole day in the infirmary. Never saw the team.”

“He didn’t mention *that*,” Harry exclaimed.

Scorpius gave him a superior look. No, Harry realised, this kid wasn’t like Sirius: this kid was Malfoy all over again.

“And – what, you call him Potter?” Harry demanded. “Er – what do you call James?”

“I call him ‘that tool,’” said Scorpius calmly.

As Harry choked on air and outrage that this child obviously thought he could waltz in here and say anything he damn well pleased, Al stirred and Harry’s gaze turned to his son, lifting a sleep-pink face and blinking currently-shining green eyes. Sometimes Harry wished that Al wore glasses: his face looked so unprotected without them.

“Dad!” Al said in a piercing whisper. “Score is coming today!”

“I’m here, twit,” Score drawled, and strolled to the sofa with two cups of coffee in hand. The child even walked straight-backed, steps precise, like he’d had deportment lessons. “You let me in yourself and then actually *fainted* on the sofa.”

“Hi Score,” Al said, radiant. “I did not faint.”

“Sure,” Score – there was no other word but drawled, he never did anything else. He sat down beside Al and when Al collapsed with exhaustion against his shoulder, he hit Al in the knee with a coffee cup. “Drink this,” he commanded. “It’s good for you.”

Sugar and caffeine at this hour would probably make Al hyper, not that Scorpius cared, obviously.

“Okay,” Al said, and Score nodded with satisfaction and Harry realised that, oh *God*, Malfoy’s kid thought of *his* kid as his Crabbe or Goyle.

He was glad when James came down, and Score and he exchanged hostile looks. James spent breakfast bristling like an angry cat as Al swayed and Score drawled.

Lily fell in love with Score at once, but that was just Lily’s way. She was distracted from her pursuit by the advent of the milkman and went off to flirt with him instead.

“Potter says you like Quidditch,” Score informed Harry condescendingly over his fifth cup of coffee, and added: “I’m the youngest Seeker in a century.”

Harry coughed. “I think you’ll find you’re not.”

“I am,” Score said. “I was a month younger than you were. I’m the youngest Seeker in a century and a half, actually. Dad looked it up.”

“I bet he did,” Harry said.

“That’s why they call him Score,” Al told them all with massively misguided pride.

“Sometimes,” Scorpius said, examining his nails, “they call me the Boy Who Scored.”

Harry could feel himself starting a migraine. Fortunately after breakfast Scorpius ordered Al in the most high-handed way to his room, where Al crashed out and Scorpius read *Flying through the Ages*.

The next day Scorpius and James got into a fight and had to be dragged apart with James howling insults, Scorpius calling him a tool about four thousand times, and Al pleading and carrying on at the top of his voice. Harry was so entirely in sympathy with James that he’d have had a hard time disciplining him. If Lily hadn’t become overexcited and burst into tears, causing mass panic, things could have become unpleasant.

The house was a very tense place for a week. Al and Scorpius spent all their time in Al’s room, where Harry could hear Al talking nineteen to the dozen. Harry wondered how on earth Al could start half his sentences with ‘Score says’ when Score only bothered to draw out one word to fifty of Al’s. Mealtimes were like a war zone with the table as the disputed territory: James, Vespasian and Carl giving Score the evil eye as Al tried to be friends with everyone and Score eyed everyone with cool distaste.

The shopping trip when Al insisted on buying friendship bracelets for them both haunted Harry’s dreams a bit.

Harry had also dreaded Score refusing to wear his, but Score did wear it, even though he looked doubtful about this decision. “My dad wears a necklace,” he said eventually. “So that’s all right.”

Scorpius talked about his father a lot. He had a silver-framed picture of his parents that he kept on Al’s desk, but he never talked about his mother: Harry got the feeling that possibly things weren’t all right there.

The picture showed Malfoy and his wife on holiday somewhere, with sun and sand, Malfoy’s wife dressed in camouflage gear and looking annoyed about something. Harry couldn’t remember her name, but he knew she was Portuguese and – naturally – a pureblood, which was probably why Malfoy had married her, since she was a good ten years older than Malfoy and her rather stern face wasn’t anything to write home about. Score might have got the height from her.

Having Malfoy smirking from a silver frame in his son’s room wasn’t fun, either. Harry counted the days until Score was due home, and then Al came to him beaming with the news that Score had invited him back.

Harry had thought it mightn’t be a bad idea. The thought of Al in that place – where Hermione had been tortured – made him shudder, but... Al would see Score’s father, then, and see how they lived. Al was sweet and trusting, but he was very quick. It might make him take a few steps back.

He let Al go. When Al returned, he took one look at Al's face and knew it hadn't worked.

"I had *so much fun*," Al confided later, sidling up to Harry so James wouldn't hear. "Mr Malfoy is so cool! He does *impressions*!"

Harry could've wept for his poor deluded child.

"Does Scorpius not do impressions?"

"No," Al said, staring. "Why would you think that?"

"No reason," said Harry. "Too careful of his own dignity, is he?"

"Score *is* very dignified," Al agreed happily. "D'you know what some of the girls call him, Dad? The Ice Prince of Slytherin!"

Harry was truly appalled.

"Did you know, Mr Malfoy was in Slytherin."

"I did know that," Harry said. "Yeah."

"I wonder if they called him that," Al speculated.

"They didn't," Harry said with finality, and did not add that had they done so, Harry would have probably been violently ill.

"Mr Malfoy said I can come back next year!"

"Did he," said Harry, and wondered what Malfoy thought he was playing at.

Next summer seemed unimportant compared to the debate over the exchange term to be spent in Durmstrang, which Score had already signed up for and which Al was therefore set on. Ginny gave in when Al started threatening to keep a diary so he could write poetry about how unhappy he was in it.

Harry gave in when James said he wanted to go too. None of James's friends were going: Harry knew that James had only offered so he'd be there to guard his brother.

When you dragged his attention away from the ladies, James was a good, good boy. Harry had let them both go, and now somehow Scorpius Malfoy had got them all lost down here in the dark underbelly of Durmstrang with alligators, and Harry had to find them.

Harry splashed mordantly through the grimy water as he went around another labyrinthine turn, ignoring the gleam of rats' eyes as they scurried past and mentally composing the mother of all lectures to that supercilious little brat.

He walked right into the dark shape, swore and then when he heard the other person swearing, swore again.

“Oh *God*,” Harry said, once he was temporarily out of curses.

“Oh, perfect,” Malfoy spat, face twisting with the effort of trying to grimace and sneer at once. “*Potter*?”

*

“Malfoy,” Harry said grimly. “What’re you doing here?”

In the grey half-light of the sewers he saw that Malfoy looked just as he had on the platform more than a year ago: coat buttoned up to his throat, hairline slightly receding, evidently not pleased to see him. But then, Malfoy never really changed.

“What do you think I’m doing here, Potter?” Malfoy demanded. “Out for a stroll? Taking the sewer air? I presume I’m here for the same reason you are: *my child* is lost in this Godforsaken place and the ravingly incompetent headmistress seems content to leave him to be eaten by reptiles.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well – I’m dealing with it. You can go home.”

Malfoy gave him a death glare. “I have no intention,” he said, speaking each word as if he was stabbing someone, “of leaving this place without Scorpius. You may do exactly as you please.”

“Right,” said Harry, and thought about this for a minute. He certainly didn’t need Malfoy slowing him down, nor did he need to spend another minute in Malfoy’s company. “Well,” he said slowly. “I suppose we should split up then. The sewers are big and we’ll cover more ground. I’ll send up sparks when I find the children.”

It was the perfect solution. He did not know why Malfoy felt called to make that terminally annoyed sound in the back of his throat.

Nor did he have time to waste finding out. “Okay then,” he said, and went past Malfoy. “See you later.”

Malfoy nodded and Harry strode on a few steps before he heard Malfoy clear his throat and then say, with what appeared to be some difficulty: “Wait.”

Harry turned. “What?”

Malfoy’s face looked strained. “I – I have a tracking spell on Scorpius,” he said between clenched teeth. “You’re going the wrong way. You’d better come with me.”

“You have a tracking spell on your kid?” Harry demanded, so as not to think about the rest of it. “Why?”

“Because children can get into very dangerous situations!” Malfoy snapped. “As for instance, this one.”

“All right. So where is he?”

“It’s not all that specific,” Malfoy said crossly. “That would be an invasion of his privacy. I just know when I’m getting closer or further away. And this way is closer, so let’s go.”

He plunged on ahead, not looking back to see if Harry was following. Harry cursed the whole situation and went after him, making sure to draw level so he wasn’t actually trailing along in Malfoy’s wake.

“Can you tell how far he is?”

Malfoy’s pointed chin was set. “Pretty far,” he said. “Come on.”

“Fine, but you don’t have to take that tone with me,” Harry snapped. “After all, your kid is the one who led my boys into this mess.”

“Oh, *really*?” Malfoy said dangerously. “And how did you work that one out, Potter?”

Harry’s voice rose. “I think it’s *pretty obvious*.”

“I see you’re displaying your usual brilliance,” Malfoy drawled. “Scorpius would never get into this sort of trouble on his own: my child happens to be level-headed and intelligent and he’s clearly been endangered by the recklessness of your hell-born brat-”

“*Al*?” Harry snarled. “Are you insane? That’s the most ridiculous-”

“No, *not Al*,” Malfoy snarled back with a withering look. “Albus is a nice child,” he added grudgingly. “Though God knows where he gets it from. Whereas from all Scorpius tells me, the other baby Potter is an absolute chip off the old block, and I have no doubt that this is all his doing.”

Harry snorted. “You think that Scorpius followed James? Scorpius wouldn’t spit on James if he was on fire.”

Malfoy looked mistily proud. “Naturally not. I think Albus followed the other baby Potter-”

“*James*,” Harry hissed.

“There are so many of them,” Malfoy said. “I find it hard to keep the names straight. Anyway, I think that Scorpius followed Al, since it must have been clear to him that Al would be eaten by alligators without him, and therefore this is all your pernicious eldest-born’s fault. I hope you’re prepared to discipline him.”

“Maybe I will,” Harry said darkly. “Maybe I’ll punish him by calling him a totally absurd name like *Scorpius*.”

He was vaguely startled when Malfoy went pink, colour rising on both cheeks as if he’d been slapped. He’d become so used to seeing Scorpius remain entirely unruffled by whatever James and the others threw at him that he’d somehow recalled the everyday Malfoy of drawling and elaborate unconcern and revised history so that he’d forgotten how easy it was to break that façade into a thousand pieces.

“Don’t blame me for that,” Malfoy muttered. “His mother chose it. I wanted to call him Jack.”

“Jack?” Harry repeated doubtfully.

“I think Jack is a nice name,” Malfoy told him, looking offended. “A little bit exotic, and it wouldn’t have given him any trouble at school. After being lumbered with something like Draco, I wasn’t going to do that to my son. Which is more than I can say for you, with your *James* and *Lily* and *Albus*—”

“Funny, I thought you didn’t know their names.”

“-Imaginative, I must say,” Malfoy continued, going pink again. “Did your wife have any say in their names? Do you permit her to speak at all?”

“Don’t you dare say a word against my wife,” Harry said.

“I *wasn’t*,” said Malfoy, and stamped on through the water.

“I would’ve been happy to let her choose names,” Harry said furiously after a minute.

Malfoy maintained an obviously disbelieving silence.

Harry broke. “She wanted to call James Pigwidgeon, all right? I couldn’t let her do that to the kids. I would have let her—”

He stopped there because Malfoy was sniggering.

“You know what? Shut up,” said Harry. “At least Ginny is there for the kids. Where’s your wife?”

“She’s in Portugal,” Malfoy answered shortly, his whole face twisting.

So there was something wrong, then. There must be, for Malfoy’s wife to be in Portugal. The ceasefire there was looking kind of unsteady about now. Harry’d been sent over to Portugal as part of the special Aurors’ division during the first ceasefire sixteen years ago. He’d seen what had happened in the aftermath of the coup, when the Portuguese Ministry suborned a family of wandmakers and suddenly every witch and wizard in Portugal had found themselves trapped, with unreliable wands and no choice but to obey the new absolute rule of the Ministry.

Some witches and wizards had learned how to use guns and started a guerrilla revolt. It had got very ugly for a while – so ugly that even now, four ceasefires later, there were still constant eruptions into violence.

Harry’d presumed Malfoy’s wife was one of the early refugees from Portugal and that she’d never go back. Things must have gone really wrong – though it was to be expected, of course, the poor woman had to put up with Malfoy. Unless she was just as arrogant as he was, and thought that things like safety laws applied to other people and she was entitled to a holiday

even in a danger zone.

Now that Harry recalled, he thought he'd even met Malfoy and the woman who was going to be his wife in Portugal sixteen years ago, at the embassy. Harry had been having his own problems at the time, but he remembered Malfoy acting like an idiot and his own disgust that they were having canapés and dancing while people died in the streets.

"Where's your precious wife, then?" Malfoy demanded, his voice ugly now. "If she's *always there for the kids*."

"She's in St Mungo's," Harry answered shortly. "She's having a baby."

Malfoy, who had hesitated at the first part of Harry's sentence, looked as if he had never heard anything so impossibly vulgar.

"What, *another one*?"

"Shut up," Harry said in a bleak, vicious voice, and for a wonder Malfoy did.

Harry wasn't all that sure about the baby himself. He'd thought – they'd agreed that three was enough, but Lily was going to Hogwarts next year and Ginny hated the idea of an empty nest. And now Ginny wasn't doing all that well, wasn't as young as she had been, and Lily was at Ron and Hermione's and Harry had to get Al and James back before Ginny knew anything had happened.

They walked on in silence for some time, though Harry could practically feel Malfoy getting edgy and ready to speak. Scorpius was quiet enough, you could say that much for him, and Harry'd forgotten that Malfoy was always on about something.

Malfoy didn't speak. They kept walking until Harry was exhausted and Malfoy was faltering, and then Harry said: "We should stop. Won't do them any good if we're half dead by the time we get to them."

For a wonder, Malfoy didn't argue. He sat down on one of the slimy ledges the sewers had to offer and shrugged off his large bag, reaching inside it for what appeared to be a sandwich. Harry became extremely aware that he was starving.

"You brought a picnic lunch?"

"I brought a bag that can hold anything, and obviously I packed food," Malfoy said in a lofty voice.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You stole that idea from Hermione."

"I improved the idea," Malfoy corrected him snottily. "That's what the enterprising and intelligent among us do."

It didn't seem worth arguing about, so Harry cut to the chase and said: "Give me a sandwich."

There was a long moment of silence. Silence seemed longer out here in the sewers, time pressed flat by wet stone.

