Summary

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Notes

Thanks to Shlybkwrm for beta reading xx
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Draco was an in-house reporter for the Daily Prophet, a career choice that had surprised a great many people. But, he had always been fascinated by the control the media had over the public. One disparaging article in the Prophet and the subject of said article was ruined; three hundred words between hero and pariah. It certainly seemed to Draco to be the best way to mould the world he lived in.

In the five years since the Dark Lord had been killed by his own rebounding curse, Draco had worked tirelessly to gain a reputation of presenting both sides of every story he submitted for print, to prove that he would not be swayed by public opinion or fear mongering. And it was working, he was the most requested interviewer the Prophet employed.

The irony of a former Death Eater striving for the fair presentation of facts was not lost on Draco. But the truth was that if he hadn't seen the public at their most manipulated and frightened, mostly through media coercion – with a side of torture and kidnapping – he would never have applied for the position. He was determined to raise the tone.

It was not *purely* for the good of the wizarding population that Draco strove for a higher quality of newspaper, he had been in Slytherin for a reason after all. But the benefit to himself was not something he would share willing with anybody, and thankfully his occulmency skills were still strong enough that he would never have to. Providing the truth was his private penitence. His way of apologising for all the evil he took part in, and with apology came the easing of his guilt – a rather large benefit he thought.

After completing his house arrest – handed down for Death Eater offences committed while under age, he'd never thought he'd be grateful for being stupid enough to take the Dark Mark, and commit his only recorded crimes before he turned seventeen, but he most certainly was – he had begun his employ with the Prophet. That had been three years ago, and in that time, among the truth revealing exposés and tell-all interviews Draco had found something new to worry about - the press storm tracking Harry Potter's every move.

Not that he *cared* of course, but he found it distasteful that Potter had no privacy, even five years after he saved the bloody world. 'But why should he?' was the common argument Draco faced every time he mentioned how uncomfortable he was with the level of intrusive reporting that went on in the offices of the Daily Prophet. But, as old bully hacks like Skeeter were fond of saying, 'Potter is our saviour, so he's public property.'

Draco was obviously in a small amount of personal debt to Potter; Potter with all his heroic life-saving from deadly fires and sentence-reducing testifying to the Wizengamot, et cetera, et cetera. But Draco's mother's actions at the end of the war had helped – Draco felt – to reduce the debt the name of Malfoy owed Potter. This debt might also have something to do with Draco's decision to raise the expected standard of reporting at the Prophet, but it wouldn't do to speculate.

Draco had been looking forward to the annual celebrations to be held on the second of May. Five years seemed something of a milestone. It was long enough ago to be only thought of occasionally, and Draco did like to forget that part of his life as often as possible. He was attending a party held at
Greengrass Moor, the home of his in-laws. He didn't know that Potter – through some connection of his Weasley girlfriend – had also received an invitation.

Draco had found himself at a party with more ex-Gryffindors than he was comfortable with, and had spent most of it away from the main crowd chatting up the exotic coat-check boy – out of sight of Greengrasses Senior of course, who were as unaware of Draco's penchant for cock as they were of their daughter's – Draco's wife Astoria – and her love of fanny. Theirs was a marriage for the purposes of parental placation, and it suited them fine.

Draco had consumed enough of the Greengrass's liquor to be wondering if this smiling foreign coat-boy would do a bit more than grin at him if he got him somewhere more private when it had happened.

The event that had brought him to Potter's front door.

Potter had stormed passed Draco and the coat boy, telling his Weasley girlfriend in an annoyed slur to leave him alone. Draco could not help but admire Potter a little, even drunk and in a grouch he was pleasant to look at these days.

No longer was he the runty boy Draco remembered from school, but a broad-shouldered man with a dusting of ever present stubble on his cheeks and chin. His glasses had been updated too, but the same untameable hair made him recognisable anywhere. He was not as tall as Draco was, he realised as Potter blew by, trying to shoo Ginny with one hand and throw back his drink with the other. His green dress robes billowed enough for Draco to see, to his amusement, that the man wore lace up canvas high-tops instead of the expected dress shoe. Draco looked down at his own hand stretched Italian leather and smiled, muggles really did make better shoes than wizards. Potter had disappeared around the corner into the main party and Draco had heard the metaphorical fireworks erupt.

"I don't give a fuck if you think the public has a right to know, Cuffe!" Harry shouted at Draco's boss Barnabas Cuffe, Editor in Chief of the Prophet. Draco had poked his head into the ballroom to see Potter gesturing wildly with his now empty glass, "they don't! I saved the whole damn lot of you and this is how I'm repaid? With bullshit stories and rumours spread about my life? Don't I deserve a little fucking privacy? The lot of you, nosy fucking wankers!" his glass exploded in his fist on the last word and Draco was rather impressed with the theatrics. The crowd had gone deathly silent as Barnabas cowered under Potter's furious rage. Draco had seen Granger tottering as fast as her heels would allow in Potter's direction. She grabbed him by the arm and steered him from the packed room, Potter had still been ranting, albeit at a much lower level.

This was the last time Harry Potter had been seen in public, it was now the middle of July and Draco was not the only person to have been curious of Potter's whereabouts. Every day there would be some farfetched article printed about Potter – that he was locked up in St Mungo's spell damage ward, or that he had fled the country after what Draco's colleagues called his "disgraceful behaviour." Draco found that he actually didn't resent Potter nearly as much as he used to, it was nice to know the perfect git was human after all.

Draco had been very surprised when an owl he recognised from Hogwarts as the pigmy bird belonging to Ron Weasley delivered to him, a tightly rolled slip of parchment from the supposedly mad, or perhaps country fleeing, Potter.

_Malfloy,

_I would like to meet with you to discuss a possible business venture, it will benefit your career like you won't believe. Send your reply via return owl and we can go from there._
Draco found this odd and suspicious, but Potter was, well Potter, and now Draco had a reason to talk to him. The Daily Prophet would sell out if Draco could get some proper information on the man and write a decent article. Not just the "a source close to Mr Potter" rubbish they'd been printing for the last ten weeks. Draco therefore replied quickly to Potter's note.

Potter,

This better not be a joke, I can meet you a ten on Tuesday morning. Take it or leave it.

Malfoy

It wouldn't do to seem eager.

Potter had agreed to the time, and this was how Draco came to be standing at Potter's front door. Draco knocked the brass knocker on the door of Number Twelve Grimmauld place at precisely ten am.

There was a clicking and grinding of many bolts and locks and the door swung inward to reveal the most decrepit elf Draco had ever seen. Its greying skin hung in folds from his bones, and there was a very large amount of snow white puffy hair growing from each ear that made Draco wonder how he could hear the door knocker at all.

"Master Malfoy," the elf said, forcing his creaking bones into a low bow, "it is an honour to have you in this house."

Draco felt that this was an odd greeting, even though for some reason the house was familiar to him. Not so much what he could see inside the entry way with its light coloured wood staircase and pale walls, but the when he had stood on the front step he had the most bizarre déjà vu as he looked up at the soot-stained frontage.

"I am here to see Mr Potter, I have an appointment at ten." Draco said.

"Yes of course, please follow Kreacher," the elf said stepping aside and allowing Draco to pass him into the entrance. "Master Harry will not be long, he asked me to make sure Mr Malfoy is comfortable while he waits."

Draco bristled, he did not want to give Potter the upper hand in this meeting, whatever it was for Draco would be the one in control. "I'm a busy man," he said. "I do not have time to sit waiting until Potter sees fit to meet me. You can tell Master Harry to contact me at my office." He spun on his heel and marched out the front door again.

He was only half way along the front walk and regretting every step, when the door behind him opened and a voice said, "Malfoy! Sorry I was trapped talking to – never mind, do you still have time to talk to me?"

Draco grit his teeth, "Yes Potter, I have time." He muttered as he turned and walked back towards the house.

"Oh good," Harry sighed. Draco scowled at him as he passed, Harry just smiled nervously and Draco wanted to hit him. "I'm grateful you came," Harry said, stepping around Draco to lead him up the staircase, "I didn't think you would, thought you'd be laughing all the way to Gringotts with the crap your lot could print about me now."
"That's why I'm here," Draco said. "Because whatever the reason you have asked me here is, I'm now the only reporter you have spoken with in nearly three months. Even if we just have tea and crumpets I will have accurate information to print about you."

"Accurate," Harry said with a little nod, "exactly." He pushed open the door to a long room, lit by long sash windows that looked out over the small and unkempt square outside, there were framed photographs of Gryffindors all over the walls and Draco felt for the first time like he was on enemy territory. The elf was already present and pouring tea, and Harry gestured for Draco to sit.

Striving to appear unruffled and at ease despite tens of pairs of unfriendly eyes watching him, Draco sat on one of the wide couches and accepted his tea from the elf, he took a sip and then placed it on the table in front of him. Then he took his notebook and quill from his satchel, flipped it open and looked expectantly at Potter.

The elf had delivered Harry a cup and saucer too, and he murmured, "Thanks Kreacher, we'll be fine for a while, I'd like for you to have a rest now."

"Yes Master." Kreacher said, and he bowed again in Draco's direction before he vanished with a resounding crack.

Draco found the whole scene to be completely odd, and it must have shown on his face because Harry said, "He's not feeling well, but the silly git won't rest unless I order him too, so," he shrugged, "I order him to."

"Noble Potter," Draco said, barely catching the sneer before it slipped out. Why should Potter being nice to his elf make Draco want to roll his eyes? Lots of people were nice to their house elves, it was just so Potter of him. "We're here for business," Draco said, forcing his voice to sound pleasant once more, "What can I do for you?"

"I've had an idea," he said, "You were there that night, at Greengrass Moor, when I …" he trailed off looking embarrassed

"When you told everyone they ought to be fucking grateful and leave you the hell alone? Yes, it's one of my fondest memories." Draco wasn't trying to annoy, it was true, and the image of Potter swearing at Draco's idiot, fame-whore of a boss was something that never failed to make him smile.

Harry flushed, "I didn't mean it, not in the way it came out, and certainly I didn't mean to shout it at the editor of the Prophet."

"Potter," Draco said calmly, "if you want me to write and print an apology from you I'm sorry, but I won't. I've spent too long earning a reputation to ruin it with that sort of nonsense."

"No, no, that's not what I want." Harry said shaking his head and causing his hair to flop about, "I think I was poisoned at the reception, I would never normally say those things –"

"Merlin, that's the worst excuse I've ever heard!" Draco snapped his notebook shut, feeling irked that Potter was mad after all, "absolutely not. Go and see Xeno if you want someone to print tripe for you."

"Malfyoy, just listen please, this isn't about that, the poison, or whatever happened that night – I promise."

"I'm listening," Draco said, "get a move on Potter, I have things to do."

"Okay, okay," Harry said, flapping his tea free hand at Draco, "it won't take long. Alfred Worple
approached me about doing an auto-biography last month," Harry said, "I'd love to know how he found me, but anyway, he seemed to think if people were reminded just how … er, saviour-y, I was once upon a time then the hate mail might die down. I told him no because I don't know him, but I think he may have had a point, not that I want to appear saviour-y but I was sick and tired of the badgering before the anniversary, and of the lies printed about me, and all the bullshit." Draco nodded, he already knew he and Potter were on the same page when it came to that.

"I thought that if I commissioned someone to write my life story, the real one, no embellishments, just the facts, then maybe people wouldn't be so keen to fill in the gaps with nonsense."

Draco stared for a moment, "Are you serious Potter?" He fought to keep his face impassive, Draco could see quite clearly where this was going and it was a million times better than his article about the fallen saviour and his crumpets.

"Very," Harry said. "I like your articles, your style, I've never read anything of yours that didn't come across as believable fact."

Draco was trying very hard not to look too pleased at the praise, or think about why it should feel so good to hear it from Potter. "You make me sound like old Binns, solid believable fact; you won't make any money from a dry, factual account of your life. People won't buy if it reads like an encyclopaedia."

Harry gave him a funny look, the corner of his mouth twitched as though he wanted to smile, "I'll give the proceeds to charity anyway, it's not like I need more money. And my life fact by fact still wouldn't be dry reading; I think you'll remember that I once broke out of Gringotts while riding a dragon?"

Draco snorted in an effort not to laugh, "Well," he said, "you may have a point there Potter."

"So, that's why I asked to meet with you, I wanted to know if you're available for hire. I know it would be quite an undertaking, so I understand if it's not possible but …" he looked hopefully at Draco.

"Just to be clear," Draco said, "You wish to tell your life story in the hope that it will satiate the wizarding world's obsession with you, and make them forgive you for calling them fucking ingrates."

"I never called them that!" Harry interrupted.

Draco flipped a hand in dismissal and smirked, "Well whatever you said, you hope this book will, what? Distract them? Or actually just remind them that technically everything you said was true, and maybe they should treat you and your personal life with a bit more respect?"

"A bit of both," Harry said, "I don't – well, to be honest I'd just like them to get bored with me so I can have a normal life, so hopefully information overload might do that, they won't be able to speculate on my life if there are no gaps, if there is a written record that can't be disputed."

Draco was surprised, Potter was quite possibly onto something. There could be no more rumours about his past if he willing told everyone everything. He tapped his quill against the edge of the notebook as he said, "But I despise you Potter, our animosity at school is famous, why would anyone read something written about you by someone that hates you?"

Harry's forehead was crinkled in disbelieving frown, "Er, that's exactly why – they all want more reason to hate me at the moment and will assume that you would never write anything flattering
about me….

Draco felt mildly foolish for not realising that himself. "I'm not cheap Potter," he said to cover his embarrassment, "and you'll have to tell me, me every dirty little secret, no matter its relevance to the book."

Harry nodded "Yes I know. Not that I have any proper secrets anyway."

"We'll see," said Draco. "I'll want more than just your version of events where possible, as many points of view as I can get."

"Sure," Harry said, "Ron will be dead chuffed at having to sit down with you."

Draco twitched uncomfortably at the impending gryffin-fest he would have to endure, "My price just doubled."

Harry grinned, "Well, you should thank Hermione for making you so wealthy then, it was her idea to ask you."

"That's a relief," Draco said, "I thought you'd actually developed some intelligence for a moment."

Harry smiled at him, "Heaven forbid," he said. "So you'll do it?"

"I'll have my solicitor draw up a contract, owl me your legal advisors details so they can correspond. If you're happy with my proposal we will begin." Draco stood from his seat and gathered his things. It was unsettling to have Potter looking at him with no disdain or suspicion like at school, Draco thought as he made his way back down stairs, Potter following in his wake. Directly after the war the green eyes had been filled with pity instead of anger in their brief meetings. This was certainly an improvement. It was as though Potter had truly moved on from all of that, something that Draco was not expecting, he had thought Potter would use him for his reputation, put the history aside, rather than just ignore it completely as he seemed to be doing.

Draco turned as he reached the door and held out his hand, Harry shook it and Draco said, "I know we progressed passed the hexing and name-calling a while ago Potter but I was not expecting to enjoy our meeting, I was mistaken."

The swallowing of twelve years' worth of one-upmanship and pride was quite worth it to see the stunned look on Potter's face. He rubbed his hand over his messy hair and stuttered, "Er… good. Me too?"

Draco found the surprised expression somewhat endearing, so he smiled properly at Potter for the first time, possibly ever, and said "My solicitor will be in touch." Before heading down the front steps and into the sunny July morning.
It took Cuthbert Higgs of the Diagon Alley solicitors, Higgs, Smith and Sharfiq a week to draft a satisfactory contract to send to Potter's lawyer. Higgs assured Draco that every single facet of Potter's life was now legally available to him, and, most importantly, not to anybody else. For the next ten years via print, anyway.

Intriguingly, the contract was retuned, signed and agreed to with no amendments or additions, within two days of it being sent out. Either Potter's lawyer was an idiot or Potter actually trusted Draco. When he looked at the familiar name on the papers Hermione Granger-Weasley, assistant counsel, Wizengamot, Draco felt an unexpected jolt of pride at the obvious display of Potter's trust.

"Draco?" Barnabas Cuffe's voice called from his office, Draco had been sitting at his desk on the edge of the bullpen, flipping through the contract Potter had sent back so un-addendum'd, when he'd heard the Editor's summons.

Draco sighed and got to his feet, he truly detested Cuffe. The shallow pillock would do almost anything to sell a paper. But since it was his good will that had gotten Draco his job he was unfortunately forced to grin and bear it.

Old Cuffe had survived the aftermath of the war, job and reputation intact. Draco still wasn't sure how, because really, all the bullshit that The Prophet printed in the last ten years had been signed off by Cuffe. He was as guilty of adding to the unhappiness of the wizards of Britain as many of the Death Eaters in Azkaban. The thing about Cuffe was, even with his highly questionable tactics, and extremely flexible take on the phrase "ethical reporting" he still managed to be entertaining.

"What can I do for you Barny?" Draco asked, he leaned against the door frame of the office and hitched a smile on his face, he had a feeling that it looked more like a leer but in all honesty he didn't give a shit. Draco had his plan – before he was thirty he would have Cuffe's job, he was set on that. He was currently angling for equal status with Betty Braithwaite who was the Arts and Lifestyle Director, a prissy title for what was actually an important position. Everyone from the head of sports to the gaggle of advice columnists The Prophet employed reported to her. Draco was the authority on current events and political news, and his friend Marcus ran finance. Cuffe over saw the lot of them, including freelances like troll-face Skeeter and her bully bunch.

"Draco lad, I'm not a hundred percent on this." he held up what appeared to be Draco's last submission, an inquiry into suspected poaching in the Cotswolds of a medicinal water-dwelling grass, "are you sure there's no more to the story?"

"Reasonably," Draco said, "Trevor Mulligan was very cagey with me though, said Betty had been talking to him the day before – I don't know what she was doing out there … fishy if you ask me…" Draco said leadingly, trying to get a rise out of Cuffe.

"She thought it would go nicely as back ground on the area for the summer wedding locations spread," he said dismissively, "lots of the paddocks out there are rented for couples to transfigure their own gardens for ceremonies,"

"Not news," Draco said under his breath.

"Yes, yes," Cuffe said impatiently, "I know you're far more important with your truth telling."

Draco smirked, "I am."
"Importance aside, this is a bit light," he waved the paper again, "it reads flat, and a story like this should be significant, Spikerush grass is used in most memory potions you know, I wouldn't be surprised if there is some dark activity going on there."

"You mean, you want the public to think there is dark activity going on there." Draco said. Of course Draco knew Spikerush was used in memory potions, he'd done his research, it was also a main ingredient in Veritaserum but that was beside the point, "Look, the stuff grows there wild," Draco said, "and it's so expensive to get at the apothecary Mulligan thought someone desperate for a bit of cash had come out and dug a bit up. That's all. If Riddle is back from the dead he'll hardly be on his hands and knees in Trev's run-off stream digging up pharmaceuticals."

Cuffe fixed Draco with a weary look, "Betty says Mulligan told her he'd seen some dodgy looking blokes hanging around, isn't that worth a second visit?"

Draco was absolutely sure both Cuffe and his bull-dog Betty were making up the 'dodgy blokes' to pad the story. "I'll see what I can do," Draco said, deciding to pick his battles, "I wanted to ask you a favour actually." he added.

"Of course," Cuffe said magnanimously, "you know your happiness is important to me." Draco raised a disbelieving eyebrow and Cuffe frowned, "Fine, you know your continuing to work for me, and help keep circulation up is important to me, how can I help?"

Draco wanted to smile at the Editor's candour, Cuffe and Draco's father had been dorm-mates at Hogwarts, this tended to afford Draco a bit more leniency than others got from his boss. "I've taken a sub-contract, writing an auto-biography, so I'll be out of the office a bit more often but I should still be able to manage my current job list." Draco said.

"Oh whose?" Cuffe said immediately, leaning forward his eyes glinting enthusiastically, "Will they give you authority for excerpt printing? You know it will be excellent for their sales."

Draco couldn't help but grin, "and ours, but we'll just have to wait on that. Only just got the contract back today."

"Who Draco?" Cuffe pressed.

"And have to sue myself? Foolish man." Draco tutted and Cuffe looked most put out.

Harry grunted and tugged harder, "Bastarding thing," he snarled, as the weed he was trying to pull from the little garden at Grimmauld Place refused to budge.

Harry felt the term weed could only be used in the loosest sense. The damn plant bared no resemblance to the small patches of bittercress he had plucked from Aunt Petunia's flower beds for most of his childhood. This monstrosity had vines as thick as Harry's arms and temperament similar to a Blast-ended Skrewt. It seemed quite resolute that it was staying in the soil.

"Fine!" he said, and released it. Its thick, sinuous branches curling in on itself once more. "You know," he said conversationally, flopping down on the grass at the garden edge and brushing earth from his knees, "I wrote to Neville about you," Harry wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but the plant seemed to still, as though listening. "He said if you won't be pulled out I should just reducto you," He gave the succulent a stern look. "Hard to hang on to the ground if you're in a hundred pieces."

Harry was quite sure he was walking the path to madness of late. But then, he supposed, that when you have no one to talk to except uppity weeds and a flu-riddled Kreacher it was not that surprising. He'd begun to appreciate the solitary existence Sirius had lived in this house in the months leading up
to his death. But at least Harry's exile was self-imposed, sort of.

Ginny was travelling with The Harpies for the summer Quidditch season on the continent, he'd not seen her in person since the morning after the party that had got him into this mess. She was only able to floo once a week due to The Harpies militant coach – *Fuhrer*, Harry affectionately called her – and her rules about contact with the opposite sex: life-threatening situations only. Harry didn't mind, he would expect Ginny to put up with the same if their roles were reversed. He could admit he was getting bored of his own company lately though. Hermione and Ron's daughter Rose was six months old and a total time-vacuum for the couple. Rosie was a gorgeous wee thing, and Harry's god-daughter. But he was definitely looking forward to her being a bit older, there was a limit to how long a man could be expected to converse in coos.

Along with their daughter, Hermione's position with the Ministry and Ron's recent promotion in the Aurors it was quite understandable that their visits to Harry had dropped off. He had seen Hermione briefly when she'd explained the contract for his book to him, but that was a while ago now … he thought. Time passed in unexpected blocks for Harry at the moment. With no routine to speak of, the days disappeared quickly, but hours seemed to drag on at a pathetic pace.

This was how he'd ended up warring with the old gnarled garden at the back of Grimmauld place. He needed something to fill his days. The garden was definitely urban-London-sized: tiny. But it contained enough mad and magically altered greenery to keep Harry on his toes.

He was excited today, Malfoy had arranged to start their sessions this afternoon. Harry wasn't sure what it would involve, this book writing lark. Hermione had already sent over an intimidating collection of folders and notes with instructions for him to start drafting his story. The extensiveness of Hermione's work made Harry think that this biography was not a spur of the moment suggestion as it had originally seemed. He wondered how long she had been organising it, waiting for the right time to bring it up.

The fact that he was looking forward to a visit from Malfoy bothered Harry surprisingly little. His old rival seemed different the last time they met, still the same easy to rile temper, but Draco had lacked the bitterness that had always made up so much of his personality. Harry reasoned that if Malfoy could be pleasant and have a whole different life after the war, then he was a good person to be around – Harry himself was entirely unsure how to create a life separate from his past.

With lifted spirits at the thought of real actual human company in a few hours, Harry got to his feet and readied himself for another go at the reluctant weed.

The twenty fifth of July had begun as a normal summer's day. By two in the afternoon however the sun was beating down with desert-worthy fervour. Draco shucked his suit jacket as he waited for entry at Grimmauld Place. He was not sure what to expect of these meetings. He was a little apprehensive about having to listen to Potter boast about his life, and his version of certain events Draco had done his best to repress, but he was a professional. If he could listen to warty Trevor Mulligan talk about his stolen fucking waterweed, then he could handle this. At least Potter was decent to look at.

The bolts began to grind shortly after Draco knocked and the door was flung inward. Standing in the dim entryway was Potter, looking much better prepared for the sporadic London heat in a thin blue t-shirt that was covered in splashes of what looked like mud, with a broad grin on his face.

"Hi!" he said, somewhat breathlessly, "Come in," Draco stepped over the threshold as Harry continued "I'm worried you're going to regret agreeing to this, I have quite a bit of stuff for you already."
Taken aback by this light-hearted greeting, Draco's reply was sharper than he meant it to be. "I'm a journalist Potter, the more information the better." It was confusing to be greeted so pleasantly, like Potter really was pleased that he was going to be spending the afternoon with his old school nemesis. Draco didn't comment on the cheerfulness, perhaps Potter was a closet essence of euphoria addict, it wouldn't be polite to draw attention.

He followed Harry up through the house, they passed the room they had sat in last time and Draco paused, expecting to go in but Harry continued his upward march. They entered a room on the third floor, a well-equipped library. The walls were lined with books, a Granger worthy amount of books. There were thick rugs covering most of the timber floor, and an unusual assortment of furniture dotted around the room that didn't really make sense to Draco, but wasn't unappealing overall. "Is this Granger's bedroom in the house of Potter?" Draco asked.

Harry started to laugh, "Sometimes," he said. "I think it's her way of surviving without the Hogwarts library. I'm sure there used to much less books than this, she's been adding to it."

Draco put his jacket on the back of a tall winged armchair and said, "I'm surprised you would dedicate a room for this purpose," realising belatedly how condescending he sounded.

"I didn't choose it," Harry said lightly, not biting at the insult, "but I would have thought you'd know that – didn't you ever come here as a child?"

Draco frowned as he folded back the cuffs on his shirt, it was cooler in the house than on the baking front step, but not by much, "I wouldn't think so…" He said slowly.

"Your mother's aunt lived here, and probably heaps of her relatives, this is the old Black Family residence".

"It is?" Draco said interestedly, suddenly he had a flashing memory – a pale faced, dark haired crone of a woman reaching toward his cheek with black lacquered fingernails, he shuddered. "Thank you Potter," he said, "I think that memory could have stayed repressed."

Harry chuckled and said cryptically, "You're lucky you never had to see the portrait. Right," he said, clapping his hands together, his good mood almost palpable, "I didn't know how you wanted to do this, but I figured you'd need notes of some kind," he grimaced apoplectically, "and when I say I, I mean Hermione, she has also provided you with a timeline reference index," Harry gestured to a stack of ordinary muggle binders on the desk, and Draco felt his eyes widen, "I know," Harry said, "I feel almost irrelevant in the writing of my own story."

"I assure you that will not be the case." Draco said, taking a seat at the desk the folders were piled on. He pulled his papers from his satchel and said, "Granger was right, I will need a written account from you of all important events and residences, also the names of anyone and everyone who can corroborate, or give a differing point of view on the events." He looked down his list of requirements, "I will need a copy of that," he pointed his wand at the index folders and muttered "Geminio" and duplicates popped into existence. "You will need to give one of these –" he rifled through his papers to find the form he was looking for, "– ah," he said, "one of these," he held the pages out to Harry, "to anyone you want me to speak to."

Harry was looking a little overwhelmed at the efficiency, "What is it?"

"Confidentiality Agreement, you really don't want anyone talking to the press before we've even got this off the ground."

Harry nodded. "Okay, anything else?"
Draco sighed, "Yes Potter." He retrieved several colour coded folders, "These are for your notes, blue for pre-Hogwarts so that's everything thing up to September '91. These," he flicked his thumb across a red, green, purple, yellow, orange and pink labelled stack, "are for each year at school, I thought it best to record in school years, September to June because it's easier to recall events that way. This," he indicated a black labelled folder, "is for July '97 through to May '98," Harry raised his eyebrows at the colour choice and Draco said, "It seemed fitting. And this one," he continued pointing to a gold stickered folder, "is for everything after."

"Very funny," Harry said.

"I thought so," Draco agreed, "you were dubbed the golden trio after all."

Harry rolled his eyes, and then said "Okay then, Hermione told me to write my notes in chronological order because I'd be less likely to forget things that way."

"She is correct," Draco said.

"Good, so I've done up to the end of '91, my first Christmas at Hogwarts." Harry sifted through the mounds of paper on the desk and found several sheets of parchment covered in what was obviously his own messy hand.

"Excellent," Draco said, taking them from him, "I'll have a look through this now if you don't mind me hanging about, I'd like to have a full draft done in two months, and that will be easier if you're recording the events in an easy to follow style, If I have any suggestions for changes I'll add them to this."

"No problem," Harry said, "do you want a drink or something? Ginny sent me some of that fancy Swiss Butterbeer for an early birthday present, it's great."

"I'm not a fan to be honest," Draco smiled, "but I'd love a cup of tea." he said, "You can't go wrong with tea."

"True," Harry agreed, "Kreacher has the flu, poor little bugger, so I'll go and make us some, milk and sugar?"

He nodded, and Harry left the room, Draco sighed to himself, he was struggling to reconcile this cheerful, grinning Potter with the one he thought he'd known for most of his life. It seemed over the top, and it made him wary, was Potter up to something? Had he developed a dependence on cheering charms? Maybe he really was using euphoria recreationally, it was all very suspicious.

Harry re-entered the library carrying a tea tray and Draco said suddenly, "Potter?" Harry looked at him and he asked, "Are you on drugs?"

"Er, no." Harry snorted, "Why?" he asked, as he put the tray on the edge of the desk and took a seat opposite Draco.

"Because, this is all so...cordial," Draco burst out in frustration. "You do remember who I am? We spent most of our lives doing nasty and horrible things to each other?"

Harry nodded as he poured the tea, "I know, you're snarky, pointy Malfoy, I just don't want to care about that shit anymore."

"Pointy?" Draco said, mildly offended, "I think you mean well defined."

Harry shrugged, and gave a little snicker, "Whatever." He passed Draco a cup and said, "You've
made it pretty obvious with all your unbiased news articles that you've changed a bit from the wanker who stomped on my face, and I figure if you can do that, why can't I be someone other than the idiot who nearly sliced you in half?"

"I suppose," Draco said slowly. "But those things did happen, and it's not like we need to be friends to write this book."

"Yeah but…" Harry trailed off looking a little hurt as he stirred sugar into his tea.

"Merlin Potter," Draco grumbled, feeling a bit guilty, "anyone would think you had no friends."

"I don't really at the moment," he admitted, "Ginny is on the European summer circuit with their man hating coach, so obviously she doesn't get time to floo very often, Hermione calls when she can but they have the baby, and Ron has looked like he's about to pass out every time I've seen him." Harry smiled fondly and sat back with his cup, "He's head of my old team at the Ministry now, and has baby-zombie-itis on top of that. Last time we had a beer he fell asleep before the take-away showed up.

"Head of your old team?" Draco asked, "but surely that's just temporary." he said, wondering all of a sudden why he hadn't realised Potter disappearing from public life meant the Ministry was one super-Auror short.

Harry shook his head, "Nope. I quit. It's a bit hard to go unnoticed when you're me, and I wasn't keen on living under polyjuice for the rest of my career. And I was putting the others in danger, it's awfully hard to be taken seriously when the people you're trying to help are asking for autographs."

"Wait," Draco frowned, "so you have no job, and don't leave the house because of the press and your friends don't visit?" Now it made sense, no wonder Potter was so bloody happy to see him, if Delores Umbridge turned up he'd probably make her a cup of tea. Draco tried not to feel disappointed.

Harry shrugged again, "It's not as bad as it seems, I'm still sorting out the garden at the back, and now I've got homework to do for you."

"But what on earth did you do all day? Before we started this?"

"Like I said, gardening, reading, wanking, I dunno – normal stuff, I only really got bored a couple of weeks ago."

Wanking? Good grief the man had definitely forgotten how to have a conversation, and now Draco was stuck with a not unappealing, but quite distracting mental image. "So, I'm the only person you've seen in how long?" He asked in an effort to control his wandering mind.

"I talked to Hermione when she looked at the contract for me –"

"Potter that was two weeks ago"

"Was it?" he looked confused, "No wonder I've been looking forward to this a ridiculous amount."

"Okay Potter," Draco said worriedly, "I suddenly feel like the deadline I've set for this book is nowhere near close enough. You need contact with more than one person. You'll go mental otherwise."

"Yeah I know," Harry nodded, and said almost to himself, "Eventually."
Draco had no idea what to say at the sudden maudlin change to the conversation. He picked up the copied folder that Granger had put together and flipped through it, the woman was thorough he had to admit. There was a list of addresses for contacts to verify the information. A fat packet of photographs at the back looked very promising, merlin, Granger had done half the work for him. They sat in silence for a long time it felt to Draco, long enough for Potter to go and make more tea.

"Can I ask you a question?" Harry's voice broke into Draco's line of thought.

Draco looked up to see him lying on one of the mismatched couches with his hands behind his head. "You can." Draco said not able to understand how the man could go from enthusiastic happiness to sudden random depression to pensive all within a few hours.

"Hypothetically … what would you do, if the one thing everyone thinks is right, the thing that makes everyone around you happy, was the one thing that made you unhappy?"

"Would you like an answer that is a vague as the question?" Draco asked thinking Potter really was odder than he'd ever known.

Harry turned his head on the couch to look at him sheepishly, "yes?"

Draco sighed and decided to humour him, "If it was me it wouldn't matter if everyone else was happy. If I wasn't, it would need to be changed." Harry frowned at him and Draco continued with an almost-laugh, "But it's you so I would say, based on the current evidence of self-sacrificing idiocy you have presented in your life so far, you will put up with whatever it is until someone steps in." then he added dramatically, "Or you die."

Harry flipped him two fingers, but sighed and said, "You're probably right."
Chapter 3

They were alone in the library in Grimmauld place, the room lit only by the desk lamp, and for some reason the floating bubble lights Draco had only ever seen at St Mungo’s. The lights bobbed about the ceiling casting weird flickering shadows across the bookshelf covered walls. Harry moaned and Draco looked around to see him laid back on the couch next to him. His t-shirt was pushed up and his jeans undone, his hand moving suggestively in the confines of his boxers. Harry tuned his head and smiled lazily at Draco with glazed eyes, white teeth sinking into his bottom lip. He moaned again as Draco made eye contact and his hand moved faster, "Draco," he murmured, a sheen of sweat made him shine oddly in the strangely lit room. Draco reached a hand out to touch Harry as he sat there, panting and repeating Draco's name over and over as he stroked himself. But before Draco's finger-tips could make contact it suddenly went dark.

Draco woke slick with sweat, his own rock hard cock already in hand. It only took four pulls before his whole body jerked and he came, the spunk coating his hand as he shuddered in the wake of powerful release.

*Unprofessional,* was the first coherent thought that flitted across Draco's mind, *enjoyable,* but unprofessional. "Idiot Potter," he mumbled as he reached for his wand to clean the mess.

It had been six days since Potter had blurted out that he spent his free time wanking. Since then Draco had been treated to three night-time imaginings of what that might look like. And, to be frank, he felt a little pervy about the whole thing, but that was only because he enjoyed them a little too much.

"Are you going out again this afternoon Draco?"

It was Marcus Belby, the financial reporter for The Prophet, and resident office flirt. Draco looked up from where he sat at his desk to see Marc flipping through Draco's schedule.

"Who's H?" he asked looking at the afternoons Draco had blocked out twice a week. "New boyfriend?" Marc batted his eyelashes and made smooching noises through his puckered up lips. "Brave of you to skip out on work for a shag, Betty would do her nut."

Draco rolled his eyes; he couldn't be further from the truth. This afternoon Draco was going to visit Weasley at the Auror offices, to talk about a *flying car* of all ridiculous things. But for Marc everything had something to do with sex. He was indiscriminate in his choice of partner, and Draco was quite proud to have never fallen for the bright brown eyes and dimpled chin, not that Marc had't tried in the beginning. But after countless shunned advances – and a well-placed stinging hex – he had given up, and now they had a surprisingly strong friendship.

Draco snatched the schedule away from him. "Have a little class, Belby," he said, and then added loftily, "for all you know it stands for Hospital, where I'm a saint, and read books to children."

"It doesn't though," Marc said with a snicker. "Come on, it's lunch, and your day to shout. I need some advice."

Dreading to think what sort of cock, or possibly clunge-related mishap he was going to have to advise his friend on, Draco got to his feet and followed him from the office.

Diagon Alley was busy with the odd mix of loitering teenagers and elderly shoppers that was found
only on weekday lunchtimes during the Hogwarts holidays. A group of what Draco hoped very much were at least seventh year girls, sat outside Florean Fortescue's in bright summer singlet's and barely-there shorts. They whispered behind their hands and shot flirtatious looks in Draco and Marc's direction as they passed. Draco gave them a look that hopefully said *I'm a busy and important adult, don't waste your time*, while Belby – completely unsurprisingly – flashed a grin and winked, causing a marked upswing in giggle volume.

They finally reached the brick archway, un-accosted by teenage girls, and wove their way through the lunch rush in the Leaky Cauldron where they found a cramped corner table. Hannah Longbottom-nee-Abbot had been the cook for Tom since the previous summer and the quality of food had vastly improved. As had the standard of patron. Their orders were taken by a brightly smiling girl with spiky black hair and a mouthful of Droobles Best. She returned quickly enough with their meals that Draco could overlook the chewing for the sake of efficiency.

Draco had just taken a sip from his pint - it was *nearly* Friday – when Marcus spoke, "I'm having an ethical dilemma." he said, looking at Draco with an expression that suggested he could smell something unpleasant. Draco thought it was most likely to be from having to admit to having ethics in the first place.

"You are?" Draco asked, trying to keep the irony out of his voice, and failing. He picked up his fork and started to eat, Hannah really did make a brilliant caesar salad.

"Yes," Marc said emphatically, "it's about work, you knob."

"Oh right," said Draco, slightly mollified, "sorry. Did Betty ask you to bend over for one of her sources again?"

"No, tosser," Marc grumbled, "I know it was you that started that rumour."

"It's not a rumour if it actually occurred, Belby," Draco said haughtily, "then it's what we in the business call a scandal."

"Fuck off," Marcus laughed, "anyway; remember that story on redundancies in the Treasury Office?"

"Yes," Draco said, "you hit on Stebbins and he wouldn't stop complaining to me about it. I have to deal with that lot all the time remember, not just when you think there's gold missing."

Marcus flapped his hand and said, "Whatever, listen, I know there is something going on with the quarterly figures coming out of Treasury, but I can't get anyone to give me a straight answer. The Ministry is reporting a downturn now that the reparations from Death Eater estates are closed, but even taking that into account it doesn't balance."

"Really?" Draco asked, "So you think they're diverting galleons… or funding something they'd rather not advertise?"

"I'm just not sure; they're all so tight lipped." Marc sighed, "Betty says I should use Sententia on one of the lower downs and see if it gets me anything, but I've never had to do that, feels a bit like cheating." He chewed thoughtfully "But it probably would work, they're all so pissy with their bosses getting paid three times what they do."

"Hold on," said Draco, his fork stopping halfway to his mouth, "use Sententia? What's that?"

Marc swallowed and said, "You know, the potion, the girls over in Lifestyle all use it to get the sources to give better interviews, makes them all chatty and stuff."
Draco’s fork fell with a clatter of steal on china, little bits of anchovy covered crouton ricocheted all over Draco’s tie. "They what?" He gasped.

Marc looked confused and drew his wand, he vanished the crumbs from Draco’s tie and said, "Didn’t you know? I thought you just didn’t use it on principal, out of pride or whatever," Draco was still too horrified to speak as Marc continued, "Like I said, feels a bit lazy, but it’s not like it makes them lie so it’s all above board."

"Above …" Draco said weakly. He gathered his thoughts and asked, "Do the interviewees take it willingly?"

"Er, no," Marc grimaced, "the girls tend to put it in the table water. I can't believe you don't know, Willis in sports swears by it."

"B-but," Draco stuttered, incensed, "but they're drugging them!"

"Yeah but it's not dangerous." Marc said looking bewildered at what he obviously thought was an overreaction on Draco’s part.

"It's un-ethical," Draco said scathingly, anger bubbling to the surface frighteningly quickly, he folded his napkin viciously for something to focus on and spoke in an urgent whisper, "did you really think I wouldn't care about this? After all the shit I've put up with gain peoples trust. The Celeb-watch whores are fucking drugging people? Merlin!" Draco threw down his napkin in punctuation and sculled the last of his pint. Then he pushed out his chair and said firmly, "Whatever you do, don't give it to anyone at the Ministry Marc, they'll put you in prison for espionage or something when they find out." And, enjoying the dramatics despite the seriousness of the situation, he turned and left a stunned Marc still sitting at the table with Draco’s half-eaten lunch.

"Cuffe!" Draco barked as he stormed into his office, he slammed the door behind him as he entered and the little roll-down blind over the glass window bounced and rattled, "Do you know about this Sententia shit?" Cuff’s uneasy look told Draco everything he needed to know. "You bastard." He snarled, "Marcus just asked me if he should be using it to get more information out of lackeys at the Ministry, that is so unbelievably illegal."

"You told him no I hope?" Cuffe asked calmly. He shuffled a stack of parchment on his desk and looked at Draco expectantly.

"Of course I told him no!" Draco said indignantly. "How long has this been going on?"

Cuffe sighed, "Not that long. Six months? It was Betty's idea." Draco drew a breath to say what he thought of Betty but Cuffe spoke first, still calm, still reasonable, still ridiculously infuriating, "Draco, you must think about this from a business perspective, we need more candid interviews, Sententia just makes people more opinionated, that's all."

Draco was at a loss, "This is insane." He muttered.

"The people already think the things they say," Cuffe continued placating, "it's not like we're telling lies about them."

"Yeah," Draco said his anger returning sharply, "but you do that too! How are readers supposed to know the difference between a regular interview, or one where the subject has been drugged or one that is based on rumours?" he paused and then said in frustration, "Rumours that were probably started by this fucking potion!"

Cuff shrugged, "I've told Betty you'd react like this. She'll be angry with Belby for telling you."
"Yes, because that's the biggest problem," Draco said sarcastically, "my reaction. At least Marc thought about it, sweet Circe don't people deserve privacy in their personal thoughts?"

"Draco, you don't care about these people, the ones who have been given Sententia are nobodies, sources on celebrity nonsense, and I'd never condone the use of it in a serious interview."

"Well perhaps you should have a talk with Willis in sports," Draco said bluntly, "he's the one who suggested Marc drug a minor cabinet member of the bloody Wizengamot. There will be law suits you realise."

Cuffe narrowed his eyes at Draco, "Really? How can you even prove it? One finance reporter's word?" His sneer was both threatening and at the same time, strangely disappointed, "I gave you this job because I knew your father and believed you would be good at it –"

"I am bloody good at it." Draco interrupted, "So good I don't need to lubricate my subjects with chatty-juice to get a half-decent conversation out of them."

"We'd get by without you." Cuff said petulantly.

"Yes, you probably would," Draco said; his heart began to pound, whatever he said he didn't want to lose his job over it. "A monopoly on the market does that for you. But if I quit, and I don't know, start my own paper, one that explains why The Prophet has such candid interviews, what do you think will happen then?" His pulse thudded in his ears as the bluff left his mouth seemingly without his consent. *Fuck*

But Cuff just glared, and Draco decided to push his advantage, "So tell Betty to stop using Sententia and go back to doing her job properly –"

"Good grief, Mr Malfoy," said a chillingly cloying female voice from behind him, "That's awfully quaint, telling your Editor In Chief how to run his staff."

Draco turned to see none other than Betty-bitchface-Braithwait standing in the doorway. Tall and slender with French-rolled cinnamon locks, and a string of pearls drawing the eye to the not-quite-proper cut of her blouse. It was easy to see why Cuffe did everything she asked – he was hoping to get his end away.

"Don't make threats you can't keep," she said, her heels click-clacking on the wooden floor as she moved briskly across the room, she stood behind Cuffe and put her peach-polished fingers gently on his shoulder, *maybe Cuffe was already getting his end away* Draco thought as Betty's lip curled, "You have nowhere near enough capital to start a paper that could compete with us."

Draco knew she was right, war reparations had left enough gold in the Malfoy vault to see his widowed mother comfortably to the end of her days, but that was all. "Marc said it was safe," he said trying to move away from his rash talk of resignation. He needed his job.

"It is," Betty said snapping out of her defensive stance at once, it was actually a little disorientating to be glared at so venomously one minute and smiled at the next, "Side effects are minimal."

"Minimal? Meaning there are some."

"Yes, of course," Betty said peevishly, "mood swings, the occasional headache, but it's only prolonged ingestion that does that. I had one girl," she said, her tone becoming gossipy, she snapped her fingers and looked at Cuffe, "You know, she was a source on that Magpies player who got caught cheating on his wife." She turned back to Draco, "That was when we first started using it, she was given it so much she started blurting out things she didn't mean to say, but she's fine now."
"Well thank goodness for that." Draco said trying very hard not to sound sarcastic. "Aren't you concerned that the public will find out?" he asked, genuinely curious "The Prophet might survive but you two won't. The board will have you out on your arse if something like this is even hinted at by some independent."

Cuffe and Betty shared a quick glance, and Betty said, "You're right Draco. The only thing is we'd all be tarred then, who's to say that you haven't used it? The public might trust you now… but if someone suggested you had obtained all your infamous facts less than honourably, and mentions of your Death Eater connections were made…"

Draco felt his stomach drop. She was right yet again, the public were so fickle, look at Potter, he literally saved the world and they had turned on him eventually. A few truth-telling interviews would buy Draco no faith at all in comparison. He was stuck, for now.

"Twenty three Harry," Ginny said quietly, her lips were right next to his ear, her warm breath tickled. "That's a proper grown up."

He gave a little laugh, "Because I wasn't yesterday?"

They were in the drawing room at Grimmauld place; Harry had been waiting for Ginny to arrive for the better part of an hour. When the fireplace had roared green and Ginny had tumbled out, Harry had found himself stumbling backward at her exuberant greeting and landed in an armchair with a heavy thump.

Ginny had climbed into his lap, her lips attacking his neck while her hand went directly for his crotch. It wasn't like Harry would complain, she had been gone for three months, and it was a long time with only his right hand for company. Before he could really register how prepared for this she must have been, his jeans and boxes were around his knees and Ginny had flicked her skirt up and was straddling him again. He wondered if she had removed her underwear when he was distracted or if she'd come out of the fire knicker-less. Either way it didn't matter because his brain had shut down and everything was clutching wet heat and a flicking tongue at his throat.

That had been ten minutes ago. Now Ginny, still in his lap with her skirt bunched up around her hips and her blouse half undone smiled at him coyly. "Happy Birthday." she said.

The innocent look on her face irritated him. Christ, the woman had just fucked him like she was being paid, it was so confusing. She did it often recently, the coquettish eyelash fluttering, timid little giggles when he paid her a complement – she had just commented on him being a proper grown up, why then would he want some bashful little girl?

The worst thing was that it had always been her most attractive quality, that she wasn't reserved or star-struck by him; she was just her, Ginny. Quidditch and laughter and shagging, he had thought her perfect. Maybe it was the lack of male company, living with The Harpies, rather than six brothers that had her becoming more stereotypical female. Whatever it was, Harry wished he could fix it; he just had no idea how to bring it up.

"Shall we have a drink?" She suggested, climbing off him and blushing a little as she pulled her skirt down.

"Sure," he smiled, and then grunted at the effort of re-jeaning himself without getting up. "There's Firewhiskey in the cabinet."

"Alcohol?" she said, her mouth twisted tentatively, "You know I'm not supposed to drink during the
"It was your idea," Harry said amused.

"I didn't mean whiskey," she said, and Harry realised she never drank the stuff anyway, post-shag brain made him forgetful. "What about that Butterbeer?" she said, "Do you have any left?"

"Yes," he said, "only two bottles," he grinned at her, "thanks for them by the way, it was cool to get a surprise like that."

Ginny looked pleased, "Well I hadn't thought I'd be able to be here, but then Coach said I could have the night off since we won the last three games."

"Lucky for me you lot are so good then," he said.

Not wanting to spoil his orgasm induced bone-melt Harry raised his wand and summoned the drinks. Ginny left the room as he popped the cap on his bottle, "I'll just go and freshen up," she said. "You should think about what you want for dinner."

"Will do," Harry said, taking a sip and slumping back in the chair.

By the time Ginny returned Harry was valiantly trying to fight off post-coital lethargy, his half-drunk bottle tipping in his hand. She gave a soft little giggle and said with a affected pout, "Poor little Harry, did I wear you out?"

"God please don't use that voice in the context of sex," he snapped, surprising himself "it's all kinds of wrong."

"Sorry," she said but she didn't sound it. Harry looked at her to see her fiddling nervously with the cap of her still done up bottle, "Mum's getting ridiculous." she said.

Harry inwardly cringed. This conversation, *again.* "Really?" He asked in trepidation.

"Yeah," Ginny said and to her credit Harry thought she sounded apologetic for Molly's matrimonial fixation. "She sent me clippings from The Prophet; the Cotswolds is the place this season apparently."

"Really? I thought Molly would want us to get married at The Burrow, like Bill and Ron." He said.

"I think Mum accepts that it's not like Bill or Ron." Ginny said, "Bill was during the war and Ron and Hermione are quite well known but … well," she said ruefully, "they're not *us.*"

It was true Harry thought, with Ginny's success in The Harpies she was rapidly becoming a celebrity in her own right, add to that the groom who lived twice… No, maybe The Burrow wouldn't cut it. "Christ," Harry said, "why can't it just be easy? Family only?"

Ginny grimaced, "I think Mum has her heart set on something a bit bigger," she pointed at herself, "only daughter and all."

"Your Mum does, or you do?" Harry asked shrewdly.

"Maybe both?" Ginny admitted.

Harry clenched he jaw to stop a sigh escaping and tried to sound unfazed, "Well we're not even engaged so…" He took another sip of his drink, dropped his head back and closed his eyes wishing that he wasn't spending his birthday talking about something he really didn't want.
It was silent for a few minutes, he could hear Ginny's fingernails tapping on her bottle, and then very softly she said, "It's been years Harry, do you even want to marry me?"

No he thought, "I don't much want to marry anyone." He said aloud, his eyes still shut.

"I'm not asking about anyone, I asking about me," she sounded regretful, and Harry opened his eyes to see her looking at him imploringly, "Harry, it's nearly seven years since we first started dating, and before that, I mean…." She huffed out a breath, and her voice wavered, "we're meant to be together. All that time at the end of the war, I thought about you every day."

"I did too," he said, he didn't want to hurt her, sitting there, looking at him like he was everything, the way she'd always looked at him.

"Then why don't you want to move on to the next bit?"

He knew how hard it would be for her to ask so bluntly, they had been tip-toeing around the subject for the better part of two years. He really thought that they would continue to do so for some time, but apparently Molly had gotten to her daughter at last. Not that Harry didn't love Molly like a mother, but the woman definitely needed a new hobby. Maybe he could convince Ron and Hermione to have another baby…

He steeled himself, he couldn't lie, "I think that is why," he said, "I look at you and remember sitting in that frigid tent feeling so hopeless, Ron had left and Hermione was so down, and I would just stare at the Marauders Map, looking at your little dot, thinking that one day it would be okay for you again." He was surprised that he was brave enough to finally say it, he never had before.

"But not for us?" her voice cracked.

"Not for me." He emphasised, "I didn't know when I'd eat next, let alone when I'd see you. I did know that I'd have to duel Riddle before I did though, and I wasn't all that sure I win that one."

"But you did."

"Ginny, I just –"

"Don't worry," she said abruptly, cutting him off in a falsely nonchalant voice. Her eyes looked very bright and she hid in her hair as she went to the drinks cabinet and took out a Three Broomsticks Butterbeer, "I like these better," she said her voice sounding a little wavery but her smile was firmly in place. "Let's not worry about it now, shouldn't have asked."

He grinned in relief, he knew it wouldn't be the last time, and he had said far more than he ever had before on the subject. Normally he pleaded work or bad press or her training schedule, it felt good to know he'd told her what he really thought; the only thing was it made him wonder how much longer she would put up with him. But for now she was smiling, so he would go with it.

She had pulled her hair up into a ponytail and sat on the floor in front of Harry's chair, her back resting against his shins. She said cheekily, "Since it's your birthday, you only have to rub my neck while we decide what we want for dinner."

"Fair enough," he said as she jigged her shoulders to scoot in between his knees. He was very pleased that his comments hadn't led to an argument.

He dug his thumbs in just below her hairline and began to rotate them, she made a little noise of pleasure and said, "Mum can go jump. As long as you promise to do this forever I'll be perfectly happy."
Harry was glad she couldn't see his face; it frightened him that even the idea of committing to neck-rubs was too much. He really was a coward. Fortunately he was saved from having to either lie or show his yellow belly when the floo roared green and Ron's head appeared, his hands firmly over his eyes.

"Harry mate? Is me, is it safe to look?"

Ron was permanently scarred from a floo experience last winter. He'd popped into the fire to see Harry and Ginny completely starkers and rather in flagrante on the rug in front of the hearth. A mortifying, but educational moment for all - Harry vowed never to repeat the clichéd Muggle nonsense of shagging in front of the fireplace and Ron never appeared in Harry's fire with his eyes open if he knew Ginny was visiting.

"Yep," Harry said, feeling the tense atmosphere lift with Ron's arrival. "We're all shagged out."

Ron made a gagging noise and Ginny giggled, "Now I'm doubly annoyed at you." he said grinchily, although he was grinning.

"Why what else did I do?" Harry asked, his fingers now fiddling with the end of Ginny's long strait ponytail.

"You and your blasted book," he said in good-natured exasperation, "I get to the office after lunch to find that the meeting that was booked in was bloody Malfoy! And shit was he in a foul mood. Not that I was expecting to have a chat like old chums but Merlin, I've never seen someone so close to exploding – that managed not to anyway."

"I didn't know he was meeting you today," Harry said, "What did he want to talk about?"

"The car mostly, and what I remembered about the philosophers stone obstacles, and er, the chamber stuff too." He glanced at Ginny apologetically.

"I knew you'd have to," she said, with a reassuring pat to Harry's ankle, the nearest bit of him she could reach, "I figure it must be a bit rotten for him, knowing that it was his dad's fault."

"Yeah," said Harry, he was so glad Ginny and Ron understood why he had to do this, and weren't being difficult about it. "I still haven't told him what the diary really was. Not really looking forward to that. Or even sure if I should, what if someone else tries to become immortal?"

"Mate," said Ron, "the whole point of this is to take away the speculation, if you leave bits out it would be a waste of time."

"Yeah you're right. I wonder why Malfoy was so shitty, was he nasty to you?"

"No," Ron said shaking his head and making the flames jump, "He was like, super polite, but I swear I could hear him grinding his teeth, someone must have really pissed him off."

"Huh," said Harry, "I'll ask him next week, are you sure it wasn't just being around you that made him so mad?"

"Funny," said Ron, "maybe. Who knows? It's totally weird that you get along with him, I know he's all virtuous and shit but honestly, to hear him call you Harry is so wrong." Harry was surprised by this, Malfoy never called him by his first name in person, but Ron was still talking, so he didn't mention it, "Anyway, just wanted to say hi to you, sister," Ron said pointedly, "since shagging your boyfriend is a reason to come home for the night, but visiting your family isn't."
Ginny shrugged and said, "I hope when you complain to Mum you say 'Harry's birthday' is more important that visiting the family."

"Will do." said Ron, with a little nod, "Happy birthday mate," he said to Harry, "we've got a present to deliver on the weekend, if you'll be around?"

Harry raised his eyebrows, "Where else would I go?"

"Dunno," said Ron distractedly, looking over his shoulder into the flames, "Sorry Rosie's just started up, but yeah weekend, see ya then." and he vanished with a pop. The fire died away and Harry sat in silence for a moment, thinking about Ron and Hermione and their happy little family and how he still didn't see that in his future no matter how hard he tried.

"So … shall we go upstairs?" Ginny asked, interrupting his mind's slow downward spiral of unanswerable and mostly depressing questions. Her playful fingers were creeping up the leg of his trousers. She had tuned and was facing him; thankfully the coyness had gone from her expression. She was looking at him steadily, a spark of promise in her eyes, it reminded him fleetingly of the time she had kissed him in her room on his seventeenth birthday. The day before Bill's wedding, the day before the real darkness started.

He shook his head as if to loosen the unhappy thoughts and forced a smile for Ginny, "Sure," he said, as she pulled him to his feet.

Strangely, as Harry followed Ginny up to his room he found himself dwelling on the revelation that Malfoy apparently referred to him as Harry these days. It made him smile just a little bit, that was something that would never remind him of the horrors of war.
Draco had spent a restless weekend trying very hard not to dwell on the shady goings on at The Prophet. The only problem was, outside his career he didn't really have much of a social life. He excused this by saying that when you had to talk to people all day you didn't want to do it in your spare time too. It was pretty feeble reasoning and he thought if he bothered to examine it he'd probably realise he had some kind of mad trust/people-phobia/Daddy-issue thing that he really didn't want to know about. He was quite happy being a gay man in his twenties with hardly any friends, commitments or romantic attachments. Perhaps he should get a cat.

With no human – or feline – distractions Draco ended up making an earnest start on Harry's book. It was so much more difficult than he expected to sit and read Harry scratchy handwriting. Not only because the writing itself was cramped and obviously scrawled out in a hurry, but the content was somewhat disturbing. Draco had spent the better part of an hour looking up muggle euphemisms in his research texts because of the sentence "I lived in the cupboard under the stairs until I was nearly eleven," he was sure "the cupboard under the stairs" must be some bizarre Surreyian slang for the smallest bedroom or perhaps a poetic reference to the boy's trapped feeling. But Draco was quite sure Potter didn't have a poetic bone in his body, and after countless books about the greater London area and its local dialects not even hinting at colloquialisms for little bedrooms, Draco had been forced to accept that the boy who lived, the little kid he had been so jealous of for being famous without even trying, had gone to bed every night in a closet.

Draco was struggling to understand how Harry had not turned on muggles the moment he had discovered the wizarding world. He actually had a very good reason to hate them, and yet still, he had fought for them. Draco was also suffering from nagging little stabs of guilt every time he came across and interaction between himself and Harry, even though he knew it was silly, what was done was done. But it was truly cringe-worthy to read about your eleven year old self.

The worst was something Draco barely remembered, a conversation with a little boy in Madam Malkin's shop. Draco remembered recognising Harry as the boy from the robe shop when they had met on the train. When Harry had turned down his offer of friendship in favour of Weasley. But Draco hadn't realised the full implications of that prior conversation. Hagrid, the first adult who had ever been kind to Harry, who brought him to Diagon Alley, and showed him an escape, Draco had called a drunken inept servant. Not only that, but he had preceded to imply that Harry and his dead mother, weren't proper magical people. No bloody wonder Harry had told him to sod off when Draco had offered to be his friend, directly after he … oh yes, insulted the first person Harry's own age who had been nice to him. Merlin Draco came across as a right little twat.

He wondered as he looked over the notes if Harry was doing it on purpose. The way he'd written their interactions did not hint at anger or old prejudice, it was just the facts as he remembered them. It made Draco understand Harry's side, even if he didn't always agree with it. It was something he hadn't expected from this process.

The thing that got to Draco the most was not the little hardships Harry mentioned as though they were nothing, or in the case of deciding to chase Voldemort to the philosophers stone his blatant (endearing) idiocy. But instead it was the odd parallels that could be drawn. Parallels that had pulled the two boys down on different sides of the war. Starting with almost blind admiration of their
parents that led to their beliefs being parroted. Then their roles in the fight being decided for them, being little more than pawns in the end, and finally their drive to achieve a seemingly impossible task. Though Harry's was predictably honourable and brave, and in his own words saviour-y. While Draco's had been something he was still ashamed of to this day. Draco had still done it out of love, for the only thing he cared about by that point, his mother's safety.

Draco felt that it was conviction they had in common. Although, while his seemed to have been strengthened by his fight for a name of his own in journalism, during the same time Harry's had petered out. That much was obvious to Draco, even with just two conversations, Harry was drifting. Why else would he hide himself away? Put up with a girlfriend he never saw, quit his job because people wrote mean things about him? Merlin, that should be old hat to Potter. Draco frowned to himself, was it just the press? Harry had been working and still living a public life until the second of May, had something else happened to send him scurrying into his hidey-hole?

Draco had spent Sunday collecting statements from people who could verify the insanity that was Harry's life. It had not been as simple as he thought, he had been chased away from Shunpike's front step by an irate Stan, who Draco only convinced to talk to him by telling him he wanted to include 'The Great Rescue of Harry Potter' by the Knight Bus.

Then after meeting Professor McGonagall at the gates to Hogwarts he'd spent much longer than he would have liked in a sterile, hard backed chair having to coax several stories from Madam Pomfrey. She had continually glanced at the letter she had received from Harry, Weasley and Granger giving her permission to answer any of the questions Draco asked about their many hospital stays, and plainly didn't care much for the situation.

He had then traipsed across the grounds for a conversation with Hagrid, where he'd hurt the giant man's feelings by refusing his frighteningly hard biscuits and then had to ruin a perfectly good cup of tea softening one up to eat to appease Hagrid and get him talking properly. The groundskeeper's opinion of Draco seemed to have changed little since school.

After this Draco had returned to the castle for a meeting in the girls loo, and then he flooed directly home, exhausted, but thankfully distracted from his bosses and their lack of morals.

It was another scorching afternoon when Draco arrived at Grimmauld place following lunch with Marc at the Leaky. He was very relieved to find that Marc had heeded his advice and kept his investigating into the treasury by the book. As Draco had pointed out to his friend, the last thing he'd want would be to discover what's going on with the missing galleons, and then have the story drowned in a news cycle completely commandeered by Sententia and The Prophet's shadiness.

Kreacher opened the heavy door to Number Twelve and said, "Welcome Mr Malfoy," the elf looked healthier than the only other time Draco had seen him. Though with eyes that bloodshot and a complexion that grey it was difficult to tell if Kreacher was actually on the mend, or had just learned to live with having the flu.

But he had a revering smile for Draco so he nodded politely back, and Kreacher led him across the entryway and down the hall to the stairs that led to the basement kitchen. "Master Harry is out there," he said opening the door at the top of the stairs on the other side of the long room. The only access to the courtyard garden, "Master Harry is always out there," he mumbled as he wandered away.

Draco climbed the short staircase and had to shade his eyes against the bright sun as he exited the dim kitchen. Once his vision had adjusted and he was able to focus, the sight presented to him made his mouth go unprofessionally dry. With his back to him across the courtyard Harry was engaged in
combat with what Draco recognised as a feisty Carallurma Lolligo – a large desert dwelling succulent cross-bred with Devil's Snare.

As though trying to give Draco's already inventive, and somewhat dirty mind fodder, Harry was clad only in a jeans and vest. A vest that had become ridiculously – and attractively – clingy due to the heat of the day and the foliage fight. His jeans were caked with dirt in places and they made Draco wonder absently when he started finding torn knees sexy.

Harry had obviously been at it for a while with the plant, if the damp curling black hair on his forehead and nape were any indication. Draco realised he had been standing there for much longer than was decent, admiring the shift of muscle under thin fabric and the glint of the sun off tanned shoulders. Potter's mental health might be suffering from is isolation but Draco could definitely see benefits to unemployment during the summer months.

One of the Carallumra's strong and flexible branches suddenly wrapped itself around Harry's left knee and tugged, sending the dark haired man hopping and stumbling uncontrollably to one side. Draco did the only thing he could think off, he drew his wand and sent a full-body-bind at the plant, it stopped it mad attack at once.

"What?" Harry said from the ground, looking dumbly at his suddenly still opponent, he rolled over and spotted Draco standing on the shady back step, "Oh, hi," he said, "you're early."

"I am on time," Draco corrected. "We agreed on two pm it is just after."

"Oh, right," Harry said flatly, looking back at the plant, "how did you do that?" he asked gesturing with his gloved thumb to the frozen Carallurma.

"How did I bind a plant?" Draco asked, wondering if Harry was having him on.

"Petrificus Totalus" Harry muttered to himself as he got to his feet.

Draco rolled his eyes, "Yes Potter, that would be the first year spell."

"Huh." Harry said, he looked perplexed, "I wonder why Neville didn't suggest that."

"What did he say to do?" Draco asked, mainly to give him something else to think about, other than Potter standing around in all his bronzed and toned summery-skin-glory.

"That if I couldn't pull it out, I should reducto it." Harry said, still seeming put out.

Draco sniggered, "I believe Longbottom is having a laugh at your expense, that's a Carallurma Lolligo."

"Yes I know," Harry said, balancing on one foot at the bottom of the steps as he toed off his wellingtons, revealing mismatched socks beneath the frayed cuffs of his jeans.

"They are filled with a substance similar to squid ink." Draco said, waiting for Harry to realise how close he came to having an unpleasant purple shower.

Harry looked up at him, surprised, "Really?"

"Did you not even check one book?" Draco said incredulously. This was the old Black house, a bit of ink was nothing compared to what could happen to you if you started reductoing things willy-nilly.
"No," Harry said, pulling off his protective gloves and wiping his sweaty face, "Better, I wrote to Neville and asked how to remove it, he knows everything about plants."

Draco laughed again, "I never knew Longbottom to be so entertaining." Harry didn't seem to find it very funny. Odd, thought Draco, weren't Gryffindors all up for buffoonery like long-distance practical jokes?

Harry passed him long-faced into the kitchen and Draco followed. It wasn't that he was disappointed not to be given the same, pleased-to-have-any-company-at-all treatment as last time, but for his host to go from annoyingly eager to sullen was rather disquieting. Harry definitely seemed bothered about something.

"It's not poisonous," Draco said, thinking that Harry didn't like being made a fool of by Longbottom, Draco could definitely understand that. "You can just wash it off."

"What?" Harry asked distractedly, as he searched in the pantry for something.

"The ink," Draco said floundering slightly, feeling more agitated with Harry by the second. They were here to work after all.

"Oh right," Harry said, he came out of the pantry with what looked to be a half empty bottle of his Swiss Butterbeer, and a flask of firewiskey. He threw himself into one of the kitchen table's chairs took a gulp of firewiskey and chased it down with the Butterbeer.

"Merlin Potter," Draco said, losing his temper, "what the hell is your problem? If you don't want to do this now you need only say, I have plenty of other shit-heads to deal with, and I'm working for you remember."

Harry huffed and turned apologetic eyes on Draco, "Sorry," he said, and he did sound it. He held the flask out in some sort of inappropriate peace offering – it was quarter past two on a Tuesday for Circe's sake.

But then Draco thought of Cuffe and Betty, and how he wished he'd made Potter agree to a higher fee. Then he could've just quit his stupid job before the sententia scandal came out, and work freelance until he found something better. He thought about how the thing he looked forward to most at the moment – for reasons he didn't want to admit to – was visiting his former rival, who was only paying him to be there and was completely straight.

Draco snatched the bottle and collapsed into the chair opposite Harry and said, "I bet whatever your problem is doesn't beat mine." He took a swig, it burned and he tried not to wince, but hell, it was only two fifteen.

"Really?" Harry asked, skeptically, taking the flask back.

"Yes, is your employer drugging people to get better information out if them?"

"What?" Said Harry, halting just before the whiskey reached his lips, "The Prophet you mean?"

"No you, you imbecile," Draco snapped.

Harry looked surprised and the heavy set of his brow lifted slightly, "Shut up," he said, but he sounded a little less shitty, "really drugging them? Why?"

"Because, the public like nice juicy stories filled with lots of inflammatory comments," Draco said taking another turn with the bottle, "it sells papers, that's why."
"But that's so wrong," Harry said, incensed, "how are you going to stop them? They can't just give people a potion to get them to talk – might as well start giving them Veritaserum, and be done with it!"

Good grief, he should have known Harry would explode just like he had, "I know that," he said placatingly, "I already told my boss what I thought, but unfortunately I still need to get paid, and that means I need to keep my job, there's a pretty small market for journalists in the magical world."

Harry looked sympathetic, the fight going out of him, "That's rotten, Ron said you were mad about something, no wonder." he said "if there's anything I can do…"

Draco sighed, "Hero Potter, sorry not this time." Harry grimaced but didn't say anything so Draco asked "So? Bet yours doesn't top that."

"It certainly doesn't cross as many ethical boundaries," Harry agreed, "it's Ginny, well not really Ginny but what she wants." Draco reigned in the disparaging comment he longed to utter, as if he wanted to listen to Harry whinge about his girlfriend. "She came to stay on my birthday, and it was fine but she wants to get married and I just don't. I really really don't."

"So then break up with her," Draco said, bluntly, "Weasley, er, Ron, seems like an actual person these days, I doubt he'd bite your head off for dumping his little sister."

"I'm not sure about that," Harry said. "But it's not that I don't want to be with her, what we do now is fine, but marriage it's too much …"

Oh the worries of the breeder Draco thought. "I thought she was away all the time now, what is it that you do?"

Harry swallowed the last of his Butterbeer and then blurted out, "Shag mostly."

Draco felt his eyes widen, who knew Potter was so shallow? "So you don't want to break up with her because the sex is convenient?"

"Not really, it's a total pain, one or two nights now and again." Harry said absently.

"Good grief Potter, you selfish prick." Draco snapped. "You can't keep a girl hanging on just because you like to shag her."

"That came out wrong," Harry said, looking confused, "I just meant that the relationship stage we're at now is fine, she comes to stay, we talk and play cards or chess or whatever, go out for dinner, and shag, it's nice, comfortable."

"Potter, don't be such a knob." Draco said completely forgetting that he was supposed to be professional, "If she's talking about marriage she obviously doesn't want a friend to shag anymore. If you don't want that then you really shouldn't be stringing her along."

"But she wants to marry the guy she fell in love with at school," Harry said sullenly, "I don't want to be him anymore. He's sad, and a bit weird." Draco just looked at him sternly, the idiot needed to stop feeling so sorry for himself and make a bloody change. As if he could read Draco's mind Harry asked suddenly "How did you change?"

"What do you mean?" Draco said carefully.

"You're different," Harry waved one of his hands in Draco's general direction, "not the same bitter toser you used to be."
The implication that he had chosen to be bitter, and then not to be, irritated Draco and he said coldly, "I grew up Potter, maybe you should consider it. Now, can we please get started?"

"Sure," Harry muttered mutinously to the table top and Draco had to force himself not to apologise.

