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Content

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Summary: *[Extensive re-telling of Deathly Hallows]* ‘Kill Albus Dumbledore’ is less a challenging task and more a suicide mission, so when Draco Malfoy is presented with the option to either dispatch his Headmaster or suffer an excruciating and most ignominious death of his own, along with his parents, he reaches deep into his black little Slytherin heart and manages to scrape together enough courage to go with option C instead: Spend Sixth Year secretly studying Animagecraft in the hopes he’ll turn into something sufficiently imposing even the Dark Lord himself won’t be able to keep Draco under his thumb. But just his luck, his Animagus form turns out to be a dragon, and a rather randy juvenile at that, intent on finding its mate: one Harry James Potter.

Author’s Notes: This is the **revised** version of the piece originally posted to *Archive of Our Own*, since removed. Substantial changes have been made to key scenes, with over 40,000 new words added, so I hope you enjoy this reborn version of the fic! Thanks go out to my original beta and overall error-catcher hamykia, as well as my Brit-pickers,

without whose help this fic would undoubtedly be rife with Americanisms: topcatnikki and HamletMouse. The revised version has been newly Brit-picked and edited by the lovely aulophobia. The cover art was lovingly crafted by EverydayMerlin, and the included illustrations come courtesy of my fabulous Big Bang partner, danasauurrr.

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Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the *Harry Potter* world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. No profit is being made from this piece, nor is any infringement intended. The story told here is the work of the above-mentioned author and is not purported or believed to be part of J.K. Rowling's story canon.

Prologue

Draco didn't know how he'd gotten here.

He didn't know—or couldn't remember, rather, because a teasing hint of recognition (*recollection*) beat at the shutters of his mind like a driving rain only to fall away and leave him grasping.

The knowledge was there, just out of reach.

But then it didn't matter that he couldn't remember. It didn't matter how he'd gotten here.

Nothing mattered, really, because there was *nothing*.

There was nothing in this place; he wasn't even sure he was really here himself. It was just...a void. A dark, empty *blank* that was cold and vast and lonely and threatened to swallow him whole—

Until, like a bolt of lightning, a shining, brilliant blot split the nothing—and then suddenly there was an ineffable, indescribable *something*.

There was nothing, and then there was something, and that *something* was now Draco's whole world.

Draco didn't know how he'd gotten here—but he knew he didn't belong here. That was the only thing he knew.

He belonged wherever that *something* was. That something was his everything, that something would make sense of this shattered kaleidoscope that was Draco's existence at the moment. Everything whirred in a swirling vortex around him, idle thought and snatches of reality that crumbled to dust whenever he reached for them. There was nothing, nothing real and nothing true and nothing to which he could cling, could ground himself.

Nothing but that something.

He roused, rallied his senses—and focused. He felt...off. Imbalanced, incomplete. A less-than that could be a greater-than if he could just find *it*: the something that waited for him out there, in the blank expanse.

He was weak, in both mind and body, and everything somehow hurt. He didn't think he even had a body here in the nothing, and yet somehow that did nothing to mitigate the agony shooting through him. His chest burned, his throat felt raw and ruined, and his lungs filled with choking smoke, painting his insides in a thick layer of ash and soot. He just wanted to lie down, curl up, turn in on himself, and wait for the something to find *him*. He'd rather be a coward and alive than brave and dead—this was what Slytherins did.

But every moment that passed, every thudding beat of his heart caged behind his ribs, was torture as that something called to him, beckoning siren-sweet in notes of silver and gold. He'd surely perish here, in the nothing, where nothing mattered, if he didn't untwist, unwind, and spread his wings. If he didn't go and claim that something for his own, demand it complete him, and reassert himself.

It seemed an impossible task. But he'd been set impossible tasks before, he felt. Yes, he'd had his back shoved against a wall, a wand at his throat, his neck on the line—and still he'd survived. He'd keep surviving. This was also what Slytherins did.

Words escaped him, the nothing that surrounded him somehow taking on a soft blur, like a bank of fog had just rolled in quiet and insidious, until it pressed down on him with real, physical force. Urgency settled right over his breastbone, slowly crushing him beneath its insistence.

He knew he ought to be frightened, but the heat in his chest was building, crescendoing into a raging inferno that eclipsed any tendrils of terror with raw, unbridled desperation.

He needed to find it. His *something*. Consume it, coil around it, and *squeeze* until its very essence seeped under his skin, tainted his blood, and became his own. Himself. Then he'd be complete, instead of this half measure. A greater-than, at last.

A thrumming purr rattled through his chest, dislodging the discomfiting urgency with promise and expectation. He swallowed it down, bit it back, and took a breath.

And then went hunting.

The Tower Falls

If the thundering *CRACK* of stone rending hadn't woken Harry, the primal scream that split the air and ripped into Gryffindor Tower, expanding to occupy every space like an Occamy of sound, would surely have done the trick.

He blinked stupidly, stars spangling his vision and a high, tinny ringing filling his ears as he fumbled at his bedside for his wand, not entirely certain where he was or *when* he was.

The lamps were sunlight-bright—but they hadn't been, he recalled, earlier when he'd dragged himself into his four-poster, utterly drained from the evening's fruitless ventures.

He'd been certain—*so certain*—that tonight would be it. The night that changed everything.

When he'd left the castle grounds on Dumbledore's arm, twisting into the stomach-churning nothingness that was Side-Along Apparition, he'd felt with a strange, giddy sort of dread that once they returned, nothing would be the same anymore. The war would begin in those precious few hours they were gone, and everything he'd been training for would start to snowball, building and crescendoing into a cacophony of activity. He'd itched for it, honestly, all but praying they'd return and see a hideous green skull riding high over the castle parapets, because waiting for the other shoe to drop was torture.

But gone they had, and then returned, and there'd been no *Morsmordre* glittering in the heavens, no Death Eaters sneaking about the hallways or Order members charging up from Hogsmeade. No battle, no scuffle. And worst of all, no Horcrux.

The Felix Felicis he'd left for Ron and the others had been wasted. Draco Malfoy had not carried out whatever scheme he'd been cooking up these many months, somehow

passing up what Harry had been certain would be the perfect chance to act. Instead, the castle had been as quiet as they'd left it, everyone abed as they ought to be save for Filch skulking about on his usual nightly rounds and Snape, darkening the doorway of the Headmaster's office and glowering with his lips pursed into a thin line of disapproval on seeing the low state to which Dumbledore had been brought by Voldemort's nasty potion.

Harry had been quite reluctant to leave Dumbledore's side, wary that Snape would seize the opportunity to act on his true master's orders to dispatch the defenceless headmaster, but he'd been given no choice, only dismissed with a knowing smile and *That will be all for this evening, my boy; thank you for your aid.*

It had been well past midnight when he'd finally found his way to Gryffindor Tower, earning a rude comment from the Fat Lady. Ron had roused briefly when Harry had stumbled in, but Harry had stifled any questions with a tired, "Can we just talk about it in the morning?" It was hardly a tale he wanted to get into in the middle of the night, and he'd hoped things might appear rosier after a hearty breakfast and what remained of a decent night's rest.

Sleep had been difficult, but in the space between one breath and the next, he'd somehow managed it—until being practically *rattled* awake by a grating *CRUNCH* and the sounds of frantic scrabbling against the tower stonework.

"Whasgoionon?" Ron mumbled sleepily, rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes as he tottered about the room in a confused, muddled haze. "What *time* is it?"

Harry's heart was racing, adrenaline flooding his system in a heady torrent. "I think—I think we're under attack." That had to be it—the Death Eaters had only been delayed. While he'd slept, slumbering peacefully and blissfully unaware, Malfoy had finally pulled off his plan. Harry cursed inwardly, knowing he should have at least checked the Marauder's Map before turning in, just to be sure he hadn't missed anything, someone out of place or an unfamiliar name roaming the halls.

Something heavy slammed into the tower, and Harry heard a few shingles clatter to the

ground far below. He swallowed, eyeing the window, and took a step towards it—

Dean snapped a hand out, fingers tight about Harry's wrist and squeezing. "Are you *mad*? You'll get your head blown off! Who knows what's out there?"

He could hear other voices now—neighbouring rooms were waking, trying to work out what was happening. Any moment now, there would be word to evacuate—or perhaps to prepare for battle. He glanced to Ron, who seemed to have finally gotten his head on straight, expression only queasy with no signs of sleep-mussed confusion. Harry schooled his features, urging his heart to slow its rapid-fire tattoo so he could think clearly. "We need to get everyone out; if the Death Eaters are—"

"*Death Eaters*?" Seamus yelped, halfway into his dressing robe. "This is—this is You-Know-Who?" He looked fearfully to the window, wincing when another blow struck the tower. The beams overhead began to groan, showering them with splinters and batting insulation. Harry tried not to think about just how many tonnes of rubble might come crashing down on their heads if the tower collapsed.

He began to snap orders, trying to sort priorities at a clip. "Everyone quick—pull on shoes and grab your wands. Neville—" Neville straightened with a jerk, his wand clasped over his chest with both hands. "Pass the word on to the others in the boys' dorms, will you? Seamus and Dean—you try and get word to the girls."

"How are we supposed to do *that*?" Seamus quailed. "The stairs don't trust us!"

"What are you and Ron gonna do?" Dean asked, snatching a pullover from a mountain of unwashed laundry.

"We'll—*oof*!" Harry lurched forward, thrown into one of the posts of Ron's bed as the tower swayed unsteadily, the grade of the floor gone disturbingly crooked. White-faced, they could only stare at each other in horror as the walls trembled and the roof finally began to cave under the assault, dust and debris showering down. Another blow like that, and it would be stone coming down, with the floor above collapsing. "Out! Out, out, out!" Harry shouted, shoving his dormmates toward the door, and they rushed out in a

frantic scrum, flooding the hallway with the rest of their House.

Another piercing scream shook the walls, inhuman and bone-juddering, and Harry imagined that if Dementors had voices, that was what they might sound like. He gave Ron's back a sharp shove, then groped for purchase as the tower shuddered again and tossed him into a chest of drawers.

Ron glanced back, eyes wide. "Harry! Harry *come on!*" He fumbled with his wand, brandishing it with a flourish. "*Accio!*"

Harry pitched forward, like someone had snagged his collar, and he felt himself zipping through midair, straight for the door—but another sharp *CRACK* sounded, followed by a sickening chorus of resounding snaps and crackles as the beams above collapsed into kindling and rained down chaos upon Harry's head, plunging his world into darkness.

A Dragon at St. Mungo's

When Harry next roused, he was no longer in Gryffindor Tower. He didn't rightly know *where* he was, actually, but it definitely wasn't his dorm and quite probably not Hogwarts at all.

The bed upon which he lay was not his sturdy four-poster but a simple high-sat mattress with railings on either side to keep him from rolling off, not entirely unlike the beds in the Hospital Wing. Madame Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, though, and the faint perfume of antiseptic and bland beige walls decorated with unremarkable landscape paintings suggested he was in a room at St. Mungo's, although which ward was unclear.

He hadn't the foggiest how much time had passed since he'd blacked out—but it had to have been a few hours at least, judging by the dazzling sunlight filtering through the gauzy blue-and-white checked curtains shading the window facing the bed. He tried to roll over, shifting onto his other side to take in the rest of the room, and winced as a sharp spear of pain lanced through his abdomen—one hand went to his stomach, and he could feel a wrapping of bandages underneath the thin shift he'd been given.

“Ron—Ron, he's awake!”

Hermione launched herself from her chair, rushing to Harry's bedside in a flash. A relieved smile bloomed on her face, whisking away the rather heavy bags that had been hanging under her eyes as she frantically motioned Ron over from where he'd evidently been napping in the corner, school robes crumpled under his head as a pillow. Harry tried to sit up, but Hermione quickly placed a hand on his shoulder, easing him back down. “How are you feeling?”

Another shot of pain drew a grimace as he tried to find a comfortable position. “Just grand.” Her smile went fond and understanding. “Bit out of it, honestly—what time is it?”

“Nearly noon,” Ron said, drawing a chair up alongside Hermione.

“Sunday,” Hermione added helpfully. “You’ve only been out a few hours, if you’re feeling disorientated.”

That was a small relief. He brought a hand up to rub at his temple and was dismayed to feel another length of bandages wrapped around his crown. “That’d explain the headache, I suppose...” He took another look around the room, then noticed shadows moving beyond the frosted glass panelling the closed door. “What happened?”

Ron tapped his temple, nodding at Harry. “You got conked on the head, mate.”

“I think he can tell that much, Ronald.” Hermione gave him an affectionate roll of her eyes.

One of the shadows beyond the frosted glass loomed larger, and the door eased open. “Hello, what’s this? You two need to keep it down now, don’t go disturbing Harry while—oh, goodness!” Mrs. Weasley filled the doorway, a hand coming to her breast. “He’s awake!” She frowned at Ron. “I told you to come fetch me when he woke!”

Ron was immediately defensive. “I was! But he *just* woke up, give the man time to gather his wits, will you?”

Hermione was quick to jump between them before the sniping escalated, and Harry’s aching head thanked her. “We’re sorry, Mrs. Weasley—but he did only wake up just now. We wanted to make sure he knew where he was before we up and left him.”

“Well,” Mrs. Weasley huffed, mollified, and turned a warm smile on Harry. “Wonderful to see you’re back with us, dear. Are you...” Her expression went a bit torn, and she pursed her lips. “Are you up for more visitors? If you’d rather not, I can try and put them off a bit longer...?”

Curious who’d come to visit him in St. Mungo’s for a bump on the head (or why a bump merited hospitalisation at all) beyond present company, Harry glanced to Hermione and Ron before shrugging, ambivalent. “I suppose? Mostly just got a bit of a headache,

really.”

She nodded, understanding, and pasted on another too-bright smile that didn't quite seem to reach her eyes. “I'll pass the word along, then, and see about getting someone in here to give you a once over.” She slipped back out the door before he could explain she needn't bother, and Hermione and Ron watched her go with mixed expressions.

“It's just a headache...” Harry muttered.

“Mum can be a bit overprotective, you know her.” Ron shrugged.

Harry decided to let it go and picked up the thread of their conversation once more. “But seriously—what happened? Last thing I remember is waking up in Gryffindor Tower with the walls practically tumbling down around us.”

Ron leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “A *dragon*, mate.”

Harry made a face, bemused. “A—what?” He looked to Hermione, hoping she could clarify, but she only nodded. “Like—an *actual* dragon? No way.”

Ron abandoned his whispering, shaking his head as his brows lifted into his fringe. “Yes way! Wasn't quite as big as the ones from the Triwizard Tournament, mind you, but it was bloody *vicious*! Tore into Gryffindor Tower like a Niffler in Gringotts! It's a *disaster* now!”

“It's true,” Hermione said, decidedly less awed. “We saw it when they evacuated the castle—it took all of the staff to wrangle it under control.”

“You...you reckon it was...” Ron's conspiratorial whisper was back. “Y'know, something to do with You-Know-Who? Or Malfoy? Or both, I guess?”

“*Ron*,” Hermione huffed, and Harry sensed this wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion, but he could feel his heart starting to pound, blood pulsing in his veins and leaving him light-headed, because his mind was already racing with possibilities at Ron's

suggestion.

Harry hadn't been wrong after all—he *hadn't*. If a dragon had attacked Hogwarts, attacked *his* bedroom, on the same night he and Dumbledore had gone Horcrux hunting, then... “It has to have been, right? I mean—a dragon, in the middle of the Scottish countryside? Attacking Gryffindor Tower of all places? A bit too much of a coincidence for my comfort.”

“Honestly, Ron! Now you've got Harry in a tizzy!” Hermione placed a hand on Harry's arm, giving a squeeze to get him to focus on her. “Don't get all worked up, all right? You're still hurt, and there's *nothing* to suggest this had anything to do with—with *anything*.”

“You can't be serious, can you?” Harry laughed. He glanced at Ron, who just crossed his arms as if to say *You see what I've had to deal with?* “What do *you* think it was, then?”

“Well—I mean—I don't *know*.” She made a little noise of frustration, and her tone went pleading. “But just think about it for a moment—why on earth would he send a *dragon* after you? It's not like him, is it?”

“We don't know what he's like, Hermione,” Ron reminded. “He's a *madman*—that's kind of the point.”

“I mean to say—he wouldn't want to let someone or something else do what he probably thinks is his birthright by now: kill Harry.”

“Who's saying it was trying to kill Harry? Maybe it was just supposed to snatch him and carry him back to...well, wherever You-Know-Who's holing up these days.”

Hermione was not convinced. “Surely there are better ways to go about it than to send a dragon, though; it's not exactly subtle.”

“This is the wizard that advertises in great big green lights when he's offed someone! Subtle's not this guy's style!”

Despite his friends' bickering, the certainty that his suspicions had been vindicated was a heady drug in Harry's system, and he felt a bit light-headed, almost giddy. "No, it's not—and a dragon really does make sense, if you think about it. It's hardly discreet, but with all the protections and wards around Hogwarts, maybe he decided just to go in guns blazing? Those dragons at the Triwizard Tournament were *not* going down easily, so it strikes me as pretty genius, honestly." He laughed, and it came out a bit manic. "I'm almost impressed."

"Harry..." Hermione sighed, but any further attempts to dissuade him from his convictions were interrupted by a soft knock on the door, followed by Mrs. Weasley poking her head inside.

"Mind if I show in your visitors, dear?"

"Sure, I suppose." He didn't miss the frowns Hermione and Ron exchanged, though, and when he saw who these well-wishers actually were, he shared their unease.

He was usually quite happy to see members of the Order, but Kingsley Shacklebolt, Harry knew, had far better ways to be spending his time than dropping in to visit a St. Mungo's patient who'd suffered a bit of head trauma. Harry very much doubted this was a social call, especially as he didn't recognise Kingsley's companion, a Ministry-robed man who could not have been more Kingsley's opposite if he'd tried: short, stout, and with a head of shaggy hair that seemed to stand on end, as if he'd just stuck a fork in a socket.

Mrs. Weasley tried for a reassuring smile. "We'll give you gentlemen a bit of privacy, shall we?" She beckoned Hermione and Ron. "Come on, you two, let's go fetch a cup of tea for everyone and something for Harry to nibble on from the canteen."

With no room to object—and no real excuse to either—Harry found himself all but abandoned, left to contend with Kingsley and anti-Kingsley on his own. Anti-Kingsley took the seat Ron had just been roused from, his midsection spilling over the side in a manner that reminded Harry pointedly of Uncle Vernon. He seemed, though, of a rather amiable demeanour, reaching for Harry's hand and giving it a firm yank. "Absolute

pleasure to meet you, young man, indeed, indeed. To think I'd ever find myself rubbing elbows with The Boy Who Lived! What a curious thing she is, Lady Fate!"

"Councilman..." Kingsley warned, and he understandably sounded a bit beleaguered. He gave Harry a tired smile. "Sorry to have to bother you like this, Potter."

"Yes, yes, of course—forgive me, where on earth are my manners?" Anti-Kingsley drew himself up, smile wide and cheeks apple-red. "Cassius Bragge, of the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau and Chair of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

Harry felt his stomach churn at the title—this was one of the lot that had sentenced Buckbeak to death—but managed to keep a grimace off his features. He summoned all the tact he could muster and returned the handshake weakly. "Nice to meet you, Sir."

"Sir!" Bragge sounded positively tickled. "Unassuming *and* polite! Oh, Elsa will enjoy hearing about—" Kingsley fixed him with another warning look, and he seemed to recall himself, clearing his throat. "Well then, I understand you've been through quite an ordeal, Mr. Potter, so we shan't take up too much of your time. I do apologise for disturbing you in your convalescence, but time is something of a factor here..." He drew a scrap of paper from a lining pocket and tapped it with his wand, promptly expanding it into a thick folder that he began to leaf through. "If you're able to rally, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Harry looked to Kingsley for guidance but was disappointed to find he was avoiding eye contact. "I, er...suppose...?"

"Good, good. Now—" Bragge rifled through another pocket until he found a pince-nez, perching it atop his nose and frowning at his file. "What can you... Hm." He seemed to think better of the glasses, pocketing them again. "How much of the past twenty-four hours do you remember? Can you describe what you've been up to in the last day or so? Just for our records."

"Your...records?" Harry frowned. "You mean the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau

wants a comment from me?” Had they taken statements from all of the Hogwarts students, then? Or—and here his heart found its beat-skipping rhythm again—were they to get to the meat of the matter at last? Was Kingsley here on Order business to discuss who’d sent the dragon after Harry and why?

But Kingsley seemed quite uncomfortable with the conversation, as if he didn’t want to be here at all, leaving Harry unsure of the circumstances. Deciding to play it safe, in case perhaps Kingsley was only waiting for Bragge to finish his routine statement-taking to discuss the matter with Harry in private, he skirted the truth: “Well, um...I spent most of yesterday evening with the Headmaster, serving a detention with him. It lasted quite a long while, and I finished late, so I went straight to bed after. I’m honestly not sure how long after that it was, but I woke up some time during the night with the rest of my dormmates when we heard something crash into the tower.”

“That would be Gryffindor Tower, then?” Harry nodded, and Bragge gave a little *hm* of interest.

“Sir, is it...is it true it was a dragon? That attacked Hogwarts.” When Bragge raised a brow, Harry considered he was perhaps not supposed to know this, if the Ministry was trying to keep things quiet, and he hastily added, “It’s only, my friends mentioned it. Ron Weasley was in the tower with me when it happened, though he managed to escape before the roof collapsed.”

Bragge cast a quick glance to Kingsley, who glided back towards the door to check they had privacy. “Well, to be brief—yes. Mr. Weasley has the right of it, more or less. It was indeed a dragon that scaled Gryffindor Tower nearabout three this morning. An Antipodean Opaleye, to be precise.” He flipped through his notes. “Juvenile, by its measurements, just come into its adult colouring—it’s quite fascinating, really. The hatchlings actually start off a rust-colour to better blend in with their high-desert environment, but by consuming a steady diet of—”

Kingsley cleared his throat loudly. “Perhaps we should save such lectures for Potter’s Care of Magical Creatures class, Councilman?”

Harry shifted upright with some effort, feeling his excitement mounting. “Do you think it was loosed on the castle purposefully? I don’t know much about dragons, but I’m pretty sure that’s not one of the species native to Britain, at least.” Bragge seemed thrown by the question, clearly not having expected it, and Harry pressed his advantage. “It’s only—I’ve noticed some funny things going on at the castle over the past few months, and I have strong reason to believe they’re to do with You-Know-Who and his followers. There’s a student who’s got known Death Eater ties—Draco Malfoy—and he’s been behaving very strangely recently, so is it...I mean, it *is* possible, isn’t it? That maybe he was somehow involved with...I dunno, using his connections to obtain a dragon and... and...”

Harry trailed off, frowning at himself. He wished he’d organised these threads in his head before opening his mouth, because he was starting to babble, and yes, Kingsley was *definitely* avoiding looking at him. God, Hermione was going to give him an earful later if she found out he’d brought up the matter of Malfoy plotting something in front of Kingsley and Bragge. He still didn’t think she was right to doubt him, but he was certainly not helping his case, and if he had to listen to *one more person* dismiss his suspicions with a smile while reassuring him that the very best people had looked into the matter and found nothing, he really was going to scream.

Bragge drew an eagle-feather quill from his coat pocket and flipped to a new page in his folio. “Yes, on that note: What can you tell us about your relationship with Mr. Malfoy?”

That stopped Harry cold, and he blinked a few times in quick succession, releasing a little huff of laughter. “My—relationship?” Kingsley was no help, eyes closed and head tilted back to rest against the wall; Harry would have to answer, ridiculous though the question seemed. “Uh, what’s there to tell, really? We hate each other, I suppose? Or at least I’m pretty sure Malfoy hates me. We’ve never gotten along—he’s been a right wanker since first-year.” It suddenly dawned on him, though, that their more distant interactions were not what was most relevant at the moment, and Harry swallowed. “And, uh, we—kind of got into a bit of a scuffle recently. I roughed him up pretty badly—though I heard he recovered all right. It was self-defence on my part, honestly, but a fight’s a fight... That’s what the detention I was serving with Dum—with the Headmaster

was for.”

He really wished Kingsley would look at him right about now, because he was starting to worry that perhaps Malfoy’s parents had brought some kind of complaint against Harry. Maybe they wanted to take legal action against him—was Kingsley here not as an Order member but as a Ministry official, ready to escort Harry before the Wizengamot to answer for his use of a Dark curse against a fellow student?

But Bragge did not seem very interested in the details of their encounter, for he added none of Harry’s confession to his notes, only frowning. “So—not friends, then? Not even perhaps casual acquaintances?” Harry shook his head, and Bragge gave another of his curious little *hms*. “I suppose, then, that means ‘more than friends’ is right out?”

“*What?*” Harry felt his eyes bug. “Where on earth would anyone get *that* idea from? I told you—we hate each other! He’s got a *pretty* colourful history of going out of his way to make my life a living hell, ask anyone in our year!” He was starting to panic now; where were these questions coming from? What did baseless assumptions about a fictitious relationship between Harry and Malfoy have to do with a dragon tearing apart Gryffindor Tower? Why was he having this discussion at all, when he had the feeling none of his classmates had had to endure the same? His headache began to reassert itself, throbbing in time with his racing heart, and he was quite through fielding such ridiculous questions. “Why are we even talking about Malfoy at all if you’re from the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau?” He directed his attention to Kingsley, raising his voice so he had no choice but to respond to Harry. “Have you found something, then? You have, haven’t you?”

“Harry, my boy...” Bragge tried weakly, but Harry ignored him.

“He *did* have something to do with the dragon, didn’t he? His family’s loaded, with all kinds of connections; I’m sure it’d be no trouble for him to import a dragon from—from wherever that breed comes from. Anter—Anton—”

“Antipodean Opaleye,” Bragge offered, looking rather uneasy as he closed his folder and set it to the side.

“Yeah, that. I knew he was up to something this past year, and I tried to tell you—I mean, the Ministry—like half a dozen times! I was right, wasn’t I? Malfoy was up to no good—he cooked up some plan that evidently involved setting loose a bloody *dragon* on Hogwarts grounds—”

“Harry,” Bragge sighed, lacing his fingers together over his chest and settling back in the chair, and Harry got the feeling his good humour was wearing thin. “Mr. Malfoy did not set a dragon loose anywhere. He *was* the dragon.”

The wind in Harry’s sails died abruptly, and the vindicated grin he’d been boasting went with it. “He...what?”

It was now Bragge’s turn to look a bit superior. “It seems that Mr. Malfoy is an unregistered dragon Animagus—and a very new one, at that. In fact, last night may have been his very first successful transformation, for upon completing the shift, he promptly succumbed to what would have been unfamiliar beastly instincts and went on the terrible rampage in which you found yourself unfortunately involved.”

Harry felt the blood leave his face. “He’s a...” He blinked in confusion. “Wait, people can just—turn into dragons?”

“‘Just turn into them’? Oh no, no, not that I’m aware of. But through Animagecraft, it’s not impossible. Magical creatures are, after all, as much animals as their more mundane cousins. Cases such as Mr. Malfoy’s are rare, to be certain, but not unprecedented. One of my cousins several times removed is a jarvey Animagus. She’s actually gotten rather foul-mouthed in the years since completing her training...” He trailed off in thought, tapping his chin, but quickly recalled himself. “With sufficient study and dedication, most anyone can learn Animagecraft, and from there, it’s simply a matter of how the form manifests, as I understand it—though I’m hardly an expert. I barely managed an A in my Transfiguration O.W.L.s! At any rate, in Mr. Malfoy’s case, once the dragon was subdued—at great cost, unfortunately—diagnostic spells and corroborating testimony allowed us to determine that the creature was not actually a true dragon but merely a student in transformation.”

Harry tried to process the news. Malfoy had...been studying Animagcraft? Surely *that* wasn't what he'd been skulking about doing all year, right? It sounded so...*anticlimactic*. Harry couldn't fathom that with all that'd been going on—Voldemort's return, Lucius Malfoy's imprisonment, the dark clouds rolling across the whole of Wizarding society—Malfoy had simply been sitting around, twiddling his thumbs, studying to become an Animagus in secret, as if he had nothing better to do with his time.

Unless that had been the entire point of the exercise. Maybe his status as a Hogwarts student was valuable but not fully exploitable. Maybe he'd been charged with the task of becoming an Animagus in the hopes that, whatever form chose him, he'd be able to use it to further Voldemort's agenda. With something sufficiently small, he could spy on Harry or even Dumbledore—and with something dangerous, he could just as easily do serious harm. *Had* done serious harm, even. He didn't want to see the state of Gryffindor Tower, as it sounded like Harry's bump on the head had been the least of the damage done.

He sighed. "Suppose that explains why he came and attacked the tower, then..."

Kingsley spoke up for the first time since turning the interview over to Bragge. "Then—you realise...?" His expression was dark and uncertain, and Harry sympathised.

"Well—yeah. I mean, it makes sense, right? Seems kind of a lot of work to go through, but Animagi can be dead useful, I imagine. I heard him whining before—I don't think he realised I was around—about some impossible task he'd been set. I'm guessing that was it? Become an Animagus and then...well, off me?" Harry sounded rather full of himself, even to his own ears, but there was no discounting how badly Voldemort wanted to destroy Harry. Draco Malfoy would've had a lot to prove, and Voldemort would've absolutely capitalised on the Malfoys' fall from grace.

Bragge shared an uncomfortable look with Kingsley, then gently cleared his throat. "... Harry, we agree that Mr. Malfoy was indeed trying to reach you when he attacked Gryffindor Tower. However, he did not do so to kill you, as you suspect." He squared his shoulders and took a breath, leaning forward. "I see no way of putting this delicately, so

I'm afraid I'll have to be blunt and inelegant about it: Mr. Malfoy gave in to the beastly instincts of an unfamiliar Animagus form and sought you out, quite fervently, as a mate."

There was a ringing in Harry's ears, not unlike he'd heard on waking back in Gryffindor Tower with the ceiling caving in around him. "...As a what now?"

"It's quite fascinating, actually." Bragge shifted in his chair, getting comfortable, and his expression brightened with excitement. "Dragons tend to be solitary creatures, even in colonies, keeping to themselves as juveniles and outside of breeding season as adults, but breeding pairs are fiercely territorial and monogamous to a fault! Their pair bonds are strong—dangerously so, in fact; no few young pairs have been lost when one partner was tragically felled by disease or injury, dragging the other down with it. For this reason, dragons will go to great lengths to procure a suitable mate, taking care to commit themselves only to the very best partner they can hope to find." He chuckled to himself. "Mr. Malfoy, being nearly of age as a wizard, would have been experiencing that drive to find a mate *particularly* strongly on transforming and would have been doubly unprepared to face it, as it was evidently his first time."

But Bragge's exposition went in one ear and out the other, with only the word *mate* reverberating through Harry's mind in crescendoing echoes. He swallowed, but his mouth was dry, and when he finally found his voice again, his words came out squeaky. "But—he's a—I'm a..." He gestured awkwardly to himself, with his bandaged midsection and blanket covering his thin shift. It wasn't that he had any particular issues with...that sort of thing...but he didn't see how this had happened, nor did he want Bragge getting the wrong idea, thinking—*god*—that Harry had in any way *encouraged* this debacle.

Bragge politely cleared his throat, nodding. "Well, dragons may be classified as Beasts by our Ministry, but they're devilishly clever creatures—near-sapient—with their own set of drives and bone-deep instincts. While we humans have long since learned to master our innate instincts, I fear we are rather ill-prepared to deal with new ones asserting themselves in our minds. Dragon Animagi in particular tend to be overwhelmed by their new form's steel trap of a mind, allowing the beast to take over." He offered Harry an understanding smile. "I suspect that, this being an unorthodox case with Mr. Malfoy not

being an *actual* dragon, the—ah, *accoutrements* of the target had little bearing on his choice of partner.” Harry didn’t know if ‘partner’ was better or worse than ‘mate’, but he wished Bragge would stop saying both. “For a dragon, a suitable mate would simply be one who complemented them, challenged them—though one they felt they could take in a fight, for dragons are notoriously proud as well.”

Harry would have laughed at the notion of Malfoy being able to take him in a fight, had he not been worried he might sick up in doing so. His headache had only worsened with Bragge’s rambling, and he wondered if he could summon a nurse and beg for a Sleeping Draught. Maybe this was just a bad dream, and he’d wake up on the right side of things once he closed his eyes. He’d be in the Hospital Wing instead of St. Mungo’s with Madam Pomfrey fussing over him instead of Bragge and his rather disturbing fascination with this whole predicament.

“Which brings us to the crux of the matter.” Bragge leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and some of the brightness went out of his eyes as he sobered. “We have...something of a problem. Mr. Malfoy is currently in our custody at the Ministry—however, he’s yet to transform back to his human self.”

The urge to laugh refused to let up; Harry figured he must have hit the point where he’d gone beyond shock and settled on manic giddiness. “You’ve...just got a dragon sitting somewhere in a conference room...?”

Bragge waved him off, “Oh no, no my boy—he’s in a holding cell under a stasis spell, for his own protection. He nearly did himself grave injury trying to escape his confines before we gathered enough staff to subdue him once more. He seems quite intent on tracking you down, that one.” At this point, it was hard to tell if the headache was bringing on the nausea or vice versa. “The difficult thing is, at this point, we fear it’s not that he *won’t* transform back so much as he *cannot*. He’s given himself wholly over to the instincts of this form and likely no longer recalls that he was ever human at all. It’s a tragic pattern, common among dragon Animagi. Most saddled with such a form suffer a similar fate of being overwhelmed by the unexpectedly demanding drives and foreign instincts of their new body, losing their sense of self entirely. It is, I’m afraid, tantamount

to a death sentence for the human mind trapped underneath all of the scales and fangs and talons: they don't realise they aren't actually a dragon and so make no effort to shift back."

"That's...that's terrible..." Harry said, a bit surprised that he sincerely meant it.

"Quite!" Bragge shook his head, tutting under his breath. "More so, these poor unfortunates are far too dangerous to ever be released, being too intelligent by half with what little remains of their humanity, and so must either be put down or held indefinitely in captivity."

"Put do—you mean *killed*?"

"In some cases, yes. If they've...hurt someone..." Bragge licked his lips, and Kingsley's hands curled into fists at his sides. "Then unfortunately, it's regulation, as with any dangerous creature."

Harry had seen quite clearly the sort of underhanded dealings that went on when it came to the dispensation of supposedly dangerous creatures, and he frowned. "Wait—so you're...you're just going to keep him imprisoned at the Ministry? Stuck like that, for the rest of his life?" He certainly had no love for Malfoy and would shed no tears if the git found himself locked up for crimes against the Wizarding and Muggle worlds alike. But to be thrown into a cell, locked away without trial for something it sounded like he'd had no say in—even if Harry was *pretty* sure he'd intended to use that Animagus form for ill—not even able to understand what he'd done wrong? It didn't sit right, somehow.

"Well, that's actually what I'm here for—to see if perhaps you'll agree to lend us a hand."

Harry didn't like the hopeful tone Bragge had just taken; it sounded oily in his ears. "...Lend a hand with what?"

Bragge cleared his throat and picked up his notebook again, flipping back a few pages. "As I mentioned, Mr. Malfoy is being kept under a stasis spell at present and will likely stay that way for the foreseeable future, given his tendency to run wild the moment he's

given his head. He's firmly in the grips of this secondary psyche, quite unaware of who he is, and we've no way to draw what remains of his humanity back to the forefront, that he might be himself once more. His mind is now a wild landscape, treacherous for even the most skilled of Legilimens to attempt to enter in search of Mr. Malfoy's human consciousness.

"However..." He tapped his notebook in a thoughtful gesture. "His mind *might* be more receptive to yours, as it's already trying to seek you out. It may allow you inside where others would be rebuffed or lost even if they managed entrance. You, Harry: *you* may be able to enter Mr. Malfoy's mind—the dragon's mind—and draw him back from the brink, help him find his humanity once more, and restore him to his former self."

Oh. Harry could almost hear the *thud* of the other shoe dropping. Now he saw why Kingsley had been avoiding looking at him.

"You—want *me* to try and...what, root around inside Malfoy's head and make him see sense?" How was that even going to work? In his mind's eye flashed visions of his disastrous Occlumency lessons with Snape. "I...really think you've got the wrong person for this, I'm sorry."

"No, no it *must* be you, my boy! You're the perfect candidate—his subconscious already yearns for you!" Ah, another word Harry wished Bragge might strike from his vocabulary, at least for the duration of the conversation: *yearn*. "You'll likely not even need to seek him out, for surely he'll find *you* with little to no prompting!"

"I mean, I get that but—seriously, I'm one of the most ill-suited people you could ask to attempt something like that! I've got a terrible record with Occlumency and all that sort of stuff. I'm liable to do more harm than good." He groped for any excuse to get out of what sounded like a task he'd surely fail—he didn't need Draco-bloody-Malfoy's well-being weighing on his conscious. "You said it'd be difficult for a skilled Legilimens to manage—but it wouldn't be impossible, right? Can't you find an expert in the field to help? Like—like Dumbledore!" He looked to Kingsley, brows raised in hope. "Dumbledore's supposed to be one of the best Legilimens around. And Malfoy's a

Hogwarts student. Shouldn't he be handling this?"

An uncomfortable silence passed between them, and Kingsley drew his arms behind his back, softly clearing his throat. "I'm afraid...that won't be possible. Albus Dumbledore is dead. He lost his life helping the staff subdue Mr. Malfoy."

The Lonely Moor

Dead. Albus Dumbledore was dead.

Harry turned the words over in his mind several times, waiting for them to sink in, but to no avail. It was just—how did that *happen*? Surely Kingsley must have been mistaken—Harry had just spoken to Dumbledore only twelve hours ago! There was no way he could have died in that time, not even up against a dragon—

Unless he hadn't been in fighting form. Harry recalled, darkly now, that Dumbledore had been adamant Harry release him to Snape's care. Snape, who served a different master, no matter how Dumbledore deluded himself. Snape, who'd been itching for greater glory than he'd been afforded all these years. Dumbledore had been terribly weakened by their failed Horcrux hunt; in such a state, it would have been only too easy to overpower him, or to slip him a poison disguised as some tincture or another meant to help Dumbledore. Did they do autopsies properly in the wizarding world?

But then—Kingsley had said he'd perished in the fight to bring down Malfoy. It thus seemed more likely that he'd died of dragonfire burns or else some combination of exhaustion and exertion—but this was Albus Dumbledore! Harry had been convinced that nothing short of the Killing Curse could ever take him down, and even *that* had been debatable. That Dumbledore could be *dead* and the world continue on apace was absurd.

He was distantly aware of Bragge still chattering away, trying his best to convince Harry to help bring Malfoy back to himself, and in his state of shock, Harry found himself mutely nodding, agreeing to do what he could. What did it matter, at this point?

“Excellent to hear, my boy! Your generosity and altruism are truly beyond reproach; I'm sure Mr. Malfoy won't soon forget the good turn you've done him, if all is successful!” Harry was unconvinced that Malfoy would feel the same beaming sense of gratitude after all was said and done, but he wasn't in this for the accolades—he just

wanted to be quit of this mess.

After reminding Harry that they would be back the next day at noon to pick him up once he was discharged, Kingsley gave Harry's shoulder a comforting squeeze and then took his leave with Bragge.

Entering in the same swing of the door as Kingsley and Bragge left, Hermione and Ron returned carrying a small wicker basket laden with fruit and muffins and a stoppered carafe of pumpkin juice. Their expressions were sombre, and Harry wondered why he hadn't noticed before. He'd just assumed they'd had a long night, or perhaps been worried about Harry's own state.

Ron hoisted the basket to eye-level. "We smuggled this out of the canteen for you— seems they're usually pretty strict with patients' diets. Oh—" He reached into a deep pocket and pulled out a rather smushed something wrapped in butcher paper. "And Mum brought sandwiches; Dad had to run back to the Ministry after he popped in to check on you earlier, so he said you're welcome to his."

"Thanks..." Harry took the sandwich, carefully unwrapping it to be polite and gumming it, not really tasting it. Between the news about Dumbledore and the whole Malfoy business, he was still reeling, his appetite gone. He gave up after nearly choking on the one bite he'd taken. "So I...I guess it's true then...? Dumbledore..."

Hermione gave a soft little gasp, reaching to rest a hand on his arm. "Oh, Harry..."

Ron held back, shifting from one foot to the other and unable to meet Harry's eye. "Didn't want to hit you with it when you'd just woken up..." His voice was thick, and Harry could now tell that what he'd taken for exhaustion in Hermione's face earlier was more akin to sorrow and despair, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Hermione took a bracing breath, sniffing. "Everyone's still...pretty shaken up about it..."

That sealed it then, he supposed. Not that he'd thought Kingsley had been lying, just... hearing it from sources he trusted implicitly to tell him the unvarnished truth somehow

struck keen and bright, and he was glad he hadn't managed to down more of the sandwich, as it'd probably just come back up right now. He drew his knees up, ignoring the sharp pain in his abdomen, and rested his arms on his knees, letting his forehead settle against them. "How?"

"...Harry, we don't have to talk about it right—"

"*How?*" he pressed, lifting his head and hardening his expression. He wanted to know how it had happened, in *excruciating* detail. He had half a mind to demand access to a Pensieve memory if their recollections didn't satisfy, even.

Hermione slumped into Bragge's chair, and Ron rubbed uncomfortably at his elbow. "Word got out pretty quick that Gryffindor Tower was being attacked. Me and Seamus helped drag you out after you got hit on the head by a falling chunk of ceiling, and the others saw to the evacuation of the rest of the tower. The first-years were pretty spooked—some just refused to even leave their rooms, sat in their four-posters bawling until we slapped a Body-bind on them and Levitated them downstairs. We figured maybe the whole castle was under attack, so we started directing students to the passageways out of the school—y'know, like the one behind the one-eyed witch and all? Anyway, a few of the Ravenclaws said they'd seen the staff out on the grounds from their tower, fighting off a dragon—so a bunch of us from the DA rallied to help 'em out. By the time we got out there, it was nothing but *Stupefys* and *Reductos* and *Impedimentas*. I reckon a few of the staff had sent Patronuses to the Ministry for back-up, but most of them were putting up a hell of a fight. Dumbledore, though..." Ron shook his head. "Honestly, he looked pretty beat by the time we joined the staff."

Harry winced inwardly. "He was. We—" He bit back a curse. "The Horcrux hunt was a complete and utter bust, and Dumbledore, he...he didn't come off it so well." Harry felt a wave of guilt sweep over him, confident now that it was their failed mission that had been Dumbledore's undoing. If he'd been at his full strength, he surely would have held his own. Ron looked very much like he wanted more details, an angry look of confusion passing over his features, but Harry could only deal with one disappointment at a time. He didn't want to think about the fake locket right now—or dwell on wherever the real

one might be. "...I'll tell you about it later."

Ron's shoulders slumped, then he shrugged. "...Well, that's really all there is to tell. No one seemed to want to kill the bloody thing outright, and most of our spells just bounced right off it. It was snapping and lashing out, belching fire at anyone stupid enough to get within striking distance and it just..." He made a vague gesture with one hand. "Caught him. Guess he didn't manage a shield spell in time and down he went." It came out trite, like Ron might break down if he dared let any emotion seep through. Harry quite understood the feeling.

Another of those inappropriate urges to laugh pounced upon him—because, well, it was really funny. Hilarious, in fact. The greatest wizard alive, the greatest *ever* in living memory—felled not by Voldemort or bested by a rival but having simply caught the bad end of a whiff of dragonfire from a student experimenting with Animagecraft. It was a rather anticlimactic end, and Harry wished he were alone just now, that he might let rip the guffaw straining just behind his tongue. It was a *riot*.

Hermione and Ron clearly had no such issues with avoiding seeming unhinged in the face of such a tragic blow, the both of them hunch-backed and quiver-lipped. He wished he could share his manic energy with them—or be rid of it some other way. It was exhausting, having to keep it in check. He knew he wouldn't be able to claw it back if he gave in, though, and all that would be left behind would be emptiness and frustration and a cold acceptance. He had too much left to do before he could allow himself that luxury.

"There's going to be a funeral come the weekend," Hermione said, her voice a bit stronger now, and she managed a weak smile. "They're laying him to rest at Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall said."

"Will you be able to leave by then?" Ron asked. "They can't need to keep you for too long, yeah?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, no—" Harry shook his head. "I'm getting discharged tomorrow, they said..." Bragge's face flashed in his mind, etched with obsequious hope. He blinked it away. "Did they...tell you anything? About the dragon?"

Ron sighed. “Nope. Hogwarts was crawling with all sorts of Ministry folks by the time they managed to get the situation in hand—but of course no one was gonna let the students know anything.” He seemed to sense that the question had been leading, though, and turned it back on Harry. “What’d Kingsley and that Ministry bloke want? Was it to do with the dragon? Was it...” He looked at Hermione, taking her temperature with a glance. “Was it really sent by You-Know-Who? Or Malfoy? Or Snape?” When Harry wasn’t quick enough to respond, he redoubled his efforts. “No *way* it just broke loose from a handler or something, right?”

Harry processed the question, weighing his options to respond. Neither Kingsley nor Bragge had given Harry specific instructions about keeping quiet concerning the nature of the Hogwarts attack, and while he wasn’t sure this was something he was entirely comfortable sharing with his friends in gory detail, he hated keeping secrets from them at a time like this. So with no one around to tell him not to—and with Dumbledore himself having expressed his approval of Harry looping Hermione and Ron in on matters otherwise best kept from the public eye—he took a breath.

“It wasn’t... I mean, the dragon: it wasn’t a real dragon. It was an Animagus.”

“A *what?*” Ron asked, just as Hermione gasped, “*Who?*”

“...Draco Malfoy.”

Ron slumped, slack-jawed, into the chair next to Hermione, who managed to look both shocked and a tiny bit jealous. He supposed that was understandable—while she’d managed the feat just after third-year with permission and hands-on training from McGonagall herself, Malfoy had evidently done all of his studying alone and in secret. Harry supposed he might have sought guidance from Snape, but there was likely very little a Potions Master could offer by way of advice on becoming an Animagus.

Hermione scrunched up her features, huffing, “But—are they certain it wasn’t simply a Draconifors spell? There are some rather impressive gargoyles guarding the gates of a derelict mansion in Cornwall near Falmouth that once belonged to—”

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess they know an Animagus when they see one,” Ron mumbled, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. “But—I still don’t get it. If that dragon—*Merlin*, if that thing was actually Malfoy, what the hell was it doing tearing up Gryffindor Tower? What’s the bloody point?” He blinked the stars from his eyes. “Was it You-Know-Who’s orders? Was he after you?”

“Please don’t phrase it like that...” Harry groaned, leaning back against his pillow and closing his eyes. There was really no getting around it. He sighed. “Bragge said—”

“Bragge?” Ron asked.

“The Ministry bloke that came in with Kingsley; apparently he’s from the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau. He said that when Malfoy completed the Animagus spell last night, for the first time, he got overwhelmed by the dragon’s mind and it took over. Supposedly he didn’t know what he was doing, just going on pure instinct. And...part of that instinct...was...” He winced, knowing this was going to leave a nasty taste in his mouth. “...Finding a mate.”

“Finding a mate?” Ron chuckled, bemused. “...I don’t get it. What’s that got...to do with...” He trailed off as realisation dawned, expression going slack. “...Oh bloody hell.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Harry said. Even saying it out loud still didn’t make it sound any more *real*, and Harry wondered if this, like Dumbledore’s death, would only hit him days or weeks later, the shock of understanding that somehow, on some level, Malfoy... how had Bragge put it? Thought Harry ‘complemented’ him? It might have been flattering, had it been anyone but Malfoy and had the revelation not involved death and destruction and terror.

Ron just shook his head, still dazed. “That’s...seriously? A *mate*? Like an animal?”

“Dragons *are* animals,” Hermione reminded. “And humans too, for that matter.”

“Yeah but—it sounds...I dunno. Dirty, kind of.”

“It’s not dirty; it’s all part of the natural order of things.”

“Yeah, and sounds like the natural order of things is *unnatural* when it comes to that prick.”

“*Ronald*,” Hermione scolded, and Ron ducked his head, looking abashed. “...It makes a funny sort of sense to me, though.” She bit her lip. “I mean—all creatures have their respective priorities when it comes to choosing partners. Even specific individuals within a species can have their own standards. Dragons are very picky but tend to select mates that...well, balance them. That their offspring might inherit the best of both parents and so be better prepared to face the world.”

Ron snorted derisively. “Can’t wait to see Harry’s and Malfoy’s scaly little bundles of joy. I gotta know, though: will any eggs be laid, and will Malfoy have to incubate them, or can he take turns with Harr—*ow!*” Hermione pinched his arm, and he flinched away, rubbing ruefully.

“I’m glad you find this so hilarious,” Harry grumbled.

Ron scooted his chair away from Hermione, casting her a dark look. “Sorry—but you’ve gotta admit, it’s...well, *weird*.”

“Don’t have to tell *me* that,” Harry said, running a hand through his hair.

“What’s going to happen to him now?” Hermione asked. “Malfoy... I mean, you said he wasn’t in his right mind, right? But still—he *killed* someone and demolished a good portion of Gryffindor Tower using magic he wasn’t licensed to practise. McGonagall made it clear when she agreed to tutor me that unregistered Animagi are dealt with pretty severely. You know what Rita was willing to give up just to keep me from outing her.”

Harry nodded. “He’s in containment right now, it seems. They...” He wondered how Ron and Hermione would take Harry’s latest assignment. “Bragge says they haven’t been able to get him to transform back.”

“Transform *back*? Hermione asked. “Wait—he’s still a dragon?”

Harry nodded. “Bragge reckons Malfoy’s stuck. That he’s like...I dunno, trapped inside his own head without even realising. He says the dragon’s instincts have taken over completely and Malfoy doesn’t remember he’s not really a dragon at all.”

“Malfoy thinks he’s *actually* a dragon now?” Ron snorted. “Blimey, but his mum named him aptly, didn’t she? That takes it.”

“It’s not funny, Ron.” Hermione frowned at the thought. “If he doesn’t recognise himself anymore...he might never turn back. He wouldn’t understand there’s anything to turn back *to*.”

Ron just shrugged. “Two dragons, one stone, the way I see it. No more dangerous creature roaming the countryside, and no more Malfoy causing trouble for everyone. We’re well rid of him.”

“Actually...” Harry started weakly. “That’s kind of why Kingsley and Bragge came to talk to me. They want me to help them try to get Malfoy situated back in his right mind.”

“Help get him *back*?” Ron’s face fell. “Oh, Harry, no no—*tell* me you said *no*.” Harry only gave a guilty, mirthless smile, and Ron groaned. “Why would you say ‘yes’ to something like that? They’ve got Malfoy locked up, safe and sound where he can’t do anything to anyone anymore, and you’re gonna go *help* him?”

Turned out, it was rather difficult defending a decision to a third party when you’d yet to manage to defend it to yourself. “I mean—he’s a git, that much is true, and now I’m more convinced than ever he’s been behind all the nasty shit that’s happened in the past year.” Hermione said nothing, but she did purse her lips into a thin line. “And he’s gone out of his way to make all our lives miserable.”

“And he *killed Dumbledore*,” Ron muttered darkly. “Maybe make sure they jot that one down.”

Harry let it stand, though it still had the hollow ring of untruth that he didn’t expect to fade until he saw Dumbledore laid out before him with his own two eyes. “...Right. But I

still don't think even he deserves what this sounds like: a death sentence, without even the dignity of understanding you were ever *alive*. I don't...know how I'm supposed to help him, or if it'll even work. And if it does, then the Ministry's welcome to dispense with him however they please. But..." He shook his head. "It wouldn't sit right with me, knowing I maybe could've done something but didn't. I want to see him rot for something he *did* do, knowing full well and tortured by his deeds; not to waste away, trapped in a prison he can't comprehend. It's cruel for one, and it gives no satisfaction for another."

Ron's expression twisted into one Harry had seen before, usually just as he was on the verge of losing a game of Exploding Snap. "All right, fine—I get it. I guess. Though I still think it's more than that little cretin deserves." He sighed, then held his hands out, pleading dramatically, "But why's it gotta be *you*?"

"Because: he's the one Malfoy chose for a mate—right?" Hermione prodded. "It's the human part of his mind that's fixated on Harry, after all—the dragon's instincts would've just amplified it and funnelled it into a drive. They're probably going to try something like Legilimency, I'd wager."

"But Harry's pants at Legilimency!" Ron protested.

"Thanks, mate," Harry said, dry humour in his voice.

"Something *like* Legilimency; the mind's a terribly complex subject of study—there's still so much about it we don't understand. Don't you remember when we snuck into the Department of Mysteries and found the Brain Room?"

Ron rubbed his arm, frowning. "Vividly."

Hermione coloured, clearly having forgotten herself, and she softly cleared her throat. "...Anyway, I can see why they're insistent that Harry be the one to help." She sniffed. "And I think it's awfully big of him."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah yeah." He looked at Harry. "You're such a soft touch, you

know? Malfoy'll love that."

"*Ron.*"

"Last one, I promise!" Harry very much doubted that would be the case, but he was relieved his friends seemed to have taken the rather awkward situation in which Harry had found himself in stride.

They decided to drop the matter for the time being and passed the rest of the afternoon and early evening discussing in detail Harry and Dumbledore's fruitless search for the Horcrux and what might have become of the original locket. Ron seemed more interested in who'd replaced it, wondering if Susan Bones would be offended if they asked her about any potential Death Eater relatives roosting in her family tree. "Or what about—whizzerface, Brocklehurst? She's Slytherin, isn't she?"

"Ravenclaw," Hermione corrected. "And it doesn't matter who replaced it—we just need to figure out where it's gone."

"Which we might could do, if we knew who'd replaced it."

After a filling dinner, by which point Harry's appetite had finally returned, thanks to the distraction of Ron and Hermione's presence, visiting hours were over, and his friends had to take their leave. Hogwarts classes had been dismissed for the remainder of the school year, as Gryffindor Tower and several corridors of the castle itself were in a shambles, so Ron and Ginny were back at the Burrow now. Hermione would be taking the Knight Bus to her parents' home just outside of London.

Ron was reluctant to abandon Harry to Kingsley and Bragge's care. "Want us to come back in the morning and go to the Ministry with you? I wouldn't say no to seeing another Malfoy behind bars, personally."

Under normal circumstances, Harry would have agreed, but he shook his head. "I'd rather you didn't, to be honest. Hopefully it'll just be a quick thing, over and done with. Then we can move on to...you know. The other stuff we've got to do." He'd do the bare

minimum to assuage his conscience, and then it was back to what really mattered: Horcruxes and their destruction. With Dumbledore gone...the three of them were the only ones left with any hope of actually defeating Voldemort once and for all. "I'll see you at the funeral."

After a few days at the Dursleys', attending a funeral for the greatest wizard in living memory and one of Harry's dearest role models would be an absolute treat.

A knock on the door to his room the next day, just as he was signing the last of what had felt like a mountain of paperwork for his discharge, announced Kingsley and Bragge's arrival, right on time to escort him to the Ministry. St. Mungo's Floo spat them directly out into the Atrium of the Ministry, which was bustling with Ministry employees as well as civilians with business therein. It was imposing as ever, with its arching walls and dark, hardwood floors and the great glittering fountain throwing up a spray that nearly reached the peacock-blue ceiling, and Harry wondered if Kingsley or Bragge ever felt the same unsettling shiver ripple down *their* spines as tended to happen to Harry whenever he found himself here. Bureaucracy, it seemed, was always a necessary evil, whether you were Muggle or Wizard.

The lift to the upper floors deposited the three of them on Level 4, which the lift attendant announced was for the, "*Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau.*" Harry frowned when he heard their destination, having to walk double-time to keep up with Kingsley's long stride and Bragge's surprisingly swift waddle. "Why are we here? I thought the Department of Magical Law Enforcement handled rogue Animagi."

"They do, yes. But our department was the only one with holding cells large enough to accommodate Mr. Malfoy," Bragge explained, and two doors and one flight of stairs later, Harry understood what he meant.

As dragons went, it wasn't too terribly large—certainly the Horntail Harry had faced in the Triwizard Tournament had been much bigger. But at nearly the size of a tramcar,

Malfoy's dragon would still have been a tight fit in a cell designed for a human occupant.

"Feel free to approach; he's under a heavy sedation spell for the moment," Bragge encouraged, but Harry wasn't entirely sure how wise it was to get within striking distance of the very creature that had slain the greatest wizard alive and nearly toppled Gryffindor Tower.

He decided to make a slow circuit of the room to get his bearings. It was mad, really: all he saw, chained to the floor with its barrel chest heaving in a regular rhythm, was an animal. A beautiful one, admittedly—but with an unsettling air of danger that couldn't quite be shaken, like the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest.

Firmly secured to the dragon's sides with thick leather straps was a pair of leathery bat-like wings, folded in repose, and its long whip of a tail was similarly bound and hoisted in a sling to keep it from kinking or being trod upon. The lamps in the sconces lining the cell threw glittering patterns of light over the dragon's armoured hide, covered from tip to tail in smooth gleaming scales of opal. Their pearlescent sheen dazzled the eye, and Harry imagined that the beast would be a sight under a fat full moon, like an avenging ghost.

But it wasn't a 'beast'. It wasn't a fascinating magical creature or some wounded animal in desperate need of charitable attentions. It was a dangerous wizard—a cruel, obsequious little prick who got his jollies tormenting those he deemed less worthy than himself. Harry held Malfoy's smarmy smirk firmly in his mind, training himself to see not a dragon, broken and beaten, but the pasty, pinch-faced wizard responsible for the death of Albus Dumbledore.

He swallowed, beating back his curiosity and awe. "...Why is he still a dragon? I mean—" He waved at the dragon. "I know *why*, just—isn't there a spell that turns Animagi back into humans?"

Blessedly, Bragge didn't ask how Harry knew of such a spell. "It would only restore the form—not the spirit. And forcing what is now a dragon's wild, untamed mind into a, well, rather *fragile* and unfamiliar form might do more harm than good. Once Mr. Malfoy's

true consciousness is reinstated, he should resume his human form without issue. Until then—” Bragge gave the dragon a firm pat on the rump, “we must tangle with this big fellow here.”

“I’ll thank you to keep your hands to yourself, Bragge,” came an oily voice, and Harry’s head whipped back toward the entrance to the cell. He hadn’t imagined the situation could quite get any worse, being stuck with the unwelcome task of trying to coax Malfoy back into his right mind, but then Severus Snape strode into the room, and the whole matter grew exponentially more headache-inducing.

Bragge wiggled his fingers and took a step back. “My apologies, Severus—it’s rather easy to forget we’re not dealing with an actual dragon at times!”

“What’s *he* doing here?” Harry asked; he wasn’t at school—might not even be going back at all, if the Horcrux hunt couldn’t be completed within the summer—and so he felt absolutely no compulsion to continue to feign any respect for Snape.

“Oh right! Well you two will be knowing each other, won’t you? A pupil, I’m certain?” Bragge glanced back and forth between Harry and Snape, and his eager grin faltered when neither deigned to engage in conversation. “Er, right then. Harry: Professor Snape has kindly offered to prepare a potion that will...well, ease your journey into Mr. Malfoy’s mind, as it were.”

“Oh, *has* he?” Harry muttered darkly, not intending to let a drop of anything the greasy asshole cooked up pass his lips. There was still every chance Snape had been involved, at least in part, in Dumbledore’s death.

“Indeed, I have.” Snape placed a small trunk on the table lining the far wall and tapped his wand against its lock. It popped open, revealing multiple levels and compartments within, and after a moment’s consideration, Snape selected a phial containing a viscous orange slurry that looked like one of the carrot and rhubarb shakes Aunt Petunia blended up for Dudley’s diet. “Legilimency with a confused, bestial Animagus is a rather risky venture for both parties. Being aware of your frankly pathetic skills with the technique, I took the liberty of preparing a wit-sharpening potion. Mr. Malfoy has

already lost *his* mind; it would be a tragedy of the highest order if you were to lose *yours* as well.” His lips curled into a devious smile, and he held the phial out for Harry to take.

But Harry held firm. “Shocking as it may seem, I’m actually rather passable at Legilimency when I’ve got proper tutelage. Though I think I successfully demonstrated my skills to you once or twice, Professor.” It was a bald-faced lie, of course, but he didn’t trust Snape as far as he could throw him. He remained certain that Snape had known what Malfoy had been up to for the past nine months; that he hadn’t put a stop to it or at least alerted Dumbledore to Malfoy’s scheme was reason enough for Harry to discount Dumbledore’s continued insistence that Snape was truly on the Order’s side and not Voldemort’s.

Granted, it was unlikely that Snape would be so bold as to poison Harry in full view of two Ministry officials—one of whom was an extremely capable Order member—but still.

Snape’s bony fingers went tight about the phial, knuckles white, and Harry wondered if he wasn’t about to crush it in his hand. “I see that bump on the head has done nothing to knock the insolence out of you.” And then the coiling smile was back. “One would think you’d muster a bit more respect for your new Headmaster.”

Harry felt his stomach drop; he hadn’t even considered who’d be running the castle once repairs were completed on the Tower and classes started back up in September. “...No. McGo—Professor McGonagall’s the Deputy Headmistress. She’s next in line.” That was how it worked, wasn’t it? Or did the Board of Governors get to pick? Malfoy’s father had been on the Board, years ago, but Harry took heart in the knowledge that they’d probably rescinded his spot once Lucius had got himself chucked into Azkaban.

“Hm,” was all Snape said, setting the phial down on the table and rummaging through his potions kit once more. “I suppose we shall see.” Out came another phial, this time filled with a heliotrope liquid. “A deep-sleeping draught, to allow the mind to wander freely.” After that came one filled with a silvery, metallic sludge. “Disillusionment Potion, to disguise your foreign presence in Mr. Malfoy’s mind, so he doesn’t reject you outright.” And finally, a phial filled with a clear liquid that Harry had seen before.

He hardened his jaw. "...That's Veritaserum." He locked eyes with Snape, fierce. "I'm *not* drinking that."

"Secrets, have we, Mr. Potter?" Snape's lip drew up into a sneer—and then he set the Veritaserum just to the side of the other phials. "It's not for you—it's for Mr. Malfoy. Three drops onto the tongue, to open his mind and make it more receptive to you."

"Thought he was supposed to be open to me *already*." Harry looked to Bragge. "You told me that's why I had to be the one who did this."

Snape scoffed. "I've no intention of allowing Mr. Malfoy's mind to be violated by your inept fumbblings, and boast though you may of your Legilimency prowess, you'll forgive me my scepticism. This requires a *rather* delicate touch." He pulled a tiny copper cauldron from the trunk and levitated it before himself, conjuring a blue flame beneath it as he poured the phials minus the Veritaserum in and set it to a low simmer. "This potion—which you *will* drink, Potter; this isn't up for discussion—will ensure that even someone intent on being the bull to another's china shop of the mind can still avoid causing them irreparable harm."

"It's up for discussion if I say it's up for discussion—and I'm not drinking something I haven't brewed myself."

"Given your abysmal Potions marks, I'd avoid drinking anything you've brewed yourself as well."

"Harry, my boy, come now," Bragge pleaded, brows lifting. "I assure you the potion's perfectly safe—you've just heard Professor Snape list off the ingredients yourself."

"Assuming that's even what's in those phials."

Snape crossed his arms. "Did you not recognise the contents, Mr. Potter? They were standard brews in my classroom—unless perhaps you haven't been paying attention during lessons...?"

Harry felt his cheeks heat, certain he'd never hated Snape more than in this moment. It

was a hard fight for most-reviled by Harry between Snape, Malfoy, and Voldemort. He ground his teeth. "...How's this supposed to work, then?"

Bragge's shoulders sank in relief, and he toddled back towards the sleeping dragon. Harry wondered what would happen if you *did* tickle one. "Well, first we'll have you drink Professor Snape's potion, which will put you under and allow you into Mr. Malfoy's mind. It should be instinctual, if the potion has done its job, so I advise you to just—" He made a little fist in a cheering motion. "Go with your gut!"

It wasn't exactly encouragingly specific. "That's...not a lot to go on. Am I supposed to be looking for anything? Should I—I dunno, call for him? And if I do manage to find him, how am I supposed to get him back into his right mind? How will I know if I've managed it?"

Bragge shifted uncomfortably, glancing to Snape and Kingsley. "Er, unfortunately, the texts describing previous such ventures have been less than helpful beyond a certain point—and the last three recorded cases failed to restore the witch or wizard's consciousness, so..."

Harry slumped, releasing a rough little bark of mirthless laughter. "You don't know what you're doing here at all."

Bragge had the good graces to look sheepish, but he quickly rallied, drawing himself up. "This is uncharted territory for us all, my boy—but into the fray we must charge, nonetheless! This is Mr. Malfoy's best hope of recovering himself, and while you maintain you didn't have the rosiest of schoolyard encounters with him, I do hope you can understand that without your very best effort, he *will* lose his life. Surely he deserves at least a chance?"

Harry exhaled raggedly and extended a hand to Snape—who placed in his palm a flask, still warm from the brewing process, containing a bubblegum-pink potion. Snape held on to the flask for a moment, refusing to relinquish it. "Try not to probe about in corners of the mind that are none of your concern this time." Feeling it best not to make promises he couldn't keep, Harry wordlessly knocked the potion back in one shot, grimacing when

he expected it to be bitter but relieved to taste a thick, minty slurry instead.

Bragge conjured a small camp bed and directed Harry to lie down and make himself comfortable. “Now, do try to keep your mind open, Harry! Keep thinking open thoughts!”

“Quite unnecessary, Bragge,” Snape sneered. “Mr. Potter’s mind is unfailingly open. Why, one can read it like a book.”

Harry tamped down the rising tide of anger bubbling within his chest like Snape’s potion. He’d come here to do a job, and he was going to get it over with as quickly as possible. Bragge was right; Malfoy may have had nefarious reasons for attempting to become an Animagus, but he couldn’t have predicted his form or the way it might take over his body. He was a victim himself, in a twisted way, and he deserved to at least face the consequences of his actions as a human, able to understand right from wrong.

“Now,” Bragge said, as Harry arranged himself on the bed, “I’ll ask you to close your eyes and count backwards from ten; this will place you into a deep slumber, at which point you’ll find your thoughts starting to wander. Just remember to—”

“Keep an open mind, yeah. I got it.”

Harry closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly; he wasn’t really tired just now, knew there were any number of things he ought to be doing, but he couldn’t move on to the next order of business until *this* matter was taken care of, so he tried to focus his thoughts. He did as Bragge suggested, clearing his mind and counting backwards.

Ten...

Nine...

Eight...

By *Seven...* his thoughts had begun to fracture, growing hazy, and at *Six...* he felt a ripple

of distant worry that he really *had* been poisoned. But then came—

Five...

Four...

Malfoy. Malfoy, he was supposed to be thinking about Malfoy. About being open and receptive to finding him.

Three...

T—

A gust of wind ruffled his hair. He could sense light beyond his lids, as if the lamps in the cell had flared to life all at once, and he blinked blearily, daring to peek.

This was *not* the Ministry cell.

He sat upright, bracing his hands to balance himself as he scrambled to his feet, and surveyed his surroundings on unsteady legs, still woozy from the potion.

No, this was not the Ministry cell *at all*.

It was...well, a rather dreary moor. Barren but for scrub grass and the odd bush or mossy boulder, stretching onward as far as the eye could see in all directions, underneath a cloudy, overcast sky.

“Mr. Bragge...?” Harry called weakly, not really expecting an answer, and sure enough, all he received in response was the lonely cry of the wind over the moor and the whistle of the short-cropped grass waving in the gusts. It was a picture-perfect ‘middle of nowhere’ setting.

He seemed quite alone—no Bragge, no Snape, no Kingsley. Definitely no dragon, and no Ministry cell either. He ran his hands down his sides, patting nervously, and sighed in relief when he realised he at least still had his wand on him, its familiar length poking out of his back pocket.

Palming it, he considered casting a Point Me to try and find civilisation; he wasn't yet confident enough in his Apparition skills to chance a jump, especially as he had no idea where he was, and he'd heard that trying to Apparate too far tended to wreak havoc on the digestive and mental faculties. He'd nearly been brained once already in the past few days; he wasn't keen to do any further damage if he could avoid it.

There was also the matter of how he'd gotten here in the first place; had the potion knocked him out, allowing persons unknown—Snape? The Ministry?—to transport Harry...wherever he was? To what end, if so?

As he dithered on about how best to find his way back to London, there came a rustling sound from behind, and Harry turned his head to peer curiously over one shoulder.

“RAH-AWK!”

Harry whirled around, nearly tripping over his own feet as he took several steps backward to escape the flurry of feathers and talons that was upon him. “What the f—” He batted wildly. “Get off!”

The peacock—he was pretty sure that was what the thing was, though he'd never seen a white one like this one before—ignored Harry's protests, continuing to squawk indignantly at him and peck at the hem of his jeans. He took several more steps back, trying to place a bit of buffer between himself and the bird, but it gave chase, its pristine feathers fluffed in anger and its beady red eyes fixed firmly on his shoelaces.

It snapped its neck out, grabbing one lace in its beak, and gave a sharp tug. “Hey—cut that out!” Harry hissed, swatting it away, and he dropped to one knee to retie his shoe. The peacock gave a little shiver, settling its feathers back into place, and then turned back around, marching away with an indignant strut. Harry watched it go for a beat, utterly thrown by the absurdity of the situation—popping up in the middle of a moor when he was supposed to be deep in the bowels of the Ministry, harassed by a bloody bird that seemed to have a fondness for shoelaces—and wondered if he hadn't hit his head again. Or maybe he'd had a bad reaction to one of the potion ingredients—surely they weren't meant to just be thrown together into a single concoction like that, right?

The peacock stopped a few paces away, turning back to look at Harry with those beady eyes, and then gave an admonishing hiss.

Harry furrowed his brows, bemused. “You, erm...you want me to follow you?” He felt ridiculous, talking to the peacock—but a little less so when it continued onward, chirruping softly in encouragement as it made its way along a sandy path that wound up a low hill.

With nothing else to do but follow the peacock, Harry did so—though he made sure to keep himself and his shoelaces a safe distance back. For the most part, the bird seemed content to ignore him, plodding along at a sedate pace and stopping now and then to peck idly at clumps of grass in search of bugs or shoelaces or whatever it was peacocks ate. They crested one hill, then down again, and another with seemingly no destination in sight.

From the top of the third hill, though, Harry realised what he’d been led to: a large, moss-covered limestone boulder with dead shrubs ringing its base and Draco Malfoy, sitting cross-legged atop it and staring off into the middle distance.

Well, that solved the mystery of where Harry was, and why.

The peacock gave a final whining squawk, then hustled off the path into the brush to go hunting. Harry watched it go with a twinge of longing; it’d been nice having something of a guide here, and now he really didn’t know quite what to do.

He glanced up at Malfoy, who didn’t seem to have noticed his arrival—didn’t seem to be aware of much at all, really, just sat there in dead silence, not even blinking. It was more than a bit eerie, and Harry wondered if Malfoy, like his dragon, was also in stasis.

He snapped a finger. “...Malfoy?”

No response, though he hadn’t honestly been expecting one. Harry drew closer, taking his steps carefully to avoid spooking Malfoy if at any point he actually came to, and waved a hand in front of Malfoy’s face. The dopey, blank expression on his fine patrician

features was unmoved, and Harry took a mental picture. He'd need something to laugh about once this was all over.

He sighed. Well, he'd *found* Malfoy—or Malfoy's human consciousness, he supposed this represented—but how exactly was he supposed to get the prick to 'reassert' himself if he was a vegetable?

Reaching up, he placed a hand on one of Malfoy's knobby knees, giving it a shake—

And Malfoy instantly shivered to life with an undignified yelp, scrambling backwards comically quickly and toppling off of the boulder and into the springy underbrush. "What the *fuck!*" he sputtered, limbs flailing as he struggled to right himself, and Harry took another mental picture.

"So you *are* alive..."

Malfoy's head snapped around, trying to place the voice, and his wide-eyed white expression darkened considerably. "Potter?" he spat, raking Harry with a confused sneer. "What are *you* doing he—" He caught himself, though, and flicked a fearful gaze around the moor. A gust of wind ruffled his messy, leaf-strewn hair, and his pressed white dress shirt had grass stains on it now. He looked positively a mess—so Harry took another mental picture. "...Where the hell am I?" Malfoy asked in a tight, hunted voice, and he pressed his back against the boulder, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides.

Harry humoured him, glancing around, but all he saw was the same barren waste as when he'd 'arrived'. He shrugged. "Was about to ask you the same thing." Malfoy relaxed a hair, curiosity evidently winning out over sheer terror, and he blinked a few times, as if the whole place might prove itself to be an illusion. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Malfoy opened his mouth, a scathing retort likely on his lips, but then quickly shut it again. His expression went slack as he wracked his memory and clearly didn't like what he'd found. He fixed Harry with a look of unspoken rage. "What have you done to me?"

Where are we? Take me back *right this instant* or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Harry asked, genuinely curious. He raked his gaze over Malfoy, from his lank, white-blond hair down to his scuffed, muddy loafers. "I don't think you've got a wand on you, and you don't look like you've got the build to take me in a fistfight, though I'm game to find out if you are." He crossed his arms over his chest, and Malfoy shifted his weight to his backmost foot, his rage tempered by a sliver of worry—perhaps he was recalling how things had turned out the last time he and Harry had squared off. "And I haven't done anything to you. In fact—*you're* the one who did something to *me*." He cocked his head, studying Malfoy's steadily flagging bravado with interest. "...And I think you remember."

"I—don't remember—"

"You don't remember turning into a great bloody *dragon* and attacking Gryffindor Tower? 'Cause that seems like it'd be hard to forget."

Malfoy was already pale as a ghost, but he somehow seemed to go whiter still, and the peacock left off its hunt in the scrub grass nearby to sit up straight and ruffle its feathers, releasing a burbling, threatened growl. Malfoy swallowed thickly. "I...I did it?"

"Attacked the school? Yeah. You did."

"No—" Malfoy shook his head in irritation. "I mean—I did it? I finally..." He trailed off, and the awe in his voice faded as his brows knit in confusion. "Wait—dragon?" He held his hands out before himself, as if he expected to see scales and talons instead of knobby knuckles and bitten-down fingernails. "I thought it was a dream..."

"Well it wasn't," Harry bit out, irritation starting to settle in when it seemed that Malfoy truly didn't have the first clue as to what he'd done, the damage he'd caused and the life he'd taken. "And it's caused *rather* a lot of trouble. You've hurt people."

Malfoy straightened, jaw tightening and throat bobbing. "My parents. Where are my parents?"

Harry shrugged. “How should I know?”

Malfoy looked around again, perhaps thinking his parents were only hiding nearby and would reveal themselves momentarily. “I have to get back to them. I have to find—where the fuck *are* we?” He started pacing, nearly trampling the poor peacock underfoot, as it scurried to get well out of his way.

Harry’s irritation crested at last, and he grew tired of humouring Malfoy. He’d have to be blunt about this if they were ever going to get anywhere with this ‘reasserting’ business. “Pretty sure we’re inside your head.” A strong gust of wind whipped around them, bringing with it a long, lonely moan that echoed across the moor. “Looks rather a lot like I expected: depressing and empty.”

This drew Malfoy up short, and he made a face that suggested he thought Harry was off his rocker. “What are you talking about?”

If Harry didn’t start directing the conversation, they were going to be discussing the same issues over and over until they throttled one another, so Harry grabbed the reins and launched into an explanation before Malfoy could have another piss fit. “Well, as I hear it: you evidently have been studying Animagework in secret for the better part of the past year, and on finally completing a successful transformation last night, you popped out a big angry dragon and went crazy. Bragge said it was something to do with the dragon’s instincts overwhelming the human parts of you, I dunno. The professors had to subdue you, and as we speak, you’re chained to the floor of a holding cell under a stasis spell at the Ministry.”

“I haven’t been—and—*what* on earth are you—” Malfoy began tripping over his own words, spluttering rather inelegantly, and Harry was going to run out of mental film for his camera very quickly at this rate. Eventually, though, Malfoy apparently chose to just discount Harry’s words altogether: “You’re *lying*.”

Harry had to laugh at that, though he chalked it up to breaking under the stress of the past twenty-four hours. “Right. Because *any* of what I just said is clearly part of some elaborate trap to...I’m really stumped. Help me out here: why am I lying, again?”

Malfoy's practised sneer fell, genuine fear washing it away to seafoam as the weight and reality of what Harry had just said sank in. Harry was willing to bet Malfoy didn't remember much of the past day or two, let alone the finer details of how he'd come to be here. It was ridiculously unfair that the prick could just *not remember*. That he could remain blissfully ignorant of what he'd done, who he'd *killed*. The blow he'd struck the wizarding world—and how thrilled he'd probably be once he realised.

"We're inside my mind," Malfoy said, not quite a statement, but not really a question either. Like he was just trying to settle things in his head, everything locking into place where before there'd been chaos.

"Like I said."

"Then what are *you* doing here?"

"Wasting my time, evidently." Harry scrubbed at his face, knowing he was *actually* going to have to come out and say it. And in doing so, he was going to sound both stupid and embarrassing, two things he absolutely didn't want to be in front of Malfoy. But then, Malfoy was the one who'd done a mating dance on top of Gryffindor Tower, apparently, so there was always that little silver lining—though it would be easier to appreciate if Harry wasn't going to inevitably be subjected to ridicule as well. "I've been recruited to help you right yourself. You kind of went bonkers when you transformed and lost track of whatever passes for your humanity. Supposedly this—" He gestured between them, "—is meant to help you find your way back to...well, you."

Malfoy grimaced, like he'd just swallowed a toad. "*You*?" He frowned, a thought crossing his mind. "...I've just made you up."

"Think about me that often, then?" Harry raised a brow, and now Malfoy looked like the toad was trying to claw its way back out again. "Unfortunately, you haven't made me up. I'm really here. And I'd really rather *not* be."

"Then fuck off. Haven't you got kittens to rescue from trees? Hufflepuffs' bumps and bruises to kiss?" He rounded on Harry, and the peacock bustled along after him, eyeing

Harry's shoelaces greedily. "Where are my parents?" he asked again.

Harry stood his ground, drawing himself up to a height that he despaired to realise was a good couple of inches below Malfoy. "I *told* you: I don't know." He bit out his words slowly, as it seemed Malfoy was having trouble parsing the simplest of phrases. "And if anyone else could be here, trust that I'd more than merrily pass off the mantle, but I was told it had to be *me* so—"

"By whom?"

"Snape!" Harry snapped, nearing his wits' end. It wasn't quite the truth, but it wasn't entirely a lie either; he was certain Snape wouldn't have let Harry be a part of this mess if there'd been any other choice. Hearing that Snape had had a say in the matter, though, would hopefully make Malfoy more receptive to...whatever it was Harry was meant to be doing.

Malfoy's brows lifted, and he glanced around hopefully. "He's here?" But of course, all he was met with was the rustling hiss of the scrub grass swaying in the wind and the idle chirrups of the peacock now hunting near the base of the boulder. The hope faded from his expression, a practised frown settling into place, and he studied Harry for a long moment. "...What's going on here? You're lying—about...something. I can feel it."

A sharp gust whipped at Harry's messy hair, and the peacock ruffled its feathers, fixing its beady eyes on Harry in dark suspicion as Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not."

"Another lie." Malfoy's voice was getting tight—which was rich, really, because Harry was pretty sure he was the one entitled to frustration here. How long had he been out here? Minutes? Hours? It was difficult to tell the passage of time in this limbo-like reality.

He tamped down the acid-like irritation eating at him; if they started rowing, they probably wouldn't stop until they'd beaten each other silly. "It's *not*. I'm not lying to you. You're in a holding cell at the Ministry—"

“What *for*?!” Malfoy sputtered. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“McGonagall says you’re supposed to register your intent to become an Animagus with the Ministry in advance—did you do that?”

Malfoy shifted uneasily. “That’s—hardly grounds to *haul me in*.”

“Maybe. But you didn’t really give them much choice when you, like I said, went *bonkers* and destroyed Gryffindor Tower.” He hardened his voice to impress upon Malfoy the gravity of his situation. “You’re lucky they didn’t put you down outright.”

Malfoy’s shoulders went slack, his tone raspy. “They—they can’t execute someone just for... Even *Azkaban*’s far-fetched, certainly not without a proper trial, and I’m still underage besides—”

“You’re right—but you’re not ‘someone’ right now. You’re just another dangerous creature, stuck in that dragon body, evidently without this bit of you—” He gestured to Malfoy. “—even realising it. And you’re gonna *stay* stuck unless you can situate yourself back in your right mind and transform.”

Malfoy shook his head. “No—no, I’d *remember* that. I’d remember...” He ran a hand through his hair, the strands fluttering in the breeze without the usual generous application of grease. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Harry threw his hands into the air. “I swear to—do I need to cast a Sonorus Charm? Can you not *hear* me, is that it?” He fixed Malfoy with a hard stare, holding his eye so he had to actually listen to what Harry was saying and process it this time. “You’ve been studying to become an Animagus, right?”

Malfoy’s jaw tensed, and he ran a tongue over his teeth. “I don’t see how that’s remotely any of your concern—”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t. Well congrats—because it worked! You came out a bloody dragon, and even if *you* can’t remember it, trust that the whole of Hogwarts, probably most of Hogsmeade, and several Ministry officials *can* remember. They remember, because as

I've recently learned, dragons have some pretty strong, forceful instincts. Instincts that shoved the human parts of you firmly aside and took over."

Malfoy blinked a few times in quick succession, and his nostrils flared. "...What do you mean 'took over'?"

"I mean *took over*. I mean punted your human consciousness into the aether of wherever-the-hell we are and started operating on raw animal instinct. And did a lot of damage in the process."

"The aether of—*what*?"

"Of whatever this place is! Your mind is stuck *here*—while your body is in the Ministry, chained up in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures until you decide to show up and reclaim it, I suppose."

"Well—take me back!" Malfoy demanded, tone sharp as he tried to affect the air of one accustomed to getting his way. He was going to be sorely disappointed, and Harry was pleased to deal him the lesson.

"Sure. Just one thing: um, *how*?"

"I don't *know*, obviously. You're the one barging in on my thoughts!"

"I didn't *barge in*—you're stuck here, or haven't you gotten it through your thick skull yet that without my help, you're going to be living out the rest of your days all scales and talons?"

"Without *your* help?" Malfoy's lip curled in disgust. "Why the fuck do you think I need your help?"

"Did you not just order me to 'take you back', despite my having no hand in your being here in the first place?" Harry massaged his temples, a pounding ache building just behind his eyes. Why had he let himself be talked into this? Malfoy had made his bed; Harry should have left him to lie in it. "It's your own damn fault I'm here at all, so if

you've got a problem with—”

“My fault?” Malfoy scoffed. “How is your being here anything to do with m—”

“You made it to do with me when you tried to tear through the castle *just to find me!*” Harry could feel a dark flush rising to his cheeks, frustration and embarrassment setting him off. “Gryffindor Tower’s in ruins now, thanks to you. The whole House might have to change common rooms before the next term starts.”

“What? Why would I...” The derisive sneer on Malfoy’s face slowly dissolved, revealing a slack-jawed expression of dawning realisation. He swallowed, neck bobbing. “...Why would I do that?”

Harry paced around to the boulder, turning to lean back against it. It was warm, even through his jumper, despite the chill of the moor. He closed his eyes to try and soothe the pounding in his head. “Wouldn’t happen to have been because you were ordered by Voldemort to kill me, would it?” There was always a chance, right? Bragge wasn’t an Order member; he wouldn’t be privy to any secrets the Order had obtained regarding the schemes and plots of the Death Eaters. Maybe this was all a misunderstanding, jumping to conclusions when actually—

“That’s ridic—” Malfoy drew himself up and squared his jaw, and Harry imagined he could hear him grinding his teeth. “I know it’s rather a challenge for you, Potter, but do try not to be so full of yourself. I’ve far greater purposes to which my skills have been directed than schoolyard brawling.” He toyed with the cuff of his left sleeve, chin jutting out proudly.

Harry winced internally, reaching to push his glasses up as he wiped his eyes. There went the last brief flicker of hope. He supposed there was no getting around the crux of the matter now. “Yeah. Yeah, I was afraid of that. Listen—” He crossed his arms over his chest, scuffing the toe of one trainer against the ground to kick up a bit of gravel. The peacock bustled to chase down a pebble that went flying into the scrub. “I had it put bluntly for me, so if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to give it to you straight as I can manage as well.” He flicked a glance up to Malfoy’s face—he half-wished the git would

interrupt again with haughty demands for him to *get on with it* and *spit it out, I don't have all day, Potter*. Alas, though: Malfoy seemed to understand Harry had something that needed getting out and had kindly buttoned up for once.

Harry cleared his throat. “Apparently—” His voice broke, most unhelpfully, and he tried again. “Apparently your Animagus form isn't *just* a dragon: it's a, uh, juvenile. Y'know—a teenage one, I guess?” Malfoy shrugged as if to say *And?* “Yeah. Anyway—like any healthy teenage boy, on getting out into the wide world, it...decided it wanted a shag. So it went looking for a...” He made a face; Harry hoped it never got easier to say this word—he didn't want to get used to it. “A *mate*.” He spread his arms out. “And guess who the lucky wizard was.”

Malfoy actually took a step back, raking a befuddled gaze from the bird's nest that was Harry's hair down to his unlaced trainers that the peacock was eyeing with renewed interest. “That's—*what?* No.” He laughed—a manic little scoff that sounded less derisive and more just this side of horrified. “You're—making that up. That's absolutely—it just makes *no*—”

“Make it up? Why the hell would I make *that* up?” Harry could hear his voice had gone a bit shrill, nearly as defensive as Malfoy.

“Don't ask me to try and comprehend what goes on inside that peabrain of yours! Everyone knows Granger's the brains of your entire operation! Having a laugh at my expense, are we?” He crossed his arms and sniffed. “Merlin, how *pathetic*. Clearly you're hard up for entertainment these days.”

“I am *not*—” Harry started, but then bit his tongue; they could go for hours, sniping back and forth like this, and Harry just wanted to get out of here now. He didn't really care if it was with or without Malfoy at this point. “You know what? Fine. Think what you want. Enjoy your delusions if they make you feel better—I'd certainly rather it not be true myself, so if you'd like to forget any of this ever happened and never speak of it to another living soul once you're back to your delightfully charming self again, then I *wholly* support you.” He clasped his hands together and gave a polite little bowing nod—

then straightened with a frown. "...Just out of curiosity, though: if you didn't become an Animagus to try and kill me, why *did* you?" Malfoy's expression shuttered, gone cold and blank. "Not for fun, surely. That 'greater purpose' you mentioned?"

"It's none of your concern." Malfoy's tone was clipped, like he'd only barely held back the truth of the matter.

"I've just explained in relatively gory detail how it is my concern, or did it go in one ear and out the other?" It wasn't impossible; Harry seemed to have repeated himself several times throughout this confrontation with Malfoy.

"I see no reason whatsoever to credit any accusation or declamation that comes dribbling out of your mouth."

"Then what are we even talking for?"

"Your guess is quite as good as mine."

Harry clenched his hands into fists, digging his bitten-down nails into the flesh of his palm, and he counted backwards from ten in a practice he'd seen Mrs Weasley adopt several times over the years in her dealings with the twins. He had to be the bigger man, here; he wouldn't be able to live it down if he let Malfoy rile him up and run him off. If Harry left this plane, it'd be because he'd concluded there was nothing more for him to do here. "...If you don't tell me why you did it, then I won't help you change back," he threatened; he didn't like to resort to such tactics, but needs must and all that.

Malfoy snorted, one bleached brow arched contemptuously. "You've just told me you've got no clue how to get out of here. And I'm *quite* sure I've said this before, but let's give it another go for fun: I *don't need your help*. In case you haven't noticed, I'm evidently the one who's managed the Animagecraft between us, so I like to think I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah? Then go on." Harry nodded. "Change back. Your mindscape's dull as shit, and I'd really like to get back to reality now."

The peacock squawked its annoyance, and Harry gave a start, fixing it with a warning glare. If the stupid bird came after his laces again, he was going to punt it down the way, he really was. Malfoy, for his part, simply screwed up his features in a sneer. “You’re welcome to fuck off whenever you like.”

“I’d have *liked* to not be here in the first place, but for some reason that’s well beyond me at the moment I actually felt sorry for you. You’d taken some stupid risks and suffered a punishment that didn’t strike me as equal to the crime.”

“Saint Potter,” Malfoy huffed, derision dripping. “A saviour complex in baggy trousers and glass-bottle specs. Too noble to keep his nose out of others’ private affairs.”

“No, I was too noble to leave you stuck like this thinking you had no choice. But I’m happy to let you rot in here, where you can’t hurt anyone else, if I think you’re up to no good.”

“Then *go!*” Malfoy snapped, colour rising to his cheeks as he showed the first true bit of life since Harry had come across him.

Harry dug in his heels. “Not until you tell me *why*. What were you doing these past few months, skulking around and sneaking off behind the professors’ backs? You weren’t being nearly as subtle as you thought you were, you know.” He considered their predicament. “Was it studying Animagcraft, then? Why the need for secrecy? Being an unregistered Animagus is illegal—and I’d think *your* sort would want to at least keep up the semblance of towing the line for a while longer yet. Or is that out the window now?”

He took a step forward, and Malfoy responded with a step back, backing up to the boulder until he was pressing himself against it. “Why take that chance? Is it Voldemort? Did he order you to do this?” Harry narrowed his eyes as a thought struck him. “Why were you crying in the bathroom? What were you talking about with Myrtle? And that was you in the Room of Requirement, wasn’t it? Is that where you practised? Or plotted whatever it is you’ve been up to, if not Animagcraft? Why did—”

“*SHUT UP!*” The peacock flew at Harry in a flurry of feathers and claws and angry

squawks and screeches, flaring wildly as Harry attempted to shield his face from the attack. He took several steps back and nearly tripped over his own feet in the effort. “This isn’t a fucking interrogation—my business is my own!”

Harry dropped into a squat, eyes squeezed shut. “Jesus just—call off your bloody bird, geez! Fine!”

“It’s not my bird,” Malfoy ground out, voice muffled by the flutter of wings and angry hissing. “But perhaps that will teach you to go sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Harry was reminded, uncomfortably, of Snape’s warning to avoid doing just that, though he maintained that this was perfectly within his purview. He was entitled to want to know what had driven Malfoy to dabble in so heavily regulated an area of magic, taking risks that could have gotten him killed but had instead destroyed the one person who stood a reasonable chance of actually saving the wizarding world when it came down to it.

It was just not *fair*. That Malfoy could sit here stewing in his ignorance, claiming what he’d been up to was no one’s business but his own, when it *was* Harry’s business. It was the whole damn *world’s* business now.

The peacock gave a final admonishing chirrup before shivering to resettle its feathers in place, adopting a threatening posture evidently in case Harry got any ideas. Once sufficiently assured Harry was not about to start anything again, it went strutting off in search of insects once more, its long tail feathers swishing in the scrub grass behind it.

Harry tentatively lowered his arms, eyeing the peacock warily and rubbing at the faint scratch marks on his arms where the stupid bird had managed to get in a few good kicks. “It sure as hell *does* belong when you do a *mating dance* on top of Gryffindor Tower.”

Malfoy flushed from nose to ears, and Harry half expected steam to start pouring from his ears. “That—I *wasn’t*—just—leave me be! Haven’t you ruined my life enough just yet?” Harry opened his mouth to ask just how he had ruined Malfoy’s life, genuinely

baffled—before recalling that healthy as he looked now, Malfoy had very recently caught the bad end of a very nasty curse courtesy of Harry’s temper, and Lucius Malfoy was currently rotting in Azkaban, something Malfoy might understandably (if not reasonably) blame Harry for. “If you’re so concerned I’m a danger to others, then let them keep me here! What do I care? I’d rather wither away in here than have a heart to heart with the Chosen One, thanks.”

Harry scoffed and shook his head, lips thinning into a grim smile. “I certainly hope you mean that, because that’s precisely what’s going to happen.” He swept an arm out, gesturing around them. “And while you’re stuck living out your days a helpless prisoner inside your own mind—and probably going mad in the process, have fun with that—there’ll be a war going on right outside your cell door. A real one, out in the open, not waged in the shadows and sneaky like it’s been so far. You know it’s coming—and you know I’m going to be there. Your parents too, I expect, one way or another.”

Malfoy just stared at Harry, jaw tight and nostrils flaring, without saying a word. He looked terrified—which good, he *ought* to be.

“Got nothing to say about that? Your mum and dad, caught up in a battle, getting blown up by a *Reducto* or ripped to shreds by Greyback and his ilk?”

“They wouldn’t—” Malfoy started, but Harry had found a pressure point and leaned on it harder.

“You seemed so concerned about their well-being earlier; you’re not even going to at least fight by their sides? Even if it’s the wrong one? Gonna let *them* die for you, too?”

Malfoy’s gaze narrowed, confusion furrowing his brow. “‘Too’? Wait—” He shook his head. “You—you said earlier I’d hurt people. That the dragon...” He swallowed. “...What did I do?”

Harry, despite himself, hesitated. He knew he could cut Malfoy to the quick right now, slough off that superior sneer with a few choice words. It wouldn’t take much to bring him down a peg or three, to really rub in his face the destruction he’d wrought with his

ill-conceived attempts at mastering illegal magic without the proper oversight. He deserved it, too, for so stubbornly refusing to explain *why* he'd done something this stupid.

But Harry wasn't Malfoy; he wasn't unnecessarily cruel or vindictive. He could be the bigger man, so though Malfoy didn't deserve the courtesy, he explained with uncharacteristically gentle caution, "...You killed Dumbledore." Malfoy's grey eyes widened a tic. "He died, trying to keep you from destroying Gryffindor Tower, from hurting any of the students inside." Malfoy turned away, plodding on leaded feet in an aimless path, fists clenched at his sides. Harry felt a flicker of frustration at the lack of any evident response. "You don't even remember that? You don't *remember* the professors trying to contain you, Dumbledore in the thick of it just—"

"Another *lie*," Malfoy hissed, glancing over his shoulder. "You'll not guilt me so easily, Potter."

That Malfoy seemed to admit that Dumbledore's death would weigh on him struck Harry as the more incredulous of the points being debated, but he just shook his head. "You think I'm lying?" He held his hands out. "You say you can detect lies—so go on. *Detect.*"

Malfoy stared at him for a long beat, looking decidedly wrong-footed by the challenge, as Harry had suspected he would.

But then he threw Harry entirely as his lips curled into a wry smile and he released a harsh, derisive snort of laughter and slumped to the ground, drawing his knees up to his chest and resting his head against them. He idly picked at a clump of weeds, not entirely unlike the peacock still stalking about nearby. "Well that's fucking fantastic."

He hadn't tried to make it sound anything but bitterly sarcastic, and Harry frowned. "That's all you've got to say for yourself?"

Malfoy ripped out a weed, studying the roots before tossing it aside. "What, I'm to deliver the eulogy then, am I?"

“An *explanation* wouldn’t be remiss: like why you would do something so stupid—something you had to have known would at the very least get *you* in trouble and at worst...” At worst would have gotten someone killed. The two, it seemed, were not mutually exclusive, because Malfoy was in some deep shit, and he had to realise this. “Gonna fess up now? Or shall I fuck off, as you so kindly suggested?”

“That presupposes you’d actually do it this time.”

“Fifth time’s the charm.” Harry hardened his gaze, well past tired of this back-and-forth but wanting to give Malfoy every chance he didn’t deserve to save himself. Harry wasn’t going to leave here with any regrets. “Tell me why you did it.”

He spoke slowly and deliberately, but he tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible. They both of them had tempers, and it was exhausting sniping as they were.

Malfoy didn’t glance away this time, and his shoulders rose and fell in a visible rhythm as he took deep breaths. “...I could lie to you. Give you any reason I thought might suit and you’d swallow it.”

“You could try. But I think I’d know—just like you’d know if I lied. I think you can’t lie to me in here. Not without a tell.” The peacock straightened, fixing its beady eyes on Harry, then returned to its urgent task of stalking a big black beetle. “So I say either embarrass yourself—you’re pretty good at that, and I do enjoy the sight—or show some stones for once.” Harry made a face of irritation. “You can’t seriously think yours is a cause worth defending anyway.”

That was, evidently, a very wrong thing to say, for Malfoy was on his feet in an instant, cheeks colouring in anger. “My cause? My *cau*—” The peacock abandoned its hunt and ruffled its feathers, hissing in warning as Malfoy rounded on Harry. “Think I get all maudlin in toilets for *fun*, do you? I’m bored, so just unleash the waterworks? Is that why you barged in and *sliced me to ribbons*? ‘Cause I was just doing it for dramatic effect?”

It was Harry’s turn to feel wrong-footed, but he felt compelled to defend himself. “It

wouldn't be the first time you'd done that sort of thing..."

"You—fucking *prick*. Can't you entertain the *idea* that maybe not everyone's priorities align precisely with your own?"

Harry rallied, Malfoy's anger fuelling his own. "When your priorities involve the extermination of innocent people, then yeah, I tend to go a bit myopic!" The high would only last a moment, and then they'd both feel more exhausted by the argument than before, but that was for future Harry to deal with.

"Then Scourgify those specs on your face and look around for once!" Malfoy practically screeched, ears and neck flushed red and breathing hard. The peacock bustled over, pacing with worrying warbles at his feet. Malfoy took a bracing breath and released it slowly, gritting his teeth. "...He has my *parents*. It might not seem like a big deal to *you*, seeing as yours bit it ages ago, but I'm rather fond of mine."

Harry blinked a few times in quick succession, trying to parse Malfoy's words and failing. "But—I mean, your dad's a Death Eater. And your mum as well, I assumed. What d'you mean he's 'got them'?" There was no mistaking who *he* was, so Harry didn't bother.

"She's *not*, as if it's any of your business," Malfoy sniffed, lip curling, then took another of those bracing breaths. He looked like he could use a stiff drink on top of it. "And you think the Dark Lord never kills his own servants? Especially when they've disappointed him as many times as my father?"

"And..." Harry tried to connect the pieces, knowing Hermione would have done so easily. Ron too, probably; he was good at working out puzzles of strategy. "He's using them to... what, get to you? Force you to do something?" He was baffled as to why on earth Voldemort would bother with Draco Malfoy of all people.

"No, you utter *bellend*, he's using *me* to get to *them*. As punishment." He spoke slowly, as if to a small child. "He doesn't give two fucks about me, beyond knowing he can use me to hurt them." He shoved his hands into his pockets, tipping his head back. "He gave me an impossible mission. One he knew I'd fail—which was the point."

Harry couldn't help himself, practically licking his lips. "...What was the mission?"

This time, Malfoy didn't sneer or snarl that it was none of Harry's business. Maybe he was just as tired of this as Harry was. He did laugh, though—a tired, dry little thing—and dropped into a squat to stroke the peacock's crown, scratching it under its chin as it closed its eyes in bliss.

"To kill Albus Dumbledore."

Harry felt his stomach bottom out, an empty, gaping hole replacing it in his abdomen. He tried to swallow, but he couldn't. No saliva. *You're lying* was ready on his lips, because it made no sense. No sense at all.

Malfoy saluted the cloudy sky. "Joke's on him, I suppose, seeing as I evidently succeeded without even properly trying."

His wording hit Harry like a punch to the gut: he'd been right again. It *had* been Malfoy behind those attacks on students. Katie Bell, strung up and lashed around like a rag doll; Ron, fingers curled white-knuckled as he grabbed at his own throat, the life leaving his eyes while he struggled for breath.

Harry's stomach resituated itself in his gut, bringing with it a wave of nausea, and he bit out, "Your 'not even properly trying' nearly killed two people—one of them my best friend."

"Potter, I am so far from being willing or able to muster remorse for Weasley you can't possibly understand."

Harry had to practically bite through his own tongue to keep from firing back at that—Ron had almost *died*. *Would* have died without the Prince's notes. But to Malfoy, it was just a failed, half-arsed shot that had blown wild.

But Malfoy wouldn't apologise, and Harry didn't feel like going another round with him. He was, however, bound and determined to leave this plane with something to show for it beyond a headache. "So Voldemort wanted you, a sixteen-year-old kid, to try and kill

the greatest wizard alive?”

Malfoy flinched at the name, but still managed a haughty, “I’m almost seventeen, I’ll have you know.”

“And that being an impossible task, as you admit yourself, you thought you’d just...what, ignore him? Hope he just wouldn’t notice you hadn’t succeeded?” Harry wasn’t following the logic of Malfoy’s decisions at all—he’d known he was no match for Voldemort, it seemed, so what had Malfoy expected to be able to do against him? He could have memorised the entire Defence Against the Dark Arts catalogue and *still* wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in a duel—Animagecraft was impressive to have pulled off, even Harry could admit, but it seemed useless.

Malfoy straightened back up with an aggravated huff, gesticulating wildly. “He has my parents, Potter! How many times do I have to tell you that? Mother’s his literal prisoner, and Father may as well be! There’s no penetrating his defences, no sneaking them out or mounting rescue missions—not for a sixteen-going-on-seventeen-year-old, at least.” His arms dropped limp to his sides. “So I tried to give myself an edge.” It came out a bit defensive, bordering on petulant.

“...By becoming a dragon?”

Malfoy looked like he very much wanted to rip out every strand of his white-blond hair. “How you’ve managed to become McGonagall’s favourite without learning anything from her lectures is beyond me.” He pounded his chest. “I didn’t choose this form—it chose me! I just wanted something...dangerous. Something strong, something that could protect me—could protect *them*. It was my sole drive, my only thought and intent. Magic responds to pure, unadulterated emotions like that.”

Harry wondered—silently, because he didn’t have a death wish—if this ‘mate’ business and Malfoy’s dragon seeking him out was also part of the ‘pure, unadulterated emotions’ Malfoy spoke of, before deciding he’d rather not know.

So that was that. This—Malfoy’s attempt to give himself some weapon, any weapon with

which to rescue his parents from a madman—was what had caused such chaos and terror at Hogwarts this past year. Some distant, dark part of Harry thrummed with a superior glee that he'd been right: Malfoy *had* been up to something—something that involved a mission on his part from Voldemort with terrible consequences that none had been able to defend against.

Had Dumbledore known? Realised he was the target? He had to have, surely—as he had to have known just what Malfoy had been studying alongside his half-hearted attempts on Dumbledore's life.

But then why take the risk of confronting Malfoy in such a terribly dangerous form, knowing he might have taken it with the sole purpose to kill Dumbledore? Had he believed he could take down a dragon single-handedly—quite literally? Harry recalled Dumbledore's ruined hand, curled and paralytic with stiff, blackened skin. He'd gone out to face down Malfoy alongside the other staff, as Hermione and Ron had explained it, still dangerously weak from their failed mission. He'd gone, knowing he wasn't at full strength, knowing that Malfoy had been tasked with his destruction. He'd gone, and his final act had been to try and calm his murderer—because he'd foolishly only seen a student.

Something tightened in Harry's chest, and he felt heat form behind his eyes, a thick lump lodging in his throat. Grief beat against the inside of his chest, straining, but he shoved it back and down again. Not yet. Soon, but not yet. And definitely not with Malfoy watching.

“You really want to stay here?” Harry asked. Malfoy had his hands stuffed back into his pockets now, shoulders hunched and head turned away. That suited Harry fine; he didn't want to look at Malfoy just at the moment. “I'll leave you here, if that's what you really want—but only if it's what you really want. I doubt I'll be able to come here again, even if I had leave to, so if you're content with whatever half-life this is, or if you think you can manage to find your way back to sanity on your own, then good luck. But I've wasted enough time here.” He glanced up at the overcast sky, frowning. “I think, at least. Honestly, I'm not even sure how long I've been in here. But I've got...things to

take care of.”

He trailed off, a bit awkward. It felt like a ‘goodbye’, and Draco Malfoy was hardly topping the list of people Harry ought to be saying that sort of thing to.

The peacock began to pace again, delivering a few errant pecks to the brush before turning its sights once more upon Harry’s trailing laces. Malfoy watched it work, distracted. “Important Saviour business, is it?”

Harry took a few steps to the side, releasing an irritated huff when the peacock pursued. “Something like that.” He made a shooin motion, trying to wave the peacock off, but this only encouraged it to rush him, nearly causing Harry to trip over his own feet. He cursed under his breath and gave a weak kick, which finally made the bird give him some room. He brushed down his shirt, turning his words over inside his mind before speaking. “...He would have helped you, if you’d asked. If you’d just explained what was going on—that you were working for Voldemort under duress—instead of trying to handle it yourself, he would’ve made sure you and your parents were safe.”

“He couldn’t even save himself. I’m supposed to believe he could have saved a whole family?” Malfoy gave a practised sniff. “Malfoys take care of our own. Rely on others and you’re only setting yourself up for disappointment.”

“Spurn others and you’re only setting yourself up for failure.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “What rapier wit; you missed being sorted Ravenclaw.”

“I’d say you disappointed pretty damn well all on your own; I can’t imagine having help could have made the situation much worse.”

Malfoy’s jaw tensed. “I don’t need your help. I can handle this—I’ve gotten myself into this mess, as you say, and I’ll see myself out.”

Harry felt the last of his patience evaporate like the remaining dregs of water from a piping kettle, and he shook his head. “Right then. I’m fucking off, as requested.”

He turned on his heel, grinding his teeth down to dust, and started marching. He didn't know how he was meant to get out of here, but he'd figure it out once well away from Malfoy.

There came a rustling from behind, though, and when Malfoy spoke again, his voice carried a raspy tremor. "I don't need your help, Potter. But it—" Harry imagined he heard him swallow, steeling himself. "It...would probably be faster if you did—whatever it was you came here to do." Harry shifted, glancing over one shoulder, and Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. "Wholly unnecessary, I'm sure you understand. But expedient nonetheless."

Harry swallowed several choice words and exhaled sharply. "Of course. Never crossed my mind."

Malfoy nodded shortly. "All right. So?"

"So?"

"So—get me out!"

Oh, right. Well this was going to be an interesting conversation. "Er, I don't—I mean, that is, I wasn't given any *instructions* exactly as to..." Before he could mumble his way through an excuse that this wouldn't be as cut and dry an exercise as he might have intimated, Malfoy paled with rage.

"You—I *fucking* knew it—" He bit back what was likely a colourful diatribe, though, and turned in place to march back towards the boulder Harry had found him perched atop.

"Wai—Malfoy, I said I'd *help*. I never said I knew *exactly* how to get out! And you need me! Of that I'm pretty sure!"

"Oh you're *pretty sure*? Well that's comforting."

Harry broke into a jog, carefully sidestepping the peacock when it lunged for his trainers. "Why else would they send me in here? Snape wasn't happy about it—"

“That makes two of us.”

“—but Bragge said since I’m your ma—”

Malfoy rounded on him so quickly Harry stumbled backward, landing on his arse with a groan. “*Don’t* say that word.”

“I didn’t say it. Bragge did.” He didn’t like saying it any more than Malfoy evidently liked hearing it, but it was a sacrifice Harry was willing to make just to see that expression on the prick’s face.

“Then don’t *repeat it*, either.” Harry now chalked Malfoy’s pallor up to dyspepsia rather than rage. “And who the fuck is Bragge?”

Harry shrugged, holding out his hands for help up. “Some Ministry bloke on the Dragon Destroying Committee or whatever.”

“On the *what?!?*” Malfoy practically shrieked, flinching.

“He finds you fascinating, he said. Help me up.”

Malfoy grimaced, taking a step back out of spite. “I’m not your nursemaid—help yourself up.”

“I thought Purebloods were supposed to be all about good manners and whatnot. Why’re you such a knob?”

“Tell me why *you* are and then maybe we’ll find out.”

God, what a childish little shit. “Is that why you went after me, then? Birds of a feather and all? You know, as a *mate*—”

Malfoy lunged for him, the peacock flaring in concert with outraged squawks, and Harry instinctively brought his arms up to protect his face—

And came awake with a start, breathing heavily.

Above him, an iron chandelier burning brightly with candles rotated slowly on its chain, and the chemical stench of potions brewing hung heavy in the air. He shifted upright and winced as pain lanced through his head. Blessedly, it was not the red-hot poker that heralded a fit of pique by Voldemort but only a bog-standard rush of blood from moving too quickly after having been laid out for a spell.

“Welcome back, my boy!” Bragge said, bustling over with a mug of what Harry feared was another potion of indeterminate effect but turned out to be only a very strong tea. “Fine work, I must say. Very fine, indeed!”

“I...huh?”

“Disorientated are we? That’s to be expected after the ordeal you’ve just been through. But Severus assures us that will wear off very soon, after which you’ll be right as rain once more!” He drew a clipboard from his robe and snapped his fingers to Summon a quill.

Harry made a face at the name. “Snape’s still—?”

Bragge scribbled something on the clipboard and nodded to another corner of what Harry realised was the containment cell. However long he’d been out, they hadn’t bothered to move him anywhere more hospitable. “Impressive handiwork. We’ll want to debrief you shortly, to get an accounting of how on earth you managed it.”

‘It’ was evidently Draco Malfoy, back once more in his gangly, pasty-faced human body. He lay passed out on the flagstones, curled into a foetal position with a blanket thrown over him to hide his modesty, as he seemed to be very naked. Snape lurked at Malfoy’s side, snapping instructions to a pair of burly orderlies while he fussed with his potions kit.

“Is he—erm, well is he gonna be all right?” Harry asked when the orderlies arranged themselves around Malfoy to haul him up, limbs hanging limp and blanket brushing the ground. His left arm flopped free as he was dragged from the room through a side door, Snape trailing behind in a flourish of black robes, and Harry caught the flash of a dark

bruise on Malfoy's forearm just before he was whisked away. Though it had probably not been a bruise at all, he mentally corrected.

"Hm?" Bragge looked up from the clipboard, following Harry's eye. "Oh yes, yes. Severus has him heavily sedated at the moment, but he'll be roused for questioning once the DMLE is prepared for their interrogation."

"Interrogation?" Bragge only nodded, declining to elaborate. "But—what'll happen to him?"

"I expect he'll be interrogated," Bragge said, teasing, though Harry didn't miss the warning tone woven through it. He'd heard similar from Dumbledore and other Order members in the past, and he wondered what sort of business Bragge got up to in his off hours.

"I know, but *after* that—" Harry licked his lips, urgency overtaking him. "Is Kingsley still about? I need to talk to him, to discuss—some things." Malfoy's confessions screamed like klaxons in Harry's ears, though he didn't have the faintest idea what to *do* with them. Malfoy would need to be guarded for his own good, something Harry didn't doubt he'd fight—and his parents too. Lucius Malfoy was still in Azkaban and therefore more or less safe, but what of Malfoy's mother? Was she under active threat? And the Order needed to know that Voldemort's reach had now found its way inside of Hogwarts. Just because Malfoy had been sent on a suicide mission didn't mean other students hadn't been charged with executing similar plots more likely to succeed. Was anyone checking McGonagall's owls or tasting her food?

'Fuck off; it's none of your concern,' a voice in his head chided, sounding disturbingly like Malfoy. The voice was right, though: this was Kingsley's job, and Harry ought to leave him to it. He had his own mission that required his full attention now, after all, and it definitely didn't involve Malfoy.

"I'm afraid he had to step out for a moment, but he'll be back shortly, as he seemed to think you'd feel more comfortable being debriefed by a friendly face?" Bragge raised his brows, and Harry nodded mutely. "Excellent. Shall I top you off?" Bragge gestured to

Harry's cup. "I'll fetch you a fresh cup while I see where Kingsley's gotten off to."

Tea cup in hand, Bragge toddled through the same door through which had just vanished Snape and the orderlies, bearing Malfoy away to an uncertain fate.

It was quiet in the cell now—and empty, without the dragon's bulk filling it. Harry felt rather small and almost missed the desolate moor of Malfoy's mind. At least it'd been fresh air, or seemed it.

'Fuck off; it's none of your concern,' the voice said again, louder this time and in that slow, irritating drawl of Malfoy's—an auditory sneer.

Malfoy was Kingsley's and the DMLE's problem now; Harry had far graver issues to deal with than the consequences facing a would-have-been Death Eater. The appropriate Ministry parties would see to Malfoy's dispensation and handle whatever mischief he'd been up to—and Harry?

Harry had a funeral to prepare for.

An Impossibly Cheery Day

It was an impossibly cheery day for a funeral.

The sky, absent so much as the blemish of a cloud wisp, yawned as a great, bright blue chasm overhead, and sunlight blanketed the whole of the school grounds, glinting off the lake and dappling the ground where the odd arching tree offered shade. It was a glorious early summer morning, still cool enough that Harry wasn't sweltering in his suit jacket.

He stood atop a grassy knoll a stone's throw from the lakeside, shading his eyes with his hand and frowning up at Gryffindor Tower. The structure had been cordoned off with some sort of barrier spell to keep it from collapsing in on itself or dropping debris on unsuspecting passersby, but the destruction was clear for all to see. The steep-pitched roof had caved in entirely, and the stonework here and there was scored with deep gashes that Harry supposed must be claw marks. The topmost few stories of the tower—including the sixth- and seventh-year dormitories—were listing at a precarious angle, and Harry suspected the structure was only still upright thanks to some hefty Charm work.

The vicinity stank of ruined spells, the delicate enchantments laced through the mortar having been destroyed in Malfoy's desperate flailing. Clearly there was no salvaging it; the tower would likely need to be demolished and then rebuilt from the ground up, brick by brick, before any students could call it home once more.

"Mad, isn't it?" Ron said, rubbing his neck. "We were just sleeping there a week ago. They haven't even finished digging through it all—pretty sure my autographed Cannons poster is still in there somewhere." He frowned. "Malfoy'll get a whole swarm of Howlers from me if it's been damaged."

Hermione swatted him with the handbag she'd had tucked under one arm. "I hardly think we ought to be concerned with knick-knacks and keepsakes that might have been

lost. That's real history there, lying in ruin." She sighed, staring up at the crumpled shell of the tower. "I had half the Library's collection of old N.E.W.T. papers in my desk drawer. I'd been meaning to copy them to use as study materials, in case they've repeated any questions over the years..."

Harry allowed a small, tight smile—this was kind of nice. A bit of normalcy, just the three of them, to enjoy in these final moments before they parted ways with Hogwarts—likely for good. He could imagine there was nothing special about today, that they'd just finished breakfast and Hermione was trying to organise a group study session while Harry and Ron were concocting plans to skive off and play some pickup Quidditch.

He dipped a hand into his pocket, fingers brushing over the gilded edges and chain of the fake locket. He'd taken to carrying it around with him; it grounded him, reminding him he had a mission, that he couldn't afford to waste any time or give the matter anything less than his full attention. To do so might risk others going the way of Dumbledore, and he doubted he'd be able to pin the blame on Malfoy next time.

Hermione seemed of a similar mindset, already hard at work digging into the more urgent of the mysteries yet to be resolved: who exactly 'R.A.B.' had been, and what they might have done with the real locket. But between the Hogwarts stacks and back issues of the *Daily Prophet* and even a brief visit to the Ministry's public archives, she'd come up empty. Indeed, her only finding of note had simply served to make Harry feel even worse than he already did: the revelation that a former Hogwarts student by the name of Eileen Prince had married a Muggle man with the surname Snape and given birth to a son who would have been...a half-blood Prince.

It had been a bitter pill to swallow, realising that this figure Harry had come to consider something of a friend-across-time, a clever, quick-witted wizard without whose help Harry might not have survived his sixth year, was probably second only to Voldemort as the person Harry hated most. Even Malfoy hadn't made Harry's years at Hogwarts half as horrible as Snape had (though not for lack of trying, to be sure).

He half-wished he'd left the Prince's book in his dormitory, instead of chucking it; with

any luck, it might have wound up incinerated by dragonfire.

From up at the castle, a bell tolled the hour—the service would be starting soon. Harry took a long breath, releasing it slowly, and Ron clapped him on one shoulder, inclining his head to suggest they find their seats.

Rows of empty folding chairs spread out behind them, waiting to receive funeral guests, and at the head of it all, before a modest pulpit, stood a white marble table, shot through with streaks of silver and grey.

He'd heard there'd been some controversy over where Dumbledore would rest—in his family's plot, or in a London-based memorial garden, or even a Ministry-owned mausoleum reserved for those who'd rendered special services to the wizarding community and merited a stately burial. But as it was generally agreed upon that Dumbledore had been the best thing to ever happen to Hogwarts, and that he'd given the very last measure of himself to save the school and its students, the decision had been made that he would lie there forever as a monument for generations to come.

It sounded lovely; Harry doubted he'd ever visit, even after all this was over.

As the tolling of the bell died away, mourners began to filter down from the castle to take their places for the service.

While classes had formally ended some days ago, after the attack, most of the students had yet to depart, staying on through the weekend to attend the funeral. Some had been hurried away by their parents, worried that the school was no longer safe with Dumbledore gone and the students attacked under his watch—like the Patil twins, and Zacharias Smith, whose hoity-toity father had evidently blustered something about sending Smith off to study abroad for his final year if the school and Board of Governors didn't address the 'incident' to the man's satisfaction.

Others, though, had stood their ground, like Seamus, who had stayed behind against his mother's wishes (and on the heels of a rather loud row that it sounded like the whole school had turned out to watch).

In stark contrast to the usual fanfare of the last day of the school year, today was a bleak, subdued affair. Trunks lay stacked in the front foyer, waiting to be loaded onto the Hogwarts Express after the funeral, and students milled about in sombre dress robes, looking as if they didn't know what to do with themselves. The younger ones looked lost, most not quite grasping the gaping hole Dumbledore's absence would have on the school going forward; the older ones were simply trying to hold themselves together, huddled in quiet conversation.

Divisions ran along House lines as well, with the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs offering the now House-less Gryffindor students shoulders to lean on for support and ears to catch their worries while the Slytherins kept mostly to themselves. Perhaps they felt keenly the truth that one of their own had been responsible for the death of their Headmaster; Harry couldn't muster much sympathy these days, having wasted the bulk of it on Malfoy himself.

Crabbe and Goyle looked strangely lost without their handler around, lurking off to the side and darting worried looks at any who drew too close. Harry wondered if Kingsley had thought to question them; they had to have known about Malfoy's mission, after all. Or at least suspected.

It had been several days now since the whole mess at the Ministry, and locked in his bedroom at the Dursleys', Harry hadn't heard a word about Malfoy's whereabouts nor seen anything in the papers. During his debriefing, Kingsley had seemed more interested in asking Harry about his experience than in fielding questions of Harry's own, especially when it came to what would become of Malfoy now that he'd managed to transform back. He'd thought the Ministry might want to boast about having caught a Death Eater, as the *Prophet* seemed to print nothing but bad news about dire happenings and disturbing events that served only to fuel public unrest. Had he been released after all, receiving a lighter sentence due to his being underage? Or perhaps they'd offered him a deal to go turncoat. Malfoy had seemed desperate enough inside his mind; it wasn't impossible.

It was more than just Hogwarts staff and students here for the service, though. Witches

and wizards of all sorts were pouring in from locations far and wide via Hogsmeade—had been all morning. Even Madame Maxime was here, having arrived in her powder-blue carriage hauled by a team of Abraxans.

Hermione inclined her head, suggesting they take their seats. The rows were quickly filling, now, and Harry let his gaze wander.

He caught sight of several Order members here and there—Moody, Tonks alongside a beleaguered Lupin, and the Weasleys, including Percy for once. Kingsley was here as well, to Harry's surprise, hovering near the back keeping watch as guests trickled in around him. Harry tamped down the urge to push his way through the crowd to ask him what had become of Malfoy in the end; now was hardly the time to satisfy his grim curiosity.

Drawing up alongside Kingsley was Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister for Magic—and Harry's lip curled in sour disgust. Perhaps he'd hoped to once again corner Harry for a chat, thinking him vulnerable. Well let him try; he'd find out the hard way Harry had a very particular style of mourning. Unbidden, an image of a white peacock flaring its wings and chasing Scrimgeour into the open arms of the Whomping Willow came to mind, and he hid an inappropriate grin behind a cough.

Other assorted denizens of Diagon Alley Harry had a passing familiarity with were there, but a great many were total strangers, and not all of them looked like Very Important People, a testament to the many varied circles in which Dumbledore had walked.

To his displeasure, Fudge was there as well, and to his even *greater* displeasure, so was Rita Skeeter, clinging close to Fudge's side and clutching a notebook and acid-green quill as she hungrily took in the other guests milling about. Harry was going to have a fit if he read some hit-job on Dumbledore in the next morning's edition of the *Prophet*, really he was, and she was gonna *wish* Hermione had turned her in for being an unregistered Animagus.

Of course there was every chance she was here to do a piece on the destruction of Gryffindor Tower—and the person responsible—which would've been the height of

hypocrisy and thus right up Skeeter's alley.

Harry would have gladly welcomed both of these interlopers with a hearty handshake and warm embrace, though, if it had meant Dolores Umbridge wouldn't show her toad-like face at the service—but there she was, crocodile tears already rolling down her overly-rosy cheeks with a huge black velvet bow pinned to an atrocious hat blocking the view of those unfortunate enough to be seated behind her. She blew loudly into a lace handkerchief, trading quiet words with the guests around her that Harry was very glad he wasn't near enough to catch, lest he be tempted to Banish her on the spot.

Harry was starting to rethink his hierarchy of most-hated people; Malfoy might not even crack the top ten with this lot.

The final guests moved to quickly take their seats as an unnatural hush fell over the crowd. The wind off the lake picked up, and the tree boughs overlooking the service swayed in the breeze. It really was a beautiful day. Too beautiful for this. It made it all the more impossible to accept the reality of the situation. Maybe if it'd been overcast and dreary, the sky opening up and releasing its sorrow in time with the tears of the mourners, Harry might have felt it, it might have hit him, but as it was, it just felt so...off. So unbelievable. Dumbledore didn't get killed by stupid, cowardly students wielding magics they couldn't quite understand—he got killed by *Grindelwald*, he got killed maybe by *Voldemort*. He got killed by the ravages of old age from which even *he* couldn't escape. But this? This was pomp and regality and quiet, and it didn't fit. It didn't make a lick of sense.

At his side, Hermione gave a soft little moan, thick with sorrow, and placed a hand on Harry's arm. He followed her gaze, and his heart clenched quite without his permission.

Shuffling down the aisle parting the sea of guests in a moth-eaten overcoat came Hagrid, blubbering tears streaming down his cheeks and nose red as he sniffled with each intaken breath. He held something in his arms, wrapped carefully in a velvet throw of deep violet that shimmered in the sunlight with inlaid golden stars. With a sick jolt, Harry realised that Hagrid had been named pallbearer, and this was Dumbledore's body.

The warmth of the sun and the sweet scents carried on the breeze seemed to slip away with the dawning horror that death was so near at hand and in so very dear a form. He could stand up and take three steps and *touch it*. Dumbledore's cold, dead body, limp and lifeless in Hagrid's arms.

Ron at his left was ashen, looking like he was just on the verge of bolting or being sick or both, and Hermione at his right wept openly, tears plopping into her lap and soaking her clutch. Harry turned his gaze ahead, focusing resolutely on the pulpit, and fought against the rising tide of emotion threatening to overwhelm him from within.

No. There was a bright blue sky above, the Great Lake was reflecting the sunlight in glinting sparkles, and this wasn't happening.

Hagrid carefully laid the body on the marble table, gently rearranging the limbs in quiet repose before turning to reclaim his seat. He blew loudly into a handkerchief as he plodded back down the aisle, earning not a few rude looks. Harry half-considered hexing the offending parties, temper mounting with each passing second, but the thought of Dumbledore's disapproval from beyond the veil stayed his hand. He could try not being *entirely* a Gryffindor and behave himself just for this afternoon. He really could.

The eulogy, delivered in a dry, meandering monotone by a wizard Harry didn't recognise, was perfectly nice and perfectly bland, reeking of Ministry protocol. It was certainly not the sort of eulogy Dumbledore would have written for himself—it even paled in comparison to the silly speeches he'd given in the Great Hall at term start over the years. Dumbledore had never cared for tradition or what was appropriate. He lived in the moment, unapologetically, and said whatever curious things came to mind without filter. He was a lot like Luna in that respect, and Harry reckoned he might have liked to have been a fly on the wall during a conversation between *those* two, just to see.

The thought brought a small, wan smile to Harry's lips—that was quickly dashed by the sudden overwhelming reminder of that dreadful truth: that he'd never hear any of those odd Dumbledoreisms again, would never be able to turn to him for advice that would be too cryptic by half, would never hear him say *My boy* in that fond, grandfatherly tone

that both comforted and frustrated.

He was dead. Dead and *gone*. Not in a blaze of glory as he deserved, but in the stupidest—silliest, really—way possible.

Harry supposed he ought to hate Draco Malfoy for this. For robbing not just the wizarding world of its best defence against Voldemort but Harry, personally, of yet another loved one. Surely Ron hated him—had hated Malfoy long before he'd ever begun dabbling in Animagework—and Hermione probably at least resented him, deep down.

But Harry mostly just felt empty. Sapped. Unresponsive—drained by the unfairness of it all. *Another* loss, another in far too long a line of them, and they just kept coming and coming and *coming*, and he was so fucking tired of this. Of loving people and then losing them.

“Rely on others and you’re setting yourself up for disappointment.”

It wasn't the same thing as Malfoy had meant—but it wasn't entirely different either. He was supposed to be stronger for his support system, but he somehow always only felt weaker for it. Voldemort wasn't choking back graceless sobs because he'd lost another mentor; Malfoy wasn't rending his garments because he had the weight of the wizarding world on his shoulders.

But then, this whole thing was Malfoy's fault in the first place, brought about because he'd loved his parents too fiercely and been too stubborn to ask for help, so Harry supposed that perhaps he shouldn't be so quick to heed the git's advice.

Ron brought a hand up, squeezing Harry's shoulder, and Hermione knocked one of her knees against his, inclining her head as if to say *Don't think we don't know what you're thinking, Harry James Potter*.

A sudden cry went up, interrupting his dark thoughts, and a wave of gasps rippled across the crowd as the marble slab upon which Dumbledore's body had been lain exploded in a blinding flash—and when the smoke dissipated, all that was left behind was a stately

white tomb, imposing for all its simplicity.

The eulogy had ended, the body had been laid to rest, and that—evidently—was that. Whatever spell of silence had lain across the crowd broke, and a soft din settled as the guests began to gather their belongings to take their leave. Harry sat there for a full minute, watching with quiet horror as everyone filtered back out the way they'd come. It baffled him that such a great man could be mourned and dismissed so quickly. As if they were all supposed to go about their business now.

But maybe that was what happened when you got felled by a fucking child in a mad accident. Of course there were no great speeches about his *bravery* and *astounding intellect* and *power we can only hope to aspire to* when hardly anyone had ever gotten to see it.

Hermione begged a moment to collect herself, and when Ron seemed to miss the obvious suggestion she wanted to be *alone* for that moment, Harry took him by the elbow and suggested they go say their hellos to Lupin and Tonks.

Before they made it to the other side of the aisle, though, Harry caught sight of Kingsley once more—this time in quiet conversation with McGonagall, who had traded her usual pointed, wide-brim hat for a staid birdcage veil with a sprig of Lily of the Valley behind one ear. Recalling his earlier curiosity, he grappled with the decision to confront Kingsley about Malfoy. The funeral was over; if everyone else was moving on to other matters, surely Harry ought to as well.

He was relieved of the choice when he found himself waylaid by Scrimgeour before he could take three steps, and perhaps thinking Harry might bolt otherwise, the Minister placed a hand on his shoulder and gave a tight, bracing squeeze, guiding him away from Ron. “Harry. I’ve been hoping to get a word with you—would you spare me a moment? I promise I won’t keep you long.”

Harry tried to peek around Scrimgeour—but Kingsley had slipped away, and now McGonagall was speaking with Madam Rosmerta. Perhaps about the plunging neckline she’d chosen in her funeral attire. His irritation piqued again, and he shrugged

Scrimgeour away roughly. “I don’t think we’ve really got any words to trade, Minister—”

Scrimgeour seemed to realise niceties would get him nowhere with Harry just now and cut in, tone much curter than only a moment ago, “It’s no great secret you were close with Dumbledore. Closer than most any other student in your time.”

Harry regarded him coolly. “And?”

“...I’ve heard that you travelled with him on an errand off school grounds the night that he died.”

“Have you, then?” Kingsley, of course. Naturally the Minister would have been privy to any details of an ongoing DMLE investigation, and Harry silently cursed himself for assuming Kingsley would place his duty as a member of the Order over that as an Auror.

Scrimgeour dropped his voice and stepped closer, and Harry imagined that the voices around them grew dim and distant, as if they’d just slipped behind a privacy spell. “The Ministry would be ever so interested in knowing just what events preceded Albus Dumbledore’s death. An Animagus transformation gone awry?” Scrimgeour gave a crooked smile. “Seems rather far-fetched something like *that* could strike down Dumbledore at his peak.”

“Where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business and no one else’s. If he’d wanted you to know, I’m sure he would have done so, Sir.”

Scrimgeour gave a rough, derisive little chuckle. “The man’s gone now, Harry. You don’t need to toe his line any longer.”

Harry only firmed his jaw, mentally digging his heels in even deeper—the gall, to speak like this when Dumbledore wasn’t even cold in the metaphorical ground. “I’ve got nothing to discuss with you.”

“I think you have, Harry,” Scrimgeour said, giving him a meaningful look. “We discussed this before—you’re still a prominent figure in the wizarding community, and if you wouldn’t mind speaking perhaps to Miss Skeeter, giving a few words to boost public

morale and remind everyone that despite the passing of so great a figure, the Ministry still holds fast, will still keep them safe, is doing its level best to—”

“Level best to *what*? How exactly *are* you keeping the people safe, Minister? What exactly should I be telling the public you’re up to?” Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “I heard you rounded up Stan Shunpike—is the wizarding world safer now that the bloke from the Knight Bus is behind bars? And what’s become of Draco Malfoy? I reckon that’s a high-profile case everyone would like to see brought to a just—and public—close. Do I need to sort him out again?”

Scrimgeour flushed, sputtering protests as Harry unleashed on him in a rising volume that was likely drawing the attention of the other guests still milling about—but he was beyond caring. He no longer had anyone reining him in, reminding him he needed to play nicely with these Ministry sorts or else they might meddle in Hogwarts’ affairs. Well Hogwarts’ greatest defender was gone now, and Harry wasn’t long for this place either himself.

“No, Minister, I’m sorry, but I think you won’t be able to rely on my cooperation in the coming months. So take your well wishes, and shove them up your—”

“Harry!” Hermione called, waving a hand at him as she and Ron jogged over.

Scrimgeour threw a dirty look over his shoulder at them, lips tightening with fury, then turned back to Harry, shaking a finger in his face. “We’ll speak again, Potter.”

“You can try, Minister. I don’t know that I’ll be readily available, but by all means.”

Scrimgeour gave him a long, dark glower, before turning to shove his way through Ron and Hermione, stalking away to rejoin the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting to depart.

Ron and Hermione held back just long enough to allow Scrimgeour to get out of earshot before crowding around Harry protectively.

“What did he want?” Hermione whispered, silently running her eyes over his body,

perhaps fearing he'd been physically assaulted.

Harry continued to watch Scrimgeour until he was well out of sight. "What do you think? Same as at Christmas. He's convinced I'm gonna spill about what Dumbledore had been up to the night he died—well he can wait 'til the sun burns out, I'm not budging."

"They're not *still* on about that, are they?" Ron hissed, joining Harry in glaring at the gaggle of Ministry officials. "Haven't they got more important things to worry about these days? There's real, scary shit popping off left and right and they're gonna tug at *this* thread?"

"When have you ever known the Ministry to focus on the 'real, scary shit' going on in the world when they've got a perfectly good scapegoat they can harass instead?" Hermione raised her brows, and Ron seemed to mull this over, giving a reluctant nod.

Hermione turned and glanced back at the ruin of Gryffindor Tower again. She crossed her arms, sighing. "I can't stop looking at it."

"It's like a car wreck," Harry said. "The eye can't help but be drawn to the carnage."

"You two are a barrel of laughs; remind me to invite you to the next funeral," Ron muttered. "But—I heard they're recruiting volunteers to help out with the rebuilding over the summer." He glanced between them. "Maybe we could pitch in?"

It was tempting—it really was. Physical labour under the blazing sun, pouring his blood and sweat into seeing the Tower restored to its former glory with his own two hands (and his wand when necessary). No Dursleys, no dragons, no Dark Lords...

But it was as much a dream, a figment of the imagination, as Malfoy's dreary moor, and Harry couldn't go there any more than he could dive back into Malfoy's mind.

"I'm not coming back after this," he said.

Ron openly gaped—but Hermione only gave a sad nod, her shoulders slumping. "I had a feeling you were going to say that."

“Had a feel—?!” Ron boggled. “Did I miss something?!” He turned on Harry, betrayed. “Whadyou mean you aren’t coming back? What’re you gonna be doing instead?”

He didn’t have one, honestly. Only a vague idea of places he wanted to visit, leads he wanted to chase down. “Back to the Dursleys first, I think—but only just a short while.” Dumbledore had seemed to think it was important Harry get all the protection out of the place he could, though he honestly didn’t see the use. But he’d obeyed Dumbledore unfailingly thus far. Why stop now?

“And then?” Ron asked. “Where are you gonna go if not back to school? You’re not of-age yet!”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve got a few places in mind—places I want to visit, just because. Places I feel like there might be Horcrux pieces hiding.” Anywhere but here, he didn’t say. Anywhere but where Dumbledore no longer was. “I mean, they’re still out there, somewhere. I’ve just gotta find them.” There were still four more hidden somewhere, lurking, waiting. And then there was the final bit inside Voldemort himself—now he thought about it, he *did* have a plan. A very simple one, a very cold one, but those were the best ones. No room for error. Just the doing. “I’m going to find them. And then I’m going to kill him.”

“Right, sounds perfectly simple,” Ron said, flatly. “You’re gonna find them, and then you’re gonna kill him.”

“I am.”

“No—you’re gonna,” Ron repeated, crossing his arms and frowning. “That’s what you said. *I’m going to.*’ Like you mean to do it alone.”

Harry released a breath in a slow, irritated sigh. “Look—I know you both mean well, I really do appreciate it—”

“Oh, isn’t that lovely, Hermione?” Ron turned to her with a toothy, mirthless grin. “He appreciates us! What a guy, our Harry.”

Hermione wasn't bothering with pretence. "Harry, we've been over this *before*—"

"But clearly we're going to have to go over it again," Ron cut in, dropping his grin.

The barbs cut deeper than Harry had thought they would, in large part because he knew how it seemed. Like he was having second thoughts—like he didn't think they could handle it.

He knew they could—they were the bravest people he'd ever met, the strongest, most loyal pair of friends a man could ask for. But having just sat through one funeral service he'd not been prepared for, he knew he would never be able to stand for theirs. "I know what I said—but...just..." He shook his head. "This is mine, a mission meant for me. So it ought to *be* me—no one else needs to get involved."

Hermione reached to settle a hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing none too gently. "You said to us once before...that there was time to turn back if we wanted to." She looked to Ron, who nodded, then back to Harry. "We've had time, haven't we?"

"Plenty of it," Ron said. "Dumbledore told you about these things because he means you to destroy them—yeah, I'll give you that. But he also told you to loop us in. I don't think he meant you to do so just so we'd have something to laugh about over breakfast the next morning."

No, Harry didn't think so either; but this mission had already killed one person Harry had loved. He didn't know if he could stomach losing any others. "I—I can't ask you to—"

"Who's asking?" Ron uncrossed his arms, shoulders slumping, and shoved his hands into the pockets of his shabby blazer. "We're telling you we're *going*."

"We're with you, whatever happens," Hermione added, and her eyes were shining again as she gave a short sniff.

Ron nodded. "Though if we're gonna go off hunting you-know-whats...we might wanna wait 'til after the to-do at the Burrow."

Harry glanced around, looking for Molly and Arthur, but they'd already made their way back to Hogsmeade, it seemed. "Why?"

Ron gave a short little laugh, like the answer was obvious. "Uh, Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember? They're planning to hold it before the next term starts—I think maybe Fleur's been offered a position of some sort at Hogwarts? I dunno the details. But we can't miss it, Harry—Mum and Dad would be gutted if you couldn't make it, and they'd *kill me* if I skipped out."

"Oh," Harry said, dumbly. It seemed absurd that anything as normal as a wedding could still be planned at a time like this. But then again, here they were, having a funeral on as beautiful a day as could be asked for. Nothing made sense these days. "No—yeah, you're right. We shouldn't miss that."

As a trio, they marched up the well-trod path back towards the castle, where carriages waited to cart guests down to Hogsmeade Station and respective Apparition and Floo points.

Against his better judgement, Harry had caved in the end, acquiescing to his friends' insistence. Maybe he was a coward, maybe he'd live to regret not putting up more of a fight. Maybe he'd still wind up slipping out behind Ron and Hermione's backs before they could make good on their vow to follow him to what could well be their collective doom.

Just at this moment, though, it was a comfort he could not describe, knowing he wasn't in this alone.

He slipped a hand into his pocket, gripping the fake Horcrux tight like a talisman—and he didn't glance back at the white tomb again.

Farewells, Fond and Otherwise

Never had a summer seemed so interminable. How was it time had seemed to fly by so much faster when Harry had had the delightful prospect of returning to Hogwarts awaiting him at season's end—versus now, when all that stretched before him was a forbidding morass of unknown and uncertainty? Wasn't it supposed to feel like the things you looked forward to would never arrive, and those you dreaded crept up before you noticed?

He could hear the Dursleys pattering about downstairs—hopefully packing, as they'd been instructed to do. He kept an ear out, alert for the heavy tread of Vernon's boot on the stair, bound to start up with Harry again—something they'd taken to doing on a daily basis in the past week or so. It wasn't as if it had been *Harry's* suggestion they seek refuge as his seventeenth birthday approached, after all—that had been the Order's doing. But the Order members didn't have to live under the Dursleys' roof, and so Harry received the brunt of their moaning and whinging as they dithered on, unsure as to whether or not they ought to actually believe they were in mortal danger once Harry came of age and the magic shielding the house broke.

Uncle Vernon still seemed convinced that this was merely a clever ploy on Harry's part to seize control of the house—as if he hadn't been left a mansion in Grimmauld Place by Sirius the year before. It had only been Harry's explanation, delivered with a smile and in graphic detail, of what would likely happen should Voldemort arrive and find the Dursleys still about when he came for Harry's head that had pushed them over. Uncle Vernon had finally set his family to packing what they could into a set of musty suitcases they hadn't used since a trip to Euro Disney several years back, all the while making sure to mutter (in tones just loud enough for Harry to catch) words like *solicitor* and *lawsuit* and *squatter*.

But he heard no sounds suggesting a small hippopotamus was tromping its way toward Harry, so he turned his attentions back to his task: he still had *loads* of packing of his

own left to do. His trunk was still half-full with the detritus of six years at a magical school, and he needed to sort through it all to decide what he was and wasn't taking Horcrux hunting.

He was frankly amazed to have gotten his trunk back at all—the last he'd seen it, it'd been shoved in a corner of his dorm room in Gryffindor Tower. Having seen the state of the Tower at Dumbledore's funeral, he didn't know how the trunk had been found in one piece, and yet remarkably, it showed relatively little wear—only dented in a few spots with the brass fittings scuffed and scraped.

He took a deep breath, bracing himself for this last push.

Those items he'd be leaving behind sat in a mound in the corner—likely to be burned by the Dursleys once they were well rid of him: his robes (Quidditch as well as school), unwieldy potions tools and supplies (Hermione would probably want to use her own anyway; Harry's cauldron had seen better days), parchment and quills and all of his schoolbooks (here again, Hermione had probably prepared a portable library or else had everything of import memorised).

It sat heavy on him, having to not just leave this stuff behind but likely never see it again. After all, this had been his *life*—the very best parts of it—for the past six years. He wouldn't shed a tear to say goodbye to Privet Drive, certainly, but even the most seemingly insignificant piece of his time at Hogwarts held a special place in Harry's heart.

But he couldn't take these things with him, nor had he the time to try and consign them to storage. He would only be bringing along the bare necessities, as Hermione anticipated living rough and needing to move often. In a rucksack, stuffed to the gills, he'd packed Muggle clothing, his Invisibility Cloak, a portable potions-making kit, the photo album Hagrid had gifted him years back, and his wand and the Marauder's Map. The fake Horcrux sat in his pocket, never off his person.

Beneath the window, collecting dust and in want of reading, was a stack of *Daily Prophets* he'd had delivered—the subscription his only link to the wizarding world during the doldrums of summer. It had been difficult, skimming the headlines of each

issue and knowing there wasn't a damn thing he could do to prevent or even address the horrors splashed across the front pages. He knew Dumbledore had wanted him to enjoy this special protection the Dursleys' home offered him for as long as possible, but he was certain he could have handled it better if he could have been preparing for Horcrux hunting in the open, instead of sitting here cooped up in his room, avoiding his relatives.

Still, the article by Elphias Doge had been nice, in the wake of Dumbledore's passing.

He leafed through the issues until he found the one in question and ran a finger over the border of the picture accompanying the obituary. It looked like it had been taken fairly recently, for Dumbledore appeared exactly as Harry remembered him, though for all he knew it could have been taken fifty years earlier. Dumbledore seemed immortal in Harry's memory—even if he clearly hadn't been.

Doge had been kind in his words, but the article spoke of Dumbledore not as Harry had known him—the wizened Headmaster with a peculiar fondness for sweets—but as a boy, and then a man. A human being with faults and foibles.

It had underscored, in bold lines, that Harry hadn't known Dumbledore at all. It was a fact he was only beginning to come to terms with, and quite against his will.

In the picture accompanying the article, greyscale Dumbledore peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles with his familiar, kindly smile that somehow seemed to see right through Harry. Well, that made one of them.

Harry gently tore the obituary from of its page, folding it carefully and tucking it into the folds of the Marauder's Map. He then threw the rest of the papers onto the growing rubbish pile and turned to face the room. The trunk was empty of all he couldn't bear to part with. Let the Dursleys chuck it out on the kerb if they liked.

He turned back to make a final sweep of the room; all that remained unaddressed was today's issue of the *Prophet*, waiting on his bed where the delivery owl had dropped it.

Settling onto the edge of the mattress, Harry picked up the newspaper, running his eyes

over the headlines. In his rush to finish his packing, he hadn't had a chance to really sit down and leaf through it, but he found his eye drawn to a bold headline at the bottom half of the front page, set over a picture of Dumbledore wearing an uncharacteristic frown as he glowered at the photographer and seemed to hold one hand up, waving them away: *DUMBLEDORE – THE TRUTH AT LAST?*

“Be sure not to miss the latest revealing tell-all from journalistic genius Rita Skeeter. Out next week is her newest book, jam-packed with lurid details concerning the late Albus Dumbledore, considered by many to be the greatest wizard of his generation but with a fair few skeletons hidden deep inside his closet. Read as Skeeter Vanishes the venerable veneer of the well-respected former Hogwarts Headmaster and digs into the disturbing details of his chaotic childhood, fraught by fractured family ties, and his decidedly less-than-law-abiding youth—along with the ne'er-do-wells with whom he consorted. Check out the Prophet-exclusive interview with our own Betty Braithwaite (page 13), where Miss Skeeter dishes on several particularly juicy nuggets uncovered in her insatiable quest for the unvarnished truth. Dumbledore allies, beware! You might get squeamish!”

Harry felt something pop inside his brain, and with a rising tide of fury fuelling him, he tore into the paper, scanning for the article. He quickly found it and began feverishly reading. His gorge rose with each line—utter tripe that could have been penned by Rita herself. Perhaps *had* been; maybe this Braithwaite was merely a pseudonym Rita used to make it seem like people actually read the shit she spewed.

In the article, she gushed about her vaunted reporting techniques, deriding Doge's thoughtful, moving obituary as rose-coloured and naïve and suggesting less than subtly that she had a trusted source who'd given her exclusive insight into the *real* Albus Dumbledore.

“But mark my words, Betty: anyone labouring under the delusion the dearly departed Dumbledore was the saint he played at being is in for a rude awakening! After all, saints don't dabble in the Dark Arts with one hand while

rallying the charge against the likes of Grindelwald and Voldemort with the other, do they? I don't want to divulge too many secrets before the book's even hit the stands, but let's just say the late and great one might have had more in common with those wizards he stood against than he let on! Dumbledore had a murky past indeed—not to mention a rather fishy family situation that he worked very hard to keep quiet.”

Harry slogged through as much of the drivel as he could stand, getting as far as Rita hinting at salacious details regarding “the Potter-Dumbledore relationship” before he chucked the newspaper at the wall, sending pages of print fluttering. His chest felt hot, his cheeks too, and his head throbbed with a rage headache.

This was just Rita Skeeter, notorious gossip who'd never met a wholesome biopic she didn't feel like she ought to drag through the mud. She was just trying to make a Knut off the backs of witches and wizards far greater than herself—it was lies, all of it. Certainly Dumbledore hadn't opened himself up completely to Harry, always the sort to play things close to the chest, even Doge had admitted, but some of these wild suggestions of Rita's were just beyond the pale—

“BOY! GET DOWN HERE!”

Harry gave a start at Uncle Vernon's blustered shout, and he huffed in irritation, glaring at the closed door. This was it, he supposed. With great effort, he eased off the bed and only just kept himself from *Incendioing* the remains of the newspaper and the tripe it tried to pass off as journalism; he could always use the pages to line Hedwig's cage.

“Don't make me come up—oh.”

Vernon shut right up when Harry appeared at the top of the steps, rucksack slung over one shoulder and affecting as disdainful an air as he possibly could. He'd only have the opportunity to take this attitude with his relatives for a short while longer; Harry intended to enjoy it while he could.

He began to trundle down the stairs, taking his time, then paused with two steps to go

and leaned on the banister. “Having *third* thoughts, now? I didn’t think you had that many stuffed inside your peabrain, but stranger things have happened.”

Vernon purpled in anger, and his ham-fists clenched at his sides as his moustache ruffled under the force of his heavy breathing, but he only ground out, “Some of *your* lot are here. Come deal with them.”

Harry perked up at this, eager to relieve whichever poor soul had been forced to make nice with Aunt Petunia and Dudley in the living room as quickly as possible. Rounding the corner, he was greeted by Hestia Jones, one of the younger Order members, and Dedalus Diggle, a squat little wizard wearing a purple top-hat that made up almost half of his height.

“Hestia, Dedalus—all right there?”

They nodded, and Dedalus squeaked, “Fantastic! We were having the loveliest conversation with your relatives!” Gauging Petunia’s and Dudley’s faces, Harry very much doubted the feeling was mutual. Dedalus nodded to Harry’s rucksack. “And all packed, I see! Well then in that case, there’s no sense dawdling any longer. Let’s get to it!” He turned back to Petunia and Dudley, with Vernon lurking like a vulture just behind the sofa upon which they were sat. “I’m sure Harry has explained the plan to you in great detail, but I’ll briefly go over it once more just to be sure we’re all on the same page. Now—” He slipped a hand into his waistcoat, tugging out a pocket watch the size of his own head and checking it with a frown. “Hestia and I will be your escort. With our Harry still being under-age, it’s far too dangerous to chance any spells under your roof, lest we give the Ministry leave to try and arrest the poor lad under false pretences—so we’ll ride in an autumnobile for a bit before Side-Alonging you all to a safe location of our choosing.” Here, he turned to Vernon, brows lifted hopefully as he asked, “I take it you’re familiar with the workings of an autumnobile, Mr. Dursley?”

“An—autumn*owhat*?”

“A car, Dad,” Dudley muttered, soft so as to avoid drawing the attention of their visitors.

“Well—of *course* I ruddy well know how to drive!” Vernon spluttered.

“Fantastic to hear! Hestia and I, we’d just be Confounded if pushed to navigating using such a contraption, but with you taking the lead, my good sir, we shall be in fine hands indeed!” Harry understood Dedalus’s fawning flattery to be just that—Vernon probably thought he was being patronised. Dedalus then turned to Harry, though, and said in an aside after clearing his throat softly, “...We’ll ask you to wait here, Harry. Your own escort will be along shortly.”

Harry frowned. “...But I thought that Mad—”

“There’s been a change of plans,” Dedalus said gravely—then offered Harry a reassuring look. “Not to worry—just the Order being overly cautious. Can’t be too careful these days, wouldn’t you say?”

“...No,” Harry said, nodding. “I suppose not.”

Dedalus gave a nod of his own, then snapped his oversized pocket watch shut, tucking it back into his waistcoat and hopping to his feet. “Right! Now, we’re on a very tight schedule—so are we all packed and ready to go?” He directed this question to the Dursleys, whose confidence in the plan seemed to be flagging by the second. “We’re trying to time everything so that the Charm breaks just at the moment you all head to safety. For that, we’ll need everyone moving in synchronisation—like clockwork!” He patted the pocket into which he’d slipped his watch.

As the family gathered their things, Hestia rose to her feet, wringing her hands with a knowing glance between the Dursleys and Harry. “Perhaps we should wait in the hall for a moment, Dedalus. Let them say a proper goodbye.”

Harry appreciated her tact, but it was wasted here, honestly. She probably thought there would be tears and loving embraces as they exchanged their farewells. Harry felt more inclined to flip them all the bird and send the trio off with pig tails sticking out of their backsides, just for old time’s sake.

Vernon shuffled forward, arms swinging awkwardly at his sides. He looked, for a moment, like he might try to shake Harry's hand in a gesture of politeness, but he seemed to recall himself at the last minute and just nodded, grunting, "Suppose this is goodbye, then, boy."

There were to be no drawn-out goodbyes, no. After all—what did you say after sixteen years' solid dislike? Harry didn't bother responding, and Vernon didn't seem to expect it, instead herding his family into the entryway.

Aunt Petunia busied herself with checking the clasp to her handbag, patting her hair in the hall mirror to avoid having to make eye contact with Harry, then looked back to her son with a tight, forced smile. "Ready, Diddy?"

Dudley was the only one who seemed still hesitant, and he stood before Harry with his mouth slightly ajar, lost for words.

Vernon gave him a clap on the shoulders. "Let's be off, then."

He brushed past Dudley, when there seemed to be no moving him until he was ready, and was already grabbing their bags at entrance to the living room when Dudley mumbled, "But—what about him?"

"Who, Poppet?" Petunia asked, stroking his hair.

He ignored her, directing his focus now to Harry. "What about you? Why've we got to leave, and you're staying?"

Harry sighed, fighting the urge to roll his eyes or bang his head against the banister or both. He'd had hopes, once upon a time, that Dudley might not turn out to be quite the stubborn dunderhead his father was, but those were quickly fading. "Listen, Dud—I've explained it a million times. It's not safe for you here—"

"Yeah, so *why're you staying?* Isn't it not safe for *you* too?" He flicked a glance at Hestia and Dedalus, who had drifted in from where they'd been waiting in the entryway, doing a very poor job of eavesdropping. "If that squirrely fellow's coming with us, who's

watching you? Why can't you—" Dudley faltered, evidently struggling to form his thoughts into words, and he looked back and forth between Harry and his parents. He'd gone red with the effort. "But where's he going to go? If it's so dangerous?"

"That..." Petunia began, then her words seemed to flee her, and she worried her lip, looking to her husband for support. Dudley threw tantrums all the time, but even Harry could tell this felt different, and Petunia didn't know how to react.

Vernon cleared his throat and tugged his trousers up by the belt loop. "Well that's none of our concern, now is it? The boy's clearly got his own business to deal with, and we ought to...we ought to get out of his hair. Plus—" He gestured to Harry, snapping his fingers. "He doesn't even want to come with us, do you?"

"Not in the slightest," Harry said with bald honesty. He thought he'd rather drive off into the sunset with Voldemort at this point than Vernon Dursley.

"There, see? So come on, son—let's get our things and pile into the car. You heard the man: we're in a hurry."

"I don't give a fig," Dudley said, and Petunia gave an audible gasp, handbag hitting the floor as she covered her mouth with both hands in white, wide-eyed shock, as if Dudley had just uttered the most horrific of slurs. In a sense, Harry supposed he had. "And I'm not gonna run off and hide while he's a sitting duck." He sniffed. "'S not the manly thing to do."

Vernon's moustache bristled, and he seemed to recall now that he was Dudley's father and not his friend, rallying for a good row. "Now you listen here: we're going, we're leaving, and that one—" He stabbed a finger in Harry's direction. "Is staying here with his lot, doing whatever it is those types are getting up to these days."

Dudley held fast, though, unmoved by his father's bluster. Normally, Harry might have been impressed; as it was, he was quietly astounded.

Evidently unable to restrain herself any longer, Hestia spoke up, voice a bit shrill with

disbelief. “With *our lot*? Whatever *those types* are getting up to these days?” She whirled on Harry, eyes wide. “Haven’t they the faintest clue who you *are*? What you’re dealing with? What your safety and security means to—”

“No, they don’t,” Harry said, sighing inwardly; this was going to become a scene if he didn’t step in. So many witches and wizards seemed flabbergasted Harry’s relatives cared so little about the whereabouts and well-being of what they had understood to be the most famous wizard in living memory (or second, perhaps, behind Voldemort). It got a little tiresome, having to witness their rude awakening. He took a step forward so he was directly in Hestia’s line of sight. He didn’t want her drawing her wand inadvertently, even if the Dursleys deserved to be taught the full seven years of Hogwarts lesson on jinxes and hexes. “And it doesn’t matter, honestly, so can we just get on with this?”

“*Doesn’t mat*—” Hestia’s voice caught, and she pressed her lips tightly together. “But you’re *Harry Potter*! You’re—”

“Just Harry Potter,” he said, cutting her off before she could really get going with an indifferent shrug. “Just Lily and James’s brat. Absolutely nothing special. These people think I’m just a waste of space—”

“I don’t think you’re a waste of space.”

Harry had to turn, physically gauging who’d spoken, because otherwise he’d never have believed those words had come from the lips of Dudley Dursley.

Perhaps reading on Harry’s face the doubt and shock, Dudley seemed to collect himself, repeating, “I don’t. You’re...you’re all right.”

Quite wrong-footed, not knowing how to deal with a Dudley saying decent things instead of teasing or throwing a punch, groped for a response. “That’s...nice, I guess. Thanks?”

Dudley just nodded, features still scrunched up as he grappled with thoughts he was clearly unaccustomed to dealing with. “...I mean, you saved my life. I’ve been a right shit to you—I don’t think I would’ve saved yours if the situation’d been reversed. Just being

honest.”

Nor would Harry have expected him to. He didn't say this, though, only: “I didn't really save your life, you know,” not wanting to part ways with Dudley thinking he owed Harry any sort of life debt. “Dementors are more about devouring souls—not actually *killing* people. You would've survived.” Though Dudley wouldn't have had much in the way of life without his soul, probably. This he also didn't say.

Dudley seemed to struggle to process this, failed, then shrugged it off.

It was here that Aunt Petunia, overcome with emotion, burst into tears and rushed past a still-boggling Hestia to throw her arms around Dudley. “Th-that's the sweetest...what a *treasure* my Dudders is,” she sobbed, mussing her carefully coiffed hair as she nuzzled her son's cheek. “Making amends with his cousin, saying such sweet things! Oh my lovely, lovely boy...”

“That hardly constituted saying something *sweet!*” Hestia huffed, indignation thick in her voice. “He only said Harry wasn't a waste of space, and that he was *all right!*”

Harry found himself torn between irritation and amusement at the display—it was the most love he thought he'd ever felt from any of these people, and he took a mental snapshot of the scene, thinking that he kind of wanted to remember this moment when his terror of a cousin had said, in his own special way, “I'm sorry, and I love you.” Maybe it was best it came out this way—Harry didn't think he would have believed it otherwise.

At length, Dudley finally managed to extricate himself from his mother's sobbing embrace, approaching Harry with his hand thrust out. “...See you, Harry. Try not to run into any more of those Dementeds, yeah?” He wanted to shake Harry's hand, it distantly registered.

It was an absurd gesture that, despite being coupled with *I don't think you're a waste of space*, did nothing to mitigate the years of neglect and bullying and terror he'd had to endure from these people, his purported *family*, but somehow...well, it meant something, Harry was sure. He just didn't know quite what. He took the proffered hand and gave it

a firm shake, one Uncle Vernon might have been proud of in another life. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ll try.” And then, because it came to him: “...Take care, Big D.”

Dudley’s shoulders sagged in evident relief, and he finally allowed himself to be shuttled to the front door. Aunt Petunia scurried after her son and husband, dabbing a handkerchief over her eyes and still avoiding looking Harry in the face. She stopped at the threshold, though, as Vernon and Dudley stepped out onto the front stoop, and looked back. Something unreadable passed over her features, and she opened her mouth a tick, like she’d meant to say something—before thinking better of it and pursing her lips. With a tiny jerk of her head, she was off, Dedalus bringing up the rear to close the door behind them.

Harry waited until he heard the car’s engine turn over and the crunch of tyres against pavement before he allowed himself to relax. Hestia frowned in concern. “All right there, Harry?” He nodded; he wasn’t really all *that* all right, but it would do for now. “Is that all you’ll be taking with you?”

She gestured to his rucksack, and he rolled his shoulder, letting it slide to the floor at the foot of the stairs. “Not quite—I’ll just run upstairs and fetch the rest of my things.”

He took the stairs two at a time, wondering how Mad-Eye’s plan had changed. Would he be Apparating with Hestia instead? Maybe Mad-Eye had gotten caught up with something and had needed to entrust Harry’s escort to another Order member. Or would they be travelling by Portkey perhaps? Back in his room, he snatched up his Firebolt leaning against the wall by the door with one hand and Hedwig’s covered cage with the other, whispering to her, “Give a hoot if you’d like one last look before we piss off from here forever.” When nothing came, he smiled to himself and stepped back into the hallway, glancing at the photographs on the wall—none of them including him—and saying his own colourful goodbyes to Petunia and Vernon in his head. If Dudley turned out all right in the end, it would be *despite* his parents.

A sudden, deafening roar jerked him from his thoughts, and his hand went immediately to his wand, stuffed in his back pocket. “He—Hestia?” he called, then gave another jolt as

a screeching whinny rent the air.

Hestia showed her face at the base of the stairs, beckoning Harry down. “Come now, come! Everyone’s just arriving!”

Harry felt his heart settle back into its chest, thudding along at a more moderate pace instead of breakneck speed. “E—Everyone?” He toddled down the stairs, awkwardly holding Hedwig’s cage at arm’s length, and Hestia took it and his broom from him when he hit the third step up. “Who’s here? What was that sound?”

“Why not go check?” Hestia said, a twinkle in her eye, and Harry rushed into the kitchen, tugging aside the faded curtains covering the window over the sink. He was certain he’d heard the strange sounds coming from the back garden.

The sun had set not ten minutes earlier, just as the Dursleys had set off, and in the dim haze of early twilight, Harry thought he saw the air over the turnip bed shimmer and blip as figures—people—began to shed their Disillusionment Charms. With the spells lifted, Harry could now see where that unearthly roar had come from: the engine of the enormous motorbike Hagrid sat astride, tugging off his helmet and goggles and shaking his great head of shaggy hair. Harry scrambled for the back door, nearly pulling it off its hinges as he wrenched it open. Hagrid gave a wave when Harry stumbled onto the back stoop. “Ready to be quit o’ this place, Harry?”

“*Harry!*” Hermione cried, launching herself into his arms and giving him a tight hug as Ron brought up the rear with a crooked grin.

“Definitely,” said Harry, glancing around at the others dismounting from brooms and—in two cases—a pair of Thestrals beating the air with their bat-like wings and snorting impatiently. “But—there’s so many of you!” There had to have been over a dozen bodies filling the garden altogether—most familiar, though some less so. “Are you all escorting me?”

“Change of plan,” growled Mad-Eye Moody, tottering forward, and his magical eye spun in its socket, scanning the sky and house and garden for imminent danger. “Into the

house, the lot of you. No sense in exposing ourselves more than necessary.”

Harry showed everyone into the living room, almost disappointed the Dursleys had already taken their leave. What he wouldn't have given to have seen the look on Petunia's face as Hagrid took up the whole length of the sofa by himself, setting it to groaning under his girth. The others scattered around the room, taking seats where they could or standing with determined, serious expressions.

It felt like the entire Order was here—Ron and Hermione he'd half-expected, but Fred and George had tagged along as well, amusing themselves with Aunt Petunia's curio cabinet and the knick-knacks therein, while Bill, his long hair tied tightly at his nape and tucked into his collar, hissed at them not to touch anything and silently begged Fleur for back-up she seemed disinterested in giving. Mr. Weasley, his spectacles sitting awry, traded quiet words with Kingsley—and Harry felt his stomach give a guilty jolt. He hadn't thought about Malfoy in what felt like ages, and he wondered once again what had become of him. Surely after nearly two months the Ministry would have him sorted, right? Curiosity roiled in his gut, and he decided he'd try to get a word later, shifting to the side as a grey-faced Remus shuffled past with Tonks in tow, her short hair her favourite shade of shocking pink. Moody shut the door just as Mundungus Fletcher scuttled inside, looking rather twitchy underneath his mess of matted hair and trying to avoid eye contact with Harry.

Harry felt the tension in the room skyrocket with the soft *snick* of the door locking, and his mind buzzed with the prospect of a daring escape versus the cloak-and-dagger route he'd assumed he'd be forced to take. There was no way Moody had brought along a small army not expecting a fight. Harry had been cooped up, barred from using his magic, all summer, and he could feel the arcane energy itching to escape him.

“Alright there, Hestia?” Moody asked. “No trouble from the Muggles, I take it?”

“No more than we were prepared for,” Hestia said, suddenly all business. “Dedalus set off with them around sunset. I noticed nothing amiss at their departure—though that isn't to say they couldn't have met with misfortune once out of view.”

Moody nodded, muttering, “Well, we’ve got rather bigger fish to fry at the moment. You’re relieved, Hestia.” She nodded curtly. “Make sure you cast your Disillusionment Charm good and tight when you go, and no Apparating within—”

“Within one hundred paces, yes, I know.” Moody growled in the back of his throat, clearly irritated with having been interrupted, but Hestia seemed unbent. She tipped a nod to Harry, patting him on the shoulder. “Good luck, Harry. I certainly hope to see you again.”

“Er, yes—sure, same here.” He didn’t quite understand what he would need luck for, but he appreciated the sentiment all the same.

With Hestia off, Moody cleared his throat, and the low hum of chatter in the room died away. He turned to Harry. “I’m sure Hestia and Dedalus have already explained that we’ve had to abandon Plan A. Seems Pius Thicknesse has been turned.” Across the room, Kingsley gave a solemn nod, arms folded and brow beetled. “That presents a rather large problem, as he’s made it an imprisonable offence to connect this house to the Floo Network or to place a Portkey here or Apparate in or out.” Moody’s craggy face scrunched up, and he seemed to be trying to roll his one good eye. “All done in the name of your protection *of course*, to prevent You-Know-Who from getting at you.”

Harry frowned. “But—I thought my mother’s charm...?”

“Yes, yes, it’s working perfectly fine still—which is how you know the reasoning’s nothing more than a cover to prevent anyone from springing you before You-Know-Who’s had a crack at you. Further mucking things up is the fact that you’re still under-age, which means you’ve still got the Trace on you.”

“The—Trace?”

Moody stamped his foot impatiently and looked like he was about to pop a vein, when Hermione hissed to him, “The charm that detects magical activity around under-seventeens, knowing when they’ve done under-age magic in a non-wizarding household or in view of Muggles.” Oh, Harry supposed he now recalled several prior incidents

where he'd been royally rolled by that thing.

“Right,” Moody grunted. “Which means if you—or anyone around you—were to cast a spell to rescue you from this little fortress of yours, Thicknesse would know about it, and by extension the Death Eaters. So if we spring you early by magical means, they’ll know, and if we just wait for the Trace to break naturally, as it will the moment you turn seventeen, then you’ll lose all the protection your mother gave you and be a sitting duck, hit with a dozen curses before you can even start on the first of your *Ds* to Apparate.”

Well, that was quite a pickle, wasn't it? Harry finally understood the tension in the room, and the adrenaline that had been pumping through his veins started to peter out, leaving lethargy in its wake. “But then...what are we going to do?” Were they going to do battle after all? Wait for the Trace to break and then throw up whatever Shield charms and Patronuses they could to give Harry time to escape? That didn't sit right at *all*, and he had protests ready on his lips.

Moody, though, smiled—which looked a bit frightening on him, honestly. “They can't Trace you if we don't use spells—so we'll just have to do things the old-fashioned magical way: brooms, Thestrals, and that infernal contraption of Black's. We're choosing to break the protection early—it's the safest way we can imagine.”

A glance around the room, and the subtle nods from his friends, told Harry the time for debate on this point had long passed, and he was expected to just duck his head and go along. He didn't like that either, but Moody carried on as if Harry wasn't there. “Now, the good news is that You-Know-Who doesn't know we're moving you tonight—Kingsley and Arthur have leaked a fake trail to the Ministry, so they think you won't be leaving until the thirtieth, which should let us catch them off guard.”

Harry didn't think Voldemort was the type to be so easily confounded, though. “Sir—the Ministry's one thing, but the Death Eaters...*You-Know-Who*...I doubt they'll take any chances.”

“Right they won't. He's bound to have a few of his lackeys patrolling the skies in the general area as we speak, just in case. For that reason, we're going to have to try and

outthink them. We've slapped a dozen different houses with every protection in our arsenal. They all look like they could be used to hide you, and they've all got some connection with the Order: my place, Kingsley's, Molly's Aunt Muriel's..." He gestured vaguely. "You get the idea."

Harry thought he got the idea rather well indeed and frowned. "You mean...you've set up *decoy* houses? Houses...lived in by real people? Who could get *hurt* by Death Eaters trying to get at me, thinking I'm holed up there?"

"Everyone knows what they've gotten themselves into," Moody growled, sounded suspiciously like Hermione and Ron had, back at Dumbledore's funeral. Knowing people were *willingly* laying their lives on the line for him didn't suit Harry any more than them doing it *unwillingly*, though. "Now—you'll be going to Tonks's parents'. Once we've seen you safely inside the boundaries of the protective enchantments on the place, you'll be able to use a Portkey, which will take you to the Burrow." Moody's magical eye spun a circuit up and down Harry's body, and Harry had the unsettling feeling it could see right through him. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm gonna need a hair."

Harry took a step back. "Wh—a *hair*?" He frowned. "...What for?"

"Because, Potter, without your hair, our intrepid volunteers here can't Polyjuice into you."

And there it was. The rub. "You're having them all *pretend to be me*? And act as decoys, drawing Death Eaters away while I scurry off unscathed?"

"Well I wouldn't go getting my hopes up about getting out of tonight 'unscathed', but that's the general idea, yeah. Fourteen of us breaking for Tonks' parents place would be a dead giveaway, don't you think?" Well, yes it would have, and he'd been wondering how Moody had planned to address that particular flaw, but this was *not* the way to go about it. "It'll be seven of us heading in seven different directions, accompanied by seven Harry Potters." Moody drew out a flask filled with a dark, viscous liquid that looked like muddied coffee and tasted, Harry knew, not much better. He felt his stomach bottom out—and shook his head with conviction.

“No.”

“Potter—”

“No way!” he snapped, taking a step back from Moody, who was growling low in the back of his throat. “Absolutely not. The houses are one thing—but I’ll not have any of you lot risking your own lives for me!”

“Because it’ll definitely be the first time any of us have ever done so?” drawled Ron. “Being your friend at all’s a risk.”

“This is different,” Harry huffed, irritation heating his cheeks. “It’s—it’s one thing to help escort me somewhere, it’s another thing *entirely* to pretend to be me!” He pointed to his scar. “You’d be putting a target right square on your foreheads!”

“And what a *lovely* target it is,” Fred said, flicking Harry’s scar—but Harry batted him away, not amused in the least.

“Admirable though your concerns for all of us are, I’ll remind you again that everyone here is over-age and able to make their own decisions,” said Moody, swirling the Polyjuice in the flask. “They’re all here of their own volition—no one’s been forced.”

Given the way Mundungus flinched, Harry wondered just how Moody defined ‘forced’. “There...there *must* be a better way. A way, at least, where no one’s going to get Unforgivables flung at their heads!” He waved around the room. “We’re all so preoccupied with not violating the law getting me out of here, but what’s the point? The Death Eaters aren’t gonna follow the law, and the Ministry will change it just to suit their whims if they’ve been turned like you say.”

“Some of us still have positions we’re maintaining for cover, Potter,” Kingsley said, and Arthur wasn’t meeting his eye just now. “We can’t be implicated in anything untoward.”

“There’s no other choice,” was Moody’s flat reminder. “Your safety is our top priority tonight, whether you like it or not. And the only way you’re getting out of here alive, the only way we’re going to chance as few of us kicking it as possible, is with this plan.” He

nodded to the front door. “As mentioned, You-Know-Who’s probably got at least a few Death Eaters patrolling the area at all times, waiting for you to just try and sneak out, so unless you’ve suddenly managed to become an Animagus in the past few months, disguises and decoys are our only options.”

Harry grit his teeth. He considered for a moment flat-out refusing—they needed a strand of his hair to finish the potion, after all. But there were thirteen of them and one of Harry (for now), and he didn’t see them finding it too difficult to overpower him when he couldn’t even use magic.

“Now, Potter.” Moody held a hand out. “If you’re through dithering, we’re on a tight schedule. The sooner we get on with this, the sooner we can kick back with a bit of Ogden’s Old and toast to You-Know-Who’s imminent downfall.”

Seeing no way around it, and being sure his displeasure showed itself on his features, Harry reached up and grabbed a few stray hairs peeking out of the birdsnest that sat upon his head, giving a tight yank and passing them to Moody, who slipped them into the unstoppered flask and gave a good shake. After a few seconds, the muddy potion fizzed violently, before turning a clear, bright gold, like a warm Butterbeer.

“Ooh, you look rather tasty, Harry! Definitely some of the better we’ve tried,” said Hermione, in what she probably thought was a cheering compliment. Ron frowned at her, and she flushed, ducking her head as she pushed back into place a strand of hair that had sprung free from the plait she’d tamed it into.

“Now let’s get all the decoys lined up over here. Too easy to mix you up otherwise,” said Moody, and Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Fleur all moved into the kitchen. Mundungus was showing his reluctance rather overtly now and had to be hustled over by a sharp glare from Moody.

“I’m better as a protector,” Mundungus grumbled. “T ain’t right, pressing me into service like this. Wasn’t part of the plan.”

Moody brandished his wand in threat, idle though it may have been considering the

Trace. “Like I told you before, you’re safer as a Potter than a protector. The Death Eaters will have orders to capture you—not kill you. You-Know-Who’ll want to finish Potter off himself, Dumbledore always said. It’s those of us who’re guarding you lot who’ll be risking life and limb. Now, if you’re dead set on being a target, I’m happy to reconsider, ‘cause I’m a reasonable sort like that, but I’d give it another long, hard think if I were you.”

Mundungus seemed to have a few more good protests in him, but Moody was already rifling through Petunia’s cupboards, apparently in search of cups, for he gave a raspy *Aha!* when he came upon a tea service set on one of the higher shelves. It was the set that, Harry knew, Petunia would have only ever brought out if the Queen were visiting.

He poured out a measure of the Polyjuice into each cup and passed them around, stoppering the flask once the sixth had been distributed and stuffing it back into his cloak. “...Right! Cheers.”

Harry forced himself to look away—but he could still *hear* the changes being wrought upon his friends, and it was no trouble at all to imagine the horrific image of Hermione and Mundungus sprouting upwards while Ron, Fred, and George shrank to match Harry’s middling height. The Weasleys’ hair would undergo no remarkable transformation beyond darkening to black as if put to flame, but Hermione’s plait would be ruined, and Fleur’s...well, it didn’t bear mentioning.

Moody seemed entirely uninterested by the horror show unfolding behind his turned back, accepting a large sack from Hagrid and rifling through it until the transformation had finished. When he turned back around, Harry joined him, finally risking a glance, and found six Harry Potters gasping and panting in the middle of Aunt Petunia’s gleaming appliances and freshly mopped linoleum.

While everyone marvelled at their new bodies, Harry caught Tonks watching them all with an almost wistful gaze, her pink hair flickering to charcoal black and back again. He wondered if Mundungus wasn’t the only one disappointed with their role in the evening’s escape plan. Remus placed a hand on her shoulder, though, whispering something in her

ear, and she nodded quietly, her hair settling down once more into bubblegum contentment.

From the roomy sack, Moody drew out identical shirts and pairs of trousers, urging everyone to change quickly—which they did so, stripping with far more impunity than they ever would have done in their own bodies. He kept a particularly close eye on Hermione and Fleur, just in case they started investigating more of their new body than Harry thought appropriate—Fred and George had already done so and flashed Harry a thumbs-up.

“You’ll find glasses in the pocket of your trousers. Once you’re changed, I’ve got dummy luggage for you to carry as well.” Moody gave the sack a shake, and Harry could hear loud banging from within what seemed to be a far more copious interior than was obvious.

At length, the six doppelgängers finished their preparations, and there in the kitchen stood seven Harry Potters, each with a rucksack, broomstick, and cage holding a snowy owl (stuffed in all cases but one).

Moody looked them over, checking the non-Harrys’ opinions, before eventually deciding they passed muster. “Right then. Now, Mundungus will be travelling with me, by broom —” He shot a look (with eyes both magical and otherwise) at the Harry nearest the back door, who was shifting nervously and wringing his hands, as if he expected further protest but received none. “Arthur will be travelling with Fred—”

“Age before beauty, I get it,” a presumably-George Harry nodded solemnly.

“George’ll be with Remus. Miss Delacour—”

“—Is riding with me on a Thestral,” Bill said, explaining to the group with a sheepish grin, “Fleur’s not too fond of brooms.” Fleur sidled up beside him, giving his arm a squeeze before slipping her—Harry’s?—fingers through his. It was a decidedly odd picture they made.

“Probably musses her hair,” the Harry next to Harry whispered—he was pretty sure this one had been Ron.

“Miss Granger will be riding with Kingsley, again by Thestral.” The Harry on the other side of Ron-Harry had a look of immense relief on his face. “And finally, Tonks will be with Ron.” Tonks pumped the air with a fist, and Ron-Harry gave her a weak smile, clearly envying Hermione being allowed to ride with one of the older, more seasoned Order members.

“So tha’ leaves you’n me, Harry!” Hagrid said with forced enthusiasm, honestly looking just a little anxious—which did nothing to mitigate Harry’s own nerves. “Not a lot o’ room on the bike with me on it, though, so we’ve got a sidecar for you.”

“That sounds...” Harry searched for words that would not hurt. “Manageable.” He trusted Hagrid with his life—on the ground. In the air...well, he would keep his Firebolt *very* close, he decided.

Perhaps sensing his hesitation, Moody sidled up close. “You and broomsticks, Potter... it’d be a dead giveaway. They’re probably gonna expect you to be with me—”

“*What?!*” Mundungus-Harry shrieked from across the kitchen.

“—and Hagrid can more than handle himself in a fight, so it’s the best strategy we’ve got.”

And the time for argument, it seemed, had passed. This plan would go off with or without his cooperation—so he owed it to these people risking their lives for his to do whatever he could to ensure everyone came out of this in one piece. He slung his rucksack over one shoulder and his broom over the other, nodded to Moody, then brought up the rear of the line as everyone filed out the back door and into the garden.

He ran his eyes over the bike Hagrid had arrived on, seeing it in a new light with Moody’s mention of *that infernal contraption of Black’s* and licked his lips. “Is that...was that really Sirius’s bike?”

Hagrid patted the seat, beaming. “Indeed she was—I suppose this’ll be your second time on ‘er then, eh!”

Harry arranged his luggage in the sidecar before climbing in himself, feeling the tiniest bit humiliated, as he had his knees uncomfortably drawn up to his chest to make room for Hedwig’s cage and sat several feet below everyone’s eyeline.

“Now, don’t you worry,” Hagrid said, patting the handlebars as he mounted the motorcycle. “I’ve had Arthur trick ‘er out just a little bit—anyone tries to mess with us, they’ll soon regret it!” He gave a gruff little chortle that did nothing to settle Harry’s mounting nerves—or diminish his likely misplaced excitement.

“*Please* be careful, Hagrid,” called Mr. Weasley, already astride his broomstick with Fred-Harry at his back. “Make sure to only use it in an emergency—it hasn’t been thoroughly tested.”

“Use what?” Harry asked Hagrid, apprehension still thick in his voice, but before Hagrid could explain, Moody announced, “All right then! Be sure we all launch at the same time—everyone get on their marks!”

There was some last-minute shuffling and scurrying as everyone made their final checks. Harry wished he’d said something inside—maybe thanked them for doing this, for risking their lives like this for him, because there was a chance, and not an unlikely one, that this might be the last time he saw some of them—

Hagrid kicked the motorbike into life, and it roared with an animalistic fury that Harry felt he’d heard somewhere before but couldn’t recall. The sidecar began to vibrate violently, and Harry grabbed onto it, white-knuckled.

“Good riding, everyone!” shouted Moody over the din. “Until we meet again! On the count of three now: one...two...*THREE!*”

The sidecar lurched, and then with another angry roar of the engine, they were off, the motorcycle rocketing into the air so quickly Harry’s neck nearly snapped. The wind

whipped at his face, screaming in his ears, and his eyes watered to the point of pain. Jammed into the sidecar as he was, Harry's legs were already starting to go numb, and by the time he thought to glance over his shoulder and take a final look at Number 4, they were already too high to tell which was the Dursleys' home. Ah well.

They rose up through wispy clouds until the warmth of the late summer heat gave way to cooler temperatures at height—

A bolt of green light zipped past them, seemingly from thin air, and the motorbike gave a sharp jerk as Hagrid dodged reflexively.

Dozens of dark hooded figures blipped into view, suspended inexplicably in mid-air and closing in on the Potters and their escorts on all sides.

“Ha—Hagrid—!” Harry started, voice raspy, and he slapped his hand sharply against the sidecar for his attention. “Hagrid, there’s—”

A scream rent the night air, and then there were bolts of blazing green light coming from what felt like *everywhere*. One smacked squarely against the sidecar, and the motorbike lurched again, this time capsizing.

Harry felt his world upend—there were street lights above him now and screams and shouts all around, and he was gripping onto the cold metal of the sidecar for dear life. From between his knees, Hedwig's cage slipped free, tumbling along with Harry's rucksack and Firebolt into the darkness.

“No—no, *HEDWIG!*” he shouted, arm outstretched. The broomstick tumbled away, but he managed to seize the strap of his rucksack and the metal handle on top of the cage just as Hagrid righted them. “Oh thank god—”

Another jet of green struck from the darkness, like a bolt of lightning, hitting the cage. Hedwig gave a sharp, pained screech and then fell to the floor of the cage, unmoving.

Harry felt his heart skip a beat, like he'd been hit himself, and then began babbling *No no no no no* in a rapid staccato as he fumbled with the cage door, reaching in to stroke

Hedwig's still, lifeless body. "Fuck, fuck, fuck you can't be—" The motorbike lurched again, and the cage was shoved into Harry's midsection, knocking the wind from him. He tried to signal to Hagrid that they had to turn around—they'd misjudged their timing *terribly*. This wasn't a couple of random Death Eaters monitoring the area just in case; this had been planned. They'd *known*.

He shoved the cage down into the nose of the car and pulled out his wand, praying it didn't slip free from his sweaty grip. "Ha—Hagrid, we have to go back, we have to—"

"Can' do that, Harry! I've got orders an' I mean to follow 'em! You're the priority, and I'll see it through to the end!" bellowed Hagrid, and he opened the throttle, snapping Harry's neck back with the sudden acceleration.

"Stop—*stop, please!*" But he nearly had his head taken off by another two jets of green light. These weren't just Unforgivables—they were Killing Curses. They didn't care if they killed any of the Harrys or not. Hedwig was only going to be the first casualty at this rate. He wriggled round, bracing himself in case the motorbike took another tumble, and marked his targets.

A group of Death Eaters had broken away from the circle to give pursuit on brooms, and the spells they fired were aimed at Hagrid's broad back. Hagrid was flying rather admirably, dodging and swerving as best the motorbike would allow, but numbers would soon win out. Harry kept himself low in the sidecar and raised his wand, spitting out *STUPEFY!* into the darkness and sending a red bolt streaking toward their pursuers, scattering the Death Eaters.

"Hold on, Harry!" Hagrid shouted over the roar of the air around them and the sounds of spellfire, and Harry craned his neck just in time to see Hagrid slam a thick finger onto a green button near the fuel gauge.

With a loud *BLAT*, a solid brick wall erupted from the exhaust pipe. Harry twisted back around to watch it expand into being in mid-air, with three of the Death Eaters smartly swerving to avoid hitting it. Their fourth wasn't quite so lucky, and he slammed into the wall headfirst, his broomstick broken into kindling that tumbled along with his body

earthward.

More curses flew over their heads from the remaining Death Eaters still giving chase, clearly aiming for Hagrid. Harry did what he could, throwing Stunning Spells over his shoulder. Red and green collided in mid-air, releasing a shower of sparks that must have seemed to the Muggles far below an out-of-season fireworks display, or else odd lightning bolts.

Another jet of green nearly took off Hagrid's head, and he yelled back, "Don' give up easily, do they? This should do the trick! Hang on to yer socks, Harry!" Hagrid slammed his whole fist on a large purple button. Harry sank as low as possible into the sidecar, shoving his wand into his pocket and grabbing a tight hold just in case.

A bellowing roar rent the night air, shaking Harry to the bone, and a burst of fire, white-hot and blue, shot from the exhaust pipe, sending the Death Eaters scattering to avoid being hit. The motorbike rocketed forward like a bullet, and the sidecar began to vibrate ominously. The force of the acceleration had splintered the metal connections to the bike, and Harry could *see* welded nuts and bolts shaking loose. He suspected this was the 'it' Arthur had advised Hagrid to deploy only in an emergency.

"H—Hagrid!" he yelled, but his voice was lost over the scream of the rushing wind. He shifted to grab his wand, the spell for a Sticking Charm on his lips, when a curse bolted out of the blue to strike the sidecar, snapping its connections clean off.

The car lurched—and then was spinning end over end, lost, until Harry finally managed to get his fingers around his wand again and pointed it at the sidecar, shouting, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" in desperate hope.

His downward plummet was abruptly arrested, the car utterly unsteerable but at least still airborne. He had only a split second's relief, though, before more curses streaked past them. That they were no longer the Killing Curse's deadly green was little comfort, and Harry watched in horror as the three Death Eaters abandoned their pursuit of Hagrid and arrowed straight for him, the motorbike banking into a steep turn, tight on their tails and gaining.

Harry aimed an *Impedimenta* square at the Death Eaters and managed to hit the middle one, but the other two kept charging for him, and then the sidecar began to tilt as his Levitation charm faltered.

Before he could begin another downward tumble, though, something seized him by the collar, hoisting him from the sidecar and dropping him onto the motorbike's seat, back to back now with Hagrid. He only just had the presence of mind to point his wand at the car once it had fallen away a safe distance and rasp, "*Confringo!*"

His heart clenched as the sidecar exploded, and he sent a silent apology to loyal, persnickety Hedwig. He should have sent her to find her way to the Burrow on her own, he cursed himself. The Death Eaters wouldn't have bothered with a little owl; she might still be alive, but he hadn't been thinking, he'd foolishly assumed this would be a snap, that Moody had everything under control. That his *Constant Vigilance* spiel was more than just words—

"Harry, hang on! I don't dare use the dragonfire button again, so you'll hafta hold 'em off of us!"

Harry could only nod, though Hagrid of course could not see him. The Death Eaters were *not* giving up, still locked in fevered chase and expertly dodging the Stunning Spells and Impediment Jinxes Harry was throwing at them as fast as he could execute the wand movements. One Blocking Jinx caught the closest Death Eater just on the shoulder, and his hood slipped—revealing in the light of the spells flashing back and forth the blank, vapid face of Stan Shunpike. Harry abruptly swallowed the Curse on his tongue, instead shouting, "*Expelliarmus!*"

"*THAT'S HIM!* That's the real one, on the motorbike!" roared Stan's partner, his victorious shout reaching Harry even over the thunder of the motorbike's engine and the spells flying all around. But instead of redoubling their efforts to catch Harry, the Death Eaters fell away, disappearing from view and leaving behind a deep sense of foreboding. Harry doubted they'd just caught a lucky break—but how had they known Harry was *the* Harry? Had they caught the others already and determined them to be decoys? God,

were his friends already *dead*?

“Hey! They’ve stopped firing at us! Reckon they’re gone?” Hagrid’s relief was palpable, but Harry was still scanning the skies for pursuers. They’d probably gone back for reinforcements. *That’s the real one*, they’d said... He clambered around on the bike, adjusting his grip on Hagrid—nothing for it but to get to the Tonks’ place and then the Burrow, as quickly as possible.

“I dunno, but I don’t wanna find out; let’s get going while we can. Can you do the dragonfire thing again?”

“Comin’ right up,” Hagrid said, mashing the purple button once more, and Harry nearly lost his grip at the sudden sharp acceleration, fingers curled tight into the folds of Hagrid’s great coat. He felt the bike begin to descend, tearing through the wispy clouds, and prayed this meant they’d nearly reached their destination.

But then his scar seared, red-hot, and his forehead felt like an egg cracking open to birth some dark horror—as Death Eaters appeared once more on either side of the bike, sending Hagrid swerving into the darkness. A Killing Curse flew overhead, the arcane energy whizzing by close enough he could hear its hiss—were they *insane*? They knew he was the real Harry Potter, and *still* they were flinging Unforgivables at him? He craned his neck, glasses askew and eyes watering, to see behind—

Voldemort.

Flying, held aloft by means Harry couldn’t see, he loomed terrible in the darkness, pale deathshad face gleaming in the light of spellfire still flying fast and furious around them. He raised his wand in his long, skeletal fingers, pointing right in Harry’s direction—

The bike lurched into a nosedive, and Harry found himself flung against Hagrid’s broad back. He clung on for dear life, angling his wand over his shoulder and sending poorly executed Stunning Spells into the darkness. Well, no one was around to give him marks now, so what was the point? He thought he heard a scream and hoped it meant he’d struck true, but it was impossible to tell at this point.

The motorbike's engine groaned, rattled, and then released a sharp bang before erupting in sparks. Dragonfire evidently didn't agree with the internals, Harry distantly observed, his scar burning and throbbing with such malevolent force he couldn't tell which way was up, even as he knew they were plummeting downward. He wholly expected to die at any second, either from a Killing Curse or colliding with the ground.

He could hear the sizzle of spells flying past them, and something dark loomed in his peripheral vision—a hooded figure riding a broomstick, reaching out for him—

“NO!” Hagrid roared, a fury in his voice Harry had never heard before, and with a great kick, he launched himself at the Death Eater. Too late, the Death Eater tried to bank away, but Hagrid tackled him off the broom. Harry instinctively reached for Hagrid, knees clinging tight to the bike's seat, but his Seeker's reflexes failed him, and both Hagrid and the unfortunate Death Eater tumbled into the darkness, disappearing.

In a booming voice that seemed to come from both all around and at the same time inside Harry's own head, he heard what had to be Voldemort scream in a hissing, snakelike rasp, “*Mine!*” The white face, contorted in rage, loomed from the darkness and barrelled for Harry, arm outstretched and wand raised with a spell ready on his lips, “*Avada—*”

Searing pain shot through Harry's scar. He screamed—or at least he tried to, but his throat was too raw now to do more than rasp in agony. He brought his hands up to clutch at either side of his head—when his wand arm shot out, reflexively, taking aim square at Voldemort.

No, not his wand arm.

Just his wand, dragging his arm up and around, as if it had a mind of its own. Through eyes half-shut in pain, Harry saw a burst of golden fire shoot from his wand-tip, spangling out to slam into the acid green of Voldemort's Killing Curse—followed by a resounding *CRACK* and a scream of agonised fury.

The pain in his scar subsided in an instant, and through the chorus of pinpoints flashing

in front of his eyes, Harry saw the purple button on the instrument gauge blur into view. Voldemort howled, from somewhere far away, “*NO!*”, and Harry slammed his fist onto the button, sending the motorbike rocketing forward, down and down and down.

He flung his wand arm out, his free hand gripping the handlebar for dear life, and shouted, “Hagrid! A—*Accio* Hagrid!” It was useless, he knew—but he wouldn’t let what might be his last moments alive be spent cowering, waiting for the inevitable.

He could now see the lights of some township below, growing nearer and nearer. He was going to crash—Hagrid might already have. Behind him, nearer now than before, Voldemort cried, “*A wand, you fools! Don’t let him escape! GET ME A WAND!*”

Someone must have complied, for suddenly Voldemort was *there*, right beside him, red eyes boring into Harry’s, and he was *not* going to let the last thing he saw be Voldemort, preparing to curse him for the final time. With the last scrap of strength he could muster, he began to bring his wand around—

But then Voldemort vanished—he just was gone.

Harry glanced around in panicked confusion—just long enough to glimpse Hagrid below him, spread-eagle on the ground and approaching fast. In a last-ditch effort to avoid joining him as a mangled lump upon the earth, Harry yanked hard on the handlebars, braking with all he had, and crashed with a great *KABLOOSH* into a muddy pond.

Blessedly, the pond was not so very deep, so he was in no danger of drowning, but he’d landed nearly *under* the motorbike, and its handlebar was practically stabbing him in the abdomen, holding him in place.

After some frantic wriggling, he scrambled from the wreckage, praying he hadn’t broken anything as he slogged through the waterweeds, and crawled over to rouse Hagrid. He kept one eye on the sky, scanning the heavens fearfully. Where had Voldemort gone? He’d been *right there*—why abandon chase? Or why not at least check that the crash had done Harry in properly?

Hagrid's form was quiet and motionless, and Harry swallowed down his fears that the obvious had happened. He struggled to shift Hagrid onto his back—but was unsuccessful, only managing to tilt his head to the side so Harry could check his pupils. “Hagrid? Hagrid—come on, please.” He gave Hagrid's cheek a light slap—then harder—and when this failed to wake him, Harry grabbed hold of his coat and began to shake, as hard as he could. “Just—wake—up *please*,” he grit out, because he couldn't take another death, not now, not so soon. He couldn't have this be *his fault*. Hedwig had been bad luck, but this... this would be...

“Who's out there? That you, Potter? Hagrid?” A beam of warm, golden light fell over them, and Harry squinted, raising an arm to shield his eyes as he struggled to his feet.

Harry didn't recognise the man's voice, but then a woman shouted, “Oh, that's them Ted! They've crashed! Quick, fetch me my Healer's kit!”

It was the last thing he heard before his knees buckled under the weight of sorrow and exhaustion, and everything went black.

Traitor Lurking

Harry woke in rather a different state than he'd blacked out, laid out on his back with a nest of cushions underneath him and one hell of a headache. His ribs and right arm didn't feel much better, and he panicked for a moment, thinking his bones had been Vanished again and he'd have to Skele-Gro them back. But no, surely there were Healers more accomplished than Gilderoy Lockhart out there, and besides, perhaps he had only sprained something.

He blinked slowly, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light and wondering why everything was blurry before remembering that his glasses had come off somewhere in the crash. He'd need to Summon them—assuming they were still in one piece.

What he could see of the room he was in, he didn't recognise—but it looked like a lovely sitting room. He hoped he hadn't crash-landed in some Muggle's backyard—he hadn't the foggiest idea how to Oblivate someone. Could you still be brought up on charges of breaking the Statute of Secrecy if you got blown out of the sky by a power-hungry madman hell-bent on your destruction and the subjugation of magical and non-magical folk alike?

His head throbbed, bringing with it a wave of nausea and pops of colour flashing in his vision—and then he suddenly recalled Hagrid, lying broken and still on the ground as Harry tried to shake life back into him. He shoved himself up, gasping, “Hagrid—!”

“Shh, shh—there, there,” someone soothed, and a fair-haired, big-bellied man shuffled into view, a hand on Harry's shoulder and an anxious expression on his features. “Hagrid's just fine, son.” He drew back and nodded over the back of the sofa Harry was sitting on. “He's got 'Dromeda seeing to him, and you couldn't ask for a more attentive nurse. How are *you* feeling, though? Anything else broken? Here you go.” He reached into his vest pocket, pulling out Harry's glasses; the lenses were scratched and muddy, but they were at least in one piece.

“Anything—else?” Harry asked, slipping his glasses on.

“I’ve seen to your ribs, and your arm—I’m nowhere near as good with Healing spells as Dromeda is, but I manage. You should be right as rain once she’s tidied up after me.” He thrust a hand forward. “Oh, I’m Ted, if you’re wondering. Ted Tonks—Dora’s father.”

Harry didn’t have the breath to spare for an introduction at the moment, blurting out, “Voldemort—”

“Whoa, whoa, easy there,” said Ted, placing a hand just over Harry’s chest to encourage him to lie back against the cushions again. “Don’t strain yourself—that crash was no joke. You ought to see the state of our garden.” He gave Harry a curious look. “What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? I keep telling Arthur he needs to actually study a manual or two before going fiddling with Muggle vehicles—I mean even I wouldn’t touch one with a barge pole, and I was raised Muggle.”

Harry strained to pick out the most relevant bits of information from Ted’s genial blathering. “No, it wasn’t the bike...” Harry said, grimacing, and his scar gave a needling pulse of reminder. “Death Eaters, loads of them. We were chased—”

“Wait, Death Eaters?” Ted straightened, all good humour gone from his face. “Why would you run into those? The whole plan was to—”

“We didn’t ‘run into’ them—we were ambushed; they knew we were leaving tonight. Somehow.” Harry glanced around, suddenly fearful he’d led them straight to these lovely people who’d offered their home to shelter Harry. “Whatever the plan was, it’s been compromised. We should—”

Ted gently guided Harry back down when he struggled to sit up. “You should relax, is what you should do.” Ted glanced up at the ceiling. “Well, I guess if the Charms weren’t holding, then we’d already be dead and you’d be captured, so there’s that at least, right? We should be safe in here for now—though I wouldn’t want to test it for too long.”

Charms... That was why Voldemort had vanished; the bike had crossed the protective

perimeter of the Order's spells. Harry swallowed. "I—thank you for getting me patched up, but...can I see Hagrid? Only, he seemed in terrible shape when I—"

"Better shape than you, I imagine!" Hagrid grinned, poking his shaggy head through the door before squeezing the rest of himself through—worse for wear but *alive*, and at this point, Harry would count that as a win. He launched himself at Hagrid, who pulled Harry into a crushing hug. Harry bore the pain in stride. "Can't believe we made it outta tha' in one piece!"

"That makes two of us..." Harry said, trailing off when his eye caught on the woman who had slipped into the sitting room just on Hagrid's heels. "You're—!" His hand went instinctively to his hip, where his wand usually sat in his pocket—but came away empty, and a soft chuckle burbled up from behind him.

Something tapped against his arm, and he tore his eyes away to glance down as Ted offered him his wand. "Found it in the wreckage and figured you might have a need for it—though I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't Jinx my wife while you're under my roof. At least have the good graces to take it outside."

"Your—wife?" Harry looked again, and instead of the near-mirror to Bellatrix Lestrange he had seen only a moment ago, now he saw a different woman, the resemblance far less pronounced now that Harry knew to look for it. Her hair was a light, soft brown, and her eyes were wider and kinder—though when she smiled, it came out just shy of a smirk that betrayed her family roots.

"I'm pleased to see you're up and about, Harry—but perhaps you can tell us what's happened to our daughter?" She looked to Ted, and the cool confidence she'd worn about her shoulders on walking into the room began to melt away, wringing her hands. "Hagrid said there were Death Eaters—that they'd found you. Where is Nymphadora?"

Harry shook his head. "I—I don't know. I don't know what's happened to *anyone* else." He'd honestly been hoping *they'd* heard. How long had he been out? Hagrid seemed relatively unscathed—but he was half-Giant. The others were far more fragile, and far less experienced in battle. Even Ron and Hermione had only really brandished their

wands in out-and-out fighting the one time at the Ministry...

God, he'd never forgive himself if...

Wait—the Portkey! They were all supposed to meet back at the Burrow, so that was where everyone would be. “She’ll be at the Burrow, if anywhere—there should be a Portkey?”

“Oh! Yes, yes, that’s right,” Ted said, beckoning them to follow him. “It’s just through here.”

Harry moved to follow, but Andromeda stayed him with a hand on his arm. “...You’ll let us know straight away, won’t you? If anything’s happened to her? I just...I have to know... I can’t stand not knowing...”

He patted her hand gamely. “Absolutely, we’ll send you word, or...or Tonks will, since I’m sure she’ll be there.” He hoped his words didn’t sound half as disingenuous to the Tonkses as they did to Harry’s own ears.

“Dromeda—you know our girl. She’ll be fine,” Ted reassured. “She knows her stuff.” Andromeda gave him a tight smile and quietly nodded, releasing Harry.

He snatched up the muddy rucksack Ted had set at the foot of the couch, certain the contents were ruined but feeling obligated to bring it along, if only to catalogue the destruction within. His broom was probably lying in pieces somewhere in the English countryside, and Hedwig and her cage were but ash on the high winds.

Ted led them down a short hallway to what appeared to be a guest bedroom, Hagrid squeezing in after him—and Ted pointed to a silver hairbrush on the chest of drawers. “Your Portkey, sirs.”

Harry grabbed it, extending it toward Hagrid so he could place a finger on it as well. “Thanks again for patching us up—for everything, really. You saved us.”

Ted only waved him off, but Hagrid straightened with a frown, glancing around. “Wait—

that's all yeh've got? Where'd Hedwig get off to?"

Harry wished Hagrid hadn't noticed, fingers clenching around the strap of his rucksack as he focused on the floor. "She...she got hit, in the commotion." He could feel the others give a soft intake of air and knew condolences were forthcoming—he couldn't stand to hear them right now, he thought, so he said gruffly, "It's—never mind. It was quick at least, and she—"

He was spared the need to continue the pithy explanation as the Portkey abruptly activated, and with a jolting jerk that hooked into his midsection, Harry found himself pulled into the weird spinning space of Portkey travel, hurtling away from the Tonkses.

Only seconds later, his feet slammed onto hardpack, and he pinwheeled forward onto his hands and knees in the great garden backing up to the Burrow.

Someone screamed—though not in pain or terror this time, only relief. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny appeared at the back door and scrambled down the steps, racing to meet Harry and Hagrid, who had also collapsed on landing.

"Harry? Harry—are you the real one? What happened? Where are the others?" cried Mrs. Weasley, patting him down.

The real one? Harry endured her groping with mounting confusion. "Wait—huh? What d'you mean? We're the first? Isn't anyone else back?"

"No one," said Ginny, voice flat, as she stood back with her arms crossed over her chest and shifting from one foot to another with nervous energy. Her eyes looked red-rimmed and puffy.

"Oh, you look *terrible!*" Mrs. Weasley said, unable to resist further patting and poking. "Was there a battle? Did You-Know-Who...?" She brought a hand to her mouth, eyes shining, and Harry wished for so many reasons he hadn't been the first one back, having to explain things to her.

"Somehow the Death Eaters found out the Order was moving me tonight—they jumped

us as soon as we left. A few of them chased me and Hagrid, I'm not sure about the others. It was all we could do to get away—and then Voldemort caught up with us—”

Mrs. Weasley pulled him into a hug he didn't feel he deserved. “Thank *goodness* you're all right,” she said, voice breaking. “Ron and Tonks were meant to be the first back—” She pointed to an empty oil can on the ground. “—But they missed their Portkey. It came back without them. And that one—” She pointed to a dirty, worn-down plimsoll. “—That one should have been Arthur and Fred's. You and Hagrid were third, and—” She gave a gasp, checking her watch. “George and Remus ought to be arriving any minute now—”

“Mum!” Ginny shouted, gasping, and pointed to a spot several feet away—where a glint in the dark shortly popped into existence, growing until Remus and George, already transformed back to himself, came spinning into existence. Remus sank to one knee once he hit solid ground, supporting an unconscious George with one shoulder—his face was grey, and he was covered in blood.

Mrs. Weasley shrieked George's name, and Harry rushed forward to help keep Remus from collapsing under George's weight. Between the two of them and Hagrid, they managed to manoeuvre George into the cosy sitting room, where Ginny was already fluffing cushions on the sofa to make him comfortable. It was impossible to miss where all the blood had come from: one of George's *ears* was missing. A nasty gash had ripped a jagged hole down the side of his head, and before Harry could so much as blink, Mrs. Weasley was elbowing him aside, casting a rainbow of spells he suspected she'd been brushing up on in recent months.

He was dithering with deciding what he ought to be doing to help when Remus stalked in, grabbed Harry by the upper arm, and dragged him none too gently back into the kitchen, shoving him against a cupboard with his wand levelled at Harry's throat.

“Oi!” shouted Hagrid, still trying to fit himself through the door. “Whadyeh think you're doin' there?!”

Remus ignored him, pressing the tip of his wand just at Harry's jugular. “There was a

creature in a tank the first time Harry Potter visited my office at Hogwarts. *What was it?*” Harry tried to swallow, mind racing, and Remus dug the wandtip in with a bite of fury. “Answer me!”

Fuck—what had it been? He closed his eyes, trekking back over the years in search of a Remus a little less lined than now, with more friends and less guilt. “A—a Grindylow, wasn’t it?”

Remus’s features smoothed with relief, and he released Harry immediately, tripping over himself as he stepped back and only barely managing to slide into one of the seats at the dining table.

“Wha’ in blazes were you doin’?!” Hagrid’s face was ruddy with anger, and he had one arm and leg through the door—Harry hoped he didn’t destroy the jamb trying to charge to Harry’s rescue.

Remus was panting, rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I’m sorry. I just—I had to make sure it was *really* you, that you hadn’t been compromised.” He pulled his hands away, forcing himself to meet Harry’s eye—his guilt and shame were on full display. “You might have been an impostor. Somehow Voldemort learned we were moving you tonight, and the only ones that were aware of that plan were the people you saw in that room. Trusted Order members.” He shook his head. “So if it wasn’t you...then it’s one of the rest of us.”

Harry rubbed at his neck, where there was probably a red mark now. “It *can’t* have been, though. No one in the Order would do that—not when we’ve all sacrificed so much already.”

Remus grimaced, lips twisting in wry humour. “I know you’d like to see the good in all of us, but the Order are hardly all saints—”

“I *know* that,” Harry snapped. “But—Voldemort only caught up with me when we were just coming up on Tonks’s parents’ place—he didn’t know which one I was at first. If someone actually betrayed us, they did a piss-poor job of it, seeing as they left out the

really crucial detail that I was riding with Hagrid.”

A bolt of fear rippled through Remus, and he straightened. “Voldemort caught up with you? What happened? How did you escape?”

Harry recounted their journey—leaving out the unnecessary detail of Hedwig’s demise but including how the Death Eaters seemed to have recognised he was the real Harry and summoned their Master, who’d wasted no time in making sure Harry died *properly* this time.

“How did they recognise you, though? The Polyjuice couldn’t have worn off on the others by then—George’s only wore off just before we made our Portkey.”

What had done it, indeed? There’d been no real trigger that he could recall. “I dunno. I did catch one of them without their hood, though, and saw it was Stan Shunpike. I thought maybe he might’ve been Imperiused, so I tried to Disarm him—”

“*Disarm?* Harry, why?” Remus looked very much like he wanted to shake some sense into Harry. “Disarming is a luxury we can no longer afford, not in these times! It’s kill or be killed.” Harry opened his mouth to protest. “Yes, *even* if they’ve got no control over themselves. This is war, Harry. Life and death—you can’t show pity. Do it, and you’re dead. I’m surprised you’re still here after all that, honestly.”

“Yeah, I *am* here—without killing anyone, at least with intent to do so. I’m not gonna *Confringo* someone when a Stunning Spell will do just as good.”

“Then Stun them! Just *don’t* try to Disarm them again.”

And now Harry was more confused than ever, wondering if he’d misread Remus’s evident bloodlust. “Don’t see what that’s got to do with anything. Disarming or Stunning—it’s all nonlethal.”

“And I admire that you’re looking for ways to live with what you might have to do in the coming months—but let’s not forget you’ve something of a penchant for casting *Expelliarmus* in battle with Voldemort. Were famously witnessed doing so by an army of

his followers, as I recall. It's your signature, a trademark almost. None of us Order members—no one but you—would think to cast *that* at a Death Eater." Remus placed a hand on his shoulder. "You must be careful. Be true to yourself, always, but be *smart*."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, only nodding ambivalently, and glanced back into the sitting room. "...What happened with you and George? Will he be all right?" Mrs. Weasley was still hovering anxiously over her son, but her wand movements had calmed, and she seemed to be wrapping up whatever Healing spells she'd been focused on.

"I think he should be...but it was a Dark curse that took his ear off. There won't be any replacing or growing it back, I expect." He didn't elaborate on how George had suffered the injury.

Scuffling from outside drew their collective attention, and Remus was on the defensive again, shoving Hagrid back outside and sprinting into the garden with Harry on his heels to see their new arrival.

Two shadowed figures were racing to meet them—Kingsley, holding a bent coat hanger and loping with a limp, and Hermione, now back to her normal appearance with her bushy hair wilder than usual. Hermione darted ahead, eyes wide and white as she wrapped Harry in a frightened hug. "Ron—have you seen Ron?"

"No—not yet, he hasn't made it back. We've been—"

Kingsley jostled past Harry, marching on Remus with his wand raised and dark accusation in his eyes. "The last words Albus Dumbledore spoke to the pair of us?"

Remus stood his ground, chin jutting. "Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him." Not missing a beat, Kingsley turned and pointed his wand at Harry, but Remus rushed him, staying his hand. "I've already checked he's the real Harry! Whoever was responsible for this, it wasn't him."

Kingsley made a noise of disgust, stowing his wand, and growled, "Then how the hell did

this happen? Someone either isn't who they say they are—or we've got a mole. Otherwise there's no way the Death Eaters could have known the plan was to move him tonight."

"Granted. But apparently they didn't realise there would be decoys. It took some time for them to recognise the real one and summon Voldemort to finish the job."

Kingsley's dark brows furrowed. "So that's why he left..." He shook his head. "I couldn't understand why he vanished, just when he'd nearly caught up to Hermione and me. How'd they figure it out?"

Remus threw Harry a long look. "An incident involving Stan Shunpike, evidently." Harry wasn't sure if he ought to feel grateful or not for Remus's covering for him.

Now Kingsley looked uncomfortable. "That means Azkaban's been taken. Suppose it really *was* Travers who nearly took my head off with a *Reducto*."

Azkaban had been taken. There'd been a breakout—and if Stan Shunpike was out and whoever this Travers fellow was...well then Lucius Malfoy was probably out, too.

Had word made it to Malfoy that his father was on the loose again? Or—the thought only just occurred—had Malfoy been in there as well, spending father-son bonding time behind bars? But surely the Ministry would have had the *Prophet* running stories day and night about *that* if so. And if Malfoy had broken out, Harry felt like...well, like he would probably have tried to find Harry again.

Or would he? The display at Hogwarts had only been because the dragon bits of him had taken over the human part, right? That wasn't going to be a problem now he was back in his right mind, in full control of his own thoughts and actions.

But what if he *had* busted out, or colluded with the other Death Eaters for some other reason? He'd told Harry he'd feared for his parents' safety, so perhaps Voldemort had managed to find a pressure point with his youngest recruit. What if he'd been out there somewhere tonight, hidden among the hooded figures...? It would certainly explain a lot.

Malfoy might have even figured out which Harrys were the fake ones and which the real one—whatever Remus said, Harry sincerely doubted that something as simple as a choice in spell amounted to a tell in the heat of battle.

He decided, though, to keep these suspicions to himself for now. He'd had quite enough of everyone accusing him of being unaccountably obsessed with Draco Malfoy over the past year already.

“How'd things go on your end, Remus?” Kingsley asked, glancing around at all who'd gathered to meet the new arrivals. “Where's George?”

“Inside, laid up.” Remus touched his ear. “He took a curse to the side of his head. Lost an ear.” He snarled, lip curling. “Snape's work.”

Hermione gasped, hands gone to her mouth in horror, and Harry choked—no one had mentioned a *word* about Snape being responsible.

The others continued to discuss their respective harrowing escapes as they made their way back inside, but Harry was elsewhere entirely.

Snape. Snape, back amongst his fellows and shooting off like party poppers spells that *killed people*. Snape who'd practically force-fed Harry a potion and claimed to be working to rescue Malfoy from the prison of his own mind.

That must have been it—Snape had sprung Malfoy from the Ministry somehow, once Harry had gotten him back into his human form, and gifted the poor sod to Voldemort on a silver platter. He felt a stab of pity for Malfoy, as he'd genuinely believed that Malfoy had mostly cared about saving his folks and wouldn't have ducked his head and gone scampering back to heel at Voldemort's feet if he could've helped it. He'd have been more likely to grab his mum and dad and fuck off to Fiji to wait the war out, spineless twat that he was.

As if Snape's role in Dumbledore's downfall hadn't been enough, here he was now trying to *murder* Harry's friends, in plain sight. Like he didn't give a damn who knew. Like he

was *proud* of it.

Harry's skin burned, blood boiling just beneath the surface, and Hermione gave him an odd look. "You all right, Harry?" she asked once they'd trundled back inside.

He shook his head—grateful when she took it to mean a dismissal rather than the *No, no I'm not* it had actually been.

They gathered around the sofa in the sitting room; George had been cleaned up, and he was breathing slowly but evenly. "I...I think he'll be all right," Mrs. Weasley said once they'd all made it in, including Hagrid, who'd had the door enlarged so he could squeeze inside. She gestured to the patch of new, raw skin where George's ear had been. "I can't make it grow back—Dark Magic, you know. But it could have been ever so much worse." Her tone suggested she was still trying to convince herself of this fact. "He's alive, that's what matters."

A great crash from the kitchen had them all on alert, wands at the ready. Kingsley shoved past to meet—Arthur Weasley, spectacles cracked and panting like he'd just run a marathon. There was a little trickle of blood winding its way from one nostril, and he looked more than a little crazed. Kingsley pointed his wand. "What did you tell me when we—"

"Question me all you like, Kingsley, but you'll do it after I've seen my boy!" Arthur brandished his wand in real threat, enough to match Kingsley's and then some. "*Move.*"

Harry took a step back, never having heard Mr. Weasley take such a tone before. Kingsley evidently hadn't either, for he gave Mr. Weasley a wide berth, and Arthur sprinted to his wife's side, dropping to his knees to lay a trembling hand on George's cheek.

"Dad—? *George!*" Fred was right on his father's heels, long legs making the trip from back door to sofa-side in only a few strides. Mrs. Weasley swept him up in a hug before he made it the whole way, though, sobbing her relief into his chest. Fred indulged her, patting her gently on the back, but he couldn't keep his eyes off George, gaping in bald,

unvarnished fright. Perhaps he saw in George a visage of what might have happened to himself.

Perhaps sensing his family's near-complete presence, George stirred—and Mrs. Weasley sobbed even harder.

“How you feeling, Georgie?” whispered Mr. Weasley.

“Oh, you know. Just peachy. You should see the other guy.”

Mr. Weasley looked to Remus. “...Who did this to him? Did you see?”

Remus's expression was grim. “Snape. You know anyone else who likes to sling around *Sectumsempra* like it's going out of style?” Harry was suddenly very interested in a thread he found sticking out of a throw tossed over the back of the Weasleys' sofa.

George braced his arms like he wanted to push himself up—then winced in pain when this pulled something he probably shouldn't have moved. “Well, at least Mum'll be able to tell us apart now.” He glanced round the room, brows lifting when he saw Harry. “Well well—there's a bit of good news. You made it back, then? Or 's that Ron in Polyjuice still?”

“No, it's the real me,” said Harry, moving closer so George didn't have to angle his neck so awkwardly to see.

“Well good; this way your untimely death won't have gotten in the way of people fawning over my heroic battle wound.” He frowned as he counted those present. “So if you aren't Ron or Bill, then where are they and why aren't they here feeding me soup and massaging my toes? Far as I can tell, I've paid the highest price for my part in this little adventure so far.”

Everyone went quiet. “They're not back yet,” Ginny said in a small voice, and what little of George's colour had begun to return promptly faded again.

“They were meant to be the first here,” Mrs. Weasley warbled, emotion welling up in her

throat. “But their Portkey came back without them.”

Mr. Weasley was at her side in an instant, drawing her and Ginny close for a hug and whispering soothing reassurances into their hair as the others looked on awkwardly.

Harry took his chance to slip outside, in desperate need of some fresh air—he couldn’t *breathe* in there, with all that tension and worry, knowing it was all his fault. He wished he could be confident the others would turn up unscathed or at least *alive*, or at least fake it.

He jogged down the back steps, tilting his head back to take in the night sky speckled with stars he could never see from Number 4. If Snape had sprung Malfoy, would he be able to track Harry down, the way he had at Hogwarts? Would whatever protective enchantments had been placed on the Burrow be enough to shield Harry’s presence? Was Voldemort maybe up there right now, circling the Burrow like a vulture and probing the charms for chinks?

“Come at me, you fuck,” Harry muttered under his breath.

“Harry?”

He turned back to the house to see Ginny and Hermione had followed him outside.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” Hermione asked.

He was starting to lose count of all the ways he wasn’t all right, but he just shrugged. “I didn’t want to get underfoot. I’d rather wait out here for the others.”

“There’s still Ron and Tonks, and Bill and Fleur, and—who else was it?” Ginny asked.

“Mundungus and Mad-Eye,” Hermione said, scanning the skies with Harry. “You don’t think he’ll find this place, do you? It’s not Unplottable—at least I don’t think it is—but still...”

“I’d rather operate under the assumption he *will* find it than hope that he won’t,” Harry

said, scar pulsing with phantom twinges. “Besides, I can’t stay here forever.”

At length, they were joined by Kingsley, Hagrid, Remus, and Mr. Weasley, and they paced as an impatient group, wearing nervous tracks into the Weasleys’ lawn.

After perhaps twenty minutes, though, a broom came screaming through the barrier, two figures huddled atop it—

“It’s Tonks!” Hermione shouted. “And *Ron!*”

They descended in less of a ‘landing’ and more of a ‘controlled crash’. Tonks hit the ground with both feet, but her legs buckled, sending her face-down into the sod while Ron was launched off, rolling a few times before skidding to a stop. Hermione was on him in a flash, wand already out and what were likely Healing spells on her lips.

Remus rushed over to help Tonks dazedly to her feet, and Harry joined Hermione to ensure Ron hadn’t been hurt too badly, Ginny and Mr. Weasley hot on his heels. Hermione had him locked in a forceful embrace, not unlike the one she’d given Harry when he’d arrived—but not *entirely* like it either, now that he thought about it. Ron gave a weak wave at Harry. “Hey. You’re alive.”

“Against all odds, yeah. You’re alive too.”

“Ron was *great*,” said Tonks, leaning on Remus as she brushed the hair from her eyes. The bubblegum pink was stained with dark, crusting blood and sweat, but she was smiling despite it all. “You’d think he’d already made it past Auror Training—should’ve seen him slinging Stunning Spells left and right. Why, one even managed to actually hit a target!”

“Was a moving target,” Ron reminded, drawing himself up. “Those’re harder.” He scrubbed cheek. “Thank goodness for your lessons, though, Harry. Saved my skin, honest it did.”

“And all the stuff inside it, too.” Tonks ruffled his hair, then glanced around the yard at those gathered. “Are we the last back?”

“No,” said Ginny. “Bill and Fleur missed their Portkey—and Mad-Eye and Mundungus too.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m gonna go let Mum and Dad know you’re here and fine.”

Remus crossed his arms, glowering. “So what kept you? What happened?” His tone was accusing, as if she’d taken the scenic route just to piss him off.

Tonks stowed her wand and snatched up the broomstick, now one of the precious few that had survived the escape from Privet Drive. “Auntie Bella. She’s got it out for me—went after me almost as hard as she was going after Ron.” She rubbed one arm, shuddering. “She...tried *very* hard to kill me. I didn’t really appreciate that; wish I could’ve given her a memento in return after...well.” She took a bracing breath. “Anyway, we definitely gave Rodolphus a good spanking, between me and Ron. Then by the time we got to Ron’s Aunt Muriel’s, we’d missed our Portkey—I know I could’ve sent on a Patronus, but I just wanted to get us back here as quickly as possible.”

“You didn’t notice any Death Eaters lurking in the area on the way in, did you?” Harry asked, supposing the answer was no but unaccountably curious all the same, and Tonks paled in boggling shock.

“Wh—*no*, of course not. Why would there be? Surely they couldn’t track you here, right?”

“Oh, no—no, you’re right. Just...” Harry bobbed his head. “Paranoid, I guess.”

Tonks gave a sympathetic nod. “Can’t blame you, I suppose.”

They passed another half hour waiting for the final four members to return, explaining to Tonks and Ron all that had happened on their respective journeys and offering up their own suspicions as to just how Voldemort had learned of their plans for the evening. Harry, wisely, didn’t say a word about Malfoy or Snape—he’d wait at least until he found some privacy with Ron and Hermione before he brought it up. Mrs. Weasley joined them for a bit to shower her youngest son with relieved affection before trading off with Fred to prepare everyone a spot to eat.

Kingsley had to return to Downing Street, where he was stationed guarding the Muggle Prime Minister, but not before extracting promises he'd be contacted once Bill and Fleur had safely arrived. Harry watched him Disapparate with a frown, knowing he'd lost yet another chance to ask after Malfoy's whereabouts. It would certainly clear up a few of his suspicions. He'd just have to lay out what he'd learned so far and rely on Ron and Hermione not to chastise him yet again for jumping to conclusions with limited information. He'd been right before—kind of—so there was every chance he was right now, too.

Mrs. Weasley was just navigating the back steps with a large basket under one arm and a tea set floating behind her when a cry went up and Ginny's hand shot toward the sky: a Thestral, almost invisible against the night sky and beating the air with its great leathery wings as it came in for a landing only a few paces away. Astride it rode Bill and Fleur, who looked harried but did not seem to have met with nearly the bumpy ride other members of their party had.

Mrs. Weasley dropped the basket, racing over. "Bill! Oh, thank Merlin! We've been so—"

Bill didn't look at his mother, though, even as she wrapped her arms around him and sobbed into his chest, instead staring at his father, jaw tense. "Mad-Eye's dead."

Everyone went quiet, and even Mrs. Weasley's tears dried up as she drew back, brows knitting. Bill looked away, and Harry felt something inside him clench, then crack, and then shatter into a million pieces no *Reparo* could ever hope to mend.

Mad-Eye Moody. The ever-vigilant.

"But—" Mr. Weasley brought a hand to his bald spot, rubbing. "No, couldn't he have—?"

Bill shook his head. "I saw it with my own eyes. We had eyeline with him and Dung after lift-off—we'd been heading in the same general direction, see—but then, well, we got waylaid. They went right for Mad Eye, just like he'd figured they would, and he might've been fine—was doing all right, even, for a while there—but then Voldemort showed up and—" At this, he looked to the other Order members. "He can *fly* now—didn't have a

broom or anything, not that we could see. Anyway, once he showed up, well Dung flat out panicked and tried to bolt. Mad Eye tried to stop him, but before he could Petrify him or anything, Dung Disapparated, and..." He took a bracing breath. "Voldemort got him. Square in the face. We wanted to save him—at least get his *body*—but I mean, it was *Voldemort*, and we were already fighting off a half dozen of our own—"

Fleur laid a hand on his arm, squeezing gently, and he choked off his words.

"There was nothing you could have done," said Remus as Fleur drew out a handkerchief and offered it to Bill. "It's enough you were able to let us know what happened—and that you made it back yourselves in one piece."

They fell into silence again, none knowing quite what to say. Harry didn't even know what to *think*. Hell, Mad-Eye had been one of the only ones Harry had been sure would actually *survive* this whole mess. He'd made it his life's work, not dying when the whole world seemed bent on doing him in.

With everyone now accounted for—living and dead—Mrs. Weasley instructed her tea set to return to the dining room, and Remus relieved her of her basket, which smelled like it contained some manner of pasties. They silently filed back into the Burrow, filling the living room where George was sitting upright and looking very put out at having been left alone with just Fred for company.

He lit up when he saw Ron and Bill, though. "My heroes have finally come to pay their respects!" he exclaimed, arms outstretched. Ron shuffled over, but not before George caught everyone's dour expressions. "...What's happened? Who's—"

"Mad-Eye," said Mr. Weasley. "He's dead."

George slowly slid back down on the sofa, defeated.

A grim quiet settled across their shoulders, and Bill pulled some glasses and a bottle of Firewhisky out of a sideboard. Harry remembered Mad-Eye, standing back in Aunt Petunia's kitchen, going on about toasting to Voldemort's imminent demise with the

same spirit Bill was now pouring measures of for the group. The memory tasted bitter as old coffee in his mind, so Harry was glad when the Firewhisky burned fiercely as he knocked it down his throat, praying the liquor would burn it to ash. By the time he'd finished his glass, the memory felt a little fainter, and he could feel a little life working its way back into his limbs, so perhaps the Firewhisky had done the job.

"You-Know-Who knew we were moving Harry tonight," said Remus, who'd drained his glass in one. There would clearly be no time for mourning, not when everyone seemed convinced there was betrayal afoot. Harry agreed that someone had betrayed them, he just didn't think the culprit was in this room.

The pleasant warmth of toasting a fallen comrade in silent communion was chased away by the coldness in Remus's voice.

"Yeah, it did seem that way," Bill admitted, "But the Death Eaters didn't seem to be expecting so many of us, did they? I know it won't be a popular opinion, but I don't think it was Dung—he knew every detail of the plan, down to who he'd be riding with. Blimey, he was the one that *suggested* it in the first place. That little shit wouldn't have told the Death Eaters what we were doing and chanced them targeting *him* by mistake. He'd have made well sure that if *anyone* survived, it would've been him and Mad-Eye." He set his glass, empty now, down on the table. "I honestly think he just panicked, and I can't entirely blame him. He didn't wanna be part of this in the first place. Any of us might've done the same as him with Voldemort right there in our face throwing a Killing Curse at us."

"And like Bill said, he expected Harry to be with the strongest, most skilled Aurors," Hermione added. "He came after Kingsley and me once he realised Mad-Eye's Harry was a decoy."

"Still doesn't explain how they knew this was all happening tonight, though," Ron said, glancing around the room and letting his eye linger on each face. Ron could read people—could read situations. Everyone took him for immature because he could be emotional when he needed to be rational and acted like he had a lot to prove, but he knew how to

read ten moves ahead, Harry had seen that in person. He was sizing up those present, looking for weaknesses—vulnerabilities. Who was the most likely to have slipped up, perhaps without meaning to.

Harry hated this. He knew it hadn't been any of them, and while he didn't want to get into it just now, with such an audience, he wouldn't have them thinking this way. Now, more than ever, they needed to be a united front. All in.

"If someone did let something slip," he said, his voice louder than he'd expected in the unnatural, mistrustful quiet, "then—I'm sure it was a mistake. Or an accident, rather. I know they didn't mean to—I *know* they didn't. There isn't a person in this room I don't trust with my life. So I don't blame them, not a bit." He kind of wanted a bit more Firewhisky just now. "We've got to trust each other—it's the only thing we've got still that separates us from them. None of you would *ever* sell me out to Voldemort, so enough of this. There's more important things to focus on now than pointing fingers. What's done is done—we're all in."

Remus was watching him, an odd expression on his face. Too close to pity for Harry's comfort. Maybe he was being naïve—but hadn't Remus just told him not to sacrifice who he was in this war, only to act a little smarter about it? Well, he was. He would trust his friends—maybe not implicitly, but this sort of infighting and doubt would not help them in the long run. Better to move on.

Remus pushed away from the table, looking to Arthur. "...We need to get it back."

"Get what back?" Tonks asked, even as Arthur gave a grim nod.

"Mad-Eye's body," said Remus, running a hand wearily through his hair. "We...someone needs to recover it." Tonks pursed her lips, and Remus added, "Unless you'd prefer we leave it for the Death Eaters to find? I hear You-Know-Who's making Inferi, now."

"...Of course not. But you aren't going alone."

"No, I was kind of hoping not to." He offered his arm. "Shall we make a date of it?"

Tonks rolled her eyes but slipped her arm through his all the same.

No one said another word as Remus and Tonks took their leave, though Bill looked like he'd very much wanted to join them and only been stayed by Fleur, who was presently dozing against his shoulder.

Harry looked around—everyone looked somehow worse now than when they'd been worried sick about everyone's safety. One man had lost his life that evening because of Harry, another his ear, and *Hedwig*... She hadn't had a chance. Her death had been senseless and absolutely, utterly unnecessary. More so Harry's fault than anyone else's injuries that evening.

"I...I think I should go. I don't think I should stay here..."

There was a long, heavy beat of silence as everyone processed what he'd just said.

"Don't be silly, Harry!" said Mrs. Weasley, sharply, as if he were making jokes at an inappropriate time. He supposed he was, from her perspective. "Why, the whole point of tonight was to get you here safely—and that's just what's happened. You're here, the family's here—we'll even have wedding guests here in a few days, now that dear Fleur's agreed to getting married here rather than in France. There's no place safer for you now than under our roof, and you're always welcome, you know that." She glanced around the room. "We'll look after you, dear. You can count on us."

He couldn't explain to her that she was only making him feel worse, not better. He shouldn't have gone back to the Dursleys at all; if he'd Apparated straight from Hogsmeade after the funeral, he could have been *anywhere* in England by now, hiding out with his own wits to protect him and no one else's life on the line.

"If Voldemort finds out I'm here—"

"But why should he?" asked Mrs. Weasley, exasperated, and Harry could feel his justifications ready to explode from him, kept just behind his tongue. "You could be at any of a dozen places right now! He's got no way of knowing *this* is the safe house we've

chosen.”

How to explain it wasn't his *own* life he was worried for? She'd nearly lost a child tonight —why wasn't she *more* scared? Why had she even chosen to let them bring Harry to the Burrow in the first place? There was only so far good will stretched.

“You leaving now,” said Mr. Weasley, a quiet gravity in his voice that clashed with the bumbling Muggle enthusiast he had always been in Harry's mind, “would make our efforts tonight pointless. At least consider that—what everyone went through to get you here. What was lost.”

“Yeah, you owe me an ear!” George piped up, hoisting himself up on the mountain of cushions his family had given him.

“I—I *know* that—”

“Mad-Eye certainly wouldn't want—”

“I KNOW!” Harry shouted, shocking the others into blessed silence. His head ached, not because of his scar for once, and he felt exhausted. Did they think he didn't appreciate the sacrifices they'd made in getting him this far? Did they not understand that that was precisely *why* he felt he needed to get as far away from here as possible, as soon as possible?

“Harry, yeh've been through a lot tonight. Try sleepin' on it,” said Hagrid, comforting. “Yeh can' go runnin' off on your own—not now! Now's when yeh rally more to yer side!” He pounded the table with his fist, grinning. “Wait 'til it gets out yeh're three fer three with You-Know-Who now! Fought him off again!”

“Certainly gonna do a lot more to boost morale than the Ministry chucking bellhops and busboys into Azkaban,” Fred said, nodding.

There was a high, tinny ringing in Harry's ear, and he closed his eyes, tight. “... Something happened,” he said, in a soft voice that was nearly lost as the group began brainstorming how to turn the night's events into a thrilling story to encourage others to

join their resistance. “Something—happened. With my wand. When I was fighting Voldemort—it wasn’t me that did it. It was the wand, it acted on its own.” He could still feel the weight of the length of holly in his pocket, and just now, he felt a bit nervous to even touch it.

After a few quiet moments, Hermione asked gently, “You mean you did magic without meaning it? That’s not so very uncommon—you just reacted instinctively; it happens all the time. Children in particular are prone to wild magic surges at times of heightened emotion.”

Harry shook his head, lips pressed tightly together. “No. It wasn’t—the bike was falling. I couldn’t have told you where Voldemort was even if he was three feet in front of me. But my wand still found him. It jerked my arm, moved me around until it was pointed straight at him—and then it shot a spell at him, one I didn’t even recognise.” He’d certainly never cast anything that manifested as golden flames before; he would have remembered something like that.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat softly, “I have to agree with Hermione; such incidents aren’t unheard of.” He gave a wry little chuckle. “You wouldn’t believe some of the cases the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad has had to deal with over the ye—”

“It wasn’t *like* that,” Harry grit out, feeling despair and frustration claw at his throat. His scar was starting to pulse again. How to get them to understand he wasn’t their Saviour, that he didn’t have anything special inside of him that somehow made him a match for Voldemort—and that he certainly wasn’t going to be able to protect them when Voldemort inevitably tracked him down and found him in their midst?

No one spoke up to refute his argument this time, but Harry knew they didn’t believe him. They didn’t believe him about his wand, and they certainly wouldn’t believe him about Snape and Malfoy, not without proof.

Though admittedly, he’d never heard of a wand performing magic on its own before—but that didn’t mean it hadn’t happened. Harry was hardly omniscient.

Another throb, and his scar seared with pain—the stress of the evening and this circular argument, no one wanting to believe him, was going to split his head in two. “I—I need some air,” he mumbled, just as bursts of colour began to dot his vision, and he shoved his way past Hagrid and out into the back garden again, praying no one followed him this time.

Why was it no one ever believed him? Or at least *humoured* him, tried to really get to the bottom of why something had happened? Why was it always blithe dismissal and moving on to the next topic, whether Harry liked it or not? Dumbledore would have believed him—he’d certainly paid the price for not heeding Harry’s warnings about Malfoy once already. Or he would have at least known why Harry’s wand had behaved the way it had. He’d have had something more than idle dismissal and patronising platitudes.

So many things would have been a *hell* of a lot different if Dumbledore had still been here, Harry was reminded for what felt like the hundredth time, and a burning sensation having nothing to do with Firewhisky clawed at his throat.

Then, out of nowhere, the pain in his scar peaked, like someone had just laid an axe into his forehead, and Harry sank to his knees, eyes clenched shut so tight he could feel tears leaking.

A voice screamed inside his head, raw and tortured.

“You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!”

In Harry’s mind’s eye burst the vision of an old man, skeletal and clapped in chains in some deep, dark dungeon. He writhed in twitching, jerky movements, and Harry could see he was the source of this agonised yowling.

“No! No, I beg you! I beg you...”

“I only had to use another’s wand, you assured me! Then the problem would be resolved!”

“I thought...I thought it would work—I genuinely believed it would!”

“You lied—to help Potter! To help him escape me!”

“I would never—it made sense, a different wand, a different core, a different allegiance...”

“Then what has happened? Explain! Lucius’s wand is destroyed now! Twin core or not, it made no difference!”

“I...I do not understand... The connection—it should exist only between your two wands. It should not...”

“More filthy lies! Perhaps proper punishment is the only way to tempt the truth from your tongue, Wand Maker.”

“Please—please don’t...!”

Voldemort raised his wand—so he’d found another in the end, it seemed—and with a wicked slash, the frail old man cuffed and bound began to contort himself into impossible shapes, his tortured screams echoing in Harry’s mind.

“Harry?”

It was over.

Harry’s ears rang with Ollivander’s echoing screams, and found he’d given himself a splinter clutching at a fence post. His knees were wet where he’d collapsed onto them, leaning against the garden gate.

Hermione rushed over, waving just beyond them. “Are you all right? Ron, over here!”

His scar was still tingling, and he was only distantly aware of his friends on either side of him, helping him back to his feet.

“What’re you doing out here, mate?” Ron asked, glancing around. “I know we’re under

enchancements, but best not to tempt fate, y’know?”

Hermione frowned. “You aren’t still thinking of leaving, are you? Certainly not without *us*, at least.”

“He damn well better not be, if he knows what’s good for him,” said Ron, tone severe.

Hermione’s expression softened when Harry had nothing to say for himself, and she seemed to consider he might actually be injured, peering into his face. “You’re not hurt, are you? You look awful!”

Well, he reckoned he was doing better than Ollivander right about now. Finally finding his voice, he shakily explained to them the vision, of Ollivander’s torture and Voldemort’s own troubles with his wand. Ron’s face was stricken, glowing pale in the moonlight, and Hermione seemed like she needed a fence post of her own to lean against.

“But—this was supposed to have stopped!” she sputtered, looking panicked. “The connection was meant to have closed!” She grabbed one of his shoulders, giving a little shake. “You can’t let it open up again—remember what happened last time? Dumbledore made it clear he wanted you to learn to close your mind!”

He nodded, in no mood to discuss this and just wanting to be done for the evening.

Dumbledore had wanted a lot of things, true.

But Dumbledore wasn’t around anymore.

The Travelling Library

Moody's death clung like a funeral veil, no part of the Burrow nor the inhabitants therein untouched by the loss of life. Mrs. Weasley made every attempt she could to make it seem like all was well, everything above-board and operating as intended, but her efforts were dashed each time an Order member appeared to update Bill and Mr. Weasley on the latest news of the resistance's efforts. It felt so...*off*, every time Harry glanced over and saw Kingsley or Remus at the door, trading hushed words with Arthur before disappearing once more. If Moody had still been here, they'd be having meetings in the open, not ducking Molly Weasley's disapproving eye.

It was difficult, sometimes, to restrain the urge to march out there and demand he be allowed to help in some way; only the certainty that he'd simply be dismissed with sad smiles and *It's too dangerous, Harry* stayed him. It wasn't *fair*—they were all allowed out there, in the wide open, to seek their revenge as they pleased, while Harry had to stay cooped up in the Burrow, folding laundry or doing the washing-up or weeding the garden as Mrs. Weasley tried to find new and inventive ways to keep him occupied. Ron and Hermione were also quick to remind him that he still had the Trace on him for a few more days yet, so unless he wanted to find himself with his wand snapped shortly after ridding the wizarding world of the greatest evil it had yet been faced with, he needed to sit tight for a few more days.

Easy enough for them to say, as they'd both come of age *months* ago. Still, he'd waited this long, and what would—he counted, four more days—a bit longer hurt?

"*Five* days," Ron corrected, shaking a finger in Harry's face. They'd managed some time alone just the two of them with Mr. Weasley and Bill off to work and Mrs. Weasley upstairs to wake the girls. "There's no way we can get out of here before the wedding, not if we ever want any chance of being allowed back again! Mum would *kill* us if we missed it, and Bill and Fleur would help."

Four days was already too long, though, and Harry made a noise of irritation. “I still don’t see how they can have a *wedding* in the middle of all—*this!*”

“Because they don’t know there is an ‘all this’—and if you know what’s good for you, you won’t disabuse them of that notion, right?” Ron leaned closer, conspiratorial. “Just a heads-up: Mum’s been trying to get me and Hermione to blab about what our plans are. I think she’s getting suspicious. So—just brace yourself. Dad and Remus shut up once they heard we had orders from Dumbledore himself, but Mum won’t be so easily put off. And you know what she’d say to us—or *do* to us—if she knew what our plan was.”

Ron said ‘plan’, as if they really had one beyond ‘find the Horcruxes and destroy them somehow’, but Harry sighed and nodded.

It was good Ron had warned him of a possible ambush, for only a few hours later, Mrs. Weasley managed to corner Harry and guilt him into helping her out with the peeling of some potatoes, a task she somehow didn’t feel deserved to be done magically but rather painstakingly by hand. Just as well, since Harry didn’t know the spell to peel them even if he’d been allowed.

“So,” she huffed, scraping away viciously with the peeler, “Ron and Hermione have made some overtures.” She pressed her lips together. “They’ve *intimated* that you three won’t be returning to Hogwarts for your final year of schooling. Turned me down to go shopping in Diagon Alley next week!”

“Oh.” Harry took one of the potatoes from the pile, setting to his peeling at a more sedate pace. “Well, er. That’s...yeah. Yeah, we’ve...made that decision.”

Mrs. Weasley released something between a snicker and a scoff that said *That’s what you think, Mister*. “And what, pray tell, is so important it can’t be put off for one more year? You’ll find a lot of doors open for you with seven years at Hogwarts under your belt—and not just in Britain. Abroad, too, if you were of a mind to travel.” She looked at Harry out of the corner of her eye. “Is that it, then? You’re wanting to travel?”

“...Kind of? It’s just, I’ve got some stuff to take care of. Time-sensitive things,” Harry

mumbled. “Ron and Hermione, too—they’re meant to help me.”

“*Meant to?*”

“They want to come—it’s...it’s their decision.” Not really one he agreed with, but one he found he was guiltily grateful for beyond measure. It was complicated; he was frightened to do this alone, but just as frightened to involve anyone else.

“And what sort of ‘stuff’ has you dropping out of school at just *sixteen* years old, hm? A bit young to be making such big decisions, if you ask me.”

Harry felt his hackles rise, but he knew she was just trying to goad him into blabbing their plans and beat back his temper. “...I’m sorry, I can’t—”

“Can’t, or won’t? I’m going to be honest with you, dear, I don’t think it’s right, you kids keeping all this hush-hush. Arthur and I have a right to know what our son’s getting himself into, and I don’t think it’s too far-fetched to assume Mr. and Mrs. Granger would agree!”

Ron had warned him this was coming, though, and he been rehearsing his spiel since before breakfast. “Listen: this involves Dumbledore, Mrs. Weasley. Some...final things he asked me to do. He didn’t want anyone else to know, so I’m sorry, but I can’t explain. And I told you: Ron and Hermione don’t have to come, I made that absolutely clear to them. Dumbledore told me I could confide in them, but he didn’t say I needed to—to force them into anything they weren’t old enough to accept or reject.” He managed to stop himself from saying *They’re adults in the eyes of the wizarding world and can damn well do what they want—and I’ll be too in another few days*, but only just.

“But it’s all right he’s forced *you* into it?” She dropped her peeler into the sink, wiping her forehead with the back of one arm, and Harry was certain the flush to her cheeks was due to more than just the noonday heat seeping in from outside. “You’re just children, I don’t care what the law says! I know there’s dodgy dealings going on these days, and it’s all coming to a head, but if there were anything Dumbledore truly needed done, well he had the whole Order to ask to handle it.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry,

Harry, but you must have misunderstood him—he was your Headmaster. He wouldn't have wanted you dropping out of school and rushing off to who-knows-where—”

“I didn't misunderstand,” Harry said flatly. “He asked it of me, and he made it very clear it was *only* me that could do it.” He attacked his potato with vigour, finished with the conversation, and littered the sink basin with peelings before grabbing another right after it and setting to work just as vigorously.

“I see,” said Mrs. Weasley, and she took a deep breath before picking up her peeler again. When she returned to her peeling, it was with a lazy, drained rhythm. “Well, you'll at least be staying for the wedding, won't you? We'd really appreciate your help with the preparations. There's still so much to do, and I'm nearly at my wits' end...”

Harry swallowed, guilt welling up. He hadn't forgotten how much her family had already sacrificed for him. And how much more they might have to sacrifice before all was said and done. “No—I...of course not.”

“Sweet of you,” she said, smiling softly and reaching for a boiling pot.

Mrs. Weasley didn't try to corner him again or talk him out of his decision, but he learned this was not because she'd accepted their choice so much as she'd decided on a new plan of attack: keep him, Ron, and Hermione so busy—and at separate tasks—they'd have no time together to make any plans. It was only in rare moments, usually late in the evenings after most of the family had gone to bed, that they managed to sneak in a few minutes to strategise—like right now, as the three of them were huddled in Ron's room while Hermione sorted through which books she would be bringing along with them and which she'd have to leave behind.

“What about this one?”

Harry glanced up from the most recent edition of the *Daily Prophet* to find Hermione holding up a book with crimson binding and gold filigree ornamentation.

“*Spellman's Syllabary*,” she said, translating the gibberish on the spine. “I wonder if

we'll need to translate runes?"

"When would we need to translate *runes*?" Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged and placed it atop the 'to-bring' tower that was beginning to teeter worrisomely and dwarfing the 'to-leave-behind' pile.

Harry turned his attention back to the newspaper, flipping through and scanning the articles with growing frustration. Days now, and there hadn't been a *word* printed about Moody's death or the attack on the Order as Harry fled Privet Drive. Either no one in the editing office knew, or the Ministry was keeping a tight lid on it. They hadn't sent a summons or anything by post about his using magic while still being under-age either—likely because they didn't want the public knowing Voldemort had been so brazen as to attack Harry in broad daylight (so to speak), with the Ministry helpless to protect him. Azkaban's mass-breakout had also somehow managed to slip underneath the *Prophet's* nose, and Harry clenched his fists so tightly that the faint scars on the back of his right hand stood out white against his skin: *I must not tell lies*.

"How are you even gonna lug all those around?" Ron asked, nodding to the 'to-bring' pile. "Thinking of Transfiguring Harry into a shopping trolley or something?"

"I'll manage," Hermione sniffed, and added *Finding the Founders: Hogwarts' Mothers and Fathers* to it with a look of challenge in her eye.

Harry set aside the newspaper and ran his eyes over the spines of the books she'd deemed too precious to leave behind. "*Everything You Didn't Know About Animagi?* What do you still need that one for? Haven't you already memorised it?"

"No." She rolled her eyes, biting back a smile. "But it never hurts to brush up on the basics."

"You've been an Animagus since *Fourth Year*," Ron reminded with fond irritation. "You're way past the basics. You could teach a class on it, probably."

Harry didn't think there was any 'probably' about it; there didn't seem a subject

Hermione hadn't made it her life's mission to excel at, Potions aside. She'd initially maintained that an Animagus form might help her navigate the halls between classes faster, allowing her more time to study even with her already jam-packed schedule—and certainly her little Polish could book it through the corridors when she wanted—but Harry suspected she'd mostly been jealous that Harry's father and his friends had managed the task as students themselves. McGonagall hadn't taken too much convincing, as Hermione told it. *"It was certainly a shorter order than asking for another Time Turner!"*

Hermione ignored Ron's comment, instead grabbing the next book from the pile—one with a lovely emerald-green cover and a title in silver gilt Harry couldn't make out from the angle. "Ooh—*Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*," she said, waving the book with raised brows. "Maybe we should send Malfoy a copy."

Ron snorted. "Can't be much worth reading wherever he's locked up now."

Harry forced a chuckle of his own. "He never struck me as much for books, though." He moved back to the bed, trying to keep his tone casual. "Hey, Ron—your dad hasn't heard anything about him, has he?"

"Who? Malfoy?" Harry nodded. "Beats me."

"I mean, he's a Death Eater—I saw his Dark Mark. Seems like the Ministry would jump on that, finally have something to really show for all this security theatre?"

Ron just shrugged. "He hasn't mentioned anything to me—though I'm willing to bet he'd steer clear of anything involving the Malfoys, regardless." He inclined his head in thought. "But Malfoy's dad's just busted out of prison—maybe they made a father-son outing of it?"

Hermione sat with her copy of *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* in her lap, tracing the gilt ornamentation with a finger. "What if we have to fight him...?" She looked up, lower lip drawn between her teeth. "I mean—it's not out of the realm of possibility, right? And there might be others, too: children of Death Eaters, or just students who've sided with

Voldemort for whatever reason.”

“Bring it on,” Ron said, flopping back on his bed and folding his arms behind his head. “I’d welcome the opportunity to wipe that stupid smirk off his pointy face.”

Hermione’s shoulders slumped, and she gave a soft sigh. “Well, of course I’d not say no to decking him and his like myself. But—these might be people we know. People we’ve had class with or—or played Quidditch against.” She drew the book to her chest, hugging it. “It’s different, fighting for your life. Trying to kill each other, without any time to figure out if that’s something you even *want* to do.”

“Anyone who’s taken that Mark’s had *plenty* of time to figure out if it was something they ‘want to do,’” Ron reminded her darkly.

“I know,” she bit out. “I’m just saying. I’m not sure it would be an easy choice...or one I could make at all, not ahead of time...”

Ron looked like he had quite a bit more to say on the subject, but Hermione placed the book on top of the ‘to-bring’ pile, and he seemed to decide to let it lie.

It stewed in Harry for longer, though—because this was something he hadn’t really considered. When they’d sworn they were with him, from the outset to the end and everywhere in between, they’d assured him they were doing so with open eyes, well aware of the dangers and risks but bound and determined to see this through at Harry’s side. But perhaps they hadn’t considered—Harry certainly hadn’t—the things they might have to do along the way. To hurt—or worse—former classmates. To destroy lives or risk having their own destroyed. To ruin futures and make murderers of themselves.

Harry didn’t relish the thought, but this was his task, *his* ever so much more than theirs, so he would bear that burden if he had to. He’d kill Stan Shunpike or Malfoy or whoever else took up arms against him in his rush to get to Voldemort if pushed to it. But that didn’t mean Hermione and Ron should have to do the same.

He sat up a bit straighter. “Listen,” he started, and Ron and Hermione looked at him,

curious, before their expressions melted into similar mixtures of resignation and defiance. “I know you said before that you wanted to come with me—”

“Here he goes,” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

“Right on schedule,” Hermione sighed, holding up the next book in the pile. “You know, I think I’ll bring this one, too.” She turned the cover so they could see it said *Hogwarts: A History*. “It’ll be nice, having a little bit of home with us on the road.”

They didn’t *get it*. “You’re not hearing me—”

“No, Harry, you’re *clearly* not hearing us,” Hermione snapped, slamming *Hogwarts: A History* onto the floor next to her and setting the ‘to-bring’ tower to wobbling. “We’re coming with you, and that’s final. You keep saying it’s our decision, and we’ve decided.”

“But—”

“I’d shut it if I were you, mate,” Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry ignored him. “You’ve *just* said you’re having second thoughts! That you’re not sure you could do what needed to be done, if it came down to it. And you shouldn’t *have* to make that decision, you shouldn’t have to be all right with that!”

“Oh, it’s my *dedication* you’re doubting, is it?” Hermione’s voice was frigid, and Ron slid over on the bed with a soft *this one’s on you* as she rounded on Harry. “I have been packing for *weeks*, readying go-bags for all of us, so we’re ready to go at a moment’s notice—which has involved *incredibly* difficult magic, not that you bothered to ask—and smuggling the rest of Mad-Eye’s Polyjuice stock out from under the other Order members’ noses.” Harry hadn’t known that at all, he realised; he’d been a bit self-obsessed these past few days. “I’ve also gone and committed a minor criminal offence—” Harry boggled, “—by performing an unsanctioned Modification of my parents’ memories so they won’t know I’m gone; they’re convinced they’re really Wendell and Monica Wilkins and that it’s been their life’s dream to move to Australia—which they’ve now done. Hopefully this way, Voldemort won’t be able to use them to get information on or

contact me—or you, as unfortunately I’ve told them rather a lot about you.” She glanced at Ron, who was frowning, and added quickly, “And Ron of course.”

Ron nodded, apparently satisfied.

“It should be no trouble to lift the enchantment once we’ve completed our...well, our task—and if worse should come to worst...well, not to brag, but I think I’ve magicked them plenty well enough they’ll live long, happy lives on the Victoria coast, never realising they had a daughter in the first place.” She grinned, smile tight, and her eyes were shining as she shrugged. “So you see? I’m all in.”

Ron looked like he wanted to go over to her, fingers clenched in the bedspread, but nerves seemed to stay him.

Harry shifted uncomfortably, wrong-footed by Hermione’s speech. “I...I’m sorry, I didn’t realise—”

“That Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? What we might have to do? What sort of people we might have to become, fighting by your side?” She sniffed, drawing herself up. “Well, we do.” And then, in an apparent effort to dispel the awkward tension, she waved haphazardly at the door. “Ron’s even transfigured the ghoul in the attic to look like him.”

“Wait—*what?*” Harry’s features scrunched up; he didn’t know if this was more or less shocking than Hermione’s burgeoning criminal record. “Why would he want to do that?”

“Oh, it’s brilliant—Ron, tell him!”

Ron leaned forward, legs folded and elbows resting on his knees. “Well, people might start asking questions when we don’t show up at Hogwarts come the 1st of September, I figure, right? And knowing me, and Hermione, and *you*, they’ll probably figure wherever we are, we’re together, off saving the world—or up to no good, depending on your perspective. Hermione here’s already seen to her folks’ safety, and you’re—no offence—kind of on your own, but I’ve got my whole family to worry about protecting, and I’m no

good at Modifying memories for a single person, let alone everyone in the Burrow.”

“You’re awful hard to forget,” Hermione said with a fond smile.

Ron’s ears went pink, and he waved her off with a shake of his head that said *Oh go on*. “The Death Eaters are bound to come straight for them, to shake them down for information on where we’ve run off to.”

“Get on with it!” Hermione urged, almost vibrating with excitement.

He stayed her with a wave of his hand. “I’m getting to it, geez. Anyway—the ghoul’s gonna come down here and live in my room after we leave. He’ll sit in my bed, and Mum and Dad will tell anyone who comes sniffing around that the *ghoul is me*.”

That sounded absurd, even for wizards. “But—surely no one’s going to actually believe that?”

“That’s the thing! The story’s gonna be that I’ve come down with spattergroit. The ghoul looks horrid on a *good* day, and now he’ll be covered in all these nasty pustules with red hair. Classic case! Plus spattergroit’s really contagious, so no one’s gonna want to touch him with a barge pole. And sure, he can’t say anything, mostly just moans and drools a lot, but that’s what the terminal cases are like once it spreads to the respiratory passages, I hear!” He wagged his brows. “Mum’ll get loads of sympathy pastries, probably. I’m kinda jealous.”

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, and back again, letting their stories sink in. These two wonderful people had upended their lives for him, had gone to lengths unimagined to protect their families and were throwing their whole lot in with Harry’s. *All in*. He still didn’t feel he deserved it, still worried that before all this was over, they’d come to regret their decisions—but this was *their* choice, he was finally starting to accept. He wouldn’t have wanted anyone to make it for him, and so he had no right to make it for them.

He wanted to tell them, in plain language, what this meant to him—what *they* meant to

him, but he couldn't find the words, and before he could say something else that would come out wrong or shove another foot in his mouth, Hermione spared him and cleared her throat. "Now—lest we waste these precious moments we have together without Ron's Mum finding some new menial task to set us, I thought maybe we should discuss where we're going to go first, whenever we leave?" Harry and Ron nodded. "Good. So, I feel like I'm stating the obvious, but perhaps we should make tracking down the remaining Horcruxes our top priority?"

"Sure, absolutely—only trouble is that still doesn't decide where we should go first." He'd been thinking over it himself, truthfully, all summer, and he supposed now was as good a time as any to suggest it, so he took a breath. "...I was thinking maybe we ought to try Godric's Hollow first."

It had been nagging at him, the thought twinging inside his mind like an old scar. He'd put it down to a morbid curiosity to see his old home for himself initially, assuming it was still standing, but over the weeks he'd come to see that was only part of it. There was just...a *feeling*. A strong, inexplicable, ineffable *tug* that told him if he went there, he'd learn things. Not necessarily happy things, but truths. He needed some good truths right about now.

Or maybe it was just that...that was where he'd survived Voldemort trying to kill him once, laid him low and broken. With the prospect of having to do so again so near at hand, maybe he was hoping for some understanding. He didn't have a mother's love to save him this time, so he'd need to leave no stone unturned if he was going to be on his own this time around.

Hermione's lips twisted into an uncertain moue. "You don't think it's risky?" she asked.

"Risky?"

"Voldemort might be keeping watch over it, expecting you to want to visit."

Let him, Harry didn't say. The thought hadn't really occurred to him before, but faced with it now, he felt a rush of adrenaline surge through him, half-hoping that was the case.

Let him try and violate that sacrosanct place; let him try and finish the job he'd done. Horcruxes or no, Harry would find a way to make him regret it.

"I've had a thought..." Ron said. "And maybe it's just me, being thick and not understanding, but...do either of you even know how to destroy these things once we find them?"

Harry frowned. No, that definitely hadn't come up in one of his conversations with Dumbledore.

But Hermione answered, rather softer and almost ashamed, "...I may know how."

"How?" asked Harry.

She bobbed her head. "I've been...doing some reading."

And now he narrowed his eyes, suspicious. "I thought there weren't any books on Horcruxes in the library?"

"Well—no, there weren't. Or rather, there *were*, and then there weren't," she said, nose and cheeks going pink. "Dumbledore removed them all—but he didn't destroy them."

Ron sat up straight. "You sneaky little so and so! You've stolen Dumbledore's private collection, haven't you? Unsanctioned Memory Modification and now grand larceny? Our Hermione's downright devious!" He was grinning, though, clearly enjoying teasing her.

"It wasn't *stealing!*" she protested, looking between them with a kind of manic desperation. Harry thought Ron ought to lay off the teasing, or else it was bound to backfire, as Hermione clearly felt digging about in someone else's library amounted to a capital offence. "I'm only borrowing them, temporarily! I fully intend to return them to the school's collection to dispense with as they please once we've finished with them, but I rather think these are extenuating circumstances. And besides, Dumbledore only removed them from the shelf; if he'd felt they were too dangerous to allow *anyone* to read, then surely he would have—"

“All right, all right,” said Ron. “You’re absolutely positively *not* a master biblioburglar, get to the point!”

“Well, it was really very easy, actually. I just—Summoned them, that’s all. You know—*Accio*. And—they zoomed out of Dumbledore’s study window right into my bag.”

“When did you do this?” Harry asked, wondering when she was ever going to stop surprising him.

“Just...just after the funeral,” she said, her voice so very small. “I know—it’s barbaric, we were supposed to be saying *goodbye*, and I—but well, it just occurred to me that the more we knew about what we were looking for, the better, and I wasn’t actually expecting it to *work*, because Summoning Charms have some convoluted rules and can be finicky depending on the properties of what you’re summoning but—” She cut herself off when Ron looked like he was readying another *Get on with it!* “So I have them now. Every book he confiscated having anything to do with soul magic in general and Horcruxes in particular.” She wrung her hands. “I like to think he would’ve let us borrow them, if we’d been in any position to ask him—I mean, it’s not as if we’re going to use these to make Horcruxes for ourselves, right?”

“Do we sound like we’re complaining?” Ron asked, then glanced around. “So where are they anyway? Already in the Leaning Tower of To-Bring?”

“Some,” she said, rummaging through the unsorted pile before extracting a large volume bound in faded black leather: *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. She held it gingerly, swallowing, as if it was a dead thing—or very dangerous. There was no discounting it was a bit of both, actually. “This one, though...this is the one with the explicit instructions on how to make them. I wish I could say Horcruxes were even the most horrible thing described in this book, but I’d be lying. There’s some absolutely atrocious magic in here.”

“I wonder when Dumbledore removed it from the Library,” Harry said, running a finger down the spine—morbid curiosity had him wanting to flip through it, if he were being honest. “If it wasn’t until he’d been made Headmaster, then I bet this is where Voldemort got his instructions.”

“How to become an invincible Dark Lord in three easy steps!” Ron snorted.

“It’s a bit more than three,” Hermione said with a shudder. “But the book does warn that it makes your soul *terribly* unstable, ripping it apart to place in foreign physical vessels. One has to wonder if he’s even really human anymore at this point.”

Harry thought the answer to that was pretty obvious. “So does it say how to destroy the Horcruxes?”

“Yes—after a fashion, at least.” Ron raised a brow, and she opened the book to a page she’d marked with a leaf. “There’s no itemised list or anything—and it seems one of the few really foolproof ways is what Harry did to Riddle’s diary.”

“What, stabbing it with a *Basilisk fang*?” Harry asked.

“Perfect!” Ron clapped. “I think Mum’s got a couple in the back of the pantry; I’ll just ask if we can borrow them in the morning, shall I?”

“I did say *one* of the ways,” Hermione said with stretched patience. “In short, you’ve got to damage the Horcrux beyond magical repair, to the extent that the soul fragment no longer has a viable vessel to inhabit. Basilisk venom only has one antidote—”

“Phoenix tears,” said Harry, nodding.

“Exactly. Unfortunately, we aren’t liable to find substances with that kind of destructive power stocking the shelves at Slug & Jiggers. And even if we *could* manage to get our hands on Basilisk venom or the like, carrying it around would be far too dangerous. We might have to play it by ear, or just gather as many as we can and search for a way to destroy them later, all at once.”

Harry recalled the ring Dumbledore had tracked down and destroyed, with its cracked signet. He wished he’d had the forethought to ask how Dumbledore had managed it, but it was yet another in a long line of regrets.

The Delacours arrived a few days early for Bill and Fleur’s wedding, as Mr. Weasley

anticipated international travel might become difficult with the institution of new Ministry regulations, and the already crowded Burrow rapidly became too cramped for comfort. Further complicating matters was the bevy of security charms and protections being placed upon the Burrow and its immediate vicinity by both the Order and the Ministry, as if the place hadn't practically been a fortress before.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had insisted Fleur's parents take their bedroom, despite the Delacours' fervent protests, and were now sleeping on the sofa bed in the sitting room. Gabrielle had come along with her parents and was rooming with Fleur in Percy's old room, and while Bill had his bedroom to himself for the moment, he'd soon be sharing with Charlie, who was due in from Romania by Harry's birthday.

With all the new arrivals, it was growing increasingly difficult to find a bit of quiet privacy between the three of them and make plans for their upcoming travels.

Mrs. Weasley also seemed to be nearly at her wits' end, between the heightened security and wedding plans and worrying that Harry, Ron, and Hermione might scarper off the moment her back was turned. Harry felt guilty for at least two of those things, knowing it was his fault she had to deal with such stresses at all, but she waved him off impatiently when he tried to apologise for complications that arose from wedding vendors not being able to visit the site before the festive day.

"Now now, none of that!" she said, flicking her wand at a basket of damp clothes and directing them to pin themselves to a washing line. "Bill will have the safest, most secure wedding one could ask for, won't he? And of course *your* safety's much more important to us all than any piddling inconveniences." Harry rather imagined Bill would have preferred his mother's sanity over wedding venue security. "Actually, I've been wanting to ask you how you wanted to celebrate your birthday."

"My birthday?" He knew it was coming up—but he hadn't imagined there'd be any to-do. Certainly not a 'celebration', at least.

"Well it's an important day! You'll finally be of-age, and that's something worth commemorating in a wizarding household."

“Oh, you really shouldn’t—” Harry began quickly, despairing of Mrs. Weasley putting herself out even *more* on his account. Maybe this was a new tactic of hers to get him to call off the mission: he had to admit, it was kind of working. “Really—let’s just make a normal dinner of it, nothing fancy. I mean, it’s the day before the wedding, so I couldn’t ask...”

She seemed to wilt a little, and Harry wondered if he’d made the right call. “Well, if you’re sure, dear. I’ll invite Remus and Tonks, shall I? And how about Hagrid? We may as well at least have some company.”

“Sure, yeah, sounds perfect. Just a nice quiet evening—but please make sure you don’t go out of your way for me, all right? Especially not...not now.”

She gave him a long, searching look. “You’re family, Harry. If that’s what you want, then you’ll have it.”

Somehow, Harry felt even guiltier for turning down her offer.

Dinner With the Minister

The air was crisp, and at this hour, everything was shaded in the soft blues and greys of approaching dawn. The scree crunched beneath his feet as he plodded along the shallow-graded trail, the mountain face on one side and a fog-covered valley spreading out before him on the other. Lurking beneath the thick blanket of mist that would soon be chased away by the morning sun he knew lay a sleepy town, most of its residents still comfortably abed. He could sense the man he was searching for was near...so very near... Was he down there in the valley, curled up under a knitted blanket or sipping a steaming cup of *kofo* on the porch in his favourite rocking chair? Would his burning questions soon be answered? Would his curiosity at last be sated...?

“—ke up, Harry.”

Something jostled his shoulder, and Harry’s eyes fluttered open, bringing Ron’s concerned face blurring into view. His back ached from lying stretched out on the camp bed in Ron’s dingy attic room. It was just before dawn here, too, just like in his dream, and there was a heavy, weighted quiet that said the rest of the house was still fast asleep. Even Pigwidgeon was snoozing on his perch in the corner, his head lolling as he leaned into the ancient but indulgent Errol.

“You were muttering in your sleep.”

“Was I?” Harry rubbed at his forehead; his scar was prickling.

Ron nodded. “Yeah. Kept saying something about ‘Gregorovitch’.”

Harry frowned. “Who’s that?”

“Beats me—you were the one saying it.” Ron cocked his head. “You don’t know him?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.” It wasn’t entirely true—Harry was sure he’d heard it somewhere,

but he couldn't pin down *where*. "I think...I think Voldemort's looking for him, though."

"So you were dreaming about—?" Harry nodded, and Ron shuddered dramatically. "Yikes. Wouldn't wanna be him, then."

Harry made to sit up up, and Ron drew back to sit on his own bed. There would be no getting back to sleep now, not now that he realised the dream had been more a vision. He tried to remember what he'd seen—any details might help—but like most dreams, all he came away with were wisps and vague emotions. He knew there had been mountains, though. And a town—perhaps the home of this Gregorovitch character. "I think...maybe he's abroad."

"You-Know-Who?"

"And maybe Gregorovitch too. There were mountains, big ones. Don't reckon it was anywhere in Britain." After a moment's beat, he asked, "...Mind if we don't tell Hermione about this? She's on me to try and shut down whatever this connection is, but I dunno how she expects me to keep him out of my head while I'm *asleep*."

"Maybe you need one of those helmets Luna's always going on about." Ron tapped his forehead. "It's the nargles, mate. They're slipping him the key, and in he comes like he owns the place."

Harry laughed weakly, still trying to wrack his mind for where he'd heard the name 'Gregorovitch' before, knowing it was going to bother him until he sorted it out. "For some reason I feel like he's connected to Quidditch somehow..."

Ron's nose wrinkled. "Who, You-Know-Who?"

"Wh—*no*, Gregorovitch."

"Hm..." Ron frowned in thought. "Sure you're not thinking of *Gorgovitch*?"

"Who's that?"

“Dragomir Gorgovitch. Chaser who transferred to the Cannons for a small mint couple of years back. Record-holder for most Quaffle drops in a season.”

“Sounds like first-rate Cannons material to me.”

“You shut your foul mouth right this instant, Harry Potter, or I’ll hex your lips off, and there’s not a damn thing you can do to stop—” Ron’s face lit up. “Hey, there *is* a damn thing you can do to stop me now!” He reached over and punched Harry’s shoulder. “Happy birthday, mate.”

Harry smiled, as he’d completely forgotten. “Yeah, I’m seventeen now!” He cast about for his wand, finding it had fallen from where he’d set it beside his pillow and rolled under the camp bed. Snatching it up, he pointed at a hole in his left sock, through which he could see his wriggling toes. “*Reparo!*” To his delight—and relief, too—the hole began neatly stitching itself together, and Ron favoured him with polite round of applause.

“Now there’s a fine demonstration of what six years at Hogwarts will get you. Wanna try my Cannons jumper next? There’s a stubborn stain Mum just can’t get out.” Harry sent an empty teacup flying at his head next, and he winced and held an arm up in defence.

“For that, I ought to *keep* the present I was gonna give you. Seems like someone’s not feeling too friendly today.” Harry held his hand out expectantly, and Ron rolled his eyes. “Yeah, all right, bend my arm why don’t you.” He drew the gift from the space between his mattress and headboard. “Make sure you open it here; it’s not exactly fit for Mum’s eyes.”

Harry tested the weight. “A book? Sure this isn’t *Hermione’s* present to me?”

“Now now, my dear Mr. Potter, this is decidedly *not* going to be part of our on-the-go library.” He motioned for Harry to unwrap it, revealing the cover. “*Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*. Explains everything you need to know about girls!”

Harry lifted a brow. “Cause I’m gonna meet so many witches when we’re on the run?”

“I’m not saying you’ve gotta use it *now*. Think of it as...insurance for the future! You

know, assuming we survive and whatnot.”

“Big assumption.”

“Really? Doom and gloom on your birthday?” Ron rolled his eyes. “Anyway—Fred and George gave me a copy for my birthday a few months back, and it’s actually proven *pretty* informative.” Harry wondered if Ron had already taken some of the book’s advice, as he seemed ready to swear by it. “Sure, you might not have anyone wooworthy around at the moment, but imagine, if you will, a far-flung future where it’s either heed the sage words of this book, lovingly gifted by your thoughtful best friend, or, you know—” Ron shrugged. “Go with your fall-back.”

“My fall-back?” He hoped Ron wasn’t about to suggest *Ginny*. Ron had been making overtures for months that none of her boyfriends of late had been worth anything and didn’t Harry agree that she needed to find a nice, stable bloke who would get along with the rest of her family and was also as mad about Quidditch as she was? It was starting to get a little uncomfortable, if he were being honest.

“Yeah. Malfoy.”

Harry grimaced. Now he kind of wished Ron *had* suggested Ginny, and he mimed throwing the book at Ron’s head, sending him ducking with a laugh.

“Hey! If anything, that ought to be incentive enough!”

“Yeah yeah, *thanks* for that. Could’ve laid off of *that* topic at least for my birthday. I’m gonna sick up whatever birthday meal your mum makes, and it’ll be your job to explain why.”

They quickly dressed and made their way downstairs, finding a pile of presents waiting on the kitchen table. Mrs. Weasley was standing watch over a frying pan and turned to greet them as they entered, beaming when she saw Harry.

“Oh, you *just* missed Arthur, dear! He had to rush to work early, something about an unscheduled meeting—but he swore he’d be back in time for your dinner and made me

promise to wish you a happy seventeenth.” She nodded to the presents. “You’ve lots of well-wishers wanting to celebrate the occasion with a gift. That’s ours there on top.”

Harry made sure to open that one first, gently untying the ribbon and peeling back the paper with care to reveal what looked to be a golden pocket watch, a bit scuffed with age but still a perfectly beautiful piece.

“It’s tradition to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age,” she said, watching him anxiously over her shoulder as she tended to what smelled like fried eggs. “I’m afraid that one isn’t new like Ron’s; it was actually my brother Fabian’s, and well, he wasn’t terribly careful with his possessions. It’s a bit dented on the back, but—”

Harry launched himself at her, mindful of the hot pans, and wrapped her in a tight hug that he hoped conveyed the depth of his gratitude and an apology for all the trouble he’d caused her and would yet cause. He thought perhaps she might have understood him, for when he released her at length, she patted his cheek clumsily and quickly turned back to her frying pans, distractedly waving her wand and causing a few uncracked eggs to go floating out the kitchen window instead of into a fresh pan.

Hermione joined them before he’d made his way back to the table to start on the rest of the gifts in the pile. “Happy birthday, Harry!” She handed him her gift directly. “I didn’t have much time to do shopping this summer—you know, because of things. But I still hope you like it!” She slipped into a seat next to Ron, asking, “What did you get him?”

Ron pretended not to hear. “Go on, open it up, let’s see!”

It turned out to be a new Sneakoscope, which was perfect, as he couldn’t recall what had happened to his previous one—perhaps it was still stuffed down one of Uncle Vernon’s old socks. The other packages included an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur that would never dull and offered several different self-shave settings, chocolates filled with fancy French wizarding liqueur from the Delacours, and a training Snitch that wouldn’t fly outside a designated radius from Tonks and Remus. He was most interested, though, in the gargantuan box of the latest Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes merchandise from Fred and George, which Hermione whispered would surely come in handy on the road.

They spent most of the afternoon helping set up the back garden for dinner, stretching the dinner table to several times its original length to fit the expanded guest list. Fred and George arrived early with an army of crimson lanterns in tow, which they enchanted to float over guests' heads, flashing a golden '17' in large numbers and setting off a mini fireworks display whenever someone said 'Happy Birthday' within a ten-foot radius. Hermione added to the effect, guiding ropes of fairy lights of alternating crimson and gold to tangle themselves into the shrubbery around the garden. "And it's easy enough to change the colours later," she explained to Mrs. Weasley, who was monitoring the decorating efforts with a close eye. "So you could reuse them for the wedding, if you like."

"You're a wiz at this stuff, 'Mione," Ron said, nodding in admiration.

"Thank you!" She flushed with pride, though her brows were crumpled just a tic in confusion. Ron gave Harry a knowing wink, and mouthed *Chapter Seven*.

As the late afternoon stretched into the early evening, the sky going pale lavenders and bright oranges, the remaining guests arrived. Remus and Tonks showed up with Charlie Weasley in tow, having been tasked with his pick-up and escort from the Portkey Authority, and Hagrid wasn't far behind.

"Seventeen, eh!" said Hagrid, nursing what looked like an entire *bucket* of wine. "Hard teh believe it was six years ago ter the day we met for the first time. Well, the first time you remembered!" He ribbed Harry, brows waggling. "How's that cousin o' yers doin', eh? Still a little—" He made an oinking sound, a devious grin beneath his beard, and Harry thought it might not be his first wine bucket of the evening.

"Not quite so little anymore," Harry said, smiling in memory—he knew he shouldn't still find one of the most traumatising moments of Dudley's life amusing, but he did, all the same.

Hagrid's eyes lit with recollection. "Oh! Right, wanted ter give yeh yer gift in private..." He reached into his coat, pulling out a small drawstring pouch made of some sort of scaly hide and threaded through with a length of cord that suggested it was meant to be worn

around the neck. “Mokeskin!”

“Moke...skin?”

“Yup! Dead useful, those pouches. Yeh can hide anythin’ in there an’ no one but the owner can get it out.” Hagrid leaned over to whisper into Harry’s ear, “And I had a fella in Knockturn Alley fit this one with an Undetectable Extension Charm too—but don’t go tellin’ anyone. Not supposed to slap those on anything but what the Ministry’s approved.”

“Thanks!” Harry said, wondering just how extendable Extension Charms actually were.

Hagrid’s wine-flush darkened, and he waved Harry off with a bashful smile.

Mr. Weasley still had not arrived by the time Mrs. Weasley levitated Harry’s cake out into the garden: a golden Snitch the size of a beach ball with fluttering wings of candy floss. She invited everyone to take their seats, as dinner was ready—she was certain that Arthur would be home at any moment, and he would be mortified to know he’d been responsible for Harry’s feast getting cold.

No one was keen to refuse, given she seemed strung ten ways to Tuesday, so they quickly took their seats. Harry found himself next to Charlie, who had received a brutally short haircut from his mother promptly on arrival; he seemed unable to resist patting his hair every so often, as if he missed its length.

They all reached for cutlery and serving spoons, and Molly removed the lid from the casserole dish with a tea towel, setting it to the side. Permission tacitly granted, they all dove in at once, every witch and wizard for themselves. Charlie politely offered Harry first dibs on what turned out to be a lamb stew, and Harry quickly spooned a healthy serving onto his plate.

“I see Mum’s finally got you eating proper Weasley portions,” Charlie laughed, taking the ladle from Harry.

Harry grinned. “Took a few years, but she wore me down.” And then, a thought occurred

to him. A thought he kind of wished hadn't, but there it was, and now that it was in his head, it wouldn't be leaving any time soon unless he did something about it. He swallowed, mouth dry all of a sudden, and then went for it: "Hey—can I ask you something, Charlie?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Do you..." Harry tried to phrase his question carefully. "What do you know about... about dragon Animagi?"

"*Dragon Animagi?*" Charlie parroted, and across the table, Hermione's head snapped to look at them. Harry resolutely did not make eye contact. Charlie leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his hair again. "Those are rare, yeah. I honestly don't know that much—I work with proper dragons, of course. I do know it doesn't tend to work out too well for the poor sods saddled with such a form, though."

"How so?" Bragge had intimated the same thing, but well, Harry had sorted Malfoy out months ago, hadn't he?

"Well, dragons aren't like normal magical creatures. They're classified as Beasts by our Ministry, but they're actually closer to Beings, like Veela and Centaurs and Merfolk. The Romanian Ministry of Magic even has a special classification for creatures like dragons that are more sapient than most but simply incapable of communication with humans."

"What do you mean by 'sapient'?"

"I mean—they've got...well, feelings. A consciousness—and underneath, instincts that are so strong, so ingrained and part of their being that it's cheap to call them that. Lots of animals have instincts, sure, and they're easy enough to overcome as most any Animagus will tell you, but with dragons...well, history tells us mastering *those* instincts is a lot more difficult than most. Even if the witch or wizard survived the transformation mentally intact—which is a tall order; I'm pretty sure most don't manage it—those instincts would have imprinted on them with such strength that it'd be..." Charlie shook his head, brows lifting. "Unbearable at times, I have to imagine. Dealing with all the

complications of dragons that are usually mitigated to at least *some* degree by being part of a colony—like hoarding, jealousy, mistrust. It'd probably drive a human spare."

"What about..." Harry wondered if he could convince Mrs. Weasley to let him have a little wine, seeing as it was his birthday. "Umm, what about—mates? Like, don't dragons mate for life?"

Charlie let out a low whistle, shaking his head. "Wow. Yeah, that would be—"

They all saw it at the same time—a silver bolt, streaking across the yard with preternatural speed and hopping up onto the table before resolving itself into the form of a moon-bright silver weasel that dimmed the glow of the lanterns floating lazily overhead. It reared up on its hind legs, sniffing the air—and then began speaking in Mr. Weasley's voice:

"Minister for Magic coming with me; be prepared."

Its message delivered, the Patronus promptly vanished with a *pop*, and for a brief moment, everyone simply stared at the table where it had stood in blank silence.

Then there was a flurry of activity. Remus shoved his chair away and grabbed Tonks's hand. "I shouldn't be here," he said. "Harry—I'm sorry—I'll explain later—" But Tonks was already giving him a shove toward the fence line, her wand brandished and an apologetic expression on her face. They broke into a run after a few steps before jumping the fence and vanishing from sight.

Mrs. Weasley, who'd been about to cut into the cake, looked absolutely bewildered, several steps behind the rest of the table. "The Minister—but why—? I don't understand —"

Another *pop* interrupted her lost mumblings, though, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at the garden gate, marching smartly for the lantern-lit garden with Rufus Scrimgeour in tow. Harry felt his stomach churn; this was decidedly *not* how he'd wanted his birthday to end.

He considered for a moment making his escape then and there. He'd promised he'd stay for Bill and Fleur's wedding, but surely anyone could understand not wanting to stick around in such distasteful company.

He lost his chance, though, as Scrimgeour's wandering eye, surveying the setup, lit on Harry. He looked somehow in even worse straits than he had at Dumbledore's funeral, his already craggy face lined deeply with a scraggly beard and grim set to his brows. Clearly, the Ministry's failed efforts to do anything more than coddle folks with empty reassurances weighed heavily on his shoulders. Good.

With a deliberate sort of calm that seemed restrained and put upon, Scrimgeour made his way to the head of the table where Harry sat and took a long look at the remaining guests. Tonks's and Remus's chairs were conspicuously empty now. "...Arthur did not mention I would be crashing a party were I to drop in."

"Kind of crass to mention it to someone who's not been invited," Harry said, and Scrimgeour's thin-lipped grimace deepened.

"...All the same, many happy returns." When Harry did not respond to the congratulations, he laid a hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned in, dropping his voice. "I'm going to need to speak with you in private, Harry." Scrimgeour's jaw tightened, his lip curling just a bit at the corner. "And with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger as well."

"Us?" said Ron, who sat just to Harry's right and had overheard the comment. "What for?"

"Were I to go into it here, it would no longer be a *private* word, would it, Mr. Weasley?" Scrimgeour turned back to Ron's dad, brows raised meaningfully, and Mr. Weasley immediately snapped to attention.

"Oh—er." Mr. Weasley was wringing his hands, looking quite as nervous as he sounded. "The sitting room, I think? Or there's Ron's room, just off the attic—" Out of Scrimgeour's eyeline, Ron was violently miming *NO!* to his father.

“The sitting room should be fine,” Scrimgeour said gruffly, and Mr. Weasley moved to lead them inside—but Scrimgeour cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Your son can show me inside, I’m sure. I think it’s best I handle things from here, Arthur.”

Mr. Weasley swallowed, and he looked a bit ill, but he nodded, looking to Harry. “We’ll just continue the party out here, and you can join us when you’re done.”

The three of them stood, with Ron leading the group back to the house. It was dead silent the whole way and felt not a little like walking to their execution; there could only be one reason the Minister himself was here, showing up out of the blue. The Ministry had somehow realised they were planning on going rogue and was here to put a stop to it.

The Burrow lay dark and cold, with everyone out making merry in the garden. “Some light, I think, would be appropriate,” Scrimgeour said, waving his wand at the oil lamps lining the wall and filling the cosy room with a soft glow that belied the cloud hanging over their heads.

Scrimgeour sank comfortably into the Mr. Weasley’s favoured armchair and gestured for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze onto the shabby sofa just diagonal to it.

“Now, as I’m sure you’ve surmised, I’m here on a bit of sensitive business, and to what I’m sure is our mutual disappointment, it involves the three of you. I’d like to ask you a few questions—separately, if it’s no trouble. Just to ensure there are no…” Scrimgeour narrowed his gaze. “Distractions.” He pointed at Harry and Hermione. “I’ll speak with Mr. Weasley first—”

“Or we can save you some time and just speak to us together,” said Harry in a tone that would have made Uncle Vernon go *polka-dotted* with rage. Hermione gave a sharp nod, clearly of the same mind: Scrimgeour thought they would be easier to pick apart if he attacked them separately. Fuck that. “If it’s that important, you should probably get on with it, Sir.”

Scrimgeour studied them all for a long beat, and Harry could almost hear the Minister’s

teeth being ground down to dust. He must have eventually decided it wasn't worth the trouble, giving Harry even *more* reason to be uncooperative, for he shrugged. "Well, if you're going to insist." He straightened, putting himself back arights. "As I'm sure you've noticed, if you bothered to glance at the most recent issue of the *Daily Prophet*, today was the reading of Albus Dumbledore's will. It should come as no great shock to you that you were mentioned in said will, so I'm here to execute the relevant portions."

Harry blinked, looking to Ron and Hermione, who seemed equally baffled. "His—will?"

Scrimgeour's gaze went appraising, and Harry could almost see the clockwork cogs spinning. "...Yes, his will. In which he bequeathed the three of you several items, which I'm now here to address."

"Wait—*all three* of us?" asked Ron, gesturing to himself and Hermione in bald shock.

"Yes, all three of—"

"Why now?" Harry interrupted. "It's been nearly a month—surely it doesn't take that long to manage a will."

Scrimgeour looked uncomfortable. "The reading was only just held this morning—"

"The public reading, maybe." Hermione snorted, then turned to Harry. "Clearly they wanted to pick through it themselves and pocket whatever seemed valuable."

Finally finding his voice, Scrimgeour dismissed her with a sniff, drawling, "The Ministry does not 'pocket' things, Miss Granger. However, the Decree for Justifiable Confiscation empowers the Ministry to review the contents and confiscate—"

"—'Confiscate items deemed by an impartial committee to be Dark in nature,'" Hermione finished. "It was meant to keep Dark artefacts from being passed down through families and bypassing modern regulations through grandfather clauses." Harry found himself more than a little impressed. Ron was just openly gaping. "And the Ministry has to provide verifiable evidence that the objects are even illegal to begin with before they can convene the committee." She glared at Scrimgeour. "Gonna tell us

Dumbledore's office was just *stacked* with Cursed objects he was trying to pawn off on school children?"

Scrimgeour actually looked a little impressed himself now. "...Impressive grasp of Ministerial reach you've got there, Miss Granger. We could use your like in my office."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm set for the foreseeable future."

Scrimgeour was giving her a very dark look now, and Harry spoke up to distract him. "Well, thanks loads for looking out for our innocence and well-being, Minister, but I can't help wonder why you're finally giving us our stuff. Couldn't find someone willing to Curse them for you as pretext to keep them yourselves?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," Hermione said, then quirked one brow. "But I'd wager it's because the thirty-one day holding period's finally up. They can't keep them any longer than that, per the decree. If the Ministry can't prove they're dangerous within that time, then they've got to pass on the objects as directed in the will—ergo, to us."

Scrimgeour ignored her, turning his focus on Ron, perhaps deeming him the easiest mark of the three of them. "Tell me, Ronald: what sort of sweets did Dumbledore favour?" Harry didn't miss how he'd dropped niceties, back to treating them like children rather than equals.

Ron looked startled at being addressed. "I—huh? Sweets, sir?"

"Yes—he was rather fond of them. I thought you might know which ones were his favourites—I'm sure you enjoyed some with him during your frequent friendly chats, what with you being one of his favourite students and all."

"Er, I'm not really—Harry was the one who..." He looked to Harry—and then caught Hermione behind him giving a very meaningful look that suggested he should maybe stop talking, right away. Too late, though, for Scrimgeour slapped his knee, beaming in triumph.

"If you were not such bosom chums, then why do you think he would have made

personal mention of you in his will, much less left you a gift on his passing? Mr. Potter was correct—it did not, in fact, take us a month to read through Albus Dumbledore’s will. It was brief, succinct, and straightforward in how his assets were to be divided. Most of his personal possessions were left to the Hogwarts archives, while a few trinkets here and there were passed on to private acquaintances.” He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, and studied Ron carefully. “What have you done—or what are you *going* to do—to merit such special treatment? You, who has *just* said he was never all that close to Dumbledore?”

Ron shifted uncomfortably, and Harry was sure there was a stream of foul curses running wild inside his mind. Hermione was probably readying some of her own to loose upon him later, too. “I...I dunno. I mean, yeah we weren’t best mates or anything, but he always liked to compliment me on my new Christmas jumper each year...”

“Come on, Ron, you were a stand-out student!” Hermione said, reaching over to squeeze his arm (with rather more force than seemed appropriate). “Star member of the Quidditch team and a Gryffindor Prefect! Dumbledore was very impressed with you—you’ve made quite the name for yourself over the years. Why, he might have even made you Head Boy this year if he hadn’t passed!”

This was being *rather* liberal, but as Harry didn’t want to wind up with Hermione’s other hand squeezing *his* arm, he let the point stand.

Scrimgeour’s mouth twisted into a sour frown, but he seemed to finally relent when, with a sigh, he reached into his coat pocket and drew out a roll of parchment and a soft leather bag. Holding the parchment up to the light, he cleared his throat.

““The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, being of reasonably sound mind but admittedly not that stable body, do hereby...” Scrimgeour made some mumblings to himself, his eyes scanning the parchment. “...Yes, here we are... ‘To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave...” His eyes flicked up to meet Ron’s, ““The sword of Godric Gryffindor, in the hope that his battle prowess and strategy on the chess board will translate well to this far more

dangerous game in which we find ourselves now involved.”

Ron’s eyes bugged out, and Harry and Hermione stiffened at his side. Harry glanced around, wondering if Scrimgeour had somehow brought the sword along *with* him. But there was no sign of it within the Weasleys’ sitting room, and it didn’t seem like it would have fit in the leather pouch, either, unless this bag too had some manner of Extension Charm on it.

“...So where is it?”

“Not here, I can tell you that,” Scrimgeour said with a superior sniff. “Godric Gryffindor’s sword is property of the *public* and therefore not subject to being willed away by anyone who takes a fancy to it. Dumbledore is in no better a position to give it away as he pleases than he would be at liberty to will away my mother’s Goblin-forged ruby and moonstone tiara. That sword belongs—”

“If not to Ron, then Harry, surely!” said Hermione hotly. “He’s wielded it once already! It came to him from the Sorting Hat when—”

“When he had great need of it?” Scrimgeour looked smug, twisting a lock of his salt-and-pepper hair around a finger. “I certainly hope you weren’t under the impression such an event was unheard of—or even all that rare. That sword has had a habit of popping up in the hands of ‘worthy’ Gryffindors throughout history—and none of them were allowed to claim ownership of it either. Now—” He fixed his calculating gaze on Ron once more. “Why would Dumbledore have left you, or *tried* to leave you, an item so rare, so valuable, if you had but a casual relationship with him? He must have taught *thousands* of students—yet the only ones he remembered in his will were you three. Why is that? To what end did he expect you to use the sword, Mr. Weasley?”

Ron shrugged. “Mum’s cutlery can’t slice steak worth shit; maybe he sympathised. Should put the fear of an angry god into the garden gnomes too, I expect.”

Even in the dim light, Harry could see Scrimgeour’s face flushing with irritation, and Hermione had to bite her lip to keep from smiling too boldly.

After squinting at Ron for another long moment, Scrimgeour turned back to Dumbledore's will with a growl. "To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, in the hope she will learn many a life lesson from the fables therein, as I have in my time."

He then pulled from the leather bag a small book that looked like it'd been around since the invention of the printing press. The binding had been Mended several times over the years, bearing scars of spellwork wrought upon it, and it had a funny, musty smell that suggested it had not been well cared for in its time. Hermione accepted it as if receiving a bomb, and Harry thought she might be holding her breath. Setting it in her lap, she traced a finger over what Harry assumed must be the title, a collection of runes whose meaning he could only guess at.

"Have you read this book before, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No," she said distractedly, still staring at the cover, awestruck.

"Then why do you think it was willed to you?"

"I mean...it's no great secret I like reading," Hermione's voice was very small and thick with building emotion now. She mopped at her eyes with her sleeve. Next to them, Ron began fishing around in his pocket, producing a handkerchief that she took with a weak smile of thanks.

"Why *this* book, then? He had quite the collection—surely you would have benefited more from a compilation of his treatises, or his first-edition copy of *Gamp's Magical Theorems*, rather than a book of fairy tales." Scrimgeour was getting irritated again, as his efforts to prise answers from the three of them failed one by one. Harry almost felt sorry for the Minister, as they really were honestly baffled as to Dumbledore's intent with the gifts so far.

"Perhaps he thought I spent too much time focusing on studies and meant to encourage me to read more for pleasure."

“You’re very bright, Miss Granger. In what I’m sure were many intimate conversations held with your late Headmaster, as you must have been quite close to be included in his will, did you ever happen to discuss codes? Cyphers? Any means of passing messages secretly, through the written word?”

“Of course not,” Hermione scoffed, blowing her nose in Ron’s handkerchief and giving a bright sniff as she pulled herself back together. “Though I don’t imagine that will have stopped the Department of Mysteries or your crack team of Aurors from combing through this book page by page.” She tapped the obviously Mended portions of the bindings. “Your lot’s handiwork?”

Scrimgeour’s frown twisted, showing teeth, and he turned back to the will, fingers crumpling the edges of the parchment from holding on to it so tightly. “To Harry James Potter...” Harry couldn’t help it, he was *excited*. The book hadn’t been too interesting, but Dumbledore had given Ron the bloody *sword of Gryffindor*. What would he leave Harry? What if—what if it was a *map*? Instructions on where to find the other Horcruxes? “I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder to rely on the innate skills with which he has been blessed without forgetting the value of teamwork.”

Harry felt something inside him wilt a bit in disappointment, as that was certainly didn’t *sound* like a weapon or master plan. From the leather pouch, Scrimgeour pulled a tiny golden ball, no bigger than a walnut, with its delicate wings curled close around it at rest. Harry hadn’t seen that first game Snitch in years, but he reckoned it was the same one, and to say its presentation here was anticlimactic was an understatement.

“You played a fair number of Quidditch games in your time at Hogwarts thus far. Why do think Dumbledore left you this particular Snitch?” Scrimgeour asked, though at this point, he mostly sounded resigned to Harry not giving him a straight answer.

“Let me know when you figure it out yourself.” Scrimgeour’s gaze hardened, and Harry shrugged. “I mean, you just said it was to remind me about...self-reliance and teamwork and whatnot. Hard to argue with the man himself.”

“So that’s it, then? A memento from a teacher to a favoured student?”

“You sound like you think it’s *not* that, Sir, so I can’t really help you.”

Scrimgeour leaned forward, holding up the Snitch and inspecting it closely. “Do you know what a ‘flesh memory’ is, Harry?”

Harry shook his head, not having the faintest clue, but Hermione made a soft noise, and after seeming to struggle with herself a bit, she eventually blurted out, “Snitches are imbued with a magical recording of the first person ever to touch them.” At least she didn’t sound too pleased in her performance this time.

Both Harry and Ron gave her bewildered looks; to be shown up by Hermione on the subject of Quidditch was a decisive blow to their pride.

“Ten points to Gryffindor.” Scrimgeour’s sour frown went crooked, hooking into a lopsided grin. “Snitches are handled with gloves at all stages of the manufacturing process, never touching human flesh until first snatched up by a skilled Seeker in a Quidditch game. The Enchantment worked into the Snitch’s casing allows it to recognise the magical signature of that first brush with a witch or wizard, which can then be used to resolve cases of a disputed capture. Now, *this* particular Snitch, Mr. Potter—” He tapped the little ball. “—being your first game Snitch and thus enchanted to respond to only *your* magical signature, would make a *perfect* hiding place for an object—a tiny one, admittedly—that someone wanted to find its way into your hands, and yours alone.”

The excitement from before returned with full force, because shit, Scrimgeour was *right*. That *had* to be why Dumbledore had left him this Snitch. There was no way it was a mere keepsake—no way *any* of these items were, not even Hermione’s book. But if it did have a flesh memory for Harry, and he took it here, in full view of Scrimgeour, what might happen if the Snitch *did* reveal itself on skin contact?

Scrimgeour seemed to be of a similar mind. “Shall we see what the old man’s been up to with this little trinket here?” Scrimgeour held it out for Harry, one brow raised. “Or should I save us both the trouble and simply *ask* you what’s inside?”

“You could ask—I couldn’t rightly tell you, though, since like I said, I dunno why he would’ve left it to me.” Which wasn’t entirely a lie; he had *ideas*, certainly, spurred on by this newfound knowledge concerning the curious manufacture of Snitches, but he didn’t know for sure, and he wasn’t keen on bouncing any of those ideas off a Ministry employee either.

But he had no choice, and maybe if it proved something too dangerous for Scrimgeour to know about, they could overpower and Oblivate him before he could fight back. He was a skilled wizard with decades more experience than the three of them put together, but he was old and one person, and they were young and three. He silently implored Ron and Hermione to be at the ready, hoping they’d come to the same conclusion as Harry had.

He met the Minister’s sharp gaze, holding his hand out obediently, and held his breath until he felt the cool, smooth casing touch his flesh, fingers instinctively gripping in response. The wings gave a spastic flutter, beating against Harry’s fingers and rocking in his grip before the latent magic expended itself and it fell still. The four of them stared as if bewitched, waiting for something—anything—to happen.

Nothing did.

“Well that was fascinating,” Ron muttered, and Hermione failed to stifle an inelegant snort.

“Sounds like maybe you’ve been had, Minister,” Harry said. “You may want to consider this is all just Dumbledore’s idea of a post-mortem prank.”

“He *was* quite the jokester,” Hermione intoned solemnly, though her lips were still quirking up at their corners.

Scrimgeour looked at all of them in turn—and then whipped his wand out and viciously incinerated the parchment, which Harry sincerely hoped had merely been a copy of the will in question. The ashes fluttered to the carpet, swirling in a cloud of dust as Scrimgeour heaved himself to his feet. “Thank you for your time.”

There was some scrabbling at the back door, and Mr. Weasley stumbled inside, white-faced. “Er, were you going to be wrapping things up soon? It’s only, we still haven’t cut the cake yet, and we were hoping...”

Mrs. Weasley poked her head in just behind her husband. “Can’t have your day end without a slice of birthday cake, Harry!” Her voice was thick with false cheer, and she kept an eye fixed on the Minister, who was stuffing his leather pouch back into his coat pocket.

He gave the three of them a final hard look, gaze lingering longest on Harry, before whipping around in a swirl of robes and storming from the room in a huff.

Mr. Weasley chased after him with apologies on his lips, but he returned in short order, shoulders slumped. “Well, he’s gone.”

“Thank fuck.”

“*Ronald Weasley*. Language!”

Ron winced. “Sorry, Mum. But he’s *such* a—well, you know!”

Mr. Weasley stared at the back door, and Harry wondered if there were really any guests still waiting outside, or had everyone scattered like Remus and Tonks after Scrimgeour had shown? Bill and the others might have Apparated up into their rooms, now within the safety of the protective charms.

“So, er, he wouldn’t tell me what he needed to speak with you about, only that it was very urgent...” Mr. Weasley stepped around into the sitting room and took back his chair, which Harry found was something of a relief. Like the tilted world had just righted itself a tick.

He didn’t seem to want to outright ask what the ‘urgent matter’ had been, perhaps feeling it wasn’t his place to pry. Harry appreciated the thought. “Turns out Dumbledore left us a few things in his will. Evidently the Ministry had been holding onto the items and only just decided to pass them on to us.”

Mrs. Weasley bustled outside to summon the others in for refreshments, muttering something about *it just feels safer with a roof over our heads right now*. Harry didn't know why it felt that way, but he agreed.

Once everyone had crowded around the kitchen table, with Hagrid taking Harry, Ron, and Hermione's seat on the sofa, Mrs. Weasley began slicing portions of cake while Harry and Hermione passed around their gifts from Dumbledore for everyone's perusal, with Ron left to lament not being allowed to have his. "Well, it is a valuable historical artefact," Mr. Weasley admitted, patting his bald pate with a frown.

The Tales of Beedle the Bard were met with muted interest and dismissed relatively quickly, and none seemed to see the importance of the Snitch. Charlie, having been a Seeker himself, did recall the bit about flesh memories, but he'd never heard of anyone *hiding* anything in a Snitch. There was a general air of *Oh, was that all?* to the scene, and Harry suspected most of them were now reminding themselves that Dumbledore *had* been a bit on the eccentric side, especially in his later years.

As the hour was drawing late, the requisite chorus of 'Happy Birthday' was delivered in record time between hastily devoured bites of cake before suggestions were made to retire, as they had an early morning ahead of them.

"Are you sure you'll be all right out here, Hagrid?" Mrs. Weasley asked, wincing as Hagrid whacked a tent peg into the ground with a forceful whallop of his fist. He'd been invited to the wedding the next day—the next day!—but even without the glut of guests already bunking in the Burrow, he would've found sleeping inside a tight fit, so he'd offered to set himself up a tent in the back garden.

"Oh don't you worry about me, Molly," Hagrid chuckled, before adding in a loud whisper, "Though I wouldn't say no to a nightcap, if yeh've got anythin' handy."

Harry bid his goodnights, enduring a kiss on the forehead from Mrs. Weasley and a firm clap on the shoulder from Mr. Weasley, before begging off to wash up for bed. As he passed Hermione, who'd just finished Banishing the extra chairs back to the attic, he whispered, "Ron's room."

He quickly readied himself for bed, waiting for the other residents in the house to settle and for Hermione to join them. Ron flipped through *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* boredly, and Harry began sorting through his possessions, trying to decide what deserved slipping into his new Mokeskin pouch. He'd never been overly attached to gold, instead being much more protective of his otherwise priceless possessions, like the Marauder's Map for sure, and R.A.B.'s locket. Definitely his new—well, old—Snitch, and there was less chance of his slicing his finger open again if he kept the shard of Sirius's mirror in the pouch, so in it went as well.

"Think we ought to hide anything else in here?" Harry asked, holding up the pouch, and Ron scratched his chin.

"Ooh—how about my sword of Gryffin—oh *wait*." He shrugged. "I think we're good. But I'd hold off asking Hermione, if I were you, unless you wanna fill it with half the Hogwarts library."

"I'm storing the books in my *own* bag, for your information," Hermione sniffed, slipping through the door just then. It was after eleven now, and they could see that the hallway behind her was dark. "Sorry—Ginny wanted some last-minute help picking out her robes for tomorrow. Seems wizarding weddings are just as perfect for hooking up as Muggle ones, and she means to not start the school year single."

"Hope you picked something sensible, then," Ron warned. "Ankle-length. Sleeves down to about here—" He touched his wrist.

"Oh, naturally. We figured what with all *this* flying free—" Hermione waved over her chest. "—She ought to be more modest with the rest of the outfit. Won't want to show up the bride."

Harry snorted softly, casting a quiet *Muffliato* and relishing, again, his newfound freedom to practise magic whenever he pleased. Hermione took a seat on Harry's camp bed, and he joined Ron on Ron's bed.

"So that was interesting, to say the least," Hermione said, taking *The Tales of Beedle the*

Bard from Ron. “I’m still honestly baffled as to why Dumbledore would have left us anything at all in his will, let alone *these* particular items.”

Harry frowned. “You might not have been that close to him, but he cared for you, still. Respected you, even.”

Hermione gave him a fond smile. “But it hardly compared to how he felt about *you*. And besides, I didn’t mean it like that; more in the sense that...well, it seems rather roundabout. Why wait until he’d died to give us these items, if they’re so important? With no instructions on their use or intention whatsoever.” She frowned, lips thinning in disappointment. “Like that Snitch—oh, I was so sure something was going to happen when you touched it, Harry!”

Harry retrieved the Snitch from the pouch, giving it a little shake to make the wings flutter. “...Well, it might still.”

Ron sat up, suddenly interested. “But the flesh memory didn’t activate.”

“True, but Scrimgeour also forgot one crucial detail about that first Snitch I ever caught.”

Hermione shook her head, clearly not following, but Ron began pounding the mattress, hissing excitedly, “That was the one you—!” He gestured to his mouth, miming taking a huge bite out of something. “Right down the gullet!”

“I didn’t *swallow* it,” Harry reminded, “But otherwise yeah. So I was thinking maybe...”

He could feel his heart thudding against his ribcage, as if trying to jump out and touch the Snitch itself. With a sharp inhalation, he brought the Snitch to his mouth and kissed the cool metal shell.

But again, nothing happened.

Harry’s heart ceased its acrobatics, thudding into his stomach with a weighty disappointment. He’d been *certain* that—

“Harry, look!” Hermione gasped, pointing to the Snitch. “Something’s happening!”

Harry jerked the Snitch away, nearly dropping it—and then he saw it: words being scrawled across the golden surface in a thin cursive script penned with glowing, molten ink that Harry knew instinctively must be Dumbledore’s:

I open at the close.

They flared bright for a brief moment—and then just as quickly faded, though not before Harry had managed to commit them to memory. “I open at the close...” Harry repeated softly, still staring at the now dull, aged gold hull of the Snitch. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hermione and Ron shook their heads, and Harry cursed silently. More damn riddles, as if they didn’t have enough mysteries on their hands already.

He muttered the words to himself a few times over, even brought the Snitch to his lips again and spoke the phrase against the casing, but there was no reaction this time.

Ron grew bored, flopping back down onto his back. “Well what about the sword he left me? You think we’re supposed to use it to protect ourselves?”

Fat lot of good it was going to do, then, and surely Dumbledore had known that. Harry didn’t like Scrimgeour, but he was kind of right: the sword of Gryffindor really wasn’t Dumbledore’s to give away, and if he’d *really* wanted Ron to have it, surely he would’ve plucked it from the case in which it had sat in his office and just *given it* to Ron.

Frustration with both Dumbledore for being so cryptic and themselves for not being able to figure out what must surely be terribly obvious riddles warred within Harry. He’d spent so much time with Dumbledore the previous year—surely there was some simple explanation for all this, some single thread connecting these seemingly disparate objects. Had the sword ever come up at all, or anything about opening or closing? The seaside cave had required a blood sacrifice before it would open to allow them into the chamber that housed the fake Horcrux. Was Harry meant to slice his wrist open over the Snitch,

then? Was there another Horcrux *inside* the Snitch?

Hermione sighed, holding *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* at arms' length. "I know I can be a bit of a bookworm, but why would he think I needed this? I've never even heard of it..." She sounded almost offended, like Dumbledore had been deliberately keeping an important resource from her.

Ron rolled over onto his side, brows knit in disbelief. "Wait, seriously? *Everyone's* heard of these stories! They're classics!"

"Classics?" Hermione scoffed. "In what world?"

"The wizarding world, duh!" He thumped the book. "Beedle wrote dozens of those... whadya call 'em? The stories where you're supposed to learn an important lesson from them."

"Fables?"

Ron shrugged. "That collection's got all the old standbys—your 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune'...your 'The Wizard and the Hopping Pot'...your 'Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump'..."

Hermione snorted, raising a hand to cover her mouth. "You're making those up."

"I'm not!" Ron was starting to sound irritated, and it was in moments like this Harry was reminded that the Weasleys, as much as the Malfoys, were Purebloods and just a bit presumptuous about it at times. "My mum must've worn our family copy to dust reading those stories to us as kids—"

"Yes, well, your mum's a *witch*," Hermione reminded. "And I'm Muggleborn—and Harry might as well be. We grew up hearing about *Muggle* fairy tales, like 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' and 'Puss in Boots'."

"*Puss in Boots*?" Ron snorted, waggling his brows with a leer. "*Now* who's making up titles?"

Hermione raised her wand, casting a soft *Lumos* to better illuminate the cover. The gilding on the runes was so faded, Harry was astounded she could make them out at all. “If this is a book of children’s stories...then I confess I’m even *more* confused as to why Dumbledore would leave it to me.” She wrinkled her nose, and Harry imagined she was weighing the chances these really *were* mundane objects Dumbledore had willed to them as simple mementos from a beloved professor.

“Well, I mean—they’ve been adapted and rewritten tons of times over the centuries. Different authors give different spins on the tales. I hear the original versions by Beedle himself are actually a fair bit darker than the watered-down bedtime stories they’ve become.” Ron gave a dramatic shudder.

A sharp creak from out in the hallway rent the quiet, and they froze. Hermione looked nervously to Harry, but he was certain the *Muffliato* was still holding.

“...We should probably get to bed,” Hermione whispered. “Tomorrow’s a big day.” Harry wasn’t feeling particularly tired, but he silently agreed with her: one more day, and then they could be off. They might not even be here another twenty-four hours; they’d need their strength for the journey ahead.

“And miss seeing Mum send Ginny back to her room to change out of whatever scandalous outfit you two have Transfigured from a negligee?” Ron punched his pillow to fluff it. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Wedding Crashers

At last, the day of the wedding dawned. It felt like weeks since Harry had arrived at the Burrow, already deep into preparations for the ceremony and festivities, but he supposed it had only been a matter of days. With all the excitement, even Mad-Eye's death seemed distant, and Harry hated how the pain of his loss, like Dumbledore's, had dwindled down into a manageable dull throb in his gut. He didn't want to have gotten used to this, didn't want to *ever* get used to it.

But it was difficult to concentrate on anger and sorrow when Mrs. Weasley was shoving baskets of flower arrangements under Harry's nose and reminding him to come back for more once he'd finished placing them at the base of the poles supporting the grand marquee inside of which Bill and Fleur would exchange their vows. Preparations would, it seemed, continue down to the wire.

At breakfast earlier, along with his plate, Mrs. Weasley had presented him with a dram of Polyjuice Potion mixed with hairs Summoned from a Muggle boy living in the local village of Ottery St. Catchpole. "Welcome to the family, Cousin Barney," she'd smiled, ruffling Harry's now vibrant auburn hair, the same colour as the rest of the Weasleys. It was far too dangerous for Harry to attend the wedding as himself, so it was decided he'd go in disguise—and who at an event like this was going to bat a lash at yet another Weasley entering the mix?

Harry finished arranging the flowers just as Hermione summoned the escorts—who were charged with showing guests to their seats—for a final huddle. The seats had been carefully assigned to avoid any clashes between guests (word was Aunt Muriel was *persona non grata* among *several* branches of the Weasley tree by now), and Hermione seemed to take her position as overseer with deadly seriousness. She had a clipboard in one hand, and her wand was tucked behind her ear, looking a rather odd adornment to her tightly plaited curls.

“Guests will arrive here—” She pointed to a line in the grass, composed entirely of marigolds, just under the marquee, “—where they’ll wait for an escort to see them to their seat, after which they may mingle. Once you’ve finished the hand-off, please return promptly so that you can attend to another guest.” She fixed Fred and George with a hard look. “And I do mean *promptly*, no matter how pretty you may deem your guest. Trust that you *won’t* like it if I have to come find you.”

“We’ll just make sure she doesn’t find us, then,” Fred said to Harry in a whispered aside that he was certain Hermione caught.

Beyond the marigold line in the grass ran a long, purple carpet with rows and rows of golden folding chairs on either side. At the head of each row, flanking the aisle, floated the same lanterns that just the day before had been used for Harry’s birthday party. Now, instead of being emblazoned with a large number ‘17’, they showed ‘B’ on the left and ‘F’ on the right, and a clump of golden balloons floated serenely over the pulpit where the actual ceremony would take place. The pitched roof of the marquee overhead was filled with floating fairy lights, bobbing freely like the candles in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. It stirred something in Harry’s chest, and he had to clear his throat once or twice whenever he caught himself staring at them for too long, suddenly conscious of the fact he might never see those candles again.

The sky was a cloudless blue expanse, and the sun shone high overhead—the bride and groom could not have asked for a more pleasant day for their nuptials, Harry thought, which they well deserved.

In short order, the guests began to arrive, popping into existence just beyond the garden hedge. As Mr. Weasley told it, organising the vetting and admission of so many guests into the Burrow’s protection had made several Ministry figures go prematurely grey, and Harry certainly did not envy them the task.

Under Hermione’s strict organisation, the new arrivals were promptly herded in an orderly fashion toward the marigold line just outside the marquee where Harry waited alongside Fred, George, and Ron. Where the guests at Dumbledore’s funeral had dressed

in drab, muted greys and blacks, those marching up the hill now were decidedly more festively attired. Harry had only once before found himself mingling amidst a huge crowd of wizarding folk, and he could confidently say that between the ridiculous hats and hairdos robes in every shade of the rainbow, Bill and Fleur's wedding could stand alongside the Quidditch World Cup for sheer fantastic pomp.

Harry lost himself in crowd-gazing until a familiar voice whispered, "*Wotcher,*" and set him startling to attention.

Tonks grinned at him from underneath a carefully manicured coif of blonde, slicked back with what looked to be a whole bottle of Sneezezy's. "Arthur told us you were the pudgy one with the curly hair." She had her arm looped through Remus's, who was for once wearing a suit that didn't look like it'd been trampled underhoof by a herd of centaur.

Harry stepped out, making a motion to escort them so that they could speak a little longer. "I'm glad you're all right."

Remus gave him a wry grin, ducking his head in apology. "I hope we didn't worry you too badly; it's only, things being the way they are and the Ministry being the Ministry, I thought it might be best if the Minister didn't think you were consorting with...well, my type."

Harry honestly couldn't give a fig how Scrimgeour felt about Harry being friends with werewolves, but he knew that keeping up appearances meant rather a lot to Remus for some reason. He shrugged. "The Ministry's going to have a poor opinion of me whether you're wishing me Happy Birthday or not, so you might as well wish me Happy Birthday and let them suck on it, I say."

Tonks let her arm drop so that she was holding Remus's hand, giving it a fond squeeze. "Scaredy wolf; I told you he wouldn't care."

Remus ducked his head, looking thoroughly embarrassed, and Harry wondered when they'd grown so close. God, he missed so much being confined to the Muggle world over summers; he would not miss another important event in his friends' lives going forward,

he vowed.

With Hermione's threat hanging over his head, he didn't dare dally too long making conversation with Remus and Tonks, and with their blessing, he hurried back to the entrance—where he found Ron desperately trying to escape a conversation with one of the more outlandish wizards Harry had ever seen, which was saying something at *this* gathering. He looked not unlike a Muggle vision of a mad scientist—frizzy white hair poking out from underneath a canary yellow top hat, a manic glint to his (slightly crossed) eyes, and robes covered in a violent floral pattern so loud Harry didn't think a *Silencio* would help. He was speaking excitedly to Ron, his entire body moving as he gesticulated wildly, and a massive pendant bearing an odd symbol, like a triangle with an eye in the centre, hung from a chain around his neck, flopping against his chest with his movements.

Harry made the grave mistake of drawing close enough the wacky wizard caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye, and he broke off his conversation with Ron and beckoned Harry forward. “Another new face! Absolute pleasure to meet you, son—Xenophilius Lovegood!” Oh, well the name alone explained rather a lot. “My daughter and I live just over the hill, you see, and the Weasleys were kind enough to have invited us along. You wouldn't be a schoolmate of my Luna's too, would you?”

“Where is Luna anyway?” Ron asked quickly, clearly relieved at the change of topic. He craned his neck around, searching the crowd. “Has she arrived yet?”

“Oh indeed, indeed. I'm sure she'll be along shortly. She tarried at the garden when she caught sight of your charming gnome infestation! It's a blessing, you know, for so many of these clever creatures to have claimed your property for their colony. Set aside a portion of your crops for their enjoyment, and you'll find the next season's bounty doubled!”

“Yeah, good luck convincing Mum to give them anything other than a swift boot over the fence,” Ron muttered just low enough Mr. Lovegood missed it. “Oh, fantastic! Looks like my services are needed again—'scuse me, Mr. Lovegood!” Ron waved down a group of

what looked to be actual *hags* who were surveying the marquee hungrily. “Ladies! Fret not, help has arrived. Please, allow me to escort you!”

“Charming young man,” Mr. Lovegood said, distractedly, as he watched Ron leave. “A bit flighty, though. Seems like he might be a few Gobstones short of a set.”

“Oh no,” a new voice said, airy and light. “That’s just how Ron is. You get used to him.” Harry whirled around at the new arrival to see Luna Lovegood, her blonde hair hanging in soft ringlets from a crown of braids threaded through with delicate lavender flowers and a large sunflower tucked behind one ear. She too was wearing an aggressively floral set of robes, though hers were fitted a bit more like a dress. “Isn’t that right, Harry?”

“Er—” Harry mumbled, thrown—surely the Polyjuice wasn’t wearing off already? He gave himself a once-over. “I’m—my name is Barney.”

“Oh. I see—summer is the season for change, after all. If that’s how you’d prefer to be addressed, I’m happy to do so.”

It was difficult to tell if he was being teased or not, and he dropped his voice to a loud whisper. “I mean—no, I’ve not really changed my name—just—how did you know it was me...?”

She shrugged. “You’re wearing a very *Harry* expression right now, that’s all. You may want to do something about that, if you’re trying to be inconspicuous.”

“What’s a ‘Harry’ expression?”

She pointed at his nose. “That one.” Harry rubbed at his nose, wrinkling it and feeling quite distressed—was it really that obvious who he was under the red hair and freckles? Perhaps he shouldn’t have come at all—if someone made a scene in the middle of the ceremony, then— “Oh. Now you’ve got a very *Hermione* expression on your face. That’s much better, Barney.”

Fred and George finally made their way back to escort the Lovegoods to their seats after Harry offered to play guinea pig for a few new Wheezes they were trying out later, and

Ron reappeared just as they wandered off. The look on his face said he was wishing he'd stuck it out with Mr. Lovegood, for the witch on his arm, an elderly hunch-backed thing with a lemon-sour expression who looked like a stiff wind might bowl her over, was leaning into him, hauling him down to ear level so she could be sure to be heard.

“—and so I told your mother I wasn't coming unless she could convince me the wedding *was* actually happening, but then I decided it would be just as entertaining if that French tit stood up poor William all the same, so here I am and—*Merlin's beard*, Lovegood's outdone himself this time. No, no I take it back, *that* was worth the trip. Good gad, are we certain that's not a crime against wizarding society these days? Where's an Auror when you need one?” She finally caught sight of Harry and flinched away, barking, “Who are *you*?”

Ron strained to pull away, but the witch held him fast with a grip of steel. “That's—that's just Cousin Barney, Auntie Muriel. He's just visiting for the wedding—he's dad's third cousin twice removed's kid.”

“Oh,” Muriel said flatly, raking Harry's with a look of disdain that rivalled any he'd ever suffered from the likes of Malfoy and his gang. “Another Weasley. Just what the world needed. And speaking of what the world needs right now—I heard Harry Potter was meant to be here. Where is he, Ronald? He *is* here, isn't he? Your mother's been gushing about him being your ‘best mate’; if I find out—”

Ron glanced to Harry in apology. “H—he couldn't make it, that's all. I mean, he's Harry Potter, he's got loads of better places to be these days than a wedding, right?”

“Hmm.” Muriel didn't sound convinced, sniffing in a manner that reminded Harry only too keenly of Aunt Marge. “Well I certainly can't fault him for taking a pass on all *this*.” ‘All this’ evidently meant anyone too far removed from her branch of the family tree and definitely included the Delacours. She turned to Harry, raising her voice unaccountably—perhaps she thought him part of the branch that had moved to Madagascar some generations back and assumed that if she just shouted loud enough, he'd understand. “A pity, though. It's not every day one gets to see a one-of-a-kind Goblin-made tiara on

display.” She added in a loud aside. “She wears it well enough for a French girl, but mark my words, she’s going to try and make off with it before the day’s done. Keep a close eye on it for me, Barney!” She then turned back to Ron, clapping him on the arm. “Well? Going to make me stand for the whole ceremony? Find me my seat, boy!”

Ron winced, and giving Harry a last long look, began to escort the doddering Muriel away into the crowd. Harry decided that pretending to be a foreign-born Weasley who did not speak much English was an excellent way to avoid uncomfortable conversations at an event such as this.

Recognising now that the twins were on to something, keeping busy with escorting guests so they couldn’t be pinned down for too long, Harry returned to the marigold line at the marquee entrance once more, greeting new guests and showing them to their seat. After another few passes, though, the glut of guests had finally dried up, and he was released at last by Hermione as she rushed back into the house to change into her wedding outfit, rolling her eyes when Harry had expressed confusion that she wasn’t going to wear the smart suit for the ceremony.

It was another twenty minutes before he managed to meet up with Ron, who from the look on his face had only just now succeeded in extricating himself from another of Muriel’s long-winded rants.

“Thought she was gonna talk my ear off,” Ron huffed, mopping his forehead with his sleeve as he collapsed against one of the tentpoles.

“Then you and George would match.”

“Speaking of which, where’re he and Fred? They offered to take her off my hands if I played guinea pig for them with some new Wheezes.”

“Sorry, I already called in that favour with them and Mr. Lovegood.”

“Figures,” Ron said, put-out. “She’s not best pleased with them anyway—not after they used her to test some Wheezes prototypes a few years back. She made a stink about

never wanting to be in the same room as them again afterwards, but I think they got the better end of *that* deal.”

“Got any Wheezes prototypes you can test on her, then?”

“Nah, only a couple of Dumbombs—and Mum would string me up seven ways to Sunday if I made a scene in the middle of her carefully curated—*wow*.” Ron straightened out of his slouch, expression going slack. “That’s not what you were wearing earlier.”

“Sharp, Ronald Weasley,” said Hermione with a wry smile, drawing up beside them. She’d traded the simple black suit she’d worn while assigning duties for a lovely lilac number that floated up a bit whenever she turned. In her hands, she gripped a matching bag edged in decorative beads. Her hair was still tamed into the plaits from earlier, but now there were tiny purple flowers threaded through the braids as well. “And nicer than anything your Aunt Muriel had to say to me. I suppose I should count my blessings she at least called me *Muggleborn* instead of anything less charitable.”