Then Malfoy raised his eyebrows and asked: “Why should I?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Malfoy, because I saved the world that one time? And your life.”

“Yes,” Malfoy drawled. “But what have you done for me lately?”

Harry stared at him in outrage. Malfoy looked like he wanted, very badly, to laugh. Then he bit down on his lip and flipped Harry a sandwich.

Harry tore into the bread with his teeth. It wasn’t even a very good sandwich.

*

Harry woke to Malfoy’s imperious hand pulling at his shoulder and the terrible awareness that his sons were lost, and he’d been sleeping on filthy stone in a sewer and wasn’t as young as he’d like to be.

“Enough lounging about, Potter,” Malfoy commanded. “Scorpius and Al could be in danger. As could the other baby Potter,” he added after a moment.

“James.”

“Fine,” Malfoy said. “Come on.” He wheeled around and strode down one of three – to Harry’s eyes interchangeable – tunnels. “This way,” he said over his shoulder.

“Fine,” Harry said to his back.

He made sure to draw level with Malfoy this time, too. Malfoy glanced over at him, face unreadable aside from the fact he was worrying at his lip, and eventually he spoke and Harry braced himself for more bloody unpleasantness.

Malfoy said in the nastiest voice Harry could imagine: “I – apologise for my behaviour earlier.”

“What?” Harry said, staring. “What?”

“Yes,” Malfoy answered, his gaze fixed straight ahead and his voice not getting any more pleasant. “I am – I apologise. I realise that I – owe you a lot,” he said, in a tone better suited to expressing a desire to rip out Harry’s lungs and set them on fire. “Including my current health and happiness. I think I may be somewhat overwrought by Scorpius’s disappearance.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “Well, er. You’re welcome, for your health and, uh, happiness.”

He did think that if Malfoy was grateful, he needn’t act like the mere sight of Harry was so very painful. It was a bit insulting.

“I *am* happy,” Malfoy told him, responding more to the tone than the words. “I have a

fulfilling job and a lot of money and a brilliant and brave wife and the most perfect child in the universe. I'm not in the best of moods just at present, but once Scorpius is safe and I am removed from your presence and – once I've had some kind of wash, because these sewers are frankly disgusting – well, then everything will be wonderful! Thank you for saving the world," he almost spat. "I *really appreciate it*."

"Jesus, Malfoy," said Harry. "Don't strain yourself." He added: "So do you keep the most perfect child in the universe in the attics or something? Because I've met Scorpius, and frankly-

"Don't you dare say a word against my son!" Malfoy shouted.

"You called James a hell-born brat!"

"I already apologised for all of that!"

"Oh my God," said Harry. "Why are you even here?"

He meant it in the sense of, what had he ever done to deserve this, why God why, but Malfoy – as was his way – obviously chose to take it personally. His pale face looked even more pinched and unhappy.

"I realise," he said, in that horrible stilted polite voice, "that you have a perfect right to think anything you like about me. But whatever else I might do, I would never leave my son in danger."

Harry thought for a moment of Narcissa Malfoy and her absolute willingness to see either Voldemort or himself in hell for *her* son's sake, and the way Malfoy used to go up in smoke every time someone said a word against his parents. He'd never thought about Malfoy's attitude towards Scorpius, but he supposed that furiously intent love made a certain amount of sense.

"I didn't think you would," Harry muttered. "I don't think anything about you, anyway. I never think about you at all."

He'd meant that to come out as more conciliatory. Malfoy's look and reply were both icy in the extreme.

"*Same here.*"

"Anyway," Harry ploughed on. "I didn't do any of it to be thanked. Particularly not twenty years after the fact. You can be rude to me if you like."

"Thank you," Malfoy said, sounding suddenly gracious. "I believe I shall."

Harry fully expected him to begin on that at once, but just then a rat brushed by Malfoy's boot and Malfoy was absorbed making terrible faces and obviously having a silent, private conniption about the filth in which he found himself.

"Wait," Harry said. "What job d'you have, anyway? I never heard about you having a job."

“This is because you’re not supposed to talk about being an Unspeakable, Potter,” Malfoy told him in condescending tones, while sending suspicious looks over his shoulder as if the rat might decide to return.

Nobody knew what the Unspeakables did, of course: just that sometimes even the Ministry had to answer to them. The Aurors got intelligence reports from them and sometimes had to ask for stuff from them: passage into danger zones, special weapons, that sort of thing. Harry’s requests were always instantly approved, which he’d regarded as sheer luck.

Given the fact that Malfoy had just expressed a certain grudging amount of gratitude, he was now rethinking this.

“Oh,” Harry said.

“Not quite as glamorous as being an Auror, of course,” said Malfoy, who seemed determined to take everything personally. “But it does have the advantage of not needing a *partner*.”

The raving git.

He must have looked at Harry’s reports. Well, he was technically allowed to do so if he was an Unspeakable, it might even be part of his job, but that didn’t matter because it was none of his business.

He’d always planned on Ron as a partner. Things would have been fine, then. But Ron had almost instantly shown incredible aptitude for training, he’d revolutionised the Auror training camps, he was far too good to waste in the field, and so Harry was left with a series of increasingly useless idiots who yelped endlessly about committing suicide and waiting for back-up and filling out stupid forms.

Quite a long series. Of which Malfoy was obviously perfectly aware.

“It’s true, being an Auror is pretty glamorous and high-profile,” Harry said, aware he was being ridiculous but still stung and unable for a moment to help being stupid. “Which is why I’m glad I’m not losing my hair.”

He more or less expected Malfoy to laugh that off, but Malfoy went instant, indignant pink.

“I’m not losing my hair!”

“Did I say you were?” Harry asked. “Sore point, is it?”

“No it isn’t, because I’m *not*,” Malfoy said. “And if I was – which I’m not! – it’s not like time has been kind to you people, now is it?” His voice took on a certain delighted malice. “What with your wife being the image of her mother.”

Harry opened his mouth to defend Ginny, and then realised that any attempt to defend Ginny would mean insulting Molly, and ground his teeth.

Malfoy seemed to be enjoying himself now. “And Weasley’s totally absurd moustache,

which makes him look like a redheaded sea lion-”

Harry had advised Ron about that moustache. Hermione had, very vehemently, advised Ron about that moustache. Ron loved it, though: he thought it made him look debonair.

“Not to mention *you*, O Middle-Aged One Who Lived,” Malfoy continued. “I must say, I’d rather be losing my hair – if I was which I’m not! – than have all those premature lines. Feeling a little off colour, Potter? Been ill? Your face is just a trifle marked by the furrows of time-”

That was when a pipe in the sewers burst and water hit Malfoy in the face.

“Whoops,” Harry said placidly. “Got very strong wandless magic. Sorry about that.”

Malfoy spat and then spat again. “Bleagh,” he said, and then spat a third time. “Ugh. Oh my God, this is the most repulsive place in the world. It must be awful for Scorpius: I presume your children are more used to squalor.”

“I swear to God, Malfoy,” Harry began, and then they turned a corner and saw the slope downwards of the sewers, so sharp that it formed a wet black ledge, and the small black shape huddled at the bottom, almost hidden under the cascading water.

Malfoy made a low, terrible sound.

Harry forced the world to make sense by splitting it brutally apart, into small reasonable pieces. He had to get down there and see: that was the first thing to do, everything after that would have to wait.

The ledge would have been a long way to fall for a child, but for a grown man it wasn’t too hard to jump. Harry landed with a splash and then heard Malfoy jump behind him: Malfoy staggered, making the water wash around their legs, and Harry glanced back to make sure that he hadn’t broken an ankle or something, and so that he could look away from the small shape.

Malfoy was leaning against the wall: he looked at Harry with wide, terrified eyes. His hands were trembling.

“I can’t,” he said in a dry voice that was trembling as well. “Potter. I *c-can’t* look.”

“I’ll look,” Harry said, and went over to the end of that ledge, put his hand into the water and turned the shape over.

It was an old skeleton, in ancient school robes. It was nothing that could have been any of the boys.

Harry shut his eyes and was deeply, quietly thankful for a moment.

Then he said over his shoulder, his voice almost steady: “It’s all right. It’s been here a long time – it’s not one of them.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said, in a small voice. Then he said, his voice changing and becoming cool, planning: “But it was a child once. These sewers are – come on. Let’s not waste time here. This is the right way.”

Left to himself, Harry would have stayed leaning against the ledge, being thankful. But Malfoy was right, and besides he had to follow him, Malfoy was the one with the tracking spell. That was good thinking, Harry thought: he was going to put a spell on every one of the children. Even the baby, when the baby was born. This was never, never going to happen again.

Malfoy was still trembling a little when Harry caught up with him.

“You all right?” Harry asked in a guarded sort of way. Well, he told himself, he couldn’t handle Malfoy going into fits on top of everything else.

“Perfectly.” Malfoy laughed, which was almost as horrible a sound as his polite voice. “Just a coward. But you knew that.”

Harry thought about the instant of paralysing dread as his fingers touched the sodden, disintegrating mass of an old school robe.

“Don’t be stupider than you can help,” he said shortly. “I was scared as hell, too.”

Malfoy’s shoulders eased considerably. “It – this place won’t bother Scorpius too much,” he said, as if he was trying to reassure himself. “He’s seen skeletons before.”

“Er – he has?”

“In Portugal,” Malfoy said briefly. “His mother used to have deserters shot and thrown in a ditch outside the camp.”

“She what?” Harry said.

Malfoy gave him a look that was almost amused. “Potter,” he said. “Do you actually not know who Béatriz is?”

Béatriz, that was it.

“Er,” Harry said. “Your wife?”

“There is that,” Malfoy conceded. “She also happens to be Béatriz Oliveira da Costa.” He looked at Harry, and obviously seeing Harry’s blank expression he added: “General Costa?”

“The, ah,” Harry said. “The commander of the Portuguese guerrilla army?”

“That’d be the one,” said Malfoy.

“*Jesus*,” said Harry.

He remembered vaguely that the commander of the guerrillas was a woman. Recollections of

campfire tales started to rise murkily through time towards him: the general's reputation was that of a woman with a savage, brutal temper, the kind who shot first and then asked questions after she'd had you thrown in the ditch. She must be coming on for fifty now, and the fraying threads of the ceasefire were held together in her iron fist. Not a lady to cross, the consensus had been.

So, probably the General wasn't in Portugal on holiday, then.

Harry remembered the stern face in Scorpius's silver frame with slightly more foreboding than before.

"Jesus," he said again. "How'd that happen?"

"I have no idea," Malfoy told him. "God was merciful. Everyone else was afraid she'd shoot them."

It took Harry a moment to realise that Malfoy had misunderstood the question, and that if he rephrased it he'd probably sound like he was insulting Malfoy's wife.

Given that Malfoy had just insulted his wife it seemed fair enough, but Harry remembered Malfoy's terror a few minutes ago and didn't quite have the heart.

"You weren't afraid she'd shoot you?"

"Oh, I was," Malfoy said. "But I was afraid of almost everything. It evened out."

"Does, er. Does Béatriz know about Scorpius?"

"No," Malfoy said in a distant voice. "We brought him back to England so he could be safe: so he could go to Hogwarts and have a normal life. She's counting on me to keep him safe, I know she is. She doesn't write – well, she never did, Scorpius takes after her, they can barely string four words together on paper. She's very – she's very focused, and we're far away. Sometimes I think she's forgotten we exist, but she trusted me with Scorpius. I couldn't write and let her know I failed."

It occurred to Harry that since Malfoy was actually telling *him* this, Malfoy might be in shock, but he wasn't going to stop searching so Malfoy could have a lie down or whatever. Their sons were out there: Malfoy could still walk, so they were walking.

"It's good, anyway," Malfoy said. "Scorpius knows not to go anywhere without provisions. They won't starve down there."

It hadn't even occurred to Harry. He sent up a prayer that Al wasn't vomiting up precious food with the excitement, and that Scorpius wasn't letting James starve.

It did occur to Harry that he'd been right about there being something wrong in the Malfoy household, even if he hadn't known about the whole long-distance forgetful and bloodthirsty general bit.

"Béatriz says that Score is the best scout his age she's ever seen," Malfoy said, and Harry

recognised the tone he himself used when he was talking about James's Chasing skills. "He also plays the mandolin extremely well. I think he's probably a prodigy."

It struck Harry that the way Malfoy talked about Scorpius was diametrically different from the way Lucius Malfoy had talked about his son in a shop once, as if Draco was in a competition and not doing as well as Lucius had hoped. Malfoy's tone made it clear that there was no competition: Scorpius had already won, most perfect child in the universe, that sort of thing.

Of course, it'd made little Scorpius grow up kind of insufferable, but it was probably a step in the right direction.

Malfoy boasted about Scorpius for some time. He seemed to have a lot to say on the subject. Harry was all right with listening to it because it kind of reminded him of Al.

God, Al, out here in the cold and dark with skeletons. He must be freaking out. He wouldn't be able to touch those provisions, Harry thought, and then remembered with an obscure sense of comfort something that had annoyed him very much when it had actually happened: the way that Scorpius became extremely cold and dictatorial whenever Al did not eat what Scorpius considered a sufficient amount.

They did not find the boys before exhaustion made Harry stop again: he didn't like to think about how long it had been but he knew they had to be sensible, however little he felt like it.

"I think he's close, now," Malfoy said in a tired sort of way. He'd lit his wand and propped it up against another ledge. Harry thought this might be so he could watch out for rats.

"Good," Harry said. Soon: they'd be with the boys soon, the boys would be safe soon. Al just had to hold on a little longer.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him, rummaged in his bag and flipped Harry a sandwich. "Eat."

"Thanks," Harry said. This sandwich was better than last night's.

Malfoy shrugged, one-shouldered. "I am fattening you up so that when the alligators come they will go for you first, and Scorpius and I can escape."

"Take Al and James too," Harry said. He ate and then after a minute he said: "So how'd you end up in a war zone in Portugal, anyway?"

Malfoy propped his pointed chin in his hand, resting his elbow against a drawn-up knee. "My mother sent me on a Grand Tour," he said at last. "She wanted to raise my spirits. She'd – You know Father died a year or so after... all that."

"Yeah," Harry said guardedly. He hadn't been very surprised. Lucius Malfoy had not looked well in the aftermath of the war: that was one reason why the new Ministry hadn't pressed charges. They'd expected him to die. Harry hadn't much cared.

Malfoy had probably felt somewhat differently.

“It wasn’t a – good year,” Malfoy said. “The house was a ruin and so was Father. So was I, pretty much, and the Ministry kept dropping by for tea and interrogations and Mother was trying to divide her time between Father’s deathbed and my Aunt Andromeda’s house, where she had her grandson to bring up because everyone else in her family was dead.”