"Good. Now, in the new notes that you sent on Friday, the ones from August to December '93, my only big concern is this conversation with Fudge at the Leaky Cauldron, he has refused to comment. I just got his owl back today," Draco pulled the ex-Ministers missive from his satchel to show Harry, who to his credit, didn't seem to be angry at Draco for talking to him like a child. Harry took the scroll and skimmed it.

"Christ, he's still a pompous prat isn't he?" Harry said, "I fear my recollections will not show the office of Minister in the best light, I will not authorise anything I have said as fact. Twat," Harry said.

"Indeed," Draco nodded, "but not surprising since he flouted the Statute of Secrecy to keep you safe from someone his Ministry had wrongly imprisoned for a decade, and wasn't trying to hurt you anyway. Also, Stan Shunpike tried to stun me when I knocked on his front door on Sunday morning."

"Why?" Harry looked confused.

Draco really didn't want to have to say it aloud, he tapped at his left wrist and Harry seemed to understand. "Is my riding the Knight Bus important do you think?" he continued as thought there'd been no interruption.

"I think so," Draco said, he consulted his timeline inclusions and rattled off, "it's appearance without your prior knowledge, and your use of a false name shows that you thought you were sure to be arrested." Harry nodded, and Draco said spitefully, "and since Fudge wants to be a prick and not cooperate, I would quite like to highlight his short comings - Namely ignoring out most important law."

For some reason Harry was smirking, "You're just gutted I didn't get chucked out of school," Harry said slyly.

"Yes," Draco deadpanned, "and then when Fudge tried to enforce the law two years later, I still didn't get my wish. Dastardly Potter, how you irked me."

"You're ridiculous," Harry said but he definitely sounded more relaxed. "Okay… Fudge after the Knight Bus … I definitely remember him telling me not to wander into muggle London. And he explained about Aunt Marge being punctured."

Draco snickered, "I do wish I could have seen that." he said, "can you just write down bits of that conversation as you remember them? I don't need to put it in now, and since I know the jist I can do my commentary in advance."

Harry nodded, "Sure, don't be too mean though."

"I won't be mean, I will be honest," Draco said dismissively, "it's not my fault the truth is nasty enough in this case."

He flipped his pages back to the start he'd made on Saturday morning, "I also wanted to ask how much you wanted from your first trip to Diagon Alley included, I thought that if your cousin ever reply's to me, we could include it in one section with Hogwarts desperate attempt to contact you, the run to the little island and then Hagrid's arrival, rather than give a moment-by-moment re-tell?"
"I guess the only important thing is my wand and Gringotts," Harry mused, then his eyes narrowed shrewdly, "Hang on … are you suggesting we gloss over it because of our conversation at the robe shop?"

"No," Draco said defensively, Harry gave him a skeptical look and he said, "fine, yes. But the conversation's really not relevant. What I'm really worried about is what if this shit about sententia gets out, and all Prophet reporters are blacklisted, and then I release a book that has me picking – unprovoked – on a half-blood orphan, telling him his mother wasn't a real witch? I mean honestly, I'll be chased out of town with pitchforks."

"Do the wizards of London carry pitchforks as a matter of course?" Harry asked cheekily, but then folded under what Draco hoped had been an extremely manly pleading look. "It's not relevant," Harry said, "You're right."

"Okay," Draco said with a minimal amount of smug. He skimmed through his notes, "So then, up to the end of '93 we're looking good." He tapped the page with his index finger, "The only problem is your cousin, I need him to confirm the things we put in here about your home life, do you think he will?"

Harry shrugged, "Maybe, I won't blame him if he doesn't though. It can't be something that he's proud off."

Draco nodded. "So how much more have you written?" He asked.

Harry looked a little guilty, "I didn't really do anything this weekend."

Draco opened the folder Hermione had compiled, "Ninety four," he murmured to himself, flipping the pages, "There is only what Granger refers to as 'The Shrieking Shack – cannot include it for legal reasons'"

"Hmm," Harry said, "Yup, that's why I haven't gotten any further."

"Why?"

Suddenly Harry laughed, startling Draco, "Speaking of the shack, do you remember when you, Crabbe and Goyle were attacked by my floating head?"

Draco glared, "Yes, and you didn't even get in trouble. We were going to beat up Weasley though, so it was probably –"

"We," Harry scoffed, interrupting, "you mean Crabbe and Goyle were. You got your arse handed to you by Hermione that year though." Harry laughed harder.

"There was no arse handing Potter." Draco protested, hoping his cheeks only felt warm, "It was one lucky shot. And what was I supposed to do, hit her back? Hardly."

Harry just continued to snigger to himself, then sobering he said thoughtfully, "You know, I think that's when Ron fell in love with her, seeing her punch you in your pointy nose."

"Well then," Draco said dryly, "I'm glad my nostril's symmetry was not sacrificed in vain."

"Your nostril?" Harry asked.

"Yes, see, it's crooked." Draco tilted his head back to show Harry the place where his nostrils joined his maxilla on a funny angle.
Harry leaned closer to see the offending disfigurement and Draco found himself holding his breath. Harry said "Oh yeah, I'd never noticed before." He was close enough that Draco could see the slightly paler skin at the edge of his hairline, protected from the sun by the thick dark hair, Harry reached out a finger as if to touch his nose but Draco blinked and leaned back.

Harry looked confused at his own actions and said, "Sorry, I – never mind."

Draco looked back at his notes, and said in a determinedly casual voice, "Right, so, we already have a recorded second point of view for the beginning of your friendship with Weasley and Granger, train and troll respectively, the argument with me that got you the seeker position, merlin that still hurts" Draco muttered, and he heard Harry let out a puff of soft laughter, "your conversation with the Centaur and his rescuing you, and then your idiotic chasing of Riddle and Quirrell to the stone. Then the car, the deathday party, and duelling club from second, I still think we should include the polyjuice potion," he said thoughtfully, "even if it does give yet another incidence of me being a bigoted imbecile."

"You're the pro," Harry said breezily and Draco looked to see the now familiar, nearly overwhelmed, but mostly just vacant expression Harry got when Draco was on an organising roll.

"Yes, I would have been more hesitant because it's unauthorised use is illegal, like the time turner, but Madam Pomfrey said she knew what Granger had done, and she didn't report it, so I'd say it's alright, and I have a witness to Granger pouring the unused portion down the loo while she waited for you to come back."

"Who?" Harry asked

"Myrtle," Draco said. He wondered if mentioning the ghost would remind Harry of another event she witnessed, an event Draco was both dreading but also morbidly curious to read from Potter's point of view.

A little line appeared between Harry's eyebrows, and he and Draco were obviously thinking along the same lines, "Did you ask her about … sixth year?"

"Yes. Did you want to read her account?" Draco asked striving to keep his tone light, "It's highly sensationalised, but she insisted I take it down word for word."

Harry shook his head, suddenly very interested in his fingernails, "When did you see her?"

"On Sunday afternoon. This whole business at work was hard to forget about, so I decided to do something productive."

"You went to Hogwarts?" Harry asked, sounding surprised.

Draco nodded, "I talked to Pomfrey and Hagrid too. Myrtle also told me about a lovely bath you two shared, I didn't know you were so kinky Potter."

"She was stalking me!" Harry burst out indignantly, half chuckling, "came out of the sodding tap for god's sake, I've never been so glad for bubbles in all my life."

Draco nodded, "yes, she did say you seemed rather uncomfortable."

"Moving on," Harry said, but his mood definitely seemed improved and Draco felt quite proud for bringing it about.

"Okay back to the Shrieking Shack, why is it you don't want to tell me what happened there?"
Harry shook his head, "No, it's not that I don't want to tell you, it's just shitty, what I did there is the reason Riddle was able to come back, god, of all the things that haunt me that one little act of mercy is the worst."

Draco winced, the flying cars and troll bogies couldn't last he told himself. He took a breath and said reluctantly, "Okay, just tell me, and then you won't have to go through the process of writing it down, was Weasley or Granger there? I can get the rest from them."

"Yeah they were both there," Harry started heavily, "It's about Wormtail, you remember him?"

"Yes." Draco said quietly, he had a brief flash of the dank cellar at The Manor, he remembered being out of breath with fear, he had been sent to see if any of the captives remained after Harry and his friends had escaped. All he found was the mottled face and bulging eyes of Wormtail, his silver hand still throttling its long dead owner.

"He was Ron's rat Scabbers." Harry said.

"I know," Draco said, "he used to brag to me about it, how he'd survived completely self-sufficiently, he seemed very proud of that."

"You never would have met him if it wasn't for me," Harry went on, "my dad and Sirius and Wormtail were all friends with Professor Lupin at school, they taught themselves how to –"

"I know about this Potter," Draco said, glad that Harry wouldn't have to talk about it for too long, "Wormtail liked to reminisce a lot, and I was the only one he had to talk to. They were Animagi so they could help Lupin, I never minded when he talked about that, a story of great friends, I couldn't imagine friends that would do something like that," Harry gave him an uncomfortable, almost pitying look, but Draco just laughed a little awkwardly and said, "but then I'd remind myself what he'd done to those friends after they left school, cowardly little wanker."

"Yeah, well I learnt all that stuff on one night in the Shrieking Shack," Harry said, drumming his fingers against the whiskey bottle. "Sirius and Lupin wanted to kill Peter but I stopped them, I said my Dad wouldn't have wanted them to be killers, now though," Harry shook his head regretfully, "I'm pretty sure my Dad wouldn't have given a shit if his mates were killers if it meant Riddle's soul had rotted away in dark, forgotten forest in the corner of Europe."

"And then Wormtail escaped?" Draco asked, trying to keep Harry on track.

"Yeah, so you see? If I'd let them kill him we never would've had a second war." He thumbed the cap from the flask and took another sip. Then held it out to Draco once more.

Draco hesitated for a moment but took it, he wasn't going back to the office this afternoon. "If you let them kill Wormtail I don't think you'd be Potter," Draco said thoughtfully, the warm little slip of whiskey urging him on to honesty, "and if you weren't Potter, then when Riddle did find a way to come back – and I lived in close proximity to the arsehole, I'm quite sure he would have figured something out – we all would have been screwed."

Harry gave him a funny look, "Do you know, that's pretty much what Dumbledore said to me?"

"Dumbledore called Riddle and arsehole?" Draco asked.

"No," Harry laughed shakily.

"So is that it?" Draco said, "You saved someone's life, again"
"Yes. If you ask Hermione she'll tell you the full story, I suppose that means I have to start on fourth year now," Harry grinned properly, suddenly cheerful, "God, just wait, there was this total git who went to the effort of making **badges** just to piss me off."

"Really? How original of him." Draco said sardonically, taken aback at Harry's constantly fluctuating mood.

"He got his though," Harry said, stifling a snigger to add, "I've never seen a prettier ferret."

"Prick," Draco muttered. It was strange to talk about their past like this, *fondly*. Like he hadn't gone to all the effort of badge making because he hated Potter so much he just wanted to be mean.

It was like talking of other people, like they had been bystanders in their own lives. Draco much preferred this. When he remembered his school days, pre sixth year was a string of unpleasant emotion. Irritation at Crabbe and Goyle for being idiots, and at himself for lacking the ability to make any real friends, of worry caused by pressure from his father to be perfect, of fear when he realised marrying and siring heirs was going to make him very unhappy, and most of all jealousy. Jealous of the man slumped in the kitchen chair opposite him, or of the boy he'd been, because Draco certainly wasn't jealous anymore.

He was a little disappointed that he'd finally allowed himself to admit that he admired Potter at the end of the war. That he was impressed by the way he handled the fame, just in time for Potter to give up and hide. But now wasn't the time to confront him. This strange and precarious facsimile of a friendship was beneficial to the book writing process, and besides, Harry was much nicer to look at when he was smiling.

Draco put his folders away, "I think that's everything I need from you until you get me your fourth year notes," He said as he got to his feet. He felt a little warm from the whiskey but other than that he thought that drinking in the middle of the day might have just been what he needed this week. Everything just seemed a little bit easier.

"Okay," Harry said, screwing the cap back on the flask and picking up his protective gloves, "I bet I'll be able to surprise you with some of the shit that went down that year."

"We'll see Harry," Draco said, it took him a moment to figure out why Harry was looking at him in some kind of smug surprise as he pulled on his gloves, and headed for the door to the garden again.

"See ya Draco," he said with a gloved salute, before he flung the door wide and headed back out onto the sunshine.

Draco stood there stunned for a minute, there was no way he could have seen what he thought he could in Harry's smiling eyes. Absolutely not. Draco should definitely get a cat, everyone knows they go hand in hand with madness.

As Harry hurried down the steps, after all but running from the kitchen he was filled with an uncomfortable pressing feeling. It was heavy, strong against his chest. There was a twitch of annoyance within him too. A tiny little rarely heard voice, one that had been around for as long as he could remember but was never acknowledged, spoke a bit louder for the first time, *We'll see Harry,* it repeated.

This little voice was the real reason Ginny was mad at him, it held the strings that stopped Harry moving forward. It whispered in the corner softly, and it had been easy to ignore. But now, as it repeated Draco’s parting words again, Harry thought it seemed to have found something to focus on,
he worried that he might not be able to quash it as simply as before.
Chapter 5

The string of continent-quality summer days broke on the eleventh of August. Harry found it incredibly ironic that Ginny's birthday dawned dreary and depressing, the air was thick with the trapped heat from weeks of sun that was being held down by the heavy purple clouds.

Harry was impressed that the weather could be quite so clever at broadcasting his internal feelings though the medium of a muggy summer morning.

What had begun as his eccentric behaviour brought on by hermitry, and helped along by afternoon drinking, had progressed from the seemingly harmless conversations with shrubbery of the last fortnight. Ever since Monday's conversation with Draco, and with his undefined internal voice fanning the flames, Harry had spent much of the intervening days accidently falling into daydreams involving crooked nostrils and whiskey-laced breath. It made him wonder if it was possible to amble casually into madness instead of the more common direct descent, and if it was supposed to be so pleasant.

Harry felt very guilty for having what was possibly a teeny-tiny little crush, brought on purely by aesthetics and an endless amount of time to dwell on things that were best left alone. Harry blamed his situation on his lack of the usual route to sexual maturity – he had been in a serious relationship since he was sixteen, with only a brief break to hunt down and murder someone – Harry didn't think it was all that surprising that he wasn't a hundred percent comfortable with himself just yet.

The reason he was a little worried, was that his uncertainty was no longer showing itself in the same way as it always had before – in the form of sporadic flashes in his mind's eye of the wrong gender when he was mid-wank, a time when no man on the planet could control what he thought about. No, now it seemed to have fixated, and much to Harry's disquiet Malfoy was the focus point.

Harry could quite happily admit that Draco was an attractive man, anyone could see that. His once pointy chin now just angular, his hair was still palest blonde, but it fell more naturally. He was tall and sharp edged, lean and always seemed to be perfectly dressed. But it matched him – straight, starched collars and precisely knotted ties sat well on his straight and precise frame. Harry didn't find it strange that he had noticed these things, he liked to think he was an observant bloke.

However, he knew he was in trouble when he found himself thinking that Draco had warm grey eyes – a reasonably ridiculous thing in itself, being that grey was, by definition, a cold shade. Alarmingly, this romanticised oxymoron was not the sappiest of the nonsense to run through Harry's mind. The worst was when he realised he knew, that since they had begun meeting, Draco had smiled at him a total of six times, and each one had been followed by a twitching frown that suggested Draco was annoyed at himself for letting them out. The idea that Draco was enjoying their conversations, whether he was trying to hide it or not made Harry much too happy. Malfoy was a happily married man for goodness sake.

Harry was quite glad that his sudden little crush would have to be left to peter out naturally. Daydreaming of stubbled jaws and angular bodies was one thing, but giving it a name was not something he was ready for. Let alone the life-altering idea of actually acting on it – which in Harry's case would be front page news. Not to mention Ginny would probably have a few pointed questions for him. He would have to brush up on bat-boggy hex deflection if that day ever came to pass.
"Will you kindly remove your posterior from my notes," Draco said, as Marc perched himself on Draco's desk, his admittedly rather admirable behind rumpling the pages Draco had put there only moments before.

Draco had just arrived back at the office after the most tedious interview he'd ever been involved in. Mrs Marion Dottage of – unbelievably – Carrion Cottage, a wind-beaten little place on the Isle of Arran had been victim to an error in banking. The goblins of Gringotts had, in a very rare mistake, credited her archive account with ten thousand galleons, rather than the one thousand she had requested be moved from her retirement vault. Because it was so unusual for the clerks at Gringotts to make any error at all, let alone one in a customer's favour, Draco had been sent north to speak with the ironically shrewd Mrs Dottage. She had lectured Draco on the importance of keeping one's own banking records. And how lucky the goblins were that she was honest, unlike, and he was quite tempted to find a way to fit the quote into his piece, the "wishy-washy, hand-out expecting, long-haired, gillyweed smoking lay-abouts" that populated the mainland.

Draco had just landed heavily in his chair and dropped his satchel to the floor, when Marc had appeared. He groaned and closed his eyes as his head fell forward in defeat to land on his forearm.

"Oh poor Draco," Marc said, patting him on the head, "what's wrong? No afternoon shag today?"

"There's no afternoon shags any day," Draco said, his voice muffled by the crook of his elbow.

"Whatever, you were grinning like a loon when you came to pick up your stuff on Monday."

"That's because I was drunk," Draco said, and imagining things he added mentally.

Marc made a noise of disbelief from above him and said, "So now you're telling me you spend your afternoons at the hospital reading books to children, while drinking?"

"Don't be ridiculous Belby, I drink before I go."

"Are you really not going to tell me what you're up to?" Marc whined, taking it upon himself to begin stroking Draco's hair in a most inappropriate fashion. It caused little pleasurable shivers to jiggle down his spine and made Draco realise that it had obviously been far too long since the last time someone had touched him in a more than perfunctory way.

Draco twitched sharply out of Marc's reach, "Nope, not telling." He said, sitting upright once more, "Is it time for lunch?"

"Yes," Marc said, "that's why I'm here, I need cheering up. I've been stuck with goblins all morning, bloody lips are as tight as their arses."

"You'd know about that would you?" Draco said, feeling like crassness would make up for his sudden sexual frustration.

Marc looked surprised at the out of character slur, but seemed to appreciate it all the same, "Fuck off," he laughed, "Come on, I found out some more about this thing in the Treasury Office."

Marc and Draco trekked down stairs and crossed a little undercover alley in the humid midday air. They joined the back of the line at the counter of The Pointed Quill, the café adjacent to the Daily Prophet offices. It seemed to be frequented almost exclusively by Prophet staff and associated people. Draco didn't often choose to eat at Pointy's, because aside from being surrounded by colleagues – most of whom he had pissed off at some point – he disliked having to decide on, and order his lunch at the counter, rather than at the table like civilized people. But they made the only
coffee in London that Draco found acceptable so he was prepared to deal with the disgruntled expressions and uncouth queue system.

"Now before you ask, no I didn't use the potion," Marc said quietly once they had ordered. They had found a space to lean amongst the little islands supporting self-serve sugar shakers and cutlery while they waited for their order to be called out. *It was all so Iberian*, Draco thought grumpily. It wouldn't be long before they would be expected to pay more if they wanted to sit and eat, rather than perch at the counter like a Spaniard. "I talked to Iris Irving in Vault Registry at Gringotts." Marc interrupted Draco's internal aspersions on the coffee houses of the Mediterranean.

"You poor thing," Draco said, and he meant it. He had many encounters with the fastidious Iris, she was a right pain in the neck. "I can't stand the little bint," he said, "do you know, last time I was there trying to get a statement, on those muggles who thought the goblins were ripping them off with the pound exchange, she had me filling in disclosure statements and all sorts of nonsense."

Marc laughed, "Yeah she really loves her forms, but she also hates her boss, reckons he's in on the misappropriations."

Draco frowned, "What do you mean 'in on it'? How do you know there is anything to be in on?" as far as Draco knew, the budget the Ministry had released had less gold to spread around than Marc had projected. But it was hardly a conspiracy that the Ministry had less funds to play with now that the war reparations had come to term.

"I told you," Marc insisted, "remember at the Leaky when you stormed out on me like a right queen?"

"Yes, yes, I owe you for emotional damage," Draco said.

"Not really," Marc said, sounding suspiciously self-satisfied, "since it looked like my lunch date had drama'd off on me I got the lovely sympathetic attention of William Beaumont, you know, works at Flourish and Blotts? He was very keen to help me through my emotional upheaval."

"You give gay men a bad name." Draco muttered. Wondering how Marc managed to waltz his way into midday sex, with a very decent looking fellow, without even trying, it was mindboggling.

"Just because you have no social life, nothing like a lunch time pick up to start the weekend." he said briskly.

"Belby, Malfoy!" Called the counter girl, reading from the order dockets and pushing two trays, each containing a wonderfully large coffee and impressively stacked sandwich towards them.

They collected their lunch and found a table, Willis from sports was sitting a few tables away, looking at his watch, there was a jug of water on is table and Draco wondered if the sports writer was meeting someone for an interview, and if so, had he already dosed the water with sententia? Since he apparently *swore by the stuff*. Draco heaved an internal sigh and turned away, hoping the victim didn't say anything too embarrassing.

"So, this Treasury thing," Marc said stirring three sugars into his large mug, "Iris says that one of the vaults that was opened in '97, just after the goblins lost control of Gringotts is back in use."

"So? I thought they were all reassigned?" Draco said, confused at the significance. And far more interested in his foamy coffee.

"No, not all of them," Marc said, "one was kept for the reparations fund, and two were used as donations housing, the Ministry got so much aid from other administrations, they had to store it
somewhere until it could be converted, but this vault was just a spare, Iris can't find any records of anything ever being deposited in it, until the middle of January this year."

Draco sighed heavily, "How on earth did you come to the conclusion that it's related to your light fingered Treasury?"

"A Ministry owned vault suddenly being used again?" Marc shrugged, "That seems dodgy to me."

"I guess," Draco said not convinced, "how did you get her to tell you this anyway? Surely that's client confidentiality broken."

"Yeah, I suppose," Marc's lip curled and Draco thought it was quite amazing that the man was able to look innocent and predatory at the same time, "how do you think I got it?" he asked.

"Oh dear merlin," Draco said, horrified, "Iris? You are a plague."

"Hey, look who Willis is talking to," Marc said suddenly, distracting Draco from his recriminations on Marc and his cock's lack of scruples. "Isn't that Weasley? From the Harpies?"

Draco spun in his seat. Sat two tables behind them, in the corner with a modicum of privacy was indeed Ginny Weasley, wearing a smart collared dress with her hair pulled up into a simple ponytail that hung long and straight down her back. Draco thought she looked very well put together, her attire was where it ended however. She was in a fit of giggles, pink cheeked and hanging on to Willis's arm as though to keep her sanity. He was chuckling to, his notebook out on the table next to him.

Draco suddenly felt ill, but before he could voice his worries about Willis and his love of sententia, Marc said speculatively, "Do you reckon he's getting a bit of that?"

That Draco thought distastefully, he might not appreciate women in the same way Marc did – thankfully, because venereal potions were expensive – but he didn't like to hear them spoken of as a commodity.

"Do you really think Willis would be brave enough to be sniffing around Potter's girl?" Draco said, trying to inject the old amount of scorn into his voice at the mention of anything Potter, but finding it sounded forced. He was sure it was true though, Willis had been two years above Draco in Slytherin, self-reliant to the core, and clever at finding ways to get what he wanted, but stealing someone's girlfriend, and someone famous at that? That didn't seem right for Willis because wouldn't be in his best interests at all.

"True," Marc said, "are they still together then? Potter and Weasley? And how do you know?"

Draco blanched, "I … um, have you seen it all over the front page? I'm sure it would be there if there were even rumours that they were on the rocks." He said, covering hastily, "and the Celeb-whores would be all over it." Draco had only just realised that Harry had told him, a journalist, that his relationship really was in a bit of trouble, merlin the man was a trusting idiot.

"Good point," Marc said, "and Willis wouldn't be foolish enough to bring her here if that was the case, the place is full of reporters."

"Mmm," Draco agreed, "I'm more worried about the fact that you told me Willis swears by sententia, and there he is, obviously interviewing someone who could not only share her own opinions, but her very famous boyfriend's."

"Willis wouldn't do that," said Marc, frowning over at the pair, "well maybe he would…"
Ginny was now laughing so hard she was leaning against Willis's shoulder, it seemed awfully cosy to Draco. Was there a possibility that she was not being completely professional? Willis was the sports writer, they probably had a lot in common and would see each other regularly, plenty of opportunity for private interviews. *Was this why she was pressuring Harry about marriage? To force herself to stop being unfaithful*—Draco cut his own thought off with a stern mental scolding, *Stop making up nonsense.* Just because comforting a heart broken Harry seemed like a good way to find out what his confusing behaviour had been about the other day, didn't mean Draco should wish it to happen.

"I'm just going to say hello," Draco said and he made to get up.

"Draco," warned Marc, "what's it to you if she's telling him stuff about Potter?"

Draco stilled, "Nothing, but don't you think he's had a bit of a rough time lately? Potter I mean."

"Lately?" Marc was giving him a strange look, "I haven't heard anything concrete about him since that drama at your in-laws, that's a point," Marc said, brightening suddenly, "she's been friends with Willis for a while, that's why she and Potter were there, I think Willis was in the Harpies press core, last season," Marc's eyes widened, "do you think they've been shagging since then or just more recently?"

"Argh, they aren't shagging you prick, they're friends," Draco said feeling relieved. He'd known that Potter had been at the same party as him because of his girlfriend, he'd just assumed it had been something to do with Astoria, not him. But the whole staff of the Prophet had been invited and allowed to bring guests so that made sense. At least this meant it was unlikely that Willis was drugging Ginny to get a better interview, she'd likely tell him everything he wanted to know anyway if they were old friends. It was at this point that Draco realised he had been staring at the pair of them, and not surprisingly, they had noticed.

Willis gave the customary head-flick-eyebrow-raise combination that meant any manner of things in male non-verbal communication. Draco took this one to mean, "Oh it's you two, from work, have a nice date."

Ginny was looking at Draco with an apprehensive expression, he supposed that wasn't too surprising, given their history. He forced a polite smile and nodded, hoping she wouldn't take offence to being stared at and run off and tell Harry that Draco was spying on her.

"If you say so," Marc said easily, "so about this vault thing, what do you reckon? Why would they suddenly start using it, if someone was stealing you'd think they'd put it somewhere other than a Ministry vault."

"Perhaps," Draco said, determinedly trying to focus on the boring vault instead of Harry's possibly slutty girlfriend, because that was just too mean. "Although, if you got caught with a private vault full of Ministry gold it would be quite obvious what you were up to then. Maybe this is so they can pretend it was all just a clerical error if someone clicks." He was thinking of Mrs Dottage and her extra nine thousand galleons.

Marc nodded, "That's a good point, it just so confusing, the budget is in deficit, which was expected this quarter, because the reparations finished at the end of May, but it's more than projected, I've been over and over the public release docs, and just I can't see where the extra money is being spent."

"Then why are you so sure it is?" Draco asked, he was losing interest in this conversation very quickly.
"I just am." Marc said stubbornly.

"That's really not a credible enough source for me." Draco said in his best Cuffe impersonation.

Marc looked annoyed, "I thought you'd be on my side, you've suffered from the greedy bastards and their reparations as much as anyone."

"Not really," Draco said, and it was true, he didn't really care that much that the Malfoy vault had been plundered by Ministry privateers. "Mother is comfortable and I opened an archive account when I was released from house arrest." It was about the only bloody fair thing about that reparations bill, Draco thought, that earnings in the form of wages were not taxable by the Ministry, though Draco would still not have risked putting his pay in the vault, the Ministry were not known to be all that scrupulous when it came to Death Eaters vaults.

"My father would be rolling in his grave if he knew I had an archive account, far to muggle," Draco said, feeling the strange mix of regret and relief he always did when thinking of his father, who, weakened by the final months of war had died in Azkaban before Draco's house arrest was complete. As much as Draco hated the things his father had done to their family he was still his Dad. He could hear his father's most superfluous voice in his head, *Draco, you mustn't trust the goblins to record your earnings on paper, what is to stop them altering the figures?*

Marc snickered, "Yes, the muggles have only used the same system for the last six hundred years, and they seem to find it perfectly suitable."

"Unfortunately to my father muggles and suitable never fit in the same sentence," Draco said, "And I am on your side, if you want to be so childish about it. But I don't really see a define link here, it could all just be a coincidence."

"Except you know Blishwick was always sympathetic."

"Belby, don't start that," Draco said carefully, it was true that Willard Blishwick, head of the Treasury Office had always been a friend of Draco's father, never quite a Death Eater, but Draco thought only in name. "You can't go blaming someone because of stuff that happened years ago – be thankful not everyone does that or we'd be working for bulldog-Betty. Cuffe was the biggest sycophant out, look at all the stuff he ran while Riddle was in charge. And he might be a tosser but hell, he's better than Braithwaite."

"I hate your ability to poke holes in everything." Marc said mutinously.

"Sorry." Draco said, "Why don't you see if your special abilities will get you a bit more detail on the budget breakdown? It will be easier to find the money if you have an idea of what it's being used for."

"Special abilities?" Marc frowned.

Draco huffed out a breath and flicked a disdainful hand in Marc's direction, "Yes, those heart stoppers you call eyes, I believe Mr Blishwick has a new secretary, she won't be on to you yet."

Marc grinned, seeming satisfied with both a complement and a plan.

Thursday afternoon was when England suddenly remembered to be, well, *English* about summer.

Perhaps it was not all of Great Brittan, Draco thought, just as there was a crack and a flash of light in the dark afternoon sky and the downpour started in earnest. Perhaps not even all of England, he
reasoned, as he held his satchel over his head and tried to make himself as small as possible. But most certainly on the front path of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place the weather was decidedly English. Drops of London summer were running unpleasantly down his neck and under his collar.

When Draco looked down at himself he saw that what had been a very nice mint-green dress shirt, was now much closer to a pale cat-sick colour as the green mixed with his now visible skin underneath. It took Draco a moment to remember why he didn't just move to Marseilles, like his mother.

One very good reason to put up with sudden drenchings opened the door at that moment.

"You're all wet." Harry said when he saw Draco standing on the narrow stoop. His satchel acting as useless umbrella above his dripping hair and cat-sick shirt.

Harry wore a particularly vacuous expression, as though he could not fathom how Draco managed to get rained on, while standing out doors in the rain. Draco reached out and snapped his fingers in front of Harry's gormless face, Harry jerked and blinked and stuttered something about a towel, shuffling off in the direction of the first floor bathroom.

Deciding that this meant he was granted entry, Draco closed the front door behind him as he stepped into the foyer. He was just pulling his wand from the water stiffened pocket of his trousers when Harry returned, "Here, sorry." Harry said, as though the rain were his fault.

"Thanks," Draco said. He dried his hands and face and scrubbed the towel through his hair before he passed it back to Harry, and then cast a drying charm to sort out his shirt and trousers, "Better?" he asked.

Harry shook his head minutely, "Your hair's all…" his fingers danced erratically around his own shaggy mop, "Potterish," he said apologetically.

Draco hurriedly raked his fingers through what could surely not be that bad. He had very well-behaved hair as a rule, thunderstorms notwithstanding. Perhaps being around Potter's was leading it astray. "It wasn't raining when I apparated from the office," he said, peering out the window beside the door into the still torrential rain, "I didn't think to cast impervious."

"I've been waiting for it all morning," Harry said, "the sky looked like it was going to fall in, the clouds were so black."

"It's certainly been a claustrophobic kind of a day." Draco agreed. It was because of the stifling sticky heat that Draco had agreed to visit Mrs Dottage up north that morning, the sea breeze had been the trip's only redeeming feature.

"Library today," Harry said, seeming recovered from his bout of absentness, "Kreacher's bringing us tea up there." He slung the towel over his shoulder and led the way upstairs.

"Lovely," Draco said. They passed the still open door of the bathroom and Harry threw the towel in before continuing upwards. Draco followed Harry up the staircase, and try as he might to not let his mind wander off on unprofessionally-pervy tangents, by the second set of stairs he was wondering if it was just climbing stairs all day that made Harry's jeans fit like that, or if he had some sort of muggle arse-ercising machine. Either way, the trip up through the house didn't seem to take anytime at all.

"You were right the other day," Draco said as they took seats in the library, either side of an end table carrying a silver tea service that looked very similar to one Draco remembered from the manor,
next to it was a willow patterned plate stacked with crumpets. "You did manage to surprise me, I
didn't know about Sirius Black living in Hogsmead."

"Was that the only thing?" Harry asked looking disappointed as he accepted his cup from Kreacher.

Draco shook his head, "I didn't know that Dobby had come to work at Hogwarts either, I only found
that out when you had the little git following me around with, you," Draco said suddenly looking at
Kreacher, having only just recognised the elf.

Draco's sixth year at Hogwarts was something he liked to pretend had happened to someone else, but
now he found a backwards sort of comfort in the idea that Harry had been trying to catch him out,
and an even more confusing spark of pride that he hadn't managed too, even though Draco obviously
wished he had never been stupid enough to get in the situation in the first place.

"Kreacher was following orders Mr Malfoy," the elf said remorsefully.

"That's okay," Draco said, the elf's large watery eyes were tugging at something inside him and he
felt bad for upsetting the creature. Good grief, his hair was not the only thing being adversely
affected by continued contact with Potter.

Harry was looking at him in surprise but he didn't comment. "So you finally believe me that I didn't
put my name in the goblet then?" He asked.

"I already knew, I told you on Monday, Wormtail liked to reminisce, and when he was feeling
particularly loyal to the cause, he would tell me how he found Riddle, and brought him back to life,"

Draco could see the hunched little man sitting beside him at the manor, when he and Severus had
returned after their escape from the astronomy tower. Wormtail's story about Potter's defying of
Voldemort to his face, surrounded by Death Eaters, at only fourteen years old had been the first time
Draco had admitted honestly to himself that he wished he had chosen the other side. That he had
been able too.

Harry seemed to be thinking along the same lines because he said, "Do you know, I can still
remember the sound of Wormtail cutting off his own hand? Of all the terrifying shit that happened
that night," he swallowed and shuddered, "Ew, the thought of it still makes me gag."

"I have to say reading it was quite bad enough." Draco said, although it was not the mutilation of
Wormtail's arm that had made Draco feel ill as he read the passage about Riddles re-birth. It had been
his father's presence, reading the moment their lives were cemented into that world. It was horribly
bleak.

Harry nodded, "Sometimes I'm glad I was so young, all that insane stuff, I don't think I could deal
with it now. But when you're a kid... I don't know it's like I always thought the grown-ups would
sort it out in the end." Harry grimaced, looking a little embarrassed "Sorry, I'm a bit weird today."

"You're a bit weird everyday Potter." Draco said, not unkindly as he opened his notebook, "We
don't have a lot of options when it comes to verifying all of this, being that most are dead."

"I know," Harry said, seeming grateful for a change in topic, "McGonagall was there right after my
name came out, and Hagrid helped me with the dragons. I sent a letter to Victor Krum, I figured he
might help, he was there when Crouch showed up in the forest."

Draco smiled, he was very pleased to get to interview Krum, if he consented. Draco hoped he could
talk him into a separate interview as well. He was retiring from international Quidditch at the end of
this season, it would do wonderful things for Draco's career to publish his final interview as a player.
"Excellent. You are a convenient man Potter." Draco said

Harry grinned, "Er … thanks?"

"I don't really have any other concerns," Draco said, running through his notes, "you told most of this story to Skeeter, so the readers already know it, and it's accepted fact, I just have to add a few details and I'll talk to Granger and Weasley again. But I think I'll save my next Hogwarts trip up until we've got fifth year done, it seems like a good breaking place, everything changed so much that summer."

"Sounds good." Harry said, helping himself to a crumpet.

Draco was glad they didn't need to go over their fourth year, just reading Harry's account had reminded him of his own personal struggles that year, coming to terms with his sexuality had not been an easy task in the confines of dorm life.

Draco hoped the fifth year notes would be just as simple, it was definitely easier now that they were cataloguing the part of Harry's life that was already well-known. Draco didn't find the need to ask as many questions because he remembered half of the important stuff himself. And so would the rest of the public. If not first hand, through the books and articles already published, and most of the information on those years was reasonably accurate.

Unfortunately this meant that he had little reason to sit and eat crumpets with Harry, other than because he wanted too, and that wasn't for any reason he could give if Harry asked why he was still there. But he needn't have worried. Once again it seemed Harry was in one of his bizarre introspective moods. He seemed quite happy just to sit, slumped in his chair and drink his tea while Draco pretended to go over his notes.

Until after more than half an hour of silence he asked a rather unexpected question, "Do you like being married?"

Draco looked at him, it was no secret amongst his circle of friends that he and Astoria were married just to keep their parents happy, he assumed Harry knew too. "It has its benefits," Draco said slowly. "Like what?" Harry asked, sitting up a little straighter.

Draco frowned, he thought he understood the reason behind the questions. "If you want me to talk you into marrying your girlfriend I won't," He said bluntly, "I'm not married for love, although lucky for me Astoria is quite lovely and we get along well, but you cannot compare my circumstance to yours."

Harry scrunched up his nose and fell back into his slouch again, "But it will make her happy, and Molly, god Molly would be over the moon. Isn't that worth it?"

Draco made a frustrated little noise and snapped, "I don't know Potter, why must you insist on asking my opinion?"

"I don't know," Harry said, shrugging, "Hermione says follow your heart, which is a load of shit because my bloody heart doesn't know what it wants at the best of times, Ron says don't hurt Ginny but he gets that I have to be happy too, and you say dump her."

"I do not." Draco said, annoyed.

"Yes," Harry insisted, "last time."
"The fact that we've had this conversation more than once concerns me," Draco muttered, "And what I actually said was, don't string her along, commit or don't, it's up to you."

"It's not stringing her along though," Harry said uncertainly, "not really."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself." Draco replied, surprising himself by falling back into the old pattern of goading Harry.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked sharply.

"Merlin Potter," Draco said in frustration, "I don't know alright? It just seems a bit much, poor Harry with his pretty girl and his independent wealth and his supportive friends, good grief why don't you get some real problems."

"Right, sorry," Harry said, obviously offended. "Look I don't know either, ever since the anniversary party I've been feeling weird, Ginny just reminds me of all the bad shit that's happened, and I don't understand why it's just her. Ron and Hermione were there through much more of the worst than she was, god, I spent more time with you than her towards the end, why don't I feel so hopeless around them? Or you?"

"I'm not a mind healer," Draco said, steadfastly ignoring the tiny kick in his pulse at this new development, and wondering if the way Harry felt around Ginny was the same hopeless feeling he'd had as a teenager, every time his father had mentioned arranging a good marital match to insure the Malfoy line. "Did you ever go to one? After the war?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "Molly made me. But it was different then, that first year, Christ it was brilliant, I don't think I've ever been so happy in my whole life."

"That's really not a very high bar." Draco said, waving his notebook filled with Harry's messed up childhood.

Harry gave a twisted smile, "I know, but I didn't feel like I needed healing so there was nothing for them to do."

"I really don't think that's how it works." Draco said.

Harry shrugged, "Either way, now no matter what I do someone's going to be pissed off, I guess it's easier if it me."

"Sweet Circe, stop feeling sorry for yourself," Draco scolded, "I'm assuming you'll be seeing her today since she's in London, why don't you talk to her about it?"

"Ginny's in London?" Harry asked, obviously surprised.

"Yes I saw her just before I came here, she was doing an interview I think," Draco felt like he was covering up for Ginny, and he didn't know why, things were evidently more sinister than they appeared if she hadn't even told Harry she was in the country.

"It's her birthday," Harry said. "I wonder why … an interview?" He asked suddenly.

"Yes," Draco nodded, "with the sports writer for the Prophet."

"Willis?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Draco said, "they're friends aren't they?"
"He’d like it to be more than that I think," Harry said. "Sometimes I think she would too." Draco didn't know how to reply to that, but Harry continued before he needed to, "she always goes on about how funny he is, something I'm definitely not."

"I don't know what to say Harry, sorry," Draco said, not willing to lie. Ginny had certainly looked like she was having fun with Willis, and if Harry suffered from mood-swings in her company too, Draco could understand why someone as bright and bubbly as she seemed to be might find that tiresome.

"'S'alright" Harry murmured, and then he made an odd choking sound and for one horrifying second Draco thought he was crying, but then he realised it was a confused laugh, "Do you know what it totally mental? I think of Ginny leaving me for another bloke and the first thing that pops into my head is how the press will turn her into the evil villain, and how she'll hate it."

"I don't think that's mental," Draco said, "I think that's exactly what will happen, you're their hero only they get to break your heart."

Harry shook his head, "No, I mean it's mental that I don't think the normal stuff, like how it will hurt me, or what I could do to stop it from happening." He paused, forehead crinkled as he stared blankly, "that's probably a bad sign right?"

Draco thought he had a point, but it was a bit disturbing to see him so openly befuddled by the situation, bloody heart-on-sleeve-Gryffindors he thought. Draco was still coming to terms with the fact that Harry viewed him as a friend. To hear himself lumped in with Weasley and Granger as a valid opinion giver was very peculiar. The worst thing was he did think Harry should break up with Ginny since he was so blatantly unhappy, but Draco didn't feel like he should say it because he worried that it was his niggly little fondness of the man skewing his motives.

There was a sudden loud CRACK and Kreacher appeared next to the table, "Master Harry, Miss Ginny has just arrived, she's down in the kitchen, she didn't want to interrupt your meeting."

Despite the depressing mood, Harry's expression nearly made Draco laugh out loud, from shock at Kreacher's sudden appearance, to inquiry as the message was delivered, followed by something Draco equated with swallowing a large mouthful of spouts, all quickly schooled into a small smile as he said, "Thanks Kreacher, tell her I'll be right down."

"Yes Master." said the elf, and he dipped his head in both of their directions before he vanished again.

"Cheer up Potter," Draco said, as Harry's little smile wavered uncertainly, "looks like she just wanted to surprise you, no affair after all."

Harry managed a more natural looking grin, "Yeah," he said, "sorry we have to cut this short,"

Draco looked at his watch, and blinked in surprise, "I've been here for two hours."

"Time flies," Harry said, with an oddly wistful look at the pile of notes.

Draco gathered his things and stood to leave, deliberating on saying what was on his mind, "Potter," he started before he lost his nerve, "don't do anything rash like break up with her, not on her birthday." Chicken he chastised himself, he wondered if his nerve had ever even existed.

"I'm not that much of an idiot." Harry replied, "I'm sure Ginny and I will be fine." he smiled again and Draco thought he was far too practiced at hiding his apparent hopelessness. He also thought briefly that it was catching.
Please take no offence from Draco's internal anti-Spanish sentiment, he just prefers sitting down to eat.
Draco had arrived at the Daily Prophet offices feeling unduly chipper for a Tuesday morning. No one in their right mind feels chipper on a Tuesday morning, so he ought to have known something terrible was about to happen. If he had thought about it, he would have expected this terribleness to involve excruciating boredom by way of pointless incoming story sorting. Or, his most hated of housekeeping the tasks included in his job description – the dreaded intern interaction. He supposed it would be easier, and marginally less mind-numbing if he actually engaged with them. But, honestly, seventeen-year-olds really were some of the most tediously self-involved creatures on the planet.

It never crossed Draco’s mind that his Tuesday-terribleness would come at eight forty-five, via minute owl on a Wizengamot letterhead, and written in a feminine yet no-nonsense hand that could only belong to Hermione Granger.

Dear Mr Malfoy,

I am writing on behalf of Harry J. Potter to inform you that your services in regard to Mr Potter's auto-biography are no longer required. This is due to your suspected use of unauthorised methods to gain information about Mr Potter's life.

Mr Potter does not wish to pursue legal action at this stage, but your actions, if proven, would violate the terms of good faith included in the contract signed by both parties rending it void. I would advise caution in relation to all contact with Mr Potter as of today the 12th of August 2003.

You will be paid for your time thus far via written requested deposit into the account registered as D L Malfoy.

Sincerely

Hermione Granger-Weasley,
Associate Counsel Wizengamot

"What the buggering fuck?" Draco said, dumfounded as he re-read the completely confusing letter. He must have misunderstood. No longer required? An uncomfortable wave of cold washed over him. He willed his eyes to see something different on the page as he looked for a third time.

THUD!

Draco nearly fell out of his chair in shock when an open, canvas-bound ledger dropped onto his desk from the heavens, sending a musty breeze up into his face and obscuring the letter.

The ledger page was headed Expenditure Tally, Treasury Office: First Quarter April – June 2003. Then followed columns of figures and their allocations, all neatly slotted into a grid. Precise penmanship must have been high on the required skill set when working in the Treasury Office.

"Bad news?" Asked Marc's voice and Draco realised it wasn't some divine intervention but his governmental-financial-scam obsessed friend.

Draco blinked at the sudden intrusion into the reparative litany of Granger's letter in his head, "Use of unauthorised methods" he muttered the most worrying sentence aloud, "what on earth?"
"Aren't you impressed?" Said Marc, not realising that Draco was otherwise occupied, "It only took me one afternoon, and I didn't even shag the receptionist."

Legal action? Draco thought, paying no attention to his nattering colleague. But Draco hadn't done anything illegal, was it a joke? Somewhere in his floundering brain it irked Draco that Harry had the bloody government's lawyers acting on his behalf, as if Draco had any hope of winning a legal battle against them.

"I did have to hide from Cuffe though," Marc went on, his voice now just a background drone to what was rapidly becoming an internal panic attack for Draco, "did you know he and Blishwick are cousins? Their mums are sisters. They were just leaving for lunch when I arrived."

Advise caution? Said Draco's indignant mental voice. How insane, like he would hurt Potter, that would be career suicide.

"But he didn't see me so it's fine, and apparently Blishwick pinched the lovely Mavis's bum yesterday morning, so she was very willing to accidently let me find the budget breakdown. She's a real sweetheart."

Paid for his time? A tiny silver lining, Draco thought, but it would be nothing compared to the agreed fee. He winced at the thought of all the lost royalties.

"We're actually going out on Friday, imagine Draco, me on a proper date." Marc paused, as if dwelling on the absurdity of such a statement. "Anyway though, what do you think? I went over the figures and all I can say is that I'm glad I don't pay the same fees on my bank accounts as the Ministry does," He chuckled to himself, "I can't believe we complain about the goblins ripping us off." He reached over Draco's shoulder and tapped at the spreadsheet, "See?"

Draco focused on the figures in front of him, the minuscule script momentarily blurred. He didn't even know what he was supposed to be looking at so he asked, aiming for something possibly on topic, "Why do they only abbreviate Account Maintenance half the time?" it was the first thing he'd noticed when he looked at the page, sometimes the full title and others it read Accnt Maintenance. Draco hated pointless abbreviations, and only doing sometimes seemed the pinnacle of pointlessness.

"Does it matter?" asked Marc, incredulously "Merlin, our taxes are being sucked up in account fees and you notice a spelling mistake? We're looking for missing gold not vowels."

"Sorry," Draco said, brusquely, "I have to go," he pushed out his chair, accidentally knocking Marc as he did so. "Sorry." he said again, but he didn't stop as he grabbed the letter and his satchel and marched through the cubicle maze toward the exit. He had to find out what was going on. He was not going to let Potter pull something like this.

Harry was drowning, or was he? He was awake, he was sure of it … almost.

He tried to open his eyes but the effort involved seemed immense. He felt as though there was something large and extremely heavy sitting on his chest as he tried to take a breath. He thought that it was probably a good thing that his eyes wouldn't open, because even with no focus point his head was spinning violently. There was a voice talking nearby,

"Harry? I'm so sorry but I have to get back to Trento, we have practice this afternoon."

It was Ginny Harry registered dimly, but she sounded wrong, far away and fuzzy. He tried to open his eyes again, but his leaden lids only fluttered for the briefest moment, "Ginny?" He asked thickly.
"Yes," the bed dipped at his side and there was a cool hand on his brow, "I'm so sorry I have to go." she said softly, "but it's the semi-finals this Saturday, I can't miss it. Hermione will be here soon, she's going to look after you."

Look after him? He did feel like a kneazle's arse. "Why am I sick?" He managed, he didn't remember getting sick, he'd been in the library with Draco, hadn't he? "I don't remember – Draco was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes" Ginny said, "he left just after I arrived,"

Harry was struggling to comprehend what was going on. Now that Ginny said it, he did remember her arrival, he had been worried about their relationship. Worried that he wasn't worried enough, something even he thought was crazy. He had been disappointed that Draco was leaving, and confused that Ginny was there when she was supposed to be in Italy.

Rapping on the door suddenly rattled through mess that was Harry's head, it was accompanied by Hermione's voice "Ginny? Harry?"

"Come in," Ginny said.

Harry heard the quick slapping of flip-flop footsteps crossing the room's wooden floor and then Hermione said, "Oh Harry," there was a new hand on his forehead – maybe that was where he had been injured? His head was still spinning rapidly. But then Hermione's hand was gone and soft lips replaced it, he hoped that was Ginny, he would have to be dying for Hermione to be kissing him.

"I'll floo tonight," he heard Ginny say, not dying then Harry thought, Ginny would surely stay by his side if his life was in danger. In fact, that was the only reason her coach accepted for being absent from practice.

"Sure," Hermione said, "I've taken the day off, and the Healer said Harry should be better within twenty four hours. It's already been fourteen."

_Fourteen hours_ Harry thought, so what time was it? The middle of the night? Draco had arrived at two, and he could vaguely remember seeing Ginny, she'd been a bit dressed up and had brought wine.

"Harry are you awake?" It was Hermione again. He managed to open his eyes enough to see her sitting next to him on his bed. She could obviously tell that he was trying to look at her, because she handed him his glasses. Then, when he fumbled to get his hand out from under the blankets, she sat them on his nose and tucked the arms over his ears for him.

"Thanks." he said, as she came into focus. It must have been early in the morning, Hermione was dressed in what had to be one of Ron's t-shirts and the sort of linen-y pyjamas that you couldn't tell were pyjamas unless you really looked, and he guessed, flip-flops, though he couldn't see her feet. She had not even tried to tame her hair, it was up in scrunched knot on top of her head. She smiled at him and Harry said, "God your hair is mental."

Hermione patted it self-consciously and said, "Well that wasn't too bad."

"Shit I'm sorry," Harry said, horrified at his rudeness, "I didn't mean that, it's just these days you normally make an effort, I haven't seen it looking –"

"Harry stop talking," Hermione said, surprisingly kindly considering his lack of tact. "I think it would be best if you just try not to say anything until it wears off. Healer Mallog said that should be by about seven this evening." She checked her watch and frowned as though she'd hoped it would
miraculously be seven in the evening already.

"Until what wears off?" Harry asked, a little panicked, "Why I am not supposed to talk? And you really shouldn't frown like that, it makes you look old."

Hermione's frown deepened, "Zip it," she said, "I still want to be your friend by the end of the day," she smiled ruefully, "but a girl can only take so much honesty. Now I'm guessing Ginny didn't tell you what happened?"

Harry shook his head, it seemed to rattle a bit, like all the important bits inside were loose. *That couldn't be good.* He desisted. "No, nothing," he said, "I only just woke up."

"Right," Hermione said, just as there was a sudden cooing gurgle from near Harry's feet. It took his slow brain a moment to realise it was just a previously quiet baby Rosie, and not some weird gurgling-toe symptom of his mysterious illness.

"Good morning Rose," Hermione said, walking her fingers up her daughter's chest and bopping her lightly on the nose with her index finger, earning a fractious little giggle in response. Hermione pulled a brightly coloured, bangle-sized plastic ring from her pocket and handed it to Rose, who immediately thrust it into her mouth and began gumming away happily. "Teething," Hermione said, "and Granny Granger will not allow magic near her only grandchild's teeth. All well and good for her, she's not dealing with the grumpy little drooler all day and night."

"Oh," said Harry, being careful not to say more.

"Right," Hermione said again, turning her attention back to him now that Rose was placated. She kept one hand on her daughter's tummy as she spoke, Rose did like to roll around a lot. "Ginny said that at about six last night, you er, fell asleep, and that it took her a while to realise that it wasn't normal sleep, but that you were having trouble breathing."

Harry was confused, "I fell asleep at six in the evening and Ginny didn't think that was weird?" Harry asked, "Christ, she gets normally gets grumpy at me if I even doze off on the couch when she's visiting."

"Well," Hermione said, not quite meeting his eye, "you'd just, er, *privately* celebrated her birthday," Hermione was obviously striving to appear unruffled, but Harry could tell it wasn't something she particularly wanted to talk about.

Harry didn't much want to either. The night was coming back to him very quickly at the mention of private celebrations – Ginny in her nice dress, smiling at him. Drinking her birthday wine while she told him about the latest dramas at Harpies camp, and the word on the likely line-up for the Bolzano Orsi - Harry's favourite non-British team. Then he remembered thinking, as she had got down on her knees in front of his chair and unzipped his fly, that considering it was her birthday he seemed to be doing very well out of it.

Then something else, light headedness from the wine hitting him without warning, and finding that every time he closed his eyes to enjoy Ginny's ministrations it was no longer his girlfriend's auburn head bobbing up and down in his lap but a blonde one, the light hair messed up and half-wet as Draco's had been after he'd come in from the rain.

Harry remembered quite clearly having to force his eyes open to stay present, to not get lost in a wine induced fantasy, as well as clamp his mouth shut as a precaution against verbalising the consuming illusion. He couldn't remember anything after the rush of climax. It was blank, nothing at all, until Ginny talking to him just a few minutes ago.
"Ginny said you usually –," Hermione scrunched her nose in distaste and then muttered, "for goodness sake, we're grown-ups." Harry understood, he didn't really talk about his sexual habits with anyone, seeing that his best friend was completely horrified given his sisters involvement and Hermione just wasn't a 'sex talk' kind of friend. But she gave a slightly manic smile and powered on as only Hermione could, "According to Ginny you are prone to falling asleep after sex, something that is very common, so I don't blame her for not realising something was wrong right away."

"What was wrong?" Harry asked forgetting to be embarrassed, and just hoping the problem wasn't him moaning Draco's name in his sleep. Although he didn't think either Hermione or Ginny would view possible bisexuality as a disease that required a healer, or something that could be cured in twenty-four hours. Ginny probably wouldn't have been too pleased with him this morning either, and she hadn't seemed pissed off.

"You were in some sort of overdose-induced coma," Hermione said, by the time Ginny realised that you were sick you were barely breathing, that's why you feel so rotten, oxygen deprivation. The Spikerush grass in the potion has built up in your system for the last three and a half months, Healer Mallog says it's surprising you didn't notice something was wrong with you sooner."

"What!?" Harry exclaimed, earning a startled jump from Hermione and a squelchy sounding shriek from Rose at his feet. "Hermione, are you telling me I've been poisoned? For the last three months?"

She nodded, "Not poisoned exactly, but there's a potion The Prophet reporters have been using, Ginny just told me about it, she is friends with Nathan Willis who works there, he told her they all use it all the time –"

"Draco told me," Harry said, "Sentia or something,"

"He told you about it? Did you take it willingly?" She asked sharply, Harry shook his head and Hermione continued, Harry could tell she was winding up in to full Hermione-auto-rant, "God he has a nerve, I think it's absolutely abhorrent. To think Malfoy has built a career on apparent honesty and really it's this sneakiness behind it. I really thought he had talent you know. I never would have suggested this if I'd thought he worked in any other way than what he presented to the public."

"Hermione," Harry said, realising what she was implying, "just hang on – you think Malfoy has been giving it to me? He doesn't use it, he told me he only just found out about it, can't have been more than two weeks ago. He was so mad, remember the day he talked to Ron? That's what he was angry about."

"Really?" she said sceptically, "Well, Healer Mallog says the build-up is at least three months old, that's the beginning of May – the party was at his in-laws Harry, he could have slipped it in your drink at any point during the evening. I'm sorry I didn't believe you when you said you'd been drugged at the party. I should have known no matter how drunk you might have been, you wouldn't go shouting at people."

That made sense at least, Harry thought. He'd been drinking whiskey that night, it had never before made him loose his temper like that. But everyone just rolled their eyes when he said something else had happened. "Hold on Hermione," Harry said, his head was still foggy, it was difficult to understand all the implications. But, as he thought about his time with Draco his innards seemed to evaporate in horrible realisation. Was this why he kept telling him things he didn't really need to? Why he felt so belligerent most of the time? Did sententia make you crazy? "What else did the healer say?" he asked urgently.

Hermione took a piece of parchment from his bedside table and handed it to him. It was topped with a crossed bone and wand emblem, below which were several paragraphs of swirly handwriting.
11 Aug 19.00 Initial assessment reveals patient has suffered ongoing exposure to spikerush and wyvern scale causing an episode of severe respiratory distress. Both spikerush and wyvern scale are active ingredients in manaire draft, pensarie,.sententia, skrikig solution, and veritaserum. The only potion that matches all foreign additives found in patients system is sententia. This potion is rarely used in modern times in a medicinal capacity – up until mid-1950's diluted sententia was recommended as a treatment for introverted children by mind healers.

Sententia has been ingested on a regular basis for at least the last three weeks and older traces of the easily dateable spikerush suggest initial exposure no more than three months ago.

Spouse confirms patient has suffered mood swings and memory loss, will confirm with patent if he has any other symptoms at next assessment – 10.00, temporary coma should have lifted by this time. Patient will likely exhibit a lack of ability to sensor his speech until the antidote is effective, at approximately 19.00.

Dennis Mallog, Healer - St Mungo's out-patient department.

Harry looked up at Hermione, "I thought I was going mad," he said, somewhat relieved, and also with a creeping disappointment in Draco. He was certainly a good actor. Harry had believed Draco's outrage at his colleague's use of the potion in a heartbeat. "Why would he lie to me?" Harry asked, "We were getting on so well."

Hermione looked surprised, "That's what you're worried about? That he lied to you? The fact that you could have died from this doesn't concern you?"

"That's true," Harry said, clutching on to what seemed like a plausible hope, "Draco's clever, and he was pretty good at potions, don't you think he'd know better than to give me an overdose?"

"Harry," Hermione said slowly, her eyes narrowing in a way that made Harry cringe, she knew something was not quite right, "I know you like to look for the best in people, and that he's changed on the surface. I mean, I thought him reformed too, but this is a big deal," she patted his knee through the bedspread and said, as though he was very dim and didn't really get it, "he could have killed you, whether he meant to or not."

Before Harry could reply – luckily, because he was probably going to say something stupid like, 'I don't think he did it,' or 'you're jumping to conclusions' something he knew Hermione wouldn't do, and the evidence all pointed in Draco's direction – there was a thunderous banging on the front door down stairs and then a voice Harry had no trouble recognising bellowed, "Potter, you contract-welshing prat! Out here at once!"

Draco couldn't stop his foot from tapping impatiently as he waited for the door at Grimmauld place to be opened for him. He was thoroughly regretting his hasty hammering on Potter's front door, which he had foolishly followed by shouting up at the terraced facade. He regretted the shouting because he liked to appear in control of his temper, which yelling at the top of his lungs certainly was not. The door hammering he wished he had thought through because now he wasn't just terribly angry, insulted, and fearful that he had lost a very large sum of money (and Harry's previous approval) but his hand hurt like a bitch.

It was not Kreacher or Harry that bravely opened the door to face the onslaught of Draco's indignation, but Hermione Granger-Weasley. Her eyebrows were set in a McGonagall-worthy straight line of disapproval and there was a red-headed child blowing spitty bubbles balanced on her hip. This small … girl? – Draco really wished that people could be more gender-specific with their baby ensembles- a yellow stretch 'n' grow really gave him no idea either way, except that ginger
people should never wear yellow, if even the cuteness of a baby couldn't make it look acceptable. The small child, poor fashion choices aside, explained Hermione's mother-with-no-time appearance, loose trousers and an even looser t-shirt, with the maddest hair Draco had ever seen in real life.

"Malfoy," she said, coolly, "I didn't expect such reckless behaviour from you," she adjusted the baby and continued in her best Assistant Counsel voice, "I advised you to be cautious in approaching Harry, if you wish to pursue this I will happily confer with Higgs. But after what has happened I cannot allow you to speak with Harry."

"After what has happened?" Draco said impatiently, "Granger, I received your letter firing me half an hour ago for something I haven't done. You'll be hearing from my solicitor, so you best have all your accusatory ducks in a row, because I'll not have my reputation at risk." She was giving him a calculating look and Draco thought he might have softened her just slightly, "Could we please speak about this inside?" he tried politely, even attempting a smile, he didn't think it worked though, his cheeks felt too stiff.

"Draco," Hermione said still baring the door way, but seeming more reasonable. She looked over her shoulder up the staircase, "This is serious, I don't know why you would bother when he was willing to tell you everything anyway but he tested positive for Sententia –"

"What?" Draco interrupted, "But he hasn't been near anyone from The Prophet except–" a heavy weight dropped into Draco's stomach as he realised what she thought he had done, "except me." he finished. *Fuck.*

Hermione was watching him intently but she didn't speak, or move to close the door. "I didn't–" Draco stuttered automatically, reaching out a hand to keep the door open in case she decided to shut him out, "Granger really, I didn't, we're friends … sort of, like you said he was telling me everything."

He really needed to talk to Harry about this, he would know Draco didn't do it. It must just be Granger drawing the most obvious conclusion. He took a deep breath, "Please Granger," he said calmly, "can we just sit down and talk about it?"

She was looking at him strangely, "Fine," and she finally stepped aside.

"In the drawing room?" he asked, his plan already formed as he started up the staircase.

"Sure," she said following him. Draco slowed his pace so she would draw level with him on the stairs and surreptitiously withdrew his wand, hiding it up his right sleeve.

When they reached the door to the drawing room he gestured with his left hand, "Ladies first," he said, his smile came easier this time, *needs must* he thought.

Hermione and the now gurgling yellow-clad child passed him into the room, and just as she bent to sit on the sofa, Draco, still in the doorway said, "Accio Granger's wand." The thin strip of wood wiggled free from her trouser pocket and Hermione, her hands full of baby tried to snatch it but missed. It soared through the air and Draco caught it in his left hand, then he took a step back out of the room. He slammed the door shut and jabbed his own wand at it, saying "Colloportus" as he did so.

Draco looked down at the other wand clutched in his fist, his heart was beating rapidly, he hadn't broken the law by disarming outside a duel, but it was awfully close. He was sure Granger and her team of legal brains could send him down for this.
"Sorry Granger," he said loudly through the door and meaning it, "Really I am. Just give me ten minutes." and he took off up the stairs, Hermione's muffled angry voice from the locked room followed him.

Draco passed the open library door and several empty guest bedrooms, he paused at each one to peer inside, but everything was still, only the continued raised voice of Hermione on the floor below disturbed the peace in the old house. Draco supposed Harry was up here somewhere, Hermione had been looking in this direction when she was trying to keep him outside.

Then as he rounded the final banister he heard a familiar voice say, "Fucking brilliant. As if I want to talk to you like this." Harry was standing at the door to one of only two rooms that opened off the tiny last landing. He was very pale, his hair even more insane than usual.

Draco pulled up short, the man looked quite sick. Draco wanted to tell him to go back to bed. Then he remembered why he had just locked a mother and baby in a room and run up more stairs than was wise for a reasonably inactive man. "Granger just told me that you have been given sententia." He said, surprised that he didn't sound as pleading as he felt, "You know I didn't do it?"

Harry seemed to brace himself on the doorframe, like he was struggling with the effort of standing but he said quite forcefully, "I don't know anything," he glowered at Draco, "Healer Mallog says the first dose was at the beginning of May – I was at your in-laws house for that stupid party then, and what did I do there? Something that has turned out rather well for you." He wobbled slightly and Draco nearly reached out a hand to help him, but Harry righted himself and said pointedly, "It does seem rather convenient."

Draco couldn't believe that this is what a sententia overdose looked like, he should have known Betty would down play the side effects to ease his temper. But it still rankled that Harry was accusing him, he narrowed his eyes and said contemptuously, "Potter, how could I possibly have thought that you having a go at my boss would lead us here? Don't be ridiculous. I didn't know the stuff existed until a fortnight ago!"

"So you say," Harry said nastily, "I thought we'd moved on from all this shit."

"Potter, I spoke to you once that whole evening, at the coat check when you arrived and you didn't even have a drink yet, so I couldn't have given you any potion. There were at least ten other reporters there, any of them could have spiked your drink."

"But none of them have been around me since." Harry said doggedly.

"When could I have given it to you?" Draco just stopped himself from throwing his arms in the air in exasperation, "You or your house-elf made all the drinks you've consumed in my presence, think it through for merlin's sake."

"I don't know!" Harry said sounding quite as frustrated as Draco felt, "You were always sneaking, up to something, I don't know why I thought you'd changed, you're Malfoy for goodness sake."

Draco very nearly winced, to hear his name sneered like that, Harry's facial expression wasn't as cruel as it would have been ten years ago, but it stung a bit to know Harry still had reservations about his character. "Nice to know what you really think Potter." Draco ground out, "You just said you thought we'd moved past this."

"What I really think? Isn't that was this is all about?" Harry's colour was returning as his voice rose with anger, "Did you really think I was hiding something? I asked to you write this book, why would I keep anything from you?"
"You wouldn't!" Draco barked losing his own temper, "exactly the point! So why would I need to use a potion, that I didn't know existed, in an impossibly stealthy way?" he glared for a moment to emphasise how ridiculous it all was, and then said dismissively, "You're an idiot. I can't believe your stupid fucking opinion matters to me."

He was quite fucked, Draco knew that as he turned and made to descend the stairs, he had no idea where to start clearing his name, but he didn't think a good first step would be punching an ill Harry Potter in the face, and that was what was going to happen if he stayed on the tiny landing for one more moment.

He heard Harry stumble behind him and then a hand seized his elbow, "Wait, Mal- Draco, wait," Harry said, he looked almost scared, his green eyes wide behind his glasses, "it's been messing with my head," he said beseechingly, "will I go back to normal now, will I stop thinking about you?"

"Let go," Draco growled at him, twitching his arm, and Harry dropped it immediately, "I don't know if you'll be normal again," Draco said, "I don't know anything about it because I didn't do it! Why would it make you think about me?"

"Thinking about me?" Harry was staring, he looked a little stunned, "Never mind," he started, but heavy footsteps on the stairs behind them interrupted him, Draco turned and raised his wand instinctively.

"Lower your wand Malfoy," It was Ron Weasley, in Auror kit from head to toe and his own wand aimed at Draco's chest, "I don't want to take you in by force, even if you are holding my wife and daughter prisoner."

Draco would never admit it aloud for as long as he lived, but he was a tiny bit afraid of Weasley at that moment, he lowered his wand just as Harry looked at him in horror, "What?"

'Prisoner' was the right term Draco supposed, but it sounded much worse when you didn't mention, 'for five minutes in a comfortable room with a house-elf at her immediate call if she needed anything.' "They're in the drawing room," Draco said, "it's not even been ten minutes."

"I know," said Ron. Not sounding at all bothered. Draco was busy wondering how Ron had ended up here at all. He didn't think Team Leading Aurors were allowed to just pop out to visit their mates at nine-thirty in the morning on a Tuesday.

"Why didn't you let them out?" Harry asked. He was leaning on the banister now, paler than ever. Ron gave him a look and said, "Do you really want an angry Hermione complicating this? Right. I heard enough of that – Malfoy you sticking by your story? You had nothing to do with it?"

"Yes," Draco said, struggling with the very foreign feeling of being *glad* that Ron Weasley was present. "I have never given anybody sententia, ever. I think it's cheating and immoral."

Ron nodded, "Okay, Harry I'm going to escort Malfoy from the house, but there's no proof he's broken any law, since Hermione let him in in the first place, so he will be free to go and we can let the lawyers deal with this."

"Okay," Harry said, Draco could see he wouldn't be upright for much longer, all the fight had gone out of him.

Ron looked worriedly at his friend for a moment and then twitched the end of his wand and said, "Come along Malfoy."
Draco glanced back at Harry who was trying very hard to hide his failing strength, jaw clenched and his knuckles white on the balustrade, "You know it wasn't me Potter." Draco said firmly, "Don't waste your money on an investigation."

Harry shook his head but didn't speak and Ron said "Go and lie down mate, Hermione said you'll feel better in a few hours." Then he shepherded Draco back down the stairs.

They passed the drawing room door and Draco called, "I'm very sorry Granger." He pulled Hermione's wand from his sleeve and held it out to Ron, "how did you know to come?" he asked.

"Thanks," Ron pocketed the wand, "Hermione," he said, indicating the door with his thumb, "there's a floo network hearth in the drawing room – Hermione called me."

"Why is she still in there then?" Draco asked

Ron looked at him surprised, "You can't take a six-month-old through the floo, it's worse for them than shaking."

"Oh," Draco said intelligently. Another bizarre moment he thought, being taught something about the wizarding world by Weasley.

They reached the front door and Ron said, "Don't go far Malfoy, it will make you look guilty if you try to get away."

"You don't think I am?" Draco said shrewdly, he could tell that Ron was at least reserving judgement on the situation.

Ron knitted his brow and gave him an Aurorly sizing up, "I think you're far too clever to get caught doing something so stupid. I also think that Hermione is just so horrified at the idea of this potion being used at all that she wants to burn The Prophet offices to the ground – and you are the only person she knows that works there so you get the brunt." He sighed, "And Harry, merlin knows, but I heard the end of your conversation up there, I'd say he's got a few things to sort out."

Draco could feel his eyebrows travelling up his forehead as Ron spoke, since when did Ron-bloody-Weasley become so wise? The world was quite plainly coming to an end.
Draco had been wrong in his assumption. The world had not come to an end, in fact, it was still exactly the same as it had been exactly one week ago. Harry Potter had not ruined his career, Granger had not appeared with an army of law-waving soldiers behind her to drag Draco from his desk in the Prophet offices. And his bank account still only contained the remnants of his last pay packet, not the partial fee he had been promised in the letter from Granger.

This lack of payment was the reason Draco was, for want of a better word, hovering at the edge of Number Eleven Grimmauld place. Surely a week was enough time for a man as wealthy as Potter, with as little to do as Potter, to find room in his schedule - of nothing - to pay Draco for his efforts.

