

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,” Shackbolt 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 Shacklebolt.

“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.”

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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,” Shacklebolt 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,” Shacklebolt 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 Shackbolt’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-”

Shackbolt looked at them, his face its usual grim blank.

“I know I did this to myself,” he said musingly. “But it still hurts.”

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“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. Shackbolt 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."

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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 fainted 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.”

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“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."

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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 Shackbolt 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 Frippl whit 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 Fipplewhit 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 Fipplewhit 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt. "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," Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 Sinnen’ 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 Sinner’s 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 Gorringle, tall and grave and still all in black, was sitting by Mr Murimble.

“What have you come back for?” Mrs Gorringle 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 Gorringle. “I’m starting to think we got the wrong end of the stick here.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Malfoy addressed Mrs Gorringle. “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 I – 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, Shackbolt 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, Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt. 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 Shackbolt’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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt.

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 Shackbolt’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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 ruffled 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 Shacklebolt and sprayed his can of mint spray directly in Shacklebolt’s face. Shacklebolt 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. Shacklebolt 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. Shacklebolt 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 bring Harry 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 instills 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, Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt removed, he decided that Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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."

"Shackbolt 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 sappy 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 WOODOOOD!"

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 Shackbolt 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 a 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 Shackbolt let the prisoners in the Auror headquarters go. It was a day so clear the grey air was almost shining.

"Ready?" Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt, 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 Shackbolt, 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?"

Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 drawing 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.”

*

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 Hogleworts."

"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 there, 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt, 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.

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“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 scabbled 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.”

*

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. “Your 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt 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 Shackbolt now, Harry thought: Shackbolt never went home, though sometimes he might go to Sinistra’s Sinnen’ 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