Harry had been in Auror training camp at the time, but he’d come whenever he could to see Teddy. He’d just – never been good with babies. Andromeda had always seemed in control, as if she knew exactly what to do. He’d never thought much about the reconciliation between Andromeda and Narcissa.

“I was a great help, of course,” Malfoy said dryly. “I went and had a nervous breakdown. After Father was – dead, Mother sent me off on the Tour and moved in with Aunt Andromeda for a while. I don’t think she could stand to be in the manor any longer. So there I was in a dozen different embassies expected to have a good time and I just... it wasn’t that I was stupid,” he said sharply, and Harry looked at him questioningly.

Malfoy waved a hand. “I mean, I clued in pretty quickly that I’d chosen the wrong side,” he said, with a return of that unpleasant voice though it was significantly less polite. “What with them slaughtering my Muggle Studies teacher in front of me and the D – Voldemort making me torture people. I did want out. I used to lie awake at night and plot different ways out, think up things I could do – but that doesn’t matter much, does it? I never did any of them. My dad was so sick, I couldn’t leave him, the things Voldemort would have done to him – and I was terrified of Voldemort and almost everything else. I know I was a coward, and I – I wanted to make up for it. I got a wand in China, a kind the Portuguese Ministry couldn’t possibly control, and I found out where the guerrilla army was and I offered to help.”

“And then what?” Harry asked.

“Then I helped,” Malfoy said. “It didn’t make much difference.” He made an impatient sound and gestured a few times, as if he could re-shape the story so it went the way he wanted it to. “I don’t – that is, I think it did help, but I realised it wasn’t any use. That wasn’t my war. My parents weren’t at risk, my school wasn’t there to be betrayed. There was so much less at stake: it was easier to be less of a coward. I’d already had my war, and had my chance. I blew it. Whatever I did in Portugal, it didn’t change anything.”

“It was, er, still probably a good thing to do.”

Malfoy did not look as if he was much concerned with this.

“Why’d you stay?” Harry asked.

Malfoy’s face lightened. “By then I’d met Béatriz. I couldn’t leave her,” he said, in just the same way he’d said that he couldn’t leave his father.

Well, Harry supposed that if he’d wanted an answer like ‘to help the oppressed witches and wizards of Portugal!’ he should’ve asked someone else.

Malfoy’s face had darkened again, probably as he remembered the fact that he’d stayed by his wife in a war zone and she didn’t write to him now. Harry remembered the naked fear on Malfoy’s face before Harry turned that dead child over, and braced himself.

“Ginny and I were separated for a while,” he said, looking at the sewer water.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Separated,” Harry repeated. “We had – communication problems,” he said, remembering how the marriage counsellor had put it and then remembering how it had felt, dinner parties with Ron and Hermione when he’d realised that what he wanted was to stay with his friends, who he could talk to, and have Ginny go home alone. Nights when it was just the two of them, staring at each other desperately over a gulf of silence and wondering if they had made a terrible mistake. “She went to her mum’s and I had the Aurors send me to Portugal. Then I came back, and we – learned to talk to each other. It was all right. Things work out.”

He’d never been with anyone else, ever. He’d woken up panicking over what he was going to do, he recalled. He’d got drunk and told his troubles to a woman with a red dress on in Portugal. She’d seemed to more or less agree that he was hopeless.

Malfoy was frowning, an expression that made his nose seem more pointed than ever. “I don’t see how that’s meant to be any sort of consolation to me,” he said, in a voice that was only mediumly snotty. “I’ve never had a problem talking to anyone.”

“Oh, whatever, Malfoy,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Malfoy finished his sandwich and reached over to put out his wand, which illuminated his face for a moment: the sewer water had left him with a streak across one cheek and his hair all over the place. One lock was falling into his eyes. For once, he wasn’t wearing an unpleasant expression. It made him look quite different.

“You know, Malfoy,” Harry said abruptly. “If you didn’t slick back your hair in that stupid way, nobody would know you were losing your hair.”

One of Malfoy’s eyebrows rose and he gave Harry a withering look. “*I am not losing my hair*,” he said in arctic tones. “Which means that I can wear my hair any way I please. Your eyesight’s probably just failing you in your old age, Potter. Failing you even more, I should say.”

“Whatever, Malfoy,” Harry repeated as Malfoy put out the wand, trying to get comfortable on dank stone.

“Or it’s a hallucination,” Malfoy’s voice drifted over to him in the darkness. “Those happen, you know. As your mind fails you in your old age.”

He paused, and Harry waited for it with a sense of inevitability.

“Fails you even more, I should say,” said Malfoy, and then went to sleep.

*

Harry woke up first. His back was killing him and when he shook out the jacket he'd been using as a pillow it was covered in green slime.

He still felt he was more sensible than Malfoy, who for some reason had not removed his dark coat and was sleeping with his hair in the slime. It was funny to see Malfoy asleep: a little unsettling. He looked younger.

"Um," Harry said loudly. "Get up."

Malfoy tried to snuggle into slimy stone and said something that sounded like 'whyfor midglet.'

"Malfoy, there's a rat beside your head."

Malfoy sat bolt upright and said: "What! Where?"

"Come on, let's go."

Malfoy blinked sleepily around at the grey sewers. "Oh God, it wasn't all some horrible nightmare," he murmured vaguely, and got up. He was still shaking his head as if to clear it and mumbling sleepy nonsense as they splashed through yet another dank tunnel. "In a better world there would be crumpets," was one of his offerings. "What distinctly sour-smelling hell is this? I wanted better than sewers and alligators for my only child."

Harry stopped trying to put the sentences together so they made any kind of sense, and kind of nodded along.

It seemed like it was always twilight in the sewers, as if they were caught in a trap between day and night and time would never move on and they would never find the children. The only sound he could hear was Malfoy's voice and the fact he was starting to find whiny nonsensical drawling soothing meant that he was going mad on top of everything else.

"I really can't see how things could get any worse," Malfoy said darkly. "Unless there were alligators in here with us. *Oh wait.*"

"We could see a rat king," Harry volunteered.

There was a long silence.

"I know I'm going to regret asking this," Malfoy said.

"Well, if a whole lot of rats get their tails all twisted up and stuck together with blood and dirt and – other stuff–"

"Oh God," Malfoy said in a faint, horrified voice.

"They sort of grow together and form what's almost a single organism, one huge, stinking seething mass of rats all–" Harry had to stop there and laugh because Malfoy's face was so

appalled.

“There’s something so wrong with you, Potter,” Malfoy said coldly. “All twisted and wrong, like rats’ tails – oh no, I can’t even think about it-” His lips twitched, though not much, as if he had to go through a dozen different tricky steps towards a smile. “*Why* would you-”

“I’m just trying to educate you,” Harry claimed. “Rat kings are health hazards. It is an Auror’s job to alert the public to hazard-”

Then there was another noise besides Malfoy’s drawl wavering between outrage and amusement: there was a splash.

And Harry was running, as he’d run a thousand times before when all the alarm bells in his head were ringing and he was an Auror and it was his job and it was his *life* but today it was his *sons* and there was another difference, too: there was someone running beside him.

“You draw first: you’re faster,” Malfoy said, his voice calm, planning. “I’ll shield you if-”

“Right, got it,” Harry got out, feeling breathless but better somehow, Malfoy’s shoulder solidly behind his. And then they rounded a turn on those endless sewers and there was the gleam of Scorpius’s fair hair and beside him the small dark figure of Al and rearing over them was a beast.

It might have been an alligator once, but now it was a nightmare, something pale from a hundred years of darkness with a thousand crashing sharp teeth, and then Harry lifted his wand and it went flying through the air, his only thought was to get it *away* from the kids, and there was the sound of a monstrous alligator hitting stone very hard.

Then all was silence.

Al and Score had turned at the sound of Harry’s spell, and seemed transfixed with astonishment. Harry still had his wand raised: Malfoy still had his shoulder behind Harry’s.

The tension of the moment broke and tall, dignified Scorpius Malfoy leaped like a spider monkey as Malfoy went down on his knees in the sewer water. Malfoy buried his face in his son’s shoulder and stroked his hair: Score was clinging around his father’s neck.

“Oh thank God,” Malfoy said in a raw, muffled voice. “I’ve been going crazy, oh thank God-”

“I knew you’d come, Dad,” said Score.

Harry stood there feeling a bit awkward in the presence of emotional displays. He wasn’t much for hugging: Ginny did that. Al hugged him sometimes, though the other two didn’t – he’d hugged him before getting on the Hogwarts Express both years so far, Harry remembered.

He stared into the grey, sewerish middle distance until he felt a touch and almost jumped, then looked down and saw Al slipping his small hand into Harry’s. Al looked up at him, green eyes wide and his smile wider, showing the chipped tooth he’d got from that plunge off

the mantelpiece and Harry's heart turned over as if it had been flipped, as simple and devastating as that.

"I knew you would come too, Dad," Al said loyally, and then spoiled it by going on: "I thought Mr Malfoy might get here first because of the tracking spell, but I was going to ask him to wait with us for you. I didn't know you'd be coming together. Have you been having a nice time?"

"We have been out of our *minds* with worry," Harry said, more sharply than he'd intended to. "I have been frantic for you and your brother, so—"

Relief turned into fear, dry-mouthed and terrible.

"Al," he said, and understood how Malfoy had not been able to look at that dead child because he didn't think he could bring himself to say it. "Al," he repeated desperately, and then managed it. "Where's your brother?"

Al gave him a puzzled look and replied: "With the girls."

Harry stared at him and in their mutually confused silence he heard two imperious Malfoy voices mingled.

"And what the hell d'you think you were doing, Scorpius?"

"It wasn't me, Dad!" Scorpius protested violently. "It was all that tool James Potter's fault!"

Malfoy had his child by the shoulders now, and was looking up into Scorpius's face with pride and devouring love. "Of course it was," he said. "I never doubted that for a minute. Now tell me—"

"Dad," Score interrupted, casually commanding. "Give me your coat."

Malfoy hesitated, and then unbuttoned his coat quickly and handed it to his son. *His* gaze now seemed to be fixed on the grey, sewerish middle distance: Harry didn't see what was so embarrassing about having to take off a coat.

Score then forcibly seized Harry's attention by walking over to them and saying, in his that deep flat voice: "Arms out."

Al let go of Harry's hand and obediently held them out, and Score put the coat on him, settling it around Al's thin shoulders and then buttoning it up to his chin. "Keep that on," he instructed. "You know you catch cold easily."

Al beamed. "Thanks, Score."

Score nodded curtly and strolled back to his father, who turned his head to see his son's approach.

Grey light caught Malfoy's naked throat and laid bare a long silver scar, starting from just under his chin and snaking along pale skin until it disappeared under the collar of his shirt.

“Oh,” said Harry.

Oh. The reason Malfoy hadn't taken off his coat, and the way he always wore it, buttoned tight to his throat as Harry had noticed, even, at the Hogwarts platform more than a year ago, and Harry just hadn't thought, hadn't known.

Score's head turned towards Harry because of the sound, the first time he'd bothered to acknowledge Harry's presence. He did not look thrilled to see him.

“Oh. It's you,” he drawled, and moved closer to his father, leaning heavily against him.

Malfoy, looking a little lost, looked anchored by his son's weight, his wandering avoidant gaze settling on him. He stroked Score's fair hair once and then said, his voice more relaxed than the set of his shoulders: “Tell me, Scorpius, what the other baby Potter has done.”

Then Harry recalled that there seemed to be something for him to be embarrassed about, and he made a vague gesture. Al, bless him, interpreted correctly and caught his hand again.

Harry said, not without a distinct feeling of foreboding: “What's all this about your brother and girls?”

*

“Dad, I know this looks bad, but I can *totally explain everything*,” James said earnestly.

James was the image of the first James, except for one thing: he had Ginny's big, velvety brown eyes. He was trying to use them to good effect, but Harry had got wise to that particular trick when James was four years old.

It was extremely unlikely to work when Harry was confronted with the sight of James's most spectacular misdemeanour yet. There seemed to be about fifteen children, crammed into a dim alcove of the sewers. He ran his eye over them and saw a couple of boys whom he devoutly hoped James wasn't trying to add to his strange thirteen-year-old harem, and then he was caught short by a flash of bushy red hair.

“Rose?” Harry exclaimed.

“Oh well, it was worth a try,” Rose Weasley said with a sigh, and climbed to her feet. She was wearing her pyjamas, as all the children were but being Rose she was also clutching a notepad and a quill. “Hello, Uncle Harry.”

“Rose, you are not even supposed to be in Durmstrang,” Harry said helplessly. “Ron and Hermione agreed on this. They're getting Owls from Hogwarts every week. They showed me the Owls!”

Rose adjusted her spectacles – Harry and James both wore glasses, but Rose definitely wore spectacles. Harry suspected her of secretly being Percy's child, somehow switched at birth with young Petrarch Weasley.

“Well obviously, Uncle Harry,” she said. “But you wouldn’t want me to miss an educational experience like this because of Dad’s irrational prejudices, would you? Of course you wouldn’t. I did not wish to cause them any concern: I forged my permission slip and prepared those Owls for them with the greatest of care, and nobody would be any the wiser if it wasn’t for James’s completely irresponsible behaviour.”

“Rose,” James said pleadingly, “not in front of my women.”

“Not to mention the totally unreasonable actions of Scorpius,” Rose went on with sweeping disapproval.

Harry perked up a bit.

“Insisting on chasing after Albus instead of alerting the authorities as was clearly right and proper,” Rose continued, and Harry deflated. “Let me tell you all about it,” said Rose.

Apparently James had been boasting about his many heroic deeds in the halls of Hogwarts and had won himself many admirers among the impressionable young ladies at Durmstrang. Harry was marginally relieved to gather that the couple of boys were the ladies’ irate cast-off suitors.

He was less relieved to hear that James had got carried away one night and declared his intention of battling the monster alligators of Durmstrang.

“With what, may I ask, young man?” Harry demanded.

“I don’t know,” James answered vaguely. “I thought something would turn up.”

Harry’s accusing glare made James cry: “It’s the pressure to live up to your legacy, Dad! It makes me act out!”

Unfortunately for James, Harry had got wise to that little trick when James was seven. Anyway, whatever Harry had once done with monsters and sewers, he’d never tried to bring along a fan club.

“I am *amazed* by the foolishness of your actions, James, and the quite dreadful danger in which you have placed others by sheer thoughtlessness. We are *very* disappointed in you and rest assured there will be consequences,” Rose announced.

“Yes,” said Harry “ - what Rose said. Exactly.”

“You are *king of the tools*,” Score chipped in.

“But don’t think you’re not in trouble for deceiving your parents, Rose,” Harry said sternly. Rose gave him a look over her spectacles that suggested she was disappointed in Harry, too.