Ron cut a dark look over at Muriel, who was now deep in conversation with a harried-looking older gentleman with a long face and stovepipe hat. “Just ignore her and try and stay out of her way. She’s a mean old bat, rude to everyone. If she gets out of hand, we just slap a Silencing Charm on her without her knowing. Then we pretend we can’t hear her and tell her she’s gotta speak up. She’s shouted herself hoarse at many a family gathering, it’s great.”

Oh. Maybe that had been why Muriel was shouting at Harry.

“Muriel gossiping hours, is it?” George sidled up from seemingly out of nowhere. His hair had been slicked back with a generous application of pomade and artfully coiffed to hide then nasty scar where his ear had once been. “Makes you wonder what sort of higher power would take a soul like old Uncle Bilius before the likes of Aunt Muriel.”

“Now *there* was a man who knew how to party!” Fred said, joining George at his side, one elbow thrown up onto George’s shoulder. Their dress robes were fashioned from complementary fabrics of navy and maroon, and they looked as smartly dressed as

Harry had ever seen either of them. “You wouldn’t believe some of the shenanigans he got up to. There was the incident with the disco chandelier—”

“—and the plague of locusts at Great Aunt Francine’s 122nd—”

“—and we can’t forget the one time he Transfigured his meat and two veg into—”

“And he’s dead now, you say? Tragic,” Hermione said, cheeks flushing and rolling her eyes. “Can’t believe I’ll never have the pleasure to make his acquaintance.”

“Oh, but Muriel’s got his portrait banging around somewhere in her place.” George quirked his brows. “I’m sure we can arrange a meeting if you’d like...?”

Hermione looked like she might be sick. “Merlin, spare me. I think I might faint.”

“Then I would catch you,” said a new voice, and they all turned around at once to see who’d come up—a young man, tan of complexion with a prominent Roman nose and bushy black brows over dark eyes. His gaze caught and held on Hermione, and a smile edged at his lips.

“Ohmygosh, *Viktor!*” Hermione’s hands came up to cover her mouth, causing her to drop her clutch, and it hit the ground with a disconcertingly loud *thud* that caused several heads to swivel their way. She quickly dropped into an elegant squat to retrieve it, blushing and tucking behind her ear a curl that had wriggled its way free from her plaits. “It—it’s been ages, I had no idea you’d be—which isn’t to say it’s not *lovely* to see you, just—”

Ron glowered at Krum from where he stood beside Fred and George. “You got an invitation?” he barked, “Or you here to crash the wedding?” Krum, looking startled, fished in his coat pocket for a moment before withdrawing a thick piece of cardstock and passing it to Ron. Ron ran his eyes over it, far too quickly to have processed any of it, and then incinerated it.

Krum looked at the ashes of his invitation, brows raised, and said carefully, “...Fleur invited me. As ve vere Champions together, if you recall.”

Sensing Ron might make a git of himself if someone didn't intervene and having no wish to see Mrs. Weasley make good on her threats to anyone disturbing the nuptials, Harry slipped between Ron and Krum, beaming up at someone who was now several heads taller than the unfortunate Muggle boy whose mien Harry had adopted. "Welcome, sir. Why don't I show you to your seat?"

"I...I don't recall where it was; it was written on the invitation, but—"

"Quite all right, we'll get you sorted, come on now." Harry laid a hand over Krum's massive back and guided him into the marquee, a gesture that was met with only minor resistance while Krum threw a parting glance back at Hermione, who waved weakly at them as they stepped away.

"I was not expecting such a hostile reception," Krum muttered, half to himself, frowning back at Ron as Harry helped navigate him to the section reserved for Fleur's casual acquaintances.

"Er, Ron's just a little tense. Important day, you see."

"He is not the vone getting married, though."

"Yeah, and much more of *that* and he never will," Harry said under his breath.

Scandalised whispers followed him and Krum as they made their way through the rows of chairs, now mostly filled with other guests, and Harry could feel dozens of eyes falling heavy upon them. He panicked for a moment, thinking his Polyjuice dose was wearing off, when he recalled that he was escorting a very large, very handsome, very famous Quidditch player, and the eyes following them largely belonged to women—and not a few men—who were understandably a bit star-struck.

Wary some of them might soon make a leap for it and start asking for autographs, Harry stepped up his pace, quickly helping Krum find his seat, and was just about to return to the entrance when Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George met him on the aisle, shooing him back the way he'd come. "It's showtime! Bottoms in seats, stat!"

Harry joined Ron and Hermione in the second row, behind Fred and George and Ginny, who had not, to Ron's immense relief, decided to go topless to the wedding.

The floating lights overhead went softer, setting the mood and encouraging any stragglers to quickly find their seats. The din of chatter quieted to a hum before shortly settling altogether when the soft strains of what Ron said was a traditional wizarding wedding march began to pipe through the marquee. Heads turned toward the marquee entrance, where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley headed the wedding party, marching arm-in-arm with beaming smiles on their faces. Mr. Weasley had on a handsome set of robes in a rich indigo, while Mrs. Weasley had gone for a muted rose. Both their outfits, Harry could tell, were brand new and had probably been dearly purchased just for the occasion.

Bill followed next, ducking a nervous nod to the rest of his siblings (or at least the ones present; Percy was still a sore subject) before taking his place at the dais alongside Charlie, who was standing as his best man. Somewhere between the previous evening and today, Charlie had managed to regrow his hair so that it hung over his ears. He looked quite a bit happier with the state of his mane than he had at Harry's birthday party, and Mrs. Weasley must have been so distracted with final preparations for the wedding, she hadn't noticed.

The brothers shared a quiet string of whispers, probably to settle Bill's obvious nerves, when the music piping in from nowhere began to swell. The crowd turned as one toward the rear of the marquee, everyone in rapt attention with gazes fixed at the entrance. An unmanned camera Levitated overhead, snapping pictures feverishly.

When Fleur rounded the corner on Monsieur Delacour's arm, Harry thought he finally understood what people meant when they called someone a *vision*. She looked like she'd just stepped out of a dream and seemed sort of ethereal in her presence. Fleur had always had an air about her that made people sit up and listen—but Harry had chalked it up to the Veela heritage. Today, though, her radiance seemed to fill the entire marquee, blessing all in attendance with a fraction of her otherworldly beauty. Gabrielle seemed to sparkle at Fleur's side in her golden dress and hand-me-down jewellery, what remained of Mr. Weasley's usually frazzled hair shone with a lustre any Gringotts goblin would

surely envy, and even Krum looked like he moonlighted as a Greek statue.

Ron was frowning next to Harry, looking at once disturbed and awestruck. “Is it just me...or does Bill look...you know...”

Harry followed his eye; Bill had always been a good-looking bloke with a rakish charm, but today, standing next to Fleur as he accepted her hand from Monsieur Delacour, he could’ve filled out all twelve pages of the *Witch Weekly’s Wonderfulest Wizards* calendar. Harry nodded approvingly. “I wouldn’t kick him out of bed.”

Ron stifled a snort, ducking his head in apology when Hermione threw them a warning look. “Careful; somewhere in a dank cell, Malfoy’s just felt a cold chill of jealousy run down his spine.” Harry added to Hermione’s warning look.

“Dearly beloved,” a wheezy little voice came from up ahead, and Harry craned his neck to see just peeking over the pulpit the tufted hair atop the head of a tiny wizard Harry might have otherwise mistaken for a Goblin. “We are gathered here on this August the first, nineteen hundred and ninety-seven, to celebrate the union of these two souls...”

Now, Harry knew this was a *very* special event—and he felt keenly that it would be the *height* of impropriety to nod off during the ceremony. But the little wizard officiating had a lilting sort of voice that sounded kind of melodic, like a wheezy lullaby, and quite against his wishes, Harry found himself zoning out of the droning speech. He didn’t seem to be the only one, at least; Hermione was rifling through her little beaded bag and—startlingly—had her arm shoved inside it, nearly up to the elbow.

“Do you, William Arthur, take Fleur Isabelle...?”

Harry straightened sharply; hold up, this was the important part. Every eye was tuned to the couple, who were now holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes, clearly lost in a world of their own, as was the sort of thing one expected at events like this.

Was this how weddings in the wizarding world always went? Was he meant to be in one of these some day, standing in front of his friends and family and acquaintances distant

and close and pledging himself to another? He'd never even been to a Muggle wedding, so he didn't rightly know how much the protocol differed between the two societies, but the officiator was saying all the sorts of things Harry imagined you were supposed to say on such an occasion. Having and holding, sickness and health, richer and poorer ("Definitely poorer," George had whispered.) and it sounded lovely.

Lovely, and foreign. Like something he'd expect to happen to others, but not really himself. When he imagined himself up there on the dais in slick black dress robes, he couldn't see the face of the person before him. He tried to imagine someone, any girl, just to see: Cho, Ginny, Luna, even Hermione. And in his mind's eye, they looked as beautiful as Fleur and they blushed and squeezed his hands and bit their lip just so, trying not to make eye contact for too long because well, it was all a bit embarrassing wasn't it? Such a to-do over *them*.

But it was just an illusion; Harry didn't feel anything from it, didn't get excited about it, didn't feel a delightful roiling in his gut that he was hitching himself to one person, for the rest of his life. In his mind, it just felt like something expected of him. That was what you *did*: found someone you fancied enough, married them, settled down somewhere with a sensible job and popped out a kid or three.

Harry had always imagined he'd crave that kind of stability—the life he'd never had, the life he *could* have had if everything hadn't gone so terribly wrong sixteen years back. But it mostly felt like yet another expectation, a role he was meant to play where his own feelings didn't much matter. He'd stand up there with Cho or Ginny or Luna (but probably not Hermione, because he couldn't bring himself to think about her like that, and besides, Ron would probably kill him) and walk the walk he was supposed to and say and do the kinds of things he ought to, but it wouldn't feel real. Not like it was real for Bill and Fleur.

And hypothetical Cho or Ginny or Luna or whoever didn't deserve that. To be someone's *well if I have to*.

"You looked happier at Dumbledore's funeral," Ron hissed.

Harry wiped at his eyes for show. “Shut up, just trying to hold it together here.”

“Makes one of us...” Ron looked over at Hermione, who evidently had been looking for a handkerchief in her bag and was now dabbing at her eyes.

She caught them looking and smiled, warbling softly, “We can’t all be emotionless clods like you, Ronald.”

“...then I declare you bonded for life!”

The wheezy little wizard gave a complicated wave of his wand over Bill and Fleur’s heads—though they had to duck a bit—and a beautiful golden ribbon shot from the end of it, wrapping itself into a bow around their joined hands before exploding in a shower of sparkling glitter that fluttered to the ground, revealing a pair of shining bands set on their ring fingers. The crowd erupted into applause at the display, rising to their feet in a standing ovation as the officiator called out, struggling to be heard over the din, “Let’s have a glorious round for our newlyweds, everyone! Congratulations to them both!”

Bill and Fleur turned to face everyone, still holding hands and grinning ear to ear as they waved. Harry was on his feet, clapping loudly and giving ear-splitting whoops that had Fred and George glancing back to nod with approval at his timbre.

Once bottoms had lifted from seats, the chairs withdrew themselves, dancing off to the sides of the marquee to settle back into circles around a dozen or more tables covered in pristine white tablecloths and extravagant place settings. The tentflaps curled up and tied themselves off, opening the space to allow the warm summer afternoon sunlight to stream in. This was all nice enough, until the grass beneath their very feet suddenly turned itself over, revealing underneath not fresh sod but gleaming bricks that slotted together to form a dance floor. Harry hoped very much that no one fancied a dance with Cousin Barney.

“Ooh, *now* we’re talking,” Ron said, reaching out to swipe a flute of something fizzy and probably alcoholic off a silver tray borne by a disembodied hand. All around them, more disembodied hands were popping into existence, some carrying trays laden with

pumpkin juice and Butterbeer and Firewhisky, while others had savoury treats on tap. Ron took a swig of his drink, then made a sour face. "...Damn, sparkling pumpkin juice."

"Thought it was Butterbeer?" Harry asked.

"Thought it was *real* beer," Ron grumbled, placing the half-empty flute on the next silver tray to come flying by.

The crowd began to press off to the sides as everyone rushed to find a spot at the tables, the seats of which were not assigned this time. Harry's toes were trod on by three different people before he fished out his wand and gave a snooty-looking older witch in aubergine robes a warning glare.

"Do you think we should go congratulate them?" Hermione asked, craning her neck toward the impenetrable scrum of well-wishers now surrounding Bill and Fleur. "Everyone else is."

"You wanna try and horn in on that scene, be my guest," Ron said. "Me, I'm fine waiting 'til they're not stood in the middle of a ravaging horde." He glanced around. "And speaking of ravaging hordes, we should probably try to grab a table before we're forced to babysit Muriel." He inclined his head for Hermione and Harry to follow.

Even with what seemed like half the guests gathered around Bill and Fleur, it was still a task trying to find an unoccupied table, even one with just room enough for three. Most had already been claimed, but they did find one in a distant corner of the marquee with just one other occupant at the moment: Luna.

She seemed delighted that that they wanted to join her, informing them that her father would be back shortly, as he'd only stepped away to deliver their present to Bill and Fleur. A look of worry flashed over her features. "I do hope they open it promptly—I don't think Daddy added any air holes."

Ron looked like he very much wanted to ask what sort of creature the Lovegoods were gifting the new couple and was it a real one or a fantastic one that existed only in their

imagination, but Hermione gave him a meaningful look, and he sort of deflated.

A chorus of clapping erupted from somewhere on the other side of the marquee, and over a *Sonorus*, someone announced that the newlyweds would be enjoying their first turn about the dance floor. Through the crowd, now thinning with everyone having secured spots at tables, Harry could make out Bill and Fleur gliding onto the dance floor as the gentle, melodic strains of a ballad Harry thought he might have heard Mrs. Weasley humming floated through the air. They were joined shortly by Mr. Weasley leading Madame Delacour and Fleur's father with Mrs. Weasley on his arm, followed by more adventurous couples lured by the lilting music and twinkling lights.

"How terribly romantic. I'd quite like to dance, myself," Luna said, staring dreamily out at the swaying couples, and Harry wondered, a knot in his stomach, if it would be rude of him not to ask her to dance now that she'd made such overtures. But she stood in place, smoothing down her robes and adjusting the sunflower at her ear, and said, "I think I will." She then glided out onto the dance floor, twirling and weaving all by herself, eyes closed and a beatific expression on her face.

Sometimes Harry really envied Luna.

But no sooner had Luna's seat been vacated than someone else plopped down into it: Viktor Krum. Hermione gave a pleased little, "Oh," but Krum didn't seem to notice her, staring into the middle distance with a dark scowl on his face. "Who is that man with all the flowers covering his robes?" He nodded across the dance floor to the refreshments area, where Luna's father was pouring himself a cup of fizzy burbleberry punch.

"Xenophilius Lovegood," Hermione said, with Ron adding menacingly, "And he's a stand-up bloke, too, so I trust you've not got a problem with him." Harry doubted Ron was all that interested in defending Luna's father's honour, though, especially when he grabbed Hermione's wrist and gave a tug. "Come on, let's dance."

He gave Hermione no chance to object—but she didn't seem inclined to, letting herself be pulled into the growing throng on the dance floor with only a wave of her fingers for Harry and Krum.

As if he'd only just noticed who he'd been sharing a table with, Krum watched them disappear into the crowd, still frowning but more in confused disappointment than dark fury. "...So they are a couple, then?"

"I...think so?" Harry didn't honestly know *what* was going on with them. He was pretty sure Ron had it bad for Hermione—had been pretty sure of that since around about fourth year—but it was hard to tell with girls sometimes. Hermione seemed equal parts frustrated and flushed with Ron, and how could you be all that happy with someone who drove you mad as much as drove you wild?

"You..." Krum seemed to realise now he hadn't actually been introduced to Harry, despite their earlier interactions.

"Barney. Barney Weasley," Harry said helpfully, and Krum gave a grunt of acknowledgement, then nodded toward Mr. Lovegood again.

"This 'Lovegood' fellow. You know him?"

"Er, only in passing. I go to school with his daughter." Krum's expression had gone angry again, and Harry panicked, worrying Mr. Lovegood had inadvertently offended in what must surely have been an innocent comment or gesture. "Their family's really nice, though. I've known Luna for years."

"I don't know his daughter—but I have seen enough of that man today to know he is absolute *filth*."

"What?" Harry asked, boggling. "What on earth would make you say that?"

"No decent man would have the *gall* to wear that symbol on his chest, in broad daylight, in the company of others."

"Symbol?" Harry squinted at Xenophilius, trying to see what had drawn Krum's ire—was it the necklace, with the weird triangle eye? "Why? What's wrong with it?"

Krum turned and regarded Harry curiously—suspicious at first, then relaxing. "...You

are young, I suppose. Too young to recognise it. He never dared set foot on your shores, after all.” Harry was just about to ask who ‘he’ was, when Krum spat, “Grindelvald. Your ‘Mr. Lovegood’ proudly sports the sign of Grindelvald.”

Harry tried to place the name. “Wait, the Dark wizard that Dumbledore defeated ages ago?”

Krum nodded, dark eyes intense, and he brought a thumb to his mouth, chewing on the nail in what looked to be a nervous habit. “That sign...haunts the nightmares of a generation in my homeland. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—were slaughtered under that sign. By Grindelvald. Good men, standing up to tyranny.” Harry saw in Krum’s eyes a glint he’d caught in his own on more than one occasion—the bone-deep aching desire for revenge. Krum wasn’t speaking in the abstract—he had a personal connection to all this.

Krum grabbed his drink and knocked it back in one draw—it had been something rich and golden, but Harry doubted it was Butterbeer. A drunk man out for revenge was *much* more dangerous and unreasonable and prone to impetuous acts than a sober one, so Harry groped for something—anything—to try and calm Krum down before he did something that would ruin the joyous occasion. “I—I’m sure there’s just been a mix-up.” The idea that Xenophilius Lovegood was in league with Dark wizards was outright preposterous—besides, Krum was the only one so far to have taken note of the symbol, and it wasn’t as if it was easy to miss Mr. Lovegood in his colourful dress robes. Surely Remus or Mr. Weasley would have noticed if someone was waltzing around sporting jewellery brought into fashion by a Dark Lord. Harry swallowed. “Plus, speaking from experience with the Lovegoods, they really like collecting eccentricities and knick-knacks. It’s possible—even probable, I’d say—Mr. Lovegood doesn’t know what he’s wearing. He probably saw it advertised in a pawn shop as a map to the lost city of Atlantis, or—”

Krum slammed a fist on the table, and in a flash of arcane light, his wand was in his hand, appearing like magic. “He either knows what that sign means and wears it with impunity, as so many ignorant fools have done before, hoping to shock and impress others—or he

does not know and is shortly about to be taught its dark, bloody history by someone well familiar with it.” Krum’s nostrils flared, and he cracked his knuckles menacingly. He began to slap the wand on his knee, which was bouncing in nervous habit. “Besides,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “Everyone knows Atlantis was teleported to the Antarctic after the massive earthquake off the isle of Gibraltar ten thousand years ago threatened to drag the city under the waves. Do they not teach the Great Atlantean Retreat in your History of Magic classes?”

They probably *had* taught it and Harry had simply slept through that lesson. “Er, well, I really don’t think he’s wearing it because he’s a follower of Grindelwald.” Krum didn’t look convinced, so Harry cast about for Luna, hoping she might be able to clear things up—when his eyes caught on the hypnotic sparks shooting from the tip of Krum’s wand as he tapped it against his knee. There was something...something about those sparks...

“Gregorovitch!” Harry exclaimed, and Krum gave him a funny look, like he’d just said a swear. Everything slotted smartly into place now—the sparks, the wand, and not Ollivander but *Gregorovitch*. “He made your wand! That’s where I remembered him from!”

And now Krum’s look went less funny and more suspicious, dark bushy brows beetling over his narrowed gaze, and *oh*, Harry had said too much now. “...How did you know my wand was a Gregorovitch piece?”

“Er...” Harry tried to think quickly. “I mean, isn’t he...more popular in your neck of the woods?” He honestly hadn’t the faintest clue about the popularity of wandmakers outside of Ollivander—but maybe Barney Weasley looked just dopey enough for his ignorance to be believed.

“...Not just my ‘neck of the woods’ but most anywhere outside of Britain. Some schools in east Asia will not allow students to sit exams without a wand of Gregorovitch make.” Krum sighed, giving his wand a once over with a frown. “Though I expect that will change soon.”

“...Why’s that?”

“Gregorovitch retired several years back.” He whipped his wand around, and a miniature figure on a broomstick dazzled into view over their heads, chasing after a tiny sparkling Snitch. “I was vone of the last to purchase a vand of his make and not vone crafted by his apprentices. He has a gift with the vood—” He cut a look at Harry, and Harry thought he seemed a bit ashamed. “...Though I do not mean to disparage your own Ollivander.”

The alcohol clearly no longer fired Krum’s blood, only making him just a bit phlegmatic. Not wanting to get into an argument and rile Krum up again, Harry let the slight against the man who’d made his own wand stand unprotested and turned his eyes back to the dance floor, not really watching any of the couples twirling and tapping to an upbeat tune.

So Voldemort was searching for a wandmaker—and not just any wandmaker, but a celebrated, world-renowned one. It didn’t take much effort for Harry to piece together why Voldemort might be searching for a man feted for his skills with wandcraft: he was surely just as concerned as Harry was about whatever had happened the night he’d escaped from Privet Drive. But why go through the trouble of tracking down Gregorovitch when he already had Ollivander? Did he believe Gregorovitch truly more educated on wandlore than Ollivander? Or was this perhaps a last-ditch effort, hoping the retired wandmaker might be able to craft Voldemort a wand that could stand against Harry’s in a fight?

If Harry’s wand was, for whatever reason, unbeatable when it came to a duel with Voldemort, perhaps things weren’t so dire-looking after all.

Or maybe he’d just kill Harry without using his wand.

“I need to—um, use the loo,” Harry said, abruptly leaping from his chair. He set off toward the edge of the dance floor, scanning the crowd for Ron to share his newfound information—and after nearly ten minutes of searching, he finally found him stood with Hermione in the middle of a pack of swaying couples. He tamped down a flash of irritation—didn’t they remember what they were meant to *do*? What a waste of time!—

with a stern silent reminder that they probably did remember and were simply enjoying their last bit of freedom before they all set off.

He left them be, threading through the crowd to people-watch. As the afternoon wore on, bleeding into evening, the celebration began to grow more raucous. Around twilight, an attendant wheeled out a wedding cake of lilac icing gilded in gold that towered ten tiers tall, topped with a miniature Bill and Fleur recreating the new couple's earlier first dance together, and fresh bottles of champagne and sparkling pumpkin juice floated through the throng of guests, topping off empty glasses as they went. The crabapple trees outside sprouted glowing fruit when dusk fell, throwing light out into the back garden, and the guests spilled from the marquee to stretch their legs. Harry caught sight of Fred and George ducking their mother's watchful eye as they slipped off to find some privacy with a pair of Veela-cousins, twins themselves, and Charlie was sat in a circle with a group of warlocks and the hags from earlier, belting out Romanian folk hymns while Hagrid joined in with a concertina so small for his massive bulk that only his index and middle fingers fit through the straps.

At length, Harry wandered back to the table where Krum had been—only to find him gone now. Instead, a hunchbacked elderly wizard had claimed Krum's (well, Luna's) seat and sat alone. What little remained of his hair crowned his head in diaphanous strings, giving him the semblance of a dandelion in a suit. He clutched a flute of champagne in both hands, eyes closed as he bobbed his head to the merry tune piping through the marquee, and Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he'd seen the man somewhere before.

And then he realised where. He approached the table, slowly so as not to startle. "May I sit down?"

The man straightened, blinking owlishly, then broke into a warm smile, extending a hand to the chair at his side. "Of course, of course, feel free."

Harry plopped down in the chair, and then leaned in closely, half to keep his cover and half because he worried he wouldn't be heard over the din of the festivities. "Please don't

make a scene of it, but I'm Harry Potter, Mr. Doge."

Doge, predictably, did make something of a scene, giving a tittering gasp as his hand flew to his chest and caused him to nearly spill his champagne. "Oh, gracious!" He plucked a pair of *pince-nez* from his vest pocket, bringing them up to get a better look. "I heard Arthur mention—but I never expected—goodness me, I'm just tickled!" He wriggled in his seat, all traces of his earlier brooding vanished, and snagged a floating champagne bottle that drifted too near their table, pouring Harry a generous measure. "Enjoying yourself? This wouldn't be your first wizarding wedding, would it?"

Harry accepted the drink graciously, ducking his head. "Is it that obvious?"

"Well most young men nearly break their necks angling to catch the bride's wand holster when the groom tosses it."

"*Wand holster?*" Harry frowned. "Why is she wearing a wand holster?"

"To protect herself, of course! In case she should find someone's Polyjuiced themselves into her new husband!" From the way Doge was grinning, it was difficult to tell if he was being entirely serious about this tradition. He quickly sobered, though, his jaw working. "I'm not entirely sure it would have been my place, but I did think of writing to you, after...well, after Dumbledore's...accident." He took a sip from his glass, and Harry could see his fingers trembling. "I know that you and he were close, and to lose him so suddenly, it must have..." He cleared his throat, and from this close, Harry could see his eyes were glazed with tears.

Harry spared him any further stumbling remarks. "The piece you wrote about him in the *Prophet* was lovely, though. I'm sorry to admit I didn't realise you were such good friends with him."

"Oh." Doge gave a half-hearted shrug, using the lapel of his coat to dab at his eyes. "We weren't so much, not in our later years—only boyhood chums. But I count myself one of his oldest and fastest friends. For a time, we were close as brothers! Which I suppose is something of a disservice to poor Aberforth."

Harry nodded, and though he felt like something of a pillock for it, he pressed, “And er, speaking of the *Prophet*...I noticed that Rita Skeeter of all people had given an interview about Dumbledore...and I wondered if you’d seen it?”

He hadn’t meant to ambush Doge about the truth or lack thereof in Rita’s interview, but the things she’d alluded to were still banging about in Harry’s head and wouldn’t leave until he’d sussed out the facts. Rita could stretch the truth near to snapping, that much was true, but she generally started with a kernel of real, solid *something*. Harry couldn’t imagine that Dumbledore had been a Dark Wizard bent on Muggle subjugation, but he had to know what it was in Dumbledore’s past that would have made Rita think she could get away with saying things like that.

Doge’s entire demeanour changed, and he rapped on the table sharply. “If you could call that drivel an ‘interview’! She dogged me for *weeks* trying to drag a few juicy morsels from my lips that she could twist to fill out that dungheap she’s peddling as a biography, and well, so soon after Albus’s passing, I’m afraid I let my temper get the better of me, telling her off and calling her *quite* a few colourful names. I know I shouldn’t have given her the pleasure, but I’m only human—and I challenge anyone in my place to have done differently!” He sighed, slumping back in his chair. “It was enough ammunition, though, for her to feel comfortable suggesting I’d gone ‘round the bend with grief.”

Harry nodded sympathetically but pushed on. “I...I know I shouldn’t put much stock in anything she writes, but she mentioned a few things in her piece—”

“Rubbish!” Doge said, before Harry had even gotten started, and he felt his irritation rising. It was one thing to defend a friend’s honour—especially when that friend was no longer around to do so himself—but another to defend it *blindly* against all assaults, whether real or imagined. “Absolute nonsense! Trust your gut, dear boy: don’t believe a *word* that snake-charming crone prints about Albus Dumbledore!”

“But she hinted he was involved with the Dark Arts when he was young, and that he actually shared the beliefs of wizards like Grindelwald and V—and You-Know-Who.”

“And you and I *both* know that’s a ridiculous accusation!”

“So—so it *isn't* true?”

“Of course not! It can't be! Why, I'd wager Dumbledore was as close with you toward the end of things as he ever was with me, so look back on those memories you shared with him, hold them close to your heart, and be convinced. *Trust* in what you know Albus Dumbledore to have been: a great man who lived a great life.”

Harry felt himself deflate, a heavy knot growing in his stomach with each sputtered protest on Doge's lips. It wasn't that he didn't want to believe Doge—he did, of *course* he did. It was only, these days...he really, *really* needed something more to go on than blind faith, at least when it came to Dumbledore. Remus had accused him of being too much like his father, of refusing to believe his closest companions could be anything but loyal to him—but this was different. Harry and Dumbledore *hadn't* been bosom companions, whatever Doge thought—so he needed to hear a little more than strident refrains of *don't believe a word of it!* right about now, even concerning something straight from the quill of Rita Skeeter.

He could feel Doge scanning his face, and perhaps sensing that Harry was wavering in the steadfast trust Doge himself had in Dumbledore, he redoubled his efforts, “Listen, that bat would claim the Minister's a werewolf and his wife an oversized mandrake in a dress if she thought it might get a few more eyes on her work—she's got no morals, no qualms! Don't waste another moment dwelling on whatever appalling accusations the likes of Rita Skeeter is—”

“Ooh, are we dishing about *Rita*? Sounds like my kind of conversation!” Harry's head snapped around to see Ron's Aunt Muriel waddling her way over. Her cheeks were much rosier than they'd been when Ron had escorted her to her seat earlier, and even from a distance, Harry could smell the alcohol fumes wafting off her in waves. “I can't *wait* to get my hands on that new biography of Dumbledore's she's penned! I hear it's absolutely salacious! I sent away for it, but one of the mail-order owls came down with the flu and infected the whole owlery, my vendor says, so their entire flock's out of service for the rest of the week.”

“We weren’t *dishing* about her, Muriel,” Doge said with visibly forced restraint, decidedly less effusive in his greeting than he’d been with Harry. “We were discussing how nothing in the book is to be believed—”

Muriel’s back was turned to them now, though, as she pulled a wand out from her cleavage and slashed it viciously through the air, Summoning a chair directly out from under the bottom of an unfortunate guest at the next table over—another Weasley, judging by the hair. When the young man opened his mouth to tell her off, she only barked, “I’m a hundred and seven!” as if this excused everything. Perhaps in this family it did.

She sank into her newly procured chair with a huff and snapped sharply to flag down one of the disembodied hands passing by with a tray of drinks. When it drew near enough, she snatched up one of the bottles of Firewhisky sat atop it, then shooed the hand away again. “This is fine stuff, I must admit. They didn’t seem to want to dip into their vault for the venue, but they’ve at least done all right with the drinks.” She tipped the bottle to refill her glass. “And you can’t claim nothing in the book’s to be believed when you haven’t even *read* it yet, dear Dogey.” She took a loud sip. “I know you were fond of the old buzzard, but I’m sad to say that Albus Dumbledore has *quite* a few skeletons rattling about in that closet of his, and it’s not just idle gossip from Rita!”

“Then it’ll be idle gossip from someone of just as ill repute,” Doge sniffed. “Jealous sorts who can’t stand to see the truly talented succeed, who have to tear someone *else* down in a wasted effort to lift *themselves* up!”

Muriel waved him off with a barked *Bah!* “It’s like arguing with a Flobberworm with you! Just because you don’t like the truth doesn’t make it a lie, you know—or maybe you *don’t* know, seeing as you so skilfully skirted the murkier aspects of Albus Dumbledore’s youth in that obituary of yours. Yes, I read it!” Doge opened his mouth to respond, his offence written clear on his features, but Muriel was merciless, powering on. “I don’t want to hear anything about how Rita Skeeter’s got it out for Dumbledore from the man who would’ve helped him hide the body if it turned out he *did* off his Squib sister!”

“*Muriel!*” Doge hissed, scandalised, and Harry’s heart juddered to a grinding halt in his chest. Squib sister? *Offed* her? He was certain Rita hadn’t mentioned any of that in her interview, and yet Muriel professed she hadn’t read the book yet. Where were these rumours coming from? Why did it feel like everyone else knew Dumbledore better than Harry had?

“But—his sister wasn’t a Squib, was she?” he asked Muriel, unable to contain himself. “I’ve only read she was sickly and couldn’t attend Hogwarts regularly.” Doge’s obituary had briefly touched on Ariana Dumbledore, but Harry was certain there’d been no mention of her having no magic of her own. Even Rita’s interview hadn’t gone so far as to suggest such a thing.

“Well who would’ve *dared* publish the truth of the matter when it might invite the wrath of one of the most powerful wizards out there—er, Barry, wasn’t it?” Muriel feigned politeness, sensing an eager ear for her gossip. “But it’s fair game now! No more hiding the past—” She fixed Doge with a knowing look. “Or trying to paper over it.” A visible tremble of delight rippled through her, from the tip of her feathered hat down to the curled toe-tips of her shoes. “Oh Skeeter’s going to be *swimming* in Galleons if she’s uncovered anything half as juicy as she’s claiming in all these promotional pieces she’s been doing for the past month!” She leaned in close and brought a hand to her mouth to deliver a whispered aside to Harry. “The truth about Ariana Dumbledore’s been something of a journalistic white whale for *ages*. We live in truly interesting times, Barty! You’re a lucky young man.”

“There is no *truth* to go after,” Doge protested, slapping the table with force enough their glasses gave a worrisome hop. “Which is to say, the matter’s always been an open and shut case! Ariana’s ill health was a sensitive subject for the family, that’s all.” He turned a pleading gaze on Harry. “He did his best to hold himself together for the sake of his family, never letting on there was anything amiss—he hated pity, Albus did.” His voice grew thick with emotion again, and Harry worried he was going to do himself ill if he kept getting overworked like this. “And—and then he was so distraught by Ariana’s passing —”

“Well it’s one thing to never speak of her—quite another to never even *see* her!” Muriel arched one of her drawn-on brows. “I don’t see how you can say they weren’t hiding the poor girl when the first time most of us saw her was when she was being laid into the ground at the damn funeral! And how *pale* she was! Like she hadn’t seen the sun once in her life! If nothing else, it’s clear there was some truth to the rumours they kept her locked in the cellar.”

Harry felt a wave of nausea sweep over him. “Why—why would they keep her locked in the cellar?” His world was tilting on its axis, and the festive atmosphere of the wedding seemed dulled somehow, like Harry sat apart from it.

“Of course they didn’t keep her *locked in the cellar*—” Doge started, but Muriel snorted with a cackling derision.

“Because she was an embarrassment! The family’s shame! Kendra Dumbledore couldn’t *stand* the thought of it getting out she’d birthed a Squib—not when opinions of her were already at the ground floor between her husband’s ‘North Sea holiday’ as some might put it and her own blood status.” Muriel pitched her voice lower, whispering *sotto voce*, “*Muggleborn*, as I hear it, though of course she pretended otherwise.”

“That’s prepost—Kendra was not Mugglebo—and Ariana was *not* a Squi—and—” Poor Doge gave a miserable sort of whine as he deflated, defeated. He seemed to be rapidly running out of the energy to combat Muriel’s ruthless deconstruction of the Dumbledore family, and while Harry sympathised, knowing he might have been in a similar position if someone were running off at the mouth about Ron and his family, he was still too shaken himself to do more than listen, rapt, while Muriel steamrolled right over Doge’s toothless protests.

“Well if she wasn’t a Squib, why did she never attend Hogwarts? And if she was—as you and Albus might have claimed—too ill to enrol, why was it she never visited St. Mungo’s? Why did no Healers ever come to call? For that matter, did she ever receive a proper diagnosis?” Muriel immediately raised a hand. “That was a rhetorical question, Dogey dear, because I know quite well—from first-hand accounts—that she did *not*. Now—”

She turned back to Harry, shaking a finger. “I should be clear, back in my day it was perfectly commonplace to hush up any association with Squibs—usually they got shipped off to Muggle schools, where they could associate with students and society more...well, more their *speed*. Where they wouldn’t need to feel like a drag on those around them, and they might actually be able to contribute. So I could have understood if the proud and humbled Kendra had sent her daughter away, in the hopes she might find a better life elsewhere, away from constant reminders of all she could never have.” She took another swig from her goblet, shaking her head in what Harry was certain was feigned sympathy. “But to just *imprison* her, in her own home? Locked away from the world, such that most presumed they’d imagined any mention of her? What sort of a family—what sort of a *person*—condones pretending a whole human being doesn’t even exist?”

Doge’s eyes were shining with unshed tears, and Harry felt another sharp stab of guilt spear through him at having played a part in his misery. It wasn’t Doge’s fault Harry had questions that needed answering, and even if there were skeletons in Dumbledore’s closet, the poor man didn’t have to stand there while Harry and Muriel rifled through them.

But the more Muriel spoke, the more of Dumbledore’s here-to-fore murky youth and family life she laid open to Harry, the more Harry couldn’t help a bubbling, boiling rage begin to build in his midsection, caustic and bitter as it clawed at his throat, because this was all starting to sound disturbingly familiar. He imagined poor Ariana, alone and forgotten, shoved into a cupboard when company came over and told she must be quiet or there’d be no supper that evening—an embarrassment to her family, a ‘freak’ they didn’t want anyone knowing they shared blood with.

There was, of course, every chance Muriel’s sources were dodgy as anything and all of this was exaggerated beyond compare, but what if it wasn’t? What if there was even a kernel of truth to it all? What if Dumbledore *had* known about all this, and had silently (or not silently) sanctioned it? Was it so very difficult to credit? He had, after all, let the Dursleys do as they would with Harry for the first eleven years of his life, and even after that he hadn’t made much fuss. There was a difference between a total stranger’s child and your own sibling—but not so very much.

“And then,” Muriel continued, tracing the lip of her goblet with a bony finger, “There’s the matter of *who* was responsible for Ariana’s death. Because I don’t believe for a minute she just up and keeled over out of the blue from whatever mysterious illness ailed her.” Doge scoffed, but Muriel pretended not to hear. “We can discount Kendra, I think, seeing as she perished—also under mysterious circumstances—not too long before poor Ariana joined her.”

Doge’s moustache bristled. “This is *hardly* the sort of wild conjecture we ought to be indulging in the middle of a wedding! Filicide?! Honestly!”

“Oh pish, it’s only the reception, and I’ve just admitted that filicide was likely *not* the cause—do keep up, Dogey. No, I think it’s far more likely one of the brothers finally got fed up with having to take over Ariana’s full-time care and control and decided to relieve himself of the problem the old-fashioned way.”

“*The old-fash—*” Doge sputtered, nearly snapping the neck of his champagne flute.

“And I don’t want you thinking I’m biased against Albus Dumbledore, Boris,” Muriel said, pasting on a sober expression as she gently swirled the dregs of the Firewhisky in her goblet. “But I will say that only *one* of the boys threw a punch at the other in the middle of the burial ceremony—furious at what had been wrought upon their sister and spitting accusations of blame. You get two guesses who, and the first one doesn’t count!”

Doge stiffened at this, brows furrowing in angry confusion. “...Where did you hear about that?” Harry straightened—if Doge was asking that sort of question, this meant there was indeed some truth to the tales Muriel was spinning. If he hadn’t been paying close attention to Muriel’s lurid recollections before, he certainly was now.

“Hear about what, Dogey? Aberforth pulling a reverse *Episkey* on his brother while their sister lay between them, cold in a casket?” She cackled, taking another swig of her Firewhisky and reaching for the bottle again. She’d nearly made it through half already. “Well, let’s just say I’ve heard it on *very* good first-hand authority from a thoroughly reliable source—” She paused for dramatic effect, then seemed unable to resist boasting about her connections. “*Bathilda Bagshot* herself! My mother used to play cards in a

ladies' group with her, you see—”

“Wait—Bathilda Bagshot? The author of *A History of Magic—that Bathilda Bagshot?*” Hermione would be pleased he'd remembered that, even if Harry had hardly ever touched his copy in all his years at Hogwarts.

“The very same, but it's not polite to interrupt, Barnaby.” She cut a look at Doge, sharp and appraising. “And I can see now you've suddenly realised I've got *something* of an idea what I'm talking about. Not so quick with the protests or excuses now you know I've got my information all but straight from the hippogriff's mouth, eh?” She took another swig of her Firewhisky, going straight for the bottle this time and dispensing with any pretence. She seemed to derive entirely too much glee from pissing on Doge's fond memories of a dear friend by dredging up the ghosts of scandals passed, and Harry didn't honestly know what to think—he doubted Muriel's recollection was the bald truth, but Doge seemed a bit defensive himself, and Harry had to wonder if his memory wasn't as rose-coloured as Rita seemed to suggest.

His interest was finally beginning to flag. He'd hoped indulging Muriel in her bone-deep desire to gossip might help shed light on some of the insinuations Rita had made in her interview, but Muriel seemed only interested in lurid retellings. And unkind as it felt, Harry also didn't feel he could entirely trust Doge's take on the past either, so he was at a loss.

He couldn't believe that Dumbledore would've sat back and let all this business with his sister happen had he known about it—had it been *true*, rather—so how much of their respective takes on the matter was fact, and how much fiction? Would he *ever* get the straight story?

“And just between you and me and this bottle of Firewhisky, I've got a *sneaking* suspicion Bathilda told more than just Mother's bridge group about what went on at that funeral.” She tapped her nose and gave a wink. “Rita's hinting at far too many juicy details in that new book of hers not to have had access to a source closer to the Dumbledores than the average nosey neighbour.”

“That’s absolutely absurd!” Doge sputtered, finding his tongue and his backbone once more; he seemed reinvigorated with a new reputation to protect against what he saw as Muriel’s slings and arrows. “You know as well as I that Bathilda wouldn’t allow the likes of Rita Skeeter to so much as weed her garden, let alone sit down for a tell-all.” He turned to Harry, reaching to cover Harry’s hand with his own. “Bathilda’s no gossip—she’s a gifted magical historian and close personal friend to the Dumbledore family and —”

“And absolutely *gaga* these days, as I hear it,” Muriel added with a rude little grin.

“Well then all the more reason not to believe a word in Skeeter’s book based on any conversations they may or may not have had!” Doge huffed, brightening with vindication.

“Oh pish, there’s more than one way to skin a Kneazle, Dogey. I’m sure Rita’s a dedicated enough journalist she wouldn’t let Bathilda going a bit loopy deter her from chasing down a promising lead.” She shrugged. “Besides, even with no bats in her belfry, Bathilda’s still got oodles of letters and journals and boxes of old photographs, I’m sure—quite the magpie she was, as I recall. Given how close she was with Albus himself, I’d wager she kept copies of correspondence between the two of them as well. If I were half as shrewd as Rita Skeeter when it came to doing my digging, I’d have procured a Portkey for Godric’s Hollow the moment the publishing contract was settled.”

Harry gave a rough jolt, nearly tipping backward in his chair. “Wait, Bathilda Bagshot—she lives in Godric’s Hollow?” Oh, he wouldn’t let Hermione and Ron dismiss his plans to head for Godric’s Hollow first *now*! Bathilda might have known his parents—might have lived next door to them, or across the street. She might even have watched Harry while his mother ran an errand. She’d have *so much* to tell him. “She’s still there?”

“Has been for years. The Dumbledores moved there after Percival got hauled off to Azkaban—you’ll be knowing all about *that* business, I’m sure—” Harry didn’t, and he was seized with a desperate curiosity, but Muriel rolled on. “And Bathilda was their neighbour.”

“So—the Dumbledores, they lived in Godric’s Hollow too?”

“Did I stutter, boy?” Muriel’s lips twisted into a sour frown as she peered into the mouth of the Firewhisky bottle.

Dumbledore...Dumbledore had lived in *Godric’s Hollow*. The very same Godric’s Hollow Harry had lived in—the very same Godric’s Hollow his parents had died in. Why had he never told Harry? Surely it would have come up in conversation, even once—they’d certainly conversed enough over *six years* Dumbledore could have found a way to work it into a chat at some point. Which meant he’d deliberately avoided telling Harry—so the only question was...*why*? Why keep this from him? What could it have hurt, sharing this little nugget of his past with Harry?

A thought came to him: were Lily and James buried there even now? He’d never thought to ask. Was the Potter family plot next to the Dumbledores’? God, had Dumbledore *visited* while Harry had been stuck at Hogwarts over the holidays? Would it have been so very inappropriate to have taken Harry aside and asked him if he might, just the once, like to visit his parents’ graves to pay his respects while Dumbledore laid flowers out for his own family? Each grieving in their own private way, but comforted by doing it together?

His stomach roiled, and a wave of aggrieved nausea washed over him—he was physically *sick* at the thought.

Muriel Vanished the empty Firewhisky bottle and grew bored when her listeners seemed to have tired of her tales, so she toddled back into the crowd, presumably to find some other poor sod to harass, and Doge, perhaps feeling guilty for not being able to properly explain away all of the mysteries of Dumbledore’s past, quietly excused himself. Harry didn’t pay them much heed, barely noticing the party still going at full-tilt around him. It wasn’t until Hermione plopped down into the chair beside him that he even realised she’d been calling his name.

“I think I must have danced my feet down to nubs!” she huffed, her wide grin belying her exhaustion. “I swear someone must have Jinxed my shoes with a *Tarantallegra*—I

just couldn't bring myself to call it a night! Ron eventually had to beg for a break—he's gone to fetch us drinks. Have you not asked anyone to dance? Ginny seemed to have her hands full, but Luna was off on her own, though last I saw her she was going to speak with her father. It looked like he'd been arguing with Viktor. I hope they haven't had too much to drink; it'd be a shame for a row to break out at..." She trailed off, bringing her hand up to Harry's shoulder as he sat there, staring off into the middle distance, with Muriel's cackling still ringing in his ears. "Harry, are you okay...?"

He swallowed, quite sure he'd never been *less* okay and unsure where to begin—

He was saved the trouble, though, when something large and silver came bounding through the crowd, scattering the dancers and skittering to a halt in the middle of the marquee. The graceful lynx struck an imposing figure as it surveyed the crowd. Every head turned, and a deadly hush fell over the guests.

Then the Patronus opened its mouth and spoke in the deep, booming baritone of Kingsley Shacklebolt: "*Ministry fallen. Scrimgeour dead. Run.*"

The Death of Draco Malfoy

It took a moment for the gravity of the situation to sink in, and the guests didn't immediately react to the Patronus's warning, confused murmurs rippling over the crowd to build into a dull drone of indecision.

But then the sharp *CRACK* of someone Apparating—or Disapparating—cleaved the silence, and this seemed to snap the crowd into panicked activity; guests were stampeding away from the tent, fanning out in all directions as they realised with dawning horror that the Patronus had not been a Wheezes prank or anything so harmless. Brooms were pulled from pocket dimensions, portable Portkeys were crudely fashioned with haste, and the air grew thick with the ozone-like burn of frantic magic as guests began Disapparating on the spot, their champagne flutes and steins of Butterbeer crashing to the floor in their wake.

Hermione snapped a hand out, grabbing Harry by the wrist and jerking him to his feet as she threw herself into the crowd. “We’ve got to get Ron! He was getting us drinks by the —”

A terrified cry went up behind them, and Harry glanced over his shoulder; figures clad in dark, formless robes were Apparating directly into the tent, shoving their way through the maddened crowd with brandished wands. “Oh—fuck.”

He had to do something—they could find Ron after—and he fished around in his robe for his wand. Death Eaters, *here*—which meant in all likelihood *Voldemort* would be here too. *Shit. Shit*, they ought to have left. Had Harry's presence at the wedding really been worth risking the lives of the Weasleys and all their guests? He'd given in to emotion once again and been led astray. When was he going to learn he needed to listen to his heart less and his head more? Not soon enough, probably.

He jerked his hand free from Hermione's grip, palming his wand, and turned on his heel

to face the marching line of pale deathshroud masks—

“*PROTEGO!*” came a chorus from all around the marquee, the incantation echoing with a host of raised voices, and a wall of shimmering magic shoved back the oncoming horde.

“*Harry!*” Hermione shrieked, looping her arm through his again and jerking him away from the shield—just beyond, he could see the Death Eaters pacing like caged tigers, searching for chinks in the lattice of spellwork. Even with so many wands behind its casting, the shield wouldn’t hold for long, especially not once Voldemort arrived. Hermione followed his gaze, leaning close and hissing in his ear, “We can’t fight them! We have to get Ron and get out—”

KABLAM! The ten-tiered wedding cake exploded in a hail of icing and sponge as a jet of golden spellfire slammed into it—the shield was already buckling, and the crowd went absolutely mad with wide-eyed terror as it abruptly became every witch and wizard for themselves. Harry’s shoulder wrenched with a painful *yank* as he was buffeted about, and he nearly lost a shoe when it was trod upon in the confused mayhem. Hermione gave a sharp yelp, and he could feel her arm slipping loose from where it was looped through his. They were going to be trampled at this rate, and Harry jabbed his wand at the wizard working his way between them to be sure they weren’t separated—

A great cry went up from the other side of the marquee, followed by screeches of *RUN!* and *THEY’VE GOT US SURROUNDED!*, and Harry’s stomach lurched as he saw the glittering shield shatter, the marquee filling with jets of light in all colours of the rainbow. The crowd abruptly thinned as everyone pelted from the tent at breakneck speed, those who could Disapparating and those who could not fleeing for their lives.

“Harry! Hermione!” someone called, and Hermione twisted about, her mouth opening in a silent cry of relief. Her free arm went out, jerking Ron close by the neck and nearly conking his head against Harry’s as she brought them all together in a tight embrace. He thought at first she was just relieved they’d managed to reunite in the chaos—until he felt the familiar twist of magic about his midsection as she turned on the spot.

His vision tunnelled as darkness crushed in around him, and the hiss of spellfire and

screams of terrorised guests vanished with a faint *pop*. For a brief moment, he was conscious only of Hermione's and Ron's bodies pressed close to his own, arms tight around his neck and waist as they spun away from the chaos.

Harry's shins gave a sharp jolt as his feet slammed into solid ground—concrete, he saw, once his head stopped spinning. There were people all around, and he panicked for a moment, thinking they hadn't managed to get away at all, that some of the enchantments had yet held and they'd been bounced back to the wedding site, but then he noticed that none of the passersby were wearing robes—or had even noticed them pop out of thin air.

“Muggles?” Harry asked, careful to keep all of himself tucked safely within the little alcove Hermione had Apparated them into—a shoelace or knobby knee poking out would quickly give them away.

“Yes,” Hermione said, carefully extricating herself from the tangled knot of arms and elbows the three of them had worked themselves into in their abrupt departure. God, they'd left everyone back there—left them with *Death Eaters*. Maybe left them even with Voldemort—who did not react kindly to Harry slipping away under his nose.

“Where are we?” Ron asked, squinting at the harried rush of Muggles scrambling about their evening business. “London?”

“Tottenham Court Road,” Hermione said, smoothing down her robes and taking several bracing breaths.

“S that in London?”

“Muggle London, yes.” She abruptly shoved them away to shoulder past them, out of their cosy little alcove into the wave of humanity, her heels clacking loudly against the concrete. “Follow me; the Muggles won't notice us, not if I've charmed us properly, but we need to find cover.”

“Haven't we got cover right here?” Ron asked, and Harry silently agreed. He'd honestly

never wanted *less* to just walk right out into the open, with nothing but a witch-in-training's Charmwork standing between himself and a fresh hail of spellfire raining down upon them, but he knew better than to disobey a direct order from Hermione when she was on a mission, and without a word crosswise, he scrambled out behind her, having to do a strange half-jog to keep up, as she was going at rather a quick clip.

"Where are we going?" Harry chanced after they'd gone a few blocks. It was late enough now that most of the shopfronts they passed were dark and empty, but even when they turned off the main street onto a smaller side thoroughfare, there were still groups of what smelled like drunken pub-goers thronging the streets, their peals of laughter and shouts reminding Harry sickeningly of the terrified guests they'd left back at the Burrow. Muggle London felt a whole world away from where they'd just come from, and Harry supposed that, in a way, it was.

"Looking *sharp*, boys," a woman clad in entirely too much (or maybe entirely too little) leather leered at them as they passed by the steps atop which she and her girlfriends were having a smoke. She whistled in brazen invitation, and Harry glanced down at himself; he and Ron were still wearing their dress robes, he realised, and were soon going to attract the attention of far more than the odd drunken lout.

"Fuck, I should've brought my Cloak," Harry muttered, shoulders hunched. Why hadn't he tucked it into his robes? The thing was as precious as his wand, and he felt naked without it.

Ron tugged at the loose material of his dress robes. "I'd take a change of clothes, at least. It's no Invisibility Cloak, but at least we'd be less obviously wizards."

"Shush, you two—I've got your Cloak, Harry, *and* a change of clothes. If I can just find a place for you to—" She abruptly drew to a halt, Harry nearly barrelling into her, and jerked her head down an alleyway. "This'll have to do. In here. And strip."

It spoke to the gravity of the situation that Ron reined in the urge to make a remark, instead hastily tugging at the fastenings to his robe from behind the shelter of a skip bin. Harry did the same, grateful to finally be getting out of his too-tight dress robes—the

Muggle boy whose appearance he'd adopted hadn't quite left his system yet.

"I gotta say, this is *not* how I imagined my evening going..." Ron said, looking rather out of place in nothing but his vest and pants, which he was trying to cover up with his dress robes.

Harry was starting to wish he hadn't chosen today of all days to wear the rattiest pair of boxers he owned; why hadn't he used his newfound ability to cast as he pleased to *Reparo* more than just his old socks? For that matter, why did he still own clothes with holes in them? "As I understand it, lots of people hit up weddings in the hopes they'll wind up in their underpants by the end of the day."

"Usually not with another bloke *and* a girl, though, surely?"

"Only the more adventurous ones, probably."

"Here we are, gentlemen." Hermione produced her small beaded handbag, the one she'd had nearly her whole arm down during the ceremony. She unlaced the cinch and began rummaging inside again before eventually pointing her wand with a huff into the mouth and muttering, "*Accio* essentials!" Out popped several sets of clothing—jeans, bulky pullovers, trainers, and even Harry's Invisibility Cloak, which caught even the faint light filtering into the alleyway as he let the fabric run through his fingers. "Here, get changed now, quickly—there should be enough for everyone."

Ron boggled. "How the bloody hell—"

"Clothes, Ron! Or we'll get arrested by the Muggle police for public indecency before any Death Eaters have a chance at us!" She huffed. "And it's an Undetectable Extension Charm, as you're so curious. Tricky, and probably not as neat as Hagrid's Knockturn Alley contact managed with Harry's Mokeskin pouch, but I think I've done it okay." She peered into the dark bag with a frown. "It's next to impossible to find anything in here without Summoning it or else turning the whole bag inside out, though."

"What else have you got in there?" Harry asked, wriggling out of what he'd assumed

were his own jeans but turned out to probably be Hermione's—he'd probably never have kids now; how did girls *stand* it so tight down there?

“What don't I have? I told you I've been packing for days, getting everything ready so we could make a quick escape if...well, you know. Just in case. And thank goodness I did. I think I've got everything we'll need—clothes, some provisions, gear, and I packed your rucksack this morning, Harry, and—” She gave the bag a little shake, and up echoed the sounds of many heavy items tumbling loosely. “Oh drats, that'll be our library...”

Ron dropped to one knee, re-tying the laces to his trainers. “You really have thought of everything, haven't you? We'd be scorch marks on the dance floor right now without you, I wager.”

She bit her lip. “I just...had a feeling. I mean, I knew the wedding would be a tempting target, so many guests to vet and with so many complicated spells.” She set the bag down and reached for the jeans Harry had discarded, tugging them up underneath the hem of her dress. After toeing on her trainers without bothering to unlace them, she Transfigured the dress into a more sensible top that wouldn't draw as many stares.

“You think someone slipped in who shouldn't have?” Ron asked, expression dark.

“I can't be sure—and you heard Kingsley. The Ministry's fallen, so it's just as possible the protections were removed at the source rather than undone in secret by a mole on the inside. Besides—it doesn't matter. What matters is that we're together, we're safe, and we've got everything we need right in here.” She allowed herself a small breath of relief, catching Ron's eye, and they held the contact for a good twenty seconds while Harry finished zipping his jeans.

“So, what now?” Harry said, breaking what he found to be an uncomfortable silence, and Hermione straightened, clearing her throat. Harry thought she might be blushing, though it was difficult to tell in the darkness of the alleyway.

“*Now* you get under the Cloak—no one's looking for us.”

“Of course they’re looking for us,” Ron snorted. “We’re like three peas in a pod—where one goes, the others can’t be far behind generally. I feel like most anyone who’s out to get Harry will know that by now.”

“Well, yes I suppose that’s true, but Harry’s the more immediately recognisable of us, so as I said, on goes the Cloak! And sharply, we shouldn’t dawdle.”

Harry did as instructed, hearing the tone of her voice shift from casually harried to genuinely frightened. He felt a bit guilty, sitting safe under the Invisibility Cloak while Hermione and Ron stood there exposed, but he knew they could no longer all three of them fit under, and if anything, Harry at least had the element of surprise on his side now should anyone of consequence come upon them.

Still, he didn’t like that they were here, that they’d escaped, and left everyone else behind. That Hermione seemed bent on them *staying* escaped.

“Do you think... Do you think everyone at the wedding, that maybe we should—” he started, but Hermione cut him off with a sharp shake of her head as she shoved their dress robes into her bag.

“I know what you’re thinking, and trust me, I feel the same way—but we can’t go back there, not yet. You’re who they’re looking for, after all; if anything, they’re safer now by your not being there.” She winced as soon as she’d said the words, hearing how they came out. “I...I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to imply—”

Harry shook his head, too worked up to care. “But we’re out in the open now, unprotected. There’s got to be some Charms still up on the Burrow itself, and if we go back, we can at least—”

“I wanna go back as bad as you, mate,” Ron said, voice soft as he ran one hand along his wand, grip tight about the hilt. “More than you even, I’m willing to bet. But we don’t know for sure if any of the protections have held, so going back’s a risk. Plus, I mean—” He shrugged. “Remus and Tonks were there, plus Bill of course, and a handful of other Order members. They don’t need us underfoot—they could handle things surely. And

hey, there's no guarantee the Death Eaters even stuck around once they saw we'd scarpered."

They all three knew that wasn't likely the case; the Death Eaters would have left, certainly, but not before they'd razed everything to the ground—the tent, the gardens, maybe even the house itself. Voldemort would have been furious, and he'd have taken out his failed attempt to seize Harry on anyone within striking distance.

Hermione poked her head out of the alleyway, glancing to and fro. "...I think we should get moving now we're all done here. It's not safe to stay in any one place for long."

The urge to stay tucked away in their safe little cubbyhole was not as strong this time, and Harry was the first out. They moved, slower now, from the alley back onto the main road, taking care to stick together lest anyone slam into Harry unknowingly.

"Not that I'm not grateful to you for getting us outta there quick, but why'd you bring us *here* of all places?" Ron asked Hermione, glancing around, and Harry wondered the same. The area wasn't terribly busy this time of night, but nor was it deserted. There were plenty of witnesses around to tell tale of the three weirdos who'd been roaming about in billowing robes and fancy dresses.

"I'm not sure, to be honest—I've visited a few times with my parents on shopping excursions, but not so very often. I suppose I felt like we'd be safer someplace reasonably Muggle than anywhere in the wizarding world right about now and just instinctively aimed for the most Muggle place I could think of in the moment."

"Well one thing's for sure, no one around here's probably looking for a skinny bloke with a scuffed-up forehead and wonky glasses," Ron said, still scanning the passersby and taking care to place himself between Hermione and the shopfronts where wandering pubcrawlers liked to shout catcalls from. "But we can't freely use magic out here, either, without violating the Statute of Secrecy. Seems an uneven trade-off."

Hermione pursed her lips. "...They make exceptions for matters of life and death, at least." Harry hoped it didn't come to that. "But if either of you have a better idea of

where we ought to go, I'm open to suggestions.”

“What about Grimmauld Place?” Ron asked, and Harry nearly tripped over his own feet, a bit surprised he hadn't thought of that himself. It *was* his, now that Sirius had willed it to him. He hadn't wanted anything to do with it, would probably have happily gone about his life never setting foot in there again, but desperate times and all that.

“We can't; all the Order members know its location, including *Snape*. He could have let every Death Eater in You-Know-Who's ranks have the run of the place by now.”

Ron shook his head. “Not from what I hear—Moody never did trust *Snape*, and once they stopped having Order meetings there, he closed it up tight and slapped a dozen different wards on it to keep *Snape* from sticking his big nose anywhere near the property.”

“Where'd you hear *that*?” Hermione was sceptical.

“Bill was talking it over with Dad a couple of months back—after, well...you know, the business with Dumbledore. He's got the most curse-breaking experience in the Order, and Moody wanted to make sure the wards were as impenetrable as possible.”

Hermione brightened. “That's...well, Bill's great at his job! If he's given whatever anti-*Snape* measures the house has been fitted with his stamp of approval, that may be a viable option.” She gave Ron a funny look. “That's a very good idea, Ron.”

Ron quirked a brow. “I do have them, now and then.”

Harry wondered if he ought to bring up his suspicions about Malfoy's involvement in the Death Eaters knowing about Harry leaving Privet Drive. If he was right, and it *had* been Malfoy's...draw, or whatever, to Harry that'd led them to realise Harry was being moved early, there was a chance he could find them again at Grimmauld Place. But then, the old Black house had been fitted with similar protections to the Burrow, and Voldemort hadn't found Harry *there* until the Ministry had fallen. Maybe they'd be all right; they just had to be careful.

A group of drunken louts had claimed a stoop across the way and were belting out—loudly and off-key—the Muggle national anthem. Hermione cut them a look of annoyance, lips pinched. “Maybe this *wasn’t* the best area to try and lose ourselves in—we should find someplace to sit and regroup.” She scanned the windows as they passed, eyes lighting up with relief. “Here! This should do!”

She reached for the handle of an all-night café, the bell over the door tinkling merrily as they stepped inside. It was low-lit and empty for the moment—perhaps for good reason. Harry suspected the place had seen better days, the stench of grease permeating the air and laying thick over everything it touched. Hermione pointed toward a booth in the back, away from the streetside windows, where they might have some privacy. “After you,” she said, ostensibly to Ron but tugging gently on Harry’s Cloak, and he slipped in first, followed by Ron, with Hermione sitting opposite the both of them. She held her beaded bag tight on her lap, and Harry suspected her wand was close at hand.

They crowded together, heads bowed, and kept as low a profile as possible. The lone waitress manning the till gave them a few moments to collect themselves before sidling over, a notepad in one hand, and Hermione quickly sent her away with a request for *just some coffee, thanks*.

“How long are we going to stay here?” Harry asked in a whisper once the waitress had stepped away. “You said yourself it wasn’t safe to stay in one place for too long.” Were they really striking out on their own now, or were they just going to lie low until it was time for them to rejoin the Weasleys? He bounced one knee nervously under the table, and he could feel the Polyjuice finally fizzling away, his trousers fitting more loosely and his eyesight going fuzzy again. Under the Cloak, he slipped on the extra pair of glasses Hermione had brought along for him, feeling a bit more like himself and safer for it.

“Just long enough to figure out our next move—I don’t like sitting around any more than either of you do, but—” Hermione fell silent, lips pinched between her teeth, when the waitress returned with two mugs, filling them with a thick sludge that looked like it might have been coffee two mornings ago but was now classifiable as toxic waste. Once the waitress was gone again, she continued, “But at least here we’re out of sight, and

maybe we can organise our thoughts better.”

“I thought we’d settled on Grimmauld Place,” Ron said, frowning down at his mug. Harry didn’t feel at all sad not to have one of his own to nurse.

Hermione winced. “Do you...do you really think it’s a good idea, us staying there?”

“You just said it was!”

“Well, yes, I know—and it *is*—but...” She reached for the sugar bowl. “It might be more dangerous, staying in such a populated area for too long. Especially London, so near to where we know there are Death Eaters concentrated.”

“Wait, so you think we should head to an *unpopulated* area, then? Like, go on the run?”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been preparing for?”

“Is it?”

“Well it’s what *I’ve* been preparing for.” She patted the beaded bag. “I’ve got a tent for us and everything.”

Ron blanched, though it was difficult to tell if his dyspeptic expression was because of the topic of conversation or the horrible black sludge coffee. “But—I dunno, shouldn’t we stick around so we can find out what’s going on?”

“We *know* what’s going on—Kingsley’s Patronus just told us and a hundred or more others: the Ministry’s fallen, the Minister—*our* Minister—is dead, and Voldemort’s in charge now.”

Ron shuddered. “You have to use his name? In public, too? What if someone heard you?”

“All the more reason not to stick around London.”

The tinkling of the bell over the door as another customer entered drew their attention—a pair of men in dark suits shuffled inside, taking stock of the interior before claiming a

table along the window fronting the café. The waitress made her way over to them promptly, her pad in her hand, but the burlier of the pair waved her off with a threatening glance and shake of his head.

Hermione leaned forward, dropping her voice down to just barely a whisper. “I say we don’t take any chances. We find the nearest alley and Disapparate, just go straight for the countryside and don’t look back until we’ve put at least three counties between ourselves and the nearest wizarding settlement.”

“But what about—”

“We can contact your family once everything’s settled down and we’re certain we’re as safe as can be. I told you I’ve got camping gear packed in the bag—we should be able to handle ourselves roughing it, at least for a few weeks.”

Ron grimaced at *a few weeks*, swirling his coffee in its mug. “I suppose... We might make things more difficult for them, going back straight away anyway—though that’s assuming they haven’t already been arrested. Poor Bill and Fleur—on their wedding day, too.” He shook his head, bringing the mug to his lips, and took a sip—before grimacing and wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “Merlin, what did you *order* us?” He grabbed a wad of napkins and wiped frantically at his tongue. “Like congealed dishwasher—Muggles actually *drink* this stuff?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen some of the junk you put away at mealtimes; don’t act as if you’ve just had your palate ruined.” She inclined her head toward the door. “Let’s get going—we’ll head back to that alleyway we changed in and Disapparate from there. I think I’ve thought of a site where we can camp out for a bit.”

Ron pushed his mug away with one finger, as if he worried the coffee might retaliate for the slight, and wriggled out of the booth. “Right. Oh—” His eyes went wide. “Wait, have you got Muggle money to pay for this? I don’t think I’ve got so much as a Knut on me...”

“Lucky for you I’m overprepared. I took out all my building society savings before I came to the Burrow.” She unlaced the cinch to her beaded bag, peering inside. “It isn’t

much, really, but if we budget smartly, we should be able to manage well enough for a while at least.”

Just then, the two workmen slipped out of their booth, their imposing frames practically filling the room, and Harry’s hackles rose. “Oi—”

Before he could get a warning out, though, the men reached into their coats and pulled out wands, casting in time with their draw. Harry shoved Ron onto his side, and Hermione instinctively ducked in response, slipping under the table as twin jets of yellow slammed into the wall, right where Ron’s head had been only a heartbeat ago. Shards of broken tile and plaster rained down around them, and Harry popped back up just long enough to whip out his wand, take aim, and cast a panicked, “*Stupefy!*” at the nearer of the two wizards.

The man took the spell square in the face, quite literally not seeing it coming. The force of the blow sent him flying backwards into a stack of chairs, where he slumped to the floor in an unconscious heap.

“*Rowle!*” the other wizard yelped, and in a panic, he sent a spell flying wild into the empty café. It whizzed wide of Harry’s head, hitting the back wall where it slammed into the dish rack, shattering crockery and glassware and sending shards flying in all directions. Harry ducked under a table for cover, and the waitress screamed, making a break for the front door.

Ron had finally gathered his wits—and his wand—and he sent a Stunning spell of his own flying at the remaining Death Eater from the cover of the alcove. The man saw this one coming, though, and dove for cover, causing the spell to instead strike the fleeing waitress, who collapsed just steps from the door.

“Ah, fuck,” Ron hissed under his breath, but it was enough to guide the remaining Death Eater’s aim, and he barked *Expulso* in Ron’s general direction, sending Ron flying into the table under which Harry was crouching. Ron groaned in pain, and Harry gaped, wide-eyed, at the blackened remains of the booth where Hermione had still been hiding.

Shit. Shit *shit*. How had things gone this bad this quickly? Ron would need mending, and Hermione...he couldn't even make her form out amidst the scorched rubble, and—

CRACK.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” Hermione shouted, hale and whole as she Apparated right behind the wizard. This close, there was no chance of missing her target, and the Death Eater straightened with a grunt, arms going down to his sides as he toppled forward, clipping his chin hard on the broken tile flooring.

Breathing heavily, Harry struggled to his feet, drawing back the hood but keeping the Cloak cinched tight about his shoulders. The Death Eater Hermione had paralysed stared up at the ceiling, unblinking, but Harry knew he was still in there, remarking them.

“All right, Harry?” Ron asked, piecing his way over.

“Yeah. Nicely done with the Apparition, Hermione.” She just nodded, clearly still shaken. Harry looked to the Death Eater he'd Stunned. “Think those were the only two?”

“I don't want to find out,” Hermione said.

Ron toed the paralysed Death Eater with his trainer. “Recognise him? I heard him call the other one ‘Rowle’.”

“I think it's Dolohov,” Hermione said. “I've seen posters of him at the Owl Postal Shop in Hogsmeade.” She began making a slow circuit of the dining room, taking in the destruction with wide eyes. “How did they find us?” she wondered, pausing to peer out the front windows, as if expecting reinforcements to arrive at any moment.

Ron shrugged. “Does it matter? If these two found us, more could be on the way. We need to get out of here.”

“But—what about *them*?” She pointed to the Death Eaters. “We can't...they've seen us. They know we're out here, on the run—”

“You want us to *kill* them?!” Ron’s voice went a bit high, and his face was white.

“No! No—just, *no!* We...” She gulped. “We just need to Oblivate them.”

Ron looked profoundly relieved. “All right, but—er, I’m not actually brushed up on my Memory Charms...” He glanced at Harry. “You?”

“You think I’d want to mess around with those things, after seeing what a misfire did to Lockhart?”

They both turned to Hermione, the only one between them with any degree of experience in Modifying memories. If it was good enough for her parents, Harry figured, it was more than good enough for a pair of Death Eaters. She heaved a beleaguered sigh. “And to think you wanted to leave me behind...” She stepped over to Dolohov, dropping into a squat and placing the tip of her wand between his dark, bushy brows. He was shivering, clearly trying to his best to break through the Body-Bind, but Hermione’s spell held fast. She took a deep breath and then slowly released it in a long draw, whispering, “*Oblivate...*”

At once, Dolohov’s eyes went glassy and unfocused, and his shivering ceased.

“Well there you go!” Ron breathed, lips twitching into a smile. “Brilliantly done, Hermione.”

“You’re starting to sound like a teacher about to offer me House Points,” she said with a wry smile. “Not that I don’t appreciate the compliments.”

Harry doubted that was the tone Ron had been aiming for; perhaps this would encourage him to lean a little less on advice from *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*. He surveyed the café with a frown—it looked like a bomb had gone off. “...Cripes, this place is a wreck.”

“Yes—we should make sure we clean up before we leave,” Hermione said. “Ron, help me Levitate these two back into their chairs.”

“Wh—Levitate them? Clean up?” He did as instructed, though, waving his wand vaguely in Rowle’s general direction. His unpolished wand movements caused Rowle to smack his head a few times against upturned tables and busted chairs, which Harry supposed had been the point of the exercise. “What for?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve Obliviated them well enough, but if they come to in the middle of this disaster, it’s going to be quite obvious to them they’ve had their memories tampered with.” She rearranged Dolohov so he was holding an empty mug to his lips. “This way we’ll cover our tracks a bit better.”

“Oh—yeah, good thinking.” Leaving Hermione to deal with Rowle, Ron and Harry quickly set to work restoring the café to its previous condition, dilapidated but at least in one piece. By the time they’d put on a fresh pot of coffee to brew—a small service for whatever poor customers chanced to drop by—Hermione had dealt with the poor waitress.

“I still wonder how on earth they managed to find us—and so quickly!” Hermione said, Levitating the waitress onto a stool near the register so she’d think she just dozed off at the till between customers. “We’re nowhere *near* the Burrow, and even if we’re not that far from Diagon Alley, it still doesn’t make sense.”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “You don’t...you don’t think Harry’s still got the Trace on him?”

“Of course not,” Hermione said, though her voice carried an uncharacteristic note of doubt. “I mean, it breaks automatically once a witch or wizard comes of age—you’d have received a summons for all the magic you’ve been working since—” She shook her head, boggling. “Since yesterday—*god*, has it only been twenty-four hours? This day feels like it’s lasted a week.”

“They could’ve put it back on him, maybe? Just to track him.”

“But it’s *illegal*—”

“Yeah, cause the Death Eaters are *all* about playing by the rules. What if they reinstated

it after they took over the Ministry?”

“It’s illegal *and* it has to be done directly—you can’t just wave your wand from anywhere in the world and place it on someone. You have to weave their unique magical signature into the spell, and that requires touch. No one who could cast it has been anywhere near Harry since it broke this morning, so—”

“Um,” Harry began, raising a hand for their attention, and they turned to stare at him. “I...I think I might know. I mean, it’s just a hunch, but...”

“But what?” Ron prodded.

“I’ve been thinking—ever since we left the Dursleys that night, when the Death Eaters seemed to know I was leaving early. And then, after we heard about Snape joining back up with them, it made a lot of sense.”

Hermione was frowning. “What did?”

“I...I think it’s Malfoy.” Ron and Hermione shared a look that Harry had seen far too many times last year for his pleasure, so he hurried to explain himself. “Just—Bragge, the bloke from the Ministry, he said that Malfoy had sought me out after he first transformed. Like, *physically* gone searching for me when he was a dragon, and even though he wouldn’t have had any way of knowing where in Gryffindor Tower I was, he still managed to tear right into our dorm room. Snape was there at the Ministry when I went to help Malfoy get back to his senses, and he left the room with Malfoy once I’d managed it. What if he’s broken Malfoy out of wherever he was being held and now the Death Eaters are using him as—I dunno, a homing beacon?”

“A foaming what?” Ron asked.

Hermione didn’t look convinced. “But—that sounds awfully far-fetched. I mean, how do you explain them knowing we were moving you early?”

Harry didn’t know, but he dug in his heels. “More far-fetched than the Ministry slapping the Trace back on me somehow?” Hermione bit her lip. “Listen—believe me, or don’t,

the point is that it's a *possibility*, you've got to admit that. We need to hide somewhere, and we need to do it fast, and at this point I see two options: Disapparate to the countryside like you suggested and maybe get tracked down again in short order by Malfoy, or take our chances with Grimmauld Place. At least no one should be able to get us in there, even if they sic Malfoy on us."

Ron rubbed at the back of his neck. "But then we'd be trapped there."

"We can either be trapped or constantly on the run. At least we'll be able to get a good night's sleep knowing no one can get in, even if Malfoy leads them right to the front door," Harry reasoned.

"*Maybe* leads them," Hermione reminded, chewing on a nail. She sighed. "All right—Grimmauld Place. But we're going to case it *carefully* before we set up shop. I don't want to find the Death Eaters have discovered a loop-hole in the Fidelius..."

After checking to be sure their two victims and unfortunate bystander were in proper positions with their memories suitably modified, Harry, Ron, and Hermione grabbed on to each other, and as a unit they twisted into the tight darkness of Apparition, disappearing with a *POP* just as the spells lifted and leaving behind no trace they'd stepped into the café to begin with.

When they popped back into existence mere moments later, they were standing just on the pavement fronting the wild, iron-fenced front garden of Number 12. Grimmauld Place had never been particularly inviting before, but it somehow had become all the more intimidating now that the three of them were on the run. Harry could only hope he hadn't missed something, that coming here hadn't been a colossal mistake. Maybe Snape was a more skilled wizard than Bill, despite his professional curse-breaking skills, and they were walking right into a trap. He supposed now, standing at the front gate, was a poor time to be having these doubts, and he could feel Hermione and Ron's eyes on him, heavy and waiting.

He looked up at Number 12, facing it properly for the first time since Sirius's death. No street lights illuminated its front walk, no lamps burned cheerily from sconces on either

side of its door. It was dark and dead, for all it seemed from the outside, and Harry felt a stirring of guilt, like they shouldn't disturb it.

"Harry..." Hermione whispered, a note of urgency in her voice. "We shouldn't dawdle."

"Right, sorry." He shook his head, shouldering his way through the creaky front gate and jogging along the short cobblestone path that cut through the overgrown lawn, taking the stone steps to the front door two at a time. He tapped the serpent-shaped silver knocker once with his wand and then traced a rune under it as Sirius had shown him. It was supposed to let the house know its master was in residence, but Harry had never tried it himself.

From within the very walls, it sounded like, there came a muffled stream of clicks and clacks followed by some rattling and clattering, as if some number of anti-intruder measures had just been disengaged. The silver knob gave a sharp twist, and the door slowly creaked open.

Peering inside from the threshold, the entryway looked dark and empty, a fine layer of dust coating the floor. At the very least, they could make out no footprints, so it seemed no one else had been through recently. "...Shall we take our chances?" Harry asked, looking to the others.

Ron shrugged. "Probably risking our lives either way—at least we can do it somewhere with a roof over our heads this way." Harry nodded, and stepped through. He'd gotten only two paces inside before the lamps bracketing the entrance flickered to life, and he caught something move out of the corner of his eye. He whipped around, wand brandished—but it was only a hallway mirror, which *harumphed* at him in offence, saying, "Well *there's* a fine 'hello'!"

Harry allowed himself to relax a tick, inclining his head to encourage Ron and Hermione to join him in the entryway. Once they'd all three entered, the door behind them slowly drifted shut, locking once more with a soft click.

It was just as eerie and imposing now as it had been the first time he'd stepped inside:

cobwebbed and musty-smelling and dark and dank, steeped in the foul magics its residents had once so proudly practised, that Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. Any progress Harry and the others had made in their efforts to clean up the place when the Order had used it had clearly been for nought, and he imagined he could feel Walburga Black's judgemental gaze piercing them from behind the thick, dark curtains that concealed her portrait.

"...Well, so far so good, yeah?"

"So far..." Ron said, scanning the moulding overhead and fixtures lining the walls, as if he expected Death Eaters to drop down and pounce upon them. Death Eaters, or else spiders. Probably the latter, given this was Ron.

"Wait," Hermione said, stopping them before they stepped from the entryway with an arm thrown out to keep them from moving any further inside. "We should probably check we're alone before we just waltz inside."

"Already did all my waltzing for the day back at the wedding," Ron muttered, adopting a defensive posture.

Hermione raised her wand, and in a soft whisper that still seemed to carry, she said, "*Homenum revelio*." A blue-white light burst from the tip of her wand, spreading like ripples in a pond down the hall and filling the rooms beyond. But though they waited, expectant, nothing more happened.

"Er, that was anticlimactic," Ron muttered.

Hermione's shoulders unclenched, and she nodded. "I'll take anticlimactic any day of the week. That spell would have told us if there were anyone else lurking about in the immediate vicinity. I suppose now we can at least relax in the knowledge we're the only ones here." Something small skittered across the floorboards in front of them, and she flinched. "Well, the only humans, at least."

"I guess the curses and jinxes worked to keep Snape and his lot out, then," Ron said,

pleased with himself.

“That, or they’ve been disarmed and the Death Eaters only stuck around long enough to set up new traps for us or any Order members that might stop by,” Harry reminded, and Ron blanched.

“Why’d you have to go and say that? I’m not gonna be able to sleep tonight, now.”

“Let’s be on our guard, shall we, boys?” Hermione took point, mounting the creaky stairs to the first floor. Harry felt a bit of a cad, letting her go first, but not enough he made to shoulder past her. They eventually found their way to the drawing room, and the lamps here too lit themselves as soon as they entered. It was chilly and smelled of old dust, and Harry’s eyes itched behind his glasses. Hermione rubbed her arms for warmth, glancing around warily as if she thought someone might leap from a cupboard or tumble out of the fire grate at any moment. Ron brushed past Harry, making for the far window, and he used his wand to draw back the curtain just enough to peer out into the darkness.

“See anyone?” Harry asked.

“Can’t see much of *anything*, to be honest—but it doesn’t look like we’ve been followed, at least?” He turned back to Harry and Hermione. “How long does it take for them to send a summons if you’ve been Traced?”

“They were pretty prompt about it the last time,” Harry said, grimacing at the memory.

“Maybe we managed it, then? Surely they’d be stalking up the front walk as we speak if they knew Harry was in here.”

“They’re wizards, Ron. If they don’t want to be seen, it’s quite easy for them to manage.” Hermione was understandably testy after the day they’d had, and she was slapping her cheeks lightly to stay awake.

“Yeah, I guess. But even if they were out there, or if they found us later—like with Malfoy, how Harry suggested—they can’t get in.” Ron looked around, nodding at the room. “Seems safe enough for the night.”

“For the night,” Hermione allowed. “I don’t think we should wander around any more until we’ve gotten some sleep, though. And even then, we shouldn’t be alone. We still don’t know if there are any traps around.”

It wouldn’t even have to be traps Death Eaters had lain recently; they’d never quite finished going through all of the contents of Number 12 the first time around, so who knew what was still rattling around here, waiting to give them a nasty shock?

Harry’s stomach gurgled loudly, and he smiled sheepishly when Ron raised a brow at him. “...Well we kind of got attacked before we could order anything from the shop.”

Ron rubbed his belly sympathetically. “I wouldn’t say no to something myself, if only to get rid of the taste of that coffee—it bloody *lingers*. It’s not supposed to do that, is it?”

“No, it’s not” Hermione said, shaking her head around a fond smile. “I wonder if there’s anything in the—Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry was doubled over in pain, and no, he was not all right at all. He fought back a pitiful whimper, his hand going to his forehead to press hard on his scar. A jet of bright, hot pain snapped down the middle of it, sending images flashing through his mind and foreign emotions coursing through his veins. A large, looming shadow, backlit by firelight—and bile-sour fury gnawing at his insides. The sensations wracked his body, sending him spasming to his knees with a cry.

“*Harry!*” Hermione shouted, scrambling forward, and Ron sank to his knees beside him, hands on Harry’s shoulders to keep him from toppling forward and smacking his head on a sidetable.

“Harry? Harry, mate, what is it? Is it another vision?” He gave Harry a little shake, insistent. “Is it—is it You-Know-Who?” He swallowed thickly. “Is he at the Burrow?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t—I don’t know, I can’t see anything, just darkness, shadows. And anger, *fuck*, he’s furious—”

“Well of course he is!” Ron spat. “But what’s he furious *at*? Is there anyone with him?”

Can you see my dad, or—or can you see—”

“Ron, stop *badgering* him!” Hermione cried.

Their bickering caused Harry’s already throbbing scar to pulse painfully. “I—I can’t tell, I can’t tell who...” He wondered if there might come a point where his head just exploded—it might be preferable to the pain just now.

“Harry.” Hermione’s voice was trembling, but she was trying to put on a brave face, and she licked her lips. “Harry, why is this still happening? You’ve got to fight it! Try to remember your Occlumency lessons—”

“What, the ones *Snape* taught me?” He really didn’t need to be lectured while it felt like his skull was trying to split open along his scar.

“He might have been a horrible teacher, but the theory was sound! That was why Dumbledore encouraged you to stick with it!” She struggled to her feet, running a hand through her hair, most of which had come loose from her plaits. “I mean, you *know* how dangerous it could be if you let him—”

“I *got it*, all right?” Harry snapped, vision flashing with blots of colour, and he clenched his eyes shut. He hardly needed reminding of what his mismanagement of this connection had wrought *last* time he’d dealt with these sorts of visions with such frequency. It was the whole reason they were here in this dank, musty drawing room in the first place. “I don’t think he’s aware of it, so leave off.”

He struggled back to his feet, then turned his back on them, not wanting the argument to escalate. Emotions were running high, and maybe things would look better in the morning. He pretended to study the old tapestry of the Black family tree on the wall to avoid further conversation—and then he was *actually* studying it after a moment, tracing the branches down to the little plaque that read *Narcissa* and then *Draco Malfoy* in a delicate embroidered script beneath it. He always forgot these Pureblood families were knotted together in a tangled mess.

“Oh!” Ron gasped, leaping back from the window, and Harry whirled around, palming his wand immediately—meeting not an attack but the silvery wisp of a Patronus bounding through the window. Its long, sleek form lit on the back of an easy chair before jumping onto the sofa next to Hermione, then up onto the mantle before alighting on the floor, just in front of Harry. He could see, now it wasn’t quite literally bouncing off the walls, that it was a weasel, and it reared up onto its hind legs, opened its mouth full of needle-like teeth, and spoke in a voice that sounded awfully like Mr. Weasley.

“We’re safe. Hope you are too. Do not reply. We’re being watched.”

Then, in a silvery cloud, the Patronus vanished, and Ron’s knees buckled, sending him to the rug. Hermione rushed over, settling down beside him and rubbing his arms comfortingly. “See now? They’re all right—safe and sound,” she whispered, voice thick with emotion but smiling, “Safer and sounder than us, at least.” Ron gave a choking laugh, wrapping her in a relieved hug.

Ron glanced up at Harry over Hermione’s shoulder, and a flash of something like guilt flickered over his features. “Harry, I—”

Harry waved him off, shaking his head—the pain had abated for a moment but was steadily building again, and he didn’t want to worry them—or be lectured by them. “It’s fine, really. I understand—it’s your family. Of course you were worried.”

“Yeah, but, I was acting like a git...”

“Acting like?” Hermione said, a brow raised, and Harry snorted, shaking his head so they didn’t catch him wincing.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Gotta use the loo. Be right back.”

“Don’t go wandering off,” Hermione reminded, and Harry gave her a wave, taking his leave at as leisurely a pace as he could stomach and praying they couldn’t tell how badly he wanted to break into a run.

When he was out of sight, he *did* run, pegging it down the hall—and once he’d shouldered

his way into the bathroom, he locked the door behind himself, fingers shaking, and leaned his whole weight against it. His knees buckled, and he slid down onto the floor—and didn't stop, slumping over onto his side as he brought up both hands to press at his temples. It felt like his head might split if he didn't hold it in one piece, and he could feel tears pricking at his eyes.

He shut his eyes, tight, praying it might keep the images at bay—but still they came, buffeted along by another's rage and mounting fury winding its way through his veins like poison and filling his every crevice. A long room stretched out before him, and he was no longer in the first-floor bathroom of Number 12 but somewhere else entirely. There were no lamps, no chandeliers, no light of any sort save that spilling out from the roaring fire blazing in its grate and throwing eerie shadows over something—someone—writhing on the floor before the fireplace. Harry tried to concentrate—and saw it was Rowle, one of the Death Eaters who had attacked them in the shop earlier. His head was thrown back, and his jaw hung open to release a yowling scream as he contorted himself into impossible positions.

A figure stood over Rowle, tall and slight and wand outstretched—casting, Harry could now surmise from Rowle's tortured screams, *Cruciatus*, or else something as sinister. The caster was not alone, either; standing in a semicircle around Rowle was a group of figures wearing dark robes and equally dark expressions. They all watched, standing silent sentinel, as their fellow lay panting and seizing on the rug before them.

Harry spoke—but the voice that issued forth was not his own.

“I grow weary of your reticence, Rowle...and Nagini grows hungry. I have been patient, I have been understanding—but Lord Voldemort's goodwill stretches only so far. I was summoned from abroad with tales of Harry Potter's imminent capture, that he had been apprehended and waited for my dispensation—only to find that, once again, he had slipped through your grasp.” A hand lifted—Harry's hand, and Voldemort's—and gestured for the caster to continue. *“Narcissa, dear—Rowle clearly requires a bit more persuasion. Let's not keep him waiting.”*

Mrs. Malfoy looked wretched, expression torn and haunted. The tip of her wand trembled, and her breath seemed to come in juddering gasps. When she didn't respond quickly enough, Harry felt Voldemort rise to his feet, and he seemed to stretch impossibly tall. "*Hesitation? Or pity? I'm not sure what's more pathetic.*"

"*My Lord—*" Mrs. Malfoy started, but she bit her tongue when Voldemort raised a hand for silence, carefully averting her eyes.

"*Help Rowle find his memories,*" Voldemort repeated, slowly, almost kindly. "*Or meet the same fate as your boy. It is entirely your choice, dear.*"

Mrs. Malfoy's eyes flared wide, trembling in some amalgamation of terror and sorrow and abject revulsion—and Harry felt himself abruptly jerked back, into his own mind, his own body.

His eyes snapped open, and he found himself laid out flat upon the cold marble tile of Number 12's first-floor bathroom. His vision swirled, and his brain seemed to pulse inside his skull, beating against it, begging to be let out. He took several deep, ragged breaths, blinking in time with each rhythmic inhale-exhale, and at length, the bathroom finally stopped spinning. With a Herculean effort, he eased upright, holding his throbbing head.

The lamps flickered in their sconces as Harry staggered back to his feet, and he winced when he caught sight of himself in the mirror—his face was gaunt and grey, bearing a haunting similarity to that of Malfoy's mother. He could still feel her fear and despair echoing inside of him and chilling him to the bone.

Or meet the same fate as your boy.

Something roiled in Harry's stomach, sending a wave of nausea rippling through him—for there was no misinterpreting those words.

Draco Malfoy was dead.

R.A.B.

Fitful sleep had Harry rousing before the sun had even risen, back aching fiercely from where he'd fallen asleep in one of the drawing room's arm chairs next to the dark fire grate. Hermione and Ron had drawn up sleeping bags next to one another on the floor after both refused to be the one to take the sofa, insisting the other sleep there. The two of them were still dead to the world, their chests rising and falling evenly, but Harry had barely slept a wink, phantom aches from his scar following him into slumber. What little sleep he *had* managed had been wracked by strange dreams, in which he'd found himself being chased by a squawking snow-white peacock, its beady red eyes glaring at him in bald accusation.

As if it were *his* fault Malfoy was dead.

He rolled onto his other side to face the window. Through the heavy, faded curtains, he could see a sliver of sky, the colour of which hinted dawn was not so very far off—but still too early for sensible folk to be up and wandering about. Harry strained his ears to hear any other sounds in the house, but there was nothing, just the sounds of his friends' deep, even breathing and the distant backfire of a car elsewhere in the Muggle neighbourhood. He shifted back around, staring down at Ron and Hermione huddled close in the gloom and felt apart from them in more than mere distance—and strangely lonely for it.

He rolled onto his back, staring up at the chandelier dangling from the ceiling. The wedding seemed a lifetime away now, though it had barely been twelve hours. Had there been any casualties among the guests? Ron's dad's Patronus had said their family was safe, but that didn't mean *everyone* had gotten off without injury. What about Tonks and Remus? Or Kingsley—had he been inside the Ministry when it had fallen? Had he made it out all right, or was he even now being tortured for information on Harry's whereabouts?

The safety and security of so many relied on Harry completing what he was now realising was quite the daunting task. It had already seemed impossible from the relative comfort of the Burrow, and even Privet Drive. It was easy enough, he supposed, making plans and champing at the bit when you weren't allowed to go anywhere. But suddenly given his head, Harry didn't know what to do with himself. Just finding a safe place to spend the night had nearly cost them their lives. How were they expected to not only *find* the Horcruxes, but destroy them? What had possessed Dumbledore to...

Dumbledore. *Dumbledore.*

He sat there for several long, aching moments, trying to summon the grief that had dogged him since the funeral—since St. Mungo's, really—and found it transformed, a different beast altogether now. He was still sad, still had to fight down a lump of emotion even now, just thinking about it, but the conversation with Muriel at the wedding, Doge's sputtered attempts at defending Dumbledore, the insinuations...they had crawled into the dark corners of his mind and begun to fester, with insidious thoughts creeping their way into his memories and painting Dumbledore in a new light. Doge had warned Harry not to let rumour and jealousy-driven accusations taint his feelings for the man he'd thought of as the greatest wizard ever to have lived, but Harry couldn't just block these things out, especially not having first-hand knowledge himself. Scrimgeour had sneered that Harry had been toeing Dumbledore's line, and Harry had been galled by the accusation at the time—but *had* he been doing that? Blindly following the words of a man he hadn't really known?

Could Dumbledore have done half the things Muriel had insinuated? Harry wanted to believe that *no, of course not*, but you didn't have to actually *do* something cruel to be party to it. Just look at Dudley. Sure, there was a difference between actively working horrors and just condoning them, but it wasn't much.

His mind drifted back to Muriel's casual, crass recollections of the Dumbledores' lives in Godric's Hollow—of Kendra and Ariana and the graves they lay in, perhaps nestled cosily in some quiet country church graveyard alongside his own parents'. He thought of Dumbledore's will and the objects he'd bequeathed to them without explanation or

instruction, another task they would be compelled to complete on blind faith alone, stumbling without direction. He thought of the Horcruxes—the ones whose locations and modes of destruction they'd yet to strike on. He thought of all of these things, and the lump of sadness in his throat grew bitter, sour with resentment.

His memories of Dumbledore *were* being tainted, as Doge had feared—but not so much with anger at the things he *might* have done as anger at the things he *did* do. Like how he *did* keep his past, so intimately entwined with Harry's, a secret. Or how he *did* keep from Harry important information he would need to complete this last great task and save countless thousands, perhaps millions, of lives. Or how he *did* claim to care for Harry but seemed to have only ever intended him to be a tool to be used, as one might care for their wand.

There'd been a time when he'd been only *too* happy to be that tool—a weapon to be wielded. Part of Dumbledore's Army—he'd even signed his name to attest as such. And thinking back now, yeah, that fit about right: a soldier in an army, sent off to war, while the actual decisions and strategising were made miles above his pay grade.

He grimaced—pathetic.

Stewing here in his dark, bitter thoughts was getting him nowhere, so he shouldered off the throw he'd wrapped himself in, pocketed his wand, and went searching for a distraction. Hermione's warnings not to go wandering without them echoed faintly in his ear, but he shrugged them off. He could go for a bit of action right about now anyway.

The gas lamps out on the landing seemed to be tied to the night-day cycle, for they did not flare bright when he stepped from the drawing room back out into the hallway, and he quietly cast *Lumos* to ensure he didn't topple over the bannister and break his neck (wouldn't *that* be a fine ending to his life's story?). He mounted the stairs, heading up to the second floor, where he found two bedrooms, including the one he'd shared with Ron when they'd stayed here with the Order in the past. Both had been, to his confusion, thoroughly tossed—drawers had been yanked from chests, the wardrobe doors hung nearly off their hinges, and the beds had been stripped, with the mattresses sliding off

their frames. The floor was littered with detritus and a thin layer of dust—whatever had done this, it had happened some time back.

A chill ran down Harry's spine; *had* Death Eaters been in here, then? *Someone* had, evidently—but friend, or foe? There'd been mention of Mundungus scouring Grimmauld Place for goods to pawn—was it that innocent an explanation? Though the more he looked at the place...the more it seemed like someone had been looking for something in particular. He gripped his wand tighter and cast *Homenum revelio* as Hermione had the night before, but it still showed only three bodies in the house.

Just on the wall outside of the room Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had shared hung the currently empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, one of the rare Black portraits that only snidely sneered at the 'Mudbloods and traitors' tramping about the house instead of screeching at the top of their lungs about them at all hours of the day and night. He recalled there'd been a sibling portrait of the former Hogwarts Headmaster hanging in Dumbledore's office at Hogwarts and surmised that Professor Black was spending much of his time there these days—it certainly had to be a more pleasant environment than here. Harry sighed; so much for asking one of the less blood-thirsty portraits if they'd seen anything untoward going on.

He continued on up the stairs, only glancing long enough at the third floor bedrooms to see they'd also been tossed. That left the fourth floor—which was one, he was realising, he'd never really explored. It only had the two bedrooms: Sirius's bedroom from his childhood, and that of his younger brother Regulus, who as Sirius put it had been ten times the Black son that Sirius had ever been, at least in their parents' eyes. Harry had never been inside Sirius's old room, and Regulus's had always been bolted shut tight.

This was as good a distraction as any, he supposed, and he reached for the handle on the door bearing the nameplate *Sirius*, shouldering his way inside, wand-first.

With just the two bedrooms on this floor, each was bound to be spacious—and indeed, Sirius's bedroom dwarfed the veritable closet Harry had shared with Ron before, matched only in size by perhaps the master bedroom. This room, to Harry's great relief,

had not been ransacked like the others he'd passed along the stairs, though it still showed the ravages of the time, and while it had likely once been as fine a room as any in the house, belonging to the eldest son, it had a sort of faded glory to it now that was only magnified by the thin coating of dust caking every flat surface in sight.

A large bed took up nearly half the space, wide enough probably for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to comfortably sleep all together and covered in a plush burgundy duvet pockmarked with tiny holes that suggested something had been nibbling on the fabric. Curtains in the same shade blacked out a pair of tall bay windows on the far wall, and Harry wondered what the view from them looked like, so high up—though he didn't dare open them, paranoid they might somehow be spotted.

Wherever he trod, his footsteps kicked up fresh clouds of fine dust that choked, and he covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve. Eyes watering, he swept his wand through the air to gently whisk the dust away. It didn't do much good—the picture frames on the wall and chandelier turning overhead and the wooden chest resting at the foot of the bed were still powdered with a thin layer—but at least his nose had stopped itching.

Beyond the dilapidated state visually, there was an aroma of disuse—a combination of the dust, animal droppings, and mould. He imagined he could hear the gentle scurrying of little clawed feet in the walls, and it felt like wherever he turned, he had to bat wildly in front of his face as an abandoned spider's web popped up out of nowhere.

The dour state of the room, though, did nothing to disguise just what sort of wizard had once called it home. With but a glance, Harry could tell that the teenaged Sirius had been *something*.

Harry had stayed over at the Burrow often enough he thought he knew what a young wizard's bedroom was supposed to look like—Quidditch posters on the walls, framed photos of friends on the desk, general untidiness all around. His own room might have looked the same, had he grown up proper in Godric's Hollow.

But Sirius had not been Ron, and he'd certainly not been Harry. No, his room, even now, after years being boarded up and neglected by the Black family in what must have been

fervent efforts to forget he existed, bore all the markings of a wizard who more than anything just wanted to piss off his Pureblood parents.

The walls were decked in paraphernalia that would no doubt have driven Walburga Black spare—faded Gryffindor banners from '73, '74, and '76; a bill of sale for a motorcycle that must have been manufactured before Sirius had even been born; and several oversized still-glossy posters of scantily clad women who Harry had to assume were Muggle, as they held still in their teasing poses instead of wandering about shaking their backsides and crooking their fingers in invitation, as they'd done in a magazine Seamus had smuggled into Gryffindor Tower at the beginning of Sixth Year.

Now that Harry took a good look around, the whole room seemed a shrine to Sirius's time at Hogwarts in some fashion or another, decorated to remind all who stepped inside that he was not and never would be a Slytherin, even if the rest of his family's blood ran silver and green.

As Harry continued his circuit of the room, admiring all the paraphernalia Sirius had collected over the years to paper over the drab silk walls in his room, he came to what he realised was the only wizarding photograph on display—and it was easy to see why this particular one had held such meaning to Sirius he'd hung it in pride of place. Harry swallowed a thick lump as he stared at a photograph of four young men, wearing fresh Hogwarts uniforms, with arms linked as they laughed raucously at the camera.

His eye immediately went to his father—not quite as tall as Sirius, but still obvious from his messy black hair and glasses with a rakish, effortlessly handsome air that reminded Harry, a bit uncomfortably, of how much a knobhead he'd come off in Snape's memory. Sirius was leaning against his shoulder, whispering something in his ear and grinning wickedly as he did so. He was striking here, blessed with the fine Black features shared by his cousins. Time had not yet taken its toll on him, and he looked happier in this snapshot than Harry had ever seen him look in life. Remus, too, seemed somehow more comfortable in his skin, not nearly so guarded as he was these days though still a bit rough around the edges. Harry made himself look at Pettigrew as well, though he did not want to, and he tried not to see Wormtail, instead focusing on how he must have looked

to his best friends: a little round, a little bashful, but up for anything, simply thrilled to be included in the shenanigans cooked up by some of the coolest kids in school.

Had they been Animagi at this point, already bound by a fantastic secret? He wondered, idly, what these three unregistered Animagi and their werewolf friend would have thought about Malfoy and his own efforts to learn the craft—and then decided he didn't want to know. He hadn't even told Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the truth about what had driven Malfoy to attack Gryffindor Tower; he didn't think he could have explained the gruesome details to his father or even Sirius. Remus might have understood, or at least had some advice to offer, but there'd been no time to discuss it during their brief encounters. *'I should have Owled him,'* Harry thought, before remembering that Hedwig was dead, and Malfoy too, so the point was moot.

Certain that Sirius wouldn't begrudge Harry requisitioning this bit of their shared past, he reached to remove the picture from the wall—but it held fast, evidently stuck with a Charm along the same lines as the one worked upon Walburga Black's portrait. Harry frowned to himself—he *really* wanted to bring it with him—and resolved to see if Hermione had ever figured out a trick to remove the Charm.

That would have to wait for later, though, and he left the picture be for now, continuing his exploration.

While the room had not been tossed like the others downstairs, it was by no means tidy, and the floor was covered in the detritus that had built up over the years—old school papers and motheaten robes and one very old, very mouldy half-eaten pumpkin pasty sitting on a chipped saucer. By now, dawn had broken, and a shaft of light slipped through between the thick curtains covering one of the bay windows, falling over a pile of books that had toppled from their shelf.

Harry slipped into a crouch and began picking through the books with great care—Hermione might want to go through them to see if any merited adding to their library. He sincerely doubted Sirius would have kept books on Dark magic—let alone Horcruxes—in his bedroom, but they might still find something they could use on the run.

Scattered amongst the books, too, he found several loose sheets of paper—free-fluttering pages that had long since parted ways with their source material. Absently, he scanned the text: the running header of one marked it as a page from an old edition of *Defensive Magical Theory*, wherein all instances of ‘wand’ had been scratched out and overwritten to say ‘cock’; another looked to be a heavily hand-edited motorcycle maintenance manual (“*Do NOT fill tank with Firewhisky! Eyebrows take forever to grow back!*”). Still another, though, wasn’t from a book at all. It was a piece of correspondence, handwritten and crumpled, and Harry smoothed it out, reading.

Dear Padfoot,

You’re officially Harry’s favourite godfather, hands down! You should have seen the look on his face when that wrapping fell away—brighter than a Lumos Maxima! It’s been a right chore trying to get him off the thing; at this rate, he’ll be playing reserve for the Cannons by Christmas! James reckons he’ll go professional right out of Hogwarts. I’ve told him I’ll have divorce papers ready if our Harry’s anything but an academic. I’ve already had to completely rearrange the sitting room so he doesn’t destroy all our knick-knacks (though I’ve left that vase Petunia sent us last Christmas around just in case; fingers crossed!), but I fear this child’s on a mission. If you do anything to further encourage reckless behaviour in our boy, I’ll thump you so good they’ll have to call the RSPCA on me. Behold the horrors you have wrought in the attached picture.

We didn’t do much for Harry’s birthday itself, the times being what they are—just a spot of tea with old Bathilda (she’s been so sweet, doting on Harry like he was one of her own, and the stories she’s got!) and a cupcake from the bakery in the square. We really wished you could have made it, but I know you’ve got important Order business, and besides, there’ll be dozens more for you to attend once everything’s settled down.

It’s pretty quiet around here, but I don’t need to tell you James would rather it weren’t. I feel bad for him—he wants to be out there with you lot so badly, in

the thick of things, but he knows we've got to stay lying low, and he wouldn't trust anyone else to protect me and Harry. Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak, so he's stuck here making sure Harry doesn't figure out how to remove the baby-proofing Charms on the broom and go zooming out the cat flap. He could sure use a visit from his best friend right about now—any chance of you making it around our way in between Order business? Moony's been out of touch (You two aren't messing about again, are you? You know how he gets this time of the month! Don't be a tease.), but Wormy dropped by just last weekend with a pick-and-mix from Honeydukes that James and I finished off in a single evening (don't worry, we regretted it sorely the next morning).

Other than him, though, we've mostly been keeping ourselves sane by chatting with Bathilda—she's the closest thing to entertainment we get these days. Her being a historian, I would've thought her stories would be dry as dead leaves, but she's got quite the collection and she isn't shy about sharing it! Especially her tales about Dumbledore! If this were coming from anyone else, I'm not sure I'd believe them, because it seems incredible that Dumbledore

The letter cut off abruptly, evidently continuing on another page.

It was the dead of summer, but Harry felt frigid, his fingers numb and goosebumps pimpling his arms. He held the paper in both hands, just staring at the writing, wondering if in doing so he might be able to brand it onto his very eyeballs—god, this letter!

He was a bundle of conflicting emotions, spanning the spectrum from joy to grief to amusement to confusion and round and round in dizzying circles until he felt like he ought to sit down—so he did, settling onto the bed, which accepted his weight with a groaning creak.

He took a breath and licked his lips, forcing himself to read the letter again, to try and glean more from it and actually understand what was written rather than simply marvelling in the understanding he was reading *Lily Potter's writing*.

She had *lived*. His mother had been a real person, not just a phantom found in memories and old photographs and miscast spells. Her hand had moved across this parchment, her quill had penned these words—words about *Harry*, her son. He brought the parchment to his nose, inhaling, and rubbed his cheek gently over it, imagining he could still smell the perfume dabbed at her wrist or the warmth of her hand.

He swallowed down a thick lump forming in his throat and read the letter what felt like a tenth time, muttering the words to himself and pausing at each full stop to parse what his mother had written.

He'd been gifted a broomstick for his very first birthday from Sirius. A broomstick! It was a wonder to learn he'd ridden a broom before that first class at Hogwarts years back—and a funny thought struck him that Sirius had now given him *two* broomsticks, though both of them were lost now, probably in a thousand pieces.

And his parents had been close with a 'Bathilda'—Bathilda Bagshot no doubt. God, first her connection with Dumbledore, and now with his own parents! More than ever, he wanted to meet this witch, to speak with her. He had so many questions!

Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak

Why had he needed James's Invisibility Cloak? He'd told Harry years back that he didn't need one to become invisible. And they'd been well out of school by that point, so it hadn't been confiscated or anything...

Wormy dropped by just last weekend with a pick-and-mix from Honeydukes

He fought down a shudder of revulsion, certain that the timing of the letter meant by this point, Pettigrew had likely already betrayed Harry's parents. If Lily had written this letter just after Harry's first birthday, it would only have been another month, maybe two, before their death... Had the gift been a sort of farewell, guilt weighing on him that he was probably seeing them alive for the last time? Had he already set in motion a plan that would leave Harry an orphan, forced eventually to take on this mission he felt in no way prepared for?

His eyes caught on the final words in the letter.

it seems incredible that Dumbledore

Incredible that Dumbledore *what?* There had to more to the letter, and he turned the parchment over, but it was blank. He hopped off the bed and sank to his knees, rifling through more of the scattered pages, but everything was written in typeset, his mother's quilled script nowhere to be seen. He moved to the great desk, tugging open drawers and rifling through cabinets to no avail. He grabbed the books that hadn't been knocked from the shelf and shook them open, considering that perhaps Sirius had hidden his letters from friends between the leaves, and even dragged a chair over to the wardrobe, feeling along its top for hidden catches.

While his efforts did not turn up a second page to the letter, he did stumble upon the photograph Lily had mentioned including for Sirius's amusement hiding under the bed frame next to a particularly large fuzball. It was a moving magical picture—he didn't know why he'd expected otherwise, it was just strange to see himself there, a chubby-cheeked black-haired baby clutching fat fingers around the shaft of a child-sized broom and weaving in and out of the frame. His face was split into a gummy grin, a few white teeth poking out, and now and then, a pair of jean-clad legs likely belonging to one of his parents would step into the frame to chase after him.

As this photograph wasn't tacked to the wall with a Permanent Sticking Charm, he slipped it into his pocket, along with Lily's letter, and continued his quest to find the rest of the letter, certain there were fantastic secrets hidden therein.

When another twenty minutes failed to turn up anything, though, he at last allowed himself to accept it had been lost to time, likely thrown away carelessly by Kreacher—where was he, anyway?—or else stolen by mice to rip up for bedding. He didn't want to consider that Grimmauld Place had indeed been raided in the interim by Death Eaters and *they'd* stolen the next page. Whatever had struck Lily as incredible about Dumbledore, Harry wasn't likely to figure it out.

"Harry?" Hermione called from the floor below, her voice muffled and not a little

strident. “Harry! *Harry!*”

“Up here!” he answered, moving to the door. “What’s wrong?”

She came charging up the stairs, her bushy head of hair whipping around when she cleared the landing, searching for his voice. Her eyes widened when she finally spotted Harry standing in the doorway to Sirius’s room. “We’ve been looking all over for you!” She shook her head, leaning over the banister and calling down, “He’s up here, Ron! I’ve found him!”

“Yeah? Chuck him over the railing for me, then!” came Ron’s annoyed voice, echoing from several floors below.

Hermione stepped up onto the landing proper, arms over her chest. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t go wandering! Have you any idea what thoughts went through our heads when we woke up and *you weren’t there?*” Harry winced as her voice went a bit shrill; the time had gotten away from him, and he’d meant to be back downstairs in the sitting room before either of them had roused.

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you. I just couldn’t get back to sleep, so I...” *Went exploring* probably wouldn’t go over too well, and there was no use disguising what he’d been up to, so he left it.

She drew closer, poking her head into Sirius’s freshly ransacked room with a frown. “What’ve you been doing in here? It’s a disaster area...”

“Er, it was partly that way when I got here—but look what I’ve found.” A good distraction was just what he needed to smooth her feathers back into place, and he pulled out his mother’s letter, waving it under her nose. She accepted it with a wry smile, suggesting she knew what he was about, and then began to read, mouthing the words to herself.

When she reached the end, she looked up at him with an unreadable expression. “... Where on earth did you find this?”

“In a pile of papers with some of Sirius’s other stuff—and not just that, this too!” He passed over the photograph, and Hermione’s grin shifted into something properly amused this time, chuckling softly at the sight of baby Harry zipping about on his new broom. Harry glanced over his shoulder. “I think there’s more to the letter—you can see it kind of cuts off abruptly. I’ve been looking for it, but no luck so far.”

“Is that why the other rooms look like a bomb went off?”

“What? Oh, no—that wasn’t me. They were already like that when I checked earlier.”

Hermione nodded. “Someone was looking for something, it seems.”

Harry swallowed. “You reckon the Death Eaters got in after all?”

She chewed on a nail. “I...don’t think so. What would they have been looking for? And for that matter, why haven’t they grabbed us yet, if they’ve already gained access? Whether it’s the Trace or Malfoy or something else altogether, if they’d been here before and the Fidelius was broken, they would have found us by now.”

“...Yeah, I suppose so.” For some reason, he didn’t want to tell Hermione about his vision of Malfoy’s mother, and what he’d heard. He thought maybe he just didn’t want to hear Ron’s *Good riddance* or Hermione trying to summon false grief. He didn’t blame them, might have felt the same way himself under other circumstances, but he doubted they’d understand how Harry felt like he’d had a hand in Malfoy’s unfortunate fate. Like he could have done more, asked more questions of Kingsley or Arthur or maybe even Moody, and had always put it off for later.

She flipped the letter over. “And you haven’t found the rest of the letter?”

“Nope.” He pointed to the final line on the page. “My mum was shocked to learn something about Dumbledore, but there’s no mention of what it was; I’ve practically turned the room upside down trying to find the rest of it.”

“I can see,” Hermione said dryly.

Her tone suggested it would take some convincing if Harry wanted to be sure she didn't dismiss his concerns out of hand. "Look, this Bathilda my mum mentions in her letter—you know who she is?"

"Haven't the foggiest."

"I think she's Bathilda Bagshot, the author of—"

Hermione gasped. "*A History of Magic!*" And *now* he had her interest. "So—wait, then your parents *knew* her? One of the most famous magical historians to ever live?"

"Apparently so—and she's still alive, living in Godric's Hollow, probably the same place she lived back when I lived there with my parents."

"*Still alive?* She must be *ancient*—where'd you hear that?"

"Er, well, Ron's Aunt Muriel got to talking at the wedding—"

"*Muriel?* What were you talking to *Muriel* for? Did she put you in a Body Bind and force you to keep her company?"

Honestly, it had felt a bit like it at the time. "She butted in on a conversation I was having with someone else—but look at the letter!" He tapped the last line again. "Bathilda knew Dumbledore, too! Enough she had stories to tell about him. I dunno about you, but sounds like she'd be pretty interesting to talk to, if nothing else."

Hermione continued staring down at the photograph in her hands, but he could see her throat working, and her lips were pursing—she wanted to say something, and he was pretty sure it wasn't *Oh that sounds like a fantastic idea, Harry!* He snatched back the photograph, slipping it along with the letter into the Mokeskin pouch hanging around his neck instead of into his pocket as before. It rested near his heart, and there was something comforting about that.

She didn't protest, only leaned against the door jamb, hands clasped before her and looked entirely too understanding for Harry's taste. He looked away, pretending to be

interested in one of the old Gryffindor banners hanging on the wall. "...I'm sure she *would* be really interesting to talk to Harry, I agree. She'd probably have all sorts of things to tell you about your parents, and about Dumbledore too, evidently. But..." He heard the wince in her voice, even if he couldn't see it on her face. "I doubt she'd know anything about Horcruxes, or else Dumbledore would have sent us to her himself. Now —" She laid a hand on his shoulder. "That's not saying you could *never* go, just—we need to focus on the mission before us, and it's dreadfully dangerous to go there at all right now. Those Death Eaters found us just like *that* yesterday." She snapped a finger. "Coming here was risky enough, seeing as it's a place you've got a documented connection with, but at least we have the Fidelius protecting us. If we went to Godric's Hollow... They have to be expecting you'd want to go there and be waiting for you."

She thought this was just about Harry's parents, about needing closure or some rubbish like that—but it was *more*. It was about needing to know exactly whose orders he was following, even from beyond the grave. "...Muriel told me about more than just Bathilda. She had lots to say about Dumbledore too—some things that sounded...well, quite suspect." He looked eyes with her. "I need to know how much of it was truth and how much just rumour and gossip."

"...What sorts of things?"

He tried not to be too pleased at the worried expression on her face; maybe once she heard Muriel's story, she'd understand Harry's drive to visit Bathilda and Godric's Hollow.

They didn't have a clue where to start with the Horcruxes—but *this*? This was a mystery they could solve, only too easily.

He unpacked everything Muriel had told him, leaving nothing out. It was difficult to get a read on Hermione's expressions, though, and when he had at last finished, she said in that same frustratingly understanding tone, "I can certainly understand why that might give you pause—"

"You think it *shouldn't* give me pause? That I should just dismiss it outright?"

“You mean to say you actually *believe*—”

“I don’t know *what* to believe. That’s why I want to find out—if Bathilda’s such a great historian, and if she knew my parents, if she *babysat* me, I’d like to think she’d have the right of whatever happened with Dumbledore and his family back then.”

“Harry, it’s ridiculous you’re even crediting this story as *potentially* plausible—we’re talking about a woman who practically worships at the altar of Rita Skeeter. She clearly hates Dumbledore, to parrot such things without evidence. You knew him firsthand, saw the sort of wizard he was—”

“I saw what he wanted me to see,” he muttered, and Hermione sighed.

“Did you even read that letter? I mean *really* read it? To the end? Whatever your mum’s talking about, it can’t have been anything too dramatic, can it? She hardly sounds scandalised.”

She had a point, but the letter and Muriel’s story were two completely different things. “You know as well as I do that there’s a grain of truth in everything Rita writes.”

“Yes, a *grain*, a grain that gets twisted and blown out of proportion until it’s unrecognisable, doing immense harm to anyone caught up in the matter.” She shook her head. “You actually lived the experiences you had with Dumbledore—the likes of Rita and Muriel? They’re just acting on rumour and hearsay. If I were you, I’d put their accusations straight out of my mind.

Harry fought down a wave of frustration and bitter resentment, certain she’d be able to read his feelings on his face otherwise. She was as bad as Doge, thinking he could just *choose* not to believe something, when he didn’t know the man in question well enough to discern the truth himself. Maybe Doge could, maybe these stories didn’t fit the man he’d known at all. But Harry didn’t have the same luxury, and he was getting more than a bit tired of everyone telling him what he should and shouldn’t care about.

There was an odd tension between them, and after a little pause, Hermione suggested

gently, "...Maybe we ought to see about getting some breakfast? Ron's probably already down in the kitchen, rooting around."

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug, going along with the suggestion largely because he was starving—he'd felt so terrible after his vision the night before that he'd all but collapsed into his chair in the sitting room, succumbing to the draw of sleep and fitful dreams. Hermione headed for the stairs, and Harry followed her back out onto the landing and past the door that led to Regulus's room—and paused.

Regulus's door bore a similar stately plaque to Sirius's, marking the room as his own, but beneath it sat another sign, one Harry had not noticed on his first pass. It was not quite as handsome as the placard above it and appeared handmade rather than professionally crafted, but its message was clear all the same, written in a neatly calligraphied hand.

DO NOT ENTER

Without the EXPRESS Permission of

Regulus Arcturus Black

A frisson of excitement rippled down Harry's spine, though he was not immediately sure why—only something tickled at the back of his mind. He read the sign again—and a third time, just in case, and then he licked his lips.

"Hermione." When she didn't respond, he raised his voice. "Hermione!"

"*What?*" She was already one flight of stairs down.

"R.A.B. I...I think I've found him."

"*What?!*" she gasped, racing to join him and following his eye to the sign. She clutched Harry's arm so tightly he worried she was going to rip it right off, her nails digging in painfully. "Sirius's brother?"

Harry nodded. "Sirius told me about him once. Apparently he was gaga over Voldemort

and joined the Death Eaters when he was really young, before he'd even graduated Hogwarts. But then something happened and I guess he got spooked about the whole thing. He tried to leave, and the Death Eaters killed him for it."

Hermione gave his arm a shake. "But—that would make perfect sense! As a Death Eater, he would've had access to Voldemort and the Horcruxes! Or at least better access than anyone else. Then if he got spooked and wanted out, he might've thought about taking Voldemort down in the doing! And clearly he managed it!" She shoved Harry away, nearly launching herself from the balcony landing as she leaned on the railing and called out, "Ron! RON! Get up here! You've got to see this!"

Clearly thinking them in danger and in need of saving, Ron came thundering up the stairs, red head popping up onto the landing only a moment later. He stood on the topmost stair, doubled over and panting with his wand in his hand. "Couldn't—your emergency—have waited—'til after—breakfast?" He winced, cracking his back as he straightened. "Or taken place on the first floor?"

Hermione said nothing, only silently pointing at the sign on Regulus's door, and Harry nodded, brows raised. Ron plodded over, face red, and flapped his shirt to cool himself as he squinted at the calligraphied notice. "That was Sirius's brother, wasn't it? Regulus."

"Regulus *who*?"

"Regulus—Black?" Hermione made a motion for him to continue, tapping the *Arcturus* in his name. "Regulus Arcturus...wait." He finally caught on, eyes bugging. "R.A.B.! The initials from the locket! You think that's him?"

"Only one way to be sure," said Harry, and with his wand at the ready, not knowing if perhaps Regulus had protected his room with more than just a *KEEP OUT* sign, he pressed down on the handle.

It didn't budge, and when Harry just frowned in confusion, Hermione shook her head fondly and pointed her wand at the handle. "Honestly, six years at the best magical school in the Western hemisphere, and you're flummoxed by a bolted door?"

Alohomora.”

Well, all right, if you wanted to be fancy about it.

The door swung open for them with a gentle creak, and Harry was the first to step over the threshold.

Being the second son, Regulus’s room was a bit smaller than Sirius’s had been and lacked the handsome, wide bay windows, but it held the same sense of former grandeur. However, where Sirius’s room had been decked out in the bright scarlet and gold of his Hogwarts house, here Slytherin colours dominated. The Black family crest had been branded into the very wood of the bed frame, along with its motto, *Toujours Pur*. This was a boy who’d been Pureblood and proud of it.

Hermione and Ron shuffled inside after him, splitting up to explore opposite corners of the room, while Harry was drawn to the far western wall, which had been papered over in dozens of newspaper clippings, now yellowed with age. Hermione noticed his interest and moved up behind him, but Harry quickly moved on, not sure what he was looking for but certain he’d know it when he found it. He gravitated toward the collection of old school photographs sitting framed on Regulus’s desk, some knocked over, their glass cracked.

“...These are all about Voldemort,” Hermione said, marvelling at the clippings. “Sightings, murders attributed to him, op-eds in support of his motives if not his means...” She turned back to them. “Whatever he might have felt by the end, clearly he’d been *very* keen on Voldemort and his ilk at some point.”

“You probably had to be, to join up so young,” Harry said, leaning down to get a closer look at the photo frames.

Ron joined Harry at the desk, pulling out drawers and feeling underneath for hidden catches.

Harry picked up one of the frames that had caught his eye: a Hogwarts Quidditch team

in robes that looked a bit old-fashioned. They were all smiling and waving, and though the colours were faded, Harry was confident this was the Slytherin House team. While Harry had never met him, it was no trouble picking out Regulus from the rest of the lineup: he had the same sculpted features and dark hair as his brother, though he was slighter and looked a bit underfed, like he'd been standing in Sirius's shadow all his life and it showed.

Harry frowned, noting Regulus's position in the picture. "...He played Seeker."

"What?" said Ron absently, having moved on to the wardrobe to Harry's right.

"Regulus. He's in the middle of the front row in this picture, that's where the Seeker..." But Hermione was still engrossed in the clippings, and Ron had dropped onto his hands and knees, peeking under the valance. "Never mind."

For some reason, this connection struck him—and unbidden, the image of Regulus Black in his mind was overlaid with that of Draco Malfoy: proud Pureblood boys with expectations heaped on their shoulders, getting mired in a war they had no business being involved in, trying to get out...and then paying the ultimate price for their decisions.

Harry shook his head and replaced the photograph, putting it out of his mind. Malfoy was dead, and that was a terrible thing, but Harry couldn't bring him back. Many others decidedly more innocent than Malfoy would die before this was all over if Harry didn't buckle down. Hermione already thought he wasn't focusing enough on his task; he didn't want to give her any more ammunition.

He put these unhelpful thoughts away and forced himself to join Ron and Hermione in their search for the locket. Like Sirius's room, this one had also been treated more lightly than the others downstairs, but there was still evidence it had been tossed. The floor was littered with schoolboy detritus in the form of overturned inkwells, textbooks with pages torn out and scattered about the room, and a still-knotted Slytherin tie looped around a bedpost.

“Oh, wait!” Hermione snapped up straight from where she’d been bent over inspecting the large wooden chest sat at the foot of Regulus’s bed. “We’re being silly.” She stepped to the doorway, facing the room, and raised her wand as she said, “*Accio* locket!” But nothing happened, and she frowned at the tip of her wand, slapping it in her hand a few times as if something just needed jiggling loose.

Ron sighed and regarded the bookcase, where he’d been tugging on spines in an effort to trigger a secret compartment to open, with a resigned expression. “Guess that settles it, then. He’s stashed it somewhere else.”

“Well, not necessarily,” Hermione said, just a touch testily, though she was biting her lip in a manner that suggested she’d been certain a Summoning spell would have saved the day. In her defence, simple spells forgotten by both Ron and Harry but remembered by Hermione had solved a great many of their problems before. “Regulus might have placed it under anti-Summoning enchantments. It’s a powerful, dangerous artefact, after all. He wouldn’t have wanted to take any chances. It could still be here, somewhere.”

Ron let his head fall forward to bang against the bookcase. “...So we’ve got to keep searching by hand, then? Without even knowing if it’s here at all, just digging around blindly?”

“Afraid so,” Hermione said, and Ron returned to tugging books off the shelf, all the while muttering darkly to himself under his breath.

They wasted another hour picking the room clean, turning it inside out and upside down and checking every possible hiding place, until like Harry with the second page of his mother’s letter, they had to conclude that they’d searched as thoroughly as was humanly possible and the locket just wasn’t there.

“It was a long shot expecting to find it in his room to begin with,” Hermione reasoned as they glumly clomped down the stairs, heading for the kitchen in the basement and a long overdue breakfast. “He must have known dozens of good hiding places. Though I don’t see him letting it go too far from sight—it must be somewhere on the property, so we’ll just have to keep looking until we find it. That’s all there is to it.”

“Lucky for us Grimmauld Place is so tiny, then,” Ron muttered, but even his dejected spirit could not quash Hermione’s determination.

“All the better to hide something you wouldn’t want a Dark Lord to find, don’t you think? And simply *hiding* something probably wouldn’t be enough when it came to You-Know-Who. There’d need to be protections. Remember all those horrible traps we found when we were cleaning this place out with the Order? Maybe they weren’t just nasty Pureblood memorabilia; maybe they were put here for a *reason*, so that anyone who came searching the house for the locket would very much regret doing so. We could have been disarming Regulus’s protections the whole while without even realising it at...at...”

She trailed off, voice cutting out, and Harry and Ron turned as one in concern—finding her stood stock still a few steps above them, one hand on the banister and her mouth agape in shock. “Mione...?” Ron said. “You okay there?”

“...at the time,” she finished in a whisper, gasping. “Ohmygosh!”

Ron jolted. “Wh—what? What’s wrong?”

Her eyes were wide—but not with fright. “There was a locket!”

“What?” Ron asked, while Harry immediately pressed, “Where?”

“The drawing room cabinet! Remember? No one could open it! So we...we...” Her shoulders slumped as recollection hit her, and Harry felt his rising spirits plummet, for he too now recalled the locket—and its fate. God, he’d *touched* the thing, held it in his hands, and he hadn’t felt anything. It’d just been a piece of costume jewellery as far as he’d noticed, and with Mrs. Weasley’s permission...they’d thrown it out, along with all manner of other dangerous junk, thinking *good riddance*.

They’d *thrown away* a piece of Voldemort’s soul—where it likely now sat in a rubbish tip somewhere, never to be found.

But Ron brightened, striking his open palm with his fist. “Wait—Kreacher!”

“What about him?” Hermione frowned.

“He was pissed as anything we were tossing out all that old crap—we caught him digging through the refuse nicking some of it back, remember?”

Indeed they had, Harry recalled, mouth dry. He didn’t want to get his hopes up again, but it was a difficult thing, and he could feel an oncoming headache spurred by so much emotional whiplash in the past five minutes alone. Oh, he prayed the elf’s dedication to the Black family ran as deep and recalcitrant as they’d come to suspect over the years.

“Nicking it—and then doing *what* with it?” Hermione asked.

“Didn’t he have a cubbyhole? Down in the kitchen?” Ron and Hermione’s eyes widened, and as a unit, they thundered down the remaining flights of stairs. Walburga Black’s portrait caught them on the ground floor landing, and her screeching cries of, “*Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!*” echoed after them as they dashed past, hurtling through the kitchen’s swinging door. Harry tore across the room, skidding to a halt just outside of Kreacher’s cupboard, and he banged on it thrice in succession.

When no response came, and despite a reproachful look from Hermione (“How would *you* like someone barging into your home without your permission?”), he wrenched the door open.

It was empty, save for a dirty, wadded up blanket fashioned into a cosy little nest, with a copy of *Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy* tucked securely under, as if Kreacher had been using it for bedtime reading. Harry immediately grabbed the blanket, savagely shaking it out, but there came no welcome *clink* of metal hitting the flagstones—only a puff of dust and the frantic skittering of dozens of roaches scattering.

Ron and Hermione took generous steps back. “Harry...” Hermione started, but Harry shook his head.

“Not yet—” He threw his head back and bellowed, “*Kreacher!*”

CRACK, and Kreacher popped into view, standing in front of the cold Floo grate with his

hands clasped behind his back and head half-bowed. He was still as Harry remembered him: bent and decrepit with age, barely reaching their knees, with stringy white hair sprouting from his ears and a bulbous nose reminiscent of a turnip. His expression suggested he was just as thrilled to see Harry as Harry was to see him—which was to say not at all. He cut Harry a look so contemptuous Harry had an apology ready on his lips before he caught himself.

“What a pleasant surprise,” croaked Kreacher, spilling the greeting mealy-mouthed onto the grimy kitchen floor as he bowed low, muttering to his knees. “Master has once again invaded my proud mistress’s ancestral home, despoiling its grandeur with the presence of Mudbloods and blood traitors—”

“Yeah all right that’s enough of *that*,” Harry growled, just barely holding himself back from wringing the elf’s neck. “I don’t wanna hear the words ‘Mudblood’ or ‘blood traitor’ pass your lips *ever* again, got it? Or we’ll see about adding your head to the decorations.” Hermione looked like she wanted to chide him for speaking so harshly, but the little bastard was responsible for Sirius’s death, and if Hermione needed reminding of that, Harry was happy to do so.

Kreacher grimaced, lip curling, but if he had any backtalk to give, he held it behind his tongue.

“Right, I didn’t summon you for a chat over tea, if that wasn’t obvious. We’ve got some questions that need answering—and you’re gonna answer them *truthfully*, got it? I’ll know if you lie.”

“As Master wishes,” Kreacher said, contorting himself into another jerky bow and still muttering to himself but silently now, perhaps because all the terrible things he wanted to say, Harry had just forbidden. Harry didn’t care, honestly, his heart racing now that he had Kreacher here, before them, with answers to important questions potentially only a mouthful of words away

“All right, so a couple years ago, when the Order was here cleaning out the drawing room upstairs and chucking all sorts of dangerous paraphernalia, we came across a golden

locket in one of the cabinets. None of us could open it, so we threw it out. You wouldn't happen to have confiscated it before it got taken away with the rest of the rubbish, would you? And remember, you'd *better* tell the truth."

There was a long moment's silence, during which Kreacher straightened up, looking Harry square in the eye with his chest puffed out. He then croaked with a sneer, "Yes. Kreacher *did* take it back."

He probably thought himself terribly brave, standing his ground in the face of an unworthy half-blood. Let him—Harry had much more urgent matters on his mind. "Shocking as it may seem, that's actually precisely what we wanted to hear. Now—" He dropped to one knee, looking Kreacher square in the face. "What've you done with it? Where is it now?"

He expected more defiance, he expected Kreacher to spit in his face. What he did not expect was for Kreacher to look absolutely *miserable*, grabbing at his ears and tugging sharply on them as he grimaced and grit out, "...*Gone*."

"Gone?" The joy that had blossomed in his chest at hearing that Kreacher *had* stolen the locket away fizzled back into nothingness. "What do you mean it's *gone*? Where's it gone? What did you do with it?" Kreacher shook his head sharply, claspng his arms around himself, and Harry felt his frazzled patience snap. "If you've hidden it someplace, then I *order* you to—"

"It was *stolen*! By that thieving Mundungus Fletcher!" Kreacher wailed, tugging his ears around to cover his eyes. "He stole Master Regulus's locket and the family portrait albums and my mistress's fineries and the goblets with the family crest and the Order of Merlin, First Class and—and—" His ears flapped back, and Harry could see that his eyes had a wild, manic gleam to them as he swayed on the spot. Harry was struck by the urge to reach out and offer him a steadying hand, though he couldn't be sure Kreacher wouldn't bite him, so he kept his hands to himself. "He took it all, he took it *all*, and—"

"Er, Kreacher, you've got to slow down and—"

“Kreacher *failed!*” he yowled. “He failed Master Regulus! Master Regulus trusted him, begged him to complete his task, and Kreacher couldn’t do it! Bad elf, *bad elf*, bad elves must be—they must be—”

Kreacher whirled on his heel and made a wild lunge for the Floo grate, going for the poker leaning in its stand, but Harry got there first, sending the poker rolling across the kitchen floor and grabbing Kreacher by the ankle when he dove after it. “Don’t—even—think about it—” All four of Kreacher’s limbs were flailing, and his foot caught Harry’s nose, knocking his glasses wild. “Kreacher, I *order* you to leave off! Hold still, dammit!”

Kreacher froze as commanded, dangling helplessly in Harry’s grip as great teardrops spilled onto the flagstones with loud *splats*. Harry carefully reached down for his glasses, awkwardly wiping the lenses one-handed before fitting them back on his face.

“Oh, Harry! Harry, don’t hold him like that!” Hermione pleaded. “It’s humiliating! Let him go!”

Harry turned on her, scowling. “Didn’t you see what he was trying to do?! I’m not gonna let him beat out his own brains! We need him!”

“Of course we can’t let him do that—but he’s clearly in pain! Just look!” And Harry did look; Kreacher was convulsing with silent sobs, and his ears and nose and cheeks were flushed tomato-red, though whether from the emotional onslaught or being held upside down, it was difficult to tell. “At least put him down!” she pleaded, looking to Ron for support, and the traitorous bastard actually shrugged as if to say *What’s the harm*.

Biting back a growl of frustration, Harry shook a finger in Kreacher’s face. “I’m going to put you down—but you’re *not* to punish yourself again. I’m tired of having to snatch away fire pokers and cast-iron skillets from you just to get a straight answer.” Kreacher didn’t respond, but when Harry placed him back onto the floor, he slumped forward, ears drooping, and did not make a move to grab the poker a second time.

“...Right, let’s try this again. Kreacher: you said Mundungus Fletcher stole the locket?” Kreacher nodded mutely, eyes fixed on the dirty flagstones beneath him. “How do you

know he's the one who took it? Did you *see* him take it?"

"Kreacher saw him. Kreacher saw him take the family portrait albums and—"

"*Focus*, Kreacher," Harry urged.

Kreacher took a rasping, rattling breath to compose himself. "He ransacked my Mistress's home, stealing all the precious goods of Black generations back and back and back, and when he'd finished with the family rooms, he came here and rifled through Kreacher's cupboard. He dug about, placing his grimy mitts all over Kreacher's carefully collected treasures, and when Kreacher caught him, he told the sneakthief—" He glanced at Harry, as if checking to see if this insult was allowed, "—to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher did not stop. He ran. He Disapparated, disappeared with *everything...*"

Kreacher was looking more miserable by the second, so Harry hurried to prise more information from him before he dissolved into another tearful fit. "...Okay. Yeah, that sounds terrible. Er..." If Mundungus had Disapparated, there wasn't much chance of Kreacher having followed him, he supposed. "The locket—you called it Master Regulus's? Do you know how he came about it? Where'd he get it from? Were you able to—" Hermione placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, not chiding this time, just steadying, and he nodded. "...Kreacher, we want to help get that locket back. It was very important to Regulus, and it's very important to us as well. But we need your help to get it back, so we need you to tell us everything you know about it—starting from the very beginning. What did Regulus have to do with that locket?"

With great reluctance, Kreacher managed to pull himself together, drawing his knees to his chest and burying his face against them, shoulders shaking. Harry wondered if he was going to have to rephrase himself and make it a direct order, but at length, Kreacher finally spoke, his bullfrog-gruff voice echoing off the walls of the dark, empty kitchen.

"Master Sirius may have been the firstborn of my mistress—but he was a *naughty* boy, always bringing shame and sorrow to the family. But Master Regulus knew his place, he knew his duty—and he saw to it he carried his name with *pride*. When the Dark Lord began his rise to power, Master Regulus spoke highly of him, eager for the day when the

Dark Lord would bring about the ruin of the Muggles and Mu—Muggleborns, paving the way for wizards to take their rightful place in the scheme of things. When he came of age, my mistress finally gave him her blessing to stand at the side of the Dark Lord and bring honour back to the Black name.

“Master Regulus performed the duties expected of him as one of the Dark Lord’s trusted servants for a full year—until he came to Kreacher one day with news that his master required an elf.”

Harry frowned, turning to Hermione and Ron. They were similarly puzzled but hanging on Kreacher’s every word. “Voldemort...needed an *elf*?” He had an army of wizards and witches at his beck and call; what would he have needed a *house-elf* for?

Kreacher did not seem to hear the question—or else he didn’t care to answer, as he had not been ordered to do so, only continuing with his tale. “Master Regulus had always been so kind to Kreacher, always caring and not a nasty little—” He bit back what must have been several choice words, “—like Master Sirius. So of course...” His voice carried a tremor, and he took a breath to steady himself. “Of course Kreacher did as he was bid. Master Regulus t-told Kreacher what an *honour* it was—that he had volunteered Kreacher, for he was a g-good and loyal elf who would see any task set him completed. Kreacher was to g-go with the Dark Lord, help him however he asked, and then...” He took a stuttering breath. “Then he must r-return to Master Regulus’s side.” Harry could sense another attack on the horizon as Kreacher began to rock in place, the hitches in his voice cutting him off every few words. “So Kreacher was a good elf, and he went with the Dark Lord. But the Dark Lord...” Kreacher’s expression went dark. “He was not a kind master like Master Regulus, or even a cold, indifferent one like Master Sirius. He was a *cruel* one.”

“Tell him he’s allowed to use whatever insults he likes with that fucker,” Ron said, and Harry snorted softly—only holding off issuing the addendum because he wanted Kreacher to get on with the story.

Kreacher wrung his hands, shuddering in memory. “He took Kreacher to a cave beside

the sea—and inside, there was a deep, dark cavern...with a black lake full of terrible, dead things that reached and grabbed and dragged...”

Harry felt his flesh break out in goosebumps despite the cloying warmth of the enclosed space, and his mouth went dry. If he closed his eyes, he could see the cave Kreacher was speaking of, could hear Kreacher’s voice echoing off the high stone walls rising up over that dark water, lurking with grasping death. He knew where Voldemort had taken Kreacher, and he was starting to understand *why*.

“There was a b-boat that moved without oars...and an island with nothing but a basin...” Kreacher grimaced, and Harry did not envy him his recollection, but they had to have it all out, no matter how unpleasant. “The basin held a potion—and the D-Dark Lord told Kreacher he must drink of it until the basin was empty. Kreacher did not want to, it tasted foul and made Kreacher’s insides burn, but still the Dark Lord bade him drink and drink and drink, until it was all gone.” He clenched his eyes shut and plugged his ears, shaking his head. “The potion made Kreacher see terrible, *horrible* things—it showed him Master Regulus, cut into so many pieces, begging for Kreacher to save him; it showed him Mistress Black in her finest dress robes, standing aflame while the home of her ancestors burned. Kreacher wept, he wept enough to refill the basin ten times over. And when he had drunk all of the potion...the Dark Lord produced a golden locket and placed it in the bottom of the basin.” Kreacher lifted his head, his watery eyes staring out at nothing. “And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island, alone.”

“But—how did you get away?” Harry asked, whispering despite himself, as if speaking any more loudly would break the spell Kreacher’s story had cast upon them.

“Kreacher is a good elf. He did as Master Regulus told him to and came home.”

“Well, yes—but Voldemort left you on the island alone. How did you get back across the lake?” House-elves had some fantastic magic, but flight wasn’t one of their many skills, he was pretty sure. He turned back to Hermione and Ron. “There were Inferi in the water—there’s no way he just swam back.”

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to—”

“Yes, I know—but I’m asking *how* you managed it.” His irritation was piquing; it was difficult to tell if Kreacher was being this obtuse on purpose or not.

“He’s telling you, mate,” Ron said. “His master gave him an order, and he executed it. Probably just Disapparated.” Ron snapped his finger for show. “Poof.”

“But you couldn’t Apparate into or out of the cave—we tried!”

Ron just shrugged, though. “Yeah, but house-elves don’t operate on the same rules as wizards and witches. Their magic’s different from ours—like how they can Apparate around Hogwarts even though we can’t.”

And oh, Harry supposed he had a point. “So Voldemort didn’t realise, then... He thought he’d tied up loose threads, but Kreacher escaped.”

Hermione gave a sharp, derisive snort. “He didn’t realise only because he wouldn’t have cared. He asked for a house-elf in the first place because he needed someone—*something*—disposable. He didn’t even think house-elves had *feelings*—how could he be expected to comprehend the intricacies of their magic?” She favoured Kreacher with a fond smile he most certainly didn’t deserve, after how he’d treated her. “A house-elf’s greatest duty is to his master, and his highest law his master’s bidding. Regulus told him to come home, and no amount of wizarding magic was going to stop him.”

Kreacher had turned away from her, as if the full force of her praise was too much for him to bear head-on. At least he was no longer rocking jerkily or muttering under his breath. “...All right, so you came back, as your master had commanded. How did Regulus take it? What did he say when you told him what had happened?”

Kreacher’s bushy brow furrowed, new lines forming on his face as he donned a deep, troubled frown. “...Kreacher’s return worried Master Regulus, especially once he heard what Kreacher had been tasked with, knowing that the Dark Lord had meant for Kreacher to stay in the cave forever. He would be most cross to learn that Kreacher had returned to his master, had told his master of what he had seen. He ordered Kreacher to stay hidden, told him he was not to leave the house, not for *anything*, and not to let any

guests see him either.” Kreacher shuddered, seizing, and then held stiff. “...But then, one evening, Master Regulus came to Kreacher’s cupboard, under cover of night. He was behaving strangely, not as he usually was. Disturbed of the mind, Kreacher thought, but Kreacher is now thinking he was just very, very frightened. He had another task for Kreacher: he wished for Kreacher to take him back to the seaside cave, to the cavern beyond the lake where the Dark Lord had travelled.”

And now, Harry could see in his mind’s eye Regulus’s simple, perfect plan. How he had plotted to take down Voldemort—he wouldn’t need to rely on others among the Death Eater ranks or his own Housemates or companions, who might themselves be spies for Voldemort or who wouldn’t hesitate to turn on him. No, he only needed his loyal old house-elf, who had already been to the cave and seen the locket’s hiding place. Who knew what it took to take the locket for himself.

Harry grimaced at the thought. “Regulus...he made you drink that potion, like Voldemort had? *Again?*” It had nearly undone Dumbledore—Dumbledore! He felt a twinge of pity for this poor creature having had to go through such an experience not once, but twice.

Kreacher’s bulbous eyes shone anew with unshed tears, and when he spoke, his voice was choked with emotion, the most raw and real Kreacher had ever seemed to Harry. “He did not ask it of me. Kreacher offered—Kreacher wanted to, he wished to help Master Regulus, to spare him the terrible images and the horrid haunting memories. But Master Regulus only produced a new locket, just like the Dark Lord’s. He gave the locket to Kreacher and told him to switch the lockets once the basin was empty. After he had switched them, Kreacher was to leave—without Master Regulus—and take the Dark Lord’s locket home and destroy it. He must never *ever* speak of it to the family, only destroy the locket and forget he’d ever heard of it.”

Hermione’s hands leapt to her mouth, expression stricken; she seemed to have understood something, but Harry needed to hear it. He needed to hear *all* of it. To know every fine detail of Regulus Arcturus Black’s final moments.

“A-and then Master Regulus—d-drunk the potion—all by himself—” His speech was interrupted by rasping sobs, and it was growing very difficult to understand him now, but Harry hung on his every word. “And K-Kreacher did as ordered—he switched the lockets, pocketed the Dark Lord’s—a-and watched as...” Kreacher rubbed at his eyes, heaving. “Master Regulus was...dragged beneath th-the water by th-the dead things—and...”

And that was the end. Regulus hadn’t died valiantly in battle but alone and terrified in a cold, dark cavern surrounded by decay and Dark magic, with only the faintest of hopes that what he’d done might somehow matter.

He’d just been a boy on a mission to right a wrong and save those he loved dear. A boy, indeed; he would have been only seventeen or so. The same age as Harry. Could Harry have done something like that? Willingly walked into darkness—death—for the chance to take down Voldemort? He wasn’t sure he’d have the stones. It took something ineffable and inexplicable to face certain doom head-on. Harry had been accused in the past of being fool-hardy and headstrong, but he certainly had no death wish. He took risks when he had some confidence of a happy outcome; what Regulus had done—even what Malfoy had done—was, Harry felt, beyond him.

“Oh, you poor, brave creature, Kreacher!” Hermione rushed him, her face a mottled red mess with tears streaming down her cheeks as she dropped to her knees and tried to hug him. Kreacher was on his feet at once, though, his sour mask of disgust sliding back into place. He cringed away from her, visibly repulsed by the gesture.

“Kreacher has Mudblood germs on himself now—he has been befouled! He must scrub it off.” He then began roughly scratching at his skin, flakes peeling away like a dog shedding hair.

Harry felt his sympathy for Kreacher having to relive such horrid memories burn away in a hot flash of anger. “Oi! I ordered you *never* to use that word again!” he snapped—and the house-elf immediately threw himself to the ground, slamming his head into the flagstones without the poker near at hand. “Ah, fuck—stop it! Dammit, *stop!* Enough!” he

shouted in exasperation over Hermione's horrified wailing at the display.

It wasn't as if he'd ordered Kreacher to punish himself. He wasn't fond of the elf, but he could see the whole business of their enforced servitude was more than a bit demented. He didn't like the idea that he owned a slave, though he knew if he freed Kreacher the way he'd engineered Dobby's freedom, there was every likelihood he'd go straight to "Miss Cissy" or "Miss Bella" and feed them valuable information.

Ron quickly drew Hermione back, shielding him from Kreacher with one arm, and the three of them watched as the elf lay there on the cold flagstones, chest heaving and lids fluttering weakly. He seemed to be staring at nothing, his eyes swollen and bloodshot, and Harry hoped he hadn't concussed himself or something. Green mucous glistened around his snout, and his breathing was laboured and faint. It was as sad a sight as Harry had ever seen, and that was saying something with Kreacher.

But so near the end of the story, Harry had to know the rest—he had to know what had become of the locket, and he couldn't wait for Kreacher to put himself to rights. His memory would never be fresher—assuming Kreacher hadn't knocked himself senseless—and with a guilty glance to Hermione, who had her head hung and shoulders bunched up tight, he pressed with as gentle an urgency as he could, "...You escaped a second time, then. This time with the locket—and your master had ordered it destroyed. Did you manage it?"

Kreacher's voice was soft and distant, resigned, and he shook his head. "Kreacher tried. He tried his *very* best. It was his master's final wish—but Kreacher failed him. He smashed the locket, he dropped the locket from the roof, he threw the locket into the fire grate. Still the locket remained, protected by powerful enchantments beyond Kreacher's ability to undo. Kreacher could not even open it, as he had seen the Dark Lord do." He tugged on his ears again, wrapping them around his head to cover his eyes like a blindfold. "Kreacher punished himself most grievously for failing in his duties—and he could not even provide comfort to his mistress, who wept and wept and wept, distraught over the disappearance of her best, most beloved son, for Master Regulus had forbidden Kreacher from telling her what had happened to him."

Regulus must have known that if word got out what he'd done, Voldemort would kill anyone who'd ever associated with Regulus. It was cruel, Mrs. Black never knowing what had become of her son, but a necessary evil. Harry wondered if the portrait in the hallway was as mad as she was because of this loss. Maybe, once this was all over, he would tell her this story. Assuming he survived, of course.

Kreacher sat there, a slumped lump of elf on the cold stonework floor, and sobbed silently. Hermione was sobbing too, decidedly less silently, but she reined in the urge to try and hug Kreacher again, instead budging up against Ron, who rubbed her shoulder comfortingly—and even he looked troubled, brow furrowed and lips pursed in a sour moue.

“...I don't get it,” Harry said, half to himself. He'd stood here, listening to Kreacher's sad story, genuinely sympathising—but there was something he just *could not reconcile*. “After all that, after all Voldemort did to him—after Regulus died, trying to bring him down... Kreacher still betrayed Sirius to Voldemort.” He spoke, then, directly to Kreacher, hammering home his words, desperate for an explanation: “The very wizard Regulus gave his last full measure to bring down—and you *helped* him.”

“Harry,” Hermione sighed, rubbing at her eyes. “...It's just not that simple. You've seen the sort of treatment house-elves endure—do you really think being told to drink a potion that made him feel terrible was all that different from what Kreacher might have endured from other Dark wizards who came calling at the Black residence? It was just another dark moment in Kreacher's long, sad life—meaningless beyond the immediacy of the torture. Regulus had worshipped his 'Dark Lord' for so long, what place did Kreacher have hating him? And from the sound of things, Regulus never told Kreacher he ought to feel any other way.” She turned her gaze to Kreacher. “House-elves are loyal to a fault—and they respond to kindness and praise with fierce fealty. He must have felt that Mrs. Black was a decent mistress, never mistreating him unless he thought he deserved it, and clearly Regulus was kind to him—so he emulated them as best he could.”

“But Regulus changed his mind! He—”

“He changed his mind—but kept those feelings to himself, never bothering to explain to Kreacher the error of his ways or how he ought to feel about Voldemort after his passing.” She crossed her arms, biting her lip. “And I think he kept it to himself on purpose; Kreacher and Regulus’s family were all safer if they stuck to their beliefs. Look what happened to Regulus once he got it in his mind to turn against Voldemort, after all. Regulus was just trying to protect them.”

It was a funny thought—not humorous really, but interesting. If Regulus had gone to his brother, confided in the Order, would he have survived? Would Sirius have? If he’d just asked for *help*—if Malfoy hadn’t been so *fucking* stubborn and gone to Dumbledore or McGonagall or—or even *Harry*...

Harry shook his head; *what-ifs* were a dangerous temptation. “But Sirius was his master *too*. He was a Black, as much as Regulus and Walburga, and even Bellatrix and Narcissa. Sirius—”

“Oh, come off it, mate,” Ron snorted, not entirely with amusement. “Sirius hated the little blighter. You saw how they acted when they were around each other—how Sirius treated him.” Harry felt his temper flare, and Ron raised a hand in defence. “And I’m not saying Kreacher didn’t deserve it—” And now Hermione was looking at him with a reproachful expression, so Ron quickly amended, “I mean, at least a little? The point is, they never got on, so why should Kreacher have cared about helping him more than helping other family members who were actually nice to him—y’know, for certain definitions of nice?” Ron shrugged. “Loyalty to family only goes so far when that family’s been a tosser, I reckon.”

Well, Harry supposed he could agree with that, though it still didn’t sit well with him.

Hermione shook her head, sighing. “I’ve always maintained that wizards would eventually get their comeuppance for the way they’ve treated house-elves all this time.” It was difficult to tell if she was referring to Voldemort...or to Sirius. The truth was probably *both*.

Harry felt his cheeks heat, half with shame and half with anger, but he said nothing,

because Hermione was right—and that pissed him off too. Too many of his heroes, he was realising (or rather, coming to accept), were flawed human beings, and he was getting *really* tired of these reckonings, though he knew he could no longer ignore them.

Kreacher was loyal, and good in his own way, and Harry was starting to maybe understand that if they were going to get anywhere with him, to really get to the truth of this locket and track it down, they would need his cooperation. Kreacher had been betrayed by wizards his entire life—even his beloved Most Noble and Ancient House of Black had poisoned his mind with their Pureblood-worshipping ‘Magic Is Might’ tripe. If he could learn terrible things, learn to give his loyalty to those who didn’t deserve it, maybe he could be taught otherwise, too.

Harry took a breath, bracing himself for what would be a truly taxing task. “...Thank you for sharing Master Regulus’s story with us, Kreacher. We agree he was...er, a fine upstanding wizard, and his memory should be preserved.”

Kreacher sniffled, giving Harry a long, appraising look. “...Master isn’t family, so Kreacher wasn’t breaking orders by telling him of Master Regulus’s feats.”

“Exactly. And...if you’re feeling up to it, we’ve got a job for you. A job that we think Master Regulus would approve of...and that you’ll quite enjoy.”

Kreacher was still staring at Harry through bloodshot eyes, searching his face for malice or cruel temptation, but he would find none. Perhaps supposing there was no harm in at least hearing Harry out, Kreacher shifted around on the floor, easing himself up into a seated position, and he glared balefully up at Harry. He was no longer shaking with silent sobs—though he still hiccupped now and then.

“...Right, so there’s a task we need completed.” He tried to keep his tone gentle, not wanting to live down to Kreacher’s already basement-level opinion of Harry—they would get more out of him, he was beginning to realise, if they treated him with a modicum of respect, and at least if he didn’t outright hate them, he wouldn’t so easily turn them over to Voldemort. He glanced to Hermione, checking she approved of his approach, and she gave him a reassuring smile, nodding in encouragement.

“You said the locket—the one you brought back from the cave, Master Regulus’s locket—was stolen by Mundungus Fletcher, right?” Kreacher groaned and clenched his eyes shut tight, grabbing at his ears fitfully, and Harry hurried to deliver his order before the elf decided it was time to start another round of punishment. “We need that locket back—we want...we want to finish the work Master Regulus started. We want to help you destroy it—but first, we need to *have* it.” He licked his lips. “So we need you to find Mundungus Fletcher and bring him back here.”

Kreacher’s arms dropped to his sides, and he looked up at Harry with wide eyes that seemed to shine with something unnameable. “Find Mundungus Fletcher?”

“And bring him here, to Grimmauld Place,” said Harry. “Do you think you could do that? Er—bring the sneakthief who stole those precious Black family artefacts here to face judgement?”

Kreacher wrung his hands, his lips curling into that familiar scowl, but then he said, “Yes. Yes, Kreacher thinks he might like that... He mustn’t be allowed to make off with my mistress’s and master’s treasures, he must pay...”

“And he will—just make sure you bring him straight back here. He can be a slippery sort, so use whatever tricks you need to grab him.” Struck with a sudden burst of inspiration, Harry reached for the Mokeskin pouch tucked in his shirt and drew out the fake Horcrux locket. “Also...I think you should have this.” He held the locket out by its chain for Kreacher to take, which he did, almost reverently. “I think Regulus would want you to have this, since he cared so much for you—”

Kreacher clutched the locket to his chest and collapsed onto the ground, howling with overwrought emotion as his waterworks started up once again.

“Well if the Death Eaters didn’t know we were in here before, they sure do now,” said Ron, wincing, but Hermione looked beatific.

As Harry did not want to ruin the fragile little seed of trust that was germinating between them, he neglected to order Kreacher to get himself together, so it was another

half hour before Kreacher's snuffles and melodramatic sobs dissolved into quiet murmurs of *A Black heirloom of his very own!* and *Master Regulus's memory shall never be tarnished now*. He eventually found his feet again, though, and after making his way unsteadily back to his cupboard (fitted with fresh linens, a candle stub, and a bowl of mixed nuts), he carefully tucked the locket into the folds of his nest of blankets. After extracting promises from Harry that they would keep careful watch over the locket to ensure it was undisturbed, he executed a low, sweeping bow in Harry and Ron's direction—not sarcastic in the least this time—coupled with a bob of his head for Hermione that was, Harry supposed, progress. Then, professing that he would return post-haste with the 'sneakthief' Mundungus Fletcher, Kreacher disappeared from the kitchen with a loud, bright *CRACK*.

"Oh *damn*," Ron groaned once Kreacher was off. "We should have asked him to make breakfast before he left."

Alas, it seemed they would have to fend for themselves for a bit, as several days passed with no sign of Kreacher or Mundungus. They tried to avoid going stir-crazy in the meantime, which was a rather difficult task seeing as they couldn't leave the premises without risking their lives. Ron took up a permanent watch in the sitting room, peeking out the windows facing Grimmauld Square now and then to see if anyone had caught on to their occupation of the Black family home. Hermione discovered on their second day in residence that a fresh copy of the *Daily Prophet* was delivered to the kitchen table every morning and spent her time carefully piecing through it for any information that seemed relevant.

There had been little thus far, though, to top the front-page spread featuring a photograph of Harry under the headline "WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE", with vague promises of a reward for alerting authorities to any sightings of Harry.

"What do they want to question *Harry* for, though?" Ron had growled, outraged. "They've already got Malfoy in custody, and fifty people saw—well, they saw!" Harry very much doubted the Ministry were seeking to question him for any legitimate reason;

this way, Voldemort could have the whole country looking for Harry, eager to turn him over for a chance at immunity for their families.

The coup at the Ministry had been a silent one, for all they could tell—there was no mention of anything untoward in the *Prophet*, at least, though it was entirely possible the Death Eaters had infiltrated the paper as well. When Harry brought this up, questioning how wise it was to take anything written in the rag seriously, Hermione only said, “This is one of those instances where we’ve got to keep our enemies closer,” and continued to scan the headlines for anything interesting.

The official word on Scrimgeour’s murder was that he’d resigned, being replaced by former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Pius Thicknesse, a sallow-cheeked man with long black hair and a beard streaked with silver. He looked to Harry like he could’ve been kin with Snape, but Hermione suspected he was merely under the Imperius Curse. “Mad-Eye mentioned Thicknesse had ‘been turned’ only recently—if he’d been working for Voldemort all along, I’m sure the coup would have happened sooner.”

“I still don’t get why You-Know-Who didn’t just declare himself Minister for Magic,” Ron said, folding the Quidditch scores page into an aeroplane and using his wand to make it fly around the room. Nearly two weeks into their covert little holiday, and even the Cannons’ trials and tribulations no longer held his interest.

“Would just be stating the obvious, wouldn’t it?” Hermione said. “With Thicknesse working for him handling the more mundane aspects of running wizarding Britain, Voldemort’s free to act as he pleases without worrying the Ministry will muck up his plans. Plus, if he’d come out and taken over in broad daylight as it were, it might have provoked open rebellion. This way, working from the shadows, he can sow distrust, uncertainty, and fear. It’s a very clever game he’s playing...” Hermione frowned down at the page she’d been poring over for the past ten minutes, running a finger over a headline in a bold font. “...And now they’ve started moving against Muggleborns.”

“What?” Harry glanced up from an old photo album of Regulus’s he’d found in the

library, though it was mostly baby photos and pictures from his pre-Hogwarts years. “What do you mean ‘moving against’ them?”

She passed him the paper, tapping an article just under the fold, and Ron slid into the seat next to Harry to read along with him. “*‘Muggleborn Register’ — The Ministry of Magic is conducting a survey of so-called ‘Muggleborns’ in order to better understand how they came to possess magical secrets.*”

“*Magical secrets?*” Ron repeated, baffled. “It’s not a secret. They’re bloody witches and wizards.”

Harry continued, his blood beginning to boil. “*‘Researchers in the Department of Mysteries, hard at work unravelling the mysteries of our magical universe, have recently concluded through rigorous testing and archival exploration that magic can only be passed down through bloodlines when legitimate wizards and witches reproduce. As such, in cases where no magical provenance is obvious or can otherwise be demonstrated—as with so-called Muggleborns—any magical abilities are likely to have been obtained through unsavoury means, forcibly syphoned or stolen from innocent wizarding folk. To address this brazen malfeasance sweeping through our community and put a stop to it once and for all, the Ministry has requested all ‘Muggleborn’ witches and wizards present themselves to the newly appointed Muggleborn Registration Commission for appraisal and interview.*”

They sat there in silence for a good thirty seconds, before Ron spluttered, “But—that’s ridiculous! No one will believe that tripe! Who in their right mind would go along with this sort of thing?”

“It doesn’t sound like not going along’s even an option, Ron,” Hermione said. “If you flip to page 2, the article continues—they’re holding ‘interviews’ daily at the Ministry, it seems, and there’s a deadline of August 31st for Muggleborns to show themselves or quote, ‘Be extracted by force and presented to the Commission for judgement.’”

“But their argument’s mental on its face!” Ron shook his head. “If you could just *steal* magic, there’d be no Squibs around! Certainly not in any Pureblood families, at least—

the Malfoys would absolutely bleed someone else dry of their magic before admitting one of their own line lost the genetic jackpot.”

Harry was already on page 2. “I don’t think applying logic’s a popular past-time these days. It says here that unless you can prove you’ve got at least one second-degree Wizarding relative, you’ll be deemed to have obtained your magical power illegally and administered punishment.” The article didn’t elaborate on what the punishment would be, but Harry doubted it would be a slap on the wrist and measly fine.

“Well—that’s just—” He scrubbed his hands through his hair. “Well obviously you can’t go, Hermione. I mean—even if we *weren’t* probably wanted—we’d find a way around it, at least until the Ministry came to its senses. I mean any decent sort would vouch for you, maybe even claim you were part of their family!” He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Hermione Weasley. Has a nice ring to it, if you ask me.” Hermione choked on the coffee she’d been nursing, and Ron quickly added, “I mean, you know, as a cousin. We’ve got loads of them scattered to the four winds—no one would be the wiser, and I’m sure my folks would go along with it.”

Harry buried his face deeper in the paper, but he could still hear the fond smile in Hermione’s voice as she cleared her throat. “...That’s very kind of you, Ron, but I couldn’t possibly ask you to—”

“Who’s asking? I’m *telling* you: I wouldn’t let it come to that.” He reached forward and took one of her hands in his own. “You’re family—or as good as. And smart as you are, I’m sure you’d have our entire family tree and all our weird traditions memorised inside and out in no time flat. You could be the new Percy.”

Hermione gave a shaky laugh, running her thumb over Ron’s knuckles, and Harry suddenly felt like he was intruding on something. He tried to lose himself in the paper, pretending to be interested in an advertisement for a new line of heavy-duty Scouring brushes made with Knarl quills, until his eye caught on the name *Dumbledore* in an article—and he peered closer at the accompanying photograph. It seemed quite old, far blurrier than the other pictures found in the *Prophet’s* pages, but one could still easily

make out the happy family depicted therein. He reread the caption, mouthing the words to himself: *The Dumbledore family—left to right, Percival, holding newborn Ariana; Albus; Aberforth; and Kendra.*

He glanced back to the picture, matching the names with the figures before him. Harry could have pegged Percival as Dumbledore's father without the aid of the caption—he had the same twinkle to his eye visible despite the age of the photograph. In his arms sat what must have been Ariana, a chubby little loaf of a baby who waved equally chubby arms at the camera. Kendra looked exactly as Muriel had described her—tall and proud with sharp cheekbones and jet-black hair pulled into a severe bun that reminded Harry a bit of Aunt Petunia. Harry recalled Muriel's comments about Kendra aspiring to be accepted into Pureblood high society; she certainly had the air for it, shoulders back and a pinched expression on her features.

Standing between their parents were Albus and Aberforth, no older than perhaps nine or ten years, dressed in matching dark suits with fine lace at the collar and sleeve cuffs and boater hats tipped in opposite directions atop their heads. They might have passed for twins at a glance, but Albus was just a bit taller and was smiling brightly, confidence already oozing from his pores, while Aberforth had a bit of a hunch to his shoulders and seemed to be trying to lose himself in his mother's skirts.

The family looked quite normal, unremarkable even. Harry would not have given them a second glance but for their name.

Harry let his eye drift to the bold headline above the picture: *EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM THE UPCOMING BIOGRAPHY OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE by Rita Skeeter*

'*Upcoming pile of shite, you mean,*' Harry thought to himself, but unaccountably curious and concluding that he ought to at least see just how ludicrous this glorified gossip column of Rita's was stacking up to be—certainly it couldn't be more lurid than Muriel's stories—he began to read:

For a witch like Kendra Dumbledore, staying put in Mould-on-the-Would, where whispers and sidelong glances in the wake of her husband's scandalous

crimes and subsequent well-publicised arrest would follow her to the end of her days, was simply not an option. No, if she was to have any hope of climbing the social ladder—or at the very least not sinking any further down it—she would need to either uproot her family and move or spend the rest of her days on a Polyjuice drip. The latter not really being an option for a witch of Kendra’s means, she was forced to abandon her home, children in tow, and set off in search of greener pastures—a small community, she decided, where word of Percival Dumbledore’s hideous crimes and subsequent imprisonment in Azkaban would not have reached the residents. From there, she could rebuild her family’s image in peace.

It was with this in mind that she decided to relocate to the cosy but remote village of Godric’s Hollow. While the town would one day become more widely known as the site of Harry Potter’s infamous escape from You-Know-Who, at this point, in the late 19th century, it was only a sleepy by-town, home to both Muggle and wizarding families and, now, a young Albus Dumbledore.

Kendra wasted no time in letting the rest of the village know she had not come to make friends, spurning her new neighbours’ friendly overtures and quickly developing a reputation for fiercely protecting her privacy.

“She wanted to be left alone,” reports Godric’s Hollow resident and vaunted historian Bathilda Bagshot. “Not surprising, given the past she was trying to escape—but I’m not entirely sure what new life she expected to build here when she slammed the door in every face that came calling. We’d catch occasional sight of the boys about town, dropping by the market or placing an order at the apothecary, but Kendra herself was little more than a ghost—and Ariana...well hardly anyone even knew she existed! I remember the first time I saw her myself: it was a full moon, not too long after they’d moved in, and I was out for a spot of moonbathing. I heard a rustling from the garden just behind mine and snuck a peek—and there was Kendra, dragging along what I thought at first was the family Crup. But when the moonlight hit them just right, I could see it wasn’t a Crup at all but a child, a little girl. I only learned her name a few days

later when I managed to run into Albus while shopping for potion ingredients in the village.”

Had Kendra sought to kill two birds with one stone in her move to Godric’s Hollow, hoping to bury the secret of her odd daughter once and for all? After all, if no one there knew she existed, they couldn’t exactly wonder what had become of her once she disappeared, could they? Indeed, Kendra may have been planning Ariana’s vanishing for years, perhaps even before Percival committed those dreadful acts. Well past the age at which most experts agree children will have demonstrated some manner of magical ability, typically in the form of small bursts of untamed power, Ariana would have seemed to the likes of Kendra Dumbledore, a witch with aspirations beyond her station, less a beloved daughter and more a weighty anchor, a shame from which she could not run as she had Percival’s transgressions.

But with no friends or neighbours around to wonder what became of little Ariana, and with sons who seemed either unwilling or unable to stand up to their mother, Kendra would have been free to imprison her daughter—or worse—as she pleased. In time, Ariana’s existence passed from memory into near-legend, and Kendra Dumbledore drew one step closer to freedom.

Next week: Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts — the Prizes and the Pretence.

When would Harry learn, he wondered, that his mood could *always* sour further, especially in the wake of slogging through purple tripe straight from the quill of Rita Skeeter? His head was pounding in anger and frustration, and he thought he might be sick.

Baby Ariana was still waving at him from her doting father’s arms, and he felt his heart clench, more lost now than he’d ever felt before. How much of this was true? Any of it? All of it? The urge to make for Godric’s Hollow and shake answers out of Bathilda Bagshot if necessary was growing too great to fight. He wanted to walk the paths Dumbledore had walked and sit on the benches Dumbledore had sat upon and

understand. No, to *know*, because if he just *knew*—if he knew the truth—then maybe understanding would come along with it. He didn't want to sit here, stewing in ignorance, any longer.

He lowered the newspaper a tick, trying not to be too obvious about it as he checked to see if Ron and Hermione's moment had ended and if they could be persuaded to take a short trip to the countryside with him under Glamours—

CRACK!

Harry nearly fell out of his chair—and Ron *did*—as a shapeless mass of struggling limbs Apparated right on top of the kitchen table. They all three shoved their chairs back, getting well out of the way of the flailing arms and legs as Kreacher wrestled fiercely with a figure in tattered blue robes. “Kreacher has—returned with the *sneakthief*—Mundungus Fletcher, Master!” Kreacher croaked triumphantly, as he finally managed to get the wizard in a headlock.

Mundungus squawked and spit, his hands flailing at his waist to draw his wand from a holster—but too late, for Hermione had already snapped, “*Expelliarmus!*”, neatly disarming him.

Mundungus rolled his whole body over, nearly crushing Kreacher in the doing, until he toppled off the table and onto the flagstones. Freed at last, he scrambled to his feet, diving for his wand, which had begun to roll in Harry's general direction, but Ron tackled him before he'd gotten two steps and made himself comfortable atop Mundungus's back.

“Get offa me!” he bellowed, wriggling and squirming in an effort to unseat Ron, but Ron had a fair bit more heft to him than a house-elf, and he elbowed Mundungus in the ribs when one of his flailing kicks connected with Ron's shin. “What's the big idear? Lemme go! Lemme go you rotten li'l—”

“Yeah, I think not. Not at least until we've had a conversation,” said Harry, marshalling everything he had to keep his tone cool and even. Mundungus responded to threats from power only; if he didn't think he was in danger of suffering grave bodily harm, he'd find a

way to weasel his way out. Harry chucked the newspaper into the cold Floo grate, where Kreacher could use it later as kindling for a cookfire, and crossed over to Mundungus. He dropped into a squat, drawing his wand and levelling it at Mundungus's pockmarked nose, then jerked his head for Ron to release his hold. "You've got three wands on you and a house-elf who's only too eager to drag your dirty arse back here again should you try and make a break for it. We won't be quite so genial next time we extend an invitation for you to join us for tea. Sound good?"

Mundungus only gave a wheezing grunt, eyeballing Harry fiercely. This close, it was impossible to miss the stench of old sweat staining his robes and bottom-shelf Firewhisky on his breath, and given the general state of him, from his wild, matted hair to his boots with the soles worn clean through, it was clear Kreacher hadn't caught him fresh from the shower.

Kreacher hopped up onto the table, arching into a low bow that looked halfway elegant. "Kreacher apologises most deeply to Master for his delay in fetching the sneakthief Mundungus Fletcher. He evaded Kreacher's capture for many days, sly as Master said he would be, but Kreacher has finally brought him back to face justice," Kreacher croaked, wringing his hands with his head ducked obsequiously. Where before such a gesture would have been made only grudgingly, Harry felt like Kreacher actually meant these intimations of servitude now, and he wasn't sure how to feel about that—or how Hermione would feel about it.

"No need to apologise; it's clear you cornered him in the end." He gave Kreacher a firm nod. "Job well done, Kreacher, truly." The elf gave another low, sweeping bow, before popping back up with perked ears and a puffed-out chest, looking fifty years younger for a bit of praise.

Harry turned back to Mundungus, keeping a firm grip on his wand and an *Incarcerous* ready on his lips just in case Mundungus tried anything. "Right, we've got a few questions for you—"

"You can't blame me, a'right? Weren't my idear to be a part of your daring-do and all

that rot in the first place! And what was I s'posed to do when bleedin' You-Know-Who's comin' right for me? Anyone else woulda took off, right? Can' force a man to sit there and wait for death to take 'im! 'S just cruel!"

"Funny, no one *else* seemed to have trouble reining in the urge to Disapparate in the face of sudden death," Hermione sniffed, arms crossed. Harry couldn't remember the last time she'd sounded so cold. "And Shield spells exist for a reason."

"And what good's a *Protego* gonna do when he's flingin' a Killin' Curse at me, eh? 'Ave a go at it, if you want!" He spat on the ground. "I choked, what're y'gonna do about' it?"

There was rather a *lot*, Harry was realising, that he wanted to 'do about it'. It'd been a while since he'd actually gotten to stand toe to toe with the one responsible for the death of a person he'd cared about—and it sent a dangerous thrill through Harry.

But now was neither the time nor the place to indulge in dark fantasies of teaching Mundungus that there might be more to fear from the likes of Harry and Ron and Hermione than Voldemort. "For your information, Kreacher didn't bring you here to explain why you fucked off when Mad-Eye needed you watching his back. Which, he's dead now, by the way. Did you know?" Harry took a step forward, stabbing the tip of Mundungus's nose with his wand and making his eyes go cross. "So I hope you sleep well, knowing you got a great man killed."

"Was sleepin' jus' fine before you sicced an 'ouse-elf on me!" He gave a quarrelsome sniff. "So what's this all about, then? Gonna bitch about the junk I pilfered, even though it was just rottin' in 'ere? I already 'eard the back end of it from Molly Weasl—*Morgana's tits, call 'im off!*"

The saucepan Kreacher had just lobbed at Mundungus's head clattered to the ground with an echoing clang, and Mundungus doubled over to protect himself as Kreacher took a running leap at him, a ladle in one hand and rolling pin in the other. Harry snapped a hand out, quickly separating them. "No—*no*, Kreacher!"

Kreacher fixed Harry with a curious expression—almost devious, Harry thought. He

raised the rolling pin hopefully. “Perhaps a light tap, Master Harry?”

Harry cleared his throat around a chuckle, and Ron snorted. “I do appreciate the backup, Kreacher, but we need him conscious if we’re to find the information we’re looking for. You know, for your old Master?” Kreacher was immediately cowed, slipping the ladle and rolling pin behind his back. “But rest assured, we’ll rely on your talents should he need further persuading, so stand at the ready.”

Kreacher became as a Beefeater, standing stock straight with the ladle crossed over his heart and the rolling pin thrown over his shoulder. All the while, he kept Mundungus pinned with a loathing he’d previously reserved for Harry, Hermione, and Ron.

Mundungus scoffed in his general direction, then turned back to Harry, squinting. “...So, what? Shake me down if you want, I ain’t got nothin’ to give back—”

“You’d better have *something* to give back, or you’re about to have a *very* bad day—and that’s saying something, considering the day you’ve had so far.” Mundungus raised his eyes from Harry’s wand to his face, bushy brows furrowed, and Harry felt another thrill run through him. They were so close to one of their goals now—it was like water down a parched throat. To finally have accomplished *something*, even if they were nowhere near the end of their quest. They needed this. *Harry* needed it. “Right, so when you were doing your ‘pilfering’, taking all sorts of things from this house that didn’t belong to you—you know, *stealing*—you decided it wasn’t enough to take from the family’s rooms, you had to go through Kreacher’s cupboard too.” Mundungus flinched again, perhaps expecting Kreacher to come after him for further retribution—but the elf stayed put, only tightening his grip on the rolling pin. “One of those items you took from the cupboard was a golden locket with a stylised S inlay.” His heart felt like it was about to beat clear out of his chest, and all he could hear was its dull, droning thudding and the panting terror of Mundungus Fletcher, convinced he was about to be bludgeoned to death by a house-elf. “That locket—what did you do with it?”

And now Mundungus raked him a shrewd, suspicious look. “...Why?” He wrinkled his nose. “What’s it worth?”

Hermione gasped. “Oh! He’s still got it, then!”

“No,” Ron snorted, “he’s just wondering if *he* got swindled this time.”

“Swindled, nothin’!” squawked Mundungus with a defeated *harrumph*. “Practically got it stolen offa me!”

“Someone *stole* it from you?” Harry’s grip tightened on his wand. “Explain. Who?”

Mundungus raised both hands in defence. “I said *practically*, didn’ I? Took my *earnings* down to Knockturn, hopin’ to get a few Galleons for the whole lot, an’ some snooty witch comes saunterin’ up, askin’ if I’ve got a *license*. I ask what for, she says ‘for tradin’ in magical artefacts’, like I ain’t standin’ there with a couple dinged-up goblets and some ratty old robes. *Artefacts!* Told her where she could stuff ‘er license, an’ she says she’s gonna write me up an’ fine me for ‘verbal assault’.” Harry frowned—written up? An Auror? “But then she sees the locket in the pile an’ says she’ll be lenient just the once an’ let me off for now but she’s confiscatin’ the locket.”

“She? Who’s ‘she’?” Mundungus screwed up his features like he was thinking, and Harry prodded him with his wand. “*Who?*”

“Like I know! Some Ministry hag, from her badge.” Harry turned to Kreacher, as if to give an order, and Mundungus sputtered, “Little woman! Lots of lace an’ frills, seemed partial to pink! Had a big ol’ bow on her head.” He then frowned to himself before adding, “Might’ve *actually* been a hag, now I fink about it. Fat an’ squat—kinda like a toad.”

Harry’s hand spasmed, and his wand dropped from his limp fingers, clattering against the floor and causing it to shoot off a volley of sparks that lit Mundungus’s eyebrows on fire.

“*Aguamenti!*” shouted Hermione, quickly dousing Mundungus, who’d begun to scream bloody murder.

The commotion seemed far away from Harry, though, and he slumped back into his chair at the table, head hung.

Ron muttered, “Bloody *hell...*” and the scars on the back of Harry’s hand twinged in sympathy.

Holding Cell 3B

August waxed on, dry and hot and brittle as dead grass, until September was upon them at last. The days seemed to stretch forever, boredom making each feel more interminable than the last, and though they now had a goal upon which to set their sights, none of them were terribly confident in their odds or eager to get on with the job. They could hardly be blamed, though; how exactly *did* you go about sneaking into the most secure site in magical Britain, undetected, while you and your friends were wanted by a Dark Lord? That certainly hadn't been covered at Hogwarts.

But daunting though the mission was, they were all of one mind that it *had* to be done; the locket was the only Horcrux they'd managed to track down so far, and as such it was by default the easiest to lay hands on (for a very loose definition of 'easy', admittedly).

"Shoes in the entry cupboard before you trek through the house, Master Harry," Kreacher croaked by way of greeting just as Harry stepped over the threshold and into Grimmauld Place from his daily watch. "And washing up, if you please—dinner is being served shortly." Harry dutifully toed off his trainers, placing them next to Hermione's and Ron's, and passed Kreacher his Invisibility Cloak. Kreacher brushed some imagined bit of dust from the Cloak, giving it a shake that set the fabric to shimmering, and then promptly hung it on a hook next the troll-leg umbrella stand.

It'd been Harry's third day on watch this week and just as dull as the dozen that had come before it. They'd all taken turns watching the Ministry's official street-level entrance from under the safety of the Cloak, monitoring peak times of usage and easy marks that could be farmed for Polyjuice samples. That was really their only way in, they'd determined—wards had been set up inside the Ministry to make Apparition in and out virtually impossible, and the Floo points were highly restricted, with only top officials allowed to even connect their homes to the Ministry's grates and security wizards monitoring each grate, checking the credentials of anyone arriving or leaving.

After running his hands under the tap and drying them with one of the fluffy white towels that now hung in the ground floor bathroom, Harry headed down into the basement, where he could hear Hermione and Ron discussing something in muted tones.

The kitchen these days had been transformed from the dark, dank state it had been when the trio had first moved in. Filled with a new sense of pride in pleasing his Master and guests, Kreacher had outdone himself with whipping Grimmauld Place back into shape, and every surface of the kitchen now shone, reflecting Kreacher's earnest efforts. The pots and pans that hung from hooks over the flat-top had been scrubbed and polished to a fine shine, the old wooden tabletop gleamed with a fresh coat of lacquer, and the goblets and flatware had all been mended, not a crack or chip in sight. The cold Floo grate had been swept and Scourgified, and within it now crackled a high, merry fire, over which a cauldron simmered full of something that smelled fantastic.

Even Kreacher had cleaned up nicely, kitted out in a fresh towel of houndstooth with his ear hair washed and trimmed and Regulus's locket bouncing on his chest as he skittered about the kitchen, tending no less than three different dishes at once.

"I think they might've gotten a glimpse of me," Harry said, plopping down into a chair with a huff.

"Who?" Hermione asked, looking up from the sheaf of scribbled notes and hand-drawn maps over which she and Ron had been poring. They'd built up quite a bank of knowledge between the three of them, though it still didn't feel like nearly enough.

"Our friends, out in the Square." Not so very long after they'd arrived at Grimmauld Place, Ron had started making note of visitors who dawdled overlong near Numbers 11 and 13. Their outfits—long cloaks despite the oppressive August heat—suggested that these were not merely Muggles passing by and curious about the odd numbering system. They were at the very least Ministry officials keen to bring charges of truancy against them and at the worst...well, Death Eaters. So long as Harry, Hermione, and Ron kept safely behind the Fidelius charm, their watchers did not seem able to see or attack them, but they'd had their share of close calls with their Apparition skills not being quite

up to snuff. “Nearly missed the front step when I Apparated in—the Cloak slipped when I was trying to get my bearings.”

Ron shook his head. “I do that every time. One of these days I’m gonna Splinch a finger or something and it’s gonna go rolling out past the wards and that’ll be that. They’re out in force today, though, aren’t they?”

Harry nodded. “Reckon it’s cause it’s the 1st of September?”

“What, are they hoping to jump us when we march out, school trunks in hand, to hail the Knight Bus to Kings Cross?” Ron glanced at his watch. “...Guess we’re a bit late for it now, though.”

Hermione sighed. “I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about it—but I’ll admit I haven’t been too successful. I’ve never missed the Hogwarts Express in six years—feels weird.”

Ron shrugged. “Harry and I missed it the once—it’s not so bad.”

They shared a silent moment’s reflection as it finally sank in that they really weren’t going back. They’d abandoned the imagined safety of a Hogwarts education and were well and truly on their own now.

Ron cleared his throat. “So how’d your watch go, otherwise?”

“Dull as ever—any excitement here?”

Ron’s expression went dark, and he looked to Hermione. “You wanna do the honours? I think I’m gonna want to kick something again if I have to get into it, and Kreacher’ll kill me if I spill his cauldron of French Onion Soup a second time.”

Harry felt a chill of apprehension ripple down his spine. “What’re you talking about? What’s happened?”

Hermione sighed, pulling out the morning’s copy of the *Daily Prophet* that had been buried underneath a streetmap of London she’d nabbed from the Underground. She

slapped it on the table before Harry, who found himself staring at portrait of a familiar figure sneering back at him from beneath a bold headline proclaiming *SEVERUS SNAPE NEW HOGWARTS HEADMASTER*.

“Oh *fuck* me...” Harry groaned. He’d spent these months praying Snape had been bluffing, only trying to rile Harry up, as he’d known the prospect of Snape assuming the position previously occupied by Dumbledore would. Surely the Board of Governors wouldn’t *allow* it, Harry had assumed. Not when they had Professor McGonagall and her years of experience as Deputy Headmistress.

But that had been before the Ministry had fallen, before a puppet government had been installed. With Death Eaters making the laws and running the country, it seemed only logical Voldemort would want to extend his reach to Hogwarts and the vulnerable young minds being sheltered therein.

He swallowed the rising tide of bile burning his throat and scanned the accompanying article, reading aloud:

“With the passing of Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has itself a new Headmaster in Severus Snape, former Head of Slytherin House and long-standing Potions master (with a brief stint as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor). As his first act in his new position, Headmaster Snape has passed his Head of House duties for Slytherin House on to current Potions master Horace Slughorn. Several more new staff members join Headmaster Snape in welcoming students at the start of term September the 1st, including Alecto Carrow in the position of Muggle Studies professor following the abrupt resignation of Professor Charity Burbage, and her brother Amycus succeeding Headmaster Snape as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.

“While the new Headmaster declined to give a comment to the Prophet on his ascension, the editorial board feels his appointment is well-merited after years of exemplary service in the moulding of young minds within the hallowed halls of Hogwarts and wishes him all the—”

Harry crumpled the paper angrily, tossing it into the fire. “More like years of exemplary *asshattery*—I can’t fucking *believe*—”

Kreacher scurried over with a copper boiling pot in hand, offering it to Harry. “If Master Harry is wanting to kick something, please use this and don’t disturb Kreacher’s bubbling cauldron like some other wizards.”

“Thanks, Kreacher, but I’ll try to rein in the urge.”

“See that you do...” Kreacher warned, slouching back to tend to whatever was bubbling on the stove.

“You should’ve been here when we first saw the article this morning,” Ron snorted, though his expression was decidedly not amused. “Hermione actually *swore*.”

“All I said was *Merlin’s pants*,” Hermione muttered, cheeks pinking. “And I wasn’t swearing because of the article—though it would’ve been well-deserved—it was because of the portrait.”

“What portrait?”

Hermione patted her beaded bag, which sat close at hand at the end of the table. “Phineas Nigellus Black, who’s been, shall we say, relocated.”

“Oh. Oh that’s good thinking indeed.” He’d known that the old Black relative had a matching portrait hanging in Hogwarts but hadn’t thought of the implications until now.

Hermione nodded, looking pleased with herself. “I didn’t want to take the chance Snape might send him to spy on us. I don’t think it’s any great secret we’re in here, given the foot traffic out in the square, but no sense in making their job easier for them if we can. Plus, who knows what information he might carry back to Snape about the You-Know-Whats.”

Harry only half-listened to her explanation, his mind occupied with the image of Snape nestled comfortably in the Headmaster’s Office at Hogwarts, fingers steepled as he sat

behind Dumbledore's great desk, in full possession of all those fantastic contraptions in Dumbledore's collection, as well as the stone Pensieve, the Sorting Hat, and—though Harry felt it now rightly belonged to *Ron*—the sword of Gryffindor.

“Well let him just try,” Ron said. “All he'll see now is the inside of that lovely handbag of yours.”

Harry shook his head. “This is all too much. How can the staff allow this? I mean—they *know* McGonagall deserves that position; there's no way they'll just let Snape waltz into Dumbledore's office and set up shop. Can't they lodge a complaint with the Board of Governors? And who are these Carrows characters?”

“Death Eaters,” Ron spat. “The article continues—well, *continued*, 'til you chucked it in the fire—on page three with pictures of them. I recognised the sister as one of the lot chasing me and Tonks. She got her hood knocked off when I managed a Stunner, and I reckon it's the same witch.”

“Fantastic,” Harry said, bitterness thick in his tone. “I'm regretting going back less and less now.”

“Yes, it does seem we dodged something of a bullet.” Hermione shuddered. “I can't imagine what this year will be like for the students stuck having to attend...”

There wasn't going to be much learning going on this year, Harry wagered. “All the more reason for the teachers to stage a revolt, then.”

“That's the rebellious student in you talking, Harry,” Hermione said, a thin, sad smile on her face. He wondered if she was remembering Fifth Year, and how amazing it had felt to be doing something, *really* doing something, to take back their school and prepare themselves to face those who'd threaten Hogwarts, with nothing but their wits and wands. “Think about it—they've got no choice *but* to go along with these decisions. They'd not only be sacked if they turned against Snape and the Carrows, they'd risk putting the students in even greater danger, since no doubt they'd be replaced by more Death Eaters.”

“And getting sacked is probably the *best* outcome they could hope for,” Ron muttered. “There’s always Azkaban for dissenters, after all.”

Hermione nodded. “If for no other reason, I’m sure they’ll stay on just to try and protect the students from further harm. I wouldn’t count on seeing any bold insurrection at Hogwarts while there are innocent students still there who might get caught in the crossfire.”

While Harry hated to admit it, the two of them made very good points. He did wonder how he might have reacted had he been at Hogwarts himself, though; he doubted he could have kept his head down and avoided making waves. Would Dumbledore’s Army have made a comeback? Might it still? Were Ginny and Neville and Luna even now passing word along to other former DA members aboard the Hogwarts Express, huddling together in conference and planning how best to ‘welcome’ their new Headmaster?

Was it so terrible he wanted to join them, rather than commit himself to this impossible quest?

He sighed, running a hand through his hair just as Kreacher came bustling to the table with a large tureen in his hands and began ladling out soup into shallow bowls, whistling a merry tune as he did so. “Kreacher hopes Master Harry and his guests are hungry—and that they will forgive dinner being served later than usual, as Kreacher had to restart the stock after Ronald Weasley *tripped*.” He fixed a pointed glare at Ron, who ducked his head.

“Said I was sorry, didn’t I? *And* I helped clean it up.”

“Vanishing the evidence really isn’t doing much,” Hermione reminded, accepting the bowl Kreacher pushed her way. “Thank you, Kreacher. It smells amazing, as usual.”

Kreacher offered a grudging grunt in return; he hadn’t quite managed direct conversation with Hermione yet, but she seemed to appreciate that he was at least trying, and Harry was just happy as long as he wasn’t calling Harry’s friends rude

names.

“On the bright side, if Snape’s stuck putting out fires at Hogwarts, then he can’t easily be elsewhere causing trouble,” Harry sighed, spooning up his soup and blowing softly over the surface, chasing away tendrils of steam. “Suppose we’ll have to trust Hogwarts to take care of itself.”

“Indeed,” Hermione nodded. “And between the teachers and the former DA members still running around, I expect they’ll manage. Open violence isn’t something Voldemort can chance at this stage, so we can at least rest easier knowing no one’s in immediate danger.” Harry wasn’t sure he shared her confidence, but he let it pass. “So what all happened today on watch? You said nothing interesting—but give us a run-down all the same. It’s important we keep track of even the most minor changes in routine.”

“I stood my watch as usual—but I didn’t catch sight of Umbridge, unless she’s suddenly slimmed down or grown a few head taller. Oh—” He nodded to Ron. “I did spot your dad, though. Nothing much of note going on with him, as far as I could see, but I figure no news is good news.”

“Nothing makes me happier these days than hearing my dad’s as unremarkable as ever.” They’d all three spotted Mr. Weasley at some point over the course of their time spent monitoring the Ministry entrances, but as Mr. Weasley himself had warned them against trying to contact him, they’d all kept their distance. After all, Harry was a wanted man, Ron was supposed to be home sick with spattergroit, and Hermione would probably be hauled off to be interrogated by the Muggleborn Registration Commission. Still, it was reassuring, seeing him out and about going through the motions and living life as usual.

“Guess that seals it,” Hermione sighed. “She must be Flooing in. I know I’ve heard Mr. Weasley mention that most Ministry staff Floo into work—or they did before, at least. Now that they’ve restricted access to those at the tip-top of the Ministry ladder, she’s probably using it as a status symbol, to show off how important she is.”

“Sounds right up her alley,” Harry agreed.

“Did you see our marks again?” Hermione asked. “Were they still regular as clockwork with their arrivals?”

They were far too big now to fit all three of them under the Cloak at once, so they would need to disguise themselves if they wanted to be able to infiltrate the Ministry. A simple Glamour or Transfiguration of the features wouldn’t do they trick; they had to be recognised as belonging in the Ministry if they wanted to make any headway once inside, and that meant Polyjuice.

“Yeah, the witch was there, nibbling on a scone with a thermos of something—probably coffee. And that wizard was walking with another witch today; she was wearing the same colour robes as he was—you know, the navy ones. I thought it was just fashion at first, but you think maybe it’s a uniform?”

“Oh,” Ron said. “He’s probably Magical Maintenance in that case.” Both Harry and Hermione’s heads slowly turned to him, confusion writ on their features. “I mean, probably? Dad mentioned there was a big to-do because they wanted to change the shade from ‘Stormy Slate’ to ‘Naval Indigo’ a couple years back, wound up with the whole unit striking until the budget committee caved and funded a new wardrobe.”

Hermione’s spoon, which had been halfway to her mouth, clattered back into her bowl, and she scrambled for her notes, rifling through them in a panic and sending several pages floating to the floor. “I can’t believe you never told us that! I haven’t made any notes about the robe colour!”

Ron lifted a brow, stirring his soup with a frown. “...Well, I mean. They’re blue. Navy, if you want to get fancy.”

“But we might have brought along the wrong colour, and *then* we’d have been marked straight away!”

“He wears the same colour robes every day—we at least picked up on the pattern.”

“And you’ve just told us they had a *strike* because the colour wasn’t precisely to their

taste!” She scrubbed her hair, leaving it a frazzled mess. “Oh *no*, now I’ve got to brush up on my *Multicorfors*. I don’t think I’ve cast it since Third Year...” She began muttering to herself, clearly worked up.

“I honestly don’t think they’ll notice even if it isn’t the *exact* shade it’s meant to be—if anyone asks, we can just say his wife’s Scouring Charm is on the fritz.”

“We can *what*?” Hermione snapped, and Ron flinched. Harry kept his head low and continued to drink his soup in silence. “If we’re going to do this, if we’re *really* going to try and infiltrate the Ministry of Magic—which is probably the most *dangerous* place for us to be right about now short of sitting in Voldemort’s lap—then we’ve got to have everything *perfect*, down to the tiniest, most seemingly insignificant of details! We know there are Death Eaters among the employees, and they’re bound to be on the lookout for intruders. That’s what the whole point of all these reconnaissance trips has been! If you’ve been holding back precious information, then—”

Ron held his hands up. “Oi, I’m not holding back anything, geez! I just didn’t think it was important!”

“Tomorrow,” Harry said, half to himself—and after a beat of silence, realising he’d spoken out loud and hadn’t quite finished the thought, he continued, “We should do it tomorrow.”

Hermione’s jaw hung open, and Ron choked on his next sip of soup, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Wha—*tomorrow*? As in—*the day after today*?” She boggled in wide-eyed shock. “I mean—you’re joking, right? We’re nowhere *near* ready for—”

“We’re ready enough.” Harry settled back in his chair, swallowing. “Or rather, we’re as ready as we’re going to get. We’ve been at this for nearly a month now, spending our days watching, monitoring, making plans, everything except *doing*, and even if we waited another month, or another *three* months watching that entrance and staking out marks, I don’t feel like it’d make much difference. While we’re sitting here, drowning in

preparations, Voldemort's out there doing god-knows-what, threatening our friends and families in ways we can't even imagine—plus, the longer we put this off, the greater the chance we might risk losing the locket altogether. Maybe the Ministry isn't where we ought to be focusing our energies even—what if she's already gotten tired of the thing and chucked it into a jewellery box at her home?" Hermione looked stricken at the thought, and he imagined she was presently being visited by visions of all her painstakingly printed notes vanishing in a puff of smoke. "The point is we've hit a point where waiting any longer's gonna do us more harm than good, I think."

Ron was absently stirring his soup, seeming to have lost his appetite, and Hermione worried her lip, searching Harry's face. "But—tomorrow? *Tomorrow?* Not even a few more days to finalise everything, make sure we're brushed up on all the fine details before diving in?"

"What details? We've already gotten all the important information down—we know where we can and can't Apparate, we know which Floo grates are reserved for commuting and who's allowed to use them, and we may not have a precise layout of the Ministry, but we know roughly where Umbridge's office will be since you overheard that one wizard say—"

"*I'll be up on Level 1; Dolores wants to see me,*" Hermione recited with a grimace, as if she hated herself for making Harry's point for him.

"Exactly, see?" said Harry.

"But—we don't have the coins yet!" Hermione protested. "How will we get in? We know you need them to actually get *into* the Ministry—"

"Which calls to mind the question of: hey, how *do* we get into the Ministry?" Ron added.

"We just follow the crowd, simple enough. And as for the coins, we'll nick them off our marks." Harry didn't understand why they were so down on the idea. It was risky, and a bit impulsive, but adrenaline would get them far, and improvisation would do the rest.

Hermione chewed on her thumbnail, looking distressed. "...I know you're getting impatient, sitting around under the Cloak all day just watching—we are too, trust us. But we can't leave *any* of this to chance! This is our only shot—my Polyjuice stocks are limited, and I don't want to push it. If we could just wait even another week, two if possible..."

Harry sighed. "If we had more time, we could *take* more time. But you know things aren't getting better out there. Each day that passes, they could find some new chink in the Ministry's defences and shore them up, or Umbridge could go on holiday, or a million other things could change." He could tell from their faces that they weren't just unsure, they were *scared*, and Harry couldn't blame them. But they couldn't let fear drag them down or keep them from seizing chances when they came along. He was confident that they'd be no better prepared months from now than they were at this point, which meant it was time to put their plan into operation. "We need to act, we need to get that Horcrux back. Before someone catches sight of it, realises what it is, and then moves it beyond our reach."

Hermione pursed her lips. "...I suppose the risks *are* starting to outweigh the benefits... And I really do think the notes we've gathered over the past few weeks will get us far—not all the way, but far. Hopefully far enough."

Ron pushed his bowl away with a sigh. "...Are we actually talking about this? Seriously? Doing this *tomorrow*?" Neither Harry nor Hermione could quite meet his eye, and he shook his head. "You're mental, the both of you. In a good way, usually, but sometimes..." He blew air loudly from his lips. "Just once, it might be nice to go to the Ministry and not have to risk my life in the doing. I'm sure it's a nice place usually; it's just every time I've gone, there's been a non-zero chance I could die."

Hermione reached over to pat his hand, brows lifted hopefully. "Well, you might at least get to see your dad? Maybe even speak with him?" Ron seemed to consider this, until she continued, "And Percy will be there too, won't he?"

"Geez, thought you were trying to make this more enticing? I've gotta maybe die *and*

I've gotta see Percy?" He checked his watch. "Wonder if the Death Eaters are still pacing about outside; I might make it easy on them..."

Hermione rolled her eyes, smiling fondly, and Harry—

A spear of pain shot through Harry's forehead, snapping along the lines of his scar. He winced, seizing sharply, and kicked out his leg to connect his shin with one of the chairs in an effort to disguise the source of his agony. "Shit..." he hissed under his breath, pitching his voice so Hermione could hear him. "Knocked my shin. That smarts." Her gaze narrowed on him, and he was certain he hadn't entirely fooled her.

"Funny bone, eh?" Ron said, nodding sympathetically, then he heaved a deep sigh. "All right. Guess it's all-in, then?" He was clearly unhappy with the situation but seemed to recognise he wasn't going to change minds; the option to let Hermione and Harry go it alone was, of course, off the table.

Harry only nodded, not trusting himself to speak lest it come out a pained groan. He shoved his chair back, standing, and Kreacher was at his side in an instant.

"But Master has not finished his first course! Was the soup not to his liking? Kreacher has prepared a savoury beef stew as the main course, or if Master is preferring it, he can skip straight to the treacle tart, as Kreacher knows he is partial to it."

Harry forced a smile, fighting past the mounting agony. "No—no, it's fine. I wouldn't spoil my appetite like that. I'll only be a moment, just going to make sure I don't need to *Episkey* anything, and I'll be back straight away." He could feel Hermione watching him suspiciously, so he hurried from the kitchen before he embarrassed himself. He charged up the stairs to the ground floor, nearly slipping on the hallway rug in his haste. Once he'd made it to the bathroom, he whirled around, back pressed up against it, then sank to his knees. Doubling over forward, he nearly cracked his skull on the black tiles, which had been polished to such a shine he could see himself in them—not pretty, not pretty at all.

His stomach heaved, and he worried he was going to sick up Kreacher's lovely French

onion soup, eyes sliding shut as he beat back the wave of nausea...

Wait—this wasn't Grimmauld Place. This wasn't even *inside*.

There were no Death Eaters flanking him this time, no wretched, tortured soul writhing on the floor before him. It was a street—a cobbled walkway in the heart of a cosy little village. It felt...Continental, at least. Alpine, almost. The buildings—homes?—were packed close together in a sort of ramshackle fashion, and here and there windows glowed with a soft golden amber light as twilight crept in. Wherever this was, it was far enough away the sun had already set.

His footsteps made no sound as he glided over the cobblestones, approaching one of the cottages, and he reached out to rap once on the wooden door with a pale, long-fingered hand. The nausea and pain were nowhere to be felt—instead, he was overcome with excitement, the blood in his veins singing. He was close, *so close*...

The door swung open, and a woman with curly brown hair pulled back under a kerchief greeted him with a broad smile—that quickly fell, her good humour replaced with dawning terror as she beheld whatever Harry was.

“*Gregorovitch?*” Harry asked, wasting no time. He had a mission—he had questions in need of answers, and this woman would serve her purpose promptly.

But she only shook her head, beginning to close the door on him. “*No, no—am sorry.*”

And that was unacceptable, so he snapped his wand out—tearing the door off its hinges and blasting the woman onto her backside. She scrambled backwards in a sort of crab-like movement as Harry stepped inside. “*Gregorovitch,*” he said again, and this time it was not a question.

The woman was weeping now, shaking her head. “*Er wohnt hier nicht mehr! He no live here! He no live here! I know him not!*”

The woman was lying, Harry knew it. He could smell it on her—underneath the terror, through the tears and desperation. She staggered to her feet, leaning against a door

jamb, and raced for a darkened hallway at the back of the cottage. Harry followed her, slow and inexorable, doom incarnate.

“Where is he, if not here? Gregorovitch.”

“Das weiß ich nicht! He gone! I know not, I know not!”

And *oh*, he was bored of her yowling now, and he raised his wand—it was not his holly and phoenix feather but one of an unfamiliar make. Still, he felt it would do for the small job he asked of it.

“Mama?”

She gave a barking whimper when two young children came padding down the hall, clinging to her skirts. She tried to shield them with her body, begging and pleading, and Harry felt a bolt of anger tear through him. *Mothers* and their *love*. He opened his mouth, there was a flash of green light—

“Harry! HARRY!”

Hermione was pounding on the door in perfect synchronisation with the ache in Harry’s head, and he opened his eyes. He was still doubled over on the floor, his forehead pressed to the polished tile and the frames of his glasses digging into his cheek.

“Harry! You okay in there? Fall in or something” Ron called through the door. *“We heard you yelling from downstairs—Kreacher’s soup that bad?”*

Fuck, of course he’d been shouting. He staggered back to his feet, bracing one hand on the sink to help maintain balance, and steeled himself for what was likely to be a thorough verbal thrashing.

When he pulled the door open, Hermione had her hand raised in a fist, as if she’d been in the middle of rapping on the door but was now considering just winding up for a right hook. *“Oh. There you are. Are you all right?”* Her eyes darted over his shoulder, as if scanning the bathroom behind him to be sure there were no Death Eaters hiding behind

the pipes or under the tub. Ron was standing behind her, his wand already in hand. He looked a bit peaky, and he was breathing heavily—they'd clearly rushed up here, ready to do battle with whatever was assaulting Harry.

"Yeah, I'm fine—I told Kreacher, I just came in here to check my leg. I knocked it pretty hard and I couldn't exactly drop trou at the dinner table."

Her gaze narrowed on him. "...So all the yelling was for...?"

"Knocked it again—on the bath this time. I'm still not used to the layout, I guess." He knew she wasn't going to swallow it, but like hell he was going to just confess and walk headlong into another lecture.

"Want Hermione to have a look at it?" Ron asked, slipping his wand back into his pocket, and his expression was so even, it was impossible to tell if he genuinely believed Harry's story, or if he'd turned traitor as well and was trying to get Harry to break. "She's getting pretty good at Healing Charms."

Harry made to move past them—"Er, no, I think I'm fine, I'll just have a bruise."—but Hermione threw her arms out, bracing them against the door jamb and blocking Harry in. "*Honestly*, Harry! Do you think we're stupid? Do you think this is the first of these fits we've seen you have?" She had her lips pursed, and her cheeks were dark with anger. "We know what we're looking at! I mean—" She sighed loudly, gesturing to him. "You look like death warmed over!"

Harry glanced into the mirror, rubbing his chin and frowning. He didn't look *that* bad, he thought. He sighed, settling onto the closed toilet lid, and ran his hands through his hair. "...I don't think you're stupid. But I'm tired of talking about it."

"Tired of arguing about it, you mean," Hermione said flatly, and Harry wasn't going to deny it.

"Well, I've only just seen him *murder* a woman in cold blood—probably her kids too—looking for information. Information she didn't have, mind, so I expect he mostly killed

them for fun. She annoyed him, so he killed her.” He kept his tone flippant, hoping it shocked. “So yeah, I’m not in the mood to talk *or* argue.”

Hermione’s jaw firmed, showing she wasn’t going to be intimidated. “Well too bad—because whether or not you’re in the mood to *discuss* this, the fact remains it’s *bad*. It’s bad you’re having to see the horrible things he’s doing, it’s bad he’s living rent-free inside your head, and it’s bad you’re having to be tortured all the while!” Her tone went a bit strident, and she seemed to consciously gentle herself with a stuttering exhalation. “Harry, I’m not harping on you because I haven’t got anything better to do. I’m worried about you! We *both* are! You can’t keep letting this happen!”

Letting it happen. As if he had any control over it whatsoever. It was either give in to the visions when they came or let the agony rip his mind apart. And given Hermione’s view on the subject, she might prefer the latter: “*At least then he couldn’t use you!*” she’d probably say.

“It’s been a month, Hermione. I slipped up—I can’t help it.” It wasn’t quite the truth, but he didn’t want to go ten rounds with her tonight.

“Slipping up’s something we can’t afford anymore, Harry! We’re out here, on our own, with nothing but our wits and wands to defend ourselves. So *defend yourself!* Stop letting him roll over you with these visions! What were all those Occlumency lessons *for* then, if not this? Dumbledore knew this couldn’t go on and did his best to help you shut him out.” Oh yeah, he’d really done his level best—like siccing Snape on him for a whole, wasted year. “If Voldemort finds out you’re spying on his thoughts, he’ll use the connection again, and who knows what terrible things he’ll manage with it this time? You’ve got to *fight it* when it comes!”

And because he was so tired, exhausted in body and mind, the words had left his lips quite before he’d given them permission: “Maybe I’m tired of fighting. At least this way, I know what he’s up to.”

Hermione’s expression went stony. “So that’s it then? You’re giving up? Just going to let him run wild inside your mind? Are you saying you *like* watching him kill and torture

innocent people?”

“No! Of course not! I—” He released a frustrated growl, head hanging. “Of course I’d rather it *weren’t* happening—but it’s gonna happen regardless of my feelings on the matter, so I’m trying to use it, to make the most of it! I can’t *help* it, honest I can’t! And you know for all the lessons and advice, I’ve never gotten the hang of Occlumency—”

“Because you never really tried!” She crossed her arms. “Plus you managed to get into Malfoy’s head just fine, and Occlumency’s only the reverse side of Legilimency. If you can manage one, I’m confident you can manage the other.” Harry didn’t have the energy to remind her he’d had Snape’s potion to help in that endeavour and that it was through no skill of Harry’s own that he’d gone diving into Malfoy’s mind. Hermione shook her head, snorting softly in disappointment. “...I don’t understand you, Harry. I can’t see why rather than work on Occlumency—rather than ask me or Ron for help, or do self-study while Ron and I dig through our books for Horcrux research—you’re content to just sit back and let these visions wreak havoc on your psyche. I mean—it’s just not healthy for you, in any sense! And maybe there’s, I dunno, a thrill from having this connection, being *right there* in his mind, seeing things no one else is privy to—”

The words died on her lips at the look Harry gave her, slowly standing again with his fists clenched at his side. “A *thrill*?” His voice was quiet, but it echoed strangely on the cold walls of the bathroom. “What, you think I get off on this? Would *you* like it, having your head split open, the vilest, most evil creature you can imagine rooting around, setting up shop and forcing you to watch every heinous, reprehensible thing he does?”

Hermione recoiled. “God, I’m sorry—that came out all wrong, of course I didn’t mean to imply you liked—”

“Hey, easy there, mate,” Ron said, frowning, and the proprietary hand he set on Hermione’s shoulder somehow only made it worse.

“Let me make it crystal clear: *I hate this.*” His voice was soft with threat. “My mind isn’t my own—I can’t ever just sit and relax and be *happy*, because any moment now and I’ll be sat there, forced to watch him do all the twisted shit he gets up to these days, for

reasons beyond my comprehension. Don't try to tell me maybe I *like* it!" He raised a finger. "I hate it. But it's happening, and while it is, I'm gonna do just like he did to me and use it to take him down."

Hermione's lip quivered, but she still managed to keep a steady voice, though she was quieter when she spoke. "...Dumbledore wouldn't have—"

"Dumbledore *isn't here*. So it's my choice—not yours, not Ron's. Mine." He swallowed thickly, because he hated fighting like this; there were so many bigger problems in need of addressing, and here they were bickering. But he wouldn't have this argument again, he was too damn tired for it. "I want to know why he's after Gregorovitch."

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"A wandmaker—mostly operates outside of Britain."

Ron's eyes lit up. "You found out who he is?" Hermione cut him an accusing look, but he didn't seem to notice.

Harry nodded. "At the wedding. Krum mentioned he'd made his wand—and he seems to swear by him. Thinks he's an even greater craftsman than Ollivander."

"A greater craftsman..." Ron scratched his chin. "So whatever he wanted from Ollivander, he didn't get it. Now he's just going around running down leads and murdering them when they don't pan out, looking for Gregorovitch?" He wrinkled his nose. "What's Gregorovitch gonna be able to tell him that Ollivander couldn't."

"Well...I'm thinking he's hoping Gregorovitch might be able to explain to him what happened between our wands when we clashed while he was chasing me, since Ollivander didn't seem to know."

Hermione huffed, though not cruelly. "This again? Weren't you listening to what Mr. Weasley and the others told you before? It wasn't anything particularly special about your wand—it was *you*. Wands just don't work that way—they aren't sentient! And if Voldemort really *is* looking for Gregorovitch hoping to find some mythical wand that

could stand up to yours, well—” She crossed her arms. “I’d rather have him off on *that* wild goose chase than executing whatever plans he has for wizarding Britain.”

“Voldemort’s been around for *decades*—he knows a fair bit more about magical theory and what does and doesn’t exist than any of us—”

“Does he?” Hermione sniffed. “Tell that to Regulus Black. Tell that to Kreacher.” She stared at him, her expression a bit sad. “...I just don’t see why you can’t allow yourself to accept that you *are* a bit special, and that you’ve got more power inside you than you might think you do. It doesn’t mean you’re *invincible* or anyone’s hero—it just means there are some things you’re capable of because you’re *you* and he’s *him*.”

“And if it *was* me, he wouldn’t need to go around kidnapping wandmakers, now would he?”

“Him *thinking* he needs to kidnap wandmakers doesn’t mean he actually *does* need to kidnap them,” Hermione said, and he resolutely ignored her.

“Something happened that I don’t understand, and clearly he doesn’t either, but it’s not because I’ve got some super special latent powers I’ve never tapped into before.” He shrugged. “I’m just not that remarkable, sorry.”

They were at an impasse. Harry knew that he hadn’t convinced Hermione of anything and that she was marshalling counterarguments—against both his wand theory and the fact he seemed content letting himself share mindspace with Voldemort.

To Harry’s relief, though, Ron stepped in before they could start up again. “Right, we’ve got an early day tomorrow, and arguing’s not gonna fix anything tonight, yeah? So let’s just...let’s just call it a night and focus on this really stupid, absolutely insane thing we’re gonna do tomorrow. ” He looked to Hermione, brows raised. “Why don’t we head back downstairs, finish off Kreacher’s stew, and discuss the plan over treacle tart? I mean, none of this’ll matter one whit if we get ourselves captured in the doing.”

Hermione made a face that said she didn’t like leaving things as they were, but she

turned and exited the bathroom all the same, and Harry heard her light step on the stairs leading back down into the kitchen. He nodded his thanks to Ron, who just shrugged.

“...You sure you know what you’re doing, mate?” Ron asked.

It was hardly a question Harry was prepared to answer. “Do any of us?”

They then returned to the basement kitchen, where Kreacher had already ladled out the next course: bowls of a thick beef stew with a treacle tart warming in the oven. By mutual tacit agreement, they did not discuss anything further that night beyond their mission the following morning.

They worked late into the night, reviewing their plan—such as it was—until they were blue in the face, and then reviewing *again*, and they only reluctantly trundled off to their separate sleeping arrangements, well aware that they’d likely be even more exhausted for the few hours sleep they might catch now than if they’d just worked through the night.

Harry had taken to sleeping in Sirius’s old bed, which Kreacher had fit with freshly laundered linens once Harry had made his preference clear, and he lay there in the darkness long after he and Hermione and Ron had bid each other good night, muttering the plan to himself as he watched the old photograph of the Marauders by wandlight. When he finally extinguished his wand and closed his eyes, however, he slipped into fitful dreams fraught with visions of the faceless Gregorovitch, the poor woman and her sons, and Voldemort roaming the wilds of Europe seeking, seeking so desperately an answer to a question Harry didn’t know.

He awoke before dawn and did not try to go back to sleep, though he wished he had a Time-Turner, that he might go back and box his own ears for staying up so late the night before.

“Yikes, mate. You look like crap,” was Ron’s unhelpful greeting as he came to wake Harry, finding him already dressed.

“And I don’t expect an improvement any time soon,” said Harry, stifling a great yawn.

Hermione was already downstairs in the kitchen, hunched over her notes and maps in a way that reminded Harry a little fondly—though not without a pang of longing—of exam time at Hogwarts. Kreacher had fresh coffee and a tray full of croissants with jams and marmalade ready for them, and Harry and Ron dug in with relish while Hermione muttered things under her breath, only offering a cursory nod before turning her attention back to her last-minute preparations.

By the time they’d finished their breakfast, their pockets bulged with more Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes stock than Fred and George’s shop shelves, and Kreacher sent them off with a low bow to all three—including Hermione—and promises to have a scrumptious dinner of steak and kidney pie waiting for them upon their return.

Ron sighed, shaking his head fondly. “It may just be the regular meals talking, but that little bugger’s actually kind of growing on me.”

“Oh yes, because you were just skin and bones before you stumbled into his kitchen,” Hermione said, poking Ron gently in the midsection.

They had to be very careful to step just far enough outside Grimmauld Place’s anti-Apparition wards while staying inside the Fidelius Charm’s protection, and they paused at the front step to watch a pair of bleary-eyed wizards obviously coming off an all-nighter try to keep one another from nodding off.

Hermione, being the most skilled of the three at Apparition, Side-Alonged Ron first before returning for Harry. They didn’t want to chance anyone getting Splinched now of all times. After a brief, chest-crushing turn in darkness, Harry found himself standing ankle-deep in rubbish in the corner of a tiny alleyway, where the first phase of their plan was to take place.

Hermione whipped out a pocket watch she’d found in Regulus’s room—and asked, very nicely, for Kreacher’s permission to borrow. “Five to eight—that’s when the rush of Ministry workers will start. Once I’ve stunned my witch—”

“We *know*,” said Ron, a bit sternly—he’d never been much of a morning person, testy when he hadn’t gotten enough sleep. Harry tended to just slog through early lessons like a mindless automaton by contrast. “Harry, help me bust the lock on the door.” He nodded to the heavily graffitied metal door on the side of the brick building they’d Apparated next to. They’d learned over the course of their scouting that the building had once been a theatre, and this was a side entrance leading backstage.

Harry moved to help yank it open, when Hermione huffed, “Honestly, what’ve you two even got wands *for*?” She raised her wand and neatly blasted the lock off the door, and Ron frowned down at the crowbar he’d dug out of the refuse pile, wrinkling his nose.

“...She’s never gonna let me show off, is she?” he muttered under his breath to Harry as Hermione closed her eyes and silently mouthed the next steps of the plan to herself.

“I really don’t think now’s the time to try and impress her,” Harry said.

“Mate, you clearly don’t know *anything* about girls—*or* Hermione.”

Hermione whirled on them both. “Okay, now—we need to get the Cloak—”

“Mione, no offence, but I didn’t stay up ‘til three in the morning going over this plan only to have you parrot it back to us every step of the way.” Ron lifted the Cloak, beckoning her under, and Hermione nodded with a huff, though she was smiling underneath her nerves.

It was only another minute of waiting, the three of them awkwardly crouched amidst the stinking rubbish, when there was a tiny *pop*, and out of nowhere, a witch—short and slight, with greying hair drawn up into a loose bun—Apparated right in the middle of the alleyway, nearly on top of them. She wrinkled her nose and lifted a boot delicately, as she’d popped into existence on top of a wad of old chewing gum.

While she was preoccupied with her messy boot, Hermione lifted her wand beneath the Cloak, took careful aim, and quietly Stunned the poor witch, the force of the spell sending her toppling backwards into a pile of bin bags.

Ron let the Cloak drop, draping it over his shoulders as he admired her handiwork with an approving nod, then slipped his arms around the witch's midsection to haul her into the darkened corridor leading to the theatre. Hermione did not cast anything to help this time, instead plucking a single grey hair from the witch's shawl and depositing it into one of the three phials of Polyjuice Potion she'd brought along.

Harry reached for the witch's bag and began to rifle through it for her identification and, they hoped, entrance token.

"Says here she's Mafalda Hopkirk," he said, reading from a small identification card tucked into a passcase. "Working in the Improper Use of Magic Office." He frowned, then realised where he'd heard the name before. "She's the one who always used to send me warning letters for using magic in front of Muggles." Now he felt just a little less guilty about their knocking her out and chucking her into a darkened theatre.

Ron took the bag from him, pawing through it, and pulled out a single golden token stamped with *M.O.M.* He frowned. "...Just the one."

"Yes, we figured that would be the case," Hermione reminded. "We'll have to hope the others all have their own tokens as well."

Hermione took Mafalda's coin, slipping it into her pocket, and knocked back the Polyjuice Potion, which looked more appetising than the likes of Crabbe and Goyle had seemed but still an unsettlingly vibrant shade of heliotrope.

A moment later, the double of Mafalda Hopkirk stood before them, looking a bit out of place dressed in a teenager's clothes. Hermione quickly shimmied into a skirt and blazer set that looked like it could have come out of Mafalda's closet and removed the witch's spectacles, slipping them onto her nose.

Harry checked his watch, feeling a spike of panic. "Shit, that took longer than we initially planned. Close the door, then back under the Cloak—the bloke from Magical Maintenance is about to arrive." Mafalda would be out for sometime under the force of Hermione's Stunner, but if they just left her out in the open, her attack would

undoubtedly draw unwanted attention and put the Ministry on alert for intruders.

Hermione smoothed down her robes and flyaway hair while Harry and Ron scurried under the Cloak once more. She would lead the next phase of the plan, and acting had never been her strong suit, but anyone else standing in full view of incoming arrivals would draw suspicion, so Harry and Ron would have to sit there quietly and wait for her to do her job.

It was not a long wait, and right on time another bright *pop* filled the alleyway as a navy-robed, somewhat ferrety-looking wizard Apparated into view, giving a start when he saw how close he'd landed to Mafalda.

"Oh, dear me. Didn't see you there, Mafalda. Good morning."

"Morning! Quite all right, no harm done. Just—taking in the fresh morning air!" To prove her point, she took in a deep breath—then promptly coughed and hacked as she inhaled the fumes of the bin heaps on either side of them, eyes watering. Her acting skills really weren't their best when she was nervous, and Harry wondered if they wouldn't have been better off with her riding in one of their pockets in her Animagus form, leaving the infiltration to Harry and Ron. "Er, how are you doing? Having a good day, I hope?"

The wizard slumped, a cloud settling over his features and his brows cinching anxiously. "...Not really, no. It's only—"

"Oh dear, that's terrible! I'm sorry to hear you aren't feeling well." Hermione scuttled around to the other side of the wizard, blocking the path to the main road so he'd have to knock her over if he wanted to make a break for it. Her eyes kept flicking over the wizard's shoulder to where Harry and Ron had been when they'd ducked under the Cloak, and Harry's grip on his wand tightened, ready to keep him in the alley, whatever it took. She dipped into one of Mafalda's pockets, nipping a Puking Pastille and offering it to the wizard with a simpering smile. "Why not try one of these? I'm sure it'll make you feel better!"

The wizard drew up short, waving away the offer. "Eh? Oh, no, it's not that I'm feeling

ill; I just—”

“Well then all the more reason to treat yourself!” She snapped out an arm to grab him by the wrist, then pressed one of the wrapped candies into his open palm, curling his fingers around it. “They’re absolutely delicious! Sure to drag you out of any doldrums! You *have* to try one!”

The poor wizard was looking quite dubious now, and not a little alarmed—which was understandable, given the manic expression on Mafalda’s features. With a weak, placating smile, he nodded and unwrapped the sweet, popping it into his mouth.

Well, if he hadn’t been feeling poorly before, he *certainly* was now, as he doubled over the moment the pastille touched his tongue and splattered the facing brick wall with a stream of vomit.

“Oh—*goodness*, that looks violent,” Hermione said, not sounding entirely like she was acting now, and she began to gently stroke his heaving back with one hand while she swiped a few strands of his frazzled, greying hair with the other. “Here, let me hold your bag for you. I don’t think you should go into work in your condition—I’d Apparate *straight* home if I were you!”

“N—no! I can’t,” he heaved, bringing a fist up to cover his mouth, but little drips and drabs leaked out the sides of his lips all the same. Harry tried to discern just what the wizard had had for breakfast, for it was painting the alley now. “Not today—have to—go in—”

“But you might be contagious!” said Hermione, strident alarm in her voice, and she was glancing toward the entrance to the alleyway with worry now. Harry could see her concern; he hadn’t expected such a violent reaction, and they risked drawing decidedly unwanted attention if they didn’t send the wizard on his way soon. “If not home, then perhaps a visit to the Healer? They’ll get you sorted right away!”

By this point, the wizard had collapsed, heaving, on all fours—though he was still trying to crawl towards the street. “...Blimey but that’s dedication,” Ron whispered from under

the Cloak, and Harry wondered what kind of perks you got working in Magical Maintenance, that their employees were this committed to showing up each day.

“Honestly, you’re in terrible shape, dear!” cried Hermione. “I’m sure we can get on without you for today, go on!”

“I...I suppose I could—*hrk*—take the morning—” He clung to Hermione’s robe, struggling back to his feet, and swayed unsteadily. After tipping his head to her and offering a weak smile, he turned on his heel, the space around him drawing down to a point as he Disapparated, leaving behind nothing but a puff of arcane smoke and the acrid stench of fresh vomit still painting the walls of the alley.

Hermione covered her mouth, wincing, and held out the bag for Ron to take. When he stepped out from under the Cloak to do so, she used her free hand to palm her wand and blindly Vanish the splatters of sick, shaking her head. “In retrospect, we should have just Stunned him.”

“It would’ve made less of a mess,” Harry agreed, emerging from the Cloak. “But Mafalda might just think she’s been mugged when she wakes up. If she found herself there with Mr. Magical Maintenance and whoever my bloke winds up being, there’d be a ruckus raised.”

“Yes, of course, you’re right.” Hermione withdrew another phial of Polyjuice Potion for Ron, who was already donning the navy-blue robes that Hermione had brought along for him to wear. She deposited the hair—belonging to Reginald Cattermole, according to a passcase they found in his bag, similar to Mafalda’s—into the phial and gave it a shake to mix it up. Ron frowned at the sickly green the potion turned and knocked it back in one go—and but a moment later, Hermione’s Mafalda had been joined by Ron’s Reg, who pulled a shiny gold token from the bowels of Reginald’s bag.

“Two down,” Ron said, rolling the token across his knuckles. “Now we just have to get Harry sorted.”

Hermione urged him back under the Cloak. “Okay, we’ll be right back with a few hairs

for your draught. Wait just a second, and *don't* move from here, no matter what!"

"If you aren't back by noon, I'm going back to Grimmauld Place for steak and kidney pie, just so we're clear."

'Just a second' was actually closer to ten minutes, though sitting there hidden under the Cloak, hoping his friends hadn't been made and were already being hauled off to Azkaban or worse without his even knowing, made it feel interminable. It was nearly eight-thirty, and he resolved to go out and try to find them once the half-hour struck when they came jogging back into the alleyway, looking over their shoulders to be sure they hadn't been followed.

"It's a difficult thing, jumping someone in broad daylight without rousing suspicion," Hermione said, slipping several curly, black hairs into a phial of Polyjuice Potion.

"Bless whatever inspiration struck Fred and George the day they concocted Nosebleed Nougat," Ron said. "Nasty stuff."

"Who was the victim?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I didn't recognise him from our reconnaissance, but he was heading in the same direction as all the Ministry folks, and he had a token on him, so you should be able to slip in as him without rousing suspicion." She passed him the phial, then began rummaging through her bag, drawing out a set of oversized robes Kreacher had laundered for them. "He was a pretty big fellow, though—you'll want these."

Tall was quite an understatement, as Harry had shot up over a foot before the transformation was complete, nearly twice Reginald-Ron's size now.

"You think this is how Hagrid feels?" Harry wondered, admiring his well-muscled arms and powerful build and stroking his bushy black beard with a smile.

"I'd wipe that grin off your face, Harry," Hermione warned. "This one didn't look like the type you'd want to mess with. He might be muscle for someone inside." Harry nodded, stowing his Cloak and glasses inside the new robe and slipping his wand into his pocket

for easy access.

“Right, everyone have their tokens ready now?” Harry and Ron held theirs up for show, and Hermione nodded. “Last chance to turn back.”

Harry and Ron looked to each other, sighed, and then each clapped one hand on Hermione’s shoulder and guided her out of the alley. Their ‘last chance’ was already miles behind them.

They merged as a group into the swelling crowd of what were either Ministry employees or very fantastically attired Muggles and headed another fifty yards along the pavement until they reached what looked to be a stairwell leading down into the Muggle Underground. Here, the crowd parted to descend in two separate groups, and Harry saw ahead of them doors standing on opposite sides of the corridor, marked *Ladies* on the one side and *Gentlemen* on the other. The Ministry employees were filing quietly and quickly into these doors, and Harry was getting a sinking, stinking suspicion he knew how they would be expected to enter the Ministry proper.

Hermione necessarily had to part with them here, and she gave a nervous smile that she probably thought was reassuring, whispering, “See you in a moment, then,” before letting herself be funnelled into the ladies’ queue and disappearing through the salmon pink door. Ron and Harry continued on with the other wizards into what would have appeared to Muggles to be an ordinary public toilet. Harry let his gaze travel over the grimy tiles covering the wall and flickering fluorescent lights overhead and wondered if any Muggles ever wandered down here by mistake, looking for a loo, or if there were maybe Muggle-repelling charms around.

Around the bend, they came upon a line of six cubicles facing a wall of sinks and urinals. While it might not be in use as a public toilet at the moment, it certainly still smelled like one, and Harry surreptitiously hiked up the hem of his robes to ensure it didn’t drag over the filthy floor.

A wizard in mustard-yellow robes just in front of Harry and Ron leaned over to address his friend in matching robes. “How much longer d’you think they’ll make us commute

like this? Gads, it reeks.”

“I reckon ‘til they track down Harry Potter, yeah? I hear there’s a reward on his head now.”

“They honestly think he’s gonna turn up in a gents’ toilet? Trying to break *into* the Ministry? No one’s that stupid!” There was a faint *ding!* and the wizard headed on to the farthest cubicle, slipping his token into a slot near the handle, then letting himself inside.

Harry and Ron shared an uneasy glance—and then there was another *ding!* from one of the middle cubicles. Harry gently jostled Ron ahead, then followed after him a moment later when the cubicle next to Ron’s *dinged* as well. In went the token, and the door swung open.

The room was filled with the sound of flushing, and Harry had a very bad feeling about how they were meant to actually get into the Ministry. The creak and clack of shoes on ceramic confirmed his suspicions, and wincing, he carefully mounted the bowl, bracing his feet on the lip of the bowl first, before—wincing—stepping into the bowl itself. To his astonishment (and no small degree of relief), his shoes remained dry despite the fact he seemed to be standing ankle-deep in toilet water. A bob dangled on a chain just at shoulder level, and Harry reached up, held his breath, and gave a yank.

Only a moment later, after much the same dark, pressurised squeezing-through-a-tube sensation as accompanied Apparition, Harry came tumbling out of a doorway, skidding across cool, smooth stone tiles before he came to a stop in a great pile of limbs. Groaning, he shifted upright, rubbing his forehead with a wince and saw that it was not a doorway he’d exited but one of the fireplaces in the Ministry of Magic’s grand Atrium. Evidently they’d appropriated some of the Floo grates for this new mode of entry.

Staggering to his feet and brushing down his robes, he caught a few people staring at him, but they quickly looked away and scurried off when they met eyes with him. He took a long look around the Atrium—and frowned at what he saw. It’d only been a couple of months since his last ‘visit’ with Bragge to sort out Malfoy, but in that brief span of time, Voldemort had instituted *quite* a few changes to the decor.

Where before there had stood in the centre of the Atrium a huge, handsome golden fountain, contrasting nicely with the polished wooden floors and peacock-blue ceiling, now a massive statue, several stories tall and carved from onyx, greeted visitors. Imposing in more than simply its dimensions, the statue depicted a witch and wizard in sleek robes sitting straight-backed atop intricately carved thrones. The wizard thrust forward a staff in one hand, while the witch held in her opposite hand an orb, and they lorded menacingly over the Ministry workers being spat out the Floo grates. At their feet had been erected a stone plaque, engraved in bold boilerplate with the mantra *MAGIC IS MIGHT*.

“Oof!” Something slammed into Harry’s knees from behind, nearly knocking him back to the floor; another wizard had just flown out of the fireplace behind him and nearly cut him down. Were it not for the fact Harry’s body was now built like a tank, he might have dropped.

“What’re you standing around for you big—oh!” The wizard who’d bumped into Harry took one look at him and paled, stammering, “Oh, goodness, terribly sorry, Runcorn. My apologies, I wasn’t watching where I was going!” And with a startled squeal, he darted off into the milling crowd of Ministry workers filling the Atrium, leaving Harry with the distinct impression that the wizard whose face he was presently wearing—Runcorn, he’d said?—was not one to be messed with. He recalled Hermione’s suggestion he might be some Ministry official’s muscle and decided he’d better straighten up and play the role.

“I see they made some changes to the decor,” someone said under their breath, and Harry whirled around—Mafalda-Hermione and Reginald-Ron had found their way free of the Floos and joined him, the three of them now huddled close. Ron jerked his chin at the statue. “Not exactly the Fountain of Magical Brethren, is it?”

Hermione gave a little shudder, though she managed to keep her features relatively even. It wouldn’t do for any of them to draw attention by reacting to the thing the way they might want to. “And those thrones...*revolting*.”

Harry ran his eyes over the statue again, now he had a better view, and realised that

what he'd initially assumed to be ornate carvings were actually—he shared Hermione's revulsion—*human bodies*. Men, women, children—and all Muggles presumably, from their simpering, stupid faces and awkwardly contorted bodies pressed together to serve as seats for the regal-looking witch and wizard. In their rightful place, at last.

“Let's go,” Hermione whispered, quiet rage in her voice. “It makes me sick standing around here.”

The next phase of their plan involved heading to Umbridge's office on Level 1 and somehow, between the three of them, creating enough of a distraction they could locate and steal the locket. This was perhaps the most unplanned part of their mission and therefore the riskiest bit.

The witches and wizards being spat out the Floo grates had coalesced into a steady stream of humanity heading towards the golden grates guarding the lifts at the far end of the hall. Harry, Ron, and Hermione quickly and quietly joined them, all the while keeping their eyes peeled for Umbridge, but she would have been difficult to spot in the crowded Atrium unless she'd been standing right next to them.

“It's gonna take forever to get to the lifts,” Harry said, craning his neck to see over the heads in front of them. The crowd was moving, but too slowly for Harry's comfort, and while there were twenty lifts in service, this was morning rush hour. “Maybe we should take the stairs?”

Hermione bit her lip. He could tell she didn't like how slowly things were progressing either—their Polyjuice doses would only last an hour...and that had started nearly fifteen minutes ago. “I want to, but I feel like we'll stick out—no one else is taking the stairs.”

“Why should they?” Ron huffed. “I'd put off getting to my desk as long as possible if I were stuck working here these days. Poor Dad...”

“Maybe we could—”

“*Cattermole!*”

They all three jolted, heads turning—and then Harry saw him. One of the Death Eaters who'd been watching over Rowle's torture—and enjoying it, from what Harry recalled—was now striding towards them. Walking around in broad daylight, as if it didn't matter. And Harry supposed it didn't, given there were already Death Eaters at Hogwarts and in the upper echelons of the Ministry's ranks.

A pall of silence settled over the crowd, and Harry swore he heard a ripple of fear sweep over the lot of them. The workers in Ron's immediate vicinity quickly scrambled aside, and their gazes swept away—a clear indication something was about to happen with which they wanted nothing to do. Oh—right, 'Cattermole'.

The Death Eater who'd singled out Ron looked none too happy to see Reg first thing in the morning, and his dour expression clashed with his sweeping ruby-red robes edged in fancy gold embroidery.

"*Morning, Yaxley!*" someone piped up from the crowd of onlookers, but Yaxley ignored them, whipping out his wand and brandishing it at Ron. Harry's hand immediately went to his pocket—but Yaxley only poked Ron in the chest, snarling at him.

"'Bout *fucking* time you showed up. How is it I asked you Magical Maintenance sods to sort out my office yesterday, and I go in this morning and it's *still* raining in there? You lot sit around on your arses all day listening to the Wireless? Hearing the Cannons get their arses kicked for the fiftieth time more fun than doing you fucking jobs?"

Ron was doing a *very* good impression of Reg Cattermole in all his ferrety, twitchy glory, eyes darting around frantically, but neither Harry nor Hermione could do anything without blowing their cover, and no one else looked up to intervening. He swallowed thickly, and when he spoke, he had a distinct quaver to his voice. "W-well, the Cannons aren't doing so poorly this season..."

Yaxley's eyes went comically wide with rage. "So you think this is funny? Having a laugh at the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement having to swim to get to his desk?" He leaned in close, stabbing Ron repeatedly in the chest with his wand. "Now that's a bold tactic for someone whose wife's about to be deposed by the head of the

Muggleborn Registration Commission. Pretty fuckin' stupid, but bold, I'll give you that."

"I—I didn't mean—"

"Honestly I'm shocked you even came in to work today—I'd have thought you'd be down on 10, enjoyin' what precious little time you've got left with her." He quirked a black brow. "Or have you already given up on her? Can't say I'd blame you—I hear it's just not the same, ruttin' with a Mudblood."

Hermione gasped softly, whirling around and busying herself with her bag when Yaxley's gaze snapped to her. He raked her with a calculating look, then slowly turned back to face Ron.

"But if I was at all concerned about keepin' that bint outta Azkaban and there was a Department head whose office was in need of un-fucking, I'd make it my *top* priority instead of faffing about. We have an accord, Cattermole?"

Ron just nodded, making agreeably squeaking sounds that ruffled Reg's bristly moustache.

Yaxley whapped him on the temple with his wand. "Then *go!*" he barked, jerking his head toward the lifts, the queues to which were by now much shorter as everyone had either crammed on to escape Yaxley's wrath or decided the stairs seemed a safer option this morning.

Ron moved to do as instructed, and Yaxley snatched him by the collar, drawing him close to whisper into his ear with deadly threat. "And if it's not *pristine* by the time I get back up there after my morning rounds, well..." He gave a wicked grin. "Maybe *your* blood status'll be up for review next."

One of the lifts gave a bright *ding!*, and the grilles opened, spilling out several confused Ministry employees who took one look at the scene unfolding between Ron and Yaxley and promptly scattered.

Yaxley shoved Ron away, sending him stumbling to the floor, then shouldered roughly

past Hermione's Mafalda—and offered Harry's Runcorn a wink and yellow-toothed smile as he strode away that suggested a cordiality Harry was quite sure he did not want to share. He was beginning to get a very bad feeling about the man whose identity he'd taken on.

"...Let's get out of here," Hermione said, reaching to help Ron back to his feet. The other Ministry workers were still giving them a wide berth, and they needed to make their escape before they drew any more unnecessary attention. Who knew how this brief but harrowing interaction might have already screwed with their plans (such as they were)?

Ron clung to her, knees shaking so violently beneath his navy robes he had trouble standing, but between Hermione and Harry, they managed to frog march him into one of the now-empty lifts. Curiously, no one else seemed to want to join them.

Once the grilles had clanged shut and the lift began lurching upwards, Ron collapsed against the side of the car, grey with fright. "Blimey, that took years off me! I'm done for—I mean, *Reg* is done for! And *Reg's* wife!" He began clawing at his face. "Oh no, they're gonna send her to Azkaban! Because of *me*!"

"Ron—Ron, *calm* down." Hermione laid a hand on his shoulder, leaning down so she could peek into Reginald's face. "They aren't going to send her to Azkaban, we'll see to it. Yaxley was only teed off someone's played a prank in his office, probably." She licked her lips. "All we have to do is get to his office, sort out whatever's wrong, and—"

"Get to his office?" Ron wailed. "We've got maybe half an hour left on our Polyjuice! We don't have time to dick around in a Death Eater's office! No—" He shook his head, slapping his cheeks, and straightened with a huff. "No. I've got this. Or, I'll figure something out. I've gotta help *Reg*—we kind of owe him. But you two should head upstairs and find Umbridge, and then I'll j—" He fell silent in mid-sentence, bushy brows knitting. "...Crap, how do I sort out Yaxley's office? He said it was raining?"

For once, there was no forthcoming lecture about the consequences of falling asleep in Charms class or cribbing Seamus's also-cribbed Transfiguration essay. "Start with the simplest solution—*Finite Incantatem*. That should do for simple Hexes and Curses—but

if it's a busted Atmospheric Charm, then things might get tricky." Ron looked queasy at the idea of 'tricky magic', and she hastened to add, "You'll need to look for the rune they'll have placed on the ceiling to keep the Charm going constantly. It could be *dagaz* somehow got corrupted to *laguz* by a crack in the ceiling or dust buildup—"

"Dagger and lager? What?" He began fishing through his pockets for a quill. "Slow down, I need to write this down."

Hermione patiently waited for him to find something to write with—but then there was a sharp grinding of metal on metal, and the lift jerked to a halt, setting the three of them swaying in place. A soft, cool voice from nowhere announced, "*Level 4, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau.*" Ron's hands went immediately to his sides, and the three of them tried to act as casually as possible as the grilles opened and a pair of wizards and several pale-violet paper aeroplanes boarded. The inter-Departmental notices fluttered around the lamp in the ceiling of the lift like cumbersome moths about a flame.

Harry tried not to think about the last time he'd visited this particular department, but he couldn't help craning his neck a bit to try and see if he spotted Bragge. Hermione gave him a stern look, and he quickly straightened, reminding himself to focus, not to get distracted—it wasn't as if Bragge could do him any good now anyway.

"Oh, g'morning, Albert," one of the wizards greeted Harry, giving him a start. Harry glanced over to Ron and Hermione for support, but they were now engrossed in a frantic exchange of whispers as Ron scribbled instructions shakily onto his forearm. The wizard had a bushy moustache and a devious leer, and given the familiarity he seemed to think he shared with Runcorn, Harry was certain he was a nasty sort. What was it about the Ministry of Magic that seemed to attract the dregs of wizarding society? Why couldn't the place just be strapped with Bragges and Arthur Weasleys?

"...Morning," Harry said, certain that Runcorn would be a man of few words and not wanting to engage this man in more conversation than was strictly necessary.

“I heard from my mate over in Goblin Liaison about Dirk Cresswell, by the way. *Nicely* done! I expect my transfer’ll be approved now! Though if you ever need anything handled for you in the Office of Misinformation, you just let old Bertrand know, and I’ll see it’s sorted.”

Harry gave only a grunting nod and tried not to wonder what had become of poor Dirk.

The lift stopped again, and the grilles opened onto, “*Level 2, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services,*” according to the disembodied conductor’s voice.

No one moved for a moment, before Hermione reached forward and pinched Ron’s arse—and with a squeak, he scurried from the lift with a baleful backwards glance, Bertrand and his companion short on his heels. Harry’s heart went with him—if he were being honest, un-fucking Yaxley’s office sounded a *lot* more fun (and feasible) than trying to lift a locket from Umbridge’s office.

The golden grilles slid shut again, and as soon as it was safe, the two of them once more alone in the upwards-lurching lift, Hermione turned to Harry and said in a hurried whisper, “Oh—oh, Harry, maybe we should have gone with him! It shouldn’t take long between the three of us, and you know I love Ron, but he’s *really* pants at solving puzzles like this, especially under a time-crunch, and—”

“*Level 1, Minister for Magic and Support Staff.*”

“Oh fuck,” Hermione squeaked in Mafalda’s breathy voice, and Harry wondered what had brought *that* out of her, when he followed her gaze out past the grilles as the lift doors drew open to reveal Dolores-bloody-Umbridge, still as squat and toady as ever and lost in conversation with a tall wizard wearing stately robes of black and gold, the well-groomed beard on his chin ending in a sharp point. ‘Oh fuck’ wasn’t the half of it.

As the lift announced its arrival, Umbridge’s eyes lit up. “Ah, fantastic! Just the witch I wanted to see.” She turned a simpering smile on the wizard. “Fortune smiles, Minister!

With Mafalda here now, we can get started on today's hearings. That is, if she can be spared for a bit of record-keeping?"

"I'm certain the Improper Use of Magic Office can get by without her until we've requisitioned a new batch of Self-Scrivelling Quills."

"Marvellous!" Umbridge was positively glowing as she turned back to Hermione. "We're going to have our hands full today, so I hope you've got your quill ready!"

"O—oh, yes. All ready to go..." Hermione said weakly, and while Umbridge checked her clipboard, running her eyes over its contents, she threw a panicked glance Harry's way. He didn't know what she expected him to do, though. They would have to play this by ear. Perhaps Hermione could distract Umbridge long enough for Harry to rummage through her office. Fuck, they hadn't planned on them being so easily split up, but here they were, flying by the seat of their pants. He fought to keep his expression even, wary of the Minister's presence.

"Goodness, ten cases on the docket today! And 'Cattermole'...a relation to one of the Ministry's own janitorial staff? Gracious...these ne'er-do-wells manage to squeeze their way in most anywhere, don't they? Well, never fear, we'll roust them soon enough." She seemed now to notice Harry, her smile still bright. "And Albert! Always a pleasure to see you up here on Level 1. Did you need something from the Minister? Or are you free as well? We could always use you down in the Courtrooms to keep the You-Know-Whats in line." In an aside to Hermione, she added, "They'll break down into tears before they've even sat in the chair, thinking to play to the Commission's sympathies. You've got to show a strong front, or else they'll walk all over you!"

Harry ducked his head. "Apologies, I can't join you just yet. Good hunting, though—I'm off here."

Umbridge nodded her head and touched her bow as if tipping a hat, then joined Hermione on the lift along with the other two waiting wizards as Harry stepped off. The last thing Harry saw before the grilles clanged shut and the lift sank out of sight was Hermione's stricken face, pleading silently. There was nothing Harry could do, though, so

he had to trust Hermione could handle herself until Harry managed to find his way back down to her without arousing suspicion. Maybe it would've been better for him to have gone ahead and taken Umbridge up on her offer.

“Do we have a problem?”

Harry gave a start, having nearly forgotten about the new Minister for Magic in the wake of his brush with Umbridge. “Er—sorry, sir?”

“Did you need something, Runcorn? Dolores asked—but you never responded.” Pius Thicknesse looked much the same as he had in the *Prophet* article: long, greasy black hair peppered with streaks of silver at the temples, and beetle-black eyes set deep into their sockets that scanned Harry from stem to stern, narrowing in suspicion. “It’s rare to run into you above Level 4. Can I help you?”

Harry swallowed thickly, reminding himself that Thicknesse was under the Imperius and would promptly report any untoward activities to the Death Eater who’d cast it on him, Harry tried to think on his feet. “Just needed a quick word with—” He groped for the first name that came to him, “Arthur Weasley. Someone said he was up on Level 1.”

“Ah.” Thicknesse nodded, and Harry felt relief flood him. “Have they caught him consorting with an Undesirable?”

Oh, god. Ron was going to kill him. “N-no, no, not as yet, sir.” Harry would never live down the guilt if his flippant lie wound up getting the Weasleys into trouble with the Ministry. “Just hoping to get his help on the Dirk Cresswell matter.” He sent silent apology to Dirk, wherever he was.

“Hm, well, do keep me posted. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before Weasley tips his hand.” Thicknesse seemed to think Arthur’s guilt was a foregone conclusion, which triggered alarm bells in Harry’s mind. “The blood traitors will receive their due as soon as we’ve stamped out the Mudblood plague.” He stared off into space for a beat, then shook his head, tipping a nod to Harry. “Good day, Runcorn.”

“Y-yes, sir. Good day, Minister.”

Thicknesse then turned on his heel, leaving Harry by the lifts as he headed back toward the Minister’s staff’s cubicles and his office. Once he’d disappeared around the corner, Harry allowed himself to release the bated breath he’d been holding, chest aching and eyes watering. *Fuck. Fuck.* There was a lot to unpack there in that brief exchange—but he had no time. The Polyjuice dose would wear off only too soon, and it was now up to Harry and Harry alone to find Umbridge’s office, sneak inside, and get that locket.

A quick glance showed him to be alone in the small stretch of hallway into which the lifts opened, so he drew out the Invisibility Cloak from his robes and draped it over himself. A downward glance revealed, to his consternation, that everything from Runcorn’s shins down was still visible, so he hunched forward into a stoop until he could no longer see the toes of his loafers. Confident now he’d hidden himself as well as possible, he set off along the corridor in the opposite direction to which Thicknesse had headed.

He plodded along for a good ten minutes, scanning the gleaming brass nameplates over each door he came to with no luck, before panic began to curdle in his stomach like old milk. He was alone, a wanted man, wandering the hallways of the Ministry of Magic—albeit invisibly. At any moment, someone could run into him and his whole cover would be blown; Runcorn’s face would not blind officials to the fact he’d been skulking about under an Invisibility Cloak.

They’d spent a *month* planning this infiltration—yet within ten minutes of entering the building, they’d been separated and nearly made, and now it was an even roll as to whether they made it out of here with their lives, let alone the Horcrux in hand. They’d spent the better part of their reconnaissance trying to suss out how to get *into* the Ministry; actually navigating the inside was always going to require a fair bit of improvisation, as they had no way to really glean any useful information on the goings-on inside without involving people like Mr. Weasley, which Ron was adamant they not do. The finer details of how they might manage once on Level 1—or what they would do if they found themselves separated—hadn’t come up. Harry and Ron were doers, not thinkers, and Hermione had done her best trying to wrangle them, but she too had

gotten bogged down in details. Now she'd been spirited away to participate in court proceedings sat right next to Umbridge slaving away at a task that might take *hours*, Ron was probably drowning in Yaxley's office by now while Reg's wife waited in vain for her husband to stand by her side as she awaited her fate, and Harry was wandering blindly around the Minister's Support Staff offices as if he hadn't just watched Umbridge trundle onto the lift, headed for the Courtrooms down on Level 10.

He made himself stop walking, resting against a wall and trying to organise his thoughts. Umbridge was downstairs, interviewing Muggleborns; he could go down and join her, but she seemed to only want to use Harry for his muscle. He doubted he'd be able to get close to her. Hermione might have better luck on that tack, actually.

He was here, Hermione was there, and Ron was screwed. There was no changing any of that right now—they just had to do what they could and then worry about regrouping later.

He'd use the time he had left on his Polyjuice dose to check Umbridge's office, just in case. Sure, she didn't strike him as the type to keep her jewellery hidden in a false bottom of a desk drawer, but he ought to at least check. What a mess it would be to find out later she'd placed her valuables in a Charmed safe in her office before going to Court.

Yes—he would search her office first. Then he'd try and round up Ron and head to the Courtrooms to rescue Hermione. He set off along the corridor again, grateful for the plush purple carpet muffling his heavy tread.

He started making note of the names and titles on the doors he passed. He couldn't recall Umbridge's current position, only certain that she was involved with the Muggleborn Registration Commission.

He turned a corner, emerging from the corridor into a wide, open bullpen, filled with a dozen witches and wizards hunched over their desks, hard at work preparing what looked to be colourful pamphlets. They were all engrossed in their efforts, wands rhythmically twitching to instruct pages to fold and staple themselves just so before arranging themselves in boxes stacked in a line down the centre of the room. When one

box was filled, it topped itself off with a lid, then flew to join a stack of others forming a barricade against the far wall. There was a rhythm to the workers' movements that suggested they'd been at this for a long while—and would be at it for a long while yet.

Under cover of the Cloak, Harry decided to chance creeping close enough to the nearest of the desks, belonging to a young, bored-looking witch, to sneak a peek at the pamphlet's gaudy cover—and felt hot rage spear through him when he read the swirling golden script: *MUDBLOODS and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pureblood Society*.

There could be little doubt as to who'd commissioned this tripe, and he only just barely managed to hold himself back from *Incendio*-ing the wall of boxes. Between Umbridge and Rita Skeeter, Harry was going to collapse from a fury-fuelled stroke by the time he was 40, assuming he survived the war.

He allowed himself a beat to collect his thoughts, taking a few deep breaths and trying to put himself back on task. Check the office—grab Ron—rescue Hermione. Those were his priorities, not stupid pseudo-science bullshit. He forced himself away from the pamphlet preparation area, continuing to scan the doors he passed for promising nameplates—

And then he saw it. Not Umbridge's nameplate (*Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister*, and below it, a newer, slightly shinier plaque reading *Head of the Muggleborn Registration Commission*)—not at first. But *it*: an eye. *Moody's eye*, now bulbous and cataract-white, enclosed in a brass casing that had been set into the wood of a door just down the hall from the bullpen. The rage he'd barely quashed on seeing Umbridge's pamphlets roared back with a vengeance, clawing at his throat, acrid and bile-like.

Clearly the Order hadn't gotten there in time after Moody had been felled. That his body had been *deseccrated* so, hung on that hag's door like a trophy, was just *too much*, and Harry's restraint snapped like a brittle twig.

He reached for the doorknob, ready to tear the door from its hinges—when Moody's voice rang clear and clarion in his mind.

Constant vigilance.

Harry stared at the eye—but it sat there dead in its casing, frozen in an unsettling torpor and gazing blindly upwards, no longer whirring about remarking dangerous, suspicious elements.

Don't be stupid, Potter. Plenty of time for foolish rashness later—don't make it that easy on them from the outset!

He wasn't being *stupid*; he was...well, all right, he was being a little stupid. And now he thought about it, Moody probably would've caned him across the temple with his wand if he'd caught Harry letting his emotions get the best of him in such a tense situation. He took a deep, bracing breath—then glanced back to the bullpen, where half the desks had a direct line of sight to Umbridge's door.

There was little chance the workers' dedication would blind them to the door of an empty office—the office of a senior Ministry official—just opening on its own right before their very eyes. This called for a bit of a distraction—and that was precisely what Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes were for. Carefully, he withdrew from his pocket one of the Decoy Detonators Hermione had insisted they all carry.

He wound it, muffling the sound of its little magical gears under his Cloak, then placed it onto the carpet next to a potted plant along the wall—and off it shot, making a wobbling beeline down the middle of the bullpen, heading straight for the wall of pamphlet-filled boxes at the back. None of the workers seemed to notice it at first—but they certainly didn't miss the loud *BANG!* and plume of billowing black smoke it gave off a moment later.

Someone shrieked—several someones, in fact—and everyone was immediately on their feet, racing to put out what they probably thought was a fire. While they busied themselves casting *Aguamenti* at the boxes (and hopefully ruining the contents), Harry leaned on the doorknob—blessedly unlocked, as Umbridge rested comfortable in the knowledge no one would *dare* enter her office without her permission—and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. Getting out would be an interesting feat, but he'd

cross that bridge when he reached it.

Even without the nameplate on the door, Harry would've known in an instant whose office this was, for Umbridge's taste in décor did not seem to have changed much since her time at Hogwarts. The place was an old biddy's dream: walls covered floor to ceiling in the same tacky floral wallpaper he thought he'd seen Aunt Petunia reviewing samples of for the sitting room; musty lace draperies bracketing a magical window, through which Harry could glimpse the mid-summer London skyline; and a trophy case filled not with hard-earned plaques and awards of recognition but ornamental plates depicting frolicking kittens batting at ribbons and pouncing on butterflies.

Harry shuddered with revulsion—and something caught his eye. Attached to the door where there might typically be a hook to hang one's robes or coat was a long, articulated device made of a shiny metal, snaking from the door to the desk. Harry studied it curiously for a moment—before realising it was fixed to the door right behind where Moody's eye sat on the other side. A telescoping lens, it seemed, that no doubt enabled Umbridge to spy on those out in the bullpen unawares.

He fought down the urge to snatch the eye, knowing it would give his intrusion away, and they still had the element of surprise on their side for now. Moody would absolutely have flayed him alive for such an act, especially when he was courting fate enough just by being here.

He forced himself to focus on his task—he needed to search the office as quickly as possible and then get back to Ron. From there, they'd see if Hermione had had any luck searching Umbridge's person. She'd been wearing a high-necked robe when they'd exchanged words at the lift, but she could have been hiding the locket underneath.

He raised his wand and murmured, "*Accio* locket." Nothing happened, of course, but he hadn't really expected it to—the Horcruxes seemed to be under particularly vexing enchantments, and who knew what additional security spells and protective Charms Umbridge might have placed on it?

Where to search first, though, in this shrine to rose-gold and lace and frolicking baby

animals? The desk took up the better portion of the office, so he would start there, he decided.

He had to practise a delicate touch to be certain Umbridge wouldn't realise she'd been burgled, and he searched first with his eyes before carefully pulling open drawers, using his wand to peek under stacks of paper or poke at suspicious pincushions.

His efforts were rewarded, though, with only the usual bits and bobs: quills and Spellotape and old potpourri, enchanted binder clips that tried to snap at his fingers and had to be slapped back into their drawer. There was an exciting moment when he found a lace box in the bottom left drawer, but opening it only revealed spare hair-bows and clips in every colour of the rainbow.

Tedious minutiae, but no locket.

A filing cabinet stood behind the desk, and Harry turned his attention to it, knowing that Filch had reserved a cabinet drawer in his Hogwarts office for contraband confiscated from students. The drawers in Umbridge's office, though, were full of folders, each labelled with a name—most of which Harry did not recognise on first glance. In the bottommost drawer, though, he found something to distract him from his search: Mr. Weasley's file.

He pulled it out and opened it.

ARTHUR WEASLEY

Blood Status: Pureblood, but with unacceptable pro-Muggle leanings.

Known member of the Order of the Phoenix

Family: Wife Molly (née. Prewett, Pureblood), seven children, two youngest at Hogwarts.

NB: Youngest son currently at home, seriously ill, Ministry inspectors have confirmed.

Security Status: TRACKED. All movements are being monitored.

Strong likelihood Undesirable No. 1 will contact (has stayed with Weasley family previously).

“Undesirable Number One,’ eh? Now who could that be...?” His eyes flicked to the span of wall just over the filing cabinet, where hung a large poster not of kittens or ribbons or flowers but himself—a very unflattering photograph, now that he thought about it; he looked a bit nauseated—with the words “UNDESIRABLE NO. 1” printed in bold underneath. On closer inspection, he saw someone had scrawled in a fancy script with bright-pink ink, “*To be punished.*”

“Just you try, you old hag,” Harry growled, and he shoved Mr. Weasley’s file back in place, moving to slam the drawer shut again—when a thought struck him.

But he shook his head, quickly driving it away. No, he couldn’t chance it. Ron might well be drowning in Yaxley’s office by now, and Hermione was trapped in the Courtrooms with Umbridge. If the Muggleborn interviews lasted more than another twenty minutes or so, the Polyjuice would start to wear off, and then...

“...*Fuck,*” Harry groaned, closing his eyes. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t just *check*, just to see. It was a thing with him: he needed to know these things, needed to see them for himself. He couldn’t turn a blind eye to Dumbledore’s possible indiscretions, and he couldn’t ignore *this*.

So he pulled open the middle drawer of the filing cabinet and began picking through the folders again, name by name, until he finally found the one he’d been certain would be here.

DRACO MALFOY

Blood Status: Pureblood, staunchly pro-Wizard with impeccable pedigree. Known member of the Death Eaters.

Family: Mother Narcissa (née Black, Pureblood) and father Lucius (Pureblood), only child.

Security Status: SECURE; Dept. of Mysteries, Level 9, Block 277, Holding Cell 3B

Under stasis; DO NOT RENNERVATE. Dragon Animagus, extremely dangerous. Handle with EXTREME caution and dispense with prejudice if necessary.

Harry felt his heart give a feeble leap—before promptly falling back into his stomach with a jolting thud.

Malfoy *wasn't dead*. He wasn't dead at all, he was *here*. Right here, in—Harry checked the file again—the Department of Mysteries...?

So why did Voldemort think he was dead, then? Or had his comment merely been a bluff to make Mrs. Malfoy do what he wanted? Not that he needed to lie to his followers in order to bend them to his will. More to the point, what was Malfoy still *doing* here, instead of being locked up in Azkaban or otherwise dealt with? The file said he was under stasis—which meant that Bragge had made Harry turn Malfoy back into himself, only to promptly knock the poor sod unconscious again.

Harry frowned, an uncomfortable tightness forming in his chest. He'd somehow thought that, having regained his human form, Malfoy might receive at least some degree of humane treatment as a prisoner. That he'd at least be *treated* as a prisoner, instead of whatever half-life this was, stuck under stasis, unaware of the danger building just outside his cell door. It had been one thing, keeping the dragon sedated until Harry had been able to force Malfoy back into his normal form, but how could they keep a human prisoner under stasis like that? Even those held in Azkaban weren't treated this way.

Plus, it didn't sound as if he'd even been tried, let alone sentenced. Surely there were laws against this sort of treatment, when the accused wasn't even *conscious* of being held.

Harry found a wand wrapped in a soft, velvet bag at the bottom of Malfoy's folder. He slipped it into the Mokeskin pouch hanging around his neck, without allowing himself to think too long about why, and returned the file to the drawer, sliding it shut.

They had a mission. He had far too many people relying on him right now to afford to get distracted by Draco Malfoy. *Again.*

But thoughts of Malfoy's pathetic state continued to dog him even as he moved on to search the drapes for secret pockets and pulled a bundle of dusty dried flowers from an equally dusty vase, peeking inside just in case, still with no sign of the locket. When had they put him under again? *Why* had they put him under again? Had he ever even roused after Harry had helped him shift back to human, or had they just slapped the stasis spell on him unawares?

And that brought up another matter, because it meant Voldemort hadn't used Malfoy to track Harry—not when he'd left Privet Drive, and not when the Death Eaters had jumped them in the café on Tottenham Court Road. How, then, had they been betrayed? The whole matter was making Harry's head hurt, and he shoved all thoughts of dragons and peacocks and ferret-faced sneering prigs firmly to the side, to be addressed when Harry and his friends *weren't* in immediate danger. He was starting to accept he couldn't ignore the matter altogether, but he could damn well pick and choose *when* he agonised over these things he had no power to change.

He glanced at Moody's eye and heard a gravelly voice reminding him once more *Constant vigilance!* The locket was his priority right now, not Malfoy, and certainly not the Ministry's morally grey prisoner management practises. How the Death Eaters had tracked them was admittedly worrisome, but they remained protected by the Fidelius so long as they were in residence at Number 12, so that too could wait until later to unpack.

After another couple of minutes of half-hearted, distracted searching, he found himself

forced to admit that the locket just wasn't here and readied to make his escape—when his eye caught on something achingly familiar and long-missed: a pair of twinkling blue eyes peering out from under half-moon frames. It was Dumbledore—or rather, a picture of him, prominently displayed on Umbridge's bookcase. Why on earth would Umbridge of all people have a picture of *Dumbledore* in pride of place in her office?

He stepped closer, unaccountably curious, and realised that it wasn't a picture frame at all but rather an image of Dumbledore on the cover of a glossy hard-back book. From this distance, Harry could now see the book's title, scrawled across Dumbledore's tall, pointy hat in a curling font of bright acid-green: *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, with the byline "by Rita Skeeter, best-selling author of *Armando Dippet: Master or Moron?*" in a smaller, more traditional type across Dumbledore's chest.

Just when he thought his day couldn't get worse, now he knew Umbridge was a Rita Skeeter fan. Didn't that just figure?

So the stupid thing was out now, was it? Or had Umbridge flashed her Ministry credentials in enough faces she got an advance copy? He snatched up the book, running a thumb along the edge of the text block to flip open to a random page—and was pleased to find another photograph. This time, of two teenage boys, arms slung over each other's shoulders and wearing bright, full-faced grins. He recognised one as Dumbledore from the photo he'd seen in the *Prophet*, but the other boy was a stranger. He had a shock of golden curls on his head and bright, wild eyes, and every now and then, he'd turn to whisper something into Dumbledore's ear, a wicked grin on his lips, and Dumbledore would cover his mouth, shoulders shaking as if he'd just been told a fantastically dirty joke. Would this have been Doge in his youth, then? Perhaps while planning their trip 'round the world before Kendra's untimely demise had put a stop to it? He scanned the page, searching for a caption—

“—and get someone from Experimental Charms up here to explain how one of their blasted devices found its way to Level 1!”

Had Thicknesse not been in mid-lecture, snarling orders over his shoulder as he entered,

he might have caught sight of Harry hastily ducking under his Invisibility Cloak and dropping into a crouch next to a potted palm wilting in the corner. Even still, he seemed to have caught a flash of movement, for on turning back to the room, Thicknesse paused for a moment and flicked his eyes about in suspicion. Perhaps concluding he'd simply seen the kittens frolicking or Undesirable No. 1 Harry wrinkling his nose from his oversized portrait, Thicknesse shook his head and swiped his wand at a quill on the desk, which promptly leapt from its inkpot and began scratching out a note to Umbridge as Thicknesse dictated.

Sensing this would be his only chance to make a clean escape, Harry slowly eased his way out of the office and back into the bullpen, hunched forward and praying he didn't tread on the hem of the Cloak and take a tumble.

The pamphlet makers were all crowded around the Decoy Detonator—or its remains at least—discussing its suspected provenance and who had set it upon them. “I'll bet it's the same person responsible for the busted Atmospheric Charm in Yaxley's office,” one of them whispered to his companion. “You've got to admire their style!”

Harry made a mental note to donate another thousand Galleons to the twins if they made it out of here alive and quickly scurried past, hurrying towards the corridor leading to the lifts.

He mashed the button to summon the lift as soon as he arrived at the end of the corridor and tried to organise his thoughts. While he hadn't turned the office inside out, he was reasonably confident the locket wasn't hidden there. But with Umbridge sat in the middle of a crowded courtroom, surrounded by Ministry employees and probably Death Eaters or their sympathisers, Harry couldn't see how they were going to be able to prise the locket's whereabouts from her, not without raising a hell of a lot of suspicion. They might have to accept that today's attempt was a wash and return to Grimmauld Place to regroup and try again another day.

First things first, he'd head back down to Level 2 and rescue Ron, assuming Yaxley hadn't found him first, and then they'd have to put their heads together to figure out

how to get Hermione out of the courtrooms on Level 10, as with precious few minutes left on their Polyjuice doses, waiting for the proceedings to end on their own wasn't an option.

Blessedly, the first lift car to arrive was empty, and with a quick glance around to be sure no one was looking, Harry hopped on and mashed the button for Level 2, waiting for the grilles to close again before tugging off the Invisibility Cloak. He was in the midst of stowing the Cloak in his robes when the lift shuddered to a stop at 2 and the grilles opened to reveal a waterlogged Reg Cattermole, looking rather more harried and defeated than he'd been when they'd parted ways earlier.

"Morning..." he bumbled as he stepped on, a bit out of breath. He didn't bother pressing a button, so Harry punched 9 for them.

When Ron seemed inclined to avoid Harry's eye, Harry poked his shoulder. "...Oi, it's me! Harry!"

Ron gave a little jolt, raking his eyes over Runcorn's form, then his shoulders sagged in relief. "Blimey but I'm tired of this Polyjuice business. No wonder people are paranoid over it. I forgot wh—" He frowned. "Hold on, where's Hermione? Wasn't she with you?"

Harry winced, scratching at his neck. "She got waylaid by Umbridge—not because she got caught!" he hastened to explain, as Ron's eyes widened in panic. "Apparently the witch she's impersonating is meant to take minutes or something for the court proceedings Umbridge is involved in. She couldn't refuse, so she's down on Level 10 now, and we've—"

He buttoned up as the lift stopped again, and the grille slid open to allow, of all people, Arthur Weasley to step inside. Harry held his breath, pretending to admire the lift's drab wallpaper, but Mr. Weasley was engaged in conversation with a witch who'd boarded with him and did not seem to notice Harry at first. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ron had turned to face the corner of the lift, like a child being punished. They were an absolute mess without Hermione.

“—and I’m sure the Chairman *would* look kindly upon anyone providing information to aid in that effort, but I can’t—” Mr. Weasley straightened, turning slowly and regarding Harry now, his easy expression darkening immediately. “...Let’s continue this discussion later, Wanda,” he said to the witch, distractedly, and continued to eye Harry with abject loathing. Who *was* this bloke Harry had Polyjuiced into? Voldemort’s half-brother? Runcorn must have been a right arsehole, he concluded, and wished Hermione had stuffed more than a Nosebleed Nougat down his gullet before sending him off.

The witch gave a wheezing, “Oh, all right,” and reached to press the button for Level 7, with the lift continuing its descent. Ron was dripping rather loudly on the floor, and Mr. Weasley turned to him, giving him a once over. “Er, all right there, Reg?” He pinched a bit of Ron’s robe, squeezing the water from it. “Isn’t your wife in for questioning today? I’d have thought you’d be with her.”

“It’s still pouring in Yaxley’s office,” Ron muttered, head ducked low. Of course there was no chance of Mr. Weasley realising who it really was underneath the potion, but it was the principle of the thing, parading about in public when Mr. Weasley would never have approved. “Been trying to get it sorted for a half-hour, but nothing seems to work. They sent me back down to Magical Maintenance to get Bernie—Bernie...Bismouth?”

“Pillsworth?”

“That’s the one.”

Mr. Weasley nodded sympathetically. “There’s been suggestions it’s a prank—no one likes Yaxley, so it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility, but the Atmospheric Charms have been on the fritz in a lot of offices, so I think it’s just general wear and tear on the Charm work. Have you tried *Meteoljinx recanto* to remove the Charm altogether? It’ll have to be recast later instead of just repairing it, so they’ll have to summon a specialist, but better than swimming to your office, eh?”

“*Meteoljinx recanto?*” Ron repeated, turning the words over in his mouth, before brightening a tick and glancing up. “No, I didn’t think to try that one! I’ll see if that sorts it. Thanks, Da—Arthur. You’ve been a help.” The lift doors opened again, spitting out the

witch who'd been chatting with Mr. Weasley, and Ron darted past her, making for the stairwell at the other end of the offices, no doubt to rush back up to Level 2.

Harry made to follow him—two heads might be better than one, and then they could head down to help Hermione—but Mr. Weasley thrust out an arm, blocking him in. Harry slowly turned to look at him, one brow raised, and he must have looked quite intimidating, for Mr. Weasley swallowed thickly, jaw tense. He held his ground, though, gritting out, “Was hoping I might have a word.”

The lift doors closed, and down they went again. Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “Something I can do for you, Arthur?”

“They took Dirk Cresswell away last week. Word is you had a hand in it.”

Harry hadn't the foggiest what Mr. Weasley was referring to, his mind back with Ron, envying him his quick escape. Time to go for the ‘man of few words’ tack again. “Sorry?”

“Don't play *stupid*,” Mr. Weasley spat, seeming to grow bolder with Harry's reluctance to engage, and Harry worried how this conversation might have gone had this actually been the *real* Runcorn and Arthur Weasley having this exchange. “You're the one who told them about the faked family tree, then? And helped track down the wizard who forged the papers?”

Oh, so that was what had happened to poor Dirk. Harry tried to draw himself up, hoping to make Mr. Weasley think twice about trying to speak this way to Runcorn again. It was for his own good. “Yeah? So what if I did?”

“There will come a time,” Mr. Weasley said, almost whispering, his tone quiet and dangerous with unspoken threat, “when you and your ilk will have to answer for the depths to which you've sunk just to get a leg up on others less fortunate than yourselves. I *hope*—I really, truly do—that I'll be there to see it happen.”

“*Level 8, Atrium*,” the disembodied lift witch's voice announced; Harry seized his chance.

“They're keeping tabs on you, Arthur. Did you know? Got a whole file on you.”

Arthur only bristled. “Is that a *threat*? Think I’ve faked a dozen and more generations of Weasley before me? I know they’re scraping the bottom of the barrel these days looking for scapegoats, but—”

“Oh for—” Harry was going to botch this, he just was. “It’s a *warning*! I’m just saying you’d better watch your—”

But then the lift doors opened on the Atrium, and they had an audience. Harry fell silent, exhaling loudly through his nose, and Mr. Weasley shouldered past him without so much as a *Thanks for the tip*. Harry stood there, shaken, and watched as an inter-Departmental memo followed Mr. Weasley out of the lift. Maybe he could send one of those to Mr. Weasley’s office, warning him anonymously.

As the lift was still headed down, no one bothered boarding, since few had business on Levels 9 or 10, and once the grilles had closed again, Harry pulled out his Invisibility Cloak once more and slipped it on, grateful to be rid of Runcorn after that. Ron would have to handle Yaxley’s office by himself; hopefully the spell Mr. Weasley had suggested would work, and he’d join Harry quickly, as Harry wasn’t sure what might happen otherwise. He didn’t think he could figure out how to get Hermione out of the proceedings without arousing suspicion on his own.

When the doors opened again on Level 9, Harry found himself in what was becoming a familiar passageway, this being his second ‘visit’. It was a far sight from the richly panelled, plushly carpeted corridors above, the only light cast in this dark, dank hallway the wan flickering Bluebell Flames burning low in sconces on the wall. Harry stepped out, jolting as the grates clattered shut behind him, the lift rising back up to the Atrium to receive more passengers.

There was no carpeting to muffle Runcorn’s heavy tread here, and his steps seemed to echo down the lonely hallway. Ahead loomed a black door, marking the entrance to the Department of Mysteries—but Harry resolutely ignored it, instead yanking open the door just to his left, which opened on to a flight of stairs leading down to the court chambers on Level 10.

Nearly at his destination, Harry started to sort through possible courses of action. He still had a few Decoy Detonators in his pocket, but using a second one—and so soon after the first up on Level 1—might unnecessarily arouse suspicion. They weren't caught yet, so there was no sense in acting out unless forced to.

Umbridge had invited him down here when they'd run into each other earlier—maybe he could just poke his head in and ask for a quick word with Mafalda. It was the simplest plan and easiest to execute (and therefore the one with the lowest chance of Harry screwing it up)—but there was no telling if Runcorn had the kind of authority to barge in on a court proceeding, and Umbridge would probably not appreciate having her fun interrupted by someone who had no business stealing her stenographer or whatever role Hermione was meant to fill. Plus, even if he managed it, they'd probably have at best a few minutes before someone came looking for Hermione if she didn't return promptly—not nearly long enough for all three of them to escape cleanly.

Preoccupied with his plans—or lack thereof, rather—he was halfway down the steps to Level 10 before he registered that the temperature had dropped several degrees, an unnatural chill settling over him like a slow-rolling bank of fog. Each step was more difficult to take than the last, and he felt his shoulders take on a raw, physical weight that dragged. The darkness seemed to deepen, and creeping in slowly, stealing away the last bits of warmth and light, came a bottomless well of despair and hopelessness so thick, so deep, he could have drowned in it.

Dementors.

Umbridge had brought in *fucking Dementors*. Or maybe the Ministry had had them here all along—regardless, they were out now, out in force, and turning the corner at the bottom step, Harry saw them: a dozen or more tall, black-robed figures with hoods that threw their faces entirely in shadows. They lurked along the walls, looming with groping spindly fingers as they waited for foolish passersby to draw near enough to snatch.

A long wooden bench occupied the far end of the corridor just outside the door leading into Courtroom C where Umbridge would be holding her interrogations, and huddled

atop it sat a half-dozen terrified Muggleborns who'd been brought in for questioning. Most hid their faces, perhaps thinking in doing so they might be able to save their souls from any Dementors that grew too bold, but some clung to loved ones with wide, white eyes, unable to tear their gazes away from the horrors unfolding before them.

A few Dementors prowled the corridor like hungry predators, gliding silently up and down the hallway and stealing away all warmth and hope as they went. Harry gave them a wide berth as he approached, their ragged, raspy breathing covering Harry's steps. His fingers twitched at his sides—oh, how he *ached* to whip out his wand and send his Patronus rushing down this hallway. He could feel the magic beating at the back of his ribcage, begging to be unleashed—but he fought the urge, tamping it down with reminders that there were still Ron and Hermione to help. He forced himself to think of them, of how they needed him to keep a level, clear head. The locket could be collected another day—his friends could not.

He shuffled his way through the gauntlet of Dementors, keeping his head down and the Cloak wrapped tight around him. He didn't dare stop, didn't give them the chance to latch on, only moved forward resolutely to Courtroom C at the end of the corridor—

—the door to which was abruptly flung open when he was but a few paces away, hitting the wall with a clanging thud that shattered the frozen silence of the hallway.

Babbled pleas filtered into the corridor, with a frantic desperation filling the air and sending the Dementors into a tizzy. “No, *no*, I'm a half-blood, you must believe me! My father was a wizard, good and proper! Arkie Alderton—he's a famous broomstick designer! His brooms have been ridden by—*unhand me, get your filthy hands off—*”

Harry crept closer, keeping clear of the Dementors now starting to swarm the door to the courtroom, as if they could sense a meal coming their way.

“Now now, Mr. Alderton. The Committee has cast its judgement,” came Umbridge's unmistakable voice, soft and silky but magnified with the force of a *Sonorus* such that it drowned out Alderton's ardent protests. “If you can't compose yourself, we shall have to have you *forcibly* controlled. And do be aware that the Dementors have been authorised

to deliver their Kiss to any who resist unduly.”

Mr. Alderton immediately ceased his blubbering protests, but quiet, defeated sobs continued to echo from the chamber.

“There, see? Civility serves us all.” Her tone was one of patronising levity—but quickly turned cold and brittle. “Now—you may take him away.”

Here, a pair of the Dementors broke off from their fellows, gliding into the courtroom and circling the defenceless Mr. Alderton. With rotting hands that reminded Harry of the Inferi in the cave pool, they reached for the wizard, dark, dirty nails digging in when he struggled, until he fainted into their grasp. They bore him away as if he weighed nothing, down the hall where they were swallowed into the scrum of other Dementors and disappeared from sight.

“Now, Mary Cattermole! Why don’t you join us?” called Umbridge, her voice once again light and inviting as she moved on to the next matter of business, and the woman on the farthest end of the bench slowly rose to her feet, visibly trembling. Her dark hair had been smoothed back into a loose bun, and her robes were not the colourful garb of Ministry workers but plain ones meant for day-to-day household labour. She was utterly unremarkable, as far as Harry could see; why anyone would go after a woman like this, when there were real, actual Dark wizards on the loose, was beyond Harry.

Sensing his moment, he rushed to hang on her heels, slipping in behind her as she shuffled into the courtroom. It gutted him, seeing her having to walk in there alone, when her husband was meant to be by her side. It was their fault Reg Cattermole hadn’t made it into work today—suddenly his reluctance to take the day off made a lot more sense—and Harry wished he could will some comfort into her, or at least let her know she didn’t have to face this farcical interview on her own.

Mrs. Cattermole was led into the centre of the chamber’s deep well, and Harry stepped off to the side, taking a moment to case the room. It was not, he realised, the same courtroom he’d been escorted to when he’d had to face the Wizengamot and answer for his use of magic in front of Muggles—that one had been *much* larger, though this one was

just as imposing, he thought, especially for the poor Muggleborns waiting in the hall for their fate to be decided. The ceiling stretched up impossibly high, leaving one feeling like a bug under glass as the audience above peered down with grave, unfriendly faces.

The insidious chill in the room did not leave even when the door closed behind them, and Harry remarked the Dementors stationed around the central well, lurking just at the outer bounds of the cylindrical beam of light pouring from high above. They peered from beneath dark hoods, watching Mrs. Cattermole hungrily, and Harry silently begged her not to make a scene, as he didn't want Umbridge making an example of her like she'd nearly done Mr. Alderton.

Harry hung a right just inside the doorway and crept up a steep flight of stairs leading to the stands overlooking the raised platform where Mrs. Cattermole was being led. It was here he found Umbridge, seated behind a balustrade and flanked on either side by Yaxley—thank god, Ron still had time to put his office back to sorts—and a stricken Hermione. Mafalda Hopkirk's face was nearly as pale and drawn as Mrs. Cattermole's, and Harry could see that the quill clutched in her fingers was trembling so much, her writing had come out illegible scribbles.

A figure he thought at first might be a ghost stalked along the balustrade, bright silver and glowing faintly—but on closer inspection, he realised it was a cat. Thick-furred and proud, it would occasionally pause to bat at some imagined dust mote floating in the air.

It was a Patronus—*Umbridge's* Patronus, no doubt. Harry supposed he shouldn't have been surprised to find a Patronus here, in the midst of an army of Dementors, but he was. Mostly because he wouldn't have thought a witch as evil as Umbridge would've been capable of casting such a spell—but then again, all it required was a very happy memory to draw upon, and here in this courtroom, casting judgement upon those too weak to defend themselves and 'purifying' the wizarding race in the doing? Oh, Umbridge must have been *ecstatic*.

"Have a seat," Umbridge said, extending her hand to a chair in the centre of the room. Mrs. Cattermole regarded the chair with some suspicion, but Dementors had moved to

block the door to the courtroom, removing any hope of her making a break for it. With little choice but to do as Umbridge said, she gingerly lowered herself into the seat—and immediately chains snaked out from the arms of the chair, locking her in place, to her visible horror. Mrs. Cattermole gave a feeble wriggle, trying to free herself—but to no avail.

Umbridge consulted her clipboard, brows raised.

“Well, shall we get started? You’re Mary Elizabeth Cattermole, yes?”

Mrs. Cattermole was still struggling against the chains, and Umbridge cleared her throat loudly. Mrs. Cattermole flinched, quickly recalling herself, and nodded shakily. “Y-yes’m.”

“Very good. And you’re married to Reginald Cattermole, presently employed in our Magical Maintenance division?” Umbridge cast about the courtroom, lips pinched. “I don’t see him here. Did he not come with you? Spouses are allowed to stand as witnesses, you should have been told as such in your summons.”

Mrs. Cattermole’s composure shattered, and she began to sob, her voice broken with hiccoughs. “I—I don’t know where he is! He was meant to meet me here, he said he would! I-if someone could maybe check with his manager...”

Umbridge sighed, scratching out something on her clipboard, and moved on. “Three children, then? Maisie, Ellie, and Alfred Cattermole?”

Mrs. Cattermole nodded weakly. “Th-they’re so young, they don’t understand... They th-think I might not c-come home!” Her sobs increased in volume and frequency, and Yaxley rolled his eyes.

“Oh, *enough*,” he snarled. “No one here gives two shits about Mudblood get.”

Terrible as Mrs. Cattermole’s sobs were, he was grateful for them, as they helped muffle his steps and distract the likes of Yaxley and Umbridge as Harry moved closer toward the benches seating the overseers. He could tell when he drew within the radius of the

Patronus's protection, as the chill of the Dementors' presence instantly evaporated. The Patronus glowed brightly as it bathed itself, feeding on Umbridge's merry confidence.

He edged as close as he dared, taking a seat just behind Hermione. How to make his presence known was a conundrum in itself; he was sure to frighten her with any sudden gestures or words, given how tense she already was, and false moves would draw Umbridge's and Yaxley's attention.

Umbridge raised her voice to continue her line of questioning, and while she was distracted, Harry leaning forward to whisper into Hermione's ear, "Don't freak out; I'm right behind you."

As expected, she gave a violent start, tipping over her inkpot and sending a wave of black cascading over the notes she'd been taking. Blessedly, neither Umbridge nor Yaxley seemed to notice the disturbance, engrossed as they were in Mrs. Cattermole's mental torture.

"Now, on your arrival at the Ministry this morning, security officials found a wand on your person and confiscated it." Umbridge checked her notes. "Eight and three-quarter inches, cherry, unicorn hair core."

"Y-yes," Mrs. Cattermole sniffled. "That's my wand."

"Mm, yes, it's certainly *someone's* wand—the question this Commission would like answered is just *whose* property it rightly is." She arched an eyebrow. "Would you mind clarifying which witch or wizard you stole this wand from? Or if you believe it was given freely, we'll want the name of whoever gave it to you all the same, as it's an actionable offence to willingly allow Muggles to come into contact with magical paraphernalia—"

"Wha—stole...? Who did I *steal* it from?" Mrs. Cattermole's features screwed up in bewilderment, her sobs momentarily stifled by her confusion. "I didn't...I didn't steal it from anyone. I bought it—from Mr. Ollivander. When I was eleven years old! I—it *chose* me, you can ask him yourself!"

Umbridge tittered softly, sharing a patronising look with Yaxley. She then leaned forwards over the balustrade to get a better look at her victim, and Harry fought the urge to give her a good hard shove—something he found remarkably easy to do once distracted by the heavy golden locket that slipped from her collar and swung forward to dangle from her neck.

The muffled squeak Hermione released said she'd spotted it too, and a rush of adrenaline began to flood Harry's system. No, there would be no coming back another day, no regrouping and trying again. The locket was here, feet from them, and they couldn't leave here without it.

"Now, dear, I can appreciate the situation you're in and how overwhelmed you must be feeling—but that's no reason to go telling all-out *fib*s, and I'll remind you that if you're caught lying to this Commission, we will *not* look favourably on your case."

"B—but I haven't lied—"

"But you just *have*, you said so yourself: that the wand collected on your arrival at the Ministry had *chosen* you. You see, that's simply not possible—wands choose witches and wizards." Umbridge laced her fingers together, arms folded neatly. "Not Muggles."

"But I'm *not* a Muggle!" Mrs. Cattermole's protests were growing strident now, and Harry silently willed her to keep her composure—hadn't she seen what'd happened to poor Mr. Alderton when he'd gotten short with Umbridge?

"We'll be the judges of that. Mafalda, dear, pass me Mrs. Cattermole's questionnaire, if you would." She held out a stubby-fingered hand, snapping in Hermione's direction. Hermione straightened, frantically rifling through a packet of documents on the desk next to her before sliding her a length of parchment with Mrs. Cattermole's name at the top.

As she handed Umbridge the documents, Hermione licked her lips, brows rising. "G—goodness, that's a *lovely* necklace, Dolores. It suits you so well." She nodded to the pendant dangling from Umbridge's neck, her tone remarkably light and conversational.

“What?” snapped Umbridge with no small amount of irritation, before glancing down to the locket. She immediately transformed, pride infusing her toady features. “Oh, yes, isn’t it? A recently uncovered family heirloom we found with my late Great Aunt Gwendolyn’s personal effects.” She settled back, patting the locket now resting atop her ample bosom with a proprietorial hand. “This *S* here stands for ‘Selwyn’—you’ll know the Selwyns, of course. They’re a relation on my father’s side. Truth be told, I can prove a connection to any *number* of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.” She turned a superior gaze to the cowering Mrs. Cattermole. “Suffice it to say *my* parents certainly weren’t...” Her lip curled as she tapped a finger next to Mrs. Cattermole’s answer to question four on the questionnaire. “...Greengrocers.” She smiled. “Some of us don’t have to *lie* about our lineage to travel in circles we weren’t meant to tread.”

Yaxley gave a rasping cough that devolved into wheezing laughter, and Umbridge’s Patronus hissed at Mrs. Cattermole. The Dementors in the corners stirred, growing restless.

Harry felt his blood rushing hot through his veins, chasing away any remaining chill the Dementors might have laid on him—*lying about her lineage?* That was rich, coming from Umbridge, who knew that locket was no ‘heirloom’—at least not one of her own. She’s stolen it—the very feat she was accusing Mrs. Cattermole of—and for no better reason than to goose her own standing amongst her no-good blood-worshipping peers. She was worse than Yaxley, worse than Malfoy—she *pretended* and *lied* and stepped on the backs of witches and wizards with ten times her strength just to get ahead, to be able to stand just *one rung* higher than those around her. At least Death Eaters owned up to what they were, at least they *stood for something*—

Harry felt the last of his patience and caution fizzle away, and with fleeting silent apology to Mad-Eye Moody, he raised his wand beneath the Cloak, levelling it at Umbridge’s thick neck and spitting, “*Stupefy!*”

Umbridge collapsed in a flash of bright red, her head smacking against the edge of her desk before she crumpled to the ground. Her Patronus blipped from existence, bringing an oncoming rush of cold dread. Yaxley didn’t seem to realise what had happened,

crouching down to give Umbridge a shake, and too late he seemed to surmise someone had Charmed her, only managing to open his mouth to cry for aid before Harry sent another Stunner right between Yaxley's eyes. He slumped over Umbridge, out cold.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped, leaping to her feet, but Harry was still riding his adrenaline high, and he ripped off the Invisibility Cloak.

"If you think I was going to sit here and listen to her spout more hogwash—"

Hermione grabbed him by the arm, pointing frantically into the pit below. "No, Mrs. Cattermole!"

Harry's stomach dropped; with the Patronus no longer around keeping them at bay and Umbridge no longer conscious to order them to their posts, the Dementors ringing the chamber below had begun to glide forward, making their way into the centre where Mrs. Cattermole still sat chained to her chair.

The poor woman struggled in her chair, sobbing openly, and tried to turn her head away when one drew close—but it reached out one spindly, decaying hand from under its ragged cloak, took her by the chin, and brought her face back around...then tipped it back, unhinging its jaw into a gaping maw—

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The familiar form of the stag leapt from the tip of Harry's wand, filling the pit with brilliantly shimmering silver light. It charged the most brazen of the Dementors, shaking its antlered head in warning, and the creatures fell back with a hiss and faded into the dark shadows edging the room once more. The stag then took a lap of the room, radiating a comforting warmth and snorting aggressively at any Dementors that thought to make another try for Mrs. Cattermole.

"I'll handle this," Harry said. "You get the Horcrux." Hermione nodded breathlessly.

He quickly stuffed his Invisibility Cloak back into his robes—they certainly wouldn't need it now—and rushed back down the stairs, nearly tripping over Runcorn's overlarge

feet in his haste to reach Mrs. Cattermole.

Her expression as she watched him approach, recognising he'd been the one to cast the Patronus that had saved her, was nothing short of gobsmacked. "Mr. Runcorn...? B-but, Reg said you were the one who told the Commission about me in the first place!"

"Wow, that wasn't very nice of me," Harry said, pointing his wand at the chains on Mrs. Cattermole's chair, and she flinched, as if fearing he meant to curse her. "Maybe I was just in a bad mood that day—I mean to make up for it now, though. *Diffindo!*" But the chains only gave a feeble shudder, and Harry swore under his breath, calling up to Hermione, "Hey, the chains aren't budging! Got anything better in your arsenal? *Diffindo* didn't do it!"

"I'm a little busy at the moment; just give me a second—"

"We don't *have* a second! My Patronus can only hold off this many Dementors for so long!" Already a few were getting bold enough that the stag had to nearly gut them with its antlers before they retreated.

"Well it'll have to try! We can't just grab the locket and leave." She freed the locket from around Umbridge's bulbous neck with a sharp tug, snapping the band. "She'll notice it's gone, and who knows what that might lead to."

"I thought the whole *point* was to get the locket—"

"It is! Honestly, stop squawking at me and let me work!" She huffed, holding the locket out at arm's length, and said, "*Geminio!*" A flash, and suddenly Hermione was holding *two* lockets—Harry hoped she remembered which one was the original; he was going to go mad if they wound up with a *second* fake locket. She slipped the new locket back around Umbridge's neck. "There. If she didn't recognise the true value in what she had before, she certainly won't realise it's a fake she's wearing now."

"Any time now, Hermione!"

She slipped the locket into her beaded bag, then came rushing down the steps at Harry's

insistent urging, wand brandished and a look of determination on her features. “All right, if *Diffindo*’s no good...” Her nose wrinkled in thought, and she pointed her wand at the chains. “Perhaps a nice *Relashio*!”

The chains shuddered sharply, then relaxed their grip, drawing back into the arms of the chair and releasing Mrs. Cattermole at last. She leapt from the chair, rubbing her arms but face still red and puffy and eyes wild with fright. “I...I don’t understand, why would you...?” She glanced back and forth between the two of them, shaking her head, but there was no time to tell her the truth—or even to make up a palatable lie.

Harry took her by the shoulders, steering her toward the exit. “It doesn’t matter, right? All you need to worry about is gathering your family together and getting as far away from here as possible. Leave the country if you can. Don’t stop to pack anything, just get the children and your husband and *go*. And don’t come back, not until things have settled down here. Consider the Continent, or try visiting the Americas for a bit, yeah? Some place remote, I’d advise.”

Mrs. Cattermole just nodded, expression quite dubious, and Harry turned back to his Patronus, summoning the stag to his side with a whistle. It shook its head in a final warning to the Dementors along the wall, then pranced back towards Harry, gleaming noontime bright.

“Can you cast yours?” he asked Hermione, and her face blanched. “It’s just, there’s a whole boatload of Dementors outside, and two will keep them in check better than one if we’re to get out of here.”

“Y—yeah, I think, probably...” She raised her wand, hand still unsteady. “*Expecto patronum!*” A fizzle of silver dust spat from the tip, dissolving into nothingness, and Hermione’s jaw tensed.

“It’s all right—try again, though. We need as many as we can manage.” He looked to Mrs. Cattermole—she didn’t have her wand on her, but some of the others waiting in the hallway might. While Hermione tried her Patronus charm again, Harry sent his on through the door as he reached for the knob, yanking it open to reveal a bench full of

pale, frightened faces staring at them in shock.

“Expecto patronum!” Hermione shouted with a steadier voice, and from her wand leapt a silver otter, gracefully cavorting through the air as it swam over to join the stag in staring down the gauntlet of Dementors guarding the corridor. Several of the Muggleborns yelped in fright as the silver creatures bounded past, clinging to each other in wide-eyed awe.

Harry drew himself up, and in Runcorn’s booming, authoritative voice, announced, “Any remaining Muggleborns and their families are urged to leave the Ministry immediately and go into hiding. Er, you’re valued members of the wizarding community, but tensions are running high at the moment, and it’s in your best interests to just—go elsewhere for a while. Abroad, if you can. Feel free to return when you feel it’s safe to do so.” Most of the Muggleborns just stared at him, confusion on their features, and Harry waved his wand. “Well go on, get going!”

As if a spell had been broken, the Muggleborns scrambled to their feet, gathering up their families and belongings and crowding around Harry, who realised he was now expected to lead them all out down the corridor. He swallowed thickly, then twitched his wand to send his stag ahead to clear the hall in its entirety, with Hermione’s otter hot on its tail. They managed to make their way through the cloud of Dementors without issue, scaling the stone steps up to Level 9 and the waiting lift, but Harry knew their luck would not last long.

A band of nearly two dozen accused Muggleborns emerging into the Atrium and making hastily for the nearest exits would surely draw attention, even though they’d managed to cover their tracks thus far. Someone would come down to see how the interrogations were going and find Yaxley and Umbridge out cold, and then the Ministry would go into lockdown.

It would go into lockdown...but there would be a window, before then. A brief one, albeit, but a window.

Harry’s mind was whirring, weighing risks against rewards and finding the latter heavily

wanting, but before he could talk himself out of what he was admittedly probably going to wind up doing anyway, the grates rattled open as the lift arrived, spitting out—

“Oh, *Reg!*” Mrs. Cattermole tackled a bewildered Ron, burying her face in his chest. “I’ve no idea what’s going on, but Runcorn freed me! He knocked out Umbridge and Yaxley and told me to take you and the kids and run! He said we should leave the country, and Reg—Reg, I believe him! I think we ought to hurry home and fetch the children and then take the first flight to—” She drew back, frowning at his navy-blue robes. “Why are you so wet?”

“Busted Atmospheric charms...” muttered Ron, carefully extricating himself from Mrs. Cattermole’s grip, red-cheeked. He nodded to Harry and Hermione. “Seems you’ve picked up a few strays. I reckon we’ve only got a matter of minutes before someone realises something’s amiss. Someone up on Level 2 mentioned Yaxley’s meant to be in a meeting in ten; I offered to come down and fetch him once I finally managed to get the rain in his office sorted, but if he doesn’t show...”

Hermione gasped—and her Patronus disappeared. “Oh, no! And the Polyjuice is about to wear off! If we’re trapped here—!”

“No *ifs*—let’s just stay on task. No one knows anything’s wrong yet.” Harry addressed the group milling behind them. “Oi! How many of you’ve still got wands?” About half raised their hands—not as many as Harry had hoped, but better than nothing. “Okay, pair up if you aren’t already—everyone find a buddy with a wand. You’ll need to act fast once the lift spits you out in the Atrium—head *straight* for the nearest exit. Floo, Apparate if you can reach an unwarded point—whatever you need to do, just *go*.” He mashed the lift button, and the golden grilles clattered open at once to admit the Muggleborns.

Mrs. Cattermole was most reluctant to leave her husband, even with Ron’s harried explanation that no, he *wasn’t* actually her husband, and that the real Reg would probably be waiting for her when she got home. He eventually had to physically shove her into the lift, reminding her that Reg had really wanted to be there with her today but

had gotten waylaid and she shouldn't be cross with him.

It was a tight fit, cramming all of them into a single car, and Hermione quietly cast a Levitation charm to send it on its way when the cables above began to groan worryingly. Its mission complete, Harry's Patronus dissipated into nothingness, and Harry instantly missed the familiar comfort and confidence that came with its presence.

"Right—er, so what now?" Ron asked, glancing between Hermione and Harry. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the lift grilles. "I mean, it's all well and good we've seen them safely on their way, but what about us?" His eyes widened. "Did you manage to get the locket? *Please* tell me we don't have to do this *all over again*—"

"No—no, we got it," Harry reassured him, and Ron's shoulders slumped in relief. "But there's...there's one more thing we need to do before we can get the hell out of here." He glanced back at the imposing black door at the end of the hall, beyond which lay the Department of Mysteries. God, this was madness—he'd almost rather face Umbridge again, carving a thousand lines into his own flesh.

He took a step towards the door, and Hermione grabbed his shoulder, frowning. "Harry? Harry, what are you doing?"

He inclined his head, lips pursed into a tight line of displeasure. *Something stupid*, he didn't say, though it would have been the truth. "What I ought to."

Her frown deepened, but she eased her grip, and he marched for the door with the two of them trailing closely. He considered throwing the Cloak on again, but it wouldn't cover all three of them, and the whole Ministry was about to be looking for them either way. They could move more quickly without the Cloak, and speed was more important than stealth at this point.

The door didn't open on its own for Harry this time, as it had on his last 'visit', but when he pressed down on the handsome silver handle, it gave without a sound, admitting the three of them into a large, circular room. It was completely empty, and every surface—from the walls to the marble flooring to the dozen or so identical-looking doors leading off

of the chamber—gleamed a polished jet-black, the only light that cast by candles with blue-burning flames encased in glass-faced lanterns mounted between the doors.

Memories were returning slowly, now, and Harry closed his eyes when the door shut behind Ron, locking them in. Hermione gasped as a great rumbling noise sounded from within the very walls around them, and then the candles began moving sideways as the circular wall rotated around them.

“Harry!” she cried, and Harry felt her stumbling in the darkness, groping for his arm. “Harry—”

“Wait,” he told her. The room continued to whirl for another few, breath-stealing seconds before grinding to a halt, the rumbling dying away to no more than distant echoes. Harry slowly opened his eyes again—no afterimages burned into his retinas this time.

“Blimey, I forgot about that,” Ron muttered, shaking his head. “That’s a trip and a half, it is.”

“*Harry!*” Hermione hissed, and when she grabbed his arm this time, she held on painfully tight, tugging at him stubbornly. “What are we *doing?*” She glanced to Ron, who looked equally unsettled, though he hid his nerves under Reg Cattermole’s more restrained mask of unease. “Any minute now, this whole place is going to go on lockdown, and there’s no way out of the Department of Mysteries other than the way we came, which—” She waved at the doors around them, “We have no idea which door it is!” She brought both hands up to grab tight to Harry’s robes, tugging with all of Mafalda’s strength. “We’re *trapped* down here, Harry!”

He took her by the wrists and gently eased her away. “I know. And we’re not the only ones.”

The candlelight caught on her frightened gaze, brow creasing in confusion—before her expression went slack as realisation dawned. “Harry—*no.*”

He sighed. “We don’t have time to—”

“You’re damn right we don’t have time to do this! We *can’t* do it!” she snapped, stamping her foot.

“Don’t have time for what?” Ron asked, stepping between them. “Can’t do *what?*”

Hermione ignored Ron, steamrolling his questions to round on Harry, as if he hadn’t already had this argument a dozen times over with himself. “He made his bed, let him damn well lie in it! I’m not going to let us get trapped—let us get *killed*—because of Draco-bloody-Malfoy!”

“*WHAT?*” Ron shrieked, and now the *both* of them were laying into Harry with loud protests. “Like hell I’m risking my neck for that arsehole! How do we get out of here?” He whirled around, scanning the walls—but all the doors looked the same, and it was impossible to tell by which one they’d entered. “*Fuck!*”

“This isn’t up for debate, the both of you,” Harry said, stepping toward one of the doors and searching it for any clue as to what might lie beyond it. Block 277, Holding Cell 3B—that was what he was looking for, and he didn’t have time to check all of the doors, especially since the room would probably reset each time an attempt was made.

“Harry—*Harry*, I get it, I really do. You feel—I don’t know, sorry for him? Responsible for him? Or, like you share a connection?” Harry cut her a warning look—if he had to listen to her rattle off another theory that he got off on having ‘special connections’ with violent scum, he was going to scream. She shook her head. “That doesn’t matter—what matters is that you understand *you can’t do this*. We can’t be here—we might *already* be too late to escape!” She jogged over, Mafalda’s sensible heels clacking brightly on the marble flooring, and placed herself between Harry and the door he was inspecting. “I don’t know how you know he’s down here, but if he *is* here, if this is where the Ministry’s holding him, then it’s not as if he doesn’t deserve it. He’s a Death Eater—you saw his Mark yourself, you said. He plotted to kill Dumbledore, *on You-Know-Who’s orders*, and even if he only managed it by accident, he still nearly killed two people in the doing —”

“Yeah!” Ron called, “One of ‘em *me!* Maybe make a note of that next time you drag us

into your mad scheme to rescue your lizard boyfriend!”

“*Ronald*,” Hermione hissed. “You’re not helping.”

“There’s nothing to help,” Harry said, stepping around her to run his hand over the jamb; there wouldn’t be any indication on this side of the wall, not if the room spun randomly every time someone entered. Which meant there had to be another way to figure out which rooms lay beyond which door. Time, Space, Love, Death...he wasn’t interested in the Research Catacombs—he needed the holding cells. The storage corridor.

“Think about who you’re doing this for, Harry,” Hermione pleaded. “This is *beyond* insane—we’re going to get killed trying to help someone who won’t hesitate to turn on us as soon as he has the chance!”

“Maybe,” Harry allowed. “Maybe even probably.” He swallowed, turning to look at the both of them, because they did need to make this decision with him, he supposed. It was their lives hanging in the balance too. “But I can’t *not* act, once I know something. You two ought to understand that about me by now. And I can’t leave here without having at least *tried* to do something. They don’t have him just locked in a cell, awaiting trial. He’s under stasis—not even *conscious*, and when do you think they’re going to get around to trying an underage unregistered Animagus for something he couldn’t control when the Ministry’s overrun by Death Eaters and there’s war just over the horizon? He could be here for *years* if we don’t do something. It’s inhumane—plus, we can’t even be sure he’d have actually killed Dumbledore if it’d come down to it.”

Ron didn’t look entirely convinced, but he was staring at the floor now, arms crossed over his chest. Hermione’s throat was bobbing, and she was blinking quickly.

He pressed on. “...I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I turned my back on him now, not when we’re *right* here. He doesn’t deserve to be freed, you’re right—but he doesn’t deserve to rot here, forgotten, either. Shouldn’t we try and err on the side of—of mercy?”

“Dumbledore tried that already; didn’t work out too well for him,” Ron muttered, throwing a dark look Harry’s way.

Harry threw his hands up. “I’m not saying we should be *friends* with him—we can always ply him for useful information. Maybe he’s got some intelligence on attacks the Death Eaters are planning!”

“Sure, and anything he knows will be *months* out of date, so that’s dead useful.” Ron shook his head. “It’s *mad*, Harry. You know it.”

He *did* know it, Ron was right. But just like he couldn’t simply ignore the things he had heard and read about Dumbledore, that he had to find out the truth, so too could he not carry on as if nothing were amiss, knowing he might have been able to help Malfoy out and had instead turned his back on him. “...You two should go back. Wait for me at Grimmauld Place—I’ll be right behind you, after I’ve taken care of this,” he said. He drew out his wand, laying it flat in his palm and whispering *Point me*. It spun wildly before jerking to a stop, indicating north just off to his right. He adjusted his stance so he was facing north, then tried to work out the coordinates; he’d never been all that good with maths, but this was the best idea he had to go on.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous!” Hermione glanced back at Ron, frantic. “We don’t *want* to go without you!”

“And couldn’t even if we did, since we’re *locked in*,” Ron muttered.

There was that. Plus, Harry didn’t honestly want them to leave, though he knew it was for the best. “This is something I’ve got to do... It just is. I’m not asking you to like it, just to understand.” Block 277—couldn’t be numbers on a clock. Had to be degrees. Which put the door...somewhere to his nine o’clock? Maybe? God, what if Unspeakables just got their door assignments Owled to them every morning and were expected to remember which one they were meant to go through when they arrived at the Ministry?

“Oh, good. As long as we don’t have to like it,” Ron bit out, then ran his hands through Reg’s thinning hair with a defeated groan. “Dammit—fine, let’s just...” He made a vague

shooing gesture. “Let’s spring the wanker. Suppose I should be glad for the chance to thank him personally for that poisoned wine.”

Harry frowned. “I’m serious, you know. You don’t have to come with.” He was pretty sure the entrance was at true north, so he could always send them back. “There’s no sense in *all* of us risking—”

“There’s no sense in *any* of us risking anything, Harry,” Hermione said, lips thinned in anger. “But if it’s go along with this stupid rescue mission you’re set on or abandon you, well I think we’ve already shared our thoughts on where you can shove any and all suggestions that we ‘save ourselves’. Plus, you can’t expect us to leave you alone with him—what if he transforms?”

“I doubt that’s going to be a problem; I told you, he’s in stasis.”

“Of course.” Hermione sighed. “And you’re going to carry an unconscious Death Eater out of the Ministry of Magic’s front doors...*how*, exactly?”

“I don’t *know!*” Harry snapped, and Hermione flinched. “I don’t know anything, all right? I just—know what needs to be done.” He grabbed the handle of the door at nine o’clock from north, then gave a yank, closing his eyes and bracing for...well, he didn’t know what.

But nothing happened, and when Harry slowly blinked his eyes open again, he found the door had opened onto a long hallway with two gleaming placards bolted to the stonework: *Blocks 256-270*, pointing to the left, and *Blocks 271-285*, pointing to the right.

Hermione would hate not being given the chance to solve the puzzle herself. He glanced at them over Runcorn’s burly shoulder. “I’m going to ‘rescue my lizard boyfriend’, now. If you’d like to come.”

“Hope he eats you,” Ron muttered under his breath, shuffling forward, and Hermione raised her eyes to the ceiling, moving her lips in what Harry suspected was a strongly

worded—but silent—string of swears before she brandished her wand with a flourish and nodded. Harry was going to have his arse handed to him by the both of them if they made it out of this place in one piece—but part of him took heart in the fact that even this hadn't been enough to drive them away.

'All in,' he thought to himself, setting off down the right side of the hallway at a jog. "His file said he's in block 277, holding cell 3B."

"His file?" Ron asked. "You *looked him up*?"

Harry didn't answer, stomach flipping when he passed Block 276. He pulled a hard left around the next corner, in a flat-out run by the time he reached holding cell 3B, situated across the hall from 3A.

He tried to swallow, breathing heavily, but there was no saliva, so he just panted open-mouthed and stared. It was a thick, wooden door with only a tiny grate for a window at the top and a slot around the middle for passing food through. This suggested that they sometimes kept people down here who *weren't* under stasis, and Harry wasn't sure what unsettled him more. How was anyone to know if someone was being unlawfully held in these cells? The Department of Mysteries answered to no one, Harry recalled; how had they gotten their hands on Malfoy in the first place—and to what ends? Charlie had said dragon Animagi were rare; were they trying to study him?

"Harry? Is that him?" Hermione was panting too, flyaways wisping around Mafalda's drained face. "Well?"

Harry nodded, reaching for the handle—he gave it a sharp tug, but it wouldn't budge.

Hermione sighed, pointing her wand at the lock. "Honestly; what if we *had* decided to go back to Grimmauld Place and wait for you? *Alohomora*."

The bolt gave a soft *snick* as it disengaged, and the door eased open a crack. "I would have tried that," Harry protested. "You just didn't give me the chance."

"*That's* the security they've got down here?" Ron marvelled. "A room to make you dizzy

and a lock that can be busted by a Hogwarts first-year?”

“If Malfoy’s really under stasis, they might not have felt stronger measures were necessary,” Hermione said.

“Let’s find out, then, shall we?” Harry placed one of Runcorn’s broad hands on the door, shoving it all the way open. “...Malfoy?” he called into the darkness.

There was no response, but he hadn’t really been expecting one, and he stepped inside with his wand at the ready. Once over the threshold, the low flames flickering inside the lamps on the wall flared brighter, casting the cell into sharp relief.

It was nowhere near the size of the chamber they’d kept Malfoy’s dragon in up on Level 4; presumably now that he was human-sized—and unconscious—he’d been housed in far meaner estate. It was no larger than Aunt Petunia’s sitting room and devoid of any furnishings aside from a cracked mirror hanging on the wall over a (thankfully empty) metal toilet pan and a low-set narrow bed shoved against the far wall, atop which lay Draco Malfoy, sound asleep.

“...He looks a little dead,” Ron whispered, and he wasn’t wrong. Malfoy looked *really* dead, actually, between his sunken cheeks and dark bags under his eyes and the ghostly pallor to his skin that said he hadn’t seen daylight in months. His body looked distressingly gaunt under the thin shift he wore, and a quick glance around the cell told Harry that everything Malfoy had to his name right now, he was wearing. God, he didn’t even have *shoes*.

Harry drew closer, nose wrinkling at the musty scent that seemed to permeate the cell. What if Malfoy *was* dead? It was hard to tell if he was even breathing in this light. He stopped at the foot of the bed, staring. Malfoy’s lips had lost their colour, and his hair was lank and dull. Didn’t your lips go blue after death? Or was that just if you’d frozen?

He glanced to Hermione. “Erm, don’t suppose you know how to break a stasis spell?”

She scoffed, then rolled her eyes. “All the way down here, with our covers blown at *any*

moment, and you didn't even consider how to—" She shook her head in exasperation, pointing her wand at Malfoy's prone form. "*Rennerivate!*" Harry watched carefully for signs of stirring—but nothing happened. Hermione frowned, puzzled. "...*Finite incantatem.*"

Still nothing, and Ron threw his hands up. "Well, we tried! Now can we go?"

Harry felt his blood racing, adrenaline and fear and frustration all screaming through his veins in a heady drug. He hadn't come this far, gotten this close, to be undone by a standard-issue stasis spell. He lunged for Malfoy, grabbing him by the shoulders to give a shake; if he had to, he was prepared to just toss him over Runcorn's rather broad back and carry him out. He couldn't have weighed more than seven stone soaking wet in this state, so it wouldn't be a great challenge.

But as soon as Harry made contact, fingers curling around Malfoy's knobby shoulders, he leapt awake with a shout and scrambled back on the bed until he came up against the cold stone wall. Harry recoiled as if he'd been struck, hands coming up defensively, but Malfoy looked to be in no position to attack, with his knees drawn up to his chest and wide, suspicious eyes sweeping the room. None of them made a sound, no sudden movements, wary of triggering a transformation, which would be a disaster for any of a half dozen reasons just at this moment.

But then another heartbeat passed, and some of the tension eased as Malfoy narrowed his eyes in confusion. "...*Potter?*" he rasped.

Harry straightened, arms falling back to his sides, and he glanced down at himself, a bit taken aback. He was certain he had more time on the Polyjuice; was he already starting to show? He looked back to Malfoy, frowning. "I—yeah... How did you know?"

Malfoy's lip curled as he raked Harry with a judging gaze. "Salazar's balls, you look hideous. Clearly there remained depths of grotesqueness you'd yet to plumb." His eyes then flicked over to Ron and Hermione, and the tension crept back into his shoulders. "Who the fuck are they?"

“Ron and Hermione,” Harry said. “I’m—we’re here to break you out. If you want to leave.”

“‘No thanks’ is a perfectly viable option, just so we’re clear,” Ron called. “And make it snappy.”

“Break me...?” Malfoy looked around the cell, eyes running over the stonework and lamps and even the toilet pan and cracked mirror, as if he were taking it in for the first time. He blinked, shaking his head. “*What?*”

“Oh for crying out—he doesn’t even know his own name!” Ron grabbed the handle of the door, jerking it open. “Just Stun him and toss him over a shoulder if you’re bent on getting him out. We don’t have time for—”

“I know who I am, Weasley!” Malfoy snapped, gingerly unfolding himself and easing onto his feet. He tottered unsteadily, and it struck Harry that he likely hadn’t used his limbs for months now—could he run, if pressed to do so? Could he even *stand*? This had been a mistake, a *huge* mistake— “My location escapes me at the moment, though. Where the fuck am I? Is this your doing?” Malfoy directed his questions to Harry, suspicion still hanging like a dark cloud over his brow.

“The Ministry of Magic; you were—”

“The *Ministry*? How did you get in here? How did you even find me?”

“Does it really matter? We don’t exactly have time to dawdle—are you coming or not?” He watched Malfoy, astounded the git was actually *hesitating*, as if Harry hadn’t just asked him a rhetorical question. He ground his teeth in irritation. “It’s a simple question, Malfoy; I don’t need ten inches from you on it! You either come with us, or you stay here, trapped in a place that’s now overrun by Death Eaters, who I’m *guessing* don’t yet realise you’re down here. Once they do suss out where Malfoy the Lesser has been all these months and why, though, I’m willing to bet they’ll capitalise on your scaly little problem and use you to wreak havoc on the populace at large.” Malfoy’s eyes flashed, and Harry could see a storm brewing within. “I don’t know if you even remember what

you said in there—”

“I remember,” Malfoy bit out. “I *remember*.”

“Changed your mind, then? Don’t care if you lose yourself again, maybe even get turned on your own parents?”

Ron growled. “If he has to think *that* long about it, I say we rescind the offer.”

“I’m *obviously* coming, you buffoon!” Malfoy said, gnawing on his thumb. “I’m only trying to do what you’ve clearly *not* done and think of how you’re going to possibly escape a Ministry of Magic you’ve just admitted is no longer your own.”

“Can we maybe think about this *while we move*, in that case?” Hermione asked, inclining her head.

That suited Harry just fine, and after Hermione Summoned a pair of Ron’s trainers and an extra robe from her beaded bag for Malfoy to wear, they were racing back along the corridor to the circular room. Well, perhaps ‘racing’ was being too generous. Malfoy was, as Harry had feared, slow on his feet, and he somehow managed to stumble over every single crack and piece of broken tile in the Department of Mysteries. Harry was just about to offer to carry him, as he was starting to lag dangerously, when Hermione whirled around and pointed her wand at Malfoy’s legs, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like a Trip Jinx.

“What was that? What did you do to him?” Harry asked, a bit defensive; he knew neither she nor Ron approved of this side-mission, but there was no sense in making things *worse* when they were all trying to escape.

She gave him an exasperated look. “Trip Jinx counter, Harry, honestly!” She addressed Malfoy here, explaining, “I thought it might make you steadier on your feet, even though you haven’t been Jinxed.”

“Today, people!” Ron called from ahead, already around the corner and back in the hallway connecting the Blocks.

How long had they been down here? Had the Muggleborns made it to safety by now? Were the Floos being sealed off and the wards expanded to block Apparition anywhere within a hundred metres of the Ministry?

Ron reached the door leading back into the entrance room first, waving them through. Once it clicked shut behind them, though, the room whirred to life, walls spinning so fast Harry's robes whipped up around his knees.

Malfoy gave a sharp jolt of surprise, leaning into Harry as the room spun. "What the fuck is going on?"

"It's meant to disorient," Harry explained, taking a step back and smoothing down his robes. "So you can't tell which door you entered by or which you're meant to head through in order to reach your destination." He held out his palm, setting his wand flat in it and whispering the *Point Me* spell.

Hermione gave a delighted gasp when Harry's wand stopped spinning, pointing at true north. "The room's a circle, of course! Block 277—two hundred and seventy-seven degrees!" She followed the tip of Harry's wand to the door at which it was pointing. "...Is that the exit, then?"

"One way to find out," Harry said, striding forward and yanking on the door—beyond which lay a long, dark corridor with the gleaming golden grilles of the lift at the end.

"Thank Merlin...!" Ron breathed, racing forward, and Harry and Hermione were tight on his heels, with Malfoy bringing up the rear at a steadier but still sedate pace. Ron mashed the button to summon the lift, and by the time the others had caught up, it had arrived, the gates clattering open to let them board.

"All right," Hermione said, taking a bracing breath as they piled on. Harry mashed the button for the Atrium, and up they climbed. "If the Floos haven't been sealed, we should go back the way we came, I think—there were departure grates on the opposite side of the Atrium, as I recall. Malfoy should stick between us; there's always the chance someone could spot him." She tapped her chin, lower lip drawn between her teeth. "I

wonder if I should turn his hair—”

Too late, though; the lift shuddered to a halt, the golden gates drawing back and the witch’s cool disembodied voice announcing, “*Level 8, Atrium.*”

Harry knew at once that they were in rather deep. The Atrium was even more chaotic now than it had been when they’d arrived, with people racing from fireplace to fireplace, sealing them off, orders bellowed here and there to *Keep an eye out! Check all identification!*

Ron cursed softly under his breath, and as a group they all pressed together with Malfoy squeezed between them. Harry still had his Invisibility Cloak tucked into Runcorn’s robes, but he didn’t trust Malfoy not to nick it, for one, and it was more difficult to make a quick escape under it for another.

The Ministry employees lined up to board the lifts to the upper levels were looking around with worried expressions, and every lift that left the Atrium was packed to the gills now as people pushed and shoved to flee the chaos that had descended upon Level 8.

“Reckon we should head back upstairs?” Ron asked under his breath, lips barely moving and words slipping out of the corner of his mouth. “We can at least lose ourselves in the shuffle, maybe? Find a loo and work some magic on your little pet project so it’s not so obvious we’re trying to sneak a Death Eater out of the Ministry of Magic?”

“Give me a wand,” Malfoy hissed, holding out his hand to Harry.

“What?” Harry scoffed. “Hell no; you’re barking if you think—”

“*Give. Me. A wand.*” Malfoy grit out, grey eyes gone almost white with fear, and pressed up close like this, Harry caught him trembling, though that might have been his legs nearly giving out after months of disuse. “Merlin knows where mine is—just *give* me one and play along.”

Ron caught Harry’s eye, giving a subtle, sharp shake of his head. Reg Cattermole’s bushy

moustache looked like it was about to curl in on itself.

Malfoy watched the exchange and leaned in closer; he was tall, but Runcorn was a giant, and Malfoy barely clipped his chin. “You don’t have a whole lot of options, Potter. If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead. Or don’t *you* remember what I said in there?” He had his palm open, waiting.

‘He just wants to save his parents,’ Harry reminded himself—that much he believed. Granted, there were a lot of ways Malfoy could save them *and* betray Harry and Hermione and Ron, but it was riskier for Malfoy to work with Voldemort than to escape on his own. Plus, he’d made much ado about only relying on himself, leading Harry to believe that if he was going to betray them, it wouldn’t be to Voldemort. Which was small comfort, but still a comfort.

Harry looked to Hermione, whose eyes bugged at the implied suggestion she give up her wand. “Excuse me—?” But Malfoy had already snatched her wand from her, quicker than any *Expelliarmus*, and then grabbed her wrist to drag her roughly from their little group. She was incensed, raising her free hand to rake him with Mafalda’s bitten-down nails. “Get your hands *off me* you cretinous little—”

Malfoy jabbed the tip of Hermione’s wand into her throat, stabbing her windpipe viciously. “Quit your *screeching*. Let’s not make a scene just yet, shall we, Granger?” He nodded to Harry. “Grab Weasley, and for Salazar’s sake, make it look *convincing*—wipe that doltish look off your face, anyone could peg you for Harry Potter that way!”

Harry felt his cheeks heat and knew he was one more cutting insult away from slapping Malfoy with a Stinging Hex and making a break for it. He’d done *more* than enough for the wanker already—if Malfoy couldn’t find it in him to not be achingly horrid for five fucking minutes, he could well stay behind and chat up his old cronies.