It wasn't fear of demanding the gold from Potter that had Draco loitering at his neighbour's fence. It was that his breeding and generally well-mannered sensibilities were recoiling at the idea of debt collection on his own behalf. It seemed both desperate and indecorous, but as he was not in the position or, to be honest, of the inclination to employ enforcers, it fell to him to round up what he was owed.

He looked at his watch, he had been here for ten minutes. It was getting ridiculous, it was his lunch break and he shouldn't have to waste it pacing next to Eleven's bins. Seizing on to this little bit of indignation Draco strode purposefully along the footpath, opened the narrow wrought iron gate of Number Twelve and made it all the way to the front steps.

He really wasn't scared, he told himself, he was just a little on edge due to lack of sleep. Draco had endured a very stressful week of waiting for his career to go up in smoke when the story of the Potter poisoning got out. He had also spent a lot of time having arguments in his head with Harry, where he convinced the idiot that it wasn't him behind the Sententia.

Draco had only been able to come up with one logical conclusion regarding Potter's ingestion of the potion - logical to Draco's middle-of-the-night-brain anyway - lying awake pondering the situation had become a worrying habit. The only other Prophet staffer that had even the slightest connection to Harry was Nathan Willis since he was Ginny's friend, flirting buddy and Sententia connoisseur. Draco thought he was trying to get Ginny to dump a constantly opinionated Potter so she would go out with him instead. Very plausible this seemed at three am, until, every time Draco came to the how – because he didn't think Ginny would be very impressed if she knew… so Draco was stumped.

Then his overtired brain would be reduced to madness on auto-loop. Perhaps Granger was sick of just being the brains and wanted some credit? Maybe Ron didn't want Harry to ever come back to work at the Auror Office? Or was it Kreacher on a misguided vigilante mission to reclaim the house for the name of Black? These questionable and unlikely causes circled repeatedly through Draco's head til dawn. Every dawn for the last seven days.

Because of this, Draco thought it was quite understandable to be feeling a little fragile, and not really prepared to have an angry Harry Potter telling him he didn't deserve to be paid because he'd accidentally tried to kill him. But still, gold was gold so he drew himself up and knocked sharply on the heavy door.

The door creaked inward and the worried little face of Kreacher appeared.

"Mr Malfoy," he said, his voice croaking as he kept it low, "Kreacher is glad you is here. Master Harry is needing his friend."
"Friend?" Draco repeated, thrown by the unexpected greeting, "I'm here on business. Potter owes me gold I'm here to collect it."

The elf's eyes narrowed and he said slowly, "You is not here to cheer Master Harry up?"

"No," Draco said firmly, annoyed at himself for the inappropriate little voice in his head that suggested ways in which Harry could be cheered up. "He was supposed to deposit gold into my account for the time I spent working for him but he did not. I deserve to be paid."

Kreacher frowned up at him, "But Master Harry fixed that. The goblins cannot read my masters perfectly legible handwriting Mr Malfoy, you should not blame Master Harry for the greedy long fingered fiend's mistakes."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about." Draco could hear his mother's voice in his head, she would be horrified at the idea of a house-elf speaking of its masters private affairs. But then Draco thought that Kreacher was allowed many freedoms the house-elves of the Manor never were. Perhaps Harry wouldn't mind that his elf was such a chatter-box.

"The goblins paid Master Harry's healer instead of you." Kreacher explained, "Master Harry says they hold a grudge against your name and used it as an excuse to --" the elf raised his gnarled hands and sketched quotation marks as he finished his sentence with what was obviously Harry's terminology, "-- piss you about', they just sent another letter this morning correcting their mistake. Master Harry was very angry at them, then he was angry at the paper for printing rubbish about his trip to the hospital yesterday. Master Harry has been very grumpy since his argument with Miss Ginny on Saturday morning and he needs to be cheered up."

Draco stared, he had the distinct impression that he had just been given an order by a house-elf. "And what if I'm not here to cheer Potter up?"

"Then you will not be permitted entrance into the home of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black." Kreacher said stubbornly, and began to push the door shut.

"My mother was a Black," Draco tried, hastily taking a step closer.

"Yes," the elf allowed, "Miss Cissy. Kreacher has met her, but Master Harry was bequeathed this house by Master Sirius, the last with the name of Black. And Master Harry has done Kreacher many kindnesses so, if you are here to make Master Harry more grumpy then you will not pass this door, it is a house-elf's job to see to the well-being of his master. Kreacher will do his duty."

"Fine," Draco said, not wanting to annoy the vehement elf any further. "If the mistake with the payment has been fixed then I would like to thank Harry." He wanted to do no such thing but the 'argument with Miss Ginny' was something Draco would like to find out a bit more about.

"Very well," said the elf, his attitude changing immediately, he turned to lead the way to the first floor, "follow me Mr Malfoy."

When Kreacher pushed open the door to the drawing room it took Draco's eyes a few seconds to adjust, the room was very dim, the dark light-blocking drapes were pulled at the long sash windows, but the lamp that hung from the ceiling was not lit. The photo-frame covered walls were still the same, the Gryffindorness of the occupants blatant.

The next thing Draco noticed made him snort disparagingly. Harry was lying on the sofa, the very picture of mawkish gloom, staring blankly up at the dark lamp. Draco was sure any moment Harry would sigh dramatically and throw his arm over his face, so overcome with depressing thoughts as
he seemed to be. But at Draco's snort, which was accidentally louder than he meant it to be, Harry raised himself on his elbow and squinted in the direction of the door. "Brilliant," he said acerbically, flopping backwards again. "Come for a laugh have you?"

"Not intentionally," Draco said, shocked not to be told to leave immediately, he couldn't help himself, "your impression of a maudlin teenager is quite humorous however."

"Bugger off," Harry said to the ceiling.

Draco wasn't planning on leaving until Harry provided proof that he had made the payment, and hopefully until he found out what the argument with Ginny had been about. "Your elf tells me you need to be cheered up Potter." Draco said off-handedly, "He seemed to think I would be a good candidate. Is he unaware that you think me a poisoner and a cheat?"

Harry sighed, "I know it wasn't you," he said turning his head to look at Draco, "I had doubts from the beginning that it was, but I couldn't ignore the evidence."

Despite the wave of relief surging through Draco he bristled at the casual tone, didn't Harry realise Draco had been expecting to be vilified far and wide for an attack on the Saviour at any moment? He struggled to keep his tone calm, his fists clenched at his sides as he still stood near the door, "Do you find it ironic that you are as bad as the press you claim to hate so much?" Draco asked pointedly.

Harry sat upright, he looked somewhat taken aback, "I am not."

"True," Draco said haughtily, "you're worse, the press at least print a retraction when false accusations are made." Harry had the decency to look ashamed, but Draco continued, he deserved some answers at least. "So, who was it? And why wasn't I told? You do realise how much this has worried me, the fact that you had the power to ruin me the moment you decided to? All I have is reputation Potter, nothing else."

Harry seemed to cringe. "Sorry, I did convince Hermione not to tell anyone until she had proof. But you can stop worrying, it's over. I know who it was and it won't be happening again." He sounded miserable.

Draco felt a bit guilty for making him sad, but it didn't stop him trying once more "Who?"

"None of your business." Harry snapped and Draco realised he'd pushed him too far.

"Right," Draco said quickly, he took a seat in the chair opposite Harry's couch, "the reason I came here was the partial fee we agreed on, it still hasn't been - "

"Don't get me started on the fucking goblins." Harry cut him off, obviously furious, surprising Draco, he had always thought of Harry as a tolerant of all creatures' type. "For the first time in my life I was glad to see one of your dad's old mates," Harry said, "The goblin was refusing to find an error, an error I knew existed because Healer Mallog had owled me to say he'd been over paid for his house call. But Travers intervened, pointed out the problem straight away and did a new transfer – you should have got it this morning."

"I don't follow," Draco said. Travers of Gringotts, was the brother of the more ambitious Travers who had ended up in Azkaban after the war.

"The archive accounts are name referenced only," Harry explained, "I sent a written request for payment to be made to your account and the slimy little buggers decided Malfoy and Mallog looked enough alike for them to get away with not paying you, and therefore muck you around for being one of the wizards that took Gringotts from them."
Draco'd had enough issues deciphering Harry's handwriting himself to think that maybe the mistake wasn't as malevolent as it seemed. "That's a bit insane given Travers is working there," Draco said voicing the other hole in the goblins apparent grudgery.

"He doesn't have a mark." Harry said dismissively, "And his family were some of the most heavily taxed with reparations. I think the goblins might actually consider his debt paid – helped by the fact that he has added to his payments by working for them. But he'd be one of the only ones."

"Merlin," Draco said, disliking the reminder of his past. "Those little fuckers. In that case I apologise for the strongly worded letter," Draco said, he had been so frustrated after he had checked his account balance at lunchtime yesterday that he'd – possibly a little unwisely – called Harry a number of unpleasant names pertaining to his cheapness and ungentlemanly conduct in a letter sent directly after he returned to the office.

But Harry gave him a rueful little grin, "Don't, it's the only thing that's been cheering me up." He reached out to the coffee table that was littered with scraps of parchment and pulled from amongst them what looked to be Draco's letter. He scanned it and said, "To be called a 'boorish and deceitful skinflint' was quite refreshing after all that guff in the paper yesterday."

"I saw that," Draco said. He'd been startled to see new photos of Harry attached to yesterday's edition. They'd been taken as he'd left St Mungo's on Sunday. Draco had assumed that Harry had been in for a check-up, even the great Harry Potter only got house-calls if he was really sick.

The lifestyle-whores had out done themselves with a half-page indulgence. Photographs and little bold print boxes holding suggestive excerpts. Harry quitting his job was the main topic, something Draco couldn't believe it had taken so long to make it to the paper. Ron was mentioned, refusing to comment – obviously a massive cover-up – and it all came to a close with the suggestion that although Harry looked fit and healthy and like he'd been on holiday, actually he was at St Mungo's because he was dying.

"You could help yourself by looking less brooding and mysterious when you go to the hospital." Draco said wryly, even though he had admired Harry's ability to take a decent photo these days, "And there was absolutely no need for you to dress so provocatively. Honestly, jeans? You were gagging for a leadingly written piece about how well exile suited you."

Harry blinked, turned a little pink and then laughed. "Kreacher is a wise elf." he said.

Draco really didn't know where his own anger had gone. He was quite worried that it could just up and leave at the sight of a mopey Harry Potter. He was still annoyed that he had been losing sleep over a non-event though. "So Potter, tell me who it was."

Harry's pleased expression vanished at once. "No, it's sorted out, don't worry about it."

Draco wasn't having that. "It was Willis wasn't it?" he said, "He looked far too happy this morning."

"He did?" Harry asked, resigned, "I guess it doesn't matter."

"Come on," Draco encouraged.

Harry seemed to sag against the couch, he huffed out a breath, looked at Draco with an odd mix of defeat and annoyance and said, "He was where it came from, but it was never meant to get so out of control." Harry blinked and rolled the edge of Draco's letter between his fingers as he continued, sounding very much like he just wanted to get it out. "He'd told Ginny about Sententia ages ago, and she has been wanting me to tell her why I don't want to get married, or move in together or whatever,
so she put in my drink at Greengrass Moor, because we were supposed to be leaving right after that and she was staying with me and thought I'd give her some proper answers, before she left with the Harpies. But instead, apparently because I was already quite, er, trollied, it just made me super pissed off."

"She did it knowingly?" Draco exclaimed.

"How did you know she did it at all?" Harry asked, looking up from the letter, his brow crinkled.

Draco shrugged, "I saw them together, her and Willis, but at the time I thought she might be victim, because he uses it on everyone apparently, and I thought he might have had designs on her, but then Marc told me they were old friends."

"Who's Marc?" Harry asked.

"He works with me," Draco said, "Marcus Belby, he was at school with us."

"Oh," Harry said. Then as if dreading the answer he asked, "Do lots of people at the Prophet know about the poisoning?"

"No, I've not heard a thing, and I'm sure they would have mentioned it in the St Mungo's article if it was even a rumour."

Harry nodded to himself, "That's what I thought." he said.

"I only thought the Sententia could have come from Ginny because Marc told me she and Willis were friends last week." Draco said, "You've been out of contact with everyone, I figured she's the only one with a connection to the Prophet, so I must have been coming from her."

"Well aren't you clever." Harry muttered.

"Not really, I didn't think she'd do it on purpose. Though, I suppose if she got the same information I did she would have thought it a harmless way to get her boyfriend to open up a bit. Merlin, why was he making excuses for the silly cow? "I had no idea it could make you so sick." Draco said truthfully. He was still a little haunted by the pale faced, weak Potter he had seen last Tuesday, even though he was completely healed by the look of him.

"Hmm," said Harry introspectively, "I bet she wouldn't mind now. It was a good thing Hermione arrived to see how I was on Saturday or I would still have flapping bogies all over my face. I never could get the countercharm to that right."

"Your elf mentioned a disagreement." Draco said, hiding his interest. Which was, of course, just plain curiosity, and nothing more.

"Yeah, that's a bit of an understatement." Harry said, his mouth twisted guiltily and he began fiddling with the letter again, "More like me losing my temper when she told me it was her and her sodding Butterbeer. I called her a few names, and may have implied that I thought she was cheating on me. Which I don't actually think, I was just so angry." He finished, sounding almost apologetic.

"No," Draco said guilelessly, "why would she go to effort of drugging you if she was just going to run off with someone else?"

"Christ that is a depressing sentence." Harry said, giving up with the letter and falling back on the cushions to look at the ceiling once more.
"Buck up," Draco said, "the Prophet is on your side again, you'll have girls desperate to help mend your broken heart once … you have broken up I take it?" he asked, realising Harry hadn't actually said that.

"Yup." Harry nodded, "Even I won't put up with being poisoned."

Draco had the mad desire to laugh, it would be so Potter to just accept Ginny's actions, to think that it was his fault for not talking to her. "So did you tell her?"

"Tell her?" Harry looked at him again, his face confused.

"Why you don't want to marry her..." Draco said encouragingly, he rather wanted to know the answer himself.

"No! As if I want the whole bloody world knowing that." Harry said fervently, "She's pissed enough at me to tell anyone that asks."

"Knowing what?" Draco asked, unable to keep himself from leaning forward just a little.

"Nope," said Harry, and he smiled, "it's nice being able to keep things to myself" he said. "You don't need to know either."

Draco was a successful journalist for a reason, he always knew the right time to push someone for an answer, and looking at the pleased little smile on Harry's face, he knew it wasn't now. But he wanted another chance. "So I guess this means you want to carry on with the book then," he said casually, "since you didn't need to fire me in the first place because you can still trust me."

Harry frowned, "I hadn't thought about it. I didn't think I'd see you for a while, I guessed you'd be too shitty with me for blaming you, I've been trying to write you an apology since I found out, but it always sounded fake on paper." He gestured to the scraps of parchment all over the table and Draco's chest seemed to constrict just a little bit. The man was so hopelessly honest, why Ginny thought she needed a potion to get him to talk baffled Draco.

Draco resisted the urge to start reading the half-finished apology notes and met Harry's eye, "All the reasons we started this haven't changed, and now I have one more to add – independence from the Prophet so I can tell the public about Sententia without ending up broke."

"I can't believe you would still want to work with me after all this." Harry muttered almost to himself, "Since when are Malfoys' so graciously forgiving?"

"I'm not sure," Draco said, trying to stop himself from smiling, "but Ron Weasley and I have had two very calm and reasonable conversations in the last month, I'd say there is some pretty unusual stuff going on."

"He's not best pleased with me," Harry said, "or Hermione."

"They can't honestly blame you for getting poisoned?" Draco said, unable to guess why the Chosen One's stooges would turn on him.

"No, but they're both unhappy about the reason why," he shook his head, "It doesn't matter, they'll come around."

"I'm sure," Draco said, leaving the reference to this reason alone and focusing on work, if it was what he thought he'd find out eventually. "So would you like a new contract drawn up or …?"
"Nah, let's just stick with the old one, get your guy to add a bit about your fee minus what I've already paid you and I'll be happy with that."

"Okay," Draco said, trying very hard not to bounce on the couch cushions like an excited little boy, he felt light with relief, "Shall I send it to Granger for approval or is she too grumpy with you?"

"Send it to her, she'll be fine," Harry said, with a half laugh, "they're only being pissy as a formality, one of the hazards of dating within the family – I called Ron's baby sister a slut, to her face, he has to be mad for at least a week, no matter what she did." He shrugged, "it's the rules."
Draco returned to the office directly after his successful conversation with Harry feeling better than he could have imagined that morning. He didn't particularly like the idea that Harry's trust affected his own state of mind so much but he'd deal with that later.

"Oh thank Merlin and all his eager to please apprentices!" It was Marc, unsurprisingly, Draco didn't know anyone else who could be quite so vulgarly cheerful. "Back on with the boyfriend are we?"

He swivelled in his chair to ask as Draco passed his cubicle on the way to his own.

"For goodness sake," Draco hissed, unable to find the right amount of anger, because he was sure the relief at being re-employed, and having secured his reputation was radiating from him so strongly Marc could probably see it. "Will you not say such ridiculous things so loudly?"

"I'm just glad I don't have to look at your smacked arse face anymore," Marc said chirpily, getting up and following Draco who had not paused on route to his desk, "Did he forgive you then? The mystery man?"

Draco stopped and exhaled in frustration, "Marc," he said, in a dangerously quiet voice, withdrawing his wand and hopefully channelling Severus Snape to the best of his ability, "for the last fucking time, there is no boyfriend."

Marc had taken half a step back, his eyes on Draco's wand. "Fine." he said, sounding like a slightly more cautious version of himself. But as quickly as it had come the caution vanished and he added, "Put that away you twat,"

Draco rolled his eyes and stowed his wand. He dumped his satchel on his desk, noticing too late that there was a little pile of in-house receipt scrolls on the surface, his bag landed heavily and sent the scrolls rolling in every direction. Sighing in defeat, he collected two from the seat of his chair and leaned across his desk to reach a couple more from the far corner.

"What have you got all these for?" Marc asked, snatching a fallen few that had made it all the way to the floor.

"For nothing," Draco said in confusion, "I didn't put these here." He unravelled one, it was an invoice from Flourish and Blotts, for parchment and scroll butts, stamped by the clerks from downstairs and signed off by Cuffe. Just a pointless piece of the endless paper trail that was business management.

"Oh," said Marc, "maybe an intern left them in the wrong place, I found an old copy of Cuffe's schedule on my desk last week. From all the way back in February. Sometimes I wonder if they are just trying to mess with us."

Draco thought the interns were far too involved in their own melodrama to bother with annoying old fuddy-duddies. Draco's hatred of interns was a recent thing, stemming from a conversation earlier in the year. A jaunty little blonde sprite had told him he had quite fashionable hair, for, you know, an older guy. Since when was twenty bloody three – or two as he had been at the time – an older guy?
Silly little bint. "Perhaps," said Draco taking the scrolls, "what am I supposed to do with them now?" He asked, unwilling to babysit company property any longer than necessary.

"Take them down to the clerk's office I suppose." Marc said, "You wouldn't want them to catch you with their stuff."

Draco thought that he was probably right, the accounts clerks did not seem to possess any sense of humour, or for that matter human, at all. Running the payroll and the Prophets coffers apparently required a grim expression at all times and a proficiency in loud exasperated sighs. Fluency in sarcasm was also desirable.

Being told off by a sarcastically grim clerk was not something Draco wished to experience. It was unwise to argue back with the people that controlled your pay.

"Right," Draco said, still feeling elated enough from his lunchtime's work that going out of his way for someone else didn't seem too annoying. He loaded the scrolls into his empty out-tray for travel and held it out for the ones Marc was still clutching.

"You can tell me why you're so happy on the way." Mark said, adding his three to the tray.

"I can't," Draco said, and Marc pouted, "Not yet. I will soon though."

They made their way back through the bullpen and past the offices of Cuffe and Betty, the latter of which was sitting at her desk, she looked up and watched the two men pass, giving them a weird little nod. Draco did a double take, Betty Braithwaite had two expressions in his experience: fake smile and death glare. A nod of acknowledgment was a bizarre new addition.

Marc held the door to the stairs open and said as Draco passed, "Well if you're going to tell me eventually you might as well just do it now…." He trailed off hopefully.

Draco raised an eyebrow and Marc just shrugged, quite unapologetic about his intrusiveness.

Once they had left the stairwell, Draco managed to distract Marc from his relentless questioning by commenting on the on-display fitness of one of the slightly frightening, but very buff printer's devils as they passed the entrance to the Press Hall. This and the clerk's office were the only things down stairs. The Press Hall housed, as the name would suggest, the massive printing press that shot out copies of the Daily Prophet every day. Magic assisted in the setting of type and the addition of photographs but otherwise the press itself had remained unchanged since the Prophet's first edition in 1696.

The burly men whose job it was to work the vast wheels of the press, and move the huge heavy sheets of set iron type pieces into place, were kept in very good shape by their work. Draco didn't really understand why these jobs couldn't be done by magic, but the one time he had asked Cuffe, on his first day three years ago, his boss had said that it was tradition. Draco had supposed at the time that despite the fact that magic could do the job faster and more accurately and, for free, tradition for the sake of tradition was a very wizardish notion and he'd not questioned it since.

Draco pushed open the swinging door to the clerk's office, and he and Marc crossed the short space to the high counter that blocked off the rest of the room, behind it Draco could see ten or so half-cubicles, all empty.

Behind the counter there was one portly, frumpy bloused woman perched on a stool whose seat looked in danger of disappearing completely into the ample width of her bottom. She only looked up from the magazine she was flipping through when Marc cleared his throat.
"Yes?" She said, her eyes dropping back to the glossy page of Witch Weekly even before Draco spoke.

He put the tray of scrolls on the counter in front of her, and said, "I found these upstairs."

"That's nice," she replied, sparing the tray the briefest of glances.

"They're receipts," Draco said through his teeth, "I assume someone down here will be looking for them."

"Maybe," said the woman. And she finally put her magazine aside, "just leave them here, I'll ask when everyone gets back from lunch."

"Okay," said Draco, and he picked up his out-tray and up-ended it, the scrolls tipping in flurry of neatly rolled parchment all over the counter top. He ignored her disgruntled sniff, and said "Have a pleasant day." Then turned and pulled the door to the corridor open and strode from the room.

Marc followed quickly. "That was a bit unnecessary," he scolded half-heartedly.

"Was it?" Draco asked airily, "Grouchy old cow." he said.

Marc sniggered, they passed the door to the Press Hall again and paused to watch as the huge type-frame was hauled upwards by two men, both exerting more effort than Draco thought he ever had in his life, and Marc said slightly wistfully, "Do you think if I got a job in there I could eat chips more than once a week?"

"If you did that all day long?" Draco laughed as a sheet of iron as wide as a double bed and covered in hundreds of rows of carefully arranged tiny type pieces, was slotted into place with a grunting effort from the press workers. "If we relied on you to set the type the paper would never even get printed in the first place."

"Point," Marc said, and he didn't seem offended in the slightest.

Once again Draco was to be found pacing somewhat apprehensively outside Number Twelve. Only this time it was at ten thirty on Wednesday evening, and he didn't do it for long because he was worried he'd be arrested by the muggle police for being a peeping tom. He'd received the contract back from Granger not long after he got home from work that day. The addendum approved and a short note apologising for her hasty dismissal of him attached.

Draco didn't really want an apology from her, he had taken her wand and locked her and her baby in a room after all. He sort of assumed they would just call it even and move on.

He looked down at the thick parchment envelope clutched in his hand, would Harry think it out of place, Draco showing up unannounced? Harry knew the contract had been approved, he'd had to initial it in Grangers presence. So Draco really had no reason to be here, other than because he wanted to be, which was slightly problematic.

He was just worried about Harry he told himself, the man had recently found out he'd been poisoned by his childhood sweet-heart, surely Draco looking in on him was the friendly thing to do. And they were sort of friends, so maybe it wasn't that weird after all …

Draco had a feeling that because he'd spent longer constructing an argument for his visit than he did on most of his stories for the paper, indicated there was obviously a bit more going on than he willing to acknowledge. Draco's internal battle with denial, or perhaps it was just purposeful ignoring, took
him all the way to the front door. He knocked and it took longer than usual before the old hinges creaked as the door opened.

"Mr Malfoy," Kreacher said when he opened the door, the entryway behind him was flickering as the gas lamps stuttered into life, "Master Harry is not usually having visitors so late."

"I just wanted to speak to him for a moment," Draco said, wondering if Kreachers mothering bothered Harry as much as it would himself, "it's work related, it won't take long –"

"Kreacher?" Harry's voice called from the direction of the kitchen, Draco could hear him coming up the stairs toward the front door, "Who is it?" He appeared in the doorway, obviously ready for bed in pyjama bottoms and vest. "Oh hi," he said there was still an aura of melancholy about him, a frown creasing his brow, "did you forget something the other day?" He spied the envelope in Draco's hand, "Is there something wrong with that? Hermione said it was fine."

"No, no," Draco said, "I just brought you a copy." It sounded even more feeble out loud, and Harry was still frowning at him, although it was a look of consternation rather than one of annoyance. Draco was somewhat distracted by the amount of skin Harry was displaying to care too much either way, he really should call this late in the evening more often.

"Are you checking up on me?" Harry asked shrewdly, as he came closer and reached out to take the contract from Draco.

"No," Draco said automatically, "I was organising the information we've collected, since we need to get cracking if we're going to meet our deadline, and that turned up so I thought I'd drop it round."

"Oh," Harry said hollowly, he turned the envelope over in his hands, as if it would cheer him up and Draco wished he wouldn't. Did he not realise how he looked, stood there half-naked, all broad shoulders and tanned arms, head hung in apparent despondency that Draco wasn't checking up on him?

"Hang on, Draco thought, "Potter did you want me to be checking up on you?"

"Er..." Harry's frown looked uncertain now and Draco's heart thudded a little harder, was he imagining it? Seeing things that weren't there? Harry and his secretive reason for not getting married, it all seemed to point in a very favourable direction in Draco's opinion, but he really wasn't bold enough to actually ask. "Well," Harry said, with a heavy exhale, "it's just everyone is pretty shitty with me at the moment, what with Ginny and the yelling et cetera, I just thought, well, it would be nice if you were." He seemed to wince a little at the bluntness of his words but continued, "even Ron and Hermione are proper pissy, they'll come around eventually but I dunno, Hermione was definitely grumpy for real when we were signing that today, and It sucks dealing with this by myself, and since I'm afraid to drink anything in the house now..."

Draco felt a little stab of disappointment. Foolish he said to himself, of course Potter just wanted a bit of company. He was upset about losing his girlfriend and having the Weasley-Grangers angry at him, even if it was only temporary. Why did Draco's imagination have to get the better of him?

"Right," Draco said briskly to cover his hesitation, "I don't trust your alcohol supply either, do you want to go out and get a drink? There are Muggle places nearby, I'm sure no one would recognise you."

"Go out for a drink?" Harry repeated.

Draco suddenly realised how much it sounded like a date on repetition. "You said you wanted a
drink, but all of yours are out of the question, going out is the next logical plan." Draco hastened to clarify.

"Alright," Harry said, brightening at once, "I guess it is. I'll just get changed then." and he darted up the stairs with far more energy than Draco was expecting.

_Fuck_ Draco thought as he waited. This was not at all in the plan, not that there really was a plan, but asking Harry out on a fucking date had not factored into Draco's thoughts, _ever_. He supposed it wasn't a date, just two blokes getting a beer, like he would with Marc. However, his inner pervy voice ruined his reasoning when Harry came back down stairs and it pointed out that he'd never felt quite so disappointed that _Marc_ had put a shirt on.

It was ridiculous to be nervous Harry thought as he walked next to Draco towards the closest Muggle pub. They were just going for a pint, that was all – commiserating Ginny's betrayal, nothing odd about that, except that the betrayal was the only thing that Harry was upset about where Ginny was concerned, the loss of his girlfriend bothered him very little.

In fact he couldn't really tell if it was the lack of Sententia in his bloodstream or just realising how absent he'd been for the last few years that made him feel so much more aware now. To have such a normal reaction to the situation was kind of brilliant, Harry thought. He'd been sad and lonely with everyone shutting him out for mouthing off. Not to mention a bit nervous about how clearly his mind, and other parts, insisted that he was attracted to men as well as women, and Draco in particular. But when your friends where upset with you and your girlfriend had hurt you, you were supposed to be a bit blue, he was pleased to feel just like anyone else would.

Harry was also struggling with the confusing concept of his own sadness making him happy but he could figure that out later. The unpleasantness that hung with him from the war still intruded from time to time but he could see a future for himself again - it was like he had been unjumbled. He glanced at Draco, he was tight jawed and slightly jerky as he walked beside him in the brisk London night. Was he aware that Harry had this nagging little thing for him? Did he regret his offer of drinking companion?

They walked in silence along Grimmauld Place, the summer seemed to be leaving quickly now, Harry thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket and looked around to distract from the awkwardness. The dead grass of the square was a weird and uneven silver carpet in the bright three-quarter moon that was sitting low in the sky. Clouds scudded intermittently across its face casting eerily moving shadows on the pale grass.

In the shade of the tall houses that lined Grimmauld Place the streetlamps buzzed and lit the footpath with unnatural orange, Harry didn't think that telling Draco the light made his blonde hair look Weasley-esque would improve his mood, so he cast around for something else to say.

"Will you be in trouble with your wife for working so late?" Harry asked eventually, offering Draco a reason to leave if he wanted it. He was a little panicky about being out in public himself, the trip to the hospital had been bad enough. He was wondering if he'd be better off turning around and going home.

Draco's eyes snapped to him, "No," he said, she knows how important my _work_ is to me." Draco looked almost offended Harry thought. "She was entertaining her latest concubine when I left anyway, so I doubt she'd miss me."

_Concubine?_ Thought Harry, good god the man used the most antiquated words in real life of anyone
Harry had ever met, including Hermione. The meaning was clear though; Draco's wife was not a faithful one. "I didn't realise," Harry said, feeling guilty for bringing it up, here he was feeling so sorry for himself when Draco's situation was probably much more difficult to deal with, "When you said you weren't married for love … does it bother you?" he asked, unable to help himself.

"Does what bother me?" Draco asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"That your wife sleeps with other men." Harry said, he'd thought it was quite obvious.

Draco glanced sideways at Harry and quirked an eyebrow, "She doesn't, concubine's are female."

"I know that, I just thought it was your way of –." he huffed and flapped a hand to indicate Draco's … Draco-ness. "Never mind," Harry said, a little frustrated with the whole thing, but much more confused by the way Draco did not seem to care that his wife was cheating on him, with women. "Do you really not mind?" He asked.

"Not particularly," Draco said as they rounded the corner. The terraced houses in this street were newer than in Grimmauld place, and instead of the tall rusted iron fences, there was a low brick wall and a hedge separating the footpath from the luxury of the meagre strip of front lawn they possessed. Draco gave a little half-laugh and added, "It would be a little hypocritical of me, considering my own preferences,"

"Your own…" Harry stopped dead as the meaning of this sentence sunk in, he blinked several times trying to gather his scattered thoughts, Draco was looking at him as though he was a little crazy and Harry managed to mutter, "You're gay?... oh fucking hell."

His brilliant, it-doesn't-matter-that-I-have-a-crush-on-you-because-you're-straight-and-married safety net had been snatched away. But before Harry's muddled brain could get any further along the string of implications, Draco's most cutting tone intervened.

"Is that a problem for you Potter?" Draco had stopped walking too and was glaring, quite obviously offended. Harry realised, too late, how his words must have sounded.

"No, I didn't mean –" Harry began, but he was out of his depth, he had no idea what he meant.

"You didn't mean what?" Draco asked, his voice still icy, "Your obvious horror at my sexuality? Merlin, it's not like it will affect my work." He looked up and down the street and Harry was afraid he would disapparate.

"Not horror," Harry said quickly, he took a step closer, to do what he wasn't sure, "I just – Christ I had no idea."

Draco stared at him with narrowed eyes, appraising. Harry felt uncomfortably scrutinised but was just glad Draco hadn't left. "Well you are reasonably self-absorbed." said Draco, sounding pissed off, but in the normal, impatient way he always did. "It's not something I hide."

"I'm not self-absorbed," Harry said, a little stung, he backed away from Draco and perched on the wall behind them, he crossed his arms and said, "Every time we've met I've been under the influence of that bloody potion. You can't blame me for not noticing, it's not like you advertise it either." Harry sent Draco a glare of his own and finished bluntly, "You're married to a woman."

Draco's eyebrows rose in surprise and he looked marginally uncomfortable for a moment, apparently rather interested in Number Twenty-seven's Pittosporums, but then he smirked and asked pointedly, "And why does it matter to you anyway Potter?"
Something heavy dropped into Harry's stomach, he hadn't expected that. Telling Ron and Hermione had been weird enough. He knew he didn't have to, but Ron had already seemed to know, Harry hadn't mentioned Draco, it was too scary to say that aloud just yet. But he had admitted he wasn't sure if he preferred men or women best – Ron had just nodded and said, "You still shouldn't have been such a nasty prat to Ginny, even though she was a stupid cow." Hermione on the other hand was worried, "Are you sure? You don't think it's a side-effect from the Sententia? Why would you keep that a secret from us for so long?" Harry didn't have an answer for her and that had made her grumpy, rather than worried, and they had left shortly afterward.

But Draco was gay, he might actually understand, Harry thought. It wasn't like Harry had to tell him how he'd come to the realisation that he found men attractive. That it was Draco and his half hidden smiles, his dry humour that snuck out occasionally and the way he seemed to listen but be impatient at the same time. Harry supposed the warm grey eyes and well defined features probably had something to do with it was well. He lifted his head to see Draco staring up at the house behind them, his hands in the pockets of his suit trousers, rocking back and forward on the balls of his feet. Harry thought Draco might already know the answer to his own question, he seemed rather smug.

"Recently I've noticed," Harry started, unable to raise his voice to the previous level, inner pep talk or not, he was still nervous, "my own... er, preferences are not as black and white as I thought."

"Really?" Draco asked in his old condescending drawl, "And what, you think that all gay men are attracted to all other gay men?"

"No of course not," Harry retorted, regretting his candour at once, he glowered up at Draco and said tetchily, "Look, I don't have anyone to talk to about this but if you're just going to be a snarky prick then I won't bother."

Harry expected a Draco-style dressing down but instead the straight shoulders sagged a little and he took two steps forward and sat on the garden wall next to Harry, "Sorry Potter," he said sincerely, "you're right. But what do you want me to say? It's alright to like shagging blokes? It might make you different but it's not wrong?" He shrugged, "Nothing I say will change anything." Then with a wry grin he said succinctly, "You're twenty three. You can shag who you like. Don't make it a big deal."

"That's quite good really," Harry said, thinking of Hermione's frown and her reaction of 'Are you sure?'

"I should moonlight as an advice columnist." Draco said ironically.

Harry looked at him, He'd stretched his legs out in front of him, and they were crossed at the ankles and balanced on his left heel, rocking just slightly from side to side. Draco was watching his fingers as they drummed on his thigh, he was obviously thinking very hard about something, his eyebrows were contracted, and Harry could see a muscle twitching at the edge of his sharp jaw.

How could he sound so casual and look so tense? it was completely incongruent.

"Of course," Harry said, "it's all just a theory at this point." Draco's head turned and Harry quickly looked away, there was no way he could continue if there was going to be eye contact. He focused on his slightly frayed shoelace instead, "it's not like I've ever even kissed a bloke, for all I know I'll do it, and it'll be awful because it turns out that I'm only into the idea of men."

To say it aloud was terrifying, Harry's heart was pounding so quickly he could barely discern between beats. Sitting on a wall in a semi-residential street in Islington, in the middle of the night, seemed a strange place for confessions. But Draco's next sentence drove the oddity of their location
out of his mind.

He spoke quietly and there was definitely a bit of amusement in his voice as he asked, "Is that a proposition Potter?"

Harry tried very hard to turn his head, to not be a complete chicken about it and actually look at Draco, but he failed, "Maybe," he said to his shoelace.

"Coward," Draco said, sounding even more amused than he had a moment before.

Harry snuck a glance out the corner of his eye and was surprised to see that Draco was much closer than last time he had looked, it gave him a fright and his head jerked up without conscious instruction.

The next thing Harry registered was Draco's cocky little grin softening, before firm fingers curled around the back of his neck and pulled him forward just enough that his own lips pressed against Draco's. They felt cool from the night air only momentarily, because Draco opened his mouth and warm breath and an even warmer tongue heated much more than Harry's lips.

His erratic pulse was almost painful, hot over-pumped blood was rushing through him, he was in some sort of wonderful shock. Harry noticed absently that his hand had found its way to rest on Draco's arm, he could feel the slightest contacting of the muscle as Draco's hand cupped the back of Harry's neck, his fingers stretching into his hair, and his thumb stroking against the roughness of Harry's cheek.

It was not so different from kisses he'd had before, Harry thought, but it seemed more consuming, more … important.

Then there was the rumble and the high-pitched screech of tyres, and their dark street was filled with light as small sleek a car zoomed by, the rhythmic pounding of its stereo echoing off the buildings on either side of the road.

Draco lurched back in surprise at the noise and sudden light, and if not for Harry's hand gripping his bicep already he would have gone head over heels, off the wall and into the garden behind them.

"Fucking hell," he hissed looking at Harry with wide eyes, then down the road to the shrinking taillights of the speeding car, the thudding of its stereo still hanging in the air.

Harry was concentrating on breathing and stopping himself from yanking Draco back towards him for another go, he belatedly released Draco's arm and said, "That was a surprise." his voice was weak, and the twitching at the corner of Draco's mouth told him it was understood that he didn't mean the car.

"You asked me to," Draco said, and even in the dim light Harry could see the colour in Draco's face. It made Harry want to smile, he had never seen Draco less than composed. This flustered version was even more appealing than the dripping wet one that had been so prominent in his head for the last two weeks.

Harry didn't know what to say, he certainly didn't want to go to the pub and sit awkwardly next to Draco at the bar, drinking a pint and making small talk. Draco seemed to have run out of things to say too, so the pair of them sat awkwardly on the garden wall instead. Maybe they should go to the pub Harry thought, at least there he could get shitfaced. The quiet seemed to stretch on, Harry's arse started to go numb from prolonged contact with hard not-made-for-sitting-on wall.

But then suddenly Draco asked, sounding disappointingly collected once more, "So then Potter, fag
or not?"

Harry snorted at the phrasing, but answered in kind, "Fag, though I don't think I'm allowed to be quite so derogatory considering I'm not opposed to sex with women."

Draco smiled at him, a proper unguarded smile that did strange things to Harry's insides. Then he laughed loudly and whacked Harry on the knee in a randomly blokey fashion, "Sex with women?" he shuddered, "You unnatural cretin."

Chapter End Notes

So, if this makes you grin like the silliest of fan girls hit that little comment button down there – I need to know I'm not the only one. xx
Kissing Harry Potter was not something Draco had ever expected would happen in his life. But six days ago, things that Draco expected seemed to flutter away. He was still, nearly a week later, quite surprised by his own daring. He’d half expected Harry to punch him.

After six days, the feeling of the kiss itself had been lost among the others Draco had experienced in the past, but he was left with a weird fizzing in his stomach every time he thought of it. And then in his mind’s eye he would see the almost wounded look on Harry’s face when Draco had said he had to go. *It was the right thing to do,* Draco told himself for what literally must have been the thousandth time. It really didn’t *seem* like the right thing to do, however. The right thing to do felt much more like it would involve a flat surface and much less clothing. Perhaps they could test out that idea *after* the book was finished, Draco scolded himself, also for the thousandth time.

He had absolutely no idea what was going on between them now, and whether or not there would be a repeat of one of the better kisses of Draco’s life. On Saturday just past, Harry had sent Draco a rather thick wad of notes detailing his fifth year at Hogwarts, and asking if they would be returning to the pre-poisoning schedule of Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. However, there had been no hint amorous affection in the letter, but then really, it wasn’t like he’d expected Harry to dot his i’s with little love hearts. So Draco had replied with a yes and hoped that in person he would understand where they stood.

Draco sat up in bed, lying around thinking about kissing Harry was not the most productive of starts to the day. He frowned down at his morning-wood, it seemed to have Potter written all over it. Why on earth did wanking to thoughts of Harry make him want to *smile*? Why on earth was he even thinking about who he would think about? *Circe,* some things were meant to happen in the heat of the moment, no self-respecting man planned out his wank fantasies.

Even as he thought the phrase Draco’s rebellious mind presented him with a number of tantalising images of Harry. Some from real life, sweating in the sun in the garden, standing around in the entrance way the week before in his pyjamas, some from the few dreams he’d had after Harry had told him he’d spent his free time wanking. Something he’d only said because he had Sententia in his system, Draco realised now.

The urge to touch himself receded slightly as the picture of the sick Harry holding himself up on the banister and glaring at Draco intruded into the pleasant ones. Thank goodness his healer had been able to help him so quickly. A healer who could have taken Draco’s gold and not said a thing. It still bothered Draco that the goblins had purposely mistaken the name on his account. Maybe his father was right, at least vaults had numbers too. But it seemed to pointless to have a vault when he only had gold to store, it wasn’t like the Prophet ever paid him in suits of armour.

Draco wondered why anyone except old families would hold vault accounts these days, they really were more annoying. To have to travel in the infernal little cart – which Draco was quite sure were never cleaned – to collect your money yourself? It was so time consuming. The fees were higher too. But having the failsafe of a number and a key meant the goblins couldn’t dick you around.

Draco forced himself out of bed, he opened the curtains at the window. Through the gap between the larger houses behind his flat there was a reasonable view of the park. It was raining steadily, the still green alder and newly golden leaves on the towering oak trees were made vibrant by the wet air.
The Manor had been taken in the Ministry collection, after it had served its purpose as prison during Draco's house arrest. But as it was both crime scene and valuable property, Draco hadn't expected to retain it one he was free.

Even three years after moving in here Draco was still very grateful he'd married Astoria – and her dowry. With it, they were able to live in a little mews row of houses one street back from the park in Holland Park. Astoria had the downstairs flat and he had upstairs. They shared a letter box and that was all, excluding dinner and a bottle of wine on Monday evenings when they would update each other on their lives.

Thankfully Astoria was gifted enough at transfiguration that should her mother show up unannounced, she could magic men's clothes in the wardrobe and shaving foam into the bathroom. It was truly the best arrangement Draco could have ever have imagined when his father had spoken of "Doing his duty" all those years ago. They did have the small problem of providing a grandchild for their parents to deal with, but they hadn't spoken of that in months. Astoria was unwilling to go through the trauma just yet. She was only twenty one, Draco didn't blame her in the slightest.

Trying very hard to keep his mind off Harry, and the impending horror of fatherhood at some point in the future, Draco found his thoughts drifting back to bank vaults as he went about his morning routine. He wondered how the Ministry deposited anything in vaults at all, like the one Iris the-papework-lover from Gringotts Vault Registry had told Marc was back in use. Did some poor lackey have to travel there in a cart with the key to do it? That seemed unlikely, and vaults cost more, surely it made more financial sense for the Ministry to operate in archive accounts where possible. As Marc had pointed out, the Ministry paid a huge amount in bank fees already.

Draco thought of the abbreviation on the budget statement Marc had pinched, how did that work then? He wondered, if it was called two different things, did that mean the gold was going two different places? Draco's payment from Harry had gone to a whole other person, because of the similarity in spelling and nasty grudge-holding goblins. If an account was listed differently… he wondered if he had just figured out where Marc and Iris's mystery vault came in.

Marc was working studiously at his desk by the time Draco made it in to work, only just on time, his wandering mind had held him up in the shower, despite his efforts otherwise.

He leaned over Marc's shoulder to see what he was working on and asked, "Do you still have that copy of the budget breakdown?" He was promptly hit quite hard in the face by the back of Marc's hand as he jumped in arm-flinging surprise and spun in his chair almost guiltily to see who had caused the unexpected intrusion into his concentration.

"Ow," Draco said rubbing his cheek, but he supposed he should have announced himself.

"Sorry Draco," Marc said, still looking a little out of sorts, "but god, don't do that."

It wasn't often Marc concentrated so thoroughly, "What are you up to?" Draco asked a little suspiciously.

"I was just looking through these expense accounts," Marc said, he seemed rather puzzled, "I don't know who the forgetful fairy is round here, but the last six months' worth were sitting on my desk when I came in this morning."

"The Prophet's accounts?" Draco asked, Merlin, they needed better interns. What if they left actual valuable information lying around where anyone could see it?
"Yeah," Marc said, flicking the page he was on with his forefinger, "What do you reckon Cuffe keeps buying at Purvis's Potioneers?"

Draco lip curled distastefully at the mention of Cuffe and potions, not that Cuffe would be stupid enough to use Prophet gold to buy Sententia. "Probably Everlasting Elixir," Draco said, trying to distract himself from the big black cloud of career ruining doom hanging over all of them. Marc looked confused and Draco added, "I swear he's shagging Betty."

Marc's nose wrinkled at the thought and then he snickered, "Pity it doesn't have itemised purchases, then we'd know."

"Hmm," Draco said, trying very hard not to let an image of Cuffe and Betty going at it invade his mind.

"What did you want the Treasury budget for anyway?" Marc asked, and he began to forage in his filing cabinet, "I have a copy, not the original," he extracted the canvas bound parchment spreadsheets and held them out to Draco.

"I had an idea about your budget obsession, there was a mix up with my pay from my other job," Draco said, as he took the ledger.

Marc's eyes lit up at the mention of his two favourite mysteries, "you'll have to tell all, about both."

"That's all I'm saying about my work at the moment." Draco said sternly.

"Fine," Marc said mutinously. Then, with a somewhat devilish grin he raised his voice and said, "Your afternoon shag pays you, I get it. Although I would have thought side-lining as a rent boy was beneath you, but –"

"Will you not!" Draco cut him off with a whack to the shoulder with the canvas book, and looking over the cubicle divide to see if anyone heard. That was the last rumour he needed following him around.

Marc clutched his shoulder and glowered, "Ouch, fine, what does the Treasury's budget statement have to do with your pay?"

Draco turned the thick pages as he answered, "It got me thinking about your bloody conspiracy theory. Archive accounts rely on the name they are registered to, so why on the Treasury statement does the Account Maintenance fee get spelled differently half the time, and yet they are tallied together in the total, ha, look –" Draco had found one of the Accnt Maintenance payments, and there, right against the far right side of the column were the digits 437.

"Four three seven," Marc said slowly, "that's … that's the vault, you know, the one Iris said is suddenly being used again!"

"I knew it." Draco said, triumphantly, "They really might diverting funds just like you thought." This was a huge deal, if he and Marc could prove it, that was.

"But…" Marc's eyes were wide and his mouth gaping slightly, "holy hell Draco," he whispered. He slammed the ledger shut as though it was something obscene, "I was right," he said quietly. "What do I do now?"

Draco was thinking quickly, Marc was right to be cautious. This was the sort of thing that made or ruined careers, if it wasn't just an error, and there were high up's from the Ministry involved, he and
Draco could both be in danger from sudden public discrediting.

"First you need to find out how it's getting past the goblins, they would notice something like this," Draco said quietly, it seemed unlikely that there wasn't an inside man, "then talk to that secretary of Blishwick's and see who's involved in signing this off."

"That secretary," Marc said, distracted for a moment, "happens to be called Mavis, and she's lovely."

Draco had a vague recollection of Marc mentioning a date with the head of the Treasury Office's secretary. "Are you still seeing her?" he asked, "That had to be at least --"

"Three weeks," Marc finished proudly, "seven dates, no shagging."

"Right," Draco said disparagingly, "I know you're annoyed that I won't tell you about my other job, but you don't need to start telling lies."

"It's not," Marc said, with a shrug, "But anyway she'll be glad to tell me who signs the figures off, Blishwick's a real creep to her."

Just as Draco opened his mouth to ask whether Marc would have time to gather the information today, there was a sudden ominous click-clacking of heels on the wooden floor, and Betty Braithwaite appeared at the edge of Marc's cubicle.

"Working hard I hope boys?" she looked as immaculately almost-slutty as ever, even Draco found his eyes drawn to her cleavage, something that deeply disturbed him. Betty's sharp gaze drifted over Marc's expense report covered desk, and then on the ledger Draco was still holding.

"Always," Marc spoke up smoothly, diverting her attention. Draco was quite horrified to see Marc turn his charming talents on Betty, he leaned in a little closer and inhaled then said, "You smell divine Betty, what is that?"

Draco had already taken a step backwards, preparing to vacate a quickly as possible when Betty said, "Something you could never afford Marcus," but she looked a little pleased.

Draco had to turn away to hide his shocked expression, he had not expected Betty to fall for such feigned flattery. Then Marc pouted rather prettily and said, "Pity, I'll just have to admire it on you then."

*The man was incorrigible*, Draco thought as he took the ledger out of Betty's sight.

He would return to the topic with Marc when she had gone again. Until then, Draco had an article to proofread, detailing a riveting report from St Mungo's. Apparently carnivorous carbuncles were wreaking havoc amongst the aging wizarding population. *Joy.*

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*Your career is based here,* Draco muttered to himself as he splashed along the footpath at lunchtime, dodging the Muggles with their heads down, pushing on through the heavy rain. All the while trying not to stab any of them in the eye with his umbrella. *Your written French is terrible and their tea is even worse,* he continued, reminding himself that life in England was easier – although wetter – than France. He doubted himself once more as a sudden gust of wind barrelled around the corner, turning the previously pelting rain into nasty driving sideways rain.

He ducked into a doorway to close his umbrella, *pointless thing* Draco thought, whenever it was wet enough to need it, it was always too windy for it to be very efficient. But the Muggles would stare if Draco just walked along impervious'd - his coat staying dry despite the downpour. He drew the line
at his shoes however, Muggle made they might be, but they still took a water repelling charm very well. He refused to walk into the Ministry of Magic with squeaking, dripping leather shoes.

He steeled himself before stepping out into the rain once more. He made the final dash around the corner and down the short alley to the phone box with his umbrella tucked under his arm, and his hand clutching his satchel to keep its shoulder strap from strangling him as he ran.

He slammed the door shut behind himself and in the tiny dry space the rain seemed much louder. The street outside was completely blurred by the sheet of water running down the square panes of glass in the sides of the booth. The pale sandstone of the surrounding buildings looked oddly warm through the haze.

Draco picked up the mouth piece on the broken down, old fashioned apparatus and dialled the digits for decent. Immediately the female voice filled the air.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Draco Malfoy, I have a meeting with Ron Weasley."

"Thank you, visitor, please attach the badge to the front of your robes."

There was a rattling and a small badge shot out of the change chute. It read, *Draco Malfoy, Visitor to Auror Office.*

He pinned it to his lapel as a klaxon-like grinding sounded beneath him, and the floor of the phone box began to move. As he sunk into the footpath Draco ran his fingers through his damp hair and then pulled out his wand to dry his trouser cuffs. By the time the door opened he was standing straight and presentable once more. He often wondered how the Muggles of London managed to arrive anywhere looking half decent, the odds were certainly against them.

Draco crossed the wooden atrium floor, grateful for his not-squeaky shoes, because at five minutes to twelve the place was not very busy and the cavernous room echoed something terrible. Once he had passed through security Draco began his journey through the many floors and corridors to the Auror headquarters. Luckily he'd been this way before, last time he'd met Weasley to talk about the book Ron had collected him in the atrium. Draco thought he would have definitely got lost if he'd had to try and find his way in unescorted the first time. He might have been able to find the right floor, but the floors themselves seemed to sprawl in a warren of twisting hallways that didn't make any logical sense.

He reached the door labelled *Auror Headquarters* relatively quickly. The open area on the other side was strangely reminiscent of the Prophet offices - a sea of organised right-angled partition walls making cubicles to house the chaos of tacked photos, personal belongings and other wall-mountable things, like graphs or maps, and oddly, in the one nearest Draco, a cross cut diagram of a Hebridean Black.

Draco took the same path between cubicles to cross the room as he and Ron had last time, he could see the wall of four doors that were the team leader's offices on the far side. Ron Weasley had the best one other than Head Auror Gawain Robards, but that was only because he'd taken it from Harry who had obviously been given the best one because he was *Harry*.

Draco did not look left or right as he walked quickly through the maze of cubicles and their Aurors. He was a free man, and one with a decent reputation, but all the Aurors that surrounded him had fought on Potter's side, and most of them remembered who he had been before. He didn't welcome being reminded of that person. Draco was startled by a set of heavy booted footsteps behind him and
he resisted the urge to go for his wand, he really did feel quite uncomfortable here.

"Malfy," said an oddly thick and squelchy voice, Draco turned to see Ron Weasley, a very large stack of manila folded files under one arm and a sandwich that was trying to burst from its paper wrappings in his other hand. It was the latter that caused the squelchy sound in his speech, swallowing he said, "Glad I made it back down here in time, I didn't know I had a meeting this morning when we set this up."

"Do you still have time?" Draco asked, somewhat distracted by a precariously dangling slice of tomato hanging out of Ron's sandwich.

Ron was unable to take time out of his work day to talk about the book so they were meeting during his lunch break. Draco had been a little surprised he would be so accommodating. He found the friendship between Ron and Harry perplexing. Ron was mad at Harry for calling his sister names, but he was still willing to go out of his way to meet with Draco to help Harry. Maybe they were speaking again Draco thought, it had, after all, been a week since he'd left Harry sitting on the wall around the corner from his house. That might be long enough for longstanding friendship to overcome Weasley family pride.

"Course," said Ron easily, "long as you don't mind me eating."

Draco looked at the messy sandwich and thought that actually he did mind a little bit, but was unwilling deal with the hassle of getting in here again just to avoid watching Ron Weasley eat. He could always look away, he reasoned.

"No problem," Draco said, managing a brief, but hopefully realistic smile.

Ron lead the rest of the way to his office, it was not the personalised space that cubicles always seemed to become when you worked in one for a decent period of time. Weasley's office was full of standard Ministry furniture. There was one framed photo on the desk of himself and Hermione standing next to Harry who was holding their daughter, they were all very dressed up, the ginger child as well, wearing an overly long white lace dress that looked highly impractical for a creature as messy as a baby. Ron made himself comfortable behind his desk and Draco sat and pulled out his notebook and quill.

"So it's fifth year?" Ron asked, as he put down his sandwich and unwrapped the paper.

"Yes," Draco said, "I thought it would be easy, because I remember most of the important stuff, so it would be just collecting differing points of view, but there is so much I had no idea about, Dementors chasing him and his cousin? I was sure that was just the Ministry trumping up charges to discredit him, but they actually sent them?"

Ron nodded, his eyes focused on his lunch, he reassembled the filling that had been escaping and re-wrapped it before he answered, "Yeah, but I didn't see them. Who are you going to get to confirm that for you?"

"Dudley Dursley hopefully," Draco said, "I wrote to him ages ago."

Ron's ginger eyebrows went up and he said doubtfully, "Good luck, I met him once, given we were only fourteen but --"

Draco nodded, "Yes, when your father blew up their living room." Draco had laughed out loud when he'd read Harry's account of that, "I never thought I'd be admiring of Arthur Weasley, but after the shit those Muggles put Harry through they deserved even more than being terrorised by
exploding fireplaces and your mad brothers."

Ron blinked and Draco realised he had just complemented the Weasley family. "So, Dementors," he said quickly, returning to his list of events that needed confirmation, scanning down it for things Ron could help with, "and then there were more of his weird seer dreams, honestly, I have no idea how I'm going to cover that without him looking like a loon." He muttered half to himself.

"Seer dreams?" Ron asked, "Well, it's not like he was seeing the future, he could just see into Riddle's head sometimes because of the horcrux thing." Ron grimaced, "I get your point though, it's not the easiest thing to explain."

"Horcrux thing?" Draco repeated, horcrux thing? "As in soul splitting?" he asked sharply, horcruxes were one of the more repulsive topics Draco had learned about while trapped in the Manor with nothing to do but read his way through the library for the two years following Riddle's death. He began to flip the pages of his notebook a little feverishly, Harry had never mentioned a horcrux being made, Harry couldn't have made one, Draco thought. He did survive the killing curse... said a little voice in the back of his mind, "He wouldn't ..."

"Er, Malfoy," said Ron hastily, "I didn't realise he hadn't told you already, it was Riddle not Harry."

"Oh, oh of course it was." Draco said, unable to explain to himself why he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion or why his palms felt clammy and his mouth dry. Why should it matter if it had been Harry? It would have helped him survive, surely anything would be acceptable if it meant he could save the bloody world. But Harry with a split soul just seemed so abhorrently wrong to Draco.

"Yeah," said Ron, and he looked quite concerned, "I may have just put my foot in it. Harry mentioned a while ago that he wasn't sure if he wanted to put the horcrux stuff in the book, he's worried it will give people ideas, I thought he would have told you though, I mean that's where we were when we didn't come back to school, we were hunting them down."

"Right, no he's been giving me the information year by year, so I only know the details of fifth year and below." Draco said.

"I just thought you'd ... you know, be talking about stuff," for some reason Ron appeared supremely uncomfortable, he gestured vaguely with his sandwich and said haltingly, "with whatever is going between you two."

Draco blanched, what had Harry been saying? "Harry told you about that?" he asked, feeling as ill at ease as Ron looked. He hadn't even had this conversation with Harry yet, he really wasn't prepared to have it with Ron sodding Weasley.

"I guessed," Ron said, looking at his lunch instead of Draco. "that morning when you two were arguing, Harry asked if he'd stop thinking about you ... Hermione's got it in her head that Harry was cheating on Ginny with you – she somehow seems to think that he couldn't possibly know he er ... fancied blokes, if he didn't already, um, fancy a bloke." He finished apologetically.

"Weasley," Draco said, he felt strangely like he was about to throw up and burst out laughing at the same time. Cheating? What on earth? "I really think you should talk to Harry about this, it's certainly not that sordid."

"I would," said Ron, "except I'm not really in the mood for arguing with him, now that Ginny's back in Italy I don't have to pretend to be pissed off on her account," he shrugged, "I don't want to make a big deal out of it."
"So why bring it up?" Draco asked, a little contemptuously, "Are you in the mood for arguing with me?"

Ron sighed heavily and after a moment he said calmly, "No," and Draco recognised the tone of a man trying very hard to keep his patience. "I'm meeting you on my lunch break. The lunch break I need to work through to get all my paperwork done, so that I can go home to my squealing teething daughter and tired wife." He sounded rather tired himself, Draco thought, "I don't want to argue with anyone."

Then suddenly he put down his sandwich in a menacing full stop. All weariness was gone as he fixed Draco with a baleful glare, "But, I would like to know that my best mate hasn't done anything stupid, and that if there is something going on with someone, then I would like to know that that someone isn't going to treat him the way a certain stuck up, pointy little ferret would have."

"Okay," Draco said trying to resist the urge to shrink down in his seat, merlin the man knew how to intimidate these days, Auror training was obviously good for something. "There really isn't anything going on," he said, "I didn't even know he was interested in men until last week. And for that matter he thought I was straight too."

"Really?" Ron said in disbelief, all seriousness gone as he started on his lunch again. "And Hermione tells me I don't pay attention." Draco wasn't sure if he should be offended by that comment or not so he kept quiet. "But now you both know?"

"Yes," said Draco, "and I kissed him, and he seemed to like it –"

"Enough, enough," Ron said, the tips of his ears were red, "I just wanted to know if he'd been messing around on Ginny, I don't need anything else."

"Right," said Draco "because she, the queen of almost Pottercide, deserves his faithfulness. Aren't you even a bit horrified that your darling little sister could have killed you best mate?"

"Of course I am." Ron said, as he forced a rebellious bit of cucumber back between the bread, "I haven't spoken to her since, stupid little bint." He said unsympathetically, "but you have to stand by your family, something I would think you of all people would understand."

Draco glowered, "Point taken." he said.

"Sorry," said Ron, he was thoughtful for a moment and then let out a little snorting laugh, "it's weird right," he said, looking at Draco with a confused expression, "how much I don't want to punch you anymore?"

"To be honest Weasley, I've never really seen eye to eye with you on that." Draco said, "Perhaps now that you deal with proper arseholes all day, boring old Malfoy doesn't really rank."

"That sounds about right," Ron said, "also when you have a six month old the only things that matter are sleep and enjoying every bit of quiet offered to you." He glanced at the framed picture on his desk, and sighed, "Getting angry requires so much effort," he smiled at the photo, "maybe I'm just getting lazier."

"Either way, it works for me," Draco said, there was something about this grown up Ron Weasley that was much less annoying than the one he remembered from school. And the feeling of relief that had washed over Draco at Ron's non-confrontational words on the staircase, at Harry's house the morning the Sententia was discovered, was something that would stick with Draco for quite a while. "I'd probably be in a bit of trouble if you hadn't been the Auror at Grimmauld place that morning,
them out there seem to have long memories” Draco said with a twitch of his head towards the door and the Aurors beyond.

"Not if they followed the rules,” Ron said, but he didn't sound confident, "Aurors can't go arresting people on suspicion of possible association with the type potion used to poison someone – we'd have to constantly arrest every potioneer in town if that was the case."

"Well, I'm grateful I wasn't brought in for questioning," Draco admitted, "I'm not too popular at the Prophet, if anyone got wind of it they'd make sure everyone knew."

"I thought of that," Ron said, a little proudly, "then they'd wonder why you were arrested at Harry Potter's house and everything would turn to shit."

Draco winced at the idea, he could imagine the headlines already. He returned to his list, unwilling to think about the damage to his hire-ability if he was ever even suspected of sententia use.

"Okay, Dementors that's Dursley, I wanted from you and Granger if she'll consent to meet me,” he looked back at Ron, "I haven't heard anything since she apologised for firing me,"

Ron waved a hand dismissively, "She'll be right once she knows you aren't the, um, other woman."

Draco scowled, "That's quite offensive you realise." He said coldly.

Ron looked uncomfortable once again, "I'm not a hundred percent on how to deal with this,” he said with a half shrug.

Bloody Gryffindors and their feelings Draco thought, annoyed. "You don't have to deal with anything you moron.” He said impatiently, "Your best friend likes kissing boys, so what? He likes girls too, surely both those things are better than the thought of him screwing your baby sister."

Ron's freckly face scrunched up in disgust, "Urgh, thank you, yes," he shuddered, "anyway, what do you need from us?" he asked, determinedly returning to subject.

Draco smirked, glad to be back on topic, "The events of that summer, Harry being left alone with the muggles, Dumbledore telling you not to talk to him, then the formation of the DA, I wrote to Longbottom about that, in Granger's notes she suggests I talk to Zacharias Smith, is there any particular reason for that?"

"Probably because he's a little prick," Ron said, "was always negative, but attended every meeting, maybe she thought you'd get a differing point of view from him than from one of Harry's friends."

Draco nodded, resigned. He was not on the best terms with Zacharias Smith. This was due to a rather painful, clichéd and un-romantic encounter on Draco's first weekend after he was freed from house arrest. Draco could admit now that Smith wasn't to blame for the faulty lock on the door of the loo in the Broomstick and Keeper. And it also wasn't his fault that at the precise moment Smith had been fumbling with Draco's flies a burly and quite intoxicated fellow had barged in to use the loo. The door flying open had knocked an already wobbly from drink Draco, staggering against an equally boozy Smith. In the sudden lurching movement, Smith's hand got trapped in the confined space and put quite a lot of very uncomfortable pressure on Draco's groin. Draco did recognise that none of it was Smith's fault, but at the same time, it was hard to be polite to someone who had quite literally punched you in the balls.

Trying very hard not to cross his legs at the remembered pain Draco continued, "Other than the DA, what you remember from when Harry had his Riddle dreams in your presence would be useful, I've already got Granger's account of that afternoon when we caught you lot in Umbridge's office, and
her and Harry going into the forest. So if you could –"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. A harassed looking, curly-haired youth poked his head in without waiting for Ron to answer, he waved a crumpled violet piece of paper and said, "Auror Weasley, Robards just messaged, Hughes from the D.M.L.E. is doing a surprise audit,"

Draco watched Ron's face drain of colour, his voice almost croaky as he said, "Fuck, thanks Michaels." He got to his feet as he continued more firmly, "Go and get the other level ones and set up a combat practice in the training hall, we'll get Robards to take Hughes through there so the rest of us can make sure we're ready." Michaels nodded and withdrew.

"Malfoy, you'll have to go." Ron went on, "Williamson is away so me and Bishop are acting heads of training and theory," he hauled his robe over his head as he spoke, then pulled open his cupboard door and took out a freshly pressed set. Draco sat, stunned by the sudden flurry of activity for a moment as Ron began to change.

It wasn't until Ron said, "Merlin Malfoy, I appreciate the complement as much as the next guy but could you get out of here?" his voice was muffled as he wriggled into his uniform pullover, "Somebody always gets torn to shreds in front of everyone else during an audit, and entertaining ex-Death Eaters is probably a good way to get the finger pointed at me."

"Right you are Weasley," Draco said, he gathered up his things and hurried from the office, he made his way down the gap between the cubicles quickly. There were workers running in every direction, folders and scrolls being heaved about and skim read, the staffers were tucking in their shirts and straitening ties. Draco felt almost transported back to the Slytherin common room when they were given a heads up that Professor Snape was on his way down, Hughes must be a right nasty bastard.

His journey out of the Ministry was an easy one, everybody seemed to be on their lunch break, the corridors were quite empty. Back at street level, he felt a sudden jolt of fizzy apprehension, the still rain-blurry windowed walls of the phone box seemed to shrink in closer just briefly as Draco remembered his next appointment – Tuesday afternoon, Grimmauld Place.
By the time Draco popped into existence in the narrow alleyway between numbers Nine and Ten Grimmauld Place he was feeling quite out of sorts. But not because of the impending meeting with Harry. Instead it was the previous one causing his distress. The last time he'd visited Auror Headquarters his head had been so full of the discovery of sententia use on unsuspecting sources that there hadn't been room for anything else. This time, while he was nervous about this meeting with Harry, it was not enough to rid him of the uncomfortable reminders of his experiences with the department after his arrest five years ago.

Draco could only assume that the Aurors, so used to dealing with hardened psychotic Death Eaters, had seen him, at barely eighteen and quite broken already, as an easy target for their pent-up hatred. It wasn't something he liked to think about at the best of times; even now, five entire years later, half an hour in the place had him right back there, full of hopeless, consuming regret.

A sudden increase in the rain drew Draco back to the present, his current location – in a litter strewn alley, and standing two feet from a lichen covered, leaking downpipe, whose foul-smelling, ricocheting back-spray was coming precariously close to Draco's person – was hardly likely to help lift his mood.

Draco opened his umbrella and left the alley, trying very hard not to dwell on the past as he dodged the puddles on the way to Number Twelve. He was very good at suppressing anything personal while he was working usually. But he couldn't quite let it go this time, it was almost disorientating to be so affected. Especially since during his visit the distraction and – loath as he was to admit it – protection of Weasley's presence had kept the usual creeping memories at bay. Thankfully he had little reason to enter the Auror headquarters in the normal course of his work for the Prophet, the Aurors tended to release statements rather than give interviews. But perhaps if he visited more often he would build up a resistance to the onslaught of nasty recollections… He really didn't want to test the theory either way.

Number Twelve looked the same as ever as Draco made his way up the front path. It was tall and imposing, the bricks becoming steadily more soot stained with each rising metre. Even though it was highly likely to be the only house in the block that still used it's fireplaces for heating and cooking. However, like many of the less affluent areas of London, and for that matter, Great Britain, the accumulated soot from the last century had yet to be washed off. Not that the rain wasn't trying.

Draco knocked on the black door. He found a rather bleak silver-lining in that although the Auror Department had left him feeling uncomfortably settled, it didn't leave much room in his head for unprofessional fantasising, which was probably a good thing. He thought it would be in rather poor taste to be daydreaming about the possibility of a second kiss while Harry answered questions about his dead godfather, and his world falling apart.

Over the last week Draco had made the decision to focus on the work that needed to be completed, and when they were done, then he could possibly pursue the annoying little attraction that he was finding it so hard to ignore. At least discussing how horrible they had been to each other during fifth year was likely to make sure Draco couldn't jump on him. Not that he would of course.

The door opened almost immediately and Kreacher greeted him with a grey toothed smile. "Mr Malfoy, Master Harry will be glad you are here, he is in the garden again."
There was a touch of aspersion in Kreacher's voice, and for once, rather than feeling like the house-elf was coddling Harry, Draco thought he understood. It was absolutely tipping, why the hell was Harry gardening? Maybe it wasn't just the sententia that made him crazy after all.

Draco shook out his umbrella and closed it before he followed the little elf across the entry-way and down the staircase to the basement kitchen. He was accosted by the distinctive scent of house-elf cooking before Kreacher even opened the door.

Elf cooking was definitely something Draco missed in his current self-sufficient life. One of the elves from Greengrass Moor came to his and Astoria's flats once a week and did general house-elf duties, but they never cooked. Draco ate mainly take-away and various culinary experiments on toast.

Kreacher was not making toast, a large steaming pot stood on the cooker, the contents filling the air with a wonderful savoury aroma. There was a child-sized carved wooden step sitting in front of the cooker, and an array of highly polished saucepans hanging above it.

Kreacher crossed the room quickly and clambered up the flight of steeper steps that led back outside into the garden. He opened the door and the sound of rain grew much louder than the quiet background patter it had been. Kreacher gestured out the door and said, "Master Harry is out there." before he retreated back down the stairs, Draco thought he heard the elf mutter something about "catching his death" as he hurried away.

Through haze of pelting rain, on the other side of the small paved area and even smaller lawn, Harry was digging furiously in the garden. Unfortunately for Draco's inner pervert the rain meant that Harry was not working in his under-things today. He had the hood pulled up on his muggle raincoat and his jeans were wet to the knee despite his wellingtons. There was a crate of brightly flowering seedlings on the grass next to him, their multi coloured petals dancing happily in the heavy rain.

"You mad bastard!" Draco called from the cover of the top step to announce himself. Harry turned at the shout, bits of hair that had escaped from his hood were pasted to his forehead and cheeks, Draco gestured with his closed umbrella at the dark sky, "It's raining!"