The ladies of Durmstrang seemed to have become extremely disenchanted with James, especially since Score’s provisions had been very stretched among all of them and had by now disappeared entirely. Everyone crowded around Malfoy’s bag and urgently requested sandwiches.

“Caviar, Dad,” Scorpius requested. “It’s my favourite.”

Malfoy smiled fondly down at him. “I know. I made sure the house elves packed dozens.”

Funny that Harry’d consistently got tuna, then.

“One for Potter too,” Score stipulated.

“I’m not all that hungry-” Al began.

“You will eat,” Score said, his tone brooking no argument.

“Okay,” Al said peaceably.

Then Malfoy saw one of the children diving like maddened scavengers for his bag properly, and his voice changed. “Bettina?” he said to a tiny Chinese doll of a girl. “Led astray by a Gryffindor! What would your father say?”

Bettina trembled, a fragile gossamer creature who looked like a good strong wind, let alone a mutant alligator, might do her some damage. “Uncle Draco, please don’t tell him,” she whispered. “I was wrong, I see that now. That boy’s no good, no good at all-”

Malfoy saw Harry’s inquiring glance and nodded at the tiny girl. “Potter. Bettina Goyle.”

Bettina’s mouth formed an O and she went and hid behind Malfoy, eyeing Harry with what seemed to be one part awe and three parts fear. Harry tried to think of something to say besides ‘You don’t exactly take after your father, do you?’ and settled with just nodding, which seemed to alarm Bettina further.

“Cute as a button,” James said. “Crazy for me.”

“You are in so much trouble, young man,” Harry told him.

“That is so unfair! You’ve forgotten what it’s like to be young and in love, Dad.”

“And who exactly are you in love with, James?”

“I am in love with love,” James declared. “I am a poet at heart.”

Harry noticed that a few girls sighed at James’s lofty statement, and sighed inwardly. Obviously this kind of stuff skipped a generation.

“See, Dad,” Score said. “I told you he was a tool.”

Malfoy sighed. “Sometimes I wish you would extend your vocabulary a little.”

Once everyone was fed Rose proposed that they get going. It was then Harry realised he had no idea how to get back.

*

"I had the tracking spell," Malfoy said. "You couldn't bring a map of the sewers?"

"You're the one who's so big on *planning*," Harry snapped. "You couldn't plan our way out of here?"

They'd stopped there because of the sixteen sets of wide childish eyes fixed on them, and the realisation that they had to be the adults and take charge of this situation, and not bicker.

"Minor delay, children," Malfoy said. "Let's all blame it on Potter. I think that's fair."

Harry would've objected, but it was clear the kids had taken to Malfoy and he was making them feel safe. Harry could protect them, he thought they knew that, but he wasn't any good at reassuring them or putting his arms around them and he certainly wasn't about to do any ridiculous impressions for them. They'd all laughed at Malfoy's Professor Longbottom, though James had loyally tried to hide it.

The kids were worn out from days of hunger and stress. They hadn't walked long before Harry and Malfoy glanced at each other and reached a silent decision it was best to have the children rested and relaxed, to let them sleep now, thinking the adults had it all under control.

Malfoy pretty much disappeared under a heap of children trying to sleep near a comforting adult presence. Score had to use his elbow viciously a few times to get the right shoulder, and Bettina Goyle was pretty much in his lap. James had three girls, the few but faithful, resting against him and looked rather pleased with himself.

Harry walked a perimeter and secured it, setting up a few traps for any alligators that might come for his charges. He was walking the perimeter again, testing for weaknesses, when Al trotted up to him. He was almost lost in Malfoy's coat, the big black sleeves flapping around his arms as if he was a tiny flightless crow.

"What're you doing?" Harry asked. "Shouldn't you be with – Score, or something?"

"Nah," Al said. "He's with his dad." He looked up, eyes so wide they looked like traffic lights. "I thought I'd come be with you."

"Well," Harry said. "Well, if you want."

Al took his hand again, leaning against him. Harry wished he was a bit younger, so Harry could pick him up and carry him about just because he was tired: then it wouldn't be an emotional thing and it wouldn't embarrass Al or Harry himself.

"Why'd you go after James, Al?" Harry asked, throat sticking on words of tenderness. He held on to his son's small hand, almost lost in Malfoy's coat sleeve. "You know better than that by now. You haven't done something like that in years."

"I know," said Al, his voice small and somehow precise, as if he was searching for the absolutely correct words. "But you see, Dad, it's very important that people here don't think I'm scared."

“Who cares what they think, Al?”

His son’s small face was screwed up with thought. “Well, Dad, it is important,” he said. “You can’t just tell people things. You have to show them, and – involve them. That’s how they understand.”

“If they don’t understand that you’re great already,” Harry said. “The hell with them.”

“What’s the point of sending people to hell?” said Al mildly. He was so good, and so insecure: it broke Harry’s heart.

“Why would anyone think you were scared, anyway?” Harry asked. “If the kids in Durmstrang are being rotten to you, Al-”

“No, they’re not,” Al said quickly. “I’m really glad I came here. I want to go to Beauxbatons next.”

“If you get lost in some kind of swamp, I will leave you to be eaten by giant French flamingos,” Harry said. “Except I won’t really.”

“I know,” Al said. “You’d come get me. I’m learning Russian, now. Score is teaching me: he is really good at languages because he is *bilingual*. I know some Portuguese too, but it is army Portuguese and Score says that I should probably watch it around grown-ups. It drives James mad when we talk it in front of him, it is *hilarious*.”

“I know Portuguese,” Harry told him. “Picked it up while I was over there. I’ll teach you some more if you want.”

Al beamed. “Then I could write to you in Portuguese! My letters could be really secret then. You don’t show them to anyone, do you?” he asked in sudden fear. “Not even Mum. My plans are very secret.”

Harry couldn’t recall plans, just a torrent of never-ending idolatry for Score Malfoy, but Albus looked worried so he shook his head firmly.

“I’ve kept them safe. You can trust me.”

“I know, Dad,” Al said, and smiled up at him again, that sweet chipped-tooth grin, and Harry thought of that skeleton under the water, and thought of what he would’ve done, and felt wrecked by how much he loved him.

“Come on, Al,” he said. “Get some rest. You can lean on me. If you like.”

Al curled up against him in a little ball of tufty black hair and enormous black coat, his hands curled around Harry’s jacket, and went to sleep. Harry was obscurely gratified when Rose trailed sleepily over to them and took over Harry’s other shoulder. Her spectacles dropped almost off her small nose as she slept. Once Al was asleep Harry stroked his hair a little, but the movement disturbed Rose.

“Whu?” she said, peering and moving from sleep to disapproval in a moment.

“Nothing,” Harry murmured. “Go to sleep, Rosie. You’re safe now.”

*

Harry woke up to warmth, opened his eyes a slit and grinned to see that James had crept up on them sometime in the night, and was almost lulled back to sleep by the musical sound of children singing.

Then he actually absorbed the words.

*“The Dark Lord came that day
And they asked who’d stay
And Slytherin ran away!”*

There was a pause, and then a boy’s voice said: “What house are *you* in, Potter?”

“I think you know that, Franz,” Al’s small voice replied steadily.

Every muscle in Harry’s body coiled for a spring. He was just about to put Rose gently aside and go deal with that child when James seized him by the shirt.

“Dad,” he whispered urgently. “It’s totally frowned on to beat up kids when you’re forty.”

“Thirty-seven, and-”

“Same thing,” said James.

“*And*,” Harry said between his teeth, “I am not going to beat up that kid.” He was almost sure. “I’m just going to teach him a lesson.”

“And what good’s that going to be?” James hissed. “You want him to shut up just because Harry Potter told him to?”

“I want him to shut up,” Harry said. “I don’t much care why.”

“*Al does*.” Harry tried to pry James off his shirt, but James hung on. “Look,” James said in a low, rapid voice. “Al has all his stupid git ideas, you know? Think about it, Dad! He knows whose kid he is. He could use that himself if he wanted to – *I have-*”

“Oh, *have* you?” said Harry.

“We are not talking about me,” James said airily. “Focus, Dad! This is Al’s choice.”

Harry looked over his shoulder, briefly abandoning the attempt to wrestle James for his shirt, and didn’t care about Al’s choice. Two of the Durmstrang boys were there, towering over the small form of Albus, and one of them chose this moment to give him a terrific shove in the back. Al stumbled and might’ve fallen, if the other kid hadn’t shoved him in the other direction.

“Don’t fight, do you, Albus Severus,” said the kid, and Harry recognised the voice as Soon To Be Deceased Franz’s.

“No,” Albus said, voice going unsteady with another shove. James hung onto Harry’s shirt with his entire body weight.

“Slytherins don’t, of course,” Franz jeered. “Cowards’ house. Everyone knows that. All the other houses stayed and fought – everyone in Durmstrang would’ve stayed – but your lot ran. Bet you would too. *Wouldn’t* you, Potter?”

Harry’d heard the stupid skipping rhymes, of course. He’d heard James teasing Al about Slytherin, and he hadn’t thought much about it: they were just reporting fact, after all. There hadn’t been one student left at the Slytherin table.

He should’ve felt guilty about that, maybe, but all he felt just now was towering protective rage that said: No. Not *my* kid.

“That’s *it*,” Harry said. “Let me go at once, James!”

“It’s as good as over now, anyway,” James said, and let go of Harry’s shirt at the exact moment Harry saw Scorpius Malfoy bearing down on Franz like a tiny blond vision of death.

He caught Al’s elbow and held him steady, and then shoved Franz hard.

“Score, no!” Al snapped.

Scorpius’s lip curled. “I’m not going to hit him,” he drawled, and narrowed his eyes to slits, making his drawl even colder and slower. “I’m Score Malfoy,” he said. “Perhaps you’ve heard of my cunning plans?”

“I’m sure that we can resolve this by talking,” Al said.

“I don’t know what it is,” Score said reflectively. “They just always go terribly, terribly wrong.”

“It’s probably all just a misunderstanding,” Al went on.

“So if you even breathe wrong in Potter’s direction, I shall try to exact revenge on you,” Score assured them, his drawl heavy with menace. “It’ll be a simple schoolboy scheme. I won’t mean any real harm.”

“I know we’re all devoted to the cause of inter-school co-operation,” Al said.

“Nobody will be more upset than me when it all gets so tragically out of hand,” Score said. “Except perhaps you, because-”

“ – And harmony,” Al said. “Harmony’s important.”

“ – You will be *wearing your intestines as hair ribbons*,” Score said with sepulchral

satisfaction. "Clear?"

"I hope we can all be friends," Al concluded. "What d'you think?"

Franz and his friend looked very confused and a little afraid for their lives. At some point, the quality of Scorpius's glare suggested, he would acquire a uniquely Malfoyian super power and turn them to stone with his sneer alone.

"Maybe you need time to think it over," Al said cheerfully. "Come on, Score."

Al walked away and Score followed him, pausing only to make a graphic slitting-throat gesture and throw a final sneer. On the whole, Harry was in complete sympathy.

It was only then, with Al removed from any sort of danger, that Harry noticed that Malfoy was awake. He had Bettina Goyle actually in his lap by now, clinging to him, and he was white as paper.

Franz and his nameless friend were ostracized thoroughly from the small children's court of impressions and laughter that Malfoy had established the day before. Harry knew that they were children and he and Malfoy were grown men, and he was still glad. He was still seething as he walked after them, guarding the rear from alligators.

"And why didn't *you* go help out your brother, James?" he demanded at one point.

"Because Score Malfoy is a crazy territorial git, is why," James said. "Anyway, that's not Al's plan. He wants to like, show everyone what Slytherin can do. Durmstrang is sort of, the next step of the plan? It is totally mortifying in school, Dad, he goes and sits at the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables and tells people to mingle: he is *asking* to get hassled."

"Does he get hassled at the Gryffindor table, James?" Harry asked.

"Dad!" said James. "Like I'd let anyone. Come on. He's my *brother*."

Harry let himself breathe. "'Course," he said. "Sorry, James."

James rumped his hair back and winked. "I'm the only Gryffindor who gets to hassle Al. Honestly."

"And before Al was Sorted," Harry said. "You know, when you were saying he might get Sorted into Slytherin, that kind of thing. Did you make a lot of cracks like that at school, in your first year?"

James bit his lip. "Everybody did it, Dad."

And that was the situation his Al had walked into, all unknowing. Harry felt another flare of that blind rage. *Not my kid*.

"And then there's Score Malfoy," Harry said slowly. "Why didn't you tell me about – that they were friends?"

“Um,” James said, giving him a look over his glasses that said Dad was being insane. “I thought you might’ve picked it up from him coming round the house, Dad? He wasn’t there as *my* friend,” James added on a strange sullen note, kicking at the sewer water. “Plus there’s Al yammering on about him all the time, Score says this, Score says that, Score thinks they should have lilies and organdie at the wedding. I thought it was *kind of obvious*.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Wait. James, can I ask you another question?”

“One more, Dad,” James said. “It’s great talking to you and all, but Franz has his eye on one of my ladies. Eternal vigilance!”

They should never have taught James that catchphrase.

“If you didn’t come to Durmstrang to protect your brother from – well, why *did* you come?”

Once more his eldest born gave him a look that said James was doubting his father’s sanity.

“Three words, Dad,” he said. “Hot foreign chicks. Come on!”

*

They walked and Malfoy thought they were getting closer to the school. Harry wasn’t sure whether he was just saying it for the children, so he drew Malfoy aside to ask him.

“No,” Malfoy said, glaring. “I *calculated* it. With my mind. There’s a slope going up that used to be going down, and I’m estimating distances here. Thank you for your inquiry! I want to go set the wards now,” he added. “If alligators arrive feed those poisonous little brats to them.”

He gave Franz and his Nameless Companion a venomous look. The boys were actually starting to look really scared: Harry felt a pang of conscience mix with the ferocious furious desire to avenge Al.

“Steady on, Malfoy,” he said, with an effort.

“No,” Malfoy said. “No, I don’t think I will. It’s not your house, okay? You know nothing about it! So shut your fat mouth.”

He kept his voice low and cast a covert glance around to make sure that the children didn’t see the adults were fighting, and then gave Harry the same look he’d given Franz.

“Hey!” Harry said, outraged. “It was my son they were pushing around this morning. Don’t forget that.”

“I don’t,” Malfoy said curtly. “It’s Al’s fight too. But it’s not yours. You haven’t been much concerned with the plight of Slytherin for a good twenty years, so don’t go putting on martyred airs now. What do you think Bettina Goyle is doing here? Goyle lives in England! Half the people I went to school with, *my friends*, sent their kids to school overseas so they wouldn’t have to put up with torture. Heard that charming song? There are about a hundred of them, and all of them say the same thing: *Slytherin ran*.”