Hermione was giving him a *look* though that told him to rein in his temper, that now was *not* the moment to put Malfoy in his place. Really, they ought to have just left him where he was, but Harry had gone off half-cocked as usual, so here they were. He would have to swallow Malfoy’s insipid remarks and wait until they’d escaped with their lives to

unload on the prick.

Malfoy seemed utterly oblivious to just how close he'd come to getting blasted into smithereens, casually flicking his eyes around the Atrium, where the last of the Floos were now being sealed off, each grate staffed by an attendant barking at frustrated Ministry-goers to stand back and wait their turn. "We need to get to an Apparition point—that'll be the quickest way out, and the most difficult for anyone to track."

"Fantastic idea," Harry muttered, pinching the sleeve of Ron's robes and drawing him closer, wand at the ready. "Except there *are* no Apparition points. They've warded most of the Atrium against Apparition, and the Floos are restricted to the higher-ups aside from those that've been requisitioned for commuters—which are now sealed, as you can see." He sighed, frustration and desperation swirling in his gut. "We'll have to try and blend into the crowd of commuters. They still don't know *who* they're looking for; if we can just stall—"

"We *can't*, Harry," Hermione whispered. "We've been here for nearly forty-five minutes; we'll be lucky to get another five out of the dose we took!" She glanced fearfully at the prowling Ministry workers stalking the crowds. "All they have to do is wait us out, and they know it."

Malfoy took a bracing breath. "You said they've warded *most* of the Atrium—but if they're smart, they'll have set up an unwarded zone so they can sneak friendlies into and out of the Ministry." His eyes drifted to a shop nestled in a corner near the Floos reserved for Ministry officials. The signage was covered with a tarp, and its windows were darkened, shades drawn, with a large *CLOSED* placard hung on the door. "...What's in there?"

"Used to be Ministry Munchies," Ron said. "They expanded their property a year or so ago. I guess business slowed, so they closed up shop."

"Closed up *when*, exactly?"

Ron frowned in thought. "...Few months back, Dad said. He was teed-off about it, cause

they'd just started selling these cheese and bacon pastry wraps he was partial to." His eyes bugged, and he looked to Harry. "You don't think...?"

"No, Potter never thinks," Malfoy muttered, jerking Hermione with him as he set off for the Ministry Munchies shop with a confident stride. "Step lively, everyone."

With a silent apology, Harry grabbed Ron by the scruff of his robes, dragging him along with Harry's wand pressed to his temple in feigned threat. They made it halfway across the Atrium, past the shadow of the hideous sculpture dominating the centre walk, before someone noticed them.

"Runcorn? And—blimey, *Malfoy?*" Malfoy froze as a man Harry didn't recognise—but who clearly recognised *them*—wandered over with a slouching gait to place himself directly between the four of them and Ministry Munchies. "I thought you was dead."

"What?" Malfoy scoffed cruelly, voice dripping with disdain. "Travers, you *dolt*, I just checked in with Snape this morning. You know full well I've been cataloguing the contents of the Department of Mysteries for our master."

Harry only noticed because he'd had one eye trained at all times on Malfoy since they'd found him in holding cell 3B, but Malfoy was waving Hermione's wand in a subtle, circular gesture and keeping firm eye contact with Travers. If he hadn't known better, Harry might have said Malfoy was working some complicated Obliviation right under everyone's noses. Whatever it was, it seemed to be working, as Travers apparently didn't notice the sad state of Malfoy's too-big robes and shoes and the fact that he looked like a freshly resurrected scarecrow.

"Ah, right, right..." Travers's eye drifted to Hermione, who was struggling valiantly in Malfoy's iron grip and trying to mash his toes with Mafalda's sensible heels. "And who've we got here?" He smiled slyly at Malfoy. "Bit old for you, son."

Malfoy's practised sneer hadn't changed at all since that meeting on the moor. "Just a couple of snoops Runcorn and I caught sticking their noses where they didn't belong." He swept a bored look over Ron's Reg Cattermole. "I'm certain these aren't even their real

faces.” Hermione kicked his shin, and he whipped her wand around to cane her temple smartly, stabbing her neck with the tip. “I intend to give our master the pleasure of finding out just why they were sniffing around the Hall of Prophecy. Stand aside.”

Travers didn’t move, but he also didn’t try to stop Malfoy as he shouldered past, Harry tight on his heels with Ron scrambling to keep up on Reg’s stubby legs. He had all of five paces to think that they *might actually manage this*.

Five paces only, though, for either Malfoy wasn’t as good at nonverbal spells as he might have hoped, or his casting had been hampered by using a wand that wasn’t his own, as the Obliviate started to crumble. “But...no, the Malfoy boy’s dead... He’s...” Travers started, features scrunching up as the hastily cast memory modification charm scrambled his thoughts.

Then, from across the Atrium near the lifts, an incensed voice raged, “STOP THEM!” as Yaxley clambered from the lift, tearing towards them with his wand drawn. “GET THEM! INTRUDERS IN THE MINISTRY! *TRAVERS!*”

“Fuck!” Harry spat, shoving Ron before him as Travers shook his head, blinking at them with a squinty-eyed gaze. “Go—go! Inside, *NOW!*”

They tore off at break-neck speed, no more sneaking about. “*Expulso!*” Malfoy shouted, slashing Hermione’s wand before him, and the door to Ministry Munchies splintered into wooden shrapnel, leaving behind a gaping hole in the shopfront.

As soon as he had one foot over the threshold, Harry looped his arm through Ron’s, reaching for Hermione’s hand with his other and bringing his arm up around Malfoy in the process. He felt Hermione turn on the spot, and he clenched his eyes shut tight, praying they’d breached the wards.

Darkness pressed in on all sides, choking and crushing as usual, but something felt... wrong. *Off*, and oh shit, they’d been Splinched, he knew they had. Kreacher was going to be picking pieces of them off Number 12’s front step. Hermione’s hand seemed to be sliding from his grip, and Malfoy had his fingers biting into the heavy folds of Harry’s

collar, practically choking him—or maybe he *was* choking him, because Harry couldn't breathe, felt like he was going to suffocate as everything crushed in around him. His vision faded, darkening, until all he remained conscious of were Ron's arm looped firmly through his and Hermione's fingers threaded between his own and Malfoy's vice-like grip clinging tight. All three felt like they were slowly slipping away, a heartbeat from spinning off into nothingness—

And then his vision returned in a flash—and there was Number 12 with its polished silver serpent door-knocker baring its fangs at him. Harry reached out, fingers splayed—but then there was another brilliant flash and a violet after-image he couldn't blink away.

Hermione's hand was suddenly crushing his own in her grip, and everything blipped out to black.

The Tagalong

After what felt like ages had passed, Harry at last roused to consciousness, eyes fluttering open. He wracked his mind, piecing through his most recent memories to try and determine precisely how he'd wound up face-down in a pile of dead leaves, twigs digging into him and the loamy scent of a late-summer forest clogging up his nose.

Had he breathed recently? When had he last drawn breath? It had felt like the Apparition had gone on forever, that much he recalled, and he wasn't honestly certain his lungs hadn't been crushed like a pork-chop beneath Aunt Petunia's meat tenderiser. He inhaled, just to see if he could, and was relieved to note that everything seemed to still be in working order.

With oxygen once again coursing through his veins, he rolled over with a groan—and then promptly shut his eyes fast as he was met with the glare of bright, dappled light streaming down from overhead. He took a moment to collect himself, waiting for his eyes to adjust, then chanced another look—and found that the blinding light above him was actually sunlight. It was midday, and the sun was peeking through the leafy canopy overhead, which rustled in quiet greeting as a stray breeze wafted through. Not the Ministry, then, and decidedly not Grimmauld Place, either.

Something twitched in his peripheral vision, and he craned his neck, fingers curling tight around what was either his wand or a bog-standard stick—he'd find out soon—just in case he was about to find himself nose-to-nose with a squirrel or some other feral woodland creature ready to scratch his eyes out.

But it was just Ron's foot.

He turned his head the other way, and there was Hermione, the last vestiges of Mafalda Hopkirk sloughing away, with—no, he hadn't dreamt it, they really *had* sprung him from the bowels of the Ministry—Malfoy sprawled just beyond her.

With a gargantuan effort, he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, not quite trusting anything more adventurous until his head had stopped spinning, and tried to gather his bearings. The last thing he remembered was the Ministry, with Yaxley and a befuddled Travers chasing them, the ruined remains of the front door of Ministry Munchies, Mrs. Cattermole and the Dementors and Umbridge and—

And the locket. Slytherin's locket—they still had it, didn't they? He prayed Hermione's beaded bag hadn't gone flying into the aether through which wizards travelled when they Apparated. Wouldn't that be just their luck, the locket spinning off somewhere over Gloucester while they landed...

Where *were* they? Harry frowned, running a hand through his hair and sending leaves fluttering to the ground. He'd thought, for half a heartbeat, that maybe they'd managed to Apparate into the Forbidden Forest, it being the only woodsy sort of place he was remotely familiar with, but Hermione would never have taken them to so dangerous a location as Hogwarts for one, not with all that was going on, and for another, this place was...too cheery. The trees were too young and too sparse, and it somehow smelled wrong, too *modern*. He hadn't thought a forest could *smell* 'Muggle', but this one did. Maybe it was the lack of unicorn droppings and centaur shit.

Ron gave a groan, garbled and pained, and drew his legs up into a foetal position as he whimpered pitifully.

"All right there, mate?" Harry asked, then turned to Hermione as she clambered to her feet, snatching up her wand again and brushing leaves from her robes. Malfoy too was stirring, grimacing and rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes. "Any idea where we are?" Harry asked Hermione.

She picked a leaf from her hair, which was a rather fetching combination of grey and brown now as Mafalda's features melted away. "We should be—" Her words caught in her throat, eyes bugging, and she practically leapt over Harry with a cry. "*Ron!*"

Harry's head whipped back around, and he actually *looked* at Ron this time, looked at how he was doubled over, how his entire left side was drenched in gore, Reg

Cattermole's navy robes black with blood. Ron's face, pale on the usual, had taken on an unnatural sickly grey pallor now, and even his freckles, revealing themselves steadily as the Polyjuice faded away, looked muted.

Harry scrambled to his feet, feeling his gorge rise as he did so, and nearly sank back onto his knees with light-headedness. "What—what's wrong with him?"

"Never seen someone Splinched, Potter?" said Malfoy, blinking owlishly in the light, and his words sounded like they ought to have been delivered with a lot more acid instead of the delicate rasp of someone trying to avoid sicking up.

"No..." Harry answered, though he supposed the question had been rhetorical. It was all he could do, just standing there gawping as Hermione threw herself into—whatever you did to fix someone who'd been Splinched. He'd always imagined Splinching might be *funny*, like winding up with an ear where your nose should be or losing your big toe over the Thames and some Ministry sorts having to fish it out for you so the Healers could re-attach it. This, though...

He flinched as Hermione ran her wand along the inside of Ron's blood-soaked arm, tearing the fabric apart, and Harry had to bring his hand to his mouth as he now saw there was a great *chunk* of Ron's arm missing. Just gone, like something had taken a clean bite out of it.

"Harry—" Hermione snapped her fingers, for his attention. "Get the dittany from my bag—there should be a bottle, an amber one."

"Right—no, I'll..." He sped over to where she had landed, snatching up the tiny beaded bag and yanking on the cinch to open it. He thrust a hand inside, feeling around for anything that felt bottle-shaped—but all that presented itself to him were books and fabric and rubber shoe-soles.

"*Quickly!*" she cried, glancing up from her task to impress her words upon him with a harried look.

“Oh for—” Malfoy huffed, evidently having found one of the sticks lying about and firmly shoved it up his arse. “You’re a pathetic excuse for a wizard, you realise?” He snatched Harry’s wand from his back pocket and pointed it into the depths of the magical bag. “*Accio dittany!*”

Out zipped a small brown bottle, landing cleanly in Malfoy’s hand. He checked the label, then tossed the bottle flippantly to Hermione. “Magic’s wasted on you,” Malfoy said, shoving Harry’s wand back at him, hilt-first.

Harry didn’t quite know what had just happened, though he was sure he ought to be offended. He would have to make time for that later, though, because Ron had collapsed, still, against the leaf litter, and his heart leapt into his throat.

“It’s fine—he’s just fainted,” Hermione said when she caught Harry staring; while all traces of Mafalda had left her face by now, her roots still showed a bit of grey, and her complexion was a sickly hue that suggested she too might faint at any moment. She had the dittany in her hands and was trying to get a grip on the cork, unsuccessfully. “God, my hands are shaking—” she said with a self-deprecating chuckle, and Harry gently took the bottle from her.

Quietly, he wrenched the stopper free, passing it back. Hermione closed her eyes and took a single, deep breath to steady herself, then tipped the bottle carefully over Ron’s wound, sprinkling three drops before stoppering it again. A vile-smelling smoke that burned the eyes curled in the sunlight streaming through the trees. When it finally cleared, Harry could see that the bleeding had actually stopped, and the wound no longer looked fresh. The divot in Ron’s arm missing flesh had now been covered in a latticework of new, delicate skin, and it looked several days healed.

“Wow...” was all he could say, and Malfoy snorted, because of course he had remarks ready for any occasion.

“As many times as you’ve been laid up in the Hospital Wing, and you’re still gawping? Such an easy sell...”

Harry turned on him; with Ron no longer knocking on Death's door, Harry was ready to have it out. But Malfoy had given him a several-step berth and was staring down at Ron with an unreadable look on his face, rubbing his chest absently.

"I think that ought to hold for now," Hermione said, rubbing at her eyes. "It's not much—but it's all I really feel safe attempting, especially out here in the open."

"Is there anything I could help with?" Harry asked; he would have volunteered Malfoy as well, were Malfoy not Malfoy. Knowing him, he'd probably do more harm than good if pressed to try and help Ron. He'd nearly killed Ron the once already; Harry wasn't going to let him try a second time. "I mean, I don't know any healing magic, really, but I could play a decent nurse, I think."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I...I mean, there are spells that could really put him to rights—but I'm not practised with them, and I wouldn't want to use Ron as a guinea pig." Oh. No, he supposed he could understand that. She pushed her hair back from her face, licking her lips nervously. "I could wind up putting him in an even more dire state than he already is."

Harry shook his head. "But...how did he get hurt? I mean—" Before Malfoy could deliver a cutting reminder that *He got Splinched you pea-brained dolt*, he amended, "How did we end up here, and with him Splinched?" Wherever 'here' was. "Weren't we heading back to—to Grimmauld Place?" His voice caught on *Grimmauld Place*, hesitating to confirm in front of Malfoy what so many Death Eaters clearly already suspected, but well, they weren't there *now*, so what did it matter if Malfoy somehow managed to carry back tales to his master?

Hermione's fingers clenched in the folds of her robes, and she took a deep breath, a soft hitch escaping her throat. "I...I meant to take us back there, but..." She shook her head. "I don't think we can do that now. Not anymore."

"What? What do you mean we can't go back? Could you not manage the Apparition with four people? If we need to, we can go in pairs—"

“That’s not it.” Her head hung low, and her shoulders tensed. “When we Disapparated from the Ministry, Travers tackled us, and he managed to grab hold of my robe. I tried to kick him off, but I was too focused on the Apparition, and he was hanging on for dear life.” She looked up, eyes shining with unshed tears. “He came back with us. Back to Grimmauld Place—I *brought* him there.” She hastened to add, “A-and he must’ve thought that was our destination—I mean, it *was*—so he loosened his grip and I finally managed to shake him, but we couldn’t stay there, not now I’d brought a Death Eater with us, so I chose a new destination and brought us here instead.”

Harry understood all the words she was saying, but in sequence, they just didn’t make sense. Maybe he’d Splinched something in his head—did that happen? “You...brought Travers to Grimmauld Place? He’s *at Grimmauld Place*?”

She nodded, her face an ugly crumpled mass of emotion. “When I Apparated us back, of course I took us inside the Fidelius, so when I shook him, we’d already passed inside the wards! With Dumbledore gone, that makes us all Secret Keepers, so...so I’ve as good as given him permission to move himself and any Death Eaters he pleases into the sitting room!”

And oh. *Oh*, she was right. Any curses or jinxes Moody might have set up would have been keyed to Snape, to allow other Order members to come and go as they pleased. There was a chance Moody had tied the spells to the Dark Mark, but that was all it was: a chance. They couldn’t go back there now, not without risking landing in the middle of dinner with Death Eaters.

It was curious. The thought they couldn’t go back—not just to a safe haven but to Grimmauld Place specifically—weighed on him, his spirits falling. It’d been so appallingly gloomy once upon a time (still was in many respects, admittedly), but of late, it’d been... he dared to say, almost *homey*. Between the three of them finally living under one roof, spending as much time together as they liked, with hot meals prepared morning, noon, and night by an elf who was in finer spirits now than he’d ever been before...yeah, Harry’d definitely endured worse. Shit, he was going to miss it, he really was.

They hadn't had much going for them, but they'd had each other, and a roof over their heads, and the imagined safety of four walls between themselves and the war brewing right outside. Now...now they were exposed, well and truly on their own.

Hermione must have seen all these thoughts writ large on Harry's features, for she wailed, "I'm sorry, Harry! Truly, I am! I didn't realise he'd grabbed on until it was too late!"

He quickly waved her off, not least of all because he had no idea where they were and whether her crying might attract attention, Muggle or otherwise. "Hey, now. C'mon, don't be ridiculous, of course it wasn't your fault. It's...well, if anything, it was mine..." He darted a guilty glance at Malfoy, who was pretending to be fascinated by the early autumn foliage. If he hadn't insisted they try and save Malfoy's sorry arse, if he hadn't wasted all their time breaking out someone who was locked up for damn good reason and who seemed disinclined to so much as say *thanks*, Ron wouldn't be sitting here half-dead, and Kreacher wouldn't be preparing what would likely have been delicious steak and kidney pies that would now probably wind up down the gullets of Death Eaters.

If Hermione was thinking of offering similar reassurances that this wasn't Harry's fault either, such considerations were interrupted by Ron groaning and opening his eyes. Harry rushed to join Hermione at his side, sinking down to one knee and mopping Ron's sweaty forehead with the sleeve of his robes. Ron still had a troubling grey pallor to him, but if he was awake and talking, that had to be a good sign, right?

"Hey, you," Hermione whispered, giving one of his fingers a comforting squeeze. Ron curled them in response, albeit weakly. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, just peachy," he groaned, wincing as his efforts to sit up were stifled by his injured arm protesting. He lay back with a huff, helped by Hermione's hand on his chest reminding him to stay still. "Where are we? Doesn't look like Grimmauld Place, unless I Splinched my memories too..."

"...It's something of a long story," Hermione said, voice still small, "...But I accidentally Apparated a Death Eater inside the Fidelius, so I left him there and Apparated us

onward somewhere else.” She glanced around. “I was aiming for the woods near the site of the Quidditch World Cup a few years back—I’m not entirely sure if we made it or not, but I was hoping for somewhere away from Muggles, one of the last places anyone might be looking for Undesirables.”

Harry took a long look around the glade to which she’d brought them, realising it did seem just a bit familiar, now that he thought about it. It certainly looked like they were alone—though Tottenham Court Road had seemed just as devoid of anyone who might recognise them, too, and how long had it taken for the Death Eaters to find them? Harry’s theory that Malfoy might have been helping them track him didn’t seem to hold much water now, but that just meant they had even *less* of a clue as to how Voldemort had managed to be nipping right at their heels most every step of their journey so far.

Still—would Malfoy know? He’d claimed he’d been given his mission to kill Dumbledore last year, suggesting he’d been cowering under Voldemort’s thumb for the better part of a year. He might have heard something, so they ought to ask, even if they’d only be encouraged to go fuck themselves.

Malfoy was pacing near a copse of aspens, arms crossed over his chest and looking irritated and harried and not a little bit suspicious.

“...Are we staying here, then?” Ron asked, though his gaze was fixed on Malfoy, and Harry could tell, by the look on Ron’s face, that he was thinking much along the same lines as Harry. The Death Eaters might be pinpointing their location even as they spoke, and Malfoy’s presence was unlikely to help the matter.

But Ron was in no condition to Apparate, still deathly pale and laid flat-out on his back, unable to move. Hermione gave a little shake of her head when Harry looked to her for an opinion, and he sighed. “...I think we should stay put for the night, at least. They got the drop on us last time and we still managed to fend them off. I reckon if they somehow track us down again, we can take them.” Of course, last time they’d been three able-bodied wizards against two, and now they were two able-bodied wizards and a severely injured third and a wandless fourth against who knew how many Death Eaters—or

Voldemort himself. The idea of giving Malfoy back his wand was, of course, right out.

Hermione's strained expression eased, relief washing over, and she sprang to her feet. "Right, I'll get straight to work."

"Wh—straight to work at what?" Ron asked, clearly starting to get used to being hovered over worryingly.

"Well, if we're going to be staying here, I don't want us sitting around unprotected. I'm going to set up a few enchantments to hide our whereabouts—we can't be too careful, now that we're outside a Fidelius." She raised her wand and used it to clear a wide area of leaves and debris, marking out a crude circle with Harry, Ron, and Malfoy at its centre. She began walking the perimeter, muttering what sounded like protective incantations under her breath, and Harry caught shifting disturbances in the air as her wand passed, like the mirages cast on a hot summer's day.

"*Salvio hexia...Protego totalum...Repello Muggletum...Muffliato...*" She glanced back at Harry, brows raised. "Don't stand there watching me—make yourself useful." She nodded to her bag. "Get out the tent, Harry—and have Malfoy help you set it up..."

"Tent?" Harry asked, as Malfoy sputtered indignantly, "*Me?*"

"In the bag! And yes, *you.*"

Well there was no need to be *short*. He was just surprised she'd thought to bring along a tent. Hermione really *had* prepared for every eventuality, it seemed, including them having to abandon their friends and families and rough it for who knew how long.

He shook his head, impressed, and snatched up the beaded bag where Malfoy had dropped it. He peered inside, hoping nothing had been broken in the commotion—when Malfoy rounded on him, unaccountably intense.

"I'm not staying here, Potter."

Harry leaned backwards, as Malfoy had laid claim to a healthy portion of Harry's

personal space. “Uh, yeah you are—not my first choice, believe me, but you’re not going anywhere, sorry.” Malfoy’s eyes flashed, and Harry tightened his grip on his wand in threat. He didn’t want to have to send Malfoy into a tree (all right, that was kind of a lie), but he was prepared to do so if pushed.

Malfoy didn’t miss the gesture, eyes flicking down to the wand tip now aimed at his midsection, and he took a step back. “I can’t stay here—you can’t make me!” Harry opened his mouth to remind him that yes, they very much *could* make him, and Malfoy added with a petulant whine, “*Don’t* make me!”

Harry half expected him to stamp his foot and throw a tantrum, and he couldn’t resist the derisive little snort of disbelief. “We gave you the choice of coming with us or staying at the Ministry in your cosy little cell. You’ll play by our rules now and give us no backtalk.” Which was not entirely true, as Harry didn’t doubt there would be *plenty* of backtalk, but it was rather thrilling finally being in a position to show Malfoy his place without having to bend to school rules.

“I have to find my parents!” Malfoy brought a hand to his chest, grabbing the oversized robes and shaking them. “The entire point of doing *this* to myself, going against my explicit orders from a fucking *madman* and studying some of the most unnecessarily complicated magic we’ve managed to craft, was to save them!” He drew himself up, breathing hard now that he’d worked himself into a tizzy. “And if I have to go through you to get to them, don’t think I won’t.”

Harry squared himself; he didn’t have Runcorn’s bulk anymore, but he still had a bit of his confidence, and he grabbed at it like a life-preserver. Malfoy’s little fits weren’t going to work, not when they had so much bigger fish to fry right at the moment. “Like I said: you’ll play by *our* rules now. You’re stuck here, deal with it—and enough with the idle threats. You’ve never been intimidating, and you’re even less so now that you’ve got no wand.”

At the mention of his lack of a wand, Malfoy’s eyes went to the one in Harry’s hand—and then he was on Harry, quicksilver fast, sending him to the ground with a sweep of his

legs and grappling for his wand.

“*Harry!*” Hermione shrieked, rushing over in a flurry. She grabbed Malfoy’s arm, but he shoved her away with an inhuman growl, sending her stumbling into a tree trunk.

Harry used the distraction to work a knee between himself and Malfoy, bringing it up into the exposed belly before delivering a sharp kick.

Malfoy roared in pain, staggering backwards—and the noise sent a flock of birds that had been roosting in the canopy above fluttering in fright. It sounded disturbingly animal, and a ripple of fear echoed through Harry as he watched, helpless, as Malfoy’s back arched into a sharp, sinuous curve, shoulders bulging to fill out the too-big robe and lips pulling back over his skull like a deathhead. He toppled forwards onto hands and knees, his fingertips curving and splaying into talon-like claws that tore furrows into the soft, loamy soil.

“...*Shit,*” Harry hissed, panic flooding his brain. This wasn’t happening—it *couldn’t* be happening. If Malfoy transformed here, there was no telling what might happen. Had he shifted since Harry had put him back to rights back in July? Could he control it right now? Harry didn’t want to think about what might happen if Malfoy lost himself again—he’d just be a wild, rogue dragon terrorising the British countryside. Bragge had mentioned it had taken all of the Hogwarts staff to bring Malfoy down before, so they had no hope of subduing him now it was just the three (*two*) of them.

Hermione was groping in the leaf litter for her wand, one hand rubbing at a goose egg on her head, and Ron’s face was contorted in pain, as he shifted around and tried to tug his wand free from his back pocket. They were three barely-of-age wizards, alone with but a handful of offensive spells in their collective repertoires, facing down a *dragon*, and wouldn’t that just make a perfect picture for the history books? Voldemort would be furious, with both the wizards he’d wanted to off himself undone by the addled thrashing of a pinch-faced prig in Animagus transformation.

But then, the transformation seemed to slow, and then to reverse, with Malfoy’s back straightening again and his shoulders deflating like popped balloons. The skin, stretched

taut over Malfoy's skull, loosened and slid back into place, leaving only a trickle of blood at Malfoy's lips as evidence anything of note had happened.

Malfoy was still resting on all fours, back heaving with deep, heavy breaths, and his perfectly normal-sized hands with perfectly normal-sized nails were crushing dead leaves in his grip. He roared again, another growl of pain and bone-deep frustration, but it was blessedly human in timbre and didn't rattle the spine with foreboding like the last one had.

"*Fuck!*" Malfoy shouted, head thrown back in defeat. His voice was raspy and broken with a gravelly undertone, like he'd just swallowed a mouthful of red-hot coals.

He didn't look especially like he was about to rip out their throats, at least not with those stubby nails of his, so Harry took a few tentative steps forward, his arms held out to appear as non-threatening as possible.

"...You can't do that, Malfoy."

"Don't fucking lecture me." Malfoy had his eyes clenched shut, and he was still breathing heavily, tremors rippling down his body.

"No—I mean, you *can't* do that. Throw a punch if you're angry with me, but you can't do *that*." Malfoy needed to understand how things had to work now, that he couldn't throw his little tantrums like before, as evidently it triggered...whatever had just happened. He wished, not for the first time, he'd asked Bragge or at least Charlie more about this dragon Animagus business. It sounded a lot more serious than he'd been prepared to deal with. "If you lost control once, you might lose it again, and—"

"Did that *look* like control to you, four-eyes?" Malfoy snarled, gaze snapping to Harry's. Maybe it was the light, all the green and gold around them, but his eyes looked more stormy hazel going black than grey, and Harry imagined he heard warning klaxons blaring somewhere.

With Herculean effort, Malfoy pushed himself to his feet, Ron's oversized trainers

scrabbling for purchase on the slick detritus. He still looked frazzled, but he was taking long, measured breaths in a steady rhythm that Harry supposed might help calm him, like he'd seen pregnant women encouraged to do during labour. Once he finally managed to get his legs underneath himself, he tried to straighten up, shoulders thrown back and chin up—but Hermione's anti-Trip Jinx seemed to have worn off, for his arms began pinwheeling, and he nearly toppled forward like he'd just been hit with a Jelly-legs Jinx.

Harry instinctively rushed forward, crouching to slip a shoulder underneath one arm so Malfoy wouldn't faceplant, but he found himself violently rebuffed with a growled, "Don't *touch* me!"—which was rich, really, because as soon as Harry had drawn close enough, Malfoy's fingers had curled into the fabric of his robes, holding tight for support.

Malfoy was a cauldron of contradictions, and Harry had known him long enough to realise this wasn't something that could be entirely attributed to those wild instincts Bragge claimed were now lurking just under Malfoy's skin, ready to pounce on anyone foolish enough to let their guard down around him. Well, Harry had never had a problem remaining on guard when it came to Malfoy, so he doubted he'd find himself caught unawares again, now that he knew Malfoy's hold on his Animagus form was so tenuous.

Was this a common thing with Animagi, emotional outbursts sending them slipping into their other form? He'd never noticed it with Hermione, though she wasn't really all that prone to such displays. She did get tetchy around exam times, but Harry had always chalked that up to Hermione being Hermione. He tried to imagine James Potter, pissed off at the outcome of a Quidditch match, stalking the halls of Hogwarts with a pair of antlers sprouting from his temples.

It was an amusing thought; this business with Malfoy was anything *but*.

He allowed Malfoy a moment to collect himself, certain that bruising his pride—while entertaining—would not help matters. At length, Malfoy's grip on Harry's robes eased, and the bowstring tension across his shoulders relaxed, if only a hair. Harry swallowed, trying his luck again: "...I'm sorry, Malfoy. But you can't leave—we can't let you." And before Malfoy could snap or snarl or get worked up into a lather again, Harry hurried to

explain himself. “It’s dangerous for us right now, and...well, you’re a flight risk. No pun intended.” Malfoy didn’t seem inclined to laugh anyway, so Harry mostly just felt ridiculous. “You’re stuck with us for now, I’m afraid.”

“So out of one prison and into another, is it?” Malfoy muttered, voice soft and defeated. He sounded exhausted, the strain of fighting both Death Eaters and Harry and Hermione *and* his own body evidently having drained him.

Harry didn’t quite know how to respond to that, rhetorical though he knew the question to be. There was no denying it, really—Malfoy *was* effectively their prisoner. But it wasn’t as if they had any choice about it; if this had been, say, Luna they’d just rescued from the Ministry, there’d be no questioning her loyalties, and they might even invite her to help them in their search for Horcruxes should she feel so inclined. With Malfoy, it was growing all too clear that he’d do most anything to try and find his parents, up to and including ripping the throats out of classmates who’d risked their lives just so his sorry arse didn’t have to sit mouldering in a dank dungeon for the rest of his life.

“...Your mum’s fine. I’ve seen her—kind of.”

Malfoy’s brow lowered, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “...You *haven’t*.” It lacked much conviction, though, begging to be tested.

“I have. Believe me or don’t—but last I saw, she was alive. Granted it was a good month ago, and I’m sure you know as well as I what could happen in that span, given the current environment...” Of course, Malfoy had been locked in the Department of Mysteries for the past two months, so maybe he *didn’t* know. “But she was all right, as far as I could tell. Physically unharmed, at least.” He decided not to mention that she thought Malfoy was dead, as that would only get him worked up again, desperate to contact his parents and let them know he was alive. For someone who took so much pride in being a Slytherin, Malfoy seemed even less inclined to stop and strategise than *Harry* when it came to the matter of his folks.

Perhaps concluding that Harry wasn’t nearly devious enough to lie about this—a point on which he assumed correctly, if only because Hermione probably wouldn’t have let him

get away with such a cruel trick—Malfoy released a stuttering breath, one hand coming up to his mouth as he closed his eyes in relief. He then wiped his face and ran his fingers through his hair, shoving the lank, straw-stiff mess back from his face. He was in want of a long bath and a shearing spell, as the Unspeakables evidently hadn't felt the need to provide either to prisoners in stasis.

“And—my father?” Malfoy asked.

“...I'm not sure, sorry. I know that he broke out of Azkaban, along with a bunch of other Death Eaters, but beyond that...” He grimaced, knowing he didn't sound nearly as sincere in his reassurances as he had with Narcissa. It was difficult to muster much sympathy, especially concerning Lucius Malfoy, but he didn't want to seem an insensitive bastard. Malfoy's opinion of him was already low enough.

Malfoy just nodded, though. “Where did you see my mother, then? *When* did you see her? Who was she with?”

Those were dangerous questions, and Harry wasn't about to give Malfoy anything else to worry about. “It hardly matters, does it? You're not leaving, and I've just told you your parents are safe—”

“You said my *mother* is safe.”

“Well that's all I know, all right? And that's all you're getting out of us.” Harry could feel his temper rising, blood bubbling as only Malfoy and his lot could get it heated. He quietly but surely beat back the beast of his own curling inside his chest, just aching to get a piece of Malfoy. He closed his eyes, listening to the rustling leaves and faint birdsong in the distance. “Sorry, but that's how it's got to be. If there's opportunity to help your parents in the course of our...mission...then we'll try, but—they'll have to fend for themselves for now.” Struck by the curious urge to encourage Malfoy's hopes, he added, “Slytherins are wily and self-reliant, I hear. Surely they'll manage.”

Malfoy gave a derisive little snort. “Tell that to the better portion of the Death Eaters,” he said, and though the bitterness in his voice was thick as syrup, his breathing had at

last evened out, and his eyes had cleared, once more a sharp, calculating grey.

Harry doubted the matter was concluded, but Malfoy seemed content to set it aside for the moment; either that, or he was just too tired to keep up arguing. Harry met Hermione's eyes over Malfoy's hunched shoulders, giving her a subtle nod, and she rushed back over to Ron to check he hadn't torn his newly mended flesh whilst wriggling to get at his wand.

With a sigh, Harry marched back over to the beaded bag, snatching it up. He tugged the cinch open and pointed his wand into the depths, Summoning the tent Hermione has asked them to set up. Malfoy gave a soft little huff of disappointment, as if he'd been looking forward to deriding Harry for once again trying to fish the tent out blindly instead of using magic.

Harry wondered if the last person to use the tent simply hadn't been bothered to pack it away properly, for what came zipping out in response to Harry's Summoning Charm was little more than a tangled mass of canvas, poles, ropes, and pegs. He frowned at what looked like a rather involved project.

"...Where on earth did you *get* this?" The material was the same drab mustard colour as the tent he'd shared with the Weasleys during the Quidditch World Cup, and he leaned forward and gave a tentative sniff—the unmistakable stench of cat piss. "Hold up, I thought Ron's dad borrowed this from that Perkins bloke at the Ministry?"

Having seen to Ron's comfort for the moment, Hermione was now back to placing security charms around their site, waving her wand in complicated movements that Harry's eyes couldn't even follow. "Well, evidently his health's been in decline, so he let Mr. Weasley keep it after the Cup. Then Ron, er, borrowed it for me." She paused laying down charms to turn and point her wand at the canvas and poles. "*Erecto!*" In short order, all of the bits and bobs and fabric had neatly arranged themselves into an A-frame, with several lengths of rope tying themselves off to pegs that burrowed into the ground.

Hermione nodded, satisfied, and returned to her spellwork. "And finally, *Cave*

inimicum!” She dared a glance over her shoulder at Malfoy, frowning. “...Damn.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“That one was to hide you from enemies; I was hoping it might eject him outright.” She shrugged. “Was worth a shot. All right, I suppose that will have to do for now. There’s a few more I’d like to lay down to keep anyone from noticing us even if they’re looking right at us, but I think that can wait until we’ve gotten Ron settled in the tent.”

“You sure we’re all right, then?” Harry glanced around; he didn’t notice anything all that different, though he supposed they were inside whatever wards Hermione might have set.

“Like I said, for now. I prioritised Alarm Charms to let us know if anyone comes within a hundred feet of us. There’s Muggle-repelling Charms as well, though of course that won’t deter Vol—”

“Oh, c’mon!” Ron moaned, grunting in pain as he struggled to sit up. “You *have* to say his name?” Hermione rushed over, laying a supporting hand at his back and urging him not to strain himself. “Just—after everything today, can we maybe not tempt fate? Feels like every time we say that name, something terrible happens...”

Hermione’s brows knit. “...We used it all the time at Grimmauld Place, though.”

“Yeah, and this *isn’t* Grimmauld Place, shocked as I am to actually miss it.” Hermione’s face fell, and Ron winced, biting his lip. “...Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that—just, can we call him You-Know-Who, if we’ve *gotta* use his name?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes, releasing a derisive huff of air through his nose, and Harry didn’t entirely blame him, speaking up, “I doubt we’d be inviting any more trouble on ourselves by speaking about him like he’s a man and not a myth. Dumbledore always said—”

“Dumbledore said lots of stuff, Harry,” Ron said, exhaustion in his voice. “And what good did it do him in the end?” Malfoy, predictably, had no smart remarks or derisive

gestures to make on that point. “Can we just not talk about him at all, in that case?”

Harry wanted to argue the point further, certain it would do them no good to start this hunt too scared and paranoid to even say the name of the man they were trying to destroy, but Hermione just pressed her lips together and gave Harry a warning look. With a sigh, he let it go; Ron and he could get into some impressive rows when they wanted to, and Harry didn’t want Ron hurting himself any more than he already was.

Hermione, worried using magic might be too unpredictable (“My hands are still shaking; I might fling him into a tree trying to Levitate him!”), had Harry help her haul Ron into the tent, and after Harry threw him a long look, jerking his head in silent command, Malfoy gathered himself—with a beleaguered sigh—and followed them inside.

Perkins’s tent was much the same on the inside as Harry had recalled from his brief stay during the World Cup: with a sitting room, single bathroom, and modest kitchenette, it was enough to get by, though there was cat hair *everywhere*. Harry kneed aside one of the faded armchairs in the sitting room and with Hermione’s help carefully lowered Ron onto the lumpy sofa. The effort had drained all three of them, and once he was settled on the cushions, Ron closed his eyes and drifted off. Harry worried he’d fainted again, but Hermione didn’t seem concerned, explaining it was best for him to rest as much as possible over the next forty-eight hours while the dittany did its work. “I’ll see if I can’t manage a Blood-replenishing Potion as well,” she added. “I think I should have the ingredients.”

“You mean to say you carry saltpetre around in your *handbag*?” Malfoy asked from where he stood lurking in the corner near the entrance. Harry didn’t much mind that he was keeping his distance from them, so long as he didn’t try to make a break for it.

“When occasion calls for it,” Hermione sniffed. “One can never be too prepared.”

Malfoy stalked over to Harry, livid. “Your girlfriend’s mental, Potter; she’s going to get us all blown to smithereens at this rate!”

“She’s not my girlfriend, and she knows perfectly well what she’s doing. If you’re so

concerned about being blown up, feel free to keep well back from us.” Harry shooed him back over to the corner.

“Seems you’ve got *some* taste, then, after all,” Malfoy sneered, and before Harry could act on the sharp spear of anger that lanced through him, Malfoy quietly removed himself to the corner once more, arms crossed and head leaned back to rest against the wall.

Hermione didn’t seem to have heard the nasty comment, though, now bustling about the kitchen with a kettle and mugs she’d pulled from her beaded bag. Harry settled into one of the armchairs, resting his eyes for a moment that must have turned into *several* moments, for when Hermione poked him awake with her toe, she was carrying two mugs of steaming tea. A third rested on the side-table near the arm of the sofa; there was no fourth—maybe she’d heard Malfoy’s remark after all.

Between the welcome warm drink and a roof once more over their heads, providing at least a semblance of security, Harry felt his frayed nerves easing, and the fear fluttering in his chest grew quiet.

“You reckon the Cattermoles made it out?”

Harry gave a jolt, nearly spilling his tea on his lap, when Ron broke the silence. He was staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, blinking slowly.

Hermione stood from her seat in the other armchair and moved Ron’s mug from the side table to the coffee table in front of the sofa so that he could reach it more easily. “Well, we gave them as best a head-start as we could. Would you like another pillow, to make it easier to sit up?” Ron shook his head. “If Mr. and Mrs. Cattermole know what’s good for them, they’ll have rushed home and collected their children and be fleeing the country as we speak.”

If they knew what was good for them, sure; but everything was so chaotic now, and Harry couldn’t rightly blame Mrs. Cattermole for having been naïve enough to think she might get a fair shake in front of Umbridge’s Commission. The coup had been insidious and calculated, and for every Cattermole family that might have been lucky enough to

escape, there were probably a dozen that didn't make it and had been consigned to Azkaban or worse, leaving children terrified they might never see their parents again. What would happen to the youngest Muggleborns, Harry wondered—Hermione had been summoned and probably would have been treated like poor Mrs. Cattermole, but what about the students still at Hogwarts? Was Snape letting Umbridge use an empty classroom to harass the very children he'd been charged with *protecting*?

"I suppose that's the best we can hope for..." said Ron, reaching for his tea and taking a tentative sip. Harry was relieved to see a little of his colour was back, though it might have been the light. "Reg seemed like a pretty decent bloke, though I dunno if he was sharp enough to recognise the urgency, what with the way everyone was talking to me when I was Polyjuiced as him." He grimaced, shaking his head. "I'll never forgive myself if we got them in trouble just because we needed to borrow Reg's face for a bit..."

Malfoy laughed—not just a tiffle or a derisive scoff, but a *laugh*, and they all three turned slowly to glare at him. He waved them off in mock apology for disturbing them. "I'm sorry, truly—it's just, you're all absolute *nutters*, you realise? Wailing and rending your garments over complete strangers, when you're out here having tea in the middle of nowhere, just waiting patiently for the Dark Lord to pelt your little sanctuary with Unforgivables and feed you piece by piece to that wretched snake of his?"

"If you haven't got anything nice to say, I'd try saying nothing at all, Malfoy," Harry said, waving his wand in threat. "Or I can shut you up, if you find the urge to make a stupid comment overwhelming."

"Maybe you should have left me where I was, then, if you weren't prepared to send me on my way once we were quit of that place."

"We certainly didn't go in there just to save *your* ungrateful arse," Ron snapped, then turned to Hermione, lowering his voice. "...So where is it?" He darted a glance over to Malfoy, who was watching them with dark eyes. "You said you got it, right?"

"I did." Hermione reached into her beaded bag where she'd slipped the locket. Harry thought about advising her to keep it hidden, not to let Malfoy in on what they'd been up

to, but he was starting to get the feeling that wouldn't really be feasible. Malfoy was going to be around for...well, an extended period. If they needed to have sensitive conversations, they could cast *Muffliato*, but they wouldn't be able to hide the locket from him very easily if they wanted to be able to study it. Lucius Malfoy hadn't known he'd been entrusted with a Horcrux, at least, so there was every chance Malfoy wouldn't recognise this one either.

She drew out the locket and passed it to Ron, who held it up by the chain, letting it swing like a hypnosis pendant.

It was their first chance getting a good look at it; the locket itself was larger than Harry had expected, certainly no delicate charm for a lady's shadow box. The ornate *S* carved into the face, Harry could now see, was made up of dozens of tiny inlaid emeralds that glinted in the wan light of the tent. It was lovely, though fairly unremarkable. Like the diary, it seemed impossible this could hold a shard of the soul of quite possibly the most evil wizard to ever walk the earth.

"You don't think someone's already done the hard work for us and destroyed it, maybe?" Ron asked, faint hope blatant in his tone. "I mean, not that we aren't *entirely* up to the challenge, but are we sure it's still a—" His eyes flicked over to Malfoy again, who had drawn closer, now openly trying to get a look at the locket. "...A *you-know-what?*"

"I think it must be," Hermione said, taking the locket back and turning it over in her hand with a frown. "We know that the only way to destroy them is to *really* destroy them, so there'd be unmistakable signs of damage, if the thing was even still in one piece." She passed it along to Harry, and he searched it for signs of tampering but could see none. True enough, all the other items that had been turned into Horcruxes had been ruined by the Horcrux's destruction. The locket looked pristine.

Harry sighed. "...I feel like if we want to destroy it, we need to get it open. Kreacher seemed to think the same, after all."

"Destroy what?" Malfoy asked, this time from just behind Harry; he was leaning over

the back of the armchair, peering down at the locket. “What is that?”

“None of your business—now go scurry back to your corner, ferret-face,” Ron sniffed.

Malfoy ignored him, sidling around to sit on the arm of the chair. “You mentioned you lot are on some mission—is *that* thing what had you skulking around the Ministry? Granger just wanted a pretty bauble to distract from her hideous face, then?”

Ron nearly fell off the sofa, so quickly did he try to rise, and it was only Hermione’s hissed admonishments that kept him from struggling to his feet.

Harry shared the sentiment, clutching the locket in his fist. It seemed to have a heartbeat of its own, throbbing in time with Harry’s mounting anger. “Another smart remark out of you, and I’ll slap a *Silencio* on you so fast your head will spin.”

“Maybe you’d get fewer ‘smart remarks’ out of me if you answered a simple question.”

“Pretty sure we *just* said it was none of your concern.”

“If you’re sticking your collective noses into something dangerous, it’s going to *become* my concern whether you like it or not, as you’re clearly intent on keeping me prisoner here!”

Harry rolled his eyes; how had he forgotten how damn dramatic Malfoy could be? Any moment now and he’d be swooning in terror, claiming he could already hear the flapping of Thestrals come to carry his soul to the great beyond or some such rot. “Listen, I get that it’s probably been tough for you to keep up with the news these past few months, what with being incarcerated for murder and all, but we’re kind of in the middle of a war here. *Everything’s* dangerous now.”

“Then I’d like to be able to defend myself!” Malfoy pointed to Ron. “That one’s not going to be fit for service any time soon. Loan me his wand.”

“The fuck you’ll touch my wand!” Ron protested, clutching his wand protectively to his chest; he looked to Harry, horror on his face, as if he actually expected him to *agree*.

Harry marshalled what remained of his patience, drawn thin though it was. “You won’t need a wand, because you won’t be leaving this tent. Will he?” He directed his question to Hermione. Malfoy clearly hadn’t given up on his plans to flee as soon as their backs were turned, and they wouldn’t be able to watch him *every* hour of the day and still get their Horcrux research done. Surely, if she could secure their camp against roving Death Eaters, she could work out a way to keep Malfoy from being able to leave without their say-so.

She nodded, understanding, and Malfoy scoffed. “And if you lot get offed while I’m stuck here tending the homestead?”

“If *we* get offed, then being wandless will be the least of your worries.”

“Fantastic,” Malfoy spat, stomping back to his corner and sliding down to sit splay-legged on the floor.

He was welcome to pout all he liked, so long as he did it in silence. Harry turned his attention back to the Horcrux, relaxing his grip and letting his fingers mould to the gentle curves of the locket. So mundane, so unassuming—but he knew something dark and demented lurked behind that delicate clasp. A shard of soul as twisted and vicious as its owner. The twin urges to both hold the locket close—to keep it safe and secure—and to fling it into the woods and Apparate away as quickly as possible warred within Harry.

He took a moment to himself, murmuring all the unlocking spells in his arsenal—and after he finished with those two, he concluded he probably wasn’t going to get the locket open tonight. He considered for a moment asking Hermione if she knew any others—for she undoubtedly would—but Harry doubted she’d be any more successful. Kreacher would have attempted every bit of magic he knew to open the damn thing, if it had been an order from his beloved Regulus, so Harry wasn’t too surprised to see the locket refused to respond to standard spells or even physical attempts to prise it open.

Harry toyed with the idea of seeing if Malfoy had any Dark spells up his oversized sleeves that might crack it, but it wasn’t worth it. Even if they *could* open it right now, they still wouldn’t be able to destroy it, as far as Hermione could figure.

“So,” Hermione said, “What shall we do with it in the interim?”

“What else, but keep it close?” Harry said. “Just until we figure out how to destroy it.” He quickly mended the snapped chain, then slipped the locket around his neck and under his shirt. He brushed a hand over the fabric and could feel it where the cool metal rested against his chest, next to the Mokeskin pouch Hagrid had given him. He didn’t dare leave it sitting around in plain sight; Malfoy might try to pocket it.

“Are you *insane*?”

Harry closed his eyes, a twinge in his temple signalling an oncoming headache. If Malfoy hated them so much, why couldn’t he just *ignore* them? “What *now*?”

Malfoy was standing by the armchair again, looking rather teed off. “*That*.” He pointed to Harry’s chest. “That locket you just blithely slipped ‘round your neck. It’s cursed, no?”

Harry craned his neck to glance down his shirt, tugging at the chain. “I dunno—maybe? Not to the touch, at least.” They’d all handled it, and Umbridge had worn it around her neck without any visible side effects for weeks; it clearly didn’t have the same horrible curse that had been cast on Gaunt’s ring.

“*Not to the—*” Malfoy’s mouth opened and closed a few times in scandalised disbelief. “Take that thing off!”

Harry snickered, bemused. “Who’s the one who wants a pretty bauble now? Is it a hoarding thing, then?”

“I’m serious, Potter!” Malfoy’s face was going red now, and Harry half-expected steam to start pouring out of his ears. “Take it—” He lunged at once, making a grab for Harry’s neck, and Harry immediately leapt from the armchair, wand brandished and all humour gone.

He took a step back, warning, “That’s enough, Malfoy.”

Malfoy's fists were clenched at his sides, but he held his ground. "Take. It. *Off.*" Harry palmed the locket through his shirt, and he could feel that phantom heartbeat even closer now, bumping in rhythm with his own heart. Malfoy released a pained growl of frustration. "*Dammit*, you don't hang that kind of thing around your neck! There's a reason Dark objects are called *Dark* objects and not *Blessèd* ones!"

Harry frowned, glancing to Hermione, who herself was staring at Malfoy with an unreadable expression, her lip tucked between her teeth and bushy brows furrowed in thought. He shook his head, and Malfoy kicked the armchair violently, nearly overturning it. "Fine. Hang yourself with it for all I care."

His dramatics were getting old already, which didn't bode well for the indefinite future, and Harry rolled his eyes at the display, but Hermione softly cleared her throat. "He...he might be right, Harry."

"Of *course* I'm right, you nincompoops." Malfoy had his sharp chin jutting out proudly, staring down his nose at Harry. Evidently he was only too happy to accept support from Hermione when it meant he got his way.

Harry looked at Hermione with an expression that said *Seriously?* but she just winced and gave a half-hearted shrug. With a sigh, he lifted the chain from his neck and slipped the locket into his Mokeskin pouch. There, still safe and secure on Harry's person, but no longer offending Malfoy's delicate sensibilities.

This seemed to sit better with both Malfoy and Hermione, so Harry slumped back into his armchair to finish off his tea. It had, of course, gone cold by now.

As the hour was well past noon, stomachs were rumbling all around—including Malfoy's, which had Harry wondering how the Unspeakables had fed him if he'd been in stasis. Was it possible he hadn't eaten in two months?

Unfortunately, given she'd assumed they would be returning to Grimmauld Place after their mission at the Ministry, all Hermione had in her bag were a few nonperishables: a bag of dried sultanas, some cheddar, and a bit of bacon for sandwiches (but

disappointingly, no bread). “How kind of you to pack hors d’oeuvres, Granger,” Malfoy said, sniffing the cheese suspiciously before abandoning it. At the very least, he didn’t *seem* like someone on the edge of starvation.

“You’re welcome not to partake at all,” Hermione returned, voice chilled. “Instead of whinging about us sharing what little we’ve got.”

Their tempers grew even shorter as the hours passed. After the meagre lunch, Hermione suggested they take turns standing watch. She was confident the spells would hold, giving them as much protection as they could reasonably expect, exposed as they were, but forewarned was certainly forearmed. Harry and Ron agreed, but when Ron turned a nasty shade of green as he made to sit up, he was promptly benched.

“I’ll be fine, honest!” Ron had protested. “Just get me set up proper. I want to help.”

“You can help by getting better, which means lots of rest.” Hermione nodded to Malfoy. “And if you feel like doing more, then keep an eye on that one to see he doesn’t make any mischief.”

“Think I’d rather get Splinched again...” Ron muttered, easing back down onto the sofa cushions.

While Hermione took her turn standing watch, Harry kept distracted playing Exploding Snap with Ron; there was little else to do, after all, aside from Horcrux research, and Harry wasn’t exactly eager to get a start on *that*. He knew it was important they track down the other Horcruxes as quickly as possible, but that was an *action*. It involved *doing*. Not sitting around with one’s nose buried in a book. He’d never been good at that sort of thing in school, and it had evidently now dogged him into adulthood.

He suspected that some of his lack of drive could be chalked up to his empty stomach, though, and he was starting to feel light-headed when it came time for him to switch spots with Hermione. She’d managed to forage a few wild mushrooms from around their campsite and used what little remained of the bacon and cheese to whip up something that bore a passing resemblance to a bacon-mushroom soup. It was thin as prison gruel

and in sore need of seasoning—both points that Malfoy made sure to note—but it managed to quell the hunger pangs at least a bit, and Hermione had clearly done her best with a limited pantry.

After “dinner”, Harry took his turn standing watch, settled between the tent flaps and watching dusk settle across the clearing. Everything had seemed so quiet earlier, but with nightfall, the woods came alive. The flap of bats on the wing, the soft hoot of owls calling to one another, the odd crunch or snap of a twig being trod underfoot by some forest creature. He was certain they were quite alone, trusting fully in Hermione’s charm work, but he kept his wand at the ready, just in case.

The bits of starry sky visible through the treetops whirled overhead as the minutes stretched into one hour, and then two. He imagined he could still feel the Horcrux beating against his chest, even where it sat nestled snugly inside the Mokeskin pouch, but it was probably just his imagination.

Why wasn’t he dancing on air right now? They’d been looking for this damn locket for *so long*—it had a death toll, even! And they’d not only managed to find it, they’d stolen it from right off the neck of one of the vilest witches Harry had ever had the displeasure of meeting, from deep within the most secure wizarding facility in all of Britain. They’d stolen it—and gotten away with it with minimal blowback. Sure, they could probably never go back to Grimmauld Place, which might well be crawling with Death Eaters by now, and if they ever saw their friends or family again, it wouldn’t be for a long while yet, but they’d achieved something worth celebrating.

So why did Harry just feel...empty?

Maybe because finally getting their hands on this locket, the real one, the *Horcrux*, had cast into stark relief just how far they had to go. One Horcrux was great, but the difficult part—identifying what object the Horcrux might be hidden within—had already been managed by Dumbledore. All Harry, Hermione, and Ron had had to do was pull off a bit of smash-and-grab. Nagini they could deal with, but the remaining two Horcruxes could be hidden anywhere. Plus it was only through Dumbledore’s efforts they even knew

about Hufflepuff's cup; the identity of the final Horcrux was a mystery.

And this was all presupposing that, somewhere along the way, Voldemort didn't figure out what they were up to, grab the remaining Horcruxes before they could find them, and secret them away, never to be located.

There'd been a certain energy that Harry only now realised he'd been feeding on, all this while. The urgency of knowing what his goal was and pouring his whole self into reaching it. Now that he'd done so, he felt at a loss as to where to turn next.

Were Hermione and Ron struggling with similar crises of conscience? Or were they putting all their faith in Harry to lead them where he would, confident that he'd figure out where they ought to set their sights next so they might charge off together? God, he hoped not—he'd warred with himself over their coming along in the first place, but now that they were out here, all together, he didn't think he could bear losing them. If along the way they grew disillusioned with him, or realised he didn't have a clue what he was doing, they might try and go back. Ron could claim he'd recovered from his illness and return to Hogwarts, and Hermione could move to Australia with her parents after she de-Modified their memories.

Well, at least he'd still have Malfoy.

He sighed, closing his eyes and trying to clear his head. His scar was starting to prickle again, and he knew these dark thoughts hadn't been helping. He could hear Hermione admonishing him already. *"If you can feel a vision coming on, then you ought to try and stop it!"* Which he might be more inclined to do, if he thought his efforts to that end would do any good. It was downright demoralising, trying your hardest and failing every damn time.

He tried to direct his thoughts toward other topics, happier ones—like Kreacher, and the delicious meals they'd enjoyed over the past month since the elf had started to warm up to them. Harry could really have gone for another helping of the previous evening's French onion soup; he appreciated Hermione's efforts, but he doubted her bacon and mushroom gruel could have compared even under the best of circumstances.

But thoughts of Kreacher and food inevitably led to thoughts of why they weren't at Grimmauld Place, pleasantly stuffed and tucked in warm in their beds. Had Kreacher served Travers and the other Death Eaters the steak and kidney pies he'd been preparing for the three of them? Had he offered them not just a meal but information as well? Would he keep quiet about what he'd seen, what he'd heard Harry, Hermione, and Ron discussing openly during their brief stay? They'd never even considered watching their words around the elf despite his history of betrayal—would he turn on them, faced once more with 'proper' masters and mistresses to whom he might pledge his fealty? 'Mistress Cissy' and 'Mistress Bella' could easily prevail upon him with their unique charms once more.

Harry wanted to believe that Kreacher's feelings towards them—even Hermione—had evolved over the past month, but it might have merely been wishful thinking. Who knew where his loyalties might lie now? Or even if he *did* want to keep their secrets, what if he were tortured? Harry had never explicitly *ordered* him not to speak to anyone other than the three of them, which looking back was a pretty fantastically stupid oversight.

They couldn't even summon him to the clearing, as there was no telling if someone from the Ministry—or a Death Eater—might tag along like Travers had done with Hermione. None of them were well-versed enough in house-elf magic to chance it. Though now that he considered it, he supposed Malfoy might know, but there was also every chance Malfoy might lie to them, hoping to get them captured because they hadn't known any better, so that he might fly off to try and track down his parents.

And now the prickling in his scar had escalated to a searing burn, the kind he knew preceded a particularly violent vision. He'd thought everything would be *better* now, but it was somehow only worse. They had the locket, but no way to destroy it, and no way to find the two other Horcruxes, and Dumbledore hadn't left them any clues, only riddles and half-truths that Harry knew he ought to ignore but couldn't. Drawn, like a moth to a flame. Dragonflame, dragonflame that had struck Dumbledore down...down...

"My patience wears thin, Gregorovitch. You will give it to me—now."

Harry spoke in that familiar high, cold tone that seared the ears with its raw cruelty, and he held his wand in a lazy, lax grip before himself, fingers long and white. Just beyond the tip of the wand, a man hung suspended upside down, nearly bent in half at the waist, as if a long rope had been tied about his midsection to leave him rotating free. He was part in shadow, part in light, and what Harry could make out of his facial expression from underneath his thick, bushy white beard reflected sheer terror, complexion ruddy from the blood rushing to his head.

“I—I have it not, no more! Gone, gone many years ago. Stolen!” the man rasped in a thick Slavic accent that was cracked with age.

“Come now, Gregorovitch—I’ll have none of your lies. Lord Voldemort knows when he’s being told a fib—and he can smell it on you.”

Gregorovitch’s pupils were blown wide with fear, and Harry leaned forward, closer and closer, with those pupils looming larger, black holes that seemed like they could easily swallow Harry whole...

And then Harry found himself standing within a pool of warm light cast by a lantern hanging overhead. He stood just behind Gregorovitch, who was hunched over his desk, in what looked to be a workshop, with wood-shavings dusting the floor and a leather of tools unfurled before a lathe. A nondescript wand of some dark wood sat clamped in a delicate vice, and Gregorovitch held another wand over it, casting intricate spells whose purpose Harry could only guess at. Every now and then, he would mutter something under his breath and scratch out a series of numbers into a ledger before casting another spell on the clamped wand.

The lamp flickered overhead—and the door to the workshop burst open, a jet of yellow light zinging forth before Gregorovitch could even glance up and sending him flying into the overburdened shelves stacked behind him. The shelves collapsed, burying Gregorovitch nearly to his shoulders in unsanded planks of wood and jars of varnish and wood glue.

The glow from the lantern caught on a shock of curly golden hair, and into the circle of

wan light stepped a striking young man with wicked eyes and a delighted grin on his handsome face. Gregorovitch opened his mouth to raise an alarm, but the wizard hit him with some foreign-language spell, raising a single finger to his lips with a bright wink. A *Silencio*, then?

He dropped into a crouch before Gregorovitch and spoke another spell Harry didn't recognise—though he presumed it to be a Disarming spell when Gregorovitch's wand leapt from his fingers, clattering to the floor and rolling under a cabinet.

The intruder then turned back to the wand over which Gregorovitch had been labouring, running a finger along its polished shaft in contemplation. Was he intending to steal it, perhaps?

But then he held up his own wand and gave a testing little flick, much like Harry had been asked to perform for Ollivander when he'd visited the wandmaker's shop to receive his first wand. The intruder's wand gave off a flurry of sparks, mottling its master's face with flashes of red and gold. He smiled, lips stretching into a wide, knowing grin—clearly pleased with the results.

Gregorovitch squirmed beneath the crushing debris, waving his hand in warning, mouth working but no sound coming out. The wizard ignored him, only slipping over to the single window illuminating the workshop and carefully unlatching it. After checking the coast was clear, he climbed up onto the sill and hopped over, disappearing into the night with a crow of triumphant laughter.

Harry was drawn back like a knocked bow, pulled from those wide, tunnel-like pupils and into himself once more. Gregorovitch was ever so much older now, Harry could tell, and he mouthed silent pleas for mercy, as if still trapped by the *Silencio* the young man had placed on him.

"The thief, Gregorovitch—who was he? Who took it from you?" Harry asked, which struck him as strange—the wizard had not stolen anything, not that he could see. He had set upon Gregorovitch in his workshop only, and while he had caused a great deal of damage and nearly sent the wandmaker through the wall, there had been no thievery.

“I do not know, I never knew, a stranger—no—I beg you—PLEASE!”

Gregorovitch’s screams nearly burst Harry’s eardrums before they were abruptly cut short by a sudden flash of green light—

“Harry!”

He jolted awake, panting, and his forehead throbbed so fiercely he was genuinely concerned something was going to pop inside his brain. He grimaced when he realised he’d passed out in the tent’s entrance, sliding down to sprawl over the ground. He’d been meant to be on watch, and here he was, drifting off and letting Voldemort wander about his dreams.

He rubbed at his eyes until Hermione came into some semblance of focus. “Sorry,” he mumbled in apology. “Sorry, must’ve dozed off—weird dream. I’m up now, though.”

She scoffed. “Are we *really* doing this again? I recognise you don’t want to talk about it, but don’t treat us like we’re stupid! Anyone can look at your face and see you were just dreaming about Vol—”

“Not the V word!” Ron groaned from the sofa, peeved, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“—See you were just dreaming about *You-Know-Who!*”

This was certainly not helping his lingering headache. “Would you stop acting like I did it on purpose? Geez....” Harry wiped a hand over his face. “It was a dream! Can *you* control what you dream about?”

“We really should brush up on your Occlumency—”

But Harry already knew how the rest of this conversation would go, as it had several times before, and he wasn’t of a mind to go through it all yet *again*. He wanted to discuss what he’d just seen. “*Or* we could talk about how I’ve just seen that he’s tracked down Gregorovitch. Probably killed him by now, from the look of things. He was still after information, though I couldn’t tell on *what*. He used Legilimency, it looked like, to see

into Gregorovitch's mind—”

“We aren't doing this again, Harry,” Hermione interrupted, voice tight. “...You should go to bed. Kip on one of the bunks, or Transfigure an armchair into a single. I think I'd better take over, since you can't seem to stay on task.”

Harry felt red suffuse his cheeks, irritation and shame mingling. “I'm *on task*. I can stand a watch, I prom—”

“No, you can't. You're nodding off—and with disastrous consequences.” She held open the flap, pointing to the sitting area. “Go lie down. Sleep. Dream, since you seem so fond of it.”

The angry set of her mouth said that there would be no further discussion on the matter, and though Harry couldn't stand her dismissive tone, he didn't want to have another row, not after the day they'd had. Checking his temper with great effort, Harry ducked back inside, stalking over to his armchair and slumping into it with a huff.

“...So what's he up to now? You-Know-Who,” Ron asked, keeping his voice quiet enough to avoid being overheard by Hermione sitting at the tent entrance. He had a stack of cards spread out in little piles on his chest, which he now gathered back into a deck. Malfoy had taken over the chair Hermione had occupied, evidently having grown tired of lurking in the corner sitting on hard floorboards, and he had his head thrown back against the cushions, eyes closed and mouth slightly agape as he snored softly.

Harry rubbed at his temples, screwing up his eyes in an effort to remember what details he could. “He found Gregorovitch. Was torturing him for information on—something, I'm not sure what. Sounds like Gregorovitch had something You-Know-Who wanted at one point, but it got stolen.”

“How would *you* know what the Dark Lord wants?”

Both Harry and Ron's eyes snapped to Malfoy in the other armchair; either his napping had been a ruse, or Harry had been speaking louder than he'd meant to. “Go back to

sleep, Malfoy.”

“Who can sleep on an empty stomach with you two prattling on like a pair of old biddies?” Malfoy’s lips turned down, curious. “What’s this about Gregorovitch? You mean the wandmaker?”

Harry looked to Ron, who gave a subtle shake of his head; they could always discuss this later, without Death Eaters eavesdropping. But Harry didn’t think Voldemort was entirely unaware of their link still persisting, and he wanted to get this out while it was still fresh in his mind. In the hopes that sharing a bit might keep Malfoy from interrupting any further, he indulged him: “Our minds, mine and You-Know-Who’s, they’re...linked, kind of. I can see what he’s doing sometimes, flashes of what he’s seeing, or snatches of conversation. It’s not something I can rightly control, really, and it’s usually only when there’s some kind of heightened emotion attached to it, like when he’s really happy or really angry.”

Malfoy recoiled, shuddering dramatically. “And you just *accept* that?”

He would probably hate how much he sounded like Hermione right now. Harry shrugged. “It’s not like I’ve got much of a choice, and it might prove useful, getting a peek at whatever he’s up to.” Malfoy didn’t need to know the debacle that had ensued the last time Harry had blindly trusted what he’d seen in these twisted visions he had.

Ron brought the conversation back around to the vision. “So he didn’t want Gregorovitch to make him a new wand, then? What’s he looking for?”

“A new wand?” Malfoy asked. “What happened to his old one?”

“What, they don’t relive the Greatest Hits in ‘Remedial Death Eating’?” Ron sneered.

Harry ignored their sniping, closing his eyes and trying to recall all that he’d seen and heard. But it was like a fading dream, growing weaker and wispier the more Harry reached for it. There had been no talk of a new wand, no—no discussion of wandlore at all. “He wanted...something Gregorovitch had owned at one point, I think. He told

Gregorovitch to hand it over, but Gregorovitch claimed it'd been stolen from him long ago. And...then..." It almost felt like he was hurtling into Gregorovitch's memories again, diving once more into those dark, terrified eyes. "You-Know-Who used Legilimency, and I saw Gregorovitch's workshop, in a memory. There was a man—a young bloke; he broke into the workshop and roughed up Gregorovitch before he made his escape. Gregorovitch made it sound like it was a burglary, that the man stole whatever it was You-Know-Who wanted, but..." Harry shook his head. "I didn't see him take anything."

"What'd he look like? The thief."

Harry opened his eyes, blinking slowly. "Young. Maybe a little older than us? Blond, messy hair. I feel like I've seen him before...but I dunno where."

He tried to hold the image of the young man in his mind, but as with all the other fine details of the vision, it began to fade, like footprints on a beach washed away by the incoming tide. Gregorovitch had said the theft had happened a long time ago, so the young man would be much older now, no doubt. Why had he looked so familiar...?

"If You-Know-Who thinks he stole something..." Ron frowned in thought. "You don't reckon it was a...?" He trailed off, brows raised suggestively, and Harry considered for the first time, with a sickening jolt, that Voldemort had figured out what they were up to, and he really *was* tracking down his Horcruxes to hide them anew.

But Voldemort had seemed far too calm to be dealing with a missing piece of his own soul. Harry shook his head. "No, no I don't think so. Whatever it was, though, I think Gregorovitch had it in his workshop. I doubt it was anything overtly valuable, like gold or jewels, in that case." He glanced to Malfoy, who was staring into the middle distance, expression troubled. "Don't suppose *you* know what your boss is looking for and want to share, hm?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed, the only sign he'd heard Harry, but surprisingly he had no cutting remarks. "...I was hardly in his inner circle before, and I doubt getting captured and interrogated by the Ministry will have endeared me to him any further."

“Now why would you think that?” Ron asked, unaccountably cheerful. “You took care of Dumbledore, just like he asked you to. I’d think he’d reward good little Death Eaters who do murder as they’re told.”

A muscle near Malfoy’s lips twitched, but he neglected to rise to the bait, turning away and drawing his knees up to his chest to curl into the armchair. Either Ron didn’t get him as riled up as Harry did, or he was as exhausted as they all were after the day they’d had.

Ron huffed in irritation but didn’t try and antagonise him further, and Harry let his head loll back against the cushions, staring up at the tent’s canvas roof.

He’d been so sure Voldemort had been tracking down Gregorovitch to try and find a solution to the issue of the twin cores of their wands—but he’d killed the man without asking a single question about wands or wandlore. He hadn’t wanted a new wand after all—Gregorovitch just happened to have at one time been in possession of an item Voldemort was searching for.

And what *was* that? He had the Ministry in the palm of his hand; the wizarding world was his to do with as he pleased, and he was virtually indestructible so long as the secret of his Horcruxes lay hidden. He had *all* of this power already...so what was he scouring the backwoods of Europe looking for? What was this object once owned by Gregorovitch that had been stolen—or not stolen?—by some merry-faced thief so many years ago?

There’d been a wild air about the boy—he’d kind of reminded Harry of Fred and George, especially in the way he’d given a *whoop!* of triumph as he’d dashed off into the night. Was that all it had been—a passing resemblance to the twins? No, no Harry was *certain* he’d seen that face somewhere else before... Just as young and cocky and carefree.

First Voldemort had gone to the village to find the woman, looking for Gregorovitch—and then he’d killed her once she’d served her purpose. Then he’d tracked down Gregorovitch himself, and having looted his mind for useful memories, had struck down Gregorovitch as well. Voldemort had seen the same memory Harry had and was probably puzzling over the identity of the thief himself this very moment. Unless he

already knew who the thief was and was on his way to pay the young man—or old man, more likely—a visit.

Harry didn't know what this item was that Voldemort was tracking from owner to owner, but he knew without a doubt that if the wild-eyed thief with the crooked smile and golden hair wasn't dead already, he would be soon.

The Sanctuary

By morning, tempers had cooled some, though Harry and Hermione were still walking on eggshells around each other, their greetings monotone.

The general consensus between the three of them being that they'd be best served keeping on the move, they decided to Apparate to a new location first thing, though Ron made his preferences for "somewhere with a decent meal" quite obvious.

"I'm sorry my efforts weren't up to snuff," Hermione had said coolly, and Ron had spent the next half hour trying to apologise and making quite a hash of it.

Once they'd packed up the tent, Hermione began dismantling the protective enchantments she'd placed around the campsite while Harry and Ron worked to clear the area of any sign humans had been camping here recently, kicking leaves and twigs around to hide their footprints. Malfoy, most helpfully, leaned against a tree and silently judged them.

After Hermione decided that they'd covered their tracks as well as possible, they Disapparated together to the woods just at the outskirts of a town Ron claimed his Aunt Muriel had lived near several decades back. "This bit of the town's Muggle, as far as I know; Muriel moved on when it started encroaching on the wizarding quarters."

They pitched the tent again—Harry was starting to get the hang of it—in the shelter of a small copse of trees, and Hermione laid down fresh defensive charms. The town being largely Muggle in population, Harry felt he could chance venturing out for sustenance under his Invisibility Cloak, with promises he'd come back straight away or send a Patronus if he ran into any trouble. Hermione had wanted to go along with him, but Harry didn't like the idea of leaving Ron alone with Malfoy; it would be much more difficult for Malfoy to try and overpower *both* Hermione and Ron than either alone.

In town, Harry managed to raid a fruit stall and swiped enough Cornish pasties for each of them with a quiet *Accio*, taking care to leave behind enough Muggle money to cover the pilfered pastries, as otherwise Hermione would surely lecture, even in desperate times such as these. He was greeted as a conquering hero on his return, and the food lifted spirits all around. Even Malfoy seemed far less prickly and contrary when he had a full belly.

Hermione spent the afternoon organising her library, placing books in towering stacks by subject and alphabetically by title. “The sooner we get started on our research, the better,” she explained, pointing to the stack of books concerning the Founders of Hogwarts. One of the only leads they had now was Dumbledore’s presumption that Voldemort would use items that had once belonged to the Founders to create his Horcruxes. Given that they already knew the locket of Slytherin’s was a Horcrux and that Hufflepuff’s cup was likely one as well, that left something of Ravenclaw’s or Gryffindor’s out there somewhere. Would he have even bothered with an heirloom of Gryffindor? They couldn’t discount it, at least.

But how many people over the years, obsessed with the Founders for one reason or another, had tried to track down one of their heirlooms and claim it for their own? Voldemort certainly wouldn’t have left a Horcrux sitting about growing dusty in a museum. What if the next Horcrux was hiding in another cave, like the one in which Voldemort had hidden the locket? How on earth were they to find it *then*?

Harry didn’t dare voice these concerns, though; they’d either be dismissed outright or only confirm fears that Harry was entirely unprepared for this quest. Not that Harry supposed that was any great secret.

Hermione drew the straw to fetch dinner under the Cloak while Harry half-stood watch, half-let Ron trounce him in a game of Wizard’s Chess. She returned just before dusk with a half-dozen eggs in a wicker basket and loaf of bread tucked under her arm. “...Well, I left some money on the windowsill where the bread had been cooling, so it’s not as if we haven’t paid for it!”

Harry and Ron reassured her, through bites of scrambled eggs on toast, that it was surely fine, and the farmer had probably gotten more for his eggs and bread through them than he would have at market in town. Hermione didn't seem entirely convinced, but they couldn't exactly walk into a Tesco and load down a trolley.

Scrambled eggs evidently being too pedestrian, Malfoy had turned *his* eggs and bread into a fancy egg-in-a-hole with chopped bacon bits on top. Harry, of course, did *not* think Malfoy's toast looked better than the lovely scramble he'd enjoyed from Ron, and if he looked at the dish longingly as Malfoy daintily cut into it, it was only because that had been the last of the bacon, which meant a lean morning.

Ron retired to the sofa to digest his meal in comfort, and Malfoy quietly removed himself to one of Perkins's old armchairs, flipping idly through an old issue of *Knuts for Kneazles* that Perkins had apparently subscribed to at one point.

Harry volunteered to do the Scouring up, as Hermione had foraged their food and Ron had cooked it, and he was just clearing down the table when Hermione cleared her throat softly for their attention.

"We didn't really get around to it last night, but I think we need to discuss sleeping arrangements," she said, hands clasped before her.

"Sleeping arrangements?" Ron asked, easing to his feet and stretching his arms high with a yawn. "About time."

Harry recalled the bunk beds they'd used during the Quidditch World Cup; they hadn't been terribly comfortable, and Harry wondered if a Cushioning Charm would last through the night on mattresses as lumpy as those had been.

Hermione nodded, gesturing to the rear of the tent. "There's three rooms; I'd initially planned for us to all take one, but..." Her eyes moved to Malfoy, who was studiously ignoring them. "We've picked up some extra baggage, and...honestly, I don't think we should leave him alone."

“Ten points to Gryffindor,” Malfoy called, licking his thumb to turn the page.

She pressed her lips into a thin line, then looked at Harry with an apologetic expression. “Harry, I feel terrible asking this, but...”

He nodded, seeing where she was going with this. “No, you’re right. I’ll bunk with him.” He could hardly ask either of them to put up with Malfoy, especially seeing as it was *his* fault Malfoy was with them in the first place.

They all three gave a jolt as a sharp *whap* sounded, with Malfoy springing up from the armchair, having flung the copy of *Knuts for Kneazles* onto the coffee table. “You’re mad if you think I’m sleeping in the same room as Potter.”

“I think Harry’s got more reason to fear sleeping in a room with *you*,” Ron snorted, and Hermione threw him a warning look.

“It’s not up for debate, Malfoy,” Harry said, cutting in before any further sniping got started; they’d been having a lovely, relatively insult-free day so far. “Trust me, if I could think of a way to make sure you didn’t get yourself into any trouble overnight, I’d gladly bunk with Ron and leave you to it, but I’m stumped.”

Malfoy’s jaw was tight, and he drew himself up stiff and straight, licking his lips. “I’ll—I’ll make an Unbreakable Vow,” he offered, and Ron snorted, bending in half at the waist as he slapped his knees in laughter. “I’m quite serious!” he snapped, dots of angry pink tingeing his cheeks.

Ron struggled to collect himself, wiping at his eyes and sniffing around bubbling chuckles. “Harry, I think that Bragge bloke got it twisted; this one *clearly* is no fan of yours.”

Harry rolled his eyes—at both of them. “Don’t be dramatic,” he said to Malfoy. “You’re not making an Unbreakable Vow. It’s a few hours a day, and you’ll be unconscious for the better part of it; I’m pretty sure you can manage.”

“It’s a perfectly nice room,” Hermione reassured, which Harry felt was quite generous of her. There was no need for her to go out of her way to try and make Malfoy feel more

comfortable, when he certainly hadn't shown them the slightest semblance of gratitude thus far, never mind all the nasty comments he'd made toward her. "It's not like we're asking you to sleep outside."

"Would that that were an option," Malfoy grumbled, flopping back into the chair and throwing his feet up onto the coffee table.

While Malfoy sulked, Hermione showed them how to make up their beds with the linens in the closet. They smelled like they hadn't been laundered since the *last* time the tent had been used, but none of them had brushed up on housekeeping spells, so they were stuck with musty sheets and drool-stained pillowcases until Hermione could dig out her copy of *The Housewitch's Helper* in the morning.

Malfoy dug in his heels and refused to be moved or coaxed from the armchair until Hermione went around dousing the lanterns, rousting him from his seat with a Stinging Jinx. He was still rubbing his arse when he darkened Harry's doorway, half-limping over to the unoccupied bed while Harry finished his evening ablutions.

Malfoy was under the covers quickly, not even bothering to remove the oversized robes they'd given him, and by the time Harry was ready to turn down the lamps, he was already rolled onto his side, back to Harry and breathing evenly. This suited Harry just fine, and after whispering a soft *Nox*, he climbed into his own bed, the Mokeskin pouch still hanging around his neck and his wand clutched to his chest like a security blanket.

Alas, it seemed Malfoy had only been waiting for cover of darkness, for just as Harry had gotten relatively comfortable, Malfoy muttered, "...This whole place reeks of cat piss."

Harry sighed. "Apologies it's not the conditions I'm sure you're accustomed to. Would you rather have stayed in that dank cell?"

There was a long beat of silence, and Harry hoped Malfoy had reconsidered starting anything, but then: "...Why did you do it?"

"Why did I do *what*?"

“You know *what*, don’t play stupid.” There came a rustling of sheets, and Harry wondered if Malfoy had rolled over, if he was looking at Harry now. It made him feel uncomfortable, especially as he couldn’t make out his own hand in front of his face in this low light without his glasses. “You’ve seen my Mark. You know I’m not just innocently caught up in this; I chose it freely with eyes wide open—initially, at least. And it’s not as if I’ve had a sudden change of heart either, if that’s what you’re hoping.”

And he wasn’t hoping that, Harry realised. It had never even crossed his mind; Malfoy was just *Malfoy*, the same as he’d always been. Twisted ideals, blind faith, and over-gelled hair. Well, maybe his hair at least had changed a bit over the past few months. “I dunno. I just couldn’t *not*, once I found out what they’d done to you. The burden of knowledge, I guess: you’re compelled to act.”

Except that wasn’t entirely true, was it? Malfoy had been lurking there at the back of his mind ever since they’d crossed paths on that lonely moor. Harry had wondered, had felt guilty, even, when it shouldn’t have been his concern any longer. He’d caught himself thinking he ought to have done more, been preoccupied with how things had turned out. It was sixth year, all over again.

Malfoy snorted. “What a Gryffindor sentiment.”

“Asking why someone rescued you instead of thanking them because you assume everyone’s got an angle—what a Slytherin sentiment.”

“I’ll thank you once I’m free to go my own way,” Malfoy sniffed. “Until then, you’re nothing more than my newest gaoler.”

So they were back to this again, were they? Fine, if Malfoy wanted to play that way... “Well that—and your mate, as I recall.”

Another beat, then Malfoy grit out, “Don’t say that word.”

Harry was the picture of innocence. “What word?”

“You—the *M word*.”

Harry had to cover his mouth to keep his grin from breaking out into full-fledged laughter. The tit couldn't even bring himself to *say* it, and somehow that made Harry want to rub it in his face all the more, even though by all rights it ought to be mortifying for Harry too. And maybe it would be, in the morning, but just now, it was enough to send him drifting off to sleep with a smile on his lips for the first time in a long while.

They were on the move again the next morning, uprooting as they had the day before and Apparating to a new location. They were mostly moving for movement's sake, not because they had any particular idea of where to go next. If they stayed in any one place for too long, the Muggle locals might start noticing their goods disappearing only to be replaced by appropriate cash payment, and then who knew where such rumours might spread? When they weren't eating or on watch, Hermione was poring over books looking for clues on where to find the final two Horcruxes. Harry and Ron were supposed to be researching how to destroy the locket, but it was a bit like being back at school and having to study for exams: just *not* happening.

Ron was ready to distract with a card game or Wizard's Chess when he was around, but once he was back on the mend, he was usually the one to offer to go searching for food, as he had the biggest appetite of the four of them. Harry was therefore left with little choice but to either comb through books with Hermione...or deal with Malfoy.

A week into their self-imposed exile, and he was honestly starting to feel a bit bad for the git (only a little, mind you). Malfoy was clearly bored out of his skull, and boredom with him tended to breed mischief and spiteful comments that no threats of *Silencio* seemed to stifle.

"Feel free to expand your horizons," Hermione offered after fielding Malfoy's third complaint of *I'm so fucking bored* that morning. She waved to the stack of books on spellwork. "There should be a few volumes in there on Animagi—try brushing up, learn a bit more about yourself."

"Know plenty about myself already, thanks."

"Answer me this, then: Exactly *how* much of an asshole are you?" Harry asked.

Malfoy grabbed one of the books, feigned studying its cover, and then chucked it at Harry's head, narrowly missing clocking him. "You were right, Granger. That *was* educational. I feel positively *suffuse* with the need for further edification." He reached for another book, and Harry was immediately on his feet, wand tight in his fist.

"That's enough of that. We're trying to study." Well, Hermione was trying, but the tight frown she was wearing said they were making it difficult.

"But I haven't gotten to know the *real* Draco, yet. There's so much more to learn!"

Harry felt Malfoy stamp down hard on his very last nerve. "I'm serious! Cut it out." Malfoy was behaving oddly today—not overtly cruel or biting, just...irritating. Annoying. Trying to get a rise out of Harry.

"Now why would you stand in the way of my bettering myself, Potter? Isn't that you lot's loftiest goal? A reformed Death Eater? Why—" Hermione hit him with a Stinging Jinx, and he gave an inelegant yelp, grabbing his arse with a look of pure rage. "Would you—*stop that!*"

"I'll stop Jinxing you when you finish whatever *this*—" She waved her hand in a vague gesture up and down his body, "is and let us get back to work." She turned to Harry, fixing him with a warning look. "And stop encouraging him."

"*Encoura—?!*"

"You heard me. There's no need to respond to him when he's obviously trying to bait you."

She was right, he knew, but...Harry hated not getting the last word, especially with the likes of Malfoy.

He shook his head, biting back any further comments, and settled for digging out that mental camera he'd fashioned months back and taking a snapshot of Malfoy limping back to his armchair, hissing in pain as he settled his Jinxed rear onto the cushions. His mental scrapbook of Malfoy's Most Humiliating Moments would have to be balm enough for

now.

This, though, turned out to only be the first of several similar displays over the next few days, each more perplexing and frustrating than the last. Malfoy had *always* been a right prick, going out of his way to bully and tease and generally make a nuisance of himself, but if Harry had to describe it, he'd say that it was almost as if Malfoy's heart wasn't in it. He grew increasingly restless, pacing and tapping his foot and even *breathing* in a manner surely meant to annoy. Where before he'd been content to eat meals with Harry, Hermione, and Ron in the sitting room, now he would fill a plate—without expressing an ounce of gratitude, of course—and slip off to their room to eat in private. Sure, there'd never been any *conversations* or anything before, but this shift only underscored how withdrawn Malfoy was becoming.

And when he wasn't holing himself up in the bedroom, he seemed to be actively seeking out conflict, letting the tiniest of issues build into an all-out row—usually with Harry. Hermione had had to step in on more than one occasion to stop their sniping from escalating, though Ron usually let them go until he felt compelled to defend Harry, leaving *Harry* instead to try and defuse the situation before Ron cast something he would be sure to regret.

Malfoy's colour hadn't improved much two weeks out from his escape from the Ministry, either; he was still paler than Harry remembered, with even darker bags under his eyes. These, Harry knew, came from Malfoy's fitful attempts at sleep, which more often than not kept *Harry* awake as well, shortening both their tempers and leading to even louder rows than before in a violent, exhausting cycle.

It was difficult to tell if this was anything out of the ordinary or if this simply was how close quarters with the likes of Malfoy would always be—but either way, Harry didn't think he could handle it for much longer. Malfoy either, for that matter.

Luckily, they wound up not having to.

Harry was studying at the tiny kitchen table with Hermione when it happened. The table was a disaster, covered with books and parchment and quills with frayed vanes, half-

empty mugs of tea gone cold, biscuit crumbs and a bacon-and-cheese toastie with two bites taken out of it from when Hermione had started to eat lunch and gotten distracted. Ron had been gone for a while now, but he'd told them he wasn't coming back until he'd tracked down a bakery he could pilfer a couple of steak bakes from, so this wasn't terribly worrying.

What *was* worrying was the fact that Harry was pretty sure he'd read the same paragraph on spiritual transmutation three times now, and he still didn't understand a word of it. Why were all of Hermione's research books so damn *dry*? He'd had enough trouble studying when the subject had been something he had at least a weak grasp on; soul magic was right out.

"I need to go outside."

Harry nearly fell out of his seat, heart leaping into his throat—*fuck*, that'd given him a shock. He'd been so engrossed in trying to slog through Desmond Kitting's *Treatise on the Body Ephemeral*, he hadn't even noticed that Malfoy had finally dragged himself out of the bedroom (after having been cloistered in there since breakfast) and was now standing right at Harry's elbow.

"What?" he said stupidly. His heart was still pounding a loud tattoo in his ears, and he hadn't quite registered what Malfoy had said.

"I need. To go. Outside," Malfoy repeated, slowly and with grit teeth. He was leaning in rather close, one hand on the back of Harry's chair and the other splayed flat on top of the book Harry had been trying (unsuccessfully) to read.

"Uh...no? Shove off, Malfoy. Can't you see I'm busy?" It was a lie, and Malfoy could probably see that, but Hermione was watching them for one, likely fearing—for good reason—they might get into another fight, and he just didn't feel like going along with Malfoy's suspiciously calm request for another.

"Why do you need to go outside?" Hermione asked.

“Was I talking to you, Granger?” he spat. “Let’s *go*, Potter.”

“I said *no*,” Harry said, shoving Malfoy’s hand from *Treatise on the Body Ephemeral*. Hermione had slapped Malfoy with several spells meant to keep him from trying to escape, the most relevant one at the moment being that he couldn’t leave the tent at all without Harry’s say-so. And Harry didn’t say so. “If you need to piss, you know where the loo is.”

He expected Malfoy to storm off in a snit, or perhaps to pitch a fit and try to goad Harry into the row he seemed to always be angling for these days.

What he didn’t expect was for Malfoy to slam his fist on the table and jerk Harry’s chair around, bending forward until they were nose-to-nose. This close, he could see that Malfoy’s eyes were going all funny—the pupils narrowing almost to slits and the irises ballooning until there was no white left, just this stormy blue-grey-green that swirled like bubbling molten lead.

“*Harr—*” Hermione started, leaping to her feet, but then her eyes flicked to Malfoy’s fist; when he unclenched it, slowly, his nails had lengthened, curving into wicked talons that scored little pinmarks into the soft wood of the table.

He opened his mouth, and the voice that came out was a gravelly burr that retained none of Malfoy’s posh drawl. “I’m going to ask once more—and then you’re going to have a *very* big problem on your hands. Get. Me. Outside. *Now*.”

Faster than Harry thought he’d ever moved before, Harry rolled out of his seat and scrambled to his feet, clamping both hands onto Malfoy’s shoulders and steering him quickly toward the tent-flap. Hermione was hot on his heels, frantically hissing *Go go go!* as if Harry needed any further encouragement beyond the impending presence of a wild dragon the size of a mini-bus inside the tent.

He shoved Malfoy through the flap and out of the tent, where he hit the ground hard and rolled several times with a grunt. He didn’t seem terribly fazed by the blow, though, lurching to his hands and knees and heaving violently in that gravelly rasp. He sounded

like he might sick up, and Harry and Hermione both gave him a wide berth, recalling that the last time someone had been in the wrong place when Malfoy's dragon had belched fire, it'd killed them. Harry wracked his mind for any spells he thought might be able to subdue a dragon—Malfoy hadn't been *that* big, had he?—but the list was distressingly short.

Why was this happening now? There'd been nothing to trigger it, not like the emotional outburst after they'd just escaped the Ministry. Had Malfoy been planning this? But no, that didn't make a lot of sense either; Ron had been gone several hours now—if he'd simply been waiting until he had fewer obstacles preventing him from escaping, he would have done it as soon as Ron had Disapparated.

“Do you think he's trying to get away?” Hermione whispered in a panicked hiss, voicing Harry's own concerns, but he shook his head.

“No...no, I think he can't control it. Or—he's been trying to control it, and it's finally slipped.” It was hard to decide which was more dangerous—an in-control Malfoy-as-a-dragon, or an out-of-control one. Harry didn't want to contend with either, which meant putting a stop to this before it escalated. There was no telling what a Stunning Spell would do right now—it might just piss him off even more—and a Body Bind would only freeze him; as soon as they lifted the spell, he'd be angrier and more unpredictable than before.

Which meant Harry had to try and talk him down from it, like he had the last time. He licked his lips, pacing out a careful circle, in case Malfoy decided to lash out with those nasty claws he was growing.

“Malfoy,” he said, fighting to keep his voice from trembling. It was rather difficult to feign calm when you were practically pissing yourself, Harry was learning. “Malfoy—we've been over this. You can't do this here, if you lose yourself again—”

“Does it *look*—like I've got—any choice, Potter?” Malfoy bit out in that raspy growl that sounded like it came from deep within his chest. It seemed to take everything he had just to get the words out, eyes clenched shut and down on all fours like an animal. He

lurched, claws digging into the patchy grass and leaf litter scattered around the clearing in which they'd set up camp, and a keening whine worked its way free from his throat. "Just—*fuck*, talk to me. T—talk to me, say something, *anything*, I can't—f-focus—"

Focus. Focus, all right. Malfoy needed a focus, yeah that made sense. Something to hold on to, to remind him he was human. Human thoughts to drive away dragon-y ones so that he wouldn't turn. Harry tried to order his own mind, groping for something to say, something to talk about, but all he managed to come up with was, "I realise I've got loads more important things to deal with right now, and it's perfectly inconsequential, but I can't help wondering, seeing as the season's about to start up, how Gryffindor's Quidditch Team will handle itself this year. It's the stupidest, most insignificant thing given people are out here fighting for and losing their lives, but—"

"Fuck—your small talk!" Malfoy snapped, lips drawn back tight over fiercely bared teeth. His eyes flashed, now a haunting, shifting shade of robin's egg blue and hunter green, and how did they *do* that? "I meant talk *to me*. Not—ngh, *at me*."

Harry could see the knobs of Malfoy's spine poking up through Ron's robes—they ought to have hung off Malfoy's frame in billowy waves, but his shoulders were starting to bulk up, and something—something was pushing through them, straining at the fabric of the robes. He was tense and taut as a nocked arrow, breathing as ragged and raw as his voice, and his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. He looked like a stiff breeze might send him over the edge, and Harry was supposed to *talk* to him.

He looked to Hermione, who gave him an encouraging nod, gesturing for him to continue.

"Er, well..." Right. Talking *to* him—to *Malfoy*. The object of the conversation was, Harry assumed, not to send him into a flying rage, so that meant no talk of Dark Lords, or parents or family, and probably no school or friends either.

Malfoy's left elbow buckled, sending him face-planting into the dirt, and against his better judgement, even if it was sure to get his arm ripped off, Harry gingerly stretched out a hand, settling it on one of Malfoy's grotesquely deformed shoulders. He was not rebuffed this time—but Malfoy did shudder at the touch, leaning into it with a frustrated

wail that started deep in the barrel of his chest and seemed to buzz through Harry's own bones.

Harry's mouth was dry, and it was only Hermione's hissed *Say something!* that reminded him he was meant to be talking Malfoy down. He licked his lips. "...What's your Patronus?"

"*What?*" Malfoy snarled, head whipping around to pin Harry with a dagger-like glare. His eyes were *blood-red* now, and it was really distracting, the way they kept changing colours. Was it based off his emotions? Red didn't seem encouraging at all, not one bit.

Harry tamped down viciously on the overwhelming urge to recoil, swallowing. "Your Patronus—what form does it take?"

The red in his eyes shifted to a muddled purple verging on black, and *oh* that was even creepier than the red, and any time Malfoy wanted to make his eyes *stop* doing that, he was perfectly welcome to. He released a laboured breath, grinding out, "...Dunno. Never cast one."

Oh. Harry supposed he should have figured that. He struggled for a follow-up. "I could teach you, if you want. It's not as complicated as it's made out to be." Unless you had a hundred Dementors bearing down on you; then you usually had to rely on your future self swooping in to save your pathetic arse. He left that part out, though.

Malfoy just shook his head, shoulders working as he raked furrows into the ground with his claws. "I don't dare try—probably end up like Raczidian." Harry didn't recall who that was, making a mental note to look it up later provided he survived this encounter. "And with what wand?" Malfoy added bitterly.

Harry shrugged. "You don't need a wand to learn the basics; and you could use mine to practise." Malfoy's brow furrowed, eyes narrowing in sharp suspicion; they'd gone a soft forest green now, and even in this beastly state, Malfoy still somehow managed to look striking. "I doubt it'll turn on me."

Malfoy seemed to process the offer for a moment, then dismissed him with a curl of his lip. “No thanks; I’m dealing with more than enough complicated magic at the moment.”

“Suit yourself.” And because Harry couldn’t resist: “I think it’d be a peacock, though.”

To his surprise, Malfoy didn’t snap or snarl or lash out in any way—he almost laughed, a rumbling chuffing sort of noise that might have been a scoff, actually, when Harry stopped to think about it. “Vile creatures,” he sneered, shuddering. “We have a troop roaming the gardens at the Manor...they’re mean as shit, caking every flat surface with their droppings...”

His voice didn’t sound nearly as raspy now, and he was breathing deeper and more evenly now, no longer hyperventilating. Harry leaned down to put himself at eye level—and saw that Malfoy’s irises had contracted nearly back to their normal size, pupils properly dilated again. “...All right there?”

Malfoy just nodded, giving a roll of his shrinking shoulders to knock Harry’s hand away. Taking the hint, Harry took several steps back but didn’t let his eyes leave Malfoy, only watched quietly as the bits and pieces of dragon that had tried to break free slowly but steadily sloughed away, leaving behind a shuddering, broken human shell.

Hermione had disappeared back into the tent—maybe to rustle up some medicinal potions, or maybe just to give them some privacy, knowing Malfoy’s pride. He’d absolutely hate to know she’d been watching him at his weakest, and they needed him as calm as possible; who knew how little it might take to send him careering back over the edge right now? Emotional instability was apparently a catalyst for his losing control, though Malfoy hadn’t seemed particularly unstable this morning, so they couldn’t be entirely sure that was all there was to it.

He wished he’d pressed Charlie for more details when he’d had the chance, or taken Bragge up on his offer to chat, since he’d seemed fascinated with dragon Animagi and their complications.

Once Malfoy managed to struggle back to his feet, only swaying a bit unsteadily before

he caught himself, Harry walked him back into the tent, hand hovering at the ready but not touching. He was somehow more wary of Malfoy ripping his arm off *now* for taking such liberties than when he'd been in the throes of an involuntary shift.

Hermione had, it turned out, gone inside to prepare tea for all of them. She'd cleared off the table, setting their books and parchment aside and pulling out Malfoy's chair for him, being sure not to stare or even make eye contact. Evidently she'd drawn the same conclusion as Harry: don't push him right now, unless they *wanted* to see him lose hold of those few threads of humanity he seemed to just barely have a grip on.

They drank their tea in silence, quietly recouping from their ordeal for the rest of the afternoon until Ron returned just before dusk, chattering boisterously about the exciting day he'd had that sounded like it involved an umbrella, a family of ducks, and a spaniel that wouldn't stop humping Ron's invisible leg. By mutual tacit agreement, neither Harry nor Hermione made a peep about their own 'exciting' incident.

Ron had managed to complete his steak bake mission in the end, and even risked grabbing a large portion of chips from the chippy to go with them, but dinner was a relatively reserved affair. As usual, Malfoy took his meal away from the table, curled up in one of the armchairs in the living room. Hermione kept throwing hangdog glances Harry's way, but Harry ignored her. It wasn't *his* fault Malfoy had snapped—and he'd done his very best to bring Malfoy back from the brink. He'd done a fine job, he thought, and what did she expect him to do? Walk over there and clap Malfoy on the shoulder, tell him it was all going to be just fine? He didn't know that, and Malfoy was unlikely to appreciate being patronised with pithy niceties.

In the end, though, it was his own curiosity that made him bring it up that evening in their bedroom, safe under cover of darkness, when it felt like there was finally enough distance from the incident they might discuss it without chancing a relapse.

"...Do we need to worry about that happening again?" Malfoy had his back to Harry, but as he hadn't yet doused the lamps, Harry could easily see the way his spine stiffened and his shoulders clenched. "Just—if it's going to be a regular thing, for whatever reason,

then we need to be *ready* for it—”

“It won’t be a ‘regular thing’, Potter. I’ve got it handled.”

“Didn’t look that way,” Harry muttered, mostly to himself. “I’ve never known Animagi that *needed* to transform. I always thought it was a voluntary thing. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? If you can’t control it—”

“I *can* control it.”

“—then it’s almost like being a werewolf or something, isn’t it?”

Malfoy shot upright, face flushed in anger. “I’m *not* some—some wolf *freak* like your Professor Lupin!”

“Oi,” Harry warned, easing up onto his elbows. “Don’t call Remus a freak.”

Malfoy scoffed, drawing his knees up to rest his head against them. It was hardly an apology, but at least he hadn’t pressed on. There was a long beat, and Harry wondered if Malfoy had actually fallen asleep in such an awkward position, until he said in a bleak monotone that was muffled against his knees, “It just...builds up.”

“What does?”

Malfoy lifted his head, tilting it to the side to stare into the middle distance. “The *need*. Like—itching under my skin. This sense that this body isn’t mine, like I’m trapped and need *out*. Like...like there’s someone else inside me. And sometimes they win.”

A chill ran down Harry’s spine; he knew well what it felt like, having someone else’s thoughts and emotions running around inside of you—and he also knew how dangerous that could be. “...That doesn’t sound like Animagcraft.”

Malfoy’s gaze shifted to focus on Harry, sharp and judging. “What do *you* know about Animagcraft?” he sneered. “It’s fine.”

“Wha—this is so *not* fine it’s not even funny!”

“It’s *fine*,” Malfoy insisted, jaw tight. “I just have to stay grounded and focused, that’s all. This morning was...a moment of weakness only. We’re not all as perfect as the Chosen One, I’m afraid.” It rang hollow, stinking of bravado. “It shouldn’t happen again.”

Harry shook his head, not buying Malfoy’s profession for a minute. “If this is all about control, and you’re clearly not in control—*don’t* give me that look—why not, I dunno...” He shrugged. “*Practise?* Bragge said dragon Animagi have difficulty not getting overwhelmed by the form, which I’m beginning to see is an understatement—”

“I’m *trying*, you prick!”

“Are you, though? ‘Cause it seems to me you’re just running away from it. Why don’t you just...let it happen? You’re the one who wanted something big and nasty to save your folks; now that you’ve got it, you’re not even going to *try* to master it?” Harry raised a brow. “It doesn’t look like it feels very good, when you...get carried away.”

“Oh *pish*, it feels divine!” Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I wanted a form that could defend itself, that could defend my *parents*. I never asked for all this—this...” He grimaced. “Baggage.”

“Baggage?” Harry didn’t follow, but Malfoy just released a frustrated growl and flopped back down onto his bed, rolling over to place his back to Harry and effectively ending their conversation.

It was long after Harry whispered *Nox* to douse the lights that sleep eventually found him.

They moved camp again the next morning, as they had with each sunrise, and once they’d set the tent up and placed their defences around their new site, Hermione ushered them inside and announced that she’d made an adjustment to the tent’s Charms.

“As you can see,” she said, gesturing to the doors separating the bedrooms from the living area, “I’ve added a fourth room in addition to our three bedrooms.” Malfoy

brightened, clearly thinking he would finally be granted his own room and some semblance of privacy, and while Harry didn't think that was such a good idea, he felt a hopeful leap run through himself as well. Hermione, though, quickly dashed those hopes. "No, Malfoy; it's not your own room. Or, well, I suppose it kind of is..." She nodded to the door. "Open it."

Malfoy gave her a suspicious look that said *Are you mad?* and took a step *backwards*, just to be contrary. She rolled her eyes, muttering several choice words under her breath, and reached for the knob to wrench the new door open.

At first, Harry thought she'd just added a back entrance to the tent, as stepping through the door felt like he'd just walked outside again. "An exit?" Ron asked, voicing Harry's thoughts.

"Nope," Hermione said, grinding a dead leaf under her trainer with a smile. "I call it the Sanctuary. I've managed to layer another Undetectable Extension Charm within the one that came with the tent. I actually borrowed the idea from Newt Scamander—he travelled the world with a briefcase that had been fitted with a similar charm to house a rather large enclosure in which many of the creatures he collected on his journeys could live. His Sanctuary was large enough it even accommodated a Thunderbird for a time." She looked to Malfoy, brows lifting. "So I suppose it could fit a dragon as well."

"I'm not *living* in here!" Malfoy sputtered.

"Oh calm down, I wasn't suggesting you do." She extended a hand, gesturing around the Sanctuary. "This is a place where you can come when you're feeling...out of sorts, as it were...and let yourself go without worrying about needing Harry's permission to leave or damaging the tent. Since the Sanctuary is technically still *inside* the tent, you're free to come and go as you please. Stay in here as long as you like, if you don't feel like consorting with us." She crossed her arms. "By *all* means."

"Wait, so this is all fake?" Ron asked, picking up a leaf and studying it intently.

"Well, it's Conjured, if that's what you mean—this isn't a real place. There are ways to

manipulate how the Extension looks on the inside, apparently, but the text I used to make this place didn't go into further detail, so I've just fit it with a Charm like the one used in the Great Hall." She swept an arm around them. "This way, it'll reflect wherever we're camped." She scratched her nose, a bit sheepish. "Er, though I haven't sorted out the Atmospheric Charms just yet to regulate the temperature, so I'm afraid you'll have to bundle up once winter hits..."

Winter. God, Harry hoped this mission wasn't going to drag another *three months*. If for no other reason than he really didn't think he could stomach close quarters with Malfoy for that long.

"How big is this place?" he asked. It was hard to gauge the dimensions because of the trees, but the sky seemed to stretch on forever.

"However big it needs to be. The charm bends space to fit the needs of whatever its contents are—just like my bag, and that Mokeskin pouch Hagrid gave you. This way, Malfoy can transform whenever he likes and move about—he should even be able to fly, if he's that sort of dragon..." She directed the question half to Malfoy, half to Harry, and Harry nodded, recalling the great bat-like wings that had been firmly strapped to the dragon's side when he'd encountered it in the holding cell at the Ministry. Had he ever even used them? That Hermione didn't seem to remember if Malfoy's dragon had wings suggested he hadn't used them when he'd attacked the school.

He was struck by a sudden wave of affection for her; Malfoy had been nothing but terrible to Hermione in school, slinging around slurs and insults every chance he got. Even in the few weeks since he'd joined them on the run, he'd yet to show an ounce of gratitude or anything resembling an apology for how he'd treated her in the past, when it was in large part thanks to her he'd been rescued in the first place. Sure, it had been Harry's idea, but he owed Hermione his life several times over, and so by extension did Malfoy now. And yet despite what a prodigious wanker he was, she had still gone out of her way to create this space so that he didn't have to freak out whenever one of those urges to transform took over. What a class act.

He was about to say as such, when Malfoy raked the Sanctuary with a bored look and muttered, "Impressive, Granger," before turning on his heel and marching back into the tent, flopping down in one of the old armchairs and piecing through a copy of *The Guardian* that Ron had snatched on a food run a few days earlier ("It's not the *Prophet*, but I figured it couldn't hurt? Might be useful, in case You-Know-Who starts moving on the Muggles.").

"That's all he's got to say?" Ron huffed, making a fist. He moved to follow Malfoy back into the tent. "What an ungrateful little piece of sh—"

"It's fine, Ron," Hermione said quickly. "I don't care about gratitude. I care if he uses it." She looked at Harry. "He's got to understand, right? We can't afford close calls with him. If he doesn't have absolute control over his magic, he could hurt us *or* himself—or others, if he escapes."

Harry bit his lip. "He told me...he said it builds up. That it feels like there's something inside of him, trying to escape. Like his body isn't his own, and sometimes whatever it is that's trying to take over wins." Hermione was frowning, chewing on a bit of her hair in nervous habit. "Does that sound like anything you've heard of? Did you ever have trouble with things like that, maintaining control or instincts trying to take over and push your human thoughts aside?"

"Oh no." She shook her head. "But rabbits aren't very bright creatures. A bit skittish, but it's perfectly easy to manage once you've experienced it. I've certainly never felt like I didn't *belong*..." She tapped her chin. "I'll do a bit of digging and see if I can't figure out what he's dealing with. No wonder he's spooked, if *that's* how it feels..."

"Not like he had the strongest of spines to begin with," Ron reminded, throwing a dirty look toward the door.

"It could be the dragon's instincts still rumbling about inside him?" Hermione suggested. "He might mistake those for another consciousness, if he wasn't expecting to have to deal with them."

Harry nodded. “Charlie said that dragons are closer to Beings than Beasts, at least according to the Romanian Ministry of Magic, so their instincts are more assertive than those of other non-human creatures.”

Ron was still glowering at the door. “And what happens when he ‘asserts’ right as a group of Death Eaters is sniffing around our doorstep?”

Harry wondered the same; if Malfoy didn’t get a handle on himself and soon, he could blow their cover with an ill-timed episode, whether he meant to or not. It was looking more and more like they all would have been better off having left Malfoy in stasis at the Ministry, and damn the moral quandary.

He kept a close eye on Malfoy over the next few days, wondering if he’d ever actually work up the courage to use the Sanctuary. There’d been a couple of near misses—but it’d turned out Malfoy had only been heading to the loo for a piss. Harry occasionally caught him stealing wary glances at the door out of the corner of his eye, but nothing ever came of it. It felt like there was a clock, ticking away a countdown somewhere, and when it finally reached zero, Malfoy would snap again, and who knew how things would end this time?

“Of course I’m worried,” Hermione said, when Harry brought up his concerns about Malfoy’s reluctance to use the Sanctuary for its intended purposes. “But unless we want to lock him in there, I don’t see there’s much we can do aside from keep watch for any signs he’s about to snap.”

“And what’s wrong with locking him in there?” Ron asked around a bite of roast beef sandwich, a thick book propped up in his lap. “I’ve been working on my *Incarcerus*.”

Harry chuckled at the thought, though Ron kind of had a point. If Malfoy refused to release these urges that seemed to build up within him in a timely manner, it could endanger them all. Would they not then be justified in *making* him use the Sanctuary?

“*You’re nothing more than my newest gaoler,*” Malfoy had said, and Harry felt a tendril of discomfort wriggle through his midsection. No, let Malfoy work himself into a froth if

he felt like it; they could handle him, if forced to. Probably. Hopefully.

He tried to push all thoughts of Malfoy and his stubborn pride and unfounded fears from his mind, pouring himself into Horcrux research, which Hermione seemed rather pleased with. Between their studies and watches and warding and scavenging, they had enough to deal with already; Malfoy would have to be trusted to his own recognisance for the time being.

But the days stretched on with no new breaks, countless hours wasted trying to determine where they might find the other Horcruxes or how to destroy the one they already had. Their conversations grew repetitive, circling and frustrating, as they consumed and regurgitated in an endless cycle all the information they'd gathered since they'd first learned of Horcruxes.

Their trips outside the protective enchantments of their campsite were brief and furtive. Only once had they dared Apparating to London, hidden—they hoped—under the safety of the Invisibility Cloak, on the off-chance Voldemort had hidden one of his Horcruxes at the old orphanage where he'd been raised as a child. But all they found at the site Dumbledore had told him about was a crowded business park, which they learned from a bored security guard had been erected over a decade ago after the old building had been demolished for its construction.

Ron had suggested they dig into the foundations, as it still might be there somewhere, but Harry had shaken his head. Voldemort had been desperate to escape that place, convinced he was too good for it; he would never have hidden a piece of his soul there. The sorts of places these Horcruxes were hidden were places of great personal triumph or confidence—a lake hidden in a seaside cavern surrounded by ravenous Inferi, or the library of a trusted lieutenant, or under the rotting floorboards of the closest thing he'd had to an ancestral home. There was a pattern—a sort of predictability that, while it might not lead them to the site of a Horcrux, could help them cross unlikely locations off the list.

No, he thought to himself as an afternoon rainstorm rolled in, fogging up his glasses:

whether it was an orphanage or a business park, this dismal corner of Muggle London was as far removed from the wizarding world as Harry imagined it was possible to be. He would have been surprised if Voldemort had *ever* come back here at all after completing his education.

As their spirits took a nose dive with their dwindling prospects for tracking down the remaining Horcruxes, so too did Malfoy's mood sour further. For a time there, he'd been taking his meals in the sitting room again, still refusing to share a table with them, but now he was back to cooping himself up in the bedroom, sleeping for most of the day and only dragging himself out for a bite or to take a piss. It was a worrisome pattern to be sure, but they really didn't have time to babysit him; if he wanted to dig in his heels and refuse to use the Sanctuary, it would be on him. Harry wasn't going to bring it up and risk triggering another episode with Malfoy *literally* trying to bite his head off, that was for sure.

They never stayed in any one place too long, Apparating all over the country, north to south and east to west, hitting a different locale each morning all in an effort to stay as untrackable as possible. If there hadn't been the ever-present threat of war and death and destruction looming over them, it might have been an adventure, as Harry had seen more of the British Isles than he'd thought could possibly exist—as it was, each new site brought with it the question of *Is it safe here? Is this where they'll finally find us?* which rather sucked away all enjoyment.

Harry's scar was still prickling, keeping him up at night as often as Malfoy's fitful dreams did. He'd stopped trying to pretend it wasn't happening, though every time Hermione witnessed it, she would purse her lips into a tight line and breathe loudly through her nose. Ron wouldn't stop pestering him about it whenever he noticed Harry wince, asking him what he'd seen this time. But it was always the same: just the merry-faced thief who'd Disarmed Gregorovitch and run off into the night.

That face haunted his dreams, and he imagined he could paint it from memory by this point. Each vision left Harry with the overwhelming surety he had seen this boy before, *knew* him, but still his identity eluded them. Whenever he woke from his dreams now,

he would bury his head back into his pillow right away, praying that this time, this dream, might be the one where he finally nailed it. Their problems would be solved, he was certain, if he could just put a finger on who this man was, and that urgency followed him when he at last stumbled into sleep.

“Potter. P—Potter, wake up. Wake up.”

Someone slapped Harry’s cheek—lightly, but strong enough to sting, and Harry blinked blearily in the darkness, not entirely sure if this was another dream or vision or what. Malfoy’s ghost-white face swam into view, far too close for comfort, and a jolt of adrenaline shot through Harry, sending him scrambling backwards. His fingers were curled tight around his wand; he’d taken to sleeping with it since bunking with Malfoy. A good thing, too, as Malfoy’s eyes were *glowing*, like dying embers in the black of night.

Harry swallowed, forcing his heart down his throat and back into his chest where it was meant to be. “What—what the hell are you doing?”

“I have to go,” Malfoy responded cryptically, his voice drawn tight, and Harry imagined it might *twang* if he reached out and plucked.

“Have to—*what?*” Harry’s mind was still swimming, and his mouth was dry. Draco Malfoy had crawled into his bed, in the middle of the night, dishevelled and wild-eyed; there was nothing about this that made sense. “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“I have to *go*,” Malfoy repeated, with a definite edge of urgency now. “I’m—” He winced, closing his eyes as he groaned feverishly—but Harry could still see something softly glowing behind Malfoy’s lids, like candlelight shining through a fingertip. “I can feel it coming again. I can’t sleep, it’s like there’s a giant sitting on my chest.”

Oh *fuck*—was *that* what was going on? Another fit? Well they’d solved that problem days ago, hadn’t they? “Jesus, you scared the shit out of me. So go to the Sanctuary and transform. ‘S not like you can do any damage in there.” Now Malfoy would *have* to drum up the stones to sort himself out, no more sitting around spooked for no good reason.

“I don’t *want* to transform you infuriating little—” He took a deep, bracing breath, his head hanging low, and Harry could almost *see* him lassoing the dragon and reining it in, even as the rope slipped his grip. Right; Harry probably shouldn’t make any sudden moves, he recalled. Malfoy was unpredictable when he got like this. Harry warily pulled his knees to his chest, readying to shove Malfoy off with a kick if needed. “Just—come with me. Come into the—the—”

“Sanctuary,” Harry supplied helpfully.

“Merlin, what a terrible name.” Malfoy forced his eyes to meet Harry’s; it was almost painful to look at, like staring overlong at a candle’s flame. “Come. And help me.”

Harry swore; this hadn’t been part of the plan. “No way, it’s—” He cast a quick *Tempus* charm. “Ugh, *three in the morning*. You don’t need me to transform anymore—”

Malfoy’s hand snapped out, grabbing the front of Harry’s pyjamas and giving a rough shake. “What part of *I don’t want to transform* didn’t you understand?!”

Harry shoved him off, grateful for the room’s dim light and the soft blur everything took on when he wasn’t wearing his glasses. He didn’t want to see the finer details of Malfoy’s features, undoubtedly screwed up into an angry scowl. “I’m going back to bed, Malfoy, and that’s the end of it.” He jerked his sheets back over himself, using his legs to lever Malfoy off the bed. “Stop being scared of your scaly little problem and just *do it*. I promise you’ll feel better.” Truthfully, he didn’t know that for sure, but it couldn’t possibly make him feel *worse*, could it? He’d felt better for a bit after the last incident, after all.

“I *won’t*,” Malfoy whined. “I can’t, please just come. Or—” He licked his lips, scrabbling under the sheets until he found Harry’s hand and took it in his own, tugging insistently. “Just—just talk to me again. Like before? Fuck, Potter, *please*, that’s all I’m asking.”

The desperation and pain thick in his voice were starting to wear on Harry, and he felt his own stubborn, contrary instincts build in equal ferocity. He was tired, confused, and a little bit terrified of what Malfoy might do in this state if he waited for too long to take

refuge in the Sanctuary. “No,” he said, firm and sharp. “Now get into the Sanctuary before you wreck the tent!” Harry jerked his hand back and wiped it on the sheets—Malfoy’s grip was hot and sweaty. “Listen, I’ll set an alarm, and if you aren’t back after a half an hour, I’ll go in after you in case you need help grounding, all right?”

“I *don’t want to transform*, Potter—please *please* don’t make me, please just—” But his words cut off as Malfoy heaved, then clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes clenched shut. A threatening, animalistic growl began to build in his throat, and Harry felt the final dregs of sleep slough away, alarms blaring in his head.

“Malfoy, get in the Sanctuary *now*.”

But Malfoy just shook his head like a petulant child, mouthing silently *No no no*—and Harry was certain that if he wanted Malfoy in the Sanctuary, he was going to have to physically put him there himself. With a reluctant sigh, he threw off the covers and jumped to his feet, wand brandished just in case. “Fine, you want—”

Malfoy retched again and then seized, stiffening sharply before toppling onto the floor with a painful thud. Harry took a reflexive step back, dumbstruck—what was he meant to do? Dammit, Malfoy was going to have his fit *right here*, and Harry was going to wind up trapped in a tiny bedroom with an angry dragon who didn’t know that Harry was very stringy and lean and probably not terribly tasty. He reached for Malfoy’s wrist ready to drag him down the hall to the Sanctuary—

And immediately released his hold, jerking his hand back and shaking it; Malfoy’s skin was *burning*, red-hot to the touch, and Harry could smell—something. Sharp and acrid, it stung his nostrils. Cheap fabric burning, he realised. Malfoy struggled to his hands and knees, weak and shaking, and Harry sank down beside him, unsure of what to do. “Should I—should I talk to you again? Malfoy, can you hear me?” His hand hovered over Malfoy’s shoulder, unsure if he’d get burned again if he tried to offer a comforting gesture. “Malfoy? Shit, *say* something!”

Malfoy’s mouth worked mechanically, opening and closing, but no sounds came out, and Harry frowned when he noticed a strange glow emanating from Malfoy’s chest. Or no,

his throat. Or no, his *face*—

Malfoy gave a violent shove, searing Harry's skin through his clothes and sending him crashing into the bureau. He then retched again, and where before he'd done nothing but dry heave, now a glowing stream of *molten lava* spewed from his mouth, incinerating the thin rug and bleeding through to the hardwood planks beneath while Harry watched in silent horror. The lava pooled on the floor, spreading slowly and inexorably as it dribbled down Malfoy's chin, his flesh melting away before Harry's very eyes.

The stench of burning flesh permeated everything, and it was only when Malfoy finally managed a tortured scream that Harry snapped into action. He Vanished the lava—but more just came spilling out of Malfoy's mouth, which was now little more than raw bone and blackened tissue sizzling sickeningly. Fuck, fuck this was *bad*. He cast *Aguamenti*, but the spell fizzled away, impotent, as soon as it had left his wand, and all the while Malfoy continued to shriek in tortured agony, seizing on the floor. He clawed at his face in desperation before Harry could stop him, coating his hands and fingers in molten fire.

Malfoy's screams had Hermione and Ron bursting through the door only moments later, wands brandished as they took in the room with wide, white eyes.

"He said he felt another shift coming on!" Harry explained breathlessly. "He wouldn't go to the Sanctuary! I *tried* to make him—but he refused—and now...!"

Hermione just swallowed, nodding. "We've got to get him in there, *now*!"

Ron made to grab Malfoy's arm, but Harry stopped him with a sharp *Don't!* "He's hot to the touch, he'll burn you! Here—*Mobilicorpus!*"

"Hurry!" Hermione urged, rushing ahead of them to open the door to the Sanctuary. Harry and Ron guided Malfoy through—still vomiting lava and writhing in tortuous, snake-like movements. It was all they could do to keep from getting pelted themselves, and by the time they wrestled him inside, his shoulders were starting to bulk as the dragon began to force its way out of Malfoy's pathetic human form.

Seeing it bound and sedated at the Ministry, Harry had thought the dragon looked sad and pale but imagined it would be quite a magnificent sight in its proper form.

This, though? Was *terrifying*. It was as if Malfoy's body was just a fleshy casing through which the dragon was tearing in a panicked effort to free itself, burning him alive from the inside out.

Hermione was babbling something, her voice soft and frantic and thick with unshed tears, but Malfoy was drowning her out as his screams shifted into an enraged roar that left a ringing behind in Harry's ears.

Then there was a hand on Harry's arm, and Hermione was pulling him away, directing him to release Malfoy. "Let him go, let it happen! It's the only thing that can save him now!"

Her eyes shimmered, and there were faint tear tracks drying on her cheeks. Harry blinked several times in rapid succession. "What...what do you mean 'save him'? He's —?"

"Dying, Harry! *Look* at him!" And Harry did, really *looked* at the broken creature that had only moments ago been Draco Malfoy. He was doubled over, back arching and shoulders straining at the tattered remains of his nightshirt. His legs were stretched out at some awkward, unnatural angle that made them look like someone had taken a sledgehammer to them, and his stomach was grossly distended, lit from within by an eerie glow. His eyes were rolled back in his head, their colour shifting in a flashy whirl from pea-soup green to vibrant yellow to blood red to black, just black. His nose was completely gone, nostrils melted closed as his skull shifted and stretched unnaturally long. Harry could *see* the bones lengthening and growing, with bubbling and blackened muscle and tendon turning over to be replaced by fresh tissue.

"What's—?"

"Injuries that Animagi suffer carry over into their animal form! Remember Scabbers, after Pettigrew cut his finger off to frame Sirius?" She waved her hand at Malfoy. "He

must have lost control, and the shift started without his meaning it to—his human body couldn't support the flame sac, and it burst..." She sniffed and rubbed furiously at her eyes. "It's like a lava plume went off in his throat."

"That...fuck, that's not good, is it?"

"Does that *look* good to you, mate?!" Ron shrieked, running his hands through his hair and pacing nervously. "Fuck it all, if this little shit dies out here—what are we gonna do?!"

"He won't die—maybe!" Hermione forced herself to take a few bracing breaths. "Dragons have really strong regenerative abilities; if he can just survive long enough to complete the transformation...then it should heal itself, and he'll be fine when he turns back."

"*If* he turns back..." Harry muttered in blank shock.

"Don't say that!" Hermione wailed, bringing her hands to her mouth.

He had to say it, though. Because he had to make himself hear it. This was his fault, *all* his fault. If he'd taken Malfoy seriously, if he'd come in here when Malfoy had asked—when he'd *begged*—none of this would have happened. He'd just been so preoccupied with putting Malfoy in his place, chalking everything up to Malfoy's stubbornness and pride. What the hell had he been thinking? Malfoy had been right: Harry *didn't* know anything about Animagi—certainly nothing about *dragon* ones, at least.

Malfoy had tried to tell him, so many times, how frightened he was of whatever this Animagus form was doing to him...and Harry had ignored him. Had made *fun* of him, even.

It was another dragging, nail-biting ten minutes before the transformation finally finished, after several near-misses where Malfoy almost passed out from the stress and blood loss. At some point, the dragon must have taken over, shifting aside Malfoy's rattled psyche as its survival instincts kicked in and healed the grievous trauma Malfoy had suffered.

The dragon was just as beautiful as Harry recalled—more so now that it wasn't magically drugged and locked in a holding cell—but it was clearly drained by the effort. Its wings hung limp at its sides, dragging along the ground, and it panted and growled plaintively as it paced with a sinuous, languid gait. Its talons gouged tracks in the ground, biting into the hardpack, and it swung its massive head from side to side as it scanned its surroundings with wary eyes of deep maroon.

Did it recognise them? Or were they dangerously close to a quintuple-X Beast? Was it Malfoy staring back at them from behind those curiously intelligent eyes, or had he retreated once more to that bleak moor with nothing but that snooty peacock for company? *Fuck*, how were they going to get him back to himself if that had happened? Would Hermione be able to recreate the potion Snape had concocted? What had been its ingredients again?

Ron nudged Harry with his elbow. "Should you maybe try and talk to it?" he suggested, faint hope in his voice. "Just, I don't really like the look it's giving us."

Harry swallowed, taking a careful step forward; he stuffed his wand in his pocket and held his hands out to show he wasn't armed, hoping Malfoy or the dragon or *both* understood the gesture. "Er...Malfoy? Can you...can you hear me?" The dragon ignored him, continuing to pace. Its long tail lashed nervously, nearly sweeping Harry's legs out from under him when it turned unexpectedly. "...Can you even understand me?"

He felt ridiculous, trying to talk to a dragon when it clearly wasn't processing a word he was saying. Malfoy either wasn't in a speaking mood, or he wasn't in there *at all*. Harry turned to Hermione and Ron for guidance, but Hermione just shooed him on, nodding. He took a breath. "Listen, you're...you're gonna be all right, yeah? Hermione says the transformation will have healed you up, so just—don't worry about that. You'll be right as rain, whenever you feel like shifting back. And—" He turned his back to Hermione and Ron, dropping his voice in shame. "...I'm sorry I was such an arsehole, really. I'm sorry I tried to make you do this alone and didn't listen to you when you asked me for help. I remember you don't like doing that sort of thing—so I imagine it took some balls to ask someone like me to help you out of a jam. And I screwed that up." If Malfoy was in there,

he was probably pissed as anything he couldn't lay into Harry right now, so Harry had to simply imagine the retorts of *You can say that again, Scarhead* and *Just my luck you finally listened and fucked right off*.

He sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Just please don't be stuck inside your mind again? Snape reckons I'd scramble your brains if I tried Legilimency to sort you out, and I don't know what potion he gave me last time to help bring you back to your senses."

The dragon was unmoved by his pleas, its forelegs buckling at last with exhaustion and the rest of its bulk following shortly after. Its barrel chest heaved with deep inhalations, and it panted open-mouthed, exposing several rows of hooked-back teeth. Its tail flopped against the ground weakly, and its eyelids fluttered, as if it were on the verge of passing out. Harry couldn't blame it.

"You two can head back to bed," he told Ron and Hermione. "I'll...I'll stick around a little longer, just in case." He didn't elaborate on *just in case*, as he didn't quite know how to finish that thought himself, but after exchanging worried glances, they nodded.

"Be careful, yeah?" Ron said. "You-Know-Who would go ballistic if he didn't get to be the one to kill you, after all."

Harry gave him a weak smile. "I'll keep it in mind."

Once they'd returned into the tent, Harry made another circuit around the dragon, giving it a once over just to make sure it was all in one piece. The transformation appeared to have healed it completely—at least on the outside—just as Hermione had said it would, which was a relief. It was bad enough, knowing he'd been responsible for that inhuman torture Malfoy had had to suffer through; if he'd gone and gotten him *killed* on top of it, Harry didn't know how he could have ever handled that.

The dragon looked to be asleep now, lids drawn low over its eyes, and its breathing was much more regular than before, though still just this side of panting. Harry stepped closer, keeping a close eye out for any signs of the beast rousing, and laid his palm gently

—tentatively—against its shoulder. Warm only, now; not the searing heat of earlier—but then the dragon shuddered, and Harry quickly jerked his hand back, scrambling to put several paces between himself and those jagged teeth that might still mistake him for a tasty morsel.

At a safe distance, Harry cleared the leaf litter to expose a patch of grass and settled down, legs crossed at the ankle and knees drawn up to his chest. The moon had long since set, and even if it had still been up, the treetops stretched so tall he wouldn't have been able to make out more than a few fading beams snaking through the waving branches. Maybe it was a trick of the eye, or maybe Harry was too sleep-drunk to think straight, but the dragon seemed to glow with its own light, as if its scales had soaked in the very moonlight itself. Each inhalation sent ripples of opalescent colour shimmering over its hide, spangling the backs of Harry's eyes so that even when he closed them, it still dazzled.

It didn't seem very fair, Harry thought, that someone with so ugly a personality as Malfoy could turn into something so beautiful. He should have been a toad. Or one of those snooty dog breeds with the smushed-nose faces. Something that looked as nasty on the outside as Malfoy was on the inside.

Well, maybe a dragon fit, in that case.

At some point, as his mind wandered, Harry must have nodded off between one thought and the next, for the next thing he knew, something had laid into his shoulder and given him a hard *shove*—and down he'd gone in a graceless pile of limbs. Before he could push himself back upright, Malfoy placed one foot on his chest to hold him in place, staring down at Harry with cold contempt in his eyes. He had a flimsy scrap of what remained of the robes he'd been wearing wrapped around his waist to give himself some decency, but there wasn't much left that hadn't been burned to ash or torn to shreds.

“Get me some clothes, you consummate *bastard*.”

Malfoy's voice was a throaty rasp, but it sounded more like the product of overuse and less because his throat had been burned raw. Small relief.

Harry eased up onto his elbows, and Malfoy removed his foot, taking several measured steps back. This close, it was obvious Malfoy wasn't quite as steady on his feet as he usually was, and Harry somehow felt ashamed for noticing. "I—yeah, yeah sure." He scrambled to his feet, dusting off the knees of his pyjama bottoms to buy himself some time so he could gather his thoughts. "Um. Are...you all right?"

Malfoy's expression could have cut glass. "No thanks to you."

Harry winced, though of course he'd well deserved that. He pursed his lips; he wanted to apologise—properly to Malfoy this time, as he wasn't sure the dragon had even understood him—but he sensed any attempts at making nice would only fall on deaf ears at the moment. Malfoy was half-naked, exhausted, and rightly pissed at Harry. Apologies would only make *Harry* feel better. "...I'll go find you some more clothes, wait here."

"What the fuck *else* am I going to do?"

Harry opened his mouth, reflexively, to give him several suggestions as to what he could do with himself—then promptly snapped it shut again. Malfoy was entitled to smart off. He could make as many nasty remarks as he liked for, say, the next twelve hours. That sounded fair. Harry beat back the urge to leap into another fantastic row with Malfoy and instead turned on his heel and marched back into the tent in search of a change of clothes—though not without a final backwards glance, where he found Malfoy turned away, shoulders hunched and head hanging low.

His heart gave a guilty lurch. Malfoy was right; he really *was* a consummate bastard.

Morning found the four of them in even darker moods than usual, all running on relatively little sleep with tensions in the stratosphere. Harry had feared Malfoy would spend the day in their room out of shame for having been seen in such a state as he had the night before, but it seemed his appetite won out over his pride, and Malfoy was not only present, he was *sitting at the table* with them, having stolen the chair Ron usually sat in.

“Oi—that’s my seat!” Ron protested when he joined them to find all three chairs already occupied.

“I didn’t see your name written on it,” was all Malfoy said, concentrating very hard on keeping his hands from shaking as he tried to manoeuvre his forkful of eggs to his mouth. Harry had been watching him out of the corner of his eye for ten minutes now, wondering if the tremors were a byproduct of the trauma Malfoy had gone through the night before—or if they prefaced another episode sure to strike again soon.

“Don’t make a fuss, Ron; you were late to breakfast, so you’ve lost your spot.” Hermione waved absently toward the sitting room, her nose buried in a book. “Transfigure one of the armchairs if you like; there’s room for a fourth.”

“Oh, well so long as there’s *room*,” Ron muttered, drawing his wand and stalking over to tame the armchair into something more dining table-friendly.

It was odd, the three—four now—of them sitting around the breakfast table as if this were perfectly commonplace: the clink of cutlery against dishes, the soft rustle of pages turning, and four heads bowed in quiet communion. Harry decided it was simply that they were all of them thrown, still walking around wrong-footed after the previous evening’s events, and as soon as they got their bearings back, they’d return to their rightful positions and things would go back to normal.

Hermione snapped her book shut, setting it to the side as she cleared her throat. “I think we need to set down some rules.”

“Rooes?” Ron asked around a mouthful of toast. “Abou’ wha’?”

“About your atrocious table manners, I have to assume,” Malfoy said, one hand raised to shield himself from the flecks of half-digested toast Ron was spitting across the table.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “*Boys*. Obviously about what happened last night.”

Malfoy stabbed his plate with his fork, dragging the tines across with a simpering smile. “You mean when Potter nearly *murdered* me?”

“I didn’t *murder*—” Harry started.

“I did say ‘nearly’, didn’t I?”

“You can’t pin this all on me—I *told you* to get into the Sanctuary and transform!”

Hermione slammed a fist down on the table, and all three of them jumped in response, buttoning up promptly. She took a long, bracing breath. “Clearly, the way we’ve been trying to handle Malfoy’s...issues...isn’t going to cut it, going forward. As such, I feel we should try being a bit more proactive about this. If, as Harry says, this is a matter of emotions and new instincts building up inside—”

“You *told her*?” Malfoy hissed at Harry, cheeks pink and eyes flashing in rage.

“Of course he did,” Hermione said with practised patience. “And a good thing, too, or else I wouldn’t know *why* this happened and it might happen again. Instead, we’re going to get out ahead of this issue.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “No more bottling anything up—no more avoiding the Sanctuary. I know you don’t like it, but you should schedule a controlled shift at least once a week, I think, to ensure you give yourself a proper outlet for these emotions you feel bring on the need to transform.”

“*Schedule* a shift?”

“What, don’t think you can pencil it in between high tea with the Bridge Club and croquet on the South Lawn?” Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line. “Whatever’s gone wrong with your Animagus spell, it’s clearly not getting any better on its own--”

“Nothing went *wrong* with it! I performed it perfectly!”

Ron snorted into his coffee, thumping his fist against his chest to clear his breathing. “Go on, pull the other.”

Hermione gave Ron a look that somehow managed to be both fond and warning at the same time. “Well, be that as it may, there’s obviously something going on here that none of us have any idea how to handle.”

“Well there’s a first,” Malfoy muttered sourly, drawing runes in the condensation on his glass of juice. “A problem Granger can’t solve.”

“I’m *working on it*,” Hermione said, not a little defensive. “But while I’m sure it may come as a shock to you, you’re hardly the biggest problem we’re dealing with at the moment, so it might take some time.”

“Don’t go out of your way on account of me, please.”

“Don’t worry; we aren’t.” Hermione raised a brow. “As I said, we’re putting it on *you* to take care of yourself. This is only my very good advice, so take it or leave it. You don’t have to transform if you don’t feel like it; by all means, fight it tooth and nail if it makes you feel better. But seeing as the alternative to using the Sanctuary to let loose on a regular basis is an excruciating and messy death, I would think you’d be marching in there just as soon as you’ve cleaned your plate.”

Malfoy just glared at her, running his tongue over his teeth, then shoved his chair back and stood up, hands fisted at his sides. Harry thought he might actually throw a punch, or at least kick the table over, but he simply fixed them all in turn with a furious look and then flounced away. He paused in front of the Sanctuary for only a moment, then ducked his head and stalked into their room, slamming the door shut with such force, an embroidered sign reading “Home Is Where You Hang Your Robes” fell from its hook on the wall and clattered to the floor.

“...I guess that could have gone worse,” Harry said, and he honestly had expected a bit more fight from Malfoy. He’d made his usual sneering remarks and thrown a modest strop, but it lacked the bite Harry had come to associate with Malfoy over the years.

“I’m not surprised,” Hermione sighed. “The diagnostic charms I cast on him show that he’s perfectly healthy physically, with no lingering effects from the injuries he suffered before he managed to transform. But mentally, I can’t imagine he’s not spooked.”

“Spooked?” Ron huffed. “You just said he’s fine. I’d be dancing on the roof if I came out of what he went through in one piece.”

“Even if you knew it was your own body that had turned against you and put you through that hell in the first place?” She buttered a piece of toast, shaking her head. “If he’s agreeing to my suggestions at all, with as little backtalk as we heard, it’s only because he’s terrified this will happen again.”

Harry felt guilt coil in his stomach, the other side of Hermione’s words ringing in his ears: *he’s terrified Harry will refuse to cooperate again.*

“And you’ll be a gentleman and help him through his shifts, Harry? I know you’re not his biggest fan—heaven knows I’m right there behind you—but at least until he’s got a stronger grip on the transformation and feels comfortable in his Animagus form, I think it’s best you’re near at hand.”

Harry straightened. “Wait—*what?* Why do I have to be there?!”

“I’ve just told you why.”

“But—” He looked to Ron for support, but Ron seemed suddenly very interested in pouring himself some juice. Coward. “We—we don’t have time, right? We’ve got a job to do, You-Know-Whats to track down. We’ve wasted enough time babysitting Malfoy—and besides! I’m only good for talking him *down* from a transformation. He told me so himself!”

“Harry—” Hermione started.

“Look, I get that what he went through was *hell*, but he managed to shift back all right, didn’t he? He can turn into a dragon and back into a human just fine now, there’s no point in my being there!”

“*Harry James Potter,*” she tried again, more forceful now, and if she was using his full name, then this was one argument he wasn’t going to win. “You’ll listen to me and actually *hear* me this time: Talking to him, be it down from a transformation or through one, does Malfoy *good*. I expect it made all the difference last night, to be honest.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Well, and I know you probably don’t want to be reminded of this, and *he* probably doesn’t want you being reminded of it either, but you’re his mate. Or—he chose you as such, at least. That’s probably the *one thing* that beast inside of him recognises, and it’s the one thing it’ll respond to in a reasonably predictable manner. Last night, when he let the transformation take over, let the dragon’s instincts and urges inside of him loose, it could have easily overwhelmed him like before. But you spoke to him, when he was still in that limbo point of his shift where his human consciousness was still at the forefront of his mind. You’re a tether for him, something familiar that he can latch on to. He’s used it in the past to try and ground himself to stay human, but it seems you can function as a lifeline connecting him to his humanity even when he lets the dragon out.”

Harry was miserable, and he let his head fall into his hands, groaning. “Why *me* though? This is ridiculous! We don’t even *like* each other—but suddenly he’s in *love* with me?”

Hermione gave him a rather unhelpful pat on the shoulder. “It’s not *romantic* love—dragons have no concept of that. It’s about finding balance. Or a partner, an equal. Biologically, another like yourself with whom it would be wise to procreate.” Harry made a face; he’d already gotten this speech from Bragge, and Hermione’s riff wasn’t sounding any more convincing. Thoughts of ‘procreating’ with Draco Malfoy nearly brought his breakfast back up. “It’s probably not even something he *consciously* has any control over. It just *is*. You came into his life, you were the force that you were, the presence that you were, and your interactions coloured your relationship. And that relationship for him is, subconsciously, one in which you’re a worthy equal, whether he recognises it or not.”

It still didn’t make a whit of sense to Harry; how had he been any sort of ‘force’ or ‘presence’ in Malfoy’s life, beyond a target to tease mercilessly? The git had never forgiven Harry for calling him out at age 11 because he’d been being an arsehole to Ron! The very idea that Malfoy felt *anything* for Harry beyond disdain and jealousy simply boggled. Romantic or not, these feelings Hermione claimed Malfoy subconsciously held for Harry were downright absurd.

Harry looked up, sighing. “...Yeah, he *definitely* wouldn’t want you reminding me of any

of that.”

Hermione smiled wryly. “So you’ll help him? And not exacerbate the situation? We’re not making much headway on the Horcruxes at the moment, so I don’t see the occasional hour or so in the Sanctuary cutting too much into our saving-the-world side-business.” She reached for the last of the boiled eggs, setting it in one of the egg cups she had pilfered from a car boot sale two campsites ago. “You made the choice to help him once, so I think you owe it to him to go all-in with it.”

And of course she was right.

Malfoy was a grade-A wanker, that much they’d confirmed over the past few weeks, but he didn’t deserve to deal with this kind of torture—not even when he’d brought it upon himself. Harry couldn’t just stand idly by knowing there was something he could do to ease Malfoy’s suffering; indeed, it was what had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

But as before, another several uneventful days passed with Malfoy refusing to go into the Sanctuary.

Had he somehow *forgotten* what had happened to him the last time? Or was his stubborn refusal to do anything Hermione suggested on account of her being Muggleborn really going to outweigh the not-so-slim chance he might die if he didn’t wrestle these urges to transform under control? Hermione had only told him to *support* Malfoy—she’d made it very clear that the decision to heed her advice or not was entirely up to Malfoy.

As such, Harry decided to try and put the issue out of his mind, instead pouring himself into Horcrux research and food runs. Nearly a month in, now, and they’d grown confident enough in their Glamour charms to chance shopping in far-flung farmers’ markets and the odd corner shop, such that now they had reasonably well-stocked cupboards. Ron had nearly cried when Harry had come back from a shopping trip with ingredients to make a beef and ale stew, and Malfoy had actually had *seconds*.

So Harry read Hermione’s dry, dull books, only managing to focus on every other word,

and drafted shopping lists whenever the others mentioned cravings. What Malfoy did with his day, Harry neither knew nor cared. His responsibility started and ended at the door to the Sanctuary, so until Malfoy stepped through, there was no need for them to interact at all.

It was a Friday when it finally happened.

Dinner had been a poor man's chicken Provençal that Aunt Petunia had thrown together when a reporter for a local gardening magazine had come to the house to write up a piece on Petunia's kitchen garden. It hadn't had half the ingredients it was meant to, Harry had learned when he'd stolen a look at the recipe, but it had been tasty enough, and the name sounded fancy. He'd known there'd be a risk Malfoy might turn his nose up at the dish on the grounds it wasn't *real* chicken Provençal, but it would keep for days under a Warming Charm, and if Malfoy didn't want to eat it, no one was going to force it down his throat.

Still, eaten it Malfoy had, cleaning his plate before quietly depositing his dirty dishes in the sink—he never offered to do the Scouring up, naturally—and then making a beeline for their bedroom, as he'd done every night since the incident. He would always throw a dirty look toward the Sanctuary before hurrying past, as if fearing it might suck him in if he strayed too close.

But that night, he stopped—standing a body length from the door to the Sanctuary and just *staring* at it. Harry, curled up in one of Perkins's armchairs with a book on ancient wizarding artefacts on display at Hogwarts, was the first to notice the curious scene, because he couldn't help but be aware of what Malfoy was doing wherever he was in the tent, even when he was actively trying to *ignore* him. Hermione followed his eye a heartbeat later, and then Ron. Harry was certain Malfoy could tell they were watching him, could probably feel their gazes weighing heavily on his shoulders and would, given half a chance, do whatever he could to dash their hopes. There was a collectively held breath as they waited, wondering if he'd finally do it.

And then, as if it were nothing at all, Malfoy huffed, reached for the doorknob, and gave a

sharp yank, striding through with head held high. Just before the door slammed shut behind him, Harry caught a glimpse of leaf-bare trees and a patchy hedgerow much like those shielding their campsite. Beyond them, he knew, lay fallow fields and heather-covered hillsides as far as the eye could see.

Well. Good for him, having finally conquered his fear. Harry would miss the sight of Malfoy shying away from the Sanctuary like a spooked horse, but at least there'd be no more close calls with Malfoy nearly burning the tent down in self-immolation.

Harry sighed and turned back to his book—but not before he caught Hermione fixing him with a heavy, knowing look. "...What?"

"Harry, we discussed this."

Ah fuck. "But I'm right in the middle of—" He hefted the book up for her to see.

"I'm certain Ron and I are perfectly capable of—" She looked to Ron, who was trying to pick a bit of sweetcorn from his teeth—when was the last time they'd had *sweetcorn* at a meal? Harry couldn't recall. "...I am perfectly capable of handling the evening's research all on my own. I've got stacks Q through S to get through, and I'm pinning rather a lot of hope on *Soul Magic and You*."

He looked to Ron for support, but Ron just shrugged. "He's *your* pet project, mate. It's up to you to clean up after him if you want to keep him."

Harry didn't particularly want to keep Malfoy, but he was pretty sure the time for such decisions had long past. With a defeated groan, Harry stood, dropping *Hidden Treasures of Hogwarts* in the armchair and shuffling toward the Sanctuary as slowly as he could possibly manage. Maybe if he put it off long enough, Malfoy would abandon his efforts—or finish quickly!—and spare Harry the trouble.

Too soon, though, he reached the doorway and placed one hand on the knob, swallowing.

"Now don't you boys have *too* much fun in there," Ron called brightly, and Harry showed him two fingers and pushed his way inside.

The very first thing he noticed, once he'd stepped over the threshold, was that Malfoy was naked.

"Holy—*put some damn clothes on!*" Harry shouted, quickly averting his eyes.

"Potter?!" Malfoy shrieked in much the same tone. "What are you doing in here?!"

"I could ask you the same thing!" They'd all just *assumed* Malfoy had come in here to transform, like Hermione had suggested. This was certainly not the sight Harry had expected to walk in on. "Why are you naked?!" This was the third time he'd seen Malfoy in his birthday suit, and that was three times too many as far as Harry was concerned.

"I'm *not*," Malfoy growled, and there was some rustling of cloth. When Harry dared a quick glance, to check, he was relieved to see that the robes that had been pooling at Malfoy's ankles were hiked up again, with Malfoy clutching the fabric about his midsection for modesty. "Not *yet*."

"Not *yet*?" Harry repeated. "Meaning you were on your way there."

"Before you rudely interrupted. Now get *out*."

"So you can finish stripping and go run through the fields bare-arsed?" Harry ran his hands through his hair, then scrubbed his face. "Just—what the *hell*, Malfoy?"

"Granger wanted me to use this place, so I'm using it!"

"To *moonbathe*? Thank god I came in when I did—another thirty seconds and I don't think I'd ever have been rid of the image!"

Malfoy closed his eyes, inhaling slowly and holding his breath. "It may have escaped your attention, but my wardrobe at present is rather limited." He gave the robes clutched in his arm a shake—they were duplicates of Ron's, whose frame most closely matched Malfoy's. "I'd rather not rip them up with a transformation. Weasley's gangly, but even his rags won't fit a dragon."

Harry frowned—why would Ron’s robes need to fit a dragon? “So? Don’t they transform with you when you shift? All the Animagi I’ve ever met have shifted with their clothes on; it’s part of the magic.” Or so he’d assumed—as now that he thought about it, Malfoy had ruined whatever clothes he’d been wearing whenever he attempted a shift. In his mind’s eye, he could see the dragon’s wings trying to rip their way through the back of Ron’s robes, and his nose still stung with the stench of burnt fabric.

“Well bully for them—I *can’t*.”

“Have you actually tried?”

“Get *out*, Potter.” Malfoy made a shooing motion with one hand, the other holding up the robes to maintain some semblance of modesty. “If it’s an eyeful you’re after, go hit up Weasley. He seems just desperate enough to slum it with you.”

Ron *was* a bit desperate, even Harry could see, but it certainly wasn’t for Harry’s company. Harry glanced around the clearing; there were too many trees and bushes around for Malfoy to shift without banging his tail or wings on something, but it was only a few dozen paces to the tree brake. “I just...thought maybe you were going to try transforming on your own.”

Malfoy gestured to himself. “Ten points to Gryffindor; I’d have *done it*, too, if I hadn’t been interrupted by your ogling me.”

Harry was definitely not ogling, because there wasn’t much to see beyond Malfoy’s pale, skinny shoulders and whip-thin arms and pointy chin. “Well I thought maybe you needed to be talked through it again.”

“I never needed to be talked *through* it, Potter. I needed to be talked *down* from it, which you seemed to think a waste of your precious beauty sleep, as I recall.” The point stung, hitting home likely just as Malfoy had intended it. “So I’ve clearly no need for you—run along back to your lackeys.”

Harry crossed his arms, throwing a longing look back to the doorway. Could he sneak

back in without their noticing? He wished he had his Invisibility Cloak on him. “Hermione told me to come in here.”

“Why?” Malfoy wrinkled his nose. “To make sure I’m managing no mischief?”

“No, to help...” Harry waved his hand vaguely in Malfoy’s direction. “I dunno, keep you grounded or something?” He shrugged. “She thinks you’re better off when I’m around than when I’m not, that’s all.”

“So you’re my nanny, then.”

“You’d have to ask her that. If you want to ignore me, then feel free.” Harry cast about for something to sit on, then grabbed one of Perkins’s rickety old folding chairs leaning against the doorway leading back into the tent. Once Hermione had crafted the space, they’d tossed most of the junk cluttering up the tent in here to make room for more bookcases. He unfolded the chair, sliding into it gingerly to be sure it would hold his weight. “Go on about your business. An after-dinner nap suits me better than hearing a lecture about ‘abandoning you in your hour of need’ or whatever.”

In retrospect, Harry supposed he should’ve brought *Hidden Treasures of Hogwarts* in here with him, though a nap was plenty more appealing at the moment than more research, especially when he didn’t even know what he was looking for. “*You’ll know it when you see it,*” Hermione had assured him, but he really didn’t think Voldemort had made a Horcrux out of the cauldron Vindictus Viridian (“*First Slytherin Head Boy*”) had used as a student.

Malfoy continued to glare at him, robes cinched at his waist, before sighing dramatically and gritting out, “*Fine.* But you’d better not watch. Turn around.”

“Why would I want to *watch*?” Harry sputtered, quickly swivelling the chair around so his back was to Malfoy—but not before he glimpsed Malfoy’s naked chest. Something about the sight caught him, so smooth and unblemished—not even a dusting of chest hair. Harry frowned to himself. “...Your chest...”

“Wha—*turn around, I said!*”

Harry ignored him, standing. “There’s no scars.” Malfoy glanced down at himself, one hand holding the robes to cover himself from the stomach down while the other came up to touch his pectoral. They’d never spoken about that moment—there hadn’t been time for one, or desire for another. Harry had carried the guilt around in his pocket for months now, though. Maybe that was why he’d leapt through hoops to see Malfoy safely from the Ministry’s dungeons. He’d almost killed Malfoy once; having saved him, perhaps they might be even. It sounded like as good a reason as any. “Just—I’m glad. That it didn’t scar. I never meant...”

Malfoy’s hand dropped back to his side, clenching into a fist, and he drew the robes up higher, clutching them like a security blanket. “...It did scar. Pomfrey and Snape did what they could, practically bathing me in dittany, but they were Dark curse scars. There’s no Vanishing those.”

Harry recalled George’s ear and how fruitless all of Molly’s efforts had been. Malfoy wasn’t making any sense. “But—they’re gone now... I don’t see anything.”

Malfoy shrugged, slender shoulders rising and falling. “They disappeared, after the first time, when I...” Oh. The first time he’d transformed into the dragon, Harry realised. “I suppose it healed them. Nice to know this form’s good for *something*. I’d hoped...” But Malfoy didn’t finish his thought, drawing his left arm tight to his chest and biting his fist.

Harry knew, if he looked at Malfoy’s forearm, he’d see a scar that the transformation hadn’t managed to heal.

Malfoy huffed, running his fingers through his hair and waving Harry off. “So? If you’re done gawking now?”

Harry rolled his eyes, shuffling around to look away, but he made sure to keep Malfoy in his peripheral vision just in case something went wrong. A split-second of forewarning might be all that saved him from getting shishkebabed or barbecued.

A breeze picked up, stirring up leaves and sending them swirling into the night sky. It wasn't cold, not really, but Harry reflexively shivered as the wind ruffled his hair, and he wished he'd thought to put on a jumper. October was bearing down upon them, and soon enough autumn would wax into winter. It was looking more and more like Hermione's prediction they'd still be here when snow set in would be coming true. He wondered what they'd be doing around Christmas—would they have made any headway at all? Or would they still be dicking around in the woods, noses buried in books while—

A flash of white caught his eye, and Harry whirled around, one hand on the wand in his back pocket and his heart in his throat. His eye sought out Malfoy—but instead, it found something far more magnificent.

That was really the only word Harry could come up with, banging about inside his head: *Magnificent*.

'*Finally*,' he thought, for he realised a part of him had been looking forward to this moment for far longer than Harry was entirely comfortable with. This moment when he'd at last see the dragon as it was *meant* to be seen. Not trussed and sedated in a dank cell, not exhausted and wrung out, collapsed in a heap—but *this*. The beast that had struck down Albus Dumbledore.

The dragon was pacing again, though not in wild confusion this time. More like it was trying to get its bearings, long neck stretched toward the sky as it scented the air. Its body was long and serpentine, with a line of hooked spines curving along its back toward the tip of its whipcrack tail, and its hide glittered with a million tiny scales that seemed to gather moonlight, reflecting back an opalescent sheen. From its bulky shoulders stretched a pair of bat-like wings, half-open and tentatively waving, like a child with outstretched arms trying to navigate a narrow beam. The dragon drew its neck back, settling into a swan-like S-shape in repose, and blinked lazily at Harry with eyes that didn't seem able to decide what colour they wanted to be.

Harry swallowed, keeping his fingers on his wand, and approached carefully—he wanted a closer look, but he also wanted all his limbs still attached to his body. No amount of

dittany was going to reattach an arm, he was pretty sure. “Malfoy...?” he tried, praying his voice didn’t crack.

The dragon swung its massive head around, fixing those distracting eyes squarely on Harry, and gave a sharp, derisive snort that Harry swore sounded like *Obviously*.

Reassured, Harry took a slow circuit of the dragon, being sure to keep clear of the tail lashing impatiently and claws like talons digging into the soft soil.

He’d thought it before, but it really was rather tiny, for a dragon, being only slightly larger than Uncle Vernon’s car. It was certainly less imposing than the house-sized creatures the champions had challenged in the Triwizard Tournament. Bragge had said Malfoy was a juvenile, with his Animagus form tied to his human development, so did that mean he would get bigger? Or was this breed one of the smaller ones? He wished he’d paid a bit more attention in Care of Magical Creatures class, though he hadn’t anticipated he’d actually need to *apply* any of the lessons.

Malfoy tried to trip him up with his tail, though Harry nimbly leapt over it—but he still managed to get buffeted by Malfoy’s awkwardly spread wings. Harry took several steps back to give him a wider berth, warning, “Watch it.” The dragon just huffed, affecting what looked like a very poor attempt at an innocent expression.

A thought occurred to him, though: “...So can you fly?”

Malfoy opened his wings fully, showing off his admittedly impressive wingspan—even with that tail, he was still wider than he was long. He tossed his head as if to say *What the fuck do you think these are for?*

“Well, yes, and they’re lovely, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to learn—but as I hear it, you apparently *climbed* Gryffindor Tower. So I ask again: Can you fly?” It was the strangest sensation, having this one-sided conversation with Malfoy—mostly because it *was* a conversation. It had been one thing, delivering his apology and pithy reassurances to the dragon when it had barely been conscious. It was another matter entirely to be full-on chatting with an overgrown lizard and half-expecting it to fire back one of Malfoy’s acrid

comments in return.

Malfoy could only grunt in response, but it didn't sound very confident. Harry inclined his head toward the tree brake, beyond which was a bit more space to move about. "Give it a shot, then? Surely it's innate." He didn't wait for a response, only charged ahead, weaving his way through the trees. He kind of hoped Malfoy wasn't going to be a stubborn arse about this; he just wanted to see the dragon fly, that was all.

Malfoy released a plaintive groan, but Harry just beckoned him on, and then with a grumbling growl, Malfoy was finally following him. He shoved his bulk through the trees, snapping saplings and crushing them underfoot with about as much finesse as an Erumpent in heat. When he finally broke through, he gave a great shiver, like a dog just come in from the rain, and sent a shower of leaves and twigs cascading off his hide.

Harry placed his hands on his hips, nodding. "Well? Go on."

Malfoy looked around to get his bearings, wings awkwardly held out from his body, and then planted his feet to brace himself. He sank into a crouch, as if he were preparing to pounce—then snapped into movement with far more grace and speed than Harry would have credited. He took a few galloping strides, wings spread wide to catch the wind, and leapt—

And then promptly face-planted, throwing up grass and flowers and sod in a chaotic spray.

Harry couldn't help it, he broke out into several loud, belly-deep guffaws, feeling like his sides might *literally* split. Malfoy was quick to recover, though, scrambling to his feet, and he gnashed his teeth in rage. Harry had to pull his glasses off and wipe his eyes, and Malfoy, evidently furious at being made a spectacle of, spit a ball of vivid-red flame that only missed Harry's head because he quickly ducked to roll out of the way.

"Oi! You could've taken my head off!" Harry snapped, drawing out his wand. The fireball had continued on past Harry and engulfed a bush in flame, and he doused it with an *Aguamenti*.

Malfoy ignored him, shuffling around with his wings open to try again. He gave a few tentative beats, whipping up a breeze that sent dust and leaves flying, and leapt straight into the air—only to come tumbling back down, his legs crumpling beneath him. Harry bit his tongue and looked away, not wanting to earn another fireball-infused rebuke. Twice more Malfoy tried to catch the air and failed before Harry decided it was too pitiful to watch in silence any longer.

“I think you need to build up more speed—or maybe you just aren’t catching the air right?” The air whistled when Malfoy flapped, suggesting most of it was being lost as he slashed through instead of collecting a downdraft that could support his bulk.

Malfoy only grunted at him, trying the exact same technique that had failed three times already and looking all the more frustrated for it.

“No—no, I just *told* you. You’ve got to angle them different, you’re losing all your lift. Look—” Harry reached out, grabbing the leading edge of one wing, and Malfoy whirled around with an angry snarl, baring his teeth and whipcracking his tail right by Harry’s head.

With a startled yelp, Harry jumped back, tripping over a root and falling squarely onto his arse.

Malfoy just settled onto his haunches, releasing a happy puff of smoke that curled around his head. Harry hadn’t known dragons could sneer, but he could have sworn this one had managed it.

“Fine,” Harry said, easing to his feet and slapping the dirt from the seat of his trousers. “If you think you can do any better, then by all means.”

Malfoy seemed content to do just that, trotting several paces away and continuing his efforts to generate enough lift to haul himself into the air. He wasn’t much more successful than he’d been before Harry started offering advice, but Harry didn’t miss that he’d changed the angle at which he held his wings, catching quite a bit more air now with no more whistling. Proudful arsehole.

He found a tree to lean against while he watched Malfoy's efforts, smiling in amusement every time Malfoy crashed in a heap of wings and talons and tail but making sure to keep his mouth firmly shut. After a fair bit of trial and effort—and with more perseverance than Harry honestly would have expected—Malfoy seemed to be getting the hang of it a bit, holding his wings at the perfect angle on every attempt now and narrowing down the timing at which the first hard downbeat needed to come in order to give him the most lift. Somewhere along the way, he seemed to realise he could use the slopes of the gentle hills around their campsite to give himself more natural height at take-off, and Harry couldn't suppress a little *yes!* of excitement when, at last, Malfoy managed to break free of his earthly bindings—for a few wingbeats, at least.

Really, it was only hovering, but Malfoy was perfectly pleased with himself when he slammed back into the ground, his four legs quivering with the impact. He gave a throaty, crowing bark, and Harry indulged him with some polite applause. “Congratulations—it only took you, what, fifty tries?”

Malfoy didn't seem to mind, still practically prancing as he made his way up the hill once more. Harry stood in place to mark each new landing point, encouraging Malfoy to try and glide farther on each pass, and in what seemed like no time at all he was able to make it nearly five body lengths before gravity got the best of him once more. He still couldn't manage to get much height, no matter how he flapped, but Harry had to admit this was impressive for Malfoy's first attempt at flying in his Animagus form. He wasn't nearly as quick a study with his wings as he had been with his broom, from what Harry recalled, but he would manage it in time. Malfoy being Malfoy, Harry doubted his pride would *let* him not be doing loop-de-loops inside of a week.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed since they'd entered the Sanctuary—but the moon overhead had passed its apogee, so it had to be quite late. Harry was pleasantly surprised to see that he hadn't minded babysitting Malfoy half as much as he'd expected, in large part because, well, Malfoy couldn't speak. It was a lot easier to handle him when he couldn't let slip whatever nasty thoughts happened to wander through his mind, and Harry imagined they might have been best mates by now if someone had just slapped the git with a *Silencio* back in first year.

He smiled at the thought, and then Malfoy cuffed his ear with a wingtip, as if he could tell Harry was thinking something particularly uncharitable about him. Harry rubbed his ear with a frown. “I didn’t say anything!”

Malfoy tossed his head in a gesture that said *I still heard it*, then set off at a gentle lope for another hill a stone’s throw away. This one was a bit taller than the others around it, with a steeper grade, and if Malfoy wasn’t careful, he might really hurt himself trying to use it as a launch pad.

He climbed to the peak, while Harry stood with his hands in his pockets at the foot to bear witness. If Malfoy broke his neck pushing himself too far before he was ready, well at least that would be one less problem they had to deal with.

Once in position, Malfoy crouched down as low as he could go, wiggling his body like a cat ready to pounce and buffeting the air with test strokes of his wings as he geared up for launch. Harry bit his tongue before he was tempted to remind Malfoy that he’d *never* seen a dragon do that, wary of disturbing his focus.

The moon was fat and bright, and Malfoy fair glowed under its watch. With another few test beats, he seemed to have decided himself and tensed like a coiled spring—before launching with a sharp kick of his hindquarters, wings open to catch as much air as he could and then soundly shoving downward. He quickly tucked his legs under his body and drew his wings up again before releasing into another downbeat. His momentum carried him forward, and though Harry would still not have called this flying, Malfoy *was* managing enough lift to keep himself aloft, and he only began losing it when exhaustion had him lapsing into a glide that he maintained for another few hundred metres, easily besting his previous record.

When he at last alighted—or rather, dropped to the ground, as he hadn’t yet mastered the art of the graceful landing—he came bounding back towards Harry, shooting little jets of flame from his nostrils. He very clearly wanted some praise for his efforts, nervous energy bubbling over, and Harry took it upon himself to keep Malfoy well-grounded. “Yes, yes, well done—but *gliding* doesn’t count as flying, you know.” Malfoy

squawked indignantly, but Harry pressed on. “No, I *know* you got a bit of altitude, I was watching, but look at the size of that hill! I don’t think it was an entirely fair attempt. You’ll have earned your wings when you can launch yourself from a dead start, I say.”

Malfoy growled under his breath, but his wings drooped a bit. He was stubborn and would never admit it, but these were clear signals he knew Harry was in the right.

Harry craned his neck skyward; the moon was heading towards the horizon now, so it was late indeed. He was a little offended neither Ron nor Hermione had poked their heads into the Sanctuary to be sure he hadn’t been murdered. Malfoy could have been using his femur for a toothpick by now, and they’d be none the wiser.

Malfoy was looking up at the hill like he was seriously considering another go, but Harry put a stop to that. He didn’t know from where Malfoy got the energy, flapping and running around and climbing up and down hills. Harry was exhausted just watching him. “It’s getting late, Malfoy—can’t we call it a night?” All he received was an irritated snort, and Malfoy stamped his foot in frustration in such a *Malfoy* way that Harry had to cover his mouth so he wouldn’t laugh. He coughed to disguise it. “All right, fine—you can keep at it if you like. I’m knackered.” He’d spent a good couple of hours in here with Malfoy, so Hermione couldn’t fault him for tagging out now.

He turned to head back toward the tree brake, but Malfoy called him back with a plaintive chirrup. Harry just waved and continued on—and sure enough, a moment later, Malfoy was shoving his way through the trees right on Harry’s heels. How much of this, Harry wondered, was *Malfoy* and how much of it was the dragon? Because it felt very much like Malfoy wanted attention, which was nothing new, but the almost playful way in which he sought it *was*.

“I told you you could stay if you wanted to practise some more,” Harry reminded him, but the dragon just gave a grunting snuffle that sounded like an audible version of a shrug. “No fun if you can’t show off for me, is it?” And then Malfoy hooked a claw into the hem of Harry’s trouser leg, and down Harry went, face-first into a mushroom patch. As he struggled to his feet, Malfoy stepped over him, sweeping his tail out to knock

Harry over again. “Bastard,” he muttered, adjusting his glasses, but Malfoy didn’t seem to hear him.

Once they reached the entrance, Harry grabbed Perkins’s rickety chair and placed it back by the entrance. Malfoy, though, was dawdling, watching Harry tidy up and showing no signs of shifting back. Harry jerked a thumb in invitation, raising his brows. “Well? Are you coming, or not? I was serious when I said you didn’t have to come back inside yet—Hermione created this space for you, after all.”

Malfoy just bucked his head, pawing the ground in irritation. Harry was beginning to rethink his relief that Malfoy couldn’t speak—before noticing the dark pile of fabric at Malfoy’s feet. *Oh*. Malfoy wanted him to turn around again so that he could shift back. “Right—right, sorry, turning around...” He rolled his eyes and turned his back, doing a ten count under his breath.

By the count of seven, there came a gentle rustling, and Malfoy called out, “...All right, you can turn back around.”

Harry did so—slowly, lest Malfoy think he was trying to ‘ogle him’ again. The robes had been pulled back over Malfoy’s head, and he was casting about, presumably for the left boot to match the right one on his foot. “You’re *really* bad at flying, you know,” Harry said.

“No, I’m really *good* at gliding,” Malfoy protested, giving a soft *ah!* when he found the wayward boot had been knocked behind the very bush he’d nearly incinerated earlier. “And when I want to fly, I will do so—and I’ll be really good at *that* too.”

“Hm. So you weren’t even trying to fly tonight, is what you’re saying.” Malfoy just shrugged, and with both boots back on the proper feet, they made for the entrance. “Pity you aren’t bigger, though; maybe we could’ve ridden you around instead of Apparating everywhere.”

Malfoy cut him a sharp look. “You’re not *riding* me. I’m not your pack mule.”

“Well obviously not—you’re far too small.”

“I’m not *small!*” Malfoy sputtered.

“Of course you are.” Harry tapped his temple. “Remember, I’ve faced a full-grown dragon with nothing but my wits and my wand. She would have eaten you for breakfast. One chomp.” He pasted on a fond smile. “You’re such a tiny little thing.”

“I’m a *perfectly normal-sized* thing. You said yourself this form is only a juvenile and—” He clamped his lips shut before he got going, though, settling for calling Harry several choice names under his breath. Well, at least *one* of them was working on controlling his emotions around the other. Hermione and Ron would be relieved.

There was a beat of silence, and Harry changed the subject. “So...was it that bad?”

“What?” Malfoy frowned in confusion—then his features softened, going slack. “...It was fine.”

“So you won’t be a prick and put off doing it again?”

Malfoy shuddered. “Believe me, I’ve *no* desire to go through that again...”

“Good.” Harry nodded. “So, uh, same time next week?”

Malfoy drew to a stop. “Next *week?*”

“...Er, do you need to do it more often?” Hermione had only said ‘regular intervals’—did this need to happen multiple times a week? *Every day?* Surely Hermione couldn’t expect Harry to be in here nightly watching Malfoy faceplant as he tried to figure out how to fly. It was a laugh riot, to be sure, but there was still a part of Harry that felt, honestly, like he’d wasted the evening. He’d almost enjoyed himself, he was forced to admit, but he doubted Hermione had made any breakthroughs in the meantime. Harry probably wouldn’t have uncovered anything of note either, but there was something to be said for feeling useful.

“Well—I don’t know, I just...” Malfoy hedged, and Harry raised a brow. This was starting to sound less like a *need* with Malfoy and more like a *want*.

“It was only ‘fine’, but you can’t wait a whole week to do it again?”

He couldn’t help the teasing edge to his tone, and sure enough, it backfired. Malfoy shouldered past him roughly, stalking towards the entrance. “You’ve completed your Granger-assigned duties; bravo. I’m confident I can handle this on my own from here on out.”

“Wh—dammit, Malfoy! It was a—” Malfoy shoved his way through the door back into the tent, slamming it shut behind him. “...Joke.” So damn prickly, he was. Always ready to tease and bully but couldn’t take a bit of gentle ribbing back. Granted, Harry wasn’t one of his Slytherin mates or even a casual acquaintance, but surely Malfoy could stand to not be such a tight-arse when they were stuck with one another.

Harry returned to the tent, where he washed up and readied for bed. Back in their room, Malfoy was already under the covers, his back to Harry and the sheets drawn up to his ears, so that all Harry could see of him was his shock of white-blond hair. The lamps had been set low, and Harry shuffled over to his own bed, settling on the mattress.

“...There’s nothing *wrong* with wanting to use the Sanctuary more often,” Harry tried in a game effort at reassurance. Malfoy was proud, and if Harry didn’t want to get into a shouting match with him at every interaction, he needed to be wary of bruising that pride.

“I’ll use it as often as I need to and no more. Good night, Potter.”

Right, clearly being understanding wasn’t the way to approach this. Malfoy responded only to two things: threat and challenge. Threat had pushed him into the Sanctuary tonight, the abject terror that the dragon would force its way out again whether he wanted it to or not. Fear was a powerful tool, but it wasn’t one Harry was comfortable wielding. Which left challenge, something he was certain would come much more naturally when dealing with Malfoy.

“...You can’t fly yet, though.”

“I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”

“Maybe, but I thought you started this whole Animagus business to save your folks? How are you going to do that if you can’t at least *fly*? Gonna scurry around while Dark wizards fire spells at you, setting their robes on fire and sweeping their legs out from under them?”

Malfoy’s voice was tense with anger, and Harry could almost hear his teeth grinding. “Again: I *fail to see* how that’s any of your business.”

“It’s not. I’m just putting it out there. If you needed to practise more often, I’d understand. Hermione and Ron would understand too.”

“Oh, well aren’t I just so *blessed* to have your understanding? That’s a weight off my shoulders.”

Harry rolled his eyes, giving up. As he saw it, he’d gone above and beyond trying to help Malfoy out. He’d broken Malfoy out of prison, talked him through multiple shifts, and was even now offering Malfoy an out, a way to save face without sacrificing his drive and ideals. What more could he do? Nothing, that was what—and that was precisely what he intended to do going forward. He flopped down onto the mattress, rustling fitfully until he’d managed to draw the covers up over his shoulders.

He lay in the darkness, eyes shut, for several long minutes, waiting for sleep to take him. Instead, he got Malfoy grumbling, “You don’t have to keep coming in with me. I don’t need your help.”

Harry rolled onto his back, staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent. “‘Rely on others and you’re only setting yourself up for disappointment.’ Wasn’t that what you said? Well you can’t do *everything* by yourself, you know.” Harry spoke from experience; he’d tried putting off Ron and Hermione several times, but he didn’t know where he’d be right now if they hadn’t been beside him every step of the way in this little excursion of

theirs.

“Well, I’ve relied on you and I’m disappointed; seems to have worked out just as I predicted.” Harry wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a joke or not, so he didn’t say anything. “...I can handle myself now.”

“Hermione told me to help you. I mean to do so whether you want me to or not.”

“Salazar’s balls, but she’s got you wound right about her little finger, doesn’t she? You do *everything* Granger tells you to?”

“She’s usually in the right, so I tend to err on her side.” He didn’t remind Malfoy that she was the entire reason that Malfoy wasn’t a pile of ash and blackened bone at the moment. Without the Sanctuary, there was little telling how they would have managed Malfoy’s issues. Harry didn’t want to consider the alternatives, honestly.

“And you think she’s right, assigning you babysitting duties with me, when as I hear it you’ve got far more important matters on which to focus?”

Harry frowned in the darkness. “...As *you* hear it?” His heart gave an uncomfortable double-beat; had Malfoy overheard them? Had they let something slip? Or—had he heard mention of their quest during his time with the other Death Eaters?

Malfoy just sniffed. “Don’t think I don’t notice all those private little conversations the three of you get into under some spell of Granger’s any time I’m around. You’re hardly subtle about it.” He wasn’t wrong; they tended to go about their research as usual, only throwing up a *Muffliato* if Malfoy was within hearing distance when there were detailed points they needed to discuss. “You may not be fond of me, and trust that the feeling is *quite* mutual, but I’m not stupid; whatever you’re scheming, I’m sure it would benefit from your full attention, rather than wasted in half-measures on me.”

Harry didn’t really understand where Malfoy was going with this conversation, as it was starting to sound like Malfoy was being *considerate*, which was preposterous. Instead, Harry shrugged to himself. “Maybe I like seeing you crash trying to haul that huge white

arse of yours into the air.”

Malfoy released a little huff that Harry thought might have been a barely stifled chuckle. “I thought you said I was a—what was it? ‘Tiny little thing?’”

And because it was dark, and Malfoy couldn’t see him, Harry smiled at the quip. It really was a pity Malfoy was such a stuck-up, cowardly arsehole. His comebacks weren’t terrible.

Malfoy sighed loudly. “...Fine, as you will.”

It was, Harry supposed, the closest they would come to a truce, so he left it at that, closed his eyes, and found sleep quite quickly this time.

Learning Curve

Whether encouraged by Harry's reminders that no one would dare tease him about actually *wanting* to use the Sanctuary or in a fit of spite to show he would not be intimidated by their judging eyes, Malfoy retired to the Sanctuary every evening after dinner for the rest of the week, with Harry reluctantly joining him at Hermione's insistence. It wasn't necessarily that he minded spending the time with Malfoy—once he was in his Animagus form, he couldn't really speak, and they got along swimmingly—he just hated feeling like he was wasting time they very much did not have.

They were completely cut off from the wizarding world right now, with no clue as to how their friends and family were faring. Had the Death Eaters gone public with their takeover of the Ministry? Was Hogwarts now a training ground for junior Death Eaters, with those averse to joining the cause instead being used for target practice? Voldemort might have declared himself the King of Magical Great Britain, and they would be none the wiser.

The only one who'd made any progress of note between them seemed to be Malfoy. His evenings practising had paid off handsomely, and more quickly than Harry would have given him credit for, Malfoy was actually *flying*—not just gliding. His stamina still needed some work, and he rarely ventured very far off the ground, evidently worried he'd lose control and crash (or perhaps he was scared of heights without a broom under him; wouldn't *that* be hilarious?), but he was looking more and more like a proper dragon daily. Harry thought he would probably miss seeing Malfoy crash and throw tantrums, hissing and flapping his wings and lashing his tail when a manoeuvre didn't work out like he'd planned.

Harry didn't know that his presence was particularly necessary any more—he'd offered to cast a Cushioning Charm in case of nasty falls and had to quickly throw up a *Protego* to deflect the fireball spat his way in response—but Malfoy tolerated him blithely now. Harry stood by his initial feeling that Malfoy really wasn't so bad when he couldn't talk

and was focused on a task, and perhaps because he was releasing whatever had been pent up inside of him in a healthy manner now, he was marginally more tolerable when he *could* talk, too. He would grumble a pithy *thanks* when whoever was on kitchen duty prepared him a plate, minded his tone around Hermione (well, usually), didn't go out of his way to rile up Ron (well, less than usually), and hadn't called Harry *Scarhead* or *Four-eyes* or some other infuriating nickname in at least two weeks.

He was still insufferable when he was in a mood, but this was usually because he was overdue a shift and was trying to goad Harry into dragging him into the Sanctuary. They had developed...a rhythm, Harry supposed. A way for the four of them to exist in the same space without constantly battling the urge to throttle each other. They were none of them entirely pleased with the situation, but they were making it work.

There were, of course, still hiccoughs: for instance, every evening in the Sanctuary began and ended with the tiresome ritual of Harry turning his back to give Malfoy privacy while he shifted. It was a niggling reminder that while Malfoy had managed the complicated magic to actually *become* an Animagus, he hadn't been formally trained, like Hermione had been, nor did he have the extensive real-world experience with his form, like the Marauders had had. He needed a tutor, honestly, but Harry was reluctant to ask Hermione to take on the role. After all, while Malfoy was reasonable civil—in relative terms—with Harry, there was no telling how he'd behave in private with Hermione.

Still, he felt compelled to at least take her temperature on the matter.

They were out shopping under a Glamour at a small supermarket. Ron had been making overtures of missing his mother's cooking of late, and though Hermione had gotten a bit cross with him ("We're out here risking our lives, and all he's concerned about is missing Molly's Sunday dinners! Did he think we'd be searching for You-Know-Whats during the day and back home in time for supper?!"), Harry had guiltily been nursing a similar craving for a hearty Lancashire hotpot Molly had made a few Christmases back. With the autumn chill giving way to an early snap, they would all appreciate something warm and filling to brace them for the coming weather.

They wandered down the aisles, ticking off their list as they went and trying to remain as unremarkable as possible. It always felt odd, walking about in broad daylight with the times being what they were. But they always stuck to small towns for such excursions, and while the Cloak would have been much safer, Glamours gave them access to a wider array of foodstuffs.

“Well it’s good to hear Malfoy’s making such strides with his Animagus form. I’ll admit I was worried his pride might outweigh his survival instinct, but it sounds like he’s managing.”

Harry shrugged. “He’s a Slytherin; that self-preservation of theirs is nothing to joke about.”

“Maybe now he’ll stop being such a grumpy arsehole; do you think we could convince him to pitch in with the cooking? It’s only fair.”

“Let’s not be too hasty with this ‘maybe he’ll stop being a grumpy arsehole’ business,” Harry drawled.

“Well, we *are* keeping him prisoner, technically,” Hermione said, casually glancing down the aisle to be sure they hadn’t been overheard. A force of habit, Harry supposed, since they never conversed outside of their campsite without a *Muffliato* in place. “He’s entitled to feel a bit put-out.”

“But—it’s not like we can just set him free!” Harry argued, and Hermione held up a hand.

“I know! Of course I know that. Desperate times and all that. But...” She shook her head. “Still, I can’t help but sympathise. If my parents were stuck under You-Know-Who’s thumb, I’d probably be just as disinclined to act rationally as him.”

They turned down the dairy aisle, and Hermione started to scan the cheeses, having confessed a craving of her own for a nice, simple toastie.

“Er, well...since you say that...” Harry cleared his throat softly. “He doesn’t seem to have learned how to shift with his clothes on yet.” Hermione fixed him with a wide-eyed look,

and he hastened to add, “I mean, I turn away whenever he does it—but I’m sure he’d be a lot more comfortable if he didn’t feel so, er, *exposed* every time he transformed...”

“I suppose he would...”

“I know it’s rotten to ask you to deal with a piece of shit like him, after all the horrible things he’s said to you, but if we can just stabilise him to the point where he doesn’t need me as much, then we could get back to doing what it is we’re *meant* to be doing.” He tried to paint as pretty a picture as he could, wary it sounded like he was just searching for an excuse to be rid of Malfoy. “He seems to have settled a bit into the reality of his situation now, and I really do think he’s got more or less some degree of control over himself. If we can get him properly polished, then I’m sure he’ll feel comfortable enough in his handling of his magic, and we can leave him to his own devices.”

Hermione picked up a wheel of Gruyère and stared at its label, though Harry doubted she was actually reading it. “...You’re right.”

“...I’m serious, though, when I say I don’t want to *ask* you to do this—” he started, but she was already shaking her head.

“No—no, I want to. I should have offered earlier, really. I do feel sorry for him, despite everything. Even as horrid as he’s been to all of us in the past, he doesn’t deserve to be tortured. He has a lot to answer for...but it wouldn’t be humane to ignore him, if there’s something we can do to help.” She gave Harry a thin-lipped smile. “Though I don’t suppose I need to tell you that.”

Harry ducked his head. He’d never properly apologised to Hermione or Ron for the danger he’d put them all in at the Ministry, and he doubted Ron would really understand even if Harry tried to explain himself. It felt good, knowing that Hermione at least saw the knots he’d worked himself into, until he hadn’t had any real choice *but* to do what he could to rescue Malfoy.

She sighed, tucking the cheese into her basket. “Of course, this all presupposes he’ll even agree to my tutoring him.”

Harry concurred; it was a rather substantial assumption indeed. He'd just have to make sure Malfoy understood he didn't really have a choice.



As expected, Draco Malfoy was decidedly *not* enamoured with the idea of tutoring under Hermione, a fact he seemed intent on relating solely through body language, as he slouched in his chair across from her with his face set in a stony expression and arms crossed over his chest.

She hadn't been lying to Harry; she *did* feel sorry for Malfoy. Yes, he'd brought all of his problems squarely upon himself, but he'd been a stupid child misled by the people around him and rarely challenged to consider the thoughts and feelings of those with a different upbringing. He deserved correctional measures at the most, not torture.

So Hermione would do what she could, for as long as Malfoy would tolerate her, and then that would be her conscience wiped clean.

"Well, I suppose we should start with the basics, just to see where you're at for being self-taught." She gestured to a stack of books she'd gathered from her library. "I studied with Professor McGonagall after Third Year to earn my Animagus licence, so I've a fair bit more experience all around than you, but I imagine there's a lot we can learn from each other." Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Do you have any questions before we get started?"

He raked a judging gaze over her, from her bushy hair drawn away from her face with a band down to her dirty trainers. "What are you, then?"

Well, at least he was speaking—and the first words out of his mouth hadn't been *Mudblood* or some variation thereon. They were off to as good a start as could be hoped. Hermione stood in place. "How about I show you?"

She took a breath, closed her eyes, and let the magic sweep out from her core. She never tired of the sensation—feeling her magic connecting with something deeper, something more innate, to give form to what she was certain must be some aspect of her soul. She'd

never really considered it, but what if that was what it was? What form, then, might someone who'd split their soul to create a Horcrux take?

These were questions to ponder later, though, and she felt everything draw in close as her world expanded, until she was peering at her surroundings through what sometimes felt like a dull, dirty looking glass. She could hear Harry and Ron discussing their game of Wizard's Chess in Ron's room; Harry had made an illegal move, and Ron was trying to show him where he should have moved instead, as now apparently he was in check on several counts. Ron had decidedly *not* been happy to learn Hermione was going to be giving Malfoy pointers on being an Animagus, demanding both he and Harry be included as chaperons, until Hermione had pointedly reminded him that *Harry* didn't need a chaperon, so why should she? He'd gone red, blustering a bit, and then Harry had dragged him off to distract him with board games until Hermione came to fetch them once they were finished with the day's lesson.

Something pinched her neck, and she found herself being hauled into the air by her scruff. Malfoy frowned, peering into her brown eyes with a thoroughly unimpressed expression. "So you're a rabbit, hm? Figures, with those oversized buck teeth of yours." He cocked his head, considering. "Or did the form just come to you because you subconsciously wanted something to appeal to Weasley?" He reached out to gently stroke her head, running a finger from the tip of her twitching nose to her ears. "Overbreeding vermin seems right up his alley—*ow!*" He dropped her immediately, sucking on the finger she'd just bitten—hard enough to draw blood, she'd tasted—and glaring down at her. "You fucking *bi—*"

She shifted back so quickly it left her a bit lightheaded and rounded on Malfoy. "Did it hurt?"

He took a step back when he found they were nose to nose, expression a comical mixture of bewilderment and fury. "Yes, it fucking hurt!"

She managed to keep her voice from quavering with anger, but only just. Her smile glittered with knives. "Oh I wasn't referring to the little nibble I just gave you."

“Little nib—did *what* hurt, then?”

“You know, when you lost control and your Animagus form slipped its leash. Did it hurt when that lava plume forced its way through you, burning you alive from the inside out? Did it hurt, when *your own magic* tried to kill you? Eager to experience it again? I’m sure it can be arranged.” She quirked a brow. “As it seems my services aren’t required.”

Malfoy went grey in the face, and his throat bobbed—she hoped he wasn’t going to be sick. Perkins’s tent already smelled like cats, and she didn’t think her Scouring charms were good enough she could get the smell of vomit out of the old rug.

Clearly he wasn’t as confident in his ability to keep his urges to transform in check as Harry might have thought, and she crossed her arms, squaring her shoulders. She’d tried being understanding, tried treating this as just another study session with a classmate who needed a leg up; now, she’d just treat him like himself.

“If you’d like my help—the help of a ‘Mudblood’—you’ll keep any vile comments off that forked tongue of yours and listen politely and treat me with respect. It’s only at our pleasure you’re even here in the first place. I think it’s a pity you’re stuck like this, but don’t think for a *second* that I’m Harry. I’d just as soon Oblivate you and send you back to the Ministry so we can get on with our business without you dragging us down.”

Malfoy’s eye twitched, brows furrowing. “...Potter wouldn’t let you. He’s the leader of your merry little band of rebels, and he’s far too much a milksop to do something like that.”

“If you honestly believe Harry thinks of himself as *anyone’s* leader, then that must be the hormones clouding your thoughts.” And here, Malfoy went *fuchsia*. “We’re a team, and while I don’t feel it was *smart* of Harry to put us all in danger, bringing you on board, the deed’s been done. You may not think very highly of him, but he’s done *far* more for you than you deserve.” Malfoy still looked rather queasy. “So either bite your tongue and listen to my instructions, or prepare for inescapable pain beyond imagination every time you can’t keep your emotions in check to stop a turn. Harry won’t always be around to salvage your control, after all.”

That he didn't bother protesting *Like I need his help!* did not bode well, though Hermione wouldn't say she was disappointed he kept any further nasty remarks to himself, giving only bored, monosyllabic answers to any subsequent questions she posed. She didn't rightly know what it meant—Harry seemed to think Malfoy was learning to control his Animagus form fantastically, but Malfoy looked even less sure of himself than before. Either Harry was less observant than he seemed (entirely possible), or Malfoy's ability to control his shifts and his need for Harry's stabilising influence weren't as connected as Hermione had imagined. More research on this point was clearly merited.

She moved their lesson out into the Sanctuary, deciding she needed to see what they were dealing with herself. Just as Harry had warned, Malfoy was indeed unable to complete a transformation while clothed, resulting in a very uncomfortable few minutes of waiting while he disrobed behind her back when she demanded he demonstrate a shift.

Harry had told her—gushing, almost—that Malfoy's dragon was a sight to see when it wasn't haggard and broken, and she had to admit he hadn't been exaggerating. She kept her distance, certain that Malfoy would be eager to get her back for nipping his finger earlier, but he kept his teeth and claws to himself. Perhaps she'd suitably cowed him with her threats.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in the Sanctuary, training. Malfoy learned to shift with clothing reasonably quickly, likely because that was the lesson he was most keen on learning. He gave her next to no backtalk, and she was impressed to see that he was able to halt his transformation at any stage and shift forward or back as directed. So he did indeed have some measure of control!

However, he seemed utterly ignorant of even the most basic details concerning his Animagus form, which was both disheartening and dangerous. If he didn't know what to expect with his dragon, then he'd be wholly unprepared when it reacted in an unexpected way to some new stimulus.

“Did you never pay attention in Care of Magical Creatures?” she asked, fetching *Men*

Who Love Dragons Too Much from the tent.

He frowned at the title. “Of course not; that oaf Hagrid is nothing more than a glorified custodian. He’s certainly not fit to be on the teaching staff, so why waste my time?”

It took everything she had to ignore the slight against her friend, and she silently commended Harry for controlling his temper despite spending so much time around Malfoy of late. “Well then, you’ve rather a lot to catch up on. I suggest you study that, cover to cover. You might learn something.”

To her surprise, he began flipping through the pages, scanning the headings in the Table of Contents. “So which one am I?”

“Which breed?” He nodded. “Well, from what I saw—and from what Harry recalls that Bragge fellow from the Ministry saying—you’re an Antipodean Opaleye. They’re native to New Zealand, but Animagework doesn’t take into account things like geographical distribution. You simply are what you are.” She cleared her throat softly. “And, er, while we’re at it, I think we ought to address some of the...complications you might be experiencing.”

“What sorts of complications?” he asked distractedly, still leafing through the book—he was comparing the illustrations of the Opaleye with several of the European breeds and did not seem pleased at how his dragon compared in size with its cousins.

“The complications associated with having claimed a mate,” she said primly, trying not to blush. This would be uncomfortable enough; perhaps if she approached the topic with a bit of clinical indifference, it would make him feel like this was nothing to get agitated about.

No such luck, for he promptly snapped the book shut and firmed his jaw, delivering a flat, “No.”

She rolled her eyes, marching after him when he turned on his heel and headed for the door leading back into the tent. “Whether you want to discuss them or not, these issues

will make themselves apparent, so you can either deal with them when they come upon you unawares or at least be ready for them.”

He gave her a flippant wave. “The former, if it’s all the same to you.”

Hermione lunged forward, grabbing Malfoy by the elbow to make him face her. He slapped her hand away in rebuff, but she shook a finger in his face. “Well *too bad*. I’ve neither the time nor the patience for that.” She snatched *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* from him, flipping through to the chapter on breeding pairs. Malfoy opened his mouth to protest, then evidently decided it wasn’t worth the effort and turned to leave.

She held the book out before her, clearing her throat, and recited, “*Characteristics of the Drake in Rut - Those new to dragon husbandry should be alert for several symptoms in males keen to impress a mate that, if not properly managed, could cause damage to person and property. These include jealousy, possessiveness, tactile urges’—that sounds fun and not at all humiliating—‘marking, hoarding’—how does that work, I wonder?—‘presenting’—which the footnote here says involves ‘mating displays’—*”

Malfoy rounded on her. “All right, ALL RIGHT—just—” He waved his arms before him. “Stop speaking. This instant.” He’d gone that ashen grey tone again and swayed unsteadily on his feet, looking as if he might pass out. He stared at the book with a sort of forlorn shock, as if it had betrayed him. “...Right, next lesson then: How do I stop all that?”

Hermione sighed softly, shoulders slumping. This poor bastard. “Well, honestly, I don’t think there’s any way *to* stop it—not entirely. But you’re human, and you’ve got self-control and therefore the power to fight those urges, provided you can recognise them.”

Malfoy was breathing heavily, gaze gone distant and unfocused, and he licked his lips. “Fine. How do I recognise them, then?”

“Hm, well jealousy and possessiveness should be the most obvious as well as the most easily combated; Harry’s in close enough proximity now that you shouldn’t feel

compelled to demand his attention, not when it's mostly being freely offered." Malfoy closed his eyes and mouthed what Hermione was pretty sure was an *Oh fuck*. "And he's not exactly beating back suitors with a stick, so there should be no issues on that end." She referenced the passage again, tapping her chin. "Tactile urges...that might be trickier. A shake of the hand or touch on the shoulder might be sufficient to satisfy, though, if you're struck by the sudden need for physical contact."

Malfoy seemed to consider this one, brows rising. "...Slug to the jaw?"

"...I don't think I can say 'no', but I'm obliged to advise against it."

"Your objection is noted and dismissed," he sniffed.

She glanced back down at the book. "Marking, hm..."

Malfoy made a face. "Is that like—establishing *territory*?"

"Or staking a claim." She bit back a wicked smile. "I would tamp down any urges to piss on him?"

He rolled his eyes, pacing in a circle. "I'll do my level best," he said, tone dry as a desert.

"Please do. I'm sure Harry will appreciate your earnest efforts. Now, hoarding—in your case, I'd say that will manifest similar to the jealousy and possessiveness. It's all about wanting to be the centre of your mate's—"

"We *don't* say that word," Malfoy ground out, eyes flashing, and Hermione quickly struck the term from her vocabulary; there were other ways to talk around the subject, and Malfoy was being reasonably cooperative for the time being. She might get out of these lessons without having pulled all of the hair from her head.

"As I said, it's about wanting to be the centre of Harry's attention. Dragons are greedy things when it comes to...well, this. They're colonial creatures, but very private in personal matters, and they don't appreciate outsiders coming between them and their... Harrys."

Malfoy buried his face in his palms, groaning aloud. “Just let it take me. Let it burn me to a crisp, just get it over with.”

God, but this one could be dramatic! “Oh honestly, pull yourself together,” she huffed, setting the book to the side. “These are hardly insurmountable hurdles. Try to manage your emotions and be alert for stray thoughts that don’t feel quite like your own, or that you think seem out of character. On encountering one, just—think like a *human*.”

“Oh! Is *that* all I’ve got to do? Think like a human?” Malfoy clapped. “Fantastic, Granger! You’ve cured me! Hurrah!”

“Be as bitter and sarcastic about the situation as you like, but this *is* quite serious. Regardless of how the dragon feels on the matter, you *can’t* monopolise Harry’s time like this forever. We’ve...we’ve got a task to complete, and while I’ve encouraged Harry to help you ground yourself while you work out the kinks of this new body of yours, he knows as well as I do that every moment we waste with *you* is one we’re not spending focused on our mission.”

“Heavens forbend I keep the Chosen One from carrying out his solemn duties,” Malfoy said with a waspish bite in his tone.

“Do I sound like I’m joking? Between the Ministry mission and dealing with your fits and tantrums, we’re weeks behind on our research. We’re not asking you to go against your conscience, so the least you could do is not hinder us any more than you already have.”

“Fine!” Malfoy cried. “Then by all means, *let me go!*”

Hermione stared at him, mouth slightly agape—and then she laughed, a bit breathless. “Wait—are you still labouring under the impression that’s actually *possible*? Malfoy, even if we *did* let you go—how far do you think you’re going to get? Still going to try and rescue Mummy and Daddy from You-Know-Who? You’re inexperienced with your form, you can barely flutter—”

“I can certainly do a lot more than *flutter!*” Malfoy protested hotly. “I don’t know what

stories Potter's been spinning, but *you tell him* that I'm—"

"And what weapons can you possibly bring to bear against the greatest Dark wizard of our lifetime? You've got no wand, after all. Going to shoot a puff of smoke at him?"

Malfoy's expression darkened. "It was enough to take down Dumbledore, wasn't it?"

Hermione's wand was in her hand and levelled between Malfoy's eyes before she even realised what she'd done. She swallowed, beating back the urge to Transfigure this figurative pile of shit into a *literal* one. "Say his name again in that tone. Go on." And of course he buttoned right up, because he was a cowardly little prick. "He was already mortally injured when he tried to save you—because recall that's what he was doing: *trying to save you*. You-Know-Who certainly won't be pulling his punches in that respect—you'd be brought down before you knew it, and then if he was feeling merciful, he *might* destroy you outright. But more than likely he'd just turn you for his use. How about it?" She lowered her wand. "Want to be Imperiused and used to terrorise Muggle townsfolk, or raze Diagon Alley to the ground? Want to be turned on your own parents, simply because he'd derive some sick joy out of it?"

Several emotions flashed across Malfoy's features—shame, despair, fear, some Hermione couldn't even name. He was absolutely exhausting to deal with. "Plus, I'm honestly not even sure you *can* leave, with or without our blessing."

Malfoy's brows furrowed as suspicion won out over the other emotions vying for recognition. "...What's that supposed to mean?"

She pointed to *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. "All those urges we just went over? They're going to make you want to be as close to Harry as possible. To the point where being apart from him for too long might be unbearable."

Malfoy gaped. "But—you *just* said they were surmountable! That I could fight them if I just focus!"

"And maybe you could, if they came on you one at a time. But at the centre of *all* of this

is *him*. Harry. Whether you like it or not—all of those instincts and drives circle around back to him, exist *because* of him. Take him away, and...” She shook her head. “These things *do* ease with time, the book says—but that’s not days or weeks. That’s *years*. Dragons are long-lived and necessarily take things slow.”

She could see it dawning on him at last that he was well and truly trapped here—not by *their* spells, but by *his own*. Seeing his expression wash over with blank defeat, she worried that his bitter frustration at being held against his will had been the only thing keeping him from going spare in the face of the absurd situation in which he now found himself mired.

Damn; they would have to tread even more carefully now. “Just stop being an arsehole, accept that things are what they are, and buckle down and *train*. It’s really your only option now. Commit to this: deal with the embarrassment and irritations and hurdles and *embrace* what will make you powerful. If you really did this to save your parents, then hold on to that. Decide right now what they’re worth to you.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re a Slytherin, aren’t you? I thought taking shitty situations and turning them to your advantage was supposed to be your forte.”

Malfoy was silent for a long beat, and Hermione imagined she could hear the cogs in his head turning—weighing every option, of which he had distressingly few. He was backed into a corner, and it struck her that a dragon might be most dangerous when given no recourse *but* to fight back.

But then he straightened, meeting her eye with a hard look—before snatching up *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* and tucking it under his arm. “...I’m taking this. Good evening, Granger.”

The Wager

Harry didn't know what Hermione had said to Malfoy during their lessons—she'd been adamant that Malfoy be allowed some degree of privacy, or she'd never get anywhere with him—but given that they had both exited the Sanctuary with life and limb intact, he supposed things had gone as well as could be expected.

He found himself regularly visiting the Sanctuary with Malfoy now. There'd been no agreement made about a schedule in so many words, as that would require discussing 'this', but most evenings—and even occasionally afternoons—when Malfoy made overtures that he was going to get some training in, Harry would quietly excuse himself to follow, with Hermione providing encouraging nods and Ron giving him *tough luck, mate* looks.

Harry contented the bits of himself that felt like he wasn't pulling his weight with Horcrux research by spending his mornings muddling his way through one dusty tome or another. Hermione always gave him an appreciative smile and prepared him a cuppa when she caught him nodding off in the middle of a passage, and she made an effort to include him in conversations about leads that she and Ron had uncovered while he'd been in the Sanctuary, so that he didn't feel left out.

Those leads were few and far between, though, and none had ever really panned out. October had settled upon them two weeks back, and they could smell November and its dipping temperatures on the air in the mornings when they moved camp. The leaves had turned to shades of gold and bronze, collecting on the ground in piles ankle-deep, and Malfoy merrily crushed them to bits with his frying-pan-sized feet when they slipped into the Sanctuary.

The lack of proper Atmospheric Charms in the Sanctuary was going to sting soon, though Harry was reluctant to ask Hermione to pull herself away from Horcrux research just to make sure he and Malfoy didn't catch a chill while skiving off. What would happen, he

wondered, when they finally made it through Hermione's books? At the rate they were going, even with Harry distracted helping Malfoy, they would exhaust their research opportunities by year's end.

"We'll have to cross that bridge when we get to it," Hermione had said when he'd brought the subject up. "Let's not go borrowing trouble prematurely, shall we?"

And as Harry was quite content with the trouble they already had in stock, he tried to put it out of his mind and simply focused on the tasks before him now: scouring Hermione's library for any mention of Horcruxes and their destruction or treasures belonging to Hogwarts founders, and filling out his mind's gallery with more mental snapshots of Malfoy making a fool of himself learning how to fly.

The latter, he would admit freely (albeit with some degree of guilt), was far more entertaining than the former. Malfoy seemed to be growing more confident in his magic by the day, no longer needing prodding or encouragement to use the Sanctuary, and he hadn't had a near-miss in weeks thanks to their almost daily sessions.

It was during one of their afternoon jaunts, rare if only because Malfoy liked to use the dragon's metabolism to speed his digestion after dinner, as he hated going to bed on a full stomach he claimed, that Malfoy cleared his throat when Harry reflexively turned around to give him his privacy and said, "...You can watch now, if you like."

Harry craned his neck over his shoulder, one brow raised and mouth slightly agape, and Malfoy quickly followed up with, "Granger's not an altogether useless tutor. I think I can manage to turn without having to strip down now. It wasn't an *invitation*, just—" He closed his mouth, forcing out an irritated grunt, and ran his hand through his hair.

"...Right." Harry wondered if he'd ever tire of seeing Malfoy get flustered. He'd always come off as so poised at school, but then again, he'd been surrounded on all sides by adoring sycophants, and most anyone could affect an unruffled air under those circumstances. Take him out of his element, and even Neville might have been able to hold his own in a conversation.

Malfoy stalked away several paces, as always, to give himself a wide berth so he didn't trample Harry underfoot. He was holding himself a bit more stiffly than usual, and there was a visible tension in his shoulders that Harry could see even under the oversized hand-me-down robes Malfoy wore.

He was *nervous*, Harry realised. Why, he couldn't fathom, but now Harry *wanted* to watch, curious to see the fruits of Hermione's labours. Every shift he'd witnessed so far had been a terrible thing, violent and wild and painful, and even though Malfoy seemed to have it under control now, the transformation itself was still shrouded in mystery. Harry had to see things for himself, he'd learned over the past few months, before he could truly accept them—and Malfoy being at peace with his dragon instead of it tearing through him to break free was no different.

So he looked, because Malfoy had said he could. If Malfoy hadn't cared, or hadn't wanted Harry to see, he wouldn't have said anything, just quietly gone about his business while Harry turned his back for no real purpose. This meant some part of him must have wanted Harry to watch, and Harry tried not to think too hard about why that was.

He'd never really appreciated Animagework, Harry thought. He recognised its utility, and he commended those with the dedication to learn it, like McGonagall and Hermione—and even Malfoy. But he could already fly and pass undetected when he chose. So what was its use to him, really?

Still, it was breathtaking watching Malfoy lose himself in what was at last a concerted, controlled, *consensual* transformation. Perhaps more so *because* it was Malfoy—going from pale and pointy and cruel to...all of that, but twisted and magnified into something wild, more befitting.

He flowed like water, an iced-over stream cracking in the spring thaw: it was one step in too-big boots and another on razor-sharp taloned claws with great scalloped wings that unfurled from his shoulders to hang like banners over his long, sinewy body. His scales gleamed in the sunlight, much like they glowed in the moonlight, and from his jagged teeth to the line of arcing spines racing from stem to stern to the whipcrack flash of his

tail and testing beats of his wings, he was every bit the fantastic beast.

And yet, Harry could still look at this creature and see Malfoy, plain as day. The dragon stood just a bit too stiff, its neck curled swan-like, and it was too expressive when it looked at Harry, too responsive to his every move. It was like Malfoy had been stuffed into a dragon costume, filling it out nicely but still distractingly human. Malfoy was still there, lurking under it all, like starburst shadows burned into the retina from staring into the sun.

Something shifted in Harry's gut, and he told himself it was relief, as he felt the last vestiges of guilt and horror—fear that Malfoy might once again find himself subsumed by his own magic—melt away to be replaced by abject fascination.

The dragon made a sharp little snort that sounded like *Done gawking?* and tossed its head, trotting away into the long grass before picking up speed and flaring its wings to catch the breeze. Harry snapped out of his daze and chased after it, marvelling at the sight. Malfoy had made great strides over the past few weeks, and Harry had to finally admit that yes, Malfoy really *was* good at flying, just like he'd said he'd be. But then, it stood to reason; Malfoy had practically grown up on a broomstick, after all.

Malfoy took a few wide laps around the campsite, working out the stiffness in his muscles, before coming in for a less-than-graceful landing near the entrance. Harry coughed around a lungful of dust, batting the air in front of his face. "Kind of takes away from the awe of all *this*—" He gestured to Malfoy, "—when you choke on the landing."

Malfoy's nostrils flared in offence, and he huffed out a tiny fireball that singed Harry's hair. He frantically patted his head to put it out, and Malfoy sneered at his handiwork as if to say *Trust me, I've improved it*.

Harry frowned, hoping he wouldn't find a bald spot during his shower that evening; it would be humiliating to have to ask Hermione to help him regrow his hair, as she would certainly want to know how he'd lost it. Two could play at this game, he decided.

"So, reckon you've got this flying thing down, then?" Malfoy gave an inelegant snort.

“Completely and totally confident in your mastery of the air?” A throaty huff, and the dragon pawed at the ground, raking deep furrows into the soil. “...Willing to place odds on it?” Malfoy cocked his head curiously, and Harry headed back towards the entrance, opening a wooden chest and rifling through it until he laid hands on the well-polished handle of a broomstick.

In an effort to stave off the spectre of cabin fever, Harry had occasionally used the Sanctuary to get in a bit of flying of his own using one of the old brooms they’d found in Perkins’s hall closet. It was certainly no Firebolt, but it was better than nothing—and Harry wasn’t trying to win any House Cups these days. He’d hoped it might clear his head and help him concentrate on the Horcrux hunt, and while it had helped with the former, he’d had no such luck with the latter.

Malfoy was already prancing in place as Harry trudged back with the broom in hand, bearing an uncanny resemblance to a hound who’d just seen his master pick up a tennis ball. It was evident he approved of the challenge, and Harry consciously bit back a smile at the image. Malfoy would work himself into a snit if he thought Harry was making fun of him, and that would be an afternoon ruined.

He brought the broom around to mount it, then scanned the site for remarkable features. “Right—shall we say first to make it *there* wins?” He pointed to a thicket of saplings in the distance still clinging to most of their leaves. Malfoy evidently agreed, for he crouched like a cat about to pounce and spread his wings, doing that funny little arse wiggle that Harry still maintained was *not* something dragons did.

Harry adjusted his grip on the handle and placed one foot on its rest, readying the other to help push off. “On your mark...” he started, and Malfoy gave an excited little keening whine, practically vibrating with leashed energy. “Set...*GO!*”

They both tore off, Malfoy kicking up dirt and leaves as he used his powerful haunches to launch himself forward and Harry nearly pulling a muscle shoving off from the ground at speeds he hadn’t attempted since Fifth Year. He’d sat out the last Quidditch season, too focused on figuring out just what Malfoy had been up to to spare the time or energy for

practise sessions, and he was beginning to feel it only thirty seconds in.

They both took their time building speed, but Perkins's broom—while certainly not a racing rig—was built for quick, short bursts, and Harry took an early lead. It soon became clear, though, that the dragon had *far* more power and stamina than a speed-locked broom. Harry had been fast out of the gate, but Malfoy was faster once he got that big white arse of his going, and the *whoosh* of wings coming up from behind soon moved overhead, and then in front, casting Harry in shadow and making his flight path wobble in the wash.

Malfoy beat him to their goal with several body-lengths to spare, making another inelegant landing before Harry had even touched down and chuffing happily, lips curled into a rather frightening approximation of a grin.

“All right, well, obviously *that* didn't count. Brooms have speed-limiting spells on them, after all, and this one's got to be at least twenty years old.”

Malfoy merely blew out a stream of smoke that blackened Harry's glasses, as if to say *Sore loser*. Harry pulled off his glasses and wiped the lenses with the hem of his shirt. “Don't give me that—you know I'm right. It's hardly fair, racing on a straightaway like that. Of course a dragon's got more power and speed to it than a broom.” Malfoy just shrugged, which looked so odd on a dragon. Harry slipped the glasses back onto his nose and lifted his brows. “*But* I'd wager I can still outfly you; brooms are built for manoeuvrability, after all.”

Malfoy's spines—ears? It was so hard to tell—flattened against his head, and he snorted in disbelief.

“Another race,” Harry challenged. “Back to the entrance. Except this time, the object will be for you to catch me before I reach it.”

The fact that Malfoy agreed *far* too eagerly should have been Harry's first clue he probably shouldn't have suggested a game of pursuit, but it was too late to back down now without looking cowardly, so he mounted up again, directing Malfoy to put a few

body lengths between their starting positions in order to make it fair.

This time, when he pushed off, it was with a burst of adrenaline as excitement and terror coursed through his veins—because you had to be mad not to be at least a *little* scared of a dragon racing through the skies after you, each great beat of its wings bringing it closer to striking distance. It made little difference that he was (mostly) sure Malfoy wouldn't actually hurt him; Harry still felt his heart thudding in his ears, and his palms were slick with sweat, just as they'd been when he'd had the Horntail bellowing in fury as it had pursued him over the Hogwarts grounds.

It was ten kinds of thrilling, being chased for a change rather than doing the chasing as he usually did on a broom. He could hear the *whoomp, whoomp, whoomp* as Malfoy's wings buffeted the air, and the gravelly huffing of the dragon's breathing grew louder and louder with each pass. Harry imagined he could feel the heat of Malfoy's breath on his neck, that at any moment Malfoy would nip him by the collar and claim victory—so he pushed the rickety old broom as fast as it would go. He knew there were speed-limiting spells on it, just like with any regulation broom, but he still felt like if he just pressed a bit harder, put in a *little* more effort, he could outfly Malfoy.

The truth, though, was that he couldn't. He couldn't outfly Malfoy now any more than he'd been able to five minutes ago—not on a straightaway. But luckily, he didn't have to, and when he realised he was no longer *imagining* Malfoy breathing down his neck but was actually feeling it, hot and sticky, Harry rolled to the side in a Sloth Grip and yanked his broom down into a dive.

Malfoy zoomed over him, continuing on another fifty feet before he realised what had happened, and by that time, Harry had dropped close to the ground and doubled back, making for the entrance in a roundabout approach that was sure to confuse his pursuer. Malfoy had managed the basics of flying, that much was true, but he didn't seem to have the hang of hairpin turns just yet, nor the skills necessary to funnel his momentum as he pleased.

Harry hopped off his broom a few paces from the doorway while Malfoy was still huffing

and puffing at a distance so great Harry almost needed Omnioculars to sight him. He didn't seem to be making much of an effort to slow down for his landing, and Harry wondered if he ought to take out his wand, in case he needed to cast a shield to avoid getting plowed under.

But as soon as the dragon hit the ground, throwing up sod and leaves, it flowed seamlessly back into Malfoy. His hair was mussed, with sweaty locks stuck to his forehead, and he was breathing hard, shaking a finger in Harry's direction. "That *wasn't fair*. I was *right there* and I *had you*—"

"You had me?" Harry glanced down at himself, patting his sides and frowning. "Hm. That's funny... I don't *seem* to have been caught..."

"Oh *fuck* you, Potter—if you hadn't bolted, you know you would have lost!"

Harry leaned on the broom, beatific. "But that's the point. What, I was supposed to play nice and keep plodding along while you ran me down? I don't think so." He was feeling rather pleased with himself; it felt like it'd been some time since he'd seen Malfoy properly pissed off, and it was a pleasant change to not be pissed off himself right back. This way, he got to appreciate the way Malfoy's usually pristine features scrunched up with rage, and the way he sent spittle flying when he spoke. He was delightfully ruffled, and like seeing Malfoy nervous, it did strange things to Harry that he couldn't quite describe. He liked seeing Malfoy so human—which was kind of funny, as it took him turning into a dragon to bring it out.

Malfoy crossed his arms, brows furrowed in a sulk. "So is that it, then?"

"Hm? Oh." Harry brought the broom up and settled it against his shoulder. "I suppose? If you're done."

Malfoy shrugged, unconcerned. "I'm done if you're done."

And that was an odd way to put it; why were they out here, if not for Malfoy? Of course Harry was done; he'd been done before they'd even set foot in the Sanctuary.

Which was, he supposed, a clue that that wasn't really what Malfoy was saying. It meant he wanted to stay longer but didn't want to seem overeager. They were back to square one all over again, and Harry felt a headache coming on. Why did Malfoy have to be so damned *circumspect* about everything? Why couldn't he just come out and *say* what he wanted, instead of making mind games out of everything?

Harry sighed. "Well, if you've got another suggestion...?"

Malfoy straightened, then cleared his throat softly, nodding to Harry's broom. "... Haven't got another of those lying about, have you?"

"Another broom?" Harry lifted a brow. "...You want to fly on a *broom*? When you can already turn into a *dragon*?" A part of him wondered if there wasn't a catch to this, or if Malfoy was perhaps considering making a getaway on broomstick. It didn't really make sense, and Harry couldn't see the point of it—but nor did he really understand why Malfoy would want a broom otherwise.

Malfoy gave a pebble on the ground a kick with the toe of his trainer, sending it off into the tall grass. "We both sat out last year's Quidditch season, so we haven't flown against each other since Fifth Year." He sniffed defensively. "I believe I owe you a sound strapping. Especially seeing as we're never going to have a fair fight like *this*."

He was right; Malfoy's dragon had the advantage with speed and power, and Harry had the advantage with manoeuvrability, so they'd pretty much just be flying circles around each other until Harry tired or Malfoy gave up. They were poorly matched as they were, and broomsticks for the both of them would ensure a more level playing field. Malfoy was not, after all, a terrible flyer, though Harry would never admit it aloud.

He mulled it over. "So—what, more racing?"

"That..." Malfoy shrugged. "Or if you happen to have a Snitch on you, we could always have a Seeker's game."

Indeed, Harry did have one, and he unconsciously brought his hand up to stroke the

smooth hide of the Mokeskin pouch that never left his neck. He wondered what Dumbledore would think, to know Harry was considering using his gift this way. Harry thought he'd probably approve, if only because Dumbledore had been strange like that. *"Yes, my boy—run along and have fun with my murderer, do!"*

Harry nodded. "Wait here," he said, then tossed Malfoy the broom and dashed back into the tent. He made a beeline for the hall closet and grabbed the other Clean Sweep tucked into the corner, then rushed back into the Sanctuary before Hermione or Ron could ask him what on earth he was doing and why he had a disturbingly manic grin on his face.

It was only unexpected, was all. Malfoy kept doing things that threw Harry for a loop, except instead of feeling wrong-footed, he just felt...well, it felt wrong to say *excited*, but that was the only word coming to mind. One of these days Malfoy would actually say something nice, and then the whole world would tilt on its axis.

He was huffing, rosy-cheeked, by the time he made it back into the Sanctuary, his broom in one hand and Dumbledore's Snitch in the other. "Will this do?"

Malfoy took the Snitch and inspected it closely. "Why is it all scuffed up?"

Harry shrugged. "It's a game Snitch," was all he said. If Malfoy knew it was the one he'd nearly swallowed, he'd probably have a fit and start moaning about 'disgusting Potter germs'.

"Well, so long as it's still in working order."

Harry wasn't entirely sure on that point, to be honest—it had opened its wings before, and then there'd been the strange writing on it, but he'd just assumed it was still viable for game play. They'd find out, he supposed.

Malfoy let the Snitch dance over his knuckles in a hypnotic rhythm. "So—first to catch the Snitch wins?"

Harry frowned. "Wins—what?" Had he just walked into a trap? He hoped Malfoy wasn't about to ask for something impossible, like to be freed, or to be given a wand. They were

actually getting along, as well as the two of them could be expected to, and Harry wasn't looking forward to the big blow-up that would surely follow if Malfoy tried to weasel his way to freedom.

But Malfoy only tapped his lips in thoughtful repose. "A favour."

"...Yes, but what *sort* of favour?"

"If I knew, I would have *said* what sort I meant, wouldn't I? I haven't decided yet, so we'll just say that when I win, you'll owe me a favour, to be delivered at a time of my choosing."

Malfoy really wasn't very good at disguising his traps, Harry thought—but then, he didn't need to disguise them. Harry could either take the offer, or leave it, and that would be the end of their afternoon. He didn't have much choice, really, if he wanted to avoid causing offence. He sighed. "And if *I* win, you'll owe me?" If Malfoy asked for something ridiculous, Harry could simply refuse. This wasn't an Unbreakable Vow, after all.

Malfoy tossed the Snitch into the air, fingers curling around the casing when it landed in his palm. "Let's be realistic here, Potter: you're not going to win."

Harry was already missing the dragon and its inability to speak. He grabbed the Snitch out of the air when Malfoy tossed it again, and wound the self-release timer. They then stepped ten paces in opposite directions, away from the Snitch, and mounted their brooms.

When the timer popped with a bright *ding!* the Snitch was off—and so were they. It disappeared for a moment, flying into the sun and blinding Harry—then nearly smacked him in the head when it came careening back towards him, and he had to do a quick roll to avoid getting clipped.

Malfoy took advantage of Harry's disorientation, arrowing off after the Snitch as it charted a zig-zagging course around the campsite. He was nearly as quick on Perkins's

broom as he'd been under his own power, but the Snitch was challenging his no-doubt rusty broom skills. Harry had the advantage of having warmed up over the past hour and so was steadier on his broom.

Malfoy took a swipe at the Snitch when it made a sharp turn, then overcorrected when he missed it and stalled out, having to work to regain his speed while the Snitch disappeared into the treetops below. When Harry zoomed past him, he was grumbling some very naughty words and complaining about third-rate broomstick makers and their shoddy craftsmanship.

The Snitch popped up from the canopy right in front of Harry and then took off for the horizon, and he locked his knees and elbows, crouching to make himself as streamlined as possible. He drew every bit of speed he could from the broomstick, counting down in his head the seconds it would take before he was within striking distance. Malfoy was creeping up behind him, and that tingle of fear-anticipation-excitement from earlier shivered down his spine once more. It still felt, somehow, like there was a dangerous creature nipping at his heels, ready to pounce on Harry as if he were a Snitch himself.

He'd just gotten down to *two* in his count, when the Snitch took a sharp nosedive. Harry cried out in shock, whipping his hand out to make a desperate grab—but he overshot his mark. Malfoy, still lagging a few lengths behind Harry, had a split-second advantage, and Harry despaired, seeing his loss staring him in his face.

But instead of turning into a dive and letting gravity help him gain the speed he would need to catch the Snitch, Malfoy rolled to the side and—fell.

Harry's heart stuttered and his stomach bottomed out, a lead weight dropping right down his gullet. They were no small ways up, and a fall from this height would be deadly. Dittany wasn't any good for mending broken bones, Hermione had informed him, and Harry didn't know of any spells that could fit splattered brains back into cracked skulls.

He shoved the handle of his broom down, forcing it into a dive he was sure it couldn't handle—but it was the only thing he could think to do. If he didn't die saving Malfoy, then Hermione or Ron or *both* would probably kill him for being so reckless.

But Malfoy had barely cleared the broom before his form blurred and loomed large, flowing smoothly into the great white dragon, and with a few concerted beats of his huge wings, he was nearly upon the Snitch. He opened his mouth, flashing rows of wicked teeth, and scooped it up before spiralling down and gently, primly, alighting on the ground in his cleanest landing yet.

Harry gaped, just *gawked* for a good thirty seconds, before mutely grabbing Malfoy's abandoned broom and drifting back to earth. He was still trying to process what had just happened when he touched down, and as his mind whirred in overdrive, Malfoy shifted back to his human form and delicately removed the Snitch from his mouth, waving it in Harry's face with all the smug self-satisfaction in the world.

Harry felt his temper reassert itself first. "That—that was—well that was *cheating* is what that was."

"How so?" Malfoy asked, all innocence.

"We were supposed to use our brooms! The whole point of being on brooms was that it wasn't *fair* when one of us was on a broom and the other was a bloody dragon!"

"Yes, we did agree to use brooms. But there was never any rule set that we had to *stay* on them." Malfoy tossed him the Snitch; it was hot and slick with saliva.

"*Eew*," Harry groaned, wrapping it in the fold of his shirt and rubbing to wipe it off. He supposed he ought to be pleased that Malfoy was comfortable enough with his magic now he could shift in mid-air without batting a lash, but the loss still stung. "Why'd you have to nearly *eat* it?"

Malfoy snorted softly, shouldering roughly past Harry as he made to head back into the tent. "Just doing my best Harry Potter impression."

Voices in the Forest

From that point, their time spent in the Sanctuary became less a matter of chaperoning Malfoy as he stretched his wings and worked off the tension that built up when the dragon bits of him wrestled with the human bits for control of his body and more a respite from the stress of Harry's mission. Harry looked forward to their sessions, he realised, though not without some degree of guilt still. Neither Hermione nor Ron ever brought it up, but he worried that resentment might be brewing between them. Of course, it had been Hermione's suggestion he spend time with Malfoy in the first place, but Harry was pretty sure there was no need for him to pop into the Sanctuary *every* night, not now that Malfoy was as smooth and sound in his transformations as any Animagus Harry had met over the years.

He'd thought about bringing it up with Malfoy; if Hermione wouldn't ask for him back, then maybe Malfoy could reassure him once more that he *didn't* need Harry shadowing him, and he could return to the tent without feeling like he'd abandoned his charge for at least a few nights a week.

But he'd somehow never been able to broach the subject, and he wasn't entirely sure why. It felt like...well, like he might disturb the fragile relationship they'd cultivated. They weren't friends by any stretch, but there was a connection—two people, stuck in a situation they couldn't help and making the best of it. Malfoy was very sensitive, despite the unruffled air he tried to affect, and if he thought Harry genuinely didn't want to spend time with him any longer, he'd pull right back into his shell all while claiming *Well I never wanted you around in the first place*. Two weeks ago, Harry wouldn't have cared, would have assumed it was *obvious* he didn't want to spend any more time with Malfoy than was strictly necessary (and that the feeling was mutual), but now he found he was watching his tongue and minding his manners, and he thought Malfoy might be doing the same.

Indeed, his quips were not as sharp of late as Harry remembered them being, and even

on the days when there *was* an edge to him, Harry usually found his barbs almost witty—unless he was pitted against Ron, in which case Harry or Hermione usually had to step in and defuse the situation. Malfoy was even joining them at the table for meals. Not every meal, granted, but even when he chose not to sup with them, he at least retired to the sitting room instead of holing up in the bedroom like a hermit.

“Granger, that was almost passable,” Malfoy said one evening after dinner; he must have been in a good mood (or else Hermione had spiked his orange squash), as he almost never engaged in dinner conversation despite their undisguised efforts to loop him in.

“High praise, coming from you,” she responded dryly, but she was clearly pleased with the rare compliment on her cooking.

They all took turns preparing meals now—even Malfoy, over Ron’s ardent protests that he’d no doubt try to poison them. Whether he was trying to do them in or not, though, was difficult to tell, as it turned out Malfoy was quite helpless in the kitchen. “*Do I look like a house-elf?*” he’d sniffed defensively when they had been faced with his failed attempt at chicken (overseasoned and undercooked) and rice (underseasoned and overcooked). Ron, too, was a horror behind the stove despite Harry and Hermione’s fervent hopes he might have absorbed some of Molly’s talent by sheer proximity. Harry, though, had been cooking for his aunt and uncle for years, and Hermione had always been self-sufficient, taking to recipes with rather more skill than Potions (“Potions is so precise is all!” she had protested, which struck Harry as funny coming from someone who’d made her fair share of pastries and baked goods in the past couple of months).

Between the four of them, there was at least some variety in their meals, and while it was neither Hogwarts nor the Burrow, Harry could say he was content.

Tonight, much like usual, they drifted into the sitting room for a bit of post-prandial relaxation. Malfoy usually made straight for the Sanctuary to work off a meal if it was a particularly heavy one, but Harry liked to digest a bit and catch up with Ron and Hermione before he joined him. The privacy afforded them with Malfoy’s absence meant they could discuss where they were (or weren’t, rather) with Horcrux research.

Except there was a hiccup in their routine this evening, as instead of making a beeline for the Sanctuary, Malfoy seemed to dither a bit, taking one step towards the door to the Sanctuary before reconsidering and shaking his head in self-reprimand. Harry watched him, bemused—and then wondered if he'd missed something. Did Malfoy need Harry to join him promptly? He hadn't had anything close to an episode in weeks, but Harry could admit that he was not particularly observant, and Malfoy could have been hiding his growing discomfort.

He was just about to stand and suggest they retire to the Sanctuary, maybe play another game of pursuit if Malfoy thought the dragon needed to be given its head for a bit, when Malfoy seemed to come to a decision and closed his eyes, taking a bracing breath. He then turned around and marched away from the Sanctuary—and came to sit on the couch, at the opposite end from Harry.

Malfoy rarely used the sitting room—and he certainly never used it while *they* were there. Harry was baffled by the sudden switch-up; was this some new mind-game of Malfoy's? A less-than-subtle hint Harry should get his arse up off the couch and head to the Sanctuary? He turned to Hermione for guidance, but she was sharing an unreadable look with Malfoy, leaving Harry lost as to what to make of the situation. Clearly there would be no discussion of Horcruxes tonight, but Hermione didn't seem to be bothered by Malfoy joining them, and Ron—well, Ron was halfway into a good after-meal nap.

Deciding the safest course of action was to behave as if this were perfectly normal, Harry reached for the book sitting atop the stack nearest to him: *From Mumbo Jumbo to Presto Change-o: Making the Impossible Possible*. It sounded dreadfully boring, and Harry was considering the merits of an after-meal nap of his own, when there came a faint rustling from just outside the tent.

They all four sat straight up—even Ron, who looked remarkably alert for having been roused from a nap. Hermione held up a finger, signalling for silence, and they strained their ears. Then they heard it, carrying over the rush of the dark river on whose banks they were camping this evening: *voices*. Nearby, at that.

Harry's head whipped around, searching for the Sneakoscope; they'd set it up on a small table near one of the bookcases, but it stood still and silent on its point, not moving or making any sort of sound at all.

He swallowed, then leaned over the arm of the couch, angling his head towards Hermione. "...You cast *Muffliato* over us, right?"

"I cast *everything*! Like always! *Muffliato*, Muggle-Repelling and Disillusionment Charms, the works!" she whispered back, complexion gone a bit green; this would be the first time their security charms would well and truly be put to the test. "Whoever's out there, they shouldn't be able to see or hear us."

'Shouldn't' being the operative word, of course.

The voices grew louder—though no more intelligible—accompanied by the scraping and scuffling of movement with the sharp snaps of twigs being trod underfoot. Their visitors were evidently trying to navigate the steep slope leading down to the riverbank. Carefully, they crept over to the entrance, with Harry, Hermione, and Ron all drawing their wands. Malfoy hung behind them, defenceless, and wearing an expression that said he didn't like that at all.

It was pitch black outside with the new moon, and Harry wanted to believe that their enchantments would hold, whether these were just Muggles passing through or innocent witches or wizards or Death Eaters.

The thought that there might be followers of Voldemort lurking a stone's throw outside their tent lodged an uncomfortable lump in Harry's throat. Was Malfoy weighing his options right now? He might not be able to escape cleanly, but he could easily give their position away. Harry wanted to believe that Malfoy had come to accept he was better off with them than anywhere else, considering the environment, but logic might not hold up when family was involved. If Malfoy thought for a moment that he stood a better chance of keeping his parents safe by returning to Voldemort's side, then he'd turn his back on them at first chance.

Malfoy made no sudden moves, though, and Harry turned his attention back to the intruders. It was a group of men, he surmised from the timbre of the voices—perhaps a dozen paces away. The burbling of the river made it difficult to determine their number, and Hermione crept back over to her armchair to find her beaded bag, rummaging about inside frantically. She drew out a handful of Extendable Ears, tossing one set each to Harry, Ron, and—after a moment’s consideration—Malfoy as well, before joining them by the tent entrance once more. Malfoy frowned in confusion at his set of Ears, fixing Harry with a look that said *What the fuck is this for?* Harry showed him how to fit the end of the flesh-coloured string into his ears, then fed the other end through the laced-up tent entrance.

His heart did a double-beat when he finally heard a weary male voice piping through the Ears.

“Looks like a decent fishing spot, wouldn’t you say? Or what do I know, I’m not a fisherman.” A pause. “Can you Summon fish?”

Someone else said *Accio salmon*, and several distinct splashes and then the slapping sound of fish hitting flesh answered the question. Wizards, then—which meant they’d have to be even *more* careful than if these had simply been wayward Muggle hikers or hunters.

Harry pressed the Extendable Ear deeper, closing his eyes and focusing. He could make out at least four voices—the two who’d already spoken, and another pair that were conversing in a language that was definitely not English and might not have been any human language at all, for how alien it sounded. It was a rough and raspy tongue, rattled off in a string of guttural noises. Harry thought he’d heard it somewhere before, or something like it, but couldn’t place his finger on where.

“*Incendio*,” someone muttered, and a fire blossomed from the darkness, casting amorphous shadows against the tent canvas sandwiched between this group and Harry’s. Shortly, the scent of baking salmon began to waft in their direction. Harry was glad they’d already eaten dinner, else their grumbling stomachs might have given them

away. The clinking of cutlery on plates filled the silence as the visitors tucked in.

“You don’t mind it’s cooked, right, Griphook? Gornuk?” someone asked—Harry thought it might have been the first man who’d spoken.

Hermione’s eyes went wide, and she mouthed *Goblins!* Harry nodded, and Malfoy settled a hand on his shoulder for balance as he leaned closer to the tent entrance, practically drilling his Ear into his skull as he strained to listen.

“Food is food. Thank you,” one of the Goblins grunted in English.

“So, how long’ve you three been on the run?” asked another man. His voice was mellow and pleasant—and vaguely familiar, too. It had a quiet undercurrent of kindness, and Harry pictured a jolly figure to match it.

The first man was his conversation partner, it seemed. “I forget—six weeks? Seven? What’s the date?” One of the Goblins mumbled something in response, though Harry didn’t catch it; he tried to recall the precise date himself and failed. “Met up with Griphook here early on—I think it was beginning of September? Then Gornuk joined us not long after. It’s been nice having a bit of company. Reckon I’d’ve driven myself spare if I’d tried to go it on my own.” There was more scraping and the sounds of a meal being enjoyed—someone poured someone else another drink, and the Goblins conversed quietly between themselves. “You on the run, Ted? Or just got out while the getting was good?” the man asked. He didn’t seem comfortable with long silences.

“Nah, I knew they were coming for me,” replied Ted, and Harry realised where he’d heard the voice before: this would be Tonks’s father. A spike of fear drove into his stomach; if Ted Tonks was here, did that mean the Tonks family had been targeted? Was Tonks herself all right, or—compromised? “Got a friend on the inside who let me know last week the Death Eaters would be in the area, sniffing around for...well, y’know. Decided I’d better make myself scarce. I certainly wasn’t gonna register with that bloody Commission of theirs, so I knew it was only a matter of time before I had to go into hiding. My wife wasn’t too happy to see me go, but she’s a smart girl—she understood.”

“She didn’t leave with you?”

“Oh, she’s a proper Pureblood—one of the Sacred Twenty-eight, even! She’ll be just fine.” Ted clapped someone on the shoulder. “And then I met Dean here—when was it, a few days ago?”

“Yeah,” said a new voice, and Harry had to cover his mouth to keep from making any noise. He, Ron, and Hermione all stared at each other. Excitement bubbled up from within—he was *certain* that was Dean Thomas, a fellow Gryffindor, sitting only a few feet away from them.

“Muggleborn, eh?” asked the first man. “Rough hand these days, that.”

“I’m actually not sure, to be honest,” said Dean. “My mum’s Muggle, that’s for sure—but my dad left us when I was a kid. I don’t recall much of him, and my mum doesn’t like to talk about him either. I’ve got no proof he was a wizard, though, and that’s all that matters to the Commission.”

There were some general murmurs of assent, and then more munching and scraping.

“And what’s your story, Dirk?” Ted asked around a mouthful. “Last I heard, you’d been caught!”

“I was,” Dirk confirmed with a sigh, and Harry wondered if this was the Dirk Cresswell that Mr. Weasley had been torn up over. “Was halfway to Azkaban when I saw my moment and made a break for it.”

“So they’re really taking Muggleborns to Azkaban?” Dean asked, a definite note of fear in his voice.

“That they are—I managed to Stun one of the Aurors and nicked his broom. I reckon he wasn’t all there—maybe Confunded, or Imperiused. Probably shouldn’t be that easy to take on a Senior Auror otherwise, right? I’m certainly not looking that gift Hippogriff in the mouth, though. I wouldn’t’ve lasted long in Azkaban...”

A solemn quiet moment passed as the others likely reflected on their own chances of surviving the wizarding prison. Ted then tried to redirect the conversation. “So where do you two fit in? I, er...well, I honestly had the impression the Goblins were more or less *for You-Know-Who*.”

“Then you had the *wrong* impression,” said one of the Goblins, speaking in a low, sedate register. “We have taken no sides—nor will we take one. This is a wizard’s war, no concern of our own.”

“Oh, yeah? You’re just on the run for the fun of it, then?” Dean asked.

“...I sensed my life might be in imminent danger for reasons *other* than your war as a whole,” the Goblin grumbled. “I refused what I took to be an impertinent request, and the parties responsible didn’t strike me as the type to take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“What kind of request?” asked Ted.

“A request more appropriate for a *house-elf* than one such as I,” the Goblin sniffed, and Harry could only picture Malfoy in his head. He had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from releasing a snort of laughter when the image wouldn’t go away.

“And what about you, Griphook? ”

“Similar reasons,” said the other Goblin. He sounded just as snooty as the first one but spoke in a higher tone, so Harry pictured another short, squat Malfoy. “Recent *managerial* changes have resulted in the Goblins losing their hold on sole control of Gringotts. As I am at the best of times loath to work with my own people and flat-out unwilling to bend my head to a wizard, I felt it best to...seek my fortunes elsewhere for a period.” He then added something under his breath in Gobbledegook, and Gornuk laughed.

“...What’s so funny?” asked Dean.

“He said,” Dirk answered for them, “that he got a doozy of a severance package. In more colourful language.”

“More like a *Severus* package!”

Harry could practically hear the devious grin in his voice, but he didn’t get the joke, and neither apparently did Dean. “I’m afraid I’ve missed something.”

“So has Severus Snape!” Griphook snickered, and then he and Gornuk collapsed into a cackling fit, their sharp yellow teeth bared through malicious grins.

All inside the tent were instantly on high alert at the mention of Snape—even Malfoy. Harry’s breathing was shallow, and he licked his lips, praying the Goblins were keen to share more details on what sounded like a *very* interesting inside joke.

“These two had a bit of fun at the Death Eaters’ expense on the way out,” Dirk said, casting little clarity on the situation.

“How so?” Ted asked.

“Didn’t you hear about the kids who tried to steal Gryffindor’s sword from the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts?”

Harry nearly choked on his own tongue, and Malfoy’s grip on his shoulder tightened almost to the point of pain. Hermione had Ron’s hand in her own and seemed to be using it like a stress ball, from the look of agony on Ron’s face.

Kids? Students had tried to steal the sword from Snape’s office? Who—and why?

“Not a word,” Ted said. “Never saw it in the papers.”

“Nor would I expect you to have,” chortled Dirk. “Griphook had insider knowledge, though—he heard it straight from Bill Weasley, one of the bank’s Curse Breakers. Apparently one of the kids who tried to nick the sword was Bill’s younger sister.”

Harry grimaced. Fuck—what had Ginny been *thinking*? Harry could think of few people more dangerous to mess with right now than Snape, and she’d snuck into his office, just to steal—

An heirloom of Godric Gryffindor. But—no, surely *that* wasn't a Horcrux. It couldn't be; Dumbledore had sat in that office for years on end, the sword hanging on the wall right beside him. That would've been the *first* Horcrux he found. And even if he'd somehow managed to overlook it, once he realised that Voldemort had been making Horcruxes out of the Founders' heirlooms, he surely would have checked the sword for clues. No, Harry didn't think the sword was a Horcrux...but Dumbledore had left it to Ron for a reason, surely. The question was...why?

"She and a some friends managed to sneak their way into Snape's office—a feat in itself if you ask me—and smashed open the case holding the sword. Snape only caught 'em as they were trying to smuggle it back down the staircase. Their lookout got cold feet and took off, so he caught 'em by surprise."

Dean sputtered. "But—why on earth would they do that? What, were they thinking they might use the sword on You-Know-Who?"

"Your guess is as good as mine—better even, maybe, seeing as they're schoolmates of yours."

"I can't imagine..."

"Well, whatever they were up to, the sword clearly wasn't safe where it was," said Dirk. "You-Know-Who probably told Snape he was mincemeat if he let it happen again, so a couple days later, Snape had it sent down to London to be stored at Gringotts instead."

"*You-Know-Who* told him?" Dean repeated. "So...you think Snape's a...?"

"Doesn't matter what anyone thinks," Ted said. "He *is* one. My daughter's an Auror, and she's gone wand-to-wand with him in recent months, alongside his hooded fellows and You-Know-Who himself. Sorry to have to tell you, son, but Hogwarts is little more than a Death Eater holiday home these days. If you ask me, you're better off out here than in there while You-Know-Who's got his folks in charge."

"You'd not receive much of an education with someone *that* stupid leading your school,

after all,” snickered Gornuck.

“I’ll grant you Snape doesn’t deserve to sit in that office—but I confess I feel like I’m still not seeing the joke,” said Ted.

“It’s a *fake!*” rasped Griphook.

“What is? The sword?”

“Indeed, the sword! It is a copy—an excellent one, to be true, but wizard-made. The true sword of Gryffindor was forged many centuries ago by Goblin hands, for only our craftsmen can imbue such weaponry with our magic. Wherever the genuine sword of Gryffindor lies, it is *not* in a vault at Gringotts Bank, as Severus Snape would believe.”

“Ah, I see.” Ted chuckled. “And I take it you neglected to mention this unfortunate mix-up to the Death Eaters, who evidently prize this sword highly and would have been *very* distraught to know they were holding a counterfeit?”

“No, no; they seemed to have more important matters on their minds at the time. I saw no reason to trouble them with the information,” said Griphook smugly, and now Ted and Dean joined in Gornuk and Dirk’s laughter.

Harry’s mind was whirring at breakneck speed as he tried to process everything—Ginny and their other friends at Snape’s mercy, a fake sword of Gryffindor in some vault at Gringott’s, Hogwarts squarely under the thumb of Death Eaters...

“What happened to Ginny Weasley, then?” Dean asked. “And you said there were others who were with her, trying to steal the sword? Do you know who they were?”

Beside Harry, Ron’s face was white, and he swallowed thickly, the Extendable Ear shoved deep.

“Oh, they were punished of course—and cruelly, as I heard it,” said Griphook, utterly indifferent.

“Wha—but they’re all right, yeah?” said Dean quickly. “I mean, you’re not saying...”

“Bill Weasley did not seem overly distraught. I trust his sister did not suffer *serious* injury. Humans are more resilient than they seem.”

“They probably just didn’t want the mess of explaining away a student’s death,” Ted muttered. “I expect they’ll be doling out punishments a fair bit more serious than detentions if You-Know-Who takes over proper.” He sighed, and there came the quiet *glug* of liquid being poured into a cup. “Suppose I’ll have to drink to Harry Potter’s health and pray for a quick resolution to all this nasty business.”

“Harry Potter, eh?” Dirk huffed. “You really reckon he’s going to be able to take down You-Know-Who?”

“If not him, then who?” Ted asked.

“I dunno, but seems quite a bit of responsibility to load onto a boy’s shoulders.”

“He’s hardly a boy; he’s of-age now—pretty sure his birthday was several months back,” Dean said. “And I reckon he’s the real thing—I dunno if I’d call him the Chosen One, or whatever it is they’re saying these days, but he’s one of the few who’s gone up against You-Know-Who and lived to tell the tale. With Dumbledore out of the picture...he might be our only hope.”

“Well yeah, there’s a lot who’d say the same,” said Dirk, sounding too patronising for Harry’s comfort. “But where’s he now? Run for the hills, nowhere to be found! And don’t mistake me, I don’t blame him in the least. But if he knew anything we didn’t, had some special weapon up his sleeve or spell in his arsenal, well then don’t you think he’d be out there fighting and rallying the resistance, instead of gone to ground? When’s the last time anyone saw him? The *Prophet* actually made a pretty good case for—”

“The *Prophet*?” Ted gave a barking laugh. “Dirk, my friend, no one who’s after facts these days is reading that drivel. You’re much better off with *The Quibbler*—”

Dirk sputtered, choking on whatever he’d been in the midst of eating and vigorously

thumping his chest. When he spoke again, it was with a wheezing rasp. “*The Quibbler*? That lunatic rag of Xeno Lovegood’s? Isn’t that the one that predicts the end of the world in every issue? And has a mail-order slip for Wrackspurt-B-Gone?”

“Now, now,” Ted said, his tone reflecting an attempt at mollification. “I know its got a reputation, but you’d do well to give it another look. Xeno is printing all the stuff the *Prophet* won’t—by which I mean the stuff they’re *ignoring*. The Death Eaters have their fingers in rather a lot of pies these days, and the *Prophet* was one of their first targets. *The Quibbler*’s become downright reputable of late; not a single mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks in the last issue. There’s no telling how long they’ll let him get away with it, of course—especially if they think he might actually be in contact with Potter. But every issue they’ve got a big front page advertisement saying that helping Harry Potter ought to be our top priority if we’re serious about stopping the likes of You-Know-Who.”

Dirk snorted in soft derision. “Easier said than done. That boy’s as rare as a Yeti nowadays; it’s no wonder *The Quibbler*’s taken an interest in him.”

“Well they haven’t caught him yet, have they? I’d say that’s a damn fine achievement in and of itself,” said Ted. “I sure would appreciate some advice on how he managed *that*. We could use all the help we can get staying not caught ourselves.”

“Aye, you’ve got a point,” Dirk sighed. “He’s Undesirable Number One, so the Ministry says—they’ve got all their people out looking for him, above-board and beneath. I’d have expected him to be caught by now—though who’s to say they haven’t done, and just killed him without publicising it?”

Ted scoffed. “I can’t see that being the case, though; what would be the point? You-Know-Who would want to make a spectacle of it. I’m rather more surprised he hasn’t used a Glamour or something to kill a look-alike, just to strike a blow against morale.”

There were some ambivalent murmurs, and then a long pause filled with more clattering of cutlery. When someone spoke again—too soft for Harry to tell the owner—it was to discuss where they would bed down for the night: there along the riverbank, or back up on higher ground where the trees offered some cover. It was eventually decided the

wooded areas were safer, and so they extinguished their fire and then clambered back up the incline, their voices soon fading away.

With their visitors gone, they all reeled in their Extendable Ears and released a collective breath. Harry's heart was still pounding, and he had to lick his lips before he spoke or risk his voice cracking. "The sword... Just—the sword!"

"I know! It all makes sense now!" Hermione gushed, all in a tizzy. "Where's my bag? Be right back!"

"What makes sense?" Ron asked. "What do you reckon they were messing about in Snape's office for?"

"Isn't that what Gryffindors do?" Malfoy muttered, rubbing at his ear. He'd had the Extendable Ear shoved in pretty deep. "Stick their noses where they don't belong?"

"Who's asking you?" Ron snapped, but further sniping was cut short when Hermione bustled back with her tiny beaded bag, one hand shoved inside up to her elbow as she rifled around for something.

"Here—we—are!" With a huff, she slowly pulled something from deep inside the bag. The gilded edge of an ornate frame peeked from the mouth of the bag, and Harry rushed over to help her draw what turned out to be a large—but empty—portrait. It looked familiar, but he couldn't place it.

Malfoy reached to trace a bit of the filigree along the frame. "...Is that Grandfather Phineas's portrait?"

They all three fixed Malfoy with a bewildered look.

"Oh—right," Hermione said. "You'll be related to him, won't you?"

"Him'?" Ron asked.

"It's Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait. Remember? It was hanging back at Grimmauld

Place—I stuffed it in here to be sure Snape couldn't spy on us through it.”

“Spy on us?” Ron asked.

“Yes—there's another of Black's portraits hanging in the Headmaster's Office.” She cut a glance at Malfoy. “He used to be a Headmaster himself, after all.”

And now Harry realised why the portrait had been familiar. “But why've you got it out? I thought we were trying to lie low!”

“We are—and we're going to stay hidden.” She had her wand out and pointed at the empty frame. “I'll blindfold him, so he won't be able to see us or where we are.”

Harry didn't miss the way her eyes flicked to Malfoy, and he shared her concerns; the security spells around their tent had kept them shielded from Ted and the others, but all Malfoy had to do to make himself known once Phineas showed up was open his mouth. Harry considered slapping a *Silencio* on him, just to be safe, but held off. Hermione hadn't said anything—not before, and not now—so if she felt he wasn't a liability...Harry would give Malfoy the benefit of the doubt. There was a degree of trust coalescing between them now that a spell to force Malfoy's silence would shatter, and Harry found himself reluctant to do that.

“Right—but I'm still struggling to see why we need his portrait at all,” Ron said.

Carefully, they propped the portrait up against the side of the tent, and Hermione wiped her brow. “Well, if what Ginny tried to steal was a *fake* sword, then that means someone else must have swapped it for the real one while it was in Dumbledore's office—in full view of all the portraits hanging there.”

“I still don't see what we're so interested in the sword for,” Ron muttered, slumping into one of the armchairs. Clearly, his nap being cut short didn't agree with him.

“I don't know either—and I think that's all the more reason we *should* be interested in it,” Hermione said. “Dumbledore left you the sword, Ron—and he didn't do it so you could slice a toastie up neat. Now we find out it's so precious to the Death Eaters—to

You-Know-Who—it’s been moved to a high-security vault in Gringotts?”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “You don’t think it’s a—?” Hermione cut him off with a sharp shake of her head.

“No—Dumbledore would surely have noticed it. But I think if we *can* find it, the real one that is, it’s better off in our hands than in anyone else’s.” She shrugged. “Surely it won’t hurt to *ask*, right?” She looked to Harry and Ron, and they had no objections. “Right then.” She cleared her throat, then tapped her wand on the portrait frame before pointing it squarely at its centre, ready to cast as soon as Phineas Nigellus stepped into view. “Er—Phineas? Phineas Nigellus?”

Nothing happened, and Malfoy hissed, “Try showing a bit of *respect*, for Salazar’s sake! He’s a hundred and fifty years old!”

Hermione cut him a sharp look, bringing a finger to her lips to signal for silence, and then she rolled her eyes and tried again. “Professor Black? Or—*Headmaster* Black? Could we speak to you, please?”

“Took you long enough to get around to that *please*, didn’t it?” came a cold, snide voice, as Phineas Nigellus slid into his portrait.

Hermione immediately cried “*Obscuro!*” and a thin strip of black fabric appeared over Phineas Nigellus’s eyes, blindfolding him. Thrown by the sudden loss of sight, Phineas Nigellus bumped into his frame and shrieked in pain.

“Wha—how *dare*—what are you—?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Professor Black,” Hermione apologised, and she did sound penitent. It must have pained her dearly to be so disrespectful to a faculty member, even one dead seventy years. “Please understand this is a necessary precaution.”

“Remove this foul addition at *once*! I am a priceless work of art, and you’re ruining me! Where am I? This isn’t the house of my forebears! Put me back! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Chatty, isn’t he?” Ron snorted, crossing to the armchair he’d been napping in before.

“Never mind where you are,” Harry said, and Phineas Nigellus froze immediately, ceasing his attempts to remove the painted blindfold.

A smile curled at his lips. “Why, could that possibly be the illustrious and elusive Mr. Potter?”

Harry shrugged, though Phineas Nigellus could not see it. “Maybe.” If notoriety was what it took to get his attention, Harry had no qualms about using it. Malfoy, for his part, rolled his eyes. “We’ve got a couple of questions we’d like to ask you—about the sword of Gryffindor.”

“Ah...” Phineas Nigellus groped behind him for the only other object in the frame: a wingback chair. He slid into it with a huff. “Yes. Those children acted *most* unwisely there. What’s gotten into this generation? Thieving from the Headmaster!”

“Snape’s not the Headmaster, and even if he *were*, that sword doesn’t belong to him.”

“He *is* the Headmaster, duly appointed, and your insolence is *not* appreciated. As for the sword, it belongs to Hogwarts itself, with the Headmaster as its caretaker. What claim did those insipid little Gryffindors and that Ravenclaw oddity have to it? None! They deserved their punishment and worse.”

“Luna’s not an oddity!” Hermione huffed; there was really only one Ravenclaw who fit that bill.

“Backtalk with an elder? I’ve had more than enough cheek for this evening!” Phineas Nigellus began to wrestle with the blindfold again. “Get this thing off of me, and put me back where you found me!”

“Maybe after you’ve answered our questions,” Harry said. “How did Snape punish them?”

“*Professor* Snape sent them into the Forbidden Forest. That oaf Hagrid needed a few

extra hands, evidently.”

“Oi, Hagrid’s not an oaf!” Ron protested, but Harry only sighed in relief. Snape might have thought that would be a loathsome punishment, but Ginny, Luna, and whoever else had joined them—Neville probably, Seamus maybe—had probably sailed through. They had, after all, faced *far* worse terrors than whatever lurked in the Forbidden Forest. An evening gathering unicorn dung or jobberknoll feathers was *much* better than what Harry had been imagining: the Cruciatus Curse, or worse.

Hermione cleared her throat, and when she spoke again, she’d gentled her tone. Fine; they could play good-cop, bad-cop. “Well then, Professor Black, you wouldn’t happen to have noticed if anyone else had, um...removed the sword as well? Perhaps taken it to be cleaned or—or something?”

Phineas Nigellus scoffed. “Muggleborns! Goblin-made silver does not require *cleaning*, you simple girl. Their armour and weaponry repels mundane dirt, imbuing only that which strengthens it.”

“Oi, don’t call Hermione simple,” Harry warned. “She’s the brightest witch of her age.”

“Pity I can’t *see* anything then, isn’t it?” Phineas Nigellus said, then eased up from his chair. “And I’ve told you to watch the tone you take with me, Mr. Potter. Perhaps I should return to the Headmaster’s office.” He made motions of groping about in his frame to see himself out.

Harry felt his irritation rising; they were getting nowhere with Phineas Nigellus—and then a burst of inspiration struck. “Dumbledore! Dumbledore’s got a portrait in there too, doesn’t he? I know you portraits visit each other, so can you maybe bring him along so we can speak to him? That way we wouldn’t have to bother you.” Why hadn’t he thought of that sooner? Dumbledore was the one who had all the answers they needed, and this was the closest they could get to actually speaking with him.

Phineas Nigellus turned his face in the direction of Harry’s voice, one slender black brow raised. “...Forgive me, Miss Granger. I assumed your stupidity was inherent, given your

blood status, but clearly you've simply been infected by Mr. Potter's failings, you poor thing." He sneered. "While yes, the portraits of Hogwarts may visit other frames within the confines of the castle, communing with one another, they cannot travel beyond the school grounds except to visit other paintings of themselves hanging elsewhere. I cannot 'bring Dumbledore along', and after the rank disrespect I've been shown this evening, I shall not be making a return visit of my own, either! Good evening to you all."

Harry felt his heart sink, and Phineas Nigellus redoubled his efforts to leave the frame.

"Professor Black!" Hermione called, desperate to keep him from going; Harry didn't share her enthusiasm and instead shuffled over to the couch, slumping down onto it. "Please, could you just tell us when was the last time the sword of Gryffindor was taken out of its case, and by whom? Before the students tried to steal it, I mean."

Phineas Nigellus sighed, patience audibly wearing thin. "...As I recall, the last time the sword was removed from its case was when Professor Dumbledore used it to destroy a ring he'd found."

Hermione whipped around to look at Harry, and Ron started awake from where he'd dozed off again. Harry's heart tried to climb up out of his throat, a shot of adrenaline flooding his veins.

Malfoy was giving them all funny looks, arms crossed over his chest as he lounged against one of the tent's posts.

"Have you told Professor Snape about any of this?" Hermione asked, her voice trembling with excitement. "About Dumbledore—and the ring?"

Phineas Nigellus finally managed to find the frame and was guiding himself out of the picture. "Professor Snape has *far* more important matters on his mind than the dead. Now, I'll expect my portrait to be placed back where it belongs in due order! I say again, good *evening*." He whipped his nose into the air and then stomped out of the frame, leaving behind nothing but the wingback chair and a murky backdrop.

“The sword!” Hermione cried, once Phineas Nigellus had vanished.

“I know!” Harry said, and unable to contain himself, he punched the air: *finally*, a bit of good luck!

“So then, the sword can *really*...?” Ron started. “We heard the same thing, right? Dumbledore used the sword on Gaunt’s ring? And destroyed it?”

Hermione beamed, nodding. She hefted the portrait up again, and Ron scrambled over to help her stuff it back into the beaded bag. Once she’d tightened the cinch, she tossed it aside with a joyous sigh. “I can’t believe it! All this time we’ve been looking for—and it was there the whole time! Dumbledore *didn’t* leave us with nothing to go on!”

“But—why the sword?” Harry asked, still perplexed. “I mean, will *any* Goblin-made weapon do, in that case? Or is there something special about it?”

“Didn’t you just hear what Professor Black said? Goblin-made blades imbibe only that which strengthens them.” Harry still didn’t quite follow, and she reached forward to shake him by the shoulders, grinning excitedly. “Harry, that sword’s impregnated with *Basilisk venom!*”

Holy shit, she was right. He’d used the blade to slay the Basilisk that lurked in the Chamber of Secrets years ago. Hermione had said that Basilisk venom was one of the few agents that could destroy a Horcrux, and while they had no access to Basilisk fangs or venom itself, with the sword, they wouldn’t need it! “That’s why he willed it to Ron!”

“He must have known they’d never let us *have* it, so he slipped it into the will as a hint. I can’t believe we missed it!” Harry thought it was rather generous of Hermione to suggest that *they* had missed it, when without Hermione’s quick thinking, neither he nor Ron would have ever considered why Dumbledore had left them the sword.

“All right.” Harry took a breath, needing to get everything straight in his mind. “Dumbledore wanted us to have the sword, and he didn’t want Snape or the Death Eaters knowing we had it. So he made a copy...”

“And put the fake in the glass case,” Ron continued.

Hermione nodded. “And left the real one...” She trailed off, frowning. “Where?”

They gazed at one another; Harry felt like the answer ought to be obvious—but it wasn't. Things never were, to him. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Where the sword was, *what* the sword was. Or *had* he told Harry, and Harry had just not realised it at the time? He wracked his brain, trying to recall their final conversations, those lessons, but all he'd been focused on was finding Horcruxes, not destroying them.

Someone sighed loudly. “Is anyone going to explain what's so amazing about the bloody sword of Gryffindor?” Malfoy asked, looking at them all in turn. His eyes fell on Harry last, and he held them there. “Is *that* what you're on this little camping trip of yours for, sneaking around all over the British Isles? Looking for this sword?”

An awkward silence settled among them; in their excitement, they'd forgotten Malfoy's presence entirely. Harry looked to Hermione, who was staring at the floor, biting her lip. How did one politely suggest a conversation didn't concern you?

Harry was spared the uncomfortable discussion, though, when Malfoy sneered, “...I see. Right, then. I'm tired, so it's off to bed with me.” He waved at the three of them. “Feel free to scheme and plot in my absence. I wouldn't want to keep you from your sacred duties any longer.”

Hermione looked pained, and even Ron grimaced.

With a derisive huff, Malfoy stormed off, being sure to roughly bump his shoulder against Harry's as he passed.

Harry turned to follow him. “Malfoy—wait...” But someone—Ron—reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, shaking his head and giving him a firm look. Only after the bedroom door had been slammed shut did Ron release him, and Harry began to pace in front of the sofa. The energy from before had gone sour with Malfoy's abrupt departure, leaving him with a manic sort of frustration. “...He feels excluded.”

Ron raised a brow. “Uh, he *is* excluded. It’s *Malfoy*—we can’t loop him in on this! I doubt four heads are gonna do us much better than three, and besides, he’s only looking out for number one. Slytherin to the core, he is. Plus—and I feel like we’re all forgetting this, me included: he’s a *Death Eater*.”

“Regulus was also a Slytherin and a Death Eater,” Hermione reminded pointedly, though she was frowning, as if she didn’t like the idea of defending Malfoy. Harry sympathised. “He still managed to do the right thing, once he realised the truth of what he’d gotten himself into.”

Ron squirmed. “I still say we can’t trust him. Not with *this*. Scrambling a few eggs is one thing; this is serious.”

“Nor am I suggesting we *should* trust him,” Hermione reassured him, though she was looking at Harry when she said it. “But it might do him some good to know he’s helping with a worthwhile cause. Something that might save his parents. You said that’s what’s most important to him, right, Harry?” Harry nodded. “Perhaps we should try to convince him this will help achieve that. Four heads might not be better than three, but if push comes to shove, I’d like some reassurance he’ll think twice before running back to You-Know-Who with his tail between his legs.”

Ron groaned, his head falling forward onto his chest. “This is mad.”

Hermione just shrugged. “I say we let him try and prove himself, at least. He doesn’t seem very adept at deception, so I don’t think we stand to lose much. We just...have to be selective about what we do share with him.”

Harry’s head was starting to hurt. He’d been in *such* a good mood before, and now here Malfoy was, inadvertently ruining things once again. He understood Malfoy’s frustration, but had he really expected any different? Did he think that just because they’d relaxed their guard around him a bit, suddenly they were all going to be best mates?

But Hermione made something of a point. There would come a time, despite their best efforts, that they’d have to fight—and Malfoy would have to choose on which side of that

fight to stand. As it was, he could go either way. They could convince him to fall back to their corner with relatively little effort, as Hermione saw it, so why not at least try? One less Death Eater to fight was one less Death Eater to fight.

Ron seemed to recognise he'd been outvoted and slumped back into his armchair. "So, the sword of Gryffindor, huh?" He put his feet up on the coffee table. "Great, another damn magical object we need that we've got no idea how to locate. Just add it to the list, I suppose."

"Oh Ron..." Hermione sighed, and Harry left them. A faint plipping against the canvas of the tent's roof heralded an oncoming shower; it would be raining in the Sanctuary too. Harry was still running on adrenaline from earlier and had kind of wanted to fly off the excess energy, but the rain made it too dangerous without Atmospheric Charms, as Harry had found his glasses fogging and shirts soaked through on several occasions.

With few other options, he decided to turn in early like Malfoy.

The lamps were already low when he entered the room, and he stepped lightly to avoid disturbing Malfoy, though Harry doubted he was already asleep. He peeled off his shirt and shrugged into his nightclothes, performing his evening toilette at a glacial pace. Too soon, though, there was no way around it, and after settling onto his mattress, Harry softly cleared his throat. "...You awake?" No response came, and after an awkward beat, Harry tried again, "Malfoy?"

"*What?*" He didn't sound groggy at all, so he clearly hadn't been sleeping—only ignoring Harry. "Done with your meeting already? Or worried I'll eavesdrop? Shall I plug my ears? Bury my head in the ground?"

"It's not like—" Harry started, then shut his mouth, grinding his teeth. He should have suggested Hermione do this; if she thought they ought to enlist his help, she could damn well ask for it herself. "Just, we have to keep this a secret. From *everyone*, not just..." He didn't want to say *Death Eaters*, though that was the truth of it. "Not even the Order of the Phoenix knows about our mission. It's only us out here, and that's how it's got to be."

Malfoy rolled over, frowning at Harry in the dim light. His white-blond hair lay fanned against the dark pillowcase in fetching contrast. “If you think making me feel *common* is going to win you points in my book, you really haven’t learned anything about me in six years.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “The point is: it’s nothing personal. We’d feel the same hesitation to be open around anyone—family, our closest friends, whoever. Rather a lot’s riding on us...managing to do what we’re doing.”

Malfoy stared at him for an uncomfortably long beat, then quietly said, “...You’re trying to kill him.”

Hardly a secret. Harry shrugged. “Isn’t pretty much everyone?”

“No, hardly anyone’s trying—not seriously. Even Dumbledore wasn’t *really* trying.”

Harry shook his head. “You’d be surprised...” He licked his lips, choosing his words very carefully. He had to speak as if, at any moment, Malfoy could whisper his words to another Death Eater, who’d carry them back to Voldemort himself. “...There’s a weapon.”

“A *weapon*?” Malfoy laughed roughly. “What, Killing Curse too good for you?”

“You actually think the Killing Curse would work against him?”

“It’s the *Killing Curse*,” Malfoy drawled. “Killing is what it does. You don’t shrug it off.”

“I did,” Harry reminded him flatly, and that shut Malfoy up. Harry sighed. “Anyway, it’s the only way we’ve seen is capable of taking him out, but...it’s in pieces.”

“It’s—broken?”

“Not broken, really. Just separated. So we have to find those pieces and...er, bring them together before we can use it. Trouble is, these pieces...well, we don’t exactly know where they all are. And they don’t look like anything terribly remarkable, so that makes

them all the harder to suss out.”

Malfoy’s gaze went distant with thought, brows cinching. “...Like the locket? The one you stole from the Ministry?”

Harry hadn’t expected him to make the connection quite that quickly; he’d need to be careful what hints he shared. “Yeah, that was one of them.”

“So that’s what you want the sword for, too? It’s another of these pieces?”

“Oh, no,” Harry said, then wished he hadn’t; it might have done well to drop a bit of misinformation in the mix. Too late for it now, though. “But we do need that as well. There’s only two pieces we’re missing right now: A chalice that once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, and then...something that used to belong to Ravenclaw.”

Malfoy’s expression soured. “Suppose you can’t tell me what *that* is either,” he sneered.

“No—no, we *literally* don’t know what it is. All we know is that it’ll probably be something she once owned—hence all the research into the Founders’ artefacts.”

Malfoy seemed to process the information, frowning in suspicion. “...You don’t really sound like you know what you’re doing.”

Harry had to laugh at that. “You’re not entirely wrong, but it’s all we have, and...and I’m positive it’s what we need to do. We’ll just have to keep our noses down, turn up what we can, and think—and then act.”

“Gryffindors are pants at thinking.”

“But we *are* good at acting, you have to admit.”

“Perhaps, but not thinking first doesn’t generally bode very well for the acting bit.”

Harry shrugged. “I dunno. I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“And how you’ve managed that is beyond me.” Malfoy sighed. “Well, luckily for you

three, Slytherins are master thinkers.”

“Overthinkers, you mean,” Harry ribbed, letting his lips quirk up at the corners to show he wasn’t being too serious. Malfoy didn’t really respond well to being the butt of jokes, and Harry didn’t want to ruin the relative peace being brokered here.

Malfoy shifted up in bed, drawing his knees to his chest, and he chewed on his thumb with a pensive expression. “...I’ve never heard anything about a cup owned by Hufflepuff or an item of Ravenclaw’s, but surely the most obvious place to look would be Hogwarts.”

“You’d think—but we know the cup’s been passed around among Hufflepuff’s descendants over the years, though it was stolen a few decades back, so it’s unlikely it’s made its way back to Hogwarts. As for Ravenclaw’s piece...” Harry grimaced. “It’s not impossible it’s still there, but Dumbledore had been searching for these items long before we took over. I imagine he explored every nook and cranny of the castle during his time there.”

Malfoy’s face fell, and it struck Harry he’d actually been trying to help—honestly—and was disappointed he hadn’t been able to offer anything of real value. Maybe Hermione was right; maybe he *did* just want to feel useful. *‘Or maybe he’s just trying to get us to let our guard down,’* an irritating voice inside his head suggested, and Harry wished, not for the first time, he’d studied Legilimency back at Hogwarts.

Still—while Malfoy was a conniving, self-serving little prick, there *was* one point on which he could always be trusted, and that was to look out for himself. Harry just had to make sure that Malfoy saw it in his best interest to work with them rather than against them.

He swallowed, and cast his line. “...So you’ll help us, then?”

“What?”

“You’ll help us with our research?” He had to word his offer well, because *help us* could

involve so many sacrifices that Malfoy was probably not yet prepared to offer (and maybe would never be).

Malfoy spoke slowly, practising just as much care with his words as Harry. "...You *want* me to?"

Harry thought he caught a flicker of something in Malfoy's eye, but when he looked again, it was gone. They hadn't visited the Sanctuary today, so he hoped it wasn't a sign Malfoy was overdue a shift. "You want to save your mum and dad? Want to make sure You-Know-Who can't hurt them or you? This is how you do it. The *only* way you can do it right now. So give us your all, and you'll have ours."

Malfoy had to understand this wasn't about a want—it was a *need*. They needed every weapon in their arsenal available, and that meant working with people they might not otherwise like, if only because their ends were aligned for the time being.

Malfoy stared at him in the dim light, then sighed, sliding back down under the covers and rolling over to place his back to Harry. "I may vomit from such sentimental Gryffindor tripe being poured into my ear."

Harry wasn't sure how to interpret that, or the closed-off body language—and then Malfoy's breathing began to even out, and he despaired. He'd thought there'd been... well, *something*. That Malfoy wanted to be a part of something bigger, wanted a hand in saving people he cared about.

And maybe he did; maybe it was just that Harry had come on too strong.

Harry drew back the covers and climbed into bed, disappointed in himself.

He should have had Hermione do this in the first place; she knew how to practise a tough kind of love with Malfoy, how to twist his arm without breaking it.

Malfoy wasn't the kind of person you just—

"You invited me; remember that."

Harry blinked in the darkness; the lamps had gone too low to make out his own hand in front of his face, and Malfoy's voice sounded eerily disembodied.

“What?”

“*You* invited *me*,” Malfoy repeated. “Not the other way around. I didn't go crawling on hands and knees, begging to be a part of your little misadventure that's quite likely going to get you all killed.”

Harry frowned at the insinuation, though it wasn't as if he hadn't pretty much assumed as such himself. “And?”

“So this doesn't count as my favour; you still owe me one,” Malfoy said. “Good night.”

The Doldrums

Harry woke, groggily, to the sound of muffled speaking and the steady droning patter of rain on the tentskin. He shuffled sleep-drunk into the kitchen, where it was evidently Malfoy's turn at the hob. He had two pans going—though one smelled a bit burned from where Harry was standing, and the look on Malfoy's face didn't impart much confidence in the state of the other. Hermione and Ron were carrying on an excited discussion at the kitchen table, one of the research books open between them.

"It's *got* to be Ravenclaw's diadem, all right?" Hermione was saying. "It just has to be! That's the *only* artefact of hers that's mentioned in *any* of these books."

Ron massaged his temples, suggesting they'd been at this for a while. "All I'm saying is it seems too obvious. You just said it yourself: it's the *only* artefact any of these books talks about. But she must've had loads of jewellery."

"What, because she's a *woman*?" Hermione sniffed, and Ron visibly winced.

"No, *no*," he stammered, going red in the face. "Just because everyone's heard of it! People have been looking for it for *ages*."

"And no one's found it. Because it's been hidden away."

"My point is that it's a heavily sought object; why would You-Know-Who make a You-Know-What out of something like that? Wouldn't he want it to be something *no one's* looking for?"

Harry pulled out a seat, plopping down. "Sorry, but I think I'm gonna have to side with Hermione here."

"Aw, *c'mon*," Ron groaned.

Harry held up a hand. “Dumbledore was certain that You-Know-Who wouldn’t want to use ordinary, unremarkable objects. *And* that he was probably looking for something from the founders. If in all our research the only item of Ravenclaw’s we’ve come across is the diadem, then it stands to reason it’s all *he* ever came across too.”

“But we’ve found mention of at least three artefacts of Hufflepuff’s so far, none of which is the cup that Smith witch owned. So clearly You-Know-Who had access to information we don’t, which means it may be the diadem, and it may not.”

Harry grimaced, because now Ron made a good point too. It was too early for this—and Malfoy blessedly swooped in with food to distract. He seemed to have salvaged whatever had been in his pans and somehow thrown together eggy bread and grilled tomatoes. Hermione cleared the table quickly as Malfoy set a plate piled high with steaming, egg-soaked toast and slightly blackened tomatoes between them.

“Impressive,” Harry said, and Malfoy lifted a brow. “Thought you couldn’t cook?”

“I was never taught to cook; I didn’t say I couldn’t learn.” Malfoy cut Ron a look. “One wonders what Weasley’s excuse is, then.”

Ron tried to deliver a mocking retort, but it was muffled by his mouth being stuffed with toast.

Malfoy slid into the fourth seat at the table, pouring himself some orange juice, and his legs casually brushed against Harry’s beneath the table as he scooted his chair in. It was close quarters—but kind of cosy, between the warmth of the tent’s charms and the filling food and the sound of the chill rain pelting down outside.

“We’ll need to move camp as soon as we’re done with breakfast,” Hermione reminded around a bite. “It’s been raining most of the night, so the river’s starting to rise. It’ll probably flood over by noon, so we’ll need to be gone before then unless we want to get waterlogged.”

They made quiet murmurs of acknowledgement, and after they’d finished the Scouring

up, it was all hands on deck to clear the site. They packed quickly, and Harry cast an umbrella charm over them while they cleaned the bank of any evidence they'd camped there. Once Hermione was satisfied with the job, they Apparated together to the next site of her choosing: a windswept, heather-covered cliffside overlooking a bay under cloudy skies that occasionally parted long enough for the sun to peek through.

"Home sweet home," Ron sighed.

"Just as I pictured it," Malfoy said. He then pointed to a red squirrel chittering loudly at them from atop a cluster of stones. "And look! A relative popping in for a visit!"

"Easy," Harry warned, half to Ron and half to Malfoy. "Let's get set up before we start going for each other's throats, shall we?" Hermione pulled Ron away to help her cast the security charms, and Harry hissed at Malfoy, "Do you really have to wind him up like that?"

"You asked me for my help; you didn't ask me to play nice with Weasley."

"Well now I am; and Hermione too, for that matter."

Malfoy gave a beleaguered sigh, as if this were a Herculean task. "Only if I *don't* have to play nice with you. My patience can only stretch so far."

Harry snorted, casting a thoughtless *Erecto* at the tent. "Why start now?"

Now that Malfoy had agreed to offer input and help in their research, there was an odd new part of the day where the four of them—usually after a meal—found themselves curled up on the couch or in armchairs, silently poring over books and occasionally scribbling notes or elbowing one another for an opinion. While Hermione and Ron were intent on tracking down the remaining two Horcruxes, Harry was more interested in figuring out where the sword of Gryffindor might have disappeared to. The locket hung heavy inside the pouch around Harry's neck, and he longed to be rid of it as soon as possible—plus, it felt like an easier target than the cup or the maybe-a-Horcrux-maybe-not diadem.

Still, the more they talked about the places in which Dumbledore might have hidden the sword, the more desperate and far-fetched their speculation became; Harry did not seriously think that Dumbledore had Transfigured it into a knife and given it to the Hogwarts house-elves to prepare meals with. But no amount of wracking his brains was doing much good; he could not recall Dumbledore ever mentioning the sword at all outside of his will, let alone where he might have hidden it.

Malfoy had pointed out the appallingly obvious when he'd accused them of not knowing what they were doing. But Harry had thought that they at least had a direction. Lately, it was beginning to feel like they didn't even have *that*, spinning their wheels fruitlessly when the answers they sought might not even be able to be found inside dusty old books.

News of the sword had mowed down the weeds of doubt that had grown in their minds, but new seeds were beginning to take root once more as the days dragged on, with darkness setting in early as autumn slowly gave way to winter. With shorter days came shorter tempers, and patience was wearing thin all around.

Even time in the Sanctuary was turning into almost a chore. Harry had thought that with the four of them now all focused on (roughly) the same task, he wouldn't feel quite as guilty for 'wasting time' with Malfoy, but it was somehow *worse*. He knew they needed to find the sword of Gryffindor almost as much as they needed to find the cup and Ravenclaw's artefact, and every time he crossed that threshold, it was another afternoon or evening he wasn't driving himself spare trying to remember if Dumbledore had said something—anything—that might serve as a clue to the sword's location.

Malfoy seemed to be sensing Harry's growing reluctance to spend time with him in the Sanctuary, for lately he was as short and snippy as he'd been when he first arrived. He kept his word and watched his tongue around Hermione and Ron, but Harry could feel him backsliding from what had been something bordering on at least camaraderie with Harry, if not friendship.

As the first snows began to fall, Harry realised that even surrounded as he was by friends and at-least-not-enemies, he felt more alone than he had in a very, very long

time.



“Harry? Would you take a look at this?” Hermione asked. “I want your opinion on something...”

Her voice was very loud in the silence of their usual post-prandial research session, and Malfoy snickered meanly at the jolt Harry gave when she’d startled him with her question. She had her copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* out open on her lap and was frowning down at the pages.

Harry cut Malfoy a warning look, then moved from his seat on the sofa to the armchair Hermione occupied, settling on one of the arms. “What is it?”

“Look at this symbol.” She pointed to what seemed to be the title of one of the stories—though it was all in runes, so Harry couldn’t be entirely sure. His eye was drawn to a character sitting above the bold-face heading: a triangle, with a circle in its centre cut through with a vertical line.

“What about it? I never took Ancient Runes.”

“I know, but *that* isn’t a rune, and it’s not in the syllabary either.” She tapped the spine of another book she’d tucked between her leg and the arm of the chair—the title was more incomprehensible scribbles, so Harry assumed it was one of her Ancient Runes textbooks. “This whole time, I’ve been thinking it was just a fancy historiated initial, but I think it must be something else entirely. Look, it’s not even part of the printed words—someone’s *drawn* it there, by hand. Doesn’t it look familiar?”

Harry took the book from her, frowning at it, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy stand and move across the tent to join them, his curiosity evidently having gotten the better of him. “No, I don’t...wait a moment.” Harry squinted. “Isn’t that the same symbol Luna’s dad was wearing round his neck? At the wedding?”

“Yes, that’s what I thought too!”

“What—the one Krum nearly decked him for?” Ron asked, placing his own book back on the table and shuffling over to throw in his two pence.

“...That’s Grindelwald’s mark.”

They all three turned to Malfoy, who was staring down at the book with a hard set to his jaw, stone-faced and serious. He swallowed, then seemed to realise they were looking at him. “I’ve—my family owns...not a few artefacts associated with him. I’ve definitely seen that mark before.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Colour me surprised.”

“But I’ve never heard that Grindelwald had a mark,” Hermione protested, confused. “There’s no mention of it in *anything* I’ve ever read about him, and he’s hardly an undocumented historical figure.”

“Maybe not, but Malfoy’s right,” Harry said, recalling the strained conversation with Krum at Bill and Fleur’s wedding. “Krum told me he’d seen it carved into a wall at Durmstrang, and that Grindelwald had put it there. He was pissed off as anything to see Luna’s dad wearing it, though I can’t imagine Xenophilius is a Grindelwald supporter.”

She traced the symbol with a finger. “That’s odd, then. If it’s a symbol of Dark Magic, representing such a terrible wizard, what’s it doing in a book of children’s stories?”

“You reckon Dumbledore wanted you to see it?” Ron asked. “You said someone drew it there by hand; do any of the other story titles have peculiar symbols over them?”

“Dumbledore?” Malfoy parroted. “What’s he got to do with this?”

Hermione held up the book. “Dumbledore left me this, in his will. He left all three of us something, though it’s been quite a chore trying to figure out *why* he chose what he did.”

“He left you a *book*?” She nodded, and he looked to Ron.

“Sword of Gryffindor for me,” Ron said. “Ministry was reluctant to part with it for some

reason, though, as you can see.”

“Didn’t want to pass off an ancient artefact of cultural significance to a teenager? Shocking.”

“Would’ve saved us some trouble,” Harry muttered.

“And you?”

Harry fished inside the Mokeskin pouch around his neck and drew out the Snitch he and Malfoy used for their Seeker’s games. “A Snitch.”

“A *Snitch*?”

“My first game Snitch, from my first ever Quidditch match.” He moved to bring it to his lips, to show Malfoy the writing, before recalling that it had been inside a dragon’s mouth not so very long ago. “Er, it’s got a flesh memory, and some writing appeared on it before: *I open at the close*. Beyond that, it’s fairly unremarkable.”

“A book, a sword, and a Snitch...” Malfoy repeated, half to himself, and then shook his head. “The man was mad.”

“Clearly not *that* mad,” Hermione said. “Since we know we need the sword now, and there’s obviously *something* important about this book, too.”

“And the Snitch?”

Hermione looked uncomfortable. “Well, I’m sure it will reveal itself in time.” She looked to Harry. “Do you think Mr. Lovegood would know more about the symbol?”

Harry winced. “I don’t think he even realised what it was; if he’d known it was related to Grindelwald, surely he wouldn’t have worn it to a *wedding*.”

“I dunno,” Ron said. “Luna’s never really been one to recognise tact, y’know? It might not’ve struck him it’d be in poor taste.”

He had a point, though out of respect for his friend, Harry didn't want to admit it. He sighed, turning to Malfoy. "Do you know anything else about it? Does it *mean* anything?"

Malfoy had his arms crossed, giving a little shake to his head. "No, I've only seen the symbol a few times, on items I know were associated with Grindelwald at some point."

"What items?"

Malfoy's arms tightened, and his shoulders tensed. "Father...has always been a collector." His tone then quickly grew defensive. "And just so you know, he's *allowed* to collect these things. They aren't Dark; the Ministry's inspected them."

"Malfoy, *what items*?" Harry couldn't help the urgency in his voice; what if *this* was the clue?

"A woman's jewellery set; a necklace, earrings, and a brooch. An anniversary gift for my mother, years ago." Malfoy shrugged. "They could have been forgeries or fakes—it's a simple enough symbol to recreate. But I doubt Father would have done business with anyone who didn't deal in artefacts with a lengthy, provable provenance."

Ron was visibly excited, eyes wide. "Y'think maybe one of 'em is a...?"

Hermione shook her head, though. "Lucius Malfoy already had one—and he lost it. I doubt he'd have been entrusted with *two*."

"Wait—what?" Malfoy's arms dropped to his side, and his hands clenched into fists. "What's my father got to do with anything? He had one of these pieces you're looking for?"

The silence that followed his question was deafening; was it wise to share *that* particular element with Malfoy? What if his father had explained to him exactly what kinds of treasures Voldemort had entrusted to them? They were walking a fine enough line as it was.

Malfoy made an angry sound in the back of his throat, spitting out, "Excuse the fuck out

of me for trying to help.” He then stormed off into the Sanctuary, slamming the door shut behind him.

Harry felt a twinge of guilt, but he couldn’t go chasing Malfoy after every tantrum he threw. His legs wouldn’t hold out.

He sighed. “So it’s Grindelwald’s symbol. But what does he have to do with *any* of this?”

Hermione bit her lip. “I’m not sure, but it must mean something. Since when has anything involving Dumbledore been mere coincidence?”

Ron snorted softly. “Maybe it’s just as well he’s dead, else I’d want to kill him myself for being so damn cryptic with everything. Chalk this up to another mystery we’ll drive ourselves round the twist trying to sort out.”



“It’s not *working*,” Malfoy growled, interrupting Hermione’s fourth re-read of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

Harry and Ron were out on a shopping excursion, and she’d been left to guard the campsite with Malfoy. It had been a fairly quiet morning, but that appeared to be over now. She closed the book, setting it onto a side table, and crossed her arms. “*What* isn’t working?”

Malfoy dropped his voice, even though they were the only ones in the tent, as if the topic were exceedingly scandalous and he didn’t want to be overheard. “The—transforming. Spending time around him, in his general vicinity. You said that would take the edge off, but it’s coming *back*. It’s wearing off, and I feel—” He shuddered, gritting his teeth. “I feel like before. All—hot, out of sorts. Like my skin’s too tight, or like I’m wearing someone else’s face.” He rubbed his shoulders. “It’s going to happen again, I know it! Even transforming now doesn’t do anything to dampen it, and I’m almost afraid to shift back, because it’s going to *happen*, probably when I least expect it, I’m going to—”

He cut himself off with a whine and sank into one of the armchairs, cradling his head in

his hands. Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed; she'd forgotten just how dramatic this one could be. He was frightened, and that was understandable, but he could stand to grow a thicker spine. She smiled grimly to herself; no wonder he'd chickened out of actually doing the job assigned to him by Voldemort and instead looked for an escape route.

"...Well, I figured this would happen."

Malfoy's head shot back up, expression betrayed. "You *knew*?"

"I *told* you, remember? This is something you're going to have to deal with: these urges that aren't necessarily yours but *are* born of your own deep-seated emotions, whether you want to acknowledge them or not." Malfoy made a face. "*Don't* give me that. Ignore them, and this is what happens. If you want to stop feeling this way, you have to identify the cause and...sate it, for lack of a better word. There's a part of you now that is probably always going to want some degree of reassurance that Harry won't leave you or abandon you; clearly, simple proximity and spending time together isn't going to be enough to achieve that reassurance anymore."

"Reassurance he won't *leave* me? I couldn't get rid of him even if I wanted to, or have you forgotten?"

"That's hardly what I'm talking about, and you well know it. It's the mate—" Malfoy held up a finger in warning. "...The *M word* business again. You've been spending time around him, yes, which did the job for a while—but you've gotten acclimated to it. It's been *normalised* for you, and now you see nothing special about his interactions with you. What you're feeling is simply the needy dragon bits of you wanting to feel unique again. Reassurance that the relationship you share with him is different from those he shares with others—and more important for it. You're going to want him around when he's not, and when he *is* around, you're going to want him closer."

"...Closer?" Malfoy whispered, almost fearful.

"Well clearly being in the same room isn't enough anymore; I expect that's what's

making you feel antsy. Once you find a way to establish a new facet to your relationship, everything should settle again. Maybe if you were to initiate some touch—”

“*Touch?!*” he practically shrieked, leaping to his feet. He ran his hands through his hair, pacing a hole in the rug. “Fuck—*fuck*. I thought that was months or—or *years* out. Not something I’d have to deal with inside a matter of weeks!”

“Don’t have a heart attack. I’m not saying you’ll need to walk around holding hands. It probably just needs to be something—something *physical*—that lets your body know it doesn’t need to freak out like this. He’s there, he’s tangible, and he’s not going to Disapparate on you.” She shrugged, reaching for the book again. “It’s all very chemical, I’m sure.”

“And what happens when I get used to *touching*?” Malfoy asked, though he didn’t sound like he wanted to know the answer to that. Hermione didn’t either, so she kept mum.

Malfoy slumped back down into the armchair, rubbing at his face. “This is so fucked up.” He cocked his head to the side, brows raised hopefully. “Don’t suppose you’re still not on board with my clocking him, then?”

“Nice try, but no.” She batted her lashes, smiling innocently. “Though I’m happy to arrange for Harry to clock *you* if you like?”

He let his head fall back against the chair cushion, then shook his head. “I can’t do this. I *can’t*. If he catches me trying to *grope him*—”

Hermione nearly ripped the book in half. “*What?*”

“Well that’s what it’s going to look like to him! This is *mortifying*.”

She scoffed. “Surely a bit of embarrassment is better than sheer torture and being burned alive?”

He lifted his head. “To a Malfoy? Debatable.”

“Well,” she huffed. “I don’t see you’ve got much choice. If you’re so worried about what he’ll think, I can explain the situation to him so he doesn’t get the wrong idea? He probably needs to be looped in regardless—”

“NO. No. No no *no*—that’s worse than *me* having to tell him.”

Hermione failed to see how her gently explaining Malfoy’s unfortunate condition to one of her best friends was worse than Malfoy slogging through it himself and probably misrepresenting a bevy of details, but she let it stand. “Well one of us is going to have to tell him, because I refuse to chance you *killing* yourself because of stubborn pride. If I have to *Imperius* Harry into giving you a great big bear hug, don’t think I won’t.” He groaned again, looking like he might just cry. “What if it overwhelms you again and you pass out before you can make the shift to heal yourself? You’ll be dead in minutes; there’s no healing those sorts of injuries in a human, not with our skill level. I’ll give you a week to sort things out with Harry, and if you can’t manage it, then I’m going to him myself.”

Malfoy’s complexion had gone ashen, and his eyes had a haunted look to them, dull and lifeless. He really was terrified of having to be this vulnerable with Harry, which struck Hermione as so absurd. Harry struggled with tact at times, and he’d never been much for decorum, but he was reasonable, and regardless of how he felt about what was being asked of him, he’d grit his teeth and bear it, like any thankless task he’d been set before.

“He’ll help you, you know. He won’t make fun of you—we aren’t thirteen anymore.”

“I’d almost rather he did,” Malfoy muttered. “Pity’s worse.”

“Well it’s not pity either. It’s because it’s *right*. It’s...” She sighed. “Fine, it’s awkward, I’ll admit, and certainly not ideal—especially the timing—but *god*, he nearly got all three of us killed at the Ministry because it didn’t sit right with him you were being held prisoner there, stuck in stasis, without a proper hearing! I know you don’t think too highly of him, but Harry Potter is a *good man*. He’s not the smartest man, he’s not the most skilled—but he’s *good*. And he can’t *not* try when he sees wrong being done and suffering undeserved.”

“Maybe it’s not undeserved,” Malfoy said, rubbing at his forearm. Hermione imagined that if he rolled up his sleeve, she’d see an angry dark blotch shaped like a rotting skull.

“I thought pity was worse? Or is self-pity an exception?”

Malfoy locked eyes with her, squaring his jaw. He still looked like stiff breeze might topple him. “I’m not holding hands with him.”

She slid a finger between the dog-eared pages she’d marked, opening the book on her lap again. “One week, Malfoy,” she warned.

Reassurance

As winter settled in proper, digging its claws into the countryside and oozing into every crack and crevice it could find, the temperatures plummeted. They dared not remain in any one area too long, especially near civilisation, and soon they were forced to venture northwest and away from the more southerly areas of England, where the weather could be relied upon to remain relatively mild for a while longer. Armed with only *Impervius* and warming charms, they wandered around the country, braving an unforgiving mountain slope, where sleet pounded the tent, a stinking marsh, where they found themselves flooded with chill water after Ron's hastily cast *Impervius* faltered in the middle of the night, and even a tiny island in the middle of a Scottish loch, where the snow half-buried the tent overnight.

It was too cold by half to remain in the Sanctuary for any lengthy amount of time these days—for Harry, at least. The everburning fire that roiled in the dragon's belly evidently kept Malfoy toasty warm, and it was little surprise that he barely waited long enough to clear the entrance to the frigid Sanctuary before shrugging into his Animagus form. Harry still felt compelled to join him, to his own bafflement, so he would bundle up at regular intervals, in several layers and underneath a half-dozen Warming Charms, and traipse in after Malfoy. They would test the limits of Malfoy's endurance or engage in games of pursuit or race for as long as Harry's Charms lasted before retiring, exhausted, to their beds.

These efforts seemed to be wasted, though; as winter rolled in, Malfoy remained on-edge, for reasons Harry couldn't quite grasp, but so far the tensions had yet to come to a head, and they continued to share most evenings around a conjured fire in the fireplace, poring over books in comfortable silence. If he closed his eyes, Harry could almost pretend he was back in the Common Room in Gryffindor tower.

It was a Tuesday night when Malfoy completely disrupted the status quo.

Harry had been in charge of dinner, and they'd supped that evening on a hearty vegetable soup that was filling to the point you didn't really want to move much afterwards. After they'd finished clearing down the table and scouring up the dishes, they moved to the sitting room, taking their usual positions. Malfoy generally sat on the sofa, at the opposite end from Harry, until he'd sufficiently digested his meal that he felt comfortable transforming, at which point they would retire to the Sanctuary.

This evening, though, he dithered, and Harry was reminded of that first evening Malfoy had worked himself up to joining them in the sitting room instead of heading into the Sanctuary straight away or holing himself up in their bedroom. After several long, overwrought moments, he seemed to gather himself and marched into the sitting room with a firm set to his jaw.

Except instead of sitting in his unofficial 'spot', he chose to sit beside Harry.

No, not *beside* Harry; practically *on top of him*.

Malfoy collapsed back onto the couch, sliding right up to Harry and pressing their sides together. He squirmed in place, getting situated, but made no moves to put any more space between them. It was uncomfortably warm with the fire going, and Harry coughed softly. "Er—"

"Not. A word," Malfoy ground out under his breath, and then reached for the nearest book—*Finding the Founders: Hogwarts' Mothers and Fathers*—and settled in.

At a loss, Harry threw a helpless look to Ron, who seemed equal parts horrified and confused. He turned to Hermione for an explanation, but she had her book hefted up so Harry couldn't catch her eye, pointedly avoiding contact. He hadn't a clue what was going on—was this a *joke*? But then, Malfoy was hardly the joking type, and Harry could *feel* how stiff and tense he was; no, he was no more happy with their position than Harry was.

With no help from his friends and Malfoy tight-lipped next to him, his heart thudding so hard it echoed into Harry, he accepted that there would be no explanation nor shifting of

positions. It seemed that unless he wanted to actively broach the subject and call attention to the elephant—dragon?—in the room, he would have to bear Malfoy’s cuddling for at least the duration of the evening.

There was nothing to be done for it, so Harry sighed, picked up his own book—*Treasures of the Sacred Twenty-Eight*—and tried to ignore the heat of Malfoy’s body pressed up tight against his own.

It was nigh unbearable at first, the both of them tense and wound tight enough to pop, but at length, Malfoy relaxed, even—to Harry’s silent horror—leaned into him a bit more, almost unthinking. Once there were no longer bony elbows in his side or knobby shoulders laying into him, Harry found he could stop being so aware of Malfoy, and as the tension eased, the comfortable communion of their evenings around the fire slowly returned. Malfoy’s breathing was soft and deep, and he seemed to carry around with him the faint scent of woodsmoke these days, subtle enough not to overwhelm but unmistakable.

Hermione was the first to turn in, bidding them all good evening and reminding Ron it was his turn at breakfast. Ron stirred from the nap he’d slipped into, nodding dopily, before stretching and casting a *Tempus* to check the hour. He made overtures of heading on to bed himself, especially when he realised it was just him and Harry-and-Malfoy left in the sitting room. He ruffled his sleep-mussed hair with one hand and gave them a weak wave with the other. “Er—well, g’night, you two...”

A thrumming *hmm* rumbled through Malfoy, and Harry dismissed Ron with a, “Night,” of his own.

And then it was just the two of them. Another few moments passed in silence, as Malfoy seemed engrossed in whatever he was reading. Harry craned his neck to run his eyes over the text and felt a pleasant little knot twist in his stomach when he saw Malfoy was reading up on Ravenclaw. He was trying to help, earnestly. He had to understand he hadn’t been entirely looped in on the truth of their quest, but he’d still decided it was something worth making an effort with. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

But Ron's *Tempus* had shown it was nearly midnight, and reluctant as Harry was now to disturb their position, since it would mean they'd finally have to address it, he was actually starting to get a cramp and needed to stretch. Casual as he could, he suggested softly so as not to startle, "You think...we should go, too?"

"Hm?" Malfoy said, distracted.

"To bed."

Malfoy twisted in place, blinking at him in confusion—then glanced around to see that they were all alone. "...Shit." He rubbed his eyes, evidently having been so engrossed in his reading he hadn't even noticed Hermione and Ron begging off.

Harry tried to defuse the tension before Malfoy froze up again. "That good a book?"

"What? No—dry as dead leaves." Malfoy's eye seemed drawn to the bits of themselves that were pressed together, and he did not appear to like what he saw. Without much choice, Harry had had to rest the arm between them along the back of the sofa, and as Malfoy roused, it had slid down to nearly settle across his shoulders. Harry had thought to pull it back, but doing so would only draw further attention to it.

Malfoy shifted, leaning away and sliding over on the cushion so that Harry could finally breathe again. "...Sorry."

"It's fine," Harry lied. Maybe if he played it off like it was nothing, they wouldn't have to discuss whatever this had been. He was sure he wouldn't like it anyway, and he was perfectly happy to let this be a one-off that neither of them ever brought up again.

Malfoy shook his head, though. "It's not—it's *not*, just..." He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes again. "I need some sleep."

He rose and made for the bedroom, and after waiting a moment to give Malfoy a head start as well as to collect himself, Harry followed. He made his evening toilette as slowly as possible, hoping that if he took long enough, maybe Malfoy would be asleep by the time he climbed into bed. When he returned and found the bedroom dark and quiet, he

cheered silently, and then crept on tip-toe over to his bed.

Before he could climb in, though, Malfoy spoke up, voice soft and far away in the darkness. "...I'll probably need to do that again."

Harry mouthed a nice hearty *fuck* to himself, then tried to affect as casual an air as possible. "The—uh, practically sitting in my lap bit?"

"Yes..." he grit out.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head, drawing back the covers and sliding in with a sigh. "I didn't see you use the Sanctuary today; is that why? Did it just... 'build up' again, and you needed help defusing it?" Perhaps that was it; Malfoy had been able to work himself down from an uncontrolled shift with direct attention from Harry before, after all. "I know it's been pretty waterlogged in there with the crappy weather outside, so I can talk to Hermione about finally setting the Atmospheric Charms. Maybe with some tweaking, she can make it so it's always clear instead of mirroring outside like it does now?"

There came the creak of bedsprings, and then the lamps flared brighter around them as Malfoy sat up, massaging his temples and wiping a hand over his face. "I wish that was all it was..." Maybe it was the wan light, but Malfoy looked rather ill. Harry hoped he wasn't coming down with something—or at least that it wasn't contagious. Malfoy took a bracing breath. "I need...reassurance."

"...Reassurance?" Harry repeated slowly. "About?"

Malfoy's shoulders tensed, and he muttered something under his breath that Harry thought sounded like *should've made Granger do this*. He closed his eyes and buried his face in his knees, which he'd drawn up to his chest. "*About* you being my...my *M word*."

Harry wanted to laugh; it sounded so *childish* when Malfoy put it like that. As if it were a curse word, and he might be reprimanded for speaking it aloud.

But then it sank in exactly what Malfoy was saying, and Harry didn't feel like laughing at

all. “Wait—*what?*”

Malfoy forced his head up, staring balefully at Harry, and ran his hands through his hair. “Has Granger seriously not given you The Talk? If not, I’m going to have words with her, because it’s not bloody fair I was forced to endure it and you *weren’t*.”

“I—I mean, she’s the one who told me I should spend time with you in the Sanctuary, but that wasn’t *cuddling on the couch*. It was just to ground you, or whatever!” This was *far* beyond what Hermione had mentioned; what did snuggling have to do with settling Malfoy so his dragon didn’t go off on a rampage and wreck the tent? Hermione had *assured* him this wasn’t about romantic love or anything, so why all of a sudden did Malfoy need this uncomfortable display of physical intimacy to keep himself in check?

Malfoy rubbed his face. “Fine. I’ll speak slowly and use small words so as not to overtax you.”

“How kind,” Harry muttered.

“Given my misfortune to be a dragon Animagus, it seems that the innate instincts and urges inherent to the creature have...imprinted...on my mind.”

Harry waved him off. “Yeah, but I’ve heard all this before. Dragon instincts, drives and whatnot, overwhelming the human bits.”

“Yes, well, what you probably nodded off and missed is that those urges can evidently... evolve. Should the creature become complacent, or jaded to the attentions it receives, it will seek stronger reassurance of its place in...in the natural order of things.”

Its place in the natural order of things? Harry shook his head. “I...I’m sorry, I’m really not following. I still don’t get what you mean about ‘reassurance’.”

Even in the low light, Harry could tell that Malfoy was flushing deeply; it wasn’t much better than the slightly nauseated look he’d been wearing earlier.

“The *dragon*. It wants...” Malfoy licked his lips, eyes flicking about the room as if

physically searching for words. “It needs to be *reminded* that...that you won’t try and leave it, that you won’t abandon it, or reject it. *That* kind of reassurance.”

Harry had to fight not to physically recoil. “That I won’t—*what?*”

“I beg you don’t make me say it again, Potter.”

“That’s not what I meant, I just—*what?*” Harry sputtered, flailing rather spectacularly with his words. “How could I—when I’m not even—when *we’re* not even—this doesn’t make any *sense?*” He shook his head. “So, what, your dragon thinks we’re—?”

“It doesn’t *think* anything, it’s a bloody animal!” Malfoy snapped, and he was still bright red, but Harry suspected it was from anger as much as shame. “It’s not *me*—it’s these feelings inside me that aren’t my own and I *don’t* want to have to deal with them, but they’re *there* and I have to or it will drive me *fucking mad*, all right?” His shoulders slumped. “It just wants reassurance, Potter. That’s all.”

Harry didn’t see how Malfoy could just *That’s all* this situation, but the defeat in Malfoy’s voice was catching. “Well...I just...what am I meant to do, then?” He knew he sounded lost; he *was*.

Malfoy closed his eyes. “Granger thought, for a while, that proximity alone might do it. Suppose that’s why she shoved us into the Sanctuary. But evidently now it’s getting greedy, and it’s going to take more to satisfy it.”

“Satisfy it...” Harry repeated queasily.

“It just wants to feel—special. It wants attentions from you that you won’t share with anyone else, so for Salazar’s sake, if you can just stomach cramped quarters for an hour or so a night, a few times a week, then maybe we can deal with this with minimal mortification. We don’t ever have to discuss this again—in fact, let’s not. We’ll just get it over with, and go about our business.” By the end of his spiel, Malfoy seemed like he was mostly trying to talk *himself* into this nightly cuddlefest, and Harry’s head was spinning.

A dozen questions stampeded through his mind—like what else might the dragon

demand of him, once it became inured to even this much attention? Was this a *permanent* thing? Were they going to be retiring together literally joined at the hip (provided either of them lived to see their golden years)?

Curiously, though, a part of him was...well, relieved.

“...Why are you *smiling*?” Malfoy spat, though his harsh tone could not disguise the clear note of worry. He probably thought Harry had finally gone off the deep end, pushed over by their situation.

“No—just, I thought all of this—” He waved at Malfoy. “You being pissy and prickly again, after actually being all right for a while there, I thought it might be because you were getting frustrated with us. I mean, we haven’t made much progress in our research in weeks, so I figured maybe...” He’d jumped to conclusions, and while the reality of Malfoy’s condition was arguably *worse* than Harry’s paranoid delusions, he couldn’t help himself. He’d liked that Malfoy felt included, and it had been disappointing to think that they hadn’t measured up. A few months back, and he would have gagged at the idea that he might ever care what Malfoy thought of him or Hermione or Ron. Now, though...he did. A little bit. It was terribly inconvenient.

Malfoy gave a sniff, lip curling. “What? Why would I give a fuck about that? *You’re* the Chosen One, here. It’s certainly none of *my* concern whether you save the world or not.”

Harry gave him a funny look. “You realise that doesn’t make any sense, don’t you? If I don’t save the world, then that consequently means the world’s doomed—with you in it.”

Malfoy shrugged. “I’m a fatalist.”

“*You?*” And this time Harry did laugh, though without much mirth. “That’s a crock. Have you ever *met* you? You bitch and whinge with the best of them.”

Malfoy showed him two fingers, which looked downright scandalous coming from such a posh wanker. “No, I bitch and whinge *the best*; get that straight.” Harry rolled his eyes. “...There are enough people dumping their expectations on you as it is. Why should I join

the unwashed masses?”

“...So you’re fine with helping us, but you draw the line at *hope*?”

Malfoy gave an elegant one-shouldered shrug. “Rely on others and you’re only—”

“Only setting yourself up for disappointment, right, yeah, I remember.” Harry shook his head. This vain attempt at self-sufficiency clashed rather harshly with Harry’s memories of Malfoy at school constantly claiming he’d sic his father on those who’d wronged him.

It must have galled him fiercely, then, to have to come crawling to Harry with these needs, begging for help he didn’t want but literally couldn’t survive without. The very reason he’d studied Animagework in the first place had been so that *he* could save his parents, all by himself, without having to seek help from anyone else. And even *that* hadn’t gone how he’d wanted it to, leaving him shackled to someone he didn’t like and who didn’t like him either.

No wonder he was such an insufferable prick.

Harry sighed. “It’s not weakness, you know. Asking for help.”

Malfoy gave him a guarded look. “...Self-reliance has served me perfectly well thus far.” He grimaced. “And it wouldn’t be quite so terrible if it wasn’t *you*. You’re the last person in the world I’d want to be in this sort of...” He trailed off, considering his words, and Harry prayed he wasn’t about to say *relationship*. “...Predicament with.”

Harry bristled. “It’s hardly a picnic for me either, you know.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Malfoy scoffed. “What great sacrifices have *you* had to make?”

“My hair, for one—I’m pulling it out at the roots having to deal with you daily.”

“Is *that* why it looks like that? My goodness, I never realised!” Malfoy laid a hand against his cheek, feigning shock. “I suppose I’ll have to do something to fix this disaster, then; it’s only fair.”

Harry patted down his hair protectively. “What, gonna spit another fireball at me? Thanks, I’ll pass. And I’ve *seen* your hair, you know. You’re not doing a terribly good job of selling yourself.”

“How can you sell something that’s priceless?”

Harry laughed, brows lifting. “God, you’re so full of shit, you know that, right?”

“Please,” Malfoy drawled. “Your reputation can only improve being associated with me.”

“*Really?* You think it’d do me good, being seen consorting with a Death Eater?”

Dead silence was all that greeted him in return, and Harry knew he’d stepped into it. He’d meant it as a joke, just more of the barbed teasing he’d come to expect with Malfoy.

When had Malfoy’s loyalties—or lack thereof—become a topic of jest, he wondered. Had he ever really considered Malfoy a Death Eater? Ron did, certainly, but Ron was Ron, and regardless of what Malfoy had done—and he’d done some terrible things—Harry couldn’t seem to see past the cowardly, snivelling little bully trying to puff himself up to seem bigger than he really was. His friends might call him naïve for it, but that was the truth.

He tried to walk his thoughtless words back. “I—I’m sorry, I didn’t meant for it to—”

“Good night, Potter,” Malfoy muttered, turning over to place his back to Harry. The lamps dimmed again, until they were nothing more than coolly burning embers. The room felt colder for the loss of light.

“Malfoy?” he tried again. “Malfoy, I’m *sorry*. It just came out.”

There was a long beat of silence, and Harry worried they’d just backslid another ten paces—but then: “...The truth tends to do that.”

Harry squirmed, uncomfortable. “I still didn’t mean to say it.”

“Why?” Malfoy asked, all innocence. “You’re right.” The lamp nearest to him flickered

and grew just bright enough to cast a pale glow over Malfoy's bed. He rolled onto his back and held his left arm up, flashing the Dark Mark so that Harry couldn't miss it. Harry fought not to flinch, knowing it would just make matters worse. Malfoy traced the curves and coils of the snake as it slithered from the skull's mouth. He flexed his arm, muscles rippling beneath flesh, and the snake seemed almost alive. "...I thought, maybe once I changed back, it'd be gone too. Like the scars on my chest." He let his arm fall back, staring blankly up at the canvas ceiling. "But I'm stuck with it, I suppose. As I should be."

They never talked about this sort of thing—it was taboo, by mutual silent agreement. But that didn't mean Harry didn't wonder things. "...Why'd you take it?"

Not once, in their months together now, had Malfoy for a moment seemed like he *actually* believed in Voldemort and his cause, leaving Harry curious as to just how deep Malfoy's loyalties actually ran. Had he joined up with the Death Eaters, wide-eyed and innocent like Regulus Black, and only turned away once the bloom had fallen from the rose?

"He offered it," Malfoy said simply. "You don't turn him down."

"I would."

"Of course *you* would. And then you'd be dead. I'm fond of living."

And that, Harry supposed, was why Malfoy had been sorted Slytherin and Harry Gryffindor. "I dunno; he's tried to kill me a few times, and it hasn't taken yet."

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, staring at Harry with something unreadable in his eyes. "...Your luck won't last forever."

It wasn't a threat, only a statement, delivered in a flat, dull monotone, as if it was an inevitability Malfoy had no choice but to accept.

"No," Harry sighed, punching his pillow a few times to fluff it up before settling down onto his back. "I expect it won't. But I don't need it to. I just need it to last as long as it

takes to bring him down.”

“And then?”

“And then I can *really* start living dangerously.”

Malfoy snorted softly. “Because you haven’t already been?”

“Of course not. I’ve been playing it safe all these years, or haven’t you noticed?”

“You’re rather hard not to notice.”

They both heard how it came out, and an awkward, stiff silence settled between them. It seemed impossible for the two of them to go five minutes in conversation without either pissing each other off or shoving their feet in their mouths.

Harry cleared his throat, then rolled over. “...Well, g’night.”

“...Good night.”

“Ron’s on breakfast duty; wake hungry.”

Malfoy groaned. “I’d rather gnaw off my own arm; why do you even make us cook? You’ve seen we’re dreadful at it.”

Harry smiled into his pillow, glad Malfoy could not see him. “Because the sight of you struggling is worth choking down your failed attempts at food.”

He didn’t need to be looking at Malfoy to know he was making a terrible face, nose all scrunched up and mouth twisted. “I thought you were supposed to embody goodness and light and all that rubbish.”

“Mm. A common misconception; I wasn’t almost sorted Slytherin for nothing.”

The loud creak of bedsprings rent the air, and all the lamps in the room flared to life as Malfoy shoved himself upright. “You *what*?”

Homecoming

To Harry's immense relief, satisfying Malfoy's need for reassurance—or his *dragon's* need, as he was quick to remind Harry—didn't turn out to be quite so bad as Malfoy had made it out to be. He'd panicked initially, thinking they might have to hold hands or—god—even start sleeping in the same bed, but this had not turned out to be the case. “It's bad enough I have to share a room with you,” Malfoy had said with an exaggerated shudder. “I'd just give myself over to painful death-by-burning-alive if it came to *that*.”

It was mostly just...sitting—quiet and close, just like that first evening. Armed with an understanding of *what* they were doing and *why*, Harry found he was staggeringly more comfortable with the situation than he had been before. It was still awkward as anything—especially on the odd evenings when Harry forgot their arrangement and decided to sit in one of the armchairs, making Malfoy grind out through clenched teeth, “*Am I to sit in your lap, then?*”—but once they were settled, even the strange quirks of Malfoy's condition didn't do much to tamp down how admittedly nice it was, sitting curled up on a lumpy sofa that smelled of cats and quietly communing with people he...well, people he didn't *hate* at least.

They were on the run, might never see their loved ones again, with the veritable weight of the world on their skinny teenage shoulders, but they were at least together, and even Malfoy's inclusion had become not just tolerable, but something Harry had grown accustomed to. When he opened his mouth these days, it was usually to offer insight on something he was reading or to answer a question (typically as snidely as he could manage) Hermione or Ron posed.

Maybe it was because they were all focused on the same task. Maybe, if they came out of this alive and returned to their separate existences, this tentative accord would crumble and be as if it had never existed. Harry honestly didn't really care—was even kind of assuming that was what would happen—but for now...it was nice. And Harry didn't have a lot of nice things in his life at the moment, so he let himself find his enjoyment where he

could and tried not to fret over the finer details.

Strangely enough, it was far less awkward seeing to Malfoy's 'needs' when Ron and Hermione were around than when Harry and Malfoy found themselves alone. Harry wasn't entirely sure *why*, but it somehow felt a lot more...intimate...sitting together when they were on their own while Hermione and Ron were off on a food run. They managed, though, and Harry was relieved to note that Malfoy did indeed seem to be in easier spirits with regular sessions of physicality. Harry still had quite a few questions about their 'predicament' (as Malfoy had described it) bouncing around inside his mind, but he was quite happy to leave them unanswered—ignorance was, after all, bliss.

He roused one morning from a particularly nice dream with a catlike stretch, back arching up off the bed before he flopped back down. He couldn't remember the details, but it had left him feeling warm down to the tips of his toes, like he'd been lying in a sunbeam. He inhaled deeply, catching the scent of sizzling bacon, and tried to recall whose turn it was at the hob. If it was Hermione, the bacon would be nice and crispy, but if Ron, it would have barely kissed the skillet. Malfoy preferred porridge for breakfast and rarely prepared a protein, so that was out.

He stumbled into the kitchen to find Ron was on duty, so he would have to put in a special request if he wanted his bacon crispy. Hermione and Malfoy seemed to be knee-deep in an argument, neither acknowledging Harry's presence when he drew up a chair and poured himself some juice.

"This isn't a debate, Malfoy—the sword is what we'll be focusing on next, *end of story*. It's the only one of the objects we have half a clue as to its location!"

"And I maintain that's a *fucking stupid reason*. Potter said it's not part of this weapon you're looking for pieces of—so what's the point? You're not going to find it with your nose buried in a book, seeing as Dumbledore's evidently the one who's hidden it, so that means you'll have to go out and look for it. *Out*, as in *out*, not under cover of safety. You're best served saving risky business like that until absolutely necessary."

"Well it's *become* necessary," Hermione huffed. "We need that sword. The pieces won't

be much use to us without it.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Harry said around a bite of toast. “We can’t actually use the pieces as a weapon until they’ve been destroyed.” There, that sounded believable. At least he hoped it did, because Malfoy was giving him one of those shrewd, suspicious looks, and Harry tried to lose him in another swig of juice.

“Exactly,” Hermione said, picking up the thread. “And the only way to destroy them is with the sword.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “And why is *that*? What’s so special about these artefacts? Or what’s so special about the sword?”

“We can’t just smash them up or blast them into itty-bitty pieces,” Hermione explained. “They have to be damaged beyond repair—and as we’ve already mentioned, the sword of Gryffindor’s been imbued with Basilisk venom. We know it’ll do the job, as it’s already been used to destroy two of the pieces. We just have to find it.”

Malfoy chewed on his thumb in thought, then lit up. “Wait—what about dragonflame?”

Hermione made a face. “Hm. Fiendfyre *maybe*, but dragonflame’s not going to kill you outright.” She then added, in a softer voice, “...Not usually, at least.”

“My brother Charlie’ll attest to that,” Ron snorted, using a spatula to move the last of the omelettes he’d been babysitting from the frying pan and onto a plate.

“Basilisk venom has only one known cure, so the sword is our best bet for destroying the Ho—pieces.” She took a breath. “So that’s why I think it’s time we went to Godric’s Hollow.”

“You—*what*?” Malfoy spat, nearly choking on his juice. He knocked his fist against his chest to clear his airway. “Are you *mad*? That’s a suicide mission!”

“Wait—we’re finally going?” Harry asked, flush with excitement.

Malfoy turned to him with an irritated frown. “You actually think this is a good idea? Showing your faces in one of the most prominent wizarding settlements in England when you’re wanted fugitives?”

“Well—I mean, you don’t have to put it like that, but *yeah!*” Harry grinned, practically bouncing in his seat. “I’ve been wanting to go there ever since we set out; I was born there. It’s where...” A bit of the joy fizzled away as dark memories threatened to encroach. “It’s where my mum and dad were murdered. Where You-Know-Who...”

Malfoy grimaced, spearing into the omelette Ron had just placed before him with savagery. “Sentimentality’s going to get you killed. Get *us* killed.”

“It’s not sentimentality,” Harry maintained, snatching up a piece of bacon; undercooked, damn. “There’s probably all kinds of things we could learn if we went—and now even Hermione thinks it’s a good idea, see?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, necessarily,” Hermione was quick to correct. “But I can’t honestly think of any other place to start. I mean—it strikes me as the most likely location, don’t you agree? It’ll be dangerous, sure, but I’ve been puzzling over it for a few days, and the more I think about it, the more likely it seems it’s there.”

Harry’s face fell at her explanation; she seemed off on a completely different tangent from Harry. “The more likely *what’s* there...?”

Hermione blinked at him. “Well—the sword, of course.”

“The sword? Gryffindor’s sword?”

“You can’t tax Potter like that this early in the morning, Granger, you ought to know better.” Malfoy reached over and flicked Harry’s temple. “The kitchens haven’t been fired yet.”

Harry slapped his hand away, glaring. “I’m only a bit lost, is all. I missed part of your

conversation, evidently.”

“Evidently,” Malfoy muttered.

“Godric’s Hollow is Godric Gryffindor’s birthplace,” Hermione said, and Harry’s eyes boggled.

“Wait—seriously? Gryffindor came from Godric’s Hollow?”

Malfoy’s head hit the table with a sharp *bang*. “This is your great hope?” he asked Hermione, jerking a thumb in Harry’s direction. “*This? This* is what you’re pinning everything on?”

Hermione looked exhausted, sighing. “Harry, did you never actually read *A History of Magic*?”

“Er...” Harry hedged. “I might’ve opened it, you know, maybe flipped through it when I bought it...but that was just the once, so...”

Hermione flounced from the table, running her finger over the spines of several books in a stack next to the armchair she usually claimed before pulling one out. “Well, seeing as the village is *named* after him, I’d have thought you might have made the connection,” she said, flicking her wand at her empty plate and sending it soaring into the Scouring rack to be addressed later. She placed *A History of Magic* on the cleared spot and began flipping through the pages, scanning the headings. “There’s actually a bit about the village in here... Ah! Here we are.”

She cleared her throat and began to read.

“Following the establishment of the International Statute of Secrecy in 1689, wizards went into hiding for good, at last wholly snipping ties with the Muggle world. Understandably loath to be driven from their ancestral homes, which in some cases had been occupied by magical bloodlines going back a millennium or more, many wizarding families banded together, under the noses of their Muggle neighbours, and founded communities-within-communities where magical folk could protect and

support one another through strength in numbers. Readers may recognise a few such locales, which include but are certainly not limited to Tinworth in Cornwall, Upper Flagley in Yorkshire, and Ottery St. Catchpole on the south coast of England. In some cases the resident Muggles were Confounded, while in others there existed a quiet, unspoken truce and mutual agreement among the locals not to poke about in each other's business. Most celebrated of these half-magical communities is, perhaps, Godric's Hollow— She emphasised this for Harry's sake, as if he might otherwise miss it, *—birthplace of Hogwarts Founder Godric Gryffindor and where many other celebrated figures, such as Bowman Wright, the wizarding smith who forged the first Golden Snitch, once called home.*"

Ron wrinkled his nose when she closed the book. "They don't mention Harry? I'd say his story's a rather historic event."

Malfoy rolled his eyes as he took a deep swig of his juice, and Hermione pretended she didn't see it. "Well, I would agree, but *A History of Magic* doesn't cover anything later than the end of the nineteenth century."

"Wow..." was all Harry could think to say, his head spinning as he struggled to take in all of this new, exciting information.

With everyone else having been served, Ron joined them at the table with an omelette of his own, speaking around mouthfuls. "You seriously never made the connection? Godric Gryffindor—and Godric's Hollow?"

"You two put rather a lot more faith in Potter's logical leaps than I ever would," Malfoy snorted. "Look at him, his mind can hardly process it all, the poor dear."

"So now that you see the connection," Hermione continued past Malfoy's snide remarks, "Don't you think Dumbledore might have expected you to go looking for the sword there? The wizarding community there certainly isn't as vibrant as it once was, so he probably could have slipped in quite easily without attracting much attention, especially since he grew up there himself."

“Yeah, I suppose...” Harry didn’t want to admit that he hadn’t been thinking about the sword at all when he’d suggested they go to Godric’s Hollow, and even now, he was far more interested in visiting his parent’s grave and the house where he’d narrowly escaped joining them in death. “Hey, remember what Muriel said?”

“Who?”

Ron nearly choked on his omelet. “Muriel? My *aunt*?”

“Yeah, the one I got roped into a conversation with at Bill and Fleur’s wedding. She mentioned Bathilda Bagshot still lives in Godric’s Hollow. You think maybe...?” She might yet have stories to tell about her famous former neighbours, and Harry couldn’t suppress the thrum of excitement.

Hermione clapped her hands. “Oh, you’re right! What if *she’s* got the sword? She’s a well-respected historian, and Dumbledore would have known her pretty much all his life. Maybe he entrusted it to her, to give to you if you came looking for it?”

Oh—that hadn’t been why he’d brought up Bathilda at all. He’d only hoped she might have some insight into his parents, or be able to share some memory of Harry he’d been too young to recall.

If Dumbledore had indeed entrusted the sword of Gryffindor to her, then it meant he’d left a great deal to chance. He’d never revealed that he’d replaced the sword with a fake, nor had he ever mentioned knowing Bathilda, let alone where they’d lived. No, he decided silently, he didn’t think Bathilda had the sword at all.

But Hermione was his most fervent ally right now, as eager to visit the wizarding village as he was, if for different reasons, so he didn’t want to give her any reason to reconsider. Plus, there was always the chance Bathilda might be able to suggest potential hiding spots.

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding. “It’s possible, right? I’ll admit it’s not much to go on, but it’s the best lead we’ve had in weeks, so I say we chance it.”

“Then it’s settled,” Hermione said. “But I don’t think we all need to go—in fact, it’s probably best we go in as small a group as possible.”

“Yeah—a pair, I suppose? I reckon I could handle it on my own, but I wouldn’t say no to another wand watching my back.” Harry turned to Ron, lifting his brows. “Up for a quick trip, mate?”

“What?” Hermione sputtered. “Why does *Ron* get to go? I’m the one who suggested this.”

“You think I’m not fit to go?” Ron asked, hurt splashed across his features.

“Of course not,” Hermione said gently. “I didn’t mean *that*—but...just, I worry the two of you might get...well, distracted.”

Harry heard loud and clear the unspoken admonishment that Ron would let Harry get away with focusing on visiting his parents and their old home rather than looking for clues about the sword, and he felt a nauseating mixture of offence and guilt roil in his stomach along with the remains of Ron’s omelette. She wasn’t entirely wrong, after all.

“Well I’m not staying here with *him*—” Ron jerked a thumb at Malfoy. “—While you two are off risking your lives!” He then, to Harry’s shock, added with a weak grimace. “Er... no offence, Malfoy.”

Malfoy cut him a cool glare. “Well you’re in luck, because I’m not staying here *either*. If you’re all going haring off into danger, I’m not going to be left here alone to watch the homestead, twiddling my thumbs until you return or stuck indefinitely behind wards I can’t remove with no wand to call my own when you three wind up killed or captured.”

“Wh—you’re *not* coming with us,” Harry said, proud he didn’t flinch when Malfoy turned that sharp glare on *him*. “You *can’t*. Not because we don’t trust you—” And that was a lie, but Malfoy didn’t challenge him on it. “—But because what do you think will happen to your parents if it gets out you’re involved with us, however forcibly?”