"Really?" Harry called back, and even though the reply was faint from distance, the sarcasm was still very obvious. "I won't be a minute!" he added, as he thrust his spade into the lawn so it stood upright un-assisted and dropped to his knees next to the freshly turned earth. He quickly transferred the bright little flowers from the crate to the garden, and patted the dark soil around each one, his gloves were thick with gluggy mud by the time he was done. Then he stood again and wiped the unpleasant sludge off on the front of his jeans, before he pulled the gloves off and shoved them into his pocket. Then he shouldered his spade, hooked the crate from the ground with his free hand and jogged across the soggy patch of lawn towards Draco.

"Sorry," Harry said as he pushed back his hood and shook his hair, it was half soaking and half completely dry, and a little static from the hood fabric. He looked like a half-squished dandelion. "The spiderwort bulbs have to be planted in the rain," he said, by way of an excuse.

Draco raised an eyebrow, wondering if Neville Longbottom was just having another long-distance botanical laugh.

Harry must have sensed his doubt because as he came up the steps he said, "They really do, I looked it up, it's not Neville playing jokes." He paused in front of Draco smelling like wet dirt something sharper that was much more appealing. "Are you hungry?" he asked, somehow managing to look into Draco's face but not quite meet his eyes.

Draco wondered if the pink spots on Harry's cheeks were caused by weather exposure or the same
thing that was edging back into his own mind, despite the gloomy shadow left by the Auror department, and his internal assurances that he was only at Grimmauld place to work.

"I am actually." Draco said, his lunchtime meeting with Ron had left him no time for food, and there was no way he would pass up an offer of a house-elf cooked meal.

Harry grinned, "Come on then, I haven't eaten yet either, Kreacher said he was making soup." He led the way inside, yanking his parka over his head as he went. "I'll just go and change." he said, wrinkling his nose as he looked down at his mud caked jeans.

Only moments after Harry had vanished up the staircase to the entry-way, Kreacher appeared with a crack at Draco's side. He was carrying a tray laden with the same silver tea service Draco had seen on previous visits to the house. It was old, with curling handles and detailed engraved patterns in a band around the bulb of the pot, milk jug and sugar bowl, as well as a silver painted version on the lips of the china cups that sat beside it. Draco wondered if Harry realised his every-day tea set was nearly three hundred years old.

"Mr Malfoy, would you like some tea?" the elf asked, as he set the tray on the kitchen table.

"I would," Draco said, he pulled the nearest chair out and sat down. Almost immediately he was presented with a cup of what looked to be perfectly made tea.

Draco had issues with too much milk in his tea, there was a very fine line between just enough to take the tanniny flavour away, but too much and it just turned into warm, bizarre flavoured milk. But like any good house-elf Kreacher had obviously paid attention to Draco's preferences the few times he had drunk tea there.

"Perfect." he said to the elf. Kreachers bloodshot eyes looked bright for a moment and he bowed. Then, with what could only be described as a skip, he hurried to the cooker and climbed onto his little step to tend to the soup.

Draco was still frowning with consternation at the elf's odd behaviour when Harry re-entered the room in clean but worn looking trousers and a hooded sweater with frayed cuffs and a hole in the corner of the pocket on the front.

Draco's frown deepened, and he asked, "How is it, that you are wealthy enough to stop working at the drop of a hat, but you don't seem to own a single item of clothing that isn't of street-urchin-only quality?

Harry shrugged as he crossed the room to lift the lid on Kreachers soup and take a sniff, "I dunno," he said, as Kreacher shooed him away with a threateningly lifted ladle. "I hate the way new stuff feels, comes from growing up in hand-me-downs I suppose. But unfortunately by the time something is the right amount of worn-in, they are pretty much worn-out."

"I guess since you never go out, it doesn't really matter." Draco said, trying not to think of the muggles and their poor effort at raising Harry. Draco had never worn a second hand garment in his life. Although he did have his father's school tie. But ties weren't the sort of thing that changed with wear, so he guessed that didn't really count.

"True," Harry said, joining Draco at the table. He was watching Kreacher who was putting his ladle to its intended purpose, and filling two bowls with the aromatic soup. Harry leaned closer to Draco and said in an undertone, "He's very pleased you know," he flicked his head in Kreachers direction, "he tries to hide it, but to have a blood relation of his former mistress spending time here makes him very happy."
"Is that what it is?" Draco asked, somewhat relieved to understand the cheerful treatment from an elf that didn't belong to him. "He's always smiling at me. I thought he was just another part of Potter's crazy world - decrepit grinning elves."

Harry smiled, and helped himself to tea, "Potter's crazy world?" he repeated.

Draco shrugged, "I'm assuming it was to do with the sententia, but you were a bit weird the first few times we met. I started thinking that you lived in your own mad little world."

"I sort of did," Harry said, stirring a heaped sugar into what had been a very serviceable cup of tea. "I feel like I needed it though," he propped both elbows on the table and cradled his tea in his hands, "I've been 'of public interest' for the last twelve years, three months off, all to myself, was kind of amazing."

Draco noticed the tense immediately, "Was?" he asked, "Are you planning on going back to work? Or just doing your own grocery shopping again?"

"Not sure yet, but I'm sick of the inside of this house," Harry said, he was so much more definite than Draco had experienced, there were no vacant pauses or confused hesitation as he said firmly, "I need to do something."

Draco thought this seemed like a bad idea, he liked that Harry was always here … safe, alone … before Draco could develop that disturbing idea any further, Harry asked, "So how was Ron? That was today right? Is he cross still?"

"No, not at all," Draco said, finding himself, once again, completely at sea when it came to the logistics of the famous Potter/Weasley friendship, "not at you, or me."

"Why would he be mad at you?" Harry asked.

"You can ask him that." Draco said bluntly. "I'm not getting in the middle of you two, it's far too difficult to follow."

"Okay," Harry said, looking a little wary, "But did he tell you what you needed to know?"

Draco shook his head, "We didn't really get round to it actually, we were interrupted by an audit."

Harry's cup stopped halfway to his mouth and his face paled exactly the way Ron's had. "From the DMLE? Hell, I hope you got out of there quick, Hughes is an intolerant arse."

"I got that," Draco said, remembering the scurrying, panicked workers. "The place went crazy."

"Yup, I don't know how much you know about the politics after the first war?" Harry asked.

Draco looked at him carefully but didn't speak, there were too many landmines in that conversation. Harry seemed to sense Draco's unease, because he explained quickly, "Directly after Riddle, you know…" He waved an imaginary wand at his own forehead, "The Death Eater round-up was led by Bartemius Crouch."

"I'm aware," Draco said, slowly.

"Well, Hughes is cut from the same maniacal cloth," Harry said, "he hates any reminders of the war, or people associated with it. He's been in charge since the end of last year, I think he lost family in the war."
Draco was only half listening, at the mention of Bartemius Crouch, Draco was immediately reminded of is son Barty Crouch Jr. one of the men responsible for ruining Draco's life, by bringing about Voldemort's re-birth.

Draco still remembered the stoic expression on his own fathers face when he arrived home that summer after fourth year. His mother had picked him up from Kings Cross, and removed the blanket of hexes he, Vince and Greg had spent their train ride from Hogwarts under. She had been pale faced and silent all the way to the apparition point. Once they appeared in Wiltshire, in front of the gates to the manor, she continued to hold Draco but the arm, as though she couldn't bear to let him go. Draco had been panicking by this time. Dumbledore's words of unity and understanding at the feast the night before had still been echoing in his head. Knowing that if Voldemort was back then his family was screwed, his father had paid off too many people to keep himself free, Voldemort would be out to get him.

In hindsight Draco knew they would have been better off if Riddle had held more grudges.

But after a week of internalised panic that his father had been killed or tortured – because his parents hadn't wanted to risk writing a letter to him at school – to see his father waiting in the entrance hall of their home, whole and calm had been a massive relief. Oddly though, when his father had given him a brief, one armed hug, Draco's tenuous relief had broken. Lucius Malfoy only hugged when someone was dead. That time it was for the death of life as they knew it.

"Er, Malfoy?" Harry's tentative voice broke through the wash of memory, "Are you alright?"

"Fine," said Draco, with a quick nod. His soup had been delivered during his pre occupation, he picked up his spoon mechanically and began to eat. "Sorry. Hughes is a prick, got it." He blinked, still not entirely present, he was thinking of what Harry had written about that same summer, he had been alone and hopeless. Just as Draco had been.

Draco disliked the constant reminders of the similarities between them, it made him think ridiculous things. What if they had actually talked to each other, properly, without the anger? Would they have realised that they didn't need to hate each other because really they both felt the same? Trapped, overlooked and scared of what was coming…

"Draco?" Harry sounded a little concerned, "are you sure you want to do this now?"

Draco focused on Harry, and then on his full soupspoon that was halted in mid-air, as he noticed properly for the first time that he was eating, "Sorry," he said, again. He rested his spoon back in his bowl and picked up the folded napkin that was still laid next to his plate, he concentrated on arranging it in his lap as he said in a would-be casual voice, "I hate going to the Auror Office, always puts me in a weird mood."

"Why?" Harry asked, there was a kind little spark of genuine interest and sympathy in his voice, something usually reserved for elves or Weasley's, and it made the unease from war memories lessen just a bit.

"Why do you think?" Draco said, overwhelmed by the unexpected urge to tell Harry his problem. "It just reminds me of being arrested, all the time I spent sitting in the holding cells waiting for bail. All the shit I did to get arrested in the first place. The Aurors were such power-tripping wankers. They convinced me I'd be going to Azkaban, kept my lawyer from seeing me until bail was posted, I don't like being reminded of that." He took a few mouthfuls of soup to hide his embarrassment as his words hung in the air. He didn't want Harry to know how bad it had really been.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, as if it was his fault Draco had been lawfully arrested. "I tried to tell them
you weren't dangerous or a flight risk, but I had no actual authority then, I hadn't even started training."

"I realise that," Draco said. "I was a war criminal, I was guilty of the things they arrested me for, I didn't expect your hero complex extended to Death Eaters as well."

"Whatever," Harry said, not biting at the half-hearted insult, "it only took so long to get you out because your mother had been barred from contact with Gringotts, the goblins went crazy locking any Death Eater associated accounts. It took them a week to release my gold for goodness sake, then it still had to go through the Higgs, Smith and Sharfij legal account."

"What?" Said Draco sharply, forgetting his self-pity, surely he'd misunderstood. Because someone would have definitely told him if Potter had bailed him out of prison.

"It had to come from your lawyers," Harry said as though apologising, "don't you think it would have been front page news if the Wizengamot registrar had known that I bailed out a Death Eater?" Harry half-laughed, "As if any of us needed that."

"But you didn't, my mother did." Draco was thinking furiously, he had tried so hard to forget that time, he rarely thought of the months following the war. He was so sure his mother had said she had paid… but all he could remember was the last time he'd seen her before he'd been released when she had said she would figure something out. He had just assumed she organised gold from somewhere, it wasn't like he had ever thought that she couldn't afford it, they had always had an endless supply of gold.

"No, it was me, I thought old Higgs would have told you." Harry said, looking uncertain, "It's really not a big deal, your mother paid me back before she left for Marseilles, years ago."

"I had no idea." Draco said faintly. He couldn't believe that not only did he owe Harry his life for the fiery broomstick rescue, and his sanity for the testimony at Draco's trial that kept him out of Azkaban, now he owed him his fucking pride as well? "Thank you Potter." He said through his teeth.

"Are you angry?" Harry asked, taken aback, "I didn't expect you to be grateful or anything, your mum saved my life, the least I could do was lend her some galleons," he looked at Draco imploringly, "I would've done whatever I could for her."

Draco nodded jerkily, for her. It was ridiculous that he was disappointed that Harry had done it as a favour to his mother, and not because … why? He didn't think Draco was evil? Or because he wanted him to be free? Or because he'd secretly had a crush on him forever and wanted to save him? Pathetic.

"Not angry," Draco said. He picked up his notebook from the table, his list of questions for Harry was easy to find, "Was the summer of ninety five the first time you found out that Arabella Figg used her cats to keep an eye on you?" he asked, his quill poised for the answer and his tone as business like as he could make it.

Harry looked at him, surprised but the abrupt start to their work, "Um, yes." He paused and then hurriedly said, "Look, Mal- Draco I assumed you knew, it really wasn't a big deal you don't owe me or anything."

"I get it." Draco said, striving for calm, but just sounding glum instead. "It's fine." He just wanted to leave. His visit to the Aurors coupled with finding out that the debt he owed Harry seemed to never end was quite bad enough. And then there was the fact that Draco really just wanted to shag the
cheerful flirty bastard, but was very sure that would be a terrible idea. It all made him claustrophobic and exhausted.

Draco looked down at his list of questions and asked doggedly, "Did Cho Chang really have to hint that heavily to get you to ask her out for Valentine's Day?"

"Er, yes," Harry laughed again, slightly embarrassed, "but I was pretty pre-occupied, I was on my way to have private mind invasion lessons with Snape."

Draco nodded, scribbling Harry's answer beneath the question, and not looking up as he asked the next one in a monotone, "Was your meeting with Skeeter completely organised by Granger? And were you at all annoyed?"

"Yes she did all of it," Harry answered, "and a little I suppose, but it was for the best so I forgave her pretty quickly."

"Right," Draco muttered jotting down the reply, "Did you know –".

"Will you stop it!" Harry burst out, cutting him off. "Jesus you tell me to grow up, look at you, all in a snit because of something that happened years ago."

"I'm not in snit," Draco said indignantly, meeting Harry's eyes and trying to sneer the best he could, "aren't I allowed to be pissed off that you, once again, saved my arse without my permission?" He prodded angrily at his little book with the nib of his quill, accidently poking a hole in the page. "Noble Potter never asking for thanks, just doing it out of the good of his heart." He muttered venomously, unable to restrain himself.

Harry snorted, and said, "Please excuse my rudeness, I'll be more courteous next time you need help." It was quite obvious to Draco that Harry was trying not to laugh. Draco considered flinging a spoonful of his nearly finished soup at him as Harry continued, "Of course you're allowed to be pissed off. But you just said you weren't so…" he grinned, and shrugged, "it sure looks like a snit to me."

"Right, well I'm not." Draco said stubbornly, stirring the dregs of his soup and calming himself down by imagining his last chunk of potato hitting Potter square in the forehead. It worked, and he was pleased that when he spoke he sounded reasonable once more. "I'm angry that I was unable to pay for my own damn bail, that you had to do it and then, like some sort of pauper I can't even pay you back, my Mummy had to do it."

"Understandable," Harry said easily, with another little grin.

Draco wanted to jinx it off his stupid face. He returned to his interrupted question, "Did you know that thestrals could fly such long distances before you used them to get to London?"

"Yeah, Hagrid had said Dumbledore sometimes used them for long trips." Harry said.

"How do you think Umbridge discovered you were out of bed the night Arthur Weasley was attacked by Nagini?"

"Filch or his cat." Harry said quickly, before he added, "Is it really just this bail thing that's got you so shitty with me?"

"Yes," Draco said. And it was, just not only for the reasons he'd given. But he was not willing to broach the subject of his persistent crush, and endless debt, feeling the way he did right now. Instead he sought diversion, "I'm not shitty at you, I've just got a lot on my mind. This morning Marc and I
figured out that someone in the Treasury Office is moving gold to a vault that isn't allocated."

"What?" Harry said, obviously taken by surprise at the sudden tangent. But Draco's distraction worked because Harry asked, "A vault that isn't allocated? That seems sloppy."

"It could be a huge deal, Ministry gold being handled suspiciously." Draco said, "There are two different listings for account fees, but one of them has a vault number attached."

Harry was quiet, apparently thinking, because after a moment he asked, "Why would they keep a vault for fees? They are such a pain."

"Exactly!" Draco said enthusiastically, impressed that Harry had grasped the concept so quickly and forgetting his snit. "It was an overflow for the war reparations and suddenly it's being used again. Except that Marc's contact in Registry doesn't know what for."

Harry looked concerned, "Do you think it's like … embezzlement or something?" he asked in a worried hush, as though there were Ministry spies afoot.

"Maybe, at the worst," Draco said, "at the least the ministry have a huge error in their budget that the public should probably know about."

"I'll say," Harry agreed fervently, "the longer something like that stays hidden, even if it's not malicious, the worse the backlash will be when it finally comes out."

Draco was pleased Harry understood the repercussions, "Marc's taking it to Cuffe this afternoon," he said, "a story involving such important public figures needs to be thorough, and he'll have to collect his information by the book. But it could be the making of him, if he does it right."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, "You talk about him a lot," he said, then he flicked his finger back and forth between them and asked, "Does he know about this?"

"About the book?" Draco asked, thinking of Marc and his endless, 'Who's the boyfriend/afternoon shag?' routine.

Harry bobbed his head in confirmation, his was mouth twitching cheekily.

Fuck it Draco cursed internally as he realised he had acknowledged that there was something other than working going on. It wasn't that he was denying it, he just thought it was better to keep things as complication free as possible.

"No, the only people that know about the book are the references for events, and they have all signed confidentiality agreements," Draco said, and then added a little proudly, "the tongue tying hex will be activated if they try to tell anyone about it."

"Is that legal?" Harry asked, sounding a bit disturbed.

"Yes, of course," Draco said huffily, "it's in the contract." As if he would break the law for a story with all the shit that was going on at the moment.

"Oh, alright." Harry said. "Well I hope the story goes well for him, at the same time though, I hope it's just an error, corruption in the ministry is so hard to stop. The public have only just forgiven us for the war – even though most of the staff were employed after Riddle fell." Draco noticed that Harry seemed to include himself as part of the ministry once more. He really must be serious about going back to work. "So what else do you want to know?" Harry asked with a nod at Draco's notebook.
Draco scanned the page, "I think that's everything," he said. "I suppose I'll need to talk to Longbottom about the fight at the ministry, even though I've heard it rehashed from the other side a thousand times."

Harry looked thoughtful, "I know Ginny is hardly likely to want to talk about anything involving me at the moment, and Ron was brained and Hermione knocked out, but you could talk to Luna about it, she managed to get though the fight almost unhurt."

Draco raised his eyebrows, thinking he'd rather have Zacharias punch him in the nuts again than have to face the girl who was imprisoned in the manor's cellar for months.

Harry seemed to read his mind, "Hmm okay, maybe Neville will be enough."

"Actually," Draco said, thinking of other points of view, and Smith, and the accidental punching, "Who else could I talk to about the DA?"

"I saw Hermione said Smith," Harry smiled ruefully, "little berk, I don't blame you for not wanting to talk to him."

"I will," Draco said, "if he's the best source." he flipped to the back of his book where he kept track of all the people he had, or needed to speak to. Most of Gryffindor House was listed, surely he could talk to one of them. "I remember that night," Draco said, "when we caught you, it seemed like there were hundreds of you, running in all directions."

"You tripped me up," Harry said, almost fondly, he rubbed his cheek, "God that hurt."

Draco remembered the moment quite well. Sending a trip jinx after Potter, the surge of triumph when he went down in a billow of robes and a huffed out expletive, before his face his the stone flags of the corridor floor with a sickening splat. And now Harry was sitting there smiling about it. He really didn't get how much Draco had hated him, he had really wanted Umbridge to hurt him.

"Why doesn't it matter to you?" Draco asked unable to help himself, "I took you to Umbridge, I knew she hated you, and that she wasn't above anything if it got her what she wanted. I wanted you to get hurt."

"Really?" Harry asked, contemplatively, "I don't know, but nothing bad that happened at school really mattered, not til the night Dumbledore … you know."

"Yes." Draco hissed, shocked that Harry would be so callous, "of course I fucking know." He said angrily, unable to prevent his voice from rising.

"Yeah, well exactly," Harry snapped back, and suddenly he was angry. His eyes darkened behind his glasses and he continued relentlessly, "getting tripped up, given detention, writing in my own blood, even getting banned from Quidditch, it was piss compared to what was coming. I lived in a tent for nine months, I was nearly killed more times than I can count and was actually killed once as well. Other than the Weasley's every piece of nearly family I have had is dead, and I was present, or at fault for most of their deaths. You can forgive me for thinking school-boy rivalry was hardly the end of the world."

Draco sat back in his chair, feeling more than a little told off. "I think that's my cue to leave." he said. The next few meetings were going to be rough if they couldn't talk about this stuff without fighting. He wanted to get out of there before things got even more hostile. Preserve the working relationship his inner career-driven voice said.
There was no reaction to Draco's suggestion of departure. Harry was frowning heavily at his empty soup bowl, so Draco tucked away his notebook and quill and stood to leave, "If you send me your notes on sixth year we can get that done next week."

"I'm not looking forward to that," Harry said quietly, lifting his head, his cheeks were pale and he certainly looked nervous.

Draco tried to keep his expression impassive but he could feel himself glaring. The situation was becoming so complicated in his mind, constantly fluctuating between wanting to hex someone and wanting to kiss them was very tiring, "No, neither am I," he said impatiently, "but it's part of your life," He reminded Harry coolly, "and that's the whole point of this."

Draco slung his satchel strap over his head so it across his chest and said brusquely, "See you on Thursday."

"Thursday." Harry repeated, with a dip of his head.

Draco strode from the room as quickly as he could without letting Harry realise he was fleeing. It was the right thing to do, even if it made him feel cowardly. But arguing wasn't going to do them any good. This was exactly what Draco had thought would happen when Harry had first asked him to write his biography. They had too much history.

Draco realised as he left through the front door that he hadn't even asked about the Horcruxes Ron had mentioned. No doubt another light-hearted discussion they had ahead of them. Draco wondered dismally if he and Harry would even be speaking to each other by the time the book writing process was over – let alone still possess enough cordial emotion to consider anything other than a head-nod in passing acquaintanceship in the future.

To add to Draco's cheerless state the apparent temporary break in the rain ended as he hurried away from Harry's house, and as it started coming down in chilly sheets again he remembered his umbrella was still inside Number Twelve. Bollocks.
Chapter 11

Harry stared at the table top as Draco’s fleeing footsteps grew quieter. “Stupid stubborn twat,” Harry muttered as the front door shut noisily. He wasn’t entirely sure if he meant Draco or himself.

*I probably shouldn’t have shouted at him,* Harry reasoned. But Draco just seemed to get more and more pissed off, no matter what he said.

All Harry had wanted to do was answer Draco’s questions for the book and then, enjoy the fact that there was someone to talk to that wasn’t his well-meaning, but smothering house-elf. And then, maybe, if there was time, snog a little. But now he just felt guilty for losing his temper.

Harry wondered if it was even possible for them to be friends. Their next meeting would contain discussion of the time Harry cut Draco in half. It really didn’t seem likely to induce friendship.

“Master Harry, would you like seconds?” Kreacher asked, startling Harry out of his regretful torpor.

“No thanks,” Harry said, finding a little smile for the elf, “it was very good though.”

Kreacher nodded as he cleared the table, when he picked up Draco’s bowl he asked, “Did you want Mr Malfoy to leave?”

“No,” Harry said, a little entertained by Kreacher’s would-be casual question, he understood the elf’s moral dilemma; blood master or bequeathed master, it must drive the elf mad. “I know you like having him here.”

Kreacher gave a funny little twitch and said, “Mistress Black only shouted at people to make them leave, if you want Mr Malfoy to stay maybe you shouldn’t shout?”

“Good advice Kreacher,” Harry said regretfully, “Thank you.”

A knock sounded from the front door on the floor above, interrupting him. Harry looked at his watch. It was only three in the afternoon, everyone he knew would be at work, and it wasn’t like the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Whale-savers could see Number Twelve to come knocking for brainwashing or collecting. The only person that visited during business hours was Draco.

Kreacher vanished with a crack from beside him, plates and all. Harry stood and made his way up the stairs, curious about his visitor.

“No, no, I’ll wait here.” Harry heard Draco’s voice saying when he reached the top of the stairs.

There was the crack of Kreacher disappearing as Harry pushed open the door to the foyer. Draco was standing on the font step, in the meagre cover of the lintel overhang with the heavy, seemingly endless rain pounding on the steps behind him.

He looked up quickly at the sound of the staircase door swinging closed. “I left my umbrella,” Draco said hurriedly, the moment he saw Harry.

“Oh right,” Harry said, he didn’t really care why Draco was back, he just wanted to part on better terms this time. “Look,” he said, “I’m sorry about before.”

Draco sighed, “Will you please stop apologising to me,” he said, and he sounded tired rather than pissed off. “Every second word that comes out of your mouth is sorry.”
Harry thought this was a strange thing to be annoyed by, because he really was sorry, how else was he supposed to let Draco know that? But he shrugged and said “Okay, I’m not sorry about before, I meant every word.”

“Better,” Draco said, almost returning Harry’s smile. Or rather, he stopped scowling.

“You can come in,” Harry said, wondering if he was pushing his luck.

“Your elf is getting my umbrella then I’ll be off.” Draco replied. He was still upright and a little standoffish, perched on the step, trying to keep out of the rain.

“Was there nothing else you wanted to ask me?” Harry said, struck by sudden inspiration; Draco wouldn’t feel like he was giving in if he came in to talk about work, “you did leave kind of suddenly.”

Harry could have laughed out loud at the change in Draco’s expression, his face seemed to clear in a second, and he said keenly, “There was actually,” he took a step inside, seemingly without a second thought as he began to rummage in his satchel – for his notebook no doubt. “I remembered just before. Weasley said your weird dreams were because, and I quote, “of the horcrux thing” – when were you planning on mentioning that?”

“Bloody Ron,” Harry said, but he was glad Draco had come inside so he answered, “I was worried it would give people ideas… you know, when they read about how unlikely it was that I was able to get them all and kill Riddle, someone might think it’s a good way to become immortal.”

“I understand that,” said Draco, pausing in his bag search to look at Harry, “but unless you think that I will decided to kill someone and make a horcrux because of your example, you still need to tell me so that I may figure out a way to present the necessary facts without accidently falsifying anything.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, “but technically I didn’t know about them til sixth year so …” he trailed off.

Draco tutted, and resumed digging in his bag as he said sarcastically, “Right, because there isn’t enough fun shit going on that year already, lets add the most evil magic of all.”

Harry didn’t quite hold in his laugh at Draco’s ironic tone. “Sorry,” he said again, “I can tell you now, if you want.” He added only half seriously.

Surprisingly, Draco didn’t make an excuse to leave, he just nodded and said “Okay.” And then looked at Harry expectantly, his excavated notebook and quill in hand.

Harry was not willing to stand around talking about Horcruxes in the foyer, neither did he want to return to the scene of their previous argument in the kitchen, so he led the way up stairs to the drawing room, all the while wondering why it was taking Kreacher so long to find Draco’s umbrella.

Harry plonked down in his favourite chair, and Draco on the nearest couch, he balanced his open book on his knee and with quill poised he said, “Right, what does you having visions of Riddle have to do with his horcrux?”

Harry sighed in resignation, “Well, firstly it wasn’t just one – it was seven,” He said, and Draco’s eyes widened considerably, “and I was one of them. When he tried to kill baby me he’d already made five, a ring from his grandfather’s family, a diary from his time at school, a locket that once belonged to Salazar Slytherin, a silver cup that had been Helga Hufflepuff’s, and the d-diadem.” He finished, falteringingly, remembering all of a sudden that Draco had been sitting behind him on the broom when he had snatched Ravenclaw’s heirloom from the feindfyre. God he was glad he’d gone back to get him that night. “They were all hidden, and safe,” Harry continued, “Riddle was planning
on making the final one with my death, Dumbledore said, because he wanted a seven part soul, but the charm my mother did stopped him. Then, before he fled as a ‘shadow of humanity’ or whatever you want to call it, part of his unstable soul latched onto me – the nearest living thing.

Draco swallowed audibly, his eyes now fixed on his scribbling quill, “Is that why you were alive when Mum checked?” His voice was very small, Harry suddenly wondered how he knew about horcruxes at all, let alone come to the conclusion that its removal could be part of Harry surviving when he shouldn’t.

“Partly,” Harry said. “I don’t really know exactly why I didn’t die – I had a super weird vision of Dumbledore explaining it all to me though – but since I imagined that, then I don’t know whether or not to believe the things he told me.”

Draco looked almost grey, “Okay,” he said, “we can come back to that.”

“Right,” Harry said, collecting his thoughts, “so before the final night of the war, Riddle and I were sort of connected, but until I had the dream about Sirius in the Ministry in June of Ninety-six, neither of us had much control over it. In fact up until I saw Nagini attack Mr Weasley Riddle had no idea the connection even existed, but I’d been seeing things for more than a year before that.”

Draco was whey-faced and slightly overwhelmed as he flipped through his notebook, “But I thought he possessed you, at the Ministry,” he found his page and read, “‘but it was too painful for him to keep it up for long.’ Surely if part of his soul could live in you, he could also.”

“No,” Harry said, “the horcrux was just attached to me, it didn’t have to share my soul like Riddle did for possession, and because he was so damaged inside, my ‘whole’ soul was painful to him.”

Draco looked confused as he scrawled across the page, his quill becoming almost blurred with the speed of his note taking, “Why?” he asked, not looking up.

“I don’t know,” Harry said, “it was to do with me being so cut up that Sirius had just been killed, all the love overpowered his evil.”

Draco nodded and continued to write, Harry sat in silence, waiting for the next question, but after nearly two minutes of quiet, interrupted only by the scratching of Draco’s quill, he started to wonder if another question was even coming.

“My mother thought it was a shame,” Draco said suddenly. Looking up at Harry again and shutting his book. “Sirius Black I mean, she wished to see her family continue in whatever way it could, when he escaped from Azkaban she and Father had an argument about offering him refuge if they could find him.”

“Really?” Harry asked, astonished.

“Yes, but of course my father didn’t want to get caught harbouring a fugitive, even though he of all people knew Black was innocent.” Draco tucked his book away and said wryly, “How do you think I knew enough about what he’d supposedly done to taunt you with it? Everyone else just thought he’d killed a bunch of muggles.”

“That’s mental,” Harry said quietly, trying to imagine a world where Sirius had hidden with the Malfoy’s in their luxurious house rather squatting in a cave, eating rats. He was willing to bet Sirius would choose the rats over living with Death Eaters every time.

“Sorry,” Draco said, with a touch of discomfort, “it was impolite to bring that up.”
“It’s fine,” Harry said, with a dismissive flick of his hand, “it’s been seven years, I’m quite happy to talk about him.” Harry didn’t mention that he’d quite happily talk about anything at all if they weren’t fighting. “It’s weird to think he was the same relation to your mum as Rosie is to Victoire.”

“Family is confusing concept with purebloods,” Draco mused, “you’re supposed to do everything you can to protect each other, but not because you love them, it’s to protect the family name.” he shifted a little uneasily on the couch, “I was a big supporter of the House of Black living on, though it was for my own selfish reasons.”

Harry kept quiet, surprised that Draco was talking so freely about something that wasn’t work, it was very unusual.

“I wished so often that he had beaten Aunt Bella.” Draco said, sounding almost guilty, “she was almost worse to live with than Riddle, he at least didn’t actively go looking for people to hurt.”

“God that must have been shit.” Harry murmured, before he could stop himself.

“Yeah,” Draco agreed flatly, “it wasn’t that bad in sixth year, not once my occlumency was good enough anyway; Bella thought that queers were quite as bad as muggleborns you see. A hindrance to the magical birth rate.” He added bitterly. He fiddled with the cuff of his shirt absently as he spoke, and the longer bits of his hair fell forward over his face. “So while I was able to hide that, and I hadn’t failed in my mission yet it was alright, Riddle came and went a lot but he wasn’t living with us. It wasn’t until after I … after the end of sixth, that’s when everything turned to shit. Dad was broken out of prison, but the Dark- Riddle was so angry –“ he stopped speaking quite suddenly, his fidgeting fingers curling on themselves, his jaw tight as he looked at Harry, quite obviously ashamed or embarrassed or something, at having said so much.

Harry though Draco was well within his rights to be upset by that period in his life. Harry had seen how life was inside Malfoy Manor, Draco being forced to torture people, prisoners held beneath their living quarters, the most repulsive of wizards infecting every corner of the house that he’d grown up in. Hideous. But hearing Draco say it made Harry realise how badly it had effected Draco, how horrible it must have been. He, Harry, might have been hungry and cold during the desperate camping trip, but hell, at least he’d been free.

“I had flashes of what was going on at your place;” Harry said, not sure if he should speak at all because Draco was quite close to glaring once more, “I was starving and frozen but I didn’t wish for a moment that I could be in your shoes.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Draco snapped, “then you would have been an evil little git, instead of the heroic saviour of our world.”

“Yes, that’s why.” Harry said, sarcastically, “No, at least I believed in what I was doing, suffering for a good cause.”

“How do you know I didn’t?” Draco retorted and even though the tone was waspish, it lacked the melancholy his voice had held previously.

“Don’t be a twat,” Harry said, not wanting to retreat to picking at each other for the sake of it. “I saw you lower your wand, and you refused to identify me.”

“I didn’t lower my wand, you fucking stole it”. Draco said indignantly.

“No, not then,” Harry said, “that night on the astronomy tower, Dumbledore said he could help you and you believed him, you lowered you wand.”
“You were there?” Draco gasped, quiet clearly horrified, he glowered at Harry and said sullenly, “Of course you were there, you’re always fucking there.”

Harry thought that it was best not to comment, he debated calling Kreacher to find out why Draco’s umbrella took an half an hour to retrieve, or to bring them some tea, or as he was feeling at the moment, whiskey.

But he didn’t, he sat and waited for Draco to sort his internal frustration out. Harry was sure he was arguing silently in his head because his lips were white with the pressure of keeping them together and he was picking, rather more violently than necessary at a loose thread on his sleeve.

Keeping quiet was the right thing to do because eventually – after the thread broke and he had no more distraction – Draco said calmly, “Look Potter, we can talk about this another time, I need your notes before we do sixth year.”

“Alright,” Harry said, quite proud to have avoided an argument, “and the horcruxes?”

“Yeah same, I’ll have to find a way to explain that without putting in too much detail, I don’t think you’re wrong to worry about a copycat at some point.”

“Okay,” Harry said, he just wanted Draco to understand that he didn’t see him as the same person any more. That to Harry, those kids that had fought in the war were other versions of themselves. Because finally, now that he was free of the constraints of impending marriage and child rearing, he felt like a different person. In the last week he had achieved more of what Hermione would call something like “emotional growth” than he had since he first met the Weasley’s and learned what it was like to have a family again.

“I’m going to go now,” Draco said, but he didn’t actually move, just picked up the strap of his satchel.

Harry really didn’t want him to go yet, while they weren’t actually fighting, the mood was still very sombre and the whole point of asking Draco back inside had been so he would leave in a better frame of mind. “Do you have another meeting?” Harry asked, trying to delay him just a bit.

“No,” Draco said, “but it’s been a long day and I don’t really want to spend the rest of it arguing with you about the horrible shit I’ve done.”

“So don’t,” Harry said quickly, “I have new whiskey, a spirit lifting nip seems in order.”

Draco was easily convinced, “I suppose it couldn’t make things worse.”

Harry summoned the unopened bottle from the cupboard and two short tumblers, he poured a measure into each and nudged Draco’s one across the coffee table to him.

Then he picked up is glass and said, “To not making things worse?”

Draco nodded, his dismal expression lifting slightly as he clinked his drink against Harry’s. Then in what was obviously a concentrated effort to change the subject he asked, “So, what are you going to do with yourself? You seemed pretty certain earlier that you were done with hiding in this place.”

Harry smiled, “Yeah, I really am. I think I’ll talk to Robards about going back to work, even though it will have to be desk duty for a while - the reasons I wanted to leave haven’t changed, arresting people while being asked for your autograph is a pain in the arse.” He shrugged, a bit embarrassed, and half expecting a cutting ‘poor-famous-Potter’ remark, but none came, so he continued, “But you talking about that error in the budget … it makes me nervous, I don’t want the public to stop trusting
us again.”

“If you didn’t go back it wouldn’t be your problem,” Draco said, the whiskey had done him some good, already the edge was going from his voice. “You’d just one of the many – you could not trust the Ministry like the rest of us.”

“But it would still be Ron’s problem, and Hermione’s,” Harry said, “and all the guys in my old team, and anyway what the hell would I do with myself otherwise? I’m good at catching baddies, that’s about it.”

“And pouring drinks.” Draco said holding out his empty glass.

“Right,” Harry snorted, “I’ll go and get a job in the pub shall I?”

“Why not?” Draco said easily, “You must have a decent amount of gold to be able to quit your job without any pre-planning.”

“I have a bit,” Harry said honestly, “but it’s not enough to last my whole life, I still need to work.”

There was a sharp and sudden knocking at the drawing room window, Harry looked around in surprise to see an owl he’d didn’t know tapping its beak relentlessly against the window pane.

“What on earth?” Harry said. Owls that delivered his mail always dropped it off through the attic window, and Kreacher brought it down into the house. But this one was very persistent, Harry got to his feet and hurried to the window. He lifted the sliding frame and the bird hopped inside and flew directly at Draco who was still sitting on the couch.

“Oi!” Harry said, but the bird just dropped its letter on Draco’s lap and pelted back out the open window.

“What the hell?” Harry said, shocked by the mad creature.

“That’s Volo, Marc’s bird.” Draco said with a little chuckle at Harry’s surprised face, “He’s fucking nuts, but very efficient.”

“Er, right.” Harry said, he didn’t want to appear nosy, but he quite wanted to know what the often mentioned Marc would be writing to Draco about. “Is something wrong?” he asked, as Draco frowned at the unfolded parchment.

“Maybe,” Draco said, “more like weird.” He held the parchment out to Harry who took it and sat down on the sofa next to him to read.

_Draco,_

_Mavis says Blishwick took over the quarterly budgets in January, they used to be done by the Assistant HoD, but Blishwick decided to do the whole thing himself the last two times. I saw Iris just after lunch, she said it’s wizards who look after the Ministry’s accounts, since the war the goblins don’t want anything to do the government._

_I tried to talk to Cuffe this afternoon but Betty wouldn’t let me near his office. I have this weird feeling she knows what we’re up to but doesn’t want Cuffe to know._

_Come back to the office so you can tell me I’m just being paranoid. You must be done shagging by now, it’s been ages._
“Er,” Harry said, stuck dumb by the final line. Was that what he was supposed to think was weird?

He read the beginning again, forcing himself to concentrate because Marc’s last words must have been a joke.

Harry already knew that wizards working at Gringotts handled the Ministry accounts, their signatures were always on the bottom of the monthly stipend allocations that each department had to submit, one of them and the Head of Treasury signed off all Ministry spending, it was one of the safeguards put in place to stop situations exactly like the one Marc and Draco seem to have discovered. “Do you think this Betty knows something, or is involved somehow?” He asked.

“I don’t know,” said Draco, slumping back against the couch, holding tightly to his whiskey. “I’ve been hoping and hoping that it was all going to turn out to be a mistake, some daft newbie ticking the wrong box or something, but Mavis, that’s Blishwick’s secretary, says he’s done them all himself, that seems very dodgy to me.”

“It does,” Harry said, leaning forward to pour himself a new drink, “it’s also against the standardised protocol, but I suppose since Treasury sets the protocols around gold in the first place they can probably break them.” He sat back as Draco had, took a sip from his glass and said, “If this is some sort of scam I bet I can guess who’s helping them at Gringotts.”

“Who?”

“Travers, he’d love to get one over on the Ministry, his family were taxed worse than yours.”

“You mentioned that before,” Draco said, “when I came to see you after you found out it wasn’t me that poisoned you, how do you know how much tax they paid?”

“Junior Aurors are little more than paper lackeys,” Harry said, “even when the Ministry was going mad trying to capture all the scattering Death Eaters and needed as many people as they could get, most of my intake spent more time signing off the arrest warrants, and filing incident reports than doing actual Auror work.”

Draco looked rather stony at the mention of arresting Death Eaters. Harry felt bad for bringing it up again, after Draco had specifically told him that just visiting the department made him uncomfortable.

Harry didn’t want to think poorly of the Aurors that had brought Draco in, no doubt people who had helped train Harry. But he’d heard the whispers in his first few weeks of training, he knew that some of the captives had been treated roughly.

Harry had spent May of ’98 at The Burrow, mourning the loss of Fred and everyone else, with everyone else, eating every heaped plate Mrs Weasley put in front of him and shagging Ginny whenever they could find a moment alone.

The only contact he’d had with anyone was his lawyer. Obviously Hermione had not been qualified in such matters at that time, so he had used a doddering old fellow called Nigel Herbert that had looked after the Weasley family wills for the last century.

He had advised Harry through the organisation of Draco’s bail for Narcissa, and the re-assignment and organisation of all Harry’s assets and wealth. Including, Harry thought it was a little late, but the writing a will for the first time in his life. Something Herbert reiterated constantly that he should have done before heading off on a suicidal mission to kill the Dark Lord.
Mr Herbert was a little overwhelmed at the process of writing a will for someone that actually had assets and heirlooms to bequeath, not to mention the gold involved – Molly and Arthur were very typical when it came to a Weasley family’s economic status.

Kingsley had arrived on the 2nd of June, puncturing the oblivious little bubble that they had all been living in for the last month by requesting that Harry, Ron and Hermione lend their faces to the rebuild of the government. Something that none of them had wanted to do unless they had some say in what was going on – they hadn’t really got it. Hermione started just above entry level in the Wizengamot administration, and Harry and Ron were both lumped in at the bottom of the Auror induction. But all three of them knew that if they were to have any actual credibility then they had to earn their place as much as the next wizard.

So, by the time Harry had any real idea of how the Aurors functioned, all the *looking-the-other-way-while-we’re-at-war* nonsense had stopped and there was a reasonable amount of structure *(paperwork)* in the arrest/hold-for-bail process.

“I remember the Travers one,” Harry continued, “because I thought it was really steep – considering there was only one Travers on trial – normally it was worked out on a sort of sliding scale of number of Death Eaters in the family and how bad their crimes were versus how much gold they had.”

“It’s probably because of the sisters,” Draco said, “Gilford Travers, he’s the one in Azkaban, and his brother Willard who works at Gringotts, are the sons of the only boy born to Travers senior. He and his wife had five daughters as well, so there are plenty of blooded Travers around that aren’t named because their mothers all made good pureblood marriages. Greg’s grandmother was a Travers,” he added conversationally.

“Greg?” Harry asked, not being able to think of anyone with that name aside from Greg Timms who was a first year Auror trainee, and he didn’t think Draco would know him, or who his grandmother was.

“Goyle,” Draco said, “you know, he was in our year –”

“Sorry,” Harry laughed, “never thought of him having a first name before.

Draco grinned, “I’m not surprised, I don’t think he was even aware of it half the time.”

“I’d say you’re right about the sisters,” Harry mused, “I didn’t particularly care about the Travers getting the shit taxed out of them at the time, the Ministry needed gold from somewhere. But that makes sense.”

“I think you’ll find most Death Eaters were quite used to paying their way out of trouble anyway,” Draco said. “Getting *the shit taxed out of us* was the least of our worries.”

“Sorry,” Harry muttered, and Draco made a tiny little tutting sound, and said, “You’re always apologising.”

“Sorry?” Harry said again, but with a sidelong smirk and Draco huffed out a short laugh.

“What are you sorry for?” He asked.

“Well that time was for annoying you with my constant apologies,” Harry said honestly, “but I don’t know, for everything I guess, I don’t really want to say because you’ll just get shitty again.”

“I might not,” Draco said
“Ha, whatever,” he reached out and knocked his glass against Draco’s, “to not making things worse remember?”

“Hmm,” Draco nodded and threw back his last mouthful, “You’ll have to give up your afternoon drinking habits if you go back to work,” he said, “it’s one thing for a journo to be a bit squiffy on the job, but an Auror? Even famous Potter would get the sack for that.”

“True,” said Harry. Reaching for the whiskey to tip another shot into Draco’s empty glass, I’ll have to find a new career then.” He refilled his own and asked, “So what are you going to do about Marc?”

“I don’t know, I’m not going back to tell him he’s paranoid, because I don’t think he is, and because he’ll give me endless shit for drinking on the job,” he smiled fondly into his glass and took a healthy gulp. “Do you know, he is so obsessed with what I’m doing when I come to meet you. He decided this morning that I’m a prostitute –“

Harry choked on his mouthful “Why?” He sputtered, although at least the cryptic parting remark on Marc’s letter was explained.

“It’s a long story.” Draco laughed, “First he thought that I had a new boyfriend, and he’s been taking the piss for weeks that I have time off to meet up with him, and then I mentioned that there had been a problem with my pay and he put the two together, rather loudly, and decided I’m a rent boy.”

“Good mate by the sound of it.” Harry said, joining in a little bemusedly as Draco continued to chuckle to himself.

“He is actually,” Draco said after a moment, “suffers from the same unnaturalness you do.” Harry frowned and Draco clarified, “He’s bi, although I think it’s actually just because only shagging one gender would limit his options. He’s quite the whore.”

“Charming,” Harry said, finding the conversation much less amusing all of a sudden, “Have you and he ever…?”

“Argh, no,” Draco said at once, his face scrunched up in distaste, “he’s probably my best friend, well only friend if you don’t count Astoria, so no, not that he didn’t try.” Draco laughed, “Idiot.”

Harry found it hard to smile at this, he felt a bit childish being jealous of the unknown Marc, he vaguely remembered Belby from school as having a load of dark curly hair and a wide smile, but that was all. “So you’re not going to go and talk to him now about this Treasury thing?” Harry asked, trying to keep the hopefulness out of his voice.

“No,” Draco said, “I’ll see him in the morning, even if he’ll have worked himself into a complete flap by then.” He leaned back against the sofa cushions and gave Harry a rare broad smile, “What would you do about this?”

“Um,” Harry said, momentarily distracted by Draco’s lazy smile and the out-of-place hair falling into his eyes, they were wide and honest and looking directly at him, Draco blinked slowly and Harry realised he was not the only one that had probably had enough to drink considering it was only four in the afternoon. He looked away from Draco and it helped him focus, “I would find out what Betty has to gain from hidden money if you think she’s involved,” he said, “same with Blishwick … he was around before the new regime,” Harry muttered, “you don’t think he owes Travers anything?”

“He certainly owed my father a few favours,” Draco said, and Harry glanced at him and saw he was sitting forward again, obviously trying to appear alert, “but I can’t imagine Willard Travers has much
pull, his brother may have, but he’s as mad as a hatter by now, locked up out there.” He shook his head slightly and asked suddenly, “Why do you insist on whiskey Potter?” he peered into his empty glass accusingly, “Can’t you just drink beer like a normal person?”

Harry grinned and shrugged, “I find whiskey achieves the desired outcome more efficiently.”

“That is the sort of thing an alcoholic would say,” Draco said a little pompously, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

“An alcoholic wouldn’t admit it,” Harry said with a chuckle, reaching out for the bottle to refill his glass, “I like beer just fine, but if I want to have a drink then it might as well be whiskey, less getting up to piss that way.”

“You are vulgar.” Draco complained, but held out his glass for a top up all the same, “Why did that girl think she needed to drug you – you say whatever is on your mind after a couple of drinks anyway.”

Harry didn’t answer right away, he sloshed a measure into each glass and screwed the cap back on before he said, feeling somewhat contrite, “She’d been waiting a long time for what she thought was inevitable, she shouldn’t have gone about it the way she did but I’m at fault too, like you said, I shouldn’t have been stringing her along.”

“Pfft,” Draco huffed, flicking a hand at Harry’s knee, “I only said that because I thought you were using her for sex, if I’d known it was because you were having a sexuality crisis I may have been a bit more understanding.”

“May have?” Harry asked.

“Would have.” Draco said firmly, “Pansy still hates me for fucking her about for so long.” He took a sip from his glass and didn’t wince at all on swallowing, then he said regretfully, “At least you could play the game if you had to, not me. Totally utterly bent.”

Harry stared, he wondered if he had the guts, he really wanted to talk to Draco about the other night, but he had no idea of the way things worked. Was it normal for gay men to kiss each other and then never speak of it again? Had Draco considered what a big deal it was to Harry to have kissed another guy, and enjoyed it? The whiskey urged him on, “Speaking of, er, being bent,” Harry said, “I um, wanted to say thanks for your help the other night.”

Draco’s eyes snapped to him and Harry forced himself to keep his expression casual, “Thanks?” Draco asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever been thanked before.” His eyes glinted just a little bit as he the tiniest of smirks crossed his lips, “But I suppose you’re welcome, it’s not like it was a hardship,” the smirk became fully fledged as he finished, “the Weaslette taught you well.”

Harry laughed, embarrassed. “Don’t call her that.” he said.

“I could call her worse.” Draco said pointedly

“I did,” Harry said, “to her face.” He still couldn’t quite believe how his sense of betrayal had caused him to say such awful things to Ginny.

“Good.” Draco said, “There’s nothing more unattractive than letting someone walk all over you.”

“Does that mean you think I’m attractive?” Harry asked, he’d meant it as a joke but somewhere on the way out of his mouth the question lost its humour.
“Obliviousness is also unattractive.” Draco muttered.

Harry didn’t quite know what to make of that, and it must have shown on his face because Draco rolled his eyes and said impatiently, “Do you really think I’d go kissing you if I thought otherwise?”

“Well I don’t know,” Harry admitted, “I did ask you to, to test the theory.”

“You think I made a sacrifice in the name of science?” Draco asked, his mouth was still smiling, but Harry could see that he was confused too.

“Maybe?” Harry said, “I don’t know how these things work, you’re only the third person I’ve ever kissed for goodness sake.”

This seem to stump Draco. He blinked twice and a little line appeared between his eyebrows. “Yes.” he said.

“Yes? Harry repeated completely lost, “yes what?”

Draco sighed peevishly, but his little smile was still there underneath the Malfoy facade, “Yes, to the attractive question, merlin keep up.”

“Oh right, er, me too?” Harry said, hating that it sounded like a question. If there was one thing he was sure of at the moment over anything else, it was that he thought Draco was attractive.

Draco’s annoyed look flickered briefly, and he seemed pleased even if Harry was completely hopeless in any remotely romantic situation. Hopeless, but brave (drunk).

Draco’s eyes widened a little as Harry leaned towards him, but then just before Harry shut his own he saw Draco’s lids flutter closed. He was much calmer this time, whiskey really was quite marvellous Harry thought.
Getting sloshed and making-out like teenagers on the couch was not how Draco had planned to spend his afternoon, but it was certainly a welcome development. Even if his ethical conscience was telling him it was reckless to have his tongue down the throat of someone he was supposedly unbiased about. But for the first time in three years Draco didn't give a shit about ethics, he just knotted his fingers in Harry's jumper and pulled him closer.

Draco hadn't been joking when he'd said that Ginny had taught Harry well. Or maybe, given the way fate seemed to work, he had natural talent, but being kissed by the man, even if it was a little awkwardly side-by-side on the sofa, was easily the most enjoyable thing Draco had done in months. It was only when Harry's lips left his own to travel across his jaw and latch on to his neck did some sort of caution shout loud enough in Draco's head for him to pay attention.

"Potter," he said, his voice sounded weak from lack of breath and, he was a little embarrassed, but almost pleading. Harry paid him no mind, except to tug Draco's collar looser and flick his tongue against the newly exposed skin. Draco's half-hearted concern was pushed away as his stomach twisted with pleasurable anticipation. Through the thin fabric of his shirt Draco could feel the heat from one of Harry's hands where it was resting above his hip. The fingers twitched a little as Draco was unable to resist tilting his head back just a bit to give him better access. Harry shuffled closer, plucking at Draco's already loosened tie as he lifted his head to press their lips together once more.

"It's just a bit of kissing" Draco's anti-conscience wheedled, as he tried to concentrate on stopping things before they went too far. But it wasn't really just kissing anymore, because Harry was all but straddling him and Draco's previously G-rated hands were suddenly not at all. His right one had found its way under the hem of Harry's jumper and flick his tongue against the newly exposed skin. Draco's half-hearted concern was pushed away as his stomach twisted with pleasurable anticipation. Through the thin fabric of his shirt Draco could feel the heat from one of Harry's hands where it was resting above his hip. The fingers twitched a little as Draco was unable to resist tilting his head back just a bit to give him better access. Harry shuffled closer, plucking at Draco's already loosened tie as he lifted his head to press their lips together once more.

When they broke for air, Draco made one last ditch attempt to appease his conscience, "Harry, wait," he said, belatedly and reluctantly removing his hand from inside Harry's jersey.

Harry sat back on his heels and Draco regretted his words at once. Harry's puffed-up, reddened lips twisted with worry, and his eyes were wide and dazed without his glasses. Draco had no memory of the glasses coming off but their absence only drew his attention to the lust blown pupils, rimmed with green looking back at him.

"This isn't a good idea" Draco managed, the words sounded flat and false to his ears. Draco had succeeded in stopping his wandering hands but they had come to rest on Harry's thighs, palm down and fingers spread on the soft worn drill of his trousers. It was tightly stretched across the firm muscle beneath, and his thumbs were tracing back and forth across the heavy inseam. He forced out another feeble admonition, "We still have lots of work to do together…"

Harry looked honestly concerned for a brief moment longer. But then he glanced down at Draco's hands still resting on his legs, and the tokeness of Draco's reluctance was glaring obvious. He quietly searched Draco's face, and as he did so, the most devious smirk Draco had ever seen quirked his lips. The look itself was quite enough to convince Draco he should just shut up.

But Harry gave a quick nod of acceptance and said decisively, "Whatever you want." And then, to
Draco’s intense disquiet he disentangled himself and collapsed onto the sofa next to Draco once more. He leaned back and closed his eyes, looking quite at ease.

The room was so quiet that the tiny little disgruntled noise in the back of Draco's throat was quite easily heard, and Harry's smirk grew wider.

"Smug git," Draco muttered, as he shoved Harry's shoulder hard enough that he fell back on the couch, and feeling a bit bold, probably because he was a bit drunk, Draco climbed on top of him.

Harry's grunt of surprise at being toppled, turned into a groan of something else completely when Draco's knee slotted between his, and his thigh pressed against Harry's groin. The involuntary thrust of Harry's hips drew Draco's attention to the growing physical evidence that he was enjoying this just as much as Draco was.

Deciding to make the most of his whiskey-born courage Draco retuned the pressure with a thrust of his own, and snuck his free hand - the one that wasn't propping him up - back beneath Harry's jumper. His skin was so warm that Draco wondered why he bothered to wear a top at all. He pushed it up, and Harry crunched forward to haul it off over his head. The movement nearly unseated Draco, who found himself balanced on one knee, on the edge of the sofa cushion with the hot hardness of Harry's prick pressed up against his inner thigh, and his hands clinging to Harry's now bare shoulders for balance.

"You right?" Harry asked, with a puff of nervous laughter at the shocked look on Draco's face.

"Fine," Draco said, disliking the lack of control. He shifted his knee daringly so that Harry's grin faltered as he let out a barely stifled moan and fell back once more, pulling Draco with him.

Harry's hands busied themselves untucking Draco's shirt while Draco tried his best to keep up, Harry's eagerness and surprising coordination were confusing him. For a man that could barely meet his eye while talking about sex, he was shockingly dextrous when it came to the real thing. Both Draco's belt and tie were undone before he knew it, and there were only two buttons holding his shirt on when he sat upright.

He needed a moment to gather himself because somehow they were very close to being naked in the middle of the drawing room, and it had been a very long time since Draco had been in such a position. His heart was hammering so rapidly and the whiskey made everything seem both more, and less important all at once. But he looked at Harry, shirtless and smiling somewhat vacantly, as he toyed idly with the loose hanging buckle of Draco's belt while he waited for the next move. His mad inky hair was everywhere, it made Draco want to laugh and he felt a little calmer.

It was strange that Draco had assumed Harry would be inexperienced, the comment about Draco being the third person Harry had ever kissed had misled him. It hadn't crossed Draco's mind that because Harry'd been with Ginny for years, he would have had more sex, and more interesting sex than Draco had – house arrest and a dark mark were limiting when it came to dating opportunities. Draco had had dates, and dates that lead to shags, and on one occasion, a shag that lead to a date, but it was hardly ever more than once with the same man, and repetition was really the only sound teacher on such a subject.

Harry wasn't pushing though, Draco noticed, he seemed content to follow through with his teasing remark of 'whatever Draco wanted'. This was probably because they had reached the practical extent of Harry's knowledge. That made Draco feel a little more collected, and eyeing the straining fabric at Harry's fly he couldn't help but reach out to trace the tempting outline with his forefinger. Harry's half-gasp and the twitch beneath his finger had Draco pressing his palm against it as he leaned forward and claimed Harry's mouth again.
Harry kissed fervently, eagerly, his fingers running the length of Draco's back beneath his shirt leaving a trail of heat and encouragement in their wake. Small pleasure-induced murmurings gurgled up from within him as Draco began to move his hand in firm little circles, the heel of his palm putting enough rhythmic pressure on the head of Harry's cock that he broke their kiss and groaned, "Christ, that's brilliant."

He buried his face in Draco's shoulder, pushing aside his shirt as he did so and mouthing at Draco's collarbone, the rasp of stubble against his throat made Draco's insides curl tighter. Harry's free hand – the other was trapped beneath Draco who was almost on his side, propped up on an elbow so he had room to work his hand – had moved from shirt removal to skim across Draco's chest, the pad of his thumb brushing purposely over his one exposed nipple. It sent a little shiver through Draco who thought, in for a Knut, in for a Sickle and bravely flicked open the button at the top of Harry's trousers and pulled down the zip.

Once freed from its constraints Harry's cock curved up strong and straight against his flat stomach. Draco suffered an internal dilemma for a moment, he wanted very much to take it in his mouth, but thought that perhaps he should go slowly, considering Harry had never even had a man touch his prick, let alone suck on it.

"Here," Harry said breathlessly, he was holding his wand and looked terrified and desperate all at once as he tapped Draco's palm, coating in clear slick something. Draco didn't hesitate, he wrapped his fingers around Harry's length, and began his twisting steady rhythm again, so different without the barrier of material. He heard the wand clatter to the floor when it fell from Harry's slack grip as he became enthralled with watching Draco's ministrations. Draco's thumb swept over the sensitive head on every second stroke and within minutes Harry was moaning and thrusting to meet each pull of Draco's hand.

This was something that was highly beneficial, not just because his enjoyment was so obvious, or because the sight of Harry Potter coming undone at nothing but his hand had Draco all kinds of turned on, but also because with every movement the jut of his hip bone grazed Draco's full and trapped cock in the most delightful way.

Then, all too soon, Harry stilled, his eyes rolled back and his stomach muscles clenched as he gasped, "Draco, I'm –" and thick white shot from him, running over Draco's slowing hand and speckling his abdomen.

"Holy fucking hell." Harry exhaled in a rush, a ridiculously wide and blissful smile stretching across his face as his body went limp and still.

His eyes opened again just as Draco was wondering if it was worth the effort of rolling over to reach his bag and wand to get rid of the mess, or if he should just wipe it on Harry's already splattered trousers. It ended up being neither, because Harry quickly began fumbling to return the favour, and Draco forgot all about his sticky hand.

Harry looked a little sheepish. His chest, neck and cheeks were flushed and his fingers were clumsy for a moment, but he compensated by dragging Draco in for a hungry kiss. This seemed to steady his confidence because with an impressively small amount of shuffling Harry managed to have him flat on his back and his trousers undone. Draco was rather overwhelmed at the efficiency of it all. But the endless kiss and pre-slicked hand that had found its way south, were quite enough for him not to be bothered about anything at all.

The feeling of someone else touching him was wonderful. Harry's hand was much warmer and rougher than his own, and although he was more hesitant than before, Harry seemed to be a fast
learner. The hot, constant friction had Draco dangerously close to the edge very quickly, or at least it seemed quickly to Draco.

When Harry broke the consuming kiss to look down their bodies, the sight of his broad, slippery hand pumping Draco's length over and over, and his own, partly re-interested prick rubbing stickily against Draco's exposed skin as Draco moved to meet his hand, evidently pleased him because he let out an almost whimpering hiss and in a strained, cracked voice he breathed, "God, I want to see you come."

Harry got his wish almost immediately, Draco was so close already, the needy plea had him right there, the rushing disorientation of release surged through him and his back arched as his climax pulsed from his cock, Harry groaned softly at the sight.

"Merlin," Draco breathed, lying still as the creeping loveliness of afterglow spread through him. Harry was half on top of him, their legs tangled and his face resting on Draco's shoulder, his arm hanging heavily and limply across his chest. Draco wondered briefly if he had fallen asleep but then Harry chuckled quietly, and Draco felt it reverberate through his ribcage.

"What's funny?" Draco asked, feeling like he had to keep his voice low in the large room.

"Nothing," Harry said, but then his chest shook again and he said, "I just tossed off Draco Malfoy, and it was the hottest thing I've ever seen." He laughed softly. "I was just thinking how bloody mental that is."

Draco couldn't help the little laugh that left him. "It's not something I envisioned in my future either," he said, still too floaty from his orgasm high to care overmuch about anything.

Harry grinned at him and then leaned over Draco to reach his wand, he snatched it from the floor and sent the tingling zing of a vanishing charm dancing over Draco. Removing the drying white flecks from his hands and stomach and, he noticed, the cushion where he had absently gripped it with a handful of come five minutes earlier. Now clean, he fastened his trousers once more, the effort involved was draining.

Harry hauled himself from the sofa and looked down at Draco who was lethargic and wondering if Harry would let him have a little sleep.

"Comfy there?" Harry asked dryly as he did up his flies.

"Very," Draco replied, his eyes were closed and he was seriously considering a wee nap, surely Harry wouldn't mind, he had plenty of other furniture to sit on.

"Good." Harry said, and all irony was gone from his tone.

Draco pried his eyes open to see Harry grinning dopily down at him. "You sappy twit." Draco muttered, sounding more acerbic than he meant to because that sweet little smile made him aware of something frightening that was unfolding in his chest. He covered his face with his arm and muttered, "Your bloody elf has a lot to answer for."

Harry just laughed to himself as he left the room. Draco re-buttoned his shirt as he lay on the sofa thinking that while hand-jobs and possibly (hopefully) various other sexual favours were a pleasant surprise, he was rapidly losing any kind of credibility when it came to this auto-biography. The whole reason Harry had asked him to write it was because their animosity was so well known. If anyone found out that they were indulging in a bit of slap and tickle on the side, the book would be seen as just another fan-work. However, it was far too difficult to worry with the lovely peace that
was sitting heavily over him.

But there was a sudden magical rustling in the fireplace that interrupted Draco's half-doze. The partially burned logs that had been sitting cold rearranged themselves and burst into glowing flickering flame. Draco bolted upright, just as the fire roared green.

Draco was immensely glad he had not dallied in doing up his trousers. Direct floo access suggested it would be a Granger-Weasley, or an extended Weasley and Draco debated for a millisecond hiding behind the sofa, but too late.

"Mate?" Ron Weasley's voice called, and Draco knew he would have to stick it out.

"Weasley." he said as pleasantly as he was able. He resisted the urge to guilty straighten his collar as Ron's disembodied head turned towards him.

"Malfoy? Oh right, Tuesday," Ron said, "I didn't realise your meetings went this late."

"Fifth was a busy year," Draco improvised, wishing that his notes, or at least notebook, were somewhere visible – Instead of a half-empty whiskey bottle, two glasses, and, he realised in horror, Harry's jumper and Draco's tie hanging off the sofa arm.

"I suppose," said Ron, his head turned in the flames again, looking around the room, "where's Harry?"

"In the loo," Draco replied, hoping desperately that Harry didn't come back as shirtless as he'd left. It was one thing for Ron to know there had been a bit of snogging, but having more than that shoved in his face might be a bit much.

At that moment Draco heard Harry's footsteps approaching the drawing room, "Hey Draco, did you –" he started as he entered, he was holding a small, colourfully labelled metal tin, and, thankfully wearing a new t-shirt. But he stopped dead at the sight of Ron's head in the fire.

He looked quickly between Draco, who was reasonably poised on the couch, and the hearth where Ron was frowning at the panicky expression on Harry's face, and back to Draco again.

"Weasley just arrived," Draco said, trying to sound bored, "I was telling him how much there is to go through for fifth year."

The relief was very obvious on Harry's face. "Oh yeah," Harry said, "heaps. Hey mate," he said to Ron plonking himself down easily in front of the fire.

"Hello," Ron said slowly, in what Draco was fast coming to recognise as his Auror Voice. It gave Draco the feeling they weren't quite as casual as they thought. But Ron didn't press, he just said to Harry, "Hermione would like to apologise for being a grumpy bitch – with food. Are you busy for dinner tomorrow night?"

"No," Harry said, with a laugh, "I'm never busy."

"Him too," Ron said with a twitch of his head in Draco's direction.

Harry didn't even look at Draco, he was staring at Ron with narrowed eyes, and Draco thought Harry had realised Ron knew more than he was letting on too. "Hermione invited Draco for dinner?"

"Yes, she was mean to him as well," Ron said innocently. He raised his voice slightly and made the
flames flicker as he turned and asked, "Are you busy Malfoy?"

Draco sincerely wished he was, or could think of some fraudulent engagement off the top of his head but he drew a blank. "No," he said, "But Granger needn't apologise, we've been over this, the whole prisoner thing…?" Draco trailed off hopefully.

"Nice try," Ron said, with a sly smile, Harry's head was swivelling between the two like a tennis spectator, "She also accused you of, er, other things, so just be there alright?"

Draco did not fancy being ordered around by Weasley even if he was nicer, surprisingly calm, and the teensiest bit scary in full Auror mode these days. But it was terribly bad manners to refuse an apology. "Fine," Draco said aloofly, "I have some questions about the book to ask her anyway if she has condescended to speak to me again."

"Good," said Ron, and then he whispered something to Harry, who tuned bright red and muttered, "Oh fuck off, I'll see you tomorrow."

Ron laughed and lifted his eyebrows in farewell to Draco before he vanished with a pop.

Harry flopped back on the rug with a mortified groan, his arm flung over his eyes. "Bloody bastard wanker." He said into the crook of his elbow.

"What did he say?" Asked Draco, thinking that they should just be thanking Merlin and Circe and every other pagan deity they could think of that Ron hadn't arrived ten minutes earlier. And never never do anything like that in the drawing room ever again.

Harry didn't answer, he just threw the little pot that he had been holding in Draco's direction.

Draco still had some seeker reflexes left to him after all these years and snatched the little tin from the air easily. Turning it over he saw the garishly bright logo of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and the claim that the pot contained Infallible Bruise Remover.

"Potter?" Draco asked, looking up to see Harry was still hiding his face, and lying on the floor. "I don't follow."

Harry lifted is arm to glimpse at Draco, "I'm sorry." He said guiltily. "I got a little carried away, why does Ron have to be such an observant bugger?" he asked the ceiling.

"Carried away?" Draco repeated with reservation, as he got to his feet to look in the mirror that hung over the fireplace.

Half-expecting to discover a black eye he didn't remember getting, Draco was surprised that he looked normal, if slightly messier than usual with his hair distinctly rumpled and no tie, but otherwise … then he caught sight of the dark spot on his neck.

"You fucking vampire," he hissed at Harry, whose reflection — now that he was sitting up again — was visible behind Draco in the mirror. Draco poked at the mark and scowled at Harry, "what are you, fourteen?"

"In my defence," Harry said, apparently finding Draco's indignation funny, rather than frightening as he should, "you seemed to enjoy it at the time."

"Prat." Draco huffed, embarrassed. But it wasn't like he could argue, Harry was right.
Draco arrived home after dinner that evening, Kreacher had insisted on apologising for his inability to find Draco's umbrella with more soup and fresh bread.

Interestingly, when Harry had cast a summoning charm to retrieve the mysteriously wandering umbrella it had soared out from behind a large bag of onions kept on the dark bottom shelf of Kreacher's cooking pantry. The elf said only that he was old and forgetful before insisting there was washing to be done and disapparating.

The lights were already on in the foyer when Draco opened the front door, the elf from Greengrass Moor must have been that day because the black and white tiled floor was gleaming spotlessly in the down lighting. Draco wondered what the elves thought about the two separate flats they had to clean and whether or not they knew the truth about Draco and Astoria's arrangement. It had been three years and the senior Greengrasses didn't seem to suspect anything, so he guessed that even if the elves did know, they weren't of the interfering breed like Kreacher.

Draco hummed to himself as he dropped his recovered brolly in the copper stand just inside the door, finding that he didn't mind at all that Kreacher was of the interfering breed. He was just shrugging out of his coat when his wife's door opened suddenly behind him.

"Finally!" Astoria exclaimed from her doorway. Draco turned to see her fastening a string of pearls around her neck, evidently getting ready for a date. She looked quite stunning this evening with her dark hair loose and waving over her bare shoulders. Her dress was new too, simple and pale and somehow shimmery. He wondered who the lucky lady was, and why, since she was clearly going out she was waiting for him.

"Hello darling," Draco said warily, hoping it was gossip and not some arduous family reason that had delayed her leaving.

"Were you humming?" She asked, disbelievingly, a saucy glint in her eye as she asked leadingly, "what have you been up too then?"

"Shagging blokes in the pubic loo." Draco deadpanned as he hung his coat on the hook next to the door. "You know us queens."

"Depraved, the whole lot of you." she giggled. "I was hoping you'd get home before I left, a letter came for you today." she nodded toward the sideboard where they left notes and post for each other.

"I get letters quite often you know." Draco said, not understanding at all why this was an event of any kind. There was, in fact, a pile of at least five envelopes on the polished wooden surface of the sideboard.

"No," Astoria said, affably impatient, "you had a letter through the letter-box today, it was on the doormat when I got in."

Draco glanced at the stack again, and there, topping of the pile of standard owl-delivered post was a plain white, thin paper envelope. In the corner of the envelope was a square stamp, a stamp that had the black ink of the Royal Postal Service marked across it.

"A postman bought this?" Draco asked, intrigued as he picked it up and flipped it over, what he saw made his still hovering smile broaden.

D. Dursley

42 Lansdowne Rd
"Why are there muggles writing to you Draco?" Astoria asked dramatically, as though it was scandalous to communicate via post-person rather than post-bird. It wasn't like she actually had anything against muggles, but she didn't know any personally, or much about their way of life, it was just a confusing unknown culture to her, as it was to most with her upbringing.