“Slytherin did,” Harry reminded him.

“Oh, the hell with you,” Malfoy spat, and whirled.

Harry heard Al’s voice in his head, small: *What’s the point of sending people to hell?*, reached out and grabbed Malfoy’s wrist. “Stop,” he said. “I don’t-”

Malfoy wrenched his wrist away and stared at Harry hatefully, his chest rising and falling hard.

“Pansy Parkinson teaches in Durmstrang now,” he said in a voice like broken ice, cold and sharp. “She moved countries when she was seventeen years old, away from her family and all her friends. Until Bettina came here and Goyle told me, I didn’t – I didn’t know where she’d gone. She had to come away from it all, because she was scared and she didn’t see why your life should be worth more than hers and her friends’ and she said so, and then you went out and practically died and she couldn’t live with herself. You don’t know what it’s like to do things wrong before you’ve even left school and not be able to take it back for your whole life, Potter. You cannot possibly understand.”

“I didn’t hold it against her,” Harry said. “I didn’t give it a second thought.”

“The privilege of the magnanimous victors,” Malfoy said smoothly. “How nice for you. As for Goyle and – and – they were bad at everything in school, their whole lives, and then there were spells which needed pure force and they were good at them and they were praised for it and they were used to following my lead and I was being *stupid*, and they were scared and trapped and they weren’t like that, all right? Not all the time, just then, just in the crisis. But that’s what the Aurors told Cr-Crabbe’s mother he was, when they came to tell her he was dead. A coward. A torturer, a traitor. That’s all he’s remembered as, and Goyle couldn’t send his daughter to Hogwarts.”

Malfoy was rubbing his wrist convulsively, as if he wanted to scrub Harry’s touch off.

“I didn’t force them to torture people,” Harry said. “Nobody did that. You didn’t do that. It was their choice.”

“And what choice did they have?” Malfoy demanded, his eyes blazing. “When were we – no, I’m sorry, that’s not right. *I* did things: I joined, I chose: if they blame me, they’re right. But them – my friends – my house, when were they ever offered a different choice? Anyone invite them into the precious DA? Anyone offer them entry into that bloody secret room in the last year? We were shut out! We had a head of house who was too busy crawling to Gryffindors to pay a blind bit of attention to us, we were left to the wolves!”

“McGonagall said that it was time for Slytherin to pick a side!”

“*When did she say that?*” Malfoy demanded. “No Slytherin I know remembers her saying that. We remember her telling us to get out.”

“She said any student of age could stay-”

“Some of their parents were Death Eaters! They’d never been given the slightest reason to believe they would be welcome on a different side, they didn’t even have friends on that side and on the other side were their families! Would it have killed her to say to the house that was as good as leaderless that we didn’t have to go – that it wasn’t too late to pick a different side? Theo Nott has wished he stayed for twenty years. There were others like him.”

Harry tried to look back over twenty years, but it was all a mess, they’d all been so desperate. He’d done his best, and won. That was the main thing, he’d thought, he still thought.

“McGonagall was about to hurl herself and her students against Death Eaters,” he snarled. “I was seventeen years old and a couple of hours later I went like a pig to the slaughter in the Death Eaters’ camp. If we got a few things wrong, if we weren’t all that careful of the Slytherins’ precious feelings, we had no time and hardly any hope! I don’t blame myself and I don’t blame her.”

He expected another accusation to be hurled at his head, but Malfoy only looked wretched and furious.

“I know,” he said. “Everyone had – a lot on their minds. Everyone was trying to do something. Maybe nobody’s to blame. I don’t know. But I know Slytherin got screwed and sometimes thinking about it makes me so *angry* that I want to blame you all.” His mouth twisted. “And hearing stupid little children sing their stupid little rhymes doesn’t help.”

“There I’m with you,” Harry said, and Malfoy came a couple of mouth-twists closer to a smile.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Well,” Harry said. “Okay.”

“Albus Severus,” Malfoy said. “I thought – I did hear rumours that Professor Snape was, that he wasn’t what he seemed, that it was all a big double bluff. And then Al told me his name, and I thought – it must be true.”

“Yeah,” Harry answered. “Yeah, it was.”

He wondered for a moment if he should’ve told more people about Snape. He wasn’t – Snape was dead, it hadn’t seemed to matter that much, and he hadn’t known how to put it. For love of Lily Evans the war was won? He’d thought it was better to let it lie, until he’d woken with that chant in his ears this morning.

“Oh well,” Malfoy said, a painful fraction closer to a smile. “Nobody to blame again, there. He had to desert our house for the – for the bluff, then. He was a hero. I hoped he was. I liked to think that if he could’ve, he would have helped some of them.”

Harry didn’t remember Snape seeming to care one way or another about anyone but his mum, and perhaps Dumbledore. But maybe he had, or maybe he should have.

“He was brave,” he said. “Now for God’s sake, Malfoy, let me do the wards, go off and amuse the kids. They like you better anyway.”

“Good taste, the Durmstrang lot,” Malfoy remarked, smiling at last, a crooked smile, as if weighted and complicated by any number of things, but there.

Harry went off to set up the wards.

*

The next day Malfoy stopped at a point where the sewers diverged into two tunnels, and was uncertain about which way to go.

The kids were already flagging.

“I’ll go on and check it out,” Harry said. “If the slope’s going up it’s the right way, am I right?”

“You’re right,” said Malfoy.

Harry thought about it for a bit, lingering awkwardly around, and finally decided to ask Al to come with him. He had to talk to him about those Durmstrang boys, and – and about these plans of his, whatever they were.

“I could use someone to walk with me,” he said eventually. “Where’s Al?”

Then he looked and saw that Al was already out for the count, black head pillowed in the crook of Malfoy’s elbow. Malfoy was looking down at him with what seemed to be quizzical surprise.

Harry felt a tug at his own elbow, and looked down into a pair of cold grey eyes.

“*Don’t wake Potter,*” Score Malfoy said. “I will come with you.”

Harry felt tempted to say that actually he was fine by himself, but Malfoy was watching and Score had shielded Al and given him his father’s coat.

“Ah,” he said. “Thank you.”

Score let go of Harry’s elbow and strode down a tunnel. Harry hadn’t actually picked which one he was planning to go down yet, but it seemed the choice had been made for him. After a few strides Score tossed a glance over his shoulder.

“Are you *coming*, Mr Potter?” he demanded.

Harry went after him, the sounds of Malfoy and the children fading behind them. Score certainly wasn’t making any sound to compensate for them. He was just striding along, head down, and Harry realised the nature of Score’s precise walk came from the same source as his tone of command. Harry felt a bit uncomfortable for having misjudged the boy, but he

couldn't explain that he'd been looking for an aristocrat and hadn't seen the army brat.

He was the adult here. He tried to think of something to say, but he'd never really had to encourage Al to talk. He thought about what he'd have said if he was talking to James.

Harry coughed. "So, Score. How are you getting on with the, er, the ladies?"

Score gave him a single withering glance. "Mr Potter, I'm twelve years old."

"Oh, well," Harry said. "It's, er, okay to be a late bloomer."

Score snorted and it occurred to Harry, quite forcibly, that the Malfoy scion had no manners.

"Are you always this rude?" he demanded.

Score gave him a frosty look. "No," he drawled. "I just think you're a tool."

Malfoy was right, Scorpius did need to learn a new word.

He'd been trying to get Scorpius to talk and unfortunately, it seemed he'd succeeded brilliantly. Score was talking, his drawl becoming more vicious with every word, and there seemed to be no way to shut him up now.

"You make my dad unhappy and everybody talks about you as if you're some kind of god and *I don't think you even read Potter's letters*," Score said furiously. "He's doing all this for you and you don't even *care*."

Harry gave up trying to find a way to say that a hundred issues of 'The Nations Have Accepted Scorpius Malfoy as their God King' were quite a slog to get through, and instead snapped: "Doing what?"

"And I'll tell you something *else*," Score said, eyes glittering. "We were all stuck down here and that tool kept saying that you'd come and everyone else believed him but I didn't want you to come. I never heard any stories about you when I was little and I don't *want* to. I don't need you to come save me, not ever. Everyone says Slytherins are cowards but I've never been scared of anything in my whole life. No matter what happened, I knew my dad would come!

"And my dad did come," Score said with finality. "He always comes. That was what he told me when I was small, when everyone else was wasting their time telling stories about you. He said that he'd always, always be there, and he *always is*. Everyone else might think they need you to save them, but I don't need you at all. So there."

There was a short silence.

"It seems pretty odd to me," Harry said, his voice clipped, "that with the kind of opinion of me you have, you bothered to make friends with Al at all."

"I didn't plan on it," Score shot back. "I knew your kids were going to be in school and Dad said, don't let them bother you, and I know that meant he'd've preferred me to stay away

from them. I was going to. I wasn't going to talk to them at all."

Now that Score was talking so much more than Harry had ever heard him talk before, Harry could hear that part of the heavy drawl was a trace of a foreign accent.

"Sounds like an excellent plan," Harry bit out. "What happened?"

He looked down at the extremely judgemental child, and was astonished to see him smile. If he'd thought about Scorpius's smile, he would've expected a smile like Malfoy's, complex and crooked and hard to win, but Score smiled easily and almost sweetly.

"Potter defeated me with his weirdness," Score said. "That's what happened."

"I don't understand."

Score hesitated and then said: "He came running through all the train carriages. He said he was looking for someone who thought they'd be Sorted into Slytherin. I was – curious. So I said I thought I would be, and Potter told me that he'd been getting sick in the bathroom and thinking about something you said to him on the platform. That Potter was named after a brave Slytherin."

All roads led to Snape today, apparently. Harry tried to remember exactly what he'd looked like, but the memory swirled away as if someone was stirring the Pensieve. All that came to him was the sight of black, bitter eyes, and a door closing.

"Potter said he thought that if there was someone you thought was brave, then it wasn't right that people talk about Slytherin the way they do. He said he was going to do something about it."

So that was the plan: this was Al's crusade. They'd obviously exposed him to Hermione at a young and impressionable age, and this was the result.

"I didn't know," Harry said helplessly.

Score looked like he wanted to kick him. "I *knew* you didn't read his letters!"

"At least I write back to him!"

Harry felt ashamed of snarling at a child even before Score went white, in that near-grey way Malfoy did. "I tried," Score said. "It kept coming out wrong. I sent him a jumper-"

"I'm sorry," Harry said at once. "He wears it all the time."

"Good," Score replied. "He catches cold so easily."

"Look," Harry said. "I love him, all right? I don't always get it right, but I want to."

He didn't remember saying he loved Al before, not out loud. It was easier than he'd thought it would be. He'd never told Al: he was sure Al knew.

“Oh well,” Score said, sounding somewhat mollified. “That’s all right, then. Dad says that you should always try, even if you’re scared of failing. He says you should work out what you want to do and then really try.” He paused and added speculatively: “Besides, you never had parents, did you? So I expect it’s quite hard for you to work out. Because your parents are dead,” he added, as if to make things perfectly clear.

“Um,” Harry said.

Score nodded sagely. “My grandfather died before I was born, but I always thought he must’ve been pretty good at it. Being a dad, that is. My dad’s really good, the best, and he must have learned it somewhere.”

“I think your dad picked up a few new things,” Harry said.

Score glanced up at him warily, and then nodded again.

Harry thought he might have an idea about what would make Score Malfoy talk. “So you and Al, you get on pretty well, then?”

Score nodded a third time. “I always wanted a brother, only Mum says she’s a bit old for babies. But that’s all right now.”

“Er, Al already has a brother,” Harry pointed out. And he certainly didn’t talk about James as if he was the glorious sunrise in human form. Harry would have been incredibly disturbed if he had.

“Yes, but he’s a tool,” Score explained patiently.

“You’re not all that keen on tact, are you, Scorpius?”

“No,” Score said frankly. “Mum says I take after her. She says she’d rather shoot them all than use diplomacy. Dad is very good at talking. He used to worry about me saying stuff, tried to coach me for when I got to go to Hogwarts and have friends. But Potter gets it, so that’s all right now too.”

“And your other friends, the ones beside Al?”

“Oh them,” Score said in an uninterested tone. “Yeah, well. Whatever. There are plenty of people around, and nobody ever hassles me about being in Slytherin because I’m tall and better at Quidditch than anybody. Also I would unleash my cunning plans on them.”

“You come by those honestly,” Harry remarked.

“Dad says the plans get better,” Score said. “I hope so, they cause awful messes about now. Weasley got very tetchy about it that one time the sky fell.”

“The sky what?”

“Not the sky,” Score temporised. “Just seemed like that at the time. Just the ceiling of the Great Hall.” He brooded about that for a second, and then offered: “It’d probably be a

problem if I made the sky fall when Potter is Minister for Magic.”

“When Al is *what*?”

“You really need to start reading those letters,” Score Malfoy said, and then enunciated as if Harry was a bit slow. “Minister – for – Magic. You know. So he can – effect social changes, he says. Someone has to take responsibility, he says.”

“He is twelve years old!”

“He’s going to be a prefect first, obviously,” Score said. “Then Head Boy. By then people should be thinking a bit differently about Slytherin. Potter’s plans are good, I think,” he added. “Dad always said to find something I really believed in. I think Potter’s plans might do. And it’s handy that Potter’s campaign trails and stuff will be on in the Quidditch off-season. So I can come with him. He gets sick, you see. He likes me to be with him. It was a shame that time we had to miss the Tornados, though.”

Harry would have started feeling extremely ashamed of himself if he hadn’t been too overcome by the idea of Al becoming Minister for Magic.

“It’s not about choosing sides anymore, Potter says. It’s about making people come together. That’s the plan he told me on the way to Hogwarts. We shook on it. Then he had to go get sick again.” Score blinked up at Harry. “It’s a *good* plan. Potter’s smart.”

“Tell me more about it.”

“Well,” Score drawled, looking a little exhausted by all the talking but willing to labour until he found the right way to say it. “Well, Potter says-”

And Harry, feeling extremely bewildered but not altogether displeased, walked on and realised he and Scorpius were in fact going the right way and listened to Score deliver a speech that could basically be defined as How the Nations of the World Would Gather Together To Acclaim Al Potter As Their God King.

Then they heard the scream.

“Al,” Harry said, knowing that scream down to his bones, at the same time that Score said: “*Potter*,” and they both started to run, splashing and stumbling, every moment expecting another scream.

They found stillness. All the children were cowering against the furthest wall except for Al and Franz: Al had clearly knocked Franz flat on his back in the sewer water and was standing in front of him. The sleeve of Malfoy’s coat was torn: Al’s arm was bloody.