This seemed to cow Malfoy a bit, but he still looked clearly distressed, and Hermione

sighed. “...I *suppose* we could hide him under the Cloak. He’s rather gangly, so we’ll have to Disillusion his ankles, but it might work? Then we three can just take Polyjuice; we’ve been mostly using Glamours when we go out, so I’ve still got quite a stock.” She then added stiffly, “And I think we can use a Shackling Spell to make it so he can’t leave Harry’s immediate radius.”

Malfoy scowled. “So now instead of a prisoner, I’m a Crup on a leash?”

“You’re perfectly welcome to stay here if that doesn’t suit,” she sniffed, and Malfoy had nothing further to say on the matter, crossing his arms in a snit.

True to form, Hermione spent the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon planning how they would reach Godric’s Hollow, discussing how they might disguise themselves and what measures they might take to ensure they kept as low a profile as possible. Harry gave his input where asked, nodding and agreeing as needed, but he’d already checked out of the conversation. For the first time since they’d discovered that the sword in Gringotts was a fake and that the real one might be their key to destroying the Horcruxes once they gathered them all, Harry felt genuinely *excited*.

Not just about the sword, but about *everything* with this trip. He was about to go back, to go *home*. He was going to return to the place where he’d once had a family, where, but for Voldemort, he might have grown up and spent every school holiday. He could have invited friends to his house—maybe even had brothers or sisters—and it would have been his mother, and not Molly, who would have made him his giant Snitch-shaped seventeenth birthday cake.

He knew it didn’t do well to dwell on these might-have-beens, that it would only hurt worse when he saw the place for himself and realised it was only a harsh reminder of what he did not and would never have, but he couldn’t help himself.

That evening, after the others had gone to bed and he was certain Malfoy’s soft, slow rhythmic breathing meant he was fast asleep, Harry pulled out the photo album Hagrid had given him years back and leafed through it. His parents still smiled and waved at him from within the old pictures, and he wondered if they would approve of him going

back, trying to salvage even a tiny piece of the puzzle that was his past. A part of him said no, they wouldn't; they would want him to practise prudence and keep his head down, perhaps sending Ron and Hermione to scout Godric's Hollow on their own, as they would attract less attention than he might.

But they weren't around, and so he wasn't obliged to listen to them. This was another of those things he couldn't just accept; he had to see it for himself, and now that he was so close, wild hippogriffs could not have kept him away.

He would have been happy to be off to Godric's Hollow immediately, but Hermione had insisted they take every precaution possible. She was convinced (probably for good reason) that Voldemort would have the village watched, (rightly) expecting Harry to return to the scene of his parents' deaths. Their disguises would therefore need to be immaculate, and they needed to ensure that they were camped someplace they were certain never to be found, in case they had to Apparate back at a moment's notice. It was therefore another week—once they'd nipped hairs from innocent Muggles doing their Christmas shopping and pitched their tent in an old barn being reclaimed by a nearby wood—before Hermione deemed them ready for their mission.

Malfoy hadn't been keen on being magically cuffed to Harry initially, but he'd quickly forgotten the terms of his joining them once Harry had brought out the Invisibility Cloak for him to try on. As expected, the Cloak didn't cover past his shins, so Hermione had to cast a Disillusionment Charm to keep his feet from showing.

Malfoy had marvelled at the Cloak, letting the fabric run through his fingers. "This is... amazing, I've never seen anything to its equal..."

Harry thrummed with pride. "It was my dad's; he used to use it to sneak around Hogwarts, so I've just carried on the tradition."

Malfoy gave him a funny look. "...I always used to wonder how you got away with some of the things you did. Assumed it was the professors' favouritism."

"Suppose you'll have to accept that I don't *always* get special treatment then, won't

you?”

“No, you only get fantastic, one-of-a-kind magical items passed down to you.”

It was decided they would Apparate to Godric’s Hollow after nightfall, just to be sure no one spotted them. With four of them travelling, there was no hope of them all fitting under the Cloak, so they had little choice but to Apparate as far from the village square as possible and head in on foot.

It was late afternoon when they finally implemented their plan, dropping the Muggles’ hairs into vials of Polyjuice Potion and knocking them back with a grimace. Harry’s Muggle was a balding, middle-aged man, and Hermione was his hunched, mousy wife. Ron had been the proprietor of a pub called the Sable and Pheasant, and his prominent paunch suggested the Muggle partook of his brews often.

With Malfoy safely under the Cloak and the proper spells in place to ensure he didn’t get the urge to wander off, they all four linked arms, standing close for warmth in the bitter December chill, and turned into the suffocating darkness.

When Harry opened his eyes, they were standing—arms still linked—in the middle of a snowy lane under a sky washing over with lavenders and navies as the first stars of the evening peeked through the wispy cloud cover. It wasn’t snowing now, but the blanket of white beneath their shoes said it had been recently. They’d have to make sure they swept away Malfoy’s tracks or else disguised them with their own, as every step he took would be a dead giveaway to his presence.

Harry looked around, taking in a deep breath. Crisp winter air filled his lungs, and his breath came out in smoky puffs when he exhaled. Cosy little cottages stood on either side of the lane they’d Apparated onto, with Christmas decorations twinkling in every window. He tried to remember what day it was—well into December, according to the calendar on the kitchen wall in the tent, but he couldn’t recall any more than that. Was Christmas really that close? He’d completely lost track of time, each day bleeding into the next.

“That’ll be the village square, I’m sure,” Hermione whispered, pointing ahead to a stone arch, beyond which they could see the soft glow of golden streetlights beckoning invitingly. “Stick close; you too, Malfoy—in fact, maybe you should walk in front, that way our tracks can cover yours.” Harry felt Malfoy shift from his side, the fabric of the Cloak brushing against him as Malfoy stepped past.

The air was cold and dry, and his cheeks were already starting to sting, but Harry couldn’t suppress an excited smile. He was *here*. Any one of these cottages they were walking past might be home to someone who’d once shared afternoon tea with his mum or traded chit-chat at market with his dad. Someone who’d babysat Harry. Hell, one of them might be Bathilda’s home—or *Dumbledore’s*—and they wouldn’t even know. They hadn’t had much luck sussing out where exactly in Godric’s Hollow Bathilda or any of the other prominent wizarding families lived. Hermione was confident, though, that they could use spellwork to pick out the warded wizarding homes from the Muggle ones, and from there it would merely be a process of elimination.

“I wonder if any of them knew my parents...” Harry said, voicing his curiosities aloud. His eye caught on one of the cottages with a sleigh-and-reindeer display set up on the snow-covered lawn. “It’s only been, what, sixteen years? That’s not too long, in the grand scheme of things.”

“Maybe,” Hermione allowed distractedly, head snapping around to check they weren’t being followed.

“Wasn’t your folks’ place protected by a Fidelius?” Ron asked, and Harry nodded. “So...I mean, shouldn’t the charm still be active? Technically, their Secret Keeper’s still around. Would we even be able to see the place if we were staring right at it?”

Harry hadn’t considered that, and he felt his stomach lurch unpleasantly. He would hate to have come all this way and to not even be able to *see* it.

The lane began to curve, and shortly they passed under the stone arch and into the heart of the village: an empty square, at the centre of which stood what looked like a war memorial, partly obscured by a frosty, wind-blown Christmas tree that looked like it’d

seen more than a few better days. Colourful fairy lights were strung overhead, twinkling in the gloaming. Several shops fronted the square, already shuttered for the night, along with a bustling pub and a little church, whose stained-glass windows glowed like jewels, a spot of warmth in the frigid darkness.

Harry paused before the tree; it looked rather shabby indeed, and several of the ornaments had been blown down from the branches, lying in shattered pieces on the cobblestones. If they'd had more privacy, Harry would have cast a *Reparo* and replaced them, as it seemed a sad, neglected little thing.

He heard Malfoy rustling next to him and felt his warmth as he drew up alongside Harry. "Not exactly the Christmas you're used to, I'll wager," Harry said softly, though they were quite alone in the square; everyone seemed to be indoors, singing either drinking songs or Christmas carols at this hour.

"Oh, we put on *quite* a show during the holidays; Mother gets terribly festive, though you wouldn't expect it." No, Harry wouldn't have expected that of Narcissa Malfoy, but he could easily see her hosting hoity-toity to-dos hobnobbing with the upper crust of wizarding society. Malfoy would be on her arm, dressed in form-fitting black robes with his hair slicked back while his father caroused with heads of families as old as their own, brokering deals and toasting their successes. Next to Malfoy, Harry felt very much like the decrepit Christmas tree. "But I confess I've always been fond of Hogwarts' decorations."

Harry scoffed. "*You?*"

"You think I'm joking, but I'm not. So gauche and tacky and distressingly plebeian; it's refreshing, really."

Harry snorted, not sure if he should believe Malfoy or not. "How do you make even your compliments sound like slights?"

"Practice, Potter. Practice."

Shaking his head, he stepped past—and then stopped when Hermione released a sharp gasp. “Harry—look!”

She was pointing at the war memorial—or what had been the memorial, for the nondescript obelisk covered in names had now transformed into a statue of three people: a man with untidy hair and glasses, a woman with long hair and a kind, pretty face, and a baby sleeping in the woman’s arms. They all wore a soft dusting of fresh snow that did nothing to disguise their identities.

Dumbstruck, Harry drew closer, gazing up into what he knew to be his parents’ faces. He’d never imagined there would be a statue, had never considered the site might be properly memorialised at all, really. It was an odd feeling, seeing himself immortalised in stone like this, a happy baby without a scar on his forehead.

“Always knew there had to be statues of the great Harry Potter lying around somewhere...” came Malfoy’s disembodied voice, warm shoulder brushing Harry’s. It lacked the usual bite, though; maybe it was too cold for snide remarks. “...Merlin, you look just like him.”

“Mm. But I’ve got my mother’s eyes, so says pretty much everyone I’ve ever met who knew them.”

A car pulled up in front of the pub and spat out several people who looked like this was not their first stop of the evening, and they nearly lost their footing on the slippery hard-pack snow as they struggled to make their way inside. Across the square, the faint, muffled strains of a hymn starting up began to pipe forth from the church.

“Oh—Harry...” Hermione said, reaching out to place a hand on his arm. She pointed toward the church. “They’ll...they’ll be in there, won’t they? Your mum and dad. I can see the gate leading into the graveyard from here, and there’s only the one in the whole village...”

Harry’s stomach flip-flopped, and he felt a thrill run through him—a thrill of something less like excitement, and more like fear. He hadn’t expected to find them so soon, and

now that he was here, only a few paces away from the church and its little graveyard thick with headstones, he wondered if he was really ready for this. The past week had seemed to drag on for ages, but now, he realised he hadn't considered the reality of it at all.

Ron clapped his shoulder, and Hermione gave him an understanding smile. "Do you...do you want some time alone with them? Or—"

Harry shook his head; he was being ridiculous. "No, it's fine, let's go." They marched across the square, and when Harry glanced back over his shoulder, the statue had turned back into the war memorial.

The congregation inside the church was still belting out their hymns, the singing growing louder as they approached the graveyard, and Harry tried to swallow down the lump in his throat that had formed in the wake of vivid memories of Christmastime at Hogwarts. It wasn't Christmas yet, he didn't think, and who knew what the castle might look like this year, under such a dark cloud as they all lived right now. But he could still hear Peeves trilling out rude versions of Christmas carols as he rattled about inside suits of armour, and he could see the grand Christmas trees lining the Great Hall that would have put the little one in the square to shame. Memories too dear to him threatened to swamp him—Dumbledore wearing a bonnet he'd won in a cracker and snowball fights on the Quidditch pitch and Mrs. Weasley's hand-knitted sweaters...

And then he thought of Malfoy, remembering all those same things just as fondly, despite himself. He pictured Malfoy in the bonnet instead of Dumbledore, and the lump at last dissolved as he bit back a chuckle. He took another mental snapshot, even though it wasn't real.

A kissing gate stood at the entrance to the graveyard, and Harry pushed it open as quietly as possible, leading them through one by one. The snow here was deep and unmarked by footsteps, a sign no one had been by to visit loved ones' markers in quite a while. Harry hoped the service inside the church would give them privacy, but Hermione cast a wide Disillusionment Charm behind them just in case, and they took care to keep

to the shadows beneath the brilliant stained-glass windows that flecked the fallen snow in a kaleidoscope of red and gold and green.

The tombstones peeked out from the snowy blanket in neat rows, and here and there Harry could see the remains of snow-covered bouquets and wreaths and other trinkets that must have meant something to the dearly departed. With one hand clenched tight around the wand in his jacket pocket, he moved along the rows, scanning the names carved into the markers.

“Look,” he whispered, pointing to the third down on the second row. “An Abbott! Reckon it’s a relative of Hannah’s?”

“It’s not a terribly uncommon name,” Hermione reminded, “But given this is a wizarding village, it’s not impossible.”

They waded deeper into the graveyard, wearing tracks into the snow that they would have to take care to Vanish as soon as they’d finished their business. Now and then, Harry caught Malfoy’s Disillusioned feet stopping before a marker, but Malfoy never said anything about it, and Harry never asked.

“Harry!” Hermione hissed from two rows away. “Here!”

Harry’s heart leapt into his throat, choking him with its feverish throbbing, and he nearly slipped and knocked himself out on a headstone in his scramble to get to her. “Is it—?”

“Oh—no, I’m sorry! But look!”

She was pointing at a marker carved from a dark, lichen-spotted granite. Harry squatted down, wiping away the snow and ice blurring the inscription to reveal the words *Kendra Dumbledore*, along with her dates of birth and death. Below her inscription was a similar one for *Ariana Dumbledore*, with the quotation, “*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*”

“...Guess Rita and Muriel got at least some of their facts right...” Ron muttered, his

hands shoved into his armpits. “The Dumbledores really did live here.”

Indeed; and some of them had died here, too. If that much had been factual, then what else...? The date of death confirmed that Ariana had died young, around the same time as her mother. How many skeletons did Dumbledore’s closet have? A man that old had to have a *deep* closet...

Had Dumbledore ever visited them? Had he *ever* come back here, or had he closed this chapter of his life, locking it away from even Harry, who would have rejoiced to know that someone he so admired and respected might intimately understand the pain of losing family? He saw, in his mind’s eye, a distant might-have-been, the two of them visiting their loved ones’ graves, Dumbledore sharing secret stories of James and Lily while Harry listened to him fondly reminisce of happier times with his mother and sister.

Of course, that was assuming there had ever really been ‘happier times’, for Muriel and Rita’s insinuations that Dumbledore himself might have had a hand in their deaths still rang in his ears. No, if Dumbledore had *wanted* to share these things with Harry, he would have. But their common history, the fact that their families lay side by side in the same graveyard, appeared to be little more than an unremarkable coincidence, left to fall by the wayside and shrouded in mystery, just like the location of the remaining Horcruxes and the sword of Gryffindor and so many other things Harry felt were important.

Harry was beginning to feel very, very used—like a tool, to be wielded and put to work but kept always at arm’s length. It left him feeling colder than the frigid winter temperatures ever could.

“So he really never mentioned—?” Ron began.

“No,” said Harry curtly. “He didn’t. But it doesn’t matter, let’s keep looking.” He turned away and tried to swallow down his bitter anger, reaching once more for that curious mixture of fear and excitement that flooded his veins at the thought of standing before his parents’ graves at last.

It was another five minutes of squinting to read headstone inscriptions in the pale, blue light before Hermione called them over to another marker. “Hey, come look at this one.” She tapped her wand against the stone, and the snow quickly melted away, exposing the inscription. “Is that...what I think it is?”

Harry and Ron leaned in to get a closer look; the grave was extremely old, and the name so worn down it was impossible to make out—but beneath it, there appeared to be a symbol of some sort carved into the stone. A triangle. “...It could be—but probably not, right? I mean, that could be anything.”

“True,” she allowed, lighting her wand with a soft *Lumos* that didn’t stretch far, just enough to illuminate the headstone. “I think it says...Ig—Ignotus? Is that a name? Or an epitaph?”

“Sounds Latin,” Ron said.

Harry shrugged. “It’s so old, maybe this guy was Roman.” He eased back up. “I’m going to keep looking for my parents.”

“All right...” Hermione said, distracted, and continued to study the marker with a thoughtful frown on her lips.

He wandered down the rows, occasionally catching sight of another surname that looked familiar. Some of the names were repeated across several markers, multiple generations of the same family lying at rest beneath their very feet. Still deeper into the graveyard he trod, his anticipation and trepidation rising with each step, each new marker.

And then, quite without warning, a wave of darkness fell upon him, and with it the biting chill of the night began to encroach. Harry whipped around, wand at the ready—expecting to see Dementors descending upon them or a Dark Mark glinting in the heavens.

But it was only that the church service had ended, with the lights inside the chapel being turned off as the sanctuary emptied. Harry found he already missed the background

noise of the hymns and the cheerful glow of the light through stained glass.

“Three stones to your left and two rows forward, Potter,” came a disembodied voice next to Harry’s ear, and he stiffened, swallowing tightly. “Steady on.”

Encouragement, even from Malfoy, wasn’t going to do much good, but Harry tried to steel himself all the same. He didn’t need to ask; he knew by Malfoy’s tone, careful and cautious, that this would be Harry’s mother and father. Each step he took seemed heavier than the last, and something pressed on his chest, right over his heart. It was, he realised, the same feeling he’d experienced at Dumbledore’s funeral: a grief so raw and so real it seemed to have a physical presence, crushing and overwhelming until he found it a struggle to even breathe.

He wasn’t excited anymore—not in the same way as before, at least. It was just another of those instances where he *had to know*, had to see it with his own eyes. For sixteen years, he’d had this part of his life deliberately kept from him. He could have been coming to visit his parents’ graves for *years*, yet no one had ever thought to suggest it. And now that it was finally here, he didn’t know if he could take it. He hoped he didn’t do anything embarrassing, like start crying. That was just what he needed, when Malfoy was standing only a few paces away.

He found the headstone easily with Malfoy’s instructions, but he doubted he would have missed it even without them. It was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore’s tomb, and gleamed in the moonlight not unlike the opalescent scales of Malfoy’s dragon, beckoning Harry closer. Being of newer make than most of the markers in the graveyard, he didn’t need to squint or stand close in order to make out the epitaph.

James Potter, born 27 March 1960, died 31 October 1981

Lily Potter, born 30 January 1960, died 31 October 1981

“The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

Harry mouthed the words, tasting them, and grimaced. Something sounded...terribly *off*

about such a saying.

“That’s a lovely sentiment,” Hermione said, drawing up alongside him.

He gave her a slanted look. “...Sounds more to me like something Death Eaters might say.” He glared at the headstone in bald accusation. “Why is that *here*?”

Malfoy scoffed sharply, from somewhere just beyond them.

“Oh Harry...” Hermione placed a hand on his arm, looking to Ron for support as he lumbered down the row toward them. “It doesn’t mean defeating death the way You-Know-Who’s corrupted the notion.” She stared down at the marker, a gentle smile on her lips. “It means...you know...living beyond death. A kind of life after death, the way we all live on in the hearts and minds of others. That’s really the only true way to achieve immortality.”

“And a sight easier than complicated spellwork, I’d wager,” Ron said.

Except you were still *dead*, when it came down to it. These were pretty words, but they didn’t change the fact that Harry’s mother and father were gone. Memories were something of a comfort, but they paled in comparison to having living, breathing parents. Warm arms to curl around you, soft breath in your hair, strong shoulders to support you. Maybe his parents were watching, somewhere, somehow—but that was all they were doing. Watching. They couldn’t hold him, couldn’t help him, couldn’t even *speak* to him. They could only be remembered. What good did that really do him, in the end?

He felt anger swelling hot in his chest, crawling up his throat and clawing at the back of his eyes until it seeped out as tears and carved tracks down his frozen cheeks. Fuck—he hadn’t wanted this. He hadn’t wanted to cry, like a child, in front of the others. He’d thought he’d steeled himself against grief, enough to keep it together until he found some privacy in the tent later, but he hadn’t imagined he’d be so *angry* at them. And yet he was. Angry that they’d died, angry that they’d left him nothing to remember them by, angry that someone had carved these pithy words on their headstone. Had Dumbledore chosen these words, like he’d chosen them for his mother and sister? He wouldn’t have

been surprised.

He didn't want their memories. He wanted *them*, here alive with him—or if he couldn't have that, he wished he'd died sixteen years back. Instead, he was standing here, before their graves, in his own personal limbo. Alive because of their sacrifice, surrounded by people who wanted to remind him that, "*Oh they aren't really gone! Not so long as we remember them!*"

He shrugged off Hermione's hand, rubbing his sleeve over his eyes, and stepped through the markers to put a bit of distance between them.

"Harry, wait—"

But he held a hand up and shook his head. "Just—gimme a minute, yeah? Just a minute."

He was having trouble breathing, all that grief and anger crushing him, and he thought he might pass out. He'd already wept in front of them, he certainly didn't want to have a *fit* in front of them too. They'd think him a fragile doll in need of coddling and be walking on eggshells around him for weeks hence.

He dropped into a squat before one of the crumbling markers and wrapped his arms around his knees for warmth, taking long, deep breaths. In, and out, and in again, he waited for his heart rate to slow to something manageable.

"You're a very ugly crier," Malfoy said beside him. "I'd avoid it if I were you. Your face gets all blotchy, and look, you're about to pass out."

He didn't know how Malfoy could tell, given he had a shot of Polyjuice in his system. "I'm not going to pass out," Harry muttered, exhausted. The tears had formed a salty crust on his cheeks, and his eyes hurt now. "I just needed a minute to collect myself—a *private* one, if that wasn't obvious."

"You're welcome to all the privacy you want; simply relieve me of this Shackling Spell and I'll be happy to give you as wide a berth as you like."

Oh—Harry had forgotten about the spell. He’d—guiltily, and ridiculously—thought Malfoy was hanging around him because he maybe *wanted* to. Malfoy got along better with him than with Ron or Hermione, at least, and he’d evidently imagined that meant something.

He eased back to his feet, the knees of his Polyjuiced body creaking ominously with the effort. “I’m fine now. Let’s go.” He turned back to Ron and Hermione, jerking his head in invitation. They’d done what they’d come to the graveyard to do, so there was no sense in tarrying any longer.

Hermione didn’t look pleased to leave on such an unhappy note, and she faced the Potters’ marker, moving her wand in a circle through the air. A wreath of Christmas roses shimmered into existence, floating down to lie at the base of the tombstone. After placing an Evergreen Charm on it, she began to wind her way back through the markers with Ron at her side.

Shortly, they came back to the kissing gate and slid through it one by one. The church was dark and quiet now, all the parishioners having retired after the evening service. Harry was about to ask where they ought to head next—he supposed they would search for Bathilda Bagshot’s home now—when Hermione drew up short, seizing Ron’s arm. “Oh!”

They all stopped, snow and gravel crunching under their boots, and Ron straightened with a frown. “What is it?”

Hermione wasn’t looking at him, though; she was staring at a line of tall hedges just on the other side of the church, eyes wide and white. “There’s someone there. Someone watching us.” She pointed at the hedges. “Did you see?”

Harry followed her eye, but he could see nothing, only the gentle sway of branches in the night breeze. “...Are you sure?”

She bit her lip. “I saw something move, I could have sworn...” She shoved her hand into her coat where she’d stowed her wand, drawing it out again.

“We look like Muggles,” Ron reminded her.

“Muggles who’ve just been visiting the graves of the Dumbledores and Potters! I’m sure there’s someone over there, really!”

Harry didn’t doubt Hermione had seen *something*, but they were all on edge these days, jumping at shadows. “...It’s a cemetery full of witches and wizards. Reckon there might be a ghost or two, like at Hogwarts? I didn’t feel anything ominous, but—”

Just then, something rustled in the hedges, sending a shower of snow floating to the ground, and they all three whipped out their wands, crowding in together for safety. Ghosts did *not* interact with the physical world like that, not that he’d ever seen.

“Maybe it’s a cat?” Ron suggested, a quaver in his voice. “Or a bird?”

“Well, if it were a Death Eater, you’d be dead by now,” Malfoy said from somewhere behind them. “Suppose you’ve at least got that going for you.”

He had a point. “I’m not keen to find out either way; let’s get out of here.”

They made their way along the ice-slick pavement back to the square. The pub was fuller and more lively now than it had been earlier, and Harry wondered how many of the church-goers had made their way there after the service. Not a few, given the raucous voices belting out off-key the same carol they’d heard as they’d passed the church. Harry considered slipping inside for warmth and maybe a nip—their Polyjuice bodies were certainly old enough that they wouldn’t have a problem being served—but Hermione directed them across the square with a nod. “Let’s go that way.”

She led them down a dark lane leading out of the village square, opposite the direction by which they had entered. This road, too, was lined with sleepy cottages through whose darkened windows they could just barely make out the odd twinkling Christmas tree. Hermione’s pace was brisk, and she kept glancing over her shoulder, probably for the mysterious figure she thought was following them.

“So how’re we gonna find Bathilda’s house?” Ron asked.

“Well, I think I should be able to detect any standard security wards with—Harry? Harry where are you going?”

Harry ignored her, though, slowing up and then cutting off from the main road. He couldn't believe what he was seeing—it was just...*sitting* here.

The hedges and lawn had grown wild over the years, and the structure itself looked like it had been gutted, a mere skeleton of its former glory. Dark ivy crept up the walls and into the exposed brickwork and beams, and a thick layer of snow from several storms over the season had built up on the roof and cracked chimney, the woodwork and furniture having been left to rot in the elements. He couldn't stop staring at the gaping gash that had been ripped into the second floor, like someone had set off a bomb.

Harry nodded to the exploded bedroom. “That...that's where it happened, isn't it?” He was sure that was where the Killing Curse had backfired, earning Harry his scar and setting back Voldemort's plans by years.

“Where what happened, Harry? I can't see anything.”

Harry turned back to Hermione and Ron, irritated. “Well—*look*. You can't see th—” He cut himself off, releasing a sharp little *oh* of realisation. “...It's the Fidelius. You were right, it must still be active.”

“Fidelius?” Hermione frowned. “Wait—oh, this is your home!” Harry nodded. “Of course! You're still woven into the charm, so you can see it.”

“Just looks like an empty lot to me,” Ron said.

“And it will stay that way, I'm afraid...” She gave Harry a sad look. “You're not the Secret Keeper; once a Keeper's been chosen, only they can bring others into the Charm until they die.”

Harry felt his heart sink; some things he wanted to keep private, but not this. He didn't want to have to be the only one who could see this sad sight. He forced himself to look, all the same, committing it to memory. This would have been his home, *this* was where he

would have grown up. Where he would have had birthdays and Christmases, where he might have had a summer romance with a local Muggle girl or practised flying in a strongly warded back garden.

“...It looks terrible, maybe it’s for the best.” He hated seeing it like this, like no one *cared*. He wondered briefly why no one had ever rebuilt it, or at least properly preserved it, but then he supposed the Fidelius kept most everyone from seeing it, so what would have been the point?

He placed his hands on the thickly rusted gate that bounded the property—he didn’t want to go inside, he just...wanted to touch it, to hold some part of the house. He would remember the feel of this gate, the cold, flaking metal, for the rest of his life.

“You’re not going to go inside, are you?” Hermione gasped. “It can’t be safe, after all these years. It might—oh!”

Something rustled in the undergrowth, and then from the tangles of vines and weeds rose a sign, like some bizarre, fast-growing flower. It must have been triggered to appear when it sensed witches or wizards, like the statue in the village square, and he blinked down at it as handsome gold letters began to scrawl themselves across the wood.

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives.

Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse.

This house, invisible to Muggles and protected behind a Fidelius Charm from all but those made privy, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

All around this neat engraving, scribbles had been added by other visitors over the years who had come to pay pilgrimage to the place where Harry had become the Boy Who Lived. Some had signed their names in Everlasting Ink, while others had carved their initials into the wood. Some had even left messages along the lines of “*Good luck, Harry, wherever you are,*” and “*If you read this, Harry, we’re all behind you!*” and “*Long live*

Harry Potter.”

“They shouldn’t have defaced the sign,” Hermione hissed, indignant, but Harry couldn’t have been happier to see the graffiti. They hadn’t been able to see the cottage, and still they’d taken the time to visit, pay their respects, and leave messages of hope. For once, Harry didn’t feel the weight of their expectations, only the warm, supportive feelings behind them.

“No, it’s brilliant. I’m glad they did, I...”

He broke off, glancing past her to the dark lane behind them. A muffled figure in a heavy trenchcoat was hobbling slowly towards them, silhouetted by the bright, merry lights in the distant square. It was hard to tell from this distance, but Harry thought the figure might be a woman—elderly, from her arching stoop and stiff, stilted gait that suggested she feared slipping on the snow-and-ice-slick ground.

Hermione turned into Ron’s embrace, but Harry kept one hand tight on the wand in his pocket, waiting to see if she would turn off at one of the cottages. Something inside him, though, said that she would not. He imagined he could feel her staring, right at him, in the darkness. Could feel her watching him and *recognising* him, even though they had another twenty minutes at least on their Polyjuice doses.

When she’d drawn within but a few yards of them, she stopped, standing stock still there in the middle of the frozen country lane and watching them from beneath the hood of a floral kerchief. Harry could see now that she favoured one foot, and her head lolled to the side at what looked to be an uncomfortable angle, her breath coming in raspy hisses.

There was no chance this woman was a Muggle; why would she have hobbled up to this empty lot on such a bitterly cold night as this if she were not a witch, hoping to pay her respects to the Potter home?

She regarded them in silence, palsy shaking her form so that she almost swayed, and Harry considered that maybe she recognised them—except their Polyjuiced bodies were from very far away, and he could make out, under the hood of her kerchief, milky-white

eyes that suggested cataracts. No, she probably could barely see at all, especially in the low light; if she knew them, it was because she knew *them*, Harry and Ron and Hermione. And he hadn't a clue who she was—a dangerous disadvantage at the moment.

“...I think we ought to leave,” Hermione whispered, her voice unnaturally calm. “This might have been a mistake.”

Harry could not move, though—he didn't *want* to. The woman lifted one trembling arm, then crooked a bony finger in invitation. Hermione gasped, as if she'd just hexed them.

“...She wants us to go with her.”

“So?” Ron's voice was several octaves higher than normal. “You can't seriously be considering this, can you? Dotty old lady asking you to follow her down a dark country road? Sure, sounds like a great plan.”

The woman beckoned again, more vigorously this time, as if she were growing impatient with Harry, and while Ron made a good point, Harry felt compelled to follow her. Suspicions about her identity began to swirl inside his mind, growing stronger with each passing second. This woman, he was convinced, knew who they were—and probably knew why they were there, too.

And there was really only one person who lived in this village who might be privy to such information.

Harry swallowed thickly; could she have been waiting for them, these many months? Had Dumbledore *asked* her to wait, confident that Harry would eventually find his way here and need her guidance? He agreed with Malfoy that, if she'd been a Death Eater, they would have been dead or captured by now. There was no need to lure them away when a simple Body-Bind or Imperius would do the job.

He licked his lips. “...Are you Bathilda?” he asked breaking the chilly silence, and Hermione gave a start.

The muffled figure nodded, beckoning again. Harry took a step forward—when

something grabbed at his sleeve. He looked down to see pale white fingers pinching his coat, holding him back. “It’s fine,” Harry whispered through grit teeth, though he knew Malfoy couldn’t say anything in return without giving himself away. “Let go.”

Malfoy refused, and Harry had to jerk his arm away to get him to let go. He understood if Malfoy had reservations, but Harry couldn’t stifle the sense that this was what he was meant to do. Too many clues had led them here for Harry to stop listening to his gut now.

The old woman turned and hobbled off back the way they had come, and Harry followed her, leaving Hermione and Ron and the invisible, spell-bound Malfoy with little choice but to join him.

She led them past several houses before reaching the gate of one that looked in particular disrepair and easing back the latch. They followed her up the gravel-strewn front path, through a garden nearly as wild and overgrown as the one at the Potter house. It looked as if it hadn’t been tended in months, and the darkness did nothing to help it seem less foreboding. The woman creakily mounted the steps, fumbled for a moment with a key at the front door before finally fitting it into the lock, then opened the door and stepped back, hand extended to invite them inside.

“Keep your wands ready,” Hermione warned, quite unnecessarily, as Harry hadn’t taken his hand off his since they’d left the graveyard.

The woman reeked—and her house smelled just as foul. Harry wrinkled his nose as they sidled past her, wishing manners didn’t prevent him from covering his nose and breathing through his mouth. Once they had all filed into the entryway (with Malfoy hopefully on this side of the door), the woman closed the door behind them with arthritic fingers splayed over peeling paint. She then turned and peered at Harry with an intensity that sent a shiver down his spine, and he forced his gaze elsewhere—anywhere but into her milky-white cataract-ridden eyes and grey, liver-spotted skin that seemed thin as old parchment paper.

A roiling stench radiated off of her in waves—old age and decay and animal musk, the

rank odour intensifying as she slowly unwound the motheaten black shawl to reveal a few wisps of thin white hair combed over a liver-spotted scalp. Harry wondered how old she actually was; he'd heard wizards were particularly long-lived, so how old did one have to get before it started to show *this* badly?

“Bathilda?” Harry repeated. “Professor Bagshot?”

She nodded again, quite enthusiastic for someone of her apparent age. Harry thought he felt the Mokeskin pouch twitch against his chest—then recalled he'd stowed Slytherin's locket inside of it. He brought a hand to his chest, right over the pouch, and could feel it pulsing with a steady, thrumming beat. Did it know where they were? Could it somehow sense that the instrument of its destruction was near?

Harry felt his own heart begin to beat in time with it, a steadily ratcheting pulse, hastened by the thought that they were *so near* to their goal.

Bathilda shuffled past them, shoving aside Ron and Hermione, and then vanished into a room just off the entry hall.

“Harry, Harry I don't think we should be here!” Hermione hissed once Bathilda had gone. “Something feels really wrong about this place!”

“What?” Harry gaped. “But—we're so close! We're *in* Bathilda Bagshot's home!” He shook his head. “We can't leave without at least asking her a few questions.”

“Well I'm afraid I'm gonna have to politely decline any tea or biscuits she offers,” Ron said, waving a hand before his face to ward off the stench. “Merlin, it smells like someone died in here...”

“And it's going to be us if Potter doesn't stop lumbering into dark parlours on invitations from creepy old biddies,” came a disembodied voice to Harry's left, which meant Malfoy had made it inside after all.

Harry sighed, irritated. “Well, look at the size of her; I'm pretty sure between the *four* of us, we could take her if we had to. She's just a lonely old lady, and Ron's Aunt Muriel

even said she wasn't all there in the head anymore. That's probably why she's acting so weird, so just...go with it, right? We're safer under cover than wandering about out in the square anyway."

"Come!" Bathilda called sharply from the next room.

Hermione jumped, Ron cursed under his breath, and Malfoy latched on to Harry's arm with a hissed, "What the *fuck* was that?"

"It's *fine*, I told you," said Harry with patronising reassurance, and he carefully extricated himself from Malfoy's grip. He inclined his head toward the sitting room. "Let's go; we'll see what she knows, and then we're out, right? If anything goes wrong, we'll just Apparate back to the tent immediately."

"*Fantastic*, except I've got no wand!" Malfoy ground out.

"Then you'd better stick close, hadn't you? And *be quiet*."

Harry followed after Bathilda into what appeared to be a sitting room, where he found her tottering around, lighting candles, though it was still too dark to see much further than a few paces ahead, and Harry couldn't help but notice the place was extremely dirty. Not just untidy—but *filthy*. Thick dust curled in little puffs wherever they stepped, and a new stench joined the already rank milieu: something *rotting*, like meat gone bad. It was no way for a human being to live, and Harry wondered when had been the last time anyone had dropped by to check on poor Bathilda. Had she no children, or other relatives? No friends in the village?

Bathilda seemed to have forgotten she could do magic, too, for Harry saw no sign of her wand, and she was lighting the candles by hand—clumsily, at that, the lacework trailing from her dress in constant danger of catching fire.

"Cripes, she's gonna set the whole place ablaze..." Ron muttered under his breath, and Harry rushed forward when she strained to reach a candelabra perched precariously atop a stack of books, gently taking the matches from her.

“Let me do that for you,” he offered, and he could feel her beady eyes watching him as he finished lighting the candle stubs standing around the room, most nearly burned down to the quick. He wondered if this was really wise, silently agreeing with Ron; the place was liable to go up like a tinderbox at the slightest wrong move.

The last unlit candle Harry could see in the room sat atop a chest of drawers, in place of pride amidst a collection of photographs standing in tarnished silver frames. When he lit the wick, the dancing flame brought to life the figures in the pictures, though the passage of time seemed to have slowed their movements to a crawl. He muttered “*Tergeo*,” and the dust vanished from the frames with a soft *poof*. He could see now that at least half a dozen photographs were missing from the largest and most ornate frames. Had Bathilda moved them—or thrown them out—in her addled state?

But then a photograph near the back of the collection caught his eye, and he snatched it up, heart in his throat.

It was *him*. The thief from Harry’s dreams, the golden-haired young man with the devil’s grin who’d attacked Gregorovitch in his workshop. He smiled lazily up at Harry from the silver frame, wispy blond hair trailing wildly down to his shoulders. Bathilda must surely know this boy—or the old man he would be now—but where had...

It came to Harry now in a flash, where he’d seen the boy before: in the pages of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, arm in arm with the teenage Dumbledore. He had a sinking suspicion that he would find the rest of Bathilda’s missing photographs in Rita’s book as well.

Harry held the photo frame up for Bathilda to see. “Mrs—Miss—Professor Bagshot?” he called. She was watching Hermione attempt to light a fire in the soot-stained fireplace. Harry crossed the room in three steps, pointing to the boy in the photo. “Who is this?”

Bathilda looked up at him, expression blank, and gave him a slow, dull blink.

Harry gave the photo a shake, bringing it just under Bathilda’s nose. Maybe her eyesight was so poor she couldn’t make out the image unless she had her nose pressed up against

it. “Who’s in this picture, Professor Bagshot? I need to know who this person is.” Bathilda wouldn’t look at the photo, just continued to stare at Harry. “*Please*. You must know him; who is this? What’s his name? Is he a relative of yours? A grandson, maybe?”

“Mate, calm down...” Ron said, one hand raised.

“Harry, what are you doing?” asked Hermione, her wand clutched tight to her chest, and Harry imagined he was frightening her—but she didn’t realise there was no *need* to be frightened. He’d just uncovered a clue that might change *everything*.

He held the picture up for her, though he doubted she could make it out from the other end of Bathilda’s long, stained and lumpy sofa. “The boy in this picture—he’s the thief I told you about! The one I saw in my dream, the one who stole something from Gregorovitch. I saw him before, too, in a photo alongside Dumbledore in Rita Skeeter’s stupid book.” He turned back to Bathilda, excitement mounting. “Who is this?”

Still, there was no response, not even a flash of recognition or understanding. Bathilda simply stared.

Hermione mustered her courage. “Why did you ask us to come with you, Professor Bagshot? Was there something you wanted to tell us?”

Bathilda showed no signs she’d heard Hermione, only shuffled closer to Harry. Her breathing was ragged, and each exhalation seemed to rattle her whole body. She gave a little jerk of her head, back towards the entry hall and the narrow stair leading up to the second storey.

Harry frowned. “You...you want us to leave?”

She wheezed, then raised a crooked finger and pointed first at Harry, then herself, and gestured to the ceiling.

Harry’s eyes flicked up, and he realised what she wanted from him. “...I think she wants to me to go upstairs with her.”

Hermione made a face, but nodded. “All right, then. Up we go.” She stepped around the sofa, shooping Ron along.

But Bathilda shook her head violently, stamping her foot with more vigour than Harry would have credited. She pointed again at Harry, then herself, breathing loudly through her nose.

“Er, I’m pretty sure she wants me to go with her *alone*.”

“What?” Ron asked sharply, and Hermione turned a narrow-eyed gaze on Bathilda.

“*Why?* Why can’t we hear whatever it is she’s got to say to you?”

Harry shrugged. “I dunno—maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, in private?” He wanted to remind Hermione that Bathilda probably wasn’t entirely there and was understandably making unreasonable demands, but they needed answers from her. That much was clearer now than ever, with the appearance of the photograph of the mysterious thief.

Hermione still didn’t look convinced. “...You really think she knows who you are? You mentioned Muriel said...”

Harry just nodded, eager to see what was to come. Bathilda was watching him with those milky eyes that showed a curious intelligence, and Harry suspected she wasn’t quite as ‘batty’ as she let on. “Yeah. I really do.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “Fine, but be quick about it!”

“What?!” Ron hissed. “We’re just going to let—?” But he fell silent at Hermione’s meaningful look.

Harry turned back to Bathilda. “Lead the way, Professor,” he said, and he thought he felt a swish of fabric brush his skin. The Horcrux, tucked inside the Mokeskin pouch around his neck, gave an eager jolt. Bathilda nodded several times, head bobbing like a chicken, and then shuffled around Harry towards the door. He tried to cast a reassuring smile

back at Hermione and Ron, but they had their backs to him, huddled in whispered conversation.

He was still holding the photograph of the thief, he realised, and with Bathilda already mounting the creaking stair and Hermione and Ron's back turned, he slipped it into his coat.

The stairs were a treacherous thing to climb, steep and narrow, and Harry worried Bathilda might topple backwards on top of him, so unsure of her steps was she. Slowly, still wheezing a bit, she made her way to the second storey with Harry tight on her heels, one hand out before him to brace her should she stumble. Once they reached the landing, Bathilda hung a sharp right, leading Harry into a what seemed the master bedroom. It was pitch black and smelled, if possible, even worse than the sitting room had been, perhaps because it was a smaller space, allowing the stench to collect in the low corners. This was helped not at all by Bathilda closing the door, robbing the room of even the faint light that had filtered in from the candles downstairs.

"*Lumos*," Harry said, and the tip of his wand ignited with a warm, soft glow. He gave a start, stumbling backwards and nearly tripping over his own feet: in those few seconds of darkness, Bathilda had drawn close, right in front of him, though he hadn't heard her approach. Harry swallowed, wishing she'd take a step back so that he could breathe; too much of this, and he really was going to be sick. He thought he'd spotted a chamberpot in the corner; maybe he could use that.

Bathilda released a rattling breath. "You are Potter?" she whispered.

Here it was, the moment he'd been waiting for. He licked his lips. "Yes, I am. Harry Potter, ma'am."

She nodded slowly, lips curling at the edges like scrolls of parchment

Ice-cold fingers grabbed his arm, wrapping tight around his wrist, and Malfoy hissed in his ear, "Potter—*Potter*, something's wrong. She's not right, she's not even—"

Harry rudely shouldered him aside, then rubbed his arms to pretend he was just chilly. Malfoy could tail Harry if he wanted, but Harry *would* have his answers. He felt the Horcrux beating fast now, faster than Harry's own heart could keep up. He wondered what it would feel like, if he had it around his neck instead of stuffed into the pouch, with the cool metal biting into his flesh directly.

It felt like a living thing, and this place smelled like so much death, he couldn't imagine the sword of Gryffindor *wasn't* here, ready to smite it.

"Have you got anything for me?" Harry asked, but Bathilda seemed distracted by the light dancing at the tip of Harry's wand, her eyes tracking it with a mesmerised languidity. "Professor Bagshot? Were you asked to give me something?"

Bathilda's eyes rolled back into her head, and Harry panicked that she might be about to have a fit—

And then several things happened at once.

His scar gave a sharp jolt that felt like an arrow loosed into his skull, the Horcrux inside the pouch hanging around his neck twitched with such violence he felt it shift his clothing under the layers, and the dark, stinking room seemed to sway, or else Harry stumbled, his vision shifting in and out of focus. A thrill of joy that he knew instinctively was not his own rippled through him, and a high, cold voice screeched inside his mind, *Hold him!*

Harry reached out, gripping the bedpost for support. The air felt thick and close, the stench choking off his breath. "*Something's wrong,*" Malfoy had said, and Harry agreed, he did, but he was so *close*, so even if it took his last breath, he would ask until he got the answers he needed.

"Have you got anything for me?" he asked, trying to raise his voice, though he had precious little breath with which to do so.

"Over there..." Bathilda whispered, retreating away from the light of Harry's wand and extending an ancient, gnarled hand to point at a cluttered dressing table sitting beneath

the bedroom window.

He shoved away from the bedpost, stumbling drunkenly, as he was still disorientated by the throbbing in his skull. He blinked rapidly, trying to bring the room back into focus. Bathilda kept to one corner, watching Harry hungrily, and he edged past her and the lumpy, unmade bed, his wand raised to cast as much light around the room as possible. It was silly, he knew, but it somehow felt like the darkness might swallow him if he let his *Lumos* fizzle out. He kept one eye trained on Bathilda, for he did not like the way she was staring at him now, her glassy eyes glinting when the witchlight caught them, like a cat's.

Something grabbed at him, and he gave a start before he realised it was just Malfoy again. "Potter, *please!*" he begged in a fierce whisper.

Harry ignored him, raking a quick glance over what looked—and smelled—like a pile of unwashed laundry heaped atop the dressing table. "What's in there?" he asked Bathilda.

"*There...*" she repeated, jabbing her finger at the shapeless mass, and he dared to turn away from her, searching the tangled mess for any sign of the sword—its ruby-studded pommel and guard, the intricate filigree of its grip, the flash of its silver blade. There was nothing, though, just a pile of rags—but that was all the distraction Bathilda had needed.

He caught it, just from the corner of his eye: she moved weirdly, with that same preternatural speed from before. He tried to whip his wand around, a spell on his lips—but the shock of what he saw there paralysed him, freezing him in place: Bathilda's form blurred—no, *melted*, jaws opening inhumanly wide as a great snake poured from her mouth, shedding its Bathilda-skin with its maw agape and lunging at Harry.

It struck his raised wand arm, sinking its fangs in deep, and the force of the bite sent Harry's wand spinning away. The light at the tip cast dizzying shadows along the walls before dying, plunging the room into pitch darkness. A blow from the snake's tail struck his midriff, knocking the wind out of him, and he stumbled backwards into the dressing table, crushing it to splinters with his weight.

Instinct had him rolling sideways. If he could get under the bed, he might be able to escape out the other side before the snake—before *Nagini* found him.

From below, Hermione's worried voice called up, "Harry? Harry—is everything all right?"

Something wrapped around his ankles, dragging him away from the bed, and a heavy mass landed on his chest, crushing the breath from him so he could not call back to Hermione. Smooth, powerful coils slid over and around him, pinning his arms to his sides before *squeezing*. "N—no..." he gasped, writhing in *Nagini*'s grip.

"Yessss..." she whispered back, "Yesss, hold you...*hold* you..."

He tried to twitch his fingers, but he couldn't feel them. He concentrated anyway, gritting out, "*Accio... Accio* wand..." Why hadn't he been practising wandless spells these past months, in case they found themselves deprived of their wands?

Nothing happened, of course, and the snake coiled itself tighter around his torso. The Horcrux was throbbing painfully from within the Mokeskin pouch, a strong, steady beat in stark contrast to the frantic pattering of Harry's own racing heart. He thought his vision might be going dark, but it was impossible to tell. Everything seemed to be growing more distant, though, all sound and thought fading, fading...

"*RELASHIO!*" someone cried, and *Nagini* recoiled sharply with a screeching hiss. Harry drew in deep, laboured breaths that ached as his crushed lungs struggled to fill themselves, and tinges of colour flashed in his vision like fireworks. Slowly, too slowly, his senses returned, but his thoughts remained scattered, and he was only distantly aware of what was going on. Someone...someone was fighting. Hermione and Ron, versus *Nagini*? They must have come up to investigate.

"*Stupefy!*"

The red jet of light that struck *Nagini* was blinding, and Harry recoiled, drawing into a foetal position. He brought a hand up to shield his eyes, using the other to push himself

upright, and shook his head to clear his vision. The room was spinning, but it was difficult to tell if it was because of the flashes of light or Harry's own oxygen-deprived state.

There came a great crash and splintering of wood. "Harry? *Harry!*" Hermione cried, and Harry blinked, barely making out hers and Ron's silhouettes outlined in the doorway, wands at the ready. But then who—?

In the light that streamed in from the landing, he saw the snake, a writhing mass of glittering scales. It dove straight for Ron, and Hermione shrieked a spell Harry didn't catch, sending the snake slamming into the curtained window, which shattered. Harry ducked to avoid the shower of broken glass, and a gust of frozen air roared into the room, whipping up curtains and bedsheets and bits of debris.

The snake was massive, Harry could see now, and it filled the room. It was absolute chaos, as jets of light and a chorus of spells flew across the room, demolishing the structure, and Nagini bobbed and wove and struck when she could. Harry groped about for his wand, rifling through the dust and snow and shards of glass and splintered wood. Nagini's lashing tail snapped off one of the bedposts, and it toppled to the floor, nearly braining Harry. He would never find his wand in this mess, and Hermione and Ron *needed* him, they couldn't hold Nagini at bay forever—

Harry's scar seared more powerfully than it had in years, like someone had shoved a jagged red-hot poker through his eye and given a sharp twist, and Harry cried out in agony. He knew what this pain meant—what it heralded. His scar hurt particularly fiercely when Voldemort was happy, which meant he was *fucking ecstatic* right now.

"He's coming!" Harry cried, his voice raspy with dust. "It's *him*, he's coming!"

His shouting drew the snake's attention again, and it lunged at him, hissing wildly and jaws snapping. Harry leapt onto the bed, and the snake's wriggling, writhing body smashed into book shelves and sent porcelain shards flying everywhere. He hopped to the floor on the other side of the bed to herd Hermione and Ron back down the stairs. They had to get out *now*, because the snake was about to be the least of their worries. They had, perhaps, seconds before Voldemort arrived; his head felt like it was about to

split open with the pain from his scar.

They stumbled back out onto the landing, and the snake screamed in rage, sounding far too human for Harry's comfort. Ron fired a *Confringo* over his shoulder as they raced down the stairs, and the force of the blast sent them flying. A wave of rebounding heat washed over them, glass shards pelting Harry as the wardrobe mirror near the door exploded. They leapt over the railing into the parlour directly, and Harry held his arms out so they could link up to Apparate—

“Wait, where's Malfoy?!” Hermione gasped.

Ron made a face. “If that little fucker somehow ran off—”

“Get us out of here *now*, Granger,” came a voice right by Harry's ear, cold and hard and trembling with rage. Malfoy's fingers dug into Harry's arm, painful even through the layers.

Harry closed his eyes, clenching them shut, and he felt his body being crushed down to a fine point as Hermione spun them away. The air grew tight and close again, and they vanished into nothingness, away from the sounds of Bathilda's house collapsing around them and an inhuman shriek echoing in his mind...

But then his scar burst open, and he was *him*, Voldemort, striding across what remained of Bathilda's destroyed bedroom with long, white hands outstretched. He reached the threshold, just in time to see the bald Muggle vanish along with his tagalongs from Bathilda Bagshot's parlour, disappearing with a loud *CRACK*. His rage peaked, and he released a banshee-like scream that rent the night, mingling in his memory with *that girl's* and echoing across the dark, sleepy December countryside.

Voldemort was screaming, and so was Harry, and his pain was Harry's pain, raw and rage-filled and darker than black. How could it have happened here...*here* again, where he'd been struck that near-mortal blow before? Within sight—a mere stone's throw—of that house where he had come so terrifyingly close to knowing what it was to die... The pain had been horrific, beyond human comprehension; he'd been *ripped* from his body...

He wished he didn't have a body; then it might not *hurt* so much. He wished he were dead; then he might not *feel* so unbearably. Death, nonexistence, peace...a cruel joke that he both longed for and loathed.

The night was fairly unremarkable, as nights went. There was a slick sheen of moisture covering the world, the remnants of an afternoon storm that had largely now passed but for stray gusts whipping up great swirling vortexes of dead leaves in the streets.

A pair of Muggle children scampered across his path, one dressed as a great orange pumpkin and the other waddling about in bedsheets with holes snipped out through which to see, both with baskets clutched in their grubby hands. They made for the village square, and everywhere he looked—lampposts, awnings, benches, even shop windows—was covered in stringy cobwebs and paper spiders and rubber bats, a riot of orange and black and all the trappings of a world of spooks and haunts they thrilled themselves with one night a year, comfortable in the fabricated nature of it all. It wasn't real, it wasn't anything to truly be frightened of.

Soon enough, they would learn what dark horrors lurked just beneath their noses, all too real and all too terrible.

He glided along, unbothered for once by the rest of the world. He had a purpose tonight, a singular goal, and his focus and conviction inured him against all this inane Muggle nonsense as he walked among these lesser beings.

Not anger, no—feeling anger with Muggles was as pointless as feeling anger with a steer up for slaughter. A waste of time. Anger was for the weaker among them.

Instead, tonight he felt...triumph. Yes, victory—long-awaited and oh so near at hand.

“Nice costume, Mister!”

The pumpkin boy had drawn up short, waving at him with a frenetic sort of energy that suggested he'd ingested far more sweets this evening than were appropriate for a

child who could be no more than ten years old. But the boy's smile weakened—then cracked and fell when he drew near enough to get a peek beneath the hood of the deep cloak. A thrill of fear, realisation something was not right...and then the child turned and fled, back to his companion, who was stamping his feet impatiently.

Beneath his robe, he fingered the hilt of his wand, considering; it would be so easy—just a flick of his wand, a trifle, and the child would serve as a warning to the Muggles of this place that they once feared the cold and the dark for good reason.

But it was quite unnecessary. No, only one child needed to die this evening.

He wandered the darkened streets, the flickering street lamps directing him toward his destination until, at last, he found it. The Fidelius Charm had been broken for him with the help of the snivelling, sycophantic Pettigrew, and the occupants of the house were none the wiser. Even now, they would be going about their evening business, dining with smiles and doting on their precious, precious baby.

Slowly, patiently he plodding along—there was no need to rush, none at all. He had waited for this moment for so very long, he would relish it. At length, he drew level with the dark hedge fronting the property—an empty lot to all eyes but his own—and stared over it...

Through the open curtains, he could see them lounging in their little sitting room, thinking themselves untouchable beneath the charm's protection. The tall, black-haired man in glasses had enchanted a toy plane to fly through rings of multi-coloured smoke to the delight of his son, bundled up in bright blue pyjamas. The child, already with nearly as wild a head of hair as his father, was grinning ear to ear, reaching vainly for the smoke rings and frowning when his fists passed through.

From around a corner, a woman with long, red hair falling in a curtain over one shoulder stepped into the sitting room. So this was the one, then? The one on whose behalf he'd endured interminable begging and pleading? Unremarkable, even for a Mudblood. She smiled, pausing a moment to stand there and watch the man playing with the baby, a fond smile on her lips, and then said something he could not catch,

gesturing to the hall from which she'd just appeared.

The man nodded, bending in half to scoop up his son and letting him fly through the few still-dissipating smoke rings before handing him off to his wife to be bundled off down the hall. He watched them go, shaking his head with a wry grin, then tossed his wand onto a side table and collapsed onto the sofa, contorting himself awkwardly with a stretch and covering a great yawn with one hand.

It was time.

The street was quiet and dark. He leaned onto the gate handle, pushing his way into the garden, and the soft creak it gave in response seemed impossibly loud—but James Potter did not hear. He was utterly oblivious to Death approaching—until the door burst open, the cheap wood splintering in an explosion of magic and dust.

He was already over the threshold before James made it to his feet.

“Lily, take Harry and run! It’s him! Go, I’ll hold him off—”

Hold him off? Without so much as a wand in his hand? Too easy—but he would take an easy kill. He’d quite earned it, after all.

“Avada Kedavra!”

The flash of the Curse bathed everything in a sick green light that could probably have been seen from two streets over without the Charm’s protection, and when the glow faded, James Potter dropped with a sickening thud, crumpling to the ground in a tangled heap of limbs.

Lily Potter was screaming from the upper floor, bleating for her lost love. He’d hoped she might be sensible—he had been told she was bright and clever, though one had to consider the source’s bias, really—but such hopes were fading. He had no personal score with her; she was just another befouled Mudblood whose time would come soon enough. It was only the child, he needed.

He climbed the steps with a slow, lazy confidence. He could hear her scrabbling about in the nursery, trying to barricade herself inside—until what? He'd seen her wand, carelessly left on the kitchen room table. She was defenceless—and she deserved it. So naïve, so stupid, trusting that their safety lay in their friends and allies rather than in the weapons they'd been endowed by the gods with.

He drew his wand in an arc, forcing the door open and blasting back the chair and boxes the Mudblood had somehow thought sufficient to stop him from entering. A waste of a Hogwarts education.

She hadn't tried to hide, in the end, though he could see a cupboard up against the wall. She just stood there, the boy in her arms, and glared with such fire and fury, he was beginning to see the allure.

She took several steps back, placing her son into the cot just underneath the window, and threw her arms wide—as if this would help in the least! Her display would not have stopped even a Muggle gun.

“You won't have him! I won't let you!”

“Stand aside, you silly girl.” He would let her try his patience, as agreed, but only for so long.

“He's just a baby! Leave him be—take me, kill me instead!”

If she kept insisting, he would have to. “This is your final warning, girl. He'll either die alone, or he'll die with you.”

She just shook her head, the utter fool, and snotty tears streamed down her red-cheeked face. His patience finally snapped.

He could have forced her away, let her live to tell the tale of what he'd done, but she was a liability. Dumbledore could rally quite a lot of support around a grieving mother. No, best to do away with them all. Neat and clean. No loose ends.

He swiped his wand, and another flash of green light filled the room. Lily Potter dropped to the floor, collapsing in a mangled heap that he toed into the corner with a grimace.

Curiously, the child had not cried in the commotion. He rolled from his back, on which his mother had placed him, and hauled himself to his feet by clutching the bars of his cot. He peered up into his visitor's face with a bright interest, perhaps thinking this another game. It was only his father beneath the cloak, weaving more pretty colours into existence, and in but a moment, his mother would pop up to surprise him. A bit of fun before bedtime.

He pointed his wand squarely at the boy's nose. This one, he would watch, carefully marking the moment when life fled those nasty green eyes. He could not see how his well-laid plans might be undone by a child, even a child that might one day grow into a man, but he would take no chances with prophecies, no matter how absurd the likes of Bellatrix or Rodolphus might think him.

His cloak slipped, and the child began to cry, seeing now that the face that lurked in the shadows was not his father's, and this was certainly no game. Oh, how he hated crying children, their whining and whinging grating on the ear.

He'd wanted to savour this moment a bit longer, but enough. It was time.

"Avada Kedavra!"

And then he broke.

He was nothing, except he couldn't be nothing because he hurt, so badly, so he had to be something. Pain shot through with terror arced through his being, and he knew he must flee, had to hide away. He could feel he was ruined and broken, a shadow of himself, a million pieces shattered...he needed to get as far...far away as possible...

"No..." Harry moaned.

Another skeleton of a ruined home, rubble and filth and...the snake, coiling and

tensing... A rebounding curse—a curse that found its mark. He had killed the boy, he was certain he had—but the boy was here again, alive and wriggling and oh so near, almost...almost got him...

“Don’t...I can’t...”

He was standing in the wreckage of Bathilda’s squalid home, dirt and debris crunching beneath his feet as he was wracked by memories. Not in years had he been this close... this close to victory, only to have it snatched away, and the pain and anger and fury called forth echoes, memories of that night, washing over him and threatening to drown him in bitter, choking recollection. Nagini slithered over broken china and glass, her glittering hide scarred and blood oozing from one ruined eye.

She brushed against his feet, reminding him that all was not lost, and he glanced down—and saw something. Something incredible.

“No...!”

“Harry, it’s all right!” Someone was squeezing his hand. “You’re all right!”

He swiped his wand, sending the gnarled remains of an old side table crashing into the wall, and bent to pick up the smashed photograph frame that had been lying underneath. Smiling at him through the broken glass was Gregorovitch’s thief. The boy he had been so desperately seeking...

“No...” Harry whimpered. “I dropped it... I dropped it, and now he...”

“Harry, mate: it’s OK, wake up! You’ve got to wake up!”

Yes—he was Harry... Harry, not Voldemort.

He opened his eyes.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione whispered, her voice warbling with emotion. “Do you—do you feel all right?”

He was staring up at the canvas roof, back in their tent. They'd laid him out on the sofa and heaped blankets on top of him. He shivered, freezing, but he could tell he'd been sweating, as the blankets he'd been swathed in were drenched. How long had he been lying here? Hours? Days?

"Peachy," he lied, not trying very hard to disguise it.

"We got away—I dunno how, but we made it," Ron said, rather unnecessarily.

"Yes, and you've been..." Hermione bit her lip. "Well you've been ill." Harry noticed now there were soft shadows under her brown eyes, and a tin bucket sat on the coffee table, a small sponge beside it. She followed his eye and snatched up the sponge, soaking it and then gently mopping his face. "Quite ill."

His gaze drifted over to Malfoy, who was leaning against one of Perkins's chairs. He had his arms crossed over his chest and was staring at the conjured blue flames flickering in the fireplace, resolutely not looking at Harry.

Harry licked his lips, wetting them. "How long have I been out?"

"Hours," Hermione said. "It's nearly morning."

"Hermione Apparated us back here, and you conked right out," Ron added. "Kind of."

"Kind of...?"

Hermione and Ron shared an uncomfortable look. "You've been shouting and moaning and...things," she explained, and Harry felt a pit of unease settle in his stomach. God, what had he done? Screamed curses, like Voldemort—or cried like the baby in the cot? Malfoy would never let him live it down.

Neither of them elaborated further. "You had some bumps and bruises, a few serious." Hermione pointed to his right arm. "The snake bit you, too, but I've cleaned the wound and put some dittany on it. I imagine that's why you were out for so long; that venom might have killed you if we hadn't treated the bite."

He glanced down at his forearm and the half-healed puncture marks. They hadn't bothered him before, but now that he'd seen them, he could feel a faint, aching throb. He closed his eyes and shook his head; if this was the worst of it between them, they'd been lucky indeed. "We shouldn't have gone to Godric's Hollow. It's my fault, all my fault—"

"It's *not* your fault!" Hermione said, but he knew she was just trying to keep his spirits up. "I wanted to go too! There was no reason not to think Dumbledore had chosen to hide the sword there for you to find, or that we might at least find some clues in Bathilda."

"Yeah, well...we were wrong on both counts then, weren't we?"

"What happened?" Ron asked. "When she took you upstairs—was the snake hiding up there? Was Bathilda working for You-Know-Who, or do you reckon she might've been Imperiused?"

"Neither," Malfoy said, his first words since Harry had roused. He was still staring into the flames, and there was a hard set to his jaw. "She *was* the snake...or the snake was her. All along."

"Wh—what?"

Harry grimaced. The stench of Bathilda's house was still there, filling his nose, under the powerful scents of dittany and soap and sweat. It brought him back to that foetid, dark room and the oppressive atmosphere. He opened his eyes again, trying to focus on the tent roof swaying gently in the breeze to keep from sicking up. "Bathilda must've been dead a while. The snake was...it was inside her, wearing her like a suit. You-Know-Who must have put it there in Godric's Hollow to wait for me, knowing I'd turn up." He turned his head to look Hermione in the eye. "...You were right."

Ron made a face of disgust. "It was *inside* her?"

"She didn't want to talk in front of you or Granger because it would have come out Parseltongue," Malfoy said. "That's probably why she wanted Potter alone, to be sure it

was him, and to make sure neither of you interfered.”

Harry sighed. “I never realised... Nothing sounded special when she spoke; just plain English, like it’s always been.” Why hadn’t he tried to get her to speak more? To at least confirm her identity before he skipped off with her alone? “Once we were up in the room, she asked me if I was Harry Potter, and when I said yes, she must’ve sent a message to You-Know-Who. I felt it, in my head, when he found out—he was so *excited*, and he told the snake to keep me there, and then...”

He could see it happening all over again, the horror of Bathilda’s body crumpling like an empty potato sack as the snake poured from her neck. He didn’t feel compelled to share these finer details, and coughed softly. “She changed into the snake and attacked.” He glanced down at the puncture marks; they didn’t look nearly as angry as they felt. “It wasn’t supposed to kill me, just keep me there until You-Know-Who could come and finish the job. If you and Ron hadn’t managed to Jinx it and make it release me, I don’t what would’ve happened.”

Ron glanced at Hermione, frowning in confusion. “...But—you were already fighting off the snake when we made it upstairs. We left you to it until we heard crashes and bangs, then went up to investigate.”

“What? No—I dropped my wand when the snake attacked me. It went rolling off somewhere, and the snake got me in its coils before I could grab it.” He shook his head, wondering if he was still addled from the oxygen loss and snake bite. “I heard you casting spells that saved me...”

They seemed to all realise at once that something wasn’t quite adding up, and Harry slowly turned to look at Malfoy, still sitting quietly by the fire.

As if he could feel their eyes on him, Malfoy sighed and pushed away from the chair. He reached into his sleeve—and palmed a wand. Harry’s wand.

Malfoy frowned down at it, turning it over a few times in his grip. “...It’s too bendy. Feels like it’ll snap in two with a strong slash.” He tossed it at Harry, who struggled comically

to catch it, clutching it to his chest.

An awkward beat passed as Harry processed the moment. Malfoy could have done... well, pretty much anything he might have wanted to. Harry's wand hadn't been won in a proper duel, but it would probably still have sufficed for some Stunning spells to knock them out. "...Thanks," Harry said lamely. "You saved my life."

"I suppose that makes us even."

"...Yeah, I suppose." It felt pithy, and Harry knew he ought to say something more; Malfoy had been against their going to Godric's Hollow from the start, and Harry had nearly gotten him killed.

But before he could think of anything further to say, though, Malfoy bid them all a curt good evening and retired to their room.

Harry watched him go, several different emotions warring in his chest. Ron frowned when Malfoy slammed the door. "...You reckon he's on the level? All this—helping out, saving Harry, keeping his nose clean... It could just be a ploy to get us to trust him."

"I dunno..." Harry sighed. "I had a vision ages back where You-Know-Who seemed to think Malfoy was dead. If he's trying to gain our trust, I doubt it's under You-Know-Who's direct orders. He was *furious* we got away, I thought my head was going to split open..." His scar gave a sympathetic twinge in memory. "I imagine he still wants to get out there and go save his parents, though."

"That much I do believe," Hermione agreed. "But I think he's smarter than we give him credit for. He knows he can't do it—not right now, at least. And certainly not alone. He's a Slytherin; he won't go charging in when he knows he'll just get himself and those he cares about killed."

"Yeah; that's what Gryffindors do!" Ron said, raising a fist in mock triumph, and Harry chuckled—then winced when the movement pulled a muscle he hadn't realised was strained.

Malfoy was a conundrum, and Harry's stomach was twisting in nauseating knots—though whether it was from the venom still in his system or the strange idea of Draco Malfoy actively trying to save Harry's life at peril to his own, he couldn't tell.

Malfoy could have revealed himself at any point once they were alone, playing it as if he'd been the one who'd encouraged them to visit the village in the first place and led Harry there. He would have been instantly restored in Voldemort's eyes, and there was every likelihood his family would have been spared. Voldemort did reward his most loyal servants (for certain definitions of 'reward' of course). Granted, he still might have wound up being used to ends he wasn't comfortable with, but if Harry had been in Malfoy's shoes, he might have gone with the option that ensured he and his parents would be safe for the time being.

"...I think we should give him a wand."

Ron was horrified. "We—*what?*" He clutched his wand to his chest. "We need ours!"

"Yeah, I know; I lifted his from the Ministry when I found it in his file." He patted the Mokeskin pouch. "Just didn't seem right to leave it there; he might never have gotten it back, and I know I'd have been devastated in the same position."

"You'd never have *been* in his position," Ron reminded, but Harry didn't entirely agree. He was, after all, Undesirable Number One at the moment. His wand could as easily find its way into a file in Umbridge's cabinets as Malfoy's at this point.

Hermione gave Harry a long look, pursing her lips. "...That could backfire, you know."

Harry nodded. "Admittedly, I do sleep more soundly knowing he hasn't got one—but I think we've gotten to the point where it's necessary. It's only going to get more dangerous from here on out, and we need all the firepower we can get."

He lifted the Mokeskin pouch from his neck, pulling open the cinch and pointing his wand inside. "*Accio* Malfoy's wand." It zoomed into his hand, velvet bag and all.

"He's already got plenty of 'firepower' as it is," Ron whined, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Damn; guess I can’t Jinx him under the table anymore...” Hermione glared at him in bald disapproval, and he raised his hands defensively. “Kidding, kidding! Geez...so touchy.”

Harry shook his head in amusement and then carefully eased upright—but Hermione was on him with a hand on his chest, warning, “You shouldn’t strain yourself!”

“I’m just moving to my bed—I’m knackered. I’m not about to go run a marathon, seriously.”

She blushed. “Sorry, suppose I’m a little on-edge. That was a close call...”

“Yeah, but we made it.” He didn’t really want to talk about what had gone wrong—as that was everything—and he was grateful Hermione was holding off on her lecture about Harry’s reckless behaviour in Godric’s Hollow. He’d probably get an earful after they’d all gotten a good night’s (morning’s?) sleep, but he seemed to have been spared for the time being. “G’night—or morning, whatever.”

“Get some sleep,” Ron advised, and Hermione shooed him away with a fond look.

Harry had expected Malfoy to already be in bed by the time he joined him, given they’d all been awake almost a full day at this point, but when he walked in, he found Malfoy sitting on the edge of his mattress, head hung low.

Well, now was as good a time as any. He patted his pocket, checking their wands. “Malf —”

Malfoy was on him in a quick, smooth motion that reminded Harry joltingly of the preternatural way Bathilda had moved. In two steps, he had Harry shoved back against the closed door, the weight of his body holding Harry in place, and he was whispering through angrily grit teeth, “Fuck you, *fuck* you, you fucking—*fuck!*”

Harry swallowed to force his heart back down in his chest where it was meant to be, standing stock still with arms limp because he didn’t know what Malfoy might do in such an obviously agitated state. “...Malfoy—”

But Malfoy wasn't listening, eyes closed and face downturned. He leaned closer, uncomfortably so, and Harry felt a brief flash of panic spear through him given Malfoy was perfectly angled to kiss him—but then Malfoy ducked his head down and pressed his forehead against the hollow of Harry's collarbone, taking in long, bracing breaths. His skin felt clammy—or maybe Harry was running a fever—but he decided that was better than the searing burn Harry had learned preceded an uncontrolled transformation. Whatever Malfoy was wrestling with right now, he seemed to have his dragon in check.

"I told you *not to go*," he growled into the thin fabric of Harry's shirt. "I told you we were going to get killed, and we almost *did*."

Malfoy's back heaved, shuddering with his laboured breathing, and Harry tentatively raised a hand, wondering if he ought to offer some manner of comfort. He let it hover weakly, then dropped it back to his side. "We had to go. We needed to—"

Malfoy lifted his face, leaning in until their noses were nearly touching, and Harry could see his eyes had those tell-tale flickering embers behind them, a sure sign of terror stoking Malfoy's fury. "I told you we didn't need *shit*. But what good's *my* opinion compared to the Golden Trio's? And what did you learn? *Fuck all*." He closed his eyes again, forcing himself to take slower, deeper breaths, and rested his face in the crook of Harry's neck. Harry squirmed with each inhalation, Malfoy's breath tickling his sensitive neck.

He tried to work a hand between them to shove Malfoy off, but he was pinned quite effectively against the door. "Er—Malfoy, can you not—"

"No. I *can't* not," Malfoy bit out, his voice thick with frustration—though whether he was frustrated with himself or Harry, it was difficult to tell. He had his pointy nose pressed against Harry's pulse, and when he spoke, his lips barely brushed Harry's skin, drawing goosebumps. "Just let me do this... Just—let me..."

Malfoy pressed himself impossibly close, and Harry tried not to struggle. He supposed he should have expected this; if the dragon was making unreasonable demands and overtures during relatively peaceful moments, then it was little surprise it was that

much *worse* after a near-death experience.

He recalled all that fuss about needing ‘reassurance’, to know that Harry wouldn’t up and disappear; evidently death fell under the umbrella of abandonment, so here they were, the long length of Malfoy’s body pressed against Harry, as if he could by simple physical touch convince the wild animal bits that had taken root in his brain that Harry was whole and healthy and here.

It had galled Malfoy fiercely, the small ways in which he had lost control of himself—of his body, his magic, his life. Harry didn’t know that he would have reacted half as elegantly as Malfoy had to the whole situation—which was saying something, as Malfoy wasn’t reacting *elegantly* at all. No, there was nothing beautiful or refined whatsoever about the way Malfoy was clinging desperately to him, fingers curled tight around Harry’s biceps and face still pressed into the crook of his neck.

It was just pitiful, really, and Harry felt a wave of guilt wash over him. Malfoy already didn’t want to feel this way, and Harry’s impulses only made it worse.

“We made it back. We’re fine, see?”

“*Shut up* and let me just—”

“I am—I am, I’m not...” Harry sighed. “I’m not pushing you away, okay? Just...do what you need to feel better.”

Malfoy lifted his head, just enough where he was eye level with Harry—and Harry almost wished he’d go back to sniffing his neck, because it was so much more awkward and uncomfortable when they had to look at each other while they did this. “...You’re being awfully generous.” The way he all but sneered the comment conveyed the sarcasm clearly.

“We’ve all had a bad day. I’m not going to make it worse than I already have.”

Malfoy snorted softly. “So you’re not as stupid as you look.”

Harry wanted badly to fire back, but he kept his mouth shut—Malfoy *had* saved his life, after all; he could let one insult slide.

Malfoy closed his eyes, breathing coming much easier now, and said, “Don’t move...”

“What? Why—” And then he saw why, as Malfoy’s grip on Harry’s arms loosened, and his fingers danced over his biceps and down his forearms, tracing each knob and jut he found. Harry struggled not to squirm when Malfoy counted his ribs with gentle taps, like he was memorising their number and placement and would make sure Harry hadn’t lost any following each subsequent brush with death. When he made it down to Harry’s bony hips, tutting under his breath in a disapproving tone that sounded too similar to Molly Weasley for Harry’s comfort, he stopped—and drew back with a frown.

“...Why are there two wands in your pocket?”

“Because I’m doubly happy to see you, obviously.” Malfoy’s glare could have cut glass, and Harry rolled his eyes. “If you let me go, maybe you’ll find out.”

For once, Malfoy obeyed without any further backtalk, and Harry lifted his shirt enough to pull out Malfoy’s wand, turning it around to hand to him hilt-first.

Malfoy took it with a kind of wide-eyed reverence, and his lips gaped slightly as he ran his eyes over the sleek hawthorn wand. Harry imagined Malfoy had been wearing much the same look—awe, wonder, and just the tiniest bit of disbelief—when he’d first received his wand from Ollivander. “Where did you...” he whispered, but then his expression immediately went stony as cold realisation set in. “...You’ve had my wand with you? This whole time?”

Harry wasn’t going to justify himself, not to Malfoy of all people. “It was in your file, the one I found in Umbridge’s office that told me where you were being held in the Ministry.” Something flashed in Malfoy’s eyes—Harry had never explained exactly how they’d found Malfoy, locked deep within the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. “I didn’t dare give it back to you, not when we didn’t trust you not to turn on us, or run away and get yourself captured or worse.”

Malfoy met his eyes, then asked, “And you trust that now?” daring Harry to stick his foot in his mouth. For once, Harry tried *very* hard not to rise to the challenge.

“...Some of us more than others.” He sighed. “You were right about Godric’s Hollow—and we nearly died because we didn’t trust you enough. We might not have made it out of there in one piece if you hadn’t had a wand, so we’ve got to take that risk.” Trust was more precious than any other resource at times like this, but they would not gain more of it by hoarding it to themselves. It only multiplied once shared. “I’ve been taking risks pretty much all my life, and it’s usually paid off.”

“Usually,” Malfoy said, twirling his wand in his fingers and relearning his grip. “But one of these days your luck’s going to run out.”

“You’ve told me that before—and you’re right there as well. So I’d rather have more people watching my back than fewer.”

Malfoy’s expression went just a bit smug. “...Well I can’t say I dislike hearing Harry Potter tell me I’m right.”

“I wouldn’t get too used to it.”

“Oh, I think I just might.” Malfoy waved his wand with a whisper, and the soft golden glow of the lamps in their room took on an eerie green tinge. God, he really *was* going to regret this.

Harry crossed his arms. “We’re going to be seriously relying on you now, you know. Asking you to take risks we wouldn’t otherwise if you weren’t an equal partner in this with us.”

Malfoy’s eyes lit up. “Wait—so then you’re *finally* going to stop tip-toeing around me and tell me what in Merlin’s name you’re *actually* up to?”

Harry only realised then how his words had sounded, and he grimaced; he hadn’t meant to imply that—but then, Malfoy had something of a point. If they were going to ask him for his all, they owed it to him to offer the same. The dragon bits of Malfoy surely

wouldn't *purposefully* put Harry in harm's way, right? "...Not tonight. Ask me again when my head doesn't feel like it's going to split in two?"

Malfoy didn't seem happy with this arrangement, deflating a bit, but he relented and took several measured steps back to allow Harry to collect himself.

Harry shuffled over to his bed and climbed in, glancing over his shoulder to see Malfoy was still standing in the middle of the room, watching him with an unreadable expression. "Er, you don't....that is—you're good now? The whole..." He gestured vaguely to himself. "That was enough...‘reassurance’, then?" It had been quite an evening; he wouldn't have been surprised if Malfoy needed more, though he hoped any urges had been sated, because he was *exhausted*. If Malfoy could stomach waiting until morning (or afternoon, or whenever they finally roused), Harry would be happy to spend as much time in the Sanctuary as he needed to balance himself out again.

Malfoy cleared his throat, slipping his wand into his sleeve and gathering up the fresh set of pyjamas piled on a stool near the bed. "...Yes, it was enough." He then left to perform his evening toilette, and Harry was asleep long before he returned.

For the Greater Good

“How’s your head?” was the first thing Malfoy asked him the next day, using the tip of his wand to poke Harry awake. Harry was momentarily touched at the concern, before he added, “Because I was promised a thorough explanation of what you three are up to once the ache dissipated.”

Harry blinked owlishly, taking in the sight of Malfoy—his lanky hair had been shorn down to a much more manageable length, and he was wearing different clothes now, nicely tailored and form-fitting. Evidently one of the first things he’d decided to do on getting his wand back was to give himself a makeover, and Ron’s hand-me-downs had been Transfigured into smartly pressed trousers and a button-up with a waistcoat. It didn’t strike Harry as attire appropriate for roughing it as they were, but he could imagine just how well advice to dress down would go over with Malfoy. *“Just because you’ve accepted that potato sacks are in fashion year-round doesn’t mean the rest of us must labour under similar delusions.”*

Harry wiped his face. “Yeah. Right. Um.” He shook his head to clear it. “Can we at least discuss it over breakfast?”

“It’s five in the afternoon, Potter.”

He’d been out for twelve hours? He wondered how long Malfoy had been looming over him like this, waiting for Harry to wake before deciding enough was enough. “Dinner then—whatever. *Food.*” He shrugged. “Hermione’s probably going to be better at explaining than I will anyway.”

“Fine,” Malfoy huffed, and he grabbed Harry by the arm and tugged him to his feet and out the door before Harry could even throw on a fresh set of clothes or make sure his hair didn’t look like a bird’s nest. It was only his Seeker’s reflexes that allowed him to snatch up his glasses from the nightstand as Malfoy marched him into the kitchen

practically at wand-point.

Malfoy shoved him into a chair at the table, but his rough treatment did nothing to disguise how overly tactile he was being, especially not when he plopped into a seat diagonal from Harry, one leg draped over the other and brushing against Harry's knee under the table. Clearly, those reassurances from earlier had worn off and were in want of replenishing.

Malfoy braced an elbow on the table, settling his chin in his hand, and raised his brows. "Well?" he prodded.

"Well what?" Hermione asked as she finished tending to what looked to be a pan of sausages, served alongside a mountain of toast with grilled tomatoes already sat in the centre of the table. Despite the hour, it seemed breakfast was still on the menu. Ron joined them, looking like he'd just woken up himself, right as Harry said, "Well Horcruxes."

Ron's eyes went comically wide, and he dropped into his chair—which Malfoy promptly pulled out from under him with a swish of his wand, sending Ron straight to the floor.

Hermione dropped her tongs with a gasp, goggling at Harry, but he quelled any objections with an even look. "All in, right?"

"Yeah, Granger," Malfoy said, levitating several sausages onto his plate, where he sat to work crafting a sandwich for himself from the toast and tomatoes. "All in, right?" He turned to Harry. "So what's a Horcrux?"

Ron struggled back to his feet, muttering, "Wanna find out?"

Harry pursed his lips. "Can you maybe stop antagonising everyone within a twenty-foot radius?"

"Can you maybe finally tell me *what's a Horcrux?*" His tone said he was starting to get annoyed at Harry's apparent dodging of the question, but his eyes retained their excitement, with a glint of curiosity at the edges. Relief swooped in Harry's chest; Malfoy

was not a terribly talented actor, they had learned, so it seemed he genuinely didn't know what Horcruxes were—which meant Lucius probably hadn't known what he'd been holding after all. Voldemort wasn't letting his Death Eaters in on the secret to his apparent immortality—or at least he hadn't told any outside of perhaps a trusted few.

Harry reached for the juice jug sat in the centre of the table. “A Horcrux is a...well, it's—”

Hermione swooped to his rescue, unable to resist a good lecture, as Harry had predicted. “It's a magical talisman created by infusing a piece of your soul into an otherwise ordinary object to create a vessel of immortality. It's very old, very Dark magic, involving murder as a catalyst to fracture the soul and fuse it with the object. In doing so, you create a tether to the mortal world. So long as a piece of your soul remains safe and unscathed, you can't be killed, even if your physical body is destroyed.”

“...All right. Well that sounds rather nasty, but I fail to see what that has to do with the three of you bouncing around the British Isles in a tent that smells of cat-piss for the better part of three months now.”

“Really?” Hermione said, dousing the burners on the stove. “You can't think of a *single person* who might be very interested in creating a Horcrux? Someone who, say, has had a brush with death before and somehow survived it?”

Malfoy's eyes bugged, and he choked on his coffee. “*Potter?*”

“Of course not!” Harry sputtered. “*You-Know-Who!*”

“Oh—well. Obviously.” Malfoy frowned, processing the influx of information. “So then, wait...these ‘objects’ you said you're looking for—the ‘pieces of a weapon’, you called them? They're Horcruxes?” Harry nodded. “But—you've said there are a half-dozen of these things!”

“I did. You-Know-Who always has to play it extra-safe, I suppose, seeing as he didn't stop at just *one*. That means there are six fragments of his soul out there—”

“*Were*, rather,” Hermione said, finally joining them at the table and helping herself to the

toast and tomatoes to prepare her own sandwich. “Two have already been destroyed.”

“—and the seventh is whatever’s left inside his body. It’s our job to track down the remaining Horcruxes and destroy them. As you’ve seen...it’s a slow-going process.”

Malfoy was slumped in his chair, brows furrowed as he stared blankly ahead. “Then... what’s the sword of Gryffindor for?”

Hermione tipped a bottle of ketchup over her sausages and tapped the bottom until a large glob came splurting out. “We need the sword to destroy the objects—the Horcruxes—remember? It’s one of only three ways we know a Horcrux can be rendered useless. Fiendfyre’s too volatile, and while the Horcrux within Tom Riddle’s diary—previously owned by your father—was destroyed with a basilisk fang, we don’t exactly have any of those in easy reach. That leaves the sword, which we know will work, because it was used to destroy the Horcrux made from a ring once owned by You-Know-Who’s grandfather.”

“Those are the two that’ve been destroyed already: the diary and the ring. We’ve got Slytherin’s locket...” Harry touched his Mokeskin pouch. “But no means to destroy it just yet.”

“That’s three...” Malfoy muttered. “The other three?”

“There’s one embedded in Nagini, that snake we tangled with last night, and another was made from Helga Hufflepuff’s cup, which you know we’ve been looking for. The final one should be in something owned by Ravenclaw. Dumbledore figured You-Know-Who wanted to use items connected to the Founders, and we’re assuming he’d use an item of Ravenclaw’s over one of Gryffindor’s, all things considered.”

Hermione nodded. “Once these last four Horcruxes are destroyed, then Voldemort will finally be mortal, and this wretched war will come to an end.”

Malfoy slowly turned to look at her, gaping. “Oh will it? Because he’ll be mortal then? *Fantastic!* Because no one’s *really* been trying to kill him so far! Once you’re done

snipping his immortality lifelines, it should be a snap to kill *the one wizard everyone in the magical world has been trying to take out for the past twenty years.*”

“Well, it’ll be possible, at least!” Hermione said defensively, and Harry couldn’t blame her, rather irritated with Malfoy’s tone himself.

“This is a mission Dumbledore believed in,” Harry reminded. “He worked the better part of his life trying to keep the wizarding world safe from You-Know-Who and his ilk—and he probably died doing it.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes at Harry. “...What’s *that* supposed to mean?” he asked, a bit waspish.

Of course he’d gone and taken it the wrong way. “I left the castle with Dumbledore the night he died. We travelled to a site Dumbledore had found out housed a Horcrux, so we snuck in to steal it, but it turned out to be a fake, left behind by someone who’d already snatched the real one to try and destroy themselves. The effort...drained Dumbledore, severely; I’ve never seen someone so weak, so frail...” He could still hear Dumbledore begging Harry not to make him drink the foul potion, could smell the dank stench of the cavern—Dumbledore’s slight weight, leaning on him, had been a burden Harry would have gladly borne a dozen times over. He licked his lips and cleared his throat, swallowing down the emotion knocking at the back of his eyes. “He’d already been injured last summer on a similar mission, so to have to go through that ordeal on top of it? I just can’t help but think that...maybe if he’d been in peak shape, he wouldn’t have...”

“...I wouldn’t have been able to kill him, you mean.”

A part of Harry instinctively wanted to reassure Malfoy that it wasn’t his fault, or that he couldn’t be blamed—but well, it *was* his fault, and he *could* be blamed, and Malfoy knew that, so anything Harry said to the contrary would just come out as an empty platitude.

When Harry refused to say anything further, Malfoy just shook his head, digging into his

pancakes savagely. “So it’s not a weapon you’re looking for at all. You’ll be no more capable of dealing a deathblow once you’ve rounded up all of these Horcruxes than you are now.”

“Oi, if all you’re gonna do is shoot down our efforts—” Ron started, but Malfoy cut him off with a sharp sneer.

“Clearly *someone* needs to do it, or else you might actually think this is going to do you any good!”

“It’s all we *can* do,” Harry said. “If we want to have even the *tiniest fraction* of a chance at defeating him, we have to do this. There’s no point in planning attacks or mastering powerful ancient spells if all we’d wind up doing is at best kicking the can another ten, fifteen years down the line. He has to die *now*.” He could feel Hermione and Ron giving him odd looks and winced inwardly at what must have been a rather fanatical-sounding speech; Malfoy always seemed to bring out the worst side of Harry. “Finding and destroying Horcruxes is what we can do right now, so that’s what we’re focusing on. We’ll worry about how to kill You-Know-Who later, when it’s actually feasible.”

Malfoy’s leg was bouncing up and down in nervous habit beneath the table, bumping up against Harry’s. “That’s assuming finding and destroying the Horcruxes doesn’t get you killed first.”

Harry raised a brow. “What do you think we gave you your wand back for?” He held Malfoy’s eye, impressing the gravity of the situation upon him as best he could. “All in?”

Malfoy pressed his lips into a thin line and made a sound of frustration in the back of his throat, but he eventually said, “...All in, I suppose.” It was hardly the ardour with which Hermione and Ron had insisted they join Harry in his quest to find the Horcruxes, but Harry would take it.

With the matter settled, they tucked into their breakfast-dinner with earnest, and as they were clearing the table, Hermione gasped. “Oh! I forgot to mention!” She dashed to her bedroom, returning with her beaded bag in hand. “Remember you mentioned

recognising the young man you'd seen in your dreams in that picture you found in Bathilda's parlour? And how you'd seen him before, in that horrid book of Rita's?" Harry nodded, excitement mounting—and it crested when she drew out of her bag a dusty copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. "Well I found this on her table, just sitting there, and I knew we could make better use of it than poor Bathilda might."

Harry eagerly took the book from her. Bathilda didn't seem to have even opened it, for the binding was stiff and the pages difficult to turn. There was a note slipped just inside the cover, penned in a familiar acid-green ink, and Harry read it aloud: "Dear Batty, Thanks for your help. Here's a copy of the book—hope you enjoy! You said every word, even if you don't remember it. Kisses, Rita." He frowned. "So Bathilda *was* a source for the book."

"Seems that way, though that note suggests Rita might have used her typical less-than-legal means to get Bathilda's cooperation."

"Skeeter's got a new book out?" Malfoy asked, leaning into Harry to get a look at the book. "And on *Dumbledore*? She works quick."

"It's easy to churn out a book in a couple of months when you make up most everything in it," Hermione sniffed.

"Got any *proof* she's made up whatever's in here?" Malfoy reached for the tea pot pouring himself a cup of earl grey to settle his stomach after the heavy meal. He had a delicate system, he liked to claim, and was the picture of lethargy after every meal. "Just because you don't like what she's got to say doesn't make it a lie."

"Didn't you do an interview with her where you called me *disturbed* and *dangerous*?" Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged. "And? Where was the lie?"

Harry rolled his eyes, though he admittedly agreed with Malfoy in a way: just because they disagreed with Rita didn't mean her book didn't contain at least some kernels of

truth. Especially if she'd used a vaunted magical historian for a source. Muriel might have called her batty, but Rita wouldn't have bothered with Bathilda unless she thought she really did have some untold stories that could earn her a quick Knut.

He stared down at Dumbledore's face, smiling out at him from the cover, and felt a surge of savage pleasure rush through him; he would finally learn all those things Dumbledore had never felt worth telling him about, would finally see all those dirty little secrets laid out before his eyes and be able to judge the truth of them. Sure, Rita would have embellished things in all likelihood, but Doge had visibly struggled to defend some of the more salacious accusations Muriel had laid out, so there was every chance that at least some of the unsavoury stories hidden in these pages were based in fact.

He thumbed through the pages, scanning the headings and keeping his eyes peeled for photographs. He found the one he was looking for almost immediately: the one with the young Dumbledore and his handsome companion. They were clasping shoulders, sharing grins that started small before growing to overtake their entire faces as they succumbed to a giggling fit over some private joke. He searched for the caption—

Albus Dumbledore, shortly after his mother's death, with his friend (and rumoured object of infatuation!) Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry actually shoved his chair back, gaping at the print with wide eyes.

"...Now that's *rich*," Malfoy drawled, doing a poor job of hiding the nasty smile blossoming on his lips.

"What?" Hermione asked, then picked up the book so she and Ron could get a better look at it. "Holy *shit*!" she shrieked, scandalised, and Ron gave her an impressed brow lift.

Grindelwald. Dumbledore's friend, Grindelwald. Dumbledore's friend—and rumoured *object of infatuation*—Grindelwald. He blinked several times, then rubbed his eyes, hoping he was just seeing things. Maybe Nagini's venom hadn't entirely worked itself out of his system.

Except Malfoy had seen the same thing, and so had Hermione and Ron. Which meant the caption really *did* read what he thought it read.

“Grindelwald, that’s...” He licked his lips. “Not—*that* Grindelwald, surely?”

“Know a lot of Grindelwalds, do you, Potter?” Malfoy leered, and he seemed to be enjoying this *far* too much for Harry’s liking.

Harry didn’t know which part of it shocked him more—that Dumbledore had been friends with Grindelwald, or that he’d maybe been *more than friends*.

“It just says ‘rumoured’ though,” Ron reminded them all, as if Dumbledore having a boyhood crush on a megalomaniac was the *truly* weird part of the whole thing.

“Except setting that aside it seems he was still friends with one of the most notorious Dark wizards in modern history,” Hermione said, slumping back in her chair. “It’s hard to argue with photographic evidence...”

“Can we be sure that’s even Grindelwald, though?” Ron asked.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Probably; he’s *Grindelwald*, so I’m sure there are plenty of picture out there of him at all points of his life. If this was a case of mistaken identity, Rita would be forced to issue a retraction, and you know how much she’d hate that. She’d lose whatever credibility she’s managed to scrounge up.”

She closed the book and tapped it with her wand, saying, “*Geminio*,” and another book popped into existence. She repeated the spell until they had four books between them. “We ought to comb through this for any more information about Grindelwald and his relationship with Dumbledore.”

“Clearly wasn’t as rosy as our late headmaster might have dreamed,” Malfoy drawled, evidently still tickled at the revelation of this (rumoured, Harry reminded himself) detail of Dumbledore’s private life. “No matching his-and-his dressing gowns, no calligraphied ‘Dumbledore-Grindelwald’ stationery, no romantic honeymoons in the south of France... Little wonder the old codger was so obsessed with the Dark Lord; clearly he’s got a

type.”

Harry rose to his feet, snatching up his copy and stalking into the sitting room; Malfoy seemed to love little more than the sound of his own voice, and Harry could no longer threaten a *Silencio* with impunity, so he had no choice but to remove himself from the situation.

Except Malfoy followed him, traipsing after him like a dog, and when Harry flopped down onto the sofa, the book open in his lap, Malfoy settled beside him with a sated little sigh, leaning into his shoulder to read along with Harry. Harry glanced back at the table, where the copy of Rita’s book Hermione had made for Malfoy still sat, untouched. “Er... You’ve got a copy on the table...”

“And you’ve got a copy right here,” Malfoy said. “Are we starting at the beginning, then?”

Evidently it was still close enough on the heels of their brush with death that Malfoy wasn’t even going to beat around the bush concerning his need for reassurance through physical contact. Hermione and Ron both studiously ignored their display on the sofa, settling into Perkins’s armchairs, and they all began to read.

Harry didn’t have the patience to start at the beginning—especially as he was only interested in one thing at this point—so he scoured the pages around the photograph for further mentions of Grindelwald’s name. He soon found another instance and dove in greedily, but he was lost without context and had to go back further to make sense of it all.

“You’ve got the attention span of a gnat, you realise?” Malfoy muttered, flipping back to the table of contents before settling on a chapter entitled ‘The Greater Good’. “Yes, that sounds about Dumbledore’s speed.”

Harry shifted the book so it sat between them and read.

With his eighteenth birthday right around the corner, everything was coming up roses for Albus Dumbledore. He left Hogwarts, fêted and honoured as he no doubt felt befit him: Prefect, Head Boy, Winner of the Barnabus Finkley Prize for Exceptional Spell-Casting, British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot, Gold Medal-Winner for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo, and already fielding offers from several prestigious magical universities, both domestic and abroad. He next intended to take a grand tour across the Continent and northern Africa, with a stopover in the Americas, to sort out his future plans together with Elphias 'Dogbreath' Doge, the faithful (albeit fog-brained) sidekick who'd attached himself to Dumbledore as a lamprey does a shark.

But then, tragedy struck. The boys had secured lodging at the Leaky Cauldron, with Portkeys scheduled for the following morning that would see them on to Greece, when an owl arrived for Dumbledore, bearing on its wings the sad news of the unexpected death of Dumbledore's mother, Kendra. Doge, who refused to be interviewed for this book, has published his own accounting of this chapter of Dumbledore's life, sentimentally biased as one might expect from sources without a journalist's objective eye. He speaks of a Dumbledore humbled by the loss of his mother, a powerful witch and the family matriarch, and paints Dumbledore's decision to cancel their trip in favour of returning to simple village life to care for his ailing sister and wild brother in rosy hues of self-sacrifice and humility.

And while Dumbledore did return to Godric's Hollow after receiving the sad news, the purpose to which he did so is debatable. Did he truly feel compelled to take up his stead as new head of the Dumbledore household, placing the good of his family over personal gain, or was this act merely one of obligation, a fetter Dumbledore would shortly come to resent?

The Dumbledore brothers took their mother's passing in rather different ways—where Albus adopted a stiff upper lip, Aberforth was...decidedly more emotive in his grief.

“He were a headcase, that Aberforth,” says Enid Smeek, former fellow resident. “Always runnin’ wild. ‘Course, with his mum and dad gone, you wanted to cut him some slack, feelin’ a bit sorry for the poor thing, but he kept chuckin’ goat dung at me head! I don’ think Albus was too fussed about him; never saw them together, anyway.”

And what was Dumbledore up to while not being ‘too fussed’ about his young brother causing trouble for concerned neighbours? Ardent fans of Dumbledore will be distraught to hear he was evidently ensuring his poor sister remained as much a prisoner under his tenure as she’d been under his mother’s.

No, Kendra’s death brought no respite for Ariana Dumbledore, no promised freedom or rescue from the cruel reality in which she found herself trapped. Albus Dumbledore was only too happy to continue claiming that he had no sister at all, or for those who could not be so easily duped, that she was too sickly to have company.

But not all blame for Kendra’s unfortunate state can be laid at the feet of Albus. No small amount of fault lies with fast family friend to the Dumbledores Bathilda Bagshot, the celebrated magical historian who has lived in Godric’s Hollow for many years. Bathilda was among the first to welcome the Dumbledores to the village and kept a close eye on them, tracking Albus’s own meteoric rise with interest. The two shared regular correspondence and forged an eventual friendship that continued until Dumbledore’s passing, bonded by a mutual academic respect and interest in themes so esoteric I shan’t bore readers with the details.

Bathilda has clung fast to her defence of the Dumbledores over the years. Even now, she maintains that Kendra was undone by a ‘backfiring charm’, a line often repeated by the Dumbledore brothers themselves, and that Ariana’s absence from the Hogwarts rolls was due only to her ill health and delicate state and certainly had nothing to do with the fact her shall-we-say-‘issues’ would have called into question the purity of the Dumbledore line and just what

sorts of odd tics might pop up in Albus himself as time passed.

But Bathilda has kept a secret far more shocking than the mysterious circumstances surrounding Kendra's passing and the true reason for Ariana's hermit-like existence—indeed, it's a tale she's never shared before. But fret not, dear readers: your intrepid author has employed time-tested reporting techniques to bring to you at last the unvarnished truth of the character of Albus Dumbledore, calling into question everything his admirers have believed of him.

For you see, Bathilda has a very famous great-nephew: a young man by the name of Gellert Grindelwald.

The same summer that Dumbledore returned home to Godric's Hollow to assume his role as head of household, Bathilda received a visit of her own from young Grindelwald, recently expelled from Durmstrang when the faculty could no longer feign ignorance of the dark deeds being enacted under their very noses. It was an unfortunate end to what had been an otherwise stellar academic career, as Grindelwald had proven himself just as brilliant as Dumbledore. But where Dumbledore funnelled his efforts into garnering awards and accolades, Grindelwald sought a very different sort of fame and was not afraid to get his hands dirty in order to attain it. While the details surrounding Grindelwald's expulsion are sketchy, the institution's reputation for tolerating all things Dark suggests that Grindelwald must have been up to some shady dealings indeed if the staff could no longer stomach him as their student.

At the time, though, the name Grindelwald had not yet earned its infamy, and he was deemed merely a troubled young man. Perhaps his family hoped that a summer in the English countryside with his great-aunt might convince him to correct his life's course and channel his energy into more laudable pursuits.

Whether by fate or fortune or mere coincidence—though who can believe such a thing exists when it comes to Albus Dumbledore—the boys who would grow

to become two of the most famous wizards of all time found themselves but a stone's throw away from one another. It must therefore be of little surprise that, in short order, they crossed paths and struck up an odd but fast friendship.

“He always seemed a charming boy to me,” Bathilda insists, gaze wandering oddly about the room as she attempts to add salt and pepper to her freshly poured cuppa, “whatever he became later. I knew that poor Albus was missing the company of lads his own age, and Gellert was feeling down about his future prospects. Knowing how bright they both were, I couldn't see any reason not to introduce them.”

The boys took to each other at once. “They'd spend all day in one another's company—they were both so brilliant, they got on like a cauldron on fire! I can't tell you the number of evenings I caught Gellert opening the window to receive a midnight owl from the Dumbledores; when inspiration struck, those boys lost all respect for time and place!”

Inspiration can be a terrible thing when it strikes a twisted mind, though. While Albus Dumbledore's fans may find it shocking, Grindelwald and Dumbledore shared far more in common than the average witch or wizard might be comfortable knowing. For your perusal, we have here the thoughts of a seventeen-year-old Albus, as relayed during one of these late-night back-and-forths with his new best friend (a copy of the original letter may be seen on page 463):

Gellert—

Precisely! Wizards' dominance over Muggles must be framed as being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD—this is the fulcrum on which to place our lever as we present our ideas to the wider wizarding world. The extraordinary power with which we've been entrusted by the laws of nature and fate dictate that we act with equally extraordinary responsibility. Our power gives us the right (and

duty) to rule over those less fortunate—and to practice responsibility in said ruling. I believe THIS is what we must stress, for it will be the foundation upon which we build a modern magical society. We cannot naïvely assume that all will immediately fall into line with our agenda—charming and charismatic as you know I find you to be, your silver tongue cannot change every mind—so we must be prepared with strong, sound counter-arguments. We mount our revolution FOR THE GREATER GOOD. We stamp out resistance FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And above all else, we must be beyond reproach in our tactics for doing so, using only the force that IS necessary and only WHEN it is necessary. (Perhaps if you'd practised more restraint at Durmstrang, you might have succeeded in your goals—but then we might never have met, so I count your misstep a blessing of fate!)

Albus

Now, remember to collect your jaws from where they've surely dropped to the floor, dear readers—and don't blame yourselves for being so thoroughly hoodwinked. Dumbledore went to great lengths to hide his erstwhile dreams of standing among the ranks of Grindelwald and You-Know-Who and Morgan Le Fay, obliterating the Statute of Secrecy and establishing absolute wizard rule over Muggles.

Now, some may wonder, what was the meaning of this? Had Dumbledore always felt this way, harbouring this contempt for Muggles, or was he, perhaps, bewitched by the charms of his new companion? Did his fondness—and some say more-than-fondness—for Gellert Grindelwald colour his views, or were these inherent to Dumbledore himself?

We may never know, but Dumbledore's letters themselves give us profound insight into his thinking around this time, and we only may infer the true nature of the boys' relationship from hearsay and gossip of other residents of Godric's

Hollow. While Bathilda seems to have been convinced her great-nephew and neighbour were nothing more than fast friends, anonymous sources residing in the village that summer remain convinced that Albus was utterly besotted with his new companion—and that Grindelwald knew this and took whole advantage of these feelings.

“Plain as the nose on your face, it was!” says a local landowner and close friend of Bathilda. “Why, Gellert all but led Albus about on a leash; he could do no wrong in Albus’s eyes, and it didn’t take more than a bright smile and a bat of those lashes for Albus to come around to seeing things from Gellert’s point of view if ever they disagreed on a subject. Albus was a good boy, the best Hogwarts has ever turned out—but young men, well they don’t tend to think straight when it comes to matters of the heart at that age, and I think it was the first time Albus had ever met a mind that challenged his own, and in so pleasing a package.”

It’s easy to imagine, then, that Dumbledore, bored and bereft of friends who could stand up to his intellect and left to care for his rough-and-tumble brother and invalid sister, might have latched on to the first person he met who he thought of as an equal. Certainly, none of his Hogwarts peers save the under-performing, middle-of-the-pack Doge professed a close friendship with Dumbledore—and then in swept a handsome, mysterious foreigner from a far-off land with larger-than-life ideas and an easy charm that won him so many fervent followers in later years.

But such notions are, of course, mere speculation, and regardless of the reasoning behind Dumbledore’s beliefs, we can be certain that he did indeed entertain them and dreamt of one day carrying out his plan to subjugate Muggles and purge the world of any who would dare stand against him. Perhaps, in another lifetime, it might have been the fearsome combined forces of Dumbledore and Grindelwald instead of You-Know-Who against whom Harry Potter would be pitted.

What a blow this must be to those who have always sought to portray Dumbledore as the Muggleborns' greatest champion! How hollow now must those speeches promoting Muggle rights ring in light of this damning new evidence. Would any have rallied to the side of this would-be despot had they known he was busy plotting his own rise to power when he should have been mourning his mother and caring for his sister?

Now, undoubtedly those determined to keep Dumbledore perched atop his crumbling pedestal will protest that he did not, ultimately, put his plans into action. "He was but a boy!" they will claim. "He obviously came to his senses! Look at all the good he did for Muggles and Muggle-Wizarding relations in his long life!"

Here again, dear readers, I fear I must dash such hopes, for the truth behind Dumbledore's apparent change of heart is altogether more shocking.

But a few months into their new friendship, before summer's end, Dumbledore and Grindelwald parted ways, never to meet again until that legendary duel (for more, see Chapter 22: A Wizard Spurned). What caused this abrupt rift between a pair who once had been as close as a Niffler and a Knut? Did Dumbledore truly, as many would like to believe, come to his senses? Had Grindelwald crafted a plan too barbaric for even the starry-eyed Dumbledore to overlook?

Alas, no; it was tragedy that brought these boys together, and it would be tragedy that tore them apart.

"It was just too much to bear, little Ariana passing so quickly like that," says Bathilda, eyes gone bright with unshed tears. "Everyone was absolutely gutted. Gellert was there when it happened, and he came back to my house flustered as anything, saying he couldn't stay here anymore, and that he wanted to go back home the next day. I think he must have grown very close to the Dumbledores, and to lose one of his new friends so quickly and so tragically... I arranged a

Portkey for him, and then he was gone, just as quickly as he'd come."

Bathilda goes on to say that Albus was utterly distraught by the death of his sister so soon on the heels of his mother's passing. It seems little wonder, then, that tempers flared. Still, could grief alone explain the coffin-side brawl that erupted between Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore?

"That was a sight! I know grief preys on us all in different ways, but for Aberforth to haul off and break his brother's nose at the funeral, in front of all the guests?" Bathilda tuts under her breath. "Kendra would have been appalled to see her sons fighting like that, before her daughter's body was even cold! Probably for the best Gellert couldn't bring himself to stay for the funeral..."

Eye-witnesses say that the fight was sparked when Aberforth made statements blaming Albus for their sister's death—but why? Unfortunately, no one but the Dumbledore brothers and Gellert Grindelwald knows the truth of how Ariana Dumbledore died—so what does Aberforth Dumbledore know about his brother that the rest of the wizarding world doesn't? Grindelwald, as is known, was expelled from Durmstrang for attempted murder of fellow students, and he fled Britain mere hours after Ariana's death. Rumours concerning the cause of Ariana's death have run rampant in the years since the tragedy—a dark rite gone awry, murder most foul for witnessing something she shouldn't have—but as for the truth...we may never know.

What we can conclude is this: something happened between these two young wizards, something that would drive a wedge between them, pitting them against one another. Or else why did Grindelwald flee the scene, and why did Dumbledore—whether out of shame or fear of exposure—never see him again until all but forced to do so, when he could no longer turn a blind eye to Grindelwald's terrorism?

Neither man ever referenced this brief boyhood friendship in later life, and many still with us will recall how Dumbledore dithered for years, seemingly reluctant

to raise a wand against the man he had once considered his closest confidant and partner, a right hand with whom he meant to bring about a revolution. Whether it was lingering affection or simple worry the world would learn of their boyhood friendship, he hesitated, costing countless lives.

Dumbledore's pride and shame are now legend, history almost too fantastic to believe, but the ideals he once prized so dearly live on in the dark corners of the world. We may hope that, as he matured over the years, Dumbledore did feel on some level regret for what he'd helped bring about, what he'd encouraged in his good friend Gellert—but the fact of the matter is this man was such a consummate liar, who knows where his true feelings lay!

We may thus never know if in the end Albus Dumbledore died believing still that some ends justified the means in the context of the greater good.

Harry let the book fall into his lap, staring ahead but not seeing anything. Beside him, Malfoy was quiet for once, no more rude quips on his tongue about “Mr. and Mr. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore-Grindelwald”. Ron was still engrossed in reading, but Harry could feel Hermione staring at him, a torn expression in her eyes and worrying her lip between her teeth.

He stood, letting the book drop to the floor and shaking off the hand Malfoy had been resting on his shoulder.

“Harry—” Hermione started, but he shook his head.

Why was he shocked? Hadn't he known, before he'd even opened that book, it would be less than charitable in how it painted Dumbledore? Hadn't he *hoped* to read that, even? Why then did he feel like a child, too stupid to see beyond the mask of goodness and wisdom Dumbledore had worn all these years? He'd thought Dumbledore infallible, that everything he'd done, he'd done for a reason—a *good* reason.

...The greater good.

Hermione set her book aside, rising slowly to her feet, as if worried she might spook him into bolting. “Listen to me, I know what it looks like. It...it paints an unkind picture of Dum—”

He snorted derisively. “You can say that again.”

“But don’t you dare forget who the author is; this is *Rita Skeeter* writing.”

He could practically hear Malfoy rolling his eyes, and truthfully Harry felt about the same right now. “Sure; supposing everything she wrote herself was a lie—but how do you explain that letter then, hm? You did read it, didn’t you?”

“I—I did...” she said, fingers playing at the hem of her shirt as she stretched the fabric in nervous habit. “I have to admit, I think that’s the worst bit, to think *that’s* where Grindelwald got his slogan...”

Harry’s brows furrowed, and his heart began to race. “*What* slogan?” He’d missed something horrible, he felt, and he could tell it was bad when Hermione’s face went ashen.

Malfoy scoffed. “I know Binns’s class was dull as dirt, Potter, but you don’t remember *anything* about Grindelwald’s campaign?”

He didn’t, but he sure as hell didn’t want to admit as such *now*.

“‘For the Greater Good’ became his slogan, Harry...” Hermione said in a small voice. “He...he did just as Dumbledore suggested in the letter: used those words to justify all the horrible things he did, the people he killed, the terror he wrought. He even had it carved over the entrance to Nurmengard.”

His irritation was peaking; he didn’t want a history lesson, he wanted to know what the *fuck* Dumbledore had been thinking. “What’s Nurmengard?” he huffed.

Malfoy picked at something in his teeth, bored. “The prison Grindelwald had built to hold...well, anyone who stood in his way, really.”

“He ended up there himself once Dumbledore beat him,” Hermione added. “And, all right, it’s an *awful* thought that Dumbledore’s own ideas helped Grindelwald grow firm in his convictions and may even have encouraged him to put his plans into motion. But, well, you *read* that chapter! Take away all of Rita’s over-the-top gilding, and it’s clear they only knew each other for a few weeks one summer when they were both *really* young and—”

“They were the same age as us.”

Ron had apparently finished the chapter himself, staring down at his copy of the book, his knuckles white where he gripped the cover. He seemed to be almost shaking with rage and confusion, and he spoke in a voice with such softness it was terrifying. Harry wanted to hug him, badly, but he thought he might also like to punch someone too, so he held back.

Ron glanced around the room at all of them in turn, then his eyes fell on Hermione and stuck there. “You’re excusing this—this *bullshit*, saying ‘they were young’, when they were the same age as we are now.”

Harry could feel his pulse spike. “Yeah. Except here we are, risking our lives fighting against a madman, and there he was, holding sleepovers with his new best friend, discussing how best to frame their plot to subjugate the Muggles.” He began to pace, knowing his temper wouldn’t remain in check for much longer and trying to work some of it off.

“I’m not defending what he wrote, all right?” Hermione said. “Believe me—a ‘right to rule’? They weren’t the first to entertain those ideas, and they certainly won’t be the last. It’s just more ‘magic is might’ bullshit; you don’t need to be a Dark wizard to be an ignorant bigot. He would have seen my parents under his own boot, based on what he wrote in that letter, so don’t you dare say I’m excusing that. *Either* of you.” She sighed. “But his mother had just *died*, and he was stuck alone in that house—”

“Alone?” Harry laughed, a bit maniacal. “God, he wasn’t *alone*! He still had his brother and sister—people depending on him!” He thought of Ariana and her imprisonment—and he suddenly wasn’t surprised anymore that Dumbledore had let him suffer under the Dursleys’ cruelty for so many years. The ends once more justifying the means. “His Squib sister he was embarrassed of, keeping her a secret lest other people think—”

“Now *that* I can’t believe,” Hermione huffed, and her eyes were starting to get puffy. “You know Rita, you know how she’ll twist anything and ignore good sense in favour of a salacious story. There may have been something wrong with her, I’ll grant you that—some magical affliction maybe, but not a Squib. The Ministry keep detailed records going back as far as the mid-eighteenth century of—” She shook her head, clearly conscious she was going off on a tangent. “Regardless, the Dumbledore we knew would never, *ever* have allowed—”

“*Never?*” Ron snapped. “You think he’d *never* have let someone keep a child stashed away in secret because they were afraid of them, or embarrassed of them? I dunno about you, Harry, but that sounds pretty familiar to me!”

“Yeah, Ron,” Harry said, crossing his arms. “Sounds *damn* familiar. Sounds kind of like a pattern if you ask me!” By the end of the sentence, he was shouting, and he heard the cry of a flock of birds outside taking to the evening air, disturbed from their nests by his tone.

Hermione was crying now, and Harry knew he was going to feel horrible about this later, but right now he was just so damn *angry*.

“He changed, though. He did, I’m sure of it.” Her tone was pleading, and she was sniffing through tears. “M—Maybe he did believe those things when he was seventeen, but look at the legacy he left behind! Look at the legislation he championed, the measures he voted for, all to support and protect Muggles’ and Muggleborns’ rights. He was the one who first warned the world about You-Know-Who! He’s the *entire reason we’re here*, and it’s only because of him we have a chance in hell of bringing that bastard down!”

Harry’s head was hung; he stared down at the book lying in a heap at his feet, lip curling

at the image of Albus Dumbledore's face looking up at him with a warm, grandfatherly smile. Harry wanted to grind his trainer into that dopey smile so badly it frightened him.

"He loved you," Hermione whispered tearfully. "I know he did. He cared for you, and everything he did, he did—"

"—For the greater good," Harry finished viciously. "If this is his idea of love, it's right fucked up. Leaving us in this mess, with an impossible task on our shoulders and no leads? That's not love. That's—I dunno. A cruel joke from beyond the grave. One last kick in the bollocks." He shook his head. "He didn't care for me—he didn't love me. He had more love for the likes of Gellert-fucking-Grindelwald than he ever spared for me."

He needed to get away from this. *All* of this. He wanted to be alone, but as much as he needed privacy, he needed open air and freedom and the option to blow something up if the urge struck him, so he made a beeline for the Sanctuary, ignoring Hermione's pleading, "*Harry!*" at his back.

He snatched up one of Perkins's brooms they now stored in a trunk just inside the Sanctuary's entrance and mounted it. The sun had nearly set, as it did on these short winter days, but Harry didn't care. He wasn't going to be hunting a Snitch; he just wanted to *fly*.

He pushed off and urged the broom as high as it would go, the Conjured forest floor disappearing beneath his feet as he soared up and up and up through the cloud cover into the frigid, quiet stillness of the heavens, with only the earliest few stars twinkling in the soft lavender-grey above. He couldn't help but be silently impressed with Hermione's skill in creating this place; it seemed to go on forever.

He angled the broom into a banking turn, then kept banking until it took a sharp dive, pouring as much speed into it as he could and letting gravity do the rest. The treeline rushed up at him impossibly fast, and he barely pulled out of the dive in time to avoid becoming a skin-sack of bones on the ground. That had been terrifying—so he did it again.

He repeated the climb and dive a few more times until his eyes hurt from the wind and his fingers started to go numb from gripping the broom handle so tightly in the frosty weather. The adrenaline high was doing wonders for his temper, and he rode it for a bit, switching from his death drops to practising a few routine manoeuvres just to keep his mind off that letter and Dumbledore and the “Greater Good”.

He made himself dizzy doing a series of rolls and inverted spiral dives. It was kind of funny, when he thought about it. Between training with Malfoy and his own evenings destressing with a bit of flying, Harry had spent more time on a broomstick in the past few months than he had in the six years before. He recalled there’d been a time—quite a few years ago by this point, admittedly—when he’d thought he might play professionally one day. That had been back when his biggest problems had been Snape’s four-foot essays and Malfoy’s rude cracks and Filch’s handsy pat-downs, though. Now, he just hoped he survived—though he wasn’t really counting on it.

“Feeling better after your tantrum?”

Harry nearly fell off his broom when Malfoy drew up beside him, clutching the fabric of his jumper over his chest. “You almost gave me a heart attack!” he snapped.

“What was it Moody used to say? ‘Constant vigilance’?”

“That wasn’t the real Moody,” Harry grumbled, raking Malfoy with a suspicious eye. “And I came in here to be alone, if it wasn’t obvious. If Ron and Hermione sent you in here after me, then—”

Malfoy laughed, one loud bark that echoed across the Conjured heavens. “You actually think they’d send *me* to talk you down from whatever pique you’ve worked yourself into? Merlin, but you’ve read the room *all* wrong.” He shrugged, slender shoulders rising and falling with an elegant carelessness. “I’m only here to watch you have your fit. It’s the most entertaining thing I’ve seen since Weasley missed his chair at breakfast-dinner.”

“He didn’t ‘miss his chair’. You pulled it out from under him.”

“Mm, well, six of one.” Malfoy’s broom floated closer, and given Harry knew what a careful flyer Malfoy was, it must have been deliberate. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“...Which was?”

“Feeling better after your tantrum?”

“It wasn’t a *tantrum*,” Harry huffed, cutting his lift and letting the broom spiral downward lazily. Malfoy didn’t take the hint and followed, keeping pace with Harry. “And of *course* I’m not. But I was doing a decent job of distracting myself in here until you showed up.”

“Yes, I’m told I can be *quite* distracting with a receptive audience.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Do you actually need something, or are you just here to annoy me?” Granted, there was no discounting he was here for *both*, but it had really been a rhetorical question.

“You’re angry,” Malfoy said, stating the obvious.

Harry leapt off his broom five feet from the ground, shins complaining when he hit the hardpacked earth. “Aren’t you observant.”

“You’re angry,” Malfoy repeated, slipping smoothly off his broom and into a light jog to draw up alongside Harry. “And I’m going to tell you why.”

Harry snatched Malfoy’s broom from him. “I know exactly why I’m angry, thanks.” He tossed the brooms back into the trunk, slamming the lid shut; where could he go now for peace and brooding quiet? If he wanted, he could slap Malfoy with a *Silencio*, but then Malfoy might just turn into a dragon and eat Harry, and that wouldn’t be very helpful for a lot of reasons. “I don’t need it spelled out again.”

Malfoy crossed his arms. “Well clearly you *do*, because you’re angry for the *wrong reasons*.” Harry turned on him, agog; a few months in forced proximity, and this

arsehole had the gall to think he *knew* Harry? Understood how he ticked? He opened his mouth, a hot retort ready on his lips, but Malfoy cut him off. “You aren’t angry your hero wasn’t everything he’s cracked up to be—though I’d wager you’re pretty teed off it’s turning out everyone else has been right about him and you’re every bit the foolish child you’ve been called. And you aren’t angry at the things he did, either. You know Granger’s right, and you know he didn’t believe any of that drivel anymore by the time he reached the ripe old age of five-hundred-and-fuckteen or whatever he was.”

Malfoy leaned close, which Harry thought was rather brave of him, seeing as Harry was about half a second and one more good insult away from clocking him across the jaw.

His breath was soft and tickled Harry’s ear when he whispered into it, “The real reason you’re so angry is because the old fart never told you any of this himself.”

Harry shoved him away hard, both hands splayed over Malfoy’s chest, and bellowed, “Maybe I am!” He didn’t know why he was yelling, only that he had to, and that it felt safe to in here. He could scream himself hoarse, listening to his fury echoing across quiet hill and dale, until he had no more breath to spare. He’d kept it all bundled up, shoved deep down in his gut, for so long—his grief and sorrow and frustration and yes, red-hot, bright-white *anger*. Anger at Dumbledore, anger at himself, anger at Voldemort, anger at *everyone*.

He felt like Malfoy had claimed to feel, when the dragon had tried to force its way out: something hot and acidic was clawing at his chest, tearing through him, and it was going to burn him alive until there was nothing left but pain and rage and ash. Unless, like Malfoy, he let it all out.

“Look at what he’s asked of me! Risk your life, Harry! Again and again and *again*. But don’t expect me to explain myself, don’t expect me to let you in—just trust me. Trust me blindly, trust that I know what I’m doing and that I’m doing it for the right reasons. Trust me, even though I sure as *hell* don’t trust you.”

Malfoy swooned mockingly, one hand at his forehead. “Oh, poor, pitiful, precious Potter. He’s the *only* person in the world who ever learned that the person he looked up to most

wasn't everything he was cracked up to be." His lip curled in disgust. "The old coot left you holding the bag with an impossible task before you and stars in your eyes—so what? You think you wouldn't be in *exactly* the same position if he'd told you everything you wanted to know?"

"Of course I wouldn't! We'd know where all of the Horcruxes were—"

"Oh, so Dumbledore knew where the final two we're still looking for are?"

Harry didn't have time to indulge the little frisson of happiness that rippled through him at Malfoy's use of the word *we*. He released a small huff, irritated with how Malfoy was being deliberately obtuse. "Well, no, but he had some ideas—"

Malfoy waved him off. "Granger won't *shut up* about her ideas; next."

"We'd probably *have them* by now, is the point! *And* they'd be destroyed to boot! Then all we'd have to worry about is the snake."

"And the Dark Lord."

"What?"

Malfoy ticked off points on his fingers. "You'd have destroyed what Horcruxes you could get your hands on but you'd still have to worry about the snake and *the Dark Lord*. Getting rid of the Horcruxes doesn't get rid of *him*."

Harry threw his head back with a huff, irritated at the pedantry. "We'd be *able* to get rid of him, though. There'd be *hope*. One Killing Curse away is where we'd be, if Dumbledore had bothered to—"

"You may as well be a dozen away, a *score* away, then! It's not that easy, and it wouldn't be any more or less easy even if Dumbledore were here to massage your little stub toes and ruffle your hair and offer you a fizzing whizbee because of what a good little boy you've been."

The argument was only stoking the fire of Harry's anger higher and hotter, and he spit out with as much venom as he could muster, "Guess I'll never know, will I? Seeing as you killed him."

Malfoy's face went stony as he shut down. Harry watched the light leave his eyes and immediately regretted his words.

"...Dammit, I didn't mean that—"

"No," Malfoy said, shouldering roughly past Harry, heading back towards the tent. "I guess you won't know."

Harry turned to follow, exhaustion dogging his steps. "Seriously, I didn't mean it like—"

"Fuck off, Potter. You want to be left alone to mope? I'm leaving you alone."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I'd rather you didn't leave angry with me, at least."

"Clearly can't have everything we want, can we?"

Harry jogged around Malfoy, blocking the door to the Sanctuary.

Malfoy glared at him. "Move."

"...I haven't finished my tantrum," Harry tried. "Thought you wanted to see it?" He wasn't very good at apologies, especially not with Malfoy, as it was entirely too easy to go low when they were really heated.

Luckily, though, Malfoy seemed rather quick to forgive—probably because he didn't care all that much whether Harry liked him or not. After a moment's consideration, Malfoy sighed, then walked over to a scrub bush and raised his wand. With a flick of his wrist, he'd Transfigured it into a squat loveseat, settling down with his arms crossed and one leg thrown over the other. Harry didn't know if this was some sort of signal, but given Malfoy hadn't left the Sanctuary, he supposed this was a good thing and moved to join him.

They were sitting close again, their sides pressed together, and Harry tried to relax into it. The cushions still felt a bit prickly and poke-y, and Malfoy was stiffer than he usually was when they sat together. Certainly he wasn't draped lazily across Harry like he'd been earlier, and Harry knew this was his fault, that he always wound up saying things he didn't mean and hurting others for it. When Malfoy said something hurtful, at least he meant it. Every word that came out of his mouth was considered and planned. Malfoy didn't have temper issues. Malfoy didn't have trust issues.

Harry tilted his head back and stared up at the cloud-strewn sky. It was fully night now, and the stars were out in force, peeking through the clouds at every opportunity they could find. "You're wrong."

"That doesn't sound like me."

Harry told himself not to smile; he was still cross. "I'm not angry because he didn't tell me."

"You're a little angry because of that."

And all right, he had a point. "...Yeah, I suppose."

"So I'm right."

"I guess." Malfoy cocked his head to the side, giving Harry a pointed look, and Harry rolled his eyes. "Fine: *You're right*." Malfoy nodded, satisfied. "It's just...I'm so angry at *him*. For *everything*. Not for any one thing but because of who he was at his core and how that influenced everything he did and everyone around him. Because of his secrets and—and his schemes and his *secrets*—"

"You said that one already."

"Well it bears repeating!" Harry leaned forward, letting his head fall into his hands. "Why'd he go out and try to take on a fucking *dragon* when he was already so weak? Why didn't he let the rest of the staff handle it? Why didn't he *think* about how we were supposed to do this if anything happened to him?"

Malfoy shrugged, though he kept his tone carefully even. “He had a will; clearly he’d considered it.”

“Yeah, sure. The most cryptic will in existence, and items we’ve either got no idea *how* to use or no clue where they are. Nice of him to leave Ron a Horcrux killer, but couldn’t he have at least done us the favour of smuggling the real sword out of Hogwarts and then told us where he’d hidden it? Of course not! Because why be direct, why *tell me* anything when he could leave clues and hints, send us wandering from one end of the country to the other on a fruitless quest when time’s of the essence!” He buried his face in his hands, groaning. “...I just feel so stupid.”

“Come on, don’t say that,” Malfoy tutted, tucking a lock of hair behind Harry’s ear. “Be *confident* that you’re stupid.”

Harry looked up, glowering. “I know where you sleep.”

“It’s not your fault, either—only an endemic failing of your House. Dumbledore should have known better than to lay out breadcrumbs like this and expect a bunch of Gryffindors to put two and two together.”

Harry slumped back against the bush-sofa; Malfoy had his arm resting across the cushion, and Harry used it as a pillow. He was so tired now, even though he’d slept most of the day. Anger was draining, and he’d been angry a lot over the years. He just wanted to *stop*. He wanted his heart to stop breaking and his images of people to stop shattering. Malfoy was safe that way; he was always what he presented himself as, no more, no less. Harry would never discover some deep, dark secret he’d kept hidden that would forever change how Harry felt about him. He was just *Malfoy*.

He closed his eyes. “...And more stupid is the fact that I still miss him.”

Malfoy snorted. “Well *I* certainly don’t. He was never a dotting, batty old grandfather to me like he was to you lot.”

Harry frowned, opening his mouth to remind Malfoy of all the good Dumbledore had

done, and how he would have surely helped Malfoy and his parents if they'd bothered to ask him—before he realised this had been Malfoy's intention all along, forcing Harry to defend Dumbledore in order to mute his anger. Fucking Slytherins.

He swallowed any comments, reaching down to pick up a dead leaf and tearing it apart piece by piece. "It's just...once they're gone, that's it. You never get to have the last word, or get the answers you want, or—or even say goodbye. No matter how you felt about them, you'll never have that closure."

"Hogwash," Malfoy sniffed, rolling his eyes. "If that's true, then what was that display back in Godric's Hollow for? You hadn't the first clue that the sword of Gryffindor might be hidden there, so why did you want to go at all if you honestly believe that confronting those who've passed is meaningless? You wouldn't get the last word or the answers you want even if the man were still alive. And if it's goodbyes you want to say—" He extended an arm, sweeping it around the Sanctuary. "Then scream them as loud as you like. There's no one else here, and I promise to wait until *after* this whole mess is sorted to sell the story of the Boy Who Had a Breakdown to Rita Skeeter."

Harry tried not to smile, but it was a losing battle, so he was grateful when Malfoy stood and started to stretch, pacing a bit as he did so and moving away from the short brush surrounding their campsite. He recognised the signs of Malfoy prepping for a shift; he evidently wanted to fly too, and not with brooms this time. Harry thought he'd like that and stood to follow him.

Then Malfoy stopped, staring up at the moon riding high above them. "...He was the same age as me, too."

"What?"

"Before—you and Weasley, you said that Dumbledore and Grindelwald were the same age as you. That age didn't excuse what they were doing, because they were old enough to know better, just like you're old enough to be on this quest of yours." He glanced back over his shoulder at Harry, his eyes dark, in stark contrast to the eerie glow his pale skin took on when struck by moonlight, just like the dragon's scales. "He was the same age as

me, too. So what's the point of it all, then, if you can't imagine you'll be a better person when you're five-hundred-and-fuckteen years old than you were at seventeen?"

Harry didn't have an answer for that, and after another heartbeat and a flash of white in the dark, Malfoy couldn't press him for one.

All In

Convinced that *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* might yet hold clues that Rita Skeeter was unwittingly peddling, Hermione had the four of them reading through the entire book, chapter by chapter, each night, like some demented book club. It quickly became clear, though, that the most interesting—if hardly relevant—information had been the text on Dumbledore’s boyhood relationship with Grindelwald, and in short order they were back to their nightly rounds of piecing through Hermione’s dwindling library.

The storm that had been building all day crested at twilight, and evening brought steadily piling snowdrifts building around their camp. Hermione had set up a series of Warming Charms to go off at regular intervals throughout the night so that they wouldn’t be snowed in come morning, but they would need to find somewhere a bit dryer to camp the next day, or the ground would be nothing but slush and mud. After a filling roast with potatoes and carrots for dinner—Harry’s contribution, and even Malfoy had had nothing bad to say about the dish—they retired to the sitting room.

Harry was halfway through *Blood, Body, and Soul: Human Rites*, with Malfoy curled up next to him, head resting against Harry’s shoulder, as he flipped idly through Hermione’s copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (“What? It’s more entertaining than any of *this* rubbish, and Dumbledore must have left it to Granger for *some* reason, right?”). Ron sat in the corner, fiddling with the dials on the Wireless; he’d sworn he caught snatches of some underground broadcast once or twice by chance and was determined to find it again if it was the last thing he did.

The night dragged, though, and Harry failed to turn up anything of note in his text beyond more than he would ever want to know about the different spells that used human sacrifice in some form or another. Magic was equal parts fascinating and disturbing at times. Malfoy had nodded off at some point and was quietly snoring, face buried against Harry’s shoulder, when Harry roused him with a jostle.

They all agreed to call it a night and returned to their rooms in strange spirits. The day felt wasted, with too many downs and not enough ups, and Harry worried that they were stagnating now that their only lead in Godric's Hollow had proven a bust.

His dreams were confused and disturbing: Nagini wove in and out of them, first through the setting of a locket, forming a living chain, and then through a wreath of Christmas roses that burst into brilliant red flame, leaving behind choking ash.

He woke abruptly in the still of night, when everything was so calm and so quiet, he knew it must be very late indeed (or else very early). He wasn't sure what had roused him, but he was wide awake. Had he had a nightmare? He didn't think so—he could recall bits and pieces, but he did not feel troubled or upset. His bad dreams of late had all been the usual sort, not the prophetic sort.

He could hear Malfoy's deep, even breathing from the other side of the room, and he envied him his undisturbed sleep. He strained to hear beyond the room, listening for sounds from the forest outside the tent's four walls. He was probably just being paranoid; Hermione was a wiz with her protective enchantments. There was no reason to think they'd suddenly stop working after months of holding strong.

Still, something felt...*off*. He couldn't tell if there was anything sinister to it, but there was still something different about tonight.

He lay back down, forcing his eyes closed, and tried to go back to sleep. But the silence was too loud, and he couldn't force his mind to settle, a prickle of some curious mixture of unease and curiosity thrumming through his head.

With an aggravated huff, he threw off his blankets and pulled on a pair of thick wool slippers and his jumper, zipping it all the way up to his chin.

"Potter?" Malfoy's voice was groggy and sleep-drunk. "The fuck are you doing up at—" He softly muttered *Tempus*, "Merlin—it's not even half-three..."

Harry considered; he could say he needed to use the loo, but something told him that

Malfoy would stay up, waiting for Harry to return. He was weird like that these days, like he needed to know where Harry was at all times. Even now, Harry could feel his eyes on him in the dark, and each passing moment would only exacerbate his alarmed suspicion.

“Thought I heard something outside,” Harry said. It wasn’t entirely a lie; he *did* feel like they weren’t alone in the forest this evening. Granted, they were in the Forest of Dean, where Hermione had said she’d camped with her parents when she was younger, so it could just be Muggle campers. But who would be camping here *this* time of year, so close to Christmas and with snow piling in great white heaps outside?

Malfoy was already shrugging into a long, plush robe he’d Transfigured from something decidedly less luxurious before Harry could tell him to stay put, so he waited for him to put himself together, and then they slowly crept toward the entrance, careful not to make a sound. There was no need to wake Hermione and Ron and worry them over what was probably just a forest creature on the prowl or a snowdrift plopping to the ground from the overburdened boughs above.

Harry ran his wand over the laces at the tent’s entrance, then stepped over the threshold and glanced around. He could see nothing out of place in the immediate vicinity of their campsite, at least, and their wards didn’t seem to have been breached—

“Potter!” Malfoy hissed, and Harry turned back to see Malfoy hovering at the entrance, glaring at him.

“What?”

“I can’t *leave*.”

Oh. He’d forgotten to have Hermione remove the Shackling Spell, evidently. “Sorry. *Finite incantatem*.”

It was only belatedly that Harry realised releasing the spell meant that, now with his wand back, Malfoy could freely Apparate away, running off to his parents or returning to

Voldemort's side or just *disappearing* altogether.

But as soon as the spell was broken, Malfoy simply strode out into the clearing and inhaled deeply, showing no signs of wanting to bolt. "Good to breathe the free air again."

Harry couldn't help but roll his eyes; Malfoy's dramatics seemed to be an all-hours affair. He took another glance around the camp, searching for anything of note—when a glint through the trees caught his eyes.

He squinted, and the glint shifted—a bright silver light, moving soundlessly through the trees with no crunching of snow or rustling of leaves and twigs. It seemed to glide with an ethereal grace, drifting closer and closer and growing brighter all the while.

He reached out, without looking, and tugged on Malfoy's sleeve. "Malfoy...Malfoy, *look*."

He could hear the dead shock in Malfoy's voice and imagined his expression had gone slack. "Is that...?"

Harry's wand was out and at the ready, reflexively, but he was frozen in place from some amalgamation of fear and awe. The light became blinding as the thing approached, casting the trees between it and Harry and Malfoy in pitch-black silhouette. Closer and closer it crept, and Harry raised his free hand to shield his eyes.

And then the source of the light stepped daintily out from behind an oak: a dazzling silver-white doe, bright as the fat moon above, delicately picking her way over the frozen, snow-covered ground with a quiet grace. She left no hoofprints behind her, made no sound as she stepped lightly, and she seemed to be staring straight at Harry through long-lashed, soulful eyes.

Harry gaped—not at her strangeness, but at how inexplicably familiar she seemed. He had seen this doe before, he *must* have—for in his heart kindled a warm recognition, a comfort and relief of *Oh, there you are!* She had come to him, he knew—had sought Harry out, called to him without a voice to come and see her.

They gazed at each other for several long moments, and then she turned and began

walking away.

“No...” he called, his voice cracking from the cold, dry air. He licked his lips. “Come back!” His legs suddenly worked again, and he stumbled over his own feet as he moved after her.

Malfoy grabbed at his shoulder, jerking him back. “Are you *insane*, Potter? That’s a Patronus!”

Harry watched helplessly as the doe continued to step deliberately through the trees, her brilliance soon muted by the forest of thick, black trunks. “Yeah—yeah, I know. Let me go; I need to follow her!”

“Yes, fantastic idea!” Malfoy hissed. “Follow some unknown someone’s Patronus into the dark winter woods while you’re a wanted man!”

Harry shrugged him off and stomped away. A part of him reminded in a devious threat that this could be a trap—but some manner of bone-deep instinct told him that no, this was not Dark magic. Nothing so bright and pure could come from a place of darkness.

“*Dammit*, Potter!”

Harry sighed, looking back over his shoulder. “Come with if you’re so worried. I think she wants me to follow her.”

“Oh, *does she now?*” Malfoy mocked, but he still tightened the belt of his robe and marched through the deepening snow after Harry, muttering crossly, “How you made it past the age of three, I’ll never know. You’re every child-murdering lunatic’s dream.”

They wove through the trees with tromping steps that seemed to echo in the night, but the doe made no noise, for she was nothing but light and magic. Harry walked with a quick, sure step, following her deeper and deeper into the woods, wholly confident that he would be allowed to approach her—to touch her, to speak with her—once they’d reached journey’s end. He hadn’t a clue where that might be, but they would get there soon enough. And then he would ask his questions...and she would give him answers. She

would tell him what he needed to know.

After what felt like only a few minutes but could have been an hour or more—time seemed to flow differently in the company of the doe—she came to a halt in a small clearing, turning back to check he had kept up. Now was his chance, he knew, and he broke into a run, questions burning on his lips, but when he reached out to touch her, to ask her all those questions that had lain waiting on his lips, she vanished.

The darkness poured back in, and even the moon, sitting bright and fat in the heavens, could not penetrate the skeletal net of the bare tree branches above. The faint, fading image of the doe was stamped on the backs of Harry's eyes, and when he closed them, he could still see her shimmering in the darkness.

But with her disappearance came a new entity creeping at Harry's consciousness: fear. He'd felt safe in her presence, protected, as Patronuses were meant to make you feel—but now he and Malfoy were out here, exposed.

"Well that's us *fucked*," Malfoy said, quickly casting *Lumos* and sweeping the clearing with a suspicious gaze. Harry placed his back to Malfoy's, wand at the ready, and listened to the sounds of the forest around them—the distant crackles of twigs, soft swishes of snow, faint far-off cries of forest creatures.

Was Malfoy right? Were they about to be attacked? The world beyond the edge of Malfoy's *Lumos* was so dark, it may as well not have existed, and Voldemort himself could have been lurking ten feet away, ready to cast at them, and they wouldn't have known. Had the doe simply been a beautiful lure drawing them into an ambush?

But nothing happened. No trap was sprung, no spells were cast, and when Harry cast *Homenum revelio*, admittedly a bit nervous to see the results, the spell came back empty save for Malfoy. Not even Ron or Hermione had shown up, indicating that they had strayed far enough from the campsite that the tent was outside of the spell's range.

They were alone, it seemed. So why had the doe led them here?

Something gleamed in the light of Malfoy's wand, catching the corner of Harry's eye, and Harry spun around, but all he saw was a small, frozen forest pond. A thin sheet of ice coated its surface, dusted with a fine layer of fresh snow that glittered beneath the *Lumos*, and Harry stepped closer with a wary caution.

The ice reflected Harry's distorted shadow in the beam of Malfoy's wandlight, and he dropped into a squat at the pond's edge, swiping a hand over the surface to brush away the fresh snow. Through the thin crusting of ice, he thought he could see something glinting, just below the surface.

A great silver cross...

"Bloody hell..." Malfoy whispered. "Is that... It's not, right? I mean—you don't wander into the forest for a midnight stroll and stumble across..."

"The sword of Gryffindor? No...no that doesn't usually happen." Harry cast *Lumos* himself for more light, angling his wand to direct as much light as possible on the object lying in the pool. He caught a flash of deep red—a cluster of rubies spangling the hilt of a broadsword.

His breath caught in his chest, which cramped tight and painful, but he couldn't be bothered to exhale, not when the sword was *right there*.

How was this even *possible*? How had the sword—which Harry knew instinctively was the real thing—found its way to a forest pond, this close to their well-protected, unplotable campsite? There was no way this was a coincidence, and Harry wracked his mind for every conceivable possibility.

Hermione said she'd chosen this spot because she'd camped here with her parents before, but had she in fact been drawn here by some unknown magic? Or was it the other way around: had the sword been placed here *because* they were camping nearby? Had the Patronus's caster been responsible, tracking their movements and leaving the sword within easy reach for them to stumble across? He held his wand up high, searching the snow for signs of disturbance, human tracks, but there was nothing. They

seemed to be all alone out here now.

He turned back to the frozen pool and the sword lying at its bottom, just waiting to be retrieved. An echo of the same excitement he'd felt in Godric's Hollow, convinced the sword was near at hand, rippled through him. Except this time, he could see it with his own eyes. They just had to grab it.

Malfoy pointed his wand at the silvery shape and murmured, "*Accio* sword," but it didn't stir. He shrugged, unconcerned. "Was worth a shot, I suppose."

He didn't sound like he'd expected it to work, and Harry shared his feeling; if all they'd had to do was pick up the sword, it would have been lying there on the ground and not at the bottom of a frozen pool. He began to pace the edge of the pond, trying to remember how the sword had delivered itself to him the last time he'd held it. He hadn't Summoned it to kill the Basilisk either—what had Dumbledore said? Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled it out of the hat?

Harry pointed his wand at the sword and said, "*Accio* sword."

Again, nothing happened, and Malfoy frowned at him. "I just *tried* that."

"Yeah, I know, but it's the sword of *Gryffindor*, and Dumbledore mentioned that only a true Gryffindor could claim it. I thought maybe..." But evidently not.

"What makes someone a 'true Gryffindor' in that case? Being *extra* impetuous and impulsive?"

Harry looked at him, a wry grin spreading on his lips. "Well, you know what the Sorting Hat said: 'their daring, nerve, and chivalry set Gryffindors apart.'" He nodded to the sword, and Malfoy saw what he meant to do, shaking his head before Harry had even got his shirt off.

"You mean their foolhardiness, lunacy, and disregard for personal safety? You can't just go *diving in*! That water has to be freezing!"

“Your concern is touching, but we need that sword. If I’ve got to freeze my bollocks off to get it, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. Besides, it won’t be more than a quick dip, and then back out again.”

“Freeze your bol—come *here*.” Malfoy snapped his fingers angrily, pointing to the ground before him. “It’s like you don’t even know you’re a wizard some days! The thought of what you might do if I weren’t out here to slap some sense into you is enough to make me go grey.” Harry shuffled over as directed. “Arms out. Stand still.” He raised his wand, and Harry closed his eyes—but after a long beat, nothing happened. When Harry slowly blinked his eyes open again, he found Malfoy staring at him with an unreadable expression. “...Awfully trusting, isn’t our Saviour?”

It felt like a rather dangerous question to ask, here in the middle of nowhere in the dead of night, and Harry only belatedly realised that this would have been a perfect setup for an ambush. He chose his words very, very carefully—and kept a Stunning Spell ready on his lips. “Not really. I just think if you were going to turn on me, you would’ve done it from the warmth and comfort of the tent, instead of letting me drag you out here when it’s below freezing.”

“Had to get dragged out here to get that damn Shackling Spell off, though.”

“So you just traipsed through the woods with me in the middle of the night because you fancied a brisk jog?” He took a step forward, so that Malfoy’s wand tip landed just between his brows. Maybe *extra* impetuous and impulsive was right, after all. “Cast, if you’re going to.” Didn’t they say you had to give a bit of trust to get it? If so, he deserved a *boat* load.

Malfoy swallowed, jaw tensing—and then he raised his wand and rapped the top of Harry’s head, muttering, “*Ebublio*.” It felt like he’d cracked an egg on Harry’s crown, and the magic trickled down his temples and neck and back, all the way to his toes, enveloping him in an airtight bubble. Malfoy then pierced the bubble with his wand and cast a Warming Charm, and Harry had to bite back a moan of relief. It felt like he’d just stepped into a hot tub, except he was perfectly dry. With another mumbled spell that

Harry didn't catch, the bubble shrank to conform to Harry's body, leaving him encased in something not unlike a warm wetsuit.

Malfoy jerked his head. "Go and get your bloody sword, Chosen One. Bollocks intact."

Harry glanced down at himself, patting his jumper and pyjama bottoms. Malfoy's spells kept him toasty warm, and kitted out like this, Harry was almost tempted to go for a swim. It might be relaxing, floating in the dark and quiet while safely cocooned in a warm onesie. Maybe later, if he could convince Malfoy not to go tattling to Ron and Hermione about their little excursion.

He delivered a salute of gratitude and then pointed his wand at the icy pool.

"*Diffindo.*"

The ice cracked, the sound ringing like a bullet shot in the still silence, and the surface of the pool broke into chunks that bobbed and dipped in the dark, roiling water. Without the distortion of the ice, Harry could see that the pool was relatively shallow—only perhaps waist-deep—but he would still have to go under if he wanted to reach the sword.

"Can I breathe underwater with this?"

"Did you *see* me cast a Bubble-head Charm?"

Harry did not want to admit he didn't know the incantation for that particular spell; he'd wondered if that was what *Ebublio* had been for.

Malfoy sighed, raising his wand again. "Shall I?"

Harry shook his head. "No, no, it's fine. I was just curious." He would only be down for a few seconds at best, just long enough to grab the sword and pop back up.

He took a deep breath, ready to test Malfoy's spellwork, and dipped one toe gingerly into the water at the pond's edge. Not bad at all; the Charms were holding up admirably, and he waded in up to his knees. By the time he reached the middle of the pond where the

sword lay, just at his toes, the water had come up to his waist. He gave Malfoy another little wave and received a dismissive flick of the fingers in return. Gathering up his courage and praying Malfoy's spells held, because Gryffindor or not, he really didn't want to go swimming in the middle of December, he took a deep breath and slipped under the water's surface.

It was darker and quieter under the water, and the bubbles he stirred glittered like diamonds in the light cast by Malfoy's *Lumos*. Harry wished he'd had the time to admire, but Malfoy was already anxious enough as it was; they were unprotected out here, beyond the bounds of Hermione's security spells, so they ought to get the sword and head back to the tent as quickly as possible.

He pushed through the dark water, twisting himself around and reaching out so that he could grope along the pond's bottom for the hilt of the sword. All he found at first were rocks and mud, but then his fingers brushed against something that felt like a handle, and with a surge of excitement, he gripped it tight and gave an upwards yank.

The sword came free, and Harry twisted back around to plant his feet—but something snaked up from the gloom and wrapped around his neck, tugging him downward.

Had he stumbled unwittingly into a nest of water weeds? The pond floor had seemed only silty, without much in the way of plant life, but perhaps he'd missed them in the dark. He brought his free hand up to bat away whatever it was that he'd run into.

It was not a weed, he quickly realised, but his Mokeskin pouch, dragging him down into the dark water and away from the surface and its precious, breathable air. He thought of the Horcrux locket, tucked safely inside. It was trying to drown him in its last desperate bid not to be destroyed.

His lungs were starting to burn from the lack of fresh oxygen, and he kicked out wildly, praying he might strike the bottom and launch himself up, but the Horcrux was relentless, dragging him down like a heavy iron anchor. He tried to work his fingers under the leather band holding it around his neck—he could drop it, go up for air, and then come back down to grab it again with a fresh breath. But he was starting to lose

feeling in his fingers as the cold began to seep through; of course the Horcrux's magic would be stronger than school-grade Charms. In another few heartbeats, the spells would break, and Harry would drown in this freezing, crushing darkness.

Violent flashes began to dot his vision, and he pinched his nose shut to keep from taking a breath, still lashing out with feeble kicks that were growing steadily weaker with each passing moment, and yet the Horcrux dragged him deeper and deeper... There was nothing left, nothing he could do... Nothing...

He choked, retching violently as someone dragged him out of the water and tossed him roughly aside. He landed face-down in the snow, soaked through and colder than he'd ever been in his life, but *breathing*, blessedly. He took in great gulps of air, heaving with each exhalation and coughing raggedly.

“Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?!” Malfoy shrieked, his voice at least an entire octave higher than usual. “Here I thought I'd Saviour-proofed those charms and yet you've managed to undo me! Leave it to you to nearly *drown* in a puddle!”

Everything hurt, but especially his chest, and Harry brought a hand up, placing it over his heart—and panicked. Where was the pouch? He slapped his neck, and he could feel where the leather strap had cut tightly into his flesh, but the pouch itself had either been cut away or fallen into the pond. Fuck, he'd have to go back into the pond and find it now. He struggled to his feet, panting. “The—the pouch, with the Horcrux—”

Malfoy stopped him with a touch to his shoulder, pressing something into his hand: Harry's Mokeskin pouch. “Don't have a fit. I had to cut it off you; looked like it had gotten caught on something.” Malfoy cast something Harry couldn't hear but realised was a Warming Charm, and he could have kissed him right about then.

Harry luxuriated in the warmth, shaking his head. “No—no, it was the Horcrux. I think... maybe it knew what we'd found. What we were going to do with the sword. It was pulling me down, felt like I had a thousand-pound boulder weighing on me...” He swallowed thickly, meeting Malfoy's gaze. “...You were right; definitely shouldn't have worn that thing around my neck.”

Malfoy pursed his lips. “If you think I’ll forget what an irresponsible arse you’ve been tonight just because you’ve told me I was right again...”

They both stared down at the ornate silver sword lying in the snow next to Harry, its ruby-encrusted hilt glinting in the light from Malfoy’s wand.

“...What if it’s the copy?” Malfoy asked.

Harry was going to blow something up if he’d gone through all of that for a *copy*. “Only one way to find out,” he said instead, and he roughly tugged open the cinch to the pouch and thrust his hand inside to grab the locket.

It was warm in his hand, and twitching a bit with a nervous energy. The fragment of Voldemort’s soul inside was agitated again, as it had been in Bathilda’s home—but this time, he was confident it was only panicking. It could sense the sword was near—and had tried to kill him for it. That alone was proof enough for him the sword was the real deal.

They’d waited long enough; he was tired of dead ends and disappointment. He wanted this thing *destroyed*, once and for all, to finally feel like they weren’t spinning their wheels in this quest. With the sword in one hand and the locket in the other, he searched the clearing until he found a broad, flat rock lying in the shadow of a sycamore tree. That would have to do; he wasn’t going to take the locket back to camp until they’d driven out whatever evil lay inside it—especially not now, knowing the lengths to which it could go to try and protect itself.

“Over here,” he said.

He brushed the snow from the rock’s surface and placed the Horcrux in a little divot the elements had carved into the face.

Malfoy drew up beside him. “So now what? You just stab it?”

Harry considered—then shook his head, holding out the sword for Malfoy to take. “No, you should do it.”

“*Me?*” Malfoy recoiled a bit. “Why me?”

Why indeed? Harry shrugged. “Because—I dunno. It just feels like it should be you.”

Malfoy’s expression went tight. “A test, then?” he asked coolly.

“No—no, I mean...” Harry’s thoughts were scattered, his heart still pounding from the near-miss in the pond, but he needed to explain this, as best he could. “You and this locket kind of go together. We stole you both from the Ministry, have kept you with us all this time not knowing what to do with you. And now...now I think we know.” He nodded to himself. “So it should be you.”

He wasn’t being generous, or trying to prove anything. This was just how it had to be, something deep inside of Harry told him. As certainly as he had known that they ought to follow the doe and that she’d bring them answers, he knew that Malfoy had to be the one to wield the sword and smite this Horcrux. He was still very angry with Dumbledore, but through him Harry had learned that not all magics could be studied in school books and lectures. Sometimes, there was power in a simple act. Intent could be a great and terrible thing.

And while Harry had assured Malfoy this was not a test—and it *wasn’t*—a thrill of excitement rippled through him at the thought that, after this, Malfoy would well and truly be part of this quest, as responsible for Voldemort’s downfall as any of them. There was something to that, though Harry didn’t really know how to frame it. He just liked the idea was all.

He dropped to his knees in front of the locket, one hand holding down the chain in case it somehow tried to escape. “I’m going to open it, and you stab it.” He looked up at Malfoy, making sure to catch his eye to impress upon him the gravity of what they were about to do. “Straight away, okay? No hesitation, because whatever’s in there is bound to struggle. You just saw it try to drown me. The bit of Riddle in the diary tried to kill me, too, and the ring Dumbledore destroyed hit him with a fatal curse before it went down. These are pieces of his *soul* and just as reluctant to shuffle off this mortal coil as him. Don’t give it a chance to fight back, right?”

Malfoy swallowed, nodding. “How are you going to open it?”

The answer had come to him only just now. All of Kreacher’s magic and Regulus’s spells had failed to force the locket to reveal its secrets, so clearly it would not be bent by traditional magic. But this had been Slytherin’s locket...and Slytherin had had one particular ability that none but his descendants—and Harry—could claim. “I’m going to ask it to open, using Parseltongue.”

Malfoy shuddered, and Harry doubted it was from the cold. “*Must* you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Plug your ears if you hate the sound so much. It’s the only way I haven’t tried getting this thing to open.”

“It’s not that—” Malfoy started hotly, ears gone red in the chill. He shook his head. “Just—get it over with.”

He was such a strange nut. “...Sure,” Harry said dismissively. He turned back to the face of the locket, focusing on the jewelled serpentine ‘S’. The inlaid emeralds glittered in the moonlight, and he told himself they were smooth, beautiful scales, coiled and curled, ready to strike.

“Right, on three...” said Harry, concentrating with everything he had on the ‘S’. The locket gave a little shudder, rattling nervously. Harry might have pitied it, but his lungs still ached from nearly being drowned. “One...two...three! *Open!*”

He punctuated the command with a hissed snarl, and the locket at last swung open with a soft *snick*, baring its secrets for all to see.

Harry didn’t know what he’d expected to find within the locket, but it certainly wasn’t a pair of eyes—Tom Riddle’s own, dark and handsome and mischievous, before he’d mutated into the pasty white monstrosity he was now—peering out from behind the glass windows. His stomach churned, revolting.

“Stab it!” Harry choked out, holding the locket in place. He hoped he wasn’t about to lose a finger to Malfoy’s unsteady hand.

Malfoy lifted the sword high over his head, point angled down. The blade dangled over the eyes, which swivelled back and forth between them frantically, and Harry had the unsettling sensation that Voldemort *himself* could see what they were doing. But no, he recalled, the bits of Voldemort that lived in these objects were only shades—*powerful* shades, but with no connection to their master. Voldemort had not known when Harry had destroyed the diary, and he had not known when Dumbledore had destroyed the ring. He would not know now, when Malfoy destroyed the locket.

Harry braced himself, the locket's chain tight in his grip. He could already imagine blood pouring from the empty windows, a visible sign of its destruction as with the previous Horcruxes.

But then, a voice hissed from the Horcrux, worming its way into their ears like a snake.

"I have seen your heart, and it is mine."

"No! Don't listen to it!" Harry snapped. He had seen firsthand how Voldemort's silver tongue could tempt a susceptible mind. "Just stab it!"

"I have seen your dreams, Draco Malfoy, and I have seen your fears. All that you desire is possible, but all that you dread is also possible..."

"Malfoy, *stab it!*" he shouted, his voice echoing off the surrounding trees. A nightbird took to the sky with a startled squawk, and Malfoy gazed down into Riddle's eyes, hypnotised, just standing there holding the sword over the locket like Damocles's blade.

"Overshadowed, bested in every respect. Shunted, spurned, downtrodden and forgotten. Yet drawn, inexorably, to your own doom, defeat incarnate. A moth to dragonflame."

"Don't listen, dammit! Just *kill the damn thing!*" Harry bellowed; the locket was quaking fiercely, ready to pop from Harry's grasp the moment he was distracted. Its desperation was mounting, and Harry feared what it might try next. Malfoy lifted the sword higher still, and Riddle's eyes began to glow scarlet, boring into Malfoy's own frightened stare.

Fuck, he was frozen; the locket had him in some kind of trance now.

Then, from the locket's windows bubbled the grotesque, misshapen heads of Harry, Hermione, and Ron. Malfoy gave a cry of shock, the spell broken, and he backed away with one arm raised to shield himself and the sword in the other. The figures continued to grow, their distorted forms coalescing first into chests, then waists, then legs, all blooming from the locket like branches with a single horrifying root. The ghostly images of Harry, Ron, and Hermione swayed over the real Harry, who snatched his fingers from the locket when it suddenly burned white-hot in his grasp.

He turned to look at Malfoy, frantic. "Malfoy!" he shouted, but he didn't seem to hear Harry, only gazing, mesmerised, at the visions the locket had produced for him.

Not-Harry locked eyes with Malfoy, fixing him with a hooded, judging gaze, before leaning in and gently kissing Not-Hermione, smiling against her lips. Harry gaped, and that would have been shocking enough a sight, had Not-Harry not then turned towards the vision of Ron and planted another soft kiss on his lips as well. Not-Harry trailed a finger down Not-Ron's cheek, nuzzling noses, and then flicked his eyes back to Malfoy with a cruel, cold smile.

"Outsider. Interloper. You don't belong here. You've never been good enough for me, and you never will be. I can't wait to be rid of you, this ball and chain."

Not-Hermione laughed at him with a high, haughty jeer. *"Honestly, your presumption! You've dragged us down, dogged our steps. We can't be quit of you soon enough. It's pathetic, really, the way you cling to him. To this notion that maybe eventually somehow some way..."*

Not-Ron had somewhere along the way laid a possessive hand against Not-Harry's neck, and he sneered down at Malfoy. *"Scum's scum, all right? Harry doesn't consort with Death Eaters; who'd want to shake a hand branded with the Dark Lord's mark? You've shown who you've thrown your lot in with, and thank Merlin it's not us."*

Fuck, this was going pear-shaped in so many ways, and Malfoy was well and truly

caught in the thrall of this sick sideshow the locket had dreamed up. He scrambled to his feet, slipping in the snow as he rushed over to Malfoy and grabbed him by the shoulders, giving him a rough shake. “Malfoy—Malfoy, *snap out of it*. It’s not real! It’s just the locket, spinning lies!” Malfoy only continued to gape in horror as Not-Harry curled a hand around Not-Hermione’s waist to draw her close, with Not-Ron sidling up behind him and nosing at his neck with a wicked grin.

Reassurance, something reminded Harry, and he heard Malfoy’s voice echoing in his mind: “*It needs to be reminded that you won’t try and leave it, that you won’t abandon it, or reject it. It just wants to feel special.*”

He grabbed one of Malfoy’s hands, wresting it from its grip on the sword, and pressed the palm to his chest, covering it with both hands and locking eyes with Malfoy. “See? A heartbeat. Real, warm—flesh and blood. It’s me, Potter. Harry? Here with you, right here. *Not there.*” He squeezed Malfoy’s hand, begging him to hear. “You want me to say the M word? I’ll say the M word. It’s not presumption, all right? I’m the one who went in there after you—*me*. Because I *wanted* to. You’re not a drag. You’re not a Death Eater, and you’re not pathetic. You’re my—” He stumbled over the word and bit his tongue, cursing himself silently. “You’re my *mate*, right? You chose me, and—and I’m all right with that.” He then pulled Malfoy’s hand away and placed it back on the grip of the sword. “And you’re gonna kill a Horcrux *right* fucking now.”

A sudden clarity filled Malfoy’s grey eyes, and he tightened his jaw—then lurched away from Harry, raising the sword high again. His arms were shaking, and his face twisted.

“Do it, Malfoy!” Harry yelled, heart leaping.

The sword flashed in the false *Lumos* light, then plunged: Harry threw himself out of the way, and there came a clang of metal against stone and a long, drawn-out scream that seemed to echo interminably.

Harry instinctively whirled around, wand at the ready to defend against whatever the locket tried to throw out next—but there was nothing to fight.

The demented visions of himself, Hermione, and Ron were gone, leaving only Malfoy, standing there with the sword held slackly in one hand, staring down at the shattered remains of the locket on the flat rock. He still looked lost, breathing heavily, and when he squeezed his eyes shut, Harry quickly glanced away, feeling strangely as if he were intruding on something private. He wondered if there were glowing embers hiding behind his lids.

Pretending he had not been staring, Harry moved to gather up the pieces of the broken Horcrux. Malfoy's stroke had shattered the glass in both windows, and Riddle's eyes were gone, leaving behind only a faint curl of smoke. The *thing*, the shard of soul that had lived in the Horcrux, had vanished; torturing Malfoy had been its final act, punishment for a Death Eater turned traitor.

The sword clanged brightly as Malfoy dropped it, and he sank to his knees, hugging his chest and head bowed low. His breath was coming in slow, great pants, and he was shaking—though not, Harry suspected, from the cold. The visions were gone, but not forgotten.

Harry stuffed the broken pieces of the locket into the Mokeskin pouch, then placed a hand, cautiously, on Malfoy's shoulder. He took it as a good sign that Malfoy did not shrug it off, as he usually did, though he supposed that could be a bad sign as well, all things considered.

He felt like he ought to say something—or *ask* something. A dozen questions vied for a place on his lips, like why the hell Malfoy would see Harry *kissing* his friends in a vision. It was a gross misinterpretation of his relationship with *either* of them, and a cold, sinking suspicion that had nothing to do with the winter chill began to dig its claws into Harry's mind, burrowing into the dark furrows too deep to extract.

At length, they gathered themselves and began the trek back to the tent. Though the walk through the dark forest with the doe had felt short, the journey back seemed to take forever, and Harry was shocked it was not yet daybreak by the time they climbed through the tent flaps. They didn't speak another word—not on the way back, not on

returning to their room, and not when they crawled under the covers of their respective beds again.

When Harry closed his eyes, he could still see himself kissing Hermione and Ron with that biting cruelty, a gesture meant only to punish and taunt; could still see Malfoy's expression—distraught and yearning. Broken and betrayed.

He stuffed the sword of Gryffindor under the mattress of his bed, where it lay as a warm, solid comfort. They had destroyed their third Horcrux, were halfway to their goal now—Harry knew he should be dancing on the roof of the tent and trying to get drunk on fermented pumpkin juice.

But all he felt was a guilt whose source he could not place, and part of him—a part of which he was quite ashamed—wished they hadn't found the sword at all.

Inevitability

Harry found he was in much better spirits after a good night's sleep, though the unearthly vision spit out by the Horcrux in its death throes still lurked at the edges of his mind, ready to move front and centre should he get distracted.

Hermione and Ron were, suffice it to say, quite shocked when Harry tossed the sword and shattered remains of the locket onto the breakfast table the next morning. The blade shone, unblemished, sitting next to a plate of half-burnt toast (courtesy of Ron), and the charred locket was almost indistinguishable from the blackened bacon rashers (courtesy of Hermione).

They pelted both Harry and Malfoy with questions, though Malfoy largely ignored anything he was asked, content to let Harry endure Hermione's lectures and Ron's admonishments while he calmly sipped his morning coffee and pieced through Hermione's well-worn copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Honestly, after all we've endured the past few months, you *still* don't understand the danger of heading off alone?" Hermione sighed. "It would've been dangerous enough even *without* a bounty on your head and You-Know-Who combing the countryside looking for you. I'm really disappointed in you, Harry."

He thought she was missing the fact that, if he hadn't gone, they wouldn't have the sword of Gryffindor plus one less Horcrux to have to deal with. "I *do* understand the danger—" Malfoy snorted derisively, covering it with a dainty sip and keeping his eyes glued to the text in his lap. "But I wasn't alone! I had Malfoy with me!" Hermione and Ron shared a torn look, and Harry hotly reminded them, "And he was the one who Charmed me up so I didn't have to go skinny-dipping in the middle of December, all right? *And* he's the one who actually destroyed the Horcrux." He pointedly left out the part where Malfoy had half-threatened him once they were away from the camp and all alone in the darkness.

“He’s also the one who can hear you talking about him,” Malfoy bit out, flicking his gaze up to meet Harry’s, and Harry didn’t appreciate the tone; he was the one defending Malfoy, after all.

“...Sorry, Malfoy—we didn’t mean it like that,” Hermione said, sounding genuinely contrite, and even Ron had his head ducked in shame. “Just...we really shouldn’t take any chances, going out in smaller groups than necessary, especially if it’s to chase down a lead.” She pursed her lips, looking at Harry. “Promise you won’t do anything so foolish again?”

“I’d have thought you’d be a little happier we found the sword and smashed the locket,” Harry muttered, taking a savage bite out of a piece of toast and wishing he had a boiled egg to dip it in.

Harry had offered them a tastefully edited version of the events in the forest, stripped of any mention of the disturbing visions the locket had produced, and both Hermione and Ron had seemed far more interested in who had produced the Patronus and placed the sword there for them to find than in the fact that they were halfway to their goal.

“We *are*, but aren’t you the tiniest bit curious about this sudden stroke of good luck? We *happen* to camp in the same area where someone coincidentally stashed the sword of Gryffindor for you to stumble across, except you *didn’t* stumble across it, someone’s Patronus led you there?”

Malfoy poured himself another cup of coffee, using his wand to bewitch the kettle and a teaspoon into doing his work for him, just because he could. “Potter tells me he’s *very* lucky, Granger; surely this is par for the course.”

Harry only barely reined in the urge to kick Malfoy under the table. “I am, but just...no amount of digging is going to make it any more obvious who our mysterious benefactor is, so I’d just as soon rejoice in the fact that we’re finally making some damn progress.”

Hermione and Ron’s suspicions were dampening Harry’s mood, and he could already feel the tendrils of doubt worming their way back into his mind, whispering insidious

suggestions. He had felt a buoyant optimism on rising that morning and bumping his shin against the sword's hilt, certain that their fortune was finally on the upswing now, but his spirits were rapidly deflating, leaving behind a vacuum into which flowed those niggling thoughts he'd been working so hard to keep at bay.

Perhaps he could have settled his nerves if he'd bothered to confront Malfoy about what the locket had shown him, but he knew without asking that Malfoy would shut down before Harry got past, "Hey, can we talk about—" and then probably not speak to Harry again for several days. Harry could have handled that, but it would prompt questions from Hermione and Ron, and Harry could *not* handle *that*.

So, reluctantly, he let it stand, though this did nothing to keep the shades from haunting Harry at every turn, as if *he'd* been the target of their malevolence and not Malfoy. For his part, though, Malfoy didn't appear to have gotten off scot-free either, as he grew increasingly fidgety and restless over the subsequent few days, dragging Harry into the Sanctuary for extra flight time, or even just a Seeker's game or five to 'blow off steam' as he claimed.

He found every excuse he could to lounge uncomfortably close to Harry on the sofa, linking arms or tracing Harry's knuckles with his long, slender fingers, like he was just itching to thread them together. He would barge into the bathroom during Harry's morning or evening toilette, claiming a need to gargle or wash his face that evidently couldn't wait until Harry had finished, and more often than not, he would sit in the chair just next to Harry at meals, brushing knees or reaching across him for a condiment and nudging him with an elbow.

And as Malfoy did these things, performed these gestures that perhaps even he was unaware of, Harry's idle thoughts and concerns began to coalesce into conviction. He started to see things that Malfoy did not—or else that he refused to. Inevitabilities.

The vision that had presented itself to Malfoy had almost certainly caused some emotional turmoil, shaking the foundations of Malfoy's heretofore reasonably comfortable surety of his place in Harry's life. Harry had taken strides to show Malfoy he

trusted him, which had seemed for a while to help ground those dragon-bits that ached to be reassured Harry held him in special regard. Between that and the odd cuddling session on the couch, they had been getting by.

But then that damned locket had gotten a final jab in, unsettling Malfoy and making him question everything all over again. They were back to square one, and while Malfoy would probably never admit as such, it was clear from the vision that he was jealous—jealous of Harry’s friendship (or some imagined more-than-friendship) with Ron and Hermione. It was an utterly ridiculous assumption to make, completely twisting his relationship with his friends into something it never had been and never would be. Ron was Ron, and while Hermione was very fetching in both body and mind, he’d already been her friend for so long once he reached an age he might *care* about the fairer sex that he couldn’t imagine getting romantically involved with her (though he suspected Ron did not share that same failing).

How was he meant to explain that to Malfoy, though? He’d get entirely the wrong idea, and then they’d have a row, and then things would be even worse than they were now. Malfoy didn’t like dealing with problems until they blew up in his face—sometimes quite literally when it involved this stupid M-word business—and while Harry wasn’t much better, one of them had to be the adult in this relationship. Or predicament, as Malfoy had called it.

And he could see a bright, unwavering line leading from one point to another, from now, as they stood, to a future, perhaps far but very probably near. A line they would, in all likelihood, *have* to walk. Malfoy’s dragon craved reassurance, begged for Harry to look at him, to *see* him, and not just accept him but to want him. And if it didn’t get those things, if it wasn’t confident in how Harry felt about it, it would lash out and go to often dangerous lengths to *make* Harry recognise it.

Which meant Harry had to make a preemptive strike and convince the dragon—convince *Malfoy*—that he was a unique presence in Harry’s life, someone apart from Ron and Hermione and important to Harry in his own way.

And Harry hadn't a clue how to manage that...other than to do something audacious. Something he would never, *could* never do with Ron or Hermione—but for the purposes of their 'predicament'...something he could do with Malfoy. At great cost to his mental stability, albeit, but Voldemort was already driving him absolutely out of his gourd, so what was another jaunt round the twist?

For a brief, fleeting moment, he considered bringing the situation up with Hermione; she'd probably find it fascinating, though, and he didn't think he could deal with her academic curiosity just now. Or worse, she'd *agree* with him.

When had it come to this? When had he stopped digging his heels in and fighting and started rolling with the punches? He supposed an hour in the Sanctuary each night or close quarters on the couch was hardly a sacrifice to pitch a fit over, but by starting down that slippery slope, he now found himself tumbling head over heels for an eventuality he was not entirely comfortable with.

Plus, he really didn't think this sort of thing fell within the purview of his responsibilities, to be quite honest. Malfoy needed his reassurance bolstered, yes, but who was Harry to decide *this* was the best way to go about it?

No, he couldn't make this decision on his own, and he couldn't consult Hermione about it either.

So naturally, he went to Ron.

It was to be Malfoy's turn at the hob at dinner that evening, so he and Hermione had popped over to the nearby Muggle town to restock on essential supplies and whatever bits and bobs he needed for what he had assured them was a time-tested Malfoy family recipe but what Harry suspected would wind up being a stack of ready meals of some variety or another. Malfoy had been delighted to learn that Muggles pre-packaged entire meals for reheating and scolded Harry for making him slave over the stove like a common house-elf.

"Been a while since we got this place to ourselves," Ron said, shielding his eyes from the

sunlight glinting off the snap-frozen heather. It was a rare sunny day, and Harry had invited Ron into the Sanctuary to fly a bit. “Sure your better half won’t be jealous?”

Harry frowned, rubbing the condensation off the handle of his broom. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, a little indignant.

“Nothing! Just, you spend a lot of time in here with him these days...” Ron shrugged. “Seems a bit mad to me, honestly.”

“Join the club,” Harry muttered, and Ron grinned.

“If eleven-year-old Harry could see you now... Hobnobbing with the likes of Malfoy.”

“Pretty sure eleven-year-old Ron would feel the same way,” Harry reminded. “You cooked him up a bowl of that porridge he likes special just the other day.”

Ron made a face at the memory. “Yeah, well, he bitches something fierce if he’s got to cook for himself or eat the same thing as the rest of us plebs. I didn’t want to deal with it first thing in the morning.” Then he looked at Harry, just stared at him for an uncomfortably long beat. “...You’re a nice guy, Harry.”

Harry shifted, leaning on the broom. “Er, thanks?”

“I mean, it’s really good what you’re doing. It’s not as if you haven’t got enough on your plate already, and you still go and stick your neck out for someone who’s been such a git to you all these years. To *all* of us, really.”

“What with the attempted murder and all.”

“*Yeah*. So anyway, you’re a stand-up bloke. Doing what you can so he doesn’t fly off his rocker, when it’s no concern of yours. You’re amazing sometimes, y’know?” Ron shrugged. “Dunno why I felt like saying that, but I did.”

Harry settled his forehead against the broom handle, wincing. “That was nice and all... but I really wish you hadn’t said that.” The last thing he needed right now was Ron

telling him what a great person he was, how much he was sacrificing just to make sure Malfoy didn't lose it. Now he'd look like a total wanker if he *knew* what he ought to do and decided not to just because it was a bit gross.

"Huh?"

"Never mind..." He wiped a hand over his face and straightened up, clearing his throat. "...Can I ask you something?"

Ron tugged on his gloves; the humidity in the air tended to make the broom handles slick once they gained any altitude. "Shoot."

"Speaking in a purely hypothetical sense..." Harry took a breath. "Would you eat a cockroach if your mum were crying and you knew the only way to stop it was to eat that roach?"

Ron gave him a long, worried look. "...You doing okay there, mate?"

"I know, it's a silly question, just—just answer it, all right?"

"You sure almost drowning didn't do a number on your head?" Harry gave him a hard look, and Ron nodded, holding his hands up. "All right, all right. It's a day for weird hypotheticals, I guess." He tapped his chin in thought, then shrugged. "Yeah, sure, why not? I like Cockroach Clusters; the buggy bits aren't so bad if they're toasted properly."

"Yeah, but this wouldn't be a Cockroach Cluster. I'm talking about a big, nasty thing—*live*, too, so those twiggy little legs are flailing about."

Ron blanched and then seemed to balk. "...Oh, er, well, I dunno... I mean, that could be hazardous to your health, in that case..."

"But your mum is crying! And—and probably hurting too! And this is the only thing that can make her feel better, and *you're* the only one who can do it." He knew he was being dramatic, but Ron needed to understand the difficult position Harry was in, and this was the only way Harry could think to present it to Ron without letting on who Molly

Weasley represented...and what eating a cockroach was meant to be.

Ron bit his lip, brow furrowed, then took a deep breath, nodding again. "...Yeah. Yeah, I could do it, I reckon. It's gross, but it'd be over and done with in a flash."

Harry felt his stomach drop out. "Seriously? You'd eat a live cockroach—?"

Ron looked hurt. "What? You mean to say you wouldn't eat a bug if my mum were crying?!"

Harry threw his hands up in defence, quickly walking his words back. "No—no of course not. I would *absolutely* eat a bug to stop Molly crying. It was just a hypothetical, that's all!"

Ron grunted his acceptance of the apology, then slung a leg over his broom. "Well if we're all done talking about roaches and my mum bawling her eyes out? You're gonna put me off my lunch, and that's a feat with me."

The conversation with Ron did relatively little to settle Harry's feelings, particularly as he'd been looking for an excuse—*any* excuse—not to do what he was probably going to wind up having to do. As such, he endeavoured to put the thought from his mind, kicking the can as far down the road as he could and convincing himself that Malfoy would settle, eventually, and things would continue on much as they had before the locket had poured poison into Malfoy's ear.

That worked for a couple of days, but then Harry's bladder had woken him in the middle of the night, and he'd found Malfoy standing over his bed in the dark. Malfoy had quickly scattered, claiming he'd only been on his way for a piss of his own, but the unsettling encounter had hardened Harry's resolve considerably.

There was no getting around it, and as Malfoy didn't seem to realise what needed to happen—or else was too proud to admit it—Harry would have to do it himself, or risk Malfoy combusting at any moment.

So he steeled himself and cleared his throat over breakfast. "Fancy a Seeker's game or

three after you're done?"

Malfoy gave him a long look over his mug of tea. "...A Seeker's game?"

Hermione frowned. "Harry, are you sure—" She cut herself off when Harry kicked her shin under the table, utterly flabbergasted.

Malfoy glanced between Harry and Hermione, immediately on his guard, and Harry tried to recover the moment with, "I've got an itch, indulge me? Ron's been off a broom so long he's hardly a challenge anymore."

"*Hey,*" Ron said, throwing a grape at Harry.

"Be serious, Potter. He was never a challenge to begin with."

Now Ron threw a grape at Malfoy with an offended, "*Hey!*"

Malfoy sighed, finishing off his tea with a loud slurp. "...I suppose. Who am I to deny the Chosen One his humiliation when he asks for it so nicely?" He sent his mug soaring back into the cupboard after blasting it with a quick Scouring Charm, then shoved his chair back, crooking a finger at Harry.

Harry stood to follow him, and Hermione fixed him with a purse-lipped questioning look. He just shook his head at her; no, he didn't want to explain why he was skiving off research when they needed to find the next Horcrux now more than ever.

Malfoy, blessedly, didn't question what had really prompted Harry's request, though Harry didn't doubt he'd seen through the pithy excuse. It only went to show how thinly Malfoy's restraint was stretched, that he'd accept any excuse to have Harry's attention all to himself, even if it was perfectly obvious to all lookers-on that was what was happening.

He hadn't really intended the offer of a Seeker's game to be anything more than a ruse to get Malfoy into the Sanctuary without arousing too much suspicion—on Malfoy's part *or* Hermione and Ron's—but now that they were here, with Malfoy grabbing a pair of

broomsticks from the trunk they stored their gear in, he supposed it would be a good way to loosen his nerves. Maybe the adrenaline high sure to accompany any such diversions with Malfoy would help propel him through the next part of his plan.

They set off after the Snitch in a blur, both convinced that they'd yet manage to wring just that little bit more speed from his broom to beat the other, but they still wound up having to resort to outrageous manoeuvres. Harry's blood was singing, his cheeks chapped from the wind and eyes watering, and he could have gone for another twenty rounds, but Malfoy begged off after Harry caught the Snitch before him the third time in a row, claiming an itch to get out of his skin and into something warmer.

Harry's stomach sank, dread settling onto his shoulders, and he followed Malfoy back down to the ground with a whimper. He supposed it had to be now, then.

Malfoy was already putting away his gear by the time Harry landed, unclasping his leathers and tugging off the Quidditch robes he'd Transfigured for himself because, *"If you're not going to make the effort to do something right, why bother doing it at all?"*

Harry found a rock half-buried in the snow that was suddenly very interesting and began toeing it with his trainer. He coughed to clear his throat and—to his own horror—licked his lips, as they were very dry and chapped from the wind. "So, er, how are you feeling?"

Malfoy ran a hand through his hair to smooth it down after he'd tugged the robes over his head. With a *Finite incantatem*, the robes turned back into the dressing gown they'd been before, which Malfoy folded neatly and draped over the lid of the trunk. "...Fine," he said, bemused.

"I mean—with the whole...transforming thing. Has it gotten any easier?"

"Easier?" His tone was no longer bemused and edging on outright wary now, and if Harry wasn't careful, he was going to spook Malfoy off before they actually did what they needed to do here.

“To manage, I mean. I know early on you had some...issues, but we’ve been working on them and...” Harry swallowed. “I was just wondering, that’s all.”

“You were just wondering?” Malfoy repeated evenly—then he shrugged in that elegant, one-shouldered way of his. “Well, have you seen me sick up lava recently? Obviously I’m making it work.” He then added too cheerily for Harry’s comfort, “We may even be able to cut down on our time in here. It’s a pleasant enough distraction but not a wholly necessary one these days.”

It was shit of the highest grade, and fragrant at that. Harry nodded. “So you’ve been attached to me at the hip for the past week...because you fancy me, then?”

“That—of *course* not!” Malfoy sputtered, ears pinking. “Just because—and you *know* that—I haven’t been *attached*—it’s only—” He cut his babbling off with a frustrated huff. “Has Granger been suggesting I’m not pulling my weight? That snotty little Muggleborn *knows* it’s only thanks to me you’re even still *alive* at this point, and Weasley spends half the day fiddling with the Wireless like—like—”

He seemed to have lost his train of thought, or else ran it off the tracks himself, knowing he had to stop before he really got going, else there’d be no end until he’d complained himself hoarse.

Harry couldn’t help but stare in bald wonder. Malfoy was so nakedly desperate to prove himself, aching to fit in where he felt he wasn’t wanted, just like the locket had taunted. It had been full of lies, Harry knew, but it seemed to seek out—and find—the darkest, most desperate part of you and then magnified those fears and worries a hundred-fold.

And Draco Malfoy *was* afraid—afraid that Harry Potter didn’t think he was worth anything. That given the choice, Harry would cut Malfoy loose so that he and Hermione and Ron could get on with their quest. The locket told him he wasn’t their friend, wasn’t their partner—was just a failed Death Eater and a successful murderer, and what had any of them really done to disabuse him of those notions?

So Harry had to do the only thing he could think of to convince both the dragon and

Malfoy that he *was* special, that Harry was still here, would stay here, and that he was willing to do something a little gross and a lot embarrassing to prove it, because words had never really worked well with Malfoy and Harry, and he didn't honestly expect that to change now.

He swallowed down the lump that had lodged in his throat. "...Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close your eyes," Harry repeated firmly, and after only a quick flick of his eyes around Harry's face, judging how serious he was being, Malfoy did as asked, lashes fluttering down. Something coiled in Harry's stomach at how readily he complied—no sharp words, just action. He never would have been so trusting before, and Harry wondered when things had changed. Was it faith, or mere curiosity?

He supposed they were about to find out. He exhaled slowly, settling one hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "Just...don't freak out. And don't hit me."

Malfoy frowned at the warning, but he didn't open his eyes or pull away, so Harry was left with no other choice—

He leaned in, head cocked to the side, and brushed his lips over Malfoy's.

Malfoy jerked back like he'd been slapped, bringing one arm up to cover his mouth and using the other to shove Harry hard across the chest. "What the *fuck* are you doing?" he snarled, flushed a dark, angry red from his nose to his neck. His eyes were wide and dancing in confusion. "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Harry rubbed his chest; he ought to have known this would be how this played out, given it was Malfoy. "What? Of *course* not—"

"I'm not going to be a part of your poofter fantasies!"

Harry's irritation spiked. "This isn't a part of—it's not a *joke*, and it's not a fantasy, don't be ridiculous!" Where had that calm, trusting version of Malfoy from only a moment ago

gone? The one who knew Harry was a strange character but tolerated him mildly and made fun of him later if the occasion called for it? “I just assumed this was the next step.”

“The next step—in *what?!*” Malfoy was practically shrieking now, and if Harry didn’t sort this out stat, he was going to start hyperventilating, and who knew how that might manifest when you were dealing with a dragon Animagus.

“In your—your ‘predicament’, obviously!” Harry waved a hand at Malfoy. “You’ve been impossible to deal with ever since the locket showed you that absurd vision, all moody and demanding and even *more* handsy than usual.” Malfoy crossed his arms and looked away, jaw tense. “And you said before that...” Harry forced himself to take a breath. “That sometimes the dragon needs reassurance. So consider yourself reassured. I’ve never done...*that* with Hermione or Ron. And I wouldn’t have done it with you either, just so we’re clear, but needs must and all that.” He shrugged. “I figured it was the grandest gesture I could make to show you I’m willing to do some embarrassing things in order to help keep you sane.”

That should show him, right? He didn’t want to even *consider* what he might further be asked to do should this not be enough. It *had* to be enough. Malfoy had to look at this and understand that Harry was practically bending over backwards to show Malfoy he was...well, Harry didn’t want to say *important* or *special*, but it was something like that. He was an existence apart, so Harry had given him something to show as such.

Malfoy just stared at him, breathing heavily. “...You did that...because of the dragon.”

“Of course! Why else would I?” And because he didn’t want Malfoy getting any strange ideas about Harry’s gesture of choice, he hastened to add, “Just—all this ‘reassurance’ talk is really about...about *M-word* stuff, right?” Malfoy grimaced. “So I figured that might get the message across best. I didn’t do it because I *wanted* to—but we might have to accept that this kind of thing is...necessary.”

“Necessary,” Malfoy spat, as if it were a vile word. “You think *this* is necessary?”

“Yeah, I do,” Harry said, tone flat, because now was not the time for Malfoy to throw another of his strops. Unless he had a better idea of how Harry could convince their scaly little problem that Harry was genuine in his acceptance of Malfoy and this absurd situation, they would have to understand that this was going to be the new normal.

But Malfoy, being Malfoy, could never do things the easy way; he had to go down kicking and screaming, so Harry supposed he shouldn't have been surprised when Malfoy stalked forward, bumping Harry roughly with his shoulder, and continued on to exit the Sanctuary without another word. The door slammed shut behind him, echoing across the empty, frost-covered hillside.

“Fine, be that way,” Harry muttered, sensing another Cold War coming on; this would be a battle to see who could hold out the longest, because Harry *knew* he hadn't been imagining the way Malfoy's attitude had shifted since they'd destroyed the locket. Things would escalate further now, and they would both dig their heels in—because Harry sure as hell wasn't going to invite Malfoy out for more ‘Seeker's games’ after this debacle—until Malfoy capitulated. And it would, of course, be *Malfoy* who gave in; he was the one with his mind to lose.

One wondered if Malfoy remembered that, though, for he ignored Harry as best he could for the next several days. He took to the sitting room during meals—if he joined them at all—and spent most of his free time in their room, always asleep by the time Harry turned in. Ron didn't seem to really notice Malfoy's odd behaviour, and Hermione blessedly did not ask what had happened between them, but there was a very palpable tension that had draped itself over the tent and all of its occupants.

Still, Malfoy showed no signs of breaking, and Harry felt his patience wearing thin; that they had come all this way, forged a kind of wartime camaraderie even, only to have it undone because Malfoy had been freaked out by a simple peck on the lips was ridiculous. If Harry could be adult about everything he'd been asked to do thus far, surely Malfoy could relax his starched propriety a hair so he didn't snap.

He reminded himself that this was siege warfare, though; *Malfoy* was the one who

needed *him*, and all he had to do was wait, just a little longer. In due course, the prissy prick would *Accio* himself a pair of balls and they would do what they must. Malfoy had already been riding the raw edge of sanity before Harry had tried to kiss him, so he was unlikely to hold out for much longer.

In the end, he lasted four days. Well, four-and-three-quarters, to be generous.

Harry was the last to turn in that night after a long, dragging day of trying to trace Ravenclaw's line down through the ages. They'd lost track of her somewhere around the 1600s, with no mention of her diadem or if it had even really existed. After Hermione and Ron bid their goodnights, Harry shuffled to his room to grab his pyjamas.

Malfoy was already curled up in bed, fast asleep as was typical in recent days, and Harry resigned himself to another day at a draw—but barely had he closed the door when Malfoy threw off his blankets and leapt to his feet, rounding on Harry with startling speed. It was more than a little intimidating, being backed up against the wall, as Malfoy was taller than Harry by several now-meaningful inches, and their time in the Sanctuary and three square meals a day meant he'd gotten a bit broader about the chest as well, no longer the skin-and-bones frail thing he'd been when they had rescued him from the Ministry.

He was standing uncomfortably close to Harry and practically vibrating with anger, a manic look dancing in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak several times, but he seemed to reconsider before any words passed his lips. His face was a contorted mess of emotions, and Harry imagined he was holding himself together with little more than a thought and a prayer.

Enough was enough.

Harry grabbed Malfoy's wrist with a frustrated growl, dragging him from the room and marching for the Sanctuary. It spoke to how far gone he must have been, how near he was to plunging over the edge, that Malfoy didn't object to being manhandled.

They'd finally had Hermione sort out the Temperature Charms inside the Sanctuary,

though she'd confessed to being flummoxed by how to handle the weather, unable to get the Conjured room to reflect an environment of her choosing. This resulted in the rather odd scene Harry and Malfoy stumbled into, with snow falling in a bright white curtain, only to dissipate before it settled, melted by the magically maintained balmy temperature.

He dropped Malfoy's wrist, running his hands through his hair and pacing in a circle until he calmed down. Malfoy was already agitated; Harry didn't need to make it worse by gloating. He could save that for afterwards.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, staring at Malfoy. "It's really *not* that big a deal; you didn't have to freak out like that about it."

"*Fuck* you," Malfoy snarled morosely, head hanging. He looked absolutely miserable, though he only had himself to blame.

"I told you—I didn't do it because I *wanted* to." Something unreadable crossed Malfoy's face, and the fists clenched at his sides tightened further; if he took a swing at Harry, then he was going to regret it. "I did it because that's how it's got to be." It felt like he was lecturing Malfoy at this point, but well, he kind of *needed* to be lectured at. Hermione was better at this sort of thing, but Harry really didn't want to involve her in this if at all possible. It was bad enough *he* had to be involved. "You're not a dragon. You turn into one on occasion, but you're *not* one, no matter what these weird emotions and urges and instincts you're dealing with are trying to tell you. You're a *human*, so the way I see it, it's *human* expressions of fidelity and whatnot that're gonna settle whatever it is inside of you that's bleeding over from your Animagus form." He shrugged, trying to impress upon Malfoy how *not a big deal* this was. "If a peck on the lips is enough where you're not gonna self-immolate, then I can handle it, really. And *you* should be able to handle it, too. Just close your eyes, think of England, and get it over with."

Slowly, Malfoy brought his eyes up to meet Harry's; Harry tried not to show how relieved he was not to see embers dancing behind them. Maybe Malfoy hadn't been quite as far gone as Harry had feared. Then Malfoy blinked and looked away, wiping a

hand over his face as he released a rough, mirthless huff of laughter. “This is *rich*.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You think this is me just being dramatic? That—what, I’m just twisting myself into knots because oh *heavens* a boy’s kissed me as a gesture? You think *that’s* what this is all about?” His expression was hard as steel. “*Please*. All the *shit* I’ve been through, and you think I’ve *honestly* got the energy to have a fit over this?”

Harry felt his world tilt, just a few degrees. “...Er, then...what’s the issue?” He’d been operating under the assumption that Malfoy had, understandably, been shocked to be told that if he wanted to maintain his sanity and keep his dragon in check, he’d need to endure a snogging session with another boy. Harry accepted that this was a *predicament* they were both involved in now, and when Malfoy had shown reluctance, Harry had necessarily taken up the slack.

Except now Malfoy was claiming it wasn’t reluctance, it wasn’t shock. So then—what?

Malfoy stared at him, then his throat bobbed—and he lashed out, grabbing Harry’s face and slotting their lips together, sudden and bold and demanding, and Harry froze. There was a disconnect, his mind only processing what had happened two beats behind, and before he’d even registered he was being kissed, Malfoy had his tongue sliding over the seam of Harry’s lips, breath hot and moist against his skin as he ratcheted the kiss up to eleven.

Pure reflex of shock had Harry struggling to jerk away, but Malfoy moved one arm down his back and locked it, leaving Harry to squirm feebly in his embrace. He tried to turn his head to the side, blood rushing in his ears—

But then just as quickly as it had started, it stopped, and Malfoy pulled back but not away. He rested his forehead against Harry’s, little beads of sweat dotting his brow with his eyes clenched shut tight, like he wanted to forget what he’d just done.

“That,” Malfoy breathed.

“That...huh?” Harry’s mind buzzed, still playing catch-up, and he imagined he could still feel the sweet burn of Malfoy’s bruising kiss, the heat and slide of Malfoy’s tongue on his lips. “*What? What the hell—*”

“*That’s the issue.*” Malfoy opened his eyes, and damn it all, the embers were kindled, flickering inside the iris with a worrisome, jerking dance. “It wouldn’t *be* a ‘peck on the lips’, you fucking tosser. You can’t cheat this. It’s got to *mean* something.”

Oh. Harry realised with dawning horror that *he was right*. Just like it hadn’t been enough before to simply shake hands or clap Malfoy on the shoulder—he’d needed to practically sit in Harry’s lap before the beast would be satisfied. Harry would have—*had*, even—given chaste kisses to friends, if occasion called for it, so that brief brush of lips had been par for the course, really.

It’s got to mean something.

Because this *all* meant something to Malfoy—subconsciously or consciously. They were in this situation in the first place because Harry *meant something* to Malfoy, and since he hadn’t said that kissing *period* wasn’t what he needed...that suggested it was only the *kind* of kissing that hadn’t been up to snuff.

This wasn’t swallowing a bug. This was settling in for a five-course dinner, soup to nuts, of every sort of creepy-crawly imaginable.

Harry closed his eyes, praying his voice didn’t break or quaver when he spoke again: “... We should, um. We should set—set some rules, I think.”

“Rules?” He could hear the confusion in Malfoy’s tone; for someone usually so sharp, he could be frustratingly oblivious when he wanted to. “...You’re not *actually* going to do this.” It was an accusation, daring Harry to take it back.

“Do I really have a choice?” Harry opened his eyes again, flicking them over to meet Malfoy’s. He kept his gaze steady, impressing upon Malfoy that he wouldn’t back down from this unspoken challenge. *You can’t handle this, Potter*, Malfoy didn’t say, but

Harry heard it all the same, and while he honestly didn't know if he could handle it or not, it was looking like he'd *have* to. "You can't seriously think I'd say no, can you? Knowing what it would do to you?"

Or maybe he *did* think Harry would say 'no'. He thought back to the visions the locket had produced, how they'd taunted, seeking out Malfoy's weak spots and applying pressure until he broke. Malfoy wouldn't allow himself to think that Harry might do this for him, might humiliate himself, because then that would be willingly placing his sanity, his well-being, in Harry's hands. Trusting him.

Rely on others and you're only setting yourself up for disappointment.

Malfoy was going to wind up crushed one of these days, carrying all of that weight on his own shoulders. "Wasn't I the one who tried to kiss you in the first place?"

"Only because you thought you could get away with the kind of kiss you probably gave your grandmother," Malfoy sneered, and Harry didn't remind him that he'd never had any grandparents, nor had he ever wanted to do more to a relative than slap them cross-eyed. "I believe I just explained that's not going to work."

"Yeah..." Harry made a face. "Vividly..." He could still feel the heat of Malfoy's 'explanation' on his skin. "But I was ready to do it all the same."

"Ever a Gryffindor," Malfoy muttered, hunching his shoulders and staring down at the ground. "Diving headfirst into a commitment you're nowhere near ready to bear."

Harry could only shrug, because Malfoy wasn't entirely wrong. "It's kind of a running theme with me, if you haven't noticed. I mean, look where we are now."

Malfoy actually did look around, though Harry had meant the comment to be rhetorical. "...I'm still not entirely convinced this isn't just some drawn-out nightmare, and I'm actually still safely tucked away in the Department of Mysteries under a Stasis Spell..."

If Malfoy was back to whinging, then that meant the arguments were over and he'd accepted his fate.

“All right, then—rules.” Harry tried to sort out in his mind what he was and wasn’t comfortable with, though he supposed it was really what he was less uncomfortable with and more uncomfortable with. “Um, number one—we only do it in the Sanctuary.” He rubbed his arms, squirming. “Just...it feels weird, if we do it elsewhere. Whatever’s in here...it’s just what we have to do.” He nodded to himself. Not the most eloquent of phrasing, but it got the message across.

“What we have to do,” Malfoy parroted, and he had that strange unreadable expression on his face again.

“...Yeah.” Harry tapped his lips in thought, pacing. “Oh, number two—only do it on the lips.”

“Where else *would* it be?” Malfoy shrieked, his cheeks and the tips of his ears flushed pink.

“Well, like—no *bites* or anything.” He’d caught glimpses of Aunt Petunia’s stories on the telly, he knew that people—couples—could get...a little carried away. He just wanted to make sure Malfoy understood this wouldn’t be anything like *that*. It was just...a business transaction, of sorts.

“Trust I shall make every effort to rein in my roiling, unbridled passion,” Malfoy drawled, lip curled into a sour sneer. “Right, I get to add one, then: Number three—you don’t breathe a *word* of this to Granger or Weasley.”

“Why would I *tell them*?” Harry sputtered.

“I don’t know! But you haven’t had any problems blabbing about all the stuff we’ve gotten up to so far, so I’d rather not chance it!”

“Trust me, if I could self-Obliviate and forget all about this, I *would*.” He shook his head. “They couldn’t *Crucio* it out of me.”

“See that it stays that way,” Malfoy said, threat evident in his tone. He then wilted, as it sank in that they were really going to do this. “This is *so* not fair!”

“Come on, pull yourself together.”

“It’s *mortifying!*”

Harry rolled his eyes; the dramatics were back. “Yes, and it’s just as embarrassing for me, I hope you’ll remember.”

“Oh, is it?” Malfoy said flatly, glaring. “*You* get to come off like you’re doing all of this out of the goodness of your own heart! While me? I look like I’ve just been aching for you since First Year and this is the culmination of all my hopes and dreams!”

“And you haven’t,” Harry said, tone rising a bit at the end in question because, honestly, given the state of things...

“*No*, I haven’t, you utter titarse!” Malfoy shouted. “You think I just cast Unforgivables at you for a lark? Smashed your face in ‘cause I thought it looked better that way?”

Harry held his arms up in defence. “All right, all right. But then I don’t see the problem. Hermione’s already said it’s not about romantic feelings or anything—”

“I know what she says!”

“—It’s about finding a partner, an equal—”

Malfoy scoffed. “You’re so far from being my equal it’s not even funny.”

Harry’s patience, already thin enough to see through, was fading with each word that fell from Malfoy’s lips. “Well I’m not going to *force* you.”

“As if you could.” He always seemed to want to have the last word.

Malfoy really wasn’t helping anything; this was going to be difficult enough as it was, but with Malfoy griping and complaining the whole way, it was going to be downright dismal.

They were adults; surely they could be mature about this. Probably. “Well—think of it this way: you stopped fighting the urge to transform, and it didn’t turn out so bad, did it?”

Maybe this will work out the same.”

Malfoy sneered. “I’ve heard tell of your snogging prowess, Potter; trust my expectations are at the ground floor.”

And *now* Malfoy had bruised his ego. Harry’s patience could take quite a beating, but this was a bridge too far. “Oh, and you’re so much better at it? Felt like you were going to gnaw my face off earlier.” It wasn’t entirely the truth, but he took the swipe anyway.

“I’m at least the more experienced between us,” Malfoy said, studying his nails.

“Sure about that, are you? You’ve only ever seen me at school—but you know I’ve spent my summers with my Muggle relatives, and when I’m not with them, I’m with the Weasleys, who live near a lovely wizarding village of several hundred.” Harry could count the number of times he’d set foot in Ottery St. Catchpole on one hand, but Malfoy didn’t need to know that.

Malfoy’s expression darkened at the implication, and Harry felt a brief flicker of concern; perhaps it wasn’t the smartest of ideas to trigger what were likely deep veins of jealousy and possessiveness.

He took a steadying breath and paced out a circle, letting their tempers cool. “...Look, I know this isn’t *ideal*—” Malfoy snorted as if to say *No, really?* “But we’ve both got far bigger, more important issues to focus on now, so let’s just...*do this*, so we can move on?”

“*Fine*,” Malfoy ground out, wrinkling his nose. “...Try again, if you must. I’ll try to tamp down the urge to clock you this time.”

“Wh—*now?*” Harry blinked, thrown. He hadn’t realised Malfoy would expect them to just get right to it.

“Backing out, Potter?” Malfoy arched a brow, lips pressed into a thin, judging line. Like he’d known Harry would try and weasel out of the agreement. “What was all that talk for, then?”

“No, just—I mean, I thought...” Well obviously, whatever he’d thought, he’d thought *wrong*, and he should have seen this coming. Malfoy had been dancing on the edge of a breakdown for several days now, and with potential salvation so near at hand, the urge to claw back some of that reassurance and confidence would be nigh unbearable. “...All right.”

Malfoy swallowed, throat bobbing, and uncrossed his arms. He was holding himself stiff as a rail, and he looked terrified.

“Did you...want to close your eyes again?”

“No I did *not*. Just get it over with.”

Malfoy’s voice broke just on the end, and he seemed to bite his tongue in frustration. Harry took several measured steps forward until the toes of his trainers kissed the tips of Malfoy’s fancy leather loafers—where *had* he dug out all these spells for this ridiculously fashionable wardrobe?

Was he meant to touch Malfoy? They hadn’t discussed etiquette—and at this point, Harry didn’t really *want* to. Discussing it was nearly as bad as *doing* it, so he decided to play it by ear. Touch was something that he knew settled Malfoy, at least on a subconscious level. If Malfoy didn’t want Harry touching him, he would surely let Harry know.

He brought his hands up and let them rest just at the knobby joint of Malfoy’s elbows, steadying the both of them in the tentative embrace. He could feel the fine thread of tension racing through Malfoy’s sinewy body, stretched tight and taut and ready to snap in the next strong breeze. Slowly, so as not to spook, Harry traced the jut of bone, memorising it, like Malfoy had done to him after the close call in Godric’s Hollow. He felt the tension ease, though only a hair, and Malfoy released a soft, haggard breath.

Harry found himself suddenly over-conscious of his technique. His earlier boasts of experience had been pure bravado, and while Harry was not entirely ignorant of the dynamics of kissing someone, he was certainly no Casanova. He and Malfoy were the

worst people in the world to be stuck doing this. They were both equally terrified of losing face in front of the other, and both able to cut each other particularly cruelly if they felt so inclined. When it came down to it, Harry thought he'd probably rather kiss Voldemort than Malfoy, if only because he didn't really care what Voldemort thought of him.

He did care what Malfoy thought of him, though. It was curious to think, but true. He didn't want to seem cruel, or insensitive. He had so much power over Malfoy right now, in so many respects, and he wanted to show Malfoy that this trust he was obliged to place in Harry—this trust he would never have freely offered—was not unappreciated and not something Harry took lightly. He wanted to show him he appreciated the efforts Malfoy was making—though the steps were small at times, and he backslid on occasion.

The larger battle they were embroiled in now, together, made these smaller ones seem so inconsequential, and he just wanted to stop wasting his energy on these pointless fights so they could focus on the more important ones.

Harry lifted his chin, tilting his head just to the side so that the tips of their noses brushed—and Malfoy inhaled sharply, holding his breath. Harry stole his moment, leaning forward to bring their lips together. They held there for a long beat, neither moving, with mouths clamped shut and lips pursed tight. It was nothing like the heat and bruising force Malfoy had used on Harry earlier, and Harry felt a bolt of panic spear through him. He hadn't a clue where to go from here—when the other party was *this* unenthusiastic, generally it was good manners to *stop*—and any moment now, Malfoy was going to realise he'd been bluffing and storm off in a strop.

But then Malfoy let his mouth fall open, just a hair, and a breathy little sigh escaped. Harry gave a gentle tug on Malfoy's elbows to draw him down, closer, and he deepened the kiss. Malfoy's hands slid up to curve around the back of Harry's shoulders, clutching the fabric of his shirt with an edge of desperation, and he let Harry nibble on the soft of his lip. He pressed forward, for more contact, and Malfoy met him, turning into the pressure and running his tongue over the seam of Harry's lips, like he'd done before.

It was slick, and hot, and bloody brilliant. Another way to make Malfoy shut up, aside from the occasional little sigh or catch of breath, and if Harry just focused on the sensations, gave himself over to it, it was...really not bad. Not bad at all. Too easy, in fact, to forget who he was doing this with and why. Too easy to just let it happen, to *do it*.

Harry took an open-mouth breath, and Malfoy's tongue slipped between his lips, brushing against Harry's. It was *alarmingly* hot, but Harry struggled to find the will to break the kiss to address it. It probably wasn't important. Probably. He nipped Malfoy's lower lip, then laved his tongue over it in apology. "...Is your tongue getting hot because you're about to puke fire, or...?"

"Dunno..." Malfoy's pointy nose was digging into Harry's cheek, and his lashes fluttered against Harry's. "Should we stop, to be safe?"

"Nah..." Harry said, muzzily, and laid down a soft, insistent kiss at the corner of Malfoy's mouth, encouraging him to turn into it at a lovely angle that let Harry cover Malfoy's lips wholly with his own. They moved with a gentle, languid rhythm that Harry could get drunk on, and what had he been worried about? How had he thought he could screw this up? They fit perfectly, so warm and right, and it was like Malfoy read his *mind—could* Malfoy read his mind? Oh, what if they used Legilimency and—

A hand came to rest on Harry's hip, though, and Malfoy drew back, their noses brushing. Harry's breath was coming in warm, short huffs, and he felt flushed all over. His lips tingled, plumped and full, and he tamped down a giddy little grin, tilting his head to press in again—but then Malfoy pulled back, properly, and glanced away, covering his mouth with his arm and clenching his eyes shut tight.

Harry tensed. "What? Wh—did I do—"

Malfoy just shook his head, taking a step back. With the distance came fresh air, and each breath cleared the haze from Harry's mind just a bit more. He took a moment to put his head back on straight while Malfoy collected himself.

Fuck. He'd just been snogging—*full on snogging*—Draco Malfoy. And...and he'd kind of

liked it. Granted, that had been the point of the whole exercise: human contact, intimacy, and that damned reassurance. The dragon had to be purring like a kitten after *that* display, surely. Harry could say, unequivocally, that he'd *never* done anything like that with...well, *anyone*. If Malfoy needed further reassurance that he was not someone Harry was going to dismiss so easily, that he was not someone Harry was disgusted to touch, Harry didn't know how he could express it. He'd had Malfoy's tongue halfway down his throat, for god's sake.

Malfoy straightened, slapping his cheeks a few times. He blinked, and the embers were gone now. On the whole, he looked a lot healthier than he had five minutes ago. He cleared his throat, then said to Harry, "You should go to bed."

Harry frowned; that hadn't exactly been what he'd expected to hear after all that. "Uh... okay..." It was late, admittedly—but he wasn't really tired. He'd let himself get carried away, though, so perhaps turning in was for the best. He needed some time to unpack what he'd just done. A decade ought to do it.

He turned to leave—but Malfoy just stood there, arms crossed over his chest again and blankly staring off into the distance. "You're not coming?"

Malfoy shook his head shortly. "...I need to fly a bit, I think. Clear my head."

Harry only just stopped himself from offering to stay; the unspoken request for privacy could not have been any clearer.

There were no biting remarks. No derisive comments that, "*Well, it was adequate, but honestly I expected more from the Chosen One.*" Harry supposed it was the best he could hope for, under the circumstances. He didn't think his ego could take brutal honesty right now, and as the fog of arousal lifted from his mind, he found he was happy to place a bit of distance between them.

"I'll...see you tomorrow, then?"

Malfoy had one arm thrown over his chest now, stretching. "Yes, I expect you will."

“You sure you don’t need me to—”

“You’ve done quite enough this evening,” Malfoy bit out. “Good night.”

For reasons beyond Harry, Malfoy seemed almost as tense and irritable now as he’d been before they’d kissed, and this was probably the kindest send-off he was going to receive. A not insignificant part of Harry felt offended he was being so curtly dismissed, like a cheap lay, but now did not seem to be the time to discuss it, so bereft of excuses to dawdle in the Sanctuary any longer, and with his own complicated emotions to sort through, Harry returned to their bedroom alone.

The Lovegoods and No-Goods

Harry didn't know when Malfoy had finally come to bed, and by the time he woke the next morning—early, because it was his turn at the till for breakfast—Malfoy was already up, though his bed did show signs he'd slept in it, however briefly.

Hermione and Ron weren't awake yet—they liked to sleep in when they didn't have breakfast duty—but Harry found Malfoy sitting on the sofa with a mug of coffee in one hand and a book whose cover Harry couldn't see in the other.

“Morning,” Harry offered, hoping it didn't sound as forced to Malfoy as it did to Harry. They'd ended things rather abruptly after the kiss the night before, and for Harry at least, it was a bit awkward, being alone together just now. He'd never been very good with follow-through, generally stumbling through romantic encounters with all the grace of a mountain troll, and try as he might to remind himself this was *not* a romantic encounter, it was difficult to deny that it shared similarities.

Malfoy had shown himself to be a master at avoiding uncomfortable discussions, though, so Harry did what he could to generate small talk, hoping to coax Malfoy out of whatever strange mood had come over him. “What do you feel like for breakfast?” See? He could be thoughtful, considerate of his partner's wants and needs.

“Granger's bacon, Weasley's buttered toast, and my own porridge.”

Harry glanced into the kitchen, half-expecting to see Hermione and Ron slaving over frying pans with a pot of porridge warming on the side. “Uh, well I'm cooking, so...”

Malfoy raised his mug in a mock toast. “Then I'm all set, thanks.”

Harry felt a spark of irritation ignite in his chest, but then it settled into a quiet, seething burn that Harry actually found just this side of comforting. It felt more...normal, like their usual interactions. He wondered if Malfoy had done it on purpose, to resolve the

awkward atmosphere between them without having to actually address it, though it was more likely he was just being his usual asshole self.

Hermione and Ron joined them shortly while Harry was finishing up their omelettes. Ron looked like he'd sleep-walked to the table, but Hermione was bright-eyed and alert, fidgeting nervously. Harry watched her curiously, tamping down the sliver of panic that she somehow knew what he and Malfoy had gotten up to in the Sanctuary the night before. Paranoia was unbecoming.

“*Must* you bounce your leg like that?” Malfoy asked her through grit teeth. “It’s annoying.”

“Sorry,” Hermione said. “It’s only—well, I think I’ve found something.”

Harry whipped his head around, whisking the last omelette blindly. “What? Found something?”

She nodded, holding up the book she’d been clutching when she arrived at the table and showing them the cover: *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

Harry frowned, turning back to his omelette. “Didn’t we burn all those?”

“No; you threw *yours* into the fire. You’re lucky it was only a magically reproduced copy. I kept my original because, well...” She shrugged. “I couldn’t shake the feeling we’d missed something. Something important—we had so many loose threads, and it seemed unthinkable they weren’t connected somehow.”

“We went through that book cover to cover, Granger,” Malfoy said, refilling his mug. “No secret codes, no leads to chase down, nothing but five-hundred pages of Skeeter’s dry drivel.”

“Five-hundred and sixteen, to be precise,” Hermione said, flipping to the back of the book and spinning it around so that Malfoy could read it right-side up. “We didn’t really comb the index, where reproductions of all the resources were catalogued—all the more our loss.” She tapped the page she’d opened to. “What do you make of that?”

Harry watched intently as Malfoy ran his eyes over the page with a bored expression. “A reproduction of the love letter Dumbledore wrote to Grindelwald way back when.”

“It’s not a *love letter*,” Harry reminded, and Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“Look *closer*, Malfoy,” Hermione urged, pointing to the signature. “Notice anything?”

“What, did he add a little heart after his—” He cut himself off, frowning at the page, then flicked his eyes up to meet Hermione’s.

She smiled, a bit devious. “This is the only letter he signed that way; there’s reproductions of several exchanges with other witches and wizards from around the same time, and *none of them* have that symbol in the signature.”

“What symbol?” Harry asked, cutting the heat and grabbing the spatula to shift the omelette from the pan to a fresh plate. He set it down with a loud clatter in front of Ron, who jolted awake with a sleepy, sniffled *Thanks*. Harry took his seat next to Malfoy, knees bumping together, and leaned over to see the whatever they were looking at for himself. “Where?”

Malfoy pointed at the *A* in *Albus*. “That one.”

Harry peered closer, resting one hand on Malfoy’s shoulder for support. He would have surely missed it without his glasses, but he could see now that the *A* had been replaced with a triangular symbol that Harry was certain he’d seen somewhere before... His head snapped up, and Hermione was smiling at him encouragingly. “Wait—is that...?”

“It’s the same mark from *The Tales of Beedle the Bard!*” she practically shouted, bustling with excitement.

Ron perked up, mouth full. Food seemed to have recharged his engines. “*Ee’l ‘eh ‘Ard?*” He swallowed with some effort. “Didn’t you mention Viktor saying something about that symbol too, Harry?”

“Yeah; he was upset because Mr. Lovegood was wearing it—he said it was Grindelwald’s

symbol.” Harry shook his head. “But—I don’t get what’s so interesting about that? Dumbledore and Grindelwald were friends,” he said with a dour tone. He could have gone quite a lot longer without having been reminded of Dumbledore’s atrocious opinions on Muggles and Muggleborns. “It’s hardly surprising Dumbledore would have signed his letters to Grindelwald using that symbol.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that Grindelwald even *had* a symbol, though? Especially before he’d become, well, *Grindelwald*? He didn’t come up with that symbol out of thin air, either—I’m *positive* that’s the same mark I saw on that headstone back in Godric’s Hollow! And that grave was there *long* before Grindelwald ever came along.” She took the book back from Malfoy, tracing the mark with her finger. “There must be more to it than meets the eye. It keeps cropping up—Viktor and Mr. Lovegood, Grindelwald and Dumbledore, that old headstone and the name *Ignotus*...”

Harry didn’t really follow, and while Malfoy had seemed initially intrigued by the find, he looked to be rapidly losing interest.

Ron took a swig of juice. “It’s a fun theory, but...what’re we supposed to do with it?”

“We aren’t supposed to do anything.” Hermione looked at them all in turn, taking a breath as if to brace herself. “I think we need to go visit Mr. Lovegood, Luna’s father.”

“What?” Ron sputtered.

“He’s the only logical choice!” Hermione protested, and Harry snorted.

“‘Logic’ and ‘Lovegood’ in the same sentence?” He loved Luna, he really did, but she and her father were more than a bit removed from reality some days.

“Well Viktor’s too far away, and too young to know anything of use, I’m sure, and Dumbledore’s out of course, and Grindelwald—well, I don’t even know whether he’s dead or alive by now. He’d be *quite* old if they still have him locked up in Nurmengard...” She waved her hands. “Anyway, Mr. Lovegood’s our best bet, I’m sure.”

“Bet for *what*?” Harry asked; she actually sounded *serious* about this. “What’s so

important about that symbol?”

“I don’t *know*—and that’s *why* it’s important. I’m sure it means something, given all the people we’ve seen it in connection with.”

“All the people we’ve seen it in connection with?” Ron repeated. “Dumbledore and Grindelwald. The end.”

“*Not* the end,” Hermione huffed, anger suffusing her face with red. “It was on that headstone, so it predates Grindelwald, and Mr. Lovegood clearly thought it meant something *other* than support for Grindelwald! If it wasn’t Grindelwald’s symbol, but a symbol of something *else* he was interested in—something he got Dumbledore interested in as well—then it could be important.”

Harry mulled over her logic, and while he was starting to see why her curiosity had been piqued, he wasn’t entirely sure it was all that relevant at the moment. He glanced over at Malfoy, who seemed intent on sitting out their debate, calmly sipping his coffee. For all his protests about wanting to be involved, not liking being left out of important conversations, he certainly wasn’t making an effort to participate when given the opportunity.

Hermione was staring at him plaintively, and with great reluctance, Harry had to say, “I dunno, it doesn’t sound like it’s going to lead us to a Horcrux, Hermione... And we don’t need another Godric’s Hollow—”

“Godric’s Hollow was dangerous because it was an *obvious* place You-Know-Who would think to look for you. We took a chance and went there only because we thought the sword might be hidden there; if we hadn’t had any reason to go there that had to do with the Horcruxes, we wouldn’t have gone at all!”

“But you want to go see Mr. Lovegood, even though he’s also got nothing to do with the Horcruxes?”

Hermione wilted. “Well—we won’t *know* he’s got nothing to do with them until we ask,

will we?” She didn’t sound half as sure of herself as she had before, but she quickly rallied, shaking her head. “This symbol keeps appearing around us, though. Dumbledore left me *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* for a reason—and that mark is the only thing we’ve found out of the ordinary in it so far. That doesn’t make you think it’s maybe connected to the Horcruxes?”

Harry released an irritated sigh. “Maybe? Sure. But I could be convinced just about *anything* was maybe connected to them at this point. We keep trying to convince ourselves that Dumbledore secretly left us signs and clues to—”

“Granger’s right,” Malfoy said, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. “I think we ought to go and see Lovegood.”

Harry threw him a dark look, and even Hermione looked torn as to whether or not she ought to appreciate his support. He was quite sure Malfoy’s suggestion had less to do with wanting to figure out the meaning behind the symbol and more with just wanting to get a rise out of Harry. This arrangement of theirs already looked to be backfiring, if it was going to put Malfoy on his prickly guard at all hours outside the Sanctuary just to compensate for having to be vulnerable for a few moments inside it.

“It won’t be like Godric’s Hollow, Harry,” Hermione reassured. “You-Know-Who’s got no reason to be within fifty miles of the Lovegoods’ place looking for you. Plus, Mr. Lovegood’s on your side! *The Quibbler’s* been for you this whole time, you heard what Dean and the others said.” Her brows lifted, her expression uncomfortably earnest. “I’m *sure* this is important!”

Harry remained unconvinced, shaking his head. “I feel like if it really was *that* important...Dumbledore would’ve told me about it before he died. I mean, he told me all about Horcruxes—”

“Cept how to destroy ‘em,” Ron muttered, and Harry frowned at him. “What? It’s *true*.”

“Only because he thought he’d be around to destroy them himself! And we figured it out.”

“Sure. *Eventually*,” Malfoy said, adding his own two Knuts. “If the old codger had told you everything he needed to before he died, he *would* have died before he finished.”

Hermione bit her lip. “I just really think this is what we need to do next. We haven’t made any more progress on tracking down Horcruxes, and honestly it feels like we’ve hit a wall. Now we’ve got this symbol that links Dumbledore and Grindelwald and someone who’s been buried in Godric’s Hollow for what looks like centuries? We *have* to go, Harry, I’m sure!”

“Why not vote on it, then?” Ron said, and Harry wondered if his sudden shift in support of Hermione’s suggestion wasn’t due in part to the fact that Hermione looked like she might start crying if Harry tried to talk her down from this one more time. “To be fair about it. Those in favour of going to see Lovegood—?”

Hermione’s hand shot into the air first, and Ron’s climbed soon after, earning him a grateful smile.

He turned to look at Malfoy, who simply quirked a brow and then slipped his hand up as well.

Harry barely held himself back from rolling his eyes; he was surrounded by traitors. There was no way Malfoy was voting his conscience—not after the fit he’d thrown about Godric’s Hollow. He just wanted to be contrary, because evidently Slytherins responded to threats of vulnerability with self-sabotage, taking everyone involved down with them.

“Well that’s that, then,” Ron said, pushing his chair out and sending his cleaned plate back to the cupboard.

“Fine,” Harry sighed, less irritated with Ron or even Hermione than Malfoy. He agreed that the danger of going was substantially less than it had been with Godric’s Hollow, but it still seemed like a pointless detour that threatened to distract them from more important matters. “But we should be quick about it—in and out, no staying for dinner or tea or anything. Once you’re satisfied, let’s move on and focus on finding these last two Horcruxes, all right?” Then a thought hit him. “Wait, where does he live anyway?”

“They’re not far from my place, actually,” Ron said. “I’ve never been there myself—and always been quite happy with that—but Mum and Dad always point towards the hills whenever they mention them. Shouldn’t be hard to find, should they? I mean, it’s the *Lovegoods*.”

“Right!” Hermione clapped her hands. “I think we should make a day of it—Harry’s right that we need to get back to Horcrux hunting as soon as possible, so let’s gather our things, then we’ll pop in for a visit and see what’s what.” She was unaccountably cheery now that she’d gotten her way and promptly excused herself from the table to get dressed and gather her things.

“I’ll remember this betrayal, you know,” Harry threatened Ron, as he tried to sneak back off to his room.

“Hey, don’t blame me, mate. Blame *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches!*”

When he’d vacated the kitchen, Harry turned to Malfoy, lowering his voice. “You only agreed to this to try and get back at me.”

Malfoy snorted in derision, shooting a Scouring Charm into his mug. “Get back at you for *what*, you paranoid weirdo?” Harry didn’t really have a good answer for that, as it would require they talk about Malfoy’s odd behaviour since the kiss. “Granger made a good point. Grindelwald’s involved with this mess somehow, so until we’ve got a lead on a Horcrux, we ought to chase down what knowledge we have.”

He stood and moved to go gather his own things, but Harry grabbed his arm, fixing him with a searching look. “Are...are you all right? Do you need to—”

Malfoy jerked his arm away, cheeks pinking. “No. I *don’t*. And when I do, trust that you’ll be the first to know.”



An hour later, they had Apparated onto a chilly hillside from which they could easily see the whole of Ottery St. Catchpole, which was little more than a collection of dwellings

scattered haphazardly around the valley.

“So which ones house your conquests?” Malfoy asked flippantly, his disembodied head floating beside Harry, as the rest of his body was draped beneath the Invisibility Cloak.

“Too many to enumerate,” Harry returned, still harbouring a kernel of irritation at Malfoy. “Put the Cloak on properly, or else there’s no point.”

They were running low on Polyjuice, so they’d decided to go out in Glamours instead, keeping Malfoy under the Invisibility Cloak. Malfoy had objected to being shoved under the Cloak again, reminding them all unnecessarily that *Harry* should be wearing it since he was the one with the price on his head. Hermione had agreed, but Harry had reminded her that she’d said this would be a safe excursion, and he was perfectly fine with not going at all if she thought it was dangerous enough he needed to be under the Cloak.

She’d folded, so here Malfoy was, draping the Cloak back over that shock of blond hair with a sour frown twisting his features.

They could see most of the village from here, and they took a moment to try and pick out the Burrow. Ron pointed out the general direction he thought it might lie, but from this distance, they couldn’t make out more than the orchard grove and tall, towering hedges that helped hide the house from the eyes of their Muggle neighbours.

“...So weird, being this close and not being able to visit,” said Ron, still staring at the spot where he knew his home to be. “I mean, I know it’s for the best—we’d only be bringing them trouble—but still.” Hermione reached over to brush her fingers against his knuckles, and he smiled at the gesture. “It’s Christmas hols; Ginny’ll be home, unless she’s off visiting—oh!” He gasped. “You think Luna’ll be home, too? I’d not say no to an update on how far into the ground Snape’s run the school..”

Malfoy didn’t say anything in response to Ron’s slight against Snape, and Harry wondered what his feelings were on the matter. Malfoy had to know Snape was a Death Eater, so maybe he’d decided to stop trying to act like Snape walked on a summer’s

breeze and shat moonbeams. Snape had helped Harry bring Malfoy back to himself, but then he'd turned right around and sliced off George's ear, plopped his greasy arse in Dumbledore's chair, and let his Death Eater mates have the run of Hogwarts. Surely even Malfoy couldn't conscience that.

"Let's try up this way," Harry said, leading the way over the top of the next hill.

But after an hour of trekking up and down the hills surrounding Ottery St. Catchpole, they'd turned up nothing—most of the cottages had been abandoned, some in recent weeks, some since long before. They'd peeked into the windows, just in case the dilapidated state of the cottages was little more than a Glamour to deter unwanted visitors, but none of the places looked eccentric enough on the inside to be the Lovegoods'. Deciding to try their luck on the other side of the valley, they clasped arms and Apparated to an area that seemed more densely occupied.

In the end, it was Ron who found it. "That's gotta be it!" he exclaimed, pointing toward the top of the hill next to the one they'd just mounted, where what looked to be a castle tower, all in slate black, rose imperiously into the sky. "Who else would live in a place shaped like a rook?"

With his beanpole stature and long limbs, Ron was easily the first to arrive at the front gate, while Harry and Hermione gave chase behind, panting all the while. Malfoy most unhelpfully Jinxed Harry's laces to come untied just short of the peak, slowing him down so he came in dead last. When he finally reached Ron and Hermione—his laces double-knotted this time—he found Ron grinning broadly and pointing to three hand-painted signs that had been tacked to a rotting, broken-down gate. "We're definitely in the right place."

Harry adjusted his glasses—Transfigured into a pair of coke-bottle lenses that Malfoy had told him were particularly unsightly—and peered at the signs.

The Quibbler Head Offices, Editor: X. Lovegood

'Tis the Season! Pick Your Own Mistletoe

PLEASE Do NOT Touch the Dirigible Plums - Owners Not Responsible For Flights of
Fancy

“Last chance to turn back,” Ron said, and Hermione pushed past him with a huff, unlatching the gate and striding up the winding path leading into a snarling, wild winter garden that was still in full bloom despite the chill. Harry was certain he’d never seen many of these plants before—though he did recognise a tree bearing a dangling fruit that looked like the orange radishes Luna sometimes wore for earrings.

“Oh—my,” Hermione gasped, drawing up short and placing one hand each on Harry’s and Ron’s shoulders to steer them back from an old, rotting stump whose roots were reaching for them like grasping tentacles. “Snargaluff!”

A bit more on their guard after the close call, they finally made their way up to the front stoop, on either side of which stood a pair of trees, their boughs heavy with a strange red berry-like fruit Harry didn’t recognise—and clumps of white mistletoe, which he did recognise. Had Hermione and Ron not been there, he might have been tempted to make a sly remark to Malfoy about kissing—but perhaps they weren’t yet at the joking and ribbing stage of this business.

Harry raised his fist to knock, when Hermione said, “Wait!” He turned to look at her, and she glanced back at the overgrown garden path and the creaky gate. “...I think maybe Malfoy should stay out here as lookout.”

“Think *again*, Granger,” Malfoy hissed from under the Cloak. “It was only because I was there to save your arses last time you’re around today!”

Hermione shifted to face where his voice had come from. “Yes, but that was a dangerous situation from the outset; this *shouldn’t* be. You’re more useful out here standing guard than trying to manoeuvre about inside while invisible. Someone’s going to bump into you or accidentally step on the Cloak, and then we’ll all be in trouble, especially if something *does* go wrong, and then You-Know-Who finds out you’re hanging about with the likes of us.”

He couldn't see Malfoy, but Harry knew he was rolling his eyes. "Mother will never be able to show herself around the ladies at Bridge Club again. ...Fine. And how exactly am I supposed to let you know if I see anything suspicious?"

Hermione tapped her lip in thought, then gave a bright *Ooh!* and pulled out her beaded bag, rifling through it before deciding it was easier to just Summon what she was looking for. A gold coin came zooming out, and she flipped it into the air. Malfoy's hand shot out to catch it, then slipped back under the Cloak. "We used these coins in Fifth Year to organise DA meetings. They've got Protean Charms on them—and that's the Master coin you've got." She Summoned another coin and passed it to Harry, still speaking to Malfoy. "You just perform a spell to alter the charm's wording, and it should be reflected in Harry's copy."

"I know how they work," Malfoy muttered, and Hermione's brows lifted, but she let it go. He pulled the Cloak back just far enough to expose his face, fixing Hermione and Ron with a pinch-lipped look. "...Don't let Potter out of your sight. I won't be able to swoop to the rescue like last time, and you know he likes to go wandering off into dark corners on his own."

"*Hey,*" Harry hissed.

"We'll be with him every minute," Hermione reassured, and Harry felt very much like a child at the moment, especially when Ron ruffled his hair and said, "Maybe we should slap *him* with a Shackling Spell this time."

Harry batted Ron's hand away, running his hand through his Glamoured hair to settle it again; it was much more obliging than his real hair. He frowned at Malfoy, then sighed. "...You be safe, too."

"As if I needed reminding," Malfoy said, then pulled the cloak back down over his face and disappeared, the crunch of dry leaves under his feet the only indication he'd gone to stand watch back at the gate.

"...Right, here goes," Hermione said. "Well go on, knock!"

Harry raised his hand again and rapped three times on the thick, black door. It looked like something from Arthurian lore: wide enough for three people to pass through abreast and studded with iron nails and strappings. The knocker was shaped like an eagle and glowered down at them with a fierce, judging gaze. Maybe this actually *had* been a castle tower at some point.

Several long seconds passed, and then came the sound of many locks being disengaged, and the door creaked open—just enough for a white face to peek out at them. Standing barefoot in what looked to be a faded and stained nightshirt—had he just woken? It was past noon—with his white, candyfloss hair lying lank and unkempt, Xenophilius Lovegood was nearly unrecognisable, a completely different man from the comparatively dapper visage he'd presented at Bill and Fleur's wedding.

“Who goes there? What's your business? Where've you come from? Why have you come here?” The questions fell from his lips in a rapid-fire, quavering tremolo, and his eyes flicked back and forth from Ron to Hermione to Harry and back again, suspicion clouding his features.

They hadn't anticipated this uncharacteristically cool reception, even with their Glamoured disguises; Luna had time and again invited them to visit when Harry was around the Burrow, assuring them they would receive a warm welcome and that her father was always delighted to regale pop-in visitors with his most recent findings concerning the mating rituals of some fantastic beast or another. He'd been under the impression Xenophilius was a man of perpetual good humour, not unlike his daughter.

“Hello, Mr. Lovegood,” Harry said, slowly extending a hand—even as Xenophilius recoiled, his pale face slipping into the darkness of his home. “I'm—” He dared a quick glance over at Hermione and Ron, but they didn't try to stop him. He wondered what Malfoy would say in their stead, then raised his wand and tapped his crown, dispelling the Glamour. “...I'm Harry Potter. And this is Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley.”

“Oh—oh my...” Xenophilius brought a hand to his mouth, and Harry didn't miss the way his eyes flicked to Harry's forehead, as if to check there was really a scar there. His lips

thinned, and his grip on the door tightened, knuckles white.

Fearing they risked having the door slammed in their faces if he didn't think quickly, Harry asked, "We're sorry to drop by unannounced like this, Mr. Lovegood—only, we've got something we'd really like to ask you about. I promise we won't take too much of your time." He tried to peek around Xenophilius to get a look inside the house, but it was a difficult thing. "Could we, er, come inside? Just for a bit?"

Xenophilius's gaze went over their heads, scanning the wild garden through which they'd come to reach the house. Did he have dangerous creatures lurking about in the tangles and snares of magical plants? Harry wouldn't have put it past the Lovegoods, come to think of it. "I...well, I'd like to—it's only polite, but..." He swallowed thickly, licking his lips. "I'm not so sure it's *wise*—the state of things being what it is. You're putting me in quite a difficult position..."

"And we're *really* sorry about that, sir—but I promise we'll be out of your hair quick as we can!" He didn't want to have come all this way, taken this risk, only to be turned away. Now that they were here, he could feel his curiosity mounting as well.

Xenophilius dithered a bit longer, smacking his lips in distress, before sighing in a very put-upon way and tugging the door open wider. "...All right, then—but get inside, *quickly!* And this really must be a short visit; I'm terribly busy, you see."

He waved them inside, and no sooner had Ron, who was drawing up the rear, made it over the threshold than Xenophilius slammed the door shut once more, bolting it tight and engaging no fewer than a half-dozen locks of different makes and sizes. A good thing they'd left Malfoy to stand guard under the Cloak; he might have gotten squashed.

Rather than opening into an entryway or even a sitting room, the door had brought them into an open space that looked, between the griddle and sink and coldbox with a little dining table in the middle of everything, like it was meant to be a kitchen. It was a bright, cheery room, its curving walls painted robin's-egg blue and decorated with all manner of hand-drawn flowers and birds and insects. Luna's work, no doubt; he'd seen her doodling during DA meetings, and clearly her father had been keen to foster her

talents in every way possible.

There came a loud *BANG!* from somewhere above them, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione gave a violent jolt, though Xenophilius didn't seem to notice, only shuffling toward a wrought-iron staircase spiralling up to the floor above. He crooked a finger absently in their direction, beckoning.

“Well, if you're wanting to come up, you might as well,” said Xenophilius, mopping his forehead of sweat; it was uncomfortably warm inside, despite the chill of winter lurking just beyond that imposing front door.

Harry cut a worried look to the others—this wasn't going to wind up being another ‘Bathilda’, was it?—but Ron just shrugged, and Hermione shooed him forward. He hoped the bang had only been Luna swatting Wrackspurts or something.

Xenophilius led the way up the stairs, and Harry, Hermione, and Ron followed, their eyes going everywhere in the fantastically strange house. Hermione, one hand on the railing, tapped her crown and Ron's in succession, dispelling their Glamours now that they were safely indoors. This floor looked at first blush to be a living room—but the huge clanging printing press chugging along in the corner suggested it doubled as a workspace.

“Step lively,” Xenophilius warned, and a good thing he did, for while the kitchen space below had been a bit untidy with back issues of *The Quibbler* piling up on the table and dishes sitting dirty in the sink and a lone slipper hiding under the range in want of a mate, *this* room was a shrine to all things cluttered, and the Lovegoods seemed to be fervent worshippers. Stacks of bric-a-brac and piles of knick-knacks outlined the meandering paths through which they were meant to tread, and Harry was reminded of the towering piles of junk he'd glimpsed within the Room of Requirement when he'd entered in the hopes of getting rid of the half-blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*.

Nowhere, though, amidst the towers of books and haphazardly scattered papers and parchments and curious models of creatures he strongly suspected did not actually exist did he see Luna; the loud *BANG* from earlier, he could now see, had come from a

massive printing press, which was rattling and rocking on its moorings as it churned out fresh copies of *The Quibbler*.

“Oh—goodness, you weren’t meant to see—” Xenophilius charged through the debris, nearly tripping over a potted plant that looked like it hadn’t been watered or seen the sun in weeks, and grabbed a faded quilt thrown over the back of an armchair, tossing it over the printing press. Harry didn’t see why he’d bothered, as uncollected copies of what was likely the latest edition of the paper continued to fly from the mouth of the press, fluttering to the floor around their feet. Xenophilius seemed satisfied, though, and turned to face Harry. “Now then, you said you needed to ask me something? Pray, make it quick.”

Xenophilius looked on the verge of tossing them out on their collective arses if they didn’t make their case quickly enough, so Harry took a breath, remarks already prepared—

“Oh—dear!” Hermione gasped, brows knit in horror. “Mr. Lovegood, *what is that?!*” With one trembling finger, she pointed at an enormous horn that had been mounted on the wall like a trophy kill. Nearly as long as Ron was tall, it was a stony grey colour and spiralled up from the base to the tip, kind of like a unicorn horn, if the unicorn had been the size of a Hungarian Horntail.

“Ah, a recent acquisition—it’s the horn of the elusive Crumple-Horned Snorkack,” said Xenophilius absently as he moved an old tea set off the seat of one of the armchairs scattered about the room.

Hermione turned to Harry and Ron, still scandalised. “That’s *not* from a Crumple-Horned anything; it’s a—”

“C’mon, ‘Mione—we’re guests,” Ron urged. “Let him have his delusions.” He placed a hand on her arm, but Hermione shook him off, rounding on Harry when it seemed she’d get no support from Ron’s corner.

“That’s an *Erumpent horn!* I recognise it from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find*

Them! Those things are *extraordinarily* dangerous—far too dangerous to keep lying about the house! I’m not even sure he’s licensed to own it—you’ve got to have special permission—” Probably seeing Harry’s eyes glaze over, she scoffed and turned to Xenophilius, pleading, “Mr. Lovegood, you *have* to get rid of that thing! They’re terribly unstable once they’ve been harvested! Once false move and this whole place could be blown sky high!”

Her strident tones seemed to absolve Xenophilius of a bit of his good humour, and he drew himself up. “My dear girl, the Crumple-Horned Snorkack is not *dangerous*,” he said with an affected drawl that sounded academic. “I’ve been professionally trained in Snorcack Husbandry by the Grand Duchess of—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lovegood, but that’s not *anything* from a Snorcack! It’s an Erumpent horn, and from the looks of the loss of veining at the base, it’s *incredibly* volatile! If you don’t get rid of it straight away—”

“While I usually am only too happy to discuss the nature of the magical but ever-so-shy Snorcack with guests, as I mentioned to you earlier: I’m quite busy today, many errands to run you know, so—” He turned back to Harry, shutting Hermione out. “If you could explain what exactly it is you need from me, Mr. Potter?”

Harry licked his lips, shooting an apologetic look at Hermione, then said, “We were hoping you might be able to help us, Mr. Lovegood.”

Xenophilius looked torn, his fingers worrying at the hem of his nightshirt. “That’s quite a risk you’re asking of me, you know—helping Harry Potter, with things as they are these days.”

“*What?*” Ron said, flabbergasted. “Hold up—aren’t you telling everyone and their brother they ought to make helping Harry do whatever needs doing their number one priority?” He pointed to the press, still banging and clattering beneath the tablecloth. “Or did Wrackspurts get into the inking plates again?”

“Of course not, Wrackspurts primarily dwell on the Ethereal Plane.” Xenophilius waved

him away. “But, well, circumstances have changed, and I fear I can no longer in good conscience advocate such a position...”

“Rules for thee but not for me, then?” Ron bit out with a fierce glower. “Didn’t realise Luna’s dad was a hypocritical coward.”

“Ron...” Hermione chided softly.

Xenophilius had no response to the accusation, though, only seemed to hunch in on himself, shoulders shrinking and expression falling. Harry was beginning to regret coming here; he hadn’t wanted to do so in the first place, and now that he could see how uncomfortable they were making Luna’s dad, he felt even worse for it.

“Well, we’ve come all this way,” Hermione said, glancing at the ceiling, where the wrought-iron staircase continued to spiral upwards to another level. “Maybe we could catch up with Luna first? And then Mr. Lovegood can decide if he thinks he ought to help us or not. Is that her room up there? Is she home?”

Xenophilius blanched at the suggestion, mouthing something to himself before firming his jaw. When he spoke, his voice was breathy and tremulous, nearly lost in the racket the printing press was making. “Luna...my Luna is presently out—down at the stream, fishing for Plimpies. She makes a lovely Plimpie stew, you know—warm and filling, we go through gallons of it most ever winter. We...” He licked his lips, then nodded to himself. “I’m sure she’d love to see you. I’ll just run and let her know you’re here, and then...then we can discuss how I might be able to help you while she prepares stew for us.”

Before Harry could protest that they really didn’t have time to stay for dinner—not least of all because they couldn’t just leave Malfoy sitting around outside freezing his arse off while they slurped down bowls of stewed whatever-the-heck Plimpies were—Xenophilius had darted for the staircase, nearly tumbling end-over-head in his rush. A moment later, they heard the clacking of the locks being disengaged and the great *THUD* of the front door slamming shut.

“I figured Xenophilius was a loon, but I never quite took him for a coward,” Ron spat.

“Guess Luna got the guts of the family. It’s probably *her* ghostwriting all the articles supporting Harry in *The Quibbler*.”

“I can’t entirely blame him—he’s only human. Plus, it’s not his own safety he’s got to be worried about,” Hermione reasoned. “Luna’s still enrolled at Hogwarts, after all—she might be in more danger than she realises...” She trailed off, frowning in thought. “Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to come here...”

“I’ll accept that, ‘You were right, Harry,’ any time you’re ready to offer it,” Harry said, giving her a wan smile. “Let’s just talk to him, get the answers we need as quickly as possible, and get out of here. Luna will understand if we have to cut our visit short.”

Hermione nodded, then glared up at the Erumpent Horn. “Right, but we should keep well away from that thing—one false move, and Malfoy’ll have to finish the Horcrux hunt on his own.”

They kept to the opposite side of the room as they waited for Xenophilius to return, and Harry stared out the window, which overlooked the wild garden out front. He could see the broken-down gate from here and wondered if Malfoy was still down there. He could be staring up at Harry right now—or making rude gestures—and Harry wouldn’t know. He gave a weak little wave, just in case, to let Malfoy know they were all right and that Mr. Lovegood hadn’t actually been Voldemort in disguise.

“What’re you doing?” Ron asked, then shouldered Harry aside to peer out the window himself. “Did you see Luna?”

“Oh, no, thought I did.”

They heard the front door creak open again, then shut with a loud thump, and a moment later, Xenophilius had climbed back up the spiral staircase, precariously balancing a tray of mismatched teacups and a steaming teapot on his head. “While we wait for Luna to return, would you care to enjoy an infusion of Gurdyroots, prepared and presented in the traditional style of the native peoples of Vanuatu?”

“But Gurdyroots were first cultivated in—” Hermione started, then fell silent at Harry’s quelling look. They didn’t have time to get into this again.

“Home-grown, of course—you cannot trust the provenance of imports,” Xenophilius continued, as if Hermione had not spoken at all. He carefully removed the tray from his head, setting it atop one of the tottering stacks of books, and poured from the teapot a deep-purple liquid that had the consistency of glue and which, Harry suspected, did not taste half as good. “I’ve told Luna she has visitors—she’s just down at Bottom Bridge now, netting up the last of the Plimpies to stew. She was delighted to hear you’d come calling, so I’m sure she’ll be along any minute now.” He began passing the teacups around to Harry, Hermione, and Ron. “Have a seat, my friends, and help yourselves to sugar if you feel the need. We Lovegoods take ours straight.”

Harry hadn’t a clue where they were meant to sit unless it was on the printing press or perched on a pile of old editions of *The Quibbler*, so he stayed standing. Xenophilius uncovered another armchair for himself—that was three now, Harry counted—when he lifted a papier-mâché model of a faerie house and placed it gently on the floor beside an ottoman, settling in with his hands folded over his stomach. “Now then, I shall help you, if I can—but I make no promises. What would you ask of me, Mr. Potter?”

Harry took a breath; here went nothing. “Well...you were wearing a symbol on a necklace at Bill and Fleur’s wedding—a circle surrounded by a triangle with a line through its centre. Do you remember the piece? We wondered if...if there was any particular meaning to it—or where you might have come across it?”

Xenophilius’s wiry white eyebrows lifted into his messy fringe. “Oh, dear me, boy—there’s a *very* special meaning to it of course! That was the symbol of the Deathly Hallows!”

He spoke the words ‘deathly hallows’ with a sort of grandeur and gravity—and Harry wondered if they were supposed to have heard the term before. A quick glance at Hermione and Ron said they were just as confused as he was. “I—I’m sorry, the Deathly...Hallows?”

“Yes! I take it by that perplexed tone you’ve not heard of them, then?” Xenophilius nodded, understanding. “Well, they certainly don’t teach you about such things at Hogwarts, I’d wager! But as my Luna will tell you, not all great knowledge is found in books and lectures! No, the tale of the Hallows must generally be passed from one Quester to another—from one wondering, wandering mind to another equally receptive!”

He sipped at his Gurdyroot infusion and swallowed with a smacking sigh. To be polite, Harry took a sip from his own cup and nearly gagged, tamping down the urge to retch. It tasted like someone had pureed a bagful of bogey-flavoured Every-Flavour Beans. Malfoy would not be sad he’d missed out on this.

“A—a ‘quester’, sir? I’m afraid this is new to us—could you maybe start from the beginning?”

“Do the Hallows have anything to do with Grindelwald, Mr. Lovegood?” Hermione asked, having dared to edge just a bit closer to the Erumpent horn in order to be a participating member of the conversation. “It’s only, we’ve heard that he used this symbol in correspondence—”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re going to try and rough me up as well, like that ignorant upstart at the wedding! Accusing me of sporting the symbol of a Dark wizard when I was merely indicating myself to be a believer, in the hopes of finding others to help me in my Quest.”

“But why would he think it was the symbol of a Dark wizard?” Hermione asked. “Are the Hallows dangerous objects, then?”

“You’re so eager to label that which you don’t understand ‘dangerous’, young lady!” Xenophilius tapped the side of his nose. “Knowledge is the only true safety we may rely upon some days. Forewarned is forearmed.”

“That doesn’t answer my question at all...” Hermione muttered under her breath, crossing her arms over her chest.

“There’s nothing *Dark* about the Hallows,” Xenophilius scoffed, turning back to Harry. “At least not in the way modern wizards might consider. Certainly they can be used to mischievous ends—*have* been used, even—but a wizard’s wand can be used to harm as easily as to heal. They’re tools, nothing more, nothing less.”

“So...they’re objects? Magical artefacts?” Harry asked, and Xenophilius nodded, swirling the infusion in his cup as if it were a fine wine. “But—what *exactly* are they? And what do you mean your ‘quest’?”

“The Quest, Mr. Potter! *The Quest*—to find the Hallows, master them, and in doing so become master of Death itself!”

Harry felt a chill of foreboding run down his spine, and Hermione cut in, “Master of Death? Are you—do you mean *necromancy*?”

“Pah!” Xenophilius finished his cup with a smacking slurp, placing it atop a teetering tower of old copies of *The Quibbler*. “Clearly we’ll have to start at the *beginning* of the beginning, then!” He clasped his hands together. “Now, you’ll of course be familiar with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’, no? A common wizarding fairy tale.”

“Uh...” Harry said, even as Ron nodded, and Hermione said, “Yes, of course.”

Xenophilius frowned. “No, Mr. Potter? Such a shame...” He cast about the room, his eyes scanning the chaos. “Let’s see, I’m certain I recall seeing my copy of the tales just around here last Tuesday...”

“Oh, if it’s *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* you’re looking for, I’ve a copy myself, Mr. Lovegood,” Hermione said, reaching into her beaded handbag. “Just here.” From it, she withdrew the book that Dumbledore had left her in his will.

Xenophilius stared at the book with an awestruck expression. “Might that be an original? A first print even, perhaps?”

“Er, I think it is...”

“Even better! Then, my dear, why don’t you read the ‘Tale of the Three Brothers’ aloud for us all? Best to make sure we’re all on the same page before charging forward. If you’re to embark on the Quest, you’ll want to start off on the right foot!”

Harry still didn’t quite understand what this ‘Quest’ was, and they certainly weren’t about to embark on anything while there were Horcruxes out there waiting to be discovered and destroyed, but Xenophilius did not seem inclined to discuss the matter further until Harry had sat through story time.

Hermione shrugged in apology, then opened the book to the page she’d shown Harry some months back, with the symbol they were investigating scrawled next to the heading. Harry hadn’t bothered to sit down and read it yet, though he knew Malfoy had been engrossed in it on more than one occasion.

She gave a little cough to clear her throat and began to read.

“Three brothers once, in times of old, walked down a lonely road. ‘Twas twilight then, and race they did, toward home, not to be slowed—”

“Mum always used to say it was midnight,” said Ron in a loudly whispered aside to Harry. “Always sounded spookier to me that way.”

“Do you *mind*?” Hermione huffed, and Ron held his hands up in defence, then mimed zipping his lips together. Xenophilius didn’t seem to notice the interruption, his attention fixed on the window overlooking the garden. From this angle, all they could see were the tops of the hedges and the scattered cloud cover crawling over the village.

Hermione pursed her lips, evidently irritated at having been thrown off her rhythm, but she quickly recovered her composure, continuing to read.

“A river wide before them stretched, too deep to wade across—but wizards were these brothers three, so all was not yet lost. Wands they produced to work their wiles and magic through them flowed; a bridge appeared from naught but air, so on and on they strode. But hardly to the centre of the bridge had they advanced, when blocked

the path before them was, as Death upon them chanced.

“His hooded robe was black as night, his fingers long and pale, for Death is not a mortal but hails from beyond the veil—”

“Wait—*Death?*” Harry boggled. What the hell kind of story *was* this?

It was now Harry’s turn to be on the receiving end of Hermione’s glare. “Yes, *Death*. It’s a story—there are going to be fantastic characters in them sometimes.”

He ducked his head. “Oh—yeah, no, sorry.” He motioned for her to continue. “No more interruptions.”

Hermione brushed her hair away from her face, exhaling loudly through her nose, and turned her focus back to the book.

“‘Good brothers three,’ spoke Death to them, ‘You have my deep respect—as bested have you me this day, your lives I shan’t collect. As proof of your bold cleverness a boon I’ll give to you; speak up and say how Death may grant each brother here his due.’

“The eldest was a man of spite, combative in his mood, and as he hoped to one day rule, a plan within him brewed. ‘O Death,’ he boomed, ‘Grant me your wand—a worthy token true; a wand that ne’er shall lose a duel, a wand that will subdue.’

“And Death approached an elder tree and begged its branches bow—and fashioned for the brother here a wand of great renown. ‘Be wary,’ warned the shade in black, ‘For those who wield such wands cannot afford a moment’s rest, lest broken be their bonds.’

“The second was a man of pride who sought to humble Death. ‘I want,’ he said, ‘to revive those who’ve drawn their final breath.’ So Death approached the riverbank and plucked a single stone. ‘This will, when used, call back to you a soul already flown.’

“The youngest, now, was good and wise and humblest of the three, and Death he

knew was cunning, quite, and difficult to flee. 'I wish to hide from all around, to bothered never be,' so Death unclasped from 'round his throat a Cloak that none could see."

Harry couldn't resist himself, turning to Ron with raised brows. "A cloak no one could see—an Invisibility Cloak?"

Ron shrugged. "There's always crazy magical items popping up in these stories."

Hermione cleared her throat, and they chorused, "Sorry..."

She sighed. "Then Death allowed the brothers three to pass thence unperturbed, and homeward bound did they then make, their way no more disturbed.

"The eldest soon perchanced to test the power of his gift: he struck a fellow wizard dead, his judgement cruel and swift. 'My magic is unparalleled, my might beyond compare! A Wand purloined from Death himself—let every man beware!"

"But Death had warned the brother well against such boastful taunts, and sure enough, word travelled 'round, inviting grave response. The brother drank the night away and stumbled to his bed, and as he slept, a thief in-crept, collecting Wand—and head.

"Now Brother Two, his Stone in hand, had plans himself as well: a lovely girl, lost young and soon, he hoped to see a spell. But once he turned the Stone o'er thrice within his clutching grasp, the shade that stood before him was not one he wished to clasp. She was, he thought, so sad and cold, deep sorrow in her eyes, and though he begged her stay with him, the truth was undisguised: This woman was not of this plane, no longer his to hold—so driven mad with longing deep, he joined her in the mould.

Harry felt a chill ripple down his spine. These were only stories, right?

"Death had, by now, collected two of three souls he was due, but though he searched for years on end, the youngest ducked his view. And then one day, with shadows long,

the brother doffed his Cloak—and Death saw he was old and grey, his voice a raspy croak: ‘My son,’ he said, ‘This Cloak is yours, long has it served me well. Its prov’nance is quite curious—too curious to tell. I pray you wrap this Cloak up tight around your shoulders sound, and never let it leave your sight—so that you won’t be found. But should time come when you’ve a child and sense your journey’s end—then, Son, bequeath this Cloak to them, and greet Death as a friend.’

“And it was here Death realised he was not owed a soul—the brother, now a father-grand, would join him on a stroll. ‘Hello, my friend,’ the old man said, a twinkle in his eye, and clasped did he Death’s hand in his—to go, but not to die.”

With a soft huff of accomplishment, Hermione closed the book—and a long beat of silence passed as the words washed over them. “Well,” Xenophilius said at last, breaking the silence as he readjusted his seat in the chair. “There you have it! The Deathly Hallows, plain as day.”

“Plain as...what?” Hermione asked, slipping the book back into her bag. “You still haven’t explained what these ‘deathly hallows’ are! Are they ghosts or something?”

“Ghosts? Of course not! They’re the *Hallows*. You just finished telling their tale!” Xenophilius yanked open a drawer on a sidetable and scrabbled through it for a quill, tearing a page from the book on top of the pile he’d been using as a footrest. Hermione released a quiet squeak of horror at the sight. “As you can see, we have the first brother’s Elder Wand...” He drew a vertical line. “And then the second brother’s Resurrection Stone.” And now a circle, bisected by the line. “And the third brother’s Cloak of Invisibility.” Finally, a triangle around the circle, with the line at its centre. It was clearly the very same symbol that Xenophilius had worn to the wedding, the same one drawn in Hermione’s book and etched into a crumbling gravestone in Godric’s Hollow. “These three objects together make the Deathly Hallows—magical items of unfathomable power. This symbol is used to identify those of us on the Quest to find them and reunite them.”

“Reunite them?” Hermione said, frowning. “But...but that was just a *story*.”

“Don’t all great tales eventually become stories, watered down over the ages into palatable bite-size nuggets we might feed to our children before bed?” Xenophilius shook his head, smile gone just a bit smug. “Some might see in Beedle’s poem a simple fairy tale—but those of us who’ve dedicated our lives to the hunt for the Hallows recognise the clues! In reuniting the Hallows—as they once were before Death gave them to the brothers—one may become as Death himself and master that last, final moment!”

He glanced out the window again, staring up at the sky. The sun had moved a bit since they’d been here; it must have been going on an hour or more. Malfoy would be getting anxious, but he’d have to be patient a bit longer. “...I expect Luna will be returning soon. It’s nearly dinner time.”

“So—when you say ‘become as Death himself’—” Ron began, “You mean like...*become Death?*”

“Bah, don’t take everything so *literally*, Mr. Weasley! Once one has gathered together the Hallows, he may effectively choose where and when and *who* shall die, including himself! The Elder Wand ensures he may not be struck down by another, the Resurrection Stone gives him the power to recall others from beyond the veil, and the Invisibility Cloak allows him to slip by others, undetected and unremarked until the time of his choosing. It’s a simple enough concept: find the Hallows, track them down wherever they’ve wandered across the centuries, and you need not fear Death’s coming.”

“Wait, are you trying to say these things—these ‘Hallows’—actually exist?” Hermione asked, and Harry knew that she was doing her level best to keep her scepticism out of her voice, but she hadn’t been entirely successful. “I’m sorry, that seems *quite* far-fetched—and placing rather a lot of faith in a children’s story. Of course there are such things as Invisibility Cloaks—they’re rare, but they do exist. But—”

“No, no, do not be deceived, my dear! While there certainly have been imitations, crude mockeries that claim to be Cloaks of Invisibility, the Third Hallow is indeed a *true* Invisibility Cloak! Disillusionment Charms and Bedazzling Hexes fade without proper

upkeep and recasting and can be removed with the mere flick of a wand—and Demiguise hair is difficult to weave and turns brittle after harvesting, rendering its utility in fashioning Invisibility Cloaks moot.” Xenophilius leaned forward, adjusting his seat until he was perched on the edge of his cushion. “The third brother’s gift, though, does precisely what one would hope such a cloak would do: renders the wearer completely invisible to the eye, never fading, never failing. It requires no Charms or Hexes, it cannot be destroyed by typical means or its magic dispelled—it is a cloak fit to sit upon the shoulders of immortals and eternal. You don’t come across a piece like that every day, I expect!”

Harry could understand why Xenophilius might say such a thing—but he, in fact, did come across a piece like that every day, and when he locked eyes with Hermione and Ron, he could see they were thinking the same thing. They had all seen, had all *touched*, precisely one such cloak—and Draco Malfoy was waiting for them just outside the front gate, hidden under it at that very moment.

“I...I suppose so,” Hermione at last allowed, and Xenophilius slapped the arm of his chair, settling back.

“Precisely! So you can see that these are no ordinary objects, not even the Cloak, which might at first blush seem the most mundane of them. No Cloak manufactured today could hold a candle to a true Hallow. If those sorts of objects could simply be procured by Owl Post, why I expect the possessor would be rich beyond imagination! He could waltz right into Gringotts and have the run of the place!”

Harry was pretty sure breaking into a place like Gringotts would still be pretty impossible, even *with* an Invisibility Cloak that had once belonged to Death, but he kept quiet.

“But—even *if* such a Cloak existed,” Hermione continued, “you can’t mean to say the *Stone* does as well. There’s just no way such a thing *could* exist even—Necromancy is an unexplored art, for good reason, but it’s based on well-founded magical lore and theory.”

Xenophilius raised a ringer. “But the Resurrection Stone does not abide by the rules of

mortals—it exists entirely to disrupt those rules! We cannot apply our narrow-minded views of what should and should not exist to objects that lie outside of our own logic.”

Hermione looked like she was about to start steaming like the teapot full of Gurdyroot infusion, and Harry cut in to spare her nerves. “Well what about the first brother’s gift, then? The wand that no one can beat—you think it exists too?”

“Ah, the Elder Wand...” Xenophilius leaned back and linked his fingers together over his chest. “Well, while we may debate over the existence of stones and cloaks ‘til sunup, of the Wand’s existence there can be no doubt, for its dark work can be seen scrawled through the annals of history—it cannot hide; it does not want to.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “...You speak of it as if it’s *conscious*.”

“I cannot say for certain that it isn’t!”

“A *thinking* wand?”

“And why not? We do not question that our wands choose us, in their own way.”

“But that’s entirely different; that’s not a *choice* so much as the wand attuning to the nearest witch or wizard who—”

Xenophilius turned his attention back to Harry, perhaps sensing Hermione wasn’t going to be quite as receptive as he might have hoped; Harry didn’t know what that said about *him*. “The Elder Wand *does* exist, my boy. It taunts, it teases—it tempts weak men to try their hand at taming it. It seeks those rich in power and weak in mind—and when it has tired of one master...it finds its way into the hand of a new one.”

“And...how is that?” Harry asked.

“Well, he who would become the new master of the Wand must claim it from its previous owner, of course.” Xenophilius nodded. “Notice I have said *claim*—and not capture. The Elder Wand is a wand like no other, in that it is a wand like *any* other.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“While it may have been a true wand of elder when granted by Death to the brother, it was, at its most basic, only a flimsy piece of wood. The Wand itself has likely long been destroyed, the wood having broken down over time and the core decayed—but its *magic*, what makes it a truly invincible weapon, has persisted, passing from wizard to wizard, as if immortal.”

“If it’s an invincible weapon, then how come it’s been passed around so often?” Ron asked. “Doesn’t seem to have worked out too well for the first guy.”

“Because it was not the First Brother’s wand—it was *Death’s*, fashioned by his hand. It is as bloodthirsty as its true master, and so any who wish to wield it must themselves become bloodthirsty as well. It will not be won in a proper duel; it will not be snatched in due course of spellwork. You must well and truly defeat its previous master and claim its power—that is how you win the loyalty of the Elder Wand. The wand like any other.”

Harry shook his head. “I still don’t understand what you mean—the wand was destroyed?”

“Yes, as I said,” Xenophilius huffed, clearly getting irritated that Harry wasn’t following. “The power is in the *magic* of the wand—not the physical wand itself! It is this power that now flows from wand to wand—”

“Wand to wand?” Hermione interrupted. “Before you said wizard to wizard!”

“And the wand chooses the wizard, no? He who has the power of the Elder Wand *has* the Elder Wand, in essence.”

Hermione’s brows furrowed, then her eyes widened. “You mean to say that...the power *transfers* to the wand of whichever wizard has won its allegiance?”

Xenophilius nodded eagerly. “Yes, precisely! This has made the Elder Wand rather a bit trickier to track than it once was. Historically, it was easy enough to follow the trail of the Wand as it changed from hand to hand, given the particularly bloody fashion it tended to

do so. But once the physical embodiment of the Wand was destroyed—or broken down, the truth of the matter is sketchy—it became much more difficult to trace. Now, *any* wand can hold the power of the Elder Wand. Why...” Xenophilius extended a hand to Harry. “Mr. Potter could be in possession of the Elder Wand right this very moment and might not even realise it. Until he wielded it in battle, of course.”

Harry pulled his wand from his back pocket, staring at it. It was just his ordinary holly wand, the same one he’d had since age eleven.

Hermione scoffed. “I’m sorry, but this all sounds like hogwash. Wands are no more and no less than what a skilled wandmaker makes of them. Once broken, they can sometimes be repaired, but their magic doesn’t—doesn’t *transfer*.”

“Of course not. Unless it is the Elder Wand.” Hermione’s hands clenched into fists, and Harry prepared to have to physically restrain her. “And much as you may not appreciate the power of the Elder Wand not conforming to your narrow-minded view of magic, young lady, I’m afraid it *does* exist—and many have paid for their mastery of it with their lives. Passing from despot to insurrectionist, from warlord to assassin, the Elder Wand has had a hand—figuratively speaking—in most every major political or martial event of the past thousand or more years, its mark remaining long after the Wand itself had turned to dust.”

“So...where’s it now?” Ron asked, voicing the question Harry himself had been about to pose.

“Well that’s the sixty-four-thousand-Galleon question, isn’t it! And if you could answer *that*, then you would be one-third more knowledgeable than we other Questers!” Xenophilius sighed, shaking his head. “Alas, while efforts have been made to track the Wand through its verified sightings, where it has been dubbed the Deathstick, or else the Wand of Destiny by its wielders, most agree that the trail goes cold following the vanquishing of the Dark Mage Loxias by his bastard twin sons, Arcus and Livius of the White Grove. Which of them actually struck the blow that ultimately felled Loxias, and into whose wand—Arcus’s of holly, or Livius’s of hawthorn—did the power of the Elder

Wand transfer? And whence did the power flow *then*? Charting the course becomes nigh impossible, the threads too frayed to follow. I expect we shall see it rear its head again in due course—the Elder Wand, as I said, has a craving for destruction and decadent displays—but for the time being, we can but wonder.”

Silence settled between them; even the printing press had cooled down, its magical cogs at rest.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Hermione said at length, fingers worrying the hem of her jacket. “All this Hallows business...it wouldn’t happen to involve someone by the name of ‘Ignotus’, would it?”

At this, Xenophilius seemed to brighten considerably, eyes widening. The name triggered something in Harry as well, but he couldn’t quite recall where he’d heard it before. “Why, young lady, you’ve been holding out on me! Making me think you a gormless rube with no true interest in the Hallows—and here you show you’re already familiar with one of the brothers himself!”

“Wait—*who’s* this Ignotus fellow?” Ron asked.

“Ignotus Peverell!” Xenophilius crowed, as Hermione added, “That was the name written on the gravestone we found in Godric’s Hollow—the one with the sign of the Hallows etched into it, remember?”

Xenophilius clapped, almost giddy, and he seemed quite a different person from the cowering ball of nerves he’d been thus far. “I’ve always said so, but the symbol of the Hallows adorning Ignotus’s grave is proof, there’s no mistaking it!”

“Proof...of what?” asked Harry, unaccountably curious. That name ‘Peverell’...it sounded familiar as well, but he couldn’t quite place it. Where had he heard it before...?

“Proof that the Peverell brothers—Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus—were the same three brothers spoken of in the tale! The original owners of the Hallows! You must understand that there are several factions of believers among we Questers, but I firmly side with my

brothers and sisters who have long held that the Peverells were the first to own the Hallows, and that it is *their* lines we ought to trace to locate the Hallows in the modern era, as these objects have a habit of circling back around to the bloodlines that first brought them into positions of significance in our world.”

Xenophilius spared another brief glance out the window—he’d done it so often, Harry wondered if it was a nervous tick. “Oh—dear me, look at the time,” he mumbled, reaching into his pocket to check a watch, his eyes passing over the face too quickly to have actually read the time. “You’ll all stay for dinner, of course.” He leapt to his feet, snatching up the tea tray and working his way through the trail he’d carved in the debris, headed for the spiral staircase. Harry quickly placed his cup—still nearly filled to the brim—on the tray as Xenophilius passed. “It’s been ages since I’ve had someone around to discuss the Quest with! I love my Luna dearly, but she doesn’t seem quite as invested in the challenge as I.”

“Who’d’ve thought *Luna*’d turn out to be the sane one in the family?” Ron muttered under his breath.

Once Xenophilius’s head of wild, white hair had disappeared and the sounds of him pattering about in the kitchen downstairs floated up to them, Harry asked Hermione, “... Okay, be brutally honest—something I’m sure won’t be a chore for you here: What do you think of this business? Hallows and all. I mean—it could be something, or it could be more Crumple-Horned Snorcacks, I suppose.”

She forced a wry smile at his teasing, then shook her head with a sigh. “I’m sorry, but this...this is just rubbish. An absolute waste of time—I’m certain that symbol means *something*, but this? This is too far-fetched, even by Lovegood standards, I think.”

“Probably got what we deserved,” Ron said, “Coming here in the first place.” He quickly added, “I mean, no offence, Hermione. Just—I think it was a long shot.”

“No,” she said, scratching her head wearily. “You’re right—it was a waste of time. We could’ve spent this entire afternoon researching!”

“Yeah, tragic...” Harry said, half to himself. He looked to Ron. “...So you don’t believe it either?”

Ron shrugged. “Nah; the story’s just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons. Whadyou call ‘em—morality tales? You know, you’re supposed to learn something about yourself from them.”

“What are you supposed to learn about yourself from that one, then?”

Ron tapped his chin. “...I dunno, but maybe that’s where they got the superstition about wands made of elder tree wood being unlucky?”

Harry had never heard of any such thing, but then again, these were wizarding fairy tales, so perhaps that was no great surprise—Ron would have entirely different traditions and superstitions from those with which Harry or Hermione might have been familiar.

A pungent stench drifted up from the kitchen—damn; it smelled like the soup was nearly ready. But where was Luna? Harry hadn’t heard the heavy door open again.

Hermione sighed. “I suppose that makes the most sense—maybe Dumbledore meant the book to be a kind of...I don’t know, spiritual guide? To keep us focused on what’s important in all this; I mean, it’s rather obvious which ‘Hallow’ you’re *meant* to choose, given the chance—”

“The Wand,” said Ron, just as Hermione continued with, “The Cloak,” and Harry said, “The Stone.”

They all three blinked at each other, a bit bemused—clearly they’d learned completely different things about themselves from this ‘morality tale’, and it showed.

“I mean, you’re *supposed* to say the Cloak, of course,” Ron said with a quick glance in Hermione’s direction, then he turned to Harry. “But come on! Who needs to be invisible when you’ve got an *unbeatable wand*?”

“Well you *certainly* haven’t complained about how useful Harry’s cloak’s been thus far,” Hermione said pointedly, one brow raised and arms crossed over her chest. “And ask yourself this: would you rather face You-Know-Who with a supposedly unbeatable wand that’s gotten all its former masters killed, or an Invisibility Cloak that even Death itself couldn’t track?”

“You think the Hallows were really crafted by Death, then?” Harry asked, and Hermione scoffed.

“Of course not—I’m hard-pressed to believe they even *exist*, let alone were created by a being from a children’s story.” She shook her head. “No—while there *are* stories about powerful, cruel wizards meeting violent ends throughout history, I’m inclined to believe that’s just because they were proud fools who got what was coming to them. Hubris has brought down more regimes than any spell yet crafted.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, which is why I’d make sure never to go *bragging* about it if I got my hands on the elder wand. That’s just begging for trouble, it is! Like—imagine Malfoy with it! He wouldn’t be able to keep quiet about it.” He gave a half-shrug. “I figure as long as you can keep your mouth shut about it, then it’s yours to do with as you please. People would just think you were a powerful wizard.”

“So then Xenophilius was telling the truth about all those ancient wizards?” Harry asked. “They really claimed to have an all-powerful wand?”

“Yes, they *claimed* as such,” Hermione said, giving Harry a look of fond exasperation. “But anyone who’s trained themselves well enough can go around proclaiming they’ve found themselves an unbeatable wand when it’s really just their own skill showing through. You ought to know perfectly well that wands are only as powerful as the wizards who wield them—so call it the Deathstick or Wand of Destiny or a Hallow, whatever you like. It’s still just a bit of wood and magical core and the innate abilities of whoever’s brandishing it, nothing more and nothing less. Let’s not forget—” She gave a sniff. “All those wizards who claimed to have an unbeatable wand were still defeated in the end, and whatever wand they were wielding didn’t seem to have made a difference.”

“But,” Harry said, “how many of them actually got beat in a duel? And how many of them got double-crossed, or were killed after boasting they had an unbeatable wand?” Hermione didn’t have a prompt answer for that.

“Well, I still wouldn’t say no to it. I’d just make sure to keep quiet about it,” Ron said.

“I’d like to see you try,” Hermione chuckled.

Ron frowned at her, then looked at Harry. “...So why would you take the Stone?”

Harry shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I? I like my wand the way it is, I’ve already got an Invisibility Cloak that suits me just fine. But with the Stone...I could see my parents again—and all the people I’ve lost since then. Sirius, Mad-Eye, Dumbledore too...” This war was far from over, and Harry didn’t doubt he would lose others still as precious to him before all was said and done. It was an easy choice for him to make.

“But the poem said that they didn’t *really* come back,” Hermione reminded gently. “The shade in the tale wasn’t the same as she’d been in life, and it eventually drove the second brother mad. I think the point of that part of the story was to teach you to know when to let go, that clinging hopelessly only prolongs suffering.”

Well, what did she know? She’d never lost anyone. Not like Harry had. He shrugged. “I suppose. There haven’t been any stories over the years about stones that can bring people back to life, have there?”

“Alas, no—it’s as far-fetched as it sounds. I imagine Beedle simply took the idea of the Philosopher’s Stone and embellished on it. You know, instead of a stone to extend life, it’s a stone to reverse death.”

Harry didn’t remind her that the Philosopher’s Stone had been real, though—so what did that say about the Resurrection Stone?

A bit of steam was wafting up from the kitchen now, bearing with it a stench growing in strength and now bordering on that of sweaty Quidditch jock strap. God, did the Lovegoods eat *anything* normal? He contemplated asking Hermione if she knew any

spells to help disguise the taste, as otherwise it was going to be difficult to eat enough of whatever was simmering down there to be polite. He'd almost rather drink a gallon of the Gurdyroot infusion.

"Well then what about the—" Ron dropped his voice, glancing quickly over at the stairwell. "The *Cloak*? That's the one I can't get over. Because, well, he's *right*—about how it's special and all. We've been using it for so long I kind of stopped appreciating it, but it's nothing like any of those other cloaks Mr. Lovegood described, is it? And I've never heard of anyone else who has anything like it. Plus we've never been caught under it—"

"We've had close calls, though," Hermione said. "And it's just doing its job; it's an *Invisibility Cloak*. That's what it *does*."

"The close calls weren't because someone spotted us through the Cloak though. And all that stuff Mr. Lovegood said about the other types of cloaks people pass off as 'Invisibility Cloaks', that was all true. Charms wear off, or the cloaks get ripped up by spells, and Demiguise hair loses its magic over time until it's just normal boring fabric. But Harry's Cloak isn't new; it was his dad's before it was his, so it's been around a while, but it's still in perfect working order!"

"Yes, all right," Hermione allowed, wrinkling her nose, "But that doesn't make it a *Hallow*, or even suggest that Hallows exist! The Stone, by its very nature, cannot..."

Her and Ron's conversation devolved into whispered arguing, and Harry, bored by now of their odd manner of flirtation, began to wander the room. He'd caught out of the corner of his eye a glint of something on the landing of the floor above, and he carefully picked his way over to the spiral staircase, craning his neck to peer up at the third level —

And found his own face staring back.

He thought at first it was a mirror on the ceiling, but when it didn't move, he recognised it as a painting. One hand on the railing, he let his curiosity guide him and placed a foot

on the bottommost step.

“And we haven’t even gotten into—Harry? Harry, where are you going? I don’t think we should wander off without Mr. Lovegood’s say-so. There’s no telling what other sorts of dangerous artefacts are lying around where we might unwittingly stumble across them!”

“Knew we should’ve put a Shackling Spell on him...”

But Harry’s head had already cleared the next landing, which held what could only be Luna’s bedroom. The walls were painted a rich navy blue, as was the ceiling, which was decorated with artful depictions of five familiar faces: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, all floating around a brilliant bronze star. He wondered if Luna had painted this after the battle at the Ministry, when they had infiltrated the Department of Mysteries together.

The paintings did not move like most magical portraits, but Harry was captivated by them all the same. A paint-splattered step-stool had been leaned against the wall, and Harry dragged it over and climbed to the top step to get a closer look at Luna’s handiwork. What he’d initially taken to be fine golden chains weaving around the pictures, linking them together, he now saw were actually a single word, repeated a thousand times over in golden ink: *friends*.

A sudden swell of affection for Luna rushed through him—mixed with guilt at having distressed and inconvenienced her father so. He would have to make a proper apology and visit again after this Horcrux business was done. Yes, he would do that.

He climbed back down, replacing the step-stool where he’d found it, and paced around the room. Beside the head of her bed sat a bureau covered in framed photographs, including a particularly large one showing a young Luna and a woman who looked very much like her. They were hugging and waving at Harry from across time, and he instinctively waved back, a small smile tugging at his lips.

The smile fell, though, when he realised the picture was quite dusty, the glass dark and murky. It reminded him uncomfortably of the pictures in Bathilda’s sitting room.

Something wasn't right here. The air smelled...flat, and dead. He stubbed his toe into the pale blue carpet beneath his trainers and kicked up a fine layer of dust. Opposite the foot of Luna's bed stood a tall wardrobe, its doors ajar; it was empty, and a spider had begun to build a web between the doors. Even the bed, now that he looked at it, did not seem as if it had been slept in recently, and he ran a finger along the headboard. It came away grimy with dust.

"Harry?" Hermione called, her head poking up as she ascended the staircase. "Are you all right?"

Before Harry could respond, Xenophilius returned to the floor below from the kitchen, holding another tray—this one laden with bowls of a thin, greasy soup the colour of dishwater.

Harry hurried back down the stairs, ignoring Hermione's startled *Harry?* "Mr. Lovegood," he said. "Where's Luna?"

Xenophilius drew to an abrupt stop, the tray trembling in his grasp. His eyes were wide and white. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your daughter, Luna. Our friend. Where is she?"

Xenophilius licked his lips, inclining his head toward the window. "I—well, I've told you, haven't I? She's just down at Bottom Bridge, fishing for Plimpies. She'll be returning very soon—"

"Then what's that soup made of?"

Xenophilius's mouth opened and closed a few times in quick succession—but nothing came out. He looked exceedingly distressed, even more so than he had when they arrived, and his eyes continued to flicker towards the window distractedly.

Harry turned to back Hermione and Ron, his face set in a grave expression. "I don't think Luna's here. I don't think she's been here for a while now—might not've even come home from Hogwarts. Her room's like a tomb—cold and dead. There's dust over

everything, her bed hasn't been slept in, all her clothes are gone..." He rounded on Xenophilius. "Let's try this again. *Where* is Luna? She's obviously not out fishing for anything, and why do you keep glancing out the window like—*Ah!*"

Harry hissed in pain as something stung his leg. He shoved his hand into his pocket—and pulled out the DA coin connected to Malfoy's. It was uncomfortably warm in his palm, and around its rim flashed a message that made Harry's blood run ice-cold: *DEATH EATERS*.

The bowls shattered as Xenophilius dropped the tray, spilling the rancid dishwater soup over the hardwood flooring. Harry, Hermione, and Ron already had their wands in hand and trained on Xenophilius before he could think to reach into his pocket to retrieve his own.

"They took my Luna!" he wailed, voice a desperate, watery hiss. "They didn't like *The Quibbler's* stance on supporting you—and now they've taken her from me as punishment! I've no idea where she is, or—or even if she's *alive!*" He took a tremulous breath. "B-but they did say that they might give her back, if I would just—"

"Just *what?*" Hermione snapped. "Because if the next words out of your mouth were about to be 'hand over Harry Potter', then things are going to get difficult."

"Out of our way," Ron said, angling his body to stand in front of Harry's. "You wanna turn Harry over to You-Know-Who and his cronies, you're gonna have to go through us."

Xenophilius's gaze bounced among the three of them, clearly sizing them up and trying to determine if he could take them on his own. His lips pursed into a thin, grim line. "...I can't let you go. Believe me, I *cannot*. They'll be here any moment, and if they see I've let you go, then my Luna will pay for it. Family first, I'm sorry my dear boy. I truly am."

For what it was worth, he sounded sorry—and Harry didn't think Xenophilius believed he had a choice. But he had no intention of going quietly, and he brought his wand up, pointing the tip squarely between Xenophilius's eyes. "And I'm sorry, too. We don't want to have to hurt you, Mr. Lovegood, but trust us: we will. So you can either get out of the

way or be moved. You can tell them you lost us, and that'll be the truth.”

“I...I'm afraid I—”

“*Harry!*” Hermione shouted, her wide-eyed gaze fixed on the window. A pair of figures on broomsticks zipped past, and in that moment of distraction, Xenophilius drew his wand, slashing it through the air in a familiar motion. Acting on instinct, Harry grabbed Ron and Hermione by the shoulder, leaping to the side and bringing them down with him so that the Stunning Spell Xenophilius had fired barely missed them, instead smashing into the Erumpent horn hanging on the far wall.

A sudden, violent explosion shook the very foundations of the tower, the sound itself hitting Harry square in the chest with real physical force. Shrapnel flew in all directions, pelting them before they could even think to throw up Shields. Harry was launched through the air, crashing into a bookcase that toppled forward and onto him, sending books of every size and sort raining down on Harry's head. He threw up his arms to protect himself, reminded distressingly of the night he'd woken to find Gryffindor Tower being attacked by a dragon.

A thick cloud of dust was thrown up by the force of the explosion, and Harry struggled blindly to free himself from the pile of books he was buried under, listening to Hermione's screaming and Ron's frantic shouts of *Harry! HARRY!* echoing from somewhere in the debris.

From the sound of a muffled groan near the staircase, it seemed like Xenophilius had been knocked off his feet and down into the kitchen below, and though he would have turned the three of them over to Death Eaters, Harry hoped he wasn't injured terribly. Wherever Luna was, she would be devastated to learn that her father had been hurt badly trying to save her.

Harry finally managed to move enough books off his chest and legs to struggle to his feet, coughing deeply as he was forced to inhale thick, choking dust. He pulled off his glasses and wiped the lenses with the sleeve of his shirt, but it did little good. He could make out through the destruction, though, that the ceiling above had caved in, and Luna's bed was

hanging down through the hole, looking as if it might come crashing down on their heads at any moment.

“Hermione? Ron?” he called, coughing to clear his lungs. “Where are—”

“*Shh!*” Hermione hissed, suddenly there at his elbow and steadying him when he gave a start. She was caked in white dust from the walls and ceiling, and the confetti-like remains of exploded books and parchment had gotten caught in her hair.

She tugged on his arm, bringing him over to the bent and broken railing where the spiral stair had been. Ron was already leaning over to peer down into the kitchen, and Hermione brought a finger to her lips to remind the both of them to be quiet. He realised why when the door downstairs crashed open, nearly falling off its hinges with the force of the spell that had been used on it.

“See? What’d I tell you, Travers—no rush, no rush at all. Just more tripe from this nutter.”

Harry couldn’t see who was speaking, but he remembered the name ‘Travers’—he’d been one of the Death Eaters at the Ministry when they’d stolen the Locket and rescued Malfoy.

“It—it’s not, I promise you: Harry Potter is upstairs—”

There came a loud *BANG*, and Xenophilius whimpered. “And my left nut’s made of solid gold. Keep your hands to yourself—you’ll get grime on our robes.” Xenophilius gave a sharp, warbling gasp. “Now, like I said the last time you called us out here: you’re gonna *pay* if you’ve summoned us for anything less than something *damn solid*.” Another bang, another squeal. “You want the little bitch back in one piece? Bring us somethin’ *good*. We don’t want your bleedin’ headdress, we don’t want your proof of Crinkle-headed Snuffalumps—”

“I—It’s Crumple-horned—” Another sharp *BANG* silenced him.

“And what was that explosion just now? Got tired of our little pop-ins? Thought you’d

lure us out here and off us, hm? Did you actually think you'd get your girl back that way?"

"I—I wasn't, I promise. I'm not sure what...but Harry Potter truly is up there, I swear it..."

"Pah, you've never seen Potter in your life. You know, I'm gettin' *awfully* tired of your lip, Lovegood—no one reads your rag anymore, so what good are you to us? Plus, you look like *shite*; I think we oughta just put you out of your misery..."

"Mind your spellwork, Selwyn," came a second voice, one Harry vaguely recognised as Travers's from their brief encounter Ministry. "Whole place looks like it's about to fall down around our ears. What've you been up to, Lovegood? Forget to open a Howler?" The crunch of debris being crushed underfoot grew louder as Travers approached the mangled staircase, and Harry, Hermione, and Ron stepped back so he wouldn't spot them. "The stairs are completely blocked."

"So clear it out."

"Might bring the place down."

"Does that sound like our problem?"

"Yes, yes clear it out! Potter's up there! Go, you'll find him!" Xenophilius blubbered. "I haven't lied! Just, please give me back my Luna!"

Someone sighed loudly, then cast *Homenum revelio*. He gasped as he felt an odd sensation pass over him—like a shadow, except he could *feel* it.

"...Hold up, now. There's *someone* up there, at least," Travers said, tone much sharper than before.

"See? See, it's just as I said—Potter's up there, Potter! I've trapped him here for you." Xenophilius released a great wailing sob. "Just please...give her back to me now, I've brought you Potter, all I ask for is my Luna..."

“Right, you want her? She’s yours—as soon as you get up those stairs and bring us back Harry Potter. And it better be *the* Harry Potter, not some stupid Muggle you’ve kidnapped and Glamoured. Double-cross us, and we’ll kill you and everyone in this place. Maybe tear it down for good measure, this place is a death trap.”

“V-Very good,” Xenophilius squeaked, and then there was shifting and banging, and the railings on the staircase began to wobble; Xenophilius was trying to clear the stairs to reach the second level.

That was their cue to get the hell out of here. Hermione was already two steps ahead of him, though, quietly directing Harry and Ron to help her move a large wardrobe that had slid down from Luna’s room and was now blocking the window. They used the sounds of Xenophilius banging about on the staircase to muffle their own attempts to Levitate the wardrobe safely away so that they could escape through the window. It took rather a lot of concentration, managing three Levitation Charms between them, and Harry was about to suggest they just use the wardrobe to block the staircase, giving them enough time to make a break for it before Selwyn and Travers blasted through, when two loud successive *BANGs* rang out from below.

Harry wondered if the Death Eaters had lost their patience and just begun beating on Luna’s father again, when Xenophilius’s frightened voice called out, “Who...who’s there...?”

Then there came another loud *BANG*, and the debris blocking the staircase erupted into a shower of woodchips, shredded paper, and dust. Hermione made a grab for Harry’s hand and looped her arm through Ron’s, ready to Apparate them to a safe distance—when Malfoy’s disembodied head poked up from the floor below. “What the fuck are you three still doing here? *Come on!*”

They scrambled down the stairs after him, taking in the chaotic state of the kitchen. The cabinet doors had been blown off their hinges, sending cups and flatware and pots and pans spilling over the floor, and the smokestack attached to the wood-fired stove was kinked oddly. A pool of water was spreading across the floor, suggesting a pipe

somewhere had burst.

Two bodies were laid out on the floor unconscious—Travers Harry recognised, making the other Selwyn.

Malfoy had Xenophilius at wandpoint, and Harry nodded to the Death Eaters. “Friends of yours?”

“Yes, I was just getting them reacquainted with my best Stunner and Body-Bind.” Malfoy jerked his chin at Xenophilius. “Friend of yours?”

“We thought so,” Harry said darkly. Xenophilius was halfway crouched and looked like he might prostrate himself before them, begging for forgiveness, if they asked it. “I’m not so sure now.” Harry turned to Hermione and Ron. “What do we do with them?”

Hermione worried at her lip, frowning in pity at Xenophilius. “We’ll have to let them go, I think.”

“Let them *go*?!” Ron shrieked. He pointed at the Death Eaters. “Those ones would’ve killed us—” Then he pointed at Xenophilius. “And *that* one would’ve let ‘em!”

“Yes, and if we do anything other than turn them loose with nothing more serious than a pat on the head, You-Know-Who will know we’ve been here!”

“Look at this place! He’s going to know we were here regardless! Especially once these three *tell* him we were here!”

Hermione lifted her brows. “How can they tell him we were here if they don’t remember it?”

Ron frowned. “Obliviate them?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “No, Weasley; just get them very, *very* drunk.”

Harry turned over Hermione’s suggestion in his mind. “But won’t the Death Eaters think something’s up when they see Mr. Lovegood’s home’s been destroyed?”

“He had an *Erumpent horn* mounted on the wall, Harry!” Hermione huffed. “Even if he hadn’t caused it to blow by hitting it with that Stunning Spell, it still would’ve gone off at the next slightest disturbance.”

“Aren’t you...Lucius Malfoy’s boy?” Xenophilius asked Malfoy, peering at him curiously. “I would have thought...well, that you’d be arm in arm with Selwyn and Travers there.”

“Now look!” Ron groaned. “He’s recognised Malfoy! We gotta get out of here—Oblivate ‘em or whatever and let’s *go!*”

“Mr. Potter!” Xenophilius hissed, reaching out for Harry before Malfoy rapped his hands viciously with his wand and forced him back with a fierce glint in his eye. “Mr. Potter, please! You must believe I didn’t mean for this to happen! I only want my Luna back!”

Harry kept his distance, raking Xenophilius with a cool gaze. “...Gonna tell us what *actually* happened to her? Or still going with the ‘fishing for Plimpies at Bottom Bridge’ line?”

Xenophilius worried at the hem of his nightshirt, expression miserable. Harry struggled to muster much pity for him, though, considering he had a goose egg on his crown that was starting to throb something horrible. “...They took her. Right off the Hogwarts Express. She was coming home for Christmas, and...and they took my darling Luna. I don’t know where they’re keeping her, but if they find out I’ve...if they see you’ve escaped...”

Harry glanced over at Hermione, then back to Xenophilius. He didn’t much like Luna’s father right now, but Luna herself was a different story. “What if they thought it was their own fault I got away? What if they saw you’d done them a favour, keeping me here, only their own stupidity let me slip through their fingers. Would that suit?”

Xenophilius’s eyes widened, then went glassy with unshed tears. “Bless you, Mr. Potter. Bless you!”

“I’m not doing it for you—I’m doing it for Luna.” He didn’t know where she was, and

though it galled, they couldn't spare the time to look for her. But he could at least make sure she didn't get in any more trouble on his account.

"Harry!" Ron hissed. "We can't let You-Know-Who know where you are!"

"We won't," Harry reassured him, looking to Hermione for support; she was the most skilled among them when it came to Obliviation, after all. "We're just letting him know where I *was*. Can we do that?"

Hermione wrung her wand in her hands. "...Yes, I think so. We should Modify Mr. Lovegood's memory a bit though—clean it of any mention of the Hallows. I don't know if there's any point to it, but if there's the slightest chance the Hallows are part of this whole mess, I don't want You-Know-Who realising we're looking into them."

"Agreed," Harry said. The less Voldemort knew about their movements, the better. "Why would we have come here instead, though?"

Hermione mulled this over a moment. "We can make it seem we came here looking for Luna, to check how things are going at Hogwarts. It makes sense we'd be worried. Oh—and we'll need to Modify their memories to remove all traces of Malfoy and Ron—"

"Me?" Ron said.

"Yes, *you*," Hermione said. "You're not supposed to be out here, remember? As far as anyone knows, the only reason you're not at Hogwarts this year is because of your dreadful case of Spattergroit—so if word got out you were not only *not* sick, you were out here actively helping a Mudblood *and* Undesirable No. 1, what do you suppose would happen to your family?" She sniffed, turning back to the Death Eaters. "It's best they only remember seeing Harry Potter on the run with his wanted Mudblood friend."

"Wish you'd stop using that word..." Ron muttered under his breath, and Hermione let a soft smile curl at her lips where he couldn't see.

She directed Xenophilius over to stand beside the slumped Death Eaters, and he allowed her to Modify his memories without further protest.

Harry watched her work, too wired with adrenaline to do much more than stare, and Malfoy made his way over, bumping Harry with his shoulder.

“*Bless you, Mr. Potter,*” he mimicked in a quiet mocking tone, and Harry tried to elbow him in the side but missed his mark, as Malfoy still had the Invisibility Cloak draped over his shoulders. “*Oh Mr. Potter, oh my hero! Oh let me kiss your feet, let me lick your—*”

“Must you?” Harry hissed, covering Malfoy’s mouth with one hand and biting back a reluctant smile.

“If I don’t, who will?”

Hermione finished her Obliviations and Memory Modification, putting all three wizards under a sleep spell that would lift in due course. “The explosion should be the last thing they remember; with any luck, they’ll just assume they got knocked out as Harry and I escaped.” She slipped her wand into her sleeve and held her hands out on either side to Harry and Ron. “I’ve had about enough of this place, if you have. Shall we?”

Harry couldn’t agree more, and he grabbed her hand, looping his other arm through Malfoy’s as Hermione Apparated them to a new far-flung location, throwing up spells and wards before the rest of them had even gotten their bearings.

“That—good for nothing—traitorous—” Ron growled as he dragged the tent from Hermione’s beaded bag. “He knows you’re out here, trying to save the wizarding world—which *includes him*—and he tries to turn you over to You-Know-Who!”

“He did it for Luna...” Harry felt compelled to remind. “And we made it out all right, thanks to Malfoy.”

“*Protego totalum... Salvio hexia...* Yes, quite,” Hermione said. “Thank you for the warning, Malfoy.”

Ron grunted, mumbling something under his breath, and Malfoy raised a hand to his ear, cupping it. “What was that, Weasley?”

Ron gestured rudely at him. “I said *thanks*, Ferret-face.”

Malfoy made a mocking bow. “I live to serve.” He flicked a glance to Harry, lips quirking up on one side, and Harry had to look away; he was sure it violated the Best Mates Code to laugh when your friend was getting the piss taken out of him by his mortal enemy, even if it was rather amusing. He was already on thin ice with Ron after Malfoy had pulled his chair out from under him at breakfast-dinner that one time. Malfoy quickly sobered with a sniff. “So what the fuck *happened*? Lovegood’s place looked like a war zone. You could hear the explosion clear across the valley. Did Weasley’s wand backfire again?”

“*Cave inimicum*,” Hermione finished with a huff, rounding on them, “No, it was just the natural consequences of someone hanging an *Erumpent horn* on their wall like a trophy! I tried to warn him, but did he listen? *No*, and now his house is in pieces!” She wilted. “Luna will be distraught when she learns...it was her home, too, after all...”

Harry thought back to the dust-covered photograph on her bedside table and frowned. He hoped it had survived the blast and that Mr. Lovegood recovered it.

“Yeah, well, serves him right, I say—after what he tried to do to us...” said Ron. “But damn—they’ve got Luna now...”

“Where do you think they’re keeping her?” Harry asked, and Ron shrugged—then slid a glance over to Malfoy, who now had the Cloak bundled up in his arms and looked very peeved to have been called to deliver his opinion on this particular matter.

“How the fuck would I know?”

“I was just *wondering*. Maybe you had a guess! Just take a shot in the dark!”

“Perhaps she’s up your arse? Have you checked?”

Ron looked like he wanted to charge Malfoy—but only got one step before he stumbled, nearly slipping to his knees with a groan. “...Shit, forgot we got blown up...ow...”

His clothes were peppered with tiny little rips and holes where shrapnel had torn through. Harry probably didn't look much better, and he patted his head gingerly, wincing when he brushed the bump on his crown.

Once the tent had been erected, they all filed inside, and Ron prepared them mugs of tea while they recovered in the sitting room. Malfoy was curled up beside Harry, as was custom, but he didn't seem to be unusually agitated the way he'd been after the debacle in Godric's Hollow. Either the kiss they'd shared in the Sanctuary the night before was going a longer way than Harry had dared hope, or Harry simply hadn't been in imminent enough danger to merit Malfoy going spare.

Malfoy listened intently as they explained what they'd learned from Xenophilius—or rather, what they *hadn't* learned, which was 'anything of merit'. "Oh Harry, you were right!" Hermione groaned, slumping into one of the armchairs and throwing an arm over her eyes. "It was a complete waste of time—barely better than Godric's Hollow, and only *that* because you weren't nearly swallowed by a snake this time."

"Er, it's fine..." Harry offered weakly, though he understood what Malfoy meant now: it did feel damn good to finally hear someone tell him he'd been *right* about something.

"No, it's *not* fine. I can't believe I ever thought *Xenophilius Lovegood* of all people would be able to help us! Honestly, I do care for Luna, but even she can be a trial for me sometimes. I'm certain all that rubbish about Hallows and whatnot was simply a story to keep us occupied while he summoned those Death Eaters." Her arm flopped back to her side as she stared, dejected, up at the canvas ceiling of the tent. "I mean, obviously the symbol holds *some* importance, but it must simply be a run-of-the-mill rune. I'll have to check my texts again, I'm sure I've missed something."

"...I wouldn't be too sure about that," Malfoy said, unusually quiet for what ought to have been a prime opportunity for him to poke fun at 'Loony' Lovegood's father. "My father at least thinks the Hallows are real."

"Lucius Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

“No, my *other* father,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. “I can’t speak to the authenticity of the tale myself, but there was a time when Father had a *keen* interest in the Hallows. It was all he would talk about, he nearly drove himself mad tracking down every book on the subject he could find and chasing down even the weakest of leads.”

“You said you saw the symbol on a woman’s jewellery set your father had purchased...”

Malfoy nodded. “He must have bought the pieces for his research; he was *obsessed* with finding the Elder Wand.”

“That *would* be the one he was most interested in,” Ron sneered, as if he hadn’t just been saying the Wand was the one he’d most like to have himself.

Malfoy didn’t rise to the bait, though, seemingly lost in memory. “...Objects created by Death or no, there are fanatics out there who believe they exist and will go to... extraordinary lengths to find them.”

“But—we already discussed this: there’s just no way these Hallows exist!” Hermione protested stubbornly. “The very idea of the Stone goes against countless centuries of Magical Theory—”

“So forget the Stone,” Ron said. “There’s still Harry’s Invisibility Cloak—”

Malfoy twisted around to look at Harry. “That Cloak’s a *Hallow*? I’ve been skulking about *under a Hallow*?”

Ron raised his brows, clearly looking for Harry to back him up, but Harry just shrugged uncomfortably. “...I don’t know. I mean—if they *do* exist, in the form they’re said to... maybe? It is a really good cloak, and it’s old, but it still works perfectly...” He didn’t want to distress Hermione any further today; at this point it was only thanks to her and Malfoy that Harry and Ron were still alive.

But he had to admit, the tale was sounding less and less like a *story* and more like legend woven over a pattern of truth. The Cloak he couldn’t deny, and if even Lucius Malfoy—a man renowned for being cruel and calculating and not easily duped—had been convinced

the Elder Wand existed, maybe there was some truth to it. So did that mean the Resurrection Stone was out there somewhere as well...?

“Just—forget about what fantastic magical items we *happen* to possess, and think about the source of this legend. A poem, that’s all! Ron said it outright: it’s *just* a story, a morality tale to teach people not to be frightened of death or try and outsmart it. Harry’s Cloak is amazing, I’ll admit, but if all we had to do to cheat death was to scurry under it, well we’d be set and I’d say let’s have Malfoy summon You-Know-Who straight away. No more tromping about in the woods, and maybe we’d make start of term, even.” She sighed. “But it’s not that easy.”

Harry turned his wand over in his fingers, appraising. “...Even if it’s not that easy, it’d at least be *easier*; I certainly wouldn’t turn down an unbeatable wand right about now.” His holly wand was a good one, and it had served him well—even against Voldemort. *Twice*. But he wouldn’t have turned down the Elder Wand—or mastery over its power, as Xenophilius had intimated was all that remained of it.

“But the Wand doesn’t exist, Harry.”

“Lucius Malfoy thought it did,” Ron said, and even Malfoy looked at him with a shocked expression, clearly baffled Ron would dare invoke his father’s name in support of an argument. “What? He did!”

Hermione threw her hands into the air. “Fine, you and Harry and Lucius Malfoy can all fight over the Elder Wand—but don’t tell me you actually believe the ‘Resurrection Stone’ is real.” She looked to Malfoy. “Your father wasn’t on a hunt for *that* as well, was he?”

“Father generally preferred people *stay* dead once they found their way through the veil.”

Hermione nodded. “There’s no magic—*none*—that can raise the dead. You can make Inferi, but that’s *absolutely* not the same.”

“But—we’ve seen people come back, after a fashion,” Harry argued. “When my wand connected with You-Know-Who’s in that graveyard battle during the Triwizard Tournament, I saw my mum and dad, and—even Cedric.” He didn’t know how he felt about using their memories to justify the Hallows’ existence, but Hermione had to admit there was magic out there that no one could explain properly. He’d yet to get a firm answer on what precisely had caused those ghosts or echoes or whatever they were to appear, though the Department of Mysteries had tried to arrange an interview with Harry shortly after. Evidently even Fudge’s claims that Voldemort had *not* returned to power could not stifle the Unspeakables’ curiosity concerning the finer details of *Priori Incantatem*.

“But...well, I mean... Those were just...just magical echoes,” said Hermione, a shadow of pity flitting across her features. “They weren’t *really* brought back, were they? Not even as ghosts? So I hardly think it’s the same thing.”

“No, but...the girl in the poem that the second brother tried to bring back, she wasn’t exactly ‘resurrected’ either, was she? Maybe it’s all in our interpretation of what the word ‘resurrection’ means. For some, maybe it’s just about having a few extra moments with someone, to see them one last time. It doesn’t sound like it’s all that different from the magic of portraits, keeping someone’s thoughts and memories from a certain point in their life embedded in a magical object.”

Harry blanched as the words left his lips; when he thought about it, the wizarding world’s portraits sounded almost like Horcruxes. And by extension of his logical argument, the Resurrection Stone kind of did as well.

He tried to walk back the unfortunate comparison. “She wasn’t a ghost, but the brother was still able to interact with her to a point. Even if it’s not the same as them still being alive, even if they aren’t *really* back, even if it’s only for a little while... That might be enough for some people.” He was quite sure it would be enough for him. What he wouldn’t give for five more minutes with *any* of the loved ones he’d lost. With Dumbledore, even.

He saw concern—and something more ineffable—in Hermione’s expression, and when she cast a worried glance to Ron and Malfoy, he heard his own words through her ears. He’d crawled too deeply into the mindset of the second brother for her comfort, and his apparent fascination with the Resurrection Stone was frightening her.

Of course she hadn’t understood. She couldn’t—nor could Ron, nor could Malfoy.

He cleared his throat, deciding to change the subject and spare them any more awkward silences. “So what about that ‘Ignotus’ fellow you mentioned? Peverell, didn’t Mr. Lovegood say his name was? Did you manage to find out anything about him, other than that he lived in Godric’s Hollow once upon a time?”

“Oh, unfortunately no,” she said, and he didn’t miss the way her shoulders slumped in relief, glad to be on to other topics. “I did look him up—I got curious after we saw the mark on the gravestone, and I figured it couldn’t have been a *terribly* common name. I didn’t find much, but I did manage to track him down to the Peverell line—so Mr. Lovegood at least didn’t make *that* up—in *Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*.”

Malfoy’s brows inched up his forehead. “Certainly not the area of interest I’d have expected from *you*.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I borrowed it from Kreacher—the Grimmauld Place house-elf—hoping we could use it to track down descendants of the Founders.”

Harry’s heart leapt. “Is he, then? Is that why he was buried in Godric’s Hollow? Because he’s descended from Gryffindor?”

“I...well, it’s difficult to be sure. That particular book only discusses Pureblood families, and there’s so much branching and interweaving, *everyone* winds up related to everyone else at some point along the way.”

“Please, make it *clearer* you think of us as a bunch of inbred freaks,” Malfoy bit out.

“If it walks like a duck...” Ron said.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “You’re a Pureblood, too, you imbecile! And you’re certainly doing a piss-poor job of disabusing Granger of this warped opinion she’s gathered.”

“The book, Hermione?” Harry said, trying to keep the conversation on topic. “What did it say?”

“Right, anyway, things get particularly sticky with the Founders’ lines; they’re full of out-of-wedlock offspring and false claimants—you know, people hoping to earn a bit of fame claiming they’re descended from a Hogwarts Founder. The only thing I could find of note about the Peverell family was that it’s one of the Pureblood families that are extinct in the male line.”

Ron wrinkled his nose. “Extinct in the male line?”

“It means the name’s died out,” said Malfoy. “When the last remaining male heir dies childless, or only has daughters.” A strange, unreadable emotion flashed on his features, and then was gone before Harry could catalogue it.

“Precisely. And the Peverell name was one of the first to go, it seems—it’s been centuries. Now, it doesn’t necessarily mean all the descendants are gone—they’d just go by a different name, after marrying into other families.”

Harry dropped his mug as it suddenly came to him—he knew, now, where he’d heard the name ‘Peverell’ before.

“Marvolo Gaunt!”

If he closed his eyes, he could still see the faded, desaturated scene from Dumbledore’s Pensieve: an old man, furious and filthy, with a ring clutched in his grimy fingers, bellowing to a man in fancy Ministry robes *Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and Pureblood all the way!*

“Honestly, Harry...” Hermione chided, Vanishing the tea that had spilt when the mug had clattered to the floor.

Ron was frowning at him. “Who?”

Harry felt like he was about to vibrate out of his skin. “Marvolo Gaunt!” he repeated, shifting forward onto the edge of his seat. Malfoy moved with him, so they were still pressed up against each other. “You-Know-Who’s grandfather! I saw him in a Pensieve memory I viewed with Dumbledore. He said he was descended from the Peverells!” Ron and Hermione looked bewildered, and he could feel Malfoy staring at him with much the same expression. “He had a ring with him—the one that used to be a Horcrux—but it wasn’t a Horcrux in the memory. Gaunt said it was a family heirloom—a *Peverell* family heirloom—and that it had their coat of arms on it.”

“Coat of arms?” Hermione wrinkled her nose. “That’s impossible; the family didn’t have a *coat of arms*. It would’ve been listed in the book!”

Harry tried to remember what the ring had looked like. “I...I don’t know, maybe he made up the coat of arms part? I don’t remember seeing anything fancy on the face—maybe a few scratches. I only ever saw it really close up after Dumbledore had already destroyed it.”

“Wait—scratches...” Hermione pounded her fist, eyes wide. “Are you sure it wasn’t the symbol?”

The symbol—the sign of the Hallows, or if not that, at least a sign Grindelwald and Dumbledore had had *great* interest in. Had Marvolo Gaunt been a believer, then? Had he been on the ‘quest’? That was difficult to believe—Gaunt hadn’t struck him as the type to read fairy tales—but Harry *could* believe that a bigoted pig who’d cared about nothing more than his ancestry and how his blood somehow made him better than those around him might try to pass off a rune inscribed in a stone as a fancy family crest.

“Yeah... Yeah, it might have bee—” But then a thought occurred to him. “Oh my god.”

“What?” Hermione half-whispered, half-squeaked.

“A stone—bearing the Hallows mark—passed down through a line of Purebloods

descended from a Peverell brother...” He swallowed thickly, saliva in short supply as excitement began to course through his veins like lightning. “What if the stone *itself* was the Resurrection Stone?”

Hermione scoffed in disgust—and Ron’s mouth fell open. “Holy—but Dumbledore destroyed it, didn’t he? D’you think it’d still work—”

“Of course it wouldn’t *work*,” Hermione snapped, scrubbing her hands over her face in frustration, “Because it *never worked*, because *there’s no such thing*.” She stood with a huff, her exasperation visibly bleeding into anger. “Harry, you’ve *got* to come back down to earth—forget the Hallows story! We know the symbol must mean something, but there’s no sense in jumping to conclusions—”

“Who’s jumping to conclusions? It makes perfect sense! The symbol was etched onto the stone, and Gaunt *said* he was descended from the Peverells! He could’ve picked *any* Pureblood family if he was just making shit up! He was way too obsessed with his blood status to use a name that’d died out years before if he wasn’t *actually* part of that family.”

“Not thirty seconds ago you weren’t sure *what* mark, if any, was on that stone,” Malfoy said, admiring his nails.

Harry ignored him, his imagination racing far beyond the confines of their little tent. Three magical objects—the Hallows—which, if united, would make the possessor master over Death.

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

His heart lurched—was that the connection? The piece Harry had been missing, now finally snugly fit in place? Was *this* how he was truly meant to face down Voldemort? Not with merely his wits and wand, but with three powerful, ancient magical artefacts lost to the sands of time but slowly, steadily finding their way back to him? The Cloak he already had in hand, so if he could just find the Resurrection Stone and claim the Elder Wand’s power, would it be enough to ensure that Voldemort would be well and truly

defeated?

“...Where’ve you gone, Potter?” Malfoy’s voice was soft and edged with wary concern. Harry was distantly aware that Hermione and Ron were still bickering about the state of the Stone, but he scarcely heard them.

Malfoy had hung the Invisibility Cloak on one of the brass hooks by the door, and Harry rose, moving over to it. He ran it through his fingers, and it seemed to flow, the cloth supple as water and light as air. In his nearly seven years in the wizarding world, he’d yet to see its equal. It was exactly what Xenophilius had described: a cloak that rendered the wearer completely invisible, never fading, never faltering; a cloak, he thought, you might even be able to hide from Death itself under...

—*Dumbledore’s still got his Invisibility Cloak*—

His heart stopped.

He’d wondered it before, when he’d read those words in Lily Potter’s letter: Why would Dumbledore need an Invisibility Cloak? Especially when he’d told Harry years back he didn’t need one to become invisible?

Because he wasn’t interested in *using* the Cloak; not for concealment at least.

Slowly, Harry turned back to the others. “...Dumbledore knew.”

“What?” Hermione asked, startled from her argument with Ron.

Harry clutched the Cloak in his hands. “He knew! He knew this Cloak was one of the Hallows! He had it with him, the night my parents died!” He tossed the Cloak over the back of the couch—belatedly thinking he probably ought to be gentler with it, as it was evidently centuries old and might’ve been hand-woven by Death himself—and fumbled with the Mokeskin pouch at his throat. He pulled out the scrap of his mother’s letter, waving it as evidence. “In the letter from my mum I found in Sirius’s room, she mentioned Dumbledore borrowing my dad’s Invisibility Cloak. We know Dumbledore was interested in the Hallows, from that letter in Rita’s book, so he must’ve wanted to

examine the Cloak more closely, thinking it might be the third Hallow!" Why else would he have wanted it, after all? Dumbledore would never have *needed* an Invisibility Cloak, after all, not with his skill with Disillusionment.

And then another glorious, thrilling thought hit him, and he nearly took a stumble, legs trembling beneath himself. "...I'm a Peverell." He licked his lips and said with more conviction. "I'm...I'm a Peverell. Dumbledore said this Cloak had been in my family for years, passed down... That must be how my dad got it! And—Ignotus Peverell's buried in Godric's Hollow, *where I was born!*"

Hermione remained resolutely unconvinced. "There's *centuries* between your birth and Ignotus's death! Just because you were born in the same place someone else died doesn't mean you're related to them!"

But Harry could not be dissuaded, and he began pacing the tent, feeling as though great new vistas of truth were opening all around him. The mere idea of possessing the Hallows—of what power they might grant him—emboldened Harry, sheltering him in a sense of relief and ensured protection.

He folded his mother's letter, slipping it back into the pouch—when his fingers brushed over smooth, chilled metal. He carefully withdrew the Snitch that Dumbledore had left him—the one both he *and* Malfoy now had nearly swallowed—and stared at it wonderingly. Could it be...?

I open at the close, the writing on the Snitch had said. Something was hidden inside, something important that Dumbledore had wanted Harry to have. Something *Dumbledore* had had in his possession at one point...but knew that Harry would eventually need.

Something small enough to fit into the casing of a Golden Snitch.

He stared, awestruck, at the scuffed-up face of the Snitch, then turned it around for the others to see. "...That's what's in here."

“...What?” Ron asked, a bit fearful.

“A Hallow! The *Stone!* *That’s* why Dumbledore willed it to me! As a way of getting the Stone to me, so I’d only have to find the Elder Wand!”

“*What?*” Hermione said, sounding even more exasperated than usual, and even Malfoy was looking sceptical by this point, though he’d humoured Harry silently so far.

Ron, though, seemed happy to support Harry in his journey of discovery. “You...really think so, mate?”

It was so clear now—how had he missed it? He had his Cloak already, and Dumbledore had done his part now to provide Harry with the Stone—though he’d not yet worked out how to get at it. With that, he’d have *two* Hallows in his possession. Once he found the Elder Wand, he’d be able to unite them all, as Xenophilius said was the goal, and become Master of—

It felt like a cold hand had reached through his chest and grabbed hold of his heart, squeezing. The bright, sunny confidence he’d basked in as he’d contemplated the role the Hallows might play in his fight against Voldemort was suddenly overshadowed by a dark, unsettling realisation.

“...Fuck. It’s the Elder Wand.”

All three of the others seemed to sense the change in his tone on a visceral level, as if the chill that had settled into Harry’s bones had infected them as well. “Harry...?” Hermione said, soft and scared.

“You-Know-Who... That’s what he’s been looking for. All these visions I’ve had of him running down leads in far-flung foreign villages, why he was torturing Ollivander—and why he killed Gregorovitch too...” Harry looked them all in the eye in turn. “He’s looking for the Elder Wand.”

As sure as he’d ever been about anything, he was sure of this now. It was as if he’d read the knowledge in Voldemort’s own mind through Legilimency. Voldemort was seeking

not a new wand but an *old* one. A very *very* old one.

How had he found out about the Hallows, though? Voldemort was a half-blood; he'd been raised as a Muggle, in a Muggle orphanage. No one had ever read him *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* as a child, and even once he'd made it to Hogwarts, it was unlikely he would have been exposed to children's stories then. Hardly any wizards believed in the Deathly Hallows, hadn't Xenophilius said as such?

But then, both Hermione and Xenophilius had spoken of the Elder Wand being the easiest to track—the Hallow that made no effort to hide its existence, spoken of in history books and correspondence by dozens of writers over the years. Voldemort *could* have heard about that one. Except he would have learned about it as the 'Deathstick' or the 'Wand of Destiny'—not a Hallow—perhaps even in the same way as Hermione had heard of it, in their History of Magic class.

Which suggested he didn't know it was a Hallow, then—and by extension, didn't know how powerful it really was. Perhaps he'd never heard of Hallows at all. After all, he'd taken one of those same Hallows and corrupted it, turning it into a Horcrux; if he'd known what the Stone had truly been capable of, would he have treated it so?

"He's looking for the Elder Wand..." Harry repeated, half to himself, half to lead the others on the journey he had just made. "But he hasn't found it yet, of that I'm sure." Voldemort could not possibly conceal so great a coup from Harry. His elation at finally having secured the wand like no other, the wand like any other, would bleed over into Harry's mind through his scar with a raw, searing agony. "Which means the Hallow *are* real, and I've already got one—" He laid his hand on the Cloak, still draped over the back of the couch. "Maybe even two." He held of the Snitch. "If we can find the Elder Wand before You-Know-Who does, if we can unite the Hallows, then maybe—"

Hermione was shaking her head again. "Harry—Harry, please, just...just slow down for a moment. I know you really believe in this stuff, but...I don't think this is it. You're just getting carried away, seeing connections where there are none!"

Why couldn't she see how perfectly everything was aligning now? Hadn't *she* been the

one so insistent they look into the connections between these pieces of the puzzle in the first place? He must not be doing a very good job of explaining.

But she hastened to speak over him when he opened his mouth to argue. “Just—think about this: If Dumbledore really thought the Hallows not only existed but were key to your defeating You-Know-Who...then why did he never speak of them to you? He told you all he knew about Horcruxes, urged you to do all you could to find and destroy them—but not a word about Hallows. If they were truly so fantastic, so powerful, then why did he have you off hunting Horcruxes and not Hallows? Especially when he knew you already had one...” She smiled wanly at him, just shy of patronising. “Maybe even two?”

She thought she had him—but he was ready, because he’d done an awful lot of brooding about the twisted thought process of Albus Dumbledore over the past few weeks. “You really think Dumbledore would’ve done anything straightforward like *tell* me about these objects? Half the stuff we know we only managed to piece together from the riddles he left us! Obviously he expected us to put the pieces together for ourselves, otherwise it’d be too dangerous.”

“More dangerous than telling you outright about the Horcruxes? Than taking you into memories and showing you exactly what they looked like and where they were last located? That’s some of the darkest magic out there, and he trusted you enough to tell you all he knew about it before he could *only* speak to you in riddles.”

“Then what’s that book for, huh? What’s *this* for?” He shook the Snitch. “Dumbledore always wanted me to find stuff out for myself—to explore and learn and take risks and make mistakes and learn from them. That’s what he *did*—and I’m convinced that’s what he’s *done*.”

“Harry, that was—that was *school*! This is life or death, the fate of our friends and family and the *entire wizarding world*! This isn’t practice, or a lesson—it’s a *distraction*. Dumbledore taught you everything he knew about Horcruxes because *that* was what he wanted you to focus on: finding and destroying them. That symbol—it doesn’t *mean* anything. At least not anything we can afford to focus on right now, because it’s nothing

to do with defeating You-Know-Who.”

Harry’s frustration she couldn’t make the connections he did mounted to a stinging irritation, and he found himself losing patience with Hermione. He turned to Ron, a firm rock of support and encouragement thus far. “*You* see what I’m talking about, don’t you? That the Hallows are what we ought to be looking for? We *need* to claim the Elder Wand before You-Know-Who does.”

Ron hesitated, glancing back and forth between Harry and Hermione with a torn expression. “I...I dunno, I mean. The way you’re talking about it, I can kind of see how it fits, bits of it at least...” he said awkwardly. “But big picture-wise, when you think about what we *know*...” He took a deep breath. “...I think we’re supposed to get rid of Horcruxes, Harry. *That’s* what Dumbledore told us to do. If he’d meant there to be Hallows involved, he would’ve mentioned it—”

“He *did* though! He left Hermione the book!” Harry turned to Malfoy, his last hope. If nothing else, Malfoy would at least side with him just to piss off Hermione and Ron. Sowing seeds of discord was a favourite pastime of his. “You said before that seeking out Horcruxes was useless, that it wouldn’t do us any good because You-Know-Who would *still* be all-but-invincible even if we managed to find all six Horcruxes and destroy them. Maybe you had a point—and maybe *this* is the final piece of that puzzle.”

Malfoy would not look at him, though; Malfoy, who seemed to have an opinion on everything, had nothing to say.

He didn’t know why, but somehow this betrayal stung keenest of all.

“Harry...” Hermione said, voice soft in the silence that had settled as Harry waited and waited and *waited* for Malfoy to say something. “...Can we please just drop this for now? It’s been a long day, and I’m sure we’re all exhausted—how about I whip us up some dinner? Maybe...maybe we’ll think more clearly with full stomachs, or after a good night’s sleep?”

It was clear she was just trying to appease him; she would be no more ready to believe

that the Hallows were the key to their success after dinner or in the morning than she was now, and he doubted Ron or evidently even Malfoy would come around in time either.

He clutched the Snitch tight in his grip, stuffing the Cloak into his jumper and zipping it. He wasn't going to let these Hallows out of his sight, now that he knew how precious they were. "I'm not feeling very hungry. But I do think I'll take that good night's sleep." With that, he strode out of the sitting room, making a beeline for his bedroom and not caring how loudly he slammed the door behind himself.

Alone, he flopped down onto his bed, staring up at the canvas ceiling in mute anger. His thoughts whirled, his mind an agitated stew of frustration and hope and despair and elation. He'd been against going to see Xenophilius from the outset, convinced the strange symbol that had so intrigued Hermione had been meaningless, but now thoughts of the Deathly Hallows and what he might be capable of if he could possess them had burrowed under his skin. With the Cloak, none could catch him; with the Stone, none could hurt him; and with the Wand...none could beat him.

Where was the Wand hiding now? Who possessed its power—did they even realise? You had to, didn't you? How could you *not know* you'd come into possession of the most powerful wand in existence? Was Voldemort close to finding it? Harry found himself wishing his scar would burn or ache again, throwing him into yet another vision.

It was a race of a sort, now. Whichever of them found the Wand first, whichever of them claimed its power...he would be the one who triumphed, Horcruxes intact or not. Hermione didn't believe, Ron didn't believe, even *Malfoy* didn't believe—but they didn't need to. It wasn't their duty to face down Voldemort. *They* hadn't been drawn into a prophecy not of their own choosing, hadn't been told that *neither can live while the other survives*.

The Snitch was cold in his fingers, and he studied the casing.

I open at the close.

Fine—only, what was ‘the close’? He ran Hermione’s recitation of the Tale of the Three Brothers back over in his mind, trying to pick out any hints of a ‘close’ in the words of the poem itself, but nothing came to him. If he could just get this Snitch to reveal all its secrets, then they’d *see*. The four of them would be aligned in their goals once more, and there would finally be some hope beyond *maybe somewhere out there are a couple more Horcruxes*.

He murmured words to the Snitch in the low, flickering lamplight, trying every unlocking spell he could think of—he even tried Parseltongue, but the Snitch remained just a Snitch.

Hoping to see the writing again, in case they’d missed something in the excitement over the Snitch revealing one of its secrets, Harry brought the Snitch to his mouth again, pressing his lips against the cold metal and trying not to think about whose mouth it had last been inside—

“Should I be jealous?”