"It's not muggles, it's one, and it's for my freelance contract," Draco grinned, "which is going spectacularly by the way." he said, waving the letter. Even though, as he said it all he could think of was spectacular hand-jobs, instead of important professional progress.

"Good for you," Astoria said sounding genuinely pleased for him, she knew he was trying to find a way out of the Prophet before it collapsed under sententia-duress and tainted everyone employed there. "I've made reservations at that new place off Diagon for dinner on Monday," she continued, "Pansy said it's gorgeous, and we haven't done public dinner for a while."

"No problem," Draco said, as he started up the stairs and tore into the envelope, "Eight?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Always," she replied, "Goodnight sweetheart," she said, retreating back inside her flat once more.

"Night darling," Draco said absently, too focused on Dudley Dursley's reply to be paying much attention.

**Mr Malfoy,**

*I was very surprised to receive your letter. I can meet with you, but I would like it if Harry was also there. He and I haven't spoken in person since 1998 and I want to make sure that this is all legitimate.*

*You or he can reach me during business hours on 161 219 6442 ex 5683 to make arrangements.*

*Sincerely*

*Dudley Dursley*
For Draco, the early morning bustle in Diagon Alley of shop keepers readying their storefronts for business was normally an unpleasant gauntlet of cheerful morning greetings aimed in his direction. The proprietors of Diagon weren’t necessarily pleased to see him, he only drew their attention because he worked for the Prophet. The wizarding community was fickle and easily lead, if the Prophet were to print something bad about their establishment, it would normally mean the end of business for them. But this Wednesday morning instead of ignoring the nods and chirpy hello’s to the best of his ability Draco found himself smiling back, and genuinely meaning his wishes for a good day’s trading. Because this morning, Draco Malfoy was in a nauseatingly upbeat mood.

It wasn’t that Draco was a generally sour person, he did tend to keep his outward temperament rather austere, but that was just because people bothered him less if he looked a bit grouchy. Today however, his inner jauntiness was making a much bigger effort than usual to escape.

This new positive world view was still present when Draco arrived at the Prophet. It even had a little smile creeping onto his face as he headed up the first of two flights of stairs to the first floor – the bullpen and executive offices. When he reached the halfway landing he almost bumped into a hung-over looking intern with un-kempt and un-washed hair, the boy winced when he saw who he’d nearly collided with, but Draco – feeling magnanimous – just asked if he was having a good morning. Draco realised his mistake halfway through the question, when the intern stopped dead and gaped warily, as though Draco was going to hex him.

Determined to get a handle on his mental cheerfulness, and a little worried people would think he was a polyjuice imposter who was nice to interns, Draco forced his face into a scowl and stalked the rest of the way to his cubicle.

Marc breezed through the swinging doors from the staircase not long after Draco had started sorting his in-tray. He made a bee-line straight for him. “Did you really ask Malcolm if he was having a good day?” Marc said, the minute he was close enough.

“Good morning to you too,” Draco replied, sparing the briefest of glances in his colleague’s direction, because he didn’t want an inquisition into his unusual behaviour.

Marc eyed him suspiciously anyway, “He’s quite frightened you know, wasn’t sure if you were flirting with him or preparing to tell him he was fired.”

Draco shrugged, “It was neither, politeness I suppose, if it needs a name.” he looked up at Marc who was still frowning. Draco wondered if he was going to have bizarrely muscular cheeks by the end of this, the strength involved in keeping his expression as Malfoy as possible was quite insane.

Draco wasn’t prepared to examine his sudden uplifting too closely, what appeared on the surface was quite enough; it was very nice to have had his cock touched by a handsome fellow and it would put anyone in a good mood, obviously.
It was the scary little thing lying beneath that he didn’t want to know about. It pointed out it that it was because it was *Harry’s* hand, that the world looked so revoltingly rosy. Or, at least, not the hand of someone who thought that shagging an ex-Death Eater seemed wild and dangerous while tipsy at the club, but in the morning when faced with the boring, honest journos from the Prophet with a faded dark mark and several well repressed personal hang-ups, they couldn’t even be bothered to hide their regret as they pushed him out the door. This was the horribly recurring end to Draco’s sting of disappointing romantic trysts.

But, there had been none of that the previous evening. He and Harry had eaten dinner in the company of a secretly smug Kreacher, and then Harry had said goodbye to him at the front door exactly like normal… though perhaps Harry’s hand didn’t normally linger on Draco’s shoulder as he attempted a casual farewell … and normally Draco didn’t have cramp in his cheek from holding in his smile … and *normally* Harry didn’t stand in the open doorway and watch Draco walk away from the house. But, otherwise…

“Well anyway,” Marc said, “don’t be nice to the interns, it frightens them.”

“Good advice,” Draco said seriously, ignoring the little fizz of pleasure his recollections had caused and fighting the twitch of lips as they tried to smile again.

“Now, since shagging is more important than answering my letter yesterday,” Marc said, perching himself on the edge of Draco’s desk, “I hope you’ve done some serious problem solving in that quick brain of yours.”

Draco nodded, having to battle his smile even harder at the irony of Marc’s constant ribbing coming true,”I have,” he said truthfully. In an effort to distract himself when he arrived home the previous evening Draco had spent a good portion of the night thinking about Marc’s story and the likely problems he would face, “This story, or I suppose really it’s a bit more than just a story if it’s a bad as it seems…” Draco looked at Marc seriously, “we just have no idea who’s involved, and that means the only people you can trust are me, and possibly Cuffe, because whatever his old-boy connections, his paper being the first to discover and print an event like this will solidify his career for the next ten years.”

“I guess that means I can’t trust you either,” Marc said abruptly, “Since you’re after Cuffe’s job.”

“Since when?” asked Draco, thinking Marc must be more concerned than he was letting on to say such things. Editor in Chief *had* been Draco’s goal, although now with Sententia in the way, not so much. But he’d never shared it with anyone, Professor Snape had told him countless times that ambition could be a weakness if people knew your desires.

“Since always.” Marc said, as though it was common knowledge. Draco’s Slytherin-stealth was obviously slipping.

“Fine,” Draco said, “but actually I would be happy with Betty’s position at the moment.” There was no point in telling Marc that he no longer wanted anything to do with the Prophet. That being self-employed and soon, was really the only way he could see himself remaining as a journalist after the inevitable public discovery of Sententia. “And also,” Draco said, “if you’re looking for a reason not to trust me, the most obvious one is because the person at the heart of this, Blishwick, not to mention Travers at Gringotts, are old chums of my Dad, for all you know I’m their inside man.”

Marc seemed to realise his overreaction because he smirked, “There’s a joke there somewhere.”

“Crass,” Draco muttered, “Seriously Marc,” he said, determinedly returning to topic as all the little potential problems – or excuses for them to be arrested by well-connected people who wanted them
quiet – he’d thought of overnight began to pop up in his head again, “You’re going to have to cover your arse something fierce, double if not triple sources, consent forms, in fact, you really should stop seeing Mary –”

“Mavis,” Marc interjected.

“Whatever,” Draco said dismissively, “so that it doesn’t just look like a bloke trying to get back at his girls nasty boss. Get a copy of her contract, I’ll have it looked at by someone to see if her job is in danger.”

“She already knows it is,” Marc said, uncharacteristically solemn for a moment, “she told me where to find the breakdown in Blishwick’s office, he’s not likely to excuse that.”

“Hearsay,” said Draco. “There’s no proof. Just get her contract to me before we leave tonight.”

“What about Iris, at Gringotts?” Marc asked, “There’s no getting around the fact that I, er, finessed, the vault details out of her.” he twiddled the first two fingers of his right hand at Draco.

“Circe, you are foul,” Draco said with a grimace, “unfortunately Iris will probably be one of the first affected by this, she really shouldn’t have said anything. But we don’t need to mention any names yet.”

“So will you distract Betty while I go and talk to Cuffe today?” Marc said, looking in the direction of the editor’s office, “She was like a guard dog yesterday. Every time I’d get near his door she’d pop up and send me off to do something else. I was beginning to wonder if she was hiding in the pot plant.”

“I actually think we should tell her,” Draco said, just as with the information gathering, on a story like this they had to be upfront the whole way. “it’s too late for her to stop the article, so if she’s involved, or knows people that are, or whatever the hell it is that makes her want this to remain unprinted, she’ll hopefully realise they’re caught and there’s no getting out of it.”

Marc nodded to himself, and was contemplative for a minute or two, which was long enough for Draco’s preoccupation with a certain bespectacled shut-in to return.

“Right, we’ll talk to Betty and go from there.” Marc said decisively, pushing himself away from Draco’s desk and heading off towards his own.

Unfortunately, neither Cuffe nor Betty seemed to be at work that day. Both Draco and Marc spent the morning glancing up hurriedly every time the swinging door from the staircase, and the only entrance onto the first floor, groaned on its hinges. It was only ever interns though, usually hidden behind tottering piles of parchment, or once a double layered tray of coffees – Draco was quite impressed that the weedy fellow had managed to make it all the way back from Pointy’s. Draco was even more impressed when one of these coffees was deposited on his desk by the intern he now recognised as Malcom the staircase-scardy-cat.

Cuffe must not be coming in, Draco thought, Cuffe always owled in and sent an intern off for caffeinated bribery if he wasn’t going to be turning up, as though he thought this would make up for him being a slacker and not coming in to the office. Really, it just made a day that was already bright because it was boss-free even better.

Draco sipped his scalding coffee as he returned to his article on the outdated Muggleborn quota law in Ministry departments. After the war it had helped rebuild a trustworthy Ministry to have muggleborns hold the majority in all offices. But now, more highly qualified Pure and Half-bloods
were missing out on positions just to keep the up the quota.

Draco took his half-empty cup with him when he left the bullpen to go up to the post-room, he had to send a request for a statement from the Human Resources Department on discrimination within the Ministry. The post-room was housed on the top floor of the Prophet office building, and was only half the size of the floor below it due to the slope of the roof. It also smelled quite awful because of the constant filtering of owls in and out the wide glassless window at one end of the room.

Draco crossed the feather-strewn floor and picked the nearest waiting owl, a white and speckled grey one, who held out its leg obediently – the Prophet’s owls were very well trained – Draco tied on his short and rolled up message. The owl fluttered away the moment Draco was finished and he watched it flap its way in the direction of the Ministry across town.

Draco turned to leave, blinking a little in the low light of the room compared to bright sky outside. As far from the window as possible was a battered and squashy sofa and several sagging armchairs – this was where the interns lived.

To Draco’s horrified surprise, hidden in the shadowy depths of one of these moth-eaten monstrosities, was Betty Braithwaite. Once Draco’s eye’s adjusted to the dim, and with the blinding square of window-light behind him, he could see that Betty was sitting next to waiw with a sharp-edged copper bob and a bright blue plastic necklace whose oversized beads reminded Draco inappropriately of sex toys. Betty managed to look more very-nearly-slutty than ever in a dreadfully sheer blouse that her modest slip beneath was quite visible through.

“Good morning Draco,” Betty said pleasantly, when his eyes fell on her. Then she tuned to the girl beside her, “Charmaine dear, could you go and check my schedule for me? I think I have a lunch but I can’t remember who it’s with.”

Charmaine – who obviously had chavvy, beer-from-a-can drinking parents – shot to her feet and bobbed her head enthusiastically, “Gotcha Ms Braithwaite.” She trilled with a snap of her gum, before she flounced from their presence.

Betty let out a long suffering sigh and Draco found himself amused, Betty, for all her faults and lack of ability to button a blouse was still eloquently spoken and deported at all times. Sometimes he thought that if she wasn’t so hell-bent on ruining people and creating scandal rather than just delivering the news they would have got along quite well. But unfortunately she was, so they didn’t.

“I didn’t think you were in today,” Draco said, he held up his coffee cup and sloshed the almost-gone contents about, “Cuffe’s not.”

“Barnabas is a busy man,” she said evasively, “I’ve been downstairs, they needed me to sort a few things out, there’s been a muddle up with some invoices, and those bitter Accounts frumps are no help at all.”

“I’d agree with that,” Draco said, remembering his own encounter with the sarcastic magazine reading clerk.

“Since I’ve got you here,” Betty said, gesturing to one of the armchairs, in a clear indication for Draco to sit. He did, cautiously perched on the edge to avoid the graveyard of toast crumbs that had collected in the creases. Betty considered him for a moment, her red lips pursed as she seemed to choose her next words carefully, “Your friend Marc, do you know what he is working on?”

“I do,” said Draco, not willing to beat around the bush any longer he added, “and you do too.”
Betty’s eyes narrowed and she said, “I’m sure I don’t –”

“Betty,” Draco interrupted quickly, “Don’t even try it. I’m not one of your lackey interns, despite my youthfulness, and I’ve been here long enough know how things work.” He said sternly, “You know what Marc’s found out, and you don’t want it printed, why not?”

Betty very obviously deliberated before she said, in something like defeat, “It’s not that I don’t want it printed, I just don’t want it printed yet, I underestimated the pair of you.”

“You did?” Draco said, taken aback at the admission.

“Yes, I’ve known there is something fishy at the Ministry for a long time, but it’s far too suspicious to have the Arts and Lifestyle Director digging about in political finance, it had to come from Mr Belby or yourself.” Draco nearly rolled his eyes at her pretentious emphasising of her title. He was surprised, but at the same time not at all, that she knew what was going on. “I thought it would take longer for you to put it all together.”

“Why does it matter if it’s printed now or next week?” Draco said, even though she hadn’t underestimated them at all, it would be at least three weeks before Marc was able to gather enough credible sources, and figure out the official line for the discovery of facts. Because the one that included him being advised to drug someone, and then fingering the existence of unallocated Gringotts vaults out of lonely banking clerks wasn’t at all suitable.

“Because,” Betty said with a touch of her condescending bite, “there are high profile people involved, and high profile people have the best lawyers – we don’t want there to be any mistakes when this is presented, do we?”

“How did you find out about it, if it’s so unbecoming for the Arts and Lifestyle Director to be investigating in politics?” Draco asked, unable to resist drawling slightly sardonically over her title.

“I’d prefer to keep that to myself.” Betty said obstinately.

“Of course,” Draco said, he hadn’t expected any less, “So how do we proceed then? Because Marc is very close to verifying the last details. And it’s going to be printed the moment he does.”

“I’m sure you can convince Mr Belby to wait for the most valuable moment,” Betty said, “The other reason this needs to be thorough is that Barnabas and Willard Blishwick are cousins. He will not like aspersions cast on his family, the case Mr Belby presents will need to be irrefutable.”

Draco had forgotten that that Cuffe was related to the head of Treasury. But then, they were both old purebloods – they were probably both Draco’s uncles too, in multiple ways, but he hadn’t looked at a family tree in years.

“He’ll still print it,” Draco said, he was sure that the only things that were important to Barnabas Cuffe were his own damn skin, and printing the most cutting and sensational story - no matter the family connection.

The rest of Draco’s morning had been busy, filled with researching examples of preferential treatment of Muggleborn job applicants, coffee, and several trips up to the post-room to procrastinate from writing his boring article. Not to mention lots of odd looks from the other staffers because he was still relatively cheerful. So he hadn’t had much time to dwell on the impending dinner engagement with his (apparently) ex-arch enemies that evening. Draco was determinedly calling it a
Work Meeting in his head, because he was not particularly happy about socialising with Harry’s friends. He did actually have work to do this evening, he wanted Granger to look at Mary, Mavis’s, contract to find out if there was any way for her to keep her job. He also needed ask Granger a few questions about her notes for Harry’s book, so really, he supposed it wasn’t complete denial to call it work.

His busy morning was followed by lunch with Marc at the Leaky – Marc had insisted he needed a pint to help him through his outrage at Betty and her presumption that he would be her story sniffer-dog. Draco needed the pint to help him ignore Marc’s repetitive whining on the subject. Draco was still highly suspicious of Betty’s motives but since she wasn’t actively trying to stop the story yet, and her reasons for delay – to double check everything – where quite legitimate, he was reserving judgement.

Upon returning from their trip to the pub, Marc had gone back to his desk where he was organising his possible contacts for the official line of story discovery. Draco had more owls to send, one being a copy of Dudley Dursley’s reply to Harry, which was something he’d been avoiding.

It wasn’t that Draco had been putting this off because he was wary about making contact, or trying to ‘play it cool’ or anything so ridiculous. Perhaps a little. But he just couldn’t think of anything to write to go with Dursley’s letter, because it was all confused now.

Before Draco was strictly business in all written contact with Harry, but now it seemed too put-on, and he thought it would make him look petty. Draco was not the sort of person to write matey notes in any case, and really had no idea what he would say anyway, so in the end settled on the concise: ‘I received this from your cousin last night, how do you wish to proceed? –Draco.’ In the hope that he would come across as busy rather than aloof.

Harry had owled back in the middle of the afternoon, a thick scroll of notes had been attached – Harry’s recollections from sixth year. He also reminded Draco of the dinner he’d been ambushed into, and said that they would talk to Dudley at Hermione and Ron’s. Embarrassingly, Draco had not understood that the Granger-Weasley’s possessed a muggle telephone, so he and Harry would be able to ring Dudley up, instead he sent a message back asking Harry why he’d made Draco go to all the effort of using muggle post, which he had, as not to frighten Dudley away with magic, if the Muggle was going to be at dinner anyway.

Draco wasn’t sure if Harry was being facetious in his very short reply of: ‘We can talk to him on the telephone, like he asked you to in the letter.’ But he thought it likely. Cheeky git.

Draco arrived at the surprisingly modern, and modest, Granger-Weasley home at six in the evening. Six in the evening, for dinner, with Weasley.

A sentence so at odds with the likelihood of a pleasant evening that it made Draco’s lips twist uncomfortably. Firstly, at twenty three years old, meeting for dinner at six was ridiculous – Draco had needed to leave work early in order to be changed and on time. Second, hell, it was with Weasley, at Weasley’s house with Granger. Draco was armed with two bottles of wine though, a red and a white, with the excuse that he didn’t know what they were eating as to match the drink, but really they were an assurance that he could drink away the awkwardness if necessary.

Draco had just raised his fist to knock on the front door when there was the pop of apparition behind him. He turned quickly, feeling jumpy and like he was on enemy territory, he even half raised his
bottle of pinot gris in defence. But it was just a harried looking Hermione, hurrying towards him up the front path.

The first time Draco had seen Hermione in recent years – when he’d been interviewing Wizengamot secretaries about the personal expenses sitting Wizengamot members were slipping in to their stipend – he had barely recognised her; real life, impeccable suits and an endless supply of Sleek-eazy’s had transformed the dowdy bush-headed priss he remembered from school into something resembling a fashionable woman. Although when she opened her mouth she was still the same strident know-it-all. It was no wonder she was doing so well in the Wizengamot office.

“Draco,” she said, juggling her briefcase and three Waitrose carrier bags, “Sorry I’m late, those duffs in council get bent out of shape so easily, old stick in the muds.” she griped. One of her bags nearly slipped from her grip as she tried to wiggle her wand from her sleeve, Draco took pity and reached out to take some of the shopping, wondering as he did so why she hadn’t shrunk it down. Muggleborns.

“Thanks.” Hermione said gratefully, passing him on the steps to open the front door and lead the way inside.

There was babyish laughter bubbling from somewhere down the long, high-ceilinged hallway as Draco followed her through the front door. He felt a little bit like a house boy, weighed down with wine and shopping, trailing along behind the briskly moving Granger. He passed the sitting room, from where the giggling originated, and stopped when he saw that Harry and Ron were sprawled on the floor. There was a ball of ginger giggles rolling around between them simultaneously trying to reach for Ron’s beer and Harry’s unshod foot which was swathed in a bright red sock.

Both Harry and Ron looked up at the sound of footfalls in the hall, their faces were arranged in similar looks of surprise to see Draco standing in the doorway laden with supermarket bags.

“Hey,” Harry said, surprise fading to a somewhat crooked smile as he looked at Draco for a second longer, “Were we supposed to bring stuff?” He turned to Ron, “I thought we were going down to the chip shop?”

Ron shrugged, “I thought so, but I wouldn’t think Malfoy would bring nappies for dinner anyway.”

Draco looked down and sure enough one of the bags contained a large box of nappies, there was an unsettling image of smiling naked child plastered across the box, surrounded by cartoon bears.

“Draco?” Hermione’s voice called from the depths of the house, “does that white want chilling?”

Harry and Ron were still looking on bemused as Draco headed in the direction of Hermione’s voice, carrying Weasley’s groceries and feeling like he was in some spiteful parallel universe. A universe where it was normal for him to pitch-in and wander un-accompanied through the house of Granger-Weasley. Draco wanted to go back to his normal universe, and thought that he should have brought three bottles of wine. Maybe Harry would have Firewhiskey hidden on his person since he was so fond of it. Perhaps Draco should search him.

“Just pop those on the counter,” Hermione said, as Draco entered the large kitchen at the back of the house. Her suit-trouserer bottom was the only thing visible as she fossicked in the fridge.

Hermione emerged with her hands full of a bottle, a rather frightening suction-cup-attached-to-hose device, and a dish of green mush. She shut the fridge door with a bump of her hip and put the odd collection down on the island counter next to Draco’s shopping bags. Then she looked at Draco and said appreciatively, “Goodness, I’m so sorry. Thanks so much for helping.” She gave him a nervy little smile as she continued, “I realise this must be very odd for you.”
Draco nodded, “It is that.”

“I wanted to speak with you actually, I got some movement on a bill that might make up for some comments I made…” she wrinkled her nose uncomfortably, “ones that my idiot husband shared with you?”

“I really wasn’t that offended,” Draco said truthfully, because he wasn’t sure how much his actions would have differed if Harry had still been with Ginny. And in a way, he was kind of glad that at least one of the three still mistrusted him, it was a bit demoralising to realise he wasn’t viewed as a threat of any kind any more. “But you’re lucky Potter doesn’t know,” he said, “sneaking around is well within the parameters of my character, but him? I think you’d need more than fish and chips to make up for that.”

“Yes, I know,” Hermione said guiltily, “I should never have even thought it. But like I say, I may have found a way to make up for it. I think you’ll be pleased with this bill.”

The kitchen door opened and Harry came in carrying two empty beer bottles, “I thought this was supposed to be an apology dinner,” Harry said, binning the bottles and looking at Hermione expectantly, sounding almost grumpy.

“It is,” she said, as she came around the island covered in shopping bags to talk to him, “I’m so sorry I didn’t take you at your word Harry,” she said seriously, her eyes flicked briefly in Draco’s direction “you’d think after thirteen years I could let you make your own decisions.”

“It’s fine.” Harry said simply, and Draco watched as Harry leaned in and gave Hermione brief hug, Draco found this easy forgiveness so foreign, it was like it was all just a formality to them, like they had never really been cross at each other. “You do realise it’s not a decision though right?” Harry said as he pulled away, and headed to the fridge for fresh beers.

“Yes, sorry, I know,” she said, and Draco realised she had been talking about him and whatever was going on between the two of them, rather than Harry’s newly mentioned orientation. “you still decide who you want to date though,” Hermione said, “I just meant I won’t think poorly of your choices. Unless it’s Smith,” she added as an afterthought. “Little twit.”

Draco snorted, unable to help himself. And they both turned to look at him. “I concur?” he said, a little helplessly.

“Right,” Harry said, with a twitch of an intrigued eyebrow in Draco’s direction, then looking at Hermione once more, he said, “I can’t officially forgive you until I want to die from chip overload.”

Hermione smiled, “Fair enough, I’m sorry I’m late, the old men I work with are bigger drama queens than sixteen year old girls. I couldn’t get away.”

“We could have started later,” Harry said, “but I need to use the phone,” he looked at his watch, “come on,” he said to Draco, “we’d better ring now, he should still be there.”

Hermione looked very confused, “Ring who?” she asked.

“Dudley,” Harry said, “he wrote back to Malfoy yesterday, about the book.”

“Oh,” she was obviously surprised, “that’s good, I didn’t think he would.”

Harry shrugged, “Neither, but he did, so we’ll be in the study.”

“Okay,” Hermione said, “I’m just going to – “ she held up her bizarre suction cup contraption, and
then with a pleased look at the bottle of merlot Draco had brought she said, “so that I can have some of that later.”

Harry grinned, “Lush.”

“I wouldn’t be too cheeky,” she said, “I’ve heard you’ve developed a fondness for afternoon drinking.”

Harry just smiled wider, “Go get milked, this call shouldn’t take long.”

Draco followed Harry from the kitchen still pondering the perplexing exchange, “what on earth was that about?” He asked as Harry opened the door at the end of the hall.

“What?”

“Granger and the plunger,” Draco clarified, as he pushed the door to behind him.

“Plunger?” Harry laughed, “that would be breast pump,” he made himself comfortable in the only chair and pulled the white plastic contraption that Draco recognised as a telephone towards him, “since she’s working she has to express milk for Mrs Weasley to give to Rosie during the day – and to feed her tomorrow since Hermione wants to have a glass of wine tonight.”

“Ergh, stop,” Draco said, waving his hands in an effort to dispel his panic at the idea of Granger and breasts, but he couldn’t resist asking, “like a cow?”

“Pretty much,” said Harry, “Ron says it’s the most disturbing thing he’s ever seen, almost put him off tits for life, almost.”

_Breeders_ Draco shuddered to himself, _foul creatures._

“I’m glad this isn’t weird,” Harry said lightly as he unfolded a scrap of parchment from his pocket and smoothed it on the desk, his eyes flicked up to Draco’s briefly, “you know, after yesterday.”

“I’m not likely to forget Potter,” Draco said, perturbed by Harry’s penchant for saying whatever was on his mind, it made Draco wonder if the Sententia had done permanent damage after all. “I did want to talk to you about that,” Draco began reluctantly, not really wanting to have the conversation about ethics and bad press getting in the way of further ‘yesterdays’, while they were in Weasley’s study.

“We should ring Dudley,” Harry said quickly, clearly not keen on the obvious impending topic, “I did a bit of digging, that phone number is for the Altrincham police station, Constable Dursley works the afternoon shift, eleven til seven,” he picked up the receiver and asked, “Is there anything I shouldn’t say? Since he’s a source or whatever?”

“You said he doesn’t have any contacts in the magical community so no, we don’t have to worry about him leaking this to anyone.” Draco said, quite glad to have been interrupted.

Harry nodded and dialled the number, then he pushed a button at the bottom of the keypad and put the receiver down on the desk. A loud robotic repetition filled the room and Draco managed to pass off his startled jump at the noise as a careless sweeping of hair from his face, or maybe not because Harry was determinedly looking at the floor, and Draco could see the edge of the very wide grin he was trying to hide.

The litany of amplified ringing was broken when a female voice with a thick Manchester accent said “Altrincham community police station, if you have an emergency please hang up and dial 999 immediately. If you know the extension you require please enter it now. For general enquires please
phone back between eight am and six pm, to listen to this mes –“ Harry cut her by off dialling four more digits.

Draco frowned at him, “That’s a bit rude Potter, you could have let her finish.”

Harry’s grin grew wider and he shook his head in silence as the ringing sounded again. It was answered quickly.

“Constable Dursley speaking,” said a deep voice.

Harry’s smile had vanished and he swallowed but didn’t say anything, he was suddenly rather pale and glowering at the plastic telephone.

“Hello?” Dursley said again.

“Good evening, Constable Dursley,” Draco said smoothly, since Harry was still silent and glaring, “My name is Draco Malfoy, you sent me a letter yesterday, with this phone number, I wanted to speak to you about Harry Potter.”

“Oh … y-yes,” Dursley stuttered, the was a deep inhale on the other end on the line and then, sounding much more collected Dursley said, “I’ve had reporters approach me before, I know Harry is sort of famous, I won’t answer any questions unless he tells me that it’s alright.” He paused, and then said ponderingly, “None of the others ever got back to me after I said that.”

“That’s because I hadn’t agreed to talk to them,” Harry said abruptly, apparently having found his voice. “It’s Harry Dudley, Draco is writing my auto-biography, he needs someone to confirm the things I told him about my life before I went to Hogwarts.”

“That’s what the letter said,” Dursley replied, “You sound like Harry but, Christ, I haven’t talked to him since he came to the safe house, when it was okay for us to go back to normal life,” he blew out a breath as if considering his options be for he continued, “To be frank, there’s no way I’m going to run the risk of this being a set up. Harry’s got a cracking temper, I’m not willing to get myself in the way of that. Not with all the hocus pocus nonsense, so I’ll need to see you in person.”

“Dudley,” Harry huffed, “it is me, you can answer anything he asks you, it’s fine.”

“Nope,” Dursley said stubbornly, “if I learned anything in that place, it’s don’t run afoul of your lot – prone to over reactions if I remember correctly.”

‘Your lot?’ Draco mouthed but Harry just rolled his eyes and said, “Okay then Dudley, when can you meet us?”

“R-really?” Dursley stuttered once more, apparently not pleased that his request had been met, “Well … you can come to me right? Since you can just pop out of thin air whenever you want?” he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before he said, “I have my break at three every day this week and next, what day suits you?”

Harry looked at Draco, “Since I do nothing….,” he said.

“Friday.” said Draco, he raised his voice and spoke to the telephone, “We’ll see you on Friday at three.”

“I’ll meet you at the pub down from the station, The Pig and Whistle.” Harry burst out laughing and Dudley said, “Yeah, yeah, but they do a brilliant shepherd’s pie.”
“Righto,” said Harry, still snickering. Draco really didn’t see what was so funny, *The Pig and Whistle* was no odder name than the ones held by wizarding pubs. And as far as swine were concerned a pig with a whistle was far more appealing image than the Hogshead with its decapitated boar emblem.

Harry hung up the phone and spun in his chair to face Draco, “That will be an interesting meeting,” he said.

“Hopefully.” Draco agreed. He was wondering why he hadn’t booked Dudley for tomorrow afternoon, when he would be expected to be away from work anyway because it was his usual scheduled Potter-time. Well, he reasoned, they were due to start sixth year tomorrow, it was best to get that over and done with. There was also a slim possibility that it might have been because he didn’t really want to give up his perfectly acceptable excuse to be alone with Harry. Very slim, minute even.

“So what were you going to say before?” Harry asked, he was fidgeting with the curly telephone cord and looking rather uncertain.

Draco didn’t know what he’d been going to say, acknowledgment of their odd relationship he supposed. Harry’s expression made him even more confused and hesitant to say what he really thought – namely ‘let’s just shag our brains out and keep it a secret,’ because he knew that would be a bad idea, both saying and doing it.

There were only three weeks until he had to have his completed draft of Harry’s biography to the editor at the printers, so being distracted would not be ideal. But then he thought, it was likely that after they had the conversation about sixth year, and seventh for that matter, the option of any kind of anything might be taken away completely.

Thankfully before Draco had to make a decision the bright ginger head of Ron Weasley poked around the door frame. “Are you finished?” Ron asked, “Let’s get going, I’m bloody starving.”

Draco wondered if being glad to see Weasley was just another part of this weird parallel world, because he most certainly was. Just as he was glad to have any excuse to delay the moment he had to tell Harry that despite it being immensely fun, if he wanted his book to serve the purpose it was meant to – to dispel all speculation on his private life – then creating a whole new swathe of rumours in the process sort of defeated the point.
Chapter 14

Fish and chips eaten straight from the newsprint wrappings, while comfortable lounging around on the sitting room floor was a bit of a tradition at Ron and Hermione's, especially when there had been a disagreement.

There was something about the communal paper platter, beating each other to the crispiest half-chip, and the sting of salt on an over vinegared tongue that was too personal to be shared with strangers, it was a family thing in Harry's mind.

But oddly, the thing that was making both him and Ron snicker, was the furthest thing from family ever. It was Draco Malfoy sitting cross-legged on the carpet looking horrified and yet enthralled, as the three of them made little piles of mayonnaise and ketchup on the edge of the paper to drag their chips though, and when Ron produced a lemon he'd nicked from Mrs Next-doors over hanging tree and squeezed it over the golden battered fish, Draco's expression was possibly the funniest thing Harry had seen in his life.

"I knew it!" Draco snapped, as Harry laughed, "You're having me on. No one eats on the floor!"

Ron and Hermione joined in laughing as Draco glared around at them all, "We're not," Ron said, "honestly Malfoy, we don't eat on the floor any other time. It's just easier, no mess, no dishes, it's nice for those of us that don't have a house elf."

"Potter is the only one here who keeps an elf," Draco said grudgingly.

Harry caught his eye and said as seriously as he could manage, "The food's fine Draco, just try it."

To Harry's great surprise after holding his gaze for a moment longer Draco picked up a chip and ran it through Harry's ketchup, then he scowled at it for a second before he popped it in his mouth.

"What?" Draco said irritably, after he swallowed, as they were all still staring at him, "it's not like I haven't had chips before, they serve them at Hogwarts. It's the altitude of our meal that I have a problem with."

"Draco," Hermione said suddenly, obviously trying to stop herself from laughing and distract Draco from his recoiling inner posh-twat in one fell work-related swoop, "ever since Harry was poisoned I've been working on an amendment to get Sententia's current potion-class raised to a C, it would mean that its' being administered by anyone other than qualified medi-staff would be illegal."

"Really?" Draco said, accepting the change of topic gratefully as Harry and Ron had a miniature battle over the biggest piece of fish. "That's … that will make quite a difference to the staff at the Prophet."

"Yes," Hermione said, "and stop situations like Harry's from happening again. I finally got enough support in council today. It's attached to the standard medicinal classifications that are voted on every year. The vote is next month."

"And what then?" Harry asked, rubbing his hand where Ron had hit him with the vinegar bottle, he should have known better than to fight a Weasley for food. "What will happen to anyone caught using it?" he said, thinking it was just like Hermione to find a completely unexpected way to get Draco on her side.
"Just a fine at this stage," she said, "a hefty one though, and it's recorded as a criminal offence. The only thing is, to get them to agree I had to give examples of misuse, I didn't give names obviously but Healer Mallog gave a statement about your incident." She said, looking at Harry, "I hope that's okay, no one knows it's about you and Ginny."

"Yeah no problem," Harry assured her, he was glad no other girls would get it in their heads that drugging their emotionally closed off boyfriends was a good idea.

"What about the use that's been going on at the Prophet?" Draco asked slightly defensive, he looked rather reticent, but Harry couldn't figure out why.

Hermione nodded, "I didn't want too, but-"

"Its fine," Draco said, with grim acceptance, "I've been waiting for weeks for the pubic to find out. This is marginally better than some poisoned source talking to Xeno." He broke up a bit of fish with his fingers as he spoke, forgetting to be repelled by floor food and finger utensils now that he was distracted, he even pinched Ron's stolen lemon as he said, "I guess I'm going to have to write about the vote, just in case someone else decides it's newsworthy, or worst case - one of the freelancers that use Sententia all the time come out in opposition to the bill, or something else insane."

"But," Harry said, "Won't the examples be made public? You have to report on your colleagues, that doesn't seem right."

Draco's upper lip curled in disdain, "Good grief Potter, 'that doesn't seem right?' he almost sounded like the sneering school boy he'd been. "The bloodhounds who have been on your tail ever since you saved us all and dared to try and live a normal life?"

Ron was nodding along in support as Draco spoke, a premise Harry found very disconcerting even in theory, let alone in practice.

"I'd have to agree with Malfoy on that," Ron said, after he swallowed his mouthful, "they deserve whatever they get." Draco tipped his head and flourished a chip in thanks to Ron.

"Weird," Harry muttered unable to restrain himself at the sight of Draco and Ron being all jokey together.

"Granger," Draco said, gracing Harry with a perfunctory placating knee pat, "while we're on the subject of the Ministry and journalists, my friend Marcus Belby has discovered something rather troubling going on in the Treasury Office."

"Unless it's illegal the Wizengamot aren't the department to talk to," Hermione said, "we don't deal with internal grievances."

"It's most definitely illegal," Draco said, "but I'm not asking you this in your official capacity."

"Did he get proof then?" Harry interrupted, remembering Belby's letter yesterday afternoon.

Draco nodded, "Yes, well, the proof is that it's happening – it's all written down, only no one else has noticed yet. Marc just needs to find a way that he could have noticed without people breaking their employee regulations, I talked to Betty she just wants to make sure we have everything covered before we print," he shrugged, "one dodgy source and the whole thing could look fabricated and unfortunately people like Blishwick have very good lawyers, who find holes in everything."

"Yeah, us," Hermione said, worriedly, "What's going on? Should you even be telling me?"
"Probably not," Draco admitted, "but I doubt Blishwick will have much of defence, so you lot will just be negotiating sentence."

"There's always a defence," Hermione said primly.

"Really?" Asked Draco, almost disparaging, "There is gold being moved to an un-named Ministry vault, completely in plain sight by using a false allocation on the budget. It's been happening since the beginning of this year. Blishwick has been signing it off on the budget, and one of the wizards that handle the Ministry gold at Gringotts is helping at the banking end."

Both Ron and Hermione looked horrified. "Old Blishwick always kept questionable company," said Ron, "I remember Dad complaining about it."

"Yes," Draco said, "company like my father. He's still a bigot as far as I know, but wealthy, so I'm not sure why he's doing this, but he definitely is."

Hermione's face was a picture of concern, obviously thinking hard, "Where does the gold go after it's put into the wrong vault?" she asked.

"I don't know that it goes anywhere." Draco said.

"So then what's the crime?" Hermione asked, nonplussed, "Ministry gold in the wrong Ministry vault isn't stolen gold, it's misplaced gold."

"Why are you defending him?" Draco shot at her suspiciously.

"I'm not, I'm just saying that it sounds like it could be easily brushed away as a clerical error." Hermione said, "If the gold moves from the wrong vault to somewhere else, _then_ you might have a case."

Draco looked annoyed and his voice was cool as he said, "I actually just wanted you to have a look at a contract for me, Blishwick's secretary helped Marc find the budget breakdown in Blishwick's office – she's sure she's going to lose her job."

"Well, if it turns out that there is criminal activity going on," Hermione allowed, "I doubt the inquiry team will care much about her, unless she's assisting the law breakers. Most secretaries are employees of the Ministry itself not the specific office, unless they're specialised."

"She's only new." Draco said.

"Then she'll definitely be on the secretary payroll, no need for her to worry." Hermione said confidently, "Her part shouldn't have to be mentioned at all anyway – the breakdown will have been archived by now, someone in the Wizengamot – who all have passes to the archive hall – may have tipped him off..." Hermione smiled, a rare mischievous smile that reminded Harry of Hogwarts, "I think I remember doing that..."

"Won't you get in trouble?" Ron asked, looking worried, but that could have been because the food was dwindling.

"Our government is supposed to be open Ron," Hermione said stiffly, "the old farts will frown on it, but honestly, they all hate me anyway so let them, and that's if Marc's sources are even questioned, if the proof is there when the inquiry team look, _how_ Marc found out really isn't their highest priority."

"Thank you Granger," Draco said, and Harry thought he sounded very grateful, "Marc will be relieved. He and Mary are somewhat of an item."
"I thought Blishwick's secretary was Mavis?" Harry said, confused, "that's what he said in the letter."

"Mavis then," Draco said brushing off his error happily.

Harry had to force himself to look away, Draco's pleased expression at the news that one of his problems was solved, made Harry want to clamber over their newspaper dinner and pounce on him. He didn't think Ron or Hermione would be too chuffed with that, so he concentrated on foraging for crispy little forgotten chips as the others began a conversation on the system of internal inquiry at the Ministry.

Ever since yesterday Harry had been unable to close his eyes without seeing the memory of Draco stretched out next to him, his fingers digging into the sofa cushion and his hips twitching as Harry worked his cock. It was much less frightening than Harry thought to have his newly recognised sexuality confirmed so thoroughly. All he wanted to do was check again and again that he still felt the same way. With Draco's assistance of course.

Harry looked out the front bay-windows as Draco and Hermione talked and Ron ate, Harry had been surprised when he'd arrived in the late afternoon that there was a new boundary fence between the front lawn and the footpath, they used to have a hedge. Harry had much preferred its wild tangles to the abrupt straight lines of the six foot fence.

"How come the fence?" Harry asked Ron when he sat back away from the paper, looking full and satisfied.

"Good isn't it?" Ron said, "George and I built it. With nails and everything, Dad came to help too," he chuckled to himself as he said; "Muggle carpentry comes a close second to plugs in his book. It was much harder than you'd think though, banging bits of wood together."

"I'll bet," Harry said, impressed, and liking the stark fence a little more knowing the effort that had gone into it. "What brought that on?"

"The hedge wasn't dense enough for the new wards to adhere to." Ron said offhandedly, looking away to Draco and Hermione, Draco had pulled out his notebook, he'd told Harry he had some questions for Hermione. Harry thought that it was useful for Draco to have a reason for conversation with both Ron and Hermione. Harry had imagined what it would be like to go and have dinner with Pansy Parkinson, or Goyle. Uncomfortable and frightening was his verdict – Draco's being here proved that bravery wasn't exclusive to ex-Gryffindors.

"New wards?" Harry repeated concerned, since the war home security had been a huge market, but most of the new protective enchantments needed something solid as a base. Hermione and Ron had always just used the trusty Muggle repelling and anti-detection charms that had served them so well during the last year of the war. "Did something go wrong with the old ones?"

"No, just upgraded them," Ron said peering out the window as if he could see the shimmer of concealment charm that kept them safe, "We've never really needed them to be that strong before."

"Lucky you," Harry said, he still had Grimmauld place under a Fidelius Charm, but neither the press nor the public had bothered Ron and Hermione as much as him since the war.

"Yeah well, ever since you locked yourself away like a loony old fruit, we've had a few more crazies hanging about." Harry frowned and Ron clarified, "Lots of people seemed to think you were hiding with us."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling guilty, "I didn't know, I'm sorry."
"No problem mate," Ron said, "anyway, built the new fence and that meant we could cast stronger privacy spells on it, so it's all good."

They were interrupted by a cackling laugh from Hermione, Harry looked over to see her and Draco still sitting on the floor, Hermione was a little pink in the face from laughing at Draco who was saying in a tone of amused incredulity, "and then the useless pillock tried to retract the statement saying he'd had too much brandy!"

"He is the worst of the lot!" Hermione said through her laughter, "I forgot that you have to deal with the horrible old duffers too. I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks they're idiots."

"Not the only one who knows they're idiots." Draco corrected as Hermione continued to laugh.

"I know you think me and Malfoy talking is weird," Ron said quietly after a moment, his horrified gaze fixed on the pair, "but that is just wrong."

It was nearly ten in the evening when Draco and Harry left Ron and Hermione's. Baby Rose had woken scratchy and squally twenty minutes before, and the flurry of bottle making and distraction techniques that followed – Ron jigging up and down the hall singing a silly tune about cauldrons made of chocolate –Harry decided that it was time to go.

"What are you doing now?" Harry asked as they reached the edge of the front walk, the fence and magical privacy hiding them from all passing eyes.

Draco sighed heavily, his nose crinkling in distaste, "Going home to read my way through one of the most shameful years of my life – from the point of view of my arch-enemy."

"Sounds fun," Harry said, his pulse quickened as steeled himself and suggested nervously, "Want to come and read at mine?" He was bemused by how casual his voice sounded; he'd expected it to come out in a high pitched squeak. Maybe he was finally getting better at this dating nonsense.

Draco shook his head, but he was smiling, "Sorry Potter, I think we've spent enough non-work time together today."

They looked at each other for a moment, and Harry stretched out a hand to clap Draco's shoulder in a friendly farewell, but his fingers seemed to stick and instead of good-bye he asked quietly, "Do you regret yesterday?" "maybe not better at it after all."

"No," Draco said at once, "I do wish things were a little less complicated though," he took hold of Harry's hand where it still rested on his shoulder and removed it, but he held onto Harry's fingers tightly, "I need to work on getting your book to the editors," he paused and looked a bit daunted for a second, "and figure out a way to break the news about Sententia without it becoming a big scandal."

"No worries," Harry said, the dreaded high-pitched squeak finally making an appearance. Draco stepped in closer, releasing his hand so that his fingers could run the length of Harry's arm. Harry cleared his throat, thinking it was ridiculous to be turned on by having his arm touched through his jacket.

"I don't really know what the rules are here." He said, meeting Draco's eyes and finding that ridiculous or not, he was most definitely turned on, although he felt slightly vindicated as he watched Draco moisten his bottom lip, his light eyes darting between Harry's own and his mouth.

"I don't know that there are any," Draco said, Harry decided it was quite unfair that Draco's voice
just seemed to get a little husky when he was nervous, "I'm quite keen for a repeat of yesterday, just not now, because the work has to come first or I may end up destitute and have to take up as a rent boy like Marc suggested." Harry thought that he wouldn't mind continuing to pay Draco if it meant more afternoon delight. He smiled to himself.

"You filthy bugger!" Draco said with a broken half-laugh and a knowing smirk. Apparently he could read minds. Or maybe just vacant expressions, "A kiss goodnight wouldn't go a miss." he said quietly and Harry wondered how Draco'd managed to crowd him up against Ron's Muggle-built fence without Harry noticing.

Draco didn't wait for permission, his lips claimed Harry's suddenly and much more firmly than the first time they had snogged on the footpath. Harry felt a little trapped with the high fence behind him and the slightly taller Draco practically pinning him to the wood. But as he'd been thinking of nothing else for most of the day being trapped while being kissed was definitely better than not being kissed.

Kissing someone taller than himself was a strange experience, he had to rise onto the balls of his feet a little to make the angle right. Harry pulled Draco closer with one hand on his hip and the other clutching his collar. He was just beginning to sink into a world that comprised only of insistent lips, heavily lidded grey eyes and a rough jaw when there was a clatter from behind Draco, and Ron's voice called, "The sprinklers come on at ten!"

Harry looked over Draco's shoulder, he could see Ron leaning out one of the upstairs windows, squinting into the dark yard. Harry wasn't sure if Ron could even see them, or just knew they hadn't left yet because the wards would tell him.

"Come on." he said to Draco, tugging his arm as he pushed away from the fence, "Night Ron!" Harry called before they passed through the haze of magic and closed the gate behind them.

"Night Potter," Draco said, fleetingly pressing their lips together once more, and then he released Harry's hand and turned on the spot, vanishing into nothing.

Despite feeling slightly vexed by Draco's sudden disappearance, Harry allowed himself an indulgent grin now that he was alone, and then copied Draco, turning into the suffocating pressure of apparition.
Chapter 15

Dear Mr Malfoy,

Thank you for your request to confirm the events of my time in Scotland in 1995. I would be very pleased to assist Harry Potter in this venture. I am training seven days a week during the season, and playing twice, both for Bulgaria and the Løftehøjde. For these reasons I will need to conduct the interview in Copenhagen where I am based.

Our current practice schedule has Friday afternoon's as personal time; if it is convenient to you I would prefer to meet at that time.

Sincerely,

Viktor Krum.

Draco re-read the letter for at least the fifth time since it had arrived that morning. Finally, he thought, the last person he needed to speak to was confirmed. Other than Zacharias Smith, but Draco had caved into taking the easy way out where he was concerned. He'd sent a written account to Smith that was a combination of Hermione and Harry's version of events concerning Dumbledore's Army, asking him to comment on it. Draco could probably have done this with most of the sources for Harry's book, but he always preferred talking to people face to face – excepting people that, as previously mentioned, had thumped him in the plums.

Draco and Marc were sitting side by side in a booth at the back of the Pointed Quill, having decided that they needed a personal day – which translated to a personal long lunch, because they couldn't just miss a whole day of work when there were Ministry scoundrels to expose. The long lunch was turning out to be just what they needed. It was the monthly payday for the Prophet staff, and payday meant that the very easy-on-the-eye Printers' Devils from the Press Hall downstairs were all splashing out on a bought lunch. As an added bonus, it was a strangely sunny September noon, so most of the burly Devils only had vests on under their coveralls.

Lovely, Draco thought happily; he felt over-tired, and slightly wrung out after the evening of Gryffindor socialising, which had been followed by the most upsetting bed-time read he'd ever had. So a bit of frivolous eye-candy observation was just what he needed.

"Is that a love letter?" Marc asked, leaning over, trying to get a look at the message from Krum.

"No," Draco said, refolding the letter smugly. A chance to talk to Viktor Krum was something he'd hoped for since Harry first hired him. Krum was retiring after a decade of professional Quidditch; he was the highest ranked Seeker on record, and famously private and press-shy. An interview with him would definitely help Draco's reputation weather the brewing Sententia storm.

"You keep smiling at it as though it's a promise of endless blowjobs for life," Marc said, pinching the little chocolate covered coffee bean from Draco's saucer. "I assumed it was from your boyfriend."

"It's for my other work," he said. Draco really wanted to share his Krum excitement with someone. Harry wouldn't get what a big deal it really was for Draco, surely it wouldn't hurt to tell Marc a little bit. "The job," Draco said carefully and Marc's bright eyes lit up, "it's a biography, and I've just landed an interview with Viktor Krum as part of it."
Marc's eyebrows shot up so quickly they got lost behind the dark curls that swept artfully across his forehead. "And he wrote to you personally? Hell, you have all the luck; he never talks to the press."

"He's an old friend of my hirer," Draco said. "The confidentiality agreements mean he can't talk to his press agent about it."

"Who's your hirer?"

"Didn't I just say confidentiality agreement?" Draco said, "You know I can't tell you; it's how these things work. I'll get you a signed copy when we're done."

"Tease," Marc grouched, but he left it at that; for all his joking around he didn't actually expect Draco to tell him. "Oh look – he's new," Marc said, nodding to an exceptionally fit Devil with sandy hair caught in a short ponytail at his nape. Marc's head was tilted to the side as he appreciated the young man. "I swear those old biddies in accounts hire on looks alone," he muttered. "Dirty minded trollops."

"I wonder what Mavis would think of this," Draco said under his breath, for some reason, to Draco it seemed more boorish of Marc to be objectifying men while dating a woman than it was in Draco's case… but then, Draco didn't really have a case because he wasn't dating Potter to begin with. It concerned him that he needed to keep reminding himself of this.

"Mavie would think he was lovely," Marc said confidently, reluctantly turning to look at Draco. "I thought she'd hit the roof when Will at Flourish and Blotts suggested a repeat round when we were in there last Sunday, he didn't realise she was with me, but instead she wanted me to tell her all about it when we got back to her place." A loutish grin spread over his face as he finished fondly, "Randy little minx."

"Please don't breed with her," Draco said emphatically. "Britain can only handle so many horny Belbys." Draco thought that perhaps Marc had met his match, since after a rather prudish eight dates, Miss Mavis had thrown her knickers aside and proved herself to be – in Marc's ever-vulgar terminology – a wanton cock-fiend.

Marc just laughed. "Thanks for finding out about the secretary employment system, by the way," he said after a moment. "That's a huge relief."

"No problem," said Draco; he hadn't mentioned Hermione and her plan of tipping Marc off yet, because he was currently still working on Gringotts and figuring out the Iris situation. He also thought that Marc might be rather suspicious about Draco's ability to get Hermione Granger to lie for him.

Draco's soup-bowl-sized coffee was half-finished when he noticed Betty and Cuffe standing in the food queue. It gave him an uneasy feeling … if she was so keen to bring down Cuffe's cousin and keep all the information from him until it was too late, why was she whispering in his ear? Draco didn't understand her desire to keep it from Cuffe; he was sure the man would sell out his own brother for a story of governmental embezzlement.

Even her reasonably legitimate excuse of wanting to make sure of the facts now had Draco to-ing and fro-ing on her real motive, because since when did Betty care about facts? She and Skeeter read from the same bible; write whatever sells. Draco recognised that this was a lucrative business model, and that it had its place in periodicals like Witch Weekly or Teen Sorceress but not a serious, supposedly factual newspaper.

Betty and Cuffe left without even a glance in his direction. Draco noticed Marc watching as Betty let
the door swing closed behind her, right in the faces of two accounts clerks; rude but possibly deserved, Draco thought.

"Are you sure we can trust her?" Marc asked.

"Not at all," Draco sighed, "but you know we have to do everything properly. Fortunately the story isn't going anywhere; even if Blishwick or the Gringotts helper is tipped off and stop, the damage has been done, their crime is recorded in Ministry documents and you'll be able to report on that no matter what."

"That's true," Marc said, as he swiped his finger around the inside lip of his cup to collect the chocolaty foam left by his coffee. He sucked the foam off his finger and then asked, "So shagging as usual this afternoon, is it? Leaving me to mope alone, surrounded by gum-snapping children with fashionable hair?"

Draco huffed in exasperation, he'd hoped that now Marc knew what he was up to the afternoons he was away – bio-writing, not hand-job getting – that the sex jokes would cease, but alas. "Yes," Draco deadpanned, "I'm off to get some cock, whoopee."

Marc snorted. "Cock should never be celebrated with a term like whoopee, it's just not right."

Draco shrugged and downed the last of his pool of coffee. "It seemed to fit with my faux cheer. I'm off tomorrow afternoon too," he said as he prepared to leave, "but I'll see you in the morning."

"All good," said Marc, his gaze falling happily on the still-lunching Devils.

Draco left him there having his little perve-fest. It wasn't a case of eagerness that had Draco wanting to get to Grimmauld Place; he didn't want to ask questions about Harry's point of view on some of the worst things Draco had ever done. It was more a case of 'ripping off the band-aid', as Muggles would say.

The summer of Nineteen Ninety-six was a strange time in Draco's life: his father had been in prison, the Dark Lord had been visiting their home regularly, and his unhinged Aunt Bella had been living in the Manor's guest wing. But oddly, Draco hadn't been unhappy. Wary of the Dark Lord, definitely; worried about his mother who had become more reclusive since Lucius' arrest, certainly; but Draco had been sure the Dark Lord would win this war he had begun, so it was just a matter of persevering until it was over and then the Malfoys would be firmly set on the winning team. Even if Lucius had bungled the capture of the prophecy, at least now he was serving his time - something he hadn't done the first time around.

Draco expected to bear the shame of his father's failure in the Department of Mysteries. His mother had warned him, even going so far as suggesting that he flee to France where Narcissa had close friends who would look after him, rather than stay in England and be punished for being his father's son.

But punishment hadn't been the case at all, not in the beginning.

The Dark Lord had requested Draco's presence one sunny July afternoon. There had been tea from his mother's favourite tea service, and then, most politely, the Dark Lord had asked Draco for a favour. Because he, Draco, had access to something the Dark Lord did not. And surely Draco would do all he could to help the cause, especially when it was only he that could do it, the Dark Lord said. Draco was the only one with the intelligence and cunning it would take, the Dark Lord relied on him. Draco had found himself vaunted, though not the favourite by any means; that position had
been firmly held by Yaxley, in the wake of Bellatrix and Lucius' errors.

Now that Draco he looked back on it, he had been almost like a pet – a young, non-threatening, easily-manipulated fool.

When the Dark Lord had promised to keep his mother safe, and to reward Draco and his father when he completed this one small favour, Draco had agreed. He hadn't realised this meant taking the mark, but it did, and then it was too late. Draco was lumped with a task that even Riddle himself couldn't complete; his nerves had set in only weeks into the start of term, what had seemed like a difficult but worthwhile task was suddenly daunting.

In a moment of weakness he'd contacted Rosmerta, instructing her to pass on the carefully wrapped package she had been holding since the summer. It was a back-up plan Draco hadn't really thought through. Having an innocent carry the necklace into the castle seemed like a good idea, except that the Gryffindor chaser had been cursed and then Professor Snape was suddenly asking leading questions.

When Draco went home for Christmas everything had changed. His mother was kept prisoner, and his Aunt Bellatrix followed his every move. He spent almost the whole two weeks with Bellatrix, who taught him Occlumency. It was a skill he wanted to learn, but the process was horrible. Draco'd never expected having Bellatrix in his head would be a pleasant experience, but it was even worse that he could have imagined. His aunt ridiculed him constantly for all the times Harry Potter had shamed him, because for some reason, those painful memories were the ones that came rushing to the forefront when she performed Legilimency.

But harder to deal with was her cruel whispered taunting. Her harsh and spiteful needling about how he wasn't a real man, how his mother would disown him if she knew, how Draco might as well be a Mudblood for having such repulsive thoughts about men.

Draco felt ashamed and belittled, and when they returned to school, he began to panic that his brilliant plan to fix the vanishing cabinet wasn't nearly as straightforward as he had hoped…

By the time Draco had been shown inside Number Twelve on Thursday afternoon, he was feeling rather ill. He nodded stiffly to Kreacher, who seemed pleased to see him as always. Then he was shown upstairs to the drawing room and took a seat on what was becoming his customary sofa.

Harry came hurrying into the room not long after Draco had sat down. He was wearing the most horrendous hand-knitted jumper Draco had ever seen, and though the green wool suited him it didn't make up for the gaucheness of a grown man in a jumper covered in a pattern of tiny broomsticks and snitches.

"Sorry," Harry said distractedly, running a hand through his hopeless hair, and coming to sit in the armchair next to Draco's sofa, "I was just talking to Robards, he's such a chatty bugger."

"Are you going back to work?" Draco asked, surprised that he was able to sound so calm with a head full of disturbia, but he was very glad for a non sixth-year topic of conversation.

"It's not that easy, unfortunately," Harry said; he was holding a piece of parchment and glanced down at it as he spoke. "Employed Aurors have to pass skills assessments every three months. I've been sitting on my arse for nearly four, Robards says I'll have to spend eight weeks in a refresher course."

"Even famous Harry Potter?" Draco asked, without really thinking, because he really was curious, he'd assumed Harry would just be able to come and go as he pleased, the press may be up and down
on their love of Harry, but the Ministry never wavered. He was their darling.

Harry looked embarrassed. "You sound just like Robards," he muttered. "Makes me wonder if it's worth it, two months of trivial shit, just so I'll be cleared to do more trivial shit at my desk."

"So then do something else," Draco said. Harry might not get special treatment, but he'd probably still get any job he wanted. Draco found it hard to be very sympathetic.

"Well, I have been thinking about helping out George," Harry said.

"Weasley?" Draco asked in horror. "Harry Potter working in a shop?" he said scornfully. "The papers will have a field day."

Harry just shrugged. "God knows then. Surely when it gets out that I was fooling around with the ex-Death Eater who wrote my book, my selling magic tricks won't be such a big deal."

"Gets out?" Draco repeated, "That wouldn't do you any good," he added cautiously. Draco wanted to say, 'Was? As in past tense? You see an end date to this thing already?' But of course he couldn't, because he was supposed to want that too, he was supposed to be telling Harry that he had a grand time the last time they were in this room together, but it couldn't continue if Harry wanted a credible book to convince the public he was old hat.

"I know it wouldn't be good," Harry said, "and only Ron and Hermione know, and they won't tell a soul, but eventually someone will find out that I don't just like girls, and that I spent my 'exile', as the trash rags are calling it, all alone with a gay man having deep and meaningful conversations about my life. There will be rumours, if not outright accusations."

Draco was impressed to see such an insightful and accurate prediction of press behaviour from Harry; he normally seemed to be blindsided by it all. "As long as you don't start dancing on tables at the Broomstick and Keeper, I think the public will take a bit of convincing," Draco said, "you're their macho saviour after all, surely Potter wouldn't get on his knees for a bit of cock, they'll say."

Harry snorted, "Shows what they know."

Draco's mouth went dry as he was assaulted by the image of Harry kneeling in front of him, that black birds nest would be excellent for winding his fingers in, controlling the pace… Draco sucked in a breath and refocused himself enough to say wryly, "Yes, well, when have the Wizarding community ever been known for thinking outside the box?"

"True," Harry said. "It's not like I want anyone to know anyway, that would be terrible."

"Understandable," Draco said, a little resentfully. He was annoyed at himself for feeling a bit hurt; of course Harry wouldn't want anyone knowing he was messing around with a Death Eater. And Draco definitely didn't fancy being a subject for the press rather than subjector; but still, knowing someone was ashamed of you was still a bit shit.

Harry was looking at him oddly as Draco ran over these things in his mind. "You dick," Harry said, "not because I'm embarrassed or whatever, because of the book, and because I remember how Ginny couldn't do anything in those first years after the war without it being speculated on, what do you think they'll run about you?"

"That I turned you gay and chased off your sweetheart, probably," Draco said immediately.

Harry looked surprised at the quick reply, "Have you been thinking about it? People… er, knowing about this?"
"I've been thinking about how to stop people from knowing," Draco said, "Besides, it's not like we're dating, so there's technically nothing for them to know."

"I guess," Harry said, and then his forehead creased, the look at odds with his forced nonchalant tone as he asked, "So, are you seeing other people then?"

Draco wanted to smile. Harry really was awful at this, it was likely a little twisted of him but Draco loved that he was one setting the parameters; that Harry, so sure and confident in every other aspect of his personality, was really quite terrible at romance. "I wouldn't have time to see anyone else," Draco said. "I literally, eat, work and sleep."

"Oh," Harry said, a smile appeared and then faded quickly as he took in the meaning of Draco's words. "So I'm just part of your work?" Harry muttered rather ungraciously.

"You are the work," Draco said, thinking that useless at romance or not, Harry didn't appreciate at all that Draco was working two very busy jobs at the moment. "The deadline is only three weeks away," Draco reminded Harry. "I spend more time thinking about your life than mine at the moment. We still have the last two years of school to cover and then everything you've done since then – super-Auror – so no, I don't have time for dates, because when I get home from the paper I have to sit up writing your life story." Draco drew a shaky breath but now that he'd started he was struggling to stop talking. "I spend an ungodly amount of time thinking about you for this book and all the while I'm trying very hard not to think about you, because I was employed for the sole reason that I don't like you, and will write an unbiased account." Draco managed to stop his rant with effort. Why did this always happen? Perhaps his ongoing contact with Harry and his sidekicks was causing an upswing in Gryffindor-esque emotional explosions. Inconvenient.

"You weren't employed because you hate me," Harry said, in surprise. "I wanted you because your articles and interviews are good. That was all that mattered to me."

"Oh," Draco said, feeling foolish, and a bit pleased. "I still think it would be best to keep things as decorous as possible until the work is complete." Harry looked at him in confusion. "For goodness' sake," Draco said impatiently. He channelled Marc and clarified as bluntly as possible: "Cocks in trousers at all times."

Harry snorted in surprise. "Gotcha," he said, chuckling to himself. Draco pulled out his notebook, determinedly not joining in Harry's ongoing snickering, "I haven't got too many questions," he said. "The main thing that's worrying me is your meetings with Dumbledore, we have to include them because people knew you were meeting him; he had messages delivered to you by lots of different students, so if we leave it out, it leaves a gap, and gaps are where the trouble starts in your life."

"Right," Harry said, recovered and focused once more. "So what do you want to do? Because going into detail about those meetings is just going to raise even more questions."

"I thought we might twist the truth a little," Draco said. Harry looked concerned and so he hurried to explain. "You were meeting Dumbledore for lessons on how to survive against Riddle; perhaps Dumbledore was teaching you advanced defensive magic?"

Harry's face cleared as he nodded. "That's what Hermione thought the lessons were going to be, so I guess that's a good explanation," he paused thoughtfully for a second. "The only thing is, that night, the last battle at the castle, people heard me telling Riddle that I'd destroyed his horcruxes. There were rumours about them after that… they seemed to have died off though," he said, with a little contemplative frown, "but all the students that had been hiding in the Room of Requirement – I told
them that I was looking for an object that would help me defeat Riddle, if there is no mention of that object then, you know…” he shrugged. "Speculation."

"You're right," Draco said; he'd assumed Harry must have met up with the hidden students on the night he returned to the castle. That was how he'd gotten in, Draco remembered, the passage in the Hogshead. "I guess the most obvious thing to do would be to say that he made one horcrux, the one you were looking for and found in the castle. I was pretty surprised when you told me there was more than one. Most people, if they know anything about them at all, wouldn't even consider the idea of splitting your soul more than once."

At that moment there was a sudden loud crack and Kreacher appeared at Harry's elbow, he was holding a tray, upon which sat the familiar silver tea set and a plate of biscuits.

"So sorry for the delay, Master Harry, the groceries just arrived downstairs," the elf said as he set the tea tray down. He looked at Harry and said gravely, "They forgot the tart cases, but I dealt with them."

"Thanks Kreacher," Harry said, snatching a biscuit from the plate. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Kreacher bowed and busied himself with the tea, the china clinking quietly in the background as Harry asked Draco, "How do you know about Horcruxes? I wondered that the other day."

"I was stuck in my house for two years," Draco said. "I read a lot, all the books in the house I think; well, all the ones that were in languages I can read, and my father had an eclectic taste in books."

"Oh right." Harry said, "Languages? As in more than English? I suppose you know French being a Black."

"Yeah," Draco said, "just the normal ones though, Latin, German, Flemish, Dutch. I'm actually not great at French for some reason, written in particular; I can understand it spoken okay, especially the locals where my mother lives on the south coast but it's like drunk Latin written down, I could never get my head around it," Draco said ruefully, "drove my father crazy."

"Flemish," Harry repeated disbelievingly under his breath. But he didn't ask for more information so Draco consulted his list of questions, looking for something that didn't involve face stomping or blood-covered bathroom floors.

A cup of tea had appeared on the end table closest to him while they had been speaking, it was dark and just slightly cloudy with milk. Kreacher had really perfected Draco's tea of late. Draco picked it up and took a sip, the warm liquid was fortifying, and it dampened the unsettled fluttering that still hadn't left him, it also tasted … sharper than usual. He watched the elf make Harry's drink before he asked, "What type of tea is this, Kreacher? It is different from last time."

Kreacher shook his head, "It's not Mr Malfoy, it's the same Yorkshire blend, nice and strong."

Harry took a mouthful of his own cup and swished it around his mouth; he swallowed and said with a shrewdly hitched-up lip, "I think what Mr Malfoy means, Kreacher, is why is there whiskey in our tea?"

"You were nervous about today, Master Harry," Kreacher said quietly, turning away from Draco as if that would stop him from hearing. "Mistress used to say a nip of whiskey is good for nerves."

Harry closed his eyes and was obviously both embarrassed and trying not to laugh, "It was well meant I'm sure," he said patiently to the elf, "but we've had problems with unexpected things in our
drinks recently, so let's not get our guests drunk unless they know about it."

"Of course Master Harry," Kreacher said, unabashed. "I'll make a new pot." He vanished quickly, taking the tea service with him.

Draco was still holding his cup and it didn’t disappear with Kreacher so he took another sip, thinking that the elf might be an out of control and interfering servant, but that alcoholic tea was something of a godsend for his tattered spirit this afternoon.

"Sorry," Harry said. "He means well, sly little bugger."

"No matter," said Draco, taking another mouthful before he put down his cup and picked up his quill in preparation to record the answer to his next question. A nice simple one about Quidditch politics. "Were you surprised to be made Quidditch captain without any training?" Draco asked. "Had Johnson hinted that she wanted you to take over?"

"I was," Harry said. "I'd not really thought about it because of what happened in fifth and getting banned for life." Draco kept his eyes on his scribbling quill; yet another reminder of the ways he'd helped to make Harry's life shit. "But the only team member who had served as long as me was Katie, and I don't think she was much of a leader type, Katie just loved to play." Merlin, Draco thought, annoyed; even something as harmless as Quidditch ended up relating to him and his botched plans that year. "I think Professor McGonagall thought that most of the Gryffindors respected me or had friends that did after the DA lessons, and I'd been on the team the longest, so I was the most obvious choice." Harry's shoulders twitched up and he finished deprecatingly, "But at the time I was shit scared I'd cock the whole thing up."

"Is that why you decided to spike Weasley's drink?" Draco asked; he'd been quite impressed with Harry's Slytherin-ness when he'd read the little trick with the Felix Felicis.

"You're as bad as Hermione," Harry said, sounding a little exasperated, "I think you'll find I didn't put anything in his drink at all. I was just being a good captain, inspiring the best from my players."

"Still seems a bit like cheating to me," Draco said flippantly. "Speaking of cheating, do you think Slughorn gave you Professor Snape's old book on purpose?"

"The luck potion wasn't cheating, no more than making up horrible songs about players to distract them," Harry said pointedly. "It's all just manipulating the mind-set of a player."

"Touchy," Draco said. He didn't feel bad about the cruel lyrics in the Weasley Is Our King chant, considering the bloody Gryffindors had hijacked it anyway. "But what about Slughorn, do you think he was trying to give you better marks by giving you Professor Snape's book?"

"Not at all," Harry said, "why on earth would he do that?"

"To make the Chosen One a more valuable collector's item," Draco said, leaving the 'Obviously' silent and implied.

"Well, no, I don't think so." Harry chewed his lip for a moment. "I don't think he even knew it was Snape's book."

"Alright," Draco said, scanning his list; there were only three questions left, so he asked the last easy one. "Why didn't you continue to meet with the DA that year?"

"The DA was only formed to help everyone learn practical defence since the Ministry was stopping us from learning. Snape might have been a giant bastard but he taught defence very well, so we
didn't need the DA anymore."

Harry's mention of Ministry interference reminded Draco of Harry's comments on his Christmas that year. "Did you really tell Scrimgeour to bugger off?" Draco asked, knowing that really he was just procrastinating.

"Not in so many words," Harry grinned. "He asked me to publicly support the Ministry, but after everything they'd done there was no way, so I told him to keep out of Dumbledore's business and left him standing in the snow on the Weasley's back lawn." Harry clenched his right fist and held it out to Draco, there were scars in the shape of letters crossing the back of his hand. "You can still see the proof that the Ministry tried to silence me, and that was nearly eight years ago now. At the time I thought I was to be commended for not punching the egotistical pillock in the face."

"It was certainly very... moral of you." Draco said, he would have taken the offer of a leg-up within the Ministry in a second, especially in that uncertain environment. But he recognised the results of line writing with a blood quill etched into the back of Harry's hand. Draco remembered his pre-Hogwarts tutor, Mrs Maynard, had threatened him with it many times; the threat alone had always been enough to get Draco to behave. Mrs Maynard had tutored many old family children, Draco's father included. She was a frightening beast, but highly efficient so her questionable methods were brushed aside in favour of good results.