In front of them stood Malfoy, wand in hand. There were pieces of alligator painted on the walls, sinking into the sewer water. He turned to the sound of their approach with his lip curled into what was almost a snarl, hair in his eyes, blood on his face. Harry was pretty damn sure it wasn’t his.

Then he saw it was them, and his shoulders relaxed. “I don’t know how you do it, Potter,” he

said, his voice strangely calm. "It's much harder to keep track of them when there's more than one."

"It's all right, Mr Potter," Scorpius said with restored calm, as unlike Malfoy's calm as a glacier was unlike thin ice. "Dad used Sectumsempra. He's very good at that. Practises it all the time." There was a vaguely worried edge to his voice as he added: "Doesn't like using it, though."

Harry's moment of stunned stillness was broken by James stumbling towards him with his face pale.

"I didn't," he said. "Dad, I didn't see, I would've, it all happened so *fast*. That idiot Franz went wandering and then Al went after him--"

"It's all right, James," Harry said automatically, and then Score Malfoy's voice cut through the air like a scythe.

"Prepare yourself," he drawled, "for a world of pain."

James's hesitating movements went purposeful, eyes going dark behind his glasses. "A universe," he corrected.

Harry caught Malfoy's eye and both of them lunged and stopped their sons' curving descent upon the hapless Franz, seizing their collars and pulling them backwards.

"Thank you, Dad, Mr Malfoy," said Al, at which point Score's vehement struggle to free himself from Malfoy's grasp ceased.

Franz was on his feet by now, looking like he expected death by alligator or cunning plan at any moment. He looked surprised when it was only Al coming towards him, green eyes intent.

"Thank--" he began, and Al shook his black head.

"Don't thank me," he said, and reached out with his injured arm and shoved Franz, quite gently. Franz stumbled all the same: Al had left a bloody handprint on his shirt. "Just think," Al went on quietly. "Think *very carefully*, before you call a Slytherin a coward again."

He turned away in the silence and Score came running. Harry knelt down to see Al's arm and Score started casting healing spells with the calm professionalism of a boy used to war wounds, the skin knitting under his wand.

"Lucky Mr Malfoy's coat was so big on me, really," Al said cheerfully. "The alligator mostly went for the big flailing sleeve. Don't fuss, Score."

"Don't move, you idiot," Score barked.

Al whispered: "So the bloody handprint? Too much?"

"A nice touch, I thought," Malfoy said in a shaky voice, and Score and Al shared a grin.

“Al!” Harry exclaimed, scandalised.

Al looked at him with wide guileless eyes and smiled that big chipped-tooth grin. “Dad,” he said. “Slytherin, remember?”

Score wiped the blood away from Al’s skin with care, hands as gentle as his voice was decidedly not.

Harry’s evolving dark suspicions about his child and the way his child, now he came to think of it, so often got his own way when it really mattered, were brought up short by the swift anxious way Score then turned to his father.

“Do you want to get sick?” he asked. “It helps Potter.”

“No,” Malfoy answered, his voice back to that fragile calm. “No, Scorpius. I’m perfectly all right. I think I’m going to go wash up a little.”

He turned and walked away. Harry was planning to follow him, have a talk perhaps, but he saw that most of the children seemed to have the same idea and were all coming after them, Score in the lead.

Malfoy had quite an audience as he spelled a puddle of sewer water as clean as he could, and then washed the blood off his face. He was shaking and he ignored them all as he pushed his sleeves up to his elbows and tried to get the blood off his hands.

That was when the shocked gasp echoed through the tunnels from a dozen childish throats.

They all knew what the Dark Mark meant.

Malfoy looked like a hunted animal for a moment, crouched by the pool, the kind of animal that became savage when hunted and went for throats. Then Score strode out in front of Harry and stood before his father, facing the other children down, and Al went with him.

Harry looked around and was not much surprised to see the children filing quickly away from Score’s baleful gaze. Rose, with a silent tact Harry was a bit surprised by, was shepherding them all quietly away and making sure that they didn’t go far. She was also holding terrified-looking Bettina Goyle’s hand.

James was the only child left beside Harry. Score’s eyes narrowed in his direction.

“What’re you looking at?” he spat. “Go on, get lost.”

“I was just,” James began.

Score came down upon him like the wrath of God, shoving at him. “Well, don’t just!”

James shoved back. “I wasn’t even-”

“Yeah, well, mind you don’t!”

“Yeah? Oh yeah?” James said. “Come and have a go, then, *if* you think-”

There was the sound of a splash and James squawking. Harry transferred his attention to Al, who was standing quietly by Malfoy.

“You don’t look very surprised,” Malfoy observed, pulling his sleeves down with his shaking hands.

“No,” Al said simply. “Me and Score tell each other everything, you see.”

“Ah,” said Malfoy, and then he swallowed and went on: “I don’t mind paying for what I’ve done – well, I do mind, I hate it, but I see that it’s fair. It’s-”

“Not Score,” Al said, certain as the sun. “I’ll see to it. It wasn’t just Slytherin who missed out – everyone missed out on them, too. Slytherin’s starting new again. You’ll see. Everybody’s going to see.”

Incredibly, that called forth Malfoy’s crooked smile. He looked up at Al almost uncertainly. “Going to save the world, then?”

“Nah,” Al said, grinning in return for Malfoy’s smile. “My dad did that. It doesn’t need saving.” He hesitated for a moment, a little shy, and then said: “I’m going to change it.”

That made Malfoy laugh, a bit shakily and not at Al. “Good luck with that.”

Al nodded and slipped away from Malfoy then as he did from grown-ups he didn’t know *all* that well, back to the refuge of Score, who at the moment seemed to be doing his level best to drown Al’s brother.

“All right, Potter?” Malfoy asked somewhat sharply. “Just taking in the scenery, are we?”

“You know,” Harry said slowly, “I get that you’re all torn up about whatever happened when we were seventeen, but it was a long time ago. Time to let it go, you know? Besides, you’re really starting to annoy me.”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

“Get off the cross, Malfoy, we need the wood,” Harry said heartlessly. “I didn’t save the world just so you could mope about it.”

“I do not *mope*!”

“I can’t have you pitching a fit every other minute,” Harry went on. “I have to work out whether my youngest son is a sweetheart or a mastermind.”

“He can be both,” Malfoy said. “He’s a good kid.” He climbed to his feet, and added: “Your other one, however, is kind of a tool.”

“James is not a tool,” Harry said sternly, and then went to rescue him. James was dripping

wet, so Harry gave him his jacket.

“I didn’t even say a word about his father!” James hissed. “Crazy! He’s crazy!”

He accepted the jacket and huddled against Harry a bit too. Rose slept against him that night as well.

The children were a bit wary of Malfoy, but Al and Score sat on either side of him and Bettina clung to him as soon as he returned to her side.

“I don’t care what they say, Uncle Draco. My dad says you’re a hero: he says you saved his life during the war.”

“He did,” Harry said fairly. “I was there.”

Malfoy went pink. Bettina regarded him with shining eyes.

“Of course, Potter had to save both our lives about thirty seconds later,” Malfoy drawled.

“You did, Dad?” James said, lifting his damp head from Harry’s shoulder. His hair was sticking out in all directions and he looked mildly surprised. “I always thought you thought Mr Malfoy was kind of a tool.”

Harry felt it was time for James to learn a life lesson. “It’s not OK to leave someone to die just because you think they’re a tool, James.”

“I would leave you to die,” Score assured James in his deep, unhurried drawl. “Except that it would upset Potter.”

“*Same here*,” said James.

Malfoy did some more impressions and the children gathered closer to him again, wariness dissipating like memory in time.

Al came back to Harry with Score in tow.

“Dad’s impressions are so mortifying,” Score said, with that easy smile. “I think he’s feeling better.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Harry.

Score blinked at him. “Fine. Dad’s nervy and Mum’s shouty, so I think there should always be someone who, you know, keeps their head.”

“So you’re – Zen about things,” Harry said, frowning, at which point a very pretty little girl with curly hair and glowing brown skin turned her head and said: “Yes?”

They all stared.

“Xenophilia Clio Thomas,” she said. “People call me Zen. Well, they have to, don’t they?”

Harry'd thought Dean and Luna lived in England, and said so.

"Well, yes," Zen admitted. "But Mum wasn't all that happy at Hogwarts, you know. She thought it might be nice for me to have friends before I was in fourth year. Of course, Mum also said that these alligators were probably vegetarian and friendly, and I think she might've been wrong about that one."

"Do not worry," James said grandly. "I will protect you."

"Tool," Scorpius said automatically, mostly looking at his father with a shade of concern on his face. Malfoy was offering to sing the children something now, and Scorpius looked pleased.

Then he saw Harry looking.

"Dad's high-strung," he said by way of explanation. "We think that's why he's losing his hair."

Unfortunately Malfoy caught that.

"I am not losing my hair, you are all having some kind of mass hallucination from the sewer fumes," he said. "You should worry about that."

Later Malfoy sang them a Portuguese lullaby. Score had conceived a cunning plan and Al and Rose had talked it over and figured out how to make it work, and Harry and Malfoy had cast the actual spells because children shouldn't play with fire. There was a little campfire bobbing on the sewer waters now.

Most of the children were asleep, James and Rose with their heads together and their glasses in a tangled little heap between them. Score and Al were sitting quietly near the fire, having one of their conversations which involved Al talking fifty times more.

"But we can't stop there, Score, don't you see? There are the goblins to consider. We have to stop the oppression of the goblins."

"If you like," said Scorpius indulgently, clearly regarding stopping the oppression of the goblins as a special treat for Al.

Al sighed, a small sleepy sigh, and settled back comfortably against Scorpius.

Malfoy was still singing, softly: Harry was pretty clear on the fact that Malfoy didn't know Harry understood Portuguese, and pretty clear that Malfoy was singing to his son alone. He looked at the intent love in the gaze Malfoy had trained on Scorpius, and then surprised the exact same look on Score Malfoy's face, directed at Al's tufty black head.

It wasn't just Slytherin who missed out – everyone missed out on them, too.

Smart kid, his Al.

*

“Almost there now. Everyone keep their eyes out for the grille,” Malfoy ordered.

“Once we’re there, we’ll Levitate you up,” Harry told the children as they splashed along the last few paces.

“You will,” Malfoy told him briefly. “I have a problem with Levitation charms.”

“There was once a donkey with our provisions on it and a cliff,” Scorpius drawled, apparently under the delusion that he was contributing helpfully to the conversation. “The donkey just went splat. Mum was really annoyed.”

“On second thoughts,” Malfoy said dryly. “Scorpius is my responsibility, and I will Levitate him.”

“Oh, *Dad*,” Score said, shaking his head and laughing up at him. “I-”

That was when they heard the noise.

“Scorpius,” Malfoy said, cutting him short. “You know what to do!”

Harry already had his wand out: he relaxed a fraction when he felt Malfoy’s shoulder pushed hard against his own and realised that Malfoy did too. He heard Scorpius’s voice issuing commands, Rose giving instructions and Al coaxing the other children away to a safe distance.

“Same plan as before?” Malfoy murmured.

“Got it,” Harry said.

Then the grille exploded from above, bringing down a cloud of dust and small stones.

As the dust cleared, a figure was revealed in a square of light. As through a mist features of classic perfection were revealed, high cheekbones and dramatic good looks accentuated by hair that was currently a deep, electric blue.

“Don’t worry, children, I’m here to rescue you,” said the Auror. “The name’s Lupin. Teddy Lupin.”

*

“Hi Ted,” Harry said.

“*Harry*?” Teddy said, his face changing: his nose became aquiline, which usually meant he was surprised.

“Hello, Teddy,” Malfoy drawled.

“*Draco*?” Teddy exclaimed. “Um, does someone want to explain to me what’s going on?”

There was the splashing of many children's feet returning, and Harry sighed inwardly as the sigh of a dozen small girls caused a breeze in the sewers.

Teddy smiled a charming, rueful little smile. "Hi, kids. How are you doing? Do you want some chocolate?"

Teddy always had chocolate.

As ten girls almost hit Teddy in the chest, Harry took a moment to crush down all of the petty jealousy he'd been feeling towards Teddy recently. Teddy was his godson, and he loved him: it didn't matter that Teddy – in between part-time modelling and romancing Veela - was the new rising star of the Aurors.

Teddy had problems keeping partners too, Harry reminded himself. Of course, that was because they kept falling madly in love with him.

He glanced towards his sons, and saw them staring at Teddy with rapturous hero-worship.

"Hi, Teddy," they chorused adoringly, together with Score Malfoy.

"Hey, James, Score. Al," Teddy said. "Rosie, sweetheart, aren't you meant to be in Hogwarts?"

Rose fanned herself with her notepad. "I forget," she said dreamily.

James tore his eyes away from his hero long enough to absorb the fact that his stock had risen appreciably among the womenfolk what with Teddy Lupin knowing his name.

"My dad is his godfather," he told Xenophilia Thomas. "He eats at our house."

Zen looked at him as if she'd forgotten who he was, but a couple more girls sidled up to him with eyes that invited him to tell them more.

"That's nothing," Score sneered, eyes fixed on Teddy. "He's my cousin. My Great-Aunt Andy brought him up."

One girl, Something Vane, Harry couldn't remember, looked speculatively at Scorpius as if wondering when Teddy's genes were going to show up. She seemed to decide that she would wait around for that, and advanced on Score with intent.

"I hear," she said in an alarmingly throaty voice for a child of twelve or thirteen, "they call you the Boy Who Scored."

Score took a smart step back.

"Um," he said. "Quidditch. They call me that because I'm good at-" The girl kept advancing, and Score's nerve broke. Along with his drawl. "Quidditch?" he said uncertainly.

"What else are you good at?" purred Miss Vane.

“Dad,” Score appealed, and retreated behind his father.

Malfoy looked somewhat disconcerted by his son’s behaviour.

“Score?” he said. “Why are we hiding from young women?”

From behind Malfoy’s elbow came a dark voice.

“Mr Potter says that it’s okay to be a late bloomer.”

Malfoy looked a little bit like he wanted to laugh. “Don’t listen to that awful man, Scorpius.”

Bettina Goyle was standing looking overwhelmed by the magnificence of Teddy and utterly unable to do anything about it. She turned her huge eyes on Al as the least threatening person in the sewer.

“Does he really have dinner with you?” she asked timidly.

“Yeah,” Al said, and beamed at her. “He’s really cool, Teddy. I’ll introduce you. It’s Bettina, isn’t it?”

Bettina beamed shyly back at him. “You can call me Betty.”

Al shook her hand gravely. “You can call me-”

“Potter!” Score commanded from behind his father. “Come away!”