Harry sat up, startled, to see Malfoy in the doorway, leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed over his chest. “...Was just trying to activate the flesh memory.”

“Is that what they call it these days?” Malfoy straightened, stepping into the room properly. He stopped just a few paces short of Harry.

“...Did Hermione and Ron send you in here after me?”

“Why is *that* always the first conclusion you jump to? Did you conk your head in that Erumpent horn explosion?” He had, actually, and now that Malfoy brought it up, the bump started throbbing again. “In what universe would I *ever* be the one either of them asked to go and be a comfort to you in this your hour of losing your gobstones over a children’s story?”

“So you’re here because you want to be.”

“I’m here because this is my room too, Potter. Unless you feel up to finally fucking off. I

certainly wouldn't say no to my own quarters.”

Harry hadn't actually considered it, but he supposed they *didn't* really need to keep an eye on Malfoy twenty-four-seven now—so perhaps he could convince Hermione to adjust the Charms on the tent to fashion another bedroom. It would admittedly be nice to have some privacy of his own; there was nowhere in the tent Harry could go to be alone with his thoughts.

He didn't want to make promises he couldn't keep, though. Instead, he mumbled, “... Thanks, by the way. For letting us know about the Death Eaters. And for taking them out. Could've been messy without you there.”

Malfoy raised a brow, looking entirely too self-satisfied. “Hm. That's twice now I've saved your life. You're racking up *quite* the life-debt to me.”

“Well trust that as soon as *your* life's in peril, I'll make every effort to even the score again.”

“Oh, I'm counting on it. You *are* the Saviour, after all. Can't have you going around letting people think you didn't earn the title.” Malfoy hugged himself a bit tighter, shoulders stiffening, and he cleared his throat softly. “...I did have a reason for coming in here.” At Harry's confused frown, Malfoy pinched his lips, then inclined his head towards the wall Harry's bed butted up against.

Towards the Sanctuary.

Harry supposed he should have seen this coming, especially given how Malfoy had reacted the *last* time Harry had been in mortal danger and needed to be rescued. It was a testament to the degree of self-control Malfoy had gathered over the past few months that he hadn't grabbed Harry by the collar and dragged him into the Sanctuary the moment the tent had been staked down.

Harry shifted upright, slipping the Snitch back into the Mokeskin pouch around his neck, and sighed. He still couldn't shake the feeling that they needed to shift their focus from

the Horcruxes—especially as they weren't making any headway—and try scouring Hermione's library for mentions of the Elder Wand. The Cloak was useful for stealth, and the Stone could bring comfort in times of peace, but the Wand was what they would most benefit from when the time finally came, as Harry knew it would, to face Voldemort in combat.

Malfoy gestured for him to move along, and Harry let himself be chivvied out of the room and into the Sanctuary next door.

He wondered if Malfoy's weird mood from that morning had finally lifted. He'd been uncharacteristically quiet during the Hallows discussion, making only the occasional rude comment instead of slipping one in every other breath. Maybe he'd just forgotten to be in a snit, after the day's hectic events. Harry wasn't about to press it, resolving to simply go blithely along with whatever Malfoy asked. It had been far too long a day to fight now, so he hoped Malfoy simply wanted to stretch his wings after having been sat hunched under the Cloak for so long on watch.

The lamps in the sitting room had been turned down, and both Hermione and Ron seemed to have retired to their rooms. Harry heard water running in the bathroom, though, so one of them must have settled on a bath. That sounded right up Harry's alley as well, actually; he was pretty sure he had dust and dirt in places he couldn't even reach now, and a soak might help clear his head and calm his racing mind.

Malfoy passed up the broom shed when they entered the Sanctuary, so a Seeker's game was out, and Harry wondered if Malfoy expected Harry to join him, or if he'd mind terribly if Harry just Transfigured a bush into an armchair—

“Do you know why my father sought the Elder Wand, Potter?”

Harry straightened immediately, jaw gone slack. Were they actually about to have this conversation? He hadn't dared hope!

Malfoy was staring at him levelly, rolling his unbuttoned sleeves up with a casual grace that made Harry feel like he'd just stepped off the farm. He continued: “Because it

represents absolute power. And absolute power does what any power does in the hands of those too weak to come by it rightly: it corrupts, *absolutely*.”

Harry’s heart sank as it dawned that Malfoy wasn’t about to share the hard-sought fruits of his father’s research.

“Good men do not seek out that wand, Potter.”

Irritation sparked in Harry’s chest; he didn’t take kindly to being patronised, least of all by the likes of Malfoy. “It’s a *wand*, Malfoy; it’s not inherently good or bad, it’s whatever the wizard makes of it. Dumbledore was looking for it too, and—”

“So you’re ready to jump to his defence once more and call him A Good Man? Or have you maybe learned that his ideals weren’t always that far removed from the Dark Lord’s?”

Harry felt like he’d been slapped, and he reflexively returned, “He was *nothing* like You-Know-Who!”

Malfoy’s easy restraint snapped like someone had just taken a Severing Charm to it. “He was enough like him that they were looking for the same thing! And if I were you, I wouldn’t be so eager to set off on a quest to find the very thing the *fucking Dark Lord* is after, knowing to what ends it’s always been used.” A flush suffused Malfoy’s pale cheeks, and his grey eyes had gone dark like stormclouds. “Those who want that wand most are those who least deserve it.”

Harry laughed, a harsh mirthless bark. “I can’t believe you brought me in here for a *lecture*.”

“Oh, pardon, where *are* my manners?” Malfoy gasped, his hand going to his throat in mock astonishment. “Should we have attended to the tongue-fucking first? Foreplay’s never been my strong suit, so I’m honestly not sure how to approach the matter with you.”

Harry’s ears went red, and he felt his neck heat in shame as he struggled to shake off

Malfoy's crude language. "Well it's better *we* have it than he have it! We don't even have to *use* it—"

Malfoy rounded on him, drawing in uncomfortably close and using every inch of the bit of height he had on Harry to try and make him feel small. "But it *wants* to be used. The wand chooses the wizard, and it wants to find one who'll earn it that *Deathstick* name." He was breathing hard and only belatedly seemed to realise they were just shy of brushing noses—and stepped back, turning abruptly away. He reached up to undo the top-most button of his shirt, rolling his shoulders. "...I'm sure you've not got a high opinion of my father, but know that however terrible you imagine him to be *now*, he was that much *worse* in the throes of his Hallows obsession. Paranoid, mistrustful, convinced the Ministry was tracking him to try and get the Hallows for themselves and that this surely meant he was close."

Harry's imagination unhelpfully supplied an image of Bellatrix Lestrange's wild-eyed visage with Lucius Malfoy's stringy white hair, and Harry wondered what Malfoy would think of him if he started laughing right now. To distract himself from the urge, Harry shrugged, "And yet you know nothing about them?"

"Did you somehow miss the *paranoid and mistrustful* bit of what I just said? You honestly think he'd chance Mother and barely-out-of-nappies me finding the Wand before him? He only left off when his collection burned to ashes after the library caught fire." Malfoy scratched his ear absently. "...Which may or may not have been started by me and then blamed on a house-elf forgetting to snuff a candle."

"You *set your home on fire?*"

"I did him a *favour*, Potter. That obsession of his would have consumed him. I count it a stroke of fortune you helped the Dark Lord rise again to keep him from diving back into that pit of madness." Malfoy shook his head. "It pains me to agree with Granger, and trust that I'll deny it if pressed, but Dumbledore left you explicit instructions to find *Horcruxes*, and he didn't let slip one *word* about Hallows. That should tell you everything you need to know about where your duty lies."

Harry rolled his eyes; he'd about had it with others lecturing him on 'duty'. "I'm sure he'd have seen things in a different light if he'd realised You-Know-Who was after the Elder Wand."

"Fuck the Elder Wand. You've faced the Dark Lord at his weakest as well as at full strength and always managed to come out the other end the victor. More or less. You clearly don't *need* that wand, and Dumbledore knew that."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, levelling Malfoy with a cocked brow. "Except someone's never missed an opportunity to remind me my luck's going to run out one of these days."

"What an asshole; don't listen to them." Malfoy closed his eyes and took a long, measured breath, reminding Harry of a yogi searching for his centre. He opened his eyes again, staring at Harry with some unreadable naked emotion in his gaze. Harry felt like he ought to be sitting for this, like Malfoy might bowl him over. "...Know that I am serious when I say this: I would rather the Dark Lord find that wand than you, Harry Potter. Because that wand always winds up killing its bearer. And—Merlin, I can't believe I'm saying this, but: I *do not* want you to die."

Sitting might have been a good idea, but instead, Harry's lips decided to tick up on one side, until he was wearing a soft, goofy little grin. Malfoy was being so earnest, and he looked genuinely put out that he'd been forced to say something nice. "...That's sweet. You like me."

Malfoy tossed his head. "You *really* don't listen, do you?" He looked like he wanted to grab Harry by the shoulders and literally shake some sense into him; Harry wisely kept a bit of distance between them, in case Malfoy actually tried it. "You don't need the Wand, Potter. Let the Dark Lord claim it if he can—it won't do him any good. If Dumbledore had thought the Wand might tip the scales unfavourably, the conniving codger would have put you on its trail from the outset. Stop thinking about what you *don't* have and look at what you do. You've got people willing to fight for you, alongside you. Even, I'd wager, to die for you."

Harry's expression darkened. "You say that like it's a good thing."

"Well it is."

He had to scoff at the notion, from Malfoy of all people. "You'd *die* for me?"

"What? Oh fuck no." Malfoy held his hands up, shuddering. "I meant Granger and the gaggle of Weasleys and some of your more desperate sycophants." Harry rolled his eyes, but Malfoy pressed, "They'd die for you because they believe in you, in what you're capable of all on your own. Belief's a powerful thing. Belief is what makes those Unforgivables so deadly—you've got to *mean* them." He took two steps forward, his voice softening to almost a plea. It went straight to Harry's stomach, twisting him up in knots. "That wand will only undo you; leave it be, Potter."

Why did Malfoy have to practically beg him? Why did he have to sound so genuinely *frightened* for Harry, and why did that somehow mean more, hit harder, than Hermione's pleas or Ron's gentle reminders?

When Malfoy spoke again, his voice had hardened, like he'd only let the mask slip for a moment—long enough for Harry to get a glimpse underneath—before sliding it back into place. "Trust in those who trust in you, however misplaced that trust may be in actuality."

Harry gave him a wry look. "You're telling me to trust in others, when clearly *you* don't even trust in me? That doesn't sound very fair. Or logical."

Malfoy actually looked ashamed, licking his lips and glancing away. He stared off into the middle distance, anywhere but at Harry now. "...I'm not there yet." Harry's eyes goggled; he hadn't actually expected a straight answer—and he certainly hadn't expected Malfoy to express something that sounded so close to regret over it. "I don't know if it's in me to trust in anything, really."

"...You think I'm going to fail, then." It wasn't a question. Harry supposed he'd just been waiting for someone else to agree.

“I think you’ve got a chance—a better chance than most others, given your track record.” Malfoy looked at him, just out of the corner of his eye, like he couldn’t bear to look at Harry head on after such an admission. “But trust...is putting it all in.” He shrugged. “Unless you want to be lied to.”

“No,” Harry said, and he didn’t have to think about it. “I’ve been lied to or misled most of my life. I’d rather have it straight, if it’s all the same to you. Even if it’s not the truth I want to hear.”

Malfoy nodded. “I won’t lie to you. I won’t tell you pretty things just to make you feel better.” His voice went cold again, though, and Harry fought the urge to shiver. “So know that when I say the Wand isn’t meant for you, I mean it, and I truly believe it to be so.” His lips were pinched and thin. “If you’re set on claiming the Wand for yourself, then that’s yours to do. I won’t help, though. I’ll do what I can to track down Horcruxes with you, but I won’t help you corrupt yourself.”

Malfoy’s words crashed over Harry like a frozen waterfall with a chilling finality. They would not have this conversation again, either way, of that Harry was sure. He didn’t very much appreciate being issued an ultimatum, but he had to admit it was very *Malfoy* of Malfoy.

They needed that wand, he maintained. He was tired of close calls and barely scraping by; he wanted this *absolute power* Malfoy spoke of, and he was confident that he could master the Wand without succumbing to the ego and pride that its previous owners had been hamstrung by. He *would not* be corrupted.

But Malfoy was serious about this. He had that desperate air about him that both fascinated and frightened Harry. This was, he realised, what Malfoy looked like when he stood his ground and fought, rather than turning tail and running, because something meant enough to him he couldn’t abandon his post.

He didn’t believe in Harry, but he believed in *this*. And Harry wanted to protect that fragile, hard-fought spark of belief—to nurture it, to see it grow into a raging inferno that consumed Malfoy.

“...Fine, we’ll focus on Horcruxes for now.”

Malfoy closed his eyes, looking like he might faint dead away with relief. He mouthed an obscenity to himself, and Harry had to roll his eyes at his dramatics.

Harry turned to head back into the tent.

Malfoy grabbed his arm, staying him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“...Uh, to bed?” It was early yet, but the sun had already nearly dipped below the horizon, as it did early in these depths of winter, and Harry was unaccountably exhausted after the day they’d had. A bath could wait, he decided. Malfoy fixed him with a hard, knowing look though, and Harry’s shoulders slumped. “Wha—*seriously?*”

“The lecture’s over; time for the tongue-fucking.”

Harry groaned, grimacing. “Can we *not* call it that?”

“Why not? It’s colourful, it’s accurate—it’s perfect. I suppose you’ve got a better suggestion?”

“I’d rather it not come up in conversation at all, really.”

Malfoy’s brows rose, and his lips curled in a suggestive leer. “I’m fine not talking.”

His grip on Harry’s arm tightened, and Harry felt a flash of panic spear through him—

But too late, and with a snap of his wrist, Malfoy jerked Harry forward, sending him stumbling over his own feet into Malfoy’s waiting embrace. Malfoy’s arms came up tight around him, locking Harry in place, and he’d dipped his head in to cover Harry’s lips before he could object—and *oh*.

Harry hadn’t agreed to this.

This was...entirely different from the night before. Then it had been all tense and tentative and *good* but mortifying for it, and that was all right. Harry could handle that,

because if they both hated it, then that meant neither of them wanted to really do it. It was just what they did, the only thing Harry could think to do, to give Malfoy his damned *reassurance*.

That had been what Harry had signed up for, that had been what Harry had *expected*—not this.

Not Malfoy's hands sliding up, over his biceps and tracing his collarbone and resting just over his pulse so that he could tell when Harry's heart started racing, when it gave a juddering jolt because Malfoy's tongue swiped over Harry's lips.

Not Malfoy's breathy sigh of relief—the tail end of an aching exhalation that Harry could almost feel, palpably, as Malfoy clung to him with fingertips and tongue and lips and bare skin brushing. Harry chased that stolen breath, parting his lips and drawing it back in as if it were his own, and Malfoy followed eagerly, giving and giving and giving.

A part of Harry knew shame, it really did—but it was a distant awareness, like he was watching this all play back on an old television. Here, in the moment, it was hard to hold on to the idea that he shouldn't be doing this, and that he *absolutely* shouldn't be doing it with Malfoy. Who else was he meant to do this with, if not this one, who was giving him everything he hadn't thought he needed? Warmth and touch and breath and not trust, but a need. Trusting Harry with his vulnerability, if not exactly trusting Harry with *himself*.

Malfoy didn't want Harry to die. It was probably going to happen anyway, Harry had mostly accepted that, but...Malfoy hadn't. He wanted Harry to live, and not just to live but to be *safe*.

"I won't help you corrupt yourself."

The vision he'd seen in the dark woods still haunted, a reminder of what it was that Malfoy most feared: Rejection. Abandonment. Never being good enough.

Never being good enough for *Harry*.

But he *was* good enough, and wasn't Harry showing him that right now, closer with Malfoy than he'd ever been with any other person ever, sharing heat and breath and what felt like even heartbeats? He needed to prove it, show Malfoy the same in return: that he didn't want Malfoy to die...that he kind of even wanted him to be happy. Or at least, he wanted him not to be so *afraid*: of himself or Harry or Voldemort or *anything*.

He wanted everyone to feel that way, really, but...he could start with Malfoy.

Harry let his arms slide around Malfoy's narrow, bony hips, settling feather-light but firm. Malfoy would learn that it was all right to cede a bit of control to Harry, that he wouldn't ruin it, wouldn't waste it—and he tightened his grip and tilted his head back the other way, knocking noses with Malfoy and pressing in hard and meaningful, so Malfoy couldn't mistake it for anything but what it was. He expected Malfoy to retreat, or to protest in some new and exciting way, because even Harry could tell he was going about this entirely the wrong way, teeth clacking and lips smushing together.

But he didn't; Malfoy just let it happen, only gentling Harry's efforts with a tailored response. He drew Harry in, parting his lips in invitation, and then slowly but firmly forced him back out, like an instructive parry. On some level, Harry was irritated; of course even snogging Malfoy would somehow turn into a competition. But on every other level, in every other respect, he was thrumming with adrenaline—this was the most terrifying thing Harry had ever done, and Malfoy didn't realise the degree of power he held over Harry in this moment. Only instead of capitalising on it, Malfoy moulded it into an *experience*.

It was only belatedly Harry recalled this was not meant to be an exercise in pleasure—it had a *purpose*. This wasn't 'snogging' or 'tongue-fucking' or anything so prosaic; Harry was meant to reassure Malfoy, to prove that he was here, he *wanted* to be here, and Malfoy would not scare him away or drive him off.

And equally so, that he would not leave Malfoy—or give Malfoy cause to leave *him*.

He'd never wanted someone else's whole-hearted faith more than in that moment, and it drove him mad he hadn't earned it. How could Malfoy stand here, breathing the same air

as Harry, sharing the same heat as Harry, and not *know* who Harry Potter was? What more could Harry possibly do to show him? How far would he have to go before Malfoy stopped needing so much reassurance and just *understood*?

Harry drew back, breaking the kiss—and whatever spell lay upon them with it. He slid his hands up from Malfoy’s hips, rubbing his fingers along the gentle curve of Malfoy’s spine, up to his knobby neck and down each vertebra in sequence. He counted them, like Malfoy had counted his ribs, and filed the information away for no reason. Malfoy’s eyes were hooded and dark, and his pupils were dilated in the low light. The hour had drawn on, lost in the haze of heightened emotions and touch and need.

“I won’t seek out the Elder Wand,” Harry said, voice a ragged rasp. “I promise. And—I’ll make you trust me.”

He didn’t quite know how he would manage that, but that was a problem for future Harry to deal with. Right now, all that mattered was settling Malfoy’s nerves and proving however he could that the locket’s vision had been lies upon lies.

An unreadable emotion passed over Malfoy’s face, flickering in his eyes before disappearing in a wisp of smoke, and he rejoined the kiss, ratcheting up the intensity. It was hot and slick and forceful, and just the way Harry could read the dragon sometimes, hear it saying things even when it wasn’t saying anything at all, he imagined he heard somehow *Thank you*.

A Happy Memory

With no small amount of reluctance but a healthy dose of determination, Harry pushed aside thoughts of the Hallows and the Elder Wand and immersed himself once more in Horcrux research. Having promised Malfoy he would not seek out the all-powerful wand, the wand that he was certain was the key to their defeating Voldemort once and for all, he had no choice *but* to hope that after the Horcruxes had been destroyed, they would be able to defeat Voldemort the good old-fashioned way, with their ordinary wits and wands.

An urgency fired the blood in his veins now; without the Hallows complete, they had to be as prepared as possible. New avenues to victory had opened up to them now, and while Harry had acceded to his friends' pleas and turned away from some, his will to see this task through to the end, to make Voldemort pay for all the lives he'd ruined, was undampened.

But the words of the prophecy rang in his mind like a death knell: *neither can live while the other survives*. Both he and Voldemort were living on borrowed time, and they could not well and truly *prosper* so long as the other was still out there, a threat.

There would be a battle—maybe soon, maybe far in the future. But it would *come*, Voldemort and his Death Eaters facing off against Harry and any who dared stand with him. And when that moment arrived, Harry wanted his friends—yes, his *friends*—to be able to defend themselves.

Hermione and Ron he had full faith in; they had proven themselves already on multiple occasions and were as prepared for war as Harry was, really. Malfoy, though, was another matter entirely. He'd done well enough for himself when he had stealth on his side, but how would he fare in open battle? When facing down his aunt? Voldemort?

Harry didn't know—and he didn't want to wait to find out.

“I’m going to teach you to cast a Patronus,” he said after having successfully convinced Malfoy to forgo their usual Sanctuary activities for target practice with Conjured plates. Malfoy’s aim left something to be desired, but when his spells did manage to connect, they reduced the plates to dust.

Malfoy drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket to rub down the shaft of his wand, scoffing. “We’ve already discussed this matter, Potter. I know I was half-blind with rage and well on my way to an agonising, uncontrolled transformation, but rest assured your dulcet tones reached deep within and brushed my very soul with inane, needling babble.” He cut Harry a sharp look. “No.”

“That’s it? Just ‘No’?”

“As I mentioned before: I doubt I could produce one, and I’m not going to chance the magic backfiring on me and eating me alive by attempting to do so.”

“Your magic’s not going to *kill you*, Malfoy—”

“It’s trying to kill me as we speak! You think I want to give it another foothold?”

Harry rolled his eyes and took a bracing breath; he needed Malfoy in a *happy* mindset for this to work, and that required Harry practise a bit of patience and control his temper. “Listen, if the likes of Umbridge can safely produce a Patronus, I’m confident you can as well. You’re...” He bit his lip, thinking how best to phrase himself. “You’ve got scruples. You may think you’ve done some bad things in the past—”

“*Think* I’ve done them? Please, Potter—I realise we’re on speaking terms and all now, and you might not like the idea you’ve had your tongue down the throat of a Death Eater, but you sound like an *utter buffoon* trying to sugarcoat it like that.”

“Fine,” Harry grit out, his ears so hot he worried they were about to start spouting steam. “You’ve probably committed a high crime or three before, enough to get yourself Kissed if the Ministry got wind of it—that about cover it?”

“Well you certainly didn’t find me locked in a dank cell in the Department of Mysteries

because I'd taken a wrong turn looking for the loo," Malfoy reminded him pointedly, and Harry had to count down from ten for that before he trusted himself to speak again. It helped, a little, that Malfoy looked marginally uncomfortable with the discussion of his sordid history.

Harry looked him dead on, though Malfoy had his gaze shunted to the side, downturned and guilty. "You're honourable, in your own way. You have pride, and you defend yourself when threatened. You care about your family—look what you've gone through to try and protect them. Patronuses are all about protection, so I'd wager you could conjure a pretty wicked one, all things considered."

Malfoy remained unconvinced, mouth twisting. "...I don't understand why you're so set on teaching me this stupid spell, though. It's not as if there are Dementors roaming the countryside."

"He's used them in the past to terrorise Muggles—and given the breakout from Azkaban, I'm sure they've got a bit of spare time on their hands. Plus Patronuses have other uses besides warding off Dementors. You can use them to send messages, too—doesn't that sound useful?"

"You can use *owls* to send messages too, if you weren't aware."

"Listen, we don't know *what* we're going to run into before everything's over with—and I don't want to find out the hard way. Forewarned is forearmed, and all that."

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, clocking Harry out of the corner of one eye. "You aren't sounding very Gryffindor today."

"And you aren't sounding very Slytherin, not wanting to be as prepared as possible just because you don't think you can learn a spell."

"I never said I couldn't *learn* it—I said it wouldn't *work*."

Harry shrugged. "Just sounds like an excuse to me."

Malfoy wagged a finger at him. “You’re goading me. It won’t work.”

“Right,” Harry laughed. “Because I’ve never gotten anywhere with you by issuing a challenge.” He sighed. “All that you’ve done, the work you’ve put in and the risks you’ve taken, and you *really* want to chance ruining it all, when you *must* know you’re less of an arse-kettle than Umbridge? It’s mad, Malfoy. Especially seeing as casting a Patronus is loads easier than becoming an Animagus!”

Malfoy sucked on his teeth, digging the toe of his fancy loafers into the scree atop which they were camped and kicking up a spray of gravel. “You’re not very good at this.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “...Malfoy—”

“You’re supposed to tell me it’s *harder* than becoming an Animagus. That way I’ll feel compelled to manage it just to rub your face in my fantastic magical prowess.”

“*Or* I could tell you it’s *easier* than becoming an Animagus, so you’ll know that if you muck it up, I’ll take the piss out of you from now ‘til next Christmas.” Harry crossed his arms over his chest, one brow raised. “Most members of the DA were able to at least produce a non-corporeal one after a few weeks’ training.”

Malfoy swiped his wand through the air, sneering. “Well if the likes of Longbottom and Lovegood could manage it, I should have no problems.”

Harry tamped down the urge to defend his friends; at least they’d come to some manner of an agreement. “Right.” Harry rubbed his hands together. “First things first: you’ll need to find a happy memory.”

“A happy memory,” Malfoy deadpanned.

“A Patronus is like a big bundle of happy feelings, ones that are strong enough to drive away the dark, soul-sucking despair that Dementors embody. If you’re focused enough and have a strong enough memory, it’ll coalesce into a corporeal form, but even a non-corporeal Patronus can protect you from Dementors.” Harry tapped his temple with his wand. “The trick is being able to hold on to that memory in the face of piss-yourself

fear.” It would help if they had a Boggart to practise with, as Harry had, but he supposed they’d have to manage without.

Malfoy snorted in bitter derision, pocketing his wand. “Well that’s *that* over.”

Harry frowned. “What? What’s *what* over? Where are you going?”

Malfoy was rolling his sleeves back down and buttoning the cuffs, marching for the entrance back into the tent. “I haven’t *got* anything like that. ‘Happy memories’. Certainly nothing strong enough to fend off a Dementor.”

Harry scrambled to block his path, arms spread wide. “Don’t say that! Everyone thinks that at first—these days it’s easier to hold on to the dark memories than the bright ones. But they’re there, somewhere.” He raised his brows hopefully. “Surely you can scrounge up *something* we can start with?”

“I really don’t think Dementors are going to be spooked by a memory of me getting my first regulation broom for Christmas when I was seven.”

No, that wouldn’t do it, Harry was pretty sure; memories involving presents and gifts and such tended not to be pure enough and had little staying power. He grabbed the tip of his wand, tapping the hilt rhythmically against his thigh. “What about...getting your letter of acceptance into Hogwarts?”

Malfoy gave him a bemused look. “Why would *that* be a happy memory? I already knew I was getting one. Every wizard or witch in Britain knows they’re going to Hogwarts.”

“I didn’t. And Hermione didn’t either.”

“Fine,” Malfoy huffed. “Every wizard or witch raised in a *proper* magical family. Getting your letter’s a foregone conclusion; it’s hardly anything worth celebrating.”

Harry felt a spark of pity for Malfoy, hearing that; looking back, receiving his Hogwarts letter really had been one of the happiest moments in Harry’s life, even if he hadn’t quite believed it to be true until the Dursleys had corroborated Hagrid’s story. It had meant

rescue from his horrid relatives, and getting to know his real friends and family; every other happy memory he'd ever experienced had stemmed from that *one* moment. It wasn't the memory he called on to produce his Patronus, but Harry thought it would still do the job if he'd chosen it.

"So right—fool's errand," Malfoy said. He inclined his head toward the tent entrance. "Are we done here?"

"Wha—*no* we aren't done," Harry said, irritated at Malfoy still trying to weasel out of the lesson. "I'm going to teach you how to cast this Charm if it's the last thing I do."

"I hope you mean that, because it's *going* to be the last thing you do."

Harry grit his teeth. "We're not leaving here until you've at least found a happy memory."

"Fantastic," Malfoy said, raising his wand. "Shall I Conjure us some chairs? I anticipate a long wait."

"You aren't even trying!"

Malfoy rounded on him. "Do you think I haven't *thought* about it before? Tried to do it, especially once I saw *you* could? Father made me practise *all* summer that year; he was absolutely furious!" That struck Harry as rather counterintuitive, but he kept his thoughts on Malfoy's father to himself. "If he couldn't scare it into me with threats and bluster, you're *certainly* not going to manage it."

Malfoy knocked his shoulder against Harry's, brushing past him to head back into the tent.

"So—what, then?" Harry called. "You're just giving up? Before you've even started?"

"It's not giving up when it's impossible, Potter. May as well tell me to fly."

"But—you *can* fly."

Malfoy threw him an annoyed look over one shoulder. “You know what I mean!”

Harry chased after him. “The point is that impossible things are only impossible until you manage to do them. And then you wonder why you ever doubted yourself in the first place. How am I supposed to make you believe in me when you can’t even believe in yourself?”

“Sounds like a personal problem to me, Potter.”

Harry snapped his hand out, grabbing Malfoy by the wrist and tugging meaningfully. “This is important to me.”

“Goodness, why didn’t you say so? If it’s important to the *Chosen One*—”

“*Malfoy*,” Harry said firmly, squeezing his wrist. “If it was me, not wanting to study a spell that might save *my* life, would you let me?”

“Would I *let* a grown wizard make his own choices about his life? Yes, I rather think I would.”

“Piss off! You would *not*. You’d shove it down my throat until I was casting in my sleep! I’d never hear the end of it. *‘I’m not going to be there to save your sorry arse every time, Potter,’* and *‘A three-year-old could cast this Charm, Potter, but clearly I’ve overestimated your abilities,’* and, *‘The Dark Lord’s going to dance atop the bones of you and all your friends but by all means, Potter, throw your strop if you must!’*”

Malfoy frowned, rubbing at his cheek. “I don’t *spit your name*.”

“You do, honestly. It’s all I can do to not cast an Umbrella Charm any time we talk.” He shifted his grip on Malfoy’s wrist, until they were almost holding hands. Malfoy was staring down at their hands with a thoughtful expression. “...I wouldn’t ask you to do this if I thought it was a waste of time. I don’t want to have to worry about you if we get into a tight spot, and until I know you’re at least packing every spell I know in your arsenal... I’m going to. Worry about you, that is.”

Malfoy's gaze shifted up to meet Harry's, expression kept carefully even. "...I can handle myself. I'm hardly helpless."

That was something of an understatement, and Harry shook his head with a small smile. "Yeah, I know. I *do* know that. But...this really *is* important to me." Malfoy looked like he wanted to make another mocking comment, but he held his tongue, and Harry gave his hand a little shake. "Just give it a shot? An *honest* shot? If you can manage a noncorporeal *something* by nightfall, I'll switch with Hermione for dinner shift and convince her to make her egg custard I know you like."

Malfoy released a chuckling huff. "Bribery, Potter? The depths to which you'll sink, honestly."

"To get what I want? Yeah, I'm ruthless that way."

Malfoy crossed his arms, regarding Harry warily. "...What's *your* memory, then?"

Harry frowned. "...None of your business."

"How's that fair? You want me to tell you mine—"

"You don't have to tell me. You just need to *have* one."

"Well perhaps if you told me yours, it might jump-start the thought process."

Harry shook his head. "No; mine's personal, I don't want to share it. Besides, knowing you, you'd probably just laugh, or make fun of it."

"True," Malfoy said, shrugging. "But who knows? Maybe *that* would wind up being my happy memory."

"*Ha ha*," Harry drawled. "I'm not telling you what my memory is; you'll have to think of one all on your own. No cheating."

"How is it *cheating* if it's *your* memory—it's not like I'd be able to produce a Patronus based on the thought of you..." Malfoy gauged Harry's reaction. "Hopping on a broom for

the first time?”

“Nope. Nowhere near.”

Malfoy made a face. “...Fine. You ought to at least *demonstrate* one for me.”

“Demonstrate—a Patronus?” Malfoy nodded. “...You’ve already seen my Patronus, though.”

“Yes, but there’s rather a difference between nearly getting run down by one and being able to appreciate it from a proper distance.”

Harry supposed he had a point, and there was no harm in showing Malfoy the charm. His Patronus was no secret, and if it encouraged Malfoy to buckle down and get serious about producing his own, then all the more reason.

Harry took a deep breath, centring himself and drawing on his happiest of memories—then cast.

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

The silver stag burst from the tip of his wand in brilliant glory, dazzling even in the afternoon sunlight. It cantered around them with a wide berth before prancing closer, shaking its magnificent antlers in Malfoy’s general direction. He took a reflexive step backwards, gazing in slack-jawed awe at the Patronus.

“Be nice,” Harry gently chided the stag. “He’s not going to be a prat this time.”

“...You talk to it like it’s sentient.”

“It’s an extension of me; sometimes I feel like it can understand me.” Hermione had told him innumerable times that it was only in his head, and that if his Patronus ever seemed capable of comprehension, it was simply the Charm’s innate magic, bending to his will. She was probably right, but Harry still liked to think of it as his father watching over him from beyond the veil.

Malfoy dared a nervous glance at Harry. "...Can I touch it?"

"Can you? I dunno. I don't think they're made of anything solid."

Malfoy frowned in annoyance. "I meant—"

"Yeah, Malfoy. You can touch it."

Malfoy held his hand out, palm face-down and fingers crooked, as if he meant the Patronus to sniff it like a wary stray. To Harry's surprise, the stag extended its neck and gave a snuffling snort at Malfoy's fingers, like it understood what he was trying to do and reacted accordingly. Maybe it had just been responding to Harry's thoughts on the gesture.

Malfoy grinned, evidently taking this as a sign of acceptance; the expression was fetching, though it took his age down several pegs.

He reached out to rub the stag's muzzle—but his touch passed through, his hand only disturbing the shape of the silvery magical aura briefly before it coalesced back into the stag's long face.

Malfoy stared down at his hand, rubbing his fingers together. "...It's like sticking your hand into a Freezing Charm."

Harry Vanished the Patronus with a swipe of his wand, and Malfoy almost looked disappointed before quickly schooling his features. "With a strong enough memory, something you can really grab onto and hold tight until it fills you with warmth from your fingers to your toes, you'll be able to produce a corporeal Patronus like that. It's only a matter of finding the right memory and being able to recall it perfectly time and again."

Malfoy stared at the place the stag had stood. "Did you get to choose what form it took?"

"No—but it's not entirely random, either. My father's was also a stag, though that may have had something to do with his Animagus form being a stag as well."

Malfoy perked up at this, whirling around with wide-eyed hope. “Wait—so then, mine’ll be a *dragon*?”

Harry shrugged. “It doesn’t always work that way. McGonagall has a cat Patronus—but Hermione’s is an otter, even though her Animagus form is a rabbit. Plus—” Harry’s brows slanted deviously. “I already told you yours is going to be a peacock.”

“It’s *not*,” Malfoy bit out. “If it came out a vile, vindictive creature like that, shitting on anything that’ll stand still long enough and screeching like a banshee, I’d just as soon let myself be Kissed.”

Harry had to laugh at the thought of Malfoy welcoming a Dementor open-armed while his peacock Patronus strutted about haughtily. “Right, well, only one way to find out. It’s your turn to try now.”

Malfoy’s shoulders slumped. “*Must I?*”

“Yes, you must. Now come on—even a non-corporeal Patronus can protect you from Dementors. You just need to find a happy enough memory. It doesn’t have to be anything too over the top, just something that filled you with joy, something that even now brings warmth and—and excitement and *happiness*.”

Malfoy raised a brow. “Hm, right then, let’s see...” He pounded the palm of one hand with the fist of the other. “Ooh! I know, I’ll try remembering Slytherin winning the House Cup back in First Year—oh *wait*...” He cut a glare at Harry, who rolled his eyes.

“That wasn’t *my* fault. That was Dumbledore’s decision.”

“And humble little cherub that you are, you politely declined the *thousand* points he gave you.”

“...Was just sixty. And I kind of saved the school, so I reckon I earned those points.” Harry sighed. “Fine, what about making the Quidditch team? In Second Year?”

Malfoy sneered, though it seemed rather self-deprecating. “Everyone knows Father

bought my way on.”

At least they weren't pretending on that account. “Maybe,” Harry allowed, “But you can't buy talent. You could've taken the position on your own merits, given the chance.”

“Yes, I could have,” Malfoy said, and though it came off snippy, he wasn't entirely successful in hiding the flush of pleasure Harry's flattery had incited. It hadn't been idle, either; Malfoy *was* a fine flier and a brilliant Seeker. Harry was confident enough in his own skills to admit as such—in the privacy of his own mind, at least.

“First kiss?” Harry suggested, and Malfoy grimaced, shaking his head. Decidedly not a happy memory, then. “What about...finally managing your Animagus transformation?” Surely seeing his hard work had borne fruit would have been something to rejoice in.

“I might have been happy, if I could remember it at all—you'll recall I was...indisposed for a bit afterwards.” Malfoy ran his hands through his hair, then rubbed at his face. “And even *that's* not a guarantee; I only attempted it out of fear—not because I wanted to challenge myself or earn extra credit or something. If I'd been conscious at the time, I wager I'd only have felt relief followed quickly by a fresh wave of anxiety at having to put the next step of my plan to save my parents into action.”

Harry was growing frustrated as Malfoy continued to shoot down his suggestions with no proposals of his own, but he reminded himself that they'd never get anywhere if the *both* of them gave in to irritation and let their tempers fly free.

He sighed. “...Fine, let's just start with *any* pleasant, positive memories and work from there? Even the most basic of happy memories should be enough to teach you how to hold on to the emotions that memory rouses. Your first broom, I think you said?” They needed to start *somewhere*, and maybe if Harry could instil in Malfoy the general idea of how to cast a Patronus, he'd be ready once he finally stumbled across a memory strong enough to defend against Dementors.

They spent the rest of the afternoon working on Malfoy's casting, with limited success. While they did at least manage to relieve Malfoy of any fears about the spell backfiring,

producing anything more than a few idle sparks that could have just been a trick of the fading light proved difficult.

When they found themselves getting too frustrated—with the casting *and* with each other—Harry suggested they take breaks to go flying or play Seeker’s games to boost Malfoy’s spirits. Once his mood had improved, Harry had them back at it—usually trying to time it after Malfoy had legitimately beaten Harry at some play or another, just in case.

Nothing much seemed to work, though, and once the light failed them, Harry had to beg off—not that Malfoy objected—to start on dinner preparations.

“...I thought you were going to switch with Granger?”

Harry smiled wanly. “I only told you I’d do that if you managed a noncorporeal Patronus by nightfall. Dazzling sparks don’t count; that won’t even give a Dementor a head cold.” Malfoy was the picture of pissed off at this, and Harry reminded, “You can always try again tomorrow? I think Ron’s on duty, but I can put in a word with Hermione should you surprise me.” He left the offer open, knowing well that he’d pushed Malfoy rather hard today and not wanting to press his luck.

Malfoy seemed to sense he was being tested, though, and sniffed. “...I wasn’t in the mood for egg custard tonight anyway.”

Harry sighed. Perhaps he should have given in; Malfoy being in a sour mood was not going to help him find a happy memory.

After dinner, Hermione chivvied them into the sitting room for evening research. She’d redoubled her efforts since the encounter with Xenophilius, perhaps thinking Harry might get distracted with thoughts of Hallows if they weren’t spending their every free moment trying to narrow down the location of Hufflepuff’s Cup and Ravenclaw’s Whatever.

They started making lists of places they hadn’t looked yet, ticking off potential hiding

spots and discussing the likelihood of Horcruxes having been stored there. Together, the four of them raked through all the shops in Diagon Alley, Hogwarts, the Riddle House, Borgin and Burkes, even Albania—every place that they knew Tom Riddle had ever lived or worked, visited, or murdered in.

“Gringotts?” Malfoy suggested as the hour was drawing towards midnight, and Ron groaned.

“Don’t say that! I don’t even wanna *consider* a Horcrux being hidden in one of those high-security vaults! May as well just hand You-Know-Who the keys to the Minister for Magic’s office in that case. We’d never get our hands on it.”

“Plus we can’t exactly stroll up to the reception desk and ask to have a look-about,” Hermione said.

In Harry’s opinion, that made it the perfect place to hide a Horcrux, but he shared the others’ hopes that it wouldn’t come down to having to *Imperius* some poor Goblin into sneaking them a copy of the contents manifesto for every vault in the bank just to say they hadn’t left any stone unturned.

Malfoy was rubbing at his eyes, blinking blearily next to Harry. He’d worked up a sweat in the Sanctuary earlier between the casting practice and the diversions, and even Harry was starting to feel exhaustion tugging at him.

Hermione stood, stretching her arms over her head with a yawn. “Right, I think I’m going to have to accept we’re not finding the next Horcrux tonight. Malfoy, remember it’s your turn at breakfast in the morning.”

Malfoy buried his face into Harry’s shoulder with a much put-upon sigh. “First no egg custard, and now this.”

“The first one’s your own fault,” Harry reminded him. “...Or there’s always the option of, you know, *asking her nicely* to make it for you.”

Malfoy drew back, wrinkling his nose. “Don’t be ridiculous, Potter. That would never

work.”

Harry shoved him away, easing to his feet—then froze as an ear-piercing screech rent the air, followed by the eruption of a distant boom and popping crackles.

They were all immediately on their guard, wands in hand and spells ready on their lips. Harry strained his ears—and caught another screech-boom-crackle quick on the heels of the first. It sounded like it was coming from all around them, though they were meant to be camped safe in a thicket surrounded by acres of farmland.

He whirled around, checking the Sneakoscope standing ever-present vigil on a sidetable next to one of the bookshelves—but it lay silent and unmoving, giving no indication there was anything sinister going on.

Malfoy tugged on his sleeve, pointing to the ceiling of the tent with his wand. Colour bloomed across the canvas in rainbow shades—as if the very skies above were lit up in yellows and reds and brilliant blue-greens.

Carefully, and quietly, Harry crept over to the entrance of the tent, ignoring Malfoy’s furious silent gestures to *Get back here, you pillock!* He ran the tip of his wand over the laces holding the entrance closed, opening them just enough to peek outside and scan the skies. Had they been found out? Or unwittingly stumbled into the midst of a battle? Or—

Another screech sounded, louder this time without the tent canvas to muffle the sound, and the boom-crackle sent dazzling sparks of pink and yellow spinning through the heavens.

Harry laughed, pulling his head back inside and fumbling with the laces to open them the rest of the way.

“Wh—what is it?!” Ron hissed. “Harry, get back in here! What’s going on?”

Harry threw a grin over his shoulder. “It’s fireworks! At least I’m pretty sure? Doesn’t look like spellwork to me.”

Hermione gasped. “It must be New Year’s Eve! I completely lost track of the days!”

Harry had too, he wasn’t ashamed to admit.

They quickly bundled up into coats and hastily cast Warming Charms to take in the sight. Hermione threw up a Tempus Charm so they could track the countdown.

The Dursleys had never been one for crowds, and Dudley had always wanted to stay up late but wound up passing out around eleven every year, but Harry had usually been able to catch snatches of the display in London on the telly if he wanted.

This was nowhere near as grand, of course—probably just a few teenagers popping off their pocket money’s haul. But still—it was nice. A moment of tradition—of something *normal*—in the middle of all this uncertainty. Harry would take his moments where he could find them, for however long he still got to experience them. He’d never gotten to see proper year’s-end fireworks with his friends before, so this was something he could tick off his bucket list, he supposed.

He glanced over at Hermione and Ron—and then quickly looked away, as Hermione was leaning against Ron’s shoulder, and he’d brought his arm up around her waist. They weren’t *doing* anything, but Harry felt like he was intruding on something very private. He thought he could hear the murmur of them speaking, and not wanting to seem like he was eavesdropping, he let his feet carry him a few paces away until he was standing next to Malfoy.

It somehow felt incredibly awkward to stand there, watching the fireworks together in silence, so Harry groped for a topic of conversation, eventually settling on, “Got a resolution?”

“A resolution?” Malfoy was staring up at the fireworks, their brilliant hues flashing across his pale features in a kaleidoscope of colour.

“Yeah, you know: something you resolve to do differently in the new year from the old one.”

Malfoy snorted softly, rolling his eyes. “I know what a resolution *is*. But there’s no guarantee any of us are going to live to see out the coming year, so what’s the point?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, tradition for one. I know you Purebloods are all about that.” Malfoy didn’t seem to bother suppressing the grin that twitched at his lips, perhaps too taken with the light show to make an effort. “And even if you may think you don’t have long left, there’s nothing saying you can’t make the most of the time you’ve got.”

“Hm. And what’s *your* resolution, then?”

Harry pursed his lips in thought, head cocked to the side as he mulled what he could conceivably accomplish in his very limited free time. “I resolve...to learn to make egg custard.”

“On *top* of saving the entire wizarding world? Needed more of a challenge, did you?”

“Well I wouldn’t want to make it *too* easy on You-Know-Who. Think of what the history books would say if I didn’t make it a fair fight.”

“Thinking ahead to the state of your legacy? Well *done*, Potter. Perhaps I’ve managed to instil in you some self-preservation instincts after all.” Malfoy took a step to the side, dodging the elbow Harry threw his way. “Well practice on Weasley first; I’ll not be your test subject.”

“But you’ll try it when I’ve managed it?”

“*If*, then perhaps.”

Harry smiled to himself, because it really was a ridiculous resolution. Ridiculous still more to be making any at all. “All right. Your turn.”

“I think not. I’m not going to participate in your patented brand of insanity. I’ve enough to occupy myself with already.”

“Oi, that’s not how this works—come on, give it.” He was insistent. “It’s *tradition*.”

“Fine,” Malfoy huffed, batting his lashes at Harry in feigned innocence. “I resolve to produce a corporeal Patronus.”

“That doesn’t count; a resolution is supposed to be something *new*, something you haven’t thought to do before. We’ve been working on your Patronus all day. Something else!” A thought came to him, then, and he grabbed the sleeve of Malfoy’s thick wool coat. “Call me ‘Harry’.”

“*What?*” Malfoy said, and Harry didn’t imagine the way he recoiled slightly, as if Harry had gone mad and he feared it was catching. “What kind of ridiculous, childish ‘resolution’ is *that?*”

“It’s not ridiculous *or* childish; I’d even go so far as to say it’s *childish* for you to keep addressing us all like we’re strangers.”

“It’s how *adults* address one another. *Potter.*”

Harry pointedly wiped his face. “I’m this close to casting an Umbrella Charm preemptively from here on out, I really am. And it’s how adults address each other when they’re *strangers*. Adults who aren’t friends.”

“And we’re friends?” Malfoy asked, carefully oblique. His tone said it was only a rhetorical question—because of *course* they weren’t—but reflected in his eyes, alongside the bursts of colour and light, was something genuine and curious.

Harry licked his lips. “...If not that, then what?”

It wasn’t the same easy, familial relationship he had with Hermione and Ron, that was for sure. It wasn’t even the firm but more distant friendships he shared with Ginny and Neville and Luna, their bonds forged by time and trials experienced together. But whatever had taken root between himself and Malfoy, Harry knew it was something real and *there*, if ineffable. *Reassurance*, he reminded himself, and let Malfoy chew on that for a while.

Malfoy grew discomfited, though, and turned back to the fireworks, swallowing. “Well,

I'm afraid to disappoint you, but it's not happening. It's far too embarrassing."

"Uh, I dunno if you've noticed," Harry laughed roughly, taking great care to keep his voice low enough the crackles and booms covered their conversation, "but we're doing some pretty embarrassing things *already*."

"Yes, and those were things we *had* to do," Malfoy bit out, jaw tense and teeth grit. "And as I hear it from this knob I'm rooming with, resolutions aren't *required*."

"I don't get why you're being so—"

"I don't want to call you 'Harry'. What more is there to get?"

"Well I *do* want you to, obviously! And it strikes me that I've been doing a lot of things *you* want *me* to do without protest—"

"*Without protest?*" Malfoy hissed.

"—So it wouldn't hurt this once for you to do something without a whole song and dance."

Malfoy glared at him, and for the first time, Harry was starting to reconsider having returned his wand. "I've saved your life *twice*, you know."

"Yeah, and you still call me by my surname. Doesn't that sound stupid?"

"*You* sound stupid."

"Now who's being childish?" He poked Malfoy in the side, though it was lost against down-insulated wool and a crisp button-up. "Come on. Here I am offering to learn to make your very favourite egg custard while juggling my solemn duty to defeat You-Know-Who, and you can't muster up a *Harry* in return? That doesn't seem fair to me."

"I do hate to break it to you, but life's not fair, Potter."

He'd turned away again, and Harry sighed. He certainly didn't want to close out the year

with Malfoy in a mood.

The Tempus Charm Hermione had cast marked the countdown at twenty seconds now, and Harry watched it, entranced, as another round of fireworks lit up the night sky behind it. The Warming Charm was wearing off, and he blew into his hands instead, too lazy to renew it.

They still had so much work to do, an impossible task before them and an uncertain fate waiting at the end of it all.

But in this moment, this intake of breath between one year and the next, they could pause, enjoy life and its promises and think about a future that might or might not come. There was no harm in fantasy, surely, and if it got them through one more day, if these little lies they told themselves eased the burden of their duties even an ounce, it was worth it.

The Tempus Charm ticked down the final few seconds, and Harry reached out, crooking his pinky and looping it through Malfoy's where it hung at his side. Malfoy's throat bobbed, the only real indication he was in any way affected by the gesture. Without so much as a flicker of emotion registering on his features, Malfoy quietly curled his pinky as well, squeezing almost imperceptibly as the charm flashed 00:00 for a heartbeat—and then began its steady onward tick.



A volley of fireworks shot into the air, lighting up the snow-covered countryside for miles around. Malfoy listed to the side, craning his head close to Harry's—and then his breath was warm against Harry's jaw, his neck. Downy soft—not touching, but *there*, and Harry stiffened in place as dry, chapped lips brushed gently over the sensitive patch of skin just under his ear.

“Happy New Year, Harry,” he whispered, and it was a wonder Harry caught it at all in the crackling and booming chaos raining down from on high.

Harry fought down a shiver that had nothing to do with the chill, praying Hermione and Ron were trading their own New Year's greetings and too distracted to glance over to see Malfoy practically necking with him.

He squeezed Malfoy's pinky back and felt his nose and ears heat as he sank into his thick, woolen scarf to hide what he knew had to be an embarrassing grin. “...Happy New Year, Draco.”

The Nightmare

The turn of the year failed to bring substantial progress in their quest, but the notion of a fresh start did boost their spirits somewhat. Harry poured himself wholeheartedly into Patronus training with Draco—*Draco*, he had to remind himself at odd intervals, because if he was going to insist on being called *Harry*, some reciprocation was merited—who still struggled to produce even the finest of protective mists. However, where before his failures had been met with tantrums and snits, Draco now simply redoubled his efforts with grittier determination when he came up short (most days, at least), which Harry counted as progress in and of itself.

Further, it seemed to make Draco feel a little better knowing that Harry was struggling almost as valiantly with mastering the egg custard as he'd resolved, which usually burned or didn't set properly. He'd managed it decently only once, while Draco and Hermione had been out on a food run, but Ron had eaten the evidence before they'd returned. Draco had gone on to insist Harry had just made up the story, which only made Harry want to shove his pale, pointy face in all of the failed attempts.

Horcrux hunting was no easier, by any stretch, but the new year had still brought a certain degree of levity and hope to their situation, and like an early thaw, everything suddenly flowed just a bit more smoothly, easing tensions all around. To Harry's pleasant surprise, Draco's stubbornness shifted to a sort of plucky perseverance and a passion for research that rivalled Hermione's own. The two were never going to be the best of chums, but they made an interesting team that Ron and Harry could only observe from afar with bemusement and wary curiosity.

It was in the midst of one of the pair's more spirited 'disagreements'—this time concerning whether Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem had truly been lost or stolen, or if it might have been secretly passed down to her daughter for reasons unknown—that Ron cornered Harry as he finished the Scouring up and cleared down the dinner table.

“...So, ‘Draco’, huh?” Ron asked, after taking a long sip of his post-prandial cuppa and staring at Harry for an uncomfortable beat.

Harry left the dishes to their own devices, casting *Tergeo* on a grimy dish cloth before wiping down the table. “I dunno, just seemed silly otherwise. After all we’ve been through, you know? He hasn’t been *horrible*, not in a while, you’ve got to admit. And it was the new year, so I just thought...” He’d tried to be as casual as possible, but by the end of his rambling, he worried he’d just come off defensive.

Ron, who’d borne the greater brunt of Draco’s cruel jabs over the years, just stared down into his mug with a thoughtful frown. “...Yeah, I suppose.”

Harry realised the idea of his getting on well with Draco must have struck Ron as odd at best and foreboding at worst, and he quickly reassured him, “I’m not saying *you* have to call him that or anything—honestly, I’m not. It just...felt like it was time. For me, I mean. But hey—” He nudged Ron with an elbow and waggled his brows. “I hear girls really like guys showing that they’re the bigger man and all, too. Y’know, letting bygones be bygones and all that?”

Ron flicked his eyes up to meet Harry’s, frown tinged with suspicion. “...You really think?”

“Guess they didn’t include *that* one in *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*, huh?”

Ron shoved his shoulder with a loopy grin, and Harry let Ron’s infectious good mood wash over him. Draco would *hate* Ron using his given name—he barely tolerated it from Harry as it was—but maybe it would guilt him into calling Ron and Hermione by their names as well. This wasn’t exactly conducive to churning up happy memories for Draco, but it would definitely bolster Harry’s own Patronus.

When Patronus practice got to be just too much for Draco, Harry switched off with training in other defensive and offensive spells as well, occasionally convincing Ron or Hermione to join them for mock duels. Draco was not a poor dueller, and his skills did not appear to have slackened since they’d first crossed wands back in Second Year. He

soaked up each new spell like a sponge, soundly besting even Harry in short order after each lesson, to Harry's mortification—perhaps his *own* skills were slipping?

But these sessions reminded Harry sorely of the DA and the camaraderie they'd built up between the Houses and years, and he caught himself daydreaming on more than one occasion.

It was only, he couldn't help wondering what might have happened if he'd tried—really *tried*—to get to know Draco before all of this. If he'd invited Draco and other Slytherins to join the DA, gone out of his way to be the bigger man, like he'd been lecturing Ron, and made an effort at understanding these people whose worth he'd decided upon before he'd ever even learned their names.

Would this—the four of them on the run across the British countryside, trying to figure out how to take down Voldemort—have been the plan all along? Would Draco have been one of the seven Harrys, risking his life for his friend? Would Dumbledore still be alive?

These were dangerous what-ifs if he dug too deeply—and even without digging deeply, they still brought about a kind of dull pain, like a rotting tooth that throbbed when he poked at it, so he tried to tell himself to leave well enough alone. There was no changing the past—he'd learned that back in Third Year—but he could still learn from it and try to make up for it. To be *better* going forward. *Malfoy* had been an annoying, vindictive, cruel little pissant, but *Draco* was all those things turned on their head. He was stubborn and calculating and fixated, and those were all qualities they could use right now, if applied properly.

Hermione had suggested, months ago now, that Draco just needed to feel like he was a part of something, that he was *valued*—and she'd been right, of course. That desire to belong, to be needed, to be *wanted* was at the core of everything that Draco was, and Harry marvelled that he actually felt *guilty* for having held back his acceptance of Draco's hand in friendship for so long.

It wasn't as if he'd forgotten, well, *everything* Draco had done back when he'd still insisted upon being a horrid shit to the three of them (and most everyone else not

sporting Slytherin green-and-silver).

It was only that he'd realised now how little real effort it would have taken to thaw the hostilities between them—and what a bounty he would have earned in return for such a gesture. So many wasted years, Harry struggling where he needn't have—Draco trapped in a cycle he thought he might never escape, broken only by an extraordinary act of desperation and a heavy sacrifice.

Harry knew if he tried to bring it up with Draco, if he made *any* attempt at apologising, it would blow up in his face—because Draco was the picture of pride, and he hadn't yet been worn down enough, hadn't yet let Harry close enough, that he could be that naked and raw. There were still lines they didn't cross, topics they didn't discuss, and that was how it had to be for now.

Just for now, though. Just until Harry got Draco to trust in him, to believe in him. Then, who knew?

“Potter—Potter! *Harry!*”

Harry jolted awake with a start, immediately on his guard and groping for his wand with one hand and his glasses with the other. It was dark, so dark he couldn't tell if he had his eyes open or still closed. Someone was shaking his shoulder roughly, and Harry blinked blearily in the darkness until Draco's pale, peaky face swam into view. He was leaned over Harry, one knee on the mattress, and he looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

Harry lifted up onto his elbows. “Wh—what's wrong?” The lamps brightened a tick, just enough to gild everything in a warm glow. Draco's hair was in disarray; whatever was happening, he hadn't taken the time to make himself presentable—and Draco *always* took the time. Harry swallowed nervously. “Is something—”

“I had—” Draco grimaced, shaking his head. “Just—can we go? To the Sanctuary?”

Harry's thoughts were muzzy, and he struggled to understand what Draco was asking. “What time is it?”

“Almost four,” Draco said. “...I know it’s late—or early, but...I just need to go. I need you to come with me.”

“Seriously?” Harry wiped his face. “*Right now?*” At this hour, he was beyond caring if he sounded short—but a sliver of worry wormed its way into his thoughts. Draco hadn’t needed to go to the Sanctuary at this time of night for months now. Not since early on, when he’d still been struggling for reassurance that Harry gave a damn about him. If something had happened that had him waking in the middle of the night...

Draco’s breathing was ragged, and he ran a hand through his hair, tousling it into something less like bed-head and more like ‘freshly tumbled’. “I—had a nightmare,” he grit out, mortification thick in his voice, and though the lamps burned too low to tell, Harry was sure he was blushing furiously. An irritated whine caught in his voice as his desperation mounted. “I just need to—just for a moment...” He still had a hand on Harry’s shoulder, and he squeezed to impress his meaning. “I don’t need to transform or anything, really, just...” He clenched his eyes shut, and his tongue darted out between his lips, just a peek of pink that betrayed how closely he was skirting the edge of restraint.

Harry flopped back down on the bed, his heartrate returning to normal territory from the panicked fibrillations Draco’s rude awakening had caused. There was no worry of Draco collapsing and painting the floorboards with white-hot lava, no chance the dragon was about to tear its way through Draco’s skin like wet paper. It was just a nightmare—a bog-standard *nightmare*. Harry covered his eyes with the back of one hand, releasing a juddering exhalation. “Jesus, you scared the crap out of me...”

“Can we *go* then? I’m—Potter, I *need* to...”

Harry brought his arm back down; Draco was still leaning over him. Even in the dim light, he still looked pale. He always did, though—it was a fair complexion that the ancestral Malfoys had probably made ritual sacrifice to achieve. Like fine porcelain, and just as fragile.

Fatigue washed through Harry now that the adrenaline burst had dissipated, and he groaned inwardly at the thought of hauling himself out of his warm bed, putting on a

robe and slippers and making the trek out into the Sanctuary. He'd never be able to get back to sleep afterwards, he was sure; it was too close to dawn.

And they needed all the sleep they could spare these days, to be sure they were ready for anything. Hermione had insisted, worried they'd miss something in their research if they stayed up too late poring through books for Horcrux hints.

Draco was clearly in a bad way, though, and Harry eased upright, pulling his legs up so he was sitting cross-legged on the mattress. He patted the empty space he'd made, smoothing out the sheets. "Let's just...do it here. Do you mind?" If Draco really didn't need to transform, then there was little point in going all the way out to the Sanctuary. All he needed was closeness and the soothing comfort of Harry's palpable presence—which meant he should be able to be...*reassured*...anywhere, really.

Harry could feel Draco's eyes weighing heavy on him, dark and wary. "...That's against the rules."

"...Yeah, but it's a rule I set. And I'm exhausted and I really want to go back to sleep." Harry waved vaguely towards the doorway. "Anyway, we've..." He had to take a running leap to get the word out. "We've kissed outside the Sanctuary before, back at New Year's—"

"I hardly think that counts—"

"—and the world didn't end, and maybe...maybe this'll calm us both down, and we can get it over with and go back to sleep." Harry reached out and grabbed the sleeve of Draco's frou-frou ruffled nightshirt, tugging him forward. Draco held his ground, long enough to swallow thickly and mouth some manner of oath under his breath, and then shifted onto the mattress. He still looked lost and desperate, and he left an armspan of space between himself and Harry.

Harry was too tired to wait forever and still a little sleep-drunk, so when struck by the urge to hold Draco's hand, he indulged. "...You're shaking," he said.

“I just had a nightmare; of *course* I’m shaking.” Then he added, with a sharp, warning look, “And I know you’ve had your fair share of them, so you’re hardly in any place to judge.”

“I wasn’t judging,” Harry said, running a thumb over Draco’s bony knuckles. “...Did you want to talk about it?”

Draco stared at him with an odd longing, and Harry wondered if sometimes he got lost in imagining the what-ifs too. “...No, I don’t,” he said, then leaned forward to close the distance and pressed his lips to Harry’s.

He brought his free hand up, fingers braced along Harry’s jaw rough with the previous day’s stubble, then dipped his thumb into the divot of Harry’s chin and coaxed his mouth open just wide enough to run his tongue along the soft of Harry’s lips.

Harry leaned into the kiss, shifting closer on the bed and smiling in the warm darkness when he felt Draco draw his other leg up. He took the hand he’d been stroking by the wrist and brought it up to splay, palm flat, over the soft cotton of Harry’s t-shirt. He held it there, just over his heart, so Draco could feel it beating, pumping steady and strong, and know that whatever he’d seen in his nightmare, it hadn’t been real. *Reassurance*. He let his hand drop away, and Draco clenched his fist in the flimsy material of Harry’s shirt, holding on for dear life.

But desperate as he’d sounded and torn though his expression had been, Draco’s kisses tonight were just as exhausted as Harry felt—slow and languid, less like a kiss and more an excuse for closeness, to touch, to be touched and grounded. Sometimes, Draco kissed him like this, and Harry had yet to wrap his mind around it. Draco had told him it had to *mean* something, these things they did—be it talking or touching or kissing—but he’d never quite explained *what* it had to mean. What Draco thought about, in moments like this.

It was too early to be doing any sort of thinking, though, and mimicking Draco back at New Year’s, Harry cocked his head to the side and mapped a trail of nibbling kisses over Draco’s baby-smooth cheek to his ear. “We really should sleep.”

Draco pulled back, ducking his head in to rejoin the kiss with a whining huff that said he hadn't appreciated the interruption. "I don't...want to sleep," he breathed, voice rough and gravelly, and a wild part of Harry wondered what he wanted to do instead: just more and more of *this*?

But that was, by definition, a want—and not a need. So not likely.

He lost himself in the ebb and flow of Draco's kisses for another lazy few minutes. He'd long grown tired of making a competition of it, letting Draco take what he needed and simply going along for the ride—it was easier that way, and more pleasant for it. Too soon, though, he felt sleep snaking its insistent arms around him. He sighed, and kissed the curve of Draco's lips, holding there to whisper against his skin, "It wasn't real, you know."

Draco's arms slid up around his shoulders, and he nearly squeezed the life out of Harry. "You think I don't know that?" he said, bitterness thick in his voice.

"...Yeah, I guess it's just one of those things you say."

Harry carefully extricated himself from Draco's embrace, sliding down onto his back and holding up the comforter in invitation. He was rapidly draining of energy for further 'reassurance', so this would have to do if Draco wasn't ready to face the night on his own again just yet.

He wasn't certain Draco would accept—it was a tiny bed, after all, and perhaps their mini-snogging session had been sufficient. Dreams could feel just as real as reality sometimes, but Draco was generally loath to let his mask slip and be vulnerable. Even for Harry. Or maybe especially for Harry.

But after only a moment's indecision, Draco gingerly unfolded himself so he could fit alongside Harry without elbowing or kneeling him anywhere sensitive. There was only room for the one pillow, so they wound up sharing it, facing each other in an awkward silence.

Harry tried to dispel the tension, running his fingers up and down Draco's arm distractedly—but the hypnotic gesture mostly only served to lull him into a quiet doze, his eyes fluttering shut as he drifted between sleep and waking. "...Sure you don't want to talk about it?" he murmured.

Draco's eyes were heavy-lidded and dark, fixing Harry in the gloom. "Why would you want to hear?"

Harry shrugged. "Well clearly you know I've got a little experience with nightmares myself. It's nice sometimes, hearing about ones that aren't real."

A long stretch of silence settled between them. The lamps dimmed again, down to faint little embers that reminded Harry of Draco's eyes on the verge of a transformation—all that rage and power just barely leashed, waiting to explode with the furnaces already lit.

Then Draco spoke in a soft, velvety voice that felt like it brushed against every single one of the tiny, sensitive hairs in Harry's ears. "I dreamt I was the dragon...in a battle. I saw the Dark Lord standing alone, apart from his Death Eaters, and I struck him down with fire and fury and everything I had. I ripped and crushed and *burned* and it felt..." Draco closed his eyes, sighing in relief. "*Amazing*. Except when I looked on what I'd done...all I saw was my mother." He opened his eyes again, his gaze boring into Harry's; there was no more exhaustion, only grim acceptance. "She was the one I'd attacked, not him. I held her, held her right in my arms as her life drained away, and she tried to say something to me, before—" He inhaled sharply and was quiet, collecting himself. Harry didn't prod, and he didn't doze. "...I wanted to kill him. *So* badly. I've never wanted to kill anyone before, not even—" He caught himself. "But I wanted to kill *him*, and I could feel his blood, wet and warm in my mouth, except it was—"

He bit his tongue, whimpering in pain, and Harry winced sympathetically.

Harry had had dreams like that before. Just normal ones, not the prophetic type—ones where he had finally struck down Voldemort in any of a dozen ways, only to find his shotgun focus had cost him the lives of his friends. Sometimes it was Ron or Hermione—or both—sometimes it was a beloved member of the Order. Sometimes it was even his

parents and Sirius, dying all over again so that Harry could live, do what he'd evidently been destined to do.

He wondered what his Boggart would look like these days.

Harry let his hand drop down between them, groping until he found Draco's and laced their fingers together with a hearty squeeze. "We'll save them."

"You can't promise that," Draco said miserably. "You can't even promise *we'll* survive."

"...No, I suppose I can't," he admitted, and this drew a rough, mirthless chuckle from Draco.

"You're not doing a very good job of getting me to trust you."

"I dunno," Harry said with a lopsided shrug. "You're sleeping in the same bed as me; clearly you trust me a little."

"I'm not asleep."

"No, you're not; let's fix that." He released Draco's hand, punching the pillow to fluff it beneath his head. It had been four when Draco had woken him; now, it would be nearer to four-thirty, and that was almost five, which might as well be morning. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and then letting it out in a long, slow exhalation as he struggled to quiet his thoughts.

"Weasley called me 'Draco' today."

Harry smiled into the pillow. "S your name, isn't it?"

"Nothing good will come of this. I'm not calling him 'Ron', just so we're clear."

"You just did," Harry grumbled. "Now shut up and go to sleep or go back to your own bed..."

He thought for a moment that Draco might do just that, if only to be contrary; they were

no longer kissing, and it was...strange. Lying here like this, so close and vulnerable. He'd bunked with Ron before when space had been in short supply at the Quidditch World Cup, but this was a different beast altogether. There was a fragile intimacy that Harry worried he'd crush if he moved even a muscle. He didn't want Draco to go, and risk disturbing whatever this was before it had taken proper root.

But Draco wasn't saying anything, and he wasn't moving, and Harry had to *know*—he opened his eyes. Draco was staring at him with that curious expression of longing again, lip tucked between his teeth.

“Harry—”

But it was four-thirty going on five, and Harry was tired. So he surged forward to kiss Draco quiet again—if only because he really, *really* wanted to go back to sleep.

Wolf at the Door

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!” Ron yelled one crisp February evening, sending Harry leaping to his feet. Draco, who’d been dozing against him and only halfway paying attention to the book in his hands, was thrown to the floor and spat several choice words in Ron’s general direction.

Hermione came bursting into the sitting room from the loo, still wiping her hands with a facecloth. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I finally guessed the password!” Ron exclaimed, beckoning them all closer. He’d been at the Wireless for weeks now, fiddling with the dial while he muttered nonsensical words and phrases under his breath. He’d claimed he’d run across a mysterious program once before, by pure chance, but hadn’t been able to find it again, as it was password-protected with the code changing daily. “It was ‘Albus’! Come on, sounds like they’re in the middle of a broadcast! The last time I caught it, it was around this time of day too.”

Ron brought the Wireless over from where it sat neglected in the corner into the sitting room proper and adjusted it so it faced all of them. He tapped his wand against the side of the device, and the volume rose. Harry sat down on the edge of the couch, leaning forward and staring at the tiny speaker, from which a rather familiar voice was issuing.

“...welcome all our listeners back and start off with a quick apology for our brief absence. No one enjoys a pop-in, least of all from a Death Eater, so we’ve been lying low of late and keeping our noses clean. But we’re back and ready to dive into another educational and inspirational episode of Potterwatch!”

“That’s Lee Jordan!” said Hermione, adding for Draco’s benefit, “He was a Gryffindor, two years our senior.”

“I know who Jordan is,” Draco grouched, and Harry was puzzled by his mood until he

recalled that Lee had once been Quidditch Commentator and had harboured a very poorly disguised bias against the Slytherin team, Draco included.

“I’m your host ‘River’, and as a treat for our regular listeners, I’m joined tonight by two of our regular correspondents, here to dish on what’s what in the wizarding world these days.”

“They’ve all got code names,” Ron explained. “But you can usually figure out who’s who, so it’s honestly not a very good system. Like, ‘River’ is Lee obviously, and then there’s —”

Hermione raised a finger to her lips meaningfully, then pointed to the Wireless.

“Before we get into the program proper, though, I’d like to take a moment to touch on a spate of recent deaths that the WWN and papers like the Daily Prophet have elected to ignore, for reasons we won’t speculate upon, being the upstanding, reputable program we are.” There was a beat of silence, during which Lee cleared his throat, and Harry felt his stomach twist itself in knots, going through the names of his friends in his head, everyone he knew, and praying he didn’t hear their names called. *“We regrettably report the murders of Edward Tonks—or Ted to his friends and family—and Dirk Cresswell. May they rest in peace and be swiftly avenged.”*

Harry’s stomach untwisted all at once, leaving him feeling nauseated and faint, and he slumped back into the couch cushions, staring ahead blankly. Hermione’s lips were pursed, and she was wringing her hands, and Ron had his head hung. Only Draco seemed unaffected by the news, though he looked uncomfortable in the face of their grief all the same.

“Murdered alongside Ted and Dirk was the Goblin ‘Gornuk’, our sources report—as the three were travelling together. Also in their party were the Muggleborn Hogwarts student Dean Thomas and a second unnamed goblin, though the whereabouts of these two are unclear at present. While they are presumed alive for the time being, if anyone has any information on their condition—even to report their death—Dean’s family is desperate for news.”

“In an unrelated but equally tragic turn, a Muggle family in Gaddley was found dead in their home over the weekend. With no clear motive or means, Muggle authorities are reportedly attributing the deaths to a mundane gas leak, but members of the Order of the Phoenix report that magical residue found at the scene indicate the recent use of the Killing Curse. It’s unclear at present if this was the work of branded Death Eaters or ordinary wizarding folk indulging in cruel urges, so our listeners are urged to take care and consider keeping an eye out for the vulnerable Muggles around them.”

“Finally, we report the passing of Bathilda Bagshot, vaunted magical historian and long-respected member of the magical community, as her remains were recently discovered in her home in Godric’s Hollow. Authorities report that she appeared to have been dead for several months, and while the cause of death is still being investigated, Dark magic is suspected to have been involved, and her home seems to have been the site of magical mayhem.”

“These are dark times, dear listeners, and worries understandably abound, but we ask you to join us now in a brief moment of silence to mourn the passing of our magical brothers and sisters—and our cousins in the Muggle community—murdered by You-Know-Who and his followers.”

Lee fell into silence, the Wireless crackling with dead air, and no one spoke for a long beat. Harry could not shake the guilt that he had been responsible for those deaths. If he’d found the Horcruxes by now—or even the Hallows, he still maintained—then Voldemort might be six feet under, and certainly Death Eaters wouldn’t feel emboldened to go out and harass or kill Muggles, and Muggleborns like Ted Tonks could have safely returned to their families.

But for fits and bursts of activity, they really *had* just been camping in the wilderness all these months, and now Tonks’s dad was dead, Dean might be too, and innocent Muggles who’d probably gone their whole lives thinking magic was made up had had the life just snuffed out of them unawares.

Draco had settled his hand beside Harry’s own on the couch, and his fingers slowly

inched their way over the faded upholstery until their fingertips barely touched.

“Thank you,” came Lee’s voice once more, and Draco pulled his hand back. *“Now, let’s switch over to our visiting correspondents, taking time out of their busy schedules to fill us in on the latest news from the front. Royal, Romulus—take it away, gentlemen.”*

“Thanks, River,” came a familiar voice—one Harry had not heard in quite some time, and he was immediately transported back to the last time he’d heard it: informing Harry uncomfortably that the dragon who’d torn down Gryffindor tower was Draco Malfoy, desperately searching for his mate.

Hermione gave a quiet gasp. *“Is that Kingsley?”*

“Unfortunately, attacks on Muggles are on the rise, though being ignorant as to the true nature of the culprits behind the incidents, they’ve taken to citing gang violence, transients, and mob retaliation,” said Kingsley. *“In happier news, though, we’ve received notice of witches and wizards going out of their way to lay protective charms over their Muggle friends’ homes or warding whole Muggle streets against Dark incursions, risking their own safety and narrowly flouting the Statute of Secrecy to quietly protect the Muggles unwittingly drawn into this war we’re fighting. You urged your listeners before, River, to keep an eye out for nearby Muggles, and I too encourage those tuning in to take after these brave few by having a care and keeping an eye on the Muggles in your lives. Cast protective Charms when you can, ward their doors and windows against intruders, set an owl to keep watch at night—these simple, thoughtful acts will help us weather this storm together.”*

“Inspiring words, Royal, but have you any words in response to those who think we ought to be taking care of our own before worrying about the fate of unfortunate Muggles targeted by Death Eaters?”

“Well, I’d say that’s a slippery slope; those saying we ought to be thinking of wizards first now might be inclined to think of Purebloods first later, and then we’re all marching around with masks on our heads and tattoos on our arms,” replied Kingsley. *“We’re all human, some of us just happen to be a little more magical than others.”*

“Hear hear, Royal,” Lee said. “We’ll include that slogan in our next merchandise run, how about it?” Kingsley chuckled amiably. “Now, let’s hear from Romulus next on our popular segment, ‘Pals of Potter’.”

Harry perked up—they were talking about him? He hoped it wasn’t going to be a repeat of poor Dirk Cresswell’s indirect dressing down, complaining Harry had gone to ground or abandoned Britain altogether and was hiding out on the Continent or in the Americas.

“Give it to us straight, Romulus: Is Harry Potter still out there, or has he been captured—or worse—by You-Know-Who?”

“It’s my firm belief that Harry is absolutely still out there, alive, and working hard at whatever task he’s been set,” came a new but no less familiar voice, and Hermione practically vibrated with excitement, releasing a squealed whisper of, “Professor Lupin!”

“Confidence! I like it.”

Remus chuckled. *“Well, I say so, if only because his death would be proclaimed by Death Eaters far and wide if it had come to pass. It’s no great secret that the loss of the ‘Boy Who Lived’ would strike a deadly blow at the morale of the resistance, as Harry remains a symbol of everything we’re still out here fighting for: the triumph of hope in the face of so much hate, the power of conviction in one’s beliefs and a willingness to stand up for others, and the need to hang in there and keep resisting those who would destroy everything we hold near and dear, no matter the cost.”*

—No matter the cost.

Harry wondered how Tonks was handling her father’s murder, for Remus’s words were painted with an achingly personal brush.

“A willingness to stand up for others’—is that what they’re calling your Saviour complex these days?” Draco snorted, drawing his legs up onto the couch cushions and letting his knees butt up against Harry’s thigh.

“Without his ‘Saviour complex’ you’d still be rotting in the Ministry, you realise?”

Hermione reminded pointedly, though her lips weren't pursed quite tightly enough to disguise a wry grin of amusement.

"Any words of sage advice to our Scarred Saviour, then, if he's out there listening?"

Remus paused for a long moment, then said, *"Harry. I don't know where you are, I don't know what you're doing—but I know you're out there, and I hope you're safe, and the only thing I can say to you at this point is: trust your instincts—they're good, and nearly always right."*

"Nearly always right?" Draco said. "Doesn't know you very well, does he?" Hermione released a watery, warbly laugh, and even Ron inclined his head as if to say *He's got a point, mate*.

"And failing those—trust your friends, who are also good and generally more right than you."

"There, that sounds better," Draco said, settling back with his arms crossed over his chest and rank superiority in his expression. Harry didn't mind; Draco had just indirectly admitted they were friends, and he didn't hate that.

"You heard him, Harry Potter: Instincts first, friends second—and everyone else can suck on it."

"I didn't say that—" Remus began, but Lee barrelled on.

"Now, speaking of Harry's friends, have we any news on those who've been a bit too vocal in their support for the Boy Who Lived and paid for it?"

Remus sighed. *"Well, it's no great secret it's a dangerous thing to be openly rooting for Harry these days. We've recently received word that Xenophilius Lovegood, whose paper The Quibbler was encouraging its readers to do whatever they could to help Harry if they ran across him, has been apprehended by Ministry authorities and sentenced to Azkaban for quote, 'Fomenting insurrection'; insurrection against whom was not specified."*

“More than he deserves, trying to turn Harry over like that...” Ron grumbled, and Harry silently agreed but told himself he felt relieved Lovegood was still alive.

“And I can’t divulge sources, but word is mere hours ago, Rubeus Hagrid—gamekeeper and Care of Magical Creatures professor at Hogwarts School—narrowly avoided being arrested and sent to Azkaban himself for daring to host a ‘Support Harry Potter’ supper at his home on the school grounds, attended by several students from the school itself.”

“You say narrowly avoided—so they let him go?”

“I expect whoever showed up to take him away didn’t have much choice, as Mr. Hagrid has a very over-protective Giant half-brother. I believe he’s on the run now and probably better off for it.”

“Perhaps the rest of us ought to invest in Giant half-brothers ourselves, in that case!”

Remus chuckled, then added gravely, *“I would advise our listeners to keep their heads in the midst of all this madness. While we here at Potterwatch applaud Harry’s efforts and wish him a whole cauldron of Felix Felicis’s worth of luck, we won’t be doing him any good getting ourselves needlessly into trouble with frivolous parties, a decidedly unwise luxury in which to indulge under present circumstances. Let’s save the celebrating for brighter days ahead.”*

“Good point, Romulus,” agreed Lee. *“Now, one wizard we certainly won’t be wishing any luck to is one who’s proving just as difficult to track as our Mr. Potter: the Chief Death Eater, the Muggle Maimer, He Who Must Not Be Very Bright—yes, it’s You-Know-Who. But how can our listeners be sure that the news they hear about You-Know-Who sightings is to be trusted? Is he really lurking in your back garden? Was he actually spotted taking tea with the Minister for Magic? Here to give us the latest information on some of the more...we’ll say creative rumours swirling about these days concerning You-Know-Who’s whereabouts, let’s turn to our newest correspondent, Rodent!”*

“Rodent?” came a new voice, bright with offence. *“I told you I wanted to be ‘Rapier’! I’m not doing this if you’re gonna make me go by ‘Rodent’!”*

Ron gave a gurgling yelp, then shuffled forward and cupped his ear to hear the broadcast better. “Fred?!”

“It’s not George?” Hermione asked.

“I think it’s Fred—I remember he went through a pirate phase just before he started at Hogwarts. ‘Rapier’ sounds up his alley.”

“All right, all right, fine—Rapier it is. Can we get on with the segment? Our listeners are surely on the edge of their seats with curiosity! What’s You-Know-Who up to these days?”

“Well, you can’t turn around lately without running into some new bit of gossip on him, can you? He’s woven quite a web of mystery for himself, which it’s plain to see has worked well in his favour. Between the bogus reports of his many amazing abilities and the sightings of him everywhere from here to Timbuktu, no one would be liable to credit a genuine run-in. He’s keeping to the shadows himself, letting his underlings do his dirty work.”

“So you’re saying he’s actually sat in front of the fireplace with his bunny slippers on, plotting and scheming between tuning in to episodes of WestEnders on the Wireless?”

Fred snorted. *“Well I wouldn’t say he’s having himself a lie-in while this is all going on—but I’m fairly confident he’s not quite as ubiquitous as the nineteen or so notices I get by owl a day might suggest! I know we’re all on edge these days, waiting for the worst to happen—but we can save ourselves a lot of trouble by practising just a bit of good sense. Like just the other day, my mum was suggesting that he and his Death Eaters had learned some new spell that let them kill with a glance. Anyone who’s been around Hogwarts in the past few years will remember that’s a Basilisk, though you’d be forgiven for mistaking the two based on looks alone.”*

Harry bit his tongue, still not in the mood quite yet to laugh but struck by the urge all the same. He missed the twins; their sense of humour would have been a blessing in the midst of all this insanity.

“So be alert—but don’t be stupid,” Lee said, and Fred grunted his agreement. *“Then if he’s not lurking in back gardens or taking tea with Ministry folks, where is he? Any truth to the rumours he’s been sighted abroad?”*

“Our last registered sighting of him was in Majorca, where reports are he’s working on his tan and making the most of the beach-ready body he paid an arm and a dash of Harry Potter’s blood for,” Fred said, and Harry finally gave in, muffling his laughter with a hand slapped over his mouth. *“Is he in Britain or isn’t he? Is he lurking around the next corner or isn’t he? We can’t be sure, honestly—but just because there are rumours going about that he’s gone international, that’s no excuse for us to let our guard down here at home. His Death Eaters are nearly as bad as the Noseless Ninny himself, and if he’s stepped away for a bit, it’s only for that—a bit. He’ll be back in rare form soon enough, so check your Charms, watch your wards, and stay safe, everyone.”*

“A ‘stay safe’ coming from you certainly means something. Thanks for your commentary, Rapier,” said Lee. *“And that concludes this episode of Potterwatch! Thanks for listening, and we’ll be back with another broadcast just as soon as it’s safe to hit the air again. Keep your Wireless tuned! The next password will be ‘Mad-Eye’. Stay safe, stay alert, and keep the faith. Good night, all.”*

The Wireless’s dial whirred in a blur, and then the lights behind the tuning panel faded. Harry felt suffused with warmth, in far better spirits thanks to the latter half of the broadcast than he’d been in the first half. Hearing these familiar, friendly voices piping into his ears over the many miles was a balm to his soul. Out here on the run, with only Hermione, Ron, and Draco to confide in, he’d almost forgotten that they weren’t actually alone in this fight. Others were resisting Voldemort in their own way—and not just the Order, but ordinary folks too.

“Well that was nice, wasn’t it?” Ron said, a huge grin on his face. “I’m glad I found it

again; it helps to hear what's going on, seeing as we can't exactly go out and grab a copy of the *Prophet* or send an owl to our friends and family."

"Yeah, that was brilliant," Harry said.

"It's so brave of them," sighed Hermione, adoration thick in her voice.

"Brave? Merlin, you really *are* Gryffindors," Draco sniffed. "It's suicidal is what it is. If the Death Eaters wanted to, it'd be no trouble to trace the broadcast."

"They mentioned before they never broadcast from the same place twice, though," Ron said. "They're always scouting out new locations to air from. Can't trace what's not there anymore. Plus it's password-protected, you heard."

Harry's mind was racing, though, and the warm, pleasant feelings that the broadcast had instilled in him only served to fire his excitement. "Did you hear what Fred said, though?" he asked, licking his lips. "Lee asked if the rumours were true, and he all but confirmed it! Voldemort's abroad—and there's only one reason he'd leave the country now when he practically runs the place: he's still looking for the Elder Wand!"

A loud scrabbling grabbed his attention, and Harry whipped his head over his shoulder. The Sneakoscope that sat on the table by the door had lit up and begun to spin worrisomely, throwing dazzling beams across the room.

Outside the tent, muffled by the canvas, they heard the whipcrack of Apparition, and several rough, excited voices traded garbled conversation just beyond the laced flaps.

"Come out with your hands up and your wands stowed!" came a rasping voice, cutting through the cold night air. "We know you're in there, and you've got a half a dozen wands pointed square at you, so no funny business! We don't give a rat's arse who we curse!"

Fuck.

Harry turned back to the others, meeting three pairs of wide, white eyes. They'd been

found out—but *how*?! Had Hermione’s wards failed? She’d cast them when they’d made camp that morning, hadn’t she? He tried to think back, then pushed the worry from his mind. It didn’t matter how whoever was out there had found them. What mattered was how they got out of this, because they’d come too far to just lie down and let themselves be marched back to the Ministry—or worse, depending on who was waiting for them.

He considered Summoning his Cloak from the bedroom, but it was too small to fit all of them, and they had all their *research* here, plus the sword of Gryffindor was sitting there leaned against Hermione’s armchair, where she’d been polishing the rubies earlier.

“You’ve got ‘til the count of three!” came the voice again. “One—”

They’d have to destroy the tent. Grab the sword and the Cloak, set fire to the tent, and Apparate away in the chaos.

“Two—”

He reached for Draco’s arm, drawing his wand with the other—

But Draco shoved away, jostling his shoulder to brush past him and crossing to the entrance in two strides of his long legs with his arms raised defensively. “We’re coming out!” he cried. “We surrender! Just—don’t curse us, please!”

“Get back here you snivelling little coward!” Ron hissed, but Draco ignored him, resolute as he swiped downward in a strike with his wand.

The tent flaps flew open, and with a sudden neck-snapping burst of speed, Draco dove out of the tent. Before he even hit the frosty ground on which they’d camped, he’d shifted into the dragon in a flurry of white, bringing chaos raining down in his wake as he unleashed a bone-juddering screech.

Spells came flying fast and loose from their attackers, but Draco threw his wings open to shield the tent, and they bounced harmlessly off. Dragonhide was, it seemed, just as resistant to spellfire as *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* claimed.

Draco's snapping and snarling and lunging distracted their attackers long enough for Harry, Hermione, and Ron to mount a counter-offensive.

"Reset the wards!" Harry ordered Hermione. "We don't want them calling reinforcements."

"We can't let them get away now that they've seen us!" Hermione cried. "I'll need to set an anti-Apparition field too!"

"Do whatever you need to," Ron said. "We'll give you cover. Harry!"

Harry nodded, and carefully sidestepping Draco's lashing tail, he and Ron used the cover of the dragon's wings to fire off a volley of offensive spells while Hermione frantically cast every ward and protective Charm in her arsenal. Harry counted six pairs of feet stampeding around the clearing—including two pair that were trying to flank the campsite. He left Ron to guard their front with Draco and scurried around back to make sure they didn't get hemmed in.

A *Reducto* nearly took Harry's head off, instead reducing the tree just behind him to splinters. Harry belatedly threw up a Shield, and beyond the protective blue glow he saw a leering face he recognised from wanted posters: the werewolf Fenrir Greyback. He was a hulking man, and the Death Eater robes he wore seemed ill-fitting, stretched in odd places, like he didn't take them off when he transformed. His matted grey hair hung in his eyes, and he had what looked like three days' worth of beard growth on his face. He drew his lips back and bared yellow, pointed teeth at Harry; given it wasn't yet the full moon, Harry suspected he'd filed his human teeth to look that way.

"Harry Potter..." Greyback growled, crooking a wicked grin at the scrawny wizard skulking at his side. "Well this is a pleasant surprise indeed."

"Happy to give an autograph if it'll send you and your friends on your merry way," Harry tried, and Greyback released a bark of laughter—followed quickly by a Stunner. Harry's Shield crumpled, and he dove into the low scrub, sending a Blasting Curse flying over his shoulder toward Greyback. Someone yowled in pain, but it didn't sound like

Greyback.

“Everyone’s looking for you, boy. They say you’ve abandoned your duty, that you’re hiding out like a scared little whelp, pissing yourself and hoping someone else comes along and makes everything better.” Harry slid down behind a thick tree stump that looked like it had been blown over in a storm, with Greyback prowling the brush. “People are dying out there, waiting on you. Why not give yourself up here and now? You’re really the only one we’re interested in; I’d be willing to let your friends go in exchange for you. What say you?”

If he’d had any faith Greyback might keep his word, Harry probably would have considered the offer—but as it was, the choice was an easy one. He popped out from behind the tree stump and cast an *Incarcerous*—but instead of Greyback, he only hit his weedy companion. The man went down, groaning in pain from what looked to be several nasty, deep-tissue burns thanks to Harry’s earlier *Confringo*, and Harry cursed under his breath. Greyback lifted his wand, expression twisted into a delighted rictus, and Harry summoned another Shield Spell, praying it held against whatever was about to come his way—

But before Greyback could cast, a massive white blur slammed into him, sending him flying like a rag doll into a tree trunk. Draco’s trunk-sized head whipped around, and he fixed Harry with a furious look—though he was a dragon, so really he *always* looked furious.

“I was watching our back!” Harry protested. “They were going to flank us!”

Draco didn’t seem to think this justified Harry getting separated from the group, and he cuffed Harry’s head with a wingtip, snarling at him in a way that said they would be having *several* words about this later.

The wizard Harry had hit with his Binding Spell had stopped squirming and simply lay on the frozen ground whimpering pathetically. Greyback was still wrapped around the tree Draco had thrown him into, unconscious; Harry hoped he stayed that way for a while.

Someone screamed—Hermione, by the sound of it, and Ron cried out, “*Harry!*”

Draco nearly trampled Harry in his rush to get back to the others, and Harry was hot on his heels. They raced back to the campsite to find Hermione and Ron duelling the other four wizards who’d arrived with Greyback. Hermione must have gotten the protective Charms back up, for she was now fending off a volley of Dark curses being flung at her by a burly wizard who looked like he might have some mountain troll in his lineage. Half the clearing was on fire from what Harry had to assume had been Draco remembering that he was in fact a dragon and could do rather a bit more than lash his tail and snap his jaws, and Ron was trying to use spellwork to direct the flames to corral the three wizards who were ganged up on him.

One of the wizards Ron was battling broke away to address Harry; curiously, no one seemed to want to take on the ferocious, fire-spewing dragon.

“Go help Hermione and Ron!” Harry yelled over his shoulder at Draco, who seemed reluctant to let Harry out of his sight now. “*Go!* I can handle a one-on-one duel, you know! I beat *you*, didn’t I?”

Draco whipcracked his tail next to Harry’s ear in a gesture that said he remembered their Second-year duel rather differently, then bounded off toward Hermione, who was being backed into a thicket of thorny bushes.

The wizard who’d marked Harry was nowhere near the duelist Greyback had been—and Greyback hadn’t been much of one either. Harry sent the man’s wand flying off into the dark woods with his favoured *Expelliarmus*, ignoring the words of Remus echoing in his mind, warning him they could not afford to hold punches at times like this. He threw a Body-Bind at the wizard and then rushed to Ron’s side, evening the odds as they took on one wizard each.

They had numbers on their side now, and Harry let himself have a little fun. Even mock matches with Draco and training with Hermione and Ron couldn’t recreate the adrenaline burst a real duel brought on, and Harry poured all of the frustration and desperation and irritation that had built up over the past six months into his Jinxes and

Hexes.

He caught his wizard with a Leg-Locker Curse, sending him toppling forward to flail helplessly. Harry whipped around, scanning the clearing for Hermione and Draco, and grinned to see they had their quarry strung up by his legs and hanging from a tree limb. Draco beat the air with his wings to make the wizard spin in a dizzy whirl. Ron had his own opponent down on his hands and knees, retching violently and spewing up slugs. “Who doesn’t love a good *Slugulus Erecto*?” Ron said, brows lifting. His hair was in wild disarray, but his eyes were bright. He’d enjoyed the thrill of a good fight as much as Harry, it seemed.

“Is that all of them?” Harry asked, casting about for any they might have missed. “I guess Hermione got the wards back up, or else—”

“*POTTER!*” someone snarled, and before he could even turn around, Harry smelled the sizzle of burning ozone as a spell arced toward him.

Draco screeched in alarm, lunging forward to block the curse with his puffed-up body and widespread wings—and the spell fizzled into nothing when it hit him.

Greyback clucked his tongue in irritation, though he had a manic gleam to his eye, and he slapped his wand against his open palm as he slowly paced the breadth of the clearing. Ron had his wand trained on Greyback, but Harry stayed him; Greyback liked to talk, and Harry had questions.

“You seem to be outnumbered,” Harry said.

“Aye, that I do. Looks like all my men are still breathing, though.”

“We aren’t murderers.”

“Sure you are; everyone is. They just need an *excuse*.” He tugged at the collar of his shirt, revealing a hairy, muscled chest. “Go on, Potter. Give it a go. See what it *feels* like.”

Draco hissed in warning, baring his fangs—and Greyback returned the gesture with a

growling, feral bark before chuckling darkly. “Pretty pretty pet you’ve got, Potter... Be a shame if it got hurt.”

Before Harry could ponder the threat, Greyback whipped his wand sharply and unleashed a Dark spell Harry didn’t recognise. Draco braced to take the hit again, and the spell sliced through the thin membrane of his wing like a hot knife through butter. He screamed in pain, a raw, piercing yowl that nearly burst Harry’s eardrums, and he had to duck into a roll to avoid getting trampled as Draco lashed out in blind fury.

He lost sight of Greyback in the confusion, and Ron and Hermione scattered as well. Draco pelted the clearing with belching streams of lava, heedless to Harry’s shouts of, “Don’t! You’ll burn the whole forest down!” *Fuck*, he couldn’t deal with an injured, rampaging dragon *and* a werewolf on his own—where had Ron and Hermione taken cover? “Ron? Hermione!”

A rustling from behind him caught his attention, and he turned—“Ron?”

The last thing he saw before everything went dark was Fenrir Greyback’s yellow-toothed grin and a flash of blinding, brilliant light.

A Swell Solution

“*HARRY!*” Hermione screamed as she watched Harry crumple to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

Malfoy whipped around, curiously pupil-less eyes gone a ghastly white, and he galloped forward with a banshee-like shriek, grabbing Greyback in his jaws and shaking him viciously before sending him tumbling head over heels into the scrub. His head cracked sharply against a boulder, and his arm twisted unnaturally behind him. He was covered in lacerations, and Hermione darkly hoped he bled out before they got around to dealing with him.

She quickly rounded on Harry to check for signs of life, helped not at all by Ron hovering over her in a frenzy. “Is he alive?! Is he—?!”

“Hush!” She pressed two fingers against Harry’s neck—there was a pulse, but it was weak and dangerously slow. She quickly cast the diagnostic Charms she’d been practising for weeks before they’d set off, praying she remembered how to parse the readouts. “Did you see what Greyback hit him with?”

“I—I saw, but I didn’t recognise it! I didn’t—it wasn’t green, though? I mean, he’d be dead if it was—”

“It wasn’t green,” Hermione said, mostly as a firm reminder to herself. No, Harry wasn’t dead—but he might be soon, if she didn’t keep her head. She snapped her fingers, pointing toward the tent. “Get me my bag—I’ve got a healer’s kit in there.” Ron raced off, nearly face-planting when he slipped on the icy ground.

Malfoy gave a whining groan and shifted back in a flurry of robes that Hermione wished she had the time to observe; she hadn’t seen him shift since those first couple of weeks of training, and though it pained her to admit it, Malfoy now seemed to have more fluidity

in his transformation than she did.

He sank to his knees beside Harry, face even more pale than usual and eyes wide and frightened as he reached out with tentative fingers to brush Harry's knuckles. Hermione's eye was drawn to Malfoy's arm, though: it hung limp and dead from his shoulder, dripping thick, dark blood on the leaf litter. Several fingers, she could see, had been nearly cleaved from the others down to the bone, though Malfoy didn't seem to notice.

She swallowed thickly. "Malf—Draco... Draco, your arm—"

"*Fuck* my arm," he snarled, twisting away so she couldn't see the gruesome damage Greyback's spell had wrought. "Wake him up."

"I'm *trying*, obviously."

"Well try *harder*."

Thankfully, Ron returned at that moment, distracting them from further arguments. He shoved the healer's kit into Hermione's hands, and she placed it on the ground, fumbling with the latches before simply rapping her wand on the lid so it popped open. She rubbed at her eyes, smiling gratefully up at Ron when he cast a *Lumos* to shed light on her efforts. She strained to read the delicate looping writing on the labels of the potion phials tucked into the kit—then quickly packed them away with a frustrated huff.

"We need to get him inside—it's freezing out here and I can't f-focus."

"Right," Ron said, sliding around to slip his arms under Harry's.

"No!" she said, snapping the lid of the healer's kit closed again. "Use *Mobilicorpus*! There might be internal damage, and we don't want to exacerbate it!"

Ron nodded faintly, looking lost, and Draco leapt to his feet, shoving Ron aside with his wand brandished. "Weasley wouldn't know a delicate touch if it grabbed him by the balls—I'll handle this."

“Leave it, Draco!” Hermione snapped. “You’ve only got the one good arm! Ron can do this.” She cast a glance over her shoulder at Greyback. “...Go put the fire out, or we’ll be burned to a crisp. Then make sure they’re all immobilised and chuck them in the Sanctuary until we can deal with them later.”

“My wandwork’s not good enough for Potter, but it’s good enough for *them*?”

“The difference is I really don’t care if your aim is off guiding *their* unconscious bodies!” Draco’s features screwed up in indignation, and he looked like he very much wanted to object. She cut him off at the knees before he could pitch a fit, adding, “And then come inside so we can clean you up, too. You’ll do Harry no good passing out from blood loss.”

She effectively ended the conversation by refusing to speak to him until he stalked over to the last of the wizards Harry had been dealing with, then she guided Ron as he levitated Harry’s unconscious body into the tent. They laid him out on the couch, shoving pillows under his head, and Hermione was reminded sickly of the state Ron had been in after he’d gotten Splinched during their escape from the Ministry.

The diagnostics Charms revealed no particularly alarming vitals—there was no internal bleeding, no broken bones, he was just *asleep*, it seemed, and deeply so. She tried a *Finite incantatem* and a *Rennervate*, just in case it really was that simple, but to no avail. Seeing as it had been Greyback who had knocked Harry out, he’d probably used a Dark spell with some obscure counter unlikely to be found in any of their *Standard Spells* books.

She dragged her healer’s kit out again now that her hands weren’t numb from the cold and fear and began the arduous process of mentally running through the effects of the pre-made potions included in the kit—after which she’d have to consider potions to be made from scratch and pray she had all the necessary ingredients. She regretted sending Draco away now; he had been no slouch in Snape’s class, even without the favouritism, and given he had been raised in a wizarding family with what was likely a well-stocked potions cabinet, he might have some ideas she wouldn’t consider.

But he was too on-edge at the moment to be any good to them; who knew what harm he

might unwittingly cause—to both himself *and* Harry—if she asked him to buckle down and concentrate on saving Harry’s life after the ordeal he’d just been through? On top of the physical injury Greyback’s nasty spell had inflicted, it couldn’t have been good for the bits of him that were more dragon than human seeing his mate in harm’s way. Experience had taught Hermione that Draco tended to be particularly tricky to handle when agitated, especially when Harry was the cause of his mood.

Which, she supposed, was certainly no new development, but the risk of uncontrolled shifts into a great big fire-breathing lizard that could destroy the tent and everything in it decidedly complicated matters.

She took a steadying breath and returned her attention to the potions. She considered the amber phial labelled *Wiggenweld Potion*—then dismissed it; this was spell damage, not a case of poisoning, and she didn’t want to dose him with anything more than necessary, worrying over cross-reactions.

The door to the Sanctuary slammed open, and Draco came marching back in with a murderous expression on his face. In no mood to endure more of his tantrums, especially at the cost of finding a way to rouse Harry as quickly as possible, she pointed to the nearest of Perkins’s armchairs and spoke with a tone that brooked no argument. “Sit. And take off your shirt.”

Draco pulled up short, forehead wrinkling. “*Excuse me?*”

“Take it off, or prepare to have it Vanished. Ron can’t disinfect your wound and wrap it like that.” She nodded to his arm, which Draco had curled gingerly against his chest. It looked no better than before, suggesting he hadn’t bothered to transform to start the healing process. She would have to do what she could to make him as comfortable as possible until he could finally be convinced to put his Animagus form to good use, which would take more time and energy than she could spare just now.

“I don’t need Weasley playing nursemaid!”

“You’re right; you need to heal *yourself*—but since I doubt anything short of *Imperius* is

going to get you back into the Sanctuary to let the dragon heal its wound on its own, you're going to let us patch you up, for whatever it's worth. I'm not going to have Harry wake up and find we've let you bleed out while he was Cursed. Now *sit*."

Draco hesitated another beat, just to be contrary, but he eventually slumped into the armchair, fumbling one-handed with the complicated buttons on his shirt and glaring daggers at Ron, as if daring him to so much as offer to help. Well, no worries on *that* end, Hermione thought.

Once Draco had shrugged out of his shirt, she directed Ron to find the bandages and tincture of iodine in her bag. Ron looked about as enthused as Draco with his task, grimacing baldly when he caught sight of the Dark Mark, but she trusted he could handle the simple task of wrapping Draco's mutilated hand without incident.

"...Don't see why you don't just cast *Episkey* or something," Draco grumbled, holding his arm out for Ron to disinfect. "Or surely you've got some Skele-Gro in that kit of yours."

"Wasted effort. That was a Dark curse Greyback slung at you—no potion or spell is going to do any good fixing you."

Draco straightened. "*What?*" he squawked—then hissed sharply as Ron brushed a cotton swab soaked in iodine tincture at the edges of the wound. "Watch it!"

"Don't be a baby," Ron said, grabbing Draco by the elbow when he tried to pull his arm away. "Can't believe you're not complaining about your hand being hacked in two but you'll whinge cause the antiseptic stings a bit."

Draco ignored him, eyes fixed on Hermione. She thought she saw tiny little embers burning in his gaze, but then she blinked and they were gone—the fight must have had her seeing things. "What do you *mean* it won't do me any good? You mean I'm going to lose my hand?!"

"I mean spells and potions won't fix it, like I said. The damage done by Dark curses can't be restored." She looked at Ron, and he frowned; they were both remembering poor

George and his lost ear. "...Not by traditional magic at least. But your Animagus transformation evidently healed the damage done by Harry's Curse before—" She waved at his chest, smooth and flat and scar-free. "—so I expect the dragon's remarkable abilities will be able to restore your hand as well."

"Then what's the point of *this*?" Draco jerked on his arm, trying to shake Ron off. "If all I've got to do is transform, you should have said so—"

"Because it wasn't *you* that got hit, it was the *dragon*; it's the dragon's body that's been damaged, this is just a reflection of it. So you'll need to let the dragon heal itself—in that form."

"I've got to *stay a dragon*?!"

"Long enough for it to heal itself, yes." He really was entirely too slow on the uptake; clearly he'd been neglecting his reading of *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*.

"And how long is that?"

Hermione shrugged. "However long it takes. I'd say at least several days." Draco's expression went slack, leaving him looking more than a bit lost as panic flashed over his features. She could see the indecision warring within him as he confronted the reality he might have to choose between saving his hand and being here for Harry. She pursed her lips, a swell of pity overcoming her good senses: "...You don't have to go right away, if you can stomach the pain. It might be better if you don't, even; I'm sure we'll need your help to stabilise Harry. You're not hurting yourself by delaying a shift, only healing exponentially more slowly than you will in transformation. Once we've got Harry settled, then you can go and tend to yourself, how's that?" Draco swallowed thickly, then nodded, just once. "Good—now stop being a prat and let Ron bandage you properly or it'll heal crooked and you'll be flying in circles for the rest of your life."

She expected more lip, but Draco ducked his head and dutifully held his arm out, no longer fighting Ron's touch. While Ron finished up the wrapping, Hermione fished out the phial of Blood-replenishing Potion she'd prepared back when Ron had been Splinched

and diluted a dose in a mug of warm water.

She passed the mug to Draco, making sure he downed it all. “I’ve got some Dissolution of Murtlap too, for the pain, if you’d like?”

“I’m not a First-year who needs to have his every cut and scrape kissed better, Granger.”

Ron pinched his bicep with a glare. “Who are you trying to impress, seriously? Take the damn stuff and shove your martyr complex.”

Draco reluctantly allowed Hermione to place three drops of the Dissolution on his tongue, grimacing at the taste. Murtlap was usually applied topically, but it worked more quickly as an analgesic when administered orally.

She sealed the bandages with a spell to make them waterproof, and after extracting a promise he would return to the Sanctuary to mend himself at the very earliest opportunity, they all three turned their attentions to rousing Harry.

Draco pulled his shirt back on and demanded a run-down of what she’d learned in her preliminary appraisal while he’d been dealing with their uninvited guests. “The trouble is, I can’t see anything physically *wrong* with him—he just won’t wake up. His pulse is still weak, but it’s steady; whatever Greyback hit him with, it seems to work like a Stasis Charm, perhaps to keep him under until they could bring him back to You-Know-Who—*oh!*” She brought her hand to her mouth, a thought striking.

“What?” Draco asked.

“Maybe you could try touching him?” At his dubious frown, she clarified. “It’s only, when we found you in the Ministry, none of our spells worked to wake you until Harry touched you.”

Draco’s expression brightened with hope—and then fell. “...I already touched him, outside.” He firmed his jaw, though, and tried again anyway, laying his palm against Harry’s shoulder and giving a gentle nudge. “...Wake the fuck up, Potter. My arm hurts.”

Ron stood behind them, arms crossed over his chest. "...Don't suppose you know what spell it was they used on him?"

"Just because it's Dark magic doesn't mean I know it," Draco growled, and Hermione tutted at them.

"Can we not be at each other's throats at least long enough to fix Harry, please?" She sighed, easing to her feet and crossing over to the bookshelf. "Anyway, it doesn't matter what spell it was. The fact alone it was Dark magic means we can't prise the Counter-curse from Greyback." She sighed. "...In which case I suppose we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way."

She pulled down every book she could find on Potions and Curses, from *Apothecariat* to *Zodiac Zolutions*. It was well past midnight by now, but she doubted any of them would have been able to sleep, despite being exhausted, and so for the next several hours, they settled in as if this were just another evening of research around the magicked fire. Draco curled up at the opposite end of the sofa from Harry, his long legs drawn up to his chest so that his toes just brushed Harry's. She wondered if the gesture gave him any comfort at all, or if it was merely instinctual by now.

The night wore on, and Hermione came across nothing of note in *Herbal Remedies and Potioneering*, nor in *Cures for a Cursed Fate* nor in *Magical Draughts and Potions*. She tried not to think about the Half-blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and how it had saved Ron's life before but had now likely been lost forever.

Ron, too, came up empty, though Hermione's heart swelled to see him so diligently poring over the texts when she knew how much he hated research. He brewed tea for the three of them around sunrise, and she gave his hand a grateful squeeze when she took her mug from him, earning a shy, boyish smile in return that was rather fetching indeed.

"Find anything yet, Granger?" Draco bit out waspishly. "Or can't you tear your cow-eyes away from Weasley long enough to actually *read*?"

Hermione jerked her hand back, cheeks colouring. “Of course I haven’t found anything; you think I’m just sitting on the solution for dramatic effect?”

Draco slammed his book shut. “I think it’s been nearly ten hours and *he’s still not awake*. I think the longer this goes on, the worse our chances of bringing him back. I think *some of us* are putting in more effort than others because *their own lives* depend on his, and maybe that suits *you* just fine.”

“Malfoy...” Hermione warned; she’d been trying to practice Harry’s gesture of outreach, confident that if they started treating Draco like a friend, then perhaps he might become one along the way, but he was trying her patience very hard right now.

“Hard to believe you managed an ‘Outstanding’ in Potions!” Draco sneered. “One wonders if you didn’t put in a bit of extra credit—”

She was on her feet in a flash, wand drawn and tip jabbed into Draco’s neck as he pushed her to her limit. “Pull that forked tongue of yours back into your mouth and be *quiet*. I know you’re worried, and I know you’re feeling particularly helpless right about now, but if you don’t *shut your damn mouth* right this instant and let us handle this—since you’ve evidently got nothing of value to offer—then I’m going to have Ron knock you out and chuck you into the Sanctuary with the others.” She was breathing hard, and she made herself take a beat before she continued, if only to keep her blood from boiling over. “Either offer some *constructive* aid or piss off into the Sanctuary and use this time to heal yourself.” She dropped her wand, taking a slow, steadying breath. “Harry *needs* you—but if you can’t get ahold of yourself long enough to actually help, you’re only dragging us down.”

Draco’s face went paler than usual at the threat, and he looked like he might sick up; perhaps he’d lost more blood than she’d thought—it was probably time for another dose of the Blood-replenishing Potion anyway.

He quickly looked away, evidently chastened, and guiltily grabbed the next book from her pile—*Moste Ancyente and Magicke of Cures*—and settled back onto the sofa to read, always with one eye on the slow, shallow rise-and-fall of Harry’s chest.

She sighed, slipping her wand back into her pocket, and tried to find where she'd left off in her text.

Morning seemed to crawl by at a glacial pace with no change, and after she'd tried reading the same passage three times without comprehending the words on the page, Hermione was forced to admit that their exhaustion was going to cause them miss important clues that might lead to Harry's cure. After much grumbling and grouching, they eventually agreed to take watches and sleep in shifts. It spoke to how sapped he'd been by the fight and his injuries that Draco agreed without more than a cursory protest to spend his sleep shift resting in the Sanctuary in transformation so that the dragon could heal itself.

It almost pained Hermione to send him away, with the way he'd stood sentinel the whole night, but Harry would have wanted him to do the same and been far less kind about it.

After only a couple of hours, though, Draco stumbled back in, looking little better than before. Hermione convinced him to let her change the bandages and re-wrap his hand, and she winced when she saw the raw, inflamed skin and sticky film of pus and exudate. Beneath the gruesome sight, though, she could tell that he was already on the mend after his brief stint in transformation. The muscle was beginning to knit back together, and the fragile, tiny bones of the hand that had been cleaved in two by Greyback's spell were peeking out from the tissue beds like little white pea shoots.

It would be some time yet before the damage was wholly undone, and he would likely not be able to fly without risking reopening the wound for another few weeks, but he would live, scrappy little git that he was.

She brewed another tincture of the Blood-replenishing Potion and Dissolution of Murtlap, applying a thick layer of dittany over the wound before wrapping it securely and sealing it.

Ron did not require much convincing to take the next sleep shift, nor was he in any danger of rejoining them in the sitting room before he'd restored his energy reserves, and Hermione wound up having to use a Stinging Jinx to get him out of bed when it came

time for dinner. Chagrined, he offered to make them all cheese toasties and sent Hermione off to bed with a plate and cup of warm chamomile, promising to wake her—without a Stinging Jinx—if he and Draco came across anything of note.

She was asleep after two bites.

Her own nap was what finally did it—and she roused just after midnight, wide awake and heart pounding. She threw off her blankets, sending the lamps flaring to life, and sank to her knees in front of a box she now used to store the books they had determined, in the course of their Horcrux research, were complete bunk. She had the cover clear in her mind, and in the middle of a stack of old alchemical almanacs and several of the more sentimental texts she'd brought along, she found it.

Ron was dozing lightly when she entered the sitting room, but Draco noticed something had changed in her demeanour immediately, rising to his feet from where he'd been sitting curled up on the sofa at Harry's feet. "What? What've you found?"

Ron gave a snorting start when Draco spoke, blinking blearily. "Hr'mione...?"

"I...I don't know if it's anything, really—I mean, it's *something*, but it could be nothing, you know?"

"Spit it out, Granger," Draco growled, scrambling around the sofa and snatching away the book she had clutched against her chest, frowning at the title. "*Witch Weekly Readers' Digest*? What kind of housewitch drivel is this?"

"I *told* you, it could be nothing—"

Draco waved the book in her face with his good hand. "So help me, Granger, if you've had your fat nose buried in this *tripe* while—*OW!*" He jerked back, dropping the book and shaking his good hand in pain. He licked the back of his hand, which now sported several nasty boils from the Jinx Hermione had just slapped him with.

Ron bent down and picked the book up, glaring darkly at Draco. "Be grateful she just zapped your hand." He was still limping a bit from the Jinx she'd cast on Ron's rear to

get him out of bed after his nap.

“If you’re through being unaccountably horrid?” she sniffed at Draco, taking the book from Ron with a small smile. She’d tired of wasting her breath arguing with Draco, especially when he was in one of his less-than-rare moods. He would learn not to be an arsehole to her the hard way: with a pound of flesh. “Now, I realise this is one of the... less *professional* texts in my library, but it included recipes for a few potions that other books didn’t because, well let’s face it, housewitches’ home remedies have *long* been derided by academic societies at large even though they—”

“Hermione, *please*,” Ron pleaded. “Save the lectures for after we’ve put Harry to rights? I mean, I’m sure he’d hate to miss them.”

“Right,” she said. “Well, you’ve both seen the readouts from my diagnostic Charms, yes? Harry’s physically fine, other than some bumps and bruises and a weak pulse; he’s just knocked out. We know it was a Dark curse that did this to him, and as Ron’s brother will attest, there’s no undoing the damage caused by Dark curses—not by conventional means at least.”

Draco rubbed at his chest with a frown. “...What sort of *unconventional* means have you been digging into, then?” He sneered, “Going to turn him into a dragon? I can vouch it’s no picnic.”

Ron brightened. “Wait! You said there was a spell—*Draconifors*!”

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes. She appreciated Ron’s enthusiasm—and was admittedly impressed he remembered the spell—but he was pulling her off topic. “*Draconifors* is only for small, inanimate objects, and if we tried to use it on Harry, there’s no telling—” She cut herself off with an irritated huff. “*The point is* that we probably won’t be able to rely on spellwork in this case. So we’ll have to stick to potions—and I don’t mean cure-alls.”

“Yeah, we kind of gathered as such, given we’ve been poring over dry old potions texts for the past thirty hours,” Ron said. “What did you have in mind?”

Hermione's cheeks heated as she settled into one of the armchairs, the book open on her lap. "Well, I thought we might try *really* waking him up. If jostling him won't do the trick, perhaps we just need to try something with a bit more of a punch."

Draco's eyes lit up. "You're finally going to let me clock him?"

"Not that sort of punch," she said, frowning. "...There's a potion I found in this book—it was honestly the reason I chucked it away, because if the authors were advertising *that* sort of funny business, then clearly we weren't going to find anything of legitimate use in here."

"What sort of 'funny business'?" Ron asked, and Hermione pursed her lips.

In a small voice, she said, "It's a...well, it's a *virility* potion."

Ron's brow wrinkled. "A—what?"

"A potion to make your cock hard, is what she means," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Are you *serious*, Granger? I thought you said you wanted to help Potter get up—not *get it up*."

"That's not why I want to try the potion, obviously!" Hermione protested, and she knew she had to be blushing red as a tomato by now. She buried her face in the crisp pages of the book, inhaling the familiar scent of the glue in the binding. "I'm sure it's hogwash for its purposes, but the list of ingredients suggests it's a concentrated reinnervation potion. It shares a lot of ingredients with an Invigoration Draught, a Vitamix Potion, Pepperup —"

"And, one assumes, a Swelling Solution."

It did, but she wasn't going to give Draco the satisfaction. "It's the only thing I've found so far that sounds like it'll have enough kick to pull Harry out of this stasis spell, all right? In fact, an overdose might actually overtax the heart and kill you, really, which makes this book *highly* suspect, but—"

“And you want to pour this down your Saviour’s throat?!”

“If you’ve got any better ideas, then I’m all ears, but you said yourself—and I agree—the longer Harry’s under, the less chance we’ve got of pulling him out, and this is the only potion I’ve found so far that I’ve got even *half* the ingredients for!” She drew herself up, defensive. “We have to try it!”

“Sure, why not?” Draco shrugged. “Worst-case scenario: his heart explodes.” He gestured towards the book in Hermione’s lap. “You’ve got all the ingredients, then?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Er—I can make substitutions for a lot of the missing bits, I’m sure, but there’s one primary ingredient we can’t do without...”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Which is?”

“Well, the authors have chosen some rather exotic ingredients, I assume to make their potion seem particularly powerful even though most have pantry-standard counterparts that are far easier to come by and do the job just as adequately. The main ingredient serving as the base of the supposed ‘virility’ enhancement, though...is filings of dragon teeth.”

Draco snorted. “Suppose you don’t have *that* in your little healer’s kit then, do you?”

“No,” she said, looking at him pointedly. “I *don’t*. So...”

“So?” It took a beat for Draco to get her meaning, and then he sputtered. “What the *fuck*—you want to pull *my teeth*?!”

“I don’t want to *pull* them! The potion only requires filings!”

“Dragon tooth filings—for *virility enhancement*! Setting aside what a load of horse shit *that* sounds like, if the point of using *this* particular potion is simply to take advantage of its ‘invigorating’ properties, then I don’t see why you need—”

“You know perfectly well that leaving out *any* ingredient—especially the one that’s

meant to be used to form the base liquor of the entire potion—could destabilise the whole thing! There’s no point in making the potion *at all* if we don’t make it *right*.” She crossed her arms. “If you honestly think this is a bad idea—for Harry’s sake—and that we should keep at our research, then...we can discuss it. But try not being petty for once in your life and *consider* that this might work.”

Draco stared at her for a long moment, lips pinched and looking like he was searching *very* hard for an excuse—but either he came up empty or he called it quits, for he gave a huffing growl of, “Let’s get this over with,” and stormed out of the room, making for the Sanctuary.

Ron watched him go with a concerned expression. “...You sure this’ll work?”

“Not at all,” Hermione sighed, grabbing an empty phial from her healer’s kit. “But what other choice have we got? If this doesn’t work, then I think we’ll have to seriously consider going for help; none of us has anywhere near the medical experience to deal with Curse damage...”

She hoped it wouldn’t come to having to Polyjuice Harry and bring him into St. Mungo’s or smuggling him into Hogwarts to see if Madame Pomfrey couldn’t revive him.

They were barely over the threshold of the Sanctuary before Draco had transformed, flowing seamlessly from a glowering, pasty-faced whip of a man into, well, a glowering, pasty-hide whip of a dragon. Hermione allowed herself a moment to appreciate the creature; several months now of hearty meals and exercise and sunlight had done Draco good, and it showed as both a human and dragon. His opalescent scales seemed to soak in the light of the half-moon hanging above, giving him a glowing lustre that was difficult to stare at straight on. Ron put it nicely when he breathed, “Wicked...” perhaps forgetting for a moment just who it was lurking beneath those gleaming scales and raked fangs and razor-sharp talons.

She spotted a dark shape out of the corner of her eye and glanced over to see their attackers laid out neatly on the frozen ground, sedated and bound in thick magical ropes. She hoped wherever they’d come from, they wouldn’t be missed any time soon. They

really ought to have moved camp the moment the battle had ended, but with Harry in such a delicate state, Hermione hadn't dared. They had to hope their charms held this time—though how they'd been found in the first place was a worrisome matter in and of itself.

She shrugged off her mounting concerns for the time being, reminding herself she needed to focus on the task at hand.

The dragon had one wing crooked oddly, and Hermione winced to see the nasty rip slicing through the thin membrane, inflamed and oozing though likely in far better shape than it had been twenty-four hours ago. She itched to patch it—it might heal even faster if she could suture it closed, and maybe some dittany would help it along, seeing as Ron had hardly any scarring at all from his Splinching incident. She doubted Draco would allow it, though—at least not while Harry was laid up on the couch. It had been difficult enough getting him to let them wrap his arm at all. Perhaps once they had Harry back with them, he could help lean on Draco to get him to see reason.

Draco paced nervously, shaking his head with snorting huffs, and Hermione found herself rethinking how wise this was; she was standing not ten feet away from a male dragon just come into its prime worried sick about its mate—and she was about to ask it nicely to open its ripping jaws wide so she could examine its teeth. That sounded like some mad task Hagrid would have set them in Care of Magical Creatures, not something any *sane* person would ever want to do.

There was nothing more to be done for it, though, and she raised her wand and cleared her throat. “If you're ready, Draco? This shouldn't take more than a moment, and then we can start brewing the potion.”

Draco huffed again, fixing her with one of those eerie pupil-less eyes of his—a sludgy purple-brown now—then plodded over and settled down on his haunches. He curled his long neck into a serpentine ‘S’ so that she could reach comfortably and opened his jaws, exposing two rows of raked teeth slick with saliva. She tried not to stare into his gullet, fearful it would be the last thing she saw before a wave of lava came belching out.

She used her wand to carve away at some of the thicker teeth towards the back, talking to herself to keep from wondering how she was going to do magic if Draco clamped his jaws shut and bit off her hands. “I hope this potion isn’t species-specific. I bought the book in Diagon Alley, so they may have assumed any potioners would be using teeth from a native species, like a Hebridean Black or a Common Welsh Green... Maybe for a Meridional breed I ought to stir in the opposite direction?” She groaned. “And that’s all assuming this will even *work* with ingredients obtained from an Animagus transformation!”

“Hermione, it’s a recipe you pulled from *Witch Weekly Readers’ Digest*; you really think it’s going to be *that* finicky?”

She threw a chastising look over her shoulder at Ron. “It’s precisely that sort of attitude that keeps tried and true spellwork and potions passed down from mother to daughter from enjoying the notoriety and acceptance those same spells and potions would if they were published by some stuffy wizard with a degree in an academic jour—”

Draco unleashed a menacing growl from deep in the back of his throat—and was she imagining it, or was there a faint glow just behind his uvula? “Sorry, sorry, I’m finished!” she muttered, quickly stoppering the phial and stepping back. She supposed they would have to hope that none of these issues greatly influenced the efficacy of the potion.

Draco transformed back, rubbing ruefully at his jaw. “You certainly took your time.”

“Well, my parents *are* dentists.”

Draco frowned. “What’s a dentist?”

“The potion, people?” Ron called; he’d given Draco a wide berth while Hermione rooted around inside his mouth, she noticed—some hero.

They bustled back into the tent, with Draco preparing the kitchen table for brewing while Hermione sorted through their ingredients. It was decided by unanimous vote that Ron would be in charge of reading off the instructions. She sought Draco’s opinion on the

substitutions she was planning and was pleased when he gave short, courteous responses. He was either very worried about Harry, or his hand was still stinging from earlier—though there was no discounting it was a little of both.

His newfound congeniality stretched into the brewing process too, where though he hovered over her distractingly as she poured in ingredients and stirred as directed, he did not seem compelled to make any snide remarks on her technique. Evidently he'd gotten it through his thick skull that if he interfered with the brew, it could by extension hurt Harry. She was surprised he hadn't insisted he make the potion himself; perhaps he realised he was in no fit state mentally to give the brew the concentration required.

While the potion simmered for the required five hours, Hermione encouraged them to cat-nap and get their strength back. Draco refused to be chivvied off back into the Sanctuary this time, though, instead settling into one of Perkins's armchairs with a mug of spiked coffee and keeping one eye on the bubbling potion and the other on Harry's prone form.

"...Sorry for calling you a coward before, Draco," Ron said out of the blue, breaking what had been nearly an hour straight of silence. Hermione blamed it on the ungodly hour—the skies outside were going grey with the approaching dawn, and clearly *anything* was possible when you'd gone over two days on a handful of hours of sleep. "Probably shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. 'Specially since you've kind of been saving our arses left and right lately." He frowned at his own words, like he couldn't believe he was saying them either.

Draco lifted one lacy white brow, still clutching his mug of coffee, though it must have long gone cold by now. "...Your thanks would be better expressed by not calling me 'Draco' like we're best mates."

Ron gave him a cockeyed grin. "Sorry, but keep pulling our bacon from the fire like that, and we're gonna feel compelled to treat you like a decent bloke."

"What a delightfully low-brow turn of phrase," Draco grumbled, tapping his wand against his mug. Shortly, tendrils of steam began to billow up.

Ron rolled his eyes, then looked at Hermione as if to say *Why do I even bother?* though there was a distinct hint of amusement in his eyes. She supposed that there came a point where it was difficult to take Draco's stinging barbs all that seriously, and she resolved in the future to stop letting his pricks and pokes get under her skin so much. Even if it was *very* satisfying to Jinx him when he mouthed off.

Hermione dozed off and on until her Alarm Charm trilled brightly, and with bated breath, she ladled a dose of the potion into a tin cup, as per the instructions, and spun around in a circle ten times while holding the cup firmly in both hands. Ron had to take her by the shoulders to guide her into the sitting room lest she trip and spill the potion in her dizziness, and Draco tipped Harry's head back and prised his jaw open so that she could pour the potion down his throat. He swallowed it reflexively, sighing softly, and their collective shoulders slumped in relief.

Now they could but wait for the results—good or bad.

“How long is it supposed to take to kick in?” Ron asked.

“The potion's instructions say it should be taken three hours before...erm, any amorous activities.” It spoke to how exhausted she was that she didn't flush as deeply this time, only rubbing her eyes and stifling a yawn. Draco had shown no signs of weariness the whole night through, but fear and worry had done a number on Hermione's nerves, and she could no longer keep her eyes open. “I'm absolutely exhausted, though... Shall we post watches again, in case he wakes and needs something? I'm happy to take one if it can please be second or third.”

“No need,” Draco said, sinking to his knees on the floor beside the sofa so that his head was level with Harry's. “I'll wait until he's up. You both can sleep, if you need it.” His mug had been refilled, and he had *Witch Weekly Readers' Digest* tucked under his good arm, perhaps intending to review the instructions to be sure they hadn't missed anything.

Hermione glanced over to Ron, whose expression said something similar to her own thoughts.

An already complicated relationship seemed on course to become even more mucked up than it was, and really the last thing Harry needed right now was confusion and distraction. But there was nothing to be done for it now—the time for intervention had *long* passed. Besides, this ‘complication’ might well save Harry’s life in the end, so perhaps it simply needed to be managed.

There was little they could do for the time being except to be there for Harry when he needed them. They were quite good at that, at least—had six and a half years’ experience, even.

She recalled Lupin’s earlier comments on the Wireless, saying that Harry should trust his instincts, as they were nearly always right.

She just hoped this wasn’t one of the rare instances when they were wrong.

Only This

Harry's dreams were more fitful than usual tonight, he pondered distantly—but then, he'd rather be plagued by colourful blurs and formless voices and ache all over than be forced to bear witness to another of Voldemort's heinous acts, so he supposed this was a step up. It was just so dark, though, and strangely lonely; he felt like he was missing something, or being missed. Incomplete, and longing for completion.

He tried to remember when he'd fallen asleep, what he'd done the day before, how long it was until daybreak—but nothing came to him. He was just tired, *so* tired. His mind felt like it was stuck in tar—and a brief, muddied flash of panic said *like being under Imperius*. But he could fight off an Imperius, he *could*. He'd done it before. At least, he thought he had. He recognised this feeling, the idea that there was no point in fighting, that it was easier to just give in... It would feel so much better to give himself over to the mind-dulling numbness of nothing.

Except he couldn't do that—or, he *could*, but that wouldn't resolve the irritating sense that there was still something missing. A something he needed on the one hand that outweighed the nothing he wanted on the other. Needs and wants, it was always about needs and wants these days. The things he wanted were never the things he needed, not for him, and a sneering voice at the back of his mind said *Tough shit, Potter. That's life*.

No, that was just what he'd been served; it didn't mean he had to accept it. He could make the need his want, could let the want become a need and satisfy both parts of himself. He wanted to be complete, to find that missing piece and be one, and the need quickly coalesced, building into a heavy, desperate urge that settled right behind his heart and fired it into a galloping rhythm that thudded in time with the pounding inside his skull.

He was hot—freezing hot, and he *needed*—

“Harry?”

There was pressure on his chest, something heavy and warm leaning on him—and then it was gone, and someone had him by the shoulders and was shaking him. Or shoving, rather, roughly and rudely. Didn't they realise what time it was?

“Harry? Harry, wake the fuck up.”

Something slapped his cheek—it *stung*. Harry's lids fluttered, but his vision was muzzy, blurred at the edges and unfocused. No glasses, he thought, though he kept squinting his eyes, waiting for the room to gain clarity.

There was a buzzing in his ears, like whoever was speaking to him was doing it through a swarm of bees. That was what was stinging him: a million pinpricks all over his skin, and it *hurt* like hell, but the pain wasn't sharp enough and the buzzing wasn't incessant enough to shake the persistent feeling...that he was still missing something. He'd been missing it in his dreams, and he was missing it awake now, and Harry was beginning to wish he'd just given in to the siren call of nothingness instead of choosing—choosing!—to chase down whatever it was that would complete him. This thing that would fill him. Satisfy him.

He shifted in place, squirming to be let up, and a fondly annoyed voice chided, “Stop that—lie down and rest. You want some water? Granger left a tincture if there's any pain...”

The blurry figure moved away, and Harry snapped a hand out, suddenly desperate not to be left alone, grabbing what he could. His fingers curled around a thin-boned wrist, and it was warm. He could feel the pulse throbbing just under the surface. It was a good throb, wild and strong, and he drew it closer. He wanted it so close, it became his own, taming the blood racing in his veins. He felt just a little less incomplete with another body so close.

There was a chuckling groan, just at his ear. “I can't fetch the tincture if you don't let go, Harry...”

Harry didn't know what this tincture was, only that he didn't need it. Or want it. All that mattered was *whoever* this was, who could make him whole again. Not Ron, not Hermione—oh. *Yeah*. “Draco...”

“You've really got to stop calling me that...” Draco whined, but he quit his fussing about the tincture and settled on the floor beside the sofa. He curled his arm over Harry's chest, letting it lie there, and this time it wasn't a heavy pressure, just a comforting one. Could he feel Harry's heartbeat, and how *off* it was? Could he fix it?

“Draco,” he said again, because it was the only thing he could think of to say at the moment. It was easy to hold on to, such a name, and the need that was coiling in him wrapped its tendrils around that name and *squeezed*. “Draco. Draco. Dra—”

“Enough, honestly,” Draco shushed, his voice carrying a twinge of worry, and Harry imagined those lacy white brows were knitting whole sweaters. “Let me at least get you some water? Your voice is—”

“*Draco*,” he said again, and his grip tightened on Draco's wrist draped over his chest, while his free hand came up around Draco's neck, settling just at the nape and rubbing little hypnotic circles in the fine feather-like hairs he found there. He exhaled slowly, and it came out a ragged, juddering breath, staccato over the roiling urges in his chest, stomach, core. “I need...”

Draco moved over him, a blurry shadow of concern and care. “You need—what? Pain potion? I told you, Granger left a tincture on the—or do you need a salve? We didn't notice you were wounded; Granger dabbed dittany on the scrapes and cuts but—oh. Or do you need the loo? You haven't pissed in two days... Fuck, that'll be awkward, but we can—”

“*Draco...*” he breathed, drawing the name into his lungs until it filled him—but the name alone wasn't enough. He tilted his head, leaning in until Draco finally stopped *asking* what he needed and *realised*.

Draco's mouth was just as warm and solid as his body, like there was an everburning fire

kindling in his core and *oh*. Oh there was, right. He was fire and fury and cool, calculating judgement all at once. Extremes in every direction, soft and hard and sharp and gentle. A man could get drunk on a paradox like Draco Malfoy. Maybe that was what was happening, Harry thought.

“Harry—*Potter*, st-stop. You’re sick...” Draco pulled his wrist from Harry’s grasp, turning his head to the side but not drawing away entirely. His hot breath fanned over Harry’s cheek, and their noses brushed.

“So make me feel better...” Harry breathed. “Draco... Draco, make me...”

“I’m *trying*—” Draco protested shortly, trying to pull away, and Harry tightened his hold.

“Not hard enough...” He let his free hand snake between them, reaching down to brush over the sensitive muscles of his stomach and trace his navel. No, not hard enough by *half*—but getting there.

He twisted his hand and rubbed the butt of his palm firmly over the front of Draco’s trousers, drawing a sharp, hissed oath from lips plump from kissing. Draco had his arm braced just next to Harry’s head now, the other hanging limp at his side like dead weight. The braced arm trembled with the effort of supporting his weight, and his hips dropped a hair, sliding seamlessly into Harry’s cupped palm.

Harry’s vision cleared, and he could see Draco worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, eyes clenched shut tight. “...Don’t.”

“Unwind, Draco...” Harry urged. Maybe Draco didn’t see that he was a little incomplete too, that Harry could help, that Harry *wanted* to. Draco was hot and hardening under Harry’s touch, and surely that meant something, but Slytherins could be so pointlessly stubborn, especially this one.

Harry curled his fingers, following the shape of Draco’s prick, imagining it was his own. They could fill each other’s empty spaces, just like this, and make a more-than-

something, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. They could—

Draco seized sharply, hips bucking, then pressed his forearm tight against Harry's throat, threatening to cut off his air supply. "If you don't keep your fucking hands to yourself I swear to the source of all magic, Potter, I will rip your balls off with my newly filed teeth." He groaned, somewhere deep in his throat. "Fucking—Granger and her—fucking *virility serum*."

Harry tried to swallow, but he couldn't get the lump past the arm Draco had crushing his windpipe. "Then *you*—touch *me*..." he rasped. He pulled his hand back up, slipping it around Draco's shoulder to splay against his back, pressing them closer.

It felt like he was an arm's length under the water's surface, and drowning; he could see salvation, life, sanity—he just couldn't quite *reach it*. But it was so near, so near, and the need was even stronger for its proximity. He would go mad, *die*, if Draco took this away from him now.

Words began to spill from his lips, babbling like a brook. "*Please... Please, please Draco, please just—*" He lifted his hips, rutting against all the long, lean bits of Draco he could reach, showing him where the need was sharpest, where he most longed to be made whole again. "Aren't...aren't you my mate—"

The arm pressing on his throat was jerked away, and a hand came up to cover his mouth—it was bandaged. When had Draco gotten hurt? "We don't use the M word, *remember?*" Draco hissed. "Because we're fucking human beings and aren't to be bent by the whims of nature."

Harry licked his palm, and Draco snatched his hand back, glaring in disgust as he wiped it on his shirt. Hips undulating jerkily in a parody of a thrust, Harry gave a deliberative *hmm*. "You're plenty bent for me, though..." He grinned at his own words, because it was so damn *hilarious*, and why hadn't he laughed about this before? Draco's imagined subtlety, the convoluted way he went about justifying the dragon's obsession with Harry when there was a perfectly *logical* explanation for it all? "You want me but you don't want me and you don't want to want me but you *do* want to want me and why are you

such a—such a para...para...”

There was a word he'd wanted to use—he'd had it earlier, but it escaped him now, and he couldn't wrap his lips around it. He closed his eyes as longing and desperation washed through him in a wave of real, physical pain, firing all his nerve endings and burning, stinging, at every point they were touching. “*Please*,” he begged, “Make it stop. Make it...”

“...I—I can't, Potter—*Harry*, don't...don't ask me to...” Draco's voice was very soft and raw with emotion, pleading.

He was straddling Harry now, back bent in an elegant curve, and Harry could feel Draco's cock filling in his trousers, pressing against the inside of Harry's thigh where he'd landed in all his squirming. It was such a lovely, comforting pressure, and maybe this was how Draco felt all the time, budged up tight against Harry to share his warmth and solidity. Acknowledgement that Harry—*Draco*—was here and wanted Draco—*Harry*—over all others.

The buzzing from before became an itching urgency, a craving for reassurance, to be the pinpoint of focus. He wanted to touch and be touched, to fill and be filled, an ouroboros of satisfaction and confirmation.

He felt like a right bastard, having denied Draco his approval and closeness and intimacy all this time, if *this* was what it felt like. Forever incomplete, forever unwhole. It was torture, and he had nowhere near the strength of spirit Draco had when it came to resistance.

Draco was staring at him, eyes dark and troubled, and Harry broke. He swallowed, throat bobbing and mouth dry. “...I need you.”

Draco's expression twisted, and he whined a soft, keening *Fuck* and lunged forward to kiss Harry, hard. It was demanding and cruel and just what Harry had been aching for: a *challenge*. All of Draco's fire and fury, directed at him and him alone.

They went for each other's flies, though Draco was faster, even with the one hand, because all Harry had was a zip at his fly, while Draco had a line of fussy buttons that Harry was halfway considering hexing off.

Before Harry could start on the topmost pearl-faced button, though, Draco had slapped him away, using his bandaged hand to hold Harry's to the couch while he held his eye meaningfully. His lips wrenched into a threatening moue. "Don't touch me."

"Want to—"

"Well too bad; I *don't* want you to." He gave a thrust of his hips, rutting against Harry with a viciousness that really only served to fire Harry's blood with feverish anticipation. "You need this? I'll give it to you. But *only* this."

And some part of Harry *hated* that; this wasn't completion—this was just a different kind of *incompletion*. He didn't want to be the only one, it wasn't going to be enough, not enough by half—but such thoughts were quickly dashed and scattered as Draco finally managed his fly and shoved his hand into Harry's pants, drawing his half-hard cock out into the open. It was chilly, compared to the confines of his trousers, and Harry shivered half from the cold, half from arousal. His mind was a muddled, muzzy mess right now, but there were long, slender fingers curling around his shaft, and he could smell Draco—antiseptic and old blood and a musky hint of woodsmoke. That was a damn fine start.

Draco released him to spit into his hand, which Harry distantly thought he should find gross, but when Draco replaced his hand, tightening his grip and tugging gently, the warm, slick slide brought him swiftly around to the idea. He could feel the blood leaving his brain to pool in his cock, all that buzzing and stinging discomfort going with it. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to pure sensation, concentrating on the fact it was Draco wanking him, Draco's spit sliding over his fevered flesh, Draco's fingers drawing back the hood of his cock and then up again as his crown peeked out and gave a wink.

Part of him was ashamed, though he couldn't quite recall why he should be. It was just reflex, at this point. He was too far gone, his head too buzzed and thoughts too full of Draco and his warmth and insistence and glorious contradiction. Harry groped for

purchase, pulling Draco down and close again—half-terrified he wouldn't kiss him now. *I'll give it to you. But only this.* And kissing wasn't *this*.

But blessedly, Draco did kiss him, and maybe he was regretting his harsh words from earlier, for his kiss was gentler this time, apologetic almost. Harry pumped his hips in counter-time to Draco's strokes and lost himself in that kiss. His world coiled like a spring, down to just the two of them and their warmth and breath and sweat and grip-tug-slide. He wanted nothing more than to touch Draco, to show him how they could be wholly complete, but this was good, so good too.

Draco's kisses lost their elegance and became rough and hurried, his grip on Harry's cock quickening, and like he'd Summoned it, Harry could feel the ardent strains of his orgasm bearing down on them. It screamed in his veins, arcing down his spine to coil just behind his bollocks. Draco nipped and suckled until Harry's lips felt scraped raw, and he drew back just enough that they nearly kissed when he spoke: "You're close..."

"Nearly...nearly, *please*..."

Draco's grip loosened, bafflingly, and he started pumping with a practised flick of his wrist. It was too quick for Harry to keep up with, so he just let go, let it happen, legs propped open as Draco wanked him to within an inch of his life, hauling him through that glittering barrier. "Sh—it, I can't, *Draco*..."

Draco pressed his pointy nose into Harry's cheek, kissing the corner of his mouth. "Then don't."

Harry felt the coil finally snap, his cock swelling and spurting in Draco's palm, which was cupped expertly to keep the resulting spatter from painting the sofa and their clothes. He gently milked Harry until the shudders subsided and Harry stopped twitching like he'd grabbed hold of a live wire. Once his cock had ceased its pulsing, Draco Vanished the evidence and produced a handkerchief from the tip of his wand, daintily wiping his hands clean.

Harry lay there, boneless, while Draco fussed with his clothing, carefully tucking his cock

back into his pants and doing up the fly, which was nice of him. Wouldn't that have been hilarious, Hermione and Ron walking in to see Harry collapsed there with his everything on display? Where were they, now that he thought about it?

A wank was always good for relaxing at the end of a day, though Harry admittedly hadn't indulged in a long while, as it was a difficult task to manage with a roommate. He wondered giddily if that might change now—though this one seemed to have well and truly tapped him. He felt his vision go blurry again, darkness encroaching from around the edges until all he could see of Draco was the faint outline of his unhappy frown, and the last thing he heard before he went under once more was Draco's defeated, miserable whisper of *I'm sorry*.

A Thankless Gesture

“Hermione! Hermione, he’s up!”

Ron’s voice was the first thing Harry heard when he roused. He kept his eyes closed, but he could see light and shadow moving just beyond his lids. His head ached, a dull, pounding throb situated just behind the centre of his forehead that pulsed in time with Ron’s speech.

“Not so loud, Ronald!” Hermione hissed, though her voice wasn’t much gentler on Harry’s ears. Carefully, somehow fearful that even opening his eyes too quickly would send him swooning, Harry blinked and found the familiar canvas roof of their tent stretching over him. “Harry! You’re awake!” Hermione said, and Harry shifted his gaze toward the sound of her voice. She was holding on to Ron’s shoulder, and their faces mooned at him from right beside the sofa on which Harry was apparently laid out. It was the second time in the past year he recalled waking up to see the two of them hovering over him with no memory of how he’d come to be there.

“Seem to be, yeah...” he mumbled, blinking again. It was morning, he thought—or daylight, at least. And *bright*, which wasn’t helping his headache at all. “Headache...” he complained, and a phial was shortly pushed into his hands, with his fingers wrapped around it to be sure he wouldn’t drop it.

“That should help—though I didn’t dare make it too strong. I wasn’t sure how it might interact with whatever’s left in your system of the virility serum.”

“The—*what?*” He knocked back the potion with one hand, groping on the side table for his glasses with the other.

Ron passed them to him with what Harry now could tell was a wry grin. “Virility serum, mate.” He wagged his brows. “Strong stuff according to *Witch Weekly Readers’ Dige—*

ow!”

He rubbed his arm where Hermione had pinched him, and she pursed her lips into a thin line. “He doesn’t need to hear the whole story just now.” She turned to Harry, concern in her big brown eyes. “Are you feeling all right, Harry? No pain or...lingering effects?”

He didn’t know what ‘lingering effects’ he was supposed to be on the lookout for, as he still couldn’t quite tell what he’d been dosed with. “Just a headache...” he said, as truthful as he could be at the moment. He then noticed that there was a party missing. “Where’s Draco?”

Ron jerked a thumb behind him. “Sanctuary. Greyback sliced him up but good, so he’s gotta let the dragon heal itself for a bit. Hermione kicked him out earlier this morning when the watch changed.”

Greyback...

His memory began to return in bits and pieces: the whirring Sneakoscope, Greyback, blood and flame and spellfire flying. The magnificent white dragon, screeching in frenzied agony.

Panic speared through him, and he tried to brace his arms beneath him, to shift upright, but Hermione and Ron were on him in an instant. “Easy there, mate,” Ron chided softly. “You had a close call, no sense in pushing yourself so soon.”

“I feel fine,” Harry said shortly.

Hermione gave him a knowing look. “You just said you had a headache.”

“Yeah, and I took a potion for it.” Neither looked very convinced, so he tried a different tack. “Can I at least use the loo? Or d’you have a bedpan for me in that bag of yours?”

Hermione coloured, drawing away. “No—of course, that’s fine.” She inclined her head in silent indication for Ron to let Harry up. “Just don’t be too long? Your body’s been through an ordeal, and it’s best you avoid overexerting yourself for at least another

twelve hours.”

“I don’t think a piss is going to tax me that much,” he assured her with an easy smile, and she shooed him away.

He refused Ron’s offered arm, professing a confidence he could make it to the bathroom just fine on his own, and shuffled away. Once he glanced back and saw Hermione and Ron were distracted in huddled conversation, though, he took a sharp turn and slipped into the Sanctuary instead.

The first thing he noticed once over the threshold was a group of unconscious strangers laid out on the ground just inside the entrance. After a moment’s consideration, though, he realised that they weren’t strangers at all: it was Greyback and the other wizards who’d attacked them in the night...how long ago had it been? He really ought to have asked Hermione and Ron. It could have been last night, or it could have been days ago, for all Harry knew. He rubbed at his chin, and the stubble peppered along his jaw said it’d been more than a day at the very least.

He ignored Greyback and his gang for the time being; they were bound up tight and out cold, so obviously they weren’t going anywhere for a while.

He scanned the clearing instead for Draco—then gave a start when he saw not a human but the great white dragon, napping in the patchy sunlight. Ron *had* said that he’d had to ‘let the dragon heal itself’, but Harry hadn’t quite connected the meaning until now.

The dragon was laid out in an inelegant sprawl to keep the pressure off its ripped wing, which as Harry approached he could see looked painfully inflamed. He wondered if Hermione had convinced Draco to let her inspect it for infection; he didn’t know if dragons could regrow lost limbs, and he didn’t really want to find out.

He worried for a moment that there might be something sinister underlying the dragon’s unconscious state, but the steady rise and fall of its barrel belly suggested that it was indeed simply snoozing. It reminded Harry of one of Mrs. Figg’s cats that could sleep almost anywhere that would stay still long enough.

He bent down to pick up a small stone, then chucked it at the dragon, striking its exposed underbelly. The dragon woke with an irritated grunt, snarling with a concentrated burst of flame from its nostrils and snapping its head around to see who'd disturbed it.

The moment it caught sight of Harry, though, it struggled to its feet—one wing still held out gingerly from its side while the other rested in repose—and took several toddling steps backwards.

Harry approached slowly, but the dragon kept backing away; perhaps Draco had been dreaming and couldn't tell if Harry was really up and about or not. He raised his hands to show he meant no harm and crooked a small grin. "Uh...nice to see you, too?" The dragon only regarded him with eyes of piercing yellow shot through with a roiling mud-red. "Draco?" he tried again, taking another tentative step forward—but it was clear the dragon had no intention of letting Harry close the distance between them.

A gathering dread settled upon Harry's shoulders, draping like a funeral shroud as snatches of dream coalesced into memory and filed his veins with ice. "...It was real, then?" he whispered, half to himself.

It was the only explanation for the way Draco was avoiding him, dancing like a spooked horse but not daring to strain his still-mending wing by trying to fly away.

Harry had dreamed while he'd slept—or at least, he'd thought he'd dreamed. He was now realising, with dawning horror, that what he'd seen, what he'd *done*, hadn't been a dream at all.

"I don't—" His voice broke, and he swallowed, cursing under his breath. "I don't suppose it...would do any good to say I'm sorry?" That sounded like a rather cheap thing to say, though; you couldn't just *apologise* for doing that to someone, and more to the point: Draco was *absolutely* the grudge-holding type, so even if Harry *had* done something that might have been excused with an apology, it wouldn't have worked on Draco. One could hope, though. "I *am* sorry. I shouldn't have—but I did. And I know it doesn't change it, but—I'm sorry. Truly."

The dragon just stared at him, nostrils flaring, and Harry had to wonder if Draco was actually in there at all. Maybe he'd retreated to that misty moor, traumatised; Harry would have understood. He suddenly felt incredibly stupid; he should have rested like Hermione had urged and waited for Draco to come to *him* when he was ready instead of pushing. "Fuck it," he muttered, and turned to head back into the tent. If Draco wanted to have anything to do with him, then well: it was a small tent, they'd run into each other.

"*You're* sorry?" came a shout from behind, and Harry stopped in his tracks, slowly turning to glance over his shoulder. The dragon was gone, and there stood Draco in a crisp button-up of spruce-blue with one sleeve rolled up to his bicep, cradling his mangled arm against his chest. "*You?*"

Harry shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "...Yeah? I'm sorry."

"For *what?*" Draco spat, incredulous.

God, was he going to make Harry *say* it? Harry wiped a hand over his face; no, of course he was going to make him say it. He ought to, after all. Face what he'd done without hiding behind excuses. He was a Gryffindor, wasn't he?

"For—for what I did to you."

All right, so maybe he was a bit of a coward after all; he'd almost been sorted Slytherin, so it stood to reason he had a healthy bit of self-preservation swirling around in him.

Draco's expression was a maelstrom of emotion—confusion, revulsion, guilt, but most of all white-hot *fury*. Harry imagined he could feel the anger radiating off of Draco palpably, like heat waves. Or maybe it really *was* heat waves, and he was about to belch lava all over Harry. "What—what *you* did to *me?*" he hissed.

Harry took a step back, wary; he really didn't want to get socked in the jaw, even if he deserved it. "...Yeah. What I did to you. When I was...not myself..."

That was a pathetic excuse, he knew—and hardly a truthful one either. He'd probably

been more *himself* in that dark, stolen moment than he'd been in a while, and while he'd felt a lot of things at the time, 'not himself' hadn't been one of them.

He grimaced. "I shouldn't have—"

"Do you even *fucking* remember what happened? Merlin, did Granger check you for a concussion? Of course she didn't; stand still—"

Draco approached with lifted wand, a diagnostic spell on his lips, and Harry batted it away with a flare of irritation.

"I remember, all right? *I remember*. I remember waking up, slowly like from a dose of Dreamless Sleep—and I remember you being there. I remember..." He closed his eyes, because he didn't want to have to see the way Draco's face washed over with disgust—or worse, pity. As if Harry's actions hadn't been something he'd had a degree of control over. "I remember the *need*. I remember—begging. Begging you for...for help."

He opened his eyes again, but kept his gaze fixed on his toes. It was curious how Hermione's Atmospheric Charms kept the chill from seeping into his flesh; he ought to have the beginnings of frostbite by now, surely. "And I remember you giving me that help. Even though you didn't want to, and even though I never should have asked for it."

Draco's eyes flashed in anger. "Of course you shouldn't have asked for it! But I shouldn't have *done it!*" He clenched the fist of his good hand around the haft of his wand, shoulders tightening, like he was barely holding himself back from throwing some curse or another at Harry's head. "You were the one who was drugged up with that potion, and I was...I was..."

"You were there," Harry finished for him. "You did what needed to be done. Because I asked. Because I *needed* it." He still didn't like the idea of using the potion as an excuse for his behaviour, but he liked even less Draco blaming himself for this whole nasty business. "...Kind of like how I do things for you, when *you* need it."

Draco scoffed, lip curling. "That's *hardly* the same thing—"

“But if it were. If it *were*, I’d do it.” Harry made himself face Draco head on now, forcing his eyes to meet Draco’s. “I’m not drugged up now, and I’m telling you I’d do it, if you needed it. And if it came down to it again, I’d want *you* to do it, too. What...” He swallowed, tongue tripping on the words. “What needed to be done.”

A long pause stretched between them, making the physical distance separating them seem all the more insurmountable. “...If I needed it,” Draco repeated in a dull monotone, expression unreadable.

Harry nodded. He’d learned, over the course of the past several months, that there were lots of different sorts of needs.

He’d told himself, all this time, that he’d only been doing what needed to be done—what the dragon required, what it took to keep Draco from losing his sanity and retreating back to that lonely moor. But he’d never *really* minded the touching at all; he’d grown up without much physical affection from his relatives and had been subconsciously trying to make up for lost time for *years* now. And the kissing...well, it hadn’t bothered him in a long while, and by this point, they’d broken all of their rules except for telling Ron and Hermione.

So what did it mean, when you kissed for kissing’s sake? When you liked it, when you *looked forward* to it?

When you enjoyed yourself with someone even when you *weren’t* kissing?

Harry had had to stop himself from following that line of thinking on more occasions than he cared to admit. He had to keep telling himself, drilling it into his mind until it became second nature, that this was all something they did because it was what the situation demanded. They could not hate it, could even like it, but it *had* to stay behind that barrier of ‘have to’.

Which was just a stone’s throw away from *for the greater good*, but it was dangerous to think of what they were doing in any other words.

If Harry allowed himself to consider that either of them actually *wanted* this...well that was something he just couldn't deal with right now. His head was already a mess, and he was mental roommates with Voldemort half the time as it was. It was best for all parties involved that this just...not become a *thing*. It was better this way. Less complicated.

Draco released a low, keening whine and launched himself at Harry, arms going vice-like around his neck as he squeezed the life out of him. "Fuck you, Potter," he bit out, voice thick with emotion.

Harry let his hands gingerly come up under Draco's arms to lock around him. "I thought we agreed on 'Harry'..." He closed his eyes and breathed in Draco's scent—it was just as he'd dreamed it had been: antiseptic and old blood and woodsmoke.

Draco hugged him tighter, nose buried in the crook of Harry's neck. His breath tickled Harry's skin, and he wondered if he was memorising Harry's scent in the same way. "You're better off accepting that you're always going to be 'Potter' when I'm pissed off at you."

Harry shrugged. "So long as you accept you're always going to be 'Draco' no matter how I feel about you." A tremor ran through Draco, and he sighed audibly against Harry's neck. He thought he felt lips ghost over his pulse, but he could have imagined it. Harry rubbed his hands up and down Draco's back. He was getting pretty good at this reassurance business.

"...I still mean to have words with you about running off in the middle of a battle without backup," Draco mumbled. "You're a hazard to my health..."

"Sure, let's have that conversation right after you tell me how long you put off getting your hand looked at. Do I need to make apologies to Hermione and Ron for your terrible behaviour again?"

"Please; I've been nothing but a gentleman."

"As I heard it, you had to be practically forced at wandpoint into letting your better half

heal itself.”

Draco drew back, brows knit in concern. He swallowed, throat bobbing. “...*Tell* me you didn’t tell Granger and Weasley. About...”

“Oh, god no. I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Do I *look* like I want to be flayed alive? Why the fuck would I tell *them* that I—I—”

Harry gave a wry grin, brows lifting. “Er, gave me a helping hand?”

Draco closed his eyes, grimacing. “Merlin, if this is going to be another ‘M word’ issue...”

This was fine, Harry told himself. They were still safe. They could joke about it, tiptoe around it—so long as it remained a *need*. Aid given because they one or both couldn’t help themselves and had no choice but to do things that they otherwise would never have considered.

They were fine, for now.

They had to be.

Questions and Answers

“We’re going to have to deal with our ‘guests’ soon, you know,” Hermione reminded them when they convened for dinner that evening.

“What do you mean ‘deal with them?’” Ron asked, colour going pale. “You’re not saying we should...”

“Of course not!” Hermione huffed. “I just mean we can’t keep them here forever.” She looked to Harry. “It’s already been nearly three days; they’re liable to be missed soon, if they haven’t been already. We’ve got Charms and wards up, but if they broke through them one time...they might manage it again.”

“You think they’d follow us? Even after we made three jumps, just in case?” Harry asked; once he’d gotten back on his feet, Hermione had deemed it best they find a new campsite, just in case the wards failed again. He, Hermione, and Ron had taken turns choosing new locations on each jump, to be sure no one had traced their Apparition destinations. They were currently squatting on forested land on the backlot of a stately country manor near the eastern coast.

“It might not matter at all how many jumps we make; if their masters have placed some sort of tracking spell on them...” Hermione worried her lip. “We can’t keep them prisoner—for one, we don’t have the *time* to look after them, and for another, they’re just dead weight. They aren’t Death Eaters, judging by the fact they’ve not got Dark Marks, and even if they were, I fail to see how holding them hostage could benefit us in the slightest.”

“The Dark Lord’s more of a ‘cut your losses’ type,” Draco confirmed. He had his injured arm done up in a sling now; after a sum total of twelve hours in the Sanctuary taking advantage of the dragon’s natural healing abilities, he was in much better shape than he’d been when Harry had awoken. Still, unless he began spending most of his waking

hours—or else his sleeping ones—letting his Animagus form heal itself, it would take several more weeks before he was in any shape to put weight on the wing, meaning he was grounded for the foreseeable future.

Ron frowned. “So, what? We just Obliviate them and send them on their way, like we did at Lovegood’s place?”

“How did they find us?” Harry asked. “Shouldn’t we figure that out before we just toss away a useful resource? For that matter, why don’t we ply them for information on what the hell’s going on out there?” They hadn’t managed to swipe a copy of the *Prophet* since before Christmas, and it was too risky to seek an audience with Phineas Nigellus Black again.

“How can we trust anything they say, though?” Ron asked. “Assuming they talk at all.” He turned to Hermione. “Did you bring along any Veritaserum? Or reckon you could whip up a batch?”

“*Whip up a batch?* Ron, it takes a month to brew!” Hermione said. “And no, I haven’t got any on me. That stuff’s highly regulated—though I wish I’d had the forethought to smuggle some out of the Ministry when we infiltrated it...”

Draco looked at them all in turn, expression deadpan. “...Are you three as stupid as you look right now? Have you not got wands? Or are you just too prissy to *use* them?”

“There’s no law saying you’ve got to open your pie hole even when you’ve got bugger-all to contribute to the conversation, you know,” Ron grouched.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Just *make them* tell you the truth, if you’re so fussed about it.”

“...How?” Harry asked. He couldn’t think of any threats they could hold over Greyback or his underlings to ensure his compliance, short of death—and Harry had no intention of letting things go that far. There’d be plenty of time for unavoidable murder later; no sense in getting started earlier than necessary.

“By using a spell that *makes them do what you tell them to.*”

Harry's expression darkened as understanding set in. "...You're saying you want us to Imperius them?"

Hermione was stricken, and she brought a hand to her mouth. "But that's an Unforgivable!"

"We're at war, in case you haven't noticed, Granger," Draco said, looking not at all ruffled by his blithe suggestion they practise spells that were illegal for a reason. "And unless you're willing to wait a month to get that Veritaserum brewed or stage *another* smash-and-grab job at the Ministry, I'd say you've not got much other choice." He shrugged. "Besides, it's *hardly* as bad as Cruciatus, or the Killing Curse."

"...He's right," Harry agreed, to Hermione's visible dismay. "I know it's an Unforgivable, but we really should interrogate them and find out what we can about how they found us and who else might know what we're up to." A tiny, insidious little voice in his mind crooned that this would be *for the greater good*, and Harry stamped out the thought immediately. "But we won't do it unless we're all agreed. Ron?"

Ron shifted uncomfortably in his seat, then gave Hermione an apologetic look and nodded. "We haven't got the time to brew anything, and it's to keep ourselves safe, right? Like Malfoy said, I don't see we've got any other choice, really. And—and at least it doesn't *hurt*, right?" He looked to Harry for reassurance.

Hermione's nostrils were flaring in anger, and she had her lips pressed tightly together. Harry hated that it seemed they were all ganging up on her, but she had to see logic. Eventually, she sighed, her shoulders slumping, and she ran a hand through her bushy hair to push it back from her face. "...All right. But we mustn't abuse the spell. Or else we're no better than..." She cut herself off before she said *the Death Eaters*, but it echoed throughout the tent all the same. "Well, let's just not get carried away?"

Harry nodded. "Right, then it's settled."

"...So who's going to cast it?" Ron asked.

His, Harry's, and Hermione's gazes all crawled to Draco, who glared back at them coldly. "Just going to assume I can do it?"

"Can't you?" Harry asked. "Because we can't." He didn't understand the attitude; Draco was the only one among them who'd been raised around Dark magic, and he was also the only one with a Mark on his arm that said he would've been *expected* to be proficient in the Unforgivables.

Draco smiled at him with a glittering sharp-toothed sweetness. "You won't know until you try." The unsettling expression was quickly replaced with a frosty haughtiness that better suited. "But don't you worry your little heads; I wouldn't ask you to dirty your hands with an Unforgivable." He drew his wand out from where he'd had it tucked in his sling, waving it towards the Sanctuary. "Right, let's get this over with."

Harry and Ron were in charge of dragging Greyback away from his mates and keeping him secured while Draco interrogated him. Hermione transfigured a bush into a high-backed chair, and they wrestled Greyback into it, slapping another *Incarcerous* on him for good measure. When Hermione lifted the stasis spell she'd placed on him, he blinked in bleary confusion for only a moment before the howling and snarling started.

"Lemme go you filthy little brats! I'll tear your throats out! I'll string your innards up like tinsel and—"

"*Imperio!*" Draco shouted, and the vile threats immediately died as Greyback's yellow eyes went funny, taking on a far-away look. Draco huffed, letting his wand drop. Clearly maintaining his hold on Greyback's mind didn't require much effort. "Well?"

"We should ask how they found our camp first," Hermione said. "In case we need to move sites or take further measures to ensure we don't get caught again."

Draco raised his wand, his eyes fixed firmly on Greyback's. "Be truthful in all your responses. Now, tell me how you found our camp."

"One of you lot spoke the Dark Lord's name," Greyback said, voice monotone and airy.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Ron asked, and Draco relayed the question.

“There’s a Taboo on it. Only upstarts like the Order of the Phoenix or Harry Potter’s liable to say that name. It breaks protective enchantments when used and calls Snatchers like us to the location.”

“Snatchers?” Hermione said. “They—*kidnap* people? Just for using You-Know-Who’s name?”

“And what do you do with the witches and wizards that you ‘Snatch’?” Draco asked.

“Take ‘em to the Ministry for processing.”

“‘Processing’,” Ron snorted. “There’s a euphemism if ever I heard one.”

Draco regarded Greyback curiously. “...And if it was Harry Potter you found—you’d take him to the Ministry as well?”

Even in his Imperius-ed stupor, Greyback’s lips curled into a wicked grin. “Certainly not about to let the Ministry take credit for *that*, are we? No, no—Harry Potter we’d take straight to the Dark Lord, and be rewarded most handsomely for it, too.”

Harry’s heart leapt. “They know where You-Know-Who is? Is he still abroad? Or...or is he back?” Had Voldemort found the Elder Wand already? Harry had assumed he’d feel it through their connection if he had—with a coup like that, he’d never be able to keep his elation hidden from Harry.

“Where is the Dark Lord right this moment?”

“I don’t know,” Greyback said. “Word is he’s using the Malfoys’ place as a base of operations in Britain, though. We’d take the boy there and then have a branded Death Eater summon him.”

A cold spear lanced through Harry’s heart, and the expressions on Ron’s and Hermione’s faces said they’d been similarly struck. Draco’s face was a pale mask, eyes wide and

white under furrowed brows. His wand faltered, dropping—and the distraction brought Greyback’s eyes into focus.

“*Draco!*” Harry hissed, reaching out to grab his shoulder. Draco abruptly straightened at his touch, renewing the spell and drilling into Greyback with questions.

“He’s there? The Dark Lord is in residence at Malfoy Manor?”

“In residence? I just told you I don’t know. He’s there sometimes and he’s not at others. That’s just where we’ve been told to go if we’ve got important information worth sharing.”

Draco licked his lips. “Is—is the master of the manor at home?”

“Master? What, *Lucius?*” Greyback laughed, a snarling little snort and bared his yellowed teeth. “Oh, he’s around. But Lucius Malfoy’s barely master of his own pissing schedule these days. We’ve got the run of the place. *Murder Manor*, it is.”

Draco swallowed, throat bobbing, and he turned to Harry, voice soft and desperate. “We have to go there.”

“Draco...” Harry started; they really couldn’t have this discussion right now.

“We *have to*. He’s got my parents—prisoners in their own home!”

Ron looked as uncomfortable as Harry felt. “But safe, at least?”

“Safe?” Draco spat. “Surrounded by Death Eaters and perhaps the Dark Lord himself?!”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Surrounded by their *allies*. Like I said: safe.”

Draco’s neck flushed darkly, and his eyes flashed, incensed. He turned back to Harry. “Harry, *please*.”

Harry glanced to Ron and Hermione, who both seemed curiously interested in the toadstools sprouting in the leaf litter. “I...Draco, it’s an *insane* risk. And—Ron’s right.” A

look of utter betrayal crossed Draco's features, and Harry quickly amended, "Your folks are smart; they're Slytherins, and you lot know all about self-preservation. If they're honestly not interested in the whole...conquest of the magical world thing...then they should know how best to play their cards and not get caught in the crossfire. They're going to sit tight and not make a fuss." Just as he imagined Draco would have been happy to do, Harry was sure, had things not worked out the way they had.

Draco's lips screwed up into an accusing snarl. "You *promised* me you'd save them!"

"And you said I *couldn't* promise that!"

"You owe me, Potter! When I beat you in that race, I won a favour!"

It took Harry a moment to even remember what race Draco was talking about, and when it came to him, he almost laughed, baffled Draco had been hanging on to their idle wager this whole time. "This hardly counts as a *favour*! A favour is—is, I dunno, doing your washing for a week! Or bringing you breakfast in bed! Not risking our mission just to save your folks!"

"*Just to—*" Draco seethed, biting his tongue before he worked himself into a froth. He took a deep, ragged breath, and Harry knew he wasn't imagining the angry embers dancing just behind his eyes. Let him pitch a fit, if he liked—if he could look at the situation objectively, he'd see their hands were tied. "...You don't have to come with me."

"What? Draco, we're not going to let you just go running off all by yourself to—"

"You're not going to *let me*? You can't keep me here anymore, Potter! I'm not your prisoner." He clenched his wand tight in his fist to seal his threat, and Harry had to fight against the instinct to palm his own wand, adrenaline firing his blood and muscles tense and taut.

It was bluster, Harry told himself. Or no, not bluster, but it wasn't what Draco truly wanted. These threats were born of Draco's fear for his parents' safety, and while Harry

understood it, there was nothing they could do. Nor could they, he knew, let Draco run off half-cocked to try and save them himself. He'd been privy to far too much to risk falling into Voldemort's grasp.

Would this whole journey end right where it had begun: with Draco locked up and placed under stasis?

"How many are at the Manor?" Hermione asked Draco, and Ron squawked, "*What?!*"

Harry whipped around, staring at her in accusation—was she really *considering* this? But she wouldn't look at him, her gaze instead fixed on Draco's.

Draco blinked, thrown by his unexpected ally, and he turned the question on Greyback.

"Dunno. Malfoy and his Missus, the Lestrangle bitch sometimes. There's a few others who pop in and out. The Dark Lord's only there for business—he's got his own matters to attend to, as I hear it. And then there's the prisoners, of course."

"What prisoners?" Draco asked.

"Ollivander. Some loopy Hogwarts brat they're keeping for leverage on that coot what runs *The Quibbler*. Think there was a goblin—can't be arsed to remember the blighter's name. I imagine they've welcomed some others since I last visited. Malfoy Manor's got some roomy cellars; plenty of space for troublemakers the Dark Lord wants close at hand."

Hermione brought her hands to her mouth. "Mr. Ollivander and Luna!" She pursed her lips, turning her pleading gaze on Harry. "Harry, we *have* to go! We can't leave them there, they're *prisoners!*"

Harry recalled the vision he'd had months ago, back at Grimmauld Place, where he'd witnessed Ollivander being tortured by Voldemort for information on why his wand had reacted so strangely to Harry's. Something sparked in his chest: Would Ollivander know about the Elder Wand, and about Voldemort's search for it? Could he direct them to it? He'd promised Draco he wouldn't seek it out, and this...this wasn't seeking it out. This

was just making sure that Voldemort hadn't gotten his hands on it yet either.

He looked to Ron, who shrugged. "...It's Luna, mate. I feel like we've got to. Her dad did us dirty, but we've gotta do something now that we know they're there."

He sighed, suddenly understanding his friends' frustrations with his own compulsions to act when there was wrong being done and he knew he could stop it. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to go; it was only that this was a risky detour that they couldn't afford to take.

But take it they would.

"...All right," he sighed. "We'll break into Malfoy Manor and try—*try*—to rescue those we can."

Draco didn't look entirely thrilled with the outcome, but he nodded all the same.



It was decided that, given the hour, they would start planning their infiltration of Malfoy Manor the next morning. Greyback was released from the Imperius Curse and placed back into stasis alongside his fellows. They would work out how best to Modify memories after prising any further information they needed from the remaining wizards, though it was generally agreed upon that Greyback, being the leader, was probably the most reliable source.

Harry tried not to think about how close their little group had just come to being torn asunder. He imagined he understood, just a little, how the dragon felt now, struggling under the incessant, paralysing fear that the slightest misstep would send someone it cared about fleeing.

He'd always known on some level that of course Draco's parents were far more important to him than the tentative accord he'd struck with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Draco had never pretended otherwise—that was one of the great things about him. For a Slytherin, he was pants at subterfuge and using schemes to get what he wanted. Maybe

it was the Malfoy blood in him; he simply spoke his desires into existence. So when he said he loved his parents and would stop at nothing to see them rescued, Harry had known he meant it.

But there was a difference, he now saw, between knowing something and *understanding* it. And Draco had just thoroughly taught him a lesson.

They turned in as soon as they returned to the tent—and as expected, Draco mutely gathered his pyjamas and toiletries and left to prepare for bed, avoiding Harry as best he could in the cramped confines of the tent. When Harry finished his own evening ablutions, the lamps had already been doused, and the long line of Draco's back was facing him in silent accusation.

Harry hardened his heart, though; he maintained that he'd made the right decision, and it had only been Hermione's thought to ask who else might be at the Manor that had them even considering going in the first place. It wasn't personal—it was *logical*. The Malfoys were perfectly safe. Probably. Luna and Ollivander, though, were being held against their will, and Harry knew that Ollivander had been tortured for information on wandlore.

Had it been anyone else, Draco would have understood and come to the exact same conclusion as Harry had. Eventually he would see that, and this odd, uncomfortable tension that made it feel like they'd crossed a line and would never be able to go back to the way things had been before would eventually dissipate.

His mind was reeling, worries swirling about how they were going to manage what honestly seemed impossible—but he must have eventually fallen asleep, because for the first time in a very long while, he dreamed of Voldemort again...

He saw a tall, dark tower, alone and forbidding amidst the landscape, and Harry felt himself racing towards it with a sense of purpose, at once calm and impatient—confident and assured that he was here, finally, after so long a journey, after so much searching.

Voldemort's thoughts were razor-sharp in Harry's mind: He was so close...so very close

to the object he'd fervently sought these many months. It lurked within these ragged stone walls, and he had but to reach in and take it. By force—it had to be by force. He had to claim it. That would not be a difficult task at all.

He was, Harry realised, flying—or gliding, moving over the ground with a preternatural speed and then spiralling up the high walls of the black fortress, gaze focused on the topmost turret, a lonely tower standing sentinel over all.

Harry rose and rose and rose, until he stood before a window that was no window at all but only a narrow slit in the moulding, crumbling stone wall. Sunlight could have barely penetrated, and certainly no man would be able to pass.

But he was no man—not any longer. Not even just a wizard, he was something more, and when he peered through the slit in the rock, he could see a figure, emaciated and contorted into a foetal position beneath a moth-eaten blanket. Dead or asleep, Harry couldn't tell, but he forced himself through the slit, sliding impossibly thin, like a human Knight Bus, and alighted on the cold flagstones of the tiny room.

The space could only charitably be called a cell, musty and dank with unchinked walls that let in the chill of late winter. The figure on the floor, starved and skeletal, stirred to life and shifted enough to fix Harry—Voldemort—in its sights. Milky eyes in sunken sockets drew open in a face that looked like a skull, skin stretched tight over protruding bones.

The figure stared at him (them) and then sat up. It was a man, Harry thought, or had been once—

And he was smiling.

His grin might have been toothy once, but most of those seemed to have fallen out or rotted in their sockets.

“So here you are at last!” the old man chortled. *“Oh, I knew you'd seek me out eventually. Knew you'd be a believer, knew you'd track me down...”* He shook his head

of scraggly hair, thinning to show a liver-spotted pate. *“But you are too late. Your journey has been wasted. It left me long ago, for a better man than I.”*

Harry could feel white-hot rage sear through his veins as Voldemort hissed, *“Lies! You will tell me of its fate, or I will strike you where you stand!”*

The man threw his arms open wide, head tilted back to expose a wrinkled throat of sagging skin. *“A greater gift I could not ask for! Kill me—do it! You’ll only be granting a beaten old man his just deserts. My death will not bring you answers—you don’t even know the question! You might have been great, the greatest! But the very fact that you have come to me, after all this time, seeking what it is you seek, tells me you’ve already lost. The Wand is lost to you. You have already been beaten—”*

Harry felt Voldemort’s fury snap; he lifted his wand—his faithful yew wand, which would never fail him again once it was his Elder Wand—and a supernova of green light filled the cell. The old man’s back snapped, limbs contorting unnaturally as he was lifted into the air—

—and then hit the cold stones again with a sickening CRUNCH, unmoving, still wearing that broad, toothless grin.

In a flash, Voldemort turned back to the window, blood pounding in his ears. The man’s words seemed to still echo off the cold stone walls: *The Wand is lost to you, you have already been beaten...*

A spike of anger drove into Harry’s skull like a railroad pike, right over his scar. The agony wrenched Harry from Voldemort’s mind, back into his own body—

He shot upright in bed with an anguished cry—and nearly slammed his head into Draco’s, who had been hovering over him, one hand on Harry’s shoulder to jostle him awake.

Draco abruptly drew back to avoid conking heads with Harry. *“You—you were talking in your sleep. Crying out...”*

Harry was breathing hard, and both his chest and head ached. He had his eyes clenched shut tight, and spangles of colour danced behind his lids from the effort. He rubbed at them, trying to banish the vision of the thin, decrepit prisoner laughing at Voldemort. He swallowed, throat dry and wishing he had a glass of water at his bedside. He had half a mind to point an *Aguamenti* down his own throat. “Nightmare...” he breathed, and he could feel Draco fixing him with a knowing look, so he corrected, “...Vision.”

“...Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry’s eyes snapped open at the unexpected offer, especially given how rote and disingenuous it sounded. Draco was giving him a long glance, looking out of sorts, and Harry realised he was simply copying what Harry had said to him when Draco had had his own nightmare. Harry wished he had the energy to laugh, because it was darkly amusing, seeing Draco Malfoy trying to empathise with someone and not being very good at it.

He eased into a sitting position and rubbed at his scar, blinking in the light. The lamps weren’t up very high, but coming back from that dark, cold cell full of decay and rot and death, everything felt far too bright. Even Draco, with his parchment-pale skin and grey eyes, was a vision Harry couldn’t quite bring himself to look at square on for too long.

“It was...*him*, then?” Draco asked, stumbling over his words, though his clumsy opening didn’t disguise what he was really asking.

“He’s not there. He’s not at the Manor, I mean. He’s...I dunno, elsewhere.” Harry screwed up his features, trying to keep the fortress firm in his mind when everything inside of him wanted to forget what he’d just seen, his head throbbing in plea. “There was a tower...tall and black, stretching up into the sky. Like a castle, but just the one tower. I think maybe it was a fortress?”

“Or a prison...” Draco said, lips pursed grimly. “That sounds like Nurmengard.”

Where had he heard that name before? “Wait—you mentioned that place...”

Draco nodded. “It’s where Grindelwald was imprisoned, once they caught him after his duel with Dumbledore.”

“Was?”

Draco just shrugged. “Is? I don’t know if he’s even still alive.”

“I think I do...” Harry muttered to himself. Pieces began to slot into place—Voldemort had chased down Grindelwald...thinking he held claim over the Elder Wand. And Grindelwald had been the merry-faced thief who had robbed Gregorovitch. Was that what he’d ‘stolen’ from Gregorovitch, then? The power of the Elder Wand?

But Grindelwald had claimed not to have the Wand any longer—had told Voldemort it was too late.

It left me long ago...for a better man than I.

The Wand had a new master now—that was where Voldemort would be bound, seeking the next owner in the chain of succession until he finally found the witch or wizard whose ordinary, run-of-the-mill wand contained power so great it had been ascribed to Death itself.

Draco sank onto the edge of Harry’s bed in relief. “He’s not at the Manor...” he repeated to himself, like a mantra—then gave Harry a sidelong glance. “Guess you’ve got no excuse not to go now.”

Harry felt anger—his own, blessedly—flare hotly in his chest. “I wasn’t looking for one; we already decided we’d go.”

“But you didn’t want to. Not until you’d heard about Ollivander and Lovegood.”

“I *did* want to!” Harry protested. “But if you’d use that cold, calculating mind Slytherins are supposed to have, you’d see the same thing I did: that we’d risk *everything* marching into a den of Death Eaters for—for—”

“For *nothing*?” Draco spat. “Is that what you want to say?”

Harry’s hands clenched into fists in the bedsheets. “No—for something that’s *not part of the mission*. I promised you we’d save your parents—”

“A promise you’ll evidently break when it suits you.”

“*Not when it—*” He threw his hands into the air in frustration. His head was pounding with an aching throb that had nothing to do with Voldemort this time. He just wanted to go back to sleep, preferably without macabre visions of death and torture; not to go another ten rounds with Draco in the middle of the night. He fixed Draco with a hard look; he was being petulant and moody, using that haughty tone that made Harry want to clock him. He was emotionally unstable right now, and he wasn’t thinking straight. Harry would simply have to force him around to seeing things the way they really were, since it seemed he was disinclined to be led there. “So you’d be all for us charging in, wands at the ready, if it were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley in there?”

Draco scoffed. “You’re saying you *wouldn’t*?”

His barbs were pointed, and they hit hard and held fast—because Harry could well imagine the state Ron would be in if that had been the case. He could admit, in the privacy of his own mind, that he wasn’t certain he could have made the same difficult decision with the Weasleys’ lives in peril.

Draco hung his head, shoulders shaking. “...I can’t lose them, Harry,” he muttered miserably. “I know they’re—they’re not perfect. But they’re *mine*. Don’t ask me not to want to save them when we’re so *close*.”

“I would never ask you to do that,” Harry said, reaching out to cover the fingers of Draco’s good hand with his own. Draco didn’t pull away, but he didn’t accept the gesture either.

“Not letting me’s little better.”

Harry sighed slowly. “...You’re right that you’re not a prisoner here. It’s *your* life, and

they're *your* folks. You're entitled to do what you feel you need to in order to keep them safe. You know I wouldn't stand in the way of that, not after all the stupid risks you've seen me take in the name of *my* parents." Draco's lips quirked up at the corners, almost imperceptibly. Harry sighed, brows cinching. "But—Draco, what if you got caught in the doing? What if you got *killed*? You think your parents would want that?"

"I'm of-age," Draco sniffed. "I can do whatever I damn well please."

Harry nodded. "You can. You can also be told it's stupid."

Draco's eyes flashed in anger. "It's *not stupid* to want to save—"

"It's stupid to go off half-cocked, barrelling into a situation you've got no control over!" He ran his hands through his hair, scrubbing in nervous irritation—then he took a long, drawn breath. "...I want to kill You-Know-Who. Like—I *want to*. I don't want to just apprehend him, turn him over to the Ministry for proper judgement and trial. I want to kill him—me and no one else—and I want it to be slow and painful. I'm supposed to be this...this beacon of hope or whatever bullshit the Order's selling these days, but don't think for a second that means I wouldn't be able to cast the Killing Curse given half a chance. He's taken most everyone I've ever loved from me, forced me into a war I'm not honestly sure I can win, and ruined countless lives over the years. There's nothing I want *more* in the world right now...than for him to die by my hand." He swallowed a thick lump. "But I can't. I can't, because if I try right now, I'll fail. I'm of-age; I can do whatever I damn well please, but it would be stupid to march out there, arms wide open, and challenge him to a duel."

Draco had a wary look on his face that Harry told himself wasn't fear. For some reason, Draco's esteem mattered to him, in a way that Ron and Hermione's didn't. "...I just want to save my parents. Not defeat the Dark Lord."

"And we're going to. We *are*. So maybe accept that we're doing our best here and want to actually manage it instead of—of flinging ourselves into uncontrolled situations unthinkingly."

Draco's lip curled into a sneer, though it seemed a bit forced and faltered after a moment. "I thought that was the Gryffindor motto. *Flinging oneself into uncontrolled situations unthinkingly.*" He made a face. "Probably sounds better in the Latin."

Harry snorted softly, lips lifting on one side, and he raised his brows. "Well you wouldn't want to go around sounding like you were mis-Sorted, would you?"

Draco gave an exaggerated shudder for effect. "Merlin, no."

Harry shifted around, until he was settled on the edge of the bed alongside Draco, and listed to the side to bump their shoulders. "We'll go, and we'll get them. I swear I won't let you lose them."

"I believe I told you you can't promise that."

"Well then, when I manage it, maybe you'll finally trust in me."

Draco stiffened, good hand clenching white-knuckled, and he said tightly, "I'll hold you to that, Potter."

They stayed like that, pressed up against each other, for a long moment—Harry thought he might have drifted off, and time seemed to pass with a curious, dream-like quality, where seconds stretched for hours before what felt like days had passed in the blink of an eye. He contemplated crawling back under the sheets and trying to grab a few more winks before it was time for breakfast—who was on duty again? He'd entirely lost track after being unconscious for the better part of the last three days.

But Draco was a warm, insistent solidity against him, and Harry was feeling...alert, he supposed. Not awake, just too primed by his vision and their heated exchanged to actually fall back asleep. His body was exhausted, but the adrenaline in his blood would need to be flushed before he could settle his mind enough to drift off.

He took a breath. "Draco..."

"Hm?" came the muzzy, half-awake reply.

“Hey,” he said, tone a bit sharper, and Draco lifted his head from where he’d let it droop against Harry’s shoulder, sleepy question in his eye. “...Do you need anything?”

Draco gave him a bemused half-smile. “At—” He reached around Harry and grabbed his wand, casting a quick Tempus Charm. “Half-four? Certainly nothing that won’t keep until morning.”

Carefully, Harry settled his hand on Draco’s thigh, tracing the corded muscles beneath the thin silk sleep bottoms. “...Anything.”

He didn’t want to sleep, even though he understood he needed to. He just knew it wasn’t going to come, not with Voldemort in his head and Draco nestled against him, his fringe tickling where it brushed against Harry’s bare skin.

Draco just stared at him in ear-splitting silence, and Harry saw the instant understanding dawned as the coalfires in his eyes lit. His throat bobbed, and he blinked forcibly. His tongue darted out, a flash of pink, to wet his lips, and he nodded slowly, as if he had a lead weight balanced on his crown.

Harry felt himself getting hot—first his neck, then his cheeks, then his ears, a rising plume of heat that probably had him flushing ten different shades of red. If Draco was going to tease him for acting the prude, he wisely seemed to be waiting until after Harry had gotten him off to do so. “Will you...for me, too?” He knew, given what had happened before, he ought to make it explicitly clear *what* he wanted and *that* he wanted it, but hopefully Draco could piece things together from Harry’s fumbling request.

Draco lifted a brow, and in a tone that was entirely too self-satisfied, he asked, “...You *need* it?”

Harry shrugged. “Who doesn’t?” And because he felt compelled to defend himself, for some odd reason, he added, “...I can’t sleep.”

Draco’s lips thinned into a wry smile. “Well that just won’t do. Our Saviour *must* have his beauty rest.” He shifted around on the bed so that they were facing each other, one leg

dangling over the side of the bed, and brought his good hand up to draw Harry's chin closer, leaning in for a too-gentle kiss. He hated kisses like this from Draco—as much as he loved them. It was just too easy to get lost in them, to let Draco sweep him away to somewhere unfamiliar, with no idea how to get back.

Harry traced a finger down Draco's arm—his shoulder, bicep, the jut of his sharp elbows, and the magically sealed bandages wrapped around his forearm. He didn't sleep with the sling on, and Hermione seemed pleased with the healing he'd managed so far. Still, Harry was careful to avoid mussing the wrappings, not keen to explain to her why they needed to be reapplied.

He eventually let his hand settle at Draco's hip, rubbing circles in the fabric over the knob of his hipbone, and Draco let his good hand trail down to brush briefly over the pulse of Harry's neck before dropping between them and rucking up Harry's nightshirt. His fingers were warm, and Harry didn't know why he'd expected them to be chilly, but he had, so his stomach muscles jumped in elation when Draco's touch skittered over them, tracing the dip of his navel and snapping the waistband of his pyjama bottoms.

“Lucky thing I didn't damage my wand arm, no?” Draco chuckled softly.

Harry huffed. “I'm Harry Potter; I live on luck, or so I hear.”

“Mm, don't I know it...”

Harry braced, waiting for Draco to slip his fingers under the waistband—but it never came, and instead he let his touch travel over the outline of Harry's cock with only perfunctory attention, palming him through his pyjama bottoms like he was a too-soft tomato before quickly moving on.

“Bloody tease...” he grouched roughly. It took everything in Harry not to buck his hips, or grab Draco by the wrist and *show* him where his hand was meant to be. Maybe this hadn't been a *need* in the conventional sense before, but much more of this, and it was going to become one.

Draco's eyes glinted in the low light. "It's called savouring the moment, Harry." He pinched the shaft gently between two fingers, though, and gave a long draw in apology, and Harry saw stars, fists clenching in the bedsheets. Getting groped through his pyjamas really had no business feeling this good.

Harry could feel that his pants were already tenting, fabric rubbing uncomfortably over his flushed skin as Draco teasingly traced along his cock, and between the soft lamp light and their close breathing and Draco's deft fingers, it was all he could do not to get lost in the muzzy memory of Draco touching him on the sofa.

But Draco hadn't wanted to do this then, and Harry couldn't honestly remember too much of the finer details of the encounter. He would therefore have to commit this one to memory in living colour.

Not a lot of good had happened to Harry over the past year or so—no, he'd had a right rotten twelve months, he could safely say. But this? Well, Harry had certainly endured worse, and he could *feel* how much Draco wanted this—wanted *him*—in these teasing caresses, the lingering touches, the gentle way he handled Harry, like he was afraid Harry would come to his senses any moment now and shove him away. Reject him.

Even here, in the warm comfort of Harry's little bed, the dragon had insinuated itself between them, and Harry had to really wonder if this would have escalated to a need, like the touching and the kissing. If it would have been something the dragon *demand*ed as a physical demonstration of Harry's commitment, instead of something Harry had simply told himself was a need.

It was difficult, in moments like this, to tell where the dragon ended and Draco began—and more difficult still for Harry to figure out if he even wanted to *know*. Knowledge was a dangerous thing, because once he *knew*, then he couldn't lie to himself anymore. Couldn't pretend.

The dragon mostly only wanted attention from its mate—and however that attention came, as long as it was *real* and *serious* and *focused*, that was all that mattered. What did Draco want, though? In over six months together, Harry hadn't yet learned how to

navigate Draco's tumultuous moods without running aground or getting caught in a maelstrom, and at least once a day he found himself with his foot in his mouth.

"Harry..." Draco whined, still palming Harry through his pyjamas. He spread his legs a bit, arching his back, until Harry finally caught on: he hadn't been holding up his side of the bargain, instead luxuriating in Draco's touch and letting his racing thoughts run rampant.

Harry nipped his lip in soft apology, quickly shoving trembling fingers under the hem of Draco's pants.

Draco hissed sharply. "Easy on the goods, Potter," he growled, voice rough with arousal.

"S—Sorry," Harry laughed weakly, grateful Draco probably couldn't see him blushing with shame. He was already mucking this up, after Draco had been so gentle and skilled and—oh *fuck*. He'd done this before. Had to have: wanked another bloke off. That was the only explanation for how he was so damn *good* at it. Even when Harry had been doped up on Hermione's homemade virility serum, he'd had sense enough to understand that Draco knew his way around a cock.

And that didn't sit well, for several reasons really, but most because it meant Draco had probably *been* wanked before, too. He was going to measure Harry against this nameless, faceless *other* and find him wanting. Only mutual mortification would keep him from mercilessly teasing Harry over breakfast the next morning.

"Gentle..." Draco breathed against his lips, lightly kneading Harry's cock through his pyjamas in demonstration. "Like you're all alone, warm and safe and no one else about... Like you can take it slow and easy...work yourself up right."

Harry tried to imagine himself as Draco suggested, though it was a difficult feat. He'd never had the luxury of such conditions; at least not in any situation he might have felt at all amorous. He probably could have indulged on those occasions when the Dursleys went out to the cinema or the zoo or the gardens and left him behind, but who could ever get it up in that dreadful place?

Wanking had always been something he'd done quickly and quietly, when needed, and not because he'd really felt like having one—and *certainly* not anything he'd ever *prepared* for.

He smiled to himself, because he could hear Draco saying in that superior tone, *What a Gryffindor, can't even schedule a proper wank—have to charge in without a plan.*

But then, who planned a wank? Well, clearly Draco, if his instructions were anything to go by.

Harry made a face. “You make it sound more complicated than it should be...”

“Now, now—don't say ‘complicated’.” He tugged down the band of Harry's shorts with one finger until his cock popped up, pert and alert. “Say...*involved*.”

“That's just...” Harry huffed, squirming as Draco finally—finally!—wrapped those long fingers of his around Harry's aching shaft and brushed his thumb over the bulbous crown. “S just a fancy word for ‘complicated’.”

“Then do me how you think I'd like, if you know best.”

Harry frowned. “...How'm I supposed to know what you like?” Hell, Harry barely knew what *he* liked, beyond the obvious preference for getting off *full stop*. He was easy to please, he thought, in that he really didn't care as long as there was an orgasm waiting at the end.

“Well, you could *listen* to me, when I tell you what to do. There's a thought.”

“Arsehole,” Harry grumbled, choking back an undignified yelp when Draco did something with his wrist that made it feel like Harry's cock was about to pop right then and there. He'd only narrowly kept from embarrassing himself. Had he cast *Muffliato*? They really ought to, if this was going to be something they did with any regularity. “Why...” He swallowed when his voice almost broke. “Why aren't you asking me what *I* want, then?”

“Because you’re very easy to please,” Draco said, too matter-of-factly for Harry’s liking, even if it was true.

“And you aren’t?”

“What do you think?”

Harry winced in pleasure as Draco’s grip slid down his shaft to tease the thin, sensitive skin covering his bollocks before drawing a finger back up to the tip. He was leaking, he could tell, because Draco’s thumb swiped over the tip and came away wet with slick. “I think...you’re a difficult bastard.”

“Right in one,” he said, pressing a dainty kiss to Harry’s nose. “Do you want to do it one at a time?”

“Huh?” Harry’s thoughts were starting to scatter, and he was losing track of their conversation.

“You aren’t even touching me, just got your hand shoved down my pants like I’m your personal hand-warmer. Can you even walk and chew Drooble’s Best at the same time?”

Harry’s ears burned at the insinuation. “I can get you off!”

“I’m sure you think you can—but can you get me off while *I’m* getting *you* off?”

And well, seeing as his hand *was* just sitting there dead inside Draco’s shorts, he was starting to have his doubts—but now that he’d been accused of a lack of focus, he found himself grinding out, “Of course I can. And I can do it before you get me off, too.” He groped about until his fingers brushed Draco’s shaft, and he made an earnest grab for it—and Draco winced.

“It’s not a *race*, Potter,” he said, a bit snippy, and Harry instantly relaxed his grip. That was twice now he’d shown himself to be overeager and ill-experienced, and he’d *never* liked embarrassing himself in front of Draco Malfoy.

His expression must have been pitiful indeed, for Draco tilted his head to press a soft kiss near Harry's ear. "Together, then. Match my pace."

Harry only nodded mutely, and when he took Draco in his hand again, this time he made sure to handle him like fine china, taking the slow, gentle approach Draco evidently favoured. He wondered what it might look like, to see Draco wanking himself off—surely he ought to observe, if only once, for research purposes. The better he was at this, the more satisfied the dragon would be, and if Draco was laid out boneless from an orgasm, well then he couldn't get into any mischief, could he?

He had to play catch-up, since Draco had already worked Harry up into a handsome erection that strained pink and pert against his stomach, dribbling a viscous something-or-other over Draco's fingers. Harry felt suddenly clumsy in the face of Draco's apparent experience with pulling off another bloke, palms sweaty, and he had to take care not to rub the sensitive shaft raw with his inept fumbling. Draco didn't seem to mind the drawn-out pace, though, offering pleased sounds and throaty encouragement that for once wasn't a backhanded compliment.

In short order, Draco's cock was settled hard and heavy in Harry's hand, and there was slick leaking from the tip that made things easier all around. Draco sighed, breathy and aroused, and rejoined his own stroking efforts—this time a bit more stilted and frenetic. *'Who can't walk and chew Drooble's Best at the same time now?'* Harry thought with a silent smirk.

Draco worked him with a steady, building touch, somehow knowing the perfect moment to twist his wrist or apply just a bit more pressure or to let off altogether. A part of him wondered, ridiculous as the thought was, if Draco was somehow using Legilimency on him, else how could he *know*? Was Harry really that easy to read? Or did every bloke get off like that? Was there some secret to wanking that Harry hadn't yet plumbed?

Draco was too damn good at this, or maybe it was just the dry spell Harry had been living in for the last...well, entire life, but it was too soon by half before he was feeling his limit approaching, though Draco had done little more than *hmm* in pleasure every now

and then.

“Dr-Draco, ease up...” he begged. “I’m close...” He didn’t want this to be over with, not quite yet: not when he’d only *just* gotten Draco going. He’d probably last at least another few minutes of earnest wanking, and that was too wide a gap for Harry’s pride to survive intact.

“Already?” Draco asked, tone suspiciously even.

“It’s been a while,” Harry protested, trying not to sound too defensive.

“Mm, but I just wanked you yesterday...”

“Well, a while before that, then!” he snapped, wriggling in place. “Just—stop touching me for a second, I’m too close.”

Draco seemed to mull this over with a furrowed brow, then his lips stretched into a familiar grin that betrayed the beginnings of a wicked plan. “...No, I think not.”

And then Harry learned what it meant to be wanked to within an inch of his life. Draco’s grip loosened, and his tugs came slick and far too fast, his fist flying over Harry’s cock with abandon. Harry brought his free hand up to clutch at Draco’s shoulder—though he didn’t know if he wanted to shove him away, or draw him closer.

“F-fuck, stop that—I said I’m—close—”

“Then you’d better hurry, hadn’t you?” Draco panted, grin gone manic. “Else I’m going to win.”

“You—said it wasn’t a race.”

“Honestly, you trust the word of a Slytherin? Tut tut...”

But though he claimed to be trying his level best to get Harry off, Draco still held back, refusing to do quite enough to send Harry careening over the edge—maybe it was just to tease, or maybe he was giving Harry the chance to catch up with his own efforts.

Regardless, the results were *torture*.

Harry let a string of epithets build behind his tongue, colouring his mindscape with filthy oaths, and he rutted on the bed, trying to shove his cock into Draco's fist to get that jolting connection his body craved. Yet still Draco kept him riding the edge, grip too loose and touch too light to truly satisfy.

Harry tried to distract himself by redoubling his efforts to get Draco off. Trial and error had taught him that Draco liked to be squeezed just a bit at the tip on the upstroke and then forced through the tight channel of Harry's fist—but it was too much stimulation if he went too fast, and Harry's mind couldn't make the connections he needed to know when he ought to gentle his handling and when he could stand to be a bit rough. He tried, though, god did he try—and he coupled his strokes with deep, exploring kisses, matching the rhythm of his tongue against Draco's to that of his hand on Draco's cock. But this only got him wondering what it might be like, what it might *feel* like, if their cocks were touching right now, if they were just rutting against one another—

That would have to wait for another time, though, because Quidditch player though he might be, Harry was not too proud to admit he lacked the stamina right now to—how had Draco put it? To *savour* it. Because Draco was something you savoured. Bitter and biting at first, but as you let him settle and work his way under your skin, you grew accustomed to him, even came to like him, until you couldn't get him out of your system.

With a thousand and one worries hanging over his head, Draco was the most fantastic distraction Harry thought he'd ever met. Draco was something he could let take over, let guide him, even if it made the smarmy bastard insufferable. He wouldn't let Harry get inside his own head, wouldn't let him brood—he'd just swoop in with a Snitch or a Pop-Tart (he was fascinated with all foods instant) or, now, an eager hand and draw Harry away from everything.

Harry shuddered to think how he might have been expected to get through all this without Draco; he might have gone his whole life, never knowing what he was missing, and it was a strange ache, to be sad for something that had never come to pass.

At length, Draco began to finally show signs of approaching his peak as well, hips trembling and trying to rise off the bed when Harry's grip loosened or his pace slackened, and he brought his bandaged arm up to loop around Harry's neck, pressing their foreheads together. Sweat had started to bead across their skin, brought out by the close warmth of their shared body heat, and the only sounds filling the room now were their laboured breathing and the wet, slick slap of their hands on each other's cocks.

Harry liked watching Draco, though he was a bit fuzzy around the edges without glasses. Harry didn't really need them to imagine the little crease between Draco's brows, the way his bottom lip would be tucked under his teeth, the gentle bob of his throat. And he could hear him, and smell him—ragged, shuddering breaths as he tried to stave off his orgasm, the scent of clean sweat and freshly washed sheets and the faint must from his slick and cock. Harry was fascinated by the sight of Draco falling apart, but it usually only happened in terrifying situations: a fight or a transformation gone wrong or conditions of near torture. He was a vision, for all the wrong reasons.

This, though? This was pure, unadulterated pleasure, and Harry knew he could get drunk on it, given half a chance. He was already feeling light-headed.

Draco whimpered somewhere deep in his throat, a keening, desperate whine that reverberated through his chest because he had his teeth worrying his lips. His grip on Harry's cock stuttered, squeezing sharply—and then Harry's hand was covered in a warm, gooey mess.

Harry cursed under his breath, fighting the immediate urge to jerk his hand away and shake it clean. He used his free hand to cover Draco's over his own cock, desperate now to follow. It was awkward going, not being a leftie, but he was so close to climax it only took a few more strokes and a sloppy kiss from Draco that missed his lips by a mile and made contact just under his chin to push him over, and then they were both sailing on bliss.

His hips kept jerking like he had a livewire shoved up his arse for a full thirty seconds after, and Draco was leaning into him with a heavy lethargy. His vision lit up, spangles

glittering like flashbulbs, and he could feel his heart thudding against his ribcage as he drifted down from his high.

This time, it was Harry who took the initiative to clean them up, Vanishing the mess and gingerly tucking himself back into his pants. He reached for Draco but had his hand weakly batted away.

“I’m a big boy,” Draco sniffed. “I can do it myself..”

“Yeah, I know. Just wanted another grope.”

“Cheeky arsehole,” Draco snorted, clearly still drunk on his orgasm. Harry found he quite liked Draco like this; if he couldn’t have a quiet Draco who kept his snide remarks to himself, then he could at least maybe have a loopy one who smiled rather a lot more than usual. It wasn’t a bad smile at all, really, and Harry took another mental snapshot, thinking the sight might bolster his own Patronus. One could never have too many nice memories to draw on, after all.

Draco eventually managed to put himself back to rights, still leaning heavily into Harry, and he cast a longing look back at his own bed on the other side of the room. “...I don’t know if I can make it over there without my legs giving out.”

Harry’s brows lifted. “That good, huh?” He liked having his ego stroked about as much as his cock.

“No,” Draco said, jabbing Harry with a finger. “Just tired is all.”

Harry glanced down, smoothing out the rumpled sheets. He’d still give them a wash in the morning; even though they’d Vanished everything, the fact remained they’d still wanked themselves silly in this very spot, so it was more the principle of the matter. He cleared his throat softly. “...Mine’s not so far away,” he said, trying not to make it sound so obviously an offer. It was only, they didn’t have to part *just* yet; Harry was finally feeling nice and sated and just wanted to lie down and close his eyes. If Draco moved, it would ruin the moment. It wouldn’t even be the first time they’d found their way into

each other's bed—though curiously, both times had been Harry inviting Draco, and that seemed unfair for some reason.

Draco followed his eye to the sheets, stifling a yawn. “No, it's not...” He snatched up Harry's wand again and gave it a flick, whispering *Epoximise*. The two beds slid together, nearly bucking the two of them off with the sudden, jerky movement, and with a faint *POP* became one full-size bed. Draco nodded, passing Harry back his wand. “Much better.”

Harry blinked, trying to process what had just happened. “Er...we can't sleep like this.”

“Of course we can,” Draco said, drawing back the covers and sliding under. He patted Harry's pillow invitingly, then punched his own to fluff it up.

“No—I mean, if Ron and Hermione come in and see, they're going to think...” They were going to think a *lot* of things. Mostly that Harry was out of his gourd—which they'd be entitled to, honestly. Harry wasn't sure the past two months hadn't all been a fever dream, and that he was still suffering under the effects of Nagini's venom.

“Why would they come in and see? We'll separate them again in the morning.” Draco shrugged, unconcerned. “Set an Alarm Charm if you're so worried.”

Harry settled in next to him, a dubious frown on his lips. “You're *not* worried?” Was this that ‘fatalist’ streak Draco had claimed to have, rearing its head again? Maybe he wasn't so much drunk on his orgasm as he'd lost his marbles out his cock.

“Mm, I'll be worried later...” Draco mumbled. “Feeling rather knackered now.” He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he slid in closer to Harry. It was uncomfortably warm, after their exertions, but Harry didn't dare move a muscle. “...You won.”

Oh, he supposed he had, technically—and that was a pleasant surprise, given how self-conscious he'd been the whole time. He hoped Draco hadn't *let* him win. It sounded implausible, but then so did Harry lasting longer, admittedly. “...Do I get a favour?”

Draco smiled into Harry's shoulder, which he was currently nuzzling in a manner Harry

might have called *cute* on anyone else. “Why does it sound like you already know what you want?”

He had several ideas, and they didn’t involve anyone doing his washing or bringing him breakfast in bed. “Must be hearing things.”

Draco pulled back, giving him a bemused look, then rolled his eyes and dipped forward to deliver a rather sweet kiss. It was only a chaste brush of the lips, certainly nothing to owl home about, but something shifted in Harry’s chest. It was a bit worrisome, unsettling even, how natural such gestures were becoming.

“No more nightmares,” Draco said, both wish and command at once—and funnily enough, Harry had no more visions that night.

Family Reunion

They set out for the Manor before dawn the next day, packing up their belongings and hoping that the Death Eaters in residence were the type to sleep in. Hermione had successfully—or so they hoped—Modified the Snatchers’ memories once they’d finished their interrogation and then turned them loose. They had then been Imperiused once again and told to seek out the werewolf pack Remus had infiltrated and turn themselves over, claiming a reformed spirit with a newfound love of vegetarian fare and a hatred for all things Voldemort.

“They’ll be torn apart—Greyback included,” Draco had sniffed, though he hadn’t sounded too broken up about it, gingerly clutching his still-healing arm.

Harry had merely shrugged, having difficulty mustering sympathy for the wizards who’d been responsible for the deaths of good people on the run. The pack might not kill them, he told himself, and that was enough to let him sleep soundly at night. If either Hermione or Ron had any objections to the script, they kept it to themselves.

As Draco had the strongest determination among them when it came to making it to the Manor and knew where it would be safest to appear so as to avoid detection, it was he who Apparated the four of them onto the Malfoy holdings. When Ron had initially objected to Draco being in charge of their Apparition, clearly still nursing a healthy helping of doubt as to Draco’s trustworthiness, Draco had simply said, “By all means, Weasley. Let it be on *your* head when we land in the Venomous Tentacula, then.”

“The—*what?!*” Ron had sputtered. “Why’ve you got *Venomous Tentacula* growing in your gardens?!”

Draco had been the picture of innocence. “How else are we expected to keep out the riff-raff?”

Ron had stifled his protests after that, but he'd kept his wand at the ready when they Apparated, just in case he needed to fend off deadly flora or worse.

After Hermione had placed a Disillusionment Charm over them, they had all linked arms, and Draco had turned on his heel and sent them tumbling into nothingness. When the world had stopped spinning, they'd no longer been faced with the scrubby steppe they'd camped on the previous night. Instead, they were skulking in the overgrown tree brake lining the edge of a long and winding drive that ran up to an imposing manor house. With its tall topiaries and gravel-strewn garden paths towered over by several impressive turrets, it had clearly once been a handsome place—but there was an unsettling air about it now. Like the stately exterior couldn't quite disguise the dark mischief being worked inside.

A flash of white in Harry's peripheral vision drew his attention, and he quickly brought his wand to the ready.

But it was only a peacock—an albino one, he was amused to note—out for a morning stroll. Its head bobbed rhythmically atop its long, curved neck as it strutted about, clearly confident in its role as master of its domain. How fitting.

Draco followed his eye, muttering. "Nasty bastard, that one. Rather full of himself. He chased me up a tree when I was seven. I think I'll have him skewered and fried up for a victory celebration once this is all over."

"Now come on, have some respect for your Patronus's formsake."

"It's not going to be a fucking peacock!" Draco hissed, jabbing him in the side with the tip of his wand. "Let's go. And keep it down; the manor grounds proper are warded against uninvited guests, but they might still have armed patrols monitoring the perimeter."

A wrought-iron fence taller than even Ron and tipped by wicked spikes surrounded the whole place. They fell in line behind Draco and walked for what felt like a half an hour through the underbrush before they finally wound their way around to the backside of the manor. The fence, which had seemed impenetrable from the front save through the

menacing front gates, was broken here by a small latch gate that looked much more manageable.

Draco held up a hand to signal for them to keep behind him, then drew his wand as they slowly approached the little gate. He looped his arm through Harry's, then nodded down the line for the others to do the same, until they were an unbroken chain. Draco tapped one of the bulbs tipping the lamp post, then moved his lips as if to cast a spell, though Harry didn't hear him say anything. The gate unlatched of its own accord, creaking inward to welcome them through.

As they passed over the threshold, Harry could feel a distinct ripple of magic that he assumed must be the wards Draco had spoken of. If whatever he'd just done hadn't fooled the protective enchantments surrounding Malfoy Manor, then whoever was waiting for them inside would surely know by now that they had trespassers on the premises and be out to greet them at any moment. There was no turning back now.

The Malfoy gardens were a sight to behold. There were greenhouses the size of the Dursley's whole home, and they gleamed in the glow of the morning sun just cresting the treetops. Harry could have happily spent the morning exploring—he kind of wanted to see the Venomous Tentacula, if Draco hadn't been pulling Ron's leg—but Draco was laser-focused, and they quickly worked their way through the rows of vegetable beds sleeping under Warming Charms until they came to a squat, nondescript door. Harry half-wondered if it wasn't a dog door before remembering whose lands they were on; no, no chance of pets here—at least nothing so mundane as a dog.

Draco tapped the jamb with his wand, and the door grew to something much more suited to humans. He chivvied them through, then tapped the jamb again to shrink the door back behind them. Harry was the first into what he took to be the kitchen, and he drew up short as soon as he was over the threshold, causing Hermione and Ron to bump into him.

The room was full of house-elves, some scurrying about holding trays of biscuits or casserole dishes, others perched on step stools ladling soup or stock from pots bubbling

atop woodfire stoves, and still others hunched over a butcher's block with rolling pins or chopping knives, engrossed in the day's meal preparations. This explained the size of the door, then.

It was a madhouse, and Harry quickly glanced over to Hermione, who was resolutely staring ahead, lips pursed. He wondered what sorts of rants were building behind that hard gaze and hoped she wouldn't be so foolish as to make a scene right this moment. What looked like *twenty* elves was absolute overkill, even for a Manor of this size, but there were more appropriate times to introduce Draco to the wonders of S.P.E.W.

The elves paid them no mind, though—whether because of the Disillusionment Charm or because they'd been trained that way—and Draco snapped his fingers for them to follow, leading them down a short corridor. They arrived at a door that looked to lead to an earth cellar—though it was bolted tight with three different locks on it, suggesting it was being used for far more than just storing vegetables.

Two of the locks melted under a simple whispered *Alohomora* from Draco, but the third refused to budge, to Draco's clear consternation. He'd either never been down here to deal with this door before, or the locks had been installed without his knowledge—both were equally plausible. He eventually resorted to a *Portaberto*, which blasted the lock from the door and left behind a smoking hole. The elves didn't appear to have noticed, intent on their tasks, but there would be no hiding the fact that someone had broken in, which would make covering their tracks difficult if not impossible.

"No one but the elves have any business being in the kitchens," Draco assured them once they'd slipped inside and shut the cellar door behind them. "We'll be long gone before anyone notices, if they *ever* notice."

"If you say so, mate..." Ron said, taking in their surroundings. The cellar was dark, dank, and musty—if there were any perishables being stored in here, they'd all be rotten.

"Which way now?" Harry whispered; he didn't want to hang around here any longer than they had to. They still had no clue how many Death Eaters were in the Manor, after all; *Homenum revelio* left a magical trace that could be felt and would surely tip off

whoever was lurking about that someone had infiltrated the wards. They couldn't even be certain the Malfoys were still around. Perhaps they'd fled for the Continent and this had been a perfectly unnecessary risk; there was no telling how out of date Greyback's information had been.

Draco cast *Lumos*, and Harry winced, bringing his hand up to shield his eyes until they adjusted. The deep shelves and racks for wine suggested they were in what had once been a large pantry for dry goods—but further on there was another door. This one led to a corner hallway, and when they finally stepped out the other side, it was clear they were no longer in anything remotely resembling a cellar.

“Don't judge,” Draco grit out, clearly aware of what the room looked like. “It's not what it seems.”

“Unless you lot get up to some kinky times, I'd say it's *exactly* what it seems,” Ron muttered, running his eyes over the iron bars lining what were undeniably *cells*.

“The Estate used to be much larger!” Draco protested sharply. “We had borders on our land, and the nearest lawmen were—”

“Now is hardly the time to be having this discussion!” Hermione hissed, rushing ahead with her own *Lumos*-bearing wand to check the occupants of the cells. When she reached the second cluster of three, she cried in relief, dispelling the Disillusionment Charm, “Luna!”

“Hermione...?” came Luna's lilting, dreamy voice, betraying a raspy roughness that said she hadn't had much in the way to drink recently. She approached the bars to her cell cautiously—then brightened when the others stepped into the pool of light cast by Hermione's wand. “Harry! Ron! And—oh. I don't believe we've met properly.”

Draco kept his distance, looking extremely uncomfortable with the situation. “We ought to hurry,” he reminded Harry. “Dawdling here's decidedly unwise. There's no telling when the guards might be back to check on their prisoners.”

“Oh, they won’t be by with breakfast for some time. They’re late risers around here, and sometimes they forget to feed us altogether. You haven’t been caught, have you?” Luna seemed unaccountably cheery given the abysmal conditions under which she was being quartered.

All the same, there was no time for tearful reunions just now. “No, we haven’t been caught. We’ve come to rescue you, Luna; we heard Mr. Ollivander’s here too?”

“Yes! He’s in terrible shape, Harry, but I think he’ll be fine if we can get him out of this horrible place.” She cast an apologetic look at Draco. “I’m sorry for the slight against your home, but it really has been just dreadful. So many nasty auras floating about down here!”

“It’s fine,” Draco muttered.

There were, it turned out, more prisoners locked up in the Malfoys’ cells than just Ollivander and Luna. There was the goblin Griphook that Greyback had mentioned, and Dean Thomas was here as well. It was quite a relief to see Dean had only been captured and not killed, as those on *Potterwatch* had feared.

The locks to the cells were easily countered, and Luna led them over to the corner of her cell, where Ollivander lay curled in a foetal position on a pile of damp hay, reminding Harry uncomfortably of the aged figure in his vision. His eyes were sunken into his skull, and his skin was practically hanging off his bones. He was but a shadow of his former self and looked even worse than he had in the vision Harry had witnessed the previous summer.

“I’ve been trying to take care of him,” Luna said, sinking to her knees and brushing Ollivander’s scraggly, thinning hair back from his feverish face. “But he’s been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse several times since I was brought here around Christmas, and I’m certain he suffered even more before then.”

“We need to get him out of here *now*, Harry,” Hermione said, and Harry nodded. The original plan had been for Ron to Apparate Luna and Ollivander to Bill and Fleur’s place

on the coast outside of Tinworth, which they knew had been fitted with hefty security charms and enchantments when it had functioned as a decoy house in Harry's escape from the Dursleys. Hermione, Harry, and Draco would then explore the Manor looking for Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy and join Ron shortly thereafter.

Things were looking a bit tricky now, though, and Ron seemed to agree, counting their tagalongs with a frown. "I could handle two or three, but *four* Side-alongs, plus myself?" He grimaced. "Honestly, I'm worried I'd Splinch us..."

Hermione bit her lip. "...I could share the load, I suppose," she offered with a worried glance at Harry. It was a departure from their plan, but a necessary one, he could see, and he nodded.

"It's important we get as many out of here as possible—and preferably in one piece." He gave Ron a wry smile. "Not that I haven't got the utmost faith in you, mate."

Ron shook his head. "No, less pressure on me this way."

Harry nodded. "Right, then Draco and I will follow shortly." He glanced to Luna. "I don't suppose you know how many Death Eaters are lurking about? And names would be great, if you know any."

"Hm, some come and go, but I know that nasty Lestrangle woman is here quite a lot. I think she'll be here." She frowned. "...She likes to use Dean for sport sometimes. He comes back with the most awful burns on his face and hands."

Great. He'd been hoping they wouldn't have to deal with any Death Eaters of note just yet, but if it came down to kill or be killed with Bellatrix Lestrangle, well Harry wouldn't lose any sleep over doing what he had to do.

"Have you—that is, do you know if...if my parents are...?" Draco asked, uncharacteristically bereft of his usual way with words, and Luna gave him a soft look of pity.

"I'm afraid I don't really know how they are. They aren't down here, though, as you can

see, so I suppose they must be doing all right? I'm sorry I don't have any more information."

Draco just resolutely shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest and slinking back into the shadows. His bandages peeked out from the cuff of his left sleeve; he'd slept the entire night before in the Sanctuary, letting the dragon heal itself as much as possible in case he needed to use his Animagus form in the doing. It would probably be another few days' worth of shifted time before he could fly again, but Hermione had pronounced him well on the mend when she had rewrapped his hand before they'd departed.

They rounded up the prisoners, with Luna and Ollivander Side-alonging with Hermione while Dean was partnered with Ron. The goblin Griphook would ride piggy-back on Ron, as his legs were useless after what looked to have been a thorough drubbing.

"If you're not there with us in a half-hour, we're coming back for you," Ron said, while Hermione used a blanket to form a makeshift sling so that Griphook was in no danger of sliding off Ron's back mid-Apparition.

"No, you're *not*." Harry didn't even know if it would be possible for them to Apparate back onto the grounds without triggering any wards. "It could take us that long just to find out where the Malfoys are being kept, let alone to mount any sort of rescue." He shook his head. "If you come racing back for us, you might tip them off before we're ready."

"Then at least take this." Hermione fished out the Master coin they'd used to communicate with Draco when speaking with Xenophilius. "Use it to let us know if you need help, all right?"

"Yeah," Harry said, determined to never use it. He pocketed it with a reassuring smile, anything to get them out of the Manor faster.

Ron looked to Draco, swallowing. "...Watch his back, yeah?"

"I'll be leading the way, but your concern is noted."

Ron pursed his lips, though he seemed to have been expecting something along those lines and declined to start an argument.

With Griphook safely secured and Mr. Ollivander toddling on dangerously unsteady legs, Harry shared a last, longing look with Hermione and Ron—and then they Disapparated with a faint *pop*, and it was just Harry and Draco alone in the cellars of Malfoy Manor now. Hermione's *Lumos* had gone with her, and the room was suddenly much darker than before. It hadn't been *cheery* by any means, but there'd been a certain comfort derived from the presence of so many of his friends that Harry had taken heart in. Now, he and Draco were on their own in a house full of people who wanted Harry dead.

He took a deep breath. "Guess this is it."

Draco snorted softly. "Still not too late to back out, Potter."

"Come on, what kind of Gryffindor would I be if I backed out now?"

"One with a higher likelihood of living to see old age than not?"

Harry grinned despite himself. They really made an unhealthy pair, feeding each other's tendencies towards dark humour. It was strange, finding something of a kindred spirit in Draco Malfoy of all people, but here they were. Never had he been more conscious of how macabre his humour tended, and if he survived all of this, he was probably going to need to have a Mind Healer on permanent retainer.

Draco jerked his head back down the passageway. "Come on, back to the kitchens. We'll take the passages behind the walls, less risk of getting spotted."

"Passages—*behind* the walls?" Harry gaped. "You have *secret passageways* in your house?" He didn't know why this shocked him so, given he was a wizard who performed any number of magical spells on a daily basis, but it did.

"They aren't *secret*," Draco corrected shortly. "They're *hidden*."

"That's called being secret."

“That’s called being *discreet*. Servants used them, so the gentlefolk of the Manor wouldn’t have to see them going about their duties—that was before house-elves of course.”

Harry’s eyes about rolled out of his head. “Of course.”

Draco led him back to the kitchens, where the house-elves were still hard at work and paid them no attention even without the Disillusionment Charm. He approached what Harry had initially taken for another cupboard but now saw hid a very narrow stair lined in green baize that they had to mount single-file, for they could not fit abreast. Harry followed Draco as they made their way quickly and quietly through the house, muffling with whispered spells the creaks of the old floorboards that hadn’t been trod on in an age. Malfoy Manor was somehow larger on the inside than it had seemed on the outside, and Harry wondered if you were technically allowed to put Extension Charms on the insides of residences like this, since Hagrid had mentioned they were tightly regulated.

They started in the eastern wing of the manor and worked their way over, checking the occupants of each room through tiny peepholes that usually turned out to be disguised by bookcases or portrait frames or similar frivolous décor. By the time they reached the grand atrium—or at least the passageways that riddled the subfloor beneath it—they’d found two Death Eaters making bored rounds along the walkways ringing the fore and aft towers and a third passed out on a settee in the library (“*One* of the libraries,” Draco had corrected), a copy of the *Daily Prophet* shielding his face while he snored loudly.

Surmising that these three were meant to be lookouts and that there would be three others in the western wing with similar duties, they decided to focus their search efforts on the rooms in the immediate vicinity of the central court. Given the hour, any residents would likely either be still abed or perhaps in the dining room, awaiting the fine breakfast the house-elves were preparing.

Harry had frowned at this. “...Greyback said they’re practically prisoners. You think he’d say that if they were taking their meals in the dining room like normal?”

Draco’s twisted grimace showed how he felt about the situation. “...Master bedroom it is,

then.”

The master bedroom was actually a master *suite*, with a receiving room, a study, a bathroom, and a bedroom. There was being filthy rich, and then there was *overkill*, and the Malfoys seemed to subscribe to the notion that if you weren't going to make something obscenely opulent, you might as well not do anything at all.

In the end, though, Draco's parents weren't in any of the rooms in the master suite—they were in what Draco called the Drawing Room but looked to Harry like just another overfurnished library. And they weren't alone.

Lucius Malfoy was sprawled out on one of the sofas in a stained shirt and ill-fitting trousers, his wispy white hair in disarray and dark circles under his eyes. He certainly didn't look like he'd had months to recover from his stint in Azkaban; hell, he looked like he might still *be* there.

Narcissa looked a sight better than her husband—or at least she was more polished in the way she'd put herself together. Her robes hung about her thin frame with a casual elegance that even her current living situation didn't seem to have robbed her of, and though she wrang her hands before herself and had her lips pursed tight, her eyes were still bright and sharp.

And then there was Bellatrix, a witch who must once have been terrible and beautiful but now was just psychosis warmed over and who'd never met an Unforgivable she didn't like, torturing for sport. Her jet-black hair was piled atop her head in a wild coif that seemed in as much disarray as her mind, and she had cut the sleeves of her gown off at the elbows so her Dark Mark was on display for all to see.

With no way to know what the state of things inside the Manor might be, they'd necessarily been forced to wing this part of the mission, so they spent several long minutes with their ears pressed against the drywall, listening to the conversation on the other side, while taking turns glancing through the peephole.

From the sound of things, they'd arrived right in the middle of a righteous argument

between Bellatrix and Lucius.

"...some gratitude for the honour you've received!" Bellatrix hissed.

"We are grateful," said Lucius with a weary peevishness that suggested this wasn't the first time they'd had this argument and he was in no mood to waste his breath. *"But we're beginning to feel like prisoners in our own home! And we were promised retribution!"*

"And so you shall receive it, at the hour of his choosing and no sooner!" Bellatrix scoffed, tone dripping in scorn. *"To moan and whinge about this and that not being done, pathetic! Pull yourself together, man!"*

"Bella, surely you must understand...our difficult situation..." A new voice spoke up now, which Harry was pretty sure belonged to Draco's mother. She was evidently stuck playing the mediator between her hot-blooded sister and a husband at his breaking limit.

"Indeed I do, Cissy. Which is why I've given you as much lead as I have. Test me much further, and you'll no longer be sheltered under my wing!"

The tension between the three in the room was thick enough to slice with a knife, and next to him, Draco was staring through the peephole tight as a drawn bowstring and ready to snap, barely even breathing. Harry placed a warning hand on his shoulder, worried Draco might otherwise be tempted to just burst through the wall, wand blazing.

Draco relaxed a hair, and Harry flicked his wand to throw up a *Muffliato*. "All right?" Draco just nodded, and Harry didn't push any further. Slytherins were tricky beasts to navigate emotionally. "...How do you reckon we ought to play this?"

"I don't think Father or Mother have wands—but Aunt Bella will. And she won't be afraid to use it, even on me." Harry had no trouble at all seeing that, given she'd happily murdered her own cousin. "Do you have any of those Wheezes products on you? The ones that waddle away and blow up?"

"The Decoy Detonator? Yeah, I brought a couple along." He rooted around in his pocket

and drew out a handful of Nosebleed Nougats, a pair of Extendable Ears, a couple of Dungbombs, and one slightly smushed but still viable Decoy Detonator.

“Let me do the talking once we’re in there,” Draco said.

“What, you don’t think your folks will be beside themselves at the opportunity for a private audience with the Chosen One?” Harry shook his head. “Fine. What should I do?”

“Just stand there and look pretty.”

There was no exit from the passageways directly into the Drawing Room, but there was one into the space next door: a nook with a cabinet for storing the tea service. They carefully crept out from the safety of the passageway, their steps muffled by a thick runner underfoot, and cordoned off their section of the wing with Silencing Charms. Harry gently placed the Decoy Detonator on the floor, angling it so that when it scurried out into the hallway, it would pass the Drawing Room. He took a breath, casting a final glance back at Draco—but his eyes were fixed on the damask wallpaper patterning the wall separating them from his parents just on the other side.

Knowing if they dawdled any longer, Draco was probably going to start entertaining ideas of letting the dragon take care of matters on its own, Harry gave the Detonator a tap of his wand, and off it toddled to do its business. After a three-count, there came a loud *BANG*, and the hallway filled with a thick, noxious black smoke. Narcissa shrieked, and Bellatrix came dashing out, wand-first—only to be hit squarely in the back with a *Petrificus Totalus* from Draco’s wand.

She instantly seized and toppled to the floor, stiff as a board. Draco stepped over her with his long legs and strode into the room with his shoulders thrown back, looking every bit the Malfoy scion, while Harry slipped in behind him and tried not to be too obtrusive. He hung back by the door, keeping one eye on the hallway, just in case the sounds of the Detonator going off somehow penetrated their Charms and brought the patrols running.

With a swipe of Draco’s wand, the smoke from the Detonator cleared, and Narcissa

gasped sharply. “Oh my—*Draco*?!” Lucius had been shocked into evident silence, his grey eyes wide—until he spotted Harry lurking behind Draco, and his whole demeanour darkened.

He jerked his sleeve up with a manic gleam in his eye, exposing his Dark Mark, and was about to press his thumb to it—when there came another burst of magic and he, too, crumpled to the floor comically still, hit by the whipcrack snap of Draco’s wand unleashing another paralysis spell.

Narcissa shrieked again and recoiled in horror, dropping to her knees by Lucius’s side to check he was still breathing.

Draco slipped his wand into his sleeve, staring down his patrician nose at Lucius’s paralysed form. “Apologies, Father, but I’d rather not be interrupted by our Lord’s presence just now.” Narcissa slowly turned her head to peer up at Draco, her breath coming in trembling little huffs as she ran her eyes over him in obvious disbelief. “... Mother.”

“What have you—but...but *how* did you...” Harry shifted uncomfortably in the corner, feeling exposed and out of place. Her brows furrowed as her gaze fell on him. “Is that... Harry Potter?”

Harry gave her a weak salute. “Um... Hullo, Mrs. Malfoy.”

She seemed at a loss for what to do and simply inclined her head in greeting, with a rather bewildered look on her features—then she turned back to Draco and rose shakily to her feet. “But...but they told me—Severus *said*... He said that you’d been—” Her lips tightened, and she fisted her hands in her robes in nervous habit. When she spoke again, there was a hitch in her voice. “He said you’d been *put down*. That the—the Ministry deemed you a dangerous creature and—and that they had to—”

“If he said that, then he lied,” Draco said, matter-of-factly. He sounded entirely too like his father, and inside these walls, he looked the part too. Harry had to fiercely tamp down the urge to grab Draco and just *go*, back to their tent, back to their little routine

they had going. He didn't like what reality did to Draco in his eyes. "And I thank him for it. Perhaps he thought to keep me out of this."

So Snape had been the one to tell Voldemort Draco was dead by the Ministry's hand? Had he lied on purpose—or merely been misinformed? That sounded like a hell of a risk to take, lying to Voldemort's face just to keep a student safe. It wasn't even as if Draco had failed in his task: whether he'd meant to kill the Headmaster or not, Dumbledore was still dead by Draco's hand. Wouldn't he have been praised and welcomed back into the fold with open arms? Draco could even have pretended like his Animagework studies had been part of the plan all along.

Narcissa finally broke and took quick strides forward to wrap her son in a bone-crushing hug, breath coming in heavy sobs as she clutched him to her breast. Draco returned the embrace after an awkward moment, and only because Harry knew to look for it, he could tell this was less a teenage son embarrassed by his mother's emotional outburst and more a distraught boy trying to hold himself together. He probably didn't want Harry witnessing this—Harry knew he'd felt ashamed when the shoe had been on the other foot in Godric's Hollow—and he tried to quietly fade into the background, wondering if he ought to cast another Disillusionment Charm on himself.

Narcissa's sharp eyes didn't miss the way he was hanging back, though, and she quickly collected herself. "That...that is Harry Potter, then?"

"Well spotted, Mother."

"You're travelling with him?"

Her word choice was telling indeed, and Draco gave a half-smile. "I'm not under Imperius, if that's what you're worried about."

"Precisely something one who's under Imperius would say," she reminded pointedly.

Draco glanced over his shoulder at Harry, one brow lifted. "Potter's the one who found me in the Ministry and rescued me. I'll admit I wasn't all that keen on becoming one of

his band-at-large at first, but the Chosen One can be most compelling.”

Her thin lips twisted into a disapproving frown. “...You’ve sided with him, then? Against —us?” There would be no mention of Dark Lords; this was and had always been a family matter it seemed.

“I’m here to *save you*,” Draco said, even if this didn’t really answer her question. He pointed to Lucius, still lying in a crumpled, undignified heap. “I’d lift the curse on Father if I knew he wouldn’t summon the Dark Lord the moment he could move his arm. I’m hoping *you’re* more receptive to reason.” He hardened his voice to a commanding tone that Harry had heard on several occasions from Lucius. “We’re leaving. *Together*.” He gestured to Harry. “Potter’s got a refuge—a place we can all go and be safe. Where we can—we can wait this out.”

He was being very careful with his phrasing—so careful, even Harry was having difficulty working out if he was actually sticking to their plan. He made sure Narcissa knew that she wouldn’t be asked to pick a side, and Harry marvelled again at how the Malfoys seemed to be so adept at twisting themselves into knots to avoid ever having to take a stand. It was a wonder Draco was standing here by Harry’s side today—and Harry resolutely did not dwell overlong on why that was.

“A refuge...?” she parroted, turning the words over in her mouth. She looked to Harry, for reassurance that Draco knew what he was talking about, he supposed, and Harry nodded.

“You may be asked to...” Harry cleared his throat softly. “...Make certain concessions, for everyone’s safety. But you’ll be taken care of.”

“We’d be *prisoners*, you mean? Out of one prison, into another?”

She sounded *exactly* like Draco, and he could really only deal with one surly, sour Malfoy at a time. “You’d be *protected*,” he said firmly. “At least you’d have your lives. And each other.” They might not have their dignity, but they didn’t have much of that *now*, so what was the difference?

She looked back to Draco with a worried frown plucking at her lips, and her eye found his bandaged arm. "...What have you gotten yourself into, Dearest?"

Draco drew himself up. "Nothing I can't get myself out of." He tightened his jaw and swallowed thickly. "Potter's word is good, Mother. I trust him."

A rush of warmth flooded Harry's system, leaving him tingling from head to toe, and it felt like his heart was going to burst. Draco never said such things lightly—he *wouldn't*. It wasn't in his nature, Slytherin that he was. He didn't know where the boy who'd sneered *Rely on others and you're only setting yourself up for disappointment* had gone, and he didn't care.

How had he ever thought Draco was *anything* like Lucius? He felt abjectly ashamed within the confines of his own mind and had to glance away, forcing himself to count the panels in the wainscoting.

"So you expect us to trust him by extension, then?"

"Of course not—but I do expect you to trust *me*. I know what I'm doing."

Narcissa looked at them both in turn, then Lucius, and finally all that she could see of Bellatrix from her vantage point: a pair of sharp-heeled pumps over striped stockings. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "We can't leave."

"What?" Draco took a physical step back, clearly thrown. "You mean—there's a spell...?"

"I mean we *can't go with you*," Narcissa said in a firmer tone, as a mother to a young child being contrary. "You must leave us here, just as you found us, and run away with Mr. Potter, back wherever you came or on to wherever you are bound next."

The tension that had been seeping steadily from Draco's shoulders came back at once, until Draco's hair was practically standing on end. He was buzzing with nervous energy, and it showed in the way he was now unable to stand still. "But—that's *insane*, Mother! We're ready to leave right now!" He extended his good hand toward her. "Come, we'll Apparate! Potter has a safehouse ready—"

Narcissa stamped her foot sharply to silence him, and Draco's mouth snapped shut with comedic immediacy. Harry was going to have to remember that, for future reference.

When she spoke again, her voice was soft and achingly gentle, and she brought her hands up to cradle his face. "Dearest, it's too dangerous."

"But—you'll be safe behind security charms and wards and—" Draco began to protest, but Narcissa shook her head.

"Not for us, for *you*." Her eyes shone, belying the forced smile on her lips. "You think he won't gather he's been betrayed in some way should we go missing? That he won't consider that—dead or alive—there's really only one person who would have come for us, in our own home, able to bypass our wards and security without raising an alarm? Your father and I are wandless now; we could never have managed it alone, and no one else would give us aid, you know this." She stroked his cheek, brushing a stray clump of hair behind his ear. "He'll realise Severus lied—and he'll kill him for it. He'll know you're out there; he'll scry for you, torture you through that horrid Mark, and...and use you to unthinkable ends, if it's true you can do what...what they say you can." She lifted a brow, searching for understanding in Draco's face, and he closed his eyes, shutting down wholly. She took a bracing breath. "So you're going to Obliviate the three of us—plant whatever memories you think you must, and then go."

Draco's face twisted into an ugly grimace. "I *can't*. I can't *leave you*." His voice was thick with emotion, real, raw misery that drove a knife into Harry's gut, and Harry's hands clenched into fists at his sides. He knew Draco would *hate* the idea of Harry pitying him, but he couldn't help it. Seeing his friends in pain hurt, full stop, and he didn't like the Malfoys very much, but he did like Draco. Liked him rather a lot, and was it so bad to wish for once that someone who'd been cut a raw deal several times over finally got a break? Draco had worked hard to get here; to have his legs taken out under him, so close to his goal, felt unimaginably cruel.

"You're not leaving us. Look where you are—you've saved us! Something I'm sure your Father would appreciate under...less trying circumstances." She smiled weakly. "This

too shall pass, Dearest. Provided the Dark Lord thinks our loyalty absolute, we'll manage." She tipped her head forward and nudged Draco's nose with her own. It looked so startlingly maternal—something Harry had witnessed Molly do with Ron and Ginny—that it threw Harry, seeing it from Narcissa Malfoy. "We're very good at wriggling out of sticky situations, your father and I."

Draco forced a laugh, and it came out watery. He had his face turned away from Harry, like he didn't want Harry to see him come undone. Narcissa drew him into another hug, rubbing her hand up and down his back soothingly. "My brave, brave dragon..." Her eyes met Harry's over Draco's shoulder; they pinned him in place, dark and threatening. "...Look after him, Mr. Potter."

She hardly needed to say so, but Harry took her words to heart. She would not remember this promise, but Harry would. "...With my life, Mrs. Malfoy."

Draco followed his mother's gaze back toward Harry, regarding him with an unreadable emotion, and then he turned away again, eyes closed and head hung. Narcissa placed a kiss on his forehead, whispering something in his ear that Harry didn't try to catch, and then stepped away.

Harry drew up close beside him, daring to brush shoulders. Anything else would surely be rebuffed, and with violence. "...Do you want me to do it?" he offered. "If it's tough, I really don't mind—"

"I can do it," Draco grit out bitterly, eyes still clenched shut tight. "I'm not a child."

Harry touched his elbow; it wouldn't do for there to be an incident here and now. "I never said you were. You know I don't think that at all about you." Draco's eyes flickered open, though he was still staring down at the plush carpet and breathing harder than he ought to be. "...I'll handle your aunt."

He didn't wait for Draco to reply; he doubted Draco wanted him to *watch*, confident though he claimed to be he could manage the job. Harry stepped out into the hallway and cast another *Muffliato* so he didn't have to hear Draco Obliviate his parents.

Bellatrix was still lying there, stock still, but he could easily imagine that this shell of a body encased rage and fury and a psychopathic streak a mile long. He placed his wand between her eyes and only just resisted the disturbingly strong urge to do for her what she'd done for Sirius. He couldn't murder her in cold blood, not like this—though it wasn't as if she didn't deserve it. It was only Narcissa Malfoy's words that Voldemort would *know* someone had broken in and deduce that it must have been Draco behind it, dead though he was thought to be, that stayed Harry's hand.

Perhaps he would pay later for placing Draco's life over the lives Bellatrix had already taken—he was half-expecting it, really. But he had to act in their best interests right now, and that meant putting off his vengeance for later.

So he proceeded to Modify her memory with his best Obliviation charm. He didn't feel as comfortable with the spell as Hermione, and he couldn't manage anything too convoluted, or it started to fall apart, but they had little other choice. They would have to tweak the story, now that the Malfoys weren't going to be joining them, but it was easy enough to pin the breakout of the prisoners on the long-gone Greyback. He carefully shifted and wove the threads of Bellatrix's thoughts, crafting a tale of Greyback turning traitor and renouncing his ways after seeing too much blood, fleeing to join a pack of resistance werewolves to mount a rebellion against the 'Dark Lord'—but not before sneaking in to free the unfortunates locked in the Malfoy cellars. It was a flimsy story, but it would have to hold for now.

Harry didn't want to be Greyback if any Death Eaters ever caught up with him—though that was assuming there would be anything left of him once the pack he'd been sent to confront finished with him.

Once he'd tidied up the loose ends of his Obliviation, he tugged three long black hairs from Bellatrix's wild coiffure and pocketed them. One never knew when it might come in handy to look like Voldemort's second.

"Let's go," Draco said, startling Harry. He hadn't heard him come up behind him—and then he remembered the *Muffliato*. He hoped Draco's Obliviation story had stuck to the

script and not been too heavily embellished.

“You’re done?” he asked.

Draco gave him a look that said *Obviously*, and hardened his jaw. His hand was clenched white-knuckled around his wand. Harry dared a glance back into the Drawing Room and now found the Malfoys slumped against one another on the couch. They were arranged in such a way that it looked as if they’d been surprised by someone entering the room and then Stunned in place before they could react.

Together, they dragged Bellatrix into the room with the Malfoys and left her splayed face-forward on the floor, to suggest she’d been Stunned from behind. It was the only conceivable way a second-rate wizard like Greyback could have ever hoped to take down Bellatrix. They set Timer Charms to release the paralysis placed on the three of them, after which they would rouse in due course and assume they’d been the victims of a sneak attack by Greyback and his rogue Snatchers.

It would have been so easy to take them; they’d done *everything* perfectly. It might have been days or *weeks* before Voldemort even got wind of what had gone down in the Manor, and that was assuming he even cared enough to pursue Draco. He was searching for the Elder Wand; what did he really need with a dragon?

He thought about bringing this up, giving Draco just a *sliver* of hope—his mother didn’t see the whole picture, she didn’t know about Voldemort’s hunt for the Wand. She could be forgiven for thinking he might try and exact some mote of revenge on Draco, when in reality he had much more important matters on his mind.

But before he could open his mouth, Draco had stepped toward him and drawn him into a tight embrace.

“Get me out of here, please...” he begged, voice soft and tremulous.

Harry just stood there, frozen for a beat, before he let himself go. He slid his arms up and around Draco, resting his chin on Draco’s shoulder and taking several long, centring

breaths. Draco was shivering—though from sadness or rage, it was difficult to tell. Maybe both.

Harry closed his eyes and thought of Shell Cottage, sitting warm and cosy on a rocky, late-winter beach with the salt spray in the air and the roofs of Tinworth visible in the distance—and together, they twisted into nothing.

The Wandmaker's Lament

They hit solid earth with a jolt that reverberated up Harry's legs, and in the same instant, his nostrils were filled with the pungent odour of the seaside. They'd landed in a thicket of seagrass only a stone's throw from the crashing breakers of the ocean, and while the sky overhead had been clear in Wiltshire, here it was an overcast steel-grey, the morning sun peeking through in only fits and starts.

Harry glanced around, looking up and down the beach, but there was no sign of a cottage—or any dwellings, really. Had they meandered off-course in their escape from the Manor? Or—did the enchantments that had been placed on Bill and Fleur's home as a safe house mean that no one could see it from outside the perimeter?

Harry fumbled in his pocket for the coin Hermione had given him, awkward business with Draco still leaning into him—but before he could draw it out, someone shouted, "*Harry!*"

He pulled away, abruptly, from Draco's embrace to see Hermione and Ron racing down the rocky shore toward them.

"We were—so worried!" Hermione panted, cheeks red and breath coming in pants. "Here!"

She pressed a piece of paper into Harry's hand, and he unfolded it, frowning at the unfamiliar scrawl. "...'Shell Cottage is located on the coast of Tinworth'? But obviously I know—oh!" No sooner had he read the words, than a prim little cottage materialised into view, just in the direction from which Ron and Hermione had come pelting. "*A Fidelius!*"

Ron nodded, still catching his breath. "Yeah. Bill had one—put on the place—after the wedding. Y'know, just in case. He's Secret Keeper." He swallowed, trying to steady his breathing. "We landed about here with the others. Got lucky Fleur spotted us out the

window.” He frowned, glancing between Harry and Draco. “But—wait, where are—”

Draco shouldered past them in silence, expression shuttered, and marched up the beach towards the cottage alone. Harry let him go, waving down Ron’s offended scowl. Once Draco was out of earshot, Ron leaned in and whispered, “What happened, then? You were supposed to bring back his folks—couldn’t you find them?”

Harry pursed his lips, staring at the stiff, silent line of Draco’s back. “...They didn’t want to come.”

Ron was incensed. “That fucking figures—just—fucking figures! We go out of our way to save their sorry hides, and—”

“It wasn’t like that,” Harry hastened to add. He still didn’t like Lucius, but Narcissa had clearly feared for her son’s life and done the only thing she could think of to see him kept safe. “I think they stayed behind for Draco. This whole time, You-Know-Who’s thought Draco was dead—”

“He thought he was *dead*?” Hermione sputtered. “Why?”

Harry shrugged. “I dunno—evidently Snape told him so? I’m not sure what he stood to gain from lying, but Draco’s parents seemed to recognise that their disappearance would ultimately lead to You-Know-Who figuring out that Draco was still alive—which might put him in danger. We didn’t really have a lot of time to discuss it, so we had to leave them behind. It was their decision in the end, though.” It wasn’t entirely the truth, considering Lucius’s first instinct, but Harry wanted to believe that his second choice *after* deciding to bring Voldemort down on all their heads would have been to sacrifice his own safety to ensure his son’s. Harry was probably being too generous, but he felt he owed it to Draco to try and see *some* good in his father. “Anyway, we Obliviated them and got the hell out of there as fast as possible.”

“So now they’re back to thinking their son’s dead...” Hermione mused sombrely, shaking her head. “And he’s got no hope of saving them, not while the war’s still going, at least.” She glanced toward the cottage, expression forlorn. “Poor Draco... He must be

devastated.” Harry quite agreed, though he didn’t know what they could possibly do about it. Draco didn’t like to discuss things, especially matters of emotional import, preferring instead to quietly brood until the events had passed from recent memory.

Hermione gasped suddenly, hand flying to her mouth. “Oh—oh no!” She grabbed Ron by the wrist and jerked him along, stumbling over the rocky dunes back to the cottage. “Bill doesn’t know about Draco! He’ll think—”

A flash of spellfire sent the door to the cottage bursting open, and a loud crack echoed over the beach, startling several gulls into flight. They reached the front steps at a sprint, panting and heaving, to see Bill warding Fleur back, wand drawn and Draco laid out flat on the floor. He’d been Stunned, it seemed, and a trickle of blood snaked down from his temple, where he’d cracked his head against the jamb.

“Oh Bill, no!”

“We told you Harry was coming with others!”

Bill gaped at them. “Wh—you brought a *Malfoy* with you?!”

“Technically it was supposed to be *several* Malfoys,” Ron said, as Hermione levitated Draco onto the sofa and Harry rushed to the sink to fetch a wet towel.

Bill let his wand drop, clearly lost, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione scurried about the sitting room. Fleur clung to his arm, eyes wide and confused. “I...I’m still not seeing why there’s a Malfoy in our home, you lot.”

“It a bit of a long story, but the short of it is we...well, we...” Hermione fumbled her words, evidently trying to come up with a good story.

“We found him imprisoned at the Ministry while on a mission of our own,” Harry said, mopping Draco’s forehead to stanch the bleeding. “So we broke him out.”

“Broke him—from the *Ministry*? This is the same Draco Malfoy that turned into a bloody dragon and killed Dumbledore, right?” He groaned at Harry. “Tell me you didn’t spring

him for some vigilante justice! I get he's a Death Eater, judging from that Mark, and you know I was just as gutted about Dumbledore's passing as anyone, but you have to let the system handle—"

"We aren't gonna *kill* him," Ron said. "Not that he hasn't given us reason enough to try."

"Indeed, especially since somewhere along the way he kind of joined our group, and now he's helping us with our mission," Hermione said.

Bill boggled. "A Malfoy is helping... A *Malfoy*?" He looked at Ron, incredulous, but Ron just shrugged.

"Wouldn't have been my first choice in travelling companion but...he pulls his weight."

Harry kept his focus on making Draco comfortable, stuffing pillows under his head and making sure his bandages hadn't come unravelled, but his heart swelled with affection for Ron. He had no cause to defend Draco the way he was, given their bad blood, yet he'd shown himself to be the better man. A quick glance at Hermione showed she felt similarly.

At Hermione's request, Fleur fetched several potions for the headache Draco was bound to have when he awoke and some smelling salts to rouse him.

Draco came awake with a start when Harry waved a sponge soaked in spirit of hartshorn under his nose, immediately on-guard and groping for his wand. Harry pressed the length of hawthorn into Draco's hands with soothing words of *Calm down* and *You're safe—it was a misunderstanding*. Draco had been through rather a lot this morning, and Harry was only too conscious of the fact that their tent was still stuffed deep inside Hermione's bag. It would take a bit of doing to get it set up if access to the Sanctuary were needed in an emergency, so they would have to try and keep Draco in his own skin or risk Bill getting feisty with his *Stupefys* again.

Eventually, after Bill and Fleur had been chivvied out of their own sitting room, Draco calmed down enough to allow Harry to pour the headache potions down his throat,

though he refused the one that would make him drowsy, protesting that it was the middle of the day and he didn't want to sleep.

Their hosts seemed to be rapidly losing patience with their unexpected guests, though, so once Harry had seen to Draco's relative comfort, he slipped into the kitchen to deliver his thanks to Bill for allowing them to recover in their cottage and see where things stood.

Hermione and Ron were already seated at the little kitchen table, nursing mugs of something warm, and Fleur was tending to a pot on the stove that smelled deliciously rich and savoury. His mouth watered at the thought of perhaps eating something they hadn't had to cook themselves for the first time in months.

"He's feeling a lot better now," Harry explained at the curious looks thrown his way when he entered. "He's sorry for spooking you, Bill—Fleur."

Ron snorted. "My arse he is—ow!" He bent over to rub his shin, where Hermione had apparently kicked him under the table.

Harry tried to change the subject; Draco resting on their sofa was not a topic that Bill seemed thrilled to discuss at the moment. "So where are the others? Luna and all? Everyone else made it here all right?"

"You mean the ones that tagged along with Ron and Hermione?" Harry nodded, and Bill pointed to the ceiling. "Luna's sharing our bedroom with Fleur, and I'll be bunking with Dean in the guest room for now. Ollivander's on the rollaway in the library, and Griphook's up in the attic." He grimaced. "I feel bad, putting a goblin in such a small space—they're proud as anything, I ought to know. But it was all we could spare."

"I'm sure Griphook understands," Hermione reassured him with a grateful smile. "And we have our own tent that's done just fine for us since we set out, so we won't put you out."

"We will find space for you, but of course!" Fleur protested, her long curtain of silvery

hair drawn up into a high ponytail that swung to and fro when she moved her head.

“Yeah,” Bill said. “I’m sure we can squeeze you in somewhere. I won’t say it won’t be tight, but—”

“Really, it’s fine, you’ve done more than enough already, just letting us catch our breath here,” Harry said, and Bill smiled weakly. “It might be best, though, if we stayed out of your hair. Especially...well, I know you don’t quite trust Draco—”

“*Draco?*” Bill laughed bitterly, wide-eyed. “Wow. What *have* you lot been up to?”

“I...maybe we could talk about it later,” Harry hedged, after a quick glance at Ron and Hermione. Dumbledore had left them strict instructions not to discuss the Horcruxes with anyone else—not even the Order—and while they’d necessarily brought Draco into the fold after substantial deliberation and mettle-showing, Harry didn’t know that he felt comfortable sharing their plans with other outside parties. Draco was one of them now—Bill, fine fellow though he was, was not. “For now, we really need to speak to Ollivander, as soon as possible.”

“We do?” Ron asked, earning another painful kick from Hermione.

“Absolutely not,” said Fleur, wiping her hands on a dish towel as she placed a lid on the pot to let whatever she was making simmer. “You ‘ave seen ze state of Monsieur Ollivander—‘e cannot possibly receive visitors until ‘e ‘as recovered—”

“I know he’s in a rough state, Fleur—and if this could wait, I’d let him get his strength back before we talked with him, but time is of the essence. We *have* to talk to him—privately if possible—right away. It’s urgent we—”

“Harry,” Hermione said softly, a hand on his arm. “...The journey really sapped him. I don’t think he’s even conscious right now, and if we tried to rouse him...” She pursed her lips. “Can’t it wait until after lunch, at least?”

It couldn’t, Harry maintained, but Ron was giving him a *look*, and Bill and Fleur were already growing annoyed with their presence and they hadn’t even been here an hour.

As there seemed to be no other choice than to put questioning Ollivander off for the time being, Harry sighed and returned to the sitting room to check on Draco.

Despite his earlier protests against taking the potion that would have made him drowsy, Harry found Draco dozing lightly on the sofa. The cut on his temple where he'd conked his head under the force of Bill's Stunner had healed nicely with a dab of dittany, and his bandaged hand was settled across his chest, which rose and fell with a comfortable rhythm. No lasting physical damage, it seemed—though Harry suspected Draco's emotional state was nowhere near so rosy.

He wished they were alone, or that they at least had a bit more privacy. Perhaps he ought to suggest to Hermione they throw together the tent now, while Draco was resting, and move him there before Bill had another fit about lodging a Malfoy under his roof. Draco probably would prefer it, at any rate—he was likely in a mood to yell at something. Or to vent some other way.

But they couldn't sneak away here, not without arousing any suspicion, and Harry found himself longing for the simple, domestic rhythm the four of them had built up over the past few months, where no one looked at Harry askance if he and Draco slipped off to the Sanctuary or retired to their shared bedroom. Granted, no one looked askance because everyone assumed they would be using these private spaces how they were *meant* to be used, and not how they had been...requisitioned.

Still, while Harry loved Bill and Fleur, he was glad the four of them would be camping in the tent and not under the pitched roof of Shell Cottage.

“So am I to be tarred and feathered and strung up for everyone's amusement? Or are we just going with a good, old-fashioned pike up the arse and stick me out front as a warning to any other Death Eaters considering darkening this lovely cottage's door?”

“A pike up the arse would be terribly undignified, you realise. Bill may not like Malfoys, but he's not *heartless*.” Harry dropped his voice and added in a stage whisper, “I pulled some strings and got them to agree to just burn you at the stake.”

“Well, I survived being burned alive once; perhaps it’ll stick this time.”

Harry snorted softly, extending a hand. “Feeling up to joining the others and proving there’s no need to break out the matches and kindling?”

Draco ignored the offered hand, instead pushing himself upright. “It’s only a bump on the head; no need to treat me like an invalid.”

“That wasn’t why—” Harry started, then wisely shut his trap when Draco cut him a dark look.

“Think I need your pity, then?”

“Of course not, I was only—”

“Only treating me with kid gloves because I’ve just had to abandon my parents to the company of a madman and his equally mad followers. I’d prefer the stake, if it’s all the same to you.”

Harry watched helplessly as Draco strode off, following the sounds of muffled conversation into the kitchen. Well that had gone spectacularly.

He gave Draco a minute before he joined him and was relieved to see this time that he hadn’t had to walk in on Draco catching the bad end of Bill’s spellwork.

Draco was seated as far away from Bill as possible, next to Hermione and across from Ron, who formed a sort of buffer between Draco and Bill and Fleur. Bill was still giving Draco the stink eye, and Fleur was sneaking glances at him in between chopping vegetables and stirring her pot of deliciousness, though the glances did not seem quite as nasty as Harry had expected. Perhaps she’d come off the Triwizard Tournament with a better opinion of the Malfoys than most of British wizarding society had.

Harry took the seat to Draco’s other side, as visible a sign he could think to give to Bill that Draco was to be trusted. He cleared his throat and tried for small talk, as any conversations that might have been going on before Draco had joined them seemed to

have died away.

“So how are the rest of your family doing? We haven’t been in touch with anyone, of course. Last we heard was a Patronus from your dad telling us not to contact them because the Burrow was being watched.”

Bill nodded. “It was, for a while—that was back when there was still some semblance of law and order in the Ministry. Dad and I could still do our jobs for the most part, just had to keep low profiles and keep any conversation we had via owl clean of Order business, since the Ministry—or really the Death Eaters by that point—were checking the mail.”

“But—the Burrow’s not being watched anymore?” Hermione asked, and Bill shook his head.

“What good would it be? There’s no one there; somewhere along the way, they caught on that Ron wasn’t actually down with spattergroit and reasoned he was off on world-saving business with Harry—”

“Which he is,” Ron confirmed proudly.

“—so then they started rounding up the whole family for questioning. It was lucky Ginny was on holiday when the word came down for them to bring in anyone named ‘Weasley’. If she’d been at Hogwarts, they could’ve grabbed her and smuggled her away before we even knew. But she’s safe too, now.”

“Safe where?” Harry asked.

“We’ve moved everyone without a home of their own to ward over to Muriel’s, and there’s a Fidelius Charm on the place. Dad’s Secret Keeper.”

Ron’s expression clouded. “But then what about Charlie? And Fred and George? And—and Percy?”

“Your brothers aren’t all helpless, you know, Ron,” Bill smiled. “Charlie’s out of the country, and Romania tends to play fast and loose with extradition treaty law. Percy’s

gone to ground, though I confess I'm not sure where he's holed up. Last I heard he was still going in to work, convinced he could do more good staying in his position than fleeing and having people think he'd done something wrong. I think Mum gave him a talking-to, though. And as for Fred and George..." Bill shrugged with a lop-sided grin. "I pity the Death Eater that tries to break into *their* flat."

Harry laughed along with Hermione and Ron at this, though the guilt curdling in his gut meant his smile failed to reach his eyes. The Weasleys had been forced out of their home all on account of being associated with him, and the Order members were evidently no better off, according to *Potterwatch*. He'd known of course that the wizarding world had been turned upside down by Voldemort's rise, but there was a difference between being vaguely aware of it and hearing real people's stories for yourself.

"Hey," Bill said sharply. "None of that, Harry."

Harry grimaced, ducking his head. "Just—it's all because of me—"

"Oh don't get such a big head; you think we weren't already Undesirables? I won't say it's got *nothing* to do with you, but we've never been favourites in certain circles. We practically coined the term 'blood traitor'." He glanced at Draco. "Wouldn't you say so, Malfoy?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably, but he managed to keep his features smoothed into an unruffled mask. "...I can't imagine being associated with Muggleborns and werewolves has earned you esteem in any of the Sacred Twenty-Eight's books, no."

"Pretty sure the Malfoys are one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight."

Draco's lips thinned into an angry white line. "And if the Dark Lord had anything to say about it, it'd be the Sacred Twenty-Seven. I'm not here for a spot of teenage rebellion, Weasley."

"Then what *are* you here for?"

"Guys," Harry said, raising his hands for peace. "Bill—can you please at least just trust

our judgement, even if you don't trust Draco? We wouldn't be here without him—he's saved our skin."

"On *multiple* occasions," Draco reminded through grit teeth.

"Right—multiple instances of skin saving." He dropped his voice, pleading with Bill: "We'll be out of your hair soon enough, yeah? We know what we're doing, and while I can appreciate the wariness, it's really unnecessary. I mean, look at Ron—if *he* can get along with Draco, it's gotta mean something, right?"

"Yeah, that he's got the attention span of a goldfish," Bill drawled, and Draco stifled an inelegant snort. Ron glared at the both of them. "...Fine, whatever. He'd just better watch his tongue while he's under our roof."

Draco's lip curled, betraying an oncoming scathing retort, and Harry hastily jumped between them with a broad smile. "Thanks, Bill. Really, we're indebted to you." He glanced around the kitchen, trying to think of a way to divert the conversation away from whether or not Draco was going to slit their throats in their sleep. "Er—so there's a Fidelius on this place too, huh?"

Bill nodded. "We figured it was safest, seeing as I'm in the Order. And it makes Fleur feel better." He winked at his wife, who threw a dazzling grin back at him. Harry had to blink the spangles from his eyes, grateful she'd turned down that vaunted Veela charm on account of company. "I've had to take leave from work, understandably, but there are decidedly more important things to focus on right now than busting curses for Goblins. We're planning to move our new guests on to Muriel's once Ollivander and Griphook are fit for travel. Muriel certainly won't appreciate a Goblin under her roof, but Mum and Dad'll be there to keep her in line."

Harry suddenly felt a deep swell of pity for Ollivander and Griphook, not to mention Dean and Luna and the remaining Weasleys forced to live with Muriel. Ginny might soon wish she'd stayed at Hogwarts and taken her chances under Snape's rule, and Dean and Luna might just head straight back to Malfoy Manor.

Lunch was delicious and filling—if slightly awkward. Draco quietly partook of the meal Fleur had prepared, refusing to be drawn into conversation even when Harry made a concerted effort. He supposed it might be for the best, especially seeing as he could tell how badly Bill wanted to get at why Draco was *really* tagging along with them.

Bill finally managed it when Harry volunteered to help with the washing up--Fleur claimed that the veneer on the flatware an aunt had given them as a wedding gift would react badly with magic and needed to be hand-washed—while Fleur stepped away to check on Ollivander.

“So what I don’t get is...why would a Death Eater need ‘rescuing’ from the Ministry? There were at least two dozen witnesses who saw him take down Dumbledore, and I know you weren’t one of them, but the fact remains they were justified in bringing him in.”

Harry shoved his hands into the soapy water, groping for the next dish to attack with a sponge. “It’s...it’s complicated. But we had our reasons, and like Ron said: he’s more than pulled his weight. You’d trust him, too, if you’d seen what he’s done. Why he did the things he did, and how he’s working to make up for it.”

Bill shook his head, tossing the damp dishrag onto the countertop. “Harry—I’ve been patient, I really have, but you’ve *got* to give me something more. What’ve you gotten yourself into? Where’ve you *been* all this time? Is Ollivander involved, is that why you need to talk to him?”

“Bill—you know I respect you, I respect *all* the Order members, but...I just can’t discuss it with you. It’s safer for all of us if this stays between as few people as possible. That’s what Dumbledore wanted.”

“But you can discuss it with Draco Malfoy? He’s involved in this ‘mission’ too? After what he *did* to Dumbledore? I’m sorry, but I find it difficult to believe he’d be happy to see you lot running around with his *murderer*—”

“He didn’t *murder* Dumbledore,” Harry protested. “It was self-defence. Or, kind of. He

wasn't in his right mind, and regardless: it's not Dumbledore's decision now. Draco's involved, full stop. And we're a hell of a lot better off for it."

"He wasn't in his right mind. Yeah, I remember there being some mention of that—went on a rampage, did he? Is it even safe he's here? Charlie's the dragon expert, but Harry, if there's *any* risk of him—"

"There's no risk. None. He's not going to transform or go mad or—or anything like that. Don't think that the things he's done don't weigh on him. They *do*. But he's committed to this now, committed to *our* cause."

"I heard other members saying the same thing about Snape," Bill reminded darkly. "And look how that turned out." He let any further arguments lie, though, when Fleur poked her head back into the kitchen to let Harry know that Ollivander was awake and willing to speak with him now.

They found Ollivander in the library where Bill had said he would be. He was lying on a narrow folding bed near a bookshelf that seemed to be dedicated to Ancient Egyptian magic, and here in the light of day, he looked in even worse shape than he had in the Malfoy cellars. His parchment-thin, yellowed skin was stretched tight over the sharp angles of his skull, and he was mottled with bruises and lash-marks that betrayed the torture he'd endured at Voldemort's hand over the course of the past year. He seemed to be dozing when the four of them filed in, but their entrance roused him, and he turned to stare at them with eyes ringed by broken, purpling skin in vast, sunken sockets. He beckoned them closer with long, skeletal fingers, and Harry was reminded again of the shade that had been Grindelwald imprisoned atop Nurmengard.

"You're looking much better, Mr. Ollivander," Harry lied with a thin smile. "Freedom looks good on you. I hope we haven't disturbed you."

Ollivander brightened, clarity returning to his gaze. "I dare say freedom *feels* good on me, too—and of course you haven't disturbed me, dear boy!" His voice was still weak and raspy, but there was a strength under it all that had not been dimmed. "I cannot say... how *grateful* I am—I was certain that cell would be my grave, that my last act would

have been..." He took a shuddering breath, wincing.

Harry drew up close to his bedside, placing one hand on Ollivander's and placing light pressure on it—anything more felt like it might break him. "Please, don't strain yourself. And gratitude's quite unnecessary—we were only too happy to do it."

Ollivander nodded weakly, eye shifting to Ron and Hermione. "And bless you as well, Mr. Weasley. Miss Granger." It was then he must have caught sight of Draco, for he quaked, "Oh no...no, *please*..."

Harry glanced back over his shoulder at Draco, who was hanging back away from the others and looking like he'd rather be downstairs having a pleasant chat with Bill. Harry swallowed and patted Ollivander on the shoulder, trying to draw his attention. "Mr. Ollivander? It's all right, really. That's Draco—remember from the cellar? He was with us earlier when we rescued you. It was only with his help we were able to pull it off at all. He's helping us defeat You-Know-Who, Sir. You needn't be afraid." He searched Ollivander's face, but his eyes were still wide and white, fixed unflinchingly on Draco. "You understand, sir? Whatever injury you might have suffered at the Manor, Draco *wasn't* involved. He won't hurt you."

Ollivander's gaze lost its focus, and he began muttering rapidly under his breath. He gasped sharply, a finger coming to his lips, and then his eyes brightened: "Yes...Draco Malfoy... Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy."

Draco's hand went to the wand in his pocket, and he nodded subtly. Ollivander relaxed against the pillows Fleur had stuffed under him, releasing a sigh of relief.

"...Mr. Ollivander, if you're feeling up to it, we had...well, we had a few questions for you," Harry said. His scar gave a pinging throb—nothing debilitating, only a warning klaxxon heralding the torture sure to come. Voldemort was on the move, and that meant they were running out of time—or probably already *had* run out of time. Voldemort would be upon his goal any moment, and Harry felt a flutter of panic lodge itself in his chest.

But...but he'd made his decision already. He'd promised Draco he wouldn't seek out the Elder Wand, and he meant to keep that promise. Still, he had to be *sure*. They needed to know what they were going to be up against, and Ollivander was the only living person Harry could think of—the only one Voldemort *hadn't* yet killed, though he surely would have been disposed of once Voldemort had what he needed—who could spell it out for them.

Ollivander smiled softly. “Anything, my boy. Absolutely anything I can answer, I shall.”

“You-Know-Who...he kidnapped you for a reason. And I know you're going to find it terribly difficult to discuss that reason...but we need to. We need you to explain why he took you—what information he needed from you.”

Ollivander's yellowing skin went ashen, and his eyes seemed to sink further into his face. His hands trembled with palsy as he brought them up to cover his mouth in horror. He shook his head, grimacing.

Harry swallowed; he didn't want to harangue the poor man, but this simply could not wait. “...He's having trouble with wands, isn't he?”

“Trouble is...putting it mildly.”

“And he's searching for a new one?”

“A new one? No, no...” Ollivander worried at the edge of the quilt draped over his torso. “A very old one.”

Harry nodded. “The Elder Wand. That's what he's after, isn't it?”

Ollivander's gaze snapped immediately to meet Harry's. “But—how could you know...?” He looked to the others, searching for an explanation.

“You mean it—it's *real*?!” Hermione sputtered in disbelief. “No!”

“He's looking for it because he thinks that's the only way to overcome the connection

between us. His own wand can't stand against mine in a fair fight as it is, *Priori Incantatem* and all, and for whatever reason, borrowed wands won't obey properly either. I saw one turned to kindling when we duelled last summer. So he wanted you to help him claim the wand that cannot be beaten."

Ollivander looked terrified, sputtering miserably, "Please, believe me when I say I had no choice but to tell him what knowledge I had gathered over the years! He took it from me, seized it from me! Torture, Legilimency—I was so weak..."

"Please, please, Mr. Ollivander—we understand, really we do." Harry spoke in soothing tones, holding his hands up to show he meant no harm. "No one blames you, not one bit. But we *need* to know what you told him. You must have explained the twin cores, yeah? And that's why he borrowed someone else's wand?"

Ollivander began muttering to himself again. "Lucius Malfoy... Elm and dragon heartstring. Twelve and a quarter inches. Quite rigid." He sighed. "A pitiable loss."

Draco made an offended sound from behind Harry. "...That wand had been in my family for *centuries*; and you just *blew it up*?" Harry could only shrug, and Draco sneered, "Salazar's balls, you *really* are a Gryffindor sometimes..."

Harry turned back to Ollivander. "Borrowing a wand wasn't enough, though. Do you know why? Why mine responded to his like that, even though it wasn't his own wand? It can't have been the twin cores in that case, right?"

Ollivander sighed, a sorrowful expression on his gaunt features. "It was...beyond me. I confess I had never heard of such a phenomenon—twin cores are rare, but even so their interactions *have* been documented. What your wand did to his, why it reacted so violently to a wand it ought rightly to have no connection to at all, I fear I cannot say..."

Harry's shoulders slumped. The curious event from the previous summer had dogged him for months, and he'd hoped that Ollivander himself might finally have some real answers. He'd claimed, in Harry's vision, to not know what had transpired, but there'd always been the chance he'd been lying to protect some great secret, or perhaps he'd

figured it out between then and now.

Harry shoved aside his disappointment, driving ahead. “Right, it doesn’t matter. He knows he can’t use his original wand against me, and none of the ones he’s borrowed have worked properly—”

“Only in a duel with you, Mr. Potter. I pray you not imagine him impotent right now. He can do a great deal of damage with any wand he picks up—he may simply find doing away with you by spellwork...tricky, at the moment. That is not to say he is not dangerous, nor that you are in any manner of speaking *safe*.”

Harry nodded. “No, no, I know that, of course. But...You-Know-Who wasn’t satisfied, was he? He wanted to know about the Elder Wand. And now he’s off looking for it.”

Ollivander’s brows beetled, and he spoke in a hushed whisper. “...How do you know all of this, Mr. Potter?” He searched Harry’s face for some explanation, but Harry gave none, keeping his features even as he waited for Ollivander to confirm his suspicions. “...Yes, he asked what I knew. He wanted to hear everything—everything!—about the wand with no loyalty, the wand with no master. The wand that only responds to power.” He grimaced, nodding. “The Elder Wand.”

Hermione groaned from behind them, slumping down into an armchair with faded upholstery in the corner. “This is rubbish...absolute rubbish...” Ron patted her shoulder with a grim smile. Perhaps she’d been able to accept the reality of Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, but accepting that the Elder Wand existed as well meant necessarily considering that the Resurrection Stone existed too, something her academic mind was having trouble processing. Harry didn’t honestly see the issue; this was *magic*. Most anything was possible, so why not an invincible wand, or a stone that brought people back to life?

Ollivander ignored Hermione, continuing on in hushed, frightened tones. “The Dark Lord has always been fond of the wand I made for him—yew and phoenix feather, thirteen and a half inches. I recall to this day the way his eyes lit up with pride when I informed him that his wand was the only one I had ever crafted with a phoenix feather core. It was true at the time, after all—I had not yet crafted *your* wand, Mr. Potter. The idea

that he had a particularly special wand appealed to him deeply, though I maintain that all of the wands I have ever made are special in their own right. However, once he discovered the existence of the twin cores—and how their magic affected his spellcasting—he grew desperate to distance himself from the wand that had chosen him those many years ago.” He locked eyes with Harry, gaze intent and sharp. “He is *convinced* that only by claiming the power of the Elder Wand can he truly become all-powerful. With its magic suffusing his yew wand, he need not fear *Priori Incantatem*, and whatever strange circumstances have allowed you to match any borrowed wand he’s wielded thus far will surely falter in the face of the Wand of Destiny.”

Harry supposed that shouldn’t have surprised him, but he felt his heart skip a beat. “... So he’ll be unbeatable, is what you’re saying. Once he claims the Elder Wand...it’s game over.”

Ollivander sighed. “...No wizard is unbeatable. No wand cannot be matched. The Elder Wand in particular is...persnickety, faithless, responding only to power, as evidenced by its colourful history, but...” He shook his head with a grimace. “I cannot say the idea of the Dark Lord wielding such a weapon in battle isn’t the stuff of nightmares. I sorely regret that my tortured ramblings may have led him to its possession...”

“But, Mr. Ollivander,” Hermione piped up, voice stronger, as if buoyed by hope. “*How* can a wand be invincible? They’re merely tools to channel our own innate magic!”

“Indeed—so one may rightly say that it is not the Elder Wand that is unbeatable, but he who claims it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Harry.

“The wand itself—its physical form—has been lost to the ages. We cannot know the shape it may take now—and that is because the shape never mattered. The source of the wand’s power cannot be destroyed, only passed along. *That* is what he who commands the power of the Elder Wand truly inherits: a force, an *essence* that subjugates all who would stand against it. Overwhelming in its intensity, in the hands of one unprepared for such responsibility...it could very well destroy its erstwhile claimant.”

“It would—*turn* on its owner?” Harry gaped.

“Not in so many words—but one may easily trace the wand’s course through history as it passed from one hand to another, through treachery at times, thievery at others, and at times...in the course of basic combat. How is it, one may ask, that an unbeatable wand can be beaten? We must assume that the wand itself has refused to be bent by an unworthy master.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Hermione snapped, though she instantly coloured and stammered, “I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean... It’s only, wands aren’t *sentient*. The way they’re drawn to us, it’s only the magical core responding to the witch or wizard in closest proximity for it to bond with.”

“Yes, that is so, Miss Granger—but we see wands refusing to be claimed all the time. A wand whose allegiance has not been properly won in a duel will often refuse to be bent to its new master’s will. Much the same can be said for the Elder Wand: it can sense when a person of worth is trying to claim it.”

“And You-Know-Who... He’s a person of worth?” Harry asked.

“It all depends on what you deem *worthy*. And what object’s—or person’s—worth is being appraised. The Elder Wand has its own criteria for a suitable master—and while I pride myself on wandlore, I cannot claim to understand the intricacies of this particular magical object.” Ollivander shook his head. “It is perhaps that the Elder Wand hides itself away until it senses the advent of a champion. There are gaps—long ones—throughout history where it has vanished from the written or spoken record. But it always resurfaces. Where it once passed easily from hand to hand as a wand of elder, it became particularly tricky to track once the wood broke down and its power came to be magically transferred.”

Was the wand asleep, even now, waiting for Voldemort to come and claim it? He was just the type of master a wand crafted by Death would have envisioned: powerful, driven, ruthless. Had the Elder Wand ever had such a master before? Would the joining of such a wand and such a wizard be enough...to outstrip even the destruction of the Horcruxes?

Harry closed his eyes, fighting down a wave of nausea lapping at his consciousness. A flash speared through his mindscape—and he imagined he could see the shop owners shuttering their store windows and hear the soft susurrus of wind rustling the dead leaves along High Street in Hogsmeade. A vision—or paranoia only this time?

“I truly am sorry, my boy. If I had been stronger, if I’d kept my mettle...”

Harry patted Ollivander on the arm with a forced smile. “Nonsense. You’re only human, and you’ve endured the unthinkable. We’ll let you get some rest now. Thanks very much for speaking with us.”

Ollivander nodded meekly, touching his lip in worry as he mumbled under his breath to himself.

Harry ushered the others from the room—then paused, a thought occurring. “Mr. Ollivander, could I ask one more thing?” Ollivander raised his brows in invitation for Harry should continue. “...Do you know anything about the ‘Deathly Hallows’?”

Ollivander looked perplexed—though relieved to be distracted. “The—what?”

“The Deathly Hallows. Perhaps in relation to the Elder Wand...?”

Ollivander only shook his head. “I—I’m afraid not, I’m sorry. I was never as invested in the lore of the Deathstick as some of my colleagues...”

Harry studied Ollivander’s sunken features, searching for any indications of artifice. He had never been terribly good at picking out lies, though, and he spared a glance back at Draco, who shook his head subtly. Harry smiled at Ollivander. “That’s all right. Thank you again, sir.”

The four of them padded quietly down the staircase, leaving Ollivander to his fitful mumblings in the library. Harry directed them to follow him out into the simple garden Fleur had fashioned, just at the front of the house. It overlooked the beach, which hissed and threw spray towards them, but was kept warm under the protection of a charm.

His headache from before had crescendoed by now into a violent throb as another vision came knocking at the back of his mind—but he refused to submit. Not yet. He had a fairly good idea of what he was going to see, anyway, so what was the point in meeting it any sooner than necessary?

He took a breath, turning to face his friends. “We know that Gregorovitch once had the Elder Wand, though it was decades back. I saw You-Know-Who trying to find him, though by the time he’d managed to do so, Gregorovitch didn’t have the Wand anymore.”

“Cause it was stolen by Grindelwald,” Ron said. “He was the thief you saw in your vision, you said.”

Harry nodded. “How Grindelwald found out Gregorovitch had it, we can’t be sure—”

“But if Gregorovitch was a wandmaker—he probably would’ve been bragging about owning *the* Wand of Destiny, hoping it might bring more business despite knowing its long and bloody history. So we can probably assume Grindelwald didn’t have to think overlong on it,” Draco finished with a grim smile.

A stab of pain lanced through Harry’s skull, and he saw a pair of bronze statues of flying boars perched atop stone gateposts. The iron gates that stood between the posts were shut tight, rattling ominously in the whipping wind.

“So Grindelwald probably used that same wand—the Elder Wand—to become as powerful as he did.”

“Then—Grindelwald has it now?” Ron asked. “Wait—Nurmengard! Greyback said You-Know-Who’s been abroad! You think—?”

Harry shook his head, sharing a look with Draco. He hadn’t told the others about his vision of Grindelwald, and there was no time to get into it now. “He went to see Grindelwald—but he was too late. Grindelwald said someone else had already taken it from him. Long ago.”

Hermione gasped. “Dumbledore! He duelled Grindelwald at the height of his power—he was the only one who had the strength to! And since he beat him, then that means...”

Ron goggled. “*Dumbledore* had the Elder Wand? He won it *in a duel*? I thought this thing was supposed to be unbeatable!”

“Weren’t you listening to Mr. Ollivander?” Hermione huffed. “If he’s right, and the Elder Wand really *does* have some...some ability to choose to whom to give its allegiance...then it might have recognised that Dumbledore was the better wizard.”

Harry nodded. “Or maybe Grindelwald wasn’t trying his hardest? Maybe there were... y’know, lingering feelings or something.” He felt his cheeks heat. “Rita’s book made it seem pretty one-sided, but it’s Rita. You’ve gotta take everything she writes with a tonne of salt.”

“Dumbledore with the Elder Wand...” Ron marvelled. “All these *years*. Blimey, he could’ve vaporised any of us!” Hermione punched him fondly in the arm. “Wait—wait *he had the Elder Wand*. So where is it now?”

“At Hogwarts, obviously,” Draco said. “Witches and wizards are buried with their wands by tradition, unless it’s an heirloom of some sort. Provided Dumbledore didn’t will his wand to anyone or bequeath it to a society...” Draco’s lips stretched into a thin line as he narrowed his gaze at Harry, who was fighting with all that he had to remain with them in the cliff-top garden, for just another minute, another second.

“But then—let’s go!” said Ron, urgently. “We have to get there before he does! We can Apparate to Hogsmeade, and then maybe use one of the passages to get onto the school grounds—”

But Harry was already shaking his head. “...It’s too late for that.” He rubbed his hand over his scar, pressing on it as if that might help keep the vision at bay. Draco was still staring at him with that knowing, judgemental look, and Hermione was biting her lip, worry stark in her big brown eyes. “He’s not stupid—he put two and two together a hell of a lot faster than we did.” He closed his eyes, but this only made the pain sharper, and

he could see shadows flitting behind his eyelids. “He’s there now.”

“You *knew*?” Ron’s voice was thick with furious accusation, and though Harry could not see it, he imagined Hermione had a hand wrapped tight around Ron’s wrist to keep him from lashing out at Harry. “We’ve been wasting time here, stuffing our faces and cooling our heels when we could have gone—we could *still* go, he might not have...” He trailed off miserably, and Harry finally broke, releasing a ragged breath as he sank to his knees in the grass.

“Harry!” Hermione shrieked. Someone rushed to his side—Hermione he had assumed, but the scent of woodsmoke overwhelmed the salty sea spray, and he unconsciously leaned into Draco.

He smiled, though it was bitter and painful. “Hermione was right. Dumbledore didn’t want me to have it. He could have left it to me, like he left us the sword and the Snitch and the book. The Ministry would never have known. So it must mean he didn’t want me to have it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes. Horcruxes, not Hallows.”

“But it’s the *unbeatable wand*, Harry!” moaned Ron. “You—say something! Talk sense into him, Malfoy!”

He didn’t need to open his eyes to see the expression on Draco’s face. Stony and unmoved, cold as the cliffs they stood atop. A perfect poker face. “...What’s done is done. Pull yourself together and stop whinging. If it’s Horcruxes we’re meant to get, then it’s Horcruxes we’ll go after. You have an unaccountable degree of trust in Dumbledore, so *act* like it and do what he’s told you to like good little boys and girls.”

“You fucking—”

“*Ron*,” Hermione snapped. “...Draco’s right. Harry’s right. Horcruxes, not Hallows.”

“Horcruxes, not...not Hallows...” Harry repeated drunkenly, vertigo sending him swaying.

He closed his eyes—and opened them to darkness. The breeze that ruffled his robes

carried no salt scent, only the sharp crisp of late winter. The fading glory of the sun was barely visible over the towering treetops, and he found himself meandering up a gravel-strewn path. He was not alone.

“Will you be joining us in the castle, my Lord?” Snape asked, cadence slow and languid. *“The Carrows are eager to share tales of their efforts thus far, and several of the older Slytherins have expressed a keen interest in the cause. I’m certain they would be honoured to make their case before you in person.”*

“Momentarily,” he said, his voice as cold and dry as the biting wind rustling the leafless treetops. *“Leave me for now—prepare the way. I have a small matter to attend to first.”*

Snape dipped a bow, clean and precise with no backtalk. A number of his Death Eaters could stand to take a leaf from Snape’s book. Harry moved with a confident, lazy ease, watching Snape’s figure disappear around a bend before drawing out his wand and tapping his crown. He shivered as he felt the Disillusionment Charm take hold, and when he glanced down at himself, he could see nothing—not even his own hand in front of his face. How much stronger would such a Charm be once he had claimed the Elder Wand? Could he pass silent as Death itself? Through solid walls where no Apparition could have possibly taken him?

In due course, he would find out—but for now, this much would do. While he generally enjoyed making a scene, striking fear and awe into those around him, for this one particular task, he wished to have no audience.

He walked on, skirting the edge of the lake when he came upon it, silvered in the twilight, and cast his eye back to the outline of the grand castle, beloved by so many—and soon to be the site of his new regime—his kingdom. His *birthright*. Who among the Founders’ descendants would have had the mettle to rise up and claim it? None but he.

And then there it was: the white marble tomb, lying in quite repose on the bank of the lake. It stood out stark against the gloaming, impossible to miss—impossible to ignore. Even in death, Dumbledore still demanded his attention. Well, he would have it one last

time—and then they would be quits.

“*You sent a boy to do a man’s job, Tom,*” he imagined he heard the old fool lecturing. “*Do you even have the temerity to finish me now?*”

Oh he did, in *spades*.

He raised his yew wand, anticipation thrilling through him in a heady rush. Close, he was *so close*. Once he had seized Dumbledore’s wand, claiming it for his own, the power of the Elder Wand would be at his fingertips. He would have liked to have struck down Dumbledore himself, letting the power flow through him and into the yew wand that had first chosen him—but it was not to be. He had outgrown it, it was a *child’s* wand. A wand that could be enfeebled by another child.

Not so, this one.

There came a sharp *CRACK* that echoed across the lonely landscape, as the tomb split squarely down its centre and fell open, at last divulging its secrets.

The body that lay within was draped in funerary shrouds, and with a whisper, he bid them open like the petals of a blossom, unfurling to reveal a face that was perfectly preserved, as lifelike in death as he ever had seemed alive. No burns, no slashes—no such indignity for the great Albus Dumbledore. They had even left his spectacles on that crooked nose of his. He might have been napping, dreaming of woolly socks or sherbet lemons or some such rot.

And then he saw it: clasped in those spindly, liver-spotted hands folded upon the chest, just as he had been told was tradition.

His lips curled into a teeth-baring grin. Had the old fool imagined that none would track down the Wand to his possession? Had he been so *arrogant*? Had he yet again underestimated the Dark Lord? Or had he merely thought that his tomb would surely be inviolable, sacrosanct and blasphemous to plunder?

He reached in, snatching the Wand from Dumbledore’s clutches—and in that moment of

connection, he could *feel* its power coursing through his veins, like a bolt of lightning straight to his magical core. His old yew wand vibrated in his grasp, and a jet of white-hot sparks shot from the tip, casting everything in dark shadow. When the glow faded, he felt the magic pulsing within him in time with his own heartbeat, steady and strong and *hungry*. He cast aside Dumbledore's now-impotent twig and marvelled at his wand. Oh, they would do great works together, he and his Elder Wand, at last in the hand of a worthy master.

The Sword of Godric Gryffindor

Bill and Fleur tried again to convince them to make themselves comfortable in the sitting room—“It’s no trouble to Transfigure the sofa and chairs into beds! You should see what Fleur can do with a few cushions and a bit of chintz.”—but Harry declined, certain that Bill and Draco spending too much time under the same roof could only lead to trouble. Ron had had months to come around to the idea of Draco being on their side; it would take Bill decidedly longer, especially since Draco didn’t seem in any particular rush to convince the Weasley newlyweds of his honest intentions.

They pitched the tent in the little cliff-top garden, well under the protection of Bill’s Fidelius Charm, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief the moment he stepped through the flaps. It had barely been twelve hours since they’d packed up that morning and made for the Manor, but the moody atmosphere within Shell Cottage—not to mention the lingering twinges from Harry’s vision—had had him longing for the familiar faded-plaid sofa and mismatched armchairs and questionable décor that Perkins had favoured.

Harry felt decidedly more comfortable surrounded by his three closest friends than when faced with the awkward tension and suspicion at Bill and Fleur’s place. He understood, of course, that Bill was only worried for them and his family, necessarily mistrustful and naturally resentful that Harry was working with parties he didn’t deem worthy *and* refusing to let Bill in on their plans—but there was nothing to be done for it. They needed to see this through to the end, just the four of them. It probably wasn’t the Horcrux-hunting party Dumbledore had envisioned, but Harry was grateful for each and every one of them.

The vision had unsettled him, though; it felt like, with each one, the bits of Voldemort that bled over into his mind began to feel more and more...*natural*. Like they belonged, and less like a foreign entity. It was a terrifying thought, that exposure to these visions was beginning to affect Harry somehow, and he knew if he brought it up, the others would have kittens.

He could still manage for the time being, though, and he sensed he would not have to deal with the visions for much longer. It felt like there was a great clock somewhere, ticking down time, but the beats were growing slower and slower, like it needed to be wound. Harry didn't know what would happen when it finally stopped, only that he felt an answering tension in himself winding in response. He just wanted to be around familiarity right now, and while he cared about Bill and Fleur and Luna and Dean and all, they were not who he wanted to spend these odd, lingering moments with.

After dinner that evening, Fleur caught Harry to pass along a message that Griphook had asked to see him. She seemed rather put-out at being ordered about by a Goblin, so Harry thanked her and quickly scaled the three flights of stairs to the attic, with the others on his heels. When they entered, Griphook was laid up in a bed so small only a toddler could have fit it. He was larger than a house-elf, but not by much, so he fit snugly. His legs had been wrapped in ribbons of bandages, a souvenir of his time in the company of the Death Eaters and Snatchers. Fleur had topped him off with Skele-Gro, but the stuff, Harry knew, tasted terrible, and regrowing bones was not pleasant at all.

Harry nodded to Griphook's bandages. "I see Fleur's got you all set. On the mend, then?"

Griphook grunted. "I am told the process will take some time." He laced his long, thin fingers over his chest, and his pitch-black eyes bore into Harry with a suspicious look. Harry had the distinct sense Griphook was trying to see straight through him—could Goblins do that? Was that how they checked on the contents of all those vaults so quickly?

"So, er...you wanted to see me?"

Griphook just stared at him with those dead, doll-like eyes. "I remember the first time I met you, Harry Potter."

"You do?" Harry asked, genuinely flabbergasted; he had only set foot in Gringotts a handful of times since his eleventh birthday, and Griphook must have seen thousands of witches and wizards since then—yet he remembered a brief brush with a scrawny boy

whose head had still been reeling with the sudden hard right his life had taken?

“Oh yes. One could not easily forget you. Even we Goblins know the story of the Boy Who Lived.” He ran his beady eyes over Harry, appraising. “You are an unusual wizard.”

It wasn’t entirely clear if this was meant to be taken as a compliment or not. “In...in what way?”

“You rescued a Goblin. At great personal risk, I gather, as I can see no reason for you to have been at Malfoy Manor in the first place.”

“We had a reason: to rescue our friends. We were happy to help you as well, but—no offence—we didn’t go there to save you.”

“Yet save me you did. And now, here I sit, choking down Skele-Gro and abiding the withering, judgemental gaze of that Veela’s get.”

“...You didn’t have to come, then,” said Harry, a little impatiently. He was sure Griphook’s foul mood could be chalked up to the pain he was in, but Harry wouldn’t stand idly by and let him snipe at Fleur like that. “If you’d like to go back—”

“I would not, thank you,” said Griphook, lip curling to reveal tiny serrated teeth. “But as I said, you are odd. Difficult to pin down.” He regarded Harry for a long moment, then shifted his gaze to Hermione. “You have something of mine,” he said to her.

Hermione blinked, bewildered. “What?”

“You carry with you a Goblin treasure,” Griphook said. “One you did not come by legitimately.”

Ron frowned, glancing to Hermione, and then Harry. “...Does he mean the Locket?” he asked in a whisper.

“Locket?” Griphook barked. “What locket?”

“He means the *sword*, you nitwit,” Draco drawled from where he stood leaned against a

bureau.

Harry turned back to Griphook. “The sword? The sword—of *Gryffindor*?” He laughed. “It’s not a Goblin treasure—and we *did* come by it legitimately.” Finders-keepers absolutely applied here, Harry maintained. If someone had stolen it to give to them, how was that in any way *their* fault? “It was given to us.”

“By whom?”

“Er, well... By—someone who knew we needed it on our quest.” He felt his irritation spike; they hadn’t come in here to have a Goblin lecture them on the chain of ownership of ancient artefacts. “The sword’s ours—”

“It is *not*,” said Griphook firmly.

“It is! We’re Gryffindors—well, most of us—and it was Godric Gryffindor’s as you can tell by the *name*, so—”

“Oh, well if it’s got his name on it!” Griphook scoffed. “You think it just sprang forth from the aether dubbed ‘the sword of Gryffindor’? Of course not! It was *made*. By a *Goblin*.”

“Well, maybe,” Ron said. “But it doesn’t matter who made it—it’s who it was made *for*. And it was made *for* Gryffindor.” He glanced at Harry and Hermione. “I mean, wasn’t it? Pretty sure that’s what I read.”

“No!” cried Griphook, face suffusing with a dull green colour that Harry thought must be a sign he was flushed with anger. He pointed a long, knobby finger at Ron. “Setting aside your woefully arrogant view that a client might have greater claim over a creation than the maker himself, the *Rhiz’halduk* was not ‘made for Gryffindor’—it was *stolen* by him, from Ragnuk the First, Goblin lord of old!” Griphook drew himself up, though with him sitting in a child’s bed, this was not very intimidating. “And I shall see this masterpiece of Goblin metallurgy restored and returned to its rightful home, in the ancient halls of its master.”

Hermione clutched her bag fearfully, and Harry decided now was the time to put a stop

to this before Griphook hurt himself—or made one of them clock him for spouting off about their ‘woeful arrogance’. “Well, we’re not giving it up. We went through rather a lot to get it, so you could say we paid fairly for it. We *need* this sword, so we’ll be holding on to it for the time being, thanks.”

Griphook bared his teeth in irritation, then relaxed back against his pillows, growling in a gravelly voice, “...Everything has a price, Harry Potter.”

Harry snorted softly, shaking his head. “You’ve seen my vault, Griphook. I really don’t need your gold, Goblin though you may be.”

Griphook’s black eyes flashed. “Perhaps I can offer you something more precious than gold. Something I expect you will be *very* interested in at this juncture.”

“And that is?” Harry asked boredly.

“Information.”

Harry narrowed his eyes in suspicion; how tricky were Goblins? “...What sort of information?”

Griphook nodded to Hermione, who had slipped around behind Ron’s shoulder. “There is another sword that is indistinguishable from the weapon you call the sword of Gryffindor—a copy. It lies within the Lestranges’ vault.”

“Yeah, we know,” Harry said.

Griphook did not ask how they knew this, but his wicked grin curled. “It is not the only thing of great value in that vault,” he hissed with a devious chuckle. “Something again, more precious than gold.”

Harry’s blood froze in his veins, and Draco straightened abruptly, palming his wand. Hermione gave a sharp gasp, leaning into Ron. Harry swallowed thickly. “...Is it something else...once owned by a founder of Hogwarts?”

Griphook's grin went toothy and knowing.

Of course—of *course*. If Voldemort had asked one follower he trusted to hide a Horcrux, it certainly stood to reason he might have asked another. Would it be the cup? Or Ravenclaw's piece? Harry stepped closer, staring down at the Goblin intently. "We have to get into that vault."

"Break into a vault? A *Gringotts* vault?" Griphook gave a derisive huff of laughter. "Impossible. Ask me to Apparate you to the moon! It might be a shorter order."

"Don't be coy, now," Draco said. "It's been done before, despite your vaunted security measures."

"Yeah," said Harry. "In fact, it was the same day we first met. I thought you said you remembered meeting me?" He raised a brow. "Or did the break-in slip your mind? Perhaps there was a lot going on that day."

"Our security measures are meant protect our clients' valuables—there was nothing of any remote worth in the vault that was broken into, so its protections were minimal. Now, if you're wanting to get a peek into an empty vault, perhaps we can arrange something—"

"You know we aren't, so don't patronise us," Harry said, and Griphook's lip curled. Well, what had he been expecting after offering them this tidbit of information? Did he think they wouldn't want to try and break in? Or had he been hoping they might attempt to do so on their own and fail, another display of 'woeful arrogance'? "We want into the Lestranges' vault—and I'm willing to bet they've paid top Galleon to ensure the best, most impenetrable security measures were placed on their vault."

"Indeed they have—so as I said, it is *impossible*." Griphook was grinning as he said this, smugly satisfied that they couldn't even use the information he'd shared. "If you seek beneath our floors, a treasure that was never yours—"

"Thief, you have been warned, beware—' yeah, I *know*, I remember your little jingle,"

said Harry. He moved right beside the bed, sinking to his knees so that now, Griphook was looking him straight on, as an equal. “You told me I’m an unusual wizard. If you really think so, if you believe I do things you wouldn’t credit from most wizards, then believe me now when I say what we’re seeking is *no* treasure. We aren’t after gold or precious magical artefacts—not for personal gain, at least. And I’m pretty sure you know that. Isn’t that why you told us about...this thing that’s in that vault...in the first place?”

Griphook stared at him slantwise in silent judgement, his gaze flicking to the lightning scar on Harry’s forehead. “...True enough, Harry Potter: you do strike me as the sort of wizard who might place more value on the immaterial...” His eye moved to Ron. “... Unlike some of your companions.”

“Oi—” Ron started hotly, but Hermione placed an arm on his, so he silently fumed.

Griphook turned back to Harry, thin lips pursed begrudgingly. “You are, as I said, unusual. Arrogant as any of your kind—but not without your merits. I cannot tell if you are simply ignorant of the ways of other wand-carriers or if you have so little self-respect you dole it out to the likes of Goblins like sweets.”

Harry didn’t know if he’d just been insulted or not; Griphook’s tone made everything sound offensive. “Then you’ll know I’m also telling the truth when I say that it won’t just be us ‘wand-carriers’ who suffer if You-Know-Who isn’t stopped. Goblins, elves, beasts and beings and magical creatures of all sorts, not to mention Muggles the world over—no one will be safe. We can do something about it—but not without what’s in that vault.”

“I have already completed my end of the bargain,” Griphook reminded them grimly. “I have given you this precious information, and now I am owed that sword.”

Harry eased back to his feet, staring down his nose at Griphook; if he wanted to believe Harry was an ‘arrogant wizard’, Harry wouldn’t disappoint. “I never made any such bargain,” Harry said, taking a leaf from Draco’s sneaky Slytherin book. “You volunteered your information freely.”

Griphook growled, beady black eyes narrowing. “I spoke in *good faith*—”

“You want to believe the worst of us, then we’ll gladly oblige. You’ll help us get into that vault safely and undetected, *that* is the new price.”

“As I said, it is *impossible*.”

“Well you’re going to try your very best,” Harry said, adding, “Because it’ll be on your head too, if we fail. Don’t imagine that the owners of that vault won’t want some retribution if we’re caught in the doing.”

Griphook ground his teeth, looking to each of them in turn, but they presented a united front of cool, hard expressions. He turned back to Harry, grimacing. “...My aid for the sword?” Harry hesitated; they still needed it, so the timing was an issue. Griphook jumped on his delayed response with a gravelly, “That is my price. If I’m to betray my people, I’ll restore some bit of honour to them in the process.”

Harry glanced back to the others—Draco was impassive, Ron uncomfortable, and Hermione ambivalent. None of them were really helping him with this choice right now. Perhaps that meant he shouldn’t make it. “We need to discuss this, Griphook, if that’s all right. Could you give us until morning, before we make a decision?”

Griphook did not appear to like this, but perhaps deeming a twelve-hour wait worth it if it meant he might get his grubby little hands on the sword, he nodded.

They took their leave then, with nothing further to discuss with Griphook, and descended the stairs. Harry thanked Fleur and Bill again for allowing them to stay under their protection, and after goodnights, they headed to the garden. Once back inside the tent, Ron put a kettle on for some tea, and they all settled in at the little dining table.

“He’s off his rocker, that one,” Ron said, drawing out four mugs and shortly filling the tent with the strong scent of fresh-brewed tea. “He can’t possibly think we’d give him the sword!”

And they weren’t—they *couldn’t*—but the accusations still nagged, and Harry turned to Hermione, as she was generally right about these sorts of things: “...Was what he said

true? Did Gryffindor really steal the sword from a Goblin lord?"

Hermione looked helpless. "I—I don't know, honestly. I've never heard or read about any battle involving Godric Gryffindor and this Ragnuk fellow, but I won't lie and say that most if not all wizarding history books are rather thin on details concerning the terrible things witches and wizards have done to other magical folk over the centuries." She bit her lip. "It's possible, I suppose?"

"Possible, maybe, but not likely!" Ron said, nearly sloshing his tea on the table when he slammed his mug down. "You heard the way he was talking to us—Goblins have had it out for wizards for as long as we've been on speaking terms. They've been spinning tales like that for ages; Griphook's just got an eye for shiny things, like any Goblin. I mean, this is *Gryffindor* we're talking about."

"What?" Draco sneered. "Don't like the idea of your paragon of purity sinking to backstabbing tactics more suited to a slimeball like Slytherin?"

Ron coloured. "At least Gryffindor's heirloom's being used for *destroying* Horcruxes instead of making them like *some* Founders' artefacts!"

"Can we not get into a row, guys?" Harry sighed; his head still ached from his earlier vision, and he mostly just wanted to go to sleep now and hope that things looked clearer in the morning.

"Whether Gryffindor actually stole the sword or not doesn't really strike me as important," Hermione said. "The point is Griphook seems to think he did, and that's the price he's put on helping us. Arguing with him about who rightfully owns the sword or whose possession it's meant to be in isn't going to solve the actual problem: we need both his cooperation *and* the sword."

"So we've got to convince him to accept something else," Ron said. "Which he's dead set against."

"He seems preoccupied with wands," Draco said. "Perhaps we can offer him one;

Granger already does half of Weasley's spellwork, so he can easily part with his."

"Want to see how I manage the other half?" Ron threatened, rolling up the sleeve on his wand arm.

"Ron, *please*," Harry begged, leaning forward to settle his elbows on the table and letting his head rest in his hands. "We don't have time to be at each other's throats—we need to figure out how we're going to play this. We have to...we have to think of *something*..." But though he knew Hermione was right, that it didn't *matter* whether Griphook's claims about the sword's provenance were true or not, it still rankled, keeping Harry from being able to focus.

He'd always been so proud to be a Gryffindor; of course he wasn't supposed to look down on any of the other houses, but there'd always been something special about being a Gryffindor that he didn't imagine any of the other houses had ever felt. Maybe Slytherins had felt that way when their 'Dark Lord' had first risen to power, but there was a chasm's worth of difference between being proud because you were better than others and being proud because...well, because you were *right*. You were *good* and *just* and—and all right, fine: *Better*.

What about all the great things Gryffindor had accomplished with the sword? Didn't that justify what he may or may not have done to get it? If he'd beaten Ragnuk fairly, then the sword was just a spoil of war, and Gryffindor had certainly put the sword to good use, brandishing it for the—

For the greater good.

"Okay," Ron said, and he was up and pacing now, expression gone a bit manic. "How's this? What if we tell Griphook we need to hold on to the sword just until we get whichever Horcrux is in the vault—we'll tell him he can have it back, once we've used it."

"But there's still *two* more Horcruxes after that one," Hermione reminded. "We can't destroy them without the sword."

“Exactly,” Ron said. “There’s a fake sword of Gryffindor in the vault, right? We can just switch them after we’ve secured the Horcrux and leave *him* with the fake one!”

“*Ronald Bilius Weasley!*” Hermione cried.

“*Bilius?*” Draco snorted. “Really? That’s what Mother and Father Weasley went with?”

“You can’t double-cross him like that!” Hermione continued. “It’s morally reprehensible for one, and he’d know the difference better than any of *us* would for another!”

Harry had to nod, though he didn’t find Ron’s suggestion nearly as repugnant as Hermione did. “Yeah, mate, he’d realise there’d been a swap.”

Ron shrugged. “Yeah, but look at him! He’s got those tiny little legs; we could easily just scarper before he realised—” He cut himself off abruptly at the dark look Hermione fixed on him.

“*Scarper?*” Hermione snapped. “Leave him with the fake sword? Use his good faith and then betray it the moment it suits us?” She shook her head. “And you wonder why Goblins don’t like us!”

Ron’s ears were nearly as red as his hair, and he had his head ducked shamefully. “Well I didn’t hear *you* offering any suggestions.”

“Because I’m trying to come up with something that benefits *both* parties—not trying to pull a fast one on him!” she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “We’ve both got something the other one wants—all we have to do is find a solution where everyone’s satisfied.”

“Oh, is *that* all?” Ron grumbled, flopping back down into his seat. “Good thing Goblins are so easily pleased. Should only take us ‘til next Christmas to come up with a solution, in that case.”

A dejected silence settled between them. They were going nowhere fast with this discussion, as there really was nothing *to* discuss: There was no compromise to be made,

for Griphook would only be satisfied once the sword was in his possession—even offering something else ostensibly as valuable would not change the fact that the sword was in wizarding hands and not Goblin ones. Harry might have been willing to part with it, too, were it not their only weapon against the Horcruxes. McGonagall would probably not have been best pleased to learn he'd just given away a precious heirloom that technically belonged to the school, but desperate times and all that.

He glanced over to Draco, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet all day. Understandable, given the circumstances, but they needed someone with a cold, calculating thought process right about now. "...What do you think we should do?"

Draco was staring down at his tea, tracing the lip of his mug with one long, elegant finger. "...There's still the question of whether he's even telling the truth about what's in that vault. And whether he'll be able to hold up his end of the bargain, even if there is a Horcrux locked inside."

Harry frowned; he hadn't wanted to consider this possibility. "You think Griphook's lying then?"

"I think he wants that sword."

"How could he know we were looking for Horcruxes, though?" Hermione asked.

Draco shrugged. "He couldn't have. But he didn't describe a Horcrux—he only said there was something 'more precious than gold' in there, and we're the ones who jumped to the conclusion he meant a Horcrux. He could have just as easily meant us to assume there was some indeterminate *something* in there of great value, and that we'd give him the sword in exchange for that information."

"So you think he's playing us?" Harry asked.

Draco took a sip of his tea, slowly to give himself time to gather his thoughts. "We won't know until we look inside that vault." Harry slumped back in his chair, rubbing his eyes in frustration. "...But Aunt Bella has always been the Dark Lord's favourite, so if he gave

one to my father, as you say...he'd almost certainly have given one to her *first*."

"So?" Harry really didn't need *more* complications introduced into this matter, though he supposed he should have expected their resident Slytherin to look at the deal from every angle and figure out just how many ways they might get screwed over by Griphook.

"It's the sword of *Gryffindor*. I don't think I should have a say in its dispensation."

"But that doesn't—"

"I trust you," Draco said. "I'll go along with whatever you decide to do."

And nice as that was to hear again—very nice indeed, and Harry's blood thrummed warm in his veins—it was no help whatsoever. He looked to Ron and Hermione, and they gave him resolute nods, as if to say *We're ready to go over a cliff with you!*

He'd wanted someone to tell him what to do, but then evidently the time for that had passed. He'd complained for so long about not being allowed to make his own decisions, and now that it was finally up to him to determine their next plan of attack, he was dithering.

He chewed his lip, wracking his brain for something—*anything*. But no magical ping of clarity hit him, no sudden epiphanies presented themselves. He was left with terrible choices and impossible ones.

He took a deep breath, then: "He wants the sword—so we'll tell him he can have it after he's helped us get into that vault."

"But, Harry—!" Ron began to protest, and Harry held up a hand.

"—But we'll be careful to avoid telling him *exactly* when he can have it."

A relieved grin spread across Ron's features, and Draco raised a brow. Hermione, though, looked alarmed. "Harry, you know we can't—"

“We’re going to give it to him, Hermione, don’t worry. But you know as well as I we can’t do that until we’ve got no more use for it. I’m not gonna double-cross him—but he’s clearly not budging, and if it means the difference between us being able to destroy Horcruxes and not, then I’m not gonna lose any sleep because he’s gotta wait a little bit longer to get back an artefact he *isn’t even gonna use*.” Griphook had tried to get the sword off them through less-than-honourable means, so they’d return it under less-than-honourable terms.

“A ‘little bit longer’—Harry, we’ve no *idea* where the remaining Horcruxes might be; like Draco said, it might not even be a Horcrux in that vault. He could be waiting *ages* for us to make good on our word!”

Harry wasn’t so sure about that, as he could still feel the clock inside him tick-tick-ticking down to some imagined future very near. He avoided saying as such, though, certain it would only frighten them. He shrugged. “The Goblins have waited a thousand years to get their ruddy sword back; what’s another few in the grand scheme of things?”

He would not stoop to doing things ‘for the greater good’. Dumbledore might have done a lot of great things under that mantle, but he’d done some underhanded stuff too in his years, of that Harry now had no doubt. Harry would keep his word and right his wrongs wherever he could—but on his own terms. If they wanted to follow him over a cliff, they had to be prepared to face the jagged rocks below.

Hermione pushed her mug away. “I want it on the record I’m not comfortable with this. We’re only inflaming tensions between our races.”

“I’d rather we didn’t have to do it either,” Harry said, choosing particularly diplomatic phrasing; Draco would be proud of him. “But it’s what we’re going to do. Griphook’s using us to get what he wants, so we’re justified in using him back. We’ll all get paid in our own way in the end.”

“Well you won’t hear *me* complaining,” Ron said, earning a glare from Hermione that for once did little to dim his smile. “So long as we don’t have to give up the sword any time soon.”

Draco's expression was unreadable as he traced the patterns in the wood grain of the table, not meeting Harry's eye. It was a good plan—a very Slytherin one, if Harry said so himself. He didn't like having to resort to such a cheap ploy, but they had little other choice.

Voldemort had the Elder Wand now, so all they could do if they wanted to have any hope of bringing him down was destroy the remaining Horcruxes. There were two left to locate—one, if this business with Griphook panned out—and then there would only be Nagini. After that would come the Herculean task of killing Voldemort himself, which Harry didn't even want to consider.

If Griphook was lying, if there wasn't actually a Horcrux in that vault...Harry could very well be walking to his death.

It didn't really make him feel much better to know at least he wouldn't be walking there alone.



When Harry finished his evening ablutions, Draco was already in bed—and given he'd placed his back to the door, he didn't seem in need of anything in particular tonight. It was something of a relief, admittedly, as Harry didn't feel all that up to...well, *anything* in the wake of that morning's mission and with the daunting task of infiltrating probably the only place more difficult to break into than the Ministry hanging over their heads.

Still, it had been a long day for Draco, with far more downs than ups, and Harry felt he ought to say something. Draco had been low-key all day, only offering input when directly addressed and letting rip perhaps a tenth of the snide remarks that usually rolled off his forked tongue. He'd been the first to head to bed as well, bowing out as soon as they had finished discussing how to deal with Griphook, and even Ron had noticed he seemed in low spirits.

Harry climbed under his covers, tucking his wand under his pillow and placing his glasses on the bedside table. He had a fist raised to fluff his pillow—then sighed. "...You awake?"

There was no response for a good thirty seconds, but then: “Would it matter?”

Harry settled back, staring up at the ceiling. “Well if you hadn’t answered, I’d have assumed ‘no’ and left you be.”

Draco’s bedsprings creaked as he rolled over, lip curled in derision. “...No you *wouldn’t* have. You’d have assumed I was ignoring you and pestered me until I gave in.”

“...Well you *would* have been ignoring me, as clearly you’re awake.”

Draco scoffed. “Did you want something?” He then lifted one brow slowly, though it didn’t look terribly inviting—more like a veiled threat. “Or *need* something?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I just wanted to know you were all right. You know, with...with your folks and all.”

Draco made a face, everything going pinched. “Oh yes. Just *dandy*. G’night, Potter.” He shifted back over, placing the long line of his back to Harry.

“*Harry*,” he sighed in beleaguered reminder.

“*Harry*, then.”

“See? You’re obviously not all right.”

Draco’s voice was tight. “I think I’d know better than you.”

“I agree—that’s why I think you’re lying.” He cocked his head to the side, catching Draco in his peripheral vision. “Did you want to talk about it?”

Draco bolted upright, grey eyes flashing. “Why the *fuck* do you think I’d want to *talk about it*?”

Harry’s brows lifted; he hadn’t expected to get *quite* that big a rise out of Draco. He shrugged. “Sometimes it helps, just having a conversation with someone who knows what you’re going through. Like when you had your nightmare.”

Draco sneered. “They aren’t *dead*, Potter—”

“*Harry*.”

Draco wiped his face with a frustrated growl. “I told you I’m not calling you that when I’m angry with you.”

“Wait, what?” Harry shifted upright. “Why are you angry with *me*?”

“Because—” Draco started sharply, then grimaced. “Because—because I’ve got to be angry at *something* and you’re all I’ve got!” He drew his knees to his chest and slumped forward, forehead resting on the knobs of his knees. His back rose and fell as he took deep, bracing breaths. “I’m *so—so fucking* pissed off. I just—want to blow something up. Destroy something.”

“Want to punch me?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Harry knew he shouldn’t smile, so he made sure to hide it. “...You’re allowed to feel angry, you know. It’s a perfectly normal human emotion, so why shouldn’t you express it? It’s not fair, what’s happened. No one’s saying you can’t—you know—want to snap. In fact, it’s probably better if you do, actually. I don’t reckon it’s healthy to bottle it up inside.”

Draco gave a soft *hm*. “Bottling things up is what Purebloods do best, though.” He sniffed haughtily and affected an even more posh drawl than usual. “Our emotions age like fine wine.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but if it’s piss when it goes in, it’ll still be piss when it comes out.” He inclined his head toward the door. “We could go to the Sanctuary, Conjure some targets for you to destroy?” Maybe they could bewitch Dumbledore’s Snitch and use it as a clay pigeon. Yet again not what Dumbledore had probably envisioned Harry using the Snitch for when he’d willed it to him, but needs must.

He could see Draco fighting a thin smile that wavered—and then fell in a miserable façade. “...Why wouldn’t they *come*? We’re all in danger, regardless. At least we could have been in danger *together*...”

Harry didn’t imagine it was a real question; Draco was a Slytherin, could see all the angles. Sometimes, though, you didn’t want to hear sound reasoning. You just wanted to indulge in some good, old-fashioned id-driven emotion.

Harry drew back the covers and moved, slowly, over to Draco’s side of the room. Perkins’s faded old rug was soft and worn beneath his toes, and he wiggled them as he stood beside Draco’s bed. “Being in danger together’s certainly better than trying to go it alone.”

Draco raked him with a suspicious glance, but at least he wasn’t shoing Harry away. “S that why you have yourself an army of Weasleys? How many are there now? Ten, twenty?”

“Too many to count. You should have seen Bill and Fleur’s wedding; redheads and freckles, as far as the eye could see.”

Draco slid back down onto his mattress with a groan. “Merlin, that sounds absolutely awful.”

“Mmhmm. Viktor Krum was there, though, which was pretty great. And the ceremony was nice.” He glanced down and realised that Draco had shifted to make room for Harry to join him, if he wanted. It was odd—every time they’d shared a bed before, it had always been Harry inviting Draco over. This way, Draco bringing Harry into *his* space...it felt like it meant something, though Harry couldn’t quite pin it down.

He reached for Draco’s wand peeking out from under his pillow to Transfigure the beds together and make them bigger, but Draco held a hand up. “Don’t. It’s fine.”

Harry raised a brow, certain it would be a tight fit otherwise; he’d woken up to bruises on his arms and stomach from Draco’s sharp elbows and knees enough times to know

they needed more space than less for a good night's rest.

Draco only drew him down and sidled close, chest to back, breathing soft and steady against Harry's neck. Harry wriggled for a good minute before he found a comfortable position, sighing loudly to signal he was finished.

"Was there dancing?" Draco mumbled.

"There was."

"Did you—?"

"Oh—god no, I can't." His mind supplied helpful flashbacks to the nightmare that had been the Yule Ball in Fourth Year. He really needed to apologise to poor Parvati before Voldemort killed him. "Two left feet."

Draco's hand had slipped around Harry's side and was gently stroking his stomach just under his thin pyjama shirt. It was a slow and hypnotic brush of fingers over skin, like he could start something, but wouldn't. Like he was barely even aware of what he was doing. "I could teach you," he said.

"Sure. As soon as you've mastered your Patronus, we'll switch."

Draco released a soft, defeated groan. "You're *still* on about that?"

"Bloody right I am. You'll find I am a cruel and unrelenting taskmaster."

Draco's fingers slowed their stroking. "...I'd hoped...that getting my parents back might be my memory." His voice was low and hesitant, almost ashamed. "I'd have been so *happy*..." He shifted his grip to Harry's hips, digging his fingers in to hold Harry tight in place as he pressed his nose to Harry's nape and inhaled sharply. When he released his breath, it came out in a ragged shudder.

Harry gave him a beat to collect himself. Draco despised pity, and Harry dared not give it to him. "You'll still get them back, you know. Pull yourself together. I'm not your

personal handkerchief.”

Draco snorted softly, pressing his forehead to the knobby bone at the top of Harry’s spine. “Tough love—I like it.”

“Figured you could use a bit of familiarity in the midst of all this new.” He sighed, closing his eyes. “And in the meantime...we’ll just have to find another happy memory.”

There was a very pregnant silence, and Draco let his grip on Harry’s hips relax, brushing his thumb in circles at the crown of Harry’s hipbone. “Like what...?”

Harry could feel himself already drifting, the day’s excitement waning into a wave of exhaustion that threatened to bury him alive. “I dunno,” he breathed against Draco’s pillow. “I’m sure we’ll figure something out, though.”

Putting Heads Together

With the decision made, Harry met with Griphook again the next morning, delivering his carefully phrased offer to exchange the sword for the Goblin's aid in infiltrating Gringott's and breaking into the Lestranges' vault. He made sure to be purposefully vague about the exact timing of the exchange, and though he worried Hermione's tight-lipped scowl would betray them, Griphook seemed blinded and deafened by the prospect of the sword returning to Goblin hands.

He fixed Harry with his beady black eyes, and Harry was struck again by the curious sense that Griphook was peeling away layers of Harry's self, searching for artifice or intrigue. "We have an accord, then? You will return to me the sword of Gryffindor provided I help you infiltrate the Lestrangle vault?"

This, Harry could answer without hesitation: "Yes."

"I believe wizards shake on these sorts of agreements, do they not?" He extended a hand, fingers overlong and nails filed into sharp claw-like points.

Harry hesitated only a moment, praying this wasn't a magically binding sort of thing, or that clasping hands would reveal the true nature of the agreement, before taking Griphook's hand in his own, tightening into a firm grip.

Evidently satisfied with whatever he had seen in Harry's eyes, Griphook gave a grunting nod and released Harry's hand. "Then we begin immediately—the sooner I have helped you in your quest, the sooner you will help me in mine."

If Harry had thought breaking into the Ministry had been a difficult task, then breaking into Gringotts, he quickly learned, was a truly testing trial. Twice as many heads planning as before meant twice as many eyes picking out glaring flaws in carefully crafted strategies—and twice as many tempers flaring when bold ideas were inevitably

shot down. With Griphook still too weak to be moved and the notion of planning their heist in the middle of Bill and Fleur's dining room right out, they were forced to keep their work primarily to the attic space where Griphook was recovering, which was kept frustratingly poorly lit, as the goblin preferred. They had to keep a *Lumos* active at all points or else cast Cat-eye Charms if they wanted to be able to see what was what.

“As I have mentioned before, the Lestrangle vault sits at the deepest level of the bank's catacombs, protected by our strongest security measures—I have only had occasion to visit this particular vault once, being primarily assigned to chaperon the medium-security vaults, but I have escorted other vault owners to the lower levels and am quite familiar with the protections guarding these most ancient of chambers.”

“And what sorts of protections would those be?” Harry had asked.

“Formidable ones,” was all Griphook would say, which was most unhelpful, but Hermione reminded them they wouldn't have to worry about how to get past any of the protections around the vault if they couldn't even get through the front doors, so Harry let the issue lie for the time being.

Hours at a time they spent cooped up in the cramped attic, reminding Harry uncomfortably of his early years at the Dursleys'. Bill was still nosing about, trying to see what they were up to, and sometimes he even recruited Fleur to do his dirty work under pretence of asking them what they might like for their next meal, but they all kept resolutely tight-lipped.

It was a slow slog, as they pored over blueprints of the building's early foundations they had pilfered from Bill's library and memorised key phrases of Gobbledegook and seemingly trivial minutiae, like which Goblins took a fermented fungal-base tea with their afternoon meals and which preferred good, old-fashioned pond water.

The hours soon stretched into days and then a week, and then two, as three new problems seemed to crop up every time they felt they'd made some headway into resolving *one*. Between Hermione and Griphook, they were back to planning everything down to the microsecond, and it was equal parts relieving to know they were leaving no

stone unturned and dispiriting to find that, a month in, they were little closer to making it beyond the front atrium of the bank than they'd been when they'd first hatched the plan.

Ron was in better spirits these days than he'd been since they'd set out, though, as he'd finally managed to reconnect with his family to some degree. Bill had taught Harry and Ron how to send messages with their Patronuses—to Draco's sour distaste; he had not appreciated Harry's stag cantering up to tell him he was a "grade-A wanker"—and Ron had immediately sent his little terrier off to deliver word to his mother and father that they were safe and sound and not to worry. It was too dangerous to send owls that might get waylaid, but Bill and Fleur had a fireplace that they were sure could be matched to Muriel's with a secure Floo connection. Ron had fairly swooned at the idea. "Bill doesn't have the first clue how to manage it, exactly, and neither do I, but imagine if we got it working! Blimey but I miss Mum's cooking!"

And then there was Draco, who had his own way of helping.

He'd been spending enough time in transformation since the attempt to rescue his parents that his arm was all but fully healed, and he'd even taken a few practice flights in the Sanctuary to build up any muscle that had been compromised by Greyback's curse and ensure he was in fighting form come time to break into Gringotts. Harry was relieved to see that the curse had caused no lasting damage—though Draco finally being back in fit shape brought along a new set of...complications.

For one thing, he was terribly distracting.

Whether he was still wound up from the incident at the Manor or agitated by the upcoming mission, Draco had been in a curiously high-strung mood for going on two weeks now, and he was taking it out on Harry in a distressingly titillating fashion. Guiltily—though not quite enough to put a stop to it—Harry found himself giving in to most every invitation extended or suggestion made for a rendezvous of the carnal sort.

It happened in the evenings, just before bed, and in the late mornings, when Harry stormed out of the attic in aggravation at yet another route of entry closed—and even

once (*just* the once) in the shower, when Draco had snuck into the tent's tiny bathroom under Harry's Invisibility Cloak. Harry had been shocked shitless and utterly mortified, trying to cover himself up with the shower curtain. He'd hissed at Draco to get out, as this was so over the line it wasn't even funny, but Draco had only smoothly disrobed and told Harry to budge up as he slid in alongside him.