During fifth year Draco had been aware of Umbridge's tendency for cruelty, and at the time he'd thought it necessary. She was helping the Dark Lord's agenda without even knowing it, convincing the public he wasn't back was a huge bonus for his regime. But seeing the results of the punishment, knowing that Harry would have that moment of feeling like a powerless child engraved in his skin and with him forever, was unexpectedly affecting.

Draco moved down the list, aiming to distract himself from morbid memories – this was obviously not his cleverest plan. "You said in your notes that there was no funeral for your godfather because there was no body, do you think that made it harder or easier for you to deal with his loss?"

"I don't know that I did deal with it," Harry said after a moment; he was still looking down at the back of his hand. "I didn't know how to write down what I felt, I'd only known him for two years, I almost felt like... I don't know," he frowned in Draco's direction, but he wasn't really looking at him. "Like of course he's dead too, now I'm back to it being just me, like Sirius was just a temporary bit of happiness..." His eyes suddenly focused on Draco and they were so wide and so brightly green as he stared beseechingly for a second. Then he blinked and said sheepishly, "How do you put that into words without sounding like the biggest sad bastard on the planet?"

"I'm not sure." Draco said, "It's so cruel, of all the people to die in that fight it had to be the person who was just yours."

Harry gave him a lopsided half-smile. "Mine?"

"Well, you had the Weasleys to look after you, feed you, give you somewhere to stay, knit you awful jumpers," Draco added with a significant look at the monstrosity Harry was wearing, trying to make him smile properly, "but having your own grown-up must have been kind of important."

Draco was a little embarrassed to admit how much thought he'd given this. Ever since he'd read Harry's notes on fourth year, he'd noticed that it was Sirius who Harry asked for advice, Sirius who sat with him all night when he'd seen the Dark Lord reborn, Sirius who wanted to tell him about the prophecy, Sirius who risked everything always, for Harry. It must have be a Black thing, Draco had decided, thinking of his mother and how she had risked so much to get Professor Snape to swear to protect Draco, to keep her son safe while he tried to commit murder.
"I suppose," Harry said. "We had a little ceremony, me and Hermione and Ron when his headstone was installed at the cemetery in Godric's Hollow. The grave is empty, but I thought if he was going to have something somewhere it should be next to my dad, Sirius's chosen family. I did feel better about it after that, but honestly I think I'd just gotten quite good at accepting death by then."

"I'm not surprised," Draco said, turning to a fresh page in his note book and beginning the next question reluctantly, and as clinically as possible, "Regarding our confrontation in the bathroom, you wrote in your notes that you had no idea what the Sectumsempra curse did; would you have written that if it wasn't me writing your book?"

"It's the truth so yes." Harry said shortly. "Snape had written 'for enemies' you were going to Crucio me, enemy seemed about right."

"Just checking," Draco said, jotting down Harry's answer, it would make a good quote, even if it did make Draco look like an arsehole. He wasn't going to tell Harry that at that point in his life he'd never used the Crucius curse on anyone, and though he'd been terribly scared and hated Potter for not being trapped in hell like Draco was, there was no way he would have had enough focus to cast the spell properly. Only the fear of it being used on himself by the Dark Lord had been enough encouragement for Draco to master it, months later.

Draco took a breath before he asked the last question, knowing that it was his own conscience that made it difficult, it wasn't really anything to do with Harry. "What about Dumbledore's hand?" he said, a bit too sharply, "did he really give you no clue that it was killing him?"

"No," Harry replied. Draco couldn't tell what Harry thought of the question by his tone; it was calm and quiet. "I asked him a couple of times but he always managed to fob me off."

"Do you know how long he had, if it had been left to progress?" Draco asked, not only out of professional requirement, but also morbid curiosity.

"A little more than a year," Harry said in the same inflectionless voice.

It grated at Draco something terrible that if he and Professor Snape hadn't intervened, Dumbledore would have died shortly after anyway. Draco had learned during the trials that Snape and Dumbledore had arranged Dumbledore's death between them, but he hadn't known that the man was so sick he'd have died around the same time anyway. Draco had spent most of his house arrest reading to occupy his mind; it was mainly to prevent him from dwelling on the unpayable debt he owed Professor Snape.

The professor had committed the ultimate act of evil to stop Draco from having to. Dumbledore had vouched for Snape, kept him from prison, given him work, saved him from everything the Death Eaters had to face after the first war. But because Draco was frightened, Snape had killed the headmaster as though it was nothing.

"The other thing is," Harry said, suddenly more animated, "when you met us on the Astronomy tower, Dumbledore was sick from the potion in the cave."

"I know, I read your notes thoroughly," Draco said, he tried very hard to keep his voice as neutral as Harry had been able too, but it was impossible. He could hear the guilt leaking through.

It had been a bizarre experience to read that moment in his life from a different point of view – it seemed so quick in Harry's retelling, Draco had felt like he stood there with his wand on Dumbledore for hours. Waiting, urging, arguing with himself in his head. Strangely, that the thing that haunted him for years afterward was not Dumbledore falling from the battlements, or Professor
Snape's cold, severely blank expression as he'd cast the killing curse, but instead it was Dumbledore's offer of help that stayed with him.

The Headmaster's emphatic, "Come over to the right side, Draco," had echoed in Draco's head for months. It was Dumbledore's use of the word right that did it. Draco hadn't thought in terms of good and evil for a long time, just of surviving, and surely the right side would win, and its fighters survive. But he had been too indecisive and the others had arrived, and Snape, the ultimate undercover agent, had saved Draco's arse. Just as his mother had hoped.

"So you know then that he was going to die from dehydration, or some magical version of it, without medical help," Harry said, and Draco had the funny feeling that Harry knew exactly what was going on in his head."With that and his cursed hand, Snape was doing him a favour, like wizarding euthanasia, not murder."

"How do you know that?" Draco asked, "Snape had to kill him because of the vow he made my mother. I know he and Dumbledore arranged it, but he still killed him."

"Yes, but it was more than an arrangement Dumbledore requested it, you heard him too, he asked Snape to do it, in front of everyone on that tower." Harry looked grim, but so very sure, "and when we do seventh year you see how I know. It's pretty fucking depressing to be honest."

"Does that mean Professor Snape's soul wasn't damaged? Because it was mercy, not murder?" Draco asked, hoping very much that it was true. Because Severus Snape, though always sharp and a bit mean, had always been on Draco's side, wherever his other allegiances lay in the end.

"I think so," Harry said. "That's what Dumbledore told me, anyway."

Draco felt a little better about it if Dumbledore had said it; everyone knew he was a store of knowledge on the strength of souls and love in magic. Even if most of it was airy-fairy at best, it was the sort of thing Draco could believe in when he needed to. Draco looked down at his notes. He didn't need any more clarification on anything in Harry's version of events from their sixth year, and Hermione's detailed and factual account filled in all the other gaps. There was still the matter of Ginny, however. "How much do you want to include about your relationship with Ginny?" Draco asked, picking up his tea cup and wondering what had happened to Kreacher and the new non-spiked pot.

Harry looked relieved when Draco put his notebook away, and he picked up his own tea and sat back against his chair, "Nothing too detailed," he said. "I was pretty surprised when I realised I liked her, you know. She'd always been there, and suddenly she was different, so I was dead pleased when we started going out." Harry sipped his drink and seemed to think for a moment. "But when I decided I'd be leaving school to hunt for Horcruxes I sort of felt like I did about Sirius, that it had been a little happy holiday, enough to buoy me up, give me hope that I'd be able to be normal eventually." He threw back the last of his tea and grimaced at Draco, "I've shot myself in the foot with the whole normal thing recently, haven't I?"

"Normal is boring, Potter," Draco said reproachfully, unsure whether or not to be offended. "You should aim for happiness in life or success, not to be the same as everyone else. How dull."

"I do aim for happiness," Harry said. "I always have – I just didn't realise until recently that I'd been going about it all wrong."

"Right," said Draco, steadfastly ignoring the pleasurable little squirm in his stomach as the implication in Harry's sentence sunk in. Draco took another gulp of tea to avoid saying something he'd regret, noticing as he did that the distraction wouldn't last long as he'd nearly drunk all of it.
Thankfully, Kreacher appeared in their midst with his usual loud crack just as Draco emptied his cup.

"So sorry Master Harry, Mr Malfoy," the elf said with a deep bow. "I did not mean to take so long with the tea, but I have just put a treacle tart in the oven." He looked at Harry as he said the last part, as though it was a further apology, and twisted his hands worriedly.

Harry looked concerned. "Is everything alright, Kreacher?"

"Fine, Master," the elf said, his eyes flicked to Draco and back to Harry as he said, "I've made stew for dinner, there is quite a lot."

Harry's worried expression softened, "Kreacher," he said, "If you wanted –" but he stopped suddenly, the elf was shaking his head, his ears flapped and his eyes were wide and pleading. Harry looked at Draco instead and said abruptly, "Do you have plans for dinner?"

Draco understood what was going on, he knew the elf was having ownership issues. Harry had mentioned it last time – although they did seem to only appear when convenient for Kreacher's weird little plans. But an offer of a proper dinner instead of sardines on toast was something he'd be foolish to turn down. "I don't," Draco said.

"Good," Harry smiled, "I could do with some career advice, if you want to stay and eat."

"Alright," Draco agreed, "shop boy is off the table, just so you know." Harry just grinned wider, and Kreacher scurried to the end table to pour tea.

It was odd, Draco thought as he was served whiskey-free tea by the conniving Kreacher, how at-ease he felt in Harry's company. Especially considering the previous topic of conversation, and the stark contrast of inappropriate-for-the-moment romantic feelings. But he really was comfortable. Almost as if they were friends.
Chapter 16

The town of Altrincham was a nice enough place, Harry thought when he and Draco arrived on Friday afternoon. It reminded him very much of Little Whinging, but with older buildings, and more humorously-named pubs – as well as the added benefit of only a third as many Dursleys.

Harry was feeling rather chipper; he and Draco had had a pleasant time together the previous evening, even if he was disappointed by Draco’s desire for self-control and professional conduct. There were only a couple of weeks left until the deadline anyway; Harry wondered if Draco would be a bit less stringent with his ethical boundaries once his part of the book-writing progress was over… But then, once his part was over, there would be no reason for them to see each other again. Harry could easily overlook that little obstacle for now, though. He was focusing on good and happy things, because the upcoming meeting with his cousin had him more nervous than he’d been expecting.

He had no trouble recognising Dudley in The Pig and Whistle on Friday afternoon; a hulking black-and-white uniformed officer with a heaped plate of shepherd’s pie before him sat with his back to the wall, his small eyes darting from pie to door as he ate.

Harry elbowed Draco and led him through the Friday afternoon pint-hunters. They came to a halt in front of Dudley’s table, and Harry’s mind went blank momentarily as he looked down at his one-time bully and tormentor. For a very brief moment he considered hexing him, just for the hell of it, or punching him in the face; but in the end Harry said, rather anti-climatically, “Hi Dudley.”

Despite Dudley’s apparent alertness, he jumped a little at the greeting.

“Harry,” he said, trying very hard to arrange a smile on his face as he looked to Draco. “You must be Mr. Malfoy, I was expecting someone older.” He held out a hand for Draco to shake and Harry had a feeling that his eleven-year-old self might have had nightmares about such a scene.

Malfoy and Dudley teaming up, chilling.

“I’m sorry my youth disappoints you,” Draco said coolly. “I assure you, I’m quite qualified.”

Dudley’s focus shifted back to Harry; oddly, he seemed to be sizing him up. It was bizarre, Harry thought, to be the one viewed as a threat by a Muggle when standing next to Draco - who might not parrot his father’s views any longer, but the disdainful way he looked at Dudley was Lucius through and through. Though at least Draco disapproved of Dudley because of his character, rather than his blood.

Harry supposed it was more a case of Dudley expecting a personal vendetta from Harry. Assess the known risk first, they learnt at Auror training, something the police probably did too. Harry knew he wasn’t the weedy eighteen-year-old that Dudley would remember, but it wasn’t like he posed any physical threat to Dudley, who still seemed in good shape - though there was a softening around his middle that could probably be blamed on shepherd’s pie for lunch a bit too often.

“You’ve a scar on your right arm, how’d you get it?” Dudley asked Harry abruptly. He sat down heavily and picked up his fork again.
Harry frowned at him as he sat too. “What?” he asked, and then realising Dudley still didn’t trust that he was, in fact, Harry, he pushed up his sleeve and said, “Which one?” There were at least four; it hadn’t taken long for Harry to realise why Mad-Eye Moody had looked the way he did – field work as an Auror was not a gentle job.

“Geez,” Dudley said, looking away from his plate to survey Harry’s arm. With all the time Harry had spent in the garden this summer the scars showed starkly against his brown skin, and the sparsely sprinkled hair that had helped disguise them was almost invisible now that it was completely sun-bleached. “Um, that one I think,” Dudley pointed to a crescent shaped white line near Harry’s elbow.

As soon as he pointed Harry remembered; Piers Polkiss and Dudley had been chasing him on a sunny afternoon, many years before Hogwarts. The only advantage Harry’d ever had over Dudley had been his speed, and that afternoon had been no exception. He’d pelted as fast as he could outside and scrambled up the big tree in the back garden. Harry had climbed surprisingly quickly, and much higher than he’d intended – something he’d put down to concentrating so hard on just getting away from Dudley’s fists at the time. He had moved up through the tree so fast and with such ease that when he looked back the ground had seemed miles below.

But Harry, not content with just escaping, and knowing that Dudley would never haul his fat bum up the tree, had unwisely hung out from the upper branches to poke his tongue at Dudley and Piers and call them chicken when they came running in his direction.

However, the upper branches were not designed to support gloating, swinging eight-year-old boys. The branch broke and Harry fell, tearing his arm on one of the tree’s limbs before he hit the ground. He’d knocked himself out with the fall and woke up in his cupboard hours later with a cold pack strapped to his head and a little measuring cup of liquid paracetamol next to his bed.

He’d never gone that high in the tree again, but even the lower branches were an excellent escape from both lazy Dudley and Aunt Marge’s yappy little bull terrier in later years.

“I fell out of the big tree,” Harry said to his cousin.

Dudley nodded, obviously content that Harry was indeed Harry, he started on his pie once more. “Piers thought you were dead, ran and got Mum.”

“That’s right; I didn’t have to do any chores the next day,” Harry smiled. “Totally worth it.”

Dudley didn’t smile back. “Do you know people get arrested for the shit Mum and Dad did to you? I’ve had to arrest people,” he said uncomfortably, “I didn’t know when we were kids. I don’t want to be involved if this is some mad way of getting back at them for what they did.”

“It’s okay, Dudley, it’s not anything like that,” Harry said. “It was a long time ago, if people haven’t come after them with some of the outrageous bullshit that’s been printed about my pre-Hogwarts life in the last five years, my dull little tale about chores and beds in cupboards won’t do it. I’m trying to get people to leave me alone, rather than stir up more trouble.”

“I don’t see how you can expect your folk to look the other way,” Dudley said stubbornly. “They love you. I remember, that whole year of hiding, with all those half-caste –” he glanced around and mouthed, “wizards, and they wouldn’t shut up about how bloody lucky we were to be your family, and weren’t we honoured to have raised the Chosen One, they’ll be out to get us after you tell the truth.”

“Mr. Dursley,” Draco said calmly, “the magical world has been through somewhat of a shake-up since the war; there is much less, er, mob mentality than there used to be.”
Harry thought that this was pushing the truth; the magical community were sheep. The power of the Prophet proved that, but he wanted Dudley to sign-off on his story, so he nodded along when his cousin looked to him for confirmation.

“People are much more aware now of how being frightened can make you do terrible things,” Harry said, “and your mum was awfully frightened of magic.” Harry didn’t think there was any point in mentioning that it was probably more likely a nasty mix of regret, jealousy, and guilt that caused Petunia to behave as she did. “I’ve seen people do a lot worse because they were scared,” he continued, “and I’ve forgiven them. So I won’t hold it against you for standing by.”

“You forgive Mum and Dad?” Dudley said incredulously, his fork was suspended in mid-air and his eyebrows drawn-in skeptically. “They starved you!”

“I don’t forgive them,” Harry said, wanting to smile at the fact that food was what concerned Dudley and not the being locked up or having to work like a house-elf. “I was I little boy and they treated me like shit, I don’t ever want to see them again, but I don’t hold it against you. We aren’t our parents.” Harry saw Draco shift out of the corner of his eye, but he didn’t say anything.

“Dad’s not well,” Dudley said, scraping the last lump of mash from his plate. “His heart’s a bit dickey, Mum’s trying to keep him on a diet but he’s terrible at it.”

“That’s a pity,” Harry said, not really knowing what to say. He was surprised to find that he didn’t care that Uncle Vernon had heart problems; apparently there was a limit to Harry’s compassion after all.

Harry looked at Draco and found him watching with an unreadable, closed expression, but the moment Harry raised his eyebrows in question Draco blinked and looked away. “Mr. Dursley,” he said briskly, “we don’t want to take up too much of your time. I have events here from Harry’s childhood that no one in the magical world was present for.” He passed over a sheaf of notes. “If you could read them and post them back with any additional comments you might have, that would be very useful.”

“Okay,” Dudley said, as he wiped his fingers on the napkin next to his empty plate. “His heart’s a bit dickey, Mum’s trying to keep him on a diet but he’s terrible at it.”

“Okay,” Dudley said, as he wiped his fingers on the napkin next to his empty plate and turned the first few pages.

“We’re on quite a tight schedule. If you could get them done over the weekend I’d appreciate it.”

Dudley nodded. “Sure, Danielle will just be glad that I’m not watching the footy,” he said to Draco, apparently aiming for some sort of male camaraderie with the always popular aren’t-women-ridiculous? line.

But Draco just frowned and said, “I’m no expert but I thought women liked shoes?”

Dudley actually laughed at this. “Good one,” he said to Draco. “Am I allowed to tell her about this? She’s my girlfriend; we live together so it might be a bit hard to keep it a secret.”

“Does she know about the magical world?” Draco asked, Harry noticed he was already slotting his papers away, in preparation for the end of the meeting.

“Sort of,” Dudley said, and Harry got the impression that Dudley was worried about something. “Her aunty was one, but she was killed that year we were hiding. But no one else in her family is… you-know-what, I don’t think – do you know any Powells? They live around here.”

Harry and Draco both shook their heads. “So many innocent people were killed,” Harry said regretfully.
“Yeah,” Dudley said. “We’d been going out for a year before I figured out that her aunty dying in ninety-eight, in a ‘gas explosion’, was actually the explosion the others at the safe house were talking about that February; one that was caused by your bad guys.”

“Really?” Harry said. He couldn’t place the explosion in his memory; having been out of touch with everyone, he’d learned about all the atrocities after the fact. He did however find it more than ironic that Dudley had shacked up with someone that had any connection with magic at all. “Watch out Dudley, you better not have kids with her, they might be magical.”

Dudley paled. “It’s a bit late for that; Danielle’s actually pregnant. Mum’s furious at me since we’re not married, but Dani says there’s no way she’s going to have wedding pictures looking like a whale so they’ll just have to wait.”

Harry laughed, but he meant it when he said, “Congratulations Dudley; scary though, being a dad.”

Dudley shrugged. “The shit I see people doing with kids in the house… the bar is pretty low these days, and I know I’ll be a better dad than half the idiots around. And Dani’s got a million little cousins so she’s a pro at babies. We’ll be all right.” Then he shook his head and said, “Bloody hell, imagine if it has to go to that mad school?”

“Hogwarts is brilliant, Dudley,” Harry said, surprised by his cousin’s tone, it certainly lacked the spiteful disgust it always held at the mention of any magic-related conversation.

Dudley shrugged again. “Bet it’s cheaper than bloody Smeltings, maybe I should be hoping for a throwback if it’s a boy, would shut Dad up.” Dudley grimaced. “What about you, are you still with that pretty ginger?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope, no girlfriend, no kids.”

“Oh, why not?” Dudley asked. “Thought defeating the bad guy would get you all the girls you want.”

“Apparently not,” Harry said, not elaborating because Dudley might be a lot more amiable than his teenage-self but Harry was willing to bet he still shared his father’s old fashioned views when it came to being anything other than properly straight.

“The problem is, Mr. Dursley,” Draco cut in, “when one is as famous as Harry it is very hard for him to know if the girl is just after the spotlight.”

“Rough,” Dudley said.

“I think it would be best if you don’t mention it to your Danielle, we really don’t want any speculation on what this book is going to contain – unless it’s carefully released speculation,” Draco added.

“Did he sign one of the jinxed agreements?” Harry asked.

“No,” Draco said, “it’s illegal to send Muggles magical objects. Arthur Weasley’s office would be all over me.”

“Jinxed?” Dudley asked sharply, dropping the papers Draco had given him.

Suddenly the little black radio on Dudley’s shoulder squawked into life, crackling out an unintelligible string of numbers.
Dudley jumped as though electrocuted and fumbled to get the radio loose, he pushed a button on the side and muttered, “Copy that, on my way.”

Dudley stood from the table and picked up the notes. “Not jinxed?” he asked, waving them.

“No, definitely not,” Draco said. “My return address is on the front, send them back as soon as you can.”

Dudley held out his hand to Harry, who shook it. “Thanks for your help, Dudley,” said Harry.

“Thanks for not turning me into a toad,” Dudley replied, with a quick grin.

“No problem,” said Harry, finding a joking Dudley very odd indeed. “Good luck with the kid.”

Dudley nodded and shook hands with Draco. Then he left the pub, the story of their childhood told in Draco’s words rolled up in his hand.

Draco was very quiet as they walked to the nearest discreet place to Apparate. He hadn’t said anything as they’d exited the pub, and he set their pace along the footpath, brisk and stiff-backed, not looking in Harry’s direction except to check for cars as they crossed the road.

“Is something wrong?” Harry asked, hurrying to keep up. He had no idea how Draco managed to move so swiftly without running.

“No,” Draco said curtly.

Harry sighed; apparently something was very wrong, and he just didn’t know what.

“Don’t huff like it’s such a hassle,” Draco snapped as they rounded the corner. The public garden they had apparated into was at the end of the street.

“It’s not a hassle,” Harry said shortly, taken aback at the harsh tone. “I was annoyed you wouldn’t tell me, you know, so I could do something about it.”

“Whatever,” Draco said as he marched along.

Harry, nearly jogging beside him, wondered what the hell Draco was so crabby about all of a sudden. Harry looked over at him; his jaw was working slightly, clenched tight as it was, and he glared at the footpath so fiercely Harry was surprised it hadn’t turned to dust.

Harry thought that it was best not to pester Draco for an answer, even though it pissed him off to be snarked at for no apparent reason. He decided to leave Draco to his temper until they arrived at the Disapparation point, so they resumed their silent walk.

Harry found his irritation at Draco slipping as they approached the park, but only because every time he glanced at his face Draco would frown more heavily and look away, and it made Harry want to do ridiculous things, like pinch his cheek or ruffle his hair, just to provoke him further. He also wanted to knock him to the ground and climb on top of him, but Harry doubted he’d be able to keep his conduct suitable for a public park in the middle of the afternoon so he didn’t.

However, he did stare at Draco rather pointedly when he looked in Harry’s direction more and more frequently as they got closer to the trees.
“Fine!” Draco blurted out when they reached the cover of several hydrangeas clustered at the base of two ancient oak trees. He looked a little manic as he said through his teeth, “I bloody hate that I’m in the same category as that classless oaf.”

“You are?” Harry asked, completely nonplussed, but assuming the oaf in question was Dudley.

“In regard to your life, yes,” Draco said heatedly. “Hearing you tell him that he wasn’t his father - it sounded very familiar.”

Now that Draco pointed it out Harry supposed it was true, but he didn’t view it the same way, and he knew why that was. Harry didn’t need to excuse Dudley’s behaviour so that he wouldn’t feel guilty for liking him, as he did in Draco’s case. Harry just wanted Dudley to know that he didn’t hate him anymore.

“I guess on the surface you might have a point,” Harry said, unsure how to express that what he’d said to Dudley was mostly to appease himself, because he didn’t like the idea that Dudley thought Harry was the type of person to hold a grudge, or that the things they did as children mattered to Harry anymore; because that felt like he was giving Dudley some kind of credit for the man Harry was now.

“I’m hoping there’s a but,” Draco said quietly. His anger seemed to have evaporated.

Draco was staring fixedly at the surrounding greenery, his back straight and his chin tilted up just the tiniest bit. It was interesting, Harry thought, that when he himself was nervous he could barely hold his head up, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, but Draco was the opposite. He stood more proudly, more confidently, as if trying to fool his own nerves. It must have been the pureblood upbringing, Harry reasoned.

“Yeah, there is,” Harry said carefully. “I’m just not sure whether or not it will make you cross.”

“Oh,” Draco said. His scrupulous Malfoy-mask slipped as he looked at Harry, his expression wary.

“It’s different with you… because…” Harry started with no idea of how he was going to finish the sentence.

In the end he thought fuck it and decided on the truth. He snatched Draco’s hand from where it hung stiffly at his side, and said firmly, “Because it’s different with you.”

“Argh, you soppy twat,” Draco scoffed. With an abrupt return to his usual manner, he rolled his eyes and tugged his hand away; his mouth was a thin line but Harry was sure he was trying to stop himself from smiling. Draco folded his arms and muttered tetchily, “I’m not cross, I’m nauseated.”

“Heartless prick,” Harry laughed, both relieved and embarrassed, and he shut his mouth before he said anything else so dreadfully mawkish.

Remembering the other night when Draco had left him rather hot and bothered on the footpath outside Ron and Hermione’s without any warning, Harry decided he wanted the upper hand for once, so he clapped Draco on the shoulder and said cheerfully, “See you Tuesday.” Before Draco could respond, Harry Disapparated. He felt nicely smug as he got a flash of Draco’s disgruntled expression before the constricting darkness took him away.
Draco was feeling very accomplished by the end of the weekend. He'd discovered that sexual frustration was highly motivating. Not that it was real frustration, but more like a twitching niggle inside him that had kept him slightly on edge for the past two days. He assumed it was related to his recently tempted sex drive, anyway. That, or the irksome disappointment in himself that his valiant efforts to keep the constantly encroaching daydreams – ones built on the afternoon he'd spent on Harry's couch – at bay, were flagging. This could probably be blamed on the first problem too.

Thankfully, working on the biography was an excellent distraction. It was difficult to think of someone in a romantic context when you were reading and writing about the millionth time their own idiocy had nearly got them killed.

On Sunday evening Draco sat in his little study, smiling smugly at the finished draft for the first seventeen years of Harry's life. He still needed Dudley's confirmation that the pre-Hogwarts stuff was accurate, and he'd set his meeting with Victor Krum for the twelfth of September – two and a bit weeks away. Draco was hopeful that Krum's point of view wouldn't alter anything he'd written about fourth year, because the deadline for the editor at the publishing house was Monday the fifteenth and there wouldn't be a lot of time for re-writes. If all went to plan, Harry's book would hit Wizarding bookshops just in time for Christmas shopping.

Draco and Harry only had four scheduled meetings left; this next one was going to be rather grim, Draco thought, but at least he hadn't done anything too horrific to Harry that final year of the war.

Draco's world had narrowed to a pinprick focus during his seventh year, when he thought back on it he could only remember his inner mantra of Survive. Do what you need to. Survive. The traumatising things the Carrows had done at Hogwarts and the hellish pit of evil his family home had become were both only half remembered, as though a dream that was fuzzy when he tried to focus on specific events. Draco was glad for this coping mechanism; he pitied Harry a little that he obviously possessed no such ability.

Harry's notes on that year had arrived at Draco's on Saturday evening, and although he and Harry had touched on what had happened previously and Draco had actually been present for some of the more significant events, he still found himself in awe. Surprisingly, mainly of Granger. Draco struggled to reconcile the idea that if there had been no troll in the girl's bathroom their first Hallowe'en night at Hogwarts, the Dark Lord would be ruler of the universe. Because Granger's friendship was the reason Harry been able to succeed.

In Draco's opinion the prophecy held at the Department of Mysteries should have warned Voldemort of a girl born in the middle of September, rather than a boy at the end of July. Because without her, Harry would probably never have escaped from Bill Weasley's wedding; he would have been eaten by a snake on Christmas night and ambushed by Death Eaters at Xeno Lovegood's. Not to mention the hundreds of times her quick wand had defended him. She was living proof that all the propaganda Draco had had forced down his throat for most of his life was complete nonsense.

Weasley, on the other hand… Draco wondered if he still felt guilty for leaving his best friend and future wife. It was interesting, Draco thought, that both Weasleys who came in contact with a Horcrux were so badly affected by it. The first thing that sprung to mind was that they were purebloods and therefore possibly more susceptible than a Muggleborn or half-blood to the ancient magic, but Harry's book wasn't the place for speculation, and since neither the locket nor the diary
were being named as Horcruxes it would have been a difficult argument to make in any case. Mainly, Draco was unsure how to portray Ron's abandonment, primarily for fear that the revelation would spark a press backlash against him.

That year of Harry's life was little known to the public, and this lack of a true story meant that Weasley's temper tantrum was completely unknown. Everything written about the final year of the war alluded to Harry keeping his head down, or lying low. In essence, suggesting that he had taken his two best friends and hidden while the world fell apart. Preserving himself to swoop in and save everyone, most heroically, at the last moment and therefore be forgiven. Draco, the Slytherin soul that he was, had thought this explanation quite acceptable; if he had had the choice to hide he would have done it in a heartbeat.

But instead Harry had endured the camping trip from hell, while having a head full of Voldemort, a jealous and angry best friend and by Christmas, a book that told him the man who'd sent him down this path had more skeletons in the closet than Draco had pairs of Italian leather shoes. And Draco had quite a few pairs of Italian leather shoes …

Dumbledore's deception of Harry took Draco completely by surprise; he really had believed the old headmaster was too good to do something so coldly necessary. The role that Professor Snape played was also much unexpected. Draco had wondered for many years why Harry had fought so hard to get Severus Snape's name stricken from the Second War Death Eater lists. Publically, Harry had only ever said that he had personal evidence that Snape had always been working against Voldemort since the night Harry had been orphaned. Draco now knew that Snape had switched sides earlier even than that, and that he had loved Harry's mother since they were children together.

Aside from Hermione and her Potter-protection, it was Professor Snape's part in all of it that had Draco double and triple checking that he had read Harry's writing correctly. Draco had thought he'd known his professor, but he was beginning to think there was much that he'd been missing. He realised of course that Snape couldn't have shared any of this with him; Draco was Occlumens enough to keep Aunt Bella and Snape out, but he'd have been no match for the Dark Lord. Professor Snape had been protecting himself, Draco and Harry … Draco couldn't imagine the how the betrayal from Dumbledore – that the boy they had been protecting for so long was actually going to die anyway – must have felt for Snape, no wonder the man was so bloody grouchy all the time.

The whole story was so bloody sad Draco wondered how Harry had even gotten out of bed in the morning.

Draco's day in the office on Monday seemed to drag like nothing ever had. Marc was a stressed out shell of his normal self, hunched at his desk hidden by stacks of files and references as he tried to map out a route for his discovery of an unnamed vault and internal Ministry documents that wouldn't get anyone fired - or himself arrested. Draco was trying to help, but he still hadn't figured out a way to explain his sudden friendly contact with Granger, or why she would want to help him.

He also still had his normal job to do, and it wasn't like his extremely riveting piece on the exorbitant price hike in live potion ingredients was going to write itself. Recently apothecaries had started jacking up prices because W.A.C.A.M. (Wizards Against Confining Animalia Magika) had lobbied for, and succeeded in getting, a law passed on the humane housing of creatures used in potion making. It didn't matter that newts, bats and toads were quite happy living in close quarters, now the shop owners had to provide 'recreation space' for them, at their own expense – which was passed on to the shoppers.

So, with tedious stories and the only person who would speak to him otherwise occupied, Draco was once again fighting the urge to sink into ethically questionable, but highly tantalising daydreams.
On Monday evening Draco managed to throw off the prickly little unsettled feeling he'd had for most of the weekend and his day at work, thanks to the bright and entertaining company of his wife. He and Astoria made an effort to have dinner in public every few months, to keep up the appearance of marriage to all the gossiping old-family dowagers. Draco was grateful for the lack of communication between generations, and that the subject of homosexuality was still rather taboo. He was sure Astoria's parents had heard rumours about his proclivity, but they would never be so discourteous to actually ask if Draco was bent. It would be beside the point anyway – bent or not Draco was married and they assumed he would provide them a grandchild, so what did it matter who he liaised with in private? It was no different to their forefathers having mistresses. Lesbianism, although still undesirable, was not as much cause for speculation, for some reason; perhaps because most women had close girlfriends anyway, or perhaps because it was men who decided what was to be frowned upon, and they didn't find fault with female coupling. Either way, the old-family backlash would be much kinder to Astoria than Draco if the truth were to be thrust under their toff noses.

Astoria had put her pure-blood upbringing and education to use after the war; she was an appraiser for an auction house. She spent her days attaching monetary values to the rare and beautiful magical objects that came up for sale, and somehow this meant that she had more information on the happenings in the upper classes of Wizarding society, than the vapid and fraudulent scandal-whores who wrote the lifestyle section of the Sunday Prophet.

Astoria was surprisingly wicked, Draco though as he sat across a stretch of white linen from her in Diagon Alley's latest restaurant du jour on Monday evening. The place was stylishly dim; little clusters of candles hung about the ceiling, and the dark wood of the furniture and the heavily starched pale table cloth looked both timeless and inviting in the ambient light.

Astoria was in her best Malfoy-wife ensemble, fitted black trousers and a demurely buttoned, beautifully tailored cream blouse. Her hair was pulled back sleekly from her face, but Draco could still see the real Astoria, with her lipstick a bit too shiny and her stiletto heels two inches too tall for a woman in such a sensible blouse. The smile that stretched her well glossed lips was a little devious as she finished telling him about the scandalously lewd paintings found in an attic on the Sandringham estate. The auction house she contracted for was having issues with getting the subjects of the paintings to behave appropriately while the works were on display to potential buyers.

"Honestly," Astoria laughed, looking a little disturbed, "he kept brandishing it at everyone who came to have a look – like it was some sort of weapon!"

"He sounds charming," Draco said, highly amused at the idea of the prudish old cows having conniptions at the sight of an energetic exhibitionist. "I wonder if it was painted from life?"

"Oh Merlin," Astoria giggled. "He was bad enough as a painted miniature, I can't imagine having a gentleman wiggling his full-sized bits at me like that!"

"I can think of worse ways to spend one's day," Draco said, struggling to keep a straight face, "although I'm not sold on the wiggling. Your description of brandishing was much more appealing."

Astoria stifled a little shriek of mirth and flicked her napkin in Draco's direction, "Stop it, stop it" she gasped. "You've been spending far too much time with that disreputable Marcus," Astoria accused when she had regained her composure. "It's not him, is it?"

"Him what?" Draco asked, thinking that Marc would definitely enjoy owning an oil of a randy nude fellow.

"That has you in this disturbingly sunny mood of late." Astoria clarified, her smile turning from playful to fiendish in a blink as she leaned toward him. "You must tell me who it is Draco," she said,
and he was reminded unsettlinly of his mother. "I know it is a someone."

"Must you pry?" Draco asked, feeling unable to lie at such a direct accusation, but that didn't mean he would tell her anything. "I'm not pestering you about the mysterious blonde I saw scampering down our front steps yesterday morning," he added pointedly.

"I don't think it's my fault that you're a neglectful husband." she said, pouting just a little, the mood lighting glinted on her too-shiny lip.

Draco snorted in amusement; Astoria was not the pouting type. "I really don't know what's happening with him," Draco admitted. "There are a few complications at the moment, but if it ever becomes… something I'll let you know."

Astoria nodded. "The mysterious blonde," she said hesitantly, shifting her cake fork minutely so that it lined up with its neighbour exactly. She kept her eyes focused on the silverware as she continued. "Her name is Maria, we've been seeing each other for six months."

Draco frowned and put down his glass, "That's very… committed of you." He'd wondered occasionally where his wife managed to find companions for so many dates; he'd just assumed there was some sort of lesbian-witch communication conspiracy that he was better off not knowing about. But if it was all the same girl, that was different, that could be serious.

"Yes," Astoria agreed, "she wants to meet you … we've been talking about things."

"Things?" Draco repeated feeling like his comfortable little world was suddenly and unexpectedly very threatened.

"The next step … you know, couple things." She finally looked away from the cutlery and there was a little line of consternation between her fine dark brows. "The future?" she finished as though unsure herself.

"Are you suggesting divorce?" Draco asked, concentrating on not allowing the first fluttering's of panic to enter his voice; the uncertainty Sententia brought to his career made him even more dependent on their current situation.

"Merlin, no!" Astoria spluttered, "Mummy will ask too many questions, I'm not ready to tell them yet … you don't want…?"

"No." Draco said quickly, he had many reasons for wanting to stay married, having somewhere to live being a rather important one.

"Good," Astoria breathed in relief, "the thing is Draco, I'm not sure how much longer it will work, if you're seeing someone and I am too, then eventually we're going to want a more conventional living arrangement, we should probably be prepared."

"Sweetheart," Draco said, because the waiter was passing their table, "let's deal with that later, my situation is more of an inconvenient reciprocal crush than any kind of serious relationship. If your Maria wants to meet me I'll do it; that was the whole point of this arrangement, the pair of us getting to live the way that makes us happy, without causing heart attacks or disownment."

Astoria covered his hand with her own where it rested on the tablecloth, just as their mains arrived. "Thank you darling," she said, gratefully.

"Why are we in here today?" Draco asked as he took a seat at one end of an oddly modern sofa in
Grimmauld Place's library on Tuesday afternoon. Draco remembered noticing the first time they sat in this room that the furniture didn't match at all, but somehow it was a comfortable space.

Harry was sitting at the other end of this angular and quite fashionable couch. His feet were up on a revoltingly fluffy red ottoman. Draco felt sorry for the turn-of-the-century bespoke oak coffee table in front them, sporting the ever-present tea set and a plate of jammy dodgers; it was far too dignified to sit next to such a tacky monstrosity.

To Draco's surprise – and approval – Harry was dressed much more tidily than usual this afternoon, in a pair of grey trousers and white shirt, both of which actually fit him. He wore a snug, and strangely familiar, grey pull-over too. Draco felt like he had not seen Harry in weeks, and in a sudden moment of sinking epiphany he realised that Harry, or lack of, (rather than sex or lack of) was the reason he'd been so unsettled the last few days. He cringed internally as he watched Harry pour their tea; it really wasn't fair that he could mess with Draco's life without even trying.

Harry shrugged in answer to Draco's question, "Kreacher just said he'd put tea up here for your visit, I find it's easier not to argue with him."

"Did you check it for liquor?" Draco asked, looking away from the oddly dapper Harry to lean in and lift the lid on the pot to sniff the dark liquid.

"Kreacher assures me that pot contains only tea." Harry sounded amused. "Don't be surprised if he accidentally makes too much dinner again though, he's been in the kitchen all afternoon. Do you have plans tonight?"

"No," Draco said, he still couldn't understand why Harry let his servant tell him what to do all the time; but then he supposed with a life like Harry's, having someone, even if it was an elf making an obvious effort to care for him, was probably very important to him.

"Good, so you'll stay and eat?"

Draco nodded. The guilty little voice in his head that spoke of unprofessional indulgence was drowned out by some slap-dash reasoning; he was just getting to know the subject of the book, to ensure he wrote in a way that illustrated Harry's character? ... Weak.

"How's Marc going with his story?" Harry asked. He was smiling, quite obviously cheerful at Draco’s willingness to stay; Draco got the feeling that Harry's penchant for ignoring rules was making itself known, since he was blatantly ignoring the supposed ethical-conduct suggestion. "Has he sorted out a believable way for him to have discovered everything?"

Draco shook his head. "Not yet. It's so evil because the facts are right there in front of us, but it has to be presented in a way that proves it was illegal, because the bigwigs involved will plead human error and then the whole story will look like amped up anti-Ministry mongering."

"Ron and I were talking about it on Sunday," Harry said, "he was wondering if the Aurors should be investigating Blishwick on a personal level. But they don't have any reason to, and I think he rather likes the idea of the old bugger being caught out publically."

"I do too," Draco said, "that's why we haven't said anything yet, don't want to give whoever is involved a heads up."

"But I thought you thought Betty was involved, and she knows."

"I don't know that she is after all," Draco sighed frustratedly, "I think she just wants the story to be as big as possible, and having it censored by Cuffe because he's trying to protect his cousin or if it
contains any of *her* usual tricks – things that could be seen as fabrication for dramatic effect – could leave it vulnerable to being picked apart by the Ministry media liaison."

Harry's expression was suddenly guarded as he said, "I think you're going to have to stop looking at this as a story." For some reason Draco thought he sounded *nervous*, but that didn't make any sense. "You're too focused on Blishwick's role. The first step in a criminal investigation involving theft is tracing the stolen goods from the start to the end point; remember what Hermione said the other night about where the gold goes *after* the Ministry vault? Did you find that out?"

Draco bristled, he didn't like the suggestion that he didn't know what he was doing, or the realisation that he *actually* didn't because bloody Potter was right. He and Marc hadn't thought past the gold going to the wrong vault, too distracted by finding a way for Marc to have discovered everything. Draco had no idea if it went anywhere after the Ministry mystery vault. He felt like an idiot. "No," he muttered. "I'll talk to Iris and find out if she knows."

"No need," Harry said, in that same edgy voice. "I know where it goes."

"You do?" Draco frowned, concerned at Harry's cagey behaviour. *What was he up to?*

"Ron and I, we, er … did a bit of digging," Harry began carefully and Draco felt a stab of annoyance. He fumed internally, *Weasley* – the Ministry employed Auror – was now involved?

"Iris needed protecting anyway," Harry continued hastily, obviously sensing Draco's ire. "Ron's had her sent to work with the curse breakers, or look like she is anyway. His brother Bill sorted it out for us. She'll be safely in Egypt while this is investigated."

"How do you know about Iris? What do you mean, *digging*?" Draco shot at him. *Nosey bloody Potter,* he thought furiously. "This was *Marc's* story, Potter, and you got the fucking Aurors involved?"

"No," Harry replied, looking stung. "I got the Weasleys involved."

"I really don't think that's any better." Draco said, and was immediately annoyed at himself for sounding petty.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Did you want Iris to lose her job?"

Draco exhaled heavily, trying to calm himself down. "No, but I didn't want the dodgy bloody Ministry and their arsehole Aurors involved in this!" Not calm apparently. "That was the whole fucking point!"

Harry leaned back against the sofa, took a sip of tea and waited for a moment. Then he said, sounding too relaxed, and much too condescending in Draco's opinion, "Draco, it's fine, no one knows. I was in there this morning," he plucked at his pullover and Draco realised where he'd seen it before: it was un-emblazoned Auror kit. "It's only Ron and me, we just got you the proof you or Marc needed," Harry said. "Marc mentioned Iris in that letter his crazy bird delivered while you were here the other day - you let me read it, remember?" Draco nodded curtly. "We just made sure that she gets to keep her job, and doesn't get in the way while this is investigated."

"Right, well," Draco muttered, resisting the childish urge to stamp his foot and say 'but it's *my* job. "What's your proof?"

"Bill convinced the Head Goblin, Begnak, to do a surprise audit of all Ministry accounts, to make sure that Travers and Smyth's records are up to scratch. The audit records are kept for all management employees to look at, so Bill is well within his rights to know what they contain; he's
willing to be your witness." Harry looked rather pleased with himself. "The goblins won't fire him; he gained their trust the best way there is, by bringing them tonnes of treasure when he worked in the field as a curse breaker."

"You prick," Draco said, but he was unable to stay angry as relief and triumph began to fill him up. Harry had delivered an iron-clad source. With respectable Bill Weasley as whistle-blower, the story would be far too hard for Travers or Blishwick to push aside. "Thank you," Draco said grudgingly. "It's really hard not to hex you when you go all thundersteely on me," he admitted ruefully.

"Thundersteely?" Harry laughed.

"Fuck off," Draco said, feeling a bit ridiculous, and wondering if Harry even realised the amount of debt Draco was racking up without even trying: life, liberty, sanity, career; hell, he felt like some sort of accidental charity case.

"I didn't mean to," Harry said earnestly, "and it will still look like Marc got the story, Bill was planning to owl him today for an interview, and Hermione is doing the same. He's going to think it's his luckiest day ever."

"Huh," Draco said, wishing he could see Marc's face when those owls arrived. "Well, I suppose that's all right then, you really should have kept me informed though." Draco couldn't resist adding. "Journalists might go to extreme lengths to get a story but poking your nose into someone else's work just isn't on."

To Draco's surprise, Harry looked slightly repentant. "I just wanted to help, corruption in the Ministry really worries me."

"It worries me too," Draco agreed, "but it's my job to tell people about it, yours is to stop it from happening in the first place."

"Perhaps," Harry grinned lopsidedly. "So then, what's on the list today?" He nodded towards Draco's notebook, obviously wanting to change the subject, "I'm sorry there's hardly any dates, it was so hard to keep track, I didn't even know what month it was that final night at the castle."

"Understandable," said Draco, accepting the diversion; being angry at someone for solving his problem seemed rather petty. He flipped through the pages in his book to get to the questions for July '97 – June '98. "Granger has a rough timeline in her notes on that year, so it shouldn't matter too much." Draco found the page, he'd nearly used up this whole book just with questions and quotes for and from Harry, and several pages every so often filled with little explanations of certain events to make them easier to understand. The book was becoming quite dog-eared already. "First, you said that Scrimgeour had held the contents of Dumbledore's will back until the law made him deliver them to you, because he was examining them – do you know what he was looking for?"

"Not really," Harry said. "He would have had ideas that Dumbledore was passing me instructions, or information on Voldemort or a secret weapon to defeat him … it was none of those."

"Well, the massive hint about Gryffindor's sword was," Draco pointed out.

"True," Harry nodded, as he poured a fresh cup of tea.

"But it was the snitch you said he was concerned with?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, thank god he didn't figure out a way to open it," Harry said fervently, "not that he would have had any idea what the stone was…" Harry's eyes seemed to dull for a second, and his voice was almost inflectionless as he added, "I really don't know if I could have made that walk into the
Draco swallowed uncomfortably – reading about Harry’s discovery of Dumbledore’s plan, and the march to meet Riddle that followed, was far more chilling than anything else Harry had described to him so far. Draco had tried to imagine being in such a position, and was quite certain that even if he had an army of dead loved ones beside him, he could never have walked so calmly to his death. He glanced at his notebook, having lost his train of thought. "So, Scrimgeour just wanted a way to stop Riddle, and thought Dumbledore had arranged to pass it to you?" he asked.

"I think so," Harry said.

"Alright," Draco murmured, his quill poised for the next answer, "When you found out that Dolores Umbridge was in possession of the locket Horcrux, why didn't you just go to her house? She'd be more likely to keep jewelry there, surely?"

"Well, we didn't know where she lived for a start," Harry said, "and with all the protection she'd have at home the Ministry seemed a more sure way to get close to her… easier to break into a building with hundreds of people entering it every day than a private home that might only allow the owner in." Harry’s forehead contracted as he paused, then he asked worriedly, "How are you going to explain that – there's only supposed to be one horcrux, and it's at Hogwarts?"

"Actually," Draco said at once, because he'd already thought of a solution, "I thought we'd say you were there to free the Muggleborns set for trial."

Harry clucked his tongue uncertainly. "But you're supposed to be making me look boring… overrated remember?"

"Well, since you did free the Muggleborns it's a much better explanation than anything else," Draco said determinedly.

Harry only looked half convinced. "If you're sure," he said.

Draco nodded. "The next thing is Weasley; do you know how he feels about me printing that he abandoned you?"

"That's actually why he came to visit on Sunday," Harry said. "We only got talking about your Treasury stuff by accident. Anyway, since we can't mention the locket and how it made him irrational, the rest of the truth makes him look pretty bad …"

"It needs to be included." Draco insisted.

"Yes, it does," Harry replied, "On Sunday Ron said he'd been jealous and all of that, but what we actually fought about that night was Ginny, and how he was worried about his family – he said as long as you stress that when he left he was with his brother, that he wanted to know if his family was all right, then he's cool with it."

Draco was impressed with Weasley's ownership of truly appalling behaviour but… "I suppose it helps that he came back in a blaze of glory to save your arse," Draco said with a small smirk.

"I suppose," Harry chuckled, "though part of that will have to be left out too."

Draco flicked back a few pages in his notebook and read his own shorthand aloud, "You followed the doe, which was cast by Snape, to find the sword of Gryffindor. Dumbledore had instructed Snape to do this so that you could use it to destroy Voldemort's lone horcrux – which turned out to be not an object like you thought, but Nagini – since that happened in front of so many witnesses."
Harry nodded. "Do you reckon that's okay? I don't mind Neville getting the credit."

"Yes, it's close enough to the truth, and there aren't any obvious gaps so it should be fine."

"Good. Neville knows what the snake was, but he doesn't know about the others."

Draco flipped the page to find his next question. "When you went to Godric's Hollow with Granger, did you truly think you'd find the sword there? I got the impression you really just wanted to visit your parent's graves." Draco winced internally as he said the last words; it was impossible to ask such a question without sounding prying.

Harry gave him a twisted little smile. "Yeah," he said, "we were sort of flailing, me and Hermione, by then; we didn't know what to do next, hell, we hardly even spoke to each other. My original plan had been to go to Godric's Hollow before I set out to find the Horcruxes, but Hermione pointed out that Voldemort might expect that. So it wasn't until she was desperate... and had convinced herself that Bathilda might be holding the sword for Dumbledore that when I suggested it, she agreed."

"Right," Draco said, and his stomach turned a little as he asked, "You weren't very clear on the mechanics of Nagini and Bathilda's body, had Riddle transfigured a shell for Nagini to hide in or ...?"

"No," Harry said. "Hermione said she saw the mess, Mrs Bagshot's, er, insides. The whole house smelled of rotten meat, she'd been gutted so Nagini could live inside." He swallowed, seeming to be suffering the same queasiness Draco was at the repulsive idea. "I'm not a hundred percent on whether the snake operated the body like a costume or what, Hermione thinks it was some variation of the Inferi curse.

"Okay," Draco said weakly, "I'm sure that's quite descriptive enough."

Harry took several large gulps of his tea, obviously trying to quell the nauseating effect of the memory. Draco had assumed he'd be used to grotesque things like that from his work as an Auror... but on second thought, he supposed that because Dark wizards could make someone feel like they were being sliced apart by a thousand knives, actually slicing them was unnecessarily messy and time consuming.

"Moving on," Draco said, wanting to get his next question over with. "Did you have any idea that Wormtail's silver hand would act the way it did when you taunted him about him owing you his life?"

"I didn't taunt him," Harry said. "Did I?"

"Reminded him then," Draco rephrased.

"I had no clue," Harry replied. "That night is so muddled in my head, I can mostly just remember Hermione screaming and Ron yelling and panicking, and then feeling like my heart had stopped when Dobby appeared in the cellar out of nothing and said he would take us out of there." Draco noticed that Harry had carefully said the cellar, not your cellar. Draco was grateful. "I didn't even make the connection with my call for help on the mirror til later," Harry said bemusedly, "I just have this recollection of a huge surge of hope inside me, and relief that there was this miraculous way out. It was a bloody weird feeling."

"I'll bet," Draco said, even though with the number of times Harry had been delivered some inconceivable life-line one would assume there'd be a point where you just sort of went with it. "So it was just instinct that made you remind Wormtail that he was in debt to you?"
"Yup," Harry nodded.

Draco noted Harry’s answer quickly; he was glad that he didn't need to ask any more questions about their brief meeting that Easter. Having it from his own point of view and Hermione's that night was well covered. "Now, the visions you had of Riddle, you said you figured out how to control them, that being so grief stricken over the death of the elf kept them out?"

"The elf," Harry interrupted in a mutter, "he saved my life, call him by his name please."

Draco blinked, surprised to be told off. "Sorry." he said shortly, "But why did grief keep Riddle out? I don't think he would have grieved over anything in his life..."

"I think that's true," Harry said, "Dumbledore said it was something like the inability to possess me, apparently I have a superhuman soul. But to me it just felt like my mind had more important things to focus on, like emotional Occlumency."

"You realise that is an oxymoron," Draco said, as he jotted down the answer anyway, "the whole point of occlumency is to be free of emotion."

"Yeah, well, I could never figure that out," Harry said. "Turned out to be a blessing. As much as I wanted to know what Voldemort was doing, I hated it."

"You said that in your notes. What did you see?" Draco had been wondering about this ever since Saturday.

"It seemed to happen most when he was angry, so mostly it was him punishing people. I saw you," Harry said abruptly, and Draco's insides tightened uncomfortably. Harry appraised him seriously for a moment before he continued. "You looked worse than you did in sixth year, the things he made you do… the stuff you saw first-hand, it was almost more disturbing that the rest of the vision content."

Draco couldn't think of a response to this. Of course, to him it had been more disturbing; the only time in his life he'd felt worse was when he'd been standing before the Wizengamot, with Cuthbert Higgs' voice still ringing in his head: 'I've defended you the best I can, but you should be prepared for an Azkaban sentence, just in case.'

Draco had thought that his seventh year at Hogwarts would be an escape from all the horror at home, even though he feared for his mother. But everywhere he turned in the castle reminded him of the year before, and of the chance of to get away that Dumbledore had offered, which Draco had given up.

The Entrance Hall he'd run across hot on Professor Snape's heels, as they fled from the Astronomy Tower. The seventh floor corridor he'd paced again and again to request the Room of Requirement to open for him. Any of the multiple bathrooms, because they all looked the same with their cracked marble sinks and damp stone floors. Draco had avoided looking in the age-dirtied mirrors for the whole year, for fear he would see Potter reflected over his shoulder just like the last time, with his wand raised, ready to finish the job Sectumsempra had started.

"You know… I wanted to ask," Harry said hesitantly into the silence. "Why you didn't identify me when we were at the manor? You knew it was me, why'd you put yourself in danger like that?"

Draco had half expected Harry to ask this, and he knew there would be nothing to gain from pretending he really hadn't recognised Harry. "We were no longer in the Dark Lord's favour…" Draco replied slowly. "I'd decided before I even came home for Easter that I wasn't actively fighting
anymore – only what was required. Giving my father a definite answer would have been counter-
productive."

"So it was for your own sake?" Harry asked. "But what about the wands? You're just as strong as
me and you didn't even fight me, I pulled all three out of your hand."

"Perhaps I'm just a weakling?" Draco offered with a shrug.

"No," Harry said, "you let me take them."

"So?" Draco asked. "This book is about your decisions, not mine."

"It's not for the book," Harry said. "I've wanted to know for years. You looked straight into my face
and said you couldn't be sure it was me, but you could!"

"Of course I could! You were tied up next to Weasley, Granger and Thomas, who the hell else
would it have been? But if I confirmed it was you, then the Dark Lord would have come back to my
house –"

Draco was suddenly overwhelmed with a clear and horrible memory of the moment Riddle did arrive
back. The Crucius Curse. Draco hadn't suffered the way his father had, for once again allowing
Harry Potter to escape. But once under the Dark Lord's wand was quite enough. Draco could only
recall wishing for death when it had been his turn. Lucius was never the same after that night; having
faced the torture curse repeatedly, it broke something in him.

Draco, his parents, Bellatrix and Greyback had been the only ones to survive Riddle's explosive rage
that evening. He could still see the bodies on the drawing room floor … Draco drew a breath, trying
to regain his previously foggy recollections, rather than the horribly real ones that were replacing
them.

Draco was distracted by Harry's fingers, which had suddenly curled around his own. Harry was
watching him uncertainly, obviously understanding the path Draco's thoughts had taken. Draco was
just grateful not to see pity. "Leave it, Potter," he admonished quietly. "I'm fine. It was a shitty few
years, that's all."

"I have no idea how I'd start dealing with what you were left with after the war," Harry said
pensively, his mouth turned down. "I've never really thought about that." His eyes met Draco's again
and he looked quite concerned. "I mean, I lost family, and, well, a bit of everyone, but at least
we won. Every single one of them would have been pleased with what we did in the end – even if
they weren't ready to go yet – but you…?" Harry shook his head as he trailed off.

"It's not like I wanted the Dark Lord to win," Draco snapped. "I chose his side because I thought he
would win in the beginning, but then… it wasn't like I could resign, so his destruction was the next
best thing."

"I --" Harry started, but he shook his head again and said, "Fuck this is depressing." He threw
himself back against the sofa, his eyes shut, still hanging on to Draco's hand.

"Potter," Draco said, reasonably gently, "we're not supposed to be doing this." He squeezed the hand
in his grip.

"I'm feeling rebellious," said Harry mutinously, "I can't focus on all the terrible shit when all I want
to do is –" He cut off abruptly, sitting up and snatching his hand away, saying quickly, "So then,
what's next on Draco's list of severely disturbing memories?"
"What do you want to do?" Draco inquired, jerked from his wallowing by the sight of a pink-cheeked Harry looking determinedly down at Draco's notebook.

"It doesn't matter," Harry said, busying himself by pouring a new cup of tea and taking a sip. "Next question?"

But Draco had had enough. Enough notes and sequencing events and bullshit memories that made him want to rock in the corner like a crazy person. "Tell me, Potter," Draco insisted, cursing his lack of professional focus as he felt the corner of his mouth lift playfully.

Harry's bright eyes met Draco's for a brief second and then he carefully put down his cup and shifted closer to Draco on the sofa. "Fine," he said, and brazenly ran his palm up the length of Draco's thigh and snagged his fingers into Draco's belt loop before he smiled. It was a fleeting, still nervous thing, and then Harry proceeded to climb into Draco's lap, card his fingers through Draco's hair, and snog the living daylights out of him.

If suddenly having a lap-full of Harry had been a surprising turn of events, it was nothing compared to what came next. Harry had slipped to the floor to kneel in front of him, and Draco actually thought he was going to pass out from insufficient blood supply to his brain. He'd never been so hard in his life as he watched an eager Harry-bloody-Potter unfasten his trousers and smile at his exposed cock.

After a second of hesitation Harry reached out his right hand and closed it around Draco's length, he moved it up and down once as if testing it out. It was a little torturous, the gentle fluttering touch, and Draco had to force himself not to squirm impatiently as Harry's thumb swept deftly yet lightly over the tip. But then Harry leaned in, looking up at Draco with a tentative excitement sparking in his eyes, a thrill of approval raced through Draco in response. Harry moved closer and now his bottom lip was so close to the head of Draco's prick that his unsteady puffs of breath were warm little promises of what was to come.

"Tell me if I'm doing all right," Harry said, his voice cracking the tiniest bit.

Draco's stomach flipped and heat seemed to spread through his chest, and he almost panicked at the very obvious symptoms of feelings much more troublesome than lust. Why couldn't Harry just stick to being bold - and a bit dirty? That would make everything much easier ...Bloody emotionally-available Gryffindor--

Draco's inner rant was completely derailed as Harry's lips slid the length of his cock, wrapping it in his soft-sucking, gloriously hot mouth, and causing Draco's brain shut down.

The pressure increased as he withdrew and Draco groaned helplessly as he felt Harry's tongue darting over the head, he took him deeper and deeper until Draco was hitting the back of Harry's throat with each bob. Soon his fingers wound in Harry's hair of their own accord, and he couldn't resist pumping into the blissful suction. Harry's cheeks were hollowed as he looked up at Draco again, his dark hair hung into his eyes and the angle meant that every look he gave Draco was through thick lashes and shaggy fringe, and completely seductive without even trying. The sight had the first licks of climax curling within Draco ridiculously quickly.

Harry's hand, which had been working the lower part of Draco's prick, unexpectedly vanished and for a moment he wondered why. But then he felt Harry's forearm bumping repeatedly against his shin and realised with a toe-curling jolt that Harry was pulling himself off while he sucked so beautifully on Draco's cock.

Harry hummed in pleasure around his mouthful, and the idea that he was enjoying servicing Draco so much that he couldn't wait, that he had to touch himself, made the hovering orgasm tighten within
Draco. He pumped harder into Harry's mouth, who didn't complain in the slightest, he just sucked more firmly and his hand moved faster and then in a reality obliterating rush Draco was coming, hard, fast, and shuddering into Harry's mouth.

"Fuck, get up," Draco gasped urgently to Harry, pulling him by the collar, so that he suddenly had a face on view of Harry's engorged cock. Harry's undone trousers slipped down at the quick movement, and his belt buckle hit the floor with a solid clunk. The flare of Draco's release was still pulsing through him as he took Harry's prick into his mouth. He bunched the hanging shirt tails up out of the way, his fist full of white fabric and thin wool as it pressed into the hard wall of Harry's stomach. The fingers of his other hand dug into Harry's arse cheek as he relaxed his throat as best he could and swallowed him down. With only three bobs of his head and as much suction as he could manage, Harry's knees nearly buckled and he shot his load down Draco's throat.

"Nugh," Harry grunted, stumbling slightly and catching himself with a clumsy hand on Draco's shoulder.

Draco's tight grip on his forearm steadied him and he looked up at Harry, who grinned foolishly, his throat and cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkling. "That was all right then?" he asked breathlessly, yanking his trousers up and collapsing next to Draco.

"Yes," Draco said faintly, unable to find even a scrap of his usual sharp tone. Harry must have sucked it out of him. "Must you be a natural at everything? It's very annoying."

"I didn't mean to annoy you," Harry said easily, "you looked so bloody sad…"

"And you thought, nothing like a blow job to lift a bloke's spirits?" Draco couldn't help the slow smile uncurling on his face as he nudged Harry in the ribs with his elbow. "Self-sacrificing as always, Potter."

"Something like that," Harry nodded, he yawned suddenly and then said, "Is there anything else on your list that can't wait until after a nap?" His eyes were already closed, his head lolling back against the sofa. Harry's flies were still undone, and his shirt untucked, the tails tangled up with the hem of his pull-over where Draco had shoved them aside to get at his cock. The skin of Harry's stomach was not as tanned as his forearms, but there was a clear demarcation just below his trouser-line that suggested he'd been gardening shirtless again, an image that would no doubt present itself in Draco's continually inventive imagination.

Draco wasn't aware of agreeing to Harry's request for a nap before they continued their work, but the next time he opened his eyes the library was much dimmer, the sky outside the tall windows was dark, and Draco's cheek was resting on a pillow shaped very much like Harry's thigh.
Chapter 18

On Tuesday evening, Draco went to bed almost as soon as he got home from Grimmauld Place. He was feeling pleasantly sleepy, due to a large house-elf cooked meal and the afternoon’s ill-advised but nonetheless enjoyable activities. He yawned his way through a shower and made a half-hearted attempt at filing the notes he’d taken that afternoon. He was in such a satisfyingly relaxed mood that even the realisation that he had the spine of a flobberworm didn’t really bother him.

Draco had just gotten into bed and was relishing being horizontal with the heavy covers pulled up to his chin, when there was a loud and urgent knocking on the front door downstairs.

Feeling rather unchivalrous Draco burrowed under his blankets and thought Astoria was closer, so she should get up and see who the mad knocker was. Apparently she did because there was a brief respite and Draco heard the front door open and close; he grinned and rolled over. Astoria would send them packing. Unfortunately, several minutes later the banging restarted again, much closer at hand because it was on the door of his flat this time, and accompanied by Marc’s voice.

“Draco, get your hand off your dick and come to the door, I really need to talk to you!”

“Yes, do hurry up Draco,” echoed Astoria’s voice from his sitting room, she must have been in the floo, Draco thought; she sounded a little peeved.

Draco hauled himself from his bed and snatched his wand from the nightstand. He quickly made his way to the door, flicking on lights as he went. Marc hardly ever called at his flat; something very important must have happened.

Draco pulled the door open, Marc stood there with a fat roll of parchment under one arm and his handsome face arranged in the most serious expression Draco had ever seen. This expression flickered as he looked Draco up and down and Draco belatedly realised that in his haste he had not covered his sleeping attire of pyjama trousers and nothing else.

“Nice,” Marc said appreciatively as his eyes travelled over Draco’s bare chest

“For the love of Merlin, Belby,” Draco said, embarrassed, and crossed his arms. “Why are you here in the middle of the night?”


“Really?” Draco asked, trying to sound intrigued as he stepped aside to allow Marc inside.

“Cuffe’s in on it too,” Marc said at once.

Draco felt his mouth fall open. “Barnabas Cuffe?”

Marc nodded vigorously. “The gold, in the vault- it’s then being moved into the Prophet’s account, they tried to say it was for advertising, public notices and jobs and such in the classifieds, but that comes out of the Public Relations offices stipend, not Treasury directly.”

Draco found he didn’t need to feign his interest any longer. He also realised that Harry must have already known this, he’d said he knew where the money went after the unnamed vault, but Draco had been too pissed off that he’d stuck his nose in to follow up the conversation. “How do you know it’s Cuffe?” he asked, shutting the door behind Marc.
“They’re cousins, remember,” Marc said. He handed Draco his wad of notes so that he could shrug out of his jacket as he continued. “Their other cousin, Willard Travers, he’s the one that’s been doing the Ministry accounts at the bank, just like you thought.”

“Cuffe and Blishwick are related to Travers?” Draco repeated.

“Yeah,” Marc nodded, “Weasley reckons they’re trying to pay back the family, they lost so much to reparations – but that was off the record. He said someone tipped him off; suggested he have a look at the old Death Eater tax accounts.”

Marc was beaming as he flipped through his notes. Draco was lost for words, it had been right in front of him the whole time, and he and Potter had even talked about the unnamed Travers all over the place. Harry and his bloody ‘digging’. Draco hoped Harry planned on being an investigative Auror rather than a combat specialist, the idiot was too bloody nosy to do anything else.

Before Draco could find something to say that was appropriately surprised and ignorant of the tipper-offer, he heard his floo buzzing in the sitting room. Astoria must have gone back to her evening if someone else was calling. Draco hurried into the room, and flicked his wand at the fireplace. He completely forgot about his shirtless condition until Harry’s head appeared in the flames.

“Draco,” Harry said at once, and then he faltered. “I’d call more often if I knew you answered the floo nude.”

“I’m not nude!” Draco said indignantly.

“Close enough,” Harry grinned, “look Bill just flooed me, it turns out the stolen money is – ”

“Being filtered through the Prophet.” Draco finished for him, “Yes, Marc has just banged down my door to tell me the same thing.”

“He’s there now?” Harry asked in a different, almost accusatory tone.

“Yes, he just arrived.”

“And you’re half naked?” Harry said shrewdly.

“I thought it was an emergency,” Draco very nearly growled, “and it is, our boss is in this as well, why didn’t you tell me today?”

“I didn’t know the account belonged to the Daily Prophet,” Harry said hastily, “it’s a business account, ‘Swift and Steele Holdings’, I just thought it was a shell company for embezzlement purposes, I would have told you if – ”

“Is that Harry Potter?” Marc interrupted, peering around the doorframe from the small entryway.

“I’m going to get dressed,” Draco said, abruptly standing up, “and yes Marc, that’s Harry Potter, Potter that’s Marcus Belby; please annoy each other instead of me.” He swept from the room with as much dignity as he could – which was minimal.

By the time Draco returned Marc was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the hearth. His notebook was open on his knee and his quill scribbling line after line of blue ink as Harry’s disembodied head spoke.

“You will have the exclusive,” Harry was saying, “Cuffe will be arrested within two weeks once you present this information to the Wizengamot, they’ll have to double-check everything but
Hermione will make sure it’s hurried along.” He smiled kindly at Marc. “Draco said to me ages ago that that this might be the sort of story that makes your career – I think he was right, the public likes nothing more than old families being cut down. You’ll be a popular fella.”

“Draco said that to you ages ago, did he?” Marc asked, turning to see Draco in the doorway, Marc’s eyebrows were raised significantly, and then he scrunched his nose and added “Boo, clothes,” in reference to Draco’s shirt and trousers.

“Potter, don’t open your fat mouth again.” Draco snapped, coming to crouch at the hearth. Marc was clever enough, he would figure out the link quickly – Draco’s acquaintanceship with Harry, him writing a famous person’s biography, it would be pretty obvious.

“It’s his bio isn’t it?” Marc said almost at once, unfortunately proving Draco right. “Your freelance contract. Harry-fucking-Potter, holy shit.” His eyes were wide, and then they flicked back to the fire. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly, looking at Harry.

“No problem,” Harry said, and he sounded almost amused.

“It is though, right?” Marc pressed.

Draco sighed heavily. “Yes, you nosey bastard.”

“So all the times you were gone, you were with him?” Marc asked, a touch of his normal teasing tone making an appearance.


“Right,” Marc said, looking suitably impressed. “Well, at least you won’t have to worry about being broke when the Prophet’s coffer are cleaned out to pay back the Ministry. You’ll be on the Best-Seller list.” He shook his head a little and muttered, “Prick.”

“They’ll make the Prophet repay it?” Draco asked. “Surely Cuffe will have to foot the bill.”

“It depends,” said Harry. “Hopefully he’s been paying himself a higher salary and then putting the money back into the Travers family vault from his own, that would make it a cut and dried debt recovery from him personally, but if he’s been clever with it, and there is no clear path out of the company account, the Prophet may be liable for at least some of it.” Harry’s forehead furrowed as he looked at Marc. “If I was you Marc, I’d be looking for work as soon as possible.”

“Fuck,” Marc gulped, “best story of my career and the fucking last.”

“There will be something,” Harry said consolingly. “The Prophet needs to exist in some form, wizards don’t get their news on telly like Muggles.”


“Oi,” Draco said, recognising the flirting lilt entering Marc’s voice. Draco snapped his fingers in Marc’s face, and added sternly, “Absolutely not.”

But Marc just smiled his most innocently devious smile and said smugly, “I knew it. You’re lucky it’s me Draco, the public would have far more interest in this than a rich old bloke hiding taxes.”

“This,” Draco said, flicking his finger between himself and the fire, “is a working relationship, get your mind out of the gutter.”
Marc immediately turned back to the hearth, and asked in his best Skeeter impression, “Does it hurt to be brushed aside like that, Harry?”

To Draco’s extreme annoyance, Harry started to laugh. “Keep it to yourself, Belby, you owe me enough favours as it is.”

“Like I would tell anyone.” Marc flipped two gloating fingers in Draco’s scowling direction.