Harry was somewhat relieved that Score seemed to regard girls as a triple threat. Al had an unsettling tendency to bond for life with his former Slytherin classmates’ offspring.

“Would somebody please explain things to me,” Teddy said plaintively, bestowing a kiss and a chocolate on Zen Thomas, who seemed vaguely startled to find a queue forming behind her.

“Look, they’re our kids,” Malfoy said, callously abandoning his only child to go explain things to Teddy.

Score Malfoy looked around suspiciously, and jumped when Rose tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oh, it’s you, Weasley,” he said, taking a deep breath of relief. “I thought it was a girl.”

“*Excuse me?*” said Rose.

Score looked bewildered. He looked even more bewildered when Rose hit him over the head with her notebook.

“I cannot even believe your stupidity. I will not put up with this. I don’t have to. I am going to *surround* myself with girl friends and never have to deal with men again!”

Rose stormed away. Scorpius leaned against the walls of the sewer and drawled: "I think I may have said something wrong."

Rose went and detached Zen Thomas from Teddy. Zen seemed puzzled and then completely delighted by Rose's agitated request to be best friends. Bettina Goyle had evidently overheard and was shyly making her way over to them, her small face hopeful.

Score sidled over to Harry, obviously intent on using him as a barrier between Score and the womenfolk. Harry gave him a slightly startled glance.

Score gave a small one-shouldered shrug. "I owe you anyway, Mr Potter."

"What for?" Harry asked.

"Telling Potter about getting to pick which house you get into."

"Oh right," Harry said. "Well, yes. I see that Al's doing all right in Slytherin, though. I'm sure he made the right choice, asking to be put there."

"Not Potter," Score said impatiently, and then added with a touch of pride: "The hat barely touched his head before he was in Slytherin. It was *me*. It tried to put me in Tool House! Dad would've had a fit!"

"Oh," said Harry.

"With Toolface, too," added Scorpius. He was clearly brooding on his wrongs. He was also clearly not getting any better at this tact thing.

He shot James a filthy look, which James returned with interest before turning back and saying passionately: "I'm so glad you came to rescue us, Teddy."

"You ingrate," said Malfoy, in much the same way his son said his favourite word. "Teddy," he continued. "I will answer all your questions if you want to come by the house tomorrow. Just get me out of this place. There are rats and Potters. I can't take it anymore."

"How do you two know each other?" Harry asked.

"Great-Aunt Andy and Grandmother live together," Score said, sounding unimpressed with Harry's mental prowess. "There are pictures of Teddy holding me when I was a *baby*," he added. "We spend Christmases together. Some of them. Because sometimes he has to go to your place. Which is not fair, we have fewer *people*."

"I thought sometimes you were on assignment," Harry said helplessly.

Teddy's hair changed all the time, but never his eyes. They were always warm, grey and full of secrets.

"Did you?" he said. "Have a chocolate."

"You're a sly one, Teddy Lupin," Malfoy remarked, with what was obviously long-standing

affection.

Harry was starting to suspect who had taught Teddy all those filthy Portuguese songs when he was little. That had always been a bit of a mystery. He also had no illusions that Malfoy hadn't been deliberately keeping out of his way. Which really, had he known before, he would've thought of as a favour.

"I can't believe you two are out here!" .

"We did manage not to kill each other," Harry said dryly. "Not that I wasn't tempted."

"That's not what I meant," Teddy said. "You shouldn't be so reckless, Harry. You're not as young as you once were, you know. What would we all do without you?"

He smiled a sweet smile, but Harry was too busy being outraged to melt. Malfoy was smirking like a demon.

"You're so right, Teddy," he faltered. "Do you know, I think all this sewer water has-" He fought to keep his face solemn. "Has brought on my rheumatism."

"Shut up, Malfoy, oh my God."

"I think Potter put his back out," Malfoy continued solemnly. "Or is it that he has a gimpy knee? The body just breaks *down*, you see. So sad. I look on you as a crutch in his old age, Teddy."

"I do my best to help out," Teddy said sympathetically, mischief along with the secrets in his eyes.

"I still have an arrest record that's twice yours," Harry said, grinning at Teddy, whose record was climbing every month. Harry was proud of him, more than anything else.

"You forgot to mention that he was a whippersnapper," Malfoy said helpfully.

"Yes," Harry said. "These things slip your mind, with age."

All the children requested that Teddy be the one to Levitate them out to the school.

"I feel our glory has been sadly lessened," Malfoy said. "Little ingrates. We should've fed just one of them to the alligators. That'd larn them."

"Little Franz, for choice," Harry said.

Teddy popped his now-deep crimson head back into the space where the grille had been. "Do either of you need help?"

"No," Harry said, and was hauling himself up by his fingertips when he heard Malfoy quaver out in tremulous tones suggestive of an eighty-seven-year-old in poor health: "If you *please*, young man."

Malfoy, Harry thought, rolling his eyes. He never changed.

*

Walking down the corridors of Durmstrang to report the return of the students to their headmistress, Teddy held Score and Al's hands.

James, hanging off Harry's arm and scuffing his shoes against the stone floors, was obviously not thrilled.

"Everyone likes Al best," he said sulkily.

"I'm sure Teddy likes you both the same," Harry said, and then looked down at James's head with a sudden spasm of worry, wondering if he was being an awful father. James obviously hadn't ruffled his hair in a while, and the black spikes were drooping like a wilting flower. "And I love you both the same," he said hastily. "You know that, James, don't you? I-"

"Yes, I know that," James said grumpily. "Of course I know that."

"Okay," Harry said, and breathed again. "Then what-"

"Nothing," James snapped, and glanced covertly over at Teddy, Al and Score.

"Oh, James," said Harry. "How did you meet Score, exactly?"

"I was just trying to be *friendly*," James snarled. "I just heard Uncle Ron talking like he was, I don't know, dangerous or something, so I thought maybe I'd see what he was talking about, so I went and found him outside the bathrooms reading *Flying Through the Ages* which is, of course, the best book in the world, so I offered to show him around, introduce him to the right people-"

Harry made a note to himself to have a strong word with Ron for making Score Malfoy out to be mad, bad and dangerous to know, and thus obviously irresistible.

"And he just called me a tool and walked off with Al," James said, incandescent with indignation. "Rude!"

"Wait," Harry said. "When did Al come into this?"

"I don't know, he came out, he'd been getting sick, I made a bit of a joke about it. It was funny, too," James said moodily. "Not that *he* laughed. Rude!"

"Oh, James," Harry said again. "Did you possibly kick your brother at any point?"

"Might've," muttered James.

"You shouldn't do that," Harry said. "And Al had just made friends with Score. If you were trying to make friends, you probably shouldn't kick his other friend, do you see?"

"Who was trying to make friends?" James demanded. "Not me. I don't care!"

He glared at Scorpius's back with what Harry was horrified to realise might be sullen yearning.

"Also I'm going blind," James continued in a voice of doom. "I can hardly see anything even with my glasses on. Can I have a seeing eye dog when I'm blind?"

"James, you're not going blind," Harry said patiently. "You're just wearing Rosie's glasses."

He glanced around to find Malfoy and thus Rose and Bettina, who were hanging off him, and found them all much closer than he'd expected. Malfoy was frowning thoughtfully in James's direction.

As Rose and James exchanged glasses, Teddy led the others back a little way to them.

"If we'd had the Slytherins on the right side during the war," Al was saying, obviously too bowled over by Teddy to keep all his plans entirely secret. "Things would've been different. Look at what a difference *one* made-

"We did win," Teddy pointed out mildly.

"Yes," Al said, "but I think that fewer people could've died."

Teddy's hair looked grey for an instant, as if there was a shadow passing over it.

"That would've been nice," Teddy murmured, and then he smiled brilliantly and the moment passed. "Harry, Draco, I meant to tell you. I think you might be in a bit of trouble. When I was here before, there were a good lot of - men in uniform. You know it's not, ah, the first time you sort of seized something you weren't assigned to, Harry."

He looked apologetic.

"What wild miscarriage of justice is *this*?" Malfoy demanded. "This school *flings* our children to the alligators – there are skeletons in those sewers, you know – and then they round up the men in uniform to give us a stern talking to? Their tiny skeleton collection running low, was it?"

"I can-" Harry began.

"You will shut up and let me do the talking, Potter," Malfoy said.

"This'll be great," Scorpius told Al, in what Scorpius obviously fondly imagined was a discreet undertone. "It'll be like the time he had a tantrum at Spain."

"Those were negotiations, Scorpius!"

Score looked unconvinced. Harry did not blame him.

"Oh well, let's get this over with," Harry said. He leaned forward and pulled the headmistress's doors wide open.

There were a lot of people in uniform in the room. There was a flurry of movement on their arrival and then Harry felt a brief sharp moment of unease: of something lost, and then realised that Malfoy was no longer at his shoulder but walking into the room.

The woman in front of Araminta von Bosau's desk whirled, long black plait flying, and met Malfoy half-way. Then she hit him.

"You *benighted Englishman*," she said in furious Portuguese. "What the hell d'you have to say for yourself?"

"Ow, my jaw," said Malfoy in the same language.

"I come home and find it *deserted*," raged the woman. "I send an Owl to my son and receive a message back from *blithering imbeciles* telling me that my entire family may have been eaten by alligators. Do you have any conception of how worried I have been? I should have—"

"—Had me shot and thrown in a ditch the day I walked into your camp," Malfoy filled in for her helpfully. "Béatriz. You came back."

General Costa looked at him with ire and as if she wasn't quite sure how he'd got hold of her hands. She looked much as she had in Score's picture, a little older: a severe, high-cheekboned face, a white scar slashing down one cheek that must have just missed her eye. She was as tall as Malfoy: as tall as Harry was, and when her hands in Malfoy's twitched Harry thought she was getting ready to hit him again.

Her hands just closed on Malfoy's, though. "Of course I came back," she said. "Did you think I wasn't — oh Draco, you stupid fool. What on earth puts these ideas into your head? I blame the inbreeding." Her eyes started to smoulder again. "I also blame the inbreeding for you dashing off to get yourself eaten by alligators."

"But darling," Malfoy said, all innocence, and let go of one hand in order to make a gesture that somehow encompassed Teddy Lupin and gave a suggestion of shining hair being flipped back. "I was perfectly safe. I was rescued by *Lupin*, after all. *Teddy Lupin*."

Harry snorted and then found the General's smouldering gaze had swung to him. That was all the warning he got before she'd yanked away from Malfoy and bore down on him with her wand out.

Harry had never been out-drawn in his life and he wasn't about to start now. He got his own wand out and aimed between her eyes.

"Draco," Béatriz said. "Who is this man, and why does he understand Portuguese?"

She and Harry kept their eyes on each other, gaze unwavering, waiting for a weakness.

Malfoy strode forward and snatched both their wands away. "Béatriz, Potter. Potter, Béatriz. Don't kill each other, you'll make a mess on the headmistress's carpet."

Béatriz regarded Harry with a little less anger. "Potter?" she said. "Oh yes. I remember —"

sixteen years ago, at the Portuguese embassy? You were very drunk.”

“-very drunk,” drawled Scorpius in English, and that was when Harry realised that Score was helpfully translating the entire conversation for the benefit of the entire room.

“Dad, you devil!” said James.

Everyone was staring at them. Harry felt a bit hot and cold with mortification.

“James, don’t be ridiculous, I was already *married*,” he said, and then slowly, in Portuguese: “You were – were you wearing a red dress?”

Béatrix nodded absentmindedly, but her attention had already turned back to her husband. “This must have been an interesting trip to the sewers,” she said dryly. “Leaving aside the alligators.”

Malfoy appeared to be amusing himself by tossing up Harry and Béatrix’s wands into the air one at a time and then catching them. “Hey,” he said in a pleased sort of way. “Does this mean I’m master of the Elder Wand again?”

Harry snorted. “Sure. Good luck finding it. Give me my wand back, Malfoy.”

“Hmm,” Malfoy said. “Let me think. What did you ever do with my old wand?”

“Um,” Harry said. “I think I put it in a drawer somewhere.”

“Oh, *did* you?”

“I could look for it,” Harry offered. “If you like.”

Malfoy threw Harry back his wand. “Nah, I don’t care anymore.” He looked back at his wife, and put the wand into her hand, touching her wrist as he did so. “Why did you come back in such a hurry, Béatrix?”

“Why does there have to be a reason?” Béatrix asked unconvincingly.

“*Béatrix.*”

“I know I promised that Score could have Hogwarts,” Béatrix said. “I feel like I should take you both back with me-”

“Mum,” Score broke in urgently. “Mum, no. Hogwarts. I want to stay in Hogwarts. I want-” He threw out a hand, like a very imperious drowning man, and Al caught it.

“Don’t worry, Score,” Al said instantly. “You can come live with us.”

James’s face was a picture.

Score did not look overly enthused, either. “Dad,” he said pleadingly.

“Whatever you need, Score, you know that,” Malfoy assured him at once. “Béatriz?”

“I need you to come back,” Béatriz admitted. “The ceasefire’s falling to pieces. It’s diplomacy, Draco, you know I can’t-”

“We’ll work it out,” Malfoy told her. “We always do. I’ll make a plan, or you’ll shoot them all.” He put a hand to her scarred cheek, fingers lingering at the spot between where her scar ended and her mouth began. “Right?”

“I only shot everyone that one time,” Béatriz muttered.

“I’ll come back with you. In the summer Score can come. By next year things will be sorted out. Would I lie to you?”

“*Shamelessly*,” said Béatriz, and that made Malfoy smile.

“Can Potter come to Portugal?” Score asked. “I will look after him. I will teach him to use a rifle.”

“That’s an important skill,” Béatriz said. “We’ll play that game,” she said, and looked at Malfoy with love and mockery. “You know, when we shoot *rats*. The trick, as you know, Score, is to wait until the rats are bloated from feeding on the corpses, and-”

“You’re disgusting,” Malfoy told her, looking terribly happy. “I should have found a nice English witch to marry.”

“Good afternoon, Mr Potter,” said Araminta von Bosau, looking up from some papers as if she had just spotted him. “Ah, I see the children are back. How nice. I told you there was nothing to worry about.”

“Now *see here*,” said Harry and Malfoy in crisp unison.

“Seeing you here, it reminds me,” Araminta continued. “I got an Owl yesterday from your wife. I believe she wanted me to tell you something about – a baby? Agony? She seemed quite annoyed.” She began to pat at the drifts of paper on her table. “I have it here somewhere...”

“Oh my God.”

“Go,” said Malfoy. “I’ll sort things out here.”

“Yes, we’ve got everything under control,” said Teddy, who was soon to be swallowed by a heap of little girls.

“Okay. Er. See you sometime. Nice to meet you, Mrs Malfoy,” said Harry, at which point Béatriz rolled her eyes. “Come on, kids.”