"This...this isn't what the Cloak's meant to be used for..." he had huffed, undone by the tight heat of Draco's hand flying over his cock. The soap suds sluicing down his chest under the pelting spray made everything gloriously slick, and Draco had swallowed any sounds he'd been in danger of making with a hungry kiss.

"Protecting the wearer from certain death, which would surely have been visited upon me had Granger or Weasley caught me sneaking in here?" Draco had smiled knowingly as he watched the evidence of their liaison swirl together before sliding down the drain. "As I understand the Hallows, that's *exactly* what it's meant to be used for."

But despite these flashes of passion and devious flirtation, Draco still wore the pain of not being able to rescue his parents as he'd wanted like a shawl around his shoulders. Harry recognised there was very little he could do about it, as Draco did not respond to sympathetic overtures like most would, but that only made it worse. Still, it was less burdensome—or seemed so—when Draco was involved in planning their Gringotts heist, and it seemed to do him as much good to have a distraction from the troubles of life outside the Fidelius's protection as it did Harry.

He spent far less time in the Sanctuary on his own and more time with Harry, Hermione, and Ron memorising maps of the vaults and the complicated trackways to reach the oldest and most well-guarded of them, as well as their protections. Draco even had some input of worth, having been to his family's vault a couple of times over the years in his father's company and with his own vault in the most well-protected catacombs in which he'd had to make a personal deposit on several occasions.

Griphook's contributions as an employee, though, far outstripped anything a mere account-holder could offer, and Harry supposed he must have wanted the sword *very*

badly indeed to part with such precious information, which would surely ruin the reputation of as vaunted an institution as Gringotts. As their plan—excruciatingly slowly—came together, he felt excitement begin to pool in his chest, adrenaline firing his veins at the first prospect that they might *actually* be able to pull this off.

After all, they'd stolen a locket off Umbridge's fat neck and smuggled a *dragon* from the bowels of the Department of Mysteries in one fell swoop. This couldn't possibly be as difficult a job, right?

“And what are *you* smiling about?” Draco muttered, catching Harry out of the corner of one eye as he pieced through a hand-drawn map of the antechamber to the lowermost level of vaults.

They were alone in the tent for the moment, with Harry laid out on the sofa and Draco sitting at the far end hunched over the coffee table. Hermione was showering in Shell Cottage, as having shared a bathroom with three boys for months on end had her desperate for a respite, and Ron was still trying to work out a secure Floo line with Bill so he could speak with his parents in person for the first time since August.

Harry had been lost in a daydream and not at all paying attention to the copy of *Gobbledegook for the Gormless* he'd borrowed from Bill's library under pretence of wanting to know if Griphook was saying rude things about Hermione behind her back.

He shrugged. “Nothing, just...I'm glad you're here. I'm—I'm glad we rescued you.”

Draco cut him a wry look. “Hm. Well you ought to be. I doubt you could have managed this without me. Honestly—wearing Slytherin's locket around your own neck? It's a wonder you don't crack your skull climbing out of bed.”

“To think we might have missed your witty banter.”

Draco lifted a brow. “You could have had all this for six years if you'd just taken my hand on the train as you should have.”

“Well you'd just insulted my best friend.”

“I *still* insult your best friend,” Draco reminded pointedly.

“Yeah, but—” Harry shrugged, not entirely sure how to respond to that. “You’re different now,” he tried, even though it didn’t feel entirely right.

Draco stared at him for a long beat with an unreadable expression. “...I’m not, really.”

Harry nodded, sighing. “Then maybe I am. *Something’s* got to be different, I mean.” It was hard to imagine *this* ever evolving organically. If the Horcrux business had never come up and Draco had never poured himself into Animagework in a desperate bid to save his and his parents’ skins, Seventh Year would surely have come and gone as all six years before. Trouble seemed to follow Harry around like a dog on a lead, but he couldn’t see it ever resulting in him and Draco becoming friends, let alone...well, whatever they were now.

Draco huffed, shaking his head and scrawling something with a well-worn quill on a scrap of parchment clipped to one of the maps. “Well feel free to wrack your feeble mind if you like—but you’ve not wanked all the Pureblood tripe out of me *yet*.”

“Have I not?” Harry leered. He was pretty sure Draco used such turns of phrase on purpose by this point.

“Not even a little bit,” Draco said, slipping the quill into its stand next to the inkwell. “But I’m confident you’ll manage it if you just put a bit of effort into it.”

Harry pretended to mull this over. “So I should try...*harder* is what you’re saying?”

Draco slid one leg up onto the couch, easing onto his knees and crawling over Harry with a slinking grace. “*Much* harder,” he said, voice pitched low. “Really...” He placed a soft, suckling kiss under Harry’s jaw. “Put your *back* into it.”

And that insinuation was both terrifying and *terribly* arousing all at once. Harry tried to pull his hips back into the cushions, so Draco wouldn’t see the shameful evidence of Harry’s hair-trigger erection. He realised he was seventeen, but this was *ridiculous*. He tried to affect a snarky bravado that really didn’t fit him, hoping to distract. “Well I think

you're just not really trying. You don't *want* to have all the Pureblood tripe wanked out of you."

"Mm, you're right..." Draco breathed, now nibbling on Harry's earlobe. "I want it *sucked* out of me."

Harry jerked back like he'd been bitten, searching Draco's face with a gobsmacked, wide-eyed stare—and for once, he didn't see a self-assured egotistical prick with confidence by the barrel staring back. Draco's cheeks were burnished with a shameful flush, and he had his eyes shunted off to the side so he didn't have to see Harry's reaction...and that was arousing in and of itself.

Which was really the whole problem. Harry swallowed, wondering where all his saliva had suddenly gone. "I've...I've never..."

"And I have?" Draco's tone was sharp and accusing, which was sort of relieving in its familiarity, though it ruined the mood.

Harry wanted to ask *Do you need it?* Really, he *should* have asked it, because...well, that was what this was all about. That was where the boundaries lay. That was how they justified all of this—by separating *want* from *need*. If he asked, then it would be clear to the both of them that this was just another extension, another way they could manage their complicated predicament without having to address the uncomfortable and increasingly undeniable truths trying to wriggle their way to the surface of the masks they wore to justify the things they did together.

Except when Harry opened his mouth to ask what he was meant to ask, what came out instead was, "...I could bite it off."

Draco gave him a lopsided grin. "I trust you."

Harry let the thrill that phrase gave him shiver down his spine and settle just behind the base of his cock. "That kind of makes me *want* to bite it off, honestly."

"A compromise then," Draco offered, trailing a finger down Harry's chest to flick the

button on his fly. “You don’t bite mine off...and I won’t bite off yours.”

Harry’s throat about closed up—which, he supposed, really wasn’t conducive for what he was (*god*) about to do, so he tried to work up as much spit as he could manage while Draco shimmied out of his bottoms and settled on the couch, legs splayed inelegantly wide.

Harry balked. “Wha—we’re doing it *here*?” He glanced back to the tent flaps—and Draco pointed his wand, lacing them tight and double-knotting them to boot.

“I’m already comfortable; if you want this business done in the bedroom, I’m afraid you’ll have to carry me.” He held out his arms expectantly, and Harry rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath as he sank to his knees. He would absolutely have preferred this happen in the bedroom, where there was very little chance of being walked in on, but a tiny part of him worried Draco would entertain second thoughts between the sofa and their doorway, and Harry had already mustered every ounce of courage in his body for this.

Draco leaned back, getting more comfortable, and let his head settle against the cushions, staring down at Harry with a hooded gaze. He seemed to have no shame, his cock hanging there limp between his legs—and damn, he wasn’t even a *little* excited about this? Harry was a bundle of nerves, but then he was the one about to do the deed; if the tables had been turned right about now, he’d have been absolutely drooling with feverish anticipation. Perhaps he could get this over with quickly and move on to the receiving end of things.

Then again, getting it over with quickly was probably a good idea regardless, considering where they were. He swallowed, then remembered he was going to need that saliva very soon, and grimaced. Where was he meant to even start? Was he supposed to—to place his tongue on the tip? God, when had Draco last showered? What if he smelled? What if his *spunk* got on Harry’s tongue? *What if that was the point?* This had been a terrible idea, just *awful*, and he really had to stop thinking with his cock, because that was the sort of business that wound up with Draco sneaking into the shower stall, and—

“Harry...” Draco sighed, spreading his legs wider and rubbing the heel of his palm over the base of his cock. The tip gave a twitch, bobbing up. “Just touch me...”

Harry bit back a vibrant *Fuck* and tried not to dwell overlong on why he was suddenly salivating like a rabid dog. Touching he could definitely do; touching they’d done *loads* of, and he knew how to touch Draco and make him feel good. He’d been a quick study—what he wouldn’t have given for this sort of dedication at Hogwarts—and over the weeks they’d been doing this now, he’d learned where Draco was most sensitive, where to stroke or squeeze when they wanted to get off fast, and where to avoid touching when he wanted to draw it out.

This should...be the same, right? Just with his tongue and lips and the heat of his mouth instead of his fingers and wrist and the tight channel of his fist.

God, he was never going to live this down if he screwed up.

He tentatively took in one hand Draco’s cock, perfectly limp and lolling to the side of his balls—and oh god, that would be Draco’s *arsehole* hiding somewhere in the dark little divot behind them, wouldn’t it? He put the thought very carefully from his mind, working the shaft with one hand to bring it to attention. Draco had asked him to touch, so touch he would, avoiding having to put his mouth on it for just a bit longer while he settled his nerves.

Evidently he was not as skilled at hiding his concerns about hygiene and propriety and the difference between a *want* and a *need* as he imagined, for Draco snorted softly, staring down at him with a languid indolence. “Scared, Potter?”

Harry scoffed reflexively—he wasn’t *scared*; there was a difference between unfounded terror and a healthy wariness, and wasn’t Draco all the time telling him he needed to be more self-serving and sceptical? He only didn’t want to muck this up, as his pride couldn’t take it. Surely Draco could understand *that*, though perhaps he had some manner of experience under his belt—pun unintended—and was therefore unconcerned about his own performance.

The goading helped, though, spearing Harry with a bolt of confidence as he gave a sharp twist of his wrist followed by a gentle, sliding squeeze, swiping a thumb over the tip and thoroughly enjoying the way Draco's hips jolted. "You wish," Harry said, and because he now had to *prove* this (and also because if he didn't do it now, he might not be able to muster the courage to do it ever), he darted his tongue out to take a tentative lick of the crown beginning to peek out from its hood.

"Oh—*shit...*" Draco hissed, pounding the sofa cushions with his fist and wriggling in a fashion that nearly slapped Harry across the face with his cock. "Oh shit."

Harry leaned back. "Hm. It's not 'great galloping gorgons', but I suppose I'll take it..." He rubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth and pondered the taste. It had tasted like...well, skin. As if he'd licked Draco's finger or stomach. Nothing of note—which was good. As long as it didn't taste *gross*, he could do this. He would just resolutely not think about the fact that this was someone's cock, that it spent the better part of the day shoved inside a pair of pants and was occasionally dragged out for requisite bodily functions.

"If you've got time to make stupid comments, you've got time to suck my cock," Draco groused, lifting his hips. He jerked his chin. "Go on, then. The sooner *I* get off, the sooner *you* do."

It was, Harry supposed, encouragement enough, and this wasn't about *Harry* enjoying the experience so much as Draco—as it would be vice versa once the deed had been done. He could Scourgify his mouth afterwards if he was so worried, and certainly Draco's slick couldn't taste worse than Polyjuice Potion or SkeleGro.

Besides, he'd quite liked the sounds Draco had made when all Harry had done was lick the tip—it would be an adventure of its own to see what happened when he sucked him off in earnest. With his will steeled, Harry wrapped the fingers of one hand about the base to hold the shaft steady and used the other to gently guide the tip to his lips.

He opened his mouth and breathed a warm column of air over the crown before pressing a soft, sucking kiss to it. He held his lips firmly pursed just at the tip, then pressed

forward a tick, parting them to take in the still-hooded crown and then drawing back again. Forward again he pressed, deeper this time, and back, repeating the gesture until he'd managed to fully coax the tip out as blood flooded the shaft and crown, plumping Draco's cock handsomely.

“Oh—that's lovely, that is. Mind your teeth...” Draco reminded, voice gone husky and stilted. He had his head tilted back against the cushions, and his pink tongue darted out to wet his lips. “But not too fast or deep—you'll choke yourself; that's not my bag.”

Harry silently filed all of his comments away for unpacking later and focused on the task quite literally at hand, determined now more than ever not to embarrass himself. He supposed he must be doing a passable job so far, since he doubted Draco would hesitate to let him know as soon as he'd bungled anything. He wondered how many times Draco had received such attentions, since he certainly seemed to know how to coach someone.

The thought of Draco with the head of some nameless, faceless *someone* between his legs, panting and keening in utter abandon did predictable things to Harry's own cock but triggered an annoying little flare of irritation at the back of his mind.

It must have shown in his technique, for Draco whined huffily, “Pick up the pace, Potter; you don't get extra points for thoroughness.”

No, Harry decided. Draco was just terribly persnickety, was all. It was entirely possible he just wanted to make sure Harry didn't make a hash of sucking his cock (a very real risk, admittedly).

He tried to distract himself from unhelpful thoughts, focusing less on the fine points of where to apply suction and how hard and more on reducing his attentions down to Draco and his reactions. Why worry about whether or not he was doing something right when Draco would be the first to let him know, one way or the other?

He tugged Draco's cock down and licked a long stripe along the topside, up to the base where short, curly hairs tickled his nose. Draco smelled...funny. Not like anything in particular, at least—not bad. More musk and must than woodsmoke now. Maybe it was

just what made him *him*, concentrated around his nethers and heightened by arousal. Harry wondered what he smelled like—and how inappropriate it would be to ask. He didn't like the idea of Draco having to pinch his nose before diving in and resolved, silently, to wash *very* thoroughly *all* over henceforth—just in case such an opportunity presented itself again.

Draco tasted much the same as he smelled—but Harry chalked it up to the salt from the sweat on his skin and probably the beginnings of his slick seeping out in little bubbling dribbles from his slit. He drew back and swiped his tongue over the tip, just to see. He tasted salty and bitter—and while that sounded disgusting, it was by no means unpalatable. Harry could power through this—especially as Draco seemed to be in quite a fit state, even though Harry hadn't done much more than tongue his tip and sniff his bollocks.

Draco had slid down almost flat on the cushions, back arched but hips quivering as he tried to keep from thrusting into Harry's mouth—whether out of embarrassment or good manners. The idea sounded frankly hot, but Harry was grateful for the restraint, still thinking about the warning not to go too deep lest he choke himself.

Still, he tried to swallow as much as he could, determined to move beyond just idly suckling at the tip because he was certain Draco would only give as good as he'd gotten once their roles were reversed, and he wanted to know what it felt like to have the *whole* of his cock sucked. He took Draco's length slowly, despite the protests of his jaw, and managed what he was sure must be at *least* half (he hoped) before the tip brushed against the back of his throat and he felt the surge of his gag reflex.

He drew back immediately, to Draco's audible disappointment, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He'd definitely need to work on that, though he wasn't sure how one went about doing away with their gag reflex.

As he couldn't possibly fit the whole thing in his mouth at once, he resorted to using his tongue and lips and breath to other ends, angling Draco's cock up and licking a stripe from the little divot where his balls attached to the underside of the shaft up to the tip,

swirling his tongue at the slit—now leaking copiously—and pressing a long sucking kiss just under the flare of the crown. Draco jerked, legs coming up to bracket Harry’s shoulders, and he released a juddering, keening moan that went straight to Harry’s own neglected cock.

Draco’s breathing came in soft, rapid pants, and he groped blindly for purchase on the faded cushions. With his arm all healed up now, Harry could see there was a fine white scar slashed right through the dull, lifeless Dark Mark. The metaphor was not lost on Harry, and he smiled in what he was sure was a very unbecoming way as he breathed warm, wet air over Draco’s bollocks, drawn up tight just at the base of his cock.

The pressure in Harry’s trousers was starting to border on painful, and he shifted on his knees—which would not be thanking him in the morning—for some relief, but to no avail. As he mouthed Draco’s cock, his hips swivelled in parody of a thrust, but there was nothing to rub *against*, nothing to rub himself off on. Frustrated, he used one hand to press down on his fly. It was better than nothing, though not very satisfying—until there was a nudge at his shoulder.

He glanced up, and Draco had one foot propped up against his shoulder, frowning down superiorly, all flushed cheeks and blown pupils. “Stop that,” he said, his lips swollen and nearly stumbling over the words. Harry started to protest, but Draco only gave another rough shove. “That’s mine, for *me*. Don’t touch it.”

Harry grimaced, not entirely sure he had it in him to oblige, but he slowly took his hand away, bringing it up to grip Draco’s thigh. It was worse, now, for having indulged a little, and Harry wanted to whimper. He didn’t think he’d ever been so hard, not hard to the point of *pain*.

Draco tapped him with his foot. “Come on. It’s not going to finish sucking itself.”

“Surely there’s a Charm for that...” Harry muttered, but returned to his task. Like Draco had said: the sooner he got Draco off, the sooner Draco would get *him* off, and he rejoined his efforts with vigour.

He put his hands to work, stroking the shaft just how he'd learned Draco liked and stimulating the tip with his tongue and lips, bobbing as deep as he could take Draco before drawing back off. He hollowed his cheeks, hoping the pressure suited, and used the rough blade of his tongue for a bit of texture, and Draco about had a fit.

“Fuck...fuck, *Harry...*” He was babbling now, mostly strings of curses intermingled with Harry's name, and glorious a song though it was, Harry belatedly wondered if he shouldn't have at least cast *Muffliato*. The laces to the tent flaps had been spelled tight, but they wouldn't stop Draco's yips and yowls from reaching the ears of anyone wandering by.

Draco was leaking like a faucet now, his bitter slick mixing with Harry's saliva, and Harry's cock felt like it was about to pop his fly. He could feel in Draco's heat and tension and flavour that he was only just outside of his climax, and Harry poured everything he had into pushing him that last little bit, until he toppled over the edge. He laved the flat of his tongue over the length of the shaft, suckling at the great vein and tweaking Draco's tight, drawn bollocks with his fingers.

Draco was writhing like a snake, lip drawn between his teeth because he'd gotten quite loud, and a desperate, keening grunt was the only warning Harry had before a violent shudder rippled through Draco's body and out the tip of his cock, coating Harry's tongue and the back of his throat in a warm, viscous liquid that was only half as vile as Xenophilius's Gurdyroot infusion.

Harry swallowed reflexively, then immediately coughed it back up, hacking to spit it out. He scrambled backwards, grabbing for his wand, and fired a raspy *Aguamenti* into his mouth.

Draco, the absolute bastard, was collapsed boneless on the sofa and *laughing* at him—because of course he was. He was still half-hard, cock tipped awkwardly to the side and deflating, and he looked utterly ravished, his pale abdomen splotched all over with pink and strands of white-bond hair plastered to his forehead with sweat.

He quirked a grin at Harry, raking him with an approving look. “That's a good look on

you, Potter.” Harry frantically wiped at his mouth, spitting, and then Vanished the evidence. “Rude,” Draco sniffed.

“Well *I* rather think it’s rude to—do that without asking permission.”

“I assumed permission when you put your mouth on my cock.”

Harry glared at him. “Then I’ll assume the same.”

Draco shrugged, clearly uncowed by the threat. “I’ll try anything once.”

There was a beat of silence, and Harry swallowed thickly—before remembering he probably wouldn’t want to swallow for a while without washing his mouth out properly and casting a Scourgify or ten. “Was it…” He cleared his throat. “...Was it okay?”

Draco snorted. “Are you really asking if getting my cock sucked was *okay*? The only way it would have been *not* okay is if you actually *did* bite it off.”

Harry made a face. “A passing grade isn’t exactly high praise.”

“Looking for critique? I’ll draft an essay—ten inches good enough?”

“Come on.” Harry waggled his brows. “It can’t have been more than three, four at the most.” Draco took another swipe at him with his foot—which Harry caught easily and held in place. “...My turn now?”

Draco’s smile was far too superior for Harry’s liking. “Someone’s overeager.”

Harry rolled his eyes; at this point, he really didn’t care *how* hard-up he seemed. “Someone really needs to get off. *Really*.”

Draco ran his eyes over Harry in bald, naked appraisal. “Mm, that can be arranged…” He held his hands out, and Harry tugged him up, quickly switching their positions and flopping down onto the sofa. He had his trousers down and cock out in record time, keeping a firm grip about the base, as even just wriggling out of his pants was enough to set him off at this point.

Draco cast a Cushioning Charm—smart!—and slid down to his knees with far too much grace for what he was about to do, brows lifted. “Well, I can see *this* won’t take long.”

Harry groaned. “You’re going first next time. That was miserable.”

Draco probably meant his grin to be flirtatious, but it was edging too close to endearing to be taken all that seriously. “Next time?”

A shrug. “Seems only fair; I won’t get to enjoy it like this.” He wanted to be worked up from a cold start, taken through all the stages and then brought off when he just couldn’t stand it anymore. All Draco would really have to do at this point was just *look* at him funny, and Harry would probably pop.

“I take that as a challenge,” Draco said, and without further ado, he pursed his lips and sank achingly slowly down Harry’s shaft. He clearly had none of Harry’s hangups, and Harry nearly burst then and there, only staving off his release with a tight grip on himself. It was warm and wet and slick, like that time in the shower but so much better because this...this was human heat, and he could look down and see Draco, flushed cheeks and hooded gaze and pink lips stretched tight about Harry, utterly engrossed in his task.

Harry could still see, in his mind’s eye, Malfoy—the bony, skeletal figure they had rescued from deep within the Department of Mysteries, desperate and confused and so, so angry. He’d been all sharp edges and cutting angles back then, but this was Draco here on his knees for Harry now. Too witty for his own good, driven and focused and somehow still so desperate and yet...

He reached out and brushed Draco’s fringe from his eyes, something curling in his gut when Draco flicked a glance up to him, lips parted around the crown of Harry’s cock. He drew back and gave a teasing flick of his tongue before pressing a soft, chaste kiss to the tip.

God, he wanted Draco.

There was no need for him—never had been, not for *this*. Harry wanted Draco with a bone-deep ache, wanted him like he knew he *shouldn't* want him. He wanted Draco angry and defeated and haughty and excited, and that might have all been fine—might have—except that Draco wasn't his to want, because Harry was a *need* for him.

Maybe if this had been real...

Maybe if Draco hadn't been such a little prick in First Year, or if he'd apologised.

Maybe if they'd kissed after Harry had rescued him in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, instead of in the Sanctuary.

Maybe if Draco had touched him when he was angry and broken over losing Sirius, instead of when he was high on a homemade virility serum.

Maybe if they'd snuck away to do this in the Room of Requirement after a late study session before N.E.W.T.s, instead of a stone's throw from Bill and Fleur's doorstep under protection of a Fidelius.

Maybe if Harry hadn't been Draco's *mate* but just a mate, a friend, who became something more because that was just what developed naturally over months, over years.

Maybe then...it would've been okay for him to feel like this, to look down and feel a rush of more than arousal as Draco's pink tongue darted out to stab at the leaking tip of Harry's cock.

Maybe then it would've been okay to want to do this more, to imagine...that Draco was having a similar crisis of conscience.

But that wasn't how it was.

That wasn't their reality, and short of stealing a Time-Turner and screwing up the timeline a second time, he couldn't go back and change anything. It was New Year's all over again—that intaken breath between one moment and the next, and he knew he

couldn't stay here with Draco forever, because he wasn't really meant to be here in the first place, but there were still fireworks going off, so he figured he might as well enjoy them while they lasted.

“Shit—shit, *Draco...*” Harry panted, pounding the sofa cushion. “M gonna...gonna...” He tried to warn Draco off, but he either didn't understand or was outright ignoring Harry, sucking hard enough that his cheeks hollowed, deep divots forming as he forcibly drew out Harry's climax, and it was *too much*. Harry's hips lifted off the couch in a sharp jerk, and he emptied himself.

Draco, being the poncy wanker that he was, didn't spill a drop, though he did grimace. Clearly Harry didn't taste much better than Draco had.

“*Aguamenti?*” he offered, raising his wand weakly, but Draco only waved him off, swallowing thickly and clearing his throat as he pounded his chest a few times with his fist. He looked somehow even better than before, still flushed and rumpled from his own cock-sucking but with his jaw hanging slightly open and lips glistening with the little bit of Harry's release he hadn't managed to swallow.

Slowly, he managed to crawl up onto the couch beside Harry, flopping inelegantly half in Harry's lap, one leg still hanging off the side.

Harry couldn't imagine it was very smart for them to still be sitting here now, with their everything hanging out—especially when Hermione was probably finished with her shower and Ron would be coming around to summon them for dinner at any moment.

But Voldemort himself would have failed to roust Harry from this very spot, and he wondered if he might need to ask Fleur for a dose of SkeleGro, because it felt like Draco had sucked all of his bones out through his cock.

Draco shifted, angling his head around to look up at Harry, brows raised hopefully. “So, was it okay?”

Harry released a satisfied groan. “Exceeds Expectation.”

Draco forced a frown, feigning disappointment. “Damn. There goes my shot at being a rentboy; all the best houses require an O in N.E.W.T.-level fellatio.”

Harry’s grin was loopy, he knew, but he didn’t really care. “Even if you get a personal recommendation from the Chosen One?”

Draco tapped his chin. “Hm, now *there’s* a thought... Or I could just resit the exam.”

“Oh, I think you must, really. Wouldn’t want people thinking you slept your way to the top.”

Draco buried his face in Harry’s bicep, failing to stifle some rather inelegant snorts of laughter, which only made Harry laugh too. “Merlin,” Draco breathed. “We’re probably neither one of us going to live to see eighteen, and we’re having a laughing fit on a sofa that smells like cat piss with our cocks flying free...”

“Come on, it smells a little like spunk now too,” Harry protested, and Draco made a face. They really did make a strange pair—not just now, but *period*.

Harry didn’t like to dwell on what-might-have-beens, but it was difficult not to, sometimes, when Draco was involved. Where might he and Ron and Hermione have been if they hadn’t rescued Draco from the Ministry? Or if Harry hadn’t tried to kiss Draco out of some misplaced belief that was the next ‘step’ in the dragon’s need for reassurance? Or if Greyback’s curse hadn’t connected and there’d never been any sex-potion shenanigans?

How much of what had happened was because Draco needed it...and how much was because Harry had guiltily wanted it?

This was, he supposed, why he didn’t like to dwell on those hypotheticals, and he reached out to thread his fingers through Draco’s, trying not to think overlong about why Draco allowed these sorts of meaningless gestures, especially when the dragon ought to already have been purring in its cage.

“...We really should make ourselves presentable,” Harry reminded at length; Fleur was

making a roast something and would be expecting them imminently.

Draco groaned but quickly Vanished any remaining evidence of their activities and eased to his feet, extending a hand to Harry.

Harry took it—and found himself drawn into an embrace, tight and strong and warm, and he wasn't sure he could break free even if he wanted to.

When Draco spoke again, after a long beat of heavy silence, his voice was raspy, and Harry doubted it was entirely a product of what they'd just done. "...I'm glad I'm here too."

The Heist

In the weeks now since they had begun to plan their infiltration of Gringotts, their raggedy little group had resolved a good many issues lying between their current position and success, but one in particular continued to dog them well into the shift of winter to spring, and it bore down upon them with the relentless persistence of the new rains: They'd nearly run through their entire batch of Polyjuice.

"If I had time, I'd brew more—but as it is, we've only got enough for one person to down a dose—and even then we'd be stretching it." She swirled the thick, viscous liquid in its vial, frowning. "I'd say it might last...an hour and a half? Two *tops*."

They had just finished lunch and been granted a rare moment to themselves with Bill off to check in on Remus and Tonks, who were staying at Tonks's parents' place—or rather, Tonks's *mother's* place now, given her father's recent murder. Bill had grown increasingly suspicious about the books going missing from his study and the way they had kept themselves cooped up in the attic with Griphook over the weeks, and it was only in the tent that they could be assured they wouldn't be overheard, thanks to Hermione's hefty charm work.

"Two hours? Are we sure that'll be enough time to get in, find the Horcrux, and get back out?" Ron asked.

"It will," Harry said, not because he was at all confident, but because it had to be enough. The longer they wasted in preparation, the greater the risk that Voldemort might discover his Horcruxes were being tampered with. This was, of course, assuming that their jaunt to Malfoy Manor hadn't already given them away. What if they were breaking into Gringotts for nothing? Bellatrix could have easily moved the Horcrux she'd been entrusted with between Griphook's tenure at the bank and now.

Harry tried to force the thought from his mind; if he dwelled on any of the dozens of

ways this whole mission could go pear-shaped, they'd never set foot out the door. They would have to focus on the problems they *could* deal with and hope the ones they *couldn't* deal with never came to pass.

“Does it *have* to be that horrid woman, though?” Hermione groaned. “I’m not exactly enamoured with the idea of turning into someone so—so *evil!*”

Harry sympathised, he really did; Bellatrix Lestrange had committed countless horrific acts, not least of all torturing Neville’s parents and killing Sirius—but they had little choice. Adopting her identity afforded them the best chance they had; Goblins were suspicious creatures, and on top of that, there were *actual* Death Eaters skulking around the bank as well, according to Griphook. Even under a heavy Glamour, Hermione would be spotted for an impostor before she’d even walked through the door. The disguise had to be *impeccable*, and hopefully everything else would fall in line behind that.

“Trust that if there were any other way, we wouldn’t ask you to stoop to this, but you know it’s the least risky of the plans we’ve entertained so far for infiltrating Gringotts,” Harry reminded. “You only need to get into character. No one will want to mess with Bellatrix if you can just perfect that aura she’s got that warns people off.” He folded up the map of the Gringotts atrium he’d been committing to memory. “Here, just—say something she would, and let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose, then tried weakly, “Er, ‘All hail the Dark Lord?’” Ron snorted, but Harry shot him a quelling look; they didn’t need Hermione getting discouraged. He nodded for her to try again, and she puffed out her chest and threw her head back. “‘Death to all Mudbloods!’”

Now it was Draco who laughed, a loud, rude guffaw, and Hermione exploded, “I’m trying my best here! If you’ve got some advice to give, I’m all ears—but otherwise shut up!”

Draco sighed dramatically. “Clearly we’ve got quite a bit of work to do.” He strode forward and grabbed Hermione by the shoulders, giving her a little shake. “Don’t stand so stiff for starters. You’ve got to be more lax, not all prim and proper.”

“But Bellatrix is a Pureblood—”

“Aunt Bella is a *Black*, and she won’t expend effort where it isn’t necessary. Those of Black stock have a loose elegance—”

“Aren’t *you* of Black stock?” Hermione asked, dubious.

“Yes, now don’t interrupt. You must be like a serpent on the move. Never look anyone in the eye unless you’re going to do them serious harm; otherwise, they should be beneath your notice. Remove any and all filler words from your vocabulary—*er, um, uh, well*. Any good Pureblood knows what she’s going to say three beats early, or she doesn’t speak at all. Hesitate, and you’ll be marked for certain.”

Harry tried not to be *terribly* amused with watching Draco try to *My Fair Lady* Hermione, but it was very difficult. Ron was watching with a mixture of horror and bald curiosity, like Hermione’s dissemblance was a train wreck he couldn’t tear his eyes from.

“Let’s try a few key phrases—perhaps some things Aunt Bella might *actually* say rather than those pithy, cartoonish quotes you stringed together. And—” He snapped his fingers for her attention when she closed her eyes in irritation. “Be sure to watch my movement and carriage. The way you handle yourself will be *just* as important as the words on your lips. Remember: lazy elegance!”

“Got ‘lazy’ right at least...” Ron muttered, and Harry snickered.

Draco brandished his wand in a flash, pointing it dead between Harry’s eyes. “*Get your hands off me, you filthy Muggle-lover!*”

Harry gave a start—it was rather disconcerting, seeing such an enraged sneer on Draco’s face. Especially now he was so used to it *not* looking like that. Harry swallowed; no, he didn’t like that at all, even in jest.

“Impressive...!” Ron had to admit, offering polite applause at the display, and Draco turned on him next, jabbing the tip of his wand into Ron’s neck, voice soft and threatening.

“Cross me again, and I’ll extract your entrails through your nose and choke you with them.”

Ron gave a feeble little chuckle, rubbing his neck when Draco drew away. “All right, I’ve gotta say, that’s pretty good.”

“Your turn, Granger,” Draco said, arms crossed as he stepped back to give her room to work.

Hermione licked her lips and raised her wand, taking a breath as she aimed it at Harry. “Get your filthy—I mean, *unhand me* you Mudblood—wait, no—” she despaired, forgetting her lines halfway through, and Draco rolled his eyes.

“You don’t have to get the script *perfect*, just be convincing! It’s better you *don’t* memorise it, really.” He waved at Ron. “Do Weasley.”

Hermione flushed brightly, and her wand only feebly flicked in Ron’s general direction. “Don’t cross—I’ll kill you if you *dare* to speak ill of...of...” She groaned in frustration, stamping her foot. “This is ridiculous!”

“You’re right,” Draco sighed, rubbing his temples. “I’ve seen quite enough of this disaster. For all our sakes, I’ll do it.”

Harry frowned. “...Do what?”

“Play Aunt Bella, of course.”

Ron snorted. “Uh, you’re a bloke?”

“*Uh, it’s Polyjuice Potion?*” Draco returned mockingly. “It doesn’t matter who’s drinking it; the end result will be the same.” He sighed. “This needs to be as convincing as possible, so I think it’s best you leave it to someone who’s actually familiar with the tells these Death Eaters will be looking for—” He fixed Hermione with a meaningful look. “—And who won’t *fold* under the slightest interrogation.”

Hermione's flush deepened, but before she could defend herself with a thorough tongue-lashing, Harry stepped in to defuse the situation: "I think he's right. We need everything to go off without a hitch in order to have even a *one* percent chance of success. Unless you think you can get Bellatrix's mannerisms and all down pat in the next few days?" He didn't want to seem like he had no faith in Hermione, but Draco had been pretty much born to play this role, and Hermione *had* expressed a reluctance to do it in the first place.

Hermione slumped, running one hand through her bushy head of hair. "Fine. If Draco wants to pretend to be his mad aunt, then have at it."

It was no great secret from the others in Shell Cottage that Harry and his friends were up to something—which wasn't so great a concern, as Harry had stopped trying to hide their efforts. They had important business to attend to, and it was difficult enough, tromping up and down the stairs to join Griphook in the attic for planning sessions without worrying about walking on eggshells around Bill and Fleur to boot. He loved them both and was grateful for the sanctuary they were offering, but he could not be bothered to spare their feelings just now when so much was on the line. There would be time enough for apologies and amend-making after Voldemort had been defeated.

Luna, Dean, and Ollivander had been safely transported to Muriel's, freeing up a fair bit of space in the house, but more room to spread out did little to ease the tension between Bill and Draco, and Bill had tried on several occasions to corner Harry in the hopes of plying him for more information on what they were up to.

He succeeded after dinner one night. He'd been eyeing Harry across the table throughout the meal, thoughtful concern hanging over his brow, and he waylaid Harry as he was heading into the kitchen to Scourgify the dishes for Fleur, as it was his turn on duty.

"I wondered if I could get a word with you, Harry? In private?" Draco had glanced up from the card game he'd been drawn into with Ron, but Harry had just shaken his head subtly and let Bill lead him into the pantry.

Bill gave him a wry smile after shutting the door. "You're a hard man to get in touch with

these days, Harry. Especially considering you're living under my roof."

"Technically we're in your garden," Harry tried, but Bill just gave him a look. "...Sorry, we've kind of been...well, we've got a lot of balls in the air at the moment."

"Yeah, hasn't escaped my notice." Bill's expression turned grave. "...I know you're planning something with Griphook."

Harry sighed. "Bill, you know we can't tell—"

"Can't tell me about it, yeah, I know. I don't like it—but I can see that whether or not I like something's not going to change the fact of you doing it anyway. So I'm not gonna tell you *not* to do whatever it is you lot are planning on doing. But—at least hear me out." Harry stood there, silent, waiting for Bill to continue, and he swallowed, palms pressed together beseechingly. "...I've worked with Goblins a *long* time. Ever since I left Hogwarts—did my research for my Seventh-year thesis apprenticing with a Senior cursebreaker, even. I've been in and out of Gringotts for nearly two decades. I've got Goblin friends—as much as a wizard and Goblin can be friends—and I know their ways. How their culture works, what sorts of mores they operate under." He licked his lips. "You've got your mission, and for whatever reason, only you and the others can be involved in it. It's a stupid way to go about things, I maintain, especially given the current climate and the fact that I'm sure you can use all the help you can get, *but* let me at least say this: If you've made some kind of deal with Griphook, I'd ask that you be *extraordinarily* careful with the details of that deal and know what you're getting into."

Harry frowned. "...What do you mean?"

"Goblins...are very good at getting what they want in a bargain. All the more so when it involves something they want *very* badly that the other party is loath to give up."

Harry thought about the sword of Gryffindor, still stuffed inside Hermione's bag for now, and of Griphook's beady eyes that never failed to find it when they went to convene with him. Any human would be furious to find he had been double-crossed, after all this effort; what could Goblins do to retaliate, Harry wondered.

“I should think it’s obvious, but Goblins aren’t humans—they’ve got a different culture, different beliefs, different innate laws and rights than we do. And that’s fine—but you’ve got to understand those differences when you interact with them. Because if you don’t, if you do anything that goes *against* what a Goblin understands about trade and purchase and gifting, you can very easily make a mortal enemy out of someone you might have otherwise counted as an ally.” Harry only stared, uncomprehending, and Bill sighed. “I’m saying, if at all possible, *never* set out thinking you can trick a Goblin. Be as open and honest as possible—deal fairly with them, and they’ll generally be straight with you. A Goblin’s trust is not easily won, and sometimes I think they can *smell* treachery on us.”

“But I haven’t been treacherous—” Harry began—he hadn’t, not yet—but Bill shook his head.

“A Goblin’s always going to suspect it of you, though—and probably have two or three contingency plans just in case. Like I said—I’ve worked alongside Goblins for a good long while. I trust a few—very few. But that one?” Bill pointed a finger overhead. “That one I wouldn’t trust as far as I could throw him. He’s always watching Hermione, and I don’t want to try and guess why. So watch your back around him—especially if whatever you’re doing with him will involve payment, and *extra*-especially if that payment will involve some manner of treasure. They’ve got convoluted ideas of ownership, as I said—and you’re likely to wind up being obliged to give up a lot more than you might’ve agreed to at the outset.”

Harry recalled Griphook’s claim that Gryffindor’s sword rightfully belonged to that ancient Goblin lord. This line of conversation was leaving Harry feeling queasy, and he wondered whether Bill was just being cautious, or if he’d actually guessed what they were up to and was trying to warn them off what Harry admittedly knew was not a very good idea.

Still, the warning did little to change the circumstances, and Griphook would be *extremely* cross if they tried to alter the terms of the agreement at this stage, especially as he’d shared so much knowledge about Gringotts already. Either way, they were going to seem like they were renegeing on the deal.

“I just care about you, Harry—and, you know, my little brother who’s tagging along with you. I want to make sure you’re being as careful as possible, if you won’t let me help out any other way.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said numbly, turning back to the sink. “I’ll—we’ll keep our guard up. Thanks for the tip.”

He hoped they weren’t going to break into Gringotts and track down the next Horcrux only to wind up *killed* because Griphook couldn’t wait a just a little bit longer to get back an old hunk of metal.

In three more days, they’d done about as much strategising and planning as was entirely possible, and the four of them gathered in the sitting room of their tent to go over the final details, with departure set for first light.

Hermione dropped one of the long, coarse black hairs that Harry had retrieved from the Manor into her final phial of Polyjuice Potion and passed it to Draco. Hermione and Ron regarded the potion with distaste, but Draco seemed disaffected, though he did make a face at the colour of the liquid: a muddy red-brown. “I suppose I thought it would be black, all things considered.” He gave it a shake. “I think she’d lose the plot if she knew her Polyjuice Potion looked like *mud*.”

It was a pleasant thought.

With Draco playing Bellatrix, that left the rest of them either pretending to be her hangers-on or otherwise out of sight. Hermione would slip into her Animagus form to hide in Draco’s pocket, while Ron would be heavily Glamoured and using Bellatrix’s inherent air of intimidation to camouflage him from curious onlookers. Hopefully no one would probe his identity too deeply when there was Bellatrix to tangle with. As they could not hope to complete the mission on their own and because he had demanded to accompany them (perhaps rightly fearing a double-cross), Griphook would be hiding with Harry under the Invisibility Cloak.

They made overtures to Bill and Fleur that they would leave the next morning, in order

to avoid any distasteful run-ins with Draco-as-Bellatrix. Bill already trusted Draco little enough as it was, and Harry saw no need to further compound the issue trying to convince him not to curse Bellatrix Lestrange on sight as well.

Harry could honestly say he was ready to leave, too. It had been nice, having this respite, and he'd liked being kept abreast of how his friends ranging far and wide were faring in these uncertain times—though Ron and Bill had never managed to work out the Floo, unfortunately. But he was itching to get back on the hunt again. Voldemort had the Elder Wand now, and Harry felt a renewed urgency coursing through his veins that worsened with each passing day.

Draco had, of course, done his level best to provide ample distraction, helping Harry work off this excess energy that would otherwise surely have left him tetchy and irritated, but their illicit liaisons were fraught with their own dangers and frustrations, so it was hardly the best solution.

They could probably have stood another couple of weeks of planning, but Harry could not tamp down the feeling that time was not on their side. The downward-winding ticking was growing louder and more insistent in Harry's mind, and he knew that the only way to silence it was to keep moving. Keep active. Keep *fighting*.

He slept poorly the night before they set out, wishing in retrospect that he'd responded to Draco's lifted brow of invitation when he'd entered the bedroom—it might have been their last bit of downtime for a while, and at least a bit of fumbling would have exhausted him just enough to nod off and get a few winks.

They all rose at first light and hastily dressed, bolting down plain toast and water before packing everything away. Shell Cottage was dark and quiet, but they were shortly joined in the little cliff-top garden by Griphook, whose legs were finally mended enough he could at least waddle. He would not be outpacing any Death Eaters in an all-out sprint, but hopefully it would not come to that.

Draco hadn't dressed, as Bellatrix would neither fit nor be suited by his usual attire, and so was looking rather awkward and uncomfortable in just his underwear. He was still

pale and pointy, but he'd filled out nicely and was unrecognisable from the pitiful creature he'd been when they'd first stumbled across him in the bowels of the Ministry. It was, however, still quite chilly in the mornings, and he grumbled for Hermione to *Hurry the fuck up with that potion* as he stood there rubbing his arms to generate heat. Harry thought about offering him his jumper, but there was little point, as Draco would only snippily refuse it. There were, it seemed, still limits to the degree of vulnerability Draco was willing to show.

Hermione pulled the stoppered phial they had prepared from her bag and passed it to Draco, who knocked it back with a grimace. He gave a sharp, hacking cough and looked like he was about to sick up—but he managed to keep it down.

“How is it?” Harry asked.

Draco raised a brow, pointedly looking at Harry. “Not the *worst* thing I've ever swallowed—but it's up there.” Harry was grateful for the low morning light that hid the shameful flush colouring his cheeks, but it seemed none of the others noticed. Hermione was too distracted searching through her beaded bag for the extra set of robes she'd brought from Grimmauld Place for Draco to wear, and Ron was openly gawking as the potion-induced changes began to ripple over Draco's body.

He'd been fairly tall, second only to Ron in their group, but the potion drew him back down a few inches, and his white-blond hair turned to soot, looking like someone had just dumped an inkpot on his head, as his hair rippled down his back in long, curly waves. His eyes darkened as well, going from storm-grey to black, and his whole demeanour seemed somehow colder and crueller as he peered out at them from behind Bellatrix Lestrange's face.

Hermione kept her gaze averted, like she couldn't bear to look him in the eye, and pressed the bunched up robes into his hands so that Draco could make himself presentable. After smoothing down the robes and tying them off where appropriate, he held his arms out. “Well?” he asked. “Acceptable?”

He had Bellatrix's low, raspy voice, and Harry found he suddenly didn't want to hear

Draco say his name, afraid it might taint the word. He was trying his level best to remember this was *Draco*, and not really Bellatrix, but the transformation was remarkable.

Ron just blurted out, “You’ve got tits, mate.”

“Well-spotted, Weasley,” Draco drawled, and it helped a bit, hearing that characteristic cadence leave Bellatrix’s lips. “It’s almost as if I’ve Polyjuiced myself into a *woman*. Will wonders never cease?”

“I know, I know, just—” He was still staring at Draco’s chest, shaking his head in confusion. “That was weirder than watching Hermione turn into Harry...”

“*What?*” Draco sputtered, looking to Harry with a wide-eyed mixture of curiosity and horror; it was an amusing expression, even on Bellatrix. Maybe especially on her.

Harry only shook his head. “A story for another time.” They had far more important matters to deal with at the moment, and the Polyjuice Potion would not last long enough for idle chatter.

Hermione helped Draco arrange Bellatrix’s wild hair so it wouldn’t get in his way, and they transfigured his boots into something with more heel. After a bit of practice walking in them—which Harry made sure to laugh at on the *inside*, taking another mental picture—they decided Draco had his role in hand. He looked every bit the crazed Death Eater second-in-command, but the fact he was using his own wand and not Bellatrix’s was a sticking point. If there were any sort of wand inspection to confirm her identity, the guise would fall apart like a house of cards. Given they had little choice otherwise, though, they would have to bank on luck. Draco had warned Harry once that his luck would not last forever, so he simply prayed it at least lasted the next twenty-four hours.

With Draco settled, Hermione moved on to fit Ron with his Glamour.

“Come on now, we’re short on time,” she said, when Ron didn’t seem able to tear his eyes away from Draco (who was helping nothing by giving Ron flirtatious winks and air-

kisses).

Harry elbowed Draco in the side with a *Must you?* expression on his face, which seemed to jostle Ron back to reality, and he turned to face Hermione, shoulders squared. “Remember, unremarkable.”

“Your life’s motto,” Draco jeered, artfully dodging another thrown elbow from Harry, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“I was thinking heavy on the facial hair this time,” Hermione said. “To disguise the features as much as possible.”

Ron winced. “All right, but can you make my nose a bit smaller, like when we went to that greengrocer’s up north?” He turned to Harry. “A prominent nose is a defining Weasley trait, you know.”

“Uh huh,” was all Harry said.

Hermione sighed and poked him in the nose with the tip of her wand, and on cue, it deflated. She muttered under her breath as she continued to fiddle with various aspects of Ron’s appearance—liver spots and long earlobes, a bushy (but trimmed) salt-and-pepper beard, and an old rugged scar down the side of his neck. Ron was probably in the most danger among them, since a Glamour could be broken far more easily than Polyjuice, which had to be flushed from the system to reveal its secrets. Perhaps his only saving grace was the fact he’d be standing next to Draco’s Bellatrix, for few were going to give him a second glance when Voldemort’s most trusted lieutenant was *right* there. They’d crafted a false identity for him, just in case, but Harry prayed Ron wouldn’t wind up in a situation where he was forced to use it.

“I think that should about do it...” Hermione said with a sigh, cocking her head as she took a step back to review her work. “What do you two think?”

She’d done a fantastic job, in Harry’s opinion—nowhere in the mass of matted brown hair and pockmarked skin and dark, bloodshot eyes could he catch any resemblance to his

best friend. With his robes Transfigured to a moth-eaten state and a wide-brimmed hat whose point had flopped over settled atop his head, Ron looked, as requested, perfectly unremarkable.

“I confess he’s not my type, but I suppose he’ll do,” Harry said.

Draco arched one of Bellatrix’s fine black brows. “Old warty men not your thing, then?”

Harry grinned despite himself. “Oh, I like my men young and my women old.” He added lightly, “Give me Madame Pomfrey on one arm and Dennis Creevy on the other and I’m a happy bloke.”

Ron snorted at the image, his moustache fluttering. “McGonagall and Jimmy Peakes will be heartbroken to learn you’ve replaced them.”

Griphook cleared his throat from where he sat on a little bench overlooking the cliff face. “If we are ready, now? I understand your potion will not last long, so we must make haste if we’re to have any hope of you succeeding in your task.”

“Indeed,” Hermione said, drawing the Invisibility Cloak out of her beaded bag.

Harry dropped into a squat to allow Griphook to clamber up onto his back, and once he was secured with a bedsheet, arms wrapped tight around Harry’s neck, Hermione draped the Cloak over them.

“Make sure to keep your feet covered while you walk, Harry,” she reminded. “A pair of trainers strolling about on their own is sure to draw attention.”

They took one last look at the cottage, still dark and silent in the early morning light. They’d said their goodbyes the night before, but it still felt like they were running off without a word. It was for the best, though; Bill would only have lectures on his tongue once he saw what they meant to do.

Ron stuffed Hermione’s bag into his cloak, and Hermione took a steadying breath, then shifted smoothly into her Animagus form. Draco bent down and gently lifted her into his

arms, giving her a scritch behind the ears and warning, “No biting this time, Granger.” He then slipped her into a deep pocket in his robes. Ron watched them with dark eyes, and Harry wondered if they should have suggested that *he* carry Hermione, but it was too late for that now, so he would simply have to tamp down any irrational fits of jealousy and focus.

They marched to the edge of the Fidelius. Beyond this point, they would be exposed, unprotected, and utterly on their own. Hidden under the safety of the Cloak, Harry reached out and silently curled his fingers around Draco’s. It was strange; they were longer and thinner than Draco’s hands, with no Quidditch callouses or the thin scar from his wounds, and pointed nails that could easily put an eye out. But Draco still gently returned the gesture, and because no one could see, Harry allowed himself to smile.

They stepped through, linked together, and turned in place to Apparate.

Draco had taken point on the Apparition, with instructions that they would enter Diagon Alley by way of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry clenched his eyes shut as he felt himself drawn into the sucking darkness, and Griphook’s arms tightened around his neck as they moved through the nether-space of Apparition—until seconds later, his knees knocked as he hit the pavement with a jolt: they’d arrived at Charing Cross Road, just across from the pub. Even this early in the morning, the street was bustling with Muggles wearing weary expressions that suggested they were either getting ready to start a long day (for those wearing sensible suits) or heading back after a long night (for those in more eccentric attire). They passed the pub as if it were invisible—which, of course, it was to them.

Ron opened the door for Draco, keeping his head ducked and playing the role of fawning sycophant to the hilt. Harry hadn’t been to the Leaky in ages, and he found he hadn’t missed it. Old Tom the barkeep was still about—though with how dead the place was at this hour, he was nearly asleep on his feet, absently wiping down a mug with a dingy rag. The only other customers were a trio of warlocks, their heads inclined in quiet conversation. They glanced up when Draco darkened the doorway, immediately falling silent and drawing their hooded cloaks tight about them. Draco cut them a curt glance,

and one Disapparated on the spot with a frightened squeak.

Tom, evidently possessing a stiffer spine than the errant warlock, continued to polish his glass as Draco strode past, inclining his head into a stiff bow and murmuring, “Madam.”

Draco only favoured him with a lip-curling sneer, nose twitching as if the very scent of the bar offended—which it might well have, seeing as the Leaky had never been a very fine establishment. As hoped, Tom and the other customers were so focused on Draco’s rendition of Bellatrix that they paid not a whit of attention to Ron, let alone noticed Harry as he wove through the spaces between tables with Griphook on his back.

Once through the bar and into the alley at the rear, Draco stood before the graffitied wall, drew his wand, and tapped the bricks in the familiar pattern that bid the archway leading into the shopping district appear. As soon as the final brick had been poked, the wall began to shift, the bricks folding and spinning as they peeled back to reveal a hole through which could be seen the higgledy-piggledy buildings and well-trod cobbled street of Diagon Alley.

The first thing they noticed was that the street was eerily quiet—almost pin-droppingly so; Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen Diagon Alley so empty, and it was clearly not simply because of the early hour. The place was absolutely *dead*, a world away from the last time Harry had visited—which he now reflected had been quite some time back. So many of the once-familiar shops were boarded up, and several of those that were still open seemed to cater primarily to the Dark Arts, judging by the wares displayed in their windows. Here and there were plastered *UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE* posters like the one Umbridge had had displayed in her office, with Harry’s own face glowering down at them.

Draco paused before one of the posters, raking it with Bellatrix’s judging gaze. He sneered. “Ten thousand Galleons? *That’s* all they’re paying for our beloved Saviour? I’d complain if I were you.”

Several of the stairways fronting empty, abandoned shops were occupied by particularly rough looking individuals in threadbare robes with tin cups clutched tight in their grips.

Harry caught them pleading with passers-by for any coin they could spare, or begging to have the Knight Bus hailed for them, so they might go to the Ministry to plead for their wands back, as they were true witches and wizards, honest.

Their cries were cut short, though, when they caught sight of Draco and the imposing figure he cut as Bellatrix—like ghosts, they melted away into the shadows, and Harry was certain that they might have made like the warlock from earlier and Disapparated on the spot had they still had wands on them. Draco studiously ignored them, nose in the air as he marched forward with purpose, until a particularly bold fellow, one eye covered with a blood-stained bandage and several days' worth of stubble on his chin, lashed out with one grasping hand to yank on Draco's robes.

"Please! They've taken my children! Please, ma'am!" He fell to his knees, nearly pulling Draco down with him. In a voice cracked with sorrow, he sobbed openly, "You know him! You must beg him to return them! I'm their only family! They must be so very frightened without me! *Please!*"

Draco released a low, cruel cackle. It really was disturbing how *good* he was at portraying his aunt, and a cold chill rippled down Harry's spine at the thought of how close they'd come to Draco being on the other side of all of this. Harry had been *eager* to fight Draco at one point, even, and he could too easily imagine a scenario in which he might have been forced to kill Draco in self-defence. "*He made his choices,*" Harry would have said, and he would've felt a pang of guilt, but it would have passed quickly enough.

Draco would have been dead, and Harry would have moved on without a thought. Underneath the Cloak, Harry's fingers twitched, itching to touch again, just to physically remind himself that hadn't come to pass.

"Children, hm? Strung 'em up as playthings for Nagini, I'd wager—and you'll soon join your whelps if you don't remove yourself from my sight at once."

With a sudden burst of preternatural strength, the man lunged for Draco's throat—but Draco only backhanded him with his wand, striking the man's temple with a sharp *WHACK*. The man tottered to the side, and Draco followed up with a *Flippendo* that

knocked the man on his arse. He tumbled twice over the cold cobblestones before sprawling out spread-eagle on the ground, unconscious.

Draco's grip about his wand was white-knuckled, but Bellatrix's expression was cool and calm as ever, disaffected and decidedly unamused. With a bored *hmph*, he marched off in a swirl of robes, not bothering to check to be sure Ron was keeping up.

Harry could sense eyes on them, and when he glanced around, he saw faces pressed up against windows lining darkened storefronts that quickly scattered when Draco swept the street with a cold, calculating gaze, ready for other desperate unfortunates hoping to catch him unawares. Bellatrix drew a crowd wherever she went, and that was precisely what they did *not* need.

It had taken all of five minutes after arriving in Diagon Alley for them to make a scene, and Harry wondered if this wasn't a sign they'd better leave now and regroup to try again tomorrow. But their Polyjuice Potion stores were depleted, and they would have to wait at least a month before they could try again if they cut and ran. Harry gently tugged on Draco's sleeve, hoping they might duck into an alcove to discuss the situation—but before he could open his mouth, someone hailed them from behind.

“Morning, Madam Lestrangle!” someone hailed them, entirely too cheerily.

Harry whipped around at the greeting, nearly throwing Griphook from his perch, and saw a weedy wizard of middling years, his greying beard wild and ragged, confidently striding towards them from the door fronting Belcher's Bottled Beers. There was something familiar about him, and Harry was certain he'd seen him somewhere but couldn't place the long, hooked nose or beady black eyes until Griphook hissed in his ear, “Travers—a Death Eater.” The name called up a memory of their being waylaid in the Ministry Atrium while trying to escape with a pale, sickly Draco in tow, and nearly being buried under the contents of Xenophilius Lovegood's cluttered home.

Draco had drawn himself up to Bellatrix's fullest height, though she barely reached Travers's shoulder, and he said, voice thick with contempt. “And what do *you* want?”

This drew Travers up short, and his expression went funny—offended, but not quite sure if he was entitled to it. He definitely didn't seem to appreciate the tone, regardless, and Harry hoped Draco knew what he was doing. "...Was just saying 'hullo'. But *pardon me*, if you're too busy to give an associate a 'by your leave'..."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Stop *fawning*, man. It's disgraceful. I've business to attend to, Travers, so if you've something to say, then spit it out."

"Well, nothing really to *say*—like I said, was just greeting you, but..." Travers searched Bellatrix's face curiously. "I confess I wasn't expecting to run into you here. I'd heard that you and the rest of the lot lodging at Malfoy Manor had been placed under house arrest after the, er...*incident* with Greyback."

Shit. *Shit*. They'd just assumed Bellatrix's face would be *carte blanche*, granting them free passage to wherever they might wish to go. They hadn't stopped to consider that their own meddling might have changed the map. He desperately hoped Draco could think on his feet. If Bellatrix was meant to be under guard, or at the very least not out in public, then—

"The 'er, *incident*' has been handled, naturally. The Dark Lord has far more important matters to deal with than some mangy mutt who stepped out of line and got what was coming to him. He'd have fed me to Nagini if I'd sat around on my arse in that mausoleum instead of striking out to see his bidding done—and I'd have well deserved it." He cocked a brow at Travers, smug. "The Dark Lord's trust, once earned, is not easily lost—perhaps you'll learn that some day." He shrugged. "Or perhaps not."

Travers's probing suspicion shifted in favour of wild offence, but he seemed to accept this explanation. Draco had sounded like he'd known this Death Eater back at the Ministry and evidently understood where Travers stood in the ranks. From the way Travers was acting, Bellatrix treating him like dirt was par for the course.

Travers glanced back at the man Draco had stunned, still slumped in a heap of limbs in the gutter, unconscious. "I saw he took a swipe at you—are you unharmed?"

Draco eyes nearly rolled out of their skull. “What do you take me for, a snivelling First-year? Shall I show you how I defended myself?” He raised his wand at Travers, who quickly took a step back, hands raised and shaking his head.

“Oh—no, no, of course not. Just, they can be a right pain in the arse, that’s all,” said Travers. He returned to Draco’s side when his wand lowered once more, doubly obsequious in his manner now. “Whinging for money’s bad enough—but some of these Wandless have the nerve to beg me to plead their cases at the Ministry! It’s just pitiful, it is—and I don’t see why they’re allowed to loiter about Diagon Alley, personally. I think I’ll speak to Yaxley in the morning, see if he can’t have the Aurors start doing sweeps and keep the riff-raff out.”

“Indeed,” Draco said, affecting a bored tone. He examined Bellatrix’s long nails and tapped one of her heeled boots in impatience.

Travers’s face fell when he saw he’d lost Draco’s attention, and he groped for a new topic—face lighting up when he at last realised Bellatrix had not shown up alone this morning. “Well well, who’s your friend here? I don’t think I recognise him.” He leaned forward, trying to get a better look at Ron’s face, while Ron pretended to be interested in one of the Undesirable Number One posters.

“No, you wouldn’t, would you? Perhaps if you paid attention in meetings instead of wasting time lighting the house-elves on fire you might have noticed we’re recruiting abroad.” Draco extended a hand to Ron. “Travers, Dragomir Despard.”

“Despard, hm...” Travers scratched at his scraggly beard. “Don’t believe I’m familiar with the name... Not one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight?”

“Good gad, there’s only *twenty-eight* of them, man. Can’t you memorise a few families without your skull popping?” He sighed dramatically. “Mr. Despard has travelled here from his home in Transylvania, as representative of a faction of witches and wizards whose views very much align with the Dark Lord’s. I’ve been asked to act as his handler, escorting him to sites of several of our more *prominent* demonstrations, so that he may review our progress thus far and facilitate our expansion in the future.” A foreigner, it

had been decided, would be the safest cover, as they all knew Voldemort was abroad at the moment, though the Death Eaters swarming about Diagon Alley would likely have no knowledge of the goings-on across borders.

“Huh... Well, pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Despard.”

“Pleas’yur,” Ron ground out in a thick, vaguely Slavic accent, scratching at his beard before holding out his meaty hand.

Travers considered the gesture for a long moment, nose wrinkling, then reluctantly extended two fingers of his own and daintily shook Ron’s fingers with a grimace. When Ron put his hand away again, Travers not-so-discreetly wiped his hand on his robe. “So, er, I take it Diagon Alley is only your first stop, then? A bit of early-morning shopping on the agenda before taking a peek at our Master’s handiwork out in the wider world?”

“Gringotts,” was all Draco said, turning on his heel and continuing their march towards the bank.

Travers scrambled to keep up with Draco’s short, quick strides. “Ah! Indeed, indeed—was just heading there myself!” he said, and Harry cursed silently; it would be difficult enough to manage the infiltration *without* a Death Eater looking over their shoulders, and now they could not communicate freely without chancing being overheard. He didn’t envy Hermione, stuck in Draco’s pocket with no way to help and wholly reliant on her companions not screwing up. “Hardly my idea of a fine way to start the morning, though—terrible how we’re forced to make nice with those glorified house-elves whenever we wish to lay hands on our own hard-fought earnings!”

Griphook’s hold on Harry’s neck tightened, as if to strangle him in Travers’s stead, and Harry gamely patted his arm in silent reminder *he* hadn’t uttered the slight and would very much like to breathe again sometime soon.

As a raggedy group, they made their way down the now quite empty cobbled street, and with Travers at their side, throwing dirty looks at anyone who so much as glanced their way, they met no more of the ‘Wandless’ as they approached the stately marble steps

fronting Gringotts at the far end. Here they would face the first of many hurdles lying between them and what they desperately hoped was a Horcrux tucked away somewhere in the Lestrangle vault: a pair of wizards, hangdog in the face and yawning at odd intervals with Probity Probes clutched in their hands as they flanked the imposing bronze doors leading into the bank.

Harry recalled Filch having used an item of much the same make to search students entering and exiting Hogwarts the year before—crude but effective tools, they would reveal Ron’s Glamour in an instant, and it would only be downhill from there.

Travers gave Draco’s Bellatrix a winning smile, then made his way confidently to the wizard on the right, while Draco, Harry, and Ron filed toward the one on the left. Being the only one in any position to do anything about their predicament, Harry darted to the front of the group and pointed his wand at their security wizard, murmuring, “*Confundo*,” low so Travers couldn’t hear. The guard gave a start as the spell hit him, his gaze going funny, and Draco strode past confidently with Ron in tow, joining Travers to head into the inner hall.

Travers extended an arm, saying, “After you,” and Draco made to sweep ahead of him, when a voice called from behind.

“Er, excuse me! Madam, a moment please?”

Harry turned back, throat clenching, just in time to see the wizard shake off the *Confundus* and raise his probe. *Fuck*, he’d already cocked up the only job he had.

“You imbecile, do you mean to say you mucked up the simplest job you could have been tasked with?” Draco sounded suitably narked off, with enough strident venom in his tone to set the poor wizard trembling. Travers looked between them, brows raised, and the poor guard held his Probity Probe up in front of his face, as if to ward off any retribution coming his way. “You’ve just *done* that!” Draco spread his arms in invitation. “Or would you like to have another go? Shall I demonstrate just where you can shove that little rod of yours?”

The other wizard who'd checked Travers muttered nervously to his companion, "... That's *Lestrangle*, Marius. Leave it."

Marius ducked his head, clutching the Probe to his chest, and stammered an apology. Draco only tossed his head, muttering *An absolute circus...* and swept inside, Ron at his side and Travers jogging to keep up. Harry kept quick on their heels, pausing only at the double doors to glance back and make sure they hadn't been marked: Marius was still scratching his head, and the other wizard seemed to be lecturing him. He breathed a silent sigh of relief; one impediment down, only about fifty more to go.

The inner hall was empty and quiet, and Draco's heels clacked loudly on the stone floor. The liveried Goblins who usually guarded the outer doors had evidently been moved inside, though neither was armed with a Probita Probe, so Harry suspected they were only here to impress. They stood straight-backed and stiff-necked before a pair of massive silver doors engraved with the now-familiar words of warning concerning the dire consequences awaiting anyone stupid enough to walk into this place with thievery on their mind. *Yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it*, Hagrid had once said when Harry had asked about the poem.

Well, this quest of theirs had certainly driven Harry to the edge, and it felt like they were about to step over. Gringotts had seemed to eleven-year-old Harry so impressive, so impenetrable—and honestly it *still* did, even to seventeen-year-old him. It felt wrong, breaking in—not because, well, it *was* wrong, breaking fifty different laws both wizarding *and* Goblin, probably, but because it was something of a betrayal of the wide-eyed wonder he'd once held for all things magical. You weren't supposed to break into Gringotts; you weren't supposed to *be able to* break into Gringotts. And yet they had to hope they could.

Draco, Ron, and Travers did not seem similarly struck by nostalgia, though, shoving through the doors and into the vast hall of the bank proper, and Harry had to scramble to keep up and avoid being locked out.

While Diagon Alley had practically become a ghost town, life seemed to continue apace

within the walls of Gringotts. The Goblins on duty were all sat atop their stools behind a long marble counter, already neck-deep in banking slips and promissory notes as they managed the first customers of the day. Travers seemed to know precisely what business he was about, and Draco let him slip past, making straight for the reception desk sat at the opposite end of the hall, while he pretended to explain the history of the building and its occupants to Ron, likely hoping they might soon be rid of their unwanted tag-along.

The old Goblin manning the reception desk—though they all looked old to Harry, if he were being honest—was carefully studying a gold coin with a jeweller’s glass, features pinched into a tight frown, and with a muttered *Bah, Leprechaun*, he tossed the coin into a bulging burlap sack, where it clinked against what Harry took to be many others like it. He settled back with a sigh, turning his attention from the coins now to Travers. “Mr. Travers, how may I help you?”

“Just making a withdrawal,” Travers said, passing over a tiny key. The Goblin removed his jeweller’s glass and examined the key before passing it back to him—and then gave a start when he noticed Draco standing behind Travers.

“Oh—my, Madam Lestrangle!” The Goblin scrambled to stand atop his high chair, adjusting the tie at his throat. “We—we weren’t expecting you today. How may we be of service?”

Harry had never seen a Goblin act so obsequious; they were always coolly polite. Bellatrix must have been a fearsome client indeed when she dropped by.

“How do you *think*? I’m here to enter my vault,” said Draco, adding with a thick drawl, “*Obviously.*”

“Ah, yes, of...of course...” the Goblin said, a bit cagey, then glanced nervously around the hall. Harry followed his eye and could now see that several of the Goblins along the counter who weren’t busy with customers had paused their work to openly stare at ‘Bellatrix’ trying to enter her vault, and even Travers was hanging back now, as if he didn’t want to be implicated in whatever was about to happen.

Anxious nerves curled in Harry's gut; something wasn't right.

The Goblin swallowed thickly, then asked, "I presume you have...your key, then?"

Oh *fuck*. They'd assumed that Bellatrix being Bellatrix, she wouldn't be bothered with 'such frivolities', as Malfoy had put it. His own father had only been asked for his key once, he'd explained, and he'd thrown such a strop about it, building security had been called. "Of course, Father promptly sued them—I've never seen him carry a key with him since."

"Of course I don't have my *key*, you imbeciles," Draco spat. "Open your beady little eyes. Don't you know who I am?"

"*They suspect!*" Griphook hissed. "Even with Travers at your side, they have likely been warned to be on guard against impostors."

Clearly their ruse with Greyback's insurrection had not been as convincing as they might have hoped, and the Death Eaters were on high alert. Yet he could not think how they might back out safely, surrounded by Goblins—who had their own sort of magic—and several wizards who would probably leap at the chance to rise a few rungs on Voldemort's ladder by turning over Harry Potter and his merry band of rebels.

"...Perhaps if we could check your wand, then, Madam?" said the Goblin. He held out one long-fingered hand, which Harry could see was trembling. Draco could not refuse without rousing suspicion, but of course his wand was not Bellatrix Lestrange's.

Draco drew his hawthorn wand from his robes and passed it hilt-first to the Goblin, who frowned down at it. "I'm afraid this does not seem to be the wand registered with our records, Madam Lestrange..."

"Of course it's not, you imbecile," Draco sneered. "Does it *look* like walnut and dragon heartstring to you? I've loaned mine to my Master, who's in sore need of a good wand at the moment." He spoke very slowly, as if to a small child, tone as demeaning as possible. "This is a *new* one."

“A new wand?” said Travers, approaching again. Perhaps his curiosity had overtaken his sense of self-preservation. “But where were you able to procure one? Which wandmaker did you use?”

Of course; Gregorovitch was dead, and Ollivander had recently been sprung from Malfoy Manor, as Travers was evidently well aware.

Griphook was nearly throttling Harry now. “You must use the Imperius Curse on him now! He’ll sound the alarm!”

It was their only choice, for they’d been backed into a corner. Swallowing thickly, Harry lifted his wand and envisioned the casual ease with which Draco had cursed Greyback and the other Snatchers during his interrogation. *You’ve got to mean them*, Bellatrix jeered in his mind, and Harry pointed his wand at Travers, the desire to protect both himself and his friends firing his blood.

Draco could not do this for him—he would have to summon the stones to do what must be done himself, and for the first (and hopefully last) time, he whispered, “*Imperio!*”

Harry felt the magic thrill through him—a strange sensation he couldn’t recall ever experiencing with any other spell—and threads of his magical essence seemed to snake out, entwining themselves around Travers’s mind and squeezing, strangling, until Harry felt the connection solidify.

Travers’s expression went slack as Harry forced his will onto him, and he nodded obediently. “Well, it is a handsome one all the same—my compliments to its maker. Mine’s been acting up lately—I think the core’s gone rotten. Tentacula tendrils—what can you do!”

“Perhaps not purchase a wand powered by Tentacula tendrils?” Draco said, sounding very bored—but Harry imagined he saw Bellatrix’s thin shoulders slump a tick in relief. He turned back to the Goblin, tone sharp. “Well? Will that do? If my word is insufficient, I’m *happy* to have my Master explain the circumstances.” He rolled up the left sleeve to his borrowed robe, exposing the ugly blotch of the Dark Mark. Had Polyjuice covered it

up, or was that Draco's own Mark peering out? If he pressed it now—if the Goblins called his bluff—would it summon Voldemort?

“No, no!” the old Goblin stammered, scrambling down from his perch. “That won't be necessary, I'm sure...” He toddled around the side of his desk to dip a nodding bow to Draco, now several heads shorter. “Please forgive the delay, Madam Lestrangle. Difficult times we're living in, and we only seek to ensure that our clients understand that their property is kept as secure as is at all possible.”

“Oh just *get on* with it,” Draco scoffed. Harry didn't know if this was exactly how Bellatrix might have acted under similar circumstances, but he thought Draco was doing a brilliant job. He knew it was an uncharitable thought, but he shuddered to think how horribly things might have gone if they'd let Hermione handle it as originally planned.

“Of—of course!” the Goblin squeaked, snapping his long, spindly fingers, and another Goblin—younger, Harry supposed, because he had only slightly fewer wrinkles and less liver spotting—appeared at his side as promptly as if he'd Apparated. “Prepare the Clankers,” he intoned, and the younger Goblin straightened with a little salute before disappearing. Harry did not know what ‘Clankers’ were, nor did he think he wanted to find out. Special keys for the oldest clients' vaults?

Mere moments later, the Goblin returned this time carrying a bulging sack nearly as large as himself. It jangled as he walked it over to the reception desk, giving the impression it was full of metal pieces. Keys after all, then?

The old Goblin checked the bag, and seemingly satisfied, he crooked a finger for Draco to follow. “This way, please, Madam Lestrangle; we will delay you no further and make for your vault.”

“How kind of you,” Draco muttered, and Harry didn't think it was entirely spoken in pretence. They'd wasted nearly twenty minutes just getting this far. It was becoming more and more likely that the Polyjuice Potion would wear off before they'd managed to find the Horcrux—which would decidedly complicate their exit strategy.

“Bogrod! Hold!” Their escort drew up short, turning to see he’d been hailed by another dashing down the long line of desks and nearly colliding with Travers, who was now standing quite still with his mouth hanging open dumbly. Ron was waving a hand in front of his face and snapping his fingers for attention, confused. Harry felt a lurch of guilt; the Imperius Curse seemed to require constant attention, else apparently the victim became utterly befuddled, a blank slate.

“Yes? Out with it. We mustn’t keep important clients waiting.”

“I am aware, but—” The new Goblin issued a curt bow to Draco, pasting on a fawning smile that did not reach his eyes, then turned back to Bogrod. “It’s only, we’ve received special instructions concerning the old family vaults, if you’ll recall.” His expression went pointed. “Protocol must be followed.”

“Oh—yes, quite...” Bogrod said, giving a weak, wary smile to Draco. He seemed relieved to finally have a fellow standing with him, and Harry didn’t think Draco would be able to bully his way into the Lestrangle vault this time, as the new Goblin looked rather stuffy, like a Gringotts version of Percy Weasley.

He pointed his wand at Bogrod, praying the Imperius Curse wasn’t limited to a single use at a time, and whispered, “*Imperio!*” again, filling the Goblin’s mind with urgency and determination to get to the Lestrangle vault.

Bogrod straightened at once, then dismissed the other Goblin with a grouching, “Can’t you see we’ve Madam Lestrangle with us *in person*, Ugbert? If you’d like to be the one to tell her she can’t visit her own vault...?” Ugbert grimaced but did not protest further, and Bogrod jangled the bag of Clankers in his hand threateningly. “Back to your station, now!” To Draco, he added obsequiously, “Our sincerest apologies, Madam. Right this way.”

With that, he slung the jangling bag over one shoulder and toddled to the large door situated just behind the reception desk. Draco and Ron made to follow, and Harry glanced back at poor Travers, who was still stood in the middle of the aisle, staring ahead blankly. He was starting to drool, and several of the Goblins were taking notice. Deciding

that leaving him there would only draw undue attention—and anyone who'd cast the Imperius Curse before would surely see in an instant that this was a sign of a job poorly done—Harry decided they would have to endure their tagalong for just a bit longer and flicked his wand to command Travers to join them.

Travers immediately snapped to it, jogging to catch up with them before following at a more sedate pace as they trailed behind Bogrod. The door off the hall spit them out into a cool, dark stone tunnel leading to the maze of tracks and vast catacombs of vaults beneath the bank.

Once out of sight and earshot of the door to the hallway, Harry checked to be sure Bogrod and Travers were well in the thrall of his Curse, then yanked off the Cloak. “These two—Draco? Could you check them out? I'm sure I've done a hack job of these Curses.”

Griphook hopped down, toddling over to Bogrod and inspecting the sack he'd brought with him. Neither the Goblin nor Travers seemed to notice, both blithely staring off ahead as if nothing were amiss.

Draco checked both of Harry's victims, frowning as he tweaked Bogrod's bulbous nose and slapped Travers's cheek lightly with his wand. “Seems to me we ought to have been working on your Unforgivables instead of my Patronus all these weeks.”

“Hey, it was my *first time*—”

“You've been passable with other ‘firsts’; I thought you might have natural talent.” Draco quirked a brow, and Harry was glad that Hermione was still stuffed in Draco's pocket and so could not remark on the bright flush to Harry's cheeks. Ron was, blessedly, oblivious. “Untwist, honestly. You haven't scrambled their brains; you simply haven't been specific enough in your instructions. They're well under your thrall, and that's what's important.”

“Right—so, er, now what?” Ron asked, scratching nervously at his beard. “I feel like we've hit a few bumps in the road—you think they twigged? Should we cut and run now,

maybe try again later?”

Draco frowned at the door through which they'd just come; beyond it, Harry thought he could hear muffled arguments being held in the main hall. “I don't think that's very much an option.”

“I say we go for it,” Harry said, suddenly bold in the wake of Draco's approval of his Imperius Curse. “I mean, we've kind of got to. We haven't got any more Polyjuice Potion.”

“Now or never, then?” Ron sighed, and Griphook clapped.

“Then we press on!” he said, with entirely too much enthusiasm for the danger of their mission. He *really* wanted the sword, it was evident, and guilt twisted in Harry's gut like a knife to the stomach. “Now, the cart must be piloted by a Gringotts employee, so Bogrod will handle that—” He gestured vaguely to Travers, slinging the bag of Clankers over his shoulder. “But the wizard can be disposed of. There is no room for him in the cart besides.”

“Disposed—?!” Harry sputtered. “I'm not going to—” He sighed, raising his wand. With another *Imperio!* he sent Travers off along the cart track in the opposite direction from where they were headed, and he quickly disappeared into the darkness.

“What did you make him do?” Ron asked.

“I told him to hide—that should be enough, right? Just keep him out of our hair for a while.” A horrible thought occurred to him, though, and he turned to Draco. “Wait, how long does Imperius last? Like, he won't stay hidden down here *forever* just because I told him to one time, right?” God, had he just effectively *killed* Travers?

“You have to recast at regular intervals to retain power, unless you're exceptionally skilled with the spell. I expect he'll start feeling more like himself in a few hours,” Draco said. “Hopefully we'll be well quit of this place by then.”

That was both encouraging and not; Harry was relieved to know Travers would not

needlessly die lost and alone beneath Gringotts, but he would also be able to tell tale of what he'd witnessed them doing. "...He knows we've been here, though. He'll tell You-Know-Who what we're up to, he'll—"

"Not remember a thing," Draco said, twirling his wand in Bellatrix's long fingers. He managed the trick nicely, even with her sharp, pointed nails. "As I said before: you lot would be lost without me."

Harry's shoulders slumped in relief, but before he could express his thanks for Draco's quick thinking, Griphook was grumbling at him to *Get on with it!*

With another *Imperio*, Harry ordered Bogrod to commandeer them a cart. which was summoned by a shrill whistle, rattling down the tracks from the direction in which Travers had disappeared.

Hurried on by the banging on the door down the passageway behind them, they all climbed into the cart. They had locked the door fast, but sooner or later, whoever was trying to break through would succeed and come looking for them.

Bogrod took the driver's position, with Griphook alongside him, and Harry, Ron, and Draco crammed together in the back seat. Draco pulled Hermione out of his pocket to be sure she wasn't squashed, but she remained in her Animagus form, as there was no room for her as a human.

"Weasley, get your hand off my arse."

"It's not on your arse! I've got my arm stuck—"

"Yes, under *my arse*."

Ron twisted around, fixing Harry with a look. "It's *not* on his arse."

Harry gave him a bemused smile. "...All right?"

With a jolt, Bogrod threw the cart into gear, and it quickly began gathering speed as it

trundled along the track for a few dozen feet before making a series of sharp twists and turns through the labyrinthine passages, sloping ever downwards. Harry thought that Ron and Draco might still be arguing about the placement of hands and their proximity to people's arses, but as they sped along, he found he could hear nothing over the bone-jolting rattle of the cart flying over the tracks. He tried to remember if it had been this harrowing a trip—in almost pitch black save for the flash of torches on the walls rushing by—when he was eleven and could not honestly recall. Perhaps it had been, and the shock had simply melded together with the rest of the fantastic things he'd been exposed to that fateful day.

He twisted around, trying to see behind them, but it was too dark to make out anything. Were they being followed already? Had another Goblin—or worse, Death Eaters—hopped their own cart and begun racing after them? They really ought to have gone for a stealthier approach—what had they been *thinking*, having Draco swanning about in broad daylight as one of the most infamous Death Eaters out there, especially one whose whereabouts could easily be verified in an instant? Would the Goblins notify other Death Eaters of the break-in? Griphook had shown no love for Voldemort or his movement—he hadn't seemed to care at all, really—but plundering Gringotts was a different matter entirely and would surely not be dismissed lightly, no matter *whose* vault was being pilfered.

A chill breeze gusted through Harry's hair, and he shivered. They were deep beneath Gringotts now—deeper than Harry had ever been before—and the temperature was plummeting. He could see his breath misting in the air if he exhaled hard enough—

Wait, that wasn't his breath. That was *real* mist, and it was only when they took a hairpin turn at speed that Harry saw it: A massive pounding waterfall sheeting over the track.

He distantly wondered what on earth a waterfall was doing this far underground, and why they'd built the cart track to go right under it, when Griphook cried, "*No!*"—but too late, they could not have veered away or braked the cart if they'd wanted to. The cart raced forward, zipping straight through the curtain of water and submerging them all

instantly. Ice-cold water filled his nose and mouth, and he fought the instinct to inhale in shock. Everything went dark and quiet—and then the cart pitched forward with a bucking jolt, sending them all flying out the other side of the waterfall.

A deafening *CRASH* heralded the cart smashing against the rock-face wall of the passage, and Harry immediately brought his arms up, braced himself for a similar experience—when he hit a soft cushion with a *WHUMP* that nearly stole the breath from his lungs. He slumped to the ground not gently, but not in the tangle of broken limbs he had expected thanks to the Cushioning Charm hastily cast by a now-human Hermione.

She was dripping wet and being helped to her feet by Ron, who was once again a gangly freckled redhead, and beside them stood an un-Polyjuiced Draco in sopping wet women’s robes with his white-blond hair plastered to his head. What the devil had just *happened*—?

“Augh, the Thief’s Downfall,” Griphook grumbled as he struggled to his feet. He had a nasty gash on his forehead and was glaring back at the waterfall pounding over the track. “We should not have been anywhere near it—that the tracks were diverted suggests we’ve been made. They’ve realised that Gringotts has been infiltrated—this is but the first of the defences they’ll be setting off against us.”

Draco struggled out of the wet robes, running his wand over his undershirt and pants to dry them. He caught Harry staring and snapped, “Do you mind?” before quickly Transfiguring his undergarments into a proper shirt and trousers.

Hermione was checking that she still had her beaded bag with its Extension charm unbroken by the jaunt through the enchanted waterfall, and Harry patted his shirt to be sure that he had his Mokeskin pouch as well. Blessedly, everything seemed to be in order—including the Invisibility Cloak.

“What’s going on here?” someone grouched, and Harry whirled around to see Bogrod shaking his head in bewilderment; the Thief’s Downfall seemed to have lifted the Imperius Curse.

“Wizards!” Griphook squawked. “Quickly, the Imperius! We still need a Gringotts employee to grant us entry to the vault, seeing as ‘Madam Lestrangle’ neglected to bring her key along.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said, pointing his wand at Bogrod. Once more, he pointed his wand at the befuddled Goblin, silently apologising for how scrambled his brains were likely to be after all this, and said, “*Imperio!*” The now-familiar sense of empowerment and immutable control thrilled through him, and this time when he shivered, it wasn’t entirely from disgust. Bogrod straightened, all confusion fleeing his features and replaced instead by blithe indifference, and Harry silently instructed him to take up the leather bag of metal, as Griphook continued to insist upon its importance.

“You’re getting good at this,” Draco marvelled. “We’ll make a proper Dark Wizard of you yet...”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Harry warned. “This feels—*wrong*.” It was a lie—but he certainly didn’t want to deal with Hermione’s lecturing concern right now, nor did he want to ask her or Ron to have to do this, and asking Draco to take over felt too cowardly. He would finish this and then never have cause to use this horrible, addicting Curse again.

A shout echoed from further down the passageway, and Hermione gasped, “Someone’s coming! We need to get out of here, *now!*”

The cart was a pile of kindling, and Harry sincerely hoped they were not too far from the Lestranges’ vault. “Can you get us to the vault?” he asked Griphook, who jerked his head forward along the passageway.

“It is only a bit farther; we can make it on foot, but only if we are quick about it.” With that, he scurried into the darkness. Harry scooped up Bogrod, and Ron cast a *Lumos* to light their way as they hurried after the Goblin.

“I realise I’m probably not gonna like the answer,” Ron said, throwing panicked looks over his shoulder every few paces, “But have we got any clue how we’re gonna get *out* of

here now?”

“You’re right,” Harry said. “You aren’t gonna like the answer.” He strained his ears, trying to listen for sounds of pursuit, but the rebounding echoes made it impossible to tell how near or far any followers were. He could, though, hear something clanking and moving around up ahead, and an uncomfortable foreboding wrapped cold fingers around his heart. “How much further, Griphook?”

“Nearly there,” Griphook panted. “Now there is only...”

Griphook trailed off, and Harry was about to ask *Only what?* when they rounded a corner into a massive open cavern and he saw ‘what’—the creature they had been warned of in vagueries and *It will be handled*, now in flesh and blood before them, bringing them all screeching to a halt.

A dragon, at least three or four times Draco’s size, was tethered to the ground by long, thick chains, its great bulk barring access to several of the deepest vaults in the place— one of which was, of course, the Lestrange vault.

The beast’s hide was a pale, sickly cream, but it looked nothing like Draco; its scales had whitened from being trapped for what was likely a *very* long time deep within the bowels of Gringotts, and they did not shine as Draco’s did, reflecting absorbed light with a ghostly glow. Its eyes, nearly crusted shut, were a milky white that suggested it was nearly blind, and its tree-trunk-sized rear legs were bound and shackled in thick iron cuffs bolted to the ground, leaving it just enough slack to shuffle in place. Its massive spike-tipped wings, strapped close to its body with thick bindings, would likely have filled the cavern had there been room enough to spread them.

Harry took a step back, gravel crunching underfoot, and the dragon turned its truck-sized head towards them, releasing a roar that made the stalactites hanging high above tremble. Harry saw the fire building in its throat only seconds before it spat a jet of flame at them, but Draco deflected the blast with a thoughtless *Protego*. He stared at the dragon in its pitiful state with an expression of dark offence, and Harry didn’t doubt he was recalling his own imprisonment in the Ministry. He touched Draco’s arm, whispering

softly, “C’mon...” It wouldn’t do any good to stare, when there was nothing they could do. Harry had already fulfilled a lifetime’s worth of dragon-rescuing duties.

“Mind your distance from the beast,” Griphook said, glaring at the dragon from behind the safety of Draco’s Shield Charm. It continued to gnash its teeth at their group, testing the strength of the shield with great bursts of white-hot fire. “The chains hold—but I should not like to test them.”

“So how are we supposed to get around it?” Ron asked, glancing to Draco. “...You wouldn’t be able to ask your cousin nicely to let us pass, would you?”

Draco made a rude gesture, and Griphook huffed. “For that, we have the Clankers—have Bogrod attend to the beast.”

Harry didn’t quite know what having Bogrod ‘attend’ to the dragon meant, but he twitched his wand in command all the same. The Goblin placed the leather bag he had slung over his back on the ground and loosened the mouth, drawing out a pair of small metal instruments—and ‘clank’ing them together. The sound of rapping metal echoed through the cavern with a sharp ringing noise, not unlike hammers on anvils.

The dragon flinched with a toothy hiss, and Bogrod passed the instruments to Harry before reaching into the bag to retrieve another pair. It shortly became evident they were expected to fill the cavern with a cacophonous racket that would keep the dragon at bay long enough to allow Bogrod to open the vault for them. Draco balked when Harry tried to pass him his Clankers. He sighed, “I know it seems cruel—”

“*Seems?*” Draco spat.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Harry said, shoving the Clankers into Draco’s hands. “Horcrux first; vigilante justice for your distant relatives later.”

Draco’s grey eyes showed no amusement with the quip, but he accepted the Clankers, morosely banging the metal together as he fixed the Goblins with a frigid glare.

“Excellent, yes—keep it up. The creature had been trained to expect pain with the

ringing of the Clankers,” Griphook explained. “Once it has retreated, have Bogrod place his hand upon the vault door to will it open.”

Draco’s Shield Charm shortly became unnecessary as the dragon released a pained roar and slunk back from the din, the noise echoing off the rocky walls, grossly magnified. Harry sympathised with the creature, as his own skull felt like it was vibrating with each *CLANG CLANG CLANG*.

As they passed by, still rattling the Clankers, Harry could see the dragon was trembling, and he could make out old scars raked over its face. They looked too fine to have been the result of battle with another dragon. *The creature has been trained to expect pain*, Griphook had said. God, what a miserable life this thing must have led. Where such wounds on a wild dragon might have healed quickly, given their fantastic abilities, malnutrition and long imprisonment had probably sapped the poor creature’s reserves.

Draco was staring fixedly at the dragon, and Harry knew he wasn’t imagining the deep, low growl building in Draco’s chest. For a wild moment, he worried Draco might snap and transform uncontrollably, as rage and fear had certainly been a trigger before, but he managed to hold it together until they had nearly completely flanked the dragon.

“Quickly!” Griphook growled. “Have him open the vault!” Harry was beginning to get annoyed with having to constantly direct Bogrod to do this or that. He would have Imperiused Bogrod to obey Griphook if he’d known he’d have to deliver new orders secondhand every five minutes.

He delivered the instructions, though, and Bogrod toddled over to the nearest vault door, bracing his palm against the wooden jamb of what Harry took to be the Lestrangle vault. After a moment, the door dissolved before them, like a sandcastle exposed to the ocean spray, and suddenly they were staring at veritable *mountains* of treasure.

The vault itself was cavernous, standing several storeys high on the inside and half a Quidditch pitch long—and it was filled, floor to ceiling, with all manner of gold and goblets, jewels and gems, whole suits of armour, crowns and tiaras and circlets, hides and hunting trophies, glass cabinets displaying flasks of potions in every colour of the

rainbow, and towering bookshelves that Hermione was already eyeing with wide-eyed wonder.

Who on earth *needed* so much treasure? It was absurd—and so disorganised, too! How did the Lestranges ever manage to find anything when they had occasion to visit? Was it just a matter of Summoning what they needed? Just in case, Harry pointed his wand into the hoard—for that was what it felt like, and there was even a dragon guarding it—and said, “*Accio Horcrux!*” but of course nothing happened. “Was worth a shot,” he sighed.

“I’d have been worried if it was that easy,” Hermione said, chivvying them inside with admonitions. “Let’s get to it the old-fashioned way, then. Remember—it’s either Hufflepuff’s cup or Ravenclaw’s diadem.”

“Or Ravenclaw’s *something else*,” Ron corrected, and Harry was reminded of their running argument over Ravenclaw’s artefact. This might be a more substantial undertaking than they’d anticipated, and time was decidedly not on their side.

They hurried inside, and Harry kept his eyes peeled for *anything* that looked like it might be a Horcrux. He had described Hufflepuff’s cup to the others, but if it was the item of Ravenclaw’s that lay in the vault, they would have to hope they came across something with the familiar crest on it. At least there was little likelihood Bellatrix would have kept something from any House other than Slytherin if it wasn’t a powerful magical object, so they could be assured that anything of Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw make was a Horcrux.

He had just begun to run his eyes over a bookcase overflowing with all manner of shiny, glittery bric-a-brac when there came a muffled *clunk* from behind, and they were plunged into total darkness. The doorway had reformed, it seemed, and now they were locked inside.

Before Harry’s heart could leap from his throat in panic, Griphook called, “Fret not, Bogrod will be able to release us when the time comes! Continue your searching—and *quickly!*”

Draco called out *Lumos*, as did Hermione, and the room lit up bright as day under the combined glare of their spells.

The light from their twin spells glinted from something on top of the shelf, Harry could now see, and he lifted up on his toes and craned his neck: it was the fake sword of Gryffindor, locked inside a glass case. “Don’t worry, no one’s gonna steal your worthless fake,” Harry muttered to the absent Bellatrix. He would’ve gladly given all of the gold in his own vault to see the look on her face when she realised that not only had she lost the Horcrux her master had entrusted to her, but the Horcrux killer she thought she’d secreted away safely wasn’t even real. Harry still didn’t know how it had come into their possession, and he admittedly didn’t care. Griphook would just have to be patient for a bit longer, as they weren’t through with it yet.

He kept the location of the fake sword in the back of his mind, ready for the switch later should it come to that—Griphook might not be fooled for long, but perhaps at a quick glance he’d believe it, and they could flee before he realised—and continued to peer around the vault and its heaps of treasure.

“Oh!” Hermione gasped. “I think I might have—*Ah!*” Her words were cut off by a sharp shriek of pain, and Harry whipped around. Hermione had stacked a collection of fine travel cases on top of one another so she could reach a set of jewel-encrusted goblets—one of which went flying as she flung it away, shaking her hand with a wincing grimace. The goblet hit the stone floor with a bright *CLANG*—and then burst apart, not broken but split into a dozen exact copies that clattered to the ground themselves, bouncing and rolling in every direction. Even having watched it happen, it was impossible for Harry to tell which had been the original cup.

Hermione was sucking on her fingers, moaning, “Flagrante Curse! It must be part of the vault’s security measures.”

“And Gemino Curses as well,” Griphook said, keeping well back from the copy-cups. “Take care with where you step and what you touch—lest you wind up roasted alive and crushed under the weight of ever-expanding gold.”

Harry wondered if this was Gringotts standard-issue security, or if Bellatrix had suggested that little addition herself. It certainly sounded sadistic enough to have come from that crazy witch's head, but Harry was learning that Goblins could be pretty cruel themselves.

"All right, you heard the Goblin: no one touch *anything*." Harry called out, eyes on his feet to be sure he didn't inadvertently nudge one of the rolling goblets, but it was already too late. Ron slipped on a pile of gold coins toppled in the commotion, and he hissed in pain, hopping on one foot as a fountain of coins erupted.

Harry quickly threw up a Shield Charm to keep them from being pelted by flying coins, but he could see the damage had already been done: The toe of Ron's trainer had melted away, leaving behind a smoking hole through which his wriggling socked toes could be seen.

"Ron!" Hermione cried, casting *Aguamenti* at his shoe, just in case.

"Right, everyone *hold still* now," Harry instructed, meeting their eyes one by one. "We've got precious little time, but we can't chance drowning in treasure."

"To think there was a time I might have yearned to go out like that," Draco drawled, scanning the piles of gold and finery with sharp eyes.

"We're either looking for a small, gold goblet—not much bigger than the ones served tableside at Hogwarts—with a badger engraved on the side, or else something of Ravenclaw's. Just look for the symbols—that'll be easiest. The eagle for—"

"We *know*!" Ron huffed. "We've only been over this a hundred times. Hufflepuff, badger, cup. Ravenclaw, eagle...fine, *probably* the diadem."

Hermione flushed with a satisfied smile, quickly turning her back on them and busying herself with a stack to her right.

Backs to one another so they didn't chance brushing up against something they shouldn't, they shifted as a group, wands turned on the room to direct light into ever

nook and cranny as they scoured the stacks of treasure with their eyes. Yet even with these precautions, they still managed to trip over the odd toppled statue or stumble against one of the false copies already produced by the *Gemino* curses, compounding the problem and earning them fresh burns. Harry was the next to send a jewellery box of precious gemstones cascading to the floor in a white-hot rainbow waterfall that multiplied several dozen-fold even as he struggled to move out of its path.

The treasure was crowding in uncomfortably close now, and the air in the vault grew close and oppressively hot from all the multiplying *Flagranted* objects, blazing with heat. They were going to either be buried alive or burned to a crisp before they managed to find the Horcrux, and Harry rubbed at his eyes to wipe away the salty sweat seeping into them. He wished he could recall the spell to stop his glasses from fogging up, because the furnace-like heat had him stumbling around half-blind.

He squinted, running his eyes over shields and Goblin-made helmets and suits of armour. He had just dismissed a silver tea service as frivolous finery when an out-of-place flash of burnished gold against the china tea pot caught his eye. He cast a *Lumos* of his own, raising his wand higher and swallowed, the light bouncing off a stout goblet with a badger embossed on the side.

“I FOUND IT! Hufflepuff’s goblet! It’s here!”

“Where?!” Ron cried, and Harry rounded on him quickly.

“Don’t move! Just—it’s right up there, next to the tea service!” He fixed the light of his wand on the set to draw the others’ eyes.

His heart skipped several beats. After all Voldemort had done to twist “Sweet Hufflepuff”’s artefact to Dark purposes, making its way through the ages, passing from hand to hand as gift or through murder, here it was.

The fourth Horcrux, within their grasp.

Or well, *almost* within their grasp—which Harry supposed was the problem.

“...Right, well, it looks lovely all the way up there. How exactly are we supposed to get it down from there? Especially without *touching* it?” Ron asked, voicing Harry’s concerns.

“Can Draco grab it?” Hermione asked, looking to Draco. “*Flagrante* shouldn’t be a match for dragonhide, I should think.”

“*Flagrante* might not hurt him, but you’ve seen the size of him,” Harry said. “There’s no way he’d be able to avoid setting off the *Gemino* curses, and then we’d be buried alive, along with the Horcrux.”

Draco swiped the air with his wand, sending up warning sparks. “Did you just say I’ve got a big arse, Potter?”

Harry rolled his eyes—then an idea hit him. “Wait—flying!”

Draco recoiled. “I can’t *fly* in here!”

Harry waved him away. “Now who’s not thinking like a wizard?” He looked to Hermione. “*Levicorpus!*”

She frowned. “That still doesn’t help us *touch* the thing.”

She had a point; how did you grab something without touching it? Or touch it without activating the curses? It clearly responded to human touch—or living touch, rather, as Draco would likely set it off as a dragon, and Griphook would set it off as a Goblin. If only they had dragonhide gloves, or tongs or—

“The sword!” He pounded his fist into his palm. “We can slip the blade through the handles on the cup!” He snapped his fingers at Hermione. “Let’s try, come on!”

She fumbled inside her robes and drew out the beaded bag, rummaging through it for a few seconds before pointing her wand into its depths and saying *Accio sword!*

Whatever spells had kept it from being Summoned from the pond had been broken, and the sword flew into her grip ruby-studded hilt-first, and she passed it to Harry. He

carefully touched the tip to a silver flagon nearby—and breathed a sigh of relief when nothing happened.

They had practised the *Levicorpus* spell in Dumbledore’s Army, and as she had shown the most success between the three of them who’d taken part in the lesson, it was decided that Hermione would be in charge of levitating Harry up to poke the sword through the cup’s handle. Draco did not seem too enthused about this plan (“Let Weasley play the victim this time! Granger’s got a vested interest in keeping *him* in one piece!”), but there was no time to argue. The heat was unbearable, searing their skin just standing in place, and he could hear the Gringotts dragon roaring plaintively on the other side of the vault door, the distant sound of clanking growing louder and louder.

They would have to fight their way out of here, one way or another, it was becoming rapidly clear. If that was how it was going to be, then they were at least going to have something to show for it, this Harry vowed.

“Let’s go,” Harry said, bracing himself with the hilt of the sword gripped tightly in both hands. They would probably only have one shot at this, with what sounded like a whole horde of angry Goblins bearing down upon them, likely armed and definitely dangerous.

Hermione turned to face him, her wand raised and an uncharacteristic look of uncertainty painted on her features. She was always so confident in her spellwork, and Harry really didn’t need her doubting herself now of all times. “You can do this,” he urged with as much confidence as he could force into his voice. “You’re the brightest witch of our age; even Draco says so.” He cut Draco a warning look, daring him to contradict Harry.

“Rubbish, he does not,” Hermione huffed, strained amusement in her tone as she tried to fight back a smile.

“At least *one* of you knows me,” Draco said, frown pinched. “Drop him, and I’ll flambé you, Granger.”

“Today, people!” Ron called, eyes fixed on the vault door with such intensity, Harry

thought he might be trying to see through it.

“Right, yes,” Hermione said, taking a measured breath. “*Levicorpus!*”

Harry’s legs slid out from under him as if he’d slipped on a slick patch of grass, and he abruptly found himself airborne, dangling from one ankle as his robes flew up (or down, rather) to cover his face. He pinwheeled his arms instinctively as he swung like a pendulum, and in his flailing, he slammed into a standing suit of armour, sending white-hot replicas crashing down around him.

“Fuck, look out!” he cried, contorting himself to try and pick his friends out from the chaos.

He caught a flash of white and an unearthly screech—and then his vision was filled with bat-like wings, spread wide and fanning over the floor of the vault.

Draco twined his sinewy body in as tight a circle as he could manage and kept his wings flared, shielding Hermione and Ron from the burning metal raining down on their heads as best he could. With his bulk, he couldn’t possibly avoid bumping against heaps of gold and jewels and bringing stacks of Galleons and other fine currency crashing to the ground, but he seemed equal to the task of protecting the vulnerable Hermione and Ron from the rising tide. He didn’t so much as flinch when the searing-hot metal pressed against his hide, and Harry was reminded once more that dragons were truly fantastic beasts.

But the ruckus on the floor toppled the fragile tower atop which the cup had been perched with its companion tea set, and with a panicked yelp, Harry thrust the sword forward, narrowly managing to thread the blade through one of the cup’s handles before it disappeared into the roiling sea of treasure below.

Bogrod was nowhere to be seen, perhaps having already been pulled under the crushing mass of gold, and Harry cast about for Griphook. A pained, gurgling scream barely audible over the roar of clinking treasure drew his attention, and he twisted around just in time to glimpse a Goblin’s long, knobby, claw-tipped fingers slipping under the rising

tide.

Harry writhed in place, still hoisted high by Hermione's *Levicorpus*, and he forced his body into a swinging pattern that brought him steadily closer and closer to what he guiltily hoped was Bogrod and not Griphook, as this was looking to be a fantastically convenient way out of their deal with the Goblin.

He thrust his hand into the white-hot mass of treasure, pushing past the pain and feeling about until his hands brushed another's—and with a sharp yank, he drew out painfully slowly a blistered, yowling Goblin. The creature's pasty skin was pockmarked with sizzling burns, and the room was shortly filled with the stench of burning flesh, but Harry could still tell that it was Griphook and not Bogrod clutching his hand.

Grunting, Harry twisted and wriggled until he managed to palm his wand, an awkward feat with the sword of Gryffindor now clutched in one cramping hand and Griphook hanging on for dear life to the fingers of another. He angled his wand, pointing at his leg, and yelled, "*Liberacorpus!*"

He plummeted downward, Griphook cushioning his fall atop the swelling mass of blazing treasure, and Harry cried out as the heat seared straight through his clothes. He could feel boils rising up on his skin, and he convulsed, drawing his knees in to make himself as small as possible and instinctively wrapping his arms around his body.

The sword—and cup still threaded on its blade—slipped from his fingers in the mayhem, disappearing into the rising tide of magically multiplied treasure. "No!" Harry cried.

Griphook scrambled out from under Harry, clambering atop him this time and evidently intent on riding him like a human sled and thereby avoiding injury. He scanned the chaos with his beady black eyes, and Harry could hear the noise on the other side of the door growing deafening, drowning out the clinking cacophony of tumbling treasure. It was too late—

Griphook shouted something raspy in Gobbledegook that sounded particularly triumphant and made a mad lunge. The wild, desperate look in his eye told Harry what

had always been the truth of the matter: Griphook had never trusted them to hand over the sword, and it was every man—or Goblin—for himself now.

Draco must have seen them, for he released a shrieking roar that brought dust sprinkling down from the stony ceiling of the vault. He snapped his neck out, catching Harry by the trouser leg before he slipped beneath the swell and tossing him under the protection of his wing along with Hermione and Ron.

“Griphook has the sword—and the cup!” he moaned, gingerly rising to his feet.

“Not for long he doesn’t!” Hermione growled, brandishing her wand. “*Accio* Griphook’s collar!”

Griphook’s gurgling yelp echoed sharply around the vault, and he came tumbling down into the pit Draco had made with his body. The treasure pressed in around them, and Draco grunted with the effort. Very soon, he would no longer be able to shield them, and even now, Galleons and beaded necklaces slipped through, threatening to burst into a hundred different copies if they didn’t watch their step.

“You little thief!” Ron roared. “We told you you could have it *after* we got out of here!”

Griphook scrambled out of Ron’s reach, the sword clutched to his chest, and the tiny golden cup that had been skewered on the sword’s blade slipped free and went rolling across the floor.

“Fuck—the cup!” Harry dove, driven by instinct, and grabbed the cup with both hands, clutching it tight to his chest even as fresh replicas came pinging free, quickly filling the little sanctuary Draco had created for them from the treasure bearing down around them. He could smell his own flesh being scalded, yet he refused to relinquish his hold—none of this would matter, *none* of it, if they didn’t come out the other side with the Horcrux.

An ominous groan sounded around them. They would be crushed, there was no getting around it now, and he shouted, “The door, Draco! Get us out of here!”

Draco hesitated only a moment before his calculating Slytherin mind caught up with reality, and he flared his wings, sending the treasure threatening to bury them alive exploding away as he charged for the door.

Not having been built to stand up to a rampaging dragon—even one on the smaller end of the spectrum—the vault door crumpled, and Draco burst out into the corridor, a veritable avalanche of red-hot treasure quite literally hot on his heels. Harry screamed in agony as he, Ron, and Hermione were borne away on a tide of scalding, still-replicating jewels and finery into the darkened outer chamber.

His body felt like one great boiling welt, but still he kept his hold on the Horcrux, even as more and more cups sprang into being, pinging against the walls and floor and ceiling.

“Harry, *let go!*” Hermione cried, reaching for the cup with hands covered in a length of fabric: the robes Draco had worn to play his aunt. Harry tried to uncurl his fingers, to drop it into Hermione’s waiting hands, but they would no longer obey him, and she eventually had to tear it from him—ripping away a sizzling strip of flesh in the process.

He seized, eyes clenched shut, and was barely conscious of being dragged forcibly away from where the tide of treasure had spit him out. He could hear approaching footsteps—a great many—and clamouring shouts.

“Up on your feet, Potter!” Draco hissed, human again now and shoving an arm under Harry’s shoulder to hoist him up. “No rest for the wicked, and all.”

“Griphook...” Harry grunted. “The sword!”

But Griphook was gone, having scarpered the first chance he’d seen, with the sword safely in his clutches. Through blurred double vision, Harry caught him cleverly folding himself into the oncoming horde of Goblins, as if he’d been part of their ranks all along.

“Thieves!” Griphook cried, brandishing the sword over his head. “Thieves in the vaults! Thieves come to steal!” The Goblins either did not realise Griphook had been the one who’d helped them infiltrate the bank, or else they didn’t care, for Griphook melted into

the crowd without issue, just another angry face amongst dozens ready to tear into Harry and his friends.

Harry leaned away from Draco, swaying unsteadily on his feet and palming his wand. There was to be no more subterfuge; the only way out now was through the veritable Goblin army advancing upon them.

“This would be a lot easier with the Killing Curse...” Draco murmured at his side, and Harry gave him a warning look. Draco shrugged. “I’m only saying. If we don’t make it out alive, you’ll know why.”

“*Stupefy!*” Harry shouted in response, aiming square for the Goblins at the head of the oncoming horde. Hermione and Ron joined in, while Draco—evidently one to forge his own path—used another spell Harry didn’t catch that came out a vibrant yellow. The Stunning Spells sent several of the Goblins toppling, but they were quickly replaced by their fellows who continued to close in. Draco’s spell exploded the ground beneath the front-most lines, sending Goblins flying in all directions, and while it was rather a more violent approach than Harry might have liked, they had little choice.

A chorus of shouts echoed down the hall, carrying over the rasping, gravelly voices of the Goblins, and Harry spotted a team of wizard guards threading their way through the crowd, wands raised for battle.

“Enough!” Harry shouted, once they’d cleared a wide enough swathe to allow them to flank the Goblin horde. “Let’s go!”

They would have to return the way they’d come—a long but necessary trek that would take them through an army of enemies bent on their capture, at least until they could reach the unwarded levels from which they could Apparate to safety.

They continued to fling spells at the Goblins to keep their path clear. There was no recovering the sword now; they were only concerned with escaping with their lives. A Horcrux killer was no use to them if they were too dead to use it, after all.

The Gringotts dragon was waiting for them when they re-emerged into the massive cavern, and it let out a furious roar at yet more interlopers encroaching on its territory. The Goblins had cowed it with their Clankers, but Bogrod's bag had been lost in the shuffle.

Harry was dancing on the edge of despair that they were caught now between a rock and a toothy, fiery hard place, when the hired wizarding guards sent a pair of *Confringos* sailing over their heads, missing Ron by mere inches and instead hitting the tethered dragon.

It gave a snarling snort of offence, turning its attention to the wizards who had attacked it, and sent a gout of flame their way. The wizards promptly turned tail and fled, doubling back the way they'd come in a mad scramble.

With the dragon distracted, Draco strode forward, pointing his wand at the cuffs chaining the beast in place. "*Relashio!*" he spat with a wicked grin, either mad or inspired, Harry wasn't honestly sure.

"What are you *doing?*!" Hermione shrieked, clinging to Ron when the cuffs broke open with loud bangs. The dragon didn't seem to notice it had been freed just yet, lashing out at the Goblins who were beginning to press closer and closer, waving their short, stubby daggers at its snout.

Draco fired a Stunning Spell at the advancing Goblins and then sprinted towards the half-blind dragon. "Come on!"

"Malfoy, are you totally off your nutter?!" Ron cried. "As if we didn't have enough creatures down here trying to kill us already?"

Draco ducked when the dragon's tail swept out, barely missing taking off his head. "I was thinking we might take our leave, if we're done with the tour?" He nodded to the dragon, motioning them over, and Harry now saw what he meant for them to do. "Come on, climb up—before it realises it's free and makes a break prematurely."

“We can’t *ride* this thing!” Ron sputtered, even as he helped boost Hermione onto the crook of the dragon’s hind leg. It didn’t seem to notice it was taking on passengers, still preoccupied with the Goblins trying to hem it back away from the vaults it had been charged with guarding.

Once Hermione was up on the dragon’s back, she extended a hand to help Ron climb up behind her.

Harry laid a hand on the beast’s heaving side; its scales were tough as bone and somehow cool to the touch, unlike Draco who always ran hot in his Animagus form. Hardly the most secure way to make an exit—and certainly not subtle—but they’d lost that luxury a while back. Better to make a scene and escape alive than to try lying low and not escape at all.

“Today, Potter!” Draco hissed, zapping a group of Goblins trying to flank the dragon with a volley of Stinging Hexes.

“Right,” Harry said, then braced a hand on the dragon’s leg to lever himself up, reaching for Ron’s outstretched hand—

—when quite inconveniently, the beast seemed to realise its chains had at last been loosed, dancing like a spooked horse and swinging its truck-sized head about with an enraged roar as one of the wizards slung a *Confringo* at its underbelly, perhaps hoping to find a sensitive spot. But given Harry was pretty sure this was a Ukrainian Ironbelly—Hermione had been most insistent he practically memorise *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*—this served only to rile the dragon up further.

With a shrill, rasping screech, it reared on its hind legs, and Harry had to duck and roll to avoid being trampled underfoot or thrown by its flaring wings. The Goblins also gave it a wide berth as it knocked several dozen of their ranks aside like paper soldiers.

“Harry!” Hermione cried fearfully, and he shared the sentiment. He could feel the blood draining from his face; he *had* to get up on the dragon’s back, because now it was crouching low, with its neck drawn in and angled upward, like it was sighting itself for a

jump. If the beast got airborne, Harry would be trapped down here with the Goblins.

He made a grab for the lashing tail—but something snagged his collar, dragging him back and nearly wringing his neck.

“Leave it!” Draco shouted into his ear, straining to be heard over the din of the shouting Goblins and roaring dragon, before adding in softer invitation that Harry swore sounded almost *playful*, “Still want to ride me?”

“*What?!*” Harry sputtered, but Draco was already dancing away in a blur of white that loomed large as his fingers splayed and grew—until it was the dragon standing before him.

It huffed in irritation that Harry was certain amounted to *Hurry the fuck up!* and crouched as low as possible, though it was no trouble at all to scramble up onto its back, given Draco was several hands shorter than the Gringotts dragon. For the sake of his ego, though, Harry did not mention this.

He had just enough time to wrap his arms in a deathgrip around Draco’s long, serpentine neck before the Gringotts dragon released a primal screech and then launched itself into the air, Hermione and Ron clinging to its back for dear life.

Harry wondered for a wild moment if it was going to try and burst through the ceiling of the cavern, for where else could it possibly go?

Instead, though, it dug its claws into the rocky face of the wall, craning its neck around to get its bearings, and then dove for the passageway through which they had travelled to reach these lowest-level vaults.

Half of the Goblin horde dove out of the way, squawking in terror, while the other half proceeded to hurl daggers and lances that bounced as harmlessly off the beast’s hide as spellfire had.

Before any of them could realise that there was another smaller, much more vulnerable and easily reachable target in Draco, he coiled his muscles, bunched tight like an arrow,

and then launched himself after the other dragon.

It took several concerted beats of his wings for Draco to gain the desired altitude, no doubt thrown off-balance by the additional and unexpected weight of a rider.

The Gringotts dragon was clawing and snapping at the narrow opening to the passageway, as it was far too bulky to squeeze through. It opened its great maw and vomited a gout of flame into the tunnel, turning the passage into a red-hot furnace and likely reducing to cinders any unfortunate Goblins still lurking within. In a panicked rage, it raked its talons across the crumbling, cracked walls, tearing away stone and mortar through sheer force.

“*Defodio!*” Hermione shouted, and the stone face of the cavern gave a groaning snap, crumbling around the dragon and sending up a choking cloud of dust. “Help me cast!” she called from somewhere in the chaos.

Harry shortly realised they were helping the dragon claw its way to freedom. One arm still looped securely around Draco’s neck as he beat the air furiously to stay aloft, he pointed toward the growing passageway opening, praying he didn’t hit the Gringotts dragon and draw its ire, and shouted in chorus with Hermione, “*Defodio!*”

Ron joined him, and between the three of them and the snarling, frantic Ironbelly, they managed to carve away enough of the walls and ceiling to allow the dragon to force its way through the narrow passageway and into the wider tunnels beyond.

The dragon was blindly racing for freedom, desperate to reach the fresher air at the surface, well away from the shrieking, clanking Goblins. Harry hoped its focus remained too fixed on escape to notice it had a tag-along; Draco was already having to follow at a measured distance, wary of straying too near the dragon’s massive spike-tipped tail that was lashing about wildly and could easily fell him—and Harry—fatally.

The cavern was tumbling down around them—boulders the size of cars and jagged fragments of stalactites and clouds of choking dust filled the air, nearly burying them alive at one point before the Gringotts dragon cleared the debris away with another

belching burst of flame.

It was difficult to tell over the sounds of destruction, but Harry thought the clamour of the approaching Goblins might be growing more muffled, and the Ironbelly's fiery breath filling the passageway kept the path clear—

—until at last, through some miracle brought about by their harried spellwork working in concert with the dragon's wild, frantic scrabbling, they finally managed to blast their way free from the dark stone passageway, clambering out of what was now a yawning pit in the middle of Gringotts' grand marble hallway. All present—customers and employees, Goblins and wizards alike—sent up shrieks of terror and dispersed immediately, diving for cover or else racing for the nearest open door. But the dragon paid them no heed, only swung its massive head to and fro, scenting the air. It could taste freedom now, Harry was sure, and with Ron and Hermione clinging terrified to its back, it broke out into a loping gallop as it charged for the entrance. The metal doors buckled like tinfoil as the dragon barrelled through, out and into Diagon Alley, drawing fresh screams and gasps from the startled morning shoppers.

The dragon hesitated only a moment before, with a final bone-juddering roar, it opened its wings like great ragged flags and took to the sky, with Harry—practically throttling Draco—giving fevered chase.

The Hog's Head

Harry reflected that perhaps hopping a ride on a wild, confused dragon that hadn't seen the light of day in who knew *how* long hadn't been the brightest idea. For one thing, there was no saddle, so one sharp bank or buffeting wind, and Hermione and Ron would go tumbling into oblivion, and for another, there were no *reins* and thus no way to steer the creature. Then again, half-blind as the dragon was, who was to say it could have been guided at all?

Draco might try to catch them, but while he was doing well enough carrying Harry, he simply was not a large enough breed to be able to support an additional two passengers.

Still, it was hard not to be relieved beyond measure, even as the Gringotts dragon beat its wings furiously for altitude, climbing up and up and up as the rest of the world fell away from them in a blur. They had escaped—and not just with their lives, but with a Horcrux as well! True, they had lost the sword of Gryffindor, but in the heady rush of having survived a situation that had seemed impossible to escape only moments ago, Harry could only think, *'Well, maybe we'll track it down again later.'*

He clung tight to Draco, who was flapping frantically behind the larger dragon. Between the rough wash of the Ironbelly's wake and the additional strain of having to support a passenger, Harry didn't doubt Draco was pushing himself beyond his means, but there was nothing to be done for it just now.

Draco's scales were smooth and warm, radiating heat from the fire that burned in his belly and cocooning Harry in a bubble that protected him from the cold, biting wind washing over them. His hands ached, fresh burns throbbing with a disjointed rhythm, but he was too exhausted to care. Draco's bat-like wings beat the air in a whoosh-whoosh-glide pattern that lulled Harry into a doze, and if he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was riding a Thestral again, soft, leathery skin and intelligent eyes and all.

Even over the whipping wind, Harry thought he could hear Ron's colourful oaths, and Hermione's face was scrunched up in what seemed to be open sobbing, though Harry couldn't tell if it was from fear or relief. Quite possibly it was both.

He wished he had some way to communicate with Draco. He could probably speak and be heard, but there was of course no way for Draco to respond beyond chirps and snarls and growls. He was usually grateful Draco's Animagus transformation necessarily shut him up and stifled his sharp comments, but right now it was making matters rather difficult.

Where were they going? Did the Gringotts dragon even know, or was it simply content to be moving *away*, putting as much distance as possible between itself and its prison? It showed no intent to land, only continuing to climb higher through chilly clouds that turned to mist and condensed into fine droplets against Draco's hide.

How long could a dragon of the Ironbelly's size fly before it needed to rest? Likely a fair bit longer than one Draco's size could—though the Gringotts dragon probably hadn't flown in *years*, and it might be starving and would probably need to seek out some form of sustenance sooner or later.

Which sent a chill of realisation rippling down Harry's spine: they were in the company of a wild, confused, probably *ravenous* dragon, flying over countryside rife with bite-sized Muggle morsels (not to mention the morsels clinging to the beast's own back). This could very easily turn into a Statute of Secrecy issue, and while Harry had far more important matters to worry about at the moment, the Ministry getting involved would only make things more difficult.

Even without the Ministry on their case, though, there was little doubt that Voldemort would have his own ways of determining what had gone down in the bowels of Gringotts. How long would it take him to learn that someone had tried to break in?

Would his followers put it off for as long as possible, perhaps trying to retrieve the cup themselves before alerting their master to its disappearance? Once he *did* learn what had been stolen, would he realise instantly what Harry and the others were up to?

And what of Draco, whose survival had been shadowed—for reasons beyond comprehension—by Snape? The Goblins had probably been distracted by the Gringotts dragon escaping, but a few would surely have noticed the second dragon slipping out alongside its larger cousin. Then, between Griphook and the missing-but-only-*presumed*-dead Bogrod, Voldemort would learn that underneath the scales and talons had been hiding one of his own Death Eaters turned traitor. Their Obliviation of Travers had been wasted effort.

Would Voldemort do what Narcissa had feared and try to find Draco? Could he track him through the Mark and find Harry in the doing? Or would he simply use Draco's parents to force him to reveal himself?

Draco was probably wondering these same things, and Harry hoped he wasn't about to insist on returning to the Manor to rescue his parents—by force, this time. It had been risky the first time and would be suicide now, though he doubted that would deter Draco.

Harry craned his neck to track the land crawling along far below them—the grey cityscape and vines of roadwork marking London had now given over to countryside in patches of green and brown. He had never seen the world from so high a vantage point—not from a broomstick, not even from an aeroplane, and he wished he had the time to truly take it in.

He leaned as far forward as he felt he safely could without toppling, straining to be sure Draco heard him. “We need to land! You-Know-Who's going to figure out we're after his Horcruxes now, so it's only a matter of time before he snatches the one we're still looking for from its hiding place and secrets it away where we're sure to never find it.”

They had precious little time to act and could not afford to wait for the Gringotts dragon to decide what it wanted to do. They might already be too late if Voldemort by chance checked up on the as-yet-unidentified Ravenclaw Horcrux first.

Draco's only response was a huffing grunt, but he put on some speed, wings buffeting the air furiously as he drew alongside the Ironbelly before pulling ahead.

He flew dangerously close to the larger dragon, and Harry realised he was *baiting* it, trying to get it to follow him down to land. Harry wasn't entirely sure this was a smart idea at all, especially as Draco had a bite-sized passenger perched on his back—and sure enough, the Ironbelly quickly became irritated with Draco's idle nips and scrabbling claws. It seemed to pick up his scent despite its poor eyesight and gave chase with a raspy bellow.

It was a harrowing situation, clinging to Draco's neck as he dipped and swerved to avoid the Ironbelly's snapping jaws and jets of flame, and Harry yelped out every swear he'd ever heard fall from Uncle Vernon's lips and a few he'd picked up from Hagrid and Filch over the years as well.

They were far enough out from civilisation now that, as Draco led the Gringotts dragon lower and lower, Harry could make out some sort of forested preserve—perhaps a national park? He caught the sun glinting off a lake in the distance and saw Draco's plan.

Harry pointed his wand to his throat, whispering, "*Sonus*," and called over to Ron and Hermione, "You've gotta dismount! Hop off once it's over the water!"

Draco broke sharply, and Harry scrambled to hold his seat. The Ironbelly zoomed past him, like a second-rate Seeker missing the Snitch. Draco was by far the more manoeuvrable of the pair, and when Harry glanced back, the Gringotts dragon was already several body-lengths away.

Harry kept his wand at the ready, just in case he needed to do...well, *something* to distract the dragon from Ron and Hermione. He held his breath, watching as they slithered over the side of the dragon and plopped into the placid water below. The Ironbelly did not seem to notice a thing and appeared content to simply be rid of the annoying little juvenile that had been unwisely picking a fight with it.

Draco gave a roll of his shoulder, dislodging Harry from his seat and sending him tumbling into the cold lake waters below. Harry flailed indignantly, slapping at the water to keep afloat, and sputtered, "What the fuck, Malfoy?!"

But Draco was already at the shore, and he crashed roughly into the sand, throwing up dust and sod as he shakily shifted back to himself.

Oh. Draco must have barely been holding it together, after the long, hard flight, and been worried Harry might be harmed in the inevitable crash that would result from his attempt to land. Harry appreciated the thought, but a bit of warning would've been even *better*.

He swam to shore, fighting against being dragged under by his sodden clothes, and was joined shortly by a spluttering and gasping Ron and Hermione. They found Draco lying on his back on the sand, eyes closed but breathing in great gasping pants; he was only exhausted, not unconscious.

Harry threw a glance over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the Ironbelly on the other side of the lake. It had landed on the distant bank and had its snout buried in the shallow shoreline waters, quenching its thirst. He hoped it kept its distance, as none of them were in any fit state to duel a dragon just now.

He envied Draco, dozing on the beach, but there was no time to waste. He beat back the fog of stress and fatigue threatening to descend upon his mind and began casting the battery of protective spells they'd used in their travels thus far. It would be quite the anticlimax to have escaped certain death—or at least capture—only to be undone because they'd neglected the most basic of security measures.

Deciding he'd done as well as he could for now, he stumbled back over to the others, who—aside from Draco—were busy tending their wounds.

So preoccupied had he been with escaping from Gringotts, Harry had momentarily forgotten the grievous injuries they'd suffered in the vault, but now that they'd had a moment to catch their breath, their many burns and welts were beginning to make themselves known. Ron and Hermione were red all over, their skin scored in places with nasty burns and their clothing dappled with singe marks. Harry was certain the damage would have been even worse if Draco hadn't helped protect them from the crushing, red-hot treasure, but their injuries were severe all the same.

Hermione Summoned a bottle of essence of dittany from her bag and began dabbing it on her welts and burns before passing it around to Harry and Ron to do the same. She'd begun pulling out bottles of pumpkin juice (fresh from Bill and Fleur's cold-box back at Shell Cottage) and fresh robes for them all when Draco finally roused and shifted upright, rubbing blearily at his eyes as if waking from a long nap. His skin was pristine, from what Harry could see, the dragon's thick hide having protected him from any injury in their escape.

Harry uncapped one of the bottles for Draco, pressing it into his hands. "All right, there?"

Draco only nodded mutely, bringing the chilled bottle to his forehead and taking several more long, bracing breaths.

"...Well that was fun," Ron said, yanking his soaking robes over his head and quickly bundling back up in the fresh change of clothes Hermione had ready. "Let's never do it again."

"Agreed," Hermione sighed. "And hopefully we won't have to."

"Let's not celebrate too early, though," Harry warned, glumly watching the skin on his hands regrow. He could feel he had boils and blisters in several unmentionable places from his brief dip in the burning treasure, but he lacked the privacy to address them at the moment. Instead, he focused on the most painful of the ones on his exposed skin. "We got the Horcrux, which is great...but now we're down the sword again."

Ron shook his head. "That double-crossing little—"

"You say 'double-crossing' like you weren't intending to do the exact same thing to him," Hermione reminded pointedly.

"But we were doing it for a good reason! *And* we were gonna give it back to him, like we promised, once we were done with it."

"Have you still got the cup?" Harry asked Hermione, and she nodded, tugging open her beaded bag and fishing around inside for a moment before at last drawing out a bundle of

wound-up fabric. She passed it over to Harry, and carefully, being sure not to touch it, he unwrapped it and stood it in a patch of scrub grass between them. It was unassuming and unremarkable, aside from the handsome enamel badger engraved on the side, its beady golden eyes glinting in the early-afternoon sun. Another impossible mission completed, another Horcrux secured—and hilariously enough, this one had *also* resulted in the rescue of an angry dragon.

He turned his attention to the far side of the lake, where the Ironbelly was still drinking its fill. How did that work, Harry wondered—wouldn't the water put out the fire in its belly? Or was the fire stored somewhere separate from the stomach? Perhaps he hadn't been quite as thorough in his study of *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* as Hermione might have liked.

"...I wonder how long they had him chained up down there," Hermione said, following Harry's gaze. "I hope he'll be all right out here on his own. I didn't notice any Muggle towns nearby when we were flying over, but there's no telling where he might go from here."

"Best case scenario, he finds a few villages to go harass and distracts the Ministry for us—we could use a break." Ron swallowed the last of his juice, then Vanished the bottle. "Either way, I think the dragon can handle itself just fine. I'm more worried about where *we* go from here."

"True enough," Hermione said. "I mean...we weren't exactly subtle getting in *or* out—so I'm pretty sure word will get to You-Know Who we broke into one of the vaults. It won't take him long to piece together what we might have been after."

"Maybe they'll be too scared to tell him," Ron suggested, and Harry couldn't help it: he laughed—a real, honest sputtering guffaw. It hurt like hell, his entire body aching with the effort. "...What?" Ron asked, one brow raised and a bemused smile on his lips.

Harry pulled off his glasses and wiped his eyes. "I mean. We left a hole in Gringotts the size of...well, a *dragon*. And fifty Goblins saw us go in *and* out." He wrinkled his nose at the rosy blurs that were Ron and Hermione. "But yeah, maybe they won't tell him."

And this time, Ron laughed too—and Hermione joined in, struggling to hide her chuckles behind a chiding smile. Draco just rolled his eyes at their display and knocked back the rest of his drink, which was about par for the course.

Voldemort knew—or would know shortly—that his defences were crumbling one by one. But he didn't know now—Harry's scar was still intact—and though his body felt like one big, throbbing bruise and he was going a bit loopy and light-headed with hunger, they were *alive* for now, so what could it hurt to have a little laugh, while they still had the luxury? He slumped back onto the soft, warm sand and laughed with his friends, knowing they would not have cause to do so again for a long while.

“Seriously, though—what *are* we doing now?” Hermione sighed at last, following Harry's lead and settling down on the sand, her arms pillowed beneath her head as she basked in the warm glow of the noontime sun. “Should we find Griphook and try to get the sword back from him? Or at least ask to borrow it to destroy the cup?”

Harry shifted upright, looking to the others in turn; their moment's respite was over—it was time to get back to business. “No—we *have* to make finding that last Horcrux our top priority. Once You-Know-Who figures out his failsafes aren't, well, *safe*, he might start moving them, and then we'll *never* get our hands on the remaining two. Nagini will already be difficult enough to deal with, but at least we *know* she's a Horcrux. We can't afford to let the other slip through our fingers.”

“And how exactly do you propose we do that?” Ron asked. “S not as if we haven't spent the better part of the last *nine months* looking for these things.”

Harry pursed his lips, suspicions finally coalescing into certainty. “...We've got to go to Hogwarts. It's the last place it could possibly be and the only place we haven't turned upside down searching.” He held a hand up when he saw doubts already forming on their features. “I know it's dangerous, but we've got to take our chances.”

Ron rubbed the back of his neck. “Listen, mate: I know we're riding high on having just broken into *and* back out of Gringott's, but this is pushing our luck...”

Harry looked to Hermione for support, but she bit her lip in worry. "...Harry, are you *sure*? Even without You-Know-Who realising what we're up to, Hogwarts is already on high alert for you, and we know there's more than a few Death Eaters on the staff, not to mention Snape running the whole operation."

"I'm as sure as I can be. We've got no other choice!" He didn't blame them for not understanding the urgency of the situation—they didn't have this maddening *tick tick tick* rattling about inside their skull, counting down the moments until...until *something* happened. But he still needed them to trust him.

Hermione remained unconvinced. "But—even if we went, and even if we *somehow* managed to sneak in undetected, what then? We don't know what the Horcrux *is*, let alone where to start looking for it. Surely Dumbledore would have found it in the fifty-odd years he was there, what with You-Know-Who churning out Horcruxes left and right!"

"Dumbledore said there were parts of the castle that remained a mystery even to him, though," Harry reminded her. "That's as good as him flat-out saying there's a Horcrux at Hogwarts and he just hadn't managed to find it yet."

Draco wiped a hand over his face, then ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling it a bit so it wasn't slicked back against his skull, as he'd worn it for so many years. "...If it's there, at Hogwarts, it won't be hiding in plain sight, else Dumbledore would've found it."

"Thanks for joining the conversation," Ron drawled, and Draco made a rude gesture, though he seemed too sapped still to escalate matters any further.

"So it's out of sight. Somewhere no one would look—somewhere even if you *did* look, you'd probably never find it."

Hermione frowned. "...What are you getting at?"

Draco clenched his jaw, gaze fixed on the water lapping against the shore. "...There's a room that...appears sometimes, out of thin air."

“Yeah,” Ron said. “The Room of Requirement. We’ve only known about it since—what—Fifth Year?”

But Draco shook his head. “No—no, at least, I don’t think so. This room is different, it’s like...it’s for losing things. Keeping them secret. Sometimes forgetting them.”

Harry’s mouth was dry as a desert, and when he spoke, his voice came out a raspy, wondering whisper. “...The Room of Hidden Things.”

Draco frowned at him. “You know about it?”

“Yes—and no. I happened upon it once; it’s where I—” He cut himself off, remembering the string of events that had led to him lobbing the half-blood Prince’s book into the room. Draco would probably not appreciate the reminder, and Harry was not keen to relive it just now. “It doesn’t matter.” He turned to Hermione and Ron, explaining, “It’s kind of like the Room of Requirement, but for anyone who’s ever ‘required’ a place to get rid of things. To lose things you never want to find again. I remember there being all kinds of contraband and other junk when I found it.”

“It’s rather useful as a hiding place, too,” Draco said. “For when you want to lose *yourself*.” He shifted uncomfortably in place when Harry fixed him with a worried look, concerned at the phrasing. “...I used it quite a bit myself last year, to hide my Animagus preparations.”

“I’ve never heard of this place...” Hermione said, tapping her chin. “But if it’s really what you say it is, then I have to admit it does sound promising. How large a room are we talking about?”

Harry winced, remembering the dozens and dozens of teetering towers of junk, as far as the eye could see. “Well, it’s kind of like a modified version of the Room of Requirement, so...it’s pretty big.” Cataloguing the contents of the entire room could easily take years, but Harry could think of no better hiding place for so precious an object: tossed away as rubbish amidst the forgotten treasures of yesteryear. “But it sounds like as good a place as any to start looking to me.”

Ron sighed. “Well, I haven’t risked my life in a good half-hour. Might as well get to it, yeah?”

Harry gave him a grateful smile, nodding. “All right then—I guess the next task is making it inside without getting caught. What do you think the chances are any of the secret passages into the castle are still working?”

“Do you want to know the odds they’re still working—or the odds they aren’t being guarded?” Hermione asked with a wry grin. “Because I’m more concerned with the latter myself.”

“Well, yeah, okay. I guess we should assume they’re all being watched?”

“I’d err on that side myself, yeah.” She sighed. “We can’t Apparate onto Hogwarts grounds, of course.”

“What about brooms?” Harry suggested. “Dumbledore and I returned to the castle on broomstick after we went Horcrux hunting that final night.”

“Viable—but very visible, even with Disillusionment charms. Maybe if we waited for dark...?” But Harry shook his head; they couldn’t waste the time. “Right, well then, I think we’ll have to Apparate to Hogsmeade and find a way inside from there, in that case.”

“You think it’s safe to Apparate to Hogsmeade?” Ron asked.

“Safe?” Hermione huffed a dry, mirthless laugh. “Not on your life. But if Hogwarts is where we’re going, then we’re desperately short on ‘safe’ routes. We’ll have to go with the one least likely to get us killed on the spot.”

Harry’s stomach churned uncomfortably at her dark—but realistic—read of the situation. “...Guys, you know you don’t have to—”

“Oh put a cork in it, Harry!” Ron groaned. He jerked a thumb at Harry, directing his words to Draco. “You see what we have to deal with? And you’re still hanging around?”

Draco eased to his feet, slapping his thighs to brush off the sand clinging to his wet clothes. “Evidently my dragon finds his death wish fetching; I’m merely along for the ride.” He pointed his wand at his trousers and muttered a drying spell, though his frown said he wasn’t pleased with the outcome. “...Wrinkles. My father would have a heart attack.”

“Maybe this is one thing he *won’t* hear about?” Harry said, trying for a bit of levity, but Draco did not seem amused.

They quickly cleaned up their rest site, Vanishing the remaining bottles of pumpkin juice and spelling their robes clean again. Harry was pretty sure he still had sand in places spellwork couldn’t reach easily, but he doubted Hermione and Ron would appreciate him stripping down half as much as Draco might.

Hufflepuff’s cup was carefully re-wrapped and safely stowed in Hermione’s beaded bag until they could figure out how to deal with it later. Hopefully they’d soon have *two* Horcruxes that needed destroying; that was a problem Harry would quite like to have.

Hermione slipped into her Animagus form, with Ron tucking her into his pocket, and then they all crowded under the Invisibility Cloak. It was far too small to cover three nearly grown adults, but it would do the job well enough provided they trod carefully. If they kept to the shadows and behind cover, they could probably escape notice.

Harry was starting to suspect that it wasn’t a *good* thing their plans relied so heavily on *probably* and *likely* and *if*, but there was nothing to be done for it.

He drew the Cloak tight, wrapping his arms around Ron and Draco’s shoulders, and turned on the spot into the familiar crushing darkness, guiltily giddy at the thought of going *home* once more.

They popped back into existence in the square at the head of High Street in Hogsmeade—though there was curiously no foot traffic, despite the prime hour of their arrival. They quickly scrambled into an alleyway alongside one of the shops fronting the square—Ceridwen’s Cauldrons, its windows dark and dusty—to get their bearings.

Harry levitated a few large crates, arranging them so that they provided a modicum of privacy. Once suitably assured they could not be seen from the street, they shrugged off the Cloak, and Hermione retook her human form.

“You ever seen a place so dead?” Harry whispered.

“Do we have to use the *D* word?” Ron groaned.

“Seriously, though: where *is* everyone? It’s worse than Diagon Alley here...”

“Hogsmeade relies heavily on the staff and students’ patronage,” Hermione said. “It stands to reason that if there are problems at the school, if students aren’t free to travel where they like, when they like, then Hogsmeade might suffer for it.”

“I suppose...” Harry allowed, peeking through a chink in the piled-up crates. “Right, well, here we are, back in Hogsmeade. Where do you reckon we ought to go next?”

“Wherever it is, let’s make it quick,” Draco said, grey eyes flicking about nervously. He gave an exaggerated shudder. “I can practically *feel* the Dark magic floating around here.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed—then straightened. “Wait—*yeah*. I can feel it too. It feels like...” He swallowed thickly, glancing to Ron and Hermione, who had plastered themselves against the wall of Ceridwen’s Cauldrons, eyes wide and frightened.

A dark, foreboding chill crept down Harry’s spine, and though it was only midday, it felt as if the sun had just been blotted out as a heavy, choking despair settled over Harry’s shoulders, all but forcing him to his knees.

He knew now why no one was about shopping in Hogsmeade, why the usually bustling High Street was dead empty.

Dementor patrols.

Draco’s already pale face went stark-white, and Harry knew he was cursing himself for

not having worked harder on his Patronus. It didn't matter, though; there was no way they could possibly fight a pack of Dementors right now, in the middle of the day in a wizarding village probably *crawling* with Death Eaters or their sympathisers.

"We've got to Disapparate!" Hermione hissed, her hand whipping out to grab Harry by the wrist. He reached out to loop his own arm through Draco's and waited for the jerking tug of Hermione's Apparition to take them far, *far* away from here—

But nothing came. They stayed put, and thinking that perhaps she just couldn't focus, couldn't decide where they ought to go, Harry clenched his eyes shut tight and turned on the spot.

Still, nothing. He could feel the Apparition spell tugging at him, straining to respond to his magic, but *nothing was happening*. The magic seemed to fall dead as soon as he summoned it.

"One-Way Anti-Apparition Wards," Draco grit out.

"They knew we were coming?" Ron asked, panic thick in his voice.

"Or laid them, just in case," Draco said. He turned to Harry. "We're sitting ducks out here, and that Cloak won't fool anyone with enough sense to just drop their eyeline a foot or so."

The chill of the approaching Dementors was growing sharper, digging into Harry's flesh with biting teeth and robbing him of his focus. He shook his head to clear it. "Let's keep moving. We'll all get under the Cloak and stick to the side streets—maybe the patrols won't stray far from High Street, so they won't notice our feet."

More *maybes*, but no one questioned the decision. Hermione stayed human this time, her wand out and at the ready. It was too dangerous *not* to fight when faced with Dementors, so she was more use to them as a witch than curled up in Ron's pocket as a rabbit.

They awkwardly shuffled out of the alley, trying to move as a single unit. There was

much bumping and bustling, and ‘quiet’ was a bit beyond them until they found a jerky rhythm, creeping slowly along the shopfronts. Harry tried to peer inside, but many of the windows were boarded up, or had their shades drawn, and it was impossible to tell if any humans were even about.

Then they appeared: Dementors, ten or more at least, gliding noiselessly around the corner, their ratty black cloaks trailing behind them and skeletal hands curled in rigor mortis at their chests.

Had Harry and the others drawn them, their raw fear and worry as clarion as a dinner bell to these creatures? Or were they only following a rote pattern, gliding up and down the streets on the lookout for unfortunate witches and wizards?

The closer they drew, the more Harry became certain that it was the former: the Dementors must be able to sense them, even under the protection of the Cloak, and Harry could *hear* them now. Their dragging, rattling breaths grated like sandpaper, no doubt tasting his mounting despair that they had come so far, gotten *so close*, and—

No. *No*. He was *not* going to go quietly, that was for certain. He raised his wand under the Cloak, keeping the lead Dementor steady in his sights. He would not cower here in silence and let these creatures take his or his friends’ souls.

Something grabbed his wrist, holding tight, and he twisted around to see Draco shaking his head sharply, lips pursed into a thin line.

But Draco didn’t understand; he didn’t feel the *urge* to unleash his Patronus, not the way Harry did. It champed inside him, aching to tear through the Dementors and send them scattering. To protect Harry. To protect them all. And Harry wanted to let it.

Draco’s grip tightened painfully, and Harry could feel Ron and Hermione staring at them in shocked silence as they waited to see who would win this battle of wills.

“Don’t,” Draco mouthed, grey eyes shaking. “*Harry.*”

But the Dementors were nearly upon them, and even if Harry had wanted to look for

any other way out of this mess—and he didn’t—he would have had no choice. Maybe Draco still didn’t trust him, not on everything, not the way Harry needed him to, and that was all right. Harry would prove it. He summoned up the warmest memory of the four of them he could imagine—the empty field at the New Year, a rainbow volley of colour flashing overhead with Draco just the tiniest bit vulnerable, his walls brought down long enough for Harry to peek inside at the desperately flawed human being cowering within. It was a powerful rush, having someone exposing themselves to you like that. His heart thudded in his chest as he whispered, “*Expecto patronum!*”

In a burst of silvery shimmer, the stag erupted from the tip of his wand and charged forward, head dropped low and shaking its great rack of antlers in threat. Its pale glow was visible even in broad daylight, and the Dementors scattered like roaches before a torch—but Harry experienced only a brief moment’s relief before there came a rallying cheer from down one of the side roads off of High Street.

“I saw it! The stag Patronus! It’s Potter all right! This way, quick! Summon the others!”

Oh. Oh *fuck*. The Dementors had been run off, taking with them their unnatural chill and the aching pall of despair, and Harry’s good sense came flooding back to him in a rush. Morgana’s *tits*, what had he done? Why had he fired off a *Patronus* in the middle of Hogsmeade in broad daylight? Why had the others *let* him? Why had—

“Potter, you utter fuckwit!” Draco growled. He groped for the edges of the Cloak, struggling out from under it. “Get this—fucking rag—off me so I can shift—”

The pounding footsteps of what sounded like at least a half-dozen Death Eaters were growing closer, and Harry’s mind was a chaotic whirl. They were going to fight—god, he hadn’t been prepared for a battle, especially not so soon on the heels of the fiasco at Gringotts. They needed to get to Hogwarts, to find the next Horcrux—not trade spellfire with wizards who’d be much less inclined to practise restraint than they might. Draco was right, he was an *utter fuckwit*, and—

While Harry had his panic attack, dithering as to whether they ought to flee or fight (as if

there were a choice), there came the grinding of metal on wood as the door just to their right was jerked open. “Potter! Get your scrawny arse in here, quick!” a rough voice hissed, and before Harry could think to comply, he found himself roughly shoved inside by several pairs of hands, with Hermione, Ron, and Draco piling in after him.

Harry almost didn’t recognise their saviour—it was enough the rough-faced old man didn’t have a Dark Mark visible on the bit of skin exposed by his rolled-up sleeves.

Once inside, Harry tugged off the Cloak, stuffing it into his pocket as he realised they’d just been unceremoniously ushered into the Hog’s Head.

“What’re you doing, fool?!” the man groaned. “Put that thing back on—and get upstairs!” He pointed to a doorway behind the grubby, sawdust-strewn bar. “And—Merlin and Morgana, keep *quiet* this time!” Before Harry could thank him—or pause to think why he suddenly seemed so familiar beyond the odd glimpses Harry had caught of the barman over the years—he had shouldered past them, storming back out the door through which they had just entered.

Harry gaped at the abrupt exit, thoughts still whirling, until Draco stabbed him in the side with the tip of his wand. “Are you deaf as well as dumb, Potter? Upstairs, post-haste!”

“Oh—yeah,” Harry mumbled, slipping around behind the bar and scrambling up the rickety wooden steps before Draco decided to slap him with a Body Bind and levitate his paralysed body the rest of the way.

As soon as his head poked up onto the upstairs landing, Harry scanned the room to be sure they hadn’t stumbled into a trap—he’d already fucked up once today, he really didn’t want to go two for two.

The stairs opened onto a sparsely furnished sitting room lit by a single, sputtering candle flickering on the mantle over a darkened fire grate. The candle threw into alternating light and shadow a single armchair, a faded rug, a rickety old dining table that looked like it comfortably sat one, and the only real piece of décor in the entire room: a large

painting of a blonde girl perched atop a boulder amidst a sea of waving yellow grass. The scene reminded him a little bit of the boulder sat in the middle of Malfoy's lonely moor. The girl wore a sweet smile on her lips, nodding serenely to Harry in welcome. He weakly returned the greeting with a wave of his fingers.

Below, they could hear muffled shouting and snarled language being traded back and forth, and after draping the Cloak over their heads once more as advised, Harry beckoned the others to follow him as they crept forward to press their noses against the grimy glass of the room's single window, peering down onto the street. The barman was facing off against a group of five hooded Death Eaters, gesticulating wildly. Harry marvelled that the other wizards hadn't cursed him yet—the barman had to have bollocks the size of cantaloupes to mouth off to Voldemort's men the way he was.

“Yeah, what? You want to have a go?” he squawked, leaning into the personal space of one of the Death Eaters. “Gonna string me up for defending my property? You send those overblown bin bags down my street, and they're sure as anything gonna get a Patronus up their arses! If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: I'm not having these things within a mile of my business!”

“*Your* Patronus, my chapped arse! That was a stag, plain as the nose on my face! And everyone knows Potter's Patronus is—”

“A *stag*?!” the barman sputtered, sounding like his head might just pop off and go spinning into the Forbidden Forest. “Have any of you lot ever *seen* a stag? Does everything with horns and hooves look like a stag to you? For cryin' out loud—*Expecto patronum!*”

A spray of silver erupted from the tip of his wand, coalescing quickly into something that, from this angle, didn't look *entirely* unlike a stag. When Harry squinted, though, he could see it was much more burly, and rather than antlers, it bore a pair of long, curving horns—it was, he thought, a rather fierce-looking goat, and it charged through the Death Eaters, who quickly made way for it, up High Street and out of sight.

“Well, that's obviously... I mean, that wasn't what I saw...” the Death Eater mumbled, a

clear note of self-doubt in his voice now. He scratched his head through the thick fabric of his hood, his mask slightly off-kilter.

“Maybe if you lot weren’t drinking me dry every eve, you’d be able to tell a proper billy goat from an effin’ deer!” The barman waved his wand in the general direction the Dementors had fled. “Keep that lot well clear of my pub! You’re scarin’ off my regulars!”

“*What* regulars?” one of the other Death Eaters jeered.

“The people who lived here before you lot came swooping in and took over like you own the place!”

“Oi,” said a new Death Eater, freshly arriving. His carriage and tone suggested he was the leader of the group. “We mind our business and you mind yours—that’s how we like it, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll learn to like it as well.”

“I *was* mindin’ my own business, wasn’t I? Then you lot came over, bangin’ on about a stag Patronus! Open your eyes!”

“Quit yer bitchin’!” another Death Eater growled. “Or I’ll give you somethin’ to bitch about!”

“Ooh, you’ve got me spooked! I’ve had stomach ulcers cause me more grief than you lot!”

“Want we should change that?”

“No, I *want* you should do as you said you would and *mind your own bleedin’ business* and don’t give me lip when I handle mine! Keep my street clear and we’ll all get along!”

“...Still say it was a stag I saw,” mumbled the first Death Eater petulantly to his nearest fellow, and this set the barman off again.

“It was a *goat*, you ninny!” he spat. “You want another demonstration? I’m happy to have it run you down! Might do you a bit of good, cleanse that rotten aura of yours.”

“Pipe down, you old sod. My head’s about to split in two from all your whinging,” said the lead Death Eater. “Right—clearly a mistake was made, innocent enough. Just keep clear of the patrols if you don’t want any trouble.”

“Bit difficult to do that when they trundle past my front door, innit? Get off with you!”

This clearly had not been the Death Eaters’ first tangle with the barman, for rather than rising to his bait, their leader shooed them away, and they strode as a group back down High Street, presumably to find another poor resident of Hogsmeade to harass.

Hermione slid to her knees, leaning her head against the windowsill and releasing a warbly little sigh of relief. Harry spelled the window opaque, then drew the curtains just in case and pulled off the Cloak.

“I think I’ve lost ten years of my life in the past ten minutes...” Draco muttered, running his hands through his hair. “Fuck, you’re going to be the death of me, Potter.”

“Promises, promises,” Ron said, drawing Hermione back to her feet and guiding her over to the only armchair in the room before settling onto a faded ottoman beside her.

They could hear the barman down below, rebolting the heavy door to the bar and mounting the creaking steps. His balding pate poked up onto the landing first, followed by the rest of his aged frame. He did not look happy to see them.

“Never, in all my years, have I seen a group with such a deathwish! Bunch of bloody little idiots!” he spat gruffly, glaring at each of them in turn. “All those years getting an education up at that school, and what’ve you learned? Nothing! Why in the name of all that’s good and magical would you come *here* with that price on your head?!”

Harry ignored the beginnings of a lecture, instead blurting out the first thing he could think of: “We can’t thank you enough, sir. I’m not sure how you managed it, but you probably saved our lives—”

“‘Probably’, nothing—I sure as blazes *did* save them. For all the good it’ll do you.” He shouldered past Harry, lighting lamps with prods of his wand. “And I didn’t do it for your

thanks, either.”

“Why *did* you do it, then?” Harry asked, peering thoughtfully at the barman. There was *something* there—something beyond the long, stringy, wire-grey hair and scraggly beard. Something beyond his dusty spectacles hiding eyes a piercing, brilliant blue—“You’re Aberforth!” he said with sudden clarity. For as much time as they’d spent poring over *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* the past few months, it was a wonder Harry hadn’t realised it sooner.

“Dumbledore’s brother?” Ron asked, gaping.

Aberforth—for it *was* him, Harry would have staked his life on it; probably *had* staked his life on it, actually—said nothing, only drawing his wand from his back pocket and pointing it at the darkened fire grate. Shortly, a flame bloomed in its heart and began crackling merrily. This far north, Spring was still a bit chilly, and the run-in with the Dementors had not helped a bit. Harry shuffled nearer to the fire once it had caught, rubbing his hands with a sheepish smile.

Someone’s stomach gurgled, and Harry turned to see Draco resolutely looking away, arms folded tightly over his chest and cheeks tinged with pink.

Aberforth followed his gaze, grunting, “...Suppose now that you’re here, I may as well spare you a spot to eat.” He raised a finger in threat. “Don’t move a muscle, and don’t make a sound, yeah?”

As soon as he’d disappeared back down into the bar, Hermione was off to the races. “Aberforth Dumbledore! I can’t believe it! All this time—and neither of them ever mentioned...!”

Harry did not share her difficulty believing; there were a great many things Dumbledore had never divulged, he’d learned in recent months. That his younger brother ran a seedy pub in Hogsmeade seemed small potatoes compared to some of the other salacious secrets they’d uncovered of late.

Aberforth returned shortly bearing a plate of sausages, chips, and four mugs of Butterbeer, which he placed on a small work table. Harry's mouth watered; he hadn't had Butterbeer in what felt like *ages*. They tucked in, ravenous from the harrowing morning, and for the next ten minutes, Aberforth's loft was filled with only the sounds of chewing and slurping and sated sighs.

"All right," said Aberforth once they'd cleaned their plates and begun the arduous task of digesting what had been a relatively sumptuous meal, all things considered. Hermione had offered to switch places with Ron, and he now sat slumped in a half-doze on the wobbly chair while she was perched attentively on the ottoman. "If you're rested enough to move, I think you'd best be on your way."

Draco sat straight-backed and alert on a bench against the wall, scanning the room and its occupants like he half expected one of them to unzip and reveal they'd been a Death Eater in disguise all along. Harry was certain he must be exhausted—even more so than Ron, who seemed able to nap anywhere—but Draco would never show it if he could at all help it. Only once they were safely camped inside their tent again, tucked away in their room, would he unwind.

"Our thoughts exactly," Harry said. "Any advice on how to go about doing that?"

Aberforth leaned back in his chair, scratching his beard. "I reckon your best bet is to get under that Cloak again and set out on foot. They put Caterwaul Charms up at night, but those won't activate until sunset. Time your leaving right, and you can slip past the Dementors easy. They've got Anti-Apparition wards up, I'm sure you've noticed, so you'll have to hoof it until you're at least as far as the foothills; you should be able to Disapparate to wherever your little hearts please from there. Or else head up towards the mountains—you might run into Hagrid then; last I heard, he was lying low in a cave on the eastern face with that half-brother of his."

"Wait—mountains? Disapparate?" Harry shook his head. "You misunderstand—we're heading for Hogwarts. We aren't *leaving*."

Aberforth released a harsh snort. "You're *mad*. That's the last place you need to go."

“Finally, someone’s talking sense,” Ron sighed, eyes still closed.

“Well, I’m sure it might seem that way,” Harry said, “but we still have to go there.”

“Bullshit you have to—whatever you need, it’s not worth your skins, which is what you’ll be risking taking so much as one *step* in the direction of that castle.”

Harry made a low noise in the back of his throat. He’d already had this argument once today, he wasn’t keen to have it again.

“...Due respect, sir, you aren’t really in a position to tell us what’s worth risking our skins for. We *have* to get into Hogwarts—full stop. It’s of the utmost importance to...to the job Dumbledore—I mean, your brother—tasked us with—”

“Oh, I see,” said Aberforth, snatching up the empty mugs and Banishing them back down the stairs. “My brother’s involved—why didn’t you say so sooner? That changes *everything*.” His tone was at odds with his words, and Harry was quickly getting the sense Aberforth and Dumbledore had not gotten on well. “Here’s my new advice then: don’t stop at the mountains. Get out of the country even, if you can. Forget my brother and his plans and whatever he told you you ‘have to’ do. There’s no honour in ‘have to’, nothing worthwhile in bending to someone else’s will at expense of your own.” He looked Harry straight in the eye, and the firelight hit the glass in his spectacles at just the right angle, making them go opaque. “Nothing can hurt him now—he won’t have to face the consequences of his decisions any longer. You, though—you’re still at his mercy so long as you blindly follow him. It’s gonna get you killed; you certainly won’t be the first it’s happened to.”

“But this isn’t *about* him, it’s about everyone else! You don’t get what he—”

“Don’t I?” Aberforth’s tone went dangerously quiet—and Harry considered for the first time that this might not be an easy conversation for the barman. It hadn’t even been a year since he’d lost the last of his family. “I knew him longer than your *grandparents* were alive, Potter. I knew every deep, dark secret there was to him, all the twisted ways he manipulated people over the years, the tippy-top highs and the abysmal lows. Gonna

try and tell me you knew him better than I did?”

“I—I didn’t mean...” Harry started, then sighed. He’d hoped the food and drink might jump-start his mind, giving him the energy to push through the pain and exhaustion. It was mostly just making him feel even more sluggish than before. They needed to be on their way and quick, or he was going to be caught in a nap like Ron. “I wasn’t suggesting that at all. I only meant to say that he left me—us—a job. One you couldn’t have known about.”

Aberforth nodded. “Of course he did. Probably made it sound ever so important, too—like the fate of the wizarding world rested on your scrawny little shoulders. It’s all bullshit—he says those sorts of things because people like *you* will believe him. You’ll think because he’s *the* Albus Dumbledore, he must know best. He must be good. He must be *right*.”

“It’s not about what’s *good* or *right*,” Harry protested, “It’s about what’s *necessary*, what I need to—”

“What you need is a good, swift kick in the arse,” Aberforth grumped. Ron snorted softly, and Hermione hissed *Ronald* in admonition. Draco was holding himself, if possible, even more stiffly than before, gaze shunted off to the side. “Sounds like that’s what it’ll take to get the stars out of your eyes. For fuck’s sake, he’s *dead* boy! Let it go, before you follow him! He made his own bed, so let him rot in it.”

“That’s hardly a choice I can make—”

“There’s always a choice—and if you aren’t choosing yourself at the end of the day, you’ll probably not live to regret it.” His words sounded achingly familiar—and Harry wondered if Aberforth didn’t have tucked away in an old trunk around here somewhere a tie in colours of green and silver. “Or what, are you in it for the glory too, like he was? Telling yourself it’s for the good of all mankind or some such rot, and damn whoever gets hurt in the process? Bollocks!”

“I—” Harry started gamely, then fell silent. He hadn’t expected an interrogation about

his motivations; hell, he hadn't had peace enough to really consider things. This was... just what he had to do. Something he felt, bone-deep, that he was *meant* to do, since Aberforth seemed hung up on 'have to'. "So, what—I'm to run away? Sit back and watch from the sidelines?"

"If you know what's good for you, yeah! I was in the Order myself at one point—*was* being the operative word. And look where it got me: old, alone, gettin' lip from younglings who ought to know better by now than to go racing towards their deaths at full tilt. There's no war, there's no more battles—look around you. He *won*. His influence is everywhere, and if you don't turn 'round right now and get as far from here as possible, he's eventually gonna do what he's been wanting to for years and kill you—you, and everyone you ever loved or cared for. Because that's what megalomaniacs *do*. You're better off staying away from them."

"You really think I could abandon everyone? Not even *try* to help?"

"Got that strong a deathwish, do you?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," Draco snorted derisively.

Aberforth frowned at him, then turned back to Harry. "There's no helping. There's nothing you or your little band here can do. So rather than waste your efforts on fighting back the rising tide, you ought to just get lost. *Literally*. Go where he'll never find you. He hasn't even looked at the States, not like Grindelwald did, and he's not likely to for a while yet." He nodded to Ron and Hermione. "And you two ought to join him—everyone knows you're in league with him." He wrinkled his nose at Draco. "Dunno what you're doing with that one, honestly, but he can't be in much better shape, so you might as well make a caravan of it."

Harry dismissed the idea out of hand. "No—I'm *not* going. I'm not running away. I've got a job, and I mean to see it through—"

"If it's a job you can do, it's a job *anyone* can do, so give it to someone who knows what they're doing. It's the smart thing, even: he'll be so focused on you, he won't see

whatever it is coming from someone else.”

Harry opened his mouth to say he knew exactly what he was doing, but that wasn't entirely true. Instead, he said, “It can't be someone else. It *has* to be me. It's not ego—it's not for glory. It's just how it has to be. Dumbledore explained that—”

“Oh right, that's what I remember best about my brother: how thorough he was about *explaining* things. How he made sure everyone who worked with him had a clear idea of what they were getting into. How he left nothing to chance.” Aberforth snorted derisively. “Do you think—do you *really* think—he wanted what was best for you?”

Harry wanted, so badly, to say *yes*—it was an ingrained response now. But the word stayed banked behind his tongue, and Aberforth seemed to read him like a book, smirking, though he did not seem entirely pleased.

“I'm blood with Albus Dumbledore, Potter. I've seen him grow from the man he was a century ago...into the man he was a year ago. He's changed over the years, I'll grant you—but you'd be surprised at just how much stayed the same. He's always been good at presenting himself in a manner the world wanted to see—showing people the perfect son, a promising student, a responsible brother, a venerable headmaster. But the thing he excelled *best* at, the thing he took to quicker than anything else...was lies. Lies and secrets and subterfuge—that's the legacy of Albus Dumbledore.” Aberforth's gaze went, almost reluctantly, to the painting of the girl hanging over the mantle. The crackling fireplace threw long shadows over the portrait, and the girl was still settled primly on the boulder, staring vacantly out into the sitting room. “Sometimes I wonder if even *he* knew all the cards he was holding.”

Hermione followed Aberforth's eye, and she nodded to the painting. “Is that...is that your sister Ariana, Mr. Dumbledore?”

Aberforth straightened, frowning at her. “...I see you've been reading Rita Skeeter's claptrap, then” Harry wondered if Draco would rise again to Rita's defence, but he was still huddled slump-shouldered on the bench and didn't seem to be tuned in to the conversation.

Hermione flushed darkly, her shame obvious even by the low light of the fire. “I—we weren’t reading it for...for pleasure or anything—”

“Elphias Doge mentioned her to me as well,” Harry said, hoping to draw away Aberforth’s ire. “I chatted with him for a spell at Bill Weasley’s wedding, and her tale came up in passing.”

“I’m hard-pressed to believe stories about my sister came up in *passing* at a wedding,” Aberforth grunted. “Doge needs to learn to keep his big mouth shut about matters that don’t concern him.”

“He wasn’t speaking ill of her,” Harry hastened to add. “He was very kind, defending her against some very nasty accusations.”

Aberforth sneered. “Defending *Albus* more likely. The way he worshipped my brother, like the sun rose and set by his leave—it was almost as bad as watching Albus pant after Gellert.” He grimaced. “The whole damn world would’ve let him curse ‘em blind and thanked him for showing ‘em the darkness.”

Harry did not mention his own misgivings about Dumbledore; they still festered within, but it didn’t seem very tactful to bring up his concerns about his former headmaster’s erstwhile aspirations of Muggle domination. Not when they were trying to get Aberforth to help them complete the task Dumbledore had asked of Harry.

No, he had made his peace, of a sort. Whatever Dumbledore’s reasoning, whatever his past, it did nothing to change the clear and present danger of Voldemort, and the need to bring him down, no matter the cost. He would continue forward, walking the path Dumbledore had marked, no matter the danger or risk. He would never receive all the answers he so desperately wanted—not from Dumbledore himself at least—but he was beginning to accept that that didn’t matter. Only the endgame mattered. Only defeating Voldemort mattered.

He had ached for Draco to trust him, so what did it say if he couldn’t trust another himself?

Harry was sure he had let Draco down on more than one occasion, betrayed that trust, and yet Draco carried on at his side. Sure, there was the dragon, and the M word business that was yet to be addressed, but Harry wanted to believe that Draco would still be here, trusting in Harry (or at least wanting to trust), even without the collar of his Animagus form.

So Harry would take a leaf from his book and place his life once more in the hands of Albus Dumbledore—though there would be no blind trust this time. He would walk that path that Dumbledore had prepared with eyes wide open.

“Whatever feelings we did or didn’t have for your brother, they’ve got nothing to do with what we’re here for now, with the job we *have* to do.”

Aberforth stared at him, and behind his spectacles, Harry could see that he had the same striking blue eyes as his brother. Eyes that gave the same discomfiting impression that they could see right through Harry, read his every thought. Know his doubts, and how to use those niggling feelings to get Harry to do what Aberforth wanted him to.

“I’m sure you saw a side to Professor Dumbledore we never did, sir, but I truly believe he *did* care for Harry,” Hermione said in soft, feeble protest. She still seemed thrown by the earlier accusation she’d violated Aberforth’s privacy by reading Rita’s book.

Aberforth gave a raspy huff. “Oh, I don’t doubt it—he did have feelings. They didn’t always come from the right parts of him, and they weren’t always manifested with the best of intentions, but he did have a heart.” His demeanour darkened. “Doesn’t change the fact that all the people he supposedly cared about somehow wound up dead or worse for all his ‘love’.”

Hermione pursed her lips, then seemingly unable to keep her thoughts to herself any longer, hurtful though they might be, she asked, “...Are you talking about what happened with your sister?”

Aberforth’s gaze turned frigid, such a strange hateful coldness in those bright blue eyes, and he squared his jaw with a hard grit of his teeth, blustering, “You think you know

what happened to my sister? Huh?” Hermione quailed under his outburst, but he barged on. “I don’t blame him for her being broken—that wasn’t his fault; it was the fault of those fucking Muggle twerps who caught her doing magic and harassed her until she got so scared of her own magic it turned inward and *destroyed* her. Broke her into a thousand little pieces. All they knew was she’d done something fantastic and they wanted to see it again, pushing her and pushing her and *pushing her...*” He swallowed thickly. “Of course she couldn’t do it, she was all of six years old—didn’t know what she’d done to begin with. But they wouldn’t let up, wouldn’t leave her be...”

There was an unmistakable quaver in his voice now, and Harry felt a collective breath held as they listened, in horror, to Aberforth’s tale. Hermione’s eyes were huge in the firelight; Ron looked like he might sick up the sausages and chips; and Draco...Draco had a look about him that was all too familiar: *Fucking Muggles, heathens, barbarians.*

It was hard to argue with him, hearing Aberforth speak.

The barman stood up, tall as Dumbledore had ever been and suddenly terrible in his anger and bone-deep, years-denied pain. “She never recovered—never, not after what they did to her. She was *terrified* of her magic, begged me and Albus to take it away from her. She tamped it down, deep, tried to keep it from showing, fought tooth and nail to never let it loose.”

Draco’s fingers clenched in the fabric of his trousers, white-knuckled and taut, and Harry itched to reach out to him, to ground him with a calming touch. Draco had spent *months* living in fear of his magic turning on him, lost, thinking he’d never be whole again.

“And of course it’s dangerous doing that sort of thing—like being scared of your own lungs so you try not to breathe. You’ve gotta breathe, and your lungs don’t give a fig how you feel about ‘em. So the magic would build up inside of her and explode in fantastic displays when she couldn’t keep it in check any longer—and you never knew when it was coming. One moment she’d be a sweet, harmless thing, playing with her dolls or piecing together a puzzle with our mum, and then...she’d be this terrifying, strange force of raw arcane energy that literally blew the roof off the house.

“She was inconsolable, couldn’t control her emotions—she’d scare herself into a faint when her magic went running rampant, and our dad...he couldn’t take it anymore. He couldn’t stand there, knowing what those boys had done to her, knowing they’d never pay for it. He couldn’t report the incident to the Ministry, after all—no, if they found out what had become of Ariana, the state she was in, they’d have locked her away, saying she was a threat to the Statute of Secrecy. She’d be tossed into St. Mungo’s and never see the light of day again. So our dad...” Aberforth swallowed. “...He took care of the matter himself. Tracked down the little bastards responsible and made them pay, but *good*. Of course they locked him up for it—life in Azkaban for ‘use of serious magical force against Muggles’. He wouldn’t cop to why he’d done it, though—not to the Aurors, not to the DMLE head, not to the Wizengamot. Just went to Azkaban quiet as a mouse. Maybe...” He released a long, stuttering breath. “Maybe things would’ve been better...if he’d told the truth. Maybe—”

But he shook his head, sighing. “Well, we were all-in after that. It was me, Albus, and our mum keeping Ariana’s condition quiet, lest she get carted off for something she couldn’t control. Our mum was a strong woman—she’d never once tried to stop our dad, and after he was gone, she had us packed up overnight and off for a fresh start in a Godric’s Hollow. Everyone who cared we were leaving we told Ariana was ill and we were just looking for some peace and quiet after the scandal with our dad.

“It was our mum who looked after her mostly, as Albus and I were in school and Ariana needed an eye on her at all times, to make sure she didn’t hurt herself or anyone else. If I’d had my druthers, I would’ve quit school then and there to help—I was Ariana’s favourite after all, I think.” He spoke with a wistful fondness and a faraway look that made him suddenly seem decades younger, a grubby schoolboy smitten with his kid sister though his mates might tease him for it. “But Mum insisted I finish Hogwarts, and Albus...well, Albus couldn’t be bothered. He was happy to be off at school and away from his loony sister, and whenever we came home for the holidays, you’d never even know he was there, always holed up in his room studying magical theory or posing in his mirror with his umpteen trophies or dashing off correspondence to all his hoity-toity acquaintances.” Aberforth said this with a sneer, and Harry wondered how much of his story had been unfairly coloured by jealousy.

“But when I had the time, on holidays and such, I’d spend all my waking hours with Ariana.” He was openly staring at the painting now, throat bobbing. “Such a sweet thing, only scared. She never asked for anything that happened to her. My mum was strong but not a patient woman—I think Ariana would’ve had trouble growing up under her roof even without all the mess she had to deal with. But I didn’t mind. I’d sneak her treats when I could, take her on walks around the garden—I was the only one who could talk her down from a fit before things really got nasty. Earned a few bumps and bruises in the doing, but it was worth it.

“But...I couldn’t be there all the time.” Aberforth grimaced, rubbing at his nose. “And I wasn’t there when it mattered most. Ariana was fourteen, and she had an attack—they came less frequently as she got older, but they were fiercer when they hit, and my mother...she wasn’t as young as she’d once been, and the strain of having to care for Ariana all by herself, to protect her from prying eyes and bear the burden of her secret... it took its toll on her. When Ariana’s fit struck, she...” He released another ragged breath, swallowing thickly. “It was an accident, it really was—Ariana was beside herself when Bathilda found them, just absolutely stricken. But all the same, our mother was dead, and her rabid magic was to blame.”

Just like Dumbledore, just like Draco. The parallels were chilling, and Harry shivered unconsciously. The urge to draw Draco close and tell him, in no uncertain terms, that Harry *wouldn’t let that happen*, was nigh overwhelming. Aberforth hadn’t been there to save Ariana from herself, but Harry *would* be there, because Draco trusted him to do so. And he would say as such, just as soon as they had a bit of privacy, he resolved.

“Well, that decidedly changed all our plans for the future—not that I’d really had any beyond finishing up school and retiring to the village to help look after Ariana. Albus was another story entirely—his whole world came crumbling down once word arrived of what had happened. No globe-trotting with Doge, no conferences in wizarding Paris, no ambassadorship to Atlantis. I thought he might’ve said ‘fuck it’ and set off anyway, but he surprised me for once in his life, coming home for our mum’s funeral and claiming he was going to settle down and take up the mantle of head of the family. Like it was some great sacrifice, but he would bear that odious honour. *Ha!*” Aberforth sneered at some

memory only he could see.

“I told him straight that I was ready to quit Hogwarts then and there. I’d learned all I needed, and I’d already talked to Bathilda and a few of our neighbours about doing some Charm repairwork for them, as I had good marks in the class and found I enjoyed the work. Plus our mother had left us a decent enough sum that Albus could’ve gone on to do the great deeds he’d always dreamed of, and Ariana and I would’ve been just dandy, never would’ve troubled him once.

“But of course Albus wouldn’t hear of it, acting all high and mighty, saying I had to finish my schooling and not to worry about our family’s situation, that he was the head now and it was his responsibility to care for the rest of us. I know he wasn’t necessarily being stubborn or prideful—he really did think it was what he was meant to do. But that sort of business breeds resentment. Which, of course it would: he’d gone from Head Boy to Head of the Gnomes Mucking Up Our Back Garden in the span of a heartbeat. And certainly he wouldn’t have time to hobnob with the rich and powerful in magical academia anymore, and who was going to slog through his dry treatises on magical theory? Not me, that was for sure. But Albus was stubborn as he was proud and insisted—and he managed all right for a few weeks.” Aberforth’s expression went dark and dangerous, and he stared into the fire with a vengeful air. “‘Til *he* showed up.”

Harry swallowed, unable to help the way his heart leapt with excitement—he’d wondered for so long, with a kind of morbid curiosity, and here he was, finally about to hear the truth of it. Dumbledore, Grindelwald, what happened between them, how they fell out.

“Gellert Grindelwald, rogue at large—and suddenly Albus’s future was bright again. Here was an equal come to call on him at last, someone with dreams as grand as his own who could rescue his mind from the monotony of life cooped up in Godric’s Hollow. He was smitten from day one, always out with Gellert cooking up some mad scheme or another, and suddenly there was no time for Ariana, not while they were hatching plans for a new wizarding order and searching for those damned fanciful Hallows. After all, they were going to be the glorious young leaders heralding the dawn of a grand new world for all

wizardkind, so what was one neglected little girl in the scheme of things?”

“For the greater good...” Harry muttered, half to himself, and Aberforth nodded grimly.

“I left ‘em to it for a few weeks. There’d been a lot of tumult in our lives lately, and maybe if Albus got it out of his system, had his fun with Gellert without my sticking my nose in it, he’d come around to his senses and remember all that rot he’d said about being the Head of House. But it only got worse as the days went by, and then Albus started rattling on about going off on campaign, to recruit followers with Gellert and sell their notions, and I had to put a stop to it.

“It was one thing for Gellert to scarper off, not having any responsibilities or ties himself, but Albus had Ariana to look after, since he wouldn’t let me do it. He couldn’t possibly take her with him, not with the dangers she posed to herself and others. Five minutes on the road with Albus and she’d have fried someone’s brains for certain! If he meant all that claptrap about taking up our mother’s mantle, he needed to *own* it.

“I was pretty proud of myself, finally standing up to him that way—I think even Albus was a bit impressed—but Gellert, he didn’t like that *one* bit. He got piss angry and popped off like I’d never seen him before. Think it even shook Albus a bit, which bully for him; about time he got the stars out of his eyes and started thinking with his north head instead of his south one. Gellert started banging on about how I was stupid, how I had no idea what it meant, standing in the way of the greatness they were trying to achieve. That I didn’t understand the good that would come of their efforts—that it was all to *help* my sister, because we wouldn’t have to hide her away once they’d remade the world as they saw fit and lifted the wizards up into their rightful place over the Muggles.

“And me being me and not gaga for Gellert, I saw through his bullshit. We got into an argument, because of course we did...and then things got physical. I’m not proud of myself for being the one to reach for my wand first—but Gellert was quicker on the draw, and he didn’t have any compunctions about using an Unforgivable, not even on his best friend’s brother. The Cruciatus Curse—I thought I was going to die, I really did. Albus was a mess, trying to stop Gellert—first with his words, and then finally with his

wand and it was an all-out duel amongst the three of us, spells being chucked left and right. We'd been arguing in the garden, and Ariana had been inside having tea in the kitchen—but I guess she saw the flashes and heard the bangs, she came out to see what was what and panicked, rushed up to stop us—”

Aberforth fell abruptly silent, face gone pale and drawn. The firelight reflected in his sorrowful blue eyes, shining brightly.

“...She only wanted to help. That's all. She saw we were hurt and angry, and she just wanted to put a stop to it. She didn't know what she was doing, and...” He swallowed a lump, closing his eyes. “...I'm not sure which of us did it. Might have been all of us. Might have been me. Might've even been her own magic overloading from shock and stress. All I know is one moment she was alive, and screaming, and then the next she was dead.”

The final word dropped with the force of a lead brick, and with a shuddering breath, he fell silent at last. Hermione had stark wet streaks running down her cheeks, and her eyes were wet with tears. Ron now openly gaped, brows knit in horror. Draco looked as broken as Harry had ever seen him, no doubt reliving his own traumatic experiences with his magic flying out of control, hurting others—hurting himself.

Harry could not find the strength to be horrified, though—he'd heard this story in several twisted iterations already. All he could summon was a deep, bitter regret, wishing Aberforth had not had the strength to make himself tell the truth of the tale—or else that he could Obliviate himself and make it to where he'd never heard it.

“...That's just awful, Mr. Dumbledore...” Hermione was the only one of them with the courage to speak up, even though it was in a very small voice. “I'm so...so sorry.”

Aberforth did not respond, only gave a gruff, grunting shrug and cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice sounded clearer and less choked. “Then of course, Gellert made himself scarce. Don't think he even told Albus goodbye—just vanished. Evidently he'd been on the run, after a fashion, with a dicey record in his home country, so having Ariana's death blamed on him, or even connected with him, wouldn't have done him any favours. And Albus...well, he wasn't going to be forging a new wizarding world order on

Gellert's arm any time soon, but he was finally free to set off and become what he'd always dreamt of being: the greatest wizard of the—”

“He wasn't free at all,” Harry said, staring down at his hands in his lap.

“What was that? Got something to say, Potter?” There was a hint of offence in Aberforth's voice, but Harry didn't care. If Aberforth was going to pour out Ariana's story and make them drink it, then he was going to get the right of it as far as Albus Dumbledore was concerned.

“You said Dumbledore was free, like he was relieved she'd died because now he could go off and do whatever he wanted—but that wasn't how it was at all.”

“You trying to say you knew him better—”

“Of course not, you know I'm not.” Harry lifted his eyes to meet Aberforth's. “...But the night he died, I'd been out with him on a special errand. He drank a potion while we were on that errand, a terrible one made him relieve his very darkest memories, the worst moments of his life. And all the while he was forcing himself to drink that potion, he was crying—screaming—pleading: *'Don't hurt them, please... Hurt me instead!'* he said.”

Ron, Hermione, and Draco were staring at Harry now—each undoubtedly with their own brand of shock. He couldn't blame them; he'd never explained to Ron and Hermione the details of what had transpired in that seaside cave—initially because, well, there'd been a dragon trying to break into Gryffindor Tower, and later because...it had seemed too intimate a thing to share, their venerable headmaster brought so low and rendered so distressingly human. And Draco...had *anyone* ever told Draco what had happened that night? Really explained it to him? Harry recalled a brief overview on that lonely, misty moor inside Draco's mind, but his understanding of the events surrounding Dumbledore's death was little better than Draco's.

Harry fixed Aberforth with a hard look. “That was his worst memory: being back there, with you and Grindelwald and Ariana. The three of you fighting—and her dying.” He could still hear Dumbledore's broken, sorrowful pleading, real tears streaming down his

face from red-rimmed eyes, and Harry recalled how childishly discomfited he'd been, seeing an authority figure brought so low. "If you'd seen him then, there's no way you could think he'd moved on from that—that he'd thought himself 'free'."

Aberforth watched him for a long while, expression inscrutable, then turned his eyes to the floor. "...Be that as it may, what makes you so sure that even then, he wasn't in some dark corner of his mind still clinging to that failed notion of a 'greater good'? That he could create a world where Ariana wouldn't have wound up that way—that what happened to her was horrible, but his ideals were well-founded? You keep talking about some job he's got you doing—how do you know he isn't just setting you up? Using you to do the task he failed at himself?"

I should be so lucky, he would have once said—but now, a shard of ice lodged itself in Harry's heart. He didn't want to be here any longer; the more he spoke with Aberforth, the darker his doubts became, and he *couldn't have doubts*, not right now.

"He was a good professor—and a half-decent headmaster, I'll grant. And I'm sure he cared about you after a fashion—but he cared about Ariana too, and look where that got her. If he loved you, *really* wanted what was best for you, then he wouldn't have sent you charging into danger—"

"Yes, he would have. He did," Harry said, chin jutting as the fire to fight back began to rekindle in his heart. Just a tiny, pitiful flame, but there. "And I know that because we don't always get to keep the people we love close at hand, safe and secure. Sometimes we have to let them go, even into danger, and pray they make it back to us. Sometimes we have to think about more than our own safety and the safety of those we care for. Sometimes we have to think about the safety of *everyone*." He swallowed, resolute when he said: "Sometimes yeah, we *do* have to think about the greater good."

"Sounds as stupid on your lips as it did on Albus's," Aberforth snarled. "You're *seventeen*—and this is war; what the hell do you know?"

"It's always been war—it's been war since I was born. I've been fighting in some fashion or another since I was a baby," Harry fired back, reminded irritatingly of having had this

same argument with Draco—except this was different. He knew the risks, he knew the stakes, and there was *no choice*. Draco had had a choice—a terrible one, but he’d *had* one. Harry didn’t. He only had one way forward, and the support of those at his side. “And even if your brother *had* told me to go to ground, to run away and save myself, I wouldn’t have. It’s my fight as much as anyone else’s, and I’ll either survive or die with my wand in my hand, because the alternative isn’t an option. Some of us don’t have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines waiting for everyone else to be brave.”

Aberforth’s expression went dark with fury. “I’d watch my mouth if I were you, Potter. You trying to say I’m a *coward*?”

“I’m saying you’ve *given up*. It’s not the same—but the end result’s not so very different. You *were* in the Order, you said—and now you’re saying You-Know-Who’s already won!”

“Because he has! There’s paltry little rebellions popping off here and there, but that’s all they are. We’re pretty fucked right about now, so there’s getting by—which is what I’m doing—and there’s just being daft.”

“But there’s no *getting by*—there’s only rolling over and taking it or fighting with every last breath, which is what we’re gonna do. I’m not gonna stop standing up for everyone who can’t, or won’t, until I *beat him*—”

“Or until you die,” Aberforth growled.

Harry firmed his jaw. “...You say that like I don’t know damn well that might be how it ends. Maybe even is *probably* how it ends. I’ve felt it for a while. I’m seventeen, sure. But I’m not stupid. I’ve been surrounded by enough death in my life to recognise it when it’s coming for me.”

He waited for more jeering or arguing from Aberforth, but all he received was a bitter scowl. Hermione was fixing him with a tortured look of pity, leaning into Ron for support. Draco looked like he might jump the bench and clock Harry sideways for so much as *suggesting* he might die at the end of all this.

“Whatever your feelings on the matter, the fact is we need to get into Hogwarts,” Harry said, keeping his tone even. He didn’t want to argue any longer; they were wasting time they really didn’t have. “If you can help us, great—but if you can’t, or if you won’t, then we’re prepared to try on our own.” He locked eyes with Aberforth. “It’s not about Dumbledore; it’s about me being able to live with myself even if I *do* survive.”

Aberforth looked around the room, perhaps hoping one of the others might plead with him for an out, a way to save themselves from this suicide mission Harry had them on, but his friends evidently had the same deathwish as Harry. With a sigh, Aberforth eased on creaking knees to his feet, shuffling around the little table, and approached the portrait of Ariana.

“...You heard ‘em,” he said to the girl in the portrait. “I tried to talk ‘em out of it, but well...” He scrubbed at his white beard. “Go on and fetch him.” The girl slipped off the rock and gave a little curtsy before twirling around and wandering away into the backdrop, her form growing smaller and smaller. Harry had never seen a portrait do that before—had never considered they really *could* interact with their paintings in three dimensions. He’d seen them leave their frames from one side or the other, but Ariana seemed to have found a small cave drawn into a culvert set against the backdrop and was travelling down it, her slight figure quickly swallowed by the darkness.

“Hold up,” Ron started. “Where’d she go?”

Aberforth nodded to the portrait. “Not sure how much reconnaissance you lot managed before you stumbled across the Dementor patrol, but all the old secret passageways have been destroyed, covered over, or are guarded at both ends. Between the Dementors outside the school and the Death Eater or Death Eater-adjacent patrols inside the school, you’re gonna have a devil of a time getting in via the front door. There’s only one other way inside now.” He wrinkled his nose. “Still think it’s suicide to go in, though. If the Carrows or one of their band at large don’t find you, Peeves might turn you in just for a lark, and running afoul of Snape’s almost as bad as facing off against You-Know-Who these days.”

“We’ll manage,” Harry said, though he shared Aberforth’s doubts.

“I’m sure you think you will,” Aberforth sighed, then craned his neck a bit, peering into the portrait. “...But at least you’ll have a bit of help, now.”

Harry turned to follow his eye and noticed that something new had appeared down the long painted tunnel through which Ariana had disappeared: it was a faint white dot, growing bigger as it approached back toward the mouth of the tunnel. After a few moments, he could make out Ariana again—and she wasn’t alone. She had someone else in tow—another portrait? The other person was taller than Ariana, and while they walked with a slight limp, they did not let this slow them down, as if they were very eager to reach the front face of the portrait.

“Bloody hell—is that...?” Ron whispered, not daring to believe his eyes.

“It can’t be!” Hermione gasped, scandalised—as if this display of magic she didn’t understand was a personal affront.

But it *was*, Harry thought.

His hair was long and lanky, like he hadn’t seen a Snipping Spell in months, and his face was raked with several long, ragged gashes that had scarred over. He carried with him a lantern that threw into stark relief the unseemly state of his clothes, his robes ripped and tattered and his shirt stained with a rusty something that Harry hoped was dirt but was probably dried blood.

Closer and closer Ariana and her charge drew to the front of the portrait, their features growing clearer as they seemed to be ready to step right out of the portrait frame and into Aberforth’s sitting room—until the living, breathing Neville Longbottom, face broken by a wide, excited grin, actually *did* step out of the portrait, which swung open wide like the portrait of the Fat Lady guarding the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

Neville hung the lantern he’d brought along on a hook next to the mantle, then quickly leapt down and rushed forward to pull Harry into a crushing hug. “I knew you’d come! I

just knew it! And here you are! Oh, *Harry!*”

Harry was flabbergasted, standing limp in Neville’s arms. “But—but *how?!?*”

But Neville had spotted Ron and Hermione now, and he launched himself into their open arms with a cry of delight, his face buried in Hermione’s bushy hair. “You can’t understand how brilliant it is to see you three!” Neville sniffed, twisting back around to face Harry. “It’s been—”

He cut himself off when he caught sight of Draco, still lurking in the corner. He swallowing thickly, wide-eyed and face drained of colour. “Uh...” he said, glancing around at Harry and the others as if to say *You guys see him too, right?*

Harry cleared his throat softly, extending a hand to Draco. “Er, Neville, I’m...sure you remember Draco.”

“*Draco?*” Neville said, voice gone a bit high with shock, and Harry nodded firmly.

“Yeah. Draco. He’s, er...been helping us out. For a good few months now.”

“Seriously?” Neville said, brows disappearing into his fringe, which was longer and more unkempt than Harry remembered it being.

“Got a problem with my helping out our Chosen One, Longbottom?” Draco sneered, and Harry could already see this was going to be An Issue. They’d had months to learn how to manage Draco, to see him prove himself several times over, to learn what he was and wasn’t. To Neville, though, this was still Malfoy, the Death Eater who’d murdered Albus Dumbledore and tried to kill Harry, too. And even *without* all that mess, he was still an insufferable prat who’d bullied Neville relentlessly.

They couldn’t have Draco snapping back at every poke and prod, though. Harry cut Draco a warning look, then explained to Neville, “We’re all after the same ends here. Draco’s more than shown his mettle, so just...at least trust that *I* trust him, even if you don’t yourself?”

Neville still looked uncertain, but he'd never been one to go looking for trouble and backed down with a nod. "If you say so... But I can't promise you won't meet some... *resistance*...with the others."

"Others?" Hermione asked.

Neville just gave her a cryptic smile. "You'll see." He then threw Harry a bright grin. "Damn but you're a sight for sore eyes! Sore everything, really. I always knew you'd show up right when we needed you, though, and not a moment sooner!"

Neville beamed, and it'd been some time since Harry had seen someone quite so *happy*, he realised. Neville looked a mess, with one of his eyes swollen nearly completely shut and yellow and purple blotches marring his face. Between his mussed hair and shredded robes, he'd obviously been living rough, and for quite some time, too.

Ron was the one to address it, with his usual tact: "Neville, mate, no offence, but you look like shit."

"You should see the other guy," Neville grinned, then scrubbed at the back of his head. "Well, no, you shouldn't—he looks fine, if we're being honest. But it's nothing, really." He shrugged, curiously dismissive of what Harry could tell had—at least at one point—been serious injuries. "Seamus got off way worse—though don't tell him I said that. He gets a big head when he thinks he's gonna have more scars to boast about at pub rounds in the future. Oh, Seamus! He's gonna flip his lid when he sees you lot—shall we get going, then? Oh—" He turned to Aberforth. "We're expecting a couple more arrivals in the next few hours, Ab. Will you send 'em on through?"

"*What?* This isn't Kings Cross Station I'm running here! I've got patrons to tend to, Longbottom! Peak business starts in a couple of hours, plus the whole village's already on high alert!"

"Yeah, I know, but they've insisted! And don't worry about your customers; the arrivals'll be Apparating right into your sitting room here. I promise, you won't even notice," Neville reassured him. "Just direct 'em down the passage, and they'll be out of

your hair in no time. Won't take two shakes."

Aberforth only grumbled in response, but this did nothing to temper Neville's demeanour, and Harry suspected they'd had conversations similar to this before. Aberforth did not strike Harry as half as gruff as he came off—much like he was learning that Dumbledore hadn't been half as much a do-gooder as Harry had once believed.

Neville rearranged the chairs and held out a hand to Hermione, helping her climb up onto the mantle and crawl into the tunnel. Ron followed, then Neville, with Draco eyeing the tunnel with no small amount of distrust as he prepared to climb through.

Before he joined his friends, Harry addressed Aberforth. "You've saved our lives, sir. It's a debt I won't soon be able to repay."

"Well repay it by looking after 'em with a bit more care, then," Aberforth grumped. "I might not be as quick on the draw next time." He flicked a glance over to Draco, who was watching the both of them with a drawn expression. "What're you waiting for, hm? Go on, get."

Draco swallowed, wringing his hands. "...Just...I thought—I ought to apologise." He shunted his gaze off to the side, and Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Draco so off-kilter. "For—for your brother—"

"The way I hear it, you lot have enough to worry about right now. No sense in taking on more guilt, 'specially when I'm pretty sure Albus wouldn't have wanted you dithering on about putting an old man out of his misery." Aberforth shrugged. "Besides, I'm not entirely convinced he didn't let it happen."

"Let it happen?" Harry said, brows knitting.

Aberforth sighed. "Maybe he had his reasons, is all. Or maybe it was just that his conscience had already been saddled with the death of one kid who couldn't control their magic and he wasn't about to make it two."

Harry let Aberforth's words simmer, wondering if even Dumbledore could be so crafty,

so scheming, as to practically *engineer* his own death at Draco's hands—

And that was a road, he decided quickly, he did not want to start down.

With another muttered *thank you*, Harry helped Draco up onto the mantle, and together they crawled through the hole behind Ariana's portrait, leaving Aberforth alone with his bitter grief.

The passageway was well-kept and looked to have been here for years, with packed-dirt floors and brass lamps bolted into the smooth stone walls. After only a few feet, it became no trouble to stand and continue forward on foot, and they continued forward in silence, the only sounds the scraping and scuffing of their trainers over the path.

They walked side-by-side now, and Harry dared a glance over to Draco. He kept his pace sedate, not wanting to catch up to the others just yet. "...You doing all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because...well, because. Maybe you might not be. It's why I asked."

"My parents are prisoners to a madman who might kill them at any moment just for a lark, we're walking to our certain—and likely very painful—doom, and I think I've ruined the knees of these trousers, which means I'm going to have holes who *knows* where in my pants when I Transfigure them back. Do you think I'm 'doing all right'?"

"Draco," Harry said quietly, grabbing him by the elbow. He stepped close, studying Draco's face—but he wouldn't meet Harry's eye. "Are you all right?"

"...It never made sense to me. He was so powerful—even the Dark Lord was afraid of him. How could I have managed to kill him, without even trying?"

"He was sick," Harry reminded him. "Sick and weak, and he was *tired*. Draco, it doesn't mean he—"

"Don't. Don't lie to me, Potter. Don't say anything at all, if you feel like you need to

bullshit me.”

Harry let his hand slide down Draco’s forearm, to his wrist, then squeezed his fingers. He didn’t know if it would do the dragon much good, but it settled Harry’s own nerves a bit. “I’m not lying to you. And I still don’t think it’s anything nefarious. I really do believe it was just—just shitty luck. But...” He rubbed a thumb over Draco’s knuckles. “...I don’t think he would’ve disliked going out the way he did. Not if he’d known what might happen—that...that *this* might happen.”

“This?” Draco said, and Harry could feel those dark eyes heavy on him. He didn’t dare meet them, cowardly fearful of what he’d see. He just stared down at Draco’s pale hand in his own.

“This—all of this. You and us, hunting Horcruxes together. We’d never have survived without you, you know that.”

Draco pulled his hand back.

“Harry?” Ron called from further down the passageway. “We need to send a rescue team?”

Harry bit his tongue, disappointment lancing through him, though he couldn’t pinpoint its source. Draco shouldered past him, marching resolutely forward without waiting for Harry to follow.

“We’re coming,” Harry called, rubbing his forehead. If he survived this ordeal, he really was going to die.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville waited for them to catch up, and then they were on the move again. “Where’d this passage even come from? It’s not one of the ones on the Marauder’s Map, is it, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t think so—there’s only the seven, and Aberforth said they were all guarded or closed off.”

“Yup,” Neville confirmed. “You’d be caught for sure using one of those passages, either going in or coming out. Snape managed to find all of ‘em over the summer hols. It’d be suicide to try to get in and out of the castle that way.” He whirled around, walking backwards, still with that beaming expression. Like he didn’t dare let them out of his sight, lest they prove a hallucination and vanish into nothingness. “But forget all that—is it *true*?”

“Is what true?” Harry asked.

“*Is what true*,” Neville mocked good-naturedly. “The bank business, of course! It’s all over the Wireless—they even broadcast a special edition of Potterwatch at lunchtime! Terry Boot got his arse kicked by Amycus Carrow for Charming the gargoyles to play the highlights from the broadcast on repeat.”

He supposed there was no point in denying it, especially since it had evidently already made it into the public sphere. “Yeah, guilty as charged, then.”

Neville laughed gleefully, and Harry smiled; his good humour despite the dark situation was infectious. “And you actually escaped on a *dragon*?” Harry nodded, and Neville gasped, scandalised. “What’d you do with it?!”

“Released one into the wild,” said Ron, then nodded toward Draco. “Decided we’d keep the other.”

This drew Neville up short, and Hermione nearly collided with him. He reached for the tie at his neck and loosened it with a gulp as he eyed Draco warily. “Then...then he really can...?”

“Really can *what*, Longbottom?” Draco muttered. “Spit it out, if you must grace us with your eloquence.”

Neville ignored him, directing his comments to Harry. “I think most of us convinced ourselves along the way it was just a cover story or something. We figured the real reason he wasn’t back at school was because he was working for You-Know-Who, and

that maybe Snape had somehow engineered the whole thing.”

Harry didn't suppose they could be blamed for jumping to such a conclusion—and Draco certainly wasn't helping matters. “...It's true, Nev. And a good thing, too, as he's a right menace once he lets loose.” He quirked a grin at Draco, hoping to dispel the strange mood he'd been in. “We're damn lucky he's putting his skills to use for our sake. I certainly wouldn't want to have to face off against him.”

Neville watched Draco curiously, and Harry imagined he probably wanted a bit of proof, if only to *see* the dragon in person. Draco did not seem ready to oblige, still holding himself stiff and awkward.

“...All right, then. But—you've gotta catch me up. Where've you been all this time? Potterwatch has mostly been updates on Death Eater movements and You-Know-Who sightings without much hard information on your whereabouts—less *Potterwatch* and more *Potterprojection*. All we've heard is you *might* have been on the run, lying low while there was a price on your head, but that always sounded silly to me, given the way you acted at school.” He started walking again. “Personally, I think you've been up to something.”

Up to something, indeed—but they could hardly tell Neville the gory details of what they'd gotten involved in, so instead Harry said, “You first, mate—we've been dying to know what's been happening at Hogwarts. It's been torture ever since we heard Snape had taken over.”

“A takeover's exactly what it's been...” Neville said, sighing. “It's not even really Hogwarts anymore.” He picked absently at the scabbed-over scar running along the side of his face. “You heard about the Carrows, I suppose?”

“Heard about them, yeah—those are the Death Eaters Snape hired as professors, right?”

“Professors!” Neville snorted. “That's a riot, that is. I doubt they're even taking a salary; probably took the positions for the fun of it.”

“Fun of it?”

“Yeah—they’re in charge of discipline, see. So you can imagine with a pair like them, they take the job to heart.” He grimaced. “They’re pretty fond of corporal punishment.”

Harry shared an inward wince. “Worse than Umbridge, then?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“They’ve always had a sadistic streak a mile long,” Draco muttered with an exaggerated shudder. “We eventually had to enchant the dishes to serve themselves when Mother and Father had them over for dinner, after they tortured half our house-elves senseless.”

Hermione gaped at him in horror, but Neville just nodded. “Yeah, I could see that. McGonagall ordered all the Hogwarts house-elves to stay away from their rooms. Didn’t take much convincing.”

“Shocking,” Ron said. “Y’know, considering house-elves.”

“Amycus—that’s the brother—he teaches Dark Arts, and—”

“Wait, you mean Defence Against the Dark Arts?” Hermione said.

“Nope, it’s just ‘Dark Arts’ now—and it’s pretty much exactly what you’d imagine. Last week, he had the Third Years practising the Cruciatus Curse on students who’d earned detentions—”

“*What?!*” Harry, Ron, and Hermione chorused, their voices echoing along the passageway. Draco, again, did not seem surprised.

“Oh yeah, I was on the receiving end of Roger Davies’ first attempt. It’s how I got this one—” He pointed to the grotesque scar down the side of his face. It looked several weeks old but did not seem to have been properly attended to. Had Madam Pomfrey been forbidden from tending to patients? “Coincidentally because I refused to use it on

him. I don't hold it against him, really—he didn't wanna do it either, was just scared, 'cause his mum's a Muggleborn. Some students have been pretty gung-ho about it, though." He cut a look at Draco. "...Crabbe and Goyle get summoned from lessons sometimes to give demonstrations."

"Probably the first time they've had top marks in anything," Ron spat.

Draco had nothing to say to this, only frowning with knit brows. If he felt compelled to defend his friends—lackeys?—he kept his tongue for the time being.

"What about the other Carrow?" Hermione asked. "There's a sister, right?"

Neville nodded. "Alecto's her name—and she's handling Muggle Studies, which you'll be curious to learn is compulsory now."

"*Muggle Studies?*" Ron sputtered. "You're having us on."

"Well, it's not *exactly* the curriculum you might imagine. The only things we learn about Muggles now are how stupid they are and how they need wizards to guide them, and now that the natural order's being restored, it's our responsibility to lead them with a firm hand."

Harry could not help but recall Dumbledore and Grindelwald's grand plans to put Muggles back in their place. No matter the pretty packaging, it still turned Harry's stomach.

"I once asked Alecto how much Muggle blood she and her brother had. I figured it couldn't be that bad, since their boss was doing pretty well for himself despite being a half-blood." Neville pointed to another slash across his forehead, just missing his eye. "She didn't take kindly to the question."

"Blimey, Neville," Ron said, shaking his head, half in admiration, half in bald astonishment.

Draco blew sharply through his nose in irritation, throwing his hands in the air. "Are all

Gryffindors blessed with deathwishes? Or have I just fallen in with the lucky few?”

“Tempting as it may be to buck the new order, there’s a time and a place for such smart remarks—and it’s certainly not when you’re locked in a room with someone who’d kill you without compunction!” Hermione admonished, but Neville waved her off.

“Nah, she wouldn’t dare make an example out of a Pureblood—even a Gryffindor one. Plus, well...” He shrugged weakly. “I feel like it helps, people standing up to them. Even when it won’t make any difference, it still gives people hope.” He smiled shyly. “I used to notice it when you did it, Harry. Really boosted morale—and we’ve sorely needed it. If it takes a bit of flesh off the bone to do it, well, at least I’m good for something.”

“Yes, fantastic role model you’ve got there, Longbottom,” Draco sneered. “Fine time to fashion your life after someone with a bounty on his head!”

Neville didn’t seem fazed. Harry didn’t know what was worse: the things that Neville had been through, or the matter-of-fact tone in which he related them.

He’d thought he’d been prepared, between the gossip on the Wireless and Professor Black’s comments, for what had become of Hogwarts, but this... Professors torturing students for a lark, the corruption of useful subjects for a dark purpose, and all this being *the norm...*

“It’s the Muggleborn and half-blood kids who’ve got it worst—they, and the ones with friends and relatives on the outside, especially if they’re causing trouble of any sort. The students are sitting ducks, then, liable to get snatched as hostages and never seen or heard from again. Like old Xeno Lovegood: he was stepping out of line with all the Potter support in *The Quibbler*, so they dragged Luna right off the train on the way back for Christmas.”

Harry’s heart leapt—finally, they could share a bit of good news and bring back hope. “Oh, she’s all right now! We’ve seen her only recently—”

“Yeah! I heard—” He fished in his pocket, pulling out a gold coin that Harry recognised as

another of the fake Galleons that Dumbledore's Army had used to communicate. He'd never imagined how useful Hermione's little charm would come to be, even now years after she'd first fashioned them. "She managed to get word to me through this. Cho and a couple of the other Ravenclaws managed to recreate Hermione's Charm—you wouldn't believe how useful it's been this year!"

"Oh, I think we can imagine..." Draco muttered, though only Harry caught it.

"It's been the only secure way of communicating—we used to use them to organise pranks and such to piss off the Carrows. Sometimes Snape, too, though he's been out of the castle a lot lately."

"Used to?" said Ron. "You don't anymore?"

Neville was worrying at the hem of his school shirt, which had once been white but clearly hadn't been washed in a while. "Not for lack of spirit. But after Luna got snatched, and Ginny never came back after Easter—"

"She's safe, too," Harry said. "Lying low with her family—they figured that was safest, what with Ron being wanted."

Neville smiled, relieved. "I'm glad—though I won't say her not coming back didn't strike a blow against our little rebellion. She and Luna and I were kind of the unspoken leaders for a while. Once it was down to just me, I got the brunt of the Carrows' irritation. Between that and others getting real nasty punishments when they got caught doing the tiniest good deed—I won't tell you what happened to Michael Corner, but it wasn't pretty—most people got scared off."

"Understandable," Ron said with a grim smile. "I'm amazed it went on as long as it did, in that case."

"You'd be surprised what people will do when they've got their backs up against the wall."

Harry thought he had a pretty good idea of the lengths to which desperate parties might

go if they thought they didn't have a choice, and this time he didn't look away when he caught Draco's eye on him.

"So yeah, with numbers dwindling, we had to lay off some of the flashier stunts—we kept up an underground resistance for a while, tagging walls with graffiti and the sort, up until a few weeks ago."

"Why? What happened?" Hermione asked.

"They went after Gran. Guess I'd finally pissed them off one too many times."

"No way!" Ron gasped, half in shock, half because the passage was now climbing rather steeply.

Neville nodded grimly. "But don't worry—she knows how to handle intruders who show up unannounced thinking they'll be more than a match for a little old witch living alone." Neville threw them a wicked grin over his shoulder, sweat trickling down from his temples. "Last I heard, they're still looking for Dawlish's nose to reattach down at St. Mungo's. Gran said she lost it after she sliced it off, but I'm sure she's stuffed it in a jar to keep as a trophy."

"What happened to her?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"Oh, she's on the run now—seemed pleased by it, though, from the postcard she sent me. Said she was proud of me, that I'm every bit my parents' son and to keep up the good fight, and that she'd always wanted to visit the South Pacific anyway."

He was beaming so brightly, they didn't even need the lamps now, and Harry nodded. "That's great, Neville." The poor guy had never had the strongest of spines, and his grandmother had been part of the problem. To finally gain her approval must've been a hell of a confidence booster, though it sounded as if he'd been acting a right badass even before Augusta Longbottom had Owled him.

"Though Gran getting away meant they didn't have anyone they could really use to threaten me into staying in line anymore, so they just kind of gave up any pretence.

Figured my next stop was either Azkaban or a cold grave, so I disappeared as soon as I got Gran's postcard."

"Hold up," Ron said, actually stopping in his tracks. "But—we're heading back to Hogwarts now, aren't we? You sure it's safe, mate?"

"Safe?" Neville laughed. "Depends on your definition. But you'll see—look! We're just about there now."

As they rounded a corner, they found themselves staring at a short flight of stairs leading up to a door—this one a bit larger than the one above the mantle in Aberforth's bar. They didn't need to crouch this time, and Neville took lead, turning the doorknob and leaning into the door to push it open.

"Make way for the soon-to-be-conquering heroes!" Neville called once over the threshold. "Didn't I tell you they'd be back? Didn't I?"

Harry was the first to emerge from the passageway behind Neville, and as he poked his head into the room, he was greeted by a chorus of delighted screams and shouts.

"It's Harry! Harry's here!"

"Potter?! Bloody hell, he's actually back!"

"Ron too!"

"Hermione!"

"*Malfoy?!*"

And suddenly it was time for another round of Harry scrambling to position himself between Draco and the angry students charging for him. Perhaps, going forward, they ought to have a script prepared for moments like this, as it would undoubtedly not be the last time he had to defend Draco's company to outsiders.

"Easy there, easy—hold up, now!" he said, hands in the air. There had to be at least

another dozen students there, and while Harry didn't recognise them all, they certainly seemed to recognise Draco.

He cast a hopeful glance back at Hermione and Ron, who were gaping baldly at the room, scanning every inch. He needed their support on this, or things could turn sour easily.

"Er, I'm sure you all recognise Draco here... But I ask that any grievances you have with him, please put them aside, or else keep well out of our way while we do what we came here to do. We've got much bigger issues to worry about right now than petty schoolyard rivalries—" He winced, knowing he sounded like some of his own professors of years past lecturing him on his antagonistic relationship with Draco. "And Draco's on our side—"

"The hell he is!" someone in the back piped up, to murmured assent from the crowd. "He killed Dumbledore!"

"He *is* on our side," Harry pressed. "He's saved my life—on *multiple* occasions, and we wouldn't be here right now without the invaluable help he's given us. And Dumbledore..." He swallowed; this was not a can of worms he was eager to unpack. "It's complicated. More complicated than we can explain right now."

"He's still a right arsehole, let's get that straight," Ron added, rather unhelpfully. "But he pulls his weight, and he's fallen hard out of love with You-Know-Who, that we've seen with our own eyes."

"And all *four* of us are here together," Hermione said. "So if you're not going to help us because of Draco, then you're not going to help us *at all*, and you may as well run and report us to Snape or the Carrows."

Harry's gaze tracked around the room, fixing on all their frightened faces. "We're all here for the same reasons, ultimately—fighting for the same goal. I plan on having my friends by my side while I do that—*all* of them."

Draco made a face, and that was all right with Harry. He could make any faces he liked, but it wouldn't change facts: they *were* friends. Maybe not like Ron and Hermione were

his friends, and not like Luna or Neville or Ginny, but...there was still something there, something that made Harry's stomach flip when Draco flashed one of those cheeky grins and made his heart clench when Draco was in pain, aching from a wound Harry couldn't heal.

Draco was the last person Harry would have ever expected to call a friend, and perhaps that was what made his companionship so precious. It would certainly explain why Harry was all the time worried he'd say or do something so off-putting Draco might decide his sanity wasn't worth it and flit off to save his parents, abandoning Harry and their quest.

"You're letting him in here, Longbottom?" another student asked, and Neville gave a start, rubbing his neck nervously.

"Er—well, I suppose if he's fine by Harry, he's fine by me. So long as he's civil, it's none of our business who Harry consorts with."

Harry gave Neville a grateful nod.

With Neville's stance made clear, the group seemed to settle, and Harry took a moment to finally take in the room proper.

He didn't recognise where they were at all—it was enormous, though, and rather sumptuously appointed. He'd never had one himself, but he imagined it looked like the inside of a fancy tree house or ship's cabin, every inch of space given a purpose. The walls were lined with bookcases fitted with rolling ladders so the topmost shelves could be easily reached, and in the corner sat a wooden-cased Wireless that he later learned had been Charmed to always pick up Potterwatch. There was a huge pit in one corner filled with pillows and beanbag chairs, where a group of students were presently poring over books and parchment in what appeared to be a study session. From the ceiling hung massive brightly coloured tapestries bearing the crests of Hogwarts houses. Harry saw the gold Gryffindor lion on a field of scarlet, the black badger of Hufflepuff on a field of yellow, and the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw on a field of blue.

“I suppose they felt the silver and green would have clashed,” Draco drawled, scanning the room with a sneering curl of his lip.

“You really think any Slytherins would have wanted to be here?” Harry asked.

“You really think any of your little sycophants *asked?*” Then for good measure, he added: “*I’m* here, aren’t I?”

Harry thought back to their days in the DA and felt a pang of guilt. Here was another *what might have been* moment in the making: how might their fight against Voldemort be affected by the presence or absence of those willing to stand against Tom Riddle’s dark forces—regardless of the House into which they’d been Sorted?

“Yeah, you are here.” Harry squinted, glancing to and fro. “Wherever ‘here’ is—Neville, what is this place?”

“What, gonna tell me you don’t you recognise the Room of Requirement?” Neville waggled his brows.

Harry’s eyes boggled, and he turned in place to take the room in anew. “No. No, I honestly don’t!”

Neville’s brows lifted. “Pretty fancy, no? I was the first one to take up semi-permanent residence—ran across it trying to shake the Carrows one day when I needed a place to hide. ‘Course it wasn’t like *this* when I first got here—just a hammock and an armchair and a Gryffindor pennant I had the Room create so I wasn’t missing the Common Room so much. It grew itself and added more decorations once more of the DA started stopping by.”

“So that’s who all’s here? Our old club?”

“At first, yeah; that was all I felt safe inviting in. We’ve expanded to friends of friends, though.”

Harry nodded, taking care to keep his voice low. “...No one had any Slytherin friends?”

Neville's eyes quickly flicked to Draco. "Er...well, I mean—there wasn't any *ban* against them, you understand? I would never say—"

"No, I know, I know. Sorry, Nev. Just—" Harry ran a hand through his hair. He could feel Draco glaring at him, probably expecting him to choke. "This place looks great, honest. But it does feel a little...lopsided."

Neville grimaced. "I told you—we seriously didn't do anything like say 'no Slytherins allowed'. It's only I don't think many of us have Slytherin friends and—" He directed his words to Draco. "And there are probably lots of Very Nice People in Slytherin—"

"Present company excluded, I'm sure," Draco drawled, though there was a dangerous lilt in his voice, and Harry cut him a warning look. They didn't need his antagonism right now.

"Just...just it's hard to walk up to someone after all this time and suddenly say, 'Hey, wanna join our rebellion?'"

Harry felt his lips twitch—yeah, he understood that better than Neville knew. He looked to Draco, who had his arms crossed over his chest now and his mouth shaped into an unhappy moue.

"...And if they approached you? If they showed they wanted to help, if you could believe they were genuine about it?"

"Oh, well then yeah, of course!" Neville glanced nervously between Harry and Draco. "...Honestly, it's been awkward at times. I wasn't lying when I said I didn't think any of us felt close enough to any Slytherins to invite them in, but their absence is pretty unmistakable. If one of them were to throw their lot in first...I think it'd only help make our bonds stronger."

"So?" Harry said to Draco. "Satisfied?"

"Hardly," Draco said with a disdainful sniff. "I'll not be anyone's token Slytherin to parade about as a symbol of House Unity."

His harsh words belied a loosening of the tension across his shoulders, though. “Heavens forfend,” Harry said. He turned back to Neville, shaking his head fondly and quickly switching topics. “So the Carrows can’t get into this place?”

Neville seemed relieved to be off the subject of Slytherin’s notable absence from their burgeoning little coup. “Nope! Though not for lack of trying. Seamus was one of the first ones to join me here, and he helped me refine the parameters of the Room to be sure only the people we wanted in here could find their way inside.” He waved a hand, beckoning someone over. “Seamus! Come harass Harry for a bit!”

Seamus had evidently been chatting up Hermione and Ron, and if Neville hadn’t identified him by name, Harry would have had a hard time placing him. Seamus’s face was almost as banged-up as Neville’s, with messy purple and yellow splotches all over.

“I was just telling Harry about the great job we did with setting the rules of the Room to be sure the Carrows couldn’t get in.”

“Oh yeah! Neville’s our boy, he is! He’s made sure that so long as one of our group stays here to claim it, no one else can get inside without our say-so. He’s picked up on how to close all the loopholes, so now even Carrows *supporters* can’t get in, not just the Carrows themselves.” Seamus flicked a quick glance to Draco, as if only now realising that if Draco had really been a spy of some sort and not genuinely in league with them, he wouldn’t have been able to enter the room at all. “He really gets the Room.”

Neville ducked his head shyly. “I mean, if so, then only because I’ve been stuck in here the longest.”

“But,” Harry said, jerking a thumb back the way they’d come. “How’d you find the passage out? We spent hours in here back in Fifth Year and I never noticed any kind of door leading to the Hog’s Head.”

“Oh, yeah! That was a happy accident, really. The first time I ducked in here to hide, I knew I wouldn’t be able to leave again—at least not until they’d gotten tired of waiting for me, which wasn’t likely to happen. I decided I’d wait as long as I could possibly stand

it—and after about a day or day and a half, well, I started getting *really* hungry, wishing the Room could Conjure some food. It didn't work—”

“Gamp's Law,” Hermione intoned with a solemn nod.

“Er, yeah—but the Room did the next best thing it could, I guess, and created the doorway you saw. I didn't have a clue where it led—only that it was going someplace that wasn't here. I figured the Room wouldn't send me knowingly into danger, so I took a chance, thinking it might take me to the Kitchens—and found my way to Ab's place!” Neville gestured around the room, and Harry now noticed several small tables placed in different corners piled with tea sandwiches and assorted snacks, as well as a pumpkin juice tap set next to a bookshelf. “All the food's from the Hog's Head—without his help, we would've been starved out of here *weeks* ago.”

“So you're all just—what, living here now?” Harry asked, though he didn't know why this should shock him, as he and Ron, Hermione, and Draco had essentially been on an extended camping trip for the better part of the last eight months.

“Yup,” said Seamus brightly. “There's hammocks that we summon up at night to sleep in, like one big Common Room, and whenever more students join us, the Room just gets bigger—more pillows and beanbags and hammocks and—”

“And *bathrooms*, thank goodness,” said Lavender Brown, sidling up. Evidently the others had decided Draco's presence was not sufficiently off-putting to keep them from grilling Harry about what they were up to, and the rest of the occupants were now drifting over to join them.

Joining Lavender were several more familiar faces that Harry was relieved to see didn't look nearly as roughed up as Neville and Seamus. Both Patil twins were here, as were Terry Boot (sporting a black eye that Harry suspected he'd earned from Amycus for charming the gargoyles earlier), Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner. They were flanked by several others in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff colours he didn't recognise, but they all had their eyes fixed on Harry with a ravenous sort of hope that made him feel a bit uncomfortable.

“There were bathrooms!” Seamus protested. “Just because we didn’t have fancy Prefect tubs—”

“Harry, mate, where’ve you *been*?” Ernie interrupted. “We’ve heard a dozen different stories from Potterwatch—you’re as hard a man to pin down as You-Know-Who. I mean, you didn’t *seriously* break into Gringotts, right?”

“That one Potterwatch got right!” Neville burst out. “And the bit about the dragon’s true, too!” He glanced to Draco. “Both of ‘em.”

Someone gasped sharply. “Then—Malfoy really *is* a dragon Animagus?” Padma asked, a glint of jealousy in her eye; *Ravenclaws*.

Harry swallowed; he appreciated Neville trying to increase Draco’s esteem in the others’ eyes, but talk of Draco’s Animagecraft would undoubtedly lead to talk of his role in Dumbledore’s death, and Harry doubted he was in any fit state to—

“I am,” Draco said, speaking up for the first time since they’d entered the Room. Every eye instantly flew to him, hiding a dozen different emotions in constant flux. “I spent all Sixth Year self-studying to become one.”

“So you could kill Dumbledore!” one of the new Ravenclaws chirped.

Ron snapped. “Pipe the fuck down, would you? Give him a chance to explain himself before you pounce on him like a swarm of Doxies!” He gave Draco a firm nod, arms crossed over his chest, and Harry had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. A Weasley defending a Malfoy—somewhere, pigs were surely flying.

Draco waited for silence again, then said, “That wasn’t my intention,” demonstrating astonishing restraint as he kept himself from sounding too defensive. “...But it was the ultimate outcome.”

Harry opened his mouth to offer support by way of explanation—but Draco just gave him a subtle jerk of his head. No, he had to stand on his own here, or they’d always look to Harry for the *real* reason, never fully trusting Draco. Granted, they might never fully

trust Draco even *with* this, but he deserved a chance to stand on his own merits, seeing as he'd been forced for these many months to rely on Harry.

“It was *my* poor decisions that killed him, *my* magic. No one else's. It doesn't matter what my reasons were, it doesn't matter whether I meant to or not, or whether I wanted to or not. He's dead all the same, and we're worse off for it.

“So go on hating me if you like, on whatever grounds suit you. I'm not asking for your forgiveness. I honestly don't give two fucks about being forgiven; I'm not keen on any of you, and you're justifiably not fond of me. But I've learned you don't have to like people in order to work with them, to do something *worthwhile* with them. So that's what I've come back to do. And if *any* of you messes with Potter's mission just to fuck with me, I'll rip your throat out.”

Despite the vividly violent implications of his comment, Harry felt his stomach churn with a nauseating kind of giddiness. Somehow, the sight of Draco *trying* with this group, standing up for himself not in defence but because he wanted their respect—it did funny things to Harry. It was just so...*unexpected*. He liked it when Draco surprised him, because it was always a trip and a half.

“How did you wind up running around with Harry, though?” Terry Boot asked, the first of the group to say something to Draco that wasn't either an insult (veiled or otherwise) or accusation.

Harry stepped in here, not wanting his dirty laundry aired for all to see. “It doesn't matter, guys. Really. You've heard Draco say his piece, and you've heard from the rest of us that he's playing on the level. For any further details—well I'm sure there will be *multiple* book deals once this is all said and done. But until then, let's concentrate on the here and now, yeah?”

“Speaking of the here and now, what's the plan, O Chosen One?” asked Seamus eagerly, rubbing his hands together.

Before any of them could parry the question with one of their own, a terrible, scorching

pain lanced through Harry, centred in the lightning scar.

It hit him like a sword stroke to the head, and the Room of Requirement swirled around him until suddenly he was not at Hogwarts anymore: instead, he was standing alone at the centre of a circle of hooded wizards wearing deathshroud masks, backlit by a roaring fire of eerie green that threw spangling shadows around the room. Before him knelt a small figure, its head barely reaching his shin, and it trembled visibly, whimpering.

“...What did you just say, creature?”

His voice shook, trembling not unlike the figure before him, and he felt thrilling through him a heady, nauseating combination of fury and fear, an undercurrent of desperation boiling his blood. He had misheard, surely—or else the creature was mistaken. It *could* not be true. It *must* not. There was, he was certain, simply *no way*, and in his irritation when no suitable response was forthcoming, he slashed through the air with his wand. A bright red line opened across the Goblin’s bald pate, and it yelped, flinching away and patting at its head protectively.

“I said speak! Say. It. Again!”

“O—of course, my lord, we...” It licked its lips, gaze fixed firmly on the cold flagstones beneath its knees, unable to meet his own. *“We...we encountered im-impostors attempting to infiltrate th-the bank. Be—before we were alerted to...to their duplicity...they b-broke into...the Lestrangle v-vault...”*

“And how, pray tell, did impostors find their way into such an institution as Gringotts, with its vaunted security measures? Is Goblin ingenuity not what it used to be? Are there not means of detecting attempts to enter by subterfuge? Who were these impostors?”

“W-well, yes of course, we have...measures, tried and trusted means of stripping away spells of disguise and—”

“Who. Were. The impostors.”

The Goblin held up an arm, as if this feeble gesture might protect it from his wrath. *“It... it was Potter, my Lord. With three accomplices, children like himself.”*

His heart—or whatever organ passed for it—thudded loudly in his chest, an insistent throbbing that he heard ringing in his own ears. No, coincidence only—Bellatrix had his trust, and he had her loyalty. The boy surely sought only items of great magical power with which to mount a foolhardy rebellion.

He swallowed the fear that threatened to claw at his throat. *“And what did Potter take from the vault? Surely you have catalogued its contents.”* When the Goblin appeared reluctant to speak, he enticed it again with another painful stripe across its bulbous skull. *“Speak!”*

“A trinket only! N—nothing of significance—”

“TELL ME!”

“O—only a cup! A worthless little golden cup, truly—”

A scream ripped through him, pulsing with rage and threatening to tear him apart—no, *no*, this could not be. How had this happened?! Had he slipped up? Had the boy somehow divined through him, through their connection, the secret of his Horcruxes?

No, a silly idea. Likely someone had betrayed him; that was the only conclusion he could draw. Not Bellatrix—*never* Bellatrix. But then who—and *how*?

When he brought his Elder Wand slashing down again, this time the Goblin dropped with thudding force, rolling over and gazing up at the ceiling overhead with beady black, unseeing eyes. He whirled around, his bloodlust not yet sated, and his audience quickly scattered, lest they tempt his blind wrath: Bellatrix and Lucius (*oh thank god, Malfoy’s dad’s still kicking...*) threw others behind them in their race for the door, but his rage would not be contained.

He struck and struck and struck, careless in his violence, conscious only of eliminating those who had borne witness to this his gravest, greatest secret. Any among them might

have been the chink in his armour. He would take no more chances, leave *nothing* more to these his so-called *followers*. It had been folly to entrust his precious Horcruxes to these blind fools; he would *not* make this same mistake again.

Bodies fell in piles around them, but he paid them no heed—he had but one focus now: ensure that his Horcruxes, his precious anchors to immortality, remained undisturbed and secreted away where none but he might find them.

The diary had been destroyed years back through Lucius’s incompetence, and now the cup had been stolen—were these the only victims of his lack of foresight? If the boy had somehow discovered the provenance of the cup and its importance to the Dark Lord, could he have conceivably learned of the others? Surely not, not if he’d found the cup only through Bellatrix’s folly. She knew of its importance, but not its purpose. Perhaps this might even be for the best—the boy would think he’d struck Lord Voldemort a mortal blow! He would let his guard down—he would make *mistakes*.

...But what if he had learned of the Horcrux through other means? Indeed, the boy was impetuous and stupid, a Gryffindor through and through: there was little chance he’d stumbled upon the Horcrux and its location all by himself. If he closed his eyes, he thought he could even hear the sounds of Dumbledore tugging on Potter’s strings from beyond the veil.

But if either of them had learned of the Horcruxes, then their top priority would surely have been to *destroy* them, not merely steal them—and he would have *felt* it, the snipping of these his tethers to lichdom. He was the most powerful wizard to have ever lived, had even surpassed Dumbledore, who had been struck down by a mere child’s display of wild magic.

He had slain so many, defeated even more. There was not a soul alive now who didn’t know his name and fear it. So how could he have not felt that his *soul incarnate* had been attacked, mutilated, maimed beyond recognition?

That he had not sensed the diary’s destruction was of little consequence—that had been before his rebirth, when he had been little more than a ghost, a pale imitation of his

former glory. Here now, reformed and remade, better than before even, he could not have mistaken it.

Such powerful magical items would have called out to him had they been threatened, one piece of his soul to another—surely this meant they were safe, intact, *whole*...

But he no longer had the luxury of relying on *surely* and *must be*. He had to know, for certain. He had to see his Horcruxes—in their whole state—for himself. This was not a task he could—or even dared—entrust to any others. No, even his second had let him down this night. He would make this journey on his own.

He kicked aside the Goblin's corpse; already it reeked, though that could have been the creature's natural stench. How proper witches and wizards tolerated such lowly beasts in their presence was beyond him. Things would change... Purview over the wizarding world would soon be returned to witches and wizards alone.

His mind was awhir with images, memories, recollections that had been seared into his mind, the sites of his greatest triumphs: the placid lake and its hidden terrors, the ramshackle shack rightfully abandoned and forgotten, the towering turrets of Hogwarts Castle...

And it was here, reviewing these his hiding places, carefully selected and each guarded in its own way, that a wave of cool relief began to lap at his fevered consciousness, for how could Potter know of the Gaunt shack, let alone that he had hidden the ring there? His relation to the Gaunts had been well hidden through Obliviation and murder when necessary. The ring, at least, would be safe.

And if not better hidden, then far more difficult to reach was the seaside cave—for even if Potter or Dumbledore had somehow discovered the cave, how could they have ever penetrated its protection? The locket was safe in its stony fortress, surrounded by murky waters filled with the dead.

This left the school, the secrets of which not even Dumbledore had ever fully penetrated. He alone had been clever enough to discover its most well-kept secret, to key in to the

magical rules that dictated the appearances and disappearings of the Room...

Nagini would no longer leave his sight, he resolved. She had been a formidable weapon thus far, aided him greatly, but now she was a liability. He would keep her close, wrapped tight about his person, where she would be warm and safe and as well-protected as one of his own limbs.

As for the other Horcruxes...he resolved to return to each of his hiding places and redouble his protections around the artefacts. It would be quicker to dispatch his lieutenants with instructions on what to look for and where...but dangerous, so very dangerous, especially if Potter *hadn't* disturbed his other Horcruxes. No, he would do this alone—if for no other reason than to ensure the task was completed adeptly.

Which site to visit first, though? Which of his Horcruxes was in the most danger, the most likely—however *unlikely* he had deemed it—to be uncovered?

The old Gaunt shack...no one would think to look there—except his middle name was public record. Dumbledore would have known it, and being nearly as old as the pyramids themselves, might have recognised its provenance and sussed out his connection with the Gaunts. From there it would be easy to consider that he might have visited the old, abandoned home—and perhaps secreted away a treasure there. It being the least conventionally secure of the resting places of his Horcruxes, he would visit there first.

The idea of the lake's location being found out—let alone its defences being breached—was absurd, but Dumbledore had known of the orphanage where he'd spent much of his youth, and the staff there had been nasty gossips. Word of the pranks he'd played on other children in that cave might have reached the old fool's ears. Perhaps it might be prudent to at least check, to be sure no one had been poking about. Yes—he would place fresh wards to alert him should anyone make their way inside, just to be certain.

Then there was Hogwarts... The diadem, he wanted to believe, was the safest of his remaining unguarded Horcruxes. Apparition onto the grounds was impossible, and Potter's infiltration via Hogsmeade would not go unnoticed. And even if he *did* somehow manage to sneak into the castle, there was no conceivable way he could have found the

diadem, for it was hidden so well even Voldemort himself could not have found it had he not known exactly where he had hidden it.

...Still, he would warn Snape that the boy might try something: perhaps he might manage to Imperius one of the Death Eaters, or Transfigure himself into a letter and have himself delivered by owl. Snape would not question the warning, and he was reminded again how of all his Death Eaters, there were so few on whom he could reasonably rely. Bellatrix would never betray him, no, but she could be duped. Played for a fool, her temper turned on her to his detriment.

Something niggled, just at the back of his mind, though. A curious thought—too many players on the board.

He turned back to survey his handiwork. The bodies littering the ground were numerous, but a few huddled still in the corners, their eyes wide with fright. He pointed to the nearest one: Dolohov, he thought, though it was difficult to tell with how mutilated his features were now. *“Return to Gringotts. Fetch me another Goblin—a witness to the crime. You will have it here waiting for me when I return.”*

Perhaps-Dolohov mumbled a warbling reply that was unintelligible but was probably something along the lines of *Of course, m’Lord, your will be done*, if he knew what was good for him.

For now, he would be off to check on his Horcruxes. He cocked his wand in a summoning flick, crooning a soft invitation in Parseltongue, and Nagini slithered out from where she’d been lurking under a bureau, winding around his ankles like a cat before coiling up to rest about his neck, her weight a welcome relief. She would stay by his side henceforth, never to be parted from him again. So long as she and he were one, he could not be undone.

The Gaunt shack first—then the cave, and then Hogwarts. Perhaps on this visit he would make himself known; it was time, he decided, the students learned of the coming new order, that they might choose how they wished to be received. It was cruel to fault children—children!—for the circumstances of their birth, even the unfortunate

Muggleborns, so he would not discount the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs out of hand; he would give them the choice to submit, to embrace his leadership, and find room for them in the shadow of his wings. They would all be united as one, instead of pitted against one another for choices they had never made, as Dumbledore would have had it.

He grunted under his breath and stalked out, tearing the doors from their hinges with a slash of his wand. The sky was overcast, full of gloomy black clouds pregnant with rain. He took in a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Let Potter have the stupid cup—Lord Voldemort would win the day in the end.

Then he turned in place and vanished with a *CRACK*.

“Potter—*Harry!*”

Harry felt himself physically jerked back into his own mind, his own body—and found he was lying on his back. Overhead, the chandeliers lighting the Room of Requirement rotated slowly. Hermione and Ron were looking down at him with worried expressions, and Draco was on his knees at his side, one hand on his shoulder.

From his pallor and the knowing looks of Ron and Hermione, Harry suspected his sudden excursion into Voldemort’s mind had not passed unnoticed. He struggled upright, and Draco’s grip on his shoulder tightened as he hissed, “Easy, you idiot—you’ve just had a fit.”

“Not a fit...” Harry muttered, rubbing at his scar, which still twinged painfully. The soft din of murmured concerns alerted him to the fact that they had a very attentive audience, and he grimaced inwardly. Just when he thought he’d finally put all those rumours he was mad to rest...

Neville waved his hands. “Hey, let’s give Harry some space, yeah? Come on, no gawking, let’s move back.” Most of the group complied with only sidelong glances, though a few of those who could claim close acquaintanceship with Harry continued to hover nearby.

“You all right there, mate?” Ron asked, sinking into a squat. “That one seemed worse than usual...”

“...He knows,” Harry said, taking care to keep his voice down. He didn’t want to frighten the others—at least no more than he already had. “He knows about the Horcruxes—about Gringotts. He’s gone to check on the others, to be sure we haven’t messed with them. And—” He took a bracing breath as a tremor of excitement rippled through him. “The last one—it is here. It’s the diadem, and it’s definitely at Hogwarts.”

“He didn’t say where exactly, did he?” Ron asked, brows lifted in hope.

Harry shook his head. “But he seemed to think it was somewhere no one would ever find it—somewhere even *he* wouldn’t have found it if he didn’t know it was there. Sounds like the Room of Hidden Things to me, right?” He glanced at Draco, who nodded numbly.

Ron and Draco helped him back to his feet, though he swayed unsteadily when they released him.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Neville said, pressing a cup of something into Hermione’s hand to pass to him. “Do you need to lie down? I’m sure you must be tired—”

But Harry cut him off, shaking his head. “No—no, we have to...” Time was of the essence now; Voldemort was on to them, and it was only a matter of time before he realised they were down to the final hidden Horcrux. “We need to get going.”

“About time,” Seamus said with a firm nod. “How can we help? We’re with you, a hundred and fifty percent.”

“Help...?” repeated Harry. Voldemort’s rage continued to ebb at his mind, threatening to pull him back under if he dropped his guard. His scar still burned fiercely, like someone had a brand pressed to his head.

“Yeah, what’s the plan?”

“Well—I mean, there’s not so much a plan as... A task.”

“A task?”

“Yeah. We came to Hogwarts—me, Ron, Hermione, and Draco—cause there’s something we need to do here.”

“Of course there is!” Seamus said, punching the air. “Just tell us what you need from us.”

“Right, Harry, we’ve been preparing for this all year,” Neville said. “We knew you’d be back, and we wanted to be ready.” He brandished his wand, flicking sparks from the tip.

“Er, well...” He hadn’t quite expected this. Moral support was one thing, but he didn’t know how he felt about drafting his friends into a fight. “This is kind of something we need to do on our own...” he started—then glanced around the Room with a frown as realisation dawned. “Wait—this is the Room of Requirement, right?”

Neville nodded. “Yeah; I explained about it, remember?”

“Yeah, no, just—” He gestured to the walls. “We actually need to be in here. I mean, not *here*. We need...another version of the Room.”

Hermione gasped. “Oh—of course! We can’t possibly access the Room of Hidden Things while the Room of Requirement is in use!” She looked to Neville. “We need to get everyone out of the Room so we can access another aspect of it—can we do that?”

Neville frowned. “I...I mean yeah, we could leave the Room. It wouldn’t be too much trouble to get the place back to the way we have it now, even if we left, but...”

“But the corridor outside is pretty busy, seeing as it’s still early afternoon,” Seamus said. “The Carrows can’t watch the Room the whole time, but they’ve got their little weasels ready to report anyone they see going in or out. Not everyone here is a permanent resident, you know?”

“There’ll be fewer monitors after curfew, though,” Lavender reminded. “If everyone left right now, we’d surely get caught, but after seven or so? Or at least around dinner time? It should be easier, so long as we time everything right.”

Harry reached into the Mokeskin pouch, drawing out the Marauder's Map and activating it. "Will this help?" He passed it to Neville, whose brows lifted into his messy fringe.

"Yeah! Wow, this is—yeah, this'll do wonders. It's definitely too crowded out there right now..." He traced the corridor where the Room was located, and there were at least half a dozen little dots milling about nearby. "So unless someone wants to go out there and cause a distraction, we'll have to wait out our vultures."

Harry shook his head; they might not be able to avoid alerting the Carrows and Snape to their presence in the end, but they could put it off for as long as possible. "Seven, huh..." He sighed, looking to Hermione. "Can we wait that long?"

Hermione frowned. "It's only just three now... We might have a bit of time?" She dropped her voice, leaning closer to Harry. "He can't possibly Apparate to *all* of the locations, can he? I don't like waiting this long, but short of sending everyone through that passageway to the Hog's Head, I don't see we've got much choice."

"Wait—yeah, why aren't we doing that?" Ron asked. "Sending them through for Aberforth to deal with."

"You want to send your friends to Hogsmeade, a place that's crawling with Death Eaters and Dementors right now?" Draco asked. "Why not just do the kind thing and hit them with the Killing Curse yourself?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I mean, maybe for evacuation, as a last resort, but we've got to keep our heads down, and that includes avoiding smuggling a group of students out of the castle."

"Right," Neville sighed. "Sorry, Harry. If we'd known you were coming and you needed the room, we'd have had it emptied before you arrived."

"No, you've done great work, Neville, really." Harry clapped him on the shoulder. "We're still in this fight, just working with a short delay."

Neville slumped in relief. "Brilliant. Right, then I'll go explain the situation to everyone,

and we'll be out of your hair as soon as the coast is clear." He waved the Marauder's Map with a grin, and Harry shooed him away.

"We'd best use our time wisely, in that case," Hermione said, once Neville and the others were out of earshot. "I'd like to pop over to the library and see if I can find any books with hints on how to destroy Horcruxes."

"The library?" Ron said. "You mean to say you didn't already pick it clean?"

"I came by all of my books *legitimately*, Ronald," she sniffed. "I brought what I own or what...er, what Professor Dumbledore 'donated'. I didn't feel right taking any of the library's own collection."

"She didn't feel *right*..." Ron muttered, shaking his head. "The fate of the free wizarding world hangs in the balance, but Merlin forbid she leave a book overdue—ow!" He winced, rubbing the back of his head where Hermione had clocked him with her beaded bag.

"For that, you're coming with me," she said.

Ron rubbed his nose. "I was gonna come regardless! Obviously."

"Oh." Hermione's cheeks flushed. "Right. Obviously." She cleared her throat, then said with forced brightness, "Shall we?"

Harry glanced to Draco, who was rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes and didn't seem to notice there was a conversation going on. "Er, I think Draco's still pretty drained from the flight. We might need our strength later, so perhaps it's best he recupes while we have the chance?"

Draco had been through hell today, between having to impersonate his mad aunt and hauling Harry on his back over half the English countryside and enduring harrowing reminders of the deadly outcomes of wild, uncontrolled magical outbursts. He deserved to kip for the next couple of hours.

Hermione *hmm*ed softly, then drew the tent from her beaded bag and passed it to

Harry. "He might prefer more familiar quarters, in that case. I doubt he'd be able to relax much in present company." Harry moved to take the tent, but she held on to it, initiating a little tug of war. She lifted one brow when he frowned at her. "What about you? Going to join us in the library, or...?"

Harry considered for a moment; three heads would certainly be better than two, with Voldemort fast closing in on them and time being a precious commodity now...

But then there was Draco, and Harry's fingers had been itching ever since the Hog's Head to give him the reassurance for which he so obviously ached. They needed to all be in fighting form; Hermione and Ron could surely handle a bit of light research without him.

"I'll—I'll stay behind. Just in case there's opportunity to use the Room earlier, you know?" He covered up the nervous catch in his voice by digging out the Horcrux, still wrapped securely. "Here, in case you come across a solution before I see you again. Destroy it the first chance you get. Oh and—" He drew out his Invisibility Cloak and passed it to Ron. "Use this. The Map wouldn't do you much good anyway with so many people about."

Ron and Hermione shared a look that Harry didn't entirely understand—but they parted without further ado as Hermione slipped back into her Animagus form and hopped into the crook of Ron's arm.

"Be careful, yeah?" Harry said.

"Try not to get into any trouble 'til we're back," Ron returned, tugging the Cloak over his head. "Tempting as it may be for the two of you."

Desperate Times

Erecting the tent was a quick affair, though explaining the need for it to Neville and the others was not.

“Just poke your head inside and give a shout if you need anything, yeah? And if Hermione and Ron get back before we’re up again, send them in after us straight away.”

Neville had frowned. “Are you sure you don’t feel like kipping on one of the hammocks? It’s silly for you to have come all this way only to hide in your tent—”

“We aren’t *hiding*,” Harry had said, before realising how defensive he sounded and explaining, “Just, Draco’s exhausted from his flight, and he’d never be able to relax surrounded by so many people who either outright hate him, don’t really care about him, or just dislike Slytherin on principle.”

Neville hadn’t seemed entirely convinced. “And...you’re tired *too*?”

“Well *you* try breaking into and then back out of Gringotts on an empty stomach.” Neville had laughed at this, and Harry had clapped him on the shoulder. “We’ve got our rooms in there, and it’ll be nice to have a little quiet time before our next round of risking our necks, y’know?”

Neville had at last relented, shoing Harry off and vowing to keep any nosy parkers from interrupting their afternoon nap. Harry had felt a little guilty, skiving off for a bit or privacy when Neville and Seamus and the others were clearly aching for more stories of what Harry had been up to, but Draco needed reassuring more than Neville’s feelings needed coddling just at the moment, so Harry’s mind was settled.

As soon as the last peg had been pinned to the Room’s flagstones with a Sticking Charm, Draco slipped through the flaps, crossing the tent’s sitting room in three long strides.

“You want some tea or something?” Harry asked, making a beeline for the kitchen to put a kettle on. “Or are you hungry? Feels like those sausages and chips were hours ago...” He wondered if the Room might oblige them with a back-door to the castle’s Kitchens. Or could they Summon house-elves in here?

Draco ignored him, though, arrowing mutely for their bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him. Harry winced and quickly cast a *Muffliato* on the tent; no sense in giving the group milling around out in the Room gossip fodder.

Abandoning his efforts with the kettle, Harry followed Draco into their bedroom at a more sedate pace. He eased the door open again, hanging in the doorway as he watched Draco shuck his trousers and shirt and combine their beds with a flick of his wand.

It was hardly a subtle invitation, but when had Draco ever shown himself to practice delicacy? This was par for the course, and they were all stressed and on-edge, so Harry decided that perhaps he ought to lower his expectations.

It wasn’t as if he was entitled to any sort of romantic overtures, after all.

“Are you coming or not?” Draco snapped accusingly, and Harry’s expression must have shown some offence, for he gentled his tone a bit as he drew back the covers. “...I’d rather the former.”

Harry reached for the zip on his cardigan. “Of course. Why do you think I came in here?” Draco just shrugged. “...You sure you didn’t need any time in the Sanctuary? This might be our last chance for...for a while.”

“I think I’ve spent more than enough time as a dragon today.” He extended an arm, beckoning impatiently. “Hurry; you’re taking for-fucking-ever.”

Harry raised a brow. “What’s the speed of my disrobing got to do with you going to sleep?” Draco just fixed him with a needling glare, and Harry nodded. “Right, right—budge up, then.”

He quickly dropped trou and tossed his shirt into the corner, where it joined a growing

pile of dirty washing that Harry had been too busy saving the world to deal with.

Draco practically dragged him under the covers, sliding up close behind him and pressing his forehead to Harry's nape. He took several deep, bracing breaths, filling the silence of their bedroom with soft inhalations. Harry imagined him like a battery, slowly recharging himself from the draining effort of worrying that Harry might lose his life the moment he dared looked away.

After a few minutes, Harry wondered if he was asleep. They really ought to sleep, even just a quick cat-nap. Somewhere out there, Voldemort was frantically checking his Horcrux hiding places and realising with mounting dread that Harry nearly had him. Once he came looking for the Horcrux here in Hogwarts, everything would come to a head. It might even happen tonight—perhaps this was all almost over.

He knew the thought ought to fill him with relief—at least a little—but it somehow didn't, not at all.

The *tick tick ticking* was growing louder with each passing breath, until it was deafening and he could hear nothing beyond the sound of his own mortality creeping up on him, the moment of kill-or-be-killed, when he would either strike Voldemort down or be struck down himself, and he didn't feel at all prepared to manage the former.

"They all hate me out there," Draco pouted against the back of Harry's neck, distracting him from musing over his impending doom with the ridiculous frivolities of social status.

Harry did not dispute this, as Draco hated pretty words about as much as Harry did. "... Well, you've kind of been a git to a lot of them. And nowhere in that lovely speech you gave did you even attempt to apologise or suggest you'd reconsidered past actions or—"

"Yes, well," Draco interrupted with a sniff. "It hardly seems the time to whinge and moan about who did what in Third Year."

"Third Year. First Year, Second Year, Fourth Year, Fifth Ye—" Draco made to pinch Harry's waist, but Harry twisted around, making a grab for his wrists. They wrestled for

a bit until Harry snaked his arm around Draco's waist and held fast, smiling with flushed cheeks. "They don't know you. What you've done, what you've been through. They just don't know you, that's all."

"And you *do*?"

"A little bit," Harry said. "More would be nice, though."

Draco's lips quirked up at one side in a poorly disguised grin of abject superiority. "Does Harry Potter want to be my *friend*?"

"Well considering I just told a room full of our schoolmates that we already *were*, then yeah sure." He shrugged. "Why not make it official?"

Draco stared at him in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable after that—lips parted and blinking slowly, not even breathing. Harry thought he probably ought to move his arm from where it was wrapped around Draco's midsection, but doing so now would only draw attention to it.

Draco swallowed, arching a brow. "Too bad I don't want to be your friend."

And now he was just being pedantic. Harry rolled his eyes, poking Draco's bare chest, right between the pectorals. "Oh no? What *do* you want to be, then?"

All humour faded from Draco's face, leaving behind a pale mask that seemed thoroughly wrong-footed by what Harry had meant to be casual—if unnecessarily flirtatious—banter. Clearly he had trod out of bounds, though, and he quickly shifted topics.

Harry cleared his throat softly. "...'S weird, being back here. Feels like we ought to be throwing Hexes at one another, or trying to get each other saddled with detentions. Maybe arguing about who's going to kick whose arse in Quidditch come the weekend..."

Draco seemed to appreciate the distraction. "Now why would I waste my breath arguing about a given Slytherin win?"

“Hm—remind me, *when* was the last time Slytherin won while I was Seeking...?”

“I think I’ve a slight advantage now.”

Harry frowned. “You mean you think you can *cheat* your way to the Cup now.”

Draco raised a finger, tutting. “Show me where in the Standard Rules of Quidditch it says a *word* banning transforming into a dragon in the middle of a match.”

Harry rolled onto his back and stared up at the canvas ceiling, settling his arms across his stomach and sighing in a much put-upon way. Draco shifted onto his side, elbow braced and head propped up in one hand as he grinned most irritatingly at Harry.

“They’d instate one, just for you.”

“Let them try; my father will hear about it.”

Harry had to snort at the notion of Lucius Malfoy, cowed Death Eater, throwing a wobbly because his unregistered Animagus offspring couldn’t incinerate the opposing team’s starting lineup.

But his smile too quickly faded into a wry kind of melancholy. “...Kind of sucks we’ll never be able to do that kind of stuff again.”

“What, drive each other mad? Trust there’s *always* opportunity for that.”

“No, just—normal kid stuff.”

Draco frowned. “We *aren’t* kids.”

“Yeah, but...it doesn’t feel like we ever really *were*, even. There was always *something*, you know?” Like mad professors trying to kill him or haunted diaries trying to manipulate ravenous beasts into eating him or deadly misunderstandings with long-lost godfathers or second comings of megalomaniacs or Umbridges or Horcruxes.

Draco extended a finger to brush along his bicep, tracing the swell of his muscle down to

the divot in the crook of his elbow, then back again “Wishing you could turn back time, then? Don’t go maudlin on me now, Potter.”

“It’s not me being *maudlin*; it just would’ve been nice for a bit of normalcy. Even just for one year.”

“We’re wizards, Potter—”

“*Harry*, honestly. I’ve had about enough of ‘Potter’ for today.”

“We’re wizards, *Harry*,” Draco obliged, without making a face for once. “We don’t get to be ‘normal’—whatever that is. It sounds dreadful.”

“Surely we deserve ‘not fearing for our lives,’ though? There must be *some* version of reality where You-Know-Who doesn’t exist, and I grew up in Godric’s Hollow and maybe even had a baby brother or sister. Where I wasn’t so scared to be sorted Slytherin I asked not to be—and we were dormmates. Where you always called me ‘Harry’ and I always called you ‘Draco’ and we just...”

He trailed off with a defeated sigh, closing his eyes. He was rambling now and not making a whit of sense.

“Where you knew me...” Draco mumbled. His thumb was rubbing hypnotically over the knob of Harry’s elbow, though he didn’t think Draco even realised he was doing it, lost in thought as he seemed to be.

“Mm. I just...” He cocked his head to the side, seeking understanding in Draco’s eyes. “I wish it didn’t feel like...there’s never any time. Like there’s always *something* we have to do. Even if we somehow come out of this alive, I feel like it still won’t really be over. There’ll just be something else to attend to, some new obligation, and there’s never enough time to...” He caught himself, just before he bungled everything. “To see.”

Draco was watching him with a dangerously fragile tension that made Harry tremble—he could muck this up fifteen ways from Sunday if he didn’t watch himself.

“...To see what?”

“To see...” Harry swallowed. “To see whatever.” He knew it was a cowardly answer, though, and he recalled Draco’s fears made manifest by the Locket—that Other World where he did the kinds of things with Ron and Hermione that made his toes curl.

A dark part of him that he kept well tamped down, the part that the Sorting Hat had latched on to and that reared its ugly head at the worst possible times, made him want to pick apart what evidently amounted to Draco’s worst fear. To see how much of it rang true, what it really *meant*.

But they didn’t have time—no time for *them*, at least. There was no time for two people: just a wall. A wall that could not have chinks or weak points, because they couldn’t afford to fall, not this close to the end. Not with so much riding on their not fucking things up.

Still, Draco at least deserved more than ‘whatever’.

“To...*look*, you know. Explore.” It still came out flat and clumsy, and with an irritated huff, he tried to roll away, placing his back to Draco—

But Draco grabbed his arm, stilling him, and fixed him with a look in his eyes that screamed manic desperation, helped none by the way his pink tongue darted out to wet his lips and his breath stuttered in his throat. His skin seemed to vibrate, and Harry worried he’d just said something *very* wrong.

“Fuck me.”

“What?” Harry spit out reflexively, and it took a moment for his brain to catch up and process just what Draco had said. “I—*what?*”

Draco’s fingers on his arm tightened, like he feared Harry might leap from the bed and beat a hasty retreat back into the Room, his state of *déshabillé* be damned.

“I’ll ask again, if I have to—but I think you heard me.” Draco closed his eyes, tight, and swallowed around a thick lump that made his words come out with a nervous warble.

“Just—I want you to—” He released an unsteady breath and opened his eyes again—just grey, just grey. No tell-tale flicker, no riot of colour. “*Please*,” he whispered through grit teeth, then with a tight smile, he added, “You still owe me the favour I won.”

Harry had to take a beat—and then another, and another after that, still not entirely sure he’d heard right, that Draco was actually asking him what it *sounded* like he was asking, because there were the things they’d done...and then there were the things they’d deliberately *not* done, because that was....that was another thing entirely.

But then, Draco was in a right state—he’d had to masquerade as a psychopath half the morning and spent the other half flying for his life over the better part of England. He’d then been rudely reminded of the dire consequences of magic that wouldn’t listen to its wielder and suffered a (decidedly earned) rude welcome on their return to a place that had once meant sanctuary.

Why *shouldn’t* he be grasping for reassurances like this, actions that were so intimately entwined with the concept of commitment they’d been enshrined into Muggle wedding vows?

“Wait—does...does, you know, the dragon...er, are you saying it *needs*—”

“Forget the *fuckin*g dragon,” Draco whined with strident irritation. “Just—I’m *asking*. In a rather mortifying setup, too, as you’re making me ask *several times*.”

But how could Harry forget the dragon? He didn’t *dare*—it was the only thing he had to left cling to if he wanted to keep this whole thing from becoming...becoming bigger than they could let it, something wholly unmanageable, and didn’t Draco *understand* that?

He’d let this go too far, he could see it now, and look where they’d wound up: curled around each other in a glorified pup tent with only their underwear keeping them decent.

But he couldn’t say that, couldn’t say *any* of that, so he just groped for the first excuse he could manage: “I’ve...I’ve never...”

“I don’t *care*,” Draco grit out. “This isn’t about—” He bit back a frustrated groan, closing his eyes to force a deep, bracing breath. Perhaps he thought it might calm him. “I just *want it*,” he said, adding in a quiet rush, “*Please*, Harry—please, just...”

“I didn’t—say *no*,” he reminded firmly, feeling his cheeks heat. He certainly wasn’t saying *yes*, either, but he didn’t know what hearing Draco literally begging him for—*that*—might do to him, and he didn’t want to find out.

Draco’s eyes opened again, and they’d lost a bit of the frenzied haze, to Harry’s relief. He didn’t seem to be under the influence of any potion—and when could he have possibly been dosed, really?—nor did he look to be being driven by the dragon’s nigh-insatiable subhuman urges. But...that hardly gave them permission to...*indulge*.

“It’s only that,” he tried again, “I mean, that’s something...I’ve never—”

“I told you: *I don’t care*.” Draco locked eyes with him, and Harry told himself that the flicker he caught in their depths was only the light from the lamps. If Draco was going to maintain this wasn’t about the dragon, he would humour him. “...It’s not as if *I* have, either.”

It came out bitter and acrid, like it left a nasty taste in Draco’s mouth, and Harry felt a thrill run through him, some muddled amalgamation of relief and excitement and arousal and abject terror.

He trod down *hard* on that feeling. “Then maybe we shouldn’t,” he said, in soft suggestion so as not to work Draco into a desperate froth again. He didn’t think he was terribly old-fashioned, but this really didn’t strike Harry as the sort of thing you were meant to dive into for the first time in a hurried encounter in a tent while a wanted man.

It was...something you were supposed to take your time with, to relish and enjoy. What had Draco said? *Savour*. And more to the point, it was something you were meant to do with someone you really loved—not someone you were unavoidably entangled with because of wayward magic and hormones and the ever-present threat of a tortured demise if you didn’t submit.

Neither of them deserved that.

“If—if the dragon doesn’t need it, then maybe—”

Draco shoved him away with a frustrated growl, falling back onto his pillow and rubbing the heels of his palms in his eyes. “It’s not always about what *it* wants! I’m allowed to want things too!”

And of course Harry knew that. Draco was only saying out loud the things they’d neither one of them ever really acknowledged: that so many aspects of this...*thing* had stopped being about what Draco or the dragon needed—really physically *needed* to satisfy, like a hunger—quite a long time ago.

There was a wealth of difference between the simple, base measures of reassurance the dragon had sought in those early days...and what Harry had felt compelled to offer, greedily accepted in return.

Harry shifted upright, drawing his knees toward his chest and resting his arms on them as he tried to process where they went from here, how they got around—*this*.

“And...what you want—is that?” Draco lifted up onto his elbows, pursing his lips and nodding quickly. “...I know I’m starting to sound like a broken record, but seriously: I don’t—really know...erm, how to...”

Draco rolled his eyes, scoffing in disgust. “It’s not fucking Divination—it’s *sex*.” He then added in soft entreaty when Harry flinched reflexively at the word, “You managed the other times decently enough.”

Harry had to laugh a little at that. “High praise, indeed.” He coughed, and he could feel his heart racing in his chest. “Don’t we...don’t we need some—stuff?” He’d caught enough of Dudley and Piers’s racy conversations and naughty posters papering the walls of Knockturn Alley to know that the business of blokes with blokes was more complicated than it seemed at first blush.

Draco’s expression slackened, losing some of its bitter anger, as if he hadn’t honestly

expected Harry to actually agree to this. He raked his eyes around the room, then grimaced. “There’s...spells. I don’t know them though...”

And an already bad idea was starting to sound worse and worse. “Draco, if we don’t even have the knowledge or materials we need, we probably shouldn’t—”

Draco’s hands were on Harry’s shoulders in a flash, gripping roughly and shoving him down, onto his back. In one smooth movement, he slid on top of Harry, straddling his waist and holding Harry firmly in place with his weight. “People *fucked*—” he said, punctuating his words with a sharp roll of his hips, “—before there were spells and salves, you know.”

He leaned in until his nose was only an inch from Harry’s, then canted his hips more slowly, gently dragging his cock alongside Harry’s. The angle caught the fabric between them, rubbing with delicious friction, and Harry bit back an inelegant yelp. He slammed his fist on the mattress, desperately swallowing down any sounds. He really didn’t want to test that *Muffliato*.

“...You said more would be nice. Knowing me.” Draco’s breath was hot against Harry’s cheeks, and he had to close his eyes against the intensity of this assault on his senses. Draco shifted forward, resting his forehead against Harry’s until their lips brushed on every word spoken. “I want to show you. What might have been.”

His words were soft and raw and so painful, Harry felt it as a physical *ache* when he didn’t say *what could be*.

Because there *was* no future, nothing beyond this moment—nothing they could promise each other, not when they knew full well they might not live to see another sunrise. If it came, it came, and perhaps they would have a whole new set of problems to deal with then, but *now* was guaranteed, at least, and Draco seemed intent on capitalising on that fact.

Harry’s cock was painfully hard by now, caught between the rocking drag of Draco’s own cock alongside. Harry’s hands went to grab his hips, unsure if he wanted to shove him off

or hold him closer. He fought down the urge to writhe, knowing it would just make deciding how he wanted to play this more difficult.

“I—I want to, I *do*—” He released a huffed chuckle despite himself, wincing. *God*, did he want to—or at least a part of him really wanted to. “I just—” He snapped his hips up, then tried (most unsuccessfully) to cross his legs when a particularly powerful wave of arousal washed through him. He threw his head back, trying to sink into his pillow, and heard Draco snicker at him, the prick. “*Fuck*,” he hissed.

“That’s what I’m asking,” Draco said, canting those hips too damn slowly for Harry’s taste. Forget fucking—they could do this all night, right through Voldemort raiding the castle, and Harry thought he’d probably be all right with it. Maybe this had been Draco’s devious plan all along.

Draco shifted back, drawing upright and braced his hands against Harry’s chest. He ran them down his rib cage and then up again, brushing over the peaking, dusky nipples with a caress that was only teasing for its brevity. It felt amazing, bloody fantastic, and Harry could feel himself careering toward the point of no return, that moment when Draco would ask him for the last time, and he’d give a resounding *yes* because it was finally a need as strong as anything the dragon had ever made known.

He lifted a knee and unseated Draco, sending him toppling to the side with an offended squawk. “What the *fuck*, Harry?!” he snarled as he collapsed onto his back, and Harry spared only a moment to run his eyes appreciatively over Draco’s tented briefs before he twisted around to crawl over Draco, snaking his way up the arching body trembling beneath him.

Draco quickly quieted when he realised he was getting his way, and he was smiling far too self-satisfactorily when Harry met his lips with a kiss full on the mouth. He tried to slake some of his arousal with the kiss, going deep and hard and demanding, and he ran his hands down Draco’s sides, touching the jutting balls of his hips before running back up.

Perhaps to ensure Harry didn’t try and back out of whatever he was committing himself

to, Draco brought his legs up to bracket Harry in place, effectively trapping him—claiming him, and Harry wondered silently if maybe the dragon had some say in this after all.

“*It’s not as if I have either,*” he’d said in petulant, defensive admission, as if this were something to be ashamed of. So many firsts, and he was spending them all—wasting them all—on Harry. Maybe he heard the *ticking* as well, maybe it had grown too loud to ignore, and there was a part of him, secreted away, finally admitting that there was a real chance that Harry was going to die very, very soon.

That this might be his last chance to have Harry—or maybe his only chance ever.

Harry dipped a finger under the hem of Draco’s briefs, sliding along the edge and meeting Draco’s eye in silent request for permission. Draco gave a sharp, shocked inhalation, worrying his bottom lip and nodding quickly.

“Lift up,” Harry said, certain he’d never heard his voice sound so gruff, and Draco canted his hips upward to allow his briefs to be peeled off. They fell by the wayside, and Harry wrapped a trembling hand around Draco’s half-hard cock, giving a few experimental tugs.

Draco hissed softly, thrusting up into the loose channel Harry had made with his fist, and licked his lips, looking quite the most wanton thing Harry had ever seen in his life. He felt a sudden urge to look away, like he wasn’t meant to see this manner of smut unfolding before his very eyes.

How could he possibly be expected to turn this down? To refuse what Draco was so eagerly offering? It wasn’t like that business with the virility potion; Draco *wanted* this, he really did, this Harry believed. He’d seen that desperation in his eyes before, a vain hope that betrayed just how much he ached for something he knew well he neither deserved nor was likely to receive. And yet still he wanted, nakedly and fiercely.

Perhaps, then, Harry wasn’t meant to turn it down at all. Wasn’t a little better than none? Wasn’t a few minutes—if that—better than *never*?

Harry thought he wasn't interested in *what might have been*, because there was a certain bliss in ignorance, but...this might be the last thing he could give Draco.

He hadn't been a very good M word, mostly because he hadn't had much choice in the matter and Harry did not take kindly to such situations, as Ron and Hermione (and now Draco) well knew, but still.

No one wanted to die a virgin, right?

He mouthed a colourful oath to himself, closing his eyes and shaking his head, and pressed two fingers to Draco's lips—sliding them in, and then out again, covered in spit.

Part of him still recoiled, a refrain of *Gross!* ringing in his ears, but the better part of his mental faculties had by now been given over to sheer terror or clouded by arousal, so there wasn't exactly much room left for disgust.

Besides, it wasn't as if they hadn't already had their tongues down each other's throats—among other things.

The saliva was better than nothing, and his strokes to Draco's cock came more smoothly now as the shaft plumped and grew in his grip. Maybe if he could get Draco off first, then he could use the slick to...to make the next part easier.

Or at the very least, he could flood Draco's veins with enough endorphins to make him forget any pain this ill-advised fucking was likely to engender. Cock-sucking he could handle, though he'd balked at the notion initially, and he was an old hand at wanking by now, but buggery was...well, a quick glance at Draco's cock, and he wasn't sure he wanted anything like *that* anywhere near his arse.

Was it really the dragon after all, then? That had Draco begging Harry to...well?

God, this really was a terrible idea. He felt a wave of nausea lap at the fraying edges of his mind, and his grip went slack.

"Pick up the *pace*, Potter," Draco growled in reminder, and Harry gave him a sharp

squeeze as he fumbled to catch up to his earlier pace. “Easy! I still need that!”

“Sorry, I—sorry,” Harry mumbled. Perfect, just perfect—and now Draco looked cross with him again, his expression no longer quite the wanton abandon he’d shown in their earlier liaisons. Indeed, he seemed no more thrilled with the situation than Harry—which he probably wasn’t. After all, who wanted their first time to be had under threat of imminent doom?

No one, of course—but Draco was still asking, and Harry reflected he was being a right prig by dithering like this and not making a damn decision one way or the other.

Harry leaned in, sidling smooth and with intent, to kiss Draco again, as gentle and attentive as he could possibly be under the circumstances.

For whatever reason, Draco *did* want this. Maybe even needed it, perhaps subconsciously. So...if it was something Harry *could* give, then he wanted to. They had enough to stress about right now, enough shit hanging over their heads, that they ought to have what they wanted while they were around to enjoy it.

Sure, this was hardly how he’d envisioned his own first time going, furtive and unsure if he was going to live another twelve hours—and Draco Malfoy had *certainly* never factored into his wildest of fantasies, this he wanted on record. But Draco had complied when Harry had begged him for something he shouldn’t have, so Harry could stand to do the same, he figured.

He could do this—so he would.

He bumped against Draco’s arse, rubbing himself through his tenting briefs along the crevice of the cheeks. He imagined sliding in, tight and slick and warm, burying himself inside Draco, imagined the sounds they would make with their voices and bodies, imagined—

Draco braced his hands between them, palms against Harry’s chest, and gave a great *shove* with a frustrated grunt. Harry’s arms pinwheeled comically as he struggled to

keep his balance, and Draco slid out from under him, cursing violently. He was out of the bed and tugging his briefs back on before Harry's mind caught up with what had just happened.

“What the—Draco?”

There was no response; Draco only snatched up his wand with trembling fingers and gave a swipe with it, bringing the rest of his clothes floating after him as he stormed out of the room.

Harry watched him go in bald confusion, then gave a violent start when he heard a door slam elsewhere in the tent: the Sanctuary.

Oh, he'd fucked this up somehow. He knew he shouldn't have been surprised, and yet he was, because he'd well and truly *committed* there, at the end. His cock was certainly still in the game.

He ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it with a sigh, and took a moment to collect himself, as it was damn awkward wandering around with a hard-on (though Draco had made it look effortless). Once down to half-mast thanks to a vivid fantasy of Dudley's conception, he pulled on his pyjama bottoms and a shirt and followed Draco out into the Sanctuary, wand at the ready in case he was in a snit.

The Sanctuary was in a curious state; perhaps because of the magic of the Room, it didn't seem capable of reflecting the environment outside the tent, instead showing a rather drab Scottish moor cast in waning sunlight, not entirely unlike the mindscape Harry had first found Draco trapped within all those months ago.

He expected to see the dragon once he entered, but Draco had not bothered to transform, instead having Transfigured a low hedge into a blue-and-white-checkered loveseat that looked comically out of place against the scrubby landscape.

He was leaned forward, his elbows settled on his knees and his head in his hands, the very picture of a pout.

“Go away.”

Harry sleeved his wand, confident that at least he would not have to parry fireballs and dodge whipcracking tails.

“...I’m getting some really mixed signals from you, you know,” he said. Draco turned to glare at him, mouth sharply downturned and suggesting he was in no mood for levity. Harry sighed, rubbing his eyes. “What do you want from me, seriously?”

“I thought I was *pretty* explicit.”

“Then why did you storm out?” It felt like there was some joke being batted about, and Harry just wasn’t getting the punchline. Every step he made seemed to be absolutely the wrong one, and he was tired of standing in place.

“Because it was rapidly becoming clear you *didn’t* want it.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest this—then closed it again, because well, Draco wasn’t *wrong*. He simply hadn’t thought about it in terms of his own pleasure. He’d made the decision to go ahead with the whole thing because it had been what Draco wanted. He’d been so focused on making Draco feel good, he hadn’t really been worried about enjoying it himself—though he’d not realised his reluctance had been quite so obvious.

He wiggled his toes in the short-cropped grass. It felt odd, standing “outside” in only pyjama bottoms and a button-up shirt hanging open. “Well can you blame me?” he asked, unable to avoid sounding overly defensive. “This hardly seems the time for—for that kind of thing.”

Draco gaped at him. “*Really?* All we’ve done already, and you can’t even *say the word?*”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I don’t really want a lecture from someone who makes me say ‘M word’.” He frowned at Draco. “And if you think it’s no big deal, why the sudden insistence we do it *now?*”

“Because—” Draco started, then promptly buttoned up, looking lost. Harry was glad of it,

as he didn't think he could quite handle hearing his reasoning. Mostly because he thought he had a fairly good idea of what it was.

It was only, it would become real if either of them said it out loud: *I think we're going to die and you're my last request. I don't want to die without having known you in a way no one else ever has or ever will.*

Harry stepped closer, slipping his hands into the pockets of his pyjama bottoms.

"...I don't know what I want, Draco," he said. "You may have it figured out, and bully for you, but—I don't. I...I have to think about stuff like this. About *steps* like this, because for me, it's a bloody *big* step. And I can't do that. Not right now. I can't afford to be distracted from what you know we've got to do. I *have* to concentrate on what's at stake."

Draco was resolutely not looking at him now, but the muscles in his jaw were as tense as drawn bowstrings. Harry was one false step away from blowing this—well, blowing it more than he already had.

"If you want to...erm, keep doing th—the kind of things we've already done, then..." Harry nodded to himself. "I can do that. I'd...I'd really like that." It felt like a scandalous admission, but there was no sense in prudish behaviour *now*. He took a bracing breath, then continued: "But if it's *got* to be this...if you really want me there, present... committed...then can you just—maybe wait?"

Draco's head snapped up, steely gaze connecting with Harry's in wide-eyed confusion. "Wait?"

"Yeah, just—" He shrugged. "Deciding to do this...it'd *mean* something. For me. So I'd want to give it some honest thought." He didn't elaborate on what that meaning was, or when he was supposed to find the time to give sleeping with Draco 'honest thought' if they were truly about to die, but Draco blessedly didn't ask. Harry softly cleared his throat. "I don't...I don't want to screw it up, is all."

A tug was easy enough, and while sucking cock hadn't been *easy* by any means, Harry hadn't seen it as something associated with the same baggage as sleeping together carried. He would be 150% in or not. *All in* or not.

Draco made a petulant little noise. "That *is* a risk with you, admittedly."

"Oi," Harry said, a touch defensive. "You said I managed the other times decently enough." He let his lips curl into a ghost of a smile, just to show he wasn't being entirely serious.

Draco was not so easily placated, though, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "...We might die, though. What if there's no time for 'waiting'?"

And fuck, evidently they were talking about this.

Harry dropped down into the seat next to Draco, leaning back against the cushions that still poked and pricked with half-Transfigured twigs.

"...We might, yeah. But we can't. We can't afford to. We *have* to come out on top of this, understand?"

"That hardly has any bearing on whether or not we *will*—"

"If you don't believe in the cause the way Hermione and Ron and I do—"

"Oh *fuck you*, Potter!" Draco snarled. "You think I've just been arsing around with you lot because I've got nothing better to do?"

"You didn't exactly have a *choice* for most of it."

"Well I've got one now!" He leapt to his feet and began to pace. "And I'm here. *All in*. I'm here for Granger and Weasley and *you* and the rest of your sycophantic horde as much as I'm here for myself or my parents. I'm here because I *want* to be."

"And why is that?"

“Because—!” Draco caught himself, the words stalling in his throat, then he took a breath and continued more sedately, “Because I don’t want you to die. Or is that not a good enough *cause* to believe in? Must I give two shits about the whole of the wizarding world and all the mulish, moronic Muggles under the sun, or can’t I just want *you*?”

Harry’s heart gave a shuddering jolt, and he tried to swallow but failed. His voice broke when he said, “N—no, that’s...that’s fine. I suppose. If you—if that’s what...” He nodded. “Then use that. Use that to give me time...to acquaint myself with the idea.”

“Acquaint yourself with the idea,” Draco repeated, unaccountably bitter. “Work up the nerve, you mean.”

“Draco,” Harry said firmly, and he flinched. “Nerve’s not the issue. I can assure you. But I’m a Gryffindor, and for once, I’m thinking before I act, yeah?”

This wasn’t a quick tug, or even their fumbling attempts at head. Harry would give this step its due consideration with a clear mind—no Dark Lords riding shotgun.

Draco gave him a long look, then shunted his gaze to the side, looking chagrined. “... That’ll be an exciting change, I suppose.”

“One thing you can’t say about me is that I’m predictable.”

“If one likes the fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants sort.” Draco rubbed his nose, then softly cleared his throat. “So...we can still do—all the other business, then?” He hastened to add, “If I need it.” Harry nodded, stifling a smile, and Draco sighed in relief, rubbing himself through his loose pyjama bottoms. “Thank Merlin, because I’m hard as a rock here. It’s fucking torture.”

Harry settled his arms along the back of the loveseat and threw one leg over the other, the picture of relaxation., “Are you, now? You could have taken care of it yourself, if it’s such a bother.”

Draco fixed him with a nasty glare, then smoothed his features, working his cock through the soft fabric, slow and languid, enough to keep himself interested but not enough to get

off.

He stared Harry down with a heated gaze, long elegant fingers pinching the tip of his cock and staining the front of his bottoms with a wet spot. Harry felt his mouth go dry, and Draco jutted his chin out proudly, lips lifting in a lilting smirk.

“Now why would I do that, when you’re right here?”

Harry released a shuddering breath, tongue darting out to wet his lips. “I’m—ah, right where? Here?” He nodded to the loveseat, then eased to his feet, taking two steps to bring him right into Draco’s personal space. Their noses brushed, and Harry traced Draco’s bicep, down to the jut of his elbow and the fragile bones of his wrist. He laid his hand across Draco’s, giving his—god, he really was rock-hard—cock a teasing squeeze. “Or...here?”

Draco lifted up onto his toes with a sharp gasp, free hand coming up to grab Harry by the shoulder to steady himself. His legs trembled, and Harry worried for a moment they might give out, so he slipped his other arm around Draco’s waist. “Easy. Don’t want you down on your knees unless you just feel like it.”

“Think I’m just *gagging* for your cock, do you?”

“I did say ‘unless you just feel like it’.”

Draco *hmm*ed. “Well, charitable donations *will* go far in restoring my family’s good name after all this Dark Lord business has been resolved.”

“Fuck you, Malfoy,” Harry laughed, taking him by the wrist and leading him back into the tent.

They’d barely made it over the threshold before Draco was on him, kissing with a slowly mounting intensity that made Harry’s head spin. They backed into the bedroom, nearly knocking a lamp to the floor in the awkward shuffle, touching everywhere they could. Hands on hips, wrists, necks, sparing their cocks until they tumbled onto their bed.

They brought each other off with lazy, languid strokes, stretching out their satisfaction, making it last as long as possible.

Harry let himself slip back into his guilty fantasy from before—imagining that this was something that had come about organically. The fruits of a relationship tended carefully, with wide eyes and open hearts.

Harry's attempts at romance in general had been...pretty abysmal, and it still felt downright absurd to think of *Draco Malfoy* in such a context, but...well, if this whatever-it-was between them had happened once in this reality, who was to say that it might not happen again elsewhere? To a Harry and Draco who had all the time in the world and the desire to indulge? Surely they weren't this fucked in *every* possible universe, right?

He recalled Hermione saying, months back, that this wasn't something new. That it was something that had always been there, lurking just under the surface, and that it had only taken this extraordinary event to allow it to break through. So maybe in another life, with another version of himself...maybe this could have happened on its own. Maybe that Harry might have a better idea of what 'this' actually was.

But he wouldn't waste his time thinking about that right now—the liminal space between *what might have been* and *what could be*. Draco had agreed to wait—one crisis at a time—and they could still use their bodies to speak the words their mouths didn't dare.

“Harry...” Draco breathed against his lips, and the air was too close, suffocating and hot as they worked each other off with increasingly frenetic jerks and tugs. “*Harry...*”

“Yeah...” Harry said, “I know...” He kissed Draco, full and sweet, and didn't try to tell himself he was doing it because of the dragon or out of any 'M word' necessity this time. He would kiss Draco, if only once, because he damn well *wanted* to before he died.

His orgasm crested, and he let it wash over him, making no effort to hold it back, as he was through denying himself the things he wanted. If Draco could indulge in his own desires before he died, then Harry felt equally entitled. Draco was quick on his heels, though, pouring eloquent oaths into the air between them, filthy words on a silver

tongue.

Draco lay boneless, limbs akimbo, after, and Harry Vanished the evidence with a lazy flick of his wand. Draco burrowed into his side with a mumbled *draw the covers you berk*, and Harry obliged.

Harry hadn't thought he was very tired at all, and yet somehow, sleep claimed the both of them all the same.

A Gathering of Forces

“Harry.”

Something nudged his shoulder, and Harry frowned, burrowing into his pillow with a soft grumble.

“*Harry!* Wake up.”

He shrugged one shoulder to draw the covers up over his head—only to find himself rudely cuffed on the crown, and he scrambled awake. He blinked blearily, squinting through blurred vision. “What the—*Hermione?*”

He didn’t have his glasses on, but he could see she was resolutely looking away, keeping her gaze fixed on one of the low-lit lamps bolted to the wall.

Quickly recalling himself, he curled into a foetal position and pulled the covers close to hide his nudity. Not that there was much point in it, given their clothes scattered around the room, the bed they were pointedly sharing, and the fact that Harry had claimed most of the blankets in his scrabbling, leaving Draco’s pasty white arse exposed for all and sundry to view.

“Wh—what are you doing in here?” he hissed, all too aware of Draco slowly rousing beside him. He hoped he could chivvy Hermione off before Draco decided to make a *scene*. This was awkward enough as it was.

“Coming to fetch you, *obviously.*” He could see her cheeks were flushed a furious pink, and her jaw was tight-set. “Make yourselves presentable and get out here quickly.”

Before Harry could protest—or ask her not to speak of what she’d just seen to Ron—she marched out of the room with a muttered *Thank god I didn’t have Ron come check...* and slammed the door behind her.

The door closed just in time for Draco to roll over onto his back, exposing his frontside—pockmarked with errant lovebites that formed a veritable treasure map to his dusky pink cock hanging limp between his thighs.

“Didn’t you put the do-not-disturb sign on the door?” he mumbled, voice thick with sleep. “Merlin...” He rubbed his eyes. “How long were we out? I feel like I’ve been run over by an Erumpent in heat...”

Harry cast a quick Tempus charm and winced. “Fuck, it’s gone eight.” He’d thought they might only take a quick nap, but clearly Draco had been more drained than he’d let on. He glared balefully at the door. “...I think she’s got the wrong idea.”

“Mm, I think she’s gotten the right one, rather.” When Harry didn’t respond, he shifted up onto his elbows, frowning. “The Dark Lord’s probably on our doorstep now, and you’re fussed Granger thinks we’ve been *indecent* with each other? Someone needs to sort out his priorities.”

Harry sighed, rolling out of bed and gathering up the articles of clothing strewn about the room, sorting his from Draco’s as he went. “It’s not that—just...I’d have rather they found out a different way.”

He could feel Draco’s eyes tracking him with a hunted wariness, and Harry somehow knew he was about to be tested. “...You wanted them to find out?”

Harry heard the implication inherent in the question—and shrugged, trying to affect an unconcerned air. “I mean, if they *had* to...is all.”

They quickly dressed and spelled away any remnant marks sure to rouse questions before shuffling out into the sitting room, still a bit dazed from their rude awakening. Hermione and Ron appeared to have been in a heated conversation of whispers, for they straightened abruptly when Harry cleared his throat to announce their arrival.

Hoping to avoid any awkward explanations or excuses, Harry quickly dove right into it. “So how’d the library go? Any leads?” He ribbed Draco with one elbow, prompting him to

contribute as well.

“You didn’t waste the afternoon sucking face in the Muggle Studies stacks, did you?” he drawled, leaning against the door jamb.

“*Draco!*”

“What? Everyone knows that’s what that section’s for.”

“Of course not,” Hermione huffed, still unable to meet their eye. “And no luck, unfortunately.” She passed back the Invisibility Cloak, neatly folded. “I’d already gone through most of the volumes having anything to do with Horcruxes back in Sixth Year, so I suppose it was a long shot to begin with.”

Harry’s shoulders dropped. It was sounding more and more like they were going to have to pay Griphook a visit before this mess could be ended, as they’d come up with no other means of damaging these Horcruxes beyond repair in their months of trying.

“Buck up, mate,” Ron offered, giving him a boyish slug to the shoulder. Harry tried to ignore that it felt a bit forced, like Ron was working very hard to keep things casual. God, Hermione had *definitely* told him. “We come bearing a bit of good news, at least!”

“Good news? Well we could certainly use it.”

“I wouldn’t say *good*,” Hermione said. “We still don’t know why it’s happened.”

“You wouldn’t call Snape abandoning the school *good*?” Ron shook his head, turning to Harry. “Scarpered off like he had hellhounds on his heels! Reckon he got called away by You-Know-Who? Maybe he’s gathering his forces?”

Draco drew his sleeve up, staring down at the Dark Mark on his arm, and frowned at it. “...Mine hasn’t burned. If Snape was called away by the Dark Lord, it wasn’t in response to a general summons.” Harry marvelled at the way he casually bared his Mark around them now, no longer showing half the guilt and self-reprobatation as in their earlier days.

“D’you think he’s done checking on the Horcruxes yet?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. “I haven’t had another vision, and I know as soon as he’s seen the locket and ring are gone, he’s going to be rightly pissed off.” He rubbed his forehead in response to a phantom twinge. “I’m not looking forward to it…”

“Well, whatever the reason, he *is* gone.” Hermione was looking at Harry now, either having forgotten what she’d seen or moved past it for the time being. “Harry, we should start moving everyone out of the Room of Requirement now.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess there’s no sense in pretending everything’s normal any longer, huh?”

“Indeed. I’ve spoken with Neville, explained that Hogwarts might soon be expecting company, and he’s agreed that we should focus on getting the castle secured as quickly as possible and see that the students who won’t be fighting are evacuated—”

“Wait, *fighting*?” Harry goggled. “Wha—*who’s* fighting?”

“Well the older students and staff, of course!” She gave him a bemused look. “We’ve got several dozen more-than-capable witches and wizards *right here*, many of whom seem bound and determined to defend their home—”

“They’re students!”

“They’re our peers, Harry. They’ve got as much right to fight as we do.”

Harry groped for an excuse; the last thing he wanted was to see his friends forming a human barrier between Voldemort and himself, falling like a house of cards before the Death Eaters’ curses. “But—they’re hardly prepared to face an *army*—”

“They took the same classes we did, mate,” Ron reminded, and Harry wondered if he and Hermione had discussed this matter already—including how to handle any objections Harry was likely to have. “Neville says they’ve been practising all year in secret, those that could be trusted. It’s not just Dumbledore’s Army, either. They can defend

themselves—and more so, they want to.”

“I don’t think it’s our place to tell them they can or can’t help defend the castle,” Hermione said, and when Harry’s expression showed he remained unconvinced, she added, “...Let them make their case, at least?” She jerked a thumb toward the tent entrance.

“Let them—? They’re out there now?”

“And then some. There’s been quite a few more arrivals through Aberforth’s pub since we popped down to the library. Evidently he’s none too pleased with the traffic, but I’m sure he’ll get over it.”

Harry clenched his jaw. He’d never been particularly enamoured of the idea of Ron and Hermione being involved in the Horcrux search to begin with, but he’d accepted it in part because he was only human and didn’t think he could handle the weight of such responsibility alone—though also because they probably would have tagged along whether Harry wanted them to or not. Draco joining them, too, he’d not had much choice in, so he’d necessarily accepted his presence as well.

But he was decidedly less than thrilled to know that his classmates, beloved professors, and staunch allies wanted to stand against Voldemort and his Death Eaters when this was really a fight for Harry and Harry alone.

Neither can live while the other survives—that had been the prophecy. Nothing in there implied anyone else had to die in Harry’s place, and he *meant* to be the only one taken down, if it came to it.

“Respect how they’d like to die, Potter,” Draco said, bumping Harry’s shoulder with his own. “It’s none of your business besides.”

Harry glared at him—but recognised that he was outnumbered on the issue and nodded toward the flaps. “Fine. Let’s go see what’s what.”

Hermione’s comment that there’d been ‘a few more’ arrivals had been quite the

understatement. The number of people crammed into the Room had more than doubled since Harry and Draco had retired to the tent, and try though he might to remain resolute that these friends and family *not* become cannon fodder for his own sake, Harry couldn't deny it felt damn good to see so many familiar faces, some he hadn't seen in a year or more.

Ginny, Fred, and George along with their parents and even Percy had shown up, and they folded Ron into a tight hug when he stepped out of the tent, letting out a cry of *Harry!* when Ron directed their attention his way.

Lee Jordan had arrived with the twins, it seemed, and Kingsley, Remus, and a leering Tonks were there representing the Order. Tonks waved at Harry, and he caught the glint of a ring on her finger, and Remus was sharing some pictures with the others around them. They'd certainly been busy—he would have to get the full story later. Cho was huddled in conversation with fellow Ravenclaws Luna and Michael Corner, and she gave Harry a weak wave when their eyes met. Dean appeared to have escaped Muriel's along with Luna, and he and Seamus were once more inseparable. Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, and Katie Bell were clustered together in what might look to a casual onlooker like the beginnings of a game of pick-up Quidditch. Draco stiffened at Harry's side when Katie caught sight of him, sidling around just behind him. Convincing *this* group not to curse Draco outright was likely going to prove—understandably—more difficult than earlier.

Bill and Fleur stood near the mob of Weasleys speaking with Charlie, whose hair had returned to a length sure to disappoint his mother, and Bill was giving Harry an unreadable look that said he still wasn't ready to trust Draco any further than he could throw him. Even Aberforth was here, suggesting there would be no more late arrivals via the Hog's Head.

The chorus of warm greetings that had been lobbed Harry's way when he stepped out of the tent fell silent once he stood aside to reveal Draco—though the thrum of whispers that ran through the crowd suggested they'd already been informed of the mysterious fourth member of the Horcurx hunting party.

Suddenly it was time for another round of awkward introductions, and Harry cleared his throat, which sounded loud in the uncomfortable quiet that had settled over the Room. “Er, Draco, this is...everyone. I’m sure you know most of them in some fashion—” And sure enough, Katie Bell did *not* look happy; they were definitely going to need to do some damage control after this. “I suppose you haven’t really formally met Ron’s folks—” Outside of a run-in in Diagon Alley where he’d soundly insulted their entire family. “Um, Remus taught us Third Year, you might remember—” Ah yes, when Draco had jeered his shabby clothing and state of low means every class. “And Kingsley...oh, I guess he’ll be a new face to you.” He’d been around when Draco had first transformed, though seeing as Draco had been unconscious for most of the duration, he wouldn’t remember him.

“And...everyone else, you probably know Draco already, but...try to get to know him again, maybe? We’re none of us the same people we were a year ago, or even six months ago—and if you think I’ve been off raising hell for You-Know-Who and his band of merry wizards, know that it’s only thanks to Draco I survived it. He’s helped us out, more than any of you can know, and....and he’s my friend. Some of you have got some problems with him, that I can understand, and I’ll leave that to you and him to sort out, but I ask that you just...put it off maybe, for just a little while, because as I’m sure you’ve heard, we’re in something of a pickle.”

“Order of Understatement, First Class, to Mr. Harry James Potter!” George crowed, and the discomfiting tension of the room shattered as a wave of chuckles rippled outward.

“...Right, what he said. Now, er, I understand that a lot of you want to stay and help defend the castle—”

“Not a lot of us, *all* of us!” Seamus cried, thrusting his wand into the air. A murmur of assent and light applause followed, and Seamus looked very pleased with himself.

“Yeah, the thing is—guys, this isn’t lessons. This isn’t a DA training session or duelling practice. This is life or death—and I’m not being dramatic. I mean You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters are coming, they *are* coming—and when they get here, they’ll kill

whoever gets in the way of what they're after." Harry swallowed. "They'll kill you to get to me. And I don't want that to happen."

"Sure, but if they want to kill us, they've got to kill us first," Fred reminded, tapping his temple. "Pretty sure that's how it works. I say we just don't give them the chance."

Harry faltered; the good humour in the room told him they just didn't *get it*, and how many ways was he going to have to outline how they were going to die excruciating and wholly unnecessary deaths if they didn't get out while the getting was good?

But Hermione placed a hand on his arm, gave him a comforting smile, then directed her attention to the rest of the room, though Harry thought her words might have been meant for him. "None of us here thinks we're immortal, or that we've got Harry's knack for surviving Killing Curses—I think we just...care more about standing for something than running away. There'll be no hiding from You-Know-Who. Not if he wins—not if Harry doesn't beat him. So I'm not sure about the rest of you, but I'd rather put my life on the line helping to end this *now* than run away and pray he doesn't smite my Muggleborn arse where I stand."

"*Can Harry beat him?*" someone else asked—a Hufflepuff who looked far too young to be standing here debating making a last stand.

"Of course he can!" Ron said, lying through his teeth as far as Harry was concerned. He had a slim chance, sure, but this lot didn't know that there were still three Horcruxes and Voldemort himself left to destroy, with no means of doing so.

Draco had urged him to respect how his friends wanted to die, but the thing was, he didn't *want* his friends to die. He didn't want *anyone* to die, really—except Voldemort, of course, and he would certainly lose no sleep over Bellatrix's death either, should it come to pass.

But that wasn't going to happen. Someone was going to die—probably several someones. Probably people he knew, probably people he loved. Probably people in this room right now. He didn't get to tell people they couldn't fight for what they believed in—not when

he hated *so much* how coddled and cosseted he'd been all these years by those who supposedly loved him very much keeping him from greater truths.

He wiped a hand over his face, sighing. "...Well, let's at least be organised about this, yeah? First thing's first, we need to get this room emptied as quickly as possible. Where's Neville?" He glanced around the crowd, frowning. "Wait—where *is* Neville?"

Neither Hermione nor Ron seemed to know, but Seamus shouldered his way to the front of the group. "He took a few DA members with him after word came Snape had run off. He didn't want the Carrows trying to slip out once they saw the Big Rat was abandoning the sinking ship."

He supposed they would have to get started without Neville. If he understood the Room as well as he claimed, he'd be able to get it to reappear if they needed it later. "Right, well let's make this quick then. Could I get everyone out into the hall? We need to empty the room." Slowly, as a syrupy mass of humanity, people began to make their way to the door, crowding dangerously until there was next to no movement save for at the bottleneck. "Er, you should head for your Common Rooms for the time being and await further instructions."

"And those of us *without* Common Rooms?" Kingsley drawled in his thick baritone. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and the expression on his face said he would've much rather been leading this show than following Harry's instructions—well he was welcome to it, if it stuck so badly in his craw.

"Oh, right, um—" And who had died and made Harry leader of the Resistance movement? Dumbledore, he supposed. Somehow all situations wherein Harry had to lead a group of scrappy rebels led back to their Headmaster. "Fine, let's all head to the Great Hall, shall we? But be on your guard—there might still be mischief-makers about."

There was a general murmur of assent from the group, with no further quips or protests. Harry didn't know if he liked that or not; surely the Order members, who'd been fighting this war longer than Harry had been alive, would speak up if he was out of his depth, right?

Hermione began to break down the tent, and though this was easily a one-person job, Ron decided he needed to lend a hand. While they worked, Draco sidled up beside Harry, lips twisted into a sour frown.

“I’m *really* getting tired of you having to reassure people I’m not going to cast Unforgivables at them at every turn...”

“It does get a bit old, doesn’t it?” Harry mused, brows lifting. “We could have shirts printed up—or those badges you were so skilled at Charming back in Fourth Year.” He grinned and lowered his voice. “I’ll wear one that says ‘Draco is my mate,’” he said, singing to the tune of *Weasley is Our King*.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Somehow I doubt that would endear me to this homely mob any further.”

“You’re going to have a hard time winning over the ones you nearly killed, I’m not going to lie. Apologies can only go so far.”

“Weasley’s all right with me now,” Draco sniffed, as if Ron were the metric by which all others’ grudges ought to be measured—and Harry supposed he had something of a point.

“True, but you know he’s only letting bygones be bygones to try and impress Hermione, being the bigger man and all that.”

Draco’s frown somehow soured even further. “So we’re back to square one as soon as he mucks up *that*.”

Eventually the crowd dispersed as everyone trickled out of the Room and made their way toward the Great Hall. Hermione slipped the tent back into her beaded bag, and after a final sweep of the Room to ensure no stragglers remained behind to keep it open, they exited as well.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t put on your Cloak, Harry?” Hermione asked once they’d stepped into the corridor; the doorway behind them disappeared with a soft *pop!* as the Room of Requirement vanished until students had need of it again. “You’re who You-

Know-Who and the Death Eaters will be looking for if they mount an offensive on the school, after all.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not as if they won’t figure out where I am soon enough—assuming he hasn’t already Crucio’d it out of one of his followers.” Snape had always had a preternatural ability to know when Harry was up to mischief; if he’d been summoned to his master’s side now, Harry was pretty much counting on Snape to out him. “I think we’re at the point where there’s really no use in secrets anymore. He’s got the Elder Wand and he knows we’re after his Horcruxes. Whether he knows I’m inside the castle or not, he’s already got a pretty stacked deck.” He looked to Draco, who’d always shown himself to be eager to point out when Harry was being atrociously naïve or exercising an undue lack of self-preservation. “All in, right?”

Draco only sighed, defeated. “Merlin help us; all in.”

Harry reached up to clap him on the shoulder, the words *Don’t sound too eager* forming on his lips—

—when another vision rocked him, jerking Harry from the warm protection of Hogwarts’ sturdy stone walls and shoving him into the cold darkness of Voldemort’s mind. His scar burned with a blinding, white-hot anger, and inside and out and all around, someone was *screaming*.

His diary had been destroyed—his cup stolen. And now his ring, passed down from Slytherin himself and further back still, bearing that proud Pureblood coat of arms—*gone!* Destroyed perhaps, even! His precious Nagini was safe at his side, her weight about his neck a comforting reminder of his still vibrant immortality, but as for the remaining two pieces...

He would check the locket first—it was the closer of the two, after all, and he imagined he heard a great clock somewhere ticking down to some finality, some *ending*—but there was to be no ending, not so long as he drew breath, not so long as his Nagini was yet curled about him and his remaining Horcruxes tucked safely away where meddling children could not stumble across them.

He flew through the air with all speed, the gloaming darkness shielding his journey from the goggling eyes of the oafish Muggles below. He was confident he had so thoroughly enchanted the locket's hiding place that his haste was wholly unnecessary, and he would feel foolish looking back on learning all was as it was meant to be. But still, he would check, if only for his peace of mind.

He reached the secluded shore and slipped as shadowy smoke into the tunnel, crawling along the craggy walls and whispering the incantations to let him pass without the need for a blood sacrifice. He sailed fast over the dark lake in the ghostly green boat, heedless of the grasping, gasping Inferi lurking just below the surface, and lit on the small island, racing for the stone basin standing at its centre.

Fury ripped through him, setting his nerves alight and boiling the very blood in his veins—he looked down, through eyes that were not his own, and saw what he had most feared: a basin full of clear, toothless water and nothing more.

“*Fuck!*” Harry screamed—in shock and anger and pain and a dozen different emotions that all boiled down to pure *fury* that he could not tell was his own or Voldemort's.

“Harry? Harry!” Hermione's voice sounded strained and tense—understandable, given the circumstances, but it grated and scraped over his already raw nerve endings, and he winced and turned away. He was lying on his back, he thought, propped up in someone's very bony lap—that would be Draco, then. He tried to blink, and the swaying chandelier overhead blipped into sight, times three until Ron got Harry's glasses properly settled on his nose again. “Thanks...” he rasped, realising he'd probably been shouting and hoping the others were already well on their way to the Great Hall and so hadn't witnessed his fit.

“Another one?” Ron asked, quite unnecessarily, and Harry nodded. “Anything useful at least?”

“He's coming. Now. *Right* now. He checked where he'd hid the ring and locket, and he's right *pissed off* to see they're gone—and terrified too.”

“Somehow the thought of him scared is more worrying than the thought of him angry,” Hermione said, and Harry agreed.

This was it—Voldemort was coming to Hogwarts, to find and secure his final Horcrux and to kill Harry in the doing, along with anyone who got in his way. There was no more running, no more hiding. No more Invisibility Cloaks or Marauder’s Maps. Just wands and spells and sheer will to live; whichever surpassed the other in those respects would be the victor. And Harry *really* wanted to live—but Voldemort wanted to live so badly, he’d murdered *six times over*. Eight if you counted Harry’s parents, and a hell of a lot more if you counted everyone who’d met their end at the tip of that yew wand over the years.

So Harry couldn’t do this alone. He couldn’t *afford* to—there was too much at stake to not ask others to put their lives at risk alongside Harry. The decision, it seemed, had been made for him.

They had precious little time left, and the castle desperately needed defending. Harry scrambled to his feet, wobbling unsteadily as he gathered his bearings.

Draco braced a hand on his shoulder, gripping tight. “Trying to get me to cart you around on my back again, Potter? Most underhanded of you.”

Harry snorted softly. “Didn’t almost get Sorted Slytherin for nothing.”

“I still don’t believe that, just so we’re clear.”

“It’s true,” Hermione said, looking a bit superior. “He just asked the Hat *not* to put him there.”

“Got a *problem* with Slytherin, Granger?”

“Me? Oh, no. But as I recall, Harry had just had a most unpleasant encounter with a Slytherin student right before getting Sorted and so had a bad impression of the House.”

“Fucked yourself over good on that one, eh, Malfoy?” Ron snickered, and Draco’s steely

gaze snapped to him. This close, Harry could see there was a bit of pink high in his cheeks.

“The fuck would I care if Potter got Sorted Slytherin or not?” he sniffed testily. “Good riddance and all that.”

“Why d’you think I’m making it up, then, if it’s no big deal?” Harry asked.

“Because—” Draco started, then seemed to rethink his protest, turning to Hermione with a huff. “Aren’t we in something of a *hurry*?”

She rolled her eyes. “Ten points to Slytherin for joining the party once more; *yes* we’re in a *terrible* hurry now apparently!”

With Harry back on his feet, they booked it down the corridor, making a beeline for the stairwell to head to the Great Hall—but were quickly drawn into a detour by the flash of spellfire on the third floor. Hermione and Ron ducked out of the way, but Harry had to be bodily thrown to the floor by Draco to avoid getting hit square in the face by a vicious *Reducto* thrown in what looked to be the midst of Neville’s rout of the Carrows.

Harry strained against Draco’s tight grip, which kept him from getting an (admittedly necessary) haircut courtesy of someone’s Scalping Hex. “We’ve got to help them!”

“No, we’ve got to *get to the fucking Great Hall*. I rather think your little army can handle a couple of third-rate Death Eaters here on babysitting duty!” He tugged at Harry’s arm, dragging him to his feet, but Harry shoved him off.

“Whether they can handle themselves or not isn’t the point! I’m not going to just—”

They were interrupted by the sharp, rapid clacking of heels on the flagstones. “I say, what is the meaning of—*Potter?!?*” Minerva McGonagall goggled at the sight that greeted her when she rounded the corner of the third-floor corridor. Her tartan dressing gown was tied tight at the waist, and her hand flew to her breast as she took a stumble and steadied herself against the wall, wand still brandished at the ready. “What in—goodness, are you really here?”

A jet of red came streaking down the hallway, but Ron batted it back with a swiftly erected *Protego*. He jerked a thumb down the hallway with a scoff. “Rude of them, don’t you think? We’re stood here trying to have a nice conversation...”

McGonagall seemed utterly floored, eyes goggling and jaw just slightly agape. ‘Dumbfounded’ was not a good look on their Transfiguration professor; it robbed her of all dignity.

Harry stepped forward, drawing her attention from the skirmish down the hall. “I’m afraid I *am* really here, Professor. I think I’ve missed a few lessons this year, but I hope you won’t dock too many points for it?”

She seemed to gather herself at last, lips thinning as she took in their curious little group, and she smoothed down several flyaways attempting a bold escape from her steel-wool bun. “Well. I don’t know that Gryffindor has all that many points *left* to dock, considering the circumstances.” Her eye fell on Draco, one brow lifting. “...I think Slytherin can spare a few, though. I must say I’m rather shocked to see *you* in such company, Mr. Malfoy. For more reasons than one.”

Harry opened his mouth to rattle off another of his now-rote ‘Draco’s not so terribly evil these days, so please hold your Hexes, as we’ve grown rather fond of him’ speeches, but Draco seemed to have it covered himself: “The accommodations at the Ministry were not quite as amenable as advertised, and I’m sure you understand Potter just can’t help himself when he sees injustice being wrought.”

McGonagall frowned at Harry in bald accusation, the lines on her face deepening. “*You’re* responsible for this?”

He hoped he was only imagining the unspoken *You brought Dumbledore’s murderer back into our midst?* “Er—in a way, I guess.” He squirmed uncomfortably under her quelling gaze. “It’s a long story, Professor, but please trust that I know what I’m doing.”

She threw her hands into the air. “Yes, it *would* take certain doom hanging over all our heads to drag an ounce of House unity from the likes of you two.”

“Think they’ve pitched in more than an *ounce*,” Hermione bit out in a carrying whisper, though McGonagall didn’t seem to have caught it, thankfully, and Ron was still distracted fending off wayward spells spiralling down the corridor.

“Well, pleasantries out of the way, can any of you explain what’s going on down there? And what *you* lot are doing here?” McGonagall pointed her wand at a statue that had been reduced to rubble by a *Reducto*, restoring it to its former glory with a practised swish. “You haven’t brought trouble to our doorstep, have you? Your absence for the better part of the school year suggests you’re not entirely ignorant of the bounty sitting atop your head, Potter, but if it’s sanctuary you’ve come seeking, then I’m not sure we can offer much. You must flee, this very moment! If the Carrows or Snape find out you’re here—”

“Er...” Harry started, and Hermione swooped in to save him.

“I think it’s a bit late for that, ma’am. Professor Snape’s abandoned the school.” She pointed down the corridor, just as a rousing chorus of cheers came echoing down the hall, bouncing off the walls. “And it sounds like the Carrows will be packing their trunks soon, too.”

“He’s *abandoned*—?”

“We think he was summoned by You-Know-Who. We think...” Hermione swallowed, looking to Harry, and he nodded for her to continue. “He’s coming, Professor. You-Know-Who is coming here. To Hogwarts. *Right now.*”

The colour drained from McGonagall’s face, distress standing stark on her features. “He wouldn’t—he *can’t*.” She brought her hand to her breast and shook her head, refusing to accept what she was hearing. “Why would he—?”

“He’s looking for something,” Harry said; he’d been so happy to see McGonagall’s familiar face, albeit more lined and strained than he recalled, he’d nearly forgotten the urgency of the situation. “There’s an object he hid inside the castle, long ago, and he wants it back now. But we can’t let him—we *have* to find it first.”

“We need to stall him, Professor!” Hermione said. “At least long enough to evacuate the school and give us time to search for the object You-Know-Who’s coming for.”

“Stall? *Evacuate*—?” She sputtered inelegantly, and Harry felt a pang of regret. She’d clearly been about to turn in for the night, and now they were telling her the Dark Lord was marching on her home, abject domination on his mind.

Harry stepped close, placing a hand on her arm and looking into her wildly dancing eyes. He needed his stern, prim Head of House right about now, not a dotty old lady in a nightgown. “Professor. He’s coming—he’s going to blow through Hogwarts, and everyone here, until he’s found what he’s looking for or else killed me, whichever comes first. Now, you’ve got the beginnings of a nice little resistance gathered, waiting for you downstairs in the Great Hall—” McGonagall’s eyes narrowed, as if offended by his having the audacity to mount a rebellion under her very nose. “I’m sorry I haven’t popped in for a pleasant chat. We just could really use some help right about now. And we’re distressingly short on time for discussion.”

She studied him over the rims of her glasses, expression tight and drawn. “It’s always *something* with you, isn’t it, Potter?”

Harry thinned his lips. “I haven’t made things easy for you over the years, have I?” She lifted her brows and gave a subtle jerk of her head. “If it makes any difference, you can blame Professor Dumbledore for this. It was all his idea.”

McGonagall’s countenance darkened, and she drew herself up, all sense of confusion and befuddlement whisked away in a flash. “This is on *Dumbledore’s* orders? *He* brought you back here?” Harry nodded; for better or worse, this was all in some way part of Dumbledore’s machinations, the rest of them mere cogs in his grand scheme. “...Very well. Speak no more and be off with you.” She took a bracing breath. “I shall assess this ‘resistance’ gathering and then see to securing the school against He Who Must Not Be Named while you and your companions search for whatever this ‘object’ is you need. Hogwarts has been through a siege or three in her time and should be quite up to the challenge.”

“A siege? No—no, we need to get everyone *out*—”

“I’m afraid evacuation is an impossibility,” McGonagall said. “With the Floo Network under observation and Apparition impossible within the grounds—”

“There’s a way,” Harry said quickly. “If you ask it to, the Room of Requirement can create a passageway leading into the Hog’s Head down in Hogsmeade.” They needed the room for their own devices, but Harry refused to put their hunt for the remaining Horcrux over ensuring the safety of the students, who had never asked to be drawn into the middle of a war not of their own making. They could always find their way into the Room of Hidden Things once the evacuation had been completed, and it wasn’t as if Voldemort could get inside himself while it was in use either.

“Surely you must be joking, Potter. Even if such a way out of the school exists, there will be no disguising the fleeing of *hundreds* of students all at once—”

“I know, I know, but You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters will be concentrating on the school and its immediate boundaries. They won’t notice people Disapparating out of the Hog’s Head.” Harry was certain that Voldemort would draw his forces out from the village now that he knew he needn’t monitor it for Harry, making it the safe haven the students would need. Aberforth had spoken of Anti-Apparition wards, but with the Death Eaters gone, dismantling them shouldn’t be too difficult.

“...I suppose you make a point,” she agreed. “It will be quite a lot of Side-Alonging, but perhaps...” She raised her wand, and from the tip burst three sleek-coated silver cats with spectacle markings around their eyes. Two waited patiently at McGonagall’s feet, joined by the third after it wound itself between Draco’s legs. “All staff members are summoned to the Great Hall—the threat has crested,” she spoke, and off they ran, filling the corridor with gleaming light that dazzled the eye.

Heavy footfalls called their attention to the other end of the hall, and Neville crowed excitedly at the head of a half-dozen others as they rounded the corner. “You’d think we’d struck ‘em with a Hot-foot Hex the way they took off, Harry! You should’ve seen it!” He waved the Marauder’s Map over his head like a victory banner before passing it

back to Harry.

“Oh that felt *wonderful!*” Hannah Abbott chortled, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed. “I only wish we could’ve gotten away with it sooner!” She drew up short when she caught McGonagall’s judging eye, though. “Oh! Professor. Um.”

McGonagall gave all parties present a once over before turning to Neville, the clear ring-leader of this erstwhile band of miscreants. “I take it your evening duelling practice session with the Professors Carrow went well, Longbottom?”

“Duelling practice—?” he started, then seemed to realise he was being gently teased, and he broke into a nervous smile. “Er, yeah. Smashing success, really. Think they might’ve been so impressed, they ran off to tell their friends...”

“Did they, now? Ten points to Gryffindor, in that case.” McGonagall turned on her heel in a flourish of tartan. “Come along then, students. We reconvene in the Great Hall for a practical demonstration.”

McGonagall did another double-take once they reached the Great Hall and she recognised the size of the ‘resistance’ Harry had spoken of. “I take it *this* is your doing as well, Potter?” she asked, and Harry jerked a thumb at Neville.

“Afraid I can’t be the scapegoat this time, Professor. Someone else has been fomenting rebellion under your very nose.”

Neville flushed and ducked his head, and McGonagall offered Gryffindor another ten points.

Kingsley swept over with Mr. Weasley, Remus, and Tonks in tow to greet McGonagall, but before they could so much as trade niceties, the doors to the Great Hall were flung open by a veritable stampede of Hogwarts staff. In they flowed—Flitwick and Sprout and Hooch and Trelawney, even Professor Binns drifted in, offering the crowd a decrepit little wave. Professors Vector and Sinistra came in arm-in-arm with their wands held high, and Madam Pomfrey had a crate—likely stuffed full of medicinal herbs and potions

—floating along behind her. Madam Pince and Filch guarded the doorway like twin gargoyles, glaring at Professor Slughorn bringing up the rear with pronounced huffing and puffing.

Slughorn bustled to the front, shouldering red-faced past his fellows. He massaged his immense chest, which heaved beneath his emerald-green silk pyjamas, and rumbled, “What on earth is going on here, Miner—oh! Oh, my gracious!” Slughorn nearly crushed poor Flitwick with a start when he realised they were decidedly not alone in the Great Hall. He scanned the room, blinking rapidly at all the new faces, and then gave a gurgling squawk once his eye fell on Harry standing just at McGonagall’s elbow. “And Mr. Potter! What an unexpected surprise...!”

“Evening, professor,” Harry said.

“Yes, quite...” Slughorn trailed off, tossing a bland, forced smile at Hermione and Ron—but his expression fell when he saw Draco. “...Mr. Malfoy, my word, aren’t you supposed to be—”

McGonagall cut him off with a sharp clap of her hands that echoed through the hall like a boom of thunder, drawing cries of surprise from those gathered. She climbed onto one of the tables, and in a magically magnified voice, addressed the crowd. “Welcome, friends and loved ones, though I fear it is under a dire flag we gather this evening. I have been informed that our erstwhile headmaster Professor Snape has been summoned to join his fellow Death Eaters, and that He Who Must Not Be Named rides for our destruction this very night.” Slughorn groaned, and a chorus of gasps erupted but were swiftly trampled underfoot as McGonagall pressed on. “It is our duty to ensure he *desperately* regrets that decision.” She drew herself up. “I therefore ask my staff and any other of-age witches and wizards who wish to do so to help in placing whatever protections we can upon the castle—”

“Protections are all well and good, Minerva, but you know there’ll be no stopping You-Know-Who in the end! If he means to breach the castle, he will!” Flitwick quailed under the withering stare McGonagall shot his way.

“Maybe, but I’ll bet we can slow him down!” said Sprout.

“Indeed. But I ask that the Heads of Houses first return to their dormitories post-haste and rouse your students. Have them gather here, where an evacuation plan will be set into motion. Let any students who are of age know that they are welcome to stay and fight if they wish, though they are by no means obligated. Please do everything you can to impress upon them the mortal danger they will face, taking a stand here, before they make any decisions.”

Flitwick and Sprout gave firm nods, but Slughorn just looked queasy.

“Expect Hufflepuff house back within twenty minutes, with bells on!” Sprout had a spark in her eye that suggested she might actually be *looking forward* to the coming battle, already plotting her own brand of horticultural horrors to inflict upon unsuspecting Death Eaters. She turned on her heel and shuffled through the crowd for the door, ticking off items on her fingers. Harry thought he caught her muttering names of terrifying plant species under her breath and did not envy the Death Eaters liable to soon storm the castle and trod right through a nest of Devil’s Snare.

McGonagall turned back to Flitwick. “I trust I will see you and your Ravenclaws back here in a similar time-frame, Filius?”

“Indeed! And I’m sure I can track down a few of my more enterprising N.E.W.T. students keen to test their Charm skills in the protection of our fine castle!”

“I look forward to it,” she said, shooing him off, and the crowd parted to let him pass.

Slughorn watched his fellow teachers depart to gather their Houses with a bewildered expression, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief. “Gracious, Minerva,” he huffed, rosy-cheeked and glistening. He was glancing about the hall, looking quite lost. “I—I’m afraid I must agree with Filius: not only will these efforts prove futile, He Who Must Not Be Named will surely rain down swift and cruel judgement on anyone who’s attempted to keep him from his quarry—”

“His ‘quarry’ is one of *your* students! And unfortunately, we haven’t time to discuss the matter any further, as time is rather of the essence. I trust you and your Slytherins will join us in the Great Hall in another twenty minutes as well?” said McGonagall. When Slughorn still seemed to dither, worrying the tie of his robe, McGonagall’s lips thinned into a tight, severe line. “...I won’t force you to stay, Horace. If you feel it’s more prudent to leave alongside your students, then I shall not attempt to stop you. Provided you *do* leave, rather than go crawling to He Who Must Not Be Named begging for sanctuary. This is quite the hour of our greatest need and our most devastating vulnerability, and should you *or* your students do anything to jeopardise the safety and lives of those brave souls who have vowed to stay on and fight to defend this school, then Horace: you *will* be struck down. With *prejudice*.”

Slughorn paled under her forbidding expression, gasping, “*Minerva!*” in so scandalised a tone Harry had to bite back a laugh. “You dare to suggest—?”

“I dare to *notice* that many of the children under your wing have relations marching upon us at this very moment—nothing further. Long has Slytherin House sat on the sidelines or straddled the fence, feeding into the darker side of its ideals and turning a blind eye to the suffering of those within and without. No more: decide with whose lot you choose to throw your own, or get out of my sight.” She pointed to the door. “Gather your students, Horace, and take the time to consider where Slytherin’s loyalties lie.”

Draco stood stiff and ramrod straight at Harry’s side, a statuesque vision of rage and frustration and humiliation on behalf of his peers. Harry saw, in his mind’s eye, the Room of Requirement, cheery in blues and reds and yellows; he saw Malfoy, cherub-cheeked and sneering with an outstretched hand, waiting in vain for Harry to take it only to be told *I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself*; he saw Draco, earnest and desperate with *I’m here, aren’t I?*

Harry touched Draco’s elbow. “...Go with him.”

Draco blinked. “What?”

Harry nodded to Slughorn, who was making for the doors to the Great Hall as one

marching for his own execution. “It’s their home that’s being threatened too; Slytherin should be given every opportunity to defend it. And we both know Slughorn’s got one foot out the door—he leans heavy on the ‘self-preservation’ bits of your House. He’s not going to try very hard to convince any of them to stay and fight.”

Draco hesitated—but only for a moment, nodding. “...I’ll be back in twenty.” He looked to Ron and Hermione. “I’m sure he’ll make every effort to undo you, but *try* to keep him alive until then.”

“Go,” Hermione said, shooing him away.

“Stay safe,” Harry said, and Draco snorted.

“I’m not a Gryffindor; you don’t have to tell me twice.”

He was soon lost in the milling crowd as he hustled after Slughorn, and McGonagall cleared her throat for attention once more. “Septima, might I presume upon you to rouse Gryffindor House and see that the students join us here in the Great Hall at their earliest convenience?” Professor Vector gave McGonagall a polite little curtsy and departed promptly. “Now then—for our castle-wide defences, I ask that you cast from the North Tower, Ravenclaw Tower, the Astronomy Tower, and the West Tower, to ensure we have a nice tight shield! If you can cast a Patronus, please spare one or two to guard against the Dementors He Who Must Not Be Named has at his command.” She ended her *Sonorus* and hopped down from the table, marching for the entrance. “Mr. Filch!”

Filch made a grab for the door jamb, nearly stumbling over his own two feet as he made to straighten smartly. “Yes’m?”

“Go and fetch Peeves, won’t you?”

“Eh? Whatchu want *Peeves* for?” Filch sputtered.

“Why do you *think*, man? It’s all hands on deck, and he’s one of the few able bodies we have that can’t be killed!”

Filch goggled at her for a beat, then bobbed his head, evidently convinced, and shuffled away to do as instructed, muttering under his breath the whole while with Mrs. Norris winding about his feet.

The crowd began to disperse, a tinny din rising up as groups formed and headed off to the four towers. Harry didn't want to leave until Draco had returned, but nor did he want to stand around twiddling his thumbs while they waited for the evacuation to be completed. McGonagall disappeared into the entrance hall, and Harry jerked his head for Hermione and Ron to follow.

McGonagall was stood in the middle of the hall, wand raised as she cried out, "*Piertotum locomotor!*" With a great rumble, the statues and suits of armour lining the corridor shivered to life atop their plinths as a pulse of magical energy washed over them. As a single unit, they leapt down from their posts, hitting the flagstones with an ear-splitting crash. Similar crashes echoed down from the floors above, suggesting that their fellows throughout the castle had sprung to action as well, a veritable stone and metal army in fighting form.

"You know your duties!" McGonagall boomed to her 'troops', pacing like a field marshal preparing to make battle. "Hogwarts is threatened! Make ready to defend it with every ounce of magic coursing through you!"

With the groaning scrape of metal against metal and stone against stone, the horde turned as one and began charging down the hallway and out into the main courtyard, throwing up a cloud of choking dust in their wake. Some were shaped like people, others like animals, still others like creatures Harry had never encountered before—and hoped he never had the displeasure. Suits of armour clanked past, brandishing longswords and spiked balls on chains and wicked glaives.

Evidently satisfied with her work, McGonagall turned—then barked at them, "What on earth are you doing still lurking about, Potter? Don't you have some object you're meant to be searching for? Quit gawping and be on your way!"

"Oh—er, well, we can't actually *do* that until the evacuation's been complete," he said,

knowing he sounded rather stupid. There was no telling how long it would take them to search the Room of Hidden Things for the diadem, and the other professors would return with their respective Houses in tow in short order. Better to wait a few minutes now to see everyone safely evacuated than to risk not being able to get the students out at all because they couldn't find their needle-shaped Horcrux in what would undoubtedly be the world's largest haystack. "I was only wondering if you might know of Ravenclaw's diadem? And if it's here at Hogwarts?" They had resolved to search for it in the Room of Hidden Things, but if McGonagall had a better suggestion, they ought to at least hear her out. "Or should we be asking Professor Flitwick, as he's Ravenclaw's Head of House, maybe?"

"Wha—*Ravenclaw's diadem*? That's what you're after? Why on—" She caught herself, though, apparently deciding she didn't really need or want to know. "I'm certain I have no idea where it could be! To my knowledge, it's been lost to the ages."

"Oh, I reckon someone found it..." Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry felt his last shred of faint hope shrivel up and die. Of course Voldemort wouldn't have made things that easy. "Thanks anyway, Professor. I suppose we'll have to search for it the old-fashioned way."

"If you've nothing better to do at the moment—" McGonagall sighed, "At least help your peers secure the castle! No place for idle hands this eve!"

Feeling very much like the Seventh Years they were, earning a sound lecture from their professor, Harry, Hermione, and Ron scurried back into the Great Hall. "Shall we join up with Ginny's group?" Ron suggested. "They're going to take the Astronomy Tower, seeing as it's nearest."

"While I'm as keen to help defend Hogwarts as the next student, I really think we ought to be focusing on finding a way to destroy these final Horcruxes once we've got them in hand," Hermione said. "Come on, let's put our heads together! We only need to damage them beyond repair!" She began ticking options off on her fingers. "I think we have to discount Fiendfyre altogether; it's just too dangerous to handle. It's almost sapient and

can turn on the caster as easily as seek its target. A mere brush with its flame will reduce a victim to ash—it'd do the trick to destroy a Horcrux for certain, but we'd probably all perish with it." She wrinkled her nose. "I'd like to try and get out of this alive, if at all possible."

"Yeah, that does sound like a good idea," Harry said. "Fine, no Fiendfyre. And we know most standard spells won't work, having tried literally every trick in our books on the locket." A thought struck him then. "What about...what about Unforgivables?"

Ron frowned. "You want to—*Imperius* a cup, mate?"

Hermione rapped him across the back of the head. "Of course not; you mean the Killing Curse?" Harry nodded. "Well—I mean, it's the *Killing Curse*. Killing. As in, making something alive...dead. The cup isn't alive—"

"Yeah, but it's got a soul shard in it, right? That's...that's kind of alive." He was reminded of the way the sliver of Voldemort's soul trapped in the diary had behaved—so human, so *real*. "The piece of Tom Riddle that was embedded in the diary certainly seemed alive."

"Perhaps, but the Hogwarts ghosts can seem alive in their mannerisms and speech as well, and the Killing Curse still wouldn't—"

Ron grabbed them both by the shoulder, squeezing painfully tight as he squeaked out, "*Basilisk!*" He shoved them away, turning in place and looking about wildly. "There's a—in the—! We've got a—!"

"BASILISK!" Hermione gasped, clapping her hands. "We're in Hogwarts! And down in the Chamber of Secrets there's a—"

"HUGE FUCKING BASILISK!" Ron shouted, earning sharp glares from Remus and Kingsley, who were conversing in low tones with Bill and Charlie Weasley while Fleur and Tonks cast Charms on the high windows lining the Great Hall, transforming their glass to thick stone. "With a mess of Horcrux killers in its mouth!"

Harry's heart leapt—finally, a bit of good luck! “Well—excellent! Brilliant, yes! Shall we —?”

Hermione grabbed his wrist, tugging him towards the door. “Yes, let's—Ronald, wait for us here?”

“Huh?” Harry and Ron chorused.

“We'll be back in a flash, really!” Hermione said, nodding towards the others; Tonks and Fleur had finished with the windows, and the group seemed to now be Transfiguring the tables and chairs into barricades, stacked high with tiny slits through which they could cast spells should a siege of the Hall become necessary. “Lend Remus and the others a hand! You're great at Transfiguration!”

“I'm terrible at Transfiguration...” Ron mumbled helplessly, and Harry mutely let himself be dragged away from the hall by Hermione as she made for the second-floor girls' lavatory.

“Er, I really think we ought to have stuck together...” Harry began, though he could hear how feeble his own protests sounded. “Don't you think—”

“Yes, I do think. I think *rather* a lot. Which is more than can be said for some of us!” Hermione huffed, and *oh*. Oh, he was about to get a lecture. She drew up short and dropped her hold on his wrist, hands on her hips. “Have you *completely* taken leave of your senses, Harry Potter?” She rapped him on the head sharply. “This is hardly what I meant when I told you to be a gentleman with him! Is this—oh god, is this to do with the mate business?” Her face went ashen, and she brought one hand up to her mouth. “Shit, be honest with me Harry: did he force...is this—did you *want* to—”

“Yes!” he sputtered, voice gone a bit high, because the last thing he needed right now was Hermione Granger defending his honour and clocking Draco Malfoy like it was Third Year all over again. He dragged her into a small alcove and snapped out a *Muffliato*. “I mean, he didn't *force* me to do anything. It's nothing to do with the dragon or—or the M word stuff or whatever.” He frowned to himself, then amended, “Well, I suppose it's a

little to do with the dragon and M word stuff—but not like you think!” Hermione was still studying him with a dubious stare, and he ran his fingers through his hair with a sigh. “Listen, do we *really* have to talk about this? *Right now?*” Perhaps Voldemort would kill him in the next hour or so and save him the trouble of having to pick up this conversation again later.

“Well—no, I suppose not, but...” She pursed her lips. “Oh what are you *doing*, Harry?”

There was worry writ clear on her face, and he groaned inwardly. This was the last thing he needed right now: his friends meddling in matters he himself was still struggling to come to grips with.

“Believe me, if I had any clue...” He wiped his face and leaned back against the cold stone wall.

“...Is it serious?” She cleared her throat softly. “I mean, if it’s just *physical*, then—”

“Hermione...” Harry groaned, burying his face in his hands. “You said we didn’t have to talk about it right now...”

“No—I mean, you don’t have to say...” she trailed off, colouring. “It’s only—Harry, it could be *really* dangerous if you and he—”

And no, this was worse: Hermione thinking he was going to go and get his heart broken, wind up hurt because he’d gotten involved with...well, someone like Draco. “Seriously, Hermione—it’s fine! I know you mean well, but I told you I really don’t want to talk about it right now. We’ve kind of got more important things to deal with at the moment, don’t you think?”

She opened her mouth again, protests perched on her lips—but she held off, sighing. She was looking at him funnily, searching his face with those big brown eyes of hers, and it unsettled. “I—I only want to...to know you’re being careful.”

“You say that like I’m not *always* careful.”

She gave him a wry little smile. “Of course, of course. How could I have forgotten? Harry Potter, paragon of thinking ahead and foremost authority on due consideration.” She bit her lip. “...Fine, I won’t press you about it any more for now, except this: Is it serious? That is, do you think...do you think you might have feelings for him?”

He frowned, not liking the leading tack of her question one bit. “...He’s my friend,” was all he said.

“Harry, you know that’s not what I meant.” She swallowed thickly. “It’s *important*—”

“It’s—complicated,” he settled on, seeing she wasn’t going to let this go, for whatever reason. “I’m not saying I don’t want to talk about it just to be contrary. I really *don’t*, because I can’t right now, all right? I can’t get distracted—or is that it? You think he’s distracting me? Because he’s not.” Perfect; now she thought he was being led about by his cock. “We’ve got our heads on straight, we really do.”

“I didn’t think you were distracted...” Hermione said, voice small. “I only wanted to make sure—”

“Listen.” Harry ran a hand through his hair, sighing, then pinched the bridge of his nose. “I appreciate you’re worried, I do, but—can we just, for now, pretend you didn’t...you know, see anything? Just forget about it? Until maybe after I’ve killed Voldemort?” The longer they dithered on about Harry’s and Draco’s ‘predicament’ (if Draco wasn’t going to call it a relationship, then he wouldn’t either), the less time they had to search for Ravenclaw’s Horcrux, and that amounted to lives lost. How could she be so worked up over something as inconsequential as Harry’s hypothetical love life at a time like this?

Hermione made a face. “If I didn’t think it’d land me in the Janus Thickey Ward next to Lockhart, I’d try to self-Obliviate, so...” She swallowed. “...But if you *wanted* to talk about it, you know you could with me, right? I promise...I promise not to freak out—any more than I already have, at least—and I won’t make any judgements—or well, I’ll try not to, I swear—and...and, oh, just know you could talk to me!” She bit her lip. “I know it’s none of my or Ron’s business, but I’d hate for you to think you had to hide—”

“I wasn’t hiding anything,” Harry said, which wasn’t a lie, though he doubted Hermione would see it that way. He tried to turn the tables. “Just—well you and Ron haven’t said anything about *you* two either!”

Hermione went beet-red, colour darkening her cheeks. “What *about* me and Ron? There’s nothing to say!”

Harry’s lips thinned into a hard line; so that was how she wanted to play it? “Well, then right. Same goes for...for me and Draco. There’s nothing to say. And if there were, then maybe I’d say something, but...but just, for right now...” He shook his head. “Not yet. I mean it: it’s complicated, really *really* complicated.”

“That I can believe,” she said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear and shunting her gaze to the side.

“...Yeah. So you can understand why I kind of want to...to play this one close to the chest? And just...see?”

“...See what?” she asked, and he tried not to think about Draco, curled in close to him and asking that same question, pregnant with hope and fear and desperation.

“...I’ll let you know when I find out.”

She was looking at him now with a curious mixture of confusion and wonder, and he could tell she really didn’t want to drop the matter, but then she firmed her lips and nodded. “Please do.” She flicked her wand, dispelling the *Muffliato*, and flashed a nervous smile. “Right! Talk over, let’s grab a Basilisk fang or three now, shall we?” She moved to slip back out of the alcove, but Harry stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Harry?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck, wondering if he really wanted to know the answer to this question, then asked, “Did you...that is, have you told...er, does—does Ron know...?” He had his suspicions, of course, but they were just that: suspicions. He dreaded having to have this same conversation with Ron at some point in the near future, but

forewarned would at least be forearmed.

She sighed. "...I haven't told him anything, no. But he's not as oblivious as you might hope." Harry winced, and she smiled wryly. "And if you're so worried about how he'll take it, you might consider being more subtle about it."

"*Be more*—I have been!" he sputtered. "It took you walking in on us to realise what we'd been up to!" A simple locking charm and he might have been spared this headache.

Hermione gave him a shrewd look that said she disagreed with that read of the situation. "And what *have* you been up to, in this 'complicated' relationship of yours?"

It was Harry's turn to go tomato red, and his ears burned. "That's—well that's none of your business is what it is."

She pursed her lips. "...Of course." She placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing. "Just keep your wits about you, yeah?"

"I *told you* I wasn't going to get distracted," he grumbled.

"I didn't mean—" She sighed fondly, then inclined her head. "Come on, we'll be missed if we don't hurry." She then slipped out of the alcove, taking the stairs at a quick clip, with Harry trailing dutifully behind.

He tried to put the conversation out of his mind, a task that became easier once they found themselves in the bathroom housing the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, when he was called upon to deliver the password in Parseltongue. Myrtle was nowhere to be seen, and he tried not to recall what had transpired the last time he'd been here.

They made quick work of harvesting the Basilisk's fangs; the Chamber seemed to have been fitted with a hefty Preservation Spell, as the corpse had shown next to no decay, looking about as fresh as when Harry had shoved the sword of Gryffindor through its skull five years earlier.

"Should we test it before we head back?" Hermione asked. "To...to make sure they'll do

the trick?”

“You think they might not work?” The only reason they’d come down here in the first place had been because Hermione had been certain the fangs would still be full of the creature’s deadly venom, making them just as useful for destroying Horcruxes as the sword had been.

“Well, of course they *should* work,” Hermione said, biting her lip. “Only...I’d just like to see another one down as quickly as possible.”

She had a point; the cup was burning a hole—figuratively this time—in Harry’s pocket, and he would be glad to be rid of it. He fumbled it from his jacket, placing the swaddled cloth on the cool flagstones and unrolling it to reveal Hufflepuff’s cup, still glinting with its polished shine and begging to be handled. “Why don’t you do the honours?”

“Me?” she asked.

“Yeah. I let Draco have at the locket, and he did all right. I’ve destroyed a Horcrux already; I figure we should all get a chance to drive a nail into You-Know-Who’s coffin.”

Hermione eyed the cup with no small amount of wary distance, then nodded in a manner that suggested she was trying to work herself up to the task. She took a breath and withdrew a handkerchief from her own pocket, which she used to carefully grasp one of the Basilisk fangs by its base, handling it like a crude knife. “I should just—stab it, right?”

“Right; even just grazing it a bit should do the trick, I think.” He hoped the cup wasn’t going to try and fight back the way the locket had; it would feel entirely too invasive, being forced to bear witness to Hermione’s deepest, darkest fears. Draco’s had been bad enough, and they still haunted.

Harry braced the cup with a bit of cloth so it didn’t go clattering away, and Hermione lifted the fang into the air—then brought it stabbing down into the bowl of the cup, hitting it square in the embossed badger emblem at the bottom. The fang bit into the gold, releasing its venom, and the cup gave a violent rattle as it strained in Harry’s grip.

From the point at which the fang had penetrated the gilding seeped a viscous black fluid, the warm light of the torchlight set into the wall sconces dancing over its shiny surface. It looked like blood, and Harry imagined he heard a high, tinny wail of fury echoing off the cold stone walls around them.

The cup abruptly crumpled in on itself, like a miniature black hole, viciously crushing itself down until it resembled a foil ball. Harry poked at it, using his wand like a billiards cue, but nothing happened, and Hermione cast several diagnostic charms over it to determine if it was now safe to handle. Alas, the *Flagrante* and *Gemino* Curses seemed to have been baked into the veneer, for they would not be removed by any spells she threw at it, to her visible consternation.

“It’ll have to be stripped if it’s ever to be touched by human hands again,” she said as they made their way back to the Great Hall. “I’m sure I saw an advertisement in the *Prophet* at one point for a white spirit meant to remove Curses from heirlooms.”

“Do you reckon we should return it to the Smith family, then?” Harry asked as they quickly made their way out of the Chamber, back into Myrtle’s bathroom. If he never had to step foot in there again, it would be too soon.

Hermione worried her lip. “Well, they probably have the legal claim on it, yes...but honestly, this sort of magical artefact really ought to be in a museum or something!”

They rounded the corner into the Entrance Corridor, finding the doors to the Great Hall already thrown open to reveal throngs of pyjama-clad Hogwarts students milling about in confusion—some huddled in conversation, some pacing nervously, and some just sat there on the floor in blank shock. “...Well, Zacharias Smith might still be around. You can always just take it straight up with him.”

“Harry!” came a chorus of greetings, and he quickly found himself being mobbed by classmates familiar and less-than.

“Let him breathe, you lot!” shouted Ron, shoving his way through the crowd to join them. “Took you long enough! Did you stop to take a piss with Myrtle while you were at

it, or what?”

Harry waved the little ball that had once been Helga Hufflepuff’s chalice, wrapped up securely in the old robes once more. “Only took the fangs for a test-run.”

Ron immediately brightened, dropping his voice—most unnecessarily, given the din of the room. “It worked?”

“Like a dream,” Hermione said.

Harry shoved one of the spare fangs bundled up tight in Hermione’s handkerchief into Ron’s hand. “Next one’s on you, mate. Seeing as of course you knew it was the diadem all along.”

Ron ignored the jibe and marvelled at the fang, grinning ear to ear. “*Wicked.*”

“Salazar’s *balls*, they’ve let all the riff-raff in...” came a sneering drawl, and Harry whipped around, trying to fight back a relieved smile and failing miserably when he saw Draco striding in at the head of a line of Slytherins of all shapes and sizes.

“You’re late,” Harry said, certain it had been more than twenty minutes by now; the Slytherins looked to be the last to arrive.

“Fashionably so, as planned.” Draco scanned the crowded room with quick, wary eyes, no doubt making an accounting of each and every student he’d wronged in the past. “Did you have to give another of your ‘please don’t murder our pet Death Eater’ speeches?”

“We only just arrived back ourselves; haven’t had time.” He lifted a brow, teasing, “Want to borrow the Cloak?”

Draco ignored the offer, frowning. “Back? Back from where?” He directed his words to Hermione and Ron. “Twenty fucking minutes you couldn’t tie him down in one place?”

“He had a chaperone,” Hermione protested, letting a satisfied little smile curl at her lips. “Besides, it was for a worthy cause.”

Harry stepped close, pressing the wrapped remains of the cup into Draco's hand. "Four down; two to go."

Draco goggled. "But how did you—?"

"*Basilisk!*" Ron hissed, evidently still giddy on the high of his eureka moment, and even Draco had to marvel at this, a grin quirking his lips.

"Do the pipes in Gryffindor Tower carry Felix Felicis or something? I swear, you lot must be the luckiest little fucks—"

Harry's scar seared, and the Great Hall blurred before his eyes—and then vanished. There was darkness all around, and before him stood the familiar tall, wrought-iron gates that guarded the castle's boundaries. Through Voldemort's eyes, he could see the long, dark stretch leading up to the castle itself and its glittering façade belying the late hour.

Nagini's weight about his shoulders was a cool comfort, and he stroked her scaly head as he stared up at the castle with a heady rush of purpose thrilling through him.

"—*ter! Potter!*" someone was hissing in his ear. "Get your shoulder under his arm, Weasley! Budge up!"

"M fine..." Harry muttered, feeling his knees give out; all right, maybe not so very fine.

"Yes, yes, right as rain, *clearly*," Draco sighed, an unmistakable quaver in his voice. "What tidings do you bear, O Chosen One? Glad ones, can we hope?"

Harry swallowed, then shook his head side to side with a slow deliberation. "...He's here."

The Ultimatum

The Great Hall was much changed from the last time Harry had sat under its enchanted ceiling as a student, nearly a year ago; indeed, it didn't even look the same as it had an hour earlier.

Behind the barricades that had once been the long House tables huddled dishevelled, sleep-drunk students from all Houses. Most milled about in their sleepclothes, though some had had the forethought to throw on travelling cloaks or at least dressing gowns. The ghosts had joined them as well, and their translucent forms floated above the throngs of confused and frightened students below, wandering in meandering, pacing circles. The living and the dead co-mingled under a dark enchanted sky, scattered with a thousand twinkling stars, and every ear was turned toward McGonagall, who had mounted a dais at the head of the Hall and was now delivering instructions on the impending evacuation.

“...do so in an *orderly* fashion. Now, the evacuation will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madam Pomfrey. Prefects will chaperon their Houses to the designated evacuation point, where capable students will Disapparate to their homes or a provided safehouse, while all others will be Side-alonged.”

The students looked understandably terrified—and not just the younger ones. Harry wondered why he hadn't been petrified by fear himself, after all they'd been through and knowing full well—perhaps better than anyone else here—what was coming. Perhaps it was the adrenaline (it certainly had to be playing a part), or perhaps it was *because* of everything they'd been through. They'd infiltrated the Ministry of Magic and kidnapped a prisoner from the Department of Mysteries; they'd broken into Gringotts and stolen treasure from one of their most well-guarded vaults. Really, this Voldemort business ought to be a breeze by comparison, especially as they were only two Horcruxes down now.

“Have we got to evacuate?” someone called out from a crowd of Hufflepuffs—Ernie Macmillan, Harry saw, when his peers turned to regard him.

McGonagall sought him out visually, nodding. “There will be no room for bystanders, Mr. Macmillan.”

“Well, of course—I meant what if we wanted to fight, too? It’s our home that’s being threatened—I’m not inclined to run off and abandon it.”

There was a smattering of applause—loudest from Professor Sprout, who stood behind McGonagall with the rest of the staff, including the palomino centaur Firenze and the members of the Order who’d shown up to help defend the castle.

“If you are of age, then you may stay if you wish,” McGonagall said. “Though I must warn you, it will be at peril to your own life. I ask that you not stay behind without having given that decision its due consideration.”

“But—we haven’t had any time to pack!” said a Ravenclaw girl. “Our books and trunks are still up in our rooms!”

“And in your rooms I’m afraid they’ll have to stay for now,” said McGonagall. “We must make our evacuation as quickly as possible; once this...this business has been concluded, then of course we will arrange to have your belongings sent on to wherever you may be taking shelter in this our time of crisis.”

“Where’s Headmaster Snape?” shouted a Slytherin, and Draco snapped his head around, frowning as he tried to locate the student.

McGonagall cleared her throat softly. “He has...been called away—” she started, only to have Seamus pipe up with, “He’s done a bunk!”

A great whooping cheer erupted from the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws—with the Slytherins only huddling together more closely and glaring out at their classmates with mistrustful expressions. Harry felt his insides churn; he supposed he ought to have seen this coming. Indeed, he would’ve been cheering right alongside them

under other circumstances. Now, though, he could see the muscles in Draco's throat tensing, a little vein throbbing in his temple, and knew he was one slight away from lashing out.

He touched Draco's wrist. "...Show, don't tell."

"What's the point, when they don't want to see?" he bit out.

"Make it so they can't look away then. Worked with me."

"In the past few hours, we have worked to place some degree of protections around the castle," McGonagall continued, "but they are unlikely to hold for very long, so I ask that you use what precious little time we've been able to buy for all of you to quickly but *calmly* now follow your Prefects to—"

"Brave defenders of Hogwarts."

A new voice, high and cold and clear, echoed throughout the Hall. It seemed to seep from the very walls themselves, like the stone and mortar were speaking, and Harry felt the tiny fine hairs on his arm stand up on end.

Several in the crowd sent up a chorus of shrieks, only to be swiftly quelled by *shushes*. The students looked around, eyes wide with terror as they searched for the source of the voice, as if convinced Voldemort was in the very room.

"I speak to you now from within the castle boundaries. I know that you are preparing to fight—shoring up defences, laying traps, taking up siege positions. Trust that your efforts are futile. You cannot hope to delay me from my prize. However, I have no desire to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts and an abiding love for the talent nurtured therein. It would pain me to spill magical blood unnecessarily."

A hush fell over the Great Hall—a pressing, painful quietude that bent every ear, as if by spellwork. You listened, whether you wanted to or not, and you didn't make a *sound* as you did so.

“Give me Harry Potter,” said Voldemort, slow and instructive, as if to a child, *“and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall take my leave immediately. Give me Harry Potter...and you will be greatly rewarded. Lord Voldemort is merciful. Lord Voldemort is understanding.”*

The silence now was like a boot on the neck, crushing.

“But Lord Voldemort is not patient. You have until midnight to decide if you would prefer to live to see the sun rise...or die like dogs.”

The echoes of the high, cold voice faded away, and Harry felt as if a spotlight had been turned on him as what seemed like every head swivelled his way, every eye in the place finding him in the crowd. All but Hermione, Ron, and Draco backed swiftly away, giving Harry a wide berth. What had seemed a frightened but steady pack before now felt dangerous: a herd of prey animals cowering under the stare of an apex predator and given the chance to save themselves by throwing one of their own into his waiting jaws.

“But—but he’s right there!”

One of the Slytherins had broken from the group—Pansy Parkinson, just as snub-nosed and pinched-faced as Harry remembered. Her black bob was mussed and askew, and she had a silk dressing gown with an empire waist tied tight about her. One of the other Slytherins—a younger one, Harry supposed, given he didn’t recognise her—tried to reach out to Pansy, hissing *Don’t!* but was rudely shrugged off.

“Potter’s right there!” she went on, and when her eye found Draco, her tone waxed pleading. *“Draco, do something!”*

Draco only hardened his gaze, drawing himself up. *“I am.”* He moved in front of Harry, flanked by Hermione and Ron.

A meagre handful of Slytherins followed his lead, flocking to Draco with wide, terrified eyes belying the determined set to their jaws. They looked far too young to be taking any manner of stand, but Harry supposed Draco had that sort of effect on people. He’d

always managed to draw a crowd, a leader even the worst sorts wanted to follow. *Make it so they can't look away*, Harry had told him, and fuck if he hadn't taken it to heart. Harry was mesmerised.

Hermione pinched him, giving him a meaningful look, and Harry ducked his head.

The Slytherins' gesture spurred the rest of the students into action, and Harry quickly found himself hemmed in on all sides now by every Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw in sight. Pansy looked mortified and incensed, an expression Harry had seen all too often etched on Draco's features, and he felt a pang of sympathy for her. She only didn't want to die; how could Harry blame her? He rather felt the same.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Thank you for your insight, Miss Parkinson." She held out one hand, gesturing toward the door. "I invite you and any other members of your House not staying on to leave the Hall first with Mr. Filch."

The better portion of the Slytherins joined Pansy, trooping from the Hall with a dark cloud hanging over all their heads. The younger ones among the few who'd stood with Draco had to be chivvied off as well, but four other Seventh-years ultimately stayed behind, staid and proud and wands clenched tight in their fists.

"...Perhaps we should have kept some behind," Draco said as the last of the Slytherins disappeared through the doors of the Great Hall. "More than a few have parents waiting out there in the darkness—parents who'd probably do whatever they were asked if their children's lives hung in the balance."

"It wouldn't stop him," Harry said. "And besides, that's not how we do things."

Draco's lips formed a thin line. "Perhaps it should be."

Harry glanced back to McGonagall, who nodded to him before calling out, "Ravenclaws, follow on!"

A fair few of the Seventh-year Ravenclaws remained behind while their fellows filed out, and even more Hufflepuffs stuck around. When nearly half of Gryffindor tried to hang

back, many *far* too young to be allowed to do so, McGonagall was forced to bodily shoo them along their way.

Ginny tried very hard to fight being sent off, breaking out into a row with Mrs. Weasley. “Everyone else is staying, though! You’re letting the boys stay!”

“Because the boys are of-age! You’re only sixteen, and you’re *going home!*” Mrs. Weasley huffed. “I let you come to see Ron was safe, and now you have, so back to your great aunt’s you go!”

“I’m in Dumbledore’s Army—”

“You’re in *no one’s* army—!”

“C’mon, Gin,” said Bill gently. “You know you can’t stay... Look, even Luna’s evacuating, see?” He extended an arm; Luna was hanging in the doorway, looking expectantly over at Ginny. A part of Harry wished the both of them *would* stay—they were damn fine witches, and every wand-wielder of any worth was needed tonight—but that part of him was very stupid and selfish and blessedly easy to ignore when lives were on the line.

“I *can’t!*” Ginny cried, angry tears sparkling in her eyes. “My whole family’s *here!* Even Charlie—even *Percy!* You can’t tell me to j-just sit there, waiting all alone, not knowing, and—” She started hyperventilating, and Mrs. Weasley wrapped her in a hug, burying her face in the top of Ginny’s hair.

Harry felt ashamed; this was his fault. He was the reason families were being torn apart, some to never find their way back together.

“...Molly, why doesn’t Ginny stay in the Gryffindor Common Room?” Remus suggested. “Then at least she’ll be on the scene and know what’s going on, but she won’t be in the middle of the fighting?”

Ginny gasped. “Yes! I’ll stay there! I swear it, Mum! Luna and I can stay there, a-and if anyone needs healing or anything like that, you can send them our way, and we’ll tend to them!”

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips, looking torn, then nodded reluctantly, and with a last hug from her parents and a wave farewell that Harry was certain was directed mostly to himself, Ron, and Hermione and not so much to Draco, she darted over to join Luna, disappearing through the doors.

Kingsley stepped onto the raised platform vacated by Professor McGonagall now to address those who had stayed behind to fight—a lonelier bunch, but with a hardened glint in their eyes that said they would not let Hogwarts fall without a fight.

“You heard him—midnight is our deadline. Once it passes—and it will do so more quickly than we might like—He Who Must Not Be Named and his minions will attack, so that leaves us perhaps a half hour to prepare. The Hogwarts staff and members of the Order of the Phoenix have put their heads together to strategise on where we go from here, so listen up: Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and McGonagall will take groups of fighters to the three foremost towers—Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and West—they ought to have a good overview of the front lawn and be well-positioned to work offensive spells as well as to shore up defences. While they work from on high, Remus—” He indicated Remus, and Tonks gave a delighted squeal. “Arthur—” He pointed towards Mr. Weasley, comforting his wife. “And I will take groups onto the grounds. Points of ingress will be particularly weak, so we’ll need someone to organise defence of the entrances into the school—”

“Did someone order a jumbo pack of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes?” chorused Fred and George, and Kingsley rolled his eyes but gave a reluctant nod, only barely managing to stifle a smile.

“Your family is barmy, Weasley, have I mentioned?” Draco muttered under his breath.

“You didn’t have to grow up being their guinea pig,” Ron returned with a shudder.

“Right then, leaders up here!” Kingsley called. “Let’s get all the troops divided up.”

Harry did not very much like Kingsley referring to Hogwarts’ defenders as *troops*, as it too easily suggested that this was some hardened, trained army and not a group of students fresh from their studies and some staff and parents rallying together. How

many here had ever cast an Unforgivable? Or even seen one cast up close? How many had had to cast a Shield Charm to save their life in the last six months? The last six *years*? How many—

“So are we sticking around for any particular reason?” Ron asked as students hurried past them, jostling for position to receive defence assignments. “Shouldn’t we be heading back to the Room ourselves so we can hop in as soon as the evacuation’s complete?”

Fuck; he’d been so preoccupied with the battle preparations he’d nearly forgotten what the battle was even *for*—why McGonagall wasn’t simply evacuating and letting Voldemort and his Death Eaters sweep in and do their worst, content to repair and rebuild later. “Right—yeah, let’s go.”

Leaving the defenders groups to their duties, they dashed from the Great Hall, spilling out into the Entrance Hall, which was still crowded with students heading up to the seventh-floor corridor. Were the Slytherins already on their way? How long would it take before the last of the Gryffindors made it through to the Hog’s Head and could be Apparated to safety? They had less than a half hour now before Voldemort began his assault on the castle, and the longer it took them to find the last of the hidden Horcruxes, the more lives might be lost in the doing.

Professor Sprout thundered past, followed by Neville and handful others. “Mind your earmuffs!” Sprout was shouting. “Make sure they’re good and tight, or you’ll *wish* the Death Eaters had Cursed you!” They were all of them carrying what looked at first glance to be large potted plants.

“Mandrakes!” Neville bellowed at Harry as he ran past, holding one up for show. “Look out below, if you’re around the Astronomy Tower! Gonna be a bad night for some Dark wizards, I reckon!”

“Er, have fun...” Harry called, but Neville had already disappeared into the throng.

It was another five agonising minutes before they finally made it to the foot of the marble staircase, allowing themselves to be swept up the steps, but when they’d barely

made it to the second floor after ten minutes, Draco lost his patience and shoved them onto one of the landings and down a corridor. “We’ll Summon brooms from the Quidditch pitch and fly up! At this rate we’ll be lucky to get to the Room before the Dark Lord’s commandeered the whole castle!”

“It hardly matters how quickly we get there if the students are still evacuating!” Hermione huffed. “We need to stall long enough to allow them to—”

The window at the end of the hall shattered with a deafening crash, glass spilling onto the flagstones. Harry took a leap back as a gigantic bear of a body tumbled through the opening, rolling a few times before coming to a groaning rest.

“Hagrid?!” Harry gasped, quickly picking his way through the debris. “What the—are you all right?”

“Oh! Goodness, Harry! Yer back!” Hagrid scooped him up into a rib-cracking hug, nearly squeezing the life from him. “Gosh, yer a sight fer sore eyes! One mo, though!” He ran back to the shattered window, bellowing through the hole, “Ta, Grawpy! I’ll handle it from here—you jus’ wait for me ‘round the corner, there’s a good lad!”

An answering groan echoed back, and Hagrid nodded with a wide grin, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “We heard You-Know-Who yammerin’ on from up in our cave—came down to see what’s what. Guess it’s time, yeah? I see everyone’s gearin’ up fer a battle!”

“Er, yeah, I suppose...” Harry frowned. “How did you *get* here? Doesn’t he have this place surrounded?”

“Nah, we smashed our way through the boundary by the forest; pretty thin over that way, and with Grawpy carryin’ me, it wasn’t nothin’. Told him ter let me down at the castle—and well, this ain’t exac’ly what I meant, but—”

Hagrid cut himself off, expression going slack—and then thunderous, as he struggled to pull his little pink umbrella from his great coat. “Get back, Harry! It’s Malfoy—”

“Stop—STOP, Hagrid!” Harry held his hands up defensively, and Hermione and Ron

quickly moved to flank him, shielding Draco from whatever spell Hagrid had been readying to fire. There was a fifty-fifty chance it would backfire, granted, but Harry didn't want to press their luck any further than they were already leaning on it. "Relax, he's with us!"

"*With you?*" Hagrid snarled, more viciously than Harry had ever heard. "That murderin' li'l bastard?"

Harry winced, though Hagrid's reaction could hardly be blamed. "It...it's more complicated than it seems, Hagrid. Just trust that he's not here to do any harm. In fact, he's helping us!"

"He is?" Hagrid frowned, stuffing the umbrella back into his coat. "A turncoat or somethin'?"

"Or something, yeah..."

Hagrid nodded, seemingly satisfied, then firmed his lips, giving Draco a weak little salute. "Right, then. Sorry 'bout that, Malfoy. No hard feelin's."

"...Of course not," Draco said, looking very much like he had several choice words he wanted to deliver and was fighting to swallow them down. He cleared his throat pointedly and said to Harry, "If we're done chatting?"

"Oh—right, sorry Hagrid, but we've got to—"

"Course you do! Midnight's nippin' at our heels! Where d'you reckon I ought to offer my services?"

Draco already had his arm looped through Harry's, though, and was dragging him bodily back towards the stairwell, which was much less crowded now than it had been just five minutes ago. "Try the Great Hall! They're giving out defence assignments there!" he called out, and Hagrid bellowed a shout of thanks, taking off for the other end of the corridor.

“How much longer do we have?” he asked as they hit the stairs at a run, huffing and puffing past the third-floor landing.

“Less than ten minutes now!” Hermione gasped. “I wouldn’t be surprised if a few Death Eaters jumped the gun, though, and—”

“Hold up!” said Ron, drawing up sharply. “Aren’t we forgetting someone?”

“*Who?*” Hermione asked with an irritated huff.

His eyes bugged. “Well, the house-elves, of course!” Ron glanced over the railing. “They’ll all be down in the Kitchens, won’t they? Dobby and whats-her-face—Blinky? And the others.”

“Wha—you want them *fighting?*” House-elves did have their own particular brand of magic, but Harry didn’t much fancy the idea of them in the thick of things, especially when they’d mostly only be obeying orders given by their masters and not fighting because they felt like it.

“Of course not!” said Ron, suddenly earnest. “We can’t order them to die for us! I mean we should tell them to get out! Can you imagine what You-Know-Who and his lot would do to a bunch of defenceless—”

Hermione gave a sharp yip of strangled delight and launched herself at Ron, knocking him back against the railing as she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him like there was no tomorrow. If Ron was shocked, he sure didn’t show it, promptly bringing his arms up around her, locking her against him and responding with such vivid enthusiasm that he lifted her well off her feet, spinning in place.

Draco made a poor attempt at stifling a rude retch, and Harry jabbed him in the side. He turned back to Ron and Hermione. “Really? *Now* of all times” When they only gripped each other more fiercely, swaying on the spot with smitten smiles on their faces, he raised his voice. “*Oi!* There’s a war going on here, in case you didn’t notice!”

“I rather think that’s the point,” Draco said, adding under his breath. “Now or never, and

all that. Surely you can sympathise.”

Harry felt his ears go pink. “It’s not that I *can’t*... It’s just...”

Ron and Hermione broke apart at last, though they were still embracing, looking very much on the verge of starting up again, and Harry huffed in irritation, “If you’re both done?” He didn’t need any further reminders of the spectacular fool he’d made of himself with Draco earlier.

“Y-yeah—right—sorry—” Ron said, quickly stepping back and fighting to keep the smile on his lips from tending too goofy, and Hermione patted herself down, clearing her throat and mouthing an apology of her own.

“Would you like us to roll out the tent?” Draco offered, lounging against the railing. “We’ve got a few minutes to spare; should be more than enough time for you, Weasley.”

“Shove off,” Ron snapped, though he was still smiling as he said it, and he shooed them all back up the stairs, as if they hadn’t been waiting on him. “Come on! Tick tock!”

They scaled the stairs, which seemed to understand their urgency and helpfully lifted them along when their stamina began to flag. They had just passed the sixth floor when a keening whine followed by a loud *CRACK* shook the shaft. Through the nearest window, Harry could see rainbow bursts of light beginning to flash across the sky—the opening salvos of the battle.

It was midnight.

“No time for sight-seeing, Potter! Get moving,” Draco snarled, shoving Harry hard across the shoulders and nearly sending him stumbling over his own feet. Dust showered down from the ceiling, and the very walls felt like they were trembling around them—no, they *were* trembling. The castle seemed to groan in pain as it came under attack, McGonagall’s hard-wrought protections already failing, putting their rag-tag team of rebels on the offensive far too early for Harry’s comfort.

They hit the seventh floor and tore down the corridor. Harry spared a glance through

one of the windows and caught sight of Grawp wandering through the central court, swinging a massive club and batting back what Harry hoped were unfriendlies.

“Maybe if he survives,” huffed Ron, so red-faced his freckles almost disappeared into his ruddy complexion, “we can recruit him as a Beater for Gryffindor.”

A scream echoed up from the floors below, and Harry froze, heart in his throat. It had sounded young—like a student. Somewhere, a student was hurt, or dying, and—

And it was going to be all for nothing if they didn’t get this Horcrux. Joining the fray right now would do nothing but drag out the inevitable, he reminded himself. *This* was what he was meant to be doing, much as he would have rather been down there fighting and dying alongside his friends instead of using them as so much cannon fodder.

They came to the stretch of corridor that had housed the Room of Requirement and found it empty, the doorway gone. Had the evacuation been completed before the deadline had passed? Were the students stranded in Hogsmeade, at the mercy of any Death Eaters or Dementors who’d hung behind in case Harry tried to escape? They had no way of knowing—and as ever, they couldn’t afford to be distracted. Whether the students had all been safely evacuated or not had no bearing on how important it was they find their way into the Room of Hidden Things and start searching for Ravenclaw’s diadem. God, they didn’t even know what it *looked* like—several of the books they’d used for research had included illustrations, but they’d all differed. It could be as marvellous as Ron’s Aunt Muriel’s Goblin-crafted tiara, or else nothing more than a glorified thinking cap. He sorely regretted not asking Flitwick for any advice, especially given he was probably raising hell from atop Ravenclaw Tower at this very moment.

“Harry?” Hermione prodded, and he forced himself back into the moment. There was nothing to be done for it now—and Hufflepuff’s cup and Slytherin’s locket as well as the Gaunt ring had been fine pieces of craftsmanship. Voldemort would not have made a Horcrux out of anything less than something he deemed a *worthy* Founder’s artefact.

“Right.” He looked to Draco. “Want to do the honours? You said you’ve spent your fair share of time in there; might open more easily for you.”

Tight-lipped, Draco shook his head. "...I don't exactly have the best memories of this place. I'd rather just get this over with as quickly as possible and be quit of it, if it's all the same to you three."

"Not sure I feel the same," Ron said, "seeing as once we're done here, then we've got to face that bloody snake."

"And You-Know-Who himself," Hermione added.

"You think his name's still Taboo'd?" Harry asked absently. "What protections are there left to break, if they've already made it over the perimeter defences?"

"*Voldemort Voldemort Voldemort,*" Draco snapped, rapping his wand against the stone wall. "Seems all right to me! Let's go!"

Harry ducked his head and began pacing away, marching past the wall where the Room of Requirement would usually appear and keeping his mind clear of everything except a single, focused thought: *I need the place where things are hidden. I need a good hiding place, a place no one would ever think to look.*

He tried every iteration of the plea he could think of—and on his third run past, the door materialised.

Hermione gave a cry of relief, reaching for the knob and yanking it open to reveal not the Room of Requirement but instead a much larger space of tall towers of junk and refuse from hundreds of students over the past centuries. "...Oh dear."

"That's a lot less colourful than what I was gonna say..." Ron muttered, poking his head inside and giving a low whistle. "...You reckon they can hold things down until we find the Horcrux?"

"I don't think we have a choice," Harry said, "and we've wasted enough time already. Let's—"

A bolt of pain speared his head, hitting like a truck to cleave him wholly in two. He felt

his knees give and thought he might have smacked his head against the wall, but he was numb to all pain but the throbbing, angry white-hot *agony* that preceded a vision.

He blinked the shower of sparkling stars from his eyes—and now it was dark, so dark. He didn't recognise where he was, some dilapidated house—so old and mouldy he could almost *smell* it. But no, it wasn't a house. It was too small—just a room. Just—a shack. The Shrieking Shack, he could see, now that his vision wasn't a blurred mess. It hit him, for the first time, how *close* Voldemort was—and yet how very far away. He was a stone's throw from Hogwarts—but a rather hefty one still. He wasn't fighting, he was—

He was talking to someone. Talking to *Snape*.

Snape was down on one knee in the centre of the room, his long, greasy black hair hanging in his face. Voldemort stalked him, pacing around him in a slow, lazy circle like a shark, with Nagini floating coiled in a protective magical bubble just over his shoulder. Harry could hear, beyond the thin, termite-infested walls of the shack, the screeches and bangs of spellfire.

"I heard a most curious thing while being apprised of the break-in at Gringotts by Potter and his lackeys, Severus," Voldemort hissed, fingering the long, tapered shaft of the Elder Wand—Dumbledore's wand. Harry ached to reach out, to *take it back*—but he had resolved already to see this quest through without the aid of any other Hallows. If Dumbledore had wanted Harry to have the Wand, he would have willed it to him at the very least. That he hadn't done so meant this battle was still winnable, even without the Unbeatable Wand.

Snape did not quail or quiver under Voldemort's raw, heavy gaze, only kept his eyes downturned and shoulders square. Had he been anyone else, Harry might have attributed it to courage—or even audacious stupidity, the kind Gryffindors prized. Instead, he saw only the cool, calm collection of one convinced of his place in the world and seeing no need to fear the beast whose favour he had courted.

"Curious, you say?"

“Yes, most curious indeed. I had been heretofore convinced that Potter would be travelling with but two companions: the Mudblood Granger and the Blood Traitor Weasley the Youngest.” Voldemort tapped his chin in thought and rubbed his chest. *“It seems, however, that this assumption was...flawed.”*

Snape did not raise his head, though Harry thought his breath might have caught in his throat for a beat. *“...Flawed, my Lord?”* he said. *“But—those are Potter’s dearest—”*

“There was a fourth party aiding them in their mission,” Voldemort said, tone gone suddenly breathy—a sign, Harry realised, he was furious. *“A party I had been assured was quite dead. A party you assured me was quite dead.”* He drew to a stop, turning to face Snape head-on, and he stared down at the greasy black head with cold, bright eyes. *“Tell me how it is, Severus, that Draco Malfoy is alive.”*

Snape looked up into his master’s eyes, brows knit in confusion but still somehow managing not to tremble. *“That—that cannot be possible, my Lord. I saw him—”*

“Saw him put down yourself, was it? Destroyed, reduced to so much ash by Ministry wands. Yes, that is what you said. That is...” Voldemort cocked his head to the side, a knowing grin curling at his lips. His red, slit-like eyes flicked to Snape’s forehead. *“... What I saw. And yet he somehow escaped Death’s cold, clammy grasp—ah!”* He clapped in mock delight. *“Perhaps we have another Boy Who Lived on our hands!”* Then, in a flash, moving so quickly Harry’s eyes couldn’t clock him, he was nose-to-nose with Snape, fury alight in his eyes. *“That is the only plausible answer, really. Certainly you would not have lied to me, correct?”*

For the first time, Snape betrayed a hint of concern, swallowing a lump in his throat: *“I beg you consider the source of such testimony, my Lord. A Goblin’s word? One wizard looks like another to them, these menial beings! It could even have been Polyjuice or a strong Glamour—”*

Voldemort lashed out, grabbing Snape by the throat and squeezing until he stopped speaking. Snape’s fingers spasmed wildly, but his arms remained at his side, as if he understood the futility of attempting to claw his way free.

“I know you are lying to me, Severus. I should never have relied on Legilimency to begin with—it is fallible.” He released his grip on Snape’s throat, drawing himself up tall and regal as he examined Snape with a detached curiosity. *“I am only left to wonder why. Why would you lie to me about this matter, this of all things? Such a trivial thing, the life of a stupid, incompetent boy, and yet you have risked your own in protecting his. Now, I considered, initially, that perhaps you had developed a fondness for the boy, or felt indebted to Lucius. A rare display of sympathy, even, for a charge you hoped to spare the task of killing. A dragon would have been an impressive addition to my arsenal, of that there can be no doubt.”* He lifted the Elder Wand, tracing runes absently in the air. *“But all of these possibilities seemed ultimately unlikely. You have courted death to feed this lie into the ear of Lord Voldemort, and I know you, Severus Snape. You’re nearly as perfect a reflection of Salazar himself as I am; your blood runs green and your bile silver.”* He sank to one knee before Snape, mirroring his pose, and dropped his voice. *“You have a reason for keeping this boy a secret from me.”*

Snape said nothing, perhaps working double-time to keep his Occlumency shields up. Narcissa Malfoy had been convinced that Snape had lied about Draco’s death to keep Voldemort from tracking him down, and it seemed she had been right. Why, though? Had he known Draco was travelling with Harry and the others? If Voldemort knew Draco was alive and sought him out, perhaps he would have found Harry as well—

But no; it seemed Snape had spun the lie long before Harry had dragged Malfoy from his dank cell in the Department of Mysteries.

Voldemort extended a hand, reaching into the lining of Snape’s robe and withdrawing his wand. He studied the length of wood for a moment, then gave it a test swipe, shooting off a harmless shower of sparks. *“I have a need for a wand, Severus. I think I’ll keep yours.”*

Harry saw a protest form on Snape’s lips, only to be beaten back. It was the same protest any witch or wizard would have mounted on being stripped of their wand, threatened in such a bold way. He gave a soft cough, straining to keep his voice steady. *“But—why would you want my wand, my Lord? You have already claimed the Elder*

Wand—the Deathstick! The most powerful wand in existence!”

“*Have I?*” Voldemort studied the Elder Wand. “*Or do I only have the echo of some feeble old fool’s useless twig?*” He tossed Snape’s wand aside, sending it clattering across the rotting floorboards, and stood. “*Do I have the Elder Wand, am I holding it now—*” He brandished it in a flash, pointing the tip squarely between Snape’s eyes. “*Or does it perhaps, as I suspect—as you know—lie in the hands of the wizard who actually defeated Albus Dumbledore?*” His lip curled as he seethed, “*Do I have it...or does Draco Malfoy?*”

Despair flashed bright in Snape’s eyes, utter defeat flickering across his features—only to be eclipsed by a brilliant flash of green. He was dead before he could even open his mouth.

Harry came back to himself with gasping breaths, heart thudding a loud tattoo in his chest.

“Harry? Harry—mate, snap out of it!” Ron was jabbering, and Harry reached out, groping for something to hold on to.

Cold fingers slid through his, gripping. “Pull yourself together,” Draco bit out with a soft sort of desperation, clasping his other hand on top of Harry’s.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Would you like some water—?”

Harry just shook his head, thoughts still spinning. “He’s—he just—Snape...Snape’s dead.” He rubbed his eyes with his free hand, still breathing hard. “He killed Snape. He killed *Snape*.” A dozen different emotions flooded through his system—anger, relief, confusion, and for some reason, *guilt*.

Draco’s grip tightened about Harry’s own, and he was glad that the angle meant he couldn’t see Draco’s face right now.

“Killed *Snape*?” Ron repeated. “Why would he do that, though? Snape’s his man, isn’t he? He held Hogwarts for him all this time...”

“Wrong time, wrong place?” Hermione suggested. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone’s met the bad end of his lashing out.”

“No...” Harry said, tongue heavy in his mouth as it began to sink in what he’d just witnessed. What it *meant*. “No, he found out Snape lied to him. About Draco being dead.” His mind was still reeling, flush with knowledge with no time to sort through it all. “He lied to Voldemort, right to his face... And Voldemort killed him for it.”

Draco released his hand, shifting to his feet and leaning to brace himself against the wall. Harry didn’t try to stop him.

Ron was bemused, and Hermione was outright frowning. “I still don’t get why on earth he lied about that, though,” Ron said. “I mean, no offence, but one little dragon’s not likely to turn the tide of a war. Dumbledore...well Dumbledore was mostly bad luck, wasn’t he? You said he was already really weak, that if he’d been...” Ron shook his head when his tone started to grow thick with emotion. “Sure, *maybe* if he was one of those massive ones, like the one we rode up out of Gringotts...”

Harry just shook his head. “It...it wasn’t Draco he wanted. It’s his wand.”

“His wand?” Hermione asked, and in his peripheral vision, Harry could see Draco take a measured step backwards. He still didn’t try to stop him.

“Dumbledore didn’t die,” Harry said. “He didn’t die—he was *killed*.” He lifted his eyes—and met Draco’s panicked, confused gaze, tiny little embers flickering wildly. “Dumbledore was killed,” he repeated. “So the power of the Elder Wand passed...to the one who did the killing.”

Draco stared down helplessly at the wand in his hand, mute and frozen.

No one spoke, no one made a move—they didn’t dare. Because now Draco had the Elder Wand, the wand that could not be beaten, the wand above all wands, and there was only *one thing* he’d wanted, truly wanted, in all the time he’d been travelling with them. He finally had the power—and no more obligations otherwise—to save his parents.

Harry reached out his hand. “Draco—”

But Draco recoiled, his wand clutched tight to his chest. He glanced between the three of them, expression hunted, then seemed to come to some manner of decision and quickly turned on his heel, dashing down the corridor and turning a corner once he reached the end.

They let him go—they had to.

Hermione gaped openly, and Ron had an unreadable, torn look on his face, staring at the spot where Draco had been standing in bald accusation, as if he might be compelled to return simply by Ron’s disapproval.

Hermione swallowed, then fixed Harry with a long look. “...Harry, we have to—”

“I know,” he said shortly, easing to his feet and palming his wand. “I know...and I know what you’re thinking. But...he needs us. And we need him.” *I need him*, went unspoken, as did *He needs me*. He looked at them both in turn, firming his jaw. “*Please.*”

Hermione took a breath—then grabbed Ron’s hand, tugging him into the Room of Hidden Things. “We’ll start looking for the diadem. Just don’t take too long, all right? If...if he’s gone, then we *have* to focus on what needs to be—”

“Thank you!” Harry said, already jogging down the corridor with a haphazard wave. He reached into the collar of his shirt, tugging out the Mokeskin pouch. The school was almost empty, save for those involved in the battle that Harry could feel, from the way the walls were shaking, had begun to work its way into the castle. It would be a simple enough task to pick Draco out from the few dots wandering around—

He skidded to a halt as he rounded the corner at the end of the hall—then tucked the pouch back into his shirt, as he would not be needing the Marauder’s Map after all. There Draco sat, hunched over on a stone bench tucked into an alcove on one of the landings. He hadn’t been trying to escape to find his parents after all; he’d just...needed a moment, evidently.

The lantern hanging above Draco's head was swaying gently back and forth in time with the booming echoes of spellwork being cast from the floors below. It threw a soft, golden sheen over his white-blond hair, and he seemed to give off an unearthly glow that reminded Harry of the dragon's moonlit scales.

Harry approached slowly, still wary of spooking him. If he'd wanted to be alone, he might bolt on seeing Harry had come after him. Harry was realising, he noted with a heaviness in his midsection, that he didn't know Draco at all, despite his claims otherwise. Oh, he knew what he'd been *shown*, what Draco had felt comfortable sharing, but that was about where his confidence ended and conjecture began. He could probably have sooner predicted how Luna or Neville would react at a moment like this than Draco, who seemed to pride himself on being thoroughly *unpredictable*.

He stopped two paces shy when he saw Draco's hands were still white-knuckled about his wand, which he had laid across his lap. Draco knew he was there of course—Harry hadn't made any attempt to muffle his approach, for one, and for another, Draco seemed to *always* know where he was.

He tried to gather his thoughts, not entirely sure what he was meant to say—only that he needed Draco to come back to the Room of Hidden Things and help them put a stop to this madness. He swallowed. “Draco—”

“Disarm me. *Please.*”

Draco's shoulders hunched as he bit out his words in a thick, hissed rush.

“Do it now, before—” A shudder rippled down Draco's spine, and he shook his head. “Before I change my mind.”

Harry stood there, and just stared. Draco didn't want the Wand. Or—he wanted it, but he didn't *want* to want it. He'd been so adamant that Harry not go chasing after it, all that *I won't help you corrupt yourself*, when he was terrified of it too.

So terrified, he was begging Harry to take this burden from him.

Harry stepped around and slid onto the bench beside Draco, settling one hand on his knee. "...You could have mastered it. I'm sure you could've."

"I couldn't," Draco bit out. "I *couldn't*, and all the better. I don't deserve it."

"...I'm sure it's not about *deserving*—"

"It's about being *worthy*. And I'm *not*. I'm—not strong or brave or—"

"Bullshit. You turned against the most powerful Dark wizard of our age, risked your own life to save your parents, and taught yourself some of the most difficult magic out there. You *are* strong. And plenty brave, too." He leaned into Draco, bumping their shoulders.

"I'm a Gryffindor. I know brave."

Draco cut him a look out of the corner of his eye. "...You know *stupid*."

Harry shrugged. "Well, six of one." He fixed Draco with an insistent gaze, holding him so he had to *hear* this. "Either way, I respect the fuck out of you, you realise that? You..." Harry nodded. "You're a good person. I get that I don't really know...a whole lot about you, but I don't need to. I know enough for now. I know the important things—the things that are important to me."

Draco stared at him, enthralled by something ineffable, and when Harry leaned forward, head ticked just to the side to press his lips softly to Draco's, he let it happen. He was still listening to Harry, still soaking in all the unspoken truths Harry struggled to impress upon him, straining to penetrate that thick layer of dragonhide and touch the flesh-and-blood human being beneath it all.

Harry held the kiss for a heartbeat, then whispered *Expelliarmus* against Draco's lips.

Draco's wand clattered to the ground, but he left it, instead bringing both hands up to thread his fingers through Harry's messy hair. He drew Harry closer, and Harry obligingly deepened the kiss, pressing Draco against the arched wall of the alcove. Draco made a noise, but it was lost in their kiss, and he wasn't—

“Harry—the...the diadem...” Draco rasped, turning his face to the side.

Reality drenched his ardour like a bucket of ice-water, and once the blood stopped humming in his ears, he could hear the shrieks and crashes of battle being waged stories below. *Fuck*—now was so very not the time to be necking in a dark, deserted corner of the castle. Hadn’t he just been saying as such to Ron and Hermione?

He pulled back and quickly brushed his hands down his shirt, trying to put himself back in order. There was no helping his hair, but then it always looked like someone had just run their fingers through it. Draco’s wand lay on the flagstones at their feet, and Harry reached to retrieve it for him—before thinking better of it.

“Er, you ought to pick it up, I think. I wouldn’t want it questioning its allegiance.”

Draco’s throat bobbed nervously, but he leaned down and took up his hawthorn wand once more, letting it slide through his fingers before he gave it a good, sharp swipe. Harry lifted a brow in question, and Draco nodded. “...Seems to be in order.”

“Good,” Harry said, and he meant it. Draco had dealt with enough unruly magic over the past year; he deserved to have *something* magical show him a bit of loyalty.

Harry stood, slipping his wand—his *Elder Wand* he tried not to think—into his sleeve and made to return to the Room to help Hermione and Ron look for the diadem, but Draco stayed put, staring ahead with a distant, lost expression.

“Severus...”

Harry pursed his lips; what did you say when a man you’d hated as long as you’d known him finally got what he deserved? Perhaps he’d had decent intentions, trying to hide Draco and his Elder Wand from Voldemort’s gaze, but it hardly mitigated the years of misery he’d subjected Harry to. A gruesome death was a risk one ran when one became a Death Eater, and unless they had the good sense to get out while they could, as Draco had, it was really only a matter of time.

He tried to muster some decent words, though, for Draco’s sake. “...It was quick. He

didn't suffer." It sounded like a rather Slytherin condolence, and worrying he'd come off cold, Harry added weakly, "He...he was a good professor."

"He was a fucking *horrid* professor," Draco huffed wryly.

"Well—but you always did well in his class."

Draco rolled his eyes, sweeping his hair back away from his face. "Because I'm amazing at Potions, you dolt. Not because he was exceptionally gifted at moulding young minds."

At last, he stood as well, taking a breath to centre himself and casting a few charms just to be certain his wand hadn't been damaged in any way by the exchange. He twirled the shaft between his fingers, then deftly slipped it into his sleeve. "Fancy a duel after we destroy this bastard?" he asked, exiting the alcove at last.

Harry fell into step beside him as they returned to the Room. "I feel like I'll have something of an edge..."

"Well then we'll both know the only way you could ever best me in a duel was with an unbeatable wand." Draco shrugged. "I don't see that I've got anything to lose, personally." With each step they took, he began to sound more and more like himself, and Harry felt the tension in his shoulders ease.

Harry palmed his wand, tracing the familiar whorls in the wood with a bitten-down nail. "...I promised you I wouldn't seek it out."

Draco sighed loudly, shaking his head. "And you didn't, so there. It found you—all you did was accept it." He swallowed, then added more softly, "Because I asked you to."

"Thought you weren't going to help me corrupt myself," Harry said, one brow lifted.

Draco stopped walking, and Harry immediately regretted his words. He'd meant to tease—but it hadn't come out that way.

"...I needed you to help me not corrupt myself more," Draco said in a very small voice.

“...I’m sorry.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that; *It’s fine* sounded too pithy, and not entirely true. Instead, he grabbed his wand by the tip and inspected the hilt, frowning. “...It doesn’t feel any different.”

He could feel Draco watching him, grey eyes falling on him with real, physical *heft*. “It won’t for you, probably. But I’m willing to bet it will for *him*.” His gaze went distant, then, and he grimaced. “...He’ll kill them now. My parents. Or try to use them for leverage—torture them, to get me to show myself so he can take the Wand from me...”

Harry didn’t expect Draco wanted to be lied to, even on a matter as sensitive as this, so he simply said, “...Yeah, he’d probably do that.” He touched Draco’s hand, tracing the swell of his wrist and tapping each knuckle in sequence. “Which is why I imagine they’re keeping well out of his way.”

“He can’t kill them unless he kills them, then?” Draco said, with a hint of a wry smile.

“Exactly; they’ll just have to put every ounce of that vaunted Slytherin self-preservation within them to use.” He crooked his finger into one of Draco’s belt loops, giving a tug. “Come on; just a bit more, and then we can have that duel.”

Draco batted his hand away and started walking again, drawling dryly, “I fair tingle with anticipation.”

The Room of Found Things

The echoing booms and shouts of a battle in full bloom faded away the moment they stepped through into the Room proper; Ron and Hermione had left the door open for them, and once it was closed, the distant furore dissipated, leaving behind only an eerie silence. The Room of Hidden Things, for this was certainly no longer the Room of Requirement, was as massive as Harry recalled, its arched ceiling stretching up impossibly high with a length the size of a Quidditch pitch—at least as far as Harry could see. The thousands—or more likely millions—of objects tossed carelessly inside by students over the centuries had built up into walls along maze-like pathways, towering storeys high in some places and making the dimensions of the room difficult to pin down.

Ron and Hermione hadn't made it very far in starting their search of the Room; Harry couldn't blame them, it seemed a daunting task. They nodded to him and Draco when they entered, thankfully not making much of a fuss concerning Draco's brief departure—or how long it had taken for them to return.

“Far cry from the usual Room of Requirement, innit?” Ron said, his voice echoing in the silence.

“It's kind of amazing, really,” Hermione said. “So many people needed to hide things over the years that the Room created a special version of itself that it recapitulates *perfectly* every time it's summoned...” She scanned the room. “I wonder how the magic manages it? Where do you think all of these objects go when this place isn't being used as the Room of Hidden Things? It would have to be a tiny pocket dimension, I think. It can't produce so much *junk* whole-cloth every time someone finds their way inside. Or I suppose it could, but that would require *infinitely* more magical energy than just—”

“There's no teachers around to give you any points, Granger,” Draco groused, rubbing his temples. “But if it'll shut you up: *ten million points to Gryffindor* for inane curiosity.” He looked to Harry. “Are we going to faff about with our pricks in our hands, or are we

going to find a Horcrux?”

“Pricks in our hands sounds more fun,” said Ron morosely. He kicked at an old, deflated Quaffle, sending it whomping down one of the half a dozen different ‘trails’ leading away from the entrance. “Geez, would you look at the state of this place? Merlin, it looks like most everyone who’s ever been to Hogwarts has hidden something in here! Didn’t he notice there was a whole *stadium’s* worth of junk in here when he hid the diadem and think, ‘You know, maybe this isn’t the best place to hide a little bit of my soul if I don’t want just anyone stumbling across it’?”

“Perhaps that’s the point,” Hermione said. “I mean, do *you* have any idea where to start looking? It’s a total needle-haystack situation in here...” She raised her wand. “*Accio diadem!*”

As expected, nothing happened. Like the cup and the locket, it seemed there was no choice but to lay hands on the diadem if they wanted to claim it.

“Guess there’s nothing for it but to search the old-fashioned way,” Harry said. “Shall we split up?”

“Looks like we’ll have to,” Hermione said. “Send up sparks if you find anything, all right? We don’t really know what the diadem looks like specifically, but given the locket and the cup were your traditional pieces of fine metalwork, and Gryffindor’s sword too, we can probably assume the diadem will be of a similar fashion, as it would have been crafted around the same time.”

“Right,” Draco said dismissively, throwing back a wave and striding down one of the rows. Harry watched him go until he’d disappeared around a corner, feeling particularly helpless.

“...Is he all right?” Hermione asked. “I mean...I’m sure you spoke to him, but—”

“He’s not gonna take our heads off, is he?” Ron cut in with a low hiss. “I don’t wanna think about the nasty shit he could get up to with the Elder Wand; I’d be lucky to get off

with just having the chair pulled out from under me.”

Harry didn't remind him that Draco had already been in possession of the Wand when he'd pulled that trick. "...He gave it up.”

“Gave it up?” Hermione echoed. “Wh—the *wand*? But how did he...” Harry waved his holly wand, giving a weak smile. “...Oh. My.” Then she narrowed her eyes, still a bit dubious. “...How can you be *sure* though?”

“I don't suppose I can. Short of duelling Voldemort...” He really didn't want to test it out just yet, though.

“Well, one step at a time,” she said, squeezing his shoulder comfortingly. “Now! The Horcrux!”

“The Horcrux,” Harry said, nodding to the rightmost path. “I'll head down this way, then.”

“Remember: sparks if you see anything!” Hermione called after him in reminder.

He jogged down the path, only haphazardly scanning the stacks, until he'd gone far enough he could only hear their pattering around as a distant echo. He appreciated they were concerned, but he had far too many things bouncing around in his mind right now, jockeying for a place at the forefront of his thoughts when he couldn't afford to be distracted. Talking about them just made it *worse*. He didn't want to discuss what he was doing with Draco, or how Draco felt about having been for a time the master of the most powerful wand in existence, or the fact *Harry* was master of it now and would likely have to bring it to bear against the madman who'd murdered his family and been responsible for the deaths of so many of his loved ones.

There he went, getting distracted again. *Diadem*, he reminded, repeating it to himself like a mantra. He let his eyes drift over the teetering towers of rubbish, seeking out anything of note, but nothing remarkable caught his eye: a few old bottles of Butterbeer, empty Owl order crates, books with covers so faded he couldn't make out the titles,

broken quills and empty ink bottles, old broomsticks, Beaters' bats—total utter *junk*. How were they possibly going to find the diadem amidst all this rubbish? Harry might have already passed it, even, if it were buried deep in any of these heaps of clutter.

He tried to think like Voldemort—where might he have hid it? Would he have just wound his arm and chucked it with all his might? No, not likely—it was a piece of his soul after all, which meant he'd probably placed it somewhere deliberately. But he wouldn't have wanted anyone to stumble across it, so it stood to reason he'd have hidden it pretty deep in the room, or else carefully buried it at the heart of one of the stacks.

Harry sighed, finding himself back at square one. Well they couldn't Summon it, but maybe they could cheat a bit? He opened his mouth, the words *Accio bit of crap next to Ravenclaw's diadem* on his lips—when he caught himself.

“Hello there...” he said to himself with a ghost of a smile. He was certain the blistered old cupboard there just at the fork ahead was the same one into which he had tossed his old Potions book—the one belonging to Snape, he recalled with a grimace. He tugged the creaking door open, showering the dusty flagstones with old paint chips, and saw it was still there: Libatius Borage's *Advanced Potion-Making*. The last time he'd come here, he'd been in a panic. He'd just flayed Draco alive and left him bleeding out in the second-floor girl's lavatory. The half-blood Prince had brought him nothing but trouble and Draco nothing but pain. He slammed the cabinet shut with a vicious finality. *Good riddance*.

The force of the blow, though, knocked over a stone bust of a pock-marked warlock—or perhaps it was just chipped in many places?—wearing a dusty old wig. The bust hit the ground with a sharp *crack*, losing its wig in the process, and went rolling. Harry made a desperate lunge after it and nearly slipped on the wig, narrowly avoiding face-planting. With an irritated grumble, he snatched up the wig and made to toss it back on top of the cupboard—when something clattered to the ground.

It was a tiara of some sort, not so different from Muriel's. The mottled discolouration suggested it was rather old, and Harry thought he could make out words engraved

around the edge, though he could not read them through the layer of grime and dust that had worked its way into the tiny crevices.

He frowned. It...it couldn't be that easy—could it?

He reached for the tiara—then thought better of touching it, remembering with a phantom echo of pain the *Gemino* and *Flagrante* curses on the cup. He tugged out a handkerchief and carefully wrapped the diadem—no, the *tiara*, he reminded himself; no sense in getting excited over what was probably just a piece of costume jewellery. He pulled his Mokeskin pouch from where it lay tucked under his shirt and carefully slipped the tiara inside.

“Don't you fucking move,” someone said from just behind him, and Harry froze, mind racing as he tried to place the voice. “Turn around—*slow*. No funny business, Potter. Reach for your wand and you'll lose that arm.”

Harry strained to hear the others, but he'd evidently strayed too far away; they were out of immediate earshot now, and if he raised his voice, his ambusher was liable to make good on the 'lose that arm' bit.

He shifted in place, turning slowly as instructed, and came face to face with Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. It was Crabbe who had his wand levelled at Harry, with Goyle hulking behind him, his own wand clutched in a ham-fisted grip. They had to have snuck inside while Hermione and Ron had held the door, waiting for Harry and Draco to return. He wondered silently if Draco might still have some pull with them and hoped he was prepared for what was looking to be a rather unhappy reunion.

“...Fancy running into you two,” Harry said, holding his hands well out from his sides. He had to stall long enough for the others to wonder where he was and come looking for him. “How come you aren't hanging around with the other Death Eaters outside?” Crabbe had his sleeves rolled up just enough Harry could see the skin on his left arm was unmarked, though. “Oh, sorry. My mistake. Guess even Voldemort's got standards.”

“You'll make a pretty present for the Dark Lord,” said Goyle, either ignoring the slight or

not realising he'd been insulted. He was grinning, like a child who'd been promised a bag of sweets if he was a very good boy and behaved himself. It reminded Harry sickeningly of Dudley. "We knew 'e was lookin' for you, so we thought we'd sniff around, see if we couldn't find you first. Now we can bring you to 'im an' get rewarded."

"Well that is a *very* good plan indeed," not bothering to disguise the patronising tone in his voice—any effort would be wasted on these two. "Only—have you worked out how to get me out of the castle? All the entrances and exits are rather heavily guarded, you see."

"Oh, don't tease them, Potter; you know they haven't. I was always the brains behind their brawn."

Draco stepped around from behind the pair, already in a duelling stance as he stared down his long, patrician nose at his former lackeys. "Vince. Greg. I'd think *very* hard about what you're trying to do here. And then I'd have another think about it, just for shits."

"Thought we was the brawn to your brains, Malfoy?" Crabbe sneered, his beady black eyes narrowing. "You don't look half bad for a dead bloke."

"I'm also a rather good shot for a dead bloke. Have you had that second thought yet? Or shall we give the Time-turner another spin?" Draco's eyes flashed in threat. "Stand down. I'd hate to have to gut you like a pair of overfed fish."

Crabbe just jutted his thick chin out defiantly. "We're done takin' orders from the likes of you. 'Specially now you've turned traitor it seems."

Draco shrugged. "I'm a Slytherin; you know we're all about saving our own skin—and seeing as Potter's going to win, I'd rather not be on the losing side. I'm sure you can understand."

"You ought've stayed dead," Crabbe snarled, and with a shockingly swift reaction, he slashed his wand around, bringing a towering stack of old school trunks and cabinetry

and even, curiously, a Muggle stand mixer down with a bellowed, “*Descendo!*”

The whole thing collapsed in on itself, the base spilling out into the aisle in an avalanche of bric-a-brac and nearly burying Draco, who only barely managed to throw up a Shield Charm to keep from being overwhelmed. Harry used the distraction to dive out of the way, quickly palming his wand as he scrambled to hide behind a tall wardrobe.

The commotion had drawn Hermione and Ron’s attention, though, and they came jogging down the path, calling his name frantically.

“Run!” Harry warned them, narrowly missing the *Crucio* that Crabbe threw at him when he poked his head out from around the wardrobe. He returned fire with a Stunning Spell, and Crabbe went flying into Goyle, sending the both of them down in a heap.

“D-don’t kill ‘im!” Goyle protested, voice strained by Crabbe’s bulk pressing down on his chest. “We’ve gotta—bring ‘im in—alive!”

“Bah, he’s gonna wind up dead either way!” snapped Crabbe as he struggled back to his feet. “Dark Lord’ll probably reward us for saving him the troub—*OOF!*” He found himself abruptly tackled to the ground by Goyle, whose uncharacteristically quick thinking caused the Stunning Spell that had been aimed square for the centre of Crabbe’s head to instead slam into the stack of junk—largely a pile of old broomsticks and mouldy Quidditch uniforms from seasons past—Crabbe had been standing before. Harry whipped around to see who their saviour had been and found Hermione, wand brandished and breathing hard; she must have run around the stacks through a back path.

Crabbe shoved Goyle off with a snarl, wincing as he worked his wand-arm free. “The Mudblood! I’ll fucking *murder* you—*Avada Kedavra!*”

Hermione dove out of the way of the bolt of acid-green spellfire, which obliterated the stack behind her. A rush of red-hot fury raced through Harry—Crabbe had been aiming to *kill*. Not to disarm, not to stun, to *kill*. He whirled around, aiming for Crabbe, and shouted, “*Reducto!*” but his spell missed its mark and hit Goyle instead.

Goyle was thrown backwards into the heap behind him, and the junk teetering at the top of the pile came tumbling down around him, burying him under a mountain of chaos.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” Crabbe cried again, leaping out from behind the old, busted wardrobe he’d been using for cover. The spell arced out from his wand—but Draco seemed to have dug himself out from the rubbish and fired back a *Stupefy*; he couldn’t block the curse, but the added magical energy was enough to shift its course, and it obliterated another stack of junk.

He huffed in accomplishment, swiping his hair back from his face with one hand, and lifted a brow at Harry. “Not that I’m sure you couldn’t handle a measly little Killing Curse on your own.”

“You have to admit, I have a better track record of it than most.”

“*Petrificus totalus!*” someone shouted; Goyle had managed to dig himself free from the bulwark. Harry and Draco ducked, and the spell slammed into the stack behind them.

Draco grabbed Harry’s collar, jerking him along. “Let’s check another aisle, shall we? The riff-raff are moving in all along here and it’s no fit place for the Chosen One.”

Harry dug his heels in, though, head snapping to and fro. “Wait—Hermione and Ron—”

“—have already made themselves scarce, now get *moving*, Potter!” They beat a hasty retreat down the aisle, heading back for the exit; Harry supposed they would have to hope that the tiara he’d stumbled upon was indeed the Horcrux, for if it wasn’t, they would have to regroup and try again after taking care of Crabbe and Goyle. That would be precious minutes more they could not spare, but what else could they do?

He hoped Draco knew where they were going, because Harry had taken a couple of detours in his wandering through the maze that was the Room of Hidden Things, and he couldn’t rightly recall which way the entrance lay.

He was just about to ask if Draco remembered the way he’d come, when a booming roar erupted from behind them, and Harry whipped around, wide-eyed and horrified.

“Time to see Mummy and Daddy again, Potter! Let’s see if you can stand the heat!” Crabbe sneered, racing down the aisle towards them, and Harry’s eye rose to the towering wall of dark fire rising up from the stacks like a tidal wave. Everything the flames touched with their lashing black tendrils crumbled to soot—and the air shortly became filled with choking ash.

Oh, this was *not* good, he could tell already.

The wave crested and began to plow forward, racing after Harry and Draco and Crabbe. Goyle was nowhere to be seen—had he gone after Ron and Hermione, or had he already succumbed to the devastating wave?

Harry skidded to a halt, raising his wand and crying, “*Aguamenti!*” A jet of water spurt forth in a violent spray—but faded into hissing mist before it got within ten feet of the rising tide of flame.

There was no way this was normal fire—fire wasn’t *black*, for one, and the flames seemed almost sentient, conscious of where Harry and the others were and giving pursuit when they fled. When he dared a terrified backwards glance as he raced down a straightaway behind Draco, he thought he saw roiling, writhing shapes in the dark mass rushing upon them: gaping maws and raking claws and blazing eyes that seemed to stare right through him. It was hypnotic, he thought, mesmerising in its beautiful destruction, and he imagined in the midst of the horror, underneath the grasping, consuming tendrils of black fire, he could see a brilliant, beckoning light, a nova in the darkness—

“Move your feet, Potter!” Draco hissed, giving another yank on Harry’s collar. “Hardly the time for admiring the scenery!”

Harry stumbled after him, already feeling a stitch forming in his side from the effort. How much further to the entrance? They were quickly losing ground following the meandering paths carved through the Room, and Harry raised his wand again, ready to clear the way with a quick *Reducto*—

Draco threw an arm out, nearly knocking Harry to the ground. They’d been outflanked

by the lashing, fiery tendrils, which were now hemming them in on all sides, circling like sharks in a shrinking spiral as they drew closer and closer.

“Shit. Hurry, back behind me,” Draco snapped. “I’ll shield you, like at Gringotts—”

“*Don’t!*” someone called from above their heads, and Harry looked up to see Hermione and Ron clinging to a broom. Hermione was waving her hands frantically. “Don’t transform! It’s Fiendfyre! You’ll never survive!”

“Catch, mate!” Ron lobbed something over his head—a long wooden stick with a bristled hilt. It was hardly the sleekest broom Harry had ever seen, and had Ron not been riding one just like it, he would have doubted it could fly, but desperate times were upon them.

Harry caught the broom and slung one leg over, jerking his head at Draco. “Get on!”

“Why do *you* get to be in front?” Draco grumbled, sliding in behind him and slipping his arms around Harry’s waist. “I’m faster on a straightaway.”

“As a *dragon*,” Harry reminded him, pushing off with a hard kick—and promptly ducking into a roll when one of the serpents in the flames lashed out. Harry felt the heat against his skin like a brand and caught the stench of burning hair.

“*Fuck!*” Draco hissed, grip around Harry’s waist tightening. “Warn me before you do that again!”

Harry didn’t respond, only pushed the broom as hard as it would go. They were barely outstripping the flames, but the smoke and heat were quickly becoming overwhelming. Below, the Cursed fire churned and roiled, consuming the guilty outcomes of a thousand banned experiments, the detritus of countless souls who had sought refuge for their dirty secrets. Somewhere down there, the half-blood Prince’s book had been reduced to ash—lost forever, now, along with the gruesome *Sectumsempra*.

“Dammit...” Draco muttered as he surveyed the carnage. “Vince and Greg...”

Harry tried to remain detached. Crabbe and Goyle had just tried to *kill* them, after all. It

did seem a horrid way to go, though: burned alive by a rabid, ravenous wall of living flame. His mind unhelpfully supplied memories of Draco, doubled over and belching lava as the dragon tried to claw its way out, boiling the very blood in his veins and driving him mad with agony.

He cursed under his breath, taking a dive and scouring the stacks.

“What the fuck, Potter—Harry, *no*.” Draco tried to reach around him, angling for a grip on the broom’s haft. “Leave it! It’s too late for them!”

“Maybe not,” Harry said. He swooped as low as he dared, dodging the swiping claws and snapping jaws of the monsters made of flame, but there was nothing. Nothing but heat and soot and ash.

“*Harry! We’ve got to get out of here!*” bellowed Ron, though the smoke had grown so thick now Harry could no longer see him, leaving the exit’s location a mystery as well.

But then Harry heard a thin, piteous human scream rise up from the chaos below, piercing through the thunder of devouring flame.

Draco heard it too, his keen eye zeroing in on one of the stacks: there were Crabbe and Goyle, clinging to one another atop a teetering tower of old, charred school desks. Harry adjusted his grip, and Draco grabbed his wrist, still trying to put him off his decision. “We’ll perish along with them, Potter! We can’t!”

“Your objection is noted and dismissed,” Harry said, and he dove.

Goyle’s eye found him, widening with frantic hope, and he reached out both arms with stubby fingers spread wide as he reached for safety. Draco braced one hand against Harry’s shoulder, using him as leverage to lean to the side and clasp Goyle’s wrist tight as they made a pass. The broom lurched under the extra weight but held its altitude, with Goyle dangling precariously from Draco’s sweaty grip.

When Harry pushed the broom to start picking up speed again, they drew Goyle off of the stack. Crabbe made a feeble swipe, trying to grab Goyle’s shoe and nearly taking a

tumble into the flames for his effort. He glared baldly up at them, rage and betrayal etched on his features. Harry felt his stomach give a guilty lurch, but there was nothing more they could do; Goyle was already slipping through Draco's fingers, and the Fiendfyre was nearly upon them—

"I'LL HAUNT YOUR ARSE SO BAD IF WE DIE TRYING TO SAVE THEIR SORRY HIDES, HARRY!" Ron roared, streaking through the smoke, and as a great, flaming chimaera bore down upon Crabbe's teetering stack, Hermione leaned to the side, reaching for his outstretched hand.

They connected—but evidently ill-content to let himself simply be carried off, Crabbe began attempting to climb up Hermione's arm, clawing at her clothes and hair to try and mount the broom. "Let go of her!" Ron snarled as he manoeuvred the broom away from the lashing flames. "Just hang on, you idiot!"

"R-Ron!" Hermione gasped, eyes gone wide and white with terror. Harry watched, helpless, as she lost her steadying grip on Ron's shoulder with Crabbe pulling her down and off the broom—she was going to fall, she was going to *fall*, into the flames, and—

"*Relashio!*" Draco shouted over his shoulder, sending a jet of fiery purple sparks streaming from the tip of his awkwardly angled wand to hit Crabbe with incredible pinpoint accuracy.

Crabbe recoiled as the spell hit him, releasing his hold on Hermione, and tumbled into the leaping flames below. Harry looked away with a tight grimace, but Draco only clutched at him all the tighter, demanding in a rasping growl, "Get us the fuck out of here."

Harry hardly needed to be told twice, and he pushed the broom as fast as it would go, Goyle still hanging on for dear life. He followed Ron and Hermione through the billowing black smoke, barely able to breathe, while around them the flames continued to feast upon the debris and detritus built up over the centuries.

A jet of spellfire streaked through the smoke, though he could not tell who had cast it,

and it slammed into the quickly approaching wall, busting open what Harry now could see was the exit. Ron and Hermione dove for it, drawing in tight against the broom to be sure they weren't clipped by the frame. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Draco had helped Goyle climb up onto the broom, and with one hand he drew Draco closer. "Budge up," he warned. "It's going to be a tight fit!"

He kept the broom as on-course as possible, fighting the finicky old thing the whole time, but perhaps it too feared winding up a pile of kindling if it didn't behave, for it flew true, and they streaked through the doorway and out into the seventh-floor corridor. Harry took in great gulps of fresh air as the door slammed behind them, but their momentum sent them straight into the opposite wall. He gave a sharp jerk on the broom's handle, and it skidded to a halt in mid-air, sending its three passengers flying.

Harry hit the wall already curled into a protective ball. Though he was certain he had bruised something badly, he was able to stagger to his feet once the hall had stopped spinning. Draco was on all fours, gasping and retching to clear his lungs of the choking black ash, and Goyle appeared to have been knocked out, a streak of blood leaking from a gash just at his hairline.

Harry hobbled over to help Draco up. His face was streaked with grime and sweat, and he fixed Harry with a wretched glare. "I *told* you you should have let me do the flying. No finesse at all..."

"If you can whinge about my skill on a broom, I guess you must be all right."

The remains of Ron's broom lay in a pile of splinters on the flagstones, but he and Hermione seemed to be in one piece. Hermione was wiping her face with a dirty rag, and Ron was staring with a lost look at the empty stretch of hallway where the door had been.

Everything seemed so much quieter out here, shielded from the roar of the deadly Fiendfyre inferno, but Harry could still hear shouts and bangs from floors below—and no sooner had he remarked the relative calm, than a number of huge bangs shook the castle, and a stampede of transparent figures riding atop equally transparent steeds

galloped past. The riders were all headless, and their heads bayed their bloodlust from where they sat tucked under their arms.

“The Headless Hunt...” Draco marvelled. “What exactly do they intend to do?”

“Spook a few Death Eaters?” Ron suggested, but Harry felt a flash of panic flare within him. How long had they been inside the Room? How many of their friends and family had been injured—or worse—while they rooted around searching for the diadem?

“Well, the good news is,” Hermione said, “if the diadem was in there...the Fiendfyre, *definitely* destroyed it.”

“*If* it was in there...” Harry said, tugging out his Mokeskin pouch. “I grabbed this off a bust, right before Crabbe and Goyle jumped me.” Careful to be sure he didn’t touch it directly, he extracted the old tiara from the pouch and held it up for the others to see.

Hermione’s expression brightened. “Look at the inscription, Harry!”

He squinted, rubbing the etching with the cloth to clean it up a bit, and was at last able to make out the tiny inscription: *Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.*

He grinned at Ron. “Still got that fang?” Ron patted his pocket, and Harry passed him the diadem. “Go wild.”

Ron sank to his knees, laying the diadem out on the stones and pulling the fang from his pocket. Keeping a steady grip on it, he frowned down at the Horcrux. Harry wondered if it would try to defend itself in some manner, as the locket and diary had, or if it would go quietly, like the cup. Ron didn’t seem inclined to give it a chance to fight back, and he brought the fang slashing down, hitting the diadem square in the middle of its pithy inscription.

With an ear-splitting tinny ring, the diadem began vibrating rapidly, seeping a thick, tarry black liquid from the point at which the fang had penetrated the veneer. When the vibrations reached a fever pitch, the diadem gave a final violent shudder and then broke apart, smashed to smithereens. The ringing echoed long after the diadem had shattered,

fading to a soft, distant scream that Harry told himself was just the muffled shouts and yells from the fighters engaged in battle outside the castle walls.

“...That wasn’t creepy at all,” Ron muttered, complexion gone pale, and he tossed the fang aside with a relieved huff. And then he started *laughing*. “That’s five! That’s *five!*”

“All that’s left is the snake!” Hermione added, taming her bushy brown hair with a tight band. It looked more than a little singed in places, and Harry wondered how badly off he seemed himself. “Oh my god, we might just pull this off!”

Harry didn’t know if he was ready to entertain *that* possibility, but the idea of only one more Horcrux lying between them and Voldemort’s downfall did ease the weight hanging around his neck. He glanced over to Draco, half-expecting another lecture along the lines of *Excellent! One step closer to our untimely demise!* but was disappointed to find Draco leaning against the wall, staring down at the still-unconscious Goyle with a rather lost expression on his face.

“...Where did Crabbe learn to cast that...?” he mumbled, so softly Harry wondered if he was expected to answer.

“Maybe...maybe from the Carrows? Sounds like they were pretty sadistic; they might’ve thought it’d be a lark—teach some poor student a deadly spell without explaining how to control it...”

Draco snorted. “He was hardly ‘some poor student’. He tried to kill you.”

“He tried to kill you, too. And you still wanted to save him.”

Draco rubbed at his eyes, and his hands came away caked in soot and sweat. “Must be your Saviour complex rubbing off on me.”

A violent explosion rocked the corridor, erupting in a shower of dust and debris at the end of the hallway. They all scrambled to their feet, wands at the ready and hearts in their throats. The battle had finally worked its way inside the castle proper, it seemed.

From the cloud of mortar dust stumbled Fred and Percy, barely ducking twin jets of yellow that probably would have taken their heads off. They whirled in place, wands flashing frantically, as a pair of Death Eaters emerged from the cloud just on their heels, rejoining their respective duels in earnest.

“I think the fuck not!” roared Ron, and he charged down the hallway, with Harry, Hermione, and Draco hot on his heels. Spellfire flew over their heads in violent jets, and they dodged and wove their way to Fred and Percy’s aid. Ron fired a *Reducto* at the ceiling just above the Death Eater who had been harassing Percy, and the wizard hopped back, fast, to avoid being crushed by the cascading stone and mortar. The movement knocked back his hood, and Harry found he was not so very surprised to see Pius Thicknesse’s high forehead and black hair streaked with grey.

“Goodness, Minister—fancy seeing you here,” Percy said, smiling brightly as he zinged Thicknesse with a Jinx. Harry didn’t know what it was, but from the way Thicknesse dropped his wand and began seizing violently, he suspected it was some variation on a Tempest Jinx. “It’s always awkward when you skive off work and then run into your boss outside the office, I think.”

Fred released a sharp bark of laughter. “Our big brother’s joking, Ron! Percy Weasley, *joking!*”

Thicknesse collapsed to the ground, tiny bolts of lightning arcing over his body, and the Death Eater nearest Fred was knocked back into the wall under the force of no less than three separate Stunners.

“No kidding!” Ron huffed, grin wide. “I don’t think we’ve heard Percy joke since he was —”

A flash of blood-red—and Harry hadn’t even *heard* the incantation, but he saw the spell arcing for Fred, whose back had been turned on the downed Death Eaters. Time slowed to a syrupy crawl, and though Harry witnessed it all unfold in what he felt was half-time, he was helpless to stop it. Immobile, he could only watch as the raw red whip of deadly spellfire leapt from the tip of the wand of a third Death Eater who’d lain in ambush. His

hood was thrown back, as if he didn't care who saw him: Amycus Carrow.

I should have killed him. I should have killed him when we had the chance. He's a Death Eater. I should have gone with Neville and killed—

“*PROTEGO!*” Draco shouted, shoving Fred roughly aside and thrusting his wand forward with a two-handed grip. Carrow's curse slammed into Draco's shield with real, physical force, but Draco managed to stay standing, the white of his hair lit up like a dying star. Fred plastered himself against the side of the corridor with a wide-eyed yelp.

Carrow roared in rage, winding up to throw another spell—and Harry doubted he would let this next one be blocked.

I think the fuck not, indeed.

He brandished his wand with a snarled, “*Incarcerous!*” and Carrow went down as several lengths of rope whipped around him. His chin clipped the flagstones when he hit the ground, knocking him out cold.

The world seemed to resolve itself then, time picking up again and continuing apace. Fred gaped at his would-be murderer, struck dumb for once in his life, and Percy had his hands in his hair, a look of horror plastered on his face. “He almost...*you* almost...” he stuttered, swallowing thickly. “That was—”

Harry gave a sharp *oof* as he was rudely shouldered aside by Ron rushing Draco. He had a wild look in his eyes, and Harry worried for a heartbeat that Ron meant to slug Draco, perhaps thinking *he* had cast the curse at Fred.

But then Ron tackled Draco in a bone-crushing embrace, arms coming up tight and fierce around Draco's neck as he hugged the life out of him. “Thank you! Oh fuck, *thank you!*” he cried into Draco's shoulder, then shoved away, keeping him at arm's length. Harry could see his eyes were shining, and his cheeks were flushed. “You—Merlin's balls, I could kiss you!” Draco boggled, mute and confused, and Ron quickly whipped his head around to find Harry, adding in a rush, “But, I mean, I won't. I won't—just, you know.

That's how grateful I am!"

Draco looked like he'd just been struck with a *Confundus*. "Er...right. Well if you wouldn't mind unhanding me, then...? It was only a Shield Charm. Your average Fourth-year could have done the same."

Harry didn't think it was the spell's degree of difficulty that had inspired such suffuse affection from Ron, but he took a mental snapshot all the same, regretting how lax he'd been in filling out the little scrapbook of his mind.

Another bone-rattling explosion sounded, further down, and Harry slipped over to the window, half its glass lying shattered on the floor, to peek outside. The castle grounds were utter chaos—bodies, some human and some not, littered the courtyard, though it was impossible to tell from this height if they were Death Eaters or Hogwarts defenders. He knew that, statistically, at least a few of them had to belong to people on their side—were probably even people he *knew*—but he didn't dare start down that path. If he did, he might never find his way back, and there was still so much they needed to do.

"What're we gonna do with them?" Ron asked, nodding to the Death Eaters and Goyle. He'd released his death-grip on Draco—who was now enduring a round of handshakes and back-slaps from Percy and Fred—and put himself back in order.

Harry mulled it over. "Take their wands and lock them in one of the rooms up here—under a Stasis Spell."

"You know they wouldn't have given you the same courtesy," Draco reminded darkly, wincing from the attentions.

"Yeah, they wouldn't—*haven't*, even. But we aren't murderers."

Draco glanced out the window, frowning at the carnage below. "We might have to be, by the end of the night."

"Well we don't have to be right *now*," Hermione said, helping levitate the bodies into the nearest room—an empty classroom that did not appear to have been used in some time,

given the layer of dust on the desks.

“How are things downstairs?” Harry asked Percy and Fred. “We’ve been—er, busy up here.”

Fred grimaced. “Not good, mate; the protective measures we set up held for a bit, but after fifteen minutes or so, the first line of You-Know-Who’s forces started forcing their way in. It’s not just Death Eaters, either. He’s got Werewolves and Acromantulas, not to mention a whole horde of Dementors—”

“Though at least they’re keeping back from the ruckus for now,” Percy said. “They’re prowling the Hogwarts boundaries. It might be they can’t cross over; some of the staff’s protections may yet be holding.”

“Small blessings,” Hermione muttered, chewing on her thumb.

“We should take what blessings we can get,” Percy continued darkly. “I’m not sure what’s happened in the time since we left the Entrance Hall, but...we’d already taken fatalities when we got cut off from Dad and the others by the Death Eaters you saw us fighting just now.”

“Fatalities,” Harry repeated flatly. “Who?”

Fred grimaced. “Feels crass to say so, but no one we knew. Could’ve been some former Order members, or other warm bodies Kingsley recruited for the battle, I can’t say.”

The thought did little to soothe Harry’s tension. His head was throbbing in time with the explosions and crashes he could still hear echoing from down below. He wanted to race down the stairs right now and join them—his mind was still whirling from the narrow escape from the Room of Hidden Things, and the near-miss with Fred just now had him spoiling for a fight.

Hermione must have seen the cogs in his head turning, for she drew in close, lowering her voice. She locked eyes with Harry. “You said you saw that...that Voldemort isn’t fighting, right? He was hanging back and letting his army do his dirty work?” Harry

nodded.

“Saw—what?” Percy asked, voice tight with fear. “You saw *him*? Where?”

Hermione ignored him, though, placing her hands on Harry’s shoulders. “Harry, we need to find the snake. That’s all that matters now.”

“All that matters now?” Harry laughed, dry and devoid of mirth. “Dunno if you just heard, but people are *dead*—”

“And a hell of a lot more are going to die if we don’t kill that snake. You have *one job* here, Harry—and it certainly isn’t to rush into the fray.” She gave his shoulders a hard shake. “We’re the only ones who can end this!”

He knew she was right, which made it all the more frustrating.

She sighed in frustration, looking to Draco, of all people. “Speak sense to him!”

“Potter doesn’t operate on sense,” he returned blandly, tapping his temple with his wand to cast a Charm that wiped the muck and grime from his face and rearranged his hair into a neat coif. Even in the midst of a battle, the pompous arse had to make sure he looked immaculate. “One must be firm with him.” He locked eyes with Harry. “Where is the snake?”

Harry blinked, thrown by the question. “What?” How was he meant to know?

Draco rapped him on the crown. “*Where is the snake?* If you’re intent on pissing about playing hero, then let that be on your head. I’m going to kill the snake and end this madness.”

“I’m not *peeing about*—there’s good we can do here! Defences we can shore up, wounded we can help tend to! He’s not going anywhere, in case you haven’t noticed—”

“Right: *he’s not going anywhere*. He’s going to come, and he’s going to *keep coming* until he’s slaughtered every last living being standing between himself and *you*. Barging

in there wand waving will do nothing more than delay the inevitable. So either *piss off* or get your head on straight.”

Harry clenched his jaw, looking to Ron for aid but finding no quarter. “...He’s right, mate,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I’m fucking terrified we’re gonna get back down there and it’s gonna be Bill or Charlie or my *mum* or someone laid out on the ground—but there’s nothing we can do but what we *came* here to do. We have to finish what we started.”

“Look into his mind,” Hermione urged. “*Look*—and find where he is! Wherever *he* is, he’ll have the snake with him too. You’ve insisted all this time you wanted to use this connection you share.” She squared her shoulders. “So use it. It’s time to finish this, Harry.”

And that, he supposed, he could get behind. He was just so *tired*—tired of terror and pain and anger and worry. Tired of waking up each day and having to be *Harry Potter*, instead of just a boy, just a student, just a wizard who wanted to deal with normal wizarding problems. Like passing his N.E.W.T.s and teaching his house-elf some manners and dealing with the peculiarities of being mated to a spoilt-rotten dragon Animagus.

He closed his eyes, frightened by how easy he found the task of slipping through Voldemort’s feeble mental defences now, to peek into his mind. Had it always been this easy? Could he have opened the connection like this whenever he wanted? Would Voldemort have known, as Harry had? Would he realise now?

It didn’t matter, though, these *ifs* and *woulds* and *maybes*, and as he let himself drift loose from his own mental moorings, the cacophonous sounds of a battle in its full throes faded, growing distant and weak, as if beyond a veil...

There was nothing but darkness, and Harry feared at first that he’d only fallen into a trance, or perhaps napped there on his feet, more exhausted than he’d realised, but then the darkness thinned to mere shadow, mottled with movement.

He tested his other senses as well—he could smell moss and dirt and decay, as if this body were his own, with Harry no longer a mere passenger. The bangs and cries were still there, only removed even further, as if he were distant from the battle. This was not the Shrieking Shack, but Voldemort was still *not fighting*.

He didn't need to, after all.

It was better that he didn't, in fact; if he charged in now, wand ready to strike down these pathetic fools thinking they could stand against him, it might prove a fatal error. And Lord Voldemort was not prone to error. No, if he engaged the boy in direct combat now, he might yet lose. He would not *die*, no, but there were some fates worse than death, and he had worked too hard to find his way back here, to the pinnacle of his power, only to stumble because he was *overeager*.

He would have to play this carefully, so very carefully. He would not be defeated, not so long as his Horcruxes yet survived. Nagini was curled tight around his neck, her weight a warm, comforting reminder of his immortality. The boy was picking off his precious tethers to this plane, one by one, but he would soon meet a block. Already his Death Eaters swarmed the castle, and the Room—that most secret of Rooms that not even *Dumbledore* had stumbled upon with his mighty intellect—would remain Lord Voldemort's secret alone. The Potter boy had been lucky, true, but that was all that drove him—luck and the support of his betters. He was not clever enough, not cunning enough to suss out the Room—you had to have thirst, drive, raw *ambition* to seek out rare Hogwarts secrets like the Room and the Chamber, not sated in your knowledge, lazy and languishing. *Content*.

While Potter had surprised him—*frightened him*, he would admit only in his heart of hearts—with how far he'd managed to come, further than he should have by all rights been allowed, he would *not* find the diadem. Not even if he somehow found the Room and searched from now to kingdom come.

The end drew nigh, he could feel it in his very bones, in his *blood*: a heady thrum resonating with each pump of his heart: *Soon. Soon. Soon*. But not yet—no, not *quite*

yet. He would have to practise all of his Slytherin cunning in these final breaths, and patience as well. He'd been denied the Wand; that had been an oversight—or rather a *betrayal*. But then, every misstep so far had been incurred due to some betrayal or another. Lucius, Bellatrix, Snape: he had learned his lesson. He'd suffered greatly for it, but it had been *well* learned. He would rely on none other than himself going forward—it was the Slytherin way, the way of his ancestors.

He would refute this prophecy and see his enemies thrown down not through brute strength and sheer power like some foolhardy Gryffindor but through the blood that ran in his veins. His ambition had brought him thus far, and his cunning would see him home. Wand or no. The Elder Wand was an impressive weapon, to be sure, but the Malfoy whelp was easily managed. He already had several of his more faithful Death Eaters scouring the battlefield for the wayward Malfoys elder; they would not abandon the school, not without their progeny, so he would simply bide his time, and in due course, Draco Malfoy would reveal himself, and the Wand would be his at last, ready to wreak havoc as the Deathstick.

He would have all that he required—soon, if not now. And until then...well, he really didn't need a wand at all.

With a gasp, Harry pulled back into himself, eyes fluttering open. In that instant, his ears were assaulted with the screeches and cries of a battle in full fury. He was being dragged, bodily, along the hallway. “Oi, he's awake again!” Fred was saying, one shoulder under Harry's arm to help him along. “Wotcher, Harry.”

“Where're we going?” he asked muzzily; he'd lost his glasses somewhere, and his mind and vision were both a blur.

“Some uninvited guests came looking for their friends,” Percy said. “We decided retreat might be the better part of valour, in this case.”

“My glasses...” Harry muttered, and someone pushed them into his hands, long fingers giving his own a squeeze.

“They make Tracking Charms for clumsy spectacled gits like you, you know,” Draco said. “Or you could save yourself the trouble and get your vision corrected.”

“But they’re my trademark,” Harry protested weakly, suddenly defensive of his glasses. He pushed them up on his nose when they slid down, his face still greased with sweat.

“Oh yes, my mistake, *no one* would recognise you without them.”

Fred got him set up in an alcove in the stairwell; the echoes of the battles being waged on floors below rang around them, rattling Harry’s ears.

“Did it work?” Hermione asked, suddenly beside him and very earnest. “Did you see where he was? Where the snake was?”

“He’s in the Forbidden Forest,” Harry said; he hadn’t recognised it in the moment, but his mind was beginning to clear again, and he could still smell the mouldering scent of wet and decay, moss and loam and mud. “He’s still not fighting—he’s not *going* to. He thinks...he thinks he doesn’t need the Elder Wand.”

“Doesn’t need it?” Ron parroted with a derisive chuff. “After all he’s gone through to try and get it?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either...” Harry glanced to Draco, who was standing off to the side, away from the group, with his arms crossed over his chest. “...He’s looking for your parents. I assume he’s planning to use them to get to you, try and force you to hand over the wand.”

“...Looking for them,” Draco said, turning the words over in his mouth, and Harry nodded.

“Meaning he hasn’t found them. Small comfort, I’m sure, but better than the alternative, yeah?”

The line of tension strung tight across Draco’s shoulders eased a hair; it wasn’t much, but it was the best Harry could offer at the moment. A niggling kernel of guilt took root in

the back of his mind, reminding Harry that he could just as easily get word to Voldemort that he'd relieved Draco of the Wand, rendering his pursuit of the Malfoys moot. Still, he couldn't shake the thought that there might come a moment when such an element of surprise would be to his advantage, and cruel though it might seem, it was the cunning thing to do. With every moment he spent in Draco's presence, Harry felt himself growing more and more Slytherin.

Harry wiped his face, then slapped his cheeks lightly. "Right, let's get moving."

"Traipsing into the Forbidden Forest in the dead of night with Harry Potter?" Draco mused as they bustled down the stairs. "Merlin and Morgana, it's First Year all over again."

Harry threw him a shrewd look over his shoulder, a quip ready on his lips concerning the absence of Hagrid's comforting presence and the way Draco had turned tail and run at the first sign of danger, when the air grew close and charged, like right before a lightning strike, and a high, cold voice spoke in booming tones that seemed to resonate inside Harry's skull.

The very walls and floors vibrated with sound, as had happened in the Great Hall earlier—and Harry realised that this was another of Voldemort's 'announcements', made to everyone in Hogwarts and the surrounding grounds and village of Hogsmeade.

"Such impressive displays of magic you've shown me this day," Voldemort said, his voice sounding so clear and close, as if he stood right behind Harry's shoulder. Harry imagined he could feel his cold, foetid breath on the back of his neck, and it took everything in him not to whip around and shove a hearty *Crucio* right down his throat. He'd never cast it before—but he was feeling lucky. *"Valiant, if ill-advised—and so brave to stand against my armies. Lord Voldemort appreciates the mettle it takes to stand tall against insurmountable odds."*

"I'll bet he does..." Fred muttered, scanning the ceiling high above, as if he expected to see Voldemort peering down through the enchanted ceiling.

“But such heart must be tempered with logic, lest it transform into stupidity, stubbornness, and hubris. I know you have sustained casualties—most unfortunate. It is always a tragedy when magical blood must be spilled, and would it were possible, I would see the battle ended here and now. I therefore propose a ceasefire.

“I command my Death Eaters and our allies to retreat immediately. No more curses, no more Hexes. No knives in the dark; you shall not cast so much as a Tripping Jinx.

“To those defending Hogwarts, I give you one hour of my grace. Tend to your wounded, gather your dead, and mourn your losses.

“...And to Harry Potter: I ask you to look around yourself. Whether you stand in the Courtyard, or in the Great Hall—whether you are cowering now in your Common Room, or if you stand atop one of the towers of the castle, you will see what you have wrought. You will see what your cowardice has begotten: death, destruction, despair as your friends and companions fight for you...and die for you. All because you would not come and face me yourself.

“Should you come to your senses, should you realise how unconscionable it is to ask others to die in your stead, you may find me in the Forbidden Forest, where I shall be waiting for you, in this hour of my mercy. However, should you insist on using these brave Hogwarts defenders to shield you from your fate, should you not give yourself over to my forces freely by the time the hour tolls, then I will bid my forces re-engage, and neither you nor your companions will receive any further quarter from me.

“And this time, I shall come for you myself, Harry Potter. I will tear through every last warm body in the castle to reach you, and I will relish doing so. You will die, to be sure, but only after you have borne witness to the senseless, needless deaths your reluctance to face your fate wrought.

“One hour, Potter. Either you will come to me, or I will come to you.”

The last strains of his voice echoed away, and the air came back with a rush. Hermione and Ron were suddenly on him, shaking his shoulders with panic writ large on their

features.

“Fuck his ‘grace’, Harry! You can’t believe he’s doing anything but blowing smoke!”

“It’s obvious he’s desperate,” Hermione said, a bit breathless. “He knows he can’t possibly beat you, man to man, so he’s trying to draw you into a trap!” She nodded to herself. “Yes, we’ll have to use the hour’s respite to plan; we can’t go barging into this like—like—”

“Like Gryffindors,” Draco helpfully supplied, though his tone was flat, and he was fixing Harry with an unreadable look.

Hermione continued on, words coming in a rush as she began formulating some undoubtedly convoluted plan, and Harry let her voice wash over him. Everything grew faint and distant, and in his ears rang still the clanging accusation of Voldemort.

...death, destruction, despair as your friends and companions fight for you...and die for you. All because you would not come and face me yourself.

One hour. He would wait for Harry to go to him...for one hour.

This assault on the castle...this hadn’t been a battle. Only a demonstration, a chance for Harry to see *what might happen*. What *would* happen, if he didn’t give himself up. No wonder Voldemort hadn’t bothered to engage; he knew he could press just so and make Harry come to him. Guilt was more compelling a spell than even the strongest of Imperius Curses.

The Elder Wand was powerful...but it would not protect him from Voldemort and however many dozens of Death Eaters surrounded him out there in the forest. Voldemort wasn’t stupid; he wasn’t goading Harry out for a fair fight. He expected a saviour, he expected a sacrifice—he expected suicide.

“...We should go see how everyone’s doing,” Harry mumbled, chillingly aware of how feeble the suggestion sounded. He needed to just...not think about this. He needed to not hear that clock in his head, louder now than it had ever been before, ticking down the

moments until...until something happened. Something he hadn't been able to name before. Something he thought he could probably name now.

"Then let's go," Draco said, grabbing him roughly by the meat of his upper arm and practically shoving him down the steps.

The silence of the castle halls seemed somehow ear-splittingly loud just now; around about the fourth floor, they began to see evidence of battles that had spread from the halls and corridors into the stairwell itself, the odd baluster missing and railings blown off. One of the staircases had lost its top three risers entirely, requiring they make a precarious jump across the gap onto the fourth, which was itself crumbling to pieces.

There were no flashes of light now, no bangs or screams or shouts. They made it to the ground floor of the castle without meeting another soul, friend or foe. They picked their way gingerly over the bloodstained flagstones in the Entrance Hall, careful not to slip in the pools of gore or trod on the scattered rainbow of gemstones—emeralds, rubies, sapphires, diamonds—spilled from the shattered House point hourglasses.

It felt like they were the only ones in the entire castle, and Harry shared Hermione's trepidation when she whispered, "...Where is everyone?" glancing fearfully around. It was downright eerie—the lamps burned low in their sconces, throwing weak shadows in the darkness, and the iron-rich stench of blood mixed with the ozone-burn of spellfire seemed to seep from the very walls.

The doors to the Great Hall were shut; Harry half didn't want to see what lay beyond. Ron stepped forward, though, and pushed through, spilling a shaft of bright, warm light into the Entrance Hall.

Here, it seemed, was where everyone had congregated after Voldemort had issued his ultimatum, a sanctuary of sorts for the beleaguered defenders of Hogwarts. The barricades that had been crafted from the House tables were still holding, though they now bore clear signs of having fended off an assault, spackled here and there with the sooty residue of Curses and splintered badly in places.

Fred and Percy broke away, arrowing for a group of redheads with cries of relief. Ron followed them with his eyes but kept his feet planted, one arm around Hermione's waist and the other still clutching his wand in a white-knuckled grip.

Groups of survivors stood huddled together around the Great Hall, friends and family alike communing during this brief respite. There were no more brave faces, no expressions of haughty bravado ready to 'give 'em hell' as there had been but a few hours earlier—only drawn, grave soldiers who already showed scars from the battles they'd been engaged in thus far.

The raised platform at the far end of the hall, from which McGonagall had addressed them all only a short while ago, had been turned over to Madam Pomfrey, who was now tending a long line of injured with the aid of one of the Patil twins and Romilda Vane. They worked with a quick, practised clip, triaging any who approached with ruthless efficiency to make the most of the time they had before the battle was rejoined.

And then there were the dead.

They lay in a neat line down the middle of the hall—there were enough of them that, side by side, they spanned half the length of the hall. Harry tried not to look, thinking he ought to at least prepare himself for whatever he was about to see, but his eye was drawn to each and every face like a magnet. *Look*, an insidious little voice inside of him jeered. *Look at what you've done*.

He saw Lavender Brown, almost unrecognisable under the ragged claw marks raked across her face, her blouse stained a violent mud-red; he saw Michael Corner, not a scratch on him, with Ginny and Cho hovering over him with faces puffy and streaked with tears, fastidiously smoothing out his robes; he saw elegant, dark-skinned Blaise Zabini, one of the few Slytherins from their year Draco had somehow managed to convince to stay behind to defend a school that would have been glad to see the backside of him; and—

“Oh—oh *no...*” Ron rasped, bringing his hand to his mouth; he bit his palm, staring at a huddled group of several Order members, crowded around two bodies laid out near the

end. Hermione seized his arm, a gasp lodging in her throat, and her knees buckled.

It was Remus—and Tonks. Lying there together, the both of them pale and still and peaceful-looking, as if merely asleep beneath the dark, enchanted ceiling. Their arms had fallen in such a way that it looked as if they'd fallen holding hands. Remus looked so old, and Tonks looked so *young*, and god, that ring was still on her finger, still glinting in the lamplight—

Ron and Hermione moved as one into the crowd of mourners—Ron at last finding himself swept up into the arms of his family and Hermione trailing mutely behind, letting Mrs. Weasley cry into her shoulder.

There was a low, constant din humming in the Hall, and Harry distantly recognised it as *sobbing*—that kind of whining moan people let out when they just didn't have the energy anymore for weeping. He thought back to Dumbledore's funeral; there'd been sadness, there'd been grief...but it had been so far removed. Harry recalled his own sadness, how it had taken months for it to really manifest—and then had done so in anger.

This, though...this felt so raw, so *immediate*. It was *right here*, all this death and sorrow and friends and family, people he loved, people he'd barely even known, lives just begun to really *live*, cut short all because of *him*.

Draco stood beside him, tall and stiff and straight, like a statue. Harry wished he could be as cold and unfeeling as Draco seemed, though the illusion was shattered by the sheer number of times Harry had seen him broken and bleeding. There were no ice princes, no stone faces—just cheap façades that could be undone with the crack of a spell.

His vision swam, and the Great Hall was swept away as darkness closed in around him, heavy and choking. Mind reeling, he shoved himself back from the doorway, stumbling into the Entrance Hall, and forced his eyes away. He couldn't look at them, he *couldn't*. He couldn't stand among their ranks and mourn the fallen, when if he'd given himself up in the first place, strode out into the Courtyard with arms wide open, then Lavender might have earned that O in Divination and Michael might have gotten back together with Ginny—or hell, even Cho—and Zabini might have helped Draco show everyone

Slytherins were just as proud to defend this school as any other House.

Remus and Tonks might have had a formal ceremony, so Harry could've congratulated them properly—they might have had a *kid*. Harry would've liked to have been someone's godfather this time.

Every single one of the bodies laid out on the flagstones weighed on him, hanging heavy around his neck like an albatross.

“*Breathe*, damn you; this is no time to have a fit.”

Draco's voice was soft and sharp and commanding, and he laid a hand on Harry's nape, jerking him forward until he was leaning into Draco's chest, face buried in the gentle swell where neck blended into shoulder.

Harry quite disagreed—it seemed the perfect time for a fit—but he did as told and took in deep, laboured breaths. They came slow and stuttered, and his chest ached with each one, but still he forced it. He had to stay here, *here* right now, and bear witness. He couldn't look away, he couldn't run into one of the bathrooms and sick up his grief; he would look and look and *look* until it was burned into his vision, until even when he closed his eyes he'd see them all laid out, pretty as you please, in silent, eternal reminder.

“It's—not fucking *fair*,” he growled into Draco's shoulder, clubbing him feebly with his balled-up fist.

“Life's not fair,” Draco said, and Harry felt the bob of his throat as he swallowed thickly. “Turns out death isn't either.”

He relaxed his fist and brought his hand up around Draco's side to lie flat against his back—then clawed at his shirt to pull him closer. “I'm sorry... You convinced Zabini to stay, and I—I got him ki—”

“Blaise got *himself* killed, Potter. If he'd wanted to live that badly, he'd have run when given the chance. He could've been sipping a hot toddy by a roaring fire in a ski lodge in

wizarding Davos by now, and it's no one's fault but his own that he's not. Perhaps he ought to have paid closer attention in Defence Against the Dark Arts instead of Charming his textbook into a mirror. Save your martyr complex for someone who might appreciate it."

It was utter tripe, classic Malfoy spinning stories and sharpening his tongue because crude, snide remarks kept well at bay anyone who might sneak in close enough to see any real vulnerability—and take advantage of it.

Except Harry was already here, inside Draco's defences, close enough to see every fine crack and unchinked crevice, so all he heard was *Yeah—I convinced him to stay; and look what happened.*

"I'm sorry..." he said again, weak and lost, unsure of what else to say. Draco only squeezed him tighter and released a ragged breath, no sharp rejoinder for once.

They stayed that way for some time, just holding one another in the dark, empty Entrance Hall, and they might have gone on longer had Harry's head not been turned by a new sound: a strange, mournful song—haunting and mesmerising at once. It reminded him of the Merfolk singing, that haunting melody that could only be heard in the dark stillness of the Great Lake, but this was brighter and cleared and sharper and—

"Is—that an *owl*?" Draco said, squinting into the darkness. He pointed, and Harry drew back from their embrace, following his eye to see a bird, plumage red as a setting sun and shining with a light that seemed to bloom from within, bearing sorrow on its wings. It spiralled down from the highest towers with lazy beats of wings aflame, and from its jewelled throat issued a song that so painfully encapsulated the bone-deep, heart-sick guilt weighing on Harry right then, it brought hot tears beating at the backs of Harry's eyes.

"Fawkes..." Harry marvelled, wiping furiously at his eyes and giving a snotty sniff. "I thought he'd left, after Dumbledore..."

Had the phoenix been living here at Hogwarts all this time, then? Or had he only

returned briefly, in this Hogwarts's darkest hour? But there were no more Basilisks to fight, and Fawkes's tears could not bring back the dead—so why?

The phoenix drew closer, the light from his body throwing into sharp relief the carnage of the Entrance Hall—then he flared, as if meaning to rake Harry across the face with his talons. Harry threw up an arm to shield himself, and Fawkes daintily alighted on his arm, taking care not to gouge or burn him. The long, golden tail feathers brushed the floor, reminding Harry with a curious ache of the fussy white peacock Harry had found wandering about Draco's lonely mental moor.

Fawkes drew up tall, balancing on one leg as he held out the other for Harry's assessment; there was a tiny scroll attached. Harry gently removed the scroll, unrolling it and frowning as he read aloud: “To be delivered to Mr. H.J. Potter...in the event of the Headmaster's untimely demise.” His heart skipped a beat, a rush of excitement flooding his system—but no, this was not the familiar looping script of Dumbledore. Fawkes had not come bearing any last-minute advice or secrets from beyond the grave.

He let his eyes drop to the next line—the only other words on the scroll: “Please proceed to the Headmaster's office; password—*with all my hart.*” He furrowed his brow, passing the scroll to Draco. “It's misspelt.”

“This is—from Dumbledore?”

Harry shook his head. “I don't think so. If it is, he didn't write it. You saw those letters in Rita's book.” He knew he had seen the handwriting somewhere before, though—he just couldn't place it. Had McGonagall sent Fawkes to him? But she could have just as easily sent a Patronus if she'd needed to summon him. He took the scroll back from Draco—then crumpled it in his fist. Fawkes leapt from his perch on Harry's arm, sweeping away towards the stairwell and taking his warm, comforting light with him.

Draco frowned, watching the phoenix go with a wistful sort of look. “You're not going to —?”

“No, no I am—” The words were out of his mouth before he'd even properly thought

about it—but what else could he do? He couldn't go back into the Hall, that was for certain. He'd glanced away from the tragic sight, distracted for only a moment, and now he couldn't bring himself to look back. It wasn't running away, he told himself; Fawkes had sought him out for a reason. He was meant to be in the Headmaster's Office right now—so that was where he would go.

“...Fine, let's go,” Draco said, shouldering past Harry—and Harry grabbed his arm, holding him fast.

“No, I—” He swallowed, searching feebly for an excuse. He needed to be alone, he needed to *not be around people*, especially people he cared about. Just for a moment, just to catch his breath before he had to face it all again. He needed to have his fit—and at least he might have some privacy in which to do it. “I think this is something...I'm meant to do alone.”

Draco's jaw tightened, expression gone murderous. “The fuck it is—”

“He gave us an hour, didn't he? No one's going to hurt me, and I really *can* keep out of trouble without you hovering over me at all hours of the day.” There would be no more Crabbes and Goyles, not with Voldemort convinced Harry would walk out the front doors and hand himself over willingly.

“I've yet to see proof of that,” Draco bit out.

Harry relaxed his hold on Draco's arm, squeezing gently. “I'll only be a moment, all right? Just—” He nodded back toward the Great Hall. “Watch over them for me?”

Draco's pursed lips said he clearly did not like the notion, but he gave a stiff, curt nod, and Harry felt his grey eyes boring holes into his back the whole way as he marched for the stairs, following Fawkes's lead.

He climbed, and climbed, and climbed until he reached the Headmaster's Tower, and when faced with the gargoyle guarding the entrance, he spoke the cryptic password. The statue slid aside, revealing the short spiral stair up into the office proper, and Harry

mounted with trepidation. Now that he was here, he was beginning to feel he'd been foolish to push Draco away; *someone* had summoned him here purposefully, and it wasn't so he could have a crying jag in private.

But when he stepped into the circular office, Fawkes sweeping past him to alight on the desk, he found it was bright and quiet and very empty. No Death Eaters lying in wait, no fellow students trying to turn him in for a reward. Even the portraits hanging on the walls that had once hosted every headmaster and headmistress to have ever called this office their own stood empty, their inhabitants having either fled to other portraits of their own in far-flung sanctuaries or slipped down to paintings in lower levels of the castle to see what was going on.

Harry glanced hopelessly at what would have, he was certain, been Dumbledore's frame, hanging directly behind the Headmaster's chair. It, too, was empty.

He turned away from it and looked instead down at the Headmaster's desk, atop which next to Fawkes sat the stone Pensieve into which he had once journeyed at Dumbledore's side. Had it only been a year since then? It felt like so much longer—just this *night* felt interminable.

The Pensieve seemed to be waiting for him, filled already with a soup of memory threads swirling silver-white and strange. Oh. Oh yes, that might be nice. Harry thought he'd quite like that right now—to live, for only a brief respite, in someone else's head. To *be* someone else. To shoulder their bad memories and happy thoughts and be shielded from his own. *Coward*, he thought, and he did not care.

With a rushing sensation of reckless abandonment, as though this would assuage his torturing grief, Harry closed his eyes, took a bracing breath, and tipped forward into anonymous recollection.

The Unbreakable Vow

Harry tumbled arse-over-head into the viscous sludge of memories, doing several somersaults before his feet slammed into soft, loamy ground. It took some time for the world to stop spinning, but when it finally did, he found himself in what appeared to be a children's playground, nearly deserted despite being, by the look of the sun, around mid-day. Where this particular playground was situated, he hadn't a clue, but beyond the low-cut treeline he could make out a single, tall smokestack belching black soot into the greying sky. A Muggle someplace, then, he supposed.

A rhythmic creak caught his ear, and he turned on one foot to see a swing set, both seats presently occupied by a pair of girls swinging back and forth in a discombobulated rhythm. They were engaged in quiet conversation with one another and did not seem to notice the skinny, underfed twig of a boy peeping at them from behind a nearby bush.

The girls looked young—perhaps only ten or so; one had mouse-brown hair and a sour, pinched frown, while the other could have easily been a Weasley, given her striking red hair, with bright green eyes shining out of an equally bright face. The spying boy had a hunched look to him, as if he made a habit of trying to make himself seem smaller than he was, and his long, greasy black hair hung in his face. Where the girls wore simple but colourful matching shirts and skirts, the boy wore a mish-mash of what had to be hand-me-downs: jeans pockmarked with rips and tears that looked less fashionable and more accidental, an oversized coat that came down to his knees with sleeves rolled up several times over, and a pair of trainers that might have been white once but were now a dishwater grey-green, scuffed and stained. Harry didn't dare judge; there had been a time he'd been forced into an outfit much the same, through no fault of his own.

It suddenly struck him, though, that he was seeing a memory—a memory, coiling slurry-like in a Pensieve stored in the Headmaster's Office. *To be delivered to Mr. H.J. Potter in the event of the Headmaster's untimely demise.*

This boy was Snape.

He looked of an age with the girls, and he was remarkably unremarkable, with the same pale, drawn look to him he'd worn as a man. His expression as he watched the girls from his secret spot in the bushes, though, was certainly one Harry had never seen on his Potions professor: besotted avarice. He had his dark eyes fixed hawklike on the younger of the pair—the redhead—as she kicked her heels out and drew them back in with equal force, swinging higher and higher despite her friend's—sister's?—admonishments.

“Don't you dare, Lily!” shrieked the mouse-brown girl. She hopped off her swing and stamped her sandalled foot sharply, hands on her hips. “Mummy said you weren't allowed to do it again!”

“She only said I *shouldn't*!” Lily said. “It doesn't mean I *mustn't*!” And as if to prove her point, Lily braced herself, waiting until the swing reached the height of its arc—and then let herself fly free. Quite literally, really: she seemed to soar unnaturally far from the swing set, given the relatively modest speed and height she'd attained, alighting a good twenty feet away with a gentle feather-step, prim on her toes like a ballerina. She held her arms out in triumph, beaming. “Did you see, Tuney? I jumped so far, and I'm totally fine! It's like magic! You try now!”

Lily. ‘Tuney’. This was Harry's mother and aunt.

Snape had known his mother and aunt?

“You're going to get in trouble!” Petunia said with a huff, hunted eyes darting to and fro; she looked like she half-wished they *weren't* alone on the playground—so that she might be able to run to their mother and tell on her sister.

“Not if Mummy doesn't find out,” Lily reasoned. Her launch from the swing had brought her very near the bush behind which Snape was lurking, and she smiled softly as her eye fell on a blossom that had fallen to the ground. She rushed over and cupped the blossom in her hands, turning back to face her sister. “Watch! I tried this yesterday with a butterfly, but I'll bet I can do it with a flower, too.” Petunia kept her distance for a brief

moment, but her curiosity eventually won out, and with her lips twisted into a disapproving moue, she drew closer, peering into Lily's hands. Once she saw she had her audience's captive attention, Lily blew softly on the petals, smiling when, in response, the flower closed back up into a new bud before blossoming again, and then repeated its trick.

"Stop! Stop that right now!" shrieked Petunia, slapping Lily's hands away, as if she had shown Petunia a creepy-crawly of some sort and not a lovely flower.

Lily frowned at her reaction. "What? I wasn't hurting anything—I just thought it was pretty."

"It's not pretty, it's *unnatural*," Petunia spat, recoiling. She stared down at the flower where it lay crumpled on the ground, lips twisting nervously. "...How'd you do it anyway?" she asked, and Harry wondered if he was mistaking the note of longing in her voice. Petunia *hated* magic—jealousy made no sense here. "Is it like Mr. Grissom's card trick? Have you got a mirror up your sleeve—?"

"A *mirror*? Stupid Muggle." A rustle of leaves heralded Snape's timely arrival as he popped out from behind the bush. "Rather obvious how she did it."

Petunia gave a startled shriek, nearly tripping over her own two feet as she rushed back for the apparent safety of the swing set, but Lily held her ground, nose wrinkled and chin jutting out defiantly. She reminded Harry, with some degree of amusement, of Draco that first day on the Hogwarts Express—all juvenile pomposity and stubbornness. She raked Snape with a judging sweep of her eyes, and he seemed to shrink in on himself, leaning on his back foot. Perhaps he had not expected to be met with screams of terror and a sneering pre-teen.

"How's it obvious, then?" she asked him, and he seemed to brighten, suddenly more sure of himself.

He cut a brief glance in the direction of Petunia, who was clutching the chain of one of the swings and glaring at the two of them in wary disapproval. Evidently satisfied they had

their privacy, he leaned forward, and said in a low, soft voice that even Petunia's ears, so attuned to catching gossip, surely couldn't catch: "Magic, of course."

Lily lifted a brow, not bothering to keep her voice down. "There's no such *thing* as magic. It's all just tricks, anyone can do it."

"Can your sister do it?"

This seemed to stir some consideration in Lily, and she bit her lip. "...She could, if she tried."

"I'll bet she couldn't—she's just a Muggle; but you..." His lips quirked up to one side, and his brows lifted as he whispered conspiratorially. "You're a *witch*."

Lily's mouth dropped open, and she snapped with the sort of bald offence only children can muster, "That's *not* a very nice name to call someone!" She then turned on her heel and began marching back toward Petunia, nose in the air. Harry half expected her to toss back *My father will hear about this!*

"Wait—no!" sputtered Snape, flushing darkly, and he raced after Lily in protest. The oversized coat he wore, which he'd been holding closed with one hand, flew open as he ran, revealing a dirty, dingy smock that looked like it hadn't seen a good wash in days; Harry now understood why he'd insisted on wearing the thing when it was well past coat-wearing weather. "I didn't mean it badly!"

Lily joined Petunia behind the swings, clinging to the opposite chain. They stood as a pair, twin frowns of disapproval on their lips, and Harry didn't know how he'd ever mistaken them for anything but blood. He shuddered to imagine his Aunt Petunia's pinch-faced scowls on his mother—a sight he probably would have been treated to at least weekly had she lived to see thirty or more.

"You *are* a witch," Snape said, more earnest now and forcing a toothy smile. "But you being a witch is a good thing! It's a *great* thing, in fact! My mum's one, and I'm one too! I mean, I'm a wizard of course. But we're the same!"

Petunia laughed, her tittering chuckle sounding brittle and cold. “Right! A wizard!” she snorted, bold once more with her sister standing by her side. She sneered at him. “I’ve seen you around—you’re the Snape family’s boy.” She looked to Lily, explaining. “You know, *those* people, the ones who live down Spinner’s End, near the river. Always arguing loud enough to wake the dead.” She then narrowed her eyes at Snape, suspicion thick in her voice. “Have you been *spying* on us?”

“Of course not!” Snape said, baldly lying, and he hunched down a bit lower in his massive coat, as if trying to lose himself in its folds. “What’s to spy on? You’re just a boring old Muggle.”

While Petunia clearly did not know what the word meant, she had sense enough to realise she was being insulted and drew herself up in a close approximation to her older self. “Come on, Lily. Let’s go home; the riff-raff are moving in.” Lily, evidently no more enamoured with Snape than her sister, did not protest, keeping close on her sister’s heels as they marched off the playground—though she did not look away from Snape until they turned around the bend at the entrance.

Once they had gone, Harry was left alone with the young Snape, whose scrawny shoulders were slumped in bitter disappointment. He mouthed an oath to himself that Harry did not catch and kicked a pine cone viciously, sending it into the scrub. “...Stupid. *Stupid.*” Harry reflected on the scene that had just unfolded; clearly this had not been a chance encounter. Snape had engineered it, after a fashion, and it had decidedly not gone how he’d pictured it.

The scene dissolved in a blur of colour and light, quickly reforming before Harry could wonder where they were off to now. The playground was gone, and he now found himself in a stand of trees atop a little hill, at the base of which he could see ran a gentle river, glittering in the late-afternoon sun. It was near enough Harry could hear it babbling, though not so near it drowned out the quiet conversation of the two children sitting cross-legged on the ground at his feet.

It was not the same day—but not so much later, Harry thought. Snape still wore his

dirty smock, though he had removed his coat and spread it on the ground, that they might sit on it.

“...gotta be careful. You have to make sure you keep the Statute of Secrecy—”

“Statue of Secrecy?” Lily asked, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

“*Statute*. Like a rule you’ve got to follow. It’s against the law to show Muggles magic usually. If the Ministry catch you doing magic outside of school, you’ll get letters of warning the first couple of times, but if it’s bad enough, you might even get *expelled*.”

Lily gasped, eyes wide and white. “But—oh *no*! I’ve already done magic outside school! *Loads* of magic! I’m not even *in* school yet, and I’ve already broken the rules!”

Snape waved her off with an easy *psh*. “I wouldn’t worry about that—it’s just wild magic you’ve been doing. All wizarding kids do it, they can’t help it sometimes. You should’ve seen me when I was younger! I accidentally set the drapes on fire this one time, and another time I blew the cat up into a balloon—it nearly floated out the window.” He shrugged. “They wouldn’t do anything to a kid who hasn’t even got their wand yet—it’s only once you’re eleven and they’re training you up that you’ve got to start being more careful.” He gave her a wink. “No more flying leaps off of swings or Herbivicus Charms.”

She favoured him with a gentle smile, then turned her eyes forward, staring into the middle distance. Absently, she picked up a twig at her side, testing its weight, then began swishing it about in graceful arcs. A casual onlooker might have imagined she was playing at conducting an orchestra—but Harry knew she was envisioning all the fantastic spells she would cast when she had a *real* wand in hand. Snape watched her amuse herself, rapt—but after a moment’s cavorting, she caught him staring and quickly dropped the stick, flushing darkly. “...You aren’t having me on, right?”

“Wh-what?” Snape sputtered, thrown by the sudden shift in her demeanour.

She cut him a dubious glance, eyes narrowing in much the same way Petunia’s had. “...

Tuney says you're making it all up to try and impress me. She says there's no such place as 'Hogwarts' and I'm not a witch or magic or anything." Her expression softened, entreating. "...But it's real, right? Cross your heart?"

Snape mimed crossing his heart. "I'll even make an Unbreakable Vow if you like!" Lily laughed, and Snape flushed, her smile infectious. "It's real, I swear it," he continued, dark eyes fixed intently on Lily's. "Your sister only thinks that because she's just a Muggle—but you and me? We're *magic*. We're a witch and a wizard. We'll get our letters, the summer of our eleventh year—you'll see."

"I can't wait..." Lily whispered to herself, marvelling at the prospect.

"You'll be a *brilliant* witch, just watch," Snape assured her, transformed and oddly impressive despite his *unimpressive* appearance. He was brimming with confidence and had a beguiling cocksurety that even Harry wouldn't have been able to resist. If Draco had approached him like this back on the train, things might have panned out quite different.

Lily leaned forward, dropping her voice even further. "They *really* send our acceptance letters by owl? Why on earth would they do that?"

"Tradition, I guess," Snape said with a shrug. "But they might send someone to deliver the news directly, since you're Muggleborn. Not wanting to spook your mum and dad and all. Plus someone will need to explain the dos and don'ts and whatnot."

Lily nodded along, then bit her lip. "...Does it...does it make a difference, being Muggleborn? I don't know anything about what's what, and no one in my family's a witch or a wizard either..."

Snape opened his mouth, a ready response on his lips—but something held him. His eager black eyes took in her pale face, her auburn hair, her skinny arms and stockinged legs. He firmed his lips. "Of course not," he said. "And anyone who says different's full of it."

“Oh, that’s good, then,” Lily said, shoulders slumping in visible relief, and she reached for the twig she’d been playing with earlier, perhaps wondering now what her real wand might look like, and if she should start practising with a dummy one in the meantime.

“Doesn’t matter where you come from—only how much magic you’ve got in you. And you’ve got *loads*, like I said.” Snape’s brows waggled rakishly. “They’ll be fighting for you. Maybe you’ll even get your letter early. Don’t think I won’t be jealous, now.”

Lily grinned at him, then flopped down onto her back. Her red hair splayed out over the leaf litter, and she stared up at the mottled canopy overhead. Harry watched Snape watching Lily, overly conscious of the eager, hungry way he looked upon her, just as he’d done before he’d shown himself to her and Petunia back at the playground. He had it *bad*, and he wasn’t doing a very good job of disguising it. Harry was beginning to get a very bad feeling about the way things had worked out between them, given how absolutely horrible Snape had treated him all these years.

Lily twisted around to glance further up the hill. “...Things all right at your place?” she asked, tone nonchalant—but Snape flinched nonetheless.

“Fine,” he said shortly. And Harry had heard *that* tone before.

“Doesn’t sound like they’re arguing any more.”

“Only probably ‘cause my dad’s left for the pub,” Snape said, bitterly snatching up a fistful of leaves. They crunched in his grip, and he began absently tearing them into confetti. “But they can argue themselves hoarse for all I care. Just a little bit longer, and then I’ll be off to Hogwarts. For now, I just stay well out of my dad’s way, and it’s not so bad. I get to hang out with you, now.”

“Does your dad not like magic? My parents think it’s funny—but I think they’re still mostly convinced it’s fancy tricks.”

“They’ll come around—your family are all right. Aside from maybe your sister.” He did not seem inclined to elaborate on his own father’s feelings concerning his magical

abilities.

Lily picked at the pile of leaf confetti Snape had made. "...Hey, Severus?"

She wasn't looking at him, but Harry saw it all the same: his face had made a funny little tic when Lily said his name. Harry was well acquainted with that tic. "Yeah?"

"...What happens to your soul after the Dementors suck it out?"

"What?!" Snape's brows furrowed in panicked worry, and he leaned in close, searching her features. "Why on earth would you want to know something like *that*?"

"Well, I mean—you said if people break the law, and I've used magic outside of school—"

Snape rolled his eyes and gave her shoulder a gentle shove. "Geez, don't spook me like that! They aren't gonna sic Dementors on a *kid*—unless they were maybe the worst kid who ever lived and blew up the Ministry of Magic or something. I told you, they don't care much about the wild magic untrained witches and wizards get up to—it's a nuisance is all. Everyone does it, like wetting the bed—" He paused here, flushing, as he realised he'd admitted to something he really hadn't wanted to, not in front of Lily. "Anyway, they save the Dementors for the people who do *really* bad stuff, like—like *killing* people, or using an Unforgivable." Lily cocked her head, evidently wondering what an 'Unforgivable' was. "There's a whole prison they built, just for evil wizards—the worst of the worst. It's called 'Azkaban', and the Dementors pretty much run the place. But they're not gonna chuck a little kid in there, especially not one who's so—"

He cut himself off again, practically swallowing his tongue this time, and went back to shredding leaves. Lily, for her part, seemed relieved, allowing herself a ghost of a smile.

Crack

Her head snapped up, along with Snape's, at the sharp sound of a twig snapping nearby—and their gazes landed on Petunia, frozen in fright, one hand on a tree trunk to balance herself.

“Oh, hey Tuney,” Lily said, inclining her head in invitation. “Want to come—”

Snape was already on his feet, though, fists clenched at his sides. “Rich of you to accuse *me* of spying, Muggle,” he snarled. “Keep sticking your nose into other people’s business and someone’s gonna bite it off some day.” He snapped his teeth at her, baring a toothy smile.

Petunia recoiled, hand at her breast and lip trembling. Her eyes jumped back and forth between Lily and Snape, and Harry knew from experience she was scrambling for some harsh, piercing rejoinder. She eventually stumbled upon, “Absolutely *barbaric*, as expected of Spinner’s End shite.” Her lip curled as she raked Snape with a critical eye. “You know that’s what they call you people, right? Because of how you smell—”

Another sharp *CRACK* rent the air: just over Petunia’s head, a branch snapped free, plummeting to the ground. Lily screamed as the branch glanced off Petunia’s shoulder, knocking her to the ground. Petunia burst into tears with a wailing yelp, scrambling back to her feet and beating a hasty retreat through the trees.

“Ohmygosh, *Tuney!*” Lily shrieked, quickly rising to follow—but Petunia had already disappeared into the underbrush. Lily stood there, impotent—then turned on Snape, fierce sparking anger in her eyes. “You did that, didn’t you? You snapped that branch on *purpose*.”

The grin on Snape’s face faded at once, and he lost a bit of colour. “Wh—of course not! It was probably just rotten—”

“Yeah, likely!” Lily sniffed, unconvinced. “I’m not one of those ‘stupid Muggles’ you talk about. I know you used magic to hurt my sister!”

“Wait—I didn’t, I swear I didn’t!” Snape cried, reaching for Lily’s hand, but she slapped him away, and without so much as a backwards glance, she raced off after Petunia.

As on the playground, Harry was once more left alone with Snape, cursing himself for a fool and looking utterly miserable.

Again the scene reformed, and Harry knew exactly where they were now: Platform nine and three-quarters. Snape stood hunched beside him, already dressed in dark school robes, next to an older woman who looked as miserable to be there as he was. “Stand up straight,” she snapped, whipping him sharply across the back with her wand, and Snape winced but reluctantly stood a little taller, expression dour. He had no eyes for the cheery scarlet steam engine or the other students milling about or even the woman Harry suspected was his mother (what had become of his father, then? Down at the pub again?), though. Instead, his whole world seemed to have dwindled down to the family of four who had just come stumbling through the wall separating the platform from the Muggle part of King’s Cross Station.

The two children—girls, one mouse-brown, one redhead—had shuffled a short distance from their parents and seemed to be carrying on a hushed conversation that prompted Harry, unaccountably curious, to move closer to them to listen.

“...don’t be like this, not when I’m about to leave and I won’t see you for *months*. Plus, I told you—” Lily settled a hand on her sister’s shoulder, and Petunia harshly shrugged it off, trying to shoulder past Lily to get back to their parents. But Lily moved to block her. “Listen! As soon as I get there, I’ll go *straight* to Professor Dumbledore and ask him if he can maybe make an exception, just the once! You’re just as capable as me, even if you don’t have magic, and you’re my sister, so—”

“I don’t *want* to go!” Petunia shouted, earning the two of them curious stares from the surrounding students and their families. Snape, for his part, would have been glaring holes straight through Petunia if he’d had the power. Petunia flushed at the attention, ears and nose burning bright red, and dropped her voice to a raspy hiss. “I don’t want to *go* to your stupid freak school, all right? I want to stay here, with all my friends and my room and my belongings and my *normal* life. So you go be a *freak*, since you seem to enjoy it so much.”

Lily did not allow herself to be baited, but her lip was trembling, and when she spoke, there was a soft tremor in her voice. “...I’m not a freak. I can’t help what I can do—Severus says I’m special.”

“Oh, well if *Severus* says so!” Petunia spat, eyes lighting up. She was relishing the reaction, clearly. “What would he know? He’s a freak too! All these people are!” She waved her arm around the platform, and Harry tried to see things through the eyes of a young girl only just realising there was a lot more to the world than she’d been led to believe: Screeching owls and yowling cats and rats that had escaped from their enclosure and were running up and down the platform; new students bidding tearful goodbyes to their parents, who were bestowing heartfelt Cheering Charms upon them; older students greeting friends for the first time after the long summer holiday, showing off the new magic they’d learned. “Good *riddance*. That train can’t take you all away from polite society soon enough, I say!”

And in an instant, all of Lily’s pity and good graces melted away, and a cold, hard stubborn wall slid into place. “Freaks, are we? Then why’d you write the Headmaster, begging to be allowed to go learn to be one yourself?” she asked, keeping her voice low and punching sharply down on each word.

Petunia turned as red as the Hogwarts Express. “I—would *never*—”

“Except you did. I saw he even wrote back—I wouldn’t have expected he’d have the time, what with being the Headmaster of a school of freaks.”

Petunia was sputtering like a tea kettle left too long on the burner. “You had *no* right—that was *private*, and how *dare* you read—!”

“I didn’t *read* it! I just saw you got a response!” Lily protested, and now it was her turn to flush darkly, her shoulders tightening as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I mentioned it to Severus, and he sounded shocked a wizard as powerful and important as Dumbledore had shared correspondence with a Muggle.” She sniffed. “But I suppose that won’t mean anything to you, since you think he’s a freak who ought to be ‘taken away from polite society’.”

Petunia was incensed now; rarely had Harry seen her so furious, and he fought down the ingrained instinct to make himself scarce lest he tempt her wrath. Memory though this was, she was still an imposing figure. “I hope you *blow yourselves up* at that school, you

and your little boyfriend,” she snapped, then spat a final harsh, “*Freak!*” and stormed back to where their parents waited taking in the fantastic scenery...

The scene dissolved again. They were on the Hogwarts Express now, and bright-green countryside flashed by in a blur beyond the windows Harry could see in peeks through each cabin. Snape was rushing down the corridor, school robes fluttering up to reveal he still wore shabby pants with holes in the knees underneath. He was checking each compartment as he passed, eventually coming to a stop outside one to which a pair of young wizards in loud conversation had already laid claim—Snape ignored them, though, in favour of the figure he could see curled up in one of the window seats, gazing distantly out at the countryside whipping by in a blur.

Given the furrowed set of her brow, Lily did not seem pleased with her company, but Harry suspected it was more to do with the fight she’d just had with her sister.

The boys glanced up from their conversation when Snape slid the door to the compartment open, but Snape only stepped over them and made his way to the seat opposite Lily. She kept her face resolutely turned toward the window, but from the angle, Harry could see in her reflection that she’d been crying.

“...Tuney hates me now.”

Snape frowned, clearly having expected Lily to rejoice—as he was—that they were finally bound for Hogwarts, leaving all of their cares behind. “What for?”

“B-because I saw she got that letter from Dumbledore.” She rubbed at her eyes, inhaling sharply.

“Aw, she’s just jealous.”

“Of course she’s jealous—but I’d hoped she’d still be happy for me. That she might miss me...” She clenched her eyes shut, and fresh tears began to form on her eyelashes. “N—now she just *hates* me...”

“So what?” Snape said, and Harry flinched; even he knew that hadn’t been the right

thing to say, and he was pants at talking to girls.

As expected, Lily's head snapped up, and though she was flushed with emotion, her eyes blazed with anger. Harry was pretty sure he'd inherited *that* from her, too. "So, she's my *sister*! You wouldn't get it, you don't have any brothers or sisters!"

"Don't need a brother or sister to know she's just a stupid M—" Snape started, but Lily cut him off with one finger raised in warning.

"*Stop* calling her that," she said, voice soft with threat, and she rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. "I don't like it when you rag on her just because she's not like us."

"You complain about her all the time, though," Snape said, sour and morose as he slumped back into his seat. "Whatever, enough about her! Look where you are! You're on the *Hogwarts Express*, just like I said we'd be! On our way to the best seven years of our lives! We're gonna learn *so* much magic, your head's gonna pop!"

He didn't bother suppressing the excitement and exhilaration in his voice, and despite herself, Lily gave him a grudging half-smile. "I suppose."

"I can't wait 'til we get Sorted," he said, sensing he was finally managing to drag her out of her doldrums with the easy distraction of their upcoming schooling. "Of course I'll be in Slytherin, but you'd better be there too! Or there's just no point in going at all!"

"*Slytherin?*" came a new voice, thick with derision and contempt—and both Lily and Snape turned as one to see that they'd drawn the attention of the other boys in the compartment.

Harry's focus thus far had been on Snape and Lily, not a thought given to the other students sharing the cabin, but now that he took a good look, he realised he was staring straight into the bespectacled eyes of the boy who would become his father not ten years from this moment. James was slight, with a shock of black hair on his head just like Snape—but there the resemblance stopped. Where Snape looked underfed and dingy, a mongrel in human clothing, James had an air of having been thoroughly doted upon in

his youth. Harry wondered if he'd ever complained about the number of birthday gifts his parents had provided.

“There’s folks who actually *want* to be Sorted Slytherin?” James asked, turning his question to the boy lounging on the seat opposite him. “Merlin, if I got chucked into Slytherin, I think I’d take a long walk off the pier into the Great Lake on Day One. Just let the Giant Squid have at me.”

His companion, a handsome boy with thick, dark hair that nearly reached his shoulders, had his head propped up in one elbow leaned against the side of the cabin; he didn’t seem to find the situation half as amusing as James. “I might just, if that happens. My whole *family’s* been in Slytherin so far,” he said, sounding not at all pleased at the prospect of joining their number. Harry realised with a jolt that this was Sirius, before he’d escaped the ‘curse’ of the Black family and found his way to the warmth and friendship of Gryffindor.

James made a show of clutching at his chest dramatically. “Well, it was nice knowing you before the snake pit swallowed you up.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, shrugging. “Don’t count me out just yet. Maybe I’ll buck tradition. Bit of pre-teenage rebellion never hurt anyone, right?” He jerked his chin at James. “Assuming the Hat doesn’t toss you into Slytherin just for a lark, where are you hoping to be Sorted?”

“Where else?” James said, miming swipes with an invisible sword at some imagined enemy or another. “*“Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!”* All my family’s been Sorted there, and I’m *just* fine continuing that tradition.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are.” It was now Snape’s turn to make a derogatory remark on another’s choice of House, and James’s head whipped around, glaring daggers.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I should think it’s obvious; if you can’t piece it together, then clearly Gryffindor *is* the

place for you.”

“Yeah?” Sirius said, rising to his feet. “Want we should show you where *your* place is?” James looked ready to join him, wand already in hand—when Lily leapt to her feet, taking Snape by the wrist and pulling him along after her.

“Come on, Severus,” she said in a tone Harry was sure he’d heard on Hermione. “Let’s find another compartment. This one’s overrun with riff-raff.” Snape had absolutely no objection to their leaving, staring down in wonder at Lily’s hand holding on to his.

“*Come on, Severus,*” James and Sirius mocked; Snape showed them two fingers before slamming the compartment door behind them, though not quickly enough he missed the sing-song, “See ya, Snivellus!” that followed them into the corridor.

The last thing Harry saw as the scene dissolved once more was James sneering face, and he tamped down the very real urge to clock him good. God, what a *dick*.

...Harry had inherited a bit of that, too, he supposed.

When he turned around, he found he a familiar scene sprawling before him; candles hung suspended in the air beneath the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, and hundreds of curious faces looked upon the collection of First-years as they lined up before the rickety stool holding the Sorting Hat, waiting to learn their House assignments.

Professor McGonagall held up a roll of parchment, calling out in her rich brogue, “Evans, Lily!”

Harry, standing behind Snape, watched his mother carefully pick her way forward through the crowd to climb onto the stool. She looked terrified, and Harry tried to send happy thoughts her way, hoping to somehow transverse time and space to lift her spirits.

McGonagall favoured her with a thin smile before placing the Sorting Hat on Lily’s head, and Harry recalled his own experience in her place. Hat Stalls were rare, but Lily had been around Snape long enough, he figured, that maybe there would be a bit of mental tug-of-war, like there had with Harry—

“*Gryffindor!*” the Hat burst out, barely a second after it had settled onto her crown. Wherever Harry had gotten his Slytherin tendencies, it clearly hadn’t been from his mother.

“*Fuck...*” Snape cursed under his breath, fists forming at his side, and Harry felt a tiny stab of pity for him; he’d been so excited to come to Hogwarts, and things weren’t starting out in his favour at all. McGonagall removed the hat from Lily’s head, extending her hand towards the Gryffindor tables, and Lily slipped off the stool, looking suddenly very relieved as she made her way over to her new Housemates, where she was welcomed with raucous cheers and grinning faces. Before she let herself be folded into the throng of red and gold, she threw a glance back at Snape, giving him a sad little smile.

Sirius, who had already been Sorted, waved Lily over and budged up to make room for her on the empty bench. She smiled to graciously accept the offer—then met his eyes and seemed to realise he was the same boy who’d nearly clocked her friend back on the train. With a firmly upturned nose and arms crossed over her chest, she moved with purpose further down the bench, leaving a wide berth between them.

The Sorting continued, and Harry watched with rapt attention as Remus and James and of course Pettigrew joined Lily and Sirius at the Gryffindor tables. Lily gave James the same glaring stinkeye she’d given Sirius, but she was warm and cordial with Remus and Pettigrew, who both looked nearly as nervous to be there as she was.

Snape was among the final few to be Sorted, and he straightened proudly when McGonagall at last called him to the stool.

He closed his eyes as McGonagall placed the hat on his head, and Harry thought he might be mouthing something to himself—perhaps he was bargaining with the thing. Snape looked just desperate enough to force himself into Gryffindor if it meant he might be able to spend more time around Lily.

Whatever he’d said, the result was the same: “*Slytherin!*”

His fate being set, Snape sighed, allowed the Hat to be removed from his head, and

shuffled off to the other side of the Hall, opposite the Gryffindor tables. The Slytherins welcomed him with polite cheers and pats on the back. Harry thought for a wild moment it was Draco standing there, clapping Snape firmly on the shoulder, with a Prefect badge gleaming on his chest—but no, it would have been Lucius Malfoy, wouldn't it?

The Hall faded into fog and memory as the scene shifted again, and Harry could see it was some time later now. Lily and Snape, looking quite comfortable in their school robes, were walking through the castle's main courtyard, and the arching branches of the trees overhead were bare, the ground littered with dead leaves. The tension in their bodies and the hushed but rapid fire of their conversation said they were arguing, and Harry broke into a jog to catch up, hoping to overhear them. As he drew close, he realised that it wasn't just a few months later but a few *years*; they were both taller and had lost much of the soft roundness of youth. Lily looked even more fetching, while Snape seemed to have grown darker and more dour, and his lips twisted into a sour snarl as he spoke to her.

"...don't see what's the problem!" Snape was saying, brows knit and entreaty thick in his voice. "I thought we were friends! *Best* friends, even!"

Lily shook her head sharply, her red hair flying up around her. "We *are*—and friends are honest with each other. Doubly so for best ones! You've been hanging around some really shady sorts lately, and I'm sorry, but—" She sighed as they came to a pillar, turning around to lean her back against it. In her arms were clutched a bundle of library books—the topmost one was, he was most amused to see, *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. Curious to think they were carrying it around with them still. What had she thought, he wondered, of the Antipodean Opaleye? "I can't keep quiet about it any longer. I *won't*. I know they're your Housemates, but Avery and Mulciber are just *horrible*. Not just mean or rude but *cruel*—and they seem to enjoy it. Especially Mulciber—I mean, did you see what he tried to do to Mary Macdonald the other day? All she did was bump his shoulder coming 'round a corner!"

Snape brushed her off, rubbing at the back of his neck uncomfortably. "That—he didn't mean anything by it, it was just a prank. A joke that fell flat, that's all."

“It wasn’t a *joke*, Sev. It was Dark Magic. I read about the Jinx he used—in a library book I had to get special permission from Professor McGonagall to read because it was in the *Restricted Section*.” Snape wasn’t meeting her eye now, and she ducked her head to force it. “So if you’re honestly telling me you think it was *funny*—”

“Didn’t say it was *funny*, just said he meant it as a joke. And if it’s unfunny jokes we’re discussing, then what about what Potter and Black pulled with Malfoy the other day?”

Lily regarded him warily. “What’s *Potter* got to do with anything? Do I look like I’m defending him to you? This isn’t about some randos in my House—it’s about the friends *you* keep.”

“Well—the point is there’s people in *both* our Houses who aren’t as amazing and wonderful as they’d have everyone believe.”

Lily made no arguments on this point, only dropped her voice. “Then we can have a conversation about Potter and Black when *they* start using Dark magic too, but until then—”

“They’re only not using it because they’re too stupid to know what they’re missing! Magic’s magic, there’s no ‘light’ or ‘dark’! It’s all in how you use it—”

“Oh, like how Avery and Mulciber use it?”

“Potter would use it too, if he ever bothered to crack open a book and learn spells beyond *Lumos* and *Tarantallegra*!”

Lily was breathing harshly through her nose. “...James Potter is a lot of things, but I doubt he’s the type of person to use that sort of *horrible* magic.”

“Oh, of course he wouldn’t! Not if it was something cooked up by a *Slytherin*, but slap a ‘Godric Gryffindor-approved’ label on it, and he’ll try just about anything! Half the people at this school thinks he hangs the moon, and the other half are too cowardly to stand up and say otherwise, but I know—and *you* should too—that he’s nothing but a stuck-up, pompous *arsehole* who gets his rocks off at others’ expense. If you can’t see

that there's nothing standing between him and the likes of Avery and Mulciber but a bit of gold and red—”

“You think Potter would *carve an M* into someone's forehead, just for bumping into him.”

“Of course not,” Snape said simply. “It'd be a P—though maybe that's giving him too much credit for knowing how to spell his own name.”

Lily was visibly growing weary of the conversation, shifting the books in her arms to the crook of an elbow as she massaged a temple. “...I'm so tired of having this conversation, Severus...”

“...Same here.” Snape shrugged his shoulders. “I just wish you'd stop acting like *my* friends are the scum of the earth when the people in *your* House are nearly as bad.”

“‘Nearly’ and ‘in my House’ being the operative words. I want nothing to do with *my* House degenerates—while you set cockroaches on fire in the boys' lavatory with *yours*.”

“Wha—who told you—” Snape flushed, and Lily rolled her eyes.

“I mean it, Sev. The time's coming soon where you're gonna have to decide what sort of people you want to be associated with. What sort of company you want to keep, knowing the kind of person it'll make you into. You can't help who you've been Sorted with—but you can certainly help how you orientate yourself with regards to them. Until you're ready to stop apologising for Avery and Mulciber, then...” She bit her lip. “...Maybe we shouldn't hang out.”

Snape's already pale face went absolutely sheet white, and he was immediately contrite. “I—I'm sorry, I know they're arseholes, I really do—it's just, they're the only ones who keep Potter and his lackeys in line sometimes! He'd be even *more* horrible if they weren't around to get him to stand down, and it just pisses me off so much that people—” Harry heard the unspoken *that you*. “—Don't realise how he's just as bad as they are, simply because he hasn't had opportunity to show it.”

“I’m not going to judge someone for the horrible things they *might* do, Sev; that’s ridiculous.”

Snape grew desperate, licking his lips feverishly. “I know, and that’s one of the wonderful things about you—I only don’t want to see you made a fool of! I mean, he fancies you, you know! James Potter fancies you!” His shoulders hunched, and he looked absolutely miserable, as if by saying the words aloud he had willed the situation into existence. “So if you thought—if you forgot—and he comes off like this big—with his Quidditch trophies—but he’s just so—cocky—infuriating—arsehole—” By the end of his rant, he was just choking out insults, his bitterness rendering him nigh incoherent.

Lily watched him impassively, arms crossed over her chest. Then she sighed loudly, defeated. “I hardly need *you* telling me James Potter has his head shoved so far up his own arse he can lick his own tonsils. I have to share a Common Room with him; believe me, *I know*.” She let her head fall back against the pillar and stared up at the crooked, raking claws of the naked branches arching over them. “But that’s all he is: a spoilt priggish bully who never quite managed to mature beyond First Year. Mulciber and Avery...the stuff they think’s amusing isn’t just ‘not funny’—it’s *evil*, Sev. And I don’t understand how you can see the things they do, the sorts of wizards they’re trying to become, and *want* to be associated with them.”

Lily was doing a very good job of trying to keep Snape on the straight and narrow, but Harry doubted he was listening to her earnest entreaties he find new companions; the moment she’d said the words ‘James’ and ‘head up his own arse’ in the same sentence, his whole demeanour had brightened, and as he offered to walk her to her next class, there was an unmistakable spring in his step.

When the scene shifted again, Harry realised with a sharp twist in his gut that he knew when and where this memory had placed him. He wondered if Snape had included this memory *on purpose*—a reminder of what Harry would find if he poked his nose where it didn’t belong, if he meddled in affairs that were none of his concern. *Be careful what you wish for.*

He watched, with no enjoyment, as Snape left the Great Hall after sitting his O.W.L. in Defence Against the Dark Arts, saw him wander away from the castle for a breath of fresh air and unwittingly into the eyeline of James, Sirius, Remus, and Pettigrew. Harry crossed his arms and shifted his gaze to the side, trying to see if he perhaps recognised any of the other students, because he neither wanted nor needed to see this memory again. He did not need to see James hoist Snape into the air and deliver barbed taunts; he had witnessed it once, and it gave him as little pleasure now as it had back then.

Lily shortly joined the group, flying to Snape's defence and enduring James's smarmy overtures—but the damage had already been done. There was Snape, humiliated and furious as he spat that most unforgivable word: *Mudblood*. The look on Lily's face suggested she might have sooner excused an *actual* Unforgivable.

The scene dissolved into one in which Snape was already well into a fervent apology.

"I'm sorry, truly!"

"I highly doubt that."

"I am! Honest! I'll swear it in an Unbreakable Vow!"

Lily rolled her eyes, decidedly not amused. "I've heard that before." She wore a dressing gown, and the lamps in their sconces flickered low and soft. It was very late at night, Harry suspected. Lily leaned against the portrait of the Fat Lady at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Her hair was drawn back in a loose plait, and she had her arms folded, keeping well back from Snape. "I came out here to tell you to go *back* to your dormitory. Filch is gonna find you, and then you'll get detention for *another* week."

"He won't—he's off handling Peeves's latest handiwork in the Greenhouses. There was manure involved. Anyway, you have to let me explain myself; I never meant to call you Mud—" He bit his tongue at Lily's sharp look. "...That word. *Honest*. You know me, you know I'd *never* talk that way about you."

"Except you did. You *did* talk that way about me." Her tone was cold, and every word

that left her lips seemed to pierce Snape right through the heart. “I can’t do this anymore, Severus. I can’t—I’m tired of making excuses for you, of doing the same thing for you that you do for your precious little Death Eater friends—”

“We aren’t! Not one of us is marked!”

“But you want to be. The whole lot of you can’t *wait* to join You-Know-Who!”

Snape opened his mouth to protest, ears burning bright red—but nothing came, and Lily scoffed.

“...I think this is it for us, Severus. You’ve chosen your way, and I’ve chosen mine.”

Snape’s face drained of colour, and he reached to grab her nightgown, tugging on one of the sleeves. “Wait—wait, Lily, *please*, I swear I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t meant to call me *Mudblood*?” she spat. “Why not? It’s what I am. It’s what you call *everyone* with Muggle parentage. Like you aren’t half-Muggle yourself.”

“I’m not—*half-Muggle*!” Snape protested hotly. “I’m a wizard!”

“And I’m a witch! You told me once that it *didn’t matter*.” She shook her head. “And like a fool, I believed you meant it. Or maybe you still do, and you’re just lying to yourself. I’m not sure which is more pathetic.”

Snape’s feeble protests devolved into monosyllabic pleas of *wait no stop don’t*, but Lily was no longer in a listening mood, and turning her back on him both literally and figuratively, she climbed back through the portrait hole, slamming it in Snape’s face...

When the scene reformed, after what felt like quite some time, Harry could see that several years had passed since Lily had broken off her friendship with Snape. Once the shifting shapes and colours finally settled, his surroundings solidifying once more, Harry found he was standing on a lonely hilltop in the cold, biting darkness of late autumn. The wind whistled mournfully over the whipping heather—and Snape snapped into view with a loud *CRACK*, no longer in school robes and brandishing his wand before him with a

white-knuckled grip.

He whirled around, wide, white eyes scanning the gloom, as if he feared attack at any moment. Snape was more terrified now than Harry thought he had ever seen him before—more so even than when he had been staring down the Killing Curse unleashed from Voldemort’s wand. This would be, given the state of Snape’s robes and the lack of lines in his face, in the midst of the first phase of the war against Voldemort, and Harry could feel Snape’s tension as keenly as if it had been his own. His heart thudded heavy and hard in his chest, and though he knew he was in no real danger, this being but a memory, he found himself glancing around in the yawning darkness all the same, wondering what Snape might be waiting for, whose arrival he might be dreading—

In a flash, the black of night was split by a jagged jet of light slamming into Snape’s chest. The shock knocked Harry squarely onto his arse, and there was a ringing in his ears. He thought for one panicked heartbeat that lightning had struck them—but when the blinding flash faded, he found Snape cowering on his knees, arms raised to ward off attack. His wand was gone, now, having been flung somewhere into the encroaching darkness.

“Please—please, don’t kill me!” he yowled.

“Rest assured, had I intended to do so, you would be quite dead now.”

Dumbledore had either been hiding beneath a Disillusionment Charm or had managed to Apparate soundlessly onto the lonely little hill. The wind had whipped up with his arrival, and his long robes billowed around him as he stood staring down his crooked nose at the low state to which Snape had been brought. The only light for miles emanated from the tip of his wand, casting dark shadows over Dumbledore’s deeply lined face.

“Why have you summoned me here, Severus? A message from Lord Voldemort, is it?”

“No! He knows nothing of our meeting, I swear it!” With a wary, searching glance at Dumbledore, as if seeking permission, Snape climbed back to his feet. With his shoulders hunched and head hung low, he seemed so very small and defeated. The wind was

whipping at his scraggly black hair, sending it flying around his face like some greasy Medusa. “I asked to meet with you...to deliver a warning—no, a request!” Dumbledore raised his wand, and Snape held a hand out in a feeble attempt to ward off whatever Curse was surely incoming. “Please, hear me out!”

But Dumbledore only gave a gentle flick of his wand, and a hush so still one could have heard a fly sneeze fall around them. By the light of Dumbledore’s wand, Harry could still make out the waving stalks of heather and detritus swirling around them, but within their intimate little bubble, all was quiet. “Well, then. I wonder what request a Death Eater would *dare* make of me,” Dumbledore said, smiling. Harry had often found the Headmaster’s smiles enigmatic, frustrating, doting, patronising—but now... This smile hid knives.

Snape drew himself up, firming his jaw. “...You’ve heard the prophecy. Trelawney’s prediction.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said with a solemn nod. “And you have as well, it seems.” Snape did not bother denying it. “I suppose you carried Sybyll’s words to Lord Voldemort’s ears straight away, then?”

Snape’s expression wrenched into something terrible, bitter desperation thick in his voice. “He thinks she spoke of Lily Evans!”

“I believe she goes by *Potter* now,” Dumbledore reminded none too gently. “And why on earth should he think that? As I heard it, the prophecy made no mention of a *woman*—only a child. A boy, born near at the tail end of the seventh month—”

“Oh, don’t play stupid!” Snape snapped, before quickly recalling himself and recoiling into his miserable husk. “You know he thinks it means *her son*.”

“Does he, now?” Dumbledore reached one hand into his pocket and pulled out a yellow candy, carefully unwrapping it.

“He’s going to kill her! He’s going to hunt down the boy and kill him, and she’ll die in the

doing, parent *and* child—”

“But are you not one of his favoured few?” He popped the sweet into his mouth, sucking boredly on it. “Surely you need but impress upon him how very much she means to you, and your most generous and understanding master will spare her. Why should she die, after all, when it is the child the prophecy spoke of?” Dumbledore cocked his head.

Snape slumped. “I...I *have* asked him—”

Dumbledore spat, and the half-eaten sweet went flying into the darkness. “You disgust me,” he growled, blue eyes flashing and lip curling into a cruel sneer. Never had he heard Dumbledore take such a tone—and Snape hadn’t either, it seemed, for he recoiled in shame. “Take the child but spare the mother? Let a good man and an innocent boy perish, so long as *you* get what you want?”

Snape seemed to recover, throwing his shoulders back and locking eyes with Dumbledore. “You cannot possibly have more contempt for me than I have for myself! So spare me the lecture, as I’m no longer your student, and just *hide them*. Hide them all if you must! Just—” He clenched his eyes shut. “Just keep her safe, *please*.”

Dumbledore regarded him for a long moment, the wind still whipping wildly in the night around them. “...And what are you prepared to give me in return, Severus?”

Snape’s head snapped up, eyes wide—and Harry was gaping right alongside him. *In return?* This was hardly a time for *bargaining*—and he expected Snape to protest as such, but instead he licked his lips, swallowed, and said, “...Anything.”

“Anything, hm?”

“Anything!”

Dumbledore chuckled, more than a little derisively. “Going to try and make an Unbreakable Vow with *me* as well?”

But Snape drew himself up, head held high and defiant. “If you asked it of me, I would.

My Vow, for her life.”

Dumbledore regarded him for a long moment, staring at him in that curious way that made you feel like he could see right through you to your very soul—and perhaps he could, for he had been, as Harry recalled, an accomplished Legilimens. Whatever he found in his search of Snape’s mind, if he’d attempted it, did not seem to concern him, though, for he sighed and waved Snape away. “That will not be necessary. Fetch your wand then, Severus. For you will have work to do.”

The hilltop faded, and when the world swirled back into view, Harry found himself standing in the Headmaster’s Office again. He thought he might have reached the end of the Pensieve memories—but he quickly realised that no, this was still some far-flung past, when Dumbledore stepped into view, hands clasped behind his back as he stared down, grim and drawn, at the man slumped forward in a chair before his desk, weeping openly.

Snape’s thin shoulders shook with ragged sobs, and when he lifted his head, he had deep tear tracks lining his face and snot leaking from his nose. He looked like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery since leaving that wild, windswept hilltop.

“You promised...you *promised* you would keep her safe... You would keep *all* of them safe...” he hissed in accusation. “I *begged* you...” Dumbledore was unmoved by his ferocity, only bowing his head.

“I made no such promise,” Dumbledore said, calm as a quiet pool. “Nor did they wish for my protection—as you well know, both Lily and James were ever so headstrong, Gryffindors through and through.” He sighed. “They placed their trust in the wrong person, and it was their undoing in the end.”

Snape’s breathing came in fits, and he gave a mournful moan, burying his face in his hands.

“...But a piece of her yet lives,” Dumbledore continued. “Her boy—he survived his brush with Lord Voldemort, protected by his mother’s enduring, undying love.” If he thought

this might cheer Snape, though, he was very wrong; Snape only gave a tiny jerk of his head, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “He lives, despite Voldemort’s very best efforts. The final, sole remaining piece of her in this world. He has his father’s hair and smile—but his eyes, his eyes are hers. I believe you would remember the shape and colour of Lily Potter’s...Lily Evans’s eyes, no?”

“Don’t you *dare* use her memory against me!” Snape snarled, head snapping up. His face was mottled with red, and the skin around his eyes and nose had gone puffy. His expression twisted. “Can you not grant me *one moment’s peace*. I trusted you would save her... It is the only thing I’ve had to cling to these many months...”

“And now you feel remorse, Severus? Regretting a few of your decisions made along the way, are we?”

“You cannot imagine...” Snape moaned, miserable—but Harry rather thought Dumbledore *could* imagine. He could probably imagine very well, in fact, the self-loathing that came with the knowledge that your actions had directly led to the death of a loved one. Snape’s breath caught in his throat. “I’m dying... I feel it—”

“You aren’t dying,” Dumbledore spat out, irritation sharp on his tongue. “You may wish to—but you mustn’t, for what good would you be to anyone then?” His tone was cold and unforgiving. If he had been attempting to comfort Snape at all, he was well through with it now. “If ever you loved that woman—if you *truly* loved her, if she was not merely a prize you coveted—then as I see it, you have but one choice. One way forward. *One* thing you can possibly do to atone for the choices you made that brought you here.”

Snape’s breathing was still laboured, punctuated by hiccoughs and sniffles, and Harry wondered if Dumbledore’s words had even reached his ears—but at length, he lifted his gaze to meet Dumbledore’s, dark brows furrowed. Perhaps he hoped he might be allowed to die after all. “...Wh-what? What could I possibly...”

“You told me that you would do *anything*. Anything at all to save her—”

“She’s *dead!*” Snape snarled. “Must you twist the knife?!”

“Not all of her. A piece of her lives yet—help me protect the boy. ”

Snape’s brows furrowed, and he shook his head in disbelief. “That—he doesn’t *need* protection! He needs his *mother*—but she’s gone now, as you insist on reminding me, and so is the Dark Lord!”

“Gone, for now—but he will return. Of this I am *absolute* in my confidence, and I know if you search your heart, you will find the same dark suspicions within yourself as well. You know he was a cunning, calculating one—and if anyone could find a way to live beyond death...he would. So he *will* rise again, and when he does, he will come looking for Harry Potter. Voldemort will come for him—he will try to kill him again and again and *again* until he succeeds. Lily gave her life to save her child; do everything in your power to see her sacrifice was not in vain.”

There was a long pause, and Snape seemed to slowly regain control of his faculties, mastering his breathing and brushing a hand over his dishevelled robes. “...I could not protect her. What makes you think I will be able to protect *him*?”

“The fact that, should he perish, then Lily will *truly* be gone from your life forever. So long as he has breath, then her love lives on. I think you were fond of the love she shared with others, no? Perhaps that will be incentive enough.” Dumbledore let his hands drop to his sides. “It is what she would have wanted you to do.”

Snape grimaced, leaping from the chair and pacing angrily in the small space between Dumbledore’s desk and the door. “So I am to be satisfied watching Potter’s whelp grow, likely into the same man his father was? You will not even allow me the dignity of choosing to join her, should I wish it?”

“Your life is your own to do with as you please, Severus,” Dumbledore said. “Waste it, if you like—you’ve certainly done a masterful job of it so far. But if you would rather do some good with your life, to ensure that dear Lily’s last, great sacrifice was not wasted, her greatest love not lost, then I would welcome your assistance, for I fear it will be a monumental task.”

Snape's lips twisted, and at last he bit out, "...Fine. *Fine*, but you must never—" He turned on Dumbledore, waving a finger in his face threateningly. "*Never* tell him, Dumbledore! You must swear that he will never know!" He bit his lip, swallowing thickly. "I could not bear...especially *Potter's* get—I want your word!"

Dumbledore was not cowed. "My word—that I shall never reveal that you were, in the end, a good man? Or as good as is likely quite possible for you?" He sighed, removing his half-moon spectacles and massaging the bridge of his nose. "You Slytherins and your pride..."

The office began to dissolve—but then seemed to rethink itself, reforming instantly. Snape looked older now, even more lined and drawn than before, and he was once again pacing a trench into the floor of Dumbledore's office, his steps dogged by a manic energy.

"—would not *believe* the cheek he has shown! Eleven years old and twice as arrogant as his father, breaking rules *left* and *right*, arrogant, impertinent—"

"You've said 'arrogant' twice, Severus," Dumbledore said, settled back in his Headmaster's chair and lost in a copy of *Transfiguration Today*.

"Because it bears repeating!"

"Now, now—I think you're being harsh on the boy. As the other staff report it, he seems a modest—" Snape scoffed. "Likeable—" Snape rolled his eyes. "And reasonably talented child, not unlike his mother, from what I recall. Having spoken with him a bit myself, I find him quite engaging."

Snape released a sharp, derisive laugh. "Engaging! And he is *wholly* his father's son—that hair, those glasses, his—"

"Eyes?" Dumbledore offered. He dog-eared one of the pages and reached for a quill and parchment. "Now, if you can manage to tear yourself away from scrawling Harry Potter's many foibles into your diary, keep an eye on Quirrell, won't you? He's been acting rather stranger than usual."

Snape only grunted in response, and then the office disappeared—replaced this time by close, encroaching darkness. Snape and Dumbledore stood in the Entrance Hall, backlit by lamps flickering in their sconces. Through the open doors of the Great Hall could be heard the fading strains of music winding down, heralding the close of the Yule Ball. The final stragglers who'd held out for the last dance stumbled past them, breathless and giddy as they made their way to bed. It was strange to think that, right at this moment, Harry himself was probably crawling into his four-poster up in Gryffindor Tower, puzzling over the clue for the Second Task.

Dumbledore waited until they were alone, drawing the darkness around them and bidding the lamps to lie low. "Show me," he said.

Snape cast a furtive glance around them, just to double-check, then rolled up his sleeve, exposing his Dark Mark. "It grows darker by the day—Karkaroff's as well."

"And how is our friend holding up?"

"Not well. You know of course of the deal he made with the Ministry after the Dark Lord's fall, in exchange for leniency with his sentencing. He fears retribution."

"As well he should," Dumbledore said, taking a measured sip of the flute of champagne he held in one hand. "Will he flee?"

"...If it burns. Not before then—but..."

"Durmstrang may need to start looking for a Headmaster, in which case."

Snape started as the doors to the Entrance Hall were thrown open—but it was only Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies, both looking pleased and pleasantly flushed. Harry knew that look well now, and he felt his own cheeks heat. Neither of them seemed to notice Snape and Dumbledore, and Roger led Fleur up the steps in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.

"And what of you?" Dumbledore asked, and Snape whipped back around, one brow arched in question. "Are you also tempted to flee?"

“What good would fleeing do? No.” He shook his head. “I am many things—but no coward.”

“No, indeed you are not,” Dumbledore agreed. “You are a braver man by far than I quite expected, if we are being honest. It’s times like this I think we Sort too soon...”

Snape looked stricken, and Harry knew in that moment he was imagining some impossible *what if*, where he’d been Sorted Gryffindor, never fallen in with Avery or Mulciber or Voldemort, and married a bright, bold Muggleborn witch. Harry felt an unwelcome pang of sympathy; those sorts of *what ifs* were siren-sweet and just as dangerous to dwell upon.

When the scene shifted, they’d returned to the Headmaster’s office. Beyond the frosted window, Harry could see it was night, again—and something was very wrong.

Dumbledore sat slumped behind his desk. His eyelids fluttered, and his breath seemed rapid—he was only barely conscious. Curled before him was his right hand, but it was mangled and blackened, as if he’d charred it in fire or dipped it into a vat of particularly caustic acid. With a jolt, Harry realised that this memory was not so very long in the past—only perhaps early Sixth Year. Snape knelt beside the chair, his wand pointed at the wrist of Dumbledore’s ruined hand as he muttered a string of unintelligible invocations in rapidfire under his breath. A bright band, like a red-hot brand, sealed around the wrist as a bracelet before quickly fading, and Snape leapt to his feet, reaching for a goblet standing on the desk and tipping its contents down Dumbledore’s throat. After a moment or two, Dumbledore’s eyelids flew open, and he was instantly awake and alert.

“Good, you aren’t dead,” Snape said, flat and cold. “Though you would have well deserved it. Touching a ring you ought to have *well* known was Cursed? My First-years aren’t half as foolish as you’ve been this night!”

Harry followed Snape’s gaze to the ring that lay, unassuming, in the folds of a handkerchief on Dumbledore’s desk. A nasty crack marred the stone set in its centre—delivered, Harry suspected, by the sword of Gryffindor, which lay on the floor where Dumbledore had probably dropped it after he’d used it to destroy the Horcrux imbued in

the ring. Now that he knew to look for it, Harry could clearly see the sign of the Hallows carved into the stone's face.

"You do your First-years a discredit," Dumbledore said, grimacing as he shifted in his seat. "I was indeed...a fool. I have learned nothing, in all my years."

"On that we can be agreed!" Snape sneered. "What could *possess* you—?"

Dumbledore chuckled softly. "Ah. Possession in itself, Severus."

Snape did not seem to understand the cryptic response, and he charged into a furious lecture. "Have you the *faintest* notion of how close you came to death just now—how close you still *are*? I'm astounded you made it back here at all, given the power in the Curse that lay on that ring, but I fear it will dog you. I've managed to contain it for now, binding it to the bone instead of leaving it to wreak havoc on the flesh, but..."

"Have you, then?" Dumbledore lifted his hand, now a gnarled, blackened mess, and inspected it with an academic air, as if it were an exhibit in a museum and not part of his own body, being devoured by some vicious curse right before his very eyes. "Truly fantastic work, Severus—more than I could have possibly hoped for."

"*Fantastic—?!*" Snape sputtered. "Have you no notion of what's to become of you?"

"Oh, I have a notion—how long would you say I have, then? Before the Curse overcomes your very best efforts, that is."

He spoke with a disaffected air, seemingly untroubled by his dire state, and could as easily have been asking after the weather as his lifespan.

Snape seemed just as thrown by Dumbledore's demeanour, but he rallied after a beat of hesitation. "...You would have to ask whoever placed the Curse. As it is, I can only hazard a guess—but that guess would be at most a year. The binding I placed will not hold; the seal will degrade over time, after which the Curse will quickly spread, strengthened by its delay."

Snape's dire predictions did not seem to faze Dumbledore, and he smiled, nodding. He seemed thoroughly untroubled by the countdown that had been placed on his life, and Harry wondered what he knew that they did not, for how could one possibly greet their own mortality with such good humour and stay sane?

"...I am reminded not for the first time how fortunate I am to have you, Severus. I do not think I have often expressed my appreciation for your particular skills...or your discretion." It was odd, hearing such warm words from Dumbledore after having heard him speak so coldly to Snape on the eve of Lily's murder.

Snape grimaced, as if the compliment physically pained him to hear. "I could have done *more* if you hadn't waited so long to summon me—at least I could have bound the Curse sooner, bought you more time!" He jerked his chin at the sword lying forgotten on the cold flagstones beneath their feet. "Or did you think the services of someone well-versed in the Dark Arts were unnecessary? You ought to know that simply damaging a Cursed object won't dispel the magic! You would need to wholly destroy it." He scoffed. "What a risk you took, all for some ancient bauble!"

"A bauble, yes..." Dumbledore shrugged. "My thoughts were preoccupied, I suppose; I failed to appropriately consider the danger."

"And now you'll pay for it with your life," Snape bit out, trying for cool contempt and failing marvellously. Harry had never imagined Snape might be so impetuous and enslaved by his emotions.

Dumbledore sighed, running a hand down his beard to smooth it out. "Yes, I imagine so. But I suppose this will solve at least one of our looming difficulties." When Snape only arched his brow in confusion, Dumbledore continued, "Naturally I refer to Voldemort's plan to remove me from the picture by having poor Draco Malfoy murder me."

Harry's attention sharpened to the keen edge of a knife, and his throat went dry. This was Sixth Year—right. Which meant Draco was this very moment worrying himself sick, wondering how he was expected to carry out his task. Had he already decided to devote himself to his Animagework studies? Harry tried to recall when he had first suspected

that Draco was up to something, more furtive in his actions than usual, but came up empty.

Snape seemed to want to discuss the issue of Dumbledore's Cursed hand further, but the smooth manner in which Dumbledore had changed the subject suggested it had been put to bed for the time being. Snape sat down in the chair across from Dumbledore's desk, looking not unlike a naughty student about to receive a gentle dressing down from the Headmaster.

"...Describing it as a 'plan' is being generous indeed," Snape said, his scowl cutting deep lines into his face. "Trust that the Dark Lord is under no illusions that Draco might actually *succeed* where so many others—himself included—have failed."

"Is he not, now? Young Draco has proven quite resourceful in his classes, I would not put it past him."

Snape scoffed. "The task is merely punishment, as Lucius has recently fallen hard out of favour among the Death Eaters. You know, of course, that the Dark Lord prefers slow torture to a quick resolution, and forcing the boy's parents to watch as he struggles futilely and is ultimately forced to pay for his failure in flesh will be a just punishment indeed, as he sees it."

"Ah. So we are a pair, then, Draco and I—our days immutably numbered." Dumbledore kept his tone even, his feelings on the matter indeterminable. "But Lord Voldemort could have set him on any *number* of tasks with equal likelihood of failure—could have even, perhaps with greater chance of success, instructed him to murder Harry Potter. Yet he chose to pit the boy against *me*... Why is that, I wonder?" Snape shifted uncomfortably, and Dumbledore gave a soft *Ah* of understanding. "He will see me removed from the picture one way or another, then? He intends to force your hand."

There was a short pause. "...I believe that is the Dark Lord's plan, yes."

"You believe it is?"

“He has not asked me to do as such—but there was rather a spectacle made of Draco’s initiation, of his being set this task as his first mission. If one of his Death Eaters meets failure, the Dark Lord expects the next nearest at hand to step in.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Which is to say he no longer cares that you be seen as a *former* Death Eater.” He sighed. “He expects the school to fall into his grasp soon, then.” Snape said nothing, but that seemed to be all the response needed.

Dumbledore drew his wand out from his sleeve, and Harry felt his heart trip a beat—this was the Elder Wand, as it had been, its power banked for so many years. Dumbledore seemed to study it, tracing the fine woodwork that had gone into the hilt with his bright blue eyes. “Well, I believe we must accept that eventuality, for as you have said, I am not long for this world. Should the worst come to pass and Hogwarts indeed inherit a new Headmaster of Voldemort’s choosing...” He slid his gaze back over to Snape. “May I have your word that you will do *all* within your power to ensure no irreparable harm comes to the students sheltering within these walls? That you will protect them, to the full extent of your ability?”

Snape did not bother to hide his discomfort, his nod stiff and stilted.

“...A comfort to hear. Fret not, I won’t ask for an Unbreakable Vow, though I know you enjoy doling those out.” He gave a satisfied huff, then began wrapping the remains of the ring back up in the handkerchief upon which it sat, taking particular care this time not to touch the casing. “I think, then, your top priority for now should be to shadow young Draco, see what he’s up to. For all his youthful bravado, he does not strike me as a murdering fiend, so I dare say he is more than a little terrified of the burden he has just been saddled with.”

“Rash, frightened children can be more dangerous than adults in the same position,” Snape grunted.

“Indeed. Reach out to him—be a shoulder to lean on, an ear for his worries, a tongue for advice. You’re his Head of House—”

“A title that will mean nothing to him, as we are now ‘fellow’ Death Eaters. He no longer sees me as anything approaching a mentor—I am a competitor for the Dark Lord’s favour. More so now than ever before, as he suspects I meddled to bring about Lucius’s downfall myself in order to usurp his position.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Teenagers and their wild emotions. We were all slave to them once—and some of us still are. All the same, do try. Who knows what innocents may find themselves unwitting victims of the schemes Draco might concoct in his desperation.” Harry wanted to laugh so hard he could cry; Dumbledore didn’t know the *half* of it. “Though I fear there is only one way—one *certain* way—to spare Draco from Voldemort’s wrath.”

Snape’s gaze narrowed, and he said, carefully and almost accusing. “...Surely you don’t mean to *let* him kill you.”

Dumbledore was quiet for a distressingly long moment, and Harry felt his stomach bottom out. The thought had merely niggled at the frayed edges of his mind before, ever since Aberforth’s ramblings, but now it hit him with the force of a cannonball. Dumbledore would have taken steps to be sure that Voldemort did not wind up with the Elder Wand...would have hidden it away as best he could.

To what degree had Dumbledore actually planned his death? Had he orchestrated his final moments so deftly? Had he meant for Draco to kill him, for the Elder Wand to fall into his hands? To find its way, somehow, back to Harry?

He had known he was dying—and he must have at least suspected that Voldemort might seek out the Elder Wand, especially after the events in the graveyard at Little Hangleton. Knowing how tenacious and desperate Voldemort was, Dumbledore could not have imagined Voldemort wouldn’t, eventually, track down the Wand to his care. Dumbledore was a man of preparation, after all; he left nothing to chance.

“No, far from it,” he said at length, smiling at Snape. “*You* must kill me.”

Snape stared at him for a long moment, unblinking. “Oh. *Must* I, then?”

Dumbledore met his gaze, unflinching. “You must. *You* must. For I would entrust this task to no other.”

“And you don’t feel that’s asking *rather* a lot of me?”

“I thought you might appreciate the chance to finally strike me down; I’m sure the urge must have come upon you once or twice over the years.”

Snape did not seem amused—but after a deep, bracing breath, he brushed his hair back from his face and tidied his robes. Then, he reached into his sleeve and drew out his wand, raising it as a conductor’s baton. “Well, can we make it quick, then? The elves are serving blackberry cobbler for dessert tonight, and I’d rather not miss it.”

“Oh goodness, I wouldn’t dream of coming between you and fresh pastry,” Dumbledore chuckled. “No, I shall not call upon your services tonight, Severus. There are a final few matters that yet require my attention before I shuffle off this mortal coil.”

“And when can I expect to do the honours, then?” Snape sneered. “As you say, it’s an urge I’ve been struggling with for quite some time, so I’m eager to get to it.”

“Well, given the evening’s events...” He made to flex his dead, black hand—but it only spasmed feebly. “I suppose we can say within the next year.”

“Recall that was a *liberal* estimation,” Snape said.

“Indeed—perhaps I will try to arrange it around your birthday, so you may celebrate in style.”

“I fair tingle with anticipation,” Snape said dryly—and then, after a bit, added with a peevish tone, “...You’re taking this awfully well. If the idea bothers you so very little, why not just save us all the trouble and let Draco *do it*?”

“Why do you *want* him to do it?”

“I don’t!”

“And neither do I—hence, our little accord,” Dumbledore said with a soft, sad smile that did not reach his eyes. “The act of murder leaves a taint on the soul—a mark, indelible and immutable. Draco Malfoy is many things—but he is not beyond hope, beyond help. He may yet be able to be convinced that he can be courageous, and good. That he deserves to be saved.”

“And *I* don’t deserve to be saved?” Snape snarled. “What of *my* soul, and the marks upon it?”

“Of what is to become of your soul, only you can say. I spoke of murder—but this? This will not be murder between the two of us, Severus—it will be a favour. One I can ask of no other. Death is coming for me, this you now know—and it will be swift and merciless, like that Bludger knocking out poor Galvin Gudgeon in the Cannons’ match against the Falcons last week. Such a pity, too; they were on a hot streak until that happened—they hadn’t lost by triple digits all season!” He sighed. “I confess, a part of me pushes for this route because I know that of all the ends Lord Voldemort could prepare for me, the one at the tip of your wand will be the quickest and most painless. I am, after all, only human—and though you might not believe it of me, afraid of dying.”

“...You’re right, I don’t believe it of you.”

“Only because you do not yet realise the difference between fearing *dying*...and fearing *death*.”

Snape fidgeted, clearly discomfited. “I could...I could prepare you a tincture, or...”

Dumbledore shook his head. “An acceptable suggestion, but I fear I will be busy with tying up loose ends until my final moments. You may need to resort to the Killing Curse for expedience—and if it will soothe the soul you so worry over, know that you have my forgiveness in advance.”

Snape did not seem satisfied with this plan, but Dumbledore was giving him no choice, and at last he gave a curt nod.

Dumbledore settled back in his chair, releasing a relieved huff. "...Thank you, Severus. You have been a worthwhile confidant all these years."

When the scene shifted again, Harry found himself outside, with the moon rising over the castle, and Snape and Dumbledore were together again. They were walking the castle grounds, quite alone, and any onlooker might have assumed the men were merely out for a postprandial walkabout.

"Am I ever to learn what it is you're up to with Potter, all these evenings spent with him? He's nodded off in class nearly every day this week, and I *know* it isn't because he's been up late studying—his essays prove as such." His tone was short and sharp, suggesting he had been holding his tongue on the matter for quite some time.

"Worried I'm grooming him for your position?" Snape gave a wide-eyed start; clearly he had *not* been thinking that—but he definitely was now. "Fret not, Severus, you've well earned the Defence Against the Dark Arts post, and I do not intend to lose you quite yet." He began stroking his beard, head turned towards the heavens. "As I have mentioned before, I have matters that need attending to. Matters involving Harry—he must be made aware of certain information, guided on how he is to proceed after my passing."

"Information...guided..." Snape frowned, as if the words left a sour taste in his mouth. "You have entrusted him with a job, then. One you evidently cannot trust *me* to complete."

"You complained so much about the first job I tasked you with, I did not think you would agree to a second." Dumbledore gave Snape a pointed look. "Do not play stupid, Severus—you and I both know that your skills and the boy's lie in very different aspects. It is not a question of trust—it is a question of who Harry Potter is...and what he needs to do."

"Yet you cannot even *tell* me what it is he needs to do? You're trusting a *sixteen-year-old* to handle this on his own? He can't even manage his own study schedule! Granger has to tutor him in half his subjects!"

Dumbledore actually chuckled at this. “True enough, on most accounts I would hesitate to ask a boy in the throes of puberty to focus on something of such import—but this is not most accounts, and Harry Potter is the only one who can do what must be done. Besides...” Dumbledore bent to sniff at a bush of night honeysuckle, blooming in the moonlight. “I would rather certain secrets not stew about inside a head that spends so much time in Lord Voldemort’s orbit.”

“A place that head sits because *you so ordered it*—not because I find the Dark Lord’s company just that charming!” Snape hissed, incensed. “Shall I tell him to fuck off the next time I see him, then? Would *that* put me back in your good graces?”

“Calm yourself, Severus—didn’t Poppy prescribe something for your blood pressure only last month? No, I would have you in no other position, for you handle your job as our ‘liaison’ with Lord Voldemort exceptionally well. Know that I do not underestimate the danger in which you place yourself for me, for you know as well as I what the consequences would be were he to grow wise to the subterfuge you’ve engaged in while under his command. You are a cunning snake, my friend.”

Snape did not appear to appreciate the compliment. “...Yet not so cunning you think I wouldn’t unwittingly spill your secrets to the Dark Lord. If you don’t trust *my* Occlumency skills, how on earth can you trust Potter’s? He’s got a direct connection to the Dark Lord’s very mind—a connection that has been used to *great* effect in the past!”

“*And* a connection that Voldemort now fears,” Dumbledore reminded. “Theirs is not merely a connection, an opportunity to peek into one another’s mind—it is a *sharing* of minds, and Voldemort has now gotten a taste of what it truly means for one such as him to dare tread within the mental boundaries of the likes of Harry Potter.”

“Because he’s *just so special*, is that it?” Snape sneered, rolling his eyes.

“For Voldemort, yes. Theirs is a unique relationship—do not let your low opinion of the boy cloud your understanding that the link he and Voldemort share is anything short of unparalleled in our history. Voldemort has learned that any attempts to possess Harry Potter, to guide him through direct mental connection will bring upon him *such* pain as

he has never experienced. I very much doubt he will attempt to confront Harry in that manner again.”

“Pain—?” Snape prompted.

Dumbledore nodded. “Lord Voldemort’s soul is...fractured. Marked, in such a way as I made mention of once before. In its state, even the briefest, most grazing brush against Harry’s is pure agony. Like a tongue on frozen steel, like bare flesh in dragonflame—”

“Who asked about *souls*?” Snape sniffed derisively. “We were speaking of their *minds*!”

“And in their case, those are one and the same—at least in certain matters. Though the connection between them transcends our petty understanding of these abstract concepts, I fear.” Dumbledore glanced around; their stroll had brought them down a meandering path, close to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They were very much alone, with only Hagrid’s hut visible in the distance, a stream of smoke curling from the chimney and the windows glowing with a warm, merry orange light. “Now, once you have killed me, you must—”

Snape scoffed. “*This* is what you dragged me out here for? More soliloquising on the ‘small service’ you somehow still expect of me, when I can’t even count myself in your inner circle?” Even in the wan light cast by the moon hanging overhead, Harry could tell he was flushed red in anger, neck and cheeks dark with rage. “No—I think maybe I’ve changed my mind. I wouldn’t want to misstep, after all, and spoil your many-cogged plans. Perhaps I shall let Draco fail or succeed on his own terms, come what may!”

“I did not extract that Unbreakable Vow from you, in the end, but you did give me your word, Severus,” Dumbledore reminded him evenly. “And now that you bring up the matter of Mr. Malfoy, I thought you agreed to keep a close eye on him? I notice he has been tucking himself away in the Library for much of his free time of late, no more of these feeble attempts on my life.”

“Please. He will find nothing outside of the Restricted Section that could possibly undo you that any other student couldn’t also piece together.”

“Perhaps, but all the same. See to it that he uses any knowledge he is seeking wisely, lest it come back to bite him. He does not want to kill me, I think, but neither does he wish for he or his parents to perish in my place either. I worry his efforts to seek out a third option may do more harm than good.”

Snape looked like he wanted to disagree, just to be contrary, but he said nothing, only ground his teeth in mute anger, and Dumbledore sighed.

“Impetuous and impatient as you are, it’s a wonder you never found your way to Gryffindor.” He shook his head. “Very well—as you say, you are indeed a skilled Occlumens, and if I am to ask so much of you, you deserve to ask a few favours of your own from me. Come to my office—after curfew, for I will be meeting with Harry again this evening. If it’s an explanation you’re after...then an explanation you shall receive.”

The next memory, Harry assumed, took place later that evening, for they were back in Dumbledore’s office once more. The thickly glazed windows showed that it was well into the evening, and Fawkes sat silent on his perch, his head tucked under one wing.

Snape was seated in a chair before the Headmaster’s desk while Dumbledore walked around him, speaking rapidly with an eager rasp in his voice. “Timing is *everything*, you must understand. If but one piece of the puzzle should fall into place at the wrong time, then all will be lost. This has been building for years—since before you were even born, Severus, and certainly before Harry was. Yet he must not know what it is he’s meant to do—what he *must* do—until the final moment. Until everything else has fallen into place and paved the path forward: a path he and he alone can walk. Otherwise...” Dumbledore paused, and a fleeting expression of grief flashed over his features. “Otherwise I fear he will not have the strength to do what must be done.” He shook his head. “He must have his back against the wall—must see that there is no choice, for there *will be* no other choice.”

“You speak of choices and needs—two very different things! And what is he meant to do? You still refuse to tell me!”

“That, I am afraid, I cannot say—no, do not protest,” he said, even as Snape opened his

mouth. “On this, I will remain firm. I hesitated even to reveal the full breadth of my plans to Harry himself, for as you have reminded me so often, he is a boy, a *child*, and a Gryffindor at that. Few would accuse him of being even-keeled, I think. Still, these are desperate times...” He rounded on Snape. “But hear me: there will come a time after I am gone—”

“We have *not* finished our discussion on that point, let it be known.”

“Confound you, do not interrupt me! For once, sit there and *listen*. You must hear this and store it away, deep within your mind, where your master cannot sniff it out. After I have been dispatched, Voldemort may feel empowered and flex his magical might for a time—but should all go as planned, should Harry succeed at the task I have set him... there will come a point where Voldemort will draw in on himself and seem to fear—to fear for the life of his snake.”

Snape seemed cowed by the outburst and blinked up at Dumbledore, brows furrowed. “His snake—Nagini?”

“The very same. You must watch closely for this moment—he may try to hide it, to seem unruffled and unbothered, even to his inner circle. But when that moment comes, when he no longer sends Nagini out to work her wiles on the world at large, when he instead keeps her close, perhaps on his person or even under magical protection...then, I think, it will be time to tell Harry.”

“Tell him...” Snape swallowed, then asked, attention rapt, “Tell him what?” and Harry felt his mouth go dry in anticipation.

Dumbledore took a deep breath, drew himself up, and closed his eyes.

“Tell him that fifteen years ago, when Lord Voldemort set upon his family’s home with murder in his heart—when Lily threw herself between them, acting as any mother would to shield her child from certain death—the protection imbued by her abiding love caused the Killing Curse to rebound, where it fractured Voldemort’s soul and sent a tiny fragment spinning away...to latch itself onto the next nearest living creature it found:

Harry Potter himself.

“That part of Lord Voldemort lives still as a parasite on Harry Potter’s soul—it is this fragment that is responsible for the curious connection between the two. But equally so, it is also this fragment that will, when all else fails, tether Voldemort to life, or at least a facsimile thereof—for as long as that tiny fragment remains lodged within Harry, protected by his mother’s love and his own burgeoning magical abilities...the Dark Lord cannot be killed.”

Neither can live while the other survives.

The prophecy’s forbidding proclamation rang like a death knell in Harry’s ears, drowning out Dumbledore’s and Snape’s conversation to a muffled hum. Something clawed at his throat, constricting, and he felt as if he were sinking into a deep pool, down so far not even light could penetrate. Their voices echoed strangely.

“But then...you mean to say that the boy...” Snape spoke slowly, carefully, making very sure he understood Dumbledore’s meaning rightly. “...The *boy* must die?”

“Not simply die—he must be *killed*. And Voldemort himself must do it—mark that well, Severus, for *that* is essential. He cannot be picked off by a stray Death Eater—he must face Voldemort and let come what may.”

Another long silence passed; Harry wanted to sit down, but he was only part of this memory, not really here at all. Perhaps it might be all right if he sicked up instead, then.

“But...you told me—” Snape shook his head, expression tightening. “You asked me to protect him! You told me it was for her! For *Lily!*”

“For her—and for all of us. He needed protecting—because he needed to grow. To mature. To become the man he would need to be—that *we* would need him to be—in order to complete this one, final task.” Dumbledore’s head hung low, eyes still closed. “I had hoped, in some far corner of my mind, that these efforts might help him to cut out this parasitic influence himself. That his innate *goodness*, the love he had inherited from

his parents and from those he came to call friends and family, might somehow counterbalance this infectious entity, but it has only grown stronger. I have wondered at times if he suspects its presence. If he can feel it, this unnatural connection that so many of us have downplayed over the years...” Dumbledore sighed, opening his eyes to stare fixedly at the richly patterned plush carpet beneath their feet. “This is what must be. There is, unfortunately, no other path forward, and if Harry is every bit the man I believe he is, he will see this. He will understand the gravity of the situation, the import of his sacrifice, and arrange matters so that his death might be the final blow needed to strike down Voldemort once and for all.”

Snape looked rightly horrified, his face a vivid visage of all the emotion that Harry could not, in his shock, process just now. “You...you mean to say...that you’ve kept him alive all this time, all these *years*—told me it was a service to Lily’s memory, mentored him and doted on him—not because he deserved it, not because you cared for him, but only so that he could die *at the right moment*? Instead of perishing at the tip of the Dark Lord’s wand before *you* found it convenient?”

“Many a war has been ended thanks to a death occurring at just the right moment. This will be no different.”

“And you are so *very* sure that Harry Potter will blithely go along with this? Won’t be horrified and turn tail—flee when he learns to what ends you have used him?” He did not say *to what ends you have used me*, but Harry heard it all the same—and Dumbledore did as well.

“...It is a blessing, after a fashion, to know the hour and time of one’s death. To have some degree of control over it, instead of being caught unawares. I do not doubt Harry will be shocked to learn what his fate must be—or the hand I had in arranging it—but he will see that the horrors faced by one boy, the weight of a single life, pale in comparison to the horrors faced by the whole of the wizarding world should Voldemort not be stopped in his tracks. This will be...for the greater good.”

Snape drew himself up, lips curling in bald contempt. “...Never before have I felt a

kinship with Potter, but now I do: You have used me, as surely as you have used him.”

“I have not used you; you offered yourself to me.”

“For a lie! For a promise you never intended to keep! A pretty story to keep me doing your bidding! I meant to leave the Dark Lord’s side after what he did to her—but you told me no, to stay and spy for you, to do everything I could, good and terrible and in between, all to keep Lily Evans’s—” He winced, biting his tongue. “Lily *Potter’s* son safe! And now you mean to say you’ve simply been raising him as *sacrifice*—?!”

“Why Severus...” Dumbledore said; it was difficult to tell if his tone was amused or serious. “Is it possible you’ve finally warmed to Harry in your time together? And here I thought only *he* had matured over the years.”

“Warmed to him? You think this is *for him*? Have you learned *nothing* of me?” Snape spat, face gone white with fury, and he whipped out his wand. “*Expecto patronum!*”

There was a brilliant flash—and then, from the tip of his wand, leapt a shining, silver doe.

The same doe that had guided Harry and Draco through those dark, snowy woods. The same doe Harry had felt such a connection with, like she knew him, like she cared for him.

She landed on the floor on delicate hooves, galloped across the office—disturbing Fawkes’s slumber—and then leapt through the frosted window pane, gone as quickly as she’d come.

There was a long beat of silence, and Harry could see Snape pulling himself back together. His hands were shaking—with fury, or with some other unnamed emotion, it was unclear. “...For one so well-versed on the strength of a mother’s love for a child, you know *nothing* of the insidious, terrible power of a love that never could have been. It consumes—eating away at you, with no outlet, until without direction, you find yourself lost in might-have-beens.”

Dumbledore stared mutely at the shimmering, silvery glow the doe had left behind—

then turned back to Snape, blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "...My dear friend—truly? After all this time?" he asked, voice breaking.

"Always," said Snape. "It is why they call it an Unbreakable Vow."

Harry was thrown mercilessly into a new memory.

They were in the Headmaster's office again, though this time Snape was the one standing behind the desk, speaking to the newly hung portrait of Dumbledore on the wall.

"The Order will doubtless be planning to remove Harry from his aunt and uncle's home soon," Dumbledore was saying. "Much ado will be made about maintaining the secrecy of the plan, with decoy dates thrown about I'm sure, but you must make certain Voldemort knows precisely when Harry means to make his escape, for we cannot have him doubting your reliability, here so close to the end of our journey. It will be a delicate balance you must strike, Severus: leading the Death Eaters to Harry's doorstep while also ensuring he escapes their clutches unscathed."

"I thought the boy was *meant* to die at the Dark Lord's hand," Snape said, glowering.

"He is—but not just yet. To that end, we will need to ensure his safety as he makes his escape. You will plant the idea of decoys within the Order—that, I think, will be our best approach, as you have informed me that the Ministry has blocked the fireplace from being connected to the Floo Network and Apparition in and out is being closely tracked. A squad of Polyjuiced Harrys departing in different directions for different safehouses is certain to confound Voldemort's plans for a swift dispensation of the last lingering impediment to his rise."

"A suggestion is easy enough to make—but I doubt the Order will bite if it comes from me. My loyalties have always been questioned—and I suspect I am even less well trusted with my impending...appointment."

"Hogwarts has had worse Headmasters..." Dumbledore said with a wry smile. "But there

is truth to what you say. I can't imagine a suggestion from him will sound any sweeter to the ears of the Order members, but try Confounding Fletcher. He's an easy mark, at least. And remember, if you cannot avoid being forced to take part in the raid yourself—"

"—Then I must act convincingly, yes, yes. You have urged me so a *dozen* times already. I know the part I'm meant to play, Dumbledore. I've gotten rather good at it over the years."

"Indeed, you have. But all the same—your remaining in Voldemort's inner circle is more important now than ever before. Be brutal if you must to curry his favour—else the Carrows will be allowed to run rampant, with our students their helpless victims."

Harry was jerked away again—and now he was flying far above the sprawl of glittering lights below, streaking through the night alongside Snape on a broomstick. Spellfire flashed around them in a violent rainbow, and ahead of Snape, he could see fleeing at breakneck speed Remus and a Harry Potter who was actually George Weasley.

A hooded figure cut Snape off—a fellow Death Eater, raising his wand and taking aim square at Remus's back to George-Harry's wide-eyed horror.

"*Sectumsempra!*" Snape shouted, wand whipping through the air—

—but a sudden buffet of wind sent the spell flying wildly, and instead of neatly slicing off the Death Eater's wand hand, it nicked George-Harry's ear, maiming him terribly—

Then, they were in a very familiar room: Sirius's old bedroom, Harry recognised. They were at Grimmauld Place, and Snape was on his knees, back arched into a curve that shook with quiet sobs. An old piece of parchment was clutched in his hands, and fat tears splattered against the text as he read Lily's letter to her friend. The second page carried only a few words:

could ever have been in love with Gellert Grindelwald. The very idea! Sounds like she's been taking tea with ol' Ogden too often, if you catch my meaning!

Lots of love,

Lily

Snape gripped the letter so hard, Harry feared it might rip—but he quickly recovered his faculties, and with a ragged sob, he folded the page bearing Lily’s signature—and her love—and tucked it into his breast pocket. He regarded the picture that had been included with the letter—Baby Harry zooming about on his new broom to his parents’ mingled terror and delight—with a final sneer before tossing it back onto the floor, where it slipped under the chest of drawers for Harry to stumble upon later.

Another dizzying shift, and Snape stood again in the Headmaster’s study, a half-filled tumbler of what looked to be Firewhisky in one hand. He raised it in mock toast to Dumbledore’s portrait. “Draco is travelling with them now, Phineas tells me. They seem to have convinced themselves just because they have stuffed him into a bag that he cannot overhear their tedious arguing.” He shook his head and took a draw. “Stupid children.”

“Is he, then?” Dumbledore said mildly, and Snape narrowed his eyes.

“You saw this coming. You *knew*—”

“I knew nothing. Nothing, beyond that Harry Potter is a good man, whatever you may think. Better than all of us.”

Snape stared him down. “Draco killed you; he managed it, in the end.”

“Without even trying! Now there is a tale worthy of a Rita Skeeter tome.”

“You’re awfully blasé about your own mortality.”

“A luxury granted to me only because I am merely a portrait. You need not mope so, Severus—would you rather the boy were still incarcerated by the Ministry? I recall it was you who put him there in the first place.”

“For his own safety! He was a danger to himself as much as to others, and—” He cut himself off, fixing Dumbledore with a pointed look. “And you know why the Dark Lord

could not be allowed to know he yet lived.”

Dumbledore’s smile thinned. “Were you never tempted yourself, Severus? After my confession...”

“Never. You know well that was not the Hallow I most longed for.” Snape drained the last of his drink, bringing his glass down on the desk so hard it nearly shattered. “... Potter will be a terrible influence on him. He’ll get Draco killed trying to carry out whatever mad task this is you’ve set him.”

“Yes, it is an unfortunate possibility. Though Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger run the same risk.”

“But they *chose* Potter!”

“As did Draco.” Dumbledore cocked his head to the side, lifting one brow. “They are not your students any longer, Severus. It is time to allow them to make their own decisions—foolish or otherwise.”

“Foolish,” Snape muttered, tracing the lip of his glass. “Definitely foolish.”

The scene shifted again, and now Snape was standing before a glassed curio housing several delicate silver instruments. Into one of the empty portrait frames hanging on the wall bustled a red-faced, wheezing Phineas Nigellus. “Headmaster! The children you spoke of! They are camping now, in the Forest of Dean. The Mudblood—”

“You will *not* use that word in my presence,” Snape snarled, looking like he might just set Phineas Nigellus’s portrait aflame with his mind.

“Yes, quite—the *Granger* girl, then! You were right—her focus finally slipped, and she neglected to cast a Speak-No-Evil spell when casting her wards this time!”

“The Forest of Dean, then?” Snape said, and Phineas Nigellus nodded firmly. Snape shifted his attention to another portrait: Dumbledore was nearly leaning wholly out of his, eyes alight with excitement. “Ten points from Gryffindor for letting their guard

down.”

“A lapse in memory that shall be to their ultimate benefit,” Dumbledore said, beckoning Snape closer. “Come, you must act quickly—retrieve the sword. Remember, it must be claimed in a moment of great need and at personal risk.” Snape rolled his eyes, and Harry thought he caught him mutter *Gryffindors* under his breath. “And most importantly, Harry *must not* learn the identity of his mysterious benefactor. Should Voldemort peer into Harry’s mind, even brief as he dares, he might learn of your treachery—”

“I *know*,” Snape said, sounding like a snotty Fourth-year. He stalked over to Dumbledore’s portrait and gripped the frame, tugging to reveal a hidden cavity within the wall. From it, Snape withdrew what Harry knew to be the true sword of Gryffindor. He replaced the portrait as it had been, studying the sword in his hand. “And you still won’t tell me why it is so important Potter have this thing?” He tossed the sword haphazardly onto the desk, where it fell with a heavy *CLANG*, and swung a travelling cloak over his shoulders.

“I think not,” said Dumbledore dismissively. “It is enough that Harry will know what to do with it—so make haste and get it into his hands as quickly as possible. Take care not to be spotted by Mr. Weasley or Miss Granger, either, for I doubt you will have endeared yourself to them any further after that display with George Weasley.”

“No good deed goes unpunished, it would seem,” Snape grumbled, and with that, he left the room, boots clapping on the stone staircase.

The image faded, and Harry felt himself being vaulted back up and out of the Pensieve, abruptly finding himself back in exactly the same room the final memory had left him. Fawkes was gone.

The door to the Headmaster’s office lay slightly ajar, and Harry stared at it, heartbeat thudding in his ears and imagining he could still hear Snape’s boots on the stair, as if he’d only just left a moment ago.

Cadmus Peverell's Gift

So there it was. The truth Harry had so longed to hear. Well, he'd gotten it good, hadn't he? He could hear Snape jeering from beyond the grave *That ought to teach you, insolent brat*. As if it wouldn't still be real had Harry not stood there and watched it all unfold, heard everything from Dumbledore's own lips.

He had never been meant to survive.

What had Snape called him? A sacrifice? Yeah, that about summed it up. The whole of his Hogwarts education—even those miserable years with the Dursleys thinking he was Harry, just Harry. Every lesson, every meal, every breath he'd taken had been borrowed time.

His job had not been to find and destroy the Horcruxes—not really. Not *his* job. Anyone could have managed that, with the right information and a healthy dose of luck (which could, of course, easily be brewed). No, all he'd ever been meant to do was die at just the right moment, without fuss, without muss, and if he managed to snip a few threads yet tethering Voldemort to life along the way, then all the better. Clean, neat, tidy. He wasn't even meant to *try* and defend himself. *Our saviour*, Draco had mocked so often, and it was true.

Death had seemed an inevitability for a while now, granted, but...there had always been a chance. A sliver of hope that maybe somehow, some way...

He snorted softly to himself, vision blurring, as he recalled the locket taunting Draco with cruel possibilities that stood no chance of coming to pass.

No, clearly Harry had just been living in ignorant bliss. More lies, meant to keep him docile, his focus shunted away from the cold purpose to which his life would be put. Blinders so he didn't realise he was simply plodding along, down that long, lonely path

straight to the killing floor. He was not the Chosen One. He was no one's hero. He was just fodder. A pig raised for slaughter, never meant to have friends or lovers or family except to keep him in line, to ensure he didn't run screaming when it was finally time.

Time to die.

A wave of bone-chilling terror suddenly washed over him, and he swayed unsteadily on his feet, gripping the edge of the desk to keep from sinking to his knees. His heart pounded in a drumming rhythm, picking up pace as it quickened with fear, and his throat was suddenly parched, mouth dry with panic.

Death.

Would it hurt to die? He'd faced what he'd thought was unimaginable pain before, pain enough to make him wish he *was* dead, but he'd always come out the other side in the end, hadn't he? So many times he'd thought *this is it, this is the end*, and then he'd escaped by the skin of his teeth. He'd never really stopped and thought about the thing itself. Or, well, he'd thought about it—but always as something that happened to other people. Something that happened to those Harry came to care for, to love, only to have them ripped away. It was a terrible thing—but only because it made him so lonely.

And now he would be the one having to make others feel lonely.

He could flee. He could do as Aberforth had suggested and run. Voldemort could try and find him, but under the protection of the Cloak, there was little chance of his succeeding, not if Harry didn't want him to. So why didn't he? Why was he still standing here, letting his panicked thoughts overrun him? He could feel his heart pumping furiously, flooding his veins with adrenaline—he wanted to run. He wanted to be *miles* away from here, safe and alive with everyone he cared about in a similar state.

But he wouldn't. He wouldn't make any false moves, simply because he'd been bred this way—raised to know his place for ten years, then to do what he knew was right thenceforth. He'd called himself a member of Dumbledore's Army, worn the title like a shiny Prefect's badge, and he really *was*. A good little soldier, exactly what Dumbledore

had built him into—becoming the kind of man who would not turn tail in the face of death but would gladly lay his life down to serve the greater good.

He was, it seemed, a Gryffindor through and through, dithering under the Sorting Hat notwithstanding. Stupid and brave to the bitter end.

No, there would be no running, no hiding, only walking head high and shoulders back towards that inevitable close.

Except his head felt very heavy, and his shoulders trembled, and he did not know if he could make his legs take him where he needed to go. It was as if his body knew what his mind meant for it to do and was fighting back with every ounce of self-preservation coded into his being.

It was, he thought, the anticipation that was the worst thing. Dumbledore had said in Snape's memory that it was a blessing to know when you were about to die—but Harry could not disagree more. How he *longed*, now, to have perished in his escape from Privet Drive—if only his spells had failed, or he'd crashed into the ground at breakneck speed clinging to Hagrid. If only he could have died like Hedwig—so quickly he wouldn't have known it had happened. Or better yet, to have gone out blazing defending a loved one from attack, taking a spell for Ron or Hermione—or letting Greyback cut him down when he'd lashed out against Draco.

He supposed this was meant to be such a sacrifice, one life for many, but it didn't feel the same to Harry, not really. This was too slow, too drawn-out—plodding, inexorably, to meet his own destruction. It would require an entirely different kind of bravery—or stupidity—than he'd learned in Gryffindor.

He felt his fingers trembling slightly and made an effort to control them, though no one was here to see him; the portraits on the walls were still empty.

With great effort, he forced his legs to lock under him and support his weight. He stood up straight and felt the blood rush to his head, but he held himself together with several deep inhalations. The air somehow smelled different now—clearer, cleaner. He gulped it

down and closed his eyes. How had he never properly *appreciated* that he was alive at all? He'd agonised over test scores and House rivalries and loathsome relatives and never considered how absolutely amazing it was he was even alive to experience those things. God, what he wouldn't give for Draco to stamp on his face just once more, to feel his nose crunch and the rush of iron-rich blood flooding his mouth. To feel the pain—to *be able* to feel the pain.

There had always been a bigger plan, Harry had known; it had frustrated him to no end he hadn't been allowed to see it, to see even a *fraction* of it really, but he'd assumed, naïvely, that Dumbledore had done everything he possibly could to see that Harry made it out alive, and so it would simply be up to him to do his own part and, well, *not die*.

Now, though, he saw with brutal clarity that his lifespan had always been measured in Horcruxes—and the time it took to destroy them. Dumbledore had, by taking Harry under his wing and showing him how to snip the threads of Voldemort's mortality, given Harry the knowledge and power to destroy himself in the doing. Two birds with one stone—no one would ever accuse Albus Dumbledore of not capitalising on such a neat, elegant opportunity. No more lives wasted than necessary—he'd ceded this most dangerous of tasks to the very boy whose life would mark the full-stop at the end of Voldemort's book.

Dumbledore had seemed so certain in Snape's memories that Harry would not flee—and why shouldn't he have been? He'd watched Harry grow up, hadn't he? Had moulded him into the type of person who would lay down his life for his friends, though it terrified him to do so. Harry had always been prepared to go it alone, to face Voldemort head on, without the safety and sanctuary of his friends—well, now was his chance.

But *oh*, Dumbledore had overestimated him. The snake yet survived, tucked in a bubble of protective energy within arm's reach of Voldemort at all times. Even after this, even once Harry was gone, Nagini would still be there, binding Voldemort to this plane. One Horcrux or six, it really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things—just like Draco had said.

Perhaps his friends would rally and be able to finish the job for him. Ron and Hermione and Draco—they knew Nagini needed to die, they knew how important it was to destroy that final Horcrux. They were all perfectly capable, so perhaps they'd manage it, even without Harry around. Now that he thought about it, that would've been why Dumbledore had encouraged him to confide in Ron and Hermione to begin with, wouldn't it? Failsafes. Back-ups. Insurance, in case Harry didn't finish the job himself. Always two steps ahead, that one...

His thoughts began to race, stumbling over each other in a muddled mass, only to slam headlong into the cold, hard truth that shortly, he would die. *I'm going to die. No more Harry Potter. No more Boy Who Lived. Gone, just gone.*

He repeated these words like a mantra, hoping that maybe if he drilled them into his mind long enough and hard enough, they'd lose meaning and perhaps not be so terribly frightening. It did not work.

The world around him, only moments ago so very vibrant, began to fade, colours dulling and sounds muffled as though heard from deep under water. How long had it been since he'd seen his friends, since he'd parted from Draco for 'only a moment'? It felt like he'd spent years and years inside Snape's memories and not only perhaps fifteen minutes.

He had time. He could yet slip down there, under his Cloak, and tempt them away for a final farewell.

He could. But he wouldn't.

There would be no goodbyes, no explanations—of that he was determined. There *couldn't* be, really; they would never understand and would do everything within their power to keep him from going, up to and including slapping him with a Body Bind and sitting on his chest.

They wouldn't forgive him—not for even *considering* doing what he was bound and determined to do.

Sure, Ron and Hermione might try to forgive him, but they wouldn't, really. They would hate him, in a dark, secret corner of their heart. Or maybe they'd wear their hatred for him on their sleeves, like he was sure Draco would.

It was funny; he was almost more terrified of what Draco would feel for him after this nasty business was finished than the act of dying itself.

Almost.

No, this was a journey they could not take together, and the attempts his friends would make to stop him would waste valuable time. He looked down at the battered gold watch he had received from Mrs. Weasley on his seventeenth birthday. He had wasted nearly half of the hour allotted by Voldemort for his surrender.

He made himself exit the Headmaster's office at last; he could not shelter in its sanctuary any longer, though his feet dragged with each step he took.

He stepped back out into the third-floor corridor, leaving the gargoyle to guard an empty office, and found the castle empty and still, everyone likely down in the Great Hall, mourning the dead and tending to the living, readying for the next wave of battle—a wave Harry would not see.

He felt as if he'd died already and come back a ghost, floating alone down the long, lonely hallways. The statues and suits of armour had all been marshalled to defend the school, and the portrait subjects were still missing from their frames. Harry had slipped along the castle corridors late at night more than a few times over the years, but never as it was now, the lamps all burning high and bright as if it were midday. It felt like a moment out of time, a breath held, waiting for the final blow.

He drew out his Invisibility Cloak, marvelling once more at its craftsmanship, then pulled it over his head and descended, feeling as if he were floating down the moving staircases, which held their positions fast so as not to delay his journey overlong. Too soon, he found himself standing in the Entrance Hall, and he paused, remembering the very first time he'd stood here. He'd been so excited, so nervous, so scared, so thrilled. Harry wanted to

reach back through time and send his younger self away, tell him to bundle himself back onto the Hogwarts Express and just *go*. Before he became too good a man to not stand his ground.

A pair of figures were standing just at the main doors, conversing, and Harry kept well out of their way, not wanting to be seen. It was Neville and Oliver, he saw, when they stepped into the circle of warm lamplight. They were, he realised, carrying in the bodies of fighters who had fallen out on the front lawn, and as if having to walk to his own death weren't a heavy enough blow, Harry caught sight who they had presently supported between them: Colin Creevey, who must have snuck back somehow after being evacuated on account of being underage. He looked somehow younger in death—something had savaged his shoulder and neck, and his head lolled at an unnatural angle.

“I think I can manage him myself the rest of the way, Nev,” said Oliver, and he drew Colin up into both arms, nodding once to Neville before heading into the Great Hall.

Neville nodded and watched him go, listing against the doorframe as he paused a moment to catch his breath. There was a track of dried blood leading down from his hairline, and his button-up had been ripped down the front, exposing an even grimier undershirt that was dark with sweat. He looked ever so much older than his seventeen years. After a beat, he sighed, rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes, then turned and trudged back down the steps, disappearing into the darkness to continue his recovery efforts.

Against his better judgement, Harry paused at the entrance of the Great Hall and peeked inside. A quiet lull had settled over everyone—some mute in their grief, others basking in the calm before the coming storm, still others mouthing words, perhaps prayers, under their breath. Hermione was huddled in conversation with Ginny, with Ron hanging back, looking on at them with an unreadable expression.

Draco, who had no one with whom to commiserate, had tucked himself into an alcove under one of the plinths that had once supported a gargoyle. He had a hunted look about him, casting a Tempus Charm before dismissing it ferociously, clearly unhappy with the

time.

Harry slipped away into the shadows, leaving the soft, muffled din of the Great Hall behind him. He couldn't chance Draco looking his way—there was the very real risk he might actually *see* Harry somehow. He'd managed to remark Harry through Polyjuice, after all; there was no guarantee that, in his desperation, the dragon bits of him wouldn't sense that Harry was there, right there, and about to do something very foolhardy.

A knife of guilt twisted in his gut. Here was another betrayal for Draco; another choice taken from him without so much as a by-your-leave. Harry hoped that the others would be able to make him see sense, keep him under control and make sure he didn't...snap. Draco still hadn't learned in eight months how to keep his temper from controlling the urge to transform—but he would *have* to now. He was strong enough, of that Harry was certain. He could survive this.

He did not look back again, only hurrying down the front steps and out into the darkness. It was better this way. Better for all of them. The only thing Harry's heart could handle.

The battered pocketwatch told him it was going on four in the morning, and a deafening quiet rolled over the grounds like a bank of fog. It was as if Hogwarts itself was waiting to see if Harry would actually go through with it—do what he must. What he *had* to.

Neville was bent over another body—Harry didn't recognise them, but they'd nearly been strangled by what looked to be a Ravenclaw necktie. A thought struck him then—and not daring to give himself the chance to second guess it, Harry moved towards Neville.

“Neville,” he said, letting the hood of the Cloak fall from his head.

Neville gave a violent start, stumbling onto his arse with one hand clutching at the ragged remains of his shirt. “Blimey, Harry! You can't do that to a bloke! Thought you were You-Know-Who himself come to call early!”

“Sorry,” Harry said, though he knew he didn't sound it. He licked his lips, heart racing.

This would be his last chance to make sure that...that what needed to happen happened. This was him tying up his loose ends, just like Dumbledore had known he would.

Neville seemed to sense something was up, glancing around as he noticed Harry was alone. "...What're you doing out here? Where're Ron and Hermione? And Malfoy?"

"They're...they're inside, I needed to just—" God, he hated lying. So he decided not to. "There's something I need to take care of, on my own. But listen, Neville, I need—"

Neville's eyes went wide and white. "Need to take care of? You'd better not mean to go and give yourself over to them! You can't do that, you just can't! We're all behind you, a thousand per—"

"I—no, of course not," Harry said dismissively, quick to cut off Neville before he got going and called others down on them. "It's just something Dumbledore wanted me to do—don't worry, it's all part of the plan. Only I might...I might not be around for a bit, so I needed to ask you for something." He settled down onto one knee, locking eyes with Neville to be sure he understood. "Voldemort...he's got a snake. Big nasty one that he carries around with him, calls it 'Nagini'. Have you heard of it?"

Neville's gaze went distant with thought, then he nodded. "...Yeah, I think so. His pet, right?"

"Right. But more than a pet, really—and I know this'll seem like a weird ask, but trust me that it's important. That snake *has* to be killed. *Has to*, understand? Ron and Hermione and Draco, they know that, and they're gonna try their best when this next wave starts, I'm sure, but just in case they—"

Die.

He couldn't say it—the very idea of any of them, of *all of them*, gone forever left him mute, killing the word in his throat. It was the only thing keeping him going right now—the knowledge that he might die, yeah, and that was going to fucking suck, but at least it might save all the people he loved. If his unfinished business killed any of them...

He swallowed, struggling to pull himself together. He had to do this, had to keep his head for just five more minutes, arrange everything *just so*, so that when he met Voldemort and took the Killing Curse for the second and final time, others could take up his slack. Harry had placed his trust in all the right people, of this he was confident. Ron and Hermione and Draco would hate him—but they would finish the job he'd left for them, and then they'd have the rest of their lives to curse his name.

“—in case they're busy, or the snake's too far away, and you see an opening, then—”

“Then I should kill the snake?” Neville finished for him, perhaps sensing Harry's struggle.

“Yeah. Kill the fucking snake,” Harry said with a firm nod.

“All right.” Neville cocked his head to the side, studying Harry carefully. “...You're okay, aren't you, Harry? I mean...all things considered? You're really not—”

“I'll be fine, Neville—just remember that bit about the snake. It's crucial. If you can pass the word along, even, that'd be great.”

He eased back to his feet and moved to draw the Cloak back over his head and be on his way; the longer he dawdled, the more difficult this would become.

“We aren't giving up, Harry. You know that, right? We're gonna keep fighting, with all we've got. Not for you—for *this*. For all this. For ourselves.” Neville's expression was earnest, and even through the blood and grime, he looked...at peace. Determined, not half as frightened as Harry was feeling right now. Harry wished he could borrow some of that courage, just for a little bit, to carry with him into the forest.

“...Of course. Thanks, I know you're—” The suffocating hand of overwhelming emotion clamped over his throat, and he couldn't bring himself to finish. He tried to swallow around it, but failed. He could barely breathe, and he closed his eyes, counting down from ten until he didn't feel like he might confess his dark duty to Neville once he opened his mouth again.

Blessedly, Neville did not press the matter any further, only rose to his feet, patted Harry on the shoulder with a final squeeze, and then shuffled away into the darkness, continuing his recovery efforts.

Harry drew the Cloak back up and set off down the path, heading for the Forbidden Forest.

Just over a small bluff, he could see Hagrid's hut, lying dark and vacant—no lights, no curl of smoke snaking from the chimney. He paused at the pumpkin patch and closed his eyes, losing himself for a moment in the fond, fading memories made there. The little cabin had been a respite of sorts, a place he could go and just sit back, break a tooth on a rock cake, and listen to Hagrid blather on about the newest deadly creatures he'd wrangled for Harry and his classmates to bond with. Hagrid loved the wizarding world, and it was that infectious excitement for all things magical that had drawn Harry down along this path to begin with.

He hoped Hagrid was all right; he hadn't noticed him in the Great Hall—and Hagrid was a bit difficult to not notice.

On he moved, passing the pumpkin patch and the darkened hut, and soon—too soon—he reached the edge of the Forest, drawing up short.

Dementors swarmed before him, weaving through the trees in a slow, lazy glide and freezing the very air in Harry's lungs. They did not approach, but nor did they retreat, and Harry wasn't sure he would be able to pass safely through this dark, forbidding throng. His wand was still stuffed in his sleeve, but he doubted he had the strength for a Patronus—simply standing here, the great castle looming at his back and his swiftly approaching death before him, it was difficult to recall any warm memories at all, let alone one strong enough to perform the Charm.

And it was here the magnitude of what he was about to do began to settle in his bones, until he was trembling uncontrollably—it felt like he was shivering, or seizing. His breath came in great gulping pants. His lungs ached, the scent of loam and sod filled his nostrils, and the late-spring air was a balm on his face. The distant call of some wild creature to

its mate echoed in the darkness, it was all so precious. If he'd known how little time he had, *really* had, he could have appreciated it all properly. Everyone else got so many years, decades to enjoy life in all its splendour, and he'd squandered the brief glimpse he had worrying over first kisses and O.W.L.s and the Hogwarts Christmas dinner menu.

He couldn't do this—he was certain his body wouldn't obey. It would fight him, like a sentient thing, and refuse to move another inch—except that it had to. He had to make it, had to marshal his dwindling stores of courage and just be done with it.

Time was ticking, ticking down—the game was drawing to a close. He had one job left: catch the Snitch, and end it all—

The Snitch.

Fingers shaking with nerves, he fumbled with the Mokeskin pouch at his neck, struggling with the cinch. He pushed aside the Marauder's Map and felt his fingers brush over the cool metal husk of Dumbledore's Snitch.

He pulled it out, letting it settle in the palm of his hand, and recalled instantly the last time he had seen this particular Snitch.

It had been one of the Seeker's games he'd played with Draco—their last, he supposed it would have to be. Draco had nearly slammed into a tree trying to catch it and still found himself knocked off his broom. He'd come out covered in scratches from the twigs with leaves sticking out of his hair but the Snitch firmly in his grasp and a triumphant smile on his lips.

Harry had blown up at him for pulling such a dangerous stunt, but he'd only shrugged and said that if he'd broken his neck, he would just have had the dragon heal it.

He felt his heart lighten; that was a good memory. Perfect to close out his mental scrapbook. Perhaps he could even use it to wind his way through the Dementors.

He hoped, despite everything, that Draco kept practising his Patronus. Harry would meet his end with rather a lot of regrets, but one of the big ones, he was realising, would

be never being able to see Draco finally manage the charm. Never knowing what memory was his trigger.

He turned the Snitch over in his hand, reading the writing scrawled across the casing: *I open at the close.*

His heart skipped a beat, lurching into a fevered rhythm, and his breathing picked up. Though he ached for time to move as slowly as possible, it mercilessly plowed ahead, and his brain was finally firing on all cylinders.

This was the close—the close of his story. The end of Harry Potter.

He pressed the golden casing to his lips—resolutely not thinking about how Draco had nearly swallowed it—and whispered: “I am about to die.”

The shell broke open with a soft *snick*, and he lowered his hand again, raising his wand beneath the Cloak and murmuring, “*Lumos.*”

The Snitch lay in two halves, cracked like a tiny golden egg, and in the centre sat a black stone Harry had seen before only in memory, when it had been fitted into the setting of a ring once owned by Marvolo Gaunt.

The Resurrection Stone still bore signs of its destruction as a Horcrux, a jagged lightning-bolt crack running right along the line representing the Elder Wand in the Hallows symbol that had been etched into its face.

A thrill ran through him—when, after all, would he ever have another chance to see if the Resurrection Stone truly lived up to its name? It could do nothing to save him now, true...but it would make the going easier. He thought he might be able to manage it, if he could have friends and family by his side as he walked this last, lonely road. People who would not try to stop him, not beg him to reconsider, but just be there, strong and welcoming, as he was about to join them.

It would not hurt to try, so he closed his eyes, wished *very* hard, and turned the stone over thrice in his hands.

“*Oh, my brave, beautiful boy,*” someone said, a wispy whisper faint as a breeze but there, real, and beside him.

He opened his eyes slowly, hardly daring to turn around—but unable to keep himself from doing so, because he had to *see*, he had to see *them*.

It was just as Beedle the Bard had described: there, and yet not. Not ghosts, no—more memory brought into the present. They had an unmistakable air of insubstantiality about them, but they moved towards him with a purpose, walking rather than floating as ghosts did, and all of them—all four of them—had the same broad smile, steeped in pride and radiating love, just love.

His eye was drawn first to James, who was of a height with Harry—which might have been something of a disappointment if he’d not been about to die. It would have been nice to hold on to faint the hope he’d sprout a few more inches before puberty had finished with him.

James was wearing not robes but a casual outfit, all trainers and jeans and rolled-up sleeves, and Harry wondered a bit morbidly if this was what he’d died in. His hair, like Harry’s, was untidy and ruffled, and his glasses looked just a bit out of fashion. Dad glasses, Harry thought, recognising the frames as the same ones Mr. Weasley favoured. He looked like a good man, like a proud father, and not like the priggish bully Harry had seen in Snape’s memories. It wasn’t that he doubted the memories—it was only that he hadn’t wanted *that* to be the last memory he had of his father. He didn’t think it was so terrible a thing to want to die believing the best about your loved ones.

Sirius loped up alongside James, and Harry nearly didn’t recognise him, for he was far younger—or at least looked it—than Harry had known him in life. Perhaps he’d chosen the form in which he would have liked to have met Harry—perhaps this was the Sirius Harry was meant to have grown up knowing, his godfather. He threw an elbow up onto James’s shoulder, his free hand in one pocket and a cocky grin on his handsome face.

Remus joined them, and here as well the ravages of time had been swept away, the lines on his face no longer quite as deep. Here was Moony, wide-eyed and thrilled to be back

among his mates—though when he ran his hand through hair that was much thicker and darker than it had been in life, Harry caught the glint of moonlight off the wedding band he wore.

A hand came up from behind to rest gently on Harry's shoulder, and he felt his breath catch in his throat, swallowing it down in a thick lump as he turned to see his mother.

She was beautiful. Pictures hadn't done her justice—even Snape's memories had not prepared Harry for the sight. She was beaming at him, absolutely glowing. Her long auburn hair fell soft around her shoulders, carrying the aroma of may bells, and her green eyes—*"You have your mother's eyes,"* he'd heard enough times to make him sick—seemed to peer through his own down into his heart, drinking him in and seeing all of his secrets at once. She did not flinch at whatever she saw; her smile only softened, fond and proud.

He let the Cloak fall about his shoulders, and she took his face in her hands. Her touch was neither warm nor chill, and when she brushed her thumbs over his cheekbones, it was like a gentle breeze. *"My brave, beautiful boy,"* she repeated. *"My Harry."*

The lump was back in his throat now, choking him. His eyes burned with emotion, and Lily's form blurred as unshed tears welled up. He blinked them back, though; he would not waste this moment, this most precious of moments, weeping like a child.

James stepped forward, bringing up a hand up to rest on Lily's shoulder. *"Look how far you've come. Look at all you've accomplished. We are so, so proud of you. You're everything we hoped for and more."*

"Only a tiny bit more to go," said Remus with an encouraging nod.

"...Does it hurt?" he asked, before he could stop himself. A childish question, and one that betrayed his fear, but he had no shame before these people.

"What, dying? 'Course not!" Sirius snapped his fingers. *"Easiest thing I've ever done! Quick as a wink, over in a flash."*

“And it will be quick, Harry,” Remus said. “Voldemort wants this over. He’s terrified of you—he won’t draw this out.”

Harry’s eye was drawn, again, to the ring on Remus’s finger; he was twisting it in what Harry suspected had become nervous habit. “...I’m sorry I couldn’t save you,” he said miserably. “I would never have asked...”

“We didn’t go down without a fight, though,” Remus said with an easy smile. “I think that’s all any of us could have asked for, eh? For it to matter. And it did matter, Harry. Never imagine that any of us would have done a damn thing different.”

“Well, I might’ve been more careful around drapery,” Sirius said.

“And I’m beginning to think it wasn’t such a good idea, asking Wormy to be our Secret Keeper, yeah, Love?” James added, and Lily just shook her head fondly, as if this was a conversation they had had a thousand times before. Harry couldn’t help himself, releasing a warbling chuckle.

A chill wind carrying a foul odour rushed over him, drowning out Lily’s faint, comforting aroma—it carried past the line of waiting Dementors, emanating from deep within the Forest as a forbidding reminder of what he had come there to do. They would not tell him to go—though he wished they would. He wished they would remind him of why he needed to do this, who he was doing it for—because the further he walked away from the castle and its defenders, the tighter he clung to his own dwindling life thread, feet dragging and will flagging.

All this time, he’d railed against being denied choices, having decisions made for him... and now here he was. Forced to make the only decision he wished he didn’t have to.

He turned to his father, praying his voice didn’t break as he asked, “...Will you walk with me?”

“Of course. Until the very end.”

“And beyond,” Lily added, kissing his forehead.

Harry supposed he was at the age where he ought to be embarrassed receiving a kiss from his mother, but he only wished he had time for a thousand more.

He glanced to the Dementors with a frown. "...Will they hurt you?"

"No," Sirius said. *"Nor will they you."*

Harry nodded, looking at them all in turn, his eyes lingering last on his mother. "I wish I'd known how to call you sooner. I didn't realise...and now there's no time..."

"Oh, my dear, sweet Harry," she said, expression serene. *"We were always there—and we'll always be there. Death himself could not tear me from you."*

"There's never enough time," James said. *"That's the terrible thing about life—and one of the great things about death."*

Harry would have to take his word for it, he decided.

He pulled the Cloak back up and set off into the Forest. The Dementors crowded in, but the sapping chill and upswell of sorrow that usually overwhelmed him in their presence was stayed, and he passed through the line of despair incarnate without issue. He hadn't needed a Patronus after all—it was just as Sirius had said: his companions were guiding and protecting him, and as a group of living and dead and in-between, they marched into the old growth, into the heart of the Forest.

The deeper Harry pressed, though, the closer the trees and undergrowth grew together, until the moonlight no longer reached, the only light that of the softly glowing incorporeal beings keeping him company as he plodded onward to his doom.

Harry still had the Cloak clutched tight around him, though he sensed it was no longer necessary. He wanted to be seen—needed to be seen. But even its protective comfort was appreciated, for however long it held.

On he trudged, nearly tripping several times over the grasping, curling roots and sliding on slick detritus. The Forest was vast, and he hadn't the faintest clue where Voldemort

might be camped out, but he would stumble upon it eventually—or it would stumble upon him. He could feel that clock still inside him, ticking down those last few moments with stuttering finality. When it stopped, then he would be where he was meant to be.

His companions walked beside him, gliding soundlessly through the darkness, and he clung to their presence for the courage to keep his feet moving in time, one in front of the other. They did not seem to mind the Cloak, and every now and then, he would glance at one of them and find them staring warmly back, a small comfort but one he would take all the same.

His mind wandered in these final few moments, his body moving without conscious direction, and he thought of the first time he'd gone wandering through these woods. They'd been just as dark and imposing then as now. Draco had been there—tiny and terrible and an absolute, utter coward. He was still terrible but no longer tiny, to Harry's chagrin, and far from a coward. What was he doing now, Harry wondered—still furiously checking the time? Had he given up on waiting and gone in search of Harry? Had he found the Headmaster's office empty and sought out Hermione and Ron? Were they even now searching the castle for him?

Had they realised what he meant to do?

Half of him (the self-serving Slytherin part, he thought) prayed they might come save him, spare him from this final, terrible task—and the other half (definitely the hard-headed, impetuous Gryffindor part) knew that if he saw them, if they found him, he'd Curse them on sight and Disapparate. He loved them, they were his friends—but he could not let them stop him (or worse, follow him).

“What was that?” came a rough, gruff voice just up ahead, and Harry froze under the Cloak. He could just make out the faint glow of wandlight through the shadows of the thick-knit trees, and he strained his ears to catch any more sounds. Beside him, his parents and Sirius and Remus stopped as well, their attention fixed beyond him.

“What was what?” another voice asked, just as rough and gruff. “I don't see nothin'.”

“Me neither... Maybe they’ve got an Invisibility Cloak. Y’tthink it might be—?”

Through a stand of trees, wands held aloft and casting bright witchlight to cut through the Forest’s gloam, stepped Yaxley and someone who Harry thought might be the mutilated Dolohov. They squinted, peering into the darkness with wary expressions, but though they were looking right at the spot where Harry stood flanked by his companions, they showed no signs of recognition.

“...Was *sure* I heard something,” said Yaxley, hacking a thick dollop of spittle onto the ground.

“Maybe an animal?” Dolohov suggested with an exaggerated shudder. “The Carrows were saying Hagrid kept a whole zoo in here, all kinds of dangerous beasts I hear—and that’s not including the natives.” He cast about, eyes scanning the treetops, and drew his Death Eater robes tighter about himself.

Yaxley withdrew a pocketwatch, frowning. “Nearly time. We should head back—doesn’t look like Potter’s gonna show.”

“Fuck it all,” Dolohov grumbled. “The Dark Lord’s gonna be rightly pissed off...” He massaged his mangled features and shuddered again, much less exaggerated this time.

“Try and stick close to one of the giants when you tell him—they make for easy cover.” Yaxley clapped Dolohov on the shoulder. “Come on, no getting around it. At least we might see some action now.”

Dolohov muttered his agreement, and together they turned to trudge back into the Forest. Harry waited until they’d moved a few paces ahead, then followed at a distance. This was, he supposed, his last chance to turn back—his last chance to survive. His last chance to ever see his friends again.

He carried on, and his parents and Sirius and Remus followed silently along at his side, favouring him with encouraging nods and smiles whenever he glanced their way. He was beyond grateful they were here with him, that they would be with him until the bitter

end—“*And beyond,*” his mother had said—because with each step closer to the Death Eaters’ camp, Harry became increasingly certain that he would never have been able to bring himself to go through with it, necessary though he understood the act to be.

Too soon for Harry’s comfort, the trees began to thin out, and the leaf litter under his trainers gave way to dirt and stone as they approached a clearing. He could see light ahead—firelight, weaving to and fro and mottling the branches above. When they stepped into the clearing, Harry recognised it as the place where the great spider Aragog had once made his lair. The webs had all been burned away, and Aragog’s children had been driven out, turned on the castle to fight for Voldemort.

The light he could now see was cast by a great crackling bonfire that had been built in the middle of the clearing, flames climbing so high they licked the boughs crowding in above. All around were gathered a motley crew: Death Eaters, some masked, and others like Bellatrix unabashed in their bloodlust; werewolves skulking at the edge of the clearing, their eyes glowing in the low light; a pair of towering giants with cruel, sculpted features; and even a few odd creatures Harry had never seen before. Maybe he shouldn’t have skived off Seventh-year Care of Magical Creatures and Defence Against the Dark Arts after all.

All of them—human, beast, being—stood in stark silence, watching and waiting, save for Bellatrix, who paced around the fire like a nervous animal, her wand twitching eagerly despite her dishevelled appearance. Beyond her, Harry caught a flash of white—and saw Lucius Malfoy, sitting huddled with his wife as far as it was possible to be from the circle of Death Eaters. Lucius’s gaze snapped to and fro around the glen, as if he expected to be trounced upon at any moment, and Narcissa stared blankly into the fire, her face sunken and shoulders slumped in defeat. Harry sent up a silent apology to Draco. They hadn’t been able to save Draco’s parents after all.

None in the camp remarked the arrival of Yaxley and Dolohov, though; instead, they were all staring, rapt, at Voldemort, who sat upon a great wooden throne that looked to have been Transfigured from an ancient stump. He was hunched forward, elbows on his knees and Dumbledore’s wand clasped tight in his bony white fingers. His head was

bowed, and Harry could see he was mumbling something under his breath. It almost looked as if he were praying, but Harry rather thought he was counting. Counting down the minutes, or perhaps the seconds now, until Harry's time would be up.

Just over his shoulder, still swirling and coiling inside a huge magical bubble, hung Nagini. Harry's hand twitched, ready to go for his wand, but he had no doubt that her glittering, charmed cage could not be penetrated by anything but the most powerful of spells—certainly nothing Harry could manage, even with the Elder Wand, in the split second he might have to attack before fifty Death Eaters pounced upon him.

"...What word?" Voldemort rasped, not bothering to look up, as Yaxley and Dolohov drew close to the roaring bonfire.

Dolohov balked until Yaxley elbowed him sharply, inclining his head forward. Dolohov swallowed and then spoke, voice tremulous, "...N-no sign, my Lord. The Dementors' line was unbroken as well."

Voldemort slowly lifted his head, and Dolohov quickly backed up to stand alongside Yaxley, perhaps hoping that with two equidistant targets, Voldemort would be unable to choose which messenger to shoot first.

He did not draw his wand, though—only stared into the dancing firelight, the licking flames reflected in his burning eyes. His fingers tightened around Dumbledore's wand, and Harry wondered if he might snap it—

Bellatrix rushed to Voldemort's side with a fevered *My Lord!*, settling at his feet with supplication writ large over her features—but Voldemort only held up a hand, and she instantly fell silent.

After a long beat of uncomfortable silence as all waited to see how he would respond to Harry's absence, Voldemort spoke. "...So, the boy has abdicated his duty," he said, voice high and soft but echoing with sharp clarity through the dead silence of the camp. He rose slowly to his feet, and his expression betrayed the hint of a frown as he continued to stare into the heart of the flames. "I confess, this was...unexpected."

Harry could *hear* the collective intake of breath. A calm, collected Voldemort was often more dangerous than one who was on an emotional bender. He wondered if, in the stillness, one of those present would hear the sound of Harry's heart beating frantically against his ribcage—it was a wonder he hadn't already been found out.

“Perhaps I have given Harry Potter too much credit,” Voldemort sighed. “I was, it seems, mistaken in—”

“You weren't,” Harry said, as loudly as he could and with all the force he could muster. He strained to hear his voice in the deafening silence, praying he didn't sound a fraction as terrified as he felt. He would not give them that satisfaction.

Harry's hands were sweating as he tugged off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffing it inside his jumper, along with his wand. He did not want to be tempted to fight back; this could not be a duel—it had to simply be an execution. The Resurrection Stone slipped from his fingers in his fumbling, lost in the litter of leaves and pine needles, and the warm comfort of his family and friends blipped out in an instant. He missed them immediately, but though they had shepherded him this far, these final few steps he would have to take on his own. He could not afford the distraction of their presence, no matter how much he longed for it—in this moment, it would be just himself and Voldemort, as it had always been meant to be, here at the end of all things.

His appearance, though, seemed to shatter the tense hush that had settled over the camp, and in an instant, the clearing erupted into life. The giants sprang to their feet, violently shaking the trunks of the trees nearest to them and showering the Death Eaters with leaves, the werewolves burst out into howls of excitement and began slavering at the mouth, and the Death Eaters released cries and gasps—even riotous laughter.

Voldemort himself stood frozen in place, as if convinced this was some sort of trick of the eye, an illusion. He fixed Harry with an unreadable expression as Harry took a step closer, and another, until only the great bonfire stood between them. As if he himself could not believe the moment had finally come, the moment he had prepared so long for.

“HARRY! NO!” a voice yelled, broken and begging.

Harry let his eye comb the camp until he found its source: *fuck*. There was Hagrid, tied to one of the trees with thick ropes—clearly the giants’ handiwork. He struggled vainly against his bonds, shaking the branches overhead as he did so. He had scratches all over his face, and one eye looked as if it had been bruised—but he was alive, well, and rightly horrified at what Harry was doing.

“YEH CAN’T DO THIS! GET OUTTA HERE! WHAT’RE YEH—?!”

“Silence him,” Voldemort said, bored—and one of the masked Death Eaters standing nearby swished their wand through the air. Hagrid fell mute, mouth still working as he screamed and begged for Harry not to do what he was bound and determined to. Harry turned away, back to Voldemort. He could not bear to look Hagrid in the eye.

Bellatrix had leapt to her feet as soon as Harry had shown himself, and she now paced behind Voldemort with an eager, manic energy. She was doing a very poor job of holding back her cackles, and they leaked from her at odd intervals, spilling out as depraved little chuckles that echoed around the clearing.

The Death Eaters, emboldened by Voldemort’s turning mood and the mounting excitement that something was about to happen, began to crowd in closer, no longer fearing their master lashing out in frustration. Harry swallowed, but held his ground and resolutely did not draw his wand. He felt weak, vulnerable—probably because he was. And Voldemort knew this, a curious, grotesque smile tugging at his lipless mouth as he considered Harry’s sudden appearance...and what it meant.

“A celebrity graces us with his presence,” he said, so softly his words were nearly lost amidst the crackling fire and Bellatrix’s sniggers. “Harry Potter. The boy who lived.”

And not wanting his last words to have been an admission that Voldemort had read him right, Harry said, “I rather prefer ‘Scarhead’ these days.”

The camp held its breath. The giants had fallen silent, and the werewolves watched with

predatory gazes. The Death Eaters were frozen in place as all waited to see if this would finally be it, if Harry would finally die. Hagrid was weeping now, still struggling against his bonds in vain, and Bellatrix looked like a hound ready to snap her lead and run her master's quarry to ground.

Harry could hear his own heart, pounding desperately in his ears and drowning everything out, and he thought inexplicably of Draco and the cold surety with which he held himself, banking his dragonflame beneath so much ice that it was an inferno when it finally broke through. He clutched the feeling to his chest, so tight it seeped into his own skin, and made it his own.

Voldemort tugged back one sleeve and raised Dumbledore's wand in a ready stance, head cocked to the side as he waited, just in case, to see if Harry might try to make some daring last-minute escape. If there were allies waiting in the woods around them, if he would draw his wand and engage in a proper duel. Harry only stared back, marshalling what little courage he still had in his stores. *Do it*, he urged silently, *Do it now*. Now, while he could still stand, before his nerves failed him and he broke, betraying his terror —

His ears rang, a high, bright note drowning out everything else, and he saw Voldemort's mouth move before he even heard the spell being cast as a violent jet of green streaked towards him—

And then there was nothing.

The M Word

“...You...you haven’t seen Harry, have you?”

Hermione glanced up from her efforts to repair one of the demolished staircases. She, Luna, and Ginny had tried to distract themselves from the mounting pile of bodies laid out in the Great Hall by sorting out the damaged areas of the castle as best they could with what little time had been granted. With the staircases repaired, they might still be able to use the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers for sanctuaries if necessary. High ground was really the only defence they had left.

Draco was standing awkwardly on the bottommost step, arms wrapped around himself and shifting nervously from one foot to another.

Her hackles went up immediately. “...No—last I saw, he was with you...” She pursed her lips. “He’s not, then?”

Draco shook his head, grimacing. “He...he got a message—Dumbledore’s bird delivered it, insane as it may seem.”

“Fawkes?”

He gave her a look that said *Had a lot of birds, did he, that Dumbledore?* “I suppose?” He shrugged. “It summoned him to the Headmaster’s office, and—he wouldn’t let me go with him. Said it sounded like something he needed to do alone, and that no one was going to try and jump him when he’d been summoned by the Dark Lord. I—I fucking let him go.” He dropped his arms and began pacing, running his hands through his hair. “It seemed reasonable, and he’s a grown-arse wizard who shouldn’t need a nanny, but it’s been almost *thirty minutes* now and—”

“All right, all right, *calm down*,” she urged, scrambling down the steps and taking him gently by the shoulders. It spoke to how worried he was that he didn’t even seem to

notice, thoughts too scattered to bother shrugging her off. She made sure to keep her tone even; if Harry had gone wandering, it would be up to them to keep Draco in his skin.

Inside, though, she was boiling with rage—though she couldn't exactly blame Draco entirely. Harry was prone to impulsively running off and taking risks he shouldn't, something she and Ron were well aware of after over six years at his side. Draco, though, had only cared about Harry's well-being for a handful of months—not nearly long enough to truly get wise to Harry's distressing tendency to thoughtlessly put himself in danger.

There was nothing to be done for it now, though, but to track down Harry and set a Shackling Spell on him.

They found Ron helping relocate paintings in corridors sure to see fighting in the coming hour, and he seemed relieved to have a mission to distract. "If I had to listen to Trelawney yammer on about what the alignment of the stars over Astronomy Tower means for the next wave of battle for five more minutes, I swear to Godric..."

He was no more happy than Hermione that Draco had let Harry slip off, but he managed to hold his tongue, and Hermione gave him a warm smile of gratitude that had him ducking his head and quickly glancing away. Draco was, for once, too preoccupied with Harry's absence to make his usual snide remarks concerning their haphazard displays of affection. She almost missed it.

They made for the Headmaster's office first, but the entrance had been sealed off, the spiral staircase refusing to show itself even when they used the password Draco said had been written on the scroll. With no sign of Harry, they were resigned to scouring the corridors and checking empty classrooms. He was nowhere to be seen, though, not even in Gryffindor Tower, still under heavy construction after having been ravaged by Draco a year earlier and neglected under the Carrows' rule.

Ron glanced out of one of the shattered windows when they reached the end of yet another corridor. "He might've gone out onto the grounds, don't you think? Maybe to help...y'know, gather the bodies?"

Hermione nodded; she was pretty sure she'd seen Neville and Oliver Wood down in the Entrance Hall, recruiting others to help—

A cold thought speared through her, and though she already knew the answer, she asked in a soft, small voice, "...He wouldn't have gone to turn himself over to Voldemort...would he?"

But—no, surely *not*. Surely—surely he wasn't *that* stupid. It was suicide, and Harry had an undeniable urge to help people, to *save* people, but he didn't have a deathwish. He would want to, he might even consider it, but he wouldn't just *leave*—

Draco evidently had less faith in their Harry, though, for he spat, "He absolutely *would*, that sanctimonious arsekettle." He was halfway back down the corridor, marching for the stairs, before Ron and Hermione realised what he intended to do and scrambled after him.

"He's got the Elder Wand now, though, right?" Ron said. "Maybe that's what he meant to do? You-Know-Who's expecting him, probably rolled out the red carpet for him, so he wouldn't have to worry about fighting his way there—then a proper duel with an unbeatable wand and it'd be done!"

He sounded unaccountably cheerful, and Hermione tamped down a flare of irritation. "But there's still one Horcrux left to destroy! And why wouldn't he have *told* us? Or told *someone* if time was of the essence? We could have made a plan, something a bit more put together than just traipsing off into the dark hoping to run across Dark wizards!"

Ron drew out his pocketwatch. "...Well it's getting late. Or early. Maybe he didn't think there was time to rally? Winging it has worked out for us about as often as slaving away for weeks over a plan, you've got to admit."

She was obliged to admit nothing of the sort, and they swiftly descended the stairs, arguing the whole way. By the third floor, Hermione had the beginnings of a plan piecing itself together in her mind. "I suppose we'll have to be better late than never," she huffed, rolling up her sleeves. "He's got a bit of a head start, but maybe we can find him

before the Death Eaters do.”

“And then *kill* the little shit,” Draco snarled.

“Or, as an alternative—just a suggestion—but we could yell at him a lot?” Ron offered.

“Not nearly as satisfying, trust me, Weasley.” Draco’s jaw was tight as he charged down the stairs, in real danger of missing a step and tumbling end over head. He would be in an all-out run before they made it to the Entrance Hall at this rate, and if he snapped and transformed, there was no guarantee he would be able to retain his fragile grip on his humanity. His mate was probably in terrible danger and had virtually abandoned him in a stressful situation—it was a wonder he was still human at all.

Hermione tried to distract as best she could. “There’s a mob of Dementors guarding the border of the Forbidden Forest. How’s your Patronus coming along, Draco?”

He drew up short on the second-floor landing, whipping around to stare at her in perplexed befuddlement—then seemed to wilt.

She sighed. “Right, just—stick between me and Ron, all right? And try focusing on as happy a memory as you can—it can’t hurt to try.”

Draco nodded, though he didn’t look very sure of himself, and they continued on down the stairs. By the time they made it to the ground floor, they were all three running, barrelling through the Entrance Hall and arrowing straight for the front steps. The hallway had been swept clear of debris, with the House Cup gemstones brushed into glittering piles against the walls, and the gruesome slicks of blood had been mopped up, though there were still dark rust-coloured stains on the flagstones that it would take several *Scourgify*s to resolve.

Ron’s long legs had him loping ahead, with Draco nipping at his heels and Hermione lagging behind. She was weighing the option to slip into her Animagus form, given it was built for speed, when Draco took a stumble, nearly bringing Hermione down with him as he crumpled to the ground like someone had just Vanished all the bones from his body.

She bit back an irritated growl at his clumsiness, reaching for his elbow to help him back to his feet—

When he seized violently and gave a choking, gurgling gasp. His back heaved, sending him surging forward, and his face cracked against the stone tiling before he rolled onto his side, convulsing.

“Fuck it all—is he having a fit?!” Ron groaned. “We’ve got to get him outside if he’s gonna transform—”

“H—he’s not, this isn’t—” Hermione sputtered, thoughts aflurry. Draco was scrabbling frantically at his shirt. “He’s choking or—or he can’t breathe—” She sank to her knees beside him, shoving her beaded bag at Ron. “Help me stabilise him! Something’s terribly wrong—”

“You think?” Ron huffed, rifling through the bag for her Healer’s Kit.

“I mean this isn’t a rogue transformation!” She knew her voice was shrill, but she really didn’t care, and she began casting Diagnostic Charms with abandon. He hadn’t been dosed with any potion or poison that she could see, and they’d been right by his side for the past twenty minutes—if anyone had hit him with a Curse, surely she or Ron would have noticed, or else been hit themselves as well.

Ron got her Healer’s Kit out, popping it open and arranging the little trays inside for easy access. Draco had stopped his furious squirming and heaving, which might have been relieving, except his colour was going terribly off now, a sickly grey pallor tainting his cheeks, and she could tell his languorous movements were not from whatever had happened relenting but instead *worsening*. His limbs grew rigid under her probing touch, and his mouth stopped working. Her Diagnostic Charm began trilling in warning—

“Fuck—*fuck!*” she hissed, feeling her own throat closing up in panic. Draco’s struggles slowed to a sluggish crawl before he seized up altogether, and the Diagnostic Charm gave an angry blare of alarm.

“Hermione?!” Ron warbled worriedly. “Hermione—what’s—”

“Shut up!” she cried, and she *was* crying, real nasty, snotty tears over Draco-bloody-Malfoy, as she raised her wand to cast a spell she had hoped she would never need in order to restart his failing heart. She forced it to beat, conducting its rhythm with her wand, and the Diagnostic Charm quieted, though it still spat out terrible, *horrible* readings that said what anyone with eyes could as easily tell just by *looking* at him: Draco was dying—was *dead* really, this was just artificial life support. She forced her breathing to steady, knowing that if she stopped, if she interrupted the Charm, his heart would fail again and might not be revived this time.

What the fuck was going on? It wasn’t the Killing Curse—he’d *be* dead, just dead, alive one moment and dead the next, if it had been that. This had been a swift but still measured descent, like someone had unplugged him and his back-up battery had wound down. She had to think—*think* what could have possibly caused an otherwise healthy wizard to just *keel over*—

A dark thought lodged in her throat like a bezoar, and she whispered in a harried rush, “Go get Charlie.”

“What?” Ron looked at her like she was mad. “*Charlie?*”

“Just go get him! Hurry!”

He didn’t try to argue again, lurching to his feet and racing for the Great Hall, where they had last seen the better bulk of the Weasleys. She prayed she wasn’t right; she’d been called a know-it-all and an insufferable swot all her life, but never had she wanted, so desperately, to be *wrong* about something.

And maybe it wasn’t *that*. Harry had assured her it wasn’t serious, after all. Perhaps dragons were just particularly sensitive to lingering spell residues, and Draco’s system had been overwhelmed. Or—or maybe one of the wilting bouquets in the Hufflepuff Common Room had included dragonsbane, or vervaine, or asphodel.

She cursed under her breath. She *would not* lose another person tonight, not if she could help it. Lupin and Tonks and Lavender and poor Colin Creevey... She hadn't been able to help them, but she *could* and *would* save Draco. Harry...Harry would kill her if anything happened to him on her watch. Oh *god*, where was he? Why had he left them like this? They were barely holding this little coalition together; Harry was their glue. Their pole star. He didn't always know where he was going himself, or what to do, but his mere presence kept hope alive. Except now he'd fucked off to god knew where, and Draco was dying under her nose, and Ron was trying to stay strong, but he was preoccupied with ensuring his family's safety. They were scattered, they were failing.

They couldn't have come this far, only to stumble here at the end.

She took one of Draco's hands in her free one, ignoring how it felt like a lump of cold, dead flesh and giving it a tight squeeze. "Get your shit together, Malfoy..." she muttered thickly.

Ron was back two minutes later with Charlie in tow, and his befuddled expression said Ron hadn't bothered to explain why they needed him. His eyes boggled at the sight of Draco laid out flat on the cold flagstones, and he swallowed, visibly shaken by the prospect of yet more death.

"You're the only one I could think to ask," Hermione confessed, voice watery and thick with emotion. She sniffed. "He's dying..."

"Yeah, I...I can see that..." Charlie said weakly. "But I'm not sure what you think I can do? If you want, I saw Madame Pomfrey back in the Great Hall—"

Hermione shook her head fiercely, daring to glance up from her wandwork. "No—no, I mean: he's a dragon Animagus. Understand?" Charlie narrowed his eyes, frowning. "He just collapsed here, without warning, and his condition nose-dived. I can't find anything physically wrong with him, so I thought maybe...maybe that had something to do with it?" She bit her lip, unable to shake the feeling she was speaking out of turn, but Draco was hardly in a conversational state, and Harry wasn't around to explain his involvement with Draco himself. "Just—Harry's missing, and we're worried..." She

fought down another wave of anger and frustration. “We’re worried he might have gone to give himself over to Voldemort, and...and Draco’s, um—well he and Harry—”

“Oh shit,” Charlie whispered, dropping to his knees and crawling close as he ran his eyes over Draco proper. “*This* is what Harry was talking about?”

“What do you mean ‘what Harry was talking about?’” Ron pressed, glancing back and forth between Charlie and Hermione with quick, nervous flicks of his eyes.

Charlie licked his lips and reached for Hermione’s Healer’s Kit, picking through the potions ingredients with a discerning eye. “He asked me about dragon Animagi at his birthday party last summer—I thought it was just a passing curiosity, but then he asked about their mates. About how they’d...” He trailed off, gaze gone distant, and his face drained of colour. “Oh shit.” His breath came in quick, frightened pants, and he ran his hands through his hair. “Oh shit—oh *shit*.”

“What?!” Ron asked, frantic now. “What’s—do you know what’s wrong? What’s happening to him?”

“It’s not him,” Charlie said softly. “It’s Harry. If—if this one’s like *this*, for no reason at all, then it means...it means that Harry’s...”

“It bloody well does *not*!” Ron yelled with a raw, sorrowful fury, actually shoving Charlie hard across the chest. He followed Charlie down to the ground, crawling over him and grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, giving a good, hard shake. “You fix him!” he roared, incensed. “You fix him *right now*, we’ve got to go and save Harry’s good-for-nothing arse! Or—” A thought appeared to strike him. “Or you take over the Charm!” Ron turned back to Hermione, face so red his freckles were nearly invisible and eyes shining. He reached for Hermione’s wrist. “Let’s go! Charlie’ll watch over Malfoy, and you and me—we’ll go find Harry and—and we’ll—”

Hermione shook him off, though, rubbing the heel of her hand in her eyes to force back the tears that wanted to cascade down her flushed cheeks. She shook her head in harsh rejection, and Ron wailed.

“Hermione *please*, please let’s...we *have* to...” he begged.

He made another feeble grab for her, and she slapped him away with a sharp, snotty *No!* She forced herself to concentrate on the Resuscitation Charm, wary of missing any beats. “I won’t leave him,” she grit out. “And neither will you. Harry’s *not dead*, because Draco isn’t either.” She would cast the Charm as many times as it took, keep some semblance of life in Draco’s body for as long as it took for Harry to find his way back from...from wherever he’d foolishly disappeared off to.

She would keep Draco alive until Harry came back. It was really that simple.

The Choice

Harry lay in darkness, listening to the silence. He liked the quiet—so...relaxing. When had been the last time he'd had some real peace and quiet? When had he *ever* been anywhere so completely and totally *dead*?

Even without looking up, he could sense that, wherever he was, he was alone in this place. It was just how it felt, that kind of comfortable solitude, with nobody watching. Nobody was there—if 'there' was even a place and not just a state of Harry's mind.

Lying there, in the nowhere place, he eventually concluded that he would have to get up and move, because whatever he was lying on was not very comfortable, and he thought he could feel a cramp forming. It was a somewhat comforting thought—because you couldn't feel things in dreams, could you? So if he could feel, then this must be an actual place and not simply something he'd concocted in his head.

It was here that Harry realised he was naked—not a stitch on, and it wasn't just his limbs angled stiffly and pressed uncomfortably against hard surfaces, no. Shame would have typically overtaken him here, but he found he was strangely calm—perhaps because he felt so confident of his solitude? Still, the situation was just a bit intriguing. How had he come to lose his clothes? When had he last had any on? Did clothes still exist in this—limbo, he supposed?

It was only on registering that what he had thought to be darkness had only been the product of closed eyes that he decided to chance opening them—which, he found, he was able to do. Oh good, he still had eyes here. That was all the important bits accounted for, then.

Except opening his eyes revealed a bright white mist—too bright for Harry, and he winced, reflexively closing his eyes again before opening them once more, slowly this time.

The mist, he discovered as his vision came into greater clarity, was a curious thing, pulling away from him as he reached out into it and crawling back in when he drew back, as if it could only be dispelled by his presence. Slowly, he shifted upright and found the floor to be good and solid—smooth, with no texture and neither warm nor cool. Simply there. Not unlike Harry.

As his awareness of existing grew, he began to pat himself down. Nothing hurt—no wounds, that is—so he supposed he was all in one piece. But—he touched his face—hadn't he had glasses? He supposed that explained the soft, dreamlike blur everything had. For all that 'everything' constituted here in this strange limbo-like place. His fingers crawled up his face to brush over his forehead. Scar, still there, but for the first time in he couldn't remember how long, not pulsing angrily.

A noise punctuated the clear, tinny silence of the nothingness: a strange thumping, as if something were flailing and in pain. Like a kitten stuffed into a sack and thrown into a ditch.

He couldn't pinpoint the source—and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to. Pitiful as the sound was, it also felt...like he wasn't meant to hear it. Like *no one* was. A new sensation began to pump through him, familiar and unmissed: *shame*, and he suddenly was no longer fine being nude, not with this strange, sad something out there in the nothing.

As if by magic—he turned and saw, folded neatly only a few paces away, a set of robes. Immediately he drew them on, luxuriating in the scent of warm, fresh linens. And curiously, they fit perfectly, as if they'd been tailored just for him at Twilfitt and Tattings. Appearing out of nothing, just when he'd thought about them, prepared just in his size...

The Room of Requirement. Was that where he was? He stood, smoothing out his new robes, and peered into the strange white mist of nothingness. The mist drew back, as if at his will, and he began to make out more and more of the room. It had a floor, this he'd known, but now he could see it also had a ceiling—covered in latticed glass and curving into a dome, like in St. Pancras—or King's Cross. There was bright light streaming

through, and he wondered if it was sunlight—if he really was *somewhere* and not *nowhere*.

More and more of the mist pulled back, revealing a massive hall that reminded Harry of the Great Hall. Everywhere his gaze fell, a something blossomed from the nothing: fantastic tapestries woven seemingly of pure gold and silver and gleaming white platinum covered the walls; and long lines of marble columns the size of full-grown trees stretched in neverending lines into the distance.

Perhaps it was a palace. A Palace of Requirement, then.

A warbling cry trilled behind him, and something brushed his leg, sending Harry leaping away before he nearly trampled underfoot a—peacock?

A lovely peacock with lustrous white plumage strutted about proudly, head bobbing, keeping close to Harry as it circled him and pecking occasionally at the mist, as if hoping to scrounge up some bugs or grain. It kept one wary pink eye trained on Harry at all times, and he watched it, curious and confused, because why on earth had the Room—Palace—of Requirement sent him a bird?

He searched his surroundings once again, struggling to place himself. All was hushed and still, save for the peacock's chittering and those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from somewhere close by, still shrouded in the mist...

The more he looked, the more he saw. The mist cleared a bit more, and he found he was in a wide, open space, bright and clean, supported by those towering columns that stretched up to the domed-glass ceiling. Now that he could properly appreciate it, he realised it was larger by far than the Great Hall, larger than anywhere he'd ever been before—and quite empty. He thought he might be the only living thing there, except for the peacock and—

Oh, *god*.

There, curled on the ground underneath a stone bench newly uncovered by the mist

lay...a child. Or something like a child—it was tiny and naked and looked as if its skin had been flayed from its bones. It shuddered under the bench, and in between thumps as it convulsed, it released rasping, desperate breaths. This was what had been making the horrible noises—still *was* making them.

The peacock hissed angrily at it, ruffling its feathers to puff itself up into something more formidable. Harry sympathised; he was afraid of the horrible thing as well. Not because it might hurt him—but because he might be forced to try and help it, this repulsive little thing. He could feel a sense of urgency in his blood, that he must go to it. Must reach out for it. Mustn't look away. That he had to face this...this thing that had found its way, without Harry's permission, into this little sanctuary.

He forced himself to draw slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. The peacock made warning chittering noises at him that he swore he could almost understand, kind of like how he could almost understand Draco when he transformed—

Oh right, that was where he'd seen the peacock before: Draco's lonely mental moor. That seemed like ages ago, now that he thought about it—and given the strange way time seemed to flow here, perhaps it had been.

Soon, he stood near enough he could touch the thing, if he wanted to. This close, it looked somehow more and less like a human child, and he knew the humane thing would be to comfort it somehow, this ruined mess, but—

“You cannot help.”

He spun around so quickly he nearly tripped over his own feet, and the peacock flared in alarm, flapping wildly and sending up a shower of downy white fluff.

Albus Dumbledore was walking towards him, sprightly and upright. Alive. His robes of midnight blue with golden threading reminded Harry uncomfortably of the shroud in which Dumbledore's body had been wrapped for his funeral and seemed entirely out of step with the clean lines and fresh white *everything* of their surroundings. As if that were the truly bizarre thing about this moment.

“Harry,” he said, arms spread wide in welcome. He was whole now and undamaged, no signs of dragonfire scarring. No blackened, Cursed hand. “Well, aren’t *you* a sight?” He sighed with a smile, then inclined his head. “Will you walk with me? I believe we’ve some catching up to do, and I cannot *wait* to hear your stories.”

Harry stood stock still as Dumbledore strode away—then quickly snapped into mute action, if nothing else eager to leave the place where the flayed child lay whimpering under a bench. He jogged to draw up alongside Dumbledore, and then they walked for a while in companionable silence, the tall columns passing in lines, until they came to another bench—this time with no disgusting creature lurking beneath.

Dumbledore sat down first, patting the bench in invitation, and Harry slid next to him, never once taking his eyes off of his old headmaster, somehow fearful he might disappear again into the mist if Harry didn’t keep him squarely in his sights. The peacock had followed on quick feet and now leapt up into Harry’s lap, settling down like a broodhen with its feet curled in comfortable repose beneath it and tiny claws digging into the folds of Harry’s robes.

Harry stared and stared, searching for something—he didn’t rightly know *what*—that might confirm whether or not this was truly happening, if Dumbledore was actually here, or if he was perhaps a figment Harry’s mind had created, another item prepared by this place at Harry’s unconscious request.

He was every bit the Dumbledore Harry had held in his mind—the Dumbledore he’d always wanted to remember, in his prime, not the way he’d been there at the end. There was no weeping, broken man forced to recall a lifetime of regrets—only a wispy silvery beard and bright, sparkling blue eyes peering down at Harry from behind grandfatherly spectacles. Even his nose was still crooked—and Harry recalled he now knew just how that had happened.

This *was* Dumbledore. Except...

“But—you’re dead,” said Harry, stating the obvious, and Dumbledore gave a bright little chortle that made the peacock lift its head and release a warning chirrup.

“Oh, yes, quite.”

Harry drew the inevitable conclusion: “Then...I’m dead as well?” He knew the thought ought to trouble him, and it did—but in a removed sort of way. The dying had been the scary part; being dead itself did not seem so bad.

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, his lips curving into an even broader smile, as if he had been waiting for Harry to ask. “Yes, I can see how you might think that. This place does certainly evoke that feeling, doesn’t it?” Dumbledore turned his face up to the glittering ceiling, letting the warm light bathe him. “But while I cannot be entirely sure—even now, some mysteries still elude me—I think the answer is *no*.”

He was beaming, and Harry could not understand why. He shook his head in confusion. “I’m sorry... *No*?”

“No,” repeated Dumbledore. “Or perhaps more aptly, *not yet*.”

Oh yes, this was definitely Dumbledore—half-answers and all. “But—that...” He reached to touch the lightning scar again, though for some reason now he could not feel it. Had it...had it disappeared? Or was this just another way in which this limbo was granting him what he had always wished for? Anonymity—or at least normality. “I should have died.” He found he was suddenly desperate to explain that he’d done exactly as Dumbledore had insisted he must if he wanted Voldemort to be truly defeated. He’d *done it*. “I let him do it! I went to him, and I let him kill me—I let him destroy the Horcrux inside me!”

“Indeed—and you’re as brave a man as I have *ever* known for that,” said Dumbledore. “I cannot imagine how difficult it was for you to do that. I would not wish it on my worst enemy—only on one of my dearest companions.”

Harry had not felt very brave at the time, this much he could recall. It was strange, the trek from the castle, through the forest... The details were fleeting, like a fading dream. He could not recall the terror and nerves that had wracked him in that moment, walking to his doom, but he knew they had been there. He swallowed. “So I failed?” It was the

only logical conclusion, if he was here—perhaps not dead, or not dead *yet*. They had been meant to destroy each other, there at the end.

“Oh, my boy,” Dumbledore said, laying one hand on his shoulder and leaning in close. “You have succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. And *that* is why you’re here.”

Harry was not ashamed to say these words, meant as compliments though they probably were, *irritated* him. Even here, Dumbledore was not sharing his secrets—not proactively at least. Harry would have to drag them from his gently smiling lips.

“...I’ve had something of a day,” Harry said. “If you could explain, sir?”

“Explain what? Surely you already *know*—after your ‘something of a day’,” Dumbledore said, frustratingly Socratic in his responses, as if Harry were still his student.

Harry resigned himself to puzzling through the whole mess on his own. “I let him kill me,” Harry repeated, half to himself, and he tried to think it over, to recall those final, horrible moments, even though he really didn’t want to. His hand came up to stroke the soft, downy back of the peacock, calming it and himself in the same motion.

“You let him *attempt* to do so,” Dumbledore corrected. “Only a minor quibble.”

“I let him cast the Killing Curse at me, and there was a piece of his soul that was in me... The container—me—was destroyed...” A lump lodged in his throat, considering his own mortality so academically. How ever did portraits manage it? “And...and so the piece of his soul that was inside me...” Harry frowned at the implication. “It’s gone?”

Dumbledore’s smile was growing, and Harry felt a bit like he was being patronised—if Dumbledore tried to offer him House points for shrewd reasoning, he didn’t know how he might react. “Precisely! He unwittingly destroyed the bit of himself that had latched on to you like a parasitic leech. And with that, you’re wholly yourself once more, dear boy.”

Harry did not feel half as thrilled at the prospect as Dumbledore, still preoccupied with the whimpering, ruined *thing* they had left behind. He glanced over his shoulder, but they were far from the bench under which the terrible creature still lurked.

“What *was* that, Professor?”

“None of either of our concerns—as I said, you cannot help it, nor should you waste any more of your precious time trying to do so.”

That suited Harry just fine. “And...and what is *this*?” he asked, hand settled on the peacock’s back. It blinked up at Harry with curious red eyes, giving a soft plaintive chirrup that suggested he was being lax in his stroking duties.

Dumbledore cocked his head. “I’ve never been much of a bird watcher, my boy, but I do believe that is a peacock.”

“Well, yes, I do know that, but I’m more confused as to why it’s here?”

He was starting to get an idea about the sad creature under the bench, but he still wasn’t quite sure where the peacock had come from. Had he wished for it somehow, like the robes? He definitely didn’t recall the Room of Requirement being able to supply living creatures to its occupants.

“I’m afraid you would have to ask the peacock that.”

Harry had not missed his cryptic, frustrating responses to otherwise straightforward questions.

Deciding that the peacock was one of the less important curiosities he was dealing with at the moment, Harry continued their conversation, still confused as to how he wasn’t dead (yet), as Dumbledore maintained. “But—Voldemort still used the Killing Curse on me. The piece of his soul that was embedded in me was destroyed *because* of that, you just said—”

“*You* just said, but continue.”

“So just—” He sighed. “How am I still alive? You don’t just *survive* the Killing Curse—”

“*You* did,” Dumbledore reminded pointedly, and Harry had the strangest sense he’d had

a conversation much like this before.

“Well, yeah, but no one died for me this time. That was kind of the point.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Voldemort has taken much from you. He took your parents. He took your friends. He took your safety and security—he took your childhood. He took your school years. He has taken and taken and *taken* from you, and oftentimes he suffered no ill or immediate consequences of his actions. But today, I think, he will find he has suffered *dearly* for one particular thing he took from you. Something he took from you...so that he could become *him* once more.”

Harry thought back, closing his eyes and letting his fingers drift in hypnotic strokes over the peacock’s back. It was the softest thing, and warm, and it curled into him with content little warbles. What had Voldemort taken from him? So much. But to become ‘Voldemort’, he’d taken...

The answer came like his robes had: out of nothing and suddenly *there* in his mind. “He took my blood,” said Harry. “In the graveyard.”

Dumbledore clapped, his enthusiasm startling the peacock, which dug its claws into Harry’s trousers and hissed in reprobation, its crest raised in alarm. “That he did—and in doing so, he drew Lily’s protection of *you* into *himself*, granting you both that small measure of magic that has meant and will mean so much. He linked the two of you, tying your life to his own—while he lives, so do you.”

Not dead *yet*, Dumbledore had said. He hadn’t failed after all—but then, he hadn’t entirely succeeded either. He’d thought if he died, then Voldemort would too—what was the point in living if it meant Voldemort hadn’t been defeated? The war would go on—his friends would fight and die, this time *without* him.

Harry’s head was starting to hurt—a good, old-fashioned confusion headache at least, and not the agonising throb along his scar.

The whimpering and thumping of the creature under the bench was growing louder now,

its yowls more plaintive. The urge to rush over and help, somehow—to at least Summon a blanket with which to swaddle it—was almost overwhelming, and he thought if he hadn't had the peacock napping on his lap, he might have tried to do so.

Harry still thought the notion they could do nothing to help the thing sounded rather callous, but his curiosity about the state of things won out eventually, and he was content to leave it be for now. "I know I'm going to sound like a broken record, sir, but I'm afraid I still don't quite get it. How did a piece of Voldemort's soul even get inside me in the first place? I mean, wouldn't that make me..."

Dumbledore smiled. "A Horcrux?"

"I wasn't gonna say it..."

"Alas, sometimes we must confront uncomfortable truths about ourselves if we ever want to move past them. Yes, Harry—you were the seventh Horcrux. The only one he never meant to make. When he came to kill you that night, he had already created six others—already split his soul in unfathomable ways. The murders of your parents—and attempted murder of *you*—were the final straws that broke him into the less-than-human state he inhabited for the next decade and more. The sundering of his physical form was accompanied by the sundering once more of his soul—a shard left behind, unwittingly hidden inside *you* until this very moment."

It was no easier a truth to swallow now than it had been when he'd heard Dumbledore say it in Snape's memory.

A Horcrux. He was a *Horcrux*. He hadn't just hosted a shard of Voldemort's soul—it had *invaded* him, worked its way into the cracks and crevices of what made Harry *Harry* and tried to twist and corrupt him, as had been done to Tom Riddle's diary and the locket.

Fuck. How many dark thoughts had been his own—and how many due to this little parasitic piece of Voldemort latched on to him? Or had they all been his and the Horcrux only magnified them? Did he have a temper, or had it been the Horcrux?

No. No, he definitely had a temper; Dumbledore had been testing it while they conversed. It was almost comforting, knowing some parts of him were definitely his own, even if he wasn't particularly proud of them.

"Voldemort," Dumbledore continued, "is an arrogant creature. He thinks himself all-powerful, all-knowing. But you and I have both seen that there is *much* power in the world that Voldemort has made no effort to understand. Love. Friendship. Loyalty. These may seem trifles, they may seem pithy things—but these are among the oldest of values and carry a meaning, a force, deeper than any magic we have yet created. But Voldemort is, in so many ways, like the Muggles he despises: if he cannot see it himself, then it must not exist.

"He cannot comprehend Lily's love for you—and so he never understood the protective enchantment her sacrifice gave you. Never understood that it lived in your blood. Never understood that by taking your blood, imbuing himself with it, he took in her love, her magic. His undying body has ensured that her sacrifice endures—and through it, so do you." Dumbledore looked triumphant, no longer simply content, but self-satisfied. "Not dead yet, as I said."

"So, all this time—all these *years*—you knew I was walking around with a little bit of him stuck inside me?" It came out an accusation, which *good*—it was meant as such. Harry tried very hard not to gape, but he didn't think he succeeded.

"I guessed, I confess. But my guesses have, usually, been good."

"And you didn't tell me? You didn't try to—I dunno—get it out of me?"

"Would you have liked me to have conked you on the head in your cradle? As we have just been discussing, there is only one way to destroy a Horcrux."

"...Might've been preferable to ten years with the Dursleys..." Harry muttered, and Dumbledore, for the first time, gave a wince.

"...I owe you something of an apology, I think." *Something* of an apology was putting it

mildly, but Harry let it stand. “I knew you would not have the easiest of lives, growing up in their care—but where Voldemort places no stock in concepts like *love* and *family*, perhaps I place too much stock in it. I genuinely believed they would treat you fairly, if for no other reason than you were blood.”

“Blood’s not nearly as important as you might think, sir,” Harry said flatly, thinking of *what-might-have-beens* growing up with Sirius, or Remus, or even as a Weasley. “Though I don’t reckon it’s possible to place too much stock in love or family.”

Dumbledore nodded, having nothing more to say to that. An awkward silence settled between them, and when it became too much to bear, Harry groped for a topic to continue the conversation, hoping to dispel the tension. “Something happened. The Death Eaters found me, when I left Privet Drive for the last time—and he chased me down and cast a spell at me.” Dumbledore nodded for him to continue, though he did not seem terribly curious, as if he had heard this story before. “It caught me off guard, and I wasn’t prepared to defend myself—”

“Professor Lockhart will be absolutely heartbroken to hear his duelling lessons fell on deaf ears, I dare say.”

“—but my wand...my wand acted on its own. It cast back at him, without my meaning to, before his spell struck, and—and the spells collided. My wand broke his—one he’d borrowed from Lucius Malfoy. Shattered it to pieces.” Harry shook his head. “*Why?*”

Dumbledore stroked his beard, “Well, I will confess that, like so many things surrounding the two of you, I can’t rightly be *sure* of the reasoning...”

“Have a guess, then,” said Harry. “I hear they’re usually good.” Dumbledore laughed.

“Indeed. Well, you know that you and Voldemort have been connected since the moment he tried to kill you—though in truth, you have been connected since before then, through prophecy and assumption and magics we may never entirely understand. Regardless, his link between you was doubled when he took your blood to rebuild his human form in the graveyard that night. In that moment, you became connected on a level neither he nor

you nor anyone could possibly comprehend, knotting your destinies even more securely than before, more than any two wizards in history. Your blood, your souls, even your *wands* shared a bond—one you witnessed manifest not long after he regained a corporeal form, if you’ll recall.”

“*Priori Incantatem*, right? His wand started...regurgitating, I suppose, the spirits of the people he’d just killed.”

“A crude description, and not entirely accurate, but we will let it be. Yes, and while you and I know that the cores reacted in this way because your wand was twin to Voldemort’s own, what is important is that *he did not know this*.” Dumbledore locked eyes with Harry, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You frightened him in that moment, Harry. He’d failed to kill you once already, something he’d chalked up to a freak accident—and here you were again, defying death, usurping his power. He has always lived in fear of his own mortality, and you were that fear made flesh and given life.

“When you duelled in the graveyard, manifesting that connection between your wands, something strange happened. Typically in a duel, when spells collide, there is an exchange of energies that is brief, nigh imperceptible, and abruptly cut. This duel between twin-core wands, though, wielded by two wizards who already shared such an intimate bond, magnified that exchange a *thousand*-fold. Your magic—not your wand, mind; only your magic *through* your wand—recognised a brother at the other end of that exchange, imbibing just a small bit of Voldemort’s own magical signature—”

Harry blanched, sputtering, “Wait—now you mean to say I’ve been carrying around a piece of Voldemort in *my wand* since Fourth Year?” He wasn’t sure why, but this thought shook him more than the realisation a bit of Voldemort’s soul had taken up residence alongside his own for sixteen years. Maybe because he’d used his wand every day, thought of it as a physical extension of himself. He *loved* it, loved how it gave his magic form, and he didn’t want to think he’d somehow caused it to be tainted with that bastard’s essence.

“That is one way of putting it, I suppose. So when he engaged you again, that night you

fled your aunt and uncle's home, your magic—your wand—saw come before it that same familiar presence...and it reacted, sending back the bit of Voldemort it had stolen from him those years earlier. Some of his own magic—magic more than even Lucius's wand could hope to contain." He spread his hands. "So, *poof*."

Harry took a breath, heartbeat skipping. "Then...then do you think I could've finished him off? If I'd been able to keep up the duel? If I'd retaliated, instead of letting the wand do all the work?"

"It *is* possible," Dumbledore allowed. "But as I said: this is merely conjecture. Even as vaunted a wandmaker as Ollivander could not, I think, have predicted what might happen or explained it to Voldemort. Certainly not without knowing your own history in detail."

A thought struck Harry, though, and he wilted. "...But most of the Horcruxes hadn't yet been destroyed. So long as at least one remained, he could've always come back, right?"

"Indeed, he could have—but it would have taken a great deal of time and effort, and who is to say he could have rallied his Death Eaters to his side a third time, after they had seen him beaten twice? You might not have killed him—but you may well have defeated him. Just as you might have managed to strike him a sore blow had you raised your wand—now your Elder Wand, congratulations and my condolences—against him when you met him in the Forest."

Harry frowned. "...I didn't want to chance a 'might have'..." He'd wanted it to be done, to be *over*. He hadn't wanted to abandon his friends to the ravages of another drawn-out war. There would still be fighting, there would likely still be dying—but if they could finish his work, kill the snake, kill *Voldemort*, then this might well be the end of it. For now, at least.

Harry turned his head to take in more of the Palace, which was revealing more of itself with each passing moment. "What is this place, anyways?"

"Now *that* is a fine question." Dumbledore eased to his feet, cocking his head in curious

confusion as he took in their surroundings. “I’ve been trying to figure that out for a while myself—looks familiar, wouldn’t you say?”

Now that he mentioned it, it *did* look familiar. “It looks...” Harry said slowly, “like a train station. Maybe King’s Cross?” He squinted—in the distance, beyond the tall, tall columns, he could see the mist pulling away to reveal what looked like platforms, though there were no trains in the bays or passengers milling about, as he was accustomed to seeing. He thought, from their position, they might even be sitting on a bench between what would be platforms 9 and 10, and he wondered idly what might happen if he rushed through the wall separating the two.

“King’s Cross Station!” Dumbledore placed his hands on his hips, taking a few steps and looking up and down the ‘platform’ forming around them now. “You really think so?”

Harry felt his irritation pique. Dumbledore was the one who had put the question to *him*, after all. “I mean, it’s obviously a train station of *some* sort, right?”

“Without any trains?”

And then, as if on cue, the mist drew away from further down the line—and a train materialised from nothing, looking not unlike the Hogwarts Express but made of soft blues and silvers with gold gilding. Harry pointed. “But there is a train.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said, a soft little thing. “So there is. So there is.”

It sounded a bit like he was humouring Harry, and he recalled now that he was still quite angry with Dumbledore and hadn’t made it through even half the reasons why. “The Deathly Hallows,” he said, apropos of nothing, and settled back onto the bench.

“Oh, yes...” Dumbledore said, a ghost of worry flitting across his features—good. He could stand to feel a little guilt. Dumbledore sighed and joined Harry once more on the bench, hands clasped between his knees. “I know I’ve asked a lot of you—like Voldemort, I took and took and took from you, giving little in return. So I know I’ve no right to ask it, but I would hope that you might find it in your heart to forgive me.

Someday, at least.” He scrambled to explain himself, “It’s only, I worried—needlessly so, I can see now—that you would suffer from the same foibles as I did, that you would not be able to resist their temptation if presented with them freely and wholly. Without having to *work* for them, without understanding them. To give you the Cloak, why that was a trifle—and if it had not undone your father, I saw no reason it might undo you. But the Stone? The Wand? These...these I did not entirely trust myself with, and so I did not entirely trust you with them.” He raised his head, fixing Harry with plaintive blue eyes. “How foolish an assumption of me, to not recognise wholly, as I have on some deeper level for a time now, that you are a better man than I. A *good* man, as I hear it.”

“What...what are you talking about?” Harry asked, suddenly wrong-footed by the startling sincerity in Dumbledore’s apology. He had expected more cryptic rigmorole.

“They aren’t *Hallows*—merely powerful magical objects. Powerful and *dangerous*—something I must confess...I have always been attracted to.” Dumbledore slumped back against the bench, his hands curling in his lap. “Perhaps I thought I could tame him—tame them, I mean. Perhaps I thought...” He shook his head. “It matters not what I thought. I was a fool all the same. Seeking to conquer the unconquerable is folly—a trap that exposes you for who you truly are. In Voldemort’s case, a scared little boy. In mine, an arrogant old man.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably—it felt a little bit like he wasn’t even a part of this conversation anymore, that maybe Dumbledore was arguing with himself.

Dumbledore took a shuddering breath and gave a little sniff, head ducked—Harry was grateful for it, he didn’t really want to see his old headmaster cry. “I find myself wondering at odd times...if Voldemort and I didn’t have more in common than we either wanted to admit. We both had visions for the future, goals we would sacrifice most anything to accomplish. We wanted those Hallows—spent our lives searching for them. All with the goal of becoming Master of Death—whatever that might mean.”

Harry nearly choked on his own tongue. “Wh—don’t be ridiculous! That’s like saying Voldemort and I are alike because we both like treacle tart!”

Dumbledore glanced up, wiry brows shooting into his hairline. “He likes treacle tart? Unexpected...”

“I—it’s a hypothetical, sir,” Harry sighed, scrubbing at his hair. “The point is, unless you were out there killing without compunction and stringing up Muggles and torturing your enemies, then I feel comfortable saying you’re *nothing* like him. This—Master of Death stuff, the means are important here, not the ends.” This, he wanted Dumbledore to understand, if only because self-pity, he’d been informed by a reliable source, was just not attractive. He could feel his anger being muted by this place; everything from the living world was slowly but surely fading from his mind. How long could he linger here, he wondered, before he forgot his friends and loved ones altogether? “You chased Hallows—you didn’t make Horcruxes.”

“Hallows, not Horcruxes,” murmured Dumbledore, wringing his hands in his lap. “But perhaps no less bloody, if I had persisted...”

“...You mean if you’d gone along with what Grindelwald wanted?”

Dumbledore gave him a warning look. “*Not* what Gellert wanted. What *we* wanted; do not pretend I was not complicit in this. I am sure Bathilda painted a pleasant enough picture for those who might like to believe I was coerced, but you must know I was no starry-eyed innocent. I think you will agree with me that, on the whole, the truth—no matter how nasty it may be to swallow—sits better in the stomach than a sugar-coated lie.”

Harry could not dispute that.

The creature under the bench continued to whimper, its calls echoing, but Harry wasn’t so distracted by it now, and the peacock was dozing comfortably in his lap, its head tucked under a wing.

“...So it’s all true, then? All that—that claptrap about dominating Muggles and ‘the greater good’?”

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. “I cannot express the depth of my shame for ever having entertained such thoughts—I would blame it on the folly of youth, but we both know you could throw a stone and hit three witches or wizards with more sense in their left thumb than I had that summer.”

Six months back, Harry might have bit out a hearty *You’re damn right!* and held on to his bitter disillusionment, but in a corner of his mind echoed sage words indeed: “*What’s the point of it all if you can’t imagine you’ll be a better person when you’re five-hundred-and-fuckteen years old than you were at seventeen?*”

“But it was Grindelwald who knew about the Hallows first, yeah?”

Dumbledore nodded, looking a touch relieved Harry was not laying into him for his childhood beliefs. “It was he who first informed me of the legend—and of the Hallows’ purported fantastic powers. I didn’t believe him, not at first, but...he fascinated me. And soon enough, what fascinated *him* fascinated me. He had come to Godric’s Hollow not by chance but design—to seek out the grave of Ignotus Peverell.”

“Then the Peverell brothers...they were *real*? Like in the poem—Death really did create the Hallows and gave them to the brothers?”

Dumbledore gave an ambivalent little shrug. “Well, I think there may have been some liberties taken with the details over the years. By this point, I think it is more likely the story is indeed just a story, a tale invented to explain the creation of extraordinary magical items by extraordinary wizards. There are many fantastic things in our world, Harry, but by and large, the simpler explanation tends to be the correct one.” He gave Harry a wink. “But I can only guess.”

“So the Wand...the Stone...and the Cloak.” Harry shook his head. “How did my *dad* wind up with the Cloak?”

“Well, in much the same way *you* wound up with it. It was passed down by a parent. Ignotus gave it to his son, and he gave it to his, and so on and so forth, father to son and mother to daughter until it came into the hands of Ignotus’s last living descendant, born

as Ignotus himself was in the village of Godric's Hollow."

Dumbledore was giving him a very pointed, knowing smile, and Harry goggled; he hadn't *actually* thought his mad ravings had been true. "Me?"

"You, Harry. When James showed it to me, I immediately recognised it for what it was, and you cannot *imagine* the excitement that raced through my blood, holding at last in my hands the third brother's Hallow. I had told myself so many times that my interest in the Hallows lay long-buried in the past...but as you know, I am a consummate liar. I could not resist the idea that I might, in the end, succeed where Gellert had failed and unite the Hallows." His face fell. "More arrogance. Even in my golden years, I still struggled with it. When your parents were murdered, and the Cloak fell into my possession...I made an Unbreakable Vow—with myself—to return it to you once you were of age. I still did not trust myself wholly with it—but if you had it, then at least I might be able to keep it in my sights. Relatively speaking, of course."

"But—you said you'd given up looking for the Hallows when you saw the Cloak. Even though you already had the Elder Wand?"

"I said that I had *told* myself I'd given up, Harry—that is a rather different thing." His voice was strained, and he seemed unable to bring himself to meet Harry's eyes. "I'm a stubborn fool—an idea, once it has taken me, is not soon cast aside." He sighed. "And it had well and *thoroughly* taken me, those many years before. The idea of putting the Muggles in their place—not because I necessarily thought myself better than them, but because I thought them worse than me. Misguided. Barbaric. History of Magic had been one of my favourite subjects in my school years, and time and time again I had seen magical folk and creatures dominated, driven away, persecuted by the Muggles they only wished to live peacefully alongside..." He covered his face with one hand, hanging his head. "And then...there was Ariana."

"You sister?"

Dumbledore nodded. "What those Muggles did to her—what they *forced* her to become. Perhaps you have heard, too, of my father and his quest for revenge? Oh, his efforts

were admirable—at least I thought so at the time. He'd only wanted vengeance, to set things right by gentle, innocent Ariana... But he'd gone about it all wrong and ultimately paid the price, dying alone and forgotten in Azkaban.

“My mother moved on—tried to flee from the shame of my father's actions. She poured herself wholly into caring for Ariana, and while I admired her efforts for a while, her sacrifice...I eventually came to resent her. To resent them *all*. And oh, *Harry...*” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “The resentment *festered*. After all, in my new life, with my new friends and new community, I was gifted! The brightest wizard of my age! Brilliant, with a promising future ahead.” He opened his eyes again, favouring Harry with a wry, sidelong grin. “...Modesty is a trait I have only recently learned—and even now I confess, it is a bit put-on. At the time, I had no compunctions about being exactly what I thought I was: a guiding light for the dullards around me, one to whom others could—nay, *should*—look to for direction. But my light couldn't gleam half as bright plagued by the shadow of the rest of my family's secrets and shame. So I sought an escape—a way out. A path forward for me, on to the glory I felt I had earned. *Deserved.*”

“...You sound a bit Slytherin, Professor.”

“Not the worst name I have been called,” Dumbledore said with a faint smile. “But Slytherins do not own the market on ambition. As I understand it, Mr. Weasley's elder brothers are doing quite well for themselves in their Diagon Alley shop.” The humour faded from his face quickly, though. “And I know these words will ring false, given all I've just told you, but I *did* love my family. Deep down, truly I did. I loved them, as they loved me, but alas—that resentment. I no longer *liked* them—and I was selfish, as we have established. Selfish and cowardly, too fearful to face the truths my mother and brother and even my sister struggled with daily.” He grimaced. “It is a shameful thing to admit, especially in the presence of one who has just shown more courage than I can quite truly grasp myself.”

Harry shifted, discomfited; he had never been accustomed to praise, at least not for deeds in which he felt he had no involvement. Letting Voldemort strike him down had been no choice at all, only a foregone conclusion.

“But then, my mother died, and I was the eldest, the only one left to care my siblings. Ariana wasn’t even aware of herself half the time, and Aberforth...well, Aberforth was Aberforth, dealing with our family’s situation in his own fashion. Suddenly my future no longer held visions of rising to greatness, leading people and earning the respect and acclaim I felt my due. No, now I was to return to my village, angry and bitter and trapped. It was the feeling of being trapped, I think, that weighed the heaviest. Took the greatest toll on me. Oh I could have visitors, I could exchange letters with like-minded scholars and such, but in the end I was there, alone, with siblings who I did not feel any particular affection for—a sentiment, I thought, returned—and who would never appreciate the sacrifice I had made for their well-being.”

Dumbledore’s expression cleared, and the lines seemed to ease a tick, smoothing until he looked somehow forty—or even a hundred and forty—years younger. When he spoke again, his tone had a gruff, almost mischievous rumble to it. “And then *he* came along.”

Harry didn’t need to ask. “Grindelwald.”

Dumbledore nodded. “You cannot imagine what a breath of fresh air he was to one so choked off as I. How his ideas caught me—aroused...my curiosity,” he added with a quirk of his lips, and Harry pointedly looked away, feeling his cheeks heat. “Not even at Hogwarts had I encountered a mind that challenged me so—cocky, arrogant, but so *free*. He was bound by nothing—not the laws of man, nor propriety, nor basic nature it seemed at times. I saw myself a prisoner, with Gellert my freedom. His manifesto spoke of we wizards taking our rightful place as the heads of civilisation, subjugating the simple Muggles and leading all magical peoples into the light. It would be a revolution—and he and I would spark it.”

Harry’s expression must have reflected his unkind thoughts, for Dumbledore tapped the side of his nose and said, “Now, don’t think me so naïve, Harry. I could hear in his words strains of the wizard he would eventually come to be—but you must understand what the world was like at the time. The Muggles were constantly squabbling, often involving wizarding kind in their wars whether we wanted to be or not; Gellert made what I though was a fine point that if the Muggles could not be trusted to govern themselves,

perhaps they needed a stronger hand. It was here I committed myself wholly to the notion of doing ill for the greater good—for the good of wizards *and* for the good of Muggles. Both peoples needed my guiding hand and Gellert’s strong convictions—a beautiful balance, he and I. And if he at times seemed callous, almost cruel, well that was folly of youth, and as he matured so too would his ideals, especially with me at his side.” He sighed in recollection, a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips as he stared into the bright, white nothingness around them. “I will admit I wilfully ignored...too many signs. Closed my eyes, turned away. He was dazzling enough to blind, and if I stuck with it, if I kept him in check and didn’t flinch, then the end result would more than justify the means.”

Harry thought that, even now, Dumbledore was still trying to justify his actions a bit, but he let it stand, instead pressing, “But—what did the Hallows have to do with Grindelwald’s plans? You said he came to Godric’s Hollow looking for the Cloak.”

“Oh, they had *everything* to do with our plans! The Deathly Hallows—when he first put the notion to me, I laughed in his face. Magic could achieve fantastic things, I told him, but there were no shortcuts to true greatness, and if he wanted to see his vision brought to life, we needed to use our minds, our intellect, our cunning—not rely on ancient relics of myth and legend. But he wore at me, shoving evidence and anecdotes down my throat until I choked and was forced to accept that perhaps the Hallows were indeed real and the key to our plans for dominion. The Elder Wand would be the signal of our unstoppable power and a point around which armies would rally. The Resurrection Stone would, Gellert explained, allow us to manipulate the line between life and death, to call upon ancient mages from the past to create a new order of power. Me...well, I had more mundane plans for it, seeing the Stone as way to unite my family once more—and finally being freed from the responsibility of caring for my siblings. They were the only sticking point in all of this, the only thing keeping me from spiriting away into the night at Gellert’s side to finally begin our meteoric rise to glory.”

“And the Cloak?”

Dumbledore frowned in thought. “He’d come to the village seeking the Cloak...but somehow it seemed to be the least important of the Hallows to him. Neither of us felt we

really *needed* it, after all—not for conventional use, we both being adept spellcasters. I expect his interest mainly lay in the completion of the Hallows trio by collecting it—and in doing so becoming what he had referred to as ‘Master of Death’. Invincible.

“Only with the three Hallows gathered together could we hope to complete the important mission laid at our feet. Which meant...we would need to travel, to search the world for clues, follow leads, question and investigate and, if necessary, steal the means to our revolution—the means to ushering in a new world for wizarding kind and Muggles alike! A *better* world.” Dumbledore grimaced, his face lined with sorrow. “...Two months I wasted with Gellert. Two months I spent utterly enthralled by him, by his vision, by his caprice and sharp mind. By his freedom. Two months—two months standing in the full force of his sun, leaving the only family I had left in dark shadow.” He shuddered. “And then summer ended, and so did my delusions.

“Aberforth and I...we could not have been more dissimilar, and that has always been for the best. Where I walked with my head in the clouds, he always kept his feet on firm ground, and so of course it was he who had to bring me back down from the heights, to shout at me those unsavoury truths I had ignored in favour of Gellert. To remind me that I was *still* not free.

“The argument became a fight, a *real* fight, and Gellert...I told myself he lost control. That he’d always had a hot head under that cool exterior, but I think that was another of my calculated lies. I don’t think I’d ever seen him *more* in control, more conscious, more conniving than in that moment. Maybe it was cruelty—or maybe he did it to free me. A twisted sort of love. The only kind I think he was actually capable of.

“Whatever the truth of the matter, the outcome was all the same: Ariana was dead, and nothing would ever be the same again. That summer had been the best of my life...and now it would be the worst.”

Dumbledore gave a little huffing gasp, his voice growing thick with emotion, and Harry caught the glint of tears burning tracks down the weathered cheeks. It was an uncomfortable thing, watching someone you had practically worshipped weep so openly,

and though Harry had been reminded at so many turns that Dumbledore was just as human as anyone else—and just as prone to folly—the sight still moved him.

“My apologies, my boy,” he said with a sniff, dabbing at his eyes and nose with a white handkerchief edged in gold. Harry idly wondered if people with names as long as Dumbledore’s ever bothered to have their belongings monogrammed. “How unbecoming.”

“Oh...no, it’s fine,” Harry assured him, in all honesty, though he didn’t think he sounded that sincere, still wrong-footed by the display.

Dumbledore sniffed again, then swallowed, and when he spoke this time, he sounded as if he had marshalled his emotions. “Well, that was Gellert’s stint in Godric’s Hollow done. He fled, which must have surprised no one but myself. I suppose I imagined us joined at the hip, and if ever there came a need to make a quick departure, it would be at each other’s side. But instead, he vanished in the night—taking with him his light and life and brilliant, dazzling future. A bundle of *what-might-have-been*. I did not feel self-pity here, though. I felt only guilt. Guilt and shame—and that, I thought, as I laid my dear sister in the ground, was also what I had earned. What I *deserved*.”

“Years passed. Gellert continued his plans for conquest without me, as I learned through rumour, and though I had long since abandoned any idea of ever standing at his side in that respect, I cannot deny that it hurt. To think yourself special to someone and be so thoroughly disabused of such a fanciful notion is a humiliation almost palpable in its pain.

“Word was he had procured a powerful new wand for himself, and though most would have put it down to mere fearful gossip, I knew that Gellert had found one of the Hallows without me and would be on to the next in due course. It was around this time that I began to be approached for positions of influence myself—even the Minister for Magic post. But I declined—I had seen what even the *taste* of power could do to me and knew I could not be trusted with it.”

Harry opened his mouth to say that, at the very least, he would have made a *much* better Minister than the likes of Fudge or Scrimgeour. After all, Dumbledore had the

power of self-reflection, the ability to learn from his mistakes. He would have seen Voldemort's return coming, surely; he would have mounted more effective defences. And then Harry might have been reviewing notes right now, cramming for his N.E.W.T.s while gorging himself on a steady supply of exploding bonbons Owled to him by his very-much-alive mother.

But Dumbledore held up a hand, stilling any protests. "No. However poorly you may think others functioned in the post, I had learned well that power only led to my undoing—whether it came in the form of a man or a position." He carefully folded his handkerchief, slipping it back into his midnight blue robes. "Power corrupts those too weak-willed to wield it—which is to say, anyone who seeks it. For the greater good, or otherwise. True power manifests in the moment, in those who are called to be leaders in an hour of need and do so simply because they must. Some still do not grow into it, but others...well." He smiled at Harry, that familiar twinkle back in his eyes. "No, I think altogether I was best suited for a quiet position on the faculty of a wizarding school, where I could make no great mischief. Engaging with young ones and not so much moulding their minds as helping them think for themselves. I think I managed well enough. I was told by a fair few whose opinions I valued that I was a good teacher—"

"You were the best—" Harry started reflexively, his irritation with Dumbledore dashed by the discomfiting display of emotion. It was more and more difficult, now, to recall why he was meant to be angry with Dumbledore—these bits and pieces of his life that were fading like snatches of a dream. He could feel his fury roiling just beneath the surface, but maintaining an outlet for it, remembering its source, was proving impossible the longer he spent here.

"Well, I will thank you for the flattery and not do you the discourtesy of believing it idle. But still, I could have done more, I think. While I hid away at Hogwarts, funnelling my guilt and shame and regret into building a better future for the witches and wizards to come—something I had always aspired to, you will recall—Gellert continued to grow in power. They say he feared me and was amassing forces so that he might be prepared to fend me off if I ever marched against him—and perhaps that was his reasoning. But I would never have done so—because confronting him would mean being met with the

truth.”

Harry frowned. “The truth, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded. “A truth I had been avoiding for many, *many* years by that point. The truth of which of us had in the end actually cast the Curse that killed Ariana. Had it been Gellert? Had it been Aberforth’s misfire? Or...had it been my own spell ricocheting? Had I murdered this innocent, this child who had looked to me as her protector but who I only ever saw as a burden?” His voice started to thicken again with repressed emotion, but he swallowed it down. “That was my greatest fear. Not the corruption of power, not the disappointment of my peers—only the knowledge that I had been the one to snuff out her life. It was terrible enough to know that my neglect of her for a summer fling had put her in danger in the first place—still terrible more to learn I had struck the killing blow.

“And I think on some level Gellert knew about this chink in my armour. He had always been so clever, so skilled at seeking out weak spots. I know he would not have hesitated to mark mine and file them away to capitalise on later. No, whatever might have lain between us at one point...it would have been no trifle to him to use my sister’s death against me and strike what would surely have been a mortal blow. So, as cowards are wont to do, I avoided him. I ignored the pleas from all corners to stand up to him, to leave off grading parchments long enough to put a stop to the senseless violence sweeping the wizarding world. I ignored them until it became no longer possible to do so. I could not let go any longer that which I had inadvertently brought about.

“Of course, many a book has been penned about what happened next. I won the duel—and with it, mastery of the Elder Wand.” He said it in a very small voice, as if he were ashamed. “Even in that moment, I did not want to cross him. I did not want him to look at me with fear, hatred, betrayal. Disappointment. We who would have been young gods together.”

A memory, clear and clarion, came to him through the hazy, muzzy fog: Harry, standing before the Mirror of Erised, enraptured by the false future he saw within. He had a good

idea now of what Dumbledore would have seen when he peered into the Mirror, and it would have been just as much a lie as Harry standing there with his mother and father had been.

“...I don’t think he felt any of those things,” Harry said after a long beat of silence. “Grindelwald. I don’t think he—resented you, or whatever you were afraid of. I saw, when Voldemort found him while he was tracking down the Wand. He said it left him a long time ago...for a better man than he was.” In his mind’s eye, he saw the hunched, skeletal figure defiant, the shadow of the merry-faced Gellert in Dumbledore’s stories still visible, beneath all the years of muck and grime.

Dumbledore looked down at his lap, lips twitching. “Time alone with our thoughts can lead us to finally accept dark truths about ourselves. I would like to think he did feel some sense of the horror he wrought upon the world—and shame for it.” It sounded very diplomatic; Harry didn’t believe it—he knew there was a tiny part of Dumbledore, remembering Grindelwald, young and beautiful and wild and still loving him a little for it. But he let him have his pretty words.

The whimperings of the creature huddled under the bench no longer disturbed Harry, faint and fading as his memories of his life beyond this way-station.

A thought struck Harry here: “Your arm—back in Sixth Year... You tried to use the Resurrection Stone, didn’t you?”

Dumbledore nodded. “You cannot imagine the thoughts that went through my mind when I came across it, quite unwittingly, in the old Gaunt home—” He paused, brows knitting, before smoothing again in wry amusement. “Or perhaps you more than anyone *could* imagine, Harry. Regardless, I confess I quite forgot myself in my emotion and tried to use it straight away, forgetting entirely that it was not merely the Stone but now a Horcrux and thus imbued with dark, dangerous magics. I had spent countless hours poring over texts and accountings concerning this Hallow, and here it was, in my possession! I plucked it from beneath the floorboards of the rotting remains of that ramshackle cottage, placed it on my finger, and imagined that I was about to see them.

Ariana, Mother, Father... That I could finally apologise, that I might show them what I'd done to rectify the sorrow my actions had brought about..."

He cradled his head in his hands, hunched and miserable.

"You must think me such a fool now. After all this time...I had learned *nothing*. I would never have been able to master the Hallows, I could see it now. I would only ever have used them for personal gain, this I had just demonstrated in living colour—the final proof that my dreams of glory had only ever been just that. Childish, naïve dreams."

"But—it was only a natural reaction! I mean, I'm sure I might've done the same if I'd found that ring and known what it was!" No, that was a lie; he *definitely* would have done the same—he was a foolish, impetuous Gryffindor through and through, and without Draco's steady presence ready to clock him sideways when he got too hot-headed, Harry probably would have been his own undoing several times over in his quest to track down Horcruxes. "Who hasn't lost a loved one and wished they could bring them back? You weren't foolish, just...I dunno. Impatient, maybe."

Dumbledore did not seem consoled. "Impatient men cannot unite the Hallows—selfish men, arrogant men, everything I had once been proud to be. That's the rub! The Hallows, like power, cannot be wielded by men who seek them. I had only ever been fit to hold the least among them—the Elder Wand—for I had come upon it reluctantly, defeating its former master in the name of protecting others. That is how one tames a wand of power, Harry: by taking it not for personal gain but to save others. To save others *from it*."

In Harry's mind flashed an image of a dark alcove, Draco clinging close and desperate, begging *Disarm me, please*. A kiss. *Expelliarmus*.

"The Cloak, the Stone, the Wand—they were never meant for me. I was permitted to hold them for a time, but only long enough to pass them on to more worthy possessors than I. Ones who would use them to shelter erstwhile enemies. Ones who would use them to harness courage for self-sacrifice. Ones who would use them to risk their lives and stand up against whatever threatened all they held dear." He lifted his watery blue

eyes to Harry's, patting his hand. "You have earned the Hallows, Harry. You deserve them. You're one man in a million *million*."

At this, Harry felt the very last of his anger ebb away, replaced, instead, by idle curiosity tinged with a hint of frustration. "...Why'd you have to make it so difficult, though?"

Dumbledore gave a wry chuckle. "I confess that was by design. Here again, I imagined in you the same flaws I saw in myself. I worried that if I gave them to you outright, if you did not study them, learn of them, come to fear them even, then you would fall to the same temptation as I and Gellert had. I would beg your forgiveness for such an assumption, but—"

"No, no..." Harry nodded. "I mean, I'm not proud of it, but you're not entirely wrong. Not saying I would've taken up world domination if I'd gotten them around Christmas instead of, you know, five minutes ago or however long it's been, but...I've learned there's value in waiting 'til you're ready for some things." Dumbledore gave him a shrewd look, like he could see right through Harry, and Harry busied himself with petting the peacock, not meeting his gaze.

"...Indeed. But you proved yourself, as I had every confidence you would, and so now, here you stand—not dead yet. The true Master of Death in every sense—for you did not flee death as Voldemort did, as Gellert strove to do, as I flirted with. You walked into its arms, unflinching, knowing in your heart that there are a great many things worth laying down your life for."

Harry supposed that was true—but equally true was the fact that there were so many desperately beautiful people, things, experiences in the living world as well, and a pang of regret echoed in his chest. The peacock stirred in his lap, its long tail swishing softly against the gleaming white floor as it did so.

"Still, it is a blessing that Voldemort never learned of the Hallows—while I doubt he would have had any use for the Cloak, and the Stone would have only reminded him of his own mortality, the Elder Wand would have been a terrible weapon in his hands. He would not have been invincible, no, but..." Dumbledore's brow creased. "It is a path I am

glad we did not have to pass down.”

“You expected him to go after the Wand, though—even without knowing about the Hallows.”

“Oh indeed. I had been sure he would try ever since your duel in the graveyard of Little Hangleton, when your wand overpowered his. He saw in that moment that he could be beaten—so it is little wonder his obsession immediately turned to finding a way to keep that from happening again. Lesser men, men with the capacity for self-reflection might have searched themselves for weakness, or explored what it was inherent to you, Harry Potter, that had nearly proven his undoing. But this was Voldemort—*Lord* Voldemort—and the very idea that you possessed some quality he lacked would have struck him as ludicrous.

“So instead, he searched for the unbeatable wand—the wand that was said to pass from hand to hand, searching for the strongest master. It consumed him, more than any quest had since the creation of his Horcruxes, convinced as he was that once in possession of the Elder Wand he would finally be invincible.”

Harry thought back, trying to recall the stream of memories Snape had left for him; they were blurring together into a muddled mess. “When you planned your death with Snape...you meant for him to end up with the wand, didn’t you?”

“I admit, that *was* my intention,” said Dumbledore, adding with a hint of a smile, “but it did not work out as I planned, did it?”

“No,” said Harry. “That bit didn’t work out as you meant at all.”

“I do not think it was necessarily for the worse, though. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Harry expertly dodged the question, as he really did not want to discuss his relationship with another student in front of his Headmaster. Dumbledore had known the both of them since they were eleven, after all; it was beyond awkward.

The peacock stirred gave a warning chirp of reminder, and Harry began absentmindedly

stroking it again. "...Draco didn't want me to seek out the Elder Wand." He didn't know why he'd said that, only that it felt like it needed to be said. Dumbledore seemed to think Harry was some paragon of goodness, and that he'd never wanted the wand, never dreamt of what he could do with the power it promised. Harry needed him to know that at least one person had seen through Harry and done all they could to put him off his own flirtation with becoming a Hallows seeker.

Dumbledore reached over and scratched the peacock under its chin. It stretched out its long neck, lids fluttering in pleasure. "Did he not?" he mused. "Well, happily enough, you have not sought it out. It has come to you, freely. I therefore think you are entitled to do with it what you will now, without fearing Mr. Malfoy's disapproval."

Harry frowned at the implication. "I don't fear his disapproval."

Dumbledore gave an ambivalent nod, weaving a bit. "Well, you *are* a braver man than I. I confess I have been wary of the disapproval of the Malfoys quite since taking up the post of Headmaster."

Harry became aware, once again, of the creature under the bench, out of sight yet not out of earshot. He reminded himself it was not their place to help it. Still, its existence was a reminder that this place was not a place at all. Not really.

They had been chatting so banally, as if they were old friends, that Harry had yet to come to grips with what his still being here meant. *Not dead yet*, Dumbledore had said, and the acceptance of what that meant—what he would still have to face—began to weigh heavy across his shoulders.

"I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"Got to? Oh no, dear boy. What happens next is entirely up to you."

Harry blinked. "Wait, I've got a choice?" He hadn't realised it wasn't a *have to*, and the idea he might be able to choose one or the other frightened him a little, honestly.

"Oh yes," Dumbledore said, turning his head towards the empty platforms unfurling into

the distance. “You likened this place to King’s Cross Station, no? And—” He nodded further down the platform on which their bench sat. “There’s a train, ready to go—waiting only for a passenger. I’m sure if you were to board it...well, you’d enjoy a nice trek with a comfortable rest at journey’s end.”

“...A journey to—to where?” His throat was dry and raspy as he asked.

Dumbledore stared at the train, not looking Harry in the eye, and only nodded and said, “On.”

Harry watched the train too—it really did look *just* like the Hogwarts Express, and he could imagine that riding on it would feel like riding the Hogwarts Express too. That thrill of excitement, the sense that he was finally going home—reuniting with friends and loved ones. It wasn’t a bad way to travel, not at all.

But still, a thought niggled, and he turned back to Dumbledore.

“...You want me to go back.”

“My boy, what I want for you is none of your concern anymore. I do not say this to be heartless—quite the contrary, I say it to free you. I hope that you no longer feel obligated to follow the whims of a pitiful old shade.” But, because he was Dumbledore, he could evidently not resist adding, “I think, though...that if you *should* choose to return, the world would be better off for it. In my experience, a world with a Harry Potter in it has been much more exciting and fulfilling than one without him, and I think I am far from alone in that sentiment.”

“If I go back, though...” Harry frowned. “I’ll have to fight him again, won’t I? Voldemort.”

“As always, that is entirely up to you.”

“Well yeah, but...not exactly much of a choice, is it?”

Dumbledore gave an ambivalent nod. “Everything is a choice. Some choices are better

than others, though, I will grant you. And not that I would want to try and sway your decision—”

“Oh of course not, no, not you,” Harry said, tone dry as the Sahara.

Dumbledore smiled, the old sparkle back in his eyes. “—If you were to return, you would be in as promising a position as ever to finish him, for good. I cannot promise it, but—”

“But you guess?”

A nod, sage and sure. “You have more than earned a peaceful rest, Harry, and trust that neither I nor anyone else would judge you for boarding that train. But you are loved, and you would be missed dearly. In returning, think not of the lives you might save from Voldemort, sundering Horcruxes and wielding Hallows—but of the people whose lives you enrich simply by existing. By being Harry, just Harry. Think not of ensuring that fewer souls are maimed or families torn apart—but of ensuring that those who deem themselves unworthy of love are disabused of that notion entirely.

“A choice cannot possibly be a wrong one if it results in a bit more love in the world, Harry. And you have so much love left to give.”

Harry glanced back once more, down the column-lined hallway where the raw-looking thing lay trembling and choking in the shadow beneath the marble bench. The peacock snuggled against his breast, its breathing soft and even now—it was asleep.

He sighed; he had wanted his choices and, yet again, been given one. He needed to learn to start appreciating the luxury instead of moaning about it. Getting here had been difficult enough—but going back would be no treat either, and it was so peaceful here, aside from the ugly thing under the bench. Peaceful and calm and full of light—everything the real world wasn’t just now. If he went back, he would be returning to the middle of a war. Returning to pain and loss and the possibility of more death. Maybe his own for good, this time. This all gave him pause, as he was so very tired. Also, he was really not looking forward to having to face Draco’s inevitable wrath, as word would no doubt get around about what Harry had done... He would be ‘Potter’ well into mid-life, at

this rate—assuming Draco ever spoke to him again.

Reluctantly, he roused the peacock with a little shake and shoed it from its perch. It gave him a look that said it was considering shitting in his lap for the offence but blessedly decided against it.

He eased to his feet, brushing his robes clean of errant white down. “...Can I ask you one last thing?” he said.

Dumbledore crossed his hands over his lap, peering up at Harry with an expression of abject contentment. Harry had the sense that Dumbledore was trying to memorise him, that maybe once Harry left here, Dumbledore would start to forget again as the real world grew distant and muzzy in his memories.

“Of course, my boy.”

He glanced around—at the not-Hogwarts Express, at the towering columns, at the glittering domed ceiling beyond which streamed impossibly brilliant light. Glorious. Heavenly.

“Would you have gone back, if you’d had the choice?”

Dumbledore only beamed at him, and the mist once more began to coalesce around them, obscuring Dumbledore from view. Still, his voice rang out, clear and unmistakable: “Who’s to say I didn’t have a choice?”

The Final Battle

When Harry came to, he was lying face-down again—though no longer on fresh white limbo linoleum. Instead, his senses were filled with the forest—the scent of mouldering leaf litter, the scraping crunch of sticks and gravel, the chill of cold, hard ground. He was back—and right where he'd fallen what must have been only moments before. Indeed, he could feel where the Killing Curse had struck him, square in the chest, and he knew if he lifted his shirt to look, he'd see an ugly purpling bruise forming just in his solar plexus.

But he could not check just now—he didn't dare stir, because beyond the sounds of the forest, he could hear the movements of the rousing Death Eaters, hurried footsteps as they swarmed their master with fawning words of, curiously, concern. Harry lay where he'd fallen, glasses mangled and mashed against his face and left arm contorted awkwardly, and though every inch of him screamed in pain—par for the course, Harry suspected, for bouncing back from near-death—he knew that he had to hold, had to *wait*.

Because something was happening.

Even barely conscious as he was, still marshalling his wits about him, he could sense the tension in the camp. Had they noticed him rouse? He panicked, convinced for a moment that they knew he yet lived and Voldemort would shortly redouble his efforts to kill him. There were far messier ways to go than the Killing Curse—ways that would make it very difficult for Harry to come back to this body, tethered to life through Voldemort or no.

He kind of regretted not taking just a little bit longer to decide on coming back and buying time to strategise his return. Wouldn't it be just like him to bounce back from death only to promptly be launched once more into its waiting arms? The Boy Who Lived, Died, Lived For A Moment, But Then Died Again.

“My Lord...my Lord...!” came the soft, beseeching hiss of Bellatrix. Her oily words

slithered into Harry's ear, and he fought not to squirm. He had precious few moments to get his bearings, and so he stretched out his other senses—checking first his body for any injury. The pain in his chest had remitted to a dull throb, no longer borderline unbearable, so he figured he was still in one piece with nothing broken. Fantastic if he decided to make a dash for it.

Something was jabbing into his stomach, though, and what he had initially dismissed as a stick he now realised was more likely his wand—and relief thrilled through him. He must not have been out for too long, as they hadn't rifled through his things yet. Or maybe they just figured a dead bloke wasn't going to be casting anything any time soon—though history alone should have told them this wasn't a very smart assumption to make when dealing with Harry Potter.

If his wand was still on him, his Cloak probably was too—which gave him two excellent options for escape, so now all he had to do was find the right timing.

“My Lord...” Bellatrix continued, insistent. “My Lo—”

“*Enough*, woman,” Voldemort grunted, just this side of strained and with no small degree of irritation. “Back, all of you.” Immediately there came the sound leaves and twigs crunching beneath feet as several people scrambled back from a singular point—Voldemort himself, it sounded like. The urge to open his eyes, to see what was going on, was overwhelming, and Harry summoned up his Gryffindor bravery (which had been replenished in full) and stupidity (which had never been in short supply) and opened his eyes a fraction.

From the awkward angle, he could just make out Voldemort, staggering to his feet from where he'd evidently fallen to the ground. His Death Eaters were giving him a generous berth, with Bellatrix alone brave enough to remain by her master's side, kneeling with panicked worry scrawled across her pasty features.

Voldemort had fallen—but why? Had there been an attack in however long had passed since he'd struck Harry down? No doubt by now his friends were starting to notice his absence, may well even have deduced what he meant to do. Perhaps they had charged

into the Forbidden Forest, come upon the camp, and...

But no, he saw no other bodies, no signs of a battle waged. The fire was still crackling merrily, and what little of the sky peeked through the canopy was still washed in that grey-blue haze of early, early morning. Barely any time at all had passed—certainly not enough time for there to have been a fight the likes his friends would have put on to get him back from Voldemort’s clutches.

Had the Killing Curse rebounded once more, taking the both of them down with it? Or had it simply been that, tethered as they were, Harry had dragged Voldemort to the cliff’s edge of death and then back again? If this was the case, then it was a blessed thing indeed that Voldemort seemed, for the moment, unaware of his erstwhile tag-along.

Bellatrix continued her solicitous fawning in hushed tones, “My Lord, let me—”

But Voldemort viciously batted away the hand she’d extended to him, snarling, “I said *enough*. Now...” A chill air settled over Harry, and he let his eyes slide shut again, certain that Voldemort had recovered himself and was turning his terrible gaze in Harry’s direction. The bat of a lash, the twitch of a finger—Voldemort would miss none of it, and then the game would be up. “...Does he live yet?”

No one answered; it was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. Perhaps none wanted to be the one to check Harry’s pulse and have to tell their master that no, for the *third time* Voldemort had failed at the simple task of killing a child.

“You,” called Voldemort, impatient, and Harry held his breath. “...The lady Malfoy, Narcissa, recently rejoining our company. Check him. See if Potter’s managed to survive *that* Killing Curse, too.”

Fuck. Draco’s mother. She would know—she would *see*. From a distance, he could feign death—but close examination would reveal his warm breath, the rise and fall of his chest, and his wildly thumping heart. But there was nothing to be done; it was too early yet to give himself away—he needed time, time to *think*, time to *plan*. So all he could do was lie there, and wait, and hope.

Narcissa's tread was soft and light, practically gliding over the leaf litter as she approached. Harry silently willed his heart to calm its racing, futile though he knew it to be. He heard the whispered rustle of her dress as she sank to her knees at his side, and then there were hands on him—soft and cold, not unlike Draco's. She rolled him over, onto his back, and cupped his cheeks, felt for a pulse at the neck, tossed aside his glasses to check his pupils—and though he knew she must have *realised* by now, she still slipped a hand under his shirt to splay over the nasty bruise where the Curse had hit him.

He could feel her lean close, her body heat seeping into him, until she could not have been more than a nose-width away from Harry. From this distance, he could smell the hair potion she used—something floral and feminine and decidedly not matronly. Of course Draco's mother would be unerringly vain.

“Is Draco alive?” she asked in a low, frightened whisper. Her question was barely audible, the words nearly lost in the sound of the crackling fire. The breath from her lips tickled his ear, and he felt the soft curtain of her hair falling down around them, the barest semblance of privacy.

And now his heart began thundering in his chest with renewed vigour, certain to be audible to onlookers—how had she thought to ask that? Or were Draco's Obliviation skills not quite as phenomenal as his bravado might have others believe? He had, after all, mucked up the Obliviation job on Travers at the Ministry.

What was he meant to say? What *could* he say—except: “...Yes...”

He confirmed her hopes with a breathy exhalation—though he did not do so with any conviction. He didn't know how long he'd been laid out here, but there was no telling what might have happened to Draco in the interim. Had Voldemort given his forces leave to rejoin the battle once Harry had presented himself for slaughter?

She had told him to keep her son safe, though, so he hoped that he had managed it—even if it cost him his life.

And then she was gone, leaves rustling and crunching as she rose to her feet.

“His is vanquished, my Lord,” she called, and Harry’s heart leapt, relief coursing through his veins. “Dead!” This seemed to finally trigger the collective exhalation of the bated breath of the camp as all present erupted into shouts of triumph, firing off rainbows of spells into the canopy and clapping their hands and stamping their feet. There were even a few yips and howls from the werewolves prowling the perimeter, and he could hear the trees shaking as the giants laid into the thick trunks.

“There you have it!” a high, cruel voice echoed over the cheers of milling crowd, almost giddy with glee. “Now *that* wasn’t so difficult was it? Not so special after all—by sheer dumb luck has their Boy Saviour made it this far, and by my unmitigated, irrefutable power has he now been laid low.” Harry steeled himself, knowing Voldemort wasn’t quite finished with him yet, and sure enough: “Let’s have him join the celebration, shall we? *Crucio!*”

Even knowing it was coming, expecting it—even having experienced it before, at the hands of this same wizard—did little to prepare Harry for the rank torture of the spell. His body was flung into the air as unimaginable pain flooded through him, his very nerves on fire. He imagined this was how Draco had felt, when the dragon had ripped through him, tearing him apart from the inside out as it struggled for freedom. Harry bit down on his tongue to keep from screaming and tasted blood, bitter and iron-rich.

It was Voldemort’s arrogant pride that saved him in the end, though: Harry’s seizures of agony were disguised by his bonelessly flailing limbs as his body was tossed about like a rag doll, and the cheers and bellows of the Death Eaters rejoicing in his defeat drowned out his grunts and whimpering cries. Had Voldemort been content to torture him on the ground, the game would have been up, but when the Curse was released and Harry hit the ground again and lay still, none seemed the wiser. His wand, still stuffed in his robes, had landed at such an angle beneath him that it was now stabbing him in the side, and it was only the agony of the Cruciatus Curse that distracted him from what was quite an uncomfortable position. He prayed the power of the Elder Wand would not allow his little Holly twig to be snapped so easily. Belatedly, he wished he had thought to secure it more tightly instead of haphazardly stuffing it in his robes, but then he had not expected to need to use it again, what with being dead and all.

“And with that, my dear friends, I believe it is time to march—come, we will take the castle shortly and quash what remains of this toothless rebellion.” Another cry of triumph filled the air. “But oh, we mustn’t let Mr. Potter miss the grand parade—after all, I’m sure his friends and compatriots are just beside themselves with worry, so let’s give them the reunion they deserve...” Voldemort snapped his finger. “*You*. Yes, yes, let’s have *you* do the honours. Unshackle him.” Who? Who had Voldemort tapped? It didn’t sound like one of the Death Eaters, not if they’d been shackled. But who would be out here...

Oh. Oh *no*.

“There’s a good fellow—now don’t worry about being too gentle with him, Hagrid. He’s good and dead, can’t feel a thing anymore. But—oh my, he seems to have lost his glasses. Well we can’t have that, can we? The Boy Who Lived must be recognisable. Glasses, scar. Everything in its place. Travers—find his glasses.”

There was a brief scuffle in the leaf litter, and someone muttered *Accio Potter’s glasses*. Harry held very still, praying Travers wasn’t half as perceptive as Mrs. Malfoy had been—and from experience, he wasn’t—and grit his teeth as his glasses were mashed roughly onto his face, one lens audibly cracking in the doing.

“Excellent, excellent—now, if you wouldn’t mind, Hagrid? And be sure to hold him up high; we want *everyone* to be able to see him as we march.”

He felt the ground tremble with each dragging step as Hagrid approached, breath hitching with whining little grunts. When he bent down to slip his arms under Harry’s limp form, fat teardrops splashed across his dirty forehead and cheeks. Hagrid held him close, cradling him against his wide barrel chest like an infant, and began to rock him, whispering words under his breath that Harry couldn’t quite catch but sounded like a soft, steady mantra of *No, no no*.

Harry’s heart ached, wishing he could offer some manner of reassurance, but loyal friend though Hagrid was, he had no talent for subterfuge and would unwittingly betray Harry before he was ready. It was a cruel necessity, but only for a bit longer, Hagrid and the

others needed to be convinced that Harry was well and truly dead.

They trudged on through the Forest, Hagrid stumbling at times but holding Harry close, protecting him from both the whipping branches his large form could not avoid hitting and any further assault by the Death Eaters or Voldemort himself. No effort was made at stealth by the procession—and why should there have been? After all, they'd just felled Harry Potter, champion of the Hogwarts resistance. There was little else to fear and certainly nothing else to threaten.

Cradled against Hagrid's chest, Harry remained still and quiet, eyes shut, passively taking in the sounds around him as they tromped through the underbrush. A number of Death Eaters were boasting now of targets they intended to go after first once they breached the castle ("McGonagall made me waste a whole Saturday afternoon polishing the Trophy Case one time just for Jinxing the toilets to flush upward—think I'll see if her sense of humour's improved since then."), and animalistic grunts, howls, and thundering, lumbering footsteps were reminder that Voldemort's dark forces were following them to what would be, Harry was confident, the last stand.

After a while—so much longer, it seemed, than it had taken Harry to reach the camp—they finally exited the Forest, the stench of loam and mould and decaying growth replaced by a fresh late-spring breeze and, strangely, a hint of sulphur. Hagrid's colony of Blast-ended Skrewts would be corralled nearby.

But then the breeze died abruptly, and all warmth began to seep away as it felt to Harry like a column of stormclouds was rolling in. No—no, not clouds. These would be the Dementors guarding the edge of the Forest, milling close and waiting expectantly for new orders from their master. He strained his ears, and he could hear it now: their gasping cries and rasping moans, and Hagrid shuddered, clutching Harry even closer.

Would they realise Harry wasn't dead and swarm him, as they had so often before? Would Voldemort see, would he know? Or would he assume their interest was not so much in Hagrid's charge as in Hagrid himself? God, he couldn't cast anything here—even if he *could* manage a wandless (and *wordless*) Patronus, everyone would know it was his

the moment the stag manifested and shook its glowing antlers in the Dementors' general direction. He would have to grit his teeth and bear their presence, praying Voldemort had instructed them to keep their distance and not go gobbling up the souls of anyone in his immediate vicinity.

“Stop,” Voldemort said, suddenly and without warning, and though the command was not directed at Harry, he imagined he could still hear the magical compulsion in it, for Hagrid lurched jerkily in midstride before seizing up. *“It’s rude to show up unannounced. Sonorus.”*

There was a quiet beat, and then:

“Harry Potter is dead.”

Voldemort’s voice, now magically amplified, echoed across the Hogwarts grounds, clear and strong and confident. In his mind’s eye, Harry could see the castle occupants, in the midst of barricading doors and tending to the wounded, pause and lend an ear to the madman banging at the gates.

“Your Saviour, you’ll be disappointed to hear, did not fall valiantly in battle—instead, he took the coward’s path, fleeing in the night while you were all distracted by battle... right into my Death Eater’s waiting clutches. You have my sympathies, brave warriors—your faith, strong and sure as it may have been, was poorly placed, heaped upon the head of a stupid, stubborn child, who to the bitter end thought only of saving his own sad skin while so many of your compatriots laid down their lives.

“But the battle is finished. The Boy Who Lived lives no more, and my own bloodlust is at last sated. I have no quarrel with the rest of you, as I have said. Spilling magical blood, especially the blood of so many with bright, promising futures ahead of them, has always been anathema to me. So I will join you at the castle, I will let you see with your own eyes that the boy you called ‘hero’ and ‘Saviour’ is no more. And then...I will accept your surrender.”

He let a beat past, and then added, *“...I will only accept surrender. There will be no*

more resistance; should any of you find this unacceptable...you will be struck down and shown no quarter. You are outnumbered, you are outmatched. Pray don't be stupid and waste any more of our time. We have a new world to build together."

With a swipe of his wand, Voldemort then cancelled the spell and turned to face Hagrid. "Come, we make for the castle. You'll march at the front—and stop *coddling* his corpse, you ignorant oaf. He's dead, and I want *everyone* to see it."

Hagrid shifted his grip on Harry, still holding him gently but now angling him forward, so anyone looking would have full view of his face. Harry prayed Voldemort moved on quickly and didn't catch a hint of flaring nostrils or flickering eyelids. Perhaps the scuffed and cracked lenses of his glasses would grant him some cover in that respect.

The procession continued forward once more, the loud snaps and cracks of leaves and twigs being trod underfoot slowly giving way to the soft rustle of robes brushing over the grassy lawn leading up to the castle. They were travelling at a faster clip now—not jogging, but walking with purpose. Voldemort was growing impatient, probably eager to claim his victory proper and tuck in for breakfast in the Great Hall. Harry's head bounced with each jostling jolt of Hagrid's heavy step, and he gave himself permission to peek again and get his bearings amidst all the flopping about.

Voldemort was walking just ahead, leading them all with Hagrid hot on his heels. Nagini was coiled around his shoulders like a fat, scaly shawl—and why shouldn't he let his treasured pet free, now that Harry was dead? With his greatest enemy defeated, his remaining Horcruxes were safe. Perhaps he was already contemplating making more. Harry doubted he'd stop at six this time.

Hagrid was still sniffing as they walked. He'd stopped outright sobbing, tear ducts perhaps having run dry, but every now and then, he'd murmur *Oh, Harry... and I'm sorry...* as if it were somehow his fault. Harry shored up his restraint and kept his lids shut tight, though he could feel hot tears of sympathy knocking at the backs of his eyes. He tried to direct soothing mental waves Hagrid's way, but he didn't think it was working. The only time he'd ever managed Legilimency decently had been with the help

of a potion, after all.

“Stop.”

Again, as if magically compelled to do so, Hagrid jerked to a halt, and from the sudden hush that followed, so had the rest of the Death Eaters and their companions. Harry mentally calculated the distance and pace they’d walked—they’d be just at the main courtyard now, probably outside the entrance. The doors would be closed, bolted tight against any intruders—but they would open, soon, and everyone would see him, seemingly dead, in Hagrid’s arms.

A beat, and then the soft rattle of locks being disengaged and the creak of heavy doors drawing back. In the gloaming, Harry felt a bright stripe of warm light streaming from the entrance fall across his dirty, battered face.

See, the only nice part about dying...was that he had known he wouldn’t have to watch as people mourned him. Wouldn’t have to witness their sorrow, their wrath, their despair. He had known returning would involve ever so much more pain and sadness than simply travelling on would, but knowledge had done nothing to temper the sound of Minerva McGonagall’s terrible scream.

“NO!”

Her cry cut the still darkness, strangled in her throat around a sob of such despair, her throat laid open raw and wailing. Hagrid’s sorrow had been difficult enough to deal with; to hear such a staid woman who was undoubtedly no stranger to sadness make *that* sort of sound...

From her master’s side, Bellatrix cackled cruelly, jeering, “Gonna have to find yourself a new Seeker, won’t you, Minny?”

Harry used the distraction of McGonagall’s display to chance a squinting glance, glimpsing wide, frightened faces willing the doorway behind McGonagall as more survivors crowded the entrance. They were all curious, and he couldn’t blame them, but he wished

they'd taken the opportunity to *hide*, instead of insisting on seeing for themselves whether or not Harry had truly fallen.

Three familiar figures shoved their way to the front of the crowd, and Harry closed his eyes again—wishing he could close his ears, too.

“No!”

“Harry! *HARRY!*”

“*Potter!*”

Hermione, Ron, and Draco's voices rang out sharp and strident, and his heart leapt for them, everything in him—all his magic, *everything*—reaching out in silent reassurance, longing to ease their worries and rally their convictions. Their cries acted as permission for the others to start up as well, and dozens of voices began hurling abuse—and not a few obscenities—at the Death Eaters gathered on the front lawn. It was a glorious cacophony, and Harry could have listened to it for ages—

“*SILENCE!*”

There was a flash and a sharp bang that nearly blinded Harry behind his still-closed eyes, and a hush settled across the entrance so suddenly it could only have been magically imposed.

“...Now,” Voldemort said, voice once more cool and calm and full of deadly threat. “Hagrid, you will place him on the ground now—at my feet, where he *belongs*.”

Hagrid shuffled to comply, and Harry felt himself being gently, so gently, lowered. “I'm so sorry, Harry...” Hagrid warbled in apology, touching his head before he withdrew.

There was a brief, considering pause, and then: “...Draco, my boy. How very good to see you—though I confess I am a bit surprised to see you looking so...*alive*.” Voldemort chuckled softly. “Take care not to stray too far; you and I need to have a little chat, once I have settled my business with your...companions. Plus I am sure your parents will be

thrilled to see their son is safe and sound.”

Harry could practically *feel* Draco straining at the Silencing Charm Voldemort had slapped on the crowd, his rage and fear palpable in the air like a coming storm. He silently prayed for Draco to melt back into the crowd, disappear into the maze of Hogwarts halls and hide, or else transform and fly away as far and fast as he could. Voldemort thought he still had the Elder Wand and would stop at nothing to wrest it from him. Once he realised Draco no longer held claim to it, Voldemort would likely kill him.

Voldemort clapped his hands once. “You see?” he said, and Harry could feel him striding back and forth right beside where Harry lay. “Your Saviour is mortal! Oh, I know many a tale was spun of the intrepid ‘Boy Who Lived’, that some might have even deemed him indestructible. But perhaps now, we can all see and agree that he was only ever a boy, who lived for a time, riding on sheer dumb luck before meeting his inevitable and ignominious end at the hands of his betters.”

“The fuck you’re his *better!*” Ron roared, and the Charm frayed and snapped once more as the defenders of Hogwarts rallied. None, it seemed, dared rush the Death Eaters—but they had no compunctions about shouting them down, and it was only another bright sharp *BANG* from a fresh Silencing Charm that brought quiet to the courtyard once more. Voldemort’s feigned patience was thinning, and Harry felt certain that the next spell cast to bring his friends’ unruliness back in line would not be something so tame as a Charm.

“Ronald Weasley—Harry Potter’s *best mate.*” He sneered the title, and Harry could hear the curl of his lip in his voice. Didn’t he know they didn’t use the M word these days? “Some of you may be wondering why, if Mr. Weasley and Harry Potter here were so very close, he was found *alone* in the Forbidden Forest. I’ll spare you the suspense: because Harry Potter was trying to sneak away, to abandon you in this your *greatest* hour of need—”

“Bullshit!” someone shouted, and evidently harbouring a fierce suicide wish, they broke

free from the crowd with a grunt, followed by the soft rustle of grass being trod upon as they charged Voldemort in plain view of everyone. Voldemort let them come, a few beats of silence passing with no reaction—and then there was a brilliant flash, followed by the sound of something hard and heavy slamming into the ground, wheezing in pain.

A shock of panic thrilled through Harry, and he chanced opening his eyes, just a slit, to see who Voldemort had struck down—

“You see?” Voldemort crowed. “Lord Voldemort is merciful. As I said, I have no quarrel with any of you any longer—and I understand that emotions are running high right now, so I will forgive this attempted assault on my person just the once. Now, stand up, boy.” He seemed to be speaking to the wizard who’d just charged him. “Let’s get a good look at you. You who thought you could *single-handedly* fell the Dark Lord.” He turned back to his Death Eaters, adding with cruel amusement, “What *has* the world come to that so many children seem to be plagued by such delusions of grandeur?”

Chuckles rippled through the crowd around Harry, and Bellatrix tittered in delight, clapping excitedly. “Oh this is *lovely*, my Lord! It’s the Longbottom boy!” She gave Neville—poor *Neville*—a fluttering little flirtatious wave. “Tell your mum and dad I said ‘hullo’.”

“Ah...” Voldemort said, recollection dawning, “Yes, yes...the Aurors. Tell me, my dear, did they ever recover their faculties?” Bellatrix shook her head, wild curls bouncing. “A pity—I suppose that means you’ll have grown up without parents, then?”

By now, Neville had struggled back to his feet. His wand was nowhere to be seen, perhaps having been thrown wide by the force of Voldemort’s spell hitting, and he was left standing alone between the Hogwarts defenders on one side and Voldemort’s army on the other. He seemed so small to Harry, so easily picked off, but Neville gave no sign he was cowed in the least. He had his empty hands curled into fists, as if he were about to just haul off and slug Voldemort. For his part, Voldemort only looked mildly amused.

“My Gran raised me. Just the way they would’ve liked—to stand up to bullying arseholes.”

Voldemort nodded solemnly, feigning sympathy. “Still, it just isn’t the same. I, too, was raised without the love of a mother or father.” He shrugged. “But I like to think I’ve done *quite* well for myself, despite my humble beginnings.” He cocked his head, sizing Neville up. “You could do well for yourself, too, with the right sorts at your side. You’ll be a Pureblood, won’t you, brave boy?”

“I’m not a *boy*, Snake-face—and yeah, I’m a Pureblood. Unlike *some* of us in this conversation.”

Harry didn’t even see Voldemort’s hand move—there was only another flash, and a bright red line blossomed on Neville’s cheek. Neville instinctively winced, bringing his hand up to touch his cheek and drawing it away, frowning at the blood he found. Voldemort cocked his head to the side. “A cheek...for your cheek. Though given the atrocious House colours of that tie, I can’t say I’m surprised to see you have your fair share of unabashed stupidity as well.” He extended a white, skeletal hand to Neville. “What say you, Longbottom? I’m willing to look past the unfortunate choices made in your youth for the promise of your undying loyalty going forward. Will it be the Death Eaters...or just *death*?”

“Thought you were supposed to be smart or something,” Neville spat, then he raised a fist. “It’s no great secret who I’ve thrown my lot in with—Dumbledore’s Army, to the bitter fucking end.”

The Silencing Charm sundered again with the force of his proclamation, and a great cheer went up from the crowd behind him. Try as he might, Voldemort could *not* keep these men and women quiet—not without killing them.

And it seemed he was preparing to do just that. He let his outstretched hand fall away, bringing up his wand, and when he spoke, it was with a deadly calm. “A tragic choice—with tragic consequences.” He pointed his wand at Neville, and without a word, Neville seized in place, straight and stiff, as if he’d just had a Body Bind placed on him. “I think it’s time to establish what will be the new order going forward. Some of you seem to think that because I have chosen the path of mercy, of *forbearance*, that you can speak

to me like you might your peers. I am *not* your peer. I am—” He raised his wand high, circling it over his head to bring it slashing down. “—Your *master*.”

With a grunt, Neville collapse to one knee, back bending in an arc as his head was forced down. Neville fought it, hard, his every muscle trembling, but he'd never been able to break out of Harry's Body Binds, so there was little hope of him being able to break out of Voldemort's.

“You wear your House colours with such pride...” Voldemort murmured. “I've never understood the fascination, myself. Ravenclaw, perhaps—at least they can claim ‘a ready mind’. Hufflepuff...well, they're dullards but unremarkable. A celebration of mediocrity. Gryffindors, though... What is there to take pride in? A ham-fisted approach to problem-solving and general disregard for authority? Now, don't mistake me, I can appreciate a good display of power. Really puts your lessers in their place, teaches them you're not one to be trifled with. But if that's *all* there is to you...? Brains enough to know how to get yourself into trouble but not how to get out? Brawn enough to start fights but not finish them? Why on *earth* would you want anyone knowing *that* was the stock you came from?” Voldemort shook his head, tutting under his breath. “No more of that, I think. For your own good.”

He raised his wand, pointing at the Headmaster's Tower, and gave a little flick of his wrist. There was a brief beat of silence—and then the distant sound of shattering glass as something shot through a window. Between the distance and the low light of pre-dawn, Harry could not make out what it was, only a dark blur closing in fast on their position—but when Voldemort snatched it from the air as it drew close, holding it by its pointy tip for all to see, Harry realised it was, of all things, the Sorting Hat.

“The Sorting Hat,” Voldemort said. “Here since the school's founding, it has sat upon the heads of countless witches and wizards as they passed through these hallowed halls. It even sat upon my own head, once upon a time, and whispered to me that I could be great, that I had ambition and ability to spare—but that if I didn't rein in my darker urges and learn compassion, learn to follow as well as lead, then only ruin awaited me.” He spread his arms wide. “Clearly, sage words indeed!” Another wave of chuckles

rippled through the crowd of Death Eaters, and Voldemort held his hand up for silence. “Henceforth, students will learn to be ambitious, they will learn to be proud, they will learn to take and claim and *demand* what is their due. They will learn those values prized by my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin.”

He stepped forward, gently placing the hat onto Neville’s head, where it sat, unmoving, as if it were any old, mouldering heirloom. “There will be no more Houses—and no more Sorting Hat. Young Neville here, ambitious though he might be, I fear has been too tainted by meatheaded Gryffindor values and must, alas, serve as an example. An example of what fate awaits anyone else foolish enough to *dare* oppose me.”

He snapped his wrist, wand arcing, and the Sorting Hat *exploded* into flame. The fireball flared bright, spooking the onlookers into strident screams of shock as Neville just sat there, immobile, unable to flee or toss aside the flaming hat on his head as the flames licked their way down. Harry imagined he could smell the stench of burning flesh and fabric all over again, just like with Draco, and he could not *bear* it; it was time, he had to act *now*—

“*HAGGER!*” something roared, and every head whipped around, momentarily distracted from the hellish immolation unfolding before them to see, of all things, *Grawp* lumbering around from behind the still-not-quite-whole Gryffindor Tower.

“Remove *that*,” Voldemort snarled at his own giants, and off they galloped, the earth quaking beneath their boots as they rushed *Grawp*—until one of them took a javelin thick as a sapling to the back of the skull and went *down*.

Shouting voices a hundred or more strong bellowed a rallying cry as a crowd springing up seemingly from out of *nowhere* began making their way at breakneck speed to the castle in a pincer movement, sandwiching the Death Eaters between themselves and the Hogwarts defenders. Joining them, racing along on thundering hooves, came the Centaurs, pelting away from their home in the Forbidden Forest, with arrows nocked and bows readied. One of them sent another javelin sailing overhead at the giants, though this one flew wide. At his signal, the others began raining down a hail of arrows on

the Death Eaters, who were now conveniently gathered into a scrum and ripe for the picking. Several had sense enough to throw up Shield Charms, but most scattered in a panic, self-preservation instincts overriding the recognition that desertion would mean certain death.

Harry didn't have a damn clue what was going on, but he wasn't about to let his moment slip by, and in a flourish he'd been preparing for since the march from the Forbidden Forest, he stuffed his hand into his robes, pulled out his Invisibility Cloak with one hand and wand with the other, and scrambled under cover. The scene around him was chaos incarnate, and recognising that there was a very real chance of being trampled if he didn't *move*, Harry sprang to his feet.

Right, first things first. He whirled on poor Neville, wand brandished, and prepared to cast—

But Neville wasn't there. Harry's head snapped around, searching—god, had he been snatched by one of the giants, or had *Bellatrix* gotten to him?—and found him already on his feet, several body lengths away, halfway back to the line of Hogwarts defenders. He'd not only shaken the Body Bind, to Harry's amazement, he'd doused the flames as well and doffed the hat, which he now held in one hand. Marvellously, he didn't seem to have a scratch on him—no burns, no scars, *nothing*. Even the hat seemed in decent shape—well, as decent as it had ever been.

Neville looked equally astonished at his hale and whole state, patting his arms with a frown—and then he slowly turned to regard the Sorting Hat clutched in his grip. Harry watched as he flipped it over, exposing the bowl, and reached inside with a determined set to his chin. His whole arm disappeared into the hat, groping, searching—and when he withdrew it once more, he held clutched in his grip now a gleaming silver handle, encrusted with rubies, followed by a long, tapered blade.

He tossed aside the hat, studying the true sword of Gryffindor in his hand for but a heartbeat—then turned to Voldemort and charged.

It was curious that, even with so many distractions on the field at the moment—the

Centaur herd bearing down on the castle, the cavalry racing up from Hogsmeade, the Death Eaters scrambling for safety and meeting the defenders in the process—every eye present was still somehow drawn, unerringly, to Neville. Death Eaters, Hogwarts defenders—and Harry himself, standing there mute and frozen under the Invisibility Cloak.

Nagini uncoiled from Voldemort’s shoulders and snapped out to meet the onrushing threat, great fangs bared, glistening with deadly poison.

But Neville only cocked his arm. The sword flashed—and down it cleaved, slicing Nagini’s head clean from her body and sending it whistling through the air where it landed a few feet away, rolling once or twice before coming to a stop, maw still agape but bright eyes now dead and cold.

The rest of her body slid from Voldemort’s shoulders like an old rubbery hose, collapsing at his feet, and he shrieked in fury as he beheld the ruin of his precious pet, visibly shaking.

His final Horcrux had been destroyed—which meant at long-fucking-last, Tom Marvolo Riddle was *mortal*.

Voldemort’s eyes burned with rage as he slowly shifted his gaze from Nagini’s corpse to Neville, who stood proud, the sword still clutched in his hand. “That was a favour Harry asked of me. Just thought you ought to know.”

Warmth that even Voldemort’s fury could not chill filled Harry’s chest, and he raised his wand, preparing to cast a Shield Charm on Neville, who was probably about to catch hell for what he’d just dared—

“HARRY!” Hagrid bellowed, audible even over the din of battle. “WHERE’S HARRY! WHERE’D HE GO?!” But few paid him heed—Harry was dead, and there were rather more important matters to attend to just now than rescuing a corpse—and he was left scrambling, shouldering aside any who dared get in his way as he scoured the field in vain search of Harry’s body.

Harry turned back to Neville, conscious he too had more important matters to attend to—but Neville was gone again, and so was Voldemort now. He caught a glimpse of Neville having now joined the fray, which had turned into outright chaos. The Centaurs had abandoned their bows and pulled out short swords and clubs, taking walloping shots against anyone in a black cloak and hood, punctuated by the odd bucking kick with their sharp hooves. The Hogsmeade Army, for Harry had deduced this was what it must be, had finally breached the low wall ringing the courtyard and were meeting the first wave of Death Eaters and assorted followers of Voldemort with raised wands and furious war cries. Even the skies were filled now with swooping Thestrals—not a few bearing riders on their backs—and Hippogriffs, including one who looked suspiciously like Buckbeak. Harry searched for Draco among their number, but he had either heard Harry’s silent plea to make himself scarce or else was too entrenched in battle to spare a moment to slip into something a little less likely to be felled by a stray curse.

The incoming charge up from Hogwarts was pushing the Death Eaters closer to the castle as they fled the trampling feet of the giants and the Centaurs’ rain of arrows, in turn pushing the Hogwarts defenders back inside, until there was a steady stream of humanity (and not-quite-humanity) shoving their way through the front door.

Harry rushed around what was now an outright battlefield, dodging Hexes and Curses where he could and firing back as good as he got, still hidden safely under the Invisibility Cloak but falling further and further back from the scrum of action. Voldemort was nowhere to be found, though, and Harry was realising now that he had in all likelihood made his way into the castle, intent on taking it and holding it one way or another.

Fuck—this was never going to end, not while Voldemort survived. Voldemort would fight so long as his Death Eaters remained, but the Death Eaters might fall back if their master was defeated.

The recognition he now had a clear-cut mission fired Harry’s blood, and he threw himself into the crowd, shoving his way through as best he could—a difficult task, given he was not exactly beefy in size and also still invisible. He made it just through the front doors and into the Entrance Hall before he met a blockage, crushed between a Death Eater

whose wide, terrified eyes said this was more than he'd signed up for, and Lee Jordan, who seemed to be trying to free his wand arm to take a shot at said Death Eater. Together, they were all buffeted through the Entrance Hall to be spat out into the Great Hall as the bottleneck finally cleared.

After shoving Lee Jordan towards the Death Eater he'd been so concerned with, Harry collected himself. The bodies had been moved by now, along with the makeshift barricades, and the battle was already in full swing.

He wasted no time in scanning the Hall, searching for the point of greatest tumult, for that would be where Voldemort would make his stand—and it was with no great difficulty that Harry found him. The Hogwarts forces had evidently come to the same conclusion as Harry and were making efforts to crowd around Voldemort, blocking him off from his own forces still working their way inside. He continued to spout threats and oaths between slinging Dark Curses, but distracted as he was by a battle he had clearly not expected to be so intimately involved in, his spells were easily deflected by the Shield Charms Harry cast to protect his friends and fellow fighters as he made his way through the Hall.

A great cheering roar sounded from just behind Harry, and he turned to see a wave of new fighters finally make their way through the gummed-up Entry Hall and into the Great Hall proper—*this* had been the oncoming army: sorely needed fresh reinforcements, ready to defend the castle.

“Well all right, now!” Slughorn huffed, cheeks ruddy, in stark contrast to the emerald-green silk pajamas he was still wearing—and were those *bunny slippers*? “Let’s, eh, let’s make this a fair fight, shall we?” His tone belied the reluctant hesitation writ across his features, but he still began gingerly picking his way through the rubble and over the already felled bodies of both friend and foe while those at his back gave an answering cry and streamed in around him. Madam Rosmerta clapped him firmly on one shoulder and gave him a loud smack on his cheek before brandishing her wand and lifting her skirts to charge ahead. Other shopkeepers and owners of Hogsmeade had joined her, but the bulk of the new bodies seemed to be friends and families of Harry’s fellow students. He even

thought he spotted Neville's grandmother tossing Jinxes left and right.

So caught up was Harry in marvelling at the welcome sight of the new wave of fighters, he was nearly knocked onto his arse with fright when the door that led to the Kitchens was blasted off its hinges, sailing clear across the Hall as out swarmed the house-elves of Hogwarts, whooping and waving all manner of disturbing kitchen implements—and at their head, riding a Diricawl and clad in armour that looked to have been fashioned from a cheese grater, was Dobby. He thrust his meat tenderiser into the air, shouting, “FOR HARRY POTTER!”, and then he and his mount disappeared in a sharp *CRACK* of magic. Harry would have thought that the strangest sight he might see today had not Kreacher, the fake Horcrux locket bouncing merrily on his chest, come scurrying out after Dobby, bellowing in his raspy croaking baritone, “Make them pay! Fight for brave Master Regulus, defender of house-elves! Tear out the hearts of his murderers! INTO THE FRAY!”

A chorus of resounding squeaks and yips followed him as he and a horde of other house-elves charged into the Hall, hacking and stabbing whatever they could reach (generally the ankles and shins and knees of unfortunate Death Eaters) with their cleavers and potato peelers and paring knives and zesters. Harry's heart swelled to such great proportions. He was strongly considering becoming a paying member of S.P.E.W.

And then overhead, swooping and swerving as gracefully as Harry had ever seen, was Draco, *finally* having transformed so that the spells he was effortlessly dodging would barely scratch his hide, even if they connected. He glided over the scrum of witches and wizards doing battle below, pelting groups of Death Eaters and their minions with globs of blood-red lava or grabbing the odd straggler and dropping them from a height. The giants had knocked down a section of the wall and forced their way inside, and Draco released a bone-jolting roar of victory when he managed to blind one about to stomp Lucius Malfoy flat.

They were doing it. They were *winning*. This was no longer a siege; it was a *roué*. Witches and wizards and all manner of magical creatures great and small were working together, giving their all to beat back what had seemed an unbeatable army. His friends,

his family, schoolmates and professors, people he had never seen before let alone spoken to—they were all putting their lives on the line, fighting with all they could muster, paying for their efforts in flesh and blood.

And Harry was just standing around gawking. When he was the only one who could end it all.

He let the warmth that came with returning hope fill him, shook his head to clear his thoughts, and sprang into action. The Cloak still wrapped tight about his shoulders, he began dodging wayward spells and weaving through duelling parties to make his way across the Hall to where Voldemort would be waiting for him.

The Hall was growing more and more crowded by the minute as those who'd been trapped outside by the bottleneck in the Entrance Hall swarmed inside through the massive hole made by the giants, and Harry didn't think the Great Hall had seen so many occupants since the Triwizard Tournament. Everywhere he looked, he saw friendly faces slamming unfriendly ones to the ground—Professor Sinistra and Angelina Johnson had teamed up to take on Yaxley, Flitwick was acquainting Dolohov with his best *Bombarda*, Hagrid had finally given up trying to find Harry's body and had channelled his rage into a walloping right hook, laying into a sneering Macnair, and Ron and Luna whipped twin Body Binds at Travers, sending him to the ground with a sharp CRACK as his head hit stone.

Rookwood raced past Harry with Seamus and Dean hot on his heels, the both of them slinging *Stupendos* like they were going out of style, and Arthur and Percy were resigning their Ministry posts in a rather ostentatious fashion via a series of colourful Hexes aimed at Thicknesse, who had found his way back to the battle. Fred and George seemed to be charming the fireballs Draco belched to zoom about the hall at their command, incinerating errant Death Eaters with pinpoint precision.

Harry finally found Voldemort in the midst of battle with not one, not two, but *three* opponents: Kingsley, McGonagall, and astonishingly Slughorn. Perhaps he'd taken that slight against Slytherin earlier in the evening personally and was now hellbent on

proving that they could be just as brave as any Gryffindor when push came to shove. Harry would take it.

Still, skilful though they were and outnumbered though Voldemort was, the duel seemed to be dragging, neither side quite able to land a finishing blow.

But Voldemort was not the only one who'd perhaps bitten off more than they could chew; at the other end of the hall, Bellatrix was engaged in a duel of her own, facing off against Hermione, Ginny, and Hannah Abbott.

Harry dithered, torn as to which group he ought to go help—Voldemort was the end goal, but the Bellatrix fight seemed in more pressing need of support. He was decided when Bellatrix whipped her wand and sent an acid-green Killing Curse straight for Hannah. Had poor Hannah not stumbled on a piece of rubble blasted free from one of the plinths lining the Hall, she would have surely been dead.

Harry's stomach gave a nauseating jolt; two Professors and an Auror could hold their own against the Dark Lord, but these were *students* battling a powerful witch bent on their murder, and though he'd trained all three of said students himself through the D.A. and knew they were more than capable, this was Voldemort's right hand, and Bellatrix was unafraid to use Unforgivables. Draco had told him to respect how others wanted to die, but that didn't mean he had to accept them dying at all.

He changed course, breaking into a flat-out run for Bellatrix—but before he'd gotten even halfway there, he was knocked sideways as someone slammed into his invisible form.

Neville raced past, the sword of Gryffindor raised high over his head as he took a running leap off an overturned bench.

Bellatrix never saw him coming. She saw Hannah Abbott, cowering on the ground, one hand raised in warding; she saw Ginny's and Hermione's gazes shifting to just over her right shoulder; she saw a shadow falling over their faces.

She didn't see Neville. But she did hear him.

“Frank and Alice Longbottom send their regards.”

SHINK

The sword flashed, and Bellatrix's demented grin froze in place, her eyes bulging a tick—and it seemed as if there was a heartbeat where it dawned on her just what had happened. Who had just struck her a mortal blow. But then the heartbeat passed, and she toppled, her body hitting the cold flagstones with a heavy thud while her head went spinning off elsewhere, disappearing into the fray. Neville was getting rather good at lopping off heads; perhaps Harry would suggest he look into a professional turn once the dust had settled.

It was an anticlimactic end—and few were more deserving. Hardly anyone noticed the fall of the terror Lestrangle—no one really but Hermione, Ginny, and an awestruck Hannah Abbott. Well, them—and Voldemort, whose head snapped around at the snickersnack of the sword slashing down a second time to snatch a favoured companion from him.

He beheld Neville, Bellatrix's corpse, and the blood-stained sword slung over his shoulder.

Neville glanced his way, almost as an afterthought, and locked eyes with Voldemort's, now blazing red with rage. He cocked a crooked, tired grin, panting heavily with exertion, before he called out, “Now Harry had nothing to do with *that* one. She was all *my* idea.”

And Voldemort *screamed*.

His cry echoed through the Hall, deafening all in earshot, and McGonagall, Slughorn, and Kingsley were blasted back by an explosion of force centred around Voldemort. Their bodies were flung like rag dolls by the shockwave of Voldemort's fury and frustration made manifest.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl all around Harry. He had almost forgotten that ominous

clock that had taken up residence inside his heart, and the din of battle had drowned out its steady tick tick tick thus far, but now it pounded loudly in his ears with a slow, measured step. He could no longer observe—that time had passed.

Voldemort raised his wand—and took careful, considerate aim at Neville, who stood his ground with a proud jut of his chin, defiant to the bitter end.

TOCK.

“*Protego!*” Harry roared, and a Shield Charm such as he had never produced before expanded to fill nearly half the Hall, clearing a circle around Harry and Voldemort and shoving any onlookers back to safety.

Voldemort’s head whipped around, searching for the caster, and knowing it was now or never, that the time had come to make his stand and end this, Harry drew off the Invisibility Cloak, letting it pool on the ground at his feet.

His abrupt appearance in the middle of the Great Hall, seemingly out of thin air, sent sharp yelps of shock rippling through the crowd, followed closely by shouts and cheers. He heard his name whispered and wept in equal parts, in chorus with *He’s alive!*s and *See? I knew its* and *Fuck, can anything kill him?*s.

But Harry held up a hand, and the crowd fell quiet. The sounds of battle elsewhere in the hall faded as well, as fighters on both sides seemed to sense something of great import was about to happen. A temporary truce seemed to be called, allowing all to come and gawk, drinking in the sight of Voldemort and Harry, alone on a field of stone and rubble and beginning to track circles around each other. A hush fell over the Hall, fuelled by fear and wonder.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the sentiment,” Harry said, voice raised to be heard from one end of the Hall to the other, “but I don’t want anyone trying to help me.” It was quiet as a tomb, and his words echoed uncomfortably loud. He swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat, suddenly conscious of just how dry his mouth felt. He’d always hated public speaking. “It’s got to be me and him—no one else.”

Voldemort's lips curled into a gruesome grin, and he chuckled deviously. "Now you and I *both* know you don't mean that. After all, that's what you *do*. Cower under cover while others do your dirty work. Now..." He tapped his chin with one long, white finger. "*Who* will we use as a shield today, Potter? Hagrid has sheer bulk on his side, but young Draco can evidently take a curse or three and keep on ticking..."

"We won't have any 'shields'. We won't have any 'lieutenants'. And we certainly won't have any Horcruxes." Voldemort's red eyes narrowed a tick, and Harry thought he could just see a little vein throbbing at his temple as it finally dawned on him just how many of his last remaining threads had been snipped. "It's just you and me. You remember that prophecy? How neither can live while the other survives?" Harry raised his wand, adopting the ready stance even as he continued to pace. "I think we're about to test it."

"Are we, then?" Voldemort cocked his head to the side, studying Harry carefully. His gaze travelled from the still leaf-littered birds' nest hair on Harry's head down to the tips of his dirty trainers and then back up again. Harry knew what he saw: just a boy, a boy who refused to die. He was thinking now, wracking his mind, wondering *how* Harry had survived. Wondering if yet another Killing Curse might do the trick this time. Wondering why the answer wasn't *of course*. "And I suppose you think today will be yet another for the history books, another subheading in the chapter of Harry Potter. The Dark Lord, defeated by the Boy Who Lived Through Sheer Dumb Luck?"

"Oh," Harry said. "I see the flaw in your thinking—you seem convinced that I've survived thus far...because I'm just lucky that way. Now, that's just a little bit sad, that you haven't put all the pieces together. I've gotten to know a poster-child Slytherin over the past few months, and I've learned you lot are generally very sharp, so I must say I'm surprised. And I think I owe it to you—you know, for all the good turns you've done me—to help you figure it out."

They were still circling one another, like sharks, slow and deliberate. For Harry no one existed outside of the circle—it was only himself and Voldemort, just as it was meant to be here at the bitter end.

“You think it was dumb luck,” Harry said, “when my mother sacrificed herself to save me—when you dismissed the power of her love and paid the price for it?” He kicked aside the shattered remains of one of the House tables, clearing the area. “Dumb luck when I fought you in that graveyard, standing over the body of my fallen friend?” He raised his voice. “Dumb luck that I didn’t even *try* to defend myself tonight, that I went to you willingly, to try and stop this, and somehow *still* survived and returned to face you here? You think *three times* I faced death at your hands and *three times* I lived through it still counts as ‘dumb luck’?”

“*Dumb luck!*” Voldemort raged, though he still kept to his side of the field, wand clutched in one bony hand but not yet daring to cast. He still feared Harry’s faithful Holly wand, for all his supposed power and experience. And Harry was going to give him something to *be* afraid of. He knew, somehow, that his wand was still the Elder Wand, that it had not thrown its allegiance to Voldemort with the casting of that Curse. It recognised him, it *wanted* him. And he would finally reward it for its loyalty.

“Well, I’m willing to bet on ‘dumb luck’ seeing me through one more encounter with you.” Harry nodded to the fighters crowding their circle; here and there, he even caught a few Death Eaters who had shouldered their way through the crowd to watch how their master fared, an almost comical juxtaposition alongside the faces of his compatriots. He cocked his head, regarding Voldemort. “...Even now, you still don’t get it, do you? You don’t see what’s happened—why none of your spells have quite stuck. Not Silencing Charms, not Body Binds, and even your Unforgivables have flown a bit wide, haven’t they?” He shrugged. “They’re protected from you. Protected by me, by what I sacrificed—just like how my mum protected me all those years ago.” The realisation had only just come to Harry, and he certainly didn’t want to test what was admittedly only a theory. Still, he could think of no other explanation for Neville’s miraculous survival of the violent conflagration Voldemort had set upon him, or why so many of the Death Eaters’ spells were coming up impotent. “You never learn from your mistakes, Tom, do you? Rich coming from me, I know. But, well.”

“You *dare*—”

“Yes, I do dare,” said Harry, holding his wand up. “And I dare with this.”

Voldemort laughed, high and hollow. “Your *wand*? Going to duel me, then? A proper wizard’s duel?”

“Not just my wand,” Harry corrected. “*The wand*.” He fixed him with a meaningful look, and Voldemort’s face went slack, all trace of a smile washing from his features. He slid his red, snake-like eyes up to Draco, who was now perched elegantly on one of the stone plinths overlooking the Great Hall. Draco hissed at him in threat, wicked fangs bared and eyes gone pitch-black.

“That brat *gave* you—”

“He didn’t give it,” Harry said. “I won it, fair and square. *The wand chooses the wizard*. It recognises me—and it’s hungry for a fight.” Harry raked him with a judging look. “Are you?”

Voldemort said nothing for a moment, only prowling in a circle, and Harry knew that he had never been more dangerous than he was right now. An animal, backed into a corner—who knew how he might lash out?

But then he stopped and drew himself up—and slid into a duelling stance. “I had already resigned myself to taking my due once this...*scuffle* was finished. It will be no trouble to wrest it from you instead of Lucius’s brat. In fact—” He smiled, showing teeth. “We’ll make this *fair*, shall we? I’ll win it from its previous master in a proper duel, on superior skill.”

Harry nodded along. “It’s possible, you could do that. It certainly has precedent...” He squared himself across from Voldemort, wand raised. “Except you and I both know what’s going to happen. Yew wand, borrowed wand, Dumbledore’s wand—it really doesn’t matter which one you use. It’s mine that makes a difference. Elder or no, it’s still *mine*.” He took a breath. “This is your last chance, Tom. Lay down your wand, tell your army to stand down and surrender, and it doesn’t have to end like this.”

The eastern wall of the Great Hall was crumbling, half a gaping hole of ruined stone and mortar, half pockmarked with the jagged scars of spells that missed their mark. Only a few windows still had glass in their frosted panes, and what stone eagles had not yet fled their posts lay shattered into a thousand pieces across the flagstones.

But the enchantment across the ceiling still held, and dawn was breaking, spangling the Conjured clouds in a dazzling array of red and gold as the rising sun began to creep up over the horizon. The morning glow spilled through and into the Hall, racing like Fiendfyre, hitting both their faces at the same time and bathing them in glory.

Now, he heard a voice in his head say—and he recognised it as his own, full of conviction and certainty. He raised his wand, shouting out the only spell he really *could*, because he was Harry-Fucking-Potter, just as Voldemort roared his own counter:

“Expelliarmus!”

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Green spellfire arced, colliding with scarlet and sending a wave of golden flame out in both directions. Harry could feel the heat of the reaction searing his knuckles, and at the centre of the circle they’d been treading, a ball of vibrant light began to coalesce, pulsing and growing just where their spells met. Harry’s wand-arm gave a violent jerk, and the Elder Wand began to tremble in his grip. He held on tight with both hands, squinting as the jet of spellfire brightened, blotting out the rays of sunlight creeping in—and then went supernova.

There was a violent flash—and then a more violent *CRACK*, and when Harry blinked the stars from his eyes, Voldemort was laid out, dead on the pockmarked flagstones, still clutching a wand that had been cracked down the middle into clean quarters. The Phoenix feather that had formed the core had been reduced to ash, and a gentle breeze swept through, scattering the dust to the four corners. The Elder Wand had snapped the impudent upstart—and laid waste to its unworthy master to boot.

Time held still for a single, long beat, as if the whole world were waiting to see if it might

be allowed to continue turning without this terror among its ranks—but then turn it did, and the silence shattered, tumbling around Harry in wave after wave of deafening screams and cheers and roars of victory. Under a new dawn, the crowd surged towards him. Ron and Hermione were quickest on the draw and enveloped him in bone-breaking embraces, but hot on their heels were Ginny and Neville and Luna, and then it was *everyone* mobbing him—maybe even a few Death Eaters, Harry couldn't have honestly told you—as they crushed in around him. Flitwick was waving down Hagrid, seemingly trying to get him to hoist Harry up on his shoulders so they could all get a glimpse of him, but there was just too much humanity, too much *life*. Harry could make sense of none of what anyone was saying, they were all shouting at once in a glorious cacophony, but he gathered from their beaming faces, dirt-streaked and stained with blood, that they were all of them overwhelmed with gratitude.

But the moment was interrupted by a viciously snarled, "*POTTER!*" that rang up over the din.

The whole of the Hall was immediately on guard, heads snapping to and fro to see who their new enemy was, and a series of soft, scandalised gasps went up, the crowd parting like water before a boat prow, when Draco came stalking forward. Fury radiated off of him in palpable waves, and once he'd drawn within an arm's length, he wound up his fist and *slammed* it into Harry's face, sending him reeling.

Someone screamed, and Draco brought his wand slashing down, spitting out *Episkey!* before smashing his fist once more into Harry's newly mended nose, breaking it again. Before Harry's mind could catch up, Draco had snarled out another *Episkey!* and had his arm drawn back to take a third swing.

"That's—enough of that—" Ron grunted, lunging for Draco's arms to jerk him back. Draco struggled violently, and it took Dean and Neville helping Ron before they had him under control. Even then, he still fought their grip, and it was only Hermione's soft, "*Not here...*" of warning that stilled him. He was panting hard, glaring at Harry with a wild, manic rage he'd generally only shown before uncontrolled shifts, when fear and anger and raw ineffable emotion overcame him. It was disturbingly close to hatred, and Harry

stared in bald shock.

He had certainly expected Draco to have...well, *opinions* on Harry's decision to give himself over to Voldemort, but he hadn't thought he'd express them quite so physically. Or at least not in such open confrontation, like keeping it inside any longer might burn him alive, his passion as roiling an inferno as the lava pooling in the dragon's belly.

Harry opened his mouth, an apology on his lips—though he wasn't sure what to say beyond *I'm sorry*, which seemed far too pithy—but Draco angrily shrugged off the hands holding him back and turned on his heel sharply, putting his back to Harry and marching away. The crowd gave him a wide berth, tracking his retreat with their eyes, until his mother shoved her way through the onlookers with a choked cry of *Draco!* and wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug, his father standing tall and stiff just to the side. Draco mutely accepted Narcissa's embrace, shoulders tight.

Harry's gut wrenched with the urge to follow after Draco, to explain why he'd done what he had, but Hermione stepped into his line of sight. She warned him off with a look, and he reluctantly relented, shoulders slumping.

Once the crowd realised there was to be no more excitement, they abruptly lost interest, and the Malfoys were swallowed up in the milling scrum. Harry quickly found himself swarmed by the crowd again as well-wishers pounded his back with wide grins, and his arm was nearly wrenched from its socket by so many wanting to shake his hand.

He only managed to beg off after a good fifteen minutes, when everyone tired of congratulating or thanking him and began the arduous process of reuniting with friends and loved ones—as well as tallying up the dead. As the Great Hall began to empty, Harry found himself once more scanning for Draco, but the Malfoys seemed to have done what they did best and made themselves scarce. Harry tried not to be too very disappointed—Draco had been worried sick over his folks for eight months now, after all—but he sensed that if he left this for too long, there would be no mending this broken trust. Ron and Hermione had known him long enough he felt confident they would not press him to explain himself until later, after casualties had been assessed and straggling Death

Eaters had been rounded up and any remaining Dark creatures driven off Hogwarts lands. Draco had known him—*really* known him—for but a heartbeat and could not be so casually dealt with.

He excused himself from Madame Pomfrey's care after being assured that he was fit as a fiddle, considering what he'd just been through. The nasty bruise on his chest from the Killing Curse would fade in time, she had said—though the fingerling lightning scar settled just between his pectorals would be with him until he finally died and *stayed* dead. He thanked her with a shy duck of his head, wondering if this would be the last time she had to tend to his bumps and bruises, and then scanned the Hall until he saw a gaggle of redheads huddled together

He jogged over to join the Weasleys. "Have you seen—?" he started to ask Ron, who just jerked his head towards the Entrance Hall.

"Said he needed some space," Ron explained. "I think his folks got waylaid by Kingsley."

Harry stared at the open doors, through which he could see others helping wounded fighters in from the courtyard for Healers to treat. McGonagall was directing one of the Centaurs, who had a nasty gash over his hindquarters, over to a straw pallet in a corner.

"...He's pissed off with me."

"Did you think he wouldn't be?" asked Hermione, sidling up to offer her two Knuts. "That we *all* wouldn't be?" she added pointedly, as if he needed reminding that she and Ron were just as angry with him as Draco was.

"You scared the shit out of us," Ron said, keeping his voice low as he ushered them away from the rest of his family. He was scratching the back of his neck, staring down at his toes. "We thought you'd *died*, mate."

"I did," Harry said, in a small voice. "Kind of."

Hermione's hand went to Ron's wrist, squeezing hard, and Harry didn't miss the way she leaned into him a bit, as if without him there, she might just collapse onto her knees. Ron

was still resolutely not looking at him, but his hands clenched into furious fists, white-knuckled. Harry hoped he held it together; his nose had already been broken twice today, he didn't want to risk a third. *Episkey* hurt like a bitch.

There was going to be a conversation later, he'd accepted that—it would be a long one, there would probably be tears backed by a half-dozen different emotions, and it would not be pretty, but it needed to happen. Dying had not helped him avoid this uncomfortable confrontation quite as he'd hoped it might.

“I...I knew you'd be pissed off—I did. You can't know how much—” Harry took a breath. He couldn't get into this right now; if he started, he wouldn't be able to stop until he'd cleansed himself of this weight. “...It was—it was something I had to do. My final job.”

Ron nodded, too quickly. “Well, I reckon he just did what *he* had to, too.” He sniffed and looked up. His eyes looked a little bloodshot. “And maybe now what's done is done, you should go do what you *ought* to instead.”

What he ought to. Harry didn't really see how that was all that different from doing what he *had* to, but his hands went to his Mokeskin pouch all the same. He loosened the cinch and drew out the Marauder's Map, solemnly swearing that he was up to no good. Which was as true now as it had ever been; he felt guilty, using the Map, as Draco clearly wanted to be left alone, but a dark voice whispered in silky warning that it would be unwise to leave things as they were now, without at least *trying* to explain himself. He wasn't quite ready to apologise yet, he didn't think, but Draco needed to know he hadn't just gone off half-cocked on a literal suicide mission.

Despite the evacuation, there were as many people crawling the halls of Hogwarts now as ever, between the Hogwarts fighters, reinforcements, and remnants of Voldemort's army still skulking about. But the vast majority were congregated in the Great Hall and first couple of floors. Draco's little dot stuck out like a sore thumb, holed up in the Prefect's Bath on the fifth floor.

He sighed, stowing the Map. “...If anyone asks where I've gone—”

“To rescue your lizard boyfriend, wasn’t it?” Ron jibed, though it seemed a forced effort, as if he was trying very hard to make himself seem comfortable with the idea of Harry and Draco being anything more than mortal enemies. Not as oblivious as Harry might have hoped, indeed.

“Er, yeah, something like that.”

“Here, this should help,” Hermione said, tugging the Invisibility Cloak from where she’d stowed it in her robes after retrieving it for him and tossing it over his head. “Now go, off with you.”

Under cover of the Cloak, Harry managed to avoid any further well-wishers, escaping the Great Hall easily and beating a hasty path to the stairwell. It seemed someone had already started work on castle repairs, as the moving staircases looked in much better condition than they’d been when he’d scaled them to visit the Headmaster’s Office.

The door to the bathroom stood open when he stepped into the fifth-floor corridor, passing the empty plinth that had once held Boris the Bewildered. He paused before entering, taking a bracing breath to steel himself, then poked his head inside. He and Draco didn’t have a good track record with bathrooms, he was reminded, so he had to hope history wasn’t about to repeat itself. It would be a very poor ending to his biography to have defeated Voldemort in a duel to the death only to wind up flayed open on the bath tile twenty minutes later because his ‘lizard boyfriend’ was narked off at him.

Draco was hunched over one of the sinks in a distressingly familiar pose, and Harry had not taken two steps inside when, without looking up, he said, “Take another step closer, and I’ll *Crucio* you again. Don’t think for a second I won’t.”

Harry did not, in fact, think he wouldn’t. His nose was still aching.

He tried for a bit of levity to ease the tension; jokes didn’t tend to go over well with Draco when he was angry—especially with Harry—but self-deprecating humour at Harry’s expense was a perennial favourite. “...Is this your way of inviting that duel? I’ve

only just come back from the dead, but I reckon I could—”

Draco rounded on him with whiplike speed, wand raised in threat, and Harry lunged for one of the columns to use it for cover. Right, so clearly humour had no place in this conversation. Harry swallowed, running a hand through his hair. “...Look, I know you probably don’t want to talk to me right now, and I honestly can’t blame you, but—at least hear me out? You don’t have to say anything in return, and you can...” He grimaced. “...You can hit me again, if it’ll make you feel better. But at least let me say my piece?”

Draco continued to stare at him with a stony expression, diamond-like in its harsh beauty, but his wand arm began to tremble, and with a bright, hearty *Fuck*, Draco shoved his wand into his pocket and turned to pace out his anger. He punted a washing basket across the room, slamming a fist onto one of the sinks with such force Harry winced, certain he must have cracked one of the fine bones of his hand.

“It wouldn’t,” he spat miserably, then took several shuddering breaths. He brought his hands up to rub at his eyes with the heels of his fists. “It wouldn’t make me feel better. *Nothing* has.”

Harry didn’t quite know what to say in response, so he said nothing. That Draco had said more than five words to him, and that none had been curse words, was already more than he could have hoped for. He didn’t dare open his mouth and ruin things now.

Draco let his hands drop back to his sides, raising his eyes to look himself over in one of the mirrors. He clearly didn’t like what he saw, for he grimaced and hung his head, back to Harry. As if Harry hadn’t seen him in far meaner estate than he was now. At length, though, he seemed to have pulled himself together to his satisfaction, and spoke again:

“Granger says I died, you know.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, an immovable lump, and he leaned a little harder against the column.

“She said that—that when you—” His voice hitched, and he swallowed, shifting around just far enough to mark Harry out of the corner of one eye. “That when *you* died, something up here...” He tapped his temple. “Snapped. Or—shut down, I suppose.” His lips drew back into a terrible sneer. “So *ta* for that.”

Harry just blinked stupidly; perhaps his brains had been rattled by his recent near-death experience, because nothing Draco was saying made an ounce of damn sense. “You—wait, you...you *died*?” He opened and closed his mouth several times in succession. “I—someone...someone killed you? In the battle?”

“Did you listen to a *fucking* word I just said? Yeah, someone killed me.” He jabbed a finger in Harry’s direction. “*You. You*, you sanctimonious, knob-headed, bilge-for-brains! *You* fucking killed me. I died because of *you*.” His shoulders slumped in exhaustion, and he crossed his arms over his chest, eyes closed. “...Or so Granger says.”

Harry’s strength returned to him in a flood, and he stumbled down the steps into the bathroom proper, though making sure to give Draco ample space in case he decided to whip out his wand again.

“I...I don’t understand,” Harry said, his voice weak with shock. He couldn’t help but be plaintively honest—how had Harry *killed* him? Draco certainly didn’t sound like he meant it figuratively—yet here he was, standing before Harry as if nothing were amiss. But then, Harry was meant to have died as well and had still somehow managed to scrape his way back to life. Death was evidently not the certainty for wizarding folk that it was for Muggles—though it did not make the near-misses any less harrowing.

Draco rubbed at his eyes again, then ruffled his hair. He looked exhausted, shadows lurking under his eyes like dark bruises and veins standing out at his temples and neck. Their nap in the tent felt like it had happened a lifetime ago. Draco put his back to one of the sinks, settling against it for support.

“I remember...we were searching for you. I gave you a half hour to do whatever it was you’d been summoned for, and then when you didn’t come back, I went looking for Granger and Weasley. Didn’t take long, between the three of us, to figure out you’d

probably bugged off to do something *phenomenally fucking stupid*, so we decided we'd find you *before* that and drag you back. Maybe head the Dark Lord off at the pass and kill you ourselves. We started for the Forest, but—something...something happened.”

He brought a hand up to his chest, fingers clenching in the fabric over his heart. “It felt like—nothing. Or, nothingness. Just this dark, heavy quiet, pulling me down. This—Merlin—this overwhelming sense that I had lost something. Something irreplaceable, some—part of me. It felt like nothing mattered anymore, like I'd never ever be whole again, and it was *worse*, so much worse than that first time I transformed.” He was staring off into the middle distance, and his eyes were dancing with a manic energy. “Because at least then, I could feel that you were out there, *somewhere*, and if I just searched hard enough, I could find you...” He released a deep, shuddering breath. “But this was just...just nothing. Like I'd had this—thread, connecting me to you, and then someone snipped it.” He swallowed hard, then turned to look at Harry. His grey eyes had gone dark, almost to black. “...Is that what it was like? For you?”

It was such an innocent question, phrased like that. Like he wanted nothing more than for Harry to at least tell him *yes*. *Yes* he felt the same strange connection to Draco that Draco felt for him. But he couldn't—because he didn't. He wasn't a dragon, or an Animagus masquerading as one, and so he'd felt nothing when he'd marched into the Forest, nothing when he'd taken that Curse, and nothing when he'd gone to that strange place beyond.

Harry's throat was dry, and he had to remind himself to breathe at regular intervals. “I—I'm sorry. I didn't *know*—I just thought...”

“You thought it would *just be you*...” The innocence was gone now, iced over, and Draco slicked his hair back away from his face with sweaty palms. “You *thought* that only you'd suffer. That only you'd have to be the one to die, and then this might all be over. That we could all carry on with our merry fucking lives.” He stepped away from the sink, shoving his hands into his pockets, and began to pace again. “Well, there's a funny little detail they really just gloss right over in *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*, see!” He laughed, a rumbling, rueful chuckle. “Apparently dragons *die* from that sort of thing!”

Losing—losing *those*.” He paused and grimaced, then bit out, “Losing their *mates*.” The bitter, angry tone was back in full force, as he shook a finger in Harry’s face. “It wasn’t just your *own* fucking life you were throwing away!”

“I...seriously, I didn’t know...” Harry repeated in a lame attempt at justification, before his pride flared and he came back on the defensive. “And I wasn’t throwing it away. I *had* to! It was...just, there was magic we hadn’t anticipated, and I...I had to, okay? I *had* to.” Draco seemed to think he’d just waltzed into the Forest on a lark, or that he’d done it just for a quick and easy end to this whole mess and not because it was something he’d been *raised* to do, manipulated into through every experience and interaction he’d ever enjoyed.

“You *had* to. You had to *abandon* us—couldn’t even summon the balls to *tell us what you were doing?*” Harry tried not to wince, as Draco’s accusations hit home. He’d been a coward, that he would not deny, but he never would’ve been able to go through with it otherwise. He knew himself well enough to understand that, if he’d confided in his friends, they wouldn’t have let him go, and he wouldn’t have wanted to either.

“I *couldn’t* tell you! It had to be done, and if I’d told any of you—”

“And what was I supposed to do, once you were gone? Granger and Weasley, they might’ve had themselves a sobfest, thrown a pity party or three, but they would’ve gotten over you! But just *fuck me*, I guess? Enjoy never feeling right in my own skin again?” He kicked angrily at the piping to one of the sinks, spitting out another vicious oath, and Harry was finally frustrated enough with how Draco wasn’t *hearing* him that he thought *What a spoilt fucking brat*.

Because that was how Draco was acting right now: childish, irrational, like he couldn’t think beyond *himself* to the—well, to the *greater good*. He didn’t understand—and maybe that was a bit of Harry’s fault too, not explaining himself well enough—that this had never been something Harry had intended nor could have possibly known about and *it wasn’t his fault*. Everything about this was shit, but it was shit they’d stumbled into, not dumped themselves.

Harry wiped his face, trying to organise his thoughts. "...You were meant...to be pissed off with me, maybe to burn down a few cottages in Hogsmeade like some dread wyrm out of a fairy tale, and then to move on with your life, just like Ron and Hermione. I did think about it, you know—" Draco opened his mouth, probably to deliver some scathing opinion on Harry's brand of *thinking*, so he quickly pressed on so as not to get distracted, "I just...I thought you were strong enough. Strong enough that you didn't really *need* me anymore. I mean..." Harry scratched his neck nervously, coughing to clear his throat when his voice hitched. "I don't feel like...we've really *needed*-needed to do...y'know, half the stuff we've been..."

Draco just gaped at him, limbs slack. The expression on his face was hard to read: a little bit shocked, a little bit confused, a *hell* of a lot incensed. When he spoke, there was a dangerous tremor in his voice. "...You are, without a doubt, the most frustrating fucking knob I have ever met." He licked his lips and tilted his head back to look up at the ceiling. "...I feel a *glorious* kinship with Voldemort now."

Harry didn't quite know what that meant, and when Draco shook his head and started for the door, Harry made a grab for him—only to be rudely rebuffed.

"Touch me, and I'll rip your arm off—Elder Wand and all."

Harry didn't try to stop him again, arms raised in an expression of surrender, and he could but watch as Draco marched out the door, slamming it behind him, and wonder what he was supposed to do now.

Harry gave Draco a few minutes' head-start before he stepped out of the bathroom as well, not wanting to look like he was chasing him down yet again; he'd been lucky to come out of that confrontation with all his bits intact, he suspected, and didn't want to push his luck.

Ron and Hermione were waiting for him when he exited the Prefects' bathroom, lurking just far enough away that they wouldn't appear to have been eavesdropping—but Harry knew Hermione had several sets of Extendable Ears tucked into that beaded bag of hers and wasn't discounting anything.

“...As happy as you hoped he’d be to see you still puttering around?” Ron asked, tactful as ever.

Harry just stared down at the flagstones, mind still reeling—everything was hot and cold right now. He was overcome with remorse, horrified that he’d unwittingly dragged Draco down that dark, morbid path with him when he’d gone to meet his death—but equally so he was irritated that Draco couldn’t grasp he’d had a damn good reason to act as he had, and that of course he hadn’t done so to deliberately hurt anyone. Perhaps if he’d been given more time to explain himself properly, instead of Draco storming out on him, he could have made him *see* that.

He lifted his eyes to Hermione, unsurprised to find she’d either been crying some more, or was on the verge of a new jag now. “...He said he died. That...that I killed him...”

She brought her hand to her throat. “Oh—Harry, *no*, no that’s not—”

“Except it is, isn’t it?” His breath was coming quicker now, and he found he was relieved to be able to direct this irritation, this *anger*, at someone else. Someone who wasn’t going to run away, or threaten him with bodily harm. “Why didn’t you *tell me*? Because you knew, didn’t you? That if one of us died, we’d drag the other down too?”

Her eyes were shining, and her breathing was stuttered as she began to hyperventilate. Ron’s hands were on her shoulders immediately, and he whispered soothing sweet nothings into her ear, cutting Harry a dark frown. “Cut her some slack, mate. She wasn’t keeping *secrets*—”

“She was! If she knew about this, that Draco and I might *kill* each other, then—”

“I didn’t realise it was that serious!” Hermione snapped, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “I—I didn’t know—that it—m-mattered!” She scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeves, breath still coming in stuttering starts. “It—it’s not s-supposed to happen un—unless it’s a—a mated pair.”

Harry’s cheeks were flushed with both mortification and rage now. “But that’s what this

whole fucking mess has been about! You *knew*—”

“No it’s *not!*” She stamped her foot angrily, then forced herself to take several deep, rhythmic inhalations, breathing out slowly between each as she struggled for calm. “A mated *pair*. There’s a world of difference between one creature pursuing another because it *wants* a mate and actually being *accepted* as one. I th-thought your and Draco’s situation was the former—”

“Wh—” Harry sputtered, and now the flush was mostly mortification. “What does that have to do with anything?!”

Hermione slumped, shaking her head. “Only *everything!*” She rubbed at her eyes again, and Ron meekly offered her a dirty handkerchief. She didn’t bother to Scourgify it this time, just blew her nose. She sniffed to clear her stuffy airways, and when she spoke again, her voice was less watery with no more stutters and hitches. “When it was just Draco, just his Animagus form following its instincts and searching for a mate, that’s *all it was*. Looking for a mate—looking for someone like you. You didn’t have to accept it—”

“The hell I didn’t!” Harry huffed. “You *told me* that I had to—”

“Because we didn’t exactly have any choice! Dragons will go through three or four potential mates sometimes before they settle! Just because you were his *first* choice didn’t mean you had to be his last. Established colonies have ways of handling eager juveniles out of their depth, and there are potions out there used in dragon husbandry to encourage a young drake to lose interest in a potential mate he’s marked. But we were trying to lie low; we couldn’t just turn him over to the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau or remand him to a state sanctuary for management—someplace where his...his *urges* could be dealt with by professionals.” She swallowed, wringing her hands. “So I told you to make the best of a bad situation. I thought...I thought if you just went along with it, did just enough to *get by*, then it would be fine.” She thinned her lips, suddenly defiant. “And it might have been, if you’d stopped there.”

“Wh—this is my fault?”

“Of course not, Harry,” Hermione sighed, exhausted. “It’s just—I *tried* to tell you, but you told me it was *complicated*, that you didn’t want to talk about it because you were still figuring things out.”

“Because I *was*! ‘Figuring things out’ means there’s *something to figure out!*” He hadn’t wanted to get into a roaring row with his best friends about fancying Draco Malfoy, but here they were, and Harry let loose. “I—I thought you were just being nosey! Trying to make sure I didn’t get my heart broken or some sophomoric shit like that!”

“Your *heart broken*, mate?” Ron groaned with a shudder. “You have to be so graphic about it?”

Hermione rushed forward, taking Harry’s hands in her own and fixing him with an entreating expression, deep brown eyes still shiny with unshed tears. “I swear, Harry. I *swear* I wasn’t keeping it from you. I thought...I just thought it wouldn’t be an issue. That it maybe wasn’t...quite so serious, and then...” She licked her lips and ducked her head. “And then by the time I realised it *was* that serious, it wouldn’t have done any good to say anything. I didn’t want to distract you, and there was nothing you could have done—”

“I might’ve—” Harry cut himself off, not entirely sure *what* he would have done differently. “I sure as hell would’ve wanted to at least *know* I might drop dead if Draco caught the bad end of a Curse! He wasn’t in the D.A.! He hasn’t trained like we have, I could’ve at least tutored him—”

Hermione was shaking her head, though. “...It doesn’t work like that. I mean—you were never in any danger. Draco’s the Animagus; he’s the one dealing with these instincts and urges, bits of his dragon bleeding over into him, making him feel things most humans aren’t aware of on any level...” She forced a weak smile. “It was just him. It was always just him.”

“...*Is that what it was like? For you?*” Draco had asked, wanting so badly to know that Harry had felt the same utter loss and devastation Draco had.

Harry closed his eyes and bit out a few silent oaths. "...Tell me what happened."

He had to know. He had to hear every gruesome detail, and Draco could not oblige—nor should he have had to.

There was a pause—Hermione probably didn't want to recount it, or thought they ought to save it for later, considering the night they'd just had. But Harry was exhausted, and he refused to buckle, to let himself get a moment's rest, until he knew exactly what had happened. What he had wrought, in his fumbling efforts to do what was right. He was like the world's most fucked-up Midas: everything he touched turned to ash.

Hermione took a breath. "Draco came to find us, when you didn't come back from... wherever it was you'd run off to. We searched the castle for you at first, then realised there was a very good chance you'd gone into the Forest to give yourself over to Voldemort. We thought to go after you, but before we'd even made it out of the castle, Draco collapsed. I thought he'd just tripped, but we couldn't get him back up, and he started seizing, and—" Harry opened his eyes to look at her, willing her to continue. *Say it*, he thought. "And then his heart stopped."

You fucking killed me. I died because of you.

Draco's words echoed like clanging gongs, and he fought the urge to plug his fingers in his ears.

Hermione rubbed at her nose again, using Ron's handkerchief to dab at her eyes. "If I hadn't performed a Resuscitation Charm and kept it pumping manually...I think we would have lost him."

Harry felt a cold chill rush through him, because she was right—they probably *would* have lost him. Harry had been able to come back only because he'd still been tethered to Voldemort, retaining a link to the living world and granted the choice of returning or moving on. But Draco...Draco would have just died and *stayed dead*. Harry would have woken on that cold, forest floor—while Draco would have been laid out on the flagstones underneath the greying dawn in the Great Hall along with the others.

“I couldn’t find anything *wrong* with him, though; he hadn’t been hit by any spell as far as I could tell—I mean, Ron and I were with him the whole time! I thought...that maybe it wasn’t something Diagnostic Charms could tell me about—that maybe it was to do with the dragon—”

“That pair bond, then?” Harry asked flatly.

She was quiet for a moment. “...I didn’t want it to be that,” she said miserably. “...But that was what Charlie figured. He s-said—” She forced herself to take a deep breath when the hyperventilating stutter showed itself again. “That...that Draco’s body had shut down, because it couldn’t sense its mate anymore—probably because you had died too. He said it happens sometimes to bonded pairs—usually young ones who haven’t had time to settle into their arrangement and learn to live apart. Having one just ripped away, suddenly like that, drags the other down with it.”

Harry then recalled the Locket’s horrific prediction: *drawn, inexorably, to your own doom, defeat incarnate. A moth to dragonflame.*

Guilt swamped through him anew. That vision had *terrified* Draco—and then it had come true. Draco hated not being in control of his own destiny about as much as Harry did—no wonder he had been so shaken.

Harry had been carrying around a sort of fatalistic acceptance of his own mortality for months—years, really. But it was one thing to accept your own death was inevitable and another altogether to have to stomach others dying for you.

God, she’d been right not to tell him. He was glad she hadn’t, now he thought about it.

He couldn’t have gone through with it. Not if he’d known he’d be dragging Draco down with him. Not even if, for some daft reason, Draco had agreed with it and calmly walked into the Forest at his side to meet Death, as if they were the Peverells. It would have been an impossible choice, and maybe Hermione had seen that, somehow. Far more clearly than Harry.

He knew, logically, that refusing to do what had to be done, what Dumbledore had meant for him to do, just because of one person wouldn't have been justified, but...it had been a hard enough task to complete when he'd thought it was a burden for him and him alone to bear. If he'd realised he would be sacrificing not only himself but Draco as well...he'd have needed a push. Or a shove.

“And...and then,” Hermione continued, frowning, “maybe...ten, fifteen minutes later? He roused—heart beating on its own and healthy as a hippogriff. It was the strangest thing I've ever seen...” She looked to Harry, searching his face for answers. “Even Charlie was confused; he thought maybe he'd interpreted the diagnostics wrong, or that the bond hadn't been as strong as we'd thought and he'd been able to shake it, even if you h-had —”

“He didn't—” Harry started, then sighed, scrubbing at his face. There was no getting around it. And he needed to tell someone. He needed to tell *them*. “I...I did die. I died, in the Forest.” He made himself look them in the eye, then tugged down his shirt collar, just low enough to expose the nasty bruise and the inflamed lightning-bolt scar on his chest. “Voldemort killed me.”

It was Ron's turn to look despondent, and Hermione slipped her arm around his waist, giving a gentle squeeze of support and hitting the handkerchief with a quiet *Scourgify*, in case he needed it.

“But I got to come back—he said...he said I could go on, if I wanted, or...I could come back and finish the fight.”

Ron frowned. “He'? He who?” He pulled away from Hermione, arms limp at his sides as he shook his head in disbelief. “Why'd you do it, mate? Why, after all we went through? How hard we worked to get this far? Why just—*give in*, like that?”

He opened his mouth to protest, as he had with Draco, that it hadn't been *giving in* or *giving up*, that there'd been a need, greater than his own life was worth. But it had been the wrong thing to say to Draco, and it was the wrong thing to say now.

So instead, he told them about Snape, about his bowlful of Pensieve memories. How he'd seen through Snape's eyes the revelation of Dumbledore's master plan and that he had never been meant to live—only to survive, until the very last moment, and to die at the appointed time. He told them about his walk through the castle, he told them about meeting Neville, and he told them about the Resurrection Stone—and of his mother and father, and Sirius and Remus.

He told them about Voldemort, and he told them about dying. He told them about Dumbledore, too, and the strange, sad, dreadful creature wailing under the bench. He did not tell them about the peacock, because he still hadn't quite figured that one out himself. He did tell them, though, about being offered a choice, and he told them—sheepish, guilty—about how he'd really, *really* considered doing as Dumbledore had proposed: taking a train and just...going on. He hoped they understood, how peaceful it had been, and how it made him realise how much life *hurt*. He also hoped they understood what it meant that he'd come back all the same. To them and Draco and Neville and Ginny and Luna, to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and McGonagall and Kingsley and Hogwarts and London and *life*.

“I just knew that I had to do it—*had* to—and I wouldn't have been able to if I'd had to look you in the face and tell you what I meant to do. I knew you'd try to stop me, and I knew I'd want you to.” He swallowed thickly as his vision blurred. “I'm sorry. I really am.”

Hermione gave a sharp sob and rushed at him, drawing him into so tight a hug as she had never given him, and Ron descended on them with wide arms, wrapping the both of them in his embrace as he soaked Harry's robes with snotty tears.

It took a shamefully long time for them to pull themselves back together this time, but they managed it, cheeks flushed and noses rubbed raw. “...I gotta admit,” Ron said, “That was probably for the best. I dunno if I could've let you go. And Draco—he'd have scooped you up and carried you off into the mountains probably.”

Harry laughed, and it came out watery. He could still feel Draco's bitter rage at the back

of his throat, eating through him like acid. He'd been a coward, and that was that; there would have been no length to their goodbyes that would have sufficed, and he hadn't had the fortitude to face them. He had felt, walking through the Forest to die, that offering himself up freely to Voldemort would be the most difficult thing he ever did. But with the clarity of hindsight, he knew that no: dying had been the easy bit, just as Sirius had assured him.

Trying to tell his friends why he hadn't had the courage to say goodbye was a *hell* of a lot harder.

God, now he wanted to cry again. He wanted to do quite a lot of things, actually. Sleep was particularly high up on the list, as he realised he hadn't really slept in months—a deep, dreamless slumber without obligations or worries hanging over his head sounded about perfect right now.

They headed back down to the Great Hall in silent companionship, but once they reached the doors, Harry balked, reluctant to go back inside. He could see, through the open doors, everyone was having their moments—there was Neville, surrounded by new admirers, Ginny resting against Molly's breast while her mother stroked her hair with a beatific smile, and even Draco, who'd been swept back into his parents' arms and had his head bowed in quiet conversation with the both of them.

Harry felt apart from all of them, and from Ron and Hermione too. He found himself, guiltily, almost longing for the Kings Cross Station in his mind, with the comfortable weight of Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder and the warmth of the peacock dozing in his lap.

He knew he wasn't finished apologising to Draco—but he couldn't do this right now. Every time he tried to do the right thing with Draco, to make things *better*, it just wound up fucking things up even worse.

They were alive, though. They had time—that damned clock had finally *finally* gone quiet. And all Harry really wanted right now was a nap.

Ron elbowed him, nodding to the Entrance Hall doors, which had been propped open to let the warm morning light flood inside. "...Go on. We'll cover for you."

Harry's heart swelled in his chest, and he hugged the both of them again. Then, resolutely not looking at Draco, he slipped on the Invisibility Cloak and headed out onto the front lawn, bound for Hogsmeade.

Grimmauld Place Again

It was one week later, to the day, when Harry was woken at what felt like the crack of dawn but turned out to actually be nearly nine in the morning by Draco Malfoy leaning on the doorbell of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, sending the announcing chimes clanging about in cacophonous discordance.

He'd thought the raucous noise might have been his hangover at first; he'd never had one, after all, but he'd found the Black Family wine cellar in his explorations the night before and, after sampling handsomely of the vintages on offer, could not tell if the banging was coming from inside or outside his head. Not for the first time, he regretted encouraging Kreacher to stay at Hogwarts for a bit and ensure the house-elves there were recovering from the battle.

When the ringing of the doorbell chimes was joined by violent pounding on the thick oak of the front door, though, Harry began to suspect he had a visitor and that he should probably make himself decent and trundle down to see who it was before they knocked the door off its hinges. He was just groping for his glasses on the bedside table when Draco's voice boomed through the house, magically magnified: "*GET THE FUCK DOWN HERE, POTTER, OR I'LL BLAST MY WAY INSIDE.*"

Harry was on his feet and halfway down the stairs, still tugging on a robe, before his ears had stopped ringing. He was starting to regret having formally claimed Sirius's bedroom as his own, all the way up on the fourth floor, instead of just kipping in the guest bedroom he'd shared with Ron during Order meetings closer to ground level.

He'd spent the better part of the past week tidying up Sirius's room, which was still a wreck between Mundungus and Snape's snooping (some good those Charms of Moody's had done!). There wasn't much else to do, after all, aside from attend more funerals—not when taking two steps into Diagon Alley meant risking being mobbed by a horde of grateful wizarding folk. He hadn't quite made it beyond cataloguing Sirius's photo albums

and the contents of his wardrobe (including several very well-worn, comfortable leather jackets, which Harry had definitely not tried on, and a shoebox full of letters from Remus that Harry had read three sentences of before tossing back, red as a tomato), but he had time, now. There was no rush.

Well, no rush to straighten Sirius's bedroom; there was absolutely a rush to make it down to the entry hall before Draco finished deciding whether to take the door down with magic or good, old-fashioned dragonflame. Harry wasn't certain Grimmauld Place was insured, after all, and surely the neighbours would notice such a display.

He paused, one hand on the knob, to steal a glimpse of himself in the entryway mirror—he'd looked worse, but he'd also looked much better, and there was no fooling anyone into thinking he hadn't just rolled out of bed. "Oh—*goodness*," the mirror offered, with a scandalised gasp. "Are beehive updos back in fashion, then?"

"Shove off," Harry said, patting down his unruly hair. It wasn't as if Draco didn't know his hair was an ongoing natural disaster.

He took a breath, straightened his dressing robe, and opened the door.

"Er—good mor—"

"I honestly didn't think it was possible, Potter," Draco growled, knocking shoulders with Harry as he rudely shoved him aside and strode through. He tossed his travel cloak haphazardly at the hooks by the door, and it floated over to arrange itself neatly alongside Harry's raincoat and Invisibility Cloak.

Harry rubbed his shoulder, wincing as he shut the door behind Draco with a muttered *Please, come in...* Draco was already clomping loudly on the stairs up to the first floor—and Harry marvelled for a moment how Draco seemed to know his way around Grimmauld Place before recalling that it likely wasn't his first time visiting the house, as he was a Black.

Harry followed at a healthy distance, sensing this wasn't a social call. "Didn't think...what

was possible?” he asked, hanging back in the doorway to the sitting room while Draco made quick work of one of the ancient armchairs near the fireplace, Transfiguring it into something high-backed and sturdy that didn’t look like it hadn’t been reupholstered since the sixteenth century.

He didn’t seem satisfied with the patterning, flicking his wand in frustration as he cycled through a dozen different fabrics and colour-coordinated ticking. “To be even *more* pissed off at you than I was before,” he spat, voice cold enough it didn’t matter the house’s Temperature Regulation Charms had been on the fritz since at least the previous summer.

Harry closed his eyes and let his head settle against the jamb. He was beginning to feel like one of those poor chaps in the television dramas whose girlfriends or wives always seemed to be angry at them over one thing or another, and they’d have to spend the better part of the half-hour episode trying to figure out just what they’d done to nark their partner off. Granted, Harry still hadn’t properly apologised—or rather, hadn’t properly *explained* himself—but that was by design. He’d thought they needed a bit of time apart, considering they’d been practically living on top of each other for the past eight months—a cooling-off period. He still *meant* to get around to it. Eventually.

Draco seemed to have settled on the upholstery fabric—a neutral eggshell cream tone with gold fleur-de-lis patterns and bronze ticking at the seams. It was quite tasteful, if more than a bit out of place in the dusty, dark sitting room of the Black family home. He had now moved on to adjusting the carved legs to his liking.

“Er, what are you *doing* with that chair...?”

“You’re the Saviour of the wizarding world, Potter,” Draco said, Transfiguring the thick, straight legs into something slender and swooping that suited the casual elegance of the upholstery. “I can’t bash your brains in with *any* old piece of furniture, now can I?”

Harry winced. “You’re...you’re still angry, then?” As if it weren’t bleedingly obvious.

Draco fixed him with a withering look. “*Did you not just hear me call you ‘Potter’?*” He

let his wand drop, evidently finished with the chair, and glanced around the sitting room. “So *this* is where you’ve been hiding out for the past week? Salazar’s arse crack, I’ve seen mausoleums with more charm.”

He wasn’t wrong about the atmosphere, though Harry still felt a pang of offence on behalf of Sirius. Not that Sirius probably wouldn’t heartily agree. “I haven’t been *hiding*,” he protested weakly. “I just—I wanted some time alone. To—recover. I’ve kind of been through an ordeal...”

Draco’s glare went positively arctic. “Oh yes, my apologies. You *died*; I can’t imagine how *that* felt.”

Harry grimaced. “Right, well, I thought...maybe you’d want some time to yourself too. I mean, you’ve kind of been forced into close quarters with three people you weren’t particularly fond of for the better part of the past year, and you’d finally gotten your parents back.”

He realised, though, with a guilty jolt that he’d just *assumed* that Draco had been relaxing and recovering at home with his parents for the past week. But Lucius Malfoy had technically broken out of Azkaban, where he’d been serving a lengthy, well-deserved sentence, and was therefore quite likely a very wanted man. And as for Malfoy Manor itself...well, nothing short of *Imperius* would ever make Harry set foot there again, after what he’d seen the Death Eaters doing there in his visions—and even then, he’d probably do his damndest to shake it off. He could hardly blame Draco if he felt the same.

Had he even been home at all? Or had he spent his days since Voldemort’s fall in and out of the Ministry, pleading leniency for his father while he and his mother made the best of one of the Leaky’s humble rooms? Unless they were on the run abroad, they’d probably either been confronted by the Ministry or would be expecting an Owl very soon.

But—no, Draco wouldn’t have left their side unless he’d been assured of their security and well-being. Unless he was here to ask Harry to lean on Kingsley or the Auror Division—fuck, what if that was the case? Harry didn’t know he could say yes; Lucius

Malfoy deserved to rot in Azkaban for the rest of his life for what he'd done in the name of Voldemort, especially as he'd shown no remorse nor had done anything during the battle that might sway Harry's opinion. Narcissa, Harry was happy to defend; she had never been particularly kind to him and seemed motivated by nothing more than a desire to keep her son safe and sound, but she bore no Dark Mark, and Harry owed her a life debt for the lie she'd spun in the Forest. Without her actions, he wouldn't be standing here today, trying to keep Draco from braining him with this lovely piece of furniture he'd Transfigured.

Harry rubbed at his neck, praying Draco wasn't here to call in that favour he was owed. "It's only, I knew you'd missed them terribly. I thought for sure you'd want to spend as much time with them as possible—at least for a while? Plus..." He crossed his arms over his chest. The bruise from the Killing Curse had indeed faded, as Madame Pomfrey had assured, and was now a sick, yellow blotch that would probably be gone entirely by June, leaving behind only the veiny tendrils coiling outward from the new lightning-bolt scar. "You made it pretty clear you didn't want to see or talk to me, or even to hear what I had to say. I figured you'd let me know when you were ready...if that ever happened."

Somewhere, in his mumbling, Harry had evidently said something very wrong, for Draco's face took on that purple tinge that Uncle Vernon's had always had when he was angry, except with Draco's complexion it was more of a lilac.

But then he took a long, slow breath, holding his hands out as if to steady himself. He pocketed his wand, perhaps so he wouldn't be tempted to use it on Harry, and closed his eyes—and when he opened them again, he was looking at Harry with a terrifying calm. Harry found himself wishing instead for the familiar glowing embers, because he knew what *those* heralded. This? This was foreign territory, and Harry prepared himself to make a quick exit, or else to throw up a Shield Charm.

"...I've spent the past eight months with you, Potter. I thought I'd figured you out, I really did—" Draco rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "But clearly I haven't gotten it through my own thick skull that you're a *bloody idiot* who has to have things spelled out for him like a toddler." He moved to take a step forward—and then seemed to

reconsider, shaking his head as if in self-reprimand, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. After another deep, bracing breath, he said, “I want to be with you.” He was distractingly earnest as he said it, that crisp, commanding calm in his voice faltering just enough Harry got a peek beneath the mask Draco kept firmly in place so as not to show any weakness. “For—whatever you take that to mean. Not because we’re—” He made a face, clearly irritated with himself. “—*M words*. Not because the dragon wants it. Because *I* want it.”

Harry swallowed thickly, Draco’s words ringing in his ears so loudly he thought someone might be at the door again. The situation was helped by nothing when Draco finally allowed himself to step forward, closing the distance between himself and Harry in carefully measured steps.

“I want your bird’s nest hair, and your glasses that do absolutely nothing for your face, and your passable Quidditch skills, and your Gryffindor stupidity—and your Gryffindor bravery—and your *distressing* tendency to sacrifice yourself because clearly just dropping dead is a lot easier than actually working toward a viable solution.”

He was close enough to touch now, but Harry couldn’t move a muscle. He didn’t *dare*. This was the closest Draco had allowed them to be, outside of physical violence, since that long, lonely trek through the Forest to meet his death. Harry felt the soft little hairs on his arm perk up, reaching out for Draco. *Everything* in him wanted to be closer, right now, than it was entirely possible to physically be.

Draco searched his face, looking endearingly lost. “You’re going to be the literal death of me, and yet I *still want you*.” His fingers came up, feathering along Harry’s jaw, almost a caress but too light, too fleeting. “It’s not a need, you understand? It’s a *want*. I’m choosing you.”

Harry gave him a beat, just in case he had anything else to say, but he seemed to have exhausted himself. Which was quite understandable, given Draco was usually so circumspect; most times he showed such a forthright side to himself, it was because he was *really* pissed off at Harry.

He recalled Ron clapping him on the shoulder in the Great Hall and encouraging Harry to stop doing what he *had* to do and start doing what he *ought* to do. Sometimes, those felt like the same thing—but with the latter, he still had a choice. A choice, and some guidance—that was what he'd always wanted, Harry realised. A *Point Me* spell, and the option to ignore it, to make his own path.

And everything in him was pointing at Draco right now—so he kissed him.

For the first time, it felt like he was really kissing *Draco*, no more pretending, no more excuses, no more hiding behind *have to*, just pure, joyful *want*. When Draco slid his hands around the back of Harry's head, drawing him in and slotting their hips together, it was because *he* wanted to, not because there was any need or drive or animal instincts directing him.

It also meant, though, that there would be no more lying, to themselves or one another—no more avoiding *this*, whatever it was, which was pretty terrifying. But just for this moment, Harry decided to let himself live without consequence, practising that Gryffindor motto of *Flinging oneself into uncontrolled situations unthinkingly*.

“You should...” he started, fumbling to speak over swollen lips with breath that sounded pornographically haggard. He swallowed, nose brushing Draco's and glasses starting to fog with their heated panting. “You should...come visit. Whenever you like. Kreacher's still at Hogwarts, so it gets dead boring when it's just me here. Ron and Hermione are coming to spend the rest of the summer hols here at the end of the month, so you could drop in whenever you wanted. It'll be just like camping, except we won't be on the run from a madman and you'll be able to sleep in your own bed, in your own home, and not have to put up with Ron's cooking unless you really feel like courting death again.”

He could see Draco's eyes narrow, just a tick—and then Draco was pulling back, away, and studying him warily. Bollocks, he'd probably come on too strong—but he was too far in it now to back out, so he pressed his luck.

“And McGonagall says she's intending on having the school open again to receive students by the 1st of September, so we're thinking of heading over after my birthday

and pitching in with the rebuilding efforts. And I've heard some buzz they might hold a special session or something for those of us who missed our final year, so maybe we could even go back and finish proper? Like—as Eighth Years, I suppose?” Now that he was making these suggestions out loud, instead of just entertaining them in passing fantasies in his mind, it admittedly sounded a bit silly. Or at the very least he was heaping a *huge* amount of pressure on someone who was likely still very cross with him. “I mean—if you'd like. It's just a suggestion. Some things we were kicking around.”

Draco's lips curled into a sharp frown that rode the knife edge of a sneer. “...You've been making plans with them?” His eyes were narrowed to slits now, until Harry could only catch in them the cruel glint of light filtering through the diaphanous curtains long the wall. “Without me?”

Oh. *Shit*. “No—I mean, that's not how it's been. Ron just brought over some food from his Mum left over from Tonks and Remus's wake—she thinks I'll keel over if I'm forced to fend for myself too long—and Hermione wanted me to sort through anything I still had left in the tent before she packed it away. We were just talking is all—it wasn't *plans*.” Draco had spent the better part of several difficult months feeling like an outsider, unwanted, and this wasn't helping things at all. “We weren't—trying to *exclude* you, or—or doing things behind your back—”

“Then why,” Draco said with dangerous calm, “did I have to find out where this place was from *Granger*?”

“I don't know,” Harry said, feeling the heat rise in his voice as his temper made itself known. He was getting well tired of having to be on the defensive with Draco every time he turned around. Things were meant to be *easier* once the Horcruxes had been taken care of and the Voldemort business was finished—yet all they'd done was fight and misunderstand one another, making each other miserable in the process. “Why didn't you just send an Owl? Like a *normal* wizard?”

Draco reached out to cuff him upside the head. “Because this place is protected by a fucking *Fidelius*, you lackwit! Granger had to Side-along me onto the doorstep.” He

threw his hands into the air and began to pace, which Harry thought was rather dramatic, even for Draco. “Dead silence for the past *week* from your quarter while I deal with Mother hovering over me like a Flitterby and Father waiting for the Ministry to drop the other boot, and I find out you’ve been having tea and scones with your lackeys on a regular basis!”

Harry’s temper flared, genuine anger firing his blood. “Don’t talk about them like that,” he warned. He was pretty sure Draco was only saying these things because he was still marked off at Harry and unaccountably feeling ignored, but this was taking it too far. “I was giving you *space*. You’d just been through a fucking terrifying experience, I think we can both agree—and that’s not to mention all the shit you’d been through in the months leading up to it! You had to Oblivate your own parents for god’s sake!” He raised an accusatory brow. “What, you wanted to ‘pop in for tea and scones’ *too*? Pissed off I didn’t extend you a handwritten invitation for cucumber sandwiches out in the garden?”

“No, you fucking—” Draco clenched his hands into white-knuckled fists, practically vibrating with irritation, and made a grating sound in the back of his throat. “I don’t want an *invitation*, I don’t want to *pop in*—I want—I want—”

Then in a flash, he was in Harry’s personal space again, chest to chest and nose to nose and breathing hard. Harry’s head was spinning from how hot and cold Draco was running. His hands came up to rest on Draco’s hips, quite without his conscious consideration.

“I want—to *stay*. I want to...” Draco rested his forehead against Harry’s, brows furrowed and grey eyes hidden beneath hooded lids. His lashes brushed against Harry’s, tickling. “I *want* to be—*more*.”

More. *More* he said—and Harry heard the unspoken meaning with stark clarity: *more to you than them*. He frowned, pulling his head back until Draco’s face blurred into focus. “...Are you jealous?” Draco’s lip curled into a dangerous snarl, but Harry pressed him, unwilling to give him something to latch on to. “That’s *ridiculous*, you know? I’ve thought so ever since the locket showed you that horrid vision. It’s—I mean, of course

it's not like that with Ron and Hermione. It's *never* been like that. You've seen them, you know they're mad for each other—like, literally, I'm pretty sure they're both touched in the head, given some of the ways they twist themselves in knots over one another." He shook his head in disbelief. "What would *possess* you—"

"Oh, I don't know! Perhaps the fact you're swooning on about how you're all going to be shacking up together over the summer like one big happy family?" There were high points of pink in Draco's cheeks—but that was a world better than the angry shade of lilac he'd been.

"They're my best friends! I've slept in a dormitory *right next* to Ron for the better part of the past seven years and spent every holiday I can think of with him—and I'd probably have done the same with Hermione if we'd had mixed dorms. Because we're *friends*. We love each other, we want to spend time together, we—"

"So what does that make *me*?" Draco spat, tone accusatory, but his expression poorly concealed his hurt. Somehow this irritated Harry all the more, as Draco had been waxing dramatic about how thick Harry had been when it came to feelings, while here he was behaving like *this* over Harry making holiday plans with friends.

"I—I don't know!" Harry answered honestly. "But *god*, would you stop going off on me for every imagined slight? I didn't leave you to your parents because I didn't want you around anymore. God, we just spent the last eight months going through hell together! Ron and I barely even spoke to Hermione before that troll incident Halloween of First Year, and look where we are now. You think going through an experience like that with another person doesn't mean something to me? To *all* of us?" He rounded on Draco, shaking a finger in his face. "Don't call them my *lackeys*. They're my friends—and I thought they were yours too."

The pink in Draco's cheek darkened, and he tightened his jaw, stubborn. "You didn't say *anything* to me—"

Harry wanted to pull out his hair by the roots. "How many different ways do you want me to say *I thought you'd want to spend time with your parents?*"

“For a *week*? You thought I needed to be left alone *for a week*?” Draco shoved him away, laughing mirthlessly. “Merlin, you probably would’ve left off for longer if I hadn’t come!”

“Well you *clearly* didn’t spend the last half a year with yourself,” Harry groused. “Because you’ve been a fucking *terror* to be around when it came to them.” He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his robe, muttering stiffly, “I didn’t want to intrude. I didn’t...” God, he sounded pathetic. “I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“Please,” Draco sneered. “Don’t coddle me, Potter. I may not be a Gryffindor—thank all that is pure and magical for *that*—but I’m not a *Hufflepuff*.”

Harry fixed him with a hard look, making sure to be firm so as not to be misunderstood. “I can’t help it if you’re jealous of them—”

“I’m *not*,” Draco grit out, lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line that said he was full of shit.

“Well good,” Harry said, humouring him all the same. “So it should go without saying that you *needn’t be*. I mean—not for...you know. That. Sort of thing.” He scratched his neck; perhaps he wasn’t in a position to be teasing Draco about his *M word* hangups.

Draco eyed him suspiciously. “...What *should* I be jealous of when it comes to them, then?”

Harry sighed. “I’ve known them a long time, all right? Longer than I’ve known you—or, I guess, longer than I’ve really *gotten to know* you. If it seems like I’m closer with them, then—it’s because I *am*, honestly. Because I know them, know how they’ll react in a given situation. I know what they want from me when they’re happy or sad or angry. I don’t...I don’t really know any of that about you. Though—” He shook his head. “I’m beginning to get an idea of what you’re like when you’re angry...” Draco rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest, and Harry stepped in slowly, touching his elbows. “If I’m being stupid, or missing something obvious, then just...*tell me*. Tell—don’t *yell*.”

“Sometimes yelling seems like all that gets through your skull,” Draco said, a sour frown on his thin lips.

“...I fucked up. I know I did. I did what I thought was the right thing, and even though I know it had to be done...” He smiled wryly. “Somehow I forgot that we were *all in*. After that, I didn’t want to fuck up anymore, so I just decided to do nothing. Except clearly *that* was the wrong thing too, so now I’m thinking why don’t *you* just tell me what you want, yeah? You like telling me what to do well enough already.”

Draco wrinkled his nose, like he knew he was being teased and wasn’t quite in a conciliatory mood just yet. “...Thought I already told you what I wanted.”

Harry felt his shoulders drop. “...We still haven’t actually...*talked*, you know? About... about anything?” Anything, or everything. All the things that lay between *I want you* and...beyond. They were both of them terrible with discussing things like this directly—calling it the ‘M word’ was but the tip of their iceberg—but Harry sensed it was a conversation that needed to be had if they wanted to start off on the right foot going forward.

Draco scuffed the toe of what Harry noted were very nice loafers. Probably leather, the spoilt prick. At least he didn’t have to wear Ron’s Transfigured hand-me-downs anymore. Harry rubbed lazy circles in the knobs of his elbows, and Draco trembled, releasing a soft breath. “Do you really *want* to? Here and now?” he asked.

“Not really...” Harry confessed. It wasn’t going to be an easy talk, after all, else they might have had it months ago, or at least once things started escalating. For all his vaunted Gryffindor courage, Harry could be quite the coward when it came to his heart, and Draco—well Draco tended to look out for number one, and that did not involve tender bouts of soul-baring. They were running out of excuses, though, and if this was... going to *be* something, something worth getting so worked up over, something worth them driving each other *mad* over, then they needed to walk in with eyes wide open and face the unhappy realities of who they were. “But we need to, I think.”

Draco made a face. “I hardly know where to begin. It’s *us*.”

He deserved Harry's honorary *Order of Understatement, First Class*, for that. Their relationship was a veritable mine field of topics that even *looking* at wrong could get them both blown to smithereens. They would have to brave it, though, if they were to have any hope of holding a conversation where one or both of them didn't wind up storming out in the end. "Well, then...do you want me to start?" Harry offered, and knowing Draco would not respond, as it would mean admitting that Harry was the braver of the two just right now, he extended his hand, palm open in invitation.

Draco stared down at it, frowning—then slowly, tentatively, he took it, lips still pursed in wary confusion.

Harry gave it a firm shake. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter."

Draco immediately jerked his hand back, rolling his eyes dramatically. "You can't be serious, Potter—you're proposing one of those ridiculous 'let's start fresh and forget all the terrible things we've done to each other' sorts of gimmicks?"

"No," Harry said, bringing his hand back. Probably for the best Draco had released it; he knew his palms were sweaty with nerves. "No, I remember everything. I remember you nearly getting Hagrid sacked. I remember you almost killing my best friend. I remember you casting an Unforgivable at me—and meaning it. I remember every Curse you threw, every nasty slur you spat, every single time I've wanted to clock you sideways for good reason." Draco's ears were burning red, and he looked a little cowed and very, *very* angry. "I can't forget that—I *won't*. I've sat here and yearned for the truth for so long, I'm certainly not about to start ignoring it now just because it isn't pretty. That never helps—it's just lying to yourself, and...well, you know I'm not so fond of lies."

The bitter anger in Draco's expression shifted to one of discomfiture, and more than a little guilt. It made Harry feel funny, deep in his gut—he liked it, he liked how it *looked* on Draco, but not for reasons of karmic pleasure or a need to feel superior. It was a curdling warmth, almost like pride. Because it meant, on some level at least, Draco regretted these things, and that was a start.

Harry swallowed that warmth down and let it spread to his limbs. "But I also remember

you saving my life—on, well, a few occasions. I remember you pulling the chair out from under Ron when you'd first gotten your wand back—which was hilarious, by the way, but I'll deny it to my dying day if ever asked. I remember you humouring me with my silly resolution request—and I plan on holding up my end of the bargain—”

“Bold of you to assume there's any such bargain still on the books, *Potter*.”

He spat the name with the requisite bite, but there was a playful spark of mischief in his eyes that said he was mostly only using Harry's surname now to be contrary.

Harry smiled at the thought—then sobered, searching Draco's face in the same earnest way Draco had touched him so often, as if he were trying to memorise Harry.

“I'm realising...I like you quite a lot when you're not being a prick—and maybe even a little bit when you are, too.” He cocked his head, just to the side, still searching. “...I assumed—hoped—the feeling was mutual.” Draco only hunched his shoulders and shunted his gaze away from Harry's, refusing to meet his eye. “There was a time when you wanted me to take your hand, to be your friend. To recognise you—to *want* you, over everyone else.” Harry licked his lips; his heartbeat was hammering in his ears. “So I suppose I'm just wondering if you still want that.”

Draco flicked his eyes back to Harry's, brows knitting and lips pursed into an irritated frown. “Because I've been so subtle this whole time?” he said, waspish.

Harry released a little snort. “Hardly. But there's a difference between saying you *want* me and...saying you want *me*.” Harry tried not to bite his tongue; he needed to get this out, and out *now*. “And...and I'm just trying to make sure which one it is. Because if it's the first one, that's fine, and if it's the second one...that's definitely fine too, but I just need to know. I need to hear you tell me.” How much of his roundabout, meandering speech was making any sense, Harry didn't know, because Draco was looking at him now with this utterly lost expression, overwhelmed and stricken, and god he didn't want to have said the wrong thing again. He was *trying*, and just once, he needed the words that came out of his mouth to be the *right ones*. “I don't want to—you know. Be a Gryffindor about this.”

There was a distressingly long beat of silence, the only sound the furious pounding of Harry's heart in his ears—

And then Draco blurted out, in a rush of breath, "I love you."

"Uh," Harry said, thinking that he ought to be *very* smart about this. "That's—" Draco looked absolutely *horrified* with himself, eyes goggling to the point they looked like they might just pop right out, and he seemed suddenly rather unsteady on his feet. "That's a —bit heavier than an introduction..."

Draco's face drained of colour, and he took a stumble; Harry quickly Summoned the chair Draco had painstakingly Transfigured just as he slumped into it, collapsing with his head in his hands as he repeated in vicious self-reprimand, "*Fuck fuck fuck.*" He was breathing heavily, and Harry worried he might be about to have a panic attack—or worse, another transformation triggered by a heightened emotional state. There was no Sanctuary here, nowhere for Draco to safely shift; there was the garden, but it was hardly suitable for a dragon to go romping about in. "Why did I say that?" Draco asked no one, then turned to Harry, almost accusing: "Why did I *say that?*"

"Uh...I don't..." Harry felt quite as lost as Draco, to be quite honest, and those three little words rang in his ears like the clanging chimes of Grimmauld Place's doorbell. It was a high, tinny sound that made the world take on a distressing blur. His mouth had gone dry as a desert. "...Did you mean it?" he asked, because he had not courted death in a week, and he needed the rush.

Draco looked dumbfounded, one brow twitching while the other seemed determined to twist itself into Escherian shapes. "...I must have?" His tone was forlorn, and he spoke as if it were a question—like he was begging Harry to say *oh no, that's ridiculous, no way you'd do that.*

And Harry broke; he couldn't just sit here and watch Draco have a fit in the dusty, mouldering sitting room perched atop as fine a piece of furniture as Harry had ever seen. If he had to have his brains bashed in, Harry supposed there were worse chairs to do the job with. "Then...my guess would be that's *probably* why you said it..."

Draco groaned, burying his face in his hands, shoulders slumped and back hunched in an elegant curve. “Fucking fuck *fuck*—I am so...” He inhaled sharply, voice thick. “Merlin, I’m so fucking pathetic. Look what you’ve *done* to me.” He looked like he might self-immolate at any moment, and Harry thought that, for his own safety, he should keep well away.

So naturally, he took a step forward. He had a reputation as a cavalier daredevil to uphold now, after all. “Yeah, you kind of are pathetic, and I have to admit I do get a kick out of hearing you beat yourself up...” he said, slipping down to his knees, because Draco refused to look up at him, evidently content to curse and moan into his hands from now ‘til kingdom-come. Harry could feel his heart trying to climb into his throat, beating with the fevered rapidity of a Snitch’s wings. “But I’m pretty sure I love you too, so we’re even.”

Draco’s head snapped up so quickly, he nearly broke Harry’s nose again—and Harry tried to jerk away, on instinct, but then Draco was on him, pushing him down onto his back and kissing him *hard*, like he was trying to crawl inside him. Harry could feel the smile stretching Draco’s lips, and the kiss kept getting broken because he was laughing like an idiot—at himself, at their position, at the sheer *idea* of them being a *them*. His hard, harsh searing kiss devolved into joyful little pecks that barely made contact, a quick press and then moving on, marking Harry all over—*oh*, so this was what ‘marking’ was—with the occasional swipe of tongue over Harry’s lips when he just couldn’t help himself, pressing in for—

Draco jerked back, gasping sharply and face washed white. His hair was in disarray, and his mouth gaped with some sudden, fraught realisation.

“Wh—what?” Harry asked, breathing heavily as he struggled up onto his elbows. Draco ignored him, only scrambled to his feet and began pacing the room, frantic. “What? Draco? Draco—*what?*” And *fuck*, he’d done something wrong again, hadn’t he? Of course he had; it was like some fucking curse. You couldn’t survive the Killing Curse *twice* without having to make reparations in some form, and this had to be it.

Apologies were ready on his lips—though he wasn't entirely sure what he was meant to be apologising *for* this time—but then Draco waved him off, distracted and harried. “Your—water closet. *Loo*. Where's the nearest—?”

“Er, it's—” Harry jerked a thumb through the door. “Just to the left...” Draco shouldered him aside, less rough and rude and more careless this time as he darted for the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

Harry half-expected to see a faint, Draco-shaped outline of dust hanging in the air over him, so quickly had he left—and the realisation Draco had simply been heeding the urgent call of his bladder put a decided stop to any amorous thoughts that might have overtaken his brain. He stared down at his crotch, where his slumbering cock had just begun to pop its head up for a peekabout only to be soundly dismissed. “...Sorry, mate. I gave it my best shot.”

He tried to collect himself before Draco returned. Maybe they could have breakfast. Draco had never really liked much of Harry's cooking, to his frustration, but there was a café not too far from Grimmauld Square. It was Muggle, but coffee was coffee, no matter the society, so perhaps Draco could be convinced to—

His thoughts were interrupted by a sharp whoop of joy, muffled through the walls, as the bathroom door flew open. Harry scrambled into the hall, wand at the ready—and was nearly bowled over by a huge silver swan that came flapping out, hissing angrily and arrowing straight for him. It nipped ferociously at his shoelaces as he stumbled backwards, falling squarely onto his arse. “What the *fu*—”



“I *told you* it wasn’t going to be a fucking peacock!” Draco crowed in triumph, wand held aloft and eyes bright and obscenely merry. “And not a *ferret* either, make sure you tell Weasley *that!*”

This was his *Patronus*, Harry realised with a jolt—and tried not to dwell overlong on what had transpired right before Draco had managed it, as Harry’s head was nearly too large to fit through doorways these days as it was. He grinned, wide and proud—but then his brows knit in bemusement. “But, a *swan* though?”

“What’s wrong with swans?” Draco sniffed. “They’re beautiful.” He beamed down at his Patronus, which had its wings held open, flapping them in threat and making menacing clicking noises with its beak.

“Beautiful, sure—” Harry said, keeping one eye trained on the Patronus at all times; its immateriality did nothing to diminish its imposing aura, rather like its caster. “And mean as shit.” He made a shoing motion, and the swan snapped out its long neck in a bold attempt to bite off his fingers. “Honestly, I fail to see how this is all that different from a peacock!”

“Don’t be ridiculous; swans are *nothing* like peacocks.”

“Well, all I know is it wasn’t a peacock that chased me up a tree when my aunt and uncle made me hold the bag of feed while my cousin fed the ducks at the park...” The swan continued to peck at his shoelaces, and Harry vowed to wear boots henceforth; he was getting sick and tired of fowl-shaped familiars making a meal of his footwear.

“Lives to make Potter’s existence a living hell?” Draco mused. “Just my style.” He swished his wand again, and the swan disappeared in a silvery puff. Draco wrinkled his nose. “...Probably would’ve come in handier if I’d managed it a couple of weeks ago.”

Harry gave a non-committal *hm*. “Well good things come to those who wait.”

“Now that’s about the least Gryffindor thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth.” Draco slipped his wand into his pocket, striding forward with purpose, until he was standing straddled over Harry. “And I’m rather done waiting.”

It was hardly subtle, not that Harry had ever expected as such with Draco, and he felt his heart start its furious pounding again. God, did Draco mean to...? *Right* now? He could see his café plans crumbling before his very eyes.

“...Ron and Hermione aren’t coming until the end of the month, you know. We don’t have to rush.” He tried to sound like he wasn’t groping for an excuse and knew he had failed spectacularly given the sour frown that tugged at Draco’s lips.

“...You don’t want to,” Draco said flatly, and Harry couldn’t help his derisive snort.

“I told you before: it’s never been about whether or not I want to.” He forced himself to sober, holding Draco’s eyes so he couldn’t misunderstand. “None of this has, you know? Not...not for me. That was kind of the point.” He’d always wanted to, on some level. Maybe not for reasons that would make Draco happy, but that did nothing to change the facts. Draco had been driven by instinct; Harry had been driven by desire. “But there’s no more Dark Lord. No classes, no teachers, no dormmates. No ‘lackeys’.” Draco bit his lip, perhaps thinking Harry wouldn’t see him trying to disguise a smile; he thought wrong. “I just feel like we should...”

Draco crossed his arms over his chest. “So help me, if you say *take it slow*—”

“Savour it,” Harry said instead, climbing to his feet with a wince. “We...we haven’t really had a lot of practice. At—well, *any* of this.”

“There’s such a thing as natural talent,” Draco sniffed.

Harry’s brows disappeared into his fringe at what looked to be a rare compliment. “And I have that?”

“Well obviously *not*. But I do.” He stepped into Harry’s space, wheedling, “I could tutor you; I *was* a Prefect, if you’ll recall, and you’ve missed a whole year of schooling...” Harry gave him a look, and he relented with a dramatic huff. “Fine. If you’re going to insist we be so bloody *Hufflepuff* about this.”

“Not Gryffindor?”

“Merlin, no,” Draco scoffed. “If we did it the Gryffindor way we’d have skipped the tugging and gone right to the fucking.” He frowned at the chair he’d Transfigured, and with a flick of his wand, returned it to its former state, giving an exaggerated shiver of disgust.

“Do I even want to know what the Slytherin way entails...?”

Draco threw him a smirk over one shoulder. “No, I expect not. But you’re going to find out regardless.”

Harry cleared his throat around a cough and tried not to be obvious as he adjusted himself through his pyjama bottoms. “Well. Right. That’s...sorted.” There was an awkward beat of silence, as they tried to work out where this left them. Wary of how else Draco might suggest they pass the time, Harry took the initiative: “I don’t—suppose you’re hungry? Or thirsty? There’s a café around the corner... It’s Muggle, but it’s quiet, and there’s private booths, too. We could set up a *Muffliato* and...you know.”

“Salazar’s balls, Potter, in *public*?” Draco made an exaggerated effort to look scandalised,

but it crumbled at the edges, leaving no doubt he wasn't entirely put-off by the idea. Harry hoped it was just the last remaining vestiges of his Muggle-terrorising tendencies and not some deeper indication of voyeuristic inclinations.

"*Talk!*" Harry sputtered, red-faced. "We could talk! You know well what I meant!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "*Talking*. Haven't we done enough of that?"

No, actually; they'd hardly done any—not the talking that mattered, at least. Harry supposed he shouldn't press his luck just now, though; words had been exchanged, after all. Important ones at that. They could work on the less important ones as they went. "You could tell me about your week?"

Draco leaned against the arm of the settee, ticking off points on his fingers. "Well, I returned in a pique to my ancestral home that had been ransacked by a bunch of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself with parents whose memories were in a shambles given my Obliviation wore off when I—oh yes—*died*. And then I moped about for a few days, waiting in vain for word that clearly wasn't going to come, and turned the Library upside down searching for a spell to turn a chair leg into a mace that might or might not be used to brain a mortal enemy you occasionally got off with. I was not successful—but I did master quite a few home renovation Charms in the doing. The end."

Harry sighed. "Come on, surely there's more to it than that. And..." He stepped closer, into the welcoming divot between Draco's legs. "And I've got some things to tell you too, so..."

They had managed thus far to expertly sidestep the entire matter of Harry's sacrifice—but the longer they put it off, the worse it would be, festering until there was no healing the wound.

Draco kept his gaze shifted just off to the side, jaw tense as he picked at a thread that had worked itself loose from the ticking on one of the cushions. "Yes, I suppose there is that..." He forced himself to look around the room, blinking several times in quick succession to disguise the bright sheen to his eyes. "Perhaps if we're out in public, I

won't make a scene."

"I've learned an audience only encourages you..." Harry said, tracing the delicate bones of Draco's wrists. He had his sleeves rolled up, and the Dark Mark glared up at Harry in bold defiance, less intimidating now for the bright white scar slashed through its centre. "Rest assured I've got no ulterior motives; I just want something sweet and caffeinated and overpriced is all." He held out one hand in invitation. "All in?"

Draco stared at it—but only for a moment, before he pursed his lips, gave a defeated smile, and took it, nodding. "All in."

Epilogue

Pushed to it and admittedly missing the sort of company neither Ron nor Hermione could provide—biting sarcasm and cruel teasing, punctuated by bouts of frenzied groping—Harry agreed to let Draco stay on at Grimmauld Place, with the sole stipulation that they take separate bedrooms. Draco agreed to the condition startlingly quickly, suggesting he had either been sorely missing his privacy over the past eight months or else had no intention of actually *sleeping* in his bedroom and would instead use the room as little more than an over-furnished walk-in closet.

Harry regretted giving him his choice of bedrooms, though, as on seeing that Harry was renovating Sirius's bedroom, Draco promptly selected Regulus's and had already Vanished the dust and Banished to the attic any furniture he'd be replacing with his own before Harry could mount any protests.

"The whole point was so we wouldn't be underfoot with each other!" Harry sighed, ducking to avoid getting clipped in the head by a hefty bedside table arrowing for the attic.

"Then I suggest you stay well out of my way," Draco said.

When he'd nearly emptied the room of all its furnishings save a handsome bookcase of mahogany (probably stuffed full of texts on the Dark Arts) and Regulus's writing desk, Harry wondered aloud, "Won't your parents *notice* so much furniture missing from your room...? How are you going to explain to them that you're...you know?"

"Shacking up with our beloved Saviour?" Draco Transfigured the dark, heavy curtains into something light and diaphanous, bringing light flooding into Regulus's dour, dingy room. He lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "I suppose we'll find out when you come to the Manor for luncheon on Sunday."

Harry blinked several times in quick succession. "When I what now?"

Draco's smile glittered with knives.

'Luncheon' it turned out was a rather complicated affair, involving at least five courses, a

virgin vintage from the cellars (far away, Harry hoped, from the mouldy, squalid dungeon with the cages of iron bar and steel), and stuffy dress robes that stank of some ancient cologne. If Harry had thought that house arrest and a decidedly inelegant fall from grace were going to sap the Malfoys' love of tradition, he was sorely mistaken. Less surprising, though, was how much work they had managed to put into restoring the Manor to its former glory in just one week.

It was like—well, *magic*.

The floorboards had been stripped and refinished, removing any nasty stains—blood or otherwise—and the furniture had been reupholstered to similar ends. The walls shone with fresh coats of paint, and even the neglected greenhouses in the garden had been reseeded. It had to have cost a mint, making any restoration an ostensibly difficult task, given how heavily the Malfoy fortunes had been garnished by the Ministry for post-war reparations. Draco had nothing to say when pressed about the cost of the repairs—up to and including the busted lock to the pantry in the kitchens—so Harry assumed the source of the funds was not up for discussion. Lucius Malfoy was a Slytherin, after all—always prepared. He probably had caches of treasure hidden all around the globe, untraceable and unmarked.

No, that the Malfoys continued to live a blessed life even after the fall of Voldemort was not so very surprising; what was truly astonishing was the fact that Lucius hadn't been chucked back into Azkaban the moment Kingsley had been appointed temporary Minister for Magic. In retrospect, Harry supposed he should have seen it coming; had he not told Draco himself that his parents had a talent for managing to keep their heads above water when most anyone else would have sunk like a stone?

Lucius had evidently worked out some sort of deal with the Ministry to serve an indefinite term of probation provided he cooperated with Aurors concerning any details on rogue Death Eaters who had gone to ground after Voldemort's defeat as well as forces being marshalled abroad. The Ministry had allowed him a wand, though they had wisely slapped it with a dozen different Charms for tracking and limiting the sorts of spells it could cast. Draco had pronounced it humiliating and made a sour face when he'd explained the details of his father's probation to Harry, but that had been all he'd had to say on the subject.

Narcissa, by contrast, had avoided serving any time altogether with Harry's testimony

that she had saved his life in the Forest, at great peril to her own. It was his speaking for her at her hearing that had prompted Narcissa to warm to Harry considerably—which mostly amounted to a polite nod when their eyes met and genial small talk when called to do so. “Oh she’s all but stitched you onto the family quilt now,” Draco assured him this meant, and Harry had to take him at his word. Lucius did not seem to feel any more fondly toward Harry now than he had when they’d first met, but Harry was pretty all right with that, satisfied that he simply kept his mouth shut when they had to interact.

Like right about now, as the Malfoys’ army of house-elves was shuttling away the remains of the main course and bringing out dessert—a crème brûlée with hints of treacle, which Harry suspected had been prepared special at Draco’s command. Lucius had downed nearly half the bottle of wine the elves had produced for the table, pointedly ignoring his wife’s soft throat-clearing whenever he moved to top off his glass, and looked like there were only about a thousand places he’d rather be than settling in for sweets with the Boy Who Was Sleeping With His Son.

It was only when the bottle was empty and he was bereft of any further excuse not to entertain some polite conversation that he wiped a hand over his face, Vanished the bottle with a careless wave of his Ministry-appointed wand, and asked with a strained smile, “So, Mr. Potter. Are you...satisfying all of Draco’s newfound needs?”

Harry choked on his crème brûlée, and that was the end of lunch. Draco promptly excused the both of them, thanking his mother for the lovely meal, as if she’d lifted a finger to prepare it herself, and slipped his arm through Harry’s, ready to Disapparate right from the dining room. It was only just as he was twisting on his heel that he called out, “By the by, I’ll be boarding at Harry’s place for the foreseeable future. I’ll have the rest of my things Summoned in the morning. Don’t bother trying to Owl me—the place is under a Fidelius, drat it all. I’ll be back for luncheon again next week, ta!”

The last thing Harry saw before they spun out of sight was Lucius’s bald expression of gobsmacked horror, which almost made the afternoon worth it.

They settled into a comfortable rhythm over the next couple of weeks, just the pair of them. Harry learned to make Draco’s porridge just the way he liked—though this didn’t stop Draco from nitpicking it every morning—and Draco learned to make precisely one meal (a shepherd’s pie that required next to no finesse in the kitchen) because it was polite to share chores and they didn’t have Hermione or Ron around to lighten the load

at the moment.

It was nice. Admittedly it was still a bit strange at times, catching Draco stumbling down to the kitchen in the mornings wearing one of Harry's oversized sweatshirts inherited from Dudley, or settling in on the sofa in the sitting room after dinner to listen to Quidditch on the Wireless, instead of trying to catch an episode of *Potterwatch* or burying their noses in Horcrux and Founders research. Strange, but not bad. It just left Harry a bit tilted, the rapidity with which their adventure had come to an end, leaving them now trying to navigate the matter of calm, quiet domesticity, a concept with which neither of them was particularly familiar nor well-suited.

Helping matters none was that there was no Sanctuary here and thus no way for Draco to really stretch his wings. Indeed, to Harry's knowledge, he hadn't transformed at all since the Battle of Hogwarts, and so they were left to find other ways to release tension and reaffirm their bond, a not altogether unpleasant task. Harry still didn't really like being surprised in the shower, but it was a lot less harrowing knowing there was no one around to overhear them. Draco's "room" was, as expected, mostly for show, and they shared the king-size four-poster in Sirius's bedroom.

Harry wondered if the "Slytherin way" to seduction was romanticised siege warfare, driving Harry to the edge until he was finally forced to give in. If so, Draco had clearly studied at the foot of the masters—and patience had never been one of Harry's virtues, a fact Draco was mercilessly taking advantage of. He almost imagined he could hear that damned clock in his head again, counting down the sighs, the breaths, the heated moments until Harry broke—but he only dug in his heels all the deeper, determined to do this *his* way, for once. It still wasn't the right time yet, there was still *something* missing, and until he found it—or at least figured out what it *was*—he couldn't bring himself to take that final step with Draco, ache for it though he might.

After nearly three weeks cooped up inside Grimmauld Place, though, they were beginning to run out of ways to entertain themselves—which really was saying something. With Diagon Alley likely to be recovering from the ravages of the war for months, and Harry wary of going anywhere near Gringotts these days, there was little else to do except mess about in bed, but Harry was quickly learning there was such thing as too much of a good thing.

"I think it's going to fall off..." Harry murmured into Draco's hair one evening, sticky

with spunk and sweat from his head to his toes.

“I’ll commission you a new one,” Draco offered, voice just as lethargic and limbs just as boneless as Harry’s. “Solid gold. Ruby-encrusted bollocks. You’ll piss Amortentia and spurt elf wine.”

“That doesn’t sound very comfortable.”

“Well if this is going to work between us, you’d best get accustomed to the finer things in life.”

And Harry did, to his great shock, *want* this to work. It was different, when it was just the two of them with nothing to hide behind, and they had made no further great confessions since their reunion, both perhaps feeling such phrases were wasted on the day-to-day, losing their lustre if not doled out sparingly. Their feelings remained unchanged, though, so Harry did not, *really* did not, want to fuck this up.

Which was how he wound up suggesting Draco invite a few of his friends over for dinner and drinks.

Draco gaped. “...You realise who my friends *are*, don’t you? Slytherins for one—and either sold you out to the Dark Lord or else made a whole-hearted attempt to do so for another?” He touched Harry’s temple with a thoughtful frown. “I haven’t wanked you silly, have I? I know you had no smarts to spare to begin with, so I’ll never forgive myself if—”

Harry only batted his hand away with a playful snort. “I’m perfectly sane. And *yes*, I know the sorts you call your best mates—”

“Right, clearly you don’t, or else you’d know I called *none* of them my ‘best mates’ like we’re in nursery school.”

“—but we can’t spend all our time in bed—”

“Can’t we?”

“—and seeing as we’ll have plenty of time with Ron and Hermione come the end of the month, and probably more later on for house parties and whatnot—” Draco gave an

exaggerated shudder and moaned *Gryffindors*. “—I figure why not? If you can put up with my lot, surely I can put up with yours.”

“Even though Pansy tried to barter your life to save her pasty arse? And Greg wanted to bring you to the Dark Lord trussed up like a Christmas goose?”

“First off, you’re in no position to call *anyone* ‘pasty,’” Harry said. “And...well, er, at least they both wanted to hand me over *alive*?” It was very difficult to look on the bright side of the situation, but he was bent on being the bigger man here. Parkinson and Goyle embodied the very worst aspects of Slytherin’s finer traits, but Draco had been friends with them, once upon a time, and if he was still of a mind to call them as such, then Harry didn’t want to stand in the way.

Draco studied him for a long moment. “...You’re serious? I can invite them over? You don’t mind?”

“Draco, it’s your house too, you realise?” Harry laughed. “I’m not your landlord; we’re... housemates, or something, I guess.” He ducked his head, correcting, “Sorry, house-*M words*.” Draco elbowed him sharply for the crack, but he was smiling, and he and Harry wrestled briefly before Harry managed to pin him to the cushions. “Seriously. Invite whoever you want. Guests are more than welcome. Even if they might’ve been happy to dance on my grave only a month back.”

Draco’s brows lifted, impressed. “Ooh, so my parents, too...?”

Harry winced, wishing he hadn’t been feeling in quite such a giving mood and wanting to reassure Draco that he wasn’t beholden to Harry in any way, something he knew Draco despised. “Er, I sup—”

“*Merlin*, Potter, I was joking! I think I just lost what little respect for you I’d scraped together.”

It would be an offer Harry would live to regret.

Grimmauld Place was the liveliest it had been since the Order had held meetings there, which Harry quite liked, as it helped distract from the fact that every room outside of their bedrooms and the sitting room still looked like it was set to host a funeral—though the company left something to be desired. Draco had taken Harry up on his suggestion

and then some, and now sprawled around the sitting room—on freshly Transfigured furniture, courtesy of Draco—were Pansy Parkinson, Gregory Goyle, Theodore Nott, and Millicent Bullstrode, all of whom looked about as happy to be there as Harry was to have them.

Harry felt like he'd unwittingly wandered into the Slytherin Common Room, and Draco's friends made sure he didn't forget it. They fell back on inside jokes or discussed their own post-war situations with Draco, not bothering to loop Harry in. He'd thought the backhanded compliments on his cooking had been bad enough, but trust Draco's companions to manage to sink even lower than Harry had imagined possible. Granted, it was admittedly nice to see Draco so garrulous and comfortable—even at the best of moments with Harry and Ron and Hermione, he had always mostly kept to himself, rarely starting or continuing a conversation on his own. It wasn't that Draco *had* to like Harry's friends...he just wanted him to. He wanted Draco to feel like part of Harry's life, a valued presence in Harry's circle.

Somehow, he still felt compelled to offer those blasted 'reassurances' at every turn.

But these Slytherins certainly weren't going to make it easy—and what was he waiting for, an engraved invitation by Owl? No; Salazar had prized those who were self-sufficient, who looked out for themselves. If Harry wanted to be brought into their chummy little enclave, he was going to have to be a Gryffindor about it and *force* his way inside.

He struck up a game of Exploding Snap, which after a few drinks—courtesy of the bottomless Black Family wine cellar—turned into *Strip* Exploding Snap, and Harry started to suspect that Parkinson might have a crush on him, as he was pretty sure she was losing on purpose. Perhaps Draco thought the same, as he cut the game short before things got too indecent, and then they mostly sat around nursing their drinks and talking shit about each other in what Harry realised was a sort of Slytherin bonding ritual.

They drank deep to Zabini's memory—and even knocked back a shot to Crabbe's—and a few drams later, Goyle was blubbing an apology and confessing he'd hid in the Hufflepuff Common room when he'd roused after Harry and Draco had saved him from the Fiendfyre, as the entrance had been left open, perhaps by students hoping others might find sanctuary within. "Didn' even fight, I didn' want to... Just wanted to be a part of somethin'..."

Harry wondered, as before, what life might have been like if things had gone just a little different. If not just Draco had been his friend, but Pansy and Theo and Greg and Millie too. He didn't want to be a Slytherin—he loved those glorious red and gold banners and his lion-hearted friends. He just *wondered* is all. Another of those dozens of what-ifs being around Draco made him wonder about.

“M sorry, Potter,” Pansy told him nearabout midnight, her breath reeking of a Goblin brew they had fished out from behind a heavy cask of elf wine. She was trying very hard to crawl into his lap, and Harry was trying very hard not to touch her breasts. “I just didn't wanna die, yeah? Draco's still pissed off at me, but you're not, right? You're a soft touch—oh.” She gave his bicep a squeeze. “Maybe not so soft...”

“Er—sure, Pansy. All's forgiven. How about I put in a good word for you with Draco, hm? If you'll—just—remove yourself—?”

“He's *gorgeous*, isn't he?” Pansy sighed, collapsing against him. “It's like he's even prettier knowing he's bent, yeah? 'Cause you can't have him.” She frowned at Harry, as if only just now processing who she was lying atop. “Or I guess you *can*. Circe's saggy tits I wish I had a cock. I'd shove it right up his pert little—”

“Draco—help—” Harry gasped, one arm outstretched pleadingly as Draco returned from helping Greg through the Floo.

“Is she complaining about wanting to fuck me with her nonexistent cock yet? That's usually the sign she's done for the evening.” Draco Levitated Pansy off of Harry despite her squirming protests and shooed her towards the stairs. “She's been working on a topically applied Polyjuice ointment since Third Year, you know. One of these days she'll manage it, and then none of our arses will be safe.”

“Just you wait, Malfoy~” Pansy threatened in sing-song as she stumbled down to the kitchen to Floo home, barely catching herself on the banister.

Once the last of the plastered Slytherins had been safely seen through the Floo, not a one sober enough to Apparate five feet let alone all the way home, Harry wanted to just collapse into bed, nearly as drained by the ordeal as he'd been by his duel with Voldemort—so he did.

“Your friends are...” he started, searching for appropriate language as Draco helped divest him of his jeans—one button of which had already been undone when Draco started. Fucking Pansy.

“Insufferable?” Draco snickered, shimmying the jeans down Harry’s legs. “I’ve certainly called them worse. Lift up.”

Harry did as asked. “No! No, honestly, they aren’t, they’re just...”

“Mm, an acquired taste.” Draco motioned for Harry to lift his arms so he could peel off his t-shirt. “It’s all right; so many fine things *are*. We’ll work on it.” He patted Harry’s cheek, then began to disrobe.

Harry watched him with undisguised interest. “...I tried tonight. You saw.”

“I did see. I was there too.”

He sounded a bit patronising, and Harry frowned. “...How come you’re not drunk?”

“Because I didn’t touch a drop of that Black swill. Aged Kneazle piss is still Kneazle piss. Besides—” His shirt hit the floor with a soft *whump*, and he climbed up onto the four-poster alongside Harry, graceful and lithe. “I didn’t want to be too compromised.”

“Too compromised? For what?”

“For this.”

This turned out to be glorious head that made Harry nearly swallow his own tongue, stars spangling his vision as his orgasm swept through him, and Harry thought that maybe having Draco’s friends over now and then wasn’t so terrible. Demonstrations of appreciation were, it seemed, never out of fashion.

They couldn’t have dinner parties every night, though, and within only a few short days, Draco’s edginess had built once more, making him even more snappish and peevish than usual. Convinced that one or both of them was going to blow a fuse if they didn’t find a suitable outlet for Draco’s pent-up energy beyond the bedroom, Harry stuck his head through the Floo while Draco was in the shower.

When Draco stepped out, skin warm and pink and hair darkened to straw-gold with moisture, Harry was practically bouncing on his heels, shoving him towards the wardrobe in Regulus's room and reminding him to dress down.

"...What *for*? I'm not going back to that Muggle supermarket, I told you; I don't care how impressive their selection of ready meals is." Harry rolled his eyes, and Draco stamped his foot in irritation. "The manager couldn't distinguish custom-tailored dress robes from some common frock!"

"Well, no, but that's beside the—anyway, we aren't going to Tesco."

Draco's brows drew together, wary. "...Where are we going, then?"

"I believe we've settled the matter of whether or not you trust me so *just trust me* and get dressed."

"Don't push your luck, Potter," he said, but began rifling through his wardrobe all the same.

Despite being advised to dress down, it was still another half hour of dithering before Draco finally decided on an outfit and looped his arm through Harry's, letting himself be dragged into spinning darkness with a sharp *CRACK*. He winced when they popped back into existence microseconds later just on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, shading his eyes from the bright morning sun with one hand.

"*Hogsmeade*?" Draco said, and Harry shook his head, pointing down High Street, where a winding lane stretched away from the village.

"Hogwarts," Harry corrected. "I told you, remember? That we might drop by to pitch in with the reconstruction efforts?"

"But—I thought that was...after your birthday—fuck." Draco blanched. "I haven't forgotten it, have I? Not that I *memorised* it, it's only your birthday's practically been a bank holiday since as long as I can remember—"

"You're barking," Harry laughed. "My birthday's not a *holiday*."

"If not before, it certainly is *now*," Draco said, raking his eyes over the shopfronts as

they stepped onto High Street. Hogsmeade was bouncing back more quickly than Diagon Alley, likely because of its proximity to the castle, which meant more able hands to help with repairs in the village as well.

“I Floo-called McGonagall, asked if we could pop in,” Harry explained, suddenly a bit embarrassed by his presumption. “...It’s only, out here you can transform whenever you like. I know you’ve been missing it—*don’t* try to tell me you haven’t,” he added, when Draco opened his mouth, protests evident on his lips. “Grimmauld Place has its charms —”

“I think you mean *curses*.”

“—but the garden’s tiny, and I wouldn’t mind getting a few laps around the Quidditch pitch myself. So?”

Draco gave him an arch look, then sighed dramatically, slipping his arm through Harry’s. “If we *must*. We’d better at least get a free lunch out of this.”

They *were* offered lunch, as it turned out, but it wasn’t exactly free. It was all hands on deck at the castle, and Harry spotted no fewer than half a dozen familiar faces among those engaged in construction and renovation and restoration. Draco proved more excited by the prospect of finally being able to stretch his wings again than he’d let on, grabbing Harry while he was in the middle of catching up with Seamus and Dean and practically frog-marching him to the Quidditch pitch.

Harry took his time choosing a broom from the rack, and by the time he returned, a handsome Nimbus model (pilfered from the Slytherin stores) over one shoulder, Draco had shed his human form for something rather more suited to his name.

Out here, in the safety of the Scottish countryside and shielded from Muggle eyes, Draco could let loose—and so he did, diving and rolling and capering like a boy with his first broom, wild and carefree as he’d never been in the Sanctuary. Harry stole a moment, just to watch him, until the excited pounding of his heart grew too much to bear, and he mounted up and kicked off.

The pitch hadn’t seen any fighting, per se, but it still showed signs of the recent battle; the Hufflepuff stands had been demolished by a tree trunk, likely thrown by one of

Voldemort's giants, and the sod on the field had been turned over in long, wicked furrows by wild spellfire. It would need to be retiled and seeded anew before any games could be held, as many of the Curses that had struck the ground had been Dark, killing the grass.

Harry buzzed Draco to get his attention, earning an irritated snort for his efforts, and then it was a thrilling game of chase, with Harry weaving through the stands and under bleachers whenever Draco got too close. There was one particularly close call when Draco ambushed him from perched atop the Ravenclaw stands, but luckily enough, the sun was in just the right position to throw Draco's dark shadow against the ground, giving Harry enough warning to take a detour before he came shooting out from under the bleachers.

After a good half hour of cavorting, Draco seemed to have finally burnt off enough excess energy he wasn't practically vibrating out of his skin any longer, and they returned to the ground. There was a high, happy flush to his cheeks when he shifted back, his hair a windswept mess, but he was grinning from ear to ear with an infectious smile Harry couldn't help but catch himself.

"Feeling better, then?" Harry asked, and Draco rolled his eyes, still smiling.

"I've certainly felt worse." Draco gave him a sidelong look. "...I've been a right prick lately, haven't I? I didn't realise..."

"Hm? Oh, no more than usual." Harry shrugged. "I can't say as I've noticed at all."

"Arsehole." He bumped shoulders with Harry, and they headed back to the Quidditch shed to return the broom. "...It crept up on me," he said with a worried frown, leaning against the door jamb while Harry locked up. "I thought—I thought I was over this. It hasn't been...a *need* for me. In a while, but this..." He closed his eyes and shook his head, and Harry drew close, taking Draco's hands in his own and running a thumb over his knuckles.

"So I'm not enough, then?" he said, taking care to keep his tone playful and teasing; Draco could be very sensitive about the M word business. "You've gone and hurt my feelings."

Draco pursed his lips, like he was trying to keep from smiling, and his eyes fluttered open. They'd gone a dark, steel grey, and they bore into Harry with insistence. "You're plenty for me... But for the dragon, maybe not so much. Don't take it too personally."

Harry clutched his chest, as if struck a mortal blow. "I may need some reassurances of my own, in that case."

Draco's eyes flicked around the shed, lips quirking up on one side. "In the *Quidditch shed*, Potter? I should have guessed..."

Harry gave him a shove, laughing brightly, and stepped around him and out into the fresh air. "We're going to be missed. I don't want to get caught by McGonagall with my trousers down when we're meant to be helping out," he said, largely to keep his mind from supplying helpful images to get him in the mood.

"I can be quick," Draco wheedled, falling into step beside him. "And you can be *very* quick."

Harry flushed, cutting him a dark look. "That was *one* time, and I told you: I'd just been dreaming about—"

"If we aren't going to pull each other off in the Quidditch shed, maybe don't get me worked up with a vivid retelling of your wildest fantasy?"

"Wasn't my *wildest* fantasy..." Harry protested weakly.

Draco raised a brow, rolling up his sleeves; he'd still insisted on wearing a button-down with a waistcoat, the stuck-up prick. "...One wonders what could possibly get you off *faster*, then."

Harry smiled. "Put in an honest day's work, and maybe I'll tell you."

He would wager Draco performed more physical labour in the next eight hours than he had in his entire life. When he tired of mixing mortar for the brick-layers and Scourgifying the flagstones in the corridors that had seen fighting, he shifted into the dragon and fired the forges for the metalwork and helped Hagrid haul loads of heavy stone from the Courtyard into the Great Hall to repair the sundered walls.

They were so exhausted by day's end, they collapsed into bed back at Grimmauld Place and actually went to sleep—though Harry roused in the wee hours of the morning to hold up his end of their bargain, which seemed to suit Draco just fine.

The end of May soon rolled around, and Ron and Hermione showed up on the front steps on the 1st of June as promised, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Neither made any remark concerning Draco already being in residence, which was a small relief; Hermione had been the one to Side-Along Draco onto the property in the first place, so Harry supposed she had put two and two together easily enough, and Ron just seemed so thrilled to be out from under his mother's hen-pecking he didn't notice Regulus's room had been given over to a new occupant.

"It's like she thinks if she takes her eye off me for two seconds, I'm gonna run off looking for more Horcruxes!" he grouched over dinner their first evening back together. Draco had insisted on 'cooking', so it was Aunt Bessie's steak pies all around. "I think she wouldn't even let Ginny go back to Hogwarts if she had her way!" He shovelled a bit into his mouth, swallowing around a gulp of pumpkin juice. "I'm about at my wits' end; June couldn't come soon enough." He slammed his glass back down with a contented sigh. "I'm officially changing my allegiance to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black!"

"Please; you're utterly bereft of the Black line's exquisite bone structure," Draco sniffed. He turned to Harry. "We'll have to blast 'Noble' off the family tapestry now."

Ron looked like he was ready to get right back into it, after nearly a month away from Draco's barbs, and Hermione cleared her throat pointedly. "Well I have to say I'm glad to have a bit of time away from my folks as well..."

"Oh yeah; how'd the de-Modifying go?" Harry hadn't wanted to pry, but she'd brought it up, so he supposed it was fair game.

She gave a wan smile. "...Er, I guess it'll come as no surprise they *weren't* happy about having magic worked on them against their will. I think I managed to restore all the changes I made, though they still call each other Wendell and Monica sometimes."

"Not as thrilled with their lengthy holiday down under as you might have hoped?" Harry asked, offering a sympathetic smile.

“No indeed,” she sighed, pushing her mash around her plate absently. “I’ve left them the address of an Owl Post Box if they want to get in touch with me, though. Perhaps a bit of cooling off time is just the ticket.”

Ron reached around to squeeze her shoulder. “They’ll come around. Your folks are stand-up sorts. They’re only as angry as they are ‘cause they were worried about you.”

“Your parents are...Muggles?” Draco asked, in that same sort of strained tone of forced politeness Narcissa used with Harry. As if he didn’t well know Hermione was Muggleborn—he’d certainly thrown enough slurs at her over the years about her blood status.

Hermione seemed to be thinking much the same thing, and she nodded. “I Modified their memories before I left with Harry and Ron to hunt Horcruxes and sent them to Australia. Gave them a whole new life—one without me in it, just in case...” She took a breath. “But it’s over now, and they’re none too pleased to learn what I did. Even though I still believe it was the best choice I could have made—and I was a wanted witch! Death Eaters wouldn’t have hesitated to torture them to try and get to me!”

“You’re right; they wouldn’t have,” Draco said, and raised his glass. “Here’s to doing whatever it takes to keep our parents safe.”

“Up to and including removing yourself from the house before you Hex them,” Ron added darkly, raising his as well.

Hermione allowed a prim little smile, ducking her head in thanks, and offered her glass.

Harry tapped a finger on the lip of his glass. “So should I just excuse myself or...?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Well I don’t think *any* of our parents would still be around and kicking if you hadn’t been your insufferable martyr self, so I think you can share the toast.”

Harry grinned and clinked his glass against his friends’.

It was almost like back in late summer the year before, when he and Ron and Hermione had been stuck here. Except they weren’t living in fear for their lives anymore, and Draco was here now, so it was actually pretty nice. Grimmauld Place was a lot bigger

than Perkins' tent, even with its expanded interior, so they had all the room they might want to spread out. Plus, Kreacher had kept the place spotless, even after their abrupt departure, so while the decor still left something to be desired, it was as fine a place as any for four friends to share.

Draco's birthday rolled around the first week of June, and Harry decided to start his special day off right with breakfast in bed—his preferred porridge, of course. As he was finishing his pumpkin juice, Harry placed a small gift box on the tray, trying not to fidget with excitement. Perhaps Draco could sense his eagerness, for he ignored the box at first, draining his cup to the last drop and daintily dabbing at his lips with his napkin.

“Would you just *open it*?” Harry prodded, collapsing back onto the pillows beside Draco and jabbing him in the side with an elbow.

Draco squirmed. “It's *my* birthday; I'll take as long as I damn well please. And I'm older than you now, Potter, so you'd do well to show some proper respect.”

“You've always been older than me, and I've never shown you any respect before. Not about to start now.”

“I *distinctly* recall being reassured that you quote, ‘respect the fuck’ out of me.”

“I do respect you,” Harry said. “But you won't catch me showing it.” He sidled in close, so their sides were pressed together. “Just open it. Oh, but—” Draco raised a brow in question. “It's not all of your gift. Hermione's taken care of the rest. Only because, well, I didn't know how to do the magic myself, and there was something of a time crunch issue.”

“You had *Granger* prepare your gift for me? And they say Gryffindors aren't romantic.”

“It was my idea, at least! And I got you *this* bit. So.” Draco was still giving him a wry look, and Harry reached for the box. “Fine, if you won't open it then—”

Draco snatched the box away, suddenly protective. “It's *my* gift. I'll thank you to keep your grubby mitts off.” He kept his shoulder turned toward Harry, as if shielding the box.

“Then *open it*,” Harry prodded, pinching the soft bit of skin showing at Draco's waist as

his night shirt rode up.

Draco wriggled and writhed, nearly upsetting the breakfast tray. “Stop *manhandling* me—all right, all right! I yield!” His resignation came just as Harry was preparing to Banish the tray back to the kitchen and convince Draco bodily to open his present, one hand already on Draco’s hip. “Don’t start something you aren’t prepared to finish,” Draco warned, eyes flicking down to Harry’s wayward hand. “We’re lunching with Mother and Father promptly at noon.”

Harry grimaced. “Do we *have* to? Or—do *I* have to? You’ll have a *much* better time without me—”

“No, *you’ll* have a much better time without you. *I* shall have a miserable time without you.” He hooked a finger into the collar of Harry’s shirt, drawing him closer. “The sooner we let my parents celebrate me, the sooner we can come back and have a proper do.” He turned the box over in his hands, carefully untying the ribbon wrapping it. Inside, he found another, smaller box, fashioned from wood, and when he undid the clasp, it popped open to reveal a shining, golden Snitch.

His lips twitched in bemusement, and he reached to take it in hand—

“Don’t!” Harry warned, smiling nervously. “I mean, don’t touch it yet.”

Draco frowned—and then understanding dawned. “...You got me a virgin Snitch?”

Harry shrugged. “Like I said, it’s only part of the gift. Hermione took care of the rest of it.”

Draco glanced to the door, then back at Harry. “Now?”

“Would I really keep you waiting on your birthday?”

Draco tapped Harry’s hand, where it was still settled on his hip. “You might just.” He shoved the hand away, rolling out of bed and sending the tray back down to the kitchen with a flick of his wand. “Step lively, Potter.”

“*Harry*,” he muttered under his breath, letting it slide because it was Draco’s birthday for one, and because Draco only did it because he knew how it annoyed Harry for

another. It was always *Harry Harry Harry* when it counted.

Draco found the door easily; he'd grown up visiting Grimmauld Place, after all, and had spent enough time here in the past month to fill in the gaps in his memory. Harry had had Hermione place it just off the sitting room down on the first floor, where anyone passing by might think it was a closet. He had recalled Hagrid mentioning something about permits and documentation being required, but as it was a last-minute gift idea, he hadn't exactly submitted the proper paperwork for the space, so the less conspicuous it looked, the better. Besides, it wasn't as if the Ministry was in any fit state to comb through the Grimmauld Place blueprints and notice an improperly permitted extension, so he could just put in the request later.

Harry nodded encouragingly when Draco touched the knob, holding his breath as he pushed through. He'd only snagged a brief peek the night before, while Draco had been washing up, just to check it was ready. Hermione had shaken her head, fondly ruffling his hair, and told him *You're a good man, Harry Potter*, which had been nice of her to say, though Harry didn't really see what had prompted her to say so.

It was just, giving Draco a new Sanctuary had been so *obvious* a gift choice.

He'd prodded Hermione into getting a bit creative with the interior, as this one wouldn't be moving about from site to site and so could support a stable environment within. It had taken some thought, deciding what this Sanctuary should look like, but given the wondering look on Draco's face, smoothly replaced by a smile of dawning realisation, he felt he'd chosen wisely.

"...This is my family's lands. It's Wiltshire."

"Is it?" Harry asked, all innocence.

"I broke my wrist climbing that tree when I was seven—and I tried to go swimming in that pond when I was ten until I found out the hard way it was infested with leeches. Father commissioned a private Quidditch pitch for me, just between those hills..." He whirled around, shaking his head with an utterly baffled expression on his face, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "You're mad."

"I don't think I am. It's just an Undetectable Extension Charm—with a few personal

touches.”

“You’re *mad*,” Draco breathed, sidling closer and taking Harry’s face in his hands, sliding their lips together. “Absolutely—” He peppered Harry’s jaw with little sucking kisses, “Barmy—” And across his cheeks. “Barking—” And nose. “Stark-raving—” And back to his lips again, holding for a long moment before drawing back slowly. “*Mad*.”

Harry supposed he’d been called worse, and though—as with Hermione—he didn’t really understand what had prompted the display, he let it stand. It was, after all, Draco’s birthday.

They put off christening the Snitch for later, as Hermione and Ron would be rumbling about now, and they had a terribly, horribly awkward lunch with the Malfoys to prepare for. Ron had, likely at Hermione’s insistence, procured a present for Draco as well, which was reluctantly passed over with a muttered *Happy birthday* just as they were heading out the door. Harry suspected his timing had been planned so that he wouldn’t have to stand around waiting to see how Draco received the gift, which turned out to be a first-press edition of *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* autographed by the author.

Lunch with the Malfoys was lunch with the Malfoys, and Harry was willing to bet all the gold in his Gringotts vault that the only reason it was an intimate meal for four rather than an extravagant affair in the ballroom with glitz and glam and a string quartet was because Draco had threatened to cut ties with them altogether if they dared invite another soul. Lucius seemed thrilled for the excuse to focus all his attention on his son, ignoring Harry’s presence altogether, and gifted him a handsome watch. Harry thought it seemed a bit stuffy for a gift, until he recognised the piece as something similar to the one Mr. Weasley had given Ron when he’d come of age—and the one Harry had received from Mrs. Weasley to the same end. Of course; with Lucius rotting in Azkaban for Draco’s seventeenth birthday—and Draco not much better off, drowning in his Animagus studies and fearful for his and his parents’ lives—there’d been no opportunity for traditional coming-of-age birthday gifts.

Draco looked to be thinking along the same lines, for he took the watch with a trembling hand, head ducked so that none but Harry could see how his eyes were shining. Lucius, too, seemed troubled by the unusually emotional exchange, quickly shooing Draco back to his mother, who was delighted to bestow upon him a new broom—a Nimbus 2020.

“I know you don’t *need* one anymore,” she said placatingly, when Draco reminded her he was perfectly capable of Apparating—and flying—on his own. “But it would be such a shame to let those Quidditch skills you were so diligent in cultivating go to waste!”

“Well, I have got a Snitch that needs breaking in...” he allowed, cutting a sly look to Harry, and Lucius whispered a colourful oath under his breath, snapping for a house-elf to top off his wine glass.

While Draco had objected to his parents throwing any sort of affair for him at the Manor, he had been only too happy for Harry to organise something far more laid back at Grimmauld Place—which meant louder music, questionable drinks, and more games of Strip Exploding Snap. Pansy, Theo, Greg, and Millie showed up unfashionably early, which Harry suspected they had done on purpose, and dragged Draco off into the sitting room to shower him with gifts, with Harry, Hermione, and Ron pointedly not invited.

“You *wanted* to be invited?” Ron asked, scandalised, when Harry complained about it as he was putting the finishing touches on Draco’s birthday dinner and dessert.

“Well—no, I just—” He sighed. “It would’ve been nice to feel at least a *little* included.” He lifted his eyes to the ceiling, wondering if there was a spell that would let him see through into the sitting room two floors above them. “They’re up there having their little Slytherin orgy, and I’m down here playing house-elf.”

Ron was looking very distressed. “Wha—you want to...you want to have an *orgy* with them?” He shook his head. “Mate, I’m really trying hard to be understanding here, but honestly—”

“Harry, watch the milk! Don’t let it burn!” Hermione said, pointing her wand at the burner over which Harry had been absently tending a sauce pan. The flame shrank to a bare flicker.

“Right! Right, sorry. And obviously I didn’t mean a *literal* orgy,” Harry explained, cheeks heating.

“Less discussion of orgies, more warming of milk!” Hermione huffed. “I’m doing the hard part getting the tart moulds ready.”

And she was, to be fair. On top of preparing Draco’s new Sanctuary, so they wouldn’t

have to trek out to Scotland every time Draco wanted to stretch his wings, Harry had also been intent on finally polishing the egg custard as he'd promised at the new year. He hadn't yet managed it alone, but Hermione had thrown herself into helping however she could, with Ron evidently providing moral support.

He was struck how, at every turn, his friends had done nothing but attempt to guide and support him as he navigated the tricky business of his relationship—whatever form it took—with Draco Malfoy over the years. They'd had his back when barbs had been traded during classes, blithely tolerated his obsession in Sixth Year, gone grudgingly along with most every bad decision he'd made during their Horcrux hunt (if only to make sure he didn't get himself killed), and were now at the point where Ron was mostly concerned he was sleeping with *several* Slytherins instead of just Draco while Hermione fussed over the thinness of her dough.

He began whisking the eggs and sugar together, stealing glances at Hermione and Ron out of the corner of his eye. "...You're sure you two are okay with this?"

"As long as Draco reminds them to hold their tongues," Ron grumbled, reaching for the evening edition of the *Prophet*; Kingsley's temporary appointment to the Minister for Magic position had recently been made permanent, and he waved out at them from the front page.

"I had half a mind to Jinx the main course to make them croak like bullfrogs for twenty-four hours if they said *Mudblood*," Hermione said. "But Harry assured me they were reasonably civil the last time they were over, so perhaps there's no need."

"No—I don't mean—" He turned to frown at Ron, who was smiling with his head buried in the paper, and Hermione was doing much the same as she struggled to crimp the rims of the tart shells. "...I hate you both." He went back to whisking furiously. "I'm really concerned here. I don't want it to be *weird*."

"Well," Hermione said, "I confess there's never going to be anything *not* weird about you and *Draco Malfoy*, but..." She stole a glance at him, one brow lifted. "Do *you* feel weird about it?"

Harry opened his mouth to say *no, of course not*, because that was what you were supposed to say. If you were with someone you wanted to be with, even if everyone else

thought you'd lost the plot, you at least were expected to be confident in your choice, to stand up for it. But this was Hermione, and she wasn't asking for what he thought was the right answer. She just wanted to know.

He shrugged weakly. "I feel like...I *should* feel weird about it—and there are times I do, you know? I'll get hit with a memory, or he'll say something or do something that I've seen him do a dozen times before, back at school, and wanted to clock him for it—but then it's like it's glazed over, I don't feel angry like I ought to."

She reached out and rubbed his shoulder. "Who says you ought to be angry? You've been through a lot this past year—so has he. So have all of us." Her eyes went to Ron, then back to Harry. "We just want you to be happy, Harry. That's really all there is to it. We'll put up with rather a lot from you, in case you haven't figured it out over the years. Plus—" She bobbed her head. "Well, we kind of like Draco, too."

"Speak for yourself," Ron muttered from behind the paper.

"He's our friend, crazy as it seems—"

"Don't let *him* hear you say that."

"—and we want him to be happy too." She used her wand to pull down Ron's paper, so he had to look her in the eye. "Isn't that right, Ronald?"

Ron tossed the paper aside with a dramatic huff. "Yeah, all right. I guess I want old Ferret Face to be happy. He's pretty insufferable when he isn't, after all." He gave Harry a crooked smile, though, to show he mostly spoke in jest. "You've spent too much of your life worrying about other people already. Just have some fun—make bad choices. Make some *really* bad choices, if you have to. Like—choices you're going to look back on in ten years and think, 'What the bloody hell was I—'"

"*Ron.*"

Ron ducked his head, full-on grinning now, and waved Harry off. "Enjoy your lizard boyfriend, if you must. Just don't say we didn't warn you."

True enough; they had tried to warn him off Draco time and time again, and yet he'd still wound up here all the same. Somehow, though, Harry didn't really mind so much that it

felt like yet another situation in which he'd had no say, been given no choice. Maybe because Draco was in much the same position—what had the locket said? *Like a moth to dragonflame*. A sappy romantic might have called it *destiny*, and though Harry did not think he was either sappy or romantic, that sounded like a pleasant enough take on their relationship—much more palatable than the take in which their life forces were intimately linked, one doomed to drag the other down into death after him. Yeah, he was just gonna go with *destined*.

Dinner, including Harry's egg custard, was a rousing success, given he earned a, "Passable, Potter," from Draco and Pansy and Theo had cleaned their plates. Greg and Millie had cleaned theirs too, but this was less a surprise or a compliment, as Draco had confided in him that Greg would eat anything that stood still long enough for him to stab it with a fork, and Millie had burned off all her taste buds in a Potions accident in Fourth Year. They set up picnic tables in the new Sanctuary, and it was kind of perfect.

Gifts were exchanged, drinks were had, and stories of Malfoy birthdays past were divulged. Harry found he liked the one about his twelfth best, when Lucius had presented Draco with twelve handsome brand-new Nimbus brooms, and the spoilt git had thought they were all for *him*, and not a 'donation' to the Slytherin Quidditch Team. "You should've seen his *face*, Potter," Pansy gasped, slapping her knee. "You'd think he'd just been told he'd contracted Spattergroit!"

She'd been on the verge of offering up the memory for public viewing, if they could just track down a Pensieve, when Draco had complained he was tired from all the excitement and hoped they could wrap it up soon. Pansy had only leered at him, muttering something about *still got a few presents you're expecting, then?* and rounded up her fellows to leave so quickly she might as well have Summoned them.

Once the guests had all Flooed home and Hermione and Ron had retired to their rooms, Harry sent Draco upstairs to enjoy a bath while he finished with the Scouring up. "Leave it," Draco said, tugging him toward the stairs. "It'll still be there in the morning."

"But—"

"It can wait. I can't."

It turned out Draco was *very* appreciative of his gifts and dinner and did not hold it

against Harry at all that Hermione had been largely responsible for both. Harry slapped up the quickest, strongest *Muffliato* he'd ever cast when Draco bent forward, lips stretched tight around his straining cock, and he bit his fist hard enough to leave marks.

“Why—am I getting—head when—it’s—*hngh*—your birthday—th-though...?”

“Are you *actually* turning me down?” Draco asked, lips puffy, as he lazily pumped Harry’s cock.

Harry frantically shook his head. “Nope. Nope, definitely not. Carry on.”

And on he carried, and on and on and *on* until Harry’s vision went white. No, on closer consideration, he decided that *this* had been his favourite Malfoy birthday after all.

Draco’s parents insisted on biweekly visits for lunch, and try as Harry might to get Ron and Hermione to come along and help make the tense meals a bit more bearable, they refused to be budged. “We’d die for you, mate,” Ron assured him with a clap on the shoulder, “but there are some sacrifices you just can’t ask us to make.” Harry could hardly blame them, but he really didn’t enjoy the meals, and he honestly didn’t think Draco did either, always bustling them back through the Floo before dessert had even settled in their stomachs.

When he asked Draco why they had to attend so regularly, if he didn’t even *like* the visits, he only received an elegant shrug. “They’re my parents. They ask me to come, so I come.”

“And I’m going along because...?”

“Because I want you there,” Draco said simply, as if that was all there was to it. Which, there might well have been; Draco was still a tricky, fickle beast to navigate, too draconic by half at times and in ways Harry didn’t think he’d ever grow accustomed to. Truthfully, though, it smacked a bit of ‘hoarding’, and Harry wondered if they ought to speak with Charlie, to see what else they might try doing in order to settle those restless bits of Draco that refused to be tamed. Not that Harry *wanted* him tamed; it was only... he wanted to be prepared, he supposed. So he didn’t fuck things up, as he was so wont to do.

Deciding they had kept themselves cooped up in their little love nest long enough, and

that lunches at the Manor definitely did not count as proper outings, Harry threw his weight into convincing Draco to come visit the Burrow with him, finally managing it well into June. He hadn't wanted the Weasleys to think he was avoiding them, but he'd needed a bit of time to himself—and to Draco—after that final battle. It was quiet in Grimmauld Place, and there had been a comfortable rhythm with Draco that did not involve Muggle gadgets and gizmos and a house fit to bursting with life. Harry loved the Weasleys, but he was finding out there were a lot of other things he loved as well, so he'd kind of been enjoying his little holiday, as it were.

As Ron told it, Mrs. Weasley had understood his need to recover, always asking after Harry when Ron popped in but never pressing for more, and Ron had returned to Grimmauld Place after each visit laden with baked goods clearly prepared with a healthy dash of love. Still, Harry felt the tiniest bit guilty, and given he could hardly leave Draco alone to stew while he popped over to Ottery St. Catchpole, they would have to go together.

When Draco asked why his attendance was required at what was looking to be a rather raucous reunion of Weasleys, with everyone but Charlie in attendance, Harry had simply turned his own words on him: "Because I want you there."

Draco had gone scarlet and donned his best dress robes until Harry had assured him with tickled laughter that this wasn't the Manor and that he had to dress much more casually, else he was going to make their hosts feel self-conscious.

"I have to dress like *you*?" Draco asked, scandalised, but managed to find a clean pair of slacks and button-down that didn't make him look like he was off to his own funeral.

Harry had warned Mrs. Weasley in advance that he would be bringing Draco along as his dinner guest, hoping she would pass the word around to Bill so he didn't try to Hex Draco on sight again, but he could not have possibly prepared himself for the sight of Molly flinging herself at Draco the moment they'd stepped through the Floo, wrapping him in a crushing hug that he'd be feeling for a few days.

"Oh, you dear, *dear* boy! Throwing yourself between our Fred and that curse! You can't know how—" She choked herself up, shaking him like a rag doll, before she finally released him, holding him at arm's length to get a good look at him. "Goodness, you're skin and bones! Ronald Weasley, you haven't been 'losing' the pies and casseroles I've

been sending around, have you?”

Ron arrowed for the back door, mumbling a reply that Harry didn't catch but was probably something along the lines of *Haven't been here five minutes and he's already causing me trouble...*

Mrs. Weasley ignored him, beaming at Draco. “Well, not to worry, we'll get you sorted quickly enough.” She belatedly noticed Harry, who had stood quietly off to the side so Draco could get the mothering over and done with. It seemed to be his turn now, though, for she folded him into a hug half as frantic but twice as tight as Draco's, clutching him to her breast and pressing a kiss onto his crown. “Oh Harry, *Harry*, I can't tell you how much...” She sighed, and Harry patted her arms. He'd known this was coming, but it didn't make it any less uncomfortable.

“It was nothing, Mrs. Weasley—”

“Nonsense! It was *everything*, and just...” She drew back, her eyes shining. “...I'm just so glad you're here,” she warbled thickly, her words heavy with meaning.

“Me too.”

She nodded, releasing him at last, and wiped her eyes. “Well, you boys head off into the garden and say hello to everyone else. It'll still be another half hour before I'm ready for you!”

Harry ducked his head, looping his arm through Draco's and dragging him towards the back door.

“Weasley's mother is...” Draco started, and Harry held his breath, waiting. “...stronger than she looks.” He rubbed his arms.

“Not quite lunches with your folks, is it?” They made their way through the little kitchen garden towards the distant sound of laughing voices. “So how much do you think you can eat before you're too pudgy to make it off the ground?”

Draco's face went sheet-white, and he drew up short. “Don't even *joke* about that.”

“Molly likes making sure all her children are well-fed and happy.”

“Thank Merlin I’m not one of her little red-headed whelps, then.”

“Oh, sorry, I misspoke: Molly likes making sure *anyone who sets foot in her home* is well-fed and happy.” He poked Draco in the waist, making him squirm. “You might need to let out a belt loop or three before we leave.”

Draco raked him with a scathing look. “*You* look fit enough after all these years under her roof; I think I’ll survive.”

Harry’s brows rose. “You think I look fit?” Draco’s cheeks pinked, and he started walking again, now at a faster clip to try and lose Harry, until he was nearly jogging by the time they joined the larger group.

It really was most everyone in the family: Ron and Hermione, Bill and Fleur, Fred and George; Ginny was home for the weekend, though she’d been spending most of her summer at Hogwarts, helping with the rebuilding; the only ones missing, aside from Charlie, who’d had to return to Romania, were Percy and Mr. Weasley, who were pulling long hours at the Ministry these days but had assured Mrs. Weasley they’d be home in time for dinner.

There were greetings all around, and Draco gamely shook every hand extended his way. Even Bill offered him a terse apology for knocking him out. “Thanks for pulling Fred’s bacon out of the fire. We’ve got a backup—” He jerked a thumb at George, who showed him a couple of fingers of his own. “But we like his model better.”

Draco only nodded and muttered, “Of course...” looking thoroughly out of his element. Harry winced inwardly; this was going to be worse than visits to the Manor if he didn’t find a way to settle Draco’s nerves—though that might prove difficult, given he hadn’t exactly found the time yet to explain to his extended family the precise nature of his and Draco’s relationship.

Oh they knew Draco was an Animagus, knew he’d been not quite himself for a while and brought down Dumbledore in his animalistic rampaging—but they didn’t know *why* he’d done that. They didn’t know *why* Harry had broken him out of the Ministry, why he’d had to tag along on their very dangerous and very secret quest. Perhaps they wondered, but they didn’t ask, and so they didn’t know.

And Harry wanted to tell them, he did, but he wanted it to be on his own terms—and he wanted Draco to be on board with it as well. He wanted this to be another *all-in* moment, and that couldn't happen right now, on a balmy Saturday afternoon out in the garden.

So he wrangled Hermione and Ron into playing buffer, giving Draco someone to talk to that he didn't feel he owed fifteen apologies. Granted, he *did* owe them apologies, but they didn't seem like they minded so much. Hermione politely asked how he was enjoying the Sanctuary, as if she hadn't caught them tumbling out flushed and laughing just the day before, and Ron grabbed them a round of Butterbeers so he had an excuse to mingle with Draco but not talk.

“Have you thought about using it for spell practice?” Hermione suggested, just as the sun was touching the distant horizon. Mr. Weasley and Percy would be home any minute now, and even this far from the kitchen, Harry could smell wonderful scents drifting out the open windows. “No sense in letting valuable skills go to waste!”

“You sound like Mother,” Draco snorted, blowing over the lip of his bottle so it sang.

Hermione flushed. “Well you don't have to practice offensive spells. What about your Patronus? Harry mentioned you were getting very close, but you said you hadn't managed it by...well, by Hogwarts. You should try to master it, you really should!”

Draco's brows quirked up, and he smiled into the draw he took off his bottle. “Well, it's mastered. So you can stop your harping.”

Ron choked on his swig. “The fuck it is.” He looked to Harry, dubious, and Harry had to nod.

“Afraid it's true. He took his sweet time getting to it, but I've seen it with my own eyes.” He grimaced. “Unfortunately.”

“So what is it, then?” Hermione prodded, curious.

“Please be a ferret, please be a ferret...” Ron muttered under his breath, fingers crossed.

“It's a *swan*,” Draco proclaimed proudly, chest puffed out. “A nasty brute, as Potter tells it, but I'm pleased enough.”

Ron burst out laughing. “A *swan*? It’s a bloody *bird*? And he’s ‘pleased’ with it!”

Draco frowned. “Something wrong with swans, Weasley?” He palmed his wand, brandishing it with a flourish. “Shall we compare our Charms? I’ve heard yours is a Chihuahua.”

“It’s a *Jack Russell Terrier*,” Ron sputtered, “and it’ll tear yours to shreds!” He tossed his empty bottle into the air and drew his wand, Vanishing the bottle before it hit the ground.

“Oi,” George warned from nearby. “Mum said no duels before dinner! It’s on your head if she catches you!”

Ron grumbled sourly but slipped his wand back into his pocket, and after ensuring he wasn’t about to be Hexed, Draco did the same.

Once his back was turned, though, Ron leaned over to Harry and whispered, “...Yours is still a stag though, yeah?”

“Uh, yeah?” Harry laughed. “What else would it be?”

“No, yeah. Just. I mean, y’know.” Ron rubbed at the back of his neck, then shrugged. “They—change. Sometimes.” He nodded to himself, evidently relieved, and released a huff of nervous laughter. “So long as it doesn’t suddenly become a dragon.”

“Don’t worry,” Harry said, clapping him on the shoulder. “If it changed, it’d probably become a peacock.”

“A *what*?”

Harry was spared from having to explain himself by the *crack* of Apparition, as Mr. Weasley and Percy finally arrived, and then there were more greetings and welcomes all around. Mr. Weasley gave Draco’s hand a firm shake, saying, “Didn’t think I’d ever be glad to see a Malfoy darkening my doorway, but there’s a first time for everything. Welcome to the Burrow, Draco,” and though Draco had nothing to say in return, only ducking a guilty nod, Harry thought he seemed a little relieved to have the matter of their families’ antagonistic past addressed right from the start and promptly sailed over.

Dinner was quite the most filling thing Harry had had in months, and he sorely regretted taking so long to start reaching out to his friends and family again, mending ties the war had strained. He resolved to start dropping by on a much more regular basis; after all, Draco would never be able to be himself around Harry's friends without frequent exposure.

Mr. Weasley drew him aside just as they were preparing to leave, asking for a private word. "I'm not sure if you've seen the papers, but the Ministry's finally getting up and running again."

"Yeah, I saw Kingsley's been appointed Minister full-time? That's great!"

Mr. Weasley nodded, smiling. "He's a tough nut, but a good man, just what the Healer ordered at a time like this." He cleared his throat softly. "So, er, when you have the time...you ought to think about bringing Draco by. To the Ministry, I mean."

Harry felt the blood leave his face, and Mrs. Weasley's sumptuous stew began to bubble nauseatingly in his stomach. "What? Why? He hasn't done anything wrong!"

Surely they couldn't still mean to prosecute him for Dumbledore's death. Everyone knew he'd had no control over himself—except, *did* everyone know that? Snape had, but Snape was dead. That Bragge bloke and Kingsley had seemed convinced as well, but that had merely been assumption on their part. What if they wanted to interrogate him? What if they thought it'd been part of a plan of Voldemort's? Granted, it kind of *had*, but that wasn't—

"Well, no, not exactly—*calm down*," he urged, seeing Harry's obvious agitation. He offered a wry smile, too fatherly for Harry's taste. "But he's kind of an unregistered Animagus, no?"

Harry's shoulders slumped in relief—oh, was *that* all?

"Not that there's probably anyone left on the island of Great Britain who *doesn't* know about the great white dragon that fought at the Battle of Hogwarts," Mr. Weasley continued, "but formalities do not appear to have been one of the victims of the war." He squeezed Harry's shoulder. "No rush—I only thought to offer a reminder, in case it had slipped your mind."

“No—I mean, yeah, I guess it had...” He nodded, forcing a smile. “Thanks, I’ll talk to Draco about it.”

“You do that,” Mr. Weasley said, shooing him off. “And don’t be a stranger!”

Harry meant to put off bringing up the Registration business for at least a few days, thinking he might ease into it once he caught Draco in a particularly good mood—but no sooner had they Apparated back into the entryway of Grimmauld Place with a loud *CRACK* than Draco was plodding down the stairs into the kitchen to put on a spot of tea, throwing back with feigned casualty, “So what did Weasley’s father want?”

“Er...” Harry followed him down, clutching the newel at the base for comfort. “...It was about you, actually.”

Draco lifted a brow as he filled the teapot. “He was warning you off me, then? Reminding you to sleep with one eye open?”

“...He thinks we should go down to the Ministry and get you properly registered as an Animagus.”

The teapot dropped into the spacious sink with a bright clang, the water still hissing from the faucet. Harry drew his wand and spelled the tap shut, slowly slipping closer so as not to startle.

Draco’s hands were gripping the edge of the sink, white-knuckled, and he had his head hung. “...Why the *fuck* do I have to—” he started, then cut himself off. His shoulders tensed. “It’s not as if it’s a secret!”

Harry came to a stop just in front of the oven, leaning back against it. “Yeah, I know. It’s just—protocol, that kind of tripe, that’s all.” Draco was staring down into the sink at the toppled teapot, though Harry suspected his mind was elsewhere—like buried in the Department of Mysteries, locked away where no one would be able to find him this time, trapped in a deep, dreamless slumber. “It’s not urgent, he said. It was just a reminder. We don’t have to go right now—”

“No,” Draco said, then shook his head, as if to convince himself. “No, I’ll go.”

This close, Harry could see he was trembling, and he corrected gently. “*We’ll* go.”

It spoke to how genuinely unsettled Draco was by the prospect of willingly returning to the Ministry that he didn't snarl back something along the lines of *I hardly need a nanny!* He was breathing heavily, though, eyes closed now as he tried to wrest back some measure of calm. Harry hated it; they'd had a pleasant enough evening at the Burrow—certainly loads less tense than any lunch at the Manor—and now Harry had ruined it.

"I'm sorry—" he started, but Draco only shook his head sharply.

"It's fine," he said, wiping his face and running his hands through his hair. He cast a last look at the abandoned teapot, then stormed off. "I'm going to use the Sanctuary—go on to bed."

Harry watched him go, feeling suddenly impotent. He wanted to follow, wanted to fly with him, or just be there when he tired himself out, as he was likely intending to do. Working himself to exhaustion was Draco's way of ensuring he slept like the dead, more effective than any Dreamless Sleep. It was invariably a signal he was worked up—and he did not want Harry to follow him. Harry had been unaccountably hurt, those first few times Draco had done it back in the tent, feeling dismissed and shut out, though he'd told himself this was only because he *had* been dismissed and shut out, as he and Draco were hardly bosom companions.

Now, though, he saw it for what it was: simple pride. Draco, even now, did not want Harry to see him weak. He would rather suffer in solitude than expose himself to Harry's pity, still that frightened little eleven-year-old stinging from Harry's scorn underneath those sharp grey eyes and flashing scales.

Harry did not notice him come to bed, and he was up before Harry the next morning, pouring his nervous energy into sorting through his two—*two*—wardrobes for a suitable outfit in which to address any Ministry sorts who wanted to cause him grief.

"Seriously, we don't have to go *today*," Harry reminded him, leaned against the door jamb as he watched Draco rifle through his closets. They weren't bottomless—Harry had checked—but you wouldn't know it from the sheer volume of fabric Draco managed to find stuffed inside. "It's not as if they're going to come cart you away—" Draco's eyes flashed in warning, and Harry swallowed his tongue. Well that had been the wrong thing to say. He cleared his throat, trying again. "Shouldn't we wait until Monday, at least? No

one's going to be about today—”

“Hardly my fault; I'll be on record as having presented myself as *soon* as the matter was brought to my attention, and then they can contact me at their leisure. It's their own incompetence that let me slip through the cracks in the first place; you'd think they'd have a big fat file with my name on it, given what sort of havoc I wrought with my first transformation.”

“...Well, yeah, they did actually, but Snape saw it got 'lost'.”

Draco shrugged. “And that's my concern how?”

Harry sighed. *Slytherins*. He supposed a haughty bravado was better than the peevish nerves Draco tended to exhibit when he was discomfited, though, and they set off for the Ministry just before noon. Hermione and Ron had left for Diagon Alley a bit earlier: Ron to pitch in at the twins' shop as he'd promised to do with the school year starting inside of two months, and Hermione to get in some shopping she'd been putting off while waiting for a shipment of books to arrive at Flourish and Blotts. There were plans for the four of them to meet up for a later lunch once Harry and Draco's business at the Ministry was sorted, and Harry's stomach was already grumbling.

“Need a *Silencio*?” Draco ribbed as they turned down the grimy, glorified alleyway hosting the Visitor's Entrance. It was overcast, making the darkened shopfronts and graffitied walls seem all the more imposing. The old red telephone box used as the entrypoint for Ministry visitors was impossible to miss, looking as shabby and dilapidated as ever and still missing multiple windowpanes with the receiver itself hanging at an odd angle.

Draco wrinkled his nose and drew his cloak tighter about himself; how he wasn't dying under such a heavy garment in midsummer was beyond Harry, but maybe he always ran hot these days, considering.

Together they squeezed into the telephone box, drawing the door shut with a snap behind them. Harry awkwardly reached for the receiver, lifting it out of the way to show the dial. He hooked a finger into the little divots of 6-2-4-4-2 and waited patiently to be addressed.

A cool female voice—the same, Harry reflected, as in the Ministry lifts—chimed at them, “*Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.*”

“Er, Harry Potter, here with Draco Malfoy for an Animagus registration?”

“*Thank you,*” said the woman. “*Visitors, please take your badges and attach them to the front of your robes.*”

A click and a rattle sounded from inside the telephone apparatus, and shortly two square, silver badges came sliding out of the coin return. Harry’s read *Harry Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World*; Draco’s read *Draco Malfoy, Here to See a Man About a Dragon.*

Draco pinned Harry’s to his robe for him with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “As if your overinflated melon of a head needed to get any fatter than it already is...”

Harry grinned as the booth began to sink into the earth, fixing Draco’s badge to his robes. “Thought you liked my head.”

Draco’s lips quirked up at one side. “...You’re improving. Still a *lot* of practice needed, though.” He leaned in close, nuzzling the sensitive skin just below Harry’s ear—oh, this was *not* a good idea, getting hot and bothered in a cramped little lift. “Perhaps a demonstration’s in order.”

“Definitely not,” Harry chided gently, trying to shift his body away—though he only succeeded in drawing one of Draco’s legs between his own, causing his cock to rub just so over Draco’s thigh. He swallowed. “Unless you want to get arrested for public indecency.”

“What’s the use of being ‘Saviour of the Wizarding World’ if you can’t flout a few morality statutes with impunity?”

“*The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,*” came the woman’s voice again, and Draco cursed.

“Hope you weren’t planning on finally fucking me today,” he drawled morosely under his breath as they stepped out into the Atrium, its rich hardwood floors and peacock-blue ceiling unchanged from a year prior. “Someone else has beat you to the punch.”

Leery of dawdling too long in the atrium, lest Harry find himself hounded by well-wishers eager to express their gratitude to the Boy Who Lived in person, they quickly made their way to the lifts after having their wands checked at the security desk, and then it was up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry had hoped that, once inside the Ministry proper, he wouldn't have to worry about being approached by strangers wanting to shake his hand or kiss the metaphorical ring, but the lift ride up was a crowded one for a Sunday, and he was quite possibly the most recognisable face in all of wizarding England at the moment.

Draco grew more and more tense as the lift rose, though it was difficult to tell if his nerves stemmed entirely from how close they were getting to the Auror office, or if they could be attributed, at least in part, to the lovely young woman explaining to Harry in a choked voice that her father had been among the Hogsmeade residents who'd fought in the Battle of Hogwarts, and how she was certain he was only alive today thanks to Harry's brave actions. With a snuffle and a quick hug of gratitude that was less chaste than Harry might have liked, she bustled off at Level 3 ("*Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes*," announced the disembodied voice in the lift), and the carriage rattled onward and upward.

Harry tried to distract, now they were alone. "I don't think it's *that* bad."

"What?" Draco asked, a bit testily.

"My head. I don't think it's as terrible as you make it out to be."

Draco glared at him, eyes narrowing in suspicion—like he could see right through Harry's clever little scheme to make him feel better. "...Are you talking about your head? Or... your *head*?"

"Which do you think?"

"I think they're *both* in a horrific state, so you're off your rocker either way."

"And I think you're just saying that to be contrary."

"Oh?" Draco laughed. "*That* confident in your cocksucking skills, are you?"

"You haven't complained," Harry said, hoping his efforts weren't about to backfire.

“Maybe I’ve been grading you on a curve.” Draco rested a hand at the dip of Harry’s hip. “Perhaps I ought to raise my standards.”

Harry glanced down at his Ministry badge, tapping it with a frown. “Well, this thing here says I’m the *Saviour of the Wizarding World*, so I’m not sure how much higher your standards can go for there to still be any eligible bachelors hanging around.”

Draco made a face. “So I’m stuck with you, is what you’re saying.”

“Look at it this way: it’ll be less of a hassle for you to just mould me into the kind of Chosen One you’d prefer to associate with than to go out and find another one altogether.”

“For a Gryffindor, you do make the occasional good point.”

“*Level 2, Department of Magical Law Enforcement*,” announced the lift voice, and Draco sighed audibly.

Harry guided him out, a hand on the small of his back, when he didn’t immediately step off. They made their way to the reception desk, behind which sat a cheery young man who was thrilled—just *thrilled*—to escort Mr. Potter and his companion to the Animagus Registry desk, just *thrilled*!

“If he says how *thrilled* he is one more time, I swear to—”

“Easy,” Harry said, keeping his voice low. “It’s just signing a few forms, and then we’ll be off.”

Well, that was a lie. It was not just signing ‘a few’ forms; it was signing a whole *stack* of forms apparently—several of which, they were informed, would need to be initialled by the Head of the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau, seeing as Draco’s Animagus form was technically a Dangerous Creature. It was therefore down to Level 4 and the Beast Division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, where none other than Cassius Bragge welcomed Harry and Draco into his office, evidently having recently received a promotion.

“Oh, I’m absolutely delighted to see you’ve made something of yourself, Mr. Malfoy!” Bragge tittered, pouring the three of them generous cups of scalding tea. “I do hope

there won't be any, er, *misunderstandings* about the need to...well, to see that you didn't hurt anyone else—and that you weren't a danger to yourself, either?" He drew a half-empty package of biscuits from a drawer, placing several on a small tray—when his bushy brows beetled in thought. "...That does remind me, though: who was it, exactly, who authorised your release? I don't recall the paperwork coming across my desk, but it was a...tricky time..."

"Er, I think Auror Kingsley might have worked something out with Professor Snape." Bragge didn't seem to find this immediately believable, so Harry added in reminder, "Like you said, it was a tricky time. But everything worked out—I'm sure you heard about Draco's efforts in the Battle of Hogwarts?"

Bragge was blessedly easily distracted and eagerly dropped the matter of Draco's mysterious disappearance from the Ministry's holding cells in exchange for tales from the battlefield. It was hardly a topic Harry wanted to revisit so soon, but if it made Draco's registration go a bit smoother, it was worth it—especially as he could feel Draco's rage bubbling just under his skin, heralding an imminent explosion of anger and frustration. He hadn't wanted to come here in the first place, and now he had to sit back, quietly so as not to give anyone cause to think him unstable, and watch as Harry politely went ten rounds with every lookie-loo in the Ministry itching for stories from a war most hadn't been remotely involved in.

Best to get this over with, for both their sakes. "So, about the Dangerous Creature forms, sir?" Harry prompted, hoping to get on with the registration.

"Yes, yes! Now let's see here..." Bragge tugged out his pince-nez, popping them on his nose and giving the forms Harry and Draco had been told needed his initialling a once-over. He nodded, lips pursed. "Seems quite straightforward—let's move to the holding cells, shall we?"

"*What?!*" Draco shrieked, already on his feet and hand on his wand. "I haven't *done* anything—"

Bragge held his hands up defensively, easing back from his desk. "Your pardon, Mr. Malfoy—it's nothing nasty. We'll simply need a bigger space to work."

"Work?" Draco sputtered. "Work at *what?*" He looked to Harry, expression plaintive. "I

haven't done anything!" he repeated, pleading now, as if Harry needed convincing.

Harry tried to keep his voice calm. Draco had been so worked up before they even stepped out of the house that morning that it wouldn't take much to push him into a full-out panic transformation, which was precisely the last thing they needed right now for so many reasons. "Mr. Bragge—would you mind explaining?" he asked. "I'm sure you can appreciate Draco doesn't have the fondest memories of the Ministry's holding cells..."

Bragge mopped his forehead, chuckling nervously. "No, I dare say he wouldn't! Do forgive me, my boy. I must simply make a few assessments of your magical stability before I can sign off on these forms you've brought me." He directed his attention to Draco, his voice soft and melodically soothing; Harry wondered if this sort of tack usually worked on dragons, or if Bragge was just playing it by ear. "This being a unique situation involving a Dangerous Creature, I'll be handling the job your case manager usually would—which includes an evaluation of your transformational capabilities, your mental fortitude, that sort of thing."

"Mental fortitude?" Draco spat, hand still ready at the hilt of his wand.

"I assure you, Mr. Malfoy, there's nothing untoward about these evaluations. We ask all Animagi to complete them, and once you've demonstrated satisfactory marks, everything will be settled and you may go on about your day. And Mr. Potter is, of course, welcome to join us—in fact, I must insist."

"Oh you *must*, must you?" Draco's lips drew into a sneer, but there was still an unmistakable tremor in his voice.

"Yes, I must," Bragge said. "We'll have a few forms for him to fill out as well."

"Me?" Harry frowned. "I'm not an Animagus, though."

"No, but—" He cleared his throat. "Well we like to try and keep mated pairs together whenever we're dealing with anything Class-4 or more dangerous." He beamed at Draco. "It helps to keep the creatures calm."

Harry wanted to sink through the floor, and Draco was flushed so red Harry expected to see steam start shooting out of his ears. Or lava belching from his mouth, one or the other.

“Now then!” Bragge scooped up the forms and Charmed his tea cup and the rest of the biscuits to float along after him as he swanned from the office. “To the holding cells!”

Harry couldn't recall if the room into which they were led was the same one Draco had been held in, or if all the holding cells just looked the same. Given Draco had been unconscious at the time, he would not remember the room either, but he was decidedly wary of the sturdy stone walls and flickering lamps in sconces all the same.

Bragge produced a file from nowhere and Summoned a quill from his office, clearing his throat. “All right, Mr. Malfoy—if you would be so kind as to demonstrate a transformation for us?” He seemed to catch himself, belatedly adding with only a hint of worry in his tone, “That won't be an issue, will it? Dear me, I'd hate to have to ask Mr. Potter here to go diving back into—”

“I can shift *fine*,” Draco grit out, tossing his travel cloak at Harry and stalking into the centre of the room. He took a breath to clear his mind, as he sometimes had to do when too agitated to make the transformation without a hiccup, and then released it in a long, slow exhale. Smooth as silk, he flowed into the dragon, his robes ballooning into the great barrel of the beast's belly and limbs stretching out long and lean before bulking, tipped with claws that could have gutted Bragge with a single swipe. His wings nearly filled the room, and his tail lashed nervously as he shook his trunk-sized head, glaring at Harry and Bragge from behind eyes of mustard yellow.

“What a truly beautiful creature...” Bragge marvelled, before he recalled himself with a humming chuckle. “That was splendid, Mr. Malfoy. Full marks—and you've even learned to shift while clothed! Tremendous.” He ticked off several boxes on the form. “Now, if you'll—let's see... Give us a turn-about?” He waved his finger in a circle. “Let's get a look at you from all angles.”

Draco released an angry snort of smoke but did as instructed, awkwardly manoeuvring in the space. He had to practically dance in place, as the holding cell was still too tight for him to pace out a full circle, but he managed it in the end, and Bragge clapped in delight. “Excellent! That's ‘Understands commands in transformation’ down, then!”

After another ten minutes of demonstrations, Bragge seemed satisfied and ticked the final box on his form, giving Draco leave to shift back.

“Now, Mr. Potter, if I could just get your signature on this particular form?” Bragge slid a slip of light-blue paper over to Harry. “For our records.”

Harry passed his eyes over the text: in big, bold type at the top were the words *ASSUMPTION OF OWNER'S LIABILITY*, with several phrases throughout the text scripted in by hand. “I, [Harry James Potter], do hereby take on sole responsibility for the actions—including damage to persons or property—of my [Dragon / sp. Antipodean Opaleye], forthwith, on this the [21st of June, 1998]. I understand that, should I fail to maintain sound control of this animal, which I have been made aware is a Class [5] Dangerous Creature, all legal repercussions will be borne by—” Harry shook his head, baffled. “I’m sorry, *what* is this?” Draco snatched the form from his hands, mouthing the words to himself as he read.

Bragge looked rather uncomfortable. “Well, as you know, Mr. Malfoy’s Animagus form is technically a Dangerous Creature, and given he’s had quite a volatile past, we can’t very well just release him into the wild, as it were, when there’s a risk of his...er, we’ll call it *backsliding*.” Bragge gestured to the paper. “This form is generally used with folks seeking to become owners of magical creatures of Class 3 or above, in order to relieve the Ministry of any liability should the animal cause injury or damage.”

“I’m no one’s *pet*—” Draco started, incensed.

“Well, no, of course not. Not in so many words, at least.” Bragge wrung his hands, pasting on a wry smile. “But it’s best we think of you and your Animagus form as two different entities in this case, Mr. Malfoy. As a human, you’re perfectly in control of your own thoughts and feelings—well, as in control as any of us can be! But this being a rather unique situation, and you having shown a history of...unpredictability when it comes to your Animagus form, the Ministry feels obliged to take every precaution it can with your case. With Mr. Potter’s sworn and notarised statement, you can be released into his care and go about your business.” He offered Harry his quill. “Mr. Potter, if you don’t mind?”

Harry frowned at the quill. “...Are you sure this is entirely necessary, sir? Draco hasn’t had an incident in *months*, and you’ve just seen he’s perfectly capable of controlling his form now.” There was, however, an insidious little voice worming about inside his mind, whispering unhelpfully that Draco *did* still have his moments, his near-misses, where the lines between wizard and dragon got just a bit too blurry for comfort. He punted it away. “Can’t he just be responsible for himself, like anyone? None of the other Animagi I know

have been asked to submit something like this.”

Bragge held out his hands. “I’m afraid we have little precedent on which to rely, and the Ministry cannot take the chance they’ll be held liable for Mr. Malfoy losing himself once more, succumbing to the creature’s baser instincts and harming someone. Unfortunately...you must either sign the form—or have someone else sign it and assume the responsibility—or we’ll have to ask that Mr. Malfoy agree never to practice Animagecraft again.”

Draco dropped the paper, and it fluttered to the ground. “...What?” he whispered fearfully.

“It is a harsh request, I know—but I beg you to understand the Ministry’s difficult position. It would be inhumane to imprison you, but the Ministry cannot be held responsible should you lose yourself and go on another rampage. Mr. Potter’s signature here affirms that he’ll help you keep check on yourself—” He fixed Harry with a serious look. “Though be certain, Mr. Potter, that affixing your signature to this form means that you will be held culpable if you’re unable to restrain Mr. Malfoy in the event...well, in *any* event. Do so wisely.”

Harry pursed his lips—and then took up the quill.

“*Restrain me?!?*” Draco hissed at him once they were on their way back to the Registrar. “Like an animal!”

“You *can* get out of hand from time to time, you have to admit.”

Draco scoffed. “I hardly think they’re speaking of throwing a strop, Potter.” He shook his head. “And of course you *signed it*, you gormless fool.”

Harry frowned, bemused, as they stepped back onto the lift. “What else was I going to do? You heard him—the alternative was you never being able to transform again.” Even now, Draco flinched at the prospect. Under any other circumstance, Harry might have laughed, given how terrified Draco had been of shifting in the first place. Now, though, he had clearly come to enjoy the power and freedom his Animagus form gave him, even as it took away a bit of his humanity in the process. Asking him to give it up, when he’d finally found acceptance, was bordering on cruel.

“...It would hardly have been an impossible ask.”

Harry didn't know about that; Draco no longer suffered from the *need* to transform, as he had in those early weeks, but he definitely still used the dragon as an outlet for all the emotions his stubborn pride kept tamped down as a wizard. “Maybe,” he allowed, not wanting to get into it—especially now the point was moot. “But it's done.” He waved his copy of the form—a cheery canary yellow—under Draco's nose. “You're all mine now.”

Draco made a swipe for it, but Harry slipped it back into the packet of papers they needed to return to the Registrar. “Just remember you said that when I start shitting in your shoes or rutting against your leg while there's company over.”

Harry grinned, drawing his wand—his Elder Wand—and waving it for show. “Nah, I reckon I could take you if you stepped out of line.”

Draco frowned. “Oh, right. You've still got that thing?”

Harry ran a finger along the warm, familiar wood, pensive. “...I don't quite know what to do with it, to be honest. I could put it away, I guess. Claim it was broken and get a new one, but...” He shrugged. “It's my wand. The first one I ever got—one of my first real birthday presents. I got it the day I found out I was a wizard, did you know? I...I can't bear to part with it, if I don't have to...” He had so many memories with his holly wand—it had defended him, so valiantly, and even if it was Death's wand, even if it claimed some manner of sentience and ached to be used to evil ends, Harry didn't want to abandon it, to just toss it aside. It wasn't as if his wand had *asked* to take on this power, after all. It hadn't been given a choice.

Draco gave him a long, unreadable look, then sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I trust you won't go *bragging* about it, at least? I'd hate to have to kill someone for you.”

Harry's lips quirked up on one side. “You won't die for me, but you'll kill for me?”

Draco flashed him a sharp smile that was not at all happy. “I already died for you, Potter. Was the once not enough?”

Right, that was enough of *that* conversation.

They quickly finished up with the remainder of the paperwork and were lined up to Floo

to the Leaky Cauldron by just after 1. Draco looked exhausted by the ordeal, still peaky around the edges, and Harry offered to call off lunch and just return to Grimmauld Place, but Draco was adamant they continue with their plans.

“It’s going to take more than a measly trip to the Ministry to undo me, you’ll learn,” he said, with a shaky sort of bravado, and Harry let it be.

They poked their heads into Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes to find Fred alone at the till, busy with a customer. He stepped away just long enough to let them know that George, Ron, and Hermione had gone on ahead to the Three Broomsticks, and if they hurried, they’d probably catch them arguing over the menu. Fred had declined to join them this time, as they were shorthanded on the weekends and needed at least one of them holding down the shop during business hours, but professed the next round would be on Harry.

George still had just the one ear on his right side, but on his left, he now had a *girl*: Angelina Johnson, who was apparently dating George. They were openly affectionate at the table, handsy and flirting, and even Hermione and Ron were acting a bit like an old married couple, with only eyes for themselves once it became clear Draco did not want to discuss how their visit to the Ministry had gone.

It honestly left Harry feeling a little lonely. His friends were sat there, budged up together and grinning and jostling playfully with their partners, while he and Draco had to sit across from them, pretending they barely tolerated one another. Not that Harry could fault them—he had not, after all, explained his relationship with Draco to anyone outside of Ron and Hermione. And even *they* didn’t have the whole picture—mostly because Harry hadn’t managed to figure it all out yet himself.

It was only, for all the talking they’d done, it had mostly been about the past; discussions of the future, of what this *was*, had been thin. It had been enough, at the time, for Harry to be assured that there *was* something between them, something real and something strong and something that they couldn’t *not* pursue, to whatever end it led. But what they were to each other, and what they were to the world, were two very different matters right now.

And it would become a *thing* if they bothered to openly acknowledge it, naming themselves something as mundane as ‘boyfriends’ (and ‘mates’ was right out).

Harry just wanted more time—he wanted to run away and live in the mountains, all alone, for a year, and *then* maybe he'd be able to handle the *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly* plastering their covers with his face and Draco's alongside scandalous headlines like *The Boy Who Kissed Another Boy* and *The Chosen One Chooses a Death Eater!*

It was none of the public's business, besides. They hadn't even been entirely open with their families about it—at least on Harry's part.

Which made him wonder why he was dragging his feet. It was one thing to want to keep his private life private and out of the public eye—but it was another thing entirely to want to keep such an important part of himself secret from the closest thing he had to family these days. He was a fairly private person, he thought, but he'd never imagined himself the type to keep something so...so fucking *big* from his loved ones. And he really, *really* didn't want to, he realised.

He tried to bring it up casually in bed that night, taking Draco's temperature on the matter. "Would you...would you be okay if I told Ron's mum and dad? About—y'know. About us?"

Draco fluffed his pillow with a punch before lying down, drawing the coverlet over himself. "Us?" he repeated with a ghost of a smile, almost a leer—definitely teasing.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked; it had been a serious question, and he'd hoped for a serious answer.

"Nothing," Draco sighed, still smiling for whatever odd reason. "I'm just stupidly taken with you when you say that word. I can't stand you on the best of days, and this helps matters none."

And *oh*, Harry was beginning to see the issue now, in dazzling technicolour. "Can't stand me when I talk about *us*?" He made sure to emphasise 'us', and Draco pulled the pillow out from under his head and beat Harry with it. Harry doubled over shielding his face with his arms and laughing, "Enough! I yield!" Draco shoved the pillow back into place with a superior *hmph*, though his good humour still showed in the curl of his lips and the glint in his eyes in the low light. Harry released a huff of exertion. "All right, fine—no more saying the U word, if you're so insistent."

Draco stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "...I suppose if you don't overdo it."

"What's overdoing it?" Draco reached for his pillow again in threat, and Harry held a hand up. "Right, right. But—seriously, I just..." He rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. There was a crack, jetting out like a lightning bolt from where the chandelier overhead was tacked to the drywall. "...I feel like I'm hiding it, and I don't mean to—but then, I kind of *do* mean to? Not—not because I don't want to be associated with you or anything, seriously it's not that—"

"I know."

And for some reason, this made him *blush*. That quiet, confident reassurance; another reminder of how much Draco trusted him, even after he'd fucked up so many times. Maybe the locket's prediction still held true: *like a moth to dragonflame*, Draco couldn't help but be drawn to his own destruction, placing his heart in Harry's hands when there was every danger of him crushing it.

Harry swallowed. "...I just thought...maybe I'd start with them. And then see how that goes."

Draco said nothing for several agonising heartbeats, before asking, "Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why do you want to tell them?"

He didn't say it in protest—no, he just sounded curious, and Harry turned the question over in his head. "...Once I tell them, it'll be real."

He thought Draco might say *It's not real now?* but instead he only asked, "...What about Granger and Weasley?"

"They don't...I don't think they know. Not really. Or—they don't understand. They think—" *They think it's something lesser*, he didn't say, because that wasn't right: they had to know, *had* to understand, because they knew Harry better than he knew himself sometimes. But there was still something important, some step taken, in speaking up for himself.

He could feel Draco staring at him in the darkness, and then reaching over, gently tilting Harry's head to face him. Draco lifted up onto his elbows, leaning forward to move his lips over Harry's, and together they melted. Harry snaked an arm around Draco, drawing them chest to chest, and imagined he could feel the roaring inferno swirling within Draco as a real, physical heat, letting it sear him and reduce him to ash.

Draco slid a slender thigh between his own, bucking his hips gently so that Harry's cock rubbed with agonisingly insufficient friction alongside Draco's—enough to encourage the shaft to fill, just in case, but certainly not enough to finish the job. Quite the literal cocktease.

Draco caressed Harry's jaw and drew away, breaking their kiss just enough to whisper against his lips, "Do you realise how much it hurts?"

"Wh—what?" Harry mumbled, thoughts addled by Draco's insistent little thrusts solely intended to drive him out of his gourd with want. "What?"

"My *heart*," he hissed miserably, nibbling at Harry's lower lip. "It's going to burst. Sometimes it's fucking overwhelming, loving you."

Harry tightened his arms, his stomach clenching and his heart beating in countertime to Draco's, racing at breakneck speed. "Shit, don't say things like that," he panted, rolling his hips. "You know what a bloody sap I am..."

"Remind me," Draco said, their foreheads pressed together, and this close he was just a soft blur of light and dark and grey.

"...I want everyone to know. *Everyone*. You used to tease me, saying I sought out the limelight and those stupid fucking headlines, and it *wasn't true*, but I want them now. Not rumours, not gossip—I want it to be clear as day, no room for doubt." He slipped a hand under the hem of Draco's briefs, sliding over the globe of his arse and squeezing tight, until he knew there would be marks left in the morning. "I never got to tell my story, never got to shape how people saw me—but I'm going to now." He pressed a fierce, hot kiss to Draco's lips, trying to draw him in, make him as much a part of Harry as it felt he already was. "And you're going to be part of it."

Draco shuddered, mouth forming a delighted *o*, and he bucked again, more violently with

a new, heady insistence. Harry could feel him, hard, on each shallow thrust. “Then fucking tell them. Put a full-page announcement in the *Prophet*, if it pleases you.”

“You’re mad,” Harry laughed.

Draco just shrugged. “I can’t possibly lose any more esteem in the eyes of society than I already have—so if you’re bent on ruining your sterling reputation, then let it be on your head.”

“So pessimistic,” Harry said, pressing a line of kisses along Draco’s jaw. “You can’t think it’ll be that bad.” There might be some fuss, naysayers protesting the actions of Draco’s family and the leniency they enjoyed in their punishment. Some might even say Draco had seduced Harry for just such purposes. But Harry would know different, and he’d make sure Draco understood the same.

“Can’t I? Ask yourself—” he said, working a hand between them to fondle Harry’s cock through his pyjama bottoms, “—how *you* would have reacted to the very suggestion of us doing this only a year ago.”

A chill ran down Harry’s spine, and his cock felt like a lump of dead flesh in Draco’s grip. “...Fuck.”

“Fuck, indeed.” Draco nuzzled his neck, untroubled by the way Harry had gone limp as he slowly, lazily worked him back up. “Tell whoever you like. Or don’t. Like you said: it’s your story.”

“Is that your fatalism talking again?” Harry chuckled wryly. “Doesn’t sound very self-serving.”

“Mm, not very Slytherin at all, is it?” Draco shifted, until their cocks were lined up neatly alongside each other. “Must be the Gryffindor in you rubbing off on me.”

“Thought you liked it when I rubbed off on you...” Harry said, giving a firm, tight thrust into the narrow space between their bodies. Draco’s arse tightened under his touch, and he hissed softly. Using his free hand, he moved Draco’s hair behind his ears, gently rubbing little circles just at the curve where skull met neck. “...Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Draco said simply. “Though I’m not sure what for. You may need to

remind me of my generosity.” He rolled his hips. “Or is this a preemptive display of gratitude?”

Harry stilled his rutting with a squeeze to his arse and a finger on his lips, begging a moment before they made each other fall apart. “Just—for everything,” he said, and it felt so pithy, so *insufficient*. It was only he felt a bit like Draco did: *It’s so fucking overwhelming, loving you*. Love and like and want and need churned in his stomach in a slurry of emotion that filled him up and threatened to drown him, to choke him with too much of a good thing. Sometimes he thought about this, about how Draco made him feel, and he wanted to weep because an insidious little voice in his head kept taunting *You could have had this so much sooner if you’d just taken it*.

But that was a lie. He couldn’t have had this, because that just wasn’t how things had gone. There was a difference—a subtle one, but there—between not being given any choice, and there never having been a choice to begin with. Their very actions, made based on who they were at their core, had kept this from happening, kept them from finding each other, until it was *just the right time*, and that was all there was to it.

So he was grateful, beyond measure, that Draco hadn’t given up. Had waited, perhaps not patiently, until he’d been where he needed to be, and Harry had been where he’d needed to be, so that they could be just what they needed from each other, precisely when they needed it most.

He rejoined their kiss, having nothing more to say but still so much more to express, and eased Draco’s briefs down until he could palm his cock, tugging with a ruthless languidity. He’d neglected to put up any Silencing Charms and didn’t want to waste the breath to do so now, but he was still conscious of Ron and Hermione sleeping only one floor below. Draco fumbled with the ties to his bottoms to get his hand on Harry’s cock and rushed to catch up. They lost themselves in the warm, close darkness, biting back breathy sighs and swallowing moans until they came with silent screams.

Never in his life had Harry felt, with such conviction, that he was right where he’d always been meant to be.

But his decision to share more of himself with his adopted family was shifted aside when July came and their visits to Hogwarts to help with the rebuilding resumed in earnest. The reconstruction was coming along nicely; the Great Hall had been completely

rebricked, and the staircases had been wholly repaired and were functioning properly once more—or at least as properly as they ever had, still occasionally depositing people where they hadn't meant to go.

But Gryffindor Tower still showed obvious signs of wear—including remnants of the damage from Draco's own wild attack over a year earlier—and the Quidditch pitch had yet to be reseeded, though carpentry appeared to have been started on the demolished stands. There was a fair bit of work yet to go before the castle was returned to its former glory—but McGonagall remained confident they would reopen on schedule, welcoming students old and new into the sturdy stone halls.

“And I hope that includes you lot as well,” McGonagall said, just as Harry and the others were bidding their farewells after a sumptuous dinner in the Great Hall; Kreacher had made sure that Harry's beloved treacle tart had been on the menu this evening, and he'd had half a mind to beg the old elf to come back to Grimmauld Place, Hermione's probable protests be damned.

“I'm sorry?” Harry said, thrown by the sudden, unexpected invitation. Oh he'd fantasised about coming back, having just one more year to be a student—a child—before he had to face the whole wide world on his own, but he hadn't seriously expected McGonagall to consider it.

McGonagall didn't seem offended she had to repeat herself, only smiling in that purse-lipped manner that said she thought he was being a bit silly. “I hope that you, as well as Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley, will consider returning to Hogwarts to complete a final year of studies. I understand you're all of-age, so this is by no means a requirement, but Hogwarts will be welcoming back any students whose Seventh-year studies were disrupted by the dire events of this past year. I have yet to sort out the details, but I and the rest of the staff have agreed that any who feel their time here is not yet finished should be invited back with open arms. And yes, Miss Granger—” McGonagall flicked her eyes to Hermione, who looked to be five seconds away from raising her hand to ask a question. “We *will* be offering returnees the opportunity to take their N.E.W.T.s.”

Harry blinked, mouth hanging open. “I...wow, thanks, Professor—er, Headmistress.”

She nodded congenially. “No need to give your response now—I only ask that you think

it over. You're not obligated to return, being of-age as you all are now. And should any of you wish to merely sit your N.E.W.T.s and engage in self-study instead, I'm sure we can work something out. I hope to hear from you by early August, though, so we can start sorting out housing arrangements for the overflow students."

She bid them good evening, and they marched in silence back down the winding path to Hogsmeade to Apparate home. He hadn't let himself entertain thoughts of *actually* being invited back—not seriously, really. Now that it was a very real possibility, though, his stomach churned with apprehension. Was he meant to accept the offer? Or was that only putting off the inevitable—the coward's way out? What did he even *want* to do now? Not just for a career, but for *anything*?

He hadn't let himself really think about the future in what felt like forever—first because he hadn't thought he'd survive to adulthood, and now because it was so much easier to focus on the *now* rather than the *later*. His battles were so much smaller when he didn't bother to expand his thoughts beyond next Thursday, and after spending so much of his life so far fighting, it was a welcome change.

God, he'd left most of his books and school supplies back at the Dursleys—they'd probably have burned them by now. It would hardly be a chore to buy new robes and textbooks and potions supplies from Diagon Alley, but it underscored how unprepared he was to go back to school. Why he *shouldn't*, even if he very much wanted to go.

To distract himself, he checked Draco's opinion as they turned in for the evening. "Have you thought any about what McGonagall said?"

"What, about leaving the pitch closed for the coming school year and postponing the Quidditch season until next?" Draco tossed his button-down into the washing basket with an angry huff. "Of course I've thought about it—it's a fucking *farce*, and she's only suggesting it because Rosier's going to be a Second-year come fall and looks primed to lead Slytherin to the Inter-house Quidditch Cup."

Harry rolled his eyes, snapping shut the book he'd been trying to lose himself in—Draco's copy of *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. "You know as well as I that the best Seeker in the world won't make up for a shitty defensive line or a blind Keeper."

Draco's brows lifted as he leered. "You thought I was the best Seeker in the world?"

Harry deflected. “I *meant* the business about us being invited back for a final year at Hogwarts.”

Draco made a face. “Oh.”

When he failed to elaborate, Harry pressed him. “...So? Have you thought about it at all?”

“I have.”

Again, no elaboration. “*And?* What do you even want to do?”

“Did I say I’d *finished* thinking, Potter?”

“*Harry,*” he corrected. “Plus I didn’t mean with school, necessarily. I was more wondering about, like...” Harry shrugged. “Life, in general.”

Draco released a laughing huff that didn’t sound all that tickled. “Trust you to come at me with the big spells first...” He rubbed a hand over his face, then ran his fingers through his hair—nervous habit, Harry had learned—before climbing into bed.

“...Sorry, I didn’t mean to put any pressure on you...” Harry removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I just thought I’d use you as a sounding board.”

“So use me,” Draco offered, rolling onto his side and propping his head up with one hand. He waggled his brows, and even without his glasses, Harry could see he was wearing an unaccountably sly expression.

He didn’t let himself be baited, sighing. “I mean, I’ve wanted to be an Auror for as long as I’ve known that kind of job existed—it’s what I’m good at, for one, and it...it sounded like it could be fun. Chasing the bad guys, being respected by the community, being... being the hero...” Maybe bouncing ideas off Draco hadn’t been such a good idea after all. “But after the last year...honestly, I just don’t know if I’ve got it in me. It feels like...like what people *expect* me to be—what they want to see me become. And part of me doesn’t want to disappoint them, but—”

“Fuck what they want,” Draco spat, shifting upright. His eyes were dark, and they weighed heavy on Harry, staring right through him. “It’s not their life—it’s yours. You’re

even stupider than I've given you credit for if you're so much as *thinking* of going along with what some nameless buffoon wandering around Diagon Alley thinks you should do with your life."

"I do love our conversations," Harry drawled. "The sweet nothings you grace me with are just what I need to hear at the end of a taxing day." Draco rolled his eyes and fell back against his pillow with a disgusted huff. "...And I know. I'm done forcing myself to be what I'm not—but it's not the easiest step to take, you know?"

Draco was sober. "...Yes, I know." He sighed loudly. "Why not just be a professional celebrity, then? Make your fortune giving speeches—signing babies and taking pictures with autographs."

Harry laughed. "I don't think that's quite how it goes."

"You're Harry-fucking-Potter; they'll take what they can get."

"Yes, well." Harry rolled his eyes. "Glamorous as that sounds, I'm sure it'd be dead boring." He shifted onto his side, one arm tucked under his pillow, and watched Draco through eyes half-lidded with exhaustion. "What about you? Any ideas at all?"

Draco snorted softly. "Well, my options are a bit limited now."

"Why?"

He flashed his Dark Mark, faded now but still stark against his pale skin, even with the white scar running down its centre. "Think people are just going to be lining up to hire someone with one of *these*?"

"The people who matter won't care—they'll understand," Harry tried to reassure.

"Well the people who matter won't necessarily be hiring. We don't all have the luxury to pick and choose which jobs we take up, if any."

Harry winced; no, for all the teasing about being a 'professional celebrity', Draco wouldn't have wanted to pursue such a 'career' any more than Harry. He liked working, liked feeling *needed*. He didn't want to rely on others, but being relied upon himself seemed to suit him just fine. Or perhaps this was more dragon stuff, like 'providing for

his mate' or some such rubbish.

He sighed. "Fine, if you *could* do anything, what would you want to do? Like, isn't there some job out there you've always wanted to do since you were little?"

"Not particularly," Draco said, shrugging. "I'm a Malfoy; we don't *have* jobs. We have assets, and we manage those assets, and if we do that *well*, then the money comes."

Harry rolled his eyes with a chuckle. "God you're such a spoilt prick." He shook his head. "Seriously? There's never been *anything* you've dreamt of doing? Or thought you'd be suited to? Like—I dunno, a Potions Mastery?"

"Just because I'm good at potions doesn't mean it's something I want to dedicate my life to." He shifted onto his side, reaching to take Harry's hand in his own, and began absently rubbing his fingers over Harry's knobby knuckles. "I wouldn't know where to start, even if I was of a mind to *make* someone hire me."

Harry turned his hand over so that their fingers laced together, squeezing. "Then... maybe that's telling us we ought to go back. I mean, that's what Sixth and Seventh Year's supposed to be for, after all: figuring out what you want to do, and then buckling down and working towards it. Neither one of us had the most typical past two years, and now we're being offered a bit of extra time. Perhaps we ought to take it." Draco was staring down at their linked hands, brows knit in consternation, and Harry carefully amended, "But only if you want, of course. It's your life; don't mould it around me."

Draco's shoulders seized as he released a rough, dry huff of laughter. "Bit late for that."

"Well, yeah, but—you know what I mean." The thought that their situation—their relationship—might in any way be a burden on Draco, chaining him down and limiting his choices, did not sit well with Harry at all.

Draco flicked his eyes up to meet Harry's. "...What are Granger and Weasley doing?"

"Mm, Ron doesn't think he's going to go back; he's been helping Fred and George run the shop, since they say it's easier on the mind—and wallet, I expect—to hire family than outside work. Things seem to be picking up now that most of the other shops in Diagon Alley are opening back up again. And Hermione's going to intern at the Ministry, which I think will surprise pretty much no one."

“The Ministry? Which Department?”

“She hasn’t decided yet; said she’s going to float around and see which she clicks with best. I think Kingsley’s hoping she’ll work under or alongside him, though. He’s going to have his hands full sorting through the corruption still ravaging the Ministry, after all. Not all the bad eggs have Dark Marks for easy identification...”

Draco snorted softly. “I can see it now: Hermione Granger, Minister for Magic-in-training.” He groaned and rubbed at his temples. “Merlin, you’ve already got a few Weasleys in there, and now Granger? By the turn of the century, it’ll be a warren of your lackeys and sycophants...”

“You could always look into working at the Ministry yourself to balance things out?” Draco gave him *such* a look, and Harry rushed to defend himself. “I’m serious! Maybe you could work with Bragge in the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau.” He was mostly teasing, but as he said it, he realised it didn’t sound like all that terrible an idea at all. He recalled, with startling clarity, how livid Draco had been at the sight of the Gringotts dragon, tethered and tortured. Perhaps he had a different view of the creatures now that he understood first-hand how they weren’t so different from humans, in their own way, and would be of a mind to stop them being treated like soulless, common animals. “I’m just saying, you’ve got more options than you might think and people willing to lend a hand.”

“You mean willing to throw their weight around?” Draco drawled, and Harry gave an innocent shrug. Despite himself, Draco smiled. “How touching.”

“I know ‘relying on others’ really isn’t your style—but maybe consider you’re not the only one who wants to help take care of the people closest to them.”

There was a long pause, and then: “...All right then.”

“All right? Er—all right what?”

“All right, I’ll *consider it*.” And with a flick of his wand, Draco doused the lamps, and that seemed to be the end of the discussion for the time being.

A crackling *whoosh* at the Floo announced a Fire Call from the Burrow several days later, just as the four of them were settling in at the kitchen table for breakfast. Mrs.

Weasley poked her head through the eerie green flames, delivering morning greetings and news that several owls had just arrived bearing official-looking letters from Hogwarts. “There’s a few for us here at the Burrow, but there’s also one for you, Harry, as well as Ron and Hermione.” She peeked around Harry at Draco, smiling nervously. “Oh, I’m sorry—none of them seemed to be for you, dear.”

Draco waved away her concern. “If I was meant to receive one, it would’ve gone to the Manor. I haven’t checked in with my parents in a few days.”

“We probably ought to get their Floo exempted from the Fidelius, huh?” Harry suggested.

Draco shuddered. “And give my parents *carte blanche* to shove their way through whenever they so please?” He wrinkled his nose. “Only if you’ll let me set up wards. I’ll want ample warning of Mother coming to pass judgement on this place before I’ve made it suitable.”

“Hey, it’s not so bad,” Harry protested weakly.

“Boys—the owls?” Mrs. Weasley reminded. “It’s only uncomfortable, standing here half through the Floo.”

“Sorry!” Harry quickly apologised. “Could you pass them—?”

“Ooh, wai!” Ron said, mouth full of toast as he scrambled to his feet. He swallowed with some difficulty. “I’ve got a load of dirty washing I’ve been meaning to bring home—”

Hermione watched him go with a dark look, tossing down her napkin and marching over to the Floo. “Hurry and pass the letters over, Molly, and we’ll shut down the connection before he comes back. Maybe he’ll finally crack that book on housework spells I ordered for him ages ago.”

Mrs. Weasley slipped three crisp envelopes through the connection, reminding them all she would expect them for Sunday dinner, and then closed the connection—just as Ron clomped back down the stairs, a bulging sack of clothes slung over one shoulder.

“What the—you let her go?” he whined. “Some friends you are...”

The letters turned out to be invitations to a dinner, to be held on the 2nd of August—three months to the day after the Battle of Hogwarts—in the Great Hall for the purpose of remembering the fallen and celebrating the imminent reopening of Hogwarts. Harry’s included a personal missive asking if he would mind delivering a few remarks. “Of *course* they want to hear our Saviour blather on for thirty minutes...” Draco grumbled, leaned over Harry’s shoulder to read his letter.

“It won’t be *thirty minutes*,” Harry said. “Honestly, I don’t really want to do it at all... I’m pants at public speaking.”

“Says the guy who gave, like, seven rallying speeches at the battle,” Ron chuckled.

“I don’t think people care as much about the content,” Hermione said, “as the fact you’re speaking at all. You have...” She shrugged. “I’m not sure. A presence, I suppose. People have always felt better after you said something, even if it was just to tell them they were doing a good job on a spell they were practising in the DA.”

Harry felt his ears grow hot; god, this was going to fuel Draco’s teasing until Christmas. “That’s rubbish, though! It’s just people heaping expectations on me.”

“Well if you’d stop exceeding those expectations—” Draco said, stabbing one of Harry’s cherry tomatoes with a fork and popping it into his mouth, “—they might stop building them up.”

“He’s got a point, mate,” Ron said, levitating his dishes to the sink. “Who’s on Scourgify duty?”

“Not going to send them through the Floo to your mum?” Hermione asked, one brow lifted pointedly.

“I told you, she *likes* doing my washing! She practically cried when I said I was moving in here for the summer and she thought Kreacher was gonna be handling it all—”

Hermione cackled cruelly. “Y-you actually think *that’s* why she cried—?”

“Well, of course not, but the point is—”

Harry tuned out their bickering, running his eyes over McGonagall’s slanted script. He

supposed he ought to do it, this being a special occasion and all that, but he hoped this wasn't heralding subsequent speaking engagements that would dog him through the years. It was useless to diminish what he'd done, even though he'd hardly come by his role in defeating Voldemort through *skill*—it had just been shitty luck, that was all.

But people would continue to want to express their gratitude, look to him for ill-sought guidance, and there was little he could do about it. He didn't want to be anyone's paragon of virtue—look how far Dumbledore had fallen, after all, when people built him up to be more than he'd truly been in life, turning on him viciously at the first sign he'd not been all he was cracked up to be. He just wanted to be *Harry*, just Harry, and while it helped having people around who grounded him, who were happy to remind him how terribly unremarkable he was, moments like this still discomfited him.

“Here we go again,” Draco sighed, snapping Harry out of his thoughts.

“What?” Were Ron and Hermione about to get into another row? He sometimes wondered if bickering was their idea of foreplay, as they seemed to *love* throwing themselves into fights. Harry didn't see the appeal at all; how could you really get on with someone when you spent half your time fighting?

Draco was watching him, slumped against the table with his head supported in one hand, and he snickered softly, an amused smile curving his lips. “*You.*”

“What *about* me?”

“Nothing, you just—you get this...” He trailed off, studying Harry, and then seemed to think better of it. “Never mind.”

Some days, Harry really didn't understand Draco.

The rest of July passed in a sticky, syrupy sludge, melted by the baking heat, until Harry's eighteenth birthday was upon them.

Mrs. Weasley insisted on having a big to-do at the Burrow, and while Harry would have been happy just having a few friends over at Grimmauld Place for something a bit less of a hassle, he'd never been able to turn Molly down.

The whole Weasley clan was in attendance—even Charlie was in for a dragon-tamers'

conference—along with a smattering of Harry’s schoolmates: Neville, Luna, Seamus, and Dean. Hagrid had been invited but hadn’t been able to get away from the restoration work and sent his regards, along with a rock cupcake slathered with ruby-red icing and bright yellow frosting piped into a 1-8. They had been instructed to arrive early, as gifts were to be handled before dinner, and Harry milled about, playing the host and greeting his guests, while Mrs. Weasley dashed around the kitchen putting the finishing touches on Harry’s birthday meal.

After what had to have been a half hour, his hand was aching from so many shakes, and his shoulders twinged from so many hugs—happy pains, but pains nonetheless. Probably just as well Hagrid wasn’t there. He cast about, seeking out Draco in what felt like a sea of redheads, and after scouring the Burrow, he finally found him sitting awkwardly alone in Mr. Weasley’s favourite chair in the den and looking no less comfortable here now than he had on his first visit. Harry smiled wryly, heart clenching with gratitude—Draco was one bloody stubborn git, so when he made an effort like this, it *meant* something. He ran a hand through his hair (a mess as usual, no helping it) and moved to relieve Draco of his boredom—

—when Charlie appeared from nowhere, it felt like, and plopped down onto the sofa just kitty-corner of Draco, a bottle of Butterbeer in his hand. Harry held back, curious to see how Draco would handle himself faced with a Weasley and no familiar face to offer support.

“Nice to see you on the mend,” Charlie said, taking a swig of his Butterbeer.

Draco stared at him blankly, evidently rendered mute with shock at being so casually addressed by an utter stranger. He quickly recovered, though, and Harry saw his walls rise up, ready to take a beating if one was coming. “...I beg your pardon?”

Charlie lifted a brow, bemused. “...You don’t remember me? No—you were pretty out of it, so I guess you wouldn’t. I’m Charlie, Charlie Weasley.”

“...The Weasley bit I gathered,” Draco drawled, but Charlie only laughed.

“Yeah, no getting anything past you, is there?” He sobered a bit. “...I’m in from Romania, I work on a dragon reserve there...”

Realisation dawned then, and Draco straightened, swallowing thickly. “You’re...you’re the Weasley who was there when I...”

Charlie nodded, smiling. “Yeah, that was me.”

Draco looked wrongfooted, and he mumbled a hasty, “...Thank you. Very much.”

Charlie only waved him off. “Not necessary. I didn’t really do much, after all—and I’m sorry about that. But you rallied—you’re looking healthy enough now, yeah?”

Draco shrugged, and another awkward silence threatened to take root. Charlie nodded, glancing around the room as if to make a quick exit—but then he laughed, a thoughtful little chuckle. “It’s funny.”

Draco looked at him like he might be just a bit mad, raking him with a dubious gaze. “...I’m sorry?”

“No, just—” He waved a hand around the room. “I was here a year ago today, actually. We had everyone over for Harry’s seventeenth last year. Mum set up some tables out in the garden—” He jerked a thumb behind him. “And I found myself sitting next to Harry.” He was smiling to himself and took another draw from his bottle. “He asked me the strangest question.”

Draco was clearly intrigued—and hating himself for it. “...What?”

“He wanted to know what I could tell him about dragon Animagi.”

Harry’s stomach bottomed out, and even from this covert angle, he could see the way Draco’s eyes widened, the subtle little flare to his nostrils. “And...what did you say?”

Charlie shrugged. “Told him all I knew—which admittedly wasn’t much and still isn’t. But he seemed to have something weighing on his mind. Unfortunately the conversation got interrupted, and we never really finished.”

Harry slipped away, as quietly as possible, and half-jogged to the kitchen. He couldn’t listen to any more—it was *mortifying*. God, he was never going to hear the end of it. It was hardly secret between them they’d always been a bit—all right, a *lot*—mad about each other, but he hadn’t wanted Draco to be made privy to just how pathetic Harry’s

fixation had been.

He was so caught up in his own thoughts he nearly bumped right into Mrs. Weasley, who was levitating a casserole out of the oven. “Goodness, Harry, do be careful!” she chided, then caught herself. “Oh dear, you’re red as a tomato. Are you feeling all right? It’s awfully stuffy in this kitchen, you should go out and get some fresh air.”

Harry cast his eye about the kitchen, which was piled high with the debris of Mrs. Weasley’s earnest efforts to ensure he had a lovely party, and a wave of guilt crashed against him. She worked herself to the bone for her loved ones, and while Harry appreciated the effort, he hated thinking about how exhausted she had to be, preparing for so many guests, just on account of him.

He pasted on a smile. “Nah, I just think someone might’ve spiked my Butterbeer. Can I lend you a hand?”

“Nonsense! It’s your special day—”

“Please, I insist. It’s my birthday, after all, so I reckon you ought to let me have my way.”

She gave him a funny look, then bobbed her head. “Well then, if you wouldn’t mind peeling the potatoes? There’s a sack, just inside the pantry. A dozen should do. I’ll just pop out to the garden for some herbs.”

He fished the potatoes out from the pantry and gave them a good rinse before going through the kitchen drawers in search of a peeler. When he came up empty, he supposed he’d been meant to use magic for the task (he really needed to learn that Peeling Charm) and instead grabbed a paring knife to get to work.

He’d only managed one, though, before someone grabbed him by the waist and whirled him around, slamming him up against the counter.

Draco’s kiss was bruising, and his hands, braced firmly at the base of Harry’s skull to hold him in place, felt like they might crush him if he struggled. Quite forgetting himself, Harry dropped the knife and melted into the kiss, pliant and languid, and his fingers skittered up and down Draco’s sides out of habit. He had the number of Draco’s ribs memorised by now.

“Granger was right,” Draco breathed against his lips, puffy and wet.

“Huh...?”

Draco kissed him, again, trying to swallow him down from the inside out. “You *are* a good man.”

Harry didn’t know what that meant, and he didn’t really care. His mind was a white fog of confusion, and all his senses had drilled down to just the precious points of contact: lips, noses, fingers, and if he canted his hips, *cocks*—

“*Ahem.*”

Draco made a low, unhappy sound in the back of his throat, giving Harry just enough slack to slant his gaze to the side—where Molly Weasley was waiting patiently for Harry to budge up so she could rinse the fresh herbs she’d just nipped from the garden. It was here that Harry realised Draco had just kissed him full on the mouth in clear view of no fewer than *four* Weasleys and their assorted significant others.

“S—sorry,” he apologised, shuffling to the side.

She flicked her eyes between them, lips pursed tight—to keep from smiling, Harry was relieved to see. “Do I need to ask Ron to help me with the potatoes instead?”

“N-no, sorry, I just—” He scrambled for the potato he’d been in the middle of peeling before Draco had pounced on him, snatching up the paring knife again. “I’m on it, be done in a sec!”

Mrs. Weasley just *hmp*hed, as if she didn’t really believe him, and continued with her preparations after giving the herbs a spritz in the sink. Draco drew up next to him, Levitating several of the potatoes at once and lazily unravelling their skins with a practised twirl of his wand. “Have to do everything the hard way, don’t you?”

“Evidently,” Harry muttered, cheeks still burning—though his lips refused to be wiped of the stupid smile plastered across them.

Once the potatoes were peeled, a process facilitated greatly by Draco’s frankly baffling knowledge of a bit of housewitch magic, Mrs. Weasley shooed him back into the den,

where everyone had gathered—packed in, really—to shower him with gifts.

Ron and the rest of the Weasleys had pooled their funds to buy him a new set of Quidditch leathers, which George explained looked pretty nice despite only being run-of-the-mill cowhide. “We thought about getting you dragonhide gear, since that’s the best stuff on the market, but given present company...”

“A wise move for someone keen to keep his remaining ear,” Draco drawled, and George flicked him a rude gesture.

Hermione, predictably, bought him a book—one filled with sumptuous dessert recipes. Draco, legs thrown over Harry’s lap, was quick to point out the tabbed pages. “I’ve already highlighted my favourites, so get to practising.”

Luna gave him a lovely potted plant she claimed to have come across when browsing the open-air gardens of Thistlebaum’s Horticultural Haven, saying, “It just called to me, hoping I would find it a new home where it could really put down roots.” Charlie had gone scarlet and tugged Harry aside later, explaining in a quick, quiet murmur that the plant grew wild in Romania at certain times of year and was commonly used to bring hen dragons into heat, driving the males wild with lust, and so he should be *very* careful about planting Luna’s gift anywhere near where Draco might go wandering when transformed.

Neville, Dean, and Seamus had pooled their funds to shower Harry with what felt like the entire Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes line—including a few prototypes thrown in by the twins on the condition Harry report back how useful he found them. Harry’s supply of Decoy Detonators and Nosebleed Nougats had been sorely depleted after months on the run, and he thanked his friends for the thought—though he wondered when he would ever find occasion to use so many prank goods again.

“And last, but *certainly* not least,” Draco said, Levitating his own gift over to Harry, “From yours truly.”

Harry lifted the box, studying it—it looked very much like the box he’d received on his eleventh birthday from Mr. Ollivander, holding his first wand. He wondered if Draco had changed his mind after all concerning Harry keeping the Elder Wand and opened it with only a tiny bit of trepidation.

The top fell away, and Harry frowned. “It’s...a miniature broom?” He removed the little figure from the box, palming it.

“Hardly,” Draco sniffed, as if offended by the suggestion, and tapped his wand against the shaft.

Immediately, the broom ballooned in size to that of a regulation Quidditch broom, and in gleaming gold script that raced along the handle were the words *FIREBOLT STREAK*.

Harry turned, gaping, to Draco, whose brows lifted in challenge. “How else am I going to kick your arse fairly if you’re puttering about on some cupboard trash? Granted, it’s no match for my Nimbus 2020, but I can’t afford to give you *too* much of an edge.”

In light of his new gifts, a game of pick-up Quidditch was quickly organised after dinner, with Harry, Ginny, Angelina, and Fred on one team facing off against Draco, Charlie, George, and Ron on the other.

As they were mounting their brooms—Harry on his new Firebolt, and Draco on his new Nimbus—Harry warned, “You’d better not *cheat* this time. It’s my birthday; I’ll have a clean game.”

Draco sighed, shaking his head. “And I have told you time and *time* again, Potter, there are no regulations barring transforming into a dragon in the middle of a game. Honestly, if you can’t accept my strategy, then you really ought to get off the pitch.”

“Ten Galleons on our team!” George called.

Whether acquiescing to Harry’s request he not cheat or simply because he didn’t feel he needed to, Draco refrained from transforming during the game, and while Harry narrowly beat him to the Snitch, it wasn’t enough to overcome Fred’s poor goal defence, resulting in victory for Draco’s team.

Harry couldn’t even gloat, as whenever he tried to rub in his quicker reflexes, asking if Draco regretted giving Harry his birthday present, he only shrugged. “A win is a win—and a loss is a loss. I’m really not that picky how I come by my victories.” Which was a load of hippogriff shit, but Harry was stuffed with good food, surrounded by good friends, and laden with good presents, so he was in no mood to argue petty details.

The 2nd of August was upon them in no time, and with the Survivors' Remembrance Banquet scheduled to start promptly at five that evening, Draco had himself and Harry well into preparations by just after noon. When asked why they had to start getting ready so early, Draco only gestured to himself with a sniffed, "You think this just *happens?*" and when Harry followed up with asking why *he* had to start getting ready so early, since Ron and Hermione weren't leaving until a half hour before dinner, he'd been hit with a Stinging Jinx and ordered into the bath.

"Bath, not shower. Shower first to rinse, then into the tub with you. There's a hair-care potion by the sink for you; you're to let it sit for thirty minutes. If I see you out of the bath before it's time, so help me I will Banish you back in and slap you with a Body Bind."

Harry had grumbled his displeasure, though it had mostly been for show; he was honestly relieved to have a bit of quiet time to himself before the event, to compose his thoughts, if nothing else. He was still feeling uncomfortable—and a tiny bit nauseated—with the idea of having to march up in front of the crowd and deliver a speech, but he settled his nerves with a reminder that if he'd survived the Killing Curse (twice!), he could surely handle a bit of public speaking.

He gave himself an extra five minutes after the Timer Charm went off, just to be sure Draco couldn't accuse him of rushing this hair-care potion business—which he was pretty sure was just a dollop of Sneezezy's mixed with a mousse agent to keep his hair bouncy but tameable. When he stepped back into the bedroom, pink as a fresh-boiled prawn, Draco had already laid out his dress robes on the bed. They weren't bad, as far as dress robes went—but even the slickest dress robes still felt so...*fussy*.

But if Draco could humour him when Harry asked him to dress down, then Harry could do the same and dress up when occasion called, and he had to admit, he couldn't exactly go marching into something with the word 'banquet' in the name dressed in trainers, jeans, and an oversized faded t-shirt.

He fingered the fabric, marvelling at its texture—smooth like silk, but breathable, and with a little give; Harry had hated how constricting the robes Mrs. Weasley had picked out for him back in Fourth Year had felt.

"*Accio* towel," came a voice behind him, and the towel wrapped about his hips snapped

free and whipped away—into Draco’s hand.

Harry’s hands immediately moved to cover his bits as he snarled out an annoyed *Oi!*

Draco rolled his eyes. “Please, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Yeah, and if you want to see it *again*, you’ll leave a man his dignity.” It was one thing to show off your meat and two veg when the mood was set, but another entirely when you were just trying to get dressed in peace.

“Stop dawdling and get *dressed*, then, would you? We’re going to be late.”

“We’ve still got *two hours* before we even need to *think* about leaving.”

“No, we’ve got *two* hours before we *need* to be there, an hour and a half before we *should* be there, and an hour before we’re *going* to be there.”

“You want us there an *hour and a half* early? Why?!”

“Because it’s going to take us that long to wade through the sea of your fawning sycophants, just to find our table.” Harry would have cuffed him if he wasn’t still shielding his cock. Draco made a shooping motion. “Go on, then. And grab a new pair of pants—not those ratty boxers you’ve probably been wearing since you were twelve.”

“What does it matter what’s *under* the robes?” he grumbled to himself, shuffling towards his bureau. When he realised Draco was going to watch him the whole time, as if he needed nannying, he snapped, “Do you mind? A little privacy would be nice.”

“Mm, debatable.” He settled comfortably against the jamb, arms crossed over his chest; for someone so invested in Harry getting ready in a timely manner, he certainly was taking his sweet time dressing himself.

“No, not debatable—*turn around*.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Well you’d better learn to want to—else I’m never going to get dressed.”

“You don’t want me to see your cock—so you’re going to punish me, by showing me your

cock. Such elegant Gryffindor logic.”

Harry flushed. “That’s not what I—”

But Draco just waved him off with a disgusted huff. “Salazar’s balls, I’ll leave you and your cock in peace. I’m taking next bath.” He threw a sharp look over his shoulder. “... And don’t come peeping until I’m ready.”

“What, *you* get to ogle my cock but I can’t ogle yours?”

“You’re welcome to ogle all you like—after the banquet. Until then, keep your eyes to yourself, unless I say so.” And then he was gone, flouncing off to Regulus’s room, leaving Harry to gape in bemusement. It was exhausting sometimes, trying to keep up with Draco. Harry loved it, as much as he hated it.

When Draco finally showed himself again, he’d dressed to kill—which really, by any measure, wasn’t wise, considering they now knew that Harry’s death would drag Draco down with him. He swanned back into Sirius’s room clad in magically custom-tailored robes—they *had* to be; fabric didn’t just cling to the human form so purposefully by *nature*—of a deep emerald, with silver filigree along the cuffs and across the lapels, as if to remind all and sundry just who he was and how instrumental his House had been in bringing down Voldemort. His hair had been styled back, though not in that severely slick coif he’d favoured in their early Hogwarts years—only just enough to give it flow and show off his bright grey eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to rend flesh from bone.

Seeing the way Draco seemed to be almost *preening* as he glided over to Harry’s wardrobe, he had to wonder if all this fuss wasn’t influenced, just a little, by the dragon wanting to show off for its mate. Then again, Draco was a prissy tosser by nature, so it could just be innate.

“I see you’ve put away your cock,” Draco said, voice muffled as he fished out a tie to match Harry’s own robes of midnight blue shot through with silver thread, a fabric Harry only now realised he’d probably been drawn to because of his brief chat with Dumbledore in that bright, peaceful Kings Crossing. “Pity.”

“Like you said,” Harry smiled as Draco looped a tie the same smoky grey as his eyes around Harry’s neck, “After the banquet.”

Draco tried to keep a grin of his own off his features, pursing his lips tightly, but it didn't really work. "You're going to make us late."

"God forbid we arrive an hour and fifteen early instead of an hour and a half."

"Fifteen minutes? That's all you've got in you?"

Harry leaned closer while Draco fidgeted with the tie, inhaling sharply. "You smell like—" He wrinkled his nose in amusement. "Like—a campfire."

"Please, all these compliments, I'm swooning."

"I meant it in a good way! It's good, I like it." This close, he could see the light flush painting Draco's cheeks, and the way he kept his eyes resolutely fixed on securing the knot at Harry's neck was telling.

"It was Pansy's idea of a terribly funny birthday present; it's meant to be *subtle* woodsmoke hints, but perhaps I laid it on a bit too thick..."

"Mm. Well she's got good taste, to know what suits you."

Draco's eyes flicked up to meet his, a curling smile blossoming on his lips. "...Jealous?"

And that was a dangerous question to entertain when they were five minutes from leaving, so Harry settled for. "I'm—working on it." It was probably a good thing the bits of dragon that still held sway over Draco *loved* the notion of Harry being jealous over him, though he was sure it wasn't healthy.

"Don't try too hard on my account," Draco leered, giving the tie a tug to secure it. "There; now you won't embarrass me." He grabbed Harry by the shoulders and spun him around to face the full-length mirror in the corner. Harry had to admit, Draco knew what he was doing. The collar was a bit high for his comfort, and he was still convinced he was overdressed for the occasion—surely a nice set of trousers and suit jacket would have been sufficient—but he didn't dislike the man he saw staring back at him from the mirror, and given the way his eyes darkened, like a storm rolling in, Draco didn't either.

Draco ran a finger down his spine, resting his chin on Harry's shoulder. Sometimes Harry hated the inch or two of height Draco had on him; other times...

Draco's brows lifted in consideration. "...Maybe being *just* an hour early won't be too tragic..."

They were still atrociously early when they finally Apparated into Hogsmeade, but this did not stop Draco from chivvying them up the drive from the village to the castle's front gates, which had been thrown open wide and decorated with twining vines and summer blossoms. If not for a liberal application of Cooling Charms, they would have both been drenched in sweat, their lovely new robes ruined, by the time they reached the sturdy stone steps.

They were not, it turned out, the first guests to arrive; the castle was already abustle with staff, Hogsmeade residents, and a number of present and former students who had already been on-site helping out with banquet preparations. Placards had been posted in the Courtyard, encouraging guests to make their way inside at their leisure.

Harry was astounded at the progress that had been made, even in the brief span that had lapsed since he and his friends had last dropped in to aid in the restoration. All of the towers finally stood tall and proud again, including Gryffindor, and the flagstones positively gleamed with Charmwork, no longer slathered in spilt blood or oozing residue from Dark spells. The Quidditch pitch, disappointingly, was still to be addressed, with the Ravenclaw tapestries still showing nasty scorch marks and sod waiting to be laid, but Harry didn't doubt it would be in working order once more by the start of term.

Walking tours of the castle had been instated, with a fat folder of pamphlets describing the repairs made waiting on a desk at the base of the staircase well. Harry noted, as they progressed through the castle, that here and there were little plaques embedded in the stonework, memorialising the fallen. He found Tonks's plaque at the base of the Astronomy Tower, with Remus's right beside it. Draco found Blaise's in the stairwell leading down to the Slytherin dormitories.

As Draco had feared, Harry found himself waylaid at most every turn by well-wishers and those who wanted to thank him for his service, or even just to say they'd shaken Harry Potter's hand. Even Ron and Hermione, once they arrived in smart dress, could not ward off all comers. Several times Harry wound up hemmed in so tightly he lost sight of his companions and had to wriggle his way back out, to Draco's clear displeasure. His apologies were sheepish, and he tried to touch in some way, whenever he could—a hand on the small of Draco's back, their arms brushing, shoulders bumping. He doubted it was

enough to quell any discomfort entirely, but it was all they could feasibly manage right now without ducking into one of the empty classrooms (which was *not* happening, any more than quickies in the Quidditch shed were happening).

Dinner was, as expected, delicious, with the elves in the kitchen having quite outdone themselves. Tucking in, Harry couldn't help but recall each and every one of the meals he'd shared at this table with friends—and now more than friends—and a knot that had taken root in his chest the moment they had walked through the sturdy wooden doors fronting the Entrance Hall began to grow, throbbing painfully, because god, *god*, he wasn't ready to give this up yet.

He knew—had known for a while—what decision he was going to make, but he couldn't shake the fear he was making it more out of wanting to cling to the past than to prepare for the future. Still, the fact was he didn't feel he'd gotten everything there was to *get* out of this place, not quite yet, and if nothing else, he didn't want his final memories of Hogwarts to be death and destruction and loss.

He had been struggling with what to say in his speech since he'd first been asked to deliver remarks—he'd never been good with public speaking, no matter what his friends said. Both Hermione and Draco had offered to help him, and while he'd been sorely tempted to accept, he had ultimately turned them down. It felt like this needed to be something he did on his own.

As he mounted the steps up onto the dais, taking his place at the stately podium behind which Dumbledore had always delivered his own quirky speeches, Harry could not help but feel everyone's expectations weighing more heavily now than they ever had. A collective breath was held, all eyes on him—and Harry swallowed thickly, cast a quiet *Sonorus*, and opened his mouth.

“The first time I stepped into this hall, it was the happiest moment of my life. Granted, I didn't have the most idyllic of childhoods, so it was kind of a low bar to clear, but still.”

A wave of polite laughter rippled out over the crowd, and Harry's nerves settled, just a little.

“The last time I was here, though...it was by far one of the saddest, most terrifying, bitter moments I'd ever faced. So I'm torn as to how to feel right now, because Hogwarts

holds *so many* happy memories for me...but it's packed with a lot of sad ones, too. It's led me to the people closest to me in life, the people I love most, people I'd willingly lay down my life for—but I've also encountered people I wish I'd never met, people whose very existence has only made my life darker.

“I have something to confess: I didn't know if I wanted to come here tonight. I've been helping out over the summer with the rebuilding efforts, as have many of you, but... there's a difference between reconstruction and...and acceptance. Trying to move on. That's a lot harder to do than just relaying bricks or applying Charms.

“We're supposed to be here remembering the brave witches and wizards who sacrificed their lives to try and make the future brighter, better. To defeat He Who Must Not Be Named. But I don't think I have to tell you all...that sometimes that's just as difficult as losing them in the first place. It's like opening an old wound, and everything hurts again, just as raw and real as the day it happened. And this castle, this school *itself*, is a constant reminder. I mean—it's literally built into the bricks now!”

More soft laughter, punctuated here and there by the odd snuffle.

“It's hard. I get it. I really, *honestly* understand. But...remembering, paying homage, is still something we ought to do. Not something we *have* to do—just a ‘should’. A suggestion. There's no right or wrong way to mourn, we all do it in our own way, in our own time, but we have a choice: to remember those whose sacrifices mean that we can be here now, to build on their lives and make the future better for those who follow, to work each day not to dwell on the sadness and sorrow but to take the hands of those beside us and hold tight as we move forward together. That way, if we stumble, there are people who care for us ready and willing to help us keep going, with us there to do the same for them.

“This school will open again in just under a month's time, bringing in hundreds of old students and dozens of new ones. It won't be the same, unfortunately. It'll never be the same—*we* aren't the same, after all. But that's life—that's *living*. We're alive. So let this dinner be what it's meant to be: a moment of silence, remembrance, and reflection. And then let's start over tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. Each step taken is a step away from the pain of the past and toward the hope of the future. Not because we have to, but because we *ought* to. I hope you'll join me.

“All in.”

He stepped back from the podium and cancelled the *Sonorus*—and in that moment, the spell over the audience seemed to shatter, as everyone rose to their feet in a resounding round of applause. Harry felt his cheeks heat, as he hadn’t quite been prepared for a *standing-fucking-ovation*, and he quickly stepped down from the dais to rejoin his party at their table. He kept his head ducked the entire way, ignoring arms outstretched for handshakes or friendly shoulder claps, and practically dove for the chair Ron had held out for him.

“You definitely should have let Granger and me help,” Draco said, leaning close to his ear to be heard over the roaring applause.

Harry wilted. “That bad, huh?” He’d known Draco would be a tough sell, but his critique coupled with the incessant clapping only made matters worse.

Draco shrugged. “Passable, for Harry Potter.” He glanced around. “And clearly your sycophants are lapping it up.”

Harry frowned—and then realised he was being *teased*, a ghost of a smile tugging at Draco’s lips as he joined in on the applause.

It was another five minutes before McGonagall managed to get the crowd settled, and then several other speakers followed in Harry’s steps, offering similarly stirring speeches—Kingsley’s call for a new order, for benevolence and forgiveness and compassion, was particularly well-received, and Harry clapped loudest of everyone for him—with McGonagall herself rounding out the evening.

As the hall emptied, Harry felt his stomach finally unclench, the deed done and the weight off his shoulders. People were still swarming the table, but Harry let them come with a sort of lazy abandon; the sooner they copped their feel of him, the sooner they’d be on their way, and then Harry and his friends might have some peace. Speaking of his friends—where were they? He’d turned his back for two seconds to shake the trembling hand of some ancient, hunch-backed witch who looked like she’d been kicking around since the Iron Age, and Draco had disappeared, along with Ron and Hermione.

McGonagall found her way to the table at length, having had her own share of hands to

shake, to thank him in person. “It was such a lovely speech, Potter, truly. I don’t think...” She sighed. “Well, I knew I was right to ask you to share a few words. Though I know you weren’t keen on it.”

Harry ducked his head; had he been that obvious. “It was nothing, Professor—Headmistress, sorry.”

She waved him off. “I rather think after what we’ve all been through together, you might call me ‘Minerva’...though I confess I’m still hoping you’ll have occasion to address me by my title for a bit longer...?”

She was angling most unobtrusively for his decision on whether or not to return for the Eighth-year curriculum, and he gave a dismissive nod. “You’ll be hearing from me soon on that matter, I expect.”

“I hope so.” She laid a hand on his shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze; she’d never been particularly ‘grandmotherly’, but Harry could almost see it now, if he squinted.

Something sharp poked him in his side as he watched her leave, and he gave a start, nearly elbowing Draco in the nose.

“Watch it,” Draco groused. “Hasn’t there been enough bloodshed here?”

“Sorry...” Harry said. “Where’ve you been?”

“You weren’t the only one with zealous fans to satiate.” He inclined his head toward the door. “But I’ve had about all the hobnobbing I can quite stand. Are you ready?”

“Definitely—where are Ron and Hermione?”

“They said we should head on without them; they’re going to linger a bit for farewells, since they’ve already decided they aren’t coming back.”

Harry *didn’t* pounce on Draco’s unspoken confession he was still mulling his return to Hogwarts over, but it was a difficult feat. He allowed himself to be shuttled out of the hall, wishing he’d thought to bring along his Invisibility Cloak, as it would have made their escape ever so much easier. As it was, it still took twice as long to reach the castle boundaries as it should have, and with great relief, Harry looped an arm through Draco’s

as soon as they breached the outer curtain, twisting in place and Disapparating with a bright *SNAP*.

They landed in the sitting room, and Harry was already starting to unbutton his dress robes, tugging at the tie Draco had worked so hard on, before his head had stopped spinning. He wondered if it would send the wrong signal if he popped down to the cellar to retrieve one of the wine bottles—or something stronger. He supposed this late, a glass of warm milk was a better choice if he needed something soothing, but the buzz of alcohol did wonders for making everything go soft and fuzzy, rendering reality a bit less daunting in times when things got overwhelming—like right about now.

It being the polite thing to do, he asked Draco, “Fancy a drink? I’m still a little—I dunno, all over the place, from that speech. I think I’ve got the frayed nerves of a ninety-year-old after the year I’ve had...” When Draco didn’t answer, Harry turned back—only to find him standing, stock still, in the doorway. “Draco?”

“Hm?”

Harry wrinkled his brow. “...You all right over there?”

Draco brought his fingers up to his neck, absently fumbling at his own tie, and nodded.

“...You don’t look it,” he chuckled nervously. “What’s wrong?”

Draco took several steps forward, until he stood at the other end of the sofa from Harry. *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*, now well-thumbed, sat on the side table with an old quill slipped inside as a bookmark. “I lied,” he said, in a very small voice, and Harry tensed.

“...About what?”

Draco swallowed, throat bobbing. “Your speech wasn’t terrible. I quite liked it.”

Harry wanted to slug him for *scaring* him like that. “And you couldn’t admit that back in the Great Hall because...?” He released a huff of laughter. “What, you just get off on taking the piss out of me?”

Draco allowed a weak little smile. “Well, naturally that—but...” He trailed off, grimacing

to himself, as if what he was saying physically pained him—and Harry felt some of the tension return. “I felt...unequal to it.”

“Wh...what do you mean?”

“Everything you said, it was all about...remembering the past but—letting it *be* the past, and moving forward. Accepting what’s changed, because that’s part of life.” He looked up, fixing Harry with a pleading look that didn’t suit at all; he was meant to be proud and pompous and larger than life, not this lost little boy staring at Harry. “It’s just—difficult, is all. When *everything’s* changed. It’s so hard to get your bearings when you don’t know what you’re even meant to be walking toward. It’s like—there’s a fog around that battle, and I’m spoilt for choice as to which way to go, but I worry that any false step I make might be a step *back*, so I’ve no idea where I ought to—”

Harry lunged forward, grabbing both Draco’s hands in his own. “So hold on to me. At least we’ll be lost together?” If people insisted on using him as a beacon, a rallying point, then what good was it if he couldn’t be just that to the people he most wanted to have faith in him?

“You can’t live my life for me,” Draco said, tugging on his hands—though not too hard.

“No—though I don’t think you’d want me to anyway. Let’s be honest, I’d probably muck it up.”

Draco snorted softly. “At least my reputation can’t possibly sink any lower.”

Bullshit, Harry thought, though he really should have said it; Draco needed to hear these things, needed to have them drilled into his head now and then too, as he could be just as stubborn as Harry when he put his mind to it. Instead, he opted to keep a cooler head, something he’d been getting a lot of practice with, spending so much time around Draco. “I can’t live your life for you, no. I can’t even really give you any good directions.” He rubbed a thumb over Draco’s knuckles, no longer holding him in place, just *touching*, just grounding the both of them. “But...we’re *all* in this fog, really. None of our lives are the same; this time last year, I thought I knew *so much*, and then I realised I either didn’t know anything, or I’d had entirely the wrong idea. I’m as lost as anyone.”

Draco frowned at him, just this side of pouting. “...You never seem it, somehow.” Harry

snorted derisively, and he pressed, “You don’t. Even when you’re confused or lost, you always have this...this *look* about you. Like you’re *just* about to solve it, just about to have it managed, and once you do, you’ll act, and you’ll *win*.” He sighed. “It pisses me off royally.”

Harry was bemused. “So I’m good at feigning confidence, is what you want to say?”

“I feigned confidence for *years*; I know another master when I see one.”

Harry smiled, drawing Draco’s arms around him, resting his hands at Harry’s hips and tracing the gentle curve of his arms, up to his elbows. The dress robes were made of something not quite silk, not quite velvet but rabbit-soft and luxurious.

“I haven’t changed.”

Draco blinked at him. “What?”

“You just said everything’s changed, and that’s got you thrown. I don’t think I’ve really changed. I think I’m the same as I’ve always been—just...maybe a little more worldly.”

“You don’t think you’ve changed?” Draco scoffed. “Think you always would’ve wound up with my hand down your pants or your cock in my mouth?”

“Maybe,” Harry said, voice gone a bit husky. He wasn’t about to be cowed by Draco’s casual use of such lewd language—he did that sort of thing to distract, Harry was learning. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it—what different choices I might’ve made, where that might’ve put us.” Draco’s eyes had a hooded quality to them, and he seemed unsteady on his feet. Harry softened his features. “You haven’t changed either, I see that now. I just started to look at you from a different angle. It’s not that there’s things about you now I love that weren’t there before; I just never noticed them. Or I outright ignored them.” He knew he sounded wistful, and he didn’t care. “Makes me sad it took so long.”

“Well,” Draco said, in a feeble attempt to collect himself. “There’s time now. To—and you’ve made me loathe this word—*savour* it.” Harry’s grin widened, so much it hurt his cheeks, and Draco’s eyes were bright as he blurted out in a huff, “I want to go back.”

“Go back?” Harry repeated, feeling like he’d lost the thread of the conversation at some

point.

“To Hogwarts. I want to do this—this Eighth-year business McGonagall has been going on about.”

Harry felt his heart leap, excitement hitting him with a tangible jolt. “You do?”

Draco nodded. “I’ve wanted to the whole time, truthfully, just...before, it wasn’t for the right reasons.”

“Right reasons?” Harry’s brows furrowed. “I don’t get it.”

“I wanted...” Draco seemed to search for the word. “A do-over. Something familiar. Something that *hadn’t* changed. It hurt nothing you’d probably be going back too, and I wouldn’t have to be out there, in the world, trying to decide where I fit for another year. I was *scared*—”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of, though!” Harry rushed to reassure him. “It’s not a *wrong* reason.”

“Then—it wasn’t the *best* reason. It’s not the reason I ought to have wanted to go back for. I don’t want to be driven by fear. I’ve spent *years* being afraid of things and letting that dictate what I do—fear of my father, of what he’d think of me if I dared be anything but what he’d moulded me into, fear of losing the respect of my peers, fear of the Dark Lord and the waste he might make of my family and future...” He closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I want to go back—I want to have the final year I deserve, I want to play Quidditch again, I want to figure out what I *want*, and I want—” He opened his eyes and snapped a hand out, grabbing the end of Harry’s tie and tugging him close enough their noses brushed. “To fuck you.”

Harry’s mouth went dry. “At—at Hogwarts?”

Draco shoved him away in disgust. “No, you *lackwit*. Right *here*.” He took a step closer, slotting all the right bits of himself just so against the right bits of Harry, until they were breathing the same air on each heady inhalation. “You can say no. I’m not saying you have to—or even that you *ought* to, since that seems to be the done thing these days. But I’m going to ask you, all the same. And then I’ll ask again tomorrow, and I’ll ask again the next day, until you Hex me silent, because I’m not going to be afraid of being

rejected by the great Harry Potter anymore.”

Harry’s heart was pounding a loud tattoo in his chest that he was sure Draco must be able to hear. There was a lot to unpack, but all that tumbled from his lips was, “That’s really not romantic.”

Draco thrust his chin out, defiant. “Romantic closed up shop months ago; not even Hufflepuffs put it off this long.”

“I wasn’t putting it off—” Harry started to protest.

“*Streelers* mate faster than we’ve managed.”

Harry didn’t know what those were, but he suspected it was another slight against Harry’s ostensible libido—which was in fine working order, he wanted it made clear. “You know I’m a sap; I just wanted it to feel right, is all.”

“Oh—I *beg* your pardon. Would you have rather I said I wanted to *make love* to you my *dear sweet buttercup*? Too bad; I thought I made myself clear.” His voice went low and deliciously gravelly as he punctuated each word. “I want to *fuck you*.”

“What...what’s the difference?” Harry asked, in a very small voice. Oh, he had a good idea, but hearing Draco talk like this, not circumspect at all, *did* things to him. Fantastic things. Like back in May, when he’d shown up on Harry’s doorstep pissed as anything and just *demand*ed.

“Not as much as you might think,” Draco said. “I just like saying it. *Fuck*.” He leaned in nuzzling just under Harry’s ear. “Though I’d rather be doing it.”

Harry’s breath hitched, and he’d had about enough. He snapped a hand out around Draco’s shoulder, and with a loud *CRACK* Apparated them directly into Sirius’s bedroom—which he was probably going to have to start thinking of as *their* bedroom after tonight.

Draco staggered on the landing, and his shoulder hit one of the bedposts, hard. “Warn me before you do that!” he groused, rubbing his arm.

“Er—sorry.”

“Side-Alonging without consent is just *rude*.”

There was a whiny twinge to his voice that suggested he wasn't in any real pain, and Harry leered. “Let me make it up to you?” Draco kept his lips twisted into a scowl, but the brightness in his eyes betrayed his interest, and Harry stepped in—then stopped. “Wait—*shit*.”

“What?” Draco asked, and the twinge had gone full-blown whine now.

Harry pursed his lips, irritated himself. “Just—Ron and Hermione. I don't...wanna, you know, get into anything if they're going to be home any minute.” He loved his friends, really he did—and flattening together like this, with plenty of space to sprawl, was a dream, but he was pretty sure no one wanted *that* much sharing between them. Charmwork only went so far, especially when both parties were otherwise indisposed.

He thought Draco would pitch a fit, or that the mood would be lost entirely, and it would be another month before the stars aligned as it felt they had just now and it was finally *time*, but Draco only shrugged, unbothered. “Weasley *may* be staying at his brothers' shop as they pull an overnigher to prepare stock for the final week before Hogwarts re-opens...and Granger *may* be helping them.”

“...They may, or are?”

“Are, after I asked them to.”

Harry felt his knees go weak, and he leaned against one of the posts for support, grimacing. “Oh god—*they're going to know*.”

“What,” Draco snorted. “You think *they're* so chaste?”

Harry quickly slapped his hands over his ears. “I *don't* want to hear about—”

“Haven't you noticed how long Weasley's showers have gotten? And how Granger claims she's going off on a morning walk right around the same time every day?”

“*Stop it!*” Harry pleaded.

“Make me.”

Well *that* he could do. Harry snaked a hand around the back of Draco's head, drawing him in for a warm, full kiss and promptly swallowing any further remarks. Draco allowed it, but only for a heartbeat, before he slipped a hand between them, deftly plucking at the line of silver buttons down the front of Harry's robes.

Harry drew back, just enough to glance down between them—and then back up, gaze locked with Draco's. His grey eyes carried a hint of challenge, as if to say *Last chance to back out now*. "I...I still don't quite know what to do here, just so we're clear..." he warned.

"Why am I not surprised? That's a Gryffindor for you: flinging himself into an uncontrolled situation unthinkingly." Draco cocked his head to the side, taking Harry's lips into a teasing, lazy kiss that was saccharine sweet. He let his hand fall lower, fondling Harry through his nice new robes. "Surely you've got an idea, though."

"A—few..." Harry admitted, swallowing. "I'm pretty sure we need less clothing."

"That would be a good start, yes."

"Right." Harry palmed his wand into sweaty hands, then pointed the tip at his chest. "*Evane—*"

"*Potter!*" Draco shrieked in horror, making a tight fist around Harry's cock—and the spell died on his lips. "So help me, if you Vanish those new robes I will snap your wand in half and then shove the pieces down your throat!"

"All right, all right—ease up! God, you're going to rip it off before I've gotten any use out of it!"

"I could say the same for those robes!" He shoved Harry away with an irritated huff and began stripping off his own robes, starting with the fussy lacing at the cuffs and collar and working his way to the mother-of-pearl buttons holding it closed at the sides. He caught Harry watching him, with undisguised want, and snapped, "Don't even *think* of pointing your wand my way!"

"Your grabhanding might've ensured it'll never point at anything again," Harry muttered, rubbing himself gingerly.

“Please; for someone who’s taken his sweet time getting one over me, you’re certainly impatient when push comes to shove.”

“For someone who’s been panting after me since before his voice dropped, you’re certainly fixated on your clothes.”

“*I haven’t been—*” Draco sputtered, and one of the gilded buttons popped off, hitting the floor with a bright *clack* and rolling underneath a bureau. “Fuck.”

“I’m *trying*,” Harry said, finally shrugging out of his robes. He sent them flying back into the wardrobe and hooked his thumbs into the band of his briefs—then paused. “...Er, we should probably decide...um, you know.”

“‘Um, you know’? After that speech, I had hoped you’d grown more eloquent overnight, but alas.”

Harry flushed. “I just mean, which one will...and which one will...”

Draco’s lips curled deviously. His robes slid off his shoulders, pooling at his ankles, and he sent them into the wardrobe alongside Harry’s with a lazy flick of his wand. “Any preference?”

Seeing as Harry had never really considered *this* before—had actually been *avoiding* considering it, even—he honestly didn’t think he had a preference, not really, but well, now was as good a time as any to mull the situation over, wasn’t it? He had a pretty good idea which one he’d be better at, as he imagined doing it with a bloke wasn’t all that different from doing it with a girl, but then again, he didn’t have any experience with girls either, so did it matter in the end? In fact, with the way things had gone in the past year, he knew more about getting a guy off than a girl, which he supposed he ought to find a little funny. And he did find it funny, but it also made him feel a little queasy with uncertainty.

God, this was going to be a disaster. He’d spent so long worrying it wouldn’t be perfect, he hadn’t bothered taking any steps to *make* it perfect.

Draco gave a sharp little intake of air, and Harry tensed. “What?”

“Nothing, just...” He swallowed. “You’ve got that look on your face.”

“Look?”

“Like I mentioned before: the look you get when you’re *just* about to solve a problem, just about to have it managed, and once you do, you’ll act, and you’ll *win*.”

Harry lifted a brow. “...Thought you said that look pissed you off.”

Draco huffed. “It does. Mostly because it’s damn arousing—you’re rather inconvenient with that look sometimes.”

Harry couldn’t help but preen a bit. “Sometimes. But now?”

Draco stepped forward, wearing only a tight pair of black boxer-briefs that betrayed just how enthused he was with the present turn of events. “Made a choice?”

Not really, Harry realised. “...You really don’t care?”

“I’m going to get off—you’re going to get me off, and it’s going to be raw and hot and hard either way.” He quirked his lips. “...Or both ways.”

And *oh*, Harry hadn’t thought about that. “We—that’s...we can do that?” He could feel his throat and chest flushing, mottled patches of red darkening his complexion. He didn’t have nearly enough experience under his belt to make an informed decision, and while the idea of a cock up his arse didn’t sound appealing on its face, there had to be something to it, right? Draco certainly didn’t seem like he relished pain, and yet here they were.

“Why the fuck couldn’t we?” he laughed.

“I—I don’t know, I just thought... I don’t know.”

Draco shook his head fondly. “Merlin, you’re a twit.”

“Well—it’s not like *you’ve* ever done this before either!”

“I read,” Draco said.

“Read *what*?”

“Books.” His hands skittered down Harry’s sides, tracing the knob of his hipbone before sliding around to massage his arse. “They’re very educational; you should open one.”

“More research?” Harry groaned—not unpleasurably, as Draco kneaded the meat of his arse, likely leaving marks. “Please tell me Hermione didn’t help out this time...”

“I had a whole week all to myself at the Manor when you *abandoned* me after the Battle of Hogwarts.” He dug his fingers in sharply, and Harry hissed. “I had to occupy myself *somehow*.” Evidently deciding Harry still needed convincing, he nipped his ear, using just enough teeth so he felt it, a frisson of pain. “Please, Harry. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll make you feel amazing.”

Oh god, he really was going to just collapse right here, on the floor; Draco would never let him live it down. He tried not to seem like he was obviously clinging to Draco for support when he asked thickly, “And—you?”

“Rest assured I’m being entirely Slytherin about this. I’ll fucking love it.” Harry could hear the leer in his voice. “I’ve been panting after you since before my voice dropped, remember?”

“Right...” He nodded, mostly to himself. “Then—let’s. Um. Let’s be fair about it.”

Draco drew back. “Fair?”

“Fair.” Harry tossed his wand onto the bed, then pulled open the drawer on the side table—and drew out one of Hermione’s magicked Galleons. “Wizard, I’ll slip it in you; dragon, you’ll do me? For the—you know. First time...”

“Can’t make up your own mind?” Draco teased.

Harry hoped his smile was self-deprecating; he didn’t want it to seem he was dragging his feet. Nerves were a tricky thing, was all. “Spoilt for choice, rather.” He made a fist and placed the coin over his thumb. With his breath held, he flipped it—and it clattered to the floor on its side, rolling away. Harry scrambled after it and managed to grab it just before it disappeared under the bed. He stood back up, panting with exertion, and held out his hand: wizard-side up.

“...Should we do it again? It didn’t really land proper.”

“What’s ‘proper’?” Draco snatched up the coin, studying it. “I see an outcome I like. I say we take what Chance has decided and be happy.”

“O...okay...”

Draco rolled his eyes, tossing the coin back into the drawer and sliding it shut. “Don’t sound so enthused, Harry.”

“I am!” he protested. “Just—still a little nervous, I think.”

“Hm.” Draco took him by the wrist, placing Harry’s palm so it splayed over his bare chest. It was still a marvel, seeing that bare expanse of smooth, porcelain skin, no horrible lacerations to remind Harry of what his thoughtless actions had nearly cost him. “Not so different,” Draco said, and Harry could feel it now: the racing *bump-bump-bump* of Draco’s heart, galloping towards a cliff.

Harry smiled at the gesture; no, not so different at all. “Scared, Malfoy?”

Draco looped his arm around Harry’s neck. “You wish.”

A disconcerting feeling swept over Harry, like gravity had just gone *wrong*—and then he felt himself being forced down into a dense, heavy point of existence, before he exploded into being again with a *POP*, now flat on his back atop their four-poster.

“Did you—just—*Apparate us onto the bed?*” He tried to sound indignant, he really did, but it was difficult, given Draco was straddling him now, using his weight—and position, his arse grinding over Harry’s cock—to keep Harry pliant. “I thought Side-Alonging without consent was rude.”

“Terribly rude, where have my manners gone—*oh.*” He slid down further and rolled his hips, dragging his cock up alongside Harry’s. “There they are.”

Harry brought his hands up to hold Draco by the hips, hissing in pleasure as he bucked into the slow, delicious friction. “Ah *fuck*, that’s good.” He released a ragged breath. “Should I—er, my pants?”

Draco swiped his wand from where he’d placed it in its stand—and promptly Vanished both their briefs. “Wha—you just went off on me for trying to Vanish clothing!”

“I went off on you for trying to return a three-hundred-Galleon set of dress robes to the Aether. I’m hardly arsed about what becomes of your dirty underwear.”

Harry rolled his eyes, returning his attention to more pleasant matters—like the fact his cock fit just right against the curve of Draco’s arse. He gave another experimental pump—but the friction was painful now, dry, sensitive skin chafing *everywhere*.

“Oh—Salazar’s balls, hold up, honestly—” Draco cut him an annoyed look. “Did you think it would just *slip in*?”

“No,” Harry said, hotly. “Was just seeing...”

Draco lifted up onto his knees, pointing his wand at his groin, and muttered a few spells under his breath.

“What did you cast?”

“*Spells*, Potter. As one does with a wand.”

“Yeah, but *what*—”

Draco rapped him on the temple with the hilt of his wand. “Spells for the bedroom, obviously!”

Harry winced, raising an arm defensively. “Yeah, but none of those was *Lubrico*. Seriously, what did you cast?”

Draco took a bracing breath, gritting out, “Spells I have never *needed* to use before. All right?”

And *oh*. Harry felt his cheeks heat—and then his *all over* heated. This was another M word situation, and there was evidently to be no discussion of the details of these spells. Harry suspected that if he wanted to learn them for his own edification, he’d need to hunt down whatever book Draco had found them in for himself.

Draco didn’t look like he was enjoying himself all that much, though. “...Does it hurt?”

“No, it’s just—strange, that’s all.” He raked Harry with a heated look. “Distract me?”

“Well I already know what your Patronus is...”

Draco actually smiled, crawling over Harry until they found a comfortable angle to kiss. “Surely you can find other ways to distract me...”

“Oh, I reckon.” He took Draco’s wand, cast a quick Lubrication Charm, and then laid it to rest on its stand with his free hand while he slicked up his cock with the other. “Slide yours against mine.”

“I’ll come...” Draco warned.

“So? Isn’t that the idea?”

Draco swallowed, pressing his forehead to Harry’s. “...It’s not how I want to come, though.” He eased Harry’s hand away from stroking himself, then shifted on the mattress until his arse was hovering just over Harry’s groin—then bore down on Harry’s cock, rocking against him. His cock was trapped between his stomach and Draco’s arse, and it was *thrilled* with the situation.

Harry, however, hissed brightly, fisting the duvet as he huffed out a string of Muggle and wizarding oaths. “Now *I’m* gonna come...”

“So? Isn’t that the idea?” Draco teased.

And if he was going to play like *that*, then Harry was game. He lifted a knee, and Draco nearly toppled to the side but managed to catch himself with one hand.

“*Watch it, oaf.*”

“Well it wasn’t how I wanted to come either.” Harry kept his knee bent, shifting his weight to try and roll Draco onto his back—but Draco wouldn’t budge. “Er—are we going to?”

Draco lifted a brow. “You do realise you being on top doesn’t necessarily mean you *physically* over me, right?”

“Er...” was Harry’s brilliant response. “No, of course—I mean, well—”

Draco eased Harry down flat onto his back again, reclaiming his position straddling his hips. “I know you rather like being in charge—”

“I *don't*—!”

“—but I think this way will be easier on the both of us, the first time. At least until...” He had to clear his throat. “Well, until we’re sure we can control ourselves.”

Control...? Harry frowned at the implication that this was, in any way, *out* of their control. “Wait, do you need to...? I mean—does the *dragon* need—?” It was an animal, after all, and as sapient as Bragge claimed dragons to be, they were clearly still ruled in large part by their instincts. Perhaps it wouldn’t like not getting to lead—was Draco, even now, fighting against the urge to just slick himself up and...?

But Draco laughed, real and genuine and bright. “Merlin, no—it’s only, I’ve read that some degree of...*deliberation*...should be practised in matters such as this, or we’ll neither one of us enjoy it.” He gave another lazy roll of his hips, pulling a groan from Harry. “So until we’ve figured out just how we like it...let’s let the one getting it up the arse do the driving, shall we?”

Harry could only nod, thoughts scattering. “Yeah. Sure. Brilliant.” The Lubrication Charm was doing wonders, but as warm and tight as this was, his cock trapped between Draco’s rocking body and his own stomach, he couldn’t help but wonder how much more amazing it would feel being buried inside Draco. Like getting sucked off, but tighter, hotter, wetter—and god, if this was going to happen, it needed to happen *soon*, because he was in very real danger of embarrassing himself.

He gave a feeble little thrust of his hips in encouragement, and Draco grinned. “Eager much?”

“God, am I.” He was painfully hard now, and he really didn’t give two shits if Draco teased him for it. He’d wipe that smarmy expression off his face in short order, regardless.

“Good.” Draco lifted up, just enough so he could take Harry’s cock in hand, and gave it a few experimental pumps. “Well this shouldn’t take too long.”

“Not if you keep doing that,” Harry grit out. “Come *on*.”

Draco only chuckled darkly—then thrust his hips forward, his own cock bouncing merrily, and positioned Harry’s cock straight up, just under the shadow of his arse cleft.

Harry goggled, breath catching in his throat at the sight. “W—wait—”

Draco cut him a sharp frown. “What *now*?”

“But—just—don’t you need to...” He swallowed. “Won’t it—hurt you?”

“So thoughtful, our Saviour...” Draco drawled. “Spells, Harry. They’re very useful.”

Oh, so that was what those spells had been. Spells to stretch, spells to dull pain, probably even prophylactic spells.

And he found himself uncharacteristically, unaccountably irritated—for reasons he could not fathom. Because why *shouldn’t* Draco use magic to make this more pleasurable, for the both of them? Why shouldn’t he cast spells, for his own safety and Harry’s? Why shouldn’t he?

“What’s wrong?” Draco asked, grey eyes hooded and wary.

“...Nothing, really.” Harry swallowed. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Draco accused softly, without anger—only concern. “Harry.”

“I...seriously, it’s *nothing*—” He could feel his cheeks heating and thanked whatever magic ran through the old house that the lamps had dimmed on their own accord, and perhaps Draco wouldn’t notice—or would chalk it up to arousal.

There was a heavy, pregnant pause, and then Draco asked, very carefully, “You wanted to?”

“I don’t—” Harry started, then changed his mind halfway through. “I don’t know. Maybe? I’ve never *done* this.”

He knew he was whining, could hear that defensive edge to his voice, and if Draco hit back with the same energy, then this evening was going to go to pot.

But Draco was still speaking in that calm, measured voice, and Harry almost hated him

for it. "...I thought this would be faster."

"It—it would be. Will be. But—" Harry licked his lips. "Maybe I don't want it to go so fast. Maybe I want there to—to be less magic?"

Draco's lips curled into a teasing leer. "I think you'll be glad for the spells when *you're* up."

"Er—well, then maybe I'd like to help *do* the magic, at least." He was certain he wasn't getting his point across, and he could feel his frustration overtaking his arousal, wilting his cock. "It's not...it's not about the doing. For me. It's—god, the whole thing's meant to be an experience. Isn't it?" It was why it had taken him so long to get to this point to begin with; he hadn't been joking when he'd said he wanted to 'savour' it. What was the point in going to a ludicrously expensive restaurant for dinner, and then skipping the appetisers altogether? "Do whatever you need, really—just let me share it with you?"

"...Merlin you're such a soft touch," Draco mumbled, though his voice was thick with emotion. He shook his head, leaning forward and sliding his hands up over Harry's chest, curling at his neck. "Of course," he whispered, close enough to kiss. "Fuck, of course—I'm sorry, I was only—"

"Eager much?" Harry teased.

"Very. Too much." Draco kissed him, soft and slow and full of apology. "Next time. I promise."

"Definitely..." Harry rolled his hips, encouraging his cock back to life; it was hardly any great tragedy, and wasn't that the thing about first times? That they were imperfect, for one, and they were generally followed by a *second* time, for another? Nothing ever went quite the way Harry wanted or expected it to—the fact he was sitting here with Draco Malfoy rutting atop him was certainly testament to *that*—so why should this be any different? That didn't presuppose it would be *bad*.

Draco slid down his body until he was faced with Harry's cock, and he exhaled a warm, open-mouthed breath over the thickening shaft. Harry squirmed, trying to keep his legs splayed when he really just wanted to lock Draco in place, until he'd taken Harry's prick into that warm, tight mouth and brought him to the edge of glory.

He trembled, hips jerking when Draco darted a pink tongue out, kissing the shaft. “F—fuck, *god*, suck me.”

Draco regarded him with undisguised interest. “...Can you hold back?”

“I—I think?”

“You don’t sound very sure. I’m going to be *very* cross if you spurt before we’ve gotten going, Potter.”

“There won’t *be* any ‘going’ if I’m not hard.”

“Hm. Point...” He sighed, as if this were a great effort he was being asked, and caressed the shaft fondly, nuzzling it with a soft, breathy inhalation. “Just for a bit, then.”

He pursed his lips tightly at the crown, drawing the head in agonisingly slowly and tonguing the slit before lifting off again. He used his hand to spread the viscous lubricant from Harry’s Charm along the shaft—and Harry wondered what it tasted like. They were going about this entirely in the wrong order, but Harry didn’t want to say as such, lest Draco think better of sucking him off.

Draco took the head in his mouth again, swirling his tongue around the crown, and then bobbed down, far enough Harry could feel the tip brush against the back of Draco’s throat. Draco’s jaw worked, and Harry could tell he was trying to take him in deeper—but in all their fumbblings, neither had ever really managed more than just a mouthful.

Still, the sight alone was enough to perk Harry’s cock up, and he struggled to keep his breathing even as he watched, rapt, as Draco lazily mouthed his prick. He was gorgeous like this, white-blond hair falling in his eyes and cheeks hollowed out with each ardent suckle, and every now and then, he’d sweep his gaze up to meet Harry’s, fixing him with those sharp grey eyes that failed to belie the playful spirit infused into Draco’s very bones.

God, Harry loved him. As much as he’d ever loathed him, he fucking loved Draco now. He was funny and sexy and stubborn and proud, and everything that drove Harry mad about him drove him wild as well. Dragonflame roaring beneath a prickly, icy exterior—and he wanted to share it with *Harry*. He’d waited for Harry, he’d fought for Harry. He *wanted* Harry.

And Harry wanted him back. He closed his legs, just enough to brush against Draco's shoulders. "Ease up—I'm close."

"Thank Merlin," Draco rasped, rubbing his jaw. "Thought I was going to have to unhinge my jaw to get you off."

"Not necessary," Harry smiled, guiding Draco closer, so they were better aligned. His cock stood stiff and proud, nosing at the inside of Draco thigh and weeping angrily for the loss of that warm, wet mouth. *Don't worry*, he told it, *I've got a better treat for you coming right up*.

"Well, if you insist." Draco leaned in and kissed him, perhaps to wash away the foreign flavour of the magical lubricant—though Harry tasted nothing on his tongue but the salt of his sweat and the faint, bitter tang of himself.

Harry accepted his attentions, humming his pleasure. "Should I return the favour?"

"The gesture is appreciated but wholly unnecessary." Draco nibbled at his lip. "Just fuck me good and proper, and we'll call it even."

A thrill rushed through Harry, and he thrust his hips with a shallow pump, letting the head of his cock brush along Draco's cleft. "Get me seated, then."

Draco glanced down between them to sight the way, then took Harry's shaft in hand and carefully angled it. Slowly—so slowly Harry wondered if he wasn't reconsidering—he relaxed his thighs and let himself settle down on top of it.

Harry could feel it, where his cock was meant to go—everything all of a sudden got *tight*, but not so tight he slipped away. Draco's expression was tense, and Harry imagined he could smell the sweat, the nerves, of this step, this grand moment, as if everything were about to change. Which was ridiculous, but there it was all the same.

Harry fought to keep very still, though he wanted more than anything to snap his hips up, bury himself right up there where he was clearly meant to be. The spongy head of his cock felt like it was being squeezed through a warm, wet channel, and he could hear Draco panting in his ear, trying to hold his breath with effort and failing. He steadied his hands at Draco's hips, giving gentle guidance when he seemed unable to push himself; Draco didn't want to appear weak, so he'd never ask for help, or beg Harry to stop. He'd

keep going, keep pushing himself, and the kindest thing Harry could do for him was to have enough respect for him not to say something stupid like *Are you all right?*

“You feel amazing,” he said instead, lifting up to kiss Draco’s neck.

“You haven’t even got the tip in,” Draco grit out. “Fuck your patronising bullshit.”

Harry lifted a brow. “Whose fault is that?”

“Want to switch places?”

“Pretty sure I already said I was open to it—shall we?”

“Fuck you, Potter.” Draco released a stuttering breath, closed his eyes, and forced his hips down—and then down and down, grimacing all the while, until his arse brushed Harry’s hipbones, fully seated, and he exhaled with an audible huff. “Fucking *shit* that’s...*fuck.*”

Harry concurred, stars spangling his vision. His fingers dug into Draco’s hips, leaving little crescent marks. “A little—warning would’ve been—appreciated.”

Draco’s eyes were still clenched shut, and his back was heaving. “I did—say *fuck you.*”

“Yeah...yeah you did...” Harry breathed, yanking himself back from the keen edge of orgasm. It was just so damn *tight*, tighter than before, tighter than he’d imagined, and Harry could feel his cock throbbing in time with his heartbeat, pumping a dull, droning tattoo. The ridges and whorls inside Draco’s arse gripped him, holding him in place, and he never wanted to leave—except he really *really* did want to. Wanted to draw back out and thrust back in with punching, punishing force, because that was like straight Felix Felicis, a shot to his most basic, primal centres.

“One false move, and I’ll rip it off,” Draco warned, as if he could read Harry’s mind. He was still grimacing, and his lids fluttered open—his eyes were bright, like he was fighting back tears. “Shit, that was a bad idea.”

“No, not one of your better ones.”

“Oh shut up; at least one of us is enjoying this...”

Harry didn't bother denying it. "Can I tell you you feel amazing *now*...?"

Draco huffed in disgust, but he didn't say no. "Anything. Anything to distract."

Harry frowned. "...It's really that bad?" There was flirtatious teasing, and then there was thoughtless cruelty; he'd never be able to forgive himself if he stumbled into the latter just because it got his cock hard. "Should we—" He didn't want to say *stop*, as Draco would hear it as giving in. "Should we try it another way...?"

"Your cock up my arse is about the only way this *goes*." Draco shook his head. "Just—give me a second. It fucking hurts, but it's hardly debilitating."

"You do have a habit of making much ado about minor injuries, now that I think about it..."

Draco pinched him, *hard*. "We'll see how minor an injury *you* find it." He released a whining groan. "Maybe I shouldn't have used a spell for the stretching after all..."

"You—you didn't *practice it* first?"

"Oh you are the *last* person I want lecturing me on throwing about poorly researched spells I picked up in shady books!"

And all right, he had a point. "...Well we'll try it the other way next time. I told you—I'd rather take it slow."

"Taken it slow enough already..." Draco's breathing was starting to even a bit, and when he shifted in place, the friction against Harry's cock sent frissons of pleasure shooting up his spine. "I want it *fast*. I just want it—hard, and hot, and—and—" He splayed his palms flat over Harry's pectorals, tracing with one finger the jagged white scar from the second Killing Curse. "Light me on fire."

Harry frowned. "...Are you sure?"

Draco closed his eyes again and tilted his head back. "Never been more sure, Potter."

Harry swallowed—then let his hips nudge forward, a shallow, experimental little thrust with no force behind it. Draco's brows furrowed, but he didn't cry out, didn't wince, so

Harry drew back, further this time, and slid back in.

Draco felt that one, gasping, and he straightened. He leaned back, hands on the mattress now, supporting his weight, and he eased up onto his knees to give Harry more room to work. Harry took this as permission and decided it was time to get around to the *fucking* bit of fucking Draco.

He set a slow, easy pace to draw it out—Draco wanted it hard, fast, but he would get neither if Harry popped too soon, so this had to necessarily be tantric. On each pass, though, he pulled out further and slid back in with a rougher, more punishing force. Soon, the quiet of the bedroom was alive with fevered panting and creaking bedsprings and the bright clap of skin against skin. Draco was biting his lip, trying and failing to stifle desperate little grunts, and Harry knew he wasn't imagining the way he was *bouncing* now, trying to keep up with Harry's mounting pace.

"Shit..." Harry grunted. "Oh, *fuck*, this is—"

"Faster," Draco breathed. "Faster—*more*."

Light me on fire.

He took hold of Draco's hips and gave a punching upward thrust—then swiftly drew out again and repeated the motion. He could feel the muscles in his stomach crying out—this was going to hurt like a *motherfucker* come morning—but he powered through, rearing in again and again and again. Draco's head, flung back, exposed the long, white column of his throat, and Harry wished the angle allowed him to bite, and claim. To mark him, somehow. *God* wouldn't the dragon be pleased?

He could feel his balls drawing up tight under his body, like a line drawn taut at the base of his spine. It was too much—too tight, too hot, too slick, and Draco was everywhere, all around him, over him and burning in his blood.

"Can't—hold off—" he grunted, sweat dripping in his eyes from the effort; he was almost drawing completely out on the downstroke now before burying himself deep as he could go on the up, and it still didn't feel like enough. He couldn't mark Draco on the outside, but maybe inside—if he let Harry. "Draco... *Draco*, I'm..."

"Yeah... Go on." Draco ran his hands down his body, wrapping his fingers around his own

cock and tugging feverishly. The pink head glistened brightly when it peeked out on each stroke, winking at Harry saucily. “*Shit*, are you gonna...inside?”

“Um.”

“You should, yeah—I spelled it, do it. Fuck, come on—fill me up.” His arse was clenching somehow even tighter around Harry, and he imagined his cock might have been ripped off without the proper lubrication, which would have honestly been a rather disappointing end to an otherwise enjoyable evening.

Such a filthy invitation on Draco’s lips nearly undid Harry, but he fought back his orgasm once more, desperate to give Draco time to catch up. Nothing about this experience so far had been quite how he expected it to be, so he felt entitled to one selfish request: that they get off around about the same time. Familiarity told him Draco would not be much longer, and Harry could hold off, he could. He *would*.

He focused on giving it to Draco just how he’d begged—hard and hot and fast, pouring back into him the same desperation and arousal that thrummed through Harry’s veins. A constant, thrilling cycle of sex and sweat and desire. Harry watched his cock disappear into Draco’s arse, glistening with lubricant and his own leaking fluids, and Draco’s cock was dribbling all over Harry’s stomach in prelude.

“Tell me when,” Harry whispered breathily, panting now. “Tell me when you’re close.”

Draco ignored him, but his fist started moving faster over his cock, a slick, squelching blur. When he released a soft, shuddering gasp that Harry well recognised, he ratcheted his thrusts up another octave, trying to fuck right *through* Draco.

“Shit—there, yes, keep going, Harry...” he grunted. “Almost—there... Faster, dammit.”

Harry’s hips and back and stomach were protesting loudly, but he pushed through, too near the edge to stop now. “Come with me, Draco. I want to—I need to—”

“Just—fucking *do it*—” Draco gasped, and Harry let go.

He came in a rush on one final punishing, punching thrust. He felt his balls empty, pumping into Draco’s arse in a wave of heat and pleasure.

Draco seized around him with a crying shout, hands reaching out for something—anything—and Harry grabbed on, lacing their fingers together. Draco’s arsecheeks clenched, and his cock bobbed, spurting long white strips of spunk over Harry’s stomach and chest—and a little on the duvet as well. Harry kept pumping, hips working on their own like a toy winding down. Each thrust was shallower, gentler than the last, until he finally collapsed onto the bed after he’d been drained of what felt like every last bit of life.

Draco sat down, hard, his thighs giving out, and Harry groaned painfully. “You’re heavy...”

“Love you, too...” Draco mumbled, still swaying. He squeezed his arsecheeks around Harry’s cock, grimacing as he glanced over his shoulder. “Salazar’s balls...you actually *did* it...”

“Did what...?”

“I didn’t think you’d actually spill inside me...” Draco tried to ease up onto his knees—but it was far too soon, and he collapsed back onto Harry’s cock with a satisfying squelch.

“You told me to!” Harry huffed, red-cheeked.

“Yeah, I know.” Draco leered. “Still didn’t think you’d do it.”

“Course I did. I wanted to...”

Draco blinked, sobering. “You did?”

“Fuck yeah.” He released Draco, sliding his hands up Draco’s arm to settle at the nape of his neck and draw him down. “Humans have instincts *too*. Drives we want to obey.” He gently rolled his hips, and Draco gave a wincing gasp, mouth hanging open. “It’s all—dark, and primal. Felt dirty. You’re a horrible influence, you know?”

Draco’s expression was a perplexing combination of utterly scandalised and absolutely delighted. “Then we’ll have to at least use *that* spell again...” He found his strength at last, lifting onto his knees with a grunt, and Harry’s cock slipped free. His spunk came sliding out cleanly, dribbling down and sticking to Harry’s wiry pubic hairs in great white globs. “No fuss, no mess.”

“For *you*.” Harry glanced down at the state he was in. “Look at me; I look like the floor of a club bathroom...”

“Not a bad look at all, considering...” Draco ran a finger through the lacy white stripes coating Harry’s stomach.

“Yeah, well you try it on next time, see how good it looks on *you*.”

“Everything looks good on me, Harry, you should know that,” Draco said, then reached for his wand and began casting *Scourgify*s with impunity. Harry shivered as the spellfire raced over his body, and his wilting cock gave a half-hearted jolt of interest before Harry reminded it not to get its hopes up.

They crawled under the covers still naked, and the sheets were comfortably cool against Harry’s still-flushed skin. He drew up tight against Draco, crotch-to-arse, and Draco threw him a warning look over his shoulder. “If I wake up with your cock poking me in the arse, you won’t appreciate it.”

And he wasn’t joking; Draco was a grouchy beast if he didn’t get his requisite beauty sleep. “I’ll take care of it discreetly. No worries.”

Draco mulled this over. “...No.”

“No?”

“No. Hold on to it until I wake up. Then I’ll handle it.”

Harry didn’t quite know how he was expected to be able to control his morning wood—especially if he woke particularly randy. Draco could sleep like the dead if he’d exerted himself the day before, and the thought of having to lie there, hard and wanting, for *hours* was not a pleasant one.

But Draco drew Harry’s arm around him, snuggling back, and Harry supposed some things were worth the wait.

When he woke the next morning—without his cock poking into Draco’s arse, thankfully—there was warm sunlight streaming into the room, slanted at an angle that suggested to Harry it was rather late. He strained his ears, listening for sounds of life in the house

below, but he heard nothing save for the soft snuffling almost-snores of Draco drowsing beside him.

His bladder made itself known with urgency, so he carefully slid out of bed, making sure he didn't disturb his partner, and stumbled into the bathroom. He winced as he waddled, sorer than he had expected, considering he'd done relatively little of the hard work the previous night.

God, they'd *fucked*. Nothing of note had really changed, he supposed, except this was finally something they were doing now: sleeping together. Not just sharing a bed, but sharing their bodies in it, in every way he could think possible—and he knew Draco would tease him for the goofy smile he was wearing, just remembering what they'd done, so he took care to wipe it off before he returned to the bedroom.

His departure had roused Draco, and Harry stood leaning against the doorway, watching him stretch languidly, like a big cat. "Morning, sleepyhead."

"Stuff it," Draco rasped, voice thick with sleep. "I know you only just woke up a moment before I did."

"Call of nature."

Draco frowned, grey eyes suddenly sharp. "I thought I told you—"

"The *other* nature. Unless you wanted to hold it while I pissed, too?" Draco made a face. "Right. Want me to fetch some coffee?"

Draco waved him off, struggling to his feet unsteadily. Harry rushed to his side, taking an elbow.

"All right, there?"

"Little...stiff."

Harry swallowed, a flash of just what had made him so stiff hitting him. "Good stiff...?"

Draco's eyes travelled over his bare flesh, from his neck, down over the Killing Curse scar on his chest, to the little trail of black hairs leading down to his cock—which, traitor

that it was, gave a twitch of greeting. “Not a bad stiff.” He leered at Harry, sinfully close, his fingers tapping suggestively at Harry’s hips. “You know, I’ll bet I could pop down to the Sanctuary for a transformation and be right as rain, ready for another round in a moment flat.”

And part of Harry—a rather obvious part—thought that sounded like a *splendid* idea, but Draco shoved him away with snort, reaching for a dressing robe. “Merlin, you really *are* insatiable.”

“I’m—not!” Harry protested, though he doubted this was believable, all evidence being to the contrary. He grabbed a robe of his own, cinching it angrily at the waist, and followed Draco down the stairs. “You’re just being suggestive. I can hardly help reacting.”

“Hm,” Draco said, pausing at the third-floor landing to throw a glance over his shoulder. “No regrets then, I take it?”

“Of course not,” Harry said, thrown—had he done something to suggest he might? Or—
“...You?”

“I was the one who asked for it,” Draco reminded him, continuing on down.

“I know, but still. Doesn’t mean it was...you know, everything you thought it might be.”

“No, it wasn’t. But—” Draco shrugged. “That doesn’t mean it wasn’t...acceptable.”

“*Acceptable?*”

“It’s a passing grade, Potter.” Harry lunged at him, nearly missing a step and bowling him over. Draco caught him, holding him tight about the waist, and leaned in close to brush warm, dry lips over Harry’s. “No, no regrets. About any of it.”

Harry’s heart clenched. He didn’t know if he’d survive Draco not being afraid of him anymore, if this was what he might expect.

As they made their way down to the kitchen, the sounds of activity greeted them: bangs and clangs of pans, the hiss of running water, and the soft murmur of quiet conversation. Hermione and Ron were back, it seemed, which meant Harry and Draco’s idyllic morning

was at an end. That would teach him to sleep in.

“Good morning!” Hermione greeted, far too brightly and casually, and Ron was sat at the little kitchen table, his nose buried in the morning’s copy of the *Prophet*. Harry returned the salutation weakly, making sure not to make eye contact, as he now knew what his friends had been up to (*under his own roof!*), and they him, and he really didn’t want to think about *any* of it, not before breakfast at least.

“Lovely dinner last night, wasn’t it?” Hermione said, to fill the awkward silence, and set a plate of toast topped with fluffy scrambled eggs in front of Harry. Draco was already digging into a bowl of his favoured porridge that had been sitting under a Stasis Charm. Harry wondered if stuffing them full of food was her way of warding off any uncomfortable discussions they might need to have now concerning engaging in amorous activities while flatmates were in residence.

“Er, yeah.” Harry reached for the salt. “Was good to see everyone again. Without, you know, impending doom hanging over all our heads.”

“Slughorn asked after you,” Ron said, folding the paper and placing it off to the side. “After you—y’know. When you left to—I mean.” Ron reached for his glass of pumpkin juice, beet-red. “He just sends his regards is all.”

Harry sank down a bit into his seat; the eggs were tasteless now, despite the generous drizzling of chilli sauce he’d applied. “Thanks...”

Silence hung over the four of them like a vulture, watching their feeble attempts at conversation sputter and expire. Only Draco seemed entirely unaffected by the tension, spooning his porridge into his mouth and staring off into space, like any other morning. Harry thought it must be nice sometimes, being such an unfeeling prat.

Right, time to change the topic. He cleared his throat softly. “So, uh, I think we’ve decided—me and Draco, I mean—that we’re going to go back for the Eighth-year curriculum they’re offering at Hogwarts.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, Harry!” Hermione clapped. She Levitated the final batch of scramble from the frying pan and onto her plate, joining Harry and the others at the table. “I really wish I could go back as well, but I just think it would be such a waste to pass up

this opportunity at the Ministry.”

“Poor thing won’t get to take her N.E.W.T.s,” Ron snickered fondly, and Hermione frowned at him, affronted.

“Well of course I’m going to take them! It’s only that *some* of us are perfectly comfortable with self-study.”

“And I’m not one,” Ron said, rising to his feet to return his own dirty dishes to the sink. He clapped Harry on the shoulder as he passed by. “Good luck finding a new Keeper.”

“I’ve actually been thinking about that...”

“Quidditch?” Ron asked, and Harry nodded.

“Like—do you think they’ll even let us play?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Draco butted in, suddenly fearful.

“Well, the Eighth-years probably won’t really be a proper class. Who’s to say there’ll be enough returnees to even have Houses, let alone whole Quidditch teams?”

Draco’s complexion went a bit green. “...Shut your mouth, Potter—if I have to share a dorm with a bunch of *Gryffindors*...”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Come on, you’ve shared a home with several for the better part of the past year, and you’re still kicking.”

“That was different! It was a matter of life and death, and I didn’t exactly have a *choice* for most of the time.”

“Well, you’ve got a choice now. Backing out?”

Draco met his challenge with a fierce glare, biting savagely into a piece of toast.

The conversation sparked a thought inside Harry, though.

They’d managed fine enough in their little almost-family unit, having learned over the months what topics were and were not appropriate for discussion and how much teasing

could be tolerated before wands came into play. But Hogwarts was a big place—a *new* place, really—with lots of people. Many of whom weren't at all fond of Draco, despite his service during the war.

And then there'd be dozens even *more* eager to cosy up to Harry since the defeat of Voldemort. He'd caught a glimpse of it just the night before and borne witness to Draco's rising tension and irritation as Harry had been swarmed with well-wishers and sycophants—the real kind, not the kind Draco imagined Harry's genuine friends to be.

What if it escalated, once they returned? What more could he do to reassure Draco of his feelings and commitment—especially in those moments when he wasn't actually there? He doubted they would share *every* class together, as there was no telling if their career paths might overlap. Worst-case scenario, they might only see each other in the mornings and evenings in the dormitory (assuming the Eighth-years weren't rooming in their old Houses; if that wasn't the case, Harry might have to put in a special request to McGonagall...).

An idea struck him, like a bolt out of the blue. A terrible idea—mad, Draco would say—that was either going to get him killed or kissed, but it was all he had to work with at the moment, so he decided to run with it. He'd been very good about not being *too* Gryffindor lately, after all, so it was time to let his red-and-gold flag flap free for a bit and renew his vows to his house's motto.

“How did preparations for the pre-return rush go at the shop?” he asked Ron.

“Brilliant, 'til about two in the morning, when the exhaustion hit, but then brilliant again around four when I got my second wind.” Ron nodded to Hermione. “I think between the four of us we must've packaged over a hundred of the back-to-school packs.”

“What's in those?”

Ron waggled his brows. “And spoil the surprise? I'm sure you'll find out the hard way soon enough.”

Harry shook his head in amusement. “Fine, be mysterious if you like. But I'd still like to drop in today if you lot don't have any plans.”

“The shop?”

“Yeah; it’s been a few weeks since I visited, and I’d like to see it again before it gets too crowded with last-minute shoppers stocking up before the school year starts. Plus I’ve got to go supply shopping.” He’d done away with most everything he’d owned back at the Dursleys’, thinking he’d never see Hogwarts again—at least not as a student.

“Good point. It does get vicious,” Ron agreed. “That trove from Neville and Dean and Seamus wasn’t enough to tide you over?”

“I’m not thinking of purchasing anything—just want to poke my head in and see what’s what. Probably won’t have much leave to drop in once school gets going again.”

“Yeah—though maybe McGonagall’ll let the Eighth-years have a bit more leeway, seeing as you’ll all be adults?”

Harry doubted that very much. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Well, Fred and George have hired on a couple of new hands, so if we want to grab lunch with the both of them this time, we can probably swing it.”

“Excellent—shall we Apparate around...” He glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner, which said it was past ten now. “Noon?”

“I’ll meet you at the Weasleys’ shop for lunch,” Draco said, sending his dishes sailing into the sink. “I’m going to visit the Manor and let Mother and Father know of my plans to return to Hogwarts.”

“Be a mate and let us see the memory if you give your old man a heart attack, yeah?” Ron called after him as Draco marched up the stairs.

At just noon, Harry, Ron, and Hermione Disapparated from the sitting room, popping back into existence just in the back alley of the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione tapped the bricks with her wand, and the wall melted away to reveal Diagon Alley, already bustling with shoppers. It was as busy as Harry had ever seen it, and he felt something warm blossom in his chest. He’d feared things might never feel *normal* again, that Voldemort had left an irrevocable taint on everything Harry had ever loved, but the human spirit, it seemed, was resilient.

They wove through the crowd, a Notice-Me-Not helping Harry avoid causing a ruckus,

and shortly found themselves at the entrance to *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes*. Through the thick-paned glass, Harry could see that the shop was packed with customers of all shapes and sizes—as many grown adults as children who were clearly Hogwarts students.

“Hey, I’ll meet you inside, all right?” Harry said, and Ron and Hermione frowned.

“Meet us? But we’re here—”

“Yeah, but I’ve just remembered there’s a book I wanted to ask about at Flourish and Blotts; I’m sure I’ll forget about it if I don’t take care of it now. I won’t be more than fifteen or twenty minutes, I’m sure.”

“*Books over a joke shop?*” Ron tutted under his breath. “You feelin’ all right mate? I know you probably didn’t get much sleep last night—”

“Bye! Back in two shakes!” Harry blurted out, cheeks aflame as he sprinted away to lose himself in the crowd.

Once he was sure he’d lost them, the merry tinkle of the bell over Fred and George’s door audible even above the din of the shoppers milling about, Harry made his way down one of the side lanes shooting off Diagon Alley. He scanned the panoply of colourful shop signs until he finally found the one he was looking for, sat between a bakery on one side and scribist on the other: *Finagle’s Festooned Fandangles*.

He cast a hasty Glamour on himself before he dared set foot inside, all too conscious of the fact that the shop was only right around the corner from the *Daily Prophet’s* main offices. The last thing he needed was a blurry shot of himself plastered across the afternoon edition spoiling his plans.

He was in and out inside of fifteen minutes, being a simple man with simple tastes, and after slipping the little brown bag into his pocket, he rejoined Ron and Hermione at the twins’ shop.

“Sorry about that; have I missed anything?” he asked, finding them stood around a pen of what was evidently Fred and George’s latest pet fad: Micro-mooncalves. *Two for 10G! Start your own herd!*

Ron pointed to one of the mooncalves, which had broken off from its fellows and had its long neck stretched up to accept treats from Hermione. “Tell her we don’t need one of these.”

“No one *needs* a pet,” Hermione said. “You get them for companionship.”

“You’ve already got Crookshanks!”

“Crookshanks isn’t a *pet*. He’s—well, he’s Crookshanks. And this little fellow wants to come home with me so bad, don’t you?” Hermione cooed at the animal, which unrolled its long tongue to swipe affectionately at her nose.

“And where exactly are we supposed to keep it?”

“They can be house-trained,” George said, sidling over to join the conversation. “And their dung makes for great fertiliser.”

“Ooh, the back garden’s gone to pot!” Hermione gasped. “This might be just what we need!”

“Remember,” Fred said, pointing to the sign. “You get a discount for a pair!”

Ron ignored them all, turning to Harry. “Did you get whatever book you were looking for?”

“Oh—yeah.” They continued to look at him expectantly, and he realised they were waiting for details. After all, it was hardly every day Harry went shopping for books that weren’t required reading for school. His mind whirled, and he latched on to the first title that came to mind: “*Hogwarts, A History*. I had it delivered home.”

Ron looked like he was seriously considering walking Harry over to St. Mungo’s, but Hermione beamed. “Oh that’s fantastic, Harry!”

He ducked his head. “Yeah, I figured it was about time I actually read it. Out of, y’know, respect for Professor Bagshot and all.”

Hermione clearly approved of the decision. “Better late than never, I say.”

Ron didn't seem to agree, but he kept his mouth shut, perhaps fearing any further commentary would see him assigned by Hermione to read it as well.

Draco was difficult to miss when he joined them at the shop, his shock of white hair standing out amidst the crowd, and with their party finally convened, they followed Fred and George's lead to a charming little pub owned in part by Lee Jordan, just a bit further down the street.

After lunch—and a few more drinks than they probably should have enjoyed, given it wasn't even yet two in the afternoon—they did a bit of window-shopping, and Harry managed to purchase most of his school supplies.

“You just *threw your school things away?*” Draco gasped, horrified.

“Yeah, I can't believe you'd do that, Harry,” Fred said, shaking his head. “We could've gotten *loads* of Galleons for some of that crap!”

George cleared his throat. “*Ladies and gentlemen, the first item up for bid this evening is a fine specimen of sports memorabilia: a jock strap, once worn by the Saviour of the Wizarding World, Mr. H. J. Potter, during regulation Quidditch matches at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry—*”

Definitely more drinks than they should have enjoyed, Harry decided.

Delighted as he was with the handling on his Firebolt Streak, Harry couldn't resist the urge to ogle the Nimbus 2020 hovering in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

“Now here's a question,” Ron said, doing his own fair share of ogling. “What's faster—your Firebolt, or Draco?”

“Me, *obviously*,” Draco sniffed. “Potter's always had to resort to dirty tricks to beat me; when it comes to sheer speed, you don't outfly a *dragon*.”

“One, they weren't ‘dirty tricks’,” Harry said. “And two, you raced me when I was riding one of those rickety old rigs of Perkins's. They've *probably* improved upon the speed since those models were manufactured back in—what, the 1700s?”

They continued their good-natured bickering all the way back to Grimmauld Place,

where they were only interrupted by dinner.

“I’m going to start shadowing some Ministry officials in the next week or so,” Hermione said, spooning a helping of sweetcorn onto her plate. It had been Ron’s turn this evening, and he’d recently taken a shine to all things instant, as Draco had; every dish on the table had come from a tin or packet and been zapped with a Warming Charm.

“Which department?” Harry asked.

“Magical Law Enforcement first—specifically the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office.”

“Hey!” Ron smiled. “Dad’s old haunt!”

“Sure they didn’t just stick you there because you’re Muggleborn?” Draco asked, one brow lifted.

Hermione shook her head. “I asked for it; I was hoping for something a bit low-key to start off with. All the stories I remember Arthur telling suggested to me it was mostly harmless cases.”

Ron laughed. “You’d think! He must not’ve told you about the time someone Charmed a—a—what do you call the boxes that heat stuff up quick?”

“Microwave?” Hermione supplied.

“—Charmed one of those to have his dinner ready every evening right when he got home from work.”

“What happened to him?” Harry asked.

“Damned if I know. I think all they found of him after his house was blown sky-high in the resulting explosion was a couple of teeth.” Ron speared a mini sausage from his baked beans onto his fork. “Muggle electrigrs don’t work too well around magic.”

“Electronics,” Hermione gently corrected. “And I’m sure they’d work just fine with the proper shielding.” She tapped her chin. “You know, that’s a thought. Mobile phones are starting to gain traction in Muggle society—my parents were talking about getting one so that they can better keep in contact with me.” She flushed. “I think they’re still sore

about having their memories Modified... But the point is, Patronuses and Owls are useful for communicating over long distances, but that Charm's complex magic, and Owl Post still takes a while. Mobile phones might be useful for witches and wizards who can't cast a Patronus, or who lack access to the Floo Network, like those living in areas largely populated by Muggles."

"Aw, come on, Hermione," Ron pleaded. "Can't you save your new campaign for next week?" Hermione gave him a sour look, and he quickly amended, "Just, your new Ministry mates would be devastated they didn't get to hear your ideas first."

"What're you up to, then?" Harry asked, swooping in to save Ron from shoving his foot any further into his mouth than it already was.

Ron looked like he was considering kissing him. "Fred and I've already been batting around a few ideas for some new Wheezes. I'm afraid I can't divulge the details, but you and Draco might want to be on the lookout for suspicious new sweets at school, if you catch my drift."

"How did your parents take the news of your going back to Hogwarts, Draco?" Hermione asked, perhaps thinking Draco might be feeling left out of the conversation. From the way he winced at being pulled into their cheery banter, Harry doubted that was the case.

He sighed, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "Well, Mother took my temperature, certain I was running a fever and delusional. Father did not, I'm sorry to have to tell you, have a heart attack—" Ron snapped his fingers in a gesture of disappointment. "But he did give me a lengthy lecture about how I ought to be learning to manage whatever's going to be left of the family finances after the Ministry get through taking every last Galleon they can as fines for wartime actions."

The three of them shifted uncomfortably in their seats; it was tough at times, balancing their dislike for Lucius Malfoy and desire to see him pay for all that he'd done over the years with their newfound fondness for Draco.

"But, as I told them both, I'm of age now and can make my own bad decisions. I expect they'll come around in time."

"Well, just remind your father if he gives you any trouble that you've got connections at

the Ministry now,” Hermione said with a firm nod. “That should bring Lucius to heel.”

After dinner, they bid their goodnights and returned to their rooms to get ready for bed. For Harry and Draco, there was no repeat of the previous night—nor anything similar, in part because their housemates were in residence and in part because Draco still seemed a bit sore, wincing when he took a seat or rose to his feet. It had sent a guilty little thrill through Harry every time it happened, and he’d worked very hard to keep it from showing on his features, but he wasn’t sure how successful he’d been. No, Draco would certainly let him know when he was ready for another round.

Though he wasn’t entirely sure he was going to be *allowed* a second time if he didn’t tread carefully with his plan.

He took first wash-up, scrubbing his face and—after a moment’s consideration—dabbing a drop of cologne under each ear before returning to the bedroom and sending Draco off for his evening toilette. When Draco returned, padding into their room in a fine set of silk pyjamas he’d received as a housewarming gift from his mother, it was to find a small, nondescript brown bag sitting on his side of the bed.

“...What’s that?” he asked, more wary than curious, as if he feared it might explode like the poor bloke’s microwave from Ron’s story.

“Something I picked up in Diagon Alley,” Harry said, nudging the bag closer to Draco and keeping well back himself. “I thought you might be able to use it.”

Draco lifted the bag and checked its branding, but Harry had ensured that the item was packed in a plain paper bag and simple velvet box, so as not to give anything away until it had been opened.

Draco popped the lid—revealing a pair of silver rings.

Harry swallowed. “Now—don’t freak out—”

“These are rings, Potter.” Oh *crap*; they were back to ‘Potter’ now.

“Yeah, yeah they are,” Harry said. “But *don’t freak out—*”

Draco’s nostrils flared, and his jaw tensed as he stared down at the rings, and if looks

could kill, the bands would have been reduced to ash then and there. “Why are you giving me a *ring*?”

“Will you promise to wait until *after* I’ve explained to Hex my balls off for what probably seems like a *really* forward gift and maybe leapfrogging several relationship milestones?” Draco fixed him with a sharp look, but he didn’t say anything, so Harry was going to count that as a win. “They’re...um, okay how can I put this without...” He shrugged, deciding to just go all-in with it. “They’re—*M word* rings.”

“They’re *what*?!” Draco shrieked, and Harry slapped up a *Muffliato*; the last thing he needed was Hermione or Ron barging in wondering what was going on.

“M word. You know—” Harry made a face, gritting out quietly. “*Mate*.”

“...Oh *fuck*, Potter,” Draco huffed, shoulders slumping in unmistakable relief. He leaned against one of the bedposts, his forehead pressed against his arm as he seemed to struggle to collect himself. “You cannot give me a ring and then tell me it’s an *M word ring*!” he snarled. “Say the fucking word!”

Harry’s brows knit in confusion. “But—oh.” Realisation hit him with the raw force of a bolt of lightning, and his throat went dry. “*Oh*. Oh no. No—no, that’s.” He waved his hands, frantic. “Nooo no no, I’m sorry, no. No. Not *that* M word. The—the other M word. *Our* M word.”

Draco’s eyes snapped up to meet his, steely grey and unamused. “That’s enough backpedalling, Potter.”

“R—right.” Harry ducked his head, wincing, and wondered if there was any way to recover from this. “It’s just—I noticed you were kind of...antsy, at dinner last night. And it got progressively worse as the evening wore on and we had more and more people around us. You’ve had me practically to yourself all this time, but...that’s going to change soon. We probably won’t even have our own room anymore.” Draco made a sour face. “So I was thinking that maybe it might be easier for you if you had some kind of—well...” He pointed to the ring box Draco was still clutching in his hand. “This. Especially when I’m not around to...you know...”

“*Restrain me*, I believe it was?”

“To *reassure* you,” Harry corrected. “You’ll wear one, and I’ll wear one, and no one has to know what they mean but us, if you don’t want.”

It wasn’t like they were wedding bands, after all; Harry had even gone out of his way to avoid gold.

He reached for the box, slowly so as not to spook, and took one of the rings for himself, holding out the other for Draco.

Draco frowned. “...I thought you were supposed to put this on me.”

Harry slid his own ring onto his right middle finger, where it sat cool and comfortably snug. “...Well, there’s a lot of meaning if I put it on you, I figure, and I don’t want to cheapen it.” He bobbed his head, ambivalent. “You know. If there ever came a time. Just, not saying that’s a *given*, but no one wants to rule things out and—”

“You really need to learn when to shut up, Harry,” Draco said, *finally* smiling again. He slid the ring onto several fingers, testing the fit, before deciding on the middle finger opposite Harry’s. Anyone with half a brain would be able to put two and two together, but...it was safe enough, he thought, while still doing the job.

Draco was still staring at his ring as they slid under the covers, mesmerised, and Harry could make him out as a soft blur when he removed his glasses, bringing his own ring close enough to see in the low lamplight. “Hermione and Ron are gonna ask about them, you know.”

Draco gave him a bemused look. “You didn’t tell them?”

“Why would I *tell* them?”

Draco shrugged, as if to say *How can I be expected to understand the baffling goings-on inside your peabrain?* “If they ask, I’ll just say they’re ‘M word rings’. That should be *perfectly* clear.”

Harry drew his pillow from under his head and hit Draco across the face with it, receiving a sharp squawk for his efforts. They tussled for a bit—which led to kissing, which led to hands wandering where they really shouldn’t, unless they wanted to wind up with new aches and pains come morning.

Harry collapsed back to the bed before he reached the point of no return, twining his fingers with Draco's and enjoying the melodic little tinkle of their rings clacking together.

Apropos of nothing, he asked, "Did you really hate me? Before."

Draco gave him a funny look, then softened into thought when he saw Harry was serious. Which, he *was* serious. The question came from nothing, but it didn't *mean* nothing.

"...I think I didn't know how to feel about you. I wanted you to notice me, I suppose. Focus on me. If I couldn't have you doing that positively, I'd take negatively. It was still you, obsessed with me. And when you didn't notice me, not the way I wanted you to at least, I told myself I never wanted you anyway, that you were obviously not worth my time if you saw fit to hang about with the sorts you did. Werewolves and convicted felons and—Muggleborns." He grew very quiet. "I didn't know how else I could feel, so I decided to feel hate. I'm not proud of it—"

"I didn't think you were." Harry smiled, nose wrinkling in amusement. "And I've noticed you now."

"Oh, I'd say you've done *quite* a lot more than *notice* me." He tapped a finger against Harry's arm, suggestive. "And trust that I intend to notice the *fuck* out of you at the earliest opportunity, so I'd be on my guard if I were you."

Harry surged forward, capturing Draco's lips in a firm kiss. He held there, breath caught, and only drew away when he couldn't bear it any longer. Their noses brushed, and he could feel Draco panting against his mouth. "...I like you, Draco."

"I'm flattered, but taken." He waved his fingers, flashing his ring. "Such a pity; I like you, too."

"Well, I'm kind of a big deal; everyone likes me."

"I wouldn't say that. My father's not so fond of you."

"That's half the fun of it. Besides, your mother likes me."

"My mother finds you amusing and a bit pitiful, as one might find a turtle stuck on its back and unable to right itself. She doesn't like you the way I do—at least I hope not."

“Mm, and how do you like me?”

Draco waved his wand at the door, locking it with a flick of his wrist. His fingers played at the hem of Harry’s pyjama bottoms as he sidled in close, clearly damning any unspoken rules about funny business while housemates were in residence. “How about I show you?”

~ *fin* ~