“Good luck with the story,” Harry said, and then he grinned at Draco, “See you on Thursday for work.”

“Yes,” Draco said grudgingly, “good night, tosser.”

Harry just laughed and blew Draco a ludicrous kiss, saying “Night sweetie!” before the green flames swallowed his faux sycophantic simper.

Draco blinked in horror, almost sure he had imagined Harry’s absurd farewell.

But then Marc said in a wavering voice full of repressed mirth, “He is a riot, Harry bloody Potter…” Then he caught the disgruntled expression on Draco’s face, and it put him over the edge. Marc broke into totally unnecessary guffaws, merrily slapping the hearth rug with his notebook and wiping at his eyes.

“So, Cuffe?” Draco said, trying to draw Marc back to seriousness.

Marc did sober, and looked at Draco with slightly narrowed eyes. “I can’t believe you’re fucking Harry Potter,” he groused. “He’s so fit these days.”

“Good god Belby!” Draco spat, mortified, “I’m not fucking him, we’re working on his book and are maybe a bit closer than we should be, but that’s all. And focus for fuck’s sake, Cuffe, the breaking story that’s going to make you a household name?”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’ve been, what, holding hands with Potter? I didn’t even know he was bent.” Marc’s eyebrows hitched in contemplation, “I never thought you’d be someone’s bit on the side though Draco, I’m a little disappointed.”

“I’m not,” Draco said impatiently, “we’re not anything, can we please get to work on the statement for the Wizengamot? I’m assuming you want my help?”

“You better be careful,” Marc said worriedly, looking at the once-again banked hearth, “the public will eat you alive for corrupting their hero.”

“Shall I suck your cock now or later?” Draco asked bluntly.

Marc’s eyes bugged out of his head. “Christ! Don’t say things like that if you don’t mean them.”

“Oh, so you can hear me then.” Draco snapped, “I was just checking. Now shut up about bloody Potter and come with me.” Draco turned on his heel and led the way to his study; they had a statement to prepare.

Draco and Marc had worked til the wee hours to get a concise draft of events together, which were then tweaked by Granger and her legalese before being filed with the Wizengamot for appraisal.
Draco had expected some sort of immediate result, an acknowledgment of the case or something. But there was nothing official, just a one-line note from Hermione the following evening:

It’s before council, action pending.

It wasn’t until Friday that something happened, and it was not at all what Draco had prepared for. The day before he’d been held up interviewing the spokeswoman for W.A.C.A.M, a horrible experience that had left Draco’s favourite suit jacket infused with sandalwood incense and suspiciously pungent roll-up smoke. It had also taken up his whole afternoon so he hadn’t been able to make his normal meeting time with Harry.

Draco had been in the post room arranging a new date, or rather an appointment, with Harry and trying very hard to think of it as work and not socialising with a high possibility of orgasm, when it had happened. There was the ominous clop-crunch of kitten-heel on the owl messed floor and the sharp snick of the door to the stairwell being closed.

It was silent for a second and then a carefully modulated voice said, “I’m surprised at you, Draco.”

Draco managed not to jump at the sudden and rather theatrical interruption. He turned around to see Betty Braithwaite standing behind him. Her hand was braced on the door handle and there was a vaguely sinister smile on her face.

“You are?” Draco asked cautiously. It seemed over the top to check his pocket for his wand, but he did so anyway.

“Yes,” Betty said, pressing her lips together briefly as she glared at him. “I thought we had an agreement.”

“We did?” Draco asked casually, he wasn’t entirely sure what she was talking about, but he had a feeling she knew that the Treasury scam was about to come to light.

“To wait to publish the story until we were sure of the facts?” she said pointedly.

Draco shook his head, wondering where she got her information from. “There’s no story published,” he said.

“No,” Betty allowed, coming closer to Draco and lowering her voice, “but very soon we’re going to have the Law Enforcement Patrol interrupting our work day.” Her expression had softened somewhat; she looked almost worried as she added, “I hope you have your stories ready to go, it’s going to be an absolute shitstorm.”

“Marc is ready,” Draco said confidently, “and how do you know anyway?” he asked, unable to resist. “It’s hardly public record.”

“I have my sources,” she brushed him off, looking even more concerned as she continued. “But are you ready, your Sententia piece? We’ll need it to discredit Cuffe with as soon as the rumours begin.”

“My Sententia piece?” Draco repeated blankly.

“Yes, I left you the receipts and things,” Betty recovered her usual brisk manner, “I’ve been making sure that all the Sententia use trails back to Cuffe.” She paused as Draco continued to look at her in confusion. “You have written the article, haven’t you? You’ll need to add that everyone was forced to use it; I know it’s against your usual line but you need this paper to survive just as much as I do.”

Draco felt like he a missed a vital part of the conversation. “You left those scrolls on my desk?” he
said, he was completely at sea. Why would Betty want him to write about Sententia when all it
would do was ruin her? “I haven’t written anything about Sententia,” Draco said, frowning at Betty.

“You haven’t?” Betty said, her voice rising in surprise. “But you were so outraged by it, I was sure
you’d be on the watch for anything that could help you stitch up Barnabas and I, why do you think I
introduced him to the damn stuff?”

Draco gaped for a moment, “What? You never told me to write anything about it!”

“When has that ever stopped you?” Betty shot at him; she sounded quite frustrated.

She wasn’t the only one. Draco threw up his hands dramatically. “You do realise this is insane?
You’re not making any sense.”

Betty fixed him with an intensely incredulous eye and Draco let his hands drop. Betty said seriously,
“Look, I’ve worked for Cuffe for fifteen years, all through the war and in the years previous. I was
here, I saw him roll over for Riddle, he didn’t even attempt to fight.” She sounded thoroughly
disappointed, and Draco was mesmerised by the unusually honest tone. “I suppose he’d always let
the Ministry tell him what to do, why would the new regime be any different?” Betty gave him a
grim little smile. “At one of the Ministry’s Christmas do’s last winter I overheard him plotting with
his cousins to ‘get back what they’re owed,’ I decided it was the last straw.”

“Hang on,” Draco said, “Why didn’t you just tell me Cuffe was up to something dodgy?”

“Why do you think?” Betty raised an eyebrow, “Because you’d get all moral, and the paper would
suffer, the Prophet needs a fresh start, all the bullshit we’ve been printing –”

“You’ve been printing-” Draco interjected.

“Yes, well, Rita’s a hard woman to argue with,” Betty admitted, “she has stuff on everyone. If I tried
to argue with her she would have ruined my ex-husbands career, he has a personal habit that his
customers wouldn’t appreciate.”

Mr Braithwaite was a well-known supplier of heavy duty protective equipment, from Quidditch
guards to the full body kit worn by wranglers of dangerous creatures.

“It’s the reason we divorced, I mean when your husband spends more on ladies underthings for
himself than for you, you have to draw the line.”

Draco snorted, he could see how macho, salt-of-the-earth dragon tamers might less inclined to shop
at Mr Braithwaite’s.

“I foolishly told Rita all about it after a glass too many, under the impression that we were friends,
but then when I said confided that I was sick of Cuffe and the status quo she put the hard word on.
Spiteful frump, I couldn’t let her do that to him; ex or not, I don’t hate him.” Betty said and Draco
couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing. She smiled widely, looking exultant, “But now all that
petty nonsense will drown in a news cycle occupied by embezzlement and dubiously-conducted
interviews, the public will be scandalised. Cuffe will be thrown out by the board and I’ll tell them
how he forced us to use Sententia, the Prophet will emerge as a newly cleansed publication, free of
that nasty tax-stealing Cuffe.” Draco was a little stunned; Betty was suddenly a real person. “You
can’t say the idea doesn’t appeal to you,” she added quietly.

“I –” Draco started, but he was at a loss. She was probably right, he wouldn’t have been okay with
framing Cuffe for Sententia use. He could see her reasoning though: make Cuffe the evil villain who
not only steals Ministry gold but also bullies his employees into drugging their sources. Public
opinion was everything when it came to the success of a paper.

The board of directors probably wouldn’t fire Cuffe unless he was actually imprisoned for the Treasury crime; because fraud and tax evasion were things the everyday man didn’t care about, and wouldn’t likely affect sales. But the board would have to do something about an Editor in Chief who was using perception-altering potions to beef up the articles.

“I can’t help but think you’d be in line to get Cuffe’s job,” Draco said, realising Betty’s motives might not be quite as upstanding as she was suggesting.

Betty smiled again. “Yes, awfully convenient, isn’t it? But then my position would need filling…” she said leadingly, and Draco got the horrible impression she was trying to sound tempting. He repressed a shudder as she continued in a suggestive voice, “Aren’t you sick of digging up the trivial stuff, Draco? Wouldn’t you rather be shaping each day’s edition… making sure the reporters met your standard?”

“So it will be your word against his?” Draco said sceptically, thinking it flimsy and completely unreliable.

Betty seemed to understand his dubiousness. “Yes, but I happen to have a very sound character witness, it will be fine.”

“Who?” Draco asked, he couldn’t think of anyone that the board would listen to over Cuffe.

Betty deliberated for a moment, and then apparently decided she could trust Draco because she said, “My brother, Donald Hughes, is head of the DMLE; no one will argue with him.”

Draco remembered the fear in both Harry and Ron’s faces at the mention of the name of their HoD. Perhaps Betty had a point. “Hughes is your brother?” he asked. Remembering what Harry had said about Hughes’s motivations, he said, “I have a friend who’s an Auror, he told me the war is a bit of a sore spot for Hughes,” Draco tried to sound kind, rather than nosy, as he asked, “they said they thought he lost family?”

Betty nodded. “Our older sister was killed right at the end of the war, we thought we’d all made it through but she was in Hogsmeade on the second of May … it wasn’t til the death toll was released that we found out … anyway,” she said, her voice a little thick, “Donald has been fighting the best way he knows, with laws and justice; my brother was a Hufflepuff, you see. Unfortunately loyal and honest to a fault. My sister was the Gryffindor cliché, she fought and died bravely.” Suddenly Betty’s sinister smile was back. “I, however, share your house colours, Draco,” Betty said proudly, “and I’m fighting the best way I know how.”
“Right,” Draco muttered, unable to allay the concern that if her vendetta was against former Death Eaters then he was undoubtedly a poor ally. But she hadn’t mentioned his past so he decided go with it for now. “I’m guessing your brother is your source in the Ministry?” he asked.

“This time,” Betty confirmed, “but only inadvertently, he arrived at my house last night to ask if I was a signatory on the company account, apparently unapproved Ministry gold has been deposited regularly for the last six months. An anonymous, but thoroughly-researched and well-written tip-off was presented to the Wizengamot on Wednesday, they’re getting ready to act and he wanted to make sure I wasn’t caught up in it.”

“Well-written?” Draco asked smugly.

“Yes, why didn’t you tell me you were going ahead with it?”

“Because we didn’t know who we could trust,” Draco said honestly, “and neither Marc nor I fancied going to jail, or being silenced by well-connected people who might not want this information brought to light.”

“I can’t fault you, I suppose,” Betty said grudgingly. “You’re just lucky I had the forethought to get the powers of signatory removed from my contract after I figured out Cuffe was up to something.”

“Cunning,” Draco said shortly. The more he thought about what she was asking with this Sententia kerfuffle, the more it agitated him; she was so bloody presumptuous. “So you want me to write a factual article outlining the use of Sententia by Prophet reporters, but say that it was Cuffe pushing its use, not you?” Draco managed to keep his annoyance hidden; it was like she thought his honesty was some sort of useful gimmick. She smiled and Draco continued before she could reply, “Did your brother tell you that the Wizengamot are going to reclassify Sententia next in a few weeks? Class C, there will be fines for both selling and administering it.”

Betty’s eyes lit up, “He didn’t, that will be brilliant timing though,” Betty said enthusiastically. “How did you pull that one? I knew you’d be doing something about it, ethics and all that.”

“And all that,” Draco said blandly. “You’re not the only one with useful contacts.”

Betty pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Alright,” she said brightly, “so you’ll get started on it then, help me get Cuffe out of this place forever?”

Draco couldn’t quite believe the gall of Betty Hughes Braithwaite, to rid the Prophet of the easily-manipulated Cuffe was an admirable goal; and he supposed that she was right, freelancers like Skeeter had the advantage of being able to work with multiple publications but the downside was that if the Prophet decided that they no longer wanted to print her articles, Skeeter couldn’t do anything about it. But she had assumed rather a lot, even if Draco probably would have spent all his free time figuring out a way to land Cuffe and Betty in it – if he hadn’t been so busy with Harry.

The only thing was, Draco didn’t trust Betty; she’d been printing bullshit for a decade, all in aid of lulling Cuffe into a false sense of security so that she could strike at the right time? It seemed over the top and convoluted. But then, Draco thought shrewdly, who was to say she wouldn’t go down with the sinking Sententia ship? She was putting a lot of faith in her brother’s influence.

Draco gave Betty a tight smile. “I’ll get started.”

As he made his way back downstairs, Draco smiled smugly to himself. Betty might have been in Slytherin at school but that didn’t mean she was clever – in her case, ambition made her selfish and stopped her from seeing the big picture. Namely, Draco was the one with the reputation for
unrelenting honesty in his articles. The readers would believe the story he told about Sententia – and it would be his story.
Chapter 19

The day of Cuffe’s arrest Draco was not at the Prophet; in fact he was not even in England. He was sitting opposite Viktor Krum in a coffee house in Copenhagen.

In the two weeks since Betty had accosted him in the postroom, very little had changed at the Prophet. Draco had written an article outlining the use of Sententia just as Betty had asked him to, though he doubted she’d be very pleased with the content when he submitted it. It pointed quite a few fingers – all in her direction.

Draco’s meetings with Harry had been very productive during the past fortnight. Thanks to diligent reporting (or snooping journalists), Harry’s life after the war was easily covered, as most of it had been printed in the Prophet; in fact it was more a case of Harry telling Draco what hadn’t happened than what had. They had even managed to get through the five years in two meetings with purely professional conduct the whole way… technically.

It wasn’t until the final departure when all the notes were taken, and Draco only had the meeting with Krum and a quick conversation with Hermione to tick off his list, that Harry decided to ignore the flimsy boundaries once again. He had followed Draco all the way down through the house to ‘say goodbye’, which turned out to mean ‘push him up against the front door and kiss the breath out of him.’

Draco had acquiesced; after all it wasn’t a huge hardship to be kissed by someone he really rather fancied, he just didn’t want to be kissed yet. He was determined that he would see out his contract before he allowed himself to examine the fuzzy, blooming sensation inside him every time he was in Harry’s company, and that was something that was getting harder and harder to ignore. In fact he was thinking about it now and the bespectacled fool was nowhere in sight – instead, across the table was the hooked nose and slightly dour expression of Viktor Krum.

They sat unbothered amongst the other customers; the Danes did not seem as fascinated by Krum’s fame as Draco would have expected. Especially given that the Copenhagen Skarpskytter had bought him from Lithuania’s highest ranked team, the Greitai Sparnai from Kaunas, for a highly publicised record fee last season. The Bulgarian-born seeker was worth every piece of gold, of course; the Skarpskytter were now top of the table due to Krum’s unbeaten capture streak, he was certainly having a bumper final season. Despite Krum’s miraculous statistics and stellar, decade-long career, only the occasional inquisitive glance came their way, usually followed by a sly double-take. Draco was quite impressed with the Danish decorum, until he realised that they were in Muggle Copenhagen, the busy quayside quadrant of Nyhavn to be exact, so the surrounding customers probably had no idea of the celebrity in their midst.

“I had hoped Potter would join you,” Krum said, looking out the window to the blustery harbour.

The colourful façades of the ancient shipping storage warehouses across the quay were a cheerful burst of brightness between an iron-grey clouded sky and frigid choppy sea. They made a quaint backdrop for the floating forest of masts belonging to the old Muggle sailing boats that filled the harbour, many of which were being tossed about on the water by the autumn wind.

“He’s here,” Draco replied, following his gaze, and thinking that this picturesque and completely foreign setting was just what he needed to escape from the almost claustrophobic feel of Wizarding London.

“He should be along shortly,” Draco continued. “There was some important business he had to
At their last scheduled biography session Harry had informed Draco that he would be tagging along on the Denmark trip. Apparently Krum had written to Harry asking if he was able to attend the meeting too. Draco was pleased for the company, for mostly innocent reasons. He was sick to death of the jittery unsettledness of the Prophet office, for a start. He, Marc and Betty were all just waiting for something to happen with Cuffe. So he had seized the excuse to leave the country and booked a hotel room in Wizarding Copenhagen for the night.

Draco reasoned that removing himself from the distracting tension at home would make adding Krum’s point of view and the finishing touches to the final draft of Harry’s bio much more pleasant. Also, his recently reawakened and Potter-focused libido helpfully pointed out that having Harry in a room down the hall would be conveniently convenient when he’d finished the draft, and was free of his ethical conscience – however weak-willed it was. Guilt-free socialising with Harry seemed like a grand way to forget about the Treasury drama.

“I only wanted to ask him a few questions,” Krum said, good-naturedly, “fair enough?” He cast a meaningful glance at the list of events in Harry’s fourth year that needed conformation.

The questions had been translated into Bulgarian by the ever-ten-steps-ahead Hermione Granger-Weasley. Draco had decided that she must have gotten somebody else to do it, when he’d first seen the page he’d thought it was written in Ancient Runes. He sincerely hoped that Granger’s ridiculous store of knowledge didn’t include being fluent in written Bulgarian, because he already felt a little inadequate in her company.

“Fair enough,” Draco echoed. He sipped his coffee, which was better even than what they served at Pointy’s. He thought he might need to find more reasons to visit Scandinavia.

Krum used an ordinary Muggle pen to scrawl away in his indecipherable language beneath each question. Draco wondered how he was going to translate it this afternoon. He would have to check the Wizarding district for translators.

He was still pondering this when the door of the coffee house opened, bringing a flurry of chilly sea air dancing through the room. Harry followed in its wake wearing a knitted hat pulled down low over his ears, his hair poked out in sporadic spikes from beneath its hem. He had a folded newspaper in his hand and a smug grin on his face that was at odds with the innocence of his cold-pinked cheeks.

Harry’s eyes darted around the coffee house and lit upon Draco and Krum in their corner. He made his way through the busy room quickly. Harry gave Krum a broad smile as soon as he reached them, and extended his hand to the Quidditch player.

“Viktor,” he said, heartily, “I’m so pleased you were able to help us out.”

“Of course,” Krum said, rising from his chair to shake Harry’s offered hand firmly, “Fleur is mentioning you often in her Christmas card letter; she is Hermy-own-ninny’s sister-in-law now?”

“Yes,” Harry said, pulling out the chair next to Draco and sitting down. As he spoke he slid the paper he’d been holding, which turned out to be a distinctly singed-around-the-edges copy of the Daily Prophet, into Draco’s lap. The banner headline took Draco’s attention immediately.

**DEATH EATERS STEAL FROM TAX PAYERS**

Draco smiled to himself, trust Marc; as dramatic as possible.
An embezzlement ring designed to refurbish the Travers family coffers after the heavy Death Eater taxation has been discovered operating within the Ministry of Magic and Gringotts Wizarding Bank.

Willard Blishwick, head of Treasury and his cousin Willard Travers, chief of Ministry accounts at Gringotts - who are both named for their grandfather, Willard Travers Snr., a known Death Eater who was killed by Aurors during the first war – have been arrested this morning for diverting Ministry gold for private use.

Barnabas Cuffe, formerly Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Prophet and part of the Travers family through his mother’s side, was also arrested, for moving the gold his cousins Travers and Blishwick had stolen through the business accounts of the Daily Prophet.

The Wizengamot ordered the arrest warrants at the opening of business this morning and the Daily Prophet, led by interim editor-in-chief Betty Braithwaite will be covering the developing story with unbiased diligence.

Draco was so absorbed by the article that it was a second before he realised Krum was asking him a question.

“Really, Mr Malfoy?”

“Ah,” Draco said guiltily, looking up. “Sorry, pardon?” he asked.

“Harry vos just saying that you considered Durmstrang for your education.”

“My father did,” Draco said, a little startled at the odd topic. He looked at Harry in confusion – how on earth had he known that? “But Mother insisted on tradition, so it was Hogwarts for me.”

“It is the same in my family,” Krum nodded. “I grew up in Bulgaria so Beauxbatons is much closer to home than Durmstrang in Norvay, but all the Krum men haff gone to Durmstrang so I did too.”

“Durmstrang has such a vigorous Quidditch program though; surely you would have chosen it anyway, despite the distance?”

“Yes,” Krum said, “though neither of my parents ever played, I had not been to a game, or flown a broom for more than travel when I started school.”

“Good grief, really?” Draco said, completely slipping from any kind of professionalism at this revelation. His words had sounded almost derisive, but he just couldn’t believe that the pure-blooded Viktor Krum, possibly the most competent seeker in history didn’t even see a Quidditch match until he was eleven years old.

“Not all magical families are obsessed with Quidditch,” Krum said, somewhat brusquely, apparently taking offence at Draco’s accidental scorn. “My parents grew up during the Great European War and the poverty that followed, they were both preoccupied with holding onto their jobs when I vos a boy. They worked very long hours, so there vons’t a lot of time for sports.”

“I see,” Draco said, feeling chastened. He knew of the ghastly state Eastern Europe was left in when Grindelwald’s forces retreated, a situation only exacerbated by the end of the Muggle war that coincided with the magical one. Draco’s own war experience had been many horrible things, but they had always had food and a warm bed, none of his family had starved or frozen to death like so many in Europe during the winter that followed in the wake of the war.

“I made up for it a hundred times over ven I started school though,” Krum said, his tone lifting. “Flying every day, as much as we were allowed, and sometimes when we weren’t.” He grinned, and
the look was odd on his normally surly face. “Being on a broom is still the best thing in the world to me,” he shrugged self-consciously. “But we are here for your life story not mine,” he said to Harry, returning his gaze to Draco’s list of questions.

Draco watched him write further and further down the page, he knew which question he must be answering. Draco had asked for a detailed description of the twenty fourth of April, the night Ludo Bagman had spoken to the four champions in the newly sprouted hedge maze on the Quidditch pitch.

Because Harry and Krum had walked alone around the edge of the forest, and then encountered the Imperiused Bartemius Crouch, Draco wanted a thorough version of events. Otherwise there could be speculation on who attacked who that evening.

Draco knew he was asking quite a lot of the reader with the story of a polyjuiced Mad-eye Moody, and a turncoat Animagus returning Voldemort to his body and magical strength. He hoped that his own credibility as a reformed Death Eater would help; he had used his recollections of Wormtail’s boasts as proof of the night in the graveyard. With Krum’s point of view on the happenings within the maze on the final night of the tournament, Draco hoped that it would be enough.

Draco had been to the counter for a refill of his coffee twice before Krum finished writing, but finally after at least another hour, he was done. Krum passed the parchment back to Draco, and then he linked his fingers and bent them back so they made a god awful cracking, both Draco and Harry winced, but Krum just shook them out and picked up his coffee.

“Do you know any good translators?” Draco asked him looking down at the squiggle covered page.

“One,” Krum said at once, “but he is very busy, normally one week waiting time for something that big.”

“Damn,” Draco muttered, he really couldn’t sacrifice quality for speed in this case.

“Pass it here,” Harry said suddenly, reaching out for the questionnaire.

“Since when do you speak Bulgarian?” Draco asked, but he pushed the papers in Harry’s direction anyway.

Harry shrugged and turned the parchment over in his hands, then held it up to the low-hanging light. His eyes were narrowed as he scrutinised it closely. Draco wasn’t sure if Harry was taking the piss or not. Eventually he asked, “What’s the Latin word for translate?”

“Vertunt,” Draco said at once.

“Vertunt,” Harry repeated, tapping the parchment with his wand. At once the sharp edged scrawling shapes of Krum’s handwriting morphed into the understandable rounded letters of English.

“How did you know that?” Draco asked, astounded, snatching the parchment to take a closer look.

Harry shrugged, “I thought everyone did, it’s just a simple translating charm.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Draco said, feeling quite perplexed. “Why would my father have made me learn so many languages if I could just tap things into English with my wand?”

Harry’s bright eyes were mischievous as he replied, “‘Cause he’s mean?”

“Well, yes,” Draco spluttered, holding the page up to the light, determined to discover the trick. “But
honestly.”

“I’ve never heard of it either,” Krum put in, looking interestingly at the parchment.

“Thank goodness,” Draco sighed, relieved that he had not missed some massive part of his education. Krum was a pureblood, perhaps language learning was one of those, ‘for traditions’ sake’ things old families were so obsessed with. “Still, it’s crazy that-“

But Draco stopped dead as Harry began to laugh, pointing an accusing finger at Krum, “You wrecked it, Viktor, I would have had him going for ages!” He just chortled at the bemused look Krum gave him, but Draco’s displeased arched eyebrow drew an explanation, even if Harry didn’t look at all contrite. “It’s Hermione’s spell,” he said easily, “she has a bit of an affinity with charmed parchment.”

“Oh,” Draco humphed, still feeling put out. Bloody Granger. “So it wouldn’t work on everything?”

“No, the parchment would have to be charmed before it was written on.” Harry gave a little shrug. “Her activation words are always Latin.” He grinned widely again, obviously pleased to have got one over on Draco.

Draco nudged Harry with his elbow, trying to look stern. “Enough fooling around, Potter, we’re on a deadline.” But he felt the corner of his mouth lift and he maintained eye contact for a moment longer than necessary, not quite able to look away.

Krum coughed. “More coffee?” he asked

“Please,” Harry said, jerking his gaze from Draco’s to look at the Quidditch player.

“Not for me thanks,” Draco said, shuffling his papers into a serviceable stack, and slotting them into his satchel. “I’m going to get my work out of the way.” He stood to pull his coat on and then slung the long strap of his satchel over his chest. “I’ll meet you both for dinner?” he asked, digging his gloves from his pocket and tugging them on.

Krum nodded, standing too and looking in the direction of the counter “Yes, at Bryggerier, down the quay? They haff good ale, good food.”

“Perfect,” Draco said. “I’ll see you there as soon as I’m done.”

Harry watched Draco leave the café; he stopped just inside the door to wind his scarf around his neck more securely before heading out into the cool late afternoon.

A fragrant cup of coffee was pushed under Harry’s nose and Krum sat down opposite him again. “Does your girl know?” he asked at once, his voice cautionary. “The Harpy?”

“Know what?” Harry asked; he’d forgotten that most people still thought he and Ginny were a couple.

“About you and the writer,” Krum said bluntly his forehead was contracted and given that he normally looked like he was scowling even when he wasn’t, an actual scowl was quite intimidating.

“Er,” Harry stuttered, feeling completely caught out. “I’m not with Ginny anymore,” he hedged, “we wanted different things.”
“Maybe too similar things I’d say,” said Krum, his dark eyes on door Draco had just left through. Despite the scowl, he didn’t sound angry or disgusted, just concerned.

Harry felt himself go red; was it that obvious? “Please don’t mention the break-up to anyone,” he said imploringly, avoiding the point. “The papers haven’t gotten wind of it yet, I’m sure Ginny would like to finish the season without her personal life overshadowing it.”

Krum nodded, and took two large swallows of coffee before he continued. “She’s haffing a good one, third ranked in goals isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, weakly, grateful Krum wasn’t prying. “She’s a brilliant player.”

Krum gave him an appraising smile. “I remember you vere good once too, why didn’t you pursue it as a career as vell?”

“I had offers,” Harry admitted. “Six regional teams offered me a place as seeker.”

Krum’s heavy eyebrows shot up. “Six? Did the trials not go vell?”

“No,” Harry said, “no trial at all, they just said I had the position if I wanted it.” He pursed his lips bitterly. “I’ll bet the managers just saw ‘Potter as seeker’ as one huge publicity stunt, so I turned them all down and stayed in Auror training.”

“I don’t blame you,” Krum said, looking offended. “I would think more public eyes on you vos not desired either?”

“No,” Harry agreed. “That’s what my book is for, my whole life story for everyone to see, hopefully then there will be no more speculation.”

“It is a shame you haff to go to such lengths,” Krum said, he paused briefly to sip at his nearly finished coffee, then said carefully, “I had vonted to ask you about your book, or more like the process of writing it I suppose.”

Harry nodded, “Go ahead, the way my life goes, there will probably be articles, if not actual books written about the writing of my biography.” He gave a wan little smile. “People are ridiculous.”

“They really are,” Krum said fervently. “I spend most of my free time in the Muggle vorld now, just to get away from the press.” He grimaced and then lifted his cup, “but it is not all bad, I’m sure you know I’m retiring this year,” he went on. “And according to my manager, writing memoirs is the thing to do to guarantee an income that doesn’t rely on endorsements,” his grimace was back. “Was the process difficult?”

“It’s been okay, actually,” Harry said truthfully. “Although Draco and I have a bit of personal history that made it uncomfortable at times.”

Krum made an odd little noise in this throat that might have been a sceptical chuckle and said, “You seem to haff overcome it.”

“Yes,” Harry muttered, feeling embarrassed; but he knew he could trust Krum, like some sort of celebrity code of honour. “That was sort of good timing more than anything else.”

“He is very nice to look at,” Krum said evenly.

Harry snorted in surprise, and Krum grinned at the look on his face, “Vot? A man comfortable in himself can appreciate the vay another man looks, yes?”
“I suppose,” Harry said, bemusedly, “so does your manager have an author in mind for your
memoirs?” He couldn’t help thinking how much Draco would want the job.

Krum sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. “Yes, I vould think hundreds, but he is a domineering coot,
I like to surprise him,” Krum nodded towards Draco’s empty chair and asked, “Your man Malfoy,
why did you choose him?”

“He has a reputation for honesty in his reporting for the paper,” Harry said. “The Daily Prophet has
an almost complete monopoly on the press market in Britain, and the Wizarding community take
their word as law, I think that Draco hates that they helped Voldemort rise to power but never had to
pay for it like everyone else did.”

“Like he did?” Krum asked. “He fought against you, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “I think that’s why he works so hard; he’s still paying for his mistakes.” Harry felt
a little awkward; he probably should let Draco tell his own story. “But whatever the reason,” Harry
said hastily, “his reputation means that people will believe what he writes in my book, and then
hopefully they’ll leave me alone.”

Krum nodded thoughtfully, “That makes sense, I hope it vorks.” He was pensive for a moment,
folding and unfolding one of the card coasters that were in a neat little stack in the centre of the table.
“I keep comparing my situation to yours,” he said, finally looking up, “but it’s not the same; when I
decided to play Quidditch I knew I vould get attention, not to mention I love it. I’m famous for
something that makes me happy, endlessly happy even after ten years.”

“I suppose,” Harry agreed, “but to be honest I’m quite happy that I got rid of Voldemort.”

Krum smiled and shook his head a little. “Vell, obviously.”

Harry grinned back, feeling a bit silly. “Don’t get me wrong, I hate the attention and at school it was
worse because I hadn’t really done anything to deserve it,” Harry paused, thinking how he always
brushed praise aside, even when it was deserved; he wondered sometimes if he came across as
sullen, rather than humble. So steeled himself and said, “But I’m pretty proud of what I achieved, not
many people get to say they saved the world.”

“Vell said,” Krum chuckled. His surly face was much less intimidating when he laughed, Harry
thought as he joined in.

Krum showed Harry around the tourist district for a couple of hours after they had finished their
coffee. It was nice enough but the cutting breeze coming in from the sea drove them to their dinner
appointment early.

Bryggerier was busy, modern place with a roaring fire at the far end of the room, and a bar lined
with more ale taps than the prefect bathroom at Hogwarts had bubble bath choices. The room was
long and narrow, with only two rows of tables and a skinny aisle down the middle. Normal straight-
backed chairs were pushed into the table’s aisle-side and a padded bench ran the length of each wall
on the other. Harry grinned; he definitely favoured a pint, bar snacks and a fire over shivery
sightseeing.

By the time Draco arrived Harry and Krum had eaten their way through a whole platter of cheeses
and fruit. Harry had never really been that adventurous with his food, Aunt Petunia and the
Hogwarts elves both being upstanding models of solid ‘British’ cuisine. But the little dishes of odd
coloured condiments and suspicious smelling shaved meats somehow encouraged a more courageous palate.

Who knew that a grape, some mouldy looking cheese and a dollop of fluorescent yellow chutney wrapped up in a slice of salami would be delicious? The Danish apparently. Harry was just wondering what daring creation he could make next when Draco’s triumphant voice distracted him.

“Finished and sent!” He crowed, sliding onto the bench next to Harry. The self-satisfaction radiated from him, and he beamed at Harry. “People will be sick to death of your over-told life story before you know it,” he continued as he reached for the jug of lager in the middle of the table and poured himself a glass.

“Hooray,” Harry said, with an ironically enthusiastic raising of arms, Draco’s unrestrained happiness was so out of character Harry struggled to take him seriously.

Krum chuckled. “Congratulations Mr Malfoy,” he said, lifting his own half-drunk pint in salute. “You seem relieved that it is over, would you ever consider writing for someone else?”

Draco was grinning delightedly at Harry as Krum spoke, and there was something more than accomplishment in his eyes, something that made Harry’s stomach squirm. But then he blinked, seeming not to have heard Krum properly, and as he turned to ask Krum to repeat himself Harry felt Draco’s toasty warm, previously gloved hand settle on his knee under the table.

“Sorry, Mr Krum,” Draco said, his long fingers performing a sort of absent-minded rolling drum up Harry’s inseam, making Harry twitch and look around to make sure none of the other patrons had a view of him being felt up under the table, which he most certainly was.

Deft, lightly gliding fingers were travelling higher up his leg, and Harry’s ears were buzzing as he stared at the scattered bits of meat and cheese on the empty platter in front of him. He could almost feel his blood diverting from its usual destination and heading south. It was completely surreal, and so out of the blue that Harry was frozen in uncertainty. He sipped his pint hurriedly and pretended to pay attention to the conversation, but nothing was registering. He could only hear a low hum and the clinking of glassware over the thud of his half-panicked and completely aroused pulse.

He and Draco were sitting so close that their arms were touching, the pub was crowded so he supposed it wouldn’t look too unnatural. Krum and Draco continued to talk, all but ignoring Harry, so he just focused on keeping his face impassive and raising his glass to his lips at regular intervals. Trying to stop it would probably just draw more attention to the situation, Harry rationalised feebly.

Harry wasn’t sure why Draco had suddenly decided that molesting him in public was a good idea, but he wasn’t going to complain. His panic had ebbed away now that he realised no one would notice and his warm and relaxed feeling from the beer and food had returned, and he lacked the will to stop the advance in any case.

The recent encounters between Draco and himself had Harry wondering if it was possible for his assumed straight, possibly bi-ness to dissipate into full-blown homosexuality over time. It seemed unlikely. Nevertheless, the idea of softly shaped lady-parts seemed much less alluring by the day. But then, Harry thought, it was actually more like the only parts that held any interest at all were attached to the sharp tongued, often impatient and slightly haughty man sitting next to him, the one whose fingertips were firmly tracing the thick stitching of Harry’s flies.

Draco’s face was still averted, nonchalant and completely focused on his conversation with Krum.

Harry felt sweat prickle along his hairline and across his upper lip; he took another swig of his pint,
all the while fighting the urge to pinch his un-accosted leg to see if this was all some enjoyable
dream. He reasoned it wasn’t a dream; the discomfort of a confined, poorly arranged hard-on wasn’t
the sort of thing that featured in dreams. But before he could work up the effort to stop Draco’s hand
(because squished cock or not, a warm hand in his lap was an agreeable turn of events), Draco’s
movements came to an abrupt halt.

Harry let out a heavy breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding just as Krum said, “Vell, vot do you
say?”

“I will speak to my solicitor,” Draco replied. “Would you want your whole life covered or just your
career?”

“I’m sure my manager vill have many opinions for you on that.” Krum said. “He vill not like that I
have beat him to the punch, but how can he argue with my choice? Surely the writer of Harry Potter’s
biography is good enough for me?”

Harry looked at Draco’s profile as he nodded just slightly, his hand slipping away from Harry’s
crotch to find his hand, which he squeezed tightly for a moment as he gave Krum a small smile. “I’ll
have my solicitor draw up a contract,” Draco said. “If you are happy with it we can go from there.”

Harry was feeling quite disconnected from the present as Krum raised his pint again, clinking it
against Draco’s. “Agreed,” he said cheerfully.

Draco kept his hands to himself for the rest of their dinner, much to Harry’s relief and
disappointment. Harry was mostly quiet, concentrating on his marvellous steak which was drowning
in mushroom sauce and grinning secretly to himself at Draco’s out of character sunny disposition. It
had increased ten-fold since he arrived, he kept up a constant stream of bright conversation, grinning
and laughing easily. Harry began to wonder if Draco was pissed but his pint remained mostly
untouched. Harry wanted to say he was unsettled by a happy Draco, but in reality every little laugh
and exuberant gesture just had him all the more besotted.

The restaurant was undergoing the transition between eatery and night spot when Krum sat back
heavily in his chair, patting his stomach and looked at his watch. Most of the tables on the other side
of the isle had been moved and there was a band setting up in the corner. The music had been subtly
gaining in volume while they picked at the long plate of tiny but delicious pastries that had been
delivered, along with more beer. There were still plenty of other diners on their side of the room,
eating from similar shared plates, drinking cider and pale lager.

Draco was chuckling at something Krum had said, there was a smudge of powdered sugar on his
bottom lip from the miniature pancake he’d just popped in his mouth. “What about, ‘you sleep with a
snitch in your hand so that on match day your fingers have muscle memory’?”

“False,” Krum laughed, “I’d just end up with cramp, veer did you hear that?”

“Dunno,” Draco said, wiping at his lower lip with his thumb, and sucking it clean.

Harry just sort of stared, all but struck dumb. This bubbly Draco was so foreign; he began to wonder
if he should be checking him for polyjuice. Was Draco really that pleased to be done with the book?
To be done with Harry? His wandering hand earlier suggested otherwise, perhaps it was just that he
didn’t feel the need to be professional anymore…

As this revelation occurred to him, Harry half gasped and inhaled the foamy head of his pint. What
had Draco said weeks ago? Once the book was done, perhaps then they could… could what though?
Harry coughed and spluttered as the beer burnt its fizzy way down the back of his throat. Draco gave
him a long-suffering look and patted him on the back.

Harry was trying to come to terms with the idea that Draco was just a man he fancied now, not a business acquaintance, but an attractive bloke whose cock Harry had had in his mouth, and would possibly expect... more?

So far, Harry’d just done what he wanted to, under the guise of experimentation. It was a nice safe scapegoat in case Draco was just fooling around ... there had been no mention of feelings after all. Or was this touchy-feely Draco just a progression to the next experiment now that the book was done? That was even more frightening, in a thrilling, stomach-clenching, sudden tightening-of-trousers kind of way.

If it was anyone else, Harry supposed the next step would be some sort of courtship; he winced internally as he thought once again about Rita Skeeter or the like getting her claws on that story. Even if Harry wasn’t Harry Potter, but just some regular bloke that Draco wanted to see, the reality was that they couldn’t, not publicly anyway. Draco was married, and as far as Harry knew without Astoria and her inheritance Draco would be rather strapped for cash – and possibly homeless. These confusing and disheartening thoughts were an uncomfortable jumble in Harry’s head. Somewhat morosely he gulped at his pint, and was suddenly distracted by Draco’s no longer patting hand. It had slipped down his spine and come to rest on the small of Harry’s back, finding a narrow slice of exposed skin just above his belt where his shirt had ridden up during his coughing fit.

Draco ran his fingers across the skin briefly, a barely noticeable linger that made Harry jolt. Good god what was with him tonight? Harry thought, looking around to make sure they were unobserved. He couldn’t keep up with the buoyantly merry, flirty-fingered Draco. But then his hand was gone and Draco looked from Harry to Krum. “I’m about done for the night,” he said brightly, “there has been something of a kerfuffle in my office this week, I’m sure I’ll be required the moment I get back to Britain.”

Krum nodded, “I haff training at 7 am, so I need to turn in too. Our coach feels it’s the best vay to discourage indulgence on our afternoon off – rip us to bits vith cardio at the crack of dawn. I could handle it in the early days, but now…” he broke off with a shrug and a grimace.

Harry chuckled, glad that he didn’t have to get up early or talk to anyone else about Cuffe. “Thanks so much for your input, Viktor,” he said gratefully.

“You’re welcome,” Krum said, “it was good to see you again, send an owl if you ever want Skarpiskyttter tickets; ex-players haff access to the box seats for life, you’d be my guest.” He turned his smile on Draco. “You too Mr Malfoy, you could even come together,” he hinted slyly as he shook Harry’s hand, who gave him a momentary withering look. “I look forward to hearing from you about the commission,” Krum added to Draco, shaking his hand too. Then he shrugged into his overcoat. “Good evening gentlemen,” he said before disappearing into the crowd.

Harry was feeling distinctly awkward as he followed Draco through the gathering crowd in Bryggerier. He thought it was possibly latent claustrophobia after months and months of minimal human contact and his own spacious house as the norm. But when the comparative silence of the quayside seemed heavy, and the cold night air froze his brain so he couldn’t think of a thing to say, Harry had to admit that he was just anxious to be alone with Draco.

Draco, predictably, was still smiling; his previously wandering hands were deep in the pockets of his long coat. He looked so wistfully content that Harry wouldn’t have been surprised to see him do a
jaunty little heel click and start whistling show tunes.

They walked close to the water, away from the evening revellers spilling from the pubs and clubs. The locals were easy to spot; they didn’t shiver and haul on multiple layers the moment they were outside. Despite his unease at the mixed-signal sending and possibly polyjuiced Draco, Harry was somewhat enchanted with the atmosphere of Nyhavn. The only real travelling he’d done was for work and on those trips he’d barely left the foreign Auror office.

There would be no more of those trips, Harry thought. Determinedly trying to occupy his mind with things other than repetitive bump of Draco’s elbow against his own, or the flicking glances in his direction he caught out the corner of his eye. Harry had finally decided that he wasn’t going back to the Aurors. It had been for the sake of Draco’s story that he had gone in at all a few weeks ago. He was definitely going to find something else to do with his life; maybe he would see a few more interesting places. His fixated mind was just wondering if Draco enjoyed travelling when he was broken from his imaginings of exotic and intrepid holidays by a firm tugging at his elbow.

Draco flashed another toothy smile and pulled Harry off the wharf and into the gap between two buildings. He withdrew his wand from his sleeve and looked surreptitiously around. There were Muggles passing the entrance to the short alley behind them, but none seemed to look in, or even notice the gap. There was a whitewashed plastered wall blocking their way down the alley. Draco ran his wand in an arc across surface of the wall and at once it began to sway. Harry took a quick step back, but then the white wall just slotted down into the earth like a giant piece of toast and Wizarding Copenhagen was revealed.

It was little different to Muggle Copenhagen Harry thought. Tall, fair people in long coats bustling busily about. Much to Harry’s amusement, Draco had been mistaken for a local in both the restaurant and the coffee house, the servers looking confused when he answered in rudimentary Danish rather than the top-speed witter they were expecting. Though Draco insisted his family was French on both his mother’s and father’s side, Harry was quite sure that there was some Germanic or Scandinavian influence somewhere in the Malfoy blood. That tall narrow blondness was northern Europe through and through.

Harry followed Draco through the busy street; he seemed to know where he was going. Harry had not been to the hotel yet. They had arrived together via international portkey but there had been a message waiting at the arrival point for Harry to contact Ron at work immediately. Harry’d spent nearly an hour kneeling on the hard hearth stones of the portkey office talking with both Ron and Robards, about his involvement in the suddenly braking Treasury scandal.

Harry had told Robards then that he would not be returning to the Auror department. Ron had grinned, apparently happy that Harry was actually making decisions about his life, and possibly because it meant he got to keep his team leader position. Ron had also pushed the special late edition of the Prophet through the flames, and Harry had pinched out its slightly smouldering edges while reading about Cuffe’s arrest. Harry had gone straight from the portkey office to the meeting with Krum, Draco having organised their rooms while Harry was in the floo.

The hotel was more modern than Harry was expecting, but then he was comparing it to the Leaky Cauldron in his head which likely hadn’t changed in three hundred years; so the turn of the century fittings and wide carpeted lobby were a pleasant surprise.

“You know Potter, I’m surprised you haven’t asked to see the final draft of your book,” Draco said as they waited for the lift to descend.

“I didn’t think you’d let me,” Harry said honestly, still out of sorts. “And anyway, I trust your judgement. I’ll look at it before it’s printed I suppose, Hermione would kill me if I didn’t.”
“Yes, I would think she would,” Draco agreed. The lift bonged in front of them and the grill rattled open.

There were no buttons to push on the wall and Harry didn’t know what floor they were on in any case. There was however a keyhole at waist height with ‘Guests’ inscribed above it in curly letters. Draco produced a silver key and put it in the keyhole, turning it easily.

Draco smiled broadly as the grill closed and the lift juddered into life. The nervous feeling in Harry’s stomach kicked up even stronger than before as Draco continued to look at him. Harry had no idea what was going to happen when they reached their floor. Maybe nothing, maybe Draco would say good night and that would be it. It didn’t help that Harry’s Gryffindor courage was currently much more cowardly lion than usual. Like he’d used up all his boldness, it was the fact that Draco was a man that was throwing Harry off. He felt like they should be even in initiating their – whatever it was. Surely Draco could tell quite clearly what Harry wanted from him.

Then suddenly Draco started to laugh, jolting Harry from his internal turmoil as he was seized in a rough hug that nearly unbalanced him. “Merlin Potter! Can you believe it?” Draco sang, still laughing and still hugging, then he pulled back. His hands were still holding Harry’s upper arms, and he almost looked overwhelmed. “I know terrible shit happened in that Triwizard Tournament, but I never thought it would save my career.” He let out a shaky breath and sounded quite dazed as he said, “Betty can stick her job up her arse.”

“Er …” Harry stuttered, he was startled by the exuberant gesture and totally lost on the topic of conversation. Draco might as well have been speaking Danish again.

“Krum, the book – you were there!” Draco said, excitedly. “He’s just asked me to write his memoirs, the bill from yours and his combined is more than I would have earned in a year at the Prophet.” A relieved whistle snuck out from between Draco’s lips and his expression turned peaceful, as he added quietly, “I’m free.”

Suddenly Draco’s flighty cheerfulness made sense; Harry couldn’t believe he’d missed such an important conversation. He knew Draco wanted out of the Prophet, he’d even thought Draco would love to get Krum’s commission; he shook his head ruefully and muttered, “Sorry, you and your… advances distracted me.”

“Oh,” Draco said, looking the tiniest bit embarrassed for a second, but then his ever-present smile thinned to a smirk, his grey eyes turned molten silver, and Harry had only the briefest moment of premonition before Draco’s lips were on his.
Draco shut the door to his hotel room with a sharp snap and huffed as he slumped against it, his head thudding against the wood. He felt completely disheartened as he replayed the last few moments in his head.

Harry had been enthusiastically kissing him back in the lift when they were interrupted by the bong of the bell to indicate they had arrived at the right floor. Harry had pulled away abruptly, his eyes wide and wary and his breath short. He’d taken several stumbling steps back out into the corridor, but his hand was linked with Draco’s so he was pulled along too.

Then something had gone wrong. Draco had taken his hand back to retrieve Harry’s room key, he passed it to Harry whose expression was suddenly even more anxious; he snatched the key from Draco’s palm and without looking in his direction stammered, “Goodnight then.”

“Goodnight?” Draco repeated blankly, as Harry’s door had closed in his face.

“Fuck,” Draco grumbled, standing upright and throwing his coat and scarf at the hat stand in temper. He was alone in his room. He had been so sure that Harry was on the same page as him: just waiting for the work to be finished so they could behave like normal twenty-three-year-olds and shag their brains out.

Draco had literally had the best day of his life so far; all the things he had been concerned about for the last three months were sorted. He had a way out of the Prophet, so he wouldn’t be tarred with the Sententia brush. He’d finished writing his first book, which was no small achievement in itself, and he was very proud and quite confident that it would do well. On top of all that, his half-meant and poorly enforced rules for his conduct around Harry were no longer valid…perfect. Until then he had assumed that booking Harry’s room was a mere formality, because it seemed as though Harry was done experimenting.

Thankfully, before that morbidly depressing thought could worm its way too deeply, there was a soft knock on the door. Draco spun around, surely no staff member would come calling at this hour, which meant it could only be–

“Draco?” Harry’s voice asked.

Draco pulled the door open at once and Harry grinned nervously at him. “Sorry about that,” Harry said, gesturing with a thumb towards his room.

“That?” Draco repeated, aiming for coolly unaffected – being turned down was bad enough, he didn’t need Harry to know how much it had disappointed him.

“Me, panicking,” Harry clarified. Then he drew a deep breath and seemed to force himself to look into Draco’s face. His eyes caught the light coming from Draco’s room and it made them look greener than usual, there were spots of colour high on his cheeks that matched the pinkness of his bottom lip. Draco didn’t know if that was from their moment in the lift or Harry worrying it with his teeth. He was still staring at Harry’s mouth when he began to speak.

“I know you told me not to make a big deal about it,” he said haltingly. “Remember, that night? The first time you kissed me?”
Draco felt a little half smile crook his lips at this admission; of course he remembered, he’d told Harry to shag whoever he wanted to, not to overthink it. Draco’s smile grew, perhaps he hadn’t been rejected after all.

Harry continued with an almost pained expression. “But I can’t help it, to me it is pretty important, and it might just be sex to you, but I don’t want this to be it—” he flipped his hand between them as his words began to tumble out. “And I know, the press would go mad, and you’re married, and that’s going to be weird, but I’m sure we can figure something out, I mean you don’t need her money now, right?”

“Er….” Draco began, but Harry cut him off.

“—Exactly, so I’m just saying that I’d kind of like to have a go, you know, at being… boyfriends or whatever you want to call it.”

Despite this brave speech Harry’s nervousness was obvious. He’d shoved his fidgeting hands in his pockets and was worrying his lip again, his teeth white against the abused flesh.

Draco was fighting the urge to laugh; affection was filling him up like warm water in his chest, and this daft man was everything he wasn’t.

“Potter,” Draco said, trying to sound like his normal brisk self, worried that if he didn’t make the effort he’d start making mad declarations of devotion. “If I’d wanted a casual fuck we would have done it by now, do you think I would have cared about professionalism if I planned to never see you again?”

Harry’s mouth fell open, his eyes narrowed in accusation. “But you said it was because no one would take the book seriously.”

“How would they have known if it was just going to be a one off?” Draco asked, he’d just assumed that Harry would figure this out for himself. Foolish Draco, he scolded himself.

“Oh…” Harry muttered. “I suppose, but you never said that.” He looked quite put out. “So you’re saying you want to keep seeing each other?”

Draco tried very hard not to roll his eyes, he really did, but failed. “Yes, Potter.”

“Good,” Harry nodded, then in a move that Draco should have seen coming, after the number of times he’d done it over the last three months, Harry pounced on him. A strong arm curled around Draco’s back and held him tight as Harry kissed him fervently.

The suddenness surprised Draco and it took him a beat to respond, but within seconds he was kissing back, his fingers weaving themselves into Harry’s messy hair. Draco was glad he’d removed his coat the moment he’d closed the door, because it meant he could feel the heat from Harry’s chest through the thin barrier of clothing between them. It also meant that Harry’s wandering hand had an easy time wending its way beneath the hem of Draco’s shirt.

Eventually, Harry’s mouth moved from Draco’s, nuzzling along his jaw and down the side of his neck. Draco shivered as he felt Harry’s tongue flicking its way across his skin. “I can’t believe you,” Harry said, managing to sound admonishing while still nibbling away at Draco’s throat. Both of his hands were now inside Draco’s shirt, ghosting over his skin, thumbs pausing to tease a nipple, fingers dipping promisingly below his waistband. “Feeling me up in the middle of the restaurant.”

“Ha,” Draco breathed, as the top button on his trousers was popped open and Harry closed his hand around Draco’s boxer-covered cock. “You didn’t complain,” Draco groaned as he moved his
hand purposefully, his grip strong, the pressure perfect. “Circe, you’re good at that,” he added, his head dropping to rest on Harry’s shoulder.

Draco’s pulse quickened at the image of Harry’s stunned face back at Bryggerier. Draco hadn’t known he’d find the thrill of it so arousing, but when Harry had relaxed and let Draco do as he wished, right there in view of Viktor Krum and who knew who else, it had sent jolts of excitement through him. Sometimes he wondered why Harry of all people brought out his pervy side; it had been pretty dormant until now.

Draco’s knees were weakening as they stood groping at each other in the middle of the room, Harry had extracted his hand from Draco’s trousers and had gone back to sucking on any bit of exposed flesh he could find. Draco’s head was swimming already, there was no caution, no uncertainty, just Harry and his open determination to ravish Draco into a puddle on the floor.

Harry pulled back enough to say, “Bed?” before returning to the assault, Draco couldn’t have agreed with the suggestion more. He began to steer them across the room. Harry went along happily, still doing ridiculous things to Draco’s restraint with only lips and tongue. Harry’s legs hit the edge of the mattress and he fell back, pulling Draco down on top of him.

Fingers flicked at buttons and Harry pulled his own t-shirt off while Draco undid his jeans. He palmed at Harry’s burgeoning erection firmly, making him keen quietly and haul Draco in for more urgent kissing.

“I never did get to repay you properly,” Draco said, shuffling back down the bed, dragging Harry’s jeans off as he went, “for that day in your library.”

Harry ginned foolishly, his laugh quiet as Draco knelt up to wrench his trainers off and discard his jeans. Draco’s shirt and tie were strewn on the floor between the bed and the door, he’d retained his trousers so far, unbuttoned with the tell-tale bulge of his erection trying to poke through the gap. He probably looked ridiculous.

Harry was quite a picture himself, Draco thought; naked and smiling, his cock swollen and curving up against his toned stomach. He looked completely comfortable as Draco stared greedily. “I’m happy to accept payment now,” Harry said cheekily.

Draco quite liked that he himself was still half dressed. Harry was so forward in sexual situations, it made him feel inexperienced. But with Harry so exposed beneath him, smiling unwaveringly up at him, Draco felt his confidence build. At least he’d had sex with men before, so technically he was the knowledgeable one here.

Draco ran his hands up Harry’s thighs, purposely skirting his groin; he dipped his head, catching Harry’s mouth briefly. He peppered kisses down his throat, across his chest; he lapped at one nipple, then the other.

Harry was muttering little sounds of enjoyment, his own warm hands sliding the length of Draco’s back, over the smooth fabric of his suit trousers to cup his arse, then back up, as Draco slunk further down, his lips keeping contact the whole way. He paused to flutter his tongue in the dip next to the rise of Harry’s hip bone. Draco’s hand held Harry firmly as he squirmed at the ticklish touch.

Then the blunt sticky head of Harry’s cock caught Draco under the chin, and he took it in hand. At the touch Harry immediately went still and quiet, and Draco looked up to see Harry watching him intently. Draco couldn’t help but smirk at the look of awe on Harry’s face as Draco’s lips hovered millimetres from the already leaking head. Draco drew a deep breath in preparation and then lowered his mouth over Harry’s straining prick.
Harry let out a low guttural groan as Draco’s mouth engulfed him. Draco swirled his tongue, and concentrated on relaxing his throat; he sucked and bobbed and swallowed, the muscles of this throat contracting convulsively around the intrusion.

The pressure was making Harry whine and shift restlessly. He was mumbling and cursing as Draco held his hips in place, sucking harder, bobbing his head faster. He moved a hand from Harry’s hip and fondled his sac, the knuckle of his ring finger pressing into Harry’s perineum, he skated it up and down the sensitive skin in time with his mouth.

Harry’s fingers twined in Draco’s hair, Draco could hear him panting and swearing and murmuring his name. Draco pulled off for breath, replacing his mouth with a steadily moving hand. He conjured lube and kept the pace, too enthralled by his view of Harry to lower his head again right away.

Harry was flushed, one hand knotted in the bed sheet, the other skimming over any part of Draco he could reach, up his arm, into his hair. His eyes flickered open to meet Draco’s, they seemed to burn, scorch their way inside Draco. Now that both Draco’s hands were busy – occupied with balls and cock, not keeping Harry still – he was thrusting up into Draco’s fist. Draco tightened his grip, heat pooling in his belly at the sight of Harry’s unadulterated enjoyment. Draco had never been with anyone who was like this, so unrestrained, so utterly absorbed in pleasure. It was beautiful to watch.

“I need,” Harry moaned, panting and shifting, searching for something more, “I need –“

There was a thrilling buzz in Draco’s head as he wondered if he dared make the next obvious move. When he’d imagined this moment it was not how he’d thought things would be, but Harry’s pleading lit something magnificent inside him. It made him bolder.

Draco’s index finger was already slick, he trailed it lower, pushing Harry’s leg up at the same time, Harry seemed to barely notice, still thrusting into the circle of Draco’s hand. He did notice however when Draco’s finger breached him. His panting, needy pleas were lost to a surprised grunt, and then as Draco moved the digit in and out Harry let out shivering groan of delight.

“God, that’s –” he pulled his other knee up to give Draco better access, breathing heavily and pushing back on Draco’s finger. “God,” he breathed again as a second finger joined the first, deeper this time, drawing a long moan, “Draco,” he murmured, “fuck, that’s... Merlin,” he cried out, as Draco finally located the little bundle of nerves inside him. Draco was still feeling a little out of practice, but watching Harry clutch at the sheets, seeing his own fingers disappear inside him, hearing Harry moan his name brokenly, desperately, and knowing that he was the one driving Harry insane; it was all a fantastic ego overload.

It wasn’t long until Harry was loose around his fingers, three of them sliding in and curling up to nudge at his prostate before withdrawing again, over and over. Harry’s cock was rigid and leaking copiously over Draco’s hand. He couldn’t believe that Harry hadn’t come yet, Draco was sure he himself wouldn’t have lasted half this long. He could feel the building tension of orgasm tightening in the pit of his stomach already, and he still had his trousers on; it was madness.

He thought he understood now why Harry had ended up jerking himself off when he’d sucked Draco’s cock in the library, if Draco’d had a free hand right now he’d definitely be considering it. The power trip of making Harry dissolve into nothing but sensation and pleasure was pushing him closer and closer to the edge, and Draco couldn’t wait any longer. He pulled his fingers away, and Harry gave a muffled almost-sob at the loss, he propped himself up on his elbows to watch Draco remove his trousers.

“Did you want me to –“ he started hoarsely, nodding in the direction of Draco’s crotch, where his hard prick was jutting out unashamedly in front of him.
Draco shook his head, leaning in to kiss Harry’s sweaty lips. “I feel like I’m going to explode as it is,” he admitted, mouthing his way across Harry’s collarbone, “I’d like to make this count.” He hooked his arms beneath Harry’s knees and lifted them so Harry’s calf muscles were resting against Draco’s shoulders, then he leaned forward to be able to line himself up.

“Tell me if –” he started, as the head of his cock pressed against Harry’s slippery, loosened entrance. But the rest of the sentence was lost as Harry canted his hips and drew Draco in. Draco’s mind went blank, the wet sliding scorching heat engulfing him. Merlin, it had been so long.

He forced himself to stop, bent forward, stomach muscles clenched, thighs trembling. One hand was next to Harry’s face on the pillow, and the other was wrapped around the ankle balanced beside his ear. “Is that okay?” Draco managed to ask, fighting every particle in him screaming to thrust harder, deeper into that amazing feeling.

Harry’s eyes opened, they were glazed and vacant. “God yes,” he said, lifting his hips again so Draco slid in even further, then he blinked and he seemed to focus slightly. A mischievous glint crossed his face as he gripped Draco’s hip with a warm hand. He pulled him closer and whispered in a filthy voice Draco had no idea he possessed, “Fuck me, Draco.”

Unable to hold back at such an obvious display of lust, Draco did. He set an unrelenting rhythm and was only too happy to obey when Harry cried out, demanding him to go faster, to pump harder. Draco could feel sweat running down the valley of his spine, his breath was short and the world was going black at the edges as he drove into Harry again and again.

Out of nowhere, Harry whimpered urgently, “I’m, I’m –” and came in great spurts all over his stomach. His body convulsed with the intensity of release and Draco’s movements stuttered – it was too much – a rush of sensation washed over him, and he came, inside Harry, still thrusting his hips, though all coordination had vanished. He fell forward, grimacing half-heartedly at the squelch of cooling ejaculate between them.

Draco felt Harry’s hand clumsily sift through his damp hair, the innocently gentle touch after such wanton ferocity made him shiver, he pressed his lips to the nearest bit of flesh he could reach, and Harry sighed.

“That was brilliant,” Harry said sleepily, “best shag ever… brilliant.”

Draco smiled, his eyes drifting closed. Today really had been an excellent day.

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Draco woke suddenly, his eyes snapped open. It took him a moment to focus. He wasn’t in Copenhagen, but his own bed. His pulse was still thudding quickly through him and he was rock hard, the sheet tenting rather obscenely over his hips. Sweet Circe, what a dream; or rather memory, he supposed. He stretched an arm out, reaching for Harry, intent on re-enacting the vivid images still playing in his head, but his hand encountered only cool cotton sheet. He was alone.

His fingers were only inches from taking care of the situation himself when there was a sudden sharp knocking at the bedroom door, and it was immediately flung open. Draco drew his knees up hurriedly to hide his erection, but it was only a very focused Kreacher.

“Morning Master Draco,” he said distractedly, bustling into the room, almost obscured by two freshly pressed morning suits. He hung them on the tallboy and placed two white roses, each with their stem bound in silver-grey ribbon on the dresser. “Time to get up, Master Harry has been
downstairs for hours getting things ready. You know how he is about the garden.”

Draco sighed, he did know. Fanatical was probably the kindest description.

He pushed himself upright and sat on the edge of the bed, nervous little jumping butterflies had taken residence in his stomach. They’d chased away his morning wood too, selfish little blighters. He eyed the suits; at least he would look exceptional while he stood up in front of all those people. Unable to sit still as he thought of all the public speaking today was going to include – something he’d never been particularly fond of – he moved to the window.

Though it was surely no later than nine in the morning, the sun seemed warm and bright for the middle of May. The window had a view of the back garden, a space completely transformed from the first time Draco had seen it nearly a year ago. It had been magically enlarged to hold today’s guests and the green lawn was immaculate. The fences of the neighbouring properties were covered with thick climbing ivy, and the flowerbeds that bordered the lawn were an explosion of colour. There was the special addition of an archway at the very bottom of the lawn, more ivy wound its way over the frame and decorative white roses were dotted all through the green leaves. It was a peaceful and idyllic scene.

That was, until a voice Draco knew at once broke the silence. “Fucking bastard! Ballsack!” Draco leaned further out the window to see Harry directly below him, surrounded by a collapsed pile of white folding chairs.

As if in tribute to meetings long past, Harry was wearing only a vest with his gardening jeans in the morning sun. He had obviously been lugging chairs to and fro and doing who knows what last minute tending to the wandering wiggentree saplings (or whatever other mad cutting Longbottom had sent for Harry to try.) So perhaps he had worked up a sweat, either way, Draco appreciated the view. He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled admiringly.

Harry turned at once, shading his eyes to look up at the bedroom window. “Useless lay-about!” he called up to him, but even with the distance Draco could see his grin.

“I think it’s more a case of you being unnaturally industrious,” Draco replied seriously. “Most people sleep til nine on Saturdays.”

He heard Harry muttering about ‘special circumstances’ as he continued to move chairs busily about the yard. He’d complained to Draco only last night that because the space had been magically expanded, he couldn’t arrange the chairs with a locomotion charm as per normal. Draco found himself quite pleased, nothing like perving on ones fit boyfriend to start the day.

In the year that had gone by since those first meetings in this old house, Harry had not made any effort to find a job. He’d spent the winter finishing the renovations to the inside of his house, and every chance he got continuing his work in the garden. He kept saying he would start looking for a job soon, but Draco never hounded him, Harry didn’t live an extravagant lifestyle so his inheritance would last for a decent while.

Harry’s main expense was his new obsession with travel, much cheaper of course in the wizarding world with no airfares or visitor visas to worry about. At least once a month he visited; he was on a mission, it seemed, to see the world. Most of Europe was crossed off his list now and North Africa was next on the agenda. Draco – as a now fully self-employed freelance journalist and biographer – was often able to arrange his schedule to be able to join him. But at the thought of parched, itchy, and don’t-drink-the-water Africa, he made a mental note to become rather busy until less intrepid destinations were on offer.
Harry’s book; The Potter-File had of course been a best-seller, it was in its third edition already, and it had only been on shelves for six months. The desired effects were beginning to show; today, for example, would never have been possible a year ago. Harry had officially lifted all enchantments from Number Twelve to allow guests in, some of the magic would go back up tomorrow for general security, but never before had anyone known where Harry Potter lived.

A tea tray had appeared on the nightstand while Draco was distracted and he sat back down on the bed to pour a cup. The two sets of dress robes kept drawing his eye. He sipped his tea and looked away, noticing the wrapped present sitting on the dresser. Draco smiled, he was very proud of his fitting gift for the groom.

He finished his tea and was wondering if he should just start getting ready when there was a rapping on the front door downstairs. The loud crack of Kreacher’s apparition followed. Then there were murmured voices and footsteps on the main staircase.

The bedroom door swung open again and at once there was an almost pained exclamation, “Really, Draco?” Marc stood framed in the doorway, his expression petulant as he took in Draco reclining on the bed in his nightclothes. “Four years of hinting and today of all days you finally offer yourself to me?”

“You are a ridiculous human being,” Draco said, but he sat up smiling solicitously at his friend, “Kreacher just brought the robes up,” he said. “We still have an hour til guests arrive, do you want a cup of tea or something?”

Marc shook his head. “No, the nerves have finally got to me,” he plonked down on the bed next to Draco, jostling the tea tray slightly, Draco steadied it with a quick hand just as Marc asked in a brittle voice, “I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I?”

“Mavis is wonderful,” Draco said earnestly, “the only person in the world who could handle you, you’re definitely doing the right thing.”

“Right,” Marc nodded jerkily, still pale. “In that case, got any whiskey?”

“Of course,” Draco said at once, standing up and crossing to the dresser, “you told me at the stag do to make sure I had a hipflask,” he rummaged in the top draw and pulled out the silver flask. “One mouthful,” Draco said sternly passing it over.

Marc took a healthy swig, and then winced and coughed. He screwed the lid back on. “Right,” he said hoarsely, “not sure if that’s better or worse.”

Draco sat beside him. “Any word from the bride this morning?”

“No, but her sister flooed, said she’s chomping at the bit to get it over with. Can’t wait to be Mrs Mavis Belby.” Marc’s cheeks flooded with colour, and he shook his head in disbelief. “Silly bint.” he said fondly.

“Yes,” Draco said, getting up once again and taking the flat wrapped gift from his dresser, he handed to Marc, “since you are officially off the market, I had Astoria procure this for you. A tribute to your old ways, something like having your cake and eating it too.”

Marc frowned, “Since when do you know cliché muggle proverbs?”

“Since Harry,” Draco shrugged as Marc ripped the paper away.

The gilt frame of the painting caught the light, and immediately there was a chipper little wolf-whistle
from the occupant of the canvas. “Well good morning handsome!” it trilled, and Marc’s face split into a delighted grin.

“Good morning yourself.” he said, and then started to laugh as the fellow in the painting began to hum a sultry tune, all the while teasingly discarding his clothing piece by piece.

Marc looked up at Draco, still chuckling, his eyes bright. “Heavens,” he said, as the little man danced about completely nude, humming his own raunchy music and blowing kisses. “It’s wonderful.”

“It’s nearly a hundred years old,” Draco said, feeling very pleased with himself for finding such an excellent gift. “The auction house didn’t have many offers on it, too crass for the old money hags Astoria says. But I thought he’d be perfect for you.”

An hour later Draco and Marc were standing in the shade of the back steps, shaking hands with arriving guests. Draco was already struggling with keeping his smile in place, a gaggle of lifestyle girls had just passed through and were now taking seats on the groom’s side.

Most of the Prophet staffers had been invited. Marc had been promoted to Arts and Lifestyle Director by the new Editor-in-Chief Jacques Durand, a French National brought in by the board of directors to help rebuild in the wake of the Cuffe disaster; a disaster that had been compounded by the Sententia debacle following swiftly on its heels. During the upheaval and investigations brought on by the exposure of Sententia use, Betty Braithwaite lost her job when her brother’s testimony had not had the clout she hoped for. She had fallen on her feet though; Assistant Editor of Witch Weekly was the perfect place for her.

The board had been rather disgruntled that Draco had tendered his resignation during the period of chaos, because he’d been touted to take the Arts and Lifestyle roll. But he just couldn’t bear the system anymore – oh, and had a commission to write the most famous Quidditch player in history’s memoirs, not to mention the biography of the most famous wizard in Britain about to hit shelves.

He was quite sure more would follow, and they had. Terrance Jamieson of the Montrose Magpies had approached just after Christmas to hire him. Draco had the good sense to put his price up, meaning one book a year was enough to keep him comfortable.

“Draco sweetheart!” trilled Astoria, coming down the stairs, her arm looped through Maria’s. Both women were in floaty summer dresses, Maria’s blonde hair swept up and sleek, Astoria’s dark waves loose and long, hanging down past her shoulders. She kissed Draco on the cheek, “You look gorgeous,” she gushed. “How’s the groom?”

“Within earshot,” Marc piped up. “And fine, thank you.”

Astoria laughed, and Draco said to her, “Find me before you go. Higgs sent his draft of the papers over yesterday, I thought you might want an idea of the offer before your she-devil gets her claws into this.”

Astoria’s smile faltered. “Mummy insisted on her, Draco, it’s not my fault.”

“I know,” Draco said, regretting the slight at once. It turned out that even when your marriage was a total sham, divorce was still difficult. They would be settling this week if Astoria and Draco could wrangle it; unfortunately Mr and Mrs Greengrass were highly disappointed in the situation and causing all sorts of trouble with supposed dowry repayments and throat-cutting lawyers. Thankfully it was the pre-nuptial they had insisted on that was keeping all Draco’s future earnings safe –
something he liked to remind them of at every meeting.