He seized James by the shoulder and disengaged Al from Score with an effort.

“Come on, come on,” Harry said, sweeping them along.

“Dad, can we *please* call the baby Scorpius,” Al said, running to keep up.

“Dad,” James said with dawning indignation. “Dad, Teddy Lupin stole my women. Make him give them back!”

*

When they met Ron on the platform, Lily took a look at the lurid colours on his Hawaiian shirt and said: “I think I might actually be sick from nerves after all, Mum.”

“Al already used the bag,” Ginny said. “Don’t you dare.”

“What with this and the moustache, I think it’s some kind of mid-life crisis,” Hermione said philosophically. “You should see his new car.”

“Dad fixed the Jag so it flies, you know,” Ron told Harry.

“As long as you don’t go chasing younger women, I suppose I can put up with it,” Hermione said.

“I am not a born fool,” said Ron. “Besides, you look as young as the day we met!”

“What, she looks eleven?” James asked. “Uncle Ron, that’s nasty.”

Ron coughed and James continued to look as if he felt that Ron and the author of *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches* both lacked James’s skills.

Al and Rose were both standing on their tiptoes, trying to see over the crowd. Harry looked at Al inquiringly, but Al didn’t seem to have spotted the Malfoys yet.

“Hi, Harry!” someone said behind him, and Harry turned around, unable to place the voice.

Cho stood in front of him, her hair tied back with a ribbon and her smile as sweet as it had been when they were in school. She was holding the hand of a toddler.

“Hello, Cho,” Harry said. “Bit young for Hogwarts, isn’t he?”

“Vince,” Cho said encouragingly. “Say hello to Mummy’s friend.”

Vince made a squeaking sound that might have been a hello.

“It’s my girl,” Cho said. “We’re transferring— oh. Sweetheart, over here!”

She flashed a dazzling smile at Goyle, who was being dragged through the crowds by Bettina. Rose gave a crow of triumph and ran over to them.

“Daddy, this is Rose!” Bettina said, glowing up at her. “She’s going to take care of me.”

The girls put their heads together and started whispering. Goyle looked at the ground. Cho

went over to him and slipped an arm around his waist.

“Greg, you remember Harry, don’t you?”

“Hi,” Goyle mumbled.

“Greg-” Cho lowered her voice. “You’re not still-? We were kids. Nobody cares about that kind of thing anymore.”

“Hi,” Harry volunteered. “Er. How’re you doing, Goyle?”

Goyle looked up and smiled a tentative smile. “’M doing okay.” Goyle cleared his throat. “Um,” he added. “Thanks. I never said.”

“That’s okay,” Harry said.

Cho’s eyes fell on Ginny. “Oh, look at the *baby*. How adorable!”

Ginny shifted the baby in her arms and gave Cho a much more friendly smile than she ever had before. “Your Vince is cute.”

Ginny and Cho plunged into a conversation about their children’s perfection, and Goyle hovered anxiously over Bettina and Rose. Ron moved over to Harry.

“I still can’t get over the fact *they* got married.”

“You aren’t the one who used to go out with her,” Harry began. That was when Al made a sound like a tiny trumpet and went charging through the crowds.

Harry’s eyes followed him and Ron gave a low whistle.

“You know, Mrs Malfoy’s not bad.”

“When Hermione kills you, you will have nobody but yourself to blame,” Harry said, seeing the swathe of people cut down – well, viciously elbowed – as Score made a path towards Al.

“Not a patch on my beautiful wife, of course!” Ron said loudly. Hermione glanced up from reassuring Lily and gave Ron a suspicious look.

Malfoy was making his way towards Al and Score, whose beautiful reunion seemed to consist of Score conducting an interrogation while Al gazed raptly. Malfoy’s fair hair was in his eyes and catching the sun: he was holding his wife’s hand.

Al and Score made their way back, Malfoy and Béatriz following them. The straps of Béatriz’s red dress did little to conceal the heavy scar tissue on her left shoulder.

“Ron Weasley,” said Ron, shaking her hand.

“Béatriz Oliveira da Costa. Weasley? Draco’s mentioned you.” She slanted a smile over at Malfoy. “I must say, I like your moustache.”

Ron looked gratified.

“Yes,” said Béatriz. “In Portugal, we admire a man with luxuriant hair. We see it as a sign of virility. So many of these Englishmen, pallid and inbred, with sadly receding-”

“You’ll have to forgive my wife,” Malfoy drawled. “Her brain was unsettled by warfare. Has hallucinations. Very sad.”

He sounded somewhat abstracted: he was looking fixedly at Scorpius. Score saw the look, let go of Al and walked over to James.

“Hello – other Potter,” he said.

James’s hand flew to his hair. “Hi!”

“Good – summer?” Score said, drawl dragging on forever.

“Yes,” James said valiantly. “I mean, ah. Yes. So how about those, er, Tornados?”

“I’m going to shake your hand now,” Score announced abruptly.

“Okay,” said James.

They shook hands. Then Score shrugged and strolled back to his father. James sidled over to Harry.

“I knew it was just a matter of time,” he said, fluffing his hair again. “I’m just that cool.”

Harry was about to respond, but James’s eye was caught by Bettina and he wandered over to say hello.

“I’m going to shake your hand now,” Malfoy repeated. “You are my beloved son, but smooth you are not.”

“What, I did what you told me to do,” Score said, sounding martyred. “I don’t know why it was such a big deal.” He smiled his easy, sweet smile up at his father. “You’re weird, Dad.”

Malfoy pushed Score’s fair hair back from his face. “I’m a genius, Scorpius. Someday you’ll realise that.”

Temporarily bereft of Score, Al came over and leaned against Harry. “I’ll write you tomorrow,” he promised. “I’ll tell you how Lily is getting on.”

“And all about your plans, I hope,” Harry said. “I shall publish them once you are Minister for Magic.”

Al laughed his sweet nervous laugh, playing with Harry’s jacket sleeve. “Dad,” he said. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“When you told me about, about Professor Snape,” Al said. “That was when I came up with the plan, and... I mean, you did mean something like that, didn’t you? If I’d done – something different – would that have made you prouder?”

Harry looked down at him, wide green eyes, shooting up now and still a little brown from Portugal. His kid.

“Al,” he said. “I can’t see how.”

Al leaned against him a little more, face turned into his sleeve.

“I’m just saying you *might* be in Slytherin,” said James.

“Of course she’ll be in Slytherin,” Score said, his deep voice combative. That truce had lasted all of three minutes. “She’s Potter’s sister. She’s going to be in Slytherin where we can take care of her.”

“Women do not need *you* to take care of them, Scorpius Malfoy,” said Rose haughtily. “Though I forgive you for your previous idiocy.”

“Right,” said Score. “I forget, what did I do again?”

Rose snorted. “Of course you’ll be in Gryffindor, Lily. You can be in my new all-girls’ club.”

“I think somebody might ask *my* opinion on this,” Lily said, narrowing her hazel eyes. “Because I don’t intend to be in *either*.”

Harry looked at his daughter inquiringly.

“I have quite enough of my brothers at home,” Lily explained, glancing up at him. “Besides, everybody is always on about Gryffindor and Slytherin. It’s *boring*. I,” Lily said with calm decision, “am going to be in Hufflepuff.”

There was mass consternation.

“A sister in Hufflepuff and a brother in Slytherin!” James moaned faintly. “I’m going to throw myself under the Hogwarts Express.”

“Nobody talks about Hufflepuff,” Lily said. “Some people say it’s not even the house for anything special. It’s going to be the house of *awesome*. And you people-” she gave her brothers a superior glance, “are going to be too busy fighting to stop me. I’ve won a lot of races that way.”

Score looked mildly impressed. “Still might end up in Slytherin, thinking like that.”

“Nope,” Lily said triumphantly. “Because you can pick which house you want to be in! Right, Dad?”

Harry grinned at her. "Right, Lily."

"Ha!".

"I think it would be nice to have someone to sit with when I sit at the Hufflepuff table," Al remarked. He and Lily shared a smile.

"Only if you bring handsome friends. Score does not count."

"He does count!" Al said.

"Now look here, Lily, I was counting on you," James began.

"I need more members for my *club*," Rose said.

"Listen to me, Lily," Score drawled. "You can be in both houses. I have a cunning plan."

"I love the piping voices of the innocent little children," Malfoy observed over the deafening noise.

Alarmed by the battle royal over Lily's House, Vincent Goyle started to roar at the top of his voice. Cho and Goyle dropped to their knees and started comforting him, and Harry cast a wary glance over at Ginny.

"Jacqueline's fine," she said.

Malfoy looked slightly startled, and then he smiled. Harry had kind of thought he might.

"That's a nice name," he remarked. "Exotic."

"That's what I thought," said Harry. Also frankly, he had run out of people to name children after.

Béatriz seemed to register the presence of a baby for the first time, and backed up a few steps.

"They're a little intimidating when they're that small," she said. "So fragile. So easy to forget when it's time to leave camp."

Malfoy, looking pleased and a little proprietary, advanced. "Can I see-?" he began, and stooped over the baby in Ginny's arms.

"He likes them, though," Béatriz said, as if reporting something bizarre.

Malfoy was murmuring something to the baby, low and sweet. Jacqueline opened her green eyes and laughed up at him. As he stooped further something shining fell out of his open-necked shirt and swung towards her on a chain. Jacqueline crowed and batted at it.

"Draco Malfoy, is that my engagement ring?" Béatriz demanded. "You said that you'd pawn that for money to feed the villagers! That was why I *agreed to marry you!*"

“I did pawn it, my beloved,” Malfoy said, flicking the ring to amuse Jacqueline further. Diamonds in a strange pattern caught the sunlight. “Then I bought it back. More money into the local economy. Very beneficial to the villagers. Besides, it’s a nice ring, much too nice for peasants.”

Béatrix was laughing. “You lying snake,” she said. It seemed to be affectionate.

Ron and Hermione were afflicted by a vehement cry from Hugo that he didn’t see why he couldn’t start Hogwarts now. Ginny had to shush Jacqueline.

Malfoy left Ginny to it, and exchanged a few words with Goyle, who laughed with the same loud guffaw he’d had back in school. It made Malfoy look just as pleased with himself as it had back then, too.

Then he turned to Harry.

“I’m sorry about the baby.”

“What?” Harry said.

Malfoy looked very sympathetic. “That it looks like she’s going to turn out redheaded, I mean. Bear it like a man, Potter.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re ridiculous, Malfoy. How’s Portugal?”

“Bending to my will. Slowly but surely.”

“Good,” Harry said. “Get back to the Unspeakables. I’m tired of not having my paperwork fast-tracked.”

“I have not the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Potter,” Malfoy said loftily, and went pink.

“Also,” said Harry, and hesitated. “If you’re back. Andromeda’s having Christmas dinner at her house this year. Saves Ginny cooking, with Jacqueline and everything.”

“I might be,” Malfoy said, hesitating as well. “Maybe.” His glance flashed on Score, quick and speaking, and then he smiled. “It might save Score pining, anyway.”

“Oh, like you can talk,” Harry said. “The pining doesn’t make your child projectile vomit.”

Malfoy laughed again. Béatrix came over to them and he reached out and took her hand. “Train’s leaving,” she remarked, and then there was tumult as everyone tried to have a touching parting and the train’s engines started up as if it wanted to have its share in the noise.

A vaguely Creeveyish child came along and snapped a picture of Harry that left the white flash still going on and off behind his eyes as Al hugged him.

“These photographers chase me everywhere these days,” Ron sighed. “Must be my

moustache.”

“Must be,” Harry agreed. Al squeezed his neck a final time and then let go and was dragged onboard by Score. Harry was still kneeling when Lily darted in and gave him a hug too: Harry laughed, slightly startled, and she hung on tight.

“Hufflepuff’s okay, right?” she whispered in his ear.

“Whatever you want is great,” Harry whispered back.

She danced back and away, into the carriage. James and Score appeared to be starting an argument on who would take care of Lily’s trunk: neither seemed to notice the fact that Rose was already dragging it and telling them that women were doing it for themselves.

The train started to move along the platform and the children waved enthusiastically, Lily’s face bright with excitement, Al grinning his chipped-tooth grin and leaning back against Score, standing tall and effortlessly confident beside him, who did not need to search for his father but had his eyes fixed on him already, always sure of where he was.

Everybody shouted goodbye.

“No more alligators, James!” Ginny shouted, and James gave her two thumbs up.

“Well, Potter,” Malfoy said once the windows passing them by no longer contained their children, “See you sometime, I suppose. Maybe at Christmas.”

“See you,” Harry said.

“We’re having Malfoy over at Christmas?” Ron said doubtfully as Malfoy and Béatriz walked down the platform with Goyle and Cho. “Will he bring his wife?”

“*Ron*,” Hermione said on a warning note, and Ron grabbed her hand.

“Come on. C’mon, Hugo. Rosie isn’t here to tell us not to and the photographers have finally left me alone. Let’s take a spin in the Jag.”

Hugo perked up and Hermione laughed, and Harry slid his arm around Ginny’s shoulders.

“I still don’t know what happened down in those sewers,” Ginny said darkly. “Except that now we’re having Malfoy over for Christmas, apparently. Why do you always do your heroic deeds without me?”

“You do heroic deeds as well. Having four children is pretty heroic.”

“This is true,” Ginny agreed. “You couldn’t do it. You’d never get your figure back.”

She grinned up at him and he laughed, planning a walk with her and Jacqueline, talking, in the garden the way they’d used to walk through the Hogwarts grounds. She was much more beautiful than she’d been when they were in school: they talked now.

“Hey, let me hold the baby.”

“You want to?” Ginny looked mildly surprised.

“I do,” said Harry, and took careful hold of Jacqueline. He’d get it right this time, he thought. He’d done all right so far.

Jacqueline blinked green eyes up at him, waving an imperious fist as if she expected another diamond ring to fall out of the sky for her amusement. Maybe he’d get her a toy for Christmas, something shining. Christmas, with Malfoy there: maybe they’d get a chance to talk again.

A long way up the sunlit platform now, Malfoy looked back over his shoulder and smiled that crooked, complicated smile. He was swinging Béatriz’s hand as they walked.

“Everything all right, Harry?” Ginny said, smiling down at Jacqueline and then up at him.

“All’s well,” said Harry, talking like a bell-ringer to make her laugh, adding: “Getting better all the time.”

The train was a gleaming snake in the distance, making its way through green hills to the beloved castle and always carrying the children home again. His child was warm in his arms and he felt suffused with a sense of well-being: the sun was shining and the world was saved and changing, too. There were no chances lost that could not be found in time, and no choices that defined you forever.

There were no endings, not really.