Maria leaned in and interrupted cheerfully. “No divorce talk at a wedding, that’s got to be bad luck. You both look smashing by the way,” she added. Then with a glance over her shoulder she said to Astoria, “Come on love, we’re holding up traffic.”

She was right. There was something of a bottleneck at the doors behind them, helped along by the very wide bottom of Ginny Weasley.

Draco supposed that was unfair, most women gained extra weight during pregnancy. He just couldn’t help but feel negatively towards the girl after the Sententia nonsense. He had to admit that porky or not, Ginny still managed to look pretty in a very loose green dress that was quite lovely with her hair.

On her arm was Nathan Willis. Ginny had surprised everyone by announcing her engagement to Willis at Christmas time, and then her pregnancy two weeks later. Draco had done the math, she must have run straight to Willis when she and Harry had broken up. But they both seemed happy, and it made Harry’s visits to the Burrow less guilt-filled, so Draco kept his opinions on Ginny to himself. He was a little surprised to see them here, but Marc had invited Willis, even though they didn’t really get along.

With Cuffe, Betty, and Draco all gone from the Prophet, the other minor department editors had fancied themselves in charge; Willis as head of sports, Marc with finance, and some Skeeter wannabe whose name Draco had never bothered to learn as head of gossip (“public interest”). But Marc had been given the position, despite the fact that he had started working at the Prophet after Willis. Therefore, the couple’s greeting of the groom and best man were very brief. Ginny didn’t meet Draco’s eyes, and he didn’t lean in to kiss her cheek as he had done with every other female invitee. Willis shook Marc’s hand and then Draco’s and then departed as quickly as possible, towing Ginny along with him.

Draco was completely distracted through the greeting of the final few guests, his gaze following Ginny and Willis around the lawn as they spoke with friends and colleagues. Ginny was a bit of an attraction, famous Quidditch player that she was. Draco could hear Mavis’s doddering old grandmother telling her not to worry, an athletic thing like her would have her figure back in no time. Draco wondered if Molly’s genes would have anything to say about that.

“Should I be worried that you’re ogling my ex-girlfriend?”

Draco jumped and turned to see Harry, looking very unlike himself with combed hair and pressed suit, waiting to be greeted as a guest to his own garden.

“Thanks so much for today, Harry.” Marc said at once, pulling Harry in for a brief hug, “Mavis fell in love with your garden the first time she saw it.”

“Glad to do it,” Harry said, his eyes flitted across the gathered people and an odd smile twisted his lips, he looked at Draco, “it’s bloody weird having this many people here, a good weird, but….”

“ Weird?”’ Draco suggested sardonically. Harry nodded absently still looking at the milling people. “Not as weird as this,” Draco said, reaching out to tweak Harry’s lapel. “Not a ragged edge in sight,” he nodded approvingly, and Harry rolled his eyes. “Your hair is awful though,” Draco said and Harry frowned.

“Be nice,” he said self-consciously, raising a hand to his head.
“No, I mean–” Draco batted Harry’s hand aside, ruffled his fingers through the flat boring strands, making them poke up in all directions. “Much better,” he said. “You look like you again.”

Harry huffed, obviously amused. “But you’re always complaining that it looks like the nest of a yet-to-be discovered creature.”

“And I always will,” Draco said, “but you’re wearing a bloody suit, I’m having enough issues getting my head around that as it is.” He smoothed the shoulder of Harry’s jacket and felt the familiar little bloom of warmth inside him at the sound of Harry’s quiet chuckle.

“That no one has figured out about you two astounds me,” said Marc, who was watching the pair of them bemusedly.

Draco regretfully retracted his lingering hand and said confidently, “People see what they expect to see, they know we’re friends after working together.”

“And it’s much easier now that the Prophet doesn’t stir up shit about me every other week,” Harry put in, grinning at Marc. “Thanks for that by the way.”

“No worries,” Marc said proudly.

Harry’s book had done exactly what he’d hoped in giving an answer to every question people could possibly want to know about him, but Draco thought that the real improvement to Harry’s quality of life was due to the Prophet’s attitude. Or more like its lack of attitude. But that was bound to happen with Marc in charge. Now every time a rumour was hinted at or Skeeter presented a leading article Marc would simply owl Harry for comment – this put a stop to the nonsense pretty quickly, they could hardly run a piece when it was accompanied by a comment from the subject negating the whole thing.

There was a loud crack and Kreacher appeared behind Harry on the top step. “Excuse me, Masters,” he said. “Miss Mavis’s car has arrived.”

Marc’s face drained of colour.

“I better sit down,” Harry said, and darted off down the last few steps and across the lawn.

“I suppose we should get in position,” Draco said grasping the whey-faced Marc by the elbow and leading him up the aisle.

“I suppose,” echoed Marc.

The ceremony passed in an exchange of flowery words. Draco found himself grateful that it was unlikely he and Harry would have the opportunity to proclaim their feelings in such a cliché way. He didn’t even think such saccharine phrases as “You are my soul’s fire,” let alone foresee a moment when he’d be willing to say it aloud and mean it.

His vows with Astoria had been even more over the top; Draco distinctly remembered trying not to laugh as Astoria recited the line “You are my greatest boon,” but the pair of them had sought to make it as flamboyantly sappy as possible. Their wedding had been a performance for the attendees, after all, not a solemn declaration of love.

Harry sat towards the back on the groom’s side, smiling pleasantly at the scene, though Draco
thought it was probably because he got to show off his garden to so many people rather than romantic indulgence. He looked in Draco’s direction after a moment, and his smile changed. Oddly, he looked rather determined.

The ringing of bells chimed loudly through Draco’s thoughts and soon the bride and groom were heading back down the aisle. Enchanted vanishing confetti rained down on them from all sides and Draco offered his arm to Mavis’s bridesmaid. She took it and they followed the couple into the multi-coloured paper rain.

The crowd were cheering and clapping and had gathered around the back steps to momentarily farewell the newlyweds. Draco hung back as the bridesmaid was hailed by some friends. Trays of hors d’oeuvres and champagne were being brought out by black waist-coated waiters, and he gladly took a glass as soon as they got near him.

He was just appreciating that Mavis had listened to his suggestions on wine when there was a warm hand on his shoulder and Harry’s voice in his ear, “So I was thinking …”

“That no one would miss us?” Draco suggested quickly, raising an eyebrow in implication and looking toward their bedroom window.

Harry smirked, and bumped him with his hip, “No,” he said, “I was thinking that since Marc is basically in charge of the Prophet, and wouldn’t want to embarrass you or me with trashy stories about our sordid gayness, or implied adultery, or love potions, or perverse blackmail, or saviour violation –”

“Oh, okay,” Draco interrupted, flapping a hand to get Harry to stop. “I get it,” he said.

“Well, we keep talking about when, and I keep chickening out,” Harry snagged a full champagne flute from a passing tray and chugged the whole thing down.

Draco watched with wide eyes; he knew Harry was talking about making their relationship public, but the sudden need for alcohol-borne courage made Draco think that a dignified statement via Marc and the Daily Prophet was unlikely. He was quite sure a bout of Gryffindor rashness was about to occur.

Harry coughed slightly upon finishing his glass. Then he fixed Draco with a look that confirmed his suspicions about impending brave, but idiotic behaviour.

Draco met this look with a challenging one of his own, he was sick of keeping his hands to himself after all. Harry’s eyes seemed to sparkle with impish daring before he stepped in closer and kissed Draco full on the lips, right there in the garden where all the guests could see.

 Except, they didn’t. Marc and Mavis had just appeared at the top of the steps again, and the guests were all looking at them with renewed cheers, rather than Harry Potter trying to come out of the closet.

“Well, fuck,” Harry muttered after he pulled away, looking completely nonplussed.

“I would think that would get their attention,” Draco said in a faux-serious undertone. His heart was beating rather rapidly and he was just a little glad that it hadn’t worked. Draco thought it was probably a bit rude to steal the bride’s thunder anyway. Tomorrow, he told himself. Or when Marc returned from his honeymoon and could control the tone of any article that suggested Harry Potter was queer and dating a semi-famous writer who used to be a Death Eater.

“Prick,” Harry said, but he grinned as he shook his head disbelievingly. “The one time I want people
to notice me.”

Draco dipped his head and pressed a chaste kiss to Harry’s smile. “It’s called irony, Potter.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

If you've enjoyed this story I'd love to hear it.
Thanks for reading.

George xx
Epilogue

The garden lining the path to the low-linteled cottage door was far more Weasley than Malfoy in Harry's opinion. The sun had only just risen, the French countryside was wild and colourful in the spring morning light, and a small amount of that wildness was captured by the ancient squat stone walls that surrounded the quaint and equally ancient dwelling. They hemmed in the wild flowers, bright and tall, with their blossoming heads heavy on their fine stems. They towered over the more subdued silver-grey lavender that spread densely below, pushing and fanning out against the stone, filling all unoccupied space. It seemed to give the impression that the plants were rebelling, trying valiantly to rejoin their fellows in the fields beyond.

Harry stood with Draco, a suitcase between them. It had been deposited on the front step so that Draco had a free hand to knock on the door with. His other – slightly trembling, and oddly clammy – hand was trapped in Harry's own firm grip. Harry squeezed it in a gesture of solidarity.

Draco turned from his thorough contemplation of the lichen spotted door-knocker to look at Harry with wildly fearful eyes. He was much less put together than usual, the differences were small enough that Harry didn't think anyone else would notice; it was only because he knew Draco so very well that he could see the cracks. Shirt not perfectly pressed, a large scuff mark on the toe of his left shoe, white blond hair walking a fine line between artfully messy and plain old neglected.

"Fuck," Draco huffed, raking his free hand through his hair as though he'd read Harry's mind. "This is absolutely not ideal."

Harry reined in his amusement. Only Draco would call a situation that terrified him out of his wits, 'not ideal.'

"No," Harry agreed, "but we're here now."

"She doesn't know that," Draco said, lowering his voice, a decidedly Slytherin twinkle creeping into his too-wide eyes. "Maybe I was a touch rash," he reasoned, "I could just write a letter." He glanced back down the garden path, as if gauging how quickly he could sprint from sight.

Harry tightened his grip on Draco's hand again, as both a warning and for comfort. "We're doing it," he said and reached for the door-knocker. Harry rapped it firmly three times and then determinedly kept his eyes on the door. He could feel Draco's disbelieving betrayed glare scalding him without needing to see it, thank-you very much.

Draco felt positively faint. There were footsteps approaching the door from inside the house, and he wondered if this was what a panic attack felt like. Heart racing, spotted vision, and an odd fizzing in his ears… all while his absolute tosser of a boyfriend held his hand and smiled reassuringly. The smug git should be begging for forgiveness. The whole sodding situation was his bloody fault!

It had started off as a normal night out. Last night that is, the night that had destroyed Draco's life. Well, perhaps not destroyed, but he'd always been prone to the overdramatic. Either way, to be standing on his mother's front step with a thundering hangover following emergency port-key travel and long trek down a country lane at cockcrow was, as Draco had told Harry already, not ideal.

Twenty hours earlier…..
The Leaky Cauldron still held its rustic 'charm' from Draco's school days, but thankfully Hannah Longbottom-nee-Abbott had lifted its fare far beyond what old Tom had deemed servable.

Draco sat at his preferred table, a booth on the wall furthest from the bar and with a good view of the door to the courtyard and the entry to Diagon Alley. He'd met many of his clients here since he began writing, and many of the required background interviews had been conducted in this very booth. Draco would have liked to work from home, but as that was Harry Potter's home too he didn't really want to invite strangers in.

Today's meeting was not with a stranger. It was with the best ally and friend Draco thought he had ever had. Although, as Marcus Belby pushed his way through the door into the pub and started toward him he did not look like the carefree flirt Draco knew so well.

"Merlin," Marc said as soon as he was in earshot, he threw himself onto the bench next to Draco, looking beleaguered and almost haunted. "Merlin's saggy bollocks."

"It's lovely to see you too Belby," Draco said, more than a little concerned by such a greeting. They were supposedly meeting to discuss business, Marc wanted an exclusive on the excerpts that were going to be printed from Draco's latest piece. Draco was happy to give him that, so they didn't really need to meet to discuss it, but it was a good excuse to catch up.

"Sorry," Marc said, "I'm not supposed to tell anyone yet." He looked around the pub nervously. "Mavis just dropped in on me at the office, Draco, she's pregnant," he said, all but whispering the last word as though frightened of it, and his anxious demeanour intensified as he looked helplessly at Draco.

"Congratulations," Draco said at once, though taking in the terrorized shadow in Marc's normally bright eyes it felt like the wrong reaction.

Marc gaped at him as though he'd grown an extra head. "A fucking kid Draco! What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Surely you knew it was on the cards?" Draco suggested warily as he thanked whichever god was on duty that he'd been born as homosexual as it was possible to be.

"I guess." Marc sighed, his apprehension fading slightly. "But, god, we've only been married three years. I wanted a bit more time –"

"Marc," Draco interrupted before he could start panicking again, "to be quite honest I expected a baby Belby nine months after the wedding, if not before."

"Not helping." Marc pouted. "What do I know about kids?"

"I have no idea," Draco said, "but from what I understand you sort of just figure it out as you go along. If Weasley can manage two I'm sure you can handle one."

Ron and Hermione were finally emerging from the eighteen month social-life hiatus their second child had forced upon them. Harry was over the moon to have Ron back for curry and beer nights.

Marc looked thoughtful. "Do you ever look after their kids?"

"Sometimes," Draco replied, "the older one is nearly five, she's quite fun in small doses. Hugo just likes to squeal and smash stuff at this point in his life so he's not visiting us at home very often. I have too many irreplaceable possessions to let that demon and his trail of destruction in. Granger understands thankfully, calls it the home-only phase."
"But I like my things," Marc whined plaintively, "I have lots of nice things."

"Your fault for falling for someone with a womb," Draco said smugly. "I will never have this problem."

"Prick," Marc said.

"Preferably." Draco smirked in agreement. "And you don't need to sell me, you're the one who strayed from the prick loving path."

"Fuck off," Marc said half-heartedly. He gazed wistfully at the bar, as though trying to summon a pint with his mind. "I do miss it sometimes you know," he said honestly, looking back at Draco after a moment. "Thankfully Mavie is very accommodating." A much more Marc-like smirk touched his lips as he continued, "Got me one of those rubber willy's, glorious black shiny thing, I think she enjoys fucking me with it nearly as much as I like taking it."

Draco laughed out loud at the incongruently innocent happiness on Marc's face as he said such a vulgar sentence. "You two really are a match made in some sort of kinky sex heaven."

"Yeah, I don't think it was the dildo that got us in this mess though."

"Was Mavis excited about the baby?" Draco asked. "I'd have thought she'd be just as scared as you – at least you don't have to cart the thing around until it bursts out of you."

"Eww," Marc spluttered, aghast. "She was a bit freaked out I think. But it's easier for them isn't it?"

"I wouldn't dare say that to any of the women I know. Probably get drowned alive in a vat of breast milk for insinuating pregnancy is easier for them than us," Draco warned. "Did you know they have machinery to milk themselves with?" he added, remembering Hermione's plunger contraption from when Rose was little. "It's horribly frightening looking."

"I think I'll have my meltdown later," Marc said, queasily.

"If you want to talk to someone who actually likes children come and see Harry tomorrow," Draco offered. "He's getting back from Tibet tonight."

It had been two very long months for Draco. He'd been rattling around in the large and empty Grimmauld Place while Harry spent eight weeks teaching English to muggle monk children. Not the children of monks obviously, but Tibetan boys who had joined the monastery. Where Harry had got the idea that living in the Himalayas with no magic and limited electricity was a fun thing to do Draco would never know, or understand.

Harry had travelled the world extensively since the book about his life was published. Draco thought he must be running out of places to go if Tibet was deemed desirable. But his boyfriend really enjoyed the unknown (dangerous) and simple (uncomfortable) sort of destinations. Harry never seemed to mind travelling alone either, in fact he reckoned he had better adventures without people he knew tagging along. Draco was mostly too busy to go gallivanting off on long holidays anyway, but funnily enough he always managed to find room in his schedule when Harry was visiting the cities of Europe. Shagging in European hotels was something of a tradition for them after all.

"I might do that," Marc said, dragging Draco away from his reminiscences of the last time he'd stayed in Prague with Harry. They might as well have stayed home for all the sightseeing they did. But as Harry had pointed out, room service at Grimmauld Place was accompanied by the well-meaning, but far too nosy Kreacher. Prague on the other hand had handsome bell boys in uniform who just smiled and left without a word.
Draco decided he didn't need the formality of haggling over price for print today, Marc clearly had enough on his mind. He dug in his satchel and pulled out the sheet of parchment with the approved teaser quotes from his latest commission; a lengthy interview with a very well-known witch on her transition to the muggle world. "Here," he said, "I want 50 galleons a quote like usual."

Marc smiled gratefully. "Thanks," he said, "it's going to be a big one. Durand won't have an issue paying that much. I still can't believe one of us is going to be marrying into the muggle's Royal family."

"That's not confirmed yet," Draco said, even though it was clear to everyone in Britain that it would only be a matter of time. "She really was such a sweetheart. The muggles are going to fall in love with her."

"Poor thing," Marc said, sympathetically, since the muggle paparazzi were a hundred times worse than the wizarding equivalent. "Is it true she's agreed to give up magic?"

Draco looked around, making sure no one was nearby. "Yep, the Queen knows about the magical community of course, but she's made the soon-to-be Mrs Winsor promise to live non-magically for the sake of the monarchy."

"Merlin," Marc breathed in shock, "she must really love him."

"Or will just make sure Lizzy isn't about when she's using her Sleek Eazy's," Draco said, and Marc's eyebrows crinkled in confusion. Draco batted his hand at him and said dismissively, "Please, as if hair like hers could be achieved with anything other than magic, it's so bloody perfect all the time."

"That's definitely true." Marc nodded, a small smile showing on his face at Draco's cavalier attitude to muggle royalty. Then he cast another longing look at the bar. "Do you think it would be bad form to have a little nip before heading back?"

"Absolutely not," Draco assured him. "We are celebrating after all."

"Celebrating," Marc repeated, an ironic twist to his lips as he added, "or commiserating, such a fine line..."

"Remember Weasley can do it. Weasley," Draco emphasised. "You're much cleverer than him, and better looking, I'm sure you'll be a natural."

Marc left after two shots of whiskey, and Draco went home to have a little afternoon nap, because what was the point of being self-employed and childless if you couldn't sleep whenever you bloody well pleased?

Harry's port-key wasn't arriving until sometime in the wee hours, depending on the queue at the Kathmandu office, since Tibet didn't even have a port key-port. So to use up what would no doubt be an evening of anxious time-checking and solo alcohol consumption, Draco had planned to meet Ron, Hermione, Marc and Mavis at the pub. Though perhaps the latter were likely to cancel in light of the hitchhiker.

Draco should have known better, a small matter like having created new life wouldn't get in the way of the Belby's social life. True, Mavis did glare at her tonic and lime after every sip as though it was the drink's fault it contained no vodka, and Marc did ask far more questions about the Weasley-Granger spawn than he normally did. In all fairness though that wasn't much of a stretch considering he'd never asked after them at all before. But other than those minor differences, the night out was similar to many others they'd enjoyed. Draco didn't even feel Harry's absence as much as he'd
expected to.

As it drew nearer to ten however Draco began to dread the inevitable, everyone but him at that table had to get up for work in the morning; it wouldn't be long before they all had to head home. It was Granger who started it first.

She drained the glass of wine she'd been nursing for the better part of an hour and looked at her watch. "That's it for me," she said, standing and picking up her handbag, "there're no kids in our house, I want a good night's sleep." She smiled at Draco. "Say welcome home to Harry for me."

"Will do," Draco replied, thinking that the next three to six hours we going to be the longest in history. Bloody Nepalese and their shambles of a government.

"I'm exhausted," Mavis said, standing too. She kissed Marc on the cheek. "Don't be too late." Draco was unfortunately sitting close enough to hear her whisper suggestively, "Prod me awake when you come to bed."

Draco looked at Marc in confusion, not because of his randy wife, that was par for the course, rabbits the pair of them, but because she was apparently leaving without him.

Marc shrugged at Draco's non-verbal inquiry, and clinked his pint with Draco's. "Wouldn't be best form to leave you all alone, port-keys from that part of the world always take forever and you are intolerably impatient."

"I would understand… in light of recent…." He paused and raised his eyebrows in Mavis's direction, who was busy digging in her purse for something. "Revelations," Draco finished.

Marc grinned. "Nah, by lucky chance her sister is in town, they're already talking colours for the nursery, I'm surplus to requirements."

"You seem better," Draco observed.

"Much," agreed Marc, lifting his pint in illustration.

"Nursery?" Ron piped up, still slouched in his seat. Hermione and Mavis paused to wave from the courtyard door, and the three men raised their hands in farewell. Draco's wave was no more than perfunctory, because he was looking at Ron in confusion.

"You're staying?" he asked, and it was proof of how much they had come to get along that the words held no negativity, just surprise that Ron would give up a childfree early night with his wife to sit beside Draco in the pub.

"Yep, just a couple more, you two need supervision."

"Oh no, has Harry finally clicked we've been shagging behind his back for years?" Marc said, giving Draco a ludicrously lecherous look from across the table.

Ron chuckled and shook his head. "Nah, he's blind, you're still good. I just know what you two are like when you're a bit low."

Draco considered Ron for a moment and then said shrewdly, "You mean Granger told you to stay so we don't drink ourselves to the floor?"

Ron lifted his eyebrows in silent confirmation and took a sip from his pint. Draco was slightly touched.
"Why would you think I'm low?" Marc asked.

Ron shrugged. "Because Mavis isn't drinking, that's what tipped Hermione off anyway, and you just said nursery."

Marc's expression wasn't really guilty, perhaps just contrite at being caught secret keeping. He nodded. "You are too observant, you should drink more, it will sort that right out."

"Good advice." Ron grinned. "But I figure you'll be having the major, holy-shit-I'm-not-cut-out-to-be-a-dad-my-life-is-ruined drama."

Marc tipped his hand from side to side out in front him. "Semi, better now than I was earlier," he admitted honestly.

"Good." Then Ron turned to Draco. "And you're always off when you're waiting for Harry to get home from a trip." Draco felt a nasty little stab of shame in his chest at his choice of words, 'off' was putting it mildly. "He said when he got back from Samoa that you were passed out drunk in the sitting room, and that Kreacher was in inconsolable hysterics because he couldn't wake you and thought you were dead."

"Perhaps," Draco muttered, "I just don't know why he can't travel from places that operate on something that resembles a schedule."

"So you have to get rat-arsed? It's a bit selfish mate."

"No," Draco huffed indignantly. Selfish? He wasn't the one off adventuring the world alone. "I get rat-arsed because I haven't spoken to Harry for two months, or however long it might have been and don't know whether he's actually got to the office to get his port-key, or if he's fallen off a cliff in the Congo or god-knows-where and is now trussed up and being spit roasted by pigmies."

"Do pigmies eat wizards?" Marc asked interestedly, disregarding the rest of Draco's outburst.

"I don't know." Draco snapped witheringly, annoyed and a little embarrassed that his genuine fears were met only by a light-hearted query on cannibalism, so he added, "Why don't you tell Weasley about Mavis and her Black Betty."

Marc's eyes bugged slightly, and he said seriously, "Because he'll faint."

"Black Betty?" Ron repeated with trepidation.

The cautious expression on Ron's face managed to lift Draco's spirits. He still got more enjoyment than he should out of a Weasley's discomfort. Then, a frightening image of Granger threatening Weasley with a wobbling ten-inch jet-black monster cock flashed through his mind's eye, and suddenly Draco wasn't pissed off anymore, he was just plain old pissed. He snorted in an undignified fashion as he began to laugh. He had to put his pint down on the table for fear of spilling it as he shook with horrified mirth.

"If he thinks it's that funny I don't want to know," Ron said bluntly. "So how far along is Mavis?" he continued determinedly, looking at Marc.

"Six weeks, just found out today," Marc said, ignoring Draco's drunken snickering, "Scary."

"It's not you know," Ron said, earnestly, "Honestly, as long as you two are good, then really it's just the tiredness that's hard to deal with." Draco calmed enough to take a sip from his glass and actually pay attention to Ron's efforts at placating Marc's fears. "I mean me and Hermione snap at each other,
and there are plenty of times when you wonder why you did it, normally when you realise your baby needs more things in its life than you have ever owned, but the minute the kid smiles, it's worth it." Draco failed to restrain his scoff at the cliché but Ron just shrugged. "I know it's corny, but it's true."

"Thanks Ron," Marc said, "better than I got from him."

Ron gave Draco an appraising look. "Let me guess … he just warned that your house will look like it's been hit by a primary-coloured plastic avalanche and then was a bit too pleased to be gay?"

Marc laughed. "Yes actually."

Draco flicked Ron two fingers and then stood to get a refill. "When I get back I'd like to talk about something other than children."

"Be nice," Ron said, "or I'll stop correcting Rose when she calls you Drakey."

Draco pursed his lips. He was certain there were worse things to be called – Ferret chief among them – but he was sick of Harry's sniggering every time Rose insisted that Drakey was better at playing tea party than Uncle Harry. Though it was likely that the game and the name combined were to blame for really setting Harry off. "Another round?" Draco offered in amicable defeat, and Ron grinned as he nodded.

One argument about the off-side rule, a bet on the Tornadoes chances in the upcoming semi, and three glasses of lager later, Draco was finally feeling like he could handle the wait for Harry to arrive at home. It was just after eleven, and the crowd in the pub was becoming steadily younger by the minute.

Draco was a month shy of his twenty seventh birthday, hardly ancient, and yet as he looked at the newcomers he could have sworn most of them should have still been at Hogwarts. The boy's faces lacked the proper definition of men's, and their belts lacked the ability to keep their trousers in the proper position. Not that Draco was looking at their barely covered bums of course, or if he was it was only to confirm that they were all far too scrawny for his taste.

The girls hanging from the arms of the low-trousered, though admittedly cheerful young men, seemed to fit the scene a bit better. High heels, bare legs and short skirts, or even short shorts Draco noticed as a pair marched by their table on route to the loo. The serious look on the girl's face suggested she was meeting someone in there for a very serious high level summit, possibly a global lip-gloss shortage.

Draco entertained himself while Marc and Ron talked about children again, despite his request. He watched the antics of the crowd, and tried very hard not to let his thoughts stray to Harry. Because thoughts of Harry led to dwelling on the somewhat concerning issue of why Draco was so very terrible at waiting for his boyfriend's return. He guessed it all stemmed from the same old guilt, the guilt that had sent him to work for The Prophet seven years ago. Rationally, Draco knew that he had done all he could to atone for his actions during the war; he'd even helped The Saviour find happiness, privacy from the press, and clothes that weren't threadbare and/or thoroughly outsized. But there was always the little voice in his head that suggested ex-Death Eaters didn't deserve to be this bloody happy.

Happiness that depends so much on another person is frightening no matter who you are. Let alone when you happen to be carrying the emotional baggage of a once manipulated, high-strung only child, who has enough Daddy issues to fill several shipping containers. So while the person that brought him this happiness was off on dangerous adventures, it was very easy for Draco's relatively dramatic brain to imagine the gods of Karma deciding that he, Draco, was still in their debt. Smiting
Harry from the Earth would surely pay all Draco owed, they would think. And so every time the
moment of Harry's scheduled arrival drew near Draco's panic that his boyfriend had actually been
dead for weeks – whether by divine intervention or cannibal pigmies, both seeming equally viable to
his internal hysteria – intensified in the extreme.

Draco was staring absentmindedly – or possibly just drunkenly – at a couple of young guys across
the room. They were trying to gain the attention of a group of girls, who were focused on nothing
but which of them had ordered the most extravagant cocktail. In Draco's opinion the blonde holding
a foot tall glass whose contents undulated like an alcoholic lava lamp was the clear winner, it was
quite mesmerising.

One of the interested blokes had stopped hovering nearby and moved in to speak to the girls. How
very brave, Draco mused, glad to have never needed to face such a daunting enemy. He cast around
for something else to watch as the guy was given his marching orders by the whole table in a round
of dismissive hand gestures and scandalised shooing. It was then that the shunned man's friend
cought Draco's eye, he seemed thoroughly disinterested in the outcome of his mate's brave advance,
and was very obviously giving an oblivious Marc an appreciative once over.

Draco wondered if this was a once-upon-a-time shag buddy of Marc's or just a random bloke
perving. He only looked about twenty-one, so Draco hoped it was the latter, since Marc hadn't been
single for four years. Although, Marc shagged anything attractive in the pre-Mavis days, including
seventeen year olds. The guy across the room was definitely attractive, in a nonchalantly scruffy kind
of way. But then, it turned out that Draco kind of had a thing for that…

Of course it was at this moment that a hand landed on Draco's shoulder, and a voice he hadn't heard
for two months said, "He's not my type, but if you really want to start bringing teenage skater boys
home I won't stop you."

"Harry!" Ron bellowed on Draco's other side, and Draco promptly fell off his stool in shock at the
shout and sudden materialisation of Harry Potter right next to him. Marc stood up to peer over the
table at Draco on the floor, and Ron laughed loudly before slapping Harry's upper arm in welcome
and informing them he was off to get another round.

Harry beamed down at Draco, extending his hand to pull him upright. His hair was short and almost
neat, his skin had a fresh scrubbed look, and though he smiled broadly there were shadows under his
eyes.

"Hey," he said, as Draco stood once more. His one little word held more emotion than Draco would
have thought possible. It sounded like a sigh of relief and a tempting promise all at once.

"Hey," Draco echoed, feeling short of breath, taken so suddenly by surprise. "Why are you here?
What time is it?"

"I got back early, Kreacher told me where to find you, I thought you'd be pleased." He eyed the table
of empties. "And less pissed."

"Less pissed than what? Last time?" Draco was so thrown by the unexpected turn of events he didn't
seem to be able to react properly. "I'm still standing aren't I?" he said defensively, as he held himself
up with a surreptitious grip on the table edge.

"Debatable," Harry replied, glancing at the patch of floor Draco had just recently been occupying.
But then he smiled and stepped a little closer. "Are we actually arguing about this?"

"Ha, merlin no," Draco said, wrapping his free arm around Harry and hugging him tight. Fuck, he'd
missed him.

It was probably just his hundredth pint talking, but Draco felt a little bit like weeping in relief, he didn't however. Instead he pressed his face into the crook of Harry's shoulder and felt the worry and tension dissolving within him, though that may have also been his hundredth pint's influence.

It was only when the muscles in Harry's back tensed under his hand that Draco realised what he'd done; a very clear display of affection in the middle of a crowded pub. Not really what their highly private relationship needed. They'd discussed going public many many times over the last four years, but Harry enjoyed his newfound freedom too much in the beginning, and Draco had never liked being in the spotlight. As the years went on and no one clicked, and even the fact that Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter were friends became boring to the press it was hard to convince themselves to change things. Life was so good.

Draco stepped back, more disappointed about the loss of contact than possible repercussions, because to his sloshed brain having everyone know he was shagging Harry didn't really seem all that terrible right then.

Marc was smiling broadly at the pair of them across the table. "Good to see you Harry!"

"You too," Harry replied. He was a bit pink in the face, and he still stood very close to Draco, their knuckles brushed where their arms hung innocently at their sides.

Ron returned with four more lagers and Harry took his gratefully. "Cheers mate," he said, leaning in front of Draco to clink his glass with Ron's.

Harry had barely taken his first sip when they were interrupted by an excited voice, "Mr Potter! Photo for the public?" It was a young and very chubby celebrity photographer, the buttons on his wrinkled shirt puckered unflatteringly across his paunch as he walked a little closer to their table. He grinned winningly and held up his camera questioningly. "Haven't seen you around for a while, where have you been?"

Draco didn't recognise him, but that didn't mean much these days. He barely took notice of any of the lowly scavengers who made money from the nonsense the trash rags peddled. Usually Harry could go about his life as normal, and there wasn't endless speculation printed about him anymore, but of course the press still liked to know what he was up to.

"Sorry, no pictures," Harry said, affably toasting the photographer with his pint, "just out with my friends." And he turned to engage Ron in conversation again.

Draco watched the pudgy kid hesitate for a moment, and when he caught his eye Draco tried to reinforce the message that he should bugger off by sending him a disdainful glare. But then, after a few seconds the photographer just sneered at him and spoke to Harry again.

"Just one?" he wheedled, all polite again, "You must have been away for a while to receive such an exuberant greeting from your friend." He shot another little sneer in Draco's direction when Harry wasn't looking, and a tiny worm of doubt wriggled in Draco's belly.

Harry, courteous as always, nodded. "I was, two whole months in Tibet, living in a muggle monastery." He smiled, and Draco was impressed that he was able to sound so genuine. "It was a great experience. These guys weren't expecting me to show up here, and they've been on the turps for a while, hence the exuberance." He elbowed Draco then, and Draco gave his best intoxicated grin. How embarrassing.
"Right-o," said the photographer, a bit too easily. He held his camera up again. "Just one picture?"

"Leave it mate," Harry said, a tiny touch of impatience entering his voice, "I'll be up in Hogsmeade in a few weeks with my friend Luna, we're releasing a travel guide together, you're welcome to come and take pictures then, might even sign a book for you if you're lucky."

Tubby was clearly annoyed to be put off. He moved his camera to his eye anyway, intent on snapping a photo, but Marc, who was closest reacted quickly. He held his hand in front of the lens at close range, obscuring the view as the flash went off.

The photographer was outraged, he scowled at Marc's hand, which was still blocking his shot. "Christ it's just a picture," he groused.

"You recognise me?" Marc said threateningly, demanding his attention, "Marcus Belby, Arts and Lifestyle editor for the Prophet, and I've just saved your arse a court date so be grateful."

The photographer paled noticeably, and Draco knew why – pissing off one of the biggest buyers of photographs was definitely not a wise move for anyone in that business.

"This establishment is private property," Draco chimed in, feeling the need to illustrate how close the photographer had come to breaking the law. He focused very hard on articulating the words as they left his drink-numb lips, "Mr Potter has declined his permission for you to take photographs of him, disregarding that is harassment, a crime that carries –"

"I know, I know," the photographer cut in hastily, backing away. "Christ, it's just a photo," he repeated, in the same hard-done-by tone. "I've got to pay the bills somehow."

"Clear out before you get yourself arrested," Ron piped up, moving his jacket to show the Auror crest embroidered on his pull over.

The sight of law enforcement seemed to decide him, and the photographer disappeared into the crowd so quickly Draco could have sworn he'd disapparated.

"Thanks," Harry said, looking around at the other three men, obviously uncomfortable, "I never want to be rude to them, gives them something to write about you know?"

"He wouldn't write anything," Marc said scathingly, "he's not a reporter, never even seen him before, I'd guess he's just trying to make a bit of easy gold, old Skeeter and the like don't spend their evenings stalking celebrities, they rely on little twats like him to get pictures to go with their stories."

"Oh." Harry frowned, and Draco thought he looked annoyed that he hadn't been rude after all. "I'd never really thought about that."

"Yup, right grimy little fuckers, tell them where to get off next time," Marc said with contempt, then he threw back the dregs from his glass and stood up. "One more for the road?" he suggested, pushing away from the table to go and buy the last round.

Draco didn't even make it through half of the pint Marc had bought before Harry was tugging on his hand under the table.

"Let's get out of here," he said close to Draco's ear since the music was gaining in volume with every song. Draco required little convincing.
They said goodbye to Ron and Marc, who were talking babies again and finishing their drinks. Then they set off through the packed room, Harry keeping his fingers tight around Draco's under the guise of preventing them from being separated as they wended their way through the crowd. But when they reached the front door of the pub Draco regretfully dropped Harry's hand.

Out on the pavement, amid the late night merrymakers moving from pub to café to theatre, Draco took several deep breaths. The cool night air did wonderful things for his inebriation, he felt much more present all of a sudden.

"Shall we walk?" Harry asked, his hands were deep in his pockets and there was a wistfulness about him that made Draco's ribs feel a size too small every time he breathed. Draco nodded in agreement, thankful for the suggestion. The twenty minute walk to Grimmauld Place would sober him up nicely, then he'd have all his faculties to do terribly filthy things to Harry when they got home.

"It is a nice night," he commented lamely as they headed off down the road.

Draco hadn't counted on the torture of walking next to Harry on the busy pavement, having him so close but unable to touch him, or kiss him, or knock him to the concrete and start tearing his clothes off…. They kept catching each other's eye as they walked. Harry wore a smirk that said he knew Draco was suffering from the enforced distance, but the way his gaze kept darting to Draco's mouth suggested he wasn't coping so well either.

The urge to just grab Harry and snog him senseless became almost unbearable as they rounded the corner into a residential street that had no night-time pedestrians. But Draco resisted, the encounter with the photographer still on his mind.

However, four blocks from home Harry finally cracked, he let out a frustrated huff and then caught the elbow of Draco's jacket to pull him around. Then his other hand slipped behind Draco's neck, and his fingers splayed out, up into the hair at his nape cradling the back of his head. He pressed his lips to Draco's firmly, the pads of his fingers caressed Draco's scalp momentarily, but he didn't linger nearly long enough, and there was only the slightest whisper of tongue on Draco's bottom lip as he drew back.

"Sorry," Harry said, looking around nervously, "I had too, thought I was going to pop."

Draco knew what he meant, he'd never had proper restraint when it came to Harry after all. He glanced up and down the street too, wobbling just a little from snapping his head around quickly. His brain seemed much looser than usual, banging about inside his skull and making him dizzy. But dizzy or not, Harry's quick little kiss still burned across Draco's mouth, he needed more, just a bit to sustain him still they got home.

"Don't fucking *apologise,*" Draco said, fisting his hand in the front of Harry's jacket to tug him back in. He kissed him fervently, his tongue slid into to Harry's mouth at once, his hands crept inside Harry's jacket holding him tight and close. He revelled in the taste and feel of him, warm, and solid, and present, and *god* Draco was kidding himself if he thought he could pull away now. Harry had melted against him, his hands slipped up and down Draco's sides, one leaving to grope at his arse as they swayed together. Hot liquid want was pooling at the base of Draco's spine, leaching through his midriff and into his stomach. He clutched Harry closer, sucked on his bottom lip, and traced his fingers across the skin of his lower back beneath Harry's shirt. Harry all but whimpered under the assault.

But then, out of nowhere, there was a bright flash of light, so bright that Draco could see it clearly through his closed lids, and even in his drunken, distracted and massively horny state he knew what it was at once: the flashbulb of a magical camera.
Something cold and heavy smothered all the fluttering heat in his belly as Harry's lips froze against his. Draco forced his eyes open to see that Harry was looking back at him, regret and trepidation tainting his previously lust blown pupils. They both remained still and staring at each other, it couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds since the flash went off, but it felt like an eternity to Draco.

"Er, Mr Potter?" The polite inquiry seemed to jolt Harry back to life, he looked towards the voice, and Draco did to. It was the same portly photographer from the pub, he was grinning smugly at them. "This definitely counts as public property, you should probably have waited 'til you got home to do that."

"You bastard," Draco snapped, incensed that someone would be so bloody rude. "What, did you follow us all the way?" Nothing pissed Draco off more than the bullshit scum like this were guilty of feeding to the public. "You realise there is actual important shit going on in the world?" he taunted scornfully.

"I'd say people will find this pretty important, would you like to comment Mr Potter?"

Harry seemed to be in shock, so Draco continued to speak for him, reining in his derision to say seriously, "I'd like your legal rep's details please, we'll be suing you for harassment. You might want to wait to sell that picture until you've gotten a quote for your defence, it might fetch enough to cover the cost, but I doubt it."

"I'm not harassing you," the kid snarked back, "I was walking home and just happened upon Harry Potter hooking up with a bloke on a street corner, lucky I had a camera." He gave Draco a cocky leer.

"Oh, just fuck off!" Harry finally spoke up, sounding completely fed up, he waved a hand in banishment and said dismissively, "So I kissed my boyfriend, big fucking deal! I didn't know that being in love was such a scandal."

Draco felt his eyes bug out at the eruption, and he stumbled as Harry turned sharply, pulling him by the hand as he all but growled, "Come on."

Draco tripped along for a few steps torn between laughter and downright horror, he really couldn't believe what had just happened. Bloody Marc, he should never have told Harry to stand up to the paps.

"I have to make a living too, you know," the photographer called after them.

"So do prostitutes," Harry returned over his shoulder, "at least people gain something from their services."

Then he turned back briefly and flicked two fingers up at the photographer, his other hand still linked firmly with Draco's. Draco couldn't help but laugh, even though he was probably just making the situation worse, and as he looked to see the guy's reaction to being flipped off by Harry Potter the flash of the camera went off again. *Fuck it.*

They rounded the corner before they spoke to each other, Draco was trying to find the right amount of panic that they were going to be outed in the most public and cliché way, but thanks to his lager ingestion such emotions were beyond him.

"I shouldn't have done that should I?" Harry said, but he didn't sound all that remorseful.

"Probably not," Draco agreed.
"Should have apparated. Sorry, walking home seemed romantic." He peeped slant-ways at Draco's face, no doubt expecting a lecture on public conduct and image maintenance. But it wouldn't come, because Draco was at a loss for words.

There was something about Harry's blunt comments to the photographer that stopped Draco from being annoyed at his outburst. No one had declared their feelings for him so candidly before, in fact, Harry was the only person to ever tell Draco that he loved him at all. Let alone shouting it on a suburban pavement at a smarmy photographer.

Draco sighed, winding his arm more securely with Harry's and wishing that Harry was taller so he could lean his drunken head on his shoulder without the world tipping sideways. "You're an idiot," he murmured.

Harry huffed a little laugh. "Yes, your idiot though, unfortunately for you."

Harry's hand was still on the door knob when Draco started fumbling with his belt, crowding him back against the inside of the old black door, attacking his neck and making him groan as he drew his fly down. Draco was so bloody desperate to get started, there was a perfectly suitable bed upstairs and several serviceable couches in the next room but somehow he needed to fall to his knees and suck Harry off right here in the entrance.

Harry wore a revering smile when Draco looked up, and he shook his head as if in disbelief at the sight of his still quite tipsy boyfriend eyeing up his now exposed cock with eager greed.

"Christ--" he said, as Draco laved at the tip teasingly before taking him in properly. "I really bloody missed you," Harry breathed in satisfaction.

His left hand ghosted through Draco's hair, and his thumb stroked the side of his face, gently touching the arch of his brow, the sharpness of his cheekbone and the hard angle of his jaw. They were all more defined than usual when his cheeks hollowed with the pressure of a long sucking slide as he drew back. Draco wondered if it was normal to love the feeling of a heavy cock sliding across his tongue as much as he did, he fucking adored it.

Harry's hips twitched forward to meet Draco's mouth as he descended again. But Draco slapped a heavy palm to his stomach to keep him still. He wanted to do much more than foreplay this evening and having Harry fuck his face to completion was certainly not going to be enough. Draco bobbed his head and sucked for all he was worth, flat tongue caressing the pulsing underside with every move, all the while holding Harry fast against the door.

Harry was breathing in little sharp bursts above him. Draco glanced up to see that he was being watched intently, greedy green eyes following every move of his tightly stretched lips. Harry smiled again as their gazes met, and the look seemed far too soft, too peaceful when matched with the hungry need that had been there only a split second before.

"Let's go upstairs," Harry said, helping pull Draco to his feet, and then kissing him soundly for a minute. "I reckon I've only got one good one in me tonight." He tugged at Draco's belt buckle, sounding a little sheepish. "I'm knackered."

But then he mouthed his way down the side of Draco's throat in a way that suggested limitless ravishing energy and plucked open the buttons on Draco's shirt. "I need you first though, two months was way too long, don't ever let me go for that long again okay? God…" He pressed his face into
Draco’s collarbone, inhaling deeply. "You smell amazing, how can I miss the way someone smells?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused as he pulled back to look into Draco’s face again.

Draco recognised his expression. It was one that never failed to turn him into a pile of sappy mush, not that he’d ever admit that out loud. Pure unguarded admiration was always good for the ego, but at close range when he was already moon-eyed from drink? Draco might well come in his trousers.

Harry breathed another one of those relieved little sighs as he pushed the shirt from Draco’s shoulders, leaving him in just his thin vest. Harry’s warm hands skimmed up his arms, and his left came up to cup his jaw, while his right travelled in a teasing path down the middle of his chest. He paused only briefly to untuck the vest and then slipped his fingers beneath the hem, baring Draco’s stomach as he traced the fine trail of pale hair that ran from his navel south.

Coming in his trousers was seeming more and more likely. Draco actually felt his cock twitch as Harry murmured, "God, you make me mental."

Draco felt like he was in a mad dream, this crazy bastard, his crazy bastard, found it so easy to declare such things, and still after four years the honest emotion in these statements floored him. This was why he feared so much about Harry not returning from his trips, because he knew he would never meet someone like him ever again.

By the time they made it to the bedroom Harry had divested them both of most of their clothes. Draco retained only his boxer shorts, and Harry paused to kiss a bit more while he kicked his way out of his trousers, standing on the toes of his socks one at a time to wriggle his feet out of them. Draco grinned at the silly unbalanced manoeuvre, but Harry quickly steadied himself with a hand on Draco’s shoulder, while the other found the tented cotton of Draco’s shorts.

The warm and purposeful grip around his stiff length made Draco moan in anticipation, and the floor seemed to sway in time with Harry’s delightful hand, making Draco realise how drunk he still was. It didn’t seem to have any adverse effects on his performance capabilities though. He was so bloody hard the thing was nearly pointing at the ceiling.

Harry had noticed too, breaking the endless kiss to say, "Christ did you not even wank while I was gone?"

Draco nodded. "Of course I did, it's just you, you daft bugger, arriving early, looking fucking gorgeous by the way, telling that pap to fuck off," – and stating so very publicly that you love me, his sappy inner drunk gushed – "Merlin." He shuddered as Harry twisted his grip, and the first little jolts of the promise of climax zipped through him. "Stop, stop," he said urgently, batting at Harry's forearm, "too good."

Harry removed his hand, shoving Draco’s shorts down as he did so, then twined their fingers together to pull Draco to the bed.

"Come on," he said, pushing Draco down and climbing top of him. "I've been dreaming about this for weeks." He kissed him again until Draco was flat on his back, Harry straddling his hips so that Draco’s insistently hard cock rested against the cleft of his bare arse. The heat was so tempting he could feel his prick pulsing, pre-come leaking in a sticky rivulet down the head.

All his thoughts of a long leisurely welcome home shag were forgotten now. Harry was rocking back slightly, teasingly, as he assaulted Draco’s throat and lips with his mouth. Draco couldn't wait. He muttered the only wandless charm he’d ever mastered – lube conjuration – and nudged his own dick out of the way to rub his slippery middle finger across Harry’s exposed entrance. The angle was excellent, by far his favourite position for preparation, no awkward bent limbs or propping pillows
required.

He also loved that when he slipped the first finger inside, Harry's groan of appreciation was much more intimate because their faces were so close together. Harry's hard cock grazed up and down Draco's stomach as he moved on Draco's finger, pushing back to feel it deeper, enjoying the slick friction completely uninhibited.

He breathed his approval in Draco's ear as a second was added. Draco curled and scissored them as far as he could reach. Harry's barely discernable murmurs of, "Yes... god Draco... missed this... so good," built and added to the pleasure growing inside him, and when he pushed his third finger through the hot, tight ring of muscle Harry kissed him fiercely, breaking only to pant more encouragement against his lips.

"Cock now," Harry said, a moment later, grinding back one last time on Draco's hand. He sat upright, reaching behind him to guide Draco in. His own prick was full and flushed, and Draco reached for it, but his fingers went slack as his attention was taken by the perfect and glorious sliding heat enveloping his own hard length.

They moaned in sync as Harry bottomed out, Draco could do little but stare in his pleasure-paralysed state. Harry was still upright, the orange streetlights from the window cast warm light over him, throwing the muscles of his thighs and stomach into greater relief, his head was back, exposing his throat, and he was breathing deeply as he adjusted to the much more significant intrusion of eight inches of turgid cock up his arse. Draco thought dazedly that he could happily look at this beautiful sight forever.

But then Harry shifted, rolling his hips and rising up, the tightness dragging up Draco's prick made little spots appear in his vision, and he could think of nothing else. There was just Harry, the beautiful pressure, and the coiling electricity building inside him.

Draco tried to keep time as Harry moved faster, the muscles in his lower back and thighs were straining as he lifted himself from the mattress over and over, but the reward was so close. Harry fell forward, a hand landed heavily in the middle of Draco's chest, the other caught the head board. Draco looked up to see the taut underside of Harry's bicep as he propelled himself faster, using his arm for leverage to ride Draco with a ferocity that was a little overwhelming.

Draco, not wanting to be outdone, planted his heels and pumped his hips. Harry swore and panted. His hand was gone from Draco's chest now, it was busy pulling at his cock. Draco marvelled at Harry's coordination in times like these, hips rolling, fist fucking, load baring arm flexing, and he still managed to duck his head and catch Draco's lips, breathing erratically, "Perfect, so fucking perfect."

Draco's orgasm hit him with very little warning, white hot sparking perfection shot through him. He gasped with the shock of it, he'd forgotten how much more intense the climax gained from sex was, wanking was really nothing in comparison. Harry seemed to agree, his sinuous movements faltered, and his face was almost pained as he came in dramatic spurts on Draco's stomach moments later.

"Two months," Harry groaned, leaning in to kiss Draco with soft sweaty lips, "a shag like that almost makes it worth it." Draco could sort of agree, though his stress-induced alcoholism probably needed to be sorted out if there was ever going to be another long trip like this one.

Harry climbed off him and magic'd away the mess, then before Draco could even convince his limbs to move Harry had wriggled up next to him, wrapped a heavy arm over his stomach and pressed a sleepy kiss to his shoulder, mumbling, "Love you," against the sweat damp skin.

Draco's hoarse reply of, "Love you too," was lost to a quick knock on the still ajar bedroom door.
There was a beat of silence, and then the voice Draco was expecting said, "Kreacher has collected Masters' clothes from the staircase, do you require anything this evening?"

Harry snickered against Draco's shoulder. "Cheeky little sod." Draco just sighed, he was long passed being annoyed by Kreacher and his lack of boundaries. "Thank you Kreacher," Harry called, hauling the bedspread up to cover their nakedness, "you can bring them in if you'd like."

The hunched little elf scurried around the door, a pile of their folded clothes in his arms. "Kreacher did not mean to intrude Masters," he said, eyes averted as he headed for the chest of draws, "he just does not want visitors to think this is a house of ill repute, shirts on the floor in the foyer, trousers on the stairs, Master Draco's vest hanging from the banister…" He gave them an almost disapproving glance, and he put the clothes on the dresser surface and headed back to the door.

"Our reputation would suffer without your moral compass to guide us," Draco said, unable to be insulted or angry with anything while Harry's hand drew lazy circles on his belly and his veins were so full of afterglow.

The elf bowed in the doorway. "Kreacher does his duty to the House of Black."

Draco drifted off to sleep easily with Harry's comforting warmth pressed close, thinking vaguely that whatever happened with that photo at least they'd deal with it together.

Harry awoke to the sound of a very familiar voice cursing. He smiled into his pillow, Draco was absolutely hopeless when he had a hangover.

"Circe's fucking tits," Draco groaned miserably. Harry opened an eye to see Draco's blurry shirtless form sitting on the edge of the bed cradling his head in his hands. Harry reached out a hand to pat his back sympathetically, but at the contact Draco jerked out of reach. "Oh no you don't, you cavalier bastard."

"Too early for that shit," Harry mumbled, not wanting to know what minute thing he done to get Draco's back up, possibly breathed too loudly or something equally offensive. But a hungover Draco was always a cantankerous Draco. Harry didn't mind too much, because the preceding drunk Draco was an affectionate and pliant Draco, a version Harry was quite fond of.

"Oh god," Draco gasped, shooting to his feet, "fucking hell."

"What?" asked Harry sitting up too and reaching for his glasses.

"That pap last night," he grit out, "fucking, fucking, fuck!"

Draco dashed from the bedside, and Harry thought he was headed to the loo to puke, but instead he wrenched open their wardrobe and pulled out the suitcase stashed in the bottom. Harry had forgotten they even had that one, camouflaged as it usually was by the two thousand pairs of shoes Draco needed to own. Apparently saddle and walnut are two very different shades of brown; Harry was yet to be convinced. Draco had thrown the case open and was tossing clothes from the cupboard into it.

"Err…" Harry began, feeling far too morning-brained to keep up, "you're going to leave me now that it's finally come out?"

"No," Draco said, sparing him only the briefest quelling glance. "France. We have to go to France."

Harry still wasn't with him. "I don't think leaving the country will be necessary… I really just want to
sleep in our bed for a few nights, we could just camp inside 'til the press calm down again… spend the time in bed?"

"No, Merlin, my mother!" Draco was clearly losing his shit, he wasn't even folding his clothes as he threw them higgledy-piggledy at the suitcase, a definite indication that a meltdown was looming. "I haven't told her about me, or us, I can't let her find out about this from the newspaper."

"Oh …" Harry suddenly understood. Draco and his mother might have the most formal relationship Harry had ever encountered, but there was something like love between them somewhere. "Oh, no I guess you can't," he agreed. "Okay, France it is."

After that it was a flurry of floo calls to arrange port keys, and a brief argument about why Draco couldn't just fire call his mum rather than the pair of them dashing off to France. Because it just wasn't proper, apparently.

The French countryside smelled so different to the English one, dry and somehow more floral. It was as if the often damp earth of England overrode all the other smells at home.

Harry was quite nervous as the door to the cottage opened. But his nervousness turned to surprise when they were greeted by a fit, well groomed gentleman in a suit, rather than a house-elf as Harry was expecting.

"Bonjour Messieurs," the man greeted them crisply. Harry assumed he was a butler, because he certainly looked the part.

Harry looked at Draco, the only French word he himself knew was 'Merde'. Not particularly helpful when speaking to posh butlers. Draco was frowning slightly, this man must be a reasonably recent addition to Narcissa's house if Draco didn't know him.

"Bonjour, je suis ici pour voir ma mère, Madame Malfoy." Draco replied to the butler, and even though the language was different Harry could hear the change in Draco's tone; it shifted from nervous to superior as he stood taller, his chin lifting fractionally.

Draco always managed to project confidence when he needed too, something that never failed to impress Harry. Personally he would have felt like shuffling his feet under the scrutiny as the butler looked Draco up and down. Then his eyes fell to their still clasped hands. He glanced at Harry briefly before nodding. "Suivez-moi," he said, leading them into the house.

Harry and Draco were shown into a small and very comfortable sitting room, there were large French windows showing a much more manicured garden out the back, tall standing roses and topiary hedges made a very pretty view. Draco smiled at the well-kept garden before he took his seat next to Harry on the sofa. "Mother's pride and joy," he said, seeing that Harry was looking too, "she smuggled most of the roses from the Manor gardens before we were forced to leave."

"I hope you're not going to arrest me for that Mr Potter," a woman's voice said from the doorway, startling them both.

Narcissa looked very different to the last time Harry had seen her in person, when she had arranged Draco's bail money with him in the months after the end of the war. She now wore muggle clothes for a start, a pale linen suit that seemed far too immaculate for the early hour of the day. Her hair was short, and much greyer, but cut in a perfect bob it still matched the austere image she always projected. Or had previously projected, because if Harry was not mistaken she had just greeted him with a joke.
"Not an Auror any longer Mrs Malfoy," Harry said, dipping his head slightly, as he and Draco both got to their feet again, "your poached roses are quite safe."

"A relief," Narcissa said.

"You look well Mother," Draco spoke up, crossing the room to kiss her cheek. "Sorry to drop in unannounced."

"Ceremony is not required here Draco, you are welcome to appear at any time of day or night." She briefly looked in Harry's direction again. "Although bringing your famous house-mate is something out of the ordinary."

"I know," Draco said. He swallowed heavily a few times and glanced back at Harry, his eyes still a touch too wide and his usually pale complexion bordering on grey.

"The thing is Mother." Draco paused to wet his lips nervously, and Harry felt himself begin to panic for the first time. He'd expected tea and pleasantries before Draco dove in with, 'I'm gay and this is my boyfriend, not just the bloke I share a house with.' It was Draco for goodness sake, he didn't like talking about their grocery list without a cup of tea in his hand, let alone the most important conversation he would possibly ever have with his mother.

But it seemed as though he was just determined to get it over with, because he drew a steadying breath and said in a calm voice that Harry was quite envious of, "Last night Harry and I made somewhat of an enemy out of a photographer. I wanted to warn you that there might be a few headlines in the pictures he took, and tell you the truth before you had to read the sensationalized version in the papers."

"Heavens," Narcissa said cautiously, moving to take a seat in the chair next to Harry's sofa, and he resumed his seat as she continued, "you're not involved in anything illegal I hope?" she smoothed her trousers and tinkled the little bell on her side table. "The ladies at bridge already think me something of a dark horse."

"No Mum," Draco said quickly, as he sat next to Harry again, "It's not bad."

"Then why do you look as though you're confessing to murder?"

"Well." Draco sighed. "I may not have been completely honest about my relationship with Harry."

Narcissa's eyes flicked to Harry then, clear surprise and suspicion on her face. "You're gay Mr Potter?"

"Er…" Harry stuttered, taken aback at the leap she had made. "Yes, Mrs Malfoy."

"I must commend you for keeping that out of the papers," she said, evidently impressed, "not that it's anyone's business but your own of course." She returned to Draco, who was looking even more shocked than Harry felt. "Yours and my son's too apparently."

"Mother," Draco croaked, "Why … how did you know?"

"Darling," Narcissa began with a tight smile. "Straight boys do not bring men home from the village inn to sleep the night in their bedroom."

Harry had to cough into his hand to hide his surprised chuckle. Draco just looked mortified. "But I --" he stammered, "You never said that you knew!"
"I didn't think I had too," Narcissa said simply, "every time you came to visit me here you would have at least one overnight guest." She lifted her shoulders fractionally. "I thought you were illustrating the point to save us an embarrassing conversation."

Draco shook his head in disbelief. "You give me too much credit Mum."

"A mother's prerogative I suppose," Narcissa said quietly.

The door opened then, and the butler entered pushing a narrow tea trolley laden with pastries and fruit and a silver tea service that was extremely similar to the one Harry liked to use at Grimmauld Place.

"Thank you, Jean," Narcissa said, "Mon fils et son amant ont eu une matinée difficile. Faites en sorte que le thé soit bien corsé."

Harry didn't have the faintest idea what was being said, but Draco, who had been staring at his mother with a kind of annoyed fascination suddenly relaxed slightly. They were silent as the tea was poured, and Jean served out small saucers of fruit and warm golden pastry. Harry began picking at his immediately, having not realised 'til now just how hungry he was. Jean must have noticed Harry's enthusiasm because he placed an extra slice of jam-smeared baguette on his plate with a conspiring smile before he left the room again.

Draco too was occupied with food and drink, gulping back his hot tea and then turning his attention to his fruit. Harry thought he must be suffering from his hangover more than he was letting on.

After several dainty sips from her tea cup Narcissa spoke again, "I must admit to not having had an inkling of your relationship, you should be proud of the privacy you've managed to uphold." Harry nodded, and Draco looked even more relaxed at the compliment. "May I ask how long you've been involved?"

"Since Harry's book," Draco answered at once, surprising Harry. That was not the official line, they'd always planned to tell people that they'd only started seeing each other after Draco was divorced. But if he wanted to tell his mum the truth Harry wouldn't stop him.

Narcissa smiled. "How funny, I remember thinking at the time that it was a miracle you and Mr Potter had become friends after the conversations you must have had to write such an intimate story." She sipped her tea again and then continued, "But this makes much more sense, good sex can get you through just about any disagreement, can't it? It certainly worked in my marriage."

"Mother!" Draco blanched, horror-struck. Harry's ribs were aching with the pressure to keep his laughter in. This woman was pure gold.

"Come now dear," Narcissa scolded gently, "we're all grown-ups here."

Draco just shook his head a little dazedly and occupied himself with his croissant. Harry had already cleared his little plate and concentrated on trying to make his tea last a bit longer.

Eventually Draco found his voice again. "And you're not disappointed?"

"I was once," Narcissa said, "Your aunt had made cryptic comments to me during the war, I had thought she was just being spiteful because she was jealous of you, but then those few months before your wedding you were … wild, and out all night, I realised what Bella had said was true."

Draco all but gawped. "You knew I was gay before I married Astoria?"
"Didn't you?" Narcissa asked in consternation.

"Well yes," Draco huffed, "but you insisted I marry, why would you do that if you knew I would be unhappy?"

"I never insisted," Narcissa disagreed. "Your father may have, and Astoria's parents most definitely did, but I only ever told you to do what was right."

"Yeah, as in marry the girl, sire heirs!"

"Do calm down dear," Narcissa instructed. "I'm insulted you think I'd choose grandchildren over your happiness. I wanted you to do what was right for you Draco."

Draco exhaled heavily and slouched back against the sofa. " Fucking brilliant, you could have made that a bit clearer."

"No need to be crass," Narcissa insisted through disapprovingly tight lips. "We are here now, and as I said, I was disappointed that you would not be able to find happiness the traditional way, but I would guess that this long-term relationship with Mr Potter is making you happy, and he is a perfectly suitable spouse in my opinion."

"Thanks," Harry said, because Draco was looking lost for words.

Narcissa smiled at him approvingly, and Harry was hit by the sudden realisation that for all intents and purposes this was his mother-in-law. Haughty Narcissa Malfoy, sister of the deranged Bellatrix was his bloody mother-in-law. Then he remembered she was also Andromeda's sister, and was actually being very nice to him, so he sipped his tea and tried not to appear too awkward.

Draco found his voice eventually, though he still sounded put-out and a bit dazed. "Right… Merlin, I've been guilt ridden over this for years Mum."

"I really do not see how that is my fault," Narcissa said coolly.

Draco looked about ready to start shouting again, so Harry spoke up quickly, "Mrs Malfoy, the reason we came today is that last night a photographer got a picture of us kissing, and it's not just that it will out me as gay, and Draco too... though I feel like everybody seems to know about him before they're told." Harry added pensively, because it really did feel like that, "But it will probably drudge up stuff from the past, war related things, our less than friendly history at school, possibly even the legitimacy of my bio, so we wanted you to know the truth before you were forced to endure all the speculation."

Draco had reined in his temper slightly and muttered mutinously, "You left out the part where you told the wanker to fuck off." He sounded like he was telling tales to a school mistress trying to get Harry in trouble for some reason. *Spoilt little brat."

"Sorry if that offends you Mrs Malfoy," Harry apologised, then deciding Draco wasn't going to get away with being a sulky dick he added, "I was just a bit annoyed to be interrupted, I quite like kissing your son."

Draco made a weird choking sound, and his face flooded with colour. Narcissa regarded Harry calculatingly before she said at length, "You must be a trial for Draco to live with at times Mr Potter, our family does not do affection well."

"He's learning," Harry said lightly, making Draco grumble under his breath.
"Thank you for coming to tell me in person Draco," Narcissa said kindly, reaching out a hand to pat her son's knee. "I really do understand how difficult this must have been."

In the wake of the hideous discussion at his mother's house, rather than embarrassment Draco was left with a surreal high of liberation at having her know everything. Even though he was furious at her for not just saying something a decade ago and saving them both ten years of secrets.

He and Harry had stayed at Narcissa's for the night, something that was nowhere near as awkward as he had been expecting, or perhaps just not in the way he'd been expecting. Because it had definitely been awkward the following morning when Draco had found Jean the butler brushing his teeth in the bathroom, while wearing Narcissa's dressing gown and little else. It was an insight into his mother's private life that Draco had not been prepared for. Jean was completely unabashed at being caught out, he smiled, tied his robe more securely and explained in a surprisingly haughty voice for a man in a flowery silk dressing gown, "I attend to all of Mrs Malfoy's needs in this house, it is the most rewarding position I have ever held."

Draco was quite happy to take him at his word, and follow his mother's example of not mentioning what went on behind closed doors. Even if the disturbing image of his mother and the butler going at it would never leave his head.

In an effort to distract himself from his mother's live-in full-service houseboy Draco had begun damage control on the impending press explosion he and Harry were about to endure. Marc, who was turning out to be indispensable in Draco's life was the first port of call when they returned to Grimmauld Place in time for lunch that day.

He, Marc and Harry were sat around the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place's basement with a tray of sandwiches to pick at between them. Draco relayed their run-in with the photographer quickly, embarrassed to have to admit he'd been careless enough to get caught.

"I can't believe you finally slipped up!" Marc cackled, far too gleefully. "I was beginning to think it would never happen."

"You really don't need to be so pleased," Draco muttered, looking around for Kreacher who'd promised to bring him 'something for his stresses'. What this might be Draco wasn't sure, but he couldn't deny that he certainly had some 'stresses' to deal with.

"A solid friendship is built on honesty," Marc said with a reasonable amount of seriousness, "and honestly I'm fucking thrilled you two are going public, you'll feel so much freer."

"Right," Draco said sarcastically, "nothing to do with the obscene amount of money this is going to make the Prophet."

"Icing on the cake," Marc laughed. Harry sat by bemusedly, obviously not really wanting to interrupt as Marc and Draco figured out the best way to attack the situation.

After four sandwiches and a pot of whiskey laced tea (this had been Kreacher's idea of stress relief, it really wasn't any wonder that Draco had become dependent on drink with such examples being set for him), they decided that a press release was just asking for attention, and worse, commentary. Then Marc said, "We might be thinking about this the wrong way, what if you're just Out?"

"How?" Draco asked. "I pretty much am anyway."

"Exactly," Marc agreed. "Go out in public tonight, and this afternoon if you can, be seen holding hands, talking closely, you know, really obvious couple stuff and if anyone asks, tell them you're
together, that you have been for ages. Behave like anyone who comments must be blind because you've been out and proud for years. I'll organise someone to get a few pictures and we'll run a story tomorrow about Harry and his long-time boyfriend buying new racing brooms or something."

Draco was impressed, could they really bluff their way through this?

"But no one knows I'm gay," Harry put in, "people will go crazy." But then he looked less concerned. "I would like a new broom though…"

"I don't think they'll go crazy, just think about it for a minute," Marc suggested, "since you broke up with Ginny you've been a confirmed bachelor, seen only in the company of Draco or Ron and Hermione, and sometimes Mavis and me, if we present the article like your broom-buying activities are the interesting part, suggest you're looking to get back into Quidditch or something else harmless, and not make a big deal about who you were with, then readers will be confused, they'll think they must have missed you coming out, they'll remember that you are always with Draco at events and things…"

Draco smiled, convinced. "Not bad Belby. I'm sure there will be a bit of a fuss, but perception is everything and it will definitely help us here."

Marc was openly smug about his clever plot. "And then, when whoever it is prints the picture of you two snogging everyone will already know you're gay, and that you're seeing Draco. With that scandal defused it's likely that a lot of people will feel like such intimate pictures are an invasion of their hero's privacy."

"You have a lot of faith in the public," Harry said dubiously.

"Have I ever steered you wrong?" Marc asked.

"No," Harry admitted. "It just feels sort of dishonest." Draco never knew whether to be charmed or irritated by Harry's determinedly pure heart at times like these.

"So?" Marc countered, echoing Draco's own inner opinion on the matter. "And besides, we're running the Middleton interview on Friday – middle-class witch gives up everything to marry a muggle prince? Yeah, no one is going to give two shits who you're shagging once her story hits the news cycle."

"It's weird that I'm a bit disappointed by that, right?" Harry mused, having obviously accepted the plan, dishonesty withstanding.

"Yes," Marc and Draco said in unison. Then Draco smirked and tapped his forefinger on the table top in accusation. "I knew you secretly loved the spotlight Potter."

Harry raised his eyebrows at the old name. "I just meant that it'll be nice having everyone know that I love you, not that I'm happy to be in the papers again, you tit."

Draco was sufficiently stumped by this bold statement, and quite touched, and wanted to jump on Harry right there across the kitchen table.

"Oh, okay then," he managed faintly, unable to control the affection swelling in his chest. He blinked once or twice and must have looked pleased, because Harry grinned happily back.

"If you're not going to start tearing each other's clothes off I'm leaving," Marc said disappointedly after a few moments of silence, during which Draco and Harry continued to stare at each other.
Harry broke eye-contact and laughed as Draco gave Marc a disbelieving glare. "Only if you join us," Harry teased, puckering his lips in an attempt at seduction, but chuckling too much to be able to pull it off.

It had the desired effect anyway, Marc's mouth fell open, and Draco was surprised his tongue didn't roll out like some lust-struck cartoon dog. After a second, when his voice had won out over his dirty imagination he complained, "You are a giant wanker, temping a married man with such …" He trailed off and made a sexy little noise in the back of his throat.

"Good grief Marc, reign it in," Draco said shortly, amazed as ever at his friend's unquenchable randiness.

Marc turned his bright eyes on Draco again, and Draco did not enjoy the envy he could see there. "I bet you're delightfully bossy in bed, is he Harry?"

Harry started to snicker. "I'm not saying anything …" But then Draco saw him nod emphatically amid his laughter anyway.

Marc shook his head and smiled ruefully. "I wouldn't change Mavie for the world, but if the worst should happen you better watch out Draco, this one is about perfect," he said, tipping his head in Harry's direction.

Harry scoffed and rolled his eyes, but his cheeks were a bit pink. Draco just shrugged and looked fondly at his embarrassed boyfriend. "I'm well aware."

In the end Marc was proved right, the confusion of Harry Potter suddenly being openly gay without any kind of fanfare or dramatic headlines definitely took the sting out of the photos from that night on the pavement. Eventually the photos had appeared in *Witch Weekly* nearly a month later, when everyone was finally bored of the Winsors.

It was not, however, the photo of them kissing that made the front page, but instead the cover showed Harry and Draco hand in hand. Harry was quite obviously flipping the camera the bird, and Draco was laughing like a loon at the sight. They just looked like a pair of slightly drunk, and very happy young men.

The headline had read, *The Boy Who Lived - Living at Last.*